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**Communicating with the Sacred Earthscape: An Ethnoarchaeological
Investigation of Kaqchikel Maya Ceremonies in Highland Guatemala**

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**Communicating with the Sacred Earthscape: An Ethnoarchaeological
Investigation of Kaqchikel Maya Ceremonies in Highland Guatemala**

by

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Dedication

I have lost many people while on this journey, but there are two whom I miss the most.

My friend, Joe Ivy (1965-2000)

and

My Mom, Peggy Ann Scott (1945-2006)

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As it is always said about these kinds of endeavors, and mine being no exception, this dissertation could not have been completed without the help, support, advice, and aid of numerous individuals, especially from my committee members Fred Valdez, Jr., Brian Stross, Samuel Wilson, William Doolittle, and James Brady.

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Communicating with the Sacred Earthscape: An Ethnoarchaeological Investigation of Kaqchikel Maya Ceremonies in Highland Guatemala

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Ann Marie Scott, Ph.D.

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Supervisor: Fred Valdez, Jr.

This dissertation presents the results of an ethnoarchaeological study of Kaqchikel Maya ceremonies in the southwestern highlands of Guatemala. The Maya view the *Earth* as being animate and sacred. Within this earthscape exist places that are especially alive and powerful. These are sacred earthmarks. Ceremonies are performed at these locations to communicate with this animate world as well as provide the maintenance necessary to keep the relationship between the natural and supernatural in balance. These special places can be various geographic locations including caves, rockshelters, mountain tops, boulders, cliffs, rivers, and archaeological sites. Inquiries into Maya cosmology show that the earth is of central importance and questions assumptions concerning the multi level worldview of sky, earth, and underworld. Furthermore, this work challenges the long tradition among Maya researchers of associating caves with the underworld. Data for this dissertation was gathered over eight seasons of fieldwork that included visiting over 65 sites. At each site a ceremony was performed by a ritual specialist; the author

directly participated in the majority of these ceremonies. Theoretically, the data and insights are used as a basis for constructing ethnographic models used as analogs in the interpretation and reconstruction of pre-contact ritual contexts, especially those found in caves. This research found that four phases were observed as part of the ceremonial process. These phases include a consultation phase, a preparation phase, a communication phase, and a termination phase. Of the various materials utilized many had pre-contact antecedents. Discussions are included on the use of brooms, sticks or staffs, and torches by the pre-contact and contemporary Maya. The study further documented that sacred sites are dynamic, constantly changing spaces often modified in the process of use. Altars are assembled, disassembled, and/or relocated. Sweeping, or altar activation, affects the depositional nature of these sites. Offerings are constructed at these sites utilizing a variety of materials to “feed” the ancestors and spiritual guardians found at these sacred portals. Numerous materials are used in a ceremonial offering for consumption. Materials used include: colored candles, numerous types of resin-based incense, sugar, chocolate, cigars, breads, herbs, flowers, perfumed liquids, and liquor.

Table of Contents

List of Figures	xvi
Chapter 1: Introduction, Environmental Background, and History	1
Introduction	1
Environmental Background of Region	4
Physical and Natural Environment of Guatemala	6
Geological synopsis for understanding cave development	8
History of Previous Investigations	9
History of Cave Archaeology	9
Early Period (1840-World War I)	9
Interwar Period (1917–1945)	10
Post War Period (1945–1980)	10
The Foundation Period (1980–1997)	12
The Recent Period (1997–present)	20
Cave Use and Sacred Landscape in Ethnography	23
Summary	26
Chapter 2: Methods and Research Strategy	28
Methods	28
Development of the Project	28
Multi-disciplinary Approach	29
Ethnography	29
Linguistics	31
Ethnohistory	31
Archaeology	32
Research Strategy Using Analogy and Ethnoarchaeology	33
The Development of Ethnoarchaeology	34
Defining Ethnoarchaeology and the Effective Use of Analogy	36
Summary	39

Chapter 3: The Fabric of Maya Spirituality	40
Introduction.....	40
Materials Used in The Ceremonial Context.....	40
Candles.....	42
Types of Incense	48
Herbs and other plant specimens	56
Liquids	71
Miscellaneous materials.....	73
Materials Curated at Sacred Sites and Personal Objects of Ritual Specialists	83
Brooms and Sticks	83
Personal objects or sacred bundles and household altars.....	90
The Ceremony.....	93
Consultation Phase.....	93
Preparation Phase.....	94
Communication Phase	104
Termination Phase	110
The Treatment of Materials during the Ceremony	111
Summary	112
Chapter 4: Ru K'u'x Ulew: Descriptions and Observations on the Sacred Landscape	113
.....	113
Introduction.....	113
Lake Atitlán Region, Department of Sololá	116
San Jorge La Laguna.....	116
San Andres Semetabaj	125
Santa Catarina Palopó.....	128
San Antonio Palopó	129
San Lucas Tolimán	130
Cerro de Oro	131
Santiago Atitlán	134
San Pedro La Laguna	137
San Juan La Laguna	139

Santa Clara La Laguna.....	141
San Pablo La Laguna	142
San Marcos La Laguna	143
Tzununá.....	144
Nahualá.....	146
Department of Chimaltenango.....	149
Tecpán.....	149
Santa Apolonia.....	155
San José Poaquil	156
San Juan Comalapa.....	158
El Tejar.....	161
San Andrés Itzapa	162
Antigua Region, Department of Sacatepéquez	163
Antigua.....	163
Santa Maria de Jesús.....	164
San Antonio Aguascalientes	166
Santo Domingo Xenacoj.....	167
Department of Escuintla	167
Department of Quiché.....	169
Santa Cruz del Quiché	169
Chichicastenango	173
Department of Totonicapán	174
San Francisco El Alto	174
Momostenango.....	175
Department of Quetzaltenango	176
Quetzaltenango	176
Department of Petén	179
Summary	180
Chapter 5: Conclusions.....	183
Cosmological Models in Cave Archaeology	183
Implications for Archaeologists Working in Caves or Other Sacred Sites.....	187

Limitations of Ethnoarchaeological Data	189
Conclusion	191
Appendix 1	193
The Cholq'ij or 260-day Ritual Maya Calendar or 20 Day Patrons	193
Bibliography	200
Vita	227

List of Figures

Figure 1.1. Map showing the Maya region.....	4
Figure 1.2. Map of Guatemala showing departments visited during the investigation.	5
Figure 3.1. Examples of materials commonly used in ceremonies.....	41
Figure 3.2. Black and <i>cebo</i> candles.	43
Figure 3.3. The Maya cross as represented by colored candles.....	45
Figure 3.4. Examples of <i>sirios</i> candles.	46
Figure 3.5. Examples of <i>veladora</i> candles showing the wax paper wrapping.....	47
Figure 3.6. Example of <i>siete potencias</i> candle.	47
Figure 3.7. Example of <i>ensarte</i> incense shown with banana leaf wrapping.....	49
Figure 3.8. Example of <i>cuilco</i> incense shown in banana leaf wrapping.....	50
Figure 3.9. Example of large size <i>pom en bola</i>	51
Figure 3.10. Example of <i>estoraque</i> incense.....	51
Figure 3.11. Example of <i>palitos</i> incense.....	52
Figure 3.12. Example of myrrh incense.....	53
Figure 3.13. Example of <i>siete inciensos</i>	54
Figure 3.14. Example of <i>perla</i> incense.	54
Figure 3.15. Example of amber incense.....	55
Figure 3.16. a. Example of charcoal. b. Note the charcoal lit in the <i>incensario</i> prior to the interview and ceremony.....	56
Figure 3.17. Example of laurel.	56
Figure 3.18. Example of <i>pericón</i>	57
Figure 3.19. Example of <i>manzanilla</i>	58

Figure 3.20. Example of <i>ruda</i>	58
Figure 3.21. Example of <i>romero</i>	59
Figure 3.22. Example of <i>siete montes</i>	60
Figure 3.23. Example of limes showing how they are cut.....	61
Figure 3.24. Various fruits given as offerings at a site.....	62
Figure 3.25. Example of <i>ocote</i> or pitch pine sticks.....	63
Figure 3.26. An example of a Maya vase (Kerr vase K702) depicting two individuals holding torches.....	65
Figure 3.27. Three examples of torches from the Madrid Codex (Vail and Hernández 2005-2008). a , almanac 3a, frame 1; b , almanac 11b, frame 8; c , almanac 86c, frame 3.....	65
Figure 3.28. Hand-rolled cigar being lit by candle flame.....	67
Figure 3.29. An example of cigar smokers from a Maya vase (Kerr Vase K8469).....	68
Figure 3.30. An example of cigar smoking from the Madrid Codex (Vail and Hernández 2005-2008, almanac 88b, frame 1).....	69
Figure 3.31. Bouquets of flowers left as offerings on an altar mound at Iximche' (Photograph courtesy of Walter E. Little).....	70
Figure 3.32. Example of green <i>agua florida</i>	72
Figure 3.33. Commercially made liquors commonly used in ceremonies.....	73
Figure 3.34. Demonstrating how sugar is used as a base for the ceremony.....	74
Figure 3.35. Example of <i>panela</i>	74
Figure 3.36. Example of commercially made honey in its plastic container.....	75
Figure 3.37. Two examples of <i>huacalitos</i> or resin cups in their original packaging.....	76

Figure 3.38. A depiction of honey extraction from the Madrid Codex (Vail and Hernández 2005-2008, almanac 103c-104c, frame 1).	77
Figure 3.39. Example of cinnamon sticks.	77
Figure 3.40. Example of chocolate wafers in brown paper packaging.	78
Figure 3.41. Example of bakery made breads.	79
Figure 3.42. An offering of corn tortillas at an animal burrow altar.	80
Figure 3.43. Example of sesame seeds.	81
Figure 3.44. A small broom, seen at the center of the picture, at a site near San Jorge La Laguna.	84
Figure 3.45. Brooms and sticks curated at the periphery of a site northeast of Antigua. Note that the “stick” at the far right is actually a metal rod.	84
Figure 3.46. The late Waq’ij’ Kej sweeping at a now destroyed sacred site near the town of Tecpán (Photograph courtesy of Walter E. Little).	85
Figure 3.47. A depiction of a broom from the Madrid Codex (Vail and Hernández 2005-2008, almanac 111b-112b, frame 4).	86
Figure 3.48. Example of incense wrappings and other ritual debris deposited at a site near San Jorge La Laguna.	86
Figure 3.49. An <i>ajq’ij</i> using a stick to stir the fire at a sacred site near Tecpán (Photograph courtesy of Walter E. Little).	87
Figure 3.50. An <i>ajq’ij</i> using a stick as a broom to “clean” or activate the altar space (Photograph courtesy of Walter E. Little).	88
Figure 3.51. Personal household altar in the corner of apartment.	92
Figure 3.52. An <i>ajq’ij</i> consults with a client via cell phone.	94
Figure 3.53. Materials being organized by both participants and <i>ajq’ij</i> (Photograph courtesy of Walter E. Little).	96

Figure 3.54. Unwrapping incense and organizing candles (Photograph courtesy of Walter E. Little).	96
Figure 3.55. A ritual specialist purifies the space with <i>agua florida</i> (Photograph courtesy of James T. Dugan).	98
Figure 3.56. An <i>ajq'ij</i> purifying the sacred space with incense (Photograph courtesy of Walter E. Little).	98
Figure 3.57. Sugar base rendered as Maya glyph, 10 Aq'ab'al (Photograph courtesy of Walter E. Little).	99
Figure 3.58. Another style of sugar rendering (Photograph courtesy of Walter E. Little).	100
Figure 3.59. <i>Q'anil</i> symbol used as a base (Photograph courtesy of Walter E. Little).	100
Figure 3.60. Placing <i>ensarte</i> on a <i>Q'anil</i> sugar base (Photograph courtesy of James T. Dugan).	101
Figure 3.61. Placing <i>ensarte</i> along the edge of the circle (Photograph courtesy of Walter E. Little).	102
Figure 3.62. Blue and green candles placed at the center of the circle (Photograph courtesy of James T. Dugan).	103
Figure 3.63. Various examples of offerings immediately before burning.	104
Figure 3.64. Offering being lit by candle during a cave ceremony (Photograph courtesy of Walter E. Little).	105
Figure 3.66. A participant kneeling at the fire during petitions (Photograph courtesy of Walter E. Little).	108
Figure 3.67. Cleansing rite with rue (Photograph courtesy of Walter E. Little). ..	109
Figure 4.1. Communities visited in the Department of Sololá.	114

Figure 4.2. Communities visited in the Department of Chimaltenango.	114
Figure 4.3. Communities visited in the Department of Sacatepéquez.	115
Figure 4.4. Area visited in the Department of Escuintla.	115
Figure 4.5. Communities visited in the Departments of Quiché, Totonicapán and Quetzaltenango.	116
Figure 4.6. Nimajay cave as seen from the road. (The cave is near the center of the picture.)	117
Figure 4.7. The opening of Nimajay cave, San Jorge La Laguna.	118
Figure 4.8. Arrangement of crosses and altars inside Nimajay cave.	119
Figure 4.9. Map of Nimajay Cave (unpublished map courtesy of James E. Brady).	120
Figure 4.10. Silla de Ma Ximón, San Jorge La Laguna.	122
Figure 4.11. Kāq Ab'āj, San Jorge La Laguna.	123
Figure 4.12. Chuwa Kāq Ab'āj, San Jorge La Laguna.	124
Figure 4.13. Unnamed site located near the <i>mirador</i> , San Jorge La Laguna.	125
Figure 4.14. Cave entrance and altar of Xe To'oy, San Andrés Semetabaj.	126
Figure 4.15. Close-up of altar inside Xe To'oy showing blood on the cross.	127
Figure 4.16. The alcove and altar in Xe Saqsiwan, San Antonio Palopó.	130
Figure 4.17. Chi Tulul, San Lucas Tolimán (photograph courtesy of Judith M. Maxwell).	131
Figure 4.18. Ch'ajyu', Cerro de Oro.	132
Figure 4.19. Ch'ajyu'Okem, Cerro de Oro.	134
Figure 4.20. Nixti', Santiago Atitlán.	135
Figure 4.21. The Maya altar and Catholic shrine at Chi' Kaqjay, Santiago Atitlán.	136
Figure 4.22. The altar at Beleje' Kawoq, San Pedro La Laguna.	137

Figure 4.23. Pa Tawal, San Pedro La Laguna.....	138
Figure 4.24. Pa Saq Mam hunting shrine, San Pedro La Laguna.	139
Figure 4.25. Chuwach San Juan, San Juan La Laguna.	140
Figure 4.26. Xe K'istilin, San Juan La Laguna.....	141
Figure 4.27. Western side altar at Tz'ikin, Santa Clara La Laguna.....	142
Figure 4.28. The interior of the structure at the cemetery of San Pablo La Laguna.	143
Figure 4.29. Xe' Ab'aj, San Marcos La Laguna.....	144
Figure 4.30. Chua Mes, Tzununá.....	145
Figure 4.31. Pumice candleholder from Chua Mes.	146
Figure 4.32. Tabal, Nahualá.....	147
Figure 4.33. Kōj Ab'aj, Nahualá.....	149
Figure 4.34. Iximche' altar mound in 2007 (Photograph courtesy of Don Arburn).	150
Figure 4.35. Iximche' Jul, situated below the archaeological site of Iximche' .	151
Figure 4.36. Infiernito, Tecpán.	152
Figure 4.37. New altar site near Iximche' (Photograph courtesy of Walter E. Little).	153
.....	
Figure 4.38. The cave at Pulch'ich', northwest of Tecpán.	155
Figure 4.39. The stela and tenoned head at Xek'owil, Santa Apolonia.....	156
Figure 4.40. Main altar at Chwi' Chum, San José Poaquil.....	157
Figure 4.41. Jolom Tz'i', San José Poaquil.	158
Figure 4.42. Xe Kupilaj, San Juan Comalapa.....	159
Figure 4.43. The cave site of Pa Ya', San Juan Comalapa.	160
Figure 4.44. Feeding the mountain at Simajulew, Sarima', San Juan Comalapa.	161
Figure 4.45. Wuqu' Tijax, El Tejar.....	162

Figure 4.46. Altar located in a private household patio, Antigua (Photograph courtesy of Walter E. Little).....	164
Figure 4.47. Newly created sacred space in a ravine, Santa Maria de Jesús.	165
Figure 4.48. Anthill site, San Antonio Aguascalientes.....	166
Figure 4.49. The activity area near the river at Tz'ikin Ala', Escuintla.	169
Figure 4.50. Temple of Tojil at K'umarqa'j, Santa Cruz del Quiche'.....	170
Figure 4.51. Cave 1 at K'umarqa'j blackened from ceremonial use.	172
Figure 4.52. a. The entrance of Cave 1 from the interior of the cave resembling an Oztotl glyph. b. Oztotl glyph (Covarrubias 1957:182, Fig 80).	172
Figure 4.53. Xe Siwan, near Chichicastenango.	174
Figure 4.54. Cerro Paklom, Momostenango.....	176

Chapter 1: Introduction, Environmental Background, and History

INTRODUCTION

For the Kaqchikel Maya and many others, the natural world is one that is alive and bustling with supernatural beings including ancestors and spiritual guardians. Communication with the supernatural through the performance of ceremonies is not only a tradition, but also a necessity in order to keep spiritual harmony between the living and the spirits. This system of gift giving (Mauss 2000) maintains the connection between the two worlds of natural and supernatural. This method of reciprocity keeps the world functioning properly. As Spenard (2006:1) asserts the ancient Maya performed rituals in caves to the Earth Lord and offered blood sacrifice, incense, and pottery, among other things, to receive in return the resources necessary to survive such as food, rain, wood, and stone. Thus, this tradition has a long history.

Maya cave archaeology has demonstrated that caves are sacred features. Cave utilization as ritual space continues to this day among many Maya groups, including the Kaqchikel Maya. Besides caves, many other geographical features such as mountains, canyons, boulders, and springs, are considered sacred and places to convene with spiritual forces. Given this broad use of geographic features, what can we learn from contemporary Kaqchikel Maya ceremonies and the relationships between the natural and supernatural worlds to help archaeology interpret data from ritual activity areas? These are issues currently being debated within cave archaeology, where there is a collective, recognized need for more ethnographic research on the use of sacred space especially in the cave environment. This dissertation attempts to address these issues and offer useful data and models that are applicable to ancient contexts.

The dissertation is presented in the following order. Chapter One introduces the project and includes an environmental background of the region summarizing the physical and natural environment. A brief geological summary describing karst and non-

karst zones is presented. The chapter rounds out with a historical overview and current direction of cave archaeology, as well as a synopsis of significant ethnographic studies with emphasis on Maya cosmology and ritual practice.

Chapter Two discusses how the project developed and the methods employed in the research and data recovery. The multi-disciplinary approach included, for example, interviews, sacred site visitation, participation in ceremonies, and extensive photo-documentation of sacred sites. The second part of Chapter Two examines the theoretical underpinnings of this ethnoarchaeological study of modern Maya ritual and its use through analogy as a model for ancient Maya ritual.

Chapter Three presents information on materials and ceremonies. The first section offers descriptions and images of the various materials used in contemporary Maya ceremonies. These include materials consumed by fire as well as those objects curated at sacred sites or the personal effects of ritual specialists. When possible, the descriptions are augmented by an examination of existing lines of evidence that supports the use of that material in pre-contact time. The second section presents an overview of ceremonies in the context of observed behavior and describes the ceremonial process in terms of phases consisting of a consultation phase, a preparation phase, a communication phase, and a termination phase.

Chapter Four provides site descriptions and images of the various sacred altars documented as part of this investigation. Occasionally, descriptions are supplemented by observations and experiences that hopefully provide a more spiritual context of these sacred sites to the reader. The chapter is arranged by regions or Departments, then by communities; exact site locations are not disclosed as a measure to help protect these sacred places.

Chapter Five presents an analysis of the data collected during this investigation. A number of major issues are discussed. The first critical discussion considers how Maya cosmology relates to and impacts the utilization of sacred sites. I question some of

the long held positions presented in the 1970s by Mayanists on cosmological models. This discussion is better understood in terms of ideational landscapes. Ideational landscapes are a group's emic view of their world. Even within a landscape approach, however, Maya archaeologists have not done a thorough job of modeling the Maya cosmological view of their world. I have come to wonder if "landscape" and "landmark" are not too deeply embedded in Western concepts of "land" as an element that can be owned, used, and discarded. In the Western mindset, people dominate and make decisions about "land." Instead, for the Kaqchikel Maya, the perspective about "land" is better understood as a sentient world with supernatural beings residing in the *Earth*. Thus, in discussing the Maya concept of the sacred and animate *Earth*, I attempt to escape this Western baggage by introducing the terms *earthscape* and *earthmark*.

The next discussion involves identifying areas where my data has important implications for archaeological contexts. I express the difficulties that archaeologists face when attempting to reconstruct ancient behaviors that are not readily recoverable from the archaeological record. Lastly, I remind the readers that these sacred locations are dynamic spaces constantly being altered through usage.

The third discussion evaluates ethnoarchaeology and its contribution to understanding ritual activity in archaeological contexts. I explore how my ethnographic data on modern Maya practices can be used to interpret ancient ritual. In addition, I discuss its many shortcomings. In particular, I point out a number of areas where it should not be used or only used with caution. This study is a documentation of rural Maya religious tradition and its survivability through hundreds of years of colonial influence and oppression, Christian dominance, and more recently, an almost four decade long civil war of immeasurable consequence. Despite these pressures, Maya ritual practice prevails, offering glimpses and echoes of the past; yet with proper constraint, can be of use in interpreting ancient practices.

Finally, Appendix One contains a summary of the 20 days of the 260-day ritual calendar or *Ch'olq'ij*. This includes a brief description of the patron day, the symbolic meanings, and characteristics of individuals born under that day sign. Lastly, materials used in ceremonies specifically for that day are presented.

ENVIRONMENTAL BACKGROUND OF REGION

Guatemala is the most environmentally and culturally diverse country in the Maya region (Figure 1.1). More than 20 Mayan languages are currently spoken in Guatemala, with over half the population considered indigenous.



Figure 1.1. Map showing the Maya region.

Research for this dissertation focused in the Kaqchikel speaking region of Guatemala, which roughly covered the area between the Antigua region, westward to the eastern side of Lake Atitlán. However, as work progressed, the study was expanded to other locations as well. Thus, the Guatemalan departments visited as part of my investigation included Sololá, Chimaltenango, Sacatepéquez, Escuintla, Quiché, Totonicapán, Quetzaltenango, and Petén (Figure 1.2).

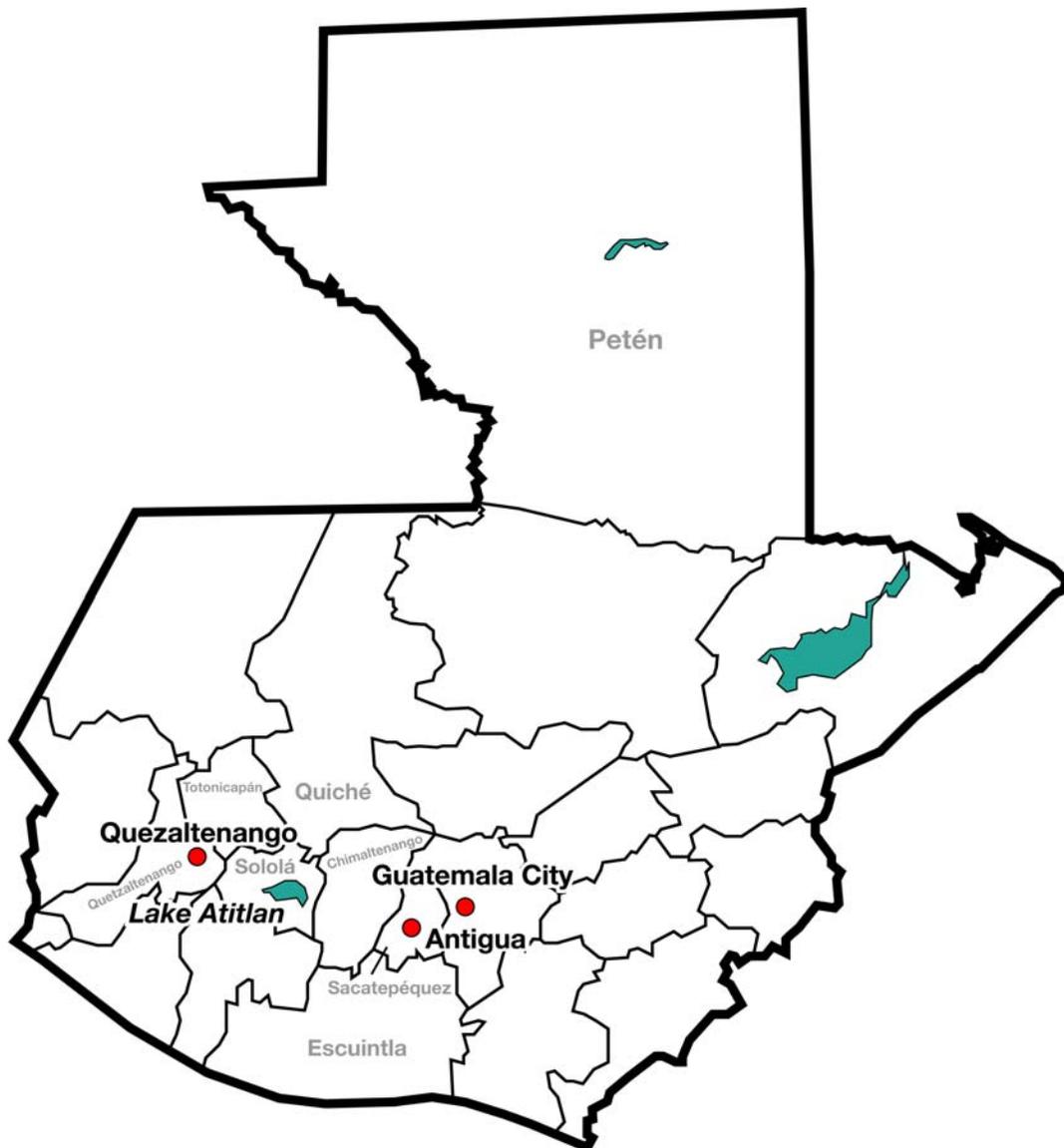


Figure 1.2. Map of Guatemala showing departments visited during the investigation.

Guatemala represents a rich, diverse environment having a variety of geographic, geological, and climatological features. The natural landscape of Guatemala is summarized below with the geology discussed separately in the context of understanding basic speleogenesis. Information on the natural and physical setting is derived from Sharer and Traxler (2006) and McBryde (1947).

Physical and Natural Environment of Guatemala

Guatemala can be divided into three geographic zones, a Pacific coastal plain in the south, lowlands in the north and a multivariate highland zone in the center. The Pacific plain consists of fertile, recently (Quaternary) laid sediments derived from the volcanic highlands bordering to the north. Along with mangrove swamps and lagoons are relic stands of rain forest including other palms, shrubs, and small trees like cacao. The climate is tropical (*tierra caliente*) with mean annual temperatures between 25-35 degrees C (77-95 degrees F). Like most of Guatemala, there are two seasons a year, a dry season and a wet season. The dry season normally occurs from January until April with the rainy season commencing in May until December. The coast has a rainfall average of about 2000-3000 mm (80-120 inches) per year. Fauna includes many marine species such as fishes, aquatic reptiles, and sea birds.

The lowland zone can be defined as situated below 800 m in elevation and characterized by a *tierra caliente* climate, which receives high rainfall. The lush tropical forest is home to a great number of plant species existing at times in differing eco-zone canopies. A great variety of animal life prospers in the lowlands including large rodents, hooved mammals, primates, felines, birds, amphibians, reptiles and countless invertebrates. The terrain consists of broken karst topography composed of Mesozoic and Cenozoic limestone formations (see the geological synopsis below).

The highland zone, areas generally above 800 m, is more environmentally complex with its varying climate, variety of ecological resources, and diverse geology. This zone can be divided into southern highlands and northern highlands. The climate of

most of the highlands is temperate (*tierra templada*) having mean annual temperatures between 15-25 degrees C (55-77 degrees F). In regions above 3000 m, the *tierra fria* prevails having cooler temperatures, with frequent frost and occasional snow. The seasons include the dry season from January to April, and the rainy season from May until December. Rainfall may develop at any time of the day; however, clear mornings with developing thunderstorms in the afternoon and evening are common. Average rainfall for most of the highlands is 2000-3000 mm (80-120 inches) annually, while in the northern most highlands the amount increases to over 3000 mm (120 inches) per year. In general, the highlands contain a mix of deciduous and coniferous forest, although much of the original flora and fauna have diminished from the long-term effects of human settlement. Some regions to the north contain a highland rain forest like the ecological zone found in Alta Verapaz.

The terrain of the southern highlands is dominated by volcanoes and valleys. An east-west band of volcanic cones are situated between the Pacific plain and a rift-valley system to the north, marking the union of continental plates. As a result, this area experiences frequent earthquakes and volcanic eruptions, which at times wreak havoc or devastation on lives and property. The thick, volcanically derived sediments are cut deeply by rivers and streams forming deep gullies or canyons. This type of topography, hills and valleys, is significant in the utilization of the sacred landscape by the Maya.

The northern highlands are marked by the continental rift of the Motagua valley. This area is composed of mineral rich, Paleozoic and Cenozoic metamorphic deposits. Some of the highest altitudes are found in this region reaching over 3000 m in height situated mainly in the chain of mountains called *Los Cuchumatanes*. Heading north the metamorphic ridges give way to the Cenozoic limestone formations creating the “haystack” karst topography. The landscape is riddled with caves and springs. Rivers disappear into cavernous mountains emerging miles away. This, too, elicits the view of sacred landscape among the Maya.

Geological synopsis for understanding cave development

Building upon the preceding discussion and to better understand cave development, Guatemala can be summarized geologically as having two major zones, a karstic zone and a volcanic zone. The karstic zone is made up of differing, cave producing limestone deposits, where caves are formed through the solution of the carbonates in the limestone bedrock. The volcanic zone consists of pyroclastic deposits like pumice layers and volcanically derived rocks. The karstic zone is found in the northern and eastern portion of Guatemala while the volcanic zone is found predominately in the south, separated roughly by a metamorphic rift and fault around the Motagua river valley. In the broadest sense, the karst of Guatemala consists of Cretaceous limestone that produces such large and highly decorated caves as Candelaria and Naj Tunich. The terrain can be mountainous like (highlands) in the region of the Verapaces, northern Huehuetenango, and parts of eastern Guatemala. Contrasting, karst can also have flat, less rugged, or slightly rolling hills like the topography found in areas of Petén, or like the terrain around the site of Dos Pilas near the Usumacinta River (lowlands).

The volcanic zone in southern Guatemala is composed of recently laid Quaternary deposits of volcanically derived sediments such as pumice and ash layers. Lava tubes, however, are not known from this region. The volcanic deposits can be the result of either airfall, fluvial, or alluvial action and rest on types of impermeable underlying rocks such as phyllite (Brady and Veni 1992:151).

Cave-like features not classically formed by processes related to bedrock solution activity are called pseudo-karst features (Brady and Veni 1992:149). The pseudo-karst of the southern highlands does yield natural features albeit usually small and low in number when compared to cave features found in the karst zone. The natural features are a result of years of water moving through the ground and dislodging the volcanic sedimentary grains to create cavities in the earth. Sometimes these natural features may have started

off small and were later modified and expanded by humans. Other naturally derived features include cracks or fissures in the bedrock resulting from tectonic events or those cavities found near streambeds from fluvial activities, many of which were recorded as part of this investigation.

HISTORY OF PREVIOUS INVESTIGATIONS

This section is divided into two categories, those investigations involving cave archaeology and those that can be best described as broadly ethnographic, which include data on cave utilization as part of sacred landscape or their discussion of Maya cosmology. Together they provide the intellectual context in which this work can be understood.

History of Cave Archaeology

In this section, I will present an in-depth historical review, a re-evaluation of time periods originally proposed by Brady (1989), and the current state of cave investigations. The reader is encouraged to see Brady (1989), McNatt (1996), Brady and Prufer (2005), and Scott (2004, 2007) for further reading.

Early Period (1840-World War I)

Historically, the first “investigation” in Maya caves is generally attributed to John Lloyd Stephens and his colleague Frederick Catherwood almost 170 years ago (Stephens 1841, 1843). Over time interest grew in caves leading to some of the more significant studies of the late 19th century including: Henry Mercer’s *The Hill-Caves of Yucatan* (1896), Edward Thompson’s *Cave of Loltun* (1897), George Gordon’s *Caverns of Copan* (1898), and Eduard Seler’s report on Quen Santo (1901). While these reports were well-executed studies and represented some of the best archaeology of their day, they seemed unable to escape the European Paleolithic model of cave habitation. As a result, caves never carved out a special niche or problem area for themselves and no attempt was made to synthesize before World War I the considerable data that had accumulated.

Interwar Period (1917–1945)

After World War I, Maya archaeology as a field began to change rapidly as it entered what Norman Hammond (1982:20) has called the era of “Institutional Domination.” Maya studies made great advances during the period from 1924 to 1970 as a result of large projects sponsored by institutions such as the Carnegie Institution of Washington, the University Museum of the University of Pennsylvania and the Peabody Museum of Harvard University. Because they had never established themselves as a legitimate research concern, caves were largely ignored by the large institutional projects. One of the few exceptions was the British Museum’s Pusilha Project (Joyce et al. 1928, Joyce 1929, Gruning 1930). As a result, serious Maya cave studies faltered during the period between the World Wars. In general, Thomas Gann (e.g., 1918, 1925, 1926, 1929, 1930) generated the largest body of data, despite lacking good maps or artifact analyses. Until the 1950s, caves continued to languish in reports or studies as something peripheral with short descriptions or notations (e.g., Lothrop 1924:131-133; Blom 1928:165-167; Kidder 1942:35; Shook 1947:183).

