

Can phenomenological fieldwork yield a richer understanding of the role of sacred caves in ancient Maya cosmology?

by Christopher Layser

Based upon a prevalent opinion that caves represent one of the best contexts for the investigation of ancient Mesoamerican religion, fieldwork at Barton Creek Cave, Cayo District, Belize is used, in conjunction with ontological and cultural evidence, to evaluate whether a phenomenological methodology could improve our understanding of the role of caves as sacred space within Maya cosmology. A canoe excursion into the cave, retracing the path of shamanic pilgrimage, provides a framework for the discussion of whether this portal to the underworld exists as a true hierophany as defined by Eliade or as a purely cultural construct. Comparisons are then drawn between this experience and astronomical iconography to argue for the existence of the belief in a sky-cave duality which may have represented a form of cosmological totality.

Introduction

The aim of this research is to determine whether a deeper perspective into the ancient Maya perception of caves as sacred space can be gained through phenomenological investigation and to ascertain how reflexive inquiry may shed light on facets of their cosmology. Brian Fagan notes that for thousands of years 'the cave functioned as a primordial sacred place, with its passages leading to the dark unknown- to the very bowels of the earth.'¹ As such, according to Holley Moyes and her colleagues, archaeological, iconographic, and epigraphic studies of ancient Mesoamerican cave sites have led to the 'establishment of caves as sacred space and their use as ritual venues by pre-

¹ Brian M. Fagan, *From Black Land to Fifth Sun: the Science of Sacred Sites*, (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1998), p.23

Columbian people'.² In this study, ontological and cultural consideration, in conjunction with phenomenological fieldwork at Barton Creek Cave, Cayo District, Belize, is used to explore the following topics: whether the cave as portal to the underworld presents itself as a true hierophany in the Eliadean sense or rather as a human/cultural construct, whether a re-creation (in part) of the pilgrimage to the underworld can provide insight as to the possible mood and motivation of the participants, and lastly to speculate whether connections can be drawn between the spatial opposition of the cave journey experience and the movement of the night sky.

Fieldwork Methodology

Three approaches to the further understanding of sacred space have been put forth by Belden Lane – the *ontological*, *cultural*, and *phenomenological*- all of which can be applied here to the study of Maya cave use.³ The *ontological* approach has at its core ethnographical investigations into indigenous examples of Mircea Eliade's notion that 'every sacred space implies a hierophany, an eruption of the sacred that results in detaching a territory from the surrounding cosmic milieu and making it qualitatively different.'⁴ An example of this approach is illustrated in Linda Schele's description of a shamanistic ritual ceremony which she had witnessed by candlelight in a deep narrow cave near Uatlan, Guatemala, wherein she relays that the local K'iche Maya understand the cave to be 'alive with the most powerful energies of the Otherworld.'⁵ A *cultural* approach, Lane explains, considers the inter-relationship between religion and the culture to which it pertains, and is therefore able to anchor the analysis of sacred space 'within the critical

² Holley Moyes, Jaime J. Awe, George A. Brooks and James W. Webster, 'The Ancient Maya Drought Cult: Late Classic Cave Use in Belize', *Latin American Antiquity*, Vol. 20, No. 1 (March 2009), p. 177

³ Belden C. Lane, *Landscapes of the Sacred: Geography and Narrative in American Spirituality*, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001) pp.42-46

⁴ Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and The Profane: The Nature of Religion*, (San Diego: Harcourt & Brace, 1957) p.26

⁵ David Freidel, Linda Schele and Joy Parker, *Maya Cosmos: Three Thousand Years on the Shaman's Path*, (New York: William Morrow Paperbacks, 1993) pp.185-187

discourse of social science methodology'.⁶ This opposing approach-founded in Emile Durkheim's notion of sacred space as a 'social' construct- is included in this research by way of examination of select iconographic and epigraphic examples as well as a review of secondary literary sources concerning the role of caves in ancient Maya cosmology.⁷ Lastly, a *phenomenological* approach, Lane argues, gives voice to the landscape itself and stresses the importance of 'embodiment in the human experience of place'.⁸

Keith M. Prufer and James E. Brady argue that since 'archaeological remains found in caves unequivocally represent the remains of ritualized actions of a religious nature, caves represent the single best context for the archaeological investigation of Maya religion.'⁹ In lieu of archaeological survey and excavation, which was beyond the scope of this research, a phenomenological methodology, reinforced with iconographic and epigraphic evaluation, was applied to the investigation of this site. A phenomenological approach to archaeology stresses the personal experiences of the individual on 'the way in which encounters with the [material culture] shape our understanding of the world'.¹⁰ Mark Vagle notes that the 'primary purpose of phenomenology as a research methodology, stemming from its philosophical roots, is to study what it is like as we *find-ourselves-being-in-relation-with others...* and *other things*.'¹¹ Academic rationale for this approach is supported by the assertion of Daniel Montello and Holley Moyes that phenomenology can

