The role of rain in postclassic Maya religious belief

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THE ROLE OF RAIN IN POSTCLASSIC MAYA RELIGIOUS BELIEF

by

LILLIE U. DAO

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Honors in the Major Program in Anthropology in the College of Sciences and in The Burnett Honors College at the University of Central Florida Orlando, Florida

Fall Term 2011

Thesis Chair: Dr. Sarah Barber
ABSTRACT

The concept of religion and its practice within ancient societies across the world is a subject that has fascinated scientists for centuries. The pre-Columbian Maya codices, first-hand Postclassic hieroglyphic documents, have been examined by hundreds of anthropologists. Analysis of these books has led scientist to hypothesize that these manuscripts were vitally connected to the Maya Postclassic belief system. Understanding the central focus of a civilization’s religion and how, why and under what circumstances the religion is practiced truly distinguishes them as a culture.

The intent of this thesis is to examine the role of rain in Maya Postclassic religious belief. Through an examination of Postclassic Maya ethnographies, archaeological evidence and the Maya Dresden, Paris and Madrid codices, this thesis evaluates the major theme of rain that is threaded throughout the culture and religion of the Maya people. By cross referencing ethnohistoric, ethnographic and archaeological evidence, it is revealed that rain was a fundamental-part of Maya religious practice as: 1) a symbol of fertility, 2) a phenomenon that people actively sought to control through religious practice and 3) as a fundamental building block of the Maya universe, construed broadly to encompass both the natural and divine elements of the universe.
DEDICATION

For Viên Nguyễn, Lành Đào and Huỳnh Nguyễn, my strong and loving grandparents who are in my heart every day

For Lâm Năm, my wonderful grandmother

For my family and friends- my unwavering support system

~

Thanks for making it all worthwhile
I express sincere thanks and gratitude to my committee members, who have been gracious enough to enable this project with their guidance, wisdom, and experience.

Special thanks go to my thesis chair, Dr. Sarah Barber.
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INTRODUCTION

The concept of religion and its practice within ancient societies across the world is a subject that has fascinated scientists of all fields for centuries. The pre-Columbian Maya codices, first-hand hieroglyphic manuscripts, and their portrayal of Maya religion have aroused great interest in the field of anthropology. The codices have been examined and deciphered by hundreds of anthropologists; but even so, many questions remain unanswered. The Maya people connected natural phenomena with divine beings and ritual. Thus, the different elements of the Earth were woven into Maya beliefs. This thesis is an in-depth study of one element of the Maya religious system: rain. Focusing on this aspect of Maya religion will shed light on a defining and unique aspect of the Maya culture. By cross referencing ethnohistoric documents (the Maya codices) with ethnographic and archaeological evidence it can be inferred that rain, a central theme within Maya religion, was a major focus of Maya religious belief, serving as: 1) a symbol of fertility, 2) a phenomena that people actively sought to control through religious practice, and 3) as a fundamental building block of the Maya universe, construed broadly to encompass both the natural and divine elements of the Maya world.

Understanding the central focus of a civilization’s religion and how, why and under what circumstances the religion is practiced truly distinguishes them as a culture. This thesis focuses specifically on the central religious theme of rain. Rain signs and the rain god are evident throughout the Maya codices. Evidence of the recurring theme of the rain and its direct connections with fertility, control of natural phenomena and the Maya peoples’ perception of the universe as a whole are provided in the proceeding chapters.
In these chapters, the data sets, ethnohistory, ethnography and archaeology derive largely from translations of the Maya codices of Dresden, Paris and Madrid. Additionally, there are more recent ethnographic accounts that provide information relevant to the codices. This thesis will distinguish the Maya people via the unique way in which rain is woven into their belief system.

OVERVIEW OF MAYA GEOGRAPHY, SOCIAL HIERARCHY AND POLITICAL ORGANIZATION

In my thesis, I have focused on the role of rain in pre-Columbian Maya religion. Although this thesis focuses on one key aspect of pre-Columbian Maya society, an overview of Maya geography, chronology, political and social organization is provided in order frame the context for the subsequent discussion of rain in Maya religious beliefs.

The Maya today and in the past have lived in southern Mexico and Central America. More specifically, what is considered as the core area of Pre-Columbian Maya occupation existed in what are now the present-day southern Mexican states of Chiapas, Tabasco, Quintana Roo, Campeche and Yucatán. The Maya region also extends throughout current-day northern Central America, including the nations of Guatemala, Belize, northern El Salvador and western Honduras (Coe 2002:47). Figure 1.1 shows a map of the Maya area with principal archaeological sites, major rivers and generalized environmental-cultural subdivisions.
Figure 1: Map of Maya area, showing principal archeological sites, major rivers and generalized environmental-cultural subdivisions (Sharer 2006)
The Maya have had a significant impact on Central America and its surrounding areas. Their presence can still be seen today threaded throughout the modern day Mesoamerican land, people and culture. “The distribution of the ancient ruins of the Maya civilization, and the settlements of their descendants, covers a geographic area of some 324,000 km² (125,000 sq. mi.), a region roughly the size of the state of New Mexico” (Sharer 2006:23). There have been five centuries of social change since the Spanish conquest- but despite this the Maya people and languages have managed to survive and continue to expand in numbers. It is also important to note that the Maya region is divided into three basic geographic zones: the Pacific coastal plain in the south, the highlands in the center, and the lowlands in the north. (Sharer 2006:30)

