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THE ITZ GOD

ITZ, THE COSMIC SAP

Communication with the Otherworld also involves the powerful concept of *itz*. In the Maya world of today, *itz* refers to excretions from the human body like sweat, tears, milk, and semen. But it can also refer to morning dew; flower nectar; the secretions of trees, like sap, rubber, and gum, and melting wax on candles. In Yukatan the *itz* of melting votive candles is directly analogous to the *itz* (the blessed rain) of heaven that God sends through the portal opened during shamanic rituals.

When celebrating the ends of important time cycles, ancient kings and lords also scattered different types of *itz*, along with their *ch'ul*-laden blood, into large braziers where the *itz* was converted into smoke, the form of divine sustenance. Scholars have long argued about what this scattered stuff shown pouring off the hands of kings in Maya art might be", but we know that it sometimes represents *ch'ul* the "soul-stuff" residing in human blood. At other times the holy stuff that being scattered could be a tree-gum incense called ch'ah, "copal"; rubber (yet another tree excretion); or maize.

**Click the image to the right to learn about
bloodletting.**

People took blood from their bodies as offerings of sustenance to the gods, but they also regarded gum excretions, *itz*, as suitable additions to - or even as substitutes for the flesh and blood of sacrificial victims. Blood Maiden, the mother of the Ancestral Hero Twins, escaped the death ordered by her father in the Otherworld when her assigned sacrificers substituted a heart made out of tree sap for her own heart and fooled the Lords of Death. Itz and *ch'ul* are fundamentally related substances - magical and holy stuff

Set in contrast to this positive image of *itz* is its opposite: the term is sometimes translated as "witch" by Maya of the Guatemala highlands. Among the modern K'iche', Ah Itz is the shaman-trickster portrayed in the Dance of the Conquest. In antiquity *Itzam* generally meant "shaman," a person who worked with *itz*, the cosmic

sap of the World Tree. Itzamna is the First Shaman and one of the gods who drew the images of the constellations on the sky at Creation.

In Classic-period imagery *itz* has two personified forms - the aged Itzamna and the great Cosmic Bird whose name was Itzam-Yeh. The bird, whose name means "Itzam Revealed," may actually be the *way* of Itzamna. Itzam-Yeh's analog in the Popol Vuh was Seven-Macaw, the bird who thought he was the sun. The story of Seven-Macaw comes as a curious interlude in the Popol Vuh, following the great flood and the destruction of the earlier experiments at making humanity. It is the last event to take place in the Creation sky (at sunset) before the resurrection of First Father, which takes place at midnight. Seven-Macaw's behavior and defeat is a commentary on essential questions of material and spiritual power. Seven-Macaw was a gorgeous bird, who brightened a dark world with his beauty. He was wealth incarnate his eyes were bright with silver and jade, his teeth were blue with beautiful stones, and his nose glistened like a brilliant mirror. But he was boastful and prideful. Lost in his arrogance, he proclaimed himself to be the sun and moon. Knowing that Seven-Macaw's claim of wealth and power would inspire vanity and envy in all the creatures of the world, the Hero Twins decided to teach him his true place. They shot him with their blowguns as he perched in his nance fruit tree, knocked him down, and broke his jaw. Angered, Seven-Macaw grabbed Hunahpu's arm and tore it out of his shoulder. After their escape the Twins asked help from their grandmother, Great White Peccary, and their grandfather, Great White Tapir, and eventually defeated the vain bird. With their new guides, the Twins set out to pretend to cure the wounded Seven-Macaw. When they came to his home, they heard him complaining loudly about the pain in his teeth. Pretending to be shaman healers, the twins fooled Seven-Macaw into allowing them to remove his bejeweled, broken teeth and replace them with ground white maize. They also persuaded him to allow them to remove the shining metal from his eyes. Blinded and helpless, Seven-Macaw died. Hunahpu retrieved his arm and the grandparents magically restored it to its place.

Ground white maize is an enduring and important ingredient in the sacred gruels used in offerings described on Classic-period pots and in modern rituals. Seven-Macaw tried to declare himself a god by means of material wealth and physical force. The Twins transformed him through attack and trickery into something comparable to a sacrificial offering. Seven-Macaw personified what the Maya farmer feared to find in his own lord and king: a false god decked out in the trappings of power. When the Hero Twins defeated Seven-Macaw, they opened the way for the eventual creation of humanity. When a Maya king stood up as the World Tree, he wore in his headdress the fabulous plumage of birds, more often than not those of Itzam-Yeh himself. He, like the Hero Twins, was responsible for keeping the cosmos in its proper order. But in all his glory, the plumage of Itzam-Yeh hovered over his head like the sword of

Damocles, reminding him and his people that the coin of power has two sides. The job of the king was to intercede with the gods and ancestors in order to sustain the balance of the world. Properly used, this power preserved cosmos and country. Improperly used, like Itzam-Yeh's arrogance, it became empty strength and a danger to all around.

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Maya Cosmos, pages 210-213, 1990