

**“Back Then When There Was No Sky”:
The Antiquity of Celestial References in Classical Yucatecan Creation Myths**

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For

SAA Symposium “Celestial References in Mesoamerican Creation Myths”
Vancouver, 26-30 March, 2008

DRAFT

DO NOT QUOTE

Second only to the few surviving Postclassic codices, the Books of Chilam Balam are among our principal sources of Classical Yucatecan Maya celestial lore. However, as recent research has amply demonstrated (Miram and Bricker 1996; Bricker and Miram 2002; Knowlton n.d. [2004]: Chapter 3; Velásquez n.d. [2007]), numerous cosmological texts within the Books of Chilam Balam are either derivative of Spanish sources such as various *reportorios de los tiempos*, or at the very least composed in extensive dialogical exchange with them. For example, the cosmogram on page 2 of the Book of Chilam Balam of Kaua (Bricker and Miram 2002:92-93) is in form completely unlike the Postclassic formée cross of the Madrid Codex pages 75-76 or the Fejérváry-Mayer page 1, composed of the circular celestial spheres of the Ptolemaic-Christian cosmos. Advances in our understanding of the sources and composition of the Books of Chilam Balam have served to reinforce that the cosmological texts, like the illustrations, cannot be automatically taken to represent continuity with the Prehispanic period, or that their sources include a hieroglyphic ur-text (Barrera Vasquez and Rendón 1948:10-11).

That said, other texts in the Books of Chilam Balam appear clearly representative of Prehispanic worldviews, perhaps even derivative of the performance of a hieroglyphic codex. Like Homeric epic of ancient Greece, the texts of the Maya Books of Chilam Balam are composites of several epochs, including those far earlier than the date of the surviving redactions. Classicists don't uncritically attribute Homeric epic with all its anachronisms to the Greek Bronze Age, but neither do they all discount the deep historical roots of those works of literature. Likewise, although the Books of Chilam Balam clearly have texts dating at least as late as the 18th century A.D., there are also portions that draw deeply from the cenote of prehispanic tradition, in terms of both content and discourse.

To demonstrate this, I will examine a section of a creation myth found in the Book of Chilam Balam of Chumayel. The overall creation myth is set in Katun 11 Ahau, and versions of this text appear not only in the Chumayel, but also in the Books of Chilam Balam of Tizimin and the Códice Pérez. However, the creation narrative I examine here is only a portion of a narrative segment that appears solely in the Chumayel redaction (ms pages 43.28-45.21) of the Katun 11 Ahau myth, where it is inserted between two closely related creation texts that I refer to as "The History of the Destruction of the World" and "The Burden of the Flower King" (Knowlton n.d. [2007]). The "History of the Destruction of the World" details the defeat of Oxlahun Ti Ku by Bolon Ti Ku, the birth of Lady Quetzal-Lady Lovely Cotinga, the theft of maize by Bolon Dzacab into the heavens, the subsequent destruction of the world in a flood, and finally the establishment of world trees and their respective bird deities in the five cardinal directions by the Bacabs. The "Burden of the Flower King" details the descent of Bolon Dzacab for his *ca put sihil* "second birth" ceremony and the sprouting of a multitude of personified flowers, indicative of both the active fertility and ephemeral beauty of the world. Between these two myths in the Chumayel redaction is an account of the events preceding the first dawn that is unique in the known corpus of Chilam Balam books.

THE VENUS PASSAGE

The text below begins on the line at which the Chumayel (ms.43.27-28) significantly diverges from the Tizimin (ms.15r.15-16) and the Códice Pérez (ms. 118.16-17) versions of the Katun 11 Ahau creation myth, the point where this account of the dawn begins:

Cumtal u cah u lac Canah ual katun Ah pay kab ah pay oc t u yum	<i>The ceramic idol sits down Above the page [relating the] katun The guide of the hand, the precursor to the foot of the lord</i>
Cumtal u cah chacpil tec t u lakin cab Ah pay oc t u yum	<i>Rosiness settles there in the eastern region The precursor to the foot of the lord</i>
Cumtal u cah sacpil te t u xaman cab Ah pay oc t u yum	<i>Greyiness settles there in the northern region The precursor to the foot of the lord</i>
Cumtal u cah lahun chan Ah pay kab t u yum	<i>Lahun Chan sits down The guide of the hand of the lord</i>
[hex u uol cab valic]	-----
Cumtal u cah kanpil tee Ah pay kab t u yum	<i>Light yellow settles there The guide of the hand of the lord</i>