The Dresden, Madrid, and Paris codices were written in the Postclassic period, one of several pre-Columbian time periods defined by archaeologists. The chronological framework of the Maya is divided into five broad periods: “Paleoindian (or Lithic), Archaic, Preclassic, Classic, and Postclassic. Two of these periods are further divided, creating 10 periods in total” (Sharer 2006: 98). Table 2.1 details the periodical divisions.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Period</th>
<th>Estimated dates</th>
<th>Major cultural developments</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Paleoinindian or Lithic</td>
<td>12,000/20,000–8000 BC</td>
<td>Initial settlement of the Americas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Archaic</td>
<td>8000–2000 BC</td>
<td>Settled communities and agriculture</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Early Preclassic</td>
<td>2000–1000 BC</td>
<td>Initial complex societies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle Preclassic</td>
<td>1000–400 BC</td>
<td>Growth in socioeconomic complexity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Late Preclassic</td>
<td>400 BC–AD 100</td>
<td>Initial states</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Terminal Preclassic</td>
<td>AD 100–250</td>
<td>Decline and transformation of states</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Early Classic</td>
<td>AD 250–600</td>
<td>Expansion of lowland states</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Late Classic</td>
<td>AD 600–800</td>
<td>Apogee of lowland states</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Terminal Classic</td>
<td>AD 800–900/1100</td>
<td>Decline and transformation of states</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Postclassic</td>
<td>AD 900/1100–1500</td>
<td>Reformulation and revival of states</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1: Estimates dates and major cultural developments associated with the 10 pre-Columbian time periods (Sharer 2006)
Two aspects of the Maya culture that evolved but also maintained its foundation with the changing times was the Maya social and political system. The Maya had two primary social divisions during the pre-Columbian period: elite and non-elite. It was these social distinctions that defined and underlay every level of Maya society. “Although these organizations were diverse, over time distinctions in status, wealth and power gave rise to a complex society with two major social groups or classes, elite and non-elite. The highest echelons of society shaped many of the fundamental attributes of Maya civilization” (Sharer 2006:86). Most sources of inequality and power in the Maya world were economic. But some individuals had religious authority as their source of power, “those who controlled religious rituals that were believed to be able to ensure rainfall, food, and protection from harm held a great deal of potential power over others in society.

Knowledge of the environment and the belief that some people could foretell and influence events spawned religious specialists and became another source of inequality and power within Maya society” (Sharer 2006:88). These authorities were priests who were perceived as foretellers of agricultural cycles. As I discuss in the chapter on cultural context, the Maya codices were religious tools used by the priestly class. The Postclassic period continued many classic life ways for the means to reinforce power and authority but it surely came with its distinctions as a Maya pre-Columbian era. As opposed to the Classic past, the Postclassic period offered a less centralized political system. “One lord was often identified as paramount among a collective body or ruling council. But decision making and responsibility for successful action was shared among a ruling oligarchy, rather than concentrated in a single individual as it had
been in the Classic past” (Sharer 2006:627). But notably, the Maya religion and its role at the major reinforcement of authority in the Postclassic states remained.

The Maya civilization was truly a complex society. The Maya people have left so much material culture behind for current day scientists to examine and reconstruct life during pre-Columbian Maya times. Having a general hold on Maya geography, social hierarchy, political structure and the Postclassic time period allows one to understand the time, locality and organizational frame under which the data sets used in this thesis. In order to have a greater understanding the Maya religious system, Maya historical documents and Maya ethnographic and archaeological case studies are cross examined in order to distinguish the Maya culture through the religious rituals and attributions to rain.

POSTCLASSIC MAYA CODICES

This thesis, to a great extent, explores ethnohistoric research that has been done on the Postclassic Maya manuscripts called codices. These codices were written in the Maya system of hieroglyphs. In the Maya culture, hieroglyphs were “carved, sculpted, and painted texts in many places: the facades of buildings, stone monuments (stelae), wooden objects, and pottery vessels; they even tattooed their bodies with hieroglyphs” (Vail 2011). A large amount of artifacts with Mayan hieroglyphic writing has survived. But as far as the codices are concerned, many Mayanist agree that there were at one point in time hundreds of codices, many more than those that have survived today. Many were destroyed during the conquest by the Spanish. (Vail 2011)
The physicality of the codices has allowed them to endure wear, tear and war. “The Maya codices are screen fold books painted on paper made from the bark of the fig tree. They were produced by coating the paper with a stucco wash and then painting it with glyphs and pictures” (Vail 2011). There is much debate about the exact geographic origins and dates of the codices, but it is generally accepted among many decipherers of the codices that the manuscripts were written in the script used throughout the lowland Maya area during the 2nd century A.D. to the 15th century. There are a total of four surviving codices: 1) Dresden, 2) Paris, 3) Madrid and 4) Grolier. The Grolier has been considered the most suspect of them all after radio carbon dating analysis done by Coe. The Grolier has been dubbed by linguists as fraud- for that reason I have chosen not to examine the codex in this thesis.

To be more specific about the dating and provenience of the three other Maya codices, John Carlson (1979) attributes the Dresden Codex to the Early Postclassic period dubbing it the earliest of the codices. Thompson has proposed the provenience in Chichén Itzá. “With regard to the Paris Codex, Thompson thought that it was most likely drafted at one of the east coast sites such as Tulum or at Mayapán between the 13th and 15th centuries. Bruce Love agrees” (Vail 2011). As for the Madrid codex, there has been a great deal of recent research regarding its dating and provenience. “Scholarly opinion has generally favored a pre-conquest date for the Madrid Codex. But more recently, Michael Coe and James Porter have returned to the possibility of a post-conquest dating of the Madrid Codex and a Tayasal provenience” (Vail 2011).

Although there is been much debate about the dating and provenience of the codices, the relevance of the codices’ relation to religion will remain despite the region or time in which they were conceived. The prominent themes and ceremonies found within the codices are threaded
throughout all the periods of the Maya pre-Columbian era. This was a consistent aspect of their culture that can be seen in archaeological, ethnographic and ethnohistoric evidence. The dating and provenience of the Maya Postclassic codices are not exact but the reason for their naming is clear. According to Vail, the Madrid Codex is currently being housed in a special storage facility at the Museo de América in Madrid and it most likely made its way over via a Spanish priest or explorer who likely took it to Europe in the 16th century, but we know little of its early history. The Dresden and Paris codices, which were discovered in European collections in the 18th and 19th centuries, were named after the cities where they were housed.

