



Eschatological Encounters

Maya Conceptualisations of the Afterlife in the Context of Early Colonial Christianisation in Highland Guatemala

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Abstract. – The corpus of missionary and indigenous colonial texts in the highland Maya language K'iche' is an exceptional resource for studying the colonial encounter of Christianity and pre-Columbian religion. To translate Christianity into K'iche', the missionaries appropriated lexical concepts from highland Maya religion, while indigenous authors took up the doctrinal discourse to negotiate both cosmologies and maintain religious tradition. This article examines the terminology used by missionary authors to express conceptualisations of Christian eschatology and analyses how the new Christian discourse of Heaven and Hell was mapped onto pre-Columbian notions of afterlife and otherworld dimensions. [*Guatemala, highland Maya, K'iche', conversion, missionary texts, translation, eschatology*]

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Introduction

Highland Guatemala was among the first regions in the Americas, where the native languages were strategically used in the conversion of the indigenous population to Christianity. It was primarily the friars of the mendicant orders of the Franciscans and Dominicans who resisted the order of the Spanish Crown for castellanisation, opposed Rome's dogma of trilingualism (i. e., the preaching of the gospel only in Latin, Greek, or Hebrew), and began to produce teaching materials in the indigenous languages (Phelan 1970: 87 f.; García Ruíz 1992: 85).

The corpus of missionary writings in the highland Mayan language K'iche' is particularly rich. It comprises various types of catechisms and confessionaries, extensive compendia of sermons and hymns, as well as ample texts of theological and devotional content that explain the new concepts of the Christian faith. Educated in the missionary schools, indigenous authors took up this new Christian discourse and developed their own literary traditions, amalgamating pre-Columbian mytho-historic narratives with European genres and themes. This combination of missionary and indigenous written resources makes Highland Guatemala a particularly appropriate place for analysing the process of conversion and the confrontation of Old and New World religious ideologies.

This article examines the role of translation in the process of conversion by focusing on conceptualisations of Christian eschatology. We will investigate how the friars communicated the idea of eternal life in Heaven or Hell and how this new terminology was mapped onto pre-Columbian notions of afterlife and otherworld dimensions. It will be argued that translation practices had the potential to seriously undermine the objective of the conversion by preserving concepts that were fundamental to highland Maya eschatology.

Creating Christian Discourse

The main languages that were used for the conversion in Highland Guatemala were the K'iche'an languages K'iche', Kaqchikel, and Q'eqchi'. The dominant language in the multilingual highlands, where over twenty different Mayan languages are spoken to the present day, was K'iche'. It was the language of the Kingdom of Q'umarkaj (Utatlán) that was overthrown by the Spanish with the aid of Kaqchikel and Central Mexican allies. The Spanish first established themselves in the Kaqchikel-speaking area. When the first Franciscan missionaries arrived, they initially concentrated on gaining language competence in Kaqchikel (or the *lengua guatemalteca*), which became the matrix language for both linguistic description and evangelisation in the Guatemalan highlands.¹ The conversion of the K'iche'-speaking Central Highlands and Q'eqchi'-speaking Eastern Highlands was, however, mostly in the hands of the Dominicans, who produced extensive doctrinal materials in these languages.

The Dominican involvement in translating the teachings of the Christian faith into the highland Mayan languages began as early as in the 1530s. In his attempt to pacify the region of Tezulutlán, that was still resisting Spanish invasion, Bartolomé de las Casas ordered a group of Dominican friars under the leadership of Luis Cáncer to create texts for the mission that could be sung to the native population in their own language (see Sparks and Sachse 2017). According to chronicler Antonio de Remesal these were the first doctrinal text materials to be written in an indigenous language of Guatemala (Remesal 1964: 215 [1691: book III, chapter XI.i.]). Seeing the success of the mission in the indigenous languages, Las Casas recruited more Dominicans in Spain who were renowned

for their linguistic talents. Among them was Domingo de Vico, who arrived in Guatemala in 1545 and according to Remesal learned seven Mayan languages within a few years.

Vico would become a major figure in the mission of the Central Highlands, as he authored Americas' first Christian theology – the “Theologia Indorum” (Theology for/of the Indians) – that was written entirely in K'iche' for an indigenous readership (Sparks 2011, 2014b; Sparks et al. 2017). The extensive work comprises two volumes and a total of 217 lengthy chapters, including explanations of essential Christian concepts, summaries of biblical narratives and catechetical literature, with the first volume covering mostly contents relating to the Old Testament and the second volume contents of the New Testament. Written between 1550–54, the “Theologia Indorum” found wide distribution across the indigenous highlands. It was translated into Kaqchikel, Tz'utujil, and Q'eqchi' still in the course of the sixteenth century – possibly as a response to Vico's martyr death among the Acalan Chontal in 1555. Today, the text survives in a number of complete and partial copies that are preserved in various archives in Europe and the United States. In his comprehensive study on the “Theologia Indorum,” Garry Sparks underlines the importance of Vico's work for the Christian conversion and the development of Christian discourse formation (2011, 2014b, 2016).

The decision to evangelise in the indigenous languages posed the challenge of finding the appropriate terminological correlates to express the abstract concepts of the Christian faith (e. g., “salvation” or “confession”). To introduce the new terminology, the missionaries in Highland Guatemala resorted to the same linguistic strategies that are found in the translation of Christianities worldwide, including the use of neologisms and the appropriation of terms from native religion (Sachse 2016: 97–102). Neologisms include (1) loanwords from Spanish (e. g., *misa*, “mass”; *paraiso*, “paradise”) or Latin (e. g., *Pascua*, “Easter”), (2) loan translations, i. e., literal translations of Spanish, Latin, or Hebrew forms into K'iche' (e. g., *keje' chuxoq*, “so be it” = Hebr. *Amen*; *utz b'ij*, “speak well” = lat. *benedicere*, “to bless”), or (3) descriptive paraphrases (e. g., *uqajik uja' Dios*, “letting down the water of God” = baptism). The latter of these strategies was very useful in the process of conversion, inasmuch as it communicated the Christian cultural practice along with a new term. Besides introducing neologisms, missionary authors also consciously appropriated terminology

¹ See Recinos et al. (1950: 31); García-Ruiz (1992: 84); Smith-Stark (2009).

from K'iche' ritual discourse. For example, the term *q'ijilaj*, literally “to do/count time” refers to the indigenous religious practice of divination based on the 260-day Mesoamerican calendar, but was adopted into the doctrinal literature to translate the Christian concept of “worship.” Dominican authors also adopted the name of the highest K'iche' creator deity “Tz'aqol B'itol” (Framer-Former) to refer to God the Creator. In the “Theologia Indorum”, Vico explains and justified the usage of the term as he identifies Tz'aqol B'itol as the only Creator God, suggesting to the K'iche' that they already had practiced monotheism in their past (Sparks 2011: 171; 2014 b: 420ff.).

Franciscans and Dominicans developed diametrically opposed approaches to translating the Christian doctrine into the indigenous languages and entered into fundamental disputes about the issue (García-Ruiz 1992). In particular the translation of the name for God was a point of contention. The Dominicans criticised the Franciscan use of the Spanish term *Dios* and promoted the K'iche' term *k'ab'awil*, which again was unacceptable for the Franciscans, as this term was referring to the stone idols the highland Maya were offering to. This dispute is reflected in the terminological choices of authors from both orders throughout the colonial times. Franciscan texts show a clear preference for the use of neologisms, while Dominican authors took more terms from K'iche' ritual discourse (Sachse 2016). This appropriation of Maya religious terminology into the Christian context is of particular interest, as it may have provided a vehicle for the survival of indigenous religious concepts and practices. The use of these terms in doctrinal discourse also sheds light on the interaction between missionaries and their K'iche' informants, who served as aides in the process of translation and compilation.

