

THE SYMBOLISM OF JAKALTEK MAYA TREE GOURD VESSELS AND CORN DRINKS IN GUATEMALA

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ABSTRACT.-In both prehistoric and historic America, gourds and corn have often been associated with fertility. This association persists in the highland Guatemalan town of Jacaltenango, where a traditional corn beverage is drunk from a tree gourd (*Crescentia cujete*) vessel. The breast-like shape of the tree gourd vessel symbolizes the breast of Mother Earth, who sustains Jakalteks with her corn milk. This paper documents the tree gourd vessel and corn drink in Jacaltenango and explores Mayan gourd and corn traditions.

RESUMEN.-En America, tanto en la prehistoria como durante el periodo histórico, las jicaras y el mafz se han asociado frecuentemente a la fertilidad. Esta asociación perdura en el pueblo de Jacaltenango en la zona alta de Guatemala, donde se bebe en una jicara de árbol (*Crescentia cujete*) una bebida tradicional de mafz. La forma de seno de la jicara simboliza el pecho de la Madre Tierra, quien sostiene a los jacaltecos con su leche de mafz. Este trabajo documenta el recipiente y la bebida de mafz en Jacaltenango y explora las tradiciones mayas acerca de la jicara y el mafz.

RÉSUMÉ.—En Amérique, la gourde et le maïs ont souvent été associés aux rites de fertilité. Cette association, qui remonte aux temps préhistoriques, persiste aujourd'hui à Jacaltenango, un village de montagne du Guatemala, où l'on boit une boisson traditionnelle de maïs dans un récipient formé par une gourde (*Crescentia cujete*). Le récipient constitué par la gourde est en forme de sein et symbolise le sein de la terre mère qui soutient les Jakalteques de son lait de maïs. Le présent travail vise à documenter le récipient formé par une gourde et la boisson de maïs de Jacaltenango et à examiner les traditions relatives à la gourde et au maïs chez les Mayas.

INTRODUCTION

In many parts of the Americas, gourds grow on both vines and trees. The two types of gourds are easily distinguishable because the rind of the tree gourd (*Crescentia cujete*) is much thinner and tougher than that of the bottle gourd (*Lagenaria siceraria*) (Ford 1985:341; Heiser 1979:17, 72; King 1985:76, 77). The bottle gourd is one of the few plants that was known to both the Old and New Worlds prior to the arrival of Columbus and is found in pre-Columbian graves wherever the climate is sufficiently dry or the specimens are charred enough to allow for preservation.

Present archaeological evidence suggests that bottle gourds were cultivated since 7,000 BC, even before the Mesoamerican staples of corn and beans (McClung de Tapia 1992:154; Menzie 1976:9). Since gourds form natural containers with little processing, they were especially important before the invention of pottery. They were also highly prized items of ritual significance, appearing in pre-Conquest tribute lists (Biart 1887:193; Ross 1984:55), and still occupy a prominent position in many native cultures.

Before the Spanish conquest Mexicans received the blood of their sacrificial victims in gourds, Mayas drank from painted gourds similar to ones still made today, and the Indians of Costa Rica and Panama adorned tree gourds with gold. Colonial Spaniards of the sixteenth century trimmed some of their gourds with silver (Heiser 1979:172-174; Menzie 1976:41). Both types of gourds are still popular in many parts of the Americas.

Tree gourds and corn drinks caught my attention when I worked as a Peace Corps volunteer in Jacaltenango from 1976-1980 and again when I returned in the summer of 1986 to do my doctoral research on Jakaltek backstrap weaving. This report is based on my research in Jacaltenango and a literature review.

I will show that the association of tree gourd vessels and corn has religious significance that dates to pre-Columbian times and that this association survives today. Although strong outside forces have tried to erase their culture, the Maya tenaciously cling to their ethnicity. One of the ways that Jakaltek Maya celebrate their heritage today is by consuming traditional drinks from tree gourd vessels.

Jacaltenango.-The Jakalteks have lived in the foothills of the Cuchumatan Mountains in northwest Guatemala since pre-Columbian times (Casaverde 1976:33; Cox Collins 1980:21; LaFarge and Byers 1931:7,199), occupying an area centered on the town of Jacaltenango. Built on a bedrock plateau overlooking Mexican territory, the town of Jacaltenango is 1437 m above sea level, and has 11 surrounding villages and 31 hamlets located at both higher and lower elevations (Merida Vasquez 1984:276-277). Its advantageous ecological position allows access to a wide variety of highland and lowland products. The principle crops are corn, beans, coffee, sugar cane, oranges, and bananas (Merida Vasquez 1984:277). It is a governmental, religious, and market center and according to the latest available figures, had a municipal population of 18,012, of which 4,967 lived in Jacaltenango itself (Guatemala 1984).

