

**LINGUISTIC AND CULTURAL CONTINUITY THROUGH THE SYMBOLIC  
REPRESENTATION OF THE NAJ 'HOUSE' IN  
CONTEMPORARY MAYAN POETRY**

by

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A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF  
THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

in

THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE AND POSTDOCTORAL STUDIES  
(Hispanic Studies)

THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA

(Vancouver)

March 2015

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## Abstract

This interdisciplinary study (linguistic and literary) is based on a corpus of contemporary Mayan poetry that has been written in Peninsular (Yucatec) Maya and translated into Spanish by the authors. These particular poets were selected for this investigation because they have all participated in, or were influenced by the Resurgence in Mayan contemporary literature. And as writer/activists they write to promote and disseminate Mayan language and culture through poetry.

All of the poems were selected for this corpus due to their rich depiction of Mayan cultural beliefs and symbolism and because they all feature the concept of *naj* ‘house’ as an essential and unifying-theme. As the *naj* embodies (physically and metaphorically) the heart and/or center of Mayan Creation and re-Creation and is a recurrent conception in both pre-Colombian and contemporary Mayan literature, it is a key symbol utilized by these poets in reference to Mayan linguistic and cultural continuity.

In addition to the *naj*, there are two other essential symbols—the three-stone hearth and the Ceiba or Mayan sacred tree—that unite these poems into a cohesive narrative. Like the *naj*, the three-stone hearth and the Ceiba are important icons in Mayan symbology representing the process of cultural generation and regeneration.

By combining a linguistic (semantic) and literary analysis of the Mayan version of each poem, this investigation reveals information on how cultural symbolism is conceptualized and communicated through language and poetic expression unique to Mayan culture. In particular, this study focuses on the poets’ utilization of polysemous terminology and the poetic devices of *difrasismo* and parallelism to express complex networks of symbolic meaning. As this linguistic

and poetic expression reflects structural aspects of the language as well as literary tropes recurrent in ancient (glyphic and pictorial) and contemporary works, it demonstrates a conceptual, linguistic, and literary continuity spanning millennia.

The combined linguistic and literary analysis of this corpus was then utilized as the basis for a pedagogical proposal to be used in the training of bilingual teachers (Spanish/English) working in schools in Portland, Oregon serving a large community of Yucatec Maya living in diaspora.

## **Preface**

This dissertation is an original, unpublished and independent work produced by Manya Wubbold. The doctoral research involved the collaboration of consultants; therefore a certificate of ethical approval was requested from the Office of Research and Ethics' Researcher Information Services (RISe) at the University of British Columbia. The Behavioral Research Ethics Board (BREB) unit assessed the methods, risks and benefits associated with this research and found it to be in compliance with RISe's rules and regulations. An Ethics *Certificate of Approval – Minimal Risk (H12-01967)* was issued.

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## Acknowledgements

I want to express my sincere appreciation to the many people whose support has made this dissertation possible. At the top of this list must be Dr. Samuel Navarro Ortega, who chaired my Committee and whose patience, guidance, insightful comments, and thoughtful encouragement have been (and will always be) a profound inspiration for me. Because of Dr. Navarro's high standards and expectations—always presented encouragingly—the process of this investigation has been both challenging and rewarding. I also want to thank the rest of my committee Dr. Kim Beaudesne and Dr. Peter Cole for their generous support and invaluable comments and suggestions. I want to give special thanks to Rolando Ek Naal for his generous contribution of knowledge and time to this project. Because of his profound knowledge of Mayan language and culture and his willingness and patience to share his perspective and understanding, it was possible to arrive at a much deeper and richer analysis of this poetry. I also want to thank the poets Donny Limber Brito May, Briceida Cuevas Cob, and Feliciano Sánchez Chan for their generous interviews and insightful comments. Obviously, without them (and Mr. Ek Naal) this project would not have been possible. Very special thanks also go to Pedro Escamillas and Jaime Chávez Marcos at Escritores en Lenguas Indígenas (ELIAC) for all of their support and help in contacting the poet/scholars for this study. I also want to thank Mayan historian Gaspar Cauich for his generous interview and expedition to the archeological site of Edzná, Campeche. Thanks also to Miguel Ángel Chi Dzul for his initial readings of the Mayan version of the poems with me. Finally, I thank my family (Mark, Phyllis, Jan, Elly, Cook, Nick, Michael, Ari, Laurie, Bob, and Jo) for believing in me and in this project. Without their loving support and encouragement this could never have happened.

## **Dedication**

I dedicate this project to my husband, best friend, and love of my life.

Also, in memory of my dear friend Cristina  
and to Tony—a most excellent secretary.

## Chapter 1: Introduction

“Es pues la literatura maya moderna una literatura sabia porque sabio es su pasado<sup>1</sup>”

(Ligorred Perramon, 2000, p. 357)

Edward Sapir (1921, pp. 233, 241) wrote that “there is a constant correlation between complexity of language and culture” and that this “variability” or richness of expression is indicative of place (natural and social environment) and time (historic development). Although Sapir wrote during a very different period in the history of linguistic and cultural research, nonetheless, his statement succinctly captures the constant interaction of language and culture—within the context of physical environment—evident in contemporary Mayan literature. Contemporary Mayan literature is an indisputable example of this symbiotic relationship between language, culture, and environment through which aspects of the vast and complex system of Mayan symbols and images are transmitted.

Mayan symbology is universally recognized for its intricate conceptualization and representation. This complex way of envisioning the world, whether it is transmitted through pictorial, oral or written language, reflects culturally specific modes of cognition and communication that have evolved over millennia. Like all contemporary languages, Mayan languages interpret and express their speaker’s experience in the modern world. But, because no language exists apart from culture and Mayan languages are the living legacy of ancient cultures, they link the past to the present and communicate a unique world view by conveying historic and contemporary information about belief, practice, and symbolic representation (Sapir, 1921).

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<sup>1</sup> “Modern Mayan literature is wise because its past is wise.”

Miguel León-Portilla (1984, p. 348), renowned Mexican historian and anthropologist, prolific writer, and champion of Mexican literature since the 1950s<sup>2</sup>, describes contemporary indigenous literature from Mesoamerica<sup>3</sup> as “[l]a nueva palabra con raíces en el viejo legado.”<sup>4</sup> In his article (entitled *La palabra antigua y nueva del hombre de Mesoamérica*) León-Portilla discusses the correlation between ancient and contemporary Mesoamerican literature and makes it clear there is a vital connection between pre-Colombian literatures and works that have been written by contemporary indigenous Mesoamerican authors. If we consider that the “roots in the old legacy” are elements of ancient Mesoamerican worldview conceptualization and symbology communicated today by indigenous authors writing in their maternal languages—for personal, social, and creative/aesthetic reasons—some important questions arise:

- What role does language play in the connection between ancient and contemporary Mayan literatures?
- What roles do language and literature play in communicating and preserving Mayan culture for future generations?
- How could future generations of Mayan speakers benefit from the preservation and continuation of this literary legacy?
- And, how is it possible to make this rich literary legacy accessible to new generations of Mayan speakers?

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<sup>2</sup> Dr. León Portilla wrote his doctoral thesis on Náhuatl philosophy, which was published in 1956 by the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM) (Díaz y de Ovando, 1982).

<sup>3</sup>“The term ‘Mesoamerica’ describes a geographical and cultural area stretching from present-day central and southern Mexico down through much of Central America, tapering out in Honduras and Nicaragua” (Restall, Sousa, & Terraciano, 2005, p. 3).

<sup>4</sup> “The new word with roots in the old legacy.”

This interdisciplinary study is an investigation of how Mayan cultural symbolism is conceptualized and communicated through language. Our particular objective is to demonstrate that in contemporary Mayan literature (in this case poetry) many elements of ancient cultural belief are transmitted linguistically, and that this linguistic production is a manifestation of the inextricable nature of culture and cognition. This research is motivated by our deep concern for the far reaching effects of language loss. In regards to Peninsular Maya, even though there are “still close to a million speakers,” there has been a dramatic decrease in younger Maya who speak the language due to the pressures of discrimination, globalization, etc. (England, 2003, p. 733). And, because the Mayan language (like all indigenous languages of Latin America) is a vehicle for unique modes of cultural conceptualization that have evolved over centuries, their diminished use may foreshadow the demise of the language and the loss of an invaluable cultural perspective that can only be transmitted linguistically. When speaking to Briceida Cuevas Cob (one of the poets whose work is included in our corpus), she articulated both her deep concern for the Mayan language and her resolute determination to resist linguistic and cultural loss.

“[M]e espanta que de aquí a veinte años solamente estemos registrados en estudios y trabajos de antropología y trabajos de doctorados y que luego ya no estemos hablando de un idioma vivo, no estaríamos hablando de estos veinte años.

Yo le calculo otros quinientos años.”<sup>5</sup>

(Personal communication, September 8, 2012)

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<sup>5</sup> “It scares me that in 20 years we will only be registered in anthropological and doctoral investigations and that we will no longer be speaking a living language. But for Maya I calculate another 500 years.”

As Tove Skutnabb-Kangas (1998, p. 10) forcefully argues, “[i]f children are not granted the opportunity to learn their parents’ idiom fully and properly so that they become (at least) as proficient as their parents, the language is not going to survive” and without “the maintenance of linguistic and cultural diversity on our planet” what we are observing is nothing less than “linguistic genocide” in an increasingly globalized and “McDonaldized” world.

This study is an analysis of a corpus of contemporary poems written in Peninsular Maya that have also been translated by their authors into Spanish. Combining research and methodology from linguistics, literary, and pedagogical studies makes this an interdisciplinary research project whose contributions are yet to be fully explored. A single approach (e.g., literary analysis) would have been insufficient to capture the depth and richness of the meaning in each poem. Instead, the combination of the linguistic and literary analysis enabled us to unveil the at times inscrutable messages (to non-Maya speakers) that were only accessible through an in-depth investigation of the maternal language versions of the poems. As mentioned previously, the principal concern of this investigation is the contemporary expression of language and culture rooted in ancient Mayan traditions. With this aim, the structure and development of the study was guided and shaped through interviews and discussions with Mayan scholars and the poets themselves.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, numerous secondary sources written by Mayan and non-Mayan academics were consulted to deepen our comprehension and appreciation of the semantic and morpho-syntactic components of each poem. Also, we consulted several Mayan scholars (cultural historians, linguists, and pedagogues), in particular, Rolando Ek Naal whose profound knowledge of Mayan language and culture provided insightful comments and

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<sup>6</sup> We were fortunate to speak to the poets of four of the poems of this corpus. Unfortunately we did not get the opportunity to speak with Jorge Cocom Pech, the author of “The House of Your Soul.”

observations that enriched the analysis of the poems. We consider ourselves very fortunate to have had Mr. Ek Naal as our principal consultant throughout the entire study.

It is important to note here that because we focus on the in-depth analysis of these poems in the poets' maternal language and not on post-colonial themes or topics, we do not incorporate this perspective into our investigation. Although many aspects of these writers' messages clearly pertain to this area of literary theory and criticism, nevertheless, due to our particular focus, this approach falls beyond the scope of this study.

The poets and authors of our corpus of poems were chosen for the renowned quality of their work and because they are all actively writing and promoting Mayan cultural continuity through language and literature. Likewise, this collection of poems was selected because of the richness of its depiction of Mayan cultural beliefs and symbolism and because each poem either features or has as a recurrent and important theme the concept of house or home. As we will explain, the notion of house or home plays an important role in Mayan society and symbology. Its construction, structure, and the way it has been traditionally lived in and utilized is emblematic of Mayan cultural traditions and beliefs that have existed for centuries. Finally, in the examination of these texts, the poets' contemporary expression of the polysemic attributes of Mayan symbolism will be explored and discussed; with special attention given to references to the house or home. The findings of our investigation and analysis will be used in the attempt to answer the following research questions:

- 1) How is cultural symbolism embedded in language, and how does this "embeddedness" reflect culturally specific modes of conceptualization?
- 2) How does language transmit cultural symbolism?

- 3) To what extent is language—as a vehicle for the conception and transmission of cultural symbolism—a key factor in the diffusion of cultural worldview and continuity in contemporary Maya society?
- 4) How does the Mayan symbolic conceptualization of “house/home” unify the corpus of poems used for this study and act as an effective catalyst or point of departure in the teaching of this literature?

This dissertation is organized into eight chapters. Chapter one (as presented above) is the introduction. The second chapter provides historical information on Mayan language, culture, and literature, as well Mayan emigration to Oregon. It sets up a framework of information that guides and supports the analysis of each poem. In the third chapter we take a brief look at the process of translation. However, because we have based our study on the Mayan version of each poem, our primary focus is on Mayan language and cultural perspective. Consequently, in this chapter we examine the relationship between language and conceptualization and explore Mayan linguistic and literary elements specific to this corpus. In the fourth chapter we introduce the poets of the corpus, and describe the methodology we have used for both our linguistic and our literary analysis. In chapter five we present our linguistic and literary analysis of the five poems and after each poem summarize the analysis. In chapter six we discuss the corpus as a unified narrative. As part of this discussion we focus on three key themes that are recurrent in this poetry and which comprise the cohesive elements of this narrative. In chapter seven we present the background information supporting the ideology and design of our pedagogical proposal. In this chapter we also include a description of our proposed units of instruction and community based learning objectives and projects. In chapter eight we conclude this dissertation with a discussion of the limitations of our investigation and our thoughts on further research.

## **Chapter 2 Peninsular Maya: A Historic Perspective of Language and Literature**

This chapter has been divided into four sections (2.1 – 2.4). Each section adds necessary socio-cultural context and provides the historical perspective to support our discussion on conceptualization in Maya, our text analysis, corpus summary and discussion, and pedagogical proposal and conclusion. Section 2.1 begins with an overview of Mayan languages and then narrows its focus to Peninsular Maya, the maternal language of the poets in this study. Section 2.2 discusses the migration of Peninsular Maya speakers to the city of Portland and supports our pedagogical proposal. Section 2.3 presents a brief outline of the linguistic and literary history of Peninsula Maya. In this section we focus on the recurrent linguistic and literary elements of ancient and contemporary Mayan literature and discuss their provenance and continuity in relation to the poetry of our corpus. We conclude Chapter 2, Section 2.4 with a concise history of the movement, commonly termed “the Resurgence in Contemporary Mayan Literature.”

### **2.1 Introduction to Peninsular (Yucatec) Maya**

Although much of the cultural symbolism in this corpus recurs in Mayan societies throughout Mesoamerica, there are linguistic and regional differences that clearly distinguish each community. Because this is a study focused on poetry written in Yucatec or Peninsular Maya, it is essential to the comprehension of this literature to have a general understanding of the linguistic geography of the area.

According to the Mexican National Institute of Statistics and Geography (2005), six out of every hundred inhabitants in Mexico (five years of age and older) speak one of the more than 62 estimated indigenous languages. After Náhuatl, Maya (also known as Yucatec, Yukatek, and



Today, an estimated 31 distinct Mayan languages (with two now extinct) are spoken by more than five million people (see Table 1). And as shown above in Figure 1, the Maya geographic region includes the Mexican states of Yucatan, Campeche, and Quintana Roo, as well as the eastern part of Chiapas and Tabasco. It also extends through Belize, a large portion of Guatemala, and parts of western Honduras and El Salvador (Pérez Suárez, 2004, p. 6). Additionally, due to trends in international migration, there are significant numbers of Mexican and Central American Maya living throughout the United States and Canada (Law, 2013).

Peninsular Maya is spoken throughout the Yucatan Peninsula in the Mexican states of Yucatan, Campeche, and Quintana Roo. It is also spoken in the northeastern corner of Guatemala and in northern Belize (see Figure 1). In addition, due to migration trends that intensified in the 1980s and have continued to this date, there are large communities of Peninsular Maya speakers located in San Francisco, Los Angeles, and Oxnard, California, as well as in Portland, Oregon (see Figures 2 and 3) (Fox & Rivera-Salgado, 2004; Lewin & Guzmán, 2006; Pérez Suárez, 2004, Worely, 2010).

Table 1

*Mayan Languages According to Linguistic Branch*

K'iche'an	Mamean	Q'anjob'alan	Ch'olan-Tseltalan	Yukatekan
K'iche' (922,378) and Achi (51,593)	Awakateko and Chalchiteko (16,272)	Q'anjob'al (99,211)	Tseltal (445,856)	<b>Yukateko (759,000)</b>
Q'eqchi' (726,723)	Mam (519,664)	Akateko (5572)	Tsotsil (404,704)	Mopan (9668)
Sakapulteko (3940)	Tektiteko (1241)	Chuj (38,253)	Ch'orti' (9105)	Itza' (123)
Sipakapense (6344)	Ixil (69,137)	Popti' (38,350)	Chol (212,117)	Lakantun (1000)
Kaqchikel (475,889)		Mocho (170)	Chontal (38,561)	Wastekan
Tz'utujil (47,669)		Tojol-ab'al (51,733)	Ch'olti' (Extinct)	Wastek (161,120)
Uspanteko (1231)				Chikomuseltek (Extinct)
Poqomam (9548)				
Poqomchi' (69,716)				

*Note.* The number of speakers for each language is in parenthesis. Yukateko (Yucatec, Penninsular Maya) has been highlighted in green to correspond to the region also outlined in green in Figure 1. Adapted from “Mayan Historical Linguistics in a New Age,” by D. Law, 2013, *Language and Linguistics Compass*, 7, p. 143.

Out of the 29 estimated spoken Mayan languages, Peninsular Maya was specifically chosen for this investigation for the following reasons:

- 1) Peninsular or Yucatec Mayan is renowned for its ancient literary tradition that includes oral, pictorial, and written texts as well as for its vital contemporary literary production.
- 2) Although there are contemporary authors writing in various Mayan languages<sup>9</sup> who are recognized in their native countries and abroad, numerous writers in Peninsular Maya have received both national (in Mexico) and international acclaim for their works.
- 3) Some of the most recognized of these authors, such as Briceida Cuevas Cob, Feliciano Sánchez Chan, Jorge Cocom Pech, and Donny Limber Brito May (all of whom have works included in this corpus), are literary activists who promote Mayan cultural and

<sup>9</sup> For example, K'iche' Maya (Guatemala) has a vibrant contemporary literary tradition and Humberto Ak'ab'al is renowned K'iche' poet whose work is recognized both nationally and internationally.

linguistic continuity through literature (Cuevas Cob & Ek Naal, personal communication, September 8, 2013; Worley, 2010)

- 4) Because this dissertation culminates in a pedagogical proposal focused on Mayan poetry and the general promotion of contemporary Mayan culture and literature with U.S. teachers who teach an increasing population of students of Mayan descent.
- 5) And finally, because Portland, Oregon (where the primary investigator for this study is based) is an important destination for immigrants who speak Peninsular Maya (see Figure 2).

For the reasons explained above, we have decided to focus on poetry written in Peninsular Maya that has been translated into Spanish by the authors. And also because this investigation culminates in a pedagogical proposal for using this literature in an Oregon university and an elementary school serving a large population of Mayan families.

The next section gives a brief overview of the history and scale of Mayan emigration from the Yucatan Peninsula to the United States with a focus on Mayan families now living in Portland, Oregon. Although there are other cities in the United States that have larger populations of Yucatec Maya, we have focused particularly on the city of Portland because this city houses a vibrant Mayan community that actively promotes social events (carnivals, festivals, parades, dances, etc.) both in the neighborhood and in the local elementary school.

## **2.2 Peninsular Maya Speakers in Portland, Oregon**

“In some ways a ‘Maya’ identity is always already transnational”

(Worley, 2007, p. 37)

According to the Mexican governmental agency *Instituto de los mexicanos en el exterior*, in 2010, Portland Oregon was the third most important destination for Yucatecans (see Figure 2).



Figure 2. Important U.S. Destinations for Yucatecos. Adapted from the official website for the *Instituto de los mexicanos en el exterior*: <http://www.ime.gob.mx/index.php>

Also, as illustrated in Figure 3, the Mexican *Comisión Nacional de Migración* (2002) identifies the state of Yucatan as having the largest Mayan population in Mexico. Combining the information from these two figures, we see a large migration of people from the Yucatan to California and Oregon who are speakers of Peninsular Maya.

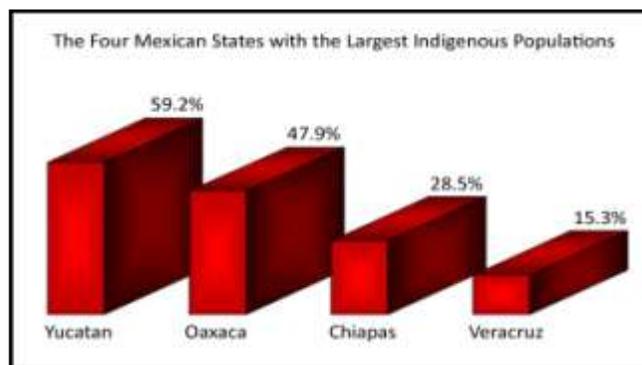


Figure 3. Mexican States with Highest Percentage of Indigenous Populations. Adapted from “Migración maya y política pública” by P. Lewin and E. Guzmán, 2006, *La Comisión de Migración*, p. 5.

The idea to create a study that would support the promotion of bilingual literature (Peninsular Maya/Spanish) in Portland came initially from personal experience observing the increase of Mayan students in classes being taught at the community college level. A more formal documentation of this increase has come from a variety of sources. Although the 2010 United States Census allows people to register as “Hispanic” and “American Indian” and to identify themselves as belonging to a specific “tribe” (a term and concept generally not utilized in Latin America), there are “persistent problems of census undercount,” especially with Latin American indigenous migrant communities composed of recent arrivals (Huizar Murillo & Cerda, 2004, p. 282). Therefore, for this study, the best evidence of what we have observed in Portland, regarding the increase in Yucatec Maya children in the educational system has come through emigration statistics from Mexico, interviews with Mayan community members and with educators who work with Mayan families in Portland.<sup>10</sup> It has also come through academic articles written by Mayan and non-Mayan scholars reporting on the Mayan transnational experience.

One Portland teacher we interviewed (June 14, 2013) reported that this year in her Spanish language kindergarten classroom, six out of her 21 students are Yucatec Maya. This represents an increase from just two students in 2011, and is an increase that is by no means unusual for her school. In two academic studies focusing on transnational communities, Jonathon Fox and Gaspar Rivera-Salgado (2004), posit that since the 1980s<sup>11</sup> the indigenous proportion of the Mexican migrant population has grown significantly. While Paul Worley

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<sup>10</sup> As many families have mixed or no legal status in the U.S., we have kept the names of Mayan community members and educators working with them in Portland anonymous in order to protect their identity.

<sup>11</sup> Fox and Rivera-Salgado (2004, p. 2) explain that an important factor in the increase of emigration of indigenous Mexicans is due to the Mexican Government’s abandonment of its “on-again / off-again commitment to make family farming economically viable.”

(2010, p. 35) explains that “emigration from both the state and peninsula of Yucatán is predominantly Maya” and is a relatively recent phenomenon that has happened over the last 25 years. Worley (2010) goes on to say that even though the number of migrants settling in cities like San Francisco and Portland has been steady since the 1980s and has intensified since 1990s, this doesn’t mean it is a community that has left its cultural identity behind.

Though an in-depth study of Yucatec migration is beyond the scope of this study, there are two aspects of this transnational experience that are essential to our investigation. The first is acknowledging the sizable community of Yucatec Maya living in Portland Oregon. The second is stating that although the migration of Yucatec Maya to the U.S. is a complicated and often dangerous process fraught with myriad problems, there are many cases where migration has resulted in Mayan communities working together to strengthen their cultural identities and connections both in Mexico and the U.S. (Lewin & Guzmán, 2006; Worley, 2010). Pedro Lewin and Estela Guzmán (2006, p. 9) describe Yucatec Mayan immigrants living in the U.S. as a “comunidad de migrantes en el exterior [que] tiene fuerte arraigo con sus localidades de origen [y] conserva fuertes lazos simbólicos con su tierra y comunidad.”<sup>12</sup> That said, the fact that Mayan children in Portland are learning English in school, but are not speaking or learning Maya (at school and often at home) is a cause for serious concern amongst Mayan activists both in the U.S. and in Mexico (personal communication, Cuevas Cob September 8, 2012; Mayan activist in Portland, personal communication, June 16, 2013).

Since there is a visible increase of Mayan children and youth in the public school system in the Portland area, it is important to include their valuable cultural perspective in

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<sup>12</sup> Pedro Lewin and Estela Guzmán (2006, p. 9) specifically describe Yucatec Mayan immigrants living in the U.S. as a “community of migrants living abroad that are strongly connected to their localities of origin and who preserve strong symbolic ties with their land and community.”

curriculum at all levels of education. Furthermore, as the Mayan experience has been transnational and multilingual for millennia and has coexisted with Spanish language and culture for the last 500 years, both Mayan culture and literature (historical and contemporary) need to be represented as an essential component in Spanish language and literature studies. For this reason, we have embarked on this investigation with the pedagogical objective of bringing these works into the classroom. And, with the idea that by studying contemporary bilingual (Maya/Spanish) poetry we will be able to use the power of language and literature to explore the connection between ancient and contemporary Mayan cultures. The following section is a concise overview of the linguistic and literary history of Peninsular Maya provided so the reader can better understand and appreciate this connection.

### **2.3 A Concise Overview of the Linguistic and Literary History of Peninsular Maya**

As this study is predominantly focused on how ancient Mayan cosmological beliefs are transmitted linguistically and how this unique cultural perspective and history is conveyed through contemporary Mayan language literature, a general understanding of certain aspects of Mayan linguistic and literary history is essential. However, we wish to note that the histories of Mayan languages and literatures are complicated fields of study and have celebrated recent breakthroughs in research, making them topics that are engendering new research and theories from modern scholars. For this reason, we will limit our discussion to the two features of Mayan linguistic and literary development that pertain specifically to our investigation: 1) the linguistic and geographic origins of Peninsular Maya; and 2) an explanation of how Mayan hieroglyphics convey specific regional information, while being written and read throughout a linguistically diverse area.

Cecil Brown and Søren Wichmann (2004, p. 129) describe Proto-Mayan (also called Common Maya) as the Maya “family parent language” that was spoken some four thousand years ago. Brown and Wichmann classify the Mayan languages that have evolved from Proto-Maya into “seven major subgroups: Yucatecan, Huastecan, Cholan, Tzeltalan, Mamean, K’ichee’an, and Greater Q’anjob’alan.” Tomás Pérez Suárez (2004), uses a somewhat different configuration, to explain that the 31 Mayan languages that stem from Proto-Maya can be grouped together in four large linguistic branches (see Figure 4).

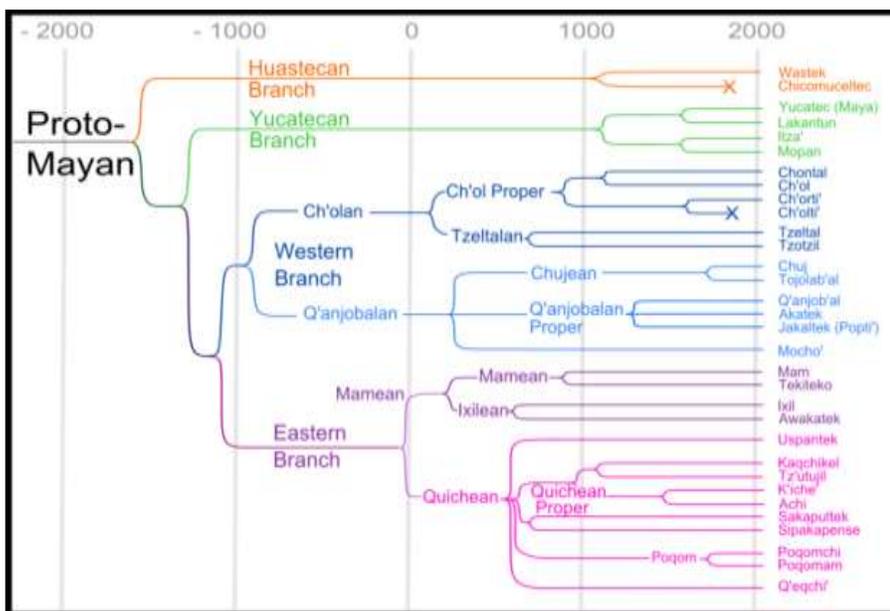


Figure 4. The Four Main Branches of Mayan Languages: Huastecan, Yucatecan, Western, and Eastern and a timeline of when they separated from Proto-Maya. Source:

[https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/thumb/e/e3/Mayan](https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/thumb/e/e3/Mayan_Language_Tree_in_colour.png/710px-ayan_Language_Tree_in_colour.png)

Language\_Tree\_in\_colour.png/710px-ayan\_Language\_Tree\_in\_colour.png. Reprinted with permission.

He further contends that the first linguistic branch to separate from Proto-Maya was Huastec and the second was Yucatec. Yucatec is comprised of four languages: Yucatec or Peninsular Maya,

Itza', Mopan and Lacandon. The third branch (also known as the Western branch) was comprised of the Cholan languages (from the low central regions), Tzeltal (from the higher regions of Chiapas), and Chuj and Q'anjob'al or Kanjobal (from the border region between Chiapas and Guatemala). The the fourth branch (or Eastern branch), includes 13 languages that are generally divided into two main groups: Mam and Quiche or K'iche'. Figure 5 illustrates Terrence Kaufmann's (1976) theory of Mayan language migration and shows the Yucatec linguistic branch as separating from Proto-Maya around 1400 BCE.



Figure 5. Terrence Kaufmann's (1976) Theory of Mayan Language Migration. Source: [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Mayan\\_Language\\_Migration\\_Map.svg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Mayan_Language_Migration_Map.svg). Reprinted with permission.

Though linguistic historians may differ in their theories about the divisions and subdivisions of Mayan languages and when they separated from Proto-Maya or Common Maya, what is most important to this study, and is common to the works that inform this study, is that Mayan languages and cultures are deeply rooted in the Mesoamerican region. And although

Yucatec / Peninsular Maya has been spoken in one specific area for thousands of years and generations of speakers have developed their own linguistic and cultural characteristics, they are still part of an overarching ancestral Maya (Pan-Maya<sup>13</sup>) identity and share many linguistic and cultural traditions with other Maya who speak completely different languages. Thus, even though we have focused our research on the Yucatan Peninsula, we have been able to incorporate information from other Mayan linguistic and geographical regions in our study and develop our analysis using both general (Mayan or Pan-Mayan) and specific (Peninsular/Yucatec Mayan) terms.

We began this dissertation by asserting that a vital connection exists between pre-Colombian literatures and contemporary works written by indigenous Latin American authors. We have also affirmed that elements of the ancient Mayan worldview conceptualization and symbology have been communicated in the maternal language (Peninsular Maya) version of the works written by contemporary poets. Throughout this investigation we have used various methods to trace the cultural symbolism used by each poet. We have also used research based on studies of hieroglyphic writings from the various “Classic” Mayan periods.<sup>14</sup> These important studies show how the ancient Mayan scribes transmitted cosmological symbology and poetic technique through pictorial language. To understand how Mayan hieroglyphics were written and read throughout a linguistically diverse area, and how they conveyed both general and regional Mayan cultural information, it is important to know that:

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<sup>13</sup> Allan Burns (1998) describes Yucatec Pan-Maya ideology as a regional identity (Yucatec Maya) that is related to other Mayan groups in Chiapas, Guatemala, Belize, and the United States.

<sup>14</sup> According to Rolando Ek Naal the Mayan “Classical” periods are time classifications that have been created by Occidental anthropologists, archeologists, historians, linguists, etc., and are not based on Mayan worldview perspective. The following list should help give readers a sense of chronology. But, it is important to remember, these Occidental time classifications have nothing to do with Maya perception of time (personal communication, July 9, 2013).

**Preclassic** (1500 B.C.E.—A.C.E. 200), **Classic** (A.C.E. 200—910) and **Postclassic** (A.C.E. 910—1524) (Schele & Mathews, 1998, p. 16).

The Maya [ancient] script is a unitary one. Its orthographic rules are the same throughout the area where writing was practiced, and its basic sign inventory, although it developed over time, was shared among all sites. Nevertheless, there is some variation in the degree of phoneticism. Since it operates with both syllabic signs and logograms, the Maya writing system in many cases offers different possibilities of writing one and the same word, i.e. by the use of logogram, a combination of a logogram and one or more syllabic signs, or by means of syllabic signs only (Wichmann, 2004, p. 22).

In other words, ancient Mayan writing was legible (to those who could read) throughout the entire Mayan region, even though many languages were spoken. Because this ancient writing incorporated both logograms<sup>15</sup> and a syllabic systems, ancient scribes “wrote with an accent” in order to indicate phonological differences in their texts and to represent linguistic regional identity (Wichmann, 2004, p. 22). Since the ancient texts communicate both general and regionally specific Mayan cultural information, our study incorporates texts found at archeological sites as well as texts embedded in artifacts<sup>16</sup> found throughout the Maya (Pan-Maya) region.

The substantial evidence of cultural expression and symbolic continuity (pre-Columbian to the present) in the Mayan language versions of the contemporary works we have studied has been a source of wonder and admiration. That for over five centuries of brutal subjugation, so much still survives and is disseminated linguistically to this day, is truly awe inspiring.

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<sup>15</sup>The Merriam Webster Dictionary defines a logogram as “a letter, symbol, or sign used to represent an entire word” (1995, p. 684).

<sup>16</sup>Ancient Mayan hieroglyphic writing is found not only in codices and on political/religious monuments, but an incredible wealth of writings (including poetry) are also found on ceramics and other artifact (Rivera Dorado, 1999 and 2000).

However, the effort to create and promote contemporary literature that is representational of Mayan linguistic and cultural conceptualization and expression continues to be a tremendous endeavor requiring the skill, creativity and perseverance of many skilled and dedicated individuals. Therefore, before we begin our analysis of this corpus, we provide the reader with a brief history of the evolution of contemporary Maya literature, as it is an essential factor in understanding and appreciating these works.

#### **2.4 The Resurgence of Contemporary Mayan Literature**

“Podemos mostrar lo maya por la lengua; es nuestro escudo y nuestra arma. [. . .]

La literatura en lengua maya es una muestra de resistencia.

Ahora defendemos nuestra identidad

con la lengua escrita.”<sup>17</sup>

(Noh Tzec, 1998)

Although Mayan literature spans millennia, it was not until relatively recently that the texts of contemporary Mayan authors have become more accessible and recognized. In Mexico, this literary development can be traced back to socio-political and literary movements (in the 1920s) that began after the Mexican Revolution (Waldman, n.d.). This was followed by the advent of Indigenist literature (1920s-1960s) and the socio-literary objectives of the participating authors, whose writing focused on the oppression, segregation and severely impoverished conditions that subjugated the indigenous population (*ibid*). However, as these writers were not

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<sup>17</sup> “We are able to express all that is Maya through the language; it is our shield and our weapon. [. . .] Literature written in Maya is an expression of resistance. Now we defend our identity with written language.” This quote comes from a presentation by Waldemar Noh Tzec at the 1998 seminar on “Identidad Maya y Creación Intelectual” in Mérida, Mexico, but was retrieved from page 357 of the article, “Literatura Maya-Yukateka Contemporánea (Tradición y Futuro)” written in 2000 by Francesc Ligorred Perramon.

indigenous and wrote from their own perspective, which included a lack of cultural knowledge and understanding of indigenous cultures, their writings (although revealing the inhumanity of the social system) have been criticized as being limited and “relativamente superficial e imaginativo” (Waldman, n.d., p. 65).<sup>18</sup>

It was not until a new generation of indigenous leaders (many of whom had been formally educated in state sponsored bilingual programs) began to organize and campaign nationally and internationally for economic and political self determination, land rights and cultural and linguistic autonomy, that an effort to produce literature written in indigenous languages began (Waldman, n.d.). In the 1970s, as part of this cultural/political movement, indigenous contemporary authorship in native languages, expressly for the purpose of protecting and disseminating indigenous languages and cultures, was actively promoted (Cocom Pech, 2010). Although these initiatives can be traced to different, and at times contradictory official language policies, the actual creation of linguistic and culturally relevant literature was (and still is) a direct result of the motivation, creativity and work of indigenous organizations and individuals (Montemayor, 2001). Consequently, the Resurgence is a movement that reflects the common goals of linguistic and cultural resistance and survival, as well as the innovative use of language in individual and community expression and creativity (Montemayor, 2001).

In the 1980s, as participants in this resurgence, Mayan scholars worked with renowned author Carlos Montemayor and others to develop a series of workshops promoting Mayan language literature by Mayan authors that was consonant with their distinct world view and values (May May, 2004, p. 355). In many cases the first step toward literary production meant the rejection of alphabets developed by non-indigenous linguists (if they existed) and the creation of alphabets by native Maya speakers that reflected the rhythm, tone, and phonology of

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<sup>18</sup> Their writings have been criticized as being limited and relatively superficial and imaginative.”

their languages. These Mayan writers were motivated not only by the challenges of artistic creation, but by the need for a commitment to their culture that caused them to rethink practically everything about their language, even to the point of deciding which alphabet to use (Montemayor, 2001, pp. 35-36).

The fact that many of the emerging authors were bilingual, had a command of Maya as their first language and Spanish as an additional language—but had been educated in Spanish—profoundly affected how they wrote in both Spanish and their maternal language. As a result, the authors focused on the oral expression of their maternal language, paying particular attention to rhythm, vocabulary and structure. They then developed a series of workshops to help them identify and eliminate (as much as possible) Spanish syntax and vocabulary from their written language. Carlos Montemayor (2001) demonstrates this process in a series of sentences in which the Mayan writers used a step-by-step process to peel away the Spanish grammar and syntax until a sentence was produced that was the same semantically, but approximated actual Mayan speech. In Table 2 we present a stripped down version of this process in order to give the reader give a rough idea of the grammatical and syntactical differences between Spanish and Maya. Although in this study we focus primarily on the semantics of a term or cluster of terms and not on syntax or grammar, our linguistic analysis allowed us to observe how meaning (the semantic element) surfaces at the structure or sentence level (the syntax). Moreover, having a better comprehension of some of the grammatical differences between Maya and Spanish helps clarify why the meaning and placement of specific morphemes or grammatical elements in Maya often yielded important information for our linguistic and literary analysis.

Table 2

*Grammatical and Syntactical Differences between Spanish and Maya*

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**Spanish** (English): **Spanish syntax and grammar**

Las casas que están en Mérida son blancas. (The houses that are in Merida are white.)

- Note the use of the definite article ‘**las**/the’
- Note the use of the verbal function ‘**que están**/that are.’
- Note the agreement of number and gender (plural and feminine) between the article ‘**las**/the,’ the noun ‘**casas**/houses,’ and the adjective ‘**blancas**/white.’

**Maya**: **Maya vocabulary with Spanish syntax and grammar**

*Le najo’ob yano’ob jo’o saktako’ob*

- Note the use of the definite article *Le*, as is done in Spanish (*las*/the)
- Note the plural agreement between the noun *najo’ob*, as is done in Spanish (**casas**/ houses)
- Note the use of the verbal function *yano’ob*, as is done in Spanish (**que están**/that are)
- Note the pluralization of the adjective *saktako’ob*, as is done in Spanish (**blancas**/white)

**Maya**: **Maya vocabulary with Maya syntax, and grammar**

*Sak u najilo’ob Jo’*

- Note that there is no definite article *Le* ‘*las*/the’
- Note that only the noun *najilo’ob* ‘casas/houses’ is plural and there is no marking of gender
- Note that there is no verbal function as seen above with *yano’ob* (**que están**/that are)
- Note that the adjective *Sak* ‘blanca/white’ is singular
- Note that the pronoun ‘*u*’ marks the possessive of *Jo’* ‘Mérida’

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*Note.* Adapted from “*La literatura actual en las lenguas indígenas de México*,” by C. Montemayor, 2001, p. 41.

After accustoming themselves to the use of Mayan syntax and grammar in their writings, the authors participating in these initial workshops turned to the analysis of prayers or language

used in ritual practice in order to identify and analyze recurrent linguistic and literary elements intrinsic to this ancient oral tradition. Alisa Buch (2001) explains that in Mesoamerica the language used in prayer, as well as that used to communicate with the divine, is a vehicle for preserving and communicating ancient knowledge. She also states that because prayer has been passed on from generation to generation through specialized orators/priests that have memorized traditional expressions and transmitted them orally, aspects of this ancient verbal artform continue to be evident in contemporary ceremonial speech (*ibid*). As Mayan society has been traditionally agricultural, and cultivation (especially of corn) continues to be a vital cultural activity, an important facet of the Mayan linguistic and literary legacy comes from the ancient agricultural rituals and prayers that have been practiced and recited for centuries (Freidel, Schele, & Parker, 1993; Lizama Quijano, 2007). Miguel May May (1991) tells us that since Mayan sacred discourse used in agricultural prayer has been carefully transmitted and handed down through the ages, it has retained its linguistic characteristics of grammatical and phonic elegance. Mayan sacred discourse then can be said to be a manifestation of language and poetic technique that is relatively unaltered (*ibid*). For this reason, while the authors participating in these initial workshops were working to eliminate Spanish grammar and syntax from their writings, they were also searching for Mayan literary traditions that were pre-Columbian in origin so they could identify and explore genres and poetic techniques that were demonstrative of their own rich literary history.

Carlos Montemayor (2001) writes that in order to understand the origins of Mayan literature it is necessary to go directly to the form and cadence of the language itself and leave behind the precepts that condition Occidental literature. He further explains that the Mayan literary tradition “[s]e trata de otro orden estético, más complejo, con una gama más amplia de

valores sonoros, con modelos milenarios que aún siguen vivos en discursos ceremoniales, en conjuros, en rezos sacerdotales, en canciones, en ciertos relatos”<sup>19</sup> (Montemayor, 2001, pp.42-43). Since Mayan ritual language is demonstrative of an ancient rhetorical art form that is highly expressive in sound (tonality and accentuation), meaning (cultural symbolism), and aesthetics (poetic articulation), it was for the participants of the workshops and for Mayan writers today an essential literary source and inspiration (Buch, 2001; Franco, 2005). Today, over 30 years later, many of the authors trained in these initial workshops are still actively writing and teaching and they—along with new generations of writers—are producing monolingual, bilingual, and multilingual texts published both traditionally and electronically.<sup>20</sup> (Cuevas Cob, personal communication, September 8, 2012). And, in their efforts to encourage new writers, Mayan language literacy, and the dissemination of Mayan literature (regionally, nationally, and internationally) they continue to participate in and lead workshops, courses, symposiums, and presentations through various organizations such as the Instituto de Cultura de Yucatán, La Asociación Mayao’on de Valladolid, and La Comisión del Desarrollo de las Comunidades Indígenas (Ek Naal, personal communication, July, 2, 2013). Because they maintain an ancient tradition of linguistic artistic expression, these texts are preserving and promoting Mayan culture through language and are living links between contemporary indigenous cultures and ancient literary traditions (Regino, 2008).

All of the poets selected for this study have participated directly in these workshops and are writers/teachers themselves who have kept the movement alive through their belief in the

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<sup>19</sup> “It is speaks of another esthetic order, more complex, with a more ample range of sonant values, thousand year old models that continue to live in ceremonial discourse, in spells, priestly [religious] prayers, in songs, and certain stories.”

<sup>20</sup> It is important to note that reflecting the discriminating practices in traditional publishing; it continues to be an enormous struggle for many indigenous writers to be published in traditional book format.

power of poetry to convey their cultural perspective and their conviction that language is essential for Maya cultural preservation and continuity (Cuevas Cob, personal communication, September 8, 2012). In their efforts to use written language as a means of promoting cultural and linguistic agency these writers have a dual task:

- 1) To create texts that promote and disseminate Mayan culture in a linguistically and culturally diverse society.
- 2) To create texts in Maya that encourage speakers of Maya to read, think, and conceptualize in their maternal language.

To accomplish these objectives the poets of this corpus, like the majority of contemporary indigenous Mexican writers, generally (but not exclusively) write and publish bilingually in Maya and Spanish.

Although we have presented the poets' Spanish translation of their works along with their Mayan version (as well as English translations) and we culminate our investigation with ideas on how to incorporate these poems into Spanish language curriculum, the process of translation is not the focus of our study. That said, there are many striking semantic differences between the poets' Maya and Spanish renditions and the gaps between the languages are often indicators of cultural information and modes of conceptualization that are imbedded in the language and transmitted linguistically. In Chapter three we briefly discuss the process of translation, not as a means of comparison, but as a point of cultural and linguistic departure.

## Chapter 3 Conceptualization in Maya: Translation, Composite Language, and Poetics

Chapter three has been divided into five sections (3.1 – 3.5). Information from these sections provides the conceptual and theoretical foundation for our linguistic and literary analysis, summary, discussion, pedagogical proposal, and conclusion. Section 3.1 examines the challenges of translation between two languages that are linguistically and culturally distinct. Corresponding to the linguistic and cultural differences discussed in Section 3.1, Section 3.2 explores the relationship between language and conception and articulates a more Mayan perspective of the notions of concept and conceptualization. Section 3.3 illustrates the agglutinate nature of the Mayan language and describes how composite terms and expressions impart complex conceptualizations. Similarly, Section 3.4 demonstrates how complex thought is transmitted through poetic techniques that are rooted in ancient Mayan literature (ritual language and pictorial writings). In this section we discuss how these literary techniques have survived for millennia and are recurrent elements in the poems of our corpus. In Section 3.5 we conclude our theoretical framework with an examination of the traditional Mayan house or *naj*— the unifying theme of this corpus.

### 3.1 The Process of Translation

“¿Cómo puede vivir el pueblo maya si no se le permite ordenar  
su pensamiento en su propia lengua?”<sup>21</sup>

(Ligorred Perromon, 1995, p. 612)

As explained previously, the regeneration of indigenous literatures in Mexico is a movement that was initially motivated by the objective of maintaining and nurturing culture

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<sup>21</sup> “How could the Maya people live if they were not permitted to order their thoughts in their own language?”

through language. The fact that the majority of the writings from this literary movement are bilingual makes it necessary to briefly discuss the role of Spanish, not as the dominant language, but as the lingua franca of writers living in a multilingual society. For many indigenous Mexican writers, the creation of bilingual texts (their maternal languages and Spanish) is an effective way to reach other linguistic groups in and outside of Mexico. And, although the production and dissemination of indigenous language literature is an act of linguistic resistance, it is not a rejection of Spanish, but an expression of cultural identity and continuity. Linguistic resistance, in this sense, is the right to speak and write in their maternal language and Spanish because they are both their rightful languages (Coronado Suzán, 1991).<sup>22</sup>

However, even though the poets chosen for this study are bilingual,<sup>23</sup> publish mostly bilingually, and are noted for the quality of their writing in both Maya and Spanish, this does not mean that all of the cultural perspective and symbolism inherent in the maternal language versions of their work has been communicated in their translations (Ek Naal, personal communication, September 24, 2012). According to Scott Hadley (2008), the task of writing a poem in Maya and then translating it into Spanish produces a peculiar phenomenon because it requires the writer to use both languages as distinct spaces or environments for the writing of one poem. He further describes this process as two languages expressing the same literary work “con

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<sup>22</sup>Although Spanish like Maya is the rightful language of the poets of this corpus and writing bilingually does make their texts accessible to other linguistic minorities in Mexico and beyond, the fact that there are very few monolingual publications in Maya in Mexico (or anywhere) is an indication of the subordination of the Mayan language (Brody, 2007).

<sup>23</sup>For this study we are defining bilingual according to the François Grosjean definition adapted by Wendy S. Francis (1999). “Bilingualism is the regular use of two (or more) languages, and bilinguals are those people who need and use two (or more) languages in their everyday lives.” This definition implies both spoken and written competence.

toda su polisemia al obedecer dos normas lingüísticas distintas”<sup>24</sup> (Hadley, 2008, p. 425). In other words, because “no two languages are perfectly reconcilable,” and Maya and Spanish are particularly dissimilar due to profound morphophonological and syntactic differences and cultural contexts, in a bilingual rendition of a text each language functions as a linguistic and cultural lens through which the work is filtered and transmitted (McGuire, 1990, p. 261).

James McGuire (1990, pp. 260-61) asserts that self-translation and/or bilingual composition refers to an “intertextual dialogue between the original and the translation” and that in this dialogue between the two languages the bilingual author-translator must make changes in his/her translation in order to the limit loss of meaning in the second language. These alterations force interdependencies between the original and the translation and create a third or bilingual space where, although the author cannot always reconcile linguistic and cultural differences, he/she can create a bridge between the two languages and cultures. However, since languages are culture-specific and meaning surfaces not only as culturally bound, but also within the context of the motives and means of communication, un-translated gaps or bilingual spaces not only indicate profound cultural and linguistic differences, but are also a means for a bilingual author (as a linguistic and cultural activist) to encourage readers to conceptualize in their maternal language (Casad, 1995).

John A. Lucy (2005, p. 307) asserts that languages “play a role in producing cultural and mental diversity.” In the case of the bilingual readers of this poetry, this means that they would in all probability be able to access meaning from the Mayan versions as well as the Spanish translations because they have the “language support” to understand the “sophisticated cultural and psychological” elements these texts entail and evoke (Lucy, 2005, p. 307). However, if the

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<sup>24</sup> “The two languages become a means of expressing the same text with all of its polysemy while obeying two distinct linguistic norms.”

reader only speaks or reads Spanish (or the non-Mayan translation language) although the translation is a bridge promoting *more* accessible cross cultural understanding, it is still only approximate because it cannot convey modes of conceptualization that are culturally and linguistically specific (Gumperz & Levinson, 1991; Francis, 1999; Wierzbicka 2013).

An example of this type of (approximate) “bilingual conceptual bridge” comes from the second poem in our corpus by Jorge Miguel Cocom Pech entitled “*U Naajil A Pixan*” / “The House of Your Soul” (2009). In the third verse of this poem in the Spanish translation, the poet describes the Mayan language as a “*casa milenaria*” ‘thousand-year-old house’ but, in the original version in Maya, he describes it as “*úuchben xa’anilnaj*” or *úuchben* ‘old,’ *xa’an* ‘palm frond,’ *il* ‘of,’ *naj* ‘house;’ ‘old-house-with-palm-roof.’ In other words, he is describing a traditional Mayan house using time honored construction techniques and regionally specific materials. Since this poem refers to the ancient house where one’s ancestors live, the original version in Maya, referring to the prototypical Mayan house that architecturally dates back to 1000 B.C.E., clearly gives us a much richer understanding of the poet’s symbolic conception of a cultural home and the ultimate message of the poem (Schele & Mathews, 1998). Furthermore, as Maya lexicon and grammar are “rich repository[s] of cultural knowledge,” the Maya speaker/reader would know that because the expression “*úuchben xa’anilnaj*” contains the grammatical element “*il*” (an affix utilized to indicate conceptual abstraction), beyond being a description of a traditional home, it is a powerful cultural symbol that for many Maya represents a way of life practiced for centuries (Ek Naal, personal communication, September, 24, 2013; Houston, Robertson & Stuart, 2001; Langacker, 1997, p. 241). In this comparison between “*úuchben xa’anilnaj*” and “*casa milenaria*”/“thousand-year-old house” it is evident that the translation, although it gives us important information, does not depict this symbol with depth

and detail; nor can it ever do so without extensive explanation. For this reason, the expression “casa milenaria” is indicative of a “bilingual conceptual bridge” because it does span a cultural linguistic gap by yielding important information and leading the reader onto the right path to ultimately grasp the overall message of the poem. Even so, it is an approximation because it only expresses a fraction of the meaning of the original text. Because the traditional Mayan home as a cultural symbol is the unifying theme of this corpus, we discuss this icon and its conception in some detail throughout our investigation.

In reading this literature, because there were so many instances of “bilingual bridges” and indications of profound linguistic and cultural differences, it was clear that in order for us to be able to carry out our analysis we would need a better understanding of: 1) how a cultural symbol or concept is conceived from a Mayan perspective; and 2) how language (in this case Maya) contributes to the process of conceptualization. The following section—as a framework for our analysis—is an exploration of the relationship between language and conceptualization and provides the reader with a working definition of the terms symbol, concept, and conceptualization from a Mayan perspective.

### **3.2 The Relationship between Language and Conceptualization and a Working Understanding of the Terms “Symbol,” “Concept,” and “Conceptualization”**

“[P]or la interdependencia del pensamiento y de la palabra se hace evidente que las lenguas, propiamente dicho, no son medios para presentar la verdad ya conocida, sino que son mucho más, a saber (existen) para descubrir la verdad antes conocida.

La diferencia de los idiomas no es la de sonidos y señales, sino

que es la diferencia de visiones del mundo mismo.”<sup>25</sup>

(Translation of Wilhelm Von Humboldt by Carlos Lenkersorf, 1998, p. 7)

Ana Wierzbicka (1992, p. 7) maintains that languages do not reflect the world directly, but reflect instead “human conceptualization, human interpretation of the world.” Furthermore, “each language embodies a particular interpretation” of the world that is not common or universal (Lucy, 2005, p. 299). In describing the transference of meaning from one language to another from a bilingual’s perspective, Wierzbicka (1992, p. 7) states that “the real question, [...] is not whether meaning can be transferred from one language to another but to what extent it is. Or, to put it differently, to what extent languages are shaped by ‘human nature’ and to what extent they are shaped by culture.”<sup>26</sup>

Before launching into a description of some of the distinct morphological and semantic features of the Mayan language that facilitate the linguistic expression of cultural perspective and conceptualization, it is important to briefly discuss the notions of “symbol” and “concept” and the process of “conceptualization.” In conjunction with this discussion, we propose a working understanding of these terms that corresponds more accurately with the cultural perspective of the authors chosen for this study. From Wierzbicka’s statement above, that language reflects “human conceptualization” and/or “human interpretation of the world,” we are given to understand that “conceptualization” (and its expression through symbolic representation) refers to the cognitive act of processing and making meaning of experience within a cultural

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<sup>25</sup> “Through the interdependence of thought and word it is evident that languages, strictly speaking, are not means of presenting the truth already known, but are much more, namely (they exist) in order to discover the truth already known. The difference between languages is not sounds and signals, but the difference between visions of the world itself.”

<sup>26</sup> For landmark research on linguistic diversity and cultural conceptualization focusing on Mayan languages see Brown, 2008 and Lucy, 2005.

framework. Moreover, that this “cultural framework” is comprised of all of the elements (social, cultural, historical, physical, and environmental, etc.) that create the “world” one lives in. Since the cultural framework of native Mayan speakers (such as the poets of this corpus) includes thousands of years of cultural and linguistic development deeply rooted in the natural environment of their place of origin—which is largely tropical jungle—it is not surprising that there is a keen use of the senses and a frequent association with nature in Mayan conceptual expression.

María del Carmen Valverde Valdés (1996, p. 28) in her discussion of ancient Mayan symbolic representation explains that it is complex and “conlleva en sí una gran pluralidad de sentidos” and “muestra y oculta al mismo tiempo realidades contradictorias.”<sup>27</sup> Moreover, she describes Mayan symbolism as the embodiment of the intricate relation between the Maya and their environment and as an expression of their identity utilized to unify and strengthen their community (Valverde Valdés, 2004). Although this description of Mayan symbolic representation focuses on ancient Mayan iconology, it is appropriately used here because it is illustrative of the key symbols recurrent in this corpus and of the intentions of the poets in their use of them. More importantly, in relation to this study, Valverde Valdés’ explanation helps clarify that our use of the terms “symbol,” “symbolic representation,” and “symbolology” is *not* an allusion to literal signs or visual representations of discrete notions, but is a reference to the complexity, inter-connectivity and social implications inherent in the concepts and imagery expressed by these poets.

In the same vein, Ronald Langacker (1997) states that from an Occidental perspective a “concept” is a notion which is frequently conceived as being a purely mental construction or

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<sup>27</sup> Mayan symbolology “entails a great plurality of meanings” and “at the same time reveals and conceals contradictory realities.”

activity. He emphasizes that his own definition of the term and understanding of its function encompasses other modes of perception such as sensory, physical, and emotional information. To give a small illustration of how a “traditional” Occidental perspective on the notion of “concept” might differ from a Maya definition, Table 3 presents two definitions of the term “concept.” The first is taken from the Merriam Webster Dictionary and the second from a conversation with Mr. Ek Naal in which we specifically asked him to define the term and notion of “concept” from what he considers a Mayan perspective.

Table 3

*Contrasting Occidental and Mayan Perspectives and Definitions of the Term “Concept”*

English Definition	Rolando Ek Naal’s Definition
<p><b>Concept:</b> “Something conceived in the mind; thought or notion; an abstract or generic idea generalized from particular instances” (1993, p. 238).</p>	<p>“<b>Un concepto maya</b> es una palabra/idea conectada con los cinco sentidos del oído, el olfato, el gusto, el tacto y la vista.”</p> <p>“A Mayan concept is a word/idea connected to the five senses of hearing, smell, taste, touch, and sight.”</p>

*Note.* Adapted from *Merriam Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary*, 1993, p. 238 and Ek Naal, personal communication, May 22, 2013.

According to the Merriam Webster Collegiate dictionary, a definitive authority on the significance of English terminology, a concept is considered a mental abstraction because it is *strictly a product of thought or the mind*. In contrast, Rolando Ek Naal defines the same term as a means of comprehension and expression that incorporates *all of the senses*. In comparing these two definitions it becomes evident that while the Merriam Webster’s Dictionary defines a

concept as “conceived in the mind” or a process of thought separated from other sensory perception, Mr. Ek Naal considers a concept as well as the process of “conceptualization” a multisensory experience.

This sensory sensitivity and how it is expressed linguistically has been studied in-depth by John A. Lucy (2005). In his study comparing the difference between how English speakers and Yucatec Maya speakers enumerate and classify nouns he explains that:

Mayan speakers clearly do exhibit a great sensitivity to the material properties of objects. In the experimental tasks, they constantly evaluate the material composition of the test items before sorting them—feeling how heavy they are, poking their nails into them to test for malleability, scraping the surface to see what material might be under any paint, smelling and tasting the objects, and generally questioning or commenting on their material properties—something English speakers rarely do. (p. 306)

For Mayan speakers then, objects are experienced and referred to through their material composition, which includes appearance, smell, texture and weight, sound, and taste. And this method of classification (perception and description) of physical objects as multisensory is an aspect of Mayan cultural perspective that is literally embedded in the language. Lucy (2005, p. 307) further explains that this mode of expression, because it incorporates an array of sensory information and is the expression of a vital and corporal experience, “suggests the everyday vitality of a distinctive orientation to the material world.”

The results of Lucy’s study provide significant insight into why there are such different cultural perspectives of what is considered to be a “concept” or the process of “conceptualization.” Moreover, they help us understand why Rolando Ek Naal, the poets of this corpus, and the other native Mayan speakers we have consulted continually elucidated Mayan

concepts and perspective through illustrations, examples and metaphors rich in sensory imagery generally coming from the physical world. Finally, Lucy's study helps clarify why the environment is an overarching cultural context that is perceived and conceptualized multisensorially and expressed verbally through the semantic and syntactic capabilities of the Mayan language.<sup>28</sup> Thus, our understanding and use of the term and notion "concept" is more aligned with Ek Naal, Langacker, and Lucy and refers to a cognitive process of perception and expression that includes multisensory reception as well as emotional and physical experiences as contributing factors to conceptualization.

To understand the relationship between language and conceptualization, Lucy (2005, p. 303) also explains that with Yucatec Maya it is helpful to "build outward from [the] language structure." In the next section we give a brief explanation of the composite nature of the Mayan language and using examples from our corpus we demonstrate how through agglutination the poets are able to express complicated concepts (that are often multisensory) by combining various morphophonological elements. Furthermore, we investigate how through this same process of agglutination, ancient symbolism embedded in the language plays an essential role in the poets' conceptualization.

