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Time, History and Ritual in a K'iche' Community: Contemporary Maya Calendar Knowledge and Practices in the Highlands of Guatemala

Akker, P. van den

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Author: Akker, P. van den

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V. Symbolism and Continuity

For writing this chapter, I am greatly indebted to don Leonso Lol, Francisco Lol, Luiz Lol, don Rigoberto Itzep, don José Angel Xeloj, Gregorio Itzep, Carlos Pérez Acabal and all the Tz'ulab' from Momostenango for the knowledge that they shared with me. Errors that might appear in the contents of this chapter are my fault alone. If such errors or any misrepresentations appear, I would like to apologize beforehand to the community of Momostenango.

INTRODUCTION

This chapter continues on the *baile de la culebra*. While the previous chapter explored the incorporation of history in this ritual, this chapter examines possible lines of cultural continuity in the dance. I am aware that the *baile de la culebra* is the outcome of processes of cultural interaction and that the dance, as we see it today, is a colonial product (see Looper, 2009, pp. 207-212). However, I am interested in knowing how the Maya people may have possibly adopted tools introduced by the Spaniards to give continuity to cultural values that remained relevant in the colonized environment. To what extent can the *baile de la culebra* be understood as a colonial reinterpretation of precolonial cultural heritage? The main aim here is to contribute to the understanding of the process of transmission of cultural values – the ethical guidelines for living life in a sustainable way in relation with the environment – which have been established and encoded in symbolic elements by the ancestors. Therefore, this chapter is geared towards a first explorative step of tracing the symbolic antecedents of the dance in prehispanic iconography.

The methodology that will be used for tracing possible prehispanic antecedents of the meaning embedded in the *baile de la culebra* is based on what has been called the ethno-iconological

approach. This approach has its roots in the work of Karl Anton Nowotny (1961, pp. 272-275) who compared ethnographic data regarding the ritual practice of counting bundles for offerings among the contemporary Tlapanecs – documented by Leonard Schultze Jena (1938) – with a selection of prehispanic central Mexican codices known as the Borgia Group, and was able to prove with this analogy that these codices were used as mantic instruments. Nowotny's focus on connecting the cultural heritage of contemporary indigenous peoples in Mesoamerica with ancient objects and prehispanic visual culture was continued by his student, Ferdinand Anders, who examined continuity in the practice of paper making in the Otomi community of San Pablito in the Sierra de Puebla (Anders & Jansen, 1986). Maarten Jansen – student of Ferdinand Anders – and Aurora Pérez Jiménez developed this methodological approach further into what they coined “post-colonial hermeneutics” by incorporating the goal of restoring the broken ties in social memory in current day indigenous communities (Jansen, 1988, 2012; Jansen & Pérez Jiménez, 2011, 181-216). Post-colonial hermeneutics builds on the ethno-iconological approach but proceeds to “reconnect the images of the codices to on-going cultural traditions, in the wider context of the struggle of indigenous peoples for emancipation, dignity and cultural rights” (Jansen, 2012, p. 82).

The methodology of post-colonial hermeneutics is an adaptation of Erwin Panofsky's iconological approach to the interpretation of art which consists of three levels namely the descriptive level, the level of thematic clusters and the level of deeper meaning (Van der Loo 1987; Oudijk, 2008). The first level is the identification and description of symbolic elements that appear in a cluster. Before any meaning can be extracted from a visual

representation, distinct elements need to be analyzed and described. The second level has a thematic focus and analyzes how clusters of symbolic elements constitute a specific meaning in a visual representation. In the ethno-iconological approach, the meaning of ancient visual culture is explored by making diachronic and synchronic analogies.

Analogies between past and contemporary societies have been criticized for not taking into account the dramatic effect of colonization: while a symbol may continue over a long time, its meaning may actually change. This fact has led George Kubler (1961, 1981) to argue that analogies between the past and the present cannot be used as a tool for interpreting Mesoamerican visual representations.

Henry Nicholson (1976) and Peter van der Loo (1987) have shown, however, that analogies of societies separated in time are both possible and valid. Peter van der Loo (1987, pp. 9-26) argues, for example, that a careful analysis of the historical processes and “thematic units” – clusters of symbolic elements – enables analogies as tools for producing valid interpretations of visual representations. In analogies, the thematic unit of a known context is used to understand another, similar, thematic unit in a less known, but comparable, context (Oudijk, 2008, p. 126). In this chapter, the known context is the context in which the *baile de la culebra* is performed today whereas the lesser known context is the context in which similar thematic units appear in the prehispanic Maya culture and, to a lesser extent, in other Mesoamerican cultures. While the contexts are separated in time, they are comparable in cultural and spatial terms. The analysis of similar thematic units is important in the process of interpreting as the meaning of a visual representation is constituted by a web of meaningful relations between the symbolic elements in the thematic unit: when specific elements reappear in a similar conjunction as they did before, it is likely that the representation has the same meaning. However, if the time span between two comparable thematic units increases, then the possibility that the meaning of these units has changed also increases. Therefore, in order to come to a sound and valid argument it is necessary to include the historical processes into the analysis as this enable insights in the possible changes of the meaning of the thematic units.

The third level of the ethno-iconological approach is the level of the “the deeper meaning”, which relates to the social, historical, and ideological context of a visual representation. This level analyzes what the representation means in relation to broader social aspects of the society where it is displayed or, in the case of a dance, is performed. Similarly, the broader significance of having a group of similar representations at a particular moment in society can also be discussed on this level of interpretation. For example: what does it mean that these dances are performed today within this particular social context?

While this methodology is actually developed to produce interpretations of specific pictographic and iconographic representations, I use the post-colonial hermeneutics approach to discuss the symbolic meaning of a dance. Because dance is a performance and not a static object, it has the capacity to change and incorporate new elements, as discussed in the previous chapter. However, similar to pictographic representations, the dance that I discuss in these chapters consists of specific symbolic elements that enable its identification as the *baile de la culebra*. This means that the thematic unit is shared and recognized on a regional scale. While a dance performance is a different medium than, for example, a codex, I argue that thematic units on different media are comparable on the second-level analysis. A painting sequence on which the passion of Christ is depicted has, for example, on this level a meaning that is comparable to the physical reenactment of the passion of Christ during Holy Week. However, on the third level of analysis, which discusses the meaning of a visual representation within its social, political, historical, and ideological context, the medium that transfers a certain message can be indicative of specific social processes.

In this chapter I explore the meaning of the *baile de la culebra* by looking into some of the core symbolic elements that constitute the thematic unit. These elements are: sacrifice, the snake, death and rebirth, and the female protagonist and her husband. I also take into account the element of time, which is implicitly present in the timing of the dance performances in the Highlands of Guatemala, and which hints at underlying elements related to the agricultural cycle, the sprouting of the maize, and

the need for water. I discuss the conceptualization of each of these elements as well as the internal relationship between the different elements within the *baile de la culebra* to come to an understanding of the symbolic meaning of the *baile de la culebra*. Furthermore, the contemporary connotations of each of the elements are compared to similar prehispanic and colonial connotations and conceptualizations through a discussion of colonial sources and prehispanic iconography. While the iconographic material is extensive, I have restricted myself in each case to discussing only specific illustrative examples that clearly show similarity in conceptualization.

In the last part of the chapter, I compare the thematic unit that constitutes the *baile de la culebra* with thematic units that appear in two iconographic cases from the late postclassic and late classic Maya culture, respectively the Dresden Codex page 74 and the codex style Snake Lady vessels, suggesting that the contemporary dance may contribute to the interpretation of these depictions. The analogy that I draw is not conclusive, as a more in-depth analysis of the historical processes is needed. However, the following discussion should be taken as a first explorative step towards the identification of possible prehispanic symbolic antecedents of the dance. More research on the topic will definitely be needed.

Finally, at the end of the chapter, I suggest on the basis of the previous analogies a hypothetical name for the female protagonist of the *baile de la culebra* and discuss the meaning of the dance within its current social, historical, and ideological context. In this third-level analysis I go into questions such as: why is the dance performed? Why is it performed in different communities at different moments in time? How does the performance of the dance show the underlying philosophy of sharing a burden? And how does the dance relate to the *chol q'ij* calendar?

DANCING AND WHIPPING

In the previous chapter I explored the whipping during the dance as a form of punishment. Several of the dancers, however, emphasized that the dance is also a sacrifice for Jesus Christ and the ancestors of the community. This section examines the symbolic meanings of whipping within the dance and it explores its relationship with precolonial sacrifice.

Dance as Sacrifice

Participating in the *baile de la culebra* is, according to the organizers, a form of offering or sacrifice. The Tz'ulab' dedicate themselves for a period of nine years to dancing for the ancestors and for the benefit of the community. The financial costs associated with this dance are relatively low in comparison to other Highland Guatemala dances, wherein the participants have to rent elaborate masks and costumes from the *morería* (a workshop that makes and rents out masks and costumes for dances). This aspect has possibly contributed to the survival of the dance in many communities. Still, each of the dancers of the *baile de la culebra* has to forego their work to participate in the dance. Although almost all the dancers have little material resources, they nevertheless take the burden of the dance and skip work on the days that the dance takes place. The authors carry the responsibility of conducting the ceremonies and preparing the food for the rest of the participants. Both obligations are a sacrifice for them as both the ceremonies and the preparation of the food costs time and money. Before 2014, the dancers would bring their own masks to the dance. This is still allowed, but the organizers realized that many masks had been lost over time, which resulted in fewer people participating in the dance. Don Rigoberto therefore took the burden in 2014 to buy new masks in Chichicastenango and to keep them at a central place (the Misión Maya). The dance itself is also a physical offering. During two or three consecutive days, the participants dance for hours in the warm sun wearing heavy dresses. Furthermore, for weeks after the dance, the sore bodies and bloody wounds caused by the whippings will remind the Tz'ulab' of the strokes they had to endure (Figure 112).

Until quite recently, whips were used on many occasions in the Highlands of Guatemala. For example, doña María Hernández Ajanel told me that when she was young the leaders of the four *barrios* of Momostenango would watch over the blessing of the water on Holy Saturday. Everybody had to stand in line and those who would push or cheat would be whipped by the authorities. Whipping was a tool for punishing or disciplining a person. On the same day, still today, children are whipped with branches of a tree by their parents to take away their *mak* ("sin") or *awas* ("taboo"). Throughout the year, parents keep

track of the behavior of their children: if they use many swear words or behave improperly, they will be whipped.

Ruth Bunzel elaborated several times on the use of the whip during her fieldwork in the 1930s in Chichicastenango. According to her, children would also be whipped on Holy Saturday to make them grow faster (Bunzel, 1952, p. 224). Also on the first day of the new Gregorian year “[...] they whip the boys who do not grow, and then the trees that do not give fruit. If I have an orange tree that does not give fruit, I buy a basket of oranges, with their stems, and hang them on the tree that the tree may take note, and one whips the tree” (Bunzel, 1952, p. 423). She especially mentions whipping in relation to sins (Bunzel, 1952, pp. 96, 293, 326). For example, sins can play a part in problems during childbirth and whipping sets free these sins (Bunzel, 1952, p. 96). In all these cases the whipping is a form of penitence. This practice is very reminiscent of the Colonial period Spanish Holy Week during which sins were publically whipped away so that after Easter everybody could have a new start without sins (Gage, 2000, Chapter XV). As Looper (2009, pp. 207-212) has pointed out, the *baile de la culebra* certainly has an element of disciplining and liberation of sins, as it coincides with Holy Week and the passion of Christ. However, the organizers are very keen on the fact that the dance is a sacrifice.

Blood sacrifices occur occasionally in the Highlands of Guatemala. Today in Santiago Atitlan bloodlettings are performed by the *cofradía de San Nicolás* with an obsidian blade which is kept in a chest together with a sacred bundle dedicated to María Castelyan and two or three gourd cups that are used to gather the blood from the bloodletting ritual (Christenson, 2001b, p. 112). After the bloodletting ritual, the blood is left at places that are related to the entrance of the underworld. Franz Termer (1957, p. 191) describes a case of bloodletting in Santa Eulalia which he documented during his fieldwork (years 1925-1929) in Guatemala: rituals specialist gather at a sacred cave for an entire day and night without drinking or eating anything. They rub their chests with a ball of wax mixed with glass splinters until they bleed. While practicing the auto-sacrifice, they are able to foresee problems concerning harvest, hunger, drought, and politics. La Farge elaborates



Figure 112. A Tz'ul dancer showing proudly his bloody wounds in the *calvario* of Momostenango.

on the auto-sacrifice in Santa Eulalia in relation to rain. For example, before important dances the participants would whip themselves or each other with leather belts into which pieces of glass were attached to petition that no rain would fall during the event (La Farge, 1994, p. 113). Later on he elaborates on the role of whipping and bleeding in the petition of rain:

The rite of Txaij is performed to bring the rain and it can be included in any praying routine. The Alcaldes Rezadores whip themselves in front of the crosses with belts in which pieces little pieces of glass, txaij, are glued with bee wax. Their assistants wash their backs with water so that the blood can run more freely and to induce heavy rainfalls, represented by the streams of blood.