Not only did cave investigations fail to participate in the remarkable advances occurring within Maya archaeology as a whole, but their exclusion from the large projects marginalized them as an area of inquiry. It is not surprising that cave investigation languished and that, in general, this period:

produced a number of short cave descriptions but, by and large, these were nothing more than visits that lasted only long enough to gather up the choicest artifacts. None of these reports approached the best work of the previous period either in methodology or completeness (Brady 1989:20).

Post War Period (1945–1980)

After World War II, important cave studies begin to appear once again. Ironically, the Carnegie Institution’s Mayapan Project, which is generally considered one of their less valuable contributions, produced a large body of well documented cave

studies and descriptions of their use relative to a larger surface site (e.g., R. E. Smith 1952, 1954, 1956; Shook 1952, 1955; A. L. Smith 1946, 1955; Stromsvik 1953, 1956).

Later, E. Wyllys Andrews IV (1961, 1970) made significant strides in the 1960s and 1970s by with his multi-disciplinary work at Balankanche, near Chichén Itzá, and David Pendergast, who conducted extensive work in Belize caves, produced a series of monographs (1962, 1964, 1968, 1970, 1971, 1974). As expected, the cursory notation of caves continues to be produced during these years, yet do improve into the 1980s where we see more complete reports of investigations and better scholarship (see Brady 1989:26 for a detailed list of contributors).

To this point, this abridged history of cave studies has focused on field studies. It is interesting that the significant first work on the interpretation of cave use does not appear until this time. While some earlier works may have touched upon why and how the Maya utilized and perceived caves and other openings in the earth, none rivaled the contribution made by J. Eric S. Thompson (1959) in his *Role of Caves in Maya Culture*. One of its lasting contributions is in its methodology, which drew upon ethnohistoric, ethnographic, and archaeological evidence. What was significant on the short term is that Thompson's synthesis of various uses of caves emphasized the ceremonial and religious aspect as the most important to the Maya (see Brady 2005a, Brady and Prufer 2005 for assessments of Thompson's contributions to cave studies).

A number of interpretive models of cave use appeared around the mid-1970s and early 1980s, including Heyden¹ (1973, 1975, 1981), MacLeod and Puleston (1978), and Pohl and Pohl (1983). Furthermore, epigraphers and art historians have been influential in developing a greater understanding of caves in Maya art and iconography (e.g., Taylor

¹ Although not part of the Maya area, Doris Heyden's investigation of the cave underneath the Temple of the Sun at Teotihuacan was instrumental in cementing the relationship of structures over caves. Neither she nor Thompson were aware of each other's work, yet they both acknowledge the "temple over cave" model, while at the same time fail to recognize the significance of it to the broader implication of site settlement. Despite this shortcoming, her interpretations and contributions directly influenced subsequent research in the Maya world.

1978; Tate 1980; Taube 1986; Stone 1995). Brady and Prufer (2005:4-6) note, however, the relative paucity of theoretical material available, even at the end of the period.

The Foundation Period (1980–1997)

Brady and Prufer (2005) discuss the intellectual background of the Post War Period in their review of theoretical publications during the 1970s and early 1980s, but the focus on published works can often be misleading. Intellectual assessments tend to focus on the contribution of antecedents to later work and thus emphasize continuity. The lag between research and publication also has a tendency to create temporal gaps between events and later publications that were affected by those events. This gap may obscure the relationship between events and publications. Both of these tendencies are evident in the previous discussions of the relationship of cave publications in the 1970s to those in the 1980s. An examination of actual historical events provides a very different view of what occurred during the 1970s and explains the trajectory that the field was forced to take during the 1980s and 1990s.²

In light of the important contributions noted during the 1970s, one can appreciate how the deaths of three prominent scholars during that decade significantly impacted the direction of Maya cave research. The premature death of E. Wyllys Andrews IV in 1971 at age 54 (Wauchope 1972), removed the foremost field archaeologist at the time with experience in caves. Andrews' publications on Gruta de Chac (1965) and Balankanche (1961, 1970, 1971) had been far more detailed than previous cave work, despite the fact that the investigations were carried out as adjunct components to his surface project at Dzibilchultun. Most importantly, the spectacular finds at Balankanche were accepted by scholars as relating to a ritual use of the cave. Furthermore, Andrews held a prominent academic position at Tulane, which was the leading American university working in

² I have attempted to construct a balanced assessment of the period by consulting a number of senior scholars who generously agreed to share their insights with me.

Yucatan, and could draw on the various resources of the Middle American Research Institute.

The death of Sir J. Eric S. Thompson in 1975 at age 76 (Hammond 1977) also deprived cave studies of its most prominent advocate and the only Mayanist of the era who had done serious scholarship on caves. His 1959 synthesis provided the first theoretical discussion of Maya cave use from a ritual perspective. Because it was published by Hamburg's Museum für Völkerkunde, the article went largely unnoticed, although some scholars such as David Pendergast (e.g., 1970, 1971) recognized its importance and cited the work. Even Edwin Shook, Thompson's colleague at the Carnegie Institution of Washington, professed never to have seen the piece (Brady 2005:f-5). While the revised version of this paper was widely distributed when published in 1975, historical events mitigated its impact. Thompson's death the same year prompted a flood of criticism of so many of his positions that for a time his work was not taken as authoritative (Brady 2005:f-6). As a result, the second synthesis was essentially ignored and Thompson's premise that cave utilization was basically religious in nature was never widely accepted. Instead, habitation tended to remain the default explanation for the presence of cultural material in caves. Thompson's death also removed the dominant voice in Maya studies as a possible champion of cave archaeology.

Finally, the tragic death of Dennis Puleston in 1978 at age 38 deprived cave studies of an original thinker and an energetic investigator who had just begun to explore caves (Harrison and Messenger 1980; Willey 1982). It appeared that Puleston himself was set to influence the future of cave archaeology as he had just presented his first statement on Maya cave use only days before being struck by lightning on the top of the Castillo pyramid at Chichén Itzá (MacLeod and Puleston 1979). Certainly he was ideally situated to take such a leadership role with a position at the University of Minnesota and with an established reputation and strong ties to the most prominent Mayanists from his work on the Tikal Project in the 1960s. Later, Barbara MacLeod, who had been

prominent in Belizean cave exploration during the 1970s (McNatt 1996:82), appeared to retire from active cave investigations and instead shifted to Maya iconographic and epigraphic studies.

The one archaeologist of note with cave experience whose career spans the 1970s and 1980s was David Pendergast. During the 1960s and early 1970s, Pendergast conducted investigations in Belize (1962, 1964, 1966, 1969, 1970, 1971, 1974) producing some of the best field reports of cave utilization to that point. The investigations, however, were predominately salvage operations and after the appearance of the final monographs, Pendergast's publications on caves cease.

Previous discussions of the intellectual history of Maya cave research document shifts in the ways in which developments since World War II were being conceptualized (Brady 1989, 1997a; Brady and Prufer 2005). Brady's first historical assessment, appearing as a chapter of his dissertation (1989), utilized three chronological periods: an Early Period (1840-1914), a Middle Period (1914-1950), and a Recent Period (1950-present). Later, he divided the Recent Period in two, with a Post-War Period (1950-1980) and a Recent Period (1980-present), and argued that the subfield of Maya cave studies began with the redefined Recent Period (Brady 1997a).

In reviewing these works, I feel that Brady's recent proposal that a subfield of Maya cave archaeology emerged in the early 1980s warrants reconsideration. In 1991, when my own involvement with caves commenced, there were only a few isolated practitioners, but a recognizable, cohesive group of cave archaeologists did not exist. A body of literature dealing with Maya or Mesoamerican caves was scattered within the broader recesses of surface archaeology or art history. Finally, the overall field of Maya archaeology in no way recognized cave studies as a formal area of investigation. However, publications were appearing and cave investigations began being conducted as part of large, regional projects in the early 1990s in Belize and Guatemala. It was out of these projects that Maya cave studies coalesced.

Cave researchers formally met for the first time as a group at the 1997 Society for American Archaeology (SAA) meetings in Nashville in the session, “New Perspectives in Mesoamerican Cave Archaeology.” In the process of organizing the session and disseminating information about it, an informal e-mail network was established that continues to link practitioners to this day. In anticipation of the meeting, a large bibliography of Mesoamerican cave sources was assembled that defined the field’s literature (Brady 1996). The dozen papers drew nearly everyone working in cave studies at that time as either a participant or as a spectator. The success of the session served as the impetus for an almost unbroken string of SAA cave sessions since that time. These factors taken together were instrumental in making cave archaeology a self-conscious entity. Because of the importance of the 1997 meeting, I have tentatively used this event to mark the commencement of the subfield of Maya cave archaeology and, therefore, the beginning of the “Recent Period.”

My redefinition of the chronology creates a nearly two-decade gap from 1980 to 1997 between the end of Brady’s Post-War Period and the actual emergence of the subfield of cave archaeology. I propose calling this the “Foundation Period” because the underlying assumptions of the field were defined, a methodology was established, and a theoretical position took shape during these years.

This treatment also differs with previous work on the nature of the transition between the 1970s and 1980s. As noted earlier, works (Brady 1989, 1997a) focusing on publications, give the impression of a smooth development of the “Recent Period” out of the trends of the 1970s. My examination of actual historical events within Maya archaeology suggests a more radical break. The significant publications in the 1970s were the final statements by three prominent scholars so that, by the end of the decade, there was virtually no one of note seriously investigating caves or cave use. Furthermore, with these deaths, all of the important Mayanists pushing for a ritual interpretation of cave use were removed. In their absence, Maya archaeology’s thinking at that time was

very accurately summed up by Norman Hammond's (1981:177) statement, "Whether residence in caves was permanent, periodic or sporadic, regular or only for ritual and refuge, we do not yet know..."

Cave related publications continue to appear in the 1980s, but it is noteworthy that the authors are totally different than those of the 1970s. Most are graduate students at least two intellectual generations removed from Thompson and Andrews. Lacking senior scholars charting the direction of investigation, it is not surprising that the tone of these new studies begins to diverge significantly from earlier work. While not trying to minimize the contributions of individuals such as Juan Luis Bonor (1989) or art historian Andrea Stone (1995), it is clear that the Foundation Period was dominated by more than 40 cave specific publications authored or co-authored by James Brady. Brady's (1989) investigation of the large cave in Guatemala called Naj Tunich in 1981 and 1982 offered new approaches in methodology and theory in the cave context. It also differed from previous work in not being a salvage operation, but instead a problem-oriented investigation.

I am more interested, however, in exploring some of the political ramifications of the radical transition to the Foundation Period and how that determined the development of cave studies. A critical examination of this period in light of the deaths of Andrews, Thompson and Puleston, helps to explain the field's struggle for acceptance during the 1980s and 1990s. When Brady begins the investigation of Naj Tunich in the early 1980s, there were no senior scholars leading intellectual discussions of cave investigations and archaeology in general had no idea how caves were used or that they might be important. Thus, a new approach to a highly marginalized area of Maya studies was being led by a graduate student.

The deaths of Andrews and Thompson removed the two senior scholars most closely linked to cave studies. In this respect it is interesting to note that, had he lived, Andrews would have only been 64 at the time of the Naj Tunich Cave Project, and in a

powerful position to influence the direction of that investigation and the acceptance of Maya cave investigations into mainstream archaeology. More often than not, senior scholars play crucial roles in getting students and their ideas accepted in the field. The backing of a senior scholar signals colleagues that a student is to be treated with respect and his or her ideas taken seriously. For cave studies the lack of a senior champion was especially critical because Brady's position that caves were important sacred space was in direct conflict with the widely accepted notion of caves as habitation sites and the ecological-materialist bias that minimized the importance of religion.

Lacking champions, cave archaeology's acceptance within the general field of archaeology faced difficulties during this period. The publication process was frequently an ordeal because knowledgeable and sympathetic reviewers who recognized cave issues tended to be difficult to find (James Brady, personal communication, 2005). The death of established practitioners also meant that the authors writing during the Foundation Period had no name recognition to aid in the dissemination of their ideas. The lack of acceptance was reflected in funding as well so cave research simply did not command the type of funding enjoyed by surface projects. In making these points, let me stress that I am not suggesting that cave archaeology was singled out nor was it treated with any particular malice. Rather, these are obstacles commonly faced by significantly new ideas or approaches that are not led by a prominent figure already established in the field.

The impact of a high profile promoter for cave investigations was best demonstrated by Arthur Demarest in the early 1990s. As director of the Petexbatun Regional Archaeological Project, Demarest extolled the importance of the cave sub-project, the Petexbatun Regional Cave Survey. As E. Wyllys Andrews V observed, "Certainly the cave project that has received the best press in recent years is the Petexbatun work. Arthur made caves one of the important branches of research, and that gave it a great deal of respectability. He also had the best person working on it, Jim [Brady]." Interest in caves noticeably increased at this time because of Brady's

innovative investigations and Demarest's role as a facilitator. In fact, I became involved in cave research after hearing Demarest speak about the Petexbatun cave sub-project and this culminated in my working with James Brady during 1993 field season.

When the foundations of a specialized sub-field of cave archaeology were being laid in the 1980s the topic already carried a good deal of intellectual baggage because cave investigations had been carried out since the nineteenth century (Brady 1989: 10-31). To better contextualize caves studies within the perceptions of the time, I consulted a number of archaeologists who were active during the 1970s and 1980s. During one interview, a prominent Mayanist told me, "They [caves] seemed to call for very large investments of effort, planning, etc. for relatively small scientific returns. ... It seems to me to be a rather limited field and one which produces information and interpretation which are difficult to integrate with the mainstream data produced by site and regional projects."

It is not difficult to see what this archaeologist is referring to. Throughout the 1970s, caves were treated as self-contained sites and little attempt was made to relate cave data to the larger social system of surface settlement. This in itself is interesting because cave investigations at the time were being carried out by surface archaeologists who had, for one reason or another, strayed into caves. Because these surface archaeologists generally worked on only one cave during their entire careers there was little effort to develop the method and theory that could relate caves to surface features. For all of his insights into the religious nature of caves, even Thompson was unable to offer much help in this area. Brady (2005a) noted that, "Thompson made no attempt to indicate how cave ritual articulated with the larger religious system or to assess the importance of caves within Maya society." It is only with the advent of cave specialists that models relating caves to larger social issues appear.

Another informant noted that he was never tempted to get involved with cave work and said, "I've always been attracted by much more prosaic, traditional mainstream

kinds of archaeological questions.” Thus, cave projects faced strongly entrenched attitudes that they offered little in terms of important data, were difficult to relate to traditional research questions, and were decidedly peripheral to mainstream interests.

Another interesting perception among the senior scholars emerged from a question concerning securing academic employment with a specialization in cave studies. While none of the prominent Mayanists I interviewed suggested that a prejudice against cave archaeology existed, one individual offered that, “being too specialized will hurt you” when it comes to finding a job. Another senior person suggested, “The general strategy for a Maya archaeologist that is interested in cave research probably would be to have at least one or two other specialties; e.g. ceramic analysis, or settlement patterns, or Classic Maya art with an emphasis on murals. Those could be emphasized and then the cave research could ride in those more career-friendly canoes. However, the other specializations would have to be genuine and vigorously pursued and not charades.”

The comment implies that cave archaeology is “too specialized” and not appropriate as a primary specialization. This idea is linked to the perception that cave data cannot address surface concerns. The general view was that cave archaeology was confined to discussing one type of geological feature of marginal importance. Cave archaeologists, however, have argued that caves represent the best context for investigating the archaeology of Maya religion (Prufer and Brady 2005). Since religion is embedded in political and economic institutions as well, cave archaeology allows its practitioners to address a wide range of issues (Brady 1997b, 2005b; Brady and Colas 2005; Halperin 2005; Prufer and Kindon 2005).

The view of cave studies as a specialized, but also marginalized sub-field, was certainly exacerbated by the theoretical approach that placed it at odds with the ecological-materialism of Processual Archaeology (Prufer and Brady 2005). Equally specialized sub-fields, such as settlement pattern studies or household archaeology, that worked within the Processualist paradigm appear to have been more readily accepted as

research foci. This issue is evident in Gordon Willey's (1982:10) posthumous discussion of Dennis Puleston who he characterized as having "the qualities of the mystic" for his interests in iconography and religion and said that Puleston's discussion of the ideological basis for the Maya collapse "set a good materialist's teeth on edge" (ibid:12). While any figure practicing cave archaeology at that time might face such criticism, these do not seriously impact an established member of the academy, but are particularly damaging to those seeking a position or tenure.

With the death of Andrews and Puleston cave studies lost all of the archaeologists with cave experience who held academic positions. In this particular area, cave archaeology has still not recovered from the loss. Despite extensive field experience and numerous publications, Brady found difficulty in securing an academic position after graduation in 1989, essentially depriving cave archaeology of an institutional base during the entire Foundation Period. While it is difficult to know to what extent this has inhibited its growth, the subfield clearly lacked an institution where graduate students could receive training in cave-specific method and theory. The failure to achieve this final step can be directly related to events of the 1970s.

The Recent Period (1997–present)

In the Biennial Gordon Willey Symposium on the History of Archaeology at the 69th Annual SAA Meeting in Montreal in 2004, I first called attention to the importance of the cave symposium held at the 1997 SAA Meeting in Nashville in relation to the emergence of a self-conscious subdiscipline of Mesoamerican cave archaeology.

The Nashville meeting was not the first session on Mesoamerican ritual cave use. That honor goes to the session, *Integrating Ethnography and Archaeology: Caves in Modern and Ancient Maya Life*, at the 1994 Annual Meeting of the American Anthropological Association in Atlanta, Georgia. The invited session, sponsored by the General Anthropology Division, was organized by James Brady and featured Jaime Awe, Doris Heyden, Dennis Tedlock, Evon Vogt, and Brady as speakers. While the session

was noteworthy for its line-up of senior figures in both cave archaeology and ethnography, the absence of any junior presenters underscores the fact that the next generation of cave archaeologists had yet to emerge at this point.

The significance of the Nashville session rests in no small part on the elaborate planning prior to the meetings. In 1996, a number of cave specialists met informally during the SAA meetings in New Orleans at a poster presentation on cave architecture by McMaster University graduate student, Patricia Austin. The number of students who stopped by the poster made it apparent that a large pool of students with cave archaeology field experience existed. After the poster session a small group of us commiserated over the need to have a cave symposium and soon the plans for a cave session for the following year emerged. Results of this planning included a correspondence initiative, called the Cave Network, for cave archaeology practitioners and those interested in cave investigations, as well as a published bibliography of over 1000 cave specific references compiled by Brady (1996), which is continuously updated.

The 11 papers presented marked the Nashville session as the first important public discussion of Mesoamerican ritual cave use. Most of the presenters are still actively working in cave archaeology so the participants have remained a significant force in determining the direction of the field.

In looking back after 12 years, it is clear that the success of the Nashville meeting was the catalyst for ten additional SAA cave sessions during time. At first there was some difficulty in carrying the momentum of the cave symposium in the following few years. Despite the erratic beginning, an important point came in 2001 with the resolve to mount yearly sessions and this has been maintained since that point.

Cave archaeology's regular presence at the SAAs during the last decade has been one of the key factors in archaeology's recognition of caves as a legitimate focus of investigation. The cave-focused symposia have provided the professional visibility that had been lacking when cave related papers had been presented as individual submissions

in general sessions on Mesoamerica. The cave sessions also underscored the great amount of research being carried out.

This latter point is significant as it relates to another issue that I discussed earlier concerning the development of the subfield of cave archaeology. I defined the interval between 1980 and 1997 as the Foundation Period when the underlying assumptions of the field were defined, a methodology was established, and a theoretical position took shape. I explicitly argued that no subfield of cave archaeology existed during Foundation Period because the developments during those two decades were the work of a few individuals, not a community of scholars. In this light, the 1994 AAA session, which relied on non-cave specialists for sufficient numbers to mount the session, can be appreciated as very much a product of the Foundation Period. The Nashville and succeeding SAA sessions in contrast demonstrated that a community of researchers had coalesced by 1997. The emergence of a community was essential in archaeology's recognition of a subfield and the lessening of the identification on simply the individual level. Thus, prominent individual scholars, such as Brady and Stone, became identified as part of the growing community of cave researchers that they have helped to nurture.

On a higher level, the series of SAA sessions not only gave students the opportunity to present, but actually created the expectation that students would present. This has resulted in a corps of students who are professionally active.

Many of these individuals, nurtured by a cohesive cohort and highly experienced in professional meetings, have contributed to the subfield through cave specific investigations (Moyes 2001, 2006; Ishihara 2007) and numerous other related topics or analyses with compelling interpretations. These works include findings on: plant remains (Morehart 2005), human remains (e.g., Gibbs 2000; Owen 2005; Scott and Brady 2005a; Tiesler 2005), speleothem breakage and transport (e.g., Brady, Scott et al., 1997; Brady, Cobb et al., 2005; Peterson et al. 2005), crystalmaney (Brady and Prufer 1999), settlement configuration (Brown 2005), pilgrimage (Patel 2005), artificial caves (Brady

2004; Pugh 2005), economic (Brady 2005b; Spenard 2006) and socio-political implications (e.g., Rissolo 2001; Prufer 2002; Woodfield 2007), and temporal studies (Scott and Brady 2005b) as well as improved methods of data recovery (Brady and Scott 1997; Moyes 2002).

In sum, the 1997 Nashville meeting represents a pivotal point in the history of Mesoamerican cave archaeology because the few professionals and the growing number of students working in the field coalesced around this event. Several important initiatives were developed in preparation for the session and then continued afterward. The formalization of the corpus of literature gave the field coherence and direction. The creation of an effective communication network maintained the group's self-conscious identity as a professional community of scholars. As I noted, the failure to organize sessions in the first years following Nashville threatened to derail the group's drive for professional recognition and perhaps the group's continued existence. The Cave Network, however, provided the unity that allowed the group to reassert itself. The annual sessions have been instrumental in creating an expectation that students will present papers and the presentations formed the basis of two important edited volumes. Fortified by the last nine annual pilgrimages to the SAA meetings the field remains unified to this day.

Cave Use and Sacred Landscape in Ethnography

Ethnographic study of the Maya indeed has a long history as well and has been a critical component to the understanding and interpretation of Maya cave use³. Some of the early archaeologists like Gordon (1898) superficially touched upon the ceremonial aspect of caves in their interpretations. Gordon suggested that a cave cult explained the presence of abundant human skeletal remains similar to the findings of Brinton (1894) in his study of nagualism. Later, Butler dismisses that notion despite citing a 1698

³ This overview of Maya ethnography is not intended as a complete history since I will only be focusing on works related to cave utilization, cosmology, ceremonies and rituals, and sacred landscape. A modicum of ethnohistoric contributions will be noted as well.

document by Bishop Nuñez de la Vega that describes ancestor veneration in caves with the Maya “people taking copal incense and flowers to the caves where they [the bones] are set” (1934:223-224).

In an unprecedented move, Sapper (1925:192), based on his ethnographic work with the Q’eqchi’, suggested that caves may have been sacred locations to the prehistoric Maya as well since the modern ones treat caves as sacred space. Some of the early ethnographies present some tantalizing details on both caves and landscape. Gordon notes (1915:137, 180, 183) the importance of caves in relation to the earth owners among the Q’eqchi’. Redfield (1941:117) observes that shamans invoke all the local cenotes by name in prayer and that plants and animals associated with cenotes are used in petitions to the rain-gods. At the same time evil winds that bring illness are also thought to emanate from cenotes (Redfield and Villa Rojas 1934:164-65). Although La Farge (1947:128) was not able to enter Yalan Na’, the sacred cave at Santa Eulalia, he nevertheless suggests that “I suspect that based on these indications that the cave is the true center of the ceremonial.” The influence of Santa Eulalia, because of the annual prophesy given by the cave, extended as far as Jacaltenango (La Farge and Byers 1931:184). Wisdom (1940:425) states that all springs in the Chorti area are named, considered sacred the focus of rain making ceremonies. Toor (1947:34-36) discusses a procession to caves and the rituals performed there in association with the planting of the fields. Stross (1994:161) discusses the importance of caves, springs and mountain tops in establishing portals to the supernatural. Although ethnographers compiled large amounts of cave data, there are no synthetic discussions of these landscape features (Brady and Prufer 2005a:7). Despite the use of ethnographic analogy by archaeologists to interpret the cave context, ethnographers were not motivated to pursue those research interests. Thus, cave descriptions among ethnographers, like archaeologists, were few and cursory in the first half of the 20th century. It was not until later that ethnographers began to specifically document contemporary cave ceremonies or utilization (Petryshyn 1969—

translated by Colas 2005; Navarrete 1966, 1971, 1974; Barrera Vasquez 1970; Uke 1970).

Unequivocally, the most notable ethnographer to make an impact in Maya cave ethnography and offer compelling data for archaeological interpretation was Evon Vogt. He had a lifelong, deep interest in using ethnographic data in the interpretation of ancient Maya (Brady and Prufer 2005a:7-8). While not focusing primarily on caves, Vogt's (1969, 1976) work among the Tzotzil Maya of Chiapas examined a variety of sacred features on the landscape and led to a proposal that prehistoric pyramid structures represent sacred mountains (1964). His treatise on Chiapas sacred geography heavily influenced archaeologist's interpretation of Maya sacred land use (Vogt 1981). One of his last contributions before his death was co-authoring with David Stuart where they couple hieroglyphic evidence with ethnographic data to demonstrate a long-standing tradition of sacred cave use illuminated in earth symbolism and metaphor to re-create an animate universe (Vogt and Stuart 2005).

Numerous regional studies by ethnographers offer insight on contemporary ritual cave use, sacred landscape features, ceremonies, and ritual specialists. These⁴ include research among the Tzeltal and Tzotzil Maya of Chiapas (Villa Rojas 1946, 1947; Holland 1963; Nash 1970; Uke 1970; Hermitte 1970; Blaffer 1972; Gossen 1974; Laughlin 1977); Lacandon speakers (Tozzer 1907; Soustelle 1961; Petryshyn 1969; Boremanse 1998; McGee 1990; 2002); Yucatec speakers (Redfield and Villa Rojas 1934; Tozzer 1941; Hanks 1984; Love 1989); various Maya groups of northern Guatemala (La Farge and Byers 1931; La Farge 1947; Watanabe 1994; Deuss 2007); Q'eqchi' speakers of Guatemala (Wilson 1995; Adams and Brady 2005; Woodfield 2007); K'iche' speakers (McDougall 1946; Bunzel 1952; Carmack 1973, 1981; Tedlock 1992; Molesky-Poz 2006; Earle 2008); Tz'utujil speakers (Mendelson 1957, 1959; Orellana 1984; Carlsen

⁴ This list is by no means exhaustive.

and Pretchel 1994; Christenson 2001, 2008; Stanzione 2003); and among the non-Maya including the Nahuatl and Mixtec groups (Sandstrom 1991; Monaghan 1995).

Research in the Kaqchikel Maya region is equally prolific and includes ethnography (Warren 1989; Hinojosa 1999; Fischer 1999; Xiquin 2000; Little 2004, 2008; Maxwell et al. 2008), archaeology (Robinson 1991; Bruchez 1997; Brown 2002; Nance et al. 2003), linguistics (Garzon et al. 1998;), and ethnohistory (Hill and Fischer 1999; Maxwell and Hill 2006).

My work with Kaqchikel Maya ritual specialists represents a departure from more commonly sought topics and instead marks a union of fields between ethnography and archaeology. Brown (2002) used the same approach in her ethnoarchaeological study of rural shrines in the southern highlands, which included sites from K'iche', Kaqchikel, and Tz'utujil regions. Brown's focus differs greatly from my own in that she attempted to document activity areas at the shrines and sought to understand how these features and extant materials would be recoverable in a site abandonment model. It appears that much of her research was conducted while sites were not in use. My ethnographic focus, at many of the same sites visited by Brown, documented cultural behaviors that led to the deposit of materials at these sites, witness the actions and behaviors performed during ceremonies, inventory materials that are commonly used among ritual specialists, and examine the patterns of use on the sacred landscape. In addition, I recorded more data on the beliefs and motivations of practitioners. I also used Brown's maps as a means to note any observable differences at the sites. While our research overlapped at certain sites, our aims and results can be best described as complementary.

SUMMARY

This dissertation research is built upon almost 170 years of cultural inquiry and interest in the life ways of the Maya. The country of Guatemala with its incredibly diverse environments and differing geology presents an ideal environment in which to

study various forms of behavior on the sacred landscape. The Maya, rich in heritage and culture, yet often reticent and secretive, offer investigators a glimpse into traditions only seen by some.

The history of cave investigations related the unfortunate events and turning points that affected the founding of the subfield. Despite the struggle that any fledgling subfield or specialization would encounter in its desire for recognition, the tenacity of cave investigators has paid off in the form of compelling studies and better acceptance of their findings among archaeologists as a whole.

Chapter 2: Methods and Research Strategy

METHODS

Development of the Project

The current study combines recent ethnographic field study of contemporary Maya ceremonies in Guatemala with experiences and knowledge acquired from my archaeological research at such sites as Dos Pilas, Guatemala, and Copán and Talgua, Honduras. Participation in the Kaqchikel Maya Language and Culture program dramatically altered my planned dissertation. Three of my Maya teachers were ritual specialists with the majority of the instructors openly practicing *costumbre*. My participation in the class offered opportunities to experience contemporary Maya spirituality on the sacred landscape. The rituals I observed provided insights into the interpretation of the archaeological contexts that I had previously investigated. I realized that cave archaeology lacked anything but the crudest analogical models of Maya ritual. With the encouragement of Maya colleagues I decided that an examination of contemporary Maya sacred site utilization with emphasis on activities, behaviors, and material culture found in ceremonies would make a more substantial contribution to the field than a purely archaeological study.

Data was gathered from eight field seasons of investigation. Initial visits to caves and other sacred sites around Lake Atitlán began in the summer of 2001 during my first Kaqchikel course. In 2002 I decided to work with my Kaqchikel instructors on Maya spirituality and sacred site utilization building upon the data I collected from the previous year. On returning to Austin, I formulated a dissertation proposal and defended it in April 2003. With my dissertation topic approved, I initiated the current study during the summer of 2003 funded by a National Speleological Society fellowship. With a dissertation research grant from The University of Texas I worked two field seasons

during the academic year 2004-2005. In both the summer of 2004 and 2005 I continued to participate in the Kaqchikel Maya Language and Culture course while collecting data for my dissertation. In the summer of 2007 I acted as a research assistant for a sacred sites project funded by FAMSI. Judith Maxwell at Tulane University and co-director of the Kaqchikel Maya Language and Culture class received a grant and together we collaborated with other indigenous ritual specialists on a sacred site survey of the Kaqchikel region of south central Guatemala. Data collected from that project is integrated into my dissertation with permission of Dr. Maxwell. Finally, I participated in a short season of cave archaeology in Huehuetenango at the end of the summer of 2007 where I was able to observe non-Kaqchikel Maya ceremonies for a comparative perspective.

Multi-disciplinary Approach

A principal objective of this project was to better understand the complex role of landscape in Maya ceremonialism. A multi-disciplinary approach incorporating techniques from ethnography and archaeology as well as approaches from ethnohistory and linguistics yielded valuable data.

Ethnography

Two common ethnographic techniques employed to collect my data were participant/observation of rituals at sacred sites followed by in-depth interviews. Informal interviews included discussions with both indigenous men and women from several Maya communities. My principal collaborator was a ritual specialist; he considered himself an *ajq'ij* or daykeeper. Another important collaborator was also a ritual specialist who called himself a *chajinel* or caretaker or guardian of a mountain, not an *ajq'ij*, despite being just as familiar with ceremonial customs and the Maya calendar as a daykeeper. Both of these individuals assisted in the field by brokering access to

sites, facilitating contact with community members, and performing ceremonies⁵. In addition, I recorded formal interviews with them.

The observations of ceremonies played a central role in my research. While ceremonies are conducted for a variety of reasons such as asking for protection from enemies, a prosperous business, better health, luck or true love, sacred site maintenance, the ceremonial process opens with a request for permission. Out of respect for the spirit owners residing at sacred sites, ceremonial offerings are necessary in order to enter these special places. My ritual specialists conducted the requisite ceremonies at each of these sites we visited, which included, at minimum, the burning of candles. Once permission has been requested and granted by the spirit owners as read by the ritual specialists, the more commonly multi-material ceremonies commenced at these sites. As a researcher I did not simply observe these acts, but I actively participated in each of the rituals performed. After the initial season of fieldwork I began to assist the specialists with the performance of ceremonies much like an apprentice. I assisted with purchasing materials in the market, preparing materials for use in the ceremonies, activating site altars, arranging materials in the offering and performing some of the activities commonly conducted in ceremonies. After our work was completed and if other ceremonies were taking place I took the opportunity to observe these other events to examine the difference in performance style among the specialists with whom I worked and/or observed.

Beside the obvious challenge of being a *gringa* among the Maya, I was able to ameliorate the potential skepticism from community members by communicating with them in Kaqchikel as well as wear indigenous women's clothing, *po't*, *pa's*, and *üq* (blouse, belt, and skirt). My association with the ritual specialists and my active

⁵ The relationship with my indigenous collaborators is also akin to what one would have with a doctor, counselor, or spiritual guide. This doctor-patient relationship is prevalent among *ajq'ija'* and their clients. Thus, throughout the dissertation I make reference to both "my collaborators" as well as "my *ajq'ij*" or "my *ajq'ija'*." This latter reference is not to imply disrespect through possession. The statements are made as a patient/client receiving information from her doctor/counselor or spiritual guide.

participation in ceremonies facilitated my being accepted by other Maya participants at these sites. I found the Maya to be polite and friendly towards me during my investigations, and on occasion, offered flattering compliments on my choice of the indigenous clothing I was wearing.

