

## Spectrum

---

Fall 2013

Article 2

---

10-1-2013

# Youth and Vegetative Renewal in Ancient Maya Religious Ideology

Emma Pankey

*University of New Hampshire, Durham*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholars.unh.edu/spectrum>

---

### Recommended Citation

Pankey, Emma (2013) "Youth and Vegetative Renewal in Ancient Maya Religious Ideology," *Spectrum*: Vol. 3 : Iss. 1 , Article 2.  
Available at: <https://scholars.unh.edu/spectrum/vol3/iss1/2>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Student Journals and Publications at University of New Hampshire Scholars' Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in Spectrum by an authorized editor of University of New Hampshire Scholars' Repository. For more information, please contact [nicole.hentz@unh.edu](mailto:nicole.hentz@unh.edu).

# YOUTH AND VEGETATIVE RENEWAL IN ANCIENT MAYA RELIGIOUS IDEOLOGY

***Emma Pankey***

---

**Abstract** The role of children in ancient Maya religion and ritual was predicated upon the qualities of youth and vitalization that children possess. Furthermore, their role was rooted in associations between these possessed qualities, phenomena of agricultural renewal, and broader conceptions of life forces and cycles. These shared qualities created links between religious ideas about young children, agricultural sustenance, and ensoulment processes. Ethnohistoric and ethnographic accounts relating to ritualized child socialization provide details for parallel arguments on the ancient social and religious status of Maya children. Ideological connections can also be directly inferred from ancient Maya art, and can be interpreted from the archaeological remains left by the material traces of ritual practices such as child sacrifice. From this evidence, theories about the possible sacred status of young children in ancient Maya religion can be drawn. Furthermore, an examination of the socio-religious implications for the inclusion of children in Maya ritual as sacrificial victims may reveal that this inclusion was significant for the continuation of more widely encompassing ideological principles; namely for the continuance of annual and agricultural cycles. Through such an examination, this paper argues for the explicit recognition of the sacredness of children in ancient Maya religion, a generally underrepresented demographic in current archaeological studies.

## **MAYA CONCEPTIONS OF CHILDREN**

Theories about ancient Maya beliefs in child sacredness must start with an understanding of the social status of Maya youth. That is, child sacredness should be understood as a product of their social status. Furthermore, status is a channel for children's religious involvement. This argument largely draws on inferences from colonial and ethnographic literary sources, which can be speculatively applied to the ancient Maya. It should be noted that despite the demonstrated temporal longevity of many aspects of Maya religious ideology, any form of ethno-archaeological hypothesis cannot be perfectly demonstrable.

Ethnographic research conducted on the ritualized social development of children from various Maya groups indicates that prior to undergoing certain rituals, a child is not

**SPECTRUM**, Issue 3, Fall 2013, pp. 4-13

considered to be a fully incorporated member of society. This assertion is supported by modern and ethnohistoric accounts of Maya child ensoulment rituals. Like other Mesoamerican groups, Maya religion is animistic. Both the contemporary and ancient Maya believe the natural world is composed of various entities, not all of which are human, that possess animate life forces characteristic of living beings. Like other animistic societies, the Maya include in this category plants, animals, natural and constructed objects located within cultural landscapes such as caves and buildings, and more diffuse features of the natural environment such as streams and wind (Harrison-Buck 2012: 65-66). These forces and the interactions between the beings that possess them are seen to animate the world through a web of relations. However, in order to become an animate being, a soul-bearing entity must be, for lack of a better word, 'ensouled'. In describing this worldview, Duncan and Hofling (2011:203) state: "The Mesoamerican worldview was constantly in motion, in cycles of birth and death, termination and regeneration. Everything that came to be needed to be animated or ensouled, and would eventually be terminated."

