As author of the only archaeological presentation in the symposium, I draw upon my background and experience to address two issues. The first is the antiquity of the mesa as an indigenous ritual stage. This is an important question because these tables are so universally referred to in indigenous languages by the term mesa that one must wonder if the word and its referent were not borrowed at the same time by native cultures that had no counterpart for either. While the mesa can take a variety of physical forms (see Sharon this volume), I will restrict my analysis to two types commonly reported in modern ethnography of the Maya area as possible regional variations. If archaeological evidence for the presence of the mesa as a material artifact can be produced then there is a solid basis for proposing that the modern indigenous cosmological associations were probably present in some form in the ancient context as well.

The Antiquity of the Mesa

The banco as a form is quite ancient, at least as a seat or a throne. Three individuals are shown seated on such benches on one side of Kaminaljuyu Monument 65, dating to the Late Preclassic (Figure 1). Jonathan Kaplan (1995) has shown that the table-altar/throne tradition dates back to the Middle Preclassic on the South Coast of Guatemala and probably relates to earlier Olmec altar/thrones (Grove 1973). Unfortunately, I know of no iconographic representations of bancos being used as altars in rituals. Thomas Gage, however, does give a mid-17th century account of finding a banco used as a table while investigating native rituals being carried out in a cave. He says:

At the entrance the cave was broad, and went a little forward, but when we were in, we found it turned on the left hand toward the mountain, and not far, for within two rods we found the idol standing upon a low stool covered with a linen cloth (Gage 1958:281).

There is, however, solid archaeological evidence for the antiquity of the use of these bancos. Parts of four Late Classic examples were recovered from the Cueva de “Las Banquetas” in the Central Depression of Chiapas (Rodríguez Betancourt 1987:108). Brian Hayden (1987:176) suggests that they may have functioned as ritual tables in much the same way as they do today. On the other side of the Maya area, Keith Prufer (n.d.) has found two bancos during his work with the Maya Mountains Archaeological Project in southern Belize in 1995. The first probably dates to the Late Classic and has very much the form of a mesa in that it is 2 m long (Figure 2). The second was found in Bats’ub/25 Flight Cave near
Unión Camp. The four-legged rosewood bench, 35 cm x 17 cm x 8 cm high, was found with an Early Classic burial (Figure 3). The surface of the bench had traces of red pigment, which is interesting in that I have discovered several prepared surfaces in caves that had red pigment sprinkled over them. A radiocarbon analysis dated the bench to A.D. 170 +/- 80, in other words, to the Late Preclassic. A special exhibit in the summer of 2002 at the Regional Anthropological Museum Palacio Cantón in Merida displayed a banco recovered from the Cenote of Sacrifice at Chichén Itzá by one of the projects conducted in the 1960s (Piña Chan 1970). Thus, there appears to be good evidence that the low banco carved from a single piece of wood definitely has pre-Columbian roots that extend back into the Preclassic. Furthermore, while the ethnographic use of the banco is noted most frequently in the Maya highlands, the archaeological evidence suggests that, prior to contact, it was used in both the northern and southern lowlands as well.

The evidence for the field table type of mesa is more difficult to find because all of the individual pieces tend to be small and the entire structure would be lost as soon as the four supports collapse. Nevertheless, indirect evidence of this type of mesa use has been recovered at Naj Tunich. Naj Tunich is a large cave site located in southeastern Peten, Guatemala (Figure 4). The cave’s entrance chamber is a huge room running more than 150 m east to west (Figure 5). The eastern third of the chamber contains a natural rise that was modified though filling and leveling behind a series of retaining walls (Figure 6) into a two-tiered balcony structure that rises 14 m above the floor of the cave. A small opening off the upper level of the balcony gives access to the 3.5 km of tunnel passage, most of which is over 15 m in diameter. The tunnels contain the largest corpus of hieroglyphic writing ever found in a Maya cave. I have recently proposed on a number of lines of evidence that Naj Tunich functioned as a major regional pilgrimage center (Brady n.d.).

