

# DEITY RELATIONSHIPS IN MESOAMERICAN COSMOLOGIES

## *The case of the Maya God L*

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### Abstract

The study of deity images in pre-Columbian Mesoamerican artworks and pictographic texts has been dominated by a concern to classify them for identification of the individual gods. The usual approach has been taxonomic classification, emphasizing the attributes consistently shared by various images to distinguish them as members of a single class (i.e., a single deity). However, identifying criteria are shared by more than one deity class, and the desired consistency in a set of traits for class membership has never been realized, such that scholars still disagree as to the proper identification of these images. This study takes a different approach, by examining the relationships among gods manifested in both imagery and text. It focuses on the Maya God L, who shares some identifying features with God M and also shares certain contexts with the God Bolon Yokte. These associations reflect their spatiotemporal alignments, with God L representing the stability of the primordial cosmic center, whereas Gods M and Bolon Yokte are “travelers” who move within the periphery. From these relationships we begin to explain not only the fluidity of deity imagery, but also how deities served as metaphoric representations of dynamic social and cosmic processes.

Mesoamerican prehistorians have long been challenged to interpret the plethora of nonnaturalistic, polymorphic beings depicted in the surviving artwork and codices. Many of these images have been interpreted as “gods” and thus are of utmost importance in understanding pre-Hispanic religions<sup>1</sup>. Post-conquest documentary sources reflect attempts by both the Spanish clergy and the indigenous literati to explain the nature and role of various deities in religious belief and practice, and in the broader cosmology or worldview. For example, Book 1 of Fray Bernardino de Sahagún’s *Florentine Codex* (Sahagún 1950–1982) provides a detailed account in both text and pictures as to how the different deities were distinguished by variations in their costume, accouterments, body paint, etc.—what we will refer to as their “regalia.”

Nevertheless, attempts by modern scholars to classify and label deity images by their regalia have met with resistance because the same elements can be shared by what are otherwise different gods, and even a single god’s regalia does not comprise a consistent complex of elements (Boone 1989:9). Scholars have come to realize that the gods had multiple aspects, that they seemingly

merged with one another, even across societal boundaries, and that animals and inanimate objects could be elevated to a deity-like rank (Thompson 1970:199–200). The representations of divinity did not comprise discrete entities, but were more fluid and shifting than previously assumed by early deity typologists (Vail 1996:365). They manifest an ancient, widespread belief in a “living” universe whose individual parts are suffused with an animating force variably represented or understood as deities, spirits, winds, souls, or guardians of some specific place (e.g., Hanks 1990:86–87; López Austin 1993:114, 135; Marcus 1983:345; Monaghan 1995:127–128; Sandstrom and Sandstrom 1986:74; Spores 1983:342; Vogt 1969:369–371).

Although most previous scholarship has concentrated on distinguishing the gods from one another so that their images might be properly identified, we take a different perspective. Our objective in this paper is to show how investigating the *relationships* among different gods, rather than delineating the essential qualities of individual gods, provides additional insights into the classificatory structures that organized the cosmos. These insights can help to overcome some of our conceptual difficulties in understanding the nature and roles of Mesoamerican deities, because many of these problems have their origin in the taxonomic approach that has been used to study the gods’ images.

We present a case study focused on the anthropomorphic image designated “God L” in Maya art to demonstrate how interdeity relationships can be productively approached. Identifying God L’s representations and determining his qualities have been complicated by the fact that some of his visual and functional char-

<sup>1</sup> This paper does not challenge the common use of the term “god” to refer especially to the anthropomorphic images and effigies (e.g., Taube 1992:8). We recognize that there is a long-standing disagreement among Mesoamerican scholars as to whether or not the Western notion of a “god” is appropriate for the pre-Hispanic era (e.g., Boone 1989; Houston and Stuart 1996; Hvidtfeldt 1958; Kubler 1969; Marcus 1978, 1983; Proskouriakoff 1965, 1978; Taube 1992; Townsend 1979; Vail 1996). This topic is so important and complex that it requires a separate study.

acteristics overlap with those of another important deity, God M. God L's image also appears in contexts that link him to other deities, including Gods K and Bolon Yokte. We explore how these deities are interrelated as members of an emic category, "travelers," a role fulfilled by humans as well as gods. The movement of travelers relates to the concentric spatiotemporal organization typical of Mesoamerican cosmology, whose most basic division is the complementary opposition of center and periphery. "Travelers" move to or within the periphery, but are linked conceptually with the center—which is epitomized by the ruler. The interrelationships between God L and these other Maya deities can be traced from the Classic to the Postclassic period, expressing the widespread, long-lived structural principles of Maya worldviews. However, the individual gods vary in their specific characteristics because they were the historically contingent products of distinct groups of people.

### THE ICONOGRAPHIC CODE

Information concerning venerated supernatural beings in pre-Hispanic Mesoamerican religions consists primarily of images in two-dimensional paintings and bas-reliefs and in three-dimensional effigies in stone or ceramic, as well as names and other textual data preserved in hieroglyphic inscriptions and early Colonial-period documentation for some of the late pre-Hispanic societies. Some of those names and myths about divine beings survive in the religious beliefs and practices of indigenous peoples today. It is possible to correlate some of the documentary information with the surviving images of Postclassic gods. This procedure is not straightforward, however, for what seems to be the same deity was given multiple names by different local groups, and various titles that referred to separate aspects of its divinity. For example, the Aztec god Tezcatlipoca was referred to by 360 names, titles, or epithets in Book 6 of Sahagún's *Florentine Codex* alone (Heyden 1991:189). Moreover, some deity names actually designated classes of beings, such as the four-fold Chaaks, Bakabs, and Pawatuns<sup>2</sup> mentioned in Fray Diego de Landa's (1982:62–63) sixteenth-century description of Yucatecan Maya religion.

As for the deity representations created by earlier peoples, or those whose religious beliefs were not recorded by the Spaniards, these cannot easily be identified. Since the last century (e.g., Seler 1990a [1887]), scholars have meticulously studied the images of the gods who populated the cosmos as imagined by various Mesoamerican societies (especially the Aztecs, Maya, Mixtecs, Olmecs, and the central Mexican creators of the "Borgia Group" codices) dating from the Formative period (ca. 1200 B.C.) to the sixteenth-century Conquest (for examples see, respectively, Nicholson [1971]; Schellhas [1904]; Caso [1977]; Joralemon [1971]; Spranz [1973]). These representations can be classified according to their regalia (costume, accouterments, and body paint), physical features (shapes and orientations of body parts), inherent qualities (age, gender, and zoomorphic, anthropomorphic, or polymorphic

status), and other individualizing criteria (names/titles, life histories, and spatiotemporal contexts). Collectively, these criteria constitute an iconographic "code" (López Austin 1993:126), a corpus of identifying features shared by the ritual practitioners who once created this imagery, and now being reconstructed by the latter-day scholars who study them (Sandstrom and Sandstrom 1986:277).

Prehistorians have necessarily focused on the visually accessible features (regalia and other visible physical qualities) of the iconographic code in order to ascertain commonalities among the various representations of the supernatural. Deity classes or types are delimited based on some consistency of features (Nicholson 1971:408), although analysts may disagree as to which regalia are diagnostic of a deity type. Another aspect of the classification process has been to associate the individual gods with venerated phenomena of the natural world, to which the sixteenth-century Spaniards first associated the "functions" of the gods they described, based on their knowledge of presumably analogous Greco-Roman polytheism (see, e.g., Sahagún 1950–1982:Book 1). Thus, there are recognized gods of such natural phenomena as the sun, rain, earth, lightning, mountains, maize, fire, and death, as well as such cultural categories as gods of rulership, warfare, sacrifice, music, and commerce.

It is recognized that specific identifying characteristics may change with different loci in the spatiotemporal range of the god, which may be manifested as different avatars (López Austin 1993:126, 150; see also Vail 1996:365), and also that some aspects of the regalia can overlap among two or more deity categories. This overlap has been considered indicative of fundamental qualities shared by multiple supernatural beings, such that they comprise "deity complexes." H. B. Nicholson (1971), for example, grouped the Aztec deities into three great complexes based on overlapping regalia and functions—the celestial creator gods, rain and agricultural fertility gods, and war-sacrifice sun gods. Despite these broad categories, certain gods could belong to more than one, or even none, of these groups (Nicholson 1971:408). Other scholars have suggested that gods with overlapping regalia represent variable outer manifestations of some underlying phenomenon (e.g., Brundage 1979:55–56; López Austin 1993:125–126; Vail 1996), but precisely what the phenomena might be that generated specific groupings of related gods has yet to be determined.

We suggest that such variation as has been encountered, and usually considered problematic in the classification of deity images, cannot adequately be dealt with because of the way the classification itself has proceeded—placing greater emphasis on the sharing of items of the regalia. This is a specific case of a general problem inherent in all classificatory approaches: any comparison of two items allows recognition of both similarities and differences. Typologies can be constructed either by recognizing the similarities of things to each other as crucial, or by emphasizing the systematic differences of things from each other. In archaeology, the dominant approach has been the former, known as the taxonomic approach and concerned with identifying bounded classes whose members are like each other in some specific way (Rouse 1960). This perspective has informed the identification of the Mesoamerican gods. Like other applications of taxonomy, the types created to differentiate these deities work to a certain extent, allowing the presumption of the existence of fairly distinct classes. The advantages of the taxonomic approach are its ease of use and its heuristic function, as it simplifies the complexity of subjects under examination by considering individual cases to be instances of a single type, in this case a single god. Taxonomies, however,

<sup>2</sup> Orthography of most Maya words follows standards established for Yucatec Maya in the *Diccionario maya cordemex* (Barrera Vásquez et al. 1980). By convention, the names of days and months are spelled as they appear in Landa's (1982) *Relación*. In reading the hieroglyphs, boldface indicates literal glyph transcription, and italic font is used for the probable rendering of words in Mayan languages.

treat other variation as insignificant, essentially as “noise.”<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, classification of any god image has not required that it display a consistent set of defining criteria; rather, it can be considered sufficient for it to display only one or a few attributes out of the larger group of regalia in order to be identified as to type.

When the images are typed and labeled, it is usually presumed that all members of the same type represent a single god; the types are asserted to have an empirical reality. Taxonomy is responsible for the notion of a “continuity” in the worship of the same deities through time and across space as selected attributes of the regalia are traced across societal, and even cultural and linguistic, boundaries. This practice is based on another, often unstated, assumption: that all of Mesoamerica shared a single, fixed pantheon of gods, such that the deity types developed for one part of Mesoamerica can be applied to other areas, and the origins of specific Postclassic deities can be traced back to the Classic and even Formative periods. Thus, Maya gods are equated with their Aztec counterparts (e.g., Kelley 1976; Seler 1990a [1887]; Taube 1992; Thompson 1950), and Aztec deity names are projected onto images dating to the Olmec period, more than 2,000 years earlier (e.g., Coe 1972:13).

