

Re-framing the *Rilaj Mam* in Santiago Atitlán: A discussion of evidence which suggests the “primordial” origin of *Maximón*

Reformulando al Rilaj Mam en Santiago Atitlán: un análisis de evidencias que sugieren el origen “primordial” de Maximón

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Received: 18/IX/2024; Accepted: 10/VII/2025

Abstract: This work presents a discussion of evidence to better define the antiquity of a contemporary Maya tradition in Santiago Atitlán known as the *Rilaj Mam* (also known as “*Maximón*”). While the physical formation and formalization of the *Mam* (“Grandfather”) tradition may be relatively recent in its making (such as in the 19th century), the mytho-historical themes and archetypal beliefs that the tradition is argued to be rooted in are very ancient. The discussion of these themes is largely based on epigraphic and art historical sources, which are used to investigate the *Mam*’s possible relationship to sacred geography where the tradition is found, a proposed correlation between the *Mam* and a Classic Maya deity known as God L, the *Mam*’s likely association with a five-day period of the ancient solar calendar known as *Wayeb’*, and a probable connection to the ancestral Mesoamerican tree and sacred wood. The study relates to topics relevant to Maya studies such as the *Popol Vuh*, the *Haab’* calendar, and mytho-chronology, and is relevant to the study of world religions, including how ancient flood mythology may have influenced narratives bound to time and calendars.

Keywords: Contemporary Maya Spirituality, God L, *Nawal*, *Popol Vuh*, Santiago Atitlán.

Resumen: Este trabajo presenta una discusión de la evidencia para definir con más precisión la antigüedad de una tradición maya contemporánea en Santiago Atitlán conocida como el *Rilaj Mam* (también conocido como “*Maximón*”). Mientras la formación física y formulación de la tradición *Mam* (“Abuelo”) pueden ser relativamente reciente en su creación (como en el siglo XIX), los temas mito-históricos y las creencias arquetípicas en las que se argumenta que dicha tradición está arraigada son muy antiguos. La discusión de estos temas proviene principalmente de fuentes epigráficas e histórico-artísticas, las cuales se utilizan para investigar la posible relación del *Mam* con la geografía sagrada donde se encuentra la tradición, una correlación propuesta entre el *Mam* y una deidad maya clásica conocida como Dios L, la probable asociación del *Mam* con un periodo de cinco días del antiguo calendario solar conocido como *Wayeb’*, y una probable conexión con el árbol ancestral mesoamericano y la madera sagrada. El estudio aborda temas relevantes para los estudios mayas como el *Popol Vuh*, el calendario *Haab’*, y la mito-cronología, y es pertinente para los estudios de las religiones del mundo, incluyendo cómo la antigua mitología diluviana, pudo haber influido en narrativas ligadas al tiempo y los calendarios.

Palabras clave: Dios L, Espiritualidad Maya Contemporánea, *Nawal*, *Popol Vuh*, Santiago Atitlán.

INTRODUCTION

In this paper, I summarize and further elaborate upon points of my Delvas presentation to students of the Universidad del Valle de Guatemala on the subject of a famous yet deeply mysterious center of contemporary Maya spirituality at Lake Atitlán: the *Rilaj Mam* (also known as “*Maximón*”), a weekly destination for dozens of devotees and hundreds of global visitors. The aim is to present various lines of evidence suggesting that the *Mam* deity complex in this Highland Guatemalan town is not only significantly older but also more closely related to widespread Mesoamerican traditions than is generally accepted or believed. The arguments presented in this contribution are intended to bring greater clarity to the *Nawal*'s contested identity, being that the *Rilaj Mam* is a sculpture with enormous symbolic power (Vallejo 2005) not only to those interested in understanding the origins of contemporary indigenous identity in Highland Guatemala but also to those who are threatened by these native traditions. Nathaniel Tam (also known as E. Michael Mendelson), who completed the first ethnography of Santiago Atitlán in the 1950's, once stated among many of his observations that the *Mam* was “loved by the majority of the village, and also by the tourists” (Mendelson 1957: 344). But like Lothrop (1929) from a generation before him, he also documents abuse by Catholic church officials, whose activities across multiple generations since have effectively reoriented the village away from its “Old Ways” (Carlsen 1997). The stunning rise of the Pentecostal Evangelical movement and megachurch phenomenon has put even greater pressure on the population to abandon the beliefs of grandparents and great-grandparents. While many tourists and villagers continue to view the *Mam* with curiosity and a nostalgic fondness, I have personally observed periodic hostility from locals, foreigners, and the highest-ranking regional Catholic church officials toward the *Mam* and *Cofradía* caretakers. Intolerance is also allegedly manifested through violence toward prayer-maker/carriers of the *Rilaj Mam* known as *telinels*. Two former *telinels* who I became familiar with since I came to reside in the village in 2013 were murdered, and a third, Pedro Ramírez Ixbalán (Fig. 1), disappeared in July 2024. These events, accomplished with complete impunity, are arguably comparable to the death of Maya daykeeper and “curandero” Domingo Choc Che, accused by his local community in San Luis, Petén, of witchcraft and burned in 2020, which resulted in national and international outrage as well as criminal convictions (BBC News Mundo 2020).

But in the case of Santiago Atitlán, there exists what might be considered a “crisis of perception” by which the *Rilaj Mam* is not recognized as a surviving Pre-Columbian tradition. Most individuals, including *Cofradía* members who attend the *Nawal* daily, perceive the tradition to be localized and of relatively recent origin. Sexton & Bizzaro Ujpán (1999: 141) state that the “belief in *Maximón* is of uncertain origin, but it seems to have emerged in the 19th century,” citing studies by Tax & Hinshaw



Figure 1. Pedro Ramírez Ixbalán, *telinel*, carries the *Mam* on Holy Friday, 2012.
Photo by David M. Schaefer

Figura 1. Pedro Ramírez Ixbalán, *telinel*, carga el *Mam*, viernes santo de 2012.
Foto por David M. Schaefer

(1969), Schwarz (1983), and Glittenberg (1994). This perception likely places the formation of the *Mam* on the shoulders of an eminent late-18th century Maya priest named Francisco Sojuel, a semi-mythical ancestor capable of transcending time who is “credited with instituting many, if not most, of the ritual practices currently observed in Santiago Atitlán” (Christenson 2009). Former *telinel* Juan Tacaxoy Coo often stated “500 years” - since the time of Spanish arrival and one-quarter the antiquity of Christ - as the *Mam*'s approximate age (Juan Tacaxoy Coo, pers. comm., 2024). Lacking known connections to the Mesoamerican past, it is the “ambiguous” and “equivocal” nature of the *Mam* (Mendelson 1957), which attracts some, while also creating a void onto which even well-intentioned individuals frequently project great prejudice and fear.

I must respectfully emphasize that despite the intensity of worship and authenticity of faith shown at the *Rilaj Mam* shrine in Santiago Atitlán, the figure need not be seen as purely a religious/spiritual object or one which visitors must choose to either admire or despise according to their convictions and upbringing. Rather, it is by “re-framing the *Rilaj Mam* through the lens of ancient Mesoamerican writing, art, and calendars - with the goal of identifying the mytho-historical archetypes underlying the tradition - that I believe it may come to be better understood, more respected and protected, and even admired by both the local

and international community. These perspectives may also provide evidence as to which Mesoamerican ancestors the origin beliefs of the Tz'utujil and other Highland Maya were and continue to be connected to, and how the sacred geography of Lake Atitlán was interpreted through origin beliefs. The paper, through its discussion of the *Rilaj Mam* tradition, seeks to reveal the subtle mytho-historical “undercurrent” still perceptible at the lake to this day by demonstrating its close association with related traditions in remote times and places of Mesoamerican history.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

A major hurdle when investigating questions of identity with respect to the *Rilaj Mam* is the fact that ethnographic analogy - often made through interviews, which attempt to reconstruct ancient meanings by relating them to the beliefs of contemporary peoples - has failed to provide any clarity or satisfying results. Despite interviews by Mendelson some 70 years ago, which revealed that the *Mam* was considered, by some, to be “primordial” and created “in the beginning of the world” (Mendelson 1959), his ethnography also uses words like “confusion” and “chaos” (Mendelson 1957) to describe the dozens of names, titles, and associations that circulated among the village and its visitors at that time, many which show an obvious fusion with “imported” Christianized ideas. While interviews with current visitors to the Cofradía of the Santa Cruz may provide data for certain types of investigations, personal experience has taught me that interview-based inquiry into the *Mam*'s origins is an exercise in futility. There is no agreed-upon explanation for the *Mam*'s identity or origins from anyone, neither from his traditionalist caretakers in the Cofradía, nor from academics in universities around the world, nor from the many inventive tour guides who bring national and international tourists to see the *Mam* each day of the year. In the case of the *Rilaj Mam*, it is the past which best seems to inform the present, rather than the present to inform the past - this is the theoretical perspective which has guided my method of study in constructing an understanding of the ancestor-*Nawal* presented here.

