

# “There Was Only Joy in their Hearts When They Feasted”: Maize and Human Mediation among the Highland Maya

Allen J. Christenson  
Brigham Young University  
allen\_christenson@byu.edu

*According to the Popol Vuh, the purpose of the Creation was to form beings who could act as mediators between this world and the world of the sacred, providing the means to perpetuate life. Human beings are thus created to sustain and provide for the world, maintain its life-giving ability, and ensure that the lives of the gods themselves are renewed in their proper season. Ceremonial feasting unites those who participate physically and socially, making the substance of the specially prepared maize part of people's bodies, the living embodiments of their ancestors who share the same divine maize flesh and blood with them. Having shared a meal together, there is a common bond between them that both purifies and strengthens them to carry out their ritual labors as mediators between this world and the world of the sacred.*

**Key Words:** *Highland Maya, maize, reciprocity, ceremonial feasting, human mediation, Creation*



According to the Popol Vuh, a document composed in the highlands of Guatemala by surviving members of the ancient K'iche' Maya nobility a few decades after the Spanish invasion of their lands in 1524, the climactic event in the final creation of mankind occurred when maize was discovered within the cleft mountain of Pan Paxil. It was this miraculous maize that the grandmother goddess Xmucane used to form the flesh of humanity (Christenson 2007:193-195). The Popol Vuh describes this creative act most frequently as a couplet pairing the verbs *awaxoq* (meaning "to be sown") with *saqiroq* ("to dawn"): "How shall it be sown? How shall there be a dawn for anyone? Who shall be a provider? Who shall be a sustainer?" (Christenson 2007:71).

The purpose of the Creation was to form beings who could act as mediators between this world and the world of the sacred, providing the means to perpetuate life. The two K'iche' words used to describe these future mediators are *tzuqul* ("provider") and *q'o'l* ("sustainer"). *Tzuqul* is a provider of any kind, although generally in the sense of food. Barbara Tedlock (1992:114) notes that one of the names for living K'iche' priest-shamans in Momostenango is *tzuqunel* ("feeder") because they symbolically "feed" the world and the ancestors with their ceremonies. *Q'o'l* is a provider of sustenance, primarily in the form of food and drink, and one who nurtures in any other way, such as a mother caring for an infant. Human beings are thus created to sustain and provide for the world, maintain its life-giving ability, and ensure that the lives of the gods themselves are renewed in their proper season. Maya gods are not all-powerful or immortal, and a god cannot be reborn without passing through old age, weakness and ultimately death. Both life and death must dance together on the world's grand stage in predictable but inevitable cycles. It is the responsibility of human beings to perpetuate this cycle through their traditional ceremonies and ritual offerings.

Although the world of the K'iche' Maya has changed profoundly since the Popol Vuh was written, there are certain core elements embedded in the way they view the world that have not

changed in fundamental ways for centuries. Maize, for example, continues to be sacred. It represents the source of life itself, but like all living things it must pass through repeated cycles of death and rebirth. The lives of human beings are linked to these cycles. The relationship between the Maya and maize is one of reciprocity. Human beings could not exist without maize as the principal staple of their diet. But nature, as established by the creator gods, also requires human beings to tend, care for, and nurture the maize crops. Traditionalist K'iche's regularly celebrate ceremonial meals in sacred houses dedicated to Indigenous deities and sacred ancestors where the feast is symbolically eaten by both the

living as well as beings that they believe are present in spirit. Having shared a meal together, there is a common bond that is established between them that both purifies and strengthens living participants to carry out their ritual labors as mediators between this world and the world of the sacred.



### Maize and Reciprocity

Maya gods are not infallible. They made three failed attempts to create beings who could support and sustain them through ritual prayers and offerings. Ultimately, the beings that were successfully able to maintain the universe were made of maize:

This, then, is the beginning of the conception of humanity, when that which



**Figure 1.** Lineage Shrine, Momostenango (all photographs by the author).

would become the flesh of mankind was sought. Then spoke they who are called She Who Has Borne Children and He who Has Begotten Sons, the Framer and the Shaper, Sovereign and Quetzal Serpent:

“The dawn approaches, and our work is not successfully completed. A provider and a sustainer have yet to appear—a child of light, a son of light. Humanity has yet to appear to populate the face of the earth,” they said.

Thus they gathered together and joined their thoughts in the darkness, in the night. They searched and they sifted. Here they thought and they pondered. Their thoughts came forth bright and clear. They discovered and established that which would become the flesh of humanity....