It is also notable to mention the different structures that are found within the codices. The information in these documents are found in two formats “tables containing dates in the Maya Long Count calendar, which places events in absolute time, and almanacs organized in terms of the 260-day ritual calendar used throughout Mesoamerica for divination and prophecy. Both types of instruments combine hieroglyphic captions with pictures that refer to specific days, either within the ritual calendar or the Long Count” (Vail 2011).

These codices are all telling of the Maya religious system and its relation to rain. I am currently unable to decipher Mayan hieroglyphic writing but I will be analyzing research that has been done by several linguists and Mayanists that specialize in this field. I have chosen to include analysis done by specific individuals in this field because their work is most frequently cited in Maya literature regarding the codices and has been considered the general scholarly opinion. I examine analyses of Eric J. Thompson (1970) and Ernst Forstemann (1976) does on the Dresden Codex. I look at Bruce Love’s (1994) interpretation of the Paris Codex. Finally, For the Madrid Codex, I focus on analysis conducted by Gabrielle Vail, Victoria R. Bricker and
Martha J. Marci (2005). I closely examine what these Mayanists have deciphered and quantify the rain signs, citing specific examples that assert the roles of rain in Maya religious belief. By cross-referencing analyses done on codices with ethnographic and ethnohistoric accounts, it is possible to assert the roles of rain in the Maya in a more holistic framework.

CULTURAL CONTEXT OF THE POSTCLASSIC MAYA CODICES

The Maya Postclassic codices were held with high regard by the Maya people and utilized by only the high priests of the society (Love 1994). The codices were sought after for an understanding of natural phenomena and the workings of the Maya universe. The codices make it clear that the Maya world encompassed both the natural and the divine elements of the universe as one and the same. It was for this reason that the Maya aimed to control and understand their world via the codices. In an ethnographic report, Gates (1978) states that the Maya people were as attentive to matters of religion as to government. This observation is highlighted when one compares ethnohistoric, ethnographic and archaeological evidence.

Love (1994) adds a greater insight into the role of scribes during the Maya Postclassic, stating that archaeological evidence indicates that scribes held an elevated position because their books were entombed in lavish crypts but ethnohistoric and ethnographic sources help to solidify this. In Tozzer’s (1941) ethnographic accounts, it was apparent that during the sixteenth-century there was a clear distinction between the role of Maya native political ruler (lord) and priest. The lords that are distinguished by Tozzer are reported to have been dedicated to economic and political affairs while the priests absorbed themselves with “sciences and ceremonies… as well
as in writing books about them” (Tozzer 1941:27). It is evident that Maya sacred books, the
codices, belonged to the priestly class.

Priests were the handlers of the codices and were endowed with the duties of
maintaining, manipulating and directing the religious activities of the people. “A far-reaching
network of priestly knowledge was in place; books and the skills to use them emanated to the
outlands from the great centers of learning” (Love 1994:5).

In regards to the cultural context of the codices is it vital to understand what religious
implications were contained in the codical manuscripts and what they were used for. Thompson
(1972) addresses the contents stating that the codices are filled with calendrical computations,
divination and prophecy, prescriptions for rites and ceremonies and history. Their use can be
inferred through a rare eyewitness account from sixteenth-century Yucatan recorded by Landa,
provides the following detail:

“During the month Uo the priests… began to prepare by fasts and other things for
celebration of another festival… having assembled, clothed in their ornaments, at
the house of the lord, first they drove away the evil spirit as usual; then they took
out their books and spread them out on the fresh boughs which they had for this
purpose, and invoking with prayers and devotions an idol named ‘Kinich Ahau
Itzamna, who they say was the first priest, they offered him gifts and presents and
burned him before their balls of incense with the new fire. Meanwhile they
dissolved in a vessel a little of their verdigris with virgin water, which they said
had been brought from the woods were a woman had never penetrated. With this
they anointed the boards of their books so as to purify them. This having been
done, the most learned of the priests opened a book and looked at the prognostics
of the year, and he manifested them to those who were present. And he preached
to them a little, recommending to them the remedies for their ills, and he assigned
this festival for the following year to the priests or lord who was to celebrate it
(Tozzer 1941:153-154)”

This is an ethnographic account of a ceremonial reading of the inscriptions intending to
cast out malevolent spirits. After much preparation, the high priest opens the book and
pronounces the omens for the coming year. The priests were the messengers of the divine thus also taking on the roles of the controllers of the universe through their religious practice with the centralized guidance of the manuscripts. According to multiple ethnographic reports scenes like this one were played out by the thousands through the lands of the Maya in the centuries before the Spanish Conquest. “But the cataclysmic onset of Spanish rule and the Franciscan zeal for religious conversion forced native religion underground. Possession and use of the hieroglyphic books was punished by torture and death, and manuscripts were destroyed. Diego de Landa burned ‘a large number’ around the year 1560” (Tozzer 1941:76-79).

Despite the attempts of the Spaniards to culturally and religious strip the native people of their traditional life ways the codices and the practice of writing them survived in several forms. According to Love (1994) they survived in their pre-Hispanic form: screen fold pages with glyphs and pictures. The books endured in the hands of Maya priests who refused to convert. Sometimes the priests clandestinely secluded the books in the very towns where the Franciscans ruled, sometimes the books escaped with Maya people who fled to the hinterlands (Love 1994:5).

Today, our current Maya codical collection serves as a mere peep-hole into Maya religious beliefs and life. Understanding the cultural context and use of the codices allow for a more comprehensive understanding of the Maya belief system. By combining archaeological, ethnohistoric and ethnographic accounts that have direct relation to the codices it is gathered that the Postclassic Maya codices are undoubtedly manuscripts of the priestly class. They were handled in a manner that intended to gain control of the Maya world by means of religious practice.
A prominent set of gods found within the codices are variations of the Maya rain deity Chac, also referred to as God B (Thompson 1972). Academics have used variants of the spelling of the name including Chaak, Chaahk, and Chaac. For consistency purposes, “Chac” is used for the spelling of this god’s name in this thesis. Chac is commonly shown as a god with a reptilian face, a long often down-curling snout, and two curved fangs projecting downward from the mouth as seen in figure 2.

