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CRADLING THE SACRED:
IMAGE, RITUAL, AND
AFFECT IN MEXICAN
AND MESOAMERICAN
MATERIAL RELIGION

The ritual posture that I identify with the term “cradling” embodies, evokes, and performs the emotions of tenderness and affection for objects of the material world and the numina within them. Today, cradling, or holding as if of an infant, is one of the primary ritual engagements with small, three-dimensional religious images in Mexico, throughout Central America, and in Latino immigrant communities in the United States (fig. 1). This practice is particularly pronounced in devotional manifestations of the infant Jesus, but it is also the case, less predictably, with devotions to a range of adult saints, from Saint Jude to the skeletal saint of death, Santa Muerte. I have observed the cradling practice in domestic rites in rural Mexican *pueblos*, at bustling Mexico City shrines, and in religious processions on the streets of Latino neighborhoods in Southern California. It is as much the powerlessness and vulnerability of these diminutive images as their potency that often occupies the religious imagination. They are “*pequeños y impotentes*” as one devotee described to me—small, powerless, and in need of care. The cradling gesture underscores the nature of these object-entities as vital matter: they are “beings,”

I am grateful to my colleague Karl Taube for his assistance in interpreting the Mesoamerican archeological record and for his warm encouragement. Carolyn Dean provided helpful insights in her response to a paper I gave on this subject at a panel on material religion at the congress of the Latin American Studies Association in the spring of 2012. Colleen McDannell thoughtfully commented on my paper on cradling at the American Academy of Religion meetings in 2011. Sally Promey’s generous invitation to speak at the Yale Sensory Cultures of Religion Research Group advanced and challenged my thinking about the relationship between past and present practices. Candace Edsel assisted diligently in securing image permissions.



FIG. 1.—Cradling an image of San Jude Thaddeus as an infant. Iglesia San Hípolito, financial district, Mexico City, July 2011. Photograph by author.

not “things.” The contemporary devotional practice of cradling saints’ images is a reflection of a Mexican Catholic analogical imagination in which the identity of the sacred image is simultaneously person, object, divinity, and materially manifest spirit.

My ethnographic observations of the contemporary cradling practice in both urban and rural contexts in central Mexico suggest interpretive possibilities for the pre-Hispanic material cultural record. Diverse cultural traditions in Mesoamerica include visual imagery and figurative objects indicating that deity images or effigies were sometimes engaged devotionally as if they were infants or toddlers: carried, cradled, embraced, held, coddled, “daidled” (to borrow a Scottish verb meaning to hold on the knee, fondle, and gently toss). Through the lens of cradling I develop an argument for rereading some of the most significant works of the Mesoamerican archeological and art historical record, in particular from the Olmec and Maya worlds. Although a great deal of evidence exists for infant-deity devotions, neither archeologists nor art historians have identified cradling rites as an important expression of Mesoamerican religion. Yet, the sources examined here suggest that cradling is among the earliest religious rituals practiced in the Americas for which we have evidence.

I offer this study of ritual cradling in contemporary Mexican and pre-conquest Mesoamerican cultural practice in order to make more general observations about human interactions with materially embodied numina. The Mesoamerican traditions that I study share a common religio-affective posture of tender regard for seemingly common objects imbued with life: from maize plants to mountains, ancestral bundles to swaddled statues, carved stones to crucifixes. In fact, in many of the world’s religious traditions the sacred is encountered first and foremost in its animation and penetration of the material world. Yet scholars of religion have not fully accounted for these “abundant objects,” material sacra whose meaning and significance surpass the limits of our current theoretical and interpretive models.¹

Many vital materialist religious traditions are not oriented around an omnipotent deity but rather occupy a spiritual universe in which numinous beings require the assistance of human beings with whom they engage in mutually dependent, reciprocal relationships. The term “vital materialism” refers to a set of beliefs and actions oriented around the ontological assumption that seemingly lifeless objects, and not just human beings, possess vitality and agency. Scholarly reflection on religious emotion has often focused on the *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*—the awe that the beholder experiences

¹ In proposing the idea of “abundant objects,” I draw on Robert Orsi’s idea of “abundant history” in “Abundant History: Marian Apparitions as Alternative Modernity,” *Historically Speaking* 9, no. 7 (2008): 12–15.

