Life, Death and Chocolate in Mesoamerica:
The Aztecs and the Maya; Where did the Ritual Use of Cacao Originate?

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Ritual use of cacao permeates the Maya, the Aztec, and other cultures of Mesoamerica. Cacao, an indigenous plant, originally appeared in the Soconusco region of Mexico, with archaeological evidence of its use stretching over millennia. Next to maize, it was the most important plant food in Mesoamerica. Cacao connected mankind to their gods; it was used as a milestone for important life events, a healing beverage, and a luxury. This essay will investigate the archaeological and ethnohistorical history of cacao in rituals and religion, and its origin. The similarities in cacao rites associated with various milestones of the lifecycle of indigenous peoples, and the symbolism of cacao and its use with human sacrificial rituals, in religion and at death, will be explored, focusing on the Maya, the Aztec and other cultures (Figure 1). Cacao has permeated the ritual life of the Mesoamerican people since ancient times. Despite the millennia that have passed, and the different cultures that procured cacao, there is a remarkable similarity in ritual contexts. It is postulated that cacao must have originated from an early culture, stemming back to the time of the Olmecs.

Figure 1: Mesoamerican timeline (Pohl 2003).
The Maya and the Aztecs were instrumental in introducing cacao to the Spanish, yet as cacao originated far to the south in Soconusco, another culture must have introduced it to them. Within the Maya region, vessels containing theobromine, an alkaloid found in cacao, have been discovered at Colha in Belize from the Pre-Classic period (c. 600 BC-250 AD), and from a Classic period tomb at Rio Azul in Guatemala (c. 460-480 AD; Figure 2); iconographic and ethnographic evidence demonstrates the cultural importance of cacao to the Maya through the Classic (c. 250-900 AD) and into the Post-Classic (c. 900-1,500 AD) periods (Hall et al. 1990, p. 139-140; Kufer, Grube and Heinrich 2006, p. 598; Powis et al. 2008, pp. 35-36; Figure 3). Five rare cacao seeds (c. 134-615 AD) were discovered in an Early Classic Maya burial at Bats’ub Cave, Belize (McNeil 2010, p. 310; Moreiras 2010, p. 19; Prufer and Hurst 2007, pp. 276-278). As few studies were apparently performed on the theobromine contents of vessels from within the Aztec sphere of influence, archaeologists rely on iconographic and ethnographic descriptions to determine the nature of such vessels. For example, Smith et al. (2003, p. 3 & 257) believe that a polished redware goblet with a butterfly element (c. 1350-1520 AD; Figure 4), found at a Coatetelco burial, was used for drinking cacao as it is similar in style to the picture of a similar cacao vessel with a bird element (Figure 5) in the Codex Tudela. They also contend that the shape of Mixtec cacao serving vessels differ from shape to those used by the Aztecs (Smith et al. 2003, p. 262). Direct evidence from the Aztec capital of Tenochtitlan is hard to find, due to Mexico City’s location on top of the old capital, and no evidence of cacao has been found within the city’s old ritual centre (Draper 2010, p. 110; Templo Mayor Museum 2012 pers. comm., 10 May). Ceramics containing cacao traces (c. 1,000-1,125 AD) have even been found as far away as Pueblo Bonito in the Chaco Canyon, USA (Moreiras 2010, p. 21; Map 2). Cacao has been important since at least 600 BC, which suggests that the Mesoamerican origin of cacao use came from a time prior to that of the Maya. The ritual use of cacao must therefore be examined before a common origin can be determined.
Map 1: Mesoamerican sites with evidence of cacao, including Pueblo Bonito in New Mexico (Moreiras 2010, p. 39).

Figure 2: Ceramic vessels from Rio Azul with cacao residues (Hall et al. 1990, p. 139).
Figure 3: Behind God L, a woman pours chocolate from one vessel into another. Princeton Vase, Late Classic Maya (c. 750 AD) (Kerr 2005a; Moreiras 2010, p. 37).

Figure 4: Polished redware goblet from Coatetelco, probably used for drinking cacao (after Smith et al. 2003, p. 259).

