
World Creator and World Sustainer: God N at Chichén Itzá

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During the ninth century, the site of Chichén Itzá in northern Yucatan emerged as the center of a powerful state that spread its influence throughout much of Mesoamerica. As attested by the art of Chichén Itzá, the success of the polity depended not only on stridently militaristic policies, but also upon fervent religious beliefs. The murals, sculptures and other forms of representational art of the site demonstrate that at the same time that the people of Chichén Itzá boasted of their dominance over defeated polities and captive peoples, they also acknowledged their obedience to the supernatural powers that infused their existence and that determined their destiny.

Among the gods to whom the populace of Chichén Itzá gave their reverence was the elderly male supernatural (fig. 1) identified as God N (Förstemann 1901; Schellhas 1904; Thompson 1970a; Taube 1989a, 1992). It is the contention of this paper that at Chichén Itzá, God N can be identified as First Father, the primordial male god of Maya cosmology.

According to Maya beliefs of both the pre-conquest and post-conquest periods, First Father played an important role in shaping the cosmos (Edmonson 1971; Tedlock 1985; Schele and Freidel 1990; Schele 1992a; Freidel, et al, 1993). Like First Mother, the female deity who was his consort, First Father was born before 4 *Ahau* 8 *Kumk'u*, the date on which the fourth cycle of cosmic creation was begun (Schele 1992a:120). Through the supernatural agency of the primordial couple, the natural world was formed, the younger gods were conceived, maize was brought into cultivation and humankind was modeled from corn dough. Creation was completed when shamanism and kingship, the essential institutions of Maya society, were established by the ancestral deity couple (Schele 1992a:163-165).

Despite his importance, First Father has not been identified with certainty in Maya art. First Father has been identified with God D, known as Itzamná (Taube 1992), and with God L (Pickands 1980). He is known in the Popol Vuh as *Hun Hunahpu* and in the Late Classic inscriptions as *Hun Ahau* and as the Maize God, *Hun Nal Ye* (Schele 1992a:21). He is depicted as a skull; he is resurrected as the youthful Maize God. Yet he remains at times practically indistinguishable from his Hero Twin Son, *Hunahpu*. He seems to be everywhere at once but remains elusive. No single deity in Maya sculpture has consistently been depicted with a set of iconographic attributes that fully symbolizes the supernatural aspects of First Father.

At Chichén Itzá, a complex of visual motifs associated with God N suggests that the deity was understood as a manifestation of First Father. One element in this complex of visual motifs is the compositional pairing of God N and Goddess O on the piers of the Lower Temple of the Jaguars. The female supernatural (fig. 2) is depicted with death motifs including a skeletalized face and long skirt decorated with crossed bones and death eyes. Similar death motifs are frequently associated in the codices with Goddess O whose identify as the ancient genetrix of creation has been well established (Joralemon 1981; Taube 1992).

A second element in the complex of visual motifs at Chichén Itzá that identifies God N with First Father is the serpentine umbilical cord associated with each of the ancestral deities. First Father, as well as First Mother, possessed procreative powers of a supernatural magnitude. Late Classic period figurines (Robicsek and Hales 1981:fig. 67; Taube 1989:fig. 24-12c) and vessels (Robicsek and Hales 1981:vessel 12a) frequently depict young women being fondled by an eager God N (Coe 1973; Schele and Miller 1986). In

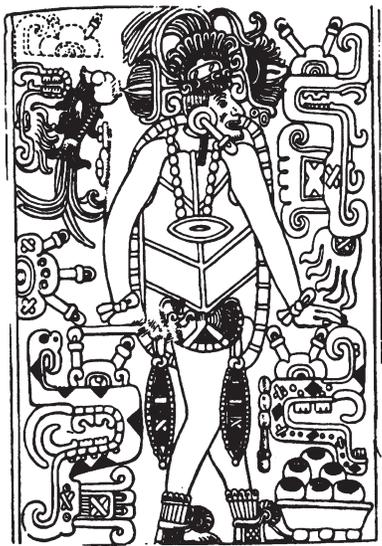


Fig. 1 God N. Lower Temple of the Jaguars. South Jamb. Chichén Itzá. Tozzer 1957, v. 12:fig. 614.