Linguistics

As Sharer and Traxler assert the study of modern Mayan languages provide insight into past beliefs, customs, and worldview (2006:121). In that light, I greatly benefited from the linguistic studies in which I participated during the Kaqchikel Maya Language and Culture course, *Oxlajuj Aj*. These classes created a means of understanding ritual discourse and cultural behavior that otherwise I would not have easily learned or understood (see Maxwell and Little 2006; Brown et al. 2006). Unequivocally, this *emic* perspective gives me a more learned position in not only understanding the rituals and behaviors, but also more credibility when offering interpretations or recognizing important implications.

Ethnohistory

The ethnohistoric record offers information on the sacred landscape of the Kaqchikel, Tz'utujil and K'iche regions. Colonial documents allow us to glimpse the utilization of the landscape at the time of the conquest. The recent publication of the Kaqchikel Chronicles (Maxwell and Hill 2006) especially help put into perspective the importance of the natural landscape to the pre- and post-contact Kaqchikel and shape my interpretations on the significance of sacred landscape to the Maya. The continued utilization of specific sacred sites that were named in the Chronicles attests to the significant nature of these powerful places to the Kaqchikel of today. Furthermore, the written documents demonstrate the continuity of ritual practice or behaviors such as divining with stones, the recognition of *nawals* or companion spirits, and the ability to

transform into the animal form of a *nawal*. These “contact period” behaviors, inherent in the ritual ideology, continue for the Kaqchikel of today.

Archaeology

My training as an archaeologist has contributed to a number of aspects of this study. This is most notable is my interest in diachronic change at sites. Rather than attempting to define an invariant structure, I have documented the dynamic quality of sacred sites. This is also reflected in my interest in taphonomic processes that affect residues of rituals. As I will show, many of these are related to Maya ritual behavior such as ritual cleaning and sweeping of sites. As an archaeologist I bring an awareness of spatial usage of the physical environment that ethnographers may not normally emphasize during their studies. My training in archaeology is also reflected in my attention to the material culture being employed in rituals.

There are, however, limitations to the implementation of archaeological methods because the contemporary Maya continuously use these sites. I became aware almost immediately that detailed mapping of sites would be difficult at best. Often local community members were present performing ceremonies at these sites and an attempt to map would be disruptive, intrusive, and even disrespectful. In this case attempting to map a site would directly conflict with my ethnographic goals. Because of the sensitive nature of these sites and out of respect for those who visit them I decided to not make mapping a central goal of this project. This did not preclude me from documenting the features at these sites by other means. With maps in hand from previous investigations (Brown 2002) I was able to document the change over time at these sites based on the data provided by Brown some years earlier. When feasible I did make maps at sites not previously investigated. Finally, I was able to record the UTM coordinates of the site with a handheld GPS unit⁶.

⁶ Detailed location information in the form of UTM coordinates of these sacred sites is not included in this study to protect them from potential harm or disrespect. Instead, site descriptions, presented in Chapter 4, are discussed in relation to the nearest community, which are displayed on maps.

The act of photographing the site was more accepted and understood by the Maya than making plan maps of these locations. As a result, sites were extensively photographed with a digital camera focusing on various features such as burn circles, stone altars, crosses, and ritual residue. Broader scale pictures showing the context of the site on the landscape were also attempted when possible. In some cases photographs were permitted during the actual construction or arrangement of the materials in the ceremonial offering. This valuable opportunity allows me to show how materials are used in a ceremony and at what stage during the construction of the offering. Photography was discouraged when the actual ceremony was initiated.

In summary, the success of my dissertation project lay in its multidisciplinary approach, which brought together various types of methodologies and avenues for understanding and interpreting sacred site usage. Despite some methodological limitations with mapping sites, the overall recovery of data was achieved through other data collection means like extensive photography, written descriptions, and GPS readings. Coupled with mutual respect and encouragement from Maya colleagues the project achieved its goals.

RESEARCH STRATEGY USING ANALOGY AND ETHNOARCHAEOLOGY

The approach employed during this dissertation research involved using ethnography as analogy, or ethnoarchaeology, to help develop interpretations of commoner sacred site usage. The use of ethnoarchaeology is not new to archaeological approaches, but given a timeline on the history of archaeological study, it is a relatively new approach. Like all strategies, it is not without some criticism.

In this section I will present a brief history on the use of analogy and ethnography in archaeological research and how it has become defined. Next, I will discuss how the approach is effectively applied, while detailing the more common criticisms and potential misuses of analogy in archaeological interpretation. Whether this work succeeded in

using analogy and an ethnoarchaeological approach effectively will be discussed in the final chapter of this dissertation.

The Development of Ethnoarchaeology

The first use of the term “ethnoarchaeologist” or the practical application of ethnoarchaeology is attributed to Jesse Walter Fewkes (1900:578-579) who worked in the American Southwest with the Hopi. His approach was to document the present life ways of this group while simultaneously examining their prehistory. While his method went largely unnoticed by many, a few saw its value like Donald Thomson’s work (1939) among aboriginal Australians.

Challenged with a need to address other aspects of behavior or technology within culture, besides simply focusing on artifact remains, ethnoarchaeology began to emerge as a more serious subdiscipline of anthropological study in the 1950s. The influential work by Maxine Kleidienst and Patty Jo Watson encouraged archaeologists to “attempt to define where and in what degree the total non-material culture of the community could be inferred from the information gathered” (Kleidienst and Watson 1956: 77). The need to have better methods of archaeological inquiry, however, did not drive this line of investigation into the fast lane. It was not until the 1960s where a more solid approach began to coalesce.

Ascher’s (1961) groundbreaking article argued that analogy is applicable in archaeological interpretations and listed criteria that can be used as a basis to apply. Driven by the “fact that archaeological interpretation has suffered from chronic ambiguity” (Ascher 1961:322), he recommended that archaeologists choose population analogs where less historical distance and time has passed between the community in question and the archaeological sample. In cases where a direct connection cannot be established a comparative approach is possible by looking at cultures from similar environments or behavioral contexts. He also argued that archaeologists conduct their own ethnographic study given the dearth of ethnographic literature that effectively

describes the material culture and behavior correlates that are useful to archaeologists. Thus, he suggested that archaeologists focus their ethnographic inquiry on topics where objects are produced, consumed, and discarded in the cultural process as likely to become in the archaeological record.

The use of analogy continues to have support in many forms as “New Archaeology” or Processual Archaeology, loosely defined as a shift in the field for explaining archaeological contexts instead of simply describing them, continued to develop. Lewis Binford’s (1978, 1981) posit of middle range theory, where the “static” nature of the material record can be connected to the “dynamics” of cultural systems (Brown 2002:42-43), was wed with ethnoarchaeology, while acknowledging the usefulness of oral histories and ethnohistoric documents.

A series of publications from the 1980s by Patty Jo Watson (1979), Richard Gould (Watson and Gould 1982), and Alison Wylie (1982, 1985), demonstrate the continued debate among researchers on how to operationalize the use of analogy in interpretation in the post-processualist period. (For an extended summary of their debates see Brown 2002:46-50). At the basic level, both Watson and Wylie were supporters of analogy in archaeological inference with appropriate use of logical reasoning. Gould, instead, argued for a case of uniformitarianism where predictable, rational, adaptive behaviors could be linked between the present and the past, and avoided analogy as it is used uncritically to project the present to the past. Another significant contributor during this time included Hodder’s (1982) *Symbols in Action*, which advanced ethnoarchaeology, but did not have an immediate transformation of the field (David and Kramer 2001:24). It was not until later when improved techniques and methodologies helped to propel the subdiscipline.

The history can be summed up by noting that most of the major problems among researchers had been cleared up by the late 1980s and early 1990s and numerous

ethnoarchaeological projects were being produced with good results (e.g., Longacre 1991). (See David and Kramer 2001:14-32 for a detailed history of ethnoarchaeology).

Defining Ethnoarchaeology and the Effective Use of Analogy

Given the vigorous debate on the use of analogy for archaeological interpretation, there is an equal contention on defining the term and/or approach of ethnoarchaeology. David and Kramer (2001:6-14, and Table 1.1) discuss over 20 various definitions of ethnoarchaeology that have been proposed over a period of 100 years. While some definitions are too narrow (e.g., Gould 1978; MacEachern 1994), others complicate the matter by splitting hairs over terms and approaches (Kent 1987). For this study, I approached the research in an Ascher-esque orientation where the “research includes an ethnographic component and is carried out with the analogical needs of the archaeologist in mind” (David and Kramer 2001:11).

One important point to note on defining ethnoarchaeology is that it is:

neither a theory⁷ nor a method, but a research strategy embodying a range of approaches to understanding the relationships of material culture to culture as a whole, both in the living context and as it enters the archaeological record, and to exploiting such understandings in order to inform archaeological concepts and improve interpretation (David and Kramer 2001:2).

Despite all the debate and argument in the field, analogy, derived from ethnographic research, is fundamental to all archaeological analysis and interpretation. In general, use of analogy draws heavily from ethnography and ethnohistorical records. Several authors (Ascher 1961; Stiles 1977) have noted that in using analogy there are two approaches: a direct historical approach and a general comparative approach. The direct historical approach assumes continuity between the archaeological population and either a living population or a historical population for which there are records. This approach

⁷ David and Kramer (2001:33-62) devote an entire chapter to “Theorizing Ethnoarchaeology and Analogy” where they note that the vast majority of ethnoarchaeological works take no explicit theoretical position, which does not mean they were atheoretical, however.

has been useful among processual archaeologists in areas where continuity is strong such as Latin America, the American Southwest, and Australia (Watson 1979).

The general comparative approach is employed when no historical analogs are available in a region and the researcher must look elsewhere for analogical assistance. This is akin to Ascher's (1961) "new analogy" or Gould's (1980) "discontinuous models" where "archaeologists using the comparative approach generally seek analogies in cultures living in similar environments using similar subsistence practices or technologies as those in the archaeological population under investigation" (Brown 2001:51-52).

There are serious issues with both approaches. Inherent in the direct historical approach is the assumption of cultural continuity. Kubler (1967, 1969) notes that there is a problem with disjunction in which particular artifact forms may continue while meanings may have changed.

The potential for misapplication for the general comparative approach is also great if the criteria of similarities are not met. Ascher (1961: 319-320), warns that: (1) these analogies should be restricted to subsistence or subsistence connected information; (2) the analogy should be drawn from a similar ecological zone; (3) the technological level should be approximately equal that of the archaeological population and (4) the analogy should be seen as a clue to the direction to look for an explanation, not as an explanation itself.

To avoid misapplication of analogy in archaeological interpretation, Binford (1967:47-48) proposes a number of steps in the application of an ethnographic analogy in the direct historical approach. The first step is an evaluation of the degree of fit between the archaeological and ethnographic situations. This should recognize not only the similarities but also the differences between the two. The spatial distribution of the archaeological and the ethnographic traits should be shown to coincide. Next, a judgment is made about the degree to which it is reasonable to expect cultural continuity. Finally, the analogy should be taken as a hypothesis and tested in the field.

While Mesoamerica harbors the criteria for a direct historical approach, there are cases where exploring “elsewhere” could prove effective in archaeological interpretation. Adams and Smith (1977) have drawn an analogy between Mediaeval Europe and the Classic Maya, which seems to break most of the rules for applying a “new analogy.” Interested in examining the effect of social and political collapse, the authors see the value of such an analogy to Mayanists in that the European case is much better documented than the Maya collapse. Their use of the analogy seems to work because they are constantly aware of the differences in the two cases and no attempt is made to push the analogy too far. Analogy is supposed to serve as an illustration rather than as an explanation, but to the extent that the analogy often guides our research and reconstruction in certain directions, the choice of an inappropriate analogy can be disastrous.

Despite the limitations of analogic approaches they can be useful and effective in archaeological reconstruction, when applied properly. Pohl (1981) provides an interesting effort to deal with the disjunction problem in the direct historical approach in attempting to use ethnographic data to reconstruct the ancient Maya *cuch* ceremony, involving animal sacrifice. She traces the ceremony from Late Classic to Post Classic and then through the colonial period into contemporary ethnography, documenting the changes that have taken place. Her study is unusual in providing such thorough documentation. Similarly, Brady and Prufer (1999) use ethnohistoric, ethnographic, and archaeological data to help reconstruct crystal usage among the ancient Maya and argue that archaeologists need to better recognize this important artifact type and its role in Maya religion.

Other ethnoarchaeological work in the Maya region includes Brian Hayden’s Coxoh Ethnoarchaeological Project. Primarily focusing on household material variability, ceramics, and lithics, this was the largest ethnoarchaeological project in the Maya highlands (Hayden 1987a, 1987b, 1987c; Nelson 1981; Deal 1998). Additionally,

the Coxoh project generated other, more specific projects that examined pottery production, reuse, and discard (Deal 1982, 1983, 1998); refuse behavior (Hayden and Cannon 1983); household features (Blake 1988); and ritual pottery and household altars (Deal 1988).

Linda Brown's (2002) dissertation work in the southern highlands of Guatemala was an ethnoarchaeological project employing Binford's middle range approach involving site structure analysis and site formation processes. Creating a typology of features found at contemporary rural sacred shrines, she developed models of site formation and abandonment for archaeological reconstruction of similar types of sites found in ancient contexts. An extensive survey of the ethnographic literature supported the study.

Summary

As archaeologists attempt to reconstruct cultural institutions and processes, the evidence and the relationships necessary for their elucidation become more complex. The logical models developed by archaeologists are too often simplistic or else fail to consider viable alternatives. Ethnography and ethnographic analogy provide a mechanism to better understand and interpret archaeological conditions, if applied properly. They help to show the dynamics and the complexity of the problems so that the relevant data from relevant contexts can be gathered. With understanding the limitations of this approach, such as recognizing the impediments to cultural continuity, ethnography as analogy can aid in reconstructing the archaeological record.

Chapter 3: The Fabric of Maya Spirituality

INTRODUCTION

The Kaqchikel Maya communicate with the supernatural world through the performance of a ceremony⁸ utilizing specialized materials. While ceremonies can be conducted in a household setting, a stronger connection is made with the spiritual world if the ceremony is performed out in the natural environment, considered sacred, alive, and full of spiritual beings. This chapter presents the types of materials commonly used in these communication efforts and summarizes how ritual specialists, called *ajq'ija'* or day keepers, perform a ceremony. The following, Chapter 4, will describe the animate world, visiting the important sites on the sacred earth where ceremonies take place. The materials and ceremonies interwoven by the fire are part of the fabric of Maya spirituality.

MATERIALS USED IN THE CEREMONIAL CONTEXT

The types of materials used in ceremonies are variable so my presentation here is not intended to be exhaustive. My investigation examined materials popularly used in positive or “white” ceremonies, however, there is a large inventory of specialized products not covered in this study pertaining to negative or “black” ceremonies.

While the basic materials employed in ceremonies generally include candles, incense, and liquor, additional elements will be added depending on the types of ceremonies or petition requested from the ancestors or *nawales* (spiritual guardians and/or day patrons). The *ajq'ija'* normally advise clients on what materials to acquire. For my research I asked my *ajq'ija'* to present to me the most commonly used materials. Thus, this chapter will present information collected on the following materials: candles, types of incense, assorted plants, various liquids, cigars, chocolate, breads, and sweets

⁸ I use the term “ceremony” predominately instead of “ritual” because my collaborators referred to them as “*ceremonias*” or “*kotz'ij*,” flower or ceremony in Kaqchikel.

(Figure 3.1). Before discussing the types of materials and how they are used in ceremonies I will briefly discuss where materials are obtained.



Figure 3.1. Examples of materials commonly used in ceremonies.

Materials for ceremonies are purchased in a community's general market at specialized stalls, if the community is large enough to sustain a larger market. In some cases, there are businesses or shops outside of the market that specifically cater to *costumbre* paraphernalia. The majority of ceremonial materials are found at these specialty shops, however, some materials such as limes, liquor, and *pan dulce* or sweet breads are found elsewhere in the market. Some communities have small markets that lack specialty stores in which case participants must travel to larger communities in order to purchase materials needed for ceremonies. During my investigation it was common for us to bring materials purchased in the large market in Antigua with us knowing that

local markets may not carry all or any of the materials needed for our planned ceremonies.

Candles

Candles represent an item fundamental to offerings at sacred sites or use at personal altars. As Wisdom (1952:127) notes, candles are indispensable in saint worship and other ritual practices. Candles come in a variety of shapes, sizes, and colors. Size is a consideration because it determines how long they burn. Candles can be found in glass containers, wax paper wrappers, or in groups bundled together with string⁹. The small groups of candles found in the foreground of Figure 3.1 are the most commonly used in ceremonies and described below. They average about 13 cm in length and are similar to the thickness of a pencil. Individually, they burn for about 20 to 30 minutes; others burn longer. Ten different colors of candles are used in ceremonies: red, black, white, yellow, blue, green, pink, sky blue, purple, and *cebo*, or “lard,” an off-white that serves a special function¹⁰. First I will discuss the meanings in the colored candles as described by my collaborators, then I will present how they utilize six candle colors in creating what they term a “Maya cross.”

Red symbolizes the sun, energy, blood, and love. Love consists of all forms including between couples, families, or friends. It also represents the rising sun over the mountains or valleys (Cuma Chávez 2005:44). Red, too, corresponds to sacred red corn¹¹.

⁹ A waxy, thin string is strung through each candlewick to hold and sometimes suspend the cluster of 12 candles in a group. This string is broken to separate the candles and kept for later use in the ceremonial burning.

¹⁰ Vogt (1993:47) discusses the Zinacanteco candle usage where they have seven colors: white, red, black, yellow, green-blue, gold striped, and *cebo* (Xevu), lard/tallow. He notes that it is unusual to see all the candles used in a ceremony unless it involves witchcraft. This can mean either inflicting harm to another community member or guarding against witchcraft.

¹¹ The four colored candles, red, black, white, and yellow, appear to act as a symbolic replacement of corn in offerings. Actual corn has not been a material that I have observed as an offering during my study, however, we have much evidence of its use in the archaeological record (Brady 1989:86, 1995:34; Brady et al. 1997:95; Brady, Begley, et al., 2000:112; Rue et al., 1989:399; Sharer and Sedat 1987:248).

Black is the controversial color. It symbolizes the energy of the dark, night, a state of rest, death, tranquility, and peace (Cuma Chávez 2005:44). Others use it for negative means of casting spells or petitioning for bad influences. Conversely, black candles can draw away these evil influences or malevolent conditions inflicted on a person. It acts as protection when coupled with *cebo* (see below) (Figure 3.2). Finally, black represents sacred corn.



Figure 3.2. Black and *cebo* candles.

White represents purity, the pure air that cleans the earth, good health for children, and symbolizes loyalty and light (Cuma Chávez 2005:44). For others it symbolizes ancestors, bones, and purification. They are used to pray for tranquility,

happiness, and prosperity. White candles are also commonly used in Catholic ceremonies such as baptisms and confirmations (see also Wisdom 1952:127). Finally, white candles correlate to sacred white corn.

Yellow represents protection for adults. It is also associated with abundance, bodies of water, and fertility. Yellow embodies the termination of the air flowing across the earth from the north into the south (Cuma Chávez 2005:45). This color also corresponds to sacred yellow corn.

Blue represents the sky. It brings positive energy from around the universe and allows contact with that energy. It is used to strengthen a connection with the “Creator” (Cuma Chávez 2005:44). Some emphasize blue candles in ceremonies for protection of work or to increase job stability.

Green candles symbolize nature and Mother Earth. They facilitate an energy connection to the medicinal plants, trees, and landscape features found on Earth. Green also means luck for those who believe (Cuma Chávez 2005:44) and can be used to petition for more success in business endeavors.

Meanings for pink, sky blue, and purple candles vary depending on the *ajq'ij* using them or the day of the ceremony within the sacred calendar. A general consensus among my collaborators indicates that pink represents women or girls, sky blue symbolizes men or boys, and purple corresponds to vices in one's life. Purple is used in petitions to purge oneself of vices and ask for protection to prevent further maleficent behavior.

Cebo candles are unusual in that they are made from animal fat or lard (tallow), not the typical wax material that makes up the other candles. Likely used in pre-contact contexts, these candles are offered with the belief that they are feeding the ancestral spirits (Vogt 1993:47, 50; Cuma Chávez 2005:45). These candles represent ancestors or grandparents and are used to communicate with those that have passed away. *Cebo* candles are often burned in conjunction with black candles (see description above) as a

form of protection against malevolent spirits residing at sacred sites, since not all spirits can be considered “good.”

All of my Maya collaborators acknowledge the significance of a “Maya cross.” Six candle colors (red, black, white, yellow, blue and green) function in constructing a Maya cross, which emphasize the four cardinal points along with the sky and earth as center; it is three-dimensional (Figure 3.3). This cross is replicated each time in a ceremony. An *ajq'ij* explains:

White represents North where air originates. It cannot be seen but instead is felt. Yellow represents South, since the air falls in the south. Air comes from the north and it falls in the south. East is represented with the color red, which is where the sun comes from. The sun comes out from the east. And as you can see, our altar faces east. Our altar receives the first sunrays in the morning. It represents East. Black represents West, since the sun sets on the west, which also represents death, darkness and rest. [The] color green represents the center of the Earth, which represents medicinal plants and Mother Nature. Along with blue, which represents the sky. It's the way in which we represent the Mayan cross, and it's also the beginning of a ceremony.



Figure 3.3. The Maya cross as represented by colored candles.

Other types of candles present at sacred sites include *sirios*, *veladoras*, and *siete potencias*. The *sirios* and *veladoras* come in the same color scheme as the small candles described above, however, the *veladoras* do not have the *cebo* type. They embody the same meanings of colors, but serve other functions as well. *Sirios* are longer tapered candles that can stay lit for 12 hours and make ceremonies last longer if desired (Figure 3.4). Curers often use *sirios* to draw away a serious illness from someone by passing the unlit candles over a patient's body. My informant noted that they cost more than the smaller candles, which is why smaller candles are used more commonly in ceremonies.



Figure 3.4. Examples of *sirios* candles.

Veladoras are smaller candles that burn for 24 hours if lit individually. They come with a waxed paper wrapping (Figure 3.5) or in glass containers. Considered as praying candles, these are used commonly at vigils, wakes or at special events like marriages, baptisms, and childbirths.



Figure 3.5. Examples of *veladora* candles showing the wax paper wrapping.

Siete potencias or “seven powers” is a specialized candle with seven colors layered one over the other (Figure 3.6). These candles come in glass containers. Each candle offers a different color at the beginning or top depending on the petition with which a person wants to begin. The *ajq’ij* explained that people use these candles to repair multiple problems in their life; it is resolving all problems with a single candle.



Figure 3.6. Example of *siete potencias* candle.

The sample candle used in the investigation included the colors red, white, blue, yellow, green, pink, and sky blue. Corresponding meanings are love and tranquility (red), purity (white), work (blue), protection (yellow), business (green), peace (pink), and travel and studies (sky blue). The *ajq'ij* noted that black and purple colors are missing from this candle. Those colors are present in other color schemes and commonly used when an individual wants to draw away negative influences, bad luck, and negative energies thought to be caused through witchcraft. These candles are popularly used among the Maya despite its non-local origin; Vogt (1993:47) noted the use of a striped candle coated with alternating bands of yellow, red, and green wax in Zinacanteco rituals, but did not offer specific suggestions on its use. *Siete potencia* candles are commonly associated with the Orisha voodoo derived from African sources (Judith Maxwell, personal communication, 2008). It is unlikely that there is a pre-hispanic antecedent related to this object for the Maya area, although the Zinacantecan type seems similar.

Types of Incense

Multiple types of incense or *pom* are used in ceremonies serving to feed the ancestors through the fire. The pleasant aroma from these offerings draw the ancestors and spirits to the ceremony. As one Q'eqchi' informant explained to Wilson (1995:72) during his research in Alta Verapaz, "When we eat stew we include salt, onions, meat, *xayau*, squash, and herbs. It's the same when we give food in a cave, there have to be different types of *pom*." Incense is also used for curative purposes. The majority of incense used by the Maya is obtained from either *Bursera* or *Pinus* species of resin producing plants (Tripplett 1999). Regional variation of plant resin use among the Maya of Guatemala exists. For example, the Q'eqchi' from Lanquin in Alta Verapaz use *Protium copal* resin for their incense production (Tripplett 1999:117; Schlesinger 2001:119), while the K'iche' near Momostenango use *Pinus* spp. derived resins for incense manufacture and use. For a technical chemical analysis and summary of various

resins used by the contemporary Maya see Tripplett (1999) and also Morehart et al. 2005).

Ensarte, or *joq pom* in Kaqchikel, is brown, resin incense shaped into the form of small volcanoes, as described by one informant, and stored in banana leaves (Figure 3.7). Identified as copal *negro* by Tripplett, this incense is composed of *Pinus* spp. resins and *Quercus* spp. (oak tree) materials (Tripplett 1999: 143). Used as part of the structural base of the ceremony, individual *ensarte* pieces serve to give fuel for the ceremonial fire. One informant noted that “as with houses, if the offering does not have a foundation, it will fall.” These incense pieces are placed face up on a granulated sugar base that has already been poured onto the prepared altar (See below for an explanation of sugar). In negative ceremonies, the pieces are placed face down as a means to cast spells or evil energy at someone. Normally, about a dozen *ensarte* packages are consumed in a large ceremony.



Figure 3.7. Example of *ensarte* incense shown with banana leaf wrapping.

Cuilco, or *pwaq pom* in Kaqchikel, is another resin incense stored in banana leaves (Figure 3.8). Their botanical source is not known but likely includes pine resins (see Tripplett 1999). Small and dark brown, these button size pieces are generally used to petition for economic abundance, but they also aromatize the ceremony. They normally are bundled as one dozen packs. When not placed during the construction of the offering, *cuilco* is used as offerings thrown into the fire during the 20 Maya days count (see Appendix 1).



Figure 3.8. Example of *cuilco* incense shown in banana leaf wrapping.

Pom, (*en bola* or ball form), is dark brown resin incense balls (Figure 3.9). Once again, it is likely that these specimens originate from *Pinus* species mixed with tree materials like *Quercus* as with the case of *ensarte*. *Pom en bola* can come in two sizes, small and large. One informant notes that besides burning the balls in general, they can be passed over a sick person and then thrown into the fire. If the ball simply burns then the patient does not have negative energies, however, if the specimen crackles with loud noise then the person has many negative influences. The smaller balls are also used

during the portion of the ceremony reciting the 20 Maya day names when the counting falls on 13 *Toj*. (See section on Ceremonies and Appendix 1).



Figure 3.9. Example of large size *pom en bola*.

Estoraque or *ixim pom* (little incense) functions to aromatize the ritual through burning and entice the spirits to come. The form represented in the sample is from the bark of the tree (Figure 3.10).



Figure 3.10. Example of *estoraque* incense.

Another incense to aromatize the ceremony is called *palitos* (Figure 3.11), which are literally “little sticks.” One informant noted that a bath can be made from *estoraque* and *palitos* by cooking the incense like a tea or broth and using it to draw up a bath. It helps with patients who have stomach problems, colds or other respiratory issues.



Figure 3.11. Example of *palitos* incense.

I believe both *palitos* and *estoraque* incense types originate from the same botanical source based on the discussion with the informant and the physical nature of the specimens. The Spanish word *estoraque*, is a botanical term meaning storax, a plant that produces a balsam material. Langenheim (2003:354-355) provides a history of the term storax and asserts the resin has been erroneously attributed to *Liquidambar styraciflua*, a member of the sweetgum family. Instead, Langenheim (2003:355) argues that several *Styrax* evergreen species in the New World produce resins and are called *estoraque* in Brazil, Mexico, and Mesoamerica (see also footnote Tripplett 1999:136-137). Alcorn (1984:690) summarizes *L. Styraciflua* as being used primarily as a construction material, not as a medicinal plant. Tripplett (1999:38) also asserts that *estoraque* may be erroneously associated with *L. styraciflua*. The spectral analysis on a sample of

estoraque from Guatemala showed it did not resemble *L. styraciflua*'s spectral signature. Tripplett (1999:38, 77) suspects that *estoraque* may be an exudate from a *Myroxylon* species (balsam) instead, however, no spectral samples of *Myroxylon* were available during her study to make a definitive comparison. *Styrax* samples were not tested either. Thus, the exact botanical source (genus and specie) of *estoraque* is not currently known.

Myrrh or *xi pul* is also used to aromatize the ceremony. The material is a soft woody substance from an unidentified source (Tripplett 1999:51). The informant notes that it has a pleasant smell and popularly used in prayers and petitions (Figure 3.12).



Figure 3.12. Example of myrrh incense.

Siete inciensos, or seven incenses, a chunky variety of all the various woody incenses, is utilized to aromatize the ceremony (Figure 3.13). It also has medicinal value as a bath to heal ailments and regulate a person's energy. The specimen appears to contain predominately crushed *ensarte*, however, the other botanical components are not fully known.



Figure 3.13. Example of *siete inciensos*.

Perla (frankincense) or *saq pom* (white incense) is widely used incense in ceremonies (Figure 3.14). It is aromatic, produces abundant smoke, and functions as small offerings sprinkled during the petition phase of a ceremony. This off-white colored, small chunky resin is also used in Catholic churches and ubiquitous during *Semana Santa* (Holy Week) processions. The botanical source is from a *Bursera* specie, popularly known in the Old World, but likely from New World autochthonous relatives such as *Bursera copallifera*. *B. copallifera* was undoubtedly used in pre-hispanic ceremonies, but whether it was in the same physical form as in the sample is uncertain.



Figure 3.14. Example of *perla* incense.

Amber is a solid, yellow resin used in ceremonies and also Catholic church rituals (Figure 3.15). The botanical source of this incense is likely *Bursera copallifera*, only in larger form here; it was probably used in pre contact ritual contexts as well.



Figure 3.15. Example of amber incense.

Charcoal is another material occasionally used in ceremonies (Figure 3.16a). While it is not considered as incense per se, the informant claimed it is used to aromatize the sacred space prior to the ceremony. Furthermore, it functions as a basis (hot coals) to burn the incense and other plant materials in an *incensario* (Figure 3.16b). While I did not ask what tree type the charcoal came from I suspect it is from either a Pine variety or an Oak variety, due to the abundance of those type in the highlands.

I have also seen the remains of large, chunky charcoal at other sites and it was pointed out that these remains were evidence of a negative or “black” ceremony. Charcoal is only used in the censers during positive ceremonies.



a



b

Figure 3.16. **a.** Example of charcoal. **b.** Note the charcoal lit in the *incensario* prior to the interview and ceremony.

Herbs and other plant specimens

Laurel is a plant burned in ceremonies to achieve success in various matters such as business endeavors, personal goals, or projects (Figure 3.17). One informant noted medicinal uses for stomach problems and colds. The specimen consists of dried leaves on branches. It is unclear if the specimen is *Laurus nobilis*, which is not indigenous to Guatemala, or some other native plant that they are calling a laurel.



Figure 3.17. Example of laurel.

Pericón, the herb (*Tagetes lucida*) known as Mexican tarragon or *anisillo* in Mexico, is used to aromatize the ceremony with its intense almost licorice like scent (Figure 3.18). The informant stated that the aroma helps to elevate prayers to Ajaw and also commemorates those *comadronas* (midwives) that have died. This herb is to be indigenous to the region.



Figure 3.18. Example of *pericón*.

Manzanilla, or chamomile, has multi-functions for the Kaqchikeles (Figure 3.19). It serves not only to aromatize the ceremony, but also has medicinal value. One informant noted:

This plant is well known in all Guatemala, since many persons in the indigenous communities use it when a woman gives birth to a baby. The woman gets into the habit of drinking chamomile tea to normalize her energy, normalize her body after giving birth. It's not only a medicinal function, but also a spiritual function, since it is known that this plant's aroma arrives jointly with prayers and petitions made to the spirits. It is well received.



Figure 3.19. Example of *manzanilla*.

Ruda, an herb known as rue, appears to be an important plant for the Maya. Besides medicinal value for treating high blood pressure, colic and infections, it also is used to spiritually cleanse an individual during a ceremony (Figure 3.20). The plant bundle is used to draw away evil influences and negative energies. The bundle is wiped over a person's body to help draw out the negativity. Afterwards, the plant is burned in the fire towards the end of the ceremony. This plant, however, is not native to the region.



Figure 3.20. Example of *ruda*.

Romero, or rosemary, is also used to aromatize a ceremony as well as serve to draw away evil spirits or negative energies (Figure 3.21). One informant noted that a cooked rosemary solution is used in conjunction with a lard and ash soap to eliminate dandruff. Rosemary is not indigenous to Guatemala.



Figure 3.21. Example of *romero*.

Siete montes represent a group of seven plants used in spiritual cleansing where the plant cluster is passed over a person's head and body to withdraw any evil influences or negative forces that inhabit him or her (Figure 3.22). This occurs towards the end of the ceremony when most of the fire has already burned and the ceremonial meal is considered eaten by the ancestors.



Figure 3.22. Example of *siete montes*.

The plants in *siete montes* consist of the following specimens. *Chilca* has long grass-like foliage. It can also be used as a tea or medicinal bath. *Altamisa*, with its small white flowers and leaves, is also noted for its aroma. *Apatzin* has small broad leaves and is also used to treat evil eye. *Ruda* is also included in the group and was previously described above. Fresh rosemary and purple colored, leafy basil are represented. Finally, red geranium flower is present in the group and included for its ability to capture negative energies. As a comparative example, red geraniums also have been used extensively in various Zinacanteco rituals in Chiapas (Vogt 1993) attesting to its important role in Maya rituals.

Limes and other types of fruits are also used in ceremonies. Limes are utilized to help get rid of any negative energies that a person may have. A simple cross shape is cut into the skin of limes and that is used to ward off negative influences (Figure 3.23). The limes are spread over a person's head and body and offered to the fire. If it turns black and simply burns then that is an indication that more negative dangers are present with a

person. Otherwise if the lime explodes or opens and releases water then there is healing or resolution to a person's negative issue. Limes are used in both "black" and "white" ceremonies and are not native to Central America.



Figure 3.23. Example of limes showing how they are cut.

