

# *History*

## **Donning the Mask: Mayan Belief, Christianity and the Power of Syncretism**

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The conquest of the Mayan people by Spanish Conquistadors was a long and bloody affair, beginning with the arrival of Francisco de Montejo in 1527. As Father Diego de Landa, Provincial of the Franciscan Order during this period, recounted in his report of events, the invading Spaniards dealt with the Mayan people harshly; they used torture and intimidation to subdue the Maya and proceeded to use them to their advantage in anyway possible.<sup>1</sup> After military control of the Yucatan had been established, the Spanish set out to conquer the Mayan people spiritually as well. The Spanish failed to understand that Mayan culture was as saturated in spirituality as Catholicism was for the Spanish. It influenced every aspect of their lives, and was so deeply infused into their culture and into their lives that it could not be removed.<sup>2</sup> The first missionary practices resulted in a hybridized Christianity or more specifically, a syncretized version of the two religions. Syncretism refers to the process of a culture's "nature of ideas, deities, and practices [deriving] from historically distinct traditions [becoming] reinterpreted and transformed in situations of a cultural encounter."<sup>3</sup>

In response, the missionaries and church officials launched the Inquisition of the Yucatan. As he witnessed the natives adopting the Christian god into their pantheon, Landa came to believe that the only way for Christianity to thrive amongst the natives was to extirpate every vestige of their pagan beliefs. De Landa and other religious officials used torture to extract confessions of pagan practice from Mayans who had "converted."<sup>4</sup> Beyond torturing those who practiced their native beliefs, Catholic officials ordered all Mayan codices gathered and burned to eradicate any written record of their religion.<sup>5</sup> It is hard to believe that any semblance

- 1 Grant D. Jones, *Maya Resistance to Spanish Rule: Time and History On a Colonial Frontier* (Albuquerque: Univ of New Mexico Pr, 1990), 43.
- 2 Robert M. Carmack, Janine L. Gasco, and Gary H. Gossen, eds., *The Legacy of Mesoamerican History and Culture of a Native American Civilization*, 2nd ed. (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson, 2007), 295.
- 3 *Ibid*, 306
- 4 Victoria R. Bricker, *The Indian Christ, the Indian King: The Historical Substrate of Mayan Myth and Ritual*, (Austin: University of Texas, 1981), 20.
- 5 Evan Hadingham, *Early Man and the Cosmos* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1985), 220.

of pre-Colonial Mayan culture survived the Spaniards' mission to destroy the indigenous way of life and replace it with a "civilized" European one. And yet, five hundred years after the conquest, Mayan spirituality not only exists, but thrives. How did this belief system make it through the Spanish invaders forced conversion of the Mayans? The answer lies in the crossover between the native religion and Christianity that forms the syncretic belief system that many Mayan people practice to this day. The debate among scholars today is how syncretism functioned in Mayan society: does syncretism show a rudimentary understanding, but ultimate acceptance of Christianity, or does it show how the Mayans repackaged their religion to appease their captors while ultimately preserving their spirituality? Essentially, the debate asks whether Mayan religion was replaced or preserved through syncretism.

The main proponent of the replacement theory is Eric Thompson. Thompson argues that the Ancient Mayan elite was becoming more "civilized," and already had a concept of monotheism as early as the Late Classic period. The common people, however, could not fathom consolidating their vast pantheon of deities into a single divine being.<sup>6</sup> Because the upper echelon of Mayan society had a concept of monotheism centered on a god known as Itzam Na, Thompson argues that they more easily and fully accepted the principles of Christianity. The idea that syncretism would help preserve their religious ideals does not fit with the picture that Thompson paints in *Maya History and Religion*. He notes that Itzam Na has all but disappeared in the modern Mayan hybrid religion, but that the deities who would be most important to the lower classes, such as the gods of the soil, are still venerated today.<sup>7</sup> What this implies, then, is that the elite in Mayan society accepted Christianity more fully and Itzam Na faded from their history because of this. The nonelite held onto their most important deities, not fully giving into Christianity, which is why their gods remain in some form to this day.

Nancy Farriss opposes such rigorous religious stratification, and as a result lends credence to the idea that syncretism served as a way to preserve Mayan culture as opposed to making it irrelevant. Farriss not only supports the idea that Mayan religion adopted surface-level aspects of Christianity, but also that their beliefs and that of their Spanish conquerors had enough in common to facilitate an exchange of ideas, specifically on the personal level in which both the Spanish and Mayan people had a deep-seated belief in "magic."<sup>8</sup> Farriss' argument lends strength to the idea that through syncretism, the Mayan people could preserve the heart of their religious beliefs and spiritual ideals by letting go of the native identities.

