

ON THE TRAIL OF QUETZAL COATL / KUKUL CAN¹

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Quetzal Coatl / Kukul Can³ is one of the various pre-Hispanic deities and culture heroes who is still remembered by the peoples of Mesoamerica. In the early ethno-historical sources written shortly after the Spanish conquest of Latin America it is apparent that in fact that the name Quetzal Coatl was applied to at least two separate personages: the deity *Ehecatl Quetzal Coatl*⁴ and the historical person *Ce Acatl Topiltzin Quetzal Coatl*.⁵ Over time, however, Quetzal Coatl / Kukul Can has been conflated into a single mythical being and as such now makes his appearances, although at times only fleetingly, in various narratives which belong to the mythical genre.

QUETZAL COATL: GOD, MYTH OR RULER?

The different aspects of the personage Quetzal Coatl has been a source of considerable debate within the Mesoamerican community. Some of the ethno-historical sources conflate these two aspects, adding a great deal of confusion to interpretations of the role of this personage in Mesoamerican pantheons as well as in the evolving political systems and religious movements which took place between the Classic⁶ and Postclassic⁷ periods.

¹ This paper employs standard Colonial Nahuatl and Mayan spellings for proper names and place names. Information about the etymology of many of these terms is included in footnotes.

² This is a highly condensed version of an article which appeared in *Ancient Mesoamerica: ON THE TRAIL OF QUETZALCOATL/KUKULCAN: TRACING MYTHIC INTERACTION ROUTES AND NETWORKS IN THE MAYA LOWLANDS*, Published online by Cambridge University Press: 28 November 2016. Authors: William J. Folan, David D. Bolles, Jerald D. Ek.

³ The names *Quetzal Coatl* and *Kukul Can* are etymologically analogous in Nahuatl and Mayan, with *Quetzal / Kukul* meaning “feather”, in particular “quetzal feather” and *Coatl / Can* meaning “snake”. In the Popol Vuh the Quiche equivalent is *Gucumatz* with the parts being *Guc* = feather / quetzal, and *cumatz* = snake, serpent. In modern Yucatec Mayan his name is *Kukil Can*. In this article Quetzal Coatl is used when talking about his presence in Mexico and Kukul Can is used when talking about his presence in Yucatan. The full name of the god in Nahuatl is *Ehecatl Quetzal Coatl*, meaning “The Spirit Feathered Serpent” and the full name for the historical figure in Nahuatl is *Ce Acatl Topiltzin Quetzal Coatl*, meaning “One Reed Our Lord Feathered Serpent”.

⁴ As noted in the previous footnote, the meaning of this name is “The Spirit Feathered Serpent”. The Nahuatl word *ehecatl / eecatl*, depending on the context, means “air / wind / spirit”.

⁵ As noted above, the meaning of this name is “One Reed Our Lord Feathered Serpent”. As is common with Mesoamerican naming practices, “On Reed”, or *Ce Acatl*, refers to the tonalamatl or xoc kin day on which this person was born. *Topiltzin* is generally translated as “Our Lord” and is derived from *toca* = “our”, *pilli* = “noble person” and *-tzin* = diminutive. It should be noted here, given the length of time that Topiltzin Quetzal Coatl was supposedly active, that in fact there is reason to suspect that there were various individuals who took on the name Topiltzin Quetzal Coatl. The acquisition of a meaningful pseudonym demonstrating the person’s self-image was a practice common in Mesoamerica.

⁶ 600-800 CE.

⁷ 900-1500 CE.

Ehecatl Quetzal Coatl

One of the aspects of the Quetzal Coatl, Ehecatl Quetzal Coatl, belongs to the realm of the supernatural. Ehecatl Quetzal Coatl was an important deity associated with a range of phenomena, including creation, wind, fertility, rain, the star Venus, merchants, and the arts. It has been conjectured that Quetzal Coatl combines this diverse set of incongruous roles, with his body forming the column that supports the sky. Characteristics that link the deity Ehecatl Quetzal Coatl with Topiltzin Quetzal Coatl include the invention of important elements based on Quetzal Coatl's teachings such as commerce, calendrics, the priesthood, learning and knowledge, and the temporal order. His many attributes have been condensed down to a fundamental role as 'extractor', or one who moves substances or knowledge from the realm of the gods to the world of humans. The linkage or descent from "Toltec" ancestors was based on this concept, and was a fundamental component of political ideologies in the Epiclassic⁸ and Postclassic Periods.

Topiltzin Quetzal Coatl

The second aspect of the Quetzal Coatl is Topiltzin Quetzal Coatl. Historical narratives associated with the personage Topiltzin Quetzal Coatl describe him as an individual with the attributes of ruler, priest, and cultural hero. The deeds and actions associated with Topiltzin Quetzal Coatl range from the mundane to the supernatural, including pilgrimages as a wandering holy man to the mythical founding of the great city of Tula / Tollan.⁹ In the latter role as sovereign, Topiltzin Quetzal Coatl is depicted as the inventor of many of the attributes of civilization. As such, Topiltzin Quetzal Coatl serves as a symbol for the pious and just ruler. These characteristics were the basis of idealized rulership and political legitimacy encompassed within the teachings of Quetzal Coatl. This concept would form a central element in political and philosophical ideologies which linked the diverse communities across Mesoamerica.¹⁰

Topiltzin Quetzal Coatl is associated with migrations and founding of cities and dynasties. Central Mexican historical narratives recount the exile of Topiltzin Quetzal Coatl from Tula / Tollan and exodus to the east via Cholula and on to Coatzacoalcos¹¹ on the Gulf Coast. In some historical narratives he continued east via raft made of snakes to the shores of Yucatan. Parallel sources for Yucatan document the arrival of the mythical personage of Kukul Can in the Yucatan Peninsula from the west. After this

⁸ 600-900 CE.

⁹ Tula, also written as Tullan and Tollan, is the present-day site in the state of Hidalgo, from *tolin* / *tollin* = rushes or tule reeds, sedge grass, cattails, a marsh plant, and *-tlan* = place of. The English word *tule* is derived from *tollin*.

¹⁰ See Florentine Codex, Book 6, chapters 6 and 7 which describes the teachings of Quetzal Coatl. As an aside: in modern times the term *Toltecayotl* has been applied to this new world order. However, the original meaning of *Toltecayotl*, at least according to late 16th century sources such as the Molina Vocabulary and the Florentine Codex, was limited to "master craftsmanship". See Molina, fol. 148v: *Toltecayotl. maeftria de arte mecanica, / Toltecatl. official de arte mecanica, o maeftro.*

¹¹ "The place where serpents are enclosed", from *coatl* = snake, *tzaqua* = enclosed and *-co* = place. Perhaps this is relevant to the idea that Quetzal Coatl made a raft of snakes and sailed off to the east.

arrival, Kukul Can was said to travel across the Maya Area establishing a network of cities.



The multiple aspects of Quetzal Coatl.

A, B: Images of the god Ehecatl Quetzal Coatl from Duran and Codex Borgia;

C, Depiction of ruler Topiltzin Quetzal Coatl performing auto sacrifice from the Florentine Codex.

D: Quetzal Coatl, Detail from folio 10 recto (Trecena 3), Codex Telleriano-Remensis.

Note that one of the identifying marks for Quetzal Coatl is the conch shell, usually worn on the belt or on the chest.

Mexican Influence in the Maya Area

Early on in the studies in archaeology and ethno-history these events were linked to archaeological evidence of “Mexican” influence in the Maya Area during the Terminal Classic Period,¹² particularly because of similarities between the cities of Tula and Chi Cheen Itza.¹³ Because the Central Mexican and Maya historical narratives had many similarities, many of the models of the transition from the Classic period to Postclassic period focused on the role of Quetzal Coatl as a real historical personage. A common theme in these historical narratives is the foundation of cities and dynasties along his

¹² 800-900/1,000 CE.

¹³ Following Mayan Colonial Orthography this place name should be spelled as Chi Cheen Itza, from Chi = mouth, edge, Cheen = well and Itza, the tribal group. See CMM: Chij: la orilla o ribera de mar o rio o orilla de heredad, boca de pozo, la margen de la escritura o de papel escrito, de la halda de la vestidura o ropa. / Cheen: pozo o cisterna o cueva de agua.

migration route. In these cities, veneration of Quetzal Coatl was a central element in religious practices and political ideologies.

Although there are examples of temples to Quetzal Coatl which date from at least the Early Classic Period,¹⁴ the increasing prominence of feathered serpent imagery associated with the god Quetzal Coatl is one of the most important changes in public art and iconography during the Terminal Classic Period. Some envision this process as a reconceptualization of the role of this god within Mesoamerican pantheons, including new aspects of Quetzal Coatl as the alligator earth monster *cipactli*¹⁵ and the association with creation. The association with creation in Aztec creation myths seems to have origins at least as early as the end of the Classic Period and is reflected in numerous depictions of an old man emerging from the mouth of a feathered serpent.



Kerr # 2067

This is one of several ceramic pieces which have the scene in which an old man emerges from the mouth of a feathered serpent. In these scenes a young woman is often ensnared in the coils of the feathered serpent.



Kerr # 7838

Another example of a young woman ensnared by the feathered serpent.



A bas-relief from the Temple of Venus at Chi Cheen showing the head of Kukul Can emerging from the mouth of the feathered serpent.

¹⁴ 250-600 CE.

¹⁵ *Cipactli* = crocodile, dragon, *Caiman crocodilus*. This is also the name of one of the days in the tonalamatl.

Quetzal Coatl as an important pan-Mesoamerican deity has roots in the feathered serpent iconography at Teotihuacan. There was a marked spread in the distribution of this deity following the collapse of Teotihuacan and the later decline of inland cities in the heart of the Southern Maya Lowlands. The conflation of Topiltzin Quetzal Coatl with the god Ehecatl Quetzal Coatl was a symbolic narrative: the wandering city-founder Quetzal Coatl is better viewed as a later etiological attempt to explain the spread of his cult, uniting in a single figure several historical episodes separated by centuries.



A portion of the façade of the Temple of Quetzal Coatl at Teotihuacan.
Dated to about 200 CE.



The Cult Network of Quetzal Coatl / Kukul Can / Gucumatz
Adapted from Ringle et al. 1998.

Contemporary views of the nature of these political, economic, and social dynamics have moved away from migration and invasion as explanatory frameworks, and instead have focused on new political institutions and ideologies. Architectural, artistic, and ceramic links between a network of important centers in the Epiclassic were part of a new world order melding religious and political messages intricately linked to a pan-Mesoamerican religious cult associated with the personage or deity Quetzal Coatl.

