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**"The blood speaks"—Maya ritual sacrifice**

**Islas, Melinda David, M.A.**

**The University of Arizona, 1990**

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**"THE BLOOD SPEAKS" —  
MAYA RITUAL SACRIFICE**

by

**Melinda David Islas**

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**A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of the  
DEPARTMENT OF ANTHROPOLOGY  
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
for the Degree of  
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**1990**

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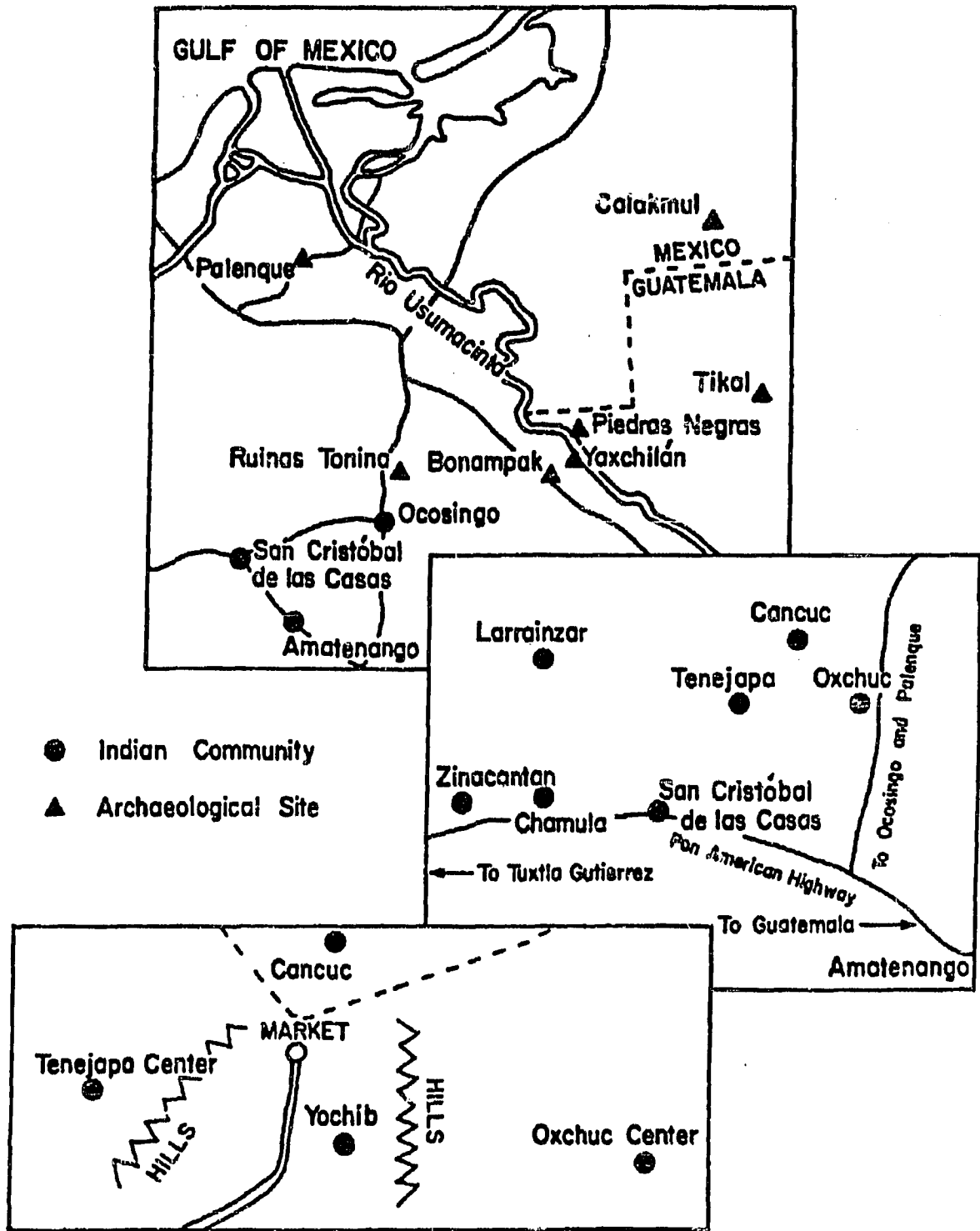


Figure 1 - Map

**ABSTRACT**

**This paper examines ritual in Classic Maya art of the Usamacinta River drainage, focusing on blood sacrifice, its iconography and symbolism, then looks at contemporary Maya ritual in highland Chiapas, Mexico. Connections between the two are made, emphasizing the continuity of Maya culture in Mesoamerica, and suggestions are made for current archaeological investigations in the Maya area.**

## I. INTRODUCTION

Blood is the most precious substance known to man: it sustains, and thus may symbolize, life itself. In numerous societies, because of this ultimate value, human blood, as well as animal blood, has been offered to the supernatural powers in ritual exchange for the blessings of fertility and prosperity.

Human blood and other precious objects, or their symbols, were offered in this way on important ceremonial occasions, such as a ruler's accession, by the elite of the Classic Maya of the Usamacinta River drainage. These sacrifices are recorded in Classic Maya artworks, on walls and stelae of sites near the Usamacinta, as well as on ceramic vessels and in codices.

After the "fall" of Classic Maya society, it is highly probable that some groups of these Indians moved west, into the highland escarpment of what today is the state of Chiapas, Mexico. Descendants of these groups, known as the Tzeltals and Tzotzils for the dialects they speak, still occupy this area. Because of its precious quality, blood retains a high symbolic value for these people.

Although human blood is no longer offered in sacrifice, it continues to have profound significance in the native culture of highland

Chiapas. Blood, both human and animal, has recognized symbolic value and is still salient in ritual practice. It has been said by one Tzotzil shaman that "the blood talks" (Vogt 1976:62), and the Tzotzil word ch'ichel means both "blood" and "ritual prayer, or speech" (Laughlin:1981).

This paper seeks to establish that there are connections between blood sacrifice rituals of the Classic Maya of the Usamacinta River drainage and rituals of contemporary Tzeltal Mayas. The following section gives some theoretical background, with discussions of ritual and symbol, literature regarding Maya blood sacrifice, and the problem of cultural persistence through time, focusing on Mesoamerica and the highland Maya of Mexico. The question of "what is 'real'?" is addressed, with reference not only to anthropology, but also to the works of a 20th Century cinematographer and author, and the role of the anthropologist in answering this question is discussed.

The next two sections refer to methodology and are mainly descriptive. Section III examines some Classic Maya artworks from sites of the Usamacinta River drainage, focusing upon the human wrist as the primary location from which blood was obtained for ceremonial sacrifice. Section IV looks at contemporary Tzeltal and Tzotzil ritual practice. First, the literature is briefly reviewed, then results are given of the

**author's fieldwork in the Tzeltal paraje of Yochib in the municipio of Oxchuc during August and September of 1990.**

**The concluding section of this paper delineates connections between Classic Maya ritual blood sacrifice and contemporary highland Maya ritual and symbol, showing probable persistence through time of this particular cultural tradition.**

## II. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

### Ritual and Symbol

Before discussing ritual and symbol in relation to the Maya, it is necessary to define both terms. Victor Turner's work on the ritual system of the Ndembu people of south-central Africa, published as The Forest of Symbols, is seminal to any similar study. Turner states that ". . . 'ritual' . . . [is] prescribed formal behavior for occasions . . . having reference to beliefs in mystical beings or powers" (Turner 1970:19). Later in the book he emphasizes the point that ritual is "a system of meanings" (Turner 1970:46).

A symbol, according to Webster's Collegiate Dictionary (1981), is "something that stands for or suggests something else . . . a visible sign of the invisible." Turner cites Edwards Sapir's work in the Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences in giving a ritual symbol's four main attributes: "1. the condensation of many meanings in a single form; 2. economy of reference; 3. predominance of emotional or oretic quality; 4. associational linkages with regions of the unconscious." Attributes one, two and three are especially relevant to this paper. Turner lists categories of the symbols he observed in Ndembu ritual situations:

"objects, activities, relationships, events, gestures, and spatial units" (Turner 1970:19). Several of these also apply directly to Maya ritual situations and are discussed below in relation to both Classic artworks and contemporary practices.

One of Turner's major points of emphasis is that a group's ritual behavior includes a "dominant" symbol, or collection of symbols, which ". . . brings the ethical and jural norms of the society into close contact with strong emotional stimuli" (Turner 1970:29). His discussion of the African milk tree in this regard has become classic in the literature of cultural anthropology. A dominant symbol may therefore be seen as related to the linguistic concept of a culture's "key metaphor," and "blood" is thus both a dominant symbol and a key metaphor in Maya culture.

