

Maize originated approximately 9,000 years ago in the Balsas River Valley of southern Mexico, or according to others in the highlands of southern Guatemala, domesticated from the wild grass teosinte. Originally small-cobbed and hard-cased with few seeded ears, the hybrid crop came to have softer kernels and larger, more accessible cobs. The high-yield food staple spread across the Americas and fueled major civilizations like the Maya and Aztecs. The crop reached Panama by 7,800 years ago, Peru by 6,700 years ago, and the Southwestern US by 4,000 years ago. Around then, maize again re-hybridized with highland teosinte, improving its adaptability to different climates and significantly boosting its productivity.

Maize is entirely dependent on humans for reproduction because the kernels are enclosed in husks that don't scatter. As such, it's a result of long-term human agricultural effort. Legendarily brought by the god Quetzalcoatl (Kukulkan), maize became central to Indigenous American religious, ceremonial, and daily life, deep in Maya and Teotihuacan mythology.

The earliest extant image of the Maya maize god is a fantastic vision in the murals at San Bartolo in Guatemala (c. 100 BC). Several centuries later, elegant sculptures like the famous one from Copan (5th – 9th centuries AD in Honduras) appeared along with paintings on ceramic pots. (Only four Maya Codices survived the Spanish Conquest: The Dresden, the Madrid, the Paris, and the Grolier, this last now being re-named the Maya Codex of Mexico.). The Dresden Codex (c. 1200 AD) comes from the Late Post-Classic period in the area of Chichen Itza in Yucatan.



Mural, San Bartolo, Guatemala....



Bust, Copan, Honduras

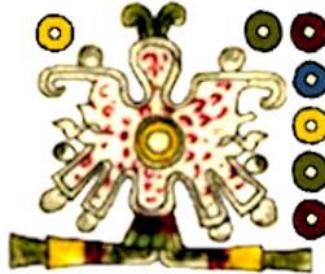


Dresden Codex, Yucatan

Over those 1300 intervening years and the thousand miles between sites, the image of the Maya maize god obviously evolved dramatically, ever since being introduced by the god Quetzalcoatl (Kukulkan). Meanwhile, another thousand miles away to the northwest and two hundred years later, a barbaric migrant tribe took over the civilizations in the Valley of Anahuac and established a huge commercial/military empire. These Aztecs (Mexica) adopted and adapted the religious rituals and culture of the resident Nahua peoples. They revered their deities and mythologies, most with distant roots in the ancient Toltecs and Teotihuacan, if not the Maya, which involved a gaggle of maize gods, the big wig being Centeotl (or Cínteotl).

CENTEOTL (Aztec God of Maize) {sen-te-otl}

Centeotl is the son of Piltzintecuhtli and either Tlazolteotl, Xochiquetzal, or Toci. As the ancient deity of maize, it's odd that Centeotl has only minor roles in the ceremonial calendar. He appears only once in the tonalamatl section of Codex Telleriano-Remensis as secondary patron of the Grass *trecena*. I've re-created that section as Tonalamatl Yohual named for its cycle of nine Lords of the Night in which Centeotl is the 4th. He is also 7th Lord of the Day in a cycle of 13 with a psychedelic butterfly as his totem.



Codex Borgia

The usual iconographic emblem of Centeotl is cobs of corn in his headdress or in a basket on his back. In Codices Borgia and Vaticanus, another identifier is face paint in a line down from the temple, zigging by the eye and down to the jaw. Otherwise, his regalia varies according to the style of each codex.



C. Rios



C. Borbonicus



T. Borbonicus: Lord of the Night/Lord of the Day

The difference between C. Borbonicus and T. Borbonicus is that the first full figure comes from the agricultural festival section of the codex, and the Lords of the Night and Day are thumbnail "labels" appearing with various days in the Tonalamatl section. In full form as Lord of the Night in Borgia, Cospi, and Vaticanus, he carries an offering of incense.



C. Borgia



Centeotl also appears in Borgia and Vaticanus in related galleries of gods performing various disturbing rituals, like this eye-gouging scene, which I won't try to interpret.