⁶ Lane, *Landscapes of the Sacred*, p.43

⁷ Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, (New York: The Free Press, 1995 [1912]) p. 441

⁸ Lane, *Landscapes of the Sacred*, p.44

⁹ Keith M. Prufer, and James E. Brady, 'Introduction: Religion and the Role of Caves in Lowland Maya Archaeology', in *Stone Houses and Earth Lords: Maya Religion in the Cave Context*, ed. Keith M. Prufer and James E. Brady, (Boulder: University Press of Colorado, 2005) p. 2

¹⁰ Colin Renfrew and Paul Bahn, *Archaeology: Theories, Methods, and Practice*, 6th Edition, (London and New York: Thames and Hudson, 2012) p. 44

¹¹ Mark D. Vagle, *Crafting Phenomenological Research*, (Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press, 2014) p.20

suggest 'the shared human experience of the cave is a major factor establishing and maintaining typological designations and meanings.'¹²

The original subject of this research was to be Actun Tunichil Muknal, or ATM Cave, but a tropical storm and subsequent flooding resulted in the temporary closure of the site, which afforded the opportunity to explore the nearby Barton Creek Cave site until the flooding had subsided. Water flowing from the mouths of both caves- each located in the Cayo District of western Belize near the towns of San Ignacio and Santa Elena- feeds tributaries of the Belize River Valley (see figure 1). In the course of this fieldwork both Barton Creek and ATM cave were visited through coordination with Cayo Adventure Tours, but ultimately the decision was made to change focus to Barton Creek Cave, the smaller of the two sites. One reason for this decision was the exclusivity of experience afforded by the low volume of tourists in relation to ATM. Another was the means of motion through the watery cave, in this case by canoe. In times past Maya shaman would have undertaken such a pilgrimage in dugout canoes, or *jukuub*, by fire-lit torches.¹³ Similarly, our excursion would be made in an aluminum canoe by electric torchlight. Christopher Tilley notes that a journey such as this, taken along a prescribed path, can be claimed to be a 'paradigmatic cultural act, since it is following in the steps inscribed by others whose steps [or in this case paddle strokes] have worn a conduit for movement which becomes the correct [way to go]'.¹⁴ This conduit of movement would take me, accompanied by my certified Cayo tour guide, against the slow current of the wide stream flowing from the maw of Barton Creek Cave.

¹² Daniel R. Montello and Holley Moyes, 'Why Dark Zones are Sacred: Turning to Behavioural and Cognitive Science for Answers', in *Sacred Darkness: A Global Perspective on the Ritual Use of Caves*, ed. Holley Moyes, (Boulder: University Press of Colorado, 2014) p.386

¹³ Andrea Stone and Marc Zender, *Reading Maya Art: A Hieroglyphic Guide to Ancient Maya Painting and Sculpture*, (London and New York: Thames and Hudson, 2011), p. 51

¹⁴ Christopher Tilley, *A Phenomenology of Landscape: Places, Paths and Monuments*, (London and New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 1997) p.31

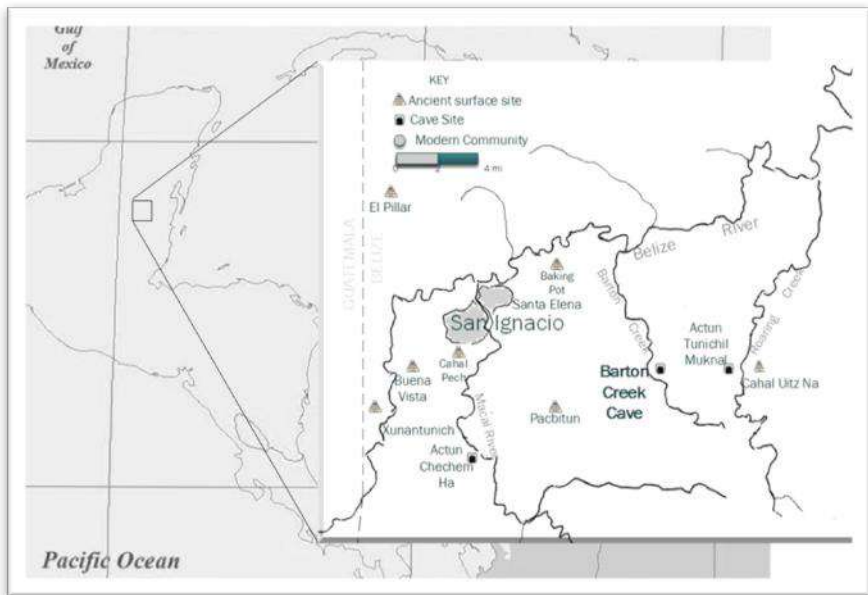


Figure 1: Map of the upper Belize River Valley showing the location of Barton creek Cave, drawn by author.