In dealing with both artwork and ritual behavior, this paper uses the term "image" to refer to an actual object or form. The meaning possessed by this image, external to the form itself, is a "symbol," and the image thus becomes symbolic of an abstract idea or value. Additionally, a symbol, or an aggregate of symbols, may relate to a theme which holds high cultural significance. For instance, in art, the image of a serpent may have reference to the zig-zag shape of a lightning bolt during a rainstorm; by extension, this serpentine form may be a symbol of rain, the visible sky, or even the cosmic Heaven. An image is



frequently multivalent, as when a snake symbolizes not only rain and the heavens, but also—simultaneously— the earth in which that snake lives, and by another extension, the cosmic Underworld. A simple example of the complex relationships among image, symbol, and theme is the image of (or verbal reference to) a serpent, symbolizing water and rain, and relating to the productivity of the land and the theme of fertility.

Fertility is indeed a central theme in Classic Maya artwork; equally salient is the related theme of blood-sacrifice. Andrea Stone connects the ritual piercing of the penis for blood to the release of "another life-giving fluid," semen, and she asserts that these two themes, fertility and blood sacrifice, are "tightly interwoven" (Stone 1988:84). The epigrapher David Stuart also links these themes in his interpretations of Maya iconography, joining fertility and birth, ancestors, and dynastic bloodlines as concerns of high cultural value to the Classic Maya elite, frequently recorded as various images in artwork.

A linguistic example of the multiple meanings symbolized by a single image is found in Brian Stross' semantic work on Tzeltal anatomical terms. Stross states that "nalil 'semen' can also be called mac (literally 'corn gruel')" (Stross 1976:247). Here it is seen that semen, a symbol of human reproduction, is linked metaphorically, and subtly, with corn, the valuable product of a fertile land.

Various images in Maya artworks and in contemporary Maya ritual function as symbols relating to the two predominant cultural themes of fertility and blood sacrifice. Some of these images, inter-related in complex symbolic metaphors, and relevant to this paper, are: blood, water, rain, jade, serpents, bones, plants, liquor, incense, heads of animals, humans, and deities . . . and the human wrist.

### Maya Blood Sacrifice

Three scholars have written major works dealing with blood sacrifice and its iconography in Classic Maya art. The earliest of these studies is Peter Joralemon's 1974 article, "Ritual Blood-Sacrifice among the Maya." Seminal to later work, this article connects the sacrifice with the idea of blood as a "blood-line," or lineage, and puts attention on the importance of this concept in the tracing of local dynasties throughout Maya history. Expanding on Joralemon's work, Linda Schele (with Mary Ellen Miller) in 1986 published The Blood of Kings. Beautifully illustrated with both photographs and line drawings, this book examines numerous aspects of Maya life and ritual as depicted in art, blood sacrifice being but one of these aspects. Despite the inclusion of several theories regarding blood sacrifice that seem only remotely possible, to date this work is the most comprehensive analysis of the subject. The third major work concerning this particular ritual is David Stuart's 1988

article "Blood Sacrifice in Maya Iconography." Succinctly and lucidly written, considering Maya epigraphy equally with pictorial art, this article is an excellent source for students and professional scholars alike.

Joralemon, Schele, and Stuart all discuss the corporeal aspects of Maya blood sacrifice. They agree that blood for the offering was obtained, by the use of "perforators," from various parts of the human body: they emphasize the piercing of the tongue and the penis, and make mention of the ears and the face. These authors are respected Mayanists, and their scholarship is not superficial, yet not one of them suggests the wrist specifically as a source for the sacrificial blood.

One hypothesis of this paper is that among the Classic Maya the wrist was a primary source for this ritual offering, and that the prominence of the wrist in artwork, even without the depiction of blood or a piercing instrument, may symbolize the complete sacrificial act. Hyperextended wrists and hands held as though to scatter, or sprinkle, some substance are prevalent in Classic Maya artworks. It is to be recalled here that Turner, as noted above, specifically mentioned that "gestures" may be symbolic. In this respect, the hyperextension of the wrist alone may be considered a symbol of blood sacrifice.

It is pertinent next to consider the act of obtaining blood and equipment for doing so. Classic Maya and modern American societies are compared.

Taking blood from a vein or artery is not difficult. It involves only the proper positioning of the arm, puncturing or lacerating the skin and underlying vessel with a sharp instrument, and then stemming the resulting blood flow after the desired amount of blood is obtained.

In contemporary American society, medical technologists, nurses and phlebotomists routinely perform venipuncture and arteriopuncture, using sterile, hollow, metal needles for piercing, and syringes or other sterile containers for collecting the blood. (Sometimes, if surface vessels have collapsed, a physician must use a scalpel to open the arm, in order to locate a deep vein in which to insert a catheter for the administration of fluids.)

Although a vessel is quickly penetrated by a needle, the procedure is easier for both the client and the health-care professional if the wrist is slightly hyperextended. This position stretches the vessel just enough to facilitate entry of the needle. In contrast, even a minor flexion of the wrist joint makes the task more difficult, as there is no tension on the vessel. A rubber or velcro tourniquet may be used to constrict vessels and thus aid the pooling of blood in the distal portion of the arm, but it is rapidly released to allow a free flow of blood into the collecting

container. Piercing a blood vessel with a thin, sharply pointed instrument produces a steady flow of blood, but this flow may be easily stopped by the application of direct pressure to the puncture site. For this purpose, health-care workers use gauze pads, cotton "balls," or Band-aids.

Metal needles were of course not available to the Classic Maya, but the environment provided an abundance of other sources of piercing instruments: thorns and spines from plants could be utilized in their natural states, and sharp objects could be fashioned from materials such as reeds, shell, bone, flint, and obsidian. Lancets of some of these materials have been found in Classic Maya graves. Stingray spines also may have been used in obtaining blood ceremonially; these have been discovered in elite tomb caches, frequently near the pelvic region of a skeleton (Schele 1986:175).

Bracelets, or wristlets, are commonly depicted in Classic Maya artworks. In several of these, it is clear that the bracelets were tied in place. The wristlets could have been used as tourniquets. In some representations they are subtly positioned just high enough on the arm to expose the area of the wrist at which a piercing instrument might most readily be inserted.

With the assistance of two colleagues, Frank Gomez, M.D., and Gayle Bergier, R.N., the author conducted two experiments. In the first,

Ms. Bergier punctured a vein of the author's wrist by means of a large-bore, sterile, intravenous catheter needle. In the second, Dr. Gomez used an obsidian blade to make a shallow cut across the veins of her inner wrist. In both experiments, blood from the wrist vessels dripped downward off the wrist and hand, exactly as it is depicted in the artworks that include the "scattering" gesture, described below.

(Photographs available from the author on request.)

The experiments had the further benefit of teaching the author that obtaining blood from a wrist vein is not a matter of simply "slashing" the wrist. On the contrary, the procedure is one of delicate and precise minor surgery, and must be carefully and slowly conducted by a person with knowledge of anatomy, in order to avoid any potential nerve damage. The experiments also showed the author how the thin, pre-Columbian objects like bone needles, thorns, or stingray spines found in grave caches could have served to dissect small vessels upwards to the point where they could be visualized and lacerated.

Though it impossible to know for certain the materials of which they were made, pointed objects are frequently portrayed in Classic Maya art. A common depiction shows a ritual lancet with an animal head for a handle, surmounted by double or triple knots, which in turn have feathers emerging from them. Schele refers to the "power and

sacred nature" of this lancet, and terms it "the Perforator God" when it is included in artwork as a ceremonial object.

It is possible that the Classic Maya of the Usamacinta River drainage used cotton to stem or catch the flow of blood during ceremonies. Karen Bruhns writes that ". . . the few surviving bits of [pre-Columbian] Maya cloth are of cotton and show that the textile arts were highly developed . . ." (Bruhns 1988:109). Joyce Marcus says ". . . cotton . . . could have been very important in areas such as the Usamacinta. At sites near the alluvial plains of that river, such as Piedras Negras, Yaxchilan, Bonampak, and El Cayo, carved stelae show royal women wearing cotton garments, some embroidered. This is in striking contrast to the royal women outside the Usamacinta zone, or at nonriverine sites such as Tikal, Naranjo, Caracol, and El Zapote . . ." (Marcus 1983:476). Round objects, which may represent cotton "balls," and folded material, which may be cotton cloth, are—like wristlets and pointed objects—frequently portrayed in artworks. These portrayals, together with archaeological evidence, show that the Classic Maya had available materials which could have been used in a manner comparable to that used by contemporary American health-care workers in obtaining blood.

The consensus among Maya scholars is that elite rulers offered their blood ceremonially on important occasions, and artists frequently

commemorated these events. Two such occasions were the accession of a ruler and the end of a culturally-significant time period, known as a katun. A third important occasion will be proposed in the Conclusions, below.

In the artworks, the outstretched hand, with hyperextended wrist, is called the "scattering" gesture. Scholars agree that precious objects are being released, and hypothesize that these may be jade beads, corn kernels, or pieces of copal incense. Stuart writes that at least in some instances it is blood that is being scattered, and he suggests on the basis of linguistic evidence that the glyph associated with this gesture of hyperextended wrist be translated as "spill, sprinkle" (Stuart 1988:188). The image of this gesture, alone, may symbolize the ritual act of blood sacrifice.