Other fruits such as melon, papaya, orange, watermelon, pineapple, banana, and mango have been left as ceremonial offerings (Figure 3.24). These sweet offerings can be used in a variety of combinations. One informant noted that fruits and vegetables like those found in stores are popularly left as offerings when conducting ceremonies to petition for successful business. Another noted that sweet fruits are used when petitioning for successful harvest or crops.



Figure 3.24. Various fruits given as offerings at a site.

Ocote sticks (*chäj* in Kaqchikel), or pitch pine (*Pinus oocarpa?*), are used not only in a ceremony, but also have medicinal purposes (Figure 3.25). Schlesinger (2001:79) notes that seeds and bark of the tree are cooked in hot water and used as a gargle for sore throats. One *ajq'ij* informant uses *ocote* as a means of detecting disease in a person or also delivering protection from illness. In a ceremony, *ocote* can be placed near the base to light the fire. Another informant asserts that *ocote* is used to “commemorate the ancestors, since our ancestors did not use electric light. They only used *ocote* to produce light to light their path.” Finally, *ocote* is used in a domestic context for lighting cooking fires.



Figure 3.25. Example of *ocote* or pitch pine sticks.

Morehart and his colleagues present an excellent treatise on the ritual use of Pine by the Maya (Morehart et al. 2005). They note that pine is common from ceremonial contexts and is an important element in Maya ritual paraphernalia. With extensive archaeological and ethnographic examples they argue that the pine used in cave contexts not only functioned as torches when necessary, but also were early versions of “candles,” which now are used in contemporary ceremonies (see section on candles above). Vogt (1993:105) documents a Tzotzil prayer couplet where there is a reference to receiving the “splinter of our pine, ...[the] dripping of our candle.” For him this linguistic parallelism suggests the use of pine as a “candle” prior to the arrival of the Spanish.

Ocote was used as torches during the pre-contact period (Schlesinger 2001:78). Caves provide an environment where wooden artifacts tend to be well preserved. This has led to the recovery of many wooden objects such as benches, bowls, figurines, spears, and torches (e.g., Pendergast 1974; Peterson 2006:102; Prufer 2005).

Torch specimens and evidence of their use in the form of ceramic torch holders have been recovered from archaeological cave contexts and surface excavations. Pine fragments interpreted as torches have been recovered from a variety of cave locations

such as Naj Tunich in Guatemala (Brady 1989:290), as well as from numerous cave sites in Belize (e.g., Pendergast 1974; Graham et al. 1980; Prufer 2002; Peterson 2006). Gann (1925:110-111), in his exploration of a cave in Belize, describes picking up a cluster of what was clearly Pre-Columbian torches (pitch-pine sticks) cached outside of a cave. He unfortunately set them on fire to use as a light source as they proceeded to the cave.

While on the Petexbatun Regional Cave Survey examining caves around the Late Classic site of Dos Pilas in Guatemala the team recovered a ceramic torch holder from the cave sites of Kaxon Pek (Scott 1994:551) and Cueva de Sangre (Brady et al. 1994:580). Other ceramic torch holders have been discovered in Naj Tunich (Brady 1989:257-258), Pothunter Cave, St. Margaret's Cave, and Actun Chanona (Graham et al. 1980:169, see Figure 10). Finally, ceramic torch holders have been recovered from surface sites in Belize including Pakal Na, Altun Ha, and Baking Pot (Peterson 2006:119).

Torches are depicted in various scenes on ancient Maya vessels and in the codices. A query of Justin Kerr's Maya Vase database for torch resulted in six vases distinctly portraying individuals holding torches (see Figure 3.26 for an example). Likewise, a search of the Madrid Codex online database (Vail and Hernández 2005-2008) yielded over 20 folios depicting torches in the document. See Figure 3.27 showing some examples of torches in this Late Post-classic document. An example from the Dresden Codex depicts Chac sitting astride a dead deer while holding two torches (see Milbrath 1999:201, Figure 5.9f).



Figure 3.26. An example of a Maya vase (Kerr vase K702) depicting two individuals holding torches.

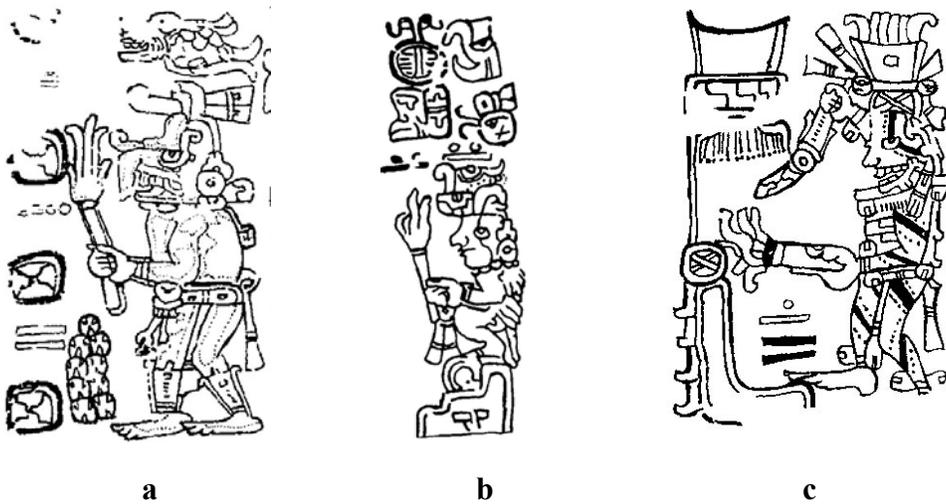


Figure 3.27. Three examples of torches from the Madrid Codex (Vail and Hernández 2005-2008). **a**, almanac 3a, frame 1; **b**, almanac 11b, frame 8; **c**, almanac 86c, frame 3.

This cursory examination of the use of *Pinus* splints by the pre-and post-contact Maya reveals the important role the pine tree has long played in the ceremonial activities of the Maya. From its possible origins as candles to lighting a pathway, *ocote* represents an essential element in ritual performances. Equally important, pine needles play a significant part in ceremonial usage as pine needle carpets and adornment (e.g., Thompson 1970:268; Vogt 1993:46-48; Christenson 2001:159,168; see Morehart et al 2005).

Tobacco products in the form of cigars or cigarettes are used in ceremonies¹². Hand rolled tobacco in the shape of cigars (*may* in Kaqchikel) is smoked by participants or burned as offerings during ceremonies (Figure 3.28). When smoked it offers clarity and vision for an individual. One informant notes that smoking and offering cigars commemorate Ma Ximón¹³. Its aroma attracts the ancestors. Another collaborator offered that some *ajq'ija* do not use cigars because they cannot read or interpret the visions and messages that are present during smoking in both the smoke and ashes. Thus, not all *ajq'ija* have the same skills. Cigars are smoked by individuals, examined by the *ajq'ij* for the sign or message, and the remaining product placed in the fire or placed in a niche or on a rock. During a visit to the sacred altars at Iximche', I noticed a young Maya female smoking a cigar that was as long as her arm! My *ajq'ij* indicated that she was an apprentice daykeeper and smoking the entire cigar was part of her task as a novice.

¹² While cigarettes are sometimes used in ceremonies and popularly found in the mouth of Ma Ximón images, my experience lies with traditional cigars purchased at specialized stores selling ritual goods; these tobacco products will be discussed instead of cigarettes.

¹³ Ma Ximón has been also identified as San Simón, Judas Iscariot, the modern persona of a pre-contact earth lord, and the culture hero/saint Ma Francisco Sojuel. See Stanzione (2000) for more interpretations of Ma Ximón, “the great tied-one,” ri Rijiläj Mam, the very/old elder (Maxwell et al. 2008). Also see Pieper (2002:15-137) for numerous variations of the image and further discussion on his role among the Maya.



Figure 3.28. Hand-rolled cigar being lit by candle flame.

Cigars are used to ward off evil and protect from black magic (Thompson 1970:116). On more than one occasion I witnessed the need by participants to smoke more than one cigar to not only get rid of evil influences, but also build up protection from future attacks. Spiritually, the smoke has curative and protective qualities as well.

Besides protection from negative influences, tobacco can be used for medicinal purposes (Thompson 1970:118-120). According to an informant, a liquid can be made with basil and liquor and rubbed on a patient, usually a child with stomach issues. Tobacco is also used to cure scorpion, wasp, and snake bites as well extract worms embedded in a patient's skin (Stanzione 2003:50). A historical document from 1588 noted that the merchant Tz'utujil Maya chewed pulverized tobacco leaves along with lime, which facilitated absorption of the nicotine into their system (Stanzione 2003:51; Thompson 1970:110). Much like coca leaf use in the Andes, the nicotine helped to allay the fatigue that merchants felt during arduous treks with cargo on trade routes. Furthermore, tobacco was considered an intoxicant. Likely a prominent additive to

chicha (Thompson 1970:119) and *pulque* (Alcorn 1984:320), tobacco may have been used in enemas, a means by which intoxicants are absorbed more quickly into the body (Robicsek 1978:23).

Tobacco usage for the Maya is certainly not a recent practice (Thompson 1970:106-110; Robicsek 1978). Besides ethnohistoric evidence from early chroniclers, pre-contact depictions of tobacco use abound on painted vases, carved imagery, and in the codices. Again, a search of the Maya Vase database yielded 18 hits for either tobacco or cigar (see Figure 3.29 for an example). Cigar smoking examples show up in the Madrid Codex (Figure 3.30). Finally, the Merchant God carved in stone at Palenque is shown puffing on a cigar (see Stanzione 2003:51, Figure 21). (See Robicsek 1978 for an extensive summary on tobacco use and depiction among the Maya).

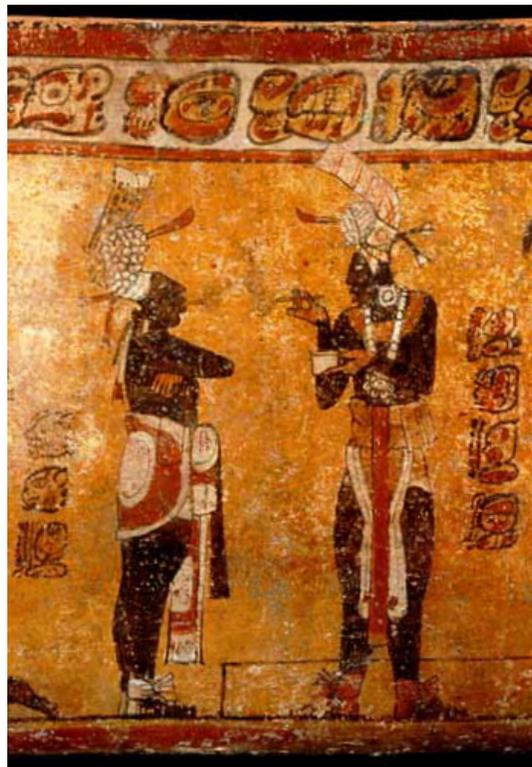


Figure 3.29. An example of cigar smokers from a Maya vase (Kerr Vase K8469).



Figure 3.30. An example of cigar smoking from the Madrid Codex (Vail and Hernández 2005-2008, almanac 88b, frame 1).

Archaeologically, it is difficult to recover cigars due to insufficient preservation. Robicsek (1978:111) notes, however, that an undocumented recovery of a cache of cigars occurred at Group H at Tikal. The cave context can provide an environment where preservation of organic materials is possible.

In his re-visit to Gordon's Cave #3 at Copan, Honduras, Brady recovered numerous fragile remains, which had been kept well preserved in the dry cave environment (Brady 1995). The recovered items included a portion of a grass mat, fabric or textile adhering to bones, fragments of a basket, and a portion of a leather bag used to contain a secondary burial. Brady also recovered a portion of a hand-rolled cigar. Due to the uncertainty whether the cigar was modern in origin it was not included in the analysis of his investigation (James E. Brady, personal communication, 2008). Unfortunately radiocarbon dating has not been performed on the specimen to determine its age. Given the dry nature of the cave and the recovery of other organic remains Brady believes that the cigar could be ancient. However, if the region around Copan has Maya traditionalists

who practice *costumbre*, a viable notion, then the cigar could be a recent addition to the cave. Only radiocarbon dating will solve this chronological puzzle.

Ornamental flowers are popularly offered in ceremonies. The offering at the fire tends to be the petals only and not the full flower with stem, unless it is one of the herbs mentioned above. Full bouquets of flowers are also seen at sites at the periphery or an adjacent altar (Figure 3.31). The color scheme from candles can be applied in general to flower petals with the most popular colors being red or reddish, white, yellow, and purple. One informant noted that petitions for love included red roses; business requests have yellow and white flowers; safe trips include white flowers; to overcome illness use white carnations; to overcome your vices utilize purple flowers.



Figure 3.31. Bouquets of flowers left as offerings on an altar mound at Iximche' (Photograph courtesy of Walter E. Little).

There is a history of flower usage in ceremonies and rites among the Maya as evidenced by numerous ethnographic (e.g., McDougall 1946; Deal 1988:86; Vogt 1993)

iconographic (e.g., Taube 2004) and ethnohistoric examples (e.g., Thompson 1970:113-114, 176-177), too vast to detail here. Instead, I present an example of archaeological evidence that supports the argument that flowers have been a component to Maya ceremonialism for many years.

A pollen analysis of soil matrix samples collected from the occupation levels in Gordon's Cave #3 yielded heavy densities of flower anthers (Rue et al. 1989:399). They argued that the flowers were remnants of offerings based on their recovery from cultural zones, their large quantity, and the unlikelihood of the heavy anthers being brought in by natural means like wind or from bats. Unfortunately, they were unable to identify the exact species of flower but suggest flowers from an arboreal family, Araliaceae.

Liquids

Various liquid products are used in Maya ceremonies including scented or perfumed waters, and those for consumption such as liquor or soft drinks. *Agua florida* is a scented liquid created from the "essence of flowers." Found in small, plastic 75 milliliter bottles, *agua florida* is used in ceremonies to spiritually clean and purify ceremonial objects and participants (Figure 3.32). It can be used in conjunction with *ruda* herbs during the spiritual cleansing of a patient. It comes in a variety of colors equating with similar meanings from candle colors. Known colors include clear/white, green, yellow, blue, and red. One informant uses white to open positive energies, clean the body and the ritual space; green to clean the physical space and create a strong contact with nature or the land's energy; yellow for removal and protection against negative attacks or energy; blue to establish more contact with the universe and its positive energy; and red to purify the blood and protect against dangers. The products are manufactured in Guatemala.



Figure 3.32. Example of green *agua florida*.

San Simón lotion is a specialized light blue liquid used to create the healthy presence and good energy of San Simón. Using the lotion during the ceremony gives you protection against dangers or bad energy and offers help with personal problems. The sample collected during the investigation was labeled as made in Mexico.

Commercially made liquor, and/or *kuxa*, a homemade fermented alcoholic beverage, are utilized in ceremonies and have a long history of use (Figure 3.33). Wisdom (1952:127) takes note of their necessity in performing ceremonies. Liquor is both consumed as well as offered directly to the sacred fire during the ceremony. The alcohol creates a connection with the ancestors and/or spirits and aids in the protection of the participants who consume or offer it. It is the essence of the ancestors. Beer, soft drinks, and water are also used and can act as a replacement to liquor or supplement its use. The use of chocolate in ceremonies will be discussed below.



Figure 3.33. Commercially made liquors commonly used in ceremonies.

Miscellaneous materials

Ceremonies include many sweet items like sugar, *panela*, honey, cinnamon, and chocolate.

Sugar, predominately the white, granular type, forms the base of a ceremony upon which the *ensarte* and other materials are placed (Figure 3.34). The sugar marks and sweetens the physical space (Cuma Chávez 2005:46). Sugar and other sweet items please the ancestors. One informant elaborated further explaining that sugar together with the *ensarte* creates a platform or base upon which to build the ceremony. I will discuss this in more detail when I describe the ceremonial process below. Sugar can be obtained in bulk from vendors selling specialized ritual materials or in the commercial market where it is sold in one-pound bags. White is the commonly utilized color, however, other colors exist, such as green, red, and black, for use in both positive and negative ceremonies.



Figure 3.34. Demonstrating how sugar is used as a base for the ceremony.

Panela, or unrefined sugar, resembles a block of brown sugar or caramel (Figure 3.35). Used to sweeten the ceremony, it also acts as a conduit to communicate with the spiritual entities thus allowing the participants to become closer in contact with the ancestors. As it burns, the block bubbles and boils while it melts; a very animated process. I am uncertain of its origin and whether it had pre-contact antecedents.



Figure 3.35. Example of *panela*.

Honey is another sweet product used in ceremonies. An informant notes that the commercially available honey, in the bear shaped plastic containers (Figure 3.36), are commonly used in ceremonies, but that there are also many who use household honey sold in jars. Honey is used to please the ancestors. Little cups of resin material called *guacalitos* are used as receptacles to hold the honey (Figure 3.37) and are normally placed around the perimeter of the offering. Cuma Chávez (2005:46) asserts that *guacalitos* act like cups to receive or deposit ancestral energies. Finally, the remaining honey can be drizzled over the materials or along the edge of the circle.



Figure 3.36. Example of commercially made honey in its plastic container.



Figure 3.37. Two examples of *huacalitos* or resin cups in their original packaging.

Honey use in a ceremonial context has a long history. From the early chroniclers we know that beverages containing honey as a key ingredient show up in ritual venues (Thompson 1970:182; Schlesinger 2001:249). Honey, along with cacao, was a highly valued product for the Maya. *Balche*, a ritual beverage, was made of fermented honey combined with the bark of the balche tree (*Lonchocarpus longistylus*) (Thompson 1970:182). (See Schlesinger 2001:247-252 for an extensive summary of apiculture among the Maya). Numerous images of apiaries, bees, and honey extraction appear in the Madrid codex (Figure 3.38). At least seven vases depicting bees or honey in the scenes exist in the Maya Vase Database. These apiarian illustrations from pre-contact contexts give credibility to the long-term importance of bees and honey to the Maya.



Figure 3.38. A depiction of honey extraction from the Madrid Codex (Vail and Hernández 2005-2008, almanac 103c-104c, frame 1).

Cinnamon, in the form of sticks, is commonly used in ceremonies (Figure 3.39). One *ajq'ij* notes that the aroma draws the attention of the spirits, ancestors, and grandfathers to the ceremony. Cinnamon does not appear to be indigenous to the Maya area and would have been a product added to the suite of “sweetened” materials during more recent times.



Figure 3.39. Example of cinnamon sticks.

Chocolate or cacao (*kakaw*) is well-documented and has a long history of use by the Maya from Middle Preclassic to modern times¹⁴ (e.g., Coe and Coe 1996; Powis et al. 2002; Adams and Brady 2005; McNeil 2006; Powis 2007; Prufer and Hurst 2007). Modern Maya commonly use chocolate in the form of bars or larger wafers in their ceremonies (Figure 3.40). One *ajq'ij* said that they use cacao in their ceremonies because the ancestors used cacao beans as currency. Thus, modern ceremonies offer cacao to help facilitate a stronger connection with the ancestors. Adams and Brady (2005:312) note that cacao is also used as a product to “feed” spirit owners of caves. In ceremonies, the intent is two-fold, to both honor and nourish the ancestors.



Figure 3.40. Example of chocolate wafers in brown paper packaging.

Bread is a special material used in ceremonies and is also considered “sweet.” An informant offered that

breads are used to thank the spirits, to thank God. Breads are used for offerings. Sweet breads are used the most, since all the materials used in a ceremony to

¹⁴ For an extensive summary on the use of cacao by the Maya, including ceramic residue studies, an overview of ceremonial usage, and botanical information, consult the references listed above.

express gratitude or pray for travel or studies are sweet materials or sweet offerings. [Why?] It is used to sweeten the heart of the summoned spirits.

Bakery made bread (*kaxlan wäy* in Kaqchikel) is commonly used in ceremonies and is purchased apart from the materials found at the specialized *tiendas* (Figure 3.41). However, corn tortillas, or *wäy*, are also offered at sacred sites (See Vogt 1993) (Figure 3.42). Bruce Love (1989) wrote an excellent essay on sacred bread use among the Yucatec Maya where he offered linguistic, iconographic, epigraphic, ethnohistoric, and ethnographic evidence to argue that bread or maize cakes appear to have a continual use in a ceremonial context for well over a millennium. I would argue that the offering of corn tortillas is more traditional, albeit, less common in the Kaqchikel area.



Figure 3.41. Example of bakery made breads.



Figure 3.42. An offering of corn tortillas at an animal burrow altar.

At least two other materials used in ceremonies deserve notice, sesame seeds and eggs. *Ajonjoli* or sesame seeds are ubiquitous in ceremonies (Figure 3.43). They are employed to ask for abundance, especially for business owners. They are predominately used during the reciting of the Maya calendar day name *Tz'ikin*, which is a bird *nawal*. One informant notes that the seeds are food for birds thus that is the material offered during the twenty-day count for *Tz'ikin*. If, for example, we do not have sesame seeds to offer, we can offer *perla* incense, which represents corn, another food for birds. The sesame seeds are purchased at the stores that carry ritual materials, not from vendors in the market.



Figure 3.43. Example of sesame seeds.

Sesame seeds are sprinkled by hand over the fire by the participant while making a chirping bird calling sound with their lips. The seeds burn and pop within the fire. An *ajq'ij* notes that the sound made by the burning seeds is important, “since the quality of the crackling is the quality of the prayer or the quality of the response received when a person prays.” Sesame seeds are not indigenous to the area and are a post-contact addition to the material repertoire. A prehistoric antecedent, which would have functioned in a similar manner, is likely amaranth seeds. Brian Stross (personal communication, 2009) notes that in Mexico sesame seeds are sometimes seen as ceremonially equivalent to amaranth seeds, which are native to the Americas.

Eggs play a special role in ceremonies akin to a diagnostic tool. They are not commonly utilized unless a need exists for the *ajq'ij* to identify problems in the life of a patient. One informant claims that specific eggs are used in this process, “not just any egg that you can get at the market. You need an egg from a black hen. It needs to be a hen from home.” The egg is passed over a person’s body, much like limes are used, and

then placed into the fire. The egg explodes in the fire leaving residue marks that are readable by the ritual specialists. The egg acts as a sponge to absorb negative aspects acquired as a human being and through the burning, the explosion symbolizes the liberation of the negative load that a person carries (Cuma Chávez 2005:46). Apparently, on those rare occasions when an egg does not explode, the patient is free from negative influences. Finally, one *ajq'ij* explains that an egg can be broken open and the yolk placed in a glass of water and read for messages. They are able to identify evil influences or possible illnesses.

Egg use among the Maya apparently has endured for more than a millennia. Prufer, in his investigation of caves and rockshelters in the Maya Mountain region of Belize, recovered the partial remains of a bird eggshell (genus/species unknown) among one of the rockshelter burials (Prufer 2005:207). Prufer posits that the rockshelter was used as a cemetery from the Postclassic through the Late Classic. Finally, he notes that other grave goods like cut calcite crystals and stingray spines indicate activities of a religious nature, yet attributing meaning to the type of ritual specialist is not possible (Prufer 2005:209). From the context of the burial, associated grave goods, and the location in a sacred space (rockshelter), the eggshell remains are most likely ceremonial in origin deposited at the time of the interment. I do not assert that the burial egg functioned in the same manner as the Kaqchikel Maya currently practice, however, I would not rule out a ritual role of some degree.

Alcorn (1984:238) in her study of Huastec ethnobotany and ceremonial uses of plants notes during a trip to a cave that egg was present in the cave, along with candles and wrappings. Otherwise stating that the offerings were observed in the central chamber of the cave, she does not give a context of where the egg was observed in the chamber or in what condition it was found. Regardless, it was observed in a ritual context among other sacred objects in what her informants described as a sacred cave.

MATERIALS CURATED AT SACRED SITES AND PERSONAL OBJECTS OF RITUAL SPECIALISTS

The final materials to be discussed are those observed as cached at a majority of the sacred sites or are the personal effects of a ritual specialist. These are not materials that are purchased and consumed during a ceremony, but rather items that make up the ritual specialist's toolkit.

Brooms and Sticks

Two pieces of ritual equipment present at almost every sacred site investigated are brooms and staffs, or sticks. Brooms consist of broken off branches of small tree limbs, shrubs, or small bushes sometimes bound together with a binding material like thin bark or plastic string (see Figures 4.44 and 4.45 for examples). While brooms are not present at every site per se, they can be fashioned like an expedient tool by breaking off a portion of any nearby shrub at open-air sites. (See the following discussion on sticks as replacement tools for brooms). They function as a means to "sweep" the altar where the ceremony will be performed (Figure 3.46). This sweeping behavior is not simply a cleaning process, but rather a complex manner by which the ceremony is initiated and the ground is activated and purified (see Stross 1998 for a summary of the animation process). The sweeping action will be discussed in more detail below. The implications of this behavior and its importance to archaeologists will be addressed in the concluding chapter.



Figure 3.44. A small broom, seen at the center of the picture, at a site near San Jorge La Laguna.



Figure 3.45. Brooms and sticks curated at the periphery of a site northeast of Antigua. Note that the “stick” at the far right is actually a metal rod.



Figure 3.46. The late Waqi' Kej sweeping at a now destroyed sacred site near the town of Tecpán (Photograph courtesy of Walter E. Little).

Broom usage among the Maya appears to have a long history. Brooms are depicted in the Madrid Codex (Figure 3.47). The few images of brooms in the codex resemble torches at times. However, the hieroglyphic text using the terms “sweeping” or “swept” that accompany the image supports the assertion that they are brooms and not torches. Historical evidence of brooms has shown up as misinterpreted artifacts. Lothrop, in his early 20th-century investigation at the ruins of Uatlán or K'umarqa'j, notes that

a constant feature of all these informal altars is the presence of prayer bundles. A pile of them can be seen in the right foreground in fig. 5. Usually these took the form of corn-leaves, doubled over and tied. Sometimes, however, they were bundles of long pine-needles carefully laid together (1929:12-14, also Figs. 5 and 6).

Lothrop did not fully understand what he was observing at the Tojil altar at Uatlán (see site description in Chapter 4). They are not “bundles” at all and instead are the wrappings for the incense. The only thing that has changed is that the wrappings are now made of dried banana leaves and not cornhusks. The wrappings from the 1920s observed

by Lothrop, and in contemporary times, exhibit the same depositional characteristics, thrown in a pile off to the side of the site (Figure 3.48). Finally, the pine-needle object is none other than a well-made, hand held broom used as a tool by the *ajq'ija* to “sweep” and “activate” the altar. Had Lothrop witnessed Maya ceremonies or seen the modern artifacts at other sites he might have interpreted these materials differently.



Figure 3.47. A depiction of a broom from the Madrid Codex (Vail and Hernández 2005-2008, almanac 111b-112b, frame 4).



Figure 3.48. Example of incense wrappings and other ritual debris deposited at a site near San Jorge La Laguna.

The other piece of ritual equipment found at almost every sacred site, more often than brooms, is a stick or staff. Sticks come in a variety of sizes from more than a meter long to a half-meter in size. Primarily, the stick operates as tool to manipulate the ceremonial fire through stirring and lifting of objects burning in the fire (Figure 3.49) (see Ceremony discussion below). This multi-functional tool can act as a broom-like object used to “sweep” or “clean” as a means to activate the altar when a broom is not available (Figure 3.50). Finally, the stick may act as a staff or walking stick for the daykeeper who is presiding over the ceremony.



Figure 3.49. An *ajq'ij* using a stick to stir the fire at a sacred site near Tecpán (Photograph courtesy of Walter E. Little).



Figure 3.50. An *ajq'ij* using a stick as a broom to “clean” or activate the altar space (Photograph courtesy of Walter E. Little).

The utilization of sticks in a ceremonial context has been documented in the ethnographic record. Adams and Brady (2005:310) noted that during a ceremony at a cave the men presiding over the ceremony picked up sticks left at the entrance of the cave and continued into the cave to an altar; afterwards, they returned to the entrance and left the sticks there. The authors called the objects “walking sticks” but do not elaborate on whether the sticks were also used to manipulate a ceremonial fire or did function as walking sticks. Nevertheless, the sticks are ceremonial equipment.

Interestingly, Bunzel’s work in Chichicastenango documented references to sticks and staffs. In one case the *ajq'ij* exclaimed “it is I, master of incense, master of candles, master of the pointed stick” (Bunzel 1952:317). The same informant referred to the *nawales* and ancestral spirits as masters of the pointed staffs, incense, and candles (Bunzel 1952:310). Not only does this demonstrate that sticks/staffs are equally

important as incense and candles, but also suggests that these objects should be considered an essential item in the ritual specialist's toolkit.

In preparing the earlier discussion on torches and their recovery from caves, I began to question the function of these fire burned, pointy objects. Could some of these light producing "torches" actually be multi-functioning and act as ceremonial equipment, too? For the Maya, unequivocally, caves are sacred spaces yet to enter deep into a cave requires light. Torches are essential to navigate within a cave. Despite the sacred context I would argue that further contextual detail is needed to better understand the function of the wooden object. For example, Peterson (2006:37) discovered two "large torch fragments with burn ends...on a flowstone shelf" in an open, well-lit rockshelter. If the rockshelter does not have a dark zone, then torches as a light source are not necessary. I would argue in this case that those wooden fragments were likely used as ceremonial sticks during an offering.

Wooden objects recovered from dark zones within caves present a problem of interpretation. Big fires of ceremonies today may not have been the style of ritual specialists one or two millennia ago. If a cave is small a large ceremonial fire will deliver large amounts of smoke. However, plenty of evidence exists (presence of charcoal in the dark zones of caves) demonstrating that fires were burned within the confines of caves, not simply at the entrances. Thus, sticks, as ceremonial "activators," as fire manipulators, or as a specialist's walking staff, are expected to be found in caves. Prufer's cave investigation in the Maya Mountains of Belize recorded the discovery of a wooden bench and two forked wooden sticks of unknown function (2005:210-211). He noted that the sticks were embedded in the earth and held in place by small rocks at their base. It is not clear if they had burned or pointed tips. Did they act as torch lights for the room or shamanic staffs, possibly decorated at the fork, during ceremonies?

Finally, in her discussion of wooden artifacts Peterson summarized the recovery of wooden spears from various sacred sites (2006:102-103). The interpretation of these

objects as “spears” appears to be derived from the pointed tip shape of the artifacts. Peterson offers information on these finds from caves as well as several wooden shafts recovered from the Cenote of Sacrifice, one of which had been stuck into a specimen of copal (Peterson 2006:103). The association of the wooden shaft directly with copal and recovered from the sacred cenote leads me to believe that this likely was once part of a ritual specialist’s toolkit and not spears used in warfare *per se*.

Wooden stick or shaft artifacts recovered from caves likely had multi-functional uses as they do at modern sacred sites. However, better contextual analysis during their recovering or recording will help to offer more solid interpretations on their use.

Personal objects or sacred bundles and household altars

Almost every *ajq’ija* I worked with or witnessed at a sacred site had some form of personal object, usually a sacred bag or bundle (*vara*). These bags or bundles are extremely private property and the items inside seldom discussed. One of my informants explained that he has an ancestor in his bag in the form of a tooth recovered from an archaeological site. He was reluctant to show me because he did not want it to lose its power. Eventually, he did show me the tooth and it was indeed a modified incisor. He further noted that he had other objects from the “past” because it is a direct connection with the Maya ancestors. These heirloomed personal objects act as communication devices fostering the contact between the *ajq’ij* and spirits. As Linda Brown (2000:320) notes these items are carefully curated in personal bundles, on household altars, and at community shrines and considered important tools by which ritual specialists access the supernatural.

Working with another informant I discerned more information. While I did not peer inside the bag I was with him when he collected objects to place inside. These objects included red tz’ite’ seeds, obsidian flakes, blades or points, crystals, small ceramic sherds, and small rocks. Emphasis was on objects from Mother Nature or archaeological sites. This same informant helped to start my personal bundle, which

includes pieces of obsidian, small rocks, a crystal, 13 *tz'ite'* seeds, and a feather. These sacred bundles are kept with their owners during ceremonies and smudged in the smoke of the ceremonial fires.

Furthermore, objects too large to be put into the bag or sacred bundle were collected and deposited at a household altar. On many occasions the informant would discover a small, fist-sized rock that would resemble either the sacred site we were visiting, a creature in nature like a bird, or a human face. He would collect it and eventually place it within the other rocks or objects recovered from other sacred sites, which make up his household altar. This essentially ensured that a direct link to the sites would be established at the household altar thus allowing the ritual specialist access to the power that resides in the site. The stone replicated the power. A similar behavior of stone collecting exists for the Lacandon Maya (Davis 1978:73-74) as well as the Mixtec (Ravicz and Romney 1969:394). When a person cannot go to the actual site they can perform a ceremony by proxy at their household. It was explained to me that it is better to go to the sacred site itself but if a person cannot make the trek to the mountains a household ceremony can suffice. (See Deal 1988 for an extensive ethnoarchaeological study of Maya family household altars; see also Pieper 2002 for images of Maya household altars and personal bundles).

During the 2007 field season I had the privilege of assembling my own household altar. My personal altar included candles, rocks, pinecones, obsidian flakes, an obsidian point (collected by the *ajq'ij*) and a mano or grinding stone. The grinding stone fragment was recovered during a walk back from a sacred site. Sticking out of a wall of a newly cut road, I noticed the fragment. The two Maya women and the ritual specialist wanted me to keep the stone because it was not only a “good sign” but also “a gift from the spirits.” We had just come from conducting a positive ceremony and they felt my discovery was related to that positivity. I collected it, “cleaned” it with green *agua florida*, and placed it in my corner altar in my apartment as the corner piece (Figure

3.51). Finally, I explained to my informant colleague that I could not take my altar components home to the United States. Instead, he keeps my sacred objects along side his personal altar until I am able to return and re-dedicate it in a new dwelling. I do have my sacred bundle in my possession.



Figure 3.51. Personal household altar in the corner of apartment.