Christian discourse was taken up by indigenous authors. Indigenous communities had town scribes, who held notary positions within the colonial administration and were responsible for composing official documents, such as testaments, deeds, property sale contracts, legal and community records as well as church and confraternity registers. The same scribes also produced historiographic documents for purposes of the indigenous community. The most notable K'iche' text from the 16th century is certainly the “Popol Vuh,” the mythological account of the creation of the world and origin of the K'iche' people that was authored by the descendants of the ruling lineage of Q'umarkaj before 1558 (see, e. g., Tedlock 1996; Christenson 2003, 2004). The corpus of in-

digenuous historiography also includes various land title documents (*titulos*) that were written to state the territorial and political legitimacy of local K'iche' nobilities, including the “Título de Totonicapán” (Carmack and Mondloch 1983) or the “Título del Yax” (Carmack and Mondloch 1989).

Although these texts have been treated as windows into a pre-Columbian past and are routinely drawn on to reconstruct the history, concepts, and practices of pre-Conquest Maya culture, they need to be seen as products of the colonial encounter. The authors were bilingual Christian converts, writing decades after the Spanish invasion and negotiating two cultural systems. Indigenous discourse and conceptualisations became influenced and modified by Christian thought, which makes these texts key resources for analysing the impact of the conversion on native culture. The texts show how indigenous authors implemented Christian discourse in their historical traditions and appropriated Spanish literary genres for their own strategic purposes. Many K'iche' *titulos* reference biblical narratives. The creation narrative in the “Título de Totonicapán”, for instance, integrates entire paragraphs from the “Theologia Indorum,”² and the authors of the “Título de Ilocab” (Carmack 1985) and the “Título de Pedro Velasco” (Carmack and Mondloch 1989) explicitly mention Vico and the “Theologia Indorum,” which confirms the wide dissemination this work had in the sixteenth-century highlands (Sparks 2011: 124–126). And although the “Popol Vuh” was explicitly written to preserve the ancient knowledge about highland Maya religion and mythology, it was plausibly composed as a refutation of Christianity (Dürr 1989; Tedlock 1996: 30) and as a direct indigenous response to the concept of the “Theologia Indorum” as a central dogmatic text (Sparks 2011: 36, 189).

Sparks has argued that the “Theologia Indorum,” the “Título de Totonicapán”, and the “Popol Vuh” are intertextually related and reflect a dialogue between Dominican missionaries and highland Maya religious specialists (2011: 186–243; 2014 a). While the indigenous authors reproduced and reconfigured doctrinal discourse in their writings and transformed native mythologies and narrative traditions to match the template of biblical linearity, Vico deliberately emulated the parallelisms and couplets of K'iche' ritual discourse and embedded them in the doctrinal language (Sparks 2011: 168ff., 221ff.). The mutual

2 Acuña (1985); Dürr (1989); Bredt-Kriszat (1999); (Sparks 2011).

adaptations make it difficult to tell surviving pre-Columbian conceptualisations from those that have been created in the context of linguistic conversion. In order to understand how elements from both religious traditions were integrated by missionary and K'iche' authors into a new and coherent belief system, the intertextualities of the sources need to be systematically analysed and disentangled. In what follows I attempt to do this for concepts from the semantic domain of eschatological cosmology.

*Kanukojo Dios qajawixel,
utzinisay re ronojel,
winaqirisay pu re kaj ulew
ruk' Jesu Christo
xere' jukisik uk'ajol Dios
xa jun qajawal.
Are' ti'ojilab'ik rumal spiritu santo
xalaxik rumal Santa Maria amaq'el qapoj
uchi' Poncio Pilato
xq'axq'ob'ik xripik chuwach cruz,
xkamik xmuqik
xqaj chi **Xib'alb'a**.
Rox q'ij xuk'astaj rib'
Chikixo'l e kaminaq
xaqan chi **kaj**.
Xapon kub'uloq
Chuwiq'iq'ab' Dios uqajaw
utzinisay re ronojel.
Chila' chipe chi wi
Chuluq'atatzij pa kiwi'
e k'ask'oj e kaminaq.
Kanukojo Spiritu Santo,
Santa Iglesia Catolica
Ruk' kik'uchb'al kib' e santos,
kanukojo usachik mak,
kanukojo ronojel winaq chik'astaj chik
ruk' **junelik k'aslem** chila' chi **kaj**.
Keje chuxoq. Amen Jesus*

Translating the Afterlife

The essence of Christian eschatology is encapsulated in the Apostles' Creed, which summarises the central statements of faith, on which Christian hope for salvation is founded: the incarnation, passion and death of Christ, his descent into Hell, resurrection, and subsequent ascension to Heaven, his second coming, the Last Judgment, and the final resurrection of the dead. In Christianity individual and collective eschatology are inseparably connected, as the decision about each soul's fate of either eternal life in Heaven or eternal death in Hell depends on Christ's Last Judgment at the end of the world.

I believe (in) God Father
completer of all,
and creator of sky and earth;
and (in) Jesus Christ
as the only son of God,
just one is our Lord.
He became flesh through the Holy Spirit,
was born by Holy Mary, eternal virgin,
suffered under Pontius Pilate
was hammered and spread onto the cross,
died, was buried,
descended into Hell.
On the third day, he revived himself
among those who are dead;
he ascended to the heaven.
He arrived to be seated
at the right hand of God, his father,
completer of all.
From there he shall return
to judge [= cut words over them]
the living and the dead.
I believe in the Holy Spirit,
the Holy Catholic Church
and the community of the saints;
I believe in the disappearance of sin,
I believe that all people shall revive again
with eternal life there in the heaven.
So be it. Amen, Jesus

(“Doctrina cristiana” – Damian Delgado 1725: 20).

The preceding K'iche' version of the Creed provides us with translations of the key terms that constitute Christian eschatological cosmology: Hell (*xib'alb'a*), Heaven (*kaj*), and eternity or eternal life (*junelik k'aslem*). In the following sections, we will analyse the K'iche' terms used to express these Christian concepts and associated ideas from the same frame of reference and explore how these renderings relate to notions of otherworld places known from pre-Columbian cosmology.

Hell

To translate the Spanish concept of *infierno* (Hell), missionary authors unanimously employed the K'iche' term *xib'alb'a* (or Kaqchikel *xib'alb'ay*), a locative derivation of an abstractive noun with the root *xib'* (fear/fright), which literally translates as “place of fearing, or fright.”

Xib'alb'a was the K'iche' concept of a non-human domain in the underworld. The term is often used indiscriminately to refer to the Classic Maya underworld, which is only known from iconographic sources and for which no generic hieroglyphic term has been identified thus far (see Fitzsimmons 2009: 15). Colonial Yukatek sources refer to the underworld as *metnal*, the precise meaning of which is not understood, though it is commonly interpreted to be a mayanised form of the Nahuatl term *mictlan*, i. e., “land of the dead” (Thompson 1990 [1970]: 300). Ethnographic accounts from Highland Chiapas describe the concept of an underworld named Katinbak, which according to the Tzeltal of Cancuc is a dark and cold place (Pitarch Ramón 1999: 28), while the Tzotzil in Chamula define it as an underworld jail for murderers and witches (Pozas Arciniegas 1987: 232–240). Much of our current understanding of the Maya underworld derives from highland Maya mythology and in particular the early colonial text of the “Popol Vuh,” which provides the only detailed description of *Xib'alb'a*. The “Popol Vuh” specifies *Xib'alb'a* as a place of darkness underneath the surface of the earth, to which one descends through caves and ravines and by crossing dangerous rivers. *Xib'alb'a* is the realm of the lords of death and disease. However, its role as a place for the spirit-essences of the deceased is not mentioned explicitly in the text, instead all references to *Xib'alb'a* regard events in the deep mythic past, before the creation of mankind.