Figure 2: The long nosed Chac god is depicted here at Sayil, Mexico (Samus 2007)
It is notable to understand that Maya gods characteristically have multiple identities. It is thought that there are a group of gods that are of the essence of one deity.

Chac had four principle aspects, each linked to a cardinal direction and color: Chaak Xib Chaak, the Red Chac of the East; Sak Xib Chaak, the White Chac of the North; Ex Xib Chaak, the Black Chac of the West; and Kan Xib Chaak, the Yellow Chac of the South. A great festival held in honor of the Chaakob in the Maya months of Chen or Yax. Called ocna, meaning “enter the house”, the ceremony was devoted to the renovation of the temple dedicated to Chaak, who also was the patron of the Maya Ik day and the number thirteen. (Sharer 2006:739)

Landa and Schellhas (1904) also write of Chac being associated with the four cardinal directions. The vital role that the Chacs have in Maya life is well demonstrated by the many divinatory almanacs covering farming activities in the codices, in which the Chacs are chiefly present. Chacs are pictured, according Schellhas (1904), 141 times in the Codex Dresden, just about half the total of all portraits of gods. It is evident that the Chacs play a pivotal part within the context of the codices and Maya religious belief. Thus, understanding the identity of the Chacs is critical in examining their purpose and placement within the codices in a religious context. “Chac, according to the Motul dictionary, was a man of great stature who taught agriculture and whom the Indians held to be god of bread, water in the sense of rain, thunder and lightning” (Thompson 1972:252). Maya scholars have generally agreed that Chac is also identical to God B in the codices.

As mentioned earlier, the Chacs have multiple identities. Some, according to Thompson’s translations (1972) include Ah Toxon Caan chac is known as the distributor of the sky Chac, who produces fine enduring rain and the Ah Chalen Caan Chac, the clear water Chac. The multiple names that the Chac bears are done so in order to highlight the deity’s manifold functions.
(Thompson 1972:256). This also attests to the attention that the Maya paid to the fine nuances of rain and water, to the many ways these can materialize in a tropical environment.

The Chac god is one of many forms that the theme of rain takes within the codices. Throughout the codices, rain is manifested in Maya religious belief in many ways. For instance, in the Dresden Codex the theme of rain can be seen in the placement and use of illustrations, glyphs and signs indicating a downpour, ponds, and urine among others.
METHODS

In this thesis, I carefully examine the role of rain in Postclassic Maya religious belief. I show that rain was a central focus of Maya religious practice, serving as: 1) as symbol of fertility, 2) a phenomenon that people actively sought to control through religious practice; and 3) a fundamental building block of the Maya universe, construed broadly to encompass both the natural and divine elements of the universe.

To make my argument, I analyzed data from three sources: ethnohistory and ethnography, including supplementary archaeological evidence. By definition ethnohistory is the study of especially native or non-Western peoples from a combined historical and anthropological viewpoint, using written documents, oral literature, material culture, and ethnographic data (Merriam 2011). “Ethnohistoric sources are documents produced by Spaniards and other foreigners during the first centuries of occupation in the New World. Ethnographic sources are eyewitness studies carried out by anthropologists and other field workers” (Tozzer 1941). One particular ethnographic work that I look at is the accounts of the late Bishop Diego De Landa. Landa played a role in the Spanish conquest and was thought to have burned many Maya manuscripts. Landa had an agenda to convert the Maya people’s religion. Landa intended to strip the Maya people of their religious identity. This makes it quite ironic because I was able to cite his ethnographic accounts in order to support and strengthen the Maya’s pre-conquest religious identity.

I have specifically focused on analyzing and cross comparing the Maya written documents titled the Dresden Codex, Madrid Codex, and the Paris Codex. The Maya codices are
ancient scripts of the Maya people that are first-hand sources. These codices, written in Maya hieroglyphic script, give insight into the Maya life ways and culture. Their names are derived from the European city where they eventually ended up after the conquest. The codices that I have chosen to compare and contrast deal with calendar rituals and attributions to divination among many other subjects. “The Dresden Codex, Paris Codex and Madrid Codex contain almanacs that present texts, calendrical dates, and pictures of activities such as planting or

Figure 3: Pages from the Maya Postclassic (a) Dresden Codex (b) Madrid Codex (c) Paris Codex (Vail 2005)
harvesting crops, and religious ceremonies. These almanacs were used to schedule seasonal events and ceremonies” (Sharer 2006:129). The Dresden Codex is largely an exposition on divination and astronomy. The Madrid Codex is devoted to horoscopes and almanacs that were thought to be used by the Maya priests to assist them in their divinations and ceremonies. And what we have of the Paris Codex is has also previously been interpreted as ritualistic dealing with deities, ceremonies and the Maya zodiac.

The physicality of the codices bears some similarities with their distinguishable differences. For a comparative visual of the three codices that contain both refer to Figure 3. Between the three codices, there are a total of 210 pages and 8,100 hieroglyph blocks. For further detailing of the amount of glyphs and the pages’ size found in the Dresden, Madrid and Paris codices refer to Table 2.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CODEX</th>
<th>HEIGHT</th>
<th>LENGTH</th>
<th>AREA (2*h*w)</th>
<th>PAGE W</th>
<th>PAGES</th>
<th>GL BLOCKS</th>
<th>% OF TOTAL</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dresden</td>
<td>20.5cm</td>
<td>1.8m</td>
<td>7,380cm²</td>
<td>9.1cm</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>3,000+</td>
<td>37%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Madrid</td>
<td>23.5cm</td>
<td>6.8m</td>
<td>32,054cm²</td>
<td>12.2cm</td>
<td>112</td>
<td>3,700+</td>
<td>46%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paris</td>
<td>24.5cm</td>
<td>4.1m</td>
<td>2,009cm²</td>
<td>12.5cm</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>1,400+</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTALS</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>210</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>8,100+</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2: Detailed table of the Dresden, Madrid and Paris codices’ physical sizes and their amount of glyphs (Vail 2005)