The use of various objects such as crystals, rocks, tz'ite' seeds, beans and other divining paraphernalia, as well as the existence of sacred bundles, are recorded in the ethnographic record (e.g. Tozzer 1907; Mendelson 1958; Grollig 1959; Tax and Hinshaw 1969; Colby and Colby 1981; Sandstrom and Sandstrom 1986; Tedlock 1992; Brady and Prufer 1999; Brown 2000:330, Table 3). While I did not witness a divining ceremony, these types of ceremonies are also mentioned in the literature (e.g., Villa Rojas 1945; Tax 1946; La Farge 1947; Redfield and Villa Rojas 1962; Sandstrom 1981; Hanks 1990; Tedlock 1992; Christenson 2001). Crystal utilization appears to be well documented by Brady and Prufer (1999) who thoroughly summarize various lines of evidence from ancient to contemporary usage. In their article they note that crystal usage has largely

gone unrecognized in the archaeological context and argues for the establishment of an artifact category of such (Brady and Prufer 1999:139). Based on the overwhelming ethnohistoric, ethnographic, and archaeological evidence, the use of crystals and other divining media merit better recognition and recording in archaeological recovery plans.

THE CEREMONY

It became apparent as I spent more time participating in ceremonies with Maya practitioners that ceremonies are like snowflakes...no two are ever alike. Because of the variation among ceremonies, in both layout and oration, it presents a challenge when trying to describe the act. Instead, patterns begin to emerge after experiencing a large number of Maya ceremonies. While differences may be explained by stylistic license taken by individual ritual specialists, most adhere to basic patterns of common behavior and/or tradition. It is those patterns of behavior I hope to elucidate.

During my research I began to observe distinct patterns of behavior found in the process. I have proposed elsewhere (Scott 2006) that there were “phases” to this process. These general phases include a consultation phase, a preparation phase, a communication phase, and a termination phase. Some of the phases ebb and flow within each other or rather may have indistinct boundaries.

Consultation Phase

In the consultation phase, the participants meet with the *ajq'ij* to discuss their issues and the course of action to resolve them. They may meet in person or this may occur over the phone (Figure 3.52). The meeting usually results in recommending the performance of a ceremony that will aid in resolving the person's problems and restore balance in their life. With the agreement by the participant, the *ajq'ij* specifies what materials are needed and where the ceremony will be performed. In some cases the *ajq'ij* will procure the materials for the participant, accompany him or her during the purchase or ask the participant to purchase them alone.



Figure 3.52. An *ajq'ij* consults with a client via cell phone.

Continuing in the consultation phase is the procurement of materials. This has changed since my original proposal, where I had placed it in the preparation phase (see Scott 2006). During the communication with the ritual specialist a list of goods is suggested to the participant to purchase for the ceremony. In some cases the local market may not carry all the items necessary so a trip to a larger market may be required. During one of my trips with the *ajq'ija* to the market to buy goods for a large ceremony at Nimajay Cave, the tone was very serious. They explained afterwards that they were very tense with concentration when it came to purchasing such special materials for an important ceremony at a very powerful site. This attests that the sacredness of the ceremony begins well before arrival at the site and affirms that communicating with the supernatural is a delicate matter.

Preparation Phase

The preparation phase is the most lengthy and complicated of the phases. As Stross (2008:375) notes preparation is important to successful ritual action. This phase consists of approaching the sacred site, asking permission from the “spirit-owner” of the

site to perform a ceremony, preparing the materials, altar preparation, and constructing the “meal” for the ancestors (placing the materials onto the altar).

Approaching a sacred site requires humility. The ritual specialists hope that the participants are present at the site with a pure and honest heart; the non-pure heart will adversely affect a ceremony and could put the patient and the interceding *ajq'ij* in spiritual danger. The energy expended during the journey to the site is also part of the sacrificial offering. It is not uncommon to have an arduous trek to an altar site and after the ceremony depart on an easier path.

Immediately upon arriving at a site,¹⁵ tradition suggests that participants kneel, acknowledge the “spirit-owner” by asking permission to enter the site (either silently or verbally through prayer), and kiss the ground or rock when finished with their personal requests. The *ajq'ija* continue reciting more expanded orations at the site periodically to ask permission of the site’s “spirit-owner” to enter the space and allow a ceremonial offering as well as to request forgiveness for the intrusion and for disturbing their space. Some specialists also don their headscarves and prepare their personal bundles/bags during this phase transforming themselves from “regular” people into those prepared to communicate with the supernatural. At times, the *ajq'ij* and participants may smoke cigars as part of the approaching sequence or while everything is being prepared. As one informant notes the cigar is smoked to determine if the site had energy for a ceremony. He states: “If the cigar opens, that means yes, this is an important place. When it opens, so the path or the space is open to be able to perform the ceremony.”

Concomitantly, the materials to be used in the ceremony are organized near the edge of the altar space. Either the *ajq'ija* alone or the participants may assist in organizing the materials. Items, such as the candles, plant materials or cigars, are laid out

¹⁵ Sometimes approaching a site requires the visitation of a circuit of smaller sites where the ritual specialists burn candles and request permission to continue at each minor site until reaching the main altar. This is not always the case and instead I describe the routine behaviors found while visiting single, primary sites, the majority of which I attended.

on the paper that they were wrapped in or on some other fabric to prevent them from touching the ground (Figure 3.53). Candles are unassembled and separated by color. The various incense products are unwrapped from their organic casing and put in piles on the paper or in a box (Figure 3.54).



Figure 3.53. Materials being organized by both participants and *ajq'ij* (Photograph courtesy of Walter E. Little).



Figure 3.54. Unwrapping incense and organizing candles (Photograph courtesy of Walter E. Little).

Next, the altar is “cleaned” or activated to receive the materials. As mentioned previously in this chapter, the “cleaning” includes either sweeping the altar space with an expedient broom or using an existing broom kept at the site. In the same vein, a wooden staff can be used to clean and activate the energy found in the altar. The previously burnt offering in the form of ashes is removed from the space and pushed to the side (see Figure 3.50). On many occasions I noted that care was taken to push the old ashes with the right hand to the right side, off the altar. When asked the *ajq'ij* explained that there are dual energies (positive and negative) at the site and our rituals are supposed to be positive, hence the use of the right hand when handling the stick or broom. Use of the left hand during a ceremony can conjure negative energies.

At times the sacred site may contain an actual altar in the form of stones or an earthen platform upon which the specialist can perform the ceremony (see Figure 3.50, earthen platform). Often the offering is constructed on the ground creating a burn circle. Once the space has been prepared by the removal of the ashes the specialist will use either *agua florida* or liquor to further purify the area by sprinkling the liquid over it (Figure 3.55). Sometimes incense may be burned in an *incensario* to cense the area as a means of purifying it (Figure 3.56). After the space is considered “clean” the materials are now ready to be placed.



Figure 3.55. A ritual specialist purifies the space with *agua florida* (Photograph courtesy of James T. Dugan).



Figure 3.56. An *ajq'ij* purifying the sacred space with incense (Photograph courtesy of Walter E. Little).

As discussed in the “materials” section of this chapter, ritual specialists employ numerous items during a ceremony. The layout or configuration of the ceremonial offering varies with the placement of the materials and the materials used, hence the reason why ceremonies are like snowflakes. Nevertheless, the majority of offerings begin with the pouring of sugar on the ground, which creates the base for the remaining materials¹⁶. Many styles of rendering exist (compare Figures 4.34, 4.57, 4.58, and 4.59). The sugar is usually either written as the Maya calendrical glyph corresponding to the day of the ceremony or more commonly drawn as the circular, cardinal direction emphasizing *Q’anil* symbol. In the *Q’anil* layout the circle is placed first then the cross line is poured from north to south then west to east. Smaller circles are placed in each quadrant created by the cross lines (see Figure 3.59). Remaining sugar will be used later in the ceremony.



Figure 3.57. Sugar base rendered as Maya glyph, 10 Aq’ab’al (Photograph courtesy of Walter E. Little).

¹⁶ In cases where there are not many materials used candles can be placed directly on the prepared surface; otherwise, candles can be placed directly on the sugar base.



Figure 3.58. Another style of sugar rendering (Photograph courtesy of Walter E. Little).



Figure 3.59. *Q'anil* symbol used as a base (Photograph courtesy of Walter E. Little).

Once the sugar is laid out the *ensarte* incense is placed along the sugar line drawing. There can be variation in performing this task but it is common to start placing

the *ensarte* in a cross of the cardinal directions (compare Figure 3.60 and Figure 3.61; see also Figure 3.34). Once the cross and Venus circles are filled in, then the remaining space is finished. Lastly, all of the remaining *ensarte* is placed on the sugar base, at times forming a small mound. Once again, there is much variation among ritual specialists but commonly other forms of incense are now placed upon the *ensarte* such as *estoraque*, *palitos*, *perla (saq pom)*, *pom en bola*, *siete inciensos* and myrrh. Some of these incense types, e.g., *perla*, *pom en bola* and/or myrrh, can also be placed in the fire at a later time.



Figure 3.60. Placing *ensarte* on a *Q'anil* sugar base (Photograph courtesy of James T. Dugan).



Figure 3.61. Placing *ensarte* along the edge of the circle (Photograph courtesy of Walter E. Little).

Next, other materials such as chocolate, cigars, rosemary, *veladoras*, or cinnamon sticks can be placed at this point or delayed for placement on the candles. Candles are commonly placed near the top of the construction. As previously discussed some of the colored candles receive special locations in the circle. The four sacred colors red, black, white, and yellow occupy the cardinal directions. Two sacred colors, blue and green, create the vertical central axis. Together they create the three dimensional Maya cross (see Figure 3.3). Red is the east where the sun rises, and black is west where the sun sets and it becomes dark. North is the rising air or white. Yellow is the south where the air descends. Blue and green candles are placed at the center of the cross representing the sky and earth (Figure 3.62). Some of the other remaining colors of candles can be placed on the circle in any location. More often they are retained for use during petitions asked in the communication phase of the ceremony. Similarly, some black and the *cebo* candles will be kept aside to initiate the fire, at times in conjunction with one or two cigars.



Figure 3.62. Blue and green candles placed at the center of the circle (Photograph courtesy of James T. Dugan).

Finally, other materials such as breads, *panela*, *ocote*, and/or chocolate are placed on the top of the offering mound. Other materials are commonly placed along the periphery of the circle. These include the *huacalitos* filled with honey, *veladores*, rosemary, more sugar, and/or flower petals. In the end, every layout is different (Figure 3.63).



Figure 3.63. Various examples of offerings immediately before burning.

Communication Phase

After the materials are all in place, the ritual meal has been prepared for the ancestors. Participants arrange themselves around the offering by either kneeling or standing. The offering is now ready to be lit. Some sacred sites have side altars where candle lighting is initiated. At times burning candles are already present and maintained at these side altars. The candles that are already burning provide flame to light the prepared offering. This is accomplished by taking single candles, usually red, yellow, white or sometimes black, lighting them with the existing ones at the side altar and bringing them back to the offering to light it. If a side altar is not present at the site the offering can be lit by candles that were started with matches (Figure 3.64).



Figure 3.64. Offering being lit by candle during a cave ceremony (Photograph courtesy of Walter E. Little).

The communication phase begins with the lighting of the offering with fire and establishing the lines of communication with ancestors, spirit-owners, *nawales*, and god or *Ajaw*, as the Supreme Creator. Ancestral spirits are key actors in this process. Practitioners consult with ancestors for assistance in petitions during the ceremony.

Orations and prayers¹⁷ begin by invoking cardinal directions and inviting the ancestors like Great Father, Great Mother and other important aspects of *Ajaw* such as Heart of the Sky, Heart of the Earth, Heart of the Fire (Hill and Fischer 1999:321). Apologies abound at the beginning asking forgiveness if participants have disrespected the sacred space or harmed any creature or rock during their journey to the site. The *ajq'ij* also asks the ancestral spirits for pardon for any sins that he or she has committed

¹⁷ While I was unable to record any orations or prayers as part of my research, many examples of transcribed prayers/ceremonies among various Maya groups exist in the literature (e.g., Bunzel 1952; Nash 1970; Gossen 1974; Tedlock 1982; Vogt 1993; 1995; Hanks 1984; Deuss 2007).

since their last contact. The ritual specialist continues the ceremony with humbly stating the reason for the communication and describing the offering to the spirits with hope that they will be pleased.

This portion of the ceremony consumes a good deal of time due to Maya courtesy and tradition. Much of the ritual speech includes discourse such as “excuse us for bothering you...please, ancestors, come to this sacred space to be with us...we’ve constructed this offering for you to consume...we’d appreciate your presence at our little fire....”

The next orations include invitations for spirit owners of numerous sacred sites, as many as can be listed. Bunzel (1952:266) notes during a curing ritual in Chichicastenango that 127 sacred mountains located between Huehuetenango and Esquipulas were named. Specific deceased family members are also called to come forth. This portion encourages participation by all participants in the ceremony to invite their own family members or recite known sacred places, especially those they have visited. Other invitees may include Christian saints as well as important Maya folkloric figure such as Ma Ma Ximón, Rey San Pascual¹⁸, and Juan Noj (see also Bunzel 1952:265-266). As previously mentioned the *ajq’ija’* invoke *Ruk’u’x Kaj*, *Ruk’u’x Ulew*, and *Ruk’u’x Qaq*, the spiritual forces that dwell in the centers of Heart of the Sky, Heart of the Earth, and Heart of the Fire, who are significant in Maya cosmology. This part of the ceremony remains rather dangerous because ancestral spirits are present and individuals must be of good, strong heart to not be adversely affected by their presence. Participants with a weak heart may become sick or susceptible to some affliction¹⁹.

¹⁸ Rey San Pascual is a figure known for communicating with the dead and is usually depicted as a skeleton (Pieper 2002:169-195). Juan No’j, also known as Don Diego, is represented as a fat, rich Ladino man. He is considered as a *duende* or goblin (Pieper 2002:219).

¹⁹ Strong heart does not refer to an actual physical condition but rather the goodness and purity of an individual. For a better understanding of Kaqchikel emotional and spiritual states, see Hill and Fischer 1999; Cook (2000:47) also notes that individuals with “two hearts,” those who are not fully vested in their service, burden, or perhaps lack spiritual belief, are at risk for serious illness or death.

Ceremonies are regulated by the *Cholq'ij* or the 260-day ritual calendar (see Appendix 1 for more in depth information on the calendar and the 20 day patrons or *nawales*). Participants are often referred to in the ritual discourse by their Maya *nawal* names, such as *Kab'lajuj Iq'* (male name construct) or *Ixk'at* (female name construct). Once the ancestors and *nawales* have arrived their presence is represented through the fire, which has been growing larger as it consumes the materials offered. Next, the reciting of the calendar round commences starting on the patron corresponding to the calendar date of the ceremony, strengthening the direct channel between the earthly world and the spirit world. It is here where the spirits will hear the petitions by the participants.

The ritual specialists cycle through each of the twenty *nawales* expressing the greatness and wisdom each holds and asking for their assistance to help petitioners with their problems. Before each cycle the *ajq'ij* will indicate to the participants which materials to offer (i.e., colored candle, *pom*, sugar, or sesame seed) or an assistant will provide the materials to each individual. Normally, the participants are kneeling during the ceremony. The prayer cycle culminates with the listing of the *nawal* name and its numeric counterpart beginning with one until it reaches thirteen at which time the participant deposits the candle or other offering held in their hands into the fire. The fire reacts in different ways indicative as direct replies from the *nawales* themselves. At times, the responses can be conspicuous changes in the flickering flames or subtle sounds emanating from the fire. Molesky-Poz notes that the ritual specialists will observe where and how the flames travel while the *nawal* is named and fed (2006:163). Participants acknowledge perceptible responses with heartfelt gratitude.

After all of the day patrons have been recognized and nourished and the petitions from the participants heard, the ritual specialist may move into other more specific requests for the ancestral spirits, if they were not already covered during the calendar cycle. Petitions will vary by individuals but examples include asking for help with health

issues, wanting a more prosperous life or business, hoping for new love, and requesting safe travels (Figure 3.66). During the calendar cycle and petitions, the burning offering is stirred often with a stick to read the fire for responses; both negative and positive responses are possible (see Figure 3.49). Sometimes the stirring may take an artistic form such as rendering glyph-like motifs or geometric renderings.



Figure 3.66. A participant kneeling at the fire during petitions (Photograph courtesy of Walter E. Little).

After the petitions have been completed some ceremonies continue with a cleansing rite for the participants. Cleansing offers protection to the participant as well as aids in removing negative influences inflicted on a person by nefarious means. *Ruda* (rue) or *siete montes* are the plants utilized during the purification process. The participant kneels in front of the fire while the ritual specialist wipes the plant over their body, while especially focusing on the person's head (Figure 3.67). Concurrently, prayers are recited to request that all negative energies are being drawn away from the individual. There is some variation in this part such as being sprayed with liquor or *agua*

florida from the mouth of the *ajq'ij*. This serves to purify an individual. Afterwards, the plant is broken up and thrown into the fire. As one informant explained, this part is done towards the end of the ceremony after the spirits have already eaten their meal and the plants filled with the negative energies from the participants do not contaminate their offering. To throw contaminated materials in the fire earlier would be akin to throwing a dirty napkin on someone's plate who has not finished eating.



Figure 3.67. Cleansing rite with rue (Photograph courtesy of Walter E. Little).

This same purifying process can be done during the calendrical naming cycle with candles by the participants themselves (see Appendix 1). The candles, gripped in the participant's hands, are passed over their own body and head to draw out any negative influences or illnesses. The candles are either tossed into the fire, or broken and crushed by hand, then thrown into the fire where the spirits will extinguish the negative energy.

At this point the ritual specialist may continue to stir the fire to discern more messages from the ancestors. More liquor is offered; more beseeching to hear the petitions declared. The fuzzy boundary between the communication and termination

phase begins to take form as gratitude is expressed to the ancestors for their participation and assistance.

Termination Phase

The termination phase consists of closing remarks to the ancestors, *nawales*, and *Ruk'ux Kaj* and *Ruk'ux Ulew*. If participants were standing, it is customary to kneel. The ritual specialist recites each of the sacred places mentioned earlier to express gratitude for their spirit owner's presence at the ceremony. Equally, the same is extended to all of the ancestors who arrived for the ceremony. The *ajq'ij* expresses hope that the offering has pleased them and that they are happy. The ceremony is complete with the extinguishing of the fire by the spirits and their departure; all that remains are ash and smoke. Grey colored ash indicates positive results of a ceremony while black ash denotes negative energies and responses. The ritual specialist and participants have opportunity to smudge their sacred bundles or their head cloths in the remaining smoke. It is important that the materials in a ceremony are fully burned lest a malevolent individual show up later and cast a curse on the participants using any remaining objects that were not consumed.

Lastly, the individuals attending the ceremony show appreciation to the other participants through an embrace or handshake. The *ajq'ij* receives special thanks represented with a kiss on their hand by those attending. An *ajq'ij* or participant may linger for silent meditation at the burn circle. Depending on the circumstances, individuals may consult with *ajq'ija'* immediately afterwards to discuss the outcome of the ceremony and feedback on the responses from the fire. Finally, the containers and wrappings from the offered materials are collected for disposal either at the site with other trash or removed for disposal elsewhere. Departure from the sacred site concludes the ceremony²⁰.

²⁰ It is very common afterwards to share a meal with the participants of a ceremony. My experience included many cases where we went back to a nearby village and ate at a restaurant or *comedor*. Very rarely did we consume a meal at the site and if so, it happened at the periphery or farther away from the ritual activity area.

THE TREATMENT OF MATERIALS DURING THE CEREMONY

Earlier in this chapter I presented an inventory of the materials that are commonly utilized in contemporary Maya ceremonies. Next, I summarized the ceremonial process where a ritual specialist is consulted, plans are made, the ceremony is performed and a response is delivered. With this contextual basis, I want to discuss other points not previously mentioned, which includes aspects on how some materials are handled and some of the idiosyncratic behavior by the ritual specialists observed during this investigation.

One of the most elementary materials used in ceremonies are candles, which tend to be the most popular objects through which petitions are expressed; these serve as a good example. The treatment of candles by participants or ritual specialists is extensive and varied depending on who is handling them. Candles are counted and passed out, held in the hands, blown on, spoken to, kissed, softened and twisted, rubbed on or passed over a person's head or body, broken or crushed, and tossed into the fire. Candles can be lit individually or in clusters, placed as a group in an unburned cache, placed in the fire as a ceremonial base, or lit and placed on rocks at a side altar. Candles can be observed after they are lit to interpret the flame. A flickering, dancing flame is a happy candle resonant of a positive message from the ancestral spirits. Eventually, a candle will melt away, at times leaving little residue in the form of wax and a burned central wick.

Other materials may receive similar treatment. Some incense items such as *pom en bola*, *cuilco* and *perla*, can be spoken to or kissed or rubbed on a person's body, and then tossed into the fire. Similarly, cigars can be partially smoked, fully smoked, be offered un-smoked, cached in a nook, ripped open, or crushed and scattered into the fire.

An important part of my investigation was observing behavior and actions found in these ceremonial contexts, aspects difficult to recover archaeologically. Results of behaviors may be ascertained from the archaeological record, but eyewitness accounts are obviously not possible. Behaviors such as speaking, walking, standing, or kneeling

commonly occur during ceremonies. Both participants and *ajq'ija* will stand or kneel during parts of a ceremony. Petitions and prayers are recited in various manners either silently, with whispers or lower voice, or loudly with wailing or crying. Arms can be outstretched or hands can be simply clasped.

Gesturing towards the sky, the earth, and the fire with an outstretched arm or hand is a popular behavior of a ritual specialist. One specialist I worked with would walk three times around the fire circle and again in the opposite direction near the termination part of the ceremony. Speaking to the fire and engaging the ancestors and spirit owners is vital and necessary. Rhythmic speaking by the *ajq'ij*, just shy of chanting, using couplets of speech, predominate the ritual discourse.

SUMMARY

Ceremonies conducted by the Maya serve many purposes. Ceremonies at sacred sites act as a means of regularly scheduled maintenance in keeping the site's spirit owners pleased and not forgotten. These rituals restore balance for a community and provide harmony between the living and the spiritual owners within the earth. Ceremonies allow direct communication with ancestors, not only in acknowledging them but also consulting their spiritual knowledge and wisdom. Ceremonies offer participants a connection to both nature/earth and supreme beings like Ajaw, or Great Mother, Great Father. The ritual specialists are recreating the cosmos in their offerings connecting the four cardinal directions along with the sky and the earth. These natural and supernatural connections are important in Maya culture. It is an expected cultural tradition to maintain the equilibrium between the spiritual and natural worlds lest a serious problem befall an individual or even community.

Chapter 4: Ru K'u'x Ulew: Descriptions and Observations on the Sacred Landscape

INTRODUCTION

This chapter presents descriptions of locations I visited as part of my investigation with narratives on relevant experiences. Given that I have participated in scores of ceremonies over the years, I have witnessed powerful, fascinating, and unexplainable events at some of the most sacred places in the Maya world. I hope to offer the reader a better understanding of sacred space and the events that occur at them.

I present descriptions in the following order. First, I will summarize the sacred sites documented around Lake Atitlán and surrounding area in the department of Sololá (Figure 4.1). Next, I will move easterly and south covering the Tecpán area in Chimaltenango (Figure 4.2) and continuing into the region around Antigua in Sacatepéquez (Figure 4.3) and south into Escuintla (Figure 4.4). I will then summarize investigations north into Quiché' and west into Totonicapán and Quetzaltenango (Figure 4.5). Finally, I will present the visit to Tikal in Petén (see Figure 1.2). The data represent investigations covering eight seasons of fieldwork between 2001 and 2007. This is most significantly seen in data collected over the years at sacred sites around Lake Atitlán or the site of Iximché', where access was more readily available in comparison to other regions or sites.

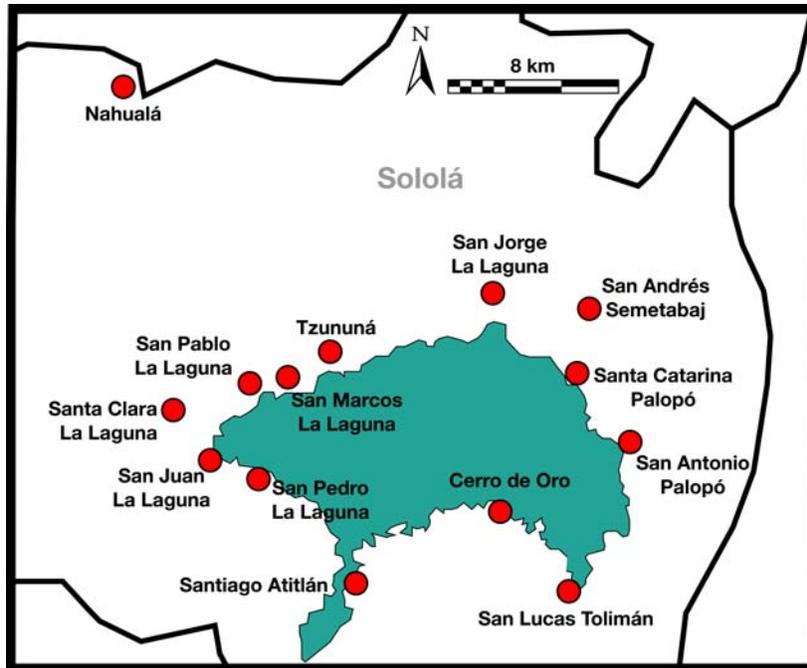


Figure 4.1. Communities visited in the Department of Sololá.

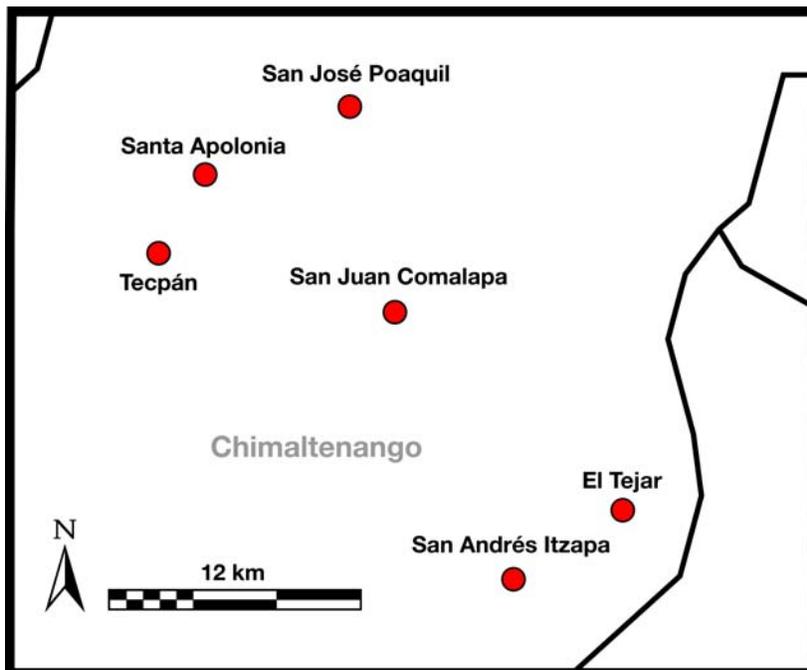


Figure 4.2. Communities visited in the Department of Chimaltenango.

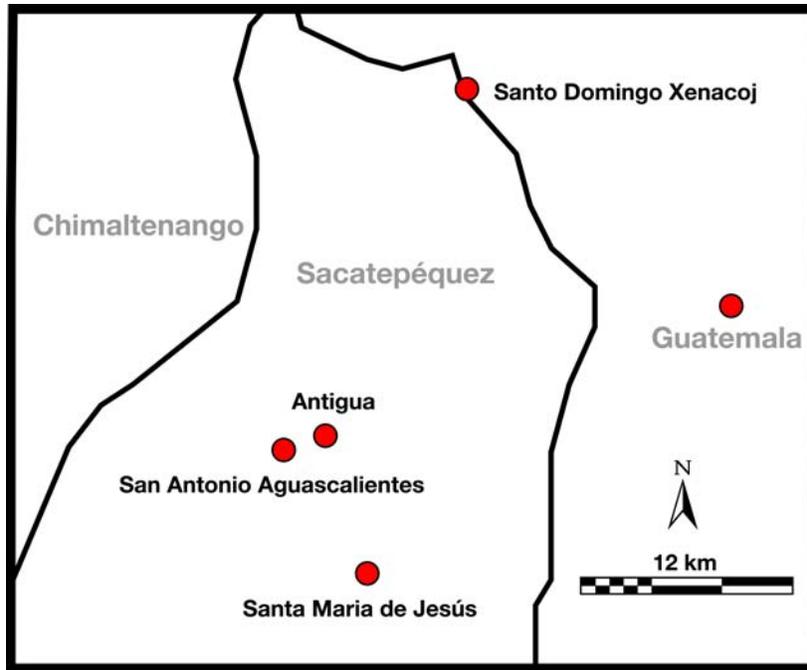


Figure 4.3. Communities visited in the Department of Sacatepéquez.

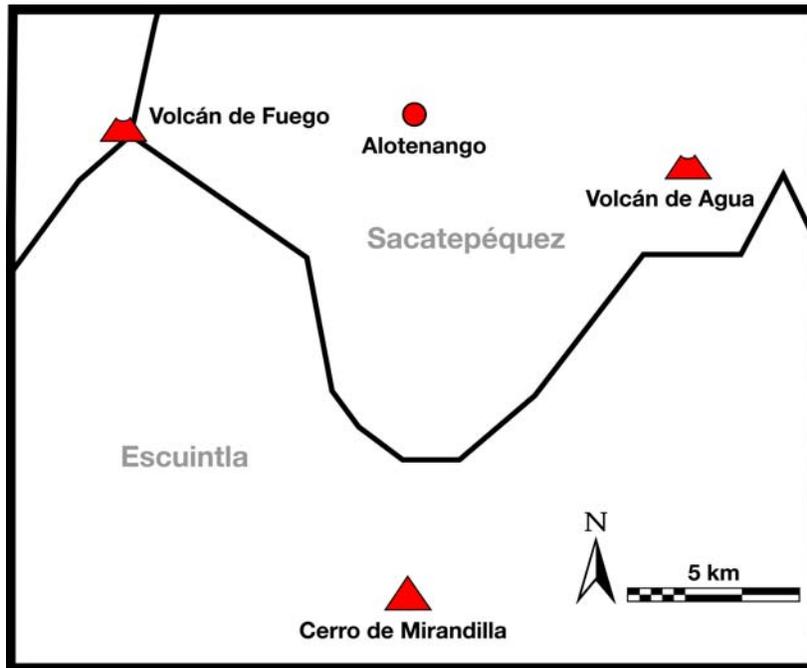


Figure 4.4. Area visited in the Department of Escuintla.

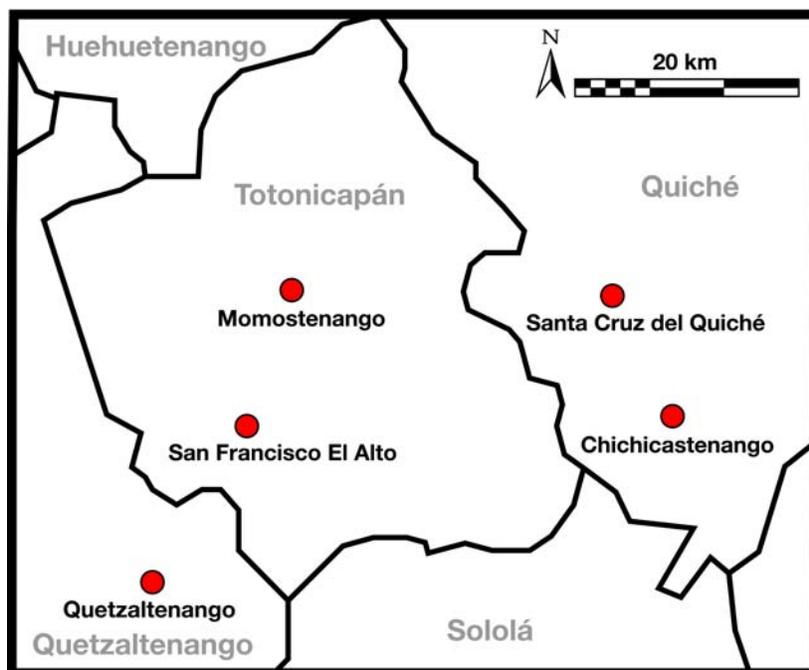


Figure 4.5. Communities visited in the Departments of Quiché, Totonicapán and Quetzaltenango.

LAKE ATITLÁN REGION, DEPARTMENT OF SOLOLÁ

San Jorge La Laguna

The community of San Jorge La Laguna had a prominent role during my investigations over the years. I had been aware of a cave located there from previous communication with James Brady. Given the geology of the region I knew that large or deep caves were rare. It was important to visit this site because it was reported to be a large chambered cave. I visited Nimajay Cave in 2001 during my first year in the Kaqchikel course. We not only visited the cave, but we also were able to see other sacred sites on the mountain. It became apparent to me early on that the whole mountainous landform that juts out towards Lake Atitlán is sacred.

Nimajay Cave is located on the eastern slope of a mountain that rises above Lake Atitlán. The cave is situated approximately 100 meters below the road that passes between Sololá and Panajachel (Figure 4.6).



Figure 4.6. Nimajay cave as seen from the road. (The cave is near the center of the picture.)

The cave opens as a single chamber measuring about 15 meters wide by about 10 meters deep with an opening approximately two meters high (Figure 4.7). The opening is best characterized as uneven due to collapsing rocks. The ceiling level drops as one enters and floor level rises when heading back to the cave. The chamber is covered in fuzzy soot all over the interior and extending to the outside over the upper lip of the entrance. This soot represents scores of ceremonies that have been celebrated there over many years. The mouth of the cave is visible from the community of Panajachel and many times one can see smoke billowing out of the entrance or flames from a ceremonial fire lighting up the chamber at night. Nimajay is a well-known pilgrimage site with numerous *ajq'ija'* and their clients traveling from the coast as well as from north central Guatemala to conduct ceremonies in the cave (Ochoa Garcia 1997; Pieper 2002). People as far as Totonicapán were present during one of my visits and had come there for a special ceremony to seek fortune.