The episodes from the “Popol Vuh” referring to *Xib'alb'a* nevertheless can be seen to define the parameters for the human relationship to the un-

derworld. The text describes the journey of the Hero Twins Junajpu and Xb'alanke, two semi-gods, who descend to the underworld to defeat the Lords of *Xib'alb'a*, whereby they define a new world order and create the conditions for the development of human life on earth. The narrative starts with the father of the twins, Jun Junajpu, who along with his brother is summoned to the underworld and then defeated and beheaded in a ballgame by the Lords of *Xib'alb'a*. Placed in a calabash tree, his decapitated head spits into the hand of an underworld lady who becomes pregnant, escapes to the surface of the earth and gives birth to the Hero Twins. Junajpu and Xb'alanke are likewise summoned by the lords, but are not defeated. Instead, they sacrifice themselves in a fire, their bones are ground and strewn into the rivers of *Xib'alb'a* from where they are reborn and finally sacrifice the lords of the underworld before rising to the sky as Sun and Moon.

The Hero Twin narrative identifies *Xib'alb'a* as a place of defeat, death, and subsequent regeneration. It has been widely recognised that there is a close connection between the narrative and the maize mythology (see among others Taube 1985; Braakhuis 2009), which constitutes the basis of highland Maya eschatology. The bones of the deceased buried into the ground are seen as the seeds from which the new maize plants sprout that provide the food for the living (see Carlsen and Prechtel 1991). This idea of intergenerational exchange is represented in the “Popol Vuh” narrative in the figure of Jun Junajpu, whose decapitated head becomes the fruit of a calabash tree, and thus primordial food that generates offspring. The sacrificial death and rebirth of the Hero Twins, on the other hand, has been associated with the present-day Tz'utujil practice of preparing *maatz'*, a ceremonial atole from toasted corn that is ground and mixed with ashes, which represents semen and is consumed at the time of sowing in ritual contexts analogical to the holy communion (Carlsen and Prechtel 1991: 32; Christenson 2001: 123 f., 196). Thus, the Hero Twin episodes indicate that *Xib'alb'a* is both, a place of death and defeat as well as of rebirth and creation. Human fate is to be buried and regenerated in the underworld to give life to one's descendants by fertilising the ground that sustains the crops for future generations.

In the “Memorial de Sololá” (Otzoy 1999) the Kaqchikel concept of *Xib'alb'ay* is explicitly referred to as a place of ancestral origin, or Tulan, the Postclassic highland Maya adaptation of the mythological Tollan from the Central Mexican sources. The text specifies that the people arrived

Kaji' k'a xpe wi
winäq pa Tulan:
chi releb'al q'ij jun Tulan,
jun chik k'a chi Xib'alb'ay,
jun chik k'a chi ruqajib'al q'ij,
chi ri' k'a xojpe wi,
chi ruq'ajib'al q'ij,
jun chik wi k'a chi K'ab'owil

from four origin places, of which one is situated in Xib'alb'ay and thus nadir (see Maxwell and Hill II 2006: 7).

Despite its name as a “place of frightening,” the origin place Xib'alb'ay had rather positive connotations in the indigenous sources. The “Memorial de Sololá” mentions it furthermore as the *raxa xib'alb'ay q'ana xib'alb'ay*, “green Xib'alb'a, yellow Xib'alb'a.” The parallel couplet *rax q'an* (green-yellow) is generally attested in Mayan languages to refer to “abundance in food” and may in this case refer to the otherworldly Mountain of

Ta xetzaq uloq
rumal Tz'aqol B'itol
Dios Nimajaw ub'i'.
Keje' k'ut keqajik
koponik puch chunik'ajal ulew,
chi rochoch k'axkol ra'il
chi rochoch chuk'a,
chi rochoch q'aq',
chi rochoch k'atik poroxik,
chi rochoch tew k'atan,
chi rochoch wayjal chaq'ij chi',
chi rochoch meb'a'il ajkoq'owalil,
chi rochoch kik' raxtew
chi rochoch b'is moq'em
chi rochoch nimab'is
chi rochoch q'equm aq'ab'
chi rochoch pu jiløj poløj,
qitzij chi kowinik chi k'ax, chi ra'
k'o chila' xe'ok wi.
Xawi xere ub'i' Xib'alb'a,
xub'inaj rochoch pa ichab'al

From four (locations) came
the people from Tulan:
in the east is one Tulan,
another one in Xib'alb'ay,
another one where the sun descends (west),
where we come from,
where the sun descends (west),
(and) another one is in K'ab'owil
(“Memorial de Sololá” – Otzoy 1999: § 4, 155).

Sustenance as the origin place of humanity (see below).

When early sixteenth-century missionaries appropriated the term *xib'alb'a* in doctrinal discourse to refer to the Christian concept of “Hell,” their image of an underworld had inherently different properties than the pre-Hispanic one. Vico describes the attributes of Christian Hell in chapter 28 of the first volume of the “Theologia Indorum,” which narrates the Fall of the Angels and their banishment in Hell, at the centre of the Earth:

Then they were thrown hither,
by Framer-Former,
God the Great Lord is his name.
Thus they descended
to arrive at the centre of the earth,
at the home of suffering and pain,
at the home of bitterness,
at the home of fire,
at the home of burning and firing,
at the home of cold and fever,
at the home of hunger and thirst,
at the home of poverty and shortage,
at the home of blood-sickness,
at the home of sorrow and anguish,
at the home of great sorrow,
at the home of darkness and night,
and at the house of groaning and grief,
truly at the might of suffering, of pain,
that is where they entered.
Only so by the name of Xib'alb'a,
is called his house in your language
(Vico 1553: fol. 71)

Here Hell is described as the home of “suffering and pain,” “burning and fire,” “diseases, hunger, poverty, sorrow, and darkness.” Some of these hardships that await the sinner find correspondences in the characterisation of the K’iche’ underworld in the “Popol Vuh.” Highland Maya Xib’alb’a was certainly a place of darkness that was associated with sickness and ailment. The majority of underworld lords mentioned in the text carry the names of diseases, such as Xik’iri Pat (Flying Scab), Kuchuma Kik’ (Gathered Blood), Ajal Puj (Pus Demon), *Ajal Q’ana* (Jaundice) (translations by Christenson 2003). Xib’alb’a was also a place of suffering and defeat. After their descent to the underworld, the Hero Twins have to pass through a series of trials (*tijob’al*) in form of different houses of elemental dangers, including darkness, cold, fire, knives, jaguars; and bats (see Table 1).

Table 1: The Houses of Trials (*tijob’al*) of Xib’alb’a according to the “Popol Vuh.”