Chumayel 43.27-44.3 (all translations by author)

From this passage, we can discern a couple important aspects of the composition of this text. First of all, the redactor of the surviving version found in the Chumayel is clearly working from a previous, probably alphabetic, version. This is discernable because in the manuscript itself (see Gordon 1993:44) the redactor crosses out the line [hex u uol cab valic] which, as we shall see, should appear one manuscript line further down. This suggests he lost track of where he was at in the text as he was transcribing it from another manuscript, only to catch his mistake briefly thereafter. Therefore, the redactor of the extant version we have is very likely not the author of the text, and therefore it was composed (and perhaps redacted an unknown number of times) at some point prior to its transcription in the Chumayel.

Second, the Chumayel first diverges from the Tizimin and the Pérez by inserting the line *canah ual katun*. From context I'm reading *canah* as *canal* meaning "above", although I should note that the verb *caan-ah* "rose" appears in both colonial dictionaries as well as hieroglyphic sources (Dresden 68a), and in the latter it appears in reference to the heliacal rise of Mars (Bricker 1997:136). *Ual* refers to the leaf or folio of a book

(Ciudad Real 2001:569), and thus I take *ual katun* to be a reference to the manuscript page from which the Katun 11 Ahau creation myth was being transcribed.

The thing that either “sits above” or perhaps “rose” is *u lac*, which according to the sixteenth century Motul dictionary (Ciudad Real 2001:350) can refer to either a ceramic plate or to an idol made of ceramic. The redactor of the Pérez version (ms 118.16-17) clearly interpreted *u lac* to refer to “his/her/its plate” since he redacts the final cognate line as:

Lai licil u cumtal u lac u luch u pop u dzam katunob t uy ahaulil mta.

“This plate, the cup, the mat, the throne of the katuns sits in its reign, (?)”

But it is not at all clear that the redactor of the Chumayel shares this interpretation. The additional material, as well as the explicit reference to the page itself, suggests this redactor is interpreting *u lac* as referring to something that appears at the top of the page he is working from. Continuing on, we see he applies to *u lac* the paired title *ah pay kab ah pay oc t u yum*. According to the Motul dictionary, *ah pay* refers to a “guide, or precursor” (Ciudad Real 2001:51). Consulting Miram and Miram’s (1988) concordance, this particular phrase is unique to the Chumayel in the known corpus of Books of Chilam Balam. Roys in his translation of the Chumayel (1967:101) glosses this as “messengers of their lord” although the term does not appear in the plural, but is rather an example of a couplet. As *u lac* takes on this paired title, I believe the redactor of the Chumayel account who originally composed these lines is referring to the depiction of anthropomorphic supernatural appearing at the top of the katun page (*ual katun*) he is transcribing from. Since depictions of Maya gods are rare if non-existent in the alphabetic Books of Chilam Balam, this suggests the following account is inspired by direct reference to, if not transcribed from, an illuminated codex.

So what do we make of this *ah pay*, and who is the “lord” (*yum*) being referred to? Since Roys’ translation, scholars have been aware that one of the deities of the Dresden Venus Table, Lahun Chan, appears in this text (Roys 1967:100-101), and it is Lahun Chan who takes this title in the text. This strongly suggests that the *ah pay* is in fact Venus, and the “lord” is the Sun. But Venus is known in both the codices and later colonial sources as *chac ek* “great or red star”. Why this unusual title, if in fact Venus is meant? In the *Popol Vuh*, Venus, also known in that text as the “Great Star”, goes by the title *Icoquih (Ik’o q’ij)*, translated by Christenson (2003:218n.569) as “Accompanies/Bears/Passes Before the Sun”. Therefore, the semantic equivalent of *ah pay* “guide, precursor” appears elsewhere in Maya creation mythology as a title for Venus.

Having argued that the title *ah pay kab, ah pay oc* refers to Venus, let’s consider the structure and content of this passage in light of what we know of prehispanic Maya Venus texts, in particular the Venus Table in the Dresden Codex (ms 24, 46-50). In the Chumayel, the link between the colors and directions are made explicitly in the first two instances, with colors explicitly mentioned in three out of four lines. The deity Lahun Chan substitutes where black and west otherwise would occur. The colors appearing in

the text are described as light or dim (*-pil*) equivalents of the standard directional colors, presumably because the sun has not yet risen, and Venus alone provides light. In contrast, the Dresden Venus passages do not include colors terms, just as the Chumayel passage lacks dates. Despite these differences, there are certain points of discursive overlap in the organization of the passages, as outlined below:

