

Maya Cosmos

Creation and the actions of the gods in making the world we know has been at the heart of the Maya religion and thought for 2,500 years. While the most famous version of the story occurs in the *Popol Vuh* of the K'iche' Maya of the Guatemala highlands, ancient scribes recorded its most detailed Pre-Columbian version in the inscriptions of the Group of the Cross at Palenque and on Stela C at Quirigua.

The divine protagonists of the ancient story, the Maize God and his cohorts, planted three stones in the stars of Orion to create the cosmic hearth on the night of the Fourth Creation, August 13, 3114 BC. Exactly 542 days later, on February 5, 3112 BC, the Maize God laid out the four sides and four corners of the cosmos; in the center he erected the World Tree. With the space of the Cosmos organized, the Maize God then generated time by setting the stars, the planets, and the Milky Way into motion.

The glyph recording this final action represents a disk with a small circle inside. Nikolai Grube recognized it as a depiction of a flat spindle whorl, called *pet* or *petet* in many Maya languages. The glyphic verb reads *pethi*, "to make round motion," as when a weaver spins her spindle in making thread. Thus, like a weaver the gods spun the sky, and they drew out time like the thread that the weaver weaves into cloth. The patterns built into that fabric by the divine weavers provide the patterns that human beings use to perceive the passage of time and the sacred symmetries of both time and space.

This relationship of the spindle and weaving to time continued past the European invasion and remained a principal metaphor for time and its repeated cycles, even though most books on the Maya today explain their calendar by using a metaphor of interlocking gears drawn from the machinery of the industrial revolution. Daniel Brinton, one of the first scholars to translate many of the Maya chronicles, gave us a different and more appropriate metaphor.

This cycle provided the temporal framework for the *k'atun* histories recorded in these books and provided Brinton and other early scholars with the idea of a "round." The two terms for "round" that Brinton recovered from these sources were *met*, "a rope or cane circle used as a stand for pots," and *pet*, "spindle whorl." Thus, the turning of the weaver's spindle

provided the metaphor for the motion of the stars begun by the gods at the beginning of the Fourth Creation, and the cycles that unfolded as the Cosmic Spindle turned on its axis created motion and time itself.

The centrality of the weaver's art played other essential roles in the Maya conception of the cosmic order. The grandmother of the classic-period Hero Twins, who was the midwife of Creation, carried the name Chak-Chel, or "Great Rainbow," in the Dresden Codex and that of Na Huntan, "Mother Caretaker," at Palenque. Her portraits in the codices show her wearing skeins of yarn in her hair. Both she and her daughter-in-law Sak Ixik, the Moon Goddess mother to the Hero Twins, were weavers. In fact, the principal term for "to weave" in Yucatec was *sakal*, a word related to other languages of the inscriptions, *hal* was the word for "to weave." It has homophonous for "to speak" and "true."

The central role of weaving to the worldview and the economic life of the Maya has not changed in the five hundred years since the invasion of the Europeans. Weaving, especially in Chiapas and the highlands of Guatemala, remains more than craft. It still serves as an instrument of ethnic identity and, during the last several decades, has become a major source of income to the Maya communities. Women still wear their blouses and skirts-*huipiles* and *pik* in Yucatec and Cholan, *pot* and *uq* in K'iche' - to identify themselves as Maya.

The weavings worn by Maya women and men and used by both in rituals that give meaning to their lives are more than pretty patterns to attract the eyes of tourists. As with their ancestors' millennia before them, the patterns they incorporate into their weavings encompass creation and the forces of nature. Maya people center themselves in the cosmos and creation by the cloth they weave and the clothes they wear, just as the gods of the ancient Maya story of creation spun out the yarn of time and space to weave the patterns and orders that human beings perceive in the fabric of the Cosmos.

Living Maya. Walter F. Morris, Jr. and Jeffrey Jay Fox. Harry N. Abrams Publishers. 1987. Linda Schele. Pages 9-10.