

Archaeology and religion: a comparison of the Zapotec and Maya

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Introduction

No archaeologist who works for any length of time among the ancient civilizations of Mesoamerica can fail to be impressed by the role that religion played in those complex societies. At the same time, Mesoamerican archaeologists, like prehistorians everywhere, have suffered from the fact that archaeology has absolutely no agreed-upon theoretical or methodological framework for dealing with prehistoric religion. The result is that some archaeologists have chosen to ignore religion while concentrating on subsistence, settlement, and economy. Still others – as pointed out by Ruz (1977) – unrestrained by the rigorous methodologies which have been developed for the study of subsistence and settlement, have allowed their enthusiasm and imagination to turn ancient religion into a personal fantasy.

Prehistoric religion and archaeological methodology

In recent years, a few tentative steps have been taken towards a methodology for the archaeological study of ancient New World religions. Flannery (1976) has suggested that the ritual paraphernalia of Formative Mesoamerica can be submitted to a kind of 'contextual analysis' aimed at distinguishing between items used for ritual on the individual, household, community, and interregional levels; this technique, however, is applicable only to items whose exact provenience is known through excavation. In one paper (Flannery and Marcus 1976a), Flannery and I attempted to document several evolutionary stages in the development of Zapotec Indian religion (including the rise of a 'state religion') through an examination of the evolutionary sequence of public buildings in which the various religious institutions were reflected. In a second paper (Flannery and Marcus 1976b), we argued that a model derived from the sixteenth-century cosmology of the Zapotec could be used to integrate prehistoric data on subsistence, economics and religion, and to explain various features which would otherwise remain archaeologically enigmatic. In addition, Linares (1977) has used similar data from sixteenth-century Panamanian sources to integrate ideological, ritual, and ecological variables in an analysis of ranked society in Central America.

It should be pointed out that all four of these approaches depend on ethnohistory – in this case, documents written by the Spanish conquerors who were the first Europeans to

contact the Indians of Mesoamerica and Panamá, or native Indian manuscripts which were preserved by the Spanish in spite of their efforts to convert the Indians to Christianity. In the New World, ethnohistory is our bridge to the past; without it one could not even glimpse prehistoric cosmology, interpret ancient public buildings, understand the contexts of ritual paraphernalia, or analyse the iconography of long-dead Panamanians.

In this paper I will briefly examine some of the problems and promises of an ethnohistoric approach to religion and archaeology in southern Mesoamerica. I will compare and contrast the Zapotec Indians of Oaxaca, Mexico, and the Maya Indians of southern Mexico and Guatemala (fig. 1). First, we will see how their ethnohistory, fraught as it

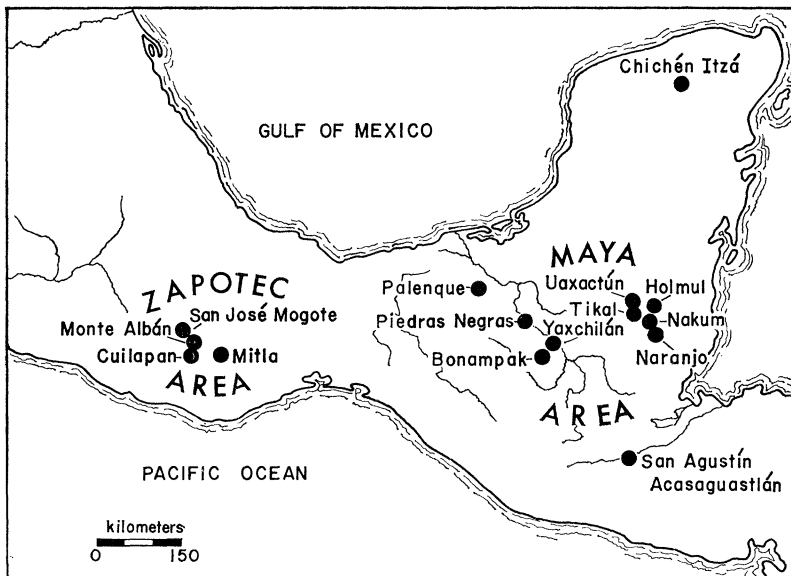


Figure 1 Map of Mesoamerica showing archaeological sites mentioned in the text

sometimes is with European preconceptions and misinterpretations, can nevertheless be used to provide a model for archaeological interpretation. Second, we will see how the archaeological record, enigmatic and incomplete as it sometimes is, can be used to verify or reject aspects of ethnohistory. Finally, I will argue that the feedback between archaeology and ethnohistory, as well as the comparison of the Zapotec and Maya, give us insights we could not derive from using only one subdiscipline, or studying one culture in isolation.

Zapotec religion: the ethnohistoric evidence

Major ethnohistoric sources on the Zapotec include Fray Juan de Córdova (1578a; 1578b), Francisco de Burgoa (1670; 1674), Gonzalo de Balsalobre (1656), and a series of *relaciones* written around 1580 (del Paso y Troncoso 1905–6). While the eyewitness accounts of the early Spanish chroniclers are invaluable, it must be remembered that

many were priests whose assignment was to stamp out Zapotec religion, not understand it. Many also had a Classical education, including knowledge of the ancient Greco-Roman pantheon which served as their model for an 'idolatrous' religion. Add to this the fact that they never fully comprehended Zapotec royal ancestor worship, and you have the makings of a serious misunderstanding. In town after town, the Spanish friars wrote down the names of deified, deceased rulers whose images were still propitiated, thinking they had seen the 'idols' of anthropomorphized 'gods' from some kind of 'pantheon'. To this day the misconception has persisted.

In fact, the Zapotec did not have an anthropomorphized pantheon. They did recognize a supreme being who was without beginning or end, 'who created everything but was not himself created', but he was so infinite and incorporeal that no images were ever made of him and no mortal came in direct contact with him (Flannery and Marcus 1976b). For him, understandably, there is little in the way of archaeological evidence. Man did come into contact with a wide variety of natural and supernatural phenomena, and because the Zapotec attributed life to many things we consider inanimate, anthropologists might characterize their religion as a form of *animatism* (Lowie 1924: 133-4).

