

Article

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Sacrifice: A Maya Conception of a Misunderstood and Underappreciated Component of Well-Being

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Abstract | In this paper, I develop an account of the premodern Maya conception of sacrifice as a virtue and a key aspect of well-being. To do this, I look to premodern Maya sources—particularly, Classic Period texts and images (in Part One) and the Postcontact text *Popol Vuh* (in Part Two). I offer interpretive reconstructions, to illustrate key features of the Maya concept of sacrifice as a principle of growth as well as metaphysical and ethical renewal, as demonstration of the interrelatedness of phenomena, and as an aspect of personal survival.

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The Maya Conception of Sacrifice

Sacrifice in the context of ancient Maya culture is commonly thought of as connected to the ritualized execution of human sacrificial victims. It may conjure images of gory ritual slaughter, decapitations and heart removal of prisoners and victims from wars. Such things featured prominently in the stories of Spanish chroniclers during the contact period, and remain fixed in the Western imagination today, as evidenced by cultural artifacts such as Mel Gibson's film *Apocalypto*.¹ While ritual execution did become a feature of Maya culture, especially pronounced in the late part of the Precolumbian period in central Mexican influenced Postclassic Period² Yucatan (the northernmost region of the Maya world), it never was as central or widespread a component of Maya culture as it has been depicted. In most of the Maya region, and though most of its history, such human sacrifice was relatively rare, and performed in the context of ritual warfare. Far more common (and more important) were forms of *self-sacrifice*, including the royal

bloodletting ritual and images of such sacrifice from a variety of Classic Period (250–900 CE) and Postclassic Period texts.

The most important aspect of the concept of sacrifice for the Classic Maya concerned *self-sacrifice*, and the construction of sacrifice as a critical aspect of well-being for the individual, the society, and the cosmos as a whole. Though this aspect of the concept of sacrifice is present in the human sacrifice rituals, it is far more apparent in the much more culturally important rituals of the ruler's autosacrificial bloodletting, which is depicted and discussed in numerous Maya texts, of the Classic Period and later, and the ritual of fasting (among others). Here, I argue that a general concept of sacrifice was understood by the Precolumbian Maya as a central part of human life and necessary for human thriving and well-being, both that of the community and the individual. The Maya largely seem to have understood sacrifice as part of a creative act, and necessary for the transformation and development of things. It is likely for this reason (among others)

that Christianity took such easy and strong root in the Maya region, as it was easily absorbed into native Maya religious forms. We know that despite insistent colonialism, a conqueror's religion is not always adopted, as the examples of colonized Asian peoples show. Despite the same insistent Iberian Catholic Christianity, the Portuguese in China and India were never successful in winning over sizable numbers of the population to Christianity. The Philippines is the only region in Asia in which colonial Christianity took root, and this may be due in part to the fact that Islam prepared the field.

In the following sections of this paper, I look to both Precontact and Postcontact sources—particularly, Classic Period texts and images (in Part One) and the Postcontact text *Popol Vuh* (in Part Two). I offer interpretive reconstructions, to illustrate key features of the Maya concept of sacrifice, as a principle of growth as well as metaphysical and ethical renewal, a demonstration of the interrelatedness of phenomena, and an aspect of personal survival.

There were numerous forms of sacrifice in ancient Maya thought, and numerous ways in which sacrifice was manifest. If anything, we can think of sacrifice as a *cluster* of concepts. There is no single term translating the English 'sacrifice'—rather, there are a number of terms and practices clearly connected to the idea of sacrifice, which is seen as a value and a necessity for the individual and society. I will not here get into the issue of the possibility of theorizing a general concept of sacrifice for the ancient Maya when there is no single term for this general concept, but I argue in other work (as do numerous others) for the legitimacy of such a project.³ Below, I discuss a few of the senses of sacrifice and practices associated with it for the ancient Maya, and offer an interpretation of how these various senses and practices manifest a general concept of sacrifice, as well as the ramifications of this concept for well-being of the individual and the community. Much of the discussion of well-being comes in consideration of the aims and motivations for particular sacrificial practices. In the first section, I look at practices documented in the Classic Period. In the second section, I look to the more explanatory Postcontact text *Popol Vuh*. Based on these considerations, I offer a view of sacrifice in ancient Maya texts connecting it to a doctrine of continual creation, of the individual, community, and cosmos. Contribution to continual creation is understood as a vital part of