While it is evident that Mesoamerican cosmologies were founded on an ancient, widespread set of very basic principles (e.g., Gossen 1986; Hunt 1977), some of which occur in other world areas (particularly East and Southeast Asia), the distinctiveness of the religions that emerged through time and across this vast area should be recognized if we are to understand the historical development and interactions of these societies. Indeed, we know from Colonial-period documentation that not only each society, but each polity, ethnic unit, social group, neighborhood, occupational group, and even kinship group crafted a special relationship with its own tutelary deity (Nicholson 1971:409), a reflection of the micropatriotism and centripetal perspective that characterize Mesoamerican worldviews. Even where Tezcatlipoca was the patron deity of two different polities, the god was not the same; each polity had its own particular Tezcatlipoca (López Austin 1993:135). Each god image was created by and for the social negotiation of meanings and relationships with the numinous power that was believed to animate the universe. In this sense, all gods are local; “each . . . has its own life and a particular story, played out among a specific group of people” (López Austin 1993:136; see also Houston and Stuart 1996:301–302).

While the taxonomies developed to identify Mesoamerican gods continue to have heuristic utility, we now need to break the conceptual binds they present if we are to examine understudied issues having to do with the role of deities (especially multiple deities) in Mesoamerican religions. We should highlight the local distinctiveness of gods in terms of historically contingent actions of various human agents. We should also look for systematic interrelations among the deity classes. The end product of the taxonomies are descriptions of individual gods, sometimes grouped with other gods, but there is as yet little sense as to how the pantheons were organized beyond some general notions of a hierarchy of greater and lesser gods and goddesses, some pairs of whom may be treated superficially by kinship dyads, or their associations with the dif-

ferent spatiotemporal segments linked together by the ritual and annual calendars (see the pantheon schemes in, e.g., Barthel [1968]; Brundage [1979]; Nicholson [1971]; Spranz [1973]). They provide few clues as to how Mesoamerican religions formed a systemic framework integrated with the organization of secular or mundane life.

Rather than view gods as essentialized clusters of symbols or try to find one-to-one correspondences between gods and nature, Alfredo López Austin (1993:104) has suggested that we look beyond the gods and the calendar for principles that interrelated the members of the various pantheons. The animals, celestial bodies, geographic features, and similar phenomena that appear most prominently in myth and ritual—and are symbolically associated with deities—have no significance in isolation, but only as they are linked together into larger classificatory schemes, “which allow the natural and social universe to be grasped as an organized whole” (Lévi-Strauss 1966:135), as a single sociocosmic metaclassification. If the gods were “models and metaphors of the social and natural worlds,” as Karl Taube (1992:9) has proposed, then we should attempt to demonstrate how gods, nature, and society signify categories that were defined in terms of their relationships within a larger structure and were organized with respect to other transformations of that structure (see also Hunt 1977:54). It is at this more fundamental level that one can understand the distinctiveness of deities, their facile ability to merge with one another, their iconic or other relationships to natural phenomena, and their historical and logical relationships to the organization of social groups (O’Mack 1991:21). It is also by studying how the gods may exemplify categories signified by their interrelationships that we can explain the known instances of iconographic continuities, despite the fact that we are dealing with gods separately created under disparate historical circumstances. Additionally, it is at this level that we can see the creation of god images as resulting from specific practices of actors negotiating their own relationships with the spirit world.

The regalia and other visual features that mark the deity categories were organized according to the sociocosmic principles that structured the operation of the natural and social domains, for the same people who conceptualized the operations of society and the cosmos created the deities to manifest these dynamic principles. The individual gods, with their distinguishing titles and life histories, were generated out of this underlying organization, and this is why deities conceptualized by different peoples sometimes shared the same, or similar, qualities (O’Mack 1991:4). For example, Scott O’Mack (1991) demonstrates that two Postclassic central Mexican gods—Yacateuctli and Ehecatl-Quetzalcoatl, both associated with long-distance merchants, but for different polities—shared a feature derived from the natural world, namely the beak of certain waterfowl. For Ehecatl (“wind”), this was an iconic feature represented by the addition of a bill or beak, sometimes as a mask, to the face of the god. His beak and black face paint were shared with a waterfowl given the same name, the *ehecatototl*, “wind bird,” the hooded merganser. For Yacateuctli, also known as Yacapitzahuac, this feature was revealed not in his regalia, but in his names, “Nose-Lord” and “Pointed Nose,” respectively, the latter name shared with the eared grebe. In both cases, similar observations of the natural world were metaphorically linked to the functions of long-distance merchants. Such merchants traveled far beyond the perimeter of the locally known world and then returned, while these waterfowl—migratory birds—habitually did the same. Furthermore, these were diving birds who spent rather

<sup>3</sup> Rouse (1960) contrasted taxonomic classification with an alternative strategy, analytic classification, which recognizes some dimensions of variation as significant and then describes differences along these dimensions. The advantage of analytic typology is its ability to represent the structure of variation in a set of data.

long periods of time submerged. They, therefore, link into a widespread cosmology summarized in the various Earth-Diver myths, better known in North America, and named for an animal demiurge who participates in the creation of the world at the behest of higher-ranked deities. The role of demiurge who travels to the underworld also fits Ehecatl-Quetzalcoatl and Yacateuctli in the surviving Mesoamerican mythology (O'Mack 1991:13–17).

These two patron deities of the long-distance merchants shared similar qualities based on an analogous relationship between the natural and social domains, not because of some cross-cultural understanding of what constitutes a “merchant god,” but as historically specific transformations of shared organizing principles. The salient principle in this example is the most fundamental spatial division of Mesoamerican concentric cosmography—the complementary opposition of center and periphery and the role of travel in dynamically linking the two. Long-distance merchants moved between the periphery of the world and their “center,” their home cities. They returned with exotic items, metonymic referents for the periphery—many of which became the property of the ruling house, which had an especially close relationship with the merchants (for the Aztecs, see Sahagún [1950–1982:Book 9]).

In the remainder of this paper, we explore how this same cosmic division is reflected in Maya pantheons, as evidenced in imagery and texts from the Classic (maximally A.D. 250–1000) and Postclassic (A.D. 1000–Conquest) periods. Our intent is to illustrate how certain Maya deities were associated with one another as part of a complex organization based on these elemental spatiotemporal categories. One way to recognize interdeity relationships, as already noted, is by the sharing of regalia items by different gods. Rather than treat this overlap as a taxonomic problem, we look for differences among the deities who are otherwise so linked. Another way is to examine scenes or texts that rather consistently place two or more deities within the same or similar frames of action. Both types of relationship pertain to one of the major Maya deities, God L.

#### GODS L AND M: TRAVELERS

The Maya gods were first distinguished by scholars in the last century on the basis of their depictions, with accompanying appellative glyphs, in surviving pre-Hispanic books—the *Dresden*, *Madrid*, and *Paris* codices (Lee 1985), dating to the Postclassic period (Taube 1992:5–6). Alphabetic designations were codified (Schellhas 1904; Kelley 1976; see Taube 1992; Vail 1996) to simultaneously label the individual gods' images and their accompanying “names” or titular glyphs. Gods L and M were singled out as two old, toothless, black-painted deities (Schellhas 1904). They have different appellative glyphs, neither of which can be read phonetically (logograph T1054, a black portrait head, often prefixed by T164, for God L, and T680 for God M). As originally identified by Paul Schellhas (1904:34–36), God L is depicted only in the *Dresden Codex*, while God M is rare in the *Dresden Codex* but quite frequently shown in the *Madrid Codex*.

Two similar black-painted codical deities were distinguished later: Gods Y and Z (Kelley 1976:69–73; Thompson 1950:76; Vail 1996:124). God Y's regalia and contexts associate him with deer. His appellative glyph in the *Dresden Codex* (D13c) is phonetically read **uuk sip** (Fox and Justeson 1984:39). Ah Uuc Yol Zip is a title preserved in the Colonial period for the patron deity of deer and hunting (Kelley 1976:72). God Z holds a spear and has the

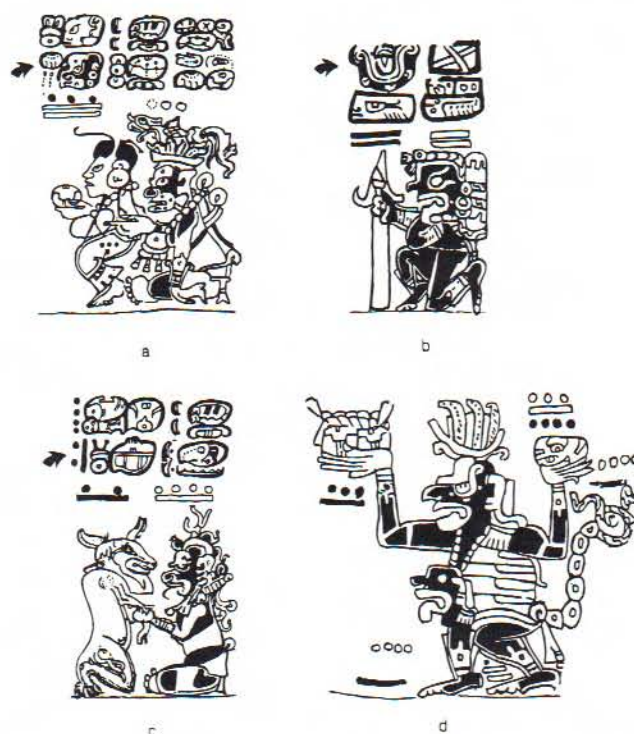


Figure 1. The four “black” gods of the codices (from Villacorta and Villacorta 1977): (a) God L, image and appellative glyph (arrow), he wears the owl headdress (D14c, p. 38); (b) God M, image and appellative glyph (arrow), he has a spear, tump line, and pack (M52a, p. 328); (c) God Y, image and appellative glyph, “uuk sip” (arrow), with a deer (D13c, p. 36); (d) God Z wears the head of God M at his waist and has a scorpion tail, also sometimes seen on God M (M79a, p. 382).

attributes of a war or hunting god, as do Gods L and M in some of their representations (Vail 1996:127, 134–135) (Figure 1). These four beings thus share features other than their black body coloring (which is not always present and can appear in different patterns), such that they seem to form a set,<sup>4</sup> and consistency in identifying them individually in the codices has not yet been achieved (see Vail 1996). Minimally, they may all be associated with warfare or hunting, overlapping activities that use the same kinds of weapons (Schellhas 1904:35–57; see also Coe 1973:14; Grube and Schele 1994:15).

