

Bleeding Earth:
Volcanoes as the Prototypical Mountains in Mayan Cosmological Past

Lyndon DeSalvo
03/07/2008
Jay Levi
SOAN 295

Abstract

My project focuses on the importance of mountains in Mayan cosmological past and to what extent they are still recognized as sacred land forms in the present day. I explain why Mayans today believe mountains to be important, and include a few myths from the K'iche region that demonstrate the spiritual power of mountains, while also explaining about the altars found on the vast majority of mountains in Mayan areas. The second part of my paper aims to prove that in Mayan history, volcanoes were seen as the prototypical mountains; however, a general loss in Mayan culture has led to the disappearance of this idea. Therefore, the majority of the second part is through book research and ancient artwork with the occasional aid from my field research. In conclusion, the overall fading of Mayan culture since colonization has contributed to the loss of distinction between mountains and volcanoes in Mayan cosmology today.

Introduction

“En seguida Jesús hizo a sus discípulos entrar en la barca e ir delante de él a Betsaidas, en la otra ribera, entre tanto que él despedía a la multitud,” he said, his voice echoing across the serene lake. *“Y después que los hubo despedido fue al monte a orar...”* (Field Notes Feb 23rd 2008). The Catholic priest paused then, though he still maintained his firm grip on the loudspeaker, which released a low buzz that carried over the misty water before being corralled by the dense forest surrounding the banks. After a twenty second pause, enough time for the one hundred or more people around the priest to begin chatting with their neighbors, he strayed from the exact text of Mark 6:45 to question the mass gathered on the shore, *“¿Dónde está Jesús?”* The crowd silenced and a few inaudible responses surfaced before the priest answered, *“En la montaña.”* He continued, *“¿Y qué está haciendo?”* to which the group, now understanding their role in the sermon, replied, *“Orando”* (Field Notes Feb 23rd 2008).

The priest repeated these two questions at least twenty times throughout the remainder of the sermon as I sat on a beached log by the edge of Lake Chikabal. I had been there since eight o'clock in the morning, having left Xela at 5:30 A.M., and was waiting for the group of twenty-five Mam people, with whom I had climbed the extinct volcano, to finish praying so I could ask them a few questions. They had disappeared a few yards into the forest to pray and had still not emerged when the Catholic mass began at around 10:30 in the morning. With nothing to do but wait, I listened to the priest as I watched the clouds rolling down over the water and remembered that the only other Catholic sermon I had heard since arriving in Guatemala had also been about Jesus on a mountain. Mountains are sacred places in many religions, such as Mount Sinai in Christianity and Mount Fuji in Shintoism to give a couple of examples. However, these earth forms are of particular importance in Mesoamerican cosmology and it was no accident that the sermons of both Catholic priests were focused on Jesus praying on a mountain. By including a Mayan religious element in their sermons, the priests were trying to make it easy for the indigenous members of the church to relate to Catholicism.

In *Religions of Mesoamerica*, David Carrasco states that the “identification of mountains as prodigious resources for abundance, danger, sacrality, and power” is one of the major religious patterns in Mesoamerican traditions (Carrasco 1990: 70). For the Aztecs, the most sacred place in their entire empire of fifteen million people was the great temple at the center of Tenochtitlan known as Coatepec, or “Serpent Mountain.” The temple was made up of two enormous shrines side-by-side dedicated to the war gods Tlaloc and Huitzilopochtli and, to the populace, was a living representation of the sacred mountains, which surround the valley of Mexico. The north side of the temple represents the Mountain of Sustenance, which in Aztec legend is a mountain that

provides the resources of life, including the rain and moisture that allowed the agriculture in the capital to continue. Mountains were viewed as the sources of life-giving waters and *altepetl*, the Nahuatl term for village, literally translates as “mountain filled with water” (Carrasco 1990: 72-3).