Perhaps the most crucial concept in Zapotec religion was that of *pè* (written *pèe* in the sixteenth century, pronounced *be* by today's Zapotec). Various translations as 'wind', 'breath' or 'spirit', *pè* was the vital force that made all living things move. Anything that moved was thus alive, to some degree sacred, and deserving of respect: animals, human beings, clouds, lightning, earthquakes, the 260-day ritual calendar and the foam on the top of a cup of stirred hot chocolate are examples of things which possessed *pè*.

Most deserving of respect were the great universal forces: *cocijo* (lightning), *zaa* (clouds), *xoo* (earthquake), *quij* (fire), and so on. Lightning was treated as a revered supernatural who had the power to grant or withhold rain; clouds were regarded as the beings from which the Zapotec (*peni-zaa*, 'cloud people') had descended, and to which their ancestors (*penigolazaa*, 'old people of the clouds') would return after death. The ancestors could intercede with the powerful supernaturals on behalf of their descendants, providing they were well taken care of. All relationships – whether with ancestors, animals, other Zapotecs, or supernaturals – were considered reciprocal, with something offered in return for every concession. The kinds of offerings one could make ranged from food and drink to one's own blood, or a sacrificed quail, turkey, dog, child or human slave depending on the severity of one's need, or the magnitude of one's gratitude. The most important offerings were made by full-time priests at standardized temples.

In my examination of the ethnohistoric sources, I have found a number of elements in Zapotec religion for which archaeological evidence might be sought: (1) the temples which were the architectural manifestation of Zapotec religion; (2) the rituals themselves, including human sacrifice, animal sacrifice, cannibalism, and ritual bloodletting; and (3) ancestor worship. Let us examine these.

Among the sixteenth-century Zapotec the temple was known as *yohopèe* (literally 'the house of *pè*'). It was a two-room structure, frequently in an elevated location, and manned by full-time 'priests'. To the outer room came persons who wished to make an offering, but the actual sacrifice would be performed in the more sacred inner room by a priest on an altar called *pecogo*, or *pe-quie* ('stone of *pè*'). No layman ever entered the inner room, and the priests rarely left it.

The Zapotec priesthood had a hierarchy composed of high priests (*uija-tào*), ordinary priests (*copa pitào*), and lesser religious functionaries, and young men who were educated to enter the priesthood (*bigaña, pigana, pixana*). Burgoa (1674) says that the *uija-tào* or 'great seer' had as his chief function the consultation with the supernatural on important matters and the transmitting of this information to others. This priest had the power to put himself into an ecstatic state, and believed what he saw in his vision. The *uija-tào* was treated by the Zapotec lord (*coqui*) with great respect and regarded as being closely connected with the supernatural; since he was the direct distributor of heavenly gifts and punishments, the lord turned to him for various needs, and followed his advice diligently (Seler 1904: 248). Priests were recruited from among the children of the nobility, and there are some accounts suggesting that certain religious offices were inherited, or passed to sons or near relatives. There were also *uesa-eche* ('sacrificers') who apparently constituted a specialized group that performed most sacrifices, particularly human sacrifices; after this activity, they brought the heart and blood to the *uija-tào*, so that he could then offer them up.

The *bigaña*, most frequently mentioned in the *relaciones* (perhaps because they had the most contact with laymen), took care of the 'idols' in the temple. Duties of some of the other religious functionaries included the burning of incense, the offering of sacrifices (particularly small animals and birds), and also the offering of one's own blood drawn from the veins under the tongue and behind the ears (Burgoa 1674: chapters 58, 64, 70). For bloodletting, the priests employed a sharp bone or stingray spine, obsidian blade, stone knife or a long fingernail grown especially for this purpose. The blood was caught on grass or bright feathers and then offered to sacred images. Burgoa says that human sacrifice was performed with 'special solemnity and elaborate ceremonies'. Córdova (1578a) adds that there were two or three occasions when human sacrifices were performed. Prisoners of war were sacrificed and the flesh was cooked for eating. Humans were also sacrificed on the occasion of the harvest; and, finally, children (frequently) or adults (occasionally) were sacrificed to *cocijo* (lightning). This offering was seen as paying a debt to *cocijo* for bringing rain.

The role of divination by the *colanij* (fortune-tellers or diviners) was also very important (Córdova 1578b: 216). The *colanij* aided the individual with important decisions to be made – whom to marry, when to marry, the naming of one's children – and took the decision out of the hands of any individual. The actual decision-maker was, in effect, fate or fortune, whose will was determined by casting lots (in this case, counting out beans by 2's, 3's, 4's, or 5's). No one could be blamed or thanked; it was all in the beans.

The Zapotec had great reverence for their ancestors, who were thought to take part in community affairs even after death. If well treated, one's ancestors could intercede on one's behalf with lightning or the other supernaturals with whom they now resided. The ancestors of royalty were even more important than those of common men, and they were often commemorated and sacrificed to as divine beings (Flannery and Marcus 1976b: 381); frequently, temples or commemorative buildings were built above their tombs. It was the sacred images of deceased rulers which the Spanish found in so many temples, and which they mistook for the 'idols' of 'gods'. Clues to this can be found in the names they collected for these 'deities', which frequently contain garbled versions of *coqui* ('male ruler'), *coquihualao* ('prince'), or *xonaxi* ('female ruler') (Marcus n.d.). A

second clue is that many have names taken from the 260-day calendar (e.g. '1 Deer', '8 Rabbit') which we know from Córdoba (1578b: 16) and Burgoa (1674: chapter 70: 316) were names given to human beings. The irony is that no 'idols' were ever made of the Zapotec supreme being – the one supernatural who might be considered a 'deity' in our terms.

Even today a kind of veneration of the ancestors continues among the Zapotec. At Juchitán, Oaxaca, and other nearby localities there are important stories about the old people of the clouds (*binigulaza*, *binnigola*, *binizaa*). When figurines or other Precolumbian household objects are recovered, the contemporary Zapotecs say they have found objects that belonged to the ancestors, or say 'we are the descendants of the *binizaa* who provided these' (Henestrosa 1936; Cruz 1936).