Gods L and M have both been identified as the god Ek Chuah mentioned in Bishop Landa's ca. 1566 [1982] description of Yucatecan culture. In 1888, Cyrus Thomas (in Schellhas 1904:35) suggested that God L might be Ek Chuah, because *ek* in Yucatec Maya means, among other things, “black.” Schellhas (1904:36) believed that God M was the better candidate because he is shown in the *Madrid Codex* with a tump line or a pack on his back, implements used by traveling merchants. Most scholars have accepted the direct identification of God M as Ek Chuah and as a merchant god (e.g.,

<sup>4</sup> Closs (1979:153) claims that all four were associated as Venus gods. Vail's (1996:197) more recent analysis disputes this contention. Nevertheless, the possibility that there were, indeed, four deities singled out by black body paint in the codices may indicate another meaningful quartet of divine beings, like the four Chaaks, Pawahtuns, and Bakabs mentioned by Landa (1982:62–63).

Coe 1973:14; Thompson 1966:165, 1970:306; Taube 1992:88–92; Vail 1996:127–134), although the codical depictions of God M show stronger associations with warfare than with trading (Schellhas 1904:36; Vail 1996:131). Long-distance trading has a relationship to warfare according to ethnohistoric descriptions of central Mexican long-distance merchants, who were armed and trained for defense against attack (Schellhas 1904:36). Indeed, one group within the category of Aztec long-distance traders—the *oztomeca*—took the lead in offensive warfare (Sahagún 1950–1982:Book 9:24), indicating a great deal of functional overlap between these traders and warriors.

Gods L and M have also been identified in other Postclassic and even Classic-period artworks, and these additional depictions have added to the regalia used to identify them; however, discerning their name glyphs in these other contexts has proven more difficult. For God M, an important feature is his long “pinocchio nose,” a characteristic shared by “traveler” deities in the central Mexican *Fejérváry-Mayer Codex* (Thompson 1957:608–609, 1966:165, 1970:306; see also Taube 1992:Figures 44 and 45). God M has occasionally been identified on Classic painted pottery, primarily on the basis of his long nose and merchant items, for instance, on a Chama vase (Figure 2) (Coe 1973:13, 1978:64; Thompson 1966:168) and on the Postclassic Santa Rita murals (Thompson 1957:609), although these appearances do not resemble his codical depictions very closely.

God L’s identifications in Classic-period imagery far exceed his few images in the *Dresden Codex* (Taube 1992:79; see Kelley 1976:Figure 23; Robicsek 1978). The most important addition to his regalia, one which carries over from the Classic to the Postclassic, is his *moan* bird headdress (Thompson 1972:89), a hat (with a broad brim in the Classic art) topped by feathers and even the bird’s head. It does not consistently appear with God L in the *Dresden Codex* (e.g., D71, D46), and, while the entire bird, without the hat, sits on a black deity’s head in D74 (Figure 3), this feature does not unequivocally identify him as God L, for that deity has also been identified as God Z or a black God B (Vail 1996:119).

The bird is an owl with black-spotted feathers and has been identified as the owl called *kuy* in Yucatec Maya (Dütting and Johnson 1993:168; Grube and Schele 1994). The owl has implications of death and the underworld (Schellhas 1904:41; Thompson 1950:214), and this or a similar owl was an icon in a widespread Mesoamerican symbolic complex related to warfare (Grube and Schele 1994). The owl is also associated with the merchant’s pack (e.g., in D43c). Whether the bird appears with God L or in other contexts, it is frequently marked with the glyphic collocation “13-sky” (Grube and Schele 1994:12) or some other number prefixed to the sky glyph. Because of their close association, the owl and God L have been proposed as mutual avatars, each representing the other (Grube and Schele 1994:13, 15), and the owl has also been suggested as the animal companion spirit of God L (Dütting and Johnson 1993:168). In addition to the owl headdress, God L’s regalia—especially in the Classic period—can include a fringed shawl or jaguar skin cape; a beaded necklace or necklace terminating in a **pop** symbol (i.e., woven reeds, a symbol of the mat throne); a staff (which may take the form of a profile reptilian face), spear, or similar implement; a cigar; other jaguar markings, such as a jaguar ear (Taube 1992:81) or spots around the mouth (Dütting and Johnson 1993:175); and occasional black face or body paint (Grube and Schele 1994:13).

An acknowledged problem in adding these Classic-period criteria to the identification of God L are the temporal, cultural, and linguistic differences among the various societies that produced these artworks (Taube 1992:6), which extend beyond the Maya realm now that a mural depiction from Epiclassic Cacaxtla in central Mexico has also been labeled God L (Grube and Schele 1994:15; Taube 1992:85). As noted above, when images are classified as belonging to a single deity type, there is the assumption that this is the same deity venerated across a vast region through many centuries. However, his regalia varies considerably in this imagery, and these identifications are frequently achieved by isolating one or two items from the larger group of attributes. At times the owl headdress alone has been used to identify God L, and even



Figure 2. Vase from the Chama region, Guatemala [K593; Coe 1978:No. 9]. Thompson [1966:168] suggests that the striding black figure to the right was a merchant, a prototype of the Postclassic God M. Coe [1978:64] identifies him more definitively as God M, Ek Chuah, and suggested that the stationary black personage on the left was a conflation of Gods L and N. Note the elaborate, long loin cloths and circular fans held by the figures. © Justin Kerr 1976; Photo No. 593, reproduced with permission.



Figure 3. God L in the *Dresden Codex* "flood scene" (D74) (from Villacorta and Villacorta 1977:158).

when it appears by itself the owl is treated as a referent to God L (e.g., Taube 1992:Figure 43), although this bird is known to appear with other deities (such as God B; Taube 1992:81) and in complex mythological scenes. Because God L has been identified as the merchant god, some of his identifications are based on any bird, not necessarily the black-spotted owl and not always worn in the headdress, where the bird co-occurs with the merchant's pack (e.g., Taube 1992:Figure 40). To explain why there should be two prominent merchant gods with overlapping regalia, Taube (1992:90) suggests that God L was the Classic-period version, supplanted in the Postclassic by God M. This could explain why God L is more frequently depicted in the Classic period and God M in the Postclassic, although both deities have been recognized for both time periods (which together comprise more than 1,000 years), and the types and numbers of artworks produced during those two periods are not comparable enough to determine the relative importance of each deity.

God L has other symbolic contexts not shared with God M. He appears in complex narrative imagery (especially on Classic-period ceramic vessels) thought to represent a now-lost body of mythic lore (Coe 1978:21; Stuart and Stuart 1993:171; Taube 1992:88). He is considered an important denizen of the Maya underworld (Coe 1973:14), and the animals with which he is associated—jaguar and owl—can be referents for the night and the earthly underworld. These associations seem to be at odds with his other persona as a merchant god. Thus, the juxtaposition of all these diverse qualities in a single deity has been said to give God L an "ambivalent" character (Taube 1992:81).

Rather than label the deity depictions in terms of some essentializing category, such as "merchant god," and interpret the god's symbolic connotations as the sum of all the contexts in which he or she appears, we investigated the symbolic linkages in the sociocosmic classification system that were drawn upon by the various peoples who created these representations. To begin, the notion that Ek Chuah was "the Maya merchant god" is problematical. Landa mentioned Ek Chuah in two contexts. The first was as a deity venerated by travelers, who burned incense to the god every night wherever they had stopped along their way to ensure a safe journey (Landa 1982:48). The second was as one of three deities venerated by cacao growers during the month of Muan, along with Chaak (God B) and Hobnil (Landa 1982:81). As Tozzer (1941:107) notes in his translation, merchants were travelers, and they used cacao beans as a form of money, so "it was natural to consider Ek Chuah as the god of merchants and travelers"; this statement echoes an earlier comment by Seler (1990b [1888]:137). Thompson (1966:165, 1970:306–307) also uses these arguments to reinterpret Landa's "travelers" as "merchants." According to Seler (1990b [1888]:136), another colonial source indicated that the god "Echuac" [*sic*] was called "the merchant," but added that also, "he replenishes the earth with all that is needful," which Seler (1990b [1888]:137) assumed was an indication of the wealth brought back by merchants. Adding Gods M and L to the equation further seemed to confirm the identification of Ek Chuah as a merchant god, because, in addition to their black color, they were sometimes associated with a merchant's pack, and God M appears in the act of traveling and wearing a tump line.

The act of traveling actually forms the larger category of which long-distance merchants are one subgroup. "Travel" has been identified by Sheila Findley (1990) as an iconographic theme on Classic Maya pottery that subsumes both merchants and soldiers—and links them to rulers. Members of all three groups share in certain regalia that set them apart, and the same regalia are found in both Maya and Aztec depictions, evidence of an ancient, widespread symbolic-classification system that served as the basis for generating individual, personified, supernatural patrons. These regalia include woven fans, staffs, burdens (noted by Thompson 1966:160, 169), and also long loincloths (see Figure 2), whereas the common contexts for identifying travelers as a theme are processions and receptions by enthroned rulers (Findley 1990:28, 45). The Aztec data indicate that fans and staffs were functional items used by real travelers, but that they had additional meanings. Aztec merchants created images of their patron deities from their staffs, and their fans were also called emblems of conquest, a recognition of the overlapping functions of long-distance traders and warriors (Sahagún 1950–1982:Book 9:9). Fans, staffs, and burdens carried by the tump line are held by individuals variously identified as soldiers, traders, and also traveling ambassadors in the Aztec *Codex Mendoza* (Berdan and Anawalt 1992:Folio 63r–68r).

