

## Cuckoo for Cacao: The Significance of Cacao Use Among the Maya

By Meredith McCabe

Chocolate has a long history of importance that began in Mesoamerica. "The Spanish invaders derived their earliest real knowledge of cacao ... from the Maya" and it is from the Maya that we get much of our understanding of the first mythology and claim to fame cacao holds (Coe & Coe 35). The Maya created many uses for the cacao tree, and showed its importance through writings, iconography, and traditions that still hold true today. The cacao tree was given power as its role of one of the favored foods of the gods, both in the Mayan mythology and Western thoughts. Cacao was a highly prized commodity. Cacao is an essential aspect of the mythology and beliefs held by the Maya, and is deeply rooted in their ideas of sexuality, gender roles, fertility, death, and regeneration.

Much of our knowledge of Mayan mythology regarding cacao is provided from the sacred book of the Quiché Maya, the Popol Vuh, and surviving detailed codices. Cacao was "second to be mentioned in the Popol Vuh after maize, in a list of 'delicious things' provided for the world from the Paxil Mountain of Sustenance" (Green 321). The Maya possess the myth "that the domestic plants which were to sustain human life had been hidden in a mountain, and had to be brought to the earth's surface by divine intervention" (Coe & Coe 42). Cacao also has a recurring role in the Popol Vuh within the story of the Hero Twins. The Hero Twins, two integral characters in an ancient Mayan epic myth, showed familial pride by avenging their father's death. Their father, the Maize God, had been decapitated and his head suspended from a cacao tree in the Underworld (Coe & Coe 41). Their mother was a daughter of one of the Underworld lords and their paternal grandmother was Lady Cacao (Xkakaw) (Green 322). The Hero Twins themselves were offspring of cacao and the Underworld, and this link is seen throughout cacao's symbolic place in Mayan culture.

There are direct references to cacao in the surviving codices that provide more clues to cacao's importance among the Maya. In the Dresden Codex, gods display their preferred meal: "dishes heaped with cacao beans." We know it to be cacao, because the "text written above each deity states that what is held in the hand is 'his cacao' [u kakaw]". The Opossum God, also shown in the Dresden, tells us that cacao is his favorite food: "kakaw u hanal" (Coe & Coe 44).

Another form of Mayan mythology involving cacao is the iconography associated with the World Trees, which consists of cacao, maize, and ceiba. These trees are usually depicted by a cross, which is probably due to the ceiba tree which has the tendency "to send out its limbs in the form of a cross" (McNeil 308). Some of these depicted trees "can be seen in a cacao pod-adorned censer which bears a womanly shape with a stone cross at its top. Cacao pods drip off of the skirt of the censer with a large pod in the stomach area of the sculpture and two pods for the breasts ... the embodiment of fertility" (McNeil 307-308). Another tree representation is found on a censer lid from Copán, which takes the form of an acrobat figure with cacao pods growing on his sides. The figure is known to be designated as a tree, because it bears the pax glyph signifying tree, and the acrobat figure is a Mayan way to represent trees in iconography. The figure is believed to depict the Maize God, because "cacao is the first fruit that

grows off of the Maize God in the Underworld" (McNeil 308-309). There are also ceramic vessels that use cacao iconography and represent cacao trees. These cacao tree representations take on three forms: "ceramic cache or offering vessels with a human face floating on their surface, which likely represents an ancestor, ... simpler forms of vessels without depictions of ancestors, and acrobat figures with cacao pods growing from their sides or one on their head" (McNeil 309). Representing the ancestors as cacao trees illustrates the idea that the soul of the deceased individual is to be reborn, which is shared among modern day Maya when a tree is planted on each grave signifying the rebirth of that person (McNeil 309).