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6 J. Eric S. Thompson, *Maya History and Religion* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1970), 233.

7 Ibid. 233

8 Nancy M. Farriss, *Maya Society Under Colonial Rule: The Collective Enterprise of Survival*. (Princeton: Princeton University, 1984), 296. n.b. The term "magic" refers to traditional animistic spirituality, and had a place in both Maya and Spanish society.

David Freidel and Linda Schele argue that the Mayan religious tradition has persisted into modernity, despite the trauma of Spanish Conquest. Freidel and Schele believed that the way Mayan spirituality endured the Conquest, despite their attempts to completely eradicate the native religion, was by incorporating some of the more superficial aspects of Christianity into indigenous beliefs. Certain aspects of Mayan religion were well suited for this adaptation, as Freidel and Schele explain in their examination of the transformation of the World-Tree/ Cross symbol in Mayan spiritual culture.<sup>9</sup> By using archaeological evidence, they challenge Thompson's assertion that elite Mayan religion had moved toward monotheism, and all the implications of that argument, which is in turn a strong endorsement of the idea that syncretism was highly favorable to the preservation of Mayan culture.

Another important scholar in this debate is Victoria Bricker. Bricker points to historic instances in which the Mayan people adopted a small aspect of the Christian faith and merged it with their own ideas. In *Encounter between Two Worlds*, Bricker explains how the Mayan people syncretized different deities with Christian religious figures.<sup>10</sup> For her, the Mayan's preserved their worldview through syncretism.

Iain S. MacLean's research on the long term effects of Spanish conquest upon modern Mayan society lead him to the conclusion that Mayan spirituality was preserved by donning the mask of the Christianity in order to survive the threat of "cultural genocide." He argues that despite the number of Mayans who poll as Catholic, they are in fact practicing their indigenous belief system under the veil of Christianity. Through the redesignation of Mayan gods as saints, the Mayan people preserved their cultural values and avoided the wrath of the Spanish missionaries.<sup>11</sup> MacLean strengthens the scholarly argument for preservation of indigenous beliefs rather than their replacement.

Munro S. Edmonson also lends strength to this argument. He concluded that despite the Christian symbols, saints, and prayers, that the Mayans did not convert so much as they adapted to their situation. He uses evidence such as the use of the cross in a heart sacrifice to illustrate how the Mayan people incorporated elements of Christianity in their rituals, and how this shows that the syncretism that can be seen both in the sources and in modern society is nativistic.<sup>12</sup> According to Edmonson, the incorporation of Christian aspects in the Mayan religion preserved the core religious values of the Mayan people, and was a form of resistance.

9 David Freidel and Linda Schele, *Maya Cosmos: Three Thousand Years on the Shaman's Path*, (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1993), 251-56

10 Victoria R. Bricker and Helga-Maria Miram, *An Encounter of Two Worlds: The Book of Chilam Balam of Kaua*, (New Orleans: Tulane University, 2002) 78.

11 Iain S. MacLean, *Reconciliation, Nations, and Churches in Latin America*, (Burlington: Ashgate Publishing, 2006), 93-96.

12 Munro S. Edmonson, *Nativism, Syncretism and Anthropological Science*, (New Orleans: Tulane University, 1960), 13.

What all of these scholars are grappling with is how to view the syncretic belief system that Mayan people adopted. They have integrated Christian symbols, Christian names, and Christian practices into their way of life. But when one watches the practitioners, there is an obvious deference to native beliefs; they leave *toj* or offerings for the saints who have taken the place of patron gods, they meld the symbolism of the cross with their own idea of the world-tree from the Mayan creation myths, and there is a historic trend of Mayan religion taking on superficial aspects of Christianity. As MacLean points out:

Mayan Catholicism transmits the impulse of Mayan spirituality, affirms cultural identity, and yet remains conservative in commitment to a protective church. Yet the necessity of survival, facing the fear of cultural genocide by the Spanish military, required wearing the mask of the Christian religion, with the possibility of transmitting deeper Mayan cultural values.<sup>13</sup>

When the archaeological and historical evidence is examined closely in conjunction with the anthropological findings concerning modern Mayan religion, it becomes clear that Mayan spirituality, though it has changed and adapted, has indeed survived the trauma of the Spanish conquest. This paper will argue that due to pre-existing and developing social issues in Mayan society at the time of the Invasion, the Spanish were able to impact native beliefs, but never fully eradicate them, resulting in a syncretized form of the indigenous culture.