Zapotec religion: the archaeological evidence

While 'public buildings' where religious activities may have been performed are known even from Early Formative Oaxaca at 1350 B.C. (Flannery and Marcus 1976a, b), it is not until the Terminal Formative period that we see our first clear examples of the *yohopèe* or Zapotec two-room temple. One of the best preserved early temples was discovered at the site of Monte Albán, the great urban capital of the Zapotec, by Alfonso Caso (1935). The temple, which dates to Period II of Monte Albán (100 B.C.–A.D. 100), was found inside Mound X, to the north-east of the Main Plaza (fig. 2a). It stood on an elevated platform and had the kind of lower outer room and raised inner room described in the ethno-historic sources. This structure, built on top of a platform with a stairway on the south side, measured 10 by 8 m. The outer room, whose doorway was flanked by single columns, measured just over 4 m. From the doorway, one crossed 2 m. of floor and stepped up into the elevated rear chamber. The latter measured 8 by 3 m. and had a 2 m. doorway, also flanked by single columns. The walls of the temple were of rectangular adobe over a stone masonry foundation 1 m. high. The columns were made of small stones set in clay mortar and vary in diameter between 82 cm. (outer chamber) and 57 cm. (inner chamber) (Flannery and Marcus 1976a: 217–18).

In 1974, a similar temple was discovered at nearby San José Mogote – Structure 13, set atop Mound 1 (Flannery and Marcus 1976a: 218). Although partially preserved, Structure 13 appeared to be 1.5 times as big as the temple in Mound X – perhaps because it was a major temple at San José Mogote while Mound X was a relatively minor one at Monte Albán. Assuming that Structure 13 was symmetrical, with the same proportions as the Mound X temple, it would have measured some 15 m. by 8 m. In addition to its greater size, Structure 13 had pairs of columns to either side of the vestibule doorway (fig. 2c). Both Structure 13 and the Mound X temple were oriented to the cardinal points (*ibid.*: 218).

In 1958, Bernal reported on a similar Period II temple in Mound I-bis at Cuilapan, Oaxaca, excavated in 1902 by Marshall Saville. Constructed of huge adobes, the temple has columns to either side of the inner and outer doorways (fig. 2b). The temple was later rebuilt several times, and associated with the third building stage (dating to the Monte Albán IIIa period, about A.D. 300) was an apparent dedicatory offering including a

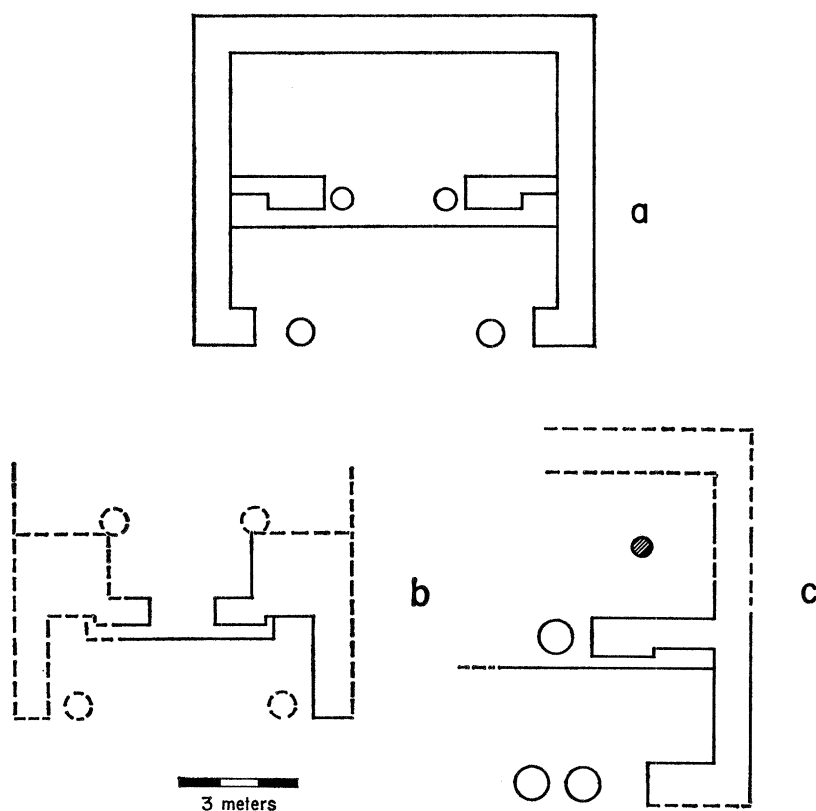


Figure 2 Ground plans of Zapotec temples: (a) temple found in Mound X, Monte Albán (redrawn from Caso 1935); (b) temple found by Saville in Mound I-bis at Cuilapan (redrawn from Bernal 1958); (c) partial plan of Structure 13, San José Mogote (after Flannery and Marcus 1976a)

sacrificed child. The child's body was covered with hematite pigment and accompanied by 17 jade figurines, 400 jade beads, 35 marine shells, 2 pottery ear spools, and disintegrated mosaics of shell, obsidian, and hematite (Bernal 1958: 25). The context of the find, the lack of ceramic vessels or any conventional grave or tomb, and the similarity of the offerings to some found in Mound I at Monte Albán indicate that this was an important offering rather than a burial.

Inside the solid adobe hearting of Mound III at Cuilapan, another temple pyramid, Bernal found a massive offering. This one included 71 jade beads, 157 beads of various other stones, 2 jade earspools, 3 obsidian blades (of the type used for ritual bloodletting by the Zapotec), 8 marine shells, 3 stones, a pearl, and 'numerous bones of small animals' including 'skull and bones of bird' (Bernal 1958: 79, 91-2). The latter are presumably quail, doves or other small birds of the type frequently sacrificed by the Zapotec. This offering dated to approximately A.D. 700 (Monte Albán IIIb-IV).