Model Syntax of Dresden Venus Table Passages:

DATE – VERB [li-?-ha] – DIRECTION – GOD NAME - VENUS TITLE [Chac Ek]

Model Syntax of Chumayel Venus passages:

VERB [cumtal] – COLOR/GOD NAME – DIRECTION - VENUS TITLE [Ah Pay]

	DATE	VERB	COLOR	DIRECTION	GOD NAME	VENUS TITLE
CHUMAYEL		X	X	X	X	X
DRESDEN	X	X		X	X	X

To make complete sense of the passage, we also need to account for the two variants of the *ah pay* title that occur in the Chumayel text, the *ah pay kab t u yum* literally: “guide of the hand of the lord” and *ah pay oc t u yum* literally: “precursor to the foot of the lord.” Unfortunately, since the Chumayel account of Venus lacks the mathematics and calendrical information of the Dresden Table, making associations between the text and the movement of Venus in the night sky far more speculative in the Chumayel than in the Dresden. However, let’s suppose for argument’s sake that the directions in the Chumayel text in fact correspond with the directions in the Dresden and their corresponding place in the Venus cycle related there. If we map the directional correspondences of the Dresden Venus Table onto the Chumayel text, we arrive at the follow associations:

Rosiness, East	Heliacal Rise	Ah pay <u>oc</u> “foot”
Greyness, North	Last visibility before superior conjunction	Ah pay <u>oc</u> “foot”
Lahun Chan [Black, West]	First appearance in western sky	Ah pay <u>kab</u> “hand”
Light yellow [South]	Last appearance before inferior conjunction	Ah pay <u>kab</u> “hand”

This reading of the Chumayel passage would suggest that to precede the “foot” of the Sun is to act as Morning Star, marching out ahead along the celestial footpath of the solar lord. For Venus to guide the “hand” of the solar lord is to serve as Evening Star. Interestingly, note that there are two references each to “hand” and to “foot” in the passage, accounting for all four limbs to form the image of a complete anthropomorphic being, in this case the Sun God.

THE FIRST DAWN

Following the Chumayel Venus passage, the text picks back up at the line the redactor of the extant manuscript had previously inserted too early, only to mark it out:

Hex v uol cab valic ah vuc chek nale	<i>However, throughout the world</i>
Tali t u uuc tas cab	<i>Seven-Limbed-Maize stands</i>
Ca emi v chekeb te u pach Ytzam Kab Ain	<i>It came to the seven divisions of the world</i>
Tij ca emi t u muk u xuk luum can	<i>So that it descended to copulate with Itzam Kab Ain</i>
Ximbal v cahob t u can cib	<i>So then it descended to its task as the cornerstone of earth and sky</i>
T u can tas	<i>Walking to the four candles</i>
Ti ek ma sasil cab	<i>To the four divisions</i>
Ti hun minan kin	<i>When the world was black and without light</i>
Ti hun minan akab	<i>When there was not one day</i>
Ti hun minan v	<i>When there was not one night</i>
Ah ubahob	<i>When there was not one month</i>
Ti yx tan vy ahal cab	<i>They sensed [it]</i>
Ca tun ahi cab +	<i>When it was dawning</i>
Valaci to y ahal cab	<i>So then it dawned! +</i>
Oxlahum pic dzac t u uuc	<i>In this time after the dawn</i>
V xocan y ahal cab	<i>Thirteen multitudes plus seven</i>
	<i>Counted the dawn</i>

Chumayel 44.3-12

At the beginning of this passage we are introduced to *Ah Vuc Chek Nal* “Seven-limbed Maize” who arrives in the seven *tas* of the *cab* “world” to fertilize the earth caiman Itzam Cab Ain. The word *tas* is often translated “layer” and is the most common term appearing in reference to the divisions of the cosmos in Classical Yucatecan Maya texts. However, the number of “layers” of different parts of the Yucatecan cosmos is not entirely consistent from text to text or even necessarily transparent within texts. The source of some of these inconsistencies is more apparent than others; less obviously Spanish influenced texts like the Katun 11 Ahau creation myth make reference to *y oxlahun tas caan* “thirteen *tas* sky” (Chumayel ms. 43.7), whereas descriptions of the universe in the Ptolemaic-Christian mold found in the Books of Chilam Balam of Kaua (ms 148.13-14), of Chan Kan (ms 30.3), and the Morley Manuscript (ms 180.10) refer to only eleven *tas*. Although “layer” would be an appropriate translation of *tas* for the enveloping series of concentric rings composing the Ptolemaic-Christian cosmos, it may be very problematic to think of the Maya *tas* we encounter in the present text in such a vertical fashion.