### **3.3 Composite Language**

Mayan agglutinative<sup>29</sup> morphology allows speakers/writers to build off of root words that are generally monosyllabic (Lucy, 1992). In *A Dictionary of The Maya Language As Spoken in Hocabá, Yucatán* there are several classes of root words listed that have been categorized as

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<sup>28</sup> For other writings on the multisensory capabilities of Mayan languages please refer to Le Guen, 2011, Bricker, 1999, and Brown, 2011.

<sup>29</sup> Agglutination (Linguistics): To form words by combining words or words and word elements. (Farlex on-line dictionary)



This composite word combines an adjective (*k'an* 'yellow') with two nominals (*óol* 'breath, spirit, energy, force, pistil' and *le'* 'leaves') and signifies yellow tender tips of young leaves, indicating a burst of young plant life and potential. Rolando Ek Naal (personal communication, May 11, 2013) explains that this term is often used in reference to sprouting corn and the “ánimo joven” (young spirit) of the budding new leaves. He goes on to say that “para los mayas las palabras tienen color, sonido, olor e incluso sabor [que se comunican y se entienden] entre el contexto de la cosmovisión maya.”<sup>33</sup>

Finally, because compound words are polysemous and are composed of lexical elements that can also be polysemic, writers/speakers using a few select composite terms can enhance descriptions and convey multiple layers of information. For this reason, key words (as is evident in the works used for this study) function like conceptual composites comprised of diverse yet related bits of information that in the course of their analysis reveal a complex web of multifaceted and interrelated meaning. Olivier Le Guen (2011, p. 119) illustrates this process by explaining that when a root word has been compounded in Maya, it “gains more specific meaning” enabling speakers to communicate using what he describes as “complex perceptual gestalts.” Richard Haly (2004, p. 124) describes this aspect of Mayan language as a way of conceptualizing—telling, knowing, and living—that is expressed through a “constellation of metaphors” that map and transmit knowledge from an implicit to an explicit conceptual domain. In other words, in Maya, because this method of agglutination facilitates the creation and articulation of complex concepts through the juxtaposition of diverse components of information, speakers are able to convey abstract yet explicit thought succinctly through composite words (Brown, 2011; Ligorred Perramon, 1992; Morales Damián, 2007).

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<sup>33</sup> “For the Maya, words have color, sound, smell, and even flavor [that are communicated and understood] within the context of the Maya worldview.”

Figure 6 below is another illustration of the composite and polysemous nature of the Mayan language and shows the semantic analysis of a key term taken from the first poem of our corpus. The poem is “*U Tsoolil Óox Tuunich K-Otoch*” / “The Three Stones of the Hearth” by Donny Limber Brito May and the term we have chosen for this illustration is *ka’anche’*, which has been translated as ‘*mesa de limbo*’ in Spanish by the author and as ‘*altar*’ in our English rendition. The purpose of this semantic analysis is to present a conceptual map that demonstrates how each of this term’s compound elements (in themselves polysemous) work off of each other to formulate the Mayan conceptualization of what a *Ka’anche’* does and symbolizes. Furthermore, this graphic is intended to illustrate how the multiple meaning and profound significance of this term relates to the author’s objective of using Mayan language literature as a means of connecting readers to their cultural history and identity.

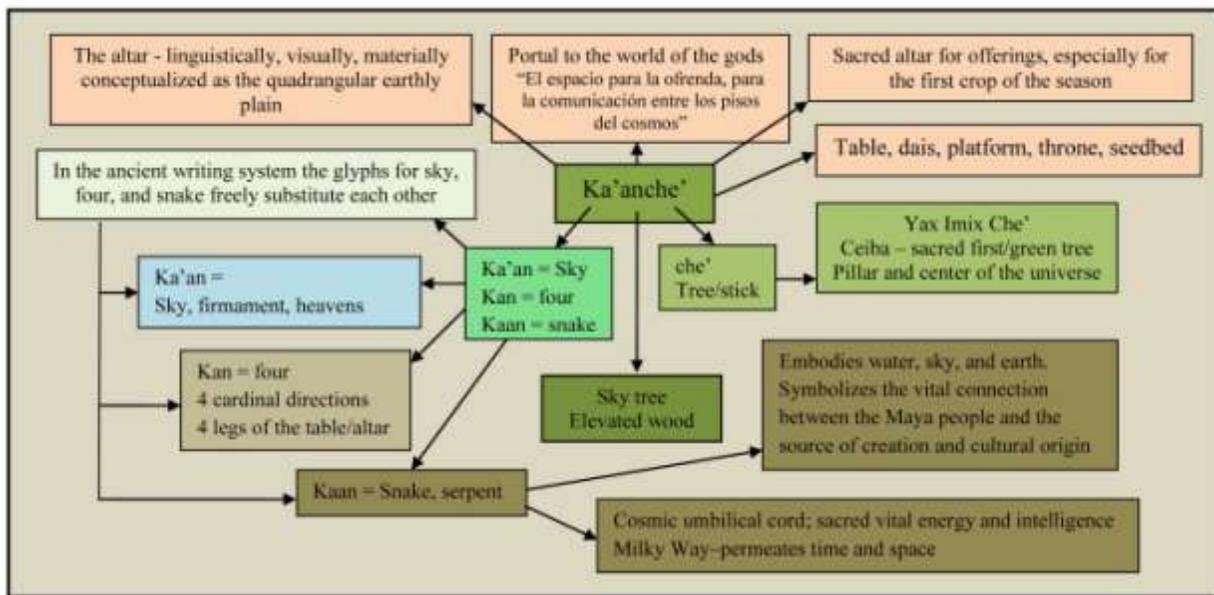


Figure 6. Diagram of the Polysemous Compositionality of a Mayan Construction through a Semantic Analysis of the Term *Ka’anche’* ‘Altar’ Adapted from Freidel, Schele, & Parker, 1993; Morales Damián, 2002; and Valverde, 2002. The quote in the top center text box is from Morales Damián (2002, p. 8) and translates as “The space for offerings for the communication between the cosmos’ strata.”

As Figure 6 demonstrates, the term *ka'anche'* 'altar' (or a table for making sacred offerings) is a composite word formed by the joining of two polysemous nouns (or stem words) *ka'an* 'sky, four, snake' and *che'* 'tree, stick.' Through an analysis of the multiple meanings inherent in *ka'an* and *che'* it is possible to give the reader a sense of how cultural symbolism informs how an altar is conceptualized in Mayan culture. In Figure 6, the term *ka'anche'* is in the center and radiating from it are other text boxes categorized by color and connected by arrows that signify the stem words' various meanings. Listed below are the eight categories (organized by color as seen in Figure 6) that represent the different symbolic aspects of a *ka'anche'*.

-  The dark green boxes contain the term *ka'anche'* and its literal translation in Maya as sky tree or elevated wood.
-  The pink boxes are basic definitions of the term *ka'anche'*: an altar, a portal to the world of the gods, an altar for offerings, and a raised platform or seedbed.
-  The light grey box explains that in ancient Mayan pictorial writings, because the terms for the number four, sky, and snake are near homophones and interconnected symbolically, as glyphs they were used interchangeably.
-  The turquoise box contains all three near homophones: *ka'an* (sky), *kan* (four), and *kaan* (snake).
-  The blue box contains the term *ka'an* along with its meaning of sky, firmament, and heavens.
-  The dark grey box contains the term *kan*, meaning the number four, as in the four cardinal directions and the four legs of the altar.
-  The brown boxes contain the term *kaan* signifying snake. The second brown box explains that snakes in Mayan cosmology symbolize water, sky, and earth as well

as the vital connection between the Mayan people and their source of creation and cultural origin. The third brown box explains that *kaan* (snake) symbolizes the cosmic umbilical cord or Milky Way that connects the sky to the earth and permeates time and space. *Kaan* as cosmic snake/umbilical cord/Milky Way represents sacred vital energy and intelligence that is transmitted from the divine to earth.

 The lighter green boxes are literal and symbolic definitions of the term *che'* as a tree or stick and/or Ceiba; the sacred first/green tree and the pillar and center of the universe.

The *ka'anche'* 'altar' is linguistically and visually conceptualized as the quadrangular earthly plane elevated by the sacred trees in each of its corners, designating the four sectors or cardinal directions. It is conceived as the "sacred space where spiritual beings arrive to partake of offerings placed on or below the table" and "is the focus of all prayer and ritual attention," the "expression of the Mayan cosmic center," and "a portal to the world of the gods" (Freidel et al, 1993, pp. 55-57, 414). This compound term is discussed in detail in the portion of this study dedicated to the semantic analysis of Brito May's poem.

The important consideration in the analysis of this term is that in Maya there are many words (homophones and near homophones<sup>34</sup>) that differ slightly in pronunciation and spelling<sup>35</sup> but are semantically completely different. Also, that it is not at all uncommon to find terms such as *kan* = four, *kaan* = snake, and *ka'an* = sky, that though they are similar in sound, but

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<sup>34</sup> Homophone: One of two or more words pronounced alike but different in meaning or derivation or spelling (Merriam Webster's Collegiate Dictionary, 1995, p. 556).

<sup>35</sup> According to Rolando Ek Naal, pronunciation and orthographic differences are primarily due to slight regional differences in the language. He goes on to say that formal writing systems in some regions where Maya is spoken are still in process, which explains why there are orthographic differences in texts.

dissimilar in meaning, are still related and interrelated symbolically. Rolando Ek Naal (personal communication, July 29, 2013) states that in Maya there is what he calls “conceptos integrales” ‘whole concepts’ that integrate many culturally symbolic elements. Moreover, because these concepts are expressed through compound language, it is not accidental that some of them are built on stem words that are homophones or near homophones such as *kan*, *kaan*, and *ka’an* in the term *ka’anche*, since each of the homophones contributes its distinct facet or facets of information to the concept as a whole.<sup>36</sup>

As stated above, Figure 6 illustrates how cultural meaning and symbolism is transmitted through the Mayan language and demonstrates that it is an objective of the authors to use their poetry and the language itself to connect Mayan readers to their cultural history and identity. Donny Limber Brito May (personal communication, September 17, 2012) explains that with his writing:

Intento hacer una transposición entre la antigüedad y la fecha actual, intento hacer pensar que así es hoy en día. Y yo creo que este uso del simbolismo maya en mi poesía tiene por objetivo analizar un poquito más ese simbolismo, porque el trasfondo de los poemas lleva esa cosmogonía maya, totalmente. Y quizás si lo leo de forma literal o lo leo en la traducción no descubro la totalidad de ese simbolismo...pero ahí están las imágenes, los símbolos.<sup>37</sup>

Using terminology replete with symbolic meaning—especially compound terms like *ka’anche*—Brito May and the other authors in this corpus create a literary experience in which

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<sup>37</sup> “I try to make a correspondence between antiquity and the current date. I try to make readers think that it is the same today. I believe that the objective of using this Mayan symbolism in my poetry is to analyze it more profoundly. Because the underlying meaning of the poems is what really conveys Mayan cosmogony. And perhaps if I do a literal reading or I read from the translation, I won’t be able to discover the totality of this symbolism. But, the images and symbols are there.”

readers in Maya are able to identify from the polyvalence profound cosmological information. Both Brito May and Ek Naal (personal communication, September 17, 2013) affirm that in many Mayan communities ancient cultural symbology has not been forgotten and that one powerful way in which it is remembered and conveyed is through language.<sup>38</sup>

The complexity of Mayan morphology also contributes to the language's visual and phonetic expressivity. Jorge Cocom Pech (2006, p. 80) explains that in Mayan literature<sup>39</sup> complex poetic images transmitted through language allude to nature and the world in which the writer lives in and have a "plastic vigor" bringing the reader closer to that world. Rolando Ek Naal (personal communication, January 24, 2013) maintains that because the Mayan language is inextricable from the natural environment of its origins it has the capacity to capture its sensorial exuberance. He asserts that it is this deep connection with the natural environment—which in itself is a living force—that infuses Mayan with its vibrancy and humanity. He goes on to say that through the combination of the language's multivalency, visual expressivity, and sonant capabilities Mayan expression is profoundly alive and facilitates the communication of experience and knowledge specific to the its cultural and environmental milieu.

To further illustrate the rich and varied sonant capabilities of the Mayan language, the following is a brief description of its phonemic inventory. Melissa Frazier (2011, p. 2) describes the consonantal phoneme spectrum of the language as including "voiceless stops, affricates, fricatives, and ejectives, as well as voiced sonorants and an implosive." Additionally, there are five contrastive vowels in Maya, which because they differ due to contrasts of length, pitch, and

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<sup>38</sup> For further examples of semantic analysis of complex Mayan terminology see Ligorred Perramon, 1992; López de la Rosa & Martel, 1995; Montolú Villar, 1984.

<sup>39</sup> In this description Cocom Pech is referring to rhetoric used in the Mayan colonial text, *Chilam Balam de Chumayel*. Nonetheless, we believe that his remarks are relevant to this discussion of contemporary poetry.

glottalization, create 20 distinct vowel sounds (Sobrino Gómez, 2012, p. 160). Table 4 below depicts the five vowels and their 20 variations and provides examples and written descriptions of their sound qualities.

Table 4

*The Five Contrastive Vowels in Maya*

Short vowel	Low tone vowel	High tone vowel	Glottalized vowel
a	aa	áa	aʼa
e	ee	ée	eʼe
i	ii	íi	iʼi
o	oo	óo	oʼo
u	uu	úu	uʼu
<u>kan</u> ‘four’	<u>kaan</u> ‘snake’	<u>káanbal</u> <sup>40</sup> ‘to learn’	<u>kaʼa</u> ‘two’
Short, unmarked for tone, modal voice. The “a” has a neutral tone and no tonal contrast.	Long, low tone, modal voice. The “aa” is described as having a low and level pitch and also as having ascending capabilities.	Long, high tone, modal voice. The <i>á</i> starts with a high pitch, which falls throughout the duration of the vowel.	Two short vowels (the first with high tone) interrupted by a glottal stop.

*Note.* Adapted from R. Ek Naal, personal communication, July 29, 2013; “Tonal Dialects and Conconan-Pitch Interaction in Yucatec Maya,” by M. Frazier, 2011, *New Perspectives in Mayan Linguistics*; *Universidad de Quintana Roo Introductorio Diccionario Español – Maya, Maya – Español*, by J. A. Gómez Navarrete, 2009; “Breve historia de los modelos del sistema vocálico del maya yucateco y su discusión actual,” by M. Sobrino Gómez, 2012, *Científica de Investigaciones Regionales*, 34(1).

<sup>40</sup> Although *káanbal*, also written as *kanbj*, (to learn) was not part of our semantic analysis of the term *kaʼanche*, according to Rolando Ek Naal (personal communication, July 29, 2013) it very much relates to this concept and its conceptualization. To give some insight into how the term *káanbal/kanbj* correlates with conceptualization of *kaʼanche* Ek Naal explains that the term *aj-sian-kaan* (*aj* = prefix indicating male / *sian* = designating a person born with an innate ability (*kaan* = four, snake, sky) signifies a wise teacher who specializes in the telling of histories/stories. It refers to the important deity Itzamná; the deity that gave names to all things and was the creator of writing. Itzamná is discussed in detail in the portion of this study dedicated to the analysis of Brito May’s poem.

Throughout this investigation we have seen that even though key terms which are essential to the composition of “whole concepts” (such as *kan*, *kaan*, *ka’an* and *ka’anche’*) are identifiable, it is not at all unusual to find them spelled differently. Since Peninsular Maya is spoken over a large geographical area, there are many regional dialectical differences and according to all of the experts whose studies were used for this investigation, tonal qualities appear to differ depending on the dialect of the speaker/writer. Variations in orthography, especially with vowels, are also due to the fact that formalizing a system of writing a language is ever an on-going process. Which is to say that since there is at this time no standardized orthography throughout the entire region where the language is spoken, there are various distinct yet coexisting Mayan alphabets and dictionaries.

Briceida Cuevas Cob (personal communication, September 8, 2012) explains that it is particularly enjoyable as an author to play with and link phonemic elements of the language to formulate words that mimic sounds from nature and capture the cultural and physical context of her writing. Emanuela Jossa (2007, p. 596) elaborates on this notion of phonetic expression by explaining that Maya speakers/writers use techniques she describes as “sound communication,” and play with linguistic elements such as onomatopoeia and reduplication to create a “dialogue with the substance of nature.” One example of how the phonemic qualities of the language facilitate this “sound communication” is the term *ch’ajch’aj’áankal*, which comes from the third poem of our corpus entitled “*Naj*” / “the House” by Briceida Cuevas Cob (2008).

*Ch’ajch’aj’áankal* is based on the stem word *ch’aj* ‘drop of water,’ which has been reduplicated *ch’aj + ch’aj* and combined with the suffix *áankal* to indicate that it is a progressive action. In the context of the poem, this sound play replicates the repetitive action of the drip-dripping of water—like tears—seeping from the house’s thatched roof. This example of onomatopoeia is an

incredibly accurate depiction of sound water makes when it trickles through straw. As such, it literally recreates the aural experience of the abandoned houses weeping away what is left of their happiness. Words like *ch'ajch'aj'áankal* (which is discussed in the literary analysis portion of this study) and *k'an-óol-le'* (discussed above on page 37) are used by the authors to demonstrate that an object such as a house or a sprouting plant is not inert or mute. Instead, the poets use complex linguistic structures expressing sound, imagery, texture, action—a wide range of characteristics—to recreate the essence of an entity's action or being.

The phonemic, visual, grammatical, and semantic dexterity described above allows speakers/writers of Maya to utilize “sound communication,” “overlapping simultaneous sensory attributes,” “symbolically related homophones,” and “complex perceptual gestalts.” It demonstrates how the poets of this corpus are able to draw on a wide range of linguistic and cultural elements to inject layers of information and meaning into their discourse. The description above also explains why the poets conceptualize quite differently in Maya than they do in Spanish. This explains the challenges the poets face when they try to replicate the detailed and descriptive cultural information embedded in their maternal language, in their Spanish translations (see Lucy, 2005; Wierzbicka, 1992, 2013).

Scott Hadley (2008, p. 425) explains that in order to translate a literary work from a Mesoamerican language into Spanish the authors must use both of their languages as distinct spaces or environments that express “the same text with all of its polysemy while obeying two distinct linguistic [and cultural] norms.” In the case of literature written in Maya, the expressive attributes described above facilitate the transmission of complex and time-honored cultural conception when used in the spare language of poetry. However, it is these same expressive attributes and forms of conception that are difficult—or impossible without extensive

explanation—to convey in translation. Aurore Monod Becquelin and Alain Breton (2012, p. 360) go even further and posit there is an “essential and necessary link between language and culture.” They write that a more profound translation of text (spoken or written) is not even possible without paying “passionate attention” to the ways Mayan speakers live and speak together (see also Wierzbicka, 2013).

As these authors write bilingually and live in a multicultural society, they must use both of their languages as discrete environments to communicate with the diverse linguistic and cultural communities in which they live and publish. For this reason, although they write in both Maya and Spanish to express their artistic vision and socio-cultural perspective, the meaning and intent of their work are not identical in both languages. Since they are both poets and pedagogues they understand that communication and cognition develop together and are inseparable from cultural context. So when they write as activists, promoting language and cultural continuity, they write expressly in Maya for Mayans to encourage the distinct cultural/cognitive process of thinking/reading in their maternal language (Chi Canul, 2012).

The poets selected for this investigation are concerned about linguistic and cultural continuity and this objective is reflected in the fluidity with which their writings explore and integrate ancient and contemporary themes. Although much of this fluidity is communicated through the language itself, the confluence of ancient and contemporary can also be seen in the language’s extensive poetic history. In the next section we examine key tropes evident in ancient pictorial, written, and oral literature that recur in the poetry of the corpus. Similar to our examination of the composite structure of key expressions, we explore how these poets communicate complex concepts utilizing ancient poetic configurations<sup>41</sup>.

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<sup>41</sup> Although it is not in the scope of this particular study, an investigation of the relationships between language structure and poetic structure would be both fascinating and informative.

### 3.4 Poetics in Maya: An Introduction to *Difrasismo* and Parallelism

“Just as a humble kitchen table<sup>42</sup> is transformed into an altar where invoked spiritual entities will abound, ordinary/common words become poetry when molded from the heart to the lips, creating the world, categories, and genres.”

(Monod Becquelin & Breton, 2012, p. 364)

In discussing the literary articulacy of the Mayan language, Carlos Montemayor (2001) maintains it is esthetically complicated due to its extensive range of values in both form and cadence. He further explains that the use of this poetic complexity in contemporary literature reflects ancient traditions still evident in ceremonial discourse. Valentina Vapnarsky (2008) describes Mayan ritual language as a verbal art form in which densely interwoven information moves between repetition and infinite variation producing rhetoric that is both complicated and refined. The intricate and elegant expression of contemporary Mayan poetry demonstrates the influence of ancient literary traditions. Not only is it still evident in spoken language, such as in the ceremonial discourse described above, it can also be seen in poetic discourse that originates in pictorial/hieroglyphic representation (Bricker, 2007; Monod Becquelin & Becquey, 2008, Stuart, 2003; Zender, 2005).

According to María Eugenia Gutiérrez González (2005, p. 18), ancient Mayan pictorial writing is a literary convention teeming with imagery that gives “form and physical presence” to both “abstract and concrete” ideas. And according to Jorge Cocom Pech (2010, p. 115), the

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<sup>42</sup>In many Maya homes the family’s humble kitchen table used for preparing and eating daily meals is also the sacred *ka’anche* ‘altar,’ transformed by belief and ritual and utilized for important ceremonies.

literary tradition found in hieroglyphic writings of the classic period<sup>43</sup> not only had the capacity to illustrate the sumptuous symbology of Maya cosmology, but also had the dexterity to communicate sophisticated poetic devices such as “alliteration, anaphora, parallelism, *difrasisimo*, metonymy, allegory, hyperbole, among others.” One of the most prevalent and distinctive features in Mayan literature is the variety of parallel constructions often referred to as “parallel couplets.” As shown in Figure 7 below, visual examples of these couplets can be found in Pre-Columbian pictorial writings that have maintained their semantic and syntactic relevance and continue to be utilized in contemporary spoken and written language (Bricker, 2007; Monod & Becquey, 2008, Stuart, 2003; Zender, 2005). One effective way of tracing continuity in Mayan oral, pictorial, and alphabetic writings is by identifying recurring tropes (such as parallel constructions) in contemporary texts and then exploring how these poetic devices communicate cultural perspectives and conceptualization while relating to semantic and syntactic structures inherent in the language. The following discussion is an examination of *difrasismo* and parallelism—two rhetorical techniques based on parallel constructions that are evident in ancient as well as contemporary Mayan discourse.

“[E]stas construcciones paralelas representan no sólo la poesía indígena, sino también la cristalización verbal de los elementos de una tradición cultural, de una gran antigüedad.”<sup>44</sup>  
(Haviland, 1992, p. 428)

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<sup>43</sup> The Classic Period spans the period A.C.E 200 to 910.

<sup>44</sup> “[T]hese parallel constructions represent not only indigenous poetry, but also the verbal crystallization of elements of a cultural tradition of great antiquity.”

Michela Craveri and Rogelio Valencia Rivera (2012) identify *difrasismo* as the undoing or rupture (*di*) of a phrase (*frase*) into two or more parallel lexical elements. Daniel F. Suslak (2010, p. 93) defines *difrasismo* as “a parallel construction in which two (or more) elements are combined to express something new, something that cannot necessarily be predicted by considering the meaning of the individual parts.” According to Craveri and Valencia Rivera (2012) there are two types of *difrasismos*: a more common form in which the combined elements are contrasting or antithetical, and a less frequently used form composed of synonomous or corresponding elements. Because they are important and recurrent literary devices utilized from pre-Columbian to contemporary times, we will discuss both types. However we will focus on what Rolando Ek Naal calls “philosophical dualities” (contrasting *difrasismos*) because they are most prevalent in all forms of Mayan literature (Bricker, 2007; Craveri & Valencia Rivera, 2012, Ek Naal, personal communication, August, 24, 2013; Hull, 2012; Monod Becquelin & Becquey, 2008; Stuart, 2003).

In his definition of contrasting *difrasismos*, Kerry M. Hull (2012, pp. 79-83) uses the terms “diphrastric kennings” or “complementary extremes.” He describes this literary device as the juxtaposition of different, or opposite but complementary terms, combined to imply a larger “metaphorical whole.” A depiction (Figure 7) of an antithetical *difrasismo* derived from ancient pictorial writing is the concept and image of *tz’ak*, signifying ‘whole’ or ‘complete.’ This is conveyed through the juxtaposition of a variety of seemingly opposite or binary paired sets of glyphs such as *k’in/ak’ab* ‘day/night’ and *chan/kab* ‘sky/earth’ (Stuart, 2003, pp. 1-2). By juxtapositioning distinct concepts such as “day and “night” or “sky” and “earth,” a third meaning or concept is generated which utilizes information from both images/symbols. Basically, day/night refers to the full cycle of time of a complete day (or time in general)

and sky/earth refers to the universe as a whole with its complementary elements of heaven and earth (Craveri & Valencia Rivera, 2012).

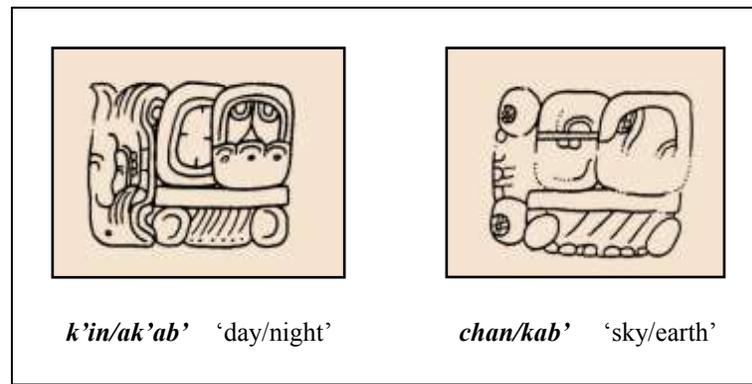


Figure 7. Examples of Difrasismo in Mayan Glyphic Writing. Difrasismos in Mayan glyphic writing signifying the concept of *tz'ak*: “whole” or “complete.” Adapted from “On the Paired Variants of TZ'AK,” by D. Stuart, 2003, *Mesoweb*, p. 2.

We wish to note that a contrasting *difrasismo* such as *k'in/ak'ab* ‘night/day,’ although clearly referring to the 24 hour cycle of a complete day, is not a standard or stock metaphor that can be used mechanically. In Mayan discourse, the meaning or value of a *difrasismo* is contextual and varies depending on its role or significance in the work or occurrence (Craveri & Valencia Rivera, 2012). And since many of the root or core words used to form contrasting *difrasismos*—such as *k'in* meaning day, sun, and time—are polysemous and deeply imbued with cultural symbolism, all of the additional information coming from their multiple meanings is also incorporated into the conceptualization of the metaphor. Because of this, what appears to be a relatively simple binary construction (such as day/night = time) turns out to be a complex and nuanced cultural conception.

An example of how this works is in the *difrasismo* *k'in/ak'ab'* (day/night)—written with an alternative spelling and with the terms in a reversed order,<sup>45</sup> *'aak'ab/k'iine'* (night/day)—found in the second stanza of the first poem of our corpus, “*U Tsoolil Óoc tuunich K-Otoch*” / “The Three Stones of the Hearth” by Donny Limber Brito May (2008). To understand the context of this poem, and therefore the meaning (or multiple meanings) of the *difrasismo*, it is necessary to explain that Brito May’s work is a poetic rendition of the traditional Mayan Creation story. Taking this context into consideration, although the *difrasismo* *'aak'ab/k'iine'* (night/day) in the poem represents the concept of the cycle of time through the metaphor of the 24 hour day it has a more complex meaning because it incorporates nuanced cosmological information corresponding to the overall message of the poem.

In the Creation story and Brito May’s poem, *'aak'ab* ‘night’ alludes to the darkness or night before creation when the sky was lying flat on the earth. *K'iine'* ‘day, sun, time,’ refers to the Mayan belief that the universe as we know it began when *Junab K'uj*, First Mother and First Father, the omnipresent god creator was reborn and lifted the sky off of the earth and set the constellations into motion. This celestial positioning and movement of the stars in the sky is a metaphor for creation (light from darkness) and the beginning of human reckoning of time (days, months, years or cycles of time). By juxtaposing night with day, the *difrasismo* *'aak'ab/k'iine'* uses just two words to present a mini Creation story of the origins of the universe and the Mayan conception of time (López de la Rosa & Martel, 1995; Morales Damián, 2002; De la Garza, 1998; Freidel et al., 1993).

Kerry Hull (2012, pp. 78-83) explains that when contrasting *difrasismos* such as *'aak'ab/k'iine'* ‘night/day’ are used metaphorically, they are able to “encapsulate deeper cultural

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<sup>45</sup>Roland Ek Naal explains that the inversion of dual terms (*difrasismo*) as with *'aak'ab/k'iine'* instead of *k'in/ak'ab'* is not at all uncommon (personal communication, August 24, 2013).

conceptions.” And since these conceptions “represent core associations that reflect intimate cultural understandings” they are more resistant to change or loss of meaning over time. This is why there is an “uninterrupted use” of some of the same or similar *difrasismos* (such as ‘*aak’ab/k’iine*’) found in ancient glyphic writings as are used in contemporary Mayan speech and writing. Since ‘*aak’ab/k’iine*’ and other contrasting *difrasismos* are essential motifs in Brito May’s poem, we have included an in-depth analysis of them in the literary analysis section of this dissertation.

For an example of a synonomous *difrasismo*, we turn to the second poem of our corpus, “*U Naajil A Pixan*” / “The House of Your Soul” by Jorge Cocom Pech (2009). In the first stanza of the translated version of the poem Cocom Pech writes: “Tu idioma es la casa de tu alma.” / “Your language is the house of your soul.” “Ahí viven tus padres y tus abuelas.” “There live your parents and your grandparents.” In both the Spanish and English translations we get the general meaning of a synonomous *difrasismo*, in that when parents are juxtaposed with grandparents the poet is referring to the larger concept of ancestors and origins. In comparison to an antithetical *difrasismo* like ‘*aak’ab/k’iine*’ ‘night/day’ examined above, the juxtaposed elements “parents” and “grandparents” are related—not contrasting—and instead of using the tension or opposition between them to create additional meaning (like what is alluded to between the opposition of day/night = time), the poet uses them together to build on the notion of family, ancestry, and origins. In Maya, Cocom Pech’s *difrasismo* is composed of the terms *láaks’ilo’ob* meaning ‘brotherhood, fraternity, fellow man, neighbor, and figuratively as ancestors’ and *kajtalil*, glossed as ‘environment or locality where people live, population, town, and community’ (Ek Naal personal communication, August 28, 2013; Gómez Navarette, 2009). Within the context of the poem Cocom Pech explains that a person’s language is the house of

their soul and it is in that house where their *láaks'ilo'ob* 'brotherhood, fraternity, fellow man, neighbor, and ancestors' live on. Moreover, it is in this ancient house where memories of *kajtalil* 'community, the environment where people live together,' and where their language and/or voice continue to live. In this couplet *láaks'ilo'ob/kajtalil* 'brotherhood, ancestors/community' the reader understands that language is the house the Mayan soul is built on and that this soul depends on community; consisting of past and present generations. Language in this sense is identity and continuity. It is the connecting link between Mayan communities of both past and future generations.

In studying *difrasismos* (both synonymous and antithetical) it helps to understand that there may be multiple couplets in the same verse or phrase (or text) and that the lexemes employed are not necessarily adjoined (Craveri & Valencia Rivera, 2012). In Cocom Pech's poem there are various examples of *difrasismos* where the lexemes in the couplet *láaks'ilo'ob/kajtalil* 'brotherhood, ancestors/community' are presented separately, with *láaks'ilo'ob* 'brotherhood, ancestors' situated in the second verse and *kajtalil* 'community' in the fourth (see Table 5). Nevertheless, the two terms work together as a couplet and their meanings play off one another, building on the notions of family, ancestry, origin, and community to deepen the overall message of the poem (Craveri & Valencia Rivera, 2012).

Because parallel constructions such as *difrasismos* and parallelism proceed from time and culture honored associations, they are representative of a specifically Mayan (or Mesoamerican) mode of seeing and expressing the world. As Craveri & Valencia Rivera state (2012, p. 29) "[e]l paralelismo es uno de los elementos estilísticos más característicos del lenguaje poético mesoamericano"<sup>46</sup> Not surprisingly, parallelistic constructions are some of the most emblematic

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<sup>46</sup> "Parallelism is one of the most characteristic stylistic elements of Mesoamerican poetic language."

poetic elements in Mesoamerican literature and in some cases have hardly changed since ancient times (Bricker, 2007; Craveri & Valencia Rivera, 2012; Monod Becquelin & Becquey, 2008).

Now we explain the differences and connections between *difrasismos* and parallelism and illustrate our explanations with examples from our corpus. These examples are both traditional (similar to forms seen in ancient literature) and experimental (examples of poetic devices that conform in style and content to the intent of the poet and the semantic context of their contemporary poetry). The *Merriam-Webster's Encyclopedia of Literature* (1995, p. 856) defines parallelism thus:

In rhetoric, a component of literary style in both prose and poetry, in which coordinate ideas are arranged in phrases, sentences, and paragraphs that balance one element with another of equal importance and similar wording. The repetition of sounds, meanings, and structures serves to order, emphasize and point out relations.

In a sense parallelism is an expanded form of *difrasismo* since speakers/writers of Maya incorporate them into their discourse to create a correlation between distinct concepts and build off of this correlation to extend and intensify the meaning of the text. Unlike *difrasismos* however, parallelism is not accomplished by juxtaposing semantically distinct lexemes, but through the correlation of longer verbal sequences expressed through the repetition of same, similar, and even contrasting concepts. Because parallelism uses and builds on the recurrence of key elements, often with language that is visually and phonetically evocative, it is an effective poetic technique that can convey multisensory metaphor.

To illustrate the structure of parallelism and demonstrate its ability to transmit nuanced cultural information through the conceptual linking of images and sound we have presented three examples: one from an ancient glyphic text, and two from the contemporary poetry of our

corpus. The first example comes from Stela C<sup>47</sup> found at the archeological site of Quiriguá, Guatemala; a major cultural hub during the Mayan Classic period. The drawings of these particular glyphs and their translations into English were retrieved from Kerry Hull's 2002 study entitled "A Comparative Analysis of Ch'orti' Verbal Art and the Poetic Discourse Structures of Maya Hieroglyphic Writing." As an in-depth analysis of these particular glyphs is not within the scope of our study, we will provide only a cursory semantic explanation based on Mr. Hull's investigation and focus primarily on how the structure of parallelism is used in this inscription. In Figure 8 below we have provided an analysis of glyphs that have been translated from the Mayan language Ch'orti' into English. So these glyphs and their transcriptions correspond visually with the structures of parallelism being described, we have color coded them and put them into numerical order. It is important to remember that even though the language is Ch'orti' and not Peninsular Maya, the fact that the glyphs were read and understood universally throughout the entire Maya region explains why the meaning of the imagery is transferable across languages.

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<sup>47</sup> "An upright stone slab or pillar bearing an inscription or design and serving as a monument, marker, or the like" (Farlex on-line dictionary).

- 1)   
 “k’alaj-ux-tuun”  
 “Three stones were tied”
- 2)  /  /   
 “utz’apaw” / “tuun” /  
 “he planted it” / “the stone” / “the Paddler Gods”
- 3)  /   
 “uti(y) Na-Jo’-Chan” / “Jix-Tz’am-Tuun-Aj”  
 “it happened at Na-Jo’-Chan” / “Jaguar Throne Stone”
- 4)  /  /   
 “utz’apaw” / “tuun” / “Ek’ Na Yax”  
 “he planted it” / “the stone” / “Ek’ Na Yax”
- 5)  /   
 “uti(y) Kab’-Kaj” / “Chan-Tz’am-Tuun”  
 “it happened at Earth [where people live together]” / “Snake Throne Stone”
- 6)  /  /   
 “k’al-tuun” / “Na-Itzamnaj” / “Ha-Tz’am-Tuun”  
 “the stone was tied / “Na-Itzamnaj” / “Water Throne Stone”
- 7) [There are no glyphs or Cho’rti’ version of this verse presented in Hull’s analysis, only the following verse in English.]  
 “it happened at the Edge of the Sky” / “First Hearth Place”

Figure 8. This example of glyphic poetry from Stela C, Quiriguá, Guatemala (Classic Period) is an expression of when the Mayan Creator the First Mother/First Father places the three sacred stones into the sky to mark the beginnings of Creation. The glyphic images have been adapted from “A Comparative Analysis of Ch’orti’ Verbal Art and the Poetic Discourse Structures of Maya Hieroglyphic Writing,” by K. Hull, 2002 *Foundation for the Advancement of Mesoamerican Studies*, p. 28.

This numbered and color-coded version of the Stela C glyphic poem illustrates how parallelism is used by an ancient scribe to reiterate and link corresponding symbolic elements and create a complete text (using a relatively limited number of glyphs) that narrates the Mayan Creation story.

- Lines 1) **“Three stones were tied”** and 6) **“the stone was tied”** are a couplet, even though they are separated by four lines of text and two other couplets. This couplet refers to the placement of the sacred stones both in the sky (Creation) and in the hearth (as a replication of Creation on earth).
- The second parts of lines 3), 5), and 6) form a triplet: **“Jaguar Throne Stone”** / **“Snake Throne Stone”** / **“Water Throne Stone,”** which we believe could refer to the symbolism of each of the three stones and the connection their dual placement (sky/hearth) creates between the sky and the earth.
- Lines 2) and 3) **“he planted it”** **“the stone”** and **“it happened at Na-Jo’-Chan”** and 4) and 5) **“he planted it”** / **“the stone”** and **“it happened at Earth [where people live together]”** form synonymous couplets in which lines 2) and 3) refer to when the First Father/Mother planted the stones directly in the sky (Chan) and lines 4) and 5) when the stones were planted on earth.
- Lines 3), 5), and 7) by repeating the same phrase **“it happened at...”** at the same point in each of the verses, the poet creates what Kerry Hull describes as an “internal triplet” (Hull, 2002, p. 28).
- It is also possible that line 1) **“Three stones were tied”** and the second part of line 7) **“First Hearth Place”** form an additional couplet. Again, even if these glyphs are not adjoined, by pairing them we are given to understand that as the three sacred stones have been placed in

the sky, they have also been placed (and will continue to be placed) in the hearth of the home as a physical reminder of the Maya people's belief in the Creation story and as a physical demonstration of cultural continuity.

- It is probable that this glyphic poem has even more interrelated pairings such as: **“the Paddler Gods”** / **“Ek’ Na Yax”** / **“Na-Itzamnaj”** / **“First Hearth Place.”** It is our belief that these four phrases relate to each other and refer to the celestial event “when the ecliptic crosses the Milky Way [the paddler gods] at right angles,” marking the date and celestial location of the beginning of Creation when the “three stones” were first placed in the sky (Freidel et al, 1993, p. 94).

Because Brito May's poem *“U Tsoolil Óoc tuunich K-Otoch”* / “The Three Stones of the Hearth” is based on the same Creation story, in the analysis section of this study we explain much of the imagery and symbolism that is presented in this inscription.

The prior example of parallelism in an ancient glyphic poem demonstrates how pairings of images (couplets, triplets, etc.) have been reiterated and linked to contribute to and emphasize the message of the text. Although our previous analysis seems basic, the fact that all of the glyphs in the poem are packed with cultural symbolism, means that each additional image contributes a tremendous amount of information to the poem. And, even though relatively few glyphs are utilized, the deliberate reiteration of symbols and meaning effectively accentuates their gravity and importance in the text.

“La poesía contemporánea también lo usa [el paralelismo] como uno de los instrumentos para la belleza de las imágenes y el vigor de las sonoridades asociadas.”<sup>48</sup>

(Monod Becquelin & Becquey, 2008, p. 119)

The second example of parallelism comes from Donny Limber Brito May’s (2008) work “*U Tsoolil Óoc tuunich K-Otoch*” / “The Three Stones of the Hearth.” This contemporary poetic rendition of the traditional Mayan Creation story is analogous to the glyphic poem above. Brito May has incorporated tropes and symbolism from ancient literary sources and in the ninth stanza, he uses parallelism to emphasize the principal concept of this section of the poem; the correlation of cultural continuity with the cyclical nature of Creation. By celebrating Creation and cultural beliefs through the ritual placing of the three stones in the hearth—a replication of First Mother/First Father’s placement of the three sacred stones in the heart of the sky—knowledge and practice get passed on to subsequent generations.

In this example of parallelism, when Brito May explains that the *Éek’ Wayil* is the night or dark portal, the mirror of death, and the darkness of our eyes, he is using parallel verses to identify and further define the connection between past and present generations and the threshold between worlds. Metaphorically, he is describing the continuous cycle of life and death and the connection/continuum that exists between contemporary Maya and their ancestors, a cycle made possible by sharing knowledge through language, memory, and cultural practice.

Table 5 is an analysis of Brito May’s use of parallelism in this stanza. In Column 1, we have transcribed Brito May’s Mayan version of the first three verses. In Column 2, we have

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<sup>48</sup> “Contemporary poetry also uses it [parallelism] as a vehicle for the beauty of its images and the vigor of its sonority.”

provided a semantic breakdown in English of Mayan key terms. And in Column 3, we have provided an English translation of the poet's Spanish version of the same verses.

Table 5

*Analysis of Brito May's Use of Parallelism*

Version in Maya	Semantic Breakdown of Key Terms	English Translation
1) <i>Le'ela u Éek' Wayil</i> <sup>49</sup>	<i>Le'ela</i> 'this' <i>Éek'</i> 'darkness, night' <i>Wayil</i> 'path'	This Portal or Entrance to the Otherworld
2) <i>Och Bej u yeets' chi'il metna</i>	<i>Och</i> <sup>50</sup> 'entrance' <i>Bej</i> 'path, road' <i>yeets'</i> 'eco, mirror, reflection, wake, trail' <i>chi'il</i> 'edge, shore, mouth' <i>metnal</i> 'Otherworld'	Entrance to Path and mirror of death
3) <i>éek'joch'e'enil k-icho'o</i>	<i>éek'joch'e'enil</i> 'darkness' <i>k-icho'ob</i> 'our eyes'	darkness of our eyes

*Note.* Adapted from R. Ek Naal, personal communication, January 23, 2013; *Universidad de Quintana Roo*

*Diccionario Introductorio Español-Maya, Maya- Español*, by J. A. Gómez Navarette, 2009.

- 1) In the first verse Brito May introduces the concept of the entrance or portal to the otherworld.
- 2) In the second verse, he refers to the same entrance or portal, but this time adds information to intensify the concept by using the image of a mirror (a powerful cultural icon) as a metaphor that symbolizes the two way vision/entrance/path to the underworld or death.

<sup>49</sup>In his semantic analysis of these terms, Rolando Ek Naal (personal communication, January 23, 2013), indicated that *Éek' Wayil* and *Och Bej* have been written with capital letters because they are considered to be sacred and living entities.

<sup>50</sup>Rolando Ek Naal (personal communication, January 23, 2013) explains that *Oochel* is the semantic root of *Och*. Therefore, the term *Och Bej* combines *Oochel*, (shadow or darkness) and *Bej* (path or road), meaning the path toward the shadow, or darkness, or the Otherworld.

In the third verse, by adding yet another metaphor, the “darkness of our eyes,” he extends meaning again by referring to the mutual gaze of Mayan eyes (human mirrors) and the two way vision/entrance/path to the underworld and death. In Mayan cosmology, the sky and the underworld are parts of the same concept, but they are considered to be located on opposite sides of a cosmic two-way mirror. By linking the three images of: 1) Éek’ Wayil the night or dark portal; 2) the mirror of death; and 3) the darkness of our eyes, the poet demonstrates that as part of the continuous cycle of life and death there is a continuum between contemporary Maya, their ancestors, and the creative forces. And that this continuum exists because of the memory/knowledge transmitted through language and cultural practice.

The third example of parallelism comes from the third text in our corpus, “*Naj*” / “House” by Briceida Cuevas Cob (2005). Although this particular example is not representative of more traditional uses of parallelism, it is a demonstration of how this trope allows the poet to play with and reiterate the phonetic qualities of the language to convey multisensory metaphor. In this poem Cuevas Cob is describing the desertion of the archetypal traditional Mayan home as many Maya families choose to build their homes using more modern construction techniques and materials. Because these ancient homes are widely considered to be emblematic of Mayan culture, the abandonment of this specific architectural construction and the image of decay of a once vibrant family home are used by the poet as a poignant metaphor for changes that threaten cultural continuity.

Cuevas Cob begins the poem with a description of the abandoned house’s exterior dilapidation. She then enters the house to describe the disintegration within. The couplet we are using as an example of parallelism (see Table 6) is a description of the only inhabitants now living in the house, a spider collecting desiccated cockroach wings and some crickets whose

chirpings are more about silence (the lack of human voices) than anything else. What is striking about this passage is that like all of the examples of parallelism noted previously, the accumulated information from the linked phrases and images creates a striking conception of the empty and dying home. But in this case, the image is more than just visual; the sounds created by the couplet literally evoke the sounds of the spider collecting dried cockroach wings and the cricket’s voice reverberating in the silence of the abandoned home. When interviewed, Cuevas Cob made a point about the sonant flexibility of the Maya language by choosing to read this section of the poem, emphasizing particularly the phonetic aspect of this metaphor.

Table 6

*Analysis of Cuevas Cob’s Use of Parallelism*

Maya	Spanish	English
<p><i>juntúul</i>  <i>amej u tsolmaj u tikin xiik’</i>  <i>xk’uuluchob’.</i>  <i>Máaso’obe’</i>  <i>tu jáalchi’itiko’ob u jilibil u bek’ech</i>  <i>suumil ch’e’eneknakil.</i></p>	<p>Adentro  una araña colecciona alas  disecadas de cucarachas.  Los grillos  desovillan hilos de  silencio.</p>	<p>Inside  a spider collects desiccated  cockroach wings.  The crickets  unravel threads of  silence.</p>

Adapted from “*Del dobladillo de mi ropa*,” Cuevas Cob, 2008, p. 32.

Though the couplet is based on the action of the two insects—the spider collecting desiccated cockroach wings and the crickets unraveling threads of silence—the metaphor for abandonment, desiccation, and silence is conveyed through the images of the three insects (the spider, the dismembered cockroaches, and the crickets) combined with the sounds of the Mayan words used to create the passage.

To appreciate the “oral poetics” of this passage it is important for readers to understand that the letter “*x*” in Maya is pronounced like the “*sh*” in English and the letter “*k*” followed by an apostrophe (*k'*) is a separate letter from “*k*” (without an apostrophe) that when pronounced, produces an explosive sound (Gómez Navarrete, 2009; Tedlock, 1977, p. 517). For this reason when the two words *xiik'* ‘wings’ and *xk'uuluch'o'b* ‘cockroaches’ are put together you can literally hear the dry rasping shiiiiiiikKKK’ ‘wings’ of the shkKK’uuluch of scurrying cockroaches and the emphasized *ch'e'eneknakil* ‘silence’ because of the lonely and reverberating *jáalchi'itiko'o'b* ‘release of sound’ of the *máaso'o'b* ‘crickets.’ Rolando Ek Naal (personal communication, September 10, 2013) explains that in Maya words can activate the senses and provoke an experience that is both visual and auditory. Cuevas Cob capitalizes on this in her work and produces evocative poetry that meticulously recreates the sound and visual environmental context of her poems. The results of this recited passage are fantastically similar to the lonely sound of insects in the Yucatan on a warm humid night.

These three examples illustrate how parallelism—as a recurring trope found in Mayan literature that is both ancient and contemporary—is utilized to link important elements of a concept that add definition and depth. Moreover, it is a literary device that not only enhances conception through the connection of images, it also contributes to the phonetic texture and rhythm of the piece, creating a poetic structure that is both visual and audible. Parallelism, in the same vein as *difrasismo* and composite words, is representative of a cognitive and communicative process inherent to Mayan language and culture that prioritizes interconnectivity and generates conceptualization through complex and vivid imagery often relating to the natural world (Ek Naal, personal communication, March 11, 2013).

All of the poets of this corpus write about what they have experienced in their own lives with the perspicuity and sensitivity that comes from having a profound knowledge of their culture. Their works reflect a perspective that has been enriched by both personal and collective memory (Ek Naal, personal communication, March 11, 2013). And since they are concerned with linguistic and cultural continuity, they follow traditional poetic models not only because of their aesthetic qualities, but because they are time proven and “powerful means of cognitive transmission” (Becquelin & Breton, 2012, p. 343). Because these poets write to preserve language and cultural perspective and to foment its continuity and growth with younger Maya speakers, their works—like the language itself—create a conduit of conception and knowledge, connecting past, current, and future generations.

In the following section we discuss the unifying theme of our corpus, the concept of *naj* (*naaj*). Glossed in general terms as ‘house’ or ‘building,’ *naj* also refers to the traditional Mayan house which is an icon of cultural cohesion and continuity (Gómez Navarrete, 2009). As we have explained previously, it is our intention to create a linguistic and literary analysis that would facilitate the presentation of these poems in Spanish university literature classes for bilingual teachers. An educational experience of this type could help develop these teachers’ interest in and comprehension of Mayan language and culture while providing them with the means to support their students (and their families) of Yucatec Mayan heritage. Just as important as it is to understand the role of composite language and ancient poetic devices in the meaning and presentation of this poetry, a deeper knowledge of the conception of *naj* (*naaj*) is essential for the comprehension and appreciation of these poems and the corpus as a whole.

### 3.5 The Traditional Maya “*Naj*” ‘House’ as the Corpus’ Unifying Theme

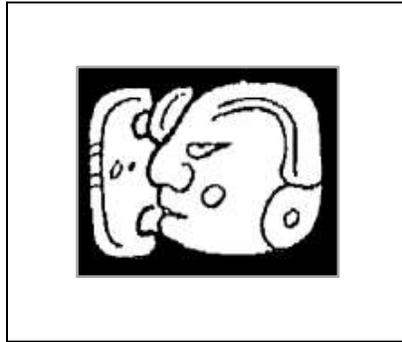


Figure 9. Classic Maya Glyph for *Naj* ‘House.’ Adapted from “The Fire Enters his House,” by D. Stuart, 1998. *Architecture and Ritual in Classic Maya Texts* p. 377.

“Encoded in houses are systems of meaning that function as a kind of language or text”

(Johnston & Gonlin, 1998, p. 145)

Thematically, all of the poems selected for this corpus focus on the challenges of maintaining Mayan cultural identity and language in a non-indigenous dominant society. The poets approach this subject from different angles addressing different aspects of their cultural heritage and its diffusion through topics such as cosmology, language, education, and cultural pride and resistance. They also explore the notion of the traditional Mayan house or home as a recurrent (and unifying) theme and of its important symbolic role in the Mayan conception of cultural identity.

In Ricardo Pinilla’s (2004, p. 15) philosophical study on issues of habitation and the home he explains that when we use the term “house” we are generally referring to the place where we establish our residence. But when we use the term “home” “we enter even deeper into the intimate center of the place that we inhabit.” In Spanish, the term “home” or “*hogar*” is “according to its etymology, the *fogón*, or fire that one finds in the center of the house.” In

Mayan symbology, the house (defined figuratively as “the four sides and the four corners of the universe” with the *fogón* or cooking fire as its heart) represents not only the “true center” of family life, but also of the Mayan cultural universe (Ligorred Perramon, 2000; Mathews & Garber, 2004, p. 50). In describing the work of Mayan poet Abimael Chuk, Francesc Ligorred Perramon (2000, p. 350) explains that when Chuk writes about the fire and hearth of the Maya in his poetry, he is referring to “the true center of [. . .] the Mayan cultural universe, its embers, [and how] its flames need to be maintained ignited [. . .] in order that there will always be light and heat.”



*Figure 10.* Traditional Mayan House. Source: photograph by John G. Gladstein, Retrieved June 26, 2014, from <http://www.mexconnect.com/articles/3928-tricksters-avengers-and-guardian-spirits-mexican-ghosts>  
Reprinted with permission.

*Naj* (house), as shown in Figure 10, is the traditional Mayan house constructed in the Yucatan Peninsula. It is oblong, whitewashed, and has a palm thatch roof. More than just a physical space, it is the conceptualized space where families have lived and where cultural

knowledge has been imparted and set into practice for centuries<sup>51</sup> (Lucero, 1998). The hearth, as the center or heart of the house, is the most essential component of this vibrant dwelling (El Naal, personal communication, April 24, 2013). In Mayan society the house is conceived as a social, political, and ritual space and the term *naj* is used (similar to Spanish and English) to represent family identity and lineage, which includes land ownership (Stross, 2007; Stuart, 1998). Additionally, the Mayan world view perceives the house as a concept that shares “overlapping symbolic structures” with the cosmos (Gillespie, 2000, p. 143). As in the Mayan conceptualization of the universe, the house has three distinct levels:

- The heavens, its roof and rafters;
- The earth, the main floor or general living space where people live out their daily lives;
- The underworld, below the house where artifacts are buried (Lucero, 2010).

The four cornered traditional Mayan house is also a replication of the earthly plain. It is oriented toward the east where the door is located and has five sectors; four quadrants or directions (walls and rounded corners) that converge on a central point, the hearth (Freidel et al, 1993). The traditional Mayan house is also considered a *living* being, and like a human it has a life cycle and needs to be “brought into life, regularly nurtured, and [even] mourned upon [its] death” (Gillespie, 2000, p. 136). Consequently, Mayans believe that when a house is “properly constructed and dedicated, it is thought of as having a ‘soul’ much like a person’s” (Vogt, 1969, p. 71).

Just as the home is thought of as a living being, the terms used to describe its construction conform to the parts of the human body (Vogt, 1969). For example, the roof is conceived as its head, with the thatching being its hair. The beams or poles used as the scaffolding for the roof

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<sup>51</sup>Although it is much more common for people to construct their homes out of concrete today, the oblong, whitewashed, thatch roofed house is still considered culturally by many Mayas to be the traditional Mayan home (Rolando Ek Naal and Miguel Ángel Chi Dzul, personal communication, May, 6, 2013).

and walls are the house's ribs, while the main posts anchoring it to the earth are its feet. The house's covering is its skin, its walls are its stomach, its corners are its ears, the door and windows (if there are any) are its eyes and mouth, and its hearth is its heart (Ek Naal, personal communication, May 6, 2013; Vogt, 1969).

When Susan Gillespie (2000, p. 142) says that “the physical house is a locus and frame for daily activities out of which meanings are constituted,” the fact that the Mayan conception of the *naj* encompasses the body, the home, and the cosmos, signifies that these meanings range from the micro to the macro cosmic and pertain to the full domain of human experience. Ethno-historian Louise M. Burkhart (1997, pp. 30-31) refers to the house in Mesoamerican society as a smaller version of the universe. It is “not a tranquil refuge from the significant currents of cosmos and history but a place where those currents intersected forcibly with human existence. One could see the [. . .] house as a model of the cosmos, writ small, but perhaps it would be better to see the [. . .] cosmos as a house writ large.”

In the five poems that comprise our corpus, the concept of *naj* ‘house’ is recurrently used to refer to the locus or home of knowledge and culture. And, although in only one poem (“U Naajil A Pixan” / “The House of Your Soul” by Jorge Cocom Pech, 2009) is *naj* used as a direct metaphor for the Mayan language, the image of the traditional Mayan home is intrinsically intertwined with the notion of language because perspective, knowledge, and culture are embedded in and transmitted *through* language. And, the home is the primary place where generations of Maya have passed both their perspective and knowledge on to their children through language and culture.

As this is an interdisciplinary study combining linguistic and literary analysis with a final pedagogical objective, the poets were chosen because they are all educators and cultural activists

who use literature (primarily poetry) as a means to promote language and cultural awareness with younger generations of Maya. These particular poems were chosen because they all emphasize the importance of cultural continuity, utilizing the traditional Mayan home as a recurrent cultural symbol. When put in a certain order, the poems work together much like the ancient glyphic poem mentioned previously (see Figure 8 on page 64). They begin with Creation—the placing of the three sacred stones in the sky—and end with cultural continuity—the placing of the stones in the hearth.

## **Chapter 4 Interdisciplinary Methodology and Corpus Introduction**

To explore the relationship between Mayan language and cultural symbolism using poetry as a vehicle and the notion of the “house” or “home” as a unifying theme, we have primarily studied the native language version of each poem, not the poets’ Spanish translations. Therefore this project begins with language (or more specifically, a semantic analysis of the Mayan versions of the poems). But, given that it is an interdisciplinary linguistic and literary study of these five poems and ultimately a pedagogical proposal on how to promote Mayan literature in the classroom, elements from each discipline—linguistic, literary and pedagogical—have been used and combined to inform this research and analysis. Combining disciplines makes it possible to draw from a wider spectrum of sources (literary, linguistic, pedagogical, as well as sociological, anthropological, astronomical, etc.). This not only informs our findings and interpretations, but it allows us to incorporate visual and literary elements from diverse but relevant studies into this dissertation.

This chapter is divided into three sections (4.1 – 4.3). Section 4.1 gives concise biographical information on each of the poets in this study, as well as a summary of each of their work. In Sections 4.2 and 4.3 we explain the processes we followed for our linguistic and literary analysis of the corpus. In these sections we also discuss the methods, techniques, and modes of presentation that we utilized. Finally, through the use of examples, tables, figures, etc. we show how we have arrived at some of our key interpretations.

### **4.1 Introduction to the Corpus**

The corpus used for this study is comprised of five contemporary poems written in Peninsular Maya and translated into Spanish by their authors. All of these texts have been selected because they are examples of the individual authors’ creative vision and poetic ability.

They are also representative of a body of literature written to promote cultural and linguistic identity. Furthermore, each of the poems features the complex cultural symbol of the traditional Yucatecan Mayan house or home as a unifying theme. By arranging and analyzing these poems in a specific order and paying particular attention to the symbology and conception of the traditional Maya house/home, we argue that these five texts create a cohesive narrative describing the cyclical process of cultural origin and regeneration.

The first poem in the corpus was written by Donny Limber de Atocha Brito May (2008) and is entitled “*U Tsoolil Óox Tuunich K-Otoch*” / The Three Stones of the Hearth.” In this poem, Brito May connects persisting Mayan cultural practices with ancient cosmology. He shows that in Mayan belief, creation and origin are part of a regenerative process. Contemporary Mayans perpetuate this process through their attention to cultural traditions and ritual focused on the home; specifically through the placement of the three sacred hearth stones.

Donny Limber de Atocha Brito May was born in Sihó, Yucatán in 1973. Mr. Brito May studied Art Education at the Instituto Campechano and currently teaches at the Universidad Intercultural Maya de Quintana Roo, Mexico. He has won multiple awards for his texts and besides writing several books, has had his work featured in journals, newspapers, and cultural publications, both locally (Yucatán) and nationally (Mexico) (Programa y reseña de actividades de la XVII Feria Artesanal y Cultural, <http://www.calkini.net/feriacalkini/2008/resena.htm>; personal communication, October 11, 2012).

The second poem “*U Náajil A Pixan*” / “The House of Your Soul” was written by Jorge Miguel Cocom Pech (2009). In this poem, Cocom Pech defines the Mayan language as the house of the Mayan cultural soul; a soul that will live on through the voice and spirit of future generations.