well-being, as a necessary component of person construction. The process of self-cultivation is directly linked to performing a role in continual creation of all things, and on the individual level, sacrifice is one of the key ways this creation takes place. For the ancient Maya, without sacrifice one cannot fully become a person. It is my hope that offering this broader understanding of the virtue of sacrifice for the ancient Maya contributes to our re-evaluation of the concept of sacrifice. Reflecting on the ancient Maya understanding of it can contribute to our rediscovery of this crucial virtue.⁴

Evidence from the Classic Period: Bloodletting as Sacrifice



(Yaxchilan Lintel 24)

A Classic Period engraving from the Maya city of Yaxchilan (in Southeast Mexico alongside the Usumacinta River, which forms the border of Mexico and Guatemala) depicts Lady Xoc, Queen of the city and wife of its ruler (*abau*) Itzamnaaj Balam II. Yaxchilan Lintel 24, as it is referred to by scholars, shows Lady Xoc kneeling before her spouse, engaged in a bloodletting sacrifice, in which she pierces her tongue and pulls a rope through it. The next carving in the series, Lintel 25, depicts an anthropomorphic serpentine figure rising from a bowl into which Lady Xoc's blood from the ceremony has run. This series of lintels represents a common Classic Period Maya practice—the royal bloodletting sacrifice. Through drawing their own blood in a public ritual display, rulers could communicate with other aspects of the world unseen by most. This access to unseen aspects of the

world, including spirits, gods, and deceased ancestors, was made possible by the drawing of blood, as blood was seen by the early Maya as containing life essence (*ch'ul*), with its own power.⁵ This power was seen as particularly potent in rulers, explaining in part their role as ritual intermediaries between humans and the invisible aspects of the world.⁶ The sacrifice of the ruler makes possible this communication with unseen aspects of the world, which is for the benefit of the community. The ruler-as-shaman idea was a central aspect of Precolumbian Maya thought, particularly in the Classic Period southern lowland cities. We find the ruler memorialized across the Maya region in ways that connect the ruler to communication with other realms.



(Yaxchilan Lintel 25)

During the Classic Period, the ruler's autosacrificial bloodletting played a much greater role than that of ritual execution, generally of captured rulers or nobles of competing cities. This practice is well recounted in numerous stelae and texts from across the Maya region⁷, and the Maya (as well as the Aztecs) are today popularly far more regularly associated with this practice. There are, of course, some links between the practice of ritual execution as sacrifice, bloodletting rituals, and more ordinary forms of sacrifice such as fasting, in that they all to some extent have the general aims of sacrifice.

One common feature of these images of autosacrifice is that the sacrificer gains some kind of power on the basis of their sacrifice, which allows access for the entire community to new sources of thriving. This is the basis of the claim of Houston, Stuart, and Taube that such sacrifice has a productive role in the continual creation of the cosmos itself. According to them, the evidence suggests that the Classic Maya view was that "time itself and the space in which it occurs could not exist without acts of bodily sacrifice."⁸ A key aspect of this ceremony, as demonstrated in Yaxchilan Lintel 25, is the generation of the ability to access unseen parts of the world through the power of *ch'ul* in the blood. There is a connection between the potency of life-force of the blood, particularly the blood of rulers and nobles, and this basic animative vital energy. Schele, Friedel, and Parker write: "Clouds, rain-laden, celestial, or in the form of sweet incense smoke, harbor *ch'ulel*, the soul stuff of the living universe."⁹ They connect the generation of these to the bloodletting ceremony, as found in a number of Classic Period images. On imagery at the inner doorway of Temple 22 at Copan, the place of bloodletting is connected to serpent images and those of the clouds discussed by Schele, Friedel, and Parker.