Figure 5: Woman pouring cacao, Codex Tudela (NEH Summer Institute for School Teachers, Oaxaca 2011a).
According to the beliefs of the Maya and Aztec, cacao was part of the creation myth and thus the start of life. In Post-Conquest literature, the K’iche’ Maya *Popol Vuh* and the Aztec *Chimalpopoca Codex*, the gods alternatively created man from maize, cacao and other good plant foods, or brought the same foods to mankind from the mythical Mountain of Sustenance (Coe and Coe 1996, pp. 41-42; Dillinger et al. 2000, p. 2058S; Recinos 1950, p. 166; Suess 2002, p. 21). Although these works were written after the Spanish Conquest, they show how mankind connects to the divine through the use of cacao. This connection began at birth, and continued throughout life. In the 16th Century, Diego García de Palacio observed a Maya naming ritual where the priest and mother presented cacao to the newly named baby (Henderson *et al.* 2007, p. 18938; Prufer and Hurst 2007, p. 288). Bishop Diego de Landa describes the Post-Conquest Maya “baptising” children with a mixture of cacao, virgin water and crushed flowers during an initiation ceremony (Vail 2009, p. 5). Friar Bernardino de Sahagún describes 16th century Aztec fathers advising their sons, who were entering religious school, to offer *cacaoatl* drink to God (Durand-Forest 1967, pp. 174). Cacao use also occurred in marriage ceremonies. The 14th century *Codex Zouche-Nuttall* depicts a Mixtec ceremony where Lady Thirteen Serpent offers a bowl of cacao to Lord Eight Deer to solemnise their marriage (Closs 2000, p. 230; Vail 2009, p. 6; Figure 6). The Post-Conquest *Madrid Codex* depicts the Maya god Chaak marrying the goddess Ixik Kaab’, stating that they were ‘given their cacao’, a term indicating marriage (Figure 7); in the Guatemalan highlands, some Maya continue to hold to this tradition (Vail 2009, pp. 6-7), although some cultures now use money in place of cacao. Chocolate still resonates with indigenous ceremonies today as it has done since much earlier times (Coe and Coe 1996, pp. 62-63; LeCount 2001, p. 943; Prufer and Hurst 2007, pp. 286-287). Cacao was also used at religious rites and festivals, and as a symbol of blood itself.
Figure 6: The groom, Lord Eight Deer, points to a cup of frothy cacao in the hands of his bride, Lady Thirteen Serpent (Mexico Lore 2006).

Figure 7: The wedding of the god Chaak and the goddess Ixik Kaab’ (NEH Summer Institute for School Teachers, Oaxaca 2011b).
The symbolism of chocolate as blood was universal throughout Mesoamerica. The *Madrid Codex* depicts four young Maya gods piercing their own earlobes to cover cacao pods in showers of their own blood because the Maya linked liquid chocolate with blood (Coe and Coe 1996, p. 44-45; Dillinger *et al.* 2000, p. 2058S; Figure 8). Landa (1937, pp. 86-89) discusses the ‘cruel and obscene’ sacrifices made by the Maya, but cacao is not identified as being part of any human sacrificial rituals. The connection between blood and chocolate also mattered to the Aztecs, for whom the metaphor "heart, blood" meant cacao, and the cacao pod was likened to the human heart torn out in sacrifice (Coe and Coe 1996, p. 101; Moreiras 2010, p. 32). The Aztecs also occasionally offered cacao to sacrificial victims. This was offered to “comfort” human sacrifices to the trader god Yacatecuhtli (Dillinger *et al.* 2000, p. 2058S; Figure 9), and was a major ingredient in *itzpacalatl* (“water from the washing of obsidian blades”) which was given to the impersonator of Quetzalcoatl. This concoction – perhaps with additional unnamed hallucinogens – would ensure that he was joyful until the time of his death (Coe and Coe 1996, p. 102; Durán 1971, pp. 131-133; Elferink 1988, p. 430-431; Versényi 1989, pp. 218-219). To the Maya, cacao was a sacred offering to the gods combined with personal blood-letting through the piercing or cutting of their own flesh. Unlike the Aztecs, there is no evidence that cacao was part of Maya human sacrifice rites. Whilst the Aztecs used cacao to subdue victims for sacrifice, it was not part of the ceremony itself as only the heart was offered to the deities. The association between cacao and blood, which survived through thousands of years of cultural change, must have originated from potent beliefs and symbolism of an ancestral culture. Although the Spanish outlawed human sacrifice in Mesoamerica and brought change to the religions of the area, blood and chocolate continued to be central to the worship the old gods.
Figure 8: Gods cutting their ears and bleeding onto cacao pods (FAMSI 2003).

