



Courtesy Allen J. Christenson

Fig. 1. Palenque Palace, House D, Pier d. This stuccoed pier shows the Maya ruler Hanab Pakal (reigned A.D. 615–683) on the left dancing out of the underworld, triumphant over death. The female figure on the right is likely his mother dressed in the beaded skirt and belt assemblage of the first mother, linking the scene to the age of first creation. The border of the panel consists of repeated glyphs read as *yax* (first, new) and *jade* (precious, sacred).

The Dance of First Beginnings: Contemporary Maya Creation Rituals in a World Context

Allen J. Christenson

A nearly universal characteristic of ancient societies is to periodically carry out ceremonies and festivals intended to renew life, particularly in connection with the creation of the world. Many of these ceremonies are tied to New Year's celebrations, linking the start of the calendar year with the beginning of time itself. Such ceremonies reinforce the notion that when the world left the hands of deity at the time of its birth, it had greater power to sustain life and nurture its inhabitants. But as with all things, the passage of time and the wear and tear of day-to-day existence inevitably results in a steady decline from the world's first pristine state of perfection. By reenacting the stages of divine creation through ritual established by ancient precedent, authorized persons can act as partners with deity in recharging the cosmos. For the most part, participants in such ceremonies consider their actions to be not mere play-acting but a genuine renewal of the cosmos by deity through human mediators. For societies that believe in the efficacy of such ceremonies, the re-creation of the world also has the effect of revitalizing the life of each individual as if he or she were the first-born child of divinity. The ceremony is therefore not so much an exercise in imitating ancient events from the age of long-dead ancestors as an opportunity to experience the more personal renewal of first creation in the souls of the living.

Traditionalist Tz'utujil-Maya in the community of Santiago Atitlán in the highlands of Guatemala continue to conduct a number of such world-renewing rituals based on mythic events set in the far-distant time of their first ancestors (fig. 2). Although couched in language that seems to imply that such myths are based on real events rather than allegories, they are seldom tied to a fixed period of time. For the most part, people in the community are not particularly interested in when things happened in the past but rather are concerned with how such events relate to their present lives and concerns. For those who practice the older faith of their Maya ancestors, human history is perceived as a procession of repetitive events having different characters and circumstances but always the same message—the world of the present is a shadow of ancient events that are both sacred and

familiar. The Tz'utujils thus continue to observe ceremonies that reenact stages in the creation of the world as a means of giving new life and purpose to their community.

Among the most powerful world-renewing ceremonies conducted in Santiago Atitlán is a ritual dance performed by a highly respected Maya priest called the *nab'eysil*. The dance takes place once each year at midnight on the evening of November 11. This date marks the end of the principal harvest season, when the Guatemalan highlands enter a long season of dry, cold weather that lasts until the coming of the rains the following April or May. Although the Guatemalan highlands are not subject to the freezing winters of more northerly latitudes, the lack of rain makes it impossible to grow most crops. The Maya thus see this season as one of sterility and universal death. The creation dance is performed in an effort to help the world survive this horror and eventually bear new life within itself (fig. 3). The ceremony is conducted by the Confraternity of San Juan, one of ten voluntary associations in the community dedicated to the worship of traditional Maya ancestral deities. Although ostensibly Roman Catholic institutions, Maya confraternities operate outside the control of the church and frequently preserve ancient Maya practices that conflict with western notions of Catholic orthodoxy. The one-room confraternity house in which the creation dance takes place is decorated to represent the interior of a sacred mountain, the dwelling place of the gods and ancestors of the community. When the *nab'eysil* priest carrying the spirit of his ancient ancestors performs the dance at the proper time and in the proper manner, he is able to re-create the world just as it was at the dawn of time.

In my work as a cultural anthropologist and art historian, I have had the opportunity to attend this ceremony on several occasions. I have also worked closely with members of a family of local Maya sculptors who incorporate ritual motifs related to Maya creationism in their art. When I discussed the creation dance with one of these artists, Nicolás Chavez Sojuel, he explained that the first ancestors performed it in his community anciently and that is why Santiago Atitlán lies at the center of everything. I asked him how long ago these things took place. Without hesitation, he asserted that the dance is as old as the world itself. Yet one of the ancestors he named as a founder of the dance was Francisco Sojuel, a legendary *nab'eysil* priest and a prominent figure in many local myths. Nicolás once told me that his father had been born only a few years after Sojuel's death and had known the great man's successor, Marco Rohuch. This circumstance puts the death of Francisco Sojuel somewhere around the turn of the twentieth century. I asked if the world had really begun so short a time ago. Puzzled over my concern for historical dates, he explained that the world has gone through many births as well as deaths. Each time the dance is performed, the world is reborn.



Courtesy Allen J. Christenson

Fig. 2. As part of the cycle of rituals intended to regenerate the world, Tz'utujil-Maya elders lead a procession of sacred images around their community, a sign that all life has been reborn.



Courtesy Allen J. Christenson

Fig. 3. The nab'eysil priest dances a sacred bundle containing the garments of a local god, called Martín, who ritually undergoes death and resurrection on an annual basis during the night of November 11.