The performer of the ritual, through their sacrifice, is able to communicate with unseen aspects of the world, including the gods and ancestors (understood as ultimately part of the same force or process, represented by *ch'ul*), enabling a unique understanding for the individual and source of power for the individual and community alike.¹⁰ As the community requires this source of power for its continuity, the community has a natural dependence on the ruler/shaman, part of whose role is to undergo this ritual sacrifice.

Munson, Amati, Collard, and Macri discuss a common sociological view of what they call "costly ritual behaviors", in which painful, intense, and/or other difficult to perform rituals have the role in a community of demonstrating the ritual performer's commitment to the community and willingness to undergo severe pain on behalf of the community.¹¹ This ties rituals like the Maya bloodletting ceremony to other painful rituals such as the "sun dance" of people of the North American plains (Lakota, Cheyenne, etc.). This was likely *part* of the significance of self-sacrifice for the ancient Maya, but there were clearly more elements to the general conception of sacrifice. We know this in part because not all acts of sacrifice were of such

intensity or pain, such as fasting (*ch'abb*), which occupied a major role among the Classic Maya, and was likely also connected to creation and renewal, as with the bloodletting ritual.¹² As I discuss below, creation is a central aim of sacrifice in its various forms throughout Maya history.

But how is the sacrifice good for the individual who sacrifices, as well as for the community that enjoys both the conditions for renewal and the transformative and revelatory benefits of this sacrifice? One possibility, suggested by the Yaxchilan Lintels, and put forward as a hypothesis by Linda Schele and Mary Miller,¹³ is that bloodletting facilitated visions and hallucinations that the Maya understood as shamanic encounters with other aspects of the world, giving the sacrificer him or herself a kind of mystical vision leading to a broadening of their own understanding or generation of additional powers of insight. Sven Gronemeyer challenged this view with medical evidence showing that the kinds of bloodletting depicted by Classic and Postclassic sources would not have resulted in hallucinatory effects.¹⁴

Some particular features of the bloodletting ritual in the Classic Period suggest another element of the sacrifice, connecting it to creation. While women, such as Lady Xoc, pierced their tongues in the ceremony, the piercing point for males was the penis.¹⁵ Many scholars note the possible symbolism of creative potency captured by this.¹⁶ David Joralemon wrote, of a Classic Period image of the city of Palenque:

In the Foliated Cross Tablet the great king Pacal is shown presenting the deified instrument of sexual self-sacrifice to the cruciform maize tree in the center of the composition. By metaphoric extension Pacal is also offering his own precious sacrificial blood to fertilize the sacred tree at the center of the world. Whatever other symbolic meaning blood-letting and sexual mutilation might have had in ancient Maya thought, there was a strong association of sexual self-sacrifice with rituals of agricultural fertility during the Classic Period.¹⁷

Joralemon also claims that drawing blood from sexual organs must have been seen by the ancient Maya as particularly potent. This connection between sacrifice and creation can be seen throughout Classic Period imagery, but becomes more explicit in later texts such as the *Popol Vuh*.

Evidence from the *Popol Vuh*: Sacrifice, Substitution, and Rebirth

The Postclassic K'iche' Maya¹⁸ text *Popol Vuh* collects a number of traditional stories concerning the creation of the world, humanity, and the K'iche' people, including the famous story of the "Hero Twins" Hunahpu and Xbalanque. In the story of the Hero Twins, the most relevant of the text to the theme of sacrifice, we find sacrifice linked with transformation. Indeed, perhaps the major theme of Part Three of the *Popol Vuh* (the story of the Hero Twins) is that of sacrifice—ways of sacrifice, its power, and its necessity for human development.