The method of inquiry by which the ancient past may be used to reconstruct modern meanings, rather than vice versa, is a privilege provided by advances in epigraphic and art historical studies in recent decades. It can now be argued that multiple, often overlapping mytho-historical themes which were important to ancient Maya identity seem to “converge” on the *Rilaj Mam* tradition and the geographical location where the tradition is said to have originated and is still found today. The following will be analyzed:

(1) Sacred Geography: The “three-ness” of majestic Lake Atitlán, with its triangular arrangement of volcanoes, with Santiago Atitlán between them, set beside the lake caldera seems to have formed a logical connection to ancient Mesoamerican narratives of time and sacred ancestors.

(2) The *Rilaj Mam* - God L Connection: In addition to a description of the two figures, four characteristics are summarized, which seem to be shared between a Classic Maya deity known as God L and contemporary *Rilaj Mam*, a relationship, which has been suggested in at least a dozen academic studies (e.g., Martin 2006, Carlson 2011).

(3) *Wayeb'* Symbolism: One of Mendelson's most important early observations about the *Rilaj Mam*, an alleged relation to *Wayeb'* - the five-day period at the end of the ancient, 365-day *Haab'* (or *Ab'*) solar calendar - is elaborated upon and shown to be tied symbolically to the popular name *Maximón*.

(4) The Ancestral Tree: The tree from which the *Mam* is made, known as *tzajtel* or *tzite'*, is seen as an expression of the ancestral Mesoamerican tree, iconographically represented in both hybrid and cross-like forms in ancient art. Primordial trees and sacred wood are shown to relate to *Wayeb'* as well as to the chronology of origin beliefs, such as in the *Popol Vuh* and hieroglyphic inscriptions known as *Ux Ahal*, the lost origins of the ballgame, at Yaxchilan.

Theoretical background

The notion that the dramatic geography of Lake Atitlán and its inhabitants may retain elements of ancestral Mesoamerican beliefs traceable to the Maya Classic period seems plausible. Yet it is the sheer magnitude of time represented here, spanning thousands of years, which stretches the limits of theoretical possibility. Claims like this may also conflict with prevailing attitudes and assumptions about Mesoamerican mythology and the ability of contemporary Mayan language speakers to maintain a worldview still oriented to such traditions. Therefore, this methodology requires additional explanation and justification. The following points are relevant considerations when attempting to compare the contemporary *Rilaj Mam* to God L, the ancestral sacred tree, and other “primordial,” archetypal beliefs:

(1) Indigenous populations of Highland Guatemala, and specifically the Tz'utujil in this case, do not show evidence of hieroglyphic writing. Attempting to connect traditions of the contemporary K'iche'-Mayan language group with more ancient ones from a distant geographical location written in entirely different languages, namely Ch'olan and/or Yucatecan, is therefore considered problematic to Classic Maya specialists who are often focused on hieroglyphic texts and the geographical areas where they are found. Similarly, the use of the Long Count calendar is not attested among the Tz'utujil or other Highland groups. Nevertheless, there is widespread agreement that the origins of the Mayan diaspora began some 4,500 years ago in the Highlands of Guatemala, only a short distance from modern Lake Atitlán (Barb MacLeod, pers. comm. 2024).

(2) Hieroglyphic texts which narrate the deeper past through dates and actions by ancient gods within the structure of the

Long Count calendar have often been labeled as “myth” or conceptualized as “just mythological” among influential academic circles. According to the modern use of these terms, this implies their inherent falsehood, or what Bricker (1981) refers to as the “antithesis” of history. While Mesoamerican peoples never differentiated between “myth” and “history” in the way that theoretical approaches do today (Boone 2000), there has been a strong preference within Mesoamerican studies to downplay the significance of 4 Ajaw 8 Kumk'u (see Thompson 1963) and other “mythological dates”, which formed the core of ancient Mesoamerican timekeeping, religion, and political order and which often feature God L, “numbered skies,” “stones,” and other key elements. However complex the reasons may be, this tendency has created bias in how ancient myths have been interpreted and presented to the public. Here I use the term “mytho-historical” when referring to the Long Count calendar and its deeper chronology of actors and events, similar to the terms “mythistory” recommended by Tedlock (1985), “theories of history” recommended by Bricker (1981), and “sacred history” suggested by Jansen & Pérez Jiménez (2007).

(3) While it is often assumed that one-to-one correspondence between the ancient and the modern naturally exists in cases of cultural continuity, there seems to exist a propensity - explained as the law of disjunction by Kubler (1969) - for original forms and meanings to be transformed, reinterpreted, and conflated over the course of many centuries and millennia. Just as Pre-Columbian beliefs have syncretically fused with Catholic saints during the past 500 years across the Americas and in places like Santiago Atitlán, disjunction states that these changes occur through natural processes, amplified in cases of intercultural contact and when passed along orally. The oldest Mesoamerican mytho-historical complexes - the original archetypes - are therefore the most likely to have undergone changes in how concepts were understood and expressed, resulting in highly localized narratives. This process not only affects the present moment but was in effect long ago, when the Classic Maya put even more ancestral beliefs (e.g., from Olmec times) into art and writing. I would also emphasize that numbers - including number-prefixed mytho-historical entities and “number-day” identified supernaturals - may be the most important surviving elements of ancient narratives because numbers are the most likely to have preserved original forms.

(4) The tendency of Mesoamerican deities to exhibit characteristics which differ by site, region, and time period has often favored a theoretical perspective whereby deities might best be conceptualized as “localized” phenomena (Gillespie & Joyce 1998). Thus, any attempt to reconstruct an “original” form or meaning of a deity is seen as counterintuitive. While cautious and conservative, this theoretical perspective is limiting in that it assumes that ancient Mesoamerican mythologies were independently contrived, such as by rulers to justify their power, and are therefore make-believe.

(5) Numerous Mesoamerican researchers, some mentioned below, have made pioneering contributions despite theoretical imitations, which demonstrate continuity and survival of beliefs across massive expanses of time and between cultures in both ancient and modern Mesoamerica. The Maize Lord, who plays a central role in Maya religion as a cultural hero who dies and is reborn again, known as *Hun Hunahpu* in the *Popol Vuh* and *Jun Ixim* in Classic Period art, has been interpreted as playing a central importance in 3,000-year-old Formative period Olmec art (Taube 1996). The Feathered Serpent complex has been found in monumental Olmec architecture at La Venta (Joralemon 1996) and appears in carvings at roughly contemporary Chalcatzingo. Lightning deity *K'awiil* has been seen to share meanings with that of Tezcatlipoca in Central Mexico (Coe 1973) and *Tohil* among the contact-period Highland K'iche' (Tedlock 1985; Valencia Rivera 2006). The identification of important *Popol Vuh*-themed monuments at Preclassic Izapa (Freidel *et al.* 1993; Guernsey 2006) verifies the antiquity of the central plot of a sacred Highland Maya book whose authenticity (because of its discovery in the early 18th century) had been subject to skepticism and doubt. Although God L, a hybrid jaguar-human, has not been identified in Formative Olmec art, it is noteworthy that were-jaguars (hybrid, jaguar-human beings) have historically been seen as playing a major theme of Olmec art (Miller & Taube 1993). In the absence of one-to-one correspondence between names and iconographic attributes, “cultural logics” (Early 2006) help bridge the gap between traditions shared by peoples from geographically separate places and times, providing a “long view” of Mesoamerican history with elements that are clearly unifying.