The reality of Mayan society when the Spanish arrived highlights how their conquest was different from the other, such as that of the Aztecs, in which an empire of people were systematically taken over, and much of their culture destroyed. Whereas Cortez took over a highly unified empire, which quickly fell apart at the loss of its leader and bureaucracy, the Mayans were never a single unified entity and the common people did not depend upon bureaucracies and hierarchies.

The Classic Mayan world was never unified, but instead consisted of independent city-states each with its own king, or *k'uhul ajaw*, as well as a bureaucracy, patron deity, and priests. The relationship between these cities was defined by war. War between the cities for resources and prestige led to a stratified society and increased centralization of political authority.<sup>14</sup> The so-called elite class is a broad term that encompasses royalty, priests, and specialized laborers. Priests were at the top of the hierarchy, with artisans, scribes, and other specialized positions falling below. The commoners consisted of peasant farmers, artisans,

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13 MacLean, *Reconciliation, Nations, and Churches in Latin America*, 96.

14 Robert J. Sharer with Loa P. Traxler, *The Ancient Maya*, 5th ed. (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1994), 299.

and shamans.<sup>15</sup> At the top of the hierarchy, the kings and priests of these Classic period cities drew their authority from the belief that they best knew how to appease the gods, and ensure the gods would keep the universe in order.<sup>16</sup> This required the priest class to keep up with an extensive calendar system, based on the movements of celestial bodies which they believed to be the manifestation of their gods. The priests and the royal family often made offerings, or *toj*, to the gods in order to retain influence and favor with them. Blood sacrifices from the elite were especially important because they were seen as an offering of *k'uh*, or life energy.<sup>17</sup> Beyond bloodletting, the Mayan elite were also instrumental in human sacrifice. The offering of human life sanctified the most important rituals, such as inaugurations or the designation of a new heir. Due to the importance of these rituals, only elites were considered an acceptable sacrifice to the gods.<sup>18</sup> The presence of elites in Mayan religion was pervasive during the Classic period. The common people believed that their king and his priests had the power to preserve their world through these rituals, and that through their sacrifice, order would persist in the world. This gave the elite classes considerable authority, as long as their situation remained prosperous.

Unfortunately for the elite, their cities began to face major problems, which eroded the perception that they enjoyed the gods favor, and lead to a period of decline. One of the leading theories on the fall of the Mayan civilizations is that overpopulation, drought, and deforestation lead to general unrest and dissatisfaction of the lower classes. As the kings and priests struggled to regain the favor of the gods, their failure led to the loss of their authority, leading in many cases to peasants abandoning their duties, and in some instances, rebelling.<sup>19</sup> While the hierarchical system was not completely destroyed, powerful kingdoms were decentralized, and the remaining social structure became less rigid. In the post-Classic social structure, the elite classes enjoyed less power over the masses.<sup>20</sup> As kings lost their divinely-inspired authority, they began to shift towards military prowess to gain and preserve their power. While a valid reason to rule, it weakened their influence over the religious aspects of Mayan life.<sup>21</sup> The social structure of the Mayan populations in the late post-Classic period was the perfect environment to allow some aspects of Christianity to seep into the Mayan belief system, but make it impossible for the Spanish to systematically stamp out indigenous spirituality.

15 Sarah E. Jackson, *Politics of the Maya Court: Hierarchy and Change in the Late Classic Period (Latin American and Caribbean Arts and Culture)* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2013), 18.

16 Carolyn Elaine Tate, *Yaxchilan: the Design of a Maya Ceremonial City* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1993), 22.

17 Sharer and Traxler, *The Ancient Maya*, 751.

18 Ibid 751.

19 Sharer and Traxler, *The Ancient Maya*, 346.

20 Thompson, *Maya History and Religion*, 233.

21 Tate, *Yaxchilan: the Design of a Maya Ceremonial City*, 82.

Already in a weaker social system, the prophecy of Chilam Balam and its implications about these newcomers lead to discord among the populations after the arrival of the Spaniards. Before the arrival of Montejo and the Spanish, the Mayans were already expecting the beginning of a new era. There had been multiple prophets in the century preceding the arrival of Europeans in Central America, such as Napuc Tun, Ahau Pech, and Natzin Abun Chan, all prophesying that a new world would begin<sup>22</sup>. According to the prophecy of Napuc Tun:

We burn on earth  
There is a rising with pride in the future.  
We burn on earth, having developed we burn, in a future time.  
The soul will see, it will be fulfilled.  
There will be a weeping over misfortunes.<sup>23</sup>

Ahau Pech and Natzin Abun Chan both prophesied that invaders would bring news of the one, true God.<sup>24</sup> Nahau Pech's prophecy went a step further. The literal translation from the Mayan text reads:

At the time when the sun is seen on high, Lord,  
There will be seen governing on the earth,  
Within the Katun 4 Ahau  
The Bearer of the true God  
For this reason, bear in mind my counsel, Lord.  
The master of the earth comes to us. . ."