The incident of the text is straightforward. The Hero Twins are brought to Xibalba, the realm of the dead, by the lords of Xibalba, all of whom represent various aspects of destruction and decay. They are brought to Xibalba on the basis of their skilled and noisy playing of the ubiquitous Mesoamerican ballgame (*pitz* in Classic Mayan), which possibly represents the regular work of human life. In the midst of this life, the Hero Twins are challenged by the lords of the realm of death, who wish to silence them and overcome them. The imagery is not so straightforward as good vs. evil or life vs. death, however. As Barrois and Tokovivine point out:

The underworld and the heavenly world in Classic Maya culture do not have the same connotations that hell and paradise do for Christianity. The underworld covers a whole set of different, positive and negative notions, just like the upper world does. In fact, if the Maya underworld is the place of darkness and death, it is as well the place of water, fertility, and life.¹⁹

The depiction of the lords of Xibalba elsewhere in the *Popol Vuh* also attests to this. In Part Four of the text, the Xibalba lords intervene on behalf of humanity with the god Tohil to procure the knowledge of generating fire for humans, which becomes essential to their future.²⁰ The struggle between the Hero Twins and the Xibalbans then clearly represents *transformation* and its means. Subjecting the Hero Twins to a number of seemingly impossible tests in order to defeat them, the Twins overcome one after another. Finally, the Hero Twins recognize that they must be sacrificed in Xibalba, and allow themselves to be sacrificed—a representation of self-sacrifice reminiscent

of the bloodletting ritual of the Classic Period.

The Hero Twins, through this sacrifice, gain the ability to sacrifice themselves (in the sense of complete destruction) and return to life. The process begins by the Twins' leaping into a pit of fire created by the Xibalbans. They later reappear in different forms, and are able ultimately to overcome the Xibalbans through this ability to sacrifice and be reborn (which the Xibalbans lack). This is highly suggestive of the theme of renewal and creation through sacrifice. Events of Part Four of the *Popol Vuh* strengthen this suggestion. There, humans (with the help of the Xibalbans) acquire fire in exchange for sacrifice, a deal made with the god Tohil. The image of the maize god being sacrificed and reborn underground is important in this connection, as fire was used for agriculture by the ancient Maya, in clearing fields. This sacrifice and rebirth of maize is a key symbol of the entire life cycle for the ancient Maya.²¹

In Part Two of the text, there is a discussion of the connection between the reborn and the sacrificed, which maps on to that between parents and children, and things remade as continuation. The suggestion seems to be that the new creation that results from sacrifice itself is identical to the sacrificed thing—that this new creation is fulfillment and continuation of the original. The head of One Hunahpu, the father of Hunahpu and Xbalanque, says:

This, my head, had nothing on it—just bone, nothing of meat. It's just the same with the head of a great lord: it's just the flesh that makes his face look good. And when he dies, people get frightened by his bones. After that, his son is like his saliva, his spittle, in his being, whether it be the son of a lord or the son of a craftsman, an orator. The father does not disappear, but goes on being fulfilled. Neither dimmed nor destroyed is the face of a lord, a warrior, craftsman, orator.²²

The focus here is on procreation as rebirth, an act for which sacrifice is necessary. The reason this view is unique as compared to other traditions is that the created entity is understood as part of the creating entity.²³ What is continually reborn is the original entity itself—thus the ruler is continually reborn in a new form. It is not that one ruler dies and his son becomes the new ruler—there is a *single* ruler, manifest by these different individuals at different times.²⁴

The image of the cultivation of maize raised above further demonstrates this view. The new maize plant, when it arises from the old, cannot be considered a *distinct* entity. Rather, the new plant represents a part of the same entity as the old. If we consider the way in which the plant (like the human) develops, this appears plausible. A seed from the prior plant becomes the ground from which the new plant develops. This seed is surely *part of* the prior plant, and is also part of (in the sense of being the basis of) the new plant. Thus the prior plant and the new plant are not completely independent, but are representative of the same thing---the *maize plant* itself. They may be understood as different stages of the maize plant. This how we should understand sacrifice and rebirth, for the human as well as for the maize plant.