(6) Indigenous Mayan language-speaking peoples of Guatemala have historically been denied an ancestral connection to the ancient Maya by mainstream society (Montejo 2005). For example, origin mythology from the *Popol Vuh* and other Highland documents refer to a place of origin as *Tula*, *Tulan*, or *Tollan* - terms, which have been traditionally understood to refer to a specific geographical location in central Mexico. This and other interpretations have been used to disseminate a derogatory explanation for the origin of indigenous people in Guatemala, that of recently arrived “Mexican immigrants”; it complements the “Mayas totally disappeared” storyline, which is often repeated by elements of Guatemalan society to this day. Sachse & Christenson (2005) built a case that *Tollan* is more likely a mytho-historical place name referring to ancient conceptions of watery origin and emergence. Sachse (2006: 369) addresses the issue of outside influence on Highland Maya beliefs: “It can now be stated that although the Postclassic Highland Maya did indeed adopt some features of central Mexican religion...their religious ideas and myths were, to a large extent, the same as those of the Classic, and have survived to the present day.” With perspectives like these, one might sooner expect, rather than be surprised to find, millenia-old symbolism woven into the wooden *nawal-antewal* that is contemporary *Rilaj Mam*.

RESULTS

The study is organized into four thematic sections titled Sacred Geography, The God L - *Rilaj Mam* Connection, *Wayeb'* Symbolism, and The Ancestral Tree. They are presented in such a way that the reader is invited to observe and make logical connections between elements in each section, even though they may not be overtly stated.

Sacred Geography. The iconic beauty of Lake Atitlán excited early writer-explorers like John Lloyd Stevens and Aldous Huxley, who popularized the setting to readers around the planet, while some academics have described the lake as “one of the most beautiful places in the world” (Christenson 2009: 98). But the first, unnamed and long-forgotten visitors to the volcanic caldera arrived across thousands of years and long before the arrival of Spain to the area, a fact which is attested by local archaeology and the range of pottery and incense burners found beneath its waves (Galindo & Popenoe 2015). How did this natural environment appeal to the minds of earlier Pre-Columbian peoples, their cosmologies, and their sacred beliefs? What elements, if any, of this ancient ideology still survive at Lake Atitlán today...and is the *Rilaj Mam* one of them?

Stross (2008) stated that Mesoamerican peoples deemed certain landscapes to be sacred and inherently powerful because of their relationship to origin beliefs; these natural environments - often mountains, stones, caves, and bodies of water - play a role in preserving cultural memory and were a common destination for pilgrimage in ancient times. What may have given Lake Atitlán a sacred and powerful quality to ancient peoples, connected to beliefs of creation and origin, is the obvious and stunning “three-ness” of its volcanoes at the deep water’s edge (Bassie-Sweet 2008). It is between this massive triangular arrangement in a hidden bay where modern village life exists in *Tz’kin Jaay* (“The Bird House”), also known as Santiago Atitlán.

The tendency to organize sacred entities into groups of three is well attested and of very early origin in Mesoamerica, going back to at least Olmec times (Stross 1989; Rice 2007). Late Preclassic Izapa, the south coast site famous for having some of the earliest *Popol Vuh*-themed monuments from well before the time of Christ, has been noted as containing a triadic arrangement of pillars supporting three stones situated among symbolic primordial waters, located before the site’s most massive temple (Guernsey 2006, citing Taube 1998). Classic Maya sites such as Copan, Caracol (Fig. 2) and Ceibal were self-identified “three mountain” or “three stone” places according to inscriptions (Martin & Grube 2008). We might even take the comparison further, to the triadic temple group arrangements ubiquitous to Maya architecture, which reached unprecedented proportions in the Late Preclassic period, as seen in the El Tigre and La Danta triple-temple groups at El Mirador, Petén (Folan *et al.* 2001). Recent investigations just kilometers from modern-day Santiago Atitlán at the underwater archaeological

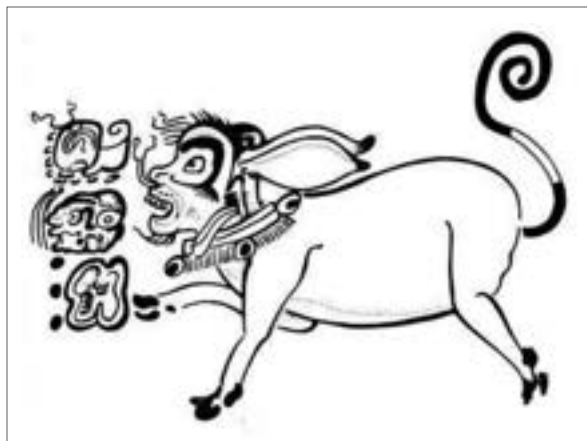


Figure 2. The “3-Mountain” placename identifies this wahy, a deer-monkey hybrid, from Caracol. Drawing from Helmke & Nielsen (2009): 75

Figura 2. El topónimo “3-Montaña” identifica este wahy, un híbrido venado-mono, de Caracol. Dibujo por Helmke & Nielsen (2009): 75

zone of Samabaj have revealed that the site was a probable pilgrimage destination containing a stela-raising tradition as well as evidence of ceramics going back to the Early Preclassic (Medrano & Rodríguez 2012).

Rare hieroglyphic inscriptions from the Maya Classic Period known today as “creation” or “era date” texts narrate the beginning of the Long Count calendar over 5,000 years in the past and consistently place it in connection with a “three stones place” (Freidel *et al.* 1993). These hieroglyphs, carved into stone, molded with stucco, and painted on ceramic vessels, are famously known from Classic Maya sites such as Palenque, Copan, Coba, Dos Pilas, and Naranjo. The Long Count calendar, Mesoamerica’s most ancient count of days, begins on the day 4 Ahau 8 Kumk’u in the year 3114 B.C.E. at the “Yax Three-Stone-Nal,” with Yax (a logograph) being read as “First,” “New,” or “Blue/Green” and Nal (a logograph) being read as “place.” The “three stones” hieroglyph - likely also a logograph - has proven difficult to decipher, but accompanying hieroglyphs suggest a connection to the *jehl* (“change”) of either a k’ojob (“three stone hearth”) (Callaway 2011) or a k’oj b’aah (“face image”) related to the belt imagery of rulers (Stuart 2011); notably, these belts also often depict three massive, shining jade celts hanging from them. Whether or not the “three stones” held a physical, metaphorical, and/or chronological meaning to earlier Mesoamerican peoples, they have been identified in the iconography of Olmec art (Reilly III 1994), well over 1,000 years before such Classic Maya “creation” / “era date” texts. This makes the “three stones” not only archetypal but subject to potential evolution, reinterpretation, and regional variation with the passage of millennia.

Most relevant to the discussion of the *Rilaj Mam* presented here, the so-called “three stones of creation” have drawn comparison to the three volcanoes at Lake Atitlán by some authors (Christenson 2001; Bassie-Sweet 2008). Equally



Figure 3. God L sits on his Jaguar throne on 4 Ahau 8 Kumk'u, the Yax "Three Stone Place." Vase of the Eleven Gods (K7750) on display at LACMA. Photo by David M. Schaefer.