C. Cospi



C. Laud



C. Magliabechiano

Both images from Cospi are as Lords of the Night, the second the thumbnail in its spreadsheet layout of the calendar. The lower portions of the full figure show how some of the original images have suffered flaking off of colors and wearing off of lines. (I didn't have time or inclination to refurbish this elegant image. By the way, I'm not sure why he has stars in his hair or the strange markings by his mouth) In the highly stylized scene from Laud, one can just make out a cob of maize in his headdress with a red tassel. Note that he holds a penitential eye-gouger. At least, the Magliabechiano figure holds a cob of maize in one hand and in the other a Tlaloc-head pitcher of water.



(Lord of the Night) C. Vaticanus B



T. Yohual



(Lord of the Night)

Tonalamatl Yohual is my compilation/re-creation of images from the calendar sections of Codices Telleriano-Remensis and Rios (Vaticanus A). The originals are quite sketchy and one might say crude, but I've "naturalized" the figures. The T. Yohual thumbnails of the nine Night Lords are immediately recognizable with standard emblems and symbols.

CENTETEO {sen-te-te-o}

While Centeotl was the generic maize god, essentially the over-lord of this supernatural crop, there were deities personifying all its types and growth-phases collectively known as the Centeteo. The various colors of maize each had a divine patron/protector:

Iztacuhca {eez-ta-kuh-ka} – white maize

Tlatlauhca {tla-tlawnh-ka} – red maize

Cozauhca {ko-zawh-ka} – yellow maize.

Yayauhca {ya-yawh-ka} – black (blue) maize.

I regret that images of these beings aren't included in the early codices—unless they're discussed in later sources that I haven't considered, like the Florentine Codex.

CHICOME COATL (Seven Snake) *{chee-ko-me-ko-atl}*

Chicomecoatl is the maize goddess of nourishment and plenty and the feminine counterpart of Centeotl, though she may have been a wife of Tezcatlipoca. Every September in that agricultural month, a young girl was sacrificed in her honor by ritual decapitation and flaying. Popularly, there were other maize goddesses of various regions, such as the Mixtec Chicome Malinalli (Seven Grass) and Chicome Tecpatl (Seven Flint). Since she was of comparatively minor importance, Chicomecoatl didn't appear frequently in the codices.



C. Borbonicus



C. Borgia



C. Fejervary-Mayer

Chicomecoatl is paired with Centeotl in Borgia and Fejervary-Mayer, and though without maize-cob emblems, her identity is implicit.



C. Magliabechiano



C. Rios

XILONEN (The Hairy One) *{shee-lo-nen}*



Codex Magliabechiano

Xilonen is the goddess of blooming maize, a *nagual* of both Chicomecoatl and Centeotl. There were other deities relating to the various growth phases of the crop, including sprouting of the seeds, juvenile stalks and cobs, etc., but their names are unknown, and codex images aren't available.

MAIZE-RELATED DEITIES

In addition to the bunch of maize-specific deities, the Aztecs revered other supernatural beings whose realms were supportive of maize agriculture. The flowing water goddess Chalchiuhlticue and storm god Tlaloc were invoked to provide moisture for the crop.



C. Fejervary-Mayer

The personified maize plants here may well be the deified Centeotl and Chicomecoatl with their nurturing patrons. Other maize-related deities supportive of agriculture were Xochipilli and Tonantzin. Meanwhile, as a metaphor for the ripened maize in its husk, prayers went out to Xipe Totec, the Flayed God, for a good harvest and to Chalchiuhtolin, the Jade Turkey, for abundance. Obviously, there was a divine army protecting and cultivating the vital crop.

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Speaking of vital crops, it's notable that staple crops in other parts of the ancient world, like rice, wheat, and barley weren't surrounded by deities devoted specifically to their cultivation. Only in the Americas did a plant get deified, maybe because there weren't that many other food sources. As a curious historical note, there are mysterious images from long before Columbian contact of figures from Egypt and India holding unmistakable ears of maize. And in modern times, maize has exploded into mega-mass production for animal fodder and biofuel, seriously impacting the ecology of the earth's land, rivers, and oceans. This gift of the gods has now become a bane.

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