The balcony was the central ceremonial stage of Naj Tunich with the retaining walls probably serving to restrict access to the upper levels to ritual specialists and those of high status. Strati-
graphic excavations were carried out on the upper level of the balcony. A $2 \times 2$ m pit was opened along the western cave wall but the western portion of the pit yielded little information because a travertine floor was encountered less than 10 cm below the surface. The eastern half of the pit, however, contained a series of superimposed use-floors that were marked by thin layers of caliche. The floors were stained a dark black by charcoal and perhaps the smoke from copal incense. All of this overlay a layer of heavily compacted sterile yellow clay. The soil characteristics are important because of the dramatic differences in color and compaction between the dark cultural levels as opposed to the yellow non-cultural levels.

In scraping across the surface of the yellow clay, a number of dark circles appeared that resembled post holes (Figure 7). These differed from holes that had been created by dripping water in that the natural holes tended to be shallow and conical in shape. By contrast, the post-holes were deeper and straight-sided. In several cases the post-holes had been plugged by a rock or mud so that when the obstruction was removed, the empty shaft was revealed. Eight of the 11 post-holes had diameters between 6 and 9 cm, much too small to have been supports for anything but small, light constructions. The largest hole was 15 cm in diameter and was equidistant from the cave wall to a similar sized feature (16 cm in diameter and 50 cm deep) just outside of the pit. Because these two holes were similar in size, and so much larger than any of the other holes, they were the only two that could be reasonably paired as having belonged to the same feature. These two holes were separated by about a meter and a half and so probably would have supported a tabletop slightly over 2 m in length.

The large number of post-holes in this one restricted area suggests that literally hundreds, if not thousands, of _mesas_ had been set up on the balcony at Naj Tunich during the centuries of uti-
numbers of post holes in otherwise sterile deposits, suggesting the erection of temporary structures perhaps akin to that of the modern Yukatek ch' a ch' aak, a ceremony in which the rain gods are offered maize, balche and sacrificial fowls.” Although they do not specifically call these mesas, it appears to be what they are referring to. Thus the field-table form of mesa also appears to have a long pre-contact history. The utilization spans the same period of time as the bancos found by Prufer just on the other side of the Belize - Guatemala border from Naj Tunich. This indicates that both forms of mesas were in regular use in the southern Maya lowlands.

Once it is established that the mesa was a component of pre-Columbian Maya ritual paraphernalia, it is possible to identify other forms. Stone altars are the features that appear to be the most obviously related. While altars are frequently reported in caves, the form is extremely variable. At Naj Tunich, an altar in Operation VII is simply a pile of rough stones topped by a rock that projects vertically from the top at a 45° angle. The necks of two ceramic vessels had been placed on the projecting stone (Brady et al. 1992:78, Stone 1995:128-129). There is, however, no flat surface anywhere on the feature, and I am reluctant to assign the function and cosmological associations of mesas to altars that lack a flat, rectangular surface. A flat, rectangular altar has been found and will be discussed below.

In the ethnographic context, very ephemeral mesas can be defined by simply laying a blanket on the ground. Little, if any, evidence of this type of mesa or the associated ritual would remain for the archaeologist to find. What may have been an analogous behavior was recovered in a muddy trough at the Cueva de Sangre at Dos Pilas. On one occasion, a large flat rock was moved to reveal a prepared surface beneath that had been created by sprinkling a red mineral pigment on the ground. Two bone awls or weaving picks, also covered in red pigment, were lying on the prepared surface. A portion of the surface had been preserved when water-born silts covered the pigment. A second surface was discovered when the sticky clay silt adhered to an archaeologist’s boot and was pulled away from the layer of pigment. The accidental discovery of two similar features suggests that this very simple form of mesa may have been regularly utilized in the rituals at the Cueva de Sangre.
The Meaning of Mesas in Caves

Over the last several decades it has become well established that caves are among the most important features in the sacred landscape (Brady 1997, Brady and Veni 1992, Heyden 1981, Stone 1995, Thompson 1975). Because caves are a focus of Maya ritual and mesas play a role in so many ceremonies, it is not surprising to find evidence of mesas in this context. Caves, however, are a unique setting that impart a special meaning to rituals and the paraphernalia used in them. This is particularly true of a great site like Naj Tunich. I would like to delve into the special significance of the mesas discovered at Naj Tunich.