Figure 9: The Aztec merchant god Yacatecuhtli, as depicted in the *Codex Fejérváry-Mayer* (Akademische Druck- u. Verlagsanstalt Graz 2004).
The religions of the Maya and Aztec were similar, as were their ways of revering their gods. The Maya deity of merchants and cacao, known as Ek Chuah during the Post-Conquest period, had links to the Aztec merchant deity, Yacatecuhtli (Guerrero 2009, p. 1194; Vail 2009, p. 6), because cacao was used as currency (Landa 1937, pp. 71). During the month of Muan, cacao plantation owners offered a dog “spotted with the colours of the cacao” in sacrifice to certain gods, including Ek Chuah (Aguilera 1985, p. 120; Dillinger et al. 2000, p. 2058S; Landa 1937, p. 131; Vail 2009, pp. 4-5). Sahagún documents Post-Conquest Aztec offerings of liquid chocolate in sacred cups to Xiuhtecutli, the old fire god, and to Yiacatecutli, by merchants who had returned from long journeys (Durand-Forest 1967, p. 174; Sahagún 1976, p. 28). The Aztecs maintained trade links with the cacao-producing Maya city of Acallan (Coe and Coe 1996, p. 59). Through such networks, the Maya adopted a new deity of merchants and cacao, known as God M (Figure 10), who had the attributes of Yacatecuhtli (Taube 1992, p. 88). The Maya Maize God also had a connection to these merchant gods, and to chocolate; he is occasionally shown as having cacao pods growing from his body (Figure 11), having been, on his death, transformed into plant foods, cacao being the most prominent after maize (Martin 2006, pp. 154-156 & 163). God L presided over the Maize God’s death and took possession of these crops, including cacao (Martin 2006, pp. 169). A mural of God L facing a cacao tree (c. 600-830 AD; Figure 12) was discovered at Cacaxtla, a central Mexican site which flourished prior to the arrival of the Aztecs (Dakin and Wichmann 2000, p. 68). The mural was painted in Maya-Mexican style at the bottom of a stairway to symbolise the ascent of God L from the underworld, ladened with maize and cacao (Coe and Coe 1996, p. 56; Martin 2006, p. 172; Vail 2009, p. 6). This belief in the Maize God is even more ancient (Taube 1996). Despite religious changes across time and culture, the religious importance of cacao never diminished.
Figure 10: Cacaxtla mural, God L at a cacao tree (Dreiss and Greenhill 2008, pp. 90-91).

Figure 11: Late Classic vase (600-900 AD) with possible depiction of God M (Pérez de Lara 2007).