Developments In Forms Of Art And Architecture

The connections between the pilgrimage centers are reflected most notably for their remarkable architectonic and artistic similarities. The importance of religious syncretism and shared symbols in pan-Mesoamerican trade cartels linking the Maya area, Highland Mexico, and the Gulf Coast is well known. The spread of this cult likely originated in the Chontalpa region in the ninth century, with the strongest evidence of participation occurring along riverine waterways and the Gulf Coast. This network included several Epiclassic¹⁶ and Postclassic¹⁷ pilgrimage centers which form an arc between Central Mexico and the Maya Area, connected by the Gulf Coast maritime trade route. Some of the most prominent examples of these pilgrimage centers include Tula, Chi Cheen Itza, Cholula,¹⁸ El Tajín, Xochicalco,¹⁹ Cacaxtla,²⁰ and Uxmal.²¹ The mechanisms and nature of the spread of the cult of Quetzal Coatl are poorly understood, but probably include a high degree of economic, social, and political integration.

The following illustrations are given here so that the reader can visualize the changes which took place with the arrival of Ce Acatl Topiltzin Quetzal Coatl / Kukul Can in the Yucatan peninsula:

¹⁶ 600-900 CE.

¹⁷ 900-1500 CE.

¹⁸ Various spelled Cholola, Cholula, Cholola, Chololla, Cholollan: variously glossed as “place of escape” or “place of the spring”. See Molina: Choloa.ni. huyr, faltar, o aufentarfe, o faltar o chorrear el agua.

¹⁹ "Place of the house of flowers", from xochitl = “flower”, calli = “house” and -co, a locative meaning “place of”.

²⁰ Cacaxtla means "Place of Cacaxtlis". Cacaxtli is the frame used to transport products on the backs of porters.

²¹ Uxmal = “the place of harvest”, from ux = “to harvest” and -mal = “place of”. See DMM: Coger con la mano fruta y legumbres: vx.

Example of Similar Architectural Style between Tula and Chi Cheen Itza



Tula

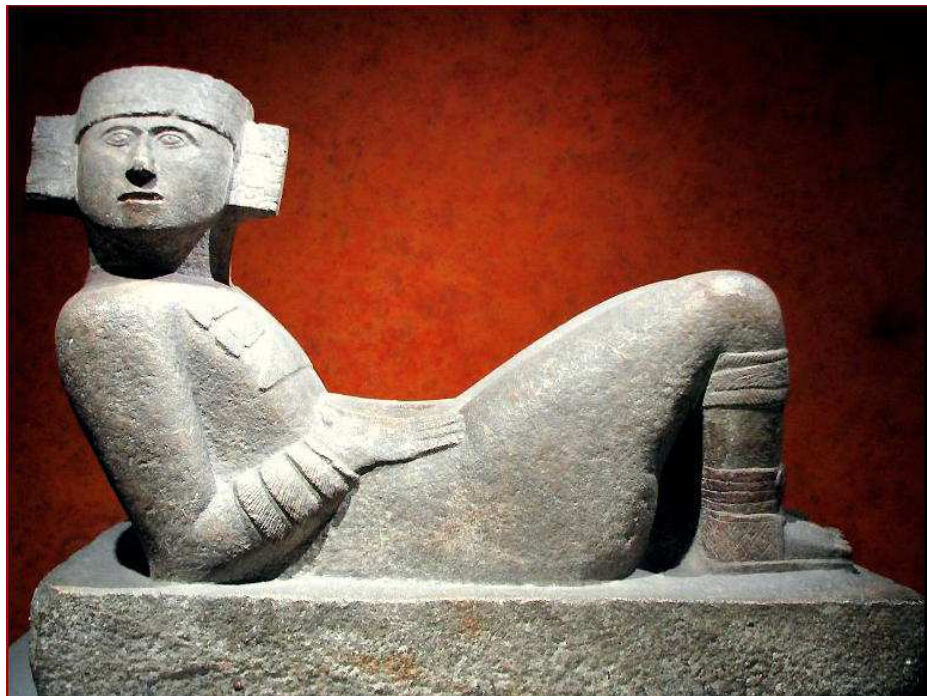


Temple of the Warriors
Chi Cheen Itza

Example of Similar Sculptural Style



Chac Mool²² at Tula



Chac Mool at Chi Cheen Itza

²² “Red Claw” or “Big Claw”. See: Colorada cosa: chac .l. chachac. / Gigante: chac. / Piés y manos del tigre: mool.

Examples of pre-Quetzal Coatl Art

Late Classic Murals From Bonaam Pak and Cacaxtla
both dating approximately 800 CE.



Bonaam Pak, Room 2



Mural de la Batalla, Cacaxtla.

Examples of post-Quetzal Coatl Art

Post-Quetzal Coatl Murals From Chi Cheen Itza and Chactemal²³ / Santa Rita



Temple of the Warriors, dating 1050-1200 CE.



Lower Temple of the Jaguars showing Kukul Can, center left., dating 1050-1200 CE.

²³ Present-day Chetumal and nearby Santa Rita. From *chacte* = *Caesalpinia platyoba*, S. Wats. (Standl.) / *C. bijuga*, L. Brazil. (Gaumer.) from which red dye is made and *-mal* = place of.



Portion of the West Wall at Chactemal / Santa Rita, with the right-hand figure being that of Kukul Can with his raft of snakes, dating 1350-1500 CE.



Borgia Codex showing Mictlantecuhtli back to back with Ehecatl Quetzal Coatl, dating 1250-1500 CE.

The nature of exchange networks also underwent significant change, with a shift from low-bulk, high-value prestige items to the movement of bulk goods via maritime trade routes. This change in part seems to have been brought about by the increase carrying capacity of the watercraft being used, with the larger seagoing vessels observed and reported by Fernando Colon being a far cry from ordinary dugout canoes. The increase of trade and religious activity as well as armed conflict in Northern Yucatan was likely associated with radical changes in the geopolitical landscape following the depopulation of Classic Period city-states across the raised karstic plain which extends across much of the Southern and Central Maya Lowlands. The movement of population centers to coastal cities included a major reorientation of trade routes. Provenience studies of obsidian have demonstrated a notable increase in exchange between the Maya lowlands and central Mexico, which likely focused on the Gulf Coast trade route. It has been suggested that shifts to coastal trade routes and decentralization of market systems would have further undermined the power of large inland centers. It has also been convincingly shown that changing obsidian exchange systems in the Terminal Classic period at Chi Cheen Itza reflect a transition from a bounded solar market system to an open interlocking market system by 900 CE. These processes were part of a general pan-Mesoamerican pattern of increasing commercialism, interregional exchange, and a general strengthening of linkages between previously disparate parts of Mesoamerica.

With the emergence of the Gulf Coast as the most prominent trade thoroughfare, the frontier region between the Maya Lowlands and Central Mexico, including coastal zones of Campeche, Tabasco, and Veracruz, takes on much greater pan-Mesoamerican significance in the Terminal Classic / Epiclassic Period, with population expansion along coastal and riverine trade routes. A demographic boom took place in southern Veracruz between 700 and 1,000 CE, with a shift from inland settlement to a repopulation of coastal areas. A similar pattern has been noted in the Maya Area at Chakan Putun,²⁴ the Lakin Cheel²⁵ region, and along the Caribbean coast. Additional research along the Candelaria River and along a postulated inland trade route across the base of the Yucatan peninsula indicate that trade became a major factor in site location.

²⁴ “Potter’s savannah”, from **chakan** = savannah and **putun**, a variant of **patom** / **potom** = potter. Today called Champoton See CMM: Chakan: çauana o deesa, vega o campo llano, o heruaje para pasto. / Patom: ollero o alfarero en general; official de cosas de barro. / Potom; potomal: en lo de Mani y Ti Kax; lo mismo que patom, patomal.

²⁵ “Eastern Cheel”, the area between Dzilam de Bravo and Hol Box. It seems that the Cheel clan dominated the trade networks in Northwestern Yucatan because there are three provinces which carried their name: Chikin Cheel or “Western Cheel” which was centered in Campeche, “Ah Kin Cheel” which was centered on the town of Dzilam Gonzalez, and “Lakin Cheel”.



Smaller dugout canoe used for local traffic.



A seagoing vessel used for long distance trading



The Maya had words for “sail” and “to sail”.²⁶

²⁶ CMM: Bub: vela de nauegar. ꕐ bub.t.: poner las velas. / BMTV: Vela de nabío: bub, v bubil chem .l. bacam.

Whether instigated by climatic change, anthropogenic environmental change, or other factors, the movement of interior population centers from urban areas such as Calak Muul²⁷ to coastal redistribution centers such as Chakan Putun and Cuzamil²⁸ during the Terminal and Post Classic instigated major changes in political, economic, and social institutions. William J. Folan's research in Cobá,²⁹ Calak Muul, and Chakan Putun supports the idea that climatic change played a major role in demographic movements to Northern Yucatan and coastal and riverine zones during the Terminal Classic Period. These new seats of power were well situated near strategic coastal trade routes that afforded a more efficient form of transportation for goods and people between disparate parts of Mesoamerica.

Yacatecuhtli / Ek Chuah and Tezcatlipoca / Bolon Yocte Guardians of Merchants and Travelers

An associated change in religious iconography includes increasing importance of the deity Yacatecuhtli / Ek Chuah, a patron deity for the *pochteca* / *ah ppolom yoc*.³⁰ Although less prominent than Quetzal Coatli / Kukul Can, Yacatecuhtli / Ek Chuah also assumes a more central role in Mesoamerican art and iconography during the Epiclassic Period. The importance of Yacatecuhtli / Ek Chuah reaches its apogee slightly earlier, around 750 CE, appearing in the monumental art centers across Mesoamerica.

The early association with this deity during the beginnings of the Classic Maya collapse, particularly in Campeche, is especially interesting given the role of this god as the patron deity of merchants and long-distance trade. This correlation makes sense given the well-documented role of Gulf Coast groups in coastal trade. Both Quetzal Coatli / Kukul Can and Yacatecuhtli / Ek Chuah have been associated with Chontal groups or with religious movements between centers on the Gulf Coast. While the Gulf Coast maritime trade route was likely an important thoroughfare in increasingly integrated pan-Mesoamerican political, economic, and ideological systems of the Epiclassic and Postclassic Periods, many of the traits associated with this 'new order' have not been extensively documented at centers in the southern and eastern Gulf Coast.

