



# Tulan and the Other Side of the Sea: Unraveling a Metaphorical Concept from Colonial Guatemalan Highland Sources

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Colonial K'iche'an texts from the Guatemalan highlands reflect a high degree of poetic complexity and exquisiteness. In particular, the text of the *Popol Vuh* from the mid-16th century relates the mythology and history of Postclassic highland Maya culture in the form of continuous parallel couplets, complex stylistic constructions and symbolic language. But the other preserved texts as well, the *títulos*, testaments, etc., are rich in figurative concepts and metaphors. Translations of these Colonial texts have to account for the difficulties that arise when rendering this figurative metaphorical language into formats and concepts that are understandable in the chosen reference language. In this, some translations are certainly more interpretive, while others are deliberately literal and very close to the text, thus reflecting the beauty of the poetic language and style. With respect to the semantic interpretation and abstraction of the text, translations often deviate from each other, and we may have to concede that a wide range of literal concepts simply eludes our proper understanding.

The K'iche'an sources are teeming with metaphorical concepts, the meaning of which still remains quite opaque. Many of those metaphors have not survived in modern K'iche'an languages or have never been recorded in the Colonial dictionaries. Moreover, it has to be allowed for that the modern meaning of specific phrases or word images that continue to be used might not correspond to their Classic usage – and, indeed, there are many examples of semantic reanalysis in modern Maya languages that would not match with their Colonial dictionary entries. In other instances, ideas and concepts persist in contemporary oral traditions, or we find them as literal translations into

Spanish. But their interpretation still remains opaque, even though we might not be well aware of it when analysing the sources. And as we shall show in this paper, it is particularly challenging to distinguish metaphor from literal meaning.

Metaphorical language is to date one of the lesser-studied fields in Maya studies and Mayan linguistics, notwithstanding the incredible potential insight into precolonial Maya culture that is encoded in metaphorical speech – be it Colonial or contemporary. It should therefore be of foremost interest for us to try and unravel the meaning of the concepts underlying poetic phrases and semantic couplets to arrive at a more profound understanding of Maya culture in past and present. It has become a habitual practice to draw on the text of the *Popol Vuh* and on other Colonial sources to find the keys for the interpretation of cultural elements from the Classic or the modern ethnographic record. This "habit" certainly requires reliable translations and interpretations of the text sources. In our search for continuities, we should always be cautioned against undue optimism when weaving ethnographic and linguistic evidence from Colonial and contemporary times into a single line of reasoning with different types of evidence from the precolonial era (i.e. from archaeological, epigraphic and iconographic sources). Spatio-temporal divergence has to be taken into account when attesting continuity. And with respect to metaphorical analysis, the "lumping" of evidence from different times and regions – and in particular even from different languages – seems to be an especially questionable undertaking.

The subject-matter of this paper is an attempt to combine evidence from such various types of sources in order to uncover a metaphor from the Colonial highland sources that remains hitherto largely unrecognized because a presumed literalness has obscured its metaphorical

interpretation as a fundamental concept of the Maya belief system, i.e. the concept of the "other side of the sea." Presenting ethnographic, Classic and comparative ethnohistoric evidence, we will show that this phrase functions as a metaphor for an otherworldly place of creation.

Although the concrete narratives may vary within the Maya area and throughout time, creation is the central paradigm in Maya mythology. The basic ideas and cornerstones of the Maya ideology of origin seem to be consistent from the late Preclassic period through the Spanish conquest (Coe 1989, Taube 1993, 1996, 2004; Freidel et al. 1993, Schele & Mathews 1998; Saturno et al. 2005). We understand that in the Maya world view all creation involves the underlying concept of birth from a primordial sea in darkness. The world came into being because the earth and the mountains arose from the sea and the sky was lifted up from the water. Creation thus involves "dawning." The dawn of the world as much as the dawn of humanity finds an analogy in the concept of the maize sprout that shoots out of the ground, from the dark watery underworld into the light. The life cycle of the maize plant is the archetypal metaphor for Mesoamerican creation mythology; it pervades modern Maya oral traditions and finds expression in precolonial Maya iconography in the form of the narrative that pictures the death, rebirth and resurrection of the Maize God (see Taube 1985, Carlsen & Prechtel 1991:28).

The following argument is just another proof that the creation story is one of the most central elements of all Maya narrative and ceremonialism. It will be pointed out that the concept of "the other side of the sea" as a reference to a place of creation may even be a pan-Mesoamerican idea, with allusions to this metaphor being found in Yucatec as well as in Aztec sources, which should encourage us to re-think in particular our understanding and interpretation of the so-called Mesoamerican migration myths.

#### *A phrase across sources*

All of the major Colonial K'iche'an sources – the *Popol Vuh*, the *Memorial de Sololá*, the *Título de Totonicapán* and several others – are quite consistent in relating that the K'iche'an nations, or more precisely the mythological founder-

fathers, originated from somewhere "across the sea." We shall take a look at the relevant passages.

The *Popol Vuh* states repeatedly that the progenitors *Balam Quitze*, *Balam Acab*, *Mahucutah* and *Iqui Balam* came from *ch'aqa palo* "across the sea," *releb'al q'ij* "where the sun emerges," that is from the east.

keje' k'u kisachik	Thus was the disappearance
kima'ixik	and end of
Balam Quitze Balam Acab	Balam Quitze, Balam Acab,
Mahucutah Iqui Balam	Mahucutah and Iqui Balam.
e nab'e winaq	They were the first people
xepe chila'	who came from
ch'aqa palo	across the sea
chi releb'al q'ij	where the sun emerges.
ojeroq ke'ul waral	Anciently they came here.
ta xekamik e ri'j chik	They died in their old age,
e ajk'ixb' ajk'ajb' kib'i'nam	they who were called bloodletters and sacrificers.

(*Popol Vuh*, fol. 48r)<sup>1</sup>

Earlier in the text, it is described how the first mother-fathers, and thus humankind, were created in *Paxil Cayala* and how these people multiplied there "where the sun emerges," before they decided to leave that place and move to a mountain named *Tulan Suywa* (*Tulan Zuyva*), *Wuqub' Pek Wuqub' Siwan* (*Vucub Pec Vucub Ziván*) "Seven Caves, Seven Canyons" to obtain their gods (cf. Christenson 2003:193-210). While the *Popol Vuh* first clearly distinguishes the East as one location and *Tulan Suywa*, *Wuqub' Pek Wuqub' Siwan* as another, a later passage refers to both places as a point of departure:

They came in crowds from the East. They were alike in the hides that they wore as coverings, for their dress was very poor. They had nothing of their own, but they were enchanted people in their essence when they came from *Tulan Zuyva*, the Seven Caves and the Seven Canyons, as they are called in the ancient account. (Christenson 2003:213)

Equally, the *Título de Totonicapán* merges *Paxil* and *Tulan* as the place of origin, the *paraíso terrenal* named *Wuqub' Pek Wuqub' Siwan*, *Siwan Tulan*, *Panparar*, *Panpaxil* and *Panc'aeala'* (Carmack & Mondloch 1983:174). The text describes that the leaders of the *wuqub' amaq'* "Seven Nations" were

<sup>1</sup> All English translations and orthographic modernizations of K'iche' and Kaqchikel texts are by the authors if not stated otherwise.

*nawal* people with great capacities who arrived *ch'aqa choo ch'aqa palow* "across the lake, across the sea" from Tulan Siwan.

<b>ta xkik'uxlaj</b>	When they remembered
<b>kipetik</b>	their arrival,
<b>e nawal winaq'</b>	they were nawal people.
<b>naj xopam wi kimuqub'al</b>	Far away arrived their vision
<b>chi kaj chi ulew</b>	in the sky, in the earth.
<b>mawi k'o ta kujunamaj</b>	There was nothing equal
<b>ruk' xkimuquj</b>	to what they have seen
<b>ronojel xe kaj</b>	all below the sky.
<b>e nimaq' etamanel</b>	They were great "knowers,"
<b>e k'amol ub'e ronojel</b>	they were leaders of all seven
<b>wuqamaq' tlekpán</b>	nations of Tecpan.
<b>keje k'ut kipetik wae</b>	Like this was their arrival,
<b>ch'aqa cho ch'aqa palow</b>	across the lake, across the sea
<b>pa tulan pa sewan</b>	from Tulan, from Siwan.

(*Título de Totonicapán*, fol. 8r)

The Kaqchikel version of the story of origin in the *Memorial de Sololá* is quite different from the K'iche' myth, but shows conformity with the other sources in its statement that the progenitors of the Xajila'-lineage, Q'aqawitz and Saqtekaw, came *ch'aqa palow* "across the sea" from Tulan, likewise associating Tulan with the place of creation named Paxil (*Memorial de Sololá*, Otzoy 1999:155).

<b>... kecha' k'a</b>	... they said.
<b>ch'aqa palow xojpe wi</b>	Across the sea we came,
<b>pa Tulan</b>	from Tulan,
<b>rub'i' juyu'</b>	as was called the mountain where
<b>xojalāx xojk'ajolāx wi pe</b>	we were born and engendered
<b>ruma qate' qatata'</b>	by our mother, our father.
<b>ix qak'ajol kecha'</b>	You are our sons, they said.
<b>ri ojer tata' mama'</b>	The ancestral father and mother,
<b>Q'aq'awith Saqtekaw</b>	Q'aq'awitz and Saqtekaw
<b>kib'i'</b>	were the names
<b>ri qi xepe pa Tulan</b>	of those who truly came from Tulan.

(*Memorial de Sololá*, transcription after Otzoy 1999: §2, 155)

The Kaqchikel narrative is quite gloomy, describing the forefather's departure from Tulan accompanied by negative omen and the presaging of death and dismay. The account of the crossing of the sea bears some similarity with the description in the *Título de Totonicapán* in that the Kaqchikel progenitors Q'aq'awitz and Saqtekaw part the sea by the help of the red staffs they brought with them from Tulan and from which they derive their name (see *Memorial*

*de Sololá*, Otzoy 1999:158). The *Memorial de Sololá* specifies that the people traveling from Tulan came from four directions and that there were four Tulans – one in the east, one in the west, one called "Xib'alb'ay" and another one which is the abode of K'ab'owil:

<b>... kecha' Q'aq'awitz Saqtekaw</b>	... Q'aq'awitz and Saqtekaw said:
<b>kaji' k'a xpe wi</b>	"It was four (locations),
<b>wināq pa Tulan</b>	where people came from Tulan:
<b>chi releb'al q'ij jun Tulan</b>	in the east is one Tulan;
<b>jun chik k'a chi Xib'alb'ay</b>	another one there in Xib'alb'ay;
<b>jun chik k'a chi ruqajib'al q'ij</b>	another one there in the west,
<b>chi ri' k'a xojpe wi</b>	the one where we come from
<b>chi ruq'ajib'al q'ij</b>	is in the west;
<b>jun chik wi k'a chi K'ab'owil</b>	another one there in K'ab'owil.

(*Memorial de Sololá*, transcription after Otzoy 1999: §4, 155)

The *Memorial de Sololá* differs from the other sources, but mainly from the *Popol Vuh*, in that it relates that the Kaqchikel progenitors came to Tulan *ch'aqa palow* "across the sea" from *r(i) uqajib'al q'ij* "where the sun descends, the west."

<b>chi ruqajib'al q'ij xojpe wi</b>	From the west we came
<b>pa Tulan</b>	from Tulan,
<b>ch'aqa palow</b>	across the sea
<b>k'a k'o wi Tulan</b>	where there is Tulan.
<b>chi ri' k'a xojalāx wi ul</b>	Where we were born
<b>xojk'ajolāx wi pe</b>	and engendered
<b>ruma qate' qatata'</b>	by our mother, our father.

(*Memorial de Sololá*, transcription after Otzoy 1999: §4, 155)

The *Historia de los Xpantzay de Tecpan Guatemala* fuses the locations Wuqub' Pek Wuqub' Siwan "Seven Caves, Seven Canyons" and Ikim Tulan Ajtz'ib' Tulan (*Quim Tulan Ahzib Tulan*) "Southern Tulan, Writer's Tulan" into one single place of origin. It is noteworthy that this document specifies the place of origin as *niqaj palo* "the center/midst of the sea;" we shall come back to this further below.

<b>... ub'inatisaxik kan kumal</b>	... it was named by them
<b>ri niqaj palo</b>	the midst of the sea,
<b>(W)uqu' Pek,</b>	Seven Caves,
<b>(W)uqu' Siwan</b>	Seven Canyons
<b>ri (i)kim Tulan</b>	Southern Tulan,
<b>r(i)'Ajtz'ib' Tulan</b>	Writers Tulan,
<b>xecha' chire ri</b>	they called it.

(*Historia de los Xpantzay*, Recinos 1957:123)

In some sources, the account of the place of origin is conflated with biblical concepts which has

given rise to assumptions that the entire myth of origin and creation from the sources has been influenced by Christian ideology (cf. Carmack & Mondloch 1983:18-19, 210). In this way, the *Historia de Don Juan de Torres* includes the biblical concept of Babylon in its description:

<b>chila' k'ut xe pe wi</b>	From there they came
<b>chi releb'al q'ij</b>	from the east
<b>ch'aaq cho ch'aaq palow</b>	across the lake, across the sea,
<b>ta xe xelik</b>	when they left
<b>chila' nay puch</b>	there as well
<b>Babilonia ub'i</b>	it is named Babylon.

(*Historia Quiche de Don Juan de Torres*, Recinos 1957:24)

The fusion with biblical places is indeed in contextual accordance with the given directions of this place in "the east" and "across the sea." In the *Título de Totonicapán* such accordance is less explicit, but nevertheless present, since the text refers to Tulan as a form of paradise, alluding to the biblical place of the "true Sinai" in one passage, and defining the location of Tulan in the "east" and "on the other side of the sea" in another:

<b>chupam paraiso terenal</b>	In the terrestrial paradise
<b>xojtz'aq wi</b>	we were formed
<b>xojb'it wi</b>	we were shaped
<b>rumal dios nima ajaw</b>	by god the great lord.
<b>mawi xutzin chi</b>	Not was completed
<b>ub'i kumal</b>	his name by them
<b>rumal k'ut kimak</b>	because of their sin.
<b>are k'u ri Sewan Tulan</b>	This was the Siwan Tulan
<b>xkib'ij</b>	they had named
<b>cha k'ut usuk'ulkil Sineyeton</b>	it is said, the true Sineyeton.

(*Título de Totonicapán*, fol. 7v)

The *Popol Vuh* recounts a journey by the progenitors' sons, who go back to Tulan to receive the insignia of lordship from the mythical lord Nacxit – one of the titles of Ce Acatl Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl. In this account, it is again specified that Tulan and the east are "on the other side of the sea."

"We go to the East from where our fathers came." Thus said the three sons when they began their journey. Co Caib was the name of the first, the son of Balam Quitze of the Cavecs. Co Acutec was the name of the son of Balam Acab of the Nihaihs. Co Ahau was the name of the other, the son of Mahucutah of the Ahau Quichés. These, then, were the names of the three who went across the sea. They had wisdom and knowledge. They were

more than ordinary people in their nature. They left behind their counsel to all their older brothers, and their younger brothers.

They rejoiced when they left: "We will not die. We will return," they said when the three of them left. Thus they passed over the sea, arriving there in the East. They went there to receive their lordship.