The town's modern name, Jacaltenango, literally means "place of the grass covered huts" (Cox de Collins 1970:133-134). According to my Jakaltek language instructor, José Luis Hernandez, the town is referred to as **Xajlah**, or "place of the white rock slabs," in Jakaltek (Popti').¹

For many years, this area was both physically and culturally among the most remote from Spanish centers in the country (Dieterich *et al.* 1979:25). The 72 km trip from Huehuetenango, the departmental capital, was a rugged two-day excursion through Chiantla, Todos Santos, San Martín, and Concepción (LaFarge and Byers 1931:9-21). In 1974 an unpaved road was built, allowing for bus transportation. I lived in Jacaltenango for 3 years before electricity was brought into town, in 1979.

Because of its relative isolation, many pre-Columbian traditions survived in Jacaltenango. Some of these ancient traditions attracted Oliver LaFarge and Douglas Byers in 1929. Their book (1931), *The Year Bearer's People*, documented the traditional culture of the Jakalteks. According to several of my informants, since that time, Catholic missionaries moved into town and in the 1940s one of the priests tried to purge traditional Mayan religious practices, which forced surviving traditions into hiding.

Gourds in Jacaltenango.-Both vine and tree gourds are cultivated in Jacaltenango. The bottle gourd (*Lagenaria siceraria*) (tzuh in Jakaltekek and *tecomate* or *calabaza* in Spanish) grows between rows of corn surrounding the lowland villages of Jacaltenango. The vines discourage weeds by providing ground cover and sometimes use the mature corn stalks for support. The Jakalteks harvest the bottle gourds when the vines dry out. The gourds are placed on ceiling rafters over cooking fires until the rinds have completely dried. The smoke from the cooking fires rises and deposits soot on the gourds, which keeps mold from growing on the exterior of the gourds as they dry. After the gourd has completely dried out, the exterior is washed and the rind is cut. The seeds are removed and the inside is scraped clean. The shape of the gourd determines its use. Large round bottle gourds are processed for storing tortillas, long ones for carrying water, and hourglass shaped gourds for canteens. Gourd canteens have a corncob stopper and are carried by looping a cord around their narrow center. Jakalteks say that water stays cooler and tastes better in a bottle gourd than in a plastic canteen. Although in some parts of the Americas bottle gourds are carved or painted, in Jacaltenango they are left plain.

Two types of tree gourds grow in the Americas: *Crescentia alata* and *Crescentia cujete*, both of the Bignoniaceae family (Figure 1).²

Only *Crescentia cujete* (tzima in Jakaltekek and *jfcara*³ in Spanish) grows in the lowland villages of Jacaltenango, near the tree owner's house (Figures 2 and 3). Tree gourds are harvested in Jacaltenango when they are dark green. Sometimes a heavy wind blows them off the tree before they are fully mature. Simple processing transforms the green fruits into drinking cups, dippers, bowls, kitchen utensils, scales (Figure 4), and containers. In some parts of Mesoamerica, tree gourds are ornamented by carving and/or painting.⁴ In Jacaltenango, tree gourds are decorated in a style unique to the area; a dark band encircles the middle (Figure 5).

To decorate a gourd in this manner, a rag is tied around the middle of the gourd; the gourd is dipped into boiling water, first one half, then the other. When the rag is removed, a colored band (the original green color of the gourd) is revealed against a darker background. The next day the gourd is cut with a machete, and the inside is cleaned out with a stick (Figures 6, 7, and 8). The gourd is then left to dry for three days. When completely dry, the green stripe turns dark brown while the upper and lower portions of the gourd turn beige. Since gourd products are in demand and few people own gourd trees, the vessels are an economic commodity and are sold locally.



FIGURE 1.—*Crescentia cujete*: A. a branch with leaves; B. the flower; C. the fruit; D. the leaf of *Crescentia alata*. This illustration is by Sylvia Garcia, from *Arboles Tropicales de México*, by T. D. Pennington and Jose Sarukhan, 1968. Courtesy of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations and the Instituto Nacional de Investigaciones Forestales.