In addition to the outstretched hand and wrist, the depiction of heads, both animal and human, is a prominent feature of Classic Maya art. Although this feature is especially marked in the Maya area, it is found also in other regions of Mesoamerica, and in the art of later cultures, such as Toltec and Aztec.

Some of the earliest Mesoamerican emphasis on the head in art is seen among the Olmec, in the puzzling colossal human heads of San Lorenzo and La Venta (1200-600 B.C.). The Olmec "Las Limas" figure of a male, holding a smaller personage on his lap, has heads of what are



probably deities carved in profile on the knees and shoulders of the larger figure. The great serpent heads projecting from the facade of the Temple of Quetzalcoatl at Teotihuacan are an outstanding example of the importance of heads in the art of central Mexico. A Zapotec ruler of Monte Alban, in Oaxaca, in the first centuries A.D., was buried with a piece of jade carved to represent the head of a bat.

Scholars believe that the Izapa culture of southeastern Chiapas and the Guatemala Pacific Coast was a link between earlier Olmec and later Maya. Stelae and accompanying altars, a distinguishing feature complex of Maya sites such as Tikal and Yaxchilan, are found in the Izapa area. Stela I, from Izapa, shows in bas relief a warrior holding a human head. A giant head similar to the Olmec ones, but with swollen, puffy features, was found at Monte Alto, near El Baul, on the Pacific Coast.

In the northern Maya area, early heads depicted in art are found at Cerros, Belize. The stucco mask facades on pyramid stairways here seem to represent deities rather than actual humans or animals. Stucco masks are found also on stairways at Toniná.

Heads are a noted feature of the Maya hieroglyphic system: deity, animal, and human heads form integral parts of the glyphs. Easily identifiable are jaguars, bats, monkeys, rabbits, parrots, and other birds. Human hands and feet are also seen among the glyphs. It is possible

that these may relate to the sacrifice of the animal or person depicted. Heads of animals are found also in the glyphs of the Maya calendar: a bat, monkey, and gopher are identifiable. Some head glyphs have been deciphered as representing specific persons or deities. Pertinent here is Bird-Jaguar, a ruler of Yaxchilan, whose identifying glyph is a jaguar head in profile with a small bird immediately above.

In this context, it is interesting to recall the abundance of totemic animals found among natives of the New World at the time of the Spanish conquest, and existing still today in some areas. Some of the Classic Maya animal-head glyphs may refer to lineages or clans. It is known that the Toltec and Aztec had warrior societies associated with totemic animals (the major ones being jaguar, coyote, and eagle). It is possible that Maya society included similar groups and that animal-head glyphs refer to these.

Relating to blood sacrifice and decapitation is a Classic era stela from Aparicio, Veracruz. Although this is outside the Maya region, the stela is mentioned here because of its symbolic iconography. It shows a seated ball player figure, headless, with seven snakes emerging from the neck area. Considering the intertwined symbolism of snakes, water, rain, and blood, it is possible that this figure represents a sacrifice for fertility.

Skeletons without heads have been found in Maya graves. Chief among these is that of the Ruler Stormy Sky of Tikal. It has been proposed that Stormy Sky was killed in battle and his head taken by his victorious enemies. Another possibility is that his head was removed after his death by his own people and buried in another location, as yet not discovered by archaeologists.

Franz Blom (1927) notes that most of the monuments at Toniná depicting humans were headless. Similarly, the seated statue of Bird-Jaguar, in Building 33 at Yaxchilan, is headless. The head itself is on the floor of a nearby niche in the same building. Although the Mexican government's "Official Guide to Yaxchilan" attributes it to the vandalism of woodcutters in the 19th century, it is not known exactly how or when this decapitation occurred.

Representations of human heads worn as decoration on belts and bustles, as pendants on necklaces, and as integral part of head-dresses are common in Classic Maya sculptures and paintings. Animal and human heads are also seen frequently on lids of Classic ceramic vessels from sites such as Tikal and Yaxchilan, and it is possible that these fine vessels were used ceremonially.

It is known from 16th Century Spanish sources that among the Late Classic Maya of Yucatan, ballplayers were ritually decapitated as

sacrifices. It is likely that many of the heads in earlier Maya art may refer to sacrifices and have ritual meaning.

In Tzotzil Maya, jol is a noun, 'head.' Its second meaning is adjectival: Laughlin gives 'worthy,' 'expensive,' and 'valuable' as three of its common translations (Laughlin 1981:231). This may be a coincidence, but it may also possibly be a linguistic connection between the object (head) and its symbolic cultural significance.

A final point, emphasized by Joralemon, Schele, and Stuart, is the significance of ancestral elite dynasties in Classic Maya society. As seen later in this paper, all these features—the emphasis on blood during ritual; the human wrist; hands, and feet; and the emphasis on familial bloodlines—are still identifiable in contemporary highland Chiapas Maya society.

### Cultural Continuity

A major problem faced by the researcher seeking similarities between Classic Maya blood sacrifice and contemporary Maya ritual is the problem of cultural continuity. In his book, Europe and the People without History, Eric Wolf takes a broad-perspective approach to this problem, as he analyzes what happened in the 16th Century when the Conquistadors, representing Spain and the Old World, confronted the indigenous peoples and cultures of the New World.

Wolf's primary concern is with politico-economic systems, but he states clearly that within a given society these overlap with the religious system. Although he does not discuss the Maya area specifically, he describes how the Spanish founded a civil-political system in indigenous Mesoamerica: "The higher Indian nobility was formally assimilated into the Spanish nobility and confirmed in their claims to tribute, property, and pensions, but they were deprived of any access to the commanding levers of power. . . . The lower orders of the Indian nobility . . . were charged with the supervision of local communities . . . and . . . came to mediate between conquerors and conquered" (Wolf 1982:146).

Wolf goes on to show how it was the Catholic Church which established a new religious system among the Mesoamerican natives, complementary to the new political one, ". . . to stage the rituals connected with the annual Catholic calendar" (Wolf 1982:147). He then explains how these civil-religious hierarchical systems came to exist and function simultaneously in an Indian community, through a process of alternation-of-office. For instance, a man might hold an office such as "judge" in the civil hierarchy for a year, and at the close of that term might then serve the community by holding a religious office such as "regidor" for a year. By means of this alternation, a man could advance upward through both systems, gaining power and prestige among his peers in the process. This dual system is known in the literature as the

"cargo" system, referring to the office as the cargo, or burden, a man bears.

Wolf recognizes that the native religions of the New World blended with Catholicism over time. He states, "The [civil-religious] hierarchy also carried on rituals relating the community to the supernatural. These rituals came to bear a dual character, part Christian and part pagan" (Wolf 1982:157). He sees also that this hierarchy utilized ". . . religious symbols that combined Christian and local cultural forms" (Wolf 1982:157).

This unique synthesis of two distinct religions is known in the anthropological literature by the term "syncretism," and it has been studied as a cultural phenomenon. For purposes of this paper, the religion that was formed—syncretized—in 16th Century Mesoamerica is considered to be relatively stable in structure for the following four centuries. It is here referred to as the Traditional Maya religion, now practiced in the Indian communities of Highland Chiapas.

In discussing two salient themes in anthropological studies of Mesoamerican religion, David Scotchmer narrows Wolf's focus on the problem of cultural continuity. Scotchmer defines one theme as the continuity of religious content, with attention paid to the syncretism of pre-Conquest native traditions and Catholicism, and the second theme as change of religious content, ". . . a dependent variable of social,

economic and political changes within the micro and macro levels of society" (Scotchmer 1986:197).

Other anthropologists have studied Maya religion and ritual in the Chiapas highlands, the chief of these being Evon Vogt, Gary Gossen, and Victoria Bricker. Vogt has studied particular ceremonies in the municipio of Zinacantan. Several aspects of his work pertinent to Maya blood sacrifice are mentioned in Section IV, below.

Gossen is editor of a volume of metaphysical essays, entitled Mesoamerican Ideas. In the introduction to this book he supports the idea of religious and cultural continuity in Mesoamerica. His perspective on the issue is that of Wolf, as he considers politico-economic aspects of change as well as the more ephemeral ones of religion. He says that despite absorption of traditional Mesoamerican economic and political systems into the European "capitalistic" ones (an absorption whose rate is rapidly increasing since mid-20th Century), ". . . there remains accessible—from the great megalopolis of Mexico City to the hinterlands of the Chiapas lowland jungle—a strain of Mesoamerican regional identity that is immutable" (Gossen 1986:2).

In the introduction to his article in this volume on "The Chamula Festival of Games" Gossen further supports his previous statement by asserting that ". . . if one focuses on the formal-structural properties of Mesoamerican symbolism, the old template of sacred agricultural,

directional and cosmological symbolism proves to be alive and well" (Gossen 1986:4). His studies of Maya ritual expressions of space and time are significant contributions to this area of cultural anthropology.