For architectural constructions made and used by people, such as temples and houses, as well as newborn humans themselves, ensoulment is a process achieved through ritual. Among contemporary Maya, it is believed that upon birth, a child's soul is not firmly fixed in their body, and must undergo baptismal rites, without which they are at risk of losing their soul to evil forces (Duncan and Hofling 2011: 202). Among the modern Yucatec Maya, child socialization ritual includes baptism by a priest and the performance of gender role ceremonies such as the Héetz-méek' ceremony during which objects associated with the particular gender role belonging to a child would be ceremonially presented to them (Duncan and Hofling 2011: 202). In addition to baptism, colonial Yucatec Maya practiced a form of infant head molding that has ancient roots. Duncan and Hofling (2011: 202) contend that the ancient and colonial Maya practice of binding the heads of infants to elongate their cranial morphology was an important part of the infant ensoulment process. Collectively, these rituals indicate that upon birth a child must be properly and mandatorily socialized and ensouled in order to ensure that they successfully become embodied persons in Maya society (Duncan and Hofling 2011: 202). Furthermore, the rituals necessary to achieve an embodied status in Maya society indicate that Maya youth possessed a different social status than fully socialized adults. This status can be used as a possible explanation for the prominent role of children in ancient Maya religious ideology, namely sacrifice rituals.

The ethnohistoric and archaeological data suggest that Maya children were targeted for human sacrifice. Below I review these data and suggest Maya children were deemed suitable candidates for sacrificial offerings due to their differential social status in Maya society. They had not yet attained full incorporation into adult society and their

souls were not firmly in place. Rather, children held a position that was proximally closer to the divine forces that operated in both the human inhabited dimension of Maya cosmology and those dimensions not immediately perceived by humans (Ardren 2011: 143). The status of their souls and their resultant position in society may have meant that children were viewed as being somewhere between divine and human, or perhaps as being not fully human. This is not to say that children were an amalgam of what was considered human and what was considered divine, but that they were humans who possessed qualities unlike socialized adults and who therefore were unique in ways that allowed them to be viewed as special candidates for offerings made to especially powerful divine forces. In her paper on Classic Maya child sacrificial rites, Traci Ardren (2011:143) suggests what one of these unique aspects of the child social status may have been. She writes that the status of a child's soul and their related social identity would have had a liminal quality. The lives of infants, in particular, are temporally and physically close to events of birth and creation, and therefore may be seen to be closer to the gods and their divine creationary forces in this regard. That is, being close to the event of birth and at risk of death, the lives of children marked prominent points on the cycles of animate life that were granted by the gods.

To illustrate connections between ethnographic and ancient beliefs about Maya child identity, Traci Ardren (2011: 137-138) has also compared ethnographic data collected by Evon Vogt from his observations of the Zinacantan in the highland Maya area of Mexico, with paleo-osteological data collected by Rebecca Storey from Late Classic period human remains from Copán in western Honduras. Vogt (1970: 86-87) describes three phases of childhood socialization in contemporary Zinacantan. The first stage begins with an infant's birth and subsequent baptismal rites. Within an hour after the birth of an infant the baby is presented with objects that symbolize his or her sex identity, such as maize farming implements for boys and maize grinding stones (*manos* and *metates*) for girls (Vogt 1970: 83). For the next three years the infant is nurtured and allowed to play freely without much scolding (Vogt 1970: 86). This stage ends when a child's mother has a new baby. From around the ages of three to nine years old children are expected to perform light chores; however, it is not until the third stage of child social development that male and female children are separated by sex and expected to perform the harder work required by their gender roles (Vogt 1970: 87).

These contemporary Maya age grades coincide with the osteological data that Storey observed at ancient Copán. From the remains of juveniles between the ages of one and fifteen there could be discerned four statistical age divisions. Within these divisions mortality rates were the highest between the ages of one and four (Storey 1992: 164). Mortality dropped between the ages of five and nine and again between ten and fourteen years old. To explain this juvenile mortality pattern Storey suggests that these age

groupings reflect nutritional changes that occurred alongside stages of socialization. It is hypothesized that among the ancient Maya at Copán, nutrition gained from proper sustenance increased as a child's age and their related chances of survival to adulthood increased. More importantly, with regards to Maya child socialization, the Copán osteological age grades neatly correspond with the socialization stages that Vogt demonstrated in contemporary Maya contexts. Ardren (2011: 138) writes that,

Perhaps the perception of childhood as consisting of three general stages – infancy, youngster, and pre-adults – is one of the core elements of self-identity and cultural organization present in related forms throughout Maya and Mesoamerican history.

It is my contention that in addition to the effects that the age grade statuses of Maya children had on socialization and health related mortality, these age grades also played a role in the selection of children for ancient Maya human sacrifice. The liminal quality of a child's identity, situated between the divine forces responsible for their creation and their eventual embodiment of adult social identities, may have caused children to be seen as capable of being “conversant with the gods” (Ardren 2011: 143). In addition to influencing a child's qualifications for sacrifice, their abilities for divine connection and their proximity to the cyclical processes of death and animate vitality may have influenced the contexts and implications of their ritual sacrifice.