... They also brought the writings of Tulan from the other side of the sea. These were the writings, as they were called, that contained the many things with which they had been invested. (Christenson 2003:256, 259)

The *Título de Totonicapán* tells the story a little differently, describing how both sons of *Balam Quitze* went to the east to the lord *Nacxit* to ask for peace, but specifying further that *Co Caib* went straight to where the sun rises and *C'o Cavib* to where the sun sets, namely and explicitly Mexico, returning along the seashore:

Entonces dijeron: "Que vayan nuestros mensajeros allí por donde sale el sol, delante del señor Nacxit, para que no nos conquisten, no nos exterminen, no nos destruyan las parcialidades de guerreros; que no disminuyan nuestro poder, nuestra descendencia, nuestro nombre y nuestra presencia," así dijeron.

Y mandaron a los dos hijos de Balam Q'uitse llamados C'ocaib y C'ok'awib. Entonces se fueron a donde sale el sol. Se fueron a recibir el señorío a donde sale el sol.

Uno de ellos se fue por donde sale el sol y el otro, por donde se oculta el sol. C'ocaib se fue por donde sale el sol, y C'ok'awib por donde se oculta el sol. Y C'ocaib se fue directamente por donde sale el sol, pero C'ok'awib regresó por la orilla del mar. No apareció el mar cuando regresó de México. (Carmack & Mondloch 1983:181; fol. 14r-1v)

Although both reports differ with respect to the precise direction of the journey, they correspond in that a passage through the sea is involved.

### *Interpretations and their Critique*

Although the sources may vary in detail, they are consistent in the statement that the K'iche'an people of the Guatemalan highlands originate from a place "on the other side of the sea"<sup>2</sup> that is also referred to

<sup>2</sup> The phrase *ch'aaq palow* has had several translations in the past, such as "near the sea" (Edmonson 1971) or "beside the sea" (Tedlock 1996:16). Yet, its etymological meaning is clearly "across the sea" or "on the other side of the sea" as Colonial dictionaries as much as modern usage confirm: *chaca-haa-ubic* "de la otra parte del río", *chaca-haa-uloc* "de esta parte del río" (Basseta 1698:fol. 178r); *4haka ya-* "allende el río o el mar, ribera de río" (Smailus 1989:186); *4haya-* "a la otra parte, o de la otra par[te] del río, o laguna", *4haka ulya-* "desta parte" (Vico 1555:fol. 216v); *qha3a* "de la otra parte" (Coto 1983[1650]:CCLI). In its contemporary usage in

as *Tulan, Tulan Zuyva, Vvcub Pec Vvcub Zivan, Paxil, Cayala* (or various other combinations of these toponyms). The majority of sources coincide in that this alleged homeland is located somewhere in the east, "where the sun emerges."

The fact that various independent sources correspond in their account of a place of origin "across the sea," in the east, named Tulan gave room for interpretation and hypothesis. The distinction of historical and mythological information within the Colonial sources of Guatemala has been troubling ethnohistorians for some time (see among others Carmack 1981:43ff., Akkeren 2000, Yamase 2002:91ff.). With respect to the question of origin, it has been generally accepted that the Colonial sources have to be understood as historical accounts and mythological narratives that would work along the same lines as our western perception of history and mythology. Being so widespread in all the sources, there has been little doubt among scholars that the concept of an origin from "the other side of the sea" is a real, actual, historical fact that has found its way into Maya mythology. Robert Carmack (1981:43-44) weighs the historical as opposed to mythological information, but agrees to accept the text principally as a historical source, and thus the migration accounts as historical fact.

In some of the chronicles, especially in the *Popol Vuh* and *The Annals of the Cakchiquels*, the narration of this [...] migration appears to have been taken directly from poems, tales, and songs recorded in old books. They are more than mere traditions and deserve serious consideration as historical fact. (Carmack 1981:43)

The assumption that the phrase *ch'aaq palow* "on the other side of the sea" has to be understood literally has led several scholars to speculate about the geographical whereabouts of an actual, historical place of origin and an immigration of foreign ethnic groups into the Guatemalan highlands (cf. Carmack 1981:43ff.). Several suggestions have been made as to where this place of origin of the K'iche' progenitors may be found.

Leaving aside the attempts of Ximénez (*Historia* cf. Libro I, cap. xxiv) to use the *Popol Vuh* passage about the crossing of the sea to

prove an Old World origin of the K'iche', the most prominent interpretation is that the K'iche' lineages immigrated from Mexico. The earliest Spanish accounts state that contemporary K'iche's understood themselves as originating from the province of Nueva España. Las Casas writes:

El reino más poderoso que habia en munchas leguas del circuito de lo que nosotros llamamos Guatimala, especialmente hácia los altos y sierras, era el reino de Ultilatlan. Este reino tuvo origen desta manera: que vinieron cuatro hermanos de hácia las provincias de la Nueva España, y así parece por los idolos y dioses que adoraban, y por decir que vinieron de las siete Barrancas, puesto que difieren ambos lenguajes, si no es algunos vocablos, por lo cual dicen algunos viejos que fueron ambas una los tiempos pasados. Venidos los cuatro hermanos á la tierra donde fué y agora en ella porque la hallaron sin morador alguno, ni quien pretendiese á a ella derecho desembarazado, porque aunque habia gentes algunas no lejos de allí, eran tan pocas que no llegaban con muncha distancia donde aquéstos poblaron. (Las Casas, *Apologética*, cap. CCXXXIV)

That this interpretation became the most common and widely accepted, and one that is little disputed to date, may be seen in a recent statement:

... most of the Highland Guatemala traditions concur in naming Tollan as the homeland of the ancestors of various ruling dynasties in this predominantly Mayance-speaking region ... Even without these explicit statements, the patently Nahua names (e.g. Chimalacat, Iztayul, Tepepul, Acxopil, Ixcaquat, Ucelut, Chicumcuat, Atunal, etc.) of certain of these dynasts would in themselves point to an ultimate Central Mexican origin for their lineages. (Nicholson 2001:169)

Archaeological data have been interpreted as providing evidence for foreign influence from Central Mexico in the southern Maya area from the Late Classic until the Late Postclassic period. Sudden changes in settlement patterns, ceramic types such as Fine Orange and Plumbate pottery, as well as architectural and sculptural style otherwise known from the Gulf Coast area which spread along the Motagua and the Usumacinta rivers into the highlands have been seen as indicators for cultural influence, if not invasion of Mexicanized Chontal Maya speakers from that region in the Early Postclassic (see Sharer 2000:485-486; 488-489).

Based solely on ethnohistoric evidence, Carmack defined these immigrants as Toltec or Epi-Toltec warlords or "small military bands" from the Tabasco-Veracruz region who started to subdue the local groups of the Highlands by means of advanced

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Modern K'iche', it means "other side, distant land"; e.g. *ch'aaq ja'* "otro lado (pais lejano)" (Ajpacajá Tum et al. 1996; see also Ajpacajá Tum 2001:158).

military technology (atlatl, *macana*, cotton-quilted armor) around 1250, which marked the beginning of the Late Postclassic era (cf. Carmack 1981:43).

Carmack summarizes the arguments for his theory using indications from the texts, mainly the *Popol Vuh* itself, to prove that the mythological founder-fathers came from a place "near the sea with many rivers and lagoons" where fishermen and farmers lived, "who grew such lowland crops as cacao, *zapotes* and *pataxte*" (Carmack 1981:44-46). Drawing on linguistic evidence to identify non-K'iche'an place names mentioned in the sources as toponyms in the Gulf Coast area (including Cayala, Tepew Oliman, Zuiwa etc.) as well as along the possible migration route, Carmack sees the description of the individual stations of the migration tales (cf. *Popol Vuh*, *Anales de los Kaqchikels*) as evidence for the Gulf Coast origin. He argues that the immigrants spoke Maya as well as Nahuatl and infers from the following passage in the *Popol Vuh* that the Yaqui from *Tepew Oliman* were their "brothers and kinsmen" (Carmack 1981:48).

"akarok xojtsachik chi Tulan xojpaxin wi qib' xeqakanaj chik qatz qachaq' awi mi xkil wi q'ij awi on e k'o wi ta mi xsaqirik" xecha' chire raj kixb' raj k'ajb' Yaki winaq "xawi xere Tojil ub'i' uk'ab'awil Yaki winaq Yolkwat, Kitzalkwat ub'i' xqajach chila' chu Tulan chi Suywa are qachelik uloq are puch utz'aqat qawach ta xojpetik" xecha' chi kib'il kib' ta xkina'taj chi apanoq katz kichaq' ri Yaki winaq ri' xsaqirik chila' Mexiko ub'i'nam wakamik	"Alas we were lost! At Tulan we split ourselves apart. We already left them behind, our older brothers, our younger brothers, Where did they see sun? Where were they when it dawned?" they said about the bloodletters, the sacrificers of the Yaqui people. "Merely only Tohil is the name of the god of the Yaqui people. Yolcuat Quitzalcuat is his name. We separated there at Tulan, at Suywa. It was our leaving from there, it was also the completion of our faces when we came," they said among themselves when they already remembered everywhere their older brothers, their younger brothers, the Yaqui people. It dawned there in Mexico (like) it has been named today.
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k'o chi nay puch Chajkar winaq xkikanaj chila' releb'al q'ij Tepew Oliman kib'i' "xeqakanaj kanoq" xecha' nim uq'atat kik'u'x	There are surely as well ash-fish people. <sup>3</sup> They remained there where the sun emerges. Tepew Oliman is their name. "We left them behind," they said. Great was the pain of their hearts. ( <i>Popol Vuh</i> , fol. 40v-41r)
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Reading the text closely, it shows that the mentioned Yaquis are not associated with Tepew Oliman, but rather there is another group, the *chajkar winaq* who are referred to as having remained in the east, where the sun emerges. Ruud van Akkeren rightfully identified *Tepew Oliman* as a Nahuatl-derived title of the so-called Chajkar people. *Tepew* means "conqueror" according to Simeón (1996:355; see Akkeren 2000:126) and *Oliman* is likely derived from *oloman* "place of rubber" (Christenson 2003:203) or *ollamani* "ballplayer" (Akkeren 2000:126). The "Place of Rubber" was the way Nahuatl speakers referred to the Gulf coast area at the time of the conquest. This identification of the name has led scholars to see connections of the K'iche' forefathers with the inhabitants of the Gulf Coast region, foremost among them the Olmeca-Xicalanca (Schele & Mathews 1998:293, 383, n. 4; Christenson 2003:203). The description in the *Memorial de Sololá* that the Kaqchikel founders on their way to the east entered into severe battles with the Nonohualca Xulpiti who inhabited this region called Suywa, came to be understood as evidence for a Gulf Coast relation since these people were fighting in canoes (cf. *Memorial de Sololá*, Otzoy 1999: §19-20, 159-160). This ethnohistorical hypothesis was supported by Lyle Campbell's linguistic analysis of K'iche'an, which argued that the majority of Nahuatl loans in K'iche'an languages comes from the Nahuatl of the Tabasco-Veracruz area (Campbell 1977:103, 109). However, given the fact that Nonohualca derives from Nahuatl *nontli* "mudo" and Xulpiti from *xolopiti* "tonto, idiota," van Akkeren (2000:126) has brought up the issue that the ethnonym might equally refer to any non-Maya speaking people populating a coastal area – if it refers to any concrete, actual group at all.

Although the *Popol Vuh* text mentions the Yaqui as a people who are culturally related to the K'iche' in that they are of the same origin and worship the same god, it seems to be a matter of belief whether this statement may be taken literally and interpreted

<sup>3</sup> The translation of this line follows Edmonson (1971). Christenson translates, "Thus surely a portion of the people remained there." Both translations are grammatically and semantically valid.

as a true historical fact or whether we should instead see it as an attempt of the local elite to link up with the dominant and influential culture of Postclassic Mesoamerica in Central Mexico.

In the Late Postclassic, significant elements of political legitimacy were derived from the Toltecs. We know that ruling lineages all over Mesoamerica tried to establish some form of connection with legendary Tollan – either by origin and descent or by travel and contact (Christenson 2003:209). The Colonial sources of Central Mexico state that Tollan was founded as a city by the priest-ruler Ce Acatl Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl. The ancient Toltecs were regarded as the creators and bearers of culture, as the inventors of sciences, calendrics, writing and craftsmanship (León-Portilla 1980:207; Cowgill 2000:292). In post-Conquest K'iche' the term *tulan* refers to a city or house that has been abandoned; Basseta translates it as a “palace, or manor-house” (Christenson 2003:209). The original meaning of *tollan* in Nahuatl is “Place of Cattail Reeds.” In Central Mexican sources the term was used to refer to the Aztecs' place of origin as much as it was a categorial title given to actual cities that were powerful religious centers and were perceived of as places of origin and creation, such as Tenochtitlan, Tula in Hidalgo, Teotihuacan, Cholula and Chichen Itza. But many references to Tollan in the Central Mexican sources cannot be related to any concrete specific place (Schele & Mathews 1998:38-39; Akkeren 2000:61-62, 88; see Christenson 2003:209; see also Cowgill 2000:292).

The migration tale about an origin from Tollan became the ideal and model feature of political legitimacy in the Postclassic throughout Mesoamerica (cf. Akkeren 2000:60-62). We may note this as an interesting characteristic in itself as it seems to define a rather widespread concept of rulership and identity formation which values a purportedly foreign descent higher than local origin. It remains an issue of debate to what extent we may assume any real migrations behind this topic (cf. Carmack 1981, Akkeren 2000:61). Despite the fact that Tollan is first and foremost a mythological concept – probably comparable to the building of a New Jerusalem by Franciscan missionary priests in the New World in the sixteenth century – there have nevertheless been various efforts to locate the place of origin in the archaeological record. In the Guatemalan sources, Tollan is generally

referred to as Tulan Suywa or Tulan Siwan (see above). Tedlock interprets the name “Suywa” as an addition or specifier to the main name Tulan that distinguishes the place of origin and political legitimacy mentioned in the highland sources from the Central Mexican Tollan (cf. Tedlock 1996:45). It is not entirely clear whether *suywa*<sup>4</sup> and *siwaan* “barranca” refer to a similar concept, or whether we should keep both references apart.

The suggestions for an actual location of this *Tulan Suywa* or *Tulan Siwan* range from Chichen Itza and Mayapán in Yucatán (Recinos 1950:63-69, Recinos & Goetz 1953:65, Fox 1978:1-2, 119-121, Carmack 1981:43, 46-48, see Christenson 2003:209-210) to Kaminaljuyú (Tedlock 1996:45) and Copán (Tedlock 1996:45, Sharer 2000:487). The interpretation of Tulan Suywa as Chichen Itzá has been mainly based on the information in the sources that it was to be found “across the sea,” and this direction has been seen as “referring to a route eastward down the Motagua Valley to the Caribbean, then by boat along the coast to the peninsula” (Sharer 2000:487; see Tedlock 1996:221, 255-256, 259). Christenson (2003: 91-92, 209) has suggested that the Tulan from which the ancestors of the K'iche' rulers derived their authority to rule might have been identical to Chichen Itza, Mayapan, or other “Toltec-influenced” sites during the Postclassic period that were probably recognized as centers of pilgrimage by the K'iche'.