Fig. 4 Goddess O. Lower Temple of the Jaguars. North Pier. North Side. Chichén Itzá. Tozzer 1957, v. 12:fig. 195.

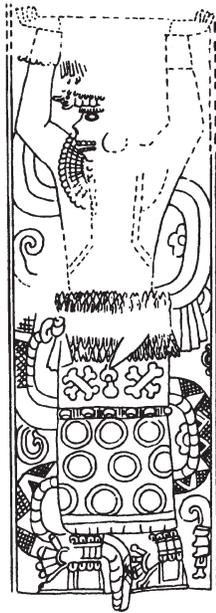


Fig. 2 Goddess O. Lower Temple of the Jaguars. North Pier. North Side. Chichén Itzá. Tozzer 1957, v. 12:fig. 196.

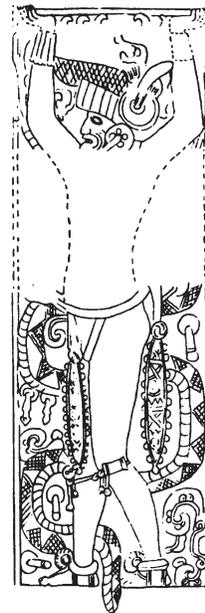


Fig. 5 God N. Lower Temple of the Jaguars. South Pier. West Face. Chichén Itzá. Tozzer 1957, v. 12:fig. 615.

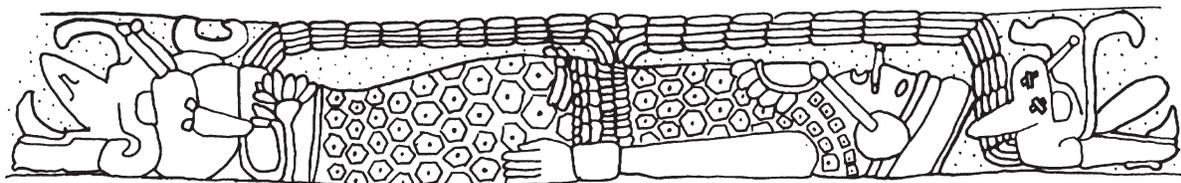


Fig. 3 North Temple. North wall. Chichén Itzá. Drawing by Linnea Wren.

contemporary Maya ritual, God N has survived as the licentious character known as *Mam*, whose clowning challenges the rigid conventions of social behavior (Stresser-Péan 1952). His public displays of lewd and undignified behavior make *Mam* an affectionate target of Maya humor. God N was the pre-conquest patron god of the five-day Uayeb period, whose acts of buffoonery were depicted by the Maya with great relish. In this aspect, he was often shown with traits adapted from the opossum *mam* (Taube 1989b:fig. 24-1).

Despite the apparent incongruity of associating the clowning opossum god with the venerable First Father, sexual potency is an essential element in the cosmological role of the ancestral couple. Located on the central axis in the basal band of the north wall of the North Temple at Chichén Itzá is a reclining female figure (fig. 3). Two serpents emerge like a bifurcated umbilical cord from her abdomen. These paired serpents apparently refer to the Maya interpretation of the umbilical cord, not only as the bond that connects the mother to her unborn child, but also as the living rope that linked the supernatural sphere to the natural world in the early period of creation (Miller 1982).

At Chichén Itzá the figures of both Goddess O (fig. 4) and God N (fig. 5), represented on the entrance piers of the Lower Temple of the Jaguars, are superimposed in front of serpent bodies. These serpentine bodies twist behind the supernatural torsos. Dropping like umbilical cords between their legs, the serpents connect the deities to the world below.