#### Ancient Maya Child Sacrifice

Human sacrifice was primarily practiced by the ancient and colonial Maya in accordance with ceremonies performed on important days of the ritual calendar, as a form of political legitimization for rulers, during times of social crisis, and as dedicatory offerings for sacred architectural structures (Ardren 2011: 135). While sacrifice to a person, deity, or animate object entailed the end of a sacrificial victim's human life it did not end that person's spiritual existence. In Maya ideology the soul continues to exist after death and therefore, human sacrifice should be seen as a transformation, rather than a termination, of a person's existence (Ardren 2011: 134). The transformative properties of sacrifice embody the life cycle transformation that all animate beings undergo. Furthermore, these properties fit well with socially transformative childhood age grades. Both involve changes in the social and spiritual existence of humans. What follows is an analysis of archaeological evidence of ancient Maya child sacrifice from various contexts as they pertain to child status and identity.

### **CHILD SACRIFICE, AGRICULTURE, AND THE ACT OF PLANTING LIFE**

Perhaps the most important form of child sacrifice practiced by the ancient Maya was sacrifice made as an offering to deities whose power influenced the natural forces necessary for agricultural success. Paramount among these deities were Chac the Maya rain god and the Maya maize god. In his guide to ancient Maya (and Aztec) mythology, Karl Taube (1993: 52) describes Chac as the god of rain and lightening who is known to have been worshiped by the Maya since at least the first century BC.

Beginning with colonial accounts, the sacrificial priority of Chac is reinforced by symbolic portrayals of him during sacrificial rites. In his sixteenth century accounts of colonial Yucatec Maya society, the Spanish bishop Diego de Landa described the role of four men known as the Chacs whose duty was to participate in the conduction of human sacrifices. It was the job of designated Chacs to assist priests by holding down the hands and feet of sacrificial victims at the time of the ceremony (Tozzer 1941: 112). In his annotation of de Landa's writings, Alfred Tozzer (1941: 112) writes that these four men represented the four divine Chacs that were believed to be manifestations of the rain god of the same name and who were associated with the four cardinal directions of the cosmos.

While the practice of human sacrifice to Chac by the ancient and colonial Maya is firmly established, it seems that the sacrifice of children composed an emphasized form of this category of human sacrifice. The most renowned context of child sacrifice to Chac occurs at Classic period Chichén Itzá's Great Cenote. The Great Cenote, also deemed the Cenote of Sacrifice, is a freshwater well that was used to deposit offerings made to Chac up until the colonial period. While many types of offerings were made at the cenote, including sacred jades and perishable items, human sacrifices occurred at the cenote in large numbers. These sacrificial victims were either thrown into the cenote alive or with their hearts cut out. Most did so willfully since the sacrifice guaranteed them a good afterlife (Thompson 1970: 180). Archaeologists have dredged the Great Cenote on two occasions. Both times the remains recovered from the cenote were predominantly composed of juvenile remains. Of the 101 minimum number of individuals recovered from the first dredging, 51 were juveniles. The second dredging likewise produced the same statistically significant results; of the 121 individuals 76 were juveniles. All of these human sacrifices were made with the intention of effecting communication with Chac.

Eric Thompson (1970: 184) suggested there was "little doubt" that colonial period Maya children were ceremonially sacrificed to the rain gods because they were virgins. This assertion was made in the context of his discussion on the necessity of ritual purity during the conduction of Maya religious ceremony. Examples of the Maya concern with purity include fasting prior to the performance of a ritual, ceremonial confession, and the purification of temples before a ceremony (Thompson 1970: 184). The significance of

virginity in Maya religious ideology and mythology is well attested. The Hero Twins, best known from the Quiche' Maya account of the Popol Vuh creation story, were both born from their virgin mother, Xquic, after she was impregnated by the saliva of their slain father (Taube 1993: 56-57). Thompson (1970:184) also notes the significance of Maya 'vestal virgins' who attended temple 'virgin fires', or *zuhuy kuk*, which were newly kindled for each ceremony performed at a given temple.