²⁷ This place name is composed of two parts: **calak** which means "paired" and **muul** which means "man-made mound / hill". For an example of the use of **calak** see CMM: Calak kuch: hilo doblado. For the meaning of **muul** see NEM: Mul: Cerro, montículo, montículo arqueológico. It might be worth mentioning that epigraphers have seized upon the word **uitz** / **huitz** for the hieroglyph which represents a pyramid, T685. In the modern language **uitz** means specifically a natural hill as opposed to **muul** which means a man-made hill. Whether this distinction was made back when the hieroglyph was used is something open to question.

²⁸ Modern-day Cozumel, from *cuzam* = chimney swift / barn swallow.

²⁹ There are a couple of possible meanings for the word **Coba**: CMM: Coba: especie de los faisanes llamados bach. / BMTV: Lago o laguna de agua: koba .l. hoc akal. Given its environment it would appear that in fact the name should be spelled **Koba** and not **Coba**, but the Mayan texts are consistent in using the word **Coba** so it would seem that the first meaning is the correct one.

³⁰ Schellhas God M, thought to be the spirit deity of merchants. A related deity is God L, Ah Bolon Yocte.



Yacatecutli
Códice Borgia, p. 55



Ek Chuah
Dresden, p. 16b

In a somewhat similar capacity is the god Tezcatlipoca who appears to be related to the Mayan god Bolon Yocte, a guardian of travelers.



Tezcatlipoca
Códice Borgia, p. 55



Bolon Yocte
Dresden, p. 60a

Depictions of Pochteca



Mendoza Codex, page 63r



Fejérváry-Mayer Codex, page 31



Florentine Codex, Book 9, page 8r

In the lower scene are some of the articles which were traded. Many of these items are listed by Fernando Colon in his description of the wares being carried by a large trading vessel.

THE INITIAL EXODUS OF QUETZAL COATL FROM CENTRAL MEXICO

Historiographic studies have demonstrated the shortcomings of uncritical acceptance of indigenous narratives as historically accurate accounts. However, indigenous histories provide an important window into the role of migration and foundation myths in political narratives late in the prehispanic era. In particular, these mythical narratives reflect important links between polities that transcended political boundaries. Indigenous histories were part of political narrative that linked cities across Mesoamerica through the mythical migrations of both the personage Topiltzin Quetzal Coatl and the god Ehecatl Quetzal Coatl. Inter-polity links consisted of both actual physical connections and symbolic ties between cities, which were envisioned as terrestrial, maritimal, celestial and subterranean links. In addition to the clear evidence for increasing pan-Mesoamerican interaction reflected in material culture, these histories offer important additional information about the nature of the interregional networks of the Epiclassic and Postclassic periods.

In many sources, the migrations start with Quetzal Coatl's departure (either voluntary or through exile) from Central Mexico and journey to the Gulf Coast. In the Florentine Codex, Book 3, Twelfth Chapter, there is the following:³¹

Twelfth Chapter, which telleth how Quetzal Coatl fled, took flight, when he went there to Tlapallan,³² and of the many things he did on the way.

And still many more portents came upon the Tolteca until Tula was destroyed.

And when these were happening, Quetzal Coatl, who already was troubled, who already was saddened, was thereupon minded to go, to abandon his city of Tula.

Thereupon he made ready. It is said that he had everything burned—his house of gold, his house of seashells; and still other Tolteca craft objects which were marvelous achievements, which were costly achievements, he buried, all; he hid all there in difficult places, perhaps inside a mountain or in a canyon.

And also the cacao trees he changed into mesquites. And all the precious birds, the resplendent trogons, the lovely cotingas, the roseate spoonbills, all of them he sent away beforehand. They kept themselves before him; they went toward Anauac.³³

And when this was done, thereupon he departed; thereupon he followed the road.

Then he came to arrive elsewhere, at Quauhtitlan.³⁴ A very thick tree stood [there], and it was very tall. He stood by it. Thereupon he called forth for his mirror. Thereupon he looked at himself; he saw himself in the mirror; he said: "Already I

³¹ Translated from the Nahuatl text by Anderson and Dibble: Florentine Codex, Book 3, pp. 33-34.

³² "The red place", perhaps in reference to the color of the earth.

³³ "Close to water," the area around Mexico City.

³⁴ "Place of the tree", from quauh / cuauh = wood, tree and -titlan = around, near. Perhaps meaning the present-day Cuauhtitlan in the State of Mexico, some 45 km. SSE from Tula.

am an old man.” Then that place he named Ueuequauhtitlan.³⁵ Thereupon he stoned, he threw many stones at the tree. And as he threw the stones, the stones indeed went into it in various places, were stuck to the old tree in various places. Just the same has it continued to exist; thus is it seen. Beginning at the foot, [the stones] extend rising to its top.

And when Quetzal Coatl followed the road, they went blowing flutes for him.

Once again he came to rest elsewhere. Upon a stone he sat. He supported himself on it with his hands. Thereupon he looked toward Tula, and thereupon he wept. As one sobbing violently did he weep. Two hailstones fell as his tears; over his face did his tears spread; as they dripped they indeed pierced holes in the stone.



The main temple at Tula

³⁵ “Place of the old / big tree”, from ueue = big, old, quauh / cuauh = wood, tree and -titlan = around, near..



A closer view of the statues on the main temple of Tula

Myths outlining the deeds of Quetzal Coatl / Kukul Can frequently include migrations and founding events in subterranean settings. In one account, Quetzal Coatl, accompanied by Xipe Totec, built houses under the earth in Mictlancalco³⁶. In others Quetzal Coatl excavated a passageway through a mountain which he could not cross³⁷ and another in the form of a tunnel passing beneath the sea.³⁸ In the Codex Vaticanus 3738, Quetzal Coatl and Xipe Totec are depicted leading migrants through an underground passageway through a mountain:

The two masters of penance Quetzalcoatl and Totec, who by another name was called Xipe, took all the innocent people who had remained, and went off with them throughout the world, populating and aggregating other peoples with them. When they reached certain mountains which they were unable to pass over, they had them pass below the mountains, and so they passed. Others say that they remained included therein, and that they ended up transformed into stones, and other similar dreams.³⁹

³⁶ “Place of the house of dead”.

³⁷ Codex Vaticanus 3738, page 9r.

³⁸ Muñoz Camargo, 1981, page 84v.

³⁹ The Italian text reads: Li due maestri della penitenza Quetzalcoatee ed il Totec quale per un altro nome si diceva Chipe tolsero li tutta la gente innocente che era restata, e se n’ andarono con essi per il mondo popolando, ed agregando seco altri Popoli; giunsero a certe montagne quali non potendo passare fingono che le pertusarono di sotto, e cosi passarono; altri dicono che restarono ivi inclusi, e che fiirono trasformati in pietre, ed altri insogni simili.



Quetzal Coatl and Xipe Totec leading their followers.
Codex Vaticanus 3738, p. 9r

RESIDENCE IN CHOLULA

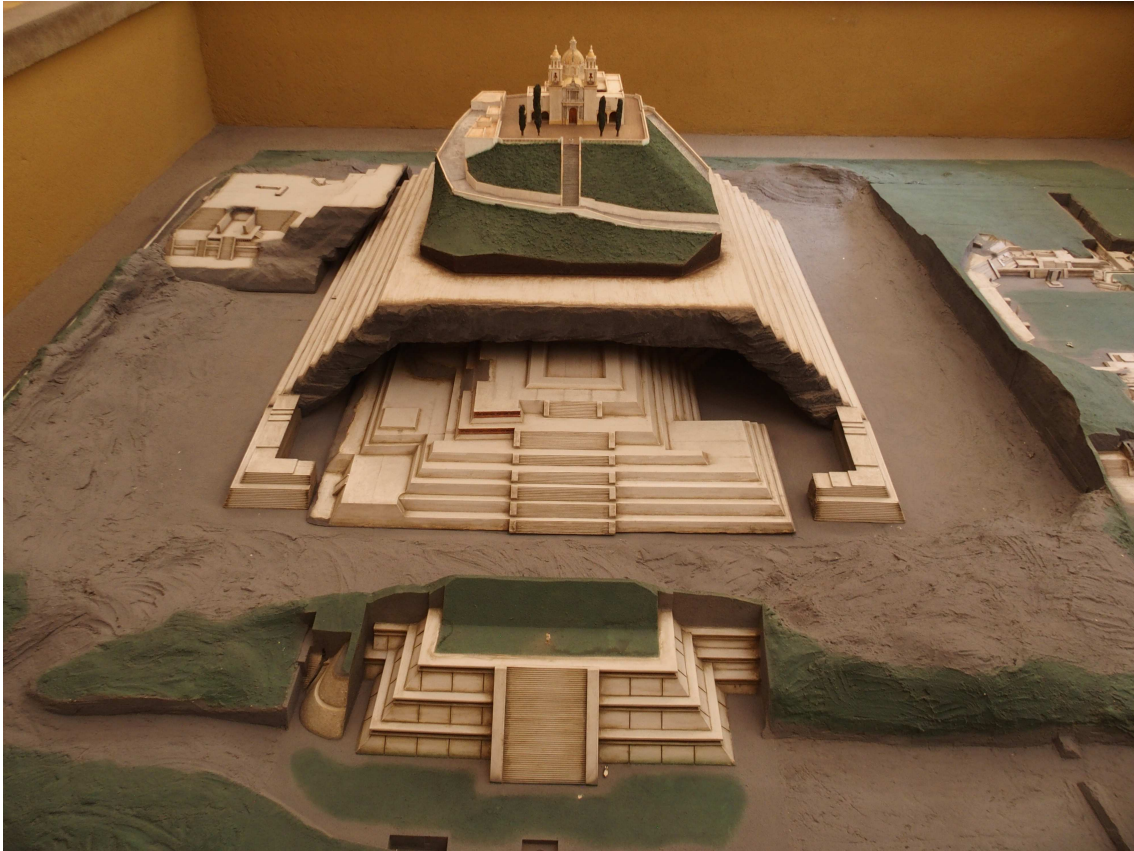
The *Relación de Cholula* makes it quite clear that Cholula was a pilgrimage center devoted to Quetzal Coatl.⁴⁰ How long Quetzal Coatl remained in Cholula before continuing on to Coatzacoalco⁴¹ is unclear. Making matters even more unclear, the oft-referenced account by Ixtlilxochitl⁴² attributes the introduction of the worship of Quetzal Coatl to the arrival at Cholula of the Olmeca-Xicalanca,⁴³ who are said to have arrived by boat from the east prior to the age of the Toltecs. Other sources corroborate the mythical origins of Quetzal Coatl in the east. Perhaps indeed there were various personages who took on the name Quetzal Coatl which would help to explain the seemingly contradictory accounts of the place of origin of the person or persons named Quetzal Coatl.