According to Ernest Moyer, this prophecy declares:

...on the day when the sun shines brightest through the compassion of the Omnipotent one, there will come those who are bringing news of God. With great affection I command you, Oh Itzas, to wait for the coming of our guests who are the parents of the earth.<sup>25</sup>

The prophesy can be seen as a precursor to that of Chilam Balam, going further than to merely foresee the end of the age of the Maya, but the coming of a foreign and powerful god who would be the undoing of the Mayan pantheon. These *chilam* were regarded by the Mayan community as a conduit of information from

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22 Richard Luxton and Pablo Balam, *The Mystery of the Mayan Hieroglyphs: the Vision of an Ancient Tradition* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1981), 29.

23 Eugene R. Craine and Reginald C. Reindorp, eds., *The Codex Pérez and the Book of Chilam Balam of Maní* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1979), 172.

24 Ibid.

25 Moyer, "The Apocryphal Mayan Prophecies," *World Destiny: The Ernest Moyer Papers*.

their gods and ancestors to the present creation. Their words foretold a terrible future of bloodshed, enslavement, and injustice, and were met with fear and trepidation by their communities.<sup>26</sup> These prophecies lent even more authority and validation to the prophecy of Chilam Balam. The prophecies were fresh in the minds of the Mayan people when Chilam Balam revealed the exact nature of the god-bearers to come.

Chilam Balam's prophecies were the most specific and the last before the Spaniards arrived, and when the Mayan first heard of the invaders, they immediately recognized them as those foretold by the great Jaguar Prophet. Chilam Balam prophesied that foreigners, white and bearded, would bear a World-Tree symbol, but the Mayan gods would be unable to touch this sign, and would flee from it, abandoning their people to these new gods. He foretold that those who capitulated to the new rulers would receive mercy, and be spared; those who tried to resist would be killed.<sup>27</sup> The Spanish interpreted the "+" shaped symbol as the Christian Cross, and used the prophecy as propaganda to justify taking power from the Mayan elites.<sup>28</sup> The Spanish exploited the prophecy, using it to convince political leaders to give control of their cities to the Spanish, and comply with the prophecy. One such instance occurred in Tah Itza. The Spanish Conquistadors used the Prophecy of Chilam Balam to convince the leader Can Ek that it was his duty to give up control to the Spanish overlords and convert his people to Christianity.<sup>29</sup>

It is hard to know exactly what was originally prophesized, as the books of Chilam Balam have been rewritten, and the original manuscripts no longer exist. The Mayans put great stock in the concept of a cyclical history, as evidenced by their calendar system and their beliefs in repeating cycles of creation, which emphasized a fatalist philosophy.<sup>30</sup> Prophecies and omens were written into indigenous chronicles, "...effacing the unforeseen from history and ...returning to what it had always been, the ineluctable fulfillment of fates."<sup>31</sup> It is important to note that it is not out of the realm of possibility that the prophecy would have mentioned a cross-like figure. Their conceptualization of the World-tree may have been interpreted by the Spanish as a cross, and used as justification for their actions. Whether or not the prophecies of Chilam Balam were reinterpreted to justify the Spanish invasion or not, the prophecies split the Mayan people into factions— those who believed the Spanish were the foreigners foretold by Chilam Balam and those who were skeptical. The believers were more willing to meet the invader's demands, while those who were skeptical resisted their culture and

26 Luxton and Balam, *The Mystery of the Mayan Hieroglyphs: the Vision of an Ancient Tradition*, 31.

27 Ibid, 29.

28 Sharer and Traxler, *The Ancient Maya*, 346

29 Jones, *Maya Resistance to Spanish Rule*, 144.

30 Ibid, 346.

31 Serge Gruzinski, *Man-Gods in the Mexican Highlands: Indian Power and Colonial Society, 1520-1800*(Stanford, Calif. : Stanford University Press, 1989), 27.

ways.<sup>32</sup> Those who lacked faith in the prophecy rebelled. But when the natives revolted against the Conquistadors, "the Spaniards pacified them in such a way that these provinces which were formerly the thickest settled... remained the most desolate in all the country."<sup>33</sup> When faced with defeat equivalent to the hell foretold by their prophets, it is no wonder that the Mayan people learned quickly that capitulation was necessary for survival. At that point, religious syncretism became a method of survival for their mortal lives and preservation of their spiritual ones.