Elaborately painted ceramics and carved artifacts discovered in Classic era burial sites give us clues to the importance of cacao to that society. Among the buried elite are painted vessels that "feature a genre of inscriptions known as the 'dedicatory formula' or the 'primary standard sequence' (PSS). These texts usually mention the vessel type, its contents, and its owner's name" (Beliaev, et al. 257). Through the deciphering of these texts, the two main ingredients mentioned are cacao and atole, or a maize gruel. Other flavorings are mentioned, such as fruit, honey, cherry, sweet potatoes or souring atole. These inscriptions provide insight that the Maya were in fact trying new ways to consume two of their esteemed crops. The different "recipes" could also point to the favored beverage of the elite individual (Beliaev, et al. 258-269). Since these cacao drinks and their vessels are often associated with the elite, it has been suggested that "chocolate drinking was a highly charged political ritual among the Late Classic Maya, a critical act that consolidated political allegiance and cemented civic agreements between individuals." Also, "chocolate drinking was a relatively private, possibly one-on-one activity between men in power" (LeCount 947).

An important aspect of the cacao drinks was the foam that was both highly valued and painstakingly produced. During the Classic period, the Maya would have produced this foam by using the "gravity method," which is pouring the cacao drink from vessel to vessel at a height to create the foam. This method was replaced during the early Colonial Period by a "wooden whisk called the molinillo" (Green 333). It is speculated that during the Preclassic period, before the use of the gravity method, spouted vessels were used to create the foam. The spouts "acted as an orifice for the introduction of air into the body [of the vessel], which would have aided the frothing of liquid chocolate" (Powis, et al. 92). The foam is important because, as the ancient Zapotecs believed, "the foam on chocolate was alive with the vital force called *pée*, present in all living things, and therefore had to be approached ritually" (Green 333). The foam is also "associated with transformation to a fertile liquid ... intermingled with air." This alludes to the frothing process being associated with sex, and linking it to women and procreation (Green 334). The cacao foam would be extracted from the top of the liquid chocolate and layered into another container to be later placed upon hot atole. This pairing is significant not only because of the pleasure given from the taste of the chocolate foam and the atole, but as a reference to the Maize God where both cacao and maize come together (Green 340).

This concept of cacao being linked to fertility, sexuality, and women was explored by Betty Faust when she witnessed a "coming of age" curing ceremony in the mid-1980s. The ceremony "relates gender roles to a cosmology that integrates the Celestial World, this Earth, and the Underworld. ... [Symbolic references to genitals are]

treated as sacred symbols of the fundamental, creative forces of the universe" (Faust 604). Biological reproduction and gender identity are fundamentally connected in Mayan thought. "Sexual beings conceived the Maya universe and gave birth to it, in the ancient creation myth" (Faust 605). The patient at the ceremony was an eleven-year-old girl experiencing "ataques de nervios," or nervous attacks, thought to be due to the delay of her first menstruation. A h-men (a shaman) was consulted, who suggested a curing ceremony: the sacrifice of a chicken to rid the blockage of the girl's menstrual blood by the Lords of the Winds (Faust 611-612). "From a Maya perspective, it is in the darkness of the womb that the next generation will be formed of menstrual blood and semen, by a spiritual connection between the Celestial World and the Underworld that involves the souls of the dead" (Faust 631).

Cacao and dried red chili peppers are used in the ceremony to symbolically represent female and male reproductive organs. The chili peppers are related to male genitals because of the "similarity between the sensation of intense heat caused by placing chili peppers in the mouth and the genital heat of sexual arousal and intercourse" (Faust 616). In appearance, the cacao beans are parallel to the female vulva since they are elongated and have a longitudinal crease; the cacao pods themselves share this same appearance. When ripened, the cacao pods mimic female physiology; they have a purple-red color and seep a white sap. During the process of creating cacao beverages, the liquid "is agitated with a [molinillo] (sometimes referred to as a 'penis')," and "women frequently joke about the similarity of the agitating action to movements in sexual intercourse" (Faust 616). These cacao beverages are served after childbirth, at a baptism, and for the Day of the Dead (when souls are reborn) to celebrate fertility and regeneration. Cacao is also associated with women and the mythic Underworld in the art of Mayan archeological sites, where themes of "sprouting and regeneration are portrayed" (Faust 616). The ritual presentations of the cacao beans and chili peppers indicate "the importance of sexuality and reproductive cycles in the structure of the universe," which is "congruent with the mythic beginnings of time and space, as described in the Popol Vuh: gendered forces in the darkness joined together to think, talk, plan, conceive, and give birth to the cosmos" (Faust 617).