before the sacred (i.e., the sacred has been imagined as an invisible, dematerialized, awe-inspiring force before whom human beings are humbled and overcome). This study contemplates how the sacred has also been ritually engaged as a small, vulnerable, and dependent child in need of nurture, tenderness, care, protection, and sustenance. The physical, embodied act of cradling materially manifest divinity in the form of a diminutive effigy performs and expresses these emotions. In emphasizing the affective dimension of vital materiality, my analysis addresses itself to the *mysterium materiae*—the mystery of vital matter—and its implications for the history of religions.²

The Mesoamerican practice highlights an important and neglected aspect of image-based religions more generally: devotional images in diverse religious traditions are commonly engaged, either deliberately or implicitly, as if they are infants or children. Like children, images and effigies (I use these two terms interchangeably) are utterly dependent on the care and ministrations of their caretakers and guardians; they must be birthed, bathed, dressed, fed, sung to, stroked, swaddled, cajoled, coddled, and soothed to sleep. In local Indian expressions of Hinduism, for example, clay icons of the baby Krishna are fed, rocked, and adored as infants.³ Hindu divine images are “activated” or consecrated as sacred through the rite of *pranapratishta* in which the “breathlife is infused into the image”: just as a newborn child, delivered from its mother’s womb, the image takes its first life-giving gasp and is brought into existence.⁴ In the ancient Near East, the *mīs pī* ritual employed “language of gestation and birth to recreate ritually the cult statue as the god,” so that the cult image was not complete until it was ritually birthed as a deity.⁵ Devotional activities directed toward effigies of infant or very young deities bring this childlike dependence into sharp relief. But the same nurture and tender attention can be observed also in the ritual care and maintenance of fully adult representations and even of nonrepresentational or nonfigurative images—for example, in ritual engagement with Maya stelae, Hindu *linga*, Andean *huacas*, Native American sacred bundles, and so on.⁶

² Jennifer Scheper Hughes, “*Mysterium Materiae*: Vital Matter and the Object as Evidence in the Study of Religion,” *Bulletin for the Study of Religion* 41, no. 4 (2012): 16–24.

³ Tracy Pintchman, “Courting Krishna on the Banks of the Ganges: Gender and Power in a Hindu Women’s Ritual Tradition,” *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 24, no.1 (2004): 18–28, 26.

⁴ Diana Eck, *Darśan: Seeing the Divine Image in India* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 52.

⁵ Michael Dick, “The Induction of the Cult Image in Ancient Mesopotamia: The Mesopotamian *Mīs pī* Ritual,” in *Born in Heaven, Made on Earth: The Making of the Cult Image in the Ancient Near East*, ed. Michael Dick (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1999), 68.

⁶ See Peter Savastano, who writes that devotees of the adult saint Gerard describe caring for him “as if for a child” (“Changing St. Gerard’s Clothes: An Exercise in Italian-American Catholic Devotion and Material Culture,” in *Italian Folk: Vernacular Culture in Italian-American Life*, ed. Joseph Sciorra [New York: Fordham University Press, 2010], 9).

A distinct set of affective postures often accompanies these ritual ministrations. Thrumming beneath these ritual practices is the feeling of tenderness toward the sacred. The act of cradling performs the particular religious feelings of nurture and care for a vulnerable, fragile, and dependent deity. The ceremonial rehearsal of the physical care of infants and young children both expresses and elicits emotions of warmth, loving care, and tender regard in the devotee and practitioner, which is to say, the ritual objects under investigation here evoke and preserve a particular set of attendant affective postures. The ritual cradling of infant-deities draws attention to the relationship between materiality and affect and the religious actions and ritual processes that bind one to the other. Specifically, it elucidates the particular potency of devotional images as bearers of emotion and preservers and anchors of affective culture.

Art historian David Freedberg has offered the most sustained theoretical argument for the evocative power of images.⁷ I suggest that in diverse religious settings, including especially the Mexican one, devotional images not only evoke emotion but in fact are also bearers of affective memory. That is, images function as “archives of feeling” and “repositories of emotion” in which religious feelings are encoded in the objects themselves.⁸ The act of cradling infant or infantilized effigies of deities preserves, archives, elicits, and expresses specific religio-affective postures, including warmth, nurture, care, and tenderness for the sacred. While larger images are meant to impress from a distance, smaller images are more likely to be held, carried, touched—to be engaged from up close. Infant-size, diminutive divine effigies suggest to the devotee their ritual use, summoning the beholder to coddle, hold, nurture, rock, and fondle.