However, purity need not always be tied to virginal status. The purity of children in their selection for sacrifice may best be understood by considering the relation of the broader social status of children to conceptions about life cycles and agricultural renewal. What connects different aspects of child social status such as virginity, youth, and processes of ensoulment and socialization, is the relation of these aspects to cyclical renewal in a broad sense, and vegetational renewal more specifically. The ancient Maya believed that Chac had the power to cause destruction through the likes of hurricanes, floods, and drought and also had the power to generate life by granting the necessary rain and winds needed for recurrent cycles of healthy crops (Ardren 2011: 140). Shamans could petition gods through entheogen induced trance states and commune with divine forces on behalf of their human communities. So too could people who were sacrificed to Chac enter unseen levels of cosmological existence in order to directly communicate with this deity and thereby petition him for the rains needed for agricultural fertility.

While the proximity of children to the regenerative processes governed by deities, like Chac, may be one explanation for the use of children as sacrifices, more direct connections between children and crops can also be made. The Maya believed that upon death humans undertook a journey to the afterworld, whereupon they waited for their eventual rebirth. Newborn infants were a manifestation of a new life cycle. In addition to the human life cycle, the Maya were preoccupied with the cycles of regeneration and renewal for other parts of the natural world, namely the maize plant, which they relied upon for their daily subsistence. Colonial period accounts described by Eric Thompson (1970:283-284) illustrate the use of maize during child birth ceremonies practiced by the Pokoman Maya. After a child's umbilical cord was cut over an ear of maize with a new obsidian knife, the bloodied maize was smoked to preserve the ear of corn for use during future planting. The grains of corn were sown in honor of the child (Thompson 1970: 283). Among the contemporary Tzotzil Maya, a similar maize ceremony links the blood of the child to the crop produced from the maize used in the ceremony. The small field used to plant the maize seed is known as "the child's blood" and the crop produced in the field is called the "blood crop". Most importantly, the consumption of the blood crop by the child's family links the relatives to the child (Thompson 1970: 284).

At an even more basic level connecting humans with maize, the Maya believe that the human race was originally made from maize. In Maya mythology, it is said that the