Houses of Trials in Xib’alb’a	
Q’equmaja	House of Darkness
Cha’im Ja	House of Blades
Tew Ja / Xuxulim Ja	House of Cold / House of Shivering
Ja chi q’aq’	House of Fire
B’alamija	House of Jaguars
Sotz’ija	House of Bats

As some of the properties of Hell described by Vico and of the houses of trials in the “Popol Vuh” seem to overlap (“darkness,” “cold,” and “fire”), it has been debated whether the accounts in both sources may be conceptually related (see Bredt-Kriszat 1999: 193). The compartmentalisation of Hell into different levels or abodes was not entirely alien to medieval Christian cosmology. However, the properties of Hell itemised by Vico do not correspond to the nine circles of Dante’s “Inferno,” or the seven terraces of the Mountain of Purgatory. Vico, moreover, uses the possessed term *rochoch* (its home) instead of the unpossessed form *ja* that the authors of the “Popol Vuh” employ to refer to the houses of trials. The term *rochoch* is used in the “Theologia Indorum” in various other contexts, where it refers to Hell as a place of existence, which seems to suggest that the list in chapter 28 may be more an inventory of the horrors that await the sinner in Hell rather than conceptualisations of different abodes of torture. Whether the “houses of trials” in the “Popol Vuh”

are a pre-Columbian concept or whether they have been created by the indigenous authors in response to the Christian doctrine cannot be satisfactorily answered.

While there does not seem to be much evidence that Vico based his description on highland Maya conceptualisations, the image of the Christian Hell that was created through the process of translation did not always contradict pre-Columbian perceptions of the underworld. An eighteenth-century catechism titled “Nabe Tihonic” (First Lesson) gives a detailed description of the late medieval notion of Hell as being subdivided into the four realms of the Limbo of Infants (*limbus puerorum*), Purgatory (*purgatorium*), Hell (*infernum*), and the Limbo of the Fathers (*limbus patrum*). These four parts are not specifically named but simply referred to as the first, second, third, and fourth Xib’alb’a. Only the accompanying description clarifies which Christian otherworld places are denoted. Table 2 lists the relevant key terms that are indicative of the respective function of the four hells.

Table 2: The Four Levels of Hell and Associated Terms in the “Nabe Tihonic” (18th c.).

Levels of Hell		Associated Terms	
Nab’e	First Hell	<i>ak’alab’</i>	“children”
Xib’alb’a	(Limbo of Infants)	<i>alaxib’al mak</i>	“birth sin”
Ukab’	Second Hell	<i>k’axk’ol ra’il</i>	“suffering-pain”
Xib’alb’a	(Purgatory)	<i>tz’aqatisaxik raxwinaqil</i>	“completion” “well-being”
Rox	Third Hell	<i>junelik</i>	“eternal suffering-pain”
Xib’alb’a	(Hell)	<i>k’axk’ol ra’il q’aq’al meq’enal</i>	“fire” “heat”
		<i>Diablos k’axtok’</i>	“Devil-traitor”
Ukaj	Fourth Hell	<i>chajib’al</i>	“guardian-place of our ancestors”
Xib’alb’a	(Limbo of the Fathers)	<i>qachuch qajawixelab’</i>	

The “First Hell” (Nab’e Xib’alb’a) can be identified as the Limbo of Infants, a state between Heaven and Hell for the children’s souls (*ak’alab’*) who have not been baptised and still bear the weight of original sin (*alaxib’al mak* – “birth sin”) which denies them direct access to Heaven. There is little ethnographic information about K’iche’an perceptions of the eschatological fate of infants. In Chichicastenango, parents commonly put off

costly baptism ceremonies until they could be sure that their infant would live, which does not suggest a strong belief in the concept of original sin (Bunzel 1952: 162). In contemporary Tzotzil and Tzeltal belief, the souls of infants who die before weaning continue to be nourished by an otherworldly tree between heaven and earth where they await their reincarnation on earth (Guiteras Holmes 1961: 143; Pozas Arciniegas 1987: 232–240). It is unclear whether any of the K'iche'an highland Maya groups shared the liminal concept of the nourishing tree, which might, after all, already be a fusion of the Christian idea of limbo and the Mesoamerican belief in a mountain of sustenance (see below).

The “Second Hell” (Ukab' Xib'alb'a) refers to the Christian concept of Purgatory, the place where the sinful human souls are purged to gain access to Heaven. It is described as a place of “suffering and pain” (*k'axk'ol ra'il*) for the sake of “completion” (*tz'aqatisaxik*) and “health, or well-being” (*raxwinaqil*) of the human soul. The idea that those who have not committed any mortal sins will pass through a process of purification before they can gain access to the celestial paradise is fundamental to the Christian conceptualisation of the afterlife. Purification can be aided by the prayers of the descendants but is achieved through the suffering of the soul, with purification by fire being the most effective means. Interestingly enough, the “Nabe Tihonic” does not mention any fires in Purgatory. The medieval concept of Lat. *purgare* (to purge, to cleanse) is not translated literally but with a term that refers to the repositioning of one's health. The root *tz'aq* is attested in several Mayan languages, including Classic Maya, with the meaning “to complete” (Kaufman 2003: 803–807). In the “Popol Vuh,” the root is used in the context of human creation and in reference to the “completion of cycles of time.” It seems that the use of the term with respect to the purging of the human soul may have been adjusted to the indigenous conceptualisation of a person's health, which requires completeness, complementarity, and emotional balance. The term *raxwinaqil* is a compound consisting of the abstractive noun *winaqil* (humanity) and the adjectival modifier *rax* (green, fresh, new). The term is exclusively attested in doctrinal K'iche' and it is unclear whether we are dealing with a pre-Columbian or a borrowed European conceptualisation.

The “Third Hell” (Urox Xib'alb'a) is Hell proper, *ad infernum*, the place of eternal damnation of the soul with no escape. In the K'iche' catechism it is characterised as a place of “eternal suffering”

(*k'axk'ol ra'il*), that is full of devils (*k'axtok'*, lit. “pain knife”), but most importantly, it is associated with “fires” and “heat.” The term employed in the missionary texts to refer to the fires of Hell is the term *q'aq'al* (fieriness), which is paired in the following example with *meq'enal*, i. e., “heat.”

qitzij nim umeq'enal uq'aq'al xib'alb'a

truly great is the heat, the fieriness of Hell

(Nabe Tihonic 18th c.: 127).

The Christian association of Xib'alb'a with fires and heat is probably the conceptualisation that manifests the clearest rupture. Highland Maya Xib'alb'a is described in the “Popol Vuh” as a cold and watery place that is reached through caves and by crossing several rivers. Therefore, it may be significant that in the missionary sources we find the term *q'aq'al* (fieriness) rather than *q'aq'* (fire) associated with the concept of Hell. The term *q'aq'al* is an abstractive form of the noun *q'aq'* (fire). In the indigenous sources, the term *q'aq'al* occurs in various semantic couplets that refer to concepts of political and divine power, such as *q'aq'al tepewal* (fieriness and majesty) (fol. 37 v), *q'aq'al nimal* (fieriness and greatness/honour) (fol. 49 v), or *q'aq'al ajawarem* (fieriness and lordship) (fol. 37 v). In all three mentioned examples the translation of *q'aq'al* as “power” would be the most adequate. The couplet *q'aq'al tepewal* (power and majesty) is also attested in the doctrinal sources where it refers to the “authority and power of God,” i. e., *uq'aq'al utepewal Dios*, meaning “fieriness (= power) and majesty of God” (Arte de la lengua k'iche' and catechism 1700–1750).