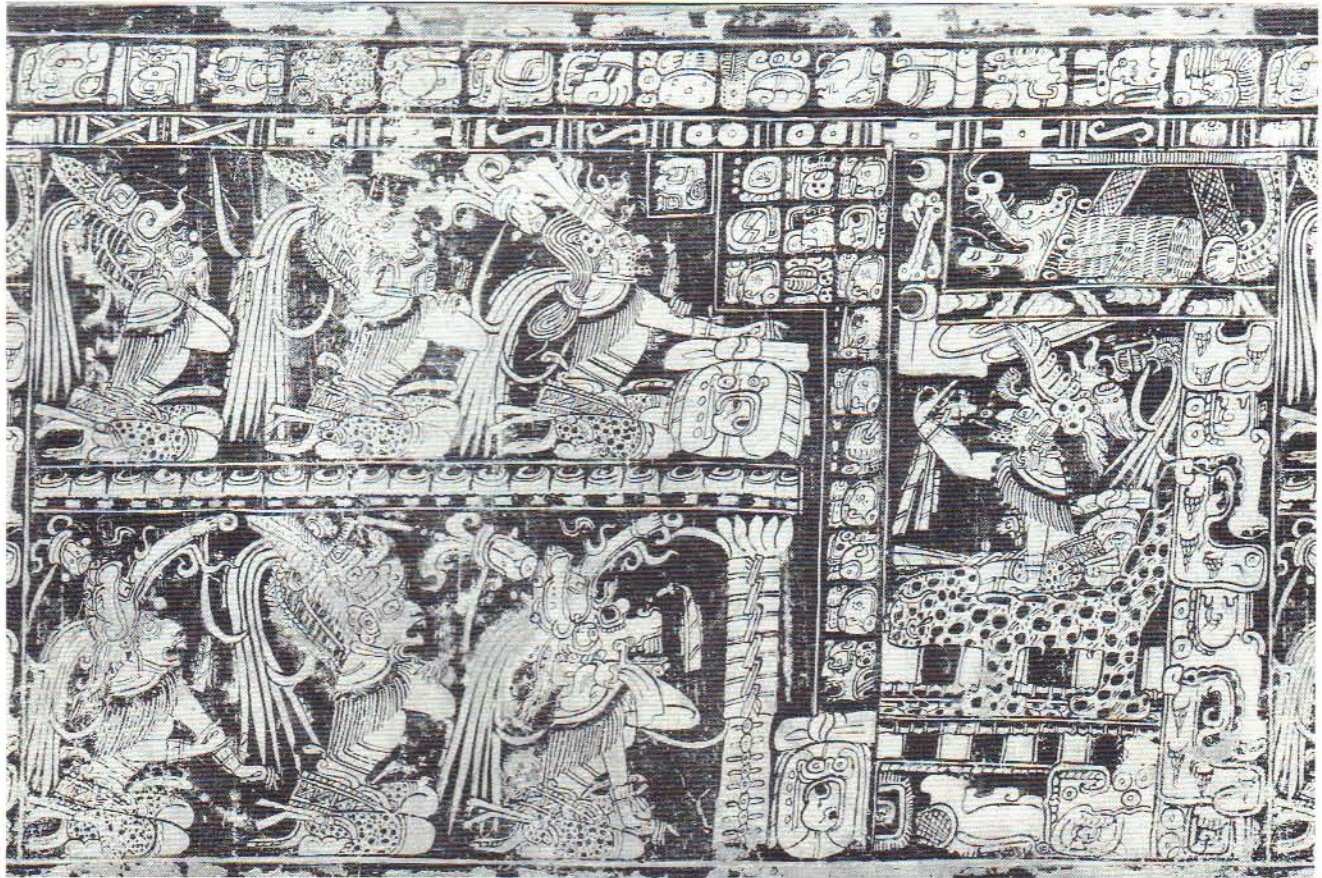


Figure 4. Vase of the Seven Gods [K2796; Coe 1973:No. 49] showing God L and naming Bolon Yokte among the deity titles. © Justin Kerr 1985; Photo No. 2796, reproduced with permission.

The long loincloths worn by travelers are of a special type, in which the two ends hang down low in both the front and back. Long loincloths were part of the regalia of some male deities in Aztec codices (Anawalt 1981:24), and were also worn by members of the various Aztec merchant groups (*pochteca*, *oztomeca*), as illustrated in the *Florentine Codex* (Sahagún 1950–1982:Book 4:Chapters 12 and 18). This type of loincloth, which could be highly decorated, was referred to as the “ruler’s” loincloth (*tlatocamaxtlal*; e.g., Sahagún 1950–1982:Book 9:8). This is one material indicator of the strong ties between merchants and the Aztec ruler (*tlatoani*). The merchants are described as trading the ruler’s property on his behalf, and he held them in high esteem, as if they were his own sons (Sahagún 1950–1982:Book 9:19). In Classic Maya art, the long loincloth is worn by travelers and also by high-ranking persons (e.g., in the Bonampak murals) (Findley 1990:45). Thus, not only do long-distance travelers (i.e., soldiers, merchants, and ambassadors) share in certain regalia attributed to their patron deities, but these same regalia associate them with their ruler.

The direct association between travelers and rulers is significant; in some Classic-period depictions, God L is shown as an enthroned ruler. Michael Coe (1978:16, 64) even suggests that God L ruled over the other supernatural beings in the underworld. A well-known example of God L as paramount over other deities is the Late Classic “Vase of the Seven Gods” (K2796; Coe 1973:No. 49; Reents-Budet 1994:318–319) painted by a Naranjo, Guatemala, artist (Reents-Budet 1994:64) (Figure 4). God L, on the

right, faces two groups of three deities each. He wears the fringed shawl and bead necklace, has spots around his mouth, a small cigar, jaguar-skin kilt and jaguar ear, and the owl headdress with an attached “9-sky” glyph (Coe 1973:107). He is seated within a house on a bench throne covered by a complete jaguar skin (Freidel et al. 1993:68). The throne is an indication of his authority, a reference to his proper place, and a clue to hierarchy among the gods.<sup>5</sup> The back wall of his house is formed by stacked polymorphic heads identifiable as *wits* (the supernatural aspect of mountains). Rolled-up curtains hang from the ceiling above the throne, and arrayed in front of the sawhorse-shaped roof beams is a zoomorphic creature variously identified as a crocodile (Freidel et al. 1993:68), a reed effigy of a crocodile (Schele and Miller 1986:112), and a deer (Taube 1988:343).<sup>6</sup>

<sup>5</sup> “Lord (*ahaw*) of the [Jaguar] Throne” (T168:609.130) is a title given to God L in the *Dresden Codex*, where the glyph for the throne is shown as a jaguar-skin-covered cushion like that on which Classic Maya rulers are often shown seated (e.g., D14c, D21b) (see also Dütting and Johnson 1993:174). This title is not unique to God L, but is shared in the *Dresden Codex* with Gods D, N, and B (Thompson 1972:35).

<sup>6</sup> The sawhorse shape of roof beams is recognized by the modern Tzotzil Maya, who top their roofs with a construction made and described in this manner (Vogt 1969:77). On the vessel, the roof area is separated by a vertical line from a giant “death eyes” and crossed-bones design that can serve as a hieroglyph (T13a, read as the possessive prefix *u-*), as if this entire image were part of a subsidiary text.



Figure 5. Vase from the Nakbe region ("Princeton Vase," K511; Coe 1973:No. 42, 1978:No.1) showing God L in his house. © Justin Kerr 1975; Photo No. K511, reproduced with permission.

The house of God L as enthroned ruler is also marked with supernatural animals in the roof beams on the Late Classic "Princeton Vase" (K511; Coe 1973:90–93, Cat. No. 42, 1978:16–21, Cat. No. 1; Robicsek and Hales 1981:15, 35; Schele and Miller 1986:286–287, 296–297), whose provenience is the Nakbe region of Guatemala (Reents-Budet 1994:356) (Figure 5). God L sits within his house on a cloth-covered-bench throne with a large cushion for a seat back. Above the rolled-up drapery of his canopy are the same sawhorse-like roof beams, in this instance marked by three supernatural animals projecting out from the center: two "water-lily jaguars" on the right and left, and a "xok" fish in the center (in frontal view). The presumption is that a second fish head was aligned with the first one on the opposite side of the roof, out of view (Schele and Miller 1986:286). The roof of God L's house is, thus, a four-part construction composed of alternating supernatural animal heads.

Remarkably, this same type of roof appears with God L in the monumental art at Late Classic Palenque, Chiapas, Mexico. God L rarely appears in Classic monumental imagery, but is shown in two important depictions at Palenque—the bas-relief carvings in the Temple of the Cross and the Temple of the Sun (Kelley 1976: Figure 23)—and it is the Tablet of the Temple of the Sun that prominently includes God L with his roof (Robertson 1991:Figure 95) (Figure 6). The central icon of this tablet is a large shield arrayed with two spears, connoting warfare-related themes, although the triangular shape formed by the spears also evokes the sawhorse configuration of house roofs. The spears rest atop a long horizontal bar with terminating supernatural animal heads, identified as profile snakes on the two ends, with a jaguar as the central head in frontal view (Schele and Freidel 1990:243).

This bar has been identified as a throne because it seems to serve this function in other depictions. The standing figure on the left in the Tablet of the Temple of the Sun holds a small version of this

throne with a supernatural mannikin seated upon it. On the Palenque Palace Tablet, three persons sit on abbreviated versions of this bar (Robertson 1985:Figures 257 and 258), each of which is individually marked by supernatural jaguar, fish, and snake heads. The Temple of the Sun throne is not a bar, however, but, like the roof of God L's house, is a horizontal, cross-shaped construction (Quirarte 1981:289, 305). It parallels the cross-shaped central images on the tablets of two other buildings that, with the Temple of the Sun, form the Cross Group—except that it is oriented horizontally rather than vertically. It is held up on the heads of two seated deities (the right one not yet identified) whose hands are carefully positioned to show that they are not touching the right-left axis but, instead, hold up the central head that projects out toward the viewer (the other jaguar head projects toward the rear, unseen on the two-dimensional tablet).

God L, seated on the left, is in his correct position under his "roof," but his roof itself forms a throne. He is recognizable from the owl feathers in his headdress, with the owl's head, and he wears a jaguar-skin cape and skirt, a belt with crossed bands (as on the Vase of the Seven Gods), and a necklace with the woven "mat" symbol (i.e., symbol of the throne and, thus, of rulership) (Robertson 1991:42). The tablet is framed by imagery on the two door-jambes of the shrine in which it is placed, and the bas-relief scenes on the jambs are edged by the same stacked *wits* (mountain) faces that form the wall of God L's house on the Vase of the Seven Gods (see Robertson 1991:Figures 112 and 113). Altogether, this imagery may be interpreted as indicating the "place" of God L as an enthroned ruler of the underworld, the roof of whose house coincides metaphorically with the throne of a human ruler. Because the place of divine kings is the cosmic center (e.g., Geertz 1977), then God L is located at that center, in a metaphysically otherworldly dimension spatially represented as in the underworld.



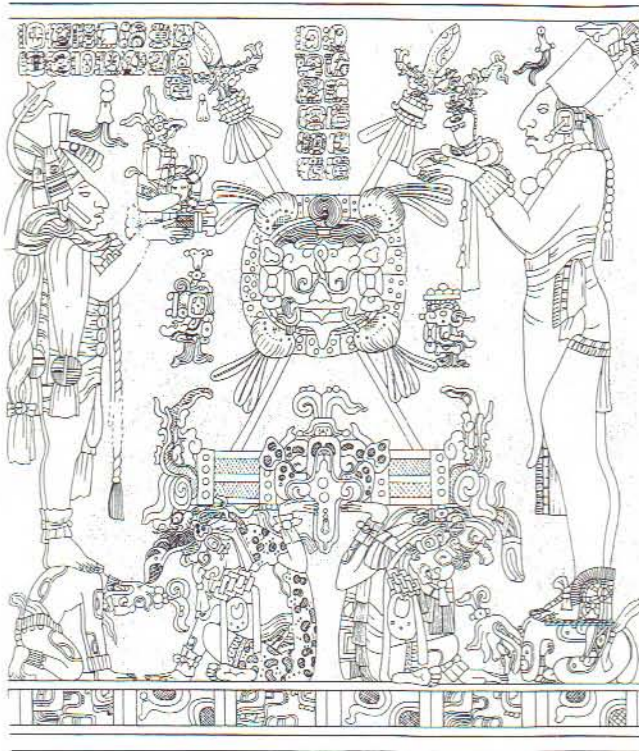


Figure 6. Tablet of the Temple of the Sun, Palenque, image only (main text deleted) (Robertson 1991:Figure 95, reproduced with permission).