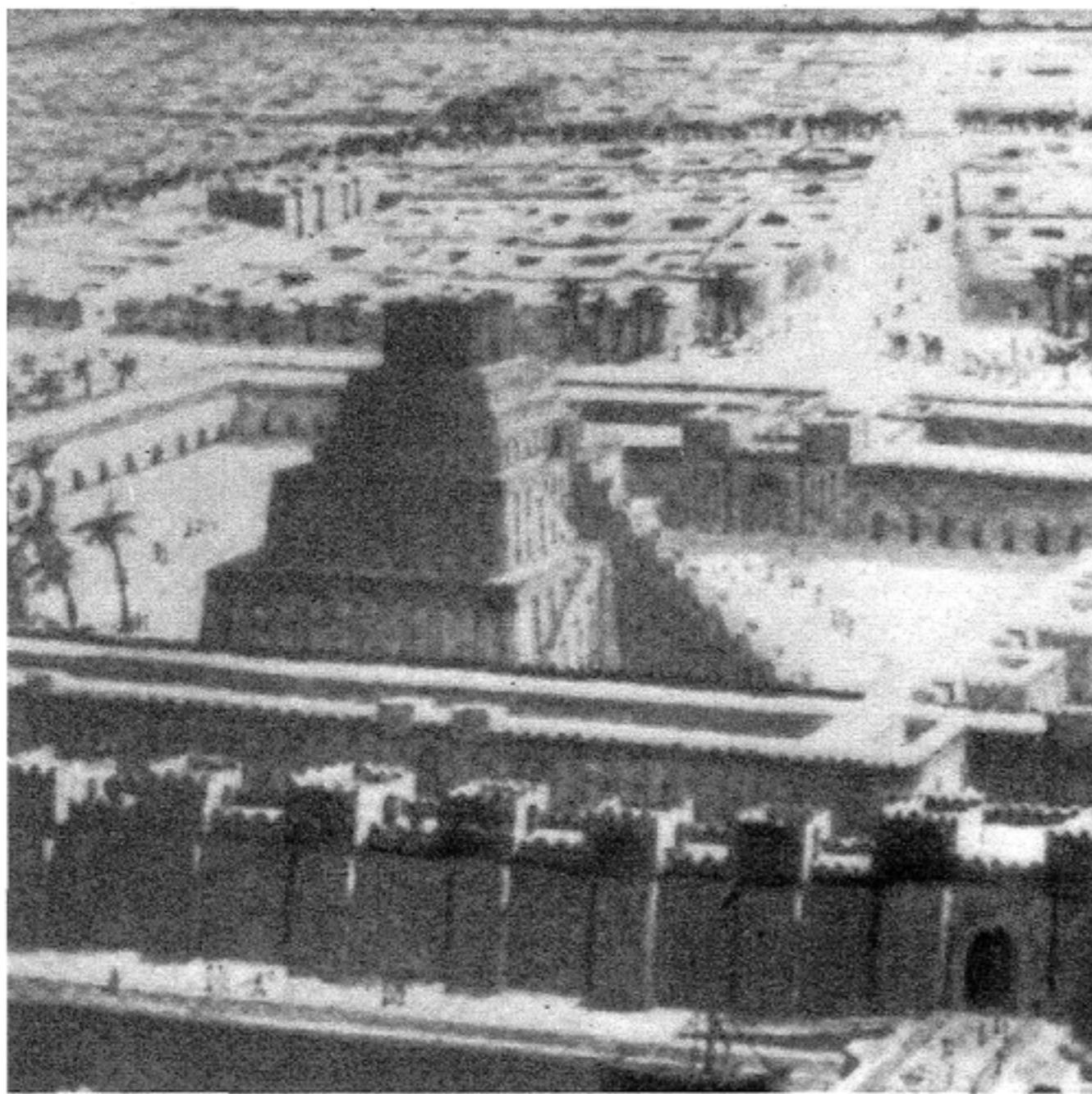


Fig. 4a. The ziggurat in Babylon was protected by a river, canal, and double wall. A processional way surrounded it. André Parrot, *Ziggurats et Tour de Babel* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1949), plate 5.

find ceremonial dramas timed to annual crisis periods in which the world undergoes a temporary death necessitating renewal through human intervention. Hugh Nibley has described at great length the ancient panegyris festivals in which entire nations gathered in massive convocations at a central place, often focused on a temple or other sacred shrine.² Among the numerous seasonal festivals known from the ancient world are the Akitu (New Year's) Festival of Babylon and Assyria, the Egyptian festival honoring the death and resurrection of Osiris, the Greek mystery rites of Eleusis in honor of Demeter and Persephone, and the Festival of Ingathering in ancient Israel.

The setting of these festivals often bears symbolic significance as well, being a representation of the center of the cosmos and the place where creation first unfolded. Mircea Eliade suggests that man always seeks to fix his abode at the “center of the world,” the point of first beginning.³ To lay out an earthly community with a temple or other sacred shrine at its center is to create a hierophany—the divine order of the cosmos as first established at the time of creation. Ceremonies performed in these sacred buildings thus transport worshippers to the center of the world, where they repeat the work of their ancestors at the beginning of time. Thus in the Enuma Elish (the Babylonian creation story), the ancient people of Babylon worshipped in a temple to the god Marduk, a structure built by the first human beings soon after the creation of the world. At the beginning of each new

For the Tz'utujils, the cosmos is conceived in living terms, undergoing birth and eventual death in endless cycles. As a result, E. Michael Mendelson, who worked in the same community nearly half a century ago, suggested that when dealing with local traditions concerning past events it is “difficult to expect history, only myths of first beginnings and the present. Between is just the passage of time.”¹

The Tz'utujil-Maya are by no means unique in their longing for a return to the beginning of things. Throughout the ancient world, we

year, the people reunited at this temple to be close to the dwelling place of the gods and to commemorate their first birth:

“Let us build a temple and call it, ‘The-Inn-Of-Rest-By-Night.’ There we will sleep at the season of the year, at the Great Festival when we form the Assembly; we will build altars for him, we build the Parakku, the Sanctuary. . . .”

When that building was finished the Annunaki [ancestors of the Babylonian people] built themselves chapels; then all came in together and Marduk set out the banquet. . . . And after the banquet in beautiful Esagila they performed the liturgy from which the universe receives its structure, the occult is made plain, and through the universe gods are assigned their places.⁴

The temple of Babylon was built in the form of a mountain, in token of the first mountain to emerge from the primordial sea (figs. 4a, 4b). It therefore stood not only as the center of Babylon the city, but as the pivotal place where time began and all creation spread outward toward the four cardinal directions.

In ancient Israel, the temple at Jerusalem was also conceived as the center of creation. The rock on which it was built orients the rest of the world because its builders likewise considered it to be the first land to emerge from the primordial waters of chaos, called forth by the voice of God:

The construction of the earth was begun at the centre, with the foundation stone of the Temple, the Eben Shetiyah, for the Holy Land is at the central point of the surface of the earth, Jerusalem is at the central point of Palestine, and the Temple is situated at the centre of the Holy City. In the sanctuary itself the Hekal [Holy of Holies] is the centre, and the holy Ark occupies the centre of the Hekal, built on the foundation stone, which thus is at the centre of the earth. Thence issued the first ray of light, piercing to the Holy Land, and from there illuminating the whole earth.⁵

According to Rabbi ben Gorion, the great temple at Jerusalem stood at the center of all things, being the “Foundation Stone of the Earth, that is, the navel of the Earth, because it is from there that the whole Earth unfolded.”⁶ One of the primary roles of the Israelite temple was to allow worshipers to return to the point of first creation in order to experience the cosmos as it



Fig. 4b. According to a contemporaneous eye-witness, Nebuchadnezzar's rendition of the ziggurat consisted of seven stages topped by the temple itself, each stage being a different color.

was at first beginning—innocent and charged with the spark of new life. The faithful who entered the temple were given the opportunity to reenact through ritual sacrifice, covenant-making, and sacred drama the paradigmatic actions of their first ancestors in the presence of the god who created them. In so doing, they were in a sense reborn to new life themselves.

Because of their association with cosmic rebirth, such ancient ceremonies were generally held at the beginning of the new year, the symbolic end of one era and the beginning of another. Such renewal demands a return to events that triggered the first creation of life. Theodore Gaster notes a remarkable pattern to these annual rituals, which are often tied to the end of the harvest and the beginning of winter, just as they are at Santiago Atitlán. This pattern is characterized by (1) a process of communal mortification such as lent, fasts, and other abstinences; (2) purgation or ritual cleansing of the city and its inhabitants to eliminate physical and spiritual impurities; (3) invigoration in which a ritual combat is staged between the powers of life and death; and (4) jubilation involving the celebration of life's victory over death.⁷

This same pattern, articulated in the myth and ceremonial practices of ancient cultures in the Old World, is also the fundamental structure of the dance of first creation at Santiago Atitlán, a dance in which participants reenact the universal combat between death and life. The climactic moment of this conflict involves the symbolic rebirth of the world from the center of the confraternity house in which it is performed. This pattern places the contemporary Maya squarely within the extended family of mankind in seeking a return to first beginnings through similar ritual means. This does not suggest the Maya had direct contact with the traditions of ancient people in the Old World, other than perhaps in the way indicated by Nibley's suggestion that certain fundamental truths are universal and central in the lives of all the world's people, although somewhat "battered . . . and distorted" in their particulars.⁸

Santiago Atitlán Rites of Mortification

Seasonal rites of rebirth are generally preceded by a period of fasting and other austerities that deny normal human activity. Such fasts mirror the loss of life-giving sustenance associated with the death of the world. In ancient Israel, these austerities took place on the Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur), held following the autumnal harvest season in connection with the celebration of the New Year in the month of Tishri: "For on that day shall the priest make an atonement for you, to cleanse you, that ye may be clean from all your sins before the Lord" (Lev. 16:29–34).⁹ On this day, all work came to a stop and the people engaged in a general fast. In many cultures, such austerities are focused in the person of the king or a priest as the