The conceptual mapping of “Fire Is Power” is found throughout Maya culture. In Classic Maya inscriptions, rulers commonly carry the element of *k'ahk* (fire) in their name phrase; e. g., Yich'aak K'ahk = Claw of Fire or K'ahk' Upakal = Fire Is His Shield (see Colas 2004). Fire is also associated with divine power. The K'iche' sources describe a sacred bundle called *pisom q'aq'al* (bundled fieriness) that the K'iche'-founder fathers left to their descendants. Similar bundles are venerated in Highland Guatemala until the present-day, such as the Martin bundle in the Cofradia San Juan in Santiago Atitlán that is considered to be the most powerful creator deity in the town and is addressed with the epithet “Lord of Fire” (Christenson 2001). The reference of *q'aq'al* to divine power seems to fit perfectly pre-Columbian understanding of Xib'alb'a as a place of origin and rebirth. We may assume that the use

of the term *q'aq'al* instead of *q'aaq'* (fire) may not have communicated the concept of the tormenting fires of Christian Hell particularly well, and instead, quite contrary to missionary intentions, have ensured the indexical continuity of the word and its conceptual context.

Finally, the “Fourth Hell” (Ukaj Xib'alb'a) refers to another pre-stage of Hell, the “Limbo of the Fathers.” Similar to innocent infants, medieval Catholic theology found an explanation for the whereabouts of the pious ancestral fathers, such as Moses, who died before the sacrifice of Christ could absolve them from original sin. The K'iche' catechism describes this place as the *chajib'al qachuch qajawixelab'*, the “guardian-place of our ancestors.” The concept of powerful ancestors who after their death reside in caves and mountains, from where they continue to influence the lives of the town, is rather prominent in Highland Guatemala ethnography (see Christenson 2001, 2009; Cook 1986: 146). It may even be attested in the Classic Maya hieroglyphic record, where deceased kings buried in the artificial mountains of pyramidal architecture are mentioned to witness accession ceremonies and, therefore, continue to have political influence even *post mortem* (Fitzsimmons 2009: 142). We cannot say whether the Christian idea of the “Limbo of the Fathers” and its reference as *chajib'al* (guardian-place) showed any conceptual continuity with the pre-Hispanic practice of ancestor worship, but the translation may unintentionally have reinforced existing ideas about the afterlife and even about the cultural principle of ancestor veneration as a political institution.

Particular mention deserves the unusual order of the levels of hell in the “Nabe Tihonic.” Thomas Aquinas separated the concept of limbo, which had been introduced into Christian belief by Augustine, into two separate abodes for the children who died in original sin and the holy fathers. Aquinas ordered the different abodes vertically according to the individual hope for salvation, starting with Hell on the lowest level, the limbo for infants on the next, above that Purgatory, and on the upper level the limbo of the fathers (Aquinas 1947: Suppl., Question 69, Article 6). He clearly explains that the children born in original sin have no hopes of going to Heaven, as they had neither acquired faith nor grace before their death.

The description in the K'iche' catechism does not specify the vertical order of the places of the soul, but follows Aquinas in the separation of the limbo into two abodes, with the “Limbo for Children” as the first and the “Limbo of the Fathers”

as the fourth abode. This ordering of the “Four Hells” may show some indigenous influence. In Mesoamerican thought, humankind and human communities are commonly conceptualised as plants, with the ancestors constituting the roots, the old and wise forming the stem or trunk, younger people the branches, and children the flowers and fruits (see Carlsen and Prechtel 1991; Sachse, in press). Moving the limbo of the honourable fathers to the lowest level of the Earth, therefore, would be consistent with indigenous cosmology.³ However, whether the numbering of the four abodes of Hell is a development in this particular set of colonial catechisms from Guatemala, whether it can be found elsewhere in New Spain, or whether it originally derives from European catechisms still awaits clarification.

The terminology used in the “Nabe Tihonic” to describe the Christian version of Xib'alb'a shows a relation to K'iche' religion which does not draw a particularly negative picture of Hell. K'iche' speakers, who assisted the missionaries in the translation process, may have introduced terms and modified translations to adapt them to pre-Hispanic otherworld concepts. Similar forms of adaptation and correction can be found with respect to the translation of Heaven.

Heaven

In Christian eschatology, the concept of Heaven and its cosmological orientation in the sky are synonymous with the celestial paradise or Kingdom of God. To translate the Spanish *cielo*, which refers to both “the skies” and “the heavens,” the missionaries appropriated the K'iche' term *kaj*. In the indigenous sources, the cosmological location of the four-cornered *kaj* is an abode reserved for deities and deified ancestors. The “Popol Vuh” clarifies that the sky existed even before creation and is identified as the place of the Creator God “Heart of Sky,” who is otherwise referred to as the storm deity Juraqan. This conceptualisation corresponds with Christian cosmology as it is laid out in the doctrinal sources, where *kaj* is equally described as the “residence” (*siwan tinamit*) and “kingdom” (*ajawarem*) of God and the angels, who are explicitly referred to as the *winaqil kaj*, the “people of the sky.”

3 This idea was suggested by Oswaldo Chinchilla Mazariegos (Yale University) after a presentation of this research at the symposium of the 19th European Maya Conference in Bratislava on November 22, 2014.

Medieval Christian belief was based on a classical geocentric *Weltbild*. Dante's "Divine Comedy" describes nine concentric and moving planetary spheres, the locations of the moon, Mercury, Venus, the sun, Mars, Jupiter, Saturn, the fixed stars, and the so-called *primum mobile*, the place of the angels. These nine spheres are encompassed

Nab'e q'ij Domingo ub'i'
xwinaqir saq chupam.
Lunes ukab' q'ij
b'elej tas chi kaj xk'ase'
chupam xwinaqir wi
xwinaqir pu rumal Dios nim ajaw.
Ub'elejichal kesolol chirij ulew
kesutinik kesutu w puch ronojel q'ij.
Ulaju' tas chi k'ut k'o aq'anoq puwi'
maja b'i chisilob'ik
xa junelik kub'ulik
rochoch utinamit Dios nimajaw

Nielsen and Sellner Reunert have recently argued that the medieval worldview, adopted by indigenous authors and conceptualisations of a layered universe described in some indigenous sources, were not indicative of Mesoamerican cos-

Lunes ukab' q'ij
b'elej tas chi kaj xk'ase'
rumal Dyos, nima ajaw.
Ub'elejichal kesolow chi rij ulew,
kesutu' puch chi ronojel q'ij.
Ulaju' tas k'ut chisilab'ik,
junelik kub'ul, rochoch utinamit
chi ronojel q'ij.

The indigenous authors adopt Vico's description as it confirms Mesoamerican cosmology that was likewise geocentric. However, it needs to be noted that both texts differ with respect to a small detail. While Vico explains that the tenth level, *empyrion*, is static, the *título* states it to be moving. This statement would be consistent with the Mesoamerican perception of the sun surrounding the earth every day. The authors of the "Título de Totonicapán" seem to have reconfigured Vico's text to ad-

by the *empyrion*, the sea of eternal light and the abode of God, on the tenth and upper level of the sky. In chapter 29 of the "Theologia Indorum," Vico mentions the cosmological composition of the nine celestial spheres surrounding the earth, and eternity beyond, on the tenth level, where nothing moves.

The first day is called Sunday,
 on which light was created.
 Monday is the second day,
 nine levels of the sky were brought to life,
 were created in it,
 and they were created by God the Great Lord.
 The nine(some) circle around the earth,
 they encircle and surround all the sun.
 The tenth level then exists above it,
 it shall not move,
 only the eternal seat,
 the abode of God the Great Lord

(Vico 1553: ch. 29).

mology but the result of Christian influence (2009). Indeed, Vico's text is reproduced almost literally in the account of the creation of the world in the "Título de Totonicapán" (Carmack and Mondloch 1983: 43):

Monday is the second day,
 nine levels of the sky were brought to life
 the nine(some) circle around the earth,
 by God, the great lord
 and they surround it every day.
 The tenth level shall move,
 the eternal seat, his abode
 on every day.

apt it to the reality of pre-Columbian cosmological perception.