Figura 3. Dios L se sentó en su trono Jaguar en 4 Ahau 8 Kumk'u, el Yax "Lugar de Tres Piedras." Vaso de los Once Dioses (K7750) en exhibición en LACMA, Los Angeles, CA. Foto por David M. Schaefer.

intriguing, a pair of ceramic vessels from the Naranjo region (K2796 and K7750) show an interest in representing the cigar-smoking, jaguar-human merchant deity God L (Fig. 3) seated on a throne when Mesoamerica's most ancient count of time, the Long Count, commenced at the "three stones place." It is precisely this God L figure, which numerous investigators (Coe 1978; Miller & Taube 1993; Christenson 1998; Stanzione 2000; Vallejo 2005; Martin 2006; Grofe 2009; Carlson 2011; Nikolai Grube, pers. comm. 2012; Van Akkeren 2012; Schaefer 2018; MacKenzie 2021) have compared to the *Rilaj Mam* (also known as *Maximón*) in Santiago Atitlán.

The God L - *Rilaj Mam* Connection. The God L figure is depicted in ancient art as an old man or as a hybrid, jaguar-human supernatural with attributes such as a large hat mounted by a bird, and a cigarette or cigar in his mouth. Despite numerous studies (Coe 1973; Gillespie & Joyce 1998; Bernatz 2006; Carlson 2011; Tokovinine & Beliaev 2013), a common name which once identified God L remains elusive, and thus the alphabetic designation created by Paul Schellhas (1904) is used. The number "thirteen" has been noted to identify God L and his owl headdress (Martin 2006); out of over 50 examples

of God L in the archaeological record, about seven depict a "numbered sky" glyph in relation to God L, and three of these show the "13-Sky" glyph (the others being "9-Sky" and "12-Sky"). God L is identified by the calendar name "13-Dog" on a rare ceramic vessel (Bernatz 2006), a number-day combination that is found in a deep-time calculation at Palenque believed to correlate with the famous "Rabbit Pot" ceramic vessel, which depicts God L and contains the name *Mam* (Stuart *et al.* 1999; Wald & Carrasco 2004). According to the *Chilam B'alam* of Chumayel, mythology from the Yucatan involves a deity known as *Oxlajun-ti-Ku* ("13-God") who in the course of being defeated by a deity called *Bolon-ti-Ku* ("9-God"), is slapped, spat upon, and thrown upon his back. Martin (2006) identified this "13-God" as a reference to God L.

God L is also identified as "4-Dog" far beyond the Maya region in the western periphery at Cacaxtla, where he is depicted in a mural scene as a jaguar-human merchant traveler (Martin 2006). In a potentially extraordinary example of shared cultural logics, the name "4-Dog" identifies a primordial female in Central Mexican creation mythology of the Codex Vienna (page 49a), a creator mother named before the birth of the cultural hero, "Lord 9-Wind" (Boone 2000). God L also plays an important role in mythic contexts of the "three stones place," the Maize Lord, the Moon Goddess, and *K'awiil*. He is believed to have animal transformations (Kerr & Kerr 2005; Carlson 2011) and to relate closely to the deities *B'olon Yokte' K'uh*, a merchant deity known from the Yucatan designated as God M, and possibly to other "old" gods such as God D (Itzamna), God N (Pauhaun), and a Deer God (Barb MacLeod, pers. comm. 2024). All of these variations and associations hint at the antiquity and central importance of God L in certain mytho-historical narratives.

The *Rilaj Mam* is an approximately four-foot tall, masked, wooden statue closely guarded in the Santa Cruz Cofradía house, where he is presented alongside three Catholic images, including the Crucified Christ ("Señor Sepultado"). Handsomely dressed in boots, *skaf* (men's traditional, embroidered bird pants), a *pas* (traditional belt-wrap), a button-down shirt and coat draped over by more than a dozen scarves, and two "cowboy" hats, the *Mam* maintains a cigarette or cigar in his mouth. The figure is essentially a hybrid tree-man made from the wood of a sacred tree called *tzajtel* in Tz'utujil or *tzite'* in Kaqchikel and K'iche'. He is considered very old through the name *Mam* ("Grandfather") as well as the common epithet *saq awa*, *saq ametz'* ("white is your hair, white are your eyebrows"). The *Rilaj Mam* has dozens of names and titles, the most common being *Nawal Ala*, *Nawal Acha* ("Nawal Boy, Nawal Man"), Don Pedro (also known as "Luch"), and San Simón. Outside of the cofradía house, the name Judas Iscariot has often been applied to the *Mam* when ritually tied to a post during Catholic Holy Week, although Mendelson (1957) emphatically denied that Judas Iscariot was the *Mam*'s true or original identity, calling this a "confusion of personalities"; he documents the



Figure 4. The *Mam* was not tied to the post during Semana Santa 2023 in order to protest the *Mam-as-Judas* Iscariot identity that has long been applied. Photo by David M. Schaefer.

Figura 4. El *Mam* no fue atado al poste durante la Semana Santa 2023 para protestar la identidad *Mam-como-Judas* que ha sido aplicado desde hace mucho tiempo. Foto por David M. Schaefer.

Mam-Judas “confusion” to at least the time of Lothrop (1929). The identification of *Mam* as Judas - a connection some investigators have seen as a central aspect of the figure's syncretic identity - may have evolved as a way to rationalize the wooden statue's elevated status during the five days of Holy Week, especially following the loss of Pre-Columbian meanings and the imposition of Christian frameworks. In this interpretation, the tying of *Mam* conveniently echoes Judas's fate after his betrayal of Christ. However, Cofradía leaders in Santiago Atitlán tend to be critical of the *Mam-as-Judas* identity, sometimes radically, as was the case with former *telinel* Nicolas Gonzalez Tziná, alcalde of the Cofradía of the Santa Cruz during Holy Week in 2023. That year, Nicolas used his authority to physically remove the chapel's post and place the *Rilaj Mam* in an untied, seated position (Fig. 4) to protest the *Mam-as-Judas* narrative, which continues to dominate the village (Nicolas Gonzalez Tziná, pers. comm. 2023).

Another problematic name, San Simón, more commonly refers to a counterpart of the *Mam* found in dozens of Guatemalan villages, most famously in San Andrés Itzapa and Zunil, which has iconographic and semantic qualities distinct from the *Rilaj Mam* in Santiago Atitlán (Bell 2012). Depicted as a well-dressed Ladino and often wearing sunglasses and sporting a cane, San Simón has a following mostly among indigenous Highland Guatemalans, and also, like the *Mam*, among Ladinos and even foreigners. As observed by Mendelson (1957), visitors to the Cofradía of the Santa Cruz are often from other villages

who come to the *Rilaj Mam* in Santiago Atitlán as pilgrims, most commonly from Tz'utujil, Kaqchikel, and K'iche' communities but also from further afar; these visitors often visit San Simón shrines elsewhere, too. San Simón receives similar offerings and prayers and is celebrated on the Day of Saint Simón, October 28th, the date on which the *Mam* is now celebrated (although this appears not to have been noted by Mendelson and may be a new custom). Another problematic name with obscure origins is Don Pedro (“Luch”), believed by Mendelson (1957) to refer to the conquistador Pedro de Alvarado, himself. The *Mam*'s most “authentic” other common name - equally confusing for its numerous semantic variations and uses (Saler 1964) - is “*nawa*” (or “*nuwa*”). A loan word from Nahuatl, the term *nawal* relates to the Classic Maya *wahy* (plural *wahyob'*) complex and has semantic and linguistic connections with sleep, dreaming, spirit companions, co-essences, animal transformations, witchcraft, diseases, and powerful ancestral spirits (Stuart & Houston 1989; Helmke & Nielsen 2009; Brown 2015). All of these names, titles, and powers mentioned point to an ambiguous and transforming identity with an ability to accept all names and titles that are given. This is logical because the *Mam* is a well-known “trickster” and “shape-shifter” who can also transform into a dog or a skunk, his primary alter-egos, as well as into birds and insects.