#### GOD L AND BOLON YOKTE: THE ORIGINS OF TIME

Another deity who sometimes appears in association with God L and has been proposed as a merchant god is Bolon Yocte or Ah Bolon Yocte, a name briefly mentioned in the Colonial Yucatec books of Chilam Balam (e.g., Roys 1967:133). This name or title also appears in pre-Hispanic inscriptions, read phonetically as **bolon okte'** (e.g., TIX.765.87), in both Postclassic codices and Classic inscriptions, indicating the longevity of this appellation. J. Eric Thompson (1970:320) suggests he was a merchant god because of his title, "He of Nine Strides," which refers directly to the act of traveling, again conflating travelers with traders. *Bolon* is the number nine, but Thompson extended the meaning of *ok*, "foot, footprint" (Barrera Vásquez et al. 1980:594), to refer to "stride," as in *ah ok*, "a walker, traveler" (*yok* is the possessive form of *ok* [Thompson 1950:56]). The title has been read more literally as "the nine-footed one" (Edmonson 1982:43; Roys 1967:133). The suffix *te'* can mean "tree, wood," and other suggested translations are "tree of nine-foot" (Edmonson 1986:115) and "nine [tree] trunks" (Edmonson 1982:74).<sup>7</sup>

<sup>7</sup> *Ok* and its cognates means "foot" in Yucatec, Chol, and Tzeltal, as well as in some of the highland Mayan languages (Schele 1984:300). In Yucatec, *ok* can also refer to the handle or haft of a tool such as an axe, knife, etc. (Barrera Vásquez et al. 1980:595). "Tree" is *che'* in Yucatec, while *te'* is its Chol counterpart; however, there are words in Yucatec that use the Chol cognate, such as the *kante'* tree erected for one of the New Year's ceremonies (Landa 1982:64). The numerical prefix may also indicate a plural as a collectivity of beings (the nine *yokte* gods). Numbers are rather common prefixes for supernatural titles; for example, Bolon Ts'akab, Bolon Mayel, and Bolon-ti-ku are nine-prefixed names in the *Chilam Balam*

Bolon Yokte is considered an obscure deity (Thompson 1950:56) whose name has been preserved but for whom no standard depiction in Maya imagery has been recognized (Grube and Schele 1994:13; Schele 1988:305). However, there are several intriguing instances in Postclassic and Classic depictions of an association between God L or his regalia and Bolon Yokte. On page 60 of the *Dresden Codex* (Figure 7), the name Bolon Yokte appears twice with accompanying images that have been tentatively identified as Bolon Yokte.<sup>8</sup> On the upper half of the page, the name appears above a depiction of two men, each with black face paint on the eye and black-tipped owl feathers in their headdresses (Thompson 1972:79). With darts and spear-throwers, they are attacking a turtle-backed God N, whose name appears above him. It has been presumed that one of these two warriors is Bolon Yokte, to match the text above them (Dütting 1984:48; Grube and Schele 1994:13; Kelley 1976:73). However, because there are two similarly garbed individuals, the epithet may refer to a class of beings, or perhaps these individuals were operating on the god's behalf or under his auspices. On the bottom half of the page, the name Bolon Yokte appears with a scene in which a warrior with a spear and shield presents a captive to a personage raised up on a serpent throne held by another human. The warrior now has a larger black-spotted, owl-feather headdress with a bird's head (Grube and Schele 1994:13). What is significant is that the Bolon Yokte title is twice associated in context with personages who wear the owl-feather headdress associated with God L, who has his own warfare associations. The feathers are not part of the usual hat of God L (as appears on D14c), but on D74 the black-painted god with darts often identified as God L has an entire owl perched on his head. On the other hand, God L is recognized as an old god, and the feather-topped warriors on D60 lack that age-related quality.

A more direct association between these two individuals is found at Classic-period Palenque, in the second of God L's appearances in the monumental art there. The frequent appearance of the name Bolon Yokte in the Palenque inscriptions has been noted (Kelley 1976:73),<sup>9</sup> but, in addition, there is an iconographic representation of this appellation on the Temple of the Cross (the northernmost of the three buildings that make up the Cross Group). The right doorjamb of the shrine room has a large portrait of a standing God L with his owl headdress (marked by a "12 sky" glyph) and cigar (Figure 8). He wears the jaguar cape and the woven-mat-motif pendant, as on the Temple of the Sun tablet, but, in addition, has an unusual costume feature that provides a direct visual link to Bolon Yokte. His long loin cloth, or an additional cloth, hangs down the front and back sides of his body (like the "traveler's" loin-cloth), its ends held up by supernatural heads. Marked on the cloth are nine footprints oriented away from God L, as if he were a center from which travel moved outward. "Nine footprints" is a literal

*of Chumayel* (Roys 1967). In the Classic period, there are the frequent references at many sites to a localized version of a triad of gods with special ties to the ruling dynasty, referenced by a "three-" prefixed title (Houston and Stuart 1996:301; Proskouriakoff 1993:22, 34, 37).

<sup>8</sup> The glyph collocation for Bolon Yokte in the codices appears at *Dresden* 60a, 60b, 68a; *Madrid* 70b; and *Paris* 7d, 8b, and 16c (Thompson 1950:56; William Ringle, personal communication 1996).

<sup>9</sup> The name Bolon Yokte appears six times in the Palenque monuments: twice on the Temple XIV Tablet, in the West Tablet of the Temple of the Inscriptions, on the House C Hieroglyphic Stairway, on the East Eaves of House C, and on Pier F of House D (Ringle and Smith-Stark 1996:237).

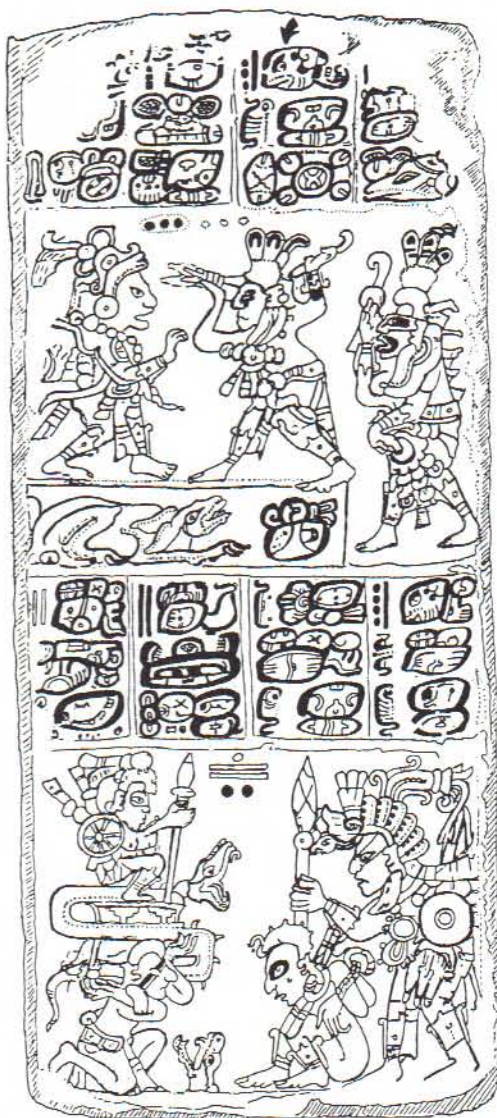


Figure 7. Bolon Yokte named twice [see arrows] in the *Dresden Codex* (D60a–b) [from Villacorta and Villacorta 1977:130].

translation of *bolon yok*, resulting in an iconographic conflation of God L with Bolon Yokte.<sup>10</sup>

The footprint-marked cloth is found in other related contexts. On Late Classic Piedras Negras Stela 6, 11, 14, and 25, footprints

<sup>10</sup> God L is represented on an Early Classic ceramic box, standing and costumed in a manner remarkably similar to that on the Late Classic Temple of the Cross, including the appearance of two footprints on his loin-cloth (Robicsek 1978:117–118, Plates 101–102). He faces a standing God K, who holds out the glyph collocation “7-ek-kan” (which also appears on the Temple of the Sun Tablet). God K is frequently paired with God L in Classic ceramic vessels (e.g., Robicsek 1978:122, 143–144, 172–173, 187, Plate 238), and God L appears to spear God K on page 46 of the *Dresden Codex*. We lack space to develop the symbolic interpretations of this pairing, but note that God K is associated in iconography and texts with rulership; holding an effigy of God K can refer to accession to the paramourncy. God K is also linked to traveling, in part because of the prominent serpent imagery in his appearances. He was drawn as an anthropomorph with a serpent replacing one leg, as a serpent with an anthropomorph head on its tail, and as a giant supernatural serpent with a full-

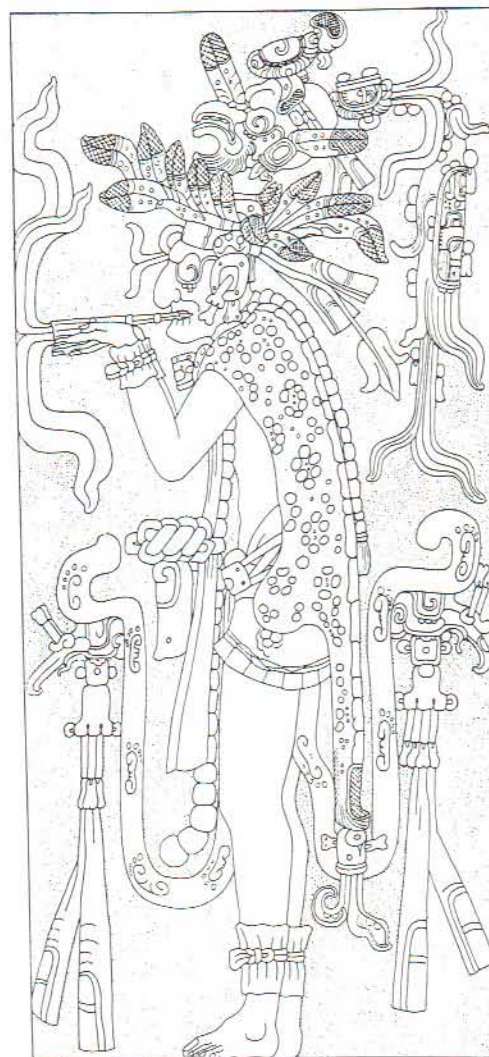


Figure 8. God L on the east jamb of the Temple of the Cross, Palenque (text deleted) [Robertson 1991:Figure 43, reproduced with permission].

mark strips of cloth that hang down from the scaffolded thrones in accession scenes (Robicsek 1978:117), linking this icon to thrones. Taube (1988:345–346) notes their resemblance to cloths that hang down from the “New Year’s” trees in the *Dresden Codex* (D25–28c), which are marked with descending footprints; *te* is “tree” (Figure 9). Visually marked as “footprint trees,” these posts were erected as part of the ritual associated with the beginning of a new cycle of time, the 360+5-day year (*haab*). In the original pagination of the *Dresden Codex*, the four New Year’s pages follow immediately after D74 (see Figure 3), the “flood” scene that depicts some version of God L and that may refer to a cosmic creation event tied to these timekeeping rituals.