All these suggestions, however, assume that the sources relate true, historical fact and the information provided may be taken as literal. But even if we agree to this degree of literalness, we have to note that the various interpretations entail several problems in their line of reasoning. Despite the fact that the sources are quite consistent with respect to Tulan Suywa and the place of origin being located *chi relib'al q'ij* “where the sun emerges,” the aforementioned proposals all point to places in the north (Yucatán) or west (Mexico). Only the *Memorial de Sololá* states an origin from a Tulan in the west,

<sup>4</sup> The meaning of *Suywa* (*zuywa*) is not entirely clear. It may equally be derived from Nahuatl *suyua* “Bloody Water” or from Yukatek “Confusion” (see Christenson 2003). Tedlock translates it as “twisted” or “deceptive” (Tedlock 1996:45) which makes sense with respect to the concept of *suywa t'an* “figurative or rhetorical language,” which in the *Book of Chilam Balam of Chumayel* refers to riddles and word plays by which true lords were to prove their legitimacy (Roys 1967:88-98). In fact, both readings of *zuywa* make sense with respect to the hypothesis brought forward in this paper, that Tulan Suywa refers to an otherworldly place. In the Yucatec *Maya Books of Chilam Balam*, *Suywa* is identified with Xicalanco, an ancient port city on the shores of the Laguna de Términos in the Mexican state of Tabasco (Recinos & Goetz 1953:53, 216; Campbell 1970:7; Carmack 1981:46; cited after Christenson 2003:210, n. 548).

however at the same time clarifying the existence of four Tulans – one for each cardinal direction. Looking eastward from the Guatemalan highlands, we would have to assume the origin of the founder-fathers to be somewhere in present-day Honduras, rather than any place in Yucatán or the Gulf Coast area. More recently, therefore, scholars have preferred to identify Tulan Suywa as the southeastern Maya polity of Copán rather than Chichén Itzá or the Gulf Coast region (see Tedlock 1996:45-47). The idea is supported by archaeological evidence for an Early Postclassic occupation of Copán (Sharer 2000:487). Tedlock's main argument for the suggestion is the passage in the *Memorial de Sololá* mentioning that a bat covered the entrance of Tulan, whereas the main sign of the Copán emblem glyph is a bat head (Tedlock 1996:46). But again, if the information from the sources is to be taken that literally, there is no sea to be crossed to reach the highlands from Copán.

It would be astounding if text sources, produced by the members of a culture that ever since Preclassic times paid utmost attention to astronomical appearances and cardinal directions, were not more specific about the exact location of a major center of pilgrimage or an important political power. Trying to find a way out by assuming that the eastward location given in the sources refers to the progenitor's perspective at their place of departure, i.e. the Gulf Coast area (cf. Christenson, Carmack), would only be convincing if we followed the text of the *Memorial de Sololá* which explicitly says that the founders came from the west and moved eastward from Suywa (see above). The *Popol Vuh* instead mentions their leaving the east, i.e. the place of creation (Paxil), when moving onwards to Tulan – and again equates Tulan with the east – so the mentioned directions do not seem reliable in any geographical sense. Given that it is indeed likely that the Postclassic center of Chichen Itza was a destination for pilgrims from the Guatemalan highlands (cf. Kubler 1985:315), the imprecision of direction poses even more questions, if we consider the statements as direct references to these doubtlessly powerful and recognized places.

Furthermore, it has to be taken into account that the Colonial Yukatek Maya likewise believed their forefathers to have come from across the sea where the sun emerges. The

following statement by Diego de Landa, however, has mostly been interpreted as Christian ideological influence that relates the Maya to the Jews:

Que algunos viejos de Yucatán dicen haber oído a sus (ante)pasados que pobló aquella tierra cierta gente que entró por levante, a la cual había Dios librado abriéndoles doce caminos por el mar... (Landa, *Relación de las cosas...*, cap. V; 1986:1)

The statements in Landa and in the Colonial sources from Guatemala are just too similar to be conceptually unrelated – and eastward from Yucatán we find nothing but open sea. The mention in the highland sources of a place called Tulan that was located *ch'aqa palow* "across the sea" and *relib'al q'ijj* "where the sun comes out" seems to make more sense if understood, not literally, but metaphorically.

### *Hypothesis*

The thrust of this paper is to put forward the hypothesis that the concept of "the other side of the sea" should not be understood as an indication of the geographical location of Tulan as a former center of political authority, but rather conveys a widespread religious concept that is rooted deep in Maya cultural tradition and has thus far been misinterpreted. It will be demonstrated that "the other side of the sea" is a metaphor that refers to a place of creation in a distant otherworld, and that the Tulan from the sources may consequently be understood as a mythological rather than actual place of origin. We shall leave aside the discussion whether there really was an immigration into the Maya area – of whatever size and impact, and at whatever period in time. There are indeed cultural elements labeled as "Toltec" or "Central Mexican" that were introduced in the Maya highlands; we will nevertheless show that the religious, or ideological, concept underlying the narrative of Tulan as a place of origin is genuinely Maya (or Mesoamerican) and that the term "Tulan" is merely the Postclassic label for it.

Ideology and belief are elements that may "travel" back and forth without physical migration being involved. Prestige certainly has something to do with it. A more prestigious culture is a dominant culture, not necessarily by force and pressure, just by ideology, which is then copied and adopted. The history of Christian missions shows many examples in which individuals spread the word of God



seeking to establish true belief among the heathens. In this way, the creation story from the Bible or the Passion of Christ have been introduced into local cultural myths all over the globe. Thus, mythology may be an acquired concept – even with regard to names and toponyms. A wide range of mythical elements found in the *Popol Vuh* and other highland sources are principally known to us from Aztec traditions, such as the migration story itself, the description of the émigrés covering up in hides, the taking of local wives, etc. (cf., e.g., Motolinia *Epístola Proemial*). But although parallels can be identified, the direction of borrowing – or source of common origin – is not always clear.

The Aztec sources describe the place of the origin of humanity or mankind generally as a mountain with a network of caves named *Chicomoztoc* "Seven Caves" (see Miller & Taube 1993:60). The concept clearly corresponds to the reference to Wuqub' Pek Wuqub' Siwan in the highland sources. Archaeological evidence of artificial caves underneath pyramids and settlements from Postclassic and Classic times – the caves underneath the Pyramid of the Sun in Teotihuacan and underneath the K'iche' capital Q'umarkaj are certainly the most prominent examples – proves that we are dealing here with a rather old concept with roots deep in pan-Mesoamerican tradition which most likely dates back well into Olmec times (Miller & Taube 1993:56). The same holds true for the idea of Paxil or the Aztec version of it, the Tonacatepetl – the Mountain of Sustenance (Miller & Taube 1993:120); the earliest Maya version of the origin myth and the Mountain of Sustenance are illustrated by the murals of San Bartolo (see Saturno et al. 2005).

We may however wonder whether the migration tales from the Guatemalan sources might indeed be an instance of mythological borrowing. In the Aztec tradition, the legendary place of departure is Aztlan. The concept of Aztlan resembles that of Tulan, or *Tulan Zuyva*, in the *Popol Vuh* (see Yamase 2002:91, 101). We have pointed out that the *Popol Vuh* makes a clear distinction between the place of human creation, *Paxil Cayala*, Wuqub' Pek Wuqub' Siwan, and Tulan as the place of departure. The fact that the pattern is identical, with the term *tollan* clearly being etymologically Nahuatl, it may at first sight seem plausible that we are dealing with a borrowed concept and that

Central Mexico is the origin of the migration myth.

In the sources from Aztec tradition, Tollan is a concept as mythological and intricate as in the Guatemalan sources – a paradise-like place of creation and abundance where power and legitimacy are bestowed as much as a place of allegedly historical episodes (Miller & Taube 1993:170). The parallels suggest that we are indeed dealing with a mythological concept that was borrowed from Aztec tradition rather than with a real political center whence the K'iche' forefathers emigrated to take over political control in the Guatemalan highlands. If we suspect so, we might have to assume that the references to the direction of origin, i.e. "where the sun emerges" and the "other side of the sea," have been copied as well. However, most Aztec sources relate that people came from the north, or even the west, where the sun goes down (*Crónica Mexicayotl*, § 9c, Riese 2004), which is very much in line with what we can reconstruct about the immigration of Uto-Aztecan speakers into Mexico (see Smith 2003:37). Connected with the borrowed concept of a supposedly mythological place called Tulan, the concepts of the "east/where the sun emerges" and the "other side of the sea" do not appear in Central Mexican sources and therefore require more detailed consideration as possible concepts from the Maya area. To show that the phrase "on the other side of the sea" is indeed to be understood as a metaphor for some kind of otherworld, we may build up a line of evidence that combines mythological narrations from the Guatemalan sources with stunningly parallel concepts from contemporary oral traditions, modern ethnography and Classic Maya iconography.

#### *Oral tradition*

Oral traditions from the Guatemalan highlands are a rich source for ethnographers, as they provide emic explanations of modern Maya cultural practice. Many thematic contents of oral traditions have roots in the Maya past and can thus give us access to ideological underpinnings and cultural continuities. Certain of these metaphorical concepts are more obvious than others. For example, the frequent occurrence of human-animal transformations in modern oral traditions may contribute to our understanding of *way* characters in Classic Maya writing and iconography. For the most part unrecognized, the concept of "the other side of the sea" appears in certain oral traditions, which will help us to understand the phrase better.

A rather prominent tale from the Guatemalan highlands is the story of a man on the shore of the sea who is swallowed by a large fish-like animal that takes him to the other side of the sea where he frees himself from the body of the animal using a knife. In the place where he arrives, he finds a rich maize field. As he feels very hungry, he breaks off an ear of corn to eat it but the corn starts crying out. The crying out of the corn draws the attention of its lords, who approach the man in the maize field and wonder how he is able to eat the corn, as they never eat it but only feed on its smell because they have been created without an anus. The man tricks these lords into allowing him to slit them open with a machete where their anus should be, thus allowing them to eat corn. When the lords realize they are dying, the man again tricks them, asking them to provide him with a deer so that he may return and get a remedy for them. In this way he returns to Guatemala and leaves his victims to die (cf. Mondloch 1978:192-203; Weisshaar 1995b:9-11; 18-20).<sup>5</sup>

There are various versions of this story: sometimes the animal is a whale, sometimes an alligator. In another version the journey across the sea is made by plane and the people encountered on the other side of the sea are evil Russians (cf. Weisshaar 1995a:vii).

The main recurring elements to be found in most versions are the following:

- the man is swallowed or eaten by an animal on the seashore / in Guatemala
- he frees himself or emerges again from the animal in a distant world
- he eats the corn in that distant world
- he tricks the inhabitants of that world into believing they can eat corn by slitting them open
- finally, he escapes with the help of a deer

These narrative elements find overt and intriguing analogies in the Colonial sources as well as in Classic Maya iconography and modern ethnography. We will expound and illustrate these parallels in what follows.

<sup>5</sup> See complete text and translation after Mondloch (1978) in the Appendix.

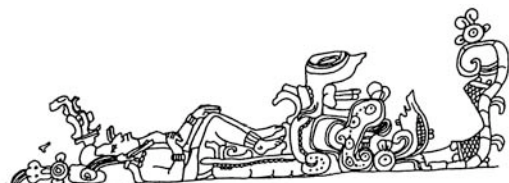
### *A Motif of Rebirth*

The narrative element of being swallowed and traveling through the sea inside an animal ostensibly reminds one of the biblical tale of Jonah and the whale. But biblical citation is not involved here, as we can prove that there is an antecedent for this episode in Classic Maya iconography that neatly fits the overall conceptual context. In a general sense, we can certainly understand the animal and the journey as a *rite-de-passage*-concept by which the man transcends from this world into another, the sea being the element that separates both worlds. In the most literal sense, the concept of rite of passage involved seems to be death. Yet, the act of swallowing leaves the man unharmed and "bodily intact" as he is taken on the journey through the sea to a place that he could not otherwise have reached on the basis of his own physical ability. The man frees himself by force, using a knife to slice open the belly of the animal from the inside – a narrative image which clearly alludes to a concept of birth.

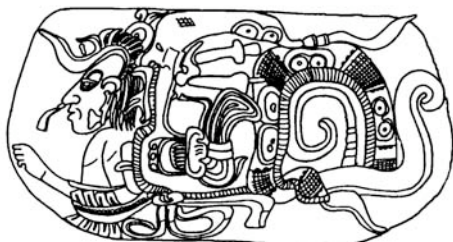
In Classic Maya art, we find several images that depict the "birth" of anthropomorphic beings, or gods, from fish-like creatures. In their paper about rebirth and resurrection of the Maize God, Michel Quenon and Geneviève Le Fort (1997) were the first to comment on this iconographic convention. In most contexts, the creature has fish- as well as snake-like attributes, which facilitated the confusion of this image with that of a vision serpent (see Freidel, Schele & Parker 1993:92; cited after Quenon & Le Fort 1997:886). Quenon and Le Fort identified the image of the young and handsome god emerging from the fish-monster as the Maize God. In some instances, the Maize God has the typically reclined position that identifies scenes of birth, or rebirth (see Fig. 1a., detail from K3033, see Reents-Budet 1994:274); most images, however, show him emerging head-first from the fish-monster (Fig. 1b-e). There are several images which show the Maize God inside the belly of a fish (Fig. 1f, see Hellmuth 1987; see also K2292, K8720, K8257). A carved shell in the Dumbarton Oaks collection depicts the god breaking through the back of the fish (see Fig. 1g).<sup>6</sup>

<sup>6</sup> There has been some discussion whether all these images refer to the same narrative and whether it is indeed the Maize God who is the protagonist of this episode. A more recent suggestion is that the seized god in the scene is the Wind God who is captured by Chaak, an event that might be related to rain-making (Taube 2004:74-78; Quenon 2005, pers. comm.). Karl Taube's main argument for this identification focuses on the floral elements on the god's forehead and before his nose and mouth which are characteristic for the Wind God, as well as the circumstance that on all vessels the event happens on a date involving the day sign

Fig. 1: Maize God emerging from a fish monster.<sup>7</sup>



a. Detail from polychrome vessel K3033  
(after drawing by Linda Schele).



b. Chocholá vase K3115  
(drawing by Carolyn Tate 1985; Fig. 7).



c. Lid of an Early Classic vessel after Gallery Mermoz  
Catalogue (drawing Michel Quenon).



d. Detail from polychrome vessel K595  
(after drawing from Michel Quenon).



e. Detail from polychrome vessel K1742  
(after drawing from Michel Quenon).



f. Late Classic carved shell pectoral, exhibited in the old village-  
museum in Copán (from Hellmuth 1987; fig. 58).



g. Carved shell from the Dumbarton Oaks Collection  
(drawing Michel Quenon).

Ik'. However, floral elements are frequently found with otherwise undisputed images of the Maize God. A similar spearing scene on the vessel K1391 clearly involves the Maize God, as does the birth scene on K3033 (Fig. 1a). Although neither image depicts the Maize God emerging from a fish-monster, the similar, if not identical, context of place and event in both cases suggests it to be rather likely that all these scenes are part of the same narrative.

<sup>7</sup> Drawings are from Quenon & Le Fort (1997) if not stated otherwise.

If we take the Xok-like fish monster as equivalent to the animal from the story, we may connect the "swallowing of the man on the seashore" with the Classic iconographic concept of the Maize God's rebirth. Drawing an analogy to the life cycle of the maize plant, the fact that the man enters the fish without being actively involved and without being bodily harmed, reminds one inevitably of the planting of maize: corn cannot sow itself, it has to be

sown into the ground, or – if we may say so – into the "underworld." The swallowing of the man that would correspond to the sowing, that is the interment of the maize kernel in the ground, finds no overt analogy in Classic Maya iconography. Classic imagery only depicts the liberation from the body of the fish monster, or the rebirth of the Maize God. On some vessels we find the scene to involve Chaak (Fig. 1d; K595, see Coe 1978) and/or a protagonist that appears to be the Wind God (Fig. 1e; K1742, see Robicsek & Hales 1981), who are engaged in spearing the fish monster and seizing the young god by his hair as if pulling him out of the fish's mouth (cf. Quenon & Le Fort 1997:888). Interpreted in the context of the life cycle of maize, the rebirth of the Maize God could be understood as an iconographic metaphor for splitting the seed open by lightning, that is, for the germination of the seed which can only come about after the first rainfalls, iconographically represented by Chaak and the Wind God.