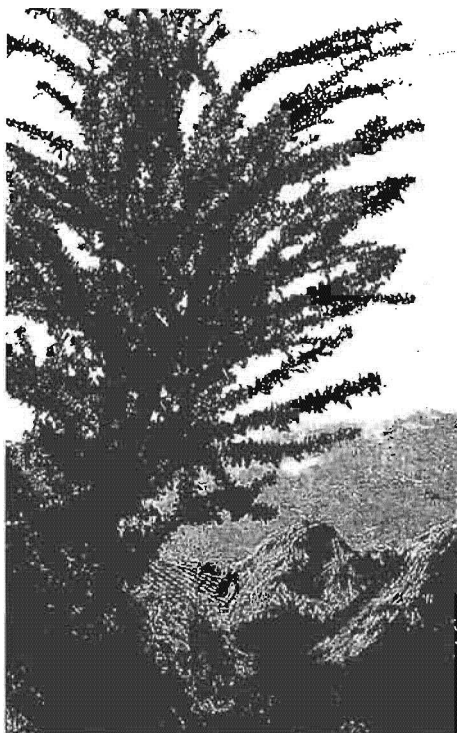


FIGURE 2.-A *Crescentia cujete* gourd tree in a lowland village of Jalcaltenango, Guatemala.



FIGURE 3.-A mature 14 cm *Crescentia cujete* gourd.

SYMBOLISM OF THE GOURD IN NATIVE AMERICA

Both bottle and tree gourds play an important role in Native American mythology. Gourds are hiding places for gods and traps for birds. They are used as body coverings and as special containers (Recinos *et al.* 1950:194,201,203,209; Recinos and Goetz 1953:67, 70). Gourd basins are used to bathe kings, and in some myths names like "house of the gourd trees" describe locations (Recinos and Goetz 1953:78,83).

The tree gourd may be associated with the human skull. In the *Popul Vuh* (Tedlock 1985), a Quiche Maya sacred book, the hero twins Hun-Hunahpu' and Vucub-Hunahpu' crossed a river which flowed among thorny gourd trees. In the underworld, Hun-Hunahpu' was decapitated. At the moment that his head was put in a tree, the tree instantly became covered with gourds. No one was allowed to pick the fruit or go near the tree. A girl, however, disobeyed and went near the tree. The skull of Hun-Hunahpu', which was among the branches, told her that the fruits were skulls and then proceeded to impregnate her by spitting on her hand. Because she was pregnant, she was ordered to be sacrificed and her heart carried in a gourd container.



FIGURE 4.-A Jakaltek woman weighs peanuts with a scale made from two halves of an undecorated tree gourd. She sells these peanuts to passersby from her door step.

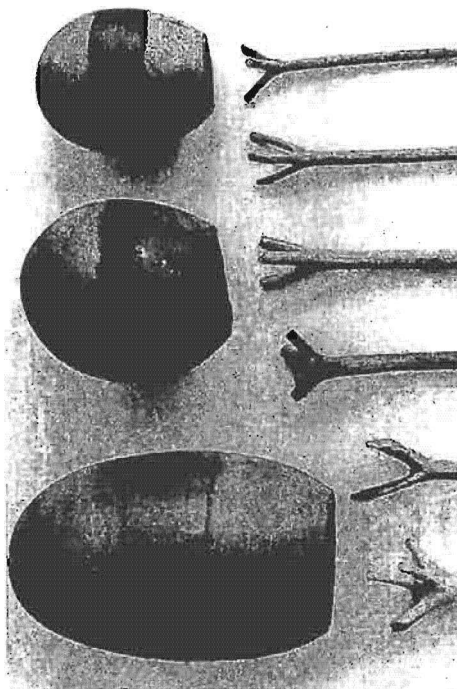


FIGURE 5.-Three Jakaltek gourds decorated with a band around the middle with six chuc'ul mixing sticks. These mixing sticks consist of a long handle with several prongs on the mixing end.

In a Mayan myth of the Corozal District in Belize, a gourd vessel full of corn drink was set out for divination purposes and a magical gourd tree seed was given to a boy. The seed grew into a gourd tree as soon as the boy threw it down. The tree later helped the boy escape his enemies (Thompson 1930:174-5).