On the following chapters, the theme of rain in the Maya belief system is asserted as: 1) a symbol of fertility, 2) a phenomenon that people actively sought to control through religious practice; and 3) a fundamental building block of the Maya universe. I present this information in one inclusive chapter with subsections. In these chapters I have quantified rain signs within the
Maya codices citing a number of specific examples pertaining to the Maya belief system. In my concluding chapter I review vital points of the subsections and I tie all three themes together for a holistic understanding of the central focus of the Postclassic Pre-Columbian Maya religion.
ROLE OF RAIN IN POSTCLASSIC MAYA RELIGIOUS BELIEF

In this chapter and its subsections the rain signs that have appeared within the Dresden, Madrid and Paris Codex are discussed. The rain gods’ signs, variants of the rain glyph and illustrations within the codices are described. I then draw conclusions about the reason for their presence and placement within the codices based on the codices’ cultural context and prior research and analysis done by Maya archaeologists, ethnographers, linguists, and historians. The Dresden, Madrid and Paris Codices are saturated with, if not devoted to, portraying the Postclassic period Maya belief system and its practice. In the sections of the codices where religion is addressed explicitly, the theme of rain is dominant. According to Gabrielle Vail’s (2011) findings, within the codices rain illustrations, glyphs and signs show up on 33 of the 74 (45%) pages in the Dresden Codex, 18 of the 24 (75%) pages in the Paris Codex and 47 of the 112 (42%) pages in the Madrid Codex. Within these codices the rain signs are almost always placed for an augural purpose in the context of weather or the success and problems of farming. In this chapter, the presence of rain signs within the Maya codices are deciphered and presented with evidence that make clear the role of rain in the Postclassic Maya religious system.

THE ROLE OF RAIN IN POSTCLASSIC MAYA RELIGIOUS BELIEF AS DEPICTED IN THE DRESDEN CODEX

Illustrations, glyphs and signs that represent rain found in the majority of the sections of the Dresden Codex indicate that divination and prediction of agricultural issues are a part of the
central focus of the Maya religion. I have focused on the sections that Thompson (1972) refers to as the “Torrential Downpour” scene and “The Farmer’s Almanacs: The Chacs”.

The “Torrential Downpour” section of the Dresden Codex is located on page 74 of the codex and it unique to all other pages in the codex. As Thompson (1972) points out, page 74 is dominated by one picture as seen in illustration 3.2. There are no divisions into horizontal bands or sections of the page. This is uncharacteristic of the majority of the pages of the Dresden Codex. This is the only page in the Dresden Codex in which an illustration dominates more than two-thirds of the entire page. “The painting depicts floods of water pouring earthward from the open mouth of a celestial dragon with subsidiary streams flowing from sun and moon cartouches suspended from the underside of the creature’s body. Additionally, an old goddess pours more water earthward from a jar she hold inverted in her claws” (Thompson 1972:88-89).

There have been many interpretations of this page of the Dresden Codex and virtually all explanations parallel each other. Forstemann (1967) states that the Torrential Downpour page denotes nothing but the end of the world and that perhaps what looks like a zero above the stream of water may likewise point to this calamity. Taube (1988) published that the scene depicted on Dresden page 74 has been associated with a flood referenced in colonial Maya sources said to have destroyed the previous creation of the world. Thompson had an additional perspective, he believed that page 74 of the Dresden Codex did not solely depict rain as the end of the world; he stated that “in view of the pages treating of rain and drought, it seems possible that the flood scene comes to symbolize the annual start of the rainy season. This page thereby would have a double function: to recall the flood and to glorify the arrival of the rains. The apparent maize seed sign would support this” (Thompson 1972:89).
Based on prior analysis of this page in the Dresden Codex, it is possible that the Torrential Downpour scene gives an insight into a prophecy that the Maya people had about the end of the world or a depiction of a past event. Thompson’s interpretation of the scene supports that this page is dedicated to the depiction of rain as a prophecy of a world calamity via rain. Page 74 of the Dresden Codex is concrete evidence of a way in which the Maya integrated prophecies of great rains into their belief system. Rain and water are depicted by the Maya codices as destroying and recreating the world attesting to the role of water as a fundamental building block of the Maya universe. Rain is both a creator and destroyer of the world. Page 74 of the Dresden Codex is a clear portrayal of rain as a destroyer but later in this chapter evidence of water as a creator will also be cited within the codices. It is within the section of the Dresden Codex in which Thompson (1972) refers to as the “Farmer’s Almanacs: The Chacs” where the message of rain as a creator is described.

The Farmer’s Almanacs are found in the Dresden Codex on pages 29-45. These pages are packed with the presence of the rain signs. Within the farmer’s almanacs, the function of rain is affirmed as a phenomenon that the Maya priests sought to control through religious practice as well as an important symbol of fertility. “This long chapter deals entirely with the problems of farmers- the weather and crops. It is dominated by the Chacs, the rain gods, but other deities make rare appearances” (Thompson 1972:94).

On Dresden pages 29a-30a, considered almanac 53, is a chant that translates placing “the Chacs at the four world directions and at the center of the Earth …this is a chant to the Chacs seated on the red tree of the east, the white tree of the north, the black tree of the west, the yellow tree of the south and in the midst of the Earth” (Thompson 1972:94). This is one of many chants
dedicated to indicating the Maya rain god’s central role within the Maya belief system. On these pages Chac is interpreted at being the focal point of the Earth as a supplier of rain. Also, Chac being shown at the corners of the universe is symbolic of this god defining the boundaries of the universe and serving as a basic element of the universe’s construction. This chant may have been used by Maya priests to practice divination in hopes that Chac would bring rain to the Earth.

Dresden pages 31a-39a, Almanac 55, are filled with tables and divinations and it is “an almanac that is clearly depicting an agricultural ceremony. A Chac holding a maize sign lies on the roof of the building. It is possible that this is a scene in which a prophecy is being received” (Thompson 1972:95). Moreover, within these pages there is a Chac that is shown with torches in both hands. The torches are translated by Thompson as thunderbolts being hurled by the Chacs. Sometimes, the Chacs hold burning torches, symbols of burning heat and drought, for the Chacs can both send and withhold the needed rain (Thompson 1972:253).