Similarly, Victoria Bricker has made two major studies of religious symbolism among the natives of highland Chiapas. In the earlier one, The Indian Christ, the Indian King, she analyzes "ritualized ethnic conflict" in highland communities. First, she examines current ritual and folklore, then known, documented, historical events. Finally, she names actual Indian personages in the traditions and shows that the Maya today identify these personages with the figure of Christ in religion. She finds that because of a basic Maya concept of time, there is in the traditions a " . . . temporal distortion which treats sequential events as structurally equivalent . . ." (Bricker 1981:180). She feels that as a result of this temporal distortion, the distinction between myth and history among the contemporary Maya is not a clear one, and that " . . . many seemingly aboriginal elements in Maya myth and ritual are actually of postconquest origin . . ." (Bricker 1981:ix). The Indian Christ shows how syncretism functions, using the example of Maya and Catholic religions, as it " . . . integrates beliefs and practices of different origin and meaning," and also how change interfaces with continuity in this one particular geographical and cultural region.



Bricker's second study, relevant here, published as "The Calendrical Meaning of Ritual," is more refined, and it has a narrower focus. She looks specifically at ritual in the municipio of Chamula, and finds that although "some very ancient rites" occur in the community's New Year's ceremonies, the meaning of these rites has not survived in local oral-traditions, and ". . . cannot be elicited in interviews with Chamula informants" (Bricker 1989:23). For this reason, she seeks the lost meaning in 16th Century Spanish documents, in Late Classic hieroglyphic texts, on monuments, and in codices. Bricker's methodology is pertinent, as this paper also attempts to delineate connections between symbolism in current Maya ritual practice and that of pre-Conquest ritual, in the limited area of blood sacrifice, seeking to identify definite continuities through time.

The author has chosen not to utilize 16th Century documentation (such as Bishop de Landa's work) of Maya rituals in Yucatan. Though some cultural continuity may exist, the changes that have occurred in Yucatecan Maya religion since the Spanish Conquest differ from those that have occurred among the Maya of the Chiapas highlands. Not only is the highland area much closer to the Usamacinta drainage than is the Yucatan peninsula, but it is subject to different outside cultural influences.

Likewise, codices are not utilized in this paper because the few existing Maya codices do not have proven provenance of either highland Chiapas or the Usamacinta drainage. The author chooses to examine instead specific Maya artworks from the Usamacinta zone and compare these with contemporary highland Maya ritual practice, as she believes that some groups of Maya from the Usamacinta lowlands migrated to the nearby Chiapas highlands after around 900 A.D.

However, there is little historical data, between the time of Classic Maya artwork and 20th Century ethnography, that deals with highland Maya ritual. Edward Calnek, in an unpublished Ph.D. dissertation on "Highland Chiapas Before the Spanish Conquest," relies on primary Spanish sources from the 16th Century, chief among these being a diary kept by Fray Tomás de la Torre, a Dominican who arrived in Chiapas with Bartolome de las Casas in 1545. Calnek states that ". . . the few surviving accounts [from the time of the Conquest] of formal ritual activity emphasize sacrifice of birds, animals, and war prisoners" (Calnek 1962:56). He goes on to say that in an early Tzotzil dictionary there is mention of human blood sacrifice from the ears (Calnek 1962:57).

Before turning to a description of the artworks chosen and then to contemporary Maya ritual practices, one significant theoretical problem must be addressed. This problem is particularly perplexing in regard to

the subject of this paper, but it contains deeper implications, implications which affect all ethnographic studies attempted.

### Reality

"What is 'real'?" is a question that puzzles not only cultural anthropologists, but other professionals as well as laymen, and it has been the subject of artistic works in various media in this century.

The question arises in the legal sphere when a crime has been committed, witnessed by more than one person. Attorneys are all too familiar with witnesses who give strikingly dissimilar descriptions of an alleged perpetrator's physical attributes and clothing. How does a jury decide, then, which description is the "real" one?

This problem occurs frequently during marital counseling sessions, in which a wife tells "her side" of a situation and a husband tells "his side," as the counselor listens to both and facilitates their interactions. This is so common in American society that it is the format of a popular monthly column, "Can This Marriage Be saved?," in the magazine, Ladies Home Journal. (Because it is pertinent to the anthropological problem, it is necessary to point out that the role of the marital counselor in this type of interaction is interpretive, not judicial.) Mothers perform a similar role to that of the marital counselor when

they settle the squabbles of young children, although the end of this settlement is a judgment, often resulting in a punishment.

In taking the oral history of an illness from a patient and his family, physicians also must decide what is "real." Did the patient have the chest pain before he started to run a fever, or afterwards? Was the cough an early symptom, or a late one? Humans seem to remember events in different ways.

This multiplicity of memories and the question of "reality" of a single event are central to the 1950 Japanese film, "Rashōmon," produced and directed by the brilliant Akira Kurasawa, and based on Akutagawa Ryūnosuke's short story, "In A Grove." The pivotal event in "Rashōmon" is a (possible) rape and subsequent murder, involving a man, his wife, and a thief, witnessed by a passing woodchopper. Kurasawa films this single event sequentially, from the perspective of each of the four characters. The task of the viewer, then, is the interpretive one of deciding which version was the "real" event—or if it is indeed possible to make this decision.

Kurasawa's statement regarding "reality" (in another context) is pertinent to ethnographic research: "Human beings are unable to be honest with themselves about themselves. They cannot talk about themselves without embellishing . . . the human heart itself is impossible to understand" (Kurasawa 1982:183).

This problem of "reality" also is a major theme of one of the most complex fictional structures of the 20th Century. Known together as "The Alexandria Quartet," the four novels, Justine, Mountolive, Balthazar, and Clea, by Lawrence Durrell, examine a set of characters and their interactions over some years in the Egyptian city of Alexandria.

As in "Rashōmon," events in the Alexandria Quartet are seen and described from the points of view of different people, slowly building to a more complete picture. In some end-notes of Justine, Durrell has one of his characters, Pursewarden, a writer, speak for him about the literary feat he himself is attempting in writing these four novels:

The narrative momentum forward is counter-sprung by references backwards in time, giving the impression of a book which is not travelling from A to B but standing above time and turning slowly on its own axis to comprehend the whole pattern. Things do not all lead forward to other things; some lead backwards to things which have passed. A marriage of past and present with the flying multiplicity of the future racing towards one. Anyway, that was my idea (Durrell 1957:248).

In an introductory note to Balthazar, Durrell further explains his notions of time and "reality":

I . . . am trying to complete a four-decker novel whose form is based on the relativity proposition. . . . Three sides of space and one of time constitute . . . the continuum. . . . The first three parts, however, are to be deployed spatially . . . and are not linked in a serial form. They interlap, interweave, in a purely spatial relation. Time is stayed. The fourth part alone will represent time and be a true sequel (Durrell 1960).

Later in Balthazar Durrell's principle character, Darley, talks about something he wrote in the earlier novel, Justine:

Yet when I wrote, the full facts were not at my disposal. The picture I drew was a provisional one—like the picture of a lost civilisation deduced from a few fragmented vases, an inscribed tablet, an amulet, a gold smiling death mask (Durrell 1960:14).

Durrell weaves this thread of explanation throughout the four novels. In one, a character writes, "To intercalate realities . . . is the only way to be faithful to Time, for at each moment in Time the possibilities are endless in their multiplicity" (Durrell 1960:226). This way of perceiving time and events is particularly interesting in relation to Bricker's 1961 statement regarding the basic Maya concept of time, which creates a temporal distortion of both ritual behavior and oral tradition, in which "sequential events" are therefore treated as though they were "structurally equivalent." Concerning this Indian concept of time and how it affects "reality" (the negative term "distortion" being Bricker's, not that of her Maya informants), Durrell's further comments are extremely relevant: "Our view of reality is conditioned by our position in space and time. . . . Thus every interpretation of reality is based upon a unique position. [my italics]" (Durrell 1960:15).

The key to "reality," therefore, seems to lie in its interpretation. With this in mind, one may consider the question of "What is 'real'?" from an anthropological perspective. Although many anthropologists recognize the problem, the works of two cultural anthropologists, Clifford Geertz and Victor Turner, are especially pertinent here.

Geertz has published a book of his collected essays, entitled The Interpretation of Cultures. Several of his ideas are relevant to the interpretation of Maya artworks and of contemporary Maya ritual. In the classic essay, "Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture," Geertz says that a true understanding of culture is essentially impossible, that all the work of anthropology is only an attempt to do so. He writes, "Cultural analysis is intrinsically incomplete. And, worse than that, the more deeply it goes, the less complete it is . . . interpretive anthropology is a science whose progress is marked less by a perfection of consensus than by a refinement of debate. What gets better is the precision with which we vex each other" (Geertz 1973:29).

Having admitted this, Geertz suggests that the task of interpretive anthropologists is to attempt cultural analysis by looking at " . . . the hard surfaces of life—with the political, economic, stratificatory realities . . . and with the biological and physical necessities on which these surfaces rest. . . ." (Geertz 1973:30). He calls for interpretive anthropologists, then, to look at "the symbolic dimensions of social action" in examining "the existential dilemmas of life."