Thus their frame and their shape were given expression by our first Mother and our first Father. Their flesh was merely yellow ears of maize and white ears of maize (Christenson 2007:192-195).

The implication is that human beings are intended to feed and nurture the gods through their actions. Maize itself is a deified, sacred substance but it requires human beings to tend, care for, and nurture the maize crops (Figure 2). There is no such thing as wild maize. It’s an entirely domesticated crop and requires near-constant attention to survive. People and maize are thus inextricably linked to their mutual benefit. Significant stages in the life cycle of human beings are linked with



**Figure 2.** Maize field, Santiago Atitlán.

maize. Among the modern K'iche's, when a woman becomes pregnant, the event is announced by a respected elder of the community at certain lineage shrines (Figure 1). This ceremony is called "the sowing" of the future child as if that child was born from a cultivated maize field (Tedlock 1992:80), further connecting humans with maize as an expression of their essential being. Francisco Antonio de Fuentes y Guzmán wrote in the seventeenth century that when a male child was born the Maya of Guatemala burned blood shed from the severed umbilical cord and passed an ear of maize through the smoke. The father then planted the seeds from this ear in the child's name in a specific area of the maize field. Parents used the maize from this small patch of land to feed the child "until he reached the age when he could plant for himself, saying that thus he not only ate by the sweat of his brow, but of his own blood as well" (Fuentes y Guzmán 1932-2933:I, 281, translation by author).

In most highland Maya languages, the word Indigenous people use to refer to themselves is some variation of *qas winaq* ("true people"). What distinguishes a true person is whether or not they eat maize. If they do eat maize, their flesh is composed of sacred substance. I first began working as an ethnographer in K'iche'-Maya communities in Guatemala back in the 1970s. At the time, I found it curious that when I struck up a conversation in K'iche' with someone I didn't know, that person would sometimes interrupt me in mid-sentence and ask me what I ate. Specifically, they would ask if I ate maize tortillas. When I affirmed that I ate what they ate, including maize tortillas and tamalitos, they would nod as if that explained a great deal. After several such experiences, I asked a friend of mine why people were curious about what I ate. He replied, "You can speak our

language. I wondered if it was because you ate maize from here. If so then you have the flesh of the ancestors in your flesh and therefore you can speak what they spoke.”

People emphasize that one must eat “local maize” to speak properly. It’s a common topic of conversation that the further you go from a community, the more distinct the dialect of the local language becomes and the more different their clothing and customs are. In Western thought, we would explain this by noting that languages and customs tend to diverge when communities are split into sub-groups based on class, distance, social relationships, and even family groupings. But among highland Maya traditionalists, language is a function of the food they eat, particularly maize. No traditional Maya would ever eat a meal without maize because that is literally what forms their flesh, blood, and identity. But this must be local maize, or that person will not speak properly or integrate into the community’s standards and rules of conduct. Their view of the world explains why young people who leave their communities forget how to speak the language and adopt non-Maya ways of dress and behavior. When outsiders such as tourists come to a highland Maya community, locals generally forgive their inability to speak Mayan languages or minor infractions of conduct that would be considered appalling if done by a Maya. This is because outsiders are not really considered to be the same species. They are wheat people, Big Mac people, or Kentucky Fried Chicken people. They may be perfectly good people in their way, but they are not of the same flesh and can’t be expected to understand.

### **Feasting with the Gods**

Before the Spanish Invasion of the K’iche’ nation in 1524, ritual feasting was a significant part of the ceremonial life of the highland Maya. Fr. Bartolomé de Las Casas, writing soon after this invasion, described the feast celebrated at the conclusion of New Years’ rites among the ancient highland Maya:

On that day there were great feasts in which they ate many birds, and much game, and they drank diverse wines, mostly the highest lord and the high priest who celebrated from one house to the other in town. They danced and leapt before the altars and gave the gods to drink of the most precious wines, soaking their mouths and faces....

Each afternoon they walked in procession with great songs and music, bearing this principal idol, or as many as there were, placing them in eminent places; and there the lords played ball before him and the rest (Las Casas 1958:clxxvii, 152, translation by author).