Despite some distinctions between God L and the *Rilaj Mam* in the brief descriptions above, there are readily identifiable similarities between the pair, which point to a conservation of meaning between the deity complexes despite great chronological and geographical separation. Next, I briefly summarize these qualities:

The Cigar and Tobacco. Both God L and the *Rilaj Mam* smoke tobacco, known as *may* in Mayan languages. Famous scenes such as the Vase of the Seven Gods and a panel from the Temple of the Cross at Palenque show God L smoking a cigar. Possible astronomical symbolism of God L's cigar includes a proposal linked to comets by Milbrath (1999). God L is depicted in a series of Maya flasks (see Kerr & Kerr 2005) studied extensively by Carlson (2003), who believed that God L was probably known as *May* and considered “the personification of tobacco itself” (Carlson 2011: 209). A similar relationship to tobacco exists for the *Rilaj Mam*, who is often referred to in prayers as *May Ala*, *May Acha* (“Tobacco Boy, Tobacco Man”) and presented with lit cigarettes in his mouth during ceremonies. He also maintains an unlit cigar in his mouth outside of ceremonies, for public events, and even while “sleeping.” Contemporary sacred fire ceremonies, including those made in the company of *Mam* and especially by visitors from the Guatemalan south coast, frequently include the smoking of cigars by ritual participants. The linguistic similarity of *may* to the word “Maya” makes tobacco as well as the *Rilaj Mam* an important symbol for the origin for people who claim the Maya identity (Pedro Esquina, pers. comm. 2015).



Figure 5. God L enjoys the company of young female goddesses on the Princeton Vase. Originally published by Michael Coe (1973).

Figura 5. Dios L disfruta la compañía de las diosas jóvenes en la Vasija de Princeton. Originalmente publicado por Michael (Coe 1973).

Theme of mercantilism. Schele & Matthews (1998) described God L as the “patron” of merchants, which matches one of *Rilaj Mam*’s titles as “Lord of Merchants” (Carlsen 1997). God L is sometimes shown with a merchant’s pack, as in the Cacaxtla mural scene, as well as with a walking staff (Tokovinine & Beliaev 2013). Origin accounts of the *Rilaj Mam* in Santiago describe that he was made by the original *nawales*, ancestor merchant travelers who lived in an earlier, mytho-historical time. God L displays wealth and offerings on the Vase of the Seven Gods, similar to how *Rilaj Mam* is considered an “extremely wealthy man” because of the amount of tribute he receives (Stanzione 2000). Santiago Atitlán borders the Pacific coast and the cacao groves there, which were a source of great wealth in ancient times. It is known today as a village with a large merchant population.

Inappropriate behavior with women. The sexual transgressions of God L seemed obvious to Coe (1978) who described God L’s palace in the Princeton Vase as a “harem” where God L is surrounded by young, female goddesses (Fig. 5). Interpretations of Jaina figurines, which show an old man “toying” with a young woman have often pointed to the culprit as being God L (Kerr & Kerr 2005). This reputation for lechery God L shares with the *Rilaj Mam* (Christenson 1998). A common local origin account in Santiago Atitlán, of which there are many variations, relates the *Mam* to the theme of sexual transgression and the attempt to establish order within the community. According to this oral tradition, the *Mam*, instead of fulfilling the role for which he was created - to guard the wives of the merchant-traveler *nawales* while they were away - began sleeping with them, instead. This required the chopping down

of the wood which makes up the *Mam*’s body to its current, reduced size in order to control his sexual prowess.

Pairing with a female counterpart. At least one instance of God L paired with a female counterpart exists in Pre-Columbian art, an image which seems very significant given its relation to *Wayeb’*, as discussed below. It is from page 74 of the Dresden Codex in the famous “flood” scene (Fig. 6). In the sky above God L, from which pours a multitude of water, hangs a hybrid female deity identifiable as Goddess O, or Ixchel in the Yucatan, where she is known as the patroness of feminine activities such as weaving. In Santiago Atitlán, the *Rilaj Mam* is paired with a female counterpart known as the *Nawal Ixox* (“*Nawal* Woman”) (Fig. 7). Having names including Maria Castellana and Maria B’atzbal, Mendelson (1959) and Christenson (1998) considered



Figure 6. Detail of Dresden Codex page 74, the flood scene with God L and Goddess O.

Figura 6. Detalle del Códice de Dresde página 74, la inundación, con Dios L y Diosa O.



Figure 7. The *Nawal Ixq*, female counterpart to the *Rilaj Mam* in Santiago Atitlán, 2023. Photo by David M. Schaefer.

Figura 7. La *Nawal Ixq*, contraparte femenina del *Rilaj Mam* en Santiago Atitlán, 2023. Foto por David M. Schaefer.

her to be the equivalent of the creator female *Xmukane* in the *Popol Vuh*. She is made from the *tzajitel* / *tzite'* tree, smokes tobacco, and is known as the patroness of weaving. Receiving daily prayers much like the *Rilaj Mam*, the *Nawal Ixq* is safeguarded away from daily public view in the house of the *telinel*.

Wayeb' Symbolism. Researchers have suggested that a syncretism in Maya communities exists between the ancient *Wayeb'* / New Year's ceremonies and post-contact, pre-Easter Holy Week, with Mendelson (1959) stating: "There appear to be certain parallelisms between Atiteco holy week and the Uayeb rites." *Wayeb'*, first studied by bishop Diego de Landa, is considered the five "delicate" days at the end of the *Haab'* 365-day calendar before the "seating" of the first month of the new year, known as *Pop* in contact-period Yucatan. This calendar has been noted for its agricultural functionality (Tozzer 1941; Thompson 1950) as well as for its ability to order public ritual, especially "ceremonies occurring at the start of the new year" (Rice 2007 citing Edmonson 1988). Although the Pre-Columbian calendars were not given importance in Santiago Atitlán by the time of Mendelson's initial studies, it should be stressed that at least 56 indigenous communities from the same cultural zone retained some use of the 260-day calendar and/or a variation of the 365-day calendar by the mid-20th century (Rice 2007 citing Gossen 1974); another study states that some 34 Ixil, Mam, and Pokomchi towns preserved remnants of the months of the ancient 365-day cycle (Tedlock 1992). Therefore, the possibility exists that Catholic Holy Week - with its shared theme of termination, sacrifice, and renewal - took the place of this most important, ancient five-day period at some point in the village's history. As Stanzione (2000) suggested, the predictable pre-Easter nearly full moon was also favorable for the nocturnal activities of Santiago Atitlán's Holy Week, which he considered to be a "disguised" form of ancient *Wayeb'*.

Holy Week activities in Santiago involving the *Rilaj Mam* as they currently exist are briefly summarized here, emphasizing interesting remnants from Pre-Columbian times that have been proposed: (1) **Holy Monday.** Around sunset and well into the night, the *Mam*'s clothes are washed upon three stones by male *cofradia* members at the edge of the Santiago bay. Christenson (1998) proposed that these three stones represent the "three stones of creation" set among primordial waters. These three stones are then painstakingly carried to the house of the third *cofrade*, where they traditionally remain until the following *Semana Santa*, to be used by the next *cofradia* that receives the Santa Cruz *Cofradía*. Meanwhile, the *Mam*'s clothes return, in procession, to the house of the *telinel* to dry. (2) **Holy Tuesday.** Early in the night, the *telinel* carries the *Mam*'s clothes and pair of hats on his back in a procession to the *cofradia* house. Under the cover of darkness, with lights off and cell phone use prohibited, the *Mam* is reconstructed by the *telinel* with help from the third and fourth *cofrades*, who are collectively hidden from view behind reed mats. About an hour later, the *Mam* is "reborn" or "renewed," revealed to the public with entirely new boots, new clothes, a new mask, new hats, and so on. Lying on his back on a fresh reed mat and new pillow, he may not be touched by human hands and is guarded throughout the night. (3) **Holy Wednesday.** In the morning, the *Mam* is processed upon the *telinel*'s shoulder to the municipality, where he symbolically "takes rulership over the community" (Christenson 1998). Hours later, the *Mam* is again processed, this time to his chapel below the Catholic church and immediately tied to the permanent post there. In my view, this is when the *Mam* becomes "*Maximón*" for the first time all year (discussed below). Immediately behind and extending above are the limbs and leaves of a *tney* tree to represent the sacred ceiba tree (Vallejo 2005; Pédrón-Colombani 2014). Here, *Maximón* remains publicly visible day and night for over 48 hours. (4) **Holy Thursday.** *Maximón* remains tied to the post, publicly visible all day and all night. (5) **Holy Friday.** Christ is crucified at noon on a cross placed in the *rumuxux ruchulew*, the symbolic navel of the earth, before the main altar at the center of the Catholic church. At about 3:00 p.m., the image of Christ enters its glass coffin and is processed down the stairs of the church to the plaza. In the late afternoon, the *Mam* is untied from his post and hoisted onto the shoulder of the *telinel*. With much excitement and fanfare, the *Mam* joins the procession of Christ (Fig. 1), eventually returning to the Santa Cruz *Cofradía* according to the *telinel*'s discretion and ability to carry its weight. Mendelson (1959, cited by Christenson 1998) claims that *Mam* was ritually dismembered at this point, a detail that Pédrón-Colombani (2014) traced back to at least 1973; I have not personally observed this dismemberment and have only witnessed the weekend pass in which the *Mam* is considered to be "resting" upstairs in the *Cofradía* house (Juan Pakach Ramírez, pers. comm. 2018).