Of course, mountains were also of particular importance to the Mayans. They were the first things built up from the sea as described in the *Popol Vuh*: “And the earth was formed first, the mountain-plain. The channels of water were separated; their branches wound their ways around the mountains” (Tedlock 1996: 66). Similar to the Aztecs, the idea of mountains as a source of abundance exists in Mayan cosmology as the origin of yellow and white corn, the substance from which humans were first created, is from a sacred mountain, called Split Place. The mountain was “filled with sweet things, thick with yellow corn, white corn, and thick with pataxte and cacao, countless zapotes, anonas, jocotes, nances, matasanos, sweets—the rich foods filling up the citadel named Split Place” (Tedlock 1996: 146). Mayan societies also constructed pyramids meant to depict sacred mountains, such as at Palenque, La Venta, and Waxaktun where temples represent the First-True-Mountain of the Creation myth, also known as Split-Place (Freidel 2001). Clearly the Mountain of Sustenance myth did not pertain solely to the Aztecs as the Mayans, and other Mesoamerican cultures, saw mountains as sacred places pregnant with wealth as well.

Methodology

Throughout my three week stay in Pachaj (an *aldea* of Cantel), where I was primarily conducting my research, I sought to interview the people in the community who were most knowledgeable on Mayan culture and myth. Therefore, I went to two schools in Pachaj, Escuela Especial Pachaj-Cantel and Centro Educativo Autogestión Comunitaria Choquiac, where I interviewed a couple teachers, one of whom was

actually a practicing *ajq'ij*, or Mayan priest. I also spoke with another man based in Cantel whose actual profession was an *ajq'ij* as well as the Catholic priest at the church in Cantel. The knowledge of the three men, all of whom I interviewed in a formal question-and-answer style, varied greatly and at times I learned almost as much from what they did not know as I did from what they could tell me. I also had informal interviews with my family and a few other people around the town, one of whom was Armando, our coordinator in Pachaj. I would have questions prepared for all of my interviews, whether formal or informal, but oftentimes it happened that the subjects would continue talking without prompt, though a couple only gave one sentence answers and nothing more. In terms of observation, I hiked Volcán Santa María on the 20th of January during my stay in Xela with my first family and learned basic information about pilgrimages to mountains from my host brother's friend who just happened to be a volcano tour guide. During my second week of research, I also went to Volcán Chikabal in hopes of learning about the pilgrimage to the lake. The majority of my research was conducted between February 10th and March 3rd 2008 while I was staying with my family in Pachaj.

Although I feel as though I learned a decent amount about my topic, I was left a little frustrated as I was hard-pressed to find resources about a topic as specific as mine, or at least as specific as I had intended it to be, in so little time. I felt that my methods were good, but I found only a few subjects who knew more than the common knowledge about mountains and *why* they are so important in Mayan cosmology. My identity as a foreigner certainly hindered my research also as some people supposed that I solely wanted the basic information. For example, I explained my project to one of the teachers in Pachaj and he said that he had some texts that would be useful to me. After two days he gave me two sheets of paper, one containing the *cholq'ij*, or Mayan

sacred calendar, and the other with a vague, basic history about Mayan tradition that did not have the word mountain even once. Certainly, my inability to speak K'iche was also a factor as the elders in Pachaj knew more than the younger generations, but they often spoke and understood very little Spanish. When conducting my research there were a few limitations, but I felt as though the majority of the problems lay in the lack of information known about my topic by the majority of the population.

Mountains as Sacred Earth Form in the Present Day

The idea of mountains as being pregnant with wealth, or more specifically water, is still very much believed today among the Maya. During, my first week in Pachaj, I hiked the small mountain, known as *K'iaq*, that sits directly behind my house, with five of my siblings. After only twenty minutes of climbing, we found ourselves at the peak looking over the sprawling cornfields of Pachaj. We sat down to rest on an outcropping of rocks and pinpointed our house against the dried-out vegetation and dusty, dirt roads below. Leti, my nineteen year-old sister, began to tell me everything she knew about *K'iaq* and soon she revealed, “Ve, debajo de estas piedras,” she patted the stone on which we were seated, “hay un nacimiento de agua” (Field Notes Feb 16th 2008). She never mentioned the mountain to house other riches, but she was particularly adamant that I make note of *K'iaq* as a source of fresh water. As I began interviewing more and more people, I continued to find that water is strongly seen as a terrestrial phenomenon and mountains are believed to be where the water originates.