Geertz thus recognizes theoretically the problem of "reality" in anthropological analysis, but offers only abstractions and rhetoric in trying to solve it. Victor Turner likewise recognizes the difficulties cultural anthropologists must face in trying to decide "what is 'real'."

especially regarding ritual, but he offers specific suggestions for the methodology of making that decision.

Turner deals with the issue of "reality" in cultural interpretation from the perspective of someone familiar with the theater. He feels that the anthropologist studying ritual is in the place of a member of an audience watching a play, seeing, perhaps, only the theatrical illusion, but convinced of that illusion's "reality."

Turner suggests that in order to identify structure and property of ritual symbols, the anthropologist must work with three classes of data: 1. external form and observable characteristics, 2. interpretations of these from specialists and laymen alike, and 3. "significant contexts" worked out by the researcher himself. This approach to the "realities" of ritual symbolism thus has strong methodological connections with the etic/emic approach of cognitive anthropology in identifying folk taxonomies of various domains. With this approach, the primary role of the ethnographer is subjectively interpretive. It is this approach that is utilized in this work to deal with the problem of interpretation of ritual in Classic Maya art and in contemporary highland Chiapas Maya culture.



### III. EXAMINATION OF ARTWORKS

Fifteen Classic Maya artworks are next described, with particular attention paid to the following: 1. prominence of the hand and wrist, especially if the wrist is hyperextended; 2. prominence of a piercing instrument; 3. depiction of absorbent material; 4. depiction of a serpent; 5. depiction of blood or blood-symbol; and 6. depiction of disembodied heads, either human or animal.

The first of these artworks are seven sculptures from Yaxchilan, a site on the western banks of the Usumacinta River, dating late 7th to early 9th Centuries A.D.

Because they bear a close resemblance, Lintels 13 and 14 are considered together. Each shows two richly garbed, standing male figures, faces turned toward one another. The costumes and head-dresses they wear are different on the two lintels. The figure on the left holds a shallow bowl outward from his body, on his outstretched left hand. The main difference in the two portrayals is that on Lintel 14 this wrist is clearly hyperextended, so that the bowl is more tilted and the objects within it appear to be in danger of spilling out. These objects may be folded cloth, or paper.

Each figure has one hand on a piercing instrument. These instruments resemble Schele's description of ceremonial lancets, having as their handles animal heads capped by a row of knots, in turn topped by feathers. A large, open-mouthed serpent is behind and between the two figures. From its mouth emerge the head, shoulders, and arms of another male figure. This third figure, also, wears different accoutrements on each lintel. On Lintel 14 he holds his hyperextended left wrist with his right fingers, in the exact position a nurse or doctor could most easily feel a pulse. Blood is depicted by spots on the folded material in the bowl.

Lintel 15 shows a kneeling woman on the right, holding a large, shallow basket in her arms. In the basket are a piercing instrument and some folded material. Piercing instruments are in the woman's hair, and more folded material is in an open bowl on the ground to her left. From this bowl arises a large serpent, and the head, shoulders and hands of a male figure come from its open mouth. Blood is shown as spots on the woman's fillet, on the folded material in the basket, and on the bowl. Behind the serpent is a double-scroll design which Stuart identifies as a blood-symbol (Stuart 1988:183), thereby linking this scene with the act of blood sacrifice.

A similar scene is shown on Lintel 25. An elaborately-robed, kneeling woman holds a shallow bowl chest-high on her outstretched left

hand. Her right arm is extended away from her body, and her right hand also is held out flat. A piercing instrument and folded material are in the bowl she holds, and folded material is seen also in a bowl on the ground to the left.

As on Lintel 15, a large serpent is shown on the left, almost floating above the bowl on the groundline. From this serpent's mouth, too, emerge the head, shoulders and arms of a male figure, holding a shield and a spear. He points the latter at the kneeling woman below, who is gazing up at him. A miniature serpent appears immediately above the woman's right wrist, its form echoing that of the larger reptile. Like the woman, this smaller serpent has its head tilted backward, so that it seems to be looking at the male figure above.

Blood spots are on the material in both bowls, and on the bowls themselves. Although no blood is shown actually dripping, the woman's extended right hand is positioned strategically above the bowl on the ground. Behind the great serpent is a curving design similar to the double-scroll design on Lintel 15. Stuart identifies this design also as a blood-symbol, mainly on the basis of glyphic elements inscribed on it (Stuart 1988:183).

Schele asserts that these lintels depict " . . . a ritually induced hallucinatory vision manifested as a huge rearing serpent" (Schele 1986:187). She refers to this manifestation throughout her book as "The

Vision Serpent," and suggests that one purpose of elite blood-letting was to produce this vision by "massive blood loss" and shock. This is extremely unlikely.

While it is true that "massive" blood loss results in shock, hallucinatory visions seldom, if ever, accompany this hemorrhaging. Trauma victims often remain alert, though terrified and hyperventilating.

It is implausible that Maya elite would be permitted to undergo purposeful, "massive" blood loss. As anyone familiar with hemodynamics knows, the risk of fatality accompanying such blood loss is quite high. Only in this century has Western biomedicine been able to replace "massive" blood loss adequately, with infusions of human blood and other fluids; there is no evidence that the Classic Maya were able to do so.

Schele interprets the figure emerging from the serpent's mouth on Lintel 25 as a warrior and Tlaloc god, and links these with a ". . . special sacrificial complex that the Maya associated with the god of the evening star and with war" (Schele 1986:177). Stuart also states that this figure is a warrior, specifically the ruler Shield Jaguar, "portrayed in a supernatural state" (Stuart, 1988:183). Considering some data from Chiapas, given below in Section IV, in which shamans have told ethnographers that "the blood speaks," and that the word for blood itself is the same word for "ritual speech," an equally plausible, alternative

explanation of the serpent forms on these four lintels is that they symbolize the "speech" of the blood that has been offered in ritual sacrifice. Another likely interpretation is that the serpent was associated with blood, semen, rain, and fertility, and this form here may be the symbolic answer to the elite's prayers for rain and bountiful crops.

Although it has no obvious connections with the previous four lintels, Lintel 26 is mentioned here. On it, a male figure, identified as Shield Jaguar, stands on the left, full-front, but with his face turned to his left, looking at a smaller figure facing him in profile on the right of the lintel. Shield Jaguar appears to be dressed for battle; he holds what may be a stone-bladed knife point-downwards in his right hand. His left hand is held at shoulder-level, with the wrist hyperextended, prominently displayed at the center of the scene. The figure at the right has "blood scrolls" of dots on the face.

Equally prominent in the scene, and in close proximity to Shield Jaguar's left hand and wrist, is an object held by the figure on the right. Schele identifies this object as "a water lily jaguar helmet" (Schele 1986:211). However, this object may be something else altogether.

In the National Museum of Anthropology in Mexico City, displayed near Lintel 26, is a large, deep, grey, undecorated ceramic pot, molded in the shape of a jaguar head (Tabasco, Late Classic). This vessel appears to be the same size as the object held by the second figure on Lintel 26,

and the two bear a startling resemblance to each other. It is here suggested that the object resembling a jaguar head on Lintel 26 is not a helmet, nor a mask, nor a head-dress, but a vessel used to collect blood that was ritually offered by a ruler as a sacrifice before battle.

On two other sculptures from Yaxchilan, Stela 1 and Stela 6, another type of sacrificial act is depicted, characterized by what is known in the literature as the "scattering" or "sprinkling" gesture, which Stuart examines in his 1988 article.

Stela 1 shows a male figure standing at the left, while a smaller figure kneels on the right, facing him. The larger figure has his hands placed palm-to-palm, with the fingers pointing downward. The smaller figure's hands are positioned prominently before the chest, and the right wrist is hyperextended, with the fingers of the left hand in close proximity . . . as though about to feel a pulse or adjust a wristlet.

The handle of a piercing instrument may be discerned lying horizontally on the larger figure's chest, possibly attached to the pectoral. No absorbent material is depicted, nor is a serpent. Blood, shown as a stream edged with round "dots" or "beads" flows downward from the larger figure's fingers, appearing to land on a mat-covered object and then flow or splash to the ground.

Stela 6 shows a similar scene, but with only one figure. As on Stela 1, no folded material or serpent is shown. There is a piercing

instrument displayed prominently on the figure's chest, and the feathers of its handle curve outward and down, following and emphasizing the line of the bloodstream below.

Various interpretations have been made for the circlets falling from the hands of the main figures on these and other monuments: that they represent such precious articles as sacred water, honey, jade beads, or corn kernels. However, largely as a result of the experiments in which her own wrist was pierced and lacerated (described above in Section II B), the author believes strongly, along with Stuart (1988:178-193), that these circlets symbolize human blood.

Mention must be made of the frequency and prominence of human and animal heads in the art of Yaxchilan. These are found as integral parts of the glyphs incorporated into the sculptures.

Human heads are often shown in miniature as pendants on necklaces on figures in sacrificial scenes, and similar small heads of jade have been found in elite grave caches throughout the Maya area. A human head is part of the bustle worn by the main figure on Stela 6, but it is not known if this is an actual head, or a mask or similar effigy.