The flagellation can of course derive from ancient Catholic practices but the use of glass fragments that have the ancient name for obsidian suggests that this is a survival from an ancient and well known Maya practice. Applying the glass with the whip rather than through direct application with the hands can be a Christian influence (La Farge, 1994, p. 155; translation mine).

The importance of sacrifice is very well verbalized by Diego Chávez, a woodcutter from Santiago Atitlan (in Christenson, 2001b):

[L]ife cannot exist without sacrifice. Maize must be crushed on a grinding stone before it can be made into tortillas. The wheat in the sacramental Host must also be ground and baked. The sun can only rise in the east after it has been buried in the west". He pointed out that anciently the Maya sacrificed people, but now they offer deer, turkeys, chickens, incense, or maize, "but it is all the same thing." Gods and sacred animals give their lives so that new life can emerge: "Tortillas, the Host, Jesus Christ, and the sun give life because they are first killed. Tortillas and bread result from the death of maize and wheat so that they can give us life. They are therefore gods" (Christenson, 2001b, p. 110; emphasis his).

Apart from physical sacrifice, symbolic sacrifice is very common in Highland Guatemalan dance. In the *baile de los toritos* in Chichicastenango, for example, one of the main dancers symbolically dies after a struggle with the bull. As I witnessed during my fieldwork in 2014, his mask is taken off and carried around as a symbolic form of decapitation and with his head covered in a red cloth he is taken around in public. Whereas the dance in itself is already a sacrifice, the final decapitation is a climactic act of submission. But also in the *baile de la culebra* Termer (1957, p. 218) and Cook (2000, p. 177) noted that in some instances the dancers would symbolically die after being whipped: they would lay on the floor appearing to be dead. Only through mimed sexual intercourse were they brought back to

life by the other Tz'ulab'. Today the symbolic death is reduced to falling on the ground, lying still for a few seconds and getting back up to harass the Lady once more.

Bloodletting in the Past

In the entire region that we know today as precolonial Mesoamerica, self-sacrifice or (symbolic) sacrifice of another person seems to have been an important ritual act. From the archaeological and iconographic record is known that blood sacrifice was not uncommon in the precolonial Maya culture (L. Schele, 1992, pp. 175-208). For example, in Figure 113 we see a depiction of communal blood sacrifice in the precolonial Maya document known as the *Madrid Codex*. Four gods, or ritual specialists that impersonate gods, stand at the four corners of a temple structure while passing a rope through perforated genitals to draw blood as sacrifice (Vail, 2013, p. 61). In Figure 114 we see a drawing of Lintel 24 from Yaxchilan on which Lady Xoc pulling a rope through her perforated tongue as part of a royal ritual (L. Schele, 1992, p. 177). In both cases, the participants use ropes as ritual paraphernalia to draw blood. The ropes were used to draw blood through perforated wounds rather than whips.

In the *Popol Vuh*, the early colonial K'iche' creation account, the first human ancestors are called the "bloodletters and sacrificers" (Christenson, 2007, p. 190). This title refers to the act of auto-sacrificing blood, a ritual practice in which one would offer his or her blood to the gods, and it shows that this practice was considered to be a core element of the human tasks and responsibilities ever since the creation of the human being (D. Tedlock, 1996, p. 291). Bloodletting was performed to give some of the vital force of life back to the life-giving cosmos, as an act of reciprocity (Christenson, 2007, p. 190).

In the Colonial period, forms of bloodletting self-sacrifice continued, although in secret because of Spanish persecution (De Fuentes y Guzmán, 1882, Parte I Libro I Capítulo V). In Yucatan, Fray Diego de Landa, who had probably never witnessed these practices with his own eyes, describes self-sacrifices in his *Relación de las cosas de Yucatán* (De Landa, 1966, p. 49). He describes how parts of the body were perforated to draw blood as an offering to the gods and how in some cases ropes were pulled through



Figure 113. Madrid Codex page 19: four personages perform bloodletting sacrifices with ropes around a temple structure.

the perforated body parts. 17th-Century chronicler Francisco Antonio de Fuentes y Guzmán writes in his *Recordación florida* that similar public forms of sacrifice took place in the Highlands of Guatemala on important Holidays or for ritual petitions:

They went through the cruel barbarity of taking out their own blood from the nose, ears, arms and legs to offer it. The preparation of this activity involved public penitence and general fasting and the intimidation of the town



Figure 114. Lintel 24 of Yaxchilan: Lady Choc making a bloodletting offering by pulling a rope through her perforated tongue.

by the priests of the idols, called Ajq'ijes [...] Part of these infamous and strange sacrifices was a very long and heavy procession, which was performed with measured pauses and extensive movement (which substantiated the weight) leading to the place of sacrifices while the most authorized personages and the Ajaues of the republics carried the horrible idol on their shoulders (De Fuentes y Guzmán, 1882, Parte I Libro I Capítulo V; translation mine).

While blood sacrifices continued to be performed, the extirpation of native practices by the Catholic authority led to public whippings as a form of punishment on the part of the friars and church authorities. These extirpatory campaigns focused on

eliminating the indigenous religion, which included the calendars and religious practices such as blood offerings (see Tavárez, 2011). Idolatry could lead to trials and public punishment, the most common punishment being public whippings (Aguilera Barchet, 1993, pp. 334-558; Escandell Bonet & Pérez Villanueva, 1993).

As I have shown throughout this work, time is an underlying principle for the organization of a society and therefore, in order to have an impact, the punishments had to be performed at a meaningful moment in time. For the Catholic missionaries, of course, this had to be an important moment in the Christian calendar. It seems that there were two specific moments during which the idolaters would be publicly punished with whippings: on Sundays and at the end of Holy Week (John Chuchiak personal communication, November 2014). These whippings were performed publicly to create a system of social shame and control, and to scare others that had been doing similar rituals in secret; they could be next¹⁰⁷. Sundays were important days for the public whippings because all the people from the villages would be in town and failing to participate in the mass may be taken as a sign of sin. In Yucatán, idolaters would be whipped on these days in front of a big crowd in front of the main church (Chuchiak, 2000, pp. 235-238). An even better and more significant moment in time was on Easter, at the end of Holy Week: the idolaters would be punished for their sins with Easter so that after the resurrection of Christ they would be able to continue their lives as good Christians, free from sin (Aguilera Barchet, 1993, pp. 334-558). Also on Maundy Thursday, the Thursday before Easter Sunday, the *procession de la sangre* was performed at several places, which involved self-flagellation. Thomas Gage, an English Dominican missionary who lived in Guatemala from 1625 until 1637 briefly mentions the punishments in his book *Nueva relación que contiene los viajes de Tomás Gage en la Nueva España*:

The Spaniards did not only teach the indians to do these ceremonies and representations, but also [taught] the way of disciplining during Holy Week; in this they do not only imitate but they exceed a lot in the severity with which they punish men and women. So I have seen some of them that did not only faint but even died in the church for having been disciplined heavily (Gage, 2000, Chapter XV; translation mine).

As we have seen in Chapter III, Holy Week and Easter are also crucial moments in time in modern Mesoamerica. This period marks the preparation of the milpa and the arrival of rain. It is a time in which the human dependency on the uncontrollable forces around us is most pronounced. In ritual, the consciousness of such dependency is expressed through a bodily gesture of submission (Rappaport, 1999, p. 142). This important ritual moment in time became after conquest the occasion for public whipping as punishment. At the same time, it is plausible that the whipping as a form of punishment or penitence during Holy Week was perceived differently by the indigenous peoples of Highland Guatemala than by the Spaniards. Christenson notes (2007, p. 190) that Fray Thomas Coto (1983, pp. 502-503) documented the term *k'ajb'* for “human sacrifice” in his extensive Kaqchikel dictionary from around 1650. Christenson relates this term to the verb *k'ajij* (“to wound the knee”) and suggests that both “likely refer to auto-sacrificial rites whereby a person’s own blood is offered to deity” (2007, p. 190). He notes, however, that Ximénez translates *k'ajb'* to “punishment” (Christenson, 2007, p. 190). The difference in the translation of *k'ajb'* – as sacrifice or punishment – shows that the Spaniards reinterpreted the Maya concept of self-sacrifice within their Catholic understanding of “penitence” and “punishment”, given also their proclivity to condemn native practices.

I suggest that the meaning of punishment for idolatry, as the missionaries understood it, was possibly negotiated by the K'iche': they may have understood it as bloodletting, i.e. as self-sacrifice. If so, the sacrifice was made for continuing the activities that the ancestors had established, for petitioning guidance and abundance in the period

¹⁰⁷ Interestingly, the Guatemalan government used the same strategy during the climax of the Civil War in the 1980s. Guerillas, presumed guerillas, and people who would openly criticize the government were occasionally executed on the central plaza of their villages or towns to send a message to those who were against the government (Falla, 1992, p. 45).

of rain and shortly before. Where the Catholic missionaries hoped to demotivate the Maya People by punishing them with bodily punishments, Maya People actually underwent a sacrifice, a form of bloodletting institutionalized by Catholic missionaries. The blood of punishment was at the same time the blood of sacrifice.

Sacrifice for the Community

Sacrifice is thus still an essential component of the *baile de la culebra* in Momostenango. At this important moment, the Tz'ulab' undergo whipping as a form of self-sacrifice through which they petition, as don Leonso already explained in the previous chapter, protection against animals that eat their crops, or against anything that could damage the *milpa*. The *baile de la culebra* enables the dancers to enter a liminal stage in which they become mediators between the ancestors at the cemetery, Jesus Christ, the *Juyub'-Taq'aj* ("the World"), and everything else that is divine and sacred. As discussed in the previous chapter, the monotonous sound of the marimba, the pain inflicted through whipping, the repetitive dance steps, the consumption of alcohol, and finally the dressing as a Tz'ul or Xinula enable the participants to truly become their personage. All these elements help the participants to physically and mentally enter a state in which they can communicate with the ancestors and Divine Beings.

Whereas in Momostenango nobody refers to the Tz'ulab' as angels, their function is similar to that of the dancers in Rabinal who were identified by Marcelo Díaz in the 1940s as angels that petition rain: as a sacrifice for the well-being of their community they went up to the sky to talk directly to God¹⁰⁸. Similarly, the interpretation of the dance in Rabinal by Father Narciso Teletor mentions that the dancers are mediators between the surface of the world and the sky:

The account is completely in [native] language: they go around complaining about goiter and sometimes they do not support

108 During the Patron Saint Feast of Santo Tomás in Chichicastenango, the sacred and living image of Tz'ijolaj goes with a rope from the base of the pole of the *palo volador* to the top of the church to deliver the messages and prayers of the Maxefios, the people from Chichicastenango (see appendix E).

the pain any longer and ask the spectators a cigarette and they smoke it; they go in circles around the Muy [Lola] and they believe they are the forerunners of the wind and the rain, who constantly call the clouds, the hail, and the wind, so that the water that generates harvest of corn and fruit will fall on the earth (Mace, 1967, p. 109; emphasis and translation mine).

Regarding human sacrifice in Central Mexico, Sahagún mentions that those who were to be sacrificed were "eagle-men", who would go as messengers to the sun in the sky (De Sahagún, 1950-1978, Book II, Chapter XXI). Also, Bartolomé de las Casas describes that the Totonacs in their petition for the rebirth of the Sun around the solstice of December would send humans as messengers to the sun (De las Casas, 1909, pp. 462-464). This means that the concept of sacrificed messengers or "eagle-men" that would go upwards to the sky to deliver the messages of the people was widespread in the at least the Nahua region at the time of contact. A process similar to the synergy between angels and the Yucatec Gods of Wind (Bricker & Miram, 2002, pp. 85-88) may possibly have led to the equation of the concept of eagle-men to that of angels with the advent of Catholicism.

In sum, at the moment when the *milpa* is being prepared and the arrival of rain is crucial for the survival of the community, the *baile de la culebra* is performed. The whipping in the dance is both a symbolic punishment and a sacrifice. By participating in the dance, the participants become mediators between the people and the divine, which is an important responsibility for the well-being of the community. Commemorating Jesus Christ, the ancestors and the *Juyub'-Taq'aj*, they petition for rain and fertility.