Perhaps the most famous Zapotec temples are those of Mitla in the eastern valley of Oaxaca. Many of Mitla's buildings date to A.D. 1100-1500 and have never been below ground; their state of preservation is remarkable. The two largest belong to the so-called

'Grupo de las Columnas', which was first described by Alonso de Canseco in 1580 (del Paso y Troncoso 1905-6: vol. 4). Each consists of a rectangular patio flanked on three sides by monumental buildings with intricate *greca* designs formed from stone mosaics. The small mosaic elements, as well as the giant lintels weighing up to 25 tons, are of easily-worked volcanic tuff. According to Dupaix (quoted by del Paso y Troncoso 1905), the Mitla 'palaces' were roofed with beams of *Taxodium* (bald cypress) 'as thick as a man', over which were laid flat stone slabs; then came a metre of lime, sand and earth, all covered with a kind of Prehispanic concrete.

The most southern of the two buildings is the so-called 'Patio of the Tombs', which was evidently a civic-administrative structure. According to Canseco (1580), it was in the halls fronting this patio that problems of 'government and republic' were dealt with, and the great lords of the region 'came together to get drunk and enjoy themselves in their heathen way'. Under the patio (and extending back under the halls) are the famous cruciform tombs which were for 'burial of the great lords of this realm'.

The most northern of the two buildings is the 'Hall of Columns', which was evidently a religious structure. 'In this building they had their idols, and it was where they assembled for religious purposes, to make sacrifices to their idols, and to perform heathen rites' (Canseco 1580: 152). There is an adulatory or altar (*pecogo*) in the centre of the patio, and the western and eastern halls have pairs of columns. The largest hall, on the north side of the patio, has six huge columns and is attached, by means of a narrow, indirect passageway, to an additional four-room structure with an interior courtyard. This additional structure, according to Canseco, was the residence of a priest who was 'like our pope': supreme head of the Precolumbian 'church'. The residence, evidently that of a *uija-tào*, is described as windowless but elegant, clearly intended to have great privacy and extremely limited access (fig. 3).

It is, in fact, not hard to picture the evolution of this religious structure out of the less elaborate two-room temple of Monte Albán II-IIIb times. Both have an outer room, or

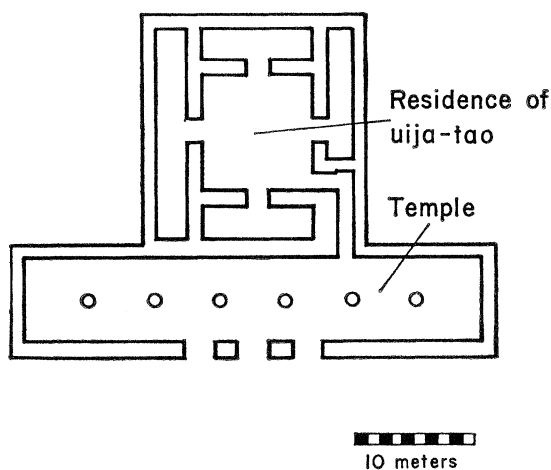


Figure 3 Plan of temple and priest's residence from 'The Hall of the Columns' at Mitla, Oaxaca (redrawn from Marquina 1964)

antechamber, reached by a flight of stairs and entered by a wide doorway with large columns; this room would presumably have been accessible to secular nobility and perhaps even to the commoner class. Both also have an interior enclosure, reached by a narrow doorway, which would have been a windowless inner sanctum to which only priests had access. In short, the archaeological evidence conforms reasonably well to the ethnohistoric descriptions.

TABLE I

A reconstruction of the religious hierarchy among the Zapotec and Maya

Rank	Zapotec	Maya
First	<i>uija-tào, vuijatào</i> 'great seer'	<i>ah kin mai, ahau can mai,</i> 'high priest'
Second	<i>copa pítào,</i> 'priest' <i>bigaña,</i> 'young priest, student priest'	<i>ah kin,</i> 'priest'
Third	<i>ueza-eche, huetete,</i> 'sacrificer' <i>colanij,</i> 'diviner'	<i>chilan,</i> 'mouthpiece', 'interpreter' <i>(ah)nacom,</i> 'sacrificer' <i>chac,</i> 'lightning' (four individuals painted blue holding victim's limbs) <i>(a)hmen,</i> 'diviner'

Maya religion: the ethnohistoric evidence

Major ethnohistoric sources on the Maya include the three extant Precolumbian codices or hieroglyphic books, dating from A.D. 1250–1450, that are currently found in Dresden, Paris and Madrid. Another source is the manuscripts written by the Yucatec Maya in European script after the Spanish Conquest; these contain prophecies and data concerning historical and religious events. Various Colonial Spanish writers also made significant contributions – particularly Diego de Landa, bishop of Yucatán, a Franciscan missionary who arrived in 1549. His *Relación de las cosas de Yucatán* was written in 1566 and constitutes a major source on Maya religion. Additionally, more recent ethnographies

provide excellent detail on various prehispanic religious practices that have survived as a kind of 'folk' religion among contemporary Maya Indians. What have disappeared are the rituals of the prehispanic Maya ruling class. In Precolumbian times, the nobility and the priesthood maintained secret practices on behalf of large territorial and political units (sometimes referred to as a 'state' religion), and much of this knowledge vanished with them.

When one turns to books on Precolumbian Maya religion, one is usually overwhelmed by the number of 'gods' enumerated (250 by one count) and their overlapping aspects or 'spheres of control'. Usually, scholars refer to these 'gods' collectively as a 'pantheon', although sometimes with misgivings:

In considering the nature of Maya gods, we may first rid ourselves of certain misconceptions by noting that in our field the term *pantheon* should not be taken in its strictly Greek sense. The idea of a general assembly of gods finds no place in Maya theology, and the visions of the behaviour of the very carnal gods of Greece and Rome that the word conjures up would have been rated by the Maya as conduct totally unbecoming divine beings (Thompson 1970: 198).

As in the case of the Zapotec, I feel we can challenge the notion that the Maya had a pantheon of anthropomorphized gods during the Classic Period (A.D. 250–950). Rather, supernatural beings were depicted in Maya art by combining parts from different animals (snake, iguana, crocodile, quetzal, parrot, jaguar and so on) into fantastic creatures that would never have occurred in nature (Spinden 1913). Why, then, have we persisted in referring to a Maya pantheon? The reasons are largely historical. The German scholar Schellhas (1904) classified the figures in the three Postclassic Maya codices as 'gods', giving each a letter designation ('God A', 'God B' etc.). Since that time, considerable effort has been expended in identifying more 'gods' in the monumental art of the Classic Period, as well as in matching up the names of the 'multitude of gods' mentioned by Landa (and other sixteenth-century friars) with depictions from the Classic.