Figure 12: Bowl depicting the Maize God as a personified cacao tree (250-600 AD) from the Dumbarton Oaks Collection (Stone and Kreft 2005).
Beyond ethnohistorical sources and surviving codices, the best source of evidence for ritual use of cacao is Mesoamerican tombs. Prufer and Hurst (2007, p. 289) note that cacao is an important part of mortuary rituals for the dead and the living: it could be an offering to accompany the deceased into the afterlife, and it may be consumed by the living during funeral preparations. The Maya were carefully buried with personalised cacao cups. The text around the rim – known as the Primary Standard Sequence – includes the name of the deceased and the type of cacao the cup contained (LeCount 2001, p. 945; Moreiras 2010, p. 19; Figure 13). The seeds found at Bats’ub Cave (c. 134-615 AD) were in an inverted bowl over the pelvis of a decapitated individual. In the position where his head should have been was an undecorated jar containing a single jade bead, and his actual head was lying to the left of his pelvis (Prufer and Hurst 2007, pp. 276-278). The body was near a wooden stool, which Prufer and Hurst (2007, p. 289) assert is an important part of ritual mortuary activity. Theobromine residue has been found in burial offering vessels at Copan (c. 430-600 AD; Figure 14), mixed with inedible cinnabar pigment to differentiate cacao drinks for the deceased from the consumable beverages of the living (McNeil 2010, p. 300 & 306). As no theobromine studies of Aztec burial vessels are available, ethnohistorical information shows that Aztecs drank cacao from cups called *copa* (Nichols et al. 2009, p. 459). An image from the *Codex Magliabechiano*, an early Post-Conquest codex, describes a high ranking individual’s funeral where his relatives offer him *cacauatl* (chocolate) for the journey (Iguaz 1993, p. 64; Figure 15). Friar Diego Durán described that, following the death of king Axayacatl in 1481, the deceased ruler was presented with slaves, cacao and other precious items for his use in the afterlife. After his body had been dressed in imitation of the gods, his wives brought him offerings of foods and gourds filled with chocolate (Durán 1994, pp. 293-294). Earlier cultures also had cacao, but there is only archaeological evidence of one ancient culture in a ritual setting. This legacy survives through to the present Maya and Aztec ritual uses of cacao.
Figure 13: Cacao cup stating the name ‘Lady Bacab of Tikal’ (Kerr 2005b).

Figure 14: The “Dazzler Vase” (c. 430-600 AD), a cylinder tripod vessel from the Margarita tomb at Honduras with evidence of cacao (Xian 2012a).

Figure 15: Relatives of the deceased offer the deceased chocolate for his journey into the afterlife, from the Codex Magliabechiano (Iguaz 1993, p. 68).
The use of cacao in ritual throughout Mesoamerica varies through time and space (Prufer and Hurst 2007, p. 285), but the number of similarities suggests a common origin. Early archaeological evidence of Mesoamerican cacao usage has been detected through traces of theobromine on ancient ceramics (Moreiras 2010, p. 6). Site assemblages include a jar (Figure 16) from the pre-Olmec Mokaya culture at Paso de la Amada, a bowl found in at El Manatí, various vessels of different shapes (Figure 17) from the Olmec capital of San Lorenzo, and a number of Olmec-style ceramic bowls and other vessels at the ‘Early Honduran’ site of Puerto Escondido in Honduras (Henderson et al. 2007, p. 18938; Joyce and Henderson 2007, p. 645; Moreiras 2010, p. 17; Powis et al. 2008, p. 36-37; Powis et al. 2011, p. 8595; Map 2; Table 1). The Mokaya, ‘Corn People’, were one of the earliest Mesoamerican egalitarian societies to become stratified during the Early Formative period (Clarke and Blake 1994, p. 22). Although Mokaya and Early Honduran ritual use of cacao cannot be determined from the location of the artefacts, Clarke and Blake hypothesise (1994, p. 28) that this style of ceramics was designed for liquids with ritual and prestige value. The word for cacao itself, however, came from the Olmec heartland (Kaufman and Justeson 2007, p. 193), suggesting that it was held in high status among the Olmecs, and those who subsequently appropriated the word, and the product, for their own usage. The El Manatí bowl, found amongst religious offerings, is indicative of the ritual importance of cacao (Powis et al. 2008, p. 37), as is a San Lorenzo burial pit for the victims of human sacrifice, capped with four cacao-filled vessels (Powis et al. 2011, p. 8597 & 8599).

“Mesoamerica had a very long, continuous history of preparing and consuming liquid chocolate ... chocolate drink was as central to the Mokaya and Olmec as we know it was to the later Maya and Aztecs” (Powis et al. 2008, p. 38). Of these early cultures, the Olmecs are the most probable culture to have disseminated cacao throughout Mesoamerica, along with their cultural, religious and social practices (Joyce and Henderson 2010, p. 197; Tolstoy and Paradis 1970, p. 350).
Figure 16: Fragment of the vessel from Paso de la Amada (Xian 2012b).