THE CYCLE OF LIFE-DEATH-LIFE

One central aspect of the *baile de la culebra* is its reference to the cycle of life-death-life, which Clarissa Pinkola Estés (2008, p. 30) defines as a omnipervasive flow of life, death, and rebirth that constitutes the world. The dance as a ritual practice stands for the end of a period and the beginning of

a new one. I will discuss here how the theme of death and resurrection constantly reoccurs during the dance. However, first I will briefly explore the general K'iche' perception of death. The perception of death in K'iche' communities can be best understood through a discussion of the *chol q'ij* day *Kame* (see Chapter I, and appendix B). Directly translated, *Kame* means "Death". However, *Kame* does not stand for an end or a final stage; it is a new beginning. *Kame* is the closing of one period and the beginning of a new one, without *Kame* nothing can exist. *Kame* stands for change, which explains its crucial importance in the Mayas conception of time. I will give an example related to a personal anecdote:

One morning in Momostenango on a day 6 *Kame* I woke up from a dream in which a deceased relative of mine tore down the wallpaper in her living room, behind which a dome with stars appeared, and telling me that she would leave for not being appreciated anymore. When I shared my experience with an Ajq'ij, he told me that my relative represented my old ideas and my old self. The day 6 *Kame* taught me that I needed a change in my life. Based on our conversation the Ajq'ij interpreted that my life was out of balance by the lack of religion and the strong presence of academic thinking; these two clashed with each other. Rather than marking death, the deceased relative and the day *Kame* showed that it was time for a change. Death is therefore not an end but rather a point of reflection, change, and continuity.

Considering the cycle of life-death-life, the timing of the dance in Momostenango is important. The fourth Friday of Lent is the preparation of the actual Good Friday, which commemorates the death of Christ. Holy Saturday and Easter Sunday, on the other hand, celebrate the resurrection of Christ. As elaborated in Chapter III, this moment coincides with the preparation of the *milpa* and the arrival of rain, which enables the growth of corn and other crops. The death of Jesus Christ and his subsequent resurrection play an important role in the rebirth of the *milpa* (see Chapter III).

In precolonial lowland Maya cosmovision the cycle of corn was perceived as a journey of the Maize God between the place of death and the place of life. The Maize God, who died and was reborn each year, travelled through the watery underworld

to trick and defeat the Lord of the Dead each time again to assure his way back to the world of the living (K. Taube, 1985, pp. 171-180). The end of the rainy season and the subsequent harvest is the death of the Maize: the maize plants are decapitated by cutting the *jolom* ("head", maize corn), which is carried in cloths to the house and stored (Carlsen & Prechtel, 1991). The death of Maize gives, as Diego Chávez explained (above), life to humans: in order to live we have to kill the Maize. Then when the first three rain showers have passed, the humans give life to the Maize by planting it. The sprouting of the first maize seeds is the rebirth of the Maize God.

Death is related to change, rather than to a definitive end. However, before change can happen the past needs to be revisited. In the case of the dance, this means that although the maize will be planted again and the rain will come, the change can only occur when the community engages with its past or roots – such as the ancestors – and physically or mentally revisit what the ancestors have left behind¹⁰⁹. This explains the conscious effort of the organizers to perform the *baile de la culebra*, a dance established by the ancestors, and to perform it in the way that the ancestors did it. Furthermore, the dance takes place in a landscape that is pregnant with the past, where ancestors have left their marks. The two most important places for the performance of this dance in this landscape are the cemetery and the central square of Momostenango.

The cemetery is the place where the ancestors are buried. The *calvario*, which is a central point for the dancers on the fourth Friday of Lent and on the morning of Holy Saturday, is surrounded by the ancestors. In the Highlands of Guatemala, the *calvario* is an important place for ancestor communication (Bunzel, 1952, p. 8; Cook, 2000, pp. 164-165). Close-by the *calvario* of Momostenango lies one of the most important altars in which communication with the ancestor takes place: Tz'aqb'al b'aaq¹¹⁰ ("wall

109 This could be the reason for the construction of Mesoamerican codices in which lineages are treated. Often they were part of a ceremony of taking power. Before this change in status could happen, the one who took power would have to be remembered of its roots. Often a physical pilgrimage was also needed, these are documented in the codices.

110 Tz'aqb'al b'aaq means "Wall of Bones". Tz'aq means as a verb "agregar" or in English "to complement", "To build", "to fabricate" and as noun it means "wall of stones" or according to Christenson "monument". The ending "-b'al" is a



Figure 115. The ossuary *Tz'aqb'al b'aaq*. Bones found at the cemetery are deposited in the structure through the small window that can be seen on this photo.



Figure 116. Fire ceremonies for the ancestors are performed in front of *Tz'aqb'al b'aaq*.

of bones"). This sacred place is an ossuary situated in between the graves (Figure 115 and Figure 116). In front of the burning place stands a small square house with small window and on top of it a dome. When workers at the cemetery find bones from an unknown grave at the cemetery, they deposit the bones through the window in the ossuary. This sacred place is thus where the bones of the ancestors have accumulated, and is seen as *uk'u'x* ("his/her heart" or "his/her essence") of the ancestors. Especially on days Ajpu (the days of the ancestors) ceremonies are performed here, but also on the day Kame or the Gregorian weekdays Monday and Thursday. According to don José Angel:

This is the place to give thanks and here protection is petitioned: "why am I suffering like this, in this way that never stops, that there is no one [else]... Why?". This is where the bones of our deceased, our grandparents, are. This is where the grandparents are – Don José Ángel Xeloj 15th of August 2016.

Whereas the cemetery is the main center for the dead, the church plaza is *uk'u'x* of life, the heart of the living people: the center of Momostenango is the busiest place in town. Especially on the market days Wednesday and Sunday the liveliness of the town center is noticeable. The plaza not only is the most visibly vibrant place in town, but it is also its heart. During the festivities for Santiago, the patron of the town, an *axis mundi* is raised here by the dancers of the *baile del venado* (Cook, 2000, pp. 107-118). Similarly, the dancers of the *baile de la culebra* plant an *axis mundi* in the form of a greased pole at the entrance of the cemetery on the fourth Friday of Lent (see Chapter III and IV). In daily activities in Momostenango, the attention between the cemetery and the center of the town shifts as, in the Gregorian calendar, a market day in the center of Momostenango (Sunday and Wednesday), is always followed by a day to visit the ancestors at the cemetery (Monday and Thursday).

instrumental or locative suffix. We find this word back in the altars of Alajsab'al and Nimasab'al, which both derive from Tz'aq-b'al. *B'aaq* means "bone". Mind the parallel with the *tzompantli* walls such as the one of Chichén Itzá and Central Mexico. In the Mazatec region this concept is known as *xoa nindaa* ("Wall of Bones").

While the cemetery, *uk'u'x* of the dead, plays a central role during the fourth Friday of Lent, the center of town, *uk'u'x* of the living, is the place for the performance in the afternoon of Holy Saturday and on Easter Sunday. The dancing procession that takes place in the morning of Holy Saturday moves from *uk'u'x* of the deceased in the southeast of the town in northwestern direction towards *uk'u'x* of the living in the center of town. This movement from death to life coincides with the resurrection of Jesus Christ on Holy Saturday (commemorated the following day with the Easter procession). It seems therefore that the dance moves symbolically from the domain of the deceased towards the domain of the living, a similar path that Jesus Christ, the Maize God, and the Hero Twins from the Popol Vuh have to follow between Good Friday and Easter Sunday. Therefore, the dancing procession of the *baile de la culebra* likely symbolizes the transition from death to rebirth¹¹¹. In the ritual dance we see the cycle of life-death-life also in the symbolic death of the dancers and their subsequent resurrection through sexual intercourse or, in the variant of Joyabaj, the death of the ladino through a snake bite and his subsequent revival (Cook, 2000, p. 177; Hutcheson, 2009, p. 883; Termer, 1957, p. 218).

Another element that stresses the symbolism of life-death-life is that of the pine tree for the *palo encebado*¹¹². The tree used for this event is always cut at the cemetery and so it is materially and symbolically nurtured by all the generations of ancestors that are buried there (Figure 117). The tree has literally fed itself from the ancestors and has grown out of their bodies. The symbolism of new life in the form of plants or trees emerging from the bodies of the ancestors is an ancient symbolism and is shared across an extensive region. For example, in Palenque in the Maya Lowlands, the sarcophagus of



Figure 117. The tree used for the event of *palo encebado* grows at the cemetery of Momostenango and feeds of the bodies of the ancestors.

the Late Classic period lord K'inich Janaab' Pakal I is elaborately decorated along this theme. On the side of sarcophagus his ancestors sprout up from seeds planted in a watery earth in the form of fruited trees (Carlsen & Prechtel, 1991, p. 34). On the main tableau K'inich Janaab' Pakal I is depicted as he is falling through the mouth of the Earth, which indicates his death (L. Schele, David Freidel, Joy Parker, 1993, p. 78). Out of his body, however, grows the central tree of life. Christenson (2001a, pp. 102-107) discusses in detail how in the contemporary Tz'utujil community of Santiago Atitlán trees are related to the center of the world and to renewal of life. Regarding funerary practices and beliefs he states, furthermore, that "[o]nce placed in the grave, Atitecos raise a small mound of earth over the body and plant a tree on top which represents the soul of the dead reborn to new life" (Christenson, 2001a, p. 206).

¹¹¹ Garret Cook (2000, p. 214) came independently to this same conclusion.

¹¹² The *palo encebado* is another phenomenon that is widespread in Mesoamerica. In the Codex Borbonicus, an early colonial Aztec manuscript executed according to Aztec conventions, we see that the *palo encebado* formed part of the feast of *Xocotl uetzi* ("the fruit falls"), another name for the feast celebrating the dead ancestors, Huey Miccailhuictl (Anders, Jansen, & Reyes García, 1991, p. 206). The feast took place in the tenth *veintena* of the year and is one *veintena* (twenty days) before the feast of *Ochpaniztli*, which I will discuss further below. *Xocotl uetzi* is a feast that usually took place around August in the Gregorian calendar and commemorated the deceased children and was performed for the Gods of Water, Seeds and Reed (De Sahagún, 1950-1978, Book II, Chapter XXIX).



Figure 118. Dresden Codex page 3a: a tree emerges out of the body of Hero Twin Junajpu.

On the 3rd page of the late postclassic *Dresden Codex* similar symbolism is depicted (Figure 118). The Hero Jun Junajpu lies on a sacrificial stone while a Tree of Life emerges as *axis mundi* out of his body (Grube, 2012, p. 74). In the four cardinal directions around him are priests or Divine Beings that perform ceremonies. Such symbolism is also known from the early colonial account of the Popol Vuh. After the defeat of the hero-twins, protagonists Jun Junajpu and Wuqub' Junajpu, by the Lords of Death, the skull of Jun Junajpu is buried in the fork of a fruitless tree in Xibalba (the Place of the Dead). Here it stimulates the tree to produce fruits in the form of skulls: the calabash (D. Tedlock, 1996, pp. 96-106). When the daughter of one of the Death-Lords came to see the tree Jun Junajpu spit in her hand and impregnated her with his children who became the next generation of hero-twins: Junajpu and Xbalanque. Before he does so, he speaks:

My saliva, my spittle, is merely a sign that I have given to you. This head of mine no longer functions, for it is merely a skull that cannot work. The head of a truly great lord

has good flesh upon his face. But when he dies, the people become frightened because of his bones. In like manner, his son is like his saliva, his spittle. He is his essence. If his son becomes a lord, or a sage, or a master of speech, then nothing will have been lost. He will go on, and once more become complete. The face of the lord will not be extinguished nor will it be ruined. The warrior, the sage, the master of speech will remain in the form of his daughters and his sons (Christenson, 2007, p. 117).

Later on, in the Popol Vuh the second generation of Hero Twins is able to go back to Xibalba to defeat the Lords of Death who had killed their fathers. Dressed in rags and acting as ugly and poor orphans they are invited to Xibalba to perform their dances. In one of the dances they sacrificed and revived each other:

So then they sacrificed themselves, Hunahpu was sacrificed by Xbalanque. Each of his legs and arms was severed. His head was cut off and placed far away. His heart was dug out and placed on a leaf. Now all these lords of Xibalba were drunk at the sight, as Xbalanque went on dancing. Arise!" he said, and immediately he was brought back to life again. Now the lords rejoiced greatly. One Death and Seven Death rejoiced as if they were the ones doing it. They were so involved that it was as if they themselves were dancing (Christenson, 2007, p. 173).

Finally, the Lords of Death propose that the Heroes sacrifice and revive them as well in their dance. The twins trick them by sacrificing them and then refusing to revive them. Junajpu and Xbalanque finally rise up to heaven to become the moon and the sun. By doing so they give life to the maize plant, which is about to sprout at that moment (Christenson, 2007, pp. 177-178). While this history was written down in the Latin alphabet in the Early Colonial period, there is iconographic evidence that the Hero Twins were also related to the birth of the God Maize (Figure 119) (K. Taube, 1985, p. 175).

In summary, the dance marks a period of change and continuation. In order to have the rebirth

of the *milpa*, the dancers need to revisit the practices of their ancestors and to continue what was started before them. They are the generations to which their ancestors gave life, and it is their responsibility to transfer the knowledge of the ancestors to the generations that will follow. By symbolically sacrificing and resurrecting each other the dancers of the *baile de la culebra* guarantee the arrival of the rain and the rebirth of the maize and the survival of the community, while remembering the ancestors they guarantee the integration of the community.