I come to these conclusions regarding the relationship of image and affect from my particular field of expertise in Mexican and Mesoamerican material religion that I take up as my focus here. I structure my discussion beginning with the more proximate ethnographic observations of contemporary practice, with special attention to devotion to the infant Jesus and to Saint Jude Thaddeus, one of the fastest-growing devotions in Mexico. I also identify cradling as a prominent domestic ritual practice among US Latino Catholics in greater Los Angeles. I then proceed to compare these contemporary rituals

⁷ For Freedberg, artistic images are potent but not agentic; see David Freedberg, *The Power of Images: Studies in the History and Theory of Response* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991).

⁸ Here I borrow feminist theorist Ann Cvetkovich’s concept, although she directs her interpretation to cultural texts, not material ones. Cvetkovich considers “cultural texts as repositories of feelings and emotions which are encoded not only in the content of the texts themselves but in the practices that surround their production and reception”; see *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 7.

to the visual and material cultural record of preconquest Mesoamerica, with particular attention to devotional engagement with infant deities among the Olmec and the Maya. Here, I interpret contemporary practices alongside pre-Hispanic ones in order to argue for cradling as an important strand of Mesoamerican ritual practice both before and after the Spanish conquest. Archeologists and anthropologists have tended to be more comfortable than historians with drawing on ethnographic data as an aid for interpreting the past—to assume, for example, that contemporary Mexican practices may potentially be illuminating for interpreting pre-Hispanic cultures, as I do here.⁹ In associating past and present activities, I do not intend to draw a straight line of descent that would impose a seamless or uninterrupted continuity where it may not exist: historians of religion accept that ritual practices can be temporarily abandoned only to be retrieved and recovered by subsequent generations. Likewise, where ritual practices remain continuous, the meanings attached to those practices may alter over time. Nevertheless, evidence suggests that the practice of ritual cradling and the attendant emotional postures of tenderness and affection have at times anchored disparate Mesoamerican religious cultures, both before and after the arrival of Christianity in the New World.

CRADLING IN EMERGING TRADITIONS IN MEXICO: THE NIÑO DIOS
AND SAN JUDAS TADEO

Cradling is evident today in both well-established and emergent religious traditions in Mexico. Here I focus attention on two distinct image devotions: the infant Jesus and Saint Jude Thaddeus (or San Judas Tadeo). In my discussion I draw on participant observation and interviews with devotees at public shrines and in private homes in the village of Tepoztlán, Morelos; in Mexico City; and in the state of Puebla. Additional research documents the practice of cradling in Latino Catholic communities in metropolitan Los Angeles. Although priests lend their support by blessing these devotional images with holy water at special masses, cradling is primarily a lay expression of lived religion.

⁹ For examples of anthropologists, archeologists, and art historians drawing on ethnographic data to understand the long past, see George Foster and Evon Vogt, “Zinacanteco Dedication and Termination Rituals,” in *The Sowing and the Dawning: Termination, Dedication, and Transformation in the Archaeological and Ethnographic Record of Mesoamerica*, ed. Shirley Boteler Mock (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1998); David Stuart, “Emotion,” in *The Memory of Bones: Body, Being, and Experience among the Classic Maya*, ed. Stephen Houston, David Stuart, and Karl Taube (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2011); Nancy Troike, “The Interpretation of Postures and Gestures in Mixtec Codices,” in *Art and Iconography of Late Post-Classic Central Mexico*, ed. Elizabeth Hill Boone (Washington, DC: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, 1982).

In the contemporary cradling posture the diminutive image or object is removed from its altar or place of honor and made to rest in a reclining or partially reclining position in the crook of an arm. Often the image is swaddled in blankets or, in some instances, bundled with other objects or offerings, forming a cradled infant bundle. The cradled objects are mass-produced plaster, ceramic, or fiberglass images designed for domestic devotional use, such as for display on home altars. Mass production and distribution facilitates widespread individual access to images allowing for the intimacy inherent to this ritual practice. Devotion is not exclusively a domestic practice: privately owned devotional images are periodically brought out and displayed in public, sometimes in great numbers. Ritual cradling thus performs the intimacy of domestic devotion in the public landscape of Mexico. Since the nineteenth century, Mexico's streets, both rural and urban, have been the stage for sometimes violent conflict between the Catholic Church and the Mexican secular state.