As noted by Morley and Brainerd (1956: 225), during the Classic Period the Maya were not worshippers of images. Most scholars relying on ethnohistoric sources and archaeological information from Yucatán agree that 'idolatry' was introduced into Yucatán by the Nahua speakers of the Postclassic era (A.D. 950–1520), who brought with them the practice of making idols. Once the Nahua influences are removed, ancient Maya religion looks more similar to ancient Zapotec religion.

In the Maya version of animatism, the word '*ku*' ('sacred', 'divine') played a role as important as did the concept of *pè* among the Zapotec. The addition of *ku* transforms a house or structure (*na*) into a temple (*kuna*); it transforms wood (*che*) into sacred cedar wood (*kuche*) for carving a statue to honour one's ancestor. In addition, the Maya had an even more exact equivalent for *pè*: the word *ik*, which also meant 'wind', 'breath' and 'life'.

Turning to the 1590 Motul dictionary (1929: 404–5) we find the Maya equivalent to the Zapotec supreme being: *Hunab ku*, 'the only live and true god'. Like his Zapotec counterpart, no images were ever made of him, because 'being incorporeal, he could not be pictured'. López de Cogolludo (1867–8: book 4, chapter 6) says that 'from *Hunab ku* they said that all things proceeded, they did not worship him by putting up idols'.

Hunab ku had created many of the other things regarded as sacred – lightning (*chac*),¹ fire (*kak*), the sun (*kin*), the moon (*u*), caves and so on. Like the Zapotec, the Maya also revered their ancestors, with royal ancestors being particularly important. And everything possessing *ik* was treated with respect: animals, trees, maize, and the earth were alive and required propitiation. When a Maya ‘cuts down the forest to make his milpa, he apologizes to the earth for “disfiguring” its face; when he kills a deer, he excuses the act on the grounds of his need’ (Thompson 1970: 165). Indeed, in the Maya mind the earth was not merely alive but sacred, and referred to as *ch’ul balamil* (*ch’ul*, ‘sacred’; *balamil*, ‘earth’). Information collected in San Pedro Chenalhó (Guiteras-Holmes 1961: 287) indicates that the earth still ‘claims the clearing, the home, and the cultivated fields; although once her permission is obtained by man to live on her, she will not indiscriminately harm him’. Rain clouds are thought to come forth from caves in the hills, and the springs and waterholes are earth’s gifts to man. The caves are the doors to hills and are feared, as are the forests and other places where the sun cannot reach.

Like the Zapotec, the Maya had a full-time priesthood with an internal hierarchy, who conducted important rituals in permanent temples of various types. The community temple was known as *ku* or *kuna*. Landa (1941: 108) reports that in addition to these community temples of cut-stone masonry, ‘the lords, priests and the leading men had also oratories and idols in their houses, where they made their prayers and offerings in private’. Landa clearly separates the temple structure from the domestic structures, although rites, offerings, and prayers were made in both; we see evidence for public religion and private religion, and communal rites versus household ritual. ‘The common people also had private idols to whom they sacrificed, each one according to his calling or occupation which he had’ (*Relación de Mérida* in Landa 1941: 108).

Sixteenth-century women are described as being very devout, burning incense before the ‘idols’, offering cotton cloth, foods and beverages. But Landa (1941: 128–9) says that women did not have the habit of shedding blood to their ‘idols’ and that they were not allowed to go to the temple for sacrifices, except on one occasion involving only the old women. Tozzer (1907: 104–5, 108) says that early twentieth-century Lacandón Maya women were also deprived of any active role in religion, being allowed to enter the sacred enclosure only at the very end of the ritual when the feast began. We will see that archaeological data from the Classic Period present a somewhat different picture of the role of women.

Now let us consider the hierarchy within the Maya priesthood. In the sixteenth century the high priest was known as *ah kin mai* or *ahau can mai*. Respected by the Maya ruler, who gave him offerings, this priest was said to have been succeeded in office by his son or a near relative (Landa 1941: 27). The role of the *ah kin mai* was primarily as adviser to the ruler; additionally, he taught the sons of other priests, as well as the second sons of the

¹ Although most Maya scholars have defined *chac* as ‘rain god’ (Thompson 1966: 123; Morley and Brainerd 1956: 196–7), there is considerable evidence that *chac* refers to lightning, thunder and thunderbolts. For example, in Tzotzil *čauk* means ‘thunder, thunderbolt, and lightning’ (Laughlin 1975: 111), while *vo?* refers to rain. Pío Pérez (1898: 29) gives *Hačchac* as ‘lightning bolt’ (*hač*, ‘whip’, and *chac* ‘lightning’); for ‘thunder’ he gives *pecchac* (‘the movement of lightning’) (*ibid.*: 64). Rain, on the other hand, is composed of compounds of *ha*, ‘water’, e.g. ‘to rain’ = *kaxal ha*; ‘to drizzle’ = *toz ha*. This is equivalent to the Zapotec situation, where *cocijo* = ‘lightning’ and ‘rain’ is simply a form of *niča*, ‘water’ (Cordova 1578a).

lords from infancy. Priests controlled calendrical knowledge (such as the timing of festivals of the 260-day ritual calendar) as well as various methods for divination and prophecy. Landa's data (1941: 29) also indicate that knowledge of hieroglyphic writing was the sole possession of the Maya priests and 'some of the principal lords'.

Ordinary priests were known as *ah kin*, and below them were religious functionaries with more specialized roles. These included the (*ah*) *nacom*, who offered human sacrifices (the equivalent to the Zapotec *ueza-eche*). Four *chacs* (impersonators of lightning) held the limbs of the victim while the (*ah*) *nacom* removed his heart and gave it to the *ah kin*. While the *ah kin* was held in great respect, the *nacom* who performed the sacrifice was not.