When I talked to my mother Doña Viqui, she agreed with her daughter and added that water is something we need day-to-day for ourselves and for our crops so, for these reasons, the mountains are essential. She informed me that a few times during long periods without rain, she would make half-day pilgrimages (or *romerías*) to the tops of nearby mountains, *K'iaq* and *La Torre*, and pray for water. Every time she has

done a pilgrimage to a mountain, she told me, the rains have come soon afterwards. Armando, the coordinator of the students in Pachaj, reiterated the point that drinkable water originates in the mountains. He continued to tell me a true story, which occurred on one of the mountains in near proximity to Pachaj, about how a group of men and young boys discovered a natural spring. In the water was a snake, so the young boys killed the animal with their machetes. However, the older men told them that the serpent had been the guardian of the water and, sure enough, the spring soon dried up. The story not only shows that mountains are believed to be the source of water, but also touches on the spiritual power given to mountains in Mayan cosmology.

After spending the majority of my first two weeks conducting research in Pachaj and Cantel, I decided it was time to broaden my scope and visit Lake Chikabal, a small lake that sits in the collapsed cone atop an extinct volcano. The volcano is situated outside of San Martín Chileverde and is in a region of the Mayan Mam people, as opposed to the Mayan K'iche, the group with whom I did most of my research. In Mam, the word *chicabal* literally means “*Dulce fuente de la vida*” or “*Donde truena antes de llover agua dulce*” (Field Notes Feb 23rd 2008). Lake Chikabal is the most sacred place in Mam cosmology because the people say that here you can physically see the concept of water as a terrestrial phenomenon. In the late morning, the clouds swoop down over the lake, as I witnessed, picking up the mist that has been floating above the water and carry it away to rain down on the people’s crops. Mam women are sometimes even referred to as “mothers of waters” and I am not sure if it was by coincidence, but of the group of twenty-five or so Mam with whom I climbed the volcano, only two of them were men. Nevertheless, the lake is of great importance to all Mam, regardless of gender, and in early May, exactly forty days after the Holy Week, hundreds of Mam people make the pilgrimage to the sacred site to participate in

ceremonies for the “Rogativa por la Lluvia” (Field Notes Feb 23rd 2008). Although Chikabal is a very holy location where many people go to pray, all mountains are seen as sacred and sites of prayer for the vast majority of present-day Maya.

During my field research, I discovered that most mountains have a myth about them, which appears to contribute to the spiritual importance of the location; that is to say, a myth about a specific mountain only helps to increase the divinity of the place in the people’s eyes. For example, even *K’iaq*, the small mountain behind my house, has its own myth, well actually it has three, but one was certainly the most popular among the people living in and around Cantel. According to many of the people in Pachaj, *K’iaq* is thought to be the top of the large volcano Cerro Quemado, an extinct volcano visible from Pachaj that appears to be missing its peak. Leti told me that there are similar large rocks to the ones we were sitting on at the top of Cerro Quemado, which helps to prove that they were once one land form. However, sometime before the arrival of the Spaniards, Cerro Quemado erupted and *K’iaq*, literally translated as “*pulga*” in K’iche because of its small size, separated from the base of the volcano and landed some kilometers away. The great battle between Tecún Umán, the last ruler of the K’iche people, and Pedro de Alvarado, the great Spanish conquistador, is said to have taken place on *K’iaq* on February 20, 1524. When Alvarado pierced Umán in the chest, his *nahual*, a quetzal bird, which had been fighting with him landed on Umán and its feathers were stained red with the blood of the fallen hero. For this reason, all male quetzals have red splotches on their chests in his memory. Therefore, the people of Cantel believe themselves to be the ancestors of Tecún Umán and Leti said that “*los recuerdos de los Maya existen*” on *K’iaq* (Field Notes Feb 16th 2008) before showing me a worn stone with Mayan numbers carved into it, which the people believe to date back to even before the time of Tecún Umán.