The cradling rite is most evident in ritual engagement with images of the infant Jesus, or Niño Dios. Catholic families in Mexico often possess at least one image of the infant Jesus, but sometimes each family member, including children, has his or her own devotional image of the Niño so that multiple images occupy a single family home. Ritual engagement occurs all year long but intensifies during Advent, continues through Christmas, and concludes at the Catholic Feast of the Presentation on February 2. During this long liturgical season, Niño images are celebrated and engaged in private fiestas in family homes. Both men and women carry their Niños around town as they tend to routine errands, and they bring images to Mass to receive blessings. These images are swaddled snugly in soft receiving blankets and nestled carefully into the crook of an arm, as the devotees stroll the plaza, stop at the grocery, or call on family friends. When I first observed this practice in the *pueblo* of Tepoztlán in December 2003, I often mistook the small images for real infants.

On Christmas Eve, when the *acostamiento* (ceremonial placing of Jesus in the manger) is celebrated in communities throughout Mexico, families carry their Niños to church for midnight Mass, where they are rocked to sleep while the priest sings lullabies to the Christ child(ren). In domestic rituals, extended families gather to honor each other's images, offering tender gestures of blessing upon the infants. The Niños are then placed in an elaborately adorned crèche, which sometimes accommodates as many as six or seven images of the baby Jesus. Mary and Joseph watch protectively over not one but a brood of infant Christs of varying sizes.

The infant Jesus has not one but many distinct identities in Mexico: the Niñoapan of Xochimilco in Mexico City, the Niño de Atocha of Zacatecas, the Santo Niño Jesús Doctor of Puebla, among others. Each has its own

unique history and symbolic associations, but cradling is practiced with all of them. As I discuss elsewhere, the emerging devotion of the Santo Niño Jesús Doctor, an image of the infant Jesus dressed as a medical doctor with white doctor's jacket and wearing a stethoscope, is one of the fastest-growing new religious expressions in contemporary Mexico.¹⁰ In domestic practice, devotees explain, the Niño Doctor is to be treated as a living child. Ritual devotion involves cradling, rocking, and comforting the infant Christ, feeding and dressing the image, bringing him toys, placing him in a bassinet to sleep at night, and other expressions of tenderness, concern, and care for the fragile life of the object. When night falls, the Niño is changed into sleeping pajamas and rocked to sleep in a bassinet: "The adult saint has his *nicho* [niche]," one devotee explained, "but the infant saint has his *cuña* [cradle]." In the morning, the Niño is woken and returned to his altar perch, and the television turned on for his entertainment. "It is like being his mama and papa," don Carlos, a caretaker and guardian of a local image of the Niño from the *pueblo* of Tepoztlán, described to me.

When I met them in 2010, don Carlos and his wife had recently lost their only child, their adult son, in a tragic motorcycle accident. This was not the only trauma don Carlos had suffered. He had survived the Mexico City earthquake of 1985 and, while working in the office of the Mexican foreign secretary to the United Nations, lived through the attacks of 9/11. He had retreated to his hometown in search of respite. A few short months after his son's death, the local Catholic community determined that the couple should be placed in charge of caring for a locally significant image of the Niño Doctor that had recently been determined to be miraculous. The image was moved onto an elaborate altar in their home. Caring for the image of the Niño Doctor interrupted the bereft couple's loneliness and despair. The small tasks of caring for the image ordered their days and gave their lives direction and purpose. The responsibility of hosting the image of the Christ child also brought don Carlos and his wife into intimate contact with other suffering and struggling neighbors who called on the Niño to assist them in times of need and crisis.