Some Maya believe that Chacs (rain deities) ride across the sky sprinkling rain from a gourd with one hand while holding machete-like lightning in the other hand (Thompson 1970:253-54).

The Aztecs also associated gourds with skulls. According to Lucien Biart (1887), some Aztec rulers fasted and prayed at Quauxicalco ("place of the tree gourds"), a temple filled with skulls (Biart 1887:146).



FIGURE 6.-A spherical gourd is cut across the middle with a machete to make two bowls (called *guacales*; Recinos *et al.* 1950:114) while an oblong gourd is cut across the top to create a drinking vessel. Some have been decorated with a band across the middle.



FIGURE 7.-This Jakalteek man uses a stick to scrape the insides and break up the pulp in the gourd. Other decorated and undecorated gourds lie at his feet, in various stages of processing.



FIGURE 8.-As their children observe, this Jakalteek husband and wife team clean the white pulp from tree gourds, some of which have been decorated with a band around the middle.

SYMBOLISM OF CORN IN NATIVE AMERICA

Cultivated com, which constitutes seventy percent or more of the Mayan diet, springs to life only when man plants it.⁵ Com and man are interdependent since man has to pray for rain and protect it from weeds, wild animals, and insects. Com is essential to the survival of many Native Americans, so it is not surprising that it plays a prominent role in American mythology and ritual.

The Quiché Maya believe that the first modern man was created from com. According to the *Popul Vuh*, four attempts were made to create the Quiche. The first Quiche were created from mud. They were fed wood and leaves, but were limp and could not move their heads. They spoke but had no mind, disintegrated in water, and could not stand. The second generation was created without souls or minds. They were made of wood but they did not remember their creators, and walked aimlessly on all fours. Their feet and hands had no strength, they had no blood or substance, and their flesh was dry and yellow. Some were destroyed by a flood and others turned into monkeys. The third generation of Quiché men, according to the *Popul Vuh*, were made of bright red beans, **tzite**⁶ (*Erythrina* sp.; Recinos *et al.* 1950:88), and women were made from cattail rushes (*Typha* sp.). Since these men did not think or speak with their Creator, they were killed by a heavy resin that fell from the sky. The fourth and last generation of Quiché, the ancestors of the present Quiché, were created of corn. According to the *Popul Vuh*, the goddess **Xmucane** made nine drinks by grinding yellow corn and white corn, and from this food came man's strength and blood. His arms and legs were made of com dough. These men talked, saw, heard, walked, grasped things, and were wise (Recinos *et al.* 1950:62, 86, 88-92, 166-169; Tedlock 1985:79, 83-86, 163-167; Thompson 1970:333-334).

A seventeenth century Pocomam Maya birthing ceremony illustrates how a newborn child was psychically united to corn, with one being the counterpart of the other. While praying for his well-being, the child's umbilical cord was cut over a multicolored ear of corn with a new obsidian knife. The knife was thrown in the river after the ceremony. The blood-stained ear was smoke cured and the grain was removed and sown with the utmost care in the name of the child. The yield was harvested and resowed, and the increased yield eaten after a share had been given to the temple priest to maintain the boy until he was old enough to sow his own com. It was said that thereby he not only ate of the sweat of his brow, but of his own "blood" (Thompson 1970:283-4).

Fray Bartolome de Las Casas detailed a similar colonial rite which differed in only two respects. The first food the child ate was a gruel made from the first harvest, and some seed was kept so the boy could plant it himself when he was old enough. He then sacrificed the harvest to the gods (Thompson 1970:283).

Thompson (1970) documented this practice among the Tzotzil Maya, where the blood-spattered grains from the ear on which the umbilical cord was cut were sown by the father in a tiny corn field called "the child's blood." The growth of the little crop was carefully watched because it foretold the child's future. The eating of the "blood crop" by all members of the *family* linked the child to the family. In Yucatec Maya, a youth of marriageable age was known as "corn plant coming into

flower" (Thompson 1970:283-284).

The 16th century Cakchiquel Maya believed that people were created of tapir and serpent blood kneaded together with corn (Recinos and Goetz 1953:47).

The corn spirit is feminine. The Kanjobal Maya of San Miguel Acatan call corn the moon and the earth our mother and the three become identified in speech and thought (Siegel 1941:66).