Moving from Yaxchilan to the nearby site of Bonampak, a sculpture and mural scenes, dated in late 8th, or early 9th Century, are examined.

Stela 2 shows three standing figures: a central male, flanked by two females who wear similar, luxurious outfits and hold shallow bowls. No hyperextension of a wrist is shown, but the man's left arm hangs down, held slightly forward as he grasps some sort of bag, and this position exposes his inner wrist, making it a focus of the composition.

The woman on the right carries a piercing instrument, holding it in close proximity to the man's exposed left wrist. Folded material is in both bowls held by the women. Neither serpent nor blood is in evidence, but tiny heads are on necklaces worn by all three figures, and the central figure wears a bustle with a human head attached.

The second artwork from Bonampak are scenes from the upper register of the famous murals in Structure 1. In the first scene, a central male figure, elaborately dressed, probably a ruler, stands frontally, with his head turned to a second, simply attired male figure on his right. A third male figure, also dressed simply, stands to the ruler's left, holding a shallow bowl.

The ruler holds his right arm out to the man on his right, with his wrist definitely hyperextended. J. Eric Thompson writes that the attendant "seems to be adjusting" the wristband (Thompson 1955:49), and Salvador Toscano agrees (Toscano 1949:20). Another interpretation—especially if one accepts Tejada Fonseca's copy of the mural, in which the ruler is holding a piercing instrument—is that the



attendant is unfastening the ruler's wristlet, in preparation for the ceremonial obtaining of sacrificial blood from his wrist.

A round object, possibly a cotton "ball," is held over the bowl by the man on the right of the ruler. It is possible that the bowl is a receptacle for the sacrificial blood and that the cotton "ball" is to be used to apply pressure and stem the flow of blood immediately after the ritual. Another explanation of this round object is that it is "ocher" (Thompson 1955:49). Toscano suggests that the bowl holds a perfume to be applied to the ruler with the round object (Toscano 1949:20). Each of these interpretations seems equally possible.

A human head figures prominently in another mural scene at Bonampak. Captives are shown, some naked, seated, and kneeling on stairs below several elaborately dressed, standing elite figures, the central one presumably the victorious ruler.

One step below the ruler is seated a captive, with his head and arm at the level of the ruler's feet, and his right leg extended down to the second step. Placed almost over this captive's right foot is a severed head. Because of the pleading attitudes of captives, and the blood dripping from fingers, it is presumed that this head represents an actual decapitation, not a mask.

The third major site from which artworks here examined is Palenque, located downstream and to the northwest of Yaxchilan and

Bonampak. Here the Gulf Plain begins to rise to the foothills of the Chiapas highlands, but Palenque is still within the Usamacinta zone.

Taken from the Temple of the Cross, dating approximately 683 A.D., the left portion of a sculpted wall panel shows a richly arrayed male figure, identified by epigraphers as the ruler Chan Bahlum, standing in profile. His left wrist is hyperextended at the level of his shoulders, palm outward, and fingers pointing up. In his right hand, he holds a piercing instrument, its point slanting down. No absorbent material is shown, nor is a serpent.

A miniature human head is centered in Chan Bahlum's necklace, and what appears to be a deity-head is suspended at his back. A small jaguar head, of unknown material, is on his belt. Behind the piercing instrument are the leaves of a plant, or perhaps fluid flowing down; bead-bone elements are attached to this form.

This latter portion of the sculpture is one of the finest examples of simple lines, combined with a complex imagery and symbolism, that exists in Classic Maya art. Stuart says this shape looks like ". . . a long stream of water, but the image is foliage-like" (Stuart 1988:193). He also equates the stream with blood. This image, therefore, is dynamically multivalent in its symbolism of water/rain, plants, and blood, clearly combining the two themes of blood sacrifice and fertility.

The second artwork from Palenque is the top surface of the lid on the sarcophagus of the ruler Pacal (600-682 A.D.), from his tomb within the Temple of the Inscriptions, excavated by Alberto Ruz beginning in 1952. Numerous interpretations have been made of the imagery of this sculpture, perhaps the most abstract and complex in Maya art.

Pacal is shown in an unusual position: seated, tilting backwards, with gracefully bent legs and arms. His right wrist is clearly hyperextended, and the fingers of his right hand curve up. This gesture is remarkably similar to that seen in the first artwork, of Chan Bahlum's left hand. A flint is shown as part of the "Quadripartite Badge" on which Pacal sits (as though on a pillow), but no actual piercing instrument is depicted.

No absorbent material is evident, but there are several groups of three large, round objects which bring to mind the cotton "ball" in the Bonampak mural. One of these groups is at the exact level of Pacal's hyperextended right wrist, though not in close proximity to it. Another of the groups is associated with the mythical bird perched atop the "world-tree" above Pacal. Scattered throughout the composition are nine other groups of these three round objects.

Nine is also the total number of human heads carved on the sarcophagus lid: six are part of the glyphs at either end, two are pendant-heads, or masks, and the ninth is the head of Pacal himself.

Nine stucco figures were originally attached to the walls of Pacal's tomb chamber, and the Temple of the Inscriptions pyramid, like that of Temple I at Tikal, rises in nine tiers. Nine adult mandibles were found in a tomb in structure E5-2 at Toniná. Although Becqueñin and Baudez were unable to determine if these represented a common burial or sequential ones, it is possible that these remains were sacrificial.

Nine was a sacred number to the Maya, and "in pre-Hispanic Maya culture nine distinct gods of death were believed to reign over the nine levels of the underworld" (Holland 1962:131). With this in mind, it is suggested that the nine groups of round objects, and the nine human heads depicted, may symbolize blood sacrifice . . . by Pacal and nine other Maya lords, or by Pacal himself on important occasions. The bird at the top of the composition may symbolize a quetzal or other bird killed during ceremonies, or whose blood was offered sacrificially.

A double-headed serpent is depicted on the sarcophagus lid, draped over the crossbars, or branches, of the "world-tree." Both serpent mouths are open, and from them emerge the heads of mythical beings, unrecognizable as either animal or human. Referring to William Holland's ethnographic work from Larrainzar, Chiapas, in which he wrote "The cross is associated with water, or fertility in general . . ." (Holland 1962:129), it may be that the cruciform tree symbolizes water, or rain.

Here, in this intricate, abstract imagery, the dual themes of sacrifice and fertility are manifest. Directly behind Pacal's wrist rises the "world-tree," adorned with symbols of blood and jade. It is suggested that this artwork symbolizes the precious blood sacrifices made by Pacal during his lifetime for the fertility and prosperity of the Maya land and people. It is further suggested that because of the prominence of the hyperextended right wrist and its proximity to the "world-tree" on the sarcophagus cover, these crucial blood sacrifices were obtained from the vessels of Pacal's wrist.

The final three sculptures to be examined, briefly, are from sites upstream from Yaxchilan, in Guatemala, east of the Usamacinta River and within its drainage.

The first of these is Stela 14 from Piedras Negras, dating in the 8th Century. A male figure is seated within a niche at the top of the stela, posed frontally. Below, on the left of the stela, is a woman, standing in profile, looking up at the "ruler." Her right wrist is hyperextended, prominent in the overall composition, and in her left hand she holds a piercing instrument. No absorbent material, serpent, or blood is clearly depicted, but it may be that the woman is about to perform auto-sacrifice on an important occasion.

A second artwork from Piedras Negras is Stela 40, dated 746 A.D., and known as "The Corn Planter." A kneeling figure is shown, with right

arm extended out and down, wrist hyperextended, and fingers pointing perpendicular to the groundline. Round objects fall below the fingers. No piercing instrument or absorbent material is seen, but these might be contained in the bag-like object carried in the figure's left hand. A human head in profile, attached to a belt, is carried at the figure's back.

The third artwork from this area is Lintel 2 from La Pasadita, Guatemala. The date of this work is not known to the author, but the scene depicted is strikingly similar, both in content and style, to the sculptures on Stelae 1 and 6 from Yaxchilan. The figure on the left of the lintel holds both palms together, fingers slanting downward, over an object at his feet. The figure on the right has the left arm held forward, with a round object, perhaps a cotton "ball," in the hand. The fingers of the right hand are poised over the left wrist, exactly where a pulse could be most easily located. A piercing instrument may be discerned suspended horizontally across the chest of the figure on the left. As seen on the Yaxchilan stelae, a "beaded" stream flows downward from the fingers of the figure on the left.

The final artwork considered is neither sculpture nor painting, and neither the date of its manufacture nor exact provenance is known. It is included here for the relevance of its images to the iconographic themes of the other art.

This work is a cylindrical, painted ceramic vessel, found in Campeche, Mexico, referred to in the literature as the Calakmul vase. Its distinctive style of decoration places it in the Late Classic. Two scenes are shown on this vessel. The first scene is a realistic depiction of a bound, seated male figure with his head bowed, just about to be decapitated. A second figure stands over him, wearing a deity-mask, holding the blade of an ax actually cutting into the captive's neck. A second masked figure stands behind the first, holding another ax.