Indeed, some Maya rituals suggest recognition of a key connection between the maize plant and the human. There is the well-known story of the *Popol Vuh* of humans being crafted by the gods from maize.²⁵ There is also the practice in the highlands of Guatemala described by the 17th century Dominican priest Francisco Ximénez of Maya burial of their dead in maize fields.²⁶ In addition, there is the story of the Hero Twins themselves, representative of both maize and the origins of rulership (Hunahpu= 1 Ahau,= 1 Ruler).²⁷

This theme of sacrifice and its role in creation runs throughout the *Popol Vuh*, and shows a link between self-sacrifice and self-creation. This in part explains the variable ways the Xibalbans are presented in the text—as antagonistic harbingers of death, but also as advocates and even ancestors. The Hero Twins are themselves born of a young woman of Xibalba, who was impregnated by spittle from the head of One Hunahpu. The ancient Maya understanding of sacrifice and creation is closely intertwined with the subject of death.

Reckoning With Death: Sacrifice in the Context of Continual Creation

What is behind this concern? To a large extent, we can only speculate on the basis of the main themes of the texts to which we have access. But one broad theme that appears across a variety of contexts in which sacrifice is raised is that of death. Not all sacrifice ends in death, not even the most important or powerful sacrifices. But all sacrifice does seem to represent, point

toward, or manifest a concern with death, one that is present throughout ancient Maya literary culture.

In ancient Maya texts of a variety of kinds, we see a concern with and recognition of death as an inevitable part of human life, and they contextualize this by understanding it as a *vital* part of the development of human life. Such a response to death makes sense of it in a larger process of world-building, and also, as we see in the above quote, the individual is able to make sense of the continuity of individuality in coming to see oneself as a particular stage of a more extended entity, which persists after the death of the individual. It is not the separable soul in a Platonic sense that offers humans immortality, rather it is being a part of a larger physical process of continual creation. The individual human being can be seen as a stage in an extended life, and thus the interests of the individual are subsumed into those of not only the currently existing community of individuals, but future states of the individual, represented by one's descendants. Just as different time-slices of the individual person can be taken as components of a person (an individual at 5 years old vs. the individual at 40 years old, for example), an individual human being like a single ruler of Copan is taken as a time-slice of an extended individual, the ruler of Copan, which is sometimes manifest by the current ruler, sometimes by his father, sometimes by his son, his grandson, and so on.²⁸ When we understand the Maya conception of personal identity in this way, individual sacrifice in the service of renewal and continual creation²⁹ can be understood as contributing to the well-being of the individual insofar as the individual is identical to, as a component of, the broader extended person comprised of numerous individuals across time. If I am an individual ruler of Copan then my sacrificial actions, as individual, are in the service of my well-being, the well-being of the ruler of Copan, that is identical with *me* right now, but in the future will be identical with some other individual.³⁰

Sacrifice, in its numerous forms in ancient Maya thought, thus contributes to the well-being of the community and of future states *at the same time* and in mainly the same way that it contributes to the well-being of the individual. Sacrifice makes continual creation possible, and it creates the conditions for the extension of the person into the future and the continued flourishing of this person. The lords of Xibalba are not merely antagonists—they also have an

important lesson to teach us, and one also learned by Hunahpu and Xbalanque. Death is a vital part of the life process, one that allows growth, just as the decay and destruction of the maize plant allows for the development of a new plant, through its seeds and its use in fertilizing the soil. The various forms of sacrifice in ancient Maya culture were intended not as propitiatory or punitive, but rather as creative acts invoking unique power to vitalize the community, individual, and future.

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pointed out.

[2] The Postclassic period was from 900-1535 CE. Mayanists generally break down Maya history into four major periods, the others of which are the Pre-classic (~2000 BCE-200 CE), Classic (250-900 CE), and Postcontact (after 1535 CE).