In Christian belief, the *empyrion* is the abode of God and the place for the souls of the deceased who go straight to the "celestial paradise" in Heaven. There are three renderings of the term "paradise" in the doctrinal sources, all of which refer respectively to both – the "earthly" and the "celestial" paradise: *junelik ki'kotem*, i. e., "eternal joy/happiness," or *ki'kotirib'al*, i. e., "place of joy/

<i>ki'kotem</i> – “happiness” / <i>ki'koti(risa)b'al</i> – “place of joy/happiness”			
<hunelic quicotem>	<i>junelik ki'kotem</i>	–	Nabe Tihonic 18th c.: 11
<hupalic quicotem chi cah>	<i>jupalik ki'kotem chi kaj</i>	“paraíso celestial”	Coto 1983: 395
<pa qui cotiriçabal vleu>	<i>pa ki'kotirisab'al ulew</i>	“paraíso terrenal”	Coto 1983: 395
<quicotibal coq,ihalal ticon>	<i>ki'kotib'al kotz'ijalaj tiko'n</i>	“deleitoso paraíso”	Coto 1983: 139
<i>q'anal raxal</i> – “(place of) abundance”			
<vrxal veanal vlleuh>	<i>uraxal uq'anal ulew</i>	“parayso terrenal”	Vico 1553: 76
<nima eanal raxal>	<i>nima q'anal raxal</i>	“paraíso celestial”	Coto 1983: 395
<i>kotz'ijalaj ulew</i> – “flowery earth/land”			
<co4,ihalal vleuh>	<i>kotz'ijalaj ulew</i>	“parayso terrenal”	Anonymous Franciscan Dictionary 1787: fol. 153 v
<pa coq,ihalal vleuh>	<i>pa kotz'ijalaj ulew</i>	“paraíso terrenal”	Coto 1983: 395
<co4,ihah ticon>	<i>kotz'ijaj tiko'n</i>	“paraizo”	Anonymous 17th c.: fol. 51 r

Table 3: Translations of the Spanish Term *paraíso* in the Missionary Sources.

happiness,” *q'anal raxal*, i. e., “abundance/plenty,” and *kotz'ijalaj ulew* i. e., “flowery earth/land” (see Table 3).

The most common of these translations is the descriptive paraphrasing of the celestial paradise as a place of “happiness, joy” (*ki'kotem*) and “eternal life” (*junelik k'aslem*). The “joys of heaven” are discussed by Aquinas (1947: Suppl., Question 69, Article 2, Objection 4) and can clearly be identified as a Christian concept.

The second rendering of the celestial and earthly paradise as a place of “abundance, plenty” does not only seem consistent with Christian thought, but also corresponds with Mesoamerican conceptualisations. The diphrastic kenning of *q'anal raxal* (yellowness and greenness) is attested in various Mayan languages including Classic Maya as a metaphor for “abundance.” It has been suggested that “yellow and green” may represent the colours of ripe and unripe maize and that the term thus refers to abundance from a good harvest (Stuart 2005: 275). In the doctrinal sources, the term *q'anal raxal* is used to translate the concepts of “paradise” and the “glory of God,” though both renderings are conceptually related, given that the celestial paradise would be the place where the souls exist in the eternal presence of God’s glory. In the “Theologia Indorum,” the term *q'anal raxal* is associated with the earthly paradise, i. e., the Garden Eden before the Fall of Man. This seems to be consistent with Mesoamerican conceptualisations of human origin places that are commonly described as places of abundance, such as the Tonacatepetl (mountain of sustenance) in

the Central Mexican sources or the place of human creation Paxil K’ayala’ in the “Popol Vuh.”

The third translation of “paradise” as *kotz'ijalaj ulew* (flowery earth/land) can be identified as a straight accommodation of a pre-Columbian concept into doctrinal K’iche’an discourse. The metaphorical concept of a “flowery world” as a paradisiacal realm of the dead is well known in Mesoamerica (see Hill 1992, Burkhart 1992, Taube 2004). Although conceptualisations vary, there is a general association of this Flower Paradise with a celestial place in the east, where the sun rises. According to Sahagún, this is the place where the souls of those who died in battle transform into butterflies. While it is possible that the K’iche’ rendering of paradise as “flowery land” was originally taken from Nahuatl catechetical texts available to the friars, related conceptualisations are found in past and present Maya culture.

The concept of a “flowery mountain” as a place of burial and rebirth has been identified in Classic Maya iconography. An image from vase K6547 in the Ethnology Museum in Berlin depicts the body of a deceased ruler in a flowery mountain of sustenance underneath a radiant Sun God with a maize seed on the top of his head (Fig. 1). In this scene, the sun may represent the concept of a celestial paradise (Taube 2004), while the maize seed alludes to the cycle of life and rebirth. As the sun dies and descends every day in the west and his reborn in the east, maize seeds are “buried” into the earth before they sprout again to new life. The other side of the vase depicts fruit trees grow-

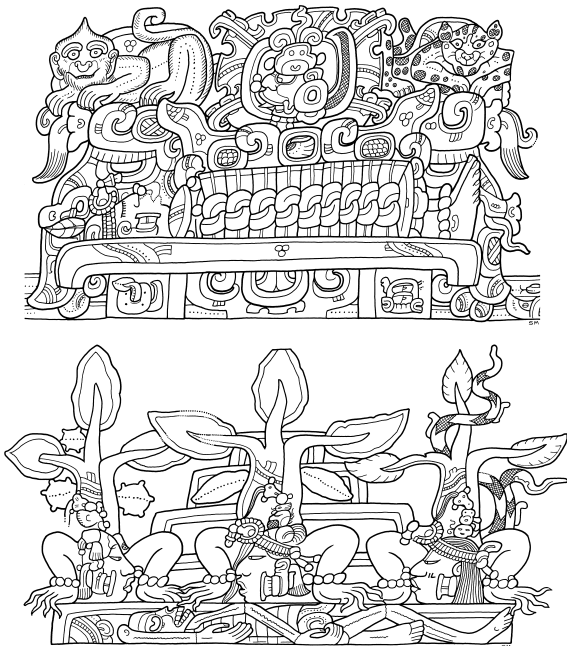


Fig. 1: Image from an Early Classic vase (K6547) of unknown provenance (Ethnologisches Museum, Berlin. Drawing: Simon Martin).

ing out of the bodies of deceased ancestors (Schele and Mathews 1998; Taube 2004: 79ff.). The image is conceptually related to the depictions of the trees sprouting from the heads of ancestral kings on the sides of the sarcophagus of Pakal in Palenque (Carlsen and Prechtel 1991: 34; Schele and Freidel 1990: 221). Both scenes have been interpreted as representations of the mythical decomposition and rebirth of the Maize God in a paradisiacal place of creation (Martin 2006).

The scholarly interpretation of the scenes on the Berlin vase seems to be consistent with contemporary Ch'orti' belief that the human soul has to pass through suffering and trials in the underworld before it can rise to the realm of the Sun God (Girard 1966: 230–232). The belief in asolar paradise full of flowers is known from present-day Maya culture (Taube 2004: 70). It is the final resting place for the souls of heroic leaders or those who died violently in war, by murder, lightning, drowning, or during childbirth (Chinchilla Mazariegos 2011: citing Girard 1966: 236; Pitarch Ramón 1999: 54). The Tzotzil refer to this place as Winajel, which is located in and moves with the sun and is also associated with the heavenly of Jesus Christ and other deities (Guiteras Holmes 1961: 143 f., 258; Villa Rojas 1990: 649). In highland Maya culture, the concept of the Flower Para-

dise also carries a connotation of rebirth. Traditional Tz'utujil of Santiago Atitlán believe in the concept of a “Flowering Mountain Earth,” which refers to an imaginary tree at the navel of the world that is the origin and end of all life (Carlsen and Prechtel 1991).