The *chilan* was a kind of ritual 'interpreter' whose duty was 'to give the replies of the gods to the people, and so much respect was shown to them that they carried them on their shoulders' (Landa 1941: 112). Then there was the (*a*)*hmen*, or 'diviner', a more lowly religious practitioner whose office – in many parts of the Maya region – is the only one still surviving (Redfield 1941).

In addition to letting their own blood with stingray spines, obsidian blades or knotted cords, the priests sacrificed birds, animals and fish. They also offered food and fermented beverages, placing them on altars in the courts of the temple and on top of the staircases. In the Sotuta and Homun testimony (Scholes and Adams 1938: 101) the most common victim of sacrifice, following human beings, was the domestic dog. Additionally, the offering of a wild peccary or deer was also common.

Landa mentions other methods of human sacrifice – arrow sacrifice, flaying, throwing the victim into a *cenote* or natural sinkhole in the limestone, hurling the victim from a precipice. According to the Sotuta and Homun testimony the victim was sometimes killed by decapitation; others had their hearts cut out while tied to a ladder with arms outstretched. Children were also sacrificed, some of these being orphans, others purchased or even kidnapped.

Archaeologists should be encouraged by the descriptions of the way Maya of various statuses were buried. Ordinary men were wrapped in a shroud, ground maize placed in their mouths along with some green stones or small jade beads; such people were buried inside or in the rear of their houses. A priest might be buried with some of his books (codices). A man who had been a diviner was buried with his stones for divination (*am*), as well as other instruments of his profession. One could thus seek corroboration between Landa's data and the archaeological record. Kidder (1935: 112), for instance, in excavating a burial at San Agustín Acasaguastlán, Guatemala, found laminated pink and green stucco (lime sizing) which may represent the pages of a codex buried with a priest; a few similar examples have been found.

For the nobility the treatment after death was different – they were cremated, with their ashes being placed in urns, and later the Maya built temples above their burials as in the case of some Zapotec. Landa (1941: 130–1) clearly says that the commoners were buried in or near their houses, while cremation was reserved for nobles and persons of 'high esteem':

The rest of the people of position made for their fathers wooden statues of which the back of the head was left hollow, and they then burned a part of the body and placed its ashes there,

and plugged it up; afterwards they stripped off the dead body the skin of the back of the head and stuck it over this place and they buried the rest as they were wont to do. They preserved these statues with a great deal of veneration among their idols. They used to cut off the heads of the old lords of Cocom, when they died, and after cooking them they cleaned off the flesh, and then sawed off half the crown on the back, leaving the front part with the jaws and teeth. Then they replaced the flesh which was gone from these half-skulls by a kind of bitumen, and gave them a perfect appearance characteristic of those whose skulls they were. They kept these together with the statues with the ashes, all of which they kept in the oratories of their houses with their idols, holding them in very great reverence and respect.

At Chichén Itzá, Uaxactún, and Holmul, urns with such cremated remains have been found (E. H. Thompson 1938; Morris, Charlot, and Morris 1931; Ricketson and Ricketson 1937; Merwin and Vaillant 1932). From the Cenote of Sacrifice at Chichén Itzá, a skull with crown cut away, eye sockets filled with wooden plugs, and painted plaster covering the face has been found (Tozzer 1941: 131 Ft. 613).

Thus, there are a number of elements in Maya religion for which archaeological evidence might be sought: (1) the temples (*kuna*) which were the architectural manifestation of Maya religion; (2) burials of priests who conducted major rituals for the nobility and the community as a whole; (3) the rituals themselves, including the burning of incense (*pom* or *copal*), human sacrifice, animal sacrifice, ritual bloodletting and cannibalism; (4) and ancestor worship. Temples, burials, caches, murals, painted and carved ceramics and carved stone monuments supplement and serve to corroborate most of the ethnohistorical sources, as well as providing information about topics not discussed by the sixteenth-century chroniclers.

Maya religion: the archaeological evidence

An early Maya temple broadly contemporary with the Period II temples at Monte Albán, sits atop Pyramid E-VII-sub at Uaxactún (Ricketson and Ricketson 1937). Structure E-VII-sub had a total height of 8 m., while at ground level it measured 24 m. north-south, and 23 m. east-west. Its upper platform, however, apparently did not support a two-room masonry temple; rather, two postholes in each room suggest that it may once have supported a pole-and-thatch structure (fig. 4a). Ricketson and Ricketson (1937: 72-3) mention additional evidence that some Maya pyramids supported thatched structures, citing representations of such in graffiti from Tikal (Maler 1911: 57, 59). Later, however, these postholes at E-VII-sub were sealed over, indicating to Ricketson that the thatched structure was only a temporary one. He suggests that the eventual function of Pyramid E-VII-sub was as an 'enormous altar, open to the air', reached by stairways on all four sides.

By the Tzakol phase (A.D. 250-500), there are clear Maya temples with stone masonry walls, a division into 'inner' and 'outer' chambers, and a single stairway. For example, Temple E-I at Uaxactún stood on a rectangular platform 3 m. high and 10 m. square; this platform was reached by a stairway of seven or eight steps on the west face. The stairway was 4 m. wide and projected 60 cm. beyond the front line of the platform.