The association with time periods may provide an additional referent for the name of Bolon Yokte. The contemporary Jacalteco

figure mannikin on its tail. The serpent is a cosmic traveler par excellence, associated with the various pathways to the upper world and lower world (Gillespie 1993:95–97). God K also travels through space-time in his association with the Classic-period 819-day-count calendars and the Post-classic *k’atun* seatings in the *Paris Codex*.



Figure 9. A New Year's page from the *Dresden Codex* (D27c), showing a footprint-marked cloth hanging from the tree [from Villacorta and Villacorta 1977:64].

Maya of Guatemala subdivide the year into periods of 40 days, each of which is referred to as one "foot" or "footprint" of the year, *yoc habil*. Although the Jacalteco do not count beyond eight such units, Thompson (1950:248) suggests that there may have been such a term to complete the year to the 360th day, which would be nine feet or footprints, *bolon yok*, a year (the *tun* of the initial-series calendar). If Bolon Yokte was actually a title that referenced a group of deities, the Nine Okte, then we suggest it probably represented time periods that would "step," or leave footprints, as they moved through segments of space.

References to time appear in other instances in which God L is pictured and Bolon Yokte is named in an accompanying text. One of these is the Vase of the Seven Gods, described above. The secondary (vertical) text is generally believed to name the six deities arrayed to the left because the glyph collocation T36v.1016, phonetically *k'u(l)*, "god," appears six times in the text to precede nominal glyphs.<sup>11</sup> The list begins with "gods" named "sky" and "earth," followed by Bolon Yokte (Coe 1973:108; Dütting and Johnson 1993:172; Freidel et al. 1993:69; Reents-Budet 1994:320; Ringle 1988:15). The significant event referred to in the text is the creation of the current great cycle of time, which began in Maya timekeeping on the calendar-round (CR) day 4 Ahau 8 Cumku (13.0.0.0.0, the "zero" date in the initial series). God L appears as an enthroned figure presiding over other deities (a nascent pantheon) at the primordium (Coe 1973:108), the beginning of time, which probably explains the reference to "blackness" in the opening of the text (Freidel et al. 1993:69). Similarly, the 4 Ahau 8 Cumku date for the origin of time is noted in the text of Palenque's Temple of the Cross, which shows God L on its outer jamb. This temporal context for God L (with other deities) also occurs in the Postclassic *Dresden Codex*. In the "Venus table" section that begins on D24, God L's portrait glyph appears in conjunction with the CR date 4 Ahau 8 Cumku (Thompson 1972:62).

Another possible reference to the beginning of a significant time period occurs on a Late Classic painted vase that juxtaposes the image of God L with the name Bolon Yokte (K1398; Kerr 1989:81;

<sup>11</sup> Houston and Stuart (1996:293) interpret the *k'u* glyph as following rather than preceding the deity name, making Bolon Yokte the fourth deity listed. A probable seventh deity name, a portrait glyph, is separated from the rest of this text by its own border, in the position of the first glyph in the secondary text.

Stuart and Stuart 1993:170–171) (Figure 10). God L appears in the two scenes on this vase, but is naked—not wearing his identifying costume, although he has jaguar spots around his mouth.<sup>12</sup> In the left scene, an anthropomorphized rabbit holds out God L's regalia. On the right side, God L (wearing the headdress of a Pawah-tun, a class of primordial being) complains about the loss of his regalia to an enthroned sun deity. The vertical text between the two scenes refers to the depicted events. It includes the name Bolon Yokte K'u and begins with the CR day 13 Oc 18 Uo (Dütting and Johnson 1993:182–183; Grube and Schele 1994:13). This is a "floating" CR day, not grounded by an initial-series (long-count) date that would allow it to be pinpointed in our calendar.

Interestingly, this same date appears in another Classic-period text—again with Bolon Yokte—on a bas-relief tablet in Palenque's Temple XIV (Schele 1988:Figure 10.4) (Figure 11), which is positioned between the Temple of the Sun and the Temple of the Cross, each of which has monumental images of God L. Within the main text on the left side of the Temple XIV tablet is a subsidiary phrase that refers to an action by Bolon Yokte on the "floating" CR date 13 Oc 18 Uo. This subsidiary clause is repeated as a secondary text above the figures in the scene (Schele 1988:304). The message is slightly different in the secondary text, referring to an event under the auspices of Bolon Yokte (Schele 1988:304–305) on 13 Oc 18 Uo, an event that happened in the "north" (Stuart and Houston 1994:9, 69). This coincidence of date and deity actor on texts found on two artworks of different proveniences is unlikely to be caused by chance (Dütting and Johnson 1993:182). Furthermore, both artworks refer to similar, probably mythological places in the secondary text of the vessel and as embedded glyph collocations below the two figures on the Temple XIV tablet (both name the places *ho nik-te* ("five flowers") and *sak-?-nal* ("white-?-place"; the unread part is not the same in each) [Dütting and Johnson 1993:182; Freidel et al. 1993:280; Stuart and Houston 1994:69]). It is well understood that the vase scenes are mythological, and the Palenque Temple XIV Tablet, which likely portrays two deceased persons (Schele 1988; Stuart and Houston 1994:69–70), is also otherworldly rather than purely historical; that text even refers to an event 932,174 years earlier (Freidel et al. 1993:280). We suggest that the 13 Oc 18 Uo date is linked to a mythological episode that can involve Bolon Yokte and God L.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>12</sup> The episode illustrated here has been linked to a similar scene on another vase (K1560; Kerr 1989:98; Robicsek and Hales 1981:15), in which a dwarf holds the regalia of a stripped God L, shown removing his loin-cloth, who together with two other aged male gods is being "robbed" of his costume by younger male beings (Dütting and Johnson 1993:167). These vessels may thus depict variants of a shared mythology concerning God L (Taube 1992:85).

<sup>13</sup> The text of the tablet of the Temple of the Cross (where God L appears on the outer jamb) indicates that the shrine within that building was referred to as the "house of the north" (Schele 1992a:130), a mythological house created by a primordial deity as the first event after the beginning of time (on 4 Ahau 8 Cumku 13.0.0.0.0) (Schele and Freidel 1990:246, 472). There is a reference to the "north house" on the vase with the two pictures of God L (see Figure 10) that is textually linked to the Temple XIV Tablet (Dütting and Johnson 1993:178). The Temple XIV Tablet depicts a woman offering a God K effigy, symbol of rulership (often linked to God L, see note 10), to the standing figure. He is shown in the act of traveling, and his long loin-cloth tips up to direct the viewer's attention to the verb that indicates the major event on this panel (T710aA.78:514 at G7; Ringle and Smith-Stark 1996:70; interpreted in Schele 1992b:99). The verb is shown as a hand with the middle finger touching the thumb; this is the same gesture the man makes with his own right hand, and is made by God L on the Vase of the Seven Gods.

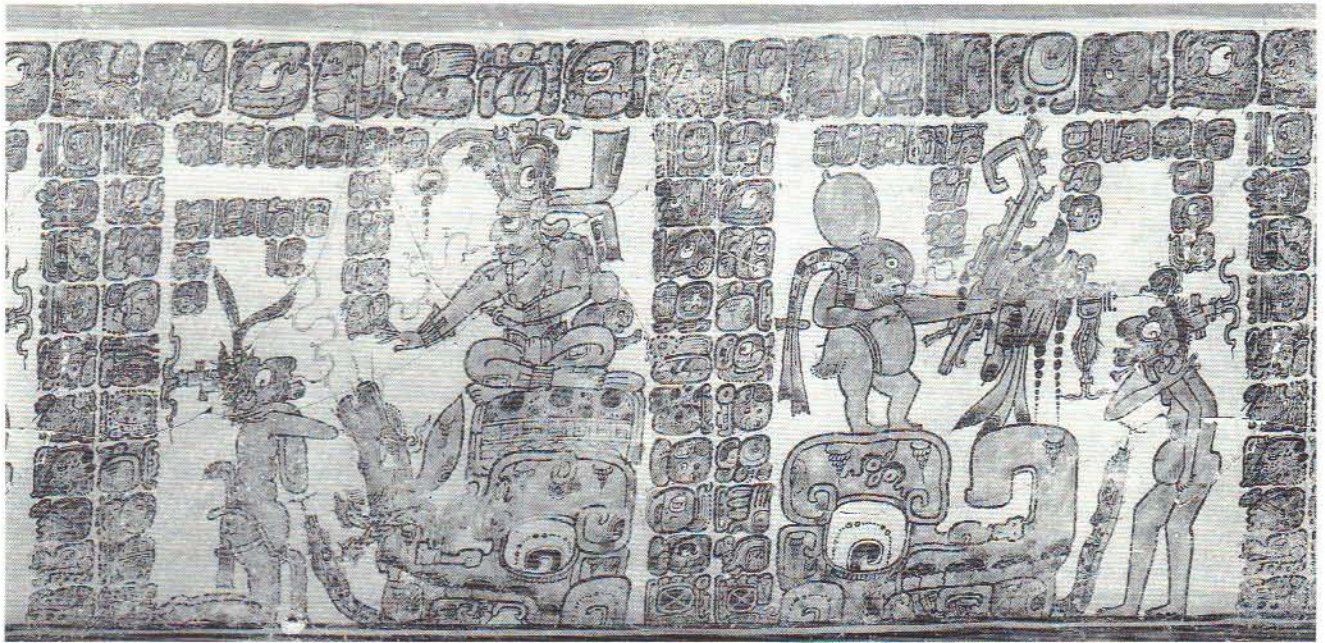


Figure 10. Late Classic vessel (K1398; Kerr 1989:81) with mythological scenes involving the loss of God L's regalia. The secondary text between the two scenes names Bolon Yokte in reference to the date 13 Oc 18 Uo. © Justin Kerr 1980; Photo No. I398, reproduced with permission.