A third element in the complex of visual motifs at Chichén Itzá that identifies God N as First Father is pose. Whether reclining (Proskouriakoff 1970:fig. 15), kneeling (Seler 1902-23, v. 5:301) or standing (Seler 1902-23, v. 5:296), God N figures raise one or both arms to support the realm above their heads. These atlantean poses identify God N with the quadripartite, world-sustaining deities who are known in their youthful aspects as *Bacabs* and in their aged aspects as *Pauahtuns* (Tozzer 1941:137; Coe 1973:15; Schele and Miller 1986:122). The function of God N as the world-sustaining force can be equated with the world trees placed at the corners and center of the universe. According to the *Chilam Balam of Chumayel* (Roys 1933:100), the world tree in the cosmic center was called *Yax Che*, or First Tree. In Late Classic hieroglyphic texts, First Father is called the "stand up sky lord" because his rebirth coincides with the moment in creation

when the raising of the World Tree separates the earth and sky (Freidel, et al. 1993:42). The sky-bearing *Pauahtun* may also be understood as a "stand up sky lord" because the Cordemex Dictionary entry for *bacahb* is 'stood up' (Barrera Vásquez 1980).

The separation of the earth from the sky is evidently portrayed in Late Classic vessel scenes in which the World Tree grows out of the skeletal head of First Father (Coe 1978:vessel 16; Robicsek and Hales 1981:vessel 109). A similar scene is represented in relief at Chichén Itzá on the balustrades of the North and South Temples, structures located at the ends of the Great Ball Court (fig. 6). The moment in the creation drama at which First Father is decapitated and buried in the ballcourt is described in the *Popol Vuh*. A similar ritual of divine internment has survived among the Kekchi Maya (J. E. S. Thompson 1970b:299). The Kekchi celebrate the end of their Easter ceremonies by the burial of a modern image of a *Bacab*. These ceremonies appear to parallel the *Uayeb* ceremonies, which have been recognized as re-enactments of creation itself (Taube 1988). The identification of God N as the *Bacab*, with First Father as the "stand up sky lord," may explain the prominence of God N both as patron of and participant in *Uayeb* ceremonies.

The cosmological motif representing the separation of the earth from the sky is seen at Palenque in the Temple of the Foliated Cross (Schele 1979:fig. 16). The tablet from this temple depicts a Maize Tree growing from a skull that sprouts vegetation. The skull has been interpreted by David Freidel as the severed head of First Father, while the Maize Tree has been interpreted as the manifestation of First Father as the resurrected Maize Lord (Freidel, et al. 1993:359). The identification of First Father with the Maize Tree is suggested by the presence on the upper stalk of the corn plant of a full-frontal mask. This mask has been assigned the phonetic value *tzuk*, a term that means 'partition' and that also serves as one name for First Father (Grube and Schele 1991).

The Maize Tree can also be identified as a manifestation of God N. A pair of *tzuk* masks, shown in profile view, can be seen at the base of the corn plant. Since only one side of the Maize Tree is visible, it is possible to infer the presence of a fourth *tzuk* mask placed symmetrically with the full-frontal mask (Freidel, Schele and Parker 1993:360). The implicit representation of four *tzuk* masks apparently refers to the *kan tzuk*, that is,



Fig. 6 World Tree. North Temple. Balustrade of Upper Stairway. Chichén Itzá. Marfig. 192. Marquina 1951:fig. 30.

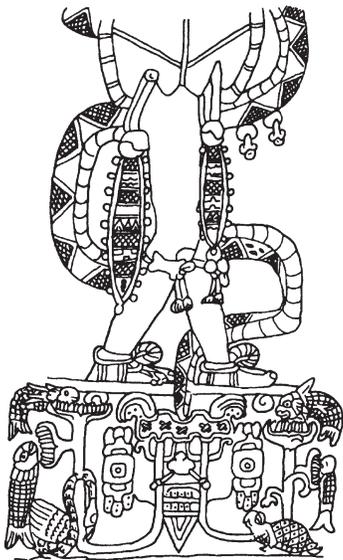


Fig. 7 God N. Lower Temple of the Jaguars. South Pier. North Face. Chichén Itzá. Drawing by Linnea Wren after Seler 1902-23, v. 5:fig. 290.