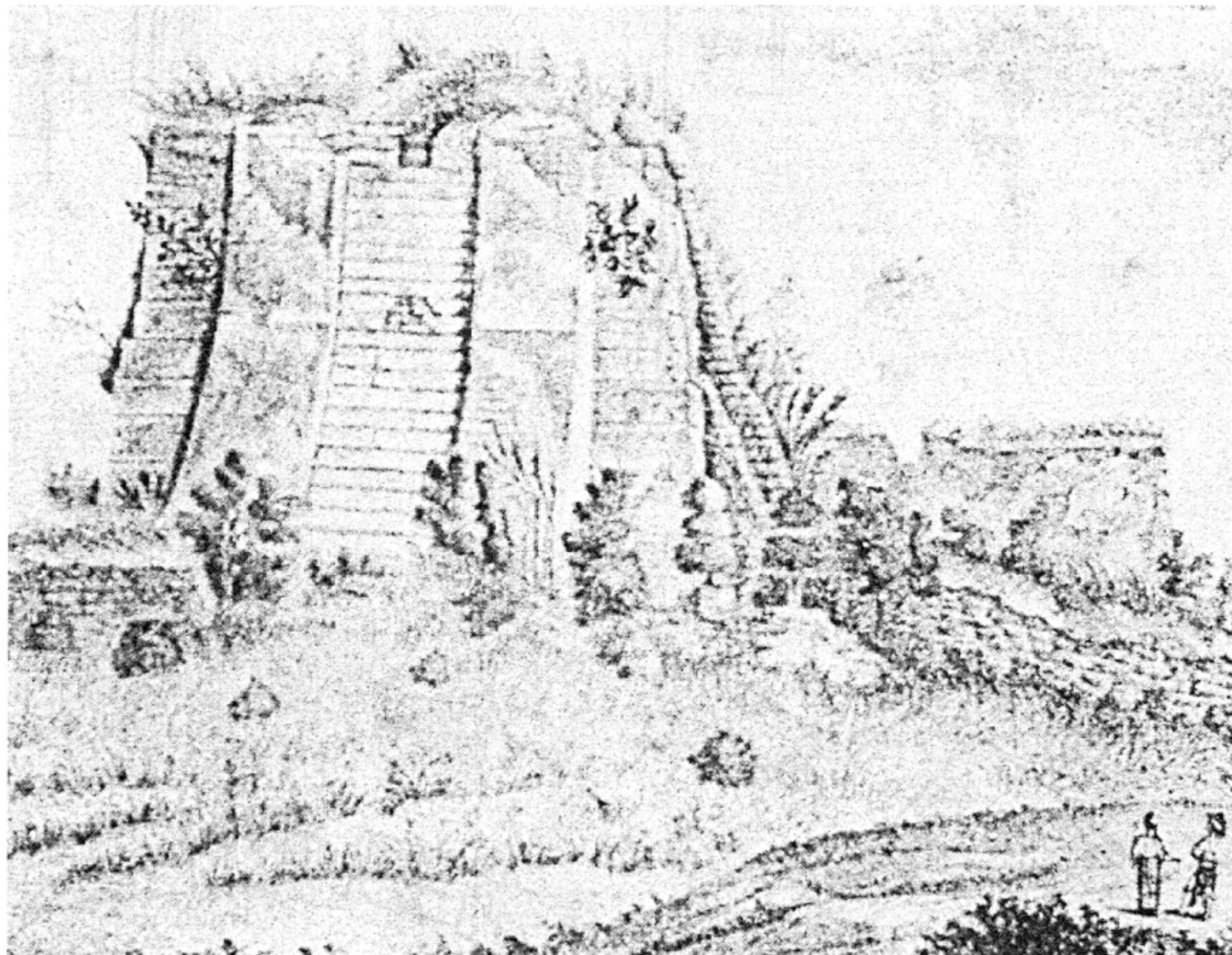


Fig. 5. Temple of Tohil at Q'umarkaj in highland Guatemala. Here the ancient Maya conducted life-renewing rituals timed to the principal maize harvest in mid-November, and kings received divine sanction to rule. Today there is little left of this once great temple; the facing stones having been stripped away for building projects in a nearby town. From a drawing made in 1834 by Rivera y Maestre.

chosen representative of all the people. Thus in ancient Israel, the high priest alone entered the Holy of Holies in the Temple on this day to offer sacrifices and pray for the atonement of his people (Lev. 16). He did so while observing a ritual fast after having spent a sleepless night studying the Torah and purifying himself.

The ancient Maya of highland Guatemala celebrated a similar festival in honor of their preeminent deity, Tohil (fig. 5). According to the *Popol Vuh*, an ancient Maya book transcribed soon after the arrival of the Spanish conquerors in the early sixteenth century, all the people made a pilgrimage to the temple of Tohil at the capital city of Q'umarkaj to honor the god and make sacrifices on one special day of the year.¹⁰ This festival took place in mid-November, timed to coincide with the principal maize harvest. It also marked the close of the solar year. At that time, “lordship” changed as well, as with the symbolic renewal of rule or the actual accession of a new king.¹¹ An early Christian missionary, Friar

Bartolomé de las Casas, described the role of a Maya priest in sixteenth-century highland Guatemala on such occasions:

The high priest, who in some provinces was the king and high lord during times of great necessity, was charged with staying in a place set apart, eating only dry maize and fruit, but not things cooked with fire, and did not enter their houses or converse with anyone. During this time of penitence, he offered many sacrifices excepting men—birds, animals, vegetables, meat, incense, etc. And he bled himself of much blood each day, sometimes from the ears, others the tongue, others from the fleshy part of the arms, others the thighs, and others the genitals. During this terrible penitence he prayed and offered on behalf of all the town to the gods, like a good prelate who carries on himself the satisfaction and troubles of all the common sinners. . . . [The night before the festival] the lord was occupied in walking stations and devotions going and coming from the temple, and slept little.¹²

In Santiago Atitlán, the dance that brings life back into the world is performed by the *nab'ey sil*, one of the community's two Maya priests who perform rituals that have world-renewing significance, as opposed to shamans (*ajkuns*), who deal with more individual concerns such as healings. Traditionally the office of *nab'ey sil* is a lifelong calling, and the person who acts in this capacity must remain ritually pure and celibate for as long as he holds the office. Shamans often invoke deceased *nab'ey sils* in the same breath with deities or local saints. It is not altogether clear what the precise relationship between deity and the *nab'ey sil* is, although the latter appears to be a corporeal manifestation of divine power.¹³ Once touched by this divinity through ritual, the *nab'ey sil* never loses its presence even in death. As a representative of all the inhabitants of the community, the *nab'ey sil* priest thus acts as a liminal figure in Tz'utujil society, bridging the material and spiritual worlds to ensure the continuation of life.

The *nab'ey sil* performs the dance of creation in a state of ritual purity, having fasted for one or two days previous and having kept a vigil in the confraternity house where the ritual is to take place. He passes the entire night without sleep. Deprivation of both food and sleep likely give the *nab'ey sil* a somewhat altered state of consciousness conducive to the ecstatic nature of the dance.

Santiago Atitlán Rites of Purgation

Among ancient societies, it was common to mark New Year's celebrations with a general cleansing of the community, particularly of the temple. Las Casas noted that, among the ancient highland Maya, people prepared their communities for two or three days prior to the great festival of Tohil, sweeping the streets and cleaning and adorning their temples with flowers of many colors. These sweepings, particularly the ashes

left from burnt offerings and incense, were then gathered and carried to a certain place apart from the dwellings.¹⁴

In Santiago Atitlán, the Tz'util-Maya make similar preparations prior to important ceremonial occasions. In the confraternity house where the dance of creation is performed, they thoroughly sweep the floor during the previous week. The sweepings are gathered up along with the burned remains of candles and incense from the altars of the confraternity house and taken in a net bag to be disposed of outside town.

