

Maize and Political Authority in Maya Culture

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Maya communities studied, hybridized cultivated, and worshipped maize in order to maintain large populations through times of rain and drought. Maize on its own could not support a society, but in developing *nixtamal*, necessary amino acids and vitamin B complex supported Mesoamerican populations as they grew.”¹ The centrality of this plant in the Maya diet meant that the people “depend to an extraordinary degree on maize as food and on maize as a cosmic metaphor,” supporting its religious practices and its relation to political leadership.² Even the Maya creation story mimics maize domestication: “Towards the end of the dry season, by planting the seed in the hole made with his digging stick, the Maya farmer symbolically sent it to Xibalba, to its temporary death. Thanks to the intervention of the Maize God’s twin sons, the maize was reborn and rose again to the surface as a young spout, to be nourished by the coming of the rains.”³ In order for kings to maintain this cycle and the mandate of heaven, they performed rituals and curated personal associations with maize and the maize god that would not only please the divine, but the people as well, connecting the cosmic and the practical.

Kings utilized ritual human sacrifice and personal bloodletting to support the cult of the maize god. Kings associated themselves with the maize god because maize kernels link to the blood: “the soul or spirit resides in both, and blood of course implies descent and lineage, among the most important considerations in kingship.”⁴ Kings connected their authority to maize by leading ceremonial practices with ritual blood tribute, sacrificing humans or bloodletting from the ear or penis with a sting-ray spine when they dedicated new buildings. This planted a soul or a spirit into the structure in the same way that they would plant a seed into the ground.⁵ Kings

¹ Michael D. Coe and Stephen Houston. *The Maya*. (New York: Thames & Hudson, 2015), 13-14.

² Brian Stross, “Maize and Blood: Mesoamerican Symbolism on an Olmec Vase and a Maya Plate,” *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics*, no 22 (Autumn, 1992): 101, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20166855>.

³ Coe, *The Maya*, 71.

⁴ *Ibid*, 103.

⁵ Coe, *The Maya*, 89.

performed these ceremonies on feats of Maya engineering prowess like temples, pyramids, and bridges in order to create a connection between the natural landscape and what men created. The blood that human and personal sacrifice provided in this situation symbolized maize and its cycle of sacrifice and rebirth. When a king administered a ceremony to dedicate a new building, the blood sacrifice represented “a heart/soul/spirit, mak[ing] the building live and operate as a part of nature.”⁶ Even the tool that kings utilized in the process looked and acted like a maize husking tool.⁷ Kings connected the nourishment of maize to the nourishment of blood, with sacrifice that would please the gods and help the kings maintain their power. Kings continued this ritual with other practices that associated their authority with the maize god.

Maya artwork demonstrates a cultivated connection between royal power and the maize god. Taube asserts that “The elongated heads of Maya nobility - artificially induced in real life, and clearly depicted in art - may represent... the maize ear,” while necklaces, nose ornaments, and the *k'an* cross also associated corn kernels with political power.⁸ Jade, one of the most valuable stones in Maya culture, represented the leafy green of cornstalks sprouting; jadeite was used to create polished celts and quetzal plumes were to create feathered maize fetishes that celebrated agricultural surplus.⁹ When kings died, they promoted this connection by wearing jade and ceremonial jewelry that linked them to the maize god, believing that “after death they would follow the path of the Maize God, defeat the Lords of Death in the Underworld and be reborn.”¹⁰ The harvest rituals detailed in the *Popol Vu's* Hero Twins stories further this connection, and its

⁶ Stross, “Maize and Blood,” 103.

⁷ Ibid, 99.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Karl Taube, “Lightening Celts and Corn Fetishes: The Formative Olmec and the Development of Maize Symbolism in Mesoamerica and the American Southwest,” *Studies in the History of Art*, 58 (2000): 300. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/42622279>.