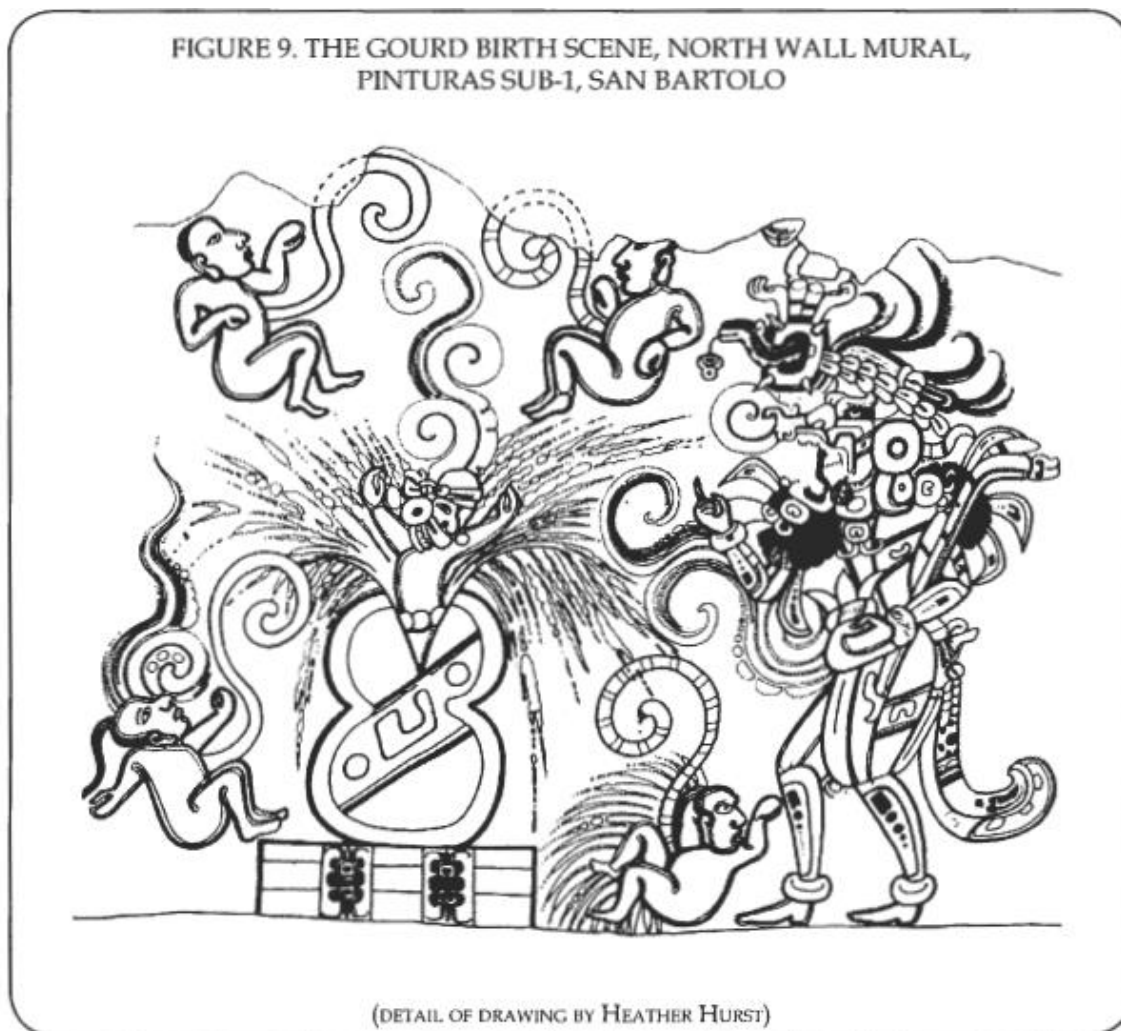
old creator goddess Xmucane ground maize to produce humans from the maize meal (Taube 1993: 62). Furthermore, the term Ah Mun, used in the *Books of Chilam Balam of Chumayel* to describe the young Maize God, is a term also used to describe adolescents (Thompson 1970: 285). Following Thompson's (1970: 283) suggestion that newborn Maya children were physically united with maize, it is logical to assume that young children would have made the most suitable sacrifices to the Maize God. Both children and new maize crops were characterized by growth and youth. Ethnographic evidence illustrates how these connections are made through linguistic lexicology. The modern Atiteco Maya use similar terminology to describe both children and new crops. Planted maize seeds are referred to as *muk* meaning 'interred ones' and *jooloma* meaning 'little skulls' (Carlsen and Prechtel 1997: 54). Once planted maize seeds have sprouted, the young plants are called *tak ai'* meaning 'little ones' or 'little children' (54). Bringing the life cycle full circle, once these new maize plants have matured some of them are allowed to dry and the seeds that they produce, their 'little skulls', can be used to grow more maize crops (54). These anthropomorphic expressions bring up a key theme involving the planting of human remains. Acts of ancient child sacrifice and acts of growing maize crops thus may have been conceptualized as shared acts of planting life, in a general sense, through interment.

In addition to biological remains and archaeological contexts containing physical sacrificial events, evidence of child sacrifice also comes from Classic Maya art and iconography. The image carved on Stela 11 at the Maya site of Piedras Negras depicts the ascension of a ruler who is shown seated on a scaffold. Below the ruler lies a young boy who has undergone a heart excision sacrifice ceremony and from his chest sprouts vegetation. The message that this image portrays makes it clear that from a child's death comes new life. The newly installed ruler pictured in the relief derives his political legitimization from his ability to oversee this process of regeneration. However, the choice of a young boy for this sacrifice should not be overlooked.

Although it has not been explicitly interpreted by scholars in this way, it is my belief that the so called Gourd Birth Scene from the north wall of the famed Preclassic murals at San Bartolo in Peten, Guatemala may likewise portray the sacrifice of a child. The murals are housed within the Structure Sub-1 room in the Las Pinturas pyramid (Saturno et al. 2005). This structure was specifically constructed to house the murals (Hurst and Urquizù 2003: 8). The investigators of Structure Sub-1 interpret the Gourd Birth Scene on the north wall mural as a depiction of a birth of five infants from a cleft on the top of an oversized gourd (Saturno et al. 2005: Fig 9). Four infants are shown, with their umbilical cords still intact, arranged in a quadripartite division around the central gourd. A fifth infant is depicted emerging from the gourd dressed in ceremonial regalia. This arrangement mimics the quincunx division of the four cardinal directions and central



world tree of the Maya cosmos (Saturno et al. 2005: 12-13). A sixth adult figure, possibly representing an early form of the Plumed Serpent deity, presides over this birth event to the right of the scene (Saturno et al. 2005: 11).