There were several levels of religious organization in both the Mayan and Spanish societies. The lowest level of organization occurred in the day-to-day personal expression of religion. At this level, both the Mayans and the Spaniards put a great deal of faith in the ability of "magic" to control their environment.<sup>34</sup> For Mayans, this included such things as healing spells, communication with gods and ancestors, or more malicious sorcery (or curses) that caused illness or death.<sup>35</sup> The Spanish even approached the Mayans for help in areas such as exorcising a bewitched cow or curing infertility. At this level, political change had very little effect on the day-to-day practices of faith. There appears to be virtually no vertical influence on Mayan religion at this level, as the Spanish did not perceive these practices as contrary to Christian beliefs.<sup>36</sup>

The highest level was the cosmic tier. The Christian God had no direct parallel in Mayan religious belief. The closest thing that the Mayans had was Itzam Na, a personification of the creative force within other deities. Itzam Na was not a supreme cosmic being, and so he had little practical application in the lives of the people, and was not heavily noted in ceremonies.<sup>37</sup> Even members of the elite class put little stock in this, wary of a deity that had no direct effect on their world.

It is the middle tier of religious organization that shows the most direct competition between Mayan and Christian spirituality, and therefore the most cross over. This is the level that religious syncretism was most powerfully used to preserve the Mayan worldview in the guise of Christian beliefs. The parochial religion was focused on the welfare of communities, and the relationship between the gods and those communities. Villages and cities had one or more patron deities that were responsible for that town's wellbeing.<sup>38</sup> When the Spanish imposed Christianity upon the populaces, they adopted the images and names of Catholic saints. The Christian God was merged with the image of the sun god, Kinich Ahau<sup>39</sup>, who was associated with sustaining life and understood as an ancestor

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32 Anthony P. Andrews, "The Political Geography of the Sixteenth Century Yucatan Maya: Comments and Revisions" *Journal of Anthropological Research*, 40 (Winter, 1985), 589.

33 Jones, *Maya Resistance to Spanish Rule: Time and History On a Colonial Frontier*, 43.

34 Farriss, *Maya Society Under Colonial Rule*, 296.

35 Bricker, *An Encounter Between Two Worlds*, 409; 431

36 Farriss, *Maya Society Under Colonial Rule*, 296.

37 Farriss, *Maya Society Under Colonial Rule*, 301

38 *Ibid.*, 299.

39 Dr. Cameron Jean Walker, *Heritage or Heresy: the Public Interpretation of Archaeology and Culture in the Maya Riviera (Caribbean Archaeology and Ethnohistory)* (Tuscaloosa: Univer-



of most Mayan dynasties.<sup>40</sup> The Cult of the Virgin Mary is one of the most pronounced examples of this. The Holy Mother took the place of Ix Chel, the moon and fertility goddess.<sup>41</sup> Mother Mary is portrayed in Christian art as tranquil and loving. She embodies the traditional idea of motherhood. Ix Chel was not only the goddess of fertility, but a malevolent goddess of the moon and water. She sent storms and floods, and was depicted with clawed hands, and a *huipul* decorated by skulls.<sup>42</sup> Despite their distinct differences in depiction and perceived personality, the Virgin Mary and Ix Chel were identified together due to their immaculate conceptions. Ix Chel is said to have given birth to the Chak gods, the bringers of rain, without copulating.<sup>43</sup> The Mayans had a strong respect of Ix Chel, and this reverence lead them to participate in pilgrimages to her shrines. When the Spanish preached about the Virgin Mary and insisted upon the conversion of the Mayans to Christianity, the Virgin Mother was a natural figure in which to invest the same level of devotion. Altars of Ix Chel were replaced by beautiful shrines that glorified the Madonna.<sup>44</sup>

Another instance of this merger can be seen in the adoption of Santiago Matamoros as the patron saint of Chimal in the highlands of Guatemala. Santiago (St. James the Moorkiller) is an adaptation of the former patron god of the town. The people portray Santiago in traditional dress, and gave him a "wife", in keeping with their culture, who also dressed in the traditional garb. The people of Chimal have parades and feasts in his honor in the traditional Mayan fashion. They merged the images of their patron deity, his history, and his tradition, with this new, Christian figure.<sup>45</sup> While the Christian God may be the supreme overlord of the universe, the deities of the ancient Maya have not been replaced, or absorbed by him. These saints functioned as "tutelary deities" in their own right.<sup>46</sup> This transformation "of the old Mayan gods into the Catholic saints preserved the core of the Yucatek Maya vision" and enabled their collective cultural survival.<sup>47</sup>

Mayan religion was rich with images that were easily merged with Christian icons after the Spanish conquest, and thus the images of Saints were not the only adaptation that the Mayans made. While the Catholic priests tried to convert the Mayans, the natives merely substituted saints and crosses for their own idols and holy images. One of the most iconic and concrete examples of this is the melding of the Christian cross and the Mayan World-Tree or yaxche. The World-

sity Alabama Press, 2009), 54.

