



Texas Notes on Precolumbian Art, Writing, and Culture

No. 52

March 1993

Palenque and Lacandon Maya Cosmology

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The Lacandon are the last of the non-Christian Maya who live in the rainforest of southeastern Chiapas Mexico, about 100 km. south of the Classic Period site of Palenque. Lacandon mythology is intimately intertwined with Palenque. They believe it was formerly home to their gods and have a variety of myths which describe the actions which occurred in structures at the site. More importantly, as advances in the translation of Palenque's hieroglyphic inscriptions have been made it has become increasingly clear that the myths are not just quaint folktales, but actually refer to specific features of the site. Consequently, an examination of these myths can provide new insights into the site's significance in Mayan religion and the influence of Classic-Period Mayan cosmology on contemporary Lacandon beliefs.

There are approximately 500 Lacandon living in the Selva Lacandona, most of whom are divided among three communities, Lacanha, Mensábak, and Najá. The first two communities have experimented with conversion to Protestant Christianity in the last twenty years, but the people of Najá have steadfastly maintained their traditional belief system and religious rituals. As documented in previous works (McGee 1984, 1987, 1988, 1990) the ritual practices of these non-Christian Lacandon possess dramatic parallels with the religious rites of the prehispanic Maya. In particular, the practice of symbolic human sacrifice, ritualized use of symbolic blood and flesh, and consumption of the intoxicating beverage balché are mainstays of Lacandon religious rituals which correspond to Mayan practices witnessed by the Spaniards in the early sixteenth century.

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Up until recently ethnographers have had to rely primarily on accounts written by Spanish missionaries, soldiers, or people educated in Spanish mission schools for information about the lifestyle and religious beliefs of the Maya at the time of the conquest. Many of the beliefs and practices of Classic-period Maya civilization could only be guessed at, or extrapolated from Colonial-Period sources. But the recent advances of linguists, epigraphers, and archeologists in translating Mayan hieroglyphics have opened up the world of the ancient Maya. It is now possible for scholars to take a giant step back in time and read what the Classic-Period Maya wrote about themselves, no longer relying on secondary sources or guesses based on fragmentary archeological evidence. This new information is of particular importance to ethnographers studying modern Maya peoples such as the Lacandon, for it allows us to study how Mayan societies have changed, or what elements have remained stable, through the long turbulent periods of Maya history.

As the archeological and dynastic history of Palenque has been recovered it has become clear that there are striking correspondences between Lacandon mythology and Classic Period Maya architecture and cosmology as it is recorded at this site. Although I have long been familiar with the Lacandon myth provided below, my own understanding of its relationship to the site of Palenque came about through speaking to one of Linda Schele's graduate seminars on the Maya, and Kent Reilly's patient insistence that ancient Maya architecture did not just house ritual action, but also was a model of Maya cosmology and religious beliefs. It was this background which led me to reexamine the corpus of Lacandon myths that I and others have collected over the last decade. I have found that these myths are rich in ritual symbolism that is rooted in the ancient Maya past, and that it is only through an understanding of Maya history (as recorded in hieroglyphic texts), linguistics, and archeology that one can develop a full appreciation for the significance of these myths. Consequently, the principal focus of this paper is to document some of the similarities between one episode in the Lacandon creation myth (transcribed by Bruce 1974) with the architecture and hieroglyphic inscriptions of the Cross Group at Palenque.

In addition to the content of the myth provided below, the structure of its performance also has significance for students of the ancient Maya. The Lacandon are not literate, thus, their corpus of mythology consists of oral performances. As with many Maya peoples Lacandon myths are told with special formalized linguistic structures which are not found in normal speech. Parts of the story below are recited in parallel couplets and triplets which correspond to the written structure of many of Palenque's hieroglyphic texts. Additionally, to understand a Lacandon myth one must realize that Lacandon storytellers are not constrained by a western sense of narrative order. Although I have numbered the verses for easy reference to the text the myth is not told in chronological order. Words highlighted in the text are linguistic markers which Lacandon storytellers use to denote a change of time or place, much like starting a new paragraph in a written text. In particular, the word *paytan* is a formulaic utterance which announces the beginning of a myth's recitation, or a change of time period. Thus the creation of the god's houses at Palenque which is described in verse 34, occurs simultaneously with the firming of the earth and creation of the forest starting at verse 53. Although the story refers to events in the distant past the narrator switches back and forth between the present and past tenses. This again is a conventional feature of Lacandon mythtelling and indicates the material's seriousness. In particular, when the narrator speaks in the present tense as if he were the god character in the story, this indicates that a listener should pay close attention to the story. Finally, as Maxwell (1990) demonstrated, events of paramount significance are often featured through the use of direct quotes. Items in brackets are the author's clarifications to the text.