Corn not only influences a child's life, it guards it. Among the Bachajon Tzeltal Maya of Mexico, it is customary to leave an ear of yellow corn with a baby which has to be left Wlattended so that the child's soul will not be stolen (Blom and LaFarge 1926:360). In Jacaltenango in the 1930s, if a child was left for any reason, an ear of corn of any color was usually placed on each side of it (LaFarge and Byers 1931:80). I was told by local informants that this tradition still persisted in some parts of Jacaltenango in the 1980s

The Jakalteek image of the cosmos envisions levels similar to those reported for other cultures. For example, the Chamulas (and Tzotzil Maya) of Chiapas, Mexico, conceptualize the Wliverse in three levels (Gossen 1974:23, 34). Thompson wrote of the Yucatec Maya that:

At the four points of the compass or at the angles between stood the four **Bacab** deities who, with upraised arms, supported the skies There were thirteen "layers" of heaven and nine of the underworld a giant ceiba tree, the sacred tree of the Maya, the yaxche, "first" or "green" tree, stands at the exact center of the earth. Its roots penetrate the underworld; its trunk and branches pierce the various layers of the skies. Some Maya groups hold that by its roots their ancestors ascended into the world, and by its trunk and branches the dead climb to the highest sky ... the sky is male, the earth female, and this intercourse mystically brings life to the world. Similarly, light is male, and darkness female (Thompson 1970:195, 196).

Some Nahuas of Mexico also associate corn with blood. They say that people sprout from the earth like young corn plants and conversely, the corn plant is seen as a human body. The roots are its feet and the tassel its hair. Corn is their blood (Sandstrom 1991 :240,241,255). Among the Cora of west central Mexico, the moon goddess, who is also called "our mother," is goddess of the earth and corn and the sun's wife (Thompson 1970:246).

Examples from outside Mesoamerica.-Native Mesoamericans were not the only Americans to associate corn with the body. Traditional Hopis see the earth as a living entity like themselves. She is their mother; they are made from her flesh and suckled at her breast. Her milk is the grass upon which all animals graze and the corn that has been created for man. The corn plant is also a living entity with a body similar to man's, and the people build its flesh into their own, so corn is also their mother. Their mother appears in two aspects which are often synonymous, as Mother Earth and as the Corn Mother (Waters 1964:7).

Corn is the metaphorical milk for the Hopi and unites the two principles of creation, male and female. Frank Waters (1964) noted that when the plant begins to grow, the leaf curves back towards the ground like the arm of a child groping

for its mother's breast. As the stalk grows upward in a spiral the male tassel appears, then the female ear of corn shows herself, at the point corresponding to the halfway span of man's life. The female ear is now ready to be fertilized by the male tassel. The silk subsequently appears and pollen is dropped on the "life line" to mature and season to its fullest expression. When the tassel finally begins to turn brown and bend downward, male and female have reached their old age and the end of their reproductive power (Waters 1964:135-136). They say, "Because we build its flesh into our own, corn is also our body. Hence, when we offer cornmeal with our prayers we are offering a part of our body. But corn is also spirit, for it was divinely created, so we are also offering spiritual thanks to the creator." When a child was born, an ear of corn, his Corn Mother, was placed beside him, where it was kept for twenty days (Waters 1964:8, 135-136).

For some of the Zuni, corn is the severed flesh of seven immortal maidens. Each of the varieties sprouted from one of the maidens: yellow, blue, red, white, speckled, black, and sweet corn (Cushing 1974:36, 42).

Corn drinks and gourd vessels. -Corn preparation in Mesoamerica has changed little since pre-Columbian times. Fray Diego de Landa wrote in 1566 that corn was soaked over night in lime and water, cooked in the morning, then coarsely ground on stones and made into balls and stored. When needed, it was dissolved in a cup made from a tree gourd and drunk. Another drink was made with toasted corn that was ground and mixed with water and chile pepper or cacao. The cacao drink was popular at festivals. Many pre-Columbian paintings and carvings show deities and officials holding carved gourds filled with chocolate, "the drink of the gods" (Osborne 1965:322). Another drink was made of 415 grains of toasted corn (de Landa 1978:34, 63). Although the number of grains in the preparation of pre-Columbian corn drinks was a consideration in de Landa's colonial account, today the quantity is dependent on the consumers' appetite. Sahagún noted similar customs in colonial Mexico (Kiddle 1948:129). Probably because of their connection with Mayan beliefs, in 1552, the Royal Audencia of Guatemala ordered the prohibition of ancient drinks and that the utensils and cups be burned (de Landa 1978:158).

