

Creation Myths and Worldview

And here is the beginning . . . Whatever might be is simply not there: only murmurs, ripples, in the dark, in the night.

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Popol Vuh (translated by Dennis Tedlock)

There was never a Garden of Eden in the Mesoamerican worldview. The first people, molded out of ground maize dough, never sinned, they never fell from grace. They were, instead, the most recent efforts by the gods to create creatures to speak and pray to them and honor them through sacrificial offerings. In return, the people of maize would be fed and, as the Aztecs thought, given the gift of laughter and sleep "so that [they] would not die of sadness" (Sahagún 1950–82, 6:93).

The gods previously had tried to create appropriate earthly companions. They had always been disappointed, however, by the inability of these earlier races to nourish them through prayers and offerings and, at times, by their overweening arrogance. So the gods had destroyed their own creations. According to the Aztecs, the very first creatures were giants that the gods had devoured by fierce jaguars; the most recent were transformed into fish when floods destroyed the mountains and the sky crashed to the earth.

According to the Maya *Popol Vuh*, the gods continually tried to create a more perfect world, looking for a race that could speak in order to pray, that could remember the gods in order to be thankful. After their previous attempts (four for the Aztecs; three for the Maya), the gods finally created this one, the world of the true Sun and Moon, of maize and humans.

Lifting the sky from the sea, where it had crashed in the floods, and naming the mountains and caves and places of the land, they created the middle world of earthlings. The world of the maize people was ordered into four directions and centered by the world tree that reached

THE FIRST BALL GAME

Mesoamerica produced the first rubber ball; the rubber came from the milky sap found in the *guayule* trees of the tropical zone, which was occupied by the earliest civilization, that of the Olmecs. The Aztecs later imported 16,000 rubber balls a year from this Gulf coast region. The ball was used in any number of games, from a hockey-like stick ball (seen in the murals of the city of Teotihuacán, near Mexico City) and a baseball version (seen in ceramic figurines from Western Mexico) to the more prevalent hipball game in which the ball—solid and packing a wallop—was bounced off hip protectors, not the hands or feet. Aztec hipball matches, according to Spanish witnesses, were accompanied by considerable betting. A team could lose by allowing the ball to hit the ground or go out of bounds. Scoring in one version of hipball required the ball to pass through narrow stone rings; this was so rarely achieved that when it happened spectators showered the scoring ballplayer with their jewelry. Fascinated by the game, the conquistador Hernán Cortés took two teams back to Spain on his first trip to report to Emperor Charles V, thereby introducing ball games to the Old World. Others simply tried to describe to the uninitiated exactly what was so remarkable about a rubber ball:

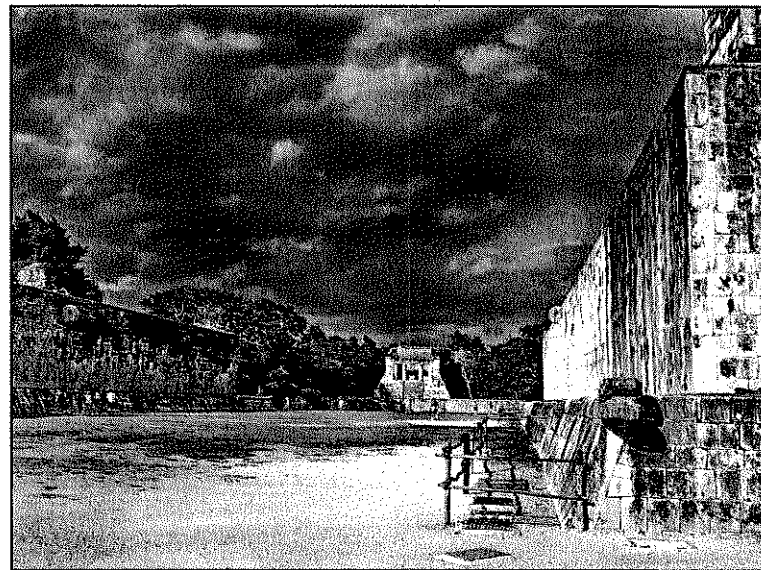
Jumping and bouncing are its qualities, upward and downward, to and from. It can exhaust the pursuer running after it before he can catch up.