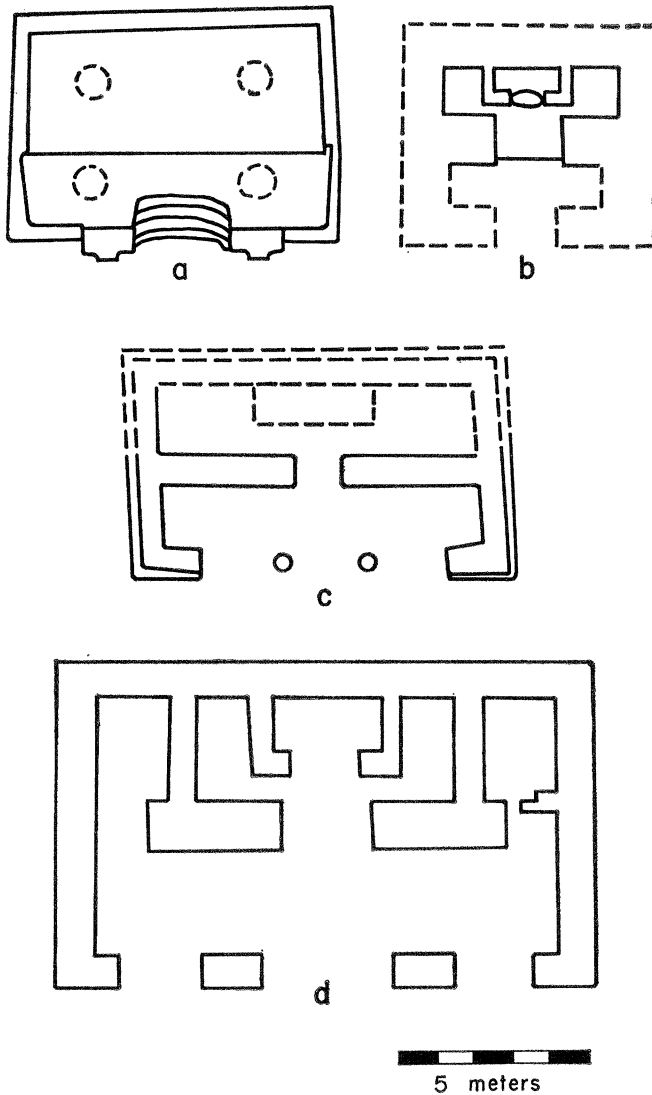


Figure 4 Ground plans of Maya temples: (a) Structure E-VII-sub, Uaxactún (redrawn from Ricketson and Ricketson 1937); (b) Structure E-I, Uaxactún (redrawn from Ricketson and Ricketson 1937); (c) Temple of the Wall Panels, Chichén Itzá (redrawn from Ruppert 1931); (d) Temple of the Cross, Palenque (redrawn from Marquina 1964)

As in the case of the Zapotec temples, Temple E-I consisted of two small rooms, a more accessible anterior room (4.5 by 1.4 m.), and a less accessible interior room (5.1 by 1.5 m.) which is 37 cm. higher (Ricketson and Ricketson 1937: 47). The interior room contained a large altar constructed of rubble-fill inside plastered stone blocks. The altar was 60 cm. high, 2.4 m. long, and 1.1 m. wide, and was enclosed by two L-shaped walls; one step was cut into the front edge of the altar (fig. 4b). In the floor south of the altar was Cist

2, a cache containing two redware dishes, set lip-to-lip, containing a set of human teeth and fragments of a skull, nine jade beads, two small jade ear plugs, and a jade pendant representing an animal head (Ricketson and Ricketson 1937: 50).

A Postclassic Maya example of a two-room temple is the Temple of the Wall Panels at Chichén Itzá (Ruppert 1931). The outer room has a very wide doorway (6.71 m.) with two columns within it. The inner room doorway is much narrower (1.35 m.). An altar occupies a central position along the back wall of the sanctuary (fig. 4c). One could find dozens of additional Classic and Postclassic examples, but there is no space in a paper of this length to mention them all.

Structures E-VII-sub and Temple E-I represent two different kinds of pyramidal structures which coexisted in the Maya Classic, each with its separate functions. One type was the so-called 'sacrificial pyramid', with four stairways ascending to a flat, structureless top; the other was the typical 'temple-pyramid', with only one stairway ascending the main side to the door of a two-room stone masonry temple. In the Postclassic period (A.D. 950-1520) these two architectural types may have coalesced in the Castillo at Chichén Itzá (Marquina 1964: 848).

Archaeological data for Maya ritual in general, and for sacrifice in particular, are abundant. The act of bloodletting was represented on stelae (free-standing stone monuments), lintels, murals, and ceramics during the Late Classic Period (A.D. 600-950). Specifically, blood was let from the tongue, the ears and the fleshy parts of the arm; it was collected on bark paper in baskets or ceramic bowls, and then presented as a gift to the supernatural.

Stingray spines were also employed to draw blood. Landa (1941) in fact states that stingray spines were customarily buried with a priest as a mark of his office. Stingray spines have indeed been recovered from many Maya sites in burials, and imitations in bone have also been found. Thompson (1966: fig. 23b), utilizing Landa's data, interprets the burials including stingray spines as being those of priests; for example, at Uaxactún *c.* A.D. 550, a man was buried full-length, face down, with red ochre on his bones. Offerings in this burial (A22, Structure A-V) included thirty-five vessels of the Early Classic period, earplugs and beads of jade and shell, jaguar teeth, a stingray spine painted red, burned and unburned copal nodules, charcoal and a bone tube (Smith 1950: fig. 121).

Obsidian blades were also employed for bloodletting. With these or other implements, a hole could be made in one's tongue and then a cord set with thorns could be passed through it; this method of offering one's own blood is represented on Yaxchilán stone monuments (Lintels 17, 24; Maudslay 1889-1902: plates 85, 86). What is significant in this case is that the individuals drawing the cord set with thorns through their tongues are women. This clearly contradicts Landa's sixteenth-century descriptions, since he specifically states that women's blood was not shed, and that they were not allowed to go to the temples for sacrifices except during one festival involving old women (1941: 128-9; Herrera 1941: 219-20). Landa's data may therefore apply only to the Postclassic situation, and possibly (?) only to middle or lower class women. It is clear that the women depicted on the lintels at Yaxchilán were nobility, most probably the wives of the rulers depicted on the same monument.

Several monuments showing a woman holding a vessel of blood-spattered papers are

known. The earliest example appears at Naranjo on Stela 24. The 'woman-with-blood-spattered-papers-in-a-vessel' motif, as well as the 'bloodletting' glyph, are most frequently the subject matter of lintels, but at Naranjo a woman from Tikal is shown on two stelae (nos 24 and 29; Maler 1908: plates 39, 41) holding a vessel. Lintel 24 at Yaxchilán shows a woman with a cord set with thorns passing through her tongue and the text includes the 'bloodletting' hieroglyph (Proskouriakoff 1960: fig. 8c); she is probably the wife of the ruler *Shield-Jaguar*. Yaxchilán Lintels 43 (Maler 1903: plate 67), 41 (Morley 1937–8: 5: plate 178B), and 17 all date to the reign of his successor, *Bird-Jaguar*.