Fig. 8 Maize God emerging from witz head. Lower Temple of the Jaguars. South Pier. East Side. Upper Panel. Chichén Itzá. Seler 1902-23, v. 5:fig.192.

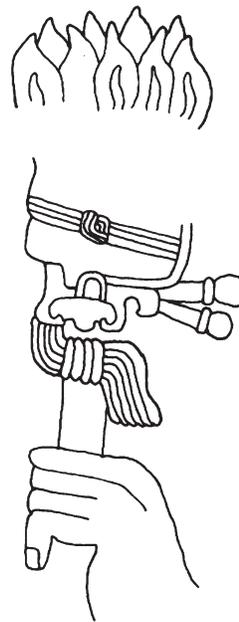


Fig. 9 Manikin scepter in hand of God N. Lower Temple of the Jaguars. North Jamb. Chichén Itzá. Drawing by Linnea Wren.

the quadripartite partitions of the cosmos, and to the quadripartite manifestations of God N as the *Bacabs/Pauahtuns* which sustain the cosmos.

At Chichén Itzá the God N equivalent of the icon represented at Palenque in the Temple of the Foliated Cross can be found on the piers of the Lower Temple of the Jaguars. Here *Pauahtun*, in place of the First Tree, stands atop a skull. Waterlily vines and flowers substitute for the optic nerves and death eyes as extrusions from the eye sockets (fig. 7). Freidel has identified First Father as the World Tree (Freidel, et al. 1993:358-9). At Chichén Itzá, *Pauahtun*, wearing the *Yax*



Fig. 10 Turtle shell with emergent Maize God. Robicsek and Hales 1981:vessel 117. Drawing by Linda Schele.

sign of the central First Tree in his headdress, substitutes for the tree. *Pauahtun*, like First Father, is the *axis mundi*; the *Pauahtuns* are directional aspects of First Father as the World Tree².

Other elements in the complex of visual traits at Chichén Itzá that identify God N with First Father are the references to lineage and lordship. Representations of God N on the entrance jambs of the Lower Temple of the Jaguars depict the deity as holding a manikin scepter in his right hand (fig. 1). Admittedly, the object held by God N on the southern jamb is difficult to identify, due in part to its partial destruction and in part to its confused rendering in the published drawing. However, the identical object in the hand of God N on the northern jamb is better preserved and can be identified as a scepter surmounted by a long-nosed, bearded deity head in profile view (fig. 9). Goddess O in the Lower Temple of the Jaguars (fig. 2) wears a jester god headband. In addition, depictions of God N and Goddess O on the entrance piers flank the jaguar throne located on the central axis of the Lower Temple of the Jaguars (Cohodas 1978:fig. 11).

It is from First Father that Maya rulers often claimed descent as justification for their right to govern (Schele and Freidel 1990:116; Freidel 1992:99). God N in his *Uayeb* role of opossum actor is often known ethnohistorically by the name *Mam*, a word that in Mayan languages

means 'maternal grandfather' as well as 'opossum' (Coe 1973:14). The highly suggestive ancestral meaning of the name *Mam* is reinforced by the recent identification of *Pauahtun* as a lineage deity at Copan.

Both William Fash (1989) and Claude Baudez (1989) have identified three architectural sculptures as *Pauahtuns* on the House of the Bacabs at Copan (Fash 1989:fig. 64). On the lower band of the north facade the two damaged figures are seated within skeletal serpent jaws. These figures, who wear beaded waterlily pectorals and hold shell ink pots, can be identified as *Pauahtuns*. The ancestral significance of these architectural sculptures is confirmed by the decorated *ahaus* that were attached to the snouts of the skeletal maws and which may signify 'father' (Fash 1989:67; Schele, et al., n.d.). In the upper entablature of the facade of the House of the Bacabs the central figure wears the waterlily headdress of a *Pauahtun*. Fash (1989) and Baudez (1989) interpret the central figure as the living embodiment of the patron god *Pauahtun*.