The previous legend is by far the most popular in Pachaj; however, Armando told me two other stories about *K'iaq*, one myth and one based on historical fact, both of which I had not heard until talking to him. He said that Tecún Umán had his own personal *ajq'ij* who would frequently perform ceremonies on *K'iaq*, but mentioned nothing of Cero Quemado or Pedro de Alvarado. Armando also stated that the actual name of the mountain was *K'iaq Ubik*, which literally translates as the verb “to throw (out)” in English. The mountain was a place where the K'iche people could get rid of bad things, in a figurative sense, brought by the Spaniards. Alternatively, he then told me another story based on historical fact which included the former President Justo Rufino Barrios. During his presidency (1873-85), Barrios was intent on building a factory in Cantel, but the population of Cantel and its *aldeas* were primarily leftists who refused the construction of a factory and won the support of the local government. Barrios was so frustrated that it is said at one point he had planned to bomb the population of Cantel from *K'iaq*, and for this reason it has the name which means “*tirar*” or “*tirador*” (Field Notes Feb 28th 2008). As I mentioned before, the latter two stories are much less popular, which I think is because the greater population like to believe the most incredible and mystical story about the mountain close to them. The splendor of the first myth about Cero Quemado and the great battle between Umán and Alvarado certainly adds to the spiritual importance of *K'iaq* in the people's view. So even though the power of a mountain is usually determined by size, according to the people I interviewed, and *K'iaq* is very small, the mountain is more significant as a result of its myth. Therefore, myths definitely add to the sacredness of mountains while inversely people believe in these myths because mountains are so central in Mayan cosmology.

So now that I have touched upon why mountains are important in Mayan cosmology, both in the past and in the present day, I will discuss why most Mayan people prefer to pray on mountains. When I first asked Leti why people pray on mountains, she responded that they are special places where you can find answers to your prayers. The response was vague, but the thought is one shared by the majority of Mayans today. On a mountain one can find their equilibrium, the sixth grade teacher Romeo told me, because you are surrounded by flora and fauna and there is nothing but silence. Many of the cities in Guatemala, such as Xela, are located in a valley, but for the most part mountains have been left untouched. He mentioned that all the negative energies are below, but as you get higher, you separate yourself more and more from the negativity and in the mountains it is much easier to encounter *Ajaw*, the god of all things. Romeo explained it to me by drawing a circle around the word *Ajaw* and then having three branches, with the labels nature, animals, and humans, sprouting off of it. He told me that to the Mayans these three beings are on the same level and that *Ajaw* is the center of everything. Armando later told me similar information, but added that people of all religions, whether it be Catholicism or Evangelism, go to mountains when they are having problems because it is something Maya. Clearly mountains are ideal locations for prayer, not only because of their magnitude in Mayan cosmology, but also because of the peace and nature encountered atop them that allows for communication with *Ajaw* and a sense of equilibrium. .

For this reason many Mayan altars are located on the tops of mountains and the majority of mountains in Guatemala have at least one altar. The number of altars on a mountain has nothing to do with the size of the mountain either as Santa María has only two altars while *K'iaq*, despite its size, has four. Furthermore, when a Mayan decides to perform a ceremony on a mountain, he does not choose one at random, but rather he

must carefully find the altar that corresponds to his prayer. Each altar has a *nahual* and so the ceremony and prayer is most successful when they relate to the sign of the altar. To give an example, one of the altars on *K'iaq* is the day name *Tz'ikin*, which has the *nahual* of a powerful bird, and people go here when they are praying for economic prosperity. When I was at *Chikabal* they had the meanings of the twenty different signs relating to the twenty days in the Mayan sacred calendar and I snapped a photo of the description of *Tz'ikin* because I remembered one of the altars on *K'iaq* was of this *nahual*. The sign read:

Tz'ikin- Significa Pájaro. Es el Nahual del dinero, día propicio para agradecer y pedir el bienestar económico. Día para el conocimiento de las aves, es la intermediación entre *Ukux kaj* y *Ukux ulew* que libera la energía negativa y pensamientos malos, la importancia de ahorrar y no derrochar el dinero y los bienes materiales (Field Notes Feb 23rd 2008).