As a modern English-speaking, middle-aged American of European descent- a cultural outsider from the perspective of the ancient Maya to be sure- of primary consideration is the objectivity and reflexivity in experiencing the phenomena of this pilgrimage in the wake of the shaman of old. As a reflexive tool to place myself within the experience and to further establish relation-with-place, I imagine myself as a spiritual initiate of a different age accompanying the shaman/guide, armed with a life-time of experience, on my first pilgrimage of discovery to the underworld. This phenomenological exercise- the act of moving through the cave in this manner and mindset- is the primary approach used in this research, though it should be noted that constraints did not allow for multiple visits to the cave, extended periods of quiet reflection within the cave, or exiting the canoe to closer investigate the cultural remains deposited on the ledges.

Portal to the Underworld

Author's field journal excerpt 1 (edited): My guide and I- one paddling at stern, the other holding the light at prow- put into the clear water which flowed from the mouth of the cave and began our slow progression towards the open maw of the mountain. We soon crossed the threshold of the cave's mouth- the demarcation between the outside world and the karstic opening into the earth.



Figure 2: Barton Creek Cave mouth, Cayo District, Belize, with the reflection of the daytime sky. Photo by author, 2015

Thresholds such as this, according to Linda Schele and David Freidel, whether between night and day, the sea and the shore, or 'the surface of the earth and the underground as in a cave... were intrinsically powerful and ambiguous' for the ancient Maya.¹⁵ Eliade expresses this concept of threshold as 'the limit, the boundary, the frontier that distinguishes and opposes two worlds-and at the same time the paradoxical place where those worlds communicate, where passage from the profane to the sacred world becomes possible.'¹⁶ Perspective on this threshold is added by Moyes, who explains that the Maya 'envisioned the vertical axis of the cosmos as consisting of the sky, the middle world or earth, and the underworld', and therefore caves, as literal geographic entrances into the earth, were 'one of the most salient features of the sacred landscape because they reify the cosmology of this three-tiered universe representing a conduit between the middle world of humans and the underworld.'¹⁷



Figure 3: Illustration of Chaak sitting in the mouth of a cave, from Codex Dresdensis, D.71b. (Sächische Landesbibliothek Dresden, facsimile –Ernst W. Förstemann, 1892)

Residing at this threshold was the rain god Chaak, whose realm was associated with the area from the mouth of the cave to the edge of the twilight-zone.¹⁸ Figure 3, an illustration from the Dresden Codex, shows Chaak seated in the mouth of the cave, where the walls themselves depict two important

¹⁵ Linda Schele and David Freidel, *A Forest of Kings: The Untold Story of the Ancient Maya*, (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1990) p.98

¹⁶ Eliade, *The Sacred and The Profane*, p.25

¹⁷ Holley Moyes, 'Constructing the Underworld: The Built Environment in Ancient Mesoamerican Caves', *Association for Mexican Cave Studies Bulletin*, No. 23, (2012), p.8

¹⁸ Moyes, 'Constructing the Underworld', p.13

iconographic cave characteristics- earth, or *kàab* and water, *ha*. This zone was often used for public rituals and ceremonies, though Keith Prufer notes a ‘widespread distinction between twilight-zone public-ritual activities and activities in more restricted dark zone areas’.¹⁹ The latter was restricted to ritual specialists. This is supported by Moyes’ study of man-made architectural modifications at a cave located near Las Cuevas, Belize, wherein she demonstrates that constructed cave architecture ‘materializes cosmology and creates narratives predicated on mythological concepts’ which ‘create a framework that guides participants in their journeys through the Maya underworld.’²⁰

Author’s field journal excerpt 2 (edited): On our journey, the clear fresh stream shaded by the cave mouth- juxtaposed to the midday heat of the jungle outside- is cool and inviting. Though saddled with the responsibility illuminating our path, I attempt to open myself to the experience, feeling the rippling water beneath the oar emanating, perhaps, a sense of the sacred.

But does this sense of sacred represent a true hierophany, an Eliadean portal to the Otherworld discernible only to the ‘religious man’?²¹ Or is it primarily a human construct, as Durkheim contends- that it is made sacred by being ‘set apart and forbidden’, and remains sacred only as long as culture continues to consider it so?²² Moyes and Brady, experts in the field, clearly feel that across Mesoamerica, caves as sacred space are indeed ‘culturally constructed’.²³ Phenomenological and reflexive consideration and evaluation was brought to bear on addressing this sacred/profane dichotomy- whether this portal to the underworld held intrinsic spiritual power in and of itself, or whether it maintained the cultural designations and meanings attributed to it-

¹⁹ Keith M. Prufer, ‘Shamans, Caves, and the Role of Ritual Specialists in Maya Society’, in *In the Maw of the Earth Monster: Mesoamerican Ritual Cave Use*, ed. James E. Brady and Keith M. Prufer, (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2010) p.186