It is recognized that the mesa is a cosmogram that defines the cosmic center and the four quarters that spread out from it. The four quarters are marked very explicitly on the mesa by the Ch’orti’ Maya who place a stone in each of the directions. The four sacred stones, ideally spherical and all the same size, are gathered from a sacred pool (Girard 1962:23). The center is marked by a fifth stone that is slightly larger than the other four. All space, from the mesa, to the house, to the village, to the world, consists of four quarters and a center point (Redfield and Villa Rojas 1962:114). William Hanks (1984:136) says that “There is not a single type of ceremony performed by shamans that does not embody the directional principle.”

The center is further seen as the axis mundi where the earthly level is connected to a celestial level above and an underworld level below. The problem in interpretation is the tendency to equate caves with the underworld. The association of caves with the underworld received its most explicit elaboration in Barbara MacLeod and Dennis Puleston’s (1978) Pathways into Darkness: The Search for the Road to Xibalba. Their model of the underworld was constructed from the Popol Vuh as well as from Lacandon ethnography. In the Popol Vuh, the underworld is portrayed as a place full of dangers and presided over by the malevolent underworld deities. In the absence of serious analysis of caves either ethnographically or archaeologically, the attribution seemed appropriate and so was applied with little question for the next 20 years.

My own reservations about the association of caves with the underworld were aroused by observation of modern Maya cave ceremonies in which the attitude of the participants was very different from what one would expect of a trip to the underworld. The ceremonies were also not dedicated to underworld deities. In modern Q’eqchi’ Maya religion, the most important indigenous figure is the Tzul’taqa’, often referred to as the “Earth Lord” in English (Adams and Brady 1994). The name literally means “hill-valley” and has counterparts in many Maya languages, suggesting that this represents a pan-Maya concept. The term tzul’taqa’ also refers to a recognized geographical entity (the hill-valley) so that the Earth Lord is clearly a personification and deification of landscape tied to the Amerindian concept of a sacred, animate Earth. Within a hill-valley the most sacred place is the cave, often referred to as a “stone house” because it is the dwelling place of the Tzul’taqa’. But the cave is not important simply as a dwelling of the deity. Xetish, an extremely important Ixil Maya cave, literally means “where once there dwelt a god” (Lincoln 1945:95-96). The cave remained important even in the absence of the deity because the power ultimately resided in the earth and the cave was the heart of the earth.

It is also clear in ethnographies that many of the properties MacLeod and Puleston attributed to the underworld are associated with Earth in indigenous thought. Thus, it is the Earth Lord that is petitioned for rain and crop fertility. Where ancestors are important, they reside within the sacred mountain, a symbol of the earth, and not of the underworld. Furthermore, I have been impressed with the fact that the underworld and underworld related deities do not appear to play a significant role in day-to-day indigenous life or thinking. For the last five years, I have stressed the role of Earth in the interpretation of Meso-American caves. In returning to the analysis of the mesa, I would note that action revolves around the top of the table, which represents the earthly plain and I would further argue that the cave also represents an intense expression of this level.