Figure 4.7. The opening of Nimajay cave, San Jorge La Laguna.

Prominent features in the cave include: an altar in the rear of the cave towards the north to either place candles or initiate a ceremony; an altar towards the middle containing two crosses and a pile of rocks; an altar with three crosses, a pile of rocks and a long tract of rocks to the rear towards the back of the cave (Figure 4.8); a sediment and ash mixed open area in the center of the room to burn offerings; numerous large rocks of ceiling collapse that can function as seats; and a rocky area to the north that slopes up towards the ceiling (according to the local informant was a place to sacrifice infants in the past).



Figure 4.8. Arrangement of crosses and altars inside Nimajay cave.

The arrangement of features is dynamic and constantly changing. The dynamic nature of this site was impressed upon me early on as I participated in a ceremony where I had to move rocks from one area to another; we were collecting rocks to place candles on them at the back altar. In another case I witness the woman from Totonicapán digging with a pick-axe in the tract of stones behind the three crosses. She was literally looking for fortune as commanded by her *ajq'ij*. That behavior radically changed the stones in that area of the cave. Over the six years of visiting this site I have seen that the crosses, which are not Christian in type, have been moved or re-positioned numerous times. During my most recent visit in 2007, I had the unfortunate experience of observing the vandalism and destruction of two of the crosses, which turned out were not made of stone as I had once thought, but instead constructed of reinforced concrete. They had been removed from the two cross altar near the middle of the chamber, broken and deposited in the stone tract behind the three cross altar. Clearly, this site is ever changing.

An altar is located on the outside of the cave down to the northwest or left hand-side looking out the entrance towards the lake. This altar is used for performing “black” or negative ceremonies such as throwing curses or getting rid of bad energy. Finally, a midden of ritual by-products has built up over the years out of the mouth down the steep slope into a *milpa* or cornfield.

Nimajay Cave was first mapped by Brady’s survey team in 1991 (Figure 4.9). This plan view of the cave accurately noted many cultural and natural features found in the cave and I have used it over time to compare the changes I have witnessed at this site. It was erroneously called “Cueva del Brujo” according to the name on the map. The investigators had gone there to observe a ceremony; Brady was given permission to take some pictures of the ceremony and map the cave.

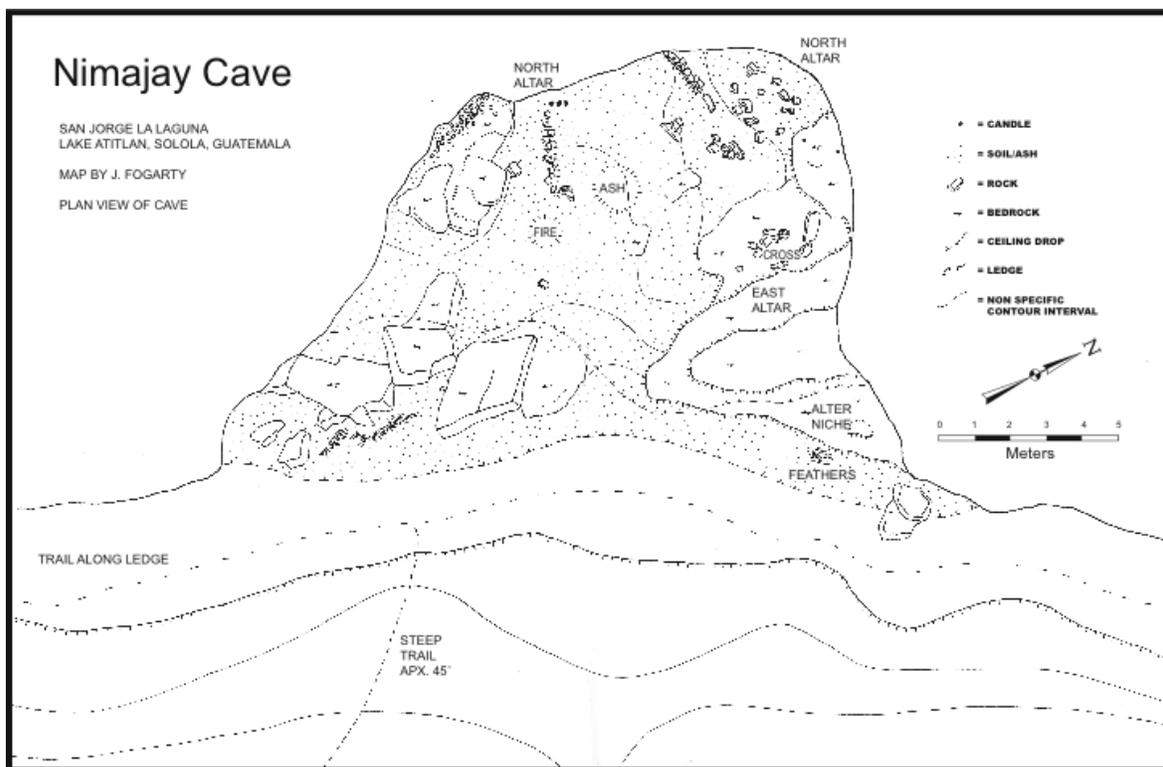


Figure 4.9. Map of Nimajay Cave (unpublished map courtesy of James E. Brady).

Linda Brown's (2002) dissertation research also investigated Nimajay Cave. While her map emphasizes the locations of altars and hearths, it lacks the cartographic detail of the cave that Brady's team noted some years earlier. In fact in neither her description nor on her map did she note the presence of any stone crosses (Brown 2002:450-452), four of which was present in the 1990s (based on a photograph) and had increased to five by 2001 (my first visit). Between the two maps I am able to ascertain some of the changes over time and take them into account as I have continued to document the dynamic nature of this site.

The next altar on this mountain, known as Silla de Ma Ximón (also called Telefonó Silla where Ma Ximón smokes his cigars), is located downslope about 150 meters southwest of Nimajay Cave. It is a small rockshelter like feature about two meters wide and one meter deep (Figure 4.10). It contains two altars, one for setting candles and one for a primary offering. It is an altar to Ma Ximón. The altar is considered very powerful and on more than one occasion I have heard many passionate wailing and crying ceremonies performed there. My 2007 visit was rather extraordinary; during the cigar smoking portion of our ceremony I became very weak and overcome by the experience, something I normally could withstand without problem during our work. My companion and I felt the same way and we both had to rest quite a while before being able to proceed and climb up the hill from this site. Our *ajq'ij* explained that we needed to be careful and be strong in our minds and hearts because the power is great at this site and we can fall victim to negative energies that may lurk at this and other sites. Our weakness may also have been a result of the previous ceremony we had just had at Nimajay and the residual negative energy from a "black" ceremony near us may have tried to follow and infect us. Whatever the case, some sites are simply more powerful than others and in some cases the energy can be felt and/or experienced.



Figure 4.10. Silla de Ma Ximón, San Jorge La Laguna.

Further southwest on the mountain rests Kāq Ab'āj (also known as Nimamesa, or San Simon Ruwarab'al where Ma Ximón sleeps). This sacred site is located at the end of the mountain on the flat rock that appears to almost float over the lake and trees. I have had many visits there since 2001. There is one main altar on the rock, which measures about two meters by one meter (Figure 4.11). To the south, a small square hole measuring about 25 centimeters or so has been cut into the rock. It appears to always contain some rain water.



Figure 4.11. Kāq Ab'āj, San Jorge La Laguna.

Offerings of money (coins) are found in some of the cracks and ritual debris has piled up on the rock ledge that slopes down towards the lake. A little broom made from brush has been there for a number of years and is used to “clean and activate” the altar (see Figure 3.44). A fire stirring stick is present. This site, too, is considered very powerful by locals and yields impressive, large fires ceremonies.

Approximately 30 meters away from Kāq Ab'āj is the cliff site called Chuwa Kāq Ab'āj. This site, located in the somewhat concave portion at the base of the cliff, has multiple altars for both positive and negative ceremonies. The ritual space measures about 10-12 meters long by two-to-three meters wide (Figure 4.12). The site is rather dirty attesting to the numerous negative ceremonies that are performed there. A characteristic of negative places is their unkempt quality. Debris from ceremonies along with candle wax and flowers were normally present during my visits.



Figure 4.12. Chuwa Kāq Ab'āj, San Jorge La Laguna.

One site, containing three sacred spaces, is located on the next mountain north of the town of San Jorge La Laguna near a tourist scenic stop or *mirador* on the road down to Lake Atitlán. The site consists of a large rock outcrop that forms two small concavities measuring about two meters across for each area (Figure 4.13). The site contained much debris from numerous negative ceremonies and was considered rather dirty and contaminated. A more positive altar was located on the upper part of the rock outcrop on a large flat boulder measuring about two meters in diameter. I had two visits to this site and noted no major changes to the features.

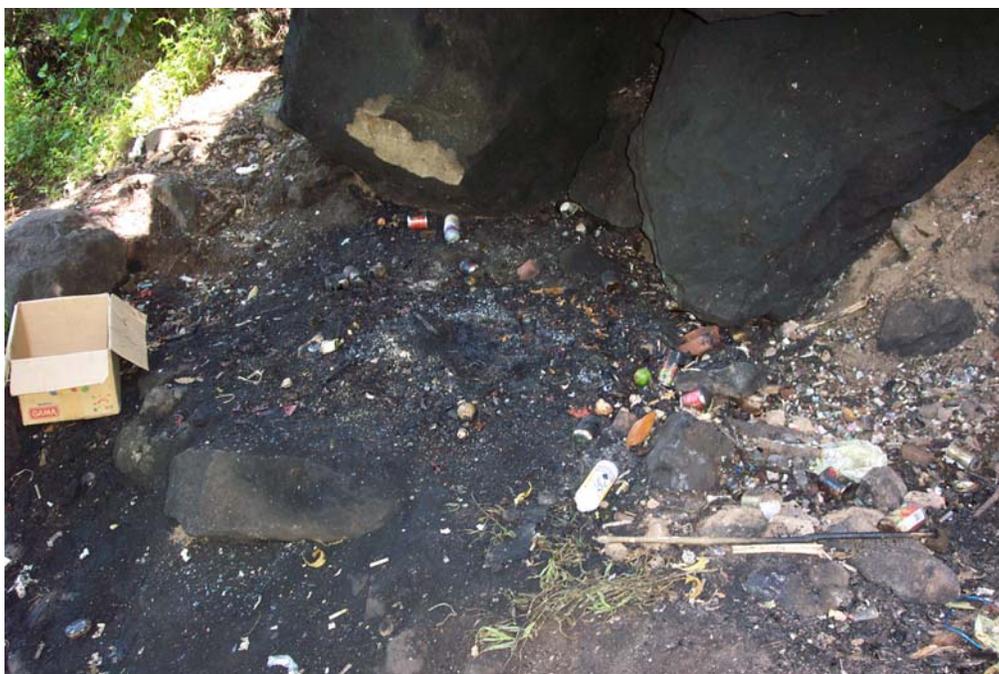


Figure 4.13. Unnamed site located near the *mirador*, San Jorge La Laguna.

San Andres Semetabaj

Xe To'oy is a cave site located northwest of the center of San Andrés Semetabaj. During my initial visit to this site the local guide commented how it is meant to be difficult to find the cave and in some cases the cave will not appear to us. We arduously walked up a densely vegetated intermittent stream gully and could not find the cave. After some time of searching for the cave we decided to make a prayer offering with alcohol in the gully to petition the spirit owner to let us find the cave; we soon encountered the cave situated in the bank of the streambed and adjacent to an open field, which coincidentally had a path leading to the site. Our guide again commented that it was meant that we suffer and sacrifice a bit to find the site, and then the spirit owner acts favorably towards us, allows us to find the cave, and will then make our departure much easier.

The cave may have once been a natural opening, but now contains artificial modifications in the passages; the guide noted that the sediments are being mined out

perhaps to make bricks or similar objects. It contains one main room and passage about two meters wide (Figure 4.14). Other alcoves are present near the entrance to the left and right. Six or seven meters further into the cave the passage it splits off to the right to form a side passage, about five to six meters in length, which also has dual alcoves at its terminus. Both passages terminate in pools of water at their ends. The height of the cave ceiling varies, but one cannot stand inside the passages and is required to crawl to reach the ends. There is a one-half meter wide trench that has been dug into the floor to facilitate walking down the main passage. This trench stops near the split. On a recent visit in 2007 I found that a third passage is being expanded on the left side of the room, which was not as extensively dug during my initial visit in 2005.



Figure 4.14. Cave entrance and altar of Xe To'oy, San Andrés Semetabaj.

Xe To'oy contains a square altar made of concrete and bricks located near the left side of the cave opening. A concrete, half-meter tall Latin cross is situated at the backside of the altar (Figure 4.15). Evidence of frequent candle burning was present during our visit along with fresh blood staining the front of the cross, likely from a recent

chicken sacrifice. Adjacent to the concrete altar was a metal circular-shaped disc, similar to a *comal*. Containing unknown charred materials similar to cigars, it showed evidence of being used in rituals. A 1970s photo of the cave with the same altar and cross appears in Warren (1989:Plate 11) where she notes that community members come to this location to celebrate rites. This attests to the long use of the cave for ceremonies, over four decades.



Figure 4.15. Close-up of altar inside Xe To'oy showing blood on the cross.

Other objects found in the cave included the ubiquitous wooden staff for use in ceremonies, some other candles found further down the main passage on the left, and a bandana found near the candles. Broken ceramics, likely of modern origin, were also noted near the back of the main passage at the pooled water. The possible long bone from a deer or other large mammal was noted in the front alcove. It is unclear if this site was used as a hunting shrine to cache deer and other animal bones.

A second unnamed sacred site is located at the summit of a hill adjacent to a road that leads northeast of town towards Xe To'oy. The informant from town explained that

the altar will reveal itself at midday and we should be there at that time with our offering, which included a special meal along with the normal offering. The top of the hill contained short grasses, shrubs, and various sized trees. We searched for the altar, but it did not appear despite our arrival at midday. Timing is everything when accessing these portals and achieving passage between the two worlds (Stross 2008:374-375). No other signs of ritual usage such as the presence of brooms or fire stirring sticks were observed. Our *ajq'ij* conducted a ceremony near an animal burrow and we left an offering of tortillas at the burrow opening.

Santa Catarina Palopó

I was able to visit two sites in Santa Catarina Palopó. Another site is known to be located on private property near the cemetery, but I was unable to visit that site.

Located near at the base of a large boulder near the central part of town lies an abandoned site called Xe Calvario Ab'aj. Old vegetation covered the base of the rock, which we removed. Broken window glass, bottle glass, a few ceramic sherds and soot marks on the rocks were present at the site. My informant said he saw candles on a rock about 12 years ago. There is no evidence of ceremonies in the recent past. My informant explained that the property changed ownership and now no one comes to this site. Furthermore, most people now have altars in their homes to conduct *costumbre* and do not venture out to sites in the landscape as much as in the past.

The second site I recorded exhibited little use and my informant had no name for it. Situated in the upper mountain region just south of town, the altar is located at the base of an approximately 20 meter high cliff. The altar consists of upturned rocks forming a basin shaped area that contained two square ceramic tiles and other flat rocks that formed its bottom. Charred materials, a portion of a cigar and an empty rum bottle were present at the altar. Other areas along the cliff wall had places to burn candles. No other tools like sticks and brooms were noted at the site.

San Antonio Palopó

One site, a rockshelter, was investigated from San Antonio Palopó. Xe Saqsiwan or Xe Saqasiwan is located in the lower portion of an exposed rock face of the large mountain situated southeast of the community. The rockshelter measures roughly eight-to-ten meters wide with a six meter tall ceiling; the floor measures about three-to-four meters deep from the back of the wall and abruptly ends at the cliff edge. The rockshelter appears to be natural, however, artificial hand holds and small steps have been cut into the soft rock pathway to facilitate a safe arrival at the site.

In the back of the rockshelter is a small alcove where rocks are have been placed as bases for lighting candles (Figure 4.16). In front of the rocks is altar space on the ground for burning offerings, which we did during my most recent visit in 2007 (Maxwell et al. 2008). This burn area was not present during my visit in 2004. There were also two metal *incensarisos* or incense burners. Only one was present in 2007. In 2004 there were seven large rocks that formed a raised altar. In 2007 those rocks had been altered to create a circular pit enclosed by five of the rocks. Changes in the back alcove since 2004 include moving the rocks around, the addition of a new *incensario*, and adding two plastic vases for flowers.



Figure 4.16. The alcove and altar in Xe Saqsiwan, San Antonio Palopó.

Brown investigated this site as part of her doctoral research (2002:176) and showed a cooking hearth to the right or south wall of the shelter in her map. I could find no evidence of that hearth nor was there any blackening of the floor, wall, or ceiling in that part of the shelter. A small wooden chair and some logs noted on the 2002 map were not present during visits in 2004 or 2007. As mentioned in the discussion of the Nimajay cave, many of these sites exhibit clear evidence of significant change over short periods of time. They are dynamic spaces constantly changing and evolving with either the addition or subtraction of objects or the re-placement or modification of features.

San Lucas Tolimán

I went to this community, but was unable to visit the site in which we had information. I was familiar with the altar at the tree described by Brown (2002) and

visited by Maxwell during previous investigations (Maxwell et al. 2008). The site is called Chi Tulül, named for the *zapote* tree, but currently situated at the base of a Silkcotton tree (Figure 4.17). Found on the north side, the altar is situated at the base of the tree where offerings are left among the roots.



Figure 4.17. Chi Tulul, San Lucas Tolimán (photograph courtesy of Judith M. Maxwell).

Cerro de Oro

I visited three sites in the community of Cerro de Oro (Brown 2002 describes these same sites). Two were active sites and one is abandoned. The first site, called Ch'ajyu', was located near the top of the mountain called Cerro de Oro. The site consists of a large, ten meter high rock spire that has a zoomorphic shape like a bird beak or open

maw of an animal (Figure 4.18). There were two large altar areas, one at the base of the rock spire, and another a couple meters to the northwest on a flat boulder. The altar at the base of the rock spire is partially bounded by a short rock wall that delineates part of the 1.5 meter by 1.5 meter sacred workspace. A wooden staff was observed nestled between some boulders to the left of the altar. The altar space on the boulder is less than two meters in diameter. The site is very active attested by the large amount of ritual debris noted at the north of the boulder altar. Two other stirring sticks were present at the site. There are many niches among the rocks where non-burned offerings or petitions written on paper are stuffed. Previous investigation by Maxwell (Maxwell et al. 2008) noted that less used altars are located behind the large rock spire and that some of the rocks appear to have eroded carved figures on them.

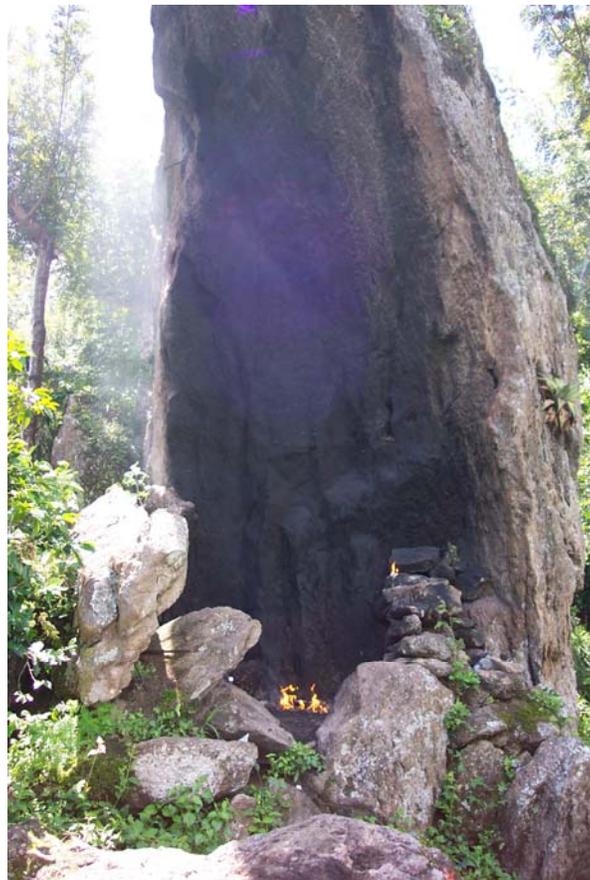


Figure 4.18. Ch'ajyu', Cerro de Oro.

Located also near the top of the crest of Cerro de Oro is an unnamed abandoned site. We had some difficulty in finding this site due to its lack of use. The site, which is composed of large boulders, has an upper and lower activity area delineated by a short rock wall. The entire area covers about three meters by three meters. I saw old candle wax and black soot residue on some of the rocks but the metal incense burners noted at the site by Brown (2002:396) were not present during our visit that occurred five years later.

The third site investigated is located in the town of Cerro de Oro, not far from the town square. This site of *Ch'ajyu' Okem*, also known as *Pa Siwan* by some, is a pilgrimage site, and numerous ceremonies are preformed here. Formerly accessible directly from the road, it must now be entered through the owner's house compound. Charging those using the site a modest fee, the owner maintains the area free of debris. The site is a cave formed by the collapse of large rocks and boulders and covers about ten meters in length by about two meters wide until it constricts at the end (Figure 4.19). Brown (2002: 385) drew a map of the site during her visit in 2000, but much has changed since that investigation. Many of the features noted at the cave in 2000 no longer exist. These include a large midden, some boulders, a cooking hearth, painted crosses, and various decorations found at the site. Many altars are present at the site for either burning offerings or placing candles. The open space near the drip line showed two large burn circles from recent ceremonies. At least three long stirring rods, a metal *incensario*, abundant flowers, and offerings of bread and cigarettes along the wall's cracks and small ledges were observed during my visit. Brown (2002: 384) recorded those same tobacco offerings along with petitions written on paper in the wall niches. Another feature not discussed by Brown, but present on the cave wall during my visit, consisted of an image of *Rey San Pasqual*, the folk saint mentioned in Chapter 3. This image, a smiling, ceramic skull figurine, is plastered into place about head level on the left side of the cave. My informant noted that *Rey San Pasqual* is associated with death and that this site is

used not only for positive rituals, but also negative ones like throwing curses onto people. The location of the figurine on the left side of the cave is not unusual given that most negative-based ceremonies are performed at the left side of most of these sites.



Figure 4.19. Ch'ajyu'Okem, Cerro de Oro.

Santiago Atitlán

There are numerous sacred locations in the area of Santiago Atitlán. Brown (2002), Mendelson (1957), Lothrop (1933), and Christiansen (2001) discuss many of these sacred precincts as well as archaeological sites, of which many are considered hallowed and are either still actively used or have recently fallen into abandonment.

During my investigations I only was able to visit one site in the town and one further away on the road to San Pedro La Laguna.

The site called Nixti' is located near the cemetery of Santiago Atitlán. It consists of a small rockshelter like feature created from tumbled boulders (Figure 4.20). The space is only about 1.5 meters wide and perhaps two meters long with an upper altar of small rocks for placing candles and a lower altar, a rock slab to hold more material-based offerings. Two large sticks were present at the site and one appeared to act as a stirring staff. Our ceremony consisted mainly of lighting black and *cebo* candles, used popularly in ceremonies to communicate effectively with the ancestors. This choice of material was also driven by the fact that the site was located near a cemetery. A comparison of the current site with findings from Brown (2002:431) showed no changes over time.



Figure 4.20. Nixti', Santiago Atitlán.

As part of the 2007 survey, one site was recorded about five kilometers south of San Pedro near the village of Chicajay off the road from Santiago Atitlán. The site is a combination Catholic shrine along with Maya altar. Both places are among what is

reported to be archaeological site mounds. The altar known as Chi' Kaqjay is situated just behind the Catholic shrine structure cupola. The altar is a small, raised platform of rocks and sediment and covers about three meters by two meters with an area in the center to burn offerings (Figure 4.21).



Figure 4.21. The Maya altar and Catholic shrine at Chi' Kaqjay, Santiago Atitlán.

Upon our arrival we saw that a large tree had fallen near the indigenous altar and that some of the branches had landed on the altar proper. We cut the branches and moved them from the altar and cleaned up the remaining debris. A group of *campesinos* were passing by and informed us that they had heard the lightning strike in this area and that it had hit that tree some moments before. The site had been hit, according to the men, because witchcraft takes place at this altar. Despite the joking nature of their statement this actual site is central in an ongoing dispute over the use of the altar on the lands owned by the Catholic Church. The Church wanted to destroy or dismantle the site but the local *ajq'ija'* and other rights groups have been able to delay this action through meetings with other better organized *ajq'ija'* and religious leaders arguing for rights to

practice Maya spirituality. I am uncertain of the final outcome of this dispute but for me it brought to the forefront the ongoing Maya struggle to practice *costumbre*.

San Pedro La Laguna

In 2007 I visited six sites around the community of San Pedro La Laguna. The first four are located just south of town on a northeastern facing mountain slope. The four shrines called Beleje' Kawoq (Figure 4.22), Waqi' Kamey, Kablajuj Aj, and Tijax, are found among various large boulders and rock faces in this mountainside; the site types include one small rockshelter, one small animal burrow/cave-like passage, and two large rock faces. All of the altars are small, about 1 to 1.5 meters in size, and do not exhibit extensive use (Maxwell et al. 2008).



Figure 4.22. The altar at Beleje' Kawoq, San Pedro La Laguna.

The fifth site documented is called Pa Tawal, which is located on private property on the peninsula northeast of town. The site consists of a cluster of large rocks, which has altar space measuring about 1.5 meters by 1.5 meters (Figure 4.23). Our local informant explained that the site was popular for fishermen to ask for permission and abundance in their daily fishing excursions. The site appears to be abandoned and was previously investigated by Brown (2006) during her project on hunting shrines. No animal bones were noted during a visit in 2007 (Maxwell et al. 2008).



Figure 4.23. Pa Tawal, San Pedro La Laguna.

The sixth site visited, called Pa Saq Mam, is a rockshelter hunting shrine extensively studied by Brown (2006) during her project (see her FAMSIS report for a summary of findings). The rockshelter measures roughly six meters long by four meters wide. There is an open area in the front about two-to-three meters in diameter that functions as a staging area for preparing ceremonies. Abundant bone caches are found in the various alcoves and spaces within the shelter (Figure 4.24). A small platform altar of

flat rock is found just inside the rockshelter for burning offerings and numerous rocks are utilized for placing candles.



Figure 4.24. Pa Saq Mam hunting shrine, San Pedro La Laguna.

San Juan La Laguna

I documented two sites near the community of San Juan La Laguna as part of the 2007 season (Maxwell et al. 2008). The first site called Chuwach San Juan is located east of town down a small alleyway on private property. It is found near the plain of the lakeshore among a large cluster of rocks in the side of a small hill. The rocks form a small alcove where candles can be placed and is large enough for a person to crouch (Figure 4.25). In front of the alcove is an altar where offerings are made. The altar space measures about a meter in diameter. There was evidence of another altar at the top of the rock to the left. The site does not receive much activity likely because of restricted access due to its location on private property.

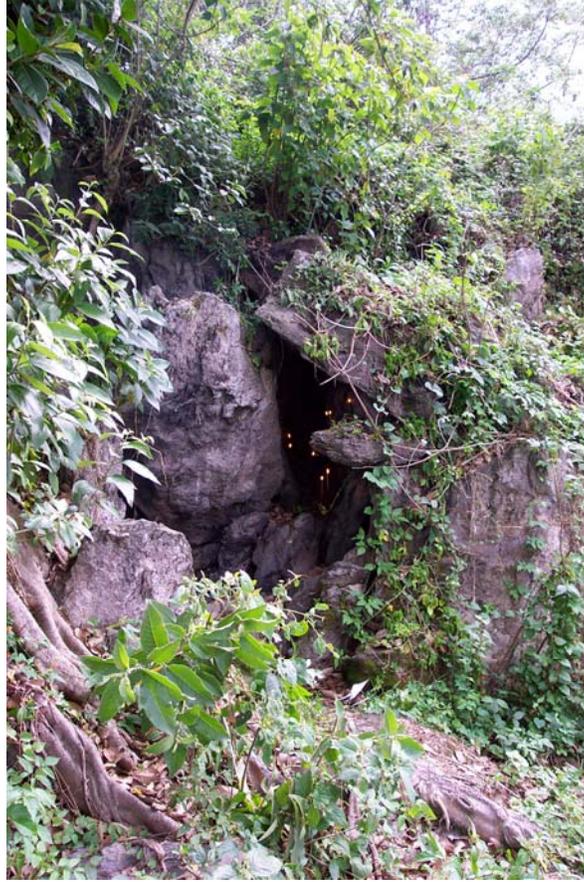


Figure 4.25. Chuwach San Juan, San Juan La Laguna.

The second site is called Xe' K'istilin and consists of a rockshelter found in the upper reaches of Cerro Cristalino north of San Juan La Laguna (Maxwell et al. 2008). The rockshelter opens to the south and measures about 15 meters wide and is about three meters deep. The ceiling is about two meters high. The location of the main altar and ritual activity space is restricted to about three by five meters situated near the center of the shelter (Figure 4.26). The entire floor appears to be an artificial platform about eight meters wide. Currently the site contains a wooden Latin cross against the back wall surrounded by dried pine needles, a small stirring stick, empty glass candles holders, numerous rocks for placing candles, and space in front of the rocks for burning offerings. According to local informants the site was used in the past for celebrating dances; this custom is no longer practiced.



Figure 4.26. Xe K'istilin, San Juan La Laguna.

From the road out of San Juan I could see a site called Chwa Kruz, which is found at the summit of a mountain just north of town. The site has a small cement platform standing behind a cross and a papal jubilee marker. A statue of the Virgin Mary overlooks the city. I did not visit this site.

Santa Clara La Laguna

Two sites were visited near the community of Santa Clara La Laguna (Maxwell et al. 2008). The mountain top shrine known as Tz'ikin is located at the top of Cerro Cristalino, the same mountain that contained the rockshelter Xe' K'istilin described above. The site has a magnificent view of the lake and two topographic benchmarks are here dated 1970. The site is well known in this region. The site currently has two primary altars where ceremonies are performed. One flat area found towards the north side of the summit covers about two meters in diameter and another altar, located on the western side, consists of a cluster of rocks and ground space measuring about two meters in diameter (Figure 4.27). Brown investigated this site as part of her research (2002: 393-

395). The northern portion still had a burn circle and rocks along with a stirring stick. The altar to the west also had a stirring stick and the burn circle, but the rocks for setting candles had been moved since Brown's visit in 2000.



Figure 4.27. Western side altar at Tz'ikin, Santa Clara La Laguna.

To the west of Tz'ikin on a lower mountaintop is the shrine known as B'atz'. Our quick visit to this site showed that the altar area currently contained some flowers placed in coffee cans but did not exhibit much evidence of recent activity. The sacred space covers about two meters by two meters.

San Pablo La Laguna

One site was visited in San Pablo La Laguna (Maxwell et al. 2008). It consists of a small chapel structure found in the town cemetery. The building measures about eight meters long by six meters wide. Inside this structure is a raised platform acting as an area to conduct ceremonies or simply to burn candles (Figure 4.28). Interestingly, on the exterior sides and back of the building there were three tall structures the shape and size

of telephone booths where offerings can be burned. Both the interior of the chapel and the ancillary attached structures were extensively blackened by soot from offerings and candles.



Figure 4.28. The interior of the structure at the cemetery of San Pablo La Laguna.

San Marcos La Laguna

In the community of San Marcos La Laguna, I recorded a shrine located within a rockshelter, called Xe' Ab'aj, situated at the edge of a coffee *finca* north of town. The rockshelter measures about 12 meters long and four-to-five meters deep at its drip line; the ceiling is about two meters high. At the back of the shelter lies a large altar of flat rocks for burning offerings and lighting candles (Figure 4.29). Two larger flat rocks act as platforms to burn offerings, however, a burn circle is present on the ground in front of one of the slabs. The arrangement of rocks measures just under two meters long by 1.5 meters wide. The back wall of the rockshelter was used to place candles, stuff written petitions into cracks, and insert cigars and cigarettes. A short stirring stick, dried plants

stems along the wall, abundant candle residue on the rocks, and some bags of trash from previous ceremonies are present near the altar. Numerous broken ceramic vessels are scattered about near the altar, against the northern wall, and in the neighboring section to the north, which is separated by a small mound of rocks and sediment with sherds. The sherds appear to be contemporary in age and could have been vessels to hold water. Undoubtedly the ceramic vessels were used as part of a ceremony, but our local guide was unable to shed any light on which type of ceremony they had been sacrificed.



Figure 4.29. Xe' Ab'aj, San Marcos La Laguna.

Tzununá

Near the community of Tzununá I visited a site called Chua Mes. Found at the base of a large rock outcrop east of the town, the site is a combination of rock boulders and a small cave-like feature. Brown (2002:337-339) describes the same location in her dissertation but under the name T'zip. The site is roughly 10 meters long with a small alcove to the west, a large group of tumbled boulders at the center, a large rock surface

east of center serving as an altar, and a passage and small cave chamber to the east (Figure 4.30). The alcove to the west contained a deposit of unknown mammal bones and a similar deposit was found in an open stone lined cache just to the left of the alcove. To the right of the largest rock in the tumbled boulders was a burn circle containing gray ash. A small wooden Latin cross rests on a ledge in the passage to the cave room and some broken ceramics were on the floor of the passage. Inside the cave room was a bat flying around and rocks used for placing candles.



Figure 4.30. Chua Mes, Tzununá.