²⁰ Moyes, ‘Constructing the Underworld’, p.7

²¹ Eliade, *The Sacred and The Profane*, p.20

²² Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, p. xivi

²³ Holley Moyes and James E. Brady, ‘Caves as Sacred Space in Mesoamerica’, in *Sacred Darkness: A Global Perspective on the Ritual Use of Caves*, ed. Holley Moyes, (Boulder: University Press of Colorado, 2014) p.151

but ultimately no incontrovertible evidence of hierophany presented itself during this fieldwork. Though clearly my surroundings had dramatically changed, as I passed through the threshold of the cave mouth there was no definitive feeling that I had crossed cosmic dimensions and no longer remained in the earthly realm. There remains the distinct possibility that, as an outsider, this observer was not sufficiently attuned to the spiritual world to be able to detect, discern, or recognize such a phenomena- perhaps a limitation of both the observer and the methodology. The methodology and scope, for instance, did not allow for the type of continued repetition of visitation that Tilley suggests may be required to ultimately experience the sense of sacredness.²⁴ Perhaps the opening of the portal did indeed require, as the Maya believed, the letting of blood- a cultural act clearly beyond the scope of this work.²⁵ Or perhaps the lack of any clear evidence for the existence of hierophany, making the cave qualitatively different from the profane space surrounding it, serves as a testament to the nature of sacred space as a human construct.

A Pilgrimage to Xibalba

Author's field journal excerpt 3 (edited): With the twilight-zone of public ceremony, and the relatively safety of the realm of Chaak astern, I am struck by how tenuous is our source of illumination surrounded by so much water. The last vestiges of sunlight vanish behind us, and only the light of the flashlight now dances across the awe-inspiring cavern ceiling and across the rippled water, much as the shaman's torch of wood and fire would have a millennia before. As we progress further into the cave, the only sound is that of the oar dipping into water. Beyond is darkness and apprehension. It is not hard to imagine a forboding sense of dread felt by successive pilgrims- accumulating over the centuries of the cave's use as a ritual circuit.

²⁴ Tilley, A Phenomenology of Landscape, pp. 74-75

²⁵ Schele and Freidel, A Forest of Kings, p. 70



Figure 4: One of several flow form bridges in Barton Creek Cave, Cayo District, Belize. Photo by author, 2015

Though the Maya three-tiered worldview was comprised of the underworld, earth and sky, the sky was further subdivided into thirteen levels, six ascending levels from the eastern horizon to the Zenith- which is the seventh, and six descending towards the western horizon.²⁶ Likewise, the underworld, which the K'iche Maya called Xibalba, was subdivided into nine levels, four descending levels down the western horizon to the Nadir- the fifth level, and another four ascending levels to the eastern horizon.²⁷

The cave was portrayed in iconography as the Maw of the Underworld, to which the Maya undertook pilgrimages in order to 'renew their ties with the

²⁶ Moyes, 'Constructing the Underworld', p.11

²⁷ Schele and Freidel, A Forest of Kings, p.66

sources of sacred power.’²⁸ Pilgrimages, as explained by Simon Coleman and J. Elsner, involve ‘not only movement through space but also an active process of response as the pilgrim encounters both the journey and the goal.’²⁹ This is similar in concept to what Mayanist Kathryn Reese-Taylor refers to as *ritual circuits*. She defines a ritual circuit as ‘movement from one location to another during the course of a political or religious ceremony...punctuated by stops to perform ritual acts at stations, specific locales along the circuit’.³⁰ Phenomenological recreation (to the extent possible), in conjunction with the archaeological evidence, suggests that the Barton Creek Cave site was used as such a ritual circuit, representing- and becoming- pilgrimage to underworld. Participants likely stopped to climb from their canoes at one or more of the rock ledges which flank the central watercourse, or on to one of the flowstone bridges that cross it, as is evidenced by the cultural remains of ritualized actions discovered resting directly on the surface of the ledges.³¹ Archaeological investigations conducted in the late nineties by the Western Belize Regional Cave Project determined that of the 10 kilometers of the cave that had been surveyed cultural material was found only in the first 450 meters, deposited on these ten ledges (Figure 5).³²

²⁸ Andrea Stone, ‘Scribes and Caves in the Maya Lowlands’, in *Stone Houses and Earth Lords: Maya Religion in the Cave Context*, ed., Keith M. Prufer and James E. Brady, (Boulder: University Press of Colorado, 2005), p. 135

²⁹ Simon Coleman and J. Elsner, *Pilgrimage Past and Present in the World Religions*, (London: Harvard University Press, 1995), p. 206

³⁰ Kathryn V. Reese-Taylor, ‘Ritual Circuits as Key Elements in Maya Civic Center Designs’, in *Heart of Creation: The Mesoamerican World and the Legacy of Linda Schele*, ed. by Andrea J. Stone, (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2002), p. 145