40 Sharer and Traxler, *The Ancient Maya*, 472.

41 Tamra Andrews, *Dictionary of Nature Myths: Legends of the Earth, Sea, and Sky* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, USA, 2000), 105.

42 Andrews, *Dictionary of Nature Myths*, 105.

43 Douglas T. Peck, *Goddess of the Ancient Maya* (Columbus: Columbian Publishers, 2008), 33.

44 *Ibid*, 34.

45 John M. Watanabe "From Saints to Shibboleths: Image, Structure, and Identity in Maya Religious Syncretism", *American Ethnologist* 17, no. 1 (Feb, 1990): 132, accessed March 13, 2014, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/645256>.

46 Farriss, *Maya Society*, 300.

47 Freidel and Shele, *Maya Cosmos*, 49.

Tree holds great significance to the Mayan people in the Yucatan. According to the Palenque creation myth depicted on the Tablet of the Cross, in the time of the fourth creation, after a great flood was sent by the Creators to cleanse their imperfect creation, Itzam-Yeh, a vain macaw, fancied himself bright enough to act as the sun. Humbled by the Hero Twin, one-Ahaw, Itzam-Yeh ascended to the sky world by way of the World Tree, a holy Ceiba tree that sprouts from the First Hearth, the foundation of the world. By chastening Itzam-Yeh, the Hero Twins rid the world of the false sun and allowed the true sun to rise, ushering in the fifth creation cycle.<sup>48</sup>

This powerful event in Mayan mythology lead to the end of the fourth creation and the beginning of the fifth and current one. The World-Tree is a holy symbol of rebirth and the energy of creation, the most important and deeply infused of the energies in the universe. Throughout the Mayan creation myths, the World Tree acts as a bridge from the terrestrial world to the celestial one. The Mayans believed celestial bodies were powerful gods who kept order, and thus the bridge by which deities made their way into the sky held holy significance and power to the Mayan people. The Mayans believed that the World Tree held the key to connecting with the celestial bodies in the sky, and that through this connection shamans could trace the origins and lineage of diseases, allowing them to heal through a connection with the cosmos. The idea of the World Tree as not only a sacred bridge, but also a giver of health is powerful enough on its own.<sup>49</sup> When viewed alongside their belief that the World Tree sprouted from the mythical First Hearth foundation of the world, the immense power and significance of the World Tree as a religious symbol becomes evident.<sup>50</sup>

The Mayans adopted the cross in a host of different ways. When the Spanish arrived, the Mayans were able to embrace the cross, so similar in form to their World Tree, and portray “outward forms of Catholicism without losing the cosmological content of their own beliefs.”<sup>51</sup> In a particularly intense instance of this, a native priest took the idea of the cross as a symbol of sacrifice to a whole new level; he tied two young girls to crosses, and intoned that they should die as Jesus Christ died. Following their death, the priest took them off of the crosses, cut their chests open, and removed their hearts.<sup>52</sup> The practice of removing the heart of a person who was tied to a stake was an old tradition, and archaeological evidence suggests that the practice may have generally included being tied to a

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48 Freidel and Schele, *Maya Cosmos: Three Thousand Years on the Shaman's Path*, 70.

49 Schele, Linda, “Creation and the Ritual of Bacabs.” In *Heart of Creation: the Mesoamerican World and the Legacy of Linda Schele*, edited by Andrea Stone, 21-34. Tuscaloosa: University Alabama Press, 2002.

50 Reilly, F. Kent III, “The Landscape of Creation.” In *Heart of Creation: the Mesoamerican World and the Legacy of Linda Schele*, edited by Andrea Stone, 55. Tuscaloosa: University Alabama Press, 2002.