Thompson (1970:195) proposes the following model of the Maya cosmos found in the Books of Chilam Balam:

There were thirteen “layers” of heaven and nine of the underworld. Although the Maya spoke of the thirteen *taz* (“layers”) of the heavens, *taz* covering such things as blankets spread out one above the other, in fact, the thirteen celestial layers were arranged as six steps ascending from the eastern horizon to the seventh, the zenith, whence six more steps led down to the western horizon. Similarly, four more steps led down from the western horizon to the nadir of the underworld, when four more steps ascended to the eastern horizon. Thus there were really only seven celestial and five infernal layers. The sun followed this sort of stepped rhomboid on his daily journey across the sky and his nightly traverse of the underworld to return to the point of departure each dawn. There is some inconclusive evidence that the Maya divided the day into thirteen “hours” and the night into nine “hours,” corresponding to the numbers of steps or layers.

There are admittedly some problems with Thompson’s application of Eduard Seler’s (1996, vol. V:3-23) stepped model of Central Mexican cosmology to account for the Maya sources. For example, the Ritual of the Bacabs speak of Metnal (the Postclassic Maya underworld) as being composed of ten *tas* (Arzápalo Marín 1987:420), not nine as Thompson’s model demands. Nonetheless, Thompson makes an important point by suggesting that the term *tas* refers not simply to vertical, but also horizontal divisions of the cosmos of Classical Yucatecan creation myths. For this reason, perhaps the translation of *tas* as “plane” or “division” is preferable to “layer” as it does not necessarily imply a vertical or horizontal divisions of the cosmos.

Considering *tas* as potentially vertical and/or horizontal helps us account for an apparent contradiction in the text above; the *cab* is first referred to as consisting of the seven *tas*, but then is referred to as having four. The people of this creation (*ah ubahob*; literally “hearers” or “sensors”), in the absence of the light of the sun or moon to see, walk to the four “candles” in the four *tas*. By not considering *tas* to mean strictly vertical or stacking layers enables us to identify these four *tas* as the four color-directions previously mentioned in the text, the only lighted portions of the pre-dawn cosmos due to Venus previous appearances as morning and evening star.

The final aspect of this excerpt I’d like to note is its mathematics. *Oxlahum pic dzac t u uuc* is an example of overcounting, the prehispanic method documented on the bottom register of pages 26-28 of the Dresden Codex, and not the form of anticipatory counting found in the eighteenth century sources like the Book of Chilam Balam of Kaua (Bricker and Miram 2002:64-65). The line appears to refer to the origin of the tzolkin calendar, composed of thirteen numbers plus an additional seven to account for both the entire list of twenty day names as well as to form a complete the uinal, the latter being the subject of its own creation myth on pages 60-63 of the Chumayel (Bricker 2002). Admittedly, it is difficult to know what to make of the reference to *pic dzac*

“innumerable” according to the Motul (Ciudad Real 2001:492). Since *pic* immediately follows a number, it is possible that it what was intended was the numeral classifier *pis* used to count days or years (Ciudad Real 2001:492). *Pis* would be spelled *piç* in the orthography of the Chumayel, therefore lending itself to being mistakenly transcribed *pic*. Moreover, I would like to point out another possibility worth further scholarly consideration. The verb *dzac* can mean either “to add” or “to multiply” in Yucatec (Barrera Vásquez et al 1980:872). In that case, the text could be referring not to 13x plus 7, equaling 20x, but to 13x *times* 7, equaling 91x, a multiple of one-fourth of the Maya computing year of 364 days, and an important unit in prehispanic seasonal calendars. Given the narrative’s emphasis on celestial phenomena occurring in a four-fold division of space, the possible role of a four-fold division of time in this creation myth an intriguing possibility worth further investigation.

DISCUSSION

The present examination is neither an analysis of the entire segment of the Katun 11 Ahau myth unique to the Chumayel, nor does it exhaust the many possible questions we could bring to this Maya mythic narrative. In some aspects, I believe the present analysis raises as many questions and possibilities as it tries to answer. Nonetheless, what I hope to have demonstrated here is that celestial references in the creation myths of the Books of Chilam Balam are not simply derived from post-conquest sources, but involve a dialogue with Maya visions of the sky of considerable antiquity.

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