³¹ Christopher T. Morehart, Jaime J. Awe, Michael J. Mirro, Vanessa A. Owen and Christopher G. Helmke, ‘Ancient Textile Remains From Barton Creek Cave, Cayo District, Belize’, *Mexicon*, Vol. 26, No.3 (Jun 2004), p.51

³² Vanessa A. Owen, ‘A Question of Sacrifice: Classic Maya Cave Mortuary Practices at Barton Creek Cave, Belize’, in *Stone Houses and Earth Lords: Maya Religion in the Cave Context*, ed., Keith M. Prufer and James E. Brady, (Boulder: University Press of Colorado, 2005) p.325

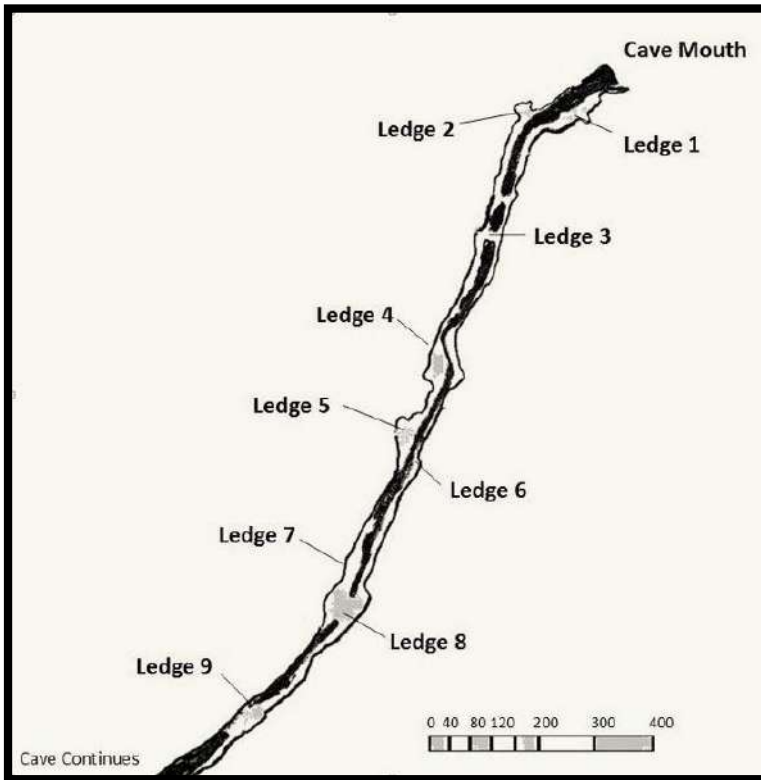


Figure 5: Map of Barton Creek Cave, drawn by author based on Owen, 2005

Among the ceramic and lithic artifacts, human remains were discovered on six of the ten ledges (Figures 6 and 7). Analysis of the skeletal, contextual, and mortuary data by Vanessa Owens suggests that ‘the majority of the internments were victims of sacrifice.’³³ Though hints can be gleaned from epigraphic and iconographic references throughout Mesoamerica, it remains a mystery and matter of debate as to whether these are the remains of willing sacrifices- perhaps even loved ones from the community- or unwilling captives from a rival polity. In the role of one who may be required to take the life of these human sacrifices, I imagine the task, though deemed necessary, to be nevertheless a disagreeable and uneasy one. Furthermore, I surmise this

³³ Owens, ‘A Question of Sacrifice’, p. 336

journey into the realm of the dark gods, stripped of its twenty-first century safeguards of electric light, moderate traffic, and government-sanctioned tour guides would only serve to escalate unease to dread.



Figure 6: Surface deposit of Ceramic cultural material on one of the many ledges in Barton Creek Cave, Belize. Photo by author, 2015



Figure 7: Human sacrificial remains on one of the many ledges in Barton Creek Cave, Belize. Photo by author, 2015

Author's field journal excerpt 4 (edited): The light of the electric torch catches the tiny droplets of water forming on the cavern ceiling causing their reflection to twinkle like starlight. Before long we are again ducking our heads as the canoe passes beneath another natural stone bridge connecting ledges. My guide breaks the silence and informs that during a recent training session with archaeologist Holley Moyes, it was suggested that each of these nine ledges- with their evidence of activity and sacrifice- represented one of the nine levels of Xibalba. Furthermore...