The location of the Maize God's rebirth is widely agreed to be clearly identifiable as a place under water, or the so-called "watery underworld" (cf. Freidel, Schele & Parker 1993:92ff., Quenon & Le Fort 1997:886). Another vessel (Fig. 2; K2723) shows the Maize God in the typical reclining position of a newborn "floating on the surface of the watery underworld above a split skull" (Quenon & Le Fort 1997:891). Several scholars have convincingly demonstrated that the rebirth of the Maize God takes place at *Yax Hal Witznal* "the first true mountain place" (mentioned on the Tablet of the Foliated Cross at Palenque) and have linked this image to the Mountain of Sustenance and place of creation *Paxil* "Split Place" mentioned in the *Popol Vuh* and in other text sources (Taube 1985; Freidel, Schele & Parker 1993:138; Bassie-Sweet 2002; Martin in press). We will come back to this below.



Fig. 2: Rebirth of the Maize God, Detail from K 2723 (photograph Justin Kerr).

The fact that the man from the story – as well as the Maize God in Classic iconography – is swallowed by a fish-like creature is certainly an indication that the place of rebirth is either under or in the water, or at least can be reached via water.<sup>8</sup> If we accept this analogy, the man in the story – just like the Maize God – is taken to an underworld, or otherworld, with the fish monster as the "medium of transport." The fish monster is thus a metaphor for an "otherworld portal." The most typical otherworld portal in Maya thought throughout time is a cave, and there is abundant ethnographic evidence that caves are perceived as entrances to the underworld (Thompson 1970; Bassie-Sweet 1994; Christenson 2001). Quite significantly, these cave portals are usually associated with water (see e.g. MacLeod & Puleston 1979:72).

Drawing again on the agricultural analogy of the life cycle of the maize plant, we may – in the widest sense – see this as an allusion to the planting stick that splits open the ground and leaves a little cave where the maize kernels are sown. In fact, the Tzutujil of Santiago Atitlán see maize as emerging out of clefts in the earth, with waters not far beneath. They build up little "hills" of earth around the growing maize stock to support it and to avoid its falling down in the wind. This little hill is considered a "sacred mountain," and the maize plant is emerging out of its cleft which is therefore a cave, or portal to the otherworld. During planting, the farmers often pour offerings to the ancestors into such portals at the center of their fields which are referred to as *r'muxux* "navel" (Carlsen & Prechtel 1991:27; Christenson 2001:118).

#### *On the other side of the sea*

Having arrived "on the other side of the sea," the man – hungry from his journey – enters a rich maize field and breaks off an ear of corn to eat it. In contrast, the lords, who are the possessors of the maize field, do not exploit its plenty by eating but simply by smelling the corn.

Feeding on smell instead of eating is a known *topos* in oral traditions from all over the Maya area and is generally connected with supernatural abilities and ancestors; according to contemporary belief in Yucatán, the ancient ancestors fed on the

<sup>8</sup> The rebirth in the watery underworld may also be related to the *Popol Vuh* episode of the Junajpu and Xb'alanke being killed by the lords of Xib'al'b'a, their bones being ground and strewn into a river, where they come back to life as "people-fish" (Christenson 2003:179).

aroma of flowers (see Taube 2004:73). Feeding ancestors and gods – or divinity in general – with the smoke of incense and other burned offerings is a recognized religious concept in Maya culture throughout time (Mendelson 1967; Freidel, Schele & Parker 1993:205-206; Houston & Taube 2000; Christenson 2003:213).

The contrasting opposition of "eating maize" and "smelling maize aroma" leaves the lords on the other side of the sea without the most basic trait of humanness. In contemporary highland Maya culture, the eating of maize, in particular of locally produced maize, is one of the central defining features of human identity (Christenson 2004b). The man's *necessity* for sustenance is contrasted by the lords' likewise non-human *inability* to digest or defecate. These attributes – "smelling" and "not-defecating" – characterize these lords as belonging to a non-human sphere. Hence, we understand that the man who is swallowed by the fish monster is carried to, or transcends into, some non-human otherworld.

The dichotomy of opposition between eating and smelling, of humanness and non-human-ness, suggests that the lords of the maize field from the story have their analogy in the lords of Xib'alb'a of the *Popol Vuh*. Indeed, there are overt parallels. Like the lords in the tale, the lords of Xib'alb'a are the keepers of riches, but they do not exploit these foods themselves. They merely smell the smoke of incense (e.g. the burning of Xkik's heart), feed on the light and partake of the essence of maize. The most striking parallel is the fruit tree where Jun Junajpu's decapitated head is hung, then turns into a calabash and causes the tree to bear rich fruit. Despite the fruit of this tree being sweet and rich, the lords Jun Kame and Wuqub' Kame do not eat it, as they cannot tell the difference between Jun Junajpu's head and the calabashes anymore, which may imply that they wish to avoid eating the remains of the Maize God, and thus maize in general. The calabash tree from the *Popol Vuh* might be an acceptable analogy to the maize field in the oral tradition – the lords avoid eating the corn, the life- and humanness-defining fruit. This analogy is further supported by the well-known image on a Late Classic Maya vase (Fig. 3; K5615, see Reents-Budet 1994:277) that depicts what is most likely Jun Junajpu's head in a cacao tree (see Miller & Taube 1993:135; Miller & Martin 2004:63). This image of the cacao tree has only recently been convincingly identified by Simon Martin as a symbol for the *Iximte'*, the Maize

Tree, symbol of sustenance and the *axis mundi* (Martin in press).<sup>9</sup>

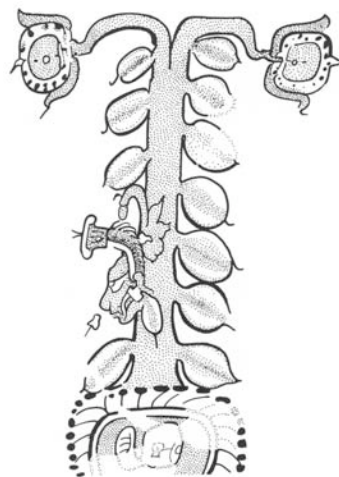


Fig. 3: The Maize God's face in a cacao tree; detail from K5615 (from Miller & Martin 2004; drawing Simon Martin).

More evidence for this analogy, and further indication that the location of the maize field "on the other side of the sea" is indeed an otherworldly place, is provided by one of the most striking elements of the narrative: the very moment the man tries to break an ear to eat it, the maize field screams: *Pero are taq xujek'o, xuraqaqeej uchii' ri ab'iix* "But when he broke it, the maize field cried out." The screaming maize field reminds us once again of the calabash tree, or *Iximte'*, from the *Popol Vuh* and of Jun Junajpu's skull speaking to the maiden Xkik', spitting into her hand, impregnating her with his saliva, and thus engendering his sons Junajpu and Xb'alanke – who are born on the surface of the earth after the flight of Xkik' from Xib'alb'a. Just as Jun

<sup>9</sup> The concept of a primeval, deified, life-giving tree at the center of the world that engendered all life now on earth is a vivid belief in contemporary Atiteco myth (Carlsen & Prechtel 1991:27). Elisabeth Wagner points out that the flowery element at the base of the cacao tree on K5615 also occurs on K2723 (see Fig. 2), where it is associated with the watery place of the Maize God's birth, or rebirth. Simon Martin understands the flower element to indicate a site of birth – possibly even a birth-place of gods. He points out that on K1979 as well as on a capstone from Ek Balam, this "birth flower" functions as a seat, in the latter case as a seat for the Maize God. According to Wagner, the "birth flower" also occurs on the stucco façade of the Ani-Structure on the eastern margin of the East Court at Copán, thus associating the toponym with the East as place of creation (see below). On K5615, Martin understands the toponym as a reference to the cacao tree, or *Iximte'*, as the manifestation of the partially reborn Maize God. Its association with the watery place of the Maize God's rebirth and the East as a birthplace of gods, suggests that the cacao tree is growing out of the waters of an underworld place of creation and thus seems to be synonymous with the world tree, or primeval fruit tree (cf. Martin in press).

Junajpu revives himself by means of procreation with an underworld lord's daughter, the eating of maize from the "iximte'-like" maize field recreates the man from the story as a human being, or catalyzes his human resurrection.

The concept of eating primordial maize is known from modern ethnographic contexts. In Santiago Atitlán, at the time of sowing a ceremony is held which involves the drinking of *maatzt'*, a maize gruel that is prepared from flour of toasted maize mixed with ash and water (Carlsen & Prechtel 1991:31-32; Christenson 2001:123). *Maatzt'* is thought to symbolize mother's milk or semen, and the drinking of *maatzt'* is connected to the idea of life-renewal, rebirth and regeneration from death (Carlsen & Prechtel 1991:31; Freidel et al. 1993:180; Christenson 2001:123). The preparation of *maatzt'* resembles the episode in the *Popol Vuh* when the Hero Twins are burned, their bones are ground, and strewn into the river where they come back to life as fish (Carlsen & Prechtel 1991:32; Tedlock 1996:130; Carlsen 1997:57-59; Christenson 2001:123). Thus, *maatzt'* represents sacrificed maize (Christenson 2001:159) and the drinking of *maatzt'* equates with eating the fruit from the calabash tree/*Iximte'* in order to become impregnated, or engendered, by primordial maize semen.

It is of particular significance that *maatzt'* is consumed at a ceremony connected with the sowing of maize, to the time of burying seeds in the ground, or cave, which again corresponds to the journey of the man in the fish to the "place of germination." In Atiteco culture, maize seeds are often referred to as *muq* "interred ones" or *jolooma* "skulls" (Tarn & Prechtel 1981; cited after Carlsen & Prechtel 1991), clearly reminiscent of Jun Junajpu's skull being placed in the tree. Like the engendering of the Hero Twins in the episode from the *Popol Vuh*, the drinking of *maatzt'* regenerates human flesh. It was the maize from the so-called Mountain of Sustenance at *Paxil Cayala* – filled with yellow and white ears of corn, with pataxte and cacao, zapotes and anonas, jocotes and honey – that, according to the creation story from the *Popol Vuh*, was used by the gods as the main ingredient for the design of humankind. In modern Maya thought, the eating of maize is understood as a means of incorporating divine/ancestral flesh into the body, thus accessing ancestral speech, knowledge, etc. Young children are fed maize so that they will be able to speak Maya and become

Maya with ancestral flesh and blood (Christenson 2004b).

However, human rebirth/resurrection requires escape from the underworld – like Xkik' finding shelter in the grandmother's house, like the Classic Maya Maize God breaking out of the turtle carapace, or like the maize sprout shooting out of the ground to grow. In the story, the man escapes the underworld by deceiving the lords into allowing him to slit them open in order that they might eat corn, without later bringing the promised curative. This part of the story is clearly reminiscent of the Hero Twins Junajpu and Xb'alanke tricking the Lords Jun Kame and Wuqub' Kame by deceiving them into submitting themselves to sacrifice and not reviving them as promised; it seems to be a decisive element that revival is held out as a prospect that is never accomplished. The killing of all Xib'alb'ans is the prelude to restoring Jun Junajpu's head and the Hero Twins rising to the sky as sun and moon (cf. Christenson 2003:185-186). Like the Hero Twins (and Xkik'), finding a way out of the underworld requires the man to apply the wit and knowledge he has just obtained from eating corn.

It is certainly not accidental that the verb expressing this act of cruelty in Mondloch's version of the oral tradition is *pusu* "slice, cut open," which is the same etymological concept that is applied in the Colonial sources to refer to the heart sacrifice.<sup>10</sup> In Classic Maya iconography, a parallel to this sacrifice may be seen in the Hero Twins stripping God L of his clothes and sacrificing one of his companions (Miller & Martin 2004:59-60). Henceforth, God L has to pay tribute to the Sun (David Stuart in Stuart & Stuart 1993:170-171; cited after Martin in press). The concept of tribute payment by God L may likewise find its parallel in the story: After tricking – or better sacrificing – the lords, the ultimate escape of the man from the underworld is only achieved by the help of a deer which he demands from the lords "for their own benefit," i.e. to bring them a saving curative.

### *Escape and resurrection*

The escape from the underworld with the help of a deer has no overt parallel in the *Popol Vuh* or Classic Maya Maize God iconography. However, the connection is there – just a little less obvious.

<sup>10</sup> E.g., *Ta xtiker k'ut pusunik, xepus ri Ilokab' chuwach k'ab'awil* "Then began therefore sacrificing, they sacrificed the Ilocab before the face of the god" (Christenson 2004a:231).

The deer is a substitute for the human as the quintessential sacrificial animal for the K'iche' and in Maya culture in general. In some versions of the story, the episode is used to explain the origin of the deer. The deer is certainly related to Tojil – the creator god who brings rain, fire and sustenance – who orders the K'iche' founders to sacrifice deer and prepare the deer bundles which they should show to the other nations as a substitute representation for the deity (Christenson 2003:234-235). Tojil himself is addressed in the text as *Qajawal Keej* "Our Lord Deer" (Christenson 2003:254).<sup>11</sup>

In Maya culture, the deer is the usual metaphor for bearing life-generating power and is thus connected to the life cycle of maize. In Santiago Atitlán, the bundle of Martín, the most powerful object associated with life-renewal, was first brought to town from the sacred place of creation, Paq'alib'al (see below), on the backs of deer. There is a deer dance in which elders wear skins and deer heads prior to the "recreation of the world" on the Day of Martín on the eleventh of November, a time that marks the end of harvest season and beginning of the dry season. The deity Martín is the principal patron of maize, rain and life itself. The Martín bundle is kept in a wooden chest that bears the carved image of a massive ear of split-cob maize, which is one of the principal images associated with the deity as a patron god of maize. The confraternity house of the Cofradía San Juan, where the bundle is kept, is the place where seed maize is blessed, and rows of split-cob maize hang from its rafters. The deity invoked as Martín is represented by a large cloth bundle, called the *ruk'ux way, ruk'ux ya'* "heart of maize food, heart of water."

<sup>11</sup> Several Mesoamerican creation myths involve the deer as a participant. In Mixtec tradition the creator couple shares the name 1 Deer (Miller & Taube 1993:70), and according to the Aztec myth, Quetzalcoatl was engendered when Mixcoatl shot a deer that turned into a woman who was then impregnated by the successful hunter and god of sky and fire (*Leyenda de los Soles*; Bierhorst 1992:153). Van Akkeren (2000:176-181) has discussed the connection of Tojil and the Mexican gods Mixcoatl and Xiuhtecuhtli (see also Tedlock 1996:154, 298). He understands Tojil primarily as a lineage god associated with fire and sacrifice and points out rightfully that the name Tojil means "payment, tribute, recompense," thus understanding Tojil as the god who only gives fire in exchange for sacrifice. Nevertheless, Tojil's traditional connection to rain is equally valid, as the day Toh in the Highland 260-day calendar corresponds to the Central Mexican day Atl "water" (see Nicholson 2001:176).



Fig. 4: The nab'eyzil dancing the Martín bundle (photograph Allen Christenson).