1. *Paytan K'akoch*
In the beginning [there was only] K'akoch¹
2. *K'akoch ma' lah u k'ul*
K'akoch but no other gods
3. *Ma' yohel hach winik*
Real people [Lacandon] did not know him

4. Āk Yum u yohel K'akoch
Our Lords [gods] knew K'akoch
5. Lati' K'akoch u k'ul
It is K'akoch who is their god.
6. K'akoch tu mentah lu'um.
K'akoch made the earth
7. Ma' tsoy lu'um tu mentah
The earth he made was not good
8. Ma' chich lu'um
The earth is not firm
9. Māna'an k'ax
There is no forest
10. Māna'an tunich
There is no stone
11. Chen lu'um yetel ha' tu mentah
He made only earth with water
12. Bāhe' tu mentah k'in
Now he made the sun
- [The word bāhe' above indicates a change of time or place has occurred. The use of the word in verses 12 and 14 indicates that the creation of the sun and plumeria flower took place at different times than the main events recounted in the story.]
13. Tu mentah Āk Nah ti' k'in
He made Our Mother for the sun²
14. Bāhe' tu mentah bāk nikte'
Now he made the plumeria flower
15. U sukun āk yum pāytan toop'ih
The older brother of our Lord [Lord of the Underworld] is the first born³
16. Pachil Ākyantho' Hachākyum toop'ih
Ākyantho' and Hachākyum are born after Sukun⁴
17. Chen bāk nikte' tu yilah
He saw only the plumeria flower
18. Māna'an k'ax
There is no forest
19. Ku yensik u yok lu'um Hachākyum
Hachākyum lowers his feet to the ground ya'alah
"ma' hach tsoy".and said "this is not good."
20. Sukunyum ma' yemen ti' kula'an
Sukunyum did not descend from his seat "tu toop' bāk nikte'"on the plumeria blossom
21. Ākyantho' ma' yemen
Ākyantho' did not descend
22. Hachākyum lati' ne poch u yemen
Hachākyum really wanted to descend "yok'ol lu'um" to the ground
23. Emi Hachākyum
Hachākyum descends
24. Lik'i ch'ik tal
He stands upright
25. Bin u ximbal ti'
He goes to walk around
26. U t'ānik u sukun
He calls his older brother
27. "Ko'oten k-āk ximbalteh āh"I'm going let us go walking you can kuyik wa ne tsoy lu'um."
sense if the earth is good"
28. U sukun Āk Yum u nuk-ik
The older brother of Our Lord answers "Bay wit-sin." "Ok little brother"
29. Lāh emi Sukunyum yetel Ākyantho'
They all descended Sukunyum with Ākyantho'
30. Bāk nikte' tu pātah toh yahaw
They left the grand plumeria blossom
31. Man
They pass [walk along]
32. Yilik