Participants in these ceremonies must also arrive in a state of ritual purity. It is customary to wash immediately beforehand and to wear a fresh change of clothes. In addition, a brazier of smoking incense is passed along to each person attending the ceremony; it is waved under each arm and across the chest to symbolically cleanse him or her in preparation for the ceremony to follow.

Santiago Atitlán Rites of Invigoration

In the theology of traditionalist Maya in Santiago Atitlán, the positive, life-generating aspects of the world are focused in a deity they call Martín. Although Martín is a powerful deity, he also has his limits. Like many Maya-derived gods, he ages, falters, and dies on an annual basis. In Maya belief, all things, including gods in all their manifestations, must periodically give way to darkness and chaos before they can be reborn to new life. It is this combat between life and death in the world that initiated the first creation. The reenactment of the conflict through ritual dance brings the primordial actions of deity into present-day space and time.

While most cult images of saints and other deities at Santiago Atitlán are carved wooden images, the god invoked as Martín is a cloth bundle wrapped in green velvet called the *ruk'u'x way, ruk'u'x ya'* (heart of food, heart of water). In highland Maya languages, *heart* refers to the fundamental essence of a thing. The bundle as the heart of Martín represents the tangible expression of that god's power to sustain life (figs. 3, 6). An elder who holds a very high position in the leadership of the confraternity house where the bundle is kept describes Martín's power as all-encompassing:

Martín is the lord of everything—of the six points [the cardinal directions plus up and down], of the twelve points [the six directions of this world plus the corresponding six directions in the underworld]. He is the lord of maize and the seedlings. He gives maize. . . . He has the power to cure all illnesses. He walks the mountains where maize is hidden. The deer is his animal counterpart who carries on its back the power of life. He is the male lord of all things. Here is great power, the power of all things.

The nab'eysil priest of Santiago Atitlán performs the dance of creation in honor of Martín on November 11, the day dedicated to St. Martin of

Courtesy Allen J. Christensen



Fig. 6. The god Martín's sacred bundle, resting on the confraternity altar. Worshippers scatter flower petals over it and bathe it with incense smoke to purify it from the taint of death and corruption.

Tours on the traditional Roman Catholic calendar. But although the Tz'utujils venerate the name of Martín on that day, his cult bears little resemblance to orthodox Catholic liturgy. The people of Santiago Atitlán consider Martín to be more ancient than any other god and to be father to them all.¹⁵ They address him as King Martín, and other saints and divinities, including Jesus Christ, obey him as his servants.¹⁶ At various times, the people of Santiago Atitlán invoke him as the patron of the earth, mountains, the three volcanoes surrounding the town, ancestral spirits, deer, maize, fruit, fire, the sun, rain, thunder, wind, clouds, and the surface of nearby Lake Atitlán. These lists vary widely and serve only to emphasize the extent of his universal power. Because of the presence of the Martín bundle among them, the people of Santiago Atitlán consider their community to be the *remuxux jab'*, *remuxux uliw* (navel of the rain, navel of the earth).¹⁷

For most of the year, the Martín bundle is kept in a carved wooden chest bearing the image of a massive ear of maize with multiple split cobs (fig. 7). This special kind of maize ear is called *yo'x* (twins) and is the particular symbol for the power of Martín to produce abundant crops of maize. Tz'utujils often bring seed maize to the confraternity house to be blessed in front of the wooden chest containing the Martín bundle to ensure an abundant harvest. In so doing, traditionalist Maya in Santiago Atitlán acknowledge their belief that the bundle is the source of maize's ability to grow to new life. The rafters of the confraternity house in which the Martín bundle resides are hung with rows of split-cob maize ears as a

token of the presence of the god. In relating the significance of these split cobs, my sculptor friend Nicolás Chavez gave the following description of how a traditional maize field is laid out among his people:

After preparing the ground, but before planting, four colored candles are placed at the corners of the maize field representing the four directions of the earth. . . . In the middle of the maize field, the farmer arranges a circle of 12 or 24 candles along with incense, drinks, chocolate, sugar, and honey. At the center of the circle he then places a special kind of maize ear called *yo'x* ("twins") which splits at the end to form extra little cobs. These have been previously blessed by a shaman priest in the house where the Martín bundle is kept in its wooden chest. Many *yo'x* cobs hang from the ceiling there because this is where maize is born. These cobs are burned and their ashes are buried beneath the ground so that they can come back to life and make more maize.

The hole in the center of the maize field into which the ashes of the *yo'x* maize cobs are buried is called the *remuxux* (navel), the same name used to refer to the community itself as the center point of the world. The alcohol, chocolate, sugar, and honey placed at the center of the field are all derived from fluids taken from living sources. Ancient Maya texts refer to such substances as *itz*, the "magic stuff" that animates and sustains life. Freidel, Schele, and Parker suggest that the modern Maya use *itz* in their



Courtesy Allen J. Christenson

Fig. 7. The chest that houses the bundle of Martín. The carved design in the center is a stylized ear of maize with numerous split cobs, a symbol of Martín's power to multiply life-sustaining maize for his people.

Courtesy Allen J. Christenson



Fig. 8. The Dance of the Deer. The dancer on the left wears a very old, nearly hairless animal skin reputed to be that of a jaguar. He is pawing the back of another dancer wearing a deerskin. The dance culminates in the “death” and subsequent “resurrection” of the deer as the animal counterpart of the god Martín.

confraternity altar to “give them power.” He then lays the bundle on the altar where other elders cense it with copal incense smoke, spray it with cologne (the preferred brand these days is Brut for Men), and sprinkle it with flower petals.

The conflict between life and death, a characteristic of renewal festivals, is then played out in the form of the Dance of the Deer. This is performed by two young men wearing very old and nearly hairless jaguar skins and two others wearing deer pelts. These skins are normally kept on a table at the southern end of the confraternity house. The first jaguar impersonator carries a small stuffed squirrel called the *ral b’alam* (child of jaguar), which he uses to claw at the back of the principal deer dancer (fig. 8). Participants insist that the squirrel is to be understood as an effigy jaguar hunting and killing the deer. The dancers once used a stuffed mountain cat, an example of which also lies on the deerskin table, but these are hard to find now, and the head of the confraternity does not wish to have the ancient one damaged by overuse. Nicolás identifies the principal deer dancer as the “substitute” of Martín and that the skin, skull, and antlers represent the body of the god in his animal form. Indeed, prior to the

ceremonies in a reciprocal way.¹⁸ With it they open a portal to the other world to nourish and sustain the divinities who reside there. In return, the offerings charge the earth with sacred power so that it may produce abundant harvests in season as well as sustain all life in general. The “death” and burial of maize serve as a metaphor for the nature of the world, which must also be carefully tended and nourished through human agency to ensure its rebirth to new life.

In preparation for the Day of Martín, the nab’eysil priest removes the Martín bundle from its chest and holds it briefly in front of each of the saints on the

dance, the nab'eysil priest blessed the deerskin to be used in the dance, addressing it as "King Martín, lord of the three levels, lord of rain, lord of maize, and lord of all the mountains."