Jorge Miguel Cocom Pech was born in Calkiní, Campeche, Mexico, in 1952. He has studied communication sciences, pedagogy, agronomy and sociology and has taught language courses in both Maya and Spanish. Mr. Cocom Pech is a nationally (Mexico) and internationally recognized poet, narrator, and essayist whose works have been translated into several languages. Besides presiding over the National Organization of Writers of Indigenous Languages (Mexico) from 2002 to 2005, he has been an active participant in meetings, conferences, and festivals related to indigenous cultures throughout the Americas (Poetas Siglo XXI, 2010).<sup>52</sup>

The third poem “*Naj*” / “House” was written by Briceida Cuevas Cob (2008). In this poem Cuevas Cob describes her deep concern for the loss of Mayan traditions, especially for the abandonment of the construction techniques and life style associated with the traditional Yucatecan Mayan home. This poem combines nostalgia with cultural imagery, defining the home as an essential icon in Mayan symbology and belief.

The fourth poem, “*Yaan a bin xook*” / “You Will Go to School” also written by Cuevas Cob (2005) describes how, although young Mayan women may leave the home to be “formally” educated, their cultural education (the foundation of their identity and the underpinnings of cultural regeneration) begins in the home. The home as depicted by Cuevas Cob is a conceptualized space dominated by women that is steeped in cultural symbolism, tradition, and collective memory, evoking both reverence and pride.

Briceida Cuevas Cob was born in 1969 in the community of Tepakán, in the municipality of Calkini, Campeche Mexico. Ms. Cuevas Cob has two books of poetry in print and has had her poetry included in several anthologies. She is also published in numerous literary journals and newspapers throughout the Yucatan Peninsula and Mexico City. In 1996 she was awarded a

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<sup>52</sup> The biographical information on Mr. Cocom Pech comes from the *Poetas Siglo XXI* 2010 Website <http://poetassigloveintiuno.blogspot.com/2010/10/1445-jorge-cocom-pech.html>.

grant from the National Fund for Culture and the Arts for Indigenous Language Writers and from 1999 to 2002 she was the director of professional development and language instruction at the House of Indigenous Language Writers in Mexico City (Montemayor & Frischmann, 2005).

The fifth poem was written by Feliciano Sánchez Chan (1999) and is entitled “*Teen lela*” / “I am this.” In this text Sánchez Chan protests the cultural destruction carried out by the dominant society and dreams of the regeneration of Mayan culture through the rebuilding—with sacred stones—of the *Noj Najil* ‘the Great House;’ a metaphor for the brilliance of Mayan culture both past and future.

Mr. Sánchez Chan was born in 1960 in the village of Xaya, in the municipality of Tekax Yucatan, Mexico. He has published extensively throughout Mexico and has worked as a cultural promoter for the Department of Popular Culture for the state of Yucatan since 1981. Mr. Sánchez Chan is renowned for the public service, collaborations and presentations he has done on behalf of disseminating Maya culture, language, and literature (*Equipo Adacémico*, 2010).<sup>53</sup>

#### **4.2 Linguistic Analysis**

The semantic analysis of the five poems of this corpus was accomplished with the assistance of consultant Ronaldo Ek Naal. Mr. Ek Naal is a native speaker of Peninsular Maya, a noted scholar of Mayan language and culture, and a working associate of the Civil Association of Writers of Indigenous Languages (ELIAC) in Mexico City. In the process we developed with Mr. Ek Naal, each of the Mayan versions of the poems was written out on large sheets of paper, in Spanish and then directly below in Mayan script. Once recorded, we worked under the expert direction of Mr. Ek Naal to analyze the meanings of each word and/or word cluster in the poems.

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<sup>53</sup> This information comes from the *Equipo Académico de la Escuela de Creación Literaria website* <http://docentescreacionliteraria.blogspot.com/2010/01/feliciano-sanchez-chan.html>.

Table 7 illustrates the method we used to analyze a phrase of Jorge Cocom Pech’s poem “The house of Your Soul” (2009).

Table 7

*The Semantic Analysis of the Frase **Ti’e’ úuchben xa’anilnaj***

<b><i>T i ' e ' </i></b>	<b><i>ú u c h b e n </i></b>	<b><i>x a ' a n </i></b>	<b><i>i l </i></b>	<b><i>n a j </i></b>
Contraction 'There/of this'	'Ancient/old' 'From a former time'	'Palm/guano' 'Type of roof thatching'	'of'	'house'

*Note.* Adapted from “The House of Your Soul” by J. Cocom Pech, 1999, *Tercer Festival Mundial de Poesía*.

It is important to note that the particle or morphosyllable *il* connecting *xa’an* ‘palm/guano’ and *naj* ‘house’ in Table 7 is a grammatical element evident in ancient glyphic writings and contemporary discourse. Although *il* can be used with nouns or adjectives, with nouns it is employed in possessive (such as is glossed above with “of”) and unpossessive constructions. The particle *il* connects the two nouns “palm” and “house” and refers to a house of palm (or more specifically a house with a palm roof). More importantly, *il* also connotes abstraction in the sense that it requires “the interpreting mind [to] see the interrelated parts as coherent parts of one, comprehensive whole” (Houston, Robertson & Stuart, 2001, p. 9). In other words, the composite term *xa’anilnaj* in Maya does not separate the notion of a house from the materials used for its roof as in English, but instead conflates the two to infer a powerful cultural symbol, the traditional Maya home and all that it entails.

Because many words in Maya are polysemic and have complex constructions, it was common during this process to separate a term and analyze each of its morphemes, creating conceptual maps (such as in Figure 6 with *ka’anche’*) in our effort to elucidate what a single

term in Maya signified. In Table 5, we show how we corroborated and/or augmented Mr. Ek Naal linguistic analysis by consulting various Mayan dictionaries and studies written by some of the foremost scholars in Mayan language and culture research. The process we used for our literary analysis followed a similar methodology. We began with the language and then progressed through our linguistic analysis identifying key terms and concepts and examining how they were utilized and expressed in poetic structures such as difrasismo and parallelism. In this manner we were able to access significant information (not accessible through the translations) that helped us to better understand the poets' overall intentions and messages, as well as their creative processes.

### **4.3 Literary Analysis**

As we have indicated before, the literary analysis for each of the poems was based on our linguistic investigation, but was developed further through an extensive examination of key images and symbols utilized by the authors through their use of poetics, such as tropes, style, and voice. As part of the structure of our literary analysis, each of the Mayan versions of the poems was transcribed and all of the key terms or sections of the text were written in bold type. The process of selecting these key terms and sections began with a series of discussions with Mr. Ek Naal. Through his interpretations and explanations, cultural aspects that were at first inaccessible or difficult to understand became more evident. This helped in choosing which words and concepts needed to be put into bold lettering and designated for further investigation and illustration. As the investigation progressed, consistent patterns were revealed (in the individual texts and the corpus as a whole) that called for more extensive examination and analysis. As seen in Table 8, each of the terms/concepts that had been put into bold lettering

were then explained in detail using a variety of scholarly sources and when possible through discussions with the poets themselves.

Beginning with the first poem of our corpus “U Tsoolil Óox Tuunich K-Otoch” / “The Three Stones of the Hearth” by Donny Limber Brito May (2008), we learned from our many discussions with Mr. Ek Naal that this work focused on Mayan cosmology and ancient symbology still practiced and understood by many contemporary Maya. But, it was not until we were able to interview with Mr. Brito May (September 17, 2012) that the significance of this work and the embedded linguistic symbolism became more accessible to us. In our discussion, Mr. Brito May explained that the inspiration for this poem came to him when he was reading the book *Maya Cosmos: Three Thousand Years on the Shaman’s Path* (Freidel et al, 1993) and he began to question himself “por qué soy maya, por qué tengo esa cosmovisión, por qué sigo ese simbolismo, y así comencé a hacerme ese tipo de preguntas, y la lectura me dio muchas cosas, reflexioné sobre cosas que incluso no pensaba que existieran.”<sup>54</sup> He further described his purpose in writing this poem as a way of demonstrating the connection between ancient and contemporary Mayan cosmological beliefs, utilizing language as the means to examine this complex symbolic representation.

[E]l trasfondo [del poema] lleva esa cosmogonía maya, totalmente. Y quizás si lo leo de forma literal o lo leo en la traducción no descubro la totalidad de ese simbolismo. Pero ahí están las imágenes, los símbolos, el ritmo que le voy dando a cada texto [. . .]. Todo tiene relación con la lengua madre.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> “Why am I Maya, why do I have this world view, why does this symbolism continue to be part of my way of thinking. And like that I began to question myself with these kinds of questions. The reading gave me many things and I reflected on things that I didn’t even know existed.”

<sup>55</sup> [T]he underlying meaning of the [poem] conveys this Mayan cosmogony completely. And perhaps if I read it literally or I read it in a translation I wouldn’t discover the totality or extent of this symbolism. But there are

In Table 8, we use the first stanza of Donny Limber Brito May’s poem “The Three Stones of the Hearth,” as a further example of our literary analysis methodology.

Table 8

*Identification of Key Terms as First Step in the Literary Analysis Process*

Version in Maya	English gloss of key terms
<i>Yáax tsoolil k'iin</i>	<i>Yáax</i> ‘first,’ <i>tsoolil</i> ‘story, memory,’ <i>k'iin</i> ‘sun, day, time’
<i>Bejlae'</i>	<i>Bejlae'</i> ‘today’
<i>u yokol k'inne tu yiilubaj</i>	<i>k'inne</i> ‘of that (distant) sun, day, time’
<i>yéetel u sakbejil ka'an, t'úubano'ob ichil u k'ab</i>	<i>sak</i> ‘white,’ <i>bej</i> ‘path,’ <i>il</i> ‘of the,’ <i>ka'an</i> ‘sky, serpent’
<i>yuum Wakah-Chan</i>	<i>yuum</i> ‘lord or great person,’ <i>Wak</i> ‘six’ <i>ah</i> ‘ancient adjective indicating the number six,’ and <i>Chan</i> ‘written in Yucatec Maya as <i>Ka'an</i> = sky/serpent’

*Note.* Adapted from D. Brito May, personal communication, September 17, 2012; R. Ek Naal, personal communication, October 12, 2012; *Maya Cosmos Three Thousand Years On the Shaman’s Path*, by D. Freidel, L. Schele, and J. Parker 1993, p. 55.

This first section of Brito May’s poem suggests the initial encounter when “that (distant) sun, together with the Milky Way was immersed within the branches of ‘the Great Tree of the World’ or Great Mother Ceiba. The Great Ceiba in this context is conceptualized as the pillar and center of the universe or *axis mundi* and is a manifestation of the deity known as **Wakah-Chan** or “Raised-up Sky” (Freidel et al., 1993, p. 53). That this deity’s name includes the number six is a reference to the six essential directions of Creation: the earth’s center or *yáax*, the four sectors or cardinal directions, and the directional movement upward or skyward (Ek Naal,

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the images, the symbols, the rhythm that I am giving to each text [. . .]. Everything is related to the mother language.

December 8, 2013). Metaphorically, this verse is a description of the initial stages of the creation of the current era when the Creator deity lifted the sky off of the earth and by partitioning it into sections, created the world as it is known today (De la Garza, 2007; Freidel et al., 1993). In our literary analysis of this section of Brito May's poem we began by using the basic technique outlined in Table 8. But, because Brito May (as well as the other poets) conveys the elements of an extremely complex worldview in very few words, we had to first examine the distinct symbolic elements and then explain how they work together to create the overall meaning of the text.

Through this process of investigation, the symbolism and significance of key terms and concepts and the poems themselves, on the one hand became clearer and more concrete, but on the other, began to unravel, revealing a complex web of interrelated imagery and meaning. That is to say, as one characteristic or element of a concept was more clearly defined, it revealed other inherent aspects or facets essential to its conception. And since polysemy and interconnectivity are essential to Mayan cultural symbolism, understanding how a concept and all of its facets interrelate and connect with other concepts is how meaning takes shape and comprehension becomes possible (Ek Naal, personal communication, December 10, 2013).

Carlos Lenkersdorf (1998, pp. 11-19) in his article comparing the importance of and necessity for biodiversity with humanity's need for linguistic diversity explains that according to the Tojolabal Maya: "no hay nada que no tenga vida" and "el conocimiento se realiza dentro del contexto de la red de la vida, del tejido cósmico, de un sistema en el cual [todo depende de todo y todo está interrelacionado.]"<sup>56</sup> It is important to note that although in the poets' Spanish

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<sup>56</sup> According to the Tojolabal Maya: "there is nothing that is not alive" and "knowledge happens within the context of the web of life; the cosmic weaving of a system in which [everything depends on everything and everything is interrelated]."

translations some aspects of this intricate symbology do come across, it is only in the maternal language versions that an in-depth exploration of this rich web of symbolic expression is actually possible. This confirms Brian Stross' (2007) belief that refined comprehension of this poetry's complicated symbolism does in fact depend on the profundity of the reader's semantic knowledge of a language.

Because the overall literary analysis concerns Mayan poetry, concepts and conceptualization, we made efforts throughout this process to refrain from Occidental theorization and explanation. Although some literary terms have been employed in this study such as "epigraph," "verse," "stanza," "*difrasismo*" and "parallelism"<sup>57</sup>, they were used for descriptive purposes only and not to compare or align Mayan writings with the norms of Occidental literature. Carlos Montemayor (2001) cautions those of us who study Mayan literature to avoid suppositions conditioned by literary research in modern Occidental languages. Instead, our focus should be on the cultural, as well as the individual uniqueness inherent in each author's expression and style. Similarly, Trinh T. Minh-ha (1989) warns that the very questions asked in the framing of a literary analysis can impose the sensibilities and judgment of the analysts. While Montemayor and Minh-ha caution that Occidental literary precepts more often than not fail in the analysis of non-Occidental literature, acclaimed Mazatec<sup>58</sup> poet Juan Gregorio Regino (2008) reexamines the terms "ritual" and "tradition" regarding indigenous Mexican literature. He posits that although this literature has deep roots in its ritual origins, it is alive not static and in a constant state of renovation (Regino, 2008). For this study, these scholars' words

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<sup>57</sup> Terms such as epigraph, verse, stanza, *difrasismo*, parallelism, etc. have been used throughout this study with the knowledge that these words are associated with Occidental literary conventions, and are not necessarily employed by the poets themselves. This has been done solely to describe their function in the poems and not as any reference to the usage of Occidental literary conventions in these works.

<sup>58</sup> Mazatec is spoken throughout the state of Oaxaca, as well as in the southern region of the state of Veracruz (Zolla & Zolla Márquez, 2004).

serve to remind us of the pitfalls inherent in applying foreign analytical methods to literature that fulfills other cultural and aesthetic purposes. The intention of this study has not been to delimit or impose meaning, or to define these works through the lens of Occidental theory and practice. But instead, we have tried to reveal and make more accessible to readers/students the multiple layers of linguistic and cultural significance inherent in these works. The literary analysis of the individual poems and the corpus as a whole has been designed and accomplished to carry out the ultimate pedagogical objectives of this study; bringing this literature into an Oregon university bilingual (Spanish/English) teacher training program. With this objective in mind, the literary analysis (like the linguistic analysis) has been created to inform our pedagogical proposal. Instead of confining this literature to a definition or type, our intention has been to offer readers and non-readers of Maya a window into the distinct world view and linguistic expression of the poets. More specifically, our hope is that a better understanding and appreciation of these works will increase teachers' and potential teachers' respect and consideration for cultural and linguistic diversity, as it has for us during the process of this investigation.

In order to create a (pedagogically motivated) literary study based on the investigations outlined above, the final presentation of each of the poems' analysis has been organized by following the structure of the poet's text. With each text we begin with the title, the introduction or epigraph (if there is one), and conclude with the body of the work, which depending on the poem, is divided into sections (or stanzas) and even subsections. Each poem has been presented in both the poets' Mayan and Spanish versions, but also has been translated into English in order to correspond with the language used for this study. As explained previously, in the Mayan versions of the poems, the key words and/or concepts that have served as the primary focus of this investigation have been put into bold lettering and in the analysis their multiple and

interconnected meanings are discussed in detail. Because of the visual nature of these concepts, which is a reflection of the “eminently graphic” and multi-sensorial nature of Maya conceptualization, images from a variety of sources have been used to illustrate the complex and interrelated symbolism explored in each text (Gutiérrez Gonzalez, 2005, p. 19). In addition, we have used selected quotes from distinguished poets and scholars throughout this study because the poetic expression of other authors is often a more concise and illustrative way to approach a complicated conceptualization. The combination of linguistic and literary methodologies in concert with the interpolation of graphic and intertextual information from Maya and Mayanist scholars has enabled a more comprehensive analysis of this poetry. And, in line with the objectives of this study, may more effectively illustrate how Mayan cultural conceptualization transmitted linguistically can be presented and discussed in the classroom.

## Chapter 5 Corpus Analysis

In this chapter, we have organized the five poems of our corpus beginning with “The Three Stones of the Hearth” (2008) by Donny Limber Brito May followed by “The House of Your Soul (2009) by Jorge Cocom Pech, “Naj” (2008) “You Will Go To School” (2005) by Briceida Cuevas Cob, and “I Am This” (1999) by Feliciano Sánchez Chan. We chose these specific poems because: 1) they are representative of the objectives of the resurgence movement to promote Mayan contemporary literature; and 2) they all focus on the notion of *naj* ‘house’ as the symbol and locus of cultural and linguistic identity. Also, because they focus on cultural and linguistic identity and explore the concept of home, we believe they will be particularly relevant for bilingual teachers in Portland Oregon, the locus of our pedagogical proposal. The poems have been presented in this particular order because when sequenced in this way, they tell a cohesive story. Moreover, true to the Mayan world view, the story they narrate is cyclical, beginning with Creation (Brito May’s poem) and ending with regeneration or re-Creation (Sánchez Chan’s poem).

For each poem and chapter section we begin with a full transcription of the poet’s Spanish version of their work, as well as an English translation.<sup>59</sup> We do this so Spanish and English readers will be able to read each poem in its entirety before reading the results of our investigation. Because our linguistic and literary analysis is done in sections or stanzas, we present each section first with its transcription in Maya, and then with its Spanish and English translations directly below. As we have stated previously in our chapter on methodology, we have put in bold type each of the words and expressions in the Mayan transcriptions that we have explored in our analysis. This allows the reader to first examine the section or stanza in Maya

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<sup>59</sup> We have done all of the English translations except for the fourth poem “You Will Go To School” by Briceida Cuevas Cob (2005), which has been translated by Donald Frischman (Montemayor and Frischman, 2005, pp. 191-193).

with the analyzed terms and expressions identified, and then read the same section in Spanish or English to keep the poem fresh in their memory.

Finally, in our analysis of each poem we have liberally utilized quotes and images from a wide variety of disciplines and sources. As we have stated above, the use of graphics and the input of multiple voices is often the more concise and illustrative way to approach the complexities of Mayan conceptualization. And, as the final objective of this study is a pedagogical proposal, our intention is to use the supplementary graphic and intertextual information to support our methods for presenting this literature and aspects of this investigation in the classroom.

### 5.1 Poem 1 “The Three Stones of the Hearth”

“*U Tsoolil Óox Tuunich K-Otoch*” by Donny Limber Brito May (2008)

“*U Tsoolil Óox Tuunich K-Otoch*”

“Las tres piedras del hogar”	“Three Stones of the Hearth”
Dijo dios.	God said.
Haya lámparas en el cielo,	That there be lights in the sky,
que separen el día de la noche,	that separate day from night,
que sirvan para señalar las fiestas,	that serve to indicate the celebrations,
los días y los años, y que brillen	the days and the years, and that brighten the sky to
el firmamento para iluminar la tierra.	illuminate the earth.
Las primeras palabras del Gran Creador	The Great Creator’s first words
Primer día del sol	First day of the sun
(I)	(I)
Hoy descende el sol	Today the sun descends

con la vía láctea,  
hundidos entre las manos del  
gran Árbol del Mundo.

(II)

En esta noche,  
las tres luminosas piedras de la tortuga,  
se han encontrado en el sur, norte, oeste y este  
como en el centro del infinito.

Porque ésta es la gigantesca cascabel de  
la serpiente del cielo.

(III)

Así comenzamos.  
Hemos sido nombrados Guacamayo  
o cocodrilo del gran ceibo.  
Por eso, el Creador nos hizo  
nacer en la mano del árbol de la nueva vida.

Segundo día del sol

(IV)

En medio de la casa  
hay tres piedras de la tortuga nocturna,  
puestas para el comienzo de mi vida,  
como fue el principio del mundo.

(V)

Sólo en tus ojos de luna nos podemos mirar.  
Porque el vientre de mi hermosa madre  
es también el vientre del cielo.  
Por eso fuimos dejados y atados en

together with the Milky Way,  
submerged within the hands of the  
great Tree of the World.

(II)

On this night,  
the three luminous stones of the turtle,  
have been found in the south, north, west, and east as  
well as in the center of the infinite.

Because this is the gigantic rattle of  
the snake of the sky.

(III)

Like that we began.  
We have been named Macaw  
or crocodile of the grand Ceiba.  
For this reason, the Creator made it that we were born in  
the hand of the tree of the new life.

The Second Day of the Sun

(IV)

In the center of the house  
there are three stones of the night turtle,  
placed at the dawn of my life,  
like it was the beginning of the world.

(V)

Only in your lunar eyes are we able to see ourselves.  
Because the womb of my beautiful mother  
is also the womb of the sky.  
For that reason we remain attached

un largo cordón umbilical.

(VI)

Entonces, por estos dos soles nacimos de nuevo  
en una sola cruz de madera cerca de la oquedad del  
cielo, siento que estamos ligados y unidos entre su  
maíz vientre de mi madre.

Tercer día del sol

(VII)

La cuerda del ombligo celeste está viva entre el claro  
sombrio de la vía láctea.

He puesto la mesa del limbo perfumada con  
la substancia bendita del cielo.

(VIII)

El Guacamayo toca el horizonte del mundo,  
se va, se pierde ante la mirada de mis ojos  
desciende como los Gemelos,  
porque estos péquenos duendes son  
el maíz de mi aliento.

(IX)

Este es el portal nocturno  
el descenso del camino y espejo de la muerte,  
oscuridad de los ojos.  
Itzamna ha llegado con nosotros y nos recibe con gracia,  
puso de nuevo las tres brillantes piedras  
de la tortuga  
en el ojo del cielo,  
las tres piedras del hogar.

by a long umbilical cord.

(VI)

Then, because of those two suns we were born anew in a  
single wooden cross close to the hollow of the sky,  
I feel we are linked and united in the  
maize womb of my mother.

The third day of the sun

(VII)

The celestial umbilical cord is alive among the clear  
darkness of the Milky Way.

I have made the table of limbo perfumed with  
the blessed substance of the sky.

(VIII)

The Celestial Macaw touches the horizon of the world,  
he goes away, lost before my eyes  
descending like the Twins,  
because those small spirits are  
the maize of my breath.

(IX)

This is the nocturnal portal  
the descent of the path and mirror of death,  
our eye's darkness.  
Itzamna has arrived and receives us with grace,  
once again he has put the three brilliant stones  
of the turtle  
in the eye of the sky,  
the three stones of the hearth.

**“U Tsoolil Óox Tuunich K-Otoch”<sup>60</sup>**

“Las tres piedras del hogar”

“The Three Stones of the Hearth”

It is notable that while all of the other poems written in Peninsular Maya in the anthology<sup>61</sup> from which this poem was taken have titles that capitalize only the first letter (following Spanish literary conventions), Brito May has chosen to capitalize every word. By capitalizing each word of the title “*U Tsoolil Óox Tuunich K-Otoch*” (translated by the poet into Spanish as “*Las tres piedras del hogar*”), the poet puts special emphasis on the significance of the concepts represented. Rolando Ek Naal (personal communication August 6, 2012) maintains that the poet is utilizing an important aspect of the flexibility of contemporary written Maya. By using capital letters he is indicating that these elements are considered to be living entities or beings that engender reverence.

In the semantic analysis of the Mayan version of the poem, *Tsoolil* translates into ‘story or memory,’ *Óox* into ‘the number three,’ *Tuunich* meaning ‘stone,’ and *K-Otoch*,<sup>62</sup> as ‘our home.’ Although this title clearly relates to the three stones placed in the cooking fire or hearth in traditional Mayan homes, it also is a reference to cosmological symbols connecting Maya daily life (both contemporary and historic) with creation ideology (Fernández Souza, 2008, Freidel et al, 1993, Morales Damián, 2012). This simultaneous reference to the home, cooking

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<sup>60</sup> In my conversation with Donny Limber Brito May on September 17<sup>th</sup>, 2012 he explained that this text is actually only a fragment of an ongoing work. At the time of its publication in 2008, the poem was divided into three sections entitled the First, Second, and Third Day of the Sun. Since its publication the poet has been steadily creating additional sections (Days of the Sun) and intends to conclude the poem when he has thirteen sections in total. He further explained that the number thirteen corresponds to the Mayan conceptualization of the thirteen levels of the sky that rise above the nine levels of the underworld or *inframundo*.

<sup>61</sup> Brito May’s poem is on pages 58-61 in the 2008 anthology *México: diversas lenguas una sola nación. Tomo I Antología de poesía en lenguas mexicanas* published by Escritores en Lenguas Indígenas, A.C. México D.F.

<sup>62</sup>The prefix *K* marks the possessive “our” in *K-Otoch*, “Our Home.”

fire/hearth, and the origins of the cosmos illustrates Mayan belief that the house (defined figuratively as “the four sides and the four corners of the universe” with the *fogón* or cooking fire as its heart) represents not only the “true center” of family life, but also of the Mayan cultural universe (Mathews et al., 2004, p. 50; Ligorred Perramon, 2000, p. 350). Javier Hirose López (2007) further explains that the square (as in the structure of the house) delimited by four sides, like the *solar* ‘the lot or space designated for the house’ and the *milpa* ‘corn field’ represents masculine forces or qualities, while the three stones forming a circle (or triangle<sup>63</sup>) mark the center or heart of the square/house and symbolize feminine forces or qualities. The confluence of these distinct forms and qualities symbolizes the duality (feminine/masculine) of the cosmos. Furthermore, in Mayan cosmogony, fire or the making of fire is “compared to the act of coitus, the making of life” (Taube, 1992, p. 39).

Significantly, the three Stones of the hearth correspond exactly with the Mayan calendar date “4 *Ahau* 8 *Kumk’u*” “the 13<sup>th</sup> of August 3114, bCE,”<sup>64</sup> the date when ancient Mayans recorded the birth of the third cosmic age (or current era) when the “three stones were set up at a place called ‘lying down sky,’ forming the image of the sky” (Freidel et al., 1993, pp. 61-63, 75). “These three stones of Creation are symbolic prototypes for the [three] hearthstones that have been used in Mayan homes for over three millennia” and “[a]s the hearthstones surround the cooking fire and establish the center of the home, so the three stones of Creation centered the cosmos and allowed the sky to be lifted from the Primordial Sea” (Freidel et al., 1993, p. 67).

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<sup>63</sup>In an interview on the 17<sup>th</sup> of September, 2012 with Donny Limber Brito May he spoke at length about the symbolism of the triangle in the representation of feminine qualities, but did not refer to it as a part of a circle.

<sup>64</sup>Inscribed on Mayan glyphs found in the city of Cobá, Quintana Roo, Mexico and on Stelae C in Quirigua, Guatemala, this date has been interpreted as the birth of the current cosmic age. Mayan cosmogony depicts three cosmic ages in which the third (spanning 3114 bCE to current times) corresponds to when the Mayan people were created out of corn (Freidel et al, 1993).

“Como el fogón de una casa,  
estas tres piedras son el corazón del cosmos<sup>65</sup>”

(De la Garza, 2007, p. 30)

Thus, Brito May’s title beginning with *Tsoolil* (story or memory) combines the story or memory of creation with contemporary cultural practice through the symbolic representation of the three stones of the hearth; emphasizing the poet’s belief that people have not forgotten and that tradition lives on (Brito May, personal communication, October 11, 2012).

**“U Tsoolil Óox Tuunich  
K-Otoch”**

Ka’ tu ya’alaj **Yuum k’uj**:

Ka’ yanak **sáasil’ob te’ tu nak’ ka’ano’**,

u ti’al u sásilkuntiko’ob

**le lu’umo’**, ka’ xan u junpáaykuntiko’ob **le k’iin**

ti’ le áakabo’, ka meyajnako’ob u tiál xan u ye’esiko’ob

le k’iino’ob’, le ja’abo’obo’ yéetel le **k’iinbesajilo’obo’**.

U yáax noj t’aanil kili’ich **Junab K’uj**

“Las tres piedras del hogar”

Dijo dios.

“Three Stones of the Hearth”

God said.

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<sup>65</sup> “Like the hearth of a house, these three stones are the heart of the cosmos”

Haya lámparas en el cielo,	That there be lights in the sky,
que separen el día de la noche,	that separate day from night,
que sirvan para señalar las fiestas,	that serve to indicate celebrations,
los días y los años, y que brillen	the days and the years, and that brighten
el firmamento para iluminar la tierra.	the sky to illuminate the earth.
Las primeras palabras del Gran Creador	The Great Creator's first words

According to Brito May (personal communication October 11, 2012), the epigraph to this poem comes from an Old Testament that had been translated into Peninsular Maya. Although his use of this passage as a prologue is not a suggestion of religious synchronism, it is as he says, a demonstration of how Creation appears to be universally conceived as movement, with the *word* (or language) functioning as its initial impetus or inspiration. He also explains that in their description of Creation both poem and epigraph emphasize a dynamic relationship between humans and the universe they are a part of. According to Brito May, maintaining this dynamic relationship is still considered essential in Mayan society. One of the ways this cosmological philosophy is made evident is through language, via a commonly used expression in modern Peninsular Mayan; *Toj in wóol*. This saying (which in English translates as “the wellbeing of person’s spirit or soul depends on if his/her path or trajectory is in synchronism with the earth and the universe”) reiterates the Mayan belief that there is a vital connection between humanity and the cosmos and that humans are responsible for sustaining this connection. Therefore, the title of Brito May’s poem illustrates how creation is reflected and reproduced symbolically with the placement of the three stones in the hearth. The epigraph demonstrates that the use of the

three stones in the hearth is an enduring cultural tradition that reinforces Mayan belief in personal and communal responsibility in the maintenance of the cosmic order.

In this poem the interrelation between the celestial bodies and Mayan cultural practices is articulated by connecting Maya cosmogony—the placement of the three stones or stars in the heavens—“That there be lights in the sky”—with communal activities—“that serve to indicate celebrations.” Mercedes de la Garza (1998) clarifies this connection between the celestial bodies and cultural tradition by explaining that Mayan cosmographers believe that humans, through their consciousness, cosmic knowledge, and ritual practices are active participants in the maintenance of cosmic balance. So as the constellations rotate—the sun and the stars through the sky in their continuous migration—their changing positions are physical manifestations of the passing of time through space.

“El tiempo cíclico [. . .] es la estructura por la cual  
se expresa una compleja manera de entender el mundo y actuar en consecuencia<sup>66</sup>”

(Bracamonte y Sosa, 2010, p. 25)

For the Maya, temporality (historically as well as today) is not an abstract concept, but a manifestation of the “evidente y eterno dinamismo del espacio”<sup>67</sup> (De la Garza, 1998, p. 25). As a consequence, this trajectory of time—conceived as a circular movement around the earth—is what determines changes that occur on the planet. Correspondingly, the human participation and response to these changes is a form of ritual practice and celebration.

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<sup>66</sup> “Cyclical time [. . .] is the structure in which a complex manner of understanding the world and acting accordingly is expressed”

<sup>67</sup> “[T]he perceptible and eternal dynamism of space.”

“Las celebraciones [ . . . ] sirven para que el hombre maya,  
responsable del mundo en que vive, mantenga con su sacrificio el orden.”

(Morales Damián, 2012, p. 9)

In the analysis of Brito May’s epigraph, *Yuum* translates as ‘great person, gentleman, sir or lord.’ *K’uj* refers to ‘omnipotent/greatest/maximum deity or god’ and clearly refers to *Junab K’uj* ‘God One, celestial god and omnipresent god creator, Maize God, First Mother and First Father’ who “caused the three stones to be planted when the sky was still lying down” (De la Garza, 1998; Freidel et al., 1993, p. 75; López de la Rosa & Martel, 1995; Morales Damián, 2002). The term *Hunab (Junab)* is a derivative of *Hunuc* meaning ‘the number one or unique and/or magnificent,’ but instead of signifying ‘only,’ it is interpreted as ‘great, true, and legitimate’ (López de la Rosa & Martel, 1995). Rolando Ek Naal emphasizes this distinction by describing the magnificence and omnipotence of this entity while reiterating that he/she is not alone because there are others (assistants) who participate in this great endeavor as well (Ek Naal, personal communication September 4, 2012).

“Creation is not the work of a solitary being,  
but a great effort brought about by many beings who plan, discuss, and act together.

This philosophy is still an important part of Maya community life”

(Freidel et al., 1993, p. 69)

The term *Nak’* meaning womb, belly, abdomen, or stomach, places *sáasil’ob*,<sup>68</sup> ‘the lights or constellations’ in the womb or belly (center) of the *ka’ano*<sup>69</sup>, ‘firmament or sky.’ This

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<sup>68</sup> The suffix ‘*ob*’ used with the term *sáasil’ob* indicates pluralization ‘lights.’

celestial positioning of the stars (three cosmic stones) in the womb or belly of the sky is a metaphor for creation, indicating not only their central placement in the sky, but also the initial impulse that set the celestial bodies into motion. The positioning and initial movement of the constellations marks “the beginning of time and space, because it is through the movement of the stars, the Milky Way, and the planets that [. . .] human beings calculate the passage of time” (Freidel et al., 1993, p. 75). Both ancient and contemporary Maya have followed this celestial calendar and in their effort to maintain cosmic balance, have expressed their belief through ritual. Thus, the practice and symbolism of the placing of the three stones in the hearth is both a daily observance of the beginning of Creation and a symbolic representation of Mayan participation in cosmic balancing. For this reason, the practice and symbolism of the placing of the three stones in the hearth is not only a veneration and daily celebration of the beginning of the new era, but also a manifestation of each Mayan family’s active participation in the perpetuation of cultural continuity.

**Yáax** tsoolil k’iin

(I)

Bejlae’

u yokol **k’inne** tu yiilubaj

yéetel u **sakbejil ka’an**, (sakbejil-ka’an)

t’úubano’ob ichil u k’ab **yuum Wakah-Chan**

Primer día del sol

First day of the sun

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<sup>69</sup> The suffix *o’* used with the term *ka’ano’* indicates ‘that,’ as in that sky that was mentioned or referred to before.

(I)	(I)
Hoy	Today
desciende el sol	the sun descends
con la vía láctea,	together with the Milky Way,
hundidos entre las manos del	submerged within the hands of the
gran Árbol del Mundo.	great Tree of the World.

*Yáax*, meaning ‘first,’ is used with time and/or objects and is a near homophone to the term for the color green, *ya’ax* or *yax*. In Mayan cosmology when *Junab K’uj* ‘First Father/First Mother, God Creator’ lifted the sky off of the earth and partitioned the world, specific colors were (and still are) utilized to demarcate the five principal regions of the earth (Hirose López, 2007; Mathews et al., 2004.). While green is used to designate the most central point, the four cardinal directions or sectors are depicted with red corresponding to the east, white to the north, black to the west, yellow to the south (León-Portilla, 1986). Accordingly, green is the color that refers to a central location both primordial and sacred, where forces unite (Morales Damián, 2002; Valverde, 2001).



Figure 11. The Cosmic Division of the Earth. This drawing from the Madrid Codex (Post Classic period) is a diagram of time and space that depicts the various cycles of time in conjunction with the cosmic division of the earth. In this drawing the Earth is divided into the four sectors with the center marked with a “T.” The center is framed by the Mayan day glyphs and on either side of the “T” are the seated Lunar deity and Itzamna, the primordial couple. Source: Madrid Codex pp. 75-76. [http://uknowledge.uky.edu/world\\_mexico\\_codices/3/](http://uknowledge.uky.edu/world_mexico_codices/3/). Retrieved June 23, 2014. Reprinted with permission: <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/>

The introduction to the first stanza, *Yáax* ‘first,’ *tsoolil* ‘story, memory,’ and *k’iin* ‘sun, day, time’ therefore suggests the initial encounter, when *k’inne*<sup>70</sup> ‘the sun,’ together with the *sakbejil-ka’an* ‘Milky Way’ placed themselves within the branches of the Great Tree of the World or “Gran Madre Ceiba<sup>71</sup>” (Valverde, 2001, p. 143). This sacred first/green tree (see Figure 12), also known as *Yax Imix*<sup>72</sup> *Che*, is conceptualized as “la ceiba sagrada, pilar y centro

<sup>70</sup> The final *e* of *k’inne* refers to that sun, placing it at a more distant time or location.

<sup>71</sup> “Great Mother Ceiba.”

<sup>72</sup> *Imix* meaning water lily or more literally, “water maize” is also a day name in the Mayan calendar. This day refers to the stage in maize cultivation when roots develop and leaf sprouts appear. Symbolically, the spelling of *imix* is the reversal of *ixim*, the Mayan term for “maize (Stross, 2007, p. 414).

del universe” or *axis mundi* and is a manifestation of the deity known as *yuum* ‘lord or great person’ *Wak* ‘six,’ *ah* ‘ancient adjective indicating the number six,’ and *Chan* ‘serpent, sky’ (Morales Damian, 2002, p. 219; Freidel et al., 1993; and Rolando Ek Naal personal communication September 4, 2012).

The ancient Maya wrote *Wakah-Chan* hieroglyphically and used “the number six prefixed to the phonetic sign *ah* and the glyph for ‘sky’ because the sounds of *wak*, the word for ‘six,’ and *ah*, are homophonous with the word *wakah*, meaning ‘raised up’” (Freidel et al., 1993, p. 53). Correspondingly, the term *Wakah*—as the number six—refers to the earth’s five sacred locations or directions: the earth’s center or *yax*, the four cardinal sectors or directions, and the directional movement upward or skyward (Ek Naal, December 8, 2013).

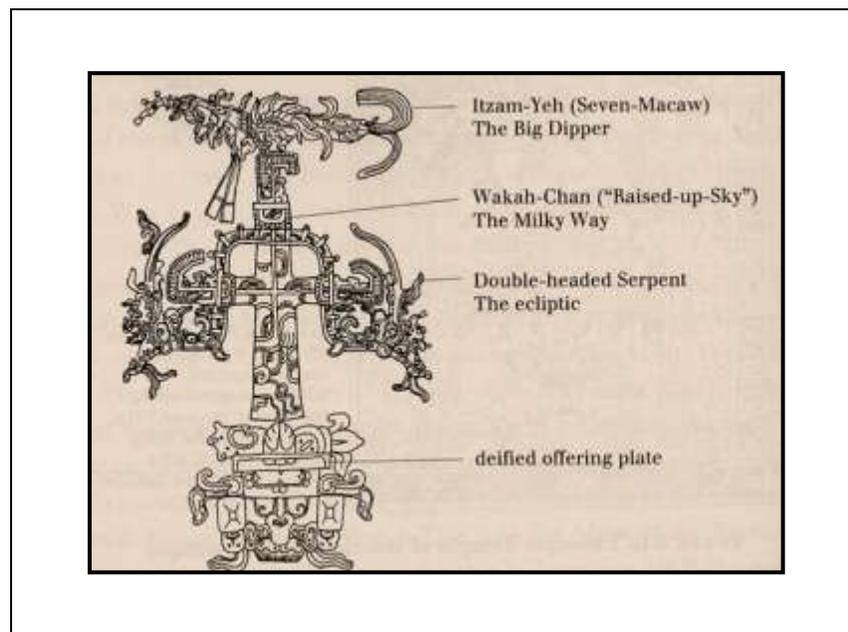


Figure 12. *Wakah-Chan*, The World Tree. Source: *Maya Cosmos Three Thousand Years On the Shaman’s Path*, by D. Freidel, L. Schele, and J. Parker 1993, p. 78. Permission for the use of this image granted by HarperCollins Publishers.

In modern Yucatec, “the words for ‘sky,’ *ka’an*, and for the number ‘four,’ *kan*, are near homophones” (in Cholan<sup>73</sup> both terms are pronounced as *chan*), but in the ancient writing system “the glyphs for the number ‘four,’ ‘sky,’ and ‘snake’ (all *chan* in Cholan or *kan* in Yucatekan) freely substitute for each other” (Freidel et al., 1993, p. 57). For this reason, ***Wakah-Chan*** or “Elevated Sky” describes the ascension towards the sun by means of the “axis mundi” represented by the Great Ceiba (Freidel et al., 1993, p. 55). This upward movement symbolizes the initial action of the creation of the universe when *Hun-Nal-Ye* ‘the First Father /First Mother and god of corn’ enters the universe and is converted into the sky as it is elevated off of the earth (De la Garza, 2007). ***Wakah-Chan*** through this transformation or manifestation as the Great Ceiba or *axis mundi* reaches its branches through all of the celestial regions. By extending its roots down into the depths of the world it connects the three levels of the universe: the sky, the earth, and the underworld (Rolando Ek Naal personal communication, September 4, 2012); Hirose López, 2007; Valverde, 2001).

Rolando Ek Naal interprets the first verse of Brito May’s poem as the initial stages of creation when the celestial bodies were put into motion after the sky had been lifted off of the earth. At this moment the sun and the Milky Way, aligned in the center of universe and immersed in the branches of the Great Mother Ceiba or *yuum Wakah-Chan*, greet each other in profound acknowledgement. He goes on to explain that deities or cosmic energies, through a metamorphic process, have the capacity to transform themselves from one living creature into

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<sup>73</sup>“The Cholan languages represent a branch of the greater Tzeltalan Group of the Mayan language family and are spoken today on both the eastern and western peripheries of the Classic Mayan region. Chontal and Chol are western Cholan languages found in Mexico (Chol is spoken in the state of Chiapas and Chontal in Tabasco) while Chorti is the only extant language of eastern Cholan and is spoken on the Guatemalan-Honduran border” (Quizar & Knowles-Berry, 1988, p. 73).

another, and even into a non-living entity (personal communication, September, 6, 2012). In this manner, *Sakbejl-ka'an* 'the Milky Way'—semantically analyzed as *Sak* 'white,' *bej* 'path' *il* 'of the' *ka'an* 'sky'—is in itself a deity and is conceptualized as the celestial path, road, rope, umbilical cord, and/or serpent that links the sky to the earth and symbolizes the vital connection between the Mayan people (historic and contemporary) and the source of creation and cultural origin (De la Garza, 1998). Consequently, because *Sakbej* 'the Milky Way' is an important polyvalent symbol, in its manifestation as an umbilical cord and/or serpent it also represents the flow of blood; the most sacred and vital of liquids that instills life into the world (De la Garza, 1998).

(II)

**Bejla' áak'ab k'iine',**

u yóoxp' éel sáasil **áak tuunicho'obe',**

sáam u yiiluba'ob **te'nojol, xaaman, chik'iin**

beyxan te' **lak'iino'**

je'bix tu **ts'u'** chúumuk ka'ane'.

Tumeen lela', u **nuxi' tsáab kaan**

ti' **ka'an.**

(II)

En esta noche,

las tres luminosas piedras de la tortuga,  
se han encontrado en el sur, norte, oeste

(II)

On this night,

the three luminous stones of the turtle,  
have been found in the south, north, west,

y este	and east
como en el centro del infinito.	as well as in the center of the infinite.
Porque ésta es la gigantesca cascabel de la serpiente del cielo.	Because this is the gigantic rattle of the snake of the sky.

“On this night,” expressed in Maya as *Bejla* ‘today,’ *áak’ab* ‘night,’ and *k’iine* ‘this’<sup>74</sup> sun, day or time,’ is a reference to the specific night in which those<sup>75</sup> *yóoxp’éel* ‘three’<sup>76</sup> *sáasil* ‘illuminated’<sup>77</sup> *tuunicho’obe* ‘stones’ of the *áak* ‘turtle’ are found in all five of directions of the universe; *nojol* ‘south,’ *xaaman* ‘north,’ *chik’iin* ‘west,’ *lak’iin* ‘east,’ and *ts’u* ‘the center, heart or depths.’

“El orden de lo terrenal era una reproducción del orden  
cósmico universal representado en los cielos”<sup>78</sup>

*“Bey ti’ka’an, bey ti’lu’um”*<sup>79</sup>

(Torres Rodríguez, 1999, p. 17)

Rolando Ek Naal states that there are several protagonists in this stanza, including: the three stones (the Creation stars), the turtle (the earth), the cardinal directions, the center or heart of the

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<sup>74</sup>The final *e* on *K’iine* is the demonstrative adjective “this” and refers to this specific sun, day or time.

<sup>75</sup> The final *e* on *tuunicho’obe* is the demonstrative adjective “those” and refers to those specific stones.

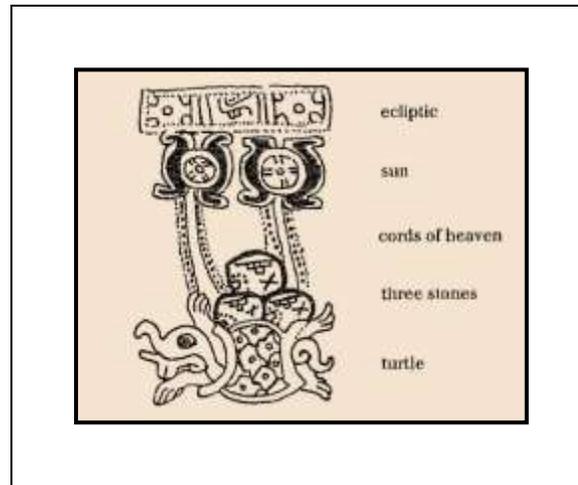
<sup>76</sup> The suffix *p’* attached to the word *yóox* (three), *yóoxp’*, is generally used to classify non living things.

<sup>77</sup> The suffix *il* attached to the word *sáasil* (light), *sáasil* signifies the possessive and refers to the stone’s light or illumination.

<sup>78</sup> “The order of what is on earth was a reproduction of the universal cosmic order represented in the sky” / “As is the sky, so is the earth”

<sup>79</sup> “Path of the sky, path of the earth”

universe, and the celestial serpent or rattle snake (representing the various formations of the Milky Way) (see Figure 13).



*Figure 13.* The Three Stones Being Placed on the Celestial Turtle’s Back as Depicted in the Madrid Codex. Source: *Maya Cosmos Three Thousand Years on the Shaman’s Path*, by D. Freidel, L. Schele, and J. Parker 1993, p. 82. Permission for the use of this image granted by HarperCollins Publishers.

He also explains that the Maya (both ancient and modern) are acute observers of nature and it is culturally characteristic to utilize elements from the environment and specific animals as models, using their qualities and traits to describe abstract concepts and phenomena (personal communication September 6, 2012). Josep Ligorred Perramon (1992. p. 184) affirms that this type of observation of nature is evident linguistically, as symbolism based on animals and natural phenomenon is often integrated into both spoken and graphic language “to produce a form of expression that manages multiple meaning.” As an example of this (see Figure 13), we can look to the image of the turtle and the three stones of the hearth. These symbolic references to the three stars in Orion’s Belt form the body of the Mayan celestial turtle and mark the sacred date of the beginning of the Creation of the current era.

In this cosmic drama First Father/Mother/Creator is reborn and emerges from the shell of the celestial turtle (see Figure 14). As he/she rises and lifts the sky, setting the constellations into motion, his/her action causes all that is above (or celestial) to be reflected on earth (Torres Rodríguez, 1999).



Figure 14. The Maize God Reborn from the Shell of the Cosmic Turtle. As depicted in the interior of Late Classic Mayan bowl. Source: *Maya Cosmos Three Thousand Years On the Shaman's Path*, by D. Freidel, L. Schele, and J. Parker 1993, p. 66. Permission for the use of this image granted by HarperCollins Publishers.

Linguistic analysis<sup>80</sup> of the term *áak* provides essential clues for understanding how the iconic representation of a turtle in this poem could symbolize simultaneously: the birth of the Creator, the beginning of Creation, constellations, the Earth, and the heart or center of the Mayan traditional home. Although the following analysis of the term *áak* (turtle) is only partial, it is an excellent demonstration of how Brito May's artistry capitalizes on the intrinsic connection between Mayan cosmological symbolism and language.

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<sup>80</sup> This list of semantic variations derived from the root word *ak* in Peninsular Maya comes from the glossary of Ligorred Perromon's (1992, pp. 192-94) article on the esthetic value of ancient Mayan sculpture at the archeological site of the Casa de las Tortugas at Uxmal and the University of Quintana Roo Spanish /Maya, Maya/Spanish Dictionary (Gómez Navarette, 2009).

<i>AK</i>	turtle, tortoise, peccary of this earth (the one the guides the others), plant that covers the roofs of houses, arched, covered, seated
<i>AAK (áak)</i>	turtle, tortoise, peccary, dwarf
<i>AKTUN</i>	cave, cavern, cave with water
<i>AK</i>	reeds in general, fresh thing, tender or green
<i>AK'AB</i>	night
<i>AK'AL</i>	lagoon, marshland, swamp, muddy area, dampen

*Ak* being the root word for wetlands and night, as well as for cave, combines the watery environment of the primordial world with the darkness of night and is a reference to the world before the sky had been lifted. This imagery, together with the physical shape of the turtle's shell conveys not only a curved or vaulted roof of a cavern, but also that of the sky or heavens (Ligorred Perramon, 1992). Visualization of the darkness of a cave or the interior of the turtle's shell with its arched contour is a direct metaphor for the unlit sky before the constellations had been placed and put into motion by the Great Creator. Reeds and the adjectives fresh, green, and tender are associated with the aquatic environment of many turtle species, as well as rebirth or beginning, especially in relation to sprouting corn. The tender green corn shoots correspond to the worldview that "One-Maize-Revealed" 'First Father/Mother' was reborn as maize, the staple sustenance of humanity and the material from which the gods created human beings (Freidel et al, 1993). That the same term for turtle is also used for peccary is particularly interesting due to its celestial or astrological connotations. In Mayan cosmology, *ak* or *áak* is the term for the constellation Gemini which is conceived as a pair of copulating peccaries, but it is also used to identify the three stars on the turtle's back that form part of Orion's Belt, represented in the home as the three sacred stones of the hearth (Freidel et al, 1993). Finally, turtles and reeds both

expressed with the term *ak* are not only associated with water, but also correspond to the notion of power and the reference to “seated” or “recipient.” The seat of authority for the ancient Maya was a rush mat made from reeds and woven to resemble the design on a turtle’s shell known as *pop*—or an insignia of authority (Liggored Perramon, 1992).

<b>Bejla’ áak’ab k’iine</b>	On this night,
u yóoxp’ éel sáasil <b>áak tuunicho’obe’</b> ,	the three luminous stones of the turtle,
sáam u yiiluba’ob <b>te’nojol, xaaman,</b>	have been found in the south, north,
<b>chik’iin</b> beyxan te’ <b>lak’iino’</b>	west, and east as well as in the
je’ bix tu <b>ts’u’</b> chúumuk ka’ane’.	center of the infinite.

To understand the idea presented in this stanza, that the three stones of the hearth or turtle are found concurrently in *ts’u’*, “the center of the infinite” and all four of the cardinal directions; *nojol* ‘south,’ *xaaman* ‘north,’ *chik’iin* ‘west,’ and *lak’iin* ‘east,’ it is necessary to understand the Mayan conceptualization of the universe as being partitioned into the four grand cosmic quadrants that converge on a central point. Furthermore, for the analysis of this poem we must understand why this partitioning, as seen on a cosmic scale, is reproduced to this day in the intimate setting of the home.

In the Mayan Creation narration when the sky was lifted off of the earth and the Great Ceiba was raised, the constellations were set into motion. This celestial movement marked the simultaneous beginning of time and the division of space. The Mayan universe is generally conceived as being divided into three vertical levels: the sky, which is separated into thirteen layers or strata; the earth, conceived as a quadrangular plane; and the underworld, consisting of

nine levels (De la Garza, 2007). This entire structure (see Figure 15) is then further partitioned into the four quadrants that merge into a central point, where the Great Ceiba extends its “roots in the Underworld, its trunk in the Middleworld and its branches in the Overworld” (Paxton, 2001, p. 26).

“The house of the World Tree is the world itself.”

(Freidel et al., 1993, p. 251)

For the ancient Maya, the sun’s circular walk through space around the quadrangular plane of the earth was a physical manifestation of the passing of time (Wichmann, 2004). This conception of the movement of time correlates with Rolando Ek Naal’s explanation that in the Mayan worldview the merging of time and space is not an abstraction, but is visible through the sun’s journey as it goes from the east to the west, “exiting and entering its houses” (personal communication September 7, 2012). Therefore, when the First Father/Mother set the constellations in motion this not only made it possible for humanity to compute time by observing the sky (the passage of the days, months, years, etc.), but also to organize social and physical space in accordance with the sun’s trajectory through the five sectors of the universe; its center—the sun’s zenith and nadir—and the four quadrants or cardinal directions.

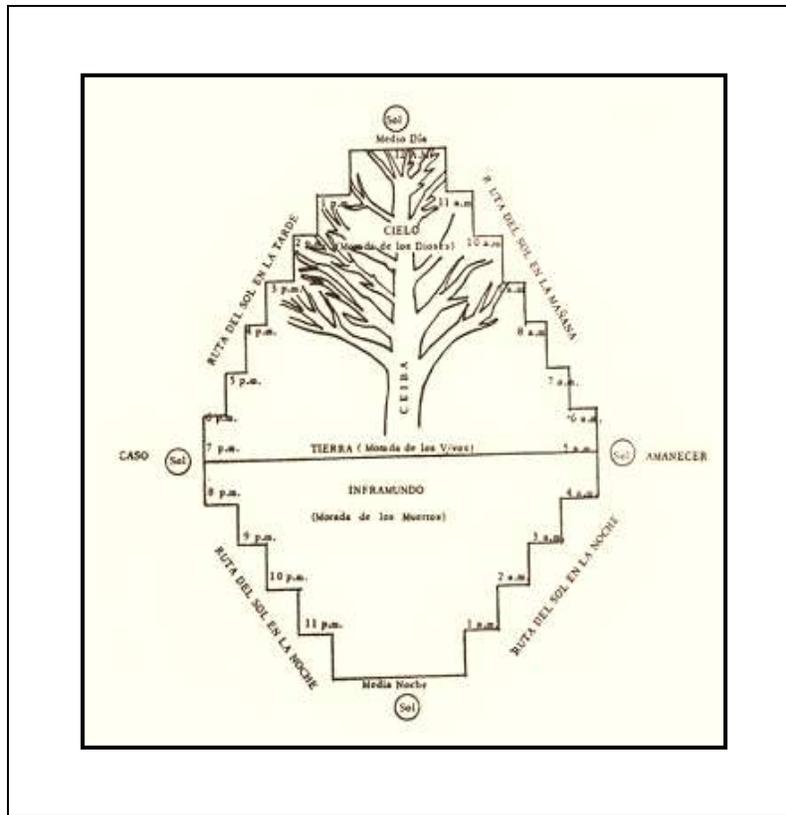


Figure 15. The Great Ceiba and the Structure of the Universe. Source: “El devenir en el mundo subterráneo,” by R. Romero Sandoval, 2012, *Revista Digital Universitaria*, 13. <http://www.revista.unam.mx/vol.13/num11/art108/> Reprinted with permission.

The sun’s visit to its “four houses”<sup>81</sup> on its path around the circumference of the earth’s horizon not only demarcates the four corners or quadrants of the earth, but also identifies the human domain or environment as having the same quadrangular shape (De la Garza, 1998, p. 60). In the Mayan worldview, domestic space is the physical embodiment of the primordial cultural order that was established at the moment of creation when the First Father/Mother defined the universe’s dimensions and orientation as a house with four walls, corners and the Great Ceiba at its center (Hanks, 1990; Hirose López, 2007; Mathews et al., 2004). According

<sup>81</sup>Rolando Ek Naal states that the sun in its circular path visits five houses; the four corners of the universe and the center (personal communication, September 24, 2012).

to Nicholas Hopkins and J. Kathryn Josserand (2001) this connection between the cosmic division of space and the structure and orientation of the home is also embedded linguistically. They explain that the terms *chik'iin* 'west,' and *lak'iin* 'east,' which describe the quadrants or areas designating the setting and rising of the sun, are of ancient origin, and correlate to the structure and orientation of a traditional Mayan home. They affirm that the reduced forms of the original terms for *chik'iin* and *lak'iin* were "spelled out in Classic Period hieroglyphic inscriptions" (see Figure 16) and that there is evidence indicating "that the original, unreduced, terms can be postulated for Proto-Mayan, as early as 2000 BC" (Hopkins et al., 2001, pp. 7-8). They demonstrate that while both terms for 'east' *likin* or *lakin* and 'west' *chikin* contain a reference to the sun *k'in*, the 'l' in *likin* or *lakin* is based on the verb 'to exit' and the term translates as "the sun comes out" or exits its house, while the 'ch' of *chikin* is based on the verb 'to enter,' and translates as "where the sun enters" or goes into its house (*ibid*).

In Mayan cosmology, the terms *likin* or *lakin* (east) and *chikin* (west) are the primary directions, but instead of designating cardinal points, they refer to "the eastern and western horizons limited by [the] sunrise and sunsets on the dates of the summer and winter solstices." The directions north *xaman* or *xaaman* and south *nohol* or *nojol*<sup>82</sup> generally define "the portions of the horizons not incorporated in east and west" and only marginally refer to the house or quadrangular structure in some contexts where they are considered the "sides [or walls] of heaven" (Paxton, 2001, pp. 23-28).

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<sup>82</sup> It is interesting to note that the terms for "north" and "south" do not exist in all Mayan languages.

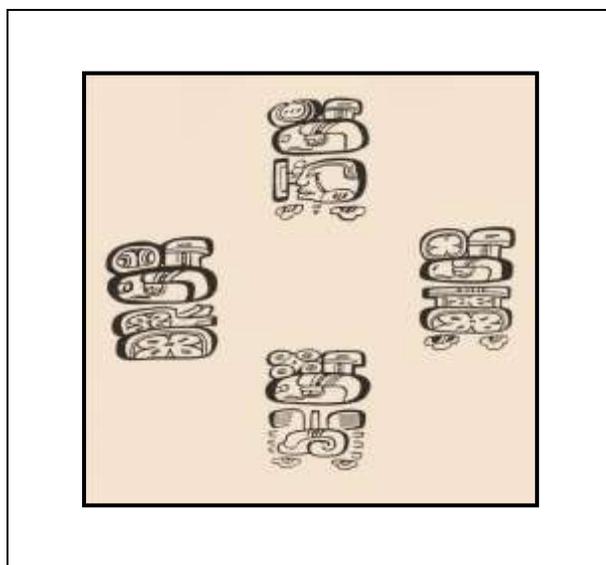


Figure 16. Classic Mayan Hieroglyphs Representing the Four Directions. The top glyph represents *xaman* ‘north,’ the left glyph represents *chik’iin* ‘west,’ the right glyph represents *likin or lakin* ‘east,’ and the bottom glyph represents *nohol* ‘south.’ “The directions are accompanied by undeciphered glyphs (above each direction) referencing the moon (north), night (west), Venus (south, and day or sun (east).” Adapted from: “Directions and partitions in Maya world view,” by N. Hopkins and J. Josserand, 2001, *Four Corners of the Maya World. Symposium*, p. 2.