51 Freidel and Schele, *Maya Cosmos*, 251.

52 France V. Sholes and Eleanor B. Adams, *Don Diego Quijada alcalde mayor de Yucatan, 1561-1565*, (Antigua Libreria Robredo, 1938) 78; 94 as quoted in Bricker, *The Indian Christ, The Indian King*, 20.

ceiba tree, invoking the sacred *yaxche*.<sup>53</sup> This denotes a deeply intertwined understanding of the Christian cross and the World Tree by the Mayan people. The transformation of the World-Tree in Mayan religious tradition is a prime example of how the Mayan people used Christian symbols as vehicles of their own spiritual beliefs. The World-Tree's conjuring houses and altars have been replaced by churches, but the world tree still manifests the soul of God, even in the stripped-down version of the cross that the Mayans use today.<sup>54</sup>

The Mayan interpretation of the cross and its symbolism of God's sacrifice merged, and the cross is seen as the Christian God himself.<sup>55</sup> This belief coincides with the personification of the World Tree that is evident in Mayan art. As early as the creation of the Temple of the Foliated Cross in Palenque, it seems the Maya held the belief that the World Tree was an animate object. The Foliated Cross plaque shows a personified *yaxche*, complete with a face, an ornate pectoral, and a lavishly decorated loincloth.<sup>56</sup> The personification of the Christian cross can be seen in the cult of the Talking Cross, which came out of the Caste Wars in Quintana Roo.<sup>57</sup> The cross, carved into the trunk of a tree outside of a holy cenote, was first believed to communicate through the voice of a *chilam*, or interpreter. Eventually, the cult, made up of the Cruzob Mayans, developed a belief that the cross would only communicate through messages written by the people who worshiped it. The Mayans adorned the cross in the traditional dress and petticoat of Mayan women, lending a native identity to the Christian symbol.<sup>58</sup> Even after Mexican forces burned the Talking Cross as they tried to quell the rebellion of the Maya, the devotees created a replacement cross, and adorned it in traditional Mayan dress. The cross remains an integral part of Cruzob culture. Each family has its own cross design, similar to the idea of a family crest, and in line with the idea that the cross constitutes a divine being in itself, each family cross can perform a different miracle.<sup>59</sup>

The personification and deification of the Christian cross, as well as the connection between the cross and the World-Tree is still deeply rooted in Mayan spiritual belief. In Zinacantan, the Mayan population believes that each cross, inspired by the ceiba tree, has a living soul that can be activated through a specific ritual that requires the crosses to be adorned with the pine boughs, and surrounded by a bed of pine needles. The crosses are painted blue-green to invoke the ceiba, and rest on a rudimentary scaffold or are encased in cement so that they are never set into the ground. The crosses are believed to be doorways for

53 Thompson, *Maya History and Religion*, 176.

54 Freidel and Schele, *Maya Cosmos*, 251.

55 Farriss, *Maya Society Under Colonial Rule*, 315.

56 Matthew Restall and Amara Solari, *2012 and the End of the World: the Western Roots of the Maya Apocalypse* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2011), 109-111.

57 Freidel and Schele, *Maya Cosmos*, 251.

58 Ibid, 253.

59 Restall and Solari, *2012 and the End of the World*, 111.

the ancestral gods, similar to the original use of the World Tree as a bridge to the celestial world.<sup>60</sup> The perpetuation of the core belief and symbolism of the World Tree-Cross is widespread among the Mayan people today, and while each group has adapted their beliefs differently, the core value and the sacredness of the *yax-che* is obviously preserved through the adaptation of the Christian cross.

Another image that resonated in both cultures was that of resurrection. When the Spanish told the Mayan people of Jesus Christ rising from the dead, the natives were not surprised. For centuries, they had worshiped and honored gods who had done the same. The Maize god, a central figure in the *Popul Vuh*, the Mayan Creation myth of the Quiche people in Guatemala, was the analogous figure for the Mayans. In the *Popul Vuh*, and in many oral traditions amongst Mayan enclaves today<sup>61</sup> the Maize God is killed by the gods of *Xibalba*, the underworld. They hang his decapitated head on a gourd tree, and the disembodied head impregnates a daughter of the gods from Xibalba. She gives birth to the Hero Twins, and they defeat the gods of Xibalba, allowing their father to be resurrected.<sup>62</sup> Jesus Christ was hung on a cross, which to the Mayan people looked like their depiction of the World-Tree. It is easy to see how they combined these two beings, and conceptualized Jesus Christ's resurrection in their understanding of the resurrection cycle of the Maize God.<sup>63</sup> We can see the connection between Christ and the Maize God in Mayan art, in which Jesus Christ and the Maize God represent analogous figures that both come out from the underworld and bring life that would charge the universe with a renewal of sacred life force.<sup>64</sup>

These cross-overs highlight how similarities in Mayan and Christian religion merged to create the modern interpretation of Mayan spirituality. The Christian-hybrid religion that exists today is not the universal Christianity of Europe, but rather a parochial syncretized tradition that has its roots in the cults of patron deities of the past. The villages have covenants with patron saints, established through vows and shrines, which are tended to with the same devotion that they tended to the altars of the old gods.<sup>65</sup> The modern Maya believe that their patron saint will intercede with God on their behalf to ensure that, if they are faithful, they will avoid disasters such as drought, epidemics, and other crises. In the event that crisis does strike the villages, the Mayans bargain with the saints, committing the community to fast, devote the day of the feast to the saint, creating new altars and shrines for the saint, and engaging in processions and charity events for the

60 Elizabeth A. Newsome, *Trees of Paradise and Pillars of the World: the Serial Stelae Cycle of* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2009), 217.