SNAKE SYMBOLISM

The snake is an important element in the performance of the dance, and it is this element that gives its name to the dance. During the Momostecan dance, an impersonated woman dances constantly with a green snake in her hands. Furthermore, the dancing procession from the calvario to the church mimics, according to don Rigoberto, the sinuous movement of a snake. Therefore, in this section I discuss the perception of snakes in contemporary Highland Guatemala communities. Furthermore, I explore prehispanic representations of snakes that suggest a similar perception.

The Guatemalan Highlands and Mesoamerica

Both elders involved in the dance, don Rigoberto and don Leonso, agreed that the dance has a very strong connection to the day Kan. The characteristics of the day Kan (“Snake”) revolve around justice (see appendix B):

[Kan] is the nawal of the creation of man and woman. Kan is the right day to ask solutions for any kind of problems or necessities. This day carries the energy of any kind of justice, not only social justice but also biological and psychological justice. On a day Kan a person may ask to do justice for the unfair treatment by the energies and forces that surround life or when somebody is punished with sickness for no particular reason – See Appendix B.

The relationship between the dance and (social) justice has already been explored in the previous Chapter. On the one hand, the dance expresses a



Figure 119. 8th century ceramic plate: The Maize God emerges from the turtle-shaped earth flanked by the Hero Twins.

concern for social justice in the form of overcoming the colonial situation caused by the Spanish occupation; on the other hand, it deals with justice inasmuch as those who engage in immoral behavior are punished. One of the mnemonic words (see Chapter I and Appendix C) related to the day Kan is *ri k'ulel* (“the enemy”). Don José Angel Xeloj¹¹³ explained to me the relationship between Kan, justice, and enemies. If a person becomes ill or encounters problems in his life on a day Kan, it is likely that someone has been envying him or her. As he explains, Kan is the Day-Lord that whips, the day that hits. The Day-Lord Kan can be called upon for doing justice with its whip, whipping harm into the life of the one who has been caused the problems (the enemy). One of the ways of countering envy is by petitioning that snakes enter the body of the enemy, which will result in a sickness known as *kumatz* (“snake illness”: cramps in the body). In the dance, justice and envy are personified by the husband who whips those who envy him for having a beautiful wife and try to steal her from him.

The Day-Lord Kan shares the aspect of whipping with a specific snake from the Highlands of Guatemala, the *raxakan* (“green snake”). This green

113

Don José Angel Xeloj 24th of August 2016.

snake is very poisonous and fast and it whips with its tail. When it feels threatened it can jump meters ahead to attack and it can chase people. It usually only attacks people who have done something wrong or who have not performed a ceremony for the snakes. Other snakes such as the *kiaq b'elej* ("red nine", a red serpent) and the *mor kumatz* ("grey snake") have, in contrast, the tendency to leave when encountering a human¹¹⁴. According to don José Angel the *raxakan* whips humans who cross his path:

It is green and of this size... One and a half meter, two meter... They are like this thick¹¹⁵, or sometimes bigger. As there is a variety of them, there are small ones and there are big ones. Green, green, green like lime. And these are the ones that fly. "Shhhh", they go through the air. They jump up in the air and they move a long distance. And this is the one that whips! Yes, I have seen it several times!
– Don José Angel Xeloj, 17th of August 2016.

Snakes are in most Maya communities related to water (Mutz, 2010, pp. 34-36). The *raxakan* is the *nawal k'u' ja'* ("nawal of the water") and the *uchajinil* ("the guardian"); it is the one who watches over the water. Any spring, well, river, or lake¹¹⁶ has its *raxakan*:

[The raxakan] is the guiding spirit of the water. I belief the day Kan is the nawal of the water wells. There is still a lot that needs to be understood Pablo¹¹⁷, because it is said that the water is limox. And the snakes appear as guardians in the water wells. Not all of the snakes are in the wells: they can also be in the rivers, they can also be in the lakes, and in the springs. They can also be seen in a little stream, anywhere where there is water. But it is certain, that the Raxakan is the green snake [...] Someone told me that the day should not be Kan but K'an, which means "angry". This might be the case because snake is angry

114 The *kiaq b'elej* ("red on the road") is a red snake which is usually found on roads and paths. The *mor kumatz* ("grey snake") is a grey snake which is usually encountered on the *milpas* and in the natural waste of the *milpa*.

115 Don José Angel Xeloj shows the size of a tea cup.

116 The *raxakan* is not related to the sea.

117 The author.

when it bites someone – Don Rigoberto Itzep Chanchavac, 10th of August 2016

The *raxakan* is usually only found near or in the water. During the dry season they tend to retreat to the wells where they go make their *ollita* ("pot") in the earth and wait until the rainy season. They are more commonly seen during the rainy season, when there is a surplus of water. And they announce that rain is coming. From the first rain onwards they come out of their pots in the earth but especially during October there are many green snakes.

In Momostenango, snakes are important *nawales* and guardians of the town. Doña María Hernández told me that there are three types of guardian snakes in Momostenango: the snake of the wells, the snake of the rivers, and the snake of the warm waters. Each of them is responsible for what happens at these places. At Payaxu, the warm water springs of Momostenango, there is one specific spring which people call *el borbollón* because of the boiling hot water that emerges from the earth. Payaxu is a thermal bath, split in two sides by a river that runs through it, and it is used by the Momostecans to bathe. Because of its curative qualities the dancers of the *baile de la culebra* are sent there after the dance to recover. This spring is guarded by a snake referred to as *kasachik ri wolqot* ("the guardian of the hot springs"). According to oral narratives the snake has a head of at least 30 centimeters wide and lives on the other side of Payaxu, where there are three more wells (of which one especially for pregnant women and midwives), across the bridge that connects different wells on the two sides of the river. If someone were to kill the snake, the *borbollón* would disappear and there would be no more warm water. Similarly, in Rachoquel (a hamlet belonging to the village of Xequemeyá within the municipality of Momostenango) and the neighboring town of San Bartolo Aguas Calientes, oral narratives tell about big snakes of a few meters high that live within the territory of the villages and are the guardians of the water. These snakes should not be killed, because that would cause great harm to the towns.

Snakes that are the guardians of water is a widespread phenomenon (Peña Sánchez, 2013, p. 85). For example, the guardian of the volcano Santa

María near Quetzaltenango is also a giant snake, which lives inside the volcano together with the ancient K'iche' kings (Termer, 1957, p. 189). Until the mid-20th century, the most important Ajq'ijab' would climb to the top of the volcano to petition water on the 3rd of May (Termer, 1957, p. 150). Similarly, Charles Wisdom (1961, p. 439) notes that in Ch'orti' region serpents¹¹⁸ resemble the serpent deity of the rain, Chicchan. According to him, it is said that more serpents are seen after heavy rainfall than at other moments, and increase in rainfall is explained as a result of the appearance of snakes that come out of the earth to provoke the rain. In contrast, hardly any serpents are seen during the dry seasons as during this period the Chicchanes are living in the inside of the hills.

As the snake is the *nawal* of the water, it is common to perform a ceremony, petitioning that the water will not cause harm that year. Tedlock (1992, p. 111), for example, mentions that the day 9 Kan is a very important day on which people gather at a waterfall altar at “*nueve sillas, nueve mesas*”, an altar also known by the *chol q'ij* calendar date 9 Tz'i', in the neighboring town of San Francisco el Alto. According to don Rigoberto the day for performing the ceremony at this altar was also the day on which the *baile de la culebra* was originally performed.

In Chapter III it was already mentioned that water may be both life-giving and destructive. For example, the *uwaja'*, which is described by some people as a giant snake, might bring destruction as it runs down the rivers swollen up from the fresh rain. *Uwaja'* derives from *Uwachja'* (*u-* 3rd person pronoun; *wach*, “the face”; *ja'*, “water”, “his/her face of the water”). Although the *uwaja'* is often described as a snake, it can also take the form of a wild boar that puts its snout in the water and lifts it up, or a bull that comes running down the river with

its horns up. In other occasions the *uwaja'* manifests itself as an enormous human with its head being the face of the wave and its hands held up high, grabbing around it. When doña María Hernández was young she and her sister secretly went up the hill together to see the *uwaja'*:

The uwaja' is a nawal in the form of a person. A person is the nawal of the water. When it would come, we would not go out [of the house]. My father says it has its nawal. It grows because of the rain and the growing river becomes like this, look... It turns, it turns and turns. And it is purely black, black, black when it comes. But my father says that it has a face, it has a face of a person. Its hands go [up] like this... One day, when my father was not there, we went to see it. What would the creciente do? We were above it, we went to see it; together with my sister we went to see. And it is true what my father says. It is purely a huge growing river, it does like this... It has one hand like this, and an enormous face! Its hands [were] like this! And my father told me: “you went to see the growing river”. “No, no”, we told him. “No”, he said, “the neighbor has told me already. You were standing over there”. “Yes, dad, we came [to see it]. It is true what you say, it has a face at the front”. “Yes, it is its nawal”, said my father, “if you are standing close-by it will pull you in. Its spirit will pull you”. It pulls like this, with its hands. And it is big. Such a huge face! Huge, huge! – Doña María Hernández Ajanel, 17th of August 2016.

However, not everybody will be dragged away by the river. Those who live a life respectful of the surroundings and the ancestors are safe from the *uwaja'*. The *uwaja'* usually takes the lives only of those who are behaving improperly. In many cases the ones who are dragged away by the water are people who have desecrated or disturbed Maya altars in the community. For example, some people convert to evangelic churches and decide to remove the sacred altars on their property. As don José Angel explains, the *uwaja'* will do justice for the ancestors and the community:

118 The chicchanes are giant snakes that are the guardians of the water. Chicchan is also the Yucatec Maya name for the day that in the K'iche' region is known as Kan. The chicchanes of the earth are responsible for most earthly events. They can live in any well or bit of water (Wisdom, 1961, p. 445). During rainy season they live in the rivers and during dry season they live in the hills (Wisdom, 1961, p. 446). Just as in Momostenango, when the rainy season starts they rush down from the mountains, making the water swell up with their bodies. If many chicchanes join in the same river, the river will overflow and cause inundations; when a chicchan leaves the river to go to another one it will cause mudslides and landslides; when they leave from one watery place to the next they destroy everything on their way and provoke hurricanes (Wisdom, 1961, p. 446).

There is this case here, I don't remember in what year it happened, it was in the barrio Santa Ana. Somebody died. The daughter in law of the man who had died was evangelist. So she entered the house and she saw that there were [sacred] burning places on the territory of her father in law. So then the woman said "we are going to take all of these things out, they don't serve for anything, it is not worth anything". So she, her sister in law, her mother in law, and another young girl, took everything out. It were four women that went there. And one Sunday they went to throw away the tiles [of the burning places] in the ravine. It was a Sunday, around more or less this hour, when they came from the market and went to the river around eleven o'clock or at midday to wash clothes there. And they did not realize it... Here [in the center] it was possible to see how the sky, coming down from Pologua and from Xela, was turning black. Around twelve o'clock in the afternoon it was very well visible here, but they did not realize it... They went to the river to wash. And so the water came, like this! So they protected themselves in a cavity there in the river bend. They went into the corner to protect themselves against the water. And when the enormous creciente came it took them along. There were the four of them. It took along all four of them. One of them was dragged until here in Rachab'aj, the other was dragged until there at Kotzokul. I went to see them, [there were] so many people. That is how it went, it were four persons. We went from the house to the river, there is this river that passes through Pala Grande, that time we went... Exactly... The other one was dragged until there. It were four women. This was the consequence of taking away the altar. If one has an Maya altar on his terrain, then this is the place to petition that "I hope I will not be taken away by the creciente, by the storm, please protect me". That is it. But, as they did not like to see it, this happened – Don José Angel Xeloj, 17th of August 2016.

The arrival of rain in Momostenango is usually accompanied by clouds and thunderstorms. As discussed in Chapter III, the lightning that accompanies the arrival of rain is related to a special kind of snake: the dragon that is being hunted by San Miguel Arcangel. In Yucatan, San Miguel Arcangel is the leader of the Chaacs, and in the Ch'orti' area the Chaacs punish the water-snakes by throwing down lightning (Redfield & Villa Rojas, 1964 [1934], pp. 115-116; Wisdom, 1961, pp. 447-450). Similarly, in Momostenango, the lightning is caused by the reflection of the sword of San Miguel Arcangel who hunts down the dragon. Usually rain falls down during this hunt. The chase of the dragon by San Miguel Arcangel is thus related to rainfall.

Finally, as the guardians of water, snakes are important for the fertility of the *milpa* (Termer, 1976, p. 309). Without water the seeds will not sprout and the people will not have food to survive. Therefore, in many communities throughout Mesoamerica snakes are related to fertility and sexual activity (Peña Sánchez, 2013, p. 86; Wisdom, 1961, p. 439). As already mentioned, there are many explicit sexual gestures towards the woman carrying the snake in the dance. Although some of these sexual gestures might be an expression of machoism, it is also likely that, in the case of a ritual dance performed in a context of rebirth and the ancestors, that the sexual gestures relate to the fertility that ensures rebirth. This is, for example, quite explicit in the case when deceased dancers are resurrected through mimed sexual intercourse.