[3] I get into this issue in the first chapter of my *Theories of Truth in Chinese Philosophy*, among other works. It is also discussed in Bryan Van Norden, *Virtue Ethics and Consequentialism in Early Chinese Philosophy*.

[4] It is a central virtue in a number of other traditions as well, including other traditions of the Americas (see Marshall, *The Lakota Way*), and some of the traditions of India (the *Bhagavad Gita* develops the notion of relinquishment of attachment to the fruits of action as sacrifice).

[5] *Ch'ul* being a uniquely human form of *itz*, a general cosmic vital essence. Friedel, Schele, and Parker discuss this connection in Friedel, Schele, and Parker 1993, 210. I also discuss it in Chapter Three of *Philosophy of the Ancient Maya*. (Barrera-Vasquez 1980, 272) connects *itz* with magic or occult power.

[6] This shamanic conception of the ruler is discussed in Sharer 2005, 70.

[7] This region is comprised roughly of the section of Central America from the Yucatan Peninsula in the north to the Pacific coast of Guatemala in the south, eastward to the westernmost parts of Honduras and El Salvador, and westward to the state of Chiapas in Mexico.

[8] Houston, Stuart, and Taube 2006, 89.

[9] Friedel, Schele, and Parker 1993, 152.

[10] As Miguel Astor-Aguilera points out, particular objects and places have this communicative power as well (Astor-Aguilera, 2010). Also on bloodletting and communication, Demarest 2004, 191; Stone 1988.

[11] "Classic Maya Bloodletting and the Cultural Evolution of Religious Rituals: Quantifying Patterns of Variation in Hieroglyphic Texts"

[12] Evidence for this is offered by Houston, Stu-

Endnotes

[1] Which included depictions of such sacrifice and other aspects of Postclassic Yucatan Maya culture that were wildly inaccurate, as numerous experts have

art, and Taube (2006, 130), as they point out that the K'iche' and Yucatec Maya terms for fasting are connected to creation and renewal.

[13] Schele and Miller 1986, 46-47.

[14] Gronemeyer, 2003.

[15] Scenes of such bloodletting are depicted on numerous stelae in Yaxchilan, site of the Lintels depicting Lady Xoc discussed above. Tate 1992, 88.

[16] Demarest 2004, 188; Bassie-Sweet 2008, 163 (connects the practice to maize rituals); Joyce and Meskell 2003, 124 (considers the connection between penis and mouth [for female rituals] as procreative in symbolism), among others.

[17] Joralemon 1974, 67

[18] The K'iche' are a Maya people of the southern highlands, in current day south Guatemala. The *Popol Vuh* as we have it is written in the K'iche' language, and was written down after Spanish contact, though the narrative dates to the Postclassic Period (~1000-1500 CE), and many elements of the story date back further than this, to the Classic and before.

[19] Barrois and Tokovivine 2004, 2.

[20] Tedlock 1996, 154-156.

[21] Scherer 2015, 53. Looper 2009, 115. I discuss this image also in McLeod 2017, ch. 2.

[22] Tedlock 1996, 99.

[23] There are parallels in Indian and Chinese Buddhism, in the Huayan school's metaphysics, which develops earlier Indian concepts like that of *satkaryavada*.

[24] Though I do not get into this issue here, this view is what I refer to as "embedded identity", discussed in McLeod 2017, ch. 2.

[25] Tedlock 1996, 145-146.

[26] Peterson 1999, 27.

[27] Looper 2009, 115

[28] While I do not have the space here to offer a full argument for my interpretation of the Maya view of identity, it is put forward by a number of scholars, and I also discuss it extensively in McLeod 2017, ch. 2.

[29] I avoid the term 're-creation' as used by some scholars, such as Prudence Rice (2007, 193), as I argue that the Maya conception of continual creation is not the duplication of a previously created cosmos (including its individual things), but the continual unfolding of a single cosmos.

[30] There does seem to be a basic logical problem caused by this, but it is essentially the same problem faced by considering time-slices of an individual as identical to the person but not identical to one another.