Francisco Ximénez served as a parrish priest in the K’iche’ region in the first years of the eighteenth century. He wrote a history of the K’iche’ people based on writings compiled soon after the Spanish invasion that in many cases are now lost. Based on one of these texts, he wrote that in Pre-Columbian times, the images of the ancient K’iche’ gods were brought from their temples to join in the great feasts, receiving the same food and drink that the mortal celebrants consumed (Ximénez 1929:I, xxx, 85-86; see also Carmack and Mondloch 1983:196). Such shared meals between gods and people continue in the Maya highlands today. As Vogt (1976:1) wrote concerning the Maya of Zinacantán, “men eat what the gods eat,” and the interaction between humans and gods in such ceremonies is considered essential to a good life and the regeneration of the universe. Food and

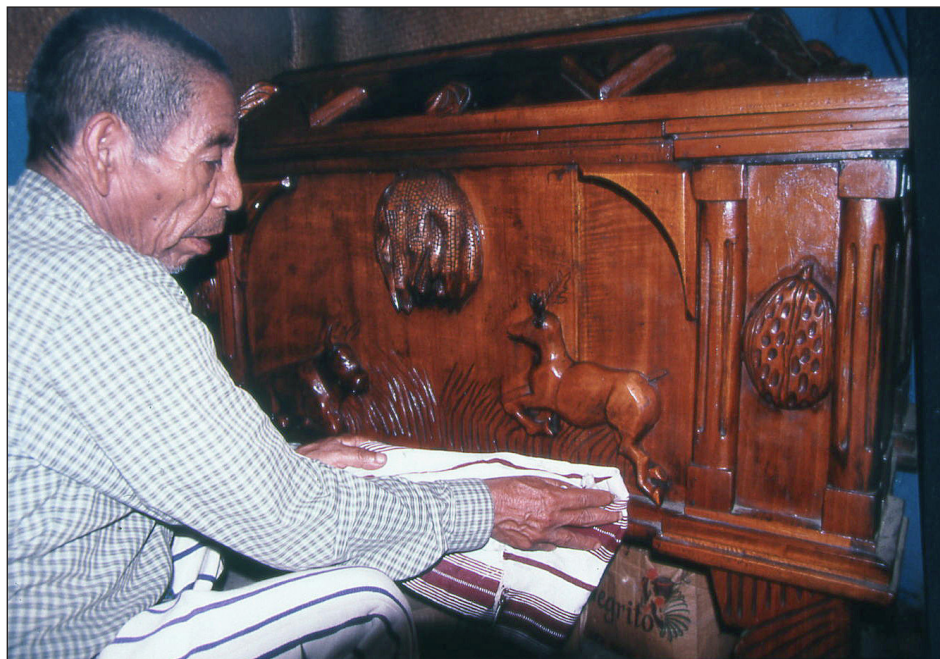
drink are “the medium of contact with the gods”:

Although Zinacantecos of low status may sit around the foot of the ritual table, no one sits at the head. There the ancestral gods preside and partake of the liquor and food served. Their living descendants are arranged in such a way that the elder ones are seated at the sides of the head of the table, next to the gods . . . With the gods invited to join and partake of the meal, liquor is served from the same glass to all in the house, an action expressing communality and continuity from the deceased ancestors down to the youngest Zinacanteco (Vogt 1976:41).

The seating order at the table reinforces the social system, both uniting people with gods as mediators and reinforcing the hierarchy within that system. As Houston and his co-authors suggest, feasting among the ancient Maya served to socially homogenize participants, constructing intimacy, a “sense of social bond and community,” and even kinship (Houston et al. 2006:102). Ceremonial feasting unites those who participate physically and socially, making the substance of the specially prepared maize part of people’s flesh, the living embodiments of their ancestors who



**Figure 3.** Maize blessing ceremony, Cofradía San Juan, Santiago Atitlán.



**Figure 4.** Sacred chest carved with split-cob maize, Cofradía San Juan, Santiago Atitlán.

share with them the same divine maize flesh and blood.

Feasting of this kind is taken very seriously, and it's not merely a friendly form of hospitality or a casual celebration. Ruth Bunzel wrote in the mid-twentieth century that the K'iche's were not "hospitable" and did not invite strangers to eat with them (Bunzel 1952:44). Even after many weeks of working closely with certain families that had been otherwise welcoming and friendly, she wrote with some regret that they never asked her to share a meal with them. This has been my experience as well. Even with K'iche's that I considered close friends, it was rare to be invited to eat with them. Even when invited to a meal, I was generally seated at a table in a separate room from where the family was eating. At the time, I interpreted this as some kind of honor as most families ate seated on the floor or on mats around the cooking hearth. I was very wrong.