Therefore, when people are having financial difficulties they will often find a mountain, such as *K'iaq*, that has an altar of the sign *Tz'ikin*. I was also told that the connection with *Ajaw* is stronger if the day name of the altar corresponds with the day in the ritual calendar. The *ajq'ij* must determine the reason for praying before deciding upon the altar where he will perform the ceremony. The reason for burning copal therefore changes from one ceremony to another because its purpose depends on the prayer. Also, Romeo told me that at some point in life one must search for an altar of their own sign, relating to both the number and the *nahual*, or has he said, “Uno tiene que buscar según su signo” (Field Notes Feb 19th 2008).

I would consequently need to find an altar with the sign *Job' Q'anil*, which is my sign according to *Ajq'ij* José, who I interviewed my last week in Pachaj. While I had been waiting outside his door to meet with him, I had noticed that on his calendar the following day, the 27th of February or 13th *Imox*, was *El Día de Agua*. After we had talked for a while about altars and how each has its own energy and performs specific functions, whether it relates to business, love, health etc., I asked him about the coming

day. He told me that it is a day to celebrate and pray for water so many people would find an altar with the sign *Imox*, which means fish and is the *nahual* of rivers, lakes, and oceans. He also revealed that mountains have the power to protect a person if they have good intentions or can have negative effects if a person has bad intentions. Evidently mountains are the ideal places to pray and are viewed as very sacred earth forms to both the past and present Mayans.

Volcanoes as the Prototypical Mountains

When I first entered the field, I had hoped to find that it was not simply mountains that were sacred, but more specifically volcanoes; that is to say, volcanoes are the prototypical mountains in Mayan belief. I had discovered hints that supported this theory in a few textual resources and in ancient artwork, so my hopes were high as the van rolled into the dusty entrance of Pachaj. How could these towering and at times very destructive land forms not have been viewed as the ultimate mountains by the ancient societies of Mesoamerica? The downfall of the entire southern Maya is typically attributed to the eruption of the Ilopango volcano (located in San Salvador) that killed or displaced an estimated population of 320,000 people around the year 260 A.D. Some 8,000 square kilometers were left uninhabitable for 200 years (. How could something capable of so much destruction *not* be distinguished from regular mountains in their cosmology? Yet, I quickly found that few people knew much about volcanoes specifically and many made no distinction between volcanoes and mountains. So the majority of my findings during my three week stay in Pachaj deal with mountains in general. However, I am prepared to attribute this to an overall loss of Mayan culture that has been a strong trend since the colonization of Mesoamerica. The evidence in texts, and also in the field, is too strong not to argue for this

hypothesis. Therefore in the second part of my paper, I will demonstrate that volcanoes are in fact the prototypical mountains in Mayan cosmological past.

I will begin to support this claim by looking at the mother civilization of Mesoamerica, the great and mysterious Olmecs. In Olmec mythology, the place of creation was not simply a mountain, but rather an enormous volcano that is today known as San Martín Pajapán and is located in the Tuxtla Mountains. In *Maya Cosmos: Three Thousand Years on the Shaman's Path*, the authors theorize that the volcano was the place of creation to the Olmecs because they undoubtedly must have “witnessed the frightening miracle of the earth bleeding stone in slow molten sheets from the craters on top of the great cones” (Freidel 2001: 132). They continue to say that volcanoes are the clearest example of the earth being born out of the Otherworld below and that the ordering of the earth and the sky took place atop a great volcano. We can especially see the importance of volcanoes to the Olmecs in their artwork found at La Venta where the gods are depicted with cleft-heads to mimic the cleft-mountains, or volcanoes (Freidel 2001: 134). On this site between the years 1000 and 600 B.C., they built a pyramid that was a replica of the creation volcano and was 420 feet in diameter and 100 feet high. Carved stone heads from basalt, a volcanic rock, were also a common feature in Olmec art and sometimes weighed up to 100 tons (Carrasco 1990: 34). To the Olmecs, the mother culture of all Mesoamerica, volcanoes were the sacred earth forms from which they were created.