In summary, the symbolism of the snake refers to the ending of the dry season. Soon there will be rain and plenty of water, brought by the *raxakan*, the guardian of the water. Throughout the rainy season the dance is performed in different communities, so that the burden of the dance is distributed and shared throughout the Highlands. Each community dances respectfully with the snake, the symbol of water, fertility, and justice. The water will enable the new life that is petitioned through sacrifice. However, for those who do not follow the morals of the ancestors, the *raxakan*, might bring destruction with water. As I discussed in Chapter III, rain petitions and petitions for protection against water are not only important prior to the rainy season but also during it.



Figure 120. Snake dance on Lintel 4, Site R (Grube, 1992).

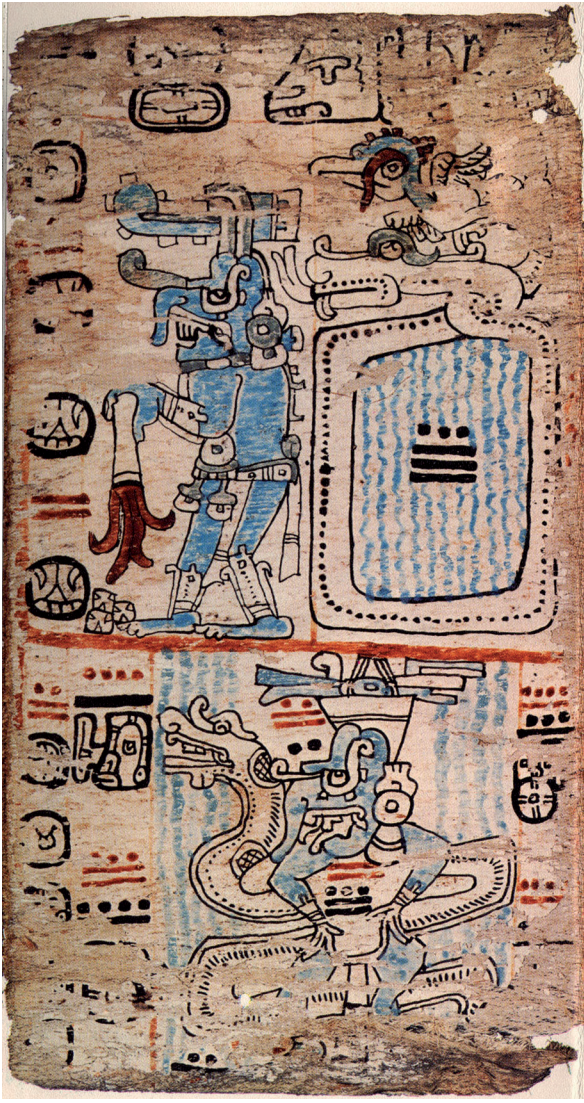


Figure 121. Madrid Codex page 4a: a snake encircles a watery place. Page 4b: a snake is wrapped around the rain-god.

The loss of traditions and the changes in the way that the ancestors did their rain petitions have caused much drought in the last years. The timing of the *baile de la culebra* shifts according to the community in the Highlands, so during the period of rain each community where the dance is performed contributes to the continuation of sacrifice for rain, fertility, protection, and growth. As such, the Highland communities share the burden of performing the dance during the entire rainy season. The slow disappearance of the *baile de la culebra* in several communities,

however, disrupts the continuation of rituals and coincides with the current climate change that has caused drought for several years. The loss of tradition accompanies the loss of ancient morals, which teach about, among other things, the respect for water. The loss of the teachings of the ancestors therefore coincides with climate change and other forms of destruction in the environment and disintegration of the community.

Serpent Symbolism in the Past

Snake symbolism in ancient Mesoamerica was related to liminality, engagement with the ancestors and water. As snake symbolism is widely present in prehispanic Mesoamerican iconography, I will restrict myself in the following discussion to those examples that speak to continuity with the *baile de la culebra*.

Although few, there are indications that snakes were also used in dance. On lintel 4 from a place called Site R, the ruler of Yaxchilan, Bird Jaguar IV, is depicted in a dancing position in front of a male underlord, both engaged in what appears to be a snake dance (Figure 120). Both persons hold snakes in their hands. According to Nikolai Grube, who identified the T516 “to dance” glyph on this stela, the translation of the text shows that on the date 9.16.16.12.2 11 Ik 15 Mac (15th of October 767) “they dance with the sky snake” (Grube, 1992, p. 212). Karl Taube (1989, pp. 371-372) has suggested that the Dumbarton Oaks panel from the Palenque area and a silhouette carving at the site of Telantunich also represent snake dances, and he relates them to the Highland Guatemala *baile de la culebra*. Although it is far from certain that the snake dance mentioned on this lintel is exactly the same as the *baile de la culebra* in the Highlands of Guatemala, Grube argues that “[b]eing the medium rather than the message, dances often were able to survive the Spanish conquest and Christianization, even though the original messages and situations in which they were performed had changed” (Grube, 1992, p. 201). Dance, as he points out, has thus the potential to survive by being adjusted to the new landscape. In order for a ritual dance to continue after the colonization it must have been important to remain relevant in this new landscape and just incorporate some of the changes, while maintaining those aspects that continued to be important. In the case of the *baile de la culebra* I propose that its relationship to agriculture, a temporal



Figure 122. Rain God Chaak and Mother Goddess Chak Chel pour rain down from vessels.

cycle that is difficult to colonize, made it to continue the cluster of symbols embedded in the dance and constituting the messages of the ritual.

Furthermore, postclassic Maya codices show a clear relation between blue snakes¹¹⁹ and the rain. On all the rain almanac of *Codex Madrid*, the snake plays an important role. For example, on page 4a, a snake stands next to the rain god Chaak (Figure 121). The snake encircles a rectangular box filled with blue lines. These representations are generally understood to be water springs or *cenotes*, natural underground caves filled with water (Vail, 2013, p. 29). Possibly the snake is here portrayed as the *nawal* or guardian of the bodies of water, as it is today in many Maya communities. In the lower section of the same page the snake is wrapped around the body of the Rain God while rain falls down. On page 30a (Figure 122), two deities closely related to rain, Chaak and Chak Chel, stand atop a snake while pouring rain down from vessels (Vail, 2013, p. 89). On *Madrid Codex* page 14b, the snake itself is pouring down rain from the sky (Figure 124) (Vail, 2013, p. 51). In the Dresden Codex we find similar iconographic representations of the snake and water. For example, on page 35b snakes are similarly depicted as the embodiment of places of water (Figure 123) (Grube, 2012, p. 138).

¹¹⁹ The word for blue and green is the same, *yax* 'grue'. Possibly the blue snake refers to a green water snake such as the *raxakan*.

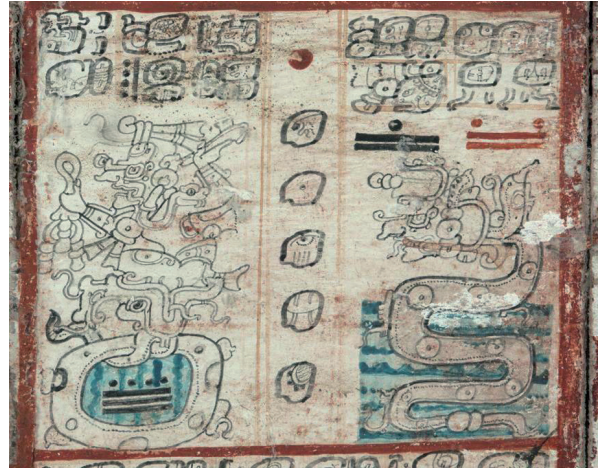


Figure 123. Dresden Codex page 35b. On the left side, the Rain God Chaak emerges out of the mouth of a snake, which is depicted as the embodiment of the cenote. On the right, a snake with the face of Chaak emerges out of the water.

THE GUARDIAN OF THE EARTH

The protagonist of the dance is Xinula. While the many Tz'ulab' are dressed similarly and take turns in being the husband, Xinula stands out for her gender, her dress and mask, the snake that she carries, and her role in the dance. Impersonated by an important Chuchqajaw, she is the one who directs the dance and is in charge of what will happen. Her connection to the snake is noticeable today, as she is the only one who carries it with her, but this relationship was more explicit in the past. After the ceremony performed to find the snake, as told by don José Angel and don Leonso, the snake shows itself to the *autores* some days or weeks (according to don Leonso 15 days to a month) before the dance begins and enters the *jícara* that the Xinula-impersonator holds in his hands. In the following days or weeks (depending on the narrative) the snake is kept at Xinula's house where it is fed with music and food. In Joyabaj the snakes that were caught before the dance were not guarded by the woman-impersonator, but by pregnant women (Mace, 1970, p. 105).

As documented by Franz Termer and confirmed by don Leonso, the *baile de la culebra* was comprised of two parts. Termer (1957, p. 219) writes that on the day of the event, the woman-impersonator would carry the jar with the snakes to the place where the dance would be performed and



Figure 124. Madrid Codex pages 13b, 14b, and 15b. A section of an almanac that continues for 7 pages. On each of the pages a blue snake related to rain crosses the almanac. On page 14b the snake seems to *turn around a vessel* from which water pours down.

there it would be placed next to the marimba where the snake enjoys the music. The jar is closed off with a piece of wool on the top. A description of the jar that is carried by the woman is given by a friend of Termer from Momostenango, don Abel de León¹²⁰:

The woman brings with her a jicara of around ten to twelve centimeters tall and eight centimeters wide at the widest point. Its extremes are more reduced in size (Termer, 1976, p. 308; translation mine).

On some occasions Xinula dances with each of the male dancers while holding the jar with the snake inside and in other performances of the dance the male dancers dance one by one with the jar alone¹²¹. After dancing with the snake, Xinula empties the jar on the ground while surrounded by other dancers and the

dancers dance one by one with the snakes. In another article, Termer (1976, p. 306) describes that Xinula is the last one to put the snake in her *huipil*. While the snake is underneath her clothes, all the dancers, but most noticeably the one dressed as a very unsightly and old dancer, make the most explicit sexual gestures around and over her. In Santa Cruz del Quiché, he relates that a ceramic jar that was placed next to the marimba during the first part of the dance was brought to the center of the scene by Xinula. Here too the jar was closed with a piece of wool cloth and after a small break she would empty the ceramic jar on the ground; a snake, roughly half a meter long, would come out of it (Termer, 1957, p. 217). Each of the dancers would then dance respectfully with the snake. When the event was over, the snakes would again be released outside the village (Termer, 1957, p. 219).

Xinula and her husband are present when the snake is called upon during the ceremonies and she is the one who watches over the snake at her home. She was the one who carried the snake to the dance and released it from the *jicara* or jar onto the floor. Mace and Termer state respectively that the snake was taken care of by pregnant women and that the explicit sexual gestures increased when the snake was underneath Xinula's *huipil*. Xinula goes along with the sexual

¹²⁰ Abel de León is also the only one who mentions the participation of a bull-dancer in the *baile de la culebra* (Termer, 1976, p. 308).

¹²¹ Dancing with a sacred object is one of the most important forms of showing respect. For example, the Chuchqajaw who performs the ritual in front of the tree of the *palo encebado*, dances with the tree during the ritual; on the arrival of the new *Mam* the organizers, husband and wife, dance together with the sacred food, the *tayuyos*; on the occasions that the *tz'ijolaj* is taken out in processions in Chichicastenango, the person who carries it has to dance continuously with the image.

invitations of the other dancers as she dances and runs away with them, which led Garret Cook (2000, p. 181) even to call her an “active lust woman”. The day on which the dance originally took place according to don Rigoberto, 9 Kan, is a day related to both the snake and to femininity, as all Ajq’ijab’ that I worked with agreed that the number 9 is a female day (see Chapter I). This seems to suggest that Xinula is the guardian or handler of the snakes.

Xinula is a K’iche’ derivation of the Spanish word *señora* (lady), but the fact that she has a white skin does not mean that she is thought of as Spanish. Namely, in the prayer recited during the dance in Rabinal that was documented by Mace (1967, pp. 135-139) the First Father and First Mother are invoked during the dance. Interestingly they are described as persons with white hair and white heads:

*They are on top of the summit, they are
below the great boulders,*

*They are at the shores of the great depths, at the
shores of the great foam,*

*Where the Mountain God – the Valley God
remains*

*They are inside the great road, the great place
of garbage*

Oh Our First Mother, Oh Our First Father

*They are from the seat of the sun, they are from
the seat of clarity (“whiteness”)*

They are our fathers and our mothers,

They are beings of white hair, they are beings of
white heads,

*They are beings of the yellow flower, they are
beings of the white flower,*

*They are beings of incense, they are beings of
candles*

*They gave thanks underneath the foot of Holy
Mary,*

They cried, they screamed,

*Where our father died, where they put one nail,
two nails, three nails*

(Mace, 1967, pp. 138-139; emphasis and
English translation mine)

The color white, *saq* in K’iche’, has many connotations. It refers, to wisdom and purity, to a stretched and straight plain, and it refers to correctness, the right way of doing things and being unspoiled. Possibly the foremothers and forefathers in the prayer documented by Mace are white as a metaphor of having some of these beautiful and precious characteristics. Their subsequent titles as “yellow flower” and “white flower” connects to the first mother and first father of the Lacandonos in Chiapas, who were two flowers *tšaknikte* (*Plumeria rubra*) and *šaknikte* (*Plumeria alba*) (Tozzer, 1907, p. 93).