According to Brown (2002:337) there was a Totonicapán open bowl dating to the early to mid-twentieth century and other utilitarian sherds. She also noted an obsidian core, a deer skull, and an andesite candleholder, none of which were observed on my trip

four years after her investigation. Finally, I observed a round candleholder made of pumice on the ground in front of the rock surface altar. The *ajq'ij* collected it to place at his altar in his house, a practice popular among ritual specialists in order to have a better connection with ancestors of the recent and far past and to strengthen bonds with particular altars. Back in my room I photographed and drew the artifact (Figure 4.31).



Figure 4.31. Pumice candleholder from Chua Mes.

Nahualá

Four sacred sites were visited near the community of Nahualá. The first two shrines were located in an intermittent streambed within the town limits and consisted of artificially modified caves. The first cave, called Tabal, is only about two meters long and 1.75 meters wide and with a low one meter high ceiling. At the back of chamber is a small stone bench with a metal can containing fresh flowers and candle residue (Figure 4.32). In front of the bench are six rocks used to place candles. In the center of the room, also in front of the six rocks, is a large burn circle on the ground signaling that is the

place to perform the ceremonies. A niche above the small stone bench also has an area to make small offerings. Some bags of trash were also observed along with a small stirring stick.



Figure 4.32. Tabal, Nahualá.

To the west of this site lies the second cave named El Sacriste (Brown 2002:191). The main room measures about one meter wide by 1.75 meters long. A tunnel continues at the rear of the room for an unknown distance and was noted on Brown's map. Except for a few rocks towards the end tunnel, none of the features noted on her map such as offering circles, trash and a midden were present during our visit. Our local informant

noted that the tunnel is full of dirt from a recent flooding episode. He also further explained that lore says a snake lives in there and comes out during *Semana Santa*.

During that same visit we attempted to go to the large rockshelter site of Campaña Ab'aj, known regionally as a sacred place where traditional dances were formerly celebrated (Brown 2002:357-359). Unfortunately, we were unable enter the site from below and were only able to view it from above. The site appears to be actively used, but the tradition of celebrating dances has fallen out of practice.

The final site visited was called Kōj Ab'aj, which means "Puma Stone." This cave site likely received its name from the fang like features that are present in the cave opening giving the appearance of the maw of an animal. Brown (2002:345-347) recorded this site as part of her research and I used her map to compare features present during my visit. The cave itself is single chambered measuring about three meters in diameter (Figure 4.33). The ceiling is low, about less than one meter in height, and requires crawling or crouching to enter. The back of the cave has a small alcove where stones are set upright and decorated with flowers. Other stones are located in front of them and used for placing candles. Near the center of the room is a large burn circle to perform ceremonies. The slab noted on Brown's map as an offering hearth was not present during my visit. The floor was littered with some leaves that had blown in and numerous pine needles, some of which were fresh and others dried. Near the entrance was another burn circle of a recent ceremony and not observed by Brown in 2000. Finally, two stirring sticks were present in the cave.



Figure 4.33. Kōj Ab'aj, Nahualá.

DEPARTMENT OF CHIMALTENANGO

Tecpán

The archaeological site of Iximche' has a sacred precinct at the end of the site consisting of unrestored mounds and circular platforms to burn offerings. The space encompasses about 35 meters wide by 40 meters long and includes four mounds, one of which is a principal altar, and at least six circular, earthen platform altars (see Figures 3.50 and 3.67). The earthen platforms were not always present and were constructed some time between 2001 and 2003. Recently trees have been cut in the area because of a spreading arbor disease and opened the area. This has resulted in modifying the general

atmosphere and ambiance around the sacred mound as well as making it more visible from the edge of the restored part of the site.

The principal mound contains three altars of piled stones at its base and one larger altar at its summit. In most cases, ceremonies are initiated at the summit prior to burning on the earthen altars. Numerous fire blackened rocks are encased in candle wax residue and the black stained ground is normally covered in a carpet of fresh pine needles. Numerous stirring sticks are present and the site is usually kept clean from trash. I have participated in six or seven ceremonies at this site and witnessed much change over time.

By 2007 the altars on the mounds have been modified from rock piles into squared forms with little niches (Figure 4.34). I believe this was a result of the scheduled visit of President Bush earlier in the year. What is not clear is whether the site was “straightened up” to look good for the presidential visit or whether it was part of the spiritual cleansing by the Maya that was extensively reported in the local news after his visit.



Figure 4.34. Iximche' altar mound in 2007 (Photograph courtesy of Don Arburn).

Behind this sacred precinct is a large ravine where a cave called Iximche' Jul is located. The mouth is about four meters high and two meters wide and the room is similar in size (Figure 4.35). In the upper reaches is a small tunnel. As part of my research in 2003 I attempted to enter this tunnel to confirm that the passage continues, however, I was unable to do so. The opening is less than one meter across, but Tecpanecos affirm that this opens up into a larger cave system, that ends in other locations in Guatemala. Evidence of a recent ceremony in the form of a burn circle was found towards the left side of the room floor. A small fire stirring stick rested near the ash circle. Logs placed in the room act as a ladder to the upper passage and the floor has been modified or stabilized with sandbags near the entrance to stop the erosion of the floor.



Figure 4.35. Iximche' Jul, situated below the archaeological site of Iximche'.

On an excursion in 2005 we were able to visit the sacred site of *Infiernito*, or “Little Hell,” which lies in a ravine south of Tecpán (Maxwell et al. 2008). A water-carved archway about seven-to-eight meters high and five meters wide leads into a

narrow ravine (Figure 4.36). The walls of the ravine are exposed Quaternary pumacious deposits, with occasional clumps of fern, moss, and lichen. The ravine dead-ends in a solid wall, made green by algae and mosses, moistened in the rainy season by a thin waterfall and in the dry season by seeps. At the termination, sacred to the spirits of the deceased, is where permission is requested to perform ceremonies at the site. The altar areas are within the ravine, but close to the stone archway on both sides of the intermittent stream. Periodic flooding erases the burn circles. The alluvium, whereupon the altars are prepared, must be re-leveled to create surfaces for the offerings. Expedient brooms and stirring sticks are devised from the nearby vegetation.



Figure 4.36. Infiernito, Tecpán.

The small hill site of Cerro de la Cruz lies just north of the town center; this was the location of my first Maya ceremony. The hilltop is cleared of trees and is graced by a four meter high cement Latin cross (see Figure 3.46). The cleared area in front of the cross measures about 5 meters in diameter and receives offerings dedicated to the cross. The burn altar lies two meters away from the cross in line with the central axis of the cross and is incorporated as part of ceremonies performed there (see Figure 3.66). This site has recently been closed off to *ajq'ija'* and their clients (Maxwell et al. 2008). The owner, a devout Evangelical Christian, has fenced off the area prohibiting access by traditionalists. A colleague reports that the cross has been toppled, but this has not been verified.

In 2005 I participated in a group ceremony at a new altar found near the entrance of Iximche'. The land, situated to the northeast of the entrance to the archaeological park, is owned by a U.S. American (Maxwell et al. 2008). When Cerro de la Cruz was closed, the owner gave permission to Tecpán *ajq'ija'* to consecrate alternative sacred space here. A new altar area has been constructed, using stone salvaged from the Postclassic structures on the property. The altar has the stones laid out in a quincunx pattern, with the burn circle in front covering about three meters in diameter (Figure 4.37).



Figure 4.37. New altar site near Iximche' (Photograph courtesy of Walter E. Little).

In 2004 a special excursion materialized to visit the sacred site of Pulch'ich', a historically significant pilgrimage site located northwest of Tecpán. Mentioned as an important landmark in the colonial documents of the Kaqchikel Chronicles (Maxwell and Hill 2006), its name has remained unchanged over hundreds of years. The significance of this site to the Tecpanecos is described by Fischer (1999:483) where he notes the Maya recognition of the power found within the *k'u'x*, literally heart, or “essence” of the site.

The site is a large escarpment that overlooks Lake Atitlán to the west. A series of altars must be visited in a pilgrimage circuit to ask for permission to enter the main site. Maxwell et al. (2008) notes that if permission is granted by the spirit-owner (*rajawal juyu'*), a downward-sloping crack in the rock allows access to 21 altars, one for each day in the *cholq'ij*, 260-day ritual calendar, and an altar for Ma Ximón. This site is extensively used, despite the difficulty of access and potential for assaults and robbery during the long trek from the highway.

The sacred space consists of the base of the cliff, small niches in the side, and a cave situated at the southern end of the landform. The cave is single chambered about three-to-four meters in diameter with a tall ceiling about four-to-six meters in height (Figure 4.38). Its long history of use is evident by blackened walls and abundant remains from ceremonies. At least three burn circles were present along with about a dozen rocks for placing candles in front of a niche in the back of the room. A stirring stick stood next to the wall on the left side of the cave. At the base of the cliff facing west along the path to the cave are a series of niches and altars where ceremonies are performed. This area spanned about 25 meters and had evidence of recent use.



Figure 4.38. The cave at Pulch'ich', northwest of Tecpán.

Santa Apolonia

As part of the investigation in 2007 I went to one site near the community of Santa Apolonia. The sacred site of Xek'owil, located southeast of Santa Apolonia on a hill top, consists of the archaeological remains of a stela and tenon head, both of which appear to be Postclassic in style (Figure 4.39). The tenon head rests on a stone and mortar base in front of the stela, which is also positioned on a similar base. In front of the head lies an approximately two meter diameter area for burning offerings; also found at the site is the ubiquitous stirring staff. The site is kept very clean, at the request of the local community members, and is frequently visited by locals because the community's water source is located adjacent to the stela.

Performing rituals in front of stelae is not a recent phenomenon. The resetting of Classic Period monuments and their use as a focus of ritual during the Terminal Classic and Postclassic has been widely documented at Tikal, Cobá, La Milpa, Uaxactun, Yaxhá, and Caracol (Folan et al. 1983:59, 81; Hammond and Bobo 1994; Pollock 1929:328-329;

Satterthwaite 1958:67; Shook 1958:16). The fact that this ritual activity can be detected as soon as the central authority at sites disappears argues that the basic idea was part of Classic Period religion.



Figure 4.39. The stela and tenoned head at Xek'owil, Santa Apolonia.

San José Poaquil

Two sites were visited in the San José Poaquil region (Maxwell et al. 2008). Chwi Chum, also known as Iglesia Ab'äj, is situated southeast of the town and consists of one massive boulder with an alcove at its base and a series of other boulders found on the periphery of the site. The boulders consist of eight stones of power containing various places for burning offerings. The primary altar is located in the alcove and burning space measuring about three meters long by 1.5 meters wide (Figure 4.40). It contained various

rocks for placing candles, two wooden stirring rods, and at least two locations to burn offerings. The top of the boulder also consists of space to conduct ceremonial smoking and to place candles as evidenced by the presence of candle wax residue.



Figure 4.40. Main altar at Chwi' Chum, San José Poaquil.

The other site visited in the region, known as Jolom Tz'i', is about five kilometers north of San Jose Poaquil. This site is located in an open field on a hilltop north of the community of Ojercaibal. The altar consists of a U-shaped line of small rocks and an area for burning offerings within the enclosure (Figure 4.41). It measures about 1.5 meters by 1.5 meters. The four corners are marked by boughs of pine trees, now dried

and brown. Some appear to have been used as stirring sticks because of their blackened ends.



Figure 4.41. Jolom Tz'i', San José Poaquil.

San Juan Comalapa

Three sacred sites were visited in the area around San Juan Comalapa (Maxwell et al. 2008). A very large single boulder site called Xe' Kupilaj was encountered near the top of a mountain northwest of Comalapa. The boulder itself is about 12-14 meters high. At its base is an area approximately four meters long to conduct ceremonies (Figure 4.42), but the area to burn offerings extends out an additional four-to-five meters to the edge of the mountain slope. Materials present at the site included a small stirring stick, glass candles, fresh, green pine needles upon which sat a freshly sacrificed red feathered chicken, yellow and red rose petals, and ash remains from a recent ceremony. The rock face exhibits abundant graffiti and trash from ceremonies has been thrown down the slope.



Figure 4.42. Xe Kupilaj, San Juan Comalapa.

A large cave, also known as Pa Ya', is located near the community of Paya' northwest of Comalapa. It has formed in the upper reaches in the side of a mountain near a spring. Traditionalists have not visited the cave in some since the path had overgrown with so much vegetation that it required clearing in order to climb to the cave. The cave mouth is fairly large, measuring about 15 meters wide by about eight-to-ten meters high (Figure 4.43). The cave is one large chamber approximately 40 meters in length with some smaller alcoves near the back of the cave. There is a hole in the ceiling and a cone of natural debris has accumulated on the cave floor from detritus washing into the aperture. The cave contains bat roosts of unknown species with guano stains abundant in areas of the cave. The small alcove in the back of the cave contains signs of modern habitation/camping with a leaf/vegetation bed and evidence of a campfire, not a ceremony.



Figure 4.43. The cave site of Pa Ya', San Juan Comalapa.

The third site documented in 2007 around Comalapa is situated northeast of the town near the community of Sarima'. The site, known as Simajulew, consists of a large rock and boulder in a farmer's cornfield near the forest's edge. The boulder and rock create a flat surface altar for placing a ritual meal; a plate and two cups were present from a previous meal offering. An artificially prepared platform, 1.5 meters by 1.5 meters, was constructed in front of the large boulder with rocks and sediment. This platform was used for burning offerings (Figure 4.44). Besides the remains of previous ritual meals, a stirring stick and an abandoned metal barbecue stove were found at the site. We specifically went there to have a picnic and feed the mountain a meal of meats and vegetables as was deemed necessary in a dream that a local informant had some days earlier.



Figure 4.44. Feeding the mountain at Simajulew, Sarima', San Juan Comalapa.

El Tejar

One site east of the community of El Tejar was documented as part of the study in 2007 (Maxwell et al. 2008). The altar known as Wuqu' Tijax is actually found up the hill but because of the high incidents of attacks and robbery of participants visiting the site rocks from the shrine were brought down the hill and placed in a farmer's field; this location is open and less prone to criminal activities (Figure 4.45). The landowner charges a fee to enter the sacred space, however, that does not discourage people from coming here. The shrine consists of a large rectangular space measuring about 15 meters by 10 meters. Rocks delineate part of the space and the blackened ground has numerous locations for burning offerings. Near the altar where we conducted our ceremony I noted two brooms (dried shrubs and tied with twine) and three fire stirring rods (see Figure 3.45 for those examples). One of the brooms was used to prepare our altar. In cases where brooms are not available at a site expedient broom tools are made by breaking off small, leafy branches of nearby shrubs. The same is true for fire stirring sticks, which can also

stand in for brooms to prepare and activate an altar (see the description of a site in Santa Maria de Jesús).



Figure 4.45. Wuqu' Tijax, El Tejar.

San Andrés Itzapa

I made one visit to the community of San Andrés Itzapa to visit the famous Ma Ximón altar there. The altar is set up in a temple dedicated to him. The custom is to walk inside the structure and light your candles on the tables provided. Proceeding up the few steps to the left, a petitioner arrives at the glass case altar containing the Ma Ximón image. The petitioner says their prayer or petition and then continues down the few exit steps to leave the altar.

The temple walls are covered with small plaques of appreciation thanking Ma Ximón for acting favorably on a petitioner's request. Outside in the courtyard are areas where larger ceremonies can be performed; we did not have a ceremony for this trip.

ANTIGUA REGION, DEPARTMENT OF SACATEPÉQUEZ

Antigua

During my fieldwork I was based in the town of Antigua. I made many visits to a Ma Ximón altar found in a business known as Nim Po't either for personal ceremonies or observing other ceremonies that I was invited to witness (see Figure 3.1). The Ma Ximón altar is open to the public for display and use; many people are curious about the Maya saint and many practitioners believe that *Ma Ximón* can bring them luck and wealth. *Ma Ximón* is believed to be directly connected with Maya ancestors. The wooden image sits on his chair on an elevated platform of large bricks set against a wall and under a covered thatch structure. In front of his seat is an offering pit that has been excavated through the concrete floor into the sediment below. The altar is always adorned with colored paper decorations or crepe paper and fresh flowers. There is a *comal* to the right side for ancillary rituals like burning cigars or other objects, a stirring staff, and small stools or benches where participants can sit.

One year during my stay I was invited to a non-public altar to witness a private ceremony. The altar, located on the private patio of a business located less than a block off the central square in Antigua, consists of a circular arrangement of rocks, one meter in diameter, and includes modern ceramics, crystals, and artifacts, such as stone figures, chert and obsidian (Figure 4.46).



Figure 4.46. Altar located in a private household patio, Antigua (Photograph courtesy of Walter E. Little).

Santa Maria de Jesús

As part of the investigation during the summer of 2007, three sacred sites were noted from the community of Santa Maria de Jesús (Maxwell et al. 2008). First, the summit of the local volcano, Agua, Jun Ajpu', is considered sacred; we did not make it to the summit to record the altar. A second site, called Xe' Tinamit, located north of the town was found to be abandoned and likely disturbed by the construction of a nearby structure, however, locals confirmed that ceremonies took place there some years ago. Finally, a spring located near the summit of a hill located northeast of town was recorded. Unfortunately, construction of water tanks and a pumping station for the spring destroyed the altar associated with this site. As a result the spring site had been ritually contaminated. Therefore, the team ventured deeper in the forest to find a cleaner, more spiritually clean space to conduct a ceremony. Our ritual specialist entered a ravine where an old tree stood and decided that we would have our ceremony at that spot. Here

I witnessed the process of creating sacred space. The specialist chose a small tree to make the fire stirring stick and broke off the little branches leaving only the skinny 1.75-meter long trunk (Figure 4.47). This stick was ritually prepared by the anointment of *agua florida*, which cleaned and activated the stick to act as a ritual tool. This stick was used to clear away leaves and debris to reveal the sediment below, which would act as the altar on which to place the offering. A circular space was opened and more *agua florida* was sprinkled over the altar to clean it (see Figure 3.55). He then placed the sugar, the incense buttons, candles, cigars, white incense, and sesame seeds, and then poured alcohol over it preparing it for burning. The ritual specialist noted that the ceremony resulted in a large and long lasting fire indicative of strong, positive energy that one finds from uncontaminated sites.



Figure 4.47. Newly created sacred space in a ravine, Santa Maria de Jesús.

San Antonio Aguascalientes

Two new sacred sites were visited near the community of San Antonio Aguascalientes during the summer of 2007 (Maxwell et al. 2008). Both sites were natural animal “homes,” an anthill and an unknown animal burrow. The anthill is located south of the town in the forest on a lightly sloping hill (Figure 4.48). There was no evidence of previous altars or burnings at the site but we specifically went there to commune more with nature. A ceremony was performed at the base of the anthill by the *ajq'ij*. This too included the selection of a small stirring stick, which was ritually cleaned and prepared for use in the fire.



Figure 4.48. Anthill site, San Antonio Aguascalientes.

The animal burrow site was found just off a foot trail that wanders northeast of town. According to our informant the burrow had a strong connection to the natural energy of the hill and was associated with the day sign of Kan. An offering of tortillas and bread was left at the burrow entrance after the ceremony concluded (see Figure 3.42).

Santo Domingo Xenacoj

One sacred site located southeast of the town of Santo Domingo Xenacoj was documented as part of our 2007 project (Maxwell et al. 2008). The shrine, known as Xe' Na' Koj, consists of a few large boulders that contained at least two altars. We conducted a ceremony at the side of one large boulder called Oxlajuj Kan and later went to a site not much further down the hill near another set of boulders called Ruchi' Xib'alb'a, where candles were burned on a small rock altar and cigars were smoked. According to the ritual specialist, both of the sites contained powerful altars and the ceremonies were strong. During the cigar smoking portion of the ceremony at least two of the participants experienced a forceful reaction to purge negative energies from their bodies, especially at the site called Xib'alb'a, where I essentially witnessed a battle between good and evil. One of the informants was being "attacked" by someone through the throwing of negative energy onto him. He was weak and vomiting, but through the positive support of all the participants at the site and the aid of the *ajq'ij*, the participant was able to withstand the "attack" and recover. It was only through the smoking of another cigar and the drinking of some alcohol, which strengthens the connection with the ancestors who offer protection from negative influences, that all of the participants successfully warded off the malevolent energy from the unknown attacker. (At a site called Xib'alb'a, I would expect such an incredible event!)

DEPARTMENT OF ESCUINTLA

The final description from the 2007 investigation consisted of a trip to a site called Tz'ikin Ala' (Maxwell et al. 2008). A series of six sacred sites are located on the northeastern portion of Cerro Mirandilla, an anomalous mountainous land feature found southeast of Volcan de Fuego on the road from Alotenango to Escuintla. Altars were found in two locations on the top of the mountain, at a spring and in a rockshelter along a trail, a ledge/rock face, a tall, cave like passage at the base of the mountain, and a series of large boulders near the river.

People from many different regions of Guatemala come to this area to conduct ceremonies. The majority of use was found at the base of the mountain by the river and the backside of the nearby cave-like passage. The altars found in the upper zone of the mountain showed much less activity compared to those by the river. This could be a reflection of the ease of access to the lower sites instead of taking the arduous climb up the mountain. More likely, high visitation of these lower sites is indicative of the nature of the ceremonies performed there, primarily negative ones. The activity area at the site along the riverside encompasses approximately 18 meters in diameter with numerous areas on the ground to burn offerings (Figure 4.49). In fact during our visit at the riverside site we conducted our ceremony as far away as we could towards the right from the main part of the site. This was not only to distance our selves ritually from the other participants at the site, but also for some safety from flying objects such as cans of chilis used extensively in negative ceremonies, which burst and fly out of the ceremonial fires. Two large negative ceremonies were being performed at the site complete with the sacrifice of two black chickens and use of exploding objects. Interestingly, however, these ceremonies were not directed by a Maya ritual specialist, but instead a Ladina woman.



Figure 4.49. The activity area near the river at Tz'ikin Ala', Escuintla.

DEPARTMENT OF QUICHÉ

Santa Cruz del Quiché

I made a trip to the archaeological site of K'umarqa'j/Uatlán to visit the caves there. The site of K'umarqa'j is the Late Postclassic, Contact Period capital of the K'iche' speaking group that was conquered by the Spanish around 1524. While this site has been previously investigated (Lothrop 1929; Wallace and Carmack 1977; Fox 1978:24, 34, 96; 1991:232, 235, 238; 1993:164; Tedlock 1986:134; Schele and Freidel 1990; Wright 1991:202-211; Brady 1991; Brady and Veni 1992; Brown 2002; Earle 2008), Brady and Veni's study was the first to document and map the two caves still existing at the site. (For a more detailed discussion of the caves and cave construction at this site consult Brady and Veni (1992:157-163).

Besides the highly utilized caves, there are two other altars at K'umarqa'j used by contemporary Maya, one stone circular platform (possibly ancient in age) with an ancillary burn area in the main plaza, and an altar at the Temple of Tojil. The Tojil

temple is an unrestored large mound located on the western side of the open plaza. The altar niche is located within the exposed wall on the eastern side of the temple; numerous rocks from the construction of the temple are used for placing candles. The open ground where ceremonies are performed covers about a two meter diameter area. About 18 meters east of this space lies the stone platform in the open plaza. We had our ceremony at the Temple of Tojil to ask permission to explore the caves found down the ravine to the northwest (Figure 4.50). The space in front of Tojil was clean of debris, but had the almost ubiquitous stirring stick leaning at the side.



Figure 4.50. Temple of Tojil at K'umarqa'j, Santa Cruz del Quiche'.

In the ravine to the northwest of the site limits are the two caves. Cave 1 has at least three areas to burn offerings just outside of the cave entrance. One is found at the entrance and two more in the form of terraced earthen platforms lie just a few meters downslope. The area was clean, but I observed two dried plants tied together acting as brooms at the site. The ground was blackened from years of ceremonies. My informant

explained that the big ceremonies are performed out here because it would become too smoky in the cave; candles and smaller offerings are burned in the cave.

We entered into Cave 1 and lit candles and cigars at the end of the main passage that held a square cross in a niche. Lit candles in glass were burning at the time of our arrival. My *ajq'ij* then made similar offerings at two of the other side passages. The cave is about 70 meters long, roughly 1 meter wide and varies in height from two-to-four meters (Brady and Veni 1992:160). There are eight side passages or niches, one of which drops down to a lower passage and continues for some eight odd meters. During my visit that lower passage contained what appeared to be trash among offerings; the odor suggested a dead animal was present perhaps the result of an animal sacrifice. We did not enter the lower passage. Each niche or passage terminus point contained candle wax residue and other evidence of offerings. The walls and ceiling were black from years of celebrating *costumbre* in this cave (Figure 4.51). Upon departing this cave I made an interesting observation on the shape of the entrance. While the main passage was a smoothly constructed “rounded arch,” the shape of the entrance from the inside changed dramatically near the bottom walls to resemble the Mexican Oztotl glyph as one exited the cave. I do not know whether that was intentional but the similarity is striking (Figure 4.52).



Figure 4.51. Cave 1 at K'umarqa'j blackened from ceremonial use.



a



b

Figure 4.52. **a.** The entrance of Cave 1 from the interior of the cave resembling an Oztotl glyph. **b.** Oztotl glyph (Covarrubias 1957:182, Fig 80).

About 45 meters north of Cave 1 sits Cave 2. We attempted to enter that cave, but as my *ajq'ij* and I began to walk down the passage we heard strange sounds coming from the dark zone in the passage. Before we could react or ascertain the source of the sounds a creature suddenly came bolting out of the darkness and out of the cave. We unknowingly had screamed and were startled by the experience. Our companion had been outside and heard the commotion and saw a small dog run out of the cave and into the outlying brush. He laughed as he saw us emerge from the cave obviously shaken up. We commiserated over the incident and despite seeing some humor from our reactions we decided it was best to not go into the cave.

Chichicastenango

Situated adjacent to the road to Chichicastenango near an abandoned structure known as El Molino Tesero are two sacred shrines; one acts as an entry point for the larger shrine above. Both of these sites were also recorded by Brown (2002: 386-387, 400-401).

We visited the first shrine, called Xe Siwan by my informant, down by the river to ask for permission to enter the principal altar further up the hill. The altar, found at the base of a large rock outcrop, consisted of a small alcove about 1 meter wide with small rocks to place candles. Only candle wax residue and cigars were observed but no burn circles or stirring sticks were present at this site.

The principal shrine is located upslope and consists of large boulders that form a shelter like feature and alcoves in a rock outcrop. The entire site measures about 15 meters long. The eastern side has numerous small alcoves for placing candle, many of which were still burning. The central portion has a large boulder overhang that forms a shelter-like cove in which the principal altar is set (Figure 4.53). It contains numerous rocks for placing candles and a blackened, square cross, likely made of concrete; fresh flowers, lit large candles in glass vessels, and fresh pine needles are present. The area on the ground in front of altar is used for burning offerings. On the western side there is

another small altar with charred remains and a stirring stick. To the right is an upper alcove that has a wooden ladder propped up against the rock to facilitate entry. Numerous lit large glass candles reside in this alcove. The features noted on Brown's map from 2000 still exist at this site.



Figure 4.53. Xe Siwan, near Chichicastenango.

DEPARTMENT OF TOTONICAPÁN

San Francisco El Alto

Near the community of San Francisco El Alto, on the side of a great valley, rests the many altars of Beleje Tz'ip. This is a powerful shrine and I was not able to take photographs at this location because of the many participants utilizing the altars. The site we visited consisted of a large ledge on the side of a mountain with a series of altars among tumbled boulders and small alcoves. During our visit a black ceremony was being performed and others were waiting along the side for workspace attesting to the popularity of the shrine.

Brown (2002:369-370) called this site El Mundo in her dissertation, but confirmed (personal communication, 2005) it is also called Nueve Sillas, a name (Belejeb Silla, Belejeb Mesa or Nine Chairs, Nine Tables) also used by Tedlock (1986:138). My *ajq'ija* called the site Beleje Tz'ip, or Nine Dogs. One explained to me that the Dog is the *nawal* or animal companion spirit of Ma Ximón and that there are nine large altars on the side of this valley and that this site is one of the nine locations. The proper way of having a ceremony here is to perform a circuit of offerings at each of the nine sites (he drew a picture of the preferred way to conduct the ceremonial circuit among the altars). He did not want to do that on this occasion because at the lower sites there is a risk of being assaulted and robbed. I could see other blackened rock outcrops further down the hill, but we did not venture to see them. In contrast, Brown (2002:396) noted at the site of El Mundo that there were nine rock ledges, which acted as “seats” for spirits who reside there, hence the name Nueve Sillas. She did not mention any other altars lower down on the side of the hill.

Momostenango

Cerro Paklom is situated on a hilltop in the town of Momostenango. This well-known site is about 25 meters wide by 40 meters long demarcated by a decorative wall (see Brown 2002:367-368) (Figure 4.54). Dozens of altars and burn circles are present at this site, a reflection of its extensive use. The altars are made of various types of materials such as bricks, stones, concrete, and piles of broken ceramics. A covered shrine consisting of 4 chambers for burning offerings was constructed between Brown's visit in 2000 and our visit in 2005. A dedication plaque nearby asks that no firecrackers or *bombas*, nor cans of *chiles* be burned at these enclosed altars. The hilltop shrine exhibited much trash and many fresh pine needles and flowers among the altars. Stirring sticks were found in many places at the site. Scores of ceramic sherds are present at what is likely the primary altar (see Figure 3.52). I was unable to examine closely many of the ceramics, but they appear to be “modern” in age.



Figure 4.54. Cerro Paklom, Momostenango.

DEPARTMENT OF QUETZALTENANGO

Quetzaltenango

In this description I relate a detailed story of my visit to the cave of Juan No'j, located in the upper reaches of Cerro Quemado, a mountain south of Quetzaltenango. It was with much excitement that my *ajq'ij* had related a story of a recent trip to Juan No'j and because it was a cave he knew that this was a place I would want to visit. Upon arriving at the site we checked with the owner of the *tienda* near the path whether there was a rope for entering the cave. The owner said there was no rope but that there were people at the site. My *ajq'ij* was optimistic there would be a rope available to enter the cave. Situated a short distance on the path there is an entrance altar at which petitioners ask for permission to climb the mountain to go to the cave. We burned our candles at this site and continued up the mountain, which was essentially sharp, volcanic rocks with little vegetation. Along the way I observed other burn circles at large rock altar sites but we did not visit them, instead headed directly to the cave. The cave itself is more of a

fracture in the mountain and lies at the end of a rocky canyon. Upon our arrival I noted about 75 to 100 people sitting among the rocks in the canyon. They were there as part of an Evangelical church group retreat from Joyabaj some 75 kilometers to the east and I found it fascinating that they came to this site to hear a sermon from their pastor. Near the entrance of the grotto crack there is a triangular shaped space on the ground where larger ceremonies are performed. Besides the Evangelical group there were traditionalists at the site conducting rituals. We shared the altar space next to a couple that was in the process of sacrificing a chicken during their ceremony.

After we burned our offering asking permission we prepared to enter the cave; no one had entered or left while we were making our offering. I donned my bandana on my head and placed my cave light over my bandana. The cave crack was about 1.5 meters wide and the floor was compacted dirt and undulated up and down. About ten meters inside the passage there was an altar on the south side of the passage where numerous candles and flowers were placed. About two meters further into the passage I saw the re-bar stake sticking out of the floor and my *ajq'ij* told me that was where the rope is tied to enter the cave. I could see the various drop-offs below the stake and knew it would be a difficult or impossible trip without a rope. My *ajq'ij* asked me if I was still interested in going in and I explained I preferred to enter with a rope and if a rope showed up soon I promised I would enter. Smiling, my *ajq'ij* took out the bottle of alcohol and lit some candles and petitioned to the spirit owner of the cave and Ma Ximón to have a rope materialize for us to enter. We sat in the passage for a while and one of the Evangelical members came into the cave to see what we were doing. My *ajq'ij* sat with her explaining about *costumbre* and after a while she left. A few minutes later we heard some noise from people walking in the passage and two men showed up with rope! Smiling again, my *ajq'ij* asked if I still wanted to go and see the wonderful altar that was down at the bottom of the cave...and of course, I said yes.

The two men tied off the rope and we joined them and two teenagers as they entered down the cave passage. The two men went first, then my daykeeper, myself, followed by the two youngsters. There were about four short two-meter drops to climb down where the rope assisted in the maneuvers. We then reached a point where one had to actually climb down the rope for about three meters. The two men had reached a bottom chamber and I could hear my *ajq'ij* talking with them about where to go next. As we were hanging on the rope I wedged my body into the passage to get a better position to rest while I listened to the conversation between my informant and the two men. The youngsters were waiting above me. My *ajq'ij* explained to the men that there was an altar there, over to the side and the men kept saying they could not see anything that my *ajq'ij* was describing. Then my daykeeper said to the men that the cave was closed. I had recalled hearing about and reading that caves can be open or closed depending on many factors but I never expected to experience that event. Suddenly, I heard strange sounds coming from the chamber. The men were startled and talking quickly and I heard my *ajq'ij* explain that they are gifts from the *dueño* or spiritual owner/guardian of the cave. Soon I recognized the strange sounds: clucking chickens! After a little more discussion it was decided since the cave was closed we would leave and we began our climb back out the cave. The two men had collected the two chickens and when we reached the altar in the cave we stopped to rest and gave the chickens some water. The men decided to keep the chickens as gifts from the cave. We thanked them for the use of their rope and they departed. We gave thanks at the altar for allowing us to enter the cave and hoped to have another visit on a different day. We emerged from the cave and the majority of the people were gone. During our walk back down the mountain I had asked my daykeeper if the cave was closed because a *gringa* was there. He felt that the cave was closed because the two men did not have any offerings to give to the cave and did not follow protocol. *Gringa* or not I knew what the protocol was for entering into sacred space.

Whether the men should have kept the chickens is another matter. I related my story to a Maya colleague who is a traditionalist and whose brother is also an *ajq'ij*. She felt that it was not good that the two men took the chickens and that the chickens were property of the *dueño* and not meant for taking. It is likely that the men will receive bad luck from that act. I found it interesting in that two different practitioners had two different interpretations on whether to keep the chickens. This attests to the differences in beliefs and stylistic practices among various Maya and/or *ajq'ija'*.