These pages are clearly a divination about the cycles of agricultural success, failure and also the seasonality of the tropical climate. The ceremony is intended to bring success but the torches indicate that a period of drought is imminent. The pattern of creation and destruction as a result of rain again is present here. Also included in Almanac 55 is a Chac that is depicted as sitting on a stool covered with jaguar skin, indicating that it a seat of authority, holding a maize sign. Thompson’s translations on the glyphs and signs on this page are read: “A new time of abundance of maize. Affliction of fighting for the maize offerings. Affliction of war. Destructive lightning storms. Hail our crops. The Chac’s fate in store for the crop. Destructive lightning storms. Drought. And then yet again thereafter, Abundance of maize. Chac” (Thompson 1972:96). There is a clear augural pattern in the translations of this page. There is a
large amount of agricultural success proceeded by short term agricultural failure. But in the end of the translation, success by the hands of the rain god is ultimately at the forefront. The Chac glyph is present at the very end after success is indicated, which is reflective of the god’s importance to the Maya people’s belief as the gods being central as a provider to the agricultural success of maize. On these pages, 31a-39a, there is a constant repetition of creation and destruction via the divine power of Chac. This clearly endorses the rain gods as the reason for both success and failure of the Maya world throughout the year- rain was at the center of the fate of the Maya’s universe. Additionally, this symbolizes fertility in the form of agricultural productivity.

On Dresden pages 29b-30b, Almanac 58, a chant is found that Thompson translates as:

“Chac is set up in the east. Game and maize in turtle dish are offered. Chac is set up in the north. Game and fish are offered. Chac is set up in the west. Balch mead and a dish of maize and iguana meat are offered. Chac is set up to the south. Balch and chocolate and a dish of maize and turkey are offered. (Balch is a Yucatec word meaning both the fermented honey in which bark of the balch tree is steeped, and denizens of the forest, particularly wild animals.)” (Thompson 1972:98). This interpretation indicates that rain is connected with worship. The codex also implies that Chac’s presence is directly associated to food offerings as an act of respect to their divine authority. The food offerings are elements of the Maya universe: defining the space in which people are able to engage in ritual actions. Chac, yet again, is seen as playing a pivotal role in the Maya divination that involves accrediting Maya success in sustenance of the people. The offerings are surely being bestowed with hopes of a bountiful supply of rain. Here, the
authority of which the rain god is held to by the Maya people show that rain is evidently a phenomenon that the people actively sought to control through religious practice.

Within Maya religious practice, Chac is sought after to ensure a supply of water to the Maya people as a means of both destruction and creation. In the ethnographic reports of Landa, water among the Maya was “according to the wise one of the things most needed by man, without which the earth cannot produce its fruits or man live” (Landa 1566:94). In Almanac 58, Chac is not only given credit for a substance that is dubbed as most needed by man but is also given offerings.

On Dresden pages 35b-37b, Almanac 60, another chant is deciphered to directly connect Chac, the rain god, with fertility. Illustrations within this almanac include, “a Chac holding a burning torch. From his penis emerges the long neck of bird. Rain is sometimes shown as a blue-green stream emerging from between Chac’s legs. Moreover, the Chacs were also known as Al Hoyabilob, the sprinklers, or the urinators. It is highly probable that the heron emerges from the Chac’s penis to express rebus fashion the action of the Chac in pouring water upon the earth” (Thompson 1972:100). Here, similar to Almanac 58 that was previously mentioned, the rain god is depicted as taking on a main role in the Maya religious system. But in this almanac it is not only Chac’s presence that ensures rain and wellness- the actual body of the Chac god is being portrayed explicitly as the giver of rain, a fundamental element of the universe. Evidently, this is an example of divination in which the Dresden Codex is attempting to understand the abundance of rain received. In doing so, credit is being given to Chac as the giver of rain through his urine. The rain coming from the genitalia of the Chac is also symbolic of fertility. Fertility is highlighted through this image of the Chac to underline the idea that reproduction is vital to the
maintenance of a balanced world. It has even been theorized that the Maya calendrical systems mimics the length of women’s ovulation cycle.

Translations of the chants and multiple sections within the Dresden Codex portray rain being supplied by the means of the divine powers and the bodies of the Chacs. In the Dresden Codex, rain takes the form of Chac, the rain god, most frequently. The theme and its key role at the center of both the Maya religious belief and practice are apparent in codical chants, illustrations and rain glyph placement. Along with the Dresden Codex, the Postclassic Maya Paris Codex has several sections that indicate divination and prediction of issues dealing with rain as a part of the focus of Maya religion.

THE ROLE OF RAIN IN POSTCLASSIC MAYA RELIGIOUS BELIEF AS DEPICTED IN THE PARIS CODEX

The Paris Codex has been characterized as a handbook for the Maya priests of Pre-Columbian Mesoamerica (Love 1994). In order to gain an insight into how this manuscript does indeed contain the theme of rain as fundamental to the Maya belief system, I have focused on what Bruce Love (1994) refers to as the “God C pages” and “Day-Sign Tables” sections of this codex.

The God C pages are located on the top two-thirds of pages 15-18 in the Paris Codex. God C, named by Paul Schellhas (1904), has been dubbed as interchangeable with the rain deity, Chac. “God C glyphs are ubiquitous in the inscriptions, but his identity and function are not clear” (Love 1994: 44). Recently, epigraphers have begun to read the glyphs as Ku (Ringle 1988;
Carlson 1989), a generic term in Yucatec Mayan for “god”. The reason he has never been exclusively identified is because Ku does not refer to a specific god and only means “god” in a broader term.