The annual ritual Dance of Martín is performed to renew, or "rebirth" the world. The most important figure in the Dance of Martín is the *nab'eyzil*, who is one of the most powerful individuals within the traditional Maya religious structure. The *nab'eyzil* believes that ancestral personages, who set the pattern for contemporary rituals, continue to operate through him as a conduit at appropriate times and under appropriate circumstances. Once touched by the divinity of Martín through ritual, the *nab'eyzil* never loses its presence even in death. Living Tz'utujil-Maya priests often invoke a long list of dead *nab'eyzils*, adding the name of Martín to each.

For the dance, the *nab'eyzil* priest removes the Martín bundle from his chest, opens it and wears the very old garments that are kept within. Two dancers wearing deer hides are symbolically killed at midnight, when the Maya believe that the power of the underworld is at its greatest. It is likely therefore that the dance of the *nab'eyzil* represents a sacrificial act in which he replicates the actions of Martín in order to recharge the world with life-giving power. Dressed in the garment, the *nab'eyzil* kneels down and addresses a long list of lords, then dances around the confraternity house to the sound of a split-log drum. Having made several circuits, the *nab'eyzil* moves to the center of the confraternity house and stands with his arms outstretched and his head bowed. Everyone in the room is then invited to approach the *nab'eyzil* one at a time. Each person kisses the Martín garment two or three times about the navel area. According to the comment of the confraternity members, the *nab'eyzil* had been killed like Jesus Christ. His posture, however, is also that of a maize plant (Christenson 2001:164-166). Christ is conflated with Martín as a maize deity.

The connection of Christ with the resurrection of the Maize God is a general concept in modern belief

among the Tz'utujil as well as the K'iche'. The concept is also well-known from Classic Maya iconography as a representation of the world tree (see Carlsen & Prechtel 1991:35). The *nab'eysil* himself describes the Dance of Martin as an act of creation during which "the ancient *nuwals* (revered ancestors, including Precolumbian Tz'utujil kings) give birth to the world." For the *nab'eysil*, the dance is not a symbol of creation, but a means of returning to the dawn of time itself in order to repeat the actions of deified ancestors and gods. As a result, the *nab'eysil* declared that because he had danced "...everything is new again" (Christenson 2001:24).



Fig. 5: The *nab'eysil* representing the "world tree" (photograph Allen Christenson).

In the story, the man's return to Guatemala, crossing the sea on the back of the deer, can plausibly be connected to the resurrection of the Maize God and thus to the renewal of life as such. The deer represents the medium or means by which resurrection is feasible – the deer being the substitute representation of Tojil, the creator of rain, fire and sustenance himself. With respect to this we may recall Classic Maya Maize God iconography and the resurrection of the Maize God from a split turtle carapace (e.g. K1892; Fig. 6), an image that is generally accompanied by the Hero Twins and sometimes by Chaak and K'awiil, as well as by the Paddlers. The image of the resurrected Maize God alludes to a sprouting maize plant shooting from the ground. Simon Martin (in press) has suggested that the rebirth and resurrection of the Maize God may be just another graphic metaphor of K'awiil's passage to the earth and sky.



Fig. 6: K 1892; polychrome plate in the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston (photograph Justin Kerr).

The importance of the deer as a sacrificial animal certainly explains why it is a widespread concept in Maya culture that ceremonies and offerings are required when going on a deer hunt (see Thompson 1970:309). It may be added that among the contemporary Maya of the highlands, the day *Kej* or *Kiej* "Deer" is understood to be one of the strongest day signs related to the commemoration of the dead (Bunzel 1981:338-339, B. Tedlock 1992:113). For our line of reasoning here, it is of special relevance to notice that all over Mesoamerica the deer is the yearbearer associated with the cardinal direction of east, that is *Mam Kej* is the yearbearer among the K'iche', *Mazatl* in Nahuatl, and *Manik* in Yukatek (see B. Tedlock 1992:99-100; Akkeren 2000:402).

From the analogies that we have drawn thus far we may deduce that in the oral tradition the "other side of the sea" is a place that corresponds to what in the Colonial sources and Classic Maya studies is generally referred to as the underworld. It is the place where the lords of Xib'alb'a reign, where one can be revived by means of the first sustenance (the first maize) and where one can only escape by means of a "life force" (Tojil, K'awiil) that is acquired as a form of tribute by trickery and deceit. We may thus interpret the story as a modern account of death and resurrection – a concept that in Maya belief always involves a passage through the underworld. The central analogy is clearly that of the life cycle of maize as embodied by the death, rebirth and resurrection of the Maize God in Classic



Maya iconography. The life cycle of maize is the archetypical religious-ideological underpinning of Maya world view – it explains the origin and creation of human life and the purpose of human death (cf. Taube 1985, 1986; Quenon & Le Fort 1997; Bassie-Sweet 1999). In modern Maya thought, human life is seen as equivalent to the life of maize and perceived as cyclical. The idea of "ancestral regeneration" is based on the concept of *k'ex* "exchange" – the most central aspect of Maya theology that describes the generation of new life out of death (Carlsen & Prechtel 1991:26; 34). Classic Maya rulers were often depicted in the costume of the Maize God, foremost in contexts in which death and re-creation from death are the overarching themes (e.g. Pakal's sarcophagus).

The tale of the man who crosses the sea in a fish certainly helps to shed a little bit more light on Classic Maize God iconography that – despite the intensive work that has been done – still remains to a certain extent opaque (cf. Quenon & Le Fort 1997). But how does this story connect with the concept of "the other side of the sea" and its conflation with Tulan and Paxil from the Colonial sources? The evidence that "the other side of the sea" in the Colonial sources equally refers to an otherworld concept is largely contextual. The key indications are the dichotomy of eating vs. smelling/not-eating, the main attributes by which the place of origin is described in the Colonial sources, and the relation to the cycle of recreation, or renewal of life.

### *Eating, smelling and nawals*

The dichotomy of the contrastive concepts of "eating" and "smelling" finds its parallel in the Colonial account of origin. The *Popol Vuh* and the *Título de Totonicapán* tell us that the progenitors when they arrived from across the sea, from Tulan, did not eat and just sustained themselves by smelling the tips or bottoms of their staffs.

maja b'i wa	They did not have food
maja b'i echa'	or sustenance.
xa uxe'	Only the bottoms
kich'am'i'y chikisiqo	of their staffs they would sniff,
keje' ri' kewa'ik chikina'o.	to feel as if they were eating.
xma kewa wi ta xepetik	But they did not eat when they came.
ma k'u q'alaj ki ik'owik	It was not clear how they passed over

uloq pa palo	the sea to come here.
keje' ri' maja b'i palo	It was as if there were no sea
xe'ik'ow wi uloq	that they had to pass over.
xa chuwi' taq ab'aj	They merely passed over
xe'ik'ow wi uloq	on the tops of stones
k'oleje' ula ri ab'aj	for there were stones
pa sanayeb'	on the sand.
ta xkib'i'natisaj k'ut	Thus they named it
Cholochik Ab'aj	"Lined Up Stones"
B'oqotajinaq Sanayeb' ub'i'	and "Piled up Sand" also was its name.
kumal ri' xe'ik'ow wi uloq	Over these they made their passage here
chupan palo	from within the sea.
ujachon rib' ja'	The water divided itself and through it
xe'ik'ow wi uloq	they made their passage here.

(*Popol Vuh*, fol. 38v)

ta kiq'axik k'u uloq	When they crossed over hereto,
waral uloq ch'aaq palo	to here across the sea,
ta xkik'am uloq'	when they brought
uxe' che uxe' k'am	the roots of trees and bejuco,
chi mawi wa	they did not have food,
chi mawi ja	they did not have water.
xa ki uwi kich'amiy	Just the heads of their staffs
chikisiqo	they should smell,
chikub'e k'u kik'ux	should console their heart
xepetik	(when) they arrived.

(*Título de Totonicapán*, fol. 9r)

We have established that not-eating defines non-humanness and perhaps even supernaturality. This certainly does not hold true for the progenitors. Having been created in Paxil from maize, the sources clearly define the founder-fathers as the first human beings and thus as human *per se*. So, their not-eating must have another connotation.

Ximénez interpreted the passage as a simple and literal statement that the progenitors were hungry and did not have anything to eat when they arrived in Guatemala, linking the passage to the biblical exodus from Egypt.

Todos vinieron junto de allá, sino que después se desparcieron, todos estaba muy tristes porque no tenían que comer y solamente olian con las narices las plantas con que les parecía que habían comido. (*En todo esto, bien claro está el paso del mar bermejo y la falta de comida: como refiere todo el Exodo*). También está manifiesto y claro la pasada del mar cuando pasaron, porque dividiéndose las aguas pasaron por encima de unas piedras que estaban puestas en ringleras y se llama aquel camino "piedras en ringlera." (Ximénez, *Historia de la provincia de San Vicente de Chiapa y Guatemala*, Libro I, cap. xix, p. 43)

The wider context of the text, however, suggests that the statement about "not-eating" should not be understood literally but rather as referring to a characteristic of the arriviers and the circumstances of their arrival. In both texts, "not-eating" is clearly related to the act of crossing over, or passing through, the sea. Not-eating is fasting. Down to the present day, fasting is a common shamanic practice in the Guatemalan highlands. Religious specialists often may not eat for several days prior to an important ceremony; in Santiago Atitlán, past *nab'eyils* are said to have been able to fast for weeks only smelling maize rather than eating it while engaged in ceremonies.<sup>12</sup> If we interpret the statement in the sources that the progenitors did not eat when they came across the sea as an indication that they were fasting (instead of suffering from hunger), the metaphor of "crossing the sea" might indeed be connected with the shamanic practice of accessing the otherworld and returning again.

The view is supported by evidence from the sources themselves that describe the progenitors as *nawals*. The *Popol Vuh* says that they were *nawal winaq* by their essential nature:

maja b'i kech	There was nothing theirs.
xa e nawal winaq	They were merely enchanted people
chi ki k'oje'ik	in their essence,
ta xepe chila'	when they came there
Tulan Suywa	(from) Tulan Suywa,
Wuqub' Pek Wuqub' Siwan	Seven Caves, Seven Canyons,
cha' chupan ojer tzij	as said in ancient word.

(*Popol Vuh*, fol. 36r)

The term *nawal* has found several translations in the sources.<sup>13</sup> Traditionally, *nawal winaq* has

<sup>12</sup> "Among the Kekchi continece and fasting precede participation in ceremonies carried out in the sacred caves of Pecmo" (Thompson 1970:173, cited in MacLeod & Puleston 1979:73).

<sup>13</sup> It is generally accepted that the term is derived from Nahuatl *nahualli* "sorcerer, one who uses spells and incantations" (Karttunen 1983:157). Edmonson in his Colonial K'iche' dictionary notates it as "linked spirit, power, evil spirits, knower, mystery" (Edmonson 1965:78). In Nahuatl, the root of the word *nahualli* is \**nahua-*, the basic sense of which seems to be 'audible, intelligible, clear.' From this root several meanings are derived, from "speaking" to "sorcery" and "language" (Karttunen 1983:157). However, the K'iche' form *nawal* can also be morphologically analysed as deriving from the root transitive verb *na'o* "think, feel"; -w- would be the antipassive suffix and the suffix -al an agentive nominalizer. The form would thus translate as "know-er or feel-er". There are several other derivations from the verb *na'o* connected with the concept of *nawal*, such as *na'wikil*,

been interpreted as "sorcerer" or "magic people" (cf. Schultze Jena 1944; Recinos 1950; Edmonson 1971). Tedlock translates it as "people of genius" (Tedlock 1996:152), while Christenson prefers the term "enchanted," as referring to "unusual power of knowledge" as well as "extraordinary abilities or talents" of the forefathers (Christenson 2003:213; see also 141). The modern K'iche' understanding of the term *nawal* differs slightly from the well described concept among Tzotzil or Yukatek Maya, who refer to animal companion spirits of human beings as *nawales* (see Köhler 1977:128-138). Among the K'iche', moreover, the term may refer to a spirit essence of an animal and sacred object as well as to the day on which a person is born (Bunzel 1981:330-331). A "brujo-que-se-transforma" is understood to be a *nawal* (Saler 1969:9). Furthermore, the souls of deceased ancestors are referred to as *nawal* (cf. Freidel, Schele & Parker 1993:184-185). Yet K'iche' and Tz'utujil people also talk about ancestors as powerful living priests. In Santiago Atitlán, the powerful *nab'eyils* are said to have been able to visit ancestors at will in the places where they live and that they themselves never really died but just moved to the place of the ancestors. These places are usually associated with water.

The idea of an ancestral abode that spiritual leaders may access by crossing some kind of water can also be found in other areas of Guatemala. Guazacapán in the department of Santa Rosa is one of the last retreats of Xinka culture in Guatemala. The small town is widely referred to as the *pueblo de los brujos* as it is one of the few places in the largely ladinized *Suroriente* where we still find so-called *voladores* "flyers" or *hacedores de lluvia* "rainmakers" – traditional religious specialists who are said to be able to leave their body while sleeping and have the power to direct the rain clouds (Schumann 1967).<sup>14</sup> Sebastián Hernández, one of the last few Xinka speakers of Guazacapán, was a renowned *volador* before he died in May 2004. When he asked me about the whereabouts of my home, I explained to him: "Alemania se queda al otro lado del mar." Don Sebastián responded that he did not believe me because no one could live on the other side of the sea, as this was the place where the dead people dwelled and only he had the power to "fly over the sea" once in a while to visit them, but no one could live there. Don Sebastián's statement confirms that among traditional religious specialists in present-day Guatemala "flying over the sea" is indeed

which can be translated as "enchanted abilities" (see Christenson 2003:141).

<sup>14</sup> See also Freidel et al. 1993: chapter 1.

understood as a metaphorical concept for a shamanistic practice or the capacity of leaving the body while sleeping and traveling by mind to some otherworld – thus defining the "other side of the sea" as precisely that otherworld.<sup>15</sup>



Fig. 7.: Religious specialist and *volador* - Sebastián Hernández (1912-2004) (photograph Frauke Sachse).

The *Popol Vuh* itself provides more evidence for this interpretation of an abode of deceased ancestors on the other side of the sea. The text relates that when the sons of the progenitors decide to go back to the east, "where the sun emerges," to receive their insignia of lordship they cross again over the sea:

"kojb'e chila'	"We go to
releb'al q'ij	where the sun emerges
chila' xepe wi qaqajaw"	from where our fathers came."
[...]	[...]
are' k'u kib'i'	These, then, were the names of
ri' xeb'e chila' ch'aaq palo	those who went across the sea.
e oxib'	They were three
ta xeb'ek.	when they went.
xawi k'o ki na'oj	They had wisdom
k'o pu keta'mab'al	and knowledge.
ma na xa	They were more than
e ta winaq	ordinary people
kik'oje'ik	in their existence.
xkipixab'aj kanoq	They left behind their counsel

ronojel katz	to all their older brothers
kich'aq	and their younger brothers.
keki'kotik xeb'ek	They rejoiced when they left:
"mawi kojkamik	"We will not die.
kojulik"	We will return,"
xecha'	they said
ta xeb'ek e oxib'	when the three of them left.
xawi xere xe'ik'owik	Thus they passed
chuwi' palo	over the sea,
ta xe'opon k'ut chila'	arriving there
releb'al q'ij	where the sun emerges.
ta xb'e	They went there
kik'ama' ri ajawarem	to receive their lordship.