At one point, a K'iche' friend of mine came to visit me accompanied by his wife, which he had never done before. They were unusually solemn and formally invited me to dinner, emphasizing that I would be eating *with* the family. When I arrived, each family member hugged me and invited me to sit with them on a mat near the hearth. Throughout the meal, after a few bites, one of the family members would lift their food in my direction and give me a little blessing, a wish for good health, or encourage me to eat more. From that evening on, my relationship with the family changed. I was hugged more, included more in the family's daily activities, and insulted in good-natured ways typical of K'iche' households. As my friend's wife told me during that first meal, we were now family, and we always would be. The phrase she used was *amaq'el, chib'e q'ij saq* ("forever, as long as the sun shines").





**Figure 5.** Offering of Maatz' atole, Cofradía Santa Cruz, Santiago Atitlán.

### **Feasting and *Cofradía* Houses**

In most larger traditional K'iche'an Maya communities, formal ritual practices are focused on the *cofradía* house, dedicated to the veneration of a particular deity or saint. Ritual feasting and drinking in honor of the gods and saints are significant activities within the *cofradía* system. The interior of both sacred mountains and *cofradía* houses are conceived as the birthplace of life-giving power. Here, ceremonies are carried out that traditionalists believe influence the natural world around them. Maize, incense, rainclouds, water, fertility, and earth all combine to give birth to life itself. Thus, seed maize is brought to the *cofradía* house to be blessed (Figure 3). Many of the most sacred belongings of the *cofradía* are kept in a sacred chest in the house, and it is marked with a massive carved ear of split-cob maize flanked by cacao pods (Figure 4). The principal elder of the *cofradía* house explained that split-cob maize is the “heart of maize and of people. It is the source of power for everything.”

The *alcalde*, or head of the *cofradía*, provides a ceremonial meal to accompany important ceremonial observances within the *cofradía* house. This meal generally consists of a piece of boiled meat in a peppery sauce, accompanied by steamed tamalitos wrapped in leaves, salt, and a beverage—either *aguardiente*, a locally made liquor called “canyon water,” maize coffee, or a carbonated drink such as Coca Cola. On the most sacred ritual occasions within the *cofradía* house, the participants also prepare a drink called *maatz'*, an atole made from maize that is toasted, ground fine, and

placed in a boiling pot of water, often with small bits of unground maize (Figure 5). When the latter is added the mixture is conceived as a “woman who gives birth to children.” Cacao is often added as well, which is considered a kind of divine “maize” that the gods and ancestors eat. Ruth Bunzel (1952:44) wrote that in Chichicastenango, maize atole, often mixed with cacao, is the principal ceremonial drink and that any important ritual includes bringing a jar of atole. It is always the first offering of meals within the *cofradías*. Bunzel (1952: 45-46) suggests that such meals are not simply a courtesy but an essential part of the ceremony and are sacramental in nature. Part of the ritual is the veneration of the food itself. Ceremonial food is brought to the *cofradía* by participants in full ceremonial dress. A rocket is set off when the food leaves the bearer’s home and again when the food arrives at the *cofradía* house. There, the jars of atole are greeted with long speeches, accompanied by music.

In the *cofradía* meals at Santiago Atitlán, individual bowls of meat are brought from the cooking house and given to each of the participants in turn seated at the table in general order of their rank within the *cofradía* system. The tamalitos are brought in a single vessel, and all take from it. Once all have been served, the *alcalde* gives a formal speech thanking first a series of gods and ancestors for providing the food to be eaten (Figure 6). He prays that the food will strengthen the participants so that their minds and hearts will have renewed life, their arms and legs will be able to endure the work they are required to do, and their necks and backs will bear their weight in their pathways. Often the *alcalde* will speak of their work as a burden they must bear, no matter the weight or the difficulty. This burden is made tolerable by the food that the gods and ancestors bring to them. According to E. Michael Mendelson, an anthropologist who worked in Santiago Atitlán in the early 1950s, ritual feasts are an essential part of *cofradía* obligation and the participants refer to them as a “service” (Mendelson 1957:135).