However, it is also not uncommon to see that Divine Guardians, or *dueños*, in the Maya area have incorporated features that relate them to historical power relations (Siegel, 1941, p. 67; Vogt, 1970, p. 6; Wagley, 1949, pp. 55-60), similar to what was discussed in Chapter IV. Many mountains and volcanoes have a guardian. By earlier ethnographers, the Guardian of the Mountain is often described as a powerful and malevolent ladino with light hair and a white skin (Siegel, 1941, p. 67; Wagley, 1949, p. 56; Wilson, 1999, p. 57). In Santiago Chimaltenango, in the department of Huehuetenango, the guardians are protectors of the village, of one’s personal life, and of the wildlife on the mountain. Inside the mountains the guardians have enormous coffee plantations. They trick or test the morals of people in the surrounding communities by, for example, lending them money which they know that they cannot repay (Wagley, 1949, p. 60). Similarly to the Spanish hacienda owners, for centuries after their death they let the people work for them on their coffee plantations inside the volcanoes to pay off their debts (Wagley, 1949, p. 60). Just as the Spaniards, their appearance in villages announces death through sicknesses such as smallpox or typhus (Wagley, 1949, p. 60). In Zinacantan in Chiapas, the guardian of the earth is a ladino who rides a deer which he whips with a snake. “He also owns all of the waterholes on which the Zinacantecos depend for household and livestock water; he controls the lightning and the clouds that are believed to emerge from caves, rise up into the sky, and produce the needed rain for crops; and he controls all the products of the earth that the Zinacantecos use” (Vogt, 1970, p. 6). In the Q’eqchi’ region, where from 1885 until 1943 two-

thirds of the coffee plantations were in the hands of German migrants, the guardian of sacred places often has German characteristics (Wilson, 1999, pp. 35, 57). Therefore, similar to the discussion in Chapter IV, the characteristics of the guardians of sacred places are constantly updated and are therefore able to incorporate traces of historical experience.

Guardians can be both male and female and are generally neither purely benevolent nor malevolent. A narrative from Colotenango – a *Mam* speaking community in the department of Huehuetenango – tells that a long time ago humans did not have maize and were close to dying of starvation (Valladares, 1989, p. 28). The humans knew that near the town of Nebaj there was a mountain where the *dueña* (“divine owner”) had great amounts of maize plants growing on her fields. The humans, led to despair by hunger, first sent out the crow to steal maize seeds from Paxil¹²², and bring them to the humans. But the animal was discovered by the *dueña*. Second, the *zompopo* (flying ant) was sent. He succeeded, and the humans could grow their own corn from that moment on. But the *dueña* found out and she grabbed the *zompopo* furiously, pinched him in the center of his body, and told him that she knew that he had helped the people. Once she saw the hungry humans, however, her mother instinct grew and she decided to let the humans have their *milpas* and that she would take care of them like a mother; she became K'txú, “Our Mother” (Valladares, 1989, p. 29). The *zompopo*, who still has the pinched middle body after the *dueña* grabbed him, became the announcer of the planting period ever since. The evenings before the first heavy rain showers the *zompopos* fly around in the houses, advising the people to prepare for the planting season (see Chapter III). The *dueña* continues to live at this mountain today: her name is Paxil and she is the embodiment of the mountain top named Paxil which has several deep cracks where the maize was once stored (Valladares, 1989, p. 30). Her husband is a rocky mountain near Chimiche known by the name of Sakwo'j or *Peña blanca* (“white peak”). Today, Paxil is an important place to perform rituals before the planting season and for the petition of rain (Valladares, 1989, pp. 45-46).

122 Paxil is also the place, mentioned in the Popol Vuh, where the first maize comes from. Paxil means “broken, split, or cleft” and refers to the split mountain where the maize was first stored (Christenson, 2007, p. 181).

The knowledge that the earth and the corn is the mother of the people is shared across a large area (Siegel, 1941, p. 66). It teaches that the earth gives life to everything around us. As long as it can be remembered in the indigenous communities of the Western Highlands, the earth takes care of human beings like a mother. She nurtures them with her crops that grow on the *milpas* (the agricultural fields) and watches over them for protection¹²³:

Some of the pregnant mothers of Concepción Chiquirichapa go to the fields to leave the lunch for their husbands. When they see that the maize has grown, they take the leaves of the maize plant, place it on their stomach and talk to the maize. “Mother”, they say, “I am happy to see you and to know that the sacred rain and sun are making you grow. We ask you to provide enough food this year for this baby, please, we want more mazorcas, we want more maize, we want you to be in good health. Because now you have another commitment which you will have to nourish” they say to the maize. So the little children are already listening in the belly of their mothers and they are connecting it with the maize – Don José Arturo Cabrera Aguilar, 9th of May 2014.

In the performance of the *baile de la culebra* in Rabinal, the female protagonist in the dance is said to be the mother of the male dancers. However, she is probably not the literal mother of the dancers. I suggest that the female protagonist in the *baile de la culebra* is possibly the mother in the sense of a *dueña*, a sacred guardian, who takes care of the humans like a mother who takes care of her children. She is in control of the dance, and she decides about fertility, death, water and rebirth. The Tz'ulab' sacrifice themselves to be with her, so that she gives life to the corn. The snake in her hand is the guardian of the water with which she controls rain and rivers. Calling the snake, keeping it in her house or in the house of pregnant women, and feeding it might be the proper preparation of the rain. Finally, when she pours out the snake from the *jícara* or jar during the

123 A similar relationship with the earth extends well into the region of Central Mexico (see Macuil Martínez, 2015; Reyes García & Christensen, 1976, p. 57).

dance, she releases the water, just like in the region of Rabinal where seven mountain angels release the water and clouds from their golden gourds (Mace, 1970, pp. 21-22). The timing of the dance coincides in Momostenango with the arrival of the rain while in other regions it continues into the rainy season. The performance of the dance does indeed intensify in mid-August when it takes place in Pologua, San Bartolo Aguas Calientes and Santa Cruz Quiché. This is probably related to the ending of the *canícula* and the fear for persistent drought (see Chapter III): the return of the water for the second part of the rainy season is crucial for a successful harvest. The penitence and sacrifice that lies at the heart of the *baile de la culebra* is likely performed for Xinula, the First Mother, to ask her for abundance through fertilization and water and protection against storms, floods, animals, and wind; to take care of the people that she watches over as a mother. The dance emphasizes that the earth is our mother, that we depend on her, and that without her we cannot live. Possibly her husband, the *ladino* who whips the Tz'ulab' for their immoral behavior, is the male dueño of the earth. His characteristics of plantation owner or rich Spaniard, as discussed in the previous chapter, seem to coincide with the descriptions of the male *dueños* that I just briefly mentioned. Being the husband of the Xinula, it is likely that he is the First Father.

THE PREHISPANIC COMPLEX OF MOTHER GODDESSES

Xinula, and her commemoration as it is performed in the *baile de la culebra*, has its roots in prehispanic Mesoamerica¹²⁴. The transformative aspect of the Mesoamerican deities, who share iconographic attributes of each other on different occasions, seems to suggest that there was a complex of gods and goddesses related to the earth (K. Taube, 1992, p. 105). The Mesoamerican mother goddess complex includes several female deities, among which Ciuacoatl, Tlazolteotl, Xilonen, and Chicomecoatl in late postclassic Central Mexico, Chak Chel and Ixchel in postclassic Yucatan, and Xmukane in the

colonial Highlands of Guatemala (Christenson, 2007, p. 54; Jansen et al., 1991, p. 208; K. Taube, 1992; J. E. S. Thompson, 1960, p. 83). These are different manifestations of the divine female force that controls life, death and rebirth (Pinkola Estés, 2008, pp. 70-127). These Mother Goddesses share a relationship to death, life and rebirth, and fertility. In prehispanic iconography they often appear as the patronesses of female activities such as weaving and giving birth.

Central Mexico

In Central Mexico, for example, a female deity related to the earth was *Chicomecoatl*, the patroness of tender maize plants. In Central Mexican iconography she is often depicted as a woman with young maize cobs in her hand. Her name *Chicomecoatl* is a calendar day, Seven Snake, which in the K'iche' calendar would be 7 Kan. She played a central role in the feast of *Ochpaniztli*, dedicated to *Tlazolteotl* ("Our Grandmother") who was the patroness of weavers, of sexuality, of the earth and of ritual cleaning (Jansen et al., 1991, pp. 209-214). This feast took place at the end of the agricultural cycle, to thank the mother



Figure 125. The celebration of *Ochpaniztli*: *Chicomecoatl* stands at the top of a pyramid with priests on both sides. Around her a fertility rite takes place as men hold imitation penises made from paper in front of their genitals. From her headdress new plants sprout.

¹²⁴ I have recently discussed the complex of Mother Goddesses before in the book chapter *Madre Milpa, Modified Maize, and More: Conflict and transnational colonialism in the Highlands of Guatemala* (Van den Akker, 2017, 137-147).

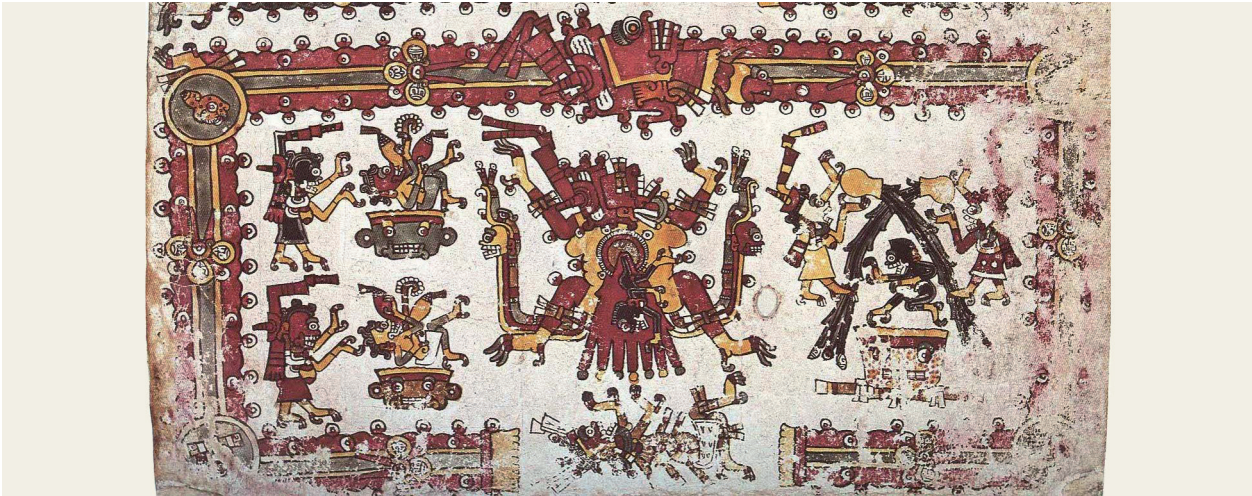


Figure 126. Codex Borgia page 31b: Inside the temple of the Aztec Goddess Ciuacoatl. The goddess sits in the position of giving birth and gives life to a black being through an act of bloodletting (Jansen & Pérez Jiménez, 2017, 462-466). On the right side, this being is washed by Ciuacoatl priests with skull heads and on the left side crops are sprouting from women lying in supine position, who were dedicated to the Goddess (Anders, Jansen, & Reyes García, 1993, pp. 197-199).

of the earth and the people for the harvest. During her feast, depicted in detail on page 30 of the early colonial Central Mexican Codex Borbonicus, a high-ranking male priest becomes the female earth by symbolically wearing the skin of a woman (Figure 125)¹²⁵. She can be seen standing at the top of a temple in the center of the page: from the elaborate headdress new maize plants and maize cobs sprout while in her hands she also carries maize cobs¹²⁶. She is the new skin of the earth, the new life that sprouts from the earth evidenced by the full grown agricultural fields at the time of her celebration (Jansen et al., 1991, p. 211).