The importance of a *Mam* figure has been documented in Maya communities where *Wayeb'* was once observed. An early Spanish priest to the Yucatan, Diego Lopez de Cogolludo (1688) wrote: "They had a wooden idol....and offered him things to eat and other gifts in a festival called Uayeyab. And at the end of the festival, they undressed him and threw the pieces of wood to the ground without giving him any more reverence. And this idol they called Mam" (Christenson 1998; also Mendelson 1959 citing Tozzer 1941). Thompson (1970: 298-299) argued: "Clearly the Yucatec and Atilán Mams are the same personage." The symbolism of a defeated *Mam* at the end of Holy Week has also been noted to exist elsewhere in Guatemala among the K'iche' and Kaqchikel. Martin (2006 citing Bunzel 1952) mentioned that the image there was "publicly stripped of his clothes at the end of his reign and beaten, kicked, and burned by boys"; he compared this to the defeat of *Oxlajunt-Ku* ("13-God") in the *Chilam B'alam* of Chumayel and further confirmed (p. 182): "A vestige of God L survives in Highland Guatemala in the complex character of *Maximón*, or more properly *Rilaj Mam*." Ceramic vessel scenes picturing God L being stripped and losing his power, with the Maize Lord in triumph, have also been likened to the *Popol Vuh* story (Coe 1978; Freidel *et al.* 1993).

The significance of Holy Week as a symbolic termination of an approximately 365-day year, symbolized by the re-creation, tying, and sacrifice of the *Mam*, makes sense in terms of the Mesoamerican ideology of "tying" or "bundling" completed units of time. The binding of *Mam* really represents the binding of time, the completion of the old "sun" at the end of the year (Stanzione 2000). Girard (1995) similarly noted that the Maya as well as Central Mexican cultures regarded completed time cycles as being "tied." According to Carlsen's explanation (1997), *Maximón* refers not to San Simón but to the Tz'utujil words *Ma*, or Mister, and *xim*, meaning "knot". It seems likely that this act of publicly tying the *Mam* to a post for much of Holy Week produced the popular name *Maximón*, which means roughly "The Tied One," "The Bound One," or "He, the Knotted One."

The completion or "tying" of the 365-day year at *Wayeb'* represented much more than the start of a new solar and agricultural cycle; *Wayeb'* was once tied to mytho-historical beliefs involving the destruction of the previous world and the creation of the new. Most famously, it is page 74 of the Dresden Codex (Fig. 6), which shows the flood scene linking *Wayeb'* visually to God L and Goddess O (Freidel *et al.* 1993; Miller & Taube 1993). In the *Chilam B'alam* of Chumayel, the sacrifice of a crocodile is one of the key events in the termination of the previous creation by flood (Roys 1933), an event which was recreated during the five days of *Wayeb'* (Pugh 2001 citing Taube 1988). This crocodile, known in the Yucatan as *Itzam Kab' Ayin*, "embodies the concept of completion and renewal appearing in Maya cosmology and calendrics" (Taube 1989: 9). The flood which ended the previous creation is associated with the raising of "world trees" with color and directional

symbolism, as well as the *Yax* ("first"/"Blue-Green") tree in the center according to the *Chilam B'alam*. Recent work on the *Chumayel* document by Knowlton (2010: 67) suggests that the raising of the central *Yax* ("first"/"Blue-Green") tree represents "an embodiment of memory of a past age" following the flood.

The Ancestral Tree. According to Schele & Matthews (1998: 19), God L was a "powerful god who destroyed the previous Creation by flood." Stanzione (2000: 48) described the *Mam* as "a creation from another era, making him a powerful boundary-crossing being" and "the last of the wooden beings left behind from a 'Sun' that no longer exists." Grofe (2009) and Van Akkeren (2012) associated the *Rilaj Mam* with the wooden people in the *Popol Vuh*, the race of human ancestors who lived during the previous, antediluvian creation. According to the *Popol Vuh*, the previous race of humans was created from precisely the same wood as the *Rilaj Mam*: "A flood was produced by Heart of Sky; a huge deluge formed, which fell upon the heads of the wooden ones. Of *tzite'* was made the flesh of the people.... But they didn't think, they didn't speak to their Creator, their Former, who had made them, who had created them. And for that reason they died...." (Recinos 1947; translated from Spanish by the author).

The *Rilaj Mam*'s construction from the sacred *tzajtel* or *tzite'* tree also has important ties to contemporary Maya spirituality elsewhere in Guatemala. This coral tree, which is relatively common in the Guatemalan highlands, is distinguished by the fiery red flowers as well as the red seeds it produces. The seeds of the tree, about the size and shape of a small bean, are used by *Ajq'ij* daykeepers in divination rituals with the 260-day *Cholq'ij* calendar, where the seeds are believed to communicate ancestral knowledge (Tedlock 1992). During a divination ritual I observed in Momostenango in 2008, the day keeper responded to a client's question by grasping a handful of *tzajtel* / *tzite'* randomly from a bag, placing the seeds on the table, and then grouping them into small squares of four seeds each until none remained. Finally, the day keeper counted the seeds while reciting the days of the *Cholq'ij* calendar until arriving at the final seed, which was used to make an interpretation. This divination was performed again for greater certainty. Divination through the *tzajtel* / *tzite'* seems to stem from ancient beliefs in a primordial, ancestral couple who were considered to be the first diviners (Miller & Taube 1993).

There is no evidence, to my knowledge, of the *tzajtel* / *tzite'* or "palo de pito" coral tree in Classic Maya art or hieroglyphic writing. However, a sacred, ancestral tree was of enormous importance to ancient Maya mythology, with expressions from Preclassic to modern times. This tree is found in a variety of naturalistic, hybrid, and cross-like forms. As noted by Roys (1933), the common "stylized" version of the tree is the Maya cross (also known as "Maltese cross" with the "+" shape). In Yucatan, where the deified tree is particularly well attested, the *yaxche'*, or *yaxcheel cab* "first tree" of the world, refers to both



Figure 8. Izapa Stela 25. The crocodile-tree hybrid with Yax ("first") snout, Hero Twin, & Bird Deity. Soconusco Archaeological Museum, Tapachula. Photo by David M. Schaefer.

Figura 8. Izapa Stela 25. La híbrida cocodrilo-árbol con nariz Yax ("Primer"), héroe gemelo, y deidad ave. Museo Arqueológico del Soconusco. Foto por David M. Schaefer

the sacred ceiba as well as the Maya cross (Freidel *et al.* 1993; Paxton 2001). Miller & Taube (1993) mentioned that the ceiba is inherently quadripartite, with four flower petals and four limbs, which typically extend from the trunk to the forest canopy, which perhaps made the ceiba and the quadripartite cross a logical pair. The ceiba formed the center of colonial Yucatan towns, was a symbol of their lineage history, and is said to have connections with the underworld (Thompson 1950).