Corn and chocolate drinks became popular with colonial Spaniards, and Mexico and Guatemala were noted for the handsomely designed tree gourd vessels from which the beverages were drunk. The phrase *sacar fa jicara* (get out the tree gourd) means "to welcome, or flatter" in Guatemala and Costa Rica. It refers to the indigenous custom of welcoming visitors with a chocolate drink served in a gourd cup (Kiddle 1948:140). These cups were rounded at the bottom. To support them when set down, either a stand especially made for the purpose or a twist of cloth or cotton was used (Standley and Williams 1974:188).

The "drink of the gods" chocolate and corn beverage that was in pre-Columbian times a privilege of the elite, is today enjoyed by all Jakalteks. Besides its popularity at religious festivals, it is consumed routinely by those who can afford the luxury. Every morning, cooked and ground balls of corn mixed with chocolate are peddled door to door. At weddings, engagements, christenings, funerals, and other ceremonies, Christian and non-Christian, gourds are still used to serve ceremonial food and drink, here and in many parts of Mesoamerica (Osborne 1965:322), sus-

taining and renewing one both spiritually and physically. This custom of drinking beverages in gourd cups is not just ideological, but practical, because it is widely believed that beverages taste better when consumed from tree gourd vessels. The drinks include *bebida* or pozol of coarsely ground corn dough mixed with water; atole of water mixed with cooked corn dough; *bebida* drunk during fiestas of water mixed with toasted and ground peanuts and cacao with corn dough; a beverage of water mixed with corn and chile; and *batido* of water mixed with corn and cacao (Recinos *et al.* 1950:211).

Along with their corn tortillas, Jakalteek farmers carry a ball of ground corn wrapped in a cloth to the fields. When they need a break, they put the corn in their tree gourd, add water from a gourd or plastic jug, mix the drink with a chuc'ul stick (Figure 5), then rotate it to keep the corn suspended in the water.

The ancient association of corn drinks with gourds is documented in a Jakalteek myth: "Their thick necked gourds were empty, and without water they couldn't beat their delicious corn and chocolate drink in their gourd cups" (Montejo *et al.* 1984:40). In Jacaltenango, some of the dead are buried with tortillas, an ear of corn, and a gourd full of pozol to serve as food for the journey to the underworld. Thompson noticed the same custom among the Maya he studied in Belize (1970:310).

Another Jakalteek Maya myth metaphorically connects the gourd to a woman's breast. To quote: "And our great coin, the cacao, whose nut we ground and took in delicious drinks served in long and bright gourds resembling our woman's breasts" (Montejo *et al.* 1984:8). The breast is that of Mother Earth, who sustains her children with corn milk *bebida* or atole drinks. The corn drink is mixed in the tree gourd with a three to five pronged chuc'ul stick (Figure 5), then right before drinking, the gourd is rotated in a motion reminiscent of the massaging action that a mother gives her breast before nursing her baby.

Some Mexican people conceptualize the earth as a turtle and according to Recinos *et al.* (1950:222), the Aztec word *ayotl* means both turtle and gourd. In the Quiche Maya book, the *Papal Vuh* the sky was referred to as the "Green Gourd" or the "Blue Bowl" (Recinos *et al.* 1950:78).

South American examples.—The tree gourd also has ritual significance in northern South America, where a Barasana shaman wraps a special tree gourd, that has lumps of bees wax and coca powder inside, in brown bark cloth. Tree gourds are cultivated by men and are their exclusive property. Besides being used as containers for coca, snuff, and beeswax, they are also made into maracas for dancing and the uses are always associated with ritual activities. Bottle gourds are the property of Barasana women and are used in the preparation and consumption of food and drink, both secular activities. In general, Barasana plant products cultivated and owned by men come from above the ground (leaves and bark) and the useful parts of the plants cultivated and owned by women tend to come from below the ground (roots and tubers). This same contrast is found in these two kinds of gourds: men's gourds come from trees while women's gourds come from the vines that trail on the ground (Hugh-Jones 1979b:163-164).

For the Barasana, the gourd is also the Sun, the father of the earth. It is kept wrapped in bark cloth because, as would the sun, it could hurt one's eyes to look

at it. The gourd is the sun's head with a feather crown, eyes, eyebrows, a tongue, and a mouth and is kept on a stand because it must never touch the ground. The wax is the shadow of prenatal children and the gourd is the womb (Hugh-Jones 1979b:165-6).