At the beginning of the Dance of the Deer, all four participants kneel in a line, the first deer at the head, facing the doorway to the east. To the beat of a split-log drum, the dancers invoke the power of that direction to aid them in their performance. They also raise their heads to call on "Heart of the Sky" and kiss the ground while praying to "Heart of the Earth." The procedure is repeated in a similar fashion for each of the other cardinal directions. The performers then dance rapidly around the room hopping from foot to foot and periodically whirling around in place as they mark a generally clockwise course around the interior of the confraternity house. As they dance, the jaguars make loud whistling sounds while roughly pawing at the backs of the deer with the little stuffed animal. The deer in turn cry out and try to escape from them. The jaguar impersonators eventually "kill" the principal deer dancer, whom they carry back to the altar as if he were a sacrificial offering.

The death of the deer occurs at about midnight, the hour when the Maya believe the power of the underworld is at its greatest. At this point, the dancers return their costumes to the table where they are normally kept, and the nab'eysil begins his portion of the ritual. First, all the doors and windows of the confraternity house are closed and bolted shut. Participants suggest that if the Martín bundle were to be unwrapped with the doors or windows left open its power would rush out and destroy the world in a great windstorm.¹⁹ Having secured the room, the nab'eysil then opens the Martín bundle and removes a very old beige garment with a painted pattern resembling tufts of hair. The nab'eysil likened this garment to the deer pelts used in the Dance of the Deer but said it is much older and more powerful. The head of the confraternity also removes from the Martín chest an old wood carving of a recumbent animal painted with black spots like those of a jaguar. This small image plays the same role in the nab'eysil's ritual as that of the jaguar sacrificers in the Dance of the Deer. The nab'eysil thus represents the sacrificial deer of Martín, who offers his life so that the world might be reborn.²⁰

Dressed in the garment of Martín, the nab'eysil priest kneels to the four directions in the same order and fashion as the deer and jaguar dancers (fig. 9). While kneeling, the nab'eysil invokes the power of Martín with a long series of titles, including "Lord of Rain, Lord of Maize, Lord of the Sun, Lord of Clouds, Heart of the Earth, Heart of the Sky, Heart of the Mountains, and Heart of the Plains." The nab'eysil then dances three slow and stately circuits around the confraternity house in a clockwise direction, followed by the head of the confraternity, who is holding the effigy jaguar.

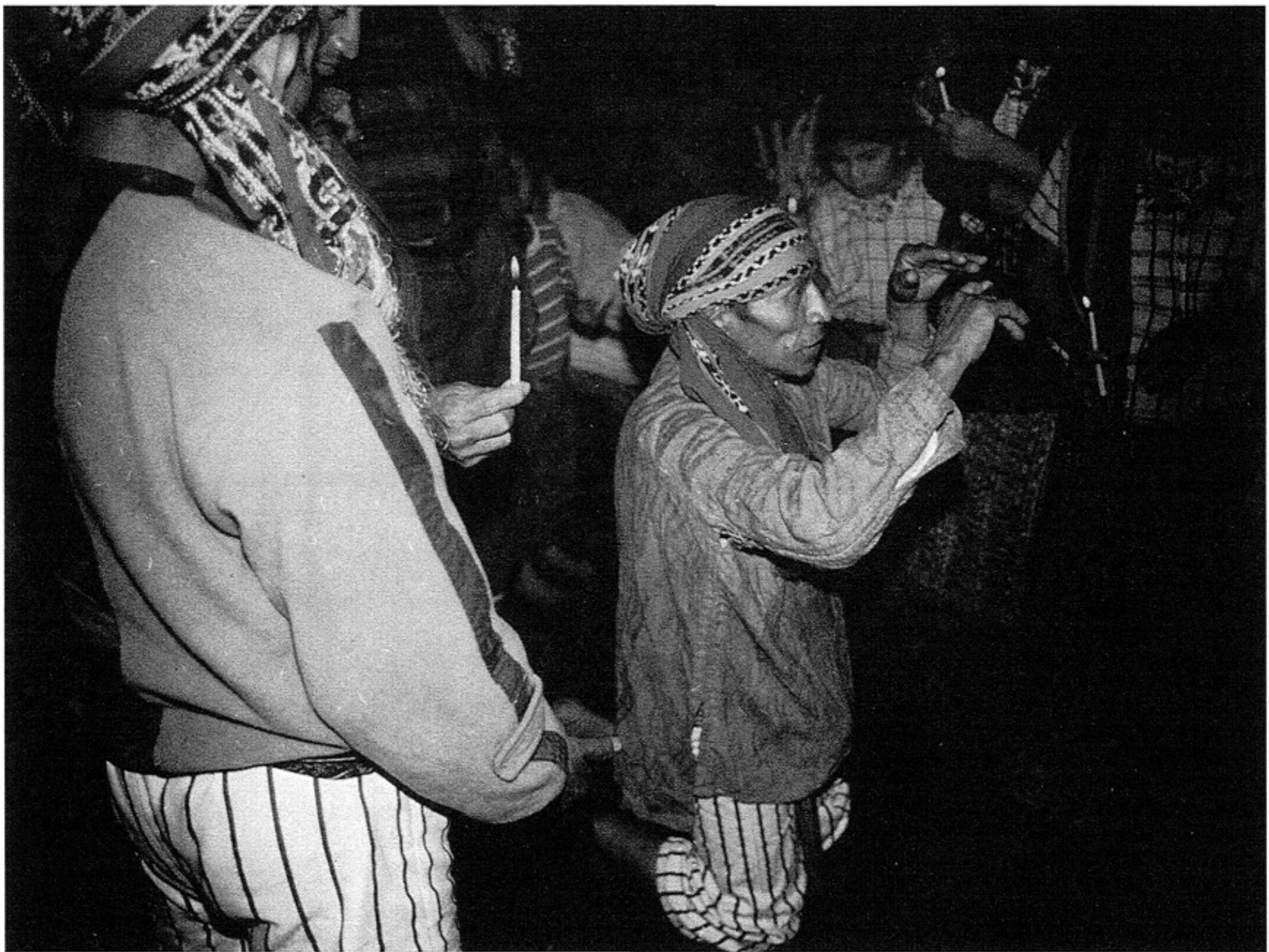


Fig. 9. The nab'eysil priest, wearing one of the garments of Martín, kneels to pray towards the east.