The second scene on the Calakmul vase is different, peaceful rather than violent. It is an interior scene, in which a female is kneeling before an old man seated on a canopied throne, and other females sit and stand in relaxed poses nearby. The old man bends forward, his mouth slightly open, and the kneeling female looks into his face; it appears as though he is talking to her. She holds her arms out in front of her, and the old man is tying—or perhaps untying—her wristlet. This interaction between these two figures is the artistic focus of the scene.

The two scenes are clearly linked by a woman who is seated behind the one who is kneeling. This woman has her head turned over her shoulder, apparently watching the decapitation, and at the same time is tapping the kneeling woman's foot with a forefinger, as though to attract her attention to the action in back of them.

Taking into consideration the decapitation, possibly sacrificial, and the obvious centrality of the woman's extended wrists in the throne scene, it is suggested here that this vase shows a Maya ruler discussing the imminent ceremonial offering of blood, loosening the wristband to expose the inner wrist, and explaining exactly how the blood is to be obtained. The Calakmul vase in this way pictorially combines, without equivocation, the two types of blood sacrifice: decapitation and wrist-piercing.



#### IV. HIGHLAND CHIAPAS BLOOD SACRIFICE

##### Past Work

Little specific anthropological examination has been made of the importance of blood in the culture, or of blood sacrifice itself, in the highland Chiapas area, although it is mentioned in passing in several publications. Studying folk medicine in the municipio of Larrainzar, William Holland found that human blood, and the pulse, were highly valued and revered. The Tzotzil Indians there called blood "the substance of the spirit," saying that the pulse itself is "the tangible, material expression of the human spirit" (Holland 1962:135).

Victoria Bricker records the sacrifice of a bull during a ceremony at the beginning of Carnaval in Chamula. Blood is collected from vessels in the bull's neck, then taken immediately to the cooking area, where it is made into a pudding for later consumption. Special treatment of the blood and of the bull's head—the lower jaw is de-fleshed and the skull is kept for ten days—makes this not merely a butchering, but a sacrificial rite (Bricker 1989:232). The emphasis of this act is on the blood and the head of the animal.

Two books were published in 1976 that have bearing on this paper. June Nash wrote Eyes of the Ancestors, a study of belief and behavior in the Tzeltal community of Amatenango. Evon Vogt authored Tortillas for the Gods, a study of rituals in Tzotzil Zinacantan. Both books describe a Traditional Maya ceremony that is performed when a family builds a new house.

Both rituals are conducted with the goal of keeping ill health and bad fortune away from the house's future occupants. Traditional ritual paraphernalia, pine needles, incense, candles, and liquor, are offered as gifts, and prayers are said.

In Amatenango, a sheep is slaughtered, and its blood, its head, and sometimes its feet, are interred. In Zinacantan, chickens—both hens and roosters—are killed, and their blood, heads, and feathers are buried. In both places, the sacrificed animals are cooked and eaten as part of the ritual meal given the participants. (More detailed descriptions of these ceremonies are recorded by Nash and Vogt, but only the pertinent aspects are noted here.)

Vogt found also that black chickens are used in another important ceremony, the muk'ta 'ilel. Two aspects of their role in this ceremony are relevant. A chicken is not sacrificed immediately. First, the shaman "makes an incision in the neck vein of the chicken, drains about a cupful of blood into a bowl. . . . The chicken's neck is either sewn up or

swaddled to prevent further bleeding" (Vogt 1976:74). It is implied that it is not the chicken's body or life-spirit, but the blood itself, that has significance in this part of the ceremony.

The second aspect of the chicken's role that is relevant to this paper is linguistic in nature. The Tzotzil terminology for the chickens used in particular ceremony is k'exoliletik or heloliletik, with the English translation of 'substitutes' or 'replacements.' Vogt believes that these terms imply that the chickens are substituted for the patient in this ceremony; this is unlikely, however, as the chickens are at last killed in ritual sacrifice. Another interpretation of these terms is that the chicken's blood symbolizes human blood that was offered ritually by the Maya prior to contact with the Spanish.

### 1990 Work

In August of 1990 I traveled to highland Chiapas with the intention of conducting a brief survey of one Maya community in order to discover whether or not ritual blood sacrifice is still practiced there. The community I chose for this survey is Yochib, a paraje on the eastern hills of the Yaxanal River Valley, on the western edge of the Oxchuc municipio. At the northern end of this valley, where the Yaxanal disappears underground into a large cave and a weekly market is held, Oxchuc joins the municipios of Tenejapa and Cancuc.

I chose this area for three main reasons. First, its location on the northeastern edge of the Chiapas highland makes it more easily accessible to migrants from the Ocosingo Valley and the lowland jungles than are municipios nearer San Cristobal. (Although it is unknown when Tzeltals and Tzotzils first arrived in the highlands, or their place of origin, their initial entry is thought to be in the early Classic era, and their dispersion over the northern highlands appears to have been relatively rapid) (McQuown and Adams in Calnek). Indeed, at this time, many Tzeltal families are emigrating from Oxchuc and Cancuc into the Ocosingo area because of economic pressures.

Secondly, Calnek mentions that each of the three municipios which join in the Yaxanal Valley has "early documentation" for its existence in the 16th Century. (It is noted that Cancuc was also known as Ocotenango and Oxchuc as Teultepec.)

The third reason for choosing Yochib is my familiarity with this valley, as I lived there in 1967-68, the summers of 1970 and 1971, and had visited briefly in 1982.

Yochib is typical of highland Chiapas Maya communities in many ways: Maya traditions persist, despite changes that have come rapidly in the past 25 years with the increasing contact with the dominant Mexican society. Although Spanish is heard on public occasions, Tzeltal is the language of the home and is preferred for normal social

interaction. The men are peasant farmers, relying mainly on corn for subsistence, although the growing of coffee as a cash crop has become important in the past generation. Precipitation is plentiful during the rainy season of May—October, but the timing of the rainfall is critical to the growth of the newly-planted crops. Additionally, heavy winds that accompany some rainstorms may destroy young plants. Prayers are made in the spring by the Traditional Maya for beneficial rains and abundant crops.

The Yochib community is largely that of Wolf's 1950s definition of "closed and corporate." Land is owned only by the Indians, and no outsiders hold offices in the civil-religious hierarchy. It is said that fewer young men care to participate in the cargo system, but the system remains viable.

Many of the people practice the Traditional Maya religion, although some belong to the Catholic Church and a large number are members of various Protestant sects, such as Presbyterian, Baptist, and Seventh Day Adventist, that have become established in Yochib during the past 30 years. Originally, there was great conflict among these groups, but now the different believers seem to live with mutual respect, and in harmony.

These religious groups are apparent also in the Yochib health-care system. There are Traditional curers, who use the human pulse for the diagnosis of illness and traditional prayers, ceremonies, and herbs for

healing. Among the other religious groups are "enfermeros" (nurses), men who have had some minimal training in Western medicine and who use pills, syrups, and injections for curing. In Yochib, no women practice either Traditional or Western healing, though women do both in other highland communities.

Interestingly, there is a syncretism of medical practice. Some of the most firmly Traditional people, even curers, will utilize Western medicine when they are sick, and the "enfermero" who works at the local Mexican government clinic is highly respected for his knowledge and use of herbal medicines.

My interpreter in Yochib is Alonzo Gomez Sabin. Alonzo is a member of the Presbyterian Church, but he has been an intermittent "back-slider" for many years, and has many close friends who are Traditionalists. He is in his early 50s and is moderately well-off, by local economic standards. He has held several offices in the Oxchuc civil hierarchy and is currently a Yochib "authority," with community responsibilities.

I spent a day talking with Alonzo, as background for the survey I intended, so he would understand exactly what information I was seeking. He told me that no ceremonies are performed in Yochib that involve the sacrifice of human blood. He stated that only four elderly men living in the valley still know the old prayers and ceremonies and

how to "pulse" a patient for diagnosing illness: Fernando Gomez Akux, Calixto Santis Ch'ail, Martin Santis Cojtom, and Tomas Santis Sopa. Because of a personal conflict between Alonzo Sabin and Martin Cojtom, I did not interview Martin, but I held informal interviews with the other three men.

The interviews were conducted in the informants' homes, which afforded great privacy. All three informants have Traditional Maya altars in their houses, with one or more large wooden crosses as the focal point. Ancillary ritual paraphernalia, bunches of pine needles, white candles, flowers, and/or incense burners, are nearby. I was told that this cross is regarded as the house's guardian spirit and called the "mayortomo" or kanan ta na in Tzeltal.

The eldest of the informants, Fernando Akux, denies that blood sacrifice is practiced, or ever been practiced, using blood of either humans or animals. He says that gifts only of candles, pine needles, flowers, incense, and liquor are offered to the "santos" and Earth Guardians during ceremonies. (These Earth Guardians are spirits that live in caves and guard the land, plants, trees, and river. In Tzeltal, they are called kananetic and balamilal.) Fernando says that since the introduction of the new religions the people do not offer gifts to these "santos" as they formerly did, and for this reason the "santos" give only

poor harvests of corn and beans to the people; he has seen this trend for 20-25 years.