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Friar Diego Durán, 1579



A ceramic cylindrical vase with ritual ball game scene from the Maya culture of the Late Classic period (A.D. c. 700–850). Height: $4\frac{1}{16}$ inches; diameter: $6\frac{1}{4}$ inches (Dallas Museum of Art, gift of Patsy R. and Raymond D. Nasher)

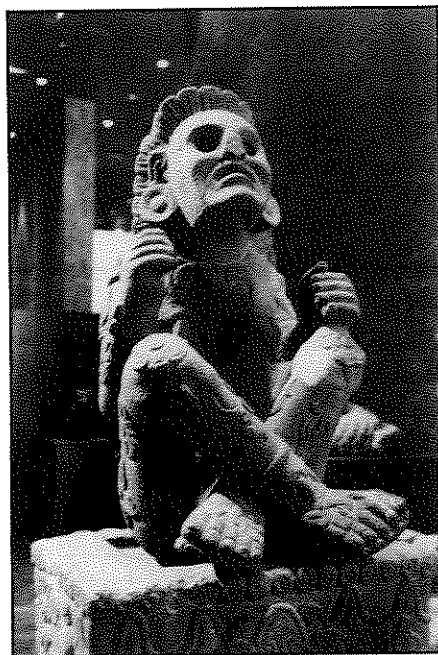
The competitive games played today, however, have none of the cosmic significance the ancient Americans attached to ball games. Most of the great pre-Columbian cities had stone ball courts in their very center next to the most sacrosanct buildings. In the Aztec origin myth, the patron god Huitzilopochtli (weet-zee-loh-POACH-tee) slays the forces of night in a ball court. The Maya story of creation as told in the *Popol Vuh* involved ballplaying hero twins who, through self-sacrifice and cleverness, defeated the gods of evil and prepared the world for the birth of the Sun, the dawning of the ancients' universe. When rulers took the throne in the seventh century A.D. at the beautiful Maya city of Palenque, they assumed the title of "ballplayer," just like the hero twin gods they were believed to embody. And when the game was played, creation was reenacted: decapitation of the losers paralleled the sacrifice of the creator gods in the Underworld ball game; the arching ball signified the movement of the Sun. The game had agricultural significance, too: central Mexican kings were said to play the rain god for bountiful crops. Momentous matters of state—alliances, border disputes, and ruler legitimization rituals—were decided on the sacred ball court.



The Great Ball Court at the Maya city of Chichén Itzá. The scoring ring is visible on the right wall. (Courtesy Peter Selverstone)

into the earthly underworld with its roots and raised up to the heavens with its branches. For all Mesoamericans this world was created through the ultimate self-sacrifice of the gods. To create the Sun and Moon, two Aztec gods had thrown themselves onto a raging fire; and Maya ancestral deities had entered the Underworld where they were defeated and decapitated in a game of hipball (see "The First Ball Game") by the gods of death and disease. Eternal night was banished, and the world was ordered and perfected for humans only through the blood sacrifices of the central Mexican god Quetzalcoatl ("feathered serpent") and the Maya hero twins, all of whom traveled to the Underworld to find the skulls and bones of their ancestors in order that they could be magically reborn in the sky. It was from these sacrifices that maize sprouted and the primordial ancestors ground the kernels to shape the first humans out of cornmeal.

The creation myths provided a metaphor for proper human behavior. The gods had sacrificed themselves in order to be reborn as the Sun and Moon; so the Sun required human sacrifice before it would dawn again after a night in the Underworld. The gods went into the



Xochipilli, an Aztec god of spring, is associated with flowers, song, and male fertility. (National Museum of Anthropology, Mexico City)

Underworld to defeat the lords of death and to honor their ancestors; so all Mesoamericans must sacrifice in order to honor their gods and ancestors. To keep the people of maize from becoming too arrogant and believing themselves godlike, the gods invented alcoholic *pulque* to blur their vision like "breath on a mirror": modesty and a sense of one's place in the cosmos were imperative.

The myths also infused the world with spiritual meaning. Nature itself was animate and willful, the winds and rains and storms and drought were godly expressions. The stars represented an aspects of the gods, caves were portals to the frightening Underworld, mountains were home to ancestral deities.

The myths justified the political order. Rulers embodied the creator gods, their deified ancestors. They wore god emblems on their costumes and communicated with the ancestors during shamanistic trances brought on by autosacrifice and hallucinogens. Their cities often were constructed as cosmograms, or replicas of places of creation—pyramids represented the sacred ancestral mountains and the place where corn was born; the small temple interiors represented caves or entrances to the Underworld, places where rulers communicated with the gods.

Like the Bible, the creation myths of Mesoamerica explained the genesis of the world and prescribed correct social and political behavior. Irreverence would result, not in hell, but in the destruction of the maize world, by earthquake according to the Aztecs. Although a few late versions of these myths have been preserved through the Spaniards' contact with the last Mesoamerican civilizations, older ones have recently been deciphered in the hieroglyphic texts of the ancient Maya. Even earlier, these myths can be identified in the art of the Olmec, dating from three millennia ago. And the myths continue to infuse the world view of many indigenous peoples today: from Maya communities in highland Guatemala to Nahuatl ones near Mexico City, ancestral mountains are still worshiped and the skies are watched for the activities of the old gods.