

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

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## Summary discussion

This study has drawn together representations of cacao in ancient Maya art and writing in search of their symbolic purpose and place in mythic narrative. We must be alert to the difficulties inherent in any such endeavor.

Representations always have lives independent of the concepts that first inspire them, while plot points can be replayed from different viewpoints or realized in equally valid metaphors. In seeking a single “meta-narrative” we might easily miss essential details or unwittingly combine distinct ideas. The fragmentary nature of our sources means that any reconstruction is provisional. Nonetheless, with these caveats in mind, we are in a position to recognize some important episodes and draw viable inferences about the significance of cacao in Maya religion.

Sources from across Mesoamerica agree that the sacrificial death of the Maize God at harvest-time—for the Maya at the hands of Underworld deities—was followed by his burial in a cave within a mountain. At least part of his soul or spirit left his body and rose to the heavens. In the Popol Vuh it is the Hero Twins who ascend to become the sun and moon, but in earlier versions it may be the Maize God whose apotheosized spirit joins or forms these celestial bodies. His abandoned corpse, by contrast, gives rise to trees bearing edible fruits and seeds. This takes place while entombed within Sustenance Mountain and symbolizes the process of germination, which takes place out of sight underground. Cacao, the most coveted product of the mortal orchard, was emblematic of all prized and sustaining vegetal growth—with the exception of maize—and the myth served to explain how it and other foodstuffs came into being. Crossculturally, trees supply a rich collection of metaphorical meanings appropriate to generational descent, and in Maya ideology they evidently constitute a bridge between death and rebirth. It is the Maize God’s manifestation as a fruit tree that allows him to pass on his procreative seed, and eventually triumph through the heroic deeds of his offspring.

The cacao of the Maize Tree grows in the domain of the Underworld’s paramount lord, God L. Evidently the source of his wealth, he enjoys the good

life

drinking and trading unaware of his forthcoming punishment at the hands of the next generation. The task of rescuing cacao and all the other foods that will sustain humanity, falls to the lightning bolt K'awiil. His special power was to penetrate different worlds, with the aweinspiring phenomenon of nature's electromagnetism making him a great energizer and catalyst (there are interesting overlaps here with scientific understandings, in which lightning fixes nitrogen—nature's fundamental fertilizer—in the soil, and electricity is harnessed to power all manner of different processes). The fusion of the Maize God with K'awiil, as on the Palenque Sarcophagus, may suggest a shoot empowered in its struggle to reach the surface. Embarked on analogous journeys skyward, the torchheaded Maize God and tonsure-coiffured K'awiil are partly synonymous entities.

The story builds to a climax with the Maize God's rebirth. On various painted vessels he is dressed in jade jewels and quetzal feathers symbolizing maize foliage and watered by the Hero Twins, before emerging from the cleft made by Chaak and K'awiil.

The Maize God's realization as a World Tree is the ultimate expression of his resurrection, with his ascent to the sky implicated in a reconfiguration of the universe, the creation of humanity, and an end to earthly darkness and chaos.

This great life and death cycle was no remote paradigm for the Maya elite, but one that seems to have made even a sip of chocolate a sacramental act. More particularly, the images on the Dumbarton Oaks Bowl, the Berlin Vase, and the Palenque Sarcophagus, must be recognized not simply as pious celebrations of the Maize God epic but as purposeful expressions of personal redemption. The lords so commemorated emulate the corn deity on his triumphal journey through the purgatorial Underworld and beyond to an ultimate, deeply desired, union with the cosmos.