Susan Gillespie (2000, p. 159) defines Mayan reproduction on a human scale that is writ large in the cosmos as “the spatial association of nestedness or encompassing concentricity.” In other words, the symbolic representation of the house as the four corners, walls and center of the universe creates a nesting box—or nesting house—effect where the hearth is placed within ever larger “houses” or areas such as the *solar* (building and planting area), community, town, and universe. She goes on to say that linking humans to these outward concentric dimensions or levels of space—from the hearth to the universe—makes “the house an entity that is both contained and container, but on multiple levels” (Gillespie, 2000, p. 158). Thus, according to the Mayan world view the image of the house symbolizes the universe and the intimate human

domain that not only shares the form of having four walls and four corners, it also shares its center or heart, represented by the three stones of the hearth.

The last verse of the second stanza *Tumeen lela', u nuxi' tsáab kaan ti' ka'an* concludes with the image of the *nuxi'* 'great or gigantic' *tsáab kaan* 'rattlesnake' *ti' ka'an* 'of the sky.' Mercedes de la Garza (1998) maintains that the serpent embodies water, sky, and earth and is one of the most fundamental symbols in Mayan cosmogony because it represents sacred vital energy—the power of fertility—and the creative forces of the cosmos. She posits that snakes in general have such remarkable qualities that they are incorporated into Mayan iconography to represent multiple and frequently contradictory concepts, such as: life and death, good and bad, masculine and feminine, as well as the heavens, the earth, and the underworld. Moreover, because the serpent as symbol has the capacity to permeate time and space, it communicates sacredness (sacred intelligence) integrating all of the beings inhabiting the cosmos. In discussing this stanza, Donny Limber Brito May (personal communication October 11, 2012) emphasizes that snakes represent wisdom, and the fact that *kaan* 'snake' and *ka'an* 'sky' are near homophones clarifies how and why this polysemic symbol represents a living link connecting humanity to celestial knowledge. This concept is illustrated historically in pre-Columbian graphics that depict deities or ancestors emerging from the open jaws of serpents (see Figure 17). The act of metaphorical transportation through the body of a snake symbolizes the capacity of these entities to communicate—from the beyond—with those living on earth. This particular symbolic interpretation resonates to this day,<sup>83</sup> as many Mayans consider serpents to be vehicles of special (or celestial) knowledge (Freidel et al., 1993).

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<sup>83</sup>For example, David Freidel (1993, p. 210) writes that contemporary "Yukatek Maya women say that they stroke a snake when they learn how embroider." Notably, many ancient and contemporary Mayan embroidery designs are modeled from the patterns that come from snake skins.



Figure 17. Vision Serpent. The face emerging from the serpent is a “materialized ancestor.” Adapted from “A Forest of Kings: The Untold Story of the Ancient Maya” by L. Schele and D. Freidel, 1990, p 69. Permission for the use of this image granted by HarperCollins Publishers.

Corresponding to the Mayan conceptualization of time and space, the serpent also represents the visual trajectory of the planets and constellation as they revolve through space.<sup>84</sup> It can also embody the cyclical, recurrent, and regenerative qualities of time due to its fecundity and ability to periodically change its skin (Freidel et al, 1993; Cauch Ramírez, personal communication, September 18, 2012). Rolando Ek Naal refers to the *nuxi’ tsáab kaan* as the grand (as in aged and important) rattlesnake and states that it represents one of the forms taken by the Milky Way—especially at certain times of the year—when its alignment in the sky directly corresponds with the center<sup>85</sup> of the world (personal communication, September 24, 2012). This alignment of the Milky Way with the center of the world is a reference to the Mayan date of Creation when this celestial body transforms itself into the Great Ceiba or *Wakah-Chan* and prepares “the old universe for the creation of the new” (Freidel et al, 1993, p. 96).

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<sup>84</sup>The serpent is also used to symbolize the Pleiades and the ecliptic (Villela and Schele, 1996).

<sup>85</sup> Rolando Ek Naal (personal communication, September 24, 2012) explains that there are various centers.

Therefore, when Brito May concludes this stanza by referring to the center of the infinite as “the gigantic rattle of the snake of the sky” he is making a reference to the Creation of the current era. When the First Father/Mother placed the three sacred stones in the great celestial rattlesnake’s tail, the sky was lifted off of the earth and the constellations (time, human consciousness and cultural memory) were set into motion. The image of the gigantic rattlesnake with its tail in the infinite and its body in the form of the Milky Way “submerged within the hands of the great Tree of the World” links the sky, earth, and hearth, symbolizing the vital connection between humanity and cosmic knowledge and cultural regeneration.

(III)

Bey túun káajiko’ona’.

Ts’o’ka’an k-k’aaba’tik

**Itzam-Yeh**

**wa áayini’, nojoch ya’ax che’il,**

le béetike’, **Junab k’u’e** tu béetaj

k-síijil tu noj k’abil u che’il

túumben **kuxtal.**

(III)

Así comenzamos.

Hemos sido nombrados

Guacamayo

o cocodrilo del gran ceibo.

(III)

Like that we began.

We have been named

Macaw

or crocodile of the grand Ceiba.

Por eso, el Creador nos hizo  
nacer en la mano del árbol  
de la nueva vida.

For this reason, the Creator made it that we  
were born in the hand of the tree  
of new life.

Rolando Ek Naal (personal communication, September 30, 2012) interprets the symbolic events described in the third stanza of the poem as the transference of celestial activities onto earth. He believes these phenomena are deeply ingrained in Mayan world view and that they continue to be influential in contemporary life. Thus, when Brito May writes that: “Like that we began,” “We have been named...,” and “the Creator made it that we were born in the hand of the tree of new life,” he is conflating mythological cosmology with contemporary Mayan society and illustrating that not only the ancient, but the modern Maya as well, play an integral role in regeneration of the cosmic forces and the cosmos. This transference of celestial activities onto earth, suggests that the role and responsibility of the Mayan community is to nurture (with their very breath, consciousness, and practice) the sacred world around them. From this perspective, we can see that processes such as the regeneration of the tree of life, the cultivation of corn, the lighting of the daily fire, and the development of a child, etc. require the cultivation and perpetuation of a life force (or soul) in concepts and objects the Maya perceive as animate.

David Freidel (1993, p. 256) clarifies this belief by affirming that:

The Maya have been feeding the tree at the center of the world for three thousand years. The details of the rituals have changed, but the differences do not belie the underlying continuity in the way they think of the world. It is alive, and all sacred things in it—including things we would call alive and things we could call inanimate—have soul. And as with a child, the soul of these objects must be brought into them and then

nurtured for their continued health. They understand that these rituals replicate the Creation of the world (. . .) [and for this reason], they continue the process of re-creation, nourishing] the tree and its sprouts so that humanity will continue to prosper.

Consequently, by saying “We have been named *Itzam-Yeh* ‘Celestial Macaw’ or *áayini* ‘this crocodile’ of the grand Ceiba,” the poet is transposing the characteristics, qualities, and significance of two extremely important entities from Mayan cosmology onto humanity and is emphasizing their continued relevance to the Mayan worldview and social practice.

In Mayan cosmology, the defining qualities of the macaw are utilized to describe attributes and aspects of significant cultural entities. The fact that the poet capitalizes the word *Macaw* makes it evident that he is not referring to macaws in general (although their characteristics do get incorporated into the new meaning), but he is specifying the great entity *Itzam-Yeh* the Celestial Macaw. The composite of morphemes that comprise this entity’s name convey the following information: *itz* (or *its*) signifying primordial liquid—fecund and full of life—and refers to dew, substance from the sky and clouds, nectar, milk, semen, humidity, and resin; while *am* implies performer or the one who acts or possesses; and *a* represents water, the fundamental conduit of life (Ek Naal, personal communication, September 30, 2012; Montolú Villar, 1984; López de la Rosa & Martel, 1995). Roland Ek Naal (*ibid*) further explains that when *itz* is converted into a verb it signifies to make magic or to enchant and that *Yeh* connotes: to show, reveal, present, and make visible. He elucidates that the name or title *Itzam-Yeh* in its entirety symbolizes the magic presented or astonishing manifestation (*ibid*). With this information we interpret *itz* to represent the essential generative fluid—whether it is for flora or fauna (including humans) and *am* as the force or entity that transforms this fluid into life. David

Freidel (1993) asserts that “in Classic-period imagery *itz* has two personified forms—the aged Itzamna [powerful creator deity] (see Figure 18) and the great Cosmic Bird whose name was Itzam-Yeh.” He goes on to say that the bird, whose name means “Itzam Revealed,” may actually be Itzamna’s *way*<sup>86</sup> or animal alter ego (Freidel, 1993, p. 211).

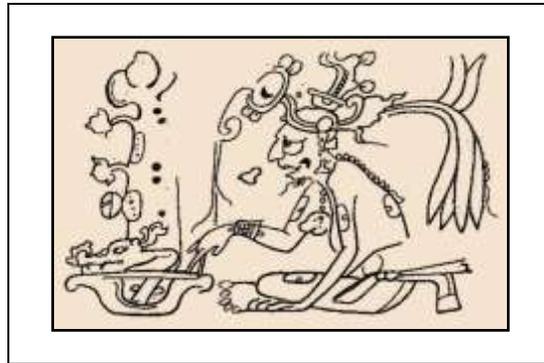


Figure 18. The Deity Itzamna with the Crocodile Tree. This representation of Itzamna and the Crocodile Tree comes from a Late Classic codex style vessel. Source: *The major gods of ancient Yucatan* by K. Taube, 1992, p. 32. Reprinted with permission.

“*Itzamna* es mucho más que un nombre; es una mezcla de mensajes contrarios y a la vez complementarios, ocultos detrás de la anatomía lingüística del nombre<sup>87</sup>”

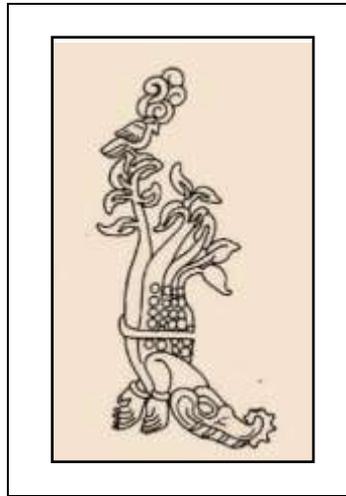
(López de Rosa & Martel, 1995, p. 284)

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<sup>86</sup> According to Mercedes de la Garza (1987 p. 99), in the Mayan worldview *ways* are considered part of the human condition and are linked to a person from their birth to their death, sharing his or her destiny and part of their spirit as well. Gabriel Bourdin (2007) explains that today’s Yucatec Maya do not think of *waay* as a common attribute, but as a nocturnal and supernatural phenomenon such as witchcraft or the act of witches/warlocks who have the capacity to change themselves into animals.

<sup>87</sup> “*Itzamna* is much more than a name; it is the blend of simultaneously contrary and complementary messages, hidden behind the linguistic anatomy of the name”

*Áayin*, when combined with the demonstrative pronoun suffix *i'* signifies this crocodile or lizard. When coupled with *Itzam-Yeh* and referred to as part of or emanating from the grand Ceiba, it represents the raising of the sky off of the earth and the beginning of the new world order consisting of the distinct yet connected strata of the universe (see Figure 19).



*Figure 19.* The Crocodile Tree. The crocodile has its snout rooted into the earth while its tail, sprouting foliage, rises to the sky. The Celestial Macaw is perched on the uppermost branches of its tail. This representation of the Crocodile Tree comes from Izapa Stela 25, Chiapas, Mexico. Adapted from *Maya Cosmos Three Thousand Years On the Shaman's Path*, by D. Freidel, L. Schele, and J. Parker 1993, p. 89. Permission for the use of this image granted by HarperCollins Publishers.

The crocodile embodies the amphibious environment of the earth still submerged in water. Its attributes, such as its rough skin which is similar to the earth's surface (or the bark of a young Ceiba), its fertility and its long lasting life on earth, when coupled with its shape—especially envisioned with its snout in the ground and its body rising into the sky—are used in pre-Hispanic images to represent how the great Ceiba as the *axis mundi* extends from the underworld, through the earth (where humanity is generated), and up to the sky (Camino, 2007; De la Garza, 1998;

Morales Damián, 2002; Stross, 2007). The Celestial Macaw perched at the top of the crocodile's tail (or the great Ceiba) with its magnificent plumage symbolizes the brilliant rays or face of the sun and has multiple meanings. Perhaps most significantly, this representation is a visual portrayal of the solar zenith (Navarijo Ornelas, 2012)

Rolando Ek Naal (personal communication, October 5, 2012) explains that Mayan deities have the power of transformation and in their metamorphic process are capable of changing themselves into living and even non-living objects. Linda Schele (1993) adds yet another dimension to this metamorphic process. She states that major images from Mayan cosmic symbolism are also maps of the sky and that the great Tree with a crocodile head at its roots is a representation of the Milky Way in its north-south position as it moves through the sky from zenith to zenith. More specifically, the celestial pageant of the Milky Way in its trajectory is the story of Creation written in the sky. It is an ancient and recurring astronomical reminder of the dates that mark the raising of the sky and placing of the Three sacred Stars/Stones in the heart of the universe, the beginning of humanity of the current era (Freidel et al., 1993).

### **Ka'a tsoolil k'iin**

(IV)

#### **Tu chúumukil ichnaj**

ti'an u yóoxtsoolil **áak tuunicho'ob áak'ab,**

ts'aban ti'al u káajal

in ku''uxtal, je'bix káajik

**le yóok'ol kaaba'.**

Segundo día del sol

(IV)

En medio de la casa

hay tres piedras de la tortuga nocturna,

puestas para el comienzo

de mi vida,

como fue el principio

del mundo.

The Second Day of the Sun

(IV)

In the center of the house

there are three stones of the night turtle,

placed at the dawn

of my life,

like it was the beginning

of the world.

By introducing the fourth stanza with *Ka'a* ‘two or second in time,’ *tsoolil* ‘story, tale, account or memory’ *k'iin* ‘sun, time or day’ Brito May presents a perspective of time that is both sequential and repetitive. Sequential, in the sense that he is describing a second sun/time/day of a successive era, and cyclical because he correlates the beginning or Creation of the *yóok'ol kaaba* ‘world’ with the commencement of his own life; the birth of a new generation. Rolando Ek Naal (personal communication, December 12, 2012) explains that *Yóok'ol* ‘world’ when juxtaposed with *kaab* ‘honey, bee’ and/or ‘world, earth, town, community’ and emphasized with *a* ‘this’ translates as on (or part of) this world of honey. *Áak áak'ab* ‘the night turtle’ represents the earth in darkness before the current era and the placement of the *tuunicho'ob* ‘three stones’ symbolizes the lifting of the sky and the initiation of the sun’s circular journey. The sun’s movement is a metaphor for time, or more specifically, the reckoning of time and human consciousness (Freidel et al, 1993). *Naj* ‘house,’ a recurrent and important theme in Mayan cosmology, is used to describe the dwelling of an individual family and the space conceived at the moment of creation by the First Father/Mother which defines the universe’s

dimensions and orientation. By symbolically merging his birth with the birth of human consciousness—within the tangible and the abstract conception of the house—Brito May is making a reference to cultural continuity on earth (this place of honey) through the birth and cultural awareness of a new generation. On several levels this section of the poem demonstrates the “concentric principle” of the Mayan worldview which perceives interrelated information in nesting spheres (or houses) (Gillespie, 2000, p. 159).

*Chúumuk* with the suffix *il* ‘of’ signifies the center or figurative heart of the *ich* ‘interior or inside’ of the *naj* ‘house’ (Ek Naal, personal communication, December 15, 2012). In Mayan society the house is conceptualized as a social, political, and ritual space and the term *naj* is used to represent family identity and lineage, including land ownership (Stross, 2007; Stuart, 1998). The Mayan world view also perceives the house as a concept that shares “overlapping symbolic structures” with the cosmos (Gillespie, 2000, p. 143). Like the Mayan conceptualization of the universe, the house has three distinct levels: the heavens, its roof and rafters; the earth, the main floor or general living space where people live out their daily lives; and the underworld, below the house where artifacts are buried (Lucero, 2010). The four cornered (or rounded corner) traditional Mayan house also is a replication of the earthly plain in that it is oriented toward the east where the door is located and has five sectors, four quadrants or directions (walls and corners) that converge on a central point, the hearth where the three stones are placed (Stuart, 1998).

The traditional Mayan house is also considered a living being and like a human has a life cycle. It is “brought into life, regularly nurtured, and [even] mourned upon [its] death” (Gillespie, 2000, p. 136). Consequently when a house is “properly constructed and dedicated, it is thought of as having a ‘soul,’ much like a person’s” (Vogt, 1969, p. 71). Following in this

vein, terms that are used to describe the human body are also applied to components of a house (Vogt, 1969). As noted previously, the roof of a house is conceived as its head, with the thatching being its hair. The beams or poles used as the scaffolding for the roof and walls are the houses ribs, while the main posts anchoring it to the earth are its feet. The house's covering is its skin, its walls are its stomach, its corners are its ears, and the door and windows (if there are any) are its eyes. Finally, its hearth with the three stones—representing the three levels of the universe—placed in the shape of a triangle, is its heart (Ek Naal, personal communication, December 22, 2012; Vogt, 1969).

When Susan Gillespie (2000, p. 142) says that “the physical house is a locus and frame for daily activities out of which meanings are constituted,” she is saying the Mayan conception of *naj* encompasses the body, the home, and the cosmos, and that these meanings range from the micro to the macro cosmic and pertain to the full domain of human experience. Consequently *Naj*—whether it refers to the individual, the family/community or the universe—symbolizes the primordial order established by the cosmic forces at the moment of Creation and is where cultural consciousness and practice (worldview, language, ritual, etc.) originates and is perpetuated. It is, as is demonstrated by the symbolic placement of the three stones of the hearth in recognition of the birth of new generations, a sacred space that must be continually constructed, maintained and ritually activated (Hanks, 1990; Hirose López, 2007; Gillespie, 2000; Mathews et al., 2004).

(V)

Chéen ichil u **ujilo'ob** a wiich

je' k-paajtal iilikba'e'.

Tumeen u **chuun** u **nak'**

in xki'ichpan **na'e'**  
u **chuun** u **nak'il** xan ka'an.

Yó'olale'  
p'a'ato'on chéen ti' junp'éeel  
nojoch k'aaxil tuuch.

(V)

Sólo en tus ojos de luna

nos podemos mirar.

Porque el vientre

de mi hermosa madre

es también el vientre del cielo.

Por eso fuimos dejados y atados

en un largo cordón umbilical.

(V)

Only in your lunar eyes

are we are able to see ourselves.

Because the womb

of my beautiful mother

is also the womb of the sky.

For that reason we remain attached

by a long umbilical cord.

According to Rolando Ek Naal (personal communication, January 10, 2013), the pupil or *ujilo'* 'moon' of a person's eyes is a metaphorical mirror, in which people are able to see themselves and others reflected. Ek Naal (*ibid*) maintains that it is through this mutual gaze that they are able to recognize each other as coming from the same origin. In the Mayan world view, in the center of the sky, "the womb of my beautiful mother," Maya people are attached to the same living umbilical cord, connecting everything in an interrelation of time and space.

The following quote by María Montolú Villar (1984, p. 67) reiterates this concept by connecting the Sun and the Moon with the Creation deities and describing them as the eyes and ears of the sky, as well as recipients and transmitters of knowledge from the past into the future.

La sabiduría del Sol y la Luna proviene de sus progenitores los dioses creadores.

Estos pusieron en el espacio del universo a sus hijos como los ojos y

oídos del cielo que todo lo ven y todo lo oyen, capaces de

saber lo que ocurrió en el pasado, lo que pasa

en el presente y lo que sucederá

en el future.<sup>88</sup>

In Brito May's poem, the Moon is the celestial womb and has the capacity to convey cultural wisdom to subsequent generations. Because all of these images—the Moon, umbilical cords, and eyes—are recurrent and important symbols in this corpus, we discuss them in detail throughout our analysis.

In the classic period, the mother goddess appeared to humans in the form of *ujilo* 'the moon.' She was the wife of Hun-Nal-Ye or the First Father and as the Great Mother helped him oversee the new Creation of the cosmos and construct and paint the new world (Freidel et al, 1993; Montolú Villar, 1984). As the wife of the First Father and recipient of his seed, the First Mother is also known as the universal womb (Montolú Villar, 1984). Additionally, because *ujilo* 'the moon' is born, grows, declines, and dies only to be reborn again every month, it is the

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<sup>88</sup> The wisdom of the sun and the moon comes from their ancestors the creation gods. They are the ones that put into the space of the universe their children as the eyes and ears of the sky so that they would see all and hear all, capable of knowing all that occurred in the past, what happens in the present, and what will transpire in the future.

celestial body associated with seasonal rains, tides, germination, the feminine biological cycle, birth, and regeneration. Because the moon and the sun are both symbols of time and cosmic rhythms on earth, when combined they are the forces that permit and generate the reproduction of life (Montolú Villar, 1984).

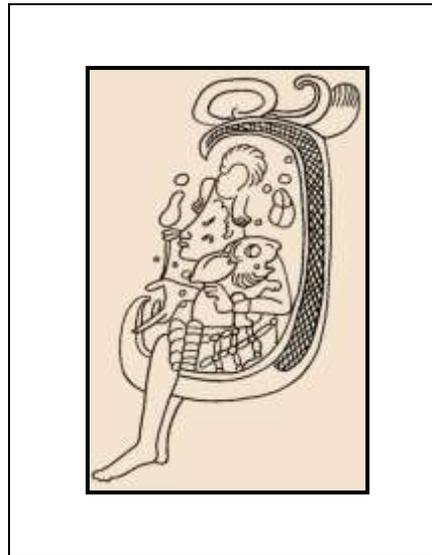


Figure 20. The Moon Goddess Holding a Rabbit. Source: *The major gods of ancient Yucatan* by K. Taube, 1992, p. 67. Reprinted with permission.

It is no coincidence that “*na*” is the root morpheme in the terms *na* ‘mother,’ *nak* ‘womb, stomach, center,’ and *chuun u nak* ‘umbilical cord or root of one’s stomach’ and that in the dictionary of Mayan hieroglyphs, *na* ‘mother’ and *na* ‘the adjective first’ are represented with the glyph or image of a woman’s head (see Figure 21) (Montgomery, 2002).

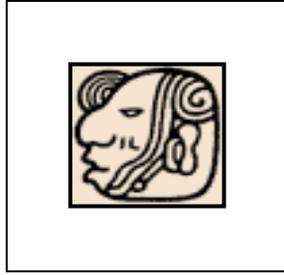


Figure 21. Glyph for *Na* 'Mother.' The graphic in her cheek is the *ik* sign for 'wind/breath/life/spirit'

Adpated from *Dictionary of Maya hieroglyphs* by J. Montgomery, 2002, p. 178.

Consequently, when Brito May writes that “Because the womb [*nak*] of my beautiful mother [*na*]<sup>89</sup> is also the womb [*nak*] of the sky / For that reason we remain attached by a long umbilical cord [*chuun u nak*]” the entire stanza speaks of a celestial center that is both the universal womb (the First Mother) and the living link (umbilical cord) connecting humanity to its origin.<sup>90</sup> Karen Bassie-Sweet (2000, p. 7) asserts that there is a Classic period goddess, “the *Na* Goddess” that appears as the “Number One Deity” and that it is her portrait which is used to represent the syllables “*na*.” Bassie-Sweet (*ibid*) argues that the *Na* Goddess is depicted with long flowing hair (a metaphor associated with corn silk) and that her flower manifestation was the water lily. Since the water lily in Mayan cosmology represents “*ixim ha*’, the corn seed of the water” we may assume that the *Na* Goddess is a representation of corn (Bassie-Sweet, 2000, p. 8). Furthermore, Bassie-Sweet (2000, p. 13) explains that when the *Na* Goddess died, “her body was symbolically laid out on the surface of the earth in a spread-eagle fashion. In this orientation, her fingers and toes<sup>91</sup> marked the corner plantings of the quadrilateral world; her

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<sup>89</sup> *Na'e*’ means “that mother” with the *e*’ being the demonstrative.

<sup>90</sup> The human body, with its extremities corresponding to the four cardinal directions or sectors and its center being the *nak* or base of the stomach is a replica of the cosmos. Similarly, because *nak* also refers to the trunk of a tree, the tree and the cross (see stanza six) are also identified with that human form and the cosmos (Morales Damián, 2010, p.289).

limbs formed the boundaries of the quadrants and her navel marked the center planting.” From this symbolic first planting, it is possible to infer that the Na Goddess as the earth Goddess became the navel, center or “soul” of the quadrilateral earthly plane.

The “soga de sangre” ‘rope of blood or umbilical cord’ is a powerful symbol in Mayan cosmology. Because it represents a conduit for blood (the sacred vital liquid) it is the fundamental icon denoting lineage and relationship and is related to the sacred serpent that infuses life into the world (De la Garza, 1998; Rivera Dorado, 1999). As a vein or artery, it also signifies the path or means of communication, implying human relations both familial and political (Wichmann, 2004). Mercedes de la Garza (1993) relates a Yucatecan Maya myth describing a prior era in which there was a path (or road) suspended from the sky called *cuxan-sum* or *sacbé* ‘living cord.’ *Cuxan-sum* was perceived as the living link between the sky and the earth, as well as the road that connected the ancient cities of Tulum, Cobá, Chichén Itzá and Uxmal. As a celestial umbilical cord with blood flowing through its center, it was the conduit through which the deities sent nourishment to the ruling classes of these important cities. When the cord was broken and the blood was spilt, these Mayan communities became disconnected from the celestial forces and lost contact with their own history. However, in another section of this same myth it is recorded that the Yucatecan Maya were able to maintain a path or *sacbé* ‘living cord’ “que une a su pasado y a su futuro: además de conservar la memoria del tiempo antiguo y sus creencias”<sup>92</sup> (De la Garza, 1998, p. 57).

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<sup>91</sup> In the Mayan languages Jacalteco and Chuj, the expressions used to designate fingers and toes are the corn seeds of the arm and the corn seeds of the leg (Sweet, 2000, p. 13).

<sup>92</sup> “That unite their past to their future: as well as preserve the memory of ancient times and beliefs”

(VI)

Bey túuna', ti' le **ka'ap'éel k'iina'**,

stijo'on tu ka'atéen

ti' u **junjílil k'atab che'**

naats' ti' u **nak' ka'an**,

taan in ki' wu'uyik junp' éelili' k'axa'anilo'on

ichil u **ixi'im jooonel in na'**.

(VI)

Entonces, por estos dos soles

nacimos de nuevo

en una sola cruz de madera

cerca de la oquedad del cielo,

siento que estamos ligados y unidos

entre su maíz vientre de mi madre.

(VI)

Then, because of those two suns

we were born anew

in a single wooden cross

close to the hollow of the sky,

I feel we are linked and united

in the maize womb of my mother.

Miguel Rivera Dorado (1999) explains that in Mayan cosmology there are two suns, the diurnal sun in the sky (the zenith) and its symmetric double, the sun of darkness or the underworld (the nadir). While the diurnal sun symbolizes the sun of the current age, the sun of the underworld is representative of the amalgamation of ancient and dead suns of prior creations and worlds. The Popol Vuh<sup>93</sup> recounts that in the Creation of the Third Era, the deities—after failing twice (the two previous suns) in their attempt to produce intelligent beings—desired to

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<sup>93</sup>The Popol Vuh is the Quiché Maya book of Creation originally written in hieroglyphics and transcribed into the Roman alphabet in the 16<sup>th</sup> century (Freidel et al., 1993).

create humans “who could reciprocate their love and care by returning nourishment to their creators.” By forming these new people from maize (representing human flesh) and the original waters of Creation (representing human blood) a mutual dependence formed in which “the gods receive from people that which they provided in the first place—maize and water transformed into flesh and blood” (Freidel et al., 1993, pp. 194-95). For this reason, Brito May affirms that in this third creation—the current sun or era—the deities applied what they had learned from their preceding efforts during the two prior suns *ka’* (two) *kiina*<sup>94</sup> (those times, suns), and in this new beginning, Mayan people (both ancient and modern) were/are made conscious of the responsibilities that bound/bind them to the creative forces.

The cross is a reflection of the Mayan conception of the structure of the universe and represents the three essential vertical levels; the zenith or sky, the nadir or underworld and the center or axis of the world. With its extremities signifying the four quadrants or cardinal directions of the earthly plane, the center is the fifth direction where the two lines of the cross converge and is the point of communication or portal between all other cosmic spaces (De la Garza, 1998; Freidel et al., 1993).

“The Cross-Tree stands, blessed, and adorned, as the symbol of ancient understanding in contemporary homes and shrines. Crosses have literally spoken to the Maya across the ages, and still do so in the modern world.”

(Freidel et al., 1993, p. 252)

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<sup>94</sup> *Ap’eel* in *ka’ap’eel* is the classification of a non living entity referring to (those times, suns) and the *a’* in *kiina* is the demonstrative signifying “those.”

In Rolando Ek Naal’s analysis of this stanza, he maintains that the single wooden cross<sup>95</sup> *jun* ‘one’ *júilil* ‘single lineal wooden bar’ *k’atab* ‘noun for crossing or crossbeam’ *che* ‘tree or stick’ is representative of when the trajectory of the Milky Way transforms it into the *Wakah-Chan* (the Great Ceiba or Tree of Life) as it intersects the ecliptic. When these two cosmological icons converge in the center of the world (in its manifestation as the hollow, black hole or *nak’ ka’an* ‘center of the sky or horizon’ their symbolic meeting represents the union of the sky center with the center of life *ixi’im* ‘maize’ *joobnel* ‘stomach, depths’ *in* ‘of’ *na* ‘mother’); they form the locus for the rebirth and repetition of the creation cycle where corn is born. This perception that time is cyclical and read celestially is reflected in the following quote by Nancy Farriss (1987, p. 574):

“In Mesoamerican thought cosmic time returns endlessly to the beginning,  
and human time intersects with cosmic time  
at each turn of the cycle—or cycles—  
in a succession of eternities.”

**Óox tsoolil k’iin**

(VII)

**U suumil u tuuch k’ane’**

**kuxa’an ichil u áaka’ab sáasil sakbej,**

Ts’ook in tsi’ik le **ka’anche’o’**

ki’ u book yéetel u **yiits’** ka’an.

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<sup>95</sup> Although the cross as a Catholic icon has been imposed upon the Maya since the Conquest, as the symbol of the World Tree it was an essential aspect of Mayan religious cosmology at least two thousand years before the Spaniard’s arrival (Freidel et al., 1993).

Tercer día del sol	The third day of the sun
(VII)	(VII)
La cuerda del ombligo celeste	The celestial umbilical cord
está viva entre el claro sombrío	is alive among the clear darkness
de la vía láctea.	of the Milky Way.
He puesto la mesa del limbo	I have made the table of limbo
perfumada con la substancia bendita	perfumed with the blessed substance
del cielo.	of the sky.

The introduction of the seventh stanza, *Óox*<sup>96</sup> ‘three or third,’ *tsoolil* ‘story, tale, account or memory’ *k’iin* ‘sun, time or day’ announces the third sun or current age. As a compliment to this announcement, the first verse reaffirms that the *suumil* ‘cord or rope’ *u* ‘of’ *tuuch* ‘navel’ *k’ane*<sup>97</sup> ‘this sky,’ continues to be *kuxa’an* ‘alive’ among the clear darkness of the *sakbej* ‘Milkyway or white path.’ To understand the poet’s inference to cultural continuity we must return to the Yucatecan Mayan myth previously described which recounts the legend of the *cuxan-sum* or *sacbé*, the sacred umbilical cord that linked the center of the sky and the cosmic forces to the Mayan nobility living in Tulum, Cobá, Chichén Itzá, and Uxmal. According to this narration, when the *cuxan-sum* ‘living cord’ was flourishing, the knowledgeable and prominent members of these ancient cities were considered to be the substance or dew from the sky. In other words, because they were the keepers and disseminators of sacred knowledge they were

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<sup>96</sup>In Yucatec (Peninsular) Maya, the term *ox* or *óox* signifies the “number three” as well as “wind” or “breath.” Given that the notions of wind or breath in the Mayan world view are directly related to life and spirit, this term works on various levels as a reference to the third and current (living) age (Taube, 2004, p. 74).

<sup>97</sup>The prefix *e’* in *k’ane’* is the demonstrative “this” in this sky.

revered like water (rain or dew) because they represented this vital element and connected humanity to the creative (regenerative) forces through their ability to communicate with the Otherworld. However, when the cord was broken and its blood was drained, the connection and flow of information ceased, the great cities withered and declined, and they were finally abandoned and left in ruins (Villa Rojas, 1980). As we noted above, there is another part of the myth that declares the Yucatecan Maya were able to preserve the vital connection of the *cuxan-sum* and maintain cultural continuity through the memory and practice of ancient beliefs.

When Brito May writes that the celestial umbilical cord is alive between the *áaka'ab* 'night or darkness' and the *sáasil* 'light of' the *sakbej* 'white path or Milky Way' it appears he is referring to that period of night when the Milky Way lies flat on the edge of the horizon, leaving the sky above in total darkness. According to Linda Schele (1993, p. 87), the Maya named this period and space of darkened sky *Ek'-Way*,<sup>98</sup> "Black transformer or Black Dreamplace" and described it as a portal communicating with the Otherworld. As the Milky Way travels through the sky and crosses the ecliptic, it passes through the *Ek'-Way* 'the portal to the Otherworld' and aligns itself horizontally for the moment of creation/recreation when it becomes the Great Ceiba of Life (Schele & Villela, 1992). It is this intersection of the *sakbej* turned *Wakah-Chan* with the portal to the Otherworld that makes communication possible between humanity (present and prior generations) and the cosmic forces. David Stuart (2003 p. 3) affirms that in Mayan cosmological symbolism, darkness and light are not perceived as binary opposites, but are elements that merge and form "paired and complementary illustrations of a conceptual whole." Thus, the juxtaposition of darkness and light in relation to the white path or Milky Way supports

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<sup>98</sup>K. M. Hunter explains that the position of the Milky Way is relatively close to the "center of the galaxy" when it intersects with the ecliptic. His webpage displays dramatic photographs illustrating this celestial event. <http://www.ancient-world-mysteries.com/2012.html>.

the perception that the unbroken cord remains a vital means of transmitting knowledge from preceding ages to the present; it is symbolic of the juncture when the light of the *sakbej* intersects the darkness of the *Ek'-Way*.

The last verse of this stanza is particularly intriguing when we analyze the terms *ka'anche'o'* and *yiits'*. Rolando Ek Naal (personal communication, December 14, 2012) explains that semantically the term *ka'anche'* signifies table, dais, platform or throne and refers to the sacred altar for offerings, especially in relation to the first crops of the season. As we have mentioned before (on page 45 of this study) *ka'an* signifies “sky” in modern Yucatec, which is also a near homophone with *kan*, “the number four” and *che'*, which means “tree or stick.” When these linguistic elements are combined with *o'* as the demonstrative, the semantic result is “this sky tree” or “this elevated wood” (Freidel et al., 1993, p. 55). The altar then—linguistically and visually—is conceptualized as the quadrangular earthly plane elevated by the sacred trees in each of its corners, which designate the four sectors or cardinal directions. Hence, *ka'anche'* ‘altar’ is a perfect illustration of the multiple or nesting (micro to macro) manifestations of the cosmos; altar → house → universe (Gillespie, 2000). David Freidel (1993, p. 55) describes the *ka'anche'* (altar) as “the focus of all prayer and ritual attention” and “the sacred space where spiritual beings arrive.” He goes on to say that, “the modern altar [is] a portal to the world of the gods, [and] is the current transformation of a specific kind of ancient portal that was, in Classic belief, brought into being in First Father’s act of creation” (Freidel et al., 1993, pp. 414-15).

When Brito May writes that he has perfumed the table of limbo (the altar) with *yiits'* ‘the blessed substance of the sky,’ he uses the Peninsular Mayan term (also written as *itz* or *its*), signifying ‘primordial liquid—fecund and full of life’—which refers to dew, substance from the sky and clouds, nectar, milk, semen, humidity, and resin. Moreover, that this primordial liquid is

what perfumes<sup>99</sup> or is scattered on the altar, ties in with the notion that knowledgeable and prominent members of society were revered like water (rain or dew). They were the keepers and disseminators of sacred knowledge that enabled them to communicate with the Otherworld. In this poem Brito May demonstrates that the cord has not been broken and that this ancient knowledge—the blessed substance of the sky—continues to connect the past and the present and lives on in Mayan communities through language and ritual practice. Like water or dew bringing life to the sacred crop of corn, new generations are nourished by information from the celestial writings, still legible and passed down from generation to generation. And, since sacred knowledge is not only a gift but is also a responsibility, all that sustains the community must be acknowledged and returned in the form of sacred belief and practice to nurture the divine.

“[E]l hombre es esencialmente materia—sustancia, sustento: maíz—.

Tal materia, añade, indica la posesión de una conciencia,  
la cual permite al ser humano cumplir con su  
misión cósmica: alimentar a los dioses<sup>100</sup>,”  
(Morales Damián, 2007, p. 88)

(VIII)

### **Itzam-Yeh**

táan u ki'machik' u chuun le **yóok'ol kaaba'**,  
táan u biin, táan u sa'atal tu aktáanil in wich

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<sup>99</sup>In Classic Maya iconography the concept of “breath-soul” or “spirit” is symbolically represented by the sweet aroma or perfume of flowers (Taube, 2004, p. 92).

<sup>100</sup>“Man is essentially material—substance, sustenance: corn. This material is additive and indicates the possession of a conscience; a conscience which enables human beings to fulfill their cosmic mission: to nourish the gods.”

táan u sa'atal je'bix le iicho'obo',  
tumeen le **mejen wíiniko'oba'**  
u **yixi'im**  
u **yóol in kuxtal.**

(VIII)

El Guacamayo

toca el horizonte del mundo,  
se va, se pierde ante la mirada de mis ojos  
desciende como los Gemelos,  
porque estos pequeños duendes  
son el maíz de mi aliento.

(VIII)

The Celestial Macaw

touches the horizon of the world,  
he goes away, lost before my eyes  
descending like the Twins  
because those small spirits  
are the maize of my breath.

In his analysis, Rolando Ek Naal says that in this stanza *Itzam-Yeh* (the Celestial Macaw) is making his presence known on the horizon—represented by the sacred altar—where he has alighted and is now resting. In pre-Hispanic Yucatan, the macaw was associated with various concepts and deities; in particular it was related to the sun at its zenith and identified with *Itzamná*, the deity with the radiant face of fire (Navarijo Ornelas, 2012). *Itzamná* was a powerful creator deity and *Itzam-Yeh*, the Cosmic Bird or Macaw, was his zoomorphic form or animal alter ego. He also represents the deity's power and ability to work (do magic) with the sacred substance “*itz*” or “cosmic sap” (Freidel et al, 1993, p. 211). According to Manuel Alberto Morales Damian (2002) *Itzam* is a polysemic term that can be divided into three interrelated semantic areas:

- 1) Water, dew and semen, the foundational substances of all life;
- 2) To cover, to conceal, referring to the sky and that which is secret;
- 3) Magic and secret and mysterious knowledge or wisdom.

In Mayan mythological cosmology *Itzamna* is perceived as a divine being of both the sky and the earth. As a formidable creative force, he is known as the first priest or shaman and as the deity of divination and “other esoteric knowledge” (Taube, 1992, p. 36). He is also celebrated as a great sage and artist and is “credited with the invention of writing” (*ibid*). Due to his creative prowess, and because his domain includes both the terrestrial and celestial levels, he is acknowledged as “one of the gods that drew the images of the constellations on the sky at Creation,” which of course included the three stones (stars) of the Celestial Turtle (*ibid*).

In the Mayan Creation story, *Itzam-Yeh* alights on the highest branches of the Great Ceiba just as the Milky Way is transforming itself into the *Wakah-Chan*. Perched on top of the *Wakah-Chan*<sup>101</sup>, the *Itzam-Yeh* (the Cosmic Bird) is an incarnation of the Big Dipper. But when the Milky Way revolves to its east-west orientation, he is dislodged and first rises, then falls, reproducing the Big Dipper’s movement (Freidel et al, 1993; Schele & Villela, 1993). When *Itzam-Yeh*, in the guise of the Big Dipper descends from the Great Ceiba, the sky is readied for the placement of the Three Stones of Creation. As the *Wakah-Chan* moves into its centric location, it is flanked by Gemini and the Orion Turtle, and the Pleiades, known as the “handful of corn seeds,” cascading their way to the horizon. By early morning on the date of Creation (February 5<sup>th</sup>), the Three Stones of Creation are set, and the whole process begins anew (Freidel et al, 1993, p. 96; Schele & Villela, 1993).

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<sup>101</sup> The *Wakah-Chan* is also known as the Crocodile Tree in this particular configuration (Schele & Villela, 1993).

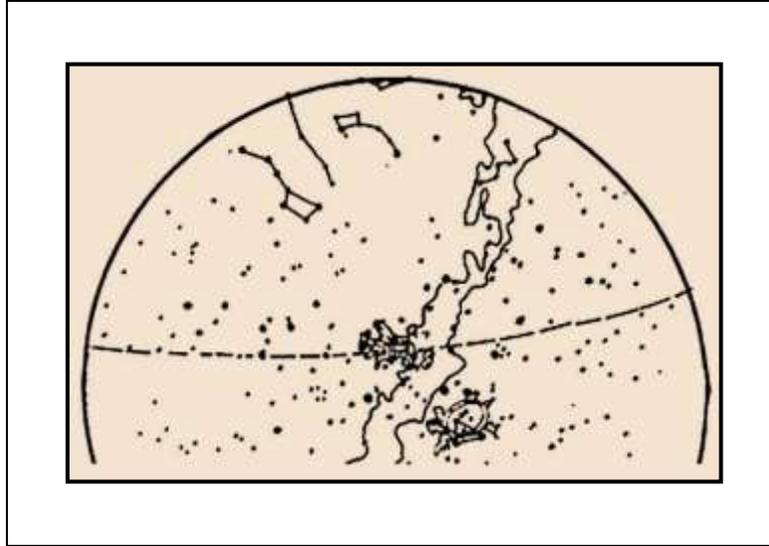


Figure 22. The Creation Place between Gemini and the Orion Turtle. “The sky at dawn on the day of Creation with the hearth and the turtle of Creation at the zenith.” Adapted from “Creation, Cosmos, and the Imagery of Palenque and Copan” by L. Schele and K. Villela. 1993, *Eighth Palenque Round Table*, p. 11. Reprinted with permission.

After describing the celestial drama of Creation, Brito May finishes the stanza by explaining that *Itzam-Yeh* is lost from sight and “descending like the Twins (Gemini).” The *mejen* ‘small’ *wiiniko’oba* ‘people, humans’ are the *yixi’imal* ‘corn, maize’ of my *yóol* ‘breath, spirit, energy, force, pistil’ of my *kuxtal* ‘life.’ This last section is a play on words, and to understand its implications we need to go back to our discussion of the term *áak* on page 113. As we described previously, the term *áak* signifies turtle, peccary, and a dwarf or small person. In this case it signifies the three stars on the turtle’s back, as well as the constellation Gemini, which is conceived as a pair of copulating peccaries. Thus, when Brito May writes that the *mejen* ‘small’ *wiiniko’oba*<sup>102</sup> ‘people, humans’ descending like the Twins or Gemini” are the *yixi’imal* ‘corn, maize’ of his *yóol* ‘breath, spirit, energy, force, pistil’ he is associating not only the Three Stones (stars) with Gemini (and perhaps the Pleiades), but is merging the symbolic

<sup>102</sup> The suffix “a” of *wiiniko’oba* is the demonstrative, signifying these people or men.

meaning of these constellations with the Mayan belief that corn is the essence of humanity.

Manuel Alberto Morales Damián (2007) illustrates this point beautifully when he describes corn seed as the primordial (precious) stone. In his analysis, he makes clear that the term *tun* signifies ‘stone’ and refers most particularly to Jadeite. Being the color *ya’x* or *yax* ‘blue green’ Jadeite is identified symbolically with water (the source of life) and the fresh green leaves of corn. He goes on to explain that the stone (like the turtle’s shell) is the hard covering of the corn seed that must be broken so the life force (or *yóol*) will sprout. *Yóol* or *óol* is a polysemic expression that, in addition to meaning ‘breath, spirit, energy, force, and pistil’<sup>103</sup> signifies a person’s most interior and intimate ‘heart’ (similar to ‘soul’ in English), as well as the ‘sprout,’ ‘shoot’ or ‘heart’ of a growing plant or tree. What’s more, since it is a term that “possesses cosmological connotations,” it connects the “nucleus” or heart of a human being with the center of the universe (Bourdin, 2007, p. 5). In essence then, the reason the Three Stones—as stars and corn seed—are placed in the sky by divine powers, and by humans in the hearth, the cornfield, and their own bodies, is that they are the quintessential symbol of the Maya people’s role (corn cultivation and ritual ceremony—participation and responsibility) in the existence and perpetuation of the cosmos.

El fogón y la milpa son complementarios, nunca opuestos como valor cultural, ya que sintetizan la base de la sobrevivencia tanto humana como divina: la comida. Con ella hay orden, hay creación, hay regeneración, y por lo mismo son una reproducción a escala del mundo. El fogón en lo vertical, ya que ahí se preserva el fuego vital que mantiene unidos a los tres planos del mundo, simbolizados por una piedra cada uno; ya que desde

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<sup>103</sup> Pistil: the female reproductive part of a flower.

ahí [. . .] la mujer ayuda al sol a renacer, a regenerarse todos los días tras su viaje por lo oscuro.<sup>104</sup> (Guzmán Urióstegui, 2007, p. 107)

(IX)

Le'ela' u **Éek' Wayil**

**Och Bej u yéets' chi'il metnal**

u éek'joch'e'enil **k-icho'ob**.

K'uch **Itzamna'** k-iknal, ka tu k'amjo'on yéetel **uts óolal**,

tu ts'áaj tu **ka'atéen** tu yóoxp'éeel **áak sáasil tuunicho'ob**

tu **yich ka'an**,

u yóoxp'éeelil tuunich k-otoch.

Bey túun káajik u tsool **k'iinil yóok'ol kaabila'**.

(IX)

Este es el portal nocturno

el descenso del camino y espejo de la muerte,

oscuridad de los ojos.

Itzamna ha llegado con nosotros y nos recibe

con gracia,

puso de nuevo las tres brillantes piedras

(IX)

This is the nocturnal portal

the descent of the path and mirror of death,

our eye's darkness.

Itzamna has arrived and receives us

with grace,

once again he has put the three brilliant stones

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<sup>104</sup> “As a cultural value, the hearth and the corn field are complementary, never opposites, because they synthesize the base of survival (food) for both humans and the divine. With food there is order, there is creation, there is regeneration and reproduction on a worldly scale. The hearth in its vertical position preserves the vital fire that maintains the unity of the three world planes; [each level] symbolized by a stone. It is from here that women help the sun to be born again, to regenerate itself every day from its voyage through the darkness.”

de la tortuga	of the turtle
en el ojo del cielo,	in the eye of the sky,
las tres piedras del hogar.	the three stones of the hearth.

Rolando Ek Naal (personal communication, December 22, 2012) tells us that the first verse of the final stanza, *Le'ela* ‘this’ *Éek’ Wayil*, refers to the portal to the Otherworld, the entrance or dark path where one passes to another dimension of life. The next two verses, although different, not only refer to the *Éek’ Wayil* as the portal to another cosmic dimension, but add symbolic information that augment its conception. This method of adding layers of imagery through reiteration, but with distinct terminology—as in the first three verses of this stanza—is an example of parallelism. As we have explained in our introduction, parallelism is a poetic structure that replicates key elements (including images and repetitive sounds) in order to emphasize a concept to illustrate its polysemic and interconnected nature. Each of the verses works together to define the notion of *Éek’ Wayil* through its various manifestations (see p.69 Table 5).

In this example of parallelism all three verses refer to the portal, path, and entrance to the Otherworld as a dark conduit connecting present and past generations. The first verse, (*Le'ela* ‘this,’ *Éek’* ‘darkness, night,’ *Wayil* ‘path’) introduces “This Portal or Entrance to the Otherworld.” In the second verse, the terms *Och* ‘entrance,’ *Bej* ‘path, road’ *yeets’* ‘echo, mirror, reflection, wake, trail,’ *chi’il* ‘edge, shore, mouth,’ and *metnal* ‘Otherworld’ add the information that the portal or entrance to the Otherworld is or has the qualities of the reflective surface of a mirror. The terms in the third verse *éek’joch’e’enil* ‘darkness’ and *k-icho’ob* ‘our eyes’ intensify this image by relating this portal or “mirror of death” to the dark reflectiveness

and intergenerational connectivity of Mayan eyes (human mirrors).<sup>105</sup> In this context *Éek'joch'e'enil k-icho'ob* 'our eye's darkness' and *Éek' Wayil* 'the Black transformer or Black Dreamplace' are centers and/or portals connecting humans to prior generations and sources of knowledge through time and space (Rivera Dorado, 1999). Miguel Rivera Dorado (1999, p. 92) explains that mirrors in ancient times were worn by warriors because they were considered focal points that "se penetra en el mundo de los muertos, por él se establece la comunicación con otras dimensiones cósmicas."<sup>106</sup> He also says that the sky and the Otherworld are one and the same thing, in that they are (or are like) the two surfaces of a polished mirror on which "se desarrolla, por cierto, la vida humana"<sup>107</sup> (Rivera Dorado, 1995, p. 260). When Brito May writes that the *Éek' Wayil* is the night or dark portal, the mirror of death, and the darkness of our eyes, he is describing the connection/continuum that exists between contemporary Maya, their ancestors and the creative forces. He is also affirming that this living link manifests itself in knowledge conveyed through language, memory, and cultural practice and the continuous cycle of life and death.

With the arrival of the creative deity and star writer *Itzamna'*, Roland Ek Naal (personal communication, December 22, 2012) helps us understand that the whole process or circle is complete. That *Itzamna' k'amjo'on*<sup>108</sup> 'has received us' *yéetel* 'with' *uts* 'goodness, wellbeing' *óolal* 'breath, spirit, energy, force, and pistil' and has once again put the three brilliant stones of the turtle in the eye of the sky and in the hearth of the home. Here we see the cycle begin anew,

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<sup>105</sup> The term *yich* 'eye/face' and its complicated conception is an important and recurrent element in four out of the five poems in this corpus.

<sup>106</sup> They were considered focal points that "penetrated into the world of the dead through which communication was established with other cosmic dimensions."

<sup>107</sup> "That human life, for certain, develops."

<sup>108</sup> The prefix *k'* in *k'amjo'on* is the object pronoun for "us."

in the universe and the home where the *tsool* ‘the story or memory’ *k’iinil* ‘of this time’ *yóok’ol kaabila*’ ‘of this world’ is perpetuated.

As the following quote by Romualdo Méndez Huchim (as cited in Ligorred Perramon, 1994, p. 351) illustrates, Itzamná’ is not forgotten. By remembering and transmitting sacred knowledge (such as the three stones in the sky as the celestial date of Mayan Creation) and practicing traditions (such as the three stones of hearth as cultural re-Creation), Mayan culture and cultural resistance continue and will be passed on to subsequent generations.

“[R]ecordemos que Iztamná  
no es el último de los guerreros del pueblo maya  
porque todavía vive  
porque sembró en nuestra conciencia  
un ideal grandioso  
este pensamiento nos llevará por el camino de  
la lucha del resurgimiento  
vamos a ganarlo con dignidad  
con valentía y con coraje”<sup>109</sup>

### 5.1.1 Summary of “The Three Stones of the Hearth”

Brito May (2008) begins this poem with an epigraph entitled “the first words of the Great Creator,” which clearly promotes the word (language) as the primary source and energy driving

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<sup>109</sup> We remember that Iztamná is not the last of the Mayan warriors, because he is still alive and because he has cultivated in our consciousness a grand ideal. This thought we will bring with us on the path of the resurgence, which we will win with dignity and valor.

Creation. In his poem the *naj* ‘house’—as the locus of Creation—is representative of the Creator deity’s partitioning of the universe. And as we have previously described, the three vertical tiers of the house embody the three levels of the universe: the roof (the heavens), the floor (the earth), and below the house where traditionally ancestors were buried (the Underworld) and its four walls embody the four cardinal directions or sectors with the three-stone hearth as the fifth direction or center.

Brito May (personal communication September 17, 2012) explains that the inspiration for this poem comes from his reading of the text “Maya Cosmos: Three Thousand Years on the Shaman’s Path” by David Freidel, Linda Schele, and Joy Parker (1993), a text famous for breaking the code of Mayan Creation iconology. The brilliance of Brito May’s poem is that he demonstrates how much of this same code and its significance are embedded in the Mayan language. In other words, how terms and expressions in Maya such as *ka’anche* ‘altar,’ incorporate and articulate ancient Creation symbology. Brito May concludes his poem by showing us that besides being intrinsic to the language, this ancient knowledge is part of collective memory and is evident in daily life and practice. That is, by lighting the fire of the three-stone hearth, Mayan families initiate life every day. But through the daily rekindling of the hearth’s fire they not only regenerate their own lives, they consciously participate in the symbolic and physical regeneration of Mayan culture (Brito May, personal communication September 17, 2012).

## 5.2 Poem 2 “The House of Your Soul”<sup>110</sup>

“*U Naajil A Pixan*” by Jorge Cocom Pech (2009)

### “*U Naajil A Pixán*”

“La casa de tu alma”	“The House of Your Soul”
(I)	(I)
Tu idioma es la casa de tu alma.	Your language is the house of your soul.
Ahí viven tus padres y tus abuelos.	There live your parents and grandparents.
En esa casa milenaria,	In this thousand-year-old house,
hogar de tus recuerdos,	home to your memories,
permanece tu palabra.	your word lives on.
(II)	(II)
Por eso,	For this reason,
no llores la muerte de tu cuerpo,	do not cry for the death of your body,
ni llores la muerte de tu alma;	do not cry even for the death of your soul;
tu cuerpo,	your body,
permanece en el rostro de tus hijos;	lives on in your children’s faces;
tu alma	your soul
eternice en el fulgor de las estrellas.	lives eternally in the brilliance of the stars.

“*U Naajil A Pixán*” written by Jorge Miguel Cocom Pech (2009)

“La casa de tu alma”      “The House of Your Soul”

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<sup>110</sup> To listen to Jorge Cocom Pech recite this poem in Maya and Spanish please refer to:  
[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cI060\\_-XwRY](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cI060_-XwRY)

Corresponding to the meaning and message of Cocom Pech’s poem, Hilario Chi Canul (2012, p. 221) writes that: “[A]l volver a mi casa, la cuna de mi lengua, *ajsa’ab in na’at*, me despertaron mi entender.”<sup>111</sup> Or, the *naj* ‘house’—the cradle of language—is where a child’s understanding and cultural identity is awakend.



*Figure 23.* Yucatecan Traditional Mayan House *Naj*. “The design, materials and construction techniques of traditional Maya houses like this have been the same for more than 1,200 years. The wood used for Mayan houses is only cut during the full moon to assure that the beams are strong and insect resistant.” Source: photograph by Huchim Herrera, J. Retrieved June 26, 2014, from: <http://maya.nmai.si.edu/gallery/santa-elena-and-san-simon>. Reprinted with permission.

Similar to the title of Brito May’s poem, Cocom Pech has also chosen to capitalize every word. Capitalization emphasizes the significance of the concepts represented by signaling they are to be considered living entities that engender reverence (Ek Naal, personal communication, August 6, 2012). As a significant aspect of the poetry itself, this literary convention

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<sup>111</sup> “On returning to my home, the cradle of my language, my comprehension was awakened”

(capitalization) adds meaning and impact to the work, while honoring the Mayan language as the living home of an ancient heritage.

Although *Naaj* (*naj*) signifies ‘house,’ it is a complex term that shares the root morpheme “*na*” with such expressions as *na* ‘mother,’ *nak* ‘womb, stomach, center,’ and *chuun u nak* ‘umbilical cord or root of one’s stomach’ and *na* ‘the adjective first.’<sup>112</sup> According to Brian Stross (2007, p. 405), the correlation between *naaj* ‘house,’ *na* ‘mother and womb,’ and *na* ‘the adjective first’ evokes an earlier system of “gender specific naming relating to lineage, continuity, housing, and motherhood.” The term *pixan*, conventionally glossed as ‘soul,’ refers to that which “gives life to the human body” (Bourdin, 2007, p. 15). In some respects *pixan* is similar to *óol*, the Peninsular Maya word signifying ‘breath,’ ‘spirit,’ ‘energy,’ ‘force,’ and ‘pistil’ and it describes a person’s most interior and intimate ‘heart,’ as well as the ‘heart’ of a growing plant or tree. However, the two terms (*pixan* and *óol*) differ in that *pixan*, coming from the root *pix*, ‘to cover/wrap’ or ‘to hide,’ alludes to coverings or that which covers, wraps, and protects the inner heart or *óol* of a person. In this sense, language and cultural identity is the house or home ‘*naaj*’ that like the soul ‘*pixan*,’ protects that which is essentially Maya (Ek Naal, personal communication, February 8, 2013).

The term *pixan* is also used to refer to the soul of a person that separates from the body during sleep (while dreaming) and after death (Bourdin, 2007; Ek Naal, personal communication, February 11, 2013; Le Guen, 2008). According to Olivier Le Guen (2008) there is a persisting belief among Maya from the Yucatan Peninsula that the souls or *pixano’ob*<sup>113</sup> of

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<sup>112</sup> In Lakantun Maya (another Mayan language from the Yucatan Peninsula) the term *nah* signifies ‘great.’ However, in Peninsular Maya the term *nojoch* signifies the adjective ‘great’ and the prefix *noj* is placed before root words such as: *noj lail* ‘principal/most important,’ *noj ko* ‘woman/wife/mother of,’ *noj yuum* ‘father-in-law,’ to signify someone or something important or primary (Gómez Navarrete, 2009).

<sup>113</sup> The suffix *o’ob* in *pixano’ob* is the pluralization of *pixan*, ‘souls.’

the dead are considered to be ancestors that fall into two categories: familial and collective.

When Cocom Pech combines *naj* with *pixan*, he is not only referring to the house (as a metaphor for language and culture) as the dwelling of the soul, he is merging both a personal and collective experience. He does this by referring to *naj* as the house of an individual, a family, and a lineage and to *pixan* as the soul of a living individual and to ancestors that are both familial and collective.

(I)

A t'aane' u naajil a pixan

Tumen ti' kuxa'an a laaks'ilo'ob.

Tie' úuchben xa'anilnaj,

tu'ux ku k'a'asa'al a kajtalil,

ti' ku p'áatal a t'aan.

(I)

Tu idioma es la casa de tu alma.

Ahí viven tus padres y tus abuelos.

En esa casa milenaria,

hogar de tus recuerdos,

permanece tu palabra.

(I)

Your language is the house of your soul.

There live your parents and grandparents.

In this thousand-year-old house,

home to your memories,

your word lives on.

*T'aan* meaning 'language,' 'speech,' 'voice,' but also indicating 'expression,' 'reason,' and 'opinion,' as well as 'breath,' is the *naaj*<sup>114</sup> 'house, home' (dwelling, origin) of one's

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<sup>114</sup> The suffix *il* of *naajil* is the preposition "of" as in "house of your soul."

*pixan* ‘soul.’ In this stanza, the poet builds on the meaning conveyed by the title and describes the Mayan language as the house or home of the Mayan people’s soul, and the place where their *laaks’ilo’ob* ‘ancestors,’ ‘lineage,’ ‘fraternity,’ and ‘origin’ live on.