61 Robert S. Carlsen, *The War for the Heart and Soul of a Highland Maya Town*, 3rd ed. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2000), 57.

62 James L. Fitzsimmons, *Death and the Classic Maya Kings* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2009), 22.

63 Allen J. Christenson, *Art and Society in a Highland Maya Community: the Altarpiece of Santiago Atitlán* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2001), 65.

64 *Ibid*, 100.

65 Watanabe "From Saints to Shibboleths", 135.

saint's glory.<sup>66</sup>The saints have become an integral part of the Mayan community. The shrines of the saints hold the same locations that patron deities once held in the hearts of the people. These saints are a conduit for the spirit and core of the ancestral gods to commune with the Mayan people today, and preserve the belief system of the Mayans.

An in-depth analysis of the merging of the World Tree and cross shows how one aspect of the Christian faith was altered and interpreted across a culture. The incorporation of Christian figures into the paradigm of Mayan religion show how syncretism preserved the heart of Mayan tradition, but allowed them to fit into the prescribed role as Christians in a time of conquest. Factors such as social status, occupation, and region influenced the reaction of the native populations to the Spanish introduction of a complex doctrine that contrasted with their own indigenous beliefs. While some natives adopted superficial aspects of the Spanish religion, others were manipulating the new faith to benefit themselves, and yet others still were engaged in an underground resistance. But even with odd cases, such as the Indian "pope" or the priests who instigated rebellions<sup>67</sup>, the most widespread reaction seems to have been adopting aspects of Christian culture.

It can not be said that the preservation of Mayan beliefs through syncretic practices was intentional. The Mayan people merely tried to understand the faith of the invading forces through their own prism of religious understanding. The result is a "preservation of a central core of concepts and principles, serving as a framework within which modification could be made and providing a distinctive shape to the new patterns that emerged."<sup>68</sup> When the Spanish came to the Mayan lands, they did not account for the collision not only of military forces, but of cultures. The diversity of the Mayan social structure allowed for intense syncretism to occur. Three factors largely contributed to the existing native beliefs of today. The decentralization and dissemination of Mayan social hierarchy weakened the influence of the religious authority elites, but it ensured that Catholic Christianity could not simply take over and eradicate the Mayan religion. Had the Mayan been unified, even amongst the city states, to the degree they had been in the Classic period, the Spanish would have simply had to overthrow the kings to strip them of their divinely inspired credibility. Since the kings were military rulers instead of religious leaders, overthrowing the kings had little to no effect on the religious belief of the lower classes.

The prophecies of the Mayan priests had prepared the natives for an invasion that would drastically change their understanding of the universe. When these invaders, foretold by their prophets, came to their land, the Mayans were primed and ready to accept that they were the catalyst for the next cycle of Mayan history. Their fatalism allowed them to perceive this as the order of the world, and

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66 Ibid, 138.

67 Bricker, *The Indian Christ, The Indian King*, 22.

68 Farris, *Maya Society Under Colonial Rule*, 8.

thus they tried to understand the Spanish invaders and the God of which they preached.

The three-tiered religious organization of Mayan religion also allowed for the infiltration of some Christian ideas and their merger with Mayan tradition, but it did not support the Spanish imposition of Christianity in its entirety upon the indigenous populations. Mayans continued to practice their own religion behind the mask of Christianity, and thus preserved the gods of the lower classes through Christian names and symbols. Though the Spanish attempted to force Christianity on the Mayans, their traditions were not conducive to the adoption of monotheism. They did however, allow the incorporation of certain Christian ideas, and the merger of Christian identities with Mayan deities. This can be seen in the worship of Christian saints according to traditional Mayan practices as well as the deification of the Christian cross.

The Spanish tried to subdue the Mayan religion and replace their pantheon of gods with the Christian God and his battalion of saints, but the spiritual conquest of the Maya failed. Modern Mayans hold on to the intense spirituality of their ancestors, which had sustained and inspired their people for three thousand years. They interpreted the Christian religion on their own terms and held onto the values and beliefs of the old ways. Today, the deities often look vastly different than they did prior to the arrival of the Spanish. They look like the saints of the European conquerors, but at their heart and core, they are the gods that created, shaped, and sustained the Mayan universe.

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