⁴⁰ See also Dúran 1971:128-133.

⁴¹ "The place where serpents are enclosed", from *coatl* = snake, *tzaqua* = enclosed and *-co* = place.

⁴² Ixtlilxochitl (1975:528-530).

⁴³ Olmeca = "Rubber people", from *olli*. cierta goma de arboles medicinal, deque hazen pelotas para jugar con las nalgas. and *-mecayotl*. abolorio, o parentesco de consanguinidad. (both entries from Molina 1571). Xicalanca = "People of the place of calabash". Xicalanco is derived from *Xicalli* = jicara, probably so named because of the xicara trees which dot the savannah in the area.



A model showing the various stage of construction
of the Temple of Quetzal Coatl



Reconstructed view of the pyramid dedicated to Quetzal Coatl at Cholula



Restored section of the pyramid at Cholula



Current view of the pyramid at Cholula
with the catholic church at its summit.

SAILING FROM COATZACOALCOS TO CHAKAN PUTUN

According to some native sources, Quetzal Coatl embarked on a raft made of intertwined serpents at Coatzacoalco⁴⁴ and arrived at Tlilan Tlapallan⁴⁵ that many have interpreted as the Maya region. After leaving Nonoalco,⁴⁶ Quetzal Coatl continued rafting toward the area frequented by Mexica merchants, perhaps making landfall in Potonchan,⁴⁷ Xicalanco⁴⁸ and Cochiztlan,⁴⁹ before arriving at Chakan Putun.⁵⁰

⁴⁴ “The place where serpents are enclosed”, from *coatl* = snake, *tzaqua* = enclosed and *-co* = place. Perhaps this is relevant to the idea that Quetzal Coatl made a raft of snakes and sailed off to the east.

⁴⁵ The suffix Tlilan appears to be derived from *tlilania*, which according to the Molina vocabulary means: *debuxar o hazer rayas con tinta, o echar perfil de negro a lo que se pinta con pinzel*. For Tlapallan: (red (earth) place?). See page 310 of Garibay’s *Llave del Náhuatl*: Tlapallan — *top. de un país mítico. “La tierra del rojo”*. Región legendaria a donde se encaminó Quetzal Coatl. For what it is worth, for the Maya and to some extent for the Nahuatl red is the world direction color for the east and Acatl years are associated with the east. Siméon concurs with Garibay that Tlapallan is derived from *tlapalli* = red and the suffix *-tlan* = in, within, near, etc. Thus, the whole name of Tlilan Tlapallan appears to mean “the place which is painted / written with red.”

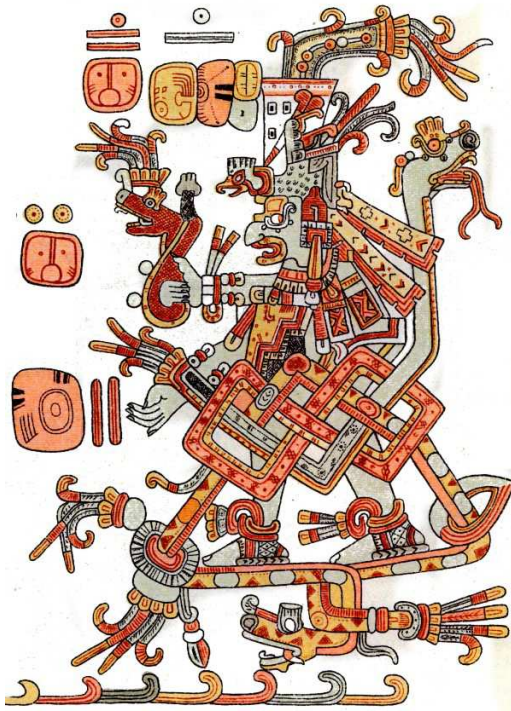
⁴⁶ Also spelled Nonoualco and Nonohualco. There are various meanings attributed to this place name, but foremost amongst them is “Place of the mute”, with the word “mute” applied to people who do not speak an intelligible language. In the Mayan texts there is a similar reference to the Itza who at times are called “Ah Nun Itza”, the mute Itza. Whether it is coincidental that there is the place name Nonohualco in Nahuatl and the fact that it is thought that Ah Nun Itza come from the area around Nonohualco deserves further study. See BMTV: Boçal, persona que no sabe el lenguaje que se habla en la tierra: *nunal, ah nun .I. nun*.

⁴⁷ “House of stench”. Potonchan is the present-day Frontera, Tabasco, at the mouth of the Grijalva River. Apparently the name is derived due to the fish-drying industry which once existed in this place. According to the Siméon dictionary, the name is derived from the Nahuatl words *potoni* = stinking and *chantli* = house, residence, habitation. The similarity of the name Potonchan to Champotón has led to some confusion about which town is meant, and, as in the case of the Siméon dictionary for example, has placed the site of Potonchan at Champotón.

⁴⁸ “Place of calabash”. Xicalanco is derived from *Xicalli* = jicara, probably so named because of the xicara trees which dot the savannah in the area. Scholes and Roys place the site at present-day Cerrillos, Campeche, which is on the shore of Laguna de Términos. However, there also exists Xicalango a few km east northeast on the other side of the peninsula on the shore of the Gulf of Mexico.

⁴⁹ “The resting place”. Cochiztlan is derived from *cochi* = sleep, rest, and *-tlan* = place. Perhaps so-named because Quetzal Coatl rested there on his journey to Chakan Putun.

⁵⁰ Presently called Chanpotón. Chakan Putun = “Potter’s savannah”, from *chakan* = savannah and *putun*, a variant of *patom* / *potom* = potter. There has at times been confusion arising from the similarities between the place names Potonchan and Chan Poton / Chakan Putun, with some researchers believing that these two names refer to the same place.



Images of Quetzal Coatl / Kukul Can on his raft of snakes
From Chactemal / Santa Rita, West Wall and Durán's Historia



The raft of snakes

Compare with the intertwined snakes in the image from Chactemal

As an example of how some of the above place names originated, the Florentine Codex, Book 3, Chapter 13, has the following about the place named Cochtiztlan, called here Cochtocan:⁵¹

And thereupon he moved on. He went to arrive elsewhere, a place called Cochtocan. And there a demon then came forth to meet him.

⁵¹ Translated from the Nahuatl text by Anderson and Dibble: Florentine Codex, Book 3, p. 36.

He said to him: “Whither goest thou?”

Then [Quetzalcoatl] said: “There to Tlapallan. I go to learn [my fate].”

Then the demon said to him: “It is well. Drink this, the pulque⁵² which I have taken hold of here.”

Quetzalcoatl said: “In no way can it be that I drink it, even though it be a little that I taste.”

Then once again the demon said to him: “Neither can it be that thou shouldst not drink it, that thou shouldst not taste it. No one do I except, no one do I release, whom I do not give pulque, make drunk, make besotted. But come, be of good cheer! Drink it!”

Quetzalcoatl then drank the pulque with a drinking tube.⁵³

And when he had drunk it, he quickly fell asleep in the road. He lay there rumbling as he slept, audible from afar as he snored. And when he awoke, thereupon he looked to one side and the other. He looked at himself. He arranged his hair. Then he named the place Cochtocan.



Quetzal Coatl resting at Cochiztlan
Florentine Codex, Book 3, page 22r.

⁵² Pulque: alcoholic beverage made from the fermented sap of various agaves.

⁵³ Piaztli or piyaztli is a long narrow gourd used for drinking and for sucking liquid out of maguey plants.

KUKUL CAN'S ARRIVAL IN YUCATAN AND SUBSEQUENT DEPARTURE

Chakan Putun was a port capital and commercial center of great importance on the west coast of the Yucatan Peninsula during the ninth century. Items exchanged through Chakan Putun included fine paste ceramics, obsidian, and terrestrial and marine food resources. Chakan Putun also is a place with a great deal of archaeological evidence for cultural influence from Highland Mexico and Veracruz, such as mortuary practices associated with the god Xipe Totec.

Indigenous histories recorded by Spanish chroniclers in both the Maya Lowlands and Central Mexico focus on the migrations of Quetzal Coatl / Kukul Can from his homeland in Central Mexico to Chakan Putun via the sea, the founding of Chakan Putun, Chi Cheen Itza and Mayapan,⁵⁴ and his subsequent departure from the same port of Chakan Putun via the sea. Landa recounted the migration myth associated with the personage / deity of Kukul Can:

It is believed among the Indians that with the Itzas who occupied Chichen Itza, there reigned a great lord, named Kukulcan, and that the principal building, which is called Kukulcan, shows this to be true. They say that he arrived from the west; but they differ among themselves as to whether he arrived before or after the Itzas or with them. They say that he was favorably disposed, and had no wife or children, and that after his return he was regarded in Mexico as one of their gods and called Quetzalcouatl; and they also considered him a god in Yucatan on account of his being a just statesman; and this is seen in the order which he imposed on Yucatan, after the death of the lords, in order to calm the dissensions which their deaths had caused in the country. ...

This Kukul Can lived with the lords in that city⁵⁵ for several years; and leaving them in great peace and friendship, he returned by the same way to Mexico, and on the way he stopped at Champoton, and, in memory of him and of his departure, he erected a fine building in the sea like that of Chi Cheen Itza, a long stone's throw from the shore. And thus Kukul Can left a perpetual remembrance in Yucatan.⁵⁶

⁵⁴ The name **Mayapan** is generally thought to mean "Flag of the Maya", from **Maya** and **pan**, "flag". (CMM: Pan: vanderá o pendón.) However, given that there is another place name which has what appears to be a Nahuatl suffix **-apan** meaning "in/on the water", namely **Zaciyapan**, perhaps the name **Mayapan** has a similar root structure in which the parts are **may** and **-apan**. There are several meanings for **may**: hoof, especially cloven hoof, a tamed deer brought up in a household, snuff powder made of tobacco and/or chili.

⁵⁵ Mayapan.