(*Popol Vuh*, fol. 48v)

The statement that the sons "had wisdom and knowledge" and were *ma na xe a ta winaq ki-k'oje'ik* "more than ordinary people in their existence" identifies them again as *nawales* who have the capacity to access the ancestors' abode. Interpreted in this way, the phrase *mawi kojkamik kojulik* "we will not die, we will return" may suggest that they go on a journey to an otherworld that can otherwise be accessed only by the dead and from where there is usually no means of return. As such, the *Popol Vuh* would justify their legitimacy to rule as having been bestowed by the place of the creation of humanity itself. This interpretation finds further support in the ethnographic analogy from Santiago Atitlán, where the powerful *nuwals* Francisco Sojuel and Marco Rohuch are simply said to have disappeared, "for they did not die, they said that they would leave a sign in front of their home at the cave of Paq'alib'al to show that they still live" (Christenson 2001:87).

The interpretation of the phrase *ch'aaq palow* "across the sea" as a metaphor for the shamanic practice of transcending into the otherworld requires us to focus our attention on water as an element of transcendence. Among the Tz'utujil, the places where deceased ancestors live are either associated with Lake Atitlán or with caves. The *nab'eyails* are able to access spiritual pathways that make it possible to travel great distances in a very short period of time – and in nearly all cases these involve watery pathways. Caves are also the places where rain clouds are created (see Christenson 2001:79). Francisco Sojuel, the famous *nab'eyail* from Atitlán, is said to have been able to cause the rain to fall (*ibid.*), and we may mention again that the Xinka *volador*, Don Sebastián, who crossed the sea in dreams was an acknowledged rainmaker. In Highland Guatemala, especially in contemporary K'iche' culture, shamanic practice and divination are strongly associated with the element of water; for

<sup>15</sup> Duncan Earle describes how among the K'iche', "those who claim to come from across the sea (like many tourists do), are considered to be from another world in a previous creation" (Earle 1986:168). The increase of tourism in Guatemala may have rectified that assumption over the years. However, the statement provides further evidence that "the other side of the sea" is still associated with an otherworld place in Highland Maya culture today.

instance, dreaming of a lake is regarded as an indication that someone is ready to receive training as an *aj q'ijj* "calendar priest" (B. Tedlock 1992:54; see Bassie-Sweet 2002). Water, in this respect, is seen as a medium, or an element, that contains knowledge – accessing the water is thus related to the practice of "seeing" and "envisioning" a world beyond (ibid.).



Fig. 8: Lago Atitlán (photograph Allen Christenson).

The metaphor of "the sea" as an element of passage for beings with supernatural abilities is seen also in the narrative about the later K'iche' ruler K'otuja from the *Títulos de la Casa Ixquin-Nehaib*.

Luego de ahí se fue [Gucumatz-Cotha] hacia la mar a conquistar y a ganar la tierra y a holgarse por la mar, y luego el dicho cacique, por darles contento a sus soldados, se volvió águila y se metió dentro de la mar, y después de haber salido de la mar se holgaron mucho del buen suceso que habían tenido. (*Títulos de la Casa Ixquin-Nehaib*; Recinos 1957: 81)

Again the *Popol Vuh* gives us further indication that the sea is a metaphor for water as a spiritual pathway rather than a reference to an actual geographical location. Describing the arrival of the progenitors from Tulan, the text states that they made their passage *chupan palo* "from within the sea":

kumal ri'	Over these [stones]
xe'ik'ow wi uloq	they made their passage here
chupan palo	from within the sea.
ujachon rib' ja'	The water divided itself
xe'ik'ow wi	and through it they made their
uloq	passage here.

(*Popol Vuh*, fol. 38v)

As mentioned above, the *Historia de los Xpantzay de Tecpan Guatemala* describes the place of origin, Tulan, to be *niqaaj palo* "the center/midst of the sea," which may be understood as additional evidence that the place of creation cannot be marked on any map. It is likely that the use of the complex preposition *chupan* [*chi u-paam*] "in its stomach," that is, "within," in the *Popol Vuh* alludes to amniotic fluid, the water through which everyone who is born passes – given that the context is the progenitors'/first humans' passage from their place of origin into the world in which they now reside. We will come back to this aspect later.

It is certainly possible that metaphorical meanings may have changed over time, but if we take a closer look at how "the other side of the sea" is described in the Colonial sources, again drawing analogies with modern ethnographic examples and Classic imagery, we find the hypothesis that it refers to an ancestral abode and place of human creation corroborated by further evidence.<sup>16</sup>

#### *Tulan – the Place of Creation*

Thus, modern ethnographic as well as Classic parallels provide us with evidence that the metaphor *ch'aaq palow* "on the other side of the sea" from the Colonial text sources should be interpreted as referring to an otherworld. We will be concerned next with defining this otherworld more precisely by its attributes and considering its explicit connection with "Tulan" and the "east/where the sun emerges."

All Colonial sources agree that the progenitors crossed over the sea from their place of origin or creation. In the *Popol Vuh* the place is named *Paxil Cayala* "Split Place, Bitter Water Place," which is described as a mountain full of yellow and white ears of corn and all sorts of fruit. *Paxil*, an abstractive of the verb *pax* "to split, to break open," has been identified by several scholars as alluding to

<sup>16</sup> In fact, the metaphorical interpretation from the oral tradition can be confirmed by oral traditions from all over the Maya area. In modern Tzotzil stories, the sea equally occurs as the interconnecting element between two worlds. A myth from the Tzotzil area recorded by Gary Gossen, *The Adventures of Xun Beyond the Sea* (Gossen 2002:539-597), is the story of a boy who tricks the youngest daughter of the king into taking him across the sea to the king's house where he seeks work. The king makes him fulfill a number of tasks and he always succeeds by trickery and the help of the daughter. Eventually, both the boy and the king's daughter escape on the back of a mule before the story continues with other events. The parallel between the Tzotzil oral tradition and the K'iche' oral tradition is obvious: the crossing of the sea functions as a passageway to a Xib'alb'a-like place.

the myth known throughout Mesoamerica – in Colonial sources and modern oral traditions – about the origin of maize from a mountain or rock that was broken open by the force of lightning (Tedlock 1996:288; Bassie-Sweet 2002:10; Christenson 2003:193). The connection between lightning and the so-called Eastern Mountain of Sustenance is clearly mirrored in Classic iconographic depictions of the Maize God's resurrection being accompanied by Chaak and K'awiil (see above). In the *Popol Vuh*, this Mountain of Sustenance is not only the place of the discovery of maize,<sup>17</sup> it is foremost the place where the creator gods form humankind from the first maize and water – possibly alluded to in the name *Cayala*, which means "bitter water" and might refer to amniotic fluid (Christenson 2004b).

The other name for the place of human creation in the sources is Wuqub' Pek Wuqub' Siwan "Seven Caves, Seven Canyons." There is evidence that caves have been perceived of as places of creation and passageways, or entrances, to the underworld ever since Olmec times (cf. Miller & Taube 1993:28, Bassie-Sweet 1991, 1996). This concept still prevails today. In Santiago Atitlán it is believed that there is a series of seven 'cave' openings into the underworld, all of which branch outward from beneath the floor of the church. According to local myth, the most powerful of these openings is the *r'muxux ruchilew* "navel of the world," a hole in the floor of the church that is uncovered once a year and gives access to the realm "where all the creative and destructive elements inherent in nature gather together" (Christenson 2001:76-77). The most sacred of all caves lies in the mountains southwest of the town and is called Paq'alib'al. The etymology of the name provided by local Atitecos is *pa q'ali-b'al* "at the place of revelation of appearance" (Christenson 2001:84). Paq'alib'al is perceived of as a place "where the greatest of the saints and gods live and create rain clouds" (Christenson 2001:79). This is how

Nicolás Chávez from Santiago Atitlán described the cave:

"All the great saints and *nuwal* ancestors live in Paq'alib'al. Their spirits live there in the center of the mountain. This is also where the south wind is born. Strong rains come from this cave because that is where the clouds are formed. There is always the sound of wind coming out of the cave because that is where the ancients live. The entrance is guarded by two pumas and two jaguars and is adorned with abundant fruits such as corozos, bananas, melacotones, plantains, zapotes, cacao and pataxtes to show that the heart of the *nuwals* are present inside and that they have power to give abundance and fertility. Inside is a gigantic snake one meter thick and fifty meters long that watches over the saints... Near the cave in a small ravine is a giant *po'j* tree where angels rest when it rains, and inside the branches are clouds..." (Christenson 2001:84)

The tree at Paq'alib'al is strongly reminiscent of the concept of the world tree as the center of creation – a concept that we find throughout Mesoamerica (Miller & Taube 1993:57; Freidel et al. 1993:55; cited after Christenson 2001:85; see also López Austin 1993:62). This neatly connects with our identification of the maize field in the oral tradition substituting for the *Iximte'* that again may be identified as the world tree (Martin in press). The association of caves with fruit-trees and abundance is known from other areas, too. Barbara MacLeod describes a similar myth about a river running into a cave where it leads to a land of abundance and fruit-trees among the Tojolab'al in Chiapas (MacLeod & Puleston 1979:73). As we have pointed out above, the eating of primordial maize, or of fruit from the primordial *Iximte'*, is associated with recreation and procreation and human renewal as such. This idea is even found beyond the Maya area. During one interview, the old Xinka *volador*, Don Sebastián, described a near-death experience that he had at the age of twenty-three, when he fell ill and angels took him into the river where ("allá en aquel mundo") he walked and ate fruit with them; he did not get to know this other world and just ate, which, as he said, is why he survived and got old. Parallels with the eating of maize in the oral tradition and the eating of fruit from the calabash tree by the maiden Xkik' are patent. Accordingly, the association of fruit-trees with caves points to the perception of these places as spaces of human renewal and rebirth.

<sup>17</sup> It is important to note that in Central Mexican oral traditions and in the text of the *Leyenda de los soles* the Mountain of Sustenance is the place where Quetzalcoatl finds the food that will sustain humankind which has just been newly created by the gods from their own blood and the ground bones of the humans of the former creation that were turned into fish by the flood (cf. Bierhorst 1992:8-9). Thus, although the Mountain of Sustenance seems to be a pan-Mesoamerican concept, with respect to the creation of contemporary humankind, Maya and Mexican mythology do not correspond.



Fig. 9: The cave Paq'alib'al (photograph Allen Christenson).

Among contemporary Maya communities, caves of abundance are widely believed to be the abode of the most powerful deceased ancestors (Vogt 1969:298, cited after MacLeod & Puleston 1979:73; Christenson 2001:84-87). What seems to be of special importance here is that these ancestors are not perceived as dead. Atitecos relate that they simply went there to the cave and that the fruit-trees were a sign of their presence (Christenson 2001:87).<sup>18</sup> Thus, Paq'alib'al is not understood as a place where all dead people go. There seems to be a distinction between the death of ordinary people, who are simply buried in the cemetery, and powerful ancestors "going to Paq'alib'al." It has been suggested by several scholars that in Classic Maya thought, resurrection and ascent to the so-called celestial paradise were restricted to the nobility, or even to the rulers alone who appeared as representatives of the Sun and the Maize God (see Carlsen & Prechtel 1991:35; Taube 2004:93). Just as the maize kernel, which is planted in the ground to sprout, is not dead but simply covered by earth, powerful ancestors are believed to control the "regenerative nature" centered in caves (cf. Christenson 2001:78; Fischer 1999:483).

All over Mesoamerica, caves are considered sacred places that function as an interface between the world of the living and the world of the dead. According to modern Atiteco belief there is a serpent stone underneath the floor of

the convento complex attached to the church – near the fountain – that guards the entrance to the cave and might be "a zoomorphic metaphor for the winding passageway of the tunnel itself which leads out of the underworld," just like the Classic Maya images of vision serpents which function as portals through which deceased ancestors could re-enter the world of the living (Stuart 1988:183-185; Freidel et al. 1993:207-210; Miller & Taube 1993:150; see Christenson 2001:79, 88). Throughout Mesoamerica, snakes are associated with water. In the highlands they are understood as the *nawals* of wells and rivers. Killing them would cause a well to fall dry (see several oral traditions in Weisshaar 1995). Among the Tz'utuijil it is believed that a massive snake lives in Lake Atitlán. As we have already mentioned, caves and creation places are associated with water and thus the serpent as the access portal to the otherworld seems to be a logical parallel.

Caves are furthermore believed to be the place where rain clouds (and the accompanying winds) are created (MacLeod & Puleston 1979:72; Christenson 2001:84). The idea goes back well into Olmec times: the famous rock-carving from Chalcatzingo shows a seated figure in cave from which wind scrolls emerge (see Taube 2004:92).<sup>19</sup> Among the Yucatek Maya, it is believed that caves are inhabited by the Chaaks (Villa Rojas 1945:103); the Tzotzil of San Pedro Chenalho "see a Chaak as the rain god, god of water, owner of the thunderbolt, lord and owner of the mountains, protector of milpas, giver of maize. He is lightning; he lives in the interior of a mountain, the doorway to his home being a cave guarded by a frog" (Thompson 1970:268; cited after MacLeod & Puleston 1979:72). The connection with caves and rain seems to be essential. Archaeological research has yielded indications that cave entrances might have been the stage for a version of precolonial *Ch'a Chaak* ceremonies (MacLeod & Puleston 1979:72). This is seen also in Yucatán, where the Chaaks as deities of rain and lightning are associated with the cardinal direction of east, and it is believed that the "highest ranking Chaak resides at the eastern horizon" from where the first rains of the season set in (Villa Rojas 1945; see Bassie-Sweet 2002:8).

The east as the direction from which the rains of the season come links up with the agricultural year and the concept of the rebirth of maize and the renewal of the world. Bassie-Sweet cites Landa who

<sup>18</sup> The association of ancestors with fruit trees finds its Classic parallel in the images of fruit trees on the sides of the Palenque sarcophagus and on the well cited vessel from the Maya collection in Berlin (Ethnologisches Museum Berlin-Dahlem). Simon Martin has shown that in both instances these images refer to the dead body of the Maize God (or the ruler Pakal as a representation of the Maize God) turning into sustenance and thus life-regenerating power (Martin in press, chapter 2).

<sup>19</sup> Elisabeth Wagner points out that the seated figure is an Olmec version of a Chaak that is equivalent to an Early Classic stucco statue of Chaak found at La Pailita, Petén (cf. Taube 1995; Graham 1997).

reported that in the month Chen or Yax the temples of the Chaaks were renovated and repainted, which was interpreted by Thompson as marking the beginning of the agricultural year. This reminds us again of Santiago Atitlán, where the Altarpiece of the church – and the church itself – is cleaned right before Easter, so that on Good Friday resurrection may mark the beginning of the new life cycle, and – at the same time – the beginning of the rainy season. The association of the east with water, new life and resurrection cannot, of course, be primarily explained by the direction from which the rain sets in – especially since in other parts of the Maya world the rains come from other directions. In the Guatemalan highlands rain clouds arrive from the Pacific – which might actually explain why in Santiago Atitlán the most important cave, Paq'alib'al, is located in the south.

In Highland Maya languages the east is called the place "where the sun emerges," overtly connecting the cardinal direction with the concept of the resurrection of the sun. The attribution of the east as a place of glory and splendor thus seems consistent. Even more plausible seems the conceptual connection of the east and the sea. Traveling straight eastward from the Guatemalan highlands one reaches the coast of the Gulf of Honduras; when the sun rises in the morning, it thus emerges from the sea, out of the underworld and out of the darkness.

The attribute of darkness and obscurity seems to be important in this respect. Most of the Colonial sources relate that the progenitors came from a place of darkness:<sup>20</sup>

<b>wae r(i) utestamento</b>	This is the testament of our fathers
<b>qat(a)ta qamama</b>	and mothers,
<b>oj ak'a-nimaqi(b')</b>	of us, the children-elders
<b>Xpantzay</b>	of Xpantzay,
<b>chire qak'ojlem, q'alaxik</b>	for engendering, our birth (was)
<b>k'a qapetik</b>	when we arrived
<b>chi q'equm chi ak'a</b>	in the darkness in the night
<b>chila Tulan Suywa</b>	from Tulan Suywa.

