

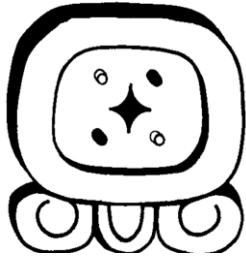
THE SYMBOLISM OF THE MAYAN FIRE CEREMONY

The Fire Ceremony is the most important and fundamental of all Mayan rituals. The information below comes from the notes that Anita Garr and I took directly from Don Rigoberto Itzep Chanchavac, a *chuch q'ajaw* (mother-father) of Momostenango, preceding the Fire Ceremony of 8 B'atz' (Yucatec: 8 Chuen) on October 24, 2010. There are many possible variations in the Fire Ceremony, depending on one's district, lineage, or individual teacher. This one is fairly typical of contemporary Momostenango.

Before undertaking any sort of ceremony, one must begin with a certain outlook, a special frame of mind.

1. First of all, one must believe in the power of the ceremony, the ritual. Those who attend a Fire Ceremony with a skeptical attitude or who take the neutral stance of the "objective observer" will derive no benefit from their participation.
2. Second, it is best to practice at least a certain amount of sexual abstinence immediately preceding a ritual. In Mayan Spirituality, family life is valued and children are a treasure; celibacy is not a permanent lifestyle ideal as it is in Hinduism, Buddhism, or monastic Christianity. All the same, some people, especially the Daykeeper or Maya priest who officiates, typically abstain for a time – occasionally even as long as twenty days – before a ceremony. This builds up shamanic power. It is also an offering to the gods, a sacrifice, and represents true respect.
3. Third, one ought to approach ceremony with a peaceful heart. One should make a special effort not to engage in arguments or disputes before a ceremony. One should come before Ajaw (the Divine Intelligence) with only good feelings towards everyone.

The first step in any Fire Ceremony is the creation of the altar, which is laid out in the shape of the ancient hieroglyph for the day-sign Q'anil (Yucatec: Lamat). Sugar is most often used to draw the altar symbol.



The glyph is circular, for it represents the eternal circle of life, of existence. Within the circle of life is a cross. The cross was not introduced to the Maya by Christianity; it is an ancient symbol which, to the Classic Maya, represented the four directions, the four pillars of the universe, the four stations of the sun during the day and the year.

We live in a fourfold universe. The center of the cross is the center of the world itself, the *axis mundi* or Tree of Life. To the ancient Maya, the cross was a symbol of the central World Tree from which the four directions emanated

In addition to the four directions, the four arms of the cross are also said to represent the four colors of corn, the four colors of humanity, and the four elements.



In each quadrant of the circle is yet another circle. The symbolism here is similar to that embodied in the well-known yin-yang symbol of Taoism, which represents the yin within yang and the yang within yin. The Q'anil hieroglyph tells us that each arm of the Medicine Wheel, each direction which emanates from the World Tree, is a wholeness unto itself, as well as a part of the fourfold pattern of life. Time and Space, the Four Cardinal Points, the Four Elements, and the Four Colors (Red, Yellow, Black and White) are divine powers and are invoked as if they were divinities.

After the altar is built, it is decorated with many different types of offerings, until it is piled high. Additionally, flowers are often placed just outside the altar at each of

the four directions and with the appropriate colors: Red = East, Black = West (since black flowers are rare, purple is commonly substituted), White = North, Yellow = South. Flowers are used as an altar decoration; they are gifts to the gods because of their beautiful fragrance and colors, an aromatic perfume for them.

These offerings are a way of giving food and life to Mother Earth. While feeding Mother Earth, the participants also feed themselves. The Fire Ceremony gives life and energy to all those who take part. We sustain our lives by sustaining Mother Earth.

There are many different kinds of offerings. They vary from one community to another, and even between different spiritual lineages. Although it is important to honor all the sacred aspects of existence, there is a hierarchy of importance which is implicit in the ceremony.

1. **The Nawales.** The word *nawal* (from the Nahuatl “*nagual*”) refers to the spirits of the day-signs that make up the sacred *chol q’ij* (Yucatec: *tzolk’in*), the 260-day cycle of the Mayan Calendar. The numerous white wax candles that adorn the Fire Ceremony altar are an offering to the *nawales*. It is said that the candles are the *manjar* of the *nawales*, which means a special, very tasty kind of dessert. Movement and dance are also offerings to the *nawales* of the calendar.

2. **The Four Elements.** Each of the four elements is honored with its own special offering.

Fire: Aromatic plants and herbs like pericone, rue and rosemary are offerings to the element of fire. They serve to attract the gods for the purpose of protecting and maintaining a good physical state, i.e. good health.