Moyes suggests that there is an underworld deity associated with each level, and the deeper one progresses into the cave, the increasingly more malevolent they become.³⁴ The *Popol Vuh* gives names to these Lords of Xibalba in order of dominance: One Death, Seven Death, Blood Gatherer, Scab Stripper, Demon of Pus, Demon of Jaundice, Bone Scepter, Skull Scepter, Demon of Filth, Demon of Woe, Wing, and Packstrap.³⁵ These pilgrimages through the cave had

³⁴ Moyes, 'Constructing the Underworld' p.11

³⁵ Dennis Tedlock, *Popol Vuh: The Definitive Edition of The Mayan Book of The Dawn of Life and The Glories of Gods and Kings*, (New York: Touchstone, 1996) p.92

as their goal 'communion, supplication, and offering to the deities of the underworld', where the cave was 'not just representing, but *existing* as the underworld'.³⁶ Elements such as encounters with dangerous gods from the realm of death, the watery blackness where the accidental dousing of a torch could mean being lost in the dark, the storied remains of past human sacrifice amid the likelihood of additional human sacrifice on each new procession- all combine to create an overwhelming sense of foreboding. There seems little similarity to pilgrimages undertaken in brighter settings, such as journeys to Jerusalem to experience proximity to holy lands or Buddhist quests to Bodhgaya for the attainment of enlightenment.³⁷ These appear to be pilgrimages of dread, seemingly taken in desperation- a supplication to dangerous powers to keep the evil at bay.

Connecting the Cave and Sky

It is important to note that the Maya three-tiered cosmological model consisting of the underworld, earth and sky is inter-connected, and any discussion of one realm would be incomplete without relating it to the others. It has already been demonstrated that caves represented a threshold between the earth and the underworld. I contend that the much of the iconography pertaining to the cave has its antecedents in the night sky. Consider Evon Vogt and David Stuart's statement, in discussing the epigraphic qualities of the cave glyph *ch'een*, that

An important and recurring ritual term in the inscriptions is *chan ch'een*, 'sky-cave'...the combination of the terms is curious, and we know of no direct parallel in historical Mayan languages. Nonetheless, it is interesting to entertain

³⁶ Marieka Arksey and Holley Moyes, 'Ancient Maya Ritual Pathways: Performing Power outside the cave at Las Cuevas, Belize'. <http://faculty2.ucmerced.edu/hmoyes/publications/ancient-maya-ritual-pathways-performing-power-outside-cave-las-cuevas-belize>, accessed December 22nd, 2015 p. 12

³⁷ Coleman and Elsner, *Pilgrimage Past and Present in the World Religions*, p. 196

the possibility that ‘sky-cave’ presents a spatial opposition that indicates some universal totality...³⁸



Figure 8: *chan ch'een*, "sky-cave" (Thompson number T561. 571:23), redrawn by author, 2015

Although a concrete interpretation of the concept of sky-cave is still lacking, it is interesting to compare to observations of Dennis Tedlock, commenting on a passage from the *Popol Vuh* in which the Hero Twins journey to Xibalba, wherein he notes that

they come to a Crossroads, where each of the four roads has a different color corresponding to a different direction. They choose the Black Road, which means, at a terrestrial level, that their journey through the underworld will take them from east to west. At a celestial level, it means that they were last seen in the black cleft of the Milky Way when they descended below the eastern horizon: to this day the cleft is called the Road to Xibalba.³⁹

Harvey and Victoria Bricker point out epigraphic verification of the Milky Way represented as the *Road to Xibalba* in a Cholan-Mayan reading of a Dresden Codex eclipse table augury caption (see Figure 8) as *ah chamal u bib chan*, or ‘death is the road of the sky’.⁴⁰

³⁸ Evon Z. Vogt and David Stuart, ‘Some Notes on Ritual Caves among the Ancient and Modern Maya’, in *In the Maw of the Earth Monster: Mesoamerican Ritual Cave Use*, ed. James E. Brady and Keith M. Prufer, (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2010) p. 160

³⁹ Dennis Tedlock, *Popol Vuh: The Definitive Edition of The Mayan Book of The Dawn of Life and The Glories of Gods and Kings*, (New York: Touchstone, 1996) p.36

⁴⁰ Harvey M. Bricker and Victoria R. Bricker, *Astronomy in the Maya Codices*, (Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 2011), pp. 835



Figure 9: *Death is the Road of the Sky*, Caption at A4-B4 on D.51b in the Dresden Codex eclipse table. Redrawn by author, 2015

Key to this particular phenomenological fieldwork was the necessary means of motion through the cave- specifically, the paddling of a canoe. This mode of transportation has parallels in Maya iconography in the form of two Paddlers Gods whose canoeing is transformational as it involves the crossing of cosmic realms.⁴¹ Susan Milbrath suggests that ‘the notion of the two traveling in a canoe suggests a trip through the watery underworld’-a position further supported by a depiction on one ceramic vessel which shows the Paddlers in separate canoes ‘positioned in quatrefoil designs that may represent a cave-like entry into the underworld’.⁴² Figure 10 depicts an image of the paddlers ferrying the Maize god- Jaguar Paddler at prow and Stingray Paddler at stern- which comes from an incised bone recovered from the tomb of HaSaw Chaan K’awil at Tikal, Guatemala.⁴³ Karen Bassie-Sweet notes that the text accompanying this image ‘uses the “Venus over the *cab* cave” glyph as a verb indicating that the location of the water is a cave’ and that these deities are therefore ‘travelling across the water of the cave that separates the world from the Underworld.’⁴⁴ But the Paddler gods are primarily oppositional astronomical figures -the Stingray Paddler’s *k’in* insignia associating him to the daytime sun, and the Jaguar Paddler’s *ak’ab* insignia relating to night/darkness, associating him with the nocturnal aspect of the sun.⁴⁵ Furthermore, the Paddler Gods appear to be closely tied to the Milky Way, which Milbrath suggests ‘may