⁵⁶ Translation from Tozzer, pp. 20-26. The original, on pp. 5r-5v, reads: Que es opinion entre los Indios que con los Izaes que poblaron Chi cheniza reyno vn gran señor llamado Cuculcan, y que muestra ser esto verdad el edificio principal que se llama Cuculcan, y dizen que entro por la parte de poniente, y que difieren en si entro antes o despues de los Izaes, o con ellos, y dizen que fue bien dispuesto, y que no tenia muger ni hijos, y que despues de su vuelta fue tenido en Mexico por vno de sus dioses, y llamado Cezalcuati, y que en Yucatan tambien le tuvieron por dios por ser gran republicano, y que esto se vio en el asiento que puso en Yucatan despues de la muerte de los señores para mitigar la dessionion que sus muertes causaron en la tierra. ...

Que este Cuculcan viuio con los señores algunos años en aquella çibdad, y q[ue] dexando los en mucha paz, y amistad se torno por el mismo camino a Mexico, y que de passada se detuu en Champoton y que para

A small island located just off the coast, adjacent to the mouth of the Río Champotón, is very likely the same temple. From these mythical accounts, Chakan Putun was a launching point for a series of migrations, pilgrimages, and perhaps conquests into the Yucatan Peninsula.

THE DISAPPEARANCE OF KUKUL CAN AND THE REAPPEARANCE OF QUETZAL COATL

From Landa's account it would seem that Kukul Can departed from the Yucatecan peninsula and returned to Mexico, but in the Mexican ethno-historical sources there is no indication that he returned to the Nahuatl speaking area after leaving Chakan Putun. Quite the contrary, in these sources it is clear that the peoples of the Nahuatl speaking area were still expecting the return of Quetzal Coatl and unfortunately for them, someone did arrive from the east in a year Ce Acatl, but this being the year 1519, a half a millennium later. Book 12 of the Florentine Codex, which is the native account of the conquest of México, has various references to this belief:⁵⁷

Book 12, Chapter 2:

“Let us not deceive the lord Moctezuma, for no longer would you live. Let us indeed go, lest we die, in order that he may be truthfully informed.”

Thereupon they went into the water. They entered the boats; they took to the water. The water folk rowed them.

And when they had drawn near to the Spaniards, then before them they performed the earth-eating ceremony at the prows of the boats: they thought it was Quetzalcoatl Topiltzin who had come to arrive.

The Spaniards called out to them: they said to them: “Who are you? Whence have you come? Where is your home?”

Then [the others] said: “It is from there in Mexico that we have come.”

Book 12, Chapter 3:

And then the year changed to the companion to follow, Thirteen Rabbit. But the year [Thirteen] Rabbit was about to come to an end, was at the time of closing, when [the Spaniards] came to land, when they were seen once again.

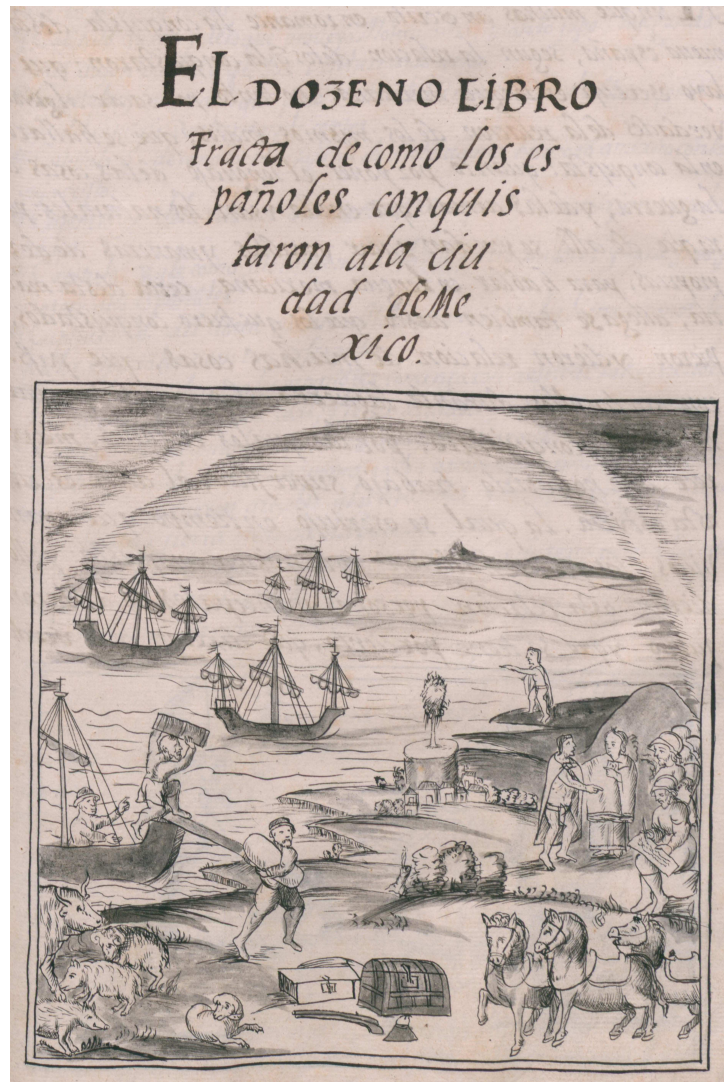
And then [the stewards] hastened to come to inform Moctezuma. When he heard of it, then he speedily sent messengers. Thus he thought — thus was it thought — that this was Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl who had come to land. For it was in their hearts that he would come, that he would come to land, just to find his mat, his

memoria suya y de su partida hizo dentro del mar /5v/ vn buen edificio al modo del de Chiçeniza vn gran tiro de piedra de la ribera, y que assi dexi Cuculcan en Yucatan perpetua memoria.

⁵⁷ Translated from the Nahuatl text by Anderson and Dibble: Florentine Codex, Book 12.

seat.⁵⁸ For he had traveled there [eastward]⁵⁹ when he departed. And [Moctezuma] sent five [emissaries] to go to meet him, to go to give him gifts.

Should it be true that a historical Quetzal Coatl / Kukul Can did in fact travel from the Nahuatl speaking area to Yucatan and, according to Landa, attempted to return to Mexico, then one must assume that he was lost at sea at some point on his return journey.⁶⁰



Title Page from the Florentine Codex, Book 12
The Native account of the conquest of Mexico.

⁵⁸ “His mat, his seat”: It is interesting that in Nahuatl there is the same figure of speech as there is in the Yucatecan Mayan language when referring to the place from which a ruler ruled. In Nahuatl it is: in jpetl, in jcpal. In Mayan it is: u poop, u sam.

⁵⁹ Cf. corresponding Spanish text.

⁶⁰ The Gulf of Mexico can indeed be a treacherous body of water. Two of my brothers-in-law were lost in the Gulf when a sudden storm came up back in about 1964.

Libro duodécimo

del suelo, y dieron les a beber vino
conque los esforaron: y tornaron en
si. Despues desto el capitan don her
nando cortés les dixo por su inter prete
oyd lo que os dize: an me dicho que los
mexicanos son valientes hombres
que son grandes peledores: y que
des luchadores son muy diestros en
las armas dizen me que vn solo
mexicano es bastante para vencer
adiez: ya veynete de sus enemigos.



icxi anthalasique in chial
Kucucalli tencistlacalli
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Florentine Codex, Book 12, page 8v

Showing the Aztec emissaries greeting Cortez as Quetzal Coatl
and bringing presents befitting such a god.

Note the bilingual format of the work with the Spanish translation
presented in the left-hand column and the original Nahuatl text in the right-hand column.

ROUTES USED BY QUETZAL COATL / KUKUL CAN

In the previous installments of this three part article about Quetzal Coatl / Kukul Can⁶¹ we have seen that this personage, either as a god and as an actual person, used various pathways to migrate from place to place. These pathways between centers across the Yucatan Peninsula and beyond were associated with four types of real or symbolic infrastructure networks: terrestrial roads (*zac beob*)⁶², celestial avenues (*cuxaan zumoob*),⁶³ underground roads (*actunoob*)⁶⁴ and perhaps most important of all in terms of diffusion of the teachings and philosophy of Quetzal Coatl / Kukul Can, the maritime and fluvial trade routes.⁶⁵ These four types of physical links between centers were metaphorical reflections of the high degree of socio-cultural and economic integration between centers which began to crystallize at the end of the Late Classic and continued into the Postclassic Period. These linkages are consistent with the hypothesis about the cultural importance of the god Quetzal Coatl / Kukul Can in the Epiclassic period based on the distribution of shared styles of material culture, including architecture, art, and ceramics.



Close-up of Kukul Can, Lower Temple of the Jaguars

⁶¹ As a reminder, this is a highly condensed version of an article which appeared in *Ancient Mesoamerica: ON THE TRAIL OF QUETZALCOATL/KUKULCAN: TRACING MYTHIC INTERACTION ROUTES AND NETWORKS IN THE MAYA LOWLANDS*, Published online by Cambridge University Press: 28 November 2016. Authors: William J. Folan, David D. Bolles, Jerald D. Ek. For the interested reader please refer to the full article for the various references and a list of the references.

⁶² **zac beob** is the plural of *zac be* = “white road”. See CMM: *Çac be: calçada o camino de calçada*.

⁶³ **Cuxaan zum** = “living rope”. As noted below in this article, mythical accounts and folklore depict *cuxaan zumoob* as large blood-filled cords that connected cities or individual deities.

⁶⁴ CMM: *Actun: cueva, cauerna, o madriguera de animales*

⁶⁵ The Mayan term equivalent to maritime and fluvial trade routes is not to be found in the various vocabularies and Mayan texts.

MAYA ZAC BEOB: INTERSITE CAUSEWAY SYSTEMS IN THE MAYA LOWLANDS

The most obvious evidence for links between cities and polities are reflected archaeologically in built roads or *zac beob*. There is a large body of literature focusing on the nature and function of *zac be* systems in prehispanic Maya polities. One of the more recent reviews of this literature differentiates between “local intrasite” causeways that linked plaza groups within a single urban epicenter, “core–outlier intrasite” roads that linked urban epicenters with minor centers and peripheral communities in the surrounding hinterland, and “intersite” causeways that linked cities together. This latter class of road systems would have had both practical and symbolic importance as components of the political landscape as formal material signifiers of interpolity relationships.