¹⁰ Jaroslaw Zralka, Wieslaw Koszkuł, Simon Martin, and Bernard Hermes, “In the path of the Maize God: a royal tomb at Nakum, Peten, Guatemala,” *Antiquity* 85 (2011): 904. antiquity.ac.uk/ant/085/ant0850890.htm

origin story shows that “maize, primary staple for the peoples of Mesoamerica, is both the material from which humans are formed and the material that provides nourishment to that form.”¹¹ Kings and gods share *k’uh*, the spirit that is found in the gods and in royal blood, and artists displayed the connection on jewelry, ceilings, pottery, and walls.¹²

This artwork often reflected religious ceremonies that kings wished to commemorate, providing a visual history of their devotion to the gods. At San Bartolo, the West Wall shows rites that build both the universe and “establishing kingship in both cosmic and specific worldly spheres,” pairing the maize god with humans to bring sustenance from caves, a place of emergence in Maya culture.¹³ This royally-commissioned artwork “associated closely with centering a polity or community and legitimating its ruler” and his ability to bring sustenance to his people.¹⁴ On another wall, the maize god accepts offerings of maize tamales and water in the same way that a king would. He stands at the mouth of a scave, “the association suggests that both the first maize and primordial water issued from the caves.” A king’s mandate of heaven would bring water to the people to support the growth of a successful maize crop, so water management was central to the king’s success. At Dos Pilas, the king built an opening in the royal palace from which water would emerge from underground rivers, insuring that that “the king gets - or takes - the credit for renewal of life-giving rains.” Because of the interdependent nature of rain and maize, kings paid significant attention to the trends that impacted them both through calendrical studies.

¹¹ Leah Alexandra Huff, Sacred Sustenance: Maize, Storytelling, and a Maya Sense of Place, *Journal of Latin American Geography*, 5, no 1 (2006), 79-96. doi:10.1353/lag.2006.0006.

¹² Coe, *The Maya*, 252.

¹³ Wendy Ashmore, “What Were Ancient Maya Landscapes Really Like?” *Journal of Anthropological Research* 71 no. 3 (fall 2015), 315, <https://jstor.org/stable/44503910>.

¹⁴ Holly Moyes, Jaime J. Awe, George A. Brook and James W. Webster, “The Ancient Maya drought Cult: Late Classic Cave Use in Belize,” *Latin American Antiquity* 20, no 1 (March 2009): 177, <https://jstor.org/stale/40650082>.

The Maya calendar supported royal authority and maize cultivation. As Stross notes, the importance of hunting in pre-agricultural Mesoamerica transferred to the importance of plant domestication that continues today as “Indian societies remaining in Mesoamerica still depend to an extraordinary degree on maize as food and on maize as a cosmic metaphor.”¹⁵ Estrada-Belli shows that the Maya creation story, putting in place a new ruler, and the new *uinal*-based calendar year simultaneously celebrate the rebirth of the maize god: “These spacio-temporal worldviews and the creation myth in which they are ritually enacted are deeply rooted in agrarian ways of life that the earliest Maya rulers evidently had appropriated at this time to fit a new ideology of central authority.”¹⁶ Maize was an important component of rituals associated with the 260-day count, utilizing red seeds or maize kernels into groups of four that shamans examined to make predictions about individuals or about the community as a whole, a process in which the king was highly invested.¹⁷ In the Maya Codex, “The almanac’s four frames are interpreted as showing the prognostications for the maize crop associated with the Maya new year,” reinforcing that kings devoted resources to tracking its progress through a tropical year.¹⁸

State institutions, public works, temple buildings, record keeping, a calendar, and a unified art style were hallmarks of Maya society.¹⁹ These traits, fostered by strong political rulers, reinforced maize’s importance in Maya culture as well. As demonstrated, jewelry and art promoted maize and the maize god, connecting him to the king. Kings dedicated public works and temples to the gods with ritual bloodletting, a practice associated with agricultural life cycles. Elites devoted significant investments to the development of a calendar that traced maize

¹⁵ Stross, “Maize and Blood,” 101.

¹⁶ Francisco Estrada-Belli, “Lightning Sky, Rain, and the Maize God: The Ideology of Preclassic Maya Rulers at Cival, Peten, Guatemala,” *Ancient Mesoamerica*, 17 (2006), 63. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26309363>

¹⁷ Coe, *The Maya*, 292.

¹⁸ Gabrielle Veil and Anthony Aveni, “‘Yearbearer Pages’ and Their Connection to Planting Almanacs in the Borgia Codex.” In *The Madrid Codex: New Approaches to Understanding an Ancient Maya Manuscript*. Boulder, Colorado: University Press of Colorado, 2009, 226.

¹⁹ *Ibid*, 63.

planting and harvest, identifying key days for the king to lead worship of the gods upon whom their success hinged. Maya kings' legitimacy depended on maize to nourish their people, so they consciously curated rituals, artwork, and a calendar to promote maize production.

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