Now, there is believed to be a direct link between the Olmecs and the Preclassic Mayans based on evidence from El Mirador, an ancient Mayan site in El Petén. During the first millennium B.C., long distance exchange networks existed between the Olmecs of highland Guatemala and the Gulf Coast and the Preclassic Maya (Hammond 1986). As a result of this direct link between the Olmecs and Preclassic Maya, the Mayans

could have drawn much of their mythology from the mother culture. Regardless if they adopted Olmec beliefs or not, volcanoes were at one time very sacred to the Mayas.

Looking back to the San Bartolo murals, the oldest known Mayan wall paintings which date back to the 100-200 A.D. (the Late Preclassic) and are located in El Petén, one can find evidence of the volcano's magnitude in their ancient cosmology. Depicted on the left side of the mural in Appendix A, and magnified in Appendix B, is what appears to be a gourd, the oldest cultigen in Mesoamerica, spewing out seeds. However, as the tour guide at the Museo Popol Vuh informed us, the gourd can also be seen to represent a volcano, from which four human figures, known to represent the four cardinal points, and a red substance, representing lava, are created. As we have read in the Popol Vuh and other sources, the creation of the four cardinal points represents the creation of the earth as is shown in the beginning of the *Popol Vuh*, which reads,

It takes a long performance and account to complete the lighting of all the sky-earth: the fourfold siding, the fourfold cornering, measuring, fourfold staking, halving the cord, stretching the cord in the sky, on the earth, the four sides, the four corners, as it is said, by the Maker, Modeler, mother-father of life... (Tedlock 1996: 63-4).

Clearly the four cardinal points signifies the earth, and even though the Popol Vuh does not directly say the creation of the earth was on a mountain, this idea is believed by some, as in Momostenango where there is one mountain, Tamanku, known as “four corners of the sky” and another mountain, Pipil, known as “four corners of the earth” (Freidel 2001: 419). The fact that the image in Appendix B from the San Bartolo mural exists, which shows the four points emerging from a volcano, is tremendous because it signifies the Mayan place of creation as a volcano.

Ixkanul, the K'iche term for volcano, literally translates as “section of land falling down.” Quite evidently the K'iche people did make a distinction between volcanoes and mountains in the past based on the fact that active volcanoes are capable of producing earth. It would be almost absurd to think that volcanoes were not seen as

the ideal mountains after our hike of Pacaya, an active volcano an hour outside of Antigua, and watching the glowing lava spill down the mountainside, or the “earth bleeding stone.” Also, it is interesting to note the section in the *Popol Vuh* when Zipacna, the eldest son of Seven Macaw, builds up the “great mountains” (Tedlock 1996: 77). As Tedlock mentions in the glossary, these great mountains are all believed to be specific volcanoes in Guatemala. For example, Fireplace is thought to be Volcán de Fuego, Xcanul is supposed to be Volcán Santa María, and Cave by the Water is believed to be Volcán de Agua. The ancient Mayas made this distinction between mountains and volcanoes, referred to as the “great mountains” in the *Popol Vuh*.

“Volcanes,” Armando told me, “son las extensiones de la Madre Tierra” (Field Notes Feb 28th 2008). As I mentioned earlier, all mountains (including volcanoes) are viewed as “pregnant with wealth”; however, volcanoes are actually able to create, or give birth, to new earth. Throughout my research I have noticed this relationship between volcanoes and the birth of, not only land, but also humans. For example, fire is to the Mayans the most sacred element because, unlike water, air, and earth, it cannot be polluted. Active volcanoes have this lava, or fire inside, while Mayans also believe that humans have fire inside of them. When I asked *Ajq'ij* José about this idea, he first touched his desk and then the floor saying they were cold. He then felt Leti’s arm and told me it was warm because everyone has a fire inside of them since the time they are born. Molesky-Poz mentions this in *Contemporary Maya Spirituality: The Ancient Ways are Not Lost* when she writes, “The ancient Mexica believed that the deities ignited a fire in the chest when the child dropped in the uterus,” (Molesky-Poz 2006: 160). She suggests that fire is in the heart of humans, a common belief among the Mayans, and it seems as though fire is also inside the heart of the earth, or volcanoes. Volcanoes are undoubtedly related to creation and this idea is further reflected in the

legend of “Q’anil: The Man of Lightning,” as told in Montejo’s *Maya Intellectual Renaissance*.