To explain why the missionaries adopted the concept of the Flower Paradise to refer to the Christian notion of the “Kingdom Come,” we need to take into account that the Mesoamerican understanding of the “flowery land” as a place of rebirth matches with Christian belief in resurrection. In 16th-century Spain, Easter Sunday was referred to as “Pascua Florida,” and, thus, associated with flowers. In the “Theologia Indorum” Vico translates Easter Sunday accordingly as “Kotz'i'jalaj Pascua” (Flowery Easter). Whether the translation of “paradise” as *kotz'i'jalaj ulew* was taken directly from contemporary highland religious discourse, however, cannot be confirmed, as the association of the resurrection with flowers and the translation of the Christian idea of paradise as “Flower Mountain” are also attested in doctrinal Nahuatl literature (see Burkhart 1992).

Eternity

Christian conceptualisations of Heaven and Hell are linked to eschatological understandings about an eternal existence of the human soul, either in Paradise or as never-ending condemnation. In cosmological terms, the concept of “eternity” was understood since medieval times as the endless existence of God outside of space.

In doctrinal K'iche', we find three basic renderings for the Spanish term *eterno*: the modifiers *junelik* and *amaq'el* and the expression *chib'e q'ij chib'e saq*. The two modifiers carry a spatial connotation. The term *junelik* consists of the numeral *ju-* (one) and the classifier *nelik* (piece, unit) that refers to territorial entities or dimensions. The form occurs in adjectival function preceding terms referring to states or places (e. g., *junelik k'aslem* – “eternal life”; *junelik ki'kotem* – “eternal happiness”; *junelik q'anal raxal* – “eternal abundance”; *junelik wa'ij* – “eternal hunger”; *junelik xib'alb'a* – “eternal Hell”). *Amaq'el* is derived from the noun *amaq'* (tribe/nation, settlement) and carries the semantic connotation of “permanence of a human group.” While *amaq'el* is actually an adverb, the term is used in the doctrinal literature in adjectival function preceding divine agents (e. g., *amaq'el q'apoj* – “eternal virgin”; *amaq'el ki'kotirisanel* – “eternal provider of happiness”) and states of existence (e. g., *amaq'el poroxik* –

“eternal burning”; *amaq’el ki’kotem* – “eternal happiness”).

Of particular interest for the present argument is the third rendering of “eternal” as *chib’e q’ij*, *chib’e saq* (as long as there is sun/day, as long as there is light). In the indigenous sources, this phrase is attested in semantic contexts that refer to future states of existence best translated as “forever.” In the “Titulo del Yax” (fol. 3r; Carmack and Mondloch 1989: 43) the ethnic groups who are subjugated during the K’iche’ expansion are told that it will be their eternal fate to serve as slaves:

Xere’ nab’eq ix ajpatan chib’e q’ij chib’e saq
You are just principal servants as long as there
is sun, as long as there is light.

In the missionary sources, the expression occurs in contexts referring to eternal states of existence in both Heaven and Hell. While the reference to the permanence of light in the context of Heaven seems to be consistent with the Christian notion of eternity as a sea of light, it is rather striking to find the expression in the context of Hell.

chila’ chi kaj pa junelik ki’kotem chib’e q’ij
chib’e saq
in Heaven in eternal joy as long as there is
sun, as long as there is light
(Nabe Tihonic 18th c.: 127).

chib’e q’ij chib’e saq katkat pa Xib’alb’a
as long as there is sun, as long as there is light
you burn in Hell
(Basseta 1698: fol. 142r).⁴

The contradiction of the Christian conceptualisation of light as an inherently positive concept that is primarily associated with God, Divinity, and the Heavens and the use of the K’iche’ expression in reference to the dark and evil realm of Satan is particularly obvious in the following example.

uq’equmal Xib’alb’al chib’e q’ij chib’e saq
in the darkness of Hell, as long as there is sun,
as long as there is light
(Nabe Tihonic 18th c.: 131).

The contexts indicate, that the expression *chib’e q’ij chib’e saq* is not likely a missionary creation

but a metaphorical concept that was appropriated from K’iche’ discourse. Indeed, in the “Popol Vuh” and other K’iche’ sources, the terms *q’ij* (sun/day) and *saq* (light) form a diphastic kenning that is attested in three basic semantic contexts suggesting its reference to the thriving and prosperity of human progeny. (1) Humans plea for “sun/day and light,” when praying to the gods for offspring and food. In a petition prayer from the “Titulo de Totonicapan” (fol. 22v–23r; Carmack and Mondloch 1983: 129–131) the K’iche’ ancestors implore the creator deities for Sun and Light.

At Kaj Ulew, at pu Tz’aqol B’itol
chaya’ ta qami’al qak’ajol,
chaya’ uxer web’al uch’ab’al chiqe,
at pu chaq’a cho, chaq’a palo,
at upam kaj, at relib’al q’ij,
at raq’anib’al q’ij,
chaya’ ta qaq’ij qasaq.

You Sky and Earth, and You Framer Former
give us daughters and sons,
give us plates and cups,
You Across the Lake, Across the Sea,
You Inside of the Sky, You Sunrise,
You Path of the Sun,
give us our sun and our light.

(2) Indigenous authors refer to the founders of lineages and descent groups as the “roots of sun/day, roots of light.” The “Popol Vuh,” for instance, mentions the founder father B’alam Aq’ab’ as the “root of sun, root of light” of the Nija’ib’ K’iche’.

... uxe’ q’ij, uxe’ saq chi winaq B’alam
Aq’ab’, mamaxel qajawixel
... the root of sun, root of light of the people is
B’alam Aq’ab’, grandfather and father
(*Popol Vuh*; fol. 56r; Christenson 2004: 319).

(3) The “Popol Vuh” (fol. 3v; Christenson 2004) mentions the ancestral creator couple Xmuqane and Xpiyakok as the “Grandmother of sun/day, grandmother of light” (*rati’t q’ij, rati’t saq*), who create and give life to humankind, also referred to as “children of sun and light.”