- They saw it
33. Way kabäl xokol ha'
Here lower near the water [Palenque]
- [The word paytan below indicates that a break from the previous narrative is occurring and the story has jumped to a different time.]
34. Păytan Hachăkyum tu yilah ũ'an
In the beginning Hachăkyum and his older yatoch yetel Sukunkyum brother saw their houses' location.
35. Hachăkyum u ya'alik
Hachăkyum says "Lati' ah katoch tin t'an."
"here is your house I say".
36. Sukunkyum u nukik "ma' in wobel."
Sukunkyum answers "I don't know."
37. Hachăkyum u ya'alik "Lati"
Hachăkyum says [to Ăkyantho] "This is ah katoch your house."
38. Măx winik.
There were not yet people.
39. Pachil u yilik K'akoch Hachăkyum
Later Hachăkyum sees K'akoch
- [Pachil, like paytan and băhe', is a marker for a change of subject or time. Used here it indicates a change of scene from the previous narration.]
41. "Eh tech ah watoch."
"Eh here is your house."
42. Hachăkyum u nukik "Eh bay yumeh."
Hachăkyum answers "Ok Lord."
43. Ts'ok u tsikbal
Their talk ended
44. Bini K'akoch.
K'akoch left
45. K'akoch ma' u yeesik u băh
K'akoch never shows himself again.
- tu ka'ten
46. Yan oxtulo' yok'ol lu'um way
There were three on the earth here
47. Yan u tsikbal yetel oxtulo'
There was talk between the three
48. Tu ya'alah "Eh ma' chich lu'um
They said "Eh the earth is not hard bik mentik" how can we make it"
49. Hachăkyum u ya'alik
Hachăkyum says "Bay ch'ukte in yan tukulik"⁴
"Ok wait I will think about it."
50. Ne taki tan chumuk he'elel
It is almost half a burning [day]
51. U ya'alik Hachăkyum "Bin in kin-Hachăkyum says "I go to search for kăxtik ba'alinkil in mentik ko'ox." things to make it [the earth] let's go."
52. "Bay" u nukik Sukunkyum
"Ok" answers Sukunkyum
53. "Ti'an chichin puuc wits" tu ya'alah
"There are small hills" said Hachăkyum
54. "Eh sa'am
"Eh sand păytan im pulik sa'am."first I throw sand"
55. Tu ch'aah sa'am
He took sand
56. Tu pulah he' yok'ol lu'um
He threw it here on the earth
57. "Eh san- sa'am chăhnh."
"Eh sand-sand change it!"
58. Băhe' Hachăkyum tu mentah k'ax
Now Hachăkyum made the forest
59. Ne tsoy tu yilah netsoy
It is good they saw it was good

60. Tan u yilik hoki' tunich
They are watching stone emerge

61. Yan tunich yok'ol k'ax
There is stone in the forest⁵

62. Tsok u mentik k'ax
They finish making the forest

63. Tu wolol ch'ik binih
All the stones were raised up⁶

64. Bâhe' ne tsoy lu'um
Now the earth is very good.

The principal events described in the text are the first creation of the world, the birth of the first three gods, and the construction of their homes at Palenque. As one reads in the passages above K'akoch, creator of the gods, invokes the plumeria flower and out of this flower are born these first gods; Hachâkyum, creator of human beings; Sukunyum, lord of the underworld and Hachâkyum's older brother, and Âkyantho', the god of foreigners. As the myth recounts, the brothers walk along and find the site where they build their houses. Named in the myth in reference to its position near small hills and south of the Usumacinta River (verses 34 and 53), the gods build their homes at Palenque. Finding their situation unsatisfactory because there is only earth and water and the earth is too soft to make anything Hachâkyum scatters sand along the earth's surface to make the ground firm and then creates the forest (verse 58). Then in a final set of couplets which are arranged in a chiasm the gods are described as watching stone or stones emerge out of the forest and being raised up, or erected.

There are a variety of parallels between this Lacandon myth and the site of Palenque. We are told that the first three gods located and built their homes at Palenque. I suggest this is a mythic reference to the three temples collectively called the Cross Group which were built by a seventh century king of Palenque named Chan Bahlum. Further, this trio of builders is strongly reminiscent of the hieroglyphic text in the inscriptions of the Cross group which refers to the goddess called First Mother or Lady Beastie, who gave birth to

the three gods who are the divine guardians of Palenque, and the founder of the supernatural lineage from which Chan Bahlum claimed descent.

Reference to Classic Period Maya mythology provides further links between Lacandon myths and Palenque. One of the ancient Maya lords of the Underworld, called God L, whose consort is the Moon Goddess, is depicted on an outer panel of the Temple of the Cross at Palenque. Correspondingly, one of the three Lacandon founders of Palenque is the god Sukunyum, chief lord of the Underworld whose wife is Âk Nah, the moon.