A well-known hybrid deified tree incorporates the features of a crocodile or cayman. This crocodile-tree is attested iconographically as early as Izapa Stela 25 (Fig. 8), where it was carved with a "Yax" nose as well as a Hero Twin and the Principal Bird Deity (Guernsey 2006). In the books of *Chilam B'alam*, this tree is referred to by the names *Yax Imixche* or *Imix Yaxche*, emphasizing the tree as "first" while also giving it a hybrid crocodile quality through associations of the first day sign, *Imix*, of the 260-day calendar (Thompson 1950). Crocodilians, in general, have been associated with origin beliefs in Mesoamerica since a very early date. Tate (2008) mentioned that a recurring theme of Olmec iconography at La

Venta was that of a primordial crocodilian representing "first" or earliest earth of a previous creation. According to Houston *et al.* (2006), time has been interpreted to issue from the dismembered body of a crocodile, and these authors also noted the sacrificial association of the days of the *Tzolk'in/Cholq'ij* calendar in many early depictions of day-sign cartouches. In an interesting connection to the sacred tree of the contemporary Highland Maya, Stanzione (2000) stated that the *tzajtel* / *tzite'* tree, though far from enormous in stature, contains a spiny trunk and branches similar to the ceiba and reminiscent of a caiman's body.

Two Classic Maya ceramic vessels, K1607 (Fig. 9a) and a sherd known as Special Deposit #2 (Fig. 9b) from Buenavista, Belize, show that the deified tree appears in both the hybrid crocodile-tree and cross forms in similar scenes involving the deity Itzamná. The first example, K1607, shows the crocodile-tree hybrid in a plate and includes an odd calendar round-style date incorporating the "percentage sign" symbol, which substitutes for the *wahy* "spirit companion" glyph in other contexts (Houston & Stuart 1989). The second example, although fragmentary, appears to show Itzamná seated before a similar plate. But the cross within this plate is not the hybrid crocodile-tree but, rather, the stylized Maya cross (i.e., the Maltese or "+"); it is marked with *té* elements, which identify it as a "tree." A small hieroglyphic caption below the Buenavista plate and cross appears to read *Yax K'uh*, or "First god/holy." This cross is similar to the cross depicted on Pakal's famous sarcophagus lid at Palenque, also sitting within a plate and marked with *té* ("tree") and *Yax* ("first") signs, which may also relate it to "blue-green," the color of jade. These examples suggest that the crocodile-tree and the stylized Maya cross ("+") are two versions of the same entity, a Mesoamerican archetype of great antiquity and stylistic variation, perhaps even exhibiting the ability to transform.

Another hybrid tree of Classic Maya mythology is the jaguar-tree. The jaguar-tree occurs in important scenes from creation mythology such as accompanying the blowgunner hero twin in K1226. In this famous scene, the Principal Bird deity lands upon the tree, which also displays a *Yax* element extending from its trunk. This hybrid entity appears as the patron of the month of *Pax* and is read *te'* ("tree") (Freidel *et al.* 1993). Boot (2008) identified an important context of this *te'* glyph in the "God D Court Vessel," which he believed refers to four seated figures as the *Chan te' Chuwen*, or the "4-*te'* artisans." He proposed that the *te'* glyph identifies these individuals - two with clear simian features and one, a human figure possibly identifiable as a *wahy* known as "Glutton Death" - as wooden *te'* beings of the previous creation, stating: "the name *te'* for each of the supernatural beings is not coincidental and...refers to these particular passages from the sixteenth century epic *Popol Vuh*" (Boot 2008: 26-27).



Figure 9a. K1607 and 9b. Buenavista Sherd, showing two versions of the deified Yax "First" tree. 9a. Photo by Justin Kerr from mayavase.com. 9b. Drawing by D. Schaefer based on Boot (2008: 33).

Figura 9a. K1607 y 9b. Buenavista Fragmento, mostrando dos versiones del "Yax" primer árbol. 9a. Foto por Justin Kerr de mayavase.com. 9b. Dibujo por D. Schaefer basado en Boot (2008: 33)

Erik Boot's recognition of the importance of *Chan te'* (4-*te'*) mythology to Classic Period depictions of the *Popol Vuh* story is supported by my independent identification of a *Chan te'* (4-*te'*) glyph in an important context of an 8th century inscription known as *Ux Ahal*, at Yaxchilan. This inscription has been interpreted as the most complete record of the origins of the ballgame (Grube & Martin 2008) and is found atop Yaxchilan's most impressive elevated structure, Temple 33, in the center of a sequence of ballgame-related panels; the center three are in high-relief. It is the "play(ing) of the 4-*te'* *Chan* in the chasm" (with *chan* read as "sky") in the lower-left corner of Step 6 which I argued (Schaefer 2011: 79-87), introduces the chronology of

the three "axing" events contained in the lower-left corner of Step 7. This interpretation required careful analysis of sets of "numbered-sky" hieroglyphs and thoughtful comparison between the *Ux Ahal* Distance Numbers at Yaxchilan and the chronology of time represented in the Cross Group at Palenque, with its intense focus on 2360 B.C.E. It defines 4-*te'* *Chan* as the "first" time period when counting forward from 4 Ajaw 8 Kumk'u, equaling approximately $13 \times 13 \times 4 (= 676)$ years before the "axing" of the Maize Lord which begins Step 7 in the center panel.

Previous studies of the *Ux Ahal* inscription at Yaxchilan have consistently treated Step 7 in isolation, assuming that its expanded Long Count notation (13.13.13.13.13.13.13.9.15.13.6.9) is actually an enormous Distance Number connecting the monument's dedication date in 744 C.E. to the *Ux Ahal* mythology in the stone's lower-left corner. This interpretation places the origins of the ballgame and the demise of the Maize Lord over 350,315,789,460 *baktuns* in the past (Schele & Miller 1986), an unfathomable span of time greater even than the age of the known universe. Nevertheless, if the *Ux Ahal* inscription is interpreted to include and count forward from Step 6 (which nearly parallels Step 7 in its location of both text and image), then a more complete picture of archetypal mytho-historical beliefs is revealed, one which includes the all-important termination of the previous age of creation that is detailed in the *Popol Vuh*. Reading the *Ux Ahal* inscription this manner provides an important solution, for the death of the Maize Lord in Step 7 followed by the hero's rebirth - often depicted in conjunction with a turtle or other aquatic being in ancient art - foreshadows the death and rebirth of *Hun Hunahpu* (i.e. the Maize Lord) as the central plot of the *Popol Vuh*, and moreover, through symbolism of the ballgame. However, this intriguing connection is lost if we assume that the *Ux Ahal* ballgame origins were intentionally back-projected by scribes of *Yaxun B'alam* over a trillion years into the past, an interpretation which is possible when Step 7 is seen in isolation.

Despite the widespread occurrence and diversity of sacred trees and tree or ancestral wood symbolism in ancient Pre-Columbian art, it is difficult to determine the extent to which colonial and contemporary use of the Maya (Maltese or “+”) cross by Mayan language-speaking peoples represents a Pre-Columbian survival or some form of syncretism with the Christian cross. Early missionaries are known to have set up crosses at places where the Maya worshipped, often in the same spot where they destroyed or removed “idols” (La Farge & Byers 1931). Placement of crosses around the perimeters of towns during colonial times was part of the Spanish *reducción* effort; crosses were portrayed to the Maya as protectors, which were important in keeping the “devil” out of the spaces that these crosses defined (Bill Hanks, pers. comm. 2010).

Early ethnographic field work, however, revealed that the Maya cross is distinct from the Christian cross, and it has been noted that cross-shaped trees literally greeted the first Spanish visitors to the Maya area (Freidel *et al.* 1993). According to Girard (1995: 159, 281), contemporary Maya crosses are often physically distinguishable by the leaves or branches, mirrors, flowers, and colored paper which decorate them; Chorti leaders insist that there are two kinds of crosses: theirs and the Catholic one - only theirs, “made of special wood prepared by the proper rites, and covered in trifoliate green leaves...has the ability to respond to their petitions for rain and food.” These Maya crosses have been described as anthropomorphic, with some having the ability to communicate (Thompson 1960).