In addition to cacao's significance in the Mayan ideas of fertility and sexuality, it has very important ritualistic aspects in burial offerings. The Maya believe that a person continues to exist even after death. As part of this belief system, the Maya figuratively feed and communicate with the dead. Offerings of food show respect for the dead, as well as demonstrating the family's social status. This demonstration showed the family's ability to honor their loved ones, legitimized the rights of the family by reminding the community of their heritage, and displayed their "power to call on ancestral forces" (McNeil 294). These ritual offerings of food were used "to appease an angry spirit or god, as an expression of esteem, or in the hope that the receiver will grant a wish or a favor to the giver" (McNeil 305). The process of creating these ritual offerings was closely monitored and had to follow certain guidelines. These ritual foods were made from the highest quality of ingredients, considered luxury items, and the Maya differentiated between these meals created for the dead as opposed to meals created for the living. Cacao was one of the staple foods offered in tombs (McNeil 299). Residue from cacao has been found in the vessels examined from ritual offerings, which implies its

importance. The cacao vessels are of the finest quality, which links cacao with wealth and the decedents' belonging to the highest social classes (McNeil 306-307).

As cacao gained importance in Mayan mythology and religious ideals, it was incorporated into society's view of sexuality, gender roles, fertility, death, and rebirth. Cacao holds strong sexual connotations that emphasize the importance of women and fertility in regard to the future. It also emphasizes the importance of family roles, such as the relationship between husband and wife and the role elders play in the community. In much of the iconography, cacao symbolizes fertility, the essence of women and the womb. From the womb is born both the future and the past; the future generations with the incorporated spirits of their elders and ancestors. The deceased are not gone – they are ever present in their rebirth on the Day of the Dead and in the birth of their descendants. Continuation of the family, the society, the culture is cacao's legacy. Cacao's relationship with the Underworld also provides the meaning of rebirth, for it is from the Underworld that these ancestors are said to be reborn. Cacao is said to have come by way of the gods, and through man's procreation, life, and death, man can again be reborn just as the cacao mythology foretells.

### Bibliography

- Beliaev, Dmitri, Albert Davletshin, and Alexandre Tokovinine. "Sweet Cacao and Sour Atole: Mixed Drinks on Classic Maya Ceramic Vases." *Pre-Columbian Foodways: Interdisciplinary Approaches to Food, Culture, and Markets in Ancient Mesoamerica*. Ed. John Edward Staller and Micheal Carraso. Springer: New York, 2010. 257-272.
- Coe, Sophie D. and Michael D. Coe. *The True History of Chocolate*. Thames & Hudson: New York, 1996.
- Faust, Betty Bernice. "Cacao Beans and Chili Peppers: Gender Socialization in the Cosmology of a Yucatec Maya Curing Ceremony." *Sex Roles* 39.7/8 (1998): 603-642.
- Green, Judith Strupp. "Feasting with Foam: Ceremonial Drinks of Cacao, Maize, and Pataxte Cacao." *Pre-Columbian Foodways: Interdisciplinary Approaches to Food, Culture, and Markets in Ancient Mesoamerica*. Ed. John Edward Staller and Michael Carraso. Springer: New York, 2010. 315-343.
- LeCount, Lisa J. "Like Water for Chocolate: Feasting and Political Ritual among the Late Classic Maya at Xunantunich, Belize." *American Anthropologist* 103.4 (2001): 935-953.
- McNeil, Cameron L. "Death and Chocolate: The Significance of Cacao Offerings in Ancient Maya Tombs and Caches at Copán, Honduras." *Pre-Columbian Foodways: Interdisciplinary Approaches to Food, Culture, and Markets in Ancient Mesoamerica*. Ed. John Edward Staller and Michael Carraso. Springer: New York, 2010. 293-314.
- Powis, Terry G., et al. "Spouted Vessels and Cacao Use among the Preclassic Maya." *Latin American Antiquity* 13.1 (2002): 85-106.