The Jakaltek Maya legend begins with the news of foreign invaders who pillage entire towns with their weapons unknown to the people of Xajla’. The sorcerers from the town went off to war, but the young porter Xhuwan was worried. “He went to the lightning guardians in their sanctuaries on the hills around town to ask for power...but only Q’anil acceded to his petition” (Montejo 2005: 144). Q’anil shared his powers of lightning with Xhuwan and his companions who turned into thunderbolts during the battle and defeated the enemy. However, as they had promised, Xhuwan and his companions were not allowed to return home and were forced to remain as men of lightning in the great southern volcano El Q’anil, the father who had given them the power. A couple things are particularly interesting about the previous legend. First of all, the volcano from where Xhuwan received his power is called El Q’anil; *Q’anil* of course refers to one of the twenty day names and signifies “seed, the germ, the origin of life, of plants and of animals” (Montesky-Poz 2006: 147) and, as Armando told me in one of his interviews, many believe it to mean “Mama,” relating to Mother Earth. Furthermore, the *Q’anil* glyph, as shown in Appendix C, is quite clearly representing the four cardinal points, which I mentioned before refers to the creation of the universe in Mayan cosmology. So the great volcano in the Jakaltek myth literally means creation and origin of life.

Although the distinction between mountains and volcanoes is near nonexistent, as I realized while carrying out my research, some Mayans do believe that volcanoes are more likely to be *encantados*, places where spirits can be encountered, than regular mountains. This is partially due to the fact that volcanoes are usually taller than mountains in Guatemala and, because one is more likely to encounter Ajaw and other

spirits the higher up one is, volcanoes are believed to be *encantados* more so than mountains. Therefore, all of the myths I heard about volcanoes dealt with supernatural powers. Armando shared with me the myth about Santa María, the 3772 meter high volcano that dominates the skyline to the south of Xela. “Hubo un campesino en los años cuarenta,” he began, “que estaba haciendo madera y apareció un hombre que dijo, ‘¿Qué estás haciendo?’” (Field Notes Feb 25th 2008). The man replied that he was searching for the riches of the world and, after they walked for a while, the two men rested beneath a tree. When the farmer awoke he was surrounded by valuables, clothes, food, and drink. He was told that he could remain there for a few hours, but meanwhile his family began to search for him on the volcano, calling his name out tirelessly. After eight hours inside the volcano, the people told him that he could stay forever if he let his blood into the fire. The farmer refused, telling them he had to return to his family, and when he left the volcano he was startled because as he walked to his house he noticed that land that had before been wild was now cultivated. He had also grown a long beard and all his hair had turned white. When he arrived at his house, he found his wife had remarried with another man and his children were all grown. Every hour the farmer had spent inside of Santa María was actually a year outside of the great volcano. Many volcanoes in Guatemala have myths such as the one relating to Santa María (and if I had more time and space I would share others I heard) that demonstrate the supernatural powers of these gigantic land forms. Volcano myths, more often than mountain myths, include mystical spirits because volcanoes are more likely to be *encantados*.

Conclusion

For the most part, volcanoes are not distinguished from mountains in present day Mayan cosmology. However, based on the evidence I have already presented,

there clearly existed a distinction between the two earth forms in Mayan cosmological past. Consequently, I argue that the loss of distinction between mountains and volcanoes is a result of the overall fading of Mayan culture since colonization. In Pachaj, the withering of Mayan culture was evident by looking at the different generations. Many of the younger generation in Pachaj do not even know how to speak K'iche, while the *abuelos* cannot speak fluent Spanish. Armando even told me that if you ask a child in Pachaj how to say river or lake or ocean, he or she will say the K'iche word for water because they do not know the specific names for bodies of water. The culture and the traditions are quickly being lost as this can be seen by simply looking at the disparity between the living generations. The strong trend is in no way a new one as Mayan culture has arguably been fading since the Spanish Conquest of Mesoamerica in the 1520s. When we were sitting around having coffee one time, Armando told me that the Mayans used to have a tradition in which a mother would climb a volcano with her baby twenty days (relates to the calendrical cycle) after giving birth. By making a sacrifice to *Ajaw* in the form of incense or candles, the child's spirit was supposedly liberated. The retired practice furthers my theory that at one time volcanoes were particularly important to the Mayans. It is also interesting that the recently born child would be brought to a volcano specifically because, after all, volcanoes were viewed as the place of creation in the past. Nevertheless, the number of people still practicing this decreased enormously after colonization and today very few people continue the tradition.