As the result of a number of discoveries over the last several years, I have come to believe that place was enormously important in Maya cosmology. I have also begun to suspect that many caves carried a far more important and specific meaning beyond their simply being access points to the sacred earth. Let me put this in a larger theoretical framework. Geographer Erich Isaac has proposed that, as ideal polar opposites, there are two basic religious orientations. The first seeks the jus-
tification of human existence in the act of creation itself while the second orientation finds it in a divine charter or covenant. Ritual in the second case will repeatedly reference the covenant and landscape modifications will be minimal. In societies that see creation as the central justification of human existence, Isaac (1962:12) says that “the attempt will be made to reproduce the cosmic plan in the landscape with greater or lesser effect upon the land, depending on the elaborateness of reproduction attempted.” While the concept of the covenant is not unknown in Mesoamerica, religion definitely focuses on the act of creation. The importance of the concept of world creation has been seriously under-appreciated, especially by archaeologists. Mircea Eliade, however, points to this as one of the fundamental concepts in religion. He says:

The paramount time of origins is the time of the cosmogony, the instant that saw the appearance of the most immediate of realities, the world. This is the reason the cosmogony serves as the paradigmatic model for every creation, for every kind of doing. It is for this same reason that cosmogenic time serves as the model for all sacred times (Eliade 1959:81).

Any doubt about the orientation in ancient Mesoamerica around the act of creation should be dispelled by Angel García-Zambrano’s discussion of contact period rituals of foundation throughout Mesoamerica. The rituals were performed at the founding of a new settlement and they established the boundaries of that community. He notes that groups attempted to find a spot with certain types of features and that they would often bypass ecologically superior locations that lacked them. He says that:

Essentially, Mesoamerican migrants searched for an environment with specific characteristics that comprised several symbolic levels.... Such a place had to recall the mythical moment when the earth was created: an aquatic universe framed by four mountains with a fifth elevation protruding in the middle of the water. The mountain at the core had to be dotted with caves and springs, and sometimes surrounded by smaller hills. A setting like this duplicated, and forever would freeze, the primordial scene when the waters and the sky separated and the earth sprouted upwards (García-Zambrano 1994:217-218).

As mentioned above, a number of recent discoveries suggest that many caves were thought to represent the cave of origin. Space does not permit me to detail these here. Several locations that closely resemble García-Zambrano’s primordial landscape have been located along with their associated caves. I have also documented two artificial caves, one in Central Mexico (Aguilar et al. n.d.) and the other in the Maya area (Brady 1991) that were built as models of the seven-chambered cave of origin, the Chicomoztoc or the Vucub Pec. Artificial caves are important because their form is the result of decisions of their makers rather than the whim of nature so that elaborate caves provide clues about what caves in general were supposed to mean. I now strongly suspect that a large class of caves was probably understood to have specifically represented the cave of origin in indigenous thought. Did all caves represent the Chicomoztoc or Vucub Pec? At this point, I don’t think so! In that case, which ones did?

David Stuart’s (Vogt and Stuart n.d.) recent decipherment of the glyph for ch’ien or cave has

Figure 8. A stalagmite occupies a dramatic position near the center of the chamber at Naj Tunich in which the mesa was found.
provided new insights into the importance of these features in ancient inscriptions. Simon Martin (2001:178) has suggested that, while meaning cave, many times the glyph may actually be referring to a community. If so, ch’en may function like the nahuatl word for community, altépetl, which literally means “water-filled mountain” (Broda 1996:460). Thus across Mesoamerica, people appear to have been inseparably identified with either the sacred cave or the sacred mountain. I suspect that all of the major caves, the caves that were the focus of group or community identity, were thought to be the cave of origin of that group of people. Given the importance that Isaac and Eliade assign to the act of creation, this has tremendous implications for our understanding the role of caves in defining place. The place of creation is the living justification of human existence and defines the center of the cosmos because the great acts of creation always occur at the center. Many of the great caves such as Naj Tunich carry the imagery of the center a step further by containing huge ribbed stalagmitic columns (Figure 8). These formations have been identified by native informants as ceiba trees, the tree of life that stands at the center and holds up the sky (MacLeod and Puleston 1978:74). This fits the imago mundi: the place of creation at the heart of the earth where the huge stone trunk of the ceiba reaches from floor to ceiling and perhaps beyond.