The end of the myth refers to the three gods raising, or erecting stones in the forest (verses 61-64). This could refer to the construction of Palenque's buildings themselves, or to the erecting of a stela in the Cross Group for we know that at one time Chan Bahlum erected such a monument, although it is now badly eroded. Despite these possibilities I think the erecting of stones in the forest is a reference to the ancient Maya myth concerning the setting of the three stones of creation which is described on Stela C at Quirigua, and which is the oldest known hieroglyphic creation text. The text on this monument says in part:

The Jaguar Paddler and the Stingray Paddler
seated a stone.

It happened at Na-Ho-Chan, the Jaguar-throne-
stone.

The-Black-House-Red-God seated a stone
It happened at the Earth Partition, the Snake-
throne-stone.

Itzamna set the stone at the Waterlily-throne-
stone." (Freidel, Schele, and Parker 1993)

Additionally, there is a reference to "The First-Three-Stone-Place" on the Tablet of the Cross at Palenque (Freidel, Schele, and Parker 1993). Thus, although the Lacandon did not inherit their ancestor's skills in hieroglyphic literacy, given the components of ancient Maya ritual which they continue to practice today, their mythology might well preserve the three creator, three stone elements from Classic-Period mythology.

Finally, the center tablet in the Temple of the Cross provides a direct link to the Lacandon myth. Although the god trio is born from the plumeria flower in the Lacandon myth and from Lady

Beastie in the Palenque texts, the central panel of the Temple of the Cross features Chan Bahlum and his father Pacal flanking a World Tree. Depicted on the ends of this cross, which is rising out of a bloodletting bowl, are plumeria flowers (Figure 1). This same event is also depicted in a statue from Jaina, demonstrating that this concept of Gods born from plumeria flowers was a common element in ancient Maya mythology (Figure 2).

In addition to the archeological evidence there are strong linguistic parallels in the structure of the Palenque texts and the Lacandon myths. The use of parallel phrase structure such as coupleting is a well documented feature of Mayan ritual speech (see for example, (Lengyel 1990). Only recently has it been discovered that hieroglyphic texts often share this same rhetorical feature. In the Cross Group texts for instance, where Chan Bahlum outlines his parentage from divine origins, his genealogy is listed in couplets alternating the birth and crowning of his ancestors (Schele and Friedel 1990: 247):

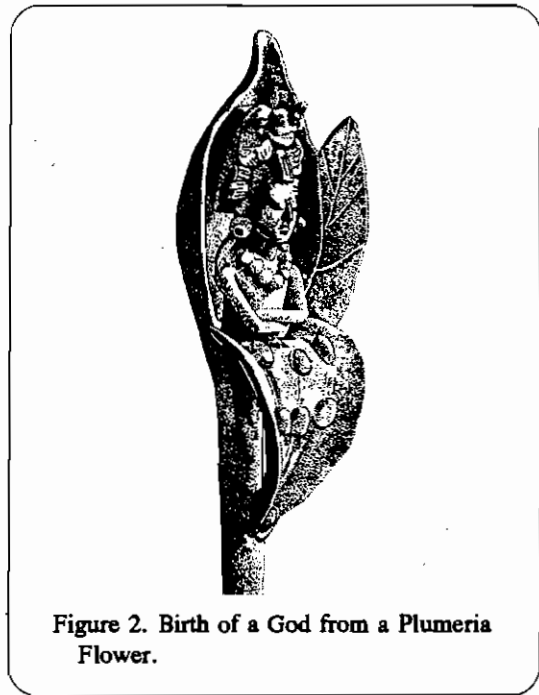


Figure 2. Birth of a God from a Plumeria Flower.