According to traditional Tz’utujil beliefs of Santiago Atitlán, the tree-cross may also be considered a Pre-Columbian survival. As stated by Carlsen & Prechtel (1991, cited by Brown 2015), the focus of Atiteco religion was oriented backward into the past, to an “Original Tree.” This conceptualization applies to contemporary women weavers who are “bound to...the ancestral deified tree at the center of existence, from which all creation was born” (Brown 2015: 67). Christenson (1998: 217) stated that the cross is considered among the Tz’utujil to have existed since the “beginning of the world.” A custom of decorating the principal cross in front of the Catholic church as a tree for the Day of the Cross, May 3, is an annual activity carried out by caretakers of the *Rilaj Mam* and organizers of the town’s traditional Holy Week activities: the Cofradía of the Santa Cruz. Six months later, the cofradía is again responsible for removing a small cross kept under lock and key in the Catholic church, ritually decorating it as a tree-cross with cypress branches, and somberly parading it through the streets for Day of the Dead. One might be led to believe, as I have been, that the sacred tree lives on in Santiago Atitlán through the Cofradía of the Santa Cruz and the millennial tradition that is the *Rilaj Mam*.

DISCUSSION

I chose to begin the paper by contextualizing the *Rilaj Mam* within its modern reality, as a controversial tradition frequently

threatened by verbal and even physical attack. I personally witnessed, for example, in 2013, a visiting archbishop delivering a sermon to the filled-to-capacity Catholic church, which included warnings about the evils of *Maximón*, framing the statue within the context of demonic possession and exorcism. The recent surge of the Pentecostal Evangelical movement in Santiago Atitlán has further fueled efforts to discredit the *Mam*, with church leaders portraying him as the “devil” in the eyes of their congregations (Pédron-Colombani 2008). Fear of idolatry in the village has even led to incidents of iconoclasm, as I witnessed during the Covid pandemic, with statues or images not representing Christ susceptible to destruction. It is no surprise that this rhetoric of intolerance has led to violence as well as murder and disappearance of many who carry on the *Nawal* tradition (McAnany & Brown 2016).

While the *Rilaj Mam* is certainly controversial within the very Mayan language-speaking community that originally gave rise to it, some interpretations presented in this contribution may also be considered contentious, as they offer perspectives on topics for which there is no established consensus within the academic community, or they offer new perspectives on topics for which a consensus has already been reached. The theoretical background section alone contains numerous viewpoints - such as my adamancy for treating Mesoamerican beliefs from the deeper past as “mytho-historical” as opposed to “just mythological” - which may seem irrelevant or even irksome. Central ideas presented, such as the association of the *Mam*, God L, *Wayeb’*, and crocodile-tree with flood mythology may conflict with common views on “creation,” which have been, historically, solely focused on 4 Ahau 8 Kum’u. Popular astronomy-inspired interpretations of Maya mythology also provide little impetus for such discussion. Some ideas presented, admittedly, also have limited physical evidence, such as the notion that *Wayeb’* was likely known and even observed in Santiago Atitlán at some point in its early colonial history.

Additional evidence for a more complete study would include the *Rilaj Mam*’s relation to the *nawal* complex, known as *wahyob’* in Classic Maya times (Stuart & Houston 1989). While I do not consider the *Mam* to be the equivalent of an ancient *wahy*, it does exhibit the hybridity characteristic of many of these *wahyob’*, such as the monkey-deer figure (Fig. 2). These *wahyob’* are related to ancient gods, the underworld, mischief or disease-making, and they sometimes exhibit traits that link them to the previous creation age (Helmke & Nielsen 2009, citing Thompson 1970). Related beliefs are, arguably, still observable in Santiago Atitlán through relics kept in cofradía houses, where I am aware of two *nawal* archaeological pieces including a hybrid jaguar-dog (Nicolas Gonzalez Tziná, pers. comm., 2013). Reverberations of *wahyob’* beliefs also seem to persist in the village’s “folk” tradition today through mischief-making, animal-human transformations known as *q’isuam* (also known as characoteles).

One of the most satisfying aspects of viewing the *Rilaj Mam* as a multi-millennial tradition is that it allows us to make

connections in “cultural logics” between ancient Mesoamerican thought and the foundational origin beliefs of world religions, such as the Old Testament. Many visitors to the *cofradía* house, for example, are told by their guides that the *Mam* is related to sinful, inappropriate behavior, and this is true (Sexton & Bizzaro Ujpán 1999). Ceremonies in which the *Mam* receives prayers for taboo topics related to relationships, love, and money occur frequently here, and even more, in the presence of alcohol consumption. Shortly after learning this, visitors frequently leave the *cofradía* quite dismissively, and their guides (having nothing more to say) follow them right out. However, as suggested in this article, sin is a defining characteristic of the *Mam*'s mytho-historical and modern identity precisely because of the indelible bond it maintains with the previous creation age, those made from *tz'ite'* in the *Popol Vuh*. The *Popol Vuh* is clear in its portrayal of this antediluvian race as flawed and inappropriate in their conduct. Likewise, God L was probably depicted in taboo scenes with female goddesses in ancient art because his age of creation, also that of the *Rilaj Mam* - the “first,” mixed-up and hybrid one - was characterized by inappropriate behavior. Mesoamerican traditions seem to share a common tendency with many ancient world narratives - including the Judeo-Christian one - of rationalizing “the flood” by blaming it on the victims' defects and deficiencies and integrating it into a narrative that serves to define proper morality in the modern age.

The power of narratives is unmistakable - some are ancient and others are modern. Popular mainstream narratives that demonize the *Rilaj Mam*, likening the tradition with devil worship or dismissing it as merely a tourist attraction, exemplify how modern storytelling exerts its influence to fill a massive void in cultural understanding. Ancient narratives possess far greater power, having been carried through hundreds of generations. They represent longevity, identity, and an original truth. By thinking critically about the information presented in this article, one can appreciate that the *Rilaj Mam* is intimately related not only to familiar Old Testament narratives but also to the cross - a beautiful, syncretic “fusion” of Old World and New World traditions. This ability to unify sacred symbols that are often assumed to be oppositional - as seen each year in the hanging of *Maximón* during Holy Week in Santiago Atitlán - is part of the symbolic power of the *Rilaj Mam* and the *Cofradía* of the Santa Cruz as its guardian. Perhaps by “re-framing” the *Rilaj Mam* as an ancient ancestor of all of humanity - one adaptable within the narratives of many world religions - we can foster the tolerance and admiration that this tradition deserves.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank Karin Rossbach of the Universidad del Valle de Guatemala (UVG), Campus Central, for coordinating my Delvas talk on May 31, 2023; also, Claudia Estrada of the Campus Sur and Celso Saloj of the Campus Altiplano for putting faith in my abilities before, during, and after the Covid pandemic, which gave me the opportunity to teach 17 courses while simultaneously carrying four ranks within Santiago Atitlán's *cofradía* system, including Escribano (notary/scribe) of the

Santa Cruz. A special thanks to Allen Christenson, Barb MacLeod, Michael Grofe, and the Anthropology Department at the UVG for providing valuable comments on this paper. Additionally, I would like to thank important people in my life who have passed and who it was a joy and privilege to study the Maya with: Brian Stross (wise and versatile thesis advisor), John McGraw (gentle and generous companion for many Highland adventures), and Erik Boot (inspirational to my decision to study ancient myths through number-prefixed hieroglyphs in graduate school). Finally, I would like to thank the resilient traditionalist community of Santiago Atitlán, in particular the late ex-alcalde Juan Pakach Ramírez of the *Cofradía* of the Immaculate Conception as well as Jose Abraham Alvarado, alcalde of the *Cofradía* of San Juan Bautista, for inviting my participation and allowing and even encouraging me to educate others about the *Rilaj Mam*. I am blessed and appreciative to have had this unique and unimpeded experience with the village's oldest and most sacred traditions.

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