“The key to understanding the God C pages in the Paris Codex lies in comparison with the Chac pages in the Dresden Codex; there are many points of similarity in the two. The first correspondence to be explored is the relationship of God C and Chac. In the Paris, the illustrations show Ku in many places, be it temple, platform, or tree, and he is holding something or doing something in each scene. In one of the sections he is replaced by a Chac suggesting an interchangeability of these spirit concepts.” (Love 1994: 44)

It is in these similarities that reveal God C and Chac as being often represented as one in the same. The Ku’s presence in a temple, platform and tree are all significant to the Chac’s role as a divinity holding great authority within the Maya belief system in the eyes of the Maya people and their priests- a temple is a place of worship, a platform is a position of authority and a tree is symbolic of foundation. The Ku, interchangeable with the rain god, is shown in these pages in a context and locations that are suggestive of immense influence among Maya religious belief.

Love (1994:44) analyzed the God C pages of the Paris and the Chac pages of the Dresden codices indicating that the hieroglyphic text in the Paris Codex and the Dresden Codex share an almost identical syntactical structure. The replicated sign translating to “there is” is used at the heading of the Dresden and Paris pages shown in Figures 4 and 5. This parallel is not found among any other cross comparisons of the Maya codices. Love has inferred that is relation indicates that God C is interchangeable with Chac. This same technique of comparison can be used to reveal the role of rain and divination in the “Day-Sign Tables” sections of the Paris Codex.
Figure 4: Glyphs and pictures from “God C” Paris Codex pages showing syntactic parallels to images in Dresden pages in figure 1.4 (Love 1994)
Figure 5: Glyphs and pictures from the Dresden Codex Chac pages showing syntactic parallels to images in the Paris Codex pages in figure 1.3. The syntax parallel “there is” can be seen at the tops of these pages (Love 1994)
Love’s (1994) Day-Sign section dominates the left two-thirds of page 21 of the Paris Codex. The content in the Day-Sign section consist of individual days taken from the Maya context of the 260-day sacred calendar. In this section “the day-sign columns are surrounded by green sky cords which intertwine, descend, and encircle a kin sign, meaning day or sun. That day or sun is in a Torrential Downpour. By extension, all the days in the columns above are downpours” (Love 1994:81). The identical Torrential Downpour sign is shown in both the Dresden and Madrid codices and surely the sign shares consistent symbolic significance throughout the codices.

Love’s analysis of the relationship between God C and Chac and his comparison of the God C pages of the Paris Codex to the pages of the Dresden Codex make it clear that God C takes on the same symbolic meaning as the Chac Gods of the Dresden Codex. The role and positions that God C takes in the Paris Codex, in many respects, mirrors the ones that Chac takes on in the Dresden Codex. As Love pointed out, a key way of understanding the connection between God C and Chac is via comparison of the Paris and the Dresden Codices. But moreover, the comparisons revealed the consistent roles that rain plays throughout the Maya Postclassic codices.

As stated previously the two main examples cited from the Paris Codex pages were the top two-thirds of pages 15-18 and the top two-thirds of page 21. Pages 15-18, the God C pages, depict rain in association with temples, platforms and trees. Temples, in the Maya society, were placed in the center of the cities. Rain’s association with temples shows that, as with the placement of temples within cities, rain is a natural phenomenon that is central to the Maya universe. Peoples and objects placed on platforms are done so to portray high authority- in this
case, the rain sign. Rain is also coupled with trees indication that rain is at the root of and foundation of the earth. These three positions serve to portray rain as a fundamental building block of the Maya universe, construed broadly to connect the natural with the divine elements of the Maya world.

On the top two-thirds of page 21, the Day-Sign pages, the torrential downpour sign is illustrated. As explained in the chapter that addressed rain and its roles as displayed in the Dresden Codex, the interpretations of the torrential downpour illustration has been deciphered to be a representation of the end of the world via rain, a depiction of the past and a glorification of the rainy season. This sign is seen across all three codices. This continuous display of the torrential downpour sign throughout all the codices implies the incredible significance of this sign and its meaning. More importantly it stresses the weight that rain holds in Maya world.

Due to the small size of the codex, smallest of the three with 24 pages, there are not many examples that can be pulled from the Paris Codex. But the examples of the assertions of rain that are in this codex hold a great magnitude affirming rain’s roles in Maya religion. These examples show rain as a phenomena that people actively sought to control through religious practice and as a primary building block of the Maya world.

THE ROLE OF RAIN IN POSTCLASSIC MAYA RELIGIOUS BELIEF AS DEPICTED IN THE MADRID CODEX

The Madrid codex contains approximately 250 almanacs concerned with a variety of topics, including rain ceremonies associated with Chac, agricultural activities, ceremonies to
commemorate the end of one year and the start of the next, deer hunting and deer trapping, the sacrifice of captives and other events associated with the nameless days at the end of the year, carving deity images, and bookkeeping. As a group, these activities comprised the yearly round, as well as a series of rituals performed to accompany these events. Although some of the Madrid almanacs were undoubtedly used for divination within the 260-day ritual calendar, others referred to events that referenced much longer periods of time (Vail 2005:5). Gabrielle Vail’s (1994) decipherment of the Madrid Codex Pages concluded that pages 24 through 31 of the Madrid Codex contain 21 almanacs whose pictures imply concern with rainfall, planting, and agricultural pests. I have focused on these pages to assess the Madrid Codex and how rain permeated Maya religious belief.

The centrality of the Chac and the frogs on page 31 and their arrangement on the page, with glyphs for the four cardinal directions imply the prominence of the Maya rain god. “The almanac in the upper area of page 31 contains five pictures, one in each of the corners and a fifth in the center. The ones in the corners represent frogs sitting in the rain, calling to mind the frogs in the Maya rain-making ceremonies performed at intervals during June and July.” (Vail 2005:284) On these pages Chac is portrayed at the focal point of this page. Furthermore, Thompson (1972) asserted that frogs, because of their announcement of the rain, have an intimate relation to the Chacs. They are the Chacs’ “musician and guests” (Thompson 1972:258)

On pages 31a, 31b (Figure 7) and 30a (6) of the Madrid codex the rain god and Chac Chel, the rain goddess, are also at the focal point. There are notable parallels between the illustrations on 30 and Madrid 31 in which both depict rain gods at the chief and largest object in the scene. “Chac and Chac Chel, are pouring water from upended pots in Madrid 30a. Chac
Figure 6: Page 30 of the Madrid Codex. The top half is considered 30a and the bottom half is considered 30b (Vail 2005)
Figure 7: Page 31 of the Madrid Codex. The top half is considered 31a and the bottom half is considered 31b (Vail 2005)
Chel is the central image on Madrid 30b and Chac is in the lower right corner of the page. Water gushes from Chac Chel’s breasts and legs” (Vail 2005:286).