“Este reencuentro del pasado con el presente;  
este volver de nuevo que para nosotros los mayas era y es sagrada concepción del tiempo,  
es un hecho que se inicia con las voces y testimonios de nuestros hermanos que hoy asumimos el  
compromiso de dejar constancia de lo que pervivió en la tradición oral,  
a través de textos literarios... pues nunca las palabras sobre  
la tierra han sido el sepulcro de los hombres.”<sup>115</sup>

(Cocom Pech, 2001, p. 24)

When Cocom Pech describes this home as the *úuchben*, ‘ancient’ and ‘from the past’ *xa’anilnaj* ‘house of palm’ he is making a specific reference to the centuries old construction of traditional Mayan homes on the Yucatan Peninsula; homes whose design has not changed significantly since before the arrival of the Spaniards<sup>116</sup> (Moya Rubio, 1984). The term *xa’anilnaj* combines *xa’an* ‘palm’ or ‘huano,’ a type of palm found in rural communities in the Yucatan Peninsula and *naj* ‘house’ and expresses a construction technique that is specific to Mayan communities of the region. Because this type of home—oblong, whitewashed with lime,

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<sup>115</sup> “This reencounter of the past with the present; this return to the beginning that was and is the sacred conception of time for us Maya, is a truth that was initiated with the voices and testimonies of our brothers and sisters that we assume today as the commitment to leave proof of what has survived in oral tradition, through literary texts...because words on earth have never been the tomb of men”

<sup>116</sup> Although this traditional architecture still exists, it has become more common in many Mayan communities for people to build their homes out of concrete block. Nevertheless, this architecture is the traditional construction people identify with Mayan culture (personal communication, Ek Naal, September 9, 2012; Chi Dzul, September 12, 2012).

and thatched with palm or huano—is so specific to the culture and the region, its study has generated a significant body of literature describing the construction materials and architectural techniques as well as the names and cultural attributes of every aspect of construction. To demonstrate the cultural and regional correlations of this structure, it helps to understand that families generally build their own homes with architectural knowledge that has been passed down through the generations and use materials for its construction that are gathered or obtained from the neighboring vicinity. For instance, the stones used for the surrounding exterior wall come from the building site itself. The wood for the beams and the house’s basic armature come from the nearby forest, and the lime used for whitewash is fabricated locally. (Moya Rubio, 1984; Pierrebürg, 2003). Although these homes are generally constructed quickly—in about a week by two by three men using no nails or screws—they are known to last for 30 or 40 years withstanding the harsh climate of the tropics (Ek Naal, personal communication, September 24, 2012) Rolando Ek Naal (*ibid*) explains the irony of their construction; the beams and armature actually tighten and become more secure in tropical storms. Moreover, every architectural component and its function are aligned with cultural beliefs that correspond to Mayan cosmology and conception of the human body (see Figure 24). For example:

The *naj* and Mayan cosmology

- The house is oriented toward the east and has three levels (the roof, the main floor, and subflooring) representing “the three layers of the universe” and the trajectory of sun or solar cycle.

The *naj* in relation to the human body

- The roof is its head (*ujo’ol naj*) and the thatching is its hair
- The front and the back roof poles are its ribs (*uch’ala’at naj*)

- The door is its mouth (*uchi' naj*) and faces the rising sun
- Its face or eyes (*ich naj*) are the walls
- The hearth is its center, heart or navel
- The construction of its walls' covering or protection of the walls' armature with a claylike substance is called the soul (*pixan*)

(Ek Naal, personal communication, September 24, 2012; Duncan & Hofling, 2011; Lucero, 2010, p. 161; Moya Rubio, 1984).

Furthermore, it is this *úuchben*, 'ancient' *xa'anilnaj* 'house of palm' that is the *naaj* 'home' and *kajtialil* 'environment, habitat, community' to Mayan personal and collective *k'aasal* 'active or living remembering or memories,' and where one's *t'aan* 'word, voice' *p'aatal* 'lives on.' In this sense, language and *naj* represent (in the words of Martin Heidegger) the "house of Being" where people dwell and "[t]hose who think and those who create with words are the guardians of this home" (2000, p. 83).

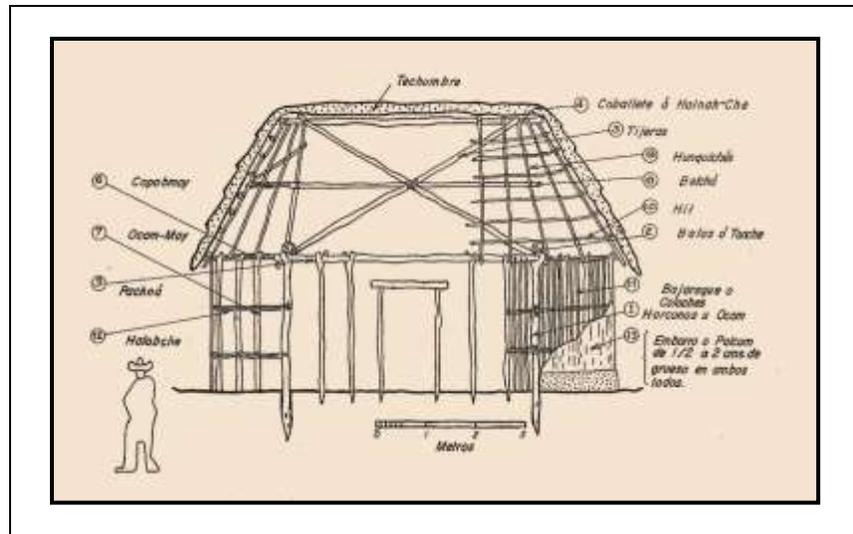


Figure 24. Construction of a Traditional Mayan House in the Yucatan Peninsula. Adapted from *La vivienda indígena de México y del mundo*, by V. Moya Rubio, 1984, p. 79.

The illustration in Figure 24 gives a cut away view of the armature used in the construction of a traditional Mayan house from the Yucatan Peninsula. Rolando Ek Naal (personal communication, March 20, 2013) explains that:

#1 *Ocom* are the feet of the house, coming from the term *oc* (foot).

#6 *Belchó* is the rodent path intended to distract rodents so that they will not bother the human inhabitants.

#10 *hil* are the house's ribs.

#11 *bajareque/coloches* are the house's veins.

The house's hands are the smaller poles or beams that attach to and rise above #1, the feet of the house.

(II)

Le bétike'

ma' a wok'tik u **kíimil** a **wíinkilil**

mix a wok'tik u **k'iimil** a **pixan**;

a **wíinkilile'**

máantats' ku p'áatal ichil u **yich** a p'alal;

a **pixané**,

máantats' ku léembal ichil u yich xuxil eek'o'ob.

(II)

Por eso,

no llores la muerte de tu cuerpo,

ni llores la muerte de tu alma;

tu cuerpo, permanece en el rostro de tus hijos;

tu alma

eternice en el fulgor de las estrellas.

(II)

For this reason,

do not cry for the death of your body,

do not cry even for the death of your soul;

your body, lives on in your children's faces;

your soul

lives eternally in the brilliance of the stars.

In Manuel Alberto Morales Damián's (2007, p. 86) study of the language used in *El ritual de los Bacabes*,<sup>117</sup> he argues that humans are conceived in this text as a "product of the bio-geographical space that they inhabit." Moreover, he believes this conception of the reciprocity between humans and nature describes an even more profound correlation between humans and the cosmos that is expressed both cosmologically and linguistically. To explore this connection between humans, nature, and cosmology and language, Morales Damián (*ibid*)

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<sup>117</sup> *El ritual de los Bacabes* was written in Maya using Latin script in the late sixteenth century in Nunkiní, Campeche and is a copy of a much older codex (Hernández Sandoval, 2012).  
<http://www.calkini.net/corazondeahcanul/numero20/elritualdelosbacabes.htm>

extracts the term *uinicel* (a colonial spelling of *wĩnkilil*, ‘body’) and the expression “*uinicel te unicel tun*”<sup>118</sup> from *El ritual de los Bacabes* and relates it to a contemporary Mayan saying “*U wĩnkil make jach bei u wĩnkil yoko cabe*” “[e]l cuerpo humano es como el cuerpo del mundo.”<sup>119</sup> Our subsequent analysis of the term *uinicel/wĩnkilil* combines information from both Damián Morales (2007) and Arzápalo Marín and Zavala Olalde’s (2010) studies and communicates the following:

#### The root, *uin*

- ‘That which is associated with the figure or presence of humans.’
- ‘Human’ (both as a physical being and as an image)
- ‘Human attainment, fulfillment, and development’

In the case of the Maya people, *uin* is related to being made of *te* or *che* ‘wood or tree’ (the sacred Ceiba) and *tun* ‘stone’ symbolically jade or corn seed.

#### *Uinic*

- ‘Woman or man and indicating human’
- The term *uinic* is also used to describe a measurement of land for working or cultivating.

#### *Uinicil*

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<sup>118</sup> Although the spelling is somewhat different in the colonial text, *uinicil* clearly refers to the same term used in Cocom Pech’s poem written as *wĩnkilil* ‘body;’ as in the ‘human body.’ Furthermore, by describing this saying—*uinicel te unicel tun* / ‘body of wood/body of stone’—as a difrasismo (the juxtaposition of two distinct elements to express something completely different), Damián Morales (2007. p. 86) demonstrates how this ancient poetic device combines language and symbology to represent the Mayan conception of the essence of being human.

<sup>119</sup> “The human body is like the body of the world.” The Mayan transcription is by Miguel Ángel Chi Dzul. It is interesting to note that in Mr. Chi Dzul’s original transcription he spelled *wĩnkil* ‘body’ with a single “i” *winkil*.

- Meaning ‘the humanity of mankind,’ the ‘essence of being human,’ and ‘the being or nature of mankind.’

### Uinal

- The cycle of 20 days. Associated with the counting of the ten fingers and ten toes of a human being

In Morales Damián’s (2007, pp. 84-86) comparison of these two expressions—“*uinicil te uinicil tun*” and “[e]l cuerpo humano es como el cuerpo del mundo”—, he explains that like wood and stone (the tree/Ceiba and stone/corn seed), humans are made of these same earthly materials and create their homes and communities from them too (see Figure 25). For this reason, when Cocom Pech writes: “do not cry for the *k’iimil* or ‘death’ of your *w’iinkilil* ‘body,’ do not cry even for the *k’iimil* of your *pixan* ‘soul’” both terms *w’iinkilil* and *pixan* communicate information about the Mayan conceptualization of the nature or essence of humanity and beliefs in the transitory nature of the human soul and the never ending cycle of life and death.

In the following quote from Ramón Arzápalo Marín and Juan Carlos Zavala Olalde’s (2010, p. 6) article “El concepto de person entre los Mayas,” the authors make it clear that to be *uinic* ‘human, a person’ must be an active member of the community. And as Mayans, they are persons who maintain, practice, and transmit the community’s cultural traditions. In the context of Cocom Pech’s poem, this conceptualization is yet another way of explaining how a person lives on through cultural continuity, transmitted linguistically from generation to generation.

“Ser *uinic* es por lo tanto, ser persona en comunidad, en el entorno sociocultural, no se es *uinic* aislado de los demás, sino que *uinic* se es en tanto que se vive en la comunidad

y se siguen las costumbres y tradiciones propias de la comunidad.”<sup>120</sup>

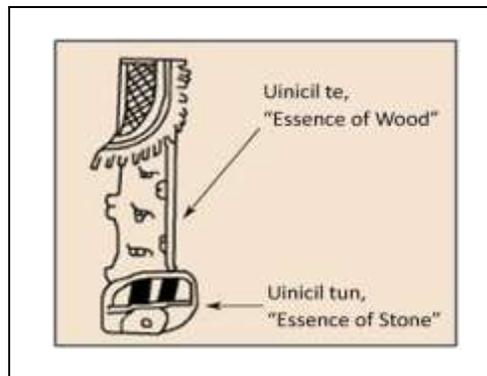


Figure 25. Graphic Representation of *Uinicil Te*, *Uinicil Tun*. *Uinicil te* signifies the essence of wood and *Uinicil tun* the essence of stone. Together these two elements form the difrasismo representing the Mayan conception of the essence of being human. Adapted from “Than-uoh: Experiencias con la escritura maya yucateca prehispánica” by P. Martel and E. López de la Rosa, 2006, *Descatos*, 22, p. 100.

The term *k'iimil*, with its root *kim* or *k'um* “to die” —when nominalized by the suffix—*il*, also reveals information about the Mayan conception of the relation between the *pixan*, ‘soul’ and *w'inkilil*, the ‘physical body’ (Gómez Navarrete, 2009; Le Guen, 2008). As noted above, the term *pixan* is used to refer to the soul of a person that separates from the body during sleep (while dreaming) and after death. Both of these states are considered dangerous because one’s soul is vulnerable when separated from one’s body, and in death the soul cannot return to its physical home and must move on to other states and dimensions of being (Ek Naal, personal communication, February 20, 2013; Le Guen, 2008). Carlos Montemayor (2005, p. 577), in his essay *Notas sobre la muerte en la narrativa maya actual*, introduces the topic by explaining that “[l]a muerte es uno de los temas de mayor complejidad y riqueza en el mundo

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<sup>120</sup> “To be *uinic* is to be a person in the community; in the socio-cultural environment. One cannot be *uinic* and be isolated from others. To be *uinic* one lives in the community and follows the customs and traditions belonging to the community.”

cultural maya contemporáneo.”<sup>121</sup> He goes on to say that in Mayan contemporary culture, death is referred to as *Yum*<sup>122</sup> *Kíimil* or Señor Muerte (Mr. or Sir Death) and is not responsible to a function or entity, but is considered to be the entity (death) itself (Montemayor, 2005). Although Montemayor describes beliefs about death as differing from community to community, in the majority of the stories he tells us that *Yum Kíimil* is an important and necessary element that maintains order and wellbeing among humans. When death carries off bodies and souls it is a necessary action that relieves suffering and continues a natural cycle. Rolando Ek Naal (personal communication, March 28, 2013) states that Death or *Yuum Kíimil* should not provoke fear or dread but should be respected and revered at a very high level. He explains that it is this being or entity<sup>123</sup> which brings both life and death and that these two elements of life on earth are fundamental since one cannot exist without the other. He also states that the dead continue to be connected to their home and community and “live” there through rituals and ceremonies such as *Hanal pixan*, “Comida de las ánimas” Feast of the spirits or Day of the Dead (Ek Naal, personal communication, March 28, 2013). Cocom Pech invokes this perspective of *kíimil* when he exhorts Mayan speakers to refrain from crying for the death of their body or souls because their body will live on in the *yich* ‘eye’ of their *paalal* ‘children’ and their soul will live *máantats* ‘always’ in the *léembal* ‘brilliance’ of the *yich* ‘eye’ of the *xuxil* ‘wasp’ *éek’ob* ‘stars.’

Both stanzas of this poem are examples of parallelism, in which the structure and significance of the verses balance each other while contributing to a central theme or concept by adding essential information. In Aurore Monod Becquelin and Cédric Becquey’s (2008)

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<sup>121</sup> “Death is one of the richest and most complicated subjects in the Mayan contemporary cultural world.”

<sup>122</sup> The term *Yum* or *Yuum* is a title of respect and translates into great person, gentleman, sir or lord.

<sup>123</sup> In a more recent conversation with Rolando Ek Naal (personal communication, December 12, 2013) he did not refer to “Death” as male or female, but instead spoke about this entity in neutral terms. This is done in Spanish by not specifying the definite article before the verb (“Porque a la vez lleva la vida y la muerte” / “Because at the same time [he/she/it] brings life and death”).

comprehensive investigation of parallelism, they reiterate that this poetic technique is omnipresent in Mayan languages and cultures and has its origins in oral tradition. They also establish that it is found in other modes of cultural expression such as in iconology which combines visual art and writing. They also explain that parallelism, like difrasismo, proceeds from the most important and frequent conceptual associations in Mayan culture and is representative of a unique cognitive process and conceptualization of the world. Finally, they describe parallelism as an effective method for transmitting knowledge because its repetition emphasizes the perspective, structure, and imagery (cognition) posited by the author (*ibid*). By using parallelism Cocom Pech has employed an ancient rhetorical device to facilitate the teaching and generation of collective memory through the repetition and association of key cultural images and terms. In order to examine and illustrate how parallelism is used in Cocom Pech's poem, a simple break down of the second stanza is provided below. To make the concepts and their analysis more accessible, the verses have first been translated from Spanish into English. Then they have been rewritten directly underneath the translation in italics with a more literal translation from Maya, also into English.

**(1a)** do not cry for the death of your body,

*do not cry for the (**kúmil**) death of your (**wúinkilil**) body,*

**(1b)** do not cry even for the death of your soul;

*do not cry even for the (**kúmil**) death of your (**pixan**)soul;*

**(2a)** your body, lives on in your children's faces;

*your (**wúinkilil**) body, lives on in the (**yich**) eyes of your (**páalal**)children;*

**(2b)** your soul lives eternally in the brilliance of the stars.

*your (**pixan**)soul will live (**máantats'**) always in the (**léembal**) brilliance of the*

*(yich) “eye” of the (xuxil) wasp (éek’ob) “stars.*

In verse *1a*, the poet appeals to the Maya reader not to fear or be saddened by the death or loss of their *wünkilil* ‘body’ because in verse *2a* they are assured it will live on in the *yich* ‘eyes’ of their *páalal* ‘children.’ Nor should they (see verse *1b*) lament the death of their even more intimate *pixan* ‘soul’ because that too will live on—as stated in verse *2b*—in the *léembal* ‘brilliance’ of the *yich* ‘eye’ of the *xuxil* ‘wasp’ *éek’ob* ‘stars.’ The term *yich* ‘eye’ used in both verse *2a* and *2b* is clearly an important element in the structure and significance of the parallelism used in the Mayan version of this poem even though it has not been translated into Spanish at all in *2b*. *Yich* (spelled also as *ich*) glossed as ‘eye,’ is a term that is generally used to refer to both a person’s eye and/or face (Duncan & Hofling, 2011; Mansilla Lory & Meza Peñaloza, 2009). Rolando Ek Naal (personal communication, March 28, 2013) also states that *yich* is the common term for the fruit of trees and for subterranean bodies of water common to the Yucatan Peninsula called *cenotes*, which are often referred to as ‘ojos de agua/eyes of water.’ In addition, *yich* is also used to describe the face or exterior of vases and applies to the surface of ceramics<sup>124</sup> used for writing and painting (Brennen, 1998). Significantly, *yich* is the root for the word *yichan*, which is defined as a type of familial relationship (Schele & Freidel, 1990). In his interpretation of this last stanza of Cocom Pech’s poem, Ek Naal (personal communication, March 28, 2013) explains that the reason people’s souls live on in the *léembal*, brilliance of the *yich*, eye of the *xuxil*, wasp *éek’ob*, stars is because the brilliance of stars is animate and vibrant, like the swarming of bees or wasps (*xuxil*). Stars create a visible energy and a palpable connection, like the dynamic gaze of two people looking at each other. Moreover, “a person’s

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<sup>124</sup> Miguel Ángel Chi Dzul says it is common to use the term *yich* to refer to various types of surfaces such as with clothing, etc. (personal communication, March 31, 2013).

essence (*pixan*, soul) does not die, but lives on integrating itself into the universe, even to the extent of converting itself into stars” (*ibid*). In this way, “the souls of the dead—as stars—transmit knowledge and illuminate the generations that follow.” Therefore, “One should not lament the apparent death of their soul because it lives on in the brilliance of the stars and in the knowledge transmitted through language” (Ek Naal, personal communication, March 28, 2013).

### 5.2.1 Summary of “The House of Your Soul”

In this poem, Jorge Cocom Pech (2009) refers to language as the house of the Mayan soul because it represents both origin and heritage. In the form of a traditional *naj* (oblong, whitewashed, and thatched) this house embodies the ancient knowledge of Mayan culture. This ancestral home is not a great stone temple of antiquity, but is the humble construction of common families that has survived and been replicated for millennia. For this reason, it is literally the home of ancestors and memories (of parents, grandparents, great grandparents, and beyond) and the locus of language and cultural identity. As with the construction and significance of the *naj*, the Mayan language abounds with the symbology of a complex cultural universe deeply rooted in the physical environment and cosmological belief. For this reason, even as individuals die and their souls move on to the next phase or incarnation, the richness of Mayan culture lives on through the transmission of language from one generation to another.

### 5.3 Poem 3 “*Naj*”

“*Naj*” by Briceida Cuevas Cob (2008)

“*Naj*”

“La casa”

“The House”

(I)

(I)

Muestra la casa sus costillas

The house showing its ribs

humedecidas por el frío.  
De sus cabellos de palma  
gotean resquicios de alegrías.  
En su rostro  
ha cesado de aletear su mirada que descansa en el  
[marco carcomido de sus ventanas.

(II)

¿Cuándo la noche orinó sus muros?

Exhibe sus venas.

Adentro

una araña colecciona alas disecadas de

[cucarachas.

(III)

Los grillos

desovillan hilos de silencio.

Cada rincón desmenuza recuerdos.

Pero así,

aún así

de las manos tomadas con la albarrada

la casa juega a la ronda,

suda su polvo.

dampened by the cold.

Drips cracks of joy

from its hair of palm.

In its face

its gaze has ceased to flutter, resting in the

[moth eaten frame of its windows.

(II)

When did the night urinate on its walls?

It exhibits its veins.

Inside

a spider collects desiccated

[cockroach wings.

(III)

The crickets

unravel threads of silence.

In every corner memories crumble and disintegrate.

But like that,

even like that

from the held hands of the stone fence

the house plays in a circle

sweating dust.



Figure 26. A Traditional *Naj* Showing Its “Ribs.” Photograph <http://imgarcade.com/1/mayans-houses/>. This photo comes from a digital open or common source

When asked to discuss the origin of this poem and the reason(s) she decided to focus on the abandonment of a traditional Mayan home, Cuevas Cob (personal communication, September 8, 2012) explained that:

[T]odavía hay varias comunidades que conservan sus casas así, tradicionales, lo cual simboliza, desde muy adentro de la cultura maya, que esas casas son como esa vida maya, esa vida que, aunque se derrumbe la casa, continuará. La vida maya continúa, continuará. Y aún a pesar de esta situación de deterioro, no de deterioro, más bien... esta situación en la que se encuentra nuestro idioma, el cual todavía no se reactiva en los jóvenes, en los niños, a pesar de ello hay mucho preservado de la cultura maya, todavía seguimos vivos, y hay muchos trabajando en la preservación de nuestra lengua, de nuestra cultura.<sup>125</sup>

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<sup>125</sup> There are still various communities that maintain their houses in this way, traditionally. Which symbolizes that coming from very deep within the Mayan culture; these houses are like Mayan life. This life that

Although many Mayan families are now building their homes using modern construction techniques and materials, because Mayan traditional houses have been built the same general way for centuries and everything about them is steeped in cultural belief, they are still considered to be emblematic of Mayan culture. Cuevas Cob like Cocom Pech, also relates the traditional Mayan home symbolically to the Mayan language. But unlike Cocom Pech, in her interview and in her two poems, her correlation is bittersweet. The house in her poem is in a state of deterioration. Its abandonment and visible neglect reveal her deep seated concern for the Mayan language in the future; a future where the younger generations are reluctant to speak and are not actively contributing to the language's vitality. Nevertheless, even with the apprehension and sense of urgency evident in her comments one is struck by the determination in her statement that "even with the house torn down" Mayan life continues and will continue (Cuevas Cob, personal communication, September 8, 2012). Moreover, people are not passively letting the language just fade away. Like the poets of this corpus, there are many activists working on the preservation of Mayan language and culture.

As a metaphor for language and cultural continuity, the traditional Mayan home (not unlike the Mayan people themselves) is recognized for its tremendous capacity for adaptation. According to Ayllón Trujillo, et al., (2008, p. 263) the traditional Mayan house "ha subsistido durante siglos por su idónea adaptación a los rigores del clima, a la austeridad del suelo y a las necesidades de uso, consumo y bienestar de la familia campesina."<sup>126</sup> Just as important that

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even with the house torn down will continue...Mayan life continues, and will continue. And in spite of this situation of deterioration, or better said...this situation in which we find our language, in which with young people and children it still hasn't been revived, even though there has been so much preserved of Mayan culture. We continue to live and there are many working on the preservation of our language and our culture.

<sup>126</sup> The traditional Mayan house "has survived for centuries because of its ideal adaption to the "rigors of the climate, the austerity of the soil, and the necessities of use, consumption, and wellbeing of the rural family."

these homes have been around for centuries and that their construction and use correlate to cultural beliefs concerning the cosmos and the human body, is how the home and the *solar*<sup>127</sup> reflect the community's resourcefulness in confronting innumerable social, economic, and natural challenges. In their investigation (see Figure 27), Ayllon Trujillo and Nuño Gutiérrez (2008) show us how the traditional Mayan house and *solar* represent a way of life and cultural perspective that includes how families live together, teach their children, grow and eat food, practice their spirituality and medicine, and make a living. In essence, "todas las señas de identidad que les permitirán socializarse fuera sin perder las raíces que darán sentido a su vida y argumento a su ética y a su estética particular (Ayllon Trujillo et al., 2008, p. 282)."<sup>128</sup>

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<sup>127</sup> The *solar* is a plot of land where a house is usually situated.

<sup>128</sup> "All of the signs of identity that will allow them to socialize in the outside world without losing the roots that will give meaning to their lives and reason for their particular ethics and esthetics."

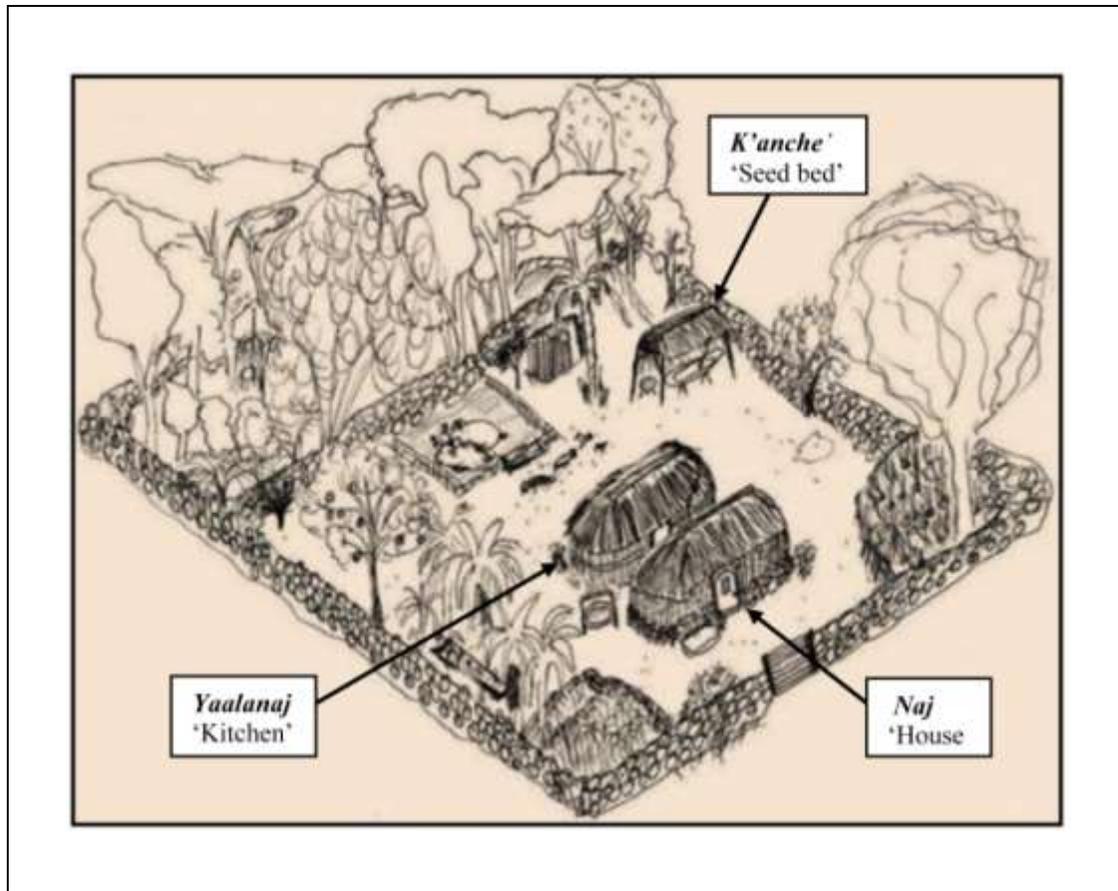


Figure 27. Model of a Traditional Yucatec Mayan House and Yard (Solar).<sup>129</sup> In this model of a traditional Mayan house and yard there are two buildings: the *naj*; #1 the main house, and #2, the slightly smaller kitchen or *yaalanaj* (or daughter house). Adapted from “El sistema casa o solar y la ordenación territorial de las familias: aplicación de la teoría de sistemas a escala micro social,” by M. Ayllón Trujillo and M. Nuño Gutiérrez, 2009, *Redes*, 13, p. 266.

When Cuevas Cob expresses her sadness and concern over the abandonment of the traditional home, she does so because it is an eloquent symbol that relates to all aspects of Mayan life.

[L]a casa típica, chiquita, donde caben todos, y así, con sus albarradas, encaladas, te abren las manos y te dicen bienvenido, así, como si llegaras en un taxi o en una

<sup>129</sup> Note that the *k'anche* is depicted in its manifestation of a raised seed bed.

bicicleta, como si vinieras de afuera y fueses bienvenido. Siempre tengo esa imagen en la cabeza [. . .]. Es un poema sobre la casa, nuestra casa, la casa que ya no es.<sup>130</sup>

(Cuevas Cob, personal communication, September 8, 2012)

*“Naj”*

“La casa”

“The House”

(I)

Le **naja’** tu **ye’esik** u **ch’ala’atel**

**siiskunaja’an** tumen **ke’el**.

Ti’ u **xa’anil** u **jo’ole’**

tu **ch’ajch’aj’áankal** u yalab **ki’imak-óolal**.

Ti’u **táan** u **yiche’**

ts’o’ok u jawal u **pokpokxiik’** u páakat ku je’elsikubaj tu

[páakab che’il kisneb.

(I)

(I)

Muestra la casa sus costillas

The house showing its ribs

humedecidas por el frío.

dampened by the cold.

De sus cabellos de palma

Drips cracks of joy

gotean resquicios de alegrías.

from its hair of palm.

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<sup>130</sup>[T]he typical house, even though it is little, there is room for everyone. And just like that, with its walls, whitewashed, it opens its arms to you and welcomes you, as if you were arriving in a taxi or on a bicycle and were coming from far away and were warmly welcomed. I always have this image in my head [. . .]. It is a poem about the house, our house; that no longer exists.

En su rostro

In its face

ha cesado de aletear su mirada que descansa en el

its gaze has ceased to flutter, resting in the

[marco carcomido de sus ventanas.

[moth eaten frame of its windows.

When Cuevas Cob begins her poem with *naja*<sup>131</sup> ‘that house’ *ye’esik* ‘showing or demonstrating’ its *ch’ala’atel* ‘ribs—also considered the veins or the fibers that sustain a house’—she is making a reference to how components of the Mayan traditional home correspond to the human body. She is also describing the physical condition of this emblematic house, that like an emaciated person—when ill or in decline— it stands *siiskunaja’an*, ‘numbed, chilled, or frozen’ by the *ke’el* ‘the cold or winter.’ And, that from its *xa’anil* ‘the palm or huano—thatching/hair’ *u jo’ole* ‘of its head’ *ch’ajch’aj’áankal* ‘is dripping’ *yalab* ‘what remains’ of its *ki’imak-óolal* ‘happiness, satisfaction, health.’ The term *ki’imak-óolal* ‘happiness, satisfaction, health’ further corroborates the human or living qualities of the house by combining the root *ki*, ‘pleasing, rich, and delightful’ with *óol*, ‘breath, spirit, energy, force, and pistil.’ Furthermore, because this composite word ends with the suffix/morphosyllable *al* (similar to the affix *il* discussed above) used in Mayan languages—evident both in glyphic writing and contemporary discourse—it merges abstract ideas into a conceptual whole. The image of the dripping away (like the seeping of tears) of *yalab* and ‘what remains’ of the house’s *ki’imak-óolal* ‘happiness, satisfaction, health,’ is one of loss; of life’s energy and joy (Houston et al, 2001). This image is particularly poignant when we consider that in Mayan cosmology water does not just symbolize, but literally *is* life (which in its full conception includes death). So,

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<sup>131</sup> The term *naja*’ with the suffix *u*’ signifies “that house.”

what Cuevas Cob is describing is that in its moribund state the house is dripping away the very essence of its being (Rivera Dorado, 1995).

According to Rolando Ek Naal (personal communication, April 11, 2013), Cuevas Cob is a master at using the phonetic resources of the Mayan language to express deeply felt concepts. This is similar to what Barbara Tedlock (1982, p. 270) refers to as the “poetic sound texture”<sup>132</sup> of ritual discourse when speakers experiment with sonant qualities inherent in the Mayan language to intensify and “expand meaning.” Cuevas Cob creates metaphor by skillfully manipulating Mayan phonetic and syntactic plasticity and expressiveness. For example, when the term *ch’ajch’aj’áankal*—coming from the word *ch’aj* ‘drop of water or liquor’ duplicated *ch’aj + ch’aj*—is combined with the suffix *áankal* to indicate gerund and replicate the sound of the repetitive action (drip-dripping). Cuevas Cob (personal communication, September 8, 2012) explains that she purposefully plays with the flexibility of the Mayan language to recreate a phonetic environment in which the reader/listener can actually hear and experience an action and what it signifies.

In the house’s *táan u yiche*<sup>133</sup> ‘face/eyes and countenance’ its *páakat* ‘gaze’ has ceased to *pokpokxiik* ‘flutt-flutter’ *je’elsikubaj* and ‘rests’ in the *che’il* ‘wooden’ frame of its window. *Pokpokxiik*’ is another example of “poetic sound texture.” The house’s gaze no longer flutters like wings or beats like a human heart. The shivering ribs of the house are like an empty birdcage or human frame that no longer is home to the palpitating heart or vibrant life. And now that there is no one living in the house, there is no fire in the hearth (or heart of the house) and

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<sup>132</sup> Barbara Tedlock (1982, p. 269) refers to “poetic sound texture” in her article about ritual language (still evident today in contemporary Mayan discourse) that is documented in the “*Chilam Balam of Chumayel*, a Yucatecan ethnohistorical document with pre-Columbian roots.”

<sup>133</sup> *Táan u yiche*’ literally means countenance of the face.

the windows no longer reflect the fluttering light and warmth (life and the symbolic regeneration of life) of its flames (Guzmán Urióstegui, 2007).

(II)

¿**Ba'ax k'iin** ka wixa'ab u pak'il tumen **áak'ab**?

Ts'o'ok u k'aajal u t'inik **yo'kabil** u **xiich'e'**.

Ichile'

**juntúul** amej u **tsolmaj** u **tikin xiik'** **xk'uuluch'o'ob**.

**Máaso'obe'**

tu jáalchi'itiko'ob u jílibil u bek'ech suumil

[ch'e'eneknakil.

(II)

¿Cuándo la noche orinó sus muros?

Exhibe sus venas.

Adentro

una araña colecciona alas disecadas de

[cucarachas.

(II)

When did the night urinate on its walls?

It exhibits its veins.

Inside

a spider collects desiccated

[cockroach wings.

This second stanza begins with a question, **Ba'ax** 'when' **k'iin** 'sun, time, day, period of time, epoch' as if to ask when this process of decay really began. Cuevas Cob (personal communication, September 8, 2012) describes this image of neglect or abandonment as the

“abandono de las paredes, del impacto de la lluvia en ellas, del sol, del polvo.”<sup>134</sup> She also explains that it is her way of referring to mold, in that she associates “a los colores de la noche con el moho”<sup>135</sup> (*ibid*). Cuevas Cob’s creation of a poetic image that correlates the moldering effect of neglect with the night corresponds with the ancient Mayan conception of the night sky as the rotated sky of the underworld, known as *mitnal* or *metnal*<sup>136</sup> ‘the realm of the dead’ as well as *ak’bal* ‘night or darkness’ *naj* ‘house;’ house of night/darkness (Schele & Freidel, 1990). Rivera Dorado (1995, p. 252) explains that in the Mayan sacred text the *Popol Vuh* there are four houses that pertain to the underworld. The first is “La Casa Oscura” / “The House of Darkness,” which is conceived as a cave leading directly to the underworld, symbolizing the world before creation, “la nada” ‘nothing,’ dreams, the night, and death. That the house has been urinated on by the night is a bleak image. However, when we add that the *pixan* ‘soul’ (the walls) of the house have been abused and neglected and are now covered with mold, the image is even more desolate. The house in this dilapidated state is described as *yo’-kabil* ‘showing or revealing’ its *xiich’e* ‘veins or tendons’ while inside an *am* ‘spider’ collects *tikin* ‘dry’ *xiik* ‘wing’<sup>137</sup> *xk’uulucho’ob* ‘cockroaches’ or desiccated cockroach wings.

In our previous discussion of parallelism we explain that the house’s abandonment and deterioration is conveyed not only through the imagery of the spider collecting desiccated cockroach wings, but also by the sounds created by the entire passage when read aloud in Maya. Parallelism, in this instance is the expression of silence and neglect conveyed through the

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<sup>134</sup> "The abandonment of the walls, the impact that the rain makes on them, of the sun, of dust."

<sup>135</sup> "I associate the colors of the night with mold."

<sup>136</sup> "In Quiche Maya *xibalba* means the underworld whereas in Yucatec Maya *xibalba* means the ruler of the underworld himself. In Yucatec Maya the name of the underworld is *mitnal*, or today *metnal*, probably derived from the Nahuatl term *mictlan*, from *micca* ‘dead’ and *tlan* ‘place of’" (Bolles & Folan, 2001, p. 303).

<sup>137</sup> The noun *xiik* ‘wing’ is singular, but as part of the concept of referring to multiple insects it is obvious there are more than one (Ek Naal, personal communication, March 30, 2013).

accumulation of sounds that evoke the mood of the empty and deteriorating house. Beginning with the *tikin* ‘dry’ *xiik* ‘wings’ of the *xk’uulucho’ob* ‘cockroaches’ and continuing on into the next section with the lonely and reverberating *jaalchi’itiko’ob* ‘release of sound’ of the *maaso’obe* ‘crickets,’ the reader/listener sees, hears, and *feels* the desolation of this once vital home and cultural hub.

(III)

**Máaso’obe’**

tu **jaalchi’itiko’ob** u jílibil u bek’ech suumil

[ch’e’eneknakil.

Jáalmooye’ tu tsi’iktik u k’a’asaj.

**Ba’ale’leili’,**

**kex beyo leili’** u **machmaj** u k’ab yéetel **koot**

tu báaxal **pilinsuut,**

tu k’íikabtik u lu’umel.

(III)

Los grillos

desovillan hilos de silencio.

Cada rincón desmenuza recuerdos.

Pero así,

aún así

de las manos tomadas con la albarrada

(III)

The crickets

unravel threads of silence.

In every corner memories crumble and

disintegrate.

But like that, even like that

from the held hands of the stone fence

la casa juega a la ronda,  
suda su polvo.

the house plays in a circle  
sweating dust.

As we have stated previously, this poem mentions three types of insects: cockroaches, spiders, and crickets. According to Rolando Ek Naal all these creatures are connected to houses, and more specifically to kitchens; traditionally a space inhabited and governed by women (personal communication, April 6, 2013). Since cockroaches are insects attracted to kitchens because of the food, the fact that they are only referred to in this poem as the desiccated wings that have been collected by a spider reinforces the sense of abandonment of the house; there is no food and no one cooking in the kitchen. And, that it has been this way for some time is made clear by the description of the deteriorated state of the house and the spider's mounting collection. In his commentary about this last stanza, Ek Naal (personal communication, April 6, 2013) explains that *máaso'obe* 'crickets' have admirable qualities and are esteemed "for their ability to jump, sing, and harmonize with the night." In the context of the poem even the crickets demonstrate their empathy by sharing the sadness of the dying house and harmonizing with its stillness.

By creating the multisensory images of the *máaso'obe* 'crickets' unwinding threads of silence while in every corner memories crumble and disintegrate, Cuevas Cob not only describes a profound sense of loss and nostalgia, but also the process of the deterioration (discontinuation) of memory. So, even though this poem is about a personal memory, it is also a reference to the demise of a fundamental cultural institution. Moreover, it is an allusion to the loss of experience/collective memory of younger generations that have never lived in a traditional Mayan home.

Cuevas Cob ends this poem with an emphatic reiteration that *Ba'ale'* 'but' *leili'* 'even so, still,' *kex beyo* 'even like this' *leili'* 'even so, still' *machmaj* 'grabbed or held' *k'ab* 'by the hand' the *koot* 'circle of white washed stones that surround the house and plot' *báaxal* 'plays' *pilinsuut* 'round and round' *k'ikabtik* 'sweating' *lu'ume* 'earth, dust.' It is the circular and binding action of the *koot* 'whitewashed rocks that surround the home and plot' that in not wanting to die continues to "hold hands" and encircle the house. The *koot* in this sense is an embodiment of what remains of the home's *pixan* 'soul' and the memory of the family (and culture) that built and lived in it (Ek Naal, personal communication, April 16, 2013; Vogt, 1969). But, like the fading memory of the children who once played *pilinsuut* 'round and round' in its yard/patio, because no one lives in the house it must inevitably lose its vitality and soul and in its decay sweat its own dust and disintegration.

The following quote by Evon Vogt (1969, p. 71) sums up the essence of Cuevas Cob's poem by explaining that "[i]ndeed, the house's soul is even more powerful than the person's, since the house consists of so many elements derived from the Earth." For this reason, the *naj* as an embodiment of creation (the initial division of the earth), humanity (both physically and culturally), and the environment (all that it is made of) is such an important symbol/life force in Mayan culture that its passage into disuse and deterioration marks a momentous shift, as the poet has so eloquently expressed in this work of loss and mourning.

### 5.3.1 Summary of "Naj"

In this poem Cuevas Cob (2008) literally writes the eulogy of the *naj*. The beloved house, loved for what it was, how it was lived in, and what it symbolizes. The poet's representation of the Mayan traditional house in its abandonment marks the passing of a cultural icon that is emblematic of Mayan resourcefulness, knowledge, and community and familial life.

The *naj*, like all living entities in Mayan belief, has a soul and although it has lasted for millennia, this poem captures the moment when it is transitioning from living experience to memory. The depiction of the house in this moribund state marks the death of an institution and the end of a way of life. It also overlaps memory (collective memory) with the forces of change, survival, and adaptation. For whatever reasons (lack of access to natural resources, technical knowledge, or pressures from outside influence) there are fewer and fewer Mayan communities building traditional *naj*. Nevertheless, for thousands of years it has survived and the memory of its cultural significance lives on.

#### 5.4 Poem 4 “You Will Go to School”<sup>138</sup>

“*Yaan a bin xook*” by Briceida Cuevas Cob (2005)

“*Yaan a bin xook*”

“Irás a la escuela”

“You Will Go to School”

*Y aquellas hormigas que reían, cantaban, bailaban y jugaban a la ronda, comenzaron a llorar. Había nacido una hembra, quien les echaría agua hirviendo cuando aparecieran en la cocina.*

(I)

Tú irás a la escuela.

No serás cabeza hueca.

Traspasarás el umbral de tu imaginación

hasta adéntrate en tu propia casa

sin tener que tocar la puerta.

*And those ants that laughed, sung, danced, and played in the round began to cry. A female child had been born, who would toss boiling water on them once they appeared in her kitchen.*

(I)

You will go to school.

You will not be empty-headed.

You will cross the threshold of your imagination

going all the way into your own house

without having to knock on the door.

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<sup>138</sup> For a video of Briceida Cuevas Cob’s recitation of this poem in Maya, please refer to [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ce\\_3YS-LW9E](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ce_3YS-LW9E) (it is the third poem recited).

(II)

Y contemplándote en el rostro de tu semejante  
descubrirás que desde tus pestañas,  
flechas nocturnas prendidas en el corazón de la  
tierra, desciende tu sencillez  
y asciende la grandeza de tu abolengo.

(III)

Tú irás a la escuela  
y en el cuenco de las manos de tu entendimiento  
contendrás el escurrir del vientre de la mujer de  
tu raza.

(IV)

De su calcañal  
descifrarás los jeroglíficos escritos por el polvo,  
el viento y el sol.  
Grandes los ojos de tu admiración  
contemplarán sus senos desfallecientes  
después de haber derramado vida sobre la tierra.

(V)

Irás a la escuela  
pero volverás a tu casa,  
a tu cocina,  
a pintar con achiote el vientre del metate  
a que lama la lengua del tizne tu albo fustán,  
a inflar con tus pulmones el globo-flama,  
a que hurguen tus ojos los delgados dedos del humo,  
a leer el chisporroteo en el revés del comal,  
a leer el crepitar del fuego.

(II)

And seeing yourself in the faces of your peers,  
You will discover that from your eyelashes—  
nocturnal arrows buried in the heart of the earth—  
your simplicity descends,  
and the nobility of your lineage rises forth.

(III)

You will go to school  
and within the cupped hands of your understanding  
you will hold the flow from the womb of the women of  
your race.

(IV)

From their heels  
You will decipher hieroglyphs,  
written by dust, wind, and sun.  
Your eyes, wide with amazement,  
will contemplate their weakened breasts,  
having poured out life upon the earth.

(V)

You will go to school  
but you will return to your home,  
to your kitchen,  
to paint the *metate*'s belly with *achiote*  
so the embers' tongue may lick at your white underskirt,  
to inflate the balloon-flame with your lungs,  
so the thin fingers of smoke may poke at your eyes,  
to read the sparking on the *comal*'s back  
and the fire's crackling.

(VI)

Volverás a tu cocina

porque la banqueta te espera.

Porque el fogón guarda en sus entrañas un espejo.

Un espejo en el que estampada se halla tu alma.

Un espejo que te invoca con la voz de su resplandor.

(VI)

You will return to your kitchen

because your bench awaits you.

Because the fire holds a mirror in its depths.

A mirror upon which your soul is imprinted.

A mirror that calls to you with the voice of its brilliance.

English translation by Donald Frischmann (Montemayor & Frischmann, 2005, p. 191-92).

When asked about her motives for writing this poem, Cuevas Cob Cuevas (personal communication, September 8, 2012) offered the following explanation:

[E]stas niñas de ahora que van a la escuela, están cultivándose de manera *light* como se dice en inglés, en el sentido de que no se interesan mucho por el idioma, son receptores pasivos, no hablan el idioma, entienden algunas expresiones y no las quieren practicar. Eso también tiene mucho que ver con la política educativa y también la falta de voluntad de los profesores bilingües que no se siguen preparando ni tienen un proyecto contundente ni real ni ninguna metodología para hacer el trabajo. Entonces cuál es nuestra preocupación o mi preocupación de que en la comunidad ahora sólo personas mayores como de mi edad para arriba hablan el idioma mientras los jóvenes y los niños están enajenados en su propio territorio, de su propio idioma. Entonces por eso precisamente escribo este texto, eso me motivó a escribir este texto de que sí y ahora sí vas a ir a la escuela, ya no serás el niño cabeza hueca pero sabes que tienes que volver,

aquí está tu entorno, tu medio ambiente, aquí tienes tus raíces y tú te podrás ir a donde quieras, adonde puedas pero tienes un filo que te invita, que te obliga a regresar.<sup>139</sup>

“Yaan a bin **xook**”

“Irás a la escuela”

“You Will Go to School”

Although translations of the title of this poem in both Spanish and English use the term “school”—referring to “formal or state run education”—an examination of the Maya word **xook** (see Table 9) reveals its polysemous nature, which in turn gives us insight into the overall message of this poem.

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<sup>139</sup> “These girls today that are going to school are getting a “light” education (as you say in English), in the sense that they aren’t very interested in the language. They are passive learners that don’t speak the language. They understand some expressions, but they don’t want to practice them. This also has to do with the politics of education as well as the lack of will and effort of the bilingual teachers that don’t continue their own education and don’t have a convincing or real plan or any methodology in order to do their work. Consequently, it is our concern or my concern that in the community now only older people my age and older are speaking the language while the young people and children are being alienated from their own land and their own language. Precisely for this reason I have written this text. This is what motivated me to write this text so that yes...and now yes, you go to school and you don’t be an empty headed child, but you know that you have to return. Here is your place, your natural environment. Here are your roots and you can go wherever you want or are able to go, but you have a tie or connection that invites you, that obliges you to return.”

Table 9

*Semantic Analysis of the Term Xook*

<i>Xook</i> as a noun:	<i>Xook</i> as a verb:	<i>Xook</i> in composite words:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>xook</i> ‘lesson’</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>xook</i> ‘to read, to count, to study, to keep in mind or take into account’</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>xookil</i> ‘count, calculation or sum; story or tale’</li> <li>• <i>xooken</i> ‘a term referring to the ability to read or to know someone and to know their history’</li> <li>• <i>xook k’iin</i> ‘literally meaning counting/reading the passage of the days or time (such as in weather forecasting) used in relation to agriculture’</li> <li>• <i>xookbil chuuy</i> ‘embroidery’ (similar to cross stitch, but with designs relating to Mayan cosmology)</li> </ul>

*Note.* Adapted from R. Ek Naal personal communication, June 6, 2013; *Introducción Diccionario Español – Maya, Maya – Español* by J. Gómez Navarrete, 2009, p. 187.

Table 9 demonstrates that the term *xook*—although translated as school—refers more to the various ways of obtaining knowledge such as through numbers, stories, people, the passage of days or time, agricultural conditions, and embroidery. This broader interpretation of education clarifies how the term *xook* in the title of this poem combined with *yaan a bin* ‘one must go’ “*Yaan a bin xook*” is a literal mandate for young women to not let ignorance become a limitation, especially when they can obtain knowledge (an education) from their own culture and others (Cuevas Cob personal communication, September 8, 2012; Ek Naal, personal communication, May 6, 2013).

Le tuun le **súniko’ob** ka’ach tu che’ejo’ob,  
tu k’ayo’ob, tu yóok’oto’ob tan xan u báaxal

u machmaj u k'abo'ob, léek u yok'olo'ob. Ko'lel  
síisa'abil, leti'e kun **jóoychokoja'atiko'ob** wa ku  
manak' ta'alo'ob ich **yáalanaj**.

Y aquella hormigas que reían,  
cantaban, bailaban y jugaban a la ronda,  
comenzaron a llorar. Había nacido una  
hembra, quien les echaría agua hirviendo  
cuando aparecieran en la cocina.

And those ants that laughed, sung, danced, and  
played in the round began to cry. A female  
child had been born, who would toss boiling  
water on them once they appeared in her  
kitchen.

When Cuevas Cob (personal communication, September 8, 2012) speaks about the epigraph of this poem she states that it comes from both oral tradition as well as “una realidad popular” still seen in various Mexican communities that situates people in specific roles and environments according to their sex and gender. In Mayan communities, saying that *súniko'ob* ‘ants’ laugh when a boy is born but cry when the baby is a girl, places men in the fields and women in the kitchen. Ants rejoicing in the birth of a boy is a reference to the practice of men working in the fields who feed them bits of corn meal to lead them away from the crops and make them happy (*ibid*). But when ants are in the kitchen, women *jóoychokoja'atiko'ob* ‘throw boiling water on them’ to get rid of them, which makes them cry. As ants are ubiquitous in tropical ecosystems it is not surprising that they are frequent protagonists in Mayan mythology and are featured in this “folk” expression.

In Mayan cosmologies ants are primarily noted for discovering the first grains of corn embedded in stone. Because of their small size, strength and determination, they were able to

get into the tight crevices of the stone and carry the kernels out on their backs (León-Portilla, 1984; Šprajc, 1996). In some Mayan communities ants are also thought to participate in eclipses because in times of astronomical disorder or unbalance they “try to eat the moon.” When this happens, it provokes the moon’s anger, which in turn makes her bite and obscure the sun causing a solar eclipse (Nájera Coronado, 1995). Since the moon is considered the “diosa de los periodos de lluvias, mareas, germinación, regeneración de la vida, símbolo del ciclo biológico femenino y representante de los partos,”<sup>140</sup> because ants attack and try to consume her, they are symbols of antagonism towards a very important female deity (Montolú Villar, 1984, p. 67). In these two symbolic representations, ants are associated with corn seed—the origin of Mayan life—and with the relationship between the sun and the moon. This lunar/solar relationship is representative of cosmic order—when all is aligned and chaos when it is not—and it illustrates the interaction and balance between what is male and female as evident in all flora and fauna reproductive cycles (Bassie-Sweet, 2000).

On a more earthly level, that ants are important indicators of rain explains why in the fields, a traditionally male space, men would welcome them. Nevertheless, although they signal the coming rain needed for the crops, they do so by seeking refuge on higher and dryer ground, which is often in the *yáalanaj* ‘kitchen’ where they can be quite destructive to foodstuffs. Therefore, it is understandable why they are not welcomed by women, who are traditionally responsible for the preparation of family meals (Mariaca Méndez, 2003).

By analyzing the term *yáalanaj* ‘kitchen,’ we see that this emphasis on gendered environments is also embedded linguistically. As noted previously, *naj* or *naaj* signifying ‘house,’ is a complex term that shares the root morpheme “*na*” with words and expressions such

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<sup>140</sup> The moon is considered to be the “goddess of rains, tides, germination, the regeneration of life, and the symbol of the feminine biological cycle and the representative of births.”

as *na* ‘mother,’ *nak* ‘womb, stomach, center,’ and *chuun u nak* ‘umbilical cord or root of one’s stomach.’ The term *yáalanaj* ‘kitchen,’ which combines *yáal* or *a’al*<sup>141</sup> ‘daughter or female child’ with *naj* ‘house,’ literally means the daughter or female child of the *naj* ‘house.’ The *yáalanaj* ‘kitchen’ both in its physical (see Figure 28) and linguistic construction is conceived as the womb (or daughter) of the house where the hearth or heart (*fogón*) resides<sup>142</sup> (Ek Naal, personal communication, August 20, 2013; Gómez Navarette, 2009).

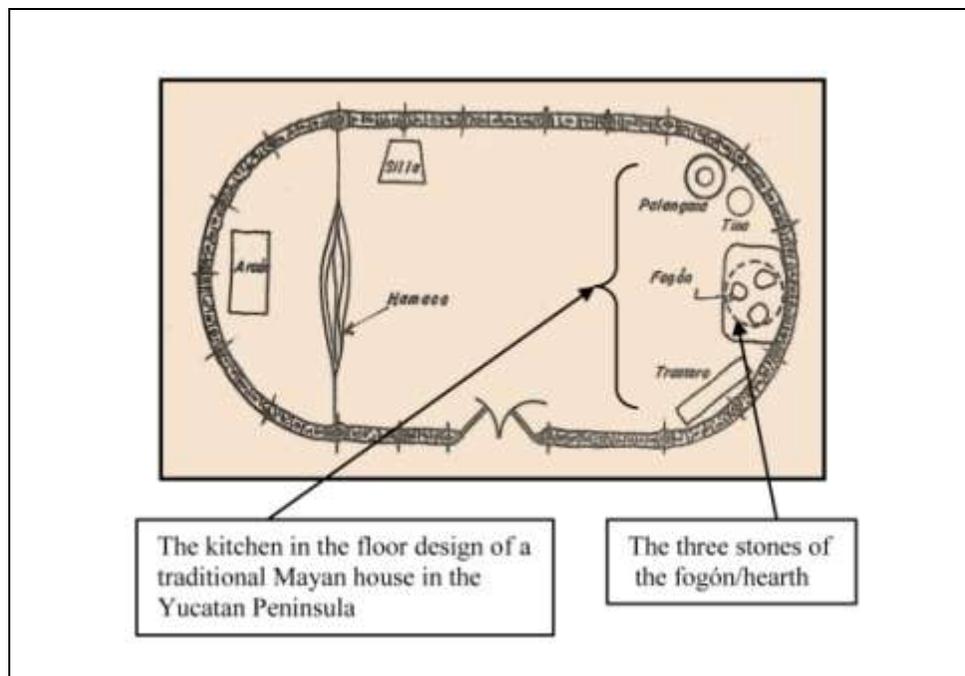


Figure 28. Floorplan of a Traditional Yucatec Mayan House *Naj*. Adapted from: *La vivienda indígena de México y del mundo*, by V. Moya Rubio, 1984, UNAM, p. 79.

By using this “folk” expression as the epilogue of this poem, Cuevas Cob is critiquing the traditional notion of a woman’s sphere and work from her own perspective as an artist living

<sup>141</sup> In the University of Quintano Roo Dictionary the noun *a’al* signifies child and refers to a female. The noun *meejen* signifies a male child (Gómez Navarette, 2009).

<sup>142</sup> In Figure 27 on page 163 of this study, the model of the traditional Mayan house and yard by Ayllón Trujillo and Nuño Gutiérrez (2009) depicts the kitchen as a slightly smaller (or daughter *naj*) situated directly behind the main house.

both inside and outside of her community of origin. She explains that this type of traditional division of labor within the family locates women in the home and not in school (personal communication, September, 8, 2012). But at the same time she laments that young women (young people in general) are distancing themselves from the kitchen and are now eating pizza instead of tortillas (*ibid*). She strongly affirms that young people can and should study and go on to the university, but “tienes que regresar a tus raíces y reevaluar tu identidad para que no pierdas de donde vienes y adonde vas”<sup>143</sup> (personal communication, September, 8, 2012). She also explains that in her own life, along with all she has learned from living outside of the community and from the sacrifices she has made for her professional and artistic development, there is also a process of learning that involves the return to the community because “muchos lo hacen de manera consciente y otros no consciente”<sup>144</sup> (*ibid*).

For this reason, the epigraph is used by the poet to place women in the home, and even more specifically in the kitchen. Since it is a sphere associated with explicit responsibilities and production, kitchen-work designates a place and a role that is privileged and respected because it is based on time honored knowledge, ability, and values. To better appreciate what these values, abilities, and knowledge are and how they correspond to the notion of femininity in traditional Mayan culture, it is important to understand that in agricultural (more specifically, corn growing) Mayan communities it is customary for a family’s various systems of production and socialization to take place in two gender specific yet complementary environments. One is (see Figure 29) located within the house and its immediate surrounding area (patio, etc.) while the other is located outside of the house and patio in the milpa ‘corn fields,’ farming/grazing areas,

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<sup>143</sup> “You have to return to your roots and reevaluate your identity so that you don’t lose where you come from or where you are going.”

<sup>144</sup> “Many do it in a conscious way and others without being conscious.”

and beyond (Ayllón Trujillo, et al., 2008; Rosado Rosado, 2003). Although women traditionally work in the home and men work in the fields, because the system is based on cooperation, there are circumstances where women participate in field work and men work in the home (*ibid*).