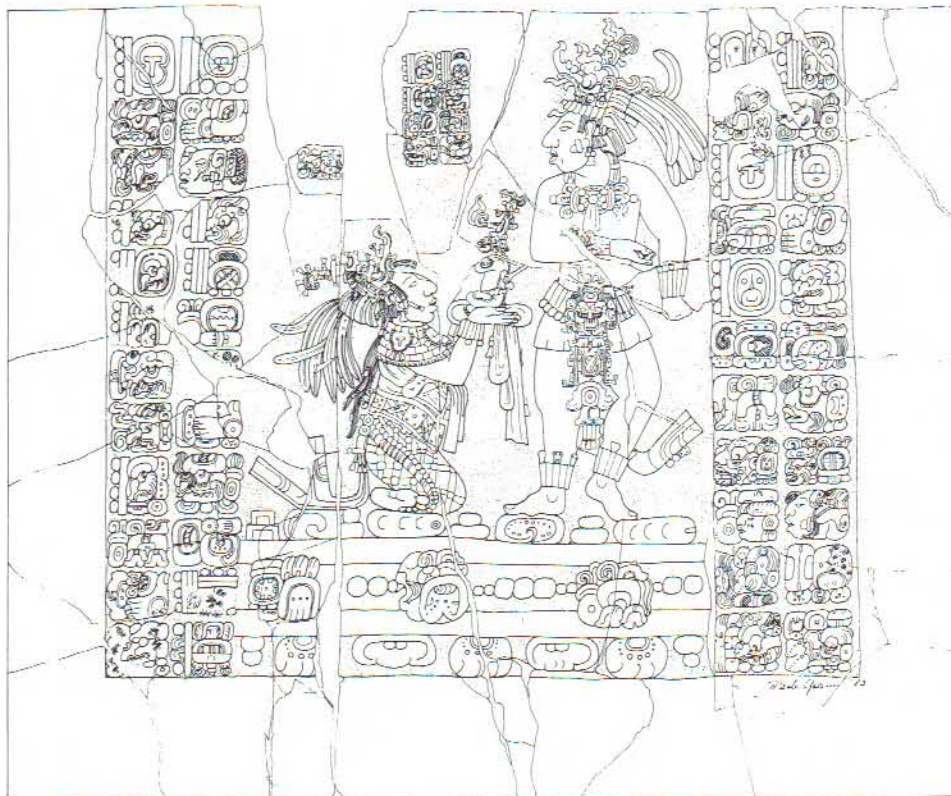


Figure 11. Tablet of Temple XIV, Palenque (Robertson 1991:Figure 176, reproduced with permission).

The 13 Oc date may once again refer to the beginning of time as measured by a different calendrical period, according to a myth preserved in the Colonial Yucatec *Chilam Balam of Chumayel*, presumably recording Postclassic Maya cosmology. In this text, 13 Oc was the first day in the creation of the *winal*, the month of 20 days (Roys 1967:116–118), which for this narrative signified the origin of time itself. The creation event is presented in the context of tracking footprints (*ok*) and counting by steps (*ok*) (Edmonson 1986:121). This pun conceptually links the initiation of time, an act involving stepping (*ok*), to the day name on which it occurred (Oc), but it also provides a rationale for why the deity(s) called Bolon Yokte would be associated with this date, as he is the one who takes steps or leaves footprints.

A further reference to the beginning of time, using yet another calendrical unit, is found on the *Dresden Codex* page that names Bolon Yokte and pictures the warriors with owl-feather headdresses (see Figure 7). The lower portion of the page is concerned with the beginning of the *k'atun*, an important temporal period within the old long-count calendar retained during the Postclassic, consisting of 20 *tuns*, or 360-day years. The specific *k'atun* is the one designated 11 Ahau, with the “lord of the *k'atun*” represented by the enthroned figure (Thompson 1972:78–79). The Colonial-period *Chilam Balams* of Chumayel, Pérez, and Kaua name Ah Bolon Yokte as the supernatural patron of the 11 Ahau *k'atun* (Thompson 1950:56). Dütting (1984:48) suggests, for this reason, that the enthroned figure, rather than the warrior, is Bolon Yokte. The greater significance of this particular *k'atun* is that it was the first *k'atun* at the beginning of time (Roys 1967:65). In the *Chilam Balam of Chumayel*, it was in the *k'atun* 11 Ahau that the sky and earth came together in a cataclysm resulting in a new creation (Roys 1967:99–100).<sup>14</sup>

Thus, both God L and Bolon Yokte were conceptually linked because of their shared association with the origins of major temporal periods tied to the cosmic creation.<sup>15</sup> Furthermore, the notion of travel relates to the Mesoamerican conception of cyclical timekeeping, because time itself was believed to undertake a journey through space and has been figuratively depicted (e.g., on Copán Stele D) as a burden being carried by means of a tump line by the various time bearers. Bolon Yokte has a direct epynomic link to the movement of time, which was conceived as moving in steps (*ok*). It remains to explain the role of God L, a primordial deity tied to rulership and to his place, the throne at the cosmic center, to Bolon Yokte and to other travelers.

## CENTER AND PERIPHERY

The linkages constructed between travelers and rulers reflect the symbolic associations of center and periphery. The center is rep-

resented by one's house, community, or town, in contrast with the periphery—represented by the forest, the untamed wilderness; “town” and “forest” as paired terms signify this opposition in reference to the totality of horizontal space. Ethnographic information amplifies the multiple meanings of this spatial division. The center is the locus for moral and physical order, safety, and social and cosmic harmony. Order is exemplified today by saints in their churches, and in the past by kings and tutelary deities in their palaces and temples. The periphery represents the converse—asocial or amoral behaviors, little internal differentiation, danger, disharmony, filth, and ugliness; yet creativity and even sacred knowledge are to be found here. The temporal dimension shifts with the spatial. In contrast with the center, whose order is measured by the regular passage of segments of time, scheduled activities, and the life cycles of individuals, the periphery may be considered timeless or the othertime of the past, where (and when) primordial qualities and mythic beings existed, together with the sacred knowledge and creative potential that the primordium signifies (Gossen 1974:29–30; Hanks 1990:306; Sandstrom 1996:163; Taggart 1983:55; Watanabe 1992:62–63).

These contrasting cosmic divisions not only represent the fundamental complementary opposition of order and chaos, but provide for their dynamic mediation. As Louise Burkhart (1989:37) has explained, order and chaos are both necessary for the functioning of the cosmos and society in Mesoamerican worldviews. Rather than forming a static structure of mere spatiotemporal proportions, they provide a framework for process, often conceived as the alternation between order and chaos as life follows from death, creation from destruction. Travelers link center and periphery by their movement between them. On the mundane level, farmers traveled to the forests to clear fields and hunt, but long-distance travelers who left their centers did so at great peril. They relied on ritual preparations and appeals to patron deities to guide them through the dangers they were bound to encounter; see, for example, the elaborate ritual preparations carried out by Aztec long-distance merchants before they set out into “the forest, grassland” (Sahagún 1950–1982:Book 9:Chapter 3) and the descriptions of nightly rituals carried out by Maya travelers as recorded by Landa (1982; see earlier).

Added to this spatial division is another important behavioral contrast between stability and movement. For the Aztecs, the center was *tlalli ixco*, “earth navel,” a place of stability (Elzey 1976:320). The center as a representation of order is spatially linked with the broader notion of “place.” Ethnographic information from contemporary Mesoamerican peoples indicates that being in one's place is an aspect of social and cosmic order as the habitual practice of both people and supernatural beings. In Yucatec Maya belief, “all animates, including spirits and directional winds, occupy relatively fixed positions. They may move habitually from their places—movement may be one of their defining features—yet they remain anchored to them and return there” (Hanks 1990:388). According to Mixtec informants, the different supernatural beings that inhabit the earth normally sit in their proper locale, which is termed their “house.” “The idea of ‘sitting’ somewhere connotes, for Mixtec speakers, permanent residence and proper place” (Monaghan 1995:99). The Lacandon Maya are described as creating “god pots,” referred to as “houses” (Tozzer 1907:186), with small stones inside that serve as “benches” for the gods to sit upon (McGee 1990:52). This action mimics that of humans, who are most appropriately located when they sit in their houses (Hanks 1990:344). Thus the juxtaposition of center, order, and stability is revealed in

<sup>14</sup> Sky and earth are paired in the opening of the secondary text on the Vase of the Seven Gods for the 4 Ahau 8 Cumku event presided over by God L in which Bolon Yokte plays a role. Thompson (1950:56) notes that the occurrence of Bolon Yokte's glyph in the *Paris Codex* on pages referring to *k'atun* 5 Ahau (P7) and 3 Ahau (P8) did not weaken the deity's association with *k'atun* 11 Ahau in the *Dresden Codex* because information in the *Dresden Codex*, and not the *Paris Codex*, is consistent with the Colonial prose sources that mention Bolon Yokte in this context.

<sup>15</sup> As more Classic-period occurrences of the name Bolon Yokte are found, we will better understand his symbolic referents and relationships. For example, the name appears on Tortuguero Monument 6 in the context of a future event, the end of the current Great Cycle that began on 4 Ahau 8 Cumku (Houston and Stuart 1996:301). Bolon Yokte K'ul appears at least twice in the Late Classic inscriptions at Copán (Grube and Schele 1990). *Okte* also appears rather prominently as a verbal expression in the Palenque Cross Group inscriptions (Schele 1984).

the common notion that every animate—human and nonhuman—should normally sit still in its proper place, its house as a micro-center.

Warriors, long-distance traders, and ambassadors traveled to the periphery and then returned on behalf of their king, who remained in the center—the “earth navel”—the place of stability as the archetypal representation of the center. We suggest that these particular classes of travelers acted in the capacity of “moving” representatives or doubles of the “immobile” king, and that is why they shared in certain identifying regalia. This behavioral duality is commonly expressed in cosmologies elsewhere in the world, and has been well described for Southeast Asia and neighboring Oceania. In Southeast Asia, the center—also known as the “navel” (Waterson 1990:115)—as the most orderly place is strongly characterized as still and unmoving, whereas the periphery is active (Errington 1989:134–135). The Polynesian Fijians said of their king that he “just sits,” and things are brought to him (Sahlins 1985:91). Similarly, kings in Southeast Asia were required to be ritually immobile and were even said to be “sleeping” (e.g., Cunningham 1965:365). The king could move within his kingdom, for all of the kingdom was his “place,” but he did so on astrologically determined occasions tuned to cosmic rhythms, in a circuit that took him back to his starting place, as if he had not moved at all (Errington 1989:135, 280).

The contrasts of immobility and movement, spatially associated with center and periphery, reflect a more encompassing dynamic duality that Georges Dumézil (cited in Sahlins 1985:90) labeled *celeritas* (from *celer*, “swift”) and *gravitas*. These terms expand on the mediation of order and chaos, particularly in the conceptions that characterize sovereignty. As contrasting principles, *celeritas* is youthful, active, disorderly, magical, creative, and violent; *gravitas* is venerable, stable, judicious, priestly, peaceful, and productive (Sahlins 1985:90). Because order must always be integrated with chaos, the mediation of *gravitas* and *celeritas* is a dynamic process generating social and cosmic life (Sahlins 1985:90). The concentric worldview spatially segregates these opposed qualities between the center and periphery, but sovereignty must partake of and mediate both qualities (Sahlins 1985:90–91); the king in the center must be represented in the periphery, as well.