Earth: Various kinds of liqueur (usually licorice) or lotions are poured on the altar and symbolize the earth element, as well as Mother Earth herself. Liquor represents spiritual contact in order to receive divine messages. Perfume is used to give pleasure to the gods with its aroma.

Air: Flowers are the offering for the element of air.

Water: The sugar with which the altar symbol is drawn represents purity because of its white color; it is an offering to the element of water and it is also used to

produce harmony and sweeten one's life and environment. It is the sweetness of life. Chocolate is another typical offering to the element of water.

3. The Ancestors. In addition to the white wax candles that are offered to the *nawales*, a typical Fire Ceremony altar is usually piled high with special light-brown candles made of tallow and called *cebo*. These are dedicated to the spirits of the ancestors. Tobacco (often in the form of ordinary cigarettes) and flowers also serve as offerings to the ancestors. Tobacco is a force for potentiality; the smoke dissolves any negative energies that surround one.

4. The Encantos. Though this word can have other meanings, in this context it refers to the guardian spirits who watch over the shrines and natural altars of the Mayan religion. Copal incense – called *pom* in K'iche' – in all its forms serves as an offering to the *encantos*.



In addition to those listed above, there are many other substances which are used as offerings in the Fire Ceremony. The most important of these is incense.

When the Maya use the word “incense” or *incienso*, it usually refers to frankincense, used in Mayan ceremonies as well as in Catholicism. The Native Mayan incense, which is made of the resin of the *tz'ite* (Yucatec: *ceiba*) tree, is *copal*, usually called *pom*. Depictions of objects which

appear to be incense burners can be found as far back as the Classic Period (200 – 900 CE), notably at Yaxchilan. *Copal* incense is associated with the day-sign No'j (Yucatec: Caban), which is the sign of our thoughts, for incense carries our thoughts to the gods. In the section on “Zuyua language” in the Book of Chilam Balam of Chumayel (16th-18th centuries), incense is called “the brains of heaven.” *Copal* is the sacred bread which is permeated with the energy of Nature itself. It is the essential food for the sacred fire and one of the symbols of the fire element as well.

Pom comes in many forms. *Cuilco Copal* (small round black copal chips the size of a penny) is a payment, an offering to the divine powers and forces. *Ensarte Copal* (*copal* pressed into a small cup-like shape) is a payment for having received good health. Large balls of *copal* are used to obtain the strength to work. The aroma of storax (bark filled with *copal* resin) attracts the gods and encourages them to give us good health. Frankincense and *ocote* (sticks of wood filled with resin) are used to dissipate negative energies from the environment.

There are even more substances which are used as offerings. Animal blood (usually from a turkey) is the most sacred offering for the gods, used only for very important matters. Fruit preserves such as jams and jellies represent divine food and symbolic dessert for the gods and are used to give thanks for agricultural production. Pine needles or branches represent the sacred napkin upon our table, Mother Earth. Honey is used to develop spiritual balance.

An egg is used to “saturate” the person (to cleanse and purify by passing the egg over her or his entire body) and remove all negativity. Tobacco, flowers, rue and cinnamon may be used for the same purpose. Commonly used in healing ceremonies, they help to remove illness and negativity. Sesame seeds (which crackle in the fire) are a form of thanks for our prosperity and are also used in ceremonies where we ask the gods for financial abundance. Music is also an offering; it's a melody for the gods.

The payment received by the Mayan spiritual guide for his work is also considered an offering. He or she relates to sacred things invoking other principles that are part of the totality of positive forces through sacred ceremony and offerings.



When the altar is complete, the Daykeepers light the pile of offerings. While the flames blaze high, they recite the names of all the 260 sacred days of the tzolk'in or chol q'ij, usually speaking poetic phrases which embody the meaning of that day. For example, one might say: "Lord I'x! 1 I'x, 2 I'x, 3 I'x, 4 I'x, 5 I'x, 6 I'x, 7 I'x, 8 I'x 9 I'x, 10 I'x, 11 I'x,

12 I'x, 13 I'x. For the power of Nature, for the feminine spirit. For the altars of our people and for all the sacred places. Lord I'x!"

As the fire burns brightly, participants often cast their own offerings into the blaze. These offerings are payment for our personal wrong-doings and misapprehensions about life; to use the Sanskrit term, they are payment for our karma. The day-sign Toj (Yucatec: Muluc) is the sign of both "payment" and of the sacred fire itself.

Daykeepers with particular divinatory skills watch the fire, noting how strongly it blazes and in which direction the flames move. From this, they read signs and omens.

The fire is allowed to burn down to the end.