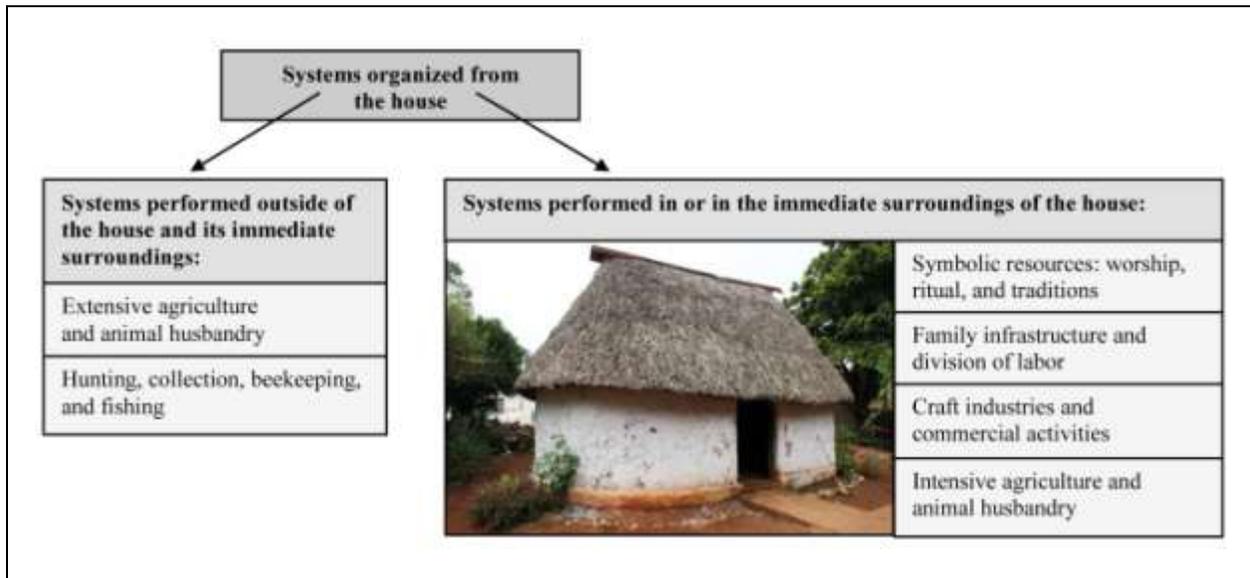


Figure 29. Systems of Production and Socialization in a Traditional Mayan Home. The systems of production that takes place outside of the house and its immediate surroundings are traditionally activities performed by men. The systems performed in the house are traditionally activities performed by women. Adapted from “El sistema casa o solar y la ordenación territorial de las familias: aplicación de la teoría de sistemas a escala micro social,” by M. Ayllón Trujillo and M. Nuño Gutiérrez, 2009, *Redes*, 13. Source: photograph by Huchim Herrera, J. Retrieved June 26, 2014, from: <http://maya.nmai.si.edu/gallery/santa-elena-and-san-simon>. Reprinted with permission.

María Teresa Ayllón Trujillo and María Rosa Nuño Gutiérrez (2008) describe the home as an ideal place where all members of the family find affection, understanding and security. It is where family members learn “todas las señas de identidad que les permitirán socializarse fuera sin perder las raíces que darán sentido a su vida y argumento a su ética y a su estética

particular”<sup>145</sup> (*ibid*, p. 282). Moreover, according to these authors the home is the locus and foundation of the Mayan conception or construction of femininity:

El territorio familiar de dentro es la casa propiamente dicha, con su huerto y su corral, o economía de traspatio, está en la base de la construcción de la feminidad. La casa con todas sus actividades—agricultura intensiva, ganadería intensiva, industrias artesanas, actividades comerciales, etc.—está a cargo simbólicamente y materialmente de las mujeres de la familia, desde el momento en que nacen hasta el día en que se van. En la casa se realizan la reproducción humana, los cuidados de la salud, la infraestructura y transformación de los alimentos para la nutrición. (Ayllón Trujillo et al., 2008, p. 282)<sup>146</sup>

Describing the distinct activities performed in the home and its immediate surroundings makes it clear that the home in a typical Mayan community is considered the family’s spiritual, social, and economic base. The home is where these systems of cultural, spiritual, and economic activity are organized, implemented and passed on to future generations. Although the home is a place for the entire family, it is considered (as we stated above) a female sphere where women take care of children, tell stories, prepare food and health products, tend animals, kitchen gardens, fruit trees, and participate in various types of commercial activities such as embroidery, ceramics, etc. Moreover, since in a traditional Mayan community women are responsible for the social, cultural, linguistic education of their children and are the primary caregivers of their

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<sup>145</sup> It is also where they learn all of the signs of identity that permit them to socialize on the outside without losing the roots that give meaning to their lives and reasoning to their ethics and particular aesthetic.

<sup>146</sup> “The familial territory within—what is really considered the home—with its kitchen garden, corral or backyard economy, is the foundation of the construction of femininity. The house with all of its activities: intensive agriculture, intensive animal husbandry, artisan industry, commercial activities, etc., are the symbolic and material responsibility of the women of the family from the moment that they are born until the day that they are gone. In the house is where human reproduction, health care, the infrastructure for the transformation of foodstuffs into nutrition is all carried out.”

families, they and the home and kitchen they manage, represent social roles and a locus that are essential for cultural continuity (Ayllón Trujillo, et al., 2008; Gúzmán Urióstegui, 2007).

(I)

Teche' yaan a bin **xook**.

Ma' tun **p'áatakech polwech**.

Yan a táats'máansik u **páakabil** u *najil* a **tuukul**

yo'olal a wokoj ta **wotoch**

ma' táan a k'opik **joolnaj**.

(I)

Tú irás a la escuela.

No serás cabeza hueca.

Trespasarás el umbral de tu imaginación

hasta adentrarte en tu propia casa

sin tener que tocar la puerta.

(I)

You will go to school.

You will not be empty-headed.

You will cross the threshold of your

imagination going all the way into

your own house without having

to knock on the door.

In the first verse of the poem Cuevas Cob uses the imperative to command the subject of her message—young Mayan women—to *xook*” ‘do lessons, read, count, study, take into account;’ in other words, to get an education and think. By getting an education and using their minds, these young women will not be *p'áatakech* ‘left behind’ like a *polwech*. Although *Polwech* is translated as ‘cabeza hueca/empty headed’ in Spanish and English, in Maya it is a composite term that combines *pol* ‘head’ with *wech* ‘armadillo’ and signifies the head of an

armadillo. When asked why she utilized the expression *polwech*, Cuevas Cob (personal communication, September 8, 2012) explained that:

[E]s una expresión que se utiliza mucho en mi comunidad. Yo trabajo mucho con las expresiones cotidianas porque estas tienen mucho sentido, encierran mucha filosofía, mucha información. Esa expresión, esa palabra, *polwech*, significa cabeza de armadillo, la cabeza del armadillo. Y esta expresión siempre la utilizan las personas de las comunidades, mi papá, los vecinos, toda la gente de la comunidad, para referirse a una persona bruta. Es una comparación con el armadillo, el cual no creo que tenga nada de bruto, con su escudo, que es durísimo. Y debido a esta protección que tiene, que es muy dura, se hace la comparación con la cabeza. La cabeza es muy dura y por lo tanto ahí no entra el estudio, no entra lo que se explica en clase, no entra el conocimiento. De ahí, la expresión quiere decir que uno no entiende, que uno tiene mucha dificultad para aprender algo.<sup>147</sup>

After insisting that young women get an education so that they do not become “armadillo heads” and get left behind Cob exhorts them to *táats’máansik* ‘cross, go through’ the *páakabil* ‘threshold, limits’ of the *najil* ‘this house’ *tuukul* ‘to think / of thought, intelligence, wisdom’ in order to *wokoj* ‘enter’ *wotoch* ‘their home’ without *k’opik* ‘knocking’ on the *joolnaj* ‘door’ (Bolles, 2001; Ek Naal, personal communication, November 3, 2013; Gómez Navarrete, 2009).

The term *páakabil*, translated by the poet as ‘umbral’ in Spanish and ‘threshold’ in English, is a

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<sup>147</sup> It is an expression that is used often in my community. I work a lot with common expressions because they make a lot of sense and involve a great deal of philosophy and information. This expression—this word *polwech*—means armadillo head, the head of an armadillo. And this expression is always used by people from the communities, my dad, the neighbors, all of the people from the community to refer to a person who is a brute. It makes a comparison with an armadillo (which I don’t believe is anything like a brute) and its covering or shield that is really hard. And because of the very tough protection that it has, they compare it with a person’s head. Their head is very hard and because of this the lessons don’t penetrate their thick skull, and what they explain in class and knowledge in general doesn’t either. That’s why the expression means that someone doesn’t understand or that they have difficulties learning something.

complex term for which we could find no direct translation in any of the various dictionaries we consulted. In *The Foundation for the Advancement of Mesoamerican Studies online Combined Dictionary* (2001), *Universidad de Quintana Roo Diccionario Introductorio Español – Maya / Maya – Español* (2009), and *A Dictionary of the Maya Language as Spoken in Hocabá, Yucatán* (1998) the terms *páak*, *paak* and *páak'al*, *paakal* have lengthy lists of meanings. Table 10 is a sampling of the most common definitions in the resources we consulted. These are also the terms that are most applicable to the context and message of the poem.

Table 10

*Semantic Analysis of the Term Páak (paak, páak'al, and paakal)*

Term	Possible Meanings
<i>páak</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Remove weeds</li> <li>• Remove the weeds or clean the underbrush in a plot or area</li> </ul>
<i>paak</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• To save or guard</li> <li>• To wait or hope</li> <li>• Surprise (noun) / to be surprised</li> <li>• Fright (noun) / to be frightened / to cause fright or surprise /to be frightened or surprised in a dream</li> <li>• To pull weeds /weed / prepare for planting</li> </ul>
<i>páak'al</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• To plant or cultivate</li> </ul>
<i>paakal</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• To be frightened or surprised between dreams with physical trembling</li> <li>• To pull out plants by the roots</li> </ul>

*Note.* Adapted from *Combined Dictionary-Concordance of the Yucatecan Mayan Language*, by D. Bolles, 2001; *A Dictionary of the Maya Language as Spoken in Hocabá, Yucatean*, by V. Bricker, E. Po'ot Yah, and O. Dzul de Po'ot, 1998, p. 206; *Introductorio Diccionario Español – Maya, Maya – Español* by J. Gómez Navarrete, 2009, p. 161.

From the definitions above, it is possible to interpret this term as an intermediate space or moment (similar to a threshold) that occurs before a transition or change. In the context of this poem, the term *páakabil* appears to refer to a mental transition, such as the shift in consciousness between dreams or between dreaming and waking. It may also be a metaphor for the transition of a piece of land from an uncultivated plot to a cultivated one; or to use Cuevas Cob's imagery, the transition from an "armadillo head" to a thinking or conscious person. Rolando Ek Naal (personal communication, October 5, 2013) defines the term *páakabil* as "el escondite" 'secret place' or "un espacio limitado" 'a delimited space.' He explains that in the context of this poem, Cuevas Cob uses the term to define the action of the protagonist crossing over and entering into the secret space of her imagination or thoughts.

This section<sup>148</sup> of the poem (as with the other examples of parallelism examined in this study) builds on a series of couplets or corresponding elements that develop the notion of head or consciousness in reference to the home or house where a child (more specifically a girl) is indoctrinated, learns her own culture, and acquires her identity. Table 11 demonstrates how the five verses of this section work together to construct this conception.

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<sup>148</sup> Although we have divided this text into sections using the poet's punctuation (periods), we acknowledge that these divisions have not been imposed by the poet, but are based on our own interpretation of the poem and have been utilized to assist in our process of analysis.

Table 11

*Couplets or Corresponding Elements that Focus on and Develop the Notion of Head or Consciousness*

Verse in Maya	Analysis in English Focusing on Key Terms
1) <i>Teche' yaan a bin xook.</i>	a) You will get an education and <b>think</b> ( <i>go to school</i> , and in the context of this poem, <i>consciously return to your community and home</i> )
2) <i>Ma tun p'áatakech polwech.</i>	b) You will <b>not be empty-headed</b> (an armadillo head, <i>be unconscious</i> )
3) <i>Yan a táats'máansik u páakabil u najil a tuukul</i>	c) You will cross the threshold of <b>your house</b> ( <i>to think/ house of thought, intelligence, wisdom</i> )
4) <i>yo'olal a wokoj ta wotoch</i>	d) going all the way into <b>your own home</b> ( <i>the source of your culture knowledge, imagination, and identity</i> )
5) <i>ma'táan a k'opik joolnaj</i>	e) without having to knock on the <b>door</b> (the <i>entrance to your own cultural heritage and way of thinking</i> ).

*Note.* Adapted from *Combined Dictionary-Concordance of the Yucatecan Mayan Language*, by D. Bolles, 2001; *A Dictionary of the Maya Language as Spoken in Hocabá, Yucatean*, by V. Bricker, E. Po'ot Yah, and O. Dzul de Po'ot, 1998; R. Ek Naal, personal communication, October 5, 2013; *Introducción Diccionario Español – Maya, Maya – Español* by J. Gómez Navarrete, 2009.

The final term *joolnaj* 'door' is an effective conclusion to the couplets of this section. Although it clearly refers to door of a house, it also appears to linguistically symbolize the term and notion of head. *Joolnaj* 'door' is a composite term that combines *jool* 'the noun 'hole' or the verb 'to make a hole' with *naj* 'house.' That *jool* is a near homophone with the terms *jo'ol* /

*hool / hol* ‘head’ and the term *naj* ‘house’ was depicted in the ancient glyphs as a human head (see Figure 30) create the effect of a concept within a concept in which the protagonist returns home to her own head or house of thought (see Table 12).

Table 12

*Analysis of the Composite Term Joolnaj*

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- There are two terms for head that have several written expressions: *pol / pool* and *jo'ol / hool / hol*.
  - The terms *hool / hol / jool* also signify the verb ‘to create a hole,’ as well as the nouns: ‘hole, opening, entrance.’
  - The composite terms *joolnaj / joonaj / hol na* combine *hool / hol / jool* with *naj* or *na* to signify ‘door or entrance of the house.’
    - In Classic period pictorial writing the notion of “door” was expressed as the mouth of the house. This corresponds with the glyphic image for *naj* (see Figure 30) and the general conceptualization of the house as a head.
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*Note.* Adapted from *Combined Dictionary-Concordance of the Yucatecan Mayan Language*, by D. Bolles, 2001; *A Dictionary of the Maya Language as Spoken in Hocabá, Yucatean*, by V. Bricker, E. Po'ot Yah, and O. Dzul de Po'ot, 1998; *Introducción Diccionario Español – Maya, Maya – Español* by J. Gómez Navarrete, 2009; “Than-uoh: Experiencias con la escritura maya yucateca prehispánica,” by P. Martel and E. López de la Rosa, 2006, *Descatos*, 22, 93-108.

In the context of Cuevas Cob’s poem, the house, like a head, is a protected place of memory and imagination where cultural knowledge is generated and preserved. Upon returning home, the young woman does not have to knock on the door because it is her own cultural identity and wisdom she is coming back to. The door in this sense is the portal to a way of thinking

(imagination) that has been formed by the cultural knowledge and identity passed down from generations of women.



Figure 30. Glyph for *Naj* (*Nah*) Adapted From “The Fire Enters His House,” by D. Stuart, 1998, *Architecture and Ritual in Classic Maya Texts*, p. 377.

(II)

Le ken a **paktabaj** tu **yich** a **láak’**  
bin a wil ti’ a **maatsab**,  
**box jul** ch’iikil tu **puksi’ik’al lu’um**,  
ku taal u yéemel a **juntatz óol**  
ti’ xan ku bin u **na’akal** u **nojil** a **chi’i’bal**.

(II)

Y contemplándote en el rostro  
de tu semejante  
descubrirás que desde tus pestañas,  
flechas nocturnas prendidas en el corazón

(II)

And seeing yourself in the faces  
of your peers  
you will discover that from your eyelashes  
nocturnal arrows burried in the heart

de la tierra,	of the earth
desciende tu sencillez	your simplicity descends,
y asciende la grandeza de tu abolengo.	and the nobility of your lineage rises forth.

On returning home the young woman will *paktabaj* ‘see herself’ in the *yich* ‘eyes/face’ of her *lúak* ‘siblings, others or those who accompany her.’ The term *yich*, also spelled *ich* in the dictionaries used for this study, signifies not only eye (or eyes in the context of this poem), but also face and fruit (Ek Naal, personal communication, October 10, 2013; Bolles, 2001; Bricker et al, 1998; Gómez Navarrete 2009). Gabriel Bourdin (2008) confirms that even though terms such as *yich/ich* ‘eyes, face, and fruit’ are polysemic, their different meanings are connected.

“Cuando decimos que un término es polisémico  
estamos planteando que en cada uno de sus distintos contextos de uso  
dicho término expresa significados diferentes,  
aunque relacionados entre sí.”<sup>149</sup>

(Bourdin, 2008, p. 60)

Rolando Ek Naal (personal communication, October 10, 2013) explains that a person’s eyes are representative of their entire face and in the same vein as a synecdoche, are the synopsis of a person’s entire body and on an even larger scale, a reflection of their humanity. Just as fruit is the product of a tree, the eyes (or face) of a person are the products of that person’s life and efforts (*ibid*). By returning to her home, the young woman recognizes herself reflected in the

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<sup>149</sup> “When we say that a term is polysemous, we are suggesting that in each one of its distinct contexts of utilization the term expresses different yet interrelated meanings.”

*yich* ‘eyes/face’ of her *lúak* ‘siblings, others or those who accompany her’ and sees the product or fruit of her cultural heritage reflected in them and in herself.

In the next section of this work the poet states that once home, the young woman will see from her *box* ‘black, darkly colored’ *maatsab* ‘eyelashes’ that are like *jul* ‘a ray, beam or streak of light or lightening’ *ch’ükil* ‘that pierces’ the *puksi’ik’al* ‘physical heart’ of the *lu’um* ‘earth, land or soil’ the *yéemel* ‘decent’ of her *juntats’óol* ‘sincerity, humility, sincere or pure heart or spirit’ and the *náakal* ‘ascent, rise’ of her *nojil* ‘great’ *ch’i’ibal* ‘race, noble ancestry, lineage, blood origin’ (Bolles, 2001; Bricker et al, 1998; Ek Naal, personal communication, September 30, 2013; Gómez Navarrete 2009). The image of the young woman’s black eyelashes as streaks of light or lightening piercing the physical heart of the earth refers to the demonstration of humility or sincerity by lowering her gaze. In other words, because of her *juntats’óol* ‘sincerity, humility, sincere or pure heart or spirit’ she lowers her eyes and her straight *box maatsab* ‘black eyelashes’ penetrate the earth like arrows (Montemayor & Frischmann, 2005). In our interview with Cuevas Cob (September 8, 2012) she spoke at length about how pressures from the dominant society have made many young women turn away from or undervalue the more traditional cultural conceptions of beauty for Mayan women. For this reason she uses the image of the young woman’s lowered or humbled gaze accentuated by her naturally straight (uncurled) eyelashes to describe how with the ascent of her *juntats’óol* ‘sincerity, humility, and sincere, pure heart,’ she may be able to see ‘recognize and appreciate’ the *na’akal* ‘rise’ of her *nojil* ‘great’ *ch’i’ibal* ‘race, noble ancestry, lineage, blood origin.’ Within the context of the poem, the terms *nojil* ‘great’ and *ch’i’ibal* ‘race, noble ancestry, lineage, blood origin’ refer to older generations of women such as the young woman’s mother, aunts, and grandmothers as members of a community worthy of admiration and profound respect.

As we have seen with the poetry of this corpus, although the Spanish translations are deep and beautifully rendered, it is in the Mayan versions of these texts that the play on words and combination of distinct but corresponding elements becomes evident. Another example of this is the juxtaposition of the expressions *juntats'óol* and *puksi'ik'al lu'um*. *Juntats'óol* is a compound expression that combines *juntats* 'sincerity, humility' with *óol* or *ol* 'formal, immaterial, metaphysical heart or spirit.' Besides meaning sincere and humble, it also refers to a sincere and pure heart or spirit. The term *puksi'ik'al* 'physical heart' when conjoined with *lu'um* 'earth' refers to the notion of a physical heart or the center of the earth (Bolles, 2001; Gómez Navarrete, 2009). Manuel Alberto Morales Damián (2010) explains that in Mayan belief all elements of the world are considered to have a heart and possess a divine essence. Therefore as the young woman's *juntats'óol* 'humility, sincere metaphysical heart or spirit' descends into the *puksi'ik'al* 'physical heart' of *lu'um* 'the earth' she nests her metaphysical heart 'spirit or will' with the physical heart of the earth. By doing so she makes a conscious return to the place of her origin and is humbled by the admiration she feels for the women who have come before her.

(III)

Teche' yaan a bin tu **najil xook**

ti' tuun u **lóoch' u k'ab a na'at**

bin a chuk u póojol u **chun u nak' u ko'olelil a ch'i'ibal.**

(III)

Tú irás a la escuela

(III)

You will go to school

y en el cuenco de las manos de tu	and within the cupped hands of your
entendimiento contendrás el escurrir del	understanding you will hold the flow from
vientre de la mujer de tu raza.	the womb of the women of your race.

The third section of the poem commands the young woman to go to school, but this time the poet couples the term *najil* ‘house of’ with the term *xook* ‘school.’ As the verse continues we come to understand that *najil xook*, although clearly meaning school house or formal education, in this case also refers to the home as the house of learning. In this house of learning the *lóoch* ‘hollow or scoop’ of the young woman’s *k’ab* ‘hand’ her *na’at* ‘understanding, good sense or judgment, reasoning, intelligence, wisdom’ will *chuk* ‘apprehend, capture, reach’ the *póojol* ‘what has flowed or drained’ from the *chun* ‘root’ of the *nak* ‘womb’ of the *ko’olelil* ‘women’ of her *ch’i’ibal* ‘race, noble ancestry, lineage, blood origin’ (Bolles, 2001; Bricker et al, 1998; Ek Naal, personal communication, September 30, 2013; Gómez Navarrete 2009).

The term *na’at* ‘good sense or judgment, reasoning, intelligence, wisdom’ is described by María Dolores Cervera Montejano (2007, p. 6) as the development or unfolding of a child’s understanding that is “un proceso gradual, progresivo y natural que depende de fuerzas internas [e] innatas.”<sup>150</sup> She goes on to say that in Mayan society when a child acquires *na’at* he/she becomes aware of “las consecuencias de su comportamiento [y] se responsabilizan de las labores que corresponden a su género”<sup>151</sup> (*ibid*). By describing that the young woman is able to feel/experience the vital fluids of the women through the cupped hands of her *na’at*, the poet is

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<sup>150</sup> The development or unfolding of a child’s understanding is “[a] gradual process, progressive and natural that depends on internal and innate forces.”

<sup>151</sup> Cervera Montejano describes the process of obtaining *na’at* as an opening of understanding when a child becomes aware of “the consequences of his/her behavior and becomes responsible for the work that corresponds to his/her gender”

saying that because the young woman has returned consciously she will be able to understand, appreciate, and feel the life-fluid/ experience/knowledge of the women who have come before her. In this section Cuevas Cob is describing two processes of human development and knowledge acquisition: 1) *na'at*, the awareness and cultural intelligence that is socially constructed and that also depends on the individual characteristics of the child; and 2) the more visceral—or even genetic—experience of the transference of vital fluids from the *nak'* 'womb' via the *chuun u nak'* 'umbilical cord' to the child.<sup>152</sup> Both of these developmental processes are directly related to the knowledge passed down from one generation of women to another, either in the form of cultural indoctrination (what a mother teaches her child in the home including language and stories) or through the physical attributes passed on to the child through the *chuun u nak'* 'umbilical cord' in the *nak'* 'womb'.<sup>153</sup> For the young woman this poem addresses, even though her life is a complicated dance between cultures (Maya and non Maya), if she returns home consciously and not as a *polwech*, she will be able to recognize and honor (and appreciate in herself) the strength, wisdom, and beauty of the *ko'olelil* 'women' of her own blood and ancestry.

As stated previously, in traditional Maya society women and men have specific spheres, roles, and principles that influence or guide the development of their identities (Ayllón Trujillo, et al., 2008; Güémez Pineda, 2000; Guzmán Urióstegui (2007). In the term *ko'olelil* 'women,' we see how certain female roles and valued characteristics are imbedded linguistically.

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<sup>152</sup> The image of the transference of vital fluids as a manner of communicating knowledge echoes how in Mayan cosmology sacred information (vital energy/intelligence) is believed to have been transmitted through a snake symbolizing the cosmic umbilical cord or Milky Way that connected the sky (the divine) to the earth.

<sup>153</sup> The transference of cultural knowledge through a conduit such as an umbilical cord or serpent (as is seen in this work, as well as the poems of Brito May and Cocom Pech) is an ancient Mayan conceptualization that has clearly maintained its relevance.

Although there are two terms that signify ‘woman’ in Peninsular Maya *ko’olel* and *x ba’al*, our focus is exclusively on *ko’olel* because it is the expression Cuevas Cob utilizes in this work.

In *The Combined Dictionary–Concordance of the Yucatecan Mayan Language* (Bolles, 2001), the root word *ko*, similar to the term *nak*, refers to the stomach or womb, while *kol* and/or *kool* are terms used to describe a person who is able, diligent and quick to learn. The terms *K’óoben* or *koben* are common terms for the kitchen and are commonly used in reference to the three stones placed in the hearth (Bricker et al, 1998). According to Rolando Ek Naal (personal communication, October 23, 2013) the term *Ko’olel Kaab* (Apis Mellifica Y Melipona SSP, stingless honeybee) reveals cultural evidence related to the term *ko’olel* (woman, lady) and is indicative of the importance of women’s role in traditional Mayan society. He explains (*ibid*) that the *Ko’olel Kaab* ‘lady/woman or Mrs. Bee’ (the stingless honeybee) produces some of the “best honey in the world” and like respected women in Mayan society, are appreciated for qualities such as their physical strength and capacity for “intensive work.” They are also valued for their “social organization,” as well as their ability to collaborate, and their resourcefulness, knowledge, and skill in using what nature has to offer (Chemas & Rico-Gray, 1991, p. 16; Ek Naal, personal communication, October 23, 2013). It is important to note that the *Ko’olel Kaab* or “lady bee” (also referred to as “goddess bee”) has been revered in Mayan society for over a thousand years, as is evident in the multiple references to her in the Madrid Codex, one of three existing pre-Columbian texts (Vit, Pedro, & Roublik, 2013, p. 222).

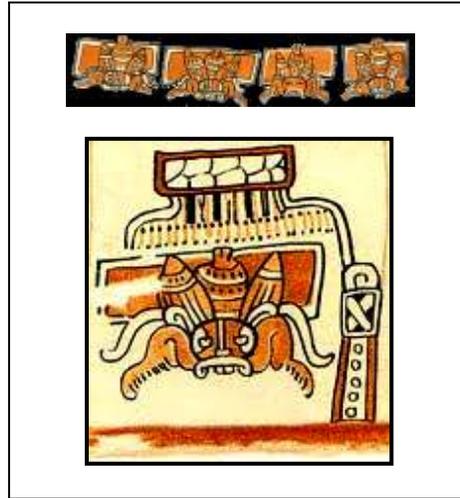


Figure 31. *Ko'olel Kaab* 'Lady Bee.' Images adapted from the Madrid Codex p. 105. Retrieved from <http://diccionariodesimbolos.com/abejasyhormigas.htm> July 19, 2014. Reprinted with permission.

(IV)

Ti' u tuunkuy

bin a **na'ana'ajo'ot** u **wo'oj ts'íib mamaiki lu'um,**

síis yéetel **k'iin.**

**U nukuch yich a cha'an ólal**

bin u cha'ant u **yiim saatal u yóol**

u ts'o'okol u **wekik kuxtal yóok'ol kab.**

(IV)

De su calcañal

descifrarás los jeroglíficos escritos por el

polvo, el viento y el sol.

Grandes los ojos de tu admiración

(IV)

From their heels

you will decipher hieroglyphics,

written by dust, wind, and sun.

Your eyes, wide with amazement, will

contemplarán sus senos desfallecientes  
después de haber derramado vida sobre la  
tierra.

contemplate their weakened breasts,  
having poured out life upon the earth.

In this section, the poet writes that from their *tuunkuy* ‘heels’ the young woman will *na’ana’ajo’ot* ‘decipher, read with her intelligence’ the *wo’oj* ‘letter, symbol, glyph’ *ts’üib* (or *dz’üib*) ‘writing’ in the *mamaiki lu’um* ‘dust,’ *s’ís* ‘cold’ and *k’iin* ‘sun, day, time.’ And, with her *yich* ‘eyes’ *nukuch* ‘great, large’ with *cha’an óolal* ‘admiration, astonishment’ she *bin* ‘will go’ on to *cha’ant* ‘admire’ the *saatal u yóol* ‘weakened’ *yiim* ‘breasts’<sup>154</sup> that have spilled *kuxtal* ‘life’ over the *yóok’ol kab* the ‘earth.’ When asked about this passage, and particularly about the symbolism of the woman’s hieroglyphic footprints in the dust, Cuevas Cob (personal communication, September 8, 2012) responded with the following communication:

Es un poco sobre la aceptación de esta manera de vernos como personas de pueblo, y es también un poco el rechazo, no un rechazo total, cómo decirlo, es esa manera de apreciar la belleza. Muchas mujeres en la actualidad no quieren tener hijos para no perder la figura, o si los llegan a tener, tienen uno o dos, mientras que a la mujer de la comunidad no le importa tener ese ensanchamiento grande del vientre, resultado del embarazo, lo cual lo tienen muchas mujeres en las comunidades porque, por lo menos hasta hace algunos años, ellas podían tener hasta diez u once hijos. Mi mamá tuvo once hijos [. . .]. Entonces, esto es lo que hay, que las niñas de ahora cuidan mucho su figura y que también hay un poco de . . . la palabra desprecio es un poco fuerte en este sentido, sería como un sentimiento de no mirar bien ya sea a la mamá o a la vecina que tiene el calcañal

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<sup>154</sup> The terms *tuunkuy* ‘heel’ *yich* ‘eye’ and *yiim* ‘breast’ although written in the singular, are pluralizations due to the context of the poem.

por usar chancas, por el contacto con el clima, por lavar, por estar siempre en contacto con el agua, con el polvo, con esa naturaleza, por usar zapatos que no tienen soporte. Y entonces, el poema es un poco la descripción de todo eso. Es, más bien, una descripción utilizando una metáfora cuyo objetivo es hablar de eso que sufre la parte del pie de la mujer por su naturaleza de ser de pueblo. Y entonces, yo intento que se vea de otra manera, al menos en el texto, que se vea que esa parte que es afectada por el polvo, por la humedad, es parte de una historia de nosotros como pueblo, es la descripción metafórica de la mujer maya, es una característica que tenemos. Incluso cuando yo estoy mucho tiempo en el pueblo usando chancas, esto comienza a sucederme a mí misma, es simplemente el contacto con los elementos de la naturaleza... mi trabajo es una descripción de esto.<sup>155</sup>

From our semantic analysis we understand that the term *na'ana'ajo'ot* 'descipher, read with intelligence' is a compound construction that reduplicates the term *na'at* 'understanding, judgement reason, intelligence' (*na'ana'a*) and then combines it with *jo'ot* 'scratch, etch, sculpt'

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<sup>155</sup> It is a little about accepting this way of seeing us as people from the community, and it is also a little the rejection, not total rejection (how should I put it). It is this way of appreciating beauty. Many women today don't want children because they do not want to lose their figure. Or if they do have children, they have one or two, while for the woman from the community they don't care if their stomachs get extended as a result of pregnancy, which many women in the community have because, at least until some years ago, they were able to have as many as ten or eleven children. My mom had eleven children [ . . .]. Well, this is the way it is, the girls today watch their figure and there is also a little... the word disregard is a bit strong in this sense, but it is more like a feeling of looking down on—whether it be—the mom or the neighbor who's heels are like this because they use sandals (flip fops) and have contact with the climate, by washing, by always having contact with water, with dust, with this environment, and because they use shoes that don't have any support. And, for this reason, the poem is a description of all of this. It is also a description utilizing a metaphor whose objective is to speak about how this part of the woman's foot suffers because of the nature of being from the community. Therefore, I try to make it so that it is seen in another way, at least in this text, that this part of the body that is affected by the dust, the humidity, is part of our history as a community. It is the metaphoric description of the Mayan woman. It is a characteristic that we have. It happens to me too, when I spend a lot of time in the community and use sandals. It is simply the contact with the elements of the environment. My work is a description of this.

Gómez Navarrete, 2009, Bolles, 2001). Rolando Ek Naal (personal communication, June 6, 2012) explains that the reiteration of this term not only emphasizes its meaning, but also describes the process of using one's intelligence to read and reflect profoundly in order to gain an even deeper understanding of what has been written. In this poem, what is being deciphered is the *wo'oj* 'letter, symbol, glyph' *ts'üib* 'written, inscribed' in the dust by the woman's weathered heel.

It is clear from our interview that Cuevas Cob is speaking about the present, yet she does so by using imagery and terminology that evoke an ancient past. By utilizing terms that are also used in the discussion of pre-Columbian writing systems, she is referring to the lives and experience of Mayan women (particularly of older generations of women such as mothers, aunts, and grandmothers, etc.) with the wonder and awe that is generally used to describe Mayan hieroglyphics. She does this to show respect for the tremendous contribution these women's lives, knowledge and work have made through the centuries without glossing over the hardship they experience bearing multiple children and doing manual labor in the humidity and heat of the tropics without the resources to buy more protective shoes. Furthermore, that these glyphs are in the dust (and not in stone) accentuates the point that although what these women have accomplished is not visible to all, their legacy *is* evident in all that survives of Mayan culture that has been painstakingly nurtured and passed down from mother to daughter for centuries.

In the final verses of this section, the young woman looks upon the older woman with her *yich* 'eyes' *nukuch* 'great, large' with *cha'an óolal* 'admiration, astonishment.' The term *cha'an óolal* is a compound expression combining the notion *cha'an* 'astonishment, admiration' with *óol* 'breath, spirit, energy, force.' Together these two terms refer to the profound astonishment and respect coming from the spirit or soul of the young woman when she *cha'ant*

‘admires’ the *saatal u yóol* ‘weakened’ *yiim* ‘breasts’<sup>156</sup> that have spilled *kuxtal* ‘life’ over the *yóok’ol kab* ‘earth.’ The term *saatal u yóol* translated as ‘weakened’ is also a compound construction that combines the notion of *yóol* or *óol* ‘breath, spirit, energy, force,’ with the term *saatal* ‘to lose,’ signifying spent energy or life force. This expression is used in reference to the older woman’s breasts which have *wekik* ‘spilled, sprinkled’ *kuxtal* ‘life’ (mother’s milk) over the *yóok’ol kaab* ‘the earth.’

Miguel Güémez Pineda (2000) states that in Yucatec Mayan communities traditional perspectives of female beauty are quite distinct from urban Occidental expectations for a women’s physical appearance. Being beautiful for a woman includes that she: “[g]ozar de buena salud, tener el cuerpo rozagante y llenito, ser capaz de procrear hijos sanos, poder amamantar y tener la fortaleza para trabajar”<sup>157</sup> (Güémez Pineda, 2000, p. 313). Although this description does not align well with many precepts of Occidental feminism, it does correspond with the context of this poem. If we go back to Cuevas Cob’s remarks during our interview (on page 180 of this study) we see she discusses a shift in attitude among many young Mayan women, who by adopting Occidental standards of beauty are rejecting (to a certain extent) traditional female aesthetics. We can see that in this text. By expressing admiration for a woman who has clearly birthed several children and nourished them with her own body, the poet (and protagonist) is critiquing this trend. At the same time this poem honors Mayan mothers and their contributions to cultural continuity, it also advocates for young Mayan women to be conscious and educated both in and out of the home. By coming home consciously, the young woman is able to fully

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<sup>156</sup> The terms *tuunkuy* ‘heel’ *yich* ‘eye’ and *yiim* ‘breast’ although written in the singular, are pluralizations due to the context of the poem.

<sup>157</sup> “That she enjoys good health, has a healthy and full (not skinny) body, is capable of having healthy children, is able to breast feed, and has strength for work.”

appreciate this woman's knowledge and contribution, and may be able to reclaim her own identity by coming to terms with the fact that her life takes place within, as well as outside of the community.

Concluding this section, we have included information from our analysis concerning the compound expression *yóok'ol kaab*, translated as 'the earth.' The expression *yóok'ol kaab* combines the term *yóok'ol* 'above, over, up' with the term *kaab* 'honey,' and although it glosses it as 'on this earth,' it is also alluding to it as an agreeable (sweet) and productive place (Bricker et al, 1998; Ek Naal, personal communication, April 26, 2012; Gómez Navarrete, 2009). Although Cuevas Cob's poem does not romanticize the notion of home as paradisiacal, from a linguistic standpoint this is a particularly lovely description of the earth, especially if we take into consideration the correlation between the term *ko'olel* 'woman' and bees (as described above).

(V)

**Teeche' yaan a bin tu najil xook**

ba'ale' yaan a suut ta **taanaj**,

ta **yaalanaj**,

**ka bon** yéetel **k'uxub** u **chun** u **nak' ka'**,

**ka** u **léets** a **sak piik** u **yaak' sabak**,

**ka** u **p'ul** yéetel u **yik'** a **sak óol p'ulu'us k'áak'**,

**ka** u **ch'op** a **wich** u **k'ak'al yaal** u **k'ab buuts'**,

**ka** a **xook ti'** u **paach** a **xáamach** u **p'ilis k'áak'**,

**ka** a **xook ti'** u **tóoch' k'áak'** u **waak'**.

(V)	(V)
Irás a la escuela	You will go to school
pero volverás a tu casa,	but you will return to your home,
a tu cocina,	to your kitchen,
a pintar con achiote el vientre del metate	to paint the <i>metate</i> 's belly with <i>achiote</i>
a que lama la lengua del tizne tu albo fustán,	so the embers' tongue may lick
a inflar con tus pulmones el globo-flama,	at your white underskirt,
a que hurguen tus ojos los delgados	to inflate the balloon-flame with your lungs,
dedos del humo,	so the thin fingers of smoke may
a leer el chisporroteo en el revés del comal,	poke at your eyes,
a leer el crepitar del fuego.	to read the sparking on the <i>comal</i> 's back
	and the fire's crackling.

In the fifth section of the poem, Cuevas Cob reaffirms that the young woman will [*t]eeche*' 'you with the final "e," which emphasizes the you (in this case, that young woman specifically)' *yaan a bin* 'will go' to *najil xook* 'house of learning, school,' but will *suut* 'return' to your (her) *taanaj* 'house,' to your (her) *yaalanaj* 'kitchen.' The next six verses, as an example of anaphora, all begin with the term *ka* 'in order to, in order that.' The poet uses this rhetorical technique to clearly describe what the young woman *will do* or what *will happen* once she is in her kitchen.

- 1) *ka* 'in order to' *bon* 'paint' with *k'uxub* 'achiote, annatto, the *chun* 'root' of the *nak*' 'womb' of the *ka*' 'metate, flat stone for grinding,'

- 2) *ka* ‘in order that’ the *sabak* ‘soot’ with its *yaak* ‘tongue’ may *leets* ‘lick’ your *sak* ‘white’ *piik* ‘petticoat, underskirt,’
- 3) *ka* ‘in order to’ *p’ul* ‘inflate’ with the *yik* ‘breath’ from your *sak óol* ‘lungs’ the *p’ulu’us-k’áak* ‘globe-flame,’
- 4) *ka* ‘in order that’ the *k’ak’al* ‘hard, tough’ *yaal u k’ab* ‘fingers’ of the *buuts* ‘smoke’ *ch’op* ‘pokes, probes’ your *wich* ‘eyes,’
- 5) *ka* ‘in order to’ *xook ti* ‘read there’ on the *paach* ‘back, reverse’ of the *xáamach* ‘comal, flat pan for making tortillas, the *p’ilis* ‘sparks’ of the *k’áak* ‘flame, fire,’
- 6) *ka* ‘in order to’ *xook ti* ‘read there’ the *tóoch* ‘rising, lifting’ *waak* ‘burst’ of *k’áak* ‘flame, fire.’

All of the key elements of this section (see the following list) are essential to the description of a woman’s experience in the kitchen of a traditional Mayan home (see Figure 32)

- The spice and colorant *k’uxub* ‘achiote, annatto’
- The *ka* ‘metate, flat stone for grinding (mostly corn)’
- The *xáamach* ‘comal, flat pan primarily used for making (toasting) tortillas’
- All of the aspects of cooking over an open hearth, *k’áak* ‘flame, fire,’ *p’ulu’us-k’áak* ‘globe-flame, *p’ilis* ‘sparks,’ *buuts* ‘smoke,’ *sabak* ‘soot’
- The *sak* ‘white’ *piik* ‘petticoat, underskirt’ of the traditional women’s dress in the Yucatan

Beginning with the first verse, *ka* ‘in order to’ *bon* ‘paint’ with *k’uxub* ‘achiote,’ the *chun* ‘root’ of the *nak* ‘womb’ of the *ka* ‘metate,’ Cuevas Cob describes two elements that have tremendous history and relevance in Mayan culture. *K’uxub* ‘achiote’ (or annatto in

English) and *ka'* 'metate or flat grinding stone.' Achiote or annatto in English (*Bixa orellana*) is a small tree native to the tropics of Central and South American. It has been extremely important to the Maya (as a spice, medicine, and colorant) for home consumption, ritual, and trade for millennia (Caso Barrera & Aliphath Fernández, 2006; Vásquez, Batista, & Yusá, 2010). Annatto, cultivated both in home gardens and large orchards or plantations, is noted for its distinctive red color and piquant taste. Although the paste (actually made from the seeds or *k'uxub*) has been (and is) utilized for various purposes, in ancient times it was used as a symbol of human blood offerings as well as in the preparation of chocolate to give it its reddish hue and to add flavor (Freidel et al, 1993). For the ancient Maya, chocolate was considered "a precious fluid" due to its symbolic representation as blood and was drunk solely by nobles and the elite (Caso Barrera et al., 2006, p. 36). Today, *k'uxub* 'annatto' maintains its cultural importance through its use in regional medicines, dyes, and delicacies such as Cochinita Pibil (pork in annatto paste traditionally roasted in underground ovens) (Anderson, 2010).

The *ka'* 'metate, flat stone used for grinding mostly corn, but also spices such as annatto, is an essential item in Mayan households and has been so for millennia. When Cuevas Cob writes that the young woman will return to her home and to her kitchen in order to ' *bon* 'paint' with *k'uxub* 'achiote, annatto, the *chun* 'root' of the *nak*' 'womb' of the *ka'* 'metate,' she is referring to the grinding of annatto on the matate, but also to how this essential tool is culturally conceptualized. Corresponding with Cuevas Cob's description of the young woman painting her *chun* 'root' of the *nak*' 'womb' with annatto, in Mayan culture the metate is thought of both physically and symbolically in conjunction with a woman's body. Besides having a womb, it is described as having a back, feet, breasts, and even teeth (López García, 2002). Metates are generally made out of hard but porous stone such as volcanic rock, and are rectangular or oblong

with a concave center that exactly fits the dimensions of the smooth hand held grinding stone called a *k'ab* 'mano or hand.' Lisa Lucero (2010, p. 144) explains that the metate "represent[s] the never-ending importance of maize in daily life." She goes on to illustrate the historic importance of the *ka* 'metate' by affirming that it is a common item among the ancient sacred artifacts found interred under houses by archeologists. Janet Long (2008) states that the matate is also one of the most important implements used in pre-Hispanic kitchens and its value and utilization continue to this day. The connection between the metate and the traditional role of the women in the kitchen is further emphasized by the ritual practice still maintained in various Mayan communities of burying a baby girl's umbilical under the grinding stone or close to the hearth, so that she will feel rooted in her home and kitchen (Freidel, 1993; Güémez Pineda, 2000; Long, 2008). That the young woman will 'paint' with *k'uxub* 'achiote,' the *chun* 'root' of the *nak* 'womb' of the *ka* 'metate' not only refers to the passing from generation to generation of cultural knowledge through traditional methods of food preparation, it is also a multisensory conceptualization of a woman's work in the kitchen that evokes smells, tastes, colors, textures, images, sounds, etc.

The second verse evokes the experience of cooking over an open hearth and dealing with the realities of *sabak* 'soot' while wearing the *sak* 'white' *piik* 'petticoat, underskirt' of traditional Yucatec clothing. According to Rosalía Hernández Pedrero (2012), clothing (and more specifically women's clothing) for indigenous peoples in Mexico is both an important aspect of daily life and a form of resistance. She further explains that as well as being a way to visibly express cultural identity and to distinguish distinct communities, it is also a source of income, especially for women (*ibid*). In the Yucatan as in other Mayan communities, the designs incorporated in the style and adornment or embroidery of the clothing (especially the huipil, see

Figure 32) relate to Mayan cosmology and draw from an ample and ancient symbology (Hernández Pedrero, 2012). As seen previously in Table 9, the term *xookbil chuuy* ‘embroidery’ (similar to cross stitch, but with designs relating to Mayan cosmology) contains the term *xook* ‘to read, to count, to study and lesson.’ Thus, as it is with the use of the metate and annatto, the use and production of traditional clothing are a tangible manifestation of women’s participation in cultural continuity and an important aspect of the young woman’s education.

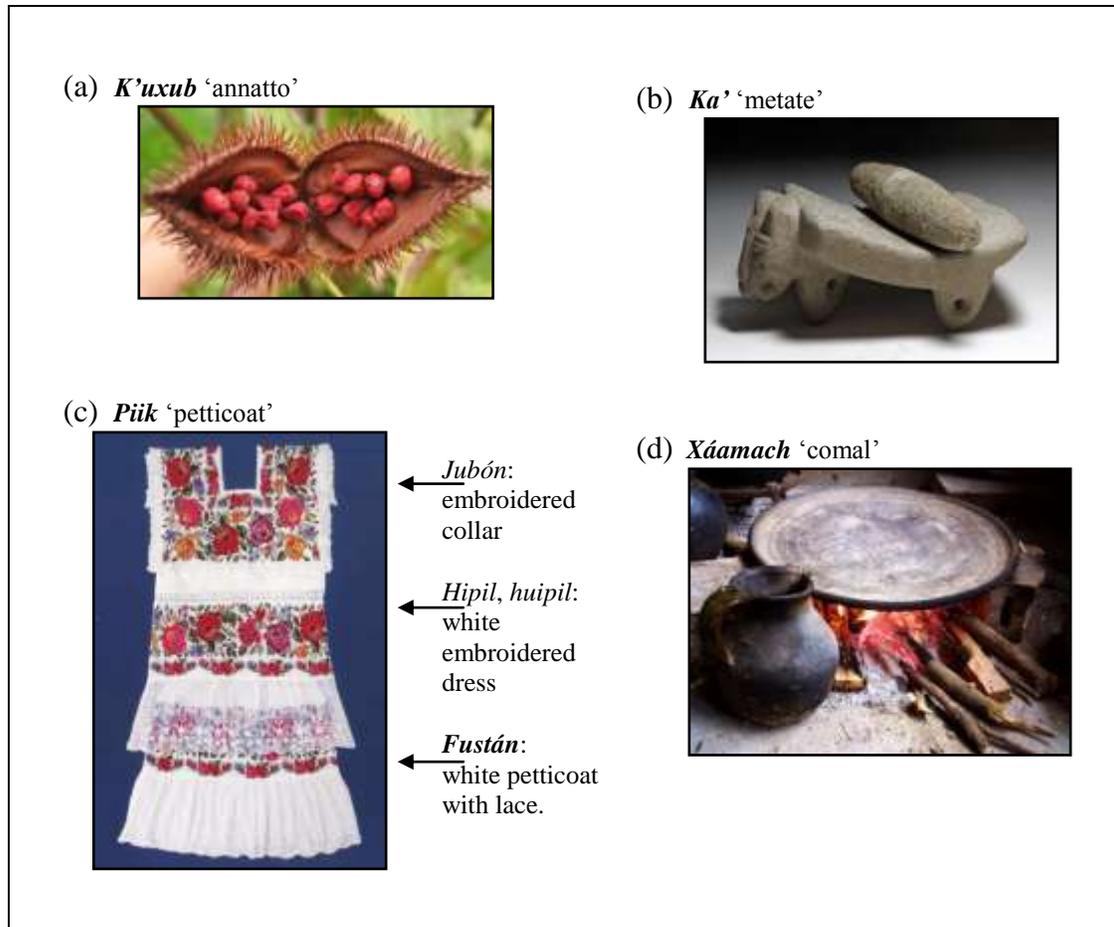


Figure 32. Images of Essential Mayan Kitchen Elements. (a) *k'uxub* 'achiote, annatto,' (b) *ka'* 'metate or flat grinding stone,' (c) *piik* 'petticoat, underskirt' of the traditional women's dress in the Yucatan, and (d) *xáamach* 'comal, flat pan for making tortillas.' Note. Although the jubón hipil, and fustán in (c) is obviously an elegant and expensive outfit used for festivities (not the kitchen), it does give an idea of women's traditional clothing and the tremendous skill required for its creation. Adapted from: (a) <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Annatto>, (b) [http://p2.la-img.com/1103/37241/15932169\\_1\\_1.jpg](http://p2.la-img.com/1103/37241/15932169_1_1.jpg), (c) <http://alonzonovelo.com/canciones-ninos/el-comal-y-la-olla/>, and (d) <http://tusamigosenmexico.tumblr.com/post/40368982997/trajes-tipicos-de-yucatan>. We have received permission to reprint both (b) and (c) and the photographs (a) and (d) come from digital open or common sources.

The third verse continues to describe the young woman's experience in the kitchen by focusing on the most important of its aspects, its hearth and fire. If we go back to the analysis of the first poem of this corpus "The Three Stones of the Hearth," we are reminded of the profound

significance of the hearth and the tending of the fire. If you recall, the reference to the three sacred stones symbolizes Creation, the maintenance of the cosmic order, and the intergenerational passing of cultural knowledge. Because the young woman inflates with the *ik* ‘breath’ from her *sak óol* ‘lungs’ the *p’ulu’us-k’úak* ‘globe-flame of its fire, we know that she too plays an important role in the maintenance of the hearth and the transmission of culture.

Both the terms *yik* ‘breath’ and *sak óol* ‘lungs’ play an important role in the deeper significance of this verse. *Yik* (*iik*, *ik*) as a noun is glossed as ‘air, wind, breath, life, and spirit,’ and as a verb, as ‘to puff or blow air’ (Bolles, 2001, Gómez Navarrete, 2009, Martínez González, 2006). Roberto Martínez González (2007, p. 106) shows that the concept of breath is not only associated with the function of breathing, but also with “la vitalidad, el esfuerzo, la virtud, y el poder”<sup>158</sup> of the person. It is very interesting to note that the glyph for *na* ‘mother’ is the depiction of a woman’s head with the *ik* sign prominently displayed on her cheek (see Figure 21 on page 132). This no doubt has to do with her sacred role of preserving the vital fire by relighting it every morning with her own breath, symbolically helping “al sol renacer, a regenerarse todos los días tras su viaje por lo oscuro”<sup>159</sup> (Guzmán Urióstegui, 2007, p. 107).

*Sak óol* glossed as ‘lungs’ is a compound expression combining the term *sak* ‘white’ with *óol* ‘breath, spirit, energy, force.’ Roland Ek Naal (personal communication, January 21, 2014) explains that life begins with breath and the reason lungs are referred to as *sak* ‘white’ with *óol* ‘breath, spirit, energy, force’ is because this expression describes where in “la geografía del cuerpo humano” the breath originates.<sup>160</sup> In Mayan cosmology each cardinal direction has its

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<sup>158</sup> “[V]itality, effort, virtue, and power.”

<sup>159</sup> Symbolically helping “the sun be reborn, to regenerate itself every day after its journey through the darkness.”

<sup>160</sup> “[T]he geography of the human body.”

specific color, and *sak* ‘white’ relates to the cardinal direction north. Ek Naal (*ibid*) goes on to say that the term *sak* indicates a part of the body that is tranquil and clarifies this point by noting that generally speaking winds coming from the north are peaceful and beneficial. Sanja Savkic (2010) agrees that the expression *sak ik*’ signifies a fresh wind that is soft and delicate. This corresponds well with Cuevas Cob’s description of a woman’s task of breathing on the hearth to start the morning fire. In Paul Worley’s (2013, p. 155) discussion of this section of the poem, he writes that when the young woman returns to her ancestral home and kitchen “[a]s much as [she] keeps the kitchen’s flame alive, so too is she produced by it, her subjectivity as a Maya woman formed through this creative act of tending the flame that connects her with previous generations of women.” For this reason, it is her *yik*’ ‘breath, life, and spirit’ and “vitality, effort, virtue, and power” that will maintain the *p’ulu’us k’áak*’ ‘globe-flame’ the heart of her home and source of identity and cultural legacy.

In describing the soot licking at the young woman’s *sak piik* ‘white petticoat,’ Cuevas Cob does accurately depicts the hardships of cooking over an open flame. When she states that the *k’ak’al* ‘hard, tough’ *yaal u k’ab* ‘fingers’ of the *buuts*’ ‘smoke’ *ch’op* ‘pokes, probes’ your *wich* ‘eyes’ she is clearly referring to the health issues (most specifically eye irritation) experienced by women due to their daily exposure to smoke in poorly ventilated kitchens. However, in addition to this physicalized description of the smoke’s hard fingers probing the young woman’s eyes, the primary images presented in this verse also have a symbolic connotation that corresponds with the overall message of the poem.

For ancient and contemporary Maya, smoke symbolizes breath as well as a means of transmitting information to and from ancestors and supernatural beings (Freidel et al, 1993; Houston & Taube, 2000). Expanding on the concept that smoke represents a form of

communication between the living and the dead, Karl Taube (1998, p. 446) states that “incense burners are the kitchen hearths of the gods and ancestors.” Smoke in this sense is the obvious link between incense burners and the Mayan three-stone kitchen hearth. Just as incense burners give off smoke, the hearth does the same (see Figure 33). In the context of this poem, smoke is a form of communication between the generations of women (past, present, future) whose task it was, is, and will be to tend the fire (Hoppan & Jacquemot, 2007). Furthermore, since eyes in Mayan cosmology symbolize human mirrors and two way communication between the living and their ancestors (see Table 5 on page 69), the image of the young woman getting smoke in her eyes reinforces this conceptualization.

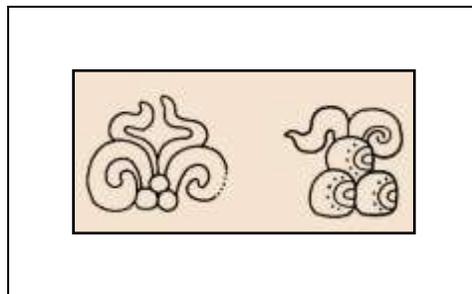


Figure 33. Two Images of the Smoking Hearthstones from Classic Mayan Art. Adapted from “The Jade Hearth,” by K. Taube, 1998, *Function and Meaning Meaning in Classic Maya Architecture*, p. 435.

In the fifth verse of this section, Cuevas Cob reiterates that the young woman will come back to her home and kitchen in order to *xook ti* ‘read there’ on the *paach* ‘back, reverse’ of the *xáamach* ‘comal, flat pan for making tortillas, the *p’ilis* ‘sparks’ of the *k’úak* ‘flame, fire.’ To appreciate the significance of this verse it is necessary to understand what a comal is, what it does, and what it represents symbolically. The comal is a flat circular pan—traditionally made of clay—that is predominantly used to cook corn tortillas (see Figure 32 on page 216), but is also

used for toasting coffee beans and other foodstuffs. Corn, as the ideological and physical “basis of life” provides between 50-75% of the calories consumed in Mayan communities (Anderson, 2010, p. 460). Because corn tortillas are a staple food, grown men will eat from 30 to 50 a day. For the women who boil the corn and grind it into “masa” on their metates, shape the tortillas by hand, and cook them on a comal on the hearth, tortilla preparation translates into a significant amount of time and labor (*ibid*). Nevertheless, this entire process is so important to Mayan culture that Julián López García (2002, p. 112) states that without the metate or comal “no hay casa, no hay hogar.”<sup>161</sup>

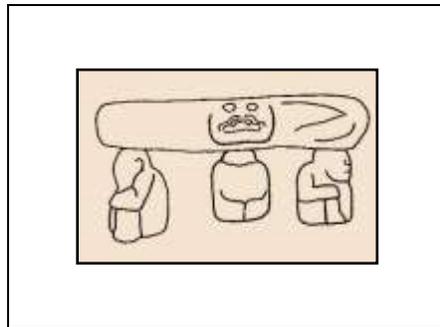


Figure 34. Altar Glyph in the Shape of a Comal. Adapted from “The Jade Hearth,” by K. Taube, 1998, *Function and Meaning Meaning in Classic Maya Architecture*, p. 446.

Although the comal and metate are complementary tools in the kitchen, their symbolically representation is quite distinct (López García, 2002). The comal, being made of clay, breaks relatively easily and needs to be replaced on a regular basis. The metate, on the other hand, is made of stone and is passed down for generations from mother to daughter (*ibid*). The comal, because of its round shape and red color when it is hot is identified with the sun and more specifically, the sun at noon (*ibid*). The more ephemeral nature of the comal, because it

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<sup>161</sup> “There is no house, there is no home.”

breaks and is replaced regularly, is like the sun going through its cycles of being hot (day) and cold when it is not being used (night) and is representative of the day-to-day (*ibid*)—while the matate, made of stone and passed down through the generations, represents perpetuity (*ibid*).

On returning to her kitchen the young woman will *xook ti* ‘read there’ on the *paach* ‘back, reverse’ of the *xáamach* ‘comal’ the *p’ilis* ‘sparks’ of the *k’úak* ‘flame, fire.’ By sitting by the fire and participating in the process of making tortillas, she undoubtedly will gaze into the fire and watch the sparks of the fire as they come into contact with the comal. It is possible that this part of the verse is a reference to the skill it takes to cook on a comal over an open flame. To do so successfully, it is necessary to work with the fire—understand and read it—in order to maintain a steady temperature and not break the comal, burn the tortillas, or waste wood.

The final verse of this section reiterates that she will *xook ti* ‘read there’ the *tóoch* ‘rising, lifting’ *waak* ‘burst’ of *k’úak* ‘flame, fire.’ By closing this section with the image of the young woman reading the rising or lifting flame or fire it is as if Cuevas Cob is issuing a call to arms and imploring the young woman to learn from all that she has been taught, in the kitchen, in the home, from her mother, grandmothers, etc. And not just remember, but to keep the flame alive by active participation. If we go back to our analysis of the term *xook*, which as a noun is glossed as ‘lesson,’ but as a verb as ‘to read, to count, to study, to keep in mind or take into account,’ we realize that reading the fire is not a passive distraction. Reading the flame or fire in this sense means understanding its cultural significance as creation and continuity and appreciating the tremendous effort it takes to keep it alive.

Finally, it is important to point out that in this section of the poem there is a definite reference to color, and more specifically to the four colors that correspond to the Mayan conception of the cardinal directions or sectors of the universe:

- Red/east—*k'uxub* 'achiote, annatto'
- White/north—*sak* 'white' *piik* 'petticoat, underskirt,'
- Black/west—*sabak* 'soot'
- yellow/south—*K'an xix'im* 'yellow corn'

Although there is no specific mention of corn (and there are various colors of corn), corn and specifically yellow corn is conjoined with the metate and the comal because the matate grinds corn and the comal toasts corn tortillas. Moreover, in traditional stories of the origin of corn, yellow corn has gotten its color because it has been toasted for consumption (Huff, 2006).

It is also very interesting to observe that in Mayan cosmology the universe is conceived as a quincunx (a cross with the fifth point at its center) (Freidel et al, 1993). In this conception of the universe, each direction or sector of the universe with its corresponding colors mark the extremities of the quincunx, while the center point where the lines intersect (designated as *ya'ax* 'green') is considered the heart or hearth of the universe (Guzmán Urióstegui, 2007; Savkic, 2010, Taube, 1994). On the macro level this is where the First Mother/Father “set up the first three stones of Creation to establish the cosmic center” (Freidel et al, 1993, p. 130). On the human or micro level, this center is replicated in the home with the traditional three-stone hearth. It is the hearth where “se conserva el fuego vital”<sup>162</sup> and creation and regeneration are made possible on a daily basis (Guzmán Urióstegui, p. 107). It is the hearth where women light and tend the fire and prepare the food (corn in the form of tortillas) that sustains their families.