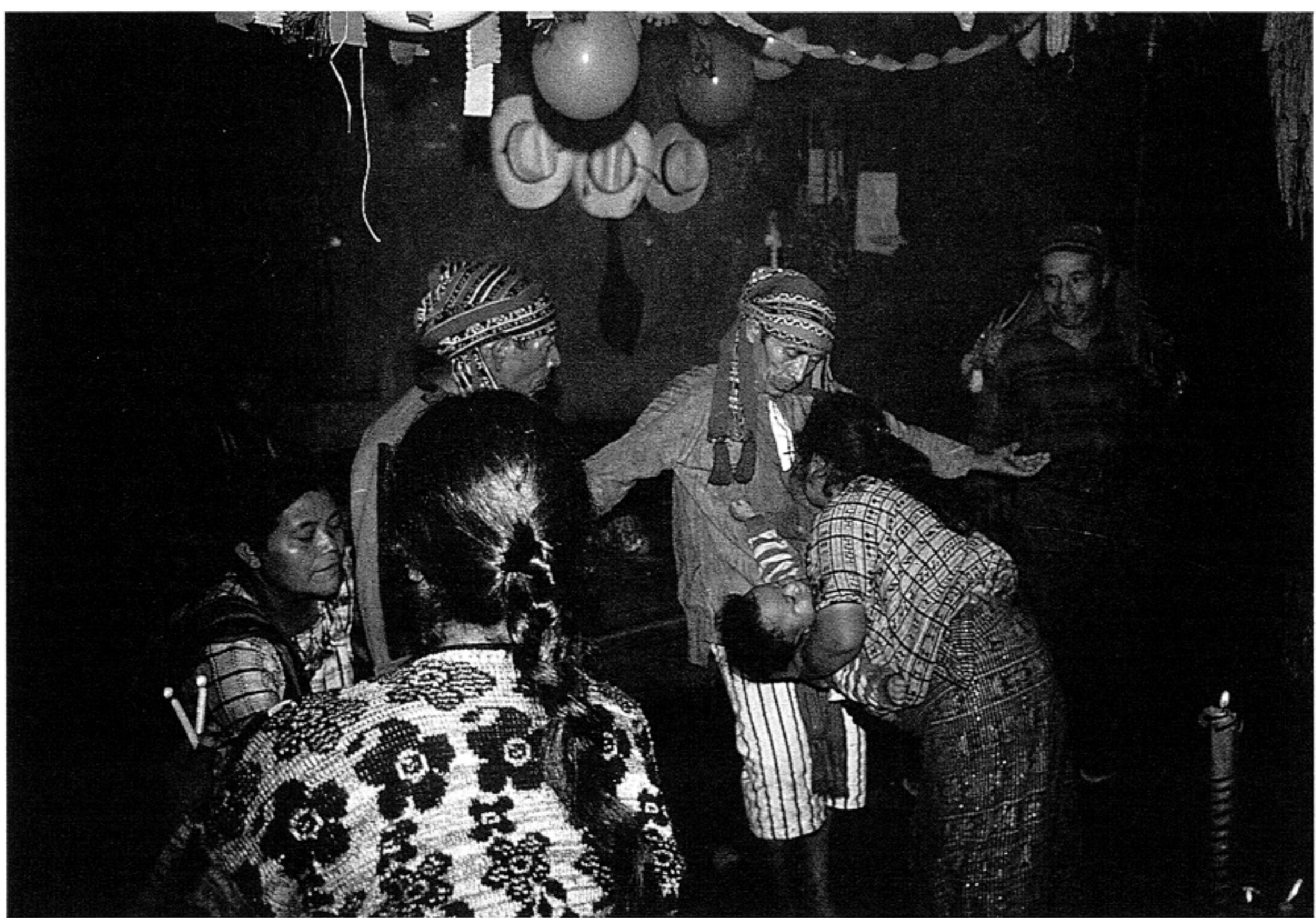


Fig. 10. The nab'eysil priest adopts a crucifixion-like pose and receives petitioners who approach to kiss the garment of Martín. In so doing, they participate in the resurrection of their god and symbolically receive new life themselves.

The steps are linked to the beat of a split-log drum played by one of the principal women of the community.

At the end of the third round of the dance, the nab'eysil stands before a table near the center of the confraternity house with his arms outstretched in a crucifixion-like pose. All present approach the nab'eysil holding candles and kiss the Martín garment three times in the navel area (fig. 10). One of the confraternity members explained that the nab'eysil had been “killed” like Jesus Christ and that is why he holds his arms in the form of a cross. Yet Christ is also conflated with Martín as a maize deity. Mendelson wrote that during a performance of the Martín dance in 1952, the first jaguar dancer declared that “Jesus Christ and Mary are intertwined with King Martín, the Sacred World, the sky, the earth, and the sons of God.”²¹ This interpretation is consistent with a comment made to me by a participant in the ritual who suggested that the pose of the nab'eysil represents not a cross but a maize plant as it grows out of the earth. The nab'eysil's stance is therefore a symbolic token of renewed life. The position of the nab'eysil's outstretched arms is also common in ancient Maya depictions of the maize god emerging out of the underworld at the time of first creation, numerous examples of which may be found on painted ceramic vessels as well as carved stone monuments dating back many centuries prior to the Spanish conquest (fig. 11).²²



Fig. 11. This carved panel from the Lower Temple of the Jaguars at Chichen Itza depicts the maize god, with corn plants sprouting from his headdress, emerging from a cleft in the earth monster's head. The god's arms are outstretched in a position similar to that of the nab'eysil. Eduard Seler, *Gesammelte Abhandlungen zur Amerikanischen Sprach-und Altertumskunde*, 5 vols. (Graz, Austria: Akademische Druck-U. Verlagsanstalt, 1961), 5: fig. 192.

Courtesy Allen J. Christenson



Fig. 12. The confraternity house rafters heavily adorned with evergreen boughs, tropical fruits, and stuffed wild animals. The decoration is meant to suggest the verdant slopes of a mountain, with the house itself representing a sacred cave within.

The confraternity house in which the Martín dance takes place also reflects creation imagery. Houses dedicated for ritual use in Santiago Atitlán represent the interior of sacred mountains where the saints and other divinities live and where rain clouds are born. When worshippers enter such houses, they conceptually pass into a symbolic cave where sacred beings live. The rafters of the confraternity house where the Martín bundle is kept are adorned with the symbolic bounty of a fertile mountainside to reinforce this symbolism. Among the decorations are a variety of stuffed animals, tropical fruits, gourds, chocolate pods, and small sprigs of *pixlaq*, a plant with tiny round leaves brought from the nearby mountains (fig. 12). With time these leaves shed and fall, a phenomenon that traditionalists liken to the fall of rain or dripping water inside caves. The gridlike pattern of plants and fruit runs north-south and east-west, representing the basic structure of the world. According to local myth, the fabric of the cosmos was first woven on a great loom by the goddess Yaxper, the patron of weaving, the moon, and midwives.²³ The warp and woof of the loom established the network of intersecting lines that give structure and support to all things. The most important image of Yaxper in Santiago Atitlán resides in a glass case located just to the right of the Martín bundle chest (fig. 13).

In contrast to the grid pattern of these decorations, eight garlands of pine radiate downward and outward from the center of the ceiling to the four corners and the center of each of the walls of the room. The ends of the garlands represent the cardinal and intercardinal directions, an indication that the power generated in the confraternity extends to the edges of the world. The geometric configuration of the confraternity's ceiling decoration does not reveal itself unless one stands at the center of the room and looks directly upward (fig. 14). From any other location, the hanging plants and stuffed animals overlap and obscure their very precise and systematic arrangement (see fig. 12). From the center of the room, however, the decorated rafters give the viewer the impression of being in the heart of a mountain or more specifically the base of a cone-shaped volcano with its verdant slopes encompassing him or her on all sides. The floor beneath this center point is devoid of furnishings of any kind so that visitors are free to experience the illusion without obstacle.

The center of the confraternity house is also the focus of the Dance of the Deer and the subsequent dance of the nab'eysil as he wears the garments of Martín. In both, the dance is begun by kneeling outward to acknowledge the mountain lords that dominate the four cardinal directions. The purpose of the ensuing dance is to center the power of the



Courtesy Allen J. Christenson

Fig. 13. The principal image of Yaxper, the creator goddess who wove the fabric of the world on her loom at the beginning of time. Her winding headdress represents an umbilicus that ties holy women to the center of creation.