Zac be systems are classified based on the nature and connectivity of nodes, including radial, solar, and dendritic systems. Within these different types of roads there is a great deal of variability in the form and degree of architectural elaboration, ranging from simple dual alignments of stone delimiting a pathway, modest raised roads, to the truly monumental causeways at centers like Cobá. Additionally, *zac beob* have been classified according to terminology and concepts recorded in dictionaries dating from the 16th to 18th centuries, including the Mayan terms *noh be*⁶⁶ for large, long roads, *chibal be*⁶⁷ for roads associated with specific lineages such as the recently discovered *zac be* in Oxppel Muul,⁶⁸ and *buth be*⁶⁹ which cross low, wet areas. These terms provide information about socio-cultural concepts associated with these features of Maya political landscapes. These terrestrial *zac be* systems provide a clear material correlate for interpolity communication routes extending from the Formative through Postclassic period.

⁶⁶ “Noh be” = “big road”.

⁶⁷ “Chibal be” = “linage road”.

⁶⁸ “Three man-made mounds”: from oxppel = three inanimate objects and muul = man-made hill.

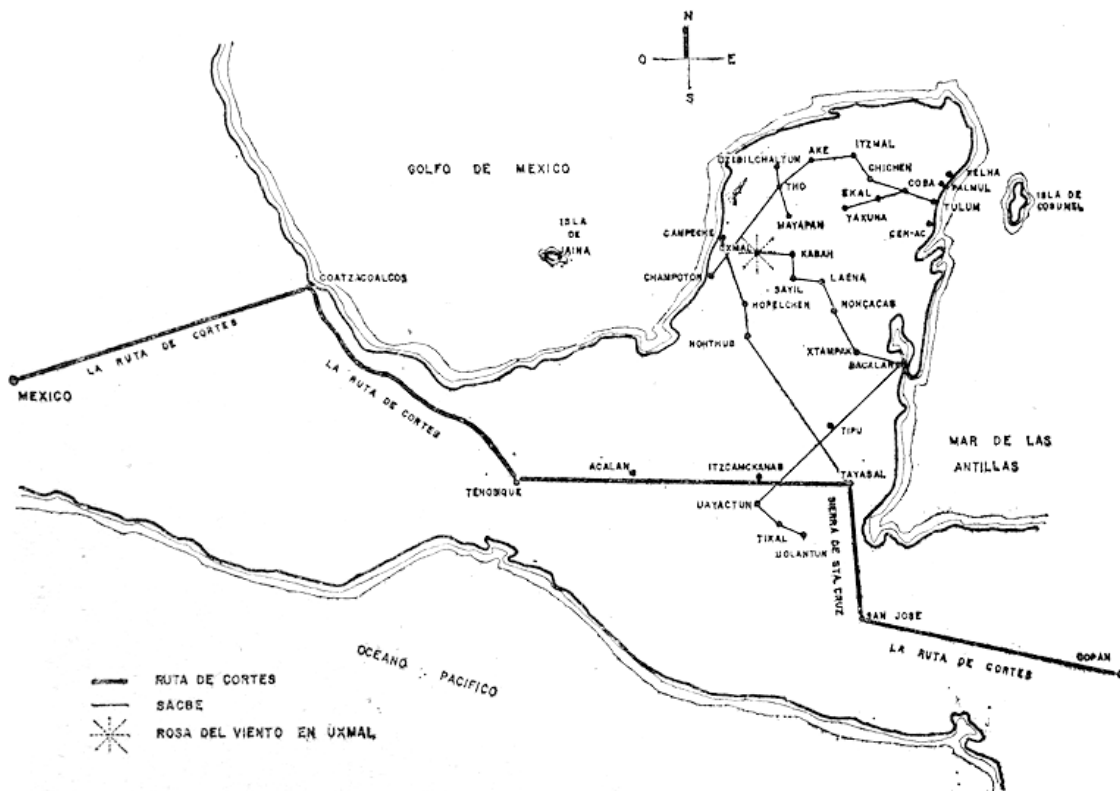
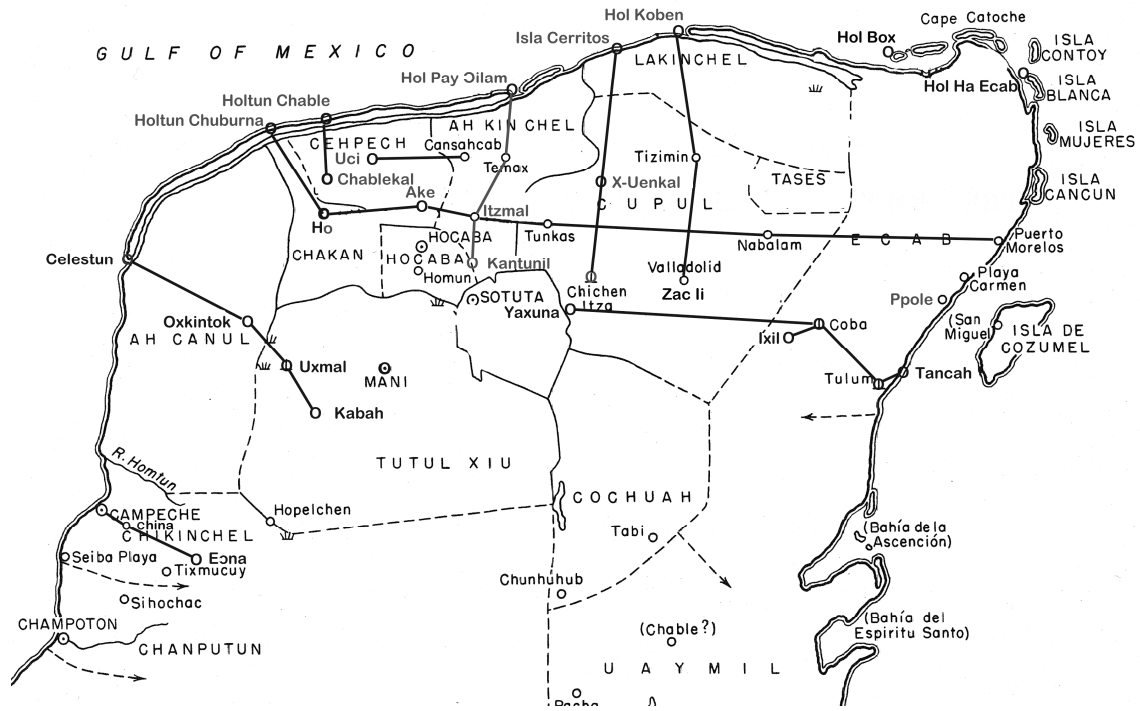
⁶⁹ “Buth be” = “filled road”.

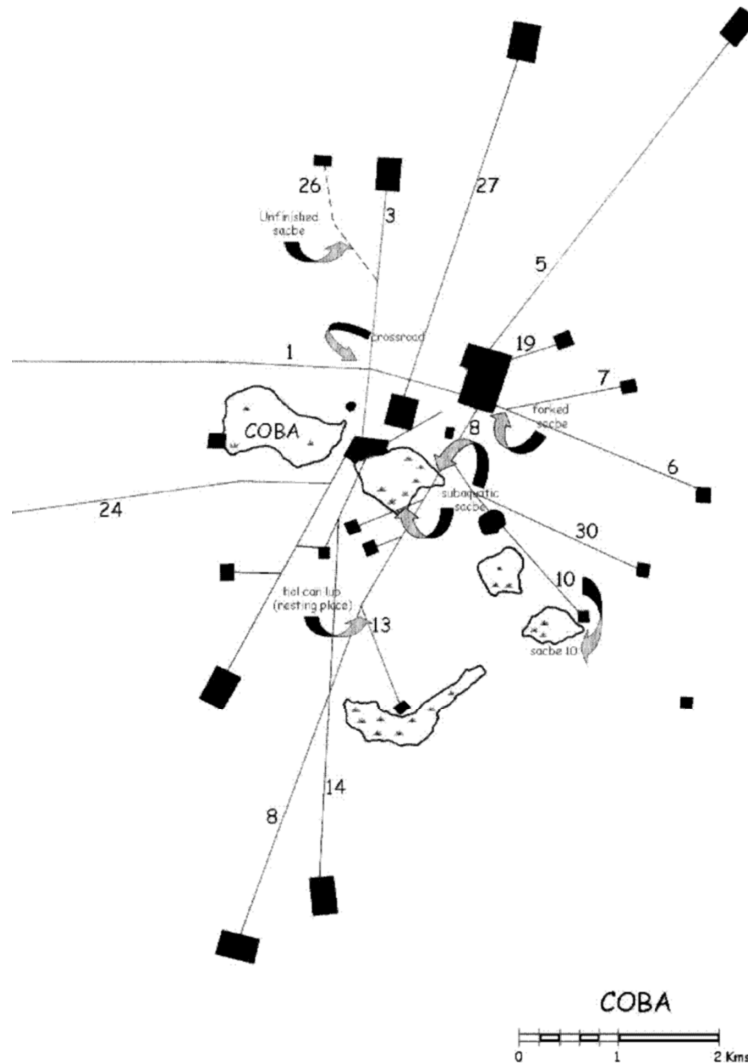


An Example of one of the Zac Beob in Yucatan



The Kabah terminus of the Kabah - Uxmal Zac





Intra-site Zac Beob in Coba

CUXAAN ZUMOOB: CELESTIAL LINKS BETWEEN PILGRIMAGE CENTERS

A metaphorical and less tangible form of intersite connections include celestial avenues, or *cuxaan zumoob*, that symbolized consanguineous relationships between individuals, groups, and places. These links were envisioned as living ropes in the form of an umbilical cord. Umbilical cord imagery has been noted in Maya art and iconography – particularly in images in Mayan and Mexican codices – as living ropes connecting individuals, families, extended households, and places.

Mythical accounts and folklore depict *cuxaan zumoob* as large blood-filled cords that connected cities. In one important account, a *cuxaan zum* was able to support a group of Itza warriors. In another account, a Spanish military contingent cut the *cuxaan zum* connecting Coba and Zac Ii, effectively severing communications between these two important cities. Other celestial links were associated with the Milky Way, called *Tamacaʼ* in Yucatec Mayan, that was interpreted as a celestial path or road.