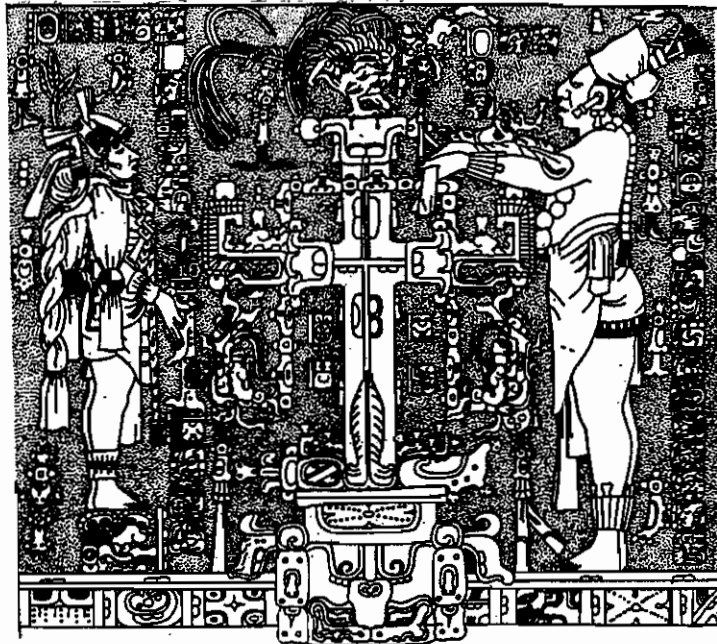


Figure 1. Panels of the Temple of the Cross, Palenque. Drawing by Linda Schele

39 years, 6 months, 16 days
 after Kan-Xul had been born
 and then he crowned himself on February 25 529.
 42 years, 4 months, 17 days
 after he had been born
 and then Chaacal-Ah-Nab crowned himself on
 May 5, 565

Examining the hieroglyphic inscriptions, it is clear that the pattern of elements throughout the inscriptions are couplets listing date of birth and crowning dates for Chan Bahlum's predecessors in office. The Lacandon myth is similarly structured. Verses 54-56 for example show the couplet patterning typical of Lacandon myths. In this instance, the taking of sand and the action of throwing it form the couplets.

54. "Eh sa'am
 "Eh sand
 päytan im pulik sa'am
 ."first I throw sand"

55. Tu ch'aah sa'am
 He took sand

56. Tu pulah he' yok'ol lu'um
 He threw it here on the earth

Additionally, the couplet structure is built into a more complex rhetorical structure called chiasmus. Within a chiasm the initial line of a piece of text is repeated by the last, the second line is repeated by the next to last line and so on until the middle of the passage. The last six lines of this episode form a chiasm which is composed of couplets, with verse 59 echoed by 64, 60 by 63, and 61 and 62 which form the central couplet.

59. Ne tsoy tu yilah netsoy
 It is good they saw it was good

60. Tan u yilik hoki' tunich
 They are watching stone emerge

61. Yan tunich yok'ol k'ax
 There is stone in the forest

62. Tsok u mentik k'ax
 They finish making the forest

63. Tu wolol ch'ik binih
 All the stones were raised up

64. Bähe' ne tsoy lu'um
 Now the earth is very good.

This chiasm is a particularly significant rhetorical feature because Christenson (1988) has found that Mayan literature with chiasms are typically historical and religious texts that are prehispanic in origin. The creation text on Stela C at Quirigua is a striking example of this phenomenon combining both couplets and chiasm in its description of the setting of the three stones of creation (Josserand and Hopkins 1992). Thus, in its referents to Palenque and rhetorical structure this Lacandon creation myth clearly reflects Classic Period Mayan cosmology and demonstrates the high degree of continuity between contemporary Lacandon and ancient Maya religious thought.

Notes

1. K'akoch is the first Lacandon diety, the creator of the gods. Just as humans worship the pantheon of Lacandon gods, these gods, in turn, worship K'akoch.

2. Äk Nah, "Our Mother" is the moon. She is the wife of Sukunyum who is the principal lord of the underworld.

3. The term used here toop'ih, means a "blossom."

4. Hachäkyum is the Lacandon creator diety. He made the earth fit for habitation and created human beings. Äkyantho' is the god of foreigners.

5. This passage could also mean "there are stones in the forest."

6. The subject of the sentence is not clear in this phrase. It could also mean the gods raised themselves up into the sky. I chose the first translation because the existence of the sky has not been established earlier in the text and the word "sky [ka'an] is not used here.

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