Courtesy Allen J. Christenson

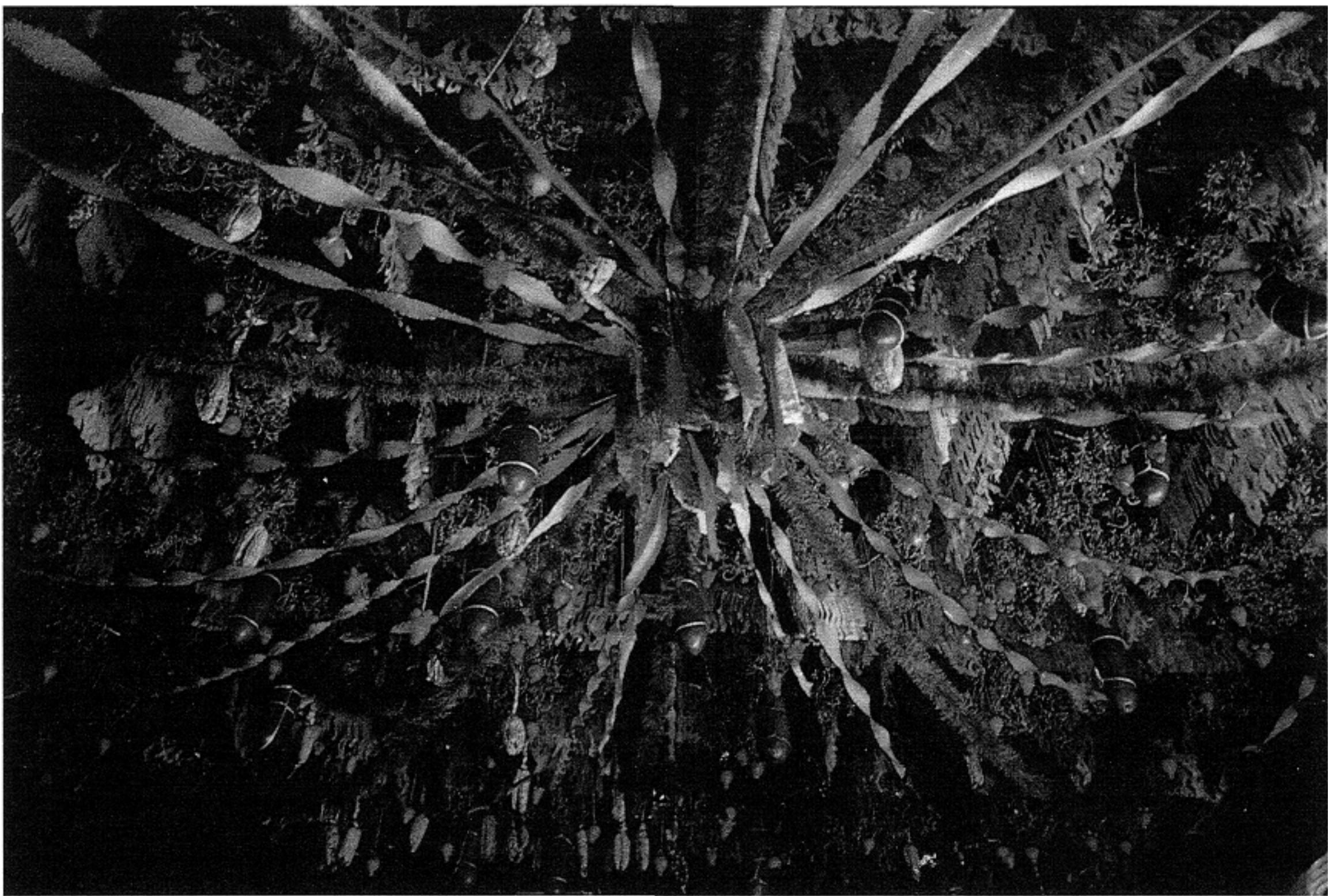


Fig. 14. The rafters of the confraternity house as seen from directly below the center. From this angle, the precise geometry of the decoration is revealed extending outward to the four cardinal directions.

four corners of the world so that it may be renewed through the rebirth of Martín. As the nab'eysil dances with the bundle or wears the garments of Martín, he follows a clockwise circuit that keeps his dominant right side directed toward the center of the room. For the Tz'utujils, the right side (*ijklq'a*, "adorned hand") represents life and strength, while the left (*xkon* or *ch'u'jq'a*, "crazy hand") signifies death, weakness, and disorder. The center of the room is also where the nab'eysil stations himself for those present to pay homage to the newly resurrected Martín.

Whether the nab'eysil's posture is seen as a token of Martín, a newly-sprouted maize plant, or the Crucifixion, the symbolism of a resurrected deity remains the same. Mendelson noted that through the story of Christ the Tz'utujils celebrate the death and rebirth of their own traditional gods.²⁴ These devotions occur, not because the Maya perceive their indigenous gods as equivalent in all respects to Christ and the saints, but because each set of deities carries out similar roles in society. The Tz'utujils choose to emphasize these similarities rather than the differences. The people of Santiago Atitlán seldom consider whether the components of a myth or ritual are Christian or Maya. The ritual is simply part of the religion that the Tz'utujils believe has existed since the beginning of time as ordained by all the gods and saints, including Martín and Christ. But the ritual must be

continued according to the patterns set by the Tz'utujil ancestors. In the past, when orthodox Catholics and priests tried to weed out “pagan” elements in local rituals, traditionalists labeled the reformers as “Protestants” who had no authority to interfere with the practice of the indigenous Maya faith. In the traditionalist view, rituals like the Martín dance follow what the ancestors have always done in the past and therefore constitute a theology that is much older than the Roman Catholic form of Christianity.

Santiago Atitlán Rites of Jubilation

Among ancient societies, the victory of life over death was celebrated with feasting and other forms of jubilation.²⁵ The same is true among participants in the Dance of Martín. Having brought new life back to the world, the images of the confraternity saints and other sacred objects are subsequently taken out into the courtyard and danced to the beat of a lively marimba band. To the degree that they are able after such a long and exhausting night, participants spend the remainder of the day feasting and drinking to celebrate the rebirth of life.

The morning after the nab'eysil performed his sacred dance, he told me that because Martín had danced through him, the world was new again and the rains would come to make the maize grow:

When I dance I feel nothing but the great weight of Martín's garment. I don't see the people around me because I am filled with the power of Martín and the ancestors and I dance in their world. Few can bear the weight of Martín's garment. For others it would cause them to fall dead.

In the eyes of the nab'eysil, the dance is not a symbolic rebirth of the cosmos but a genuine creative act in which time folds inward on itself to reveal the actions of deity in the primordial world. Through the dance and the sacred garments that he wears, the priest transforms himself into Martín in order to reenact the creation of the world at the dawn of time. Although the outward forms of this dance have undoubtedly changed dramatically over the centuries, it is not different conceptually from dance rituals performed by the Maya prior to the Spanish Conquest. For the Maya of the Classic period (ca. A.D. 200–900), ritual dance also served as a means by which humans transformed themselves into supernaturals in order to replicate their actions, particularly in connection with events that began the world.²⁶

As is the case with the nab'eysil of Santiago Atitlán, the ancient Maya impersonation of deity through sacred dance was “not so much a theatrical illusion as a tangible, physical representation of a deity.”²⁷ Mary Helms notes that those who possess sacred ancestral objects and manipulate them in conjunction with songs or dances present “tangible evidence that they

themselves possess or command the unique qualities and ideals generally expected of persons who have ties with distant places of supernatural origins and, therefore, are themselves 'second creators.'"²⁸ Such ancient Maya dances were generally performed by ruling lords dressed in the guise of gods or founding ancestors who were linked to specific creation events (fig. 15). Often these dances acted out stages in the history of the rebirth of the maize god, Hun-Nal-Yeh (One Maize Revealed), who inaugurated the creation of the world after emerging from a clefted sacred mountain to raise up the sky (see fig. 10). The Maya believe this mythic act took place on the date 13.0.0.0.0 4 Ahau 8 Kumk'u of their Long Count Calendar (equivalent to August 13, 3114 B.C.), inaugurating the present world.