The wording and gestures of the *alcalde* imply that the gods and ancestors are present at the



Figure 6. Alcalde, Cofradía San Juan, Santiago Atitlán.

feast. Indeed, the table where the food and drink are consumed stands perpendicular to the altar and chests that bear the *cofradía's* patron deities and saints. When referring, for example, to the Heart of the Sky, the *alcalde* looks up and gestures toward the sky with his hand. He looks down and gestures toward the ground when referring to the Heart of the Earth. When the name of each deceased ancestor is mentioned, the *alcalde* gestures with his hand toward the table as if they were seated there along with the living. The understanding is that in calling upon each deity or ancestor, they are acknowledged as being present. The *alcalde* lists each participant by name and title and calls on the patron saint of the *cofradía* to bless that individual so that the soles of their feet, knees, heart, arms, head, and thoughts will have power and that nothing harmful will happen to them during the year.

Having finished his formal prayer, the *alcalde* addresses each participant individually by rank and encourages them to eat and take a drink. In turn, those seated at the table raise a bit of their food or drink first toward the altar, then toward the *alcalde*, and then to each participant present in general order, thanking them. Each individual acknowledges this gesture of gratitude in turn before moving on to the next person (which makes eating rather difficult with constant interruption to thank those present or to acknowledge their gestures of gratitude in return). A bit of drink, and sometimes a morsel of food, is splashed onto the table or floor as an offering to the gods and ancestors so that they may join in the feast.

Because participants eat the same food and drink from the same table, in a sense, they share a common body. Of course, ancestors were once living community members, and their descendants bear the same flesh and blood. Even the saints appear to share this corporeal bond. On one occasion, the wife of the *alcalde* of the Cofradía of San Juan remarked, “We will all one day be saints like these on the altar” (Andrew Weeks, personal communication, 2016). For the Maya, saints and ancestors are not transcendent above the living in material ways, differing more in rank and status. Nevertheless, on ceremonial occasions, they all interact, including sharing food and drink.

### **Feasting with the Ancestors**

Prior to the Spanish Invasion ritual feasting was a significant part of the ceremonial life of the highland Maya. The *Popol Vuh* notes that feasting and drinking were a major, if not the major, function of the Great Houses that each lineage constructed at their capital city of Q'umarkaj (Figure 7). This is especially true regarding bride negotiations (Christenson 2007:265-267). Feasting served to unite families with bonds that were based on shared flesh, not simply matrimonial ties:

And yet again they began to feast and to drink to their daughters. They who were called the Three Great Houses gathered together to celebrate. They would drink their drinks and eat their food, and this alone was the bride price for their sisters and their daughters. There was only joy in their hearts when they feasted within their great houses (Christenson 2007:265).

The Title of Totonicapán, composed a year or two before the *Popol Vuh*, also describes these feasts, including a description of a sample menu served in ancient times:

They exchanged their daughters between themselves. They bore their daughters to the drinkers of sweet drink. They were given to the poor and the widowers. They went to their homes to give them: “We give her to you without cost, we offer her to you,” they said.



**Figure 7.** Great Houses, Q'umarkaj.

Merely one large jar of cacao and one gourd cup of guacamole; merely one vessel of food of some kind and one platter with the thigh of a wild pig; merely one gourd vessel of maize tamales wrapped in *q'anaq'* leaves and *kub'* leaves. This was the price for their daughters that they set. It was done there at Chi Ismachi'.

Thus they came together, these three nations of the K'iche' (Christenson 2022).

Until recently, courting was a highly formalized ritual in the Guatemalan highlands. It focused on feasting as a means of bringing a new bride into the family, thus joining two separate lineages into the same flesh. Ancestors are an integral part of this process and must be included in all aspects of the bride negotiations and eventual marriage. Gifts to the prospective bride's parents extend over a considerable period and mainly consist of food, particularly maize atole and cacao (Bunzel 1952:25). Atole is an essential part of this gift exchange throughout the Guatemalan highlands. While various food gifts may be given during bride petition ceremonies in the Tz'utujil Maya town of Santiago Atitlán, maize atole is always included. Wealthy families may give additional gifts as a means of impressing the girl's parents, but atole must be given by the family of even the poorest of hopeful bridegrooms (Mendelson 1957:61-62).

The marriage feast joins the two families in a far more profound way than in most societies. Having eaten maize together, the two families become literally of one flesh and are no longer considered separate lineages. Thus, after the girl enters the boy's home, there can be no further intermarriage between the two families—ever. Such a union would be considered incestuous.