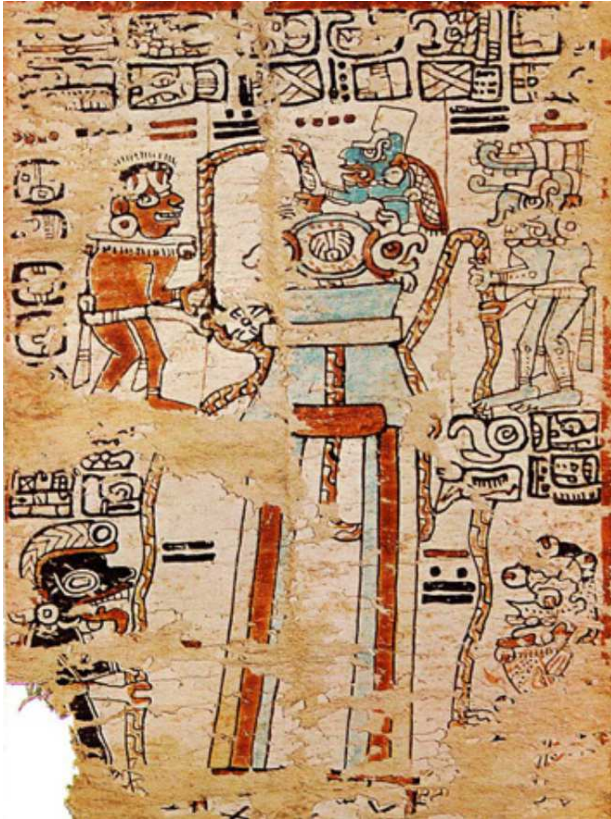
However, as will be noted in one of the recent narratives which is given below, the *cuxaan zum* is not always celestial. While the story teller does not specifically state that the *cuxaan zum* he is talking about is within an *actun* system which supposedly goes from Mani to Ho / Mérida, the fact that the rope begins in the cenote of X-Cabal Cheen Mani⁷⁰ and has its other terminus under the Cathedral in Mérida would indicate that in his mind this *cuxaan zum* is subterranean.

Examples of Cuxaan Zumooob



Codex Vindobonensis, p. 14

⁷⁰ The well X-Cabal Cheen Mani is the fabled well / cenote a couple of blocks southwest of the main plaza of Mani. In legend this well will be the last place on earth which will have water, and the lady named Ix Nuc Mani (Old Woman of Mani) will dispense one nut-shell of water for each child brought to her. The name X-Cabal Cheen Mani means “Low well of Mani”, so named because it sits in one of the lower depressions in the town. See the story by Alonzo Gonzalez Moo given below.



Codex Madrid, p. 16



Codex Perenianus, p. 22

ACTUNOOB: UNDERGROUND NETWORKS

In addition to the terrestrial and celestial links, mythical subterranean routes linked cities via underground passages between cities. These subterranean passageways are called *actun*.⁷¹ Myths outlining the deeds of Quetzal Coatl / Kukul Can frequently include migrations and founding events in subterranean settings. For example, as mentioned in Part 2 of this article, Quetzal Coatl, accompanied by Xipe Totec, excavated a passageway through a mountain which they could not cross.

Subterranean routes were related to the numerous *actunoob* in the Peninsula of Yucatan, including several very large and long *actunoob* in Chakan Putun and other *actunoob* in Mani. Compared to the terrestrial and celestial links reviewed above, there are far fewer depictions and iconography associated with subterranean routes. These *actunoob* are at times connected with sacrificial rites since they are entrances to the underworld. Cenotes were associated with similar meanings. These are reasonably similar to the subterranean *actun* routes between Merida, Mani, Uxmal and Chakan Putun, as well as the obsidian mines in the highlands and the tunneling of mountains associated with Quetzal Coatl / Kukul Can along with his numerous sojourns into the underworld.

⁷¹ The words **zahcab**, **zazcab** and **sascabera** are also applied to cave-like structures, but these names imply that the cave was created by excavating marl from them. See DMM: Cueva y tierra blanca de donde la sacan: çahcab.

Underground routes were related to religious rites that include human sacrifice of adults and / or children, as exemplified in the underground route between the Cenote X-La Cah⁷² in Dzibil Chaltun⁷³ with Chablekal,⁷⁴ the route between Mani and Ich Caan Ziho associated with a celestial and underground route, and apparently the route linking Acan Muul⁷⁵ and Uxmal, almost all which are found in the western part of the Yucatan peninsula.



The entrance to X-Cabal Cheen Mani, the home of X-Nuc Mani.

Formerly there was a *Cuxaan Zum* coming out from under the one of steps and also a box-like structure made of stones which enclosed the rope. Supposedly if one cuts the *Cuxaan Zum* blood would come out. See the story by Alonzo Gonzalez Moo given below for more about this particular *cuxaan zum* and the box made to hold it.

⁷² X-La Cah = old / rotten / ruined town, from x-la = old / rotten / ruined and cah = town. This is the local name for the central area of what is now called Dzibil Chaltun.

⁷³ Dzibil Chaltun = written bedrock, from dzibil = written / engraved and chaltun = bedrock. A modern name created because at the site a fallen stela was found with hieroglyphs. However, of course the stela is not bedrock. One of the tests for whether or not one has reached bedrock when excavating in Yucatan is that bedrock tends to have a clear ring to it when struck with the pickaxe whereas a large rock which is not attached to the bedrock usually has a dull thump.

⁷⁴ Chablekal: In the Mayan manuscripts there is an important place named Lahun Chable. There is some question as to the location of Lahun Chable. My personal belief is that it is related to the town of Chablekal which is located on the eastern edge of the ruins at Dzibil Chaltun. This belief is based on part because there is a port east of Progreso named Chable Puerto which is a translation of Holtun Chable, a port mentioned in the Chumayel.

⁷⁵ Acan Muul = groaning / sighing man-made mound, from acan = groaning / sighing and muul = man-made mound.



X-Cabal Cheen Mani, seen from the stairway entering from the southwest, where the people of Mani used to draw their water.
They say that the *actun* which is about a meter above the water level goes to Ich Caan Ziho / Ho / Mérida.⁷⁶

⁷⁶ X-Cabal Cheen Mani is said to be the nexus of several *actunoob* with *actunoob* entering from Uxmal, Noh Cacab, Ox Kutzcab and Ich Caan Ziho. About half way down to the water level there is another *actun* not shown in these photos which extends off to the east for about 100 meters. At the end of this *actun* there is a stone retaining wall. I was told that a few years before I came to see the X-Cabal Cheen Mani (ca 1970) some archaeologists attempted to take down the wall to see what was behind it. Locally it is thought that a “dragon” (Kukil Can?) lives behind the wall. In any case, after the first day of work the archaeologists stopped working for the day. When they returned next morning the wall had been rebuilt, and so they began again to excavate the wall. After several attempts at this the archaeologists give up. Or at least so the story goes. Bey cu thanoob, bey cu yalcoob. (So they speak, so they say.)



A view more towards the eastern wall where one can see other *actunoob* supposedly with other destinations such as Ox Kutzcab⁷⁷ and Chi Cheen Itza

⁷⁷ Ox Kutzcab = pitch made of the resin from the tree called ox (*Brosimum alicastrum* Swartz). See CMM: Kutz cab: çulaque que es cierto bitun o engrudo con que los indios peguen los suelos a ollas desoladas o desfondadas, para que siruan de barreñones para atol. Hazese de cal y de la lana del ppupp, y del çumo de las maluas desta tierra.

MARITIME AND FLUVIAL TRADE ROUTES

While the above three networks, *Zac Beoob*, *Cuxaan Zumoob* and *Actunoob*, form the real and mythological routes of communication between various sites in the northern Yucatan peninsula, maritime and fluvial trade routes are not mentioned in the various oral histories. Given the overall importance of maritime and fluvial trade routes to the movement of goods, people and ideas throughout Meso-America in the pre-conquest era this is indeed surprising. Perhaps this in part is due to the fact that today's Maya are mostly dwellers of inland towns and cities, resulting in coastal and fluvial sites of habitation having lost their importance amongst today's Maya.

KUKIL CAN⁷⁸ AMONGST TODAY'S MAYA

Now, more than a millennium after Quetzal Coatl / Kukul Can supposedly visited Yucatan, the Maya of Yucatan still remember him. His name amongst the Maya of today, consistent with changing grammatical usage, is Kukil Can. He appears in a variety of oral histories and narratives, some examples of which are given below. In some of these stories Kukil Can / Feathered Serpent appears in the guise of a rattlesnake. In these stories, Kukil Can either travels via celestial pathways or by subterranean pathways.

In the first story, told by Alonzo Gonzalez Moo in the early 1970's, information about the *cuxaan zum* and *actunoob*, both of which occur at the cenote X-Cabal Cheen Mani, is presented along with mention of Kukil Can. Note that in this story don Alonzo specifically states that the *cuxaan zum* runs through the *actun* system which radiates out from X-Cabal Cheen Mani.

THE CUXAAN ZUM OF X-NUC MANI⁷⁹

Told by Alonzo Gonzalez Moo, Ti Cul
(From Allan Burns' *An Epoch of Miracles*)

Well, there in the town of Mani there is a deep well. There is a huge box there; there is a huge rope there, rolled up in the box.⁸⁰ It is a thick rope.⁸¹ The thing is, the rope lives—it has blood. There in the middle of the town of Mani it is rolled up. Half of the rope. When it is cut, blood runs out. When you try to roll it up again, it won't go. Long ago it was cut like that, it was put in two huge boxes. That's the only way it can be rolled up, because one box can't carry it.

⁷⁸ Because there has been a simplification in grammar over the last century the suffix -Vl, in which the vowel agrees with the vowel of the syllable it is attached to, has in general gone to -il. So, Kukul Can in colonial times is now Kukil Can. Still the same person.

⁷⁹ X-Nuc Mani = the old woman of Mani. She supposedly inhabits X-Cabal Cheen Mani. In some stories she is a benign grandmotherly person but here there seems to be a malevolent side to her character.

⁸⁰ As can be seen in the recent photo of the entrance to X-Cabal Chaan Mani, neither the *cuxaan zum* nor the box mentioned in this story presently exist, but when I first visited X-Cabal Cheen Mani in the early 1970's both these features were to be seen.

⁸¹ The rope was about 4 cm in diameter.

There at X-Cabal Cheen Mani there in the middle of the center of Mani there is water in it. The well is enchanted because it was made that way by the ancient Makers.⁸² It was spoiled in the old times. At midday strange things are heard. Roosters sing and turkeys shout, people talk, dogs bark, burros shout, pigs, goats, cows, horses—it's enchanted like that.

There is a big path inside the X-Cabal Cheen Mani that runs to the town of Ho and comes out there underneath the cathedral. That is where the big path comes out. That road keeps going, it doesn't have an end. It just keeps going, it doesn't have an end. Because the path that runs there goes all the way to Jerusalem too.