The South American Pira-Parana also conceive of a three layered universe; a great spherical gourd with the arch as a central horizontal plane (Hugh-Jones 1979a:258). The South American Barasana also compare the sky to a gourd (Hugh-Jones 1979b:167).

The fact that similar beliefs are found scattered throughout Native groups of North, Central, and South America that have little or no contact with one another suggests that this concept is very old.

CONCLUSION

Jakalteks I spoke with preferred the tree gourd decorated with a band rather than plain, but most could give no other reason than, "It is our tradition." A few traditional Jakalteks, however, suggested that the gourd could have religious significance. Most Jakalteks today speak Jakaltekt Maya as their primary language and most Jakaltekt women wear traditional clothing. The banded tree gourd might simply be an ethnic marker reinforcing distinctions of speech and dress.

One highly educated Jakaltekt man suggested the local decoration of the tree gourd symbolized the three levels of the cosmos. This is possible since the gourd is often associated with the earth and the cosmos is divided into three regions by both Christian and non-Christian Native Americas. The three levels of the Mayan cosmos may be graphically represented on the Jakaltekt tree gourd; a dark female band running through the middle of a light male sky and underworld. Even the **ehue'ul** mixing stick is symbolic; its three, four, or five points representing the three levels, the four directions, or the four directions with a balanced center, all important Maya religious concepts.

Although clay, plastic and metal cups have replaced the tree gourd in much of America, the strength of tradition and its practical value should assure its survival in Jacaltenango.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank Padre Amulfo Delgado Montejo, a native Jakaltekt, for his linguistic and cosmological insights. This paper developed from a conversation we had in 1986 about the symbolism of the stripe around the Jakaltekt tree gourd vessel. His insight encouraged me to organize information that I had gathered during my four year residence in Jacaltenango and to review the literature in both Guatemala and the United States on the symbolism and cultural importance of gourds and com.

NOTES

¹ Jakaltekt is one of 25 Mayan languages spoken today. It is a member of the Kanjobalan branch of Mayan (Day 1973:98). The Jakaltekt Maya and their language are now called

Popti' by the Academia de las Lenguas Mayas de Guatemala.

² *Crescentia clljete* is a 7-10 m high tree. It has a trunk of up to 20 cm in diameter, long drooping branches, spatula shaped leaves 15-30 cm long, and oval or round fruits 15-30 cm long. *Crescentia alata* is 3-12 m high, has a trunk of up to 50 cm in diameter, thick and sometimes interlaced branches, scaly light brown bark, narrow trifoliate 2-9 cm leaves that form a cross, and round or oval fruit that are 10-15 cm long. Both species are common at altitudes from sea level to 1,200 meters. On some Pacific coast sites of Central America, there are extensive stands of *Crescentia clljete* trees, forming a distinct and characteristic plant association. Although sometimes very large, the fruits are not heavy. The tube shaped flowers bloom only one night and are pollinated by bats (PelUlington and Sarukhan 1968: 374-375; Siebert 1940:383-384; Standley and Williams 1974:183-189). This tree was sacred to the Maya because of the cross-shaped leaves. Also, the thorns of the tree were used to draw blood for sacrificial purposes (Thompson 1930:190).

³ *Jícara* might come from the Nahuatl word, **xicalli**. **Sik-tli** means navel (Karttunen 1983:323) and **ka'-li** means house or receptacle; the compound translates to "a receptacle having a navel" (Kiddle 1948:123-124; Morales 1978:3).

⁴ A negative painting technique is employed in San Bernardino, Guatemala. The gourd is painted with wax (a sun and branch motif is popular), dyed, and then the wax is removed (Morales 1978:4). In Rabinal, Guatemala, gourds are cleaned and dyed with soot and insect wax by women and carved with a pointed tool by men. Others are cleaned and painted with red, yellow, or black oil paints (Morales 1982:3, 4; Osborne 1965:326-331).

⁵ I was told by several Jakalteq farmers that uncultivated com still grows in some areas of Jacaltenango. Although I did not see a specimen, according to its description, the uncultivated corn might be teosinte (2. *mexicana*)(Galinat 1985:247; McClung de Tapia 1992:148).

⁶ Like their cousins, the Quiche (see Recinos *et al.* 1950:88), Jakalteks use **tzité** beans for divination.

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