As we have seen, food was also an essential part of marriage negotiations among the ancient Maya. According to the Popol Vuh, no gift exchange other than food was necessary or even desirable

among the earliest ancestors of the K'iche' people (Christenson 2007:265). Later, when the lineages fell into dissension and broke apart, the demand for more than food and drink during bride negotiations was blamed for the split. It is also significant that the outward expression of this dissent was the desecration of the ancestral dead—the most violent means possible of breaking familial ties:

And yet they were also divided because there began to be contention. They began to envy each other regarding the bride price for their sisters and their daughters. For it was no longer merely food and drink that they demanded. This, then, was the root of their division. They turned on each other, desecrating the bones and the skulls of the dead (Christenson 2007:267).

Digging up the bones of the dead is a chilling choice of insult—it means the rejection of common family ancestry established through ritual feasting in the past. All families have tiffs; however, this represents the permanent severing of blood ties.

## Conclusion

In modern K'iche' communities, maize continues to be not only a staple of their diet, but essential to their concept of self. In a very literal sense, traditionalist K'iche's consider themselves to be the people of maize. Reciprocity is central to their way of looking at the world. They would not exist if it were not for maize. By the same token, maize could not exist without the people who lovingly plant the seeds, tend their maize fields, harvest the mature crops, and prepare it on a daily basis to feed their families. They continue to be the mediators that their ancient book, the *Popol Vuh*, declared them to be in the sixteenth century. The cultivation of maize reflects the great cycles of the world first set in motion by the ancient gods and perpetuated by the humans they created for this purpose.



Nearly fifty years ago, I was working on a K'iche' language dictionary in a remote area of the western highlands of Guatemala near Cunén. I chose this area because little Spanish was spoken there (at the time), and the language was relatively free of foreign-language loan words. One morning I was working on vocabulary related to medicinal plants with a young couple well-known in the area for their knowledge of traditional remedies. They had a little three-year-old daughter who played alongside her mother as she ground maize dough for the morning meal. Maize is never ground dry for every day use. The kernels are boiled in water mixed with lime to soften the hard shell of the maize grains and then left to soak overnight in a large pot. The maize is then ground on a volcanic stone, adding water periodically to keep the resulting dough moist. Both mother and father became so absorbed in our discussion about traditional remedies that the woman lost track of what her daughter was doing. She had gotten into the pot of maize grains, and several of them had dropped through her fingers to the hard-packed dirt floor near the family hearth. When the mother noticed what had happened, she immediately stopped what she was doing, gently took the remaining grains from her daughter's hand, put them back in the pot, and placed her daughter on her lap. Then one by one, she picked up each kernel of maize that had fallen to the ground, carefully wiped every speck of dirt from it with her apron, kissed it, and placed it back in the pot. By the time she had picked up the last kernel, she was crying—we all were. Finally, she held her daughter close and said: "We must always respect our maize. It is our mother, it is our father, we are its children."

## References

Bunzel, Ruth.

1952 *Chichicastenango: A Guatemalan Village*. Publications of the American Ethnological Society XXII. J.J. Augustin Publisher, Locust Valley.

Carmack, Robert.M., and James L. Mondloch.

1983 *El Título de Totonicapán*. Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, México.

Christenson, Allen J., (translator)

2007 *Popol Vuh: Sacred Book of the Quiché Maya People*. Second Revised Edition. University of Oklahoma Press, Norman.

2022 *The Title of Totonicapán*. University Press of Colorado, Louisville. In Press.

Fuentes y Guzmán, Francisco Antonio de

1932-33 *Recordación Florida*. 3 Vols. Biblioteca Goathemala, Guatemala City.

Houston, Stephen, David Stuart, and Karl Taube

2006 *The Memory of Bones: Body, Being, and Experience Among the Classic Maya*. University of Texas Press, Austin.

Las Casas, Fra. Bartolomé de

1958[1560] *Apologética historia sumaria de las Indias*. Edited by Juan Pérez de Tudela Bueso. Biblioteca de Autores Españoles, Madrid.

Mendelson, E. Michael

1957 *Religion and World-View in a Guatemalan Village*. Microfilm Collection of Manuscripts on Middle American Cultural Anthropology, no. 52. University of Chicago Library, Chicago.

Tedlock, Barbara

1992 *Time and the Highland Maya*. Second Revised Edition. University of New Mexico Press, Albuquerque.

Vogt, Evon Z.

1976 *Tortillas for the Gods: A Symbolic Analysis of Zinacanteco Rituals*. University of Oklahoma Press, Norman.

Ximénez, Fra. Francisco

1929[1722] *Historia de la provincia de San Vicente de Chiapa y Guatemala*. Vols. 1-3. Biblioteca Goathemala, Guatemala.