The possibility that God N represents a lineage deity not just for scribes but also for ruling families is raised by the pervasive presence of waterlily motifs associated with *Pauahtun* throughout Copan and by the appearance of waterlily motifs with rulers in other Maya sites (Baudez 1989:78). At Palenque the tied waterlily headdress emblematic of *Pauahtun* (Thompson 1970a:299) is worn by the living Pacal on the Oval Palace Tablet, Pacal's accession tablet (Schele and Miller 1986:fig. II-5), and by the dead Pacal on the Palace Tablet, the accession table of Pacal's son, K'an Hok' Chitam (Schele and Miller 1986:fig. II-7).

The central figure in the upper entablature of the House of the Bacabs at Copan is flanked by two figures wearing ears of corn in their headdresses (Fash 1989:fig. 64). These flanking figures have been interpreted as younger lineage members, often called 'sprouts' in Classic period texts (Schele 1992:141). According to modern interpretations of Maya cosmology (Freidel, et al. 1993:42), First Father entered the underworld during creation. There he was transformed into the Maize God who sprang as a living plant from the cleft earth into the human sphere. The substitution of the corn for waterlily motifs in two of the figures in the upper entablature of the House of the Bacabs suggests an analogy between First Father as the reborn Maize God and God N as the ancestral father of the living sprouts.



Fig. 11 God N emerging from witz head. North Colonnade. Chichén Itzá. Taube 1992:fig. 48a.



Fig. 12 God N impersonator/captive. Northwest Colonnade. Column 33S. Chichén Itzá. Morris, Charlot and Morris 1931:plate 100.

Additional elements in the complex of visual traits at Chichén Itzá that identify God N as First Father include references to maize. Directly above the pilasters and piers of God N and Goddess O in the Lower Temple of the Jaguars, the Maize God rises from a cleft *witz* head (fig. 8), confirming the cosmological identity of the supernatural ancestral couple. Taube (1989a:41) has noted a bowl of tamales placed at the feet of God N.



Fig. 13 Warrior wearing quechquemil. Northwest Colonnade. Column 57S. Chichén Itzá. Drawing by Linnea Wren.

Still another element that identifies God N as First Father is the turtle carapace that is worn by *Pauhtun* in one of his roles as world bearer. At Chichén Itzá God N frequently appears in guises that include conch shells, spider webs and insect bodies, possibly those of dragon-flies³. The primary importance of the tortoise carapace guise for the identity of God N, however, is indicated by the set of four God N figures on Structure H-17 in Late Post-Classic Mayapan. Although the Chichén Itzá precedent of representing God N as a quadripartite set is continued at Mayapan, the iconographic variation is eliminated. Each of the four God N sculptures is shown with a turtle shell (D. E. Thompson 1955:282).

The turtle shell, which can substitute for the *tun* glyph in the name of *Pauhtun* (Taube 1992:fig. 46a),⁴ has been shown to act as a metaphor for the trickster figure in Maya mythology (Kurbjuhn 1985). This figure is also the archetypal creator, ancestor, and magician. The turtle shell is also a symbol for the constellation Orion and for the surface of the earth. It apparently refers to the cosmological scenes in which the Maize God springs into the natural world from the Underworld (Taube 1985). A cleft carapace can substitute for First Father's skull in creation

imagery (Freidel, Schele, and Parker 1993:47). On one vessel, which depicts the birth of the Maize God, the carapace and the skull appear together, superimposed on each other (Freidel, et al. 1993:fig. 2.4; fig. 10).