⁴¹ Stone and Zender, *Reading Maya Art*, p. 51

⁴² Susan Milbrath, *Star Gods of the Maya: Astronomy in Art, Folklore, and Calendars*, (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1999), pp. 127-129

⁴³ Stone and Zender, *Reading Maya Art*, p. 51

⁴⁴ Karen Bassie-Sweet, *From the Mouth of the Dark Cave: Commemorative Sculpture of the Late Classic Maya*, (Norman and London: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991), p.101

⁴⁵ Stone and Zender, *Reading Maya Art*, p. 51

be a divine river in some contexts, and a canoe is required for the crossing.’⁴⁶ In fact, the image in figure 10 has been interpreted as a depiction of the Paddler Gods, accompanied by four zoomorphic creatures with their own astrological significance, ferrying the Maize God along the watery road from Xibalba, along the Milky Way, in participation in the act of creation of the current cosmos.⁴⁷



*Figure 10: Jaguar Paddler at prow and Stingray Paddler at stern, part of assembly of seven gods on incised bones (MT38a) from tomb of HaSaw Chaan K'awil (Burial 116 at Tikal) image: Freidel, David A., Linda Schele, and Joy Parker. *Maya Cosmos: Three Thou Thousand Years on the Shaman's Path* (New York: W. Morrow, 1993), p. 90*

In the hope of better illustrating, visually, the relationship of these various canoe voyages- the ferrying of the Maize God by the Paddler Gods, the cave pilgrimage of the ancient Maya shaman, and my own phenomenological fieldwork retracing their path- I wish to superimpose these concepts onto an indigenous depiction of the Classic Maya worldview- an elaborately portrayed cosmogram painted on a tripod plate which was ‘intended to hold the blood that helped open a portal to the Otherworld.’⁴⁸ The Maw of the Underworld, the opened cave-portal, is illustrated in this painting as a skeletal-jawed-serpent out of which flow the pure life bearing waters of the Underworld. This serpent representing the underworld is depicted along the lower half of the plate rim, to which I have added numerical identifiers to what I interpret as symmetrical representations of the different levels of the underworld (Figure 11). Conversely, the two-headed Cosmic Monster which represents the Milky Way, adorns the upper half of the rim.⁴⁹ Though no labels have been added here, the

⁴⁶ Milbrath, *Star Gods of the Maya*, p.127

⁴⁷ Freidel, Schele and Parker, *Maya Cosmos*, pp.89-92

⁴⁸ Schele and Freidel, *A Forest of Kings*, p.69

⁴⁹ Milbrath, *Star Gods of the Maya*, p 275-282

eastern horizon would represent the first level of the sky, the Zenith the seventh, and the western horizon the thirteenth level. These two zoomorphic serpentine representations circumscribe a whole body of cosmological iconography, including: Chaak as the rising Evening-star, the World Tree as *axis mundi*, inverted Xibalbans mirroring the middle world, and figures from the *Popol Vuh*.

Against this backdrop I have inserted two additional images- the cave map of Barton Creek and the depiction of the Paddler Gods, in their correct position and orientation in relation to the Cosmogram/plate, in order to provide a visual representation of the spatial opposition of the *sky-cave* concept as hinted at by Vogt and Stuart and to connect the cave and sky as reciprocal components of the same Cultural Astronomy. Counter-clockwise motion around the Cosmogram traces out not only the path of pilgrims and paddlers, but that of the Sun, Moon, and Venus as well. More precisely, Schele and Freidel explain that the Maya believed that 'at sundown Xibalba rotated above the earth to become the night sky'.⁵⁰