(*Testamento de los Xpantzay*; Recinos 1957:153)

<sup>20</sup> We find this concept again in the Central Mexican sources where the arrival of the Aztecs is also stated as occurring at a time when there was still obscurity (see e.g. *Anales de Cuauhtitlan*).

Equally, the *Título de Totonicapán* and the *Popol Vuh* state that the progenitors originated from the dark, or left Tulan, the place where the sun emerges, in the darkness:

<b>ju su chi Tulan xpe wi</b>	Straightaway at Tulan came
<b>kiq'aq'al</b>	their glory.
<b>nima eta'mab'al k'o kuk'</b>	Great knowledge was theirs.
<b>chi q'equ'mal k'ut</b>	In darkness therefore,
<b>chi aq'ab'al puch</b>	in night as well they
<b>xkib'ano</b>	accomplished it.
<b>xepe chi k'ut</b>	Already they came,
<b>xeb'orotaj chi</b>	already they were pulled up
<b>ula chila'</b>	from there.
<b>xkikanaj chik</b>	Already they left behind
<b>releb'al q'ij</b>	the place where the sun emerges.

(*Popol Vuh*, fol. 37v)

The association of the progenitors' place of origin with the concept of darkness confirms the idea of Tulan Suywa and the east functioning as metaphors for an otherworldly place of creation. Again, we find analogies in Classic Maya iconography. Simon Martin points out that Classic images of the Mountain of Sustenance are typically marked not only with maize kernels but also glyphs for *ak'ab* "darkness" (T504), which he understands – besides indicating an underworld place – as a reference to rainwaters that are created inside the mountain (Martin in press).<sup>21</sup> His interpretation finds its ethnographic analogy in the widespread idea of rain being created in caves, and thus in dark places, as we have pointed out above.

We might drive this argument even further, interpreting the *ak'ab* signs marking the Mountain of Sustenance as an allusion to the fact that creation takes place before "the dawn." Primordial waters are associated with darkness: on the so-called Cosmological plate K1609, the waters of the underworld are referred to as *ik' naab nal* "black/dark ocean place" (see Wagner 2000: 287).<sup>22</sup> Drawing again an analogy to the life cycle of maize and the process of natural human conception, we can clearly say that sprouting and pre-natal growth take place in the dark – in the earthen ground, in the

<sup>21</sup> This analysis is mainly based on the argument that *ak'ab* signs mark the vessel of Chaak containing rainwater and that page 65a in the Dresden Codex makes reference to *ak'ab ha'al* "dark rain" (see Martin in press).

<sup>22</sup> In the Colonial Highland Maya texts, *q'equmal* "blackness, darkness" and *aq'ab'al* "night" form a semantic couplet. We draw this analogy here, although it is not entirely clear whether in Classic Maya the term *ik'* "black, dark" may substitute for, or complement, *ak'ab* "night, dark".

womb.<sup>23</sup> Water is involved in both cases. Thus, "leaving Tulan" might be nothing other than a metaphor for "sprouting/ being born," that is, emerging from the place of creation/underworld/cave/womb through the sea/primordial water/amniotic fluids into life.<sup>24</sup> This interpretation finds further support in the phrase *xeb'orotaj chi ula chila'* "already they were pulled up from there" (*Popol Vuh*, fol. 37v; see above), which is to be understood best as "they were pulled out like weeds" and may thus literally refer to the process of sprouting – the maize seed leaving its place of creation, or germination, shooting upwards through the surface of the earth. The interpretation of the term *suywa* as "bloody water" (see above), which also alludes to amniotic fluids, certainly supports the idea of Tulan as a metaphor for a place of birth and creation.<sup>25</sup>

We have shown that in the oral tradition as much as in the Colonial sources the metaphor "on the other side of the sea" refers to an otherworld concept. In the oral tradition, the characteristics of this otherworld place largely correspond to Xib'alb'a proper, while in the Colonial sources the sea seems to separate this world from Tulan, or from the place of human creation. At first sight, this seems to leave us with a problem of contradiction, since according to the *Popol Vuh* the underworld *Xib'alb'a*, the place of creation *Paxil Cayala*, and the place of departure *Tulan* appear not to be in the same location – or are they?

Internal indications from the text of the *Popol Vuh* suggest that the concepts of Xib'alb'a and the place of creation are not mutually exclusive. It has been shown that the Classic Maya Maize God narrative takes place in an underworld place that is iconographically associated with primordial waters. Furthermore, it has been shown that the life cycle of the Classic Maize

God image has clear analogies in the *Popol Vuh* – all of these being associated with Xib'alb'a as a place of death and rebirth. The death of Jun Junajpu and his subsequent restoration take place in Xib'alb'a; the death of the Hero Twins, the grinding of their bones and their coming back to life as "people-fish" after having been strewn into the river likewise take place in Xib'alb'a. The text is even very explicit in that the undertow of the water did not carry them away:

But they did not go far away, they just straightaway sank there beneath the water. And when they appeared again it was as chosen boys, for thus they had become. (Christenson 2003:179)

Thus the twins are killed in Xib'alb'a and reborn from its waters – not unlike their father Jun Junajpu, who is killed in Xib'alb'a and impregnates an underworld lord's daughter who gives birth to his sons on the surface of the earth. Thus, the *Popol Vuh* clearly defines Xib'alb'a as a place of creation as well as of human defeat and death. According to everything that is known about the Maya world view and the cyclical perception of life created from death, it would be rather logical if both places were identical, especially if we exploit again the analogy with the life cycle of maize – the maize kernel sprouts where it is planted.

Nevertheless, it cannot be ignored that Mesoamerican religious traditions distinguish between several otherworld concepts, or places, whose exact position within a general cosmological framework has challenged the minds and creativity of scholars for some time (cf. e.g. Thompson 1970; MacLeod & Puleston 1979; Freidel et al. 1993; Bassie-Sweet 2002; Taube 2004). According to Landa, the Colonial Yukatek distinguished *mitnal* – the underworld – and a "lugar muy deleitable," a place of abundance (Landa 1986:60; Taube 2004:70). The belief in an otherworld place where food is abundant is also found among the Tzotzil and the Tz'utujil (Carlsen & Prechtel 1991; Taube 2004:81). The descriptions of Paq'alib'al in Santiago Atitlán (see above) clearly correspond to what Karl Taube labels "flower mountain," a "paradise" and abode of the ancestors connected with the *axis mundi* (Taube 2004:81). These Maya descriptions of a paradise of abundance find their Central Mexican equivalent in the concept of Tamoanchan, the place of creation where the world tree rises, where gods (e.g. the maize deity Centeotl) and humans alike were created, as well as the calendar and time itself (Miller & Taube 1993:160; López Austin 2001:184-185). But the descriptions also remind us of Central

<sup>23</sup> This analogy is even more logical given that in the highlands, maize "takes nine months to bear" (Neuenswander 1981:149).

<sup>24</sup> It has been noted before that "sprouting" functions as an analogy to "dawning" (see Tedlock 1985:251, cited after Carlsen & Prechtel 1991:31) and that the life of the maize plant is the primary underlying metaphor of human life. The metaphorical couplet of the sowing and the dawning has been interpreted to have "human connotations," with the sowing being a metaphor for human death while the dawning refers to human birth (Carlsen & Prechtel 1991:30). Among the Tz'utujil, the birth of a child may be described as "it sprouted" (Carlsen & Prechtel 1991:28).

<sup>25</sup> In fact, this etymology might be related to the meaning of the creation place Cayala as "Bitter Water" (see above).



Mexican Tlalocan, the realm of Tlaloc, on the fourth level of heaven – likewise a place of abundance of food, a watery, primordial land of the glorious dead that can be entered by religious specialists through caves and water in dreams (Miller & Taube 1993:167; Knab 2001:227-228).

According to the general model of Maya cosmology, the earth floats on the sea with the world tree in the center and the four corners separating the sky and the earth, interconnecting all three layers: the sky, the earth and the underworld (cf. Miller & Taube 1993: 186; Wagner 2000:286). Parallel to the daily journey of the sun, the west is associated with death and the dreadful underworld places Xib'alb'a, Mictlan or Metnal; whereas the east is the place of creation, where the sun rises and the souls of those who managed to overcome the lords of the underworld by trickery ascend to the "celestial paradise" (cf. Taube 2004). Given this model of the world, it seems to make sense that the underworld *is* the place of creation, and it seems to make sense that Xib'alb'a, Paxil Cayala and Tulan all may be accessed via a cave or by crossing the water. Recreation and renewal may take place at the *axis mundi* – "Flowery Mountain Earth" according to the Tz'utujil of Santiago Atitlán, for whom the calabash tree from the *Popol Vuh* is the primeval metaphor. Rebirth, i.e. the ascent to the upper world, comes about in the east.<sup>26</sup> It is not particularly striking that the *axis mundi* and the east may be perceived of as identical concepts; e.g. the Yukatek Maya understand the eastern horizon as the trunk of the sky (Villa Rojas 1945; cited after Bassie-Sweet 2002:8).

Although there are clear conceptual differences, we are far from understanding the cosmological pattern behind the various otherworld places known to us from Classic iconography, Colonial sources and ethnographic data. While Xib'alb'a and Mictlan have always been understood as netherworld concepts, the precise location of which has only been relevant and discussed with respect to theology and

cosmology, places like Tulan and Suywa – or Tamoanchan, Aztlan, Chicomoztoc and Colhuacan from the Central Mexican sources – have been interpreted mythologically as well as terrestrially (cf. López Austin 2001:185). The cosmological arrangement of these places of creation remains complex and the connection to the *axis mundi* and the east is merely an approximation.

Moreover, we may want to ask whether we might not arrive at distorted images if we lump Maya and Central Mexican, Classic and modern ethnographic categories together. For instance, it is still an issue whether the Aztec model of a world of thirteen celestial and nine underworld levels, or spheres, can be assumed to hold true for Classic Maya culture as well, as there is only indirect evidence in the form of nine-level pyramids or other numerological interpretations, etc. (cf. Miller & Taube 1993). Throughout Mesoamerica we find the concept of an otherworld place of creation associated with the number seven. We have mentioned Wuqub' Pek Wuqub' Siwan as the highland Maya equivalent of Chicomoztoc; however, it should also be noted that the Classic Maya antecedents *wuk ik'nal* and *wuk ha'nal* – were creation places in the watery underworld, as depicted on the so-called cosmic plate, K1609 (see Wagner 200:286-287). Is the parallelism in the name enough to infer that these are identical locations within a unified Mesoamerican cosmography?

Defining these mytho-geographical places within such a cosmological model may be as impossible as trying to "map" the Christian idea of the Garden Eden or Hell. The underlying spatial concept might be quite different from western thinking, and location might not matter nearly as much as the event taking place. And although we have indications that Xib'alb'a and the place of creation/rebirth are not mutually exclusive otherworld concepts, the problem is not really solved by simply reducing them to one single location. It simply serves to underscore our own insufficient comprehension of the issue.

## Conclusions

We have presented several text-internal arguments and precolonial as well as ethnographic analogies to conclude that the phrase "the other side of the sea" in the Colonial sources is only a metaphor for a place of origin in the sense of creation and not departure, and thus does not

<sup>26</sup> The connection of east and rebirth is especially striking in the Ch'orti belief that "the soul of the child derives from the east" (Wisdom 1940:427-428; see Taube 2004). Modern K'iche' daykeepers in Momostenango associate the east with the present and the future as well as birth – as opposed to ancestors and the dead who are associated with the west; visits to the sacred mountain east of the town are made on the day 11 *Keej* (Deer), the day associated with divination of the future (see B. Tedlock 1992:140-141).

necessarily refer to an actual location that could be found on any map.

The explicit reference to an origin from the west and an eastward migration in the *Memorial de Sololá* – as well as the Spanish sources that mention an origin in Mexico – might at first seem to contradict our interpretation of the phrase as a mere metaphor. However, the Kaqchikel text states that there were four Tulans, two of them clearly related with otherworldly places, that is, "Xib'alb'ay" and the place of the "Kab'owil." If we take the text literally, the reference to the Tulan *chi Kab'owil* corresponds to the statement in the *Popol Vuh* that the progenitors left the east (for the first time) to go to Tulan to receive their gods. Thus, the *Memorial de Sololá* might express in four-fold manner what is conflated into one single (or two) concepts in the *Popol Vuh* – Tulan as a place of creation.<sup>27</sup> In Mesoamerican cosmography the four cardinal directions were marked by four world trees that were also associated with the four yearbearers (see Roys 1933:64; *Codex Borgia*: p. 49-52; *Codex Dresden*: p. 25-28; *Codex Fejérváry-Mayer*: p. 1; Miller & Taube 1993:186). The concept of the four Tulans might refer to precisely this idea of four world trees in the east, west, north and south – each one being a place of creation in itself.<sup>28</sup>

We certainly cannot disregard the fact that there were clear attempts to establish a connection with the politically influential culture of the Late Postclassic phase, that is, the Aztecs in Tenochtitlán. And furthermore we must not ignore that *Tulan*, or *Tollan*, functioned indeed as a reverential epithet for a number of major centers in Postclassic times, and certainly these places were perceived as major religious centers and "places of creation." However, our thrust here is stronger, namely that these worldly,

political power centers are not the places the Colonial sources primarily refer to. Our interpretation of Tulan as a metaphor for an otherworldly place of creation certainly does not preclude that the concept might have had several physical manifestations in actual places, such as Chichen Itza or Mayapan, and that these may even have been implicit in the concept. In Santiago Atitlán the concept of the "navel of the world" is not tied to one single place but several actual places which are still perceived of as "one" center of the world. Santiago Atitlán itself is today considered a dawning, or eastern place, irrespective of its actual location with respect to other places, which supports our interpretation that the sources do not indicate any precise location of possibly implicit real places either, and that "east (where the sun emerges)" is not an actual given direction but just a label for centers that are perceived of as places of creation. The phrase *relib'al q'ij* may therefore be best translated literally, that is "where the sun emerges," to conserve its apparently more metaphorical connotation (see also Yamase 2002:112).

Understanding the concept of Tulan as a reference to an otherworldly place of creation, it seems logical that some of the sources mention a second journey back to the east, to where the sun emerges, when the ancestors cross the sea again to receive the insignia of power from a lord called Nacxit. "Nacxitl" was one of the names of the legendary and likewise mythological ruler Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl (Roys 1933:83; Nicholson 2001:283). Although we must not confuse the purportedly historical figure Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl with the deity of the same name, it is nevertheless noteworthy that Ehecatl Quetzalcoatl is a creator god.<sup>29</sup> The mention of the mythological, and even deified, Nacxit as the ruler of Tulan – who (presumably at his death) went eastward according to the sources – makes it even more likely that the Guatemalan sources refer to a place of creation rather than to an actual city with an actual sovereign. In this context, it makes even more sense that the K'iche' ancestors claim their insignia from Nacxit, because at the same time they also claim divine descent; the *Título de Totonicapán* even states that Nacxit gave them the bundle of glory, the *Pisom Q'aq'al* (Carmack & Mondloch 1983:175-176; fol. 8v, 9r).

<sup>27</sup> With respect to this we may want to remember the passage in the *Memorial* that describes the entrance to Xib'alb'a as guarded by a bat, which gave Tedlock reason to assume a connection with Copán. Van Akkeren points out that the bat may also simply refer to a cave-like place that provides access to the underworld (Akkeren 2000: 79, n. 3).