(VI)

**Yaan a suut ta yaalanaj**

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<sup>162</sup> It is the hearth where “vital fire is preserved.”

tumen wa'ala'an u **pa'atech** u **k'anche'il** tu'ux ka **pak'ach waaj**,

tumen **k'óoben** u ta'akmaj jump'éeel **neen** tu chuun u **nak'**.

Jump'éeel **neen** tu'ux **ts'aalal** a **pixan**.

Jump'éeel **neen** ku yawat páaytikech

yéetel u **juum** u **t'aan** u **léets' jul**.

(VI)

Volverás a tu cocina

porque la banqueta te espera.

Porque el fogón guarda en sus entrañas

un espejo.

Un espejo en el que estampada

se halla tu alma.

Un espejo que te invoca con la

voz de su resplandor.

(VI)

You will return to your kitchen

because your bench awaits you.

Because the fire holds a mirror in its depths.

A mirror upon which

your soul is imprinted.

A mirror that calls to you with the

voice of its brilliance

The final section tells us the young woman will *suut* 'return' to her *yaalanaj* 'kitchen, daughter house' because her *k'anche'il* 'bench'<sup>163</sup> where she *pak'ach* 'makes, pats out' *waaj* 'tortillas' *pa'atech* 'awaits' her. Lauren Wynne (2013, p. 33) states that for the Maya in the Yucatán "tortilla making is required female knowledge, understood as crucial to the complementary gender roles that have organized household production for centuries." In our discussion about this last section of Cuevas Cob's poem, Roland Ek Naal explains (personal

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<sup>163</sup> There are interesting similarities between *k'anche'* 'bench' and *ka'anche'* 'altar' (see Figure 6 of this study). Rolando Ek Naal states that the difference in spelling (and more importantly pronunciation) differentiates these two objects and consequently what they symbolize (personal communication, January 28, 2014).

communication, August 28, 2013) that the term **pak'ach** specifically refers to the preparation of tortillas, in that it literally recreates the sound women make patting out the corn dough or masa. In her description of the process of learning how to make tortillas, Wynne (2013) states that because it takes a significant amount of time and practice to become an adept tortilla maker, girls start learning the entire procedure when they are little. Wynne (2013, p. 33) also explains that in their training period girls are rarely in charge of the fire, but “tend to play a supporting role, patting out tortillas while an older female relative judges the ‘cooked-ness’ on the xamach [‘comal’].”

The last four verses of this section are presented in the form of parallelism, with the first two verses or couplets beginning with the term *tumen* ‘because,’ and the third and fourth verses or couplets beginning with *jump'el neen* ‘one/a mirror.’

1) *tumen wa'ala'an u pa'atech u k'anche'il tu'ux ka pak'ach waaj,*

‘because your bench awaits you where you make tortillas,’

2) *tumen k'óoben u ta'akmaj jump'éel neen tu chuun u nak'.*

‘because the three-stone hearth guards or keeps in its womb or depths a mirror.’

3) *Jump'éel neen tu'ux ts'aalal a pixan.*

‘a mirror on which your soul has been imprinted.’

4) *Jump'éel neen ku yawat pááytikech yéetel u juum u t'aan u léets' jul.*

‘a mirror whose shout or call attracts or invites you with the sound of the word of the flame or streak of light.’

From our analysis of the first verse of the first couplet, we know that the young woman will return to her kitchen because her bench for making tortillas awaits her by the hearth. The second verse explains that guarded or kept in the *nak'* ‘womb, depths’ of the *k'óoben* ‘kitchen,

cooking hearth, three stones of the fire’ there is a *neen* ‘mirror’ (Bolles, 2001; Gómez Navarrete, 2009). In Maya the term *nen* (*neen*) besides signifying the noun ‘mirror’ also refers to the verbs ‘imagine, contemplate, think, meditate and consider’ (Bolles, 2001; Rivera Dorado, 1999) Brian Stross (1986, p. 296) affirms that in ancient Mayan writing mirrors relate directly to a person’s “spirit, soul, or inner self” and are a powerful tool used in divination and curing. Miguel Rivera Dorado (1999, p. 92-94) explains that in ancient Mayan symbology mirrors were conceived as “el vehículo de una privilegiada comunicación con los poderes espirituales residentes en el inframundo” and/or centers through which it was possible to establish “la comunicación con otras dimensiones cósmicas.”<sup>164</sup> Moreover, in David Bolles’ *Combined Dictionary–Concordance of the Yucatecan Mayan Language* (1997) there are multiple entries that utilize the term *nen*, *neen* as a two way mirror for seeing and being seen by powerful entities and the divine. Additionally, it is interesting to note that in Brito May’s poem “The Three Stones of the Hearth” (the first poem of our corpus), he too utilizes the image of the mirror or the mutual gaze of Mayan eyes as human mirrors in order to define the connection between past and present generations and the relationship or threshold between worlds.

The third verse of the second couplet continues with the image of the mirror and emphasizes that it is *jump’éel neen*<sup>165</sup> ‘a mirror’ on which your *pixan* ‘soul’ has been *ts’aalal* ‘imprinted.’ Although the term and notion of *pixan*, normally glossed as ‘soul’ has been discussed throughout this study, because it is a complex and culturally specific concept, it is helpful to reiterate some of the most salient characteristics of its Peninsular Maya definition. As

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<sup>164</sup> “[T]he vehicle of a privileged communication with the spiritual powers residing in the otherworld” and/or centers through which it was possible to establish “communication with other cosmic dimensions.”

<sup>165</sup> Since articles are not used in Peninsular Maya, *jump* ‘in the expression *jump’el neen*, signifies ‘one’ (as in number) and *el* refers to the classification of non living things (Ek Naal, personal communication, August 28, 2012).

this is a particularly complicated concept that exceeds the scope of this study, we will only give a brief explanation to support our poetic analysis.

According to Gabriel Bourdin (2008), the Peninsular Maya vocabulary contains numerous terms that correspond to the culturally conceived physical and non-physical attributes of human beings. Among the list of non-physical attributes, *ik*, *óol*, and *pixan* are not only terms and concepts found in this corpus, but are also some of the most fundamental elements used for describing emotional and spiritual states of the human experience that are usually associated with the soul and/or spirit in English and Spanish. *Ik* glossed as ‘spirit, and vital breath’ is normally referred to as breath, wind, spirit, energy, exuberance, power, and effort. *Ool* (*óol*) glossed as “‘formal’ heart, will, and desire’ is used in reference to the spirit, energy, force, vitality, and movement that is the essence of a person. In contrast to *ool* as the “‘formal’ or energetic heart, the term *puczical* is used in reference to the physical heart organ. Finally, *pixan* ‘soul’ is the term used when referring to what is left of a person, who has died and no longer has *ool*. In other words, that aspect of a person that remains close to family and loved ones even after he or she has died<sup>166</sup> (Bourdin, 2008; Civera Cerecedo & Herrera Bautista, 2007; Martínez González, 2006; Tuz Chi, 2009).

When Cuevas Cob describes the mirror as bearing the imprint of the young woman’s *pixan* ‘soul,’ she is addressing that element of a human being that remains with family and loved ones after death and alluding to a core aspect or piece of the young woman that has never left home. Montemayor (2005, p. 192) maintains that this is an allusion to the Mayan custom of burying a baby’s umbilical cord “where she or he will eventually work.” Rolando Ek Naal (personal communication, January 30, 2013) explains that even though people might leave their

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<sup>166</sup> It is interesting to note that *pix* is the verb root ‘to cover’ and *pixan* also refers to ‘something that is covered, wrapped, protected or sheltered’ (Bolles, 1997).

homes, the fact that Maya children have their umbilical cords buried in a specific place (girls under or close to the hearth and boys generally in la milpa or el monte ‘the corn fields or the woods’) designates where they must return in order to maintain their identity. In other words, it is the place where they come back to their own way of thinking and to themselves (*ibid*). Cuevas Cob completes the couplet and the entire poem with the verse *[j]ump’éel neen* ‘a mirror’ whose *yawat* ‘call, shout’ *páaytikech* ‘attracts or invites’ you with the *juum* ‘sound’ of its *léets’ jul* ‘flame or streak of light’ (radiant) *t’aan* ‘word.’ Once again she refers to the mirror that has been imprinted with the young woman’s *pixan*, and states that it will attract/invite her with the radiant sound of its *t’aan* ‘word.’ *T’aan* minimally glossed as ‘word,’ is a most appropriate term to conclude this work, considering Cueva’s Cob’s commitment to and passion for cultural and linguistic continuity.

*T’aan* as a noun, signifies ‘word, speech, and voice’ and as a verb, ‘to speak or to express oneself.’<sup>167</sup> Hilario Chi Canul (2012) in his article on how language is taught in the home by Mayan mothers explains that the process these women use (which he calls *uj’ook’ol t’aan*) focuses on how cultural knowledge is embodied in every word. Cuevas Cob begins this poem by stating that the young woman will go to school, that she will be educated (both at home and out in the world), but that she will also come home conscious, able to appreciate her cultural heritage and the women who have come before her. She will understand that the knowledge she has inherited—embodied in the very language she speaks—has been passed down to her through generations of women, the same grandmothers and mothers who have lit and tended the hearth’s fire for millennia and whose umbilical cords are also buried in the kitchen. Their hearth is her

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<sup>167</sup> *T’aan* is also used in the expressions *lik’t’aan* ‘poem,’ which literally means *lik* ‘to lift or elevate’ the *t’aan* ‘word, voice, etc’ and *iik’t’aan* ‘poet,’ and is a compound word that combines the term *ik* ‘spirit, and vital breath’ with *t’aan*. Rolando Ek Naal affirms that an *iik’t’aan* ‘poet’ is known by this name because they have the ability to “habla con el espíritu adentro/they speak using the spirit within them.” A female poet is called an *ix iik’t’aan* and a male poet is called an *aj iik’t’aan*.

hearth, the ancient symbol of Creation and regeneration and the heart and center of Mayan cultural identity.

#### 5.4.1 Summary of “You Will Go to School”

In this poem Cuevas Cob (2005) describes the difficult process of a young woman returning to her home and cultural identity. The poet conflates the demand for this young woman to be educated (outside of the home) with her need to recognize the value of the cultural knowledge taught to her by the women who have come before her. Through the use of cultural symbolism coming from the home, kitchen and the gendered labor of traditional life, she has woven a complex narrative layering ancient symbolism and poetics with contemporary sensibilities. She has done this to illustrate how her protagonist must be mindful of the greatness of her culture if she is to participate in its continuation. More specifically, to reclaim her cultural heritage (place and self) she must come home consciously and upon entering her home, go directly into her kitchen. Because it is there that she will be able to appreciate the cultural wisdom that has been passed down to her from mother to daughter for centuries.

#### 5.5 Poem 5 “I Am This”

“*Teen lela*” by Feliciano Sánchez Chan (1999)

##### “*Teen lela*”

“Yo soy éste”	“I am this”
(I)	(I)
Yo soy éste	I am this
que acaba de colgar sus sueños al viento.	who has just finished hanging his dreams in the wind.
(II)	(II)
Sueño forjado con el polvo	Dream forged with dust

del camino	from the road
y el verde del monte	and the green of the woods
que duerme.	that sleep.
(III)	(III)
Sueño regado	Dream watered
con el fresco de la luna,	with the freshness of the moon,
que refleja besos de enamorados.	reflecting lover's kisses
(IV)	(IV)
He horadado la roca	I have bored through the stone
para hallar el laberinto de las grutas	in order to find the labyrinth of the grottos
donde transito sin dejar huellas,	where I travel without leaving footprints,
para que el hombre extraño	so that the stranger
no sepa mi trayecto.	does not know of my journey.
(V)	(V)
Este es mi camino secreto,	This is my secret path,
volví a él porque hoy	I returned to it because today
asesinaron mi camino terrenal.	they have murdered my path on earth.
(VI)	(VI)
Aun pisando bajo la luz	Still treading under the light
de estrellas,	of the stars,
hoy mis pies tropiezan	today my feet stumble
en el pavimento,	on the pavement,
extrañando las piedras	missing the stones
que antes leían	that before were able to read
la historia de mis callos.	the history of my calluses.
(VII)	(VII)
Yo soy éste	I am this
que cuelga sus sueños al viento.	who hangs his dreams out in the wind,

Mientras espero que retoñe mi Ceiba,  
 recorro caminos subterráneos  
 en busca de piedras luminosas,  
 para edificar la Casa Grande  
 del nuevo Sol que vendrá.

While I wait for my Ceiba to sprout,  
 I traverse subterranean paths  
 in search of luminous stones,  
 to build the Great House  
 of the new Sun that will come.

**“Teen lela”<sup>168</sup>**

Teen le ts’o’ok

in ch’uykiinsik

in náay ti’le **Yum Iik’a’**.

Yo soy éste”

“I am this”

(I)

(I)

Yo soy éste

I am this

que acaba de colgar sus sueños

who has just finished hanging his dreams

al viento.

in the wind.

By entitling his poem “*Teen lela*” “I Am This” Sánchez Chan begins the poem with an introduction of himself that refers much more to his effort, action, and objectives than to his physical presence. The first verse of the poem continues in this vein by stating that *Teen* ‘I’ am the one who just *ts’o’ok* ‘finished’ *ch’uykiinsik* ‘hanging’ his *náay* ‘dream’ on the *Yum* ‘Father, Sir, Lord’ *Iik’a’*<sup>169</sup> ‘Wind.’ Although this first verse gives very little information about the poet as the dreamer, how the term wind is written in Maya—*Yum* ‘Father, Sir, Lord’ *lik’a’*

<sup>168</sup> Sánchez Chan utilizes the definite article in this work as is seen in the *le* of *lela*, *le*, and *ti’le*.

<sup>169</sup> The fact that the term *Iik’a’* ends in the suffix *a’*, indicates ‘this Wind.’

‘Wind’—does give us information on how the notion of ‘wind’ is being conceptualized by the poet. Rolando Ek Naal (personal communication, August 18, 2012) explains that the poet has capitalized *Yum* and *Iik* because: 1) it is a title or proper name and a form of paying respect; and 2) the wind in this context is considered to be a living being. The term *náay*, which according to Gómez Navarrete (2009) is both the verb ‘to dream’ and the noun ‘dream,’ refers to a person’s dreams or thoughts/visions while sleeping. In Sánchez Chan’s use of the term, it is also utilized in reference to hope and aspiration as with *sueño* in Spanish and dream English. Moreover, in the context of this poem, Sánchez Chan (personal communication, February, 13, 2014) also uses the term *náay* ‘dream’ as an allusion to his poetry. The image of the poet hanging his dreams on the wind corresponds to how the terms ‘poet’ and ‘poem’ are expressed in Maya. *Iik’t’aan* ‘poet’ is a compound expression that combines the term *iik* ‘air, wind, breath, life, and spirit’ with *t’aan* ‘word, language, speech, voice’ and *lik’t’aan* ‘poem’ literally means *lik* ‘to lift or elevate’ the *t’aan* ‘word, language, speech, voice.’ Thus, dreams like poetry are transmitted by *iik*. We wish to note that the poet’s dreams are not scattered to the wind, they are hung on *Yum lik’a*’ to be carried or transmitted by a specific and revered being.

(II)

**Jump’él náay pata’an**

yéetel u **jujuykilil** u jáal **bej**

yéetel u **ya’axt’ube’enil k’áax**

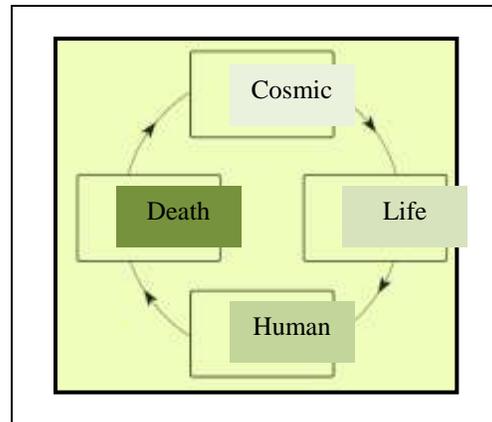
ku **wenel**.

(II)	(II)
Sueño forjado con el polvo	Dream forged with dust
del camino	from the road
y el verde del monte	and the green of the woods
que duerme.	that sleep.

The second verse specifies that it is *Jump'éel* 'one or a' *náay* 'dream' that has been *pata'an* 'formed, molded, shaped, invented, imagined' by the *jujuykilil* 'dust' of the *bej* 'road, path' and the *ya'axt'ube'enil* 'profoundly green *k'áax* 'woods, hills' that *wenel* 'sleep.' Although this verse in Spanish (and English) is visually evocative, in Maya it is far more complex and multisensory. Describing the *náay* 'dream' as having been *pata'an* 'formed, molded, shaped, invented, and imagined' allows the reader to envision this process as being both physical and mental (Bricker et al., 1998; Gómez Navarrete, 2009). Adding to the multisensory effect, the expression *jujuykilil* 'dust' reduplicates the morphemes *juy* (*júuy* – the circular movement of a substance) and combines it with the suffix *kilil* (which by forming the gerund describes an action or process) to both visually and audibly represent how dust is created, as well as its movement and sound (Ek Naal, personal communication, August 18, 2012; Gómez Navarrete, 2009). The verse concludes with the compound expression *ya'axt'ube'enil*. Although *ya'axt'ube'enil* which has been translated into Spanish as 'verde' 'green' by the poet. In Maya it is a term that combines *ya'ax* 'green' with *t'ube'enil*, an additional adjectival expression meaning 'profound or profoundly' in reference to the deepness or intensity of the color green of the *k'áax* 'woods, hills' that are sleeping (*ibid*).

By describing the *náay* ‘dream’ (or poem) as being *pata’an* ‘formed, molded, shaped, invented, imagined’ by the *jujuykilil* ‘dust’ of the *bej* ‘road, path’ and the *ya’axt’ube’enil* ‘profoundly green *k’úax* ‘woods, hills’ that *wenel* ‘sleep,’ Sánchez Chan is saying that his dream/poem has been formed by life experience. The idea that a person’s life is like a journey and the *bej* ‘road, path’ is where his or her life or experiences take place is what Zoltán Kövecses (2005. p. 11) calls a “primary metaphor.” Kövecses explains that even though primary metaphors are universal and cognitively that they play a crucial role, it is when a metaphor takes on the nuances and dimensions of a culture that it becomes complex and is able to reflect how people think within their own cultural context (*ibid*). Indeed, in an article about the complexity of *bej* ‘road, path,’ Søren Wichmann (2004) states that in the Mayan worldview, a *bej* connotes multiple meanings, and as a metaphor (typical to Mayan metaphorical conception), its meanings are cyclical. In other words, Mayan metaphors are not lineal (concrete → abstract) such as in a road (concrete) symbolizing life’s experience (abstract), they evoke multiple meanings that can produce an endless cycle of interconnected images and thought (see Figure 35) (*ibid*). For example, in ancient time roads and paths mirrored cosmic spatial patterns and “ordered the places of daily living” by integrating communities—homes, temples, and ceremonial centers—into the larger conception of the cosmos (Cauich Ramírez, personal communication September 18, 2012; Freidel et al, 1993, p. 162). Because these ancient roads were surfaced with lime plaster, they were white and known as “*los sacbeo’ob*” or white roads and were considered and revered as earthly reproductions of the Milky Way (De la Garza, 1998, p. 76). These roads as sacred links or conduits were important elements in Mayan cosmology, because they were conceived as umbilical cords conveying vital liquid (blood) between heaven and earth (*ibid*). Wichmann (2004, p. 22) goes on to explain that in Mayan cosmology, roads or paths are

generally conceptualized in reference to human relations as a “vía de comunicación” associated with place of origin (also see Freidel et al, 1993). He further states that the term *bej* is used to describe a person’s “transcurso de la vida (*life-span*),” and even death is considered to be a path or road (*ibid*, p. 18).<sup>170</sup>



*Figure 35.* The Conceptualization of *Bej* ‘Road, Path’ as a Cyclical Metaphor. Simplified graphic of how the concept of *bej* ‘road, path’ is conceptualized as a cyclical metaphor connecting humanity to the cosmos in a never-ending cycle of life, death, and rebirth.

For this reason, in Sánchez Chan’s poem it is not simply about the dreamer who has formed his dream (poem) from life experiences on the *bej* ‘road, path’ of life; it is about the multiple symbologies of the *bej* itself. By forming his dream with the dust of the road, it is the dust—as particles of the polysemic *bej*—that is literally the “stuff” his dream is made of.

Besides the dust of the *bej*, the other element that informs his dream is the *ya’axt’ube’enil* ‘profoundly green *k’úax* ‘woods, hills’ that *wenel* ‘sleep.’ The term *k’úax* glossed as ‘woods, hills’ refers to a forest or treed area that is wild or uncultivated (Bolles, 2001;

<sup>170</sup> It is interesting to note that Wichmann (2004) states that the notion of *bej* has also been used to describe the writings, drawings, and tracing of ancient Mayan scribes.

Gómez Navarrete, 2009). *K'áax* 'woods, hills,' referred to as 'el monte' in Spanish, is conceptualized in conjunction with the home and the milpa 'corn field' in Mayan cultural worldview because it too is an essential area for familial and community survival.

To understand the symbolic importance of *K'áax* 'woods, hills' in this verse it is necessary to outline some of the more elemental aspects of its importance in Mayan culture. Karl Taube (2003, p. 485) states that in ancient Mayan ideology the forest and its beings, in contrast to homes and cultivated fields, "embody the timelessness beyond and before the creation of the ordered world and time." Enrique Javier Rodríguez Balam (2010, p. 106) describes contemporary Mayan conception of the *k'áax* 'woods, hills' as "un espacio privilegiado de socialización y transmisión de conocimientos."<sup>171</sup> It is where firewood, wild honey, and a wide array of plants and materials are collected, a process which requires tremendous knowledge and skill (Anderson, 2010; Villa Rojas, 1987). And, in a gender ordered labor system, it is where young men learn from their elders how to hunt and use tools responsibly (Rodríguez Balam, 2010). Furthermore, the *k'áax* 'woods, hills' as a living environment transmits information, hosts a variety of beings both natural and supernatural<sup>172</sup>, is unpredictable and mysterious, and is dangerous when not respected or understood (Hofling, 1993; Rodríguez Balam, 2010).

Rodríguez Balam (2010, p. 106) writes that:

[E]l monte habla y, en consecuencia, comunica cosas. Quizá por ello es que algunos aseguran que dentro de este espacio es necesario aprender a escuchar los ruidos, hasta los

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<sup>171</sup> "A privileged space for socialization and the transmission of knowledge."

<sup>172</sup> It is important to note that there is not a distinction between natural vs supernatural in Mayan worldview, as both are considered to be part of the natural world (O'Connor, 2010).

que en apariencia sean imperceptibles; hay que saber escuchar lo que el monte dice, interpretar el sonido y la dirección de sus vientos, entender lo que comunican.<sup>173</sup>

In this verse, that the *k'áax* 'woods, hills' *wenel* 'sleep' are sleeping is highly significant. Besides being an endless source of stories, the *k'áax* 'woods, hills', knowledge and mystery, is an environment that supports life with its own abundant life (firewood, honey, edible plants, house building supplies, etc.) That it is asleep and silent indicates a shift from what is natural and forshadows what comes next in the poem. The poet by stating that his *náay* 'dream' has been formed or imagined by the dust of the *bej* 'road, path' and the sleeping *ya'axt'ube'enil* 'profoundly green'<sup>174</sup> *k'áax* 'woods, hills' describes his own experiences of coming from a small Mayan community in Yucatán.<sup>175</sup> But he also speaks to a broader and more collective experience that encompasses the dust of ancient roads and the vibrant green of a forest *once* teeming with life (Sánchez Chan, personal communication, February 13, 2014).

(III)

Jump'éeel *náay jóoya'ta'an*

yéetel u *síisal X-ma Uj,*

tu'ux ku *léembal*

---

<sup>173</sup> “The woods speak, and in consequence communicate things. Perhaps, because of this some people claim that within this space it is necessary to learn to listen to the sounds, even to those that are apparently imperceptible. One must know how to listen to what the woods say, interpret the sound and direction of its winds, and understand what they are communicating.”

<sup>174</sup> That the woods are *ya'axt'ube'enil* 'profoundly green' and *ya'ax* 'green' is the color of the center of the quincunx, and the heart (and hearth) of the universe could also serve to emphasize the primary or essential nature of the forest for Mayan cultural conception (Guzmán Urióstegui, 2007; Savkic, 2010, Taube, 1994).

<sup>175</sup> Mr. Sánchez Chan comes from the small community Tekax, Yucatán, which is known on official Mexican tourism registries as “El lugar de los bosques /The Place of Forests” (<http://mexicovivo.mx/detalle.php?cat=10&contenido=227>)

u ts'u'uts' máax ku yaabilaj.

(III)

Sueño regado

con el fresco de la luna,

que refleja besos de enamorados.

(III)

Dream watered

with the freshness of the moon,

reflecting lover's kisses

In the third section of the poem Sánchez Chan continues to describe his dream (poem) as a *náay* 'dream' that has been *jóoya'ta'an* 'watered, irrigated' with the *súisal* 'freshness' of *X-ma* 'Mother' *Uj* 'Moon,' that *léembal* 'shines, glimmers, reflects' the *ts'u'uts'*<sup>176</sup> 'kiss, kisses' of *yaabilaj* 'love.' The term *súisal*<sup>177</sup> 'freshness' is glossed by Gómez Navarrete (2009, p. 167) as the "frescura y sombra que hacen los árboles grandes"<sup>178</sup> and refers to a comforting, coolness or freshness emanating from *X-ma* 'Mother' *Uj* 'Moon. The **X** in *X-ma* is a feminine prefix and although *na* 'glosses as 'mother,' Rolando Ek Naal (personal communication, August 22, 2012) explains that *X-ma* is a compound term that also signifies 'mother' (Bolles, 2001; Bricker, 1998, Gómez Navarrete, 2009). That both the *X-ma* 'mother' and *Uj* 'moon' are capitalized signifies that this expression is used in reference to a living entity/deity worthy of reverence and respect (Ek Naal, personal communication, August 22, 2012; Gómez Navarrete, 2009).

María Montolíu Villar (1984) describes the ancient Mayan Moon goddess, Ixchel as the deity of rains, tides, germination, procreation, regeneration of life, and the feminine biological

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<sup>176</sup> Rolando Ek Naal (personal communication, August 18, 2012) states that like so many terms or expression in Maya, *ts'u'uts'* glossed as the noun 'kiss' and as the verb 'to kiss,' is onomatopoeic, in that it replicates the sound of a kiss.

<sup>177</sup> The root *súis* is both the adjective 'frozen' and the noun 'cold' (Gómez Navarrete, 2009).

<sup>178</sup> "The freshness and shade that large trees make."

cycle. She also explains that the Moon as a divine being is the patron (or representative) of births, medicine, and divination, as well as hidden waters, such as in *cenotes*,<sup>179</sup> wells, and caves. She is represented in ancient pictorial art in her various cycles or ages from when she is young and fertile to when she is aged and senile (see Figure 36) (*ibid*). In this section of the poem the *náay* ‘dream’ has been *jóoya’ta’an* ‘watered, irrigated’ with the *síisal* ‘freshness’ of *X-ma Uj* ‘Mother Moon’ that *léembal* ‘shines, glimmers, reflects’ the *ts’u’uts* ‘kiss, kisses’ of *yaabilaj* ‘love’ indicates this is a reference to the moon in an early or young phase when she is at the height of her fecundity.

“La luna es un cuerpo que nace, crece, se desarrolla, decrece y muere constantemente, por ello se le asocia a la ley del devenir del tiempo”<sup>180</sup> (Montolú Villar, 1984, p. 67).

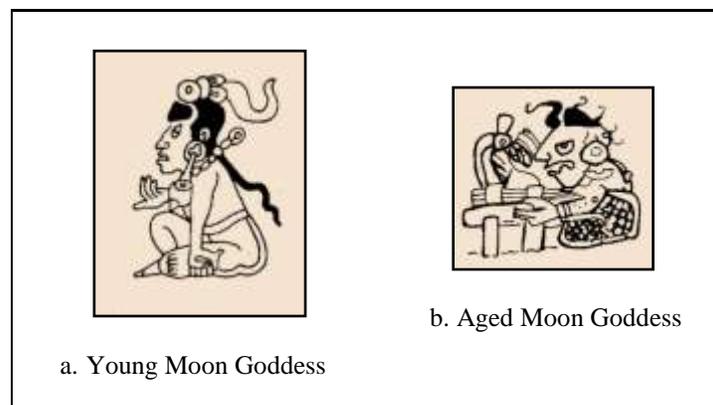


Figure 36. Moon Goddess. The Moon Goddess represented in ancient pictorial art in her various cycles or ages. Adapted from “La Diosa Lunar Ixchel sus Características y Funciones en la Religión Maya,” by M. Montolú Villar, 1984, *Anales de Antropología*, 21, p. 66.

<sup>179</sup> *Cenotes* are subterranean bodies of water.

<sup>180</sup> “The moon is a body that is born, grows, develops, diminishes, and dies constantly, for this reason she is associated with the law of progression of time.”

In the first three sections of his poem Sánchez Chan describes not only himself as the one “who has just finished hanging his dreams on the wind,” but also the materials or elements that have formed and nourished his dreams. To accomplish this he has utilized three couplets (an example of parallelism) in which the first verse of each pair states an idea and the second verse expands on the first verse by adding more detailed information (see Table 13).

Table 13

*Example of Parallelism from the First Three Sections of “I Am This” Sánchez Chan (1999)*

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Section 1	Couplet	{	a.	I am this
			b.	who has just finished hanging his dreams in the wind.
Section 2	Couplet	{	a.	Dream forged with dust from the road
			b.	and the green of the woods that sleep.
Section 3	Couplet	{	a.	Dream watered with the freshness of the moon
			b.	reflecting lover’s kisses

---

*Note.* In this example of parallelism each section is composed of two corresponding concepts that form a couplet. In each of these couplets the first verse (a) states an idea, while the second verse (b) augments this idea with additional information. For example, in Section 1 the poet states that “I am this” and then adds to this statement by declaring that he is the one that “has just finished hanging his dreams in the wind.”

The first couplet introduces the poet *and* explains his action of transmitting his dream (hanging it in the Wind). The second couplet defines his dream as being made of path or road dust *and* green forest. The third couplet describes how the dream is nourished *and* reflected (by the Moon). The key elements in this parallel construction—the Wind, the Moon, the path/road, and the woods—are all highly significant in the Mayan worldview and symbology. The Wind and

the Moon are both living and life giving entities. Besides being complementary (male and female), they both represent cyclicity in that the Wind is the essence of life and the Moon in its phases represents the full cycle of life. The path/road representing life experience, a reflection on earth of celestial bodies, and a mode of communication between earth and the other world, is a connection that indicates origin as both a place of departure and of return. Finally, the profoundly green forest, although at one time teeming with meaning and life (both natural and supernatural), because it is now asleep is *not* an allusion to bucolic tranquility. Because it is an environment essential to survival and cultural transmission, but also one of unpredictability (outside of human control) and danger, the forest's somnolent state is an indication of a suspension of what is natural and the disruption of the intricate fusion of nature and culture of Mayan worldview.

(IV)

**Teen le táant**

in **jolik y nak' wits**

tia'al in k'uchul tu **satunsatil**

u **jobnel áaktun**

tu'ux uchak in **xímbal**

ma'u p'áatal in **pe'echak**

tia'al ma' **vojeltik sak wíinik**

tu'ux kin máan.

(IV)

(IV)

He horadado la roca	I have bored through the stone
para hallar el laberinto de las grutas	in order to find the labyrinth of the grottos
donde transito sin dejar huellas,	where I travel without leaving footprints,
para que el hombre extraño	so that the stranger
no sepa mi trayecto.	does not know of my journey.

In the fourth section the Sánchez Chan uses the expression [t]een ‘I’ táant ‘have just’ to refer to the poet recently having *jolik* ‘perforated’ the *nak* ‘stomach, abdomen’ of the *wits* ‘hill’ in order to find the *satunsatil* ‘labyrinth’ of the *jobnel* ‘entrails’ of the *áaktun* ‘cave.’ It is interesting to note that since Maya considers all aspects of the earth to be living, the hill is described as having a *nak* ‘stomach, abdomen’ and the cave’s *satunsatil* ‘labyrinth’ is conceived as its *jobnel* ‘entrails.’ However, none of this personification has been translated into Spanish. Lisa Lucero (1999) explains that caves are common features of the Mayan geographical and sacred landscape and are conceived as conduits to the deepest recesses of the earth, a region that is both dangerous and supernaturally charged. Freidel, et al., (1993, p. 151) state that “all natural openings to the earth, whether caves or cenotes, were portals to the Otherworld.” That the poet has bored through the *nak* ‘stomach, abdomen’ of the *wits* ‘hill’ in order to find the *satunsatil* ‘labyrinth’ of the *jobnel* ‘entrails’ of the *áaktun* ‘cave’ indicates an effort of mythic proportion: 1) perforating the hill; and 2) finding and following the labyrinth of the entrails of the cave. The term *satunsatil* ‘labyrinth’ emphasizes the difficulty of the process in that as an expression it duplicates the root word *sat* ‘lost, misplaced, lose’ and brackets it with the root word *tun* ‘stone’ (Bricker et al., 1998; Gómez Navarrete, 2009). After boring into the hill, the poet enters the *satunsatil* ‘labyrinth’ in order to *xúmbal* ‘walk’ without leaving

*pe'echak* 'prints' so that the *sak* 'white' *wüinik* 'man' does not *yojeltik* 'know' where he has gone.

A significant aspect of this poem is the mythology it utilizes that corresponds to the archeological site of the ancient city of Oxkintok, Yucatan and more specifically to one of its structures, the labyrinth Satunsat (see Figure 37) (Brady & Bonor Villarejo, 1993; Rivera Dorado, 2003). The ancient city of Oxkintok (dating to the Late Pre-Classic Period) was considered as a center of learning and knowledge. As legend has it, during the creation of the Third Age (the current age of humans made of corn), Satunsat was thought of as the secret and sacred place where the knowledge from prior ages was hidden (*ibid*). By being able to enter the labyrinth, conceived as a cosmic “saurian” monster that connected the three levels of the universe (the heavens, the earth, and the Underworld), humanity was able to retrieve the ancient knowledge,<sup>181</sup> “los secretos de la verdadera realidad” and the “palabra, fuerza inapelable que ordena el universo”<sup>182</sup> (Rivera Dorado, 2003, p. 8).<sup>183</sup>

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<sup>181</sup> According to Miguel Rivera Dorado (2003), one myth explains that the ancient knowledge of the prior ages was in the form of three books guarded by a giant dragon like the creature Itzam Cab Afn.

<sup>182</sup> “The secrets of the true reality” and the “word, is an inevitable force that orders and organizes the universe.”

<sup>183</sup> Rivera Dorado (2003) explains that in one form of this legend, the knowledge hidden in Satunsat was in the form of three sacred books.



Figure 37. Structure and Labyrinth of Satunsat, in Oxkintok, Yucatán. Source: <http://www.labolab.net/mitologia/el-satunsat-o-laberinto-maya/> Retrieved June 30, 2014. Reprinted with permission.

By entering the *satunsatil* ‘labyrinth’ of the *jobnel* ‘entrails’ of the *áaktun* ‘cave’ in his dream (and poem) the poet is retelling a legend: 1) the difficult journey into the darkness of the earth; 2) following the serpentine path of the labyrinth; and 3) entering a hidden and secret place. A place unknown to *sak* ‘white’ *wūnik* ‘man’ where the poet leaves no trace, the hidden place of sacred Mayan knowledge.

It is appropriate that the labyrinth is in the *jobnel* ‘entrails’ of an *áaktun* ‘cave’. The term *áaktun* ‘cave’ (as we discussed earlier in Brito May’s poem) combines the root words *ak* or *áak* ‘turtle’ and ‘night’ with *tun* ‘rock or stone.’ *Ak* being the root word for ‘wetlands’ and ‘night,’ as well as for ‘cave’ (the interior of a turtle’s shell), combines the watery environment of the primordial world with the darkness of night, a reference to the Mayan world (and the knowledge it contained) before the Creation of the current age (Ligorred Perramon, 1992).

(V)

Lela’ in **ta’aka’an beel,**

**suunajeni' tumeen bejla'a**  
**kiinsa'ab in lu'umkab beele'.**

(V)	(V)
Este es mi camino secreto,	This is my secret path,
volví a él porque hoy	I returned to it because today
asesinaron mi camino terrenal	they have murdered my path on earth.

In the fifth section of the poem, Sánchez Chan emphasizes that this path (of sacred knowledge) is his *ta'aka'an* 'protected, hidden' *beel* 'path, road' and that he has *suunajeni'* 'returned to it'<sup>184</sup> because *bejla'a* 'today, the present' *kiinsa'ab* 'they have murdered' this *lu'umkab* 'earth, earthly' *beele'* 'path, road.' With the term *kiinsa'ab* 'they have murdered,' which the poet translates into Spanish as 'assassinated,' the emphasis and objective of this poem becomes very clear. He is saying that the destruction visited upon the Maya by the dominant society has been so violent and devastating that it has literally obliterated many aspects of Mayan culture and way of life. More specifically—as is described below in the poem and by the poet himself in an interview (Sánchez Chan, personal communication, February 13, 2014)—this section of the poem is a description of how the Mexican government has paved over and destroyed ancient, sacred Mayan roads.

(VI)

Kex tumeen **yaanal u paakat**  
**Yum Eek' kin xiimable',**

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<sup>184</sup> The final **i'** in **suunajeni'** refers to the path.

**bejla'e** ku **t'óochpajal** in **wook** ti' táax **bej**,  
ka'alikil in **k'a'ajsik** le **tuunich**  
**ka'ach** u **k'aj óolo'ob** u **t'aajan** in **wooko'**.

(VI)	(VI)
Aun pisando bajo la luz	Still treading under the light
de estrellas,	of the stars,
hoy mis pies tropiezan	today my feet stumble
en el pavimento,	on the pavement,
extrañando las piedras	missing the stones
que antes leían	that before were able to read
la historia de mis callos.	the history of my calluses.

In the sixth section the poet continues with the theme and imagery of the path or road. He explains that *yaanal* 'under' the *paakat* 'gaze' of *Yum* 'lord, father, sir' *Eek* 'star, darkness, black' he still *ximable* 'walks,' but *bejla'e* 'today' his *wook* 'feet' *t'óochpajal* 'stumble' on the *t'aax* 'level' *bej* 'path.' Revisiting section five we are reminded by the poet's words that his earthly path had been assassinated and the road that he is now traveling, because it is *t'aax* 'level,' has been paved over (Sánchez Chan, personal communication, February 13, 2014). Although still walking and guided by the illumination of the *Yum* 'lord, father, sir' *Eek* 'star,' the poet's *wook* 'feet' *t'óochpajal* 'stumble' on this alien and unnatural surface. When the poet states that he *k'a'ajsik* 'remembers' the *tuunich* 'stones' of the *ka'ach* 'time in the past' that *k'aj óolo'ob* 'knew, were familiar with' *wooko'* 'the crying' *t'aajan* of his 'calluses' he is

making a reference to a well known and traveled path that was as familiar with him as he was with it. Moreover, because paths and roads are conceptualized in Mayan belief as links with ancestors and the divine, these ancient stones embody not just the physical memory of the poet, but of the many, many generations of Maya who have traveled this path or road (Sánchez Chan, personal communication, February 13, 2014).

In our interview with the poet (February 13, 2014) he explained that this section of the poem is based on the irony that the Mexican government deems as “progress” and “development” the form of the construction used in highways built in the Yucatán. Mr. Sánchez Chan (*ibid*) recounted that he grew up without electricity and that the community he is from is part of a network of ancient Mayan cities and cultural hubs (la Zona Puuc) that are intricately connected by ancient roads and paths called *sacbej* in Maya. As is stated above, these roads mirrored constellation routes and were covered in lime plaster. This literally made them illuminated vias of transportation that were easily navigable through dense forest even in inclement weather because they are so water absorbant (Cauich Ramírez, September 18, 2012). According to Sánchez Chan, these ancient roads and paths were so skillfully constructed that the community could travel at night without stumbling because “hasta las piedras nos ayudaron a transitar”<sup>185</sup> (personal communication, February 13, 2014). The sad irony is that without consulting the Mayan community, the Mexican government has constructed highways by literally paving over their ancestral roads (*ibid*). Because the government did not take into consideration the people who live there (and have lived there for millennia), the new roads are poorly planned and constructed and are actually very dangerous (*ibid*). Sánchez Chan (personal communication, February 13, 2014) affirms that of course his community wants progress and

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<sup>185</sup> “Even the rocks would help our transit.”

development, but in accordance with *their* cultural beliefs and way of life and *their* definition of what is community wellbeing.

(VII)

Teen le táant

in ch'uykiinsik in **wayak'** ti' **Yum Iik'o'**,

beyo' ka'alikil in **páa'tik** u **top'che'**

in **X-ya'axche'e**

kin **xímbaltik** in **áak'ab bej'**

tia'al in kaxtik **ki'ichkelem tuun'ob**,

tial'al in **beetik** u **Noj Najil**

le **túumben K'iin** bíin **taalako'**.

(VII)

Yo soy éste

que cuelga sus sueños al viento.

Mientras espero que retoñe mi Ceiba,

recorro caminos subterráneos

en busca de piedras luminosas,

para edificar la Casa Grande

del nuevo Sol que vendrá.

(VII)

I am this

who hangs his dreams in the wind,

While I wait for my Ceiba to sprout,

I traverse subterranean paths

in search of luminous stones,

to build the Great House

of the new Sun that will come.

In the seventh and last section the poet once again states that he is the one who has hung his *wayak* ‘dreams or aspirations’ on *Yum* ‘father, lord, sir’ *Iik’o* ‘Wind.’ That Sánchez Chan begins and ends with the same (or similar) verse supports the cyclical design of the poem and emphasizes the notion of rebirth and continuity as a key element in this work. After placing his dream on the Wind the poet *páa’tik* ‘waits’ for the *top’che* ‘sprout, rebirth’ of his *X-ya’axche’e* ‘Sacred Ceiba.’ The compound expression *top’che* combines the root words *top* ‘sprout, rebirth’ with *che* ‘tree, wood’ and refers to another compound expression *X-ya’axche’e*, which combines *X-* ‘the prefix for a feminine being,’ *ya’ax* ‘green and close homophone for ‘first,’ and *che* ‘tree, wood’ a term meaning ‘Mother Ceiba,’ the Mayan sacred tree of life (see Figure 38).

As with the Wind and Stars, *X-ya’axche’e* the Ceiba and more specifically the ‘Mother Ceiba’ is a revered living being. Going back to the first poem of our corpus, “The Three Stones of the Hearth,” we know that in Mayan cosmology during the Creation of the current age when the great Creator lifted the sky off of the earth, it was the Ceiba as the *axis mundi* that grew out of the center and connected the three levels of the universe—the sky, the earth, and the underworld (Hirose López, 2007; Valverde, 2001). Sánchez Chan (personal communication, February 13, 2014) explains that the Ceiba is conceptualized as the spinal column of the universe and symbolically its sprouting or rebirth represents the regeneration and fortification of Mayan culture.



Figure 38. Ceiba Pentandra, the Mayan Sacred Tree. Source: [http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:The\\_300-year-old\\_ceiba\\_tree,\\_Vieques,\\_Puerto\\_Rico.JPG](http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:The_300-year-old_ceiba_tree,_Vieques,_Puerto_Rico.JPG). Retrieved July 15, 2014. Reprinted with permission.

By continuing to *xúmbaltik* ‘walk’ on the *úak’ab* ‘night’ *bej*’ ‘path, road’ while he waits for the *top’che*’ ‘rebirth, sprout’ of his *X-ya’axche’e* ‘Mother Ceiba,’ the poet is alluding to his quest for knowledge acquired by following the ancient pathways such as Satunsat (personal communication, February 13, 2014). It is also an allusion to the day when this knowledge is not hidden and/or paved over and Mayan culture like the Ceiba will regenerate (grow) and flourish again (*ibid*). In our discussion with Mr. Sánchez Chan (*ibid*) he explained that in Mexico (and abroad) the Maya live under very difficult conditions and that it is easy for people to get lost in the labyrinth of the dominant society and lose their cultural identity. He reiterated that security for the Mayan community is dependent on the strength and stability of their cultural identity. For this reason, when he writes that he continues to walk these dark, underground paths, he is referring to the labyrinths of sacred Mayan knowledge. And, that he *kaxtik* ‘searches’ for *ki’ichkelem* ‘beautiful’ *tuun’ob* ‘stones’ alludes to the carved stones of Mayan archeological

sites (temples and stelae) etched in ancient wisdom (*ibid*). Moreover, that he searches for these sacred stones in order to *beetik* ‘make, construct’ the *Noj* ‘great’ *Najil* ‘house’ of the *túumben* ‘new’ *K’iin* ‘Sun, time, age’ speaks of a reconstruction or regeneration of Mayan culture (*ibid*). Sánchez Chan affirms that the *Noj* ‘Great’ *Najil* ‘House’ refers to the Mayan culture as an ancient, brilliant, and living legacy. Furthermore, that the Great House of the *túumben* ‘new’ *K’iin* ‘Sun, time, age’ identifies it as the brilliant culture of the present and the future as well as the past. Sánchez Chan (personal communication, February 13, 2014) explains that this poem represents the dream of his community to be in charge of their development and progress and to reconstruct the Great House of Mayan culture using the wisdom and brilliant legacy of its sacred stones as its foundation.

In concluding this analysis of Sánchez Chan’s poem, it is important to note that the term *K’iin* ‘Sun, time, day’ like *Yum Iik* ‘Father Wind,’ *X-ma Uj* ‘Mother Moon,’ *X-ya’axche* ‘Mother Ceiba,’ *Yum Eek* ‘Father Star,’ is capitalized and refers to the Sun (Father Sun) as a revered living being. Together these divine entities—beginning with the Wind as the essence of life and ending with the regeneration of the new Sun—are an allusion to the cyclicity of time, birth and rebirth. As we have explained in previous chapters, in the Mayan Creation narration, when *Junab K’uj*, First Mother and First Father, omnipresent god creator placed the three sacred stones in the hearth (heart of the earth) he/she lifted the sky off of the earth. From this action the Great Ceiba grew through the center of the earth demarking and uniting the three levels of the universe: the heavens, the earth, and the Underworld. As the sky was lifted, the constellations were set into motion, marking the beginning of human reckoning of time (days, months, years or cycles of time). As in the first poem of this corpus written by Brito May (2008), Sánchez Chan includes these same sacred elements as a reference to the cyclicity of time and the Creation and

re-Creation of Mayan culture and identity. Moreover, it is the home, conceptualized in this poem as the *Noj Najil* ‘Great House or ancestral cultural home to all Maya,’ where this regeneration will take place.

### **5.5.1 Summary of “I Am This”**

In this poem Sánchez Chan (1999) begins by transmitting his dreams through the Wind deity. He explains that these dreams are made of the dust of ancient Mayan roads and the profoundly green woods. The content of these dreams are on the one hand, iconic elements of Mayan world view that are particularly indicative of the region and community where the poet lives; while on the other, they represent aspects of Mayan culture and the environment that are being destroyed by non-Mayan societies. Due to this destruction the poet is forced to return to a path that is secret and unknown until the Mayan tree of life (the Ceiba) flourishes once again. By following this path (Satunsat, a labyrinth renowned for the safekeeping of ancient knowledge) the poet not only keeps his cultural perspective alive, but searches for sacred stones etched in wisdom to rebuild the great house of Mayan culture for the future.

## Chapter 6 Corpus Summary and Main Theme Synopsis and Discussion

We begin this chapter (Section 6.1) with a summary of the corpus as a whole to: 1) reiterate our rationale for the selection of these five poems as the focus of this study; and 2) to illustrate how these poems work together to create a cohesive narrative. In the conclusion of our summary we examine how all of these works share many commonalities yet are each a unique manifestation of the individual authors' perspectives and artistic sensibilities. In Section 6.2 we have selected three key and recurrent themes that correspond to the overall narrative of the corpus because they reflect Mayan cyclical conceptions of both time and Creation. In this section we also summarize their essential meaning as it is revealed throughout the corpus. In Section 6.3 we conclude with a discussion of our findings.

### 6.1 Corpus Summary

The poems of this corpus were selected because they are representative of the objectives and concerns motivating the resurgence of contemporary Mayan literature. As direct or next generation participants in this movement, these poets write to promote Mayan culture through language and literature and to actively campaign against language and culture loss. From the themes of their poetry and from their conversations during interviews,<sup>186</sup> it is evident that these poets are deeply concerned about the future of Mayan culture and language. Furthermore, as they expressed in their interviews they are especially worried about younger generations who are not learning to speak Maya and for various reasons (mostly economic) are part of the Mayan diaspora moving to larger cities in Mexico and to the United States.

Additionally, these poems were chosen for this investigation because they all feature the concept of *naj* 'house or home' as the primordial source and center of language and culture. As

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<sup>186</sup>It is important to note that we did not speak with Jorge Cocom Pech.

we have seen in our analysis, the *naj* as a concept is complex and polysemous and these particular texts were selected because they show different yet interrelated facets of its overall meaning. What is also significant (especially in relation to our initial research questions—see page 5) is that we discovered that when these poems are organized to form a corpus, their distinct but corresponding portrayals, effectively illustrate how the notion of *naj* is conceptualized through a Mayan perspective. What we mean by this is that since each poem represents different aspects of what a *naj* symbolizes in Mayan culture, the corpus illustrates how the multifaceted icon *naj* is conceptualized and expressed in the worldview and language of these poets. Below, in summarizing the *naj*'s significance in these works, we discuss its various facets and manifestations that have been articulated by each poet.

Although the conception of *naj* works as a thread to connect these poems, our decision to arrange them into a corpus in this specific order has been the result of a process. First of all, it is important to emphasize that these texts were written by different authors, at different times, and for different reasons. Consequently, they could be organized chronologically, alphabetically or even randomly and would still reflect salient concepts and modes of conception that are unique to Mayan perspective.<sup>187</sup> Nevertheless, because this study concludes in a pedagogical proposal,

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<sup>187</sup> As part of this overall study it is imperative to explain that the decision to unify these texts into a corpus is solely a product of this investigation and does not reflect our belief that these poems should be limited to a fixed category of literature. Even further from our beliefs and objectives would be to classify and diminish these works as a kind of “ethnic” literature. First of all, this type of classification would assume that there are hegemonic cultures that had the power and ability to label others. Moreover, it would suggest that these hegemonic cultures’ literatures were designated as “not ethnic” and had no ethnicity or cultural context themselves (Craveri, 2011). Secondly, it would infer that the texts selected for this study because they are written in Maya and share common themes are a “type” and stay within some rigid precepts that regulate Mayan literature. Thirdly, limiting their works to a classification of “other” and thus “subordinate” undermines the fact that these poets are acclaimed writers in both Maya and Spanish and are cultural scholars who have spent their professional lives studying, reflecting, and writing about their multicultural experience as Mayan Mexicans. And it is for these reasons, that they are able to present their ideas through the cultural perspective and sensibilities of each of their languages. On the one hand, these poets offer their Mayan readers a contemporary text imbued with the history and symbolism of their ancient language and culture. On the other, they present a parallel or approximate text that makes this perspective (or slice) of Mayan world view more accessible to Spanish readers. In sum, these five poems do form a cohesive corpus, but they are

our goal was to sequence these texts in a manner that facilitated their teaching. After experimenting with their order, we discovered that when arranged as they are now presented, these five poems narrate a cohesive story with the notion of *naj* ‘house/home’ as a unifying theme. Relevant to our pedagogical objectives and our research as a whole, we also learned that this story focusing on *naj* corresponds to Mayan cyclical conceptions of both time and Creation. As we make evident in our summary of each poem, the corpus as a cycle begins with the Creation of Mayan culture (the first hearth and home) and ends with aspirations for the re-Creation of Mayan culture (the rebuilding of the great house/home) of the future.

The first poem, “The Three Stones of the Hearth” (Brito May, 2008), is a poetic rendition of the Mayan Creation narration. It situates the house/home as the locus of Creation and a source and resource of cultural identity. As we saw in our analysis, the poet refers to memory—a living collective memory specifically relating to the home and the hearth—in which ancient Mayan knowledge is remembered, alive, and manifest in language and the practice of daily life. Brito May illustrates that through language and practice (such as by lighting the fire of the three-stone hearth on a daily basis), families demonstrate their understanding of ancient lore by actively participating in cultural Creation and regeneration. In this way, language assumes a pivotal role in the communication and exchange of culture as we see next.

In “The House of Your Soul” (Cocom Pech, 2009), the poet proclaims that language is the thousand-year old house of the Mayan soul. It is the home of culture and memory, and the basis of identity. In this work, Cocom Pech emphasizes that the Mayan language is a legacy that links present and future generations of Maya to their ancient past. He affirms that it is through language that the brilliance of Mayan culture lives on. As we will see in the next poem, although

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each unique works written by individuals with distinct perspectives and artistic sensibilities that have a profound understanding of the cultures they live in.

there is a somber future for the traditional *naj*, these poets believe in the Mayan conception of home—the source of memory and knowledge—as the foundation for the preservation and development of language and culture.

In the third poem, Cuevas Cob (2008) describes the traditional Mayan house as being both emblematic of Mayan culture, but also as a relic of another age—abandoned and in decline. The poet speaks with nostalgia for what it represents, but also in grim terms of its slow disintegration and death. The traditional Mayan house in this work, as a reference to culture, is a stark representation of Cuevas Cob’s concerns for the future. Nevertheless, even though the archetypal *naj* is fading from the physical landscape, after thousands of years as the icon for family and community, the traditional Mayan home is a prominent aspect of Mayan collective memory and imagination. For this reason, we have a deeper understanding of why it continues to be portrayed as the source and foundation of cultural identity in the next poem.

The fourth poem “You Will Go to School” (Cuevas Cob, 2005) is written from the perspective of someone whose life takes place both in and outside of a Mayan community. In this text a young woman is exhorted to go to school, which is an allusion to formal schooling, but is also a reference to the rich cultural education she has received in her traditional Mayan home. Cuevas Cob is emphatic in stating that the young woman must return educated and conscious to her home, i.e., the locus of her cultural identity. That is, if she is to appreciate her cultural heritage and the knowledge and wisdom of the generations of Mayan women who have come before her.

The fifth poem, “I am This” (Sánchez Chan, 1999), concludes the cycle by focusing on another beginning. In this work, the poet writes of his dreams for the rebirth of the Ceiba (the Mayan sacred tree) and his hopes for a future when the Great House of Mayan culture and

identity will be rebuilt with the sacred wisdom of ancient stones. Sánchez Chan speaks of the injustice of false “progress” (the paving over of ancient roads in order to construct poorly planned and dangerous new roads) and his aspiration for a new Sun or age when the development and wellbeing of the Mayan community will be based on their own cultural knowledge and agency.

Although the notion of house/home is the most important element unifying this corpus, the following two themes—the three-stone hearth and the Mayan World Tree—are also recurrent elements of Mayan belief and symbology that link these poems together to form a cohesive body. What is most significant is that all of these elements relate to the generation and regeneration of Mayan culture through time. When we say through time, we refer specifically to a Mayan conception of time, which unlike a linear Occidental perception is cyclical and exceptionally far reaching. It is important to keep in mind that the Maya have lived in the same region and have spoken the same language for thousands of years (Pérez Suárez, 2004). For this reason, theirs is a cultural perception of time that spans millennia and views the future as being inseparable from the past (Bracamonte y Sosa, 2010). Throughout the analysis of this corpus we have seen how the poets overlap this conception of time with the symbolic language and imagery of Mayan Creation cosmology. In their poetry and through the utilization of ancient symbols (such as the *naj*, the three-stone hearth, and the Ceiba or World Tree) they align contemporary time with cosmological time. In this way, they demonstrate that the process of cultural generation and regeneration, like Creation and re-Creation, is cyclical and requires (as in ancient times) the conscious and continued participation of the Mayan people (Freidel et al., 1993).

The poets of this corpus illustrate that many ancient beliefs and traditions have been remembered and are evident in language, perspective, and daily practice. Moreover, their works

articulate how the richness of ancient Mayan symbology and rhetoric continues to be communicated through language and literature. However, as writer/activists they also affirm that the Mayan language and culture continue to face tremendous adversity and their texts express their deep-seated concern about linguistic and cultural loss as the consequence of discrimination and neglect by the dominant society.

## 6.2 Synopsis of Main Themes

As the conception of *naj* ‘house’ is the principal theme of this study, we begin this section with a discussion of its various elements and manifestations as they are represented in each of the five poems. We will then conclude with an overview of this concept by making a list of the poets’ representations of its essential meanings. Beginning with Brito May’s text, we focus on the fourth section of the poem where the poet presents his expression of *naj* as both the place of his birth and the locus of Creation.

(IV)	(IV)	(IV)
Tu chíumukil <b>ichnaj</b>	En medio de la <b>casa</b>	In the center of the <b>house</b>
ti’an u yóoxtsoolil áak	hay tres piedras de	there are three stones of
tuunicho’ob áak’ab,	la tortuga nocturna,	the night turtle,
ts’aban ti’al u káajal	puestas para el comienzo	placed at the dawn
in ku’uxtal, je’bix kaajik	de mi vida,	of my life,
le yóok’ol kaaba’.	como fue el principio	like it was the beginning
	del mundo.	of the world.

By saying that in the center of the house there are “three stones of the night turtle, placed at the dawn of [his] life, like it was the beginning of the world,” Brito May conflates the home where he was born with the universe where the three sacred stones were placed during the

Creation of the current age. In its manifestation as the poet's birth home, the *naj* represents the locus of cultural identity for family and, by extension, its lineage and cultural continuity. Its symbolic representation as the universe makes the home the locus of Creation of the earth and of human life. The poet, by presenting these two complementary conceptions of the notion of *naj*—as the home of his birth and as the structure of the universe—symbolically merges his birth (or that of a new generation) with the birth of Mayan culture.

In the first section of Cocom Pech's (2009) poem, the poet states that the Mayan language is the house of the Mayan soul. He then specifies that it is the ancient traditional thatched roof *naj* where ancestors and memories dwell, and where the Mayan voice resides.

(I)	(I)	(I)
A t'aane' u <b>náajil</b> a pixán	Tu idioma es la <b>casa</b> de tu alma.	Your language is the <b>house</b> of
Tumen tí' kuxa'an a	Ahí viven tus padres y	your soul.
baats'ilo'ob.	tus abuelos.	There live your parents and
Ti'e' úuchben <b>xa'anilnaj</b> ,	En esa <b>casa milenaria</b> ,	grandparents.
u k'aasal a kajtialil,	hogar de tus recuerdos,	In this <b>thousand-year-old house</b> ,
ti' ku p'aatal a t'aan.	permanece tu palabra.	home to your memories,
		your word endures/lives on.

When Cocom Pech describes this home as the ancient house of palm he is referring specifically to the centuries old construction of the traditional Mayan *naj* in the Yucatan Peninsula. This traditional home—oblong, whitewashed with lime, and thatched with palm or huano—is so specific to the culture and the region that everything about it, from the design and materials of its construction to the way it is lived in and referred to, is aligned with Mayan cultural beliefs. Furthermore, by conflating the traditional *naj* with the Mayan language and

stating that it is the house of one's soul, the poet describes it as: 1) a person's means of expressing how he/she sees and experiences the world; and 2) a source of protection for the human soul. In other words, because the soul is the essence of a person that dwells in this conflation of house and language, in a sense the *naj* is a manifestation of the human body and material representation of cultural continuity. Finally, as the locus of culture/soul, Cocom Pech envisions the *naj*/language as the touchstone of knowledge and memory, the home of cultural identity where the Mayan spirit and voice live on.