Among the ancient Maya, elements of the myth of the maize god's rebirth and subsequent creation of the world were apparently performed as part of annual New Year's observances as well as the accession of new kings. Thus on two separate stone tablets, as well as on the stuccoed piers facade of the Palace Complex at the Classic Maya site of Palenque, kings are shown dancing out of the primordial waters of the underworld, wearing garments characteristic of the Maize God's twin sons (see fig. 1). These twins, who later became the founders of the mythic Maya dynasty of kings, brought the life-sustaining power of their father into the world. This ancient royal dance may be analogous to the modern

Fig. 15. Painted vessel by the ancient Maya artist Ah Maxam. The vessel shows the maize god, or a king dressed in the guise of the maize god, with one foot raised, dancing the world into existence. On his back is an elaborate assemblage representing the fabric of the cosmos. Rollout Photograph © Justin Kerr File no. K633.



Tz'utujil-Maya ritual of creation in which the nab'eysil as the representative of divine lordship dances clothed in the guise of Martín, the patron deity of maize.

Conclusion

The ritual dance of Martín represents a translation of contemporary Tz'utujil-Maya theology into material form. This theology is based on a world view that all things, both animate and inanimate, require periodic renewal through ritual performance to reenact the origin of the cosmos. As such, the dance performed by the nab'eysil of Santiago Atitlán is consistent with world-renewing ceremonies characteristic of many of the world's peoples. Although the cultures cited in this study have disparate backgrounds, they share a need to experience on a periodic basis the divine act of first creation. They accomplish this through eminently social events that reflect collective realities, making the realm of the sacred tangible for those in attendance. Participants in turn feel themselves to have been present at the moment of first beginnings and trust that the experience represents a rebirth of life-generating power in their own lives.

Allen J. Christenson (allen_christenson@byu.edu) is Assistant Professor in the Department of Humanities, Classics, and Comparative Literature at Brigham Young University. He holds a BS, DDS, MA, and a Ph.D. degree, the latter two in pre-columbian art history at the University of Texas at Austin. He has published *Popol Vuh: The Mythic Sections—Tales of First Beginnings from the Ancient K'iche Maya* (Provo, Utah: BYU Studies/FARMS, 2000), and has a book forthcoming on the art and culture of the Tz'utujil-Maya of Santiago Atitlán, the result of ethnographic and linguistic work beginning in 1978 in the Guatemala highlands.

1. E. Michael Mendelson, *Religion and World-View in a Guatemalan Village*, Microfilm Collection of Manuscripts on Middle American Cultural Anthropology, no. 52 (Chicago: University of Chicago Library, 1957), 416.
2. Hugh Nibley, "The Hierocentric State," in *The Ancient State: The Rulers and The Ruled*, vol. 10 of *The Collected Works of Hugh Nibley*, ed. Don E. Norton (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1991), 99-147; Hugh W. Nibley, *Nibley on the Timely and the Timeless: Classic Essays of Hugh W. Nibley*, Religious Studies Monograph, vol. 1 (Salt Lake City: Publishers Press, 1978), 24-41; Hugh Nibley, *Temple and Cosmos: Beyond This Ignorant Present*, vol. 12 of *The Collected Works of Hugh Nibley*, ed. Don Norton (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1992), 23, 47-58.
3. Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion*, trans. Willard R. Trask (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World Inc., 1959), 22; Mircea Eliade, *The Myth of the Eternal Return or, Cosmos and History*, trans. Willard R. Trask (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1974), 17-18.
4. Enuma Elish, quoted in Nancy K. Sandars, *Poems of Heaven and Hell from Ancient Mesopotamia* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England: Penguin Books, 1971), 98-99.
5. Louis Ginzberg, *The Legends of the Jews*, trans. Henrietta Szold, vol. 1 (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1937), 12.

6. Eliade, *Sacred and the Profane*, 44.
7. Theodor H. Gaster, *Thespis: Ritual, Myth, and Drama in the Ancient Near East* (New York: Harper and Row, 1966), 26–44.
8. Nibley, *Timely and the Timeless*, 41.
9. Hayyim Schauss, *Guide to Jewish Holy Days: History and Observance*, trans. Samuel Jaffe (New York: Schocken Books, 1938), 112–21.
10. Dennis Tedlock, trans., *Popol Vuh*, rev. ed. (New York: Touchstone, 1996), 170, 191–93.
11. Robert M. Carmack and James L. Mondloch, *El Título de Totonicapan* (México: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 1983), 195–96, 252; Robert M. Carmack, *Quichéan Civilization* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973).
12. Fray Bartolomé de las Casas, *Apologética historia sumaria de las Indias*, 2 vols. (México: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 1967), 2.clxxvii.216–17, translation by Allen J. Christenson.
13. E. Michael Mendelson, “A Guatemalan Sacred Bundle,” *Man* 58, no. 170 (1958): 124; E. Michael Mendelson, “The King, the Traitor, and the Cross: An Interpretation of a Highland Maya Religious Conflict,” *Diogenes* 21 (1958): 5; E. Michael Mendelson, *Los escándalos de Maximón*, pub. 19 (Guatemala: Seminario de Integración Social Guatemalteca, 1965), 91.
14. Las Casas, *Apologética historia sumaria de las Indias*, 2.clxxvii.214–16.
15. Mendelson, *Religion and World-View*, 462; Mendelson, “The King, the Traitor, and the Cross,” 5.
16. Mendelson, *Religion and World-View*, 454; Sandra L. Orellana, *The Tzutujil Mayas: Continuity and Change, 1250–1630* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1984), 106; Peter Canby, *The Heart of the Sky: Travels Among the Maya* (New York: Harper Collins, 1992), 325.
17. Mendelson, “Guatemalan Sacred Bundle,” 123.
18. David Freidel, Linda Schele, and Joy Parker, *Maya Cosmos: Three Thousand Years on the Shaman’s Path* (New York: Morrow, 1993), 51.
19. Mendelson, *Los escándalos de Maximón*, 58.
20. Mendelson, “Guatemalan Sacred Bundle,” 124.
21. Mendelson, *Religion and World-View*, 215.
22. Michel Quenon and Genevieve Le Fort, “Rebirth and Resurrection in Maize God Iconography,” in Justin Kerr, ed., *The Maya Vase Book, Volume 5* (New York: Kerr Associates, 1997), 893–95.
23. Nathaniel Tarn and Martin Prechtel, “Constant Inconstancy: The Feminine Principle in Atiteco Mythology,” in *Symbol and Meaning beyond the Closed Community: Essays in Mesoamerican Ideas*, ed. Gary Gossen, vol. 1 of *Studies on Culture and Society* (Albany, N.Y.: Institute for Mesoamerican Studies, 1986), 173–84; Martin Prechtel and Robert S. Carlsen, “Weaving and Cosmos amongst the Tzutujil Maya,” *Res* 15 (1988): 123.
24. Mendelson, *Los escándalos de Maximón*, 138.
25. Gaster, *Thespis*, 43–44.
26. Freidel, Schele, and Parker, *Maya Cosmos*, 260–62; Mendelson, “Guatemalan Sacred Bundle,” 124.
27. Stephen Houston and David Stuart, “Of Gods, Glyphs and Kings: Divinity and Rulership among the Classic Maya,” *Antiquity* 70 (1996): 299.
28. Mary W. Helms, *Craft and the Kingly Ideal: Art, Trade, and Power* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1993), 49.