The kenning of “sun and light” is best understood within the complex of the conceptual metaphor that “human life is a maize plant” (Sachse, in press). The idea that life is analogous to the growth cycle of maize pervades Maya culture from the Classic to the present time and constitutes the basis of pre-Columbian eschatological

⁴ This reference is not found in the edited version of Basseta’s dictionary by Acuña (2005) which seems to omit certain entries.

belief. Humans were not only created from maize, they are seen as individual corn stalks and the phases of their lives are expressed with the same vocabulary that describes the growth stages of a maize plant. When children are conceived they are “sown,” when they are born, they “dawn” like a plant that breaks through the surface of the earth. Classic and Modern Maya refer to their children as “sprouts,” who grow into mature plants (see, e. g., Christenson 2001). The couplet of the “sowing” and the “dawning” is used in the “Popol Vuh” as a metaphor for human and world creation, which refers to the beginning of life with the placing of a seed in the earth and the growing of the plant out of the ground and into the light (Sachse, in press). When maize shoots come out of the ground they require sunlight to grow, branch out, and reproduce. In this context, the kenning of “sun and light” can be understood as a metaphor for future human offspring and prosperity. Accordingly, indigenous authors refer to human offspring as “children of light.” In the “Rabinal Achi” (Breton 2007: 35), the metaphor *saqil al, saqil k’ajol* (daughters of light, sons of light) refers to the loc-

*Chaya’taj qetal, qatzijel,
chib’e q’ij, chib’e saq,
ta chawaxoq, ta saqiroq.
Qi ta raxal b’e, raxal jok.
Kojaya’ wi
li’anik saq, li’anik amaq’ taj,
utzilaj saq, utzilaj amaq’ taj,
utzilaj k’aslem, winaqirem ta puch,
kojaya’ wi*

In combination, *saq* (light) and *amaq’* (settlement) refer to the two prerequisites for successful plant growth: sunlight and stability. Analogically, humans and human social groups can be seen as plants that require nutrition and a place to sprout and grow. The image of the community as a plant or tree is common in Maya culture. According to Carlsen and Prechtel (1991: 29) the image of a town in the traditional Tz’utujil society of Santiago Atitlán is that of a tree of which the people are the fruits and flowers, the confraternities the branches, the elders form the trunk, and the ancestors the roots. In the “Popol Vuh,” the first generations of lords are named as the *uxe’ saq, uxe’ amaq’, uxe’ k’aslem*, i. e., “root of light, root of

al vassals of the king; and in the “Popol Vuh” (fol. 1r; Christenson 2004) the triplet *saqil amaq’il, saqil al, saqil k’ajol* (nations/settlements of light, daughters of light, sons of light) refers to the birth of humankind in the context of world creation.

The “Popol Vuh” also contains a prayer of the first humans to Tz’aqol B’itol to give them offspring. They implore the deity for calm and steady *saq* (light) and *amaq’* (settlement),⁵ in order for them to “sow” and “dawn,” i. e., procreate eternally.

5 The term *amaq’* denotes a unit within Highland Maya social organisation. In the colonial dictionaries *amaq’* is given as “pueblo” (see Anonymous 17th c.: fol. 8v; Basseta 2005 [1690]) or “ciudad” (see Basseta 2005 [1690]; Anonymous Franciscan Dictionary 1787) with connotations of both a social group and a place. Subordinate places or people as well as the outskirts of central places were referred to as *ruq’a’ amaq’* (lit.: “arm of the *amaq’*”) (Coto 1983; Anonymous 17th c.: fol. 8v). The term has been translated as “tribe” (Tedlock 1996) or “nation” (Christenson 2003). The underlying concept seems to carry the connotation of “permanence” of a larger human group in a specific territory, which is why “settlement” is chosen here as a close, albeit inadequate translation.

It shall be given our sign, our word,
as long as there is sun, as long as there is light,
truly may there be green roads, green paths.
May it be sown, may it dawn.
Give us
calm light, calm settlement,
good light, good settlement,
good life and creation,
may you give to us

(fol. 35 r; Christenson 2004: 298).

nation, root of life” (fol. 50v; Christenson 2004); and in the “Rabinal Achi” war against the Tzamanib’ is metaphorically referred to as the *uch’ayik uwixal ukutamil la ajaw*, the “the striking of the root and trunk of (your) Lord” (Breton 2007: 158f.). The conceptual metaphor that puts human life and community in analogy to plants and trees places each community at the centre of the world, turning it into a local *axis mundi* that connects the underworld, the surface of the earth and the skies. The concept is also reflected in the discourse of traditionalists in Atitlán when they refer to their town as the *r’muxux ruchiliew*, “navel of the face of the earth,” the centre of the world where the imaginary *axis mundi* connects

the living and the dead, which is ritually re-enacted every year on Good Friday with the erection of a large wooden cross in the centre of the church that symbolises the rebirth of Christ as “a new maize plant” (see Christenson 2001: 77).

Thus, the phrase *chibe' q'ij, chib'e saq* (as long as there is sun, as long as there is light) does not refer to the concept of “eternity” in the Christian sense. Instead of a static form of eternal existence outside of time and space, the K'iche' metaphor alludes to the daily rebirth of the sun which assures the continuation of the cycle of life. Thus, eternity lasts as long as the sun sets and rises and as long as one's own descent group produces offspring.

Conclusions

Analysing the terminology that was created to refer to the central Christian otherworld concepts of “Hell,” “Heaven,” and “Eternity,” we find that the missionaries adopted and re-used terms meaningful within the semantic framework of highland Maya cosmology. In this framework, human fate is an intergenerational exchange of death and rebirth, epitomised in the life cycle of the maize plant and the daily path of the sun, which connects the surface of the world with the netherworlds below and above. While Christian eschatology is individualised, with salvation and eternal life in Heaven or Hell being the outcome of personal conduct and merit, highland Maya thought connects human souls to their ancestors and descendants, their origin and posterity. In this belief system, eternity is assured by the procreation of one's own offspring and both Xib'alb'a and the solar paradise are places of human regeneration and rebirth rather than eternal damnation or happiness.

Several terms used in the doctrinal sources in association with the locations of Christian eschatology are indexical of this pre-Columbian worldview. The Maya notion of the underworld as a cold and powerful place seems to have influenced the choice of the term *q'aq'al* (fieriness = power) over the literal *q'aaq'* (fire) to refer to the Christian idea of the “fires of Hell.” And the placement of the “Limbo of the Fathers” at the lowest level of Hell coincides all too well with the idea of the ancestors forming the roots of human progeny. Still more convincing are allusions to a vivid Mesoamerican belief in the divinity of the Sun, which is preserved in the adoption of the term “flower land” – the solar paradise of regeneration and rebirth – as a translation for the Heaven and

Kingdom Come. Furthermore, the role of the Sun in Mesoamerican cosmology as the provider of life survived in the doctrinal sources in the translation of the Christian concept of “eternity.”

The use of this terminology in doctrinal K'iche' sheds light upon the process of translation and the role individual agents may have played in it. The appropriation of terminology from K'iche' ritual discourse appears in doctrinal sources of Dominican origin (see Sparks 2011, 2014 b; Sachse 2016). The evidence that Dominican missionaries actively applied this analogical strategy to translate Christian concepts comes from a colonial document about the foundation of the *congregación* of Chamelco in the Alta Verapáz (Estrada Monroy 1979). Besides the Christian elements of mass and prayer, an anonymous author related indigenous performances, including the dramatic staging of the Hero Twin myth known from the “Popol Vuh” as a traditional dance with costume and masks. He comments that the Dominican fray Luis Cáncer, upon watching the dance performance of the resurrection of the Hero Twins from the Underworld, saw the parallels with the Passion and Resurrection of Christ and thought of its usefulness in the preaching of the new faith to the Q'eqchi' (Estrada Monroy 1979: 174). The document suggests that it was a conscious Dominican practice to take matching elements from pre-Columbian religion and use them to explain Christianity.

While it cannot be proven that the Dominican friars who translated the doctrine into K'iche' intentionally rendered Christian otherworld concepts with terms from K'iche' cosmology, we may be able to trace this vocabulary by the assistance of native K'iche' speakers, who were actively involved in the conversion and influenced the creation of doctrinal discourse (Sparks 2011: 298ff.). Indigenous authors corrected and modified the Christian traditions, matching them carefully with their own cosmological conceptualisations. In this way, the translation of Christianity into K'iche' led to the reproduction of the cultural logic of highland Maya cosmology and contributed to the preservation of pre-Hispanic worlds in the words of the new Catholic faith.

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