Figure 17: Vessels from the San Lorenzo used for cacao (Powis et al. 2011, p. 8599).

Map 2: Locations of early archaeological sites with cacao (Powis et al. 2011, p. 8596).
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Culture</th>
<th>Site</th>
<th>Stratigraphy</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Date</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mokaya</td>
<td>Paso de la Amada</td>
<td>Construction fill deposit</td>
<td>Tecomate jar, vertical fluting</td>
<td>c. 1,900-1,500 BC</td>
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<td>Olmec</td>
<td>El Manatí</td>
<td>Ritual context, with luxury offerings</td>
<td>Deep bowl, red slip line at base</td>
<td>c. 1,650-1,500 BC</td>
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<tr>
<td>Olmec</td>
<td>San Lorenzo</td>
<td>Domestic and ceremonial contexts</td>
<td>Caamaño jar, course</td>
<td>c. 1,800-1,600 BC</td>
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<td>Caimán bottle, polished</td>
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<td>Conejo open bowl, orange-on-white</td>
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<td>Eroded necked jar, grey</td>
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<td>Garza neckless jar, smooth</td>
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<td>Mulato cup, black</td>
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<td>Peje micaceous closed form</td>
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<td>Pochitoca bottle, polished</td>
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<td>Tejón rimmed bowl, white</td>
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<td>Tejón open vessel, white</td>
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<td>Tejón open bowl, white</td>
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<td>Tigrillo rimmed bowl, black and white</td>
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<td>Tigrillo open bowl, black and white</td>
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<td>Tigrillo ladle, monochrome</td>
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<td>Tigrillo open bowl, monochrome</td>
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<td>Tigrillo small cup, monochrome</td>
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<td>Tigrillo rimmed bowl, white-rimmed black</td>
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<td>Xochiultepec collared jar, white</td>
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<td>Xochiultepec necked jar, white</td>
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<td>Xochiultepec open bowl, white</td>
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<tr>
<td>‘Early Honduran’</td>
<td>Puerto Escondido</td>
<td>Two different domestic contexts</td>
<td>Various open bowls, flaring walls (x 7)</td>
<td>c. 1,400-900 BC</td>
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<td>Black base of cylinder, glossy</td>
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<td>Urbe unslipped jar, pattern burnishing</td>
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<td>Barraca bottle spout, glossy</td>
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**Table 1:** Early archaeological vessels with evidence of cacao from Mesoamerican sites (after Henderson *et al.* 2007, p. 18938; Joyce and Henderson 2007, p. 645; Moreiras 2010, p. 17; Powis *et al.* 2008, p. 36-37; Powis *et al.* 2011, p. 8595).
Despite cultural changes over time and space throughout Mesoamerica, resulting in different ritual use of chocolate, cacao was the second most important plant to the various cultures of Central America. The Maya and the Aztecs used cacao in coming-of-age and wedding customs; and as liquid offerings for the gods due to its symbolic connections with blood. Both cultures used different methods to prepare people for sacrifice – the Aztecs occasionally gave cacao to the victims, whereas the Maya did not. They both presented cacao to the dead for use in the afterlife. Although evidence as to whether the Olmec associated chocolate with lifecycle milestones and religion is lacking, cacao was clearly an important product as they, too, provided their dead with cacao for their journey into the underworld. Based on this evidence, cacao was first used in a ritual manner by the Olmecs. To more satisfactorily answer this question, research is required on the status of cacao in the Olmec religion domain, and on the theobromine content in Aztec ceramics. Chocolate was the foremost plant food, after maize, used ritually in almost every aspect of the lives of the peoples of Mesoamerica. “It is a mysterious product, rendered sacred, but for reasons never clearly stated ... Linked to the earth and the cyclical nature of human life, it both mediates and transcends relationships between humans and the forces that animate the earth” (Prufer and Hurst 2007, p. 292). The use of cacao may have changed throughout history, but it has always retained its place of importance to the peoples of Mesoamerica, thanks to the ancient Olmec.
Aguilera, C 1985, *Flora y Fauna Mexicana: Mitología y Tradiciones*, University of Texas, Mexico.


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