As he spoke to me of his loss and how caring for the Niño brought solace, don Carlos fondly and softly rocked an invisible image of the Niño in his arms—cradling the image in absentia. Don Carlos explained: "The image itself evokes the feeling of *ternura* [tenderness], above all because it is a baby. It is because [the image] is *pequeña y impotente* [small and powerless]." Embodied in don Carlos's striking gesture and explanation are so many of the themes I explore here: principally, the idea that the sacred, even when invis-

¹⁰ Jennifer Scheper Hughes, "The Niño Jesus Doctor: Novelty and Innovation in Mexican Religion," *Nova Religio* 16, no. 2 (2012): 4–26.

ible and abstract, should be held, rocked, soothed, and loved as though it were an infant. Don Carlos's gentle devotions are premised on the idea of the sacred as a fragile material being in need of nurture from human caretakers. He describes his devotional labors as assuming the roll of a doting parent. Most important, don Carlos explicitly articulates the religious emotions that adhere to the image through ritual practice: fondness, tenderness, and gentle concern. For don Carlos, working within his particular Mexican Catholic religious frame, it is not the concept of God the Father that most moves him, but rather that notion that he himself could be a loving and tender father to an infant god.

Although in other cultural settings these nurturing rites and the related feelings might be designated as "maternal" or as affective expressions of femininity, I do not believe this designation is appropriate in the cultural contexts of this study. In fact, men engage in cradling rites at least as often as women. Don Carlos, and not his wife, served as the primary caretaker of the Niño while it was in their home. In his ethnographic study of Mexican masculinity, *The Meanings of Macho: Being a Man in Mexico City*, anthropologist Matthew Gutmann subverts "facile expectations of Mexican male gender identities" by documenting the role of Mexican men as fathers and as childcare providers, including of very young infants. He anchors his discussion around a photograph he took of a working-class father in urban Mexico City cradling his infant behind the counter of his guitar shop (fig. 2). Over the course of two years in the early 1990s, Gutmann gathered dozens of comments about the photograph from local residents. Men and women alike responded favorably to the photograph, describing the father's care as "very normal" and "*muy tierno*" (very tender). Others did not see anything noteworthy in the photograph, or simply nodded approval: "*muy bien*" (very good).¹¹ Gutmann concludes that working-class men were more likely than fathers of middle-class or affluent backgrounds to carry, cradle, and tend to their children in this way. In other words, the nurturing and care of infants by men is not uncommon among certain classes in Mexico. Therefore, male believers often bring the personal experience of caring for and cradling real infants, and the related feelings of parental nurture and care, to their devotional engagement with images of the Niño Dios. Additionally, devotional practice does not differ greatly among women and men, as is evident throughout this study.

Doña Juanita, another respected resident of Tepoztlán, inherited charge for the Niño from don Carlos, and the image moved into her home the following year. Ritual tenderness is also strongly evident in doña Juanita's doting and

¹¹ Matthew Gutmann, *The Meanings of Macho: Being a Man in Mexico City* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 54–56.



FIG. 2.—José Enríquez cradling his infant child while working in his guitar shop. Mexico City, 1989. Photograph by Matthew Gutmann; used with permission.

meticulous care for the image. As she prepares the Niño for sleep each evening, her gentle gestures enact fondness and affection even as they communicate profound respect. She handles the child gingerly and with reverence, cradling him lovingly for a moment before she places him in the bassinet that is designated exclusively for his use. For doña Juanita these are not simple expressions of tenderness but rather, she clarified to me, manifestations of deep faith: “First, I am filled with faith. And moved by faith, I treat the baby with *cariño* [affection].”

The cradling of images of the Niño Jesús is also common practice among many Latino Catholic communities in Southern California, where seasonal celebrations of the Niño tend to be more strictly limited to the domestic sphere. Occurring largely at privately sponsored ritual gatherings in individual homes and sometimes in lay-organized holiday events in church basements, these rites usually occur with little clerical participation or oversight. Southern Californian practitioners frequently employ the Spanish word *chinear* (to hold, carry, cradle in one’s arm, care for, pamper, and spoil) and other similar affective terms to describe ritual engagement with images of the baby Jesus. When the ritual involves the *acostamiento* (or *acostadita*), devotees describe their ritual actions toward the baby with the verb *arrullar* (to soothe, to lull to sleep). Lay ritual experts are called upon to orchestrate domestic and community rites, including leading the appropriate festal songs. A network of small family-owned shops, highly specialized *botánicas*, and local *santeros* (artisans skilled in the repair of images) supports the material necessities of caring for these infant images, including selling distinctive costumes for the Niños. In the United States, as in Mexico, there are professional and commercial structures in place to support devotion. The ritual expression of feelings of care and tender regard for material manifestations of the sacred permeate Mexican religious practice and are powerful enough to cross national borders.

These religious