⁵⁰ Schele and Freidel, *A Forest of Kings*, p.66

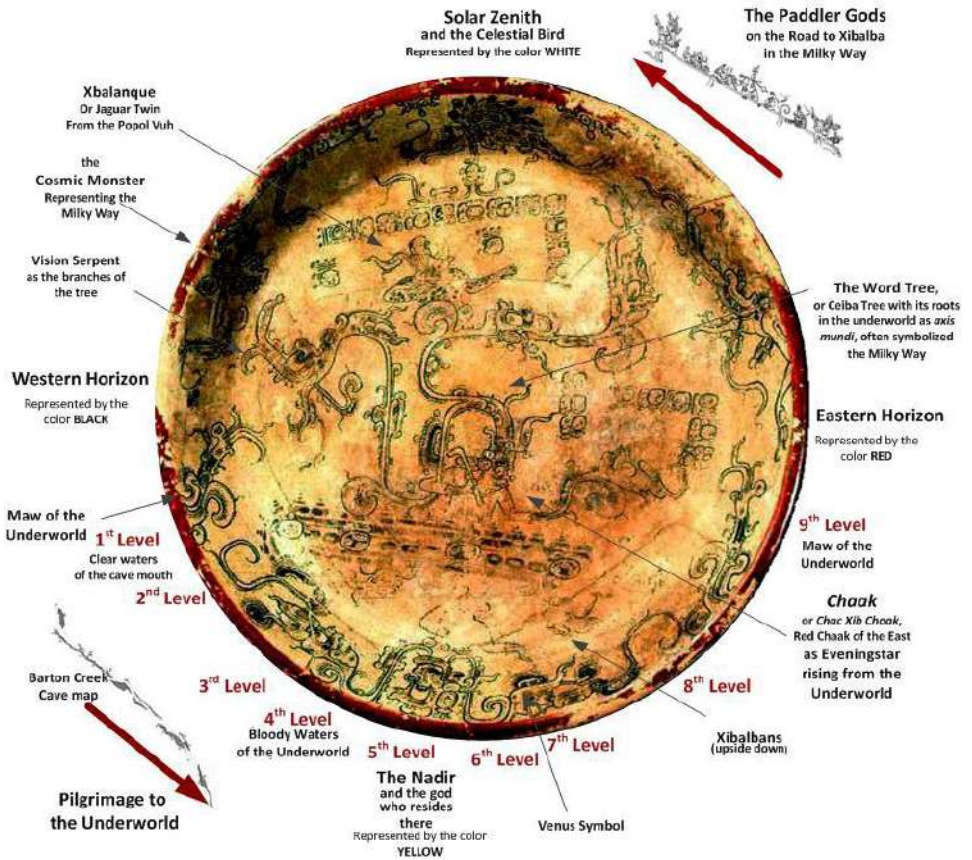


Figure 11: Master of the famous pot from Altar de Sacrificios in Guatemala, Chac, tripod plate, annotation modified from: Schele, Linda and David Freidel, *A Forest of Kings*, New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1990. P.70. Image from Schele, Linda and Mar Mary Ellen Miller, *The Blood of Kings: Dynasty and Ritual in Maya Art*, (Fort Worth: Kimbell Art Museum, 1986), p.315. Photograph © Justin Kerr 1985, used with permission

Discussion

Author's field journal excerpt 5 (edited): As we approached approximately a quarter mile from the cave's mouth, the once-high cavern ceiling was now mere feet above our heads, and my guide informed that although the cave stretched on for over five more miles,

it would soon be too dangerous to proceed any further by canoe. Having passed the furthest extent of ancient Maya cultural remains and known activity, we turned and headed back the way we came, ascending from deep within the Underworld. If indeed there was a sense of traversing between realms, it was surely strongest as we approached the threshold of the cave mouth from the direction of deep within the bowls of the earth, as eyes adjusted to the brilliant sunlight around the bend.

As a final thought, here phenomenology can perhaps yield a new perspective on the development of such beliefs not directly accessible from examination of the archaeological record. As I emerged from the cave, for instance, I could picture participants gathered at the cave mouth engaged in organized public ritual- the threshold where sky (air), earth (stone), and underworld (water) meet. After sundown, perhaps the night sky could be seen reflected in the clear dark water at the mouth of the cave (refer to figure 2). Perhaps even a portion of the Milky Way would be visible, creating that sense of dualism and opposition so integral to Maya Cosmology. I could envision the religious specialists, the paddlers, progressing into the darkness of the cave, with their bound sacrificial captives in tow, the stars disappearing beneath and behind them as they descend into the underworld on their pilgrimage along the Road to Xibalba. Torchlight then catches the droplets of water on the cavern ceiling, reflecting much like the twinkle of stars in the night sky. Cosmic realms have been crossed; the sky, the cave and the Underworld have become one.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the aim of this research was to determine whether phenomenological fieldwork at Barton Creek Cave could yield a deeper understanding of the role of sacred caves and their place within ancient Maya Cosmology. Reflexive considerations were compared to cultural primary and secondary sources to suggest support of Durkheim's position that the cave's function as a portal to the underworld was a cultural construct of the Maya society. Partial re-creation of the experience of a presumed shamanic journey to the underworld suggested that these processions were pilgrimages of dread born of necessity and sacrifice. Connections were drawn between the motion through the cave (the pilgrimage) and the motion of the night sky (the Milky Way) in order to suggest a conceptual spatial opposition- which possibly

encapsulates some Maya concept of universal totality. Lastly, new lines of speculation were opened in consideration of the development and adoption of a *sky-cave* duality. This fieldwork has sought to demonstrate that phenomenological methodologies- completely independent of empirical survey, excavation, or disruption of the cultural remains at archaeological sites- can provide, through the experience of the researcher, new insight to the nature of sacred landscapes and their cultural significance.

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