**FIGURE 1.** *Depiction of the Gourd Birth Scene (after Saturno, et al. 2005:Fig. 9).*

While the birth of these five infants from a gourd is significant for the connection of children to both agricultural and human renewal, the specific interpretation of the scene's lower right infant as a sacrificial victim would bring this view full circle. Unlike the other infants, the lower right infant is shown with stylized blood emanating from his chest. Similar motifs were commonly used to represent the human sacrifice throughout the ancient Maya region and it is known that chest sacrifice, whereby an individual's heart was excised from their chest cavity, was a common form of ancient Maya human sacrifice. As a sacrificial victim in a scene depicting the birth of children from a symbolic

source of agricultural sustenance and vegetation, the role of child sacrifice in processes of linked human and agricultural renewal is highlighted by this sacrificial interpretation of the lower right infant. As such, it is possible that the Gourd Birth Scene is an early representation of the importance of human youth as sacrificial victims in the Maya worldview.

## CONCLUSION

Like the renewal of agriculture through crop cycles, children were a renewable form of life. Both crops and children were created and divinely granted by the gods, and both subsequently grew to biological and social maturation. For maize, this was a physical growth whose penultimate achievement was use for human nutriment. For children, processes of physical and social maturation coincided. Examinations of the social status of ancient Maya children indicate that their spiritual and biological positions shared common characteristics with processes of creation and emergence and forces related to ensoulment and vitality. Additionally, whether it is correct or not to conflate children with agriculture, the growth of maize and children should be recognized as being heavily laden with linked religious, ritual, and ultimately social implications. For the ancient Maya, the birth and sacrifice of children may have been connected with the growth and consumption of maize through commonly shared stages of an overarching life cycle.

## REFERENCES CITED

Ardren, Traci

2011 Empowered Children in Classic Maya Sacrificial Rites. *Childhood in the Past: An International Journal* 4(1): 133-145.

Duncan, William N. and Charles Andrew Hofling

2001 Why The Head? Cranial Modification as Protection and Ensoulment Among the Maya. *Ancient Mesoamerica* 22: 199-210.

Carlsen, Robert S. and Martín Prechtel

1997 The Flowering of the Dead. In *The War for the Heart and Soul of a Highland Maya Town*. The University of Texas Press, Austin, TX. pp. 47-69.

Harrison-Buck, Eleanor

2012 Architecture as Animate Landscape: Circular Shrines in the Ancient Maya Lowlands. *American Anthropologist* 114(1):63-79.

Hendon, Julia

2012 Objects as Persons: Integrating Maya Beliefs and Anthropological Theory. In *Power and Identity in Archaeological Theory and Practice: Case Studies from*

*Ancient Mesoamerica*, edited by Eleanor Harrison-Buck, pp. 82-89. University of Utah Press, Salt Lake City, UT..

Hurst, Heather and Mónica Urquizú

2003 The Murals of San Bartolo: A Window into the Art and Cosmovision of Precolumbian Man. *PARI Journal* 12(2), 2011, pp. 8-13. Translated from Las pinturas murals de San Bartolo: Una ventana al arte y cosmovisión del hombre prehispánico. In *XVI Simposio de Investigaciones Arqueológicas en Guatemala*, edited by Juan Pedro Laporte, et al., pp. 325-334.

Tozzer, Alfred

1941 Landa's Relación de las cosas de Yucatan, a translation. Papers of the Peabody Museum of American Archaeology and Ethnology, Vol. 18. Harvard University, Cambridge, MA.

Saturno, William, Karl Taube, David Stuart, and Heather Hurst

2005 *The Murals of San Bartolo, El Peten, Guatemala, Part 1: The North Wall*. Ancient America, No. 7. Center for Ancient American Studies, Barnardsville, NC.

Storey, Rebecca

1992 The children of Copán: issues of paleopathology and paleodemography. *Ancient Mesoamerica* 3: 161-167.

Taube, Karl

1993 *Aztec and Maya Myth*. University of Texas Press, Austin.

Thompson, J. Eric S.

1970 *Maya History and Religion*. The University of Oklahoma Press. Norman, Oklahoma.

Vogt, Evon

1970 *The Zinacantecos of Mexico: A Modern Maya Way of Life*. Holt, Reinhard, and Winston. New York.