The Mayan culture has certainly diminished since colonization, but I am in no way implying that Mayan culture has evaporated completely. When we visited the Zapatista autonomous community in Chiapas, I bought a square piece of cloth stitched with the following Mayan saying: “Cortaron nuestras ramas / Cortaron nuestro trunco /

Pero nunca pudieron arrancar nuestras raíces / ¡Aquí estamos!” (Field Notes Jan 29th 2008). As the aphorism emphatically says, the roots of Mayan culture have never been pulled up despite the fact that many customs and beliefs have been lost through the past five hundred centuries. Although I found that volcanoes are rarely distinguished from mountains today, some peoples might still hold volcanoes in higher regard. In San Andrés Xecul for example, the neckpiece of women’s *traje* is known to represent not simply a mountain, but a volcano. Nevertheless, to me, the neckpiece is just a small reminder of the ancient beliefs that have been all but forgotten by the present day Maya. Volcanoes were the prototypical mountains in Mayan cosmological past, but the overall fading of Mayan culture since colonization has undoubtedly contributed to the loss of distinction between mountains and volcanoes in Mayan cosmology today.

Acknowledgements

I would like to say thank you to all the people who helped me with my research, particularly Armando, Romeo, and *Ajq'ij* José as their patience and wisdom were greatly appreciated. Also, without the support of my second family, I am not sure I would have had half of the experience that I did. My relationship with them is what really has made this trip as rewarding as it has been and, even though my project was frustrating at times, they always managed to lift my mood and forget my research troubles. So thank you Doña Viqui and family for making Pachaj feel like a second home.

Appendix A



Figura 2. Muro Norte (dibujo por Heather Hurst).

www.famsi.org

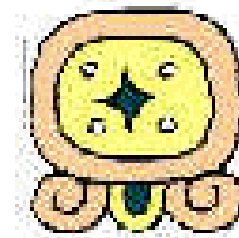
Appendix B



Figura 2. Muro Norte

www.famsi.org

Appendix C



www.enlacequiche.org

Works Cited:

- Carrasco, David.
1990 Religions of Mesoamerica: Cosmovision and Ceremonial Centers. Long Grove: Waveland Press.
- Freidel, David and Linda Schele and Joy Parker.
2001 Maya Cosmos: Three Thousand Years on the Shaman's Path. New York: Perrenial Publishers.
- Hammond, Norman.
1986 New Light on the Most Ancient Maya. *Man* 21(3):399-413.
- Molesky-Poz, Jean.
2006 Contemporary Maya Spirituality: The Ancient Ways Are Not Lost. Austin: U Texas Press.
- Montejo, Victor.
2005 Maya Intellectual Renaissance: Identity, Representation and Leadership. Austin: U Texas Press.
- Sheets, Payson.
1999 The Effects of Explosive Volcanism on Ancient Egalitarian, Ranked, and Stratified Societies in Middle America. In *The Angry Earth: Disaster in Anthropological Perspective*. Anthony Oliver-Smith and Susanna M. Hoffman, eds. Pp. 36-58 New York: Taylor & Francis Inc.
- Tedlock, Dennis.
1996 *Popol Vuh*. New York: Simon & Schuster.
- Vogt, Evon and Catherine Vogt.
1970 Levi-Strauss Among the Maya. *Man* 5(3):379-92.

Appendix A



Figura 2. Muro Norte (dibujo por Heather Hurst).

www.famsi.org

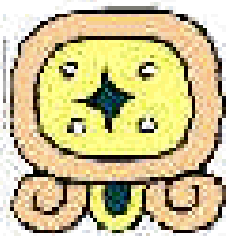
Appendix B



Figura 2. Muro Norte

www.famsi.org

Appendix C



www.enlacequiche