The notion of centrality was reinforced at Naj Tunich by virtue of its being a pilgrimage center (Brady n.d.). As Turner and Turner (1978: 22-23) note, for the pilgrim in his hometown, the distant pilgrimage center is seen as being located in the chaotic wilderness. Once the trip commences, however, the perspective changes to a trek through the wilderness to reach the sacred center. As the destination draws near, the pilgrim enters a circuit of secondary sites that builds the drama and anticipation of encountering which epitomizes the sacred.

Returning to Maya ritual, the mesa situates or centers space and re-establishes the cosmic order by defining the four directions. As the place of creation, caves are inseparably linked to the concept of the cosmic center. Mesas erected within such caves would set up their cosmogram as a microcosm of this larger directional symbol, concentrating and accentuating it. The entire cosmos would be seen to emanate from these structures.

This feeling is particularly exemplified by an intact table altar that was discovered in 1989 at the end of the new branch of Naj Tunich. To reach the altar, the pilgrimage must first gain admittance to the balcony. As noted earlier, the balcony was created through the construction of a series of retaining walls, which are thought to have restricted access to the area beyond. The tunnel system can only be entered through a small opening on the upper level of the balcony. The fact that access to the tunnel system was tightly restricted is clearly reflected in the drastic drop in artifact density in the tunnels. From the entrance to the tunnel system, the pilgrim would have had to penetrate over a mile into the earth and would have negotiated a technical climb and a dangerous drop to reach the final chamber. The trip would have been a pilgrimage within a pilgrimage. The pilgrim then entered a circular chamber by crawling through a low opening. A dramatic stalagmite is found near the center of this chamber and a rectangular, flat-topped stone mesa was built against a tongue of protruding bedrock (Figure 9). Within the altar on the center-line was a large piece of speleothem with the cortex removed to reveal its crystalline structure (Brady

Figure 9. This unusual rectangular mesa was found in the most inaccessible part of Naj Tunich, several kilometers from the entrance (photograph courtesy of George Veni).
and Prufer 1999). Given its location in the deepest, most inaccessible part of Naj Tunich, I believe that this altar represented the most powerful spot in the entire cave. The cosmological model laid out by the mesas would have taken on special significance being located at the heart of this extremely sacred site. I have wondered if this chamber was considered within the region to be the very place of creation.

Conclusions

I have attempted to show that archaeologically preserved examples of mesas can be dated to at least the Late Preclassic with a wider range dating to the Classic Period. Despite its Spanish name, the mesa clearly appears to be part of an indigenous religious tradition. The small body of archaeological evidence that does exist also suggests there were regional patterns of mesa forms. Pre-Hispanic bancos, associated today with the Maya highlands, have been recovered in both the southern and northern lowlands as well as the highlands. Evidence has also been produced showing that both the bush table and the banco were in use in a small area of the Maya Mountains at the same time. A flat-topped, rectangular stone mesa has been reported from Naj Tunich and evidence from Dos Pilas suggests that mesas may have been laid out by sprinkling red mineral pigment on bare earth.

While ethnography has documented the use of mesas in the context of folk religion, the archaeological evidence from Naj Tunich suggests that at least the stone mesa was used by the elite as well. The context and associated artifacts of one of the bancos recovered by Keith Prufer (n.d.) suggests that it was used by a shaman. Thus, mesas appear to have been used at all social levels. This is hardly surprising because the mesa embodies the most basic cosmological principals. This allowed mesas to be employed by all classes even as the form, function, and message of the rituals conducted on them differed.

Finally, I have suggested that place was extremely important in Mesoamerican cosmology. Caves were important sacred places because they were the dwelling place of the deities and epitomized the heart of the earth. I have suggested that the great caves, the caves that were the focus of community and group identity, may have been thought to have been connected to the fundamen-

tally important acts of world and human creation. Caves, therefore, would have represented the cosmic center and the place of power. The mesa carried the same message of centrality. Used within a cave, the mesa would have been seen as enhancing by further concentrating, intensifying, and focusing the power inherent in place.

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