That rope that goes from Mani to Ho, there is where the "poor people's horse" is going to run—the squirrel. There is where the "rich people's horse" is going to run too—a real Spanish horse. There they will be sent to get some hot tortillas from Ho and bring them to Mani. When the horse gets on, it falls because its feet slip like that. Because it can't go like that. That "poor people's horse"—the squirrel—has feet too. When it grabs the rope—the "poor people's horse"—with its claws, then it can't fall like that. Quickly it goes like that. It comes right away running with the hot tortillas to Mani too.

There is the Old Woman who sells water too. There is Kukil Can. There water will be sold: you'll be given a little nutshell of water; you'll give one child for it like that. These things will happen. The day is coming closer too.



Under a bower of fragrant jasmine, the Old Woman of Mani related her stories to the little Mayan prince.

Illustration from "Birds were Different Then" showing X-Nuc Mani.
In these stories she is a benign grandmotherly person.

⁸² The word used here was h-men, which is often translated as "shaman." The word is derived from mentic, "to make" or "to create," so h-men is translated as "maker" here.

Points of Interest in this Story

There are several themes in this story which are reiterated by other story tellers. To begin with, that the *cuxaan zum* indeed is alive and should one cut it blood will gush out. Further, if the rope is completely cut that each part regrows to the original length, obligating the people to make two separate boxes to hold the rope.

That in and around enchanted *actunoob* and cenotes at mid-day one can hear a cacophony of sounds.

That the *actunoob*, especially those in cenotes, are the underworld routes which interconnect important sites throughout the Yucatecan Peninsula.

That in certain of these *actunoob* there are *cuxaan zumoob* which run from one important center to another.

That the squirrel is the poor man's horse which runs on these *cuxaan zumoob*. And that they run so fast that they can bring hot tortillas from the larger city. In this case, Mérida is the source of the hot tortillas. In other stories cities such as Itzmal / Izamal or Zac Ii / Valladolid are the source for the hot tortillas. Also, depending on the local dialect, these squirrels are named *u tzimin otziloob* (the poor man's horse) or *u tzimin mazeualoob* (the Maya's horse). Note that *u tzimin culoob* (rich people's horse, that is, a real horse) of course can not travel on the *cuxaan zum* because its hooves can not hold onto the rope.

That when the world is coming to the end the only source of water will be at X-Cabal Cheen Mani. There the X-Nuc Mani will sell water, one nut-shell full, for each child that a person brings her. In this story X-Nuc Mani would appear to be malevolent in nature. As to the nature of Kukil Can who in name in conjunction with X-Nuc Mani, one can only speculate. However, as will be seen in the following pair of stories, it seems that Kukil Can is malevolent in nature.

TWO STORIES ABOUT KUKIL CAN BY ANTONIA POOT TUZ

In the following two stories Antonia Poot Tuz shares with us her perspective about the nature of Kukil Can. Antonia was born and grew up in Ho Tzuc / Tihosuco, Quintana Roo, and presently works at the Museo de la Guerra de Castas.

KUKIL CAN

by Antonia Poot Tuz

The legend is told in my town of Ho Tzuc that Kukil Can makes his appearance in the center of worship of Chi Cheen Itza every March 21. The reason is that this is the time when the day and night are equal here on earth arrives. (The equinox at Chi Cheen). This happens when Kukil Can descends the northern stairways of the Temple of Kukil Can.⁸³ The sign of this is when the length of the night is the same as the length of the

⁸³ Note that Antonia uses the official name of the pyramid rather than calling it the Temple of Kukil Can.

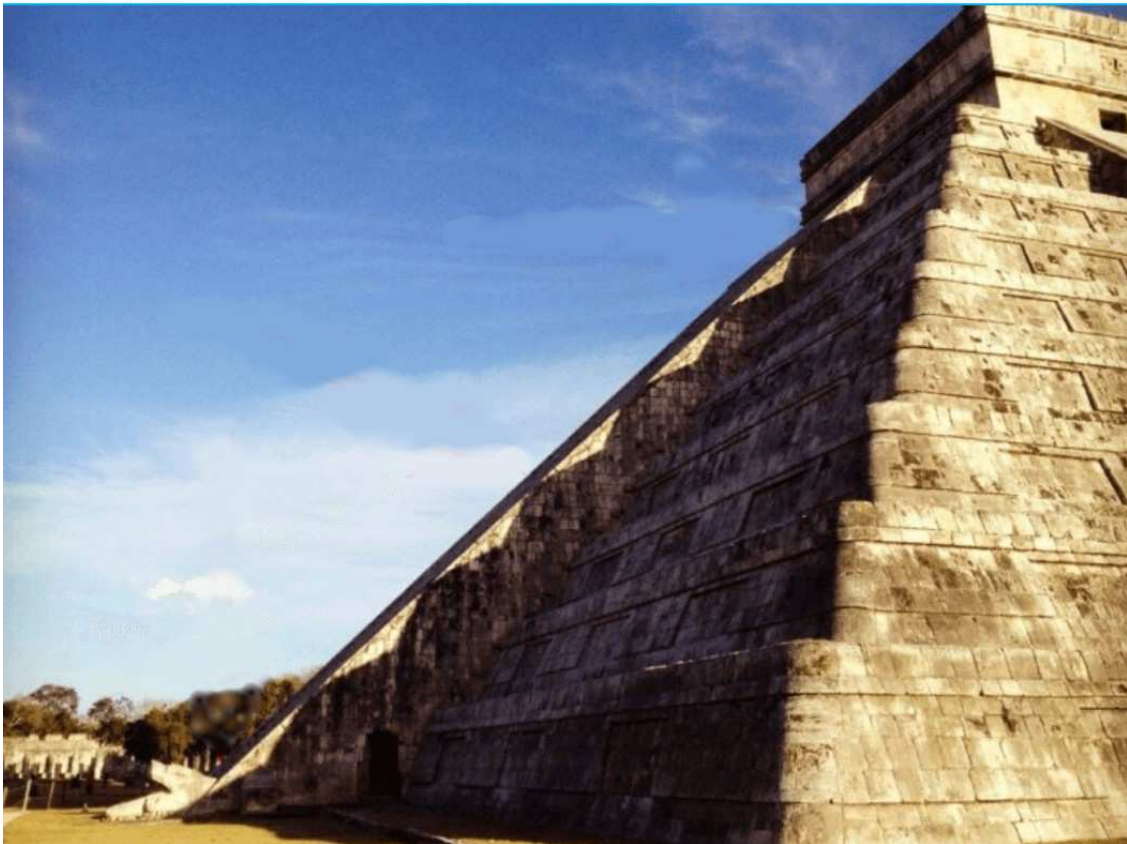
day. At this time the trees begin to bud, the flowers bloom and the animals have their off-spring, a happy time. Because of this our grandfathers and grandmothers knew through observation the equinox happens on March 21 and also on September 20 to 21.

Our grandparents point out that during these days there are many animals to hunt in the forest, but that does not mean that one should go to hunting them. Those who know the legend of Kukil Can and have had experience know that hunters should not go out to hunt in the forest because if they go to hunt whatever they shoot, in truth whether they are seeing deer, peccary, spotted agouti, Mexican agouti or pizote, really in truth those are rattlesnakes but in the guise of deer, peccary or whatever it looks like.

That is to say, by nature the rattlesnake transforms into an animal during the days of March 21 and September 20 and 21.

As I have been explaining, our grandparents came to understand that this is what was happening. On their own they learned that what appeared to be, what looked like what they were hunting, was in fact a rattlesnake which had transformed itself. Just as I said, when the hunter thought he shot a deer, when he went to get it he would see in the intestines of the deer a frog or a bird, and thus what he shot was not a deer.

In the same way they discovered the fang that is not exactly a fang of the animal but rather the fang of a snake. The taste of the meat is off and the meat is greenish. For that reason our forefathers say that the days of March 21 and September 20 and 21 they should not go hunting because if they go they will only shoot rattlesnakes.



The afternoon shadow which appears to go up the balustrade.

In another observation that our grandparents made on March 21 to September 20 and 21 is the appearance or flight of Kukil Can in the sky and precisely the same date it slides down the northern stairways into the ceremonial center in the morning and up the northern stairways out of the ceremonial center in the evening.

I will now tell you what the old people said and how they knew about the story of the rattlesnake. He lives on earth. They say the time will come for the rattlesnake when he grow so much that his skin becomes leathery and he will grow wings. This happens with the arrival of March 21 and also September 16. The rattlesnake then takes flight but falls into the big ocean, a place where he can do no harm to the people.

WHAT A GIRL AND HER MOTHER SAW ON SEPTEMBER 16

by Antonia Poot Tuz

On a quiet night, on a still night when I was a little girl my mother and I went out to the patio of our home. I remember that I could only hear the sound of the crickets. I looked around me but I could barely see the trees in the reflection of moonlight, I could hardly see my hands. Suddenly I began to hear a sound like a whisper in the sky:

Sssssits, sssssits, sssssits.

Then I looked up and began to search the sky and suddenly a long figure with wings appeared. I saw how it was flying so slowly. I was startled and at that moment I said to my mother:



“Mommy, look at what is up in the sky. It is big. Listen mommy, it is singing.”

My mother tried to make out what it was. While this was happening, while what we were watching was getting closer to the center of the moon, we both managed to distinguish the body of a snake. My mother said to me:

“Be quick child. Let’s quickly go into the house. That is an evil thing which is flying along.”

I had always heard my father saying that truly there are snakes which are able to fly. He would say to me like this:

“Little girl. When you see something which is crossing in front of the middle of the moon, when it covers the face of the moon with its body, that which you are seeing is going to heaven.”

I thought it was an invented story, and for that reason my mother said to me,

“Child. In truth that is the snake which is flying. It is not just a figment of your imagination.”

So now I have seen that it is really true. That is why our ancestors worshiped the rattlesnake and believed it is a god because in addition to flying on a certain date it also eats corn.

A FINAL THOUGHT

From the above three stories, it would seem that today Quetzal Coatl / Kukul Can has lost those special qualities which made him, both as a god and as a person, someone worthy of admiration. Even though his presence in Yucatan a millennium ago has had a lasting influence in the art and architecture of the Yucatecan Peninsula, his philosophical teachings are now forgotten and he has become a caricature based on his name and not based on what he brought in terms of culture to the Maya so long ago.