Another Central Mexican Mother Goddess related to snakes is known by the Nahuatl name *Ciuacoatl*, meaning “Lady Snake” whose day of commemoration was 13 Quauhtli (“13 Eagle”; 13 Tz’ikin in the K’iche’ calendar) (J. E. S. Thompson, 1960, p. 83). In the Mixtec region, which neighbors the Nahuatl region, this same goddess was known by her calendric name 9 Grass (9 E’ in the K’iche’

calendar). This Goddess was related to earth, fertility, death and (child-)birth, and ancestor communication (Figure 126). She is usually characterized by the snake in her hair or headdress (Anders et al., 1991, p. 41; Jansen & Perez Jimenez, 2017, 364-375). Her jaguar paws symbolize her power and strength. She often has an unfleshed lower jaw, which indicates her special characteristic of ancestor communication, and wears a skirt with crossed bones depicted on it, which relates her to death.

In Figure 127, the Goddess Lady 9 Grass, the Mixtec version of Ciuacoatl, sits in front of her skull-and-bones temple, the place for ancestors’ veneration. This temple is similar to *Tz’aqb’al b’aaq*, the ossuary at the cemetery of Momostenango: both are built on top of bones and are therefore good places for ancestor communication. The Goddess advises Lady 6 Monkey on her marriage, after which the latter makes offerings of precious objects. An important aspect of the ritual is a dance in which Ciuacoatl, Lady 6 Monkey, and other (divine) protagonists dance on the rhythm of the *teponaztli* in the center of the upper page. This is followed by a ritual bath. Similarly, in the *baile de la culebra* we see that the dance is preceded and ended by rituals in which offerings are made and the dancers go to the thermal baths in the days that follow the dance. In the codex Añute, the ceremonies are performed as a preparation

¹²⁵ Interestingly, just as that *Ochpaniztli* takes places one *veintena* (20 days) after the feast of Xocotl uetzi in which the *palo encebado* plays a crucial role, the *baile de la culebra* on Holy Saturday takes place one *veintena* after the 4th Friday of Lent on which the *palo encebado* was organized.

¹²⁶ In Momostenango the dancers used to decorate themselves with fruits and vegetables (Termer, 1957, p. 219) just as Goddesses do in the codex Borbonicus.

for a marriage. However, the similarities in the ritual pattern in the Central Mexican codex and the *baile de la culebra* shows that the sequence of ritual activities in the *baile de la culebra* was not unfamiliar in prehispanic Mesoamerica. Furthermore, similar to Chuchqajaw don Leonso who impersonated Xinula, in the Aztec empire Ciacoatl was impersonated by the most important priest of the Aztec Empire (and second commander-in-chief):

And this is how he entered the city on another day with the celebrations and ceremonies mentioned in the other chapters, except for that before entering the city on this day the King Motecuhzoma painted his entire body in yellow polish which they call axin and he put his earspools and nose and mouth decorations. And the prince, his cousin, dressed in the clothes of the goddess Ciacoatl, which were female clothes, which they called “the clothes of the eagle”. This is how they entered the city and arrived to the temple where Motecuhzuma did his usual blood sacrifice of his ears, his flesh, and his shin and he gave thanks to the god Huitzilopochtli for the favor of victory (Duran, 1967, Historia..., Tomo I, Chapter LVI; translation and emphasis mine).

The Maya Region

The Lowland Maya parallel of the Central Mexican Mother Goddess complex includes the postclassic goddesses that have been identified in the academic literature as Goddess O and Goddess I (K. Taube, 1992, p. 103; J. E. S. Thompson, 1960, p. 83). While Schellhas (1904, p. 38) and Zimmermann (1956, p. plate 7) originally identified the two deities as separate female goddesses, Thompson (1960, p. 83) suggested that the two are the younger and the elder aspect of the same motherly creative force. Research on the Mother Goddess in the prehispanic and colonial Highland Guatemala is still very scarce. Allen Christenson (2007, pp. 54-55) and Dennis Tedlock (1996, p. 32) argue, however, that the grandmother Xmukane is likely the K'iche' variant of the Mesoamerican Mother Goddess. Milbrath (1999, p. 138) goes a step further and suggests that Xmukane and Lady Ixkik' are respectively the aged and the younger aspects of the Mother Goddess.



Figure 127. Codex Añute/Selden p. 7-8, reading sequence is from the lower right corner towards the left and then from the upper left corner towards the right.

When the Goddess appears in the young form in precolonial Lowland Maya depictions, scholars usually call her Ixchel, after the name that Diego de Landa documented in Yucatan (De Landa, 1966, p. 58). There is no clear indication, however, that this name was also in use in the Classic or Postclassic periods (K. Taube, 1992, p. 64). Diego de Landa says that she is the patron of medicine and childbirth, and that during the month of Uo, which was dedicated to the first diviner and father God Izamná and the mother Goddess Ixchel the dance *chan-tun-yab* (“snake-stone-?”) would be organized especially for Ixchel (De Landa, 1966, pp. 58, 93). Goddess O is the aged variant of Goddess I. Her name is often written with the T109 prefix *chak*, which means “great” or “red” followed by the glyph *chel*, meaning “end” or “rainbow” (K. Taube, 1992, pp. 99-101). Usually written as T109.145:612, her name reads *Chak Chel* (Kelley, 1976, p. 69; J. E. S. Thompson, 1960, p. 83) which probably relates to the goddesses *Chakal Ixchel* and *Zacal Ixchel* that are mentioned in the 16th-century Ritual of the Bacabs (Roys, 1965, pp. 53-54; K. Taube, 1992, p. 99).

The main glyph of Ixchel's (or Goddess I's) personal name is the head of a young or aged female with a *caban* curl (glyph for “earth”) placed on her temple. The *caban* sign also appears in De Landa's syllabary in combination with the sound for *u*, which stands for the moon (De Landa, 1966, Chapter XLI; Milbrath, 1999, p. 138). Usually her name glyph carries the prefix *sak* (“white”) (K. Taube, 1992, p. 64). The *sak* sign in her postclassic name has generally been interpreted as a reference to the whiteness of the moon (Milbrath, 1999, p. 140; K.



Figure 128. Madrid Codex page 30. Upper section: The Rain God and Chak Chel pour rain out of a vessel while standing on a snake. Lower section: Water emerges from the body of Chak Chel.

Taube, 1992, p. 68; J. E. S. Thompson, 1960, p. 83). However, in the K'iche' Highlands there are many connotations to the word *saq*, as, for example, the stretched earth. An aldea of the K'iche' town Cantel, for example, is called Pa Sak, meaning "place of the stretched earth", a metaphor for the long valley in which the aldea lies. This shows that *saq* does not necessarily need to refer to the white moon. While Selser (1904, pp. 50-52) and Thompson (1972, pp.

47-48) relate the Goddesses to the moon, because the young Goddess is occasionally portrayed seated in the shape of the moon, holding a rabbit, there is no consensus about the relationship between the moon and the Goddesses in the Classic period. As Taube (1992, p. 64) points out, the goddess should only be identified as Moon Goddesses when she is portrayed with clear attributes that indicate such a relationship.

Apart from the aged face and other characteristics of an elderly age, such as the wrinkled body, humpback, hanging breasts, and missing teeth, the young and old Goddesses have the same attributes. Therefore, I follow Thompson (1960, p. 83) who suggested that these Goddesses are different aspects of the same motherly creative force. In the codices, the Mother Goddess has often claws and fangs and wears a skirt with crossed bones and other death-aspects, while in her hair she wears a snake. On some occasions the snake is not in her hair but she carries the snake in a belt around her waist. Sometimes her body is skeletonized, indicating her relationship with death. She often has two cotton spindles in her hair and in the codices she is often portrayed together with male gods (Milbrath, 1999, p. 140). She is often portrayed while weaving.

Thompson (1960, p. 83) notes that the Young and Aged Mother Goddesses are patrons of the *chol q'ij* day Men of the Classic period Yucatec calendar (that would be Tz'ikin in the K'iche' calendar). The Mother Goddesses are patrons of weaving, birth, death, fertility, medicine and sexuality (Miller & Taube, 1997, pp. 60-61; Manning, 1993, 61-62; K. Taube, 1992, p. 101; J. E. S. Thompson, 1960, p. 83). They are furthermore strongly related to the agricultural cycle, the soil and the crops, and to the water that brings the rebirth of the plants. They are often depicted in the vicinity of water in the form of a *cenote* or the rain and accompanied by the God of Rain, Chaac or God B. Occasionally they are depicted in the younger aspect, carrying young creatures as mothers on their back. One explicit shared characteristic is the snake, whose symbolism I have discussed in a previous part of this chapter.

In some depictions in the Maya codices water flows from the body of the Mother Goddess and in other depictions she turns a vessel with water over,

creating a flow of rain (Figure 128 and Figure 129). For example, on the famous page 74 of the Dresden codex, the Goddess Chak Chel is hanging from a stream of water that originates out of a band that is a stylized depiction of the sky¹²⁷. The sky band ends on the left in the shape of a snake-like reptilian with front legs, from whose mouth water runs down. In the lower part God L crawls while holding an *atlatl* and arrows in his hand. Chak Chel turns the vessel that she holds in her hands around and water pours down, an event that is related to day 4 Eb every fifth year (Grube, 2012, p. 174).

The act of pouring water down and creating rain calls to mind the part in the *baile de la culebra* in which Xinula would pour the snake out of the *jícara*. As discussed previously, the snake is currently the patron of the water and the dance coincides with the rainy season, which in its arrival appears as appears as the *uwaja'* (the life giving – life destroying force of water). This leads me to suggest that the pouring of the snake in the *baile de la culebra* may represent a similar act as the scene that can be seen on page 74 of the Dresden codex, and that is represented on several other pages of the Madrid and Dresden codices. If so, the reading of Dresden Codex page 74 should actually be more nuanced than that it is interpreted today. Whereas most interpretations consider this page as announcing a destructive flood (Förstemann, 1906, p. 266; Grube, 2012, p. 174; K. Taube, 1992, p. 101), it might, at the same time, suggest that the rainy season will bring an abundance of water and food security.

THE SNAKE LADY VASES

Looper (2009, p. 219) and Taube (1989, p. 372) have suggested a relationship between the *baile de la culebra* and depictions on a series of painted vases from the classic Maya area (K0719, K1079, K1081, K1198, K1382, K1813, K3202, K3702, K3716, K4485, K5164, K5230, K5862, K6754, K7838). On all of these vessels, also known as the Snake Lady vases, a snake is peacefully wrapped around the body of a young lady¹²⁸. The head of



Figure 129. Dresden codex page 74: Chak Chel pours water down from a vessel while hanging from the sky.

¹²⁷ I have recently discussed an iconographic comparison of page 74 in the Dresden Codex and the *baile de la culebra* elsewhere (Van den Akker, 2018, accepted).

¹²⁸ The Snake Lady vases form part of a distinct

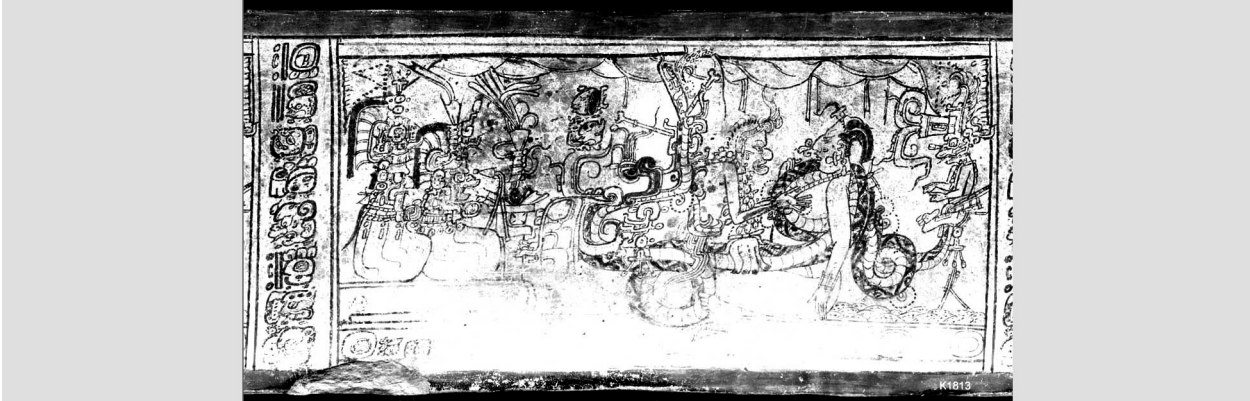


Figure 130. Kerr vase K1813: an old man emerging from the mouth of a serpent touches the breasts of a young lady. The scene appears to occur inside a palace in front of god figures wrapped in bundles.

the snake is twisted towards the woman and out of the mouth emerges an old person that approaches the woman and touches her in a sexual manner¹²⁹ (Figure 130 and Figure 131). The Old Man shows characteristics of both God N and God K (Milbrath, 1999, p. 153; Robicsek & Hales, 1981, p. 107). In most of the vessels, the snake emerges out of the leg of K'awil, also known as God K, who has elements of several gods incorporated in his figure. It is very likely that the Old God, similar to the depictions of the Mother Goddess, is one of the many aspects of the Old Father Gods (Adams, 1971, p. 113; Robicsek & Hales, 1981, p. 113; J. E. S. Thompson, 1970).