The rain gods, in the Madrid illustrations, take on a main role in the Maya divination that involves accrediting Maya success in the providers of rain and water for the Maya land. As seen in the Dresden pages, these pages do not only show the rain god and goddesses’ presence that ensures rain and wellness - but the actual body of the Chac goddess, her breasts, are portrayed explicitly as the giver of water and rain. This is a clear example in which the rain gods and rain is placed central to the Maya world. Not only is rain central but rain is also attribute to growth and life on earth.

Moreover, the scene that portrays rain coming from the genitalia and the breasts of the Chac deity and Chac goddess is also symbolic of fertility. Fertility is highlighted through images in the other codices too, as mentioned previously, underline the idea that reproduction is vital to the safeguarding of a balanced Maya universe. Although the Madrid Codex does not contain as much explicit evidence of rain’s involvement in Maya religion, pages 30 and 31 of the Madrid Codex are wholly dedicated and centralized around the rain god and goddess inferring a clear message about the fundamental role that rain plays in the Maya universe as a fundamental building block of the Maya universe, construed broadly to encompass both the natural and divine elements of the universe.

Additionally, it is also on these pages that it is clearly evident that rain is depicted among the Maya belief system as a symbol of fertility. In the Madrid Codex, as with the other three codices that were discussed in the previous chapters, all contain illustrations and glyphs indicating rain and rain gods. In all the codices the symbolism of the placement and the context
of the rain signs attest to rain’s roles in the Maya religious belief system. In the proceeding conclusion I will discuss how the three codices include the theme of rain in a similar light to work towards affirming that rain’s role as 1) a symbol of fertility, 2) a phenomena that people actively sought to control through religious practice, and 3) as a fundamental building block of the Maya universe, construed broadly to encompass both the natural and divine elements of the Maya world.
CONCLUSIONS

Understanding a focus within the Maya religion and how, why and under what circumstances the religion is practiced truly distinguishes them as a culture. By cross referencing ethnohistoric, ethnographic and archaeological evidence, it is revealed that rain was fundamentally built in as a part of the focus of Maya religious practice as: 1) a symbol of fertility, 2) a phenomenon that people actively sought to control through religious practice and 3) as a fundamental building block of the Maya universe, construed broadly to encompass both the natural and divine elements of the universe. Additionally, the role rain glyphs and the reason for their presence and placement within the codices is asserted in the codices’ cultural context and research and analysis done by Maya archaeologists, ethnographers, linguists, and historians. The Dresden, Madrid and Paris Codices are devoted to portraying the Maya’s belief system and its practice.

In order to understand how all three codices work together to provide evidence for the multiple roles of rain within the Maya religious belief it is notable to reiterate the placement of the rain signs within the codices that have been discussed. The Dresden Codex contains rain signs within its Torrential Downpour and Farmer Almanac pages. The Torrential Downpour pages place rain water as the largest object on page and being poured earthward as an indication of the end of the world or a calamity that occurred during Maya history. The Farmer’s Almanac contains pages that depict the rain god placed in all four cardinal directions of the earth, the rain sign with the earth sign, Chac with food offerings, Chac shown pouring water onto earth both
through pots and through genitals and, lastly, this section of the Dresden also depicts pages dominated by rain sign and Chac.

The Paris Codex contains rain signs within its God C pages and Day-Sign section. God C has been deciphered by Mayanist to be interchangeable with the rain god. God C, also read as the rain god, is placed in association with positions near or on top of trees, temples and platforms. Additionally, the Paris’ Day-sign tables depict the torrential downpour sign at heading; this same sign is present within all three discussed codices.

The Madrid Codex contains rain signs on several pages depicting the rain god in illustrations as the largest and central figure on multiple pages, rain god pouring water earthward and the rain god pouring water earthward and onto heads via genitals. By cross referencing all three codices with ethnographic and archaeological evidence it can be inferred that rain, a central theme within Maya religion was a major focus of Maya religious belief.

This thesis has asserted rain as a symbol of fertility, a phenomenon that people sought to control and as a central to the Maya universe. Rain as a symbol of fertility is affirmed when it is depicted as being poured onto the earth from the rain god’s genitals and breasts within the Maya illustrative chant pages. Rain signs and the rain god, Chac, is constantly placed in chants and ethnographic evidence places the codices to be of the priestly class- both ethnohistoric and ethnographic evidence shows rain as a phenomena that priests and the Maya people actively sought to control through religious practice. Moreover, in the codices Chac is continuously placed in all four cardinal directions. Glyphs within the codices in have been deciphered to attribute the beginning and end of life to rain and the rain gods.
In the sections of the codices where religion and chants are addressed explicitly, the theme of rain is not only present but is dominant. As stated prior, within the codices rain illustrations, glyphs and signs show up on 33 of the 74 pages in the Dresden Codex, 18 of the 24 pages in the Paris Codex and 47 of the 112 pages in the Madrid Codex. The rain glyphs are almost always placed for an augural purpose in the context of weather or the success and problems of farming. Rain as a symbol of fertility, the start of life, and rain placed central in the codical religious chants all work together to affirm that rain was a fundamental building block of the Maya universe, construed broadly to encompass both the natural and divine elements of the Maya world.

This thesis cites some and not all of the depictions of the rain in the codices and its relation to Maya religion but it is evident that rain was a part of the focus of Maya culture and religion. The Maya people view rain as a divine element that allowed the world to grow and thrive- that without it life and the world would have to come to a halt.
REFERENCES