There is also an important bloodletting ceremony depicted in a mural painting in Room 3, Structure 1, at Bonampak (Ruppert, Thompson and Proskouriakoff 1955: fig. 29). This ceremony occupies the upper half of the east end wall. Seated on top of a large bench or table are three persons in long gowns. The central figure is probably the wife of the ruler; behind her is a younger woman who has been tentatively identified as their daughter. In front of the woman is the Maya lord himself, apparently in the act of drawing blood from his tongue. The ruler is inserting a white object (bone, stingray spine?) into his tongue while a male attendant, kneeling at the front of the massive altar, is shown holding two more objects with very sharp points. Resting in front of the ruler is a large spiked vessel containing bark paper strips. For Thompson (1955: 54–5) the scene clearly represented a ceremonial offering of blood, as one of the rites preparatory to a cycle of other ceremonies. This scene can be dated to roughly A.D. 800.

We also have good evidence for human sacrifice in the archaeological record. For example, on Stela 11 at Piedras Negras (Maler 1901: plate 20) a victim is shown stretched over a stone altar at the base of a ladder leading up to the temple, where the ruler is seated on his throne; instead of blood emanating from the open wound of the victim there are long feathers which Thompson (1970: 176) suggests are quetzal feathers, symbolizing something precious – a definition the Maya applied to human blood. In the Dresden Codex, a tree is shown emanating from the wound after the removal of the victim's heart (Thompson 1972: 123). On a gold disk recovered from the Sacred Cenote at Chichén Itzá, a victim is stretched over a stone altar with a gaping wound clearly shown; four assistants hold down the limbs of the victim, most probably the *chacs* or 'lightning impersonators' referred to by Landa. This form of sacrifice seems to be the most common form, although others are known. Immediate sacrifice of victims taken in raids was a common practice, as was the offering of children and adults to the *chacs*, lightning beings that were purported to live in the cenote at Chichén Itzá.

At one time or another, a great variety of living things and inanimate materials were given in sacrifice. Archaeological data reveal caches containing manatees, jaguars, opossums, parrots, quail, owls and turtles (Thompson 1970: 182). Colonial sources and modern ethnographies document more recent sacrifices of dogs, deer, turkeys, iguanas, pumas, crocodiles or caymans, squirrels, insects and feathers. The sixteenth-century sources list dogs, deer and turkeys in greatest frequency.

Copal incense was offered, and has been found archaeologically. Additionally, rubber, cacao, maize, squash seeds, flowers, pine boughs and needles, as well as the fermented beverage *balche* (honey and bark of the tree *Lonchocarpus longistylus*) are listed ethno-historically. Honey, wax, *zuhuy ha* (uncontaminated or 'virgin' water collected from cenotes and caves), jade, obsidian, shell and iron pyrite mirrors were also offered.

Children were also considered to be *zuhuy* (virgin or uncontaminated), and were thus appropriate offerings to the supernatural beings and forces, particularly to lightning.

The dedication of buildings and stelae called for 'wealthy' offerings included in the cache – jade, shell, obsidian and other imported items. The communal offerings for public buildings and public religion contrast with the offerings made by the lower class farmers in their fields and family altars – ceramic vessels, copal, food and drink.

Summary and conclusions

Obviously, in a paper this brief there are only a few conclusions that can be drawn. However, the Zapotec and Maya share so many principles that I believe we can see the outlines of an ancient, basic and widespread religious pattern that existed in Southern Mesoamerica before the incursions of Nahuatl speakers into that area.

That pattern would include the concept of a vital force expressed as 'wind', 'breath' or 'spirit', glossed *pè* by the Zapotec and *ik* by the Maya. It included lightning as a powerful supernatural (Zapotec *cocijo*, Maya *chac*), sometimes taking the form of four *cocijos* (as in the Zapotec 260-day calendar) or four *chacs* (in the Maya universe). It also included an animatistic view of the world in which everything that moved deserved respect.

Both Zapotec and Maya constructed temples with a highly sacred inner room and a less sacred outer room. Both had a religious hierarchy which included high priests, common priests, sacrificers and diviners. Both offered in sacrifice their own blood, birds and animals, children, and captives taken in war. Both revered their own ancestors and constructed memorial buildings above royal ancestors. Zapotec royal ancestors may have been commemorated in tomb murals as early as the Classic Period, while Maya royal ancestors were commemorated with carved stelae during the same period. On all these subjects, the archaeological record provides confirmation for the ethnohistoric sources.

On the other hand, the archaeological record shows that Classic Maya women may have played a greater role in religion and in temple activities than the sixteenth-century documents would suggest. It also shows that 'idols' were not an important part of Maya ceremonialism until the Postclassic arrival of Nahuatl speakers. In such cases, archaeology can be used to correct ethnohistoric models, or establish the time depth to which they may be valid. Such feedback between the two lines of evidence will strengthen both archaeology and ethnohistory.

Finally, our examination of these two peoples using two subdisciplines suggests that the Zapotec and Maya did not have a vast Greco-Roman style pantheon of anthropomorphized gods, as has sometimes been supposed. While this topic surely deserves further research (Marcus and Flannery n.d.), it appears that both peoples believed in a single, supreme, incorporeal 'creator' and a series of great supernatural forces which they represented by combining aspects of different creatures. Cloud and earthquake were relatively more important for the Zapotec, sun and moon relatively more important for the Maya. In both areas, the early Colonial Spanish underestimated the role of ancestor worship and mistook venerated, deceased royalty for gods. At the same time, such is the richness of the ethnohistoric data that the sixteenth-century writers left us many of the clues we need to correct their misunderstandings, and put the archaeology and religion of southern Mesoamerica on more solid ground.

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Abstract

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Archaeology and religion: a comparison of the Zapotec and Maya

This paper deals with the way ethnohistoric models can be used as a framework for organizing archaeological data, and in turn how archaeology can be used to verify or correct ethnohistoric data. Sixteenth-century descriptions of Zapotec and Maya religion are compared to data derived from the archaeological record from the same two regions. Finally, Zapotec and Maya religion are compared to see what basic patterns they might share.