

# Cacao in Ancient Maya Religion: First Fruit from the Maize Tree and other Tales from the Underworld

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Like all agrarian societies, the ancient Maya had an abiding and intimate relationship with the natural world. All manner of trees, plants, leaves, flowers, fruits, and roots found a place in their symbol system and the flora that surrounded them, both wild and cultivated, was embedded in their spiritual outlook. The crops that fed and enriched them were especially charged with religious sentiment and took pivotal roles in mythic narrative.

In recent years we have gained notable insights into the past use of *Theobroma cacao* as a status marker and elite consumable, as well as into some aspects of its ritual use and function as a rudimentary currency (a literal “cash crop”).<sup>1</sup> But it is fair to say that we have yet to establish its place in Maya theology. The present study addresses this issue, its focus falling on the art and writing of the Classic period (AD 250-900), although with forays into the succeeding Postclassic (AD 900-c.1542) and Colonial eras (AD c.1542-1820). The themes encountered—fertility and sustenance, sacrifice and regeneration, embodiment and transformation—are pan-Mesoamerican in scope and we can usefully draw on descriptions of central Mexican religion made shortly after the Spanish conquest.

Moreover, since certain Pre-Columbian ideas survive in traditional Maya communities to this day, modern ethnographies are fertile sources of complementary data.

In the forthcoming book “Chocolate in the Americas: A Cultural History of Cacao” (University of Florida Press) Simon Martin sets out a mythological narrative for cacao among the ancient Maya. He describes how cacao is intimately involved with the story of the Maize God, whose journey into the Underworld and ultimate resurrection serves as a metaphor for the cycling of the seasons and the triumph of life over death. Texts and images from the Classic period (AD 250-900) add details missing from the surviving account of this story in the Popol Wuj, the epic tale recorded by the K’iche’ Maya in the 16th century.

In the Classic era story the death of the Maize God leads to the ascent of his soul to heaven, while his corpse is transformed into fruit trees and all the crops humans will eat (with the exception of maize).

This equates to the episode on the Popol Wuj where the severed head of Hun Hunahpu is set into a calabash tree and comes to life. For the Classic Maya the most valuable tree was cacao, and it is as a cacao tree that he first returns from death and reproduces himself, inseminating an Underworld maiden and giving rise to his sons and avengers, the famous Hero Twins—as the Popol Wuj describes. His sons ultimately defeat the lords of death and fully restore their father, who is reborn on earth as the young and beautiful maize stalk.

As Martin points out, the finely painted ceramic vases of the Classic Maya contain the phrase yuk'ib iximte'el kakaw "Drinking vessel for Maize Tree-like cacao". Here the precious chocolate drink of the ancient Maya is compared to the mythic "Maize Tree", the first cacao created in the Underworld from the sacrificed body of the Maize God.