<sup>28</sup> A possible parallel to this from the Classic might be seen on Copán Stela A in the association of the four powerful polities of the time with directional glyphs. Here, Copán is associated with the east, Palenque with the west, Calakmul with the north and Tikal – though not quite geographically consistent – with the south (see Martin & Grube 2000:203; Wagner 2004). It is however not definite that these polities were thus perceived of as "places of creation" – as were the Postclassic centers bearing the epithet Tollan – or whether we are simply dealing with a statement of socio-political relevance.

<sup>29</sup> Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl's role in the sources corresponds loosely to the Hero Twins and their father Jun Junajpu. Like them, he descends into the underworld to trick the lords of Mictlan and rescue the bones from the former humans so that humanity can be re-created (cf. *Codex Chimalpopoca*, Bierhorst 1992).

In the Aztec sources, Tollan is generally not equated with Aztlan, Chicomoztoc or Tamoanchan as a place of origin and human creation. Central Mexican Tollan is certainly a mythic and a powerful place of the origin of civilization, but the origin and the creation of humankind was primarily associated with Tamoanchan, Chicomoztoc and Aztlan. In the Maya sources, the place of creation and Tulan are often conflated, or even identical, concepts.

This has caused most scholars to understand that Central Mexican or Nahuatl traditions diffused into the Maya area rather than the reverse (see López Austin 1993:62). It is certainly not a new idea that Tulan, as a term and as a concept, has been adopted from Central Mexican tradition to refer to a mythical place of origin. We have pointed out before that the migration story and the claim of descent or origin from Tulan was a widespread tradition throughout Postclassic Mesoamerica by means of which ruling lineages claimed political legitimacy. According to the line of reasoning, Tulan in the Colonial sources from Guatemala is even more than a mythical place of origin – it is a metaphor for a place of human creation as such. As we may understand the Mountain of Sustenance and human creation in a womb-like cave as widespread concepts that are rooted deeply in the Mesoamerican past, we may exclude any connection with a migration from a real place called Tollan. In the Colonial Guatemalan sources, "Tulan" is merely an *en vogue* Postclassic label for an older and genuinely Maya, or pan-Mesoamerican, concept of a place of creation where sustenance originates.

The concept of *Tollan* "the Place of Cattail Reeds" is likely much older and possibly dates back to Olmec times (Christenson 2003:94). It has been suggested that the Classic Maya name for Teotihuacan was *Puh* "Place of Reeds" (Stuart 2000:501-506). Such toponymic synonyms are frequent; for instance, the K'iche' named their capital Q'umarkaj, the "Place of Ancient Reeds" to indicate its political-religious centrality as a place of creation and of "Toltec" legitimacy (see Fox 2001:295).

We have mentioned the apparent references to the Gulf Coast area. Understanding the concept of Tulan as a mythical place of creation rather than a physical location allows us to shed some light on relevant passages in the texts. With respect to the text of the *Popol Vuh*, we may even argue that the presumed ethnonymic

reference to Tepew Oliman may indeed be merely a reference to a former creation. Edmonson's translation of the *Chajkar Winaq* as "Ash-Fish People" bears a certain logic with respect to the general argument of this paper that Tulan stands for a mythical place of creation. In the *Popol Vuh*, the burned bones of the overcome Hero Twins are ground and strewn into the river where they turn into "people-fish." In fact, the "people-fish" or "ash-fish-people" may be just another metaphor for a Postclassic Maya historical awareness of a past Mesoamerican culture – the so-called Olmecs from the Gulf Coast region. Support for this interpretation comes from outside the Maya area. In the Aztec creation myth from the *Leyenda de los soles*, humankind of the current era/creation is modeled from the bones of the former human beings from the third creation that were turned into fish by the flood (cf. Bierhorst 1992:8-9). Thus, the reference to the Tepew Oliman as *Chajkar Winaq* in the *Popol Vuh* could indeed refer to former creations and "ancient cultures," as well as to "origin" in the larger sense.

Connected with the concept of creation are knowledge, wisdom, creativity, arts and writing. In the Colonial sources, Tollan is generally referred to as a place of arts and writing. Toltec is the central concept for the bringing of culture and knowledge. In the *Popol Vuh*, the title *aj toltecat* is one of the names of the creator gods mentioned in connection with the creation of the effigies of carved wood (see Christenson 2004a:30), and the progenitors' sons are said to bring back insignia and writing from Tulan after crossing over to the sea to go back to the place where their fathers came from. Given the aforementioned association of water with knowledge, this passage from the *Popol Vuh* certainly confirms the interpretation of "crossing over the sea" as a metaphor for entering a spiritual pathway of knowledge that is not open to all, but only to the powerful *nawals*.

Understanding *Tulan* on "the other side of the sea" as a place of creation, an otherworld that is the abode of powerful ancestors and the location of rebirth and renewal of human origin, closely connected to the life cycle of maize and the natural perception of human birth, accessible through the life-giving element of water and knowledge – could we go so far as to suggest that the Central Mexican description of the place of origin Aztlan inside a lake could be linked with that same concept?

The search for Aztlan is an ongoing scholarly question – not only in the history of Mesoamerican studies, but also in Aztec history itself. Fray Diego Durán (cap. XXVII; 1984(II):215-224) reported that

Motecuhzoma I sent out an expedition to search for the lost homeland where the ancestors had lived. After having transformed themselves into animals, the emissaries arrived at a lake in the midst of which was the mountain Colhuacan. After re-transforming themselves into humans they crossed the water in canoes in order to find Huitzilopochtli's mother Coatlicue and their ancestors still alive on the mountain. As a sign, they brought back all sorts of fruit from this place of abundance on their return to Mexico. The detailed account in Duran suggests that in Late Postclassic Aztec culture, Aztlan may indeed have been thought of as an actual place. However, the narrative contains several elements which are reminiscent of the descriptions of Tulan, Wuqub' Pek Wuqub' Siwan in the Guatemalan sources. Thus, the original underlying concept might be much older, genuinely Mesoamerican and not referring to any actual place.

Irrespective of whether all these arguments prove valid, what the analysis shows so far is that more caution is needed in dealing with the Colonial texts. Religious metaphors may exist in contexts that appear to be literal statements of historical significance. The differentiation of historical and mythic information in autochthonous Colonial texts therefore is very much dependent on the correct interpretation of metaphors and language in general.

It needs to be mentioned that ethnohistoric research involves some political responsibility.

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Scholarly interpretations of the Colonial sources may become "written history" and may be drawn on by contemporary Maya people to reconstruct local history as part of the overall process of modern ethnic identity formation. We are certainly aware that the argument brought forward in this paper contradicts the prevailing idea of an immigration of the K'iche'an noble lineages from Mexico. We do not make a statement about whether there was an immigration or whether there was not. The evidence presented above simply shows that the phrases "the other side of the sea" and "the place where the sun emerges," as well as the toponym Tulan, do not indicate any precise location of origin but primarily carry a metaphorical meaning that makes sense within the general framework of a hitherto not particularly well understood Maya theology.

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## Appendix

*The story of the man swallowed by a fish...*

Oral Tradition recorded, translated and published by James L. Mondloch (1978: 192-203). Here reproduced with modernized orthography.

Ojer tzij na k'u ri' k'o jun achi xul pa we qatinamit Watemala. Pero are taq xul ri achi, na xul ta xaq je ri', sino pa ri utinamit xel loq, xe chuchi' ri mar. Jas taq kar katajin kutzukuj che ri uwa'im. Pero xaq k'a te' xel la chuchi' ri nimalaj ja' jun chikop, pero maj rilom wi uwach. Y ri are' raj xanimajik, pero na xkowin taj xanimajik. Y ri chikop xaq si xub'ik' b'ik intero. Y ri achi k'aslik xe' chupam.

Y ri chikop xtijtaz b'i ri achi rumal, xok b'i pa ri mar. Y ri awaj xk'o'ji pa ri mar como oxib' q'ij. Y ri achi k'a k'aslik, pero karilo byen qeq'u'm upam ri chikop. Asta el fin na k'ut, chi oxib' q'ij xel b'i ri jun chikop chuchi' ri mar pero najalaj juyub' chik.

Are' k'u ri achi xrilo chi algo xok apan uwach le q'ij. Karilo algo saq chik. Y k'o jun laj ub'aq ruk'a'm b'ik, como ri ojer na kakoj ta ch'ich' na. Entonces xuriq pa ri ubolsa como ruk'a'm b'ik. Entonces xa je ri' xutzererej upam ri jun chikop, y xkowinik xel b'ik. Xaq sie xsa'i' kan ri jun chikop chuchi' ri mar.

Entonces ri achi xopanik, pero sib'alaj kanum chik como maj utijom. Entonces xe' che utzukuxik jasa ri kutijo. Xaq k'a te xril apan je la' k'o ab'ix. K'a te k'u ri' xub'ij: wa' ke'ma la jun waj. Pero galan taq aj xrilo. Y xujek' jun aj. Pero are taq xujek'o, xuraqaqeej uchi' ri ab'ix. Are' k'u ri' ri achi: jasa k'u' wach wa' cher kuraq uchi'? Nima xuxe'j rib', a pero unumik are' ri' ri mas rajawaxik. Xaq si xujek' wi ri aj, cha'. Xuchap utijowik.

Pero are' k'u ri rajaw ri ab'ix, are taq xkito xtz'e'nik, panim xe'kila' are taq xe'kiriqa', jun achi k'o pa ri ab'ix. Katajin kutij ri aj. Y ri a're' xkitala chech: bweno, jasa modo kachap ri ab'ix? kecha' ri che. Pwes sib'alaj kinnum chik; maj wa nutijom, kacha' ri achi. Bweno, jasa modo katij at ri aj? Ri oj maya kikatij taj, kecha' chech. Ri oj katikom wa' ab'ix, pero xew kaqasiqo, na kaqatij taj, kecha' ri winaq chech ri achi. Are k'u ri achi: jasa modo che ri oj kaqatij yi'a'. Bweno, jawi chi' k'o kel wi le katijo? Kecha' ri winaq chech. Pwes, ri,

Well, there is this legend that there was a man who arrived here in our country of Guatemala. But when the man arrived here, he did not arrive in just any old way, but he came here from his country and he went to the seashore. He was looking for various kinds of fish for his meal. But suddenly an animal came out on the shore of the very big water but nowhere he had seen its like. And he almost fled, but he was not able to flee. And the animal simply gulped him down whole. And the man, alive, went into its stomach.

And the animal, after the man was eaten by it, entered into the sea. And the beast was in the sea about three days. And the man was still alive, but he saw that it was very dark inside the animal, until at last then, on the third day the animal came out of the sea, but he was in a very distant land now.

But the man saw that the sunlight was entering a little in there. He saw that it was a little clear then. And he had a small bone he was carrying along, because in olden times knives were not being used yet. Then he located it in his pocket as he was carrying it. And so then he slashed open the animal's stomach, and he was able to get out. And the animal was left sunning at the seashore.

And so the man arrived there. But he was hungry then since he had had nothing to eat. And so he went to look for what he could eat. Suddenly he saw over in the distance there was corn. And after that he said: I'm going to get and bring it here for myself. But he saw delicious ears of corn. And he pulled an ear. But when he pulled it the corn cried out strongly. And so the man said, What kind of thing is this that it cries out? He was quite frightened, ah but his hunger, that was the most important thing. So he actually pulled off the ear of corn, it is said. He began to eat it.

But the owners of the corn, when they heard it cry out, quickly they went to see it, and when they arrived there, a man was in the corn. He was eating the ears of corn. And they quickly asked him, Okay, how come you are taking the corn? they said to him. Well, I'm very hungry now; I haven't eaten anything, the man said. Well, how can you eat the corn? We can't possibly eat it, they said to him. We have planted this corn but we only smell it, we don't eat it, the people said to the man. And the man said, How come it is that we in fact

k'o ri uchi' wachaq; chi' kel wi ri na utz taj, bweno, ri achaq kaqab'ij oj chech. Entonces ri winaq: bweno jasa k'u modo ub'anom le jul chiwech? Kecha' ri winaq chech. A pwes ri oj oj pusum, kacha' ri achi chkech.

Bweno, la kab'an k'u jun pabor chkech, kojapusu? Kaqaj oj kaqatij la' le aj, kecha'. Bweno, utz ri', pero k'o jun kunab'al kok chech wa' we pusunik, pero najalaj juyub' k'o wi. We kiwaj, kiya jun nukej ke'ma la ri kunab'al, y kixinpus kanoq, kacha' ri' chke ri winaq. Bweno, utz ri', kecha ri winaq. Entonces xkiya kib' pa pusik. Y xu'ma jun ch'ich', xumin pa q'aq'. K'a te ri' kukoj chkech. Xupus ri uchi' kachaq ri winaq, como maj ri uchi' kachaq jawi kel wi ri kiwa'. Y xa je ri' xpustajik.

Xkiyala b'i jun chikop chech; jun nimalaj masat y xuq'axej ri mar. Upusum chi kan ri winaq, xe' chuk'amik ri kunab'al. A're' k'u ri winaq xkilo chi na k'is ta xu'pusu. Y a're' k'u ri na xepus taj, xkilo che ri kamik chi kaka'n ri kachi'il. Xkichap uraqik kichi' chrij ri chikop: katzalij uloq, katajin kekam ri kachi'il. Entonces are' k'u ri chikop xuta kitzij ri rajaw. Xub'ij chech ri achi: ma xa katajin kinkisik'ij loq, kacha'. No', na katkisik'ij taj; chakowila loq, xa kecha' yi'a ri'. Ja'e', kacha' k'u ri' ri chikop. Xa mas xek.

Xek al fin xq'ax apan chi uchi' ri mar jawi chi' elenaq wu'la ri achi. Y xu'ya kan ri jun chikop chi le mar. Y xa je ri' xpe pa ri utinamit jawi chi' petinaq wi. Y que kunab'al? Na xtzalij ta chi uloq. Xaq xew xukamisaj. Ya je ri' kak'is wa' we kwento ri'.

eat it? Well, is there somewhere where what you eat comes out? the people asked him. Well, right here is my anus, here is where the waste leaves from, that is, the shit we call it. Then the people (said), Well, what is that hole you all have alike? the people said to him. Ah, well, we're slit open, the man said to them.

Okay, but will you do us a favour and slit us open? We want to eat those ears of corn, they said. Okay, that's fine, but there's a medicine that is used with this slitting, it is in a faraway land. If you want, give me a deer and I'll go and get the medicine and I'll slit you before going, he said to the people. Okay, that's fine, the people said. Then they gave themselves to be slit. And they went and got a machete; he stuck it in the fire. After that he used it on them. He slit open the peoples' anuses, since they didn't have anuses where their food could come out. And so in that way they got slit open.

They quickly gave him a very large deer as he went, and he crossed over the sea. Leaving the people slit open, he went to get the medicine. But the people saw that he had not slit all of them, and the ones that were not slit saw that their companions were dying. They began to yell after the animal, Come back here, our companions are dying. And so the animal heard his owners call. He said to the man, Oh, they're calling me here from over there, he said. No they aren't calling you, they're just telling you to speed it up as fast as you can. Don't permit our companions to just die, they actually said. And so the animal said, Okay, and all the more he went on and on.

At last he crossed over to the edge of the sea where the man had left from when he came. And the animal left him at the edge of the sea. And in just that manner he returned to his country from where he had come. And what medicine? He didn't return here again. He simply killed them. And so that's the end of this here story.