We suggest that this same complex of interrelated sociocosmic principles was manifested by the Maya deities examined here. God L, the enthroned old deity, represents *gravitas*—the center, stability, and the patriarchal authority of rulership. He is especially prominent in primordial scenes representing the establishment of order as the regular movement of time. The primordium’s spatial counterpart is on the distant periphery, but God L’s “place” is another center (an earlier one), and centers are metaphysically connected to one another. In Aztec thought, the center was “the above and below,” a vertical axis extending through the navel of the earth, with connotations of “darkness,” “beginning,” and “oldest time”; it was the place of primordial unity where creation originated (Elzey 1976:327–328). Thus, God L’s house roof can form the image of the throne for the Palenque paramount, the living king’s central seat spatially juxtaposed with the earlier one directly below it, from which it draws authority.

God M and Bolon Yokte, in their various manifestations, would be the moving doubles of God L, aspects of the totalizing power of sovereignty that God L represents. They are shown or mentioned in the same mythological scenes, and they can use items of the same set of regalia. The two deities are not the same because of the variable forms that the relationships between center and pe-

riphery may take. Bolon Yokte has close associations with the movement of time, whereas God M undertakes more human-like actions, a traveler on the horizontal earth as a merchant or a warrior. The God L/God M–Bolon Yokte relationship is also a representation of hierarchy within the pantheon, as immobility is a characteristic of sovereign power, whereas the moving gods take the role of subordinate demiurges. Additional relationships between God L (or his counterparts) and specific other deities remain to be discovered as we further investigate how different cultural groups chose to represent those portions of the multifaceted aspects of center and periphery that were salient to their understandings of cosmic and social dynamics.

## CONCLUSION

Our examination of the Maya God L has demonstrated: (1) the difficulties experienced in distinguishing his images from those of other visually similar supernatural beings, (2) how this overlap of regalia can reveal a complex of associations represented by God L and similarly constructed deities, and (3) how the contextual associations of God L—his habitual “place” and “time”—exemplify basic cosmological principles that link him to other gods as a manifestation of an elaborate sociocosmic structure. God L overlaps in the iconographic code with God M, and his regalia and contexts are also associated with a deity named Bolon Yokte. Within a spatiotemporal framework, all three beings represent a model of the concentric landscape within which “travelers” operate, and their interaction illustrates fundamental notions of place and movement in Mesoamerican cosmology.

This study has relied upon, but goes beyond, earlier attempts to classify and identify powerful supernaturals in ancient Mesoamerican cosmologies as if they represented standardized, essentialized qualities. Such taxonomic classification is fraught with difficulties because the various pre-Hispanic deities were historically contingent constructions, local to each society or subgroup. They were materially manifested and represented in artworks according to an iconographic code that allows for the recognition of some consistency of defining regalia as a prelude to classification by both the creators of this imagery and contemporary scholars. However, it is at this formal, symbolic level that one should expect to find the greatest diversity of expression, for “every culture chooses its own idioms and plays creatively between the multiplicity of levels and depths of meaning which mytho-poetic structures exhibit” (Hunt 1977:258).

We have focused, instead, on the *relationships* exhibited by several specific deities in surviving texts and artworks as representing exemplary models of the dynamic, parallel operation of cosmos and society. It is at this deeper level that one can expect to find more long-lived, widely shared organizing principles that generated the individual groupings of gods, each always drawn upon fluid and multiple deity aspects (Hunt 1977:259). In particular, we noted certain key structuring principles derived from ethnographic and ethnohistoric sources—the spatial contrast of “center-periphery” associated with the opposition of “stillness-movement.” These categories are linked to cosmic and societal order and disorder, and hence with governance, moral behavior, and the contractual relationships humans create with the spirit world. They are also operationalized as mundane actions. People would leave their houses—their proper sitting place as a microcenter—every day, and then return to them, but particular categories of persons traveled long distances, to the periphery of their world. They were

ritually and materially marked as travelers having a special relationship to the ruler, who represented the stillness and stability of the center. The supernatural world is modeled on the same principles, and thus we should expect to find deities representing multiple manifestations of a basic center-periphery relationship among various Mesoamerican societies, even though the gods themselves were not necessarily identically conceived and represented among different groups.

The apparent longevity and widespread veneration of the deity designated "God L" is in part an artifact of our classification techniques, for there is no coherent set of regalia or associated symbolic meanings that consistently refer to him in every instance in which he has been so identified. Nevertheless, the im-

agery of a divine being belonging to the spatiotemporal category "center/primordium" allows us to infer that this category was rather consistently manifested in Maya thought by an aged male often marked by the color black and a specific owl worn on his head (and thus we need to further explore the roles that age hierarchy, gender, and bodily orientations play in symbolizing relationships in various domains). By adding to our formal typologies of supernatural beings an analysis of the relationships exhibited by these deities—relationships representing metaphoric transformations of operations in the natural and social worlds—we may better understand the nature and role of deity and the organization of pantheons within the various pre-Hispanic Mesoamerican cosmologies.

## RESUMEN

El estudio de las imágenes de deidades en el arte precolombino y textos pictográficos de Mesoamérica ha sido dominado por la preocupación de clasificarlas, con el propósito de identificar los varios dioses individualmente. La clasificación taxonómica ha sido el acercamiento usual, la cual hace énfasis en los atributos compartidos conformemente entre varias imágenes, y que además permite distinguirlas como miembros de una sola clase—una sola deidad—o manifestaciones de un código iconográfico. Sus atributos visuales—a los cuales nos referimos como emblemas reales—incluye disfraces, vestidura, pintura de cara o cuerpo, y género. Este tipo de investigación ha producido listas que incluyen los dioses y sus características especialmente para las civilizaciones maya, azteca, mixteca, zapoteca, y olmeca. Una sola perspectiva pan-Mesoamericana del mundo, en la cual los dioses son asignados a específicos fenómenos naturales y culturales, (e.g., dios de la lluvia, dios de la tierra, dios del fuego, dios comerciante) es también comúnmente asumida, a tal grado que las deidades veneradas por sociedades grandemente separadas en espacio y tiempo, han sido equivalentemente comparadas.

Sin embargo, la deseada consistencia, buscada en las características utilizadas para la clasificación de deidades, nunca se ha logrado, puesto que los criterios usados para tal identificación son compartidos por más de una clase de deidades. De esta manera, los investigadores continúan aún en desacuerdo en cuanto a la identificación adecuada de varias imágenes, puesto que es difícil determinar cuales atributos específicos deben ser diagnósticos para cada deidad. Aun la agrupación de deidades, en la cual los dioses comparten atributos y funciones, todavía tiende a considerarlos como categorías aisladas e esenciales dentro del mismo grupo. Mientras que el acercamiento taxonómico nos ha permitido entender un poco de la plétora de imágenes supernaturales, debemos ahora enfocarnos en los temas o cuestiones poco examinadas, las cuales tienen que ver con el papel de las deidades en la religión de Mesoamérica.

Este estudio, por lo tanto, toma una perspectiva diferente, desde la cual se examina las relaciones entre dioses dentro de marcos cósmicos, espacio-temporales, específicos, los cuales son reflejados a través de sistemas sociales y políticos. El enfoque de este estudio será en el dios Maya L, el cual comparte algunas características con el dios M, y ciertos contextos con el dios Bolon Yokte. Los dioses L y M fueron primeramente identificados con dos de los ancianos dioses negros en los códices postclásicos maya. Otros dos dioses negros (Y y Z) fueron más tarde identificados. Sin embargo, ha sido difícil identificar conformemente las imágenes de estos cuatro dioses, puesto que no solamente comparten las mismas características, sino tam-

bién son similares en sus variables asociaciones con viaje, guerra, y comercio de larga distancia. El dios M ha sido desde hace mucho tiempo candidato para el "dios mercader" maya conocido como Ek Chuah en el período post-clásico. El dios L ha sido también propuesto para este papel, a pesar de que éste posee otros contextos no compartidos con el dios M, especialmente en las imágenes del período clásico. Además, en algunas imágenes del dios L del período clásico el nombre de Bolon Yokte aparece en el texto que le acompaña. Bolon Yokte es también nombrado en los códices postclásicos, y en una ocasión, es nombrado juntamente con otros personajes marcados con ciertos atributos del dios L. Todos estos últimos contextos están asociados con los orígenes de grandes períodos calendáricos, incluyendo el comienzo del calendario de "long count," el calendario postclásico de "short count," y, el conteo del tiempo mismo, en general.

Las relaciones que unen a estos tres dioses en dos pares (dios M y dios L; Bolon Yokte y dios L) refleja su alineamiento espacio-temporal. El dios L representa la estabilidad del centro cósmico primordial, mientras que el dios M y Bolon Yokte son "viajeros" los cuales se movilizan dentro de la periferia. La asociación de "viajero" con el dios M está más unida directamente con los mercaderes de larga distancia, quienes comparten los criterios visuales de sus dioses patronos: abanicos, bordón, y taparrabos largos. Algunos de estos atributos fueron también compartidos por guerreros, puesto que tanto el guerrero como el mercader eran viajeros de distancias largas, y se movilizaban hacia la periferia del mundo en nombre de su soberano en el centro. Por lo tanto, ellos también compartían sus atributos y sus asociaciones contextuales con el soberano, y actuaban como su "doble" en movimiento. El soberano representaba la inmovilidad—representado en el acto de permanecer sentado—lo cual se asocia con el centro. Bolon Yokte representaba otra clase de viajero a través de la periferia: El movimiento del tiempo a través de los segmentos cardinales de espacio, o en un circuito a través del zenit y nadir, como en el caso de sol.

Un acercamiento a la fluidez de las imágenes de deidades puede ser posible si se consideran a los dioses como productos de sistemas culturales históricamente en contingencia, y no como un fenómeno esencial y aislado, pero si como categorías definidas por su relación entre sí, en un marco sistemático de cosmología. Al examinar estas relaciones explicaremos no solamente el traslape existente en los criterios visuales—un problema creado por nuestros propios métodos—pero más importante aún, como las deidades sirven de representaciones metafóricas en la dinámica de procesos sociopolíticos y cósmicos.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We extend our gratitude to the following scholars for their generous, constructive comments and criticisms on an earlier version of this paper: Stephen Houston, Joyce Marcus, Joel Palka, Bill Ringle, and David Stuart. David Grove and Scott O'Mack also provided helpful suggestions and corrections. Our acknowledgment of their contributions does not indicate their

agreement with all the ideas and interpretations contained herein, and we remain responsible for any errors or omissions. Nestor Quiroa translated the Spanish summary. Justin Kerr kindly supplied the rollout photographs of Maya vessels.

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