Regarding pulsing for diagnosis, Fernando explains that when a person is ill, an evil spirit, a pukuh, enters his heart, and this evil spirit will "talk" to the pulser through the sick person's blood. The blood itself does not speak, but the words of the pukuh will enter the pulser's mind as he feels the pulse.

Fernando says that in the past, young men learned how to pulse from their fathers or grandfathers; certain families in Yochib were known for having this ability. Fernando's father and a younger brother, both deceased, were respected for this knowledge. Fernando has had four sons live to adulthood, but two have died. Of the four, only one, who is deceased, cared to learn and practice the Traditional prayers and rituals.

The next oldest of the informants, Calixto Ch'ail, readily admits that blood sacrifice of animals is still carried out in Yochib. He says that when a new house (or other building) is constructed, approximately ½ liter of blood from a chicken or a bull is poured into holes where the four cornerposts will be placed; the animal's head is also interred. Bulls are preferred to chickens, but they are expensive, and they are not always available. Prayers are offered, along with the omnipresent pine needles, candles, incense, flowers, and liquor. At the conclusion of the ceremony, a ritual meal is eaten.



The prayers are said to the 13 gods, or spirits, of the earth and sky (tatik ta balamilal, tatik ta ch'ulchan) so that no harm will come to the occupants of the house. Calixto lists these 13 gods as San Mikel, Espiritu Santo (!), Santo Tomas, Ch'ul Ahauv, Mukul Maestro Sukristo, Santa Roxa, Angel Santa Marti, Halametik Santa Mari, Halawinik Santa Rezon, Ch'ul Marti Santa Sebastian, and Tatik Obispa. All are of equal importance; one is not above any other. These spirits live in the earth and sky, not in caves. They do not eat or drink the animal's blood, but the earth itself does. No special names are given to the sacrificed animals or their blood.

Calixto says that not only did he perform this ceremony when he built his current house, but he was one of the men who performed it in 1983, when the community built a Conasupo (government store). Two other men participated: Fernando Akux—who denies that blood sacrifice exists!—and Juan Morales (deceased). All members of the community, Traditional, Catholic, and Protestant, contributed money for the ceremony. A bull was bought, its blood utilized, and its head buried. Gifts of flowers, pine needles, candles, and incense were given; liquor was drunk and fireworks ignited. Music was from drum and flute, pre-conquest Maya instruments. (Harps and guitars are sometimes played during Yochib ceremonies, but these are probably of European origin.)

As a side-note on this ceremony: a "dry law" was passed by the Oxchuc authorities in 1983, prohibiting the drinking of alcohol for any purpose, private or ceremonial. But because the Yaxanal Valley is far from the municipal center, people ignore this ruling. As in the past, liquor is brought to Yochib from other highland municipios and sold at the weekly market.

Like Fernando, Calixto says that the young men in Yochib do not care to learn the ancient ceremonies, and he expresses regret for this.

The youngest of the three informants, Tomas Santis Sopa, also initially denied the ceremonial use of human or animal blood, but later in the interview he readily gave information regarding animal-blood sacrifice during this new house ritual.

Tomas agrees that bulls and chickens are used, and states that turkeys may be used also. Two fowl are used for a small house, four fowl or a bull are used for a large house or a communally-owned building. The color of the chickens is not important. Some men, but not all, drink fresh blood from the bull to give them the strength of a bull. In former times, a deer was used in place of the bull. (Wild deer are no longer found in the Chiapas highlands.)

The gift of the animals' blood protects the house's occupants. When asked why blood is given, instead of some other liquid, such as

liquor or soda pop, Tomas says that blood is offered "because we are of blood," that animal blood is a substitute for human blood.

Like Calixto, Tomas says that prayers are made during this ceremony to the 13 gods of the earth and sky, but his list differs slightly: Santo Tomas, Tatik Dios Te Ch'ulchan, Sehlool Santo Tomas, Mukul Tatik Ahauv, Halametic Santa Maria, Halametik Persision, Halametik Cantelaria, Tatik San Alonzo, Tatik San Tiago (from Tenejapa), Tatik San Juan (from Cancuc), Metik Persision (from Cancuc), Halametik Santa Rosa, and Ch'ulum Chul Balamilal. Calixto and Tomas name 13 gods, and 13 is recognized as having been a sacred number among the ancient Maya. Additionally, both lists show a melding of the Tzeltal and Spanish languages, a good example of religious syncretism.

When asked how the blood "speaks" to a diagnostician, Tomas gives a clear explanation that has a parallel in Western culture. He says that sometimes the blood runs differently in the vein and "talks" in this way; it does not have an actual, audible voice.

The pulser holds his fingers on the wrist of the sick person and asks him what sins (if any) he has committed to cause his illness. If the person denies any sins and is lying, his blood stops momentarily and then runs irregularly, "speaking" to the pulser in this way. In this context, one thinks of modern polygraphs, or "lie-detector machines,"

which measure a person's heartbeat, blood pressure, and galvanic skin response to questioning.

Tomas agrees with Fernando and Calixto that the young men of Yochib no longer wish to learn the old ways.

During the interviews, I attempted to ascertain the origins of various Yochib families, especially those of my interpreter and the three informants, in order to connect the families with a migration from the lowlands of the Usamacinta River drainage, but the attempt was unsuccessful. No man was able to go back in time beyond three generations, though I was able to determine that many of the families now living in the Yaxanal Valley had previously lived in nearby areas of the Chiapas highlands.

However, I have related information that may have bearing on the significance of blood and heads both in Classic Maya art and in current ritual practice. First, the expression referring to the oldest man in a household, shol na, is translated as 'head of the house.' By reference this term may also be translated as 'head of the family.' In Tzotzil, 'head' 'name,' jol bil, is translated as 'family name, surname' (Laughlin 1981:230).

Secondly, although now being replaced by the Mexican (Spanish) naming system, in which a man is known by his first name, followed by the last name of his father and then the last name of his mother (e.g.,

Juan Gomez Lopez), the traditional Maya family names were used will into mid-20th Century. Some of these names, referring to plants and animals are: Sabin (a type of weasel), Akux (honeybee), Balte' (piece of a tree), Akilan (a type of gopher), Ichilok (species of tomato), Cojtom (a cat-like animal), Kukal (firefly), Wax (wildcat), Wakax (bull), Chitam (pig), Kulub (grasshopper), and Tsemen (elephant). Some of these animals are seen as heads in the glyphs of Classic Maya art.

I suggest that in the past these family names were related to Maya blood-lines, such as clans or lineages, and had totemic significance. Additionally, I suggest that a family's totemic animal may have been ritually sacrificed, as a symbolic representation of the family or one of its members.

## V. CONCLUSIONS

The persistence of Maya ritual throughout many centuries and the associated continuity of Maya culture are major themes of this paper. Using Victor Turner's model for identifying structure and property of ritual symbols in seeking to establish evidence for these, the author examined the act of blood sacrifice in Classic Maya artworks and in contemporary highland Maya ceremonies in Chiapas.

Several results of this search, and the author's interpretations, include:

1. Blood sacrifice did exist among the Classic Maya of the Usamacinta River drainage and is represented in the iconography of artworks at archaeological sites there, chiefly Yaxchilan, Bonampak, and Palenque. Some of these representations are realistic; some are symbolic.
2. The human wrist is strikingly prominent in many of these artworks, and it probably was one locus from which sacrificial blood was routinely obtained.
3. Actual blood sacrifice, of fowl and animals, exists today in the ceremonies of the highland Chiapas Tzeital and Tzotzil Maya. The

animal blood may be a symbolic substitute for human blood utilized in the past.

4. Use of animal heads in contemporary Maya ritual exists. Both human and animal heads are salient in Classic Maya art; the animal heads in the past may have had totemic significance. Today they may serve as symbolic substitutes for human heads.

5. Considering the use of animal heads in contemporary rituals of building construction/dedication, and the prominence of heads in Classic Maya art, it is probable that the Classic Maya sacrificed blood and heads on occasions of construction/dedication of significant edifices, and then buried the heads at the corners of these buildings.

The author suggests that archaeologists currently working at Maya sites seek caches containing skulls, blades, axes, and piercing instruments under the corners of buildings being excavated. Such caches would be strong evidence for the existence of this contemporary Maya ritual in Classic Maya times and thus support the claim for the persistence and continuity of Maya culture in Mesoamerica.

Although the ancient Maya are long dead, and the blood of the Maya of today does not talk with actual sound, still, blood speaks to us symbolically, in the images of Classic Maya artwork and through contemporary ritual practice.

**It whispers of water, of rain, of the lightning and thunderstorms, of the beauty of precious green jade and life-giving corn; it prays to the gods for the fertility of the Maya land and for divine blessing on the Maya people.**

**If we listen attentively, we may hear the drums and haunting flutes of ancient and contemporary rituals, the rustle of ceremonial feathers, soft and shimmering as corn leaves in the sun and wind, and we may hear, too, the blood of the Maya speak.**



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