The woman has been interpreted by Susan Milbrath (1999, p. 153) as a version of the Mother Goddesses. On the majority of the vessels, the event takes place in front two bundled Gods (either the God of Self-Sacrifice, the Patron of the Month Pax, G7 of

the nine Lords of the Night or Chaahk) who sit at the top of a platform (Lopes, 2005, p. 1; Robicsek & Hales, 1981, p. 110). The scenes seem to take place at a palace or place related to the earth, as on several vases *caban* ("earth") signs, the same as we find on postclassic Mother Goddesses, appear. Although the texts have not yet been completely translated, they usually mention a date, a birth event, and the names of the gods involved (Lopes, 2005).

The general interpretation of the scene on these vessels – which is still far from conclusive – is that the depiction shows the birth of Gods (Lopes, 2005; Milbrath, 1999, p. 153; Robicsek & Hales, 1981, p. 107; K. Taube, 1994, p. 664). The apparent sexual interaction between the elderly god, that emerges from the mouth of the bearded snake, and the lady is interpreted as a scene of fertility. The presence of both the young aspect as the old aspect of the same male god suggests some form of ancestor communication and rebirth (Robicsek & Hales, 1981, pp. 107-113).

In the discussion of the vases that show the Snake Lady, the vase K2772 is never mentioned. This vase has a similar configuration as the previously discussed vases, but has also striking differences. In Figure 132 we see the image depicted on vase K2772. On the left side stands the Rain God Chaak with elements of God K'awil, holding an axe in his hand. His foot transforms into a snake that is wrapped around a structure that is decorated with mirrors and earth-glyphs, the same *caban* glyphs ("earth") that are sometimes found on the Mother Goddesses (K. Taube, 1992, p. 64) and enters the building through

group of Maya artefacts known as the codex-style ceramics – named after the postclassic Maya codices because of their stylistic similarity (Coe, 1973, pp. 91-103; 1978, pp. 1-51; Coe & Kerr, 1982, pp. 102-107; Robicsek & Hales, 1981). Interpretations of the iconography and epigraphy displayed on these ceramics has been hindered due to the lack of contextual knowledge as most of them have been excavated by looters (Hansen, Bishop, & Fahsen, 1991, pp. 225-227). These vases have been produced in the Late Classic period (A.D. 550-850) in the northern Petén region and southern region of Campeche. Especially the sites of Nakbé, El Mirador, and Calakmul seem to have been main players in the production and distribution of these types of vessels (Hansen et al., 1991; Reents & Bishop, 1987). The iconography and epigraphy of the vases, while not yet completely deciphered, contain both mythological and dynastic information (Martin, 1997, pp. 847-867).

¹²⁹ It has been suggested that the couple figurines from Jaina might be showing the same goddess together with an elderly god N (Milbrath, 1999, p. 153; K. Taube, 1989, p. 372). Concluding evidence is however missing.

a cleft in the roof. The head of the snake is turned towards the wall of the structure and from its mouth emerges the head of the Old God who approaches and touches the wall exactly like he does with the Lady in the previously discussed vessels.

The Lady is now represented in threefold, sitting on a platform on the right looking towards the knelt God of Sacrifice and another God, who appear seated and not as bundles, below her. The earth-glyphs surrounding them indicate that they are inside (a place dedicated to) the earth. The crack in the roof through which the snake enters might represent, as Taube (1992, pp. 77-78) has suggested in other cases, the rebirth of the maize. The configuration of the Chaak-K'awil, the snake, and the old man mirrors exactly that of the earlier discussed vessels. Whereas in those depictions the old god was sexually approaching a woman, he touches the earth-structure in K2772 in a similar way. This might suggest that



Figure 131. Kerr vase K5164: The young lady has a snake wrapped around her half naked body and is being approached by an old man that emerges from the mouth of the snake.

the woman, around which the snake is draped in the above discussed vases, is the incarnation of the earth-structure; possibly she is the guardian of the earth. The depiction on K2772 shows her seated in threefold in her place of earth, which is likely to be a similar concept as Paxil, the split mountain top mentioned in the colonial Popol Vuh (Christenson, 2007, p. 181) and in the oral narrative documented in the contemporary *Mam* community of Colotenango (Valladares, 1989, p. 28).

In both the vessels and the dance, the woman has a evident relationship with the snake and she is intimately approached by a(n elderly) man. In both cases the event takes place in front of the ancestral deities, and is related to earth and water. Rebirth seems to be both the topic of the vessels as of the *baile de la culebra*. Dr. Alessia Frassani, working in the Mazatec region, pointed out to me (personal communication, 2017) that the medium for depicting the Snake Lady should be included in the analysis. The fact that the medium is a vessel, which in the *baile de la culebra* was used for storing the snake, fits the general cluster of symbols found in the *baile de la culebra*.

As Looper (2009, p. 221) has pointed out, the coincidence in symbolic representations in the Snake Lady vessels and the contemporary *baile de la culebra* is not necessarily a case of direct inheritance. One clear argument for this is the difference in medium: one transfers the message through ritual dance and the other transfers it through iconography on a vessel that was likely used in

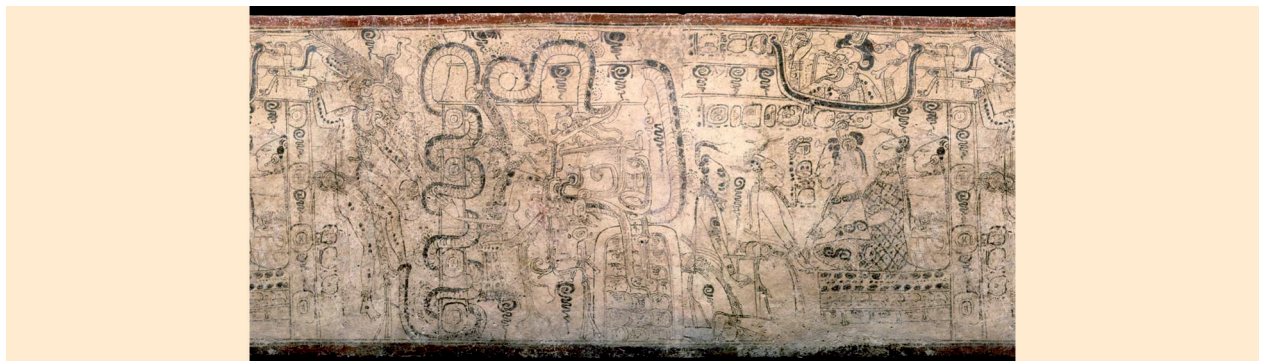


Figure 132. Vase K2772. At the left: the old man emerging from the mouth of the snake approaches an earth structure in the same way as how he approaches the woman in other vases. At the right: the young woman is depicted in three fold and the two bundle gods that appear on other Snake Lady vessels appear here in their anthropomorphic form.

ritual contexts. However, similarity in symbols and their configuration suggests that within a cultural system, similar underlying canonical messages are transmitted. I suggest that the *baile de la culebra* shows the effortful continuation of a concern or a cultural value, by clustering symbols that make up the canonical message transmitted in an act or performance. The concern for rebirth, fertility, and rain has always been present in Maya society, as in any other agricultural society, which makes it likely that this concern has always been expressed through different practices (e.g. reading, telling narratives, dance, and ritual) which use a specific cluster of symbols. The fact that today the *baile de la culebra* is performed in Highland Guatemala communities, shows that respect for the environment is recognized by the organizers as an important cultural value that contributes to the rebirth of the *milpa* and the survival of the human being.

LADY 9 KAN

Each of the prehispanic Mother Goddesses that I have discussed above was related to a specific day in the 260-day count. The day of the Nahua goddess of the young maize cobs, Chicomecoatl, was the day 7 Snake in the Nahua calendar. The day of the Nahua goddess related to the ancestors, Ciuacoatl, was 13 Eagle in the Nahua calendar. In the Mixtec variant, the day of this goddess in the Mixtec calendar was 9 Grass. The day of the Yucatec Mother goddesses Ixchel and Chak Chel in the postclassic Yucatec calendar was Men (the exact Day-Number is, to my knowledge, not certain). Don Leonso, the eldest organizer of the *baile de la culebra*, told me that the actual day for performing the dance was the *chol q'ij* day Kan (see Chapter IV). Don Rigoberto added to this that the specific day in the *chol q'ij* was the day 9 Kan (9 Snake). As I discussed in Chapter I, the number 9 of the *chol q'ij* is a feminine number. As such the date 9 Kan is a female aspect of the day Snake.

Comparing the attributes and characteristics of Xinula with those present in the complex of Mother Goddesses in early colonial and precolonial Mesoamerica, and taking into consideration that these were impersonated during important ceremonies by highly respected male priests, I suggest that Xinula

in the *baile de la culebra* is possibly a local variant of a Mother Goddess. Similar to the above discussed Mother Goddesses, who were each related to specific days in the Mesoamerican calendar, Xinula seems to be related to the day 9 Kan. Taking the Nahua Chicomecoatl (Lady 7 Snake) and the Mixtec Lady 9 Grass as examples, I propose to identify Xinula (“señora”) as Lady 9 Kan.

The *chol q'ij* day 9 Kan is not fixed in the astronomical calendar and thus shifts in relation to the solar year. However, as I discussed in Chapter I and as Ruth Bunzel (1952, p. 301) has pointed out before, specific *chol q'ij* dates are also celebrated at specific moments in the Gregorian solar calendar. For example, the day 8 Q'anil, the day of the *milpa* and the day to bless the seeds, is not fixed in the solar calendar. Therefore, the blessing of the seeds, which has to be done before sowing, takes place in Momostenango on another adequate day Q'anil prior to planting, which at that moment substitutes the day 8 Q'anil. Later (or earlier) in the year when the day 8 Q'anil arrives, ceremonies for the blessing of the *milpa* and the seeds are again performed at the *winel* by the ritual specialists of the lineage.

Similarly, I propose that the day 9 Kan is a day to petition water and fertility. While the day 9 Kan may occur during the dry season, the need for water and fertility is most relevant during the rainy season and the period just prior to it when the *milpa* is being prepared. I suggest therefore that the *baile de la culebra*, as a ceremony for water and fertility, is fixed in the rainy season and the period of the preparation of the *milpa*. The performance of the *baile de la culebra* in different communities in the Highlands of Guatemala takes place on distinct moments in the rainy season. These moments, as I have discussed in Chapter III, coincide with important stages in the agricultural, meteorological and solar cycle. These stages have, in colonial sources, been documented as the names of the *veintena* periods, which, as a product of synergy, are now celebrated on Christian Holidays (see Chapter III). In contrast to Mace (1967, p. 122) and Hutcheson (2009, p. 883), who respectively worked in Rabinal and Joyabaj, and argue that the *baile de la culebra* is a seasonally displaced fertility rite, I argue that the dance is purposefully performed on these significant moments in the cycle of the *milpa*.

As discussed in Chapter III, one of the reasons that droughts are currently experienced in the Highlands of Guatemala is the lack of continuation in the petition for water. Rain petitions in Momostenango include at least five ceremonies, each at a distinct place. However, as soon as the rain has arrived, giving thanks and petitioning should not be stopped as the rain needs to continue falling until the beginning of November. Furthermore, Chapter I shows that there is no central place where ceremonies are performed in the cycle of the *trecenas*: ceremonies have to be conducted at four different places, spread over the territory of Momostenango. Similarly, the ceremony for the *Mam*, the *alcalde* of the New Year, described in Chapter II, is performed each year at a different altar in one of the four cardinal directions of the town (which repeats after a four year period).

The organization and performance of the *baile de la culebra* is a heavy burden, both financially and physically (the whipping and dancing is extremely exhausting), and cannot be performed every month by each separate community throughout the Highlands of Guatemala. I propose therefore that, similar to the other aforementioned cycles, each individual performance of the *baile de la culebra* is a contribution to the shared burden to continue the petition for rain and fertility throughout the rainy season, which is carried by several communities in the Highlands of Guatemala. Thus, over time the dance moves through different communities. As discussed in Chapter IV, the average period for performing the *baile de la culebra* in the Highlands encompasses 227 days – close to a complete *chol q'ij* cycle – as it starts around the equinox of March and finishes on the 1st of November, at the end of the dry season. This means that it is quite likely that the day 9 Kan will fall somewhere within this period.

In summary, I suggest that the *baile de la culebra* is a burden that is carried by several Highland communities. Central to this dance stands Lady 9 Kan, a mother goddess related to earth, life, death and water. I argue that the dance is not to be performed at one singular moment in time. Instead the dance has to take place at different important moments in the agricultural cycle, over a period that encompasses a complete *chol q'ij* cycle, to give a constant continuity to the petition for water and fertility. As such, the *baile de la culebra* binds

together the communities of the Highlands of Guatemala through the intersection of the Christian Calendar, the *chol q'ij*, and the *junab' q'ij*.