Department of Petén

The archaeological site of Tikal in Petén, like many of the larger restored ruins, have specific locations where the Maya can perform public ceremonies. Many of these are large circular platforms normally found in plaza areas. At some sites, there are more private places to have a ceremony. During my visit in 2001, my collaborator expressed desire to perform a ceremony in a cave there. Considering myself knowledgeable on most of the caves at major archaeological sites, I was sure that there were no “caves” at Tikal. Giving him the benefit of the doubt, a friend, the *ajq'ij*, and myself made the trip to Petén and headed to the site. I explained that I was not familiar with a cave at the site. He said he knew where the cave was located. Approaching one of the larger structures, he announced that we had arrived. The “cave” turned out to be an archaeologist's excavation tunnel, likely from the 1950s or 1960s, but clearly it did not matter to him. It was an opening into the earth; a sacred place for him to perform his ceremony. This strongly collaborates Brady and Veni's (1992) suggestion that simple excavated “spaces” can be just as sacred as natural caves.

I did, however, tell him that it was an archaeologist's excavation tunnel. Not dissuaded, he promptly noted there was a better place to have a ceremony, in a cave with the mask. We traversed the site and arrived to complex of structures. Standing at the stairs leading down to an opening under a structure, we saw that it had been roped off; the sign said no admittance. The *ajq'ij* was only slightly disappointed and stood off to the

side. There were numerous people around along with park security; my traveling companion and I commiserated on how we could go down the stairs and into the room. We were both upset that our indigenous companion was not allowed to practice his spirituality in private at such a sacred place. Just a few moments later it began to rain. Most of the tourists scrambled to get out of the rain by heading to other structures away from us, or huddling under some of the bigger trees in the plaza. Few tourists were nearby. The rain intensified and the *ajq'ij* smiled and I said to him “let’s go!” Together, he and I entered into the “cave” tunnel using my small flashlight for a source. Moving quickly in order to not get in trouble with park security, we scurried forward about six meters into the passage until a sharp corner to the left and we arrived at a large stucco mask. With bats flying around us, the *ajq'ij* began to pray and pulled materials from his bag. We performed what I called the “quickest ceremony ever” where we lit black and *cebo* candles and puffed quickly on cigars. The *ajq'ij* had written a petition on a piece of paper and together with a cigar he stuffed it in a niche high above the eye of the mask. Content, he announced that we were done. We turned around and began our walk towards the exit. I could see it was still raining. I was curious as to whether our action was good or not. Would the ancestors be pleased? Was the daykeeper pleased? As we approached the opening and we both exited the tunnel, at that moment, a resounding boom from a lightening strike shook the ground and echoed in the park. We scrambled up the wet stairs and met our friend. Then, the rain simply stopped and the tourists began to move around again. At this point, our daykeeper was smiling wide. Our desire to enter the cave was made possible by the rain and the tourists leaving the area. This gave us enough time to enter and make our offering. It seemed that everyone was pleased. The ancestors had heard us and, through the thunder, we heard back.

SUMMARY

In this chapter I wanted to provide not only a context of where ceremonies are performed but also demonstrate the diversity of places they are found. While my original

intention of this research was to focus mainly on the cave context, the nature of the geology did not allow for numerous caves in the area. Furthermore, it became apparent that other types of landform features were just as important as the cave features in the region. I was unable to find clear evidence that a cave was more powerful than a non-cave feature. The highland Maya appear to believe that not all sites are equal in power, but that there are no distinguishing characteristics within a category such as a cave, a mountaintop, or a boulder, that separate them out into a hierarchy of power. Or in other words there is no information that one place is more powerful just because it has certain geographical features. All sites are powerful but the power waxes and wanes in accordance with the days in the sacred calendar, the positive or negative disposition of the participants, or even in the type or quantity of materials used in a ceremony.

For the Maya the landscape does not simply function as a means to eke out a living; it is much more meaningful to them. The landscape is animate and living, and most importantly, it is sacred. It is upon this sacred landscape where one communicates with the ancestors through special portals found in unique locations on the landscape. Communication is achieved through the burning of offerings on a prepared altar. However, it is not only communication at these sites; it is also the spiritual maintenance of the sacred landscape keeping the *rajawal juyu'* (or *dueños*), “spirit-owners,” of these places content and pleased. Otherwise, terrible things may happen such as droughts, illnesses, or general bad luck.

The sacred locations and their associated altars come in a variety of forms on the landscape and may include: mountains or volcanoes and their summits, large rocks or boulders, cliffs, rock outcrops or piles of rocks, clefts in rocks, rockshelters, caves, both natural and artificial, springs, rivers, streams, lakes or other water sources, features at archaeological sites such as stelae, mounds, or excavation tunnels, modern cemeteries, trees, and faunal features such as animal burrows or anthills. This does not mean that every hilltop or every cleft found in rocks is sacred. For the majority of sites it is a long

tradition of practice at a particular site; the original decision to frequent a specific location may be lost. When questioned as to why come to “this” place, the answer invariably is because it has always been so.

Altars can be found in private space as well, which includes rooms or open patios in people’s houses or living compounds. All *ajq’ija* and most Maya traditionalists have altars in their homes, but still venture out into the sacred landscape to commune with nature, ancestors, and do spiritual maintenance at sites. Finally, sacred space can be created on any part of the landscape and be treated as sacred through the deliberate preparation of a new altar. Because long established places can have both negative and positive power the new altars are considered more pure and not contaminated by all the previous ceremonies and, therefore, a better and more powerful connection with the ancestors.

Chapter 5: Conclusions

As I presented in Chapter 1, Maya cave archaeology as a self-conscious subdiscipline emerged only in 1997. Because of this, the field is still very much involved in constructing its theoretical and methodological framework. This dissertation was designed to address theoretical issues that are currently being debated within cave archaeology. In this chapter I will outline a number of these debates, contextualize my study within the emerging cave archaeology paradigm, and finally show by how my data speak to the issues. I will also discuss the limitations of ethnoarchaeological data for reconstructing ancient Maya practices.

COSMOLOGICAL MODELS IN CAVE ARCHAEOLOGY

At the highest level, my data address the ongoing debate over the model of Maya cosmology to be employed. By cosmology I am referring to the ancient Maya beliefs concerning the origin, nature and functioning of the cosmos. If one were to examine the development of Maya studies as a whole over the course of the twentieth century, the cosmological model most often employed would be a somewhat nebulous view that combines the idea of a four directional horizontal universe that has three vertical layers: sky, earth, underworld. The elements of this model have been laid out in J. Eric S. Thompson's (1970) work as well as discussed by others (e.g., Earle 1986; Molesky-Poz 2006; Maxwell et al. 2007; Stross 2008).

The problem for cave archaeology is that this model never spoke to the issue of why caves were being utilized in ritual, let alone why they might be important. Thompson (1970:183), for instance, states that caves, along with mountains and temples, are one of three main focuses of Maya worship. This, however, is simply presented as a descriptive fact and is never integrated into a larger religious and cosmological belief system that would explain why this was the case. This prevented Thompson from assessing the importance of caves in Maya society (Brady 2000, 2005:f-7).

Perhaps growing out of Thompson's inability to relate caves to a larger cosmological model, Barbara MacLeod and Dennis Puleston (1978) in their Palenque Mesa Redonda presentation, *Pathways into Darkness: The Search for the Road to Xibalba*, accept the three level model of the universe and propose that caves represent the Maya underworld. Their model 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. The attribution was widely accepted and applied with little question for the next 20 years.

The MacLeod and Puleston model has some conceptual weaknesses, however. In the *Popol Vuh*, the underworld lords were ultimately defeated and disposed of by the Hero Twins. If this is the case, why employ a model of the underworld from prior to the defeat? The model fails to explain why the Maya are motivated to conduct rituals at caves or explain why caves were important in ancient Maya society.

One of the most important critiques of the MacLeod and Puleston model is that rain, which they attributed to the underworld, is actually associated with *Earth* in indigenous thought (Brady and Prufer 2005:5). Thus, it is the Earth Lord or Chaac, earth-associated deities, that is petitioned in caves for rain and crop fertility. Thus, the significance of caves is tied to the all-important agricultural cycle and its relationship to earth.

James Brady (1997a) made the first explicit statement repudiating the relationship of caves with underworld and associating them instead with the belief in a sacred, animate Earth. Later that year, Brady (1997b) employed this model with the idea of the four directional universe to explain his data from the Petexbatun cave project. In this model caves are equated with Eliade's (1958) idea of the cosmic center as the *axis mundi*. Brady argued that the four directional model always assumes a fifth point, the center, which he associates with caves. A later work (Brady and Prufer 2005) drops the

connection with Eliade while emphasizing the importance of *Earth* as to explain why landscape features such as caves were important to the ancient Maya.

In attempting to bring my own data to bear on this issue, it should be noted that ethnographic data has played an important role in the formation of all of the models discussed above. Thompson (1959, 1975) originally set the standard in approaching questions in a holistic manner that integrated archaeology with ethnohistory and ethnography. Brady and Prufer (2005) are the most committed to the use of ethnography and even make a theoretical argument for its incorporation. My ethnoarchaeological approach represents a continued evolution of the trend noted above in that I am actually gathering my own ethnographic material.

My data have a number of implications for the cosmological models being employed by archaeologists to explain ancient Maya practices. As noted at the beginning of this section, the model most often employed is a complex five directional (the four quarters and the center) horizontal plane with three vertical levels (sky, earth, underworld). In many models the vertical levels are connected at the center, which acts as the *axis mundi*. The nature, importance and interrelationship of the vertical levels have received only minor elaboration so it appears that the unarticulated assumption is that the three are separate, but equivalent. This is not what I encountered. The quincunx model of the cosmos replicated in Kaqchikel ceremonies is more appropriately expressed as six directions, the four cardinal locations, and an “up” and “down,” the *Sky* and the *Earth*.

While *Sky* and *Earth* are both integral, there is little recognition or discussion of “underworld.” It was clear to me that the underworld was of little, if any, concern in day-to-day activities of my informants. This is not to say that it does not exist. If an ethnographer entered into philosophical discussions and enquired specifically about this topic, information might be gathered. John Sosa, who did elicit such information from Yucatec Maya, nevertheless comes to a conclusion similar to my own. He (Sosa 1985:424) says,

The public also reckons each cuun ka'an to be where the sky and earth meet at a great distance, and although no one was willing to give an explanation of how the sun and moon can pass through the earth, since “only God knows that,” many claim that both return to the east ic lu'um, “in the earth.” In this way, we can see how the subterranean level of the cosmos is not really completely distinct from the earth, but is conceived to be within it, although the only point from the public’s perspective where all three are joined is at cuun ka'an, “the horizon.” Their specific name for the underworld is metnal, although when the subject comes up it often evokes a laugh, since its inhabitant, kisin, “the devil,” is not really considered evil in the same sense as in Western Christianity, but is only believed to be able to “trick people,” and his influence is therefore minimal.

One of my Kaqchikel collaborators expressed to me that Xib'alb'a can be visited or evoked at any place or site; thus, it is not necessarily associated with a cave, despite the notion of it being an “underworld” location. The underworld and Xib'alb'a are associated with the dead.

One of the sites visited near Iximche', called Infiernito, or “Little Hell,” was also known as Xib'alb'a by some. As described earlier the site is a pseudokarst feature consisting of a cave-like passage into an open, narrow canyon. Daykeepers assert that the name is related to the deceased individuals who were either pushed into the canyon during the civil war or those who simply met a violent end (Maxwell et al. 2007:19). Thus, the link of Xib'alb'a is to the dead, not to the geomorphology of the site, or even being underground.

While the “underworld” has a minimal, or almost non-existent role in the ceremonies, the same could not be said of the other two levels. *Earth* especially was a deep concern as an entity to the ritual specialists with whom I worked. It is for this reason that I have employed to term *earthscape* to call attention to this entity rather than simply to the land. I am not the first to note the overwhelming importance of *Earth*. Calixta Guiteras-Holmes (1961: 289) says, “The Earth is the mother of universal life. She is the most compelling power in the universe. She is the supreme power. All others seem to form part of her or have proceeded from her depths.” In another place she notes, “Throughout the interviews his idea of a universal power, the source of both good and

evil—that is, the earth, and in a broader sense the universe—is evident, although never expressed in so many words” (Guiteras-Holmes 1961: 289).

Guiteras-Holmes’ statement about universe resonated with me but in sense very different than the idea of solar systems and galaxies. In prayers, ritual specialists often juxtaposed the term *Ruk’u’x Kaj*, *Ruk’u’x Ulew*, “Heart of Sky,” “Heart of Earth.” It is the combination of the two that appears to represent “the universe” and referred as *mundo* (world), an essence of creation. Even here, however, *Earth* is the greater part. Once again, this has been noted by others. Carlson and Eachus (1977: 38) found that, “. . . to the Kekchi (Q’eqchi’), there is only one deity with whom he must be vitally concerned: Cu:l Taq’a (*tzuultaqa*), the ‘Earth God.’ While the Kekchi do acknowledge the existence of other deities, he nevertheless feels that their effect on earth-dwellers is marginal, if not nil.”

My data suggest that in applying a three horizontal level model of the cosmos it must be recognized that *Earth* is the level of overwhelming importance. Most of the deities, spirits, ancestors, and forces found in the animate universe reside in the *Earth*. The ritual activity that I observed revolved around communication with these beings and forces at powerful *earthmarks*. This new cosmological model represents a significant departure from the previous model precisely because it emphasizes *earthmarks* as the salient features in an *earthscape*.

IMPLICATIONS FOR ARCHAEOLOGISTS WORKING IN CAVES OR OTHER SACRED SITES

In revisiting the proposed phases presented in Chapter 3, I assert that there is an observable structure to rituals, which leads to general patterns of repetitive behavior. In noting the substantial variations in specific elements of a ceremony such as the layout of materials, the materials used and orations, my findings suggest that *ajq’ija*’ enjoy a good deal of latitude in determining how a ceremony is conducted. An overarching structure is only discernable at a level of abstraction that ignores the variation in specific details.

Unfortunately for archaeologists, it does not appear that there are specific and specialized paraphernalia that distinguish particular types of rituals that are discernible in the remains of a ceremony. In the end virtually all of the materials are simply ashes. While some remains may be identifiable, like sugar, eggshells, or candle fragments, the ubiquity of these materials in many kinds of ceremonies makes it difficult to say with any certainty that a specific ritual was performed.

It is also poignant to note that the consultation phase and the initial part of the preparation phase do not occur at the sacred landmark. This is similar to the observation made by Adams and Brady (2005) concerning Q'eqchi' Maya rituals. Frequently, this stage is the most time consuming and where the greatest outlay of money occurs. Archaeologists need to be cognizant of this fact when attempting to judge the expenditure of resources on rituals. The material remains at the sacred landmark represent the deposition or end point of a longer process of which the ritual is simply the culmination.

My research demonstrates that the 260-day calendar remains an important element in modern Kaqchikel ritual, which suggests that it was even more important in pre-contact times when the entire society openly operated on it. It is possible that cave rituals may have been regular calendrical observances, something that has fallen from tradition in parts of the northern highlands²¹.

Behaviors noted during this investigation have taphonomic implications for the archaeological record. Previously I explained how “sweeping” the altar animates and purifies it. The activity redistributes materials and differentially affects the movement of larger and smaller items. Larger items may be purposely carried by hand from the center of the altar area. This may account for the caching of broken vessels for instance that have been noted along walls and in niches in archaeological caves. Andrea Stone noted that this might, in fact, explain the depositional state of broken ceramics placed at the

²¹ Maxwell and Hill (2006:42) note that of the highland calendar users the *Chuj* were actively using it through 1978, at which time the last daykeeper in San Mateo Ixtatán died.

periphery of a cave formation altar in the pilgrimage cave of Naj Tunich (personal communication, 2003). Brady (1989:109) also demonstrates that ceramic found in a crevice on the balcony represented a secondary placement in that spot rather than having been the place where it was utilized. While these patterns have been noted by archaeologists, no explanation for these depositions has been advanced until now.

I have demonstrated that these earthmarks are dynamic locations, constantly being redefined and reconstructed. Information collected from multiple visits to Nimajay reveals that various stone features are seemingly assembled with every use and will later be disassembled as new visitors take stones to construct their own features. Stone crosses utilized in various ceremonies are also frequently repositioned within the cave. I would note that Naj Tunich (Brady 1989:86) contains evidence not just of hearths, but also of partial circles of stones that are the remains of this process of construction and disassembly. Clearly, this dynamic quality of repositioning and reassembly was as much a part of the past as it is of the present. It is important that archaeologists keep mind that some features may not have long functional histories at their sites. My data suggest that very often we may be examining a short lived feature that has its current form only because it happened to be the last one built before the site fell into disuse. Archaeologists need to look for evidence of this dynamic quality of ritual space.

Finally, the materials employed in ceremonies are overwhelmingly organic suggesting that archaeologists need to employ specialized techniques such as flotation in order not to lose a major component of the ritual assemblage. Some work has been conducted in this area of research, but clearly there is room for further investigation.

LIMITATIONS OF ETHNOARCHAEOLOGICAL DATA

In undertaking an ethnoarchaeological study of modern Kaqchikel use of the sacred earthscape as a means of constructing models to be applied archaeologically at ancient Maya cave sites, there is an implicit assumption of historical continuity in beliefs and/or practices. In certain cases great continuity can be documented as in the case of the

contemporary use of sites mentioned in the Kaqchikel Chronicles (Maxwell and Hill 2006). The social context, however, has changed dramatically from pre-contact times. Early chroniclers Sahagún (1969) and Durán (1971) document highly distinct rituals in honor of specific Aztec deities that were developed and performed by the priests attached to particular temples. There is every reason to believe that the Maya had similarly distinct rituals. With the coming of the Spanish, the priesthood was disbanded, state sponsorship disappeared, and pre-contact ceremonies were suppressed.

What I have documented is the survival of a rural Maya peasant religious tradition. I have attempted to show that ceremonies tend to follow a set pattern of phases. A good deal of individual variation is present, but I could not find any indication that distinct “scripts” exist for particular sites or for particular types of ceremonies. My conclusion is similar to Petryshyn’s (2005:332) experience in observing three Lacandon caves ceremonies in which all were very similar.

I have great concern that archaeologists will attempt to use uncritically elements of this folk tradition in attempts to reconstruct what was clearly a complex system of elite ritual. It must first be recognized that the elite religious and ideological systems of the Classic Period would have carried heavy doses of propaganda designed to legitimize the status of the privileged. It is doubtful that these aspects of ritual would have been incorporated into the folk tradition. This recognizes that even in Pre-Columbian times considerable class differences likely existed in religious practices. Having said that we must also acknowledge that there must have been broad areas of common understanding or these rituals would have failed to accomplish their intended purpose of justifying the position of the elite. In presenting descriptions of contemporary ceremonies, archaeologists working with elite ritual are warned that these descriptions can reflect no more than the non-elite understanding of that common ground.

CONCLUSION

For the Maya, the landscape does not simply function as a means to eke out a living; it is much more meaningful to them. The landscape is animate and living, and most importantly, it is sacred. It is upon this sacred *earthscape* where one communicates with the ancestors through special portals found in unique locations in the environment. Communication is achieved through the burning of offerings on a prepared altar. However, it is not only communication at these sites; it is also the spiritual maintenance of the sacred landscape keeping the *rajawal juyu'* (or *dueños*), “spirit-owners,” of these places content and pleased. The spiritual maintenance of these sites is linked to the *Cholq'ij*, or ritual calendar days. As one informant noted, when a fire burns quickly then the site’s spirit owner was very hungry and had been neglected due to lack of visitation maintenance. Thus, it is important that these traditions are observed by community members to help maintain the social order, where practitioners are rewarded with good harvests, economic prosperity, large families, and good health.

In this dissertation I have endeavored to show how enormously significant *Earth* is for pre-conquest Maya religion. Thompson dimly perceived this in suggesting that mountains, caves and temple pyramids were the three major focuses of Maya worship. We know that the Maya conceived of their pyramids as *wits* (hills), so the temple pyramid was simply a man-made model of the mountain-cave. As Stross (2008:377) observes these constructed elements, like pyramids, are treated as if they stand for the power entities that are being worshiped, like mountains or caves. This suggests that cave archaeologists are working on one of the most important foci of Maya religion and, as Prufer and Brady (2005) assert, caves are the best context for studying that religion. As an archaeological context, caves provide a well-preserved location, quite often sheltered from the elements and receiving little traffic. This dissertation has been about knowing what happens at these sacred places, whether they are mountain peaks, valley floors, or

deep caves, and hopefully come away with a greater appreciation on why the Maya have been drawn to them for over two millennia.

Appendix 1

Information compiled in this appendix is derived from the following sources: Tedlock 1992, Molesky-Poz 2006, Maxell et al. 2008, discussions with collaborators, as well as personal experience. Please consult these cited sources for a more detailed summary of the Maya ritual calendar.

THE CHOLQ'IJ OR 260-DAY RITUAL MAYA CALENDAR OR 20 DAY PATRONS

The Maya ritual calendar consists of two parts consisting of the 20 day names and a number sequenced 1 through 13. When calculated together, it comes out as 260 days, or about 9 months. In divination, the numbers, in general, indicate a level of strength or force. Low numbers, such as 1, 2, and 3, are considered gentle, weak, or youthful, while the higher numbers, 11, 12, and 13, are considered powerful, even violent, and serious. The remaining middle numbers are indifferent or neutral, being neither gentle nor violent.

The following descriptions provide information on the spiritual energy and meaning of the day as well as characteristics of persons born on that day. It should be noted that this summary is a mix of regional and idiosyncratic beliefs among daykeepers. In other words, some ritual specialists may feel a particular day has a proclivity for negativity while others do not.

*Imox*²² (lizard, crazy, crocodile)—*Imox* is associated with lizards and water. Lizards represent abundance. This day is linked with intelligence, but also with insanity and imbalance if one does not act humbly. This day provides a portal to powerful, hidden, energy, both positive and negative, which is dangerous. Those born on this day are social, spiritual, and sensible, yet can be weak or undirected. Those that are strongly spiritual may lean towards negative aspects of spiritual communication such as

²² The day names are presented in Kaqchikel Maya.

witchcraft. Special offerings during a ceremony include *pom en bola*, *huacalitos*, honey, *cuxa*, beer, and water.

Iq' (wind, air)—*Iq'* is the wind. Wind, moving air, is associated with breath, with life. It is a strong day carrying mystic spirituality and intelligence. *Iq'* is powerful wind associated with violent rainstorms, thus, a day dangerous for travel. People born under this nawal are strong minded, impulsive, and even wild. Special materials in ceremonies may include incenses of *palitos* and *cascara*, *ocote*, *pericón*, *romero*, candles of *cebo*, chocolate and liquor.

Aq'ab'al (place of night, obscurity, dawn)—Linguistically, the term *Aq'ab'al* is most directly rendered as “place of night.” It is linked to nighttime, darkness, and death, yet peacefulness. *Aq'ab'al* is often interpreted as a transition period, either from night to day, “dawn,” or from day to night “dusk.” This day is considered to be a good day for new undertakings like a marriage or important journey and asking for clarity in one's life. Those born on this day are happy, verbally skillful, and youthful. Special materials for ceremonies are abundant incenses such as *cascara*, *palitos*, and *saq pom* as well as honey. There is also a special incense called *copal pom de coban* that my collaborator noted we did not use during our work. Thus, it was not described in Chapter 3.

K'at (spiderweb, net, weaving, fire)—The word *K'at* is related to the passive stem //k'at//, derived from the transitive root //k'ät// “to burn.” This day is also associated with forms of woven objects such as nets, used in bag form to carry burdens, and spiderwebs. It is a day to pay debt to the ancestors through a large ceremony. *K'at* is a day to weave or tangle something as well as unweave or untangle something in one's life. It is an excellent day to ask for unity in a community and abundance. An individual born on *K'at* tends to be a sincere, orderly person, a potential leader. Special objects for ceremonies include *romero*, *ocote*, *cascara*, *huacalitos*, and *agua florida*, both white and yellow.

Kan (snake, serpent)—This day is associated with a snake and/or Plumed serpent. It is the essence of the sky and the earth. *Kan* is associated with spiritual strength and rebirth. *Kan* is also associated with justice, and can be addressed in seeking redress of wrongs, as well as insight for clear judgment and adjudication. Individuals born under *Kan* are wise and powerful with both good and bad energies, depending on their character. Special offerings include five *panelas* or honey, *pericón*, and 20 candles of blue and green color.

Kamey (death)—Derived from the root //käm// “to die,” *Kamey* is associated with death, yet daykeepers note that this does not make the day wholly negative. As Death, *Kamey* can signal a time for rest and recuperation, building energy for a rebirth. It is a day to ask for pardon and connect with ancestors. A person born under this nawal is astute, wise, and has the potential to be a diviner. Special offerings on *Kamey* include 20 *pom en bola*, *cascara*, *saq pom*, *romero*, and numerous candles of black and *cebo* that provide an equilibrium for the offering.

Kej (deer, pillars of the four cardinal directions)— Most published sources identify *kej* with deer; however, daykeepers actively link this day to “horse” as well. *Kej* is considered a good day to ask for forms of transportation like cars, trucks, or buses. *Kej* is also associated with male power and vitality. It is associated with authority and leadership. *Kej* sponsors hunters, while protecting wildlife. Equilibrium of nature is emphasized. Individuals are intelligent and agile and can assume great positions of power. Special offerings include *ensarte*, *copal pom*, *saq pom* and 13 candles each of red, black, white, and yellow.

Q’anil (seed, rabbit, Venus)—The primary association with *Q’anil* is the seed, representing both beginnings and fertility/abundance. Most ceremonies invoking positive energies begin with the symbol *Q’anil* traced in sugar on the altar. Commonly associated with the planet Venus, the *Q’anil* glyph represents Venus above and below the horizon, in its stations as morningstar and eveningstar. The animal totem is the rabbit. It is a day

to ask for abundant harvest since *Q'anil* is protector of seeds. Individuals born on *Q'anil* tend to be intuitive and responsible while having a strong spiritual force. Special offerings include 5 *panelas* or honey, *saq pom*, *pericón*, and 20 yellow candles.

Toj (payment, offering, pain)—*Toj* means “payment.” It is a day to seek justice. One may redress or seek redress of wrongs on this day. *Toj* has associations with rain and so is important for agricultural ritual as well. Individuals born on this day may have issues with money or suffer from sins, but are good intermediaries with problems. Special offerings include *copal pom*, *saq pom*, and especially *cuilco*, which acts as payment of money. There is also the sacrifice of chickens consisting of a hen for male participants and a rooster for females.

Tz'i' (dog, justice)—*Tz'i'* protects both the material and spiritual well-being of a patient, household or community. *Tz'i'* can carry connotations of lasciviousness, jealousy, and gluttony. On the positive side, *Tz'i'* is associated with order, justice, and protection. It is a good day to ask for help with legal problems. People born on this day can be well balanced, friendly, and helpful to people with problems yet may be weak and unlucky. Special offerings include *romero*, *ocote*, breads, *agua florida* white and yellow and chicken blood if petitioning help for illnesses.

B'atz' (Howler monkey, thread)—*B'atz'* is the modern Kaqchikel word for the howler monkey. However, *b'atz'* is nearly homophonous with *b'ätz'* or “thread.” Many daykeepers prefer the “thread” interpretation. They stress the functions of thread in interweaving the fabric of time and space, in binding women and men together, in creating and maintaining connections. Negative aspects of this day are akin to snarls or knots and tangles. It is a good day to initiate activities or “untangle” problems. A person born on this sign will be lucky in life, marriage and business ventures. They are also able to successfully intermix natural and conventional medicine. Special objects for ceremonies include incense *saq pom* and a sacred drink of *pericón*, honey, and *ajenjo*,

which is the herb wormwood. The broken strings that are sometimes used to bind the clusters of candles can be offered to *b'atz'*.

Ey (tooth, road, destiny)—*Ey* is the root of the term for “tooth.” In Maya iconography of glyphic texts, people represented with a prominent single tooth in this fashion were taken to be elderly, and thus, wise. This interpretation is almost lost for most Kaqchikel daykeepers today. The popular interpretations link *ey* to *b'ey*²³ or “road.” This day then is propitious for blessing journeys, protecting travelers and migrants, or beginning new undertakings. People born on *Ey* are healthy, natural leaders, travelers, diplomats, and well-respected individuals. Special offerings include honey and *copal pom*.

Aj (cane, reed, cornstalk)—*Aj* is cane. The generative and regenerative powers of cane make it a strong patron of renewal and abundance. It is strongly linked to family and home. *Aj* also has secondary associations with celebrations of identity. It is a good day to petition for protection of the home, people, and animals. Individuals born under this sign have successful family lives and businesses. Special offerings include *panela*, honey, *pericón*, *saq pom*, and chocolate drinks.

I'x (jaguar, strength)—*I'x* refers to the jaguar. In pre-contact society the jaguar and its pelt were symbols of rulership and knowledge. Contemporary ceremonies emphasize this day to facilitate spiritual connections, especially for divination. The day is also associated with women. It is also linked to sacred shrines on the landscape. It is a day to resolve problems and formulate new strategies. Individuals born on *I'x* will have a strong connection to the spiritual earth, be wealthy, and possibly sickly. Special offerings for ceremonies include *cascara*, *palitos*, *ocote*, blood of chicken or rooster, *cuxa*, beer, and perfume of seven spirits.

²³ This reading may have been facilitated due to the crucial role of K'ichee' daykeepers in keeping the day-count alive during the centuries of repression of traditional religious practice and the prominence these spiritual guides have had in the revitalization. The day-count proceeds by counting each day with its thirteen numeral coefficients, 1-13. In K'ichee' all the numbers between 1 and 10 (*ka'ib'* [2], *oxib'* [3], *kajib'*...*waqxaqib'* [8], *b'elejeb'* [9]) end in /b'/, facilitating “re-cutting” the morphemes to encourage interpretation of a /b'/ initial for //ey// > //b'ey// (Maxwell et al. 2008:23-24).

Tz'ikin (Bird, fortune, knowledge)—Just as birds are seen as good providers for their family, so *Tz'ikin* may be petitioned for aid in finding or improving job opportunities, in commercial ventures, and in obtaining financial aid, grants, or loans. *Tz'ikin* also symbolizes freedom, liberty and independence. *Tz'ikin* may also be appealed to for help with fertility issues, for strength and for vitality. Individuals who are born on this day will have luck with love and wealth. They are happy, friendly, and helpful. Special offerings include sesame seeds, which feed the “bird,” and *saq pom*.

Ajmaq (owl, sin, dead ancestors)—*Ajmaq* has associations with death and spiritual knowledge derived from ancestors. During the *Ajmaq* invocation or count, participants are often invited to meditate with their deceased loved ones and their lineage forebears. It is interesting to note, however, that many daykeepers consistently pronounce this day *Ajmak* rather than *Ajmaq*. They link the day, not with measurement or learning, but with //mak// “sin, fault, error.” They ask for forgiveness on this day of their sins. The owl is the totem of this day. A person born on this day will have a strong character and be lucky with business ventures. Special offerings include food, fruit, chocolate, liquor, beer, soda and breads. More importantly is the offering of *cebo*²⁴ candles and *saq pom*.

No'j (wisdom, intelligence, creativity)—*No'j* is associated with *na'oj* “thought, knowledge, understanding.” This day is associated with knowledge and with formal education. It is also related to the earth's movements and forces. It is a good day to make decisions and petition wisdom from the ancestors. A person born on *No'j* will be a creative, innovative individual with good character; they are good students and leaders. Special offerings include five *panelas*, or honey, *pericón*, *saq pom*, and twenty white candles.

²⁴ These are lard candles, which are symbolically linked with ancestors, deceased kith and kin. The linkage may be metonymic since lard candles were the norm during the lives of some ancestors. Lard candles tend to be completely consumed in offering fires, leaving no telltale wax residue. The consumption of offerings is indicative of the success of the petition. Incomplete burning, a fire that is difficult to start, or which falters, is blown out or rained out, is not an effective vehicle for communication with the day spirit, with the ancestors, or with other essences invoked (Maxwell et al. 2008:24).

Tijax (obsidian, flint, suffering)—*Tijax* is associated with obsidian or flint blade. However, daykeepers usually do not associate *Tijax* with “warfare.” They do recognize the excellent cutting properties of obsidian, linking it to surgery, and the ability to excise diseased tissue. Thus, *Tijax* is a patron for doctors or healers. *Tijax* also encompasses other realms of learning and intelligence. Many modern daykeepers also associate *Tijax* with rain and lightning, as well as pain and suffering. *Tijax* is a good day to ask for curing of an illness or the power to withdraw from poor relationships. An individual born on this day may be considered talented yet weak, and often a victim of lies and scandal. Special offerings on this day include *romero*, *ocote*, *agua florida* white and yellow, and the blood of a hen for a male patient’s illness, or the blood of a rooster for female patients.

Kawoq (women, storm, law/justice)—*Kawoq* is associated with women and their life-force; some daykeepers also link this day to rainstorms or tempests. *Kawoq* may be petitioned for aid in overcoming obstacles and resolving problems. It is also a day for judges and lawyers. Those born under *Kawoq* tend to be friendly, calm, caring and defenders of the community. Special offerings include a sacred drink of *pericón*, honey, and *ajenjo*, along with abundant *saq pom*.

Ajpub’ (hunter, hero)—*Ajpub’* is linked explicitly to the Hero Twin, of that name, from the *Popol Wuj*. The word *ajpu’/ajpub’* means “blowgunner,” thus, the association with hunter. The day is linked to triumph over obstacles. *Ajpub’* is also associated with leadership. Individuals born on this day are orators, friendly, comedic, romantic, and givers. Special offerings include *copal pom*, *ensarte*, myrrh, and *saq pom*.

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