In Cuevas Cob's (2008) "Naj," the entire poem describes the traditional Mayan home as abandoned and in decline. The reader knows from her description that it was once vibrant and alive, but now that it is empty, it is slowly disintegrating. Nevertheless, her description and poem depict a living being that though it is dying or no longer in use for many families, is still an important symbol of cultural consciousness deeply embedded in Mayan collective memory.<sup>188</sup>

(III)	(III)	(III)
Máaso'obe' tu jáalchi'itiko'ob u	Los grillos	The crickets
jílibil u bek'ech suumil	desovillan hilos de silencio.	unravel threads of silence.
[ch'e'eneknakil.	Cada rincón desmenuza recuerdos.	In every corner memories crumble
Jáalmooye' tu tsi'iktik u k'a'asaj.	Pero así,	and disintegrate.
Ba'ale'leili',	aún así	But like that, even like that
kex beyo leili' u machmaj u k'ab	de las manos tomadas con la	from the held hands of the stone
yéetel koot	albarrada	fence
tu báaxal pilinsuut,	la <b>casa</b> juega a la ronda,	the <b>house</b> plays in a circle
tu k'íikabtik u lu'umel.	suda su polvo.	sweating dust.

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<sup>188</sup> Although the term "*naj*" is not used, the *naj* or traditional Mayan house is the focus of this section.

In the poem “You Will Go to School” (Cuevas Cob, 2005), the poet conceptualizes the home—much like a person’s head—as a protected place of memory and imagination where cultural knowledge is generated and preserved. In this text, the subject (a young Mayan woman) does not have to knock on the door when she returns home because it is her own cultural identity and wisdom or consciousness that she is coming back to.

(I)	(I)	(I)
Teche’ yaan a bin xook.	Tú irás a la escuela.	You will go to school.
Ma tun p’áatakech polwech.	No serás cabeza hueca.	You will not be empty-headed.
Yan a táats’ máansik u	Trespasarás el umbral de tu	You will cross the threshold of
páakabil u <b>najil</b> a tuukul	imaginación hasta adentrarte	your imagination going all the
yo’olal a wokoj ta wotoch	en tu propia <b>casa</b> sin tener	way into your own <b>house</b>
ma’ táan a k’opik jolnaj.	que tocar la puerta.	without having to knock on
		the door.

The *naj* in this poem is considered a primarily female space where women are taught time honored knowledge and skills that are essential for cultural continuity. To come home to her own cultural identity and consciousness the young woman must enter her kitchen where the three-stone hearth, fire, and cooking implements await her. Every element she comes into contact with is imbued with the symbolism of her cultural identity. Every action she takes has been passed down from one generation of women to another for centuries. Home, like the head of a conscious person, is a vessel of knowledge—knowledge to be learned, remembered, and transmitted.

In the sixth section of the final poem “I Am This” (Sánchez Chan, 1999), the house, as the *Noj Najil* ‘Great House’ is a direct reference to the Mayan culture as an ancient, brilliant, and

living legacy. *Naj* in this sense is the regeneration of Mayan culture for the present and the future reconstructed on the sacred stones from the temples/houses of the ancient past. As these stones are inscribed with the wisdom of a great civilization they provide the foundation for the greatness of Mayan culture in its continuation.

(VII)	(VII)	(VII)
Teen le táant	Yo soy éste	I am this
in ch'uykiinsik in wayak'	que cuelga sus sueños al viento.	who hangs his dreams in the wind.
ti' Yum Iik'o', beyo'	Mientras espero que retoñe mi	While I wait for my Ceiba to
ka'alikil in páa'tik u top'che'	Ceiba, recorro caminos	sprout, I traverse subterranean
in X-ya'axche'e kin	subterráneos en busca de	paths in search of luminous
xímbaltik in áak'ab bej'	pedras luminosas, para edificar	stones, to build <b>the Great House</b>
tia'al in kaxtik ki'ichkelem	<b>la Casa Grande</b> del nuevo Sol	of the new Sun that will come.
tuun'ob, tial'al in beetik u	que vendrá.	
<b>Noj Najil</b> le túumben K'iin		
in taalako'.		

The following list is a summary of what the concept of *naj* 'house' signifies in this corpus. In parenthesis are the names of the poems that have contributed the different facets of meaning.

*Naj*:

1. The locus of the Creation of the world and Mayan consciousness  
 ("The Three Stones of the Hearth" and "I Am This")
2. The place of one's birth and cultural identity

- (“The Three Stones of the Hearth,” “The House of Your Soul,” and “You Will Go to School”)
3. The locus of family and in extension, lineage and cultural continuity  
(“The Three Stones of the Hearth,” “The House of Your Soul,” and “You Will Go to School”)
  4. The Mayan language; a means of expressing how one sees and experiences the world  
(“The House of Your Soul”)
  5. The origin of knowledge and memory; where the Mayan spirit and voice live on  
(“The Three Stones of the Hearth,” “The House of Your Soul,” “You Will Go to School,” and “I Am This”)
  6. A place where time honored knowledge and skills are taught that are essential for cultural continuity  
(“The Three Stones of the Hearth,” “You Will Go to School,” and “I Am This”)
  7. A protected place of memory and imagination where cultural knowledge is generated and preserved  
(“The Three Stones of the Hearth,” “You Will Go to School,” and “I Am This”)
  8. A cultural icon deeply embedded in Mayan collective memory  
(“The House of Your Soul,” “Naj,” and “You Will Go to School”)
  9. The foundation and structure of Mayan culture and identity for the future  
(“The House of Your Soul,” “You Will Go to School,” and “I Am This”)

Although there are many important elements that recur throughout this corpus we have selected these key themes (even though they are not in every poem) because they are essential to

the overall narrative of the corpus and are iconic Mayan expressions of Creation, cultural regeneration, and the cyclical nature of time. Because it is perhaps the most significant in relation to the conception of home and cultural continuity, we begin with the three-stone hearth.

In “The Three Stones of the Hearth” (Brito May, 2008), the sacred stones of the hearth are mentioned in the second, fourth, and ninth sections of the poem. In the second section of the poem the sacred hearth stones are referred to as “the three luminous stones of the turtle.”

(II)	(II)	(II)
Bejla' áak'ab k'iine <b>u yóoxp'</b> <b>éel s'aasil áak tuunicho'obe'</b> , sáam u yiiluba'ob te'nojol, xaaman, chik'iin beyxan te' lak'iino' je'bix tu ts'u' chúumuk ka'ane'. Tumeen lela', u nuxi' tsáab kaan ti' ka'an.	En esta noche, <b>las tres luminosas</b> <b>pedras de la tortuga</b> , se han encontrado en el sur, norte, oeste y este como en el centro del infinito. Porque ésta es la gigantesca cascabel de la serpiente del cielo	On this night, <b>the three luminous</b> <b>stones of the turtle</b> have been found in the south, north, west, and east as well as in the center of the infinite. Because this is the gigantic rattle of the snake of the sky.

In this context, the three luminous stones of the turtle are symbolic references to the three principal stars of Orion's Belt (Alnitak, Rigel, and Saiph) (Tedlock, 2010). This constellation marks the sacred date of the beginning of the Creation when the sky was lifted off of the earth and the First Father/Mother placed the three sacred stones in the great celestial rattlesnake's tail (the ecliptic). By simultaneously placing these three sacred stones in the sky and the earth, the great Creator set into motion not only time, but also Mayan consciousness and cultural memory. By continuing to place the three sacred stones in their hearths, contemporary Maya both remember and reenact (on a human scale) the drama of Creation.

In the fourth section the poet explains that “the three stones of the night turtle” were placed at the dawn of his life, just as they were at the time of Creation.

(IV)	(IV)	(IV)
Tu chúumukil ichnaj ti'an u <b>yóoxtooolil áak tuunicho'ob</b> <b>áak'ab</b> , ts'aban ti'al u káajal in ku''uxtal, je'bix kaajik le yóok'ol kaaba'.	En medio de la casa hay <b>tres</b> <b>pedras de la tortuga nocturna</b> , puestas para el comienzo de mi vida, como fue el principio del mundo.	In the center of the house there are <b>three stones of the night turtle</b> , placed at the dawn of my life, like it was the beginning of the world.

By stating that the stones mark the beginning of his life, as they do the beginning of the world, the poet presents a perspective of time and cultural regeneration that is both concentric and cyclical. In other words, his birth as the beginnings of a new generation is, on a much smaller scale, another version of the Creation or re-generation of the world. Furthermore, by placing the three stones in the intimate center of the home (the hearth) and in the immensity of the night sky, the poet reflects on a conception of time and regeneration that is both familial and cosmic. Finally, that the stones of the hearth and of the sky must be tended on a regular basis means that the responsibility for cultural Creation and regeneration belongs to both humanity and the divine.

In the ninth section the poet states that with the arrival of the powerful creator deity *Itzamna'* the whole process or circle of being is complete and begins anew.

(IX)	(IX)	(IX)
Le'ela u Éek' Wayil Och Bej u yeets' chi'il metnal u éek'joch'e'enil k-icho'ob.	Este es el portal nocturno el descenso del camino y espejo de la muerte, oscuridad de los ojos.	This is the nocturnal portal the descent of the path and mirror of death, our eye's darkness.

<p>K'uch Itzamna' k-iknal, ka tu  k'amjo'on yéetel uts óolal,  tu ts'áaj tu ka'atéen tu  <b>yóoxp'él áak sáasil tuunicho'ob</b>  tu yich ka'an, u <b>yóoxp'élil</b>  <b>tuunich k-otoch.</b></p>	<p>Itzamna ha llegado con nosotros  y nos recibe con gracia, puso de  nuevo <b>las tres brillantes piedras</b>  <b>de la tortuga</b> en el ojo del cielo,  <b>las tres piedras del hogar.</b></p>	<p>Itzamna has arrived and receives  us with grace, once again he has  put <b>the three brilliant stones of</b>  <b>the turtle</b> in the eye of the sky,  <b>the three stones of the hearth.</b></p>
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Bey túun káajik u tsool k'iinil  
yóok'ol kaabila'

*Itzamna'* has once again put the three brilliant stones of the turtle in the eye of the sky and in the hearth of the home. As the three stars mark the date of Creation, the fire in the three-stone hearth marks the re-Creation (regeneration) of collective memory, daily practice, and cultural continuity.

Although the hearth is not explicitly mentioned in “The House of Your Soul” or “Naj,” it is such an integral aspect of the traditional Mayan *naj* that it is inseparable from the house itself. That said, in the sixth section of “You Will Go to School” (Cuevas Cob, 2005) the poet utilizes the term *k'óoben*, which in general refers to the ‘kitchen and cooking hearth,’ and in Maya is also (and always) a specific reference to the traditional three-stone hearth (Bolles, 2001; Bricker et al., 1998; Ek Naal, personal communication, September 10, 2012; Gómez Navarrete, 2009).

<p>(VI)  Yaan a suut ta yaalanaj  tumen wa'ala'an u pa'atech  u k'anche'il tu'ux ka pak'ach  uaj, tumen <b>k'óoben</b> u ta'akmaj</p>	<p>(VI)  Volverás a tu cocina porque la  banqueta te espera.  Porque el <b>fogón</b> guarda en sus  entrañas un espejo.</p>	<p>(VI)  You will return to your kitchen  because your bench awaits you.  Because the <b>fire</b> holds a mirror in  its depths.</p>
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jump'éeel neen tu chuun u nak'.	Un espejo en el que estampada	A mirror upon which your soul is
Jump'éeel neen tu'ux tsáalal a pixan.	se halla tu alma.	imprinted.
Jump'éeel neen ku yawat	Un espejo que te invoca con la	A mirror that calls to you with the
páaytikech yéetel u juum u	voz de su resplandor.	voice of its brilliance
táan u léets' jul.		

In this section the poet writes that deep within the hearth there is a mirror on which the young woman's soul has been imprinted. In Mayan belief mirrors are polyvalent symbols that refer to the reflection of/or seeing into a person's soul, the connection between different generations, and a threshold between the living and beyond. That the hearth reflects this young woman's soul and calls to her, defines it as the place where she will find the deepest element of herself—her identity and place in the continuum of her family and cultural heritage.

The following list is a summary of what the concept of the three-stone hearth in this corpus signifies.

The three-stone hearth:

1. Is the symbolic reference to the three principal stars of Orion's Belt and the sacred date of the beginning of Creation.

“The Three Stones of the Hearth”

2. Is a symbolic reference both in the sky (as the constellation) and on earth (as the hearth) indicating the birth and regeneration of Mayan consciousness and cultural memory.

“The Three Stones of the Hearth”

3. Is an integral aspect of the traditional Mayan *naj* that is inseparable from the house itself.

“The Three Stones of the Hearth,” “The House of Your Soul,” “Naj,” and “You Will Go To School”

4. Is where baby girls' umbilical cords are buried and where women find the deepest element of themselves; their identity and cultural heritage.

“You Will Go To School”

5. Its continued use in Mayan contemporary homes is emblematic of collective memory and the belief and participation of Mayan families in cultural continuity.

“The Three Stones of the Hearth” and “You Will Go To School”

For the final concept, we have chosen the Ceiba or Mayan World Tree. Although this icon of Mayan belief is only evident in two of the poems, we believe its symbolic power and sequential placement in the corpus makes it a fitting topic upon which to conclude this chapter. First, the Mayan World Tree is a fundamental and polyvalent concept recurrent in ancient and contemporary Mayan literature (Freidel et al., 1993; Morales Damián, 2006; Taube, 1998). Second, as the Mayan sacred tree and regenerating pillar of the universe it is the symbol par excellence for Mayan cultural continuity (Freidel et al., 1993; Morales Damián, 2007; Sánchez Chan, personal communication, February 13, 2014). Third, because of the complexity and interconnectivity of its varied meanings and manifestations, it is emblematic of Mayan belief and expression. And finally, regarding the sequencing of this poetry, that the Mayan World Tree is both a key element in the first section of the first poem and the last section of the last poem makes it an essential concept that both begins and concludes the cycle of this corpus.

Brito May (2008) begins the first section of his poem by describing the first meeting of the sun and the Milky Way and their immersion within the branches of the Great Tree of the World. In this section the poet introduces the Ceiba as the deity or lord *Wakah-Chan*.

(I)	(I)	(I)
Bejlae' u yokol k'inne tu yiilubaj	Hoy desciende el sol	Today the sun descends
yéetel u sakbejlil ka'an, (sakbejlil-	con la vía láctea, hundidos	together with the Milky Way,
ka'an) t'úubano'ob ichil u k'ab	entre las manos del <b>gran</b>	submerged within the hands of the
<b>yuum Wakah-Chan.</b>	<b>Árbol del Mundo.</b>	<b>great Tree of the World.</b>

The Great Ceiba in this context is conceptualized as the *axis mundi* or pillar of the universe and is a manifestation of the deity **Wakah-Chan** or “Raised-up Sky” (Freidel et al., 1993, p. 53). As we have explained in our analysis, this deity’s name includes the number six and is a reference to the six essential directions of Creation: the earth’s center or *yáax*, the four sectors or cardinal directions, and the directional movement upward or skyward. Metaphorically, this section is a description of the initial stages of the creation of the current era when the Creator deity lifts the sky off of the earth and sets the constellations into motion. By lifting the sky off of the earth the Great Creator establishes a house defining the universe’s dimensions and orientations with its four walls (directions), three levels (sky, earth, underworld), and the Great Ceiba at its center (Hanks, 1990; Hirose López, 2007; Mathews et al., 2004). The Creator, by setting the stars into movement initiates the trajectory of the sun and constellations and as a result, begins human reckoning of the cycles of time (Freidel et al., 1993).

The Ceiba is also referred to twice in the third section of Brito May’s (2008) poem.

(III)	(III)	(III)
Bey túun káajiko'ona'.	Así comenzamos.	Like that we began.
Ts'o'ka'an k-kaaba'tik	Hemos sido nombrados Guacamayo	We have been named Macaw
Itzam-Yeh wa áayini', <b>nojoch ya'ax</b>	o cocodrilo del <b>gran ceibo.</b>	or crocodile of <b>the grand Ceiba.</b>
<b>che'il</b> , le béetike', Junab k'u'e tu	Por eso, el Creador nos hizo	For this reason, the Creator made it

béetaj k-síjil tu noj

nacer en la mano del **árbol**

that we were born in the hand of the

k'abil u **che'il túumben kuxtal.**

**de la nueva vida.**

**tree of new life.**

When the poet writes that: “Like that we began” “We have been named *Itzam-Yeh* ‘Celestial Macaw’ or *áayini* ‘this crocodile’ of the grand Ceiba,” he aligns the characteristics, qualities, and significance of two important entities from Mayan cosmology with Creation and Mayan cultural consciousness. The crocodile with its rough skin similar to the earth’s surface (or the bark of a young Ceiba), its lasting life, and its fertility is symbolic of the earth itself. Furthermore, the shape of the crocodile (especially when envisioned with its snout in the ground and its body and tail rising into the sky) is representative of how the great Ceiba is depicted as the *axis mundi* in pre-Hispanic images (De la Garza, 1998; Camino, 2007; Stross, 2007; Morales Damián, 2002). The Celestial Macaw perched at the top of the crocodile’s tail (or great Ceiba) with its magnificent plumage embodies the brilliant rays or face of the sun and is a visual metaphor for the solar zenith (Navarijo Ornelas, 2012). Most significantly, the crocodile and the macaw (or the Ceiba and the sun) in this formation are representational of the Milky Way in its north-south position as it revolves through the sky from zenith to zenith and are a recurring astronomical reminder of the dates of Creation (Freidel et al., 1993).

Brito May concludes this section by writing that “the Creator made it that we were born in the hand of the **tree of new life.**” By naming the Ceiba the tree of new life the poet brings in other aspects of its cultural significance. As we have said before, the Ceiba on the macro level is the center of the universe, but on the human level it literally embodies regeneration and continuity. As the tree of new life the Ceiba’s roots are the roots of Mayan culture and history and its fruit are the children of subsequent generations. In other words, how its massive roots and branches support and sustain the universe is synonymous with how its deep cultural roots

and abundant flowers and fruit nourish and sustain humanity (Ek Naal, personal communication, March 14, 2014).

We conclude with a discussion of the significance of the Ceiba in the last section of the last poem “I Am This” (Sánchez Chan, 1999).

(VII)	(VII)	(VII)
Teen le táant	Yo soy éste	I am this
in ch’uykiinsik in wayak’ ti’	que cuelga sus sueños al viento.	who hangs his dreams in the wind,
Yum Iik’o’, beyo’ ka’alikil in	Mientras espero que retoñe mi	While I wait for my <b>Ceiba</b> to sprout,
páa’tik u top’che’ in <b>X-ya’axche’e</b>	<b>Ceiba</b> , recorro caminos	I traverse subterranean paths
kin xíimbaltik in áak’ab bej’ tia’al	subterráneos en busca de piedras	in search of luminous stones,
in kaxtik ki’ichkelem tuun’ob,	luminosas, para edificar la Casa	to build the Great House
tial’al in beetik u Noj Najil le	Grande del nuevo Sol que vendrá.	of the new Sun that will come.
túumben K’iin bíin taalako’.		

In this final section the poet writes that after placing his dream on the Wind, he awaits the sprouting or rebirth of the *X-ya’axche’e* ‘Mother Ceiba’ or Mayan tree of life. After declaring his aspirations for agency (cultural, political, economic, civic, etc.), the poet is now awaiting the regeneration and fortification of Mayan culture symbolically represented by the resprouting of the sacred Ceiba.

The following list is a summary of the significance of the Ceiba in this corpus.

The Ceiba:

1. Is the Great Mother Ceiba or the Mayan tree of life.

“The Three Stones of the Hearth” and “I Am This”

2. Is conceptualized as the *axis mundi* or pillar of the universe and is a manifestation of the deity *Wakah-Chan* or “Raised-up Sky.”

“The Three Stones of the Hearth”

3. In the form of the crocodile and the macaw it is representational of the Milky Way in its north-south position as it revolves through the sky from zenith to zenith. In this form it is a recurring astronomical reminder of the dates of Creation.

“The Three Stones of the Hearth”

4. Is symbolic of Mayan continuity. Its roots represent Mayan culture and history and its abundant fruit are the children of subsequent generations.

“The Three Stones of the Hearth” and “I Am This”

5. Its re-sprouting represents the regeneration and fortification of Mayan culture.

“The Three Stones of the Hearth” and “I Am This”

### 6.3 Discussion of Main Themes

When we stated above that the *naj* is a cultural symbol deeply embedded in Mayan collective memory, it is clear from these poems and our research that this is also true of the three-stone hearth and the World Tree. As we have said previously, all three of these themes are polysemous symbols that are recurrent in Mayan literature from pre-Colombian to contemporary times (Taube, 1998; Tedlock, 2010; Morales Damián, 2006). Moreover, even when these themes are presented in this corpus as mundane objects (such as a dilapidated and abandoned house in “Naj,” a humble cooking hearth in “You will Go to School” or as the four posts of an altar in “The Three Stones of the Hearth”), their representations are still imbued with the complex symbolic significance that has its origin in this ancient expression. Examining and discussing how the symbolic meaning of the *naj*, the three-stone hearth, and the Ceiba or World Tree

overlaps in this corpus, helps us understand the following: (1) how these themes are conceptualized from a Mayan perspective; and (2) how and why the poets have used them to express cultural origin, identity, and continuity.

In the context of these poems, the *naj*, the three-stone hearth, and the Ceiba or World Tree all represent the locus of the Creation. To understand how such seemingly disparate symbols are able to mean the same thing, we have to refer to Mayan cosmology. For example, we know that the Mayan Creation narration conflates the initial partitioning of the universe with that of the construction, orientation, and function of a house, or *naj* (Freidel et al., 1993; Stuart, 1998). Furthermore, this partitioning of the world/house coincides with the simultaneous placing or centering of the three stones in the heart (or hearth) of the earth and in the sky (Freidel et al., 1993; Stuart, 1998); while the house defines the horizontal dimensions of the universe i.e., the four directions. The Ceiba growing through the center of everything connects the three vertical levels of the universe by extending its roots into the underworld, its trunk through the earth, and its branches into the heavens (De la Garza, 2007; Freidel et al., 1993; Hirose López, 2007; Valverde, 2001). In sum, although the *naj*, the three-stone hearth, and the World Tree are all distinct symbols, as images representing nesting centers of the universe (house→hearth→tree) they all mark the locus of Creation. In Figure 39 below we see the “house” of the universe partitioned both horizontally (as the four earthly sectors or directions) and vertically (as the nine steps of the underworld, the flat surface of the earth, and the thirteen steps of the heavens). Although in this particular graphic the sacred tree marks the center of the universe and there is no visual representation of the hearth, it is not difficult to imagine how both the Ceiba and the three stones in this sense are synonymous symbols designating the heart of Creation (Freidel et al., 1993; Rivera Dorado, 1986).

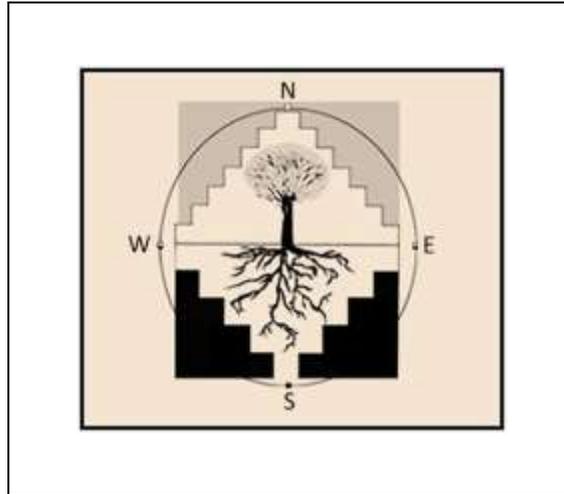


Figure 39. The Ceiba as the Heart of Creation. Adapted from *La religión maya*, by M. Rivera Dorado, 1986, p. 47.

In a similar vein, the *naj*, the three-stone hearth, and the Ceiba or World Tree all represent the source and center of Mayan cultural consciousness and continuity. First of all, the *naj* is where all traditional Maya are born and raised. For this reason it is the cultural foundation and nucleus where children learn language, time honored knowledge and skills, and develop their imagination, memory, perspective, and identity (Chi Canul, 2012; Cuevas Cob, personal communication, September 8, 2012; Langacker, 1997). Because the *naj* is the locus of family and lineage, it represents the core and structure of Mayan culture and identity for the future. The three-stone hearth as the heart of the *naj* is both a reference to the date of Creation on the cosmic scale and a reference—through the daily lighting and maintaining of the fire—of re-Creation on the human scale. As a symbolic reference both in the sky (as the constellation) and on earth (as the hearth), it indicates the birth and regeneration of Mayan consciousness and cultural memory. Its continued use in Mayan contemporary homes is emblematic of the active belief and practice of Mayan families to enact and promote cultural continuity. Finally, as mentioned previously,

the Ceiba or World Tree is also an icon of Creation, re-Creation, and cultural continuity. With its profound roots embodying the depth of Mayan culture and history and its abundant fruit representing the flourishing of subsequent generations, its resprouting symbolizes the regeneration of cultural consciousness and practice in action.

We have focused on these three themes because they are crucial to the understanding of these texts and the corpus as a whole. Furthermore, because they are iconic Mayan expressions that recur in ancient and contemporary writing their study plays an important role in the appreciation of Mayan literature. As a result, they have been utilized as a key aspect of our pedagogical proposal. Because they are polysemous symbols that are central to the overall meaning of these poems, we believe that their exploration could help students move beyond the Spanish translations of these works and get a deeper understanding of the complexity of the poets' worldview. Moreover, since much of the meaning of these themes is embedded linguistically, (refer to our diagram of the term *Ka'anche'* on pages 45 for an example), their examination promotes insight into how the Mayan language corresponds to Mayan cultural conceptualization.

## **Chapter 7 Pedagogical Proposal**

This chapter is divided into two sections and two subsections. Section 7.1 provides background information about why and how this proposal was developed, as well as the connections and potential partnerships that have resulted from this process. Section 7.2 is an overall description of the proposal itself. Because we have used both a formal academic approach and experiential/community based learning in this proposal, we have divided this section into two subsections that discuss each of these methodologies: Subsection 7.2.1 outlines the units of study that will take place in the university and Subsection 7.2.2 outlines two workshop units that will take place in the community.

### **7.1 Background Information for the Pedagogical Proposal**

In our experience teaching Spanish language and literature in various institutions, we have heard and read much about multiculturalism and the importance of teaching culturally relevant curriculum in the classroom. However, in the state of Oregon where “one in five public school students are now ‘Latino’, and the number is growing” (Graves, 2010, para. 6) and where indigenous Mexicans make up one of the largest groups of Latino immigrants in the state (Wozniacka, 2009), it is notable how little is being done to remediate this deficiency. How can we adequately educate students—especially students who are in training to be bilingual teachers—in university Spanish language and teacher training programs unless we teach curriculum that brings the indigenous Mexican perspective into the classroom?

As a way to address the scarcity or absence of the Mexican indigenous perspective in these programs, we envision a course that would be cross-listed in a university course catalogue under Spanish language, literatures, and education. This course would be for students who are Spanish speakers (either native or non-native) and who are in the process of, or are interested in

becoming, bilingual teachers (Spanish/English). It would also be appropriate for bilingual teachers already in the classroom who are seeking further professional development. Because this is an educational experience designed for teachers, half of the curriculum will be based on the linguistic and literary analysis of the poems and will take place in the university. The other half will be presented as experiential/community based learning and will take place in an elementary school in Portland situated in a community with a large population of Mayan families who are originally from the Yucatan Peninsula. We believe that by combining a theoretical and academic approach with a more applied methodology, teachers and teachers in training will have the opportunity to experience first hand how Mayan symbology expressed through language and literature can be taught in the classroom.

For this pedagogical project to be successful, we believe that its design and implementation must take into consideration the objectives and needs of all of the participants. For this reason, the following background information clarifies how the objectives of the poets/scholars align with and support the needs and aspirations of the Mayan community in Portland. Furthermore, it illustrates how common gaps in information about Mayan language and culture might impede teachers in their work with Mayan students and their families.

To understand how this lack of information could negatively affect Mayan students, it is important to know that Mayan children studying in Portland public schools are often placed in bilingual schools that primarily teach Spanish as a gateway to English. With this context it is not difficult to envision that if these children are speaking Spanish and English all day at school and living in an English dominant society, they are at risk of losing their maternal language and hence, their natural modes of cultural conceptualization. Furthermore, as school children coming from Mexico, they have become part of a growing statistic of “Latinos” in the public school

system. The problem with this label is that for this particular population it overlooks several important aspects of their identity. First, their maternal or ethnic language is not Latin based (Spanish), it is Maya. Second, their cultural heritage, although it encompasses being Latin American and Mexican, is also Mayan.<sup>189</sup> Third, designation as Latinos and not as Yucatec Maya erases a huge piece of their cultural identity (Lyman, Cen Montuy, & Tejeda Sandoval, 2007).

Unfortunately, it has repeatedly come to our attention that many educators (at the university and elementary level) are unfamiliar with contemporary Mayan languages and cultures. This is evidenced by the multiple comments we have heard about Maya being a dead or dying language and/or that there is very little “authentic” Mayan culture left (Lyman et al., 2007). Although we are happy to state that these comments are not true, it is sad to report that they are based on ignorance that persists. These children and their families are *not* relegated to a moribund language and an ancient and/or dying society, but are living members of vibrant communities. Moreover, whether they are living in the Yucatan Peninsula or in Portland, Oregon they are the modern descendents of a great culture and civilization.

We share the poet/scholars’ fears that if these children lose their maternal language and strong connections to their cultural heritage they are at risk of losing their linguistic and cultural identity and security (Cuevas Cob, personal communication, September 8, 2012; Sánchez Chan, personal communication, February 13, 2014). This is especially grave when we consider that “most Yucatecan migrants [in the U.S.] are undocumented” (Lewin Fischer, 2007, p. 20). Our point is that even if these children were born in the U.S and have citizenship, chances are other members of their family, including their parents and even older siblings do not share their legal

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<sup>189</sup> It is important to note that because they live and are being educated in the U.S., their cultural heritage also includes their experience in the United States.

status. Consequently, the entire family is vulnerable and living under extremely precarious and stressful circumstances. For these reasons, we argue that for these children to also lose aspects of their linguistic and cultural identity is a tremendous sacrifice. This loss potentially leaves them belonging neither here nor there without the cultural identity and security that all children need and deserve for their healthy development (Lyman et al., 2007; Sánchez Chan, personal communication, February 13, 2014; Skutnabb-Kangas, 1998).

Although we believe the university could and should advocate for these families in many ways, as university Spanish language literature teachers we feel this is one project that has the potential to address some of the issues described above. Namely by: promoting the celebration and teaching of Mayan language and culture in the elementary school and university classrooms; by increasing knowledge about Mayan language and culture on the part of teachers and teachers in training; and by providing a direct link with the poet/scholars to the Mayan community and teachers (elementary and university) in Portland. Another important attribute of this project is that the Mayan poet/scholars will be the intellectual authorities directing and doing most of the teaching. Unfortunately, it is still all too common for U.S. academics to study Mayan culture strictly through the perspective of non-Mayan scholars. Consequently, having the poet/scholars lead the workshops and teach as much of the university course content as possible<sup>190</sup> will make them the intellectual leaders of this project and will help dispel this kind of thinking and practice.

By beginning our pedagogical project at the university with a rigorous academic approach, our hope is not only to eliminate some of the misconceptions outlined above, but to give the student/teachers a solid intellectual base for understanding and appreciating the beauty and complexities of Mayan language and culture. With a more intensive introduction to Mayan

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<sup>190</sup> Depending on their schedules and how much time they will be able to stay in Portland.

language and culture, we believe that the student/teachers will be able to understand and value the activism of the poets and obtain a much deeper comprehension of their poetry. Moreover, they will be able to recognize that the complex conceptualization that is evident in this poetry (such as with the main themes: the *naj*, the three-stone hearth, and the Ceiba) is indicative of how people think and communicate in Maya. And finally, we hope that once they have an appreciation of the complexities of Mayan conception, they will be more in favor of promoting activities and programs supporting Mayan linguistic and cultural continuity in their community. In conclusion, we believe that because this project combines the rigors of academia and the purpose of activism with the hands-on experience of community based learning it has the potential to create an effective course for student/teachers that is both meaningful and transformative (Furco, 1996; Berger Kaye, 2010).

The preparation for this proposal began with our interviews with the poets and scholars. After discussing their poems and objectives, we asked them if we were able to gather the funds and put all of the pieces together if they would be interested in participating in workshops with bilingual teachers and teachers in training in Portland. They were also asked if they would be interested in working in bilingual classrooms (also in Portland) with elementary age students and lead literature/writing workshops. Their response was overwhelmingly positive. The second step was to speak with *Bilingual Teacher Pathway*<sup>191</sup> at Portland State University and ask if they would be interested in listing this course as part of their bilingual teacher training program. Their response was also very positive and they assured us of their full participation and support. We then went to an elementary school in Portland that is situated in a community with a large population of Mayan families originally from the Yucatan Peninsula. After several meetings

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<sup>191</sup> *Bilingual Teacher Pathway*, as its name implies, is a program designed to encourage and support speakers (especially native speakers) of languages spoken by large immigrant populations in Oregon to become bilingual teachers in the state <http://www.pdx.edu/ci/bilingual-teacher-pathway>.

with Mayan families and community activists they not only expressed their enthusiasm for our project, but explained that it corresponded to their hopes and aspirations for providing language and cultural resources in Maya for the entire family. They also affirmed that they were very much in favor of using their children's school as a venue for classes and presentations (Personal communication with Mayan parent/activists, June 14, 19, 21, 2013). We then spoke with teachers and community outreach specialists at the school. They explained that since the project dovetailed with their desire to better understand Mayan culture and language and to foment a better relationship with their Mayan students and their parents, they would gladly pledge their support and participation (Personal communication with Portland public school teachers and outreach specialists, June 14, 2013). Our last step was to identify and speak with funding sources in the university and the community, as well as agencies and organizations connected with the Mexican government. Our project again met with interest and assurances of support. In sum, although this proposal is theoretical, because all of the people and organizations involved have expressed sincere enthusiasm and have pledged their support, we feel it is a realizable project. Moreover, we believe that there is enough interest, collaborators, and supporters to make it an on-going endeavor that could develop and grow over time.

From our experience in working in community based projects for over 20 years, we have learned that to make this type of educational approach successful and sustainable the needs being addressed, the overall objectives, and the amount of commitment expected must be agreed upon and sanctioned by all of the participants. For this reason, as we have stated above, the direction and core ideas for this project have come from our discussions and interviews with the poet/scholars, the Mayan parents and community activists, the elementary school teachers, and the coordinators of *Bilingual Teacher Pathway*.

## **7.2 Pedagogical Proposal**

The following proposal because of its theoretical nature is written as an outline and does not focus on curricular details (such as explicit assignments and means of assessment, etc.). Nevertheless, it does describe how the course is divided into ten units and what each of these units will cover. It also explicates that the first eight units, since they are of a linguistic and literary academic nature, will take place at the university; while units 9 and 10 because they are in the format of workshops working directly with teachers and school children, will take place in the elementary school.

As there are two venues listed (the university and the elementary school) the following subsections 7.2.1 and 7.2.1 are organized by the units and activities that will be presented in each locality. Because this course would be taught under the auspices of *Bilingual Teacher Pathway* at Portland State University and they follow the quarter system, the entire course is projected to take place over a two-term period of twenty weeks. Each of the following units represents a two-week period of instruction and activities.

### **7.2.1 At the University**

This portion of the course is directly related to the teaching of this corpus. Our idea is that by learning about the Mayan language and its literary history and then studying these five poems, students (teachers and teachers in training) will get a basic introduction to Mayan symbolism and a better understanding and appreciation for Mayan language and culture. Moreover, they will become aware of the complexities of Mayan conception expressed both in language and literature (Brown, 2008; Lucy, 1997).

## **Unit 1: Mexican Indigenous Languages**

This course will begin with a basic overview of Mexico's indigenous linguistic and cultural diversity. We will then narrow our focus and students will learn about the areas in Mexico (and Central America) where Mayan languages are spoken. This unit will conclude with a presentation on Peninsular Maya that will include basic demographical information about speakers of the language living in Mexico as well as large communities living in the United States.

## **Unit 2: Introduction to Peninsular Maya**

In this unit we will concentrate solely on Peninsular Maya presenting students with a basic overview of the language's pronunciation, spelling variations, and agglutinative morphology. If possible this presentation will be taught by a Mayan scholar (such as Donny Limber Brito May or Rolando Ek Naal) either in person or by teleconference.

## **Unit 3: An Introduction to the History of Mayan Literatures**

In this unit students will get an overview of the history of Mayan literatures (pictorial to alphabetic). The unit will focus on recurrent poetic techniques used in ancient and contemporary poetry such as parallelism and *difrasismo*. Examples demonstrating these techniques will come from our corpus as well as from pictorial and alphabetic pre-Colombian and Colonial works.

## **Unit 4: The resurgence in Mayan literature and the Process of Translation**

In this unit the class will study the development of the resurgence of Mayan literature from the 1980s to the present time. Since the poets of this corpus are direct participants in its resurgence, their experience and writings on the subject will be fundamental to the presentation of this topic. As much as possible this unit will be taught directly by the poets themselves (in

person or by teleconferencing) and readings will primarily come from other Mayan writers and scholars that have participated in this movement.

In the second part of this unit the class will study the challenges inherent in translating between very distinct cultures and languages such as Maya and Spanish. If feasible the poets themselves will discuss their process of self-translation with the class and explain how they convey the complexities of the Mayan worldview in Spanish.

### **Unit 5: The *Naj*, the Three-stone Hearth, and the Ceiba**

In this unit the students will focus on the concepts of the *naj*, the three-stone hearth, and the Ceiba. These concepts will be presented to the class as key symbols from Mayan cosmology and as principle themes in the five poems they will soon be reading. In order to give students a general understanding of their symbolic significance as well as an appreciation for the consistency of their meaning over time, these three themes will be examined using both contemporary and historic literature.

### **Unit 6: The Corpus (the First Three Poems)**

In this unit the class will read the last three poems, “The Three Stones of the Hearth,” “The House of Your Soul,” and “House.” Each poem will be read closely giving the students time to reflect upon and discuss what they have learned, understand and struggle to understand. In these class discussions particular attention will be paid to how the three themes of the *naj*, three-stone hearth, and the Ceiba correspond to the overall message or meaning of each poem. If possible, the poets will read their works directly to the class in both languages in person or via teleconferencing. After each of these readings, there will be a discussion period in which students will be able to question the poets directly.

## **Unit 7: The Corpus (the Last Two Poems)**

In this unit the class will read “You Will Go to School” and “I Am This.” This unit will follow the same format described above in Unit 6.

## **Unit 8: The Corpus as a Narrative and the Promotion of Linguistic and Cultural Continuity**

In this unit we will discuss the corpus as a cohesive narrative. As part of this discussion, we will compare and contrast how the main themes are presented in each work and how they function as a connecting thread through all of the texts. In this unit we will also ask students to identify other concepts that recur in these works. As a class we will discuss the relevance of these concepts in each poem, how they correspond to the three main themes, and how they function in the overall narrative.

In the second part of this unit, the class will be presented with readings and discussions about current efforts to promote Mayan literature in Mexico and the United States. This lecture will also include a discussion on the efforts by the poets and others in Mexico and Oregon to promote Mayan linguistic and cultural continuity. As a conclusion to this unit, we will formally invite Mayan cultural activists in Portland <sup>192</sup> to speak to the class on their efforts and projects to promote linguistic and cultural awareness in their community. After finishing the literature class at the university, poet/scholars, the teacher/ students, and the professors will continue the course out in the community at the designated elementary school.

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<sup>192</sup> There are several Yucatec Mayan cultural activists/leaders in Portland that have expressed an interest in this study and a willingness to speak to students on their multiple objectives and projects. One of these leaders, LLeny Ku is the director of Grupo Lolbé [grupololbe@gmail.com](mailto:grupololbe@gmail.com). Lolbé is a traditional Yucatec dance troupe that organizes street festivals open to the public and promotes Yucatec Mayan dance, food, and traditional games for the entire family. Although this is only one small aspect of what they do, it is important to note that these festivals are now established events occurring over an area of several city blocks and are well attended by both Maya and non-Maya families.

### **7.2.2 In the Community**

As stated above, this portion of the course (Units 9 and 10) will be presented as a series of workshops that will initially take place at the elementary school. Spanish speaking teachers teaching at the school not enrolled in the class and parents interested in promoting Mayan language literature in the classroom and at home will be encouraged to participate in the workshops outlined in Unit 9.

#### **Unit 9: Mayan Culture and Language in the Classroom (Workshop Series 1)**

To prepare for the first workshops, participating teachers (at an earlier time) will be asked to fill out a brief questionnaire about the levels, abilities, and interests of their students. In this questionnaire they will also state their preferences for the presentation topics on Mayan culture, language, and literature that will take place in their classrooms. The questionnaire will provide information such as the age and grade of their students and at what level they are reading and writing in Spanish. It will also ask the teacher to order, according to their preferences, the following possible workshops:<sup>193</sup>

1. An introductory Mayan language class for children.
2. A cultural presentation through Mayan children stories.
3. A childrens' writing workshop in Maya and Spanish.
4. A cultural presentation through Mayan music and children's songs.

The purpose of the questionnaire is to give the Mayan poets and scholars a better understanding of the children and the workshop preferences of the Portland teachers. The poets will get this information well before the events to help them develop and prepare for their workshop

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<sup>193</sup> These are all workshop topics that were discussed and approved with enthusiasm by the poets and scholars during our interviews. Mr. Ek Naal is a recognized Mayan scholar and musicologist which is significant since from a Mayan perspective, literature, music and dance are interrelated and intrinsic aspects of cultural expression (Freidel, et al, 1993).

presentations. Four two-hour workshops will take place over a period of two days. The poet/scholars will present their workshops in the classes with the largest concentration of Mayan children (from kindergarten to third grade). As much as possible, the poets will incorporate the symbolism from their poems into the workshops. Although these workshops will take place at the elementary school, the rest of the unit (two-week) time period will be spent at the university with the teacher/students assisting the poet/scholars in their preparations.

On the dates of the workshops each of the poet/scholars participating in this project will present their topic from the list above in one of the selected classrooms at the elementary school during school hours. During these presentations the university student/teachers will act as class assistants. These presentations (as the themes imply) will be geared towards the children, but will incorporate any community member or teacher that is also attending. The overall objective of these workshops is to provide the children, community members, and teachers with the opportunity to learn directly from these renowned Mayan poet/scholars. As they are eminent Mayan writers and cultural scholars who are recognized in their home communities and abroad, they bring a perspective and profound cultural knowledge that is not available to many of these families living in diaspora.

#### **Unit 10: Mayan Culture and Language in the Classroom (Workshop Series 2)**

The project/course will culminate in a final series of teachers' workshops at the university (without the children present). In these events participating elementary school teachers and the student/teachers from the university will work together in small groups to create curriculum presenting Mayan culture for elementary students with help and guidance from the Mayan poets/scholars. As a way to archive their projects and to support future curriculum

development pertaining to Mayan culture, all of the presentations, workshops, and poet/scholars lectures will be filmed and/or recorded and shared online through a blog.

By combining the university literature course with the presentations and workshops, bilingual teachers/teachers in training will learn about the complexity, beauty, and history of the Mayan language, culture, and literature. By studying fundamental cultural symbols and seeing how they are expressed linguistically and are recurrent in both ancient and contemporary literature they will learn to recognize unique qualities inherent in Mayan conceptualization. Finally, by studying these poems and then working with the poets in the schools (especially with children and their parents with Mayan heritage), these teachers and teachers in training will experience how language, culture, and culturally specific modes of conceptualization are the underpinnings of identity and of identity security (Sánchez Chan, personal communication, February 13, 2014; Skutnabb-Kangas, 1999). As a consequence, we are convinced they will have a better understanding of, and appreciation for, these author/activists' objectives and efforts in promoting Mayan cultural and linguistic continuity.

It is important to remember that the poets of this corpus are part of a literary and social movement. As both artists and activists they write to celebrate their language and culture and to stop linguistic and cultural loss. As we have mentioned above, more and more Maya are losing their maternal language and are compelled to leave their home communities. As a result, Mayan linguistic and cultural continuity is increasingly threatened, especially among the young. And, as these poet/scholars are painfully aware, once a language is lost to younger generations—which is an active not a passive loss—it is lost (Cuevas Cob, personal communication September 8, 2012; Sánchez Chan, personal communication, February 13, 2014; Skutnabb-Kangas, 1998).

Yucatec Maya whether they are living in Mexico or in diaspora in Portland, Oregon have the right to speak their language and maintain their culture. They also have the right to know that their language and culture have produced a vibrant literary tradition that has developed over millennia. Unfortunately for Maya families living in the United States, exercising these rights is very difficult. This is in part due to the dominance of English over Spanish and Spanish over Maya. It is also because most Maya migrate to the United States when they are young<sup>194</sup> and do not have the benefit of living and learning from elders in their community of origin or receiving extensive education (or any at all) in their maternal language (Ku, personal communication, June 21, 2013; Lyman et al., 2007; Martell, Pineda, & Tapia, 2007; Skutnabb-Kangas, 1999; Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco).

Our hope is that this study will result in members of the Yucatec Maya community in Portland being able to study with these renowned experts in their own language<sup>195</sup> and culture. We believe that when put into action our pedagogical proposal could develop into an established educational program, which would include ongoing Mayan language classes for the children and their families. As part of this ongoing program, we envision repeated and extended visits by the poet/scholars in which they would teach both at the school and the university.

In our conclusion below, we discuss what we feel are the most essential aspects of this entire study. Not surprisingly, the interdisciplinary approach to this investigation has produced a tremendous amount of information. It has also provided distinct methodologies and has created different means of synthesizing and communicating what we have learned. In sum, our linguistic and literary methodology and pedagogical proposal have allowed us to take this abundance of

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<sup>194</sup> Two issues that influence youthful Maya migration to the U.S. are: 1) the economic necessity compelling migration and the type of work that is available (such as in services, manufacturing, and construction), and 2) the dangers and physical risks inherent in clandestine border crossings (Martell et al., 2007).

<sup>195</sup> Which includes Spanish and English if necessary.

information and—not unlike a funnel—to sift (examine), channel (select), and distill (organize) our findings to arrive at and discuss what we believe are the most significant and useful results of this investigation.

## Chapter 8 Conclusion

This chapter is divided into three sections. Section 8.1 is the general conclusion. In Section 8.2 we discuss the limitations of this study and in Section 8.3, we explain what comes next concerning both our future research and our intentions for our pedagogical proposal.

### 8.1 Conclusion

The notion of '*naj*' is the common thread connecting the poetry of this corpus. And, even though it is a complex concept with each of the poems reflecting a different facet of its meaning, it is consistently conceptualized in these works as the locus of Mayan identity and the foundation and source of Mayan language and culture. Moreover, because the *naj* is a symbol for cultural and linguistic continuity, it reflects a Mayan perspective on social responsibility. In other words, according to Mayan belief (both ancient and contemporary) all Maya are responsible for the generation and regeneration of their culture (Ligorred Perramon, 2000; Lucero, 1998; Mathews et al., 2004). As an integral aspect of this trust, all Maya are responsible for passing on culturally specific modes of perceiving and expressing their worldview to future generations (Chi Canul, 2012).

For the poets of this corpus this is a serious charge and a primary motive for their writing. As explained earlier, they have all participated in or have been influenced by the Resurgence of contemporary Mayan literature and as activists write to promote their language and culture. For this reason, it is not at all random or accidental that the concept and symbol of the *naj* is what links their works into a unified corpus. As poets deeply concerned for the survival of their language and the flourishing of their culture, they have expressed their hopes and apprehensions through the utilization of this powerful and primary cultural icon. And as mentioned earlier, although much of their intent comes across in their Spanish translations, it is only in the original

versions of their poems that the multiple significance of the *naj* and the nuance and complexity of their perspectives and objectives are fully realized.

As these poets are part of (or influenced by) the Resurgence and concentrate on cultural and linguistic continuity as both a right and as social responsibility, these poems, although distinct in style and focus, have other recurrent symbols and tropes that unify them as a corpus. As we have explained in detail throughout our investigation, besides the *naj* the two most important symbols connecting these works are the three-stone hearth and the Ceiba. As seen in our analysis of each poem, there are many other symbols such as fire, paths, mirrors, etc. that play an important role in the corpus' overall narration. Nevertheless, we have intentionally narrowed our ultimate focus to these three symbols because they are essential for understanding Mayan perspective and practice concerning the Creation and re-Creation of their culture. Furthermore, because these symbols are fundamental to Mayan cosmology, they are examples of metaphorical representation that have been part of Mayan consciousness and literary expression for millennia.

Through the study of the poetry of this corpus and the key symbols of the *naj*, the three-stone hearth, and the Ceiba we are able to observe correlations and consistencies not only across the symbols themselves, but across modes of conceptualization inherent in both ancient and contemporary Mayan writing. By this we refer specifically to how these three key symbols embody (physically and metaphorically) the heart and/or center of Mayan Creation and re-Creation. And, as icons emblematic of Mayan cultural renewal and continuity, they have maintained their significance and relevance from pre-Colombian to the present time (Freidel et al., 1993; Morales Damián, 2006; Tedlock, 2010).

Our study of this poetry has also helped us to understand how Mayan culture and culturally specific modes of conceptualization are embedded in language. In particular, we refer to how the poets of this corpus have expressed complex networks of symbolic meaning through a nominal or concentrated use of language (Craveri et al., 2012; Hull, 2012; Ungerer & Schmid, 1996). As we have explained in our study, this expressivity is due to a system of “complex morphological affixing” inherent to the Mayan language (Lucy, 1992, p. 42). Because many Mayan terms are polysemous and are able to convey information that relates to multisensory experience, they have the capacity to incorporate layers of symbolic meaning into texts that are often coupled with sensory experiences relating to the natural world. Consequently, the poets are able to use a single term (such as *ka'anche'*) to transmit complex symbolic information deeply rooted in ancient beliefs that reflect a profound connection to the environment (Becquelin et al., 2012).

This complexity of perception and communication is also evident in the poetic styles and structures utilized by the authors. Through the use of poetic techniques such as *difrasismo* and parallelism, these poets not only express cultural perspective and significance, but also intricate modes of cultural conceptualization. As these tropes reflect structural aspects of the language and are poetic devices recurrent in ancient (glyphic and pictorial) and contemporary works, they demonstrate a conceptual, linguistic, and literary continuity spanning millennia (Bricker, 2007; Craveri et al., 2012; Hull, 2012; Monod Becquelin et al., 2008; Stuart, 2003; Zender, 2005).

All that we have described above—the three key symbols and the expression of symbolic meaning through compound terms and poetic structures—reveals modes of conceptualization specific to Mayan culture. Because this information provides us with a deeper understanding of Mayan cultural perspectives and expression we have used it as the foundation of our pedagogical

proposal. As we have stated earlier, our intention is to utilize what we have learned from this investigation to promote the teaching of Mayan language and culture in Portland, Oregon. By doing so, we will do what we can to help support Mayan families in their effort to promote their language and culture for their children. And as academics, we can also help achieve these aims by educating bilingual (Spanish/English) teachers about Mayan language, culture, and modes of conceptualization through the medium of literature.

In conclusion, our ultimate goal for this dissertation is to have a more comprehensive understanding of how the Mayan worldview towards cultural continuity is presented in the corpus of our study. In particular, we have tried to identify recurrent tropes and symbolism originating in ancient beliefs and expression that have maintained their significance over time. And through this identification, we hope to have a better understanding of the role of language in the communication of culturally specific modes of conceptualization.

## **8.2 Limitations of this Study**

### **1. Size of the Corpus:**

Clearly this is not an exhaustive study of Mayan contemporary poetry. To begin with, a comprehensive study of Mayan contemporary poetry as a type or genre of literature falls outside the scope of this investigation. Furthermore, since our approach is interdisciplinary and a principal focus of this study is cultural and linguistic continuity, we purposely limited our corpus to the selection of these five poems. Although we are aware that a larger corpus would have provided us with a broader view of contemporary Mayan poetry, we were compelled by the following reasons to curtail the number of poems for our investigation:

- We needed a corpus that was representative of the objectives of the Mayan Resurgence. Consequently, we only selected poetry reflecting the current Mayan literary production of authors who write to promote linguistic and cultural continuity.
- Since our approach of using a combined linguistic and literary analysis yielded an abundance of insightful information, the limit of five poems kept the dimension of our investigation to a manageable size. This dual analysis, by revealing in-depth information from both a linguistic and a literary perspective, provided us with more than sufficient material to do a detailed investigation.
- Because we aimed for an application of this investigation through a pedagogical proposal, our corpus needed to correspond (in size and focus) to our curricular objectives. This meant we selected individual poems that were varied in style, perspective, and complexity that when combined as a corpus could be taught within the limited time period of university instructional units.

Overall, the small size of our corpus has been mitigated by the dual analysis of our methodology and is a positive factor because it made it possible to incorporate three disciplines into our study and accomplish our overall objectives.

## 2. Our Limited Knowledge of the Language:

We also wish to note that our limited knowledge of the Mayan language made it necessary for us to rely on the information provided by the poet/scholars, who were most generous with both their time and knowledge. And for this reason, the linguistic (and aspects of the literary) analysis of each poem is based on their knowledge and perspective. Although we acknowledge that our restricted knowledge of the Mayan language is a limitation, the poet's

generous insights compensated for our limitations and enriched and strengthened both the process and the results of this investigation.

In the same vein, our decision to emphasize semantics (in our linguistic analysis) instead of the morphosyntax of the language was primarily based on our interest and focus on the cultural significance and poetic expression of these works. And, even though knowledge of the formal aspects of the language would indeed have contributed to a deeper and richer comprehension of these texts, this was not within the scope of our training or our overall objectives. As it was, our semantic investigation revealed such an abundance of valuable information that it was a challenge to delimit and select only that which would best promote a deeper understanding of each poem and the corpus as a whole.

Ultimately, our selection of these five poems and decision to work with the poet/scholars has helped mitigate our limited knowledge of the Mayan language, while both enhancing and defining our investigation. The size of our corpus allowed us to focus more deeply on each poem and produce a more thorough analysis. Working directly with the poet/scholars and incorporating their knowledge and perspectives into our investigation not only broadened our research and augmented our findings, but created a most rewarding experience.

### 3. Cultural Bias:

Perhaps the most significant limitation we have faced throughout this investigation is our own Occidental perspective. As this is a complex issue that affected our investigation in different ways, we will discuss this limitation thematically. First of all, it is important to remember that there is no definitive dictionary of Peninsular Maya. As we have stated previously there are many regional (and even personal<sup>196</sup>) preferences and/or differences in

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<sup>196</sup> We were repeatedly told during our investigation by consultants that they (or someone) had a preference for one spelling over the other or that this was how something was spelled in this specific community, etc.

spelling. Even to the point that between the poems in this corpus and other versions of the same poem, we found identical words that were spelled differently. This forced us to consult various experts and dictionaries, which in most cases resulted in non-definite and diverse or ambiguous answers. Thus, we had to continually put aside our expectation for more concise and definitive information (especially from dictionaries) and learn to appreciate multiple and often more open-ended definitions. An example of this is the term *paakabil* translated into Spanish as ‘umbral’ and in English as ‘threshold’ found in the fourth poem of our corpus “You Will Go To School” written by Briceida Cuevas Cob (2005) (see Table 10 p. 195). In the various sources we consulted, this term had multiple meanings and a variety of spellings. Since our analysis always began with the meaning and the context of the poems and the comments and perspectives of the poet/scholars, we only incorporated the information we found from dictionaries and other outside sources when they both enhanced and opened<sup>197</sup> our understanding of the text.

Another issue arising from having an Occidental perspective is that we often approached a complex concept with the culturally biased notion that we would be able to grasp and explain it in discrete terms if we did a “complete” and “systematic” investigation. We soon understood that this was often not the case with Mayan symbolic conceptualization when we heard (on a regular basis) from the poet/scholars that their detailed answers to our questions were only basic explanations. What is more, to have a deeper understanding of the full significance and complexity of the concept would require extensive cultural and linguistic comprehension and exposure. When working with Mr. Ek Naal, he often would conclude a lengthy explanation of a complicated concept by stating that we had made a good beginning. And, that he would continue

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<sup>197</sup> When we say that the multiple meanings and spellings of a term “opened” our understanding of the text, we are referring to the creation and enhancement of meaning due to the confluence of multiple sources and types of information.

to add information when we had a better comprehension of the more fundamental aspects of the concept. Again, it was necessary to overcome what we began to comprehend was our cultural expectation and impatience for what we considered “concise” and “definitive” answers. We also had to learn that what was “methodical” for us was not necessarily the best approach for understanding the intricate conceptual relationships so common to Mayan literature.

In sum, although all attempts were made to moderate our cultural biases, we recognize that because we come from an Occidental background, the risk remains. Nevertheless, throughout this investigation we have attempted to follow the style or approach used by the poet/scholars to present information. In other words, we have learned to put our emphasis on the relationships between concepts so we may better appreciate how these relationships connect and create clusters or constellations of metaphorical thought.

### **8.3 What Comes Next**

The future of our project is two-fold since it concerns both our literary/linguistic research and our pedagogical objectives. For our long-term goals relating to research we feel that further investigation concerning the relationship between language, culture, and modes of conceptualization as is expressed in Mayan poetry would contribute to the general body of knowledge. We are particularly interested in exploring how the process of agglutination in the Mayan language relates to glyphic and pictorial writing systems. We would also like to study how tropes such as *difrasismo* correspond to both syntactical and visual forms of agglutination and reveal bimodal (multisensory) conceptualization as expressed in both ancient and contemporary Mayan literature. We believe that a deeper understanding of the correlation between agglutination and metaphorical expression through *difrasismo* could reveal modes of conception unique to this linguistic community. For example, we are interested in making a

detailed study of the examples of *difrasismo* in this corpus that are the same or similar to *difrasismos* coming from glyphic writings (such as we have done on pages 58-59 with the expression ‘*aak’ab/k’iine*’ ‘night/day’ meaning ‘time’ or ‘the passing of 24 hours,’ etc.). Working off of these examples, we would then examine parallel expressions in spoken language to distinguish if there are patterns or commonalities in the juxtaposition of symbolic elements that carry over into everyday thought and conversation. We would be particularly interested in the correlation these diphrastic expressions have with the natural world and how this linguistic and cultural connection to the environment has transformed (or not) over time. We would also be interested in devising pedagogical methods for incorporating the information gained from this study into future bilingual teacher training curriculum.

As for our goals relating to the realization of our pedagogical proposal, our first step would be to contact all of the potential funding organizations we mentioned in our pedagogical proposal and arrange a schedule that worked for the poet/scholars, the elementary school, and *Bilingual Teacher’ Pathway*. Although this process will take some time, we intend to realize this project between the 2014-2016 academic calendars. As part of this educational project, our hopes are to assist in the implementation of Mayan language classes for the children and their families throughout the academic year. Furthermore, with the help and support of the poet Feliciano Sánchez Chan and the organization Escritores en Lenguas Indígenas A.C. (ELIAC) in Mexico City we hope to bring to Portland (both to the elementary school and the neighborhood public library) a collection of bilingual children’s books in Maya and Spanish that have been written by Mayan authors.

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