A cleft carapace also substitutes for a *witz* head in depictions of the emergence of the Maize God. As previously noted, such scenes of supernatural transformation are found in the monumental sculptures of Chichén Itzá. On the jambs and piers of the Lower Temple of the Jaguars, the young Maize God is represented wearing ears of corn in his headdress and holding fruited and flowered vines (fig. 8). In depicting the god as he rises from the cleft *witz* head, these scenes evidently illustrate the passage in the *Chilam Balam of Chumayel* that refer to “the birth of him who was hidden in the stone” (Roys 1933:190). In this scene, and in others where the Maize God is born from a turtle carapace (op. cit.:fig. 2.4 and 2.27c), God N can be identified as one of the paired profile heads emerging from the sides of the *witz* head; he may personify the place where maize was born. This image suggests the “three-cornered precious stone of grace” which was formed during creation and which combines the Maya utilization of stone monuments as memorials of the gods with the Maya reverence for corn as the basis of human life (Roys 1933:107). Also at Chichén Itzá, on the columns of the North Colonnade, God N substitutes for the Maize God, and he himself emerges from the *witz* head (fig. 11).

The monumental art indicates not only that ritual performances at Chichén Itzá invoked the supernatural deities of creation, but also that ritual performers enacted the supernatural deeds of First Father. Distinctive costume elements worn by God N at Chichén Itzá include the shell pendant and hanging cross-hatched belt elements (fig. 1). Five piers in the Temple of the Warrior complex depict God N impersonators who incorporate these distinctive elements in their costumes (Morris, et al. 1931:Temple of the Chacmool, col. 6W; Temple of the Warriors col. 19N; Northwest Colonnade cols. 4N, 4W, 4S, 32S, 33S, 37E). In three instances (Morris, et al. 1931:Northwest Colonnade, cols. 32S, 33S, 37E), the God N impersonators can also be identified by their bound wrists as captives (fig. 12).

Maya art has a long tradition of displaying bound captives. In most instances, however, captives are stripped of most or all of their clothing and are displayed in postures indicative of their

subservience towards their captors (Dillon 1981; Schele 1984). At Chichén Itzá, in contrast, captives are richly laden with marks of high status and prestige (fig. 12). The depiction of captives at Chichén Itzá suggests that the use of a godly impersonator as a sacrificial victim, a practice observed in Aztec society, may have originated in the Maya lowlands. Thus, the transformation in the ritual practices and ideological functions surrounding human sacrifice that has been attributed to the Aztecs of the Late Post Classic period (Demarest 1984) may have actually occurred at Chichén Itzá during the Terminal Classic period.

Among the Aztecs, great religious festivals climaxed with the sacrifice of the living images of the god to the supernaturals. Godly impersonators intended for sacrifice played an important role in ceremonial practices. Chosen from among the prisoners captured in war because they possessed no physical blemishes, the godly impersonators, called *teixiptlas*, were considered upon the moment of their selection to have been reborn and to have become visible manifestations of the gods, called *teotls* (Hvidfeldt 1958; Townsend 1978:28). Their physical worthiness to be presented as offerings was increased by the godly behavior they were expected to exhibit during the ritual period, usually one year in length, preceding their sacrifice. Conducting themselves as models of elegant deportment and exquisite refinement, the handsome *teixiptlas* embodied the qualities attributed to the gods and were treated with the deference due to the gods. According to Sahagun (1950-69, 3:66; quoted in Hvidfeldt 1958:86),

The *teixiptla* was looked at as our lord, was treated as our lord, people asked for favors from him with sighing, before him they prostrated themselves, before him people kissed the ground.

So elevated was the status of the godly impersonator that the captive selected for this ritual role was dressed with gifts of splendid clothes and precious ornaments by the emperor. Himself regarded as godly, the emperor, it was reported to Sahagun (1950-69, 3:66; quoted in Hvidfeldt, 1958:87), “considers the *teixiptla* full surely his precious *teotl*!”. At the end of the designated period, the godly impersonators, now solemn and sometimes weeping, were led in a dance-like procession through the ritual precincts of Tenochtitlan. Ascending to the summit of the pyramid, they met their deaths.

The Classic Maya engaged in many forms of impersonation. A large percentage of the figures

depicted in the Temple of the Warrior complex at Chichén Itzá wear masks, headdresses and garments which signal highly charged ritual meanings. In addition to identifying costume elements associated with Chac, Tlaloc and other deities as well God N, it may also be possible to identify a triangular cape called the *quechquemitl* (Morris, et al. 1931:Northwest Colonnade, cols. 57S, 61S). Although worn by males, the *quechquemitl* may signal the presence of a mother goddess impersonator (fig. 13). According to Anawalt (1984), the *quechquemitl* functioned as a memory garment which was used almost exclusively to cover effigies and to costume impersonators, male and female, of the mother goddess.

Andrea Stone (1991) has argued that impersonation functioned both in the political arena as a strategy for the consolidation of power and in the spiritual arena as a means to open a channel of communication between human society and the gods. Among the Maya, forms of elite impersonation rituals in which males assumed female gender roles were prominent. The switched gender roles observable at Chichén Itzá in the depictions of warriors wearing *quechquemitls* may be attributable to the same reasons which caused Maya rulers to assume other female garments, including the netted costume (Stone 1991). Elite males strove to place themselves at the center of the natural reproductive cycle and thereby to personify the forces of agricultural and human fertility.

The files of figures sculpted in the surfaces of the Great Plaza of Chichén Itzá appear to depict rituals of procession, dance and sacrifice that united the populace and that propelled the rise of the polity. The depiction of bound God N impersonators argue that some captives at Chichén Itzá became godly impersonators of First Father and that their sacrifice re-enacted the descent of the ancestral male into the underworld to ensure the emergence of corn into the natural sphere. The presence of a possible impersonator of First Mother suggests that the rituals depicted at the Great Plaza, like the Aztec festival of Ochpaniztli, combined the celebration of agricultural fertility with the exaltation of military success (Brown 1984).

At Chichén Itzá, the sheer magnitude of artistic endeavor and the overwhelming number of depictions both of human and supernatural subjects recalls the question asked by the gods in the Popol Vuh (Tedlock 1985:79). Faced by the transitoriness of existence and mutability of the

cosmos, the gods anxiously queried, "How... can we be invoked and remembered on the face of the earth?" At Chichén Itzá, invocation and remembrance of both the human actors and supernatural deities was attempted in stone.

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NOTES

1 Identifying God N with the World Tree, the *Yax Che*, may explain why he is the head variant for the Mayan number five (J. E. S. Thompson 1971:133-4): he is the fifth and central direction.

2 God N's importance as a symbol of the quadripartite and centered universe may explain why his profiled face is a logogram for the so-called dedication verb. MacLeod (1990:331-347) has read the phonetic form of this verb as *hoy*, or 'to make proper', 'to circumambulate as in rituals to the various world directions'. Friedel, Schele, and Parker (1993:40-41; 357n.19) agree with her reading of this verb, and emphasize its meaning as centering, ordering, and partitioning—the very things done by the *bacabs*. As they point out, it also is what First Father as *Hun Nal Ye "Tzuk"* does at Palenque where the God N logogram substitutes for the verb in the Temple of the Cross creation text (*ibid.*, 41-42; fig. 2.7b, 2.8a).

3 I am grateful to Susan Milbrath for this suggestion (personal communication).

4 Taube (1989b) has convincingly demonstrated that God N's name is not merely two syllables, *pauh*, or *pa*, and *tun*, but rather three. The third, middle element is a corn curl motif, translated as *wah*, which by the Spanish Conquest, meant tamale. Although the Cordemex has no entry for *pa*, it does have *romper* for *pa'* (Barrera Vasques 1980). Based on this reading, a tentative meaning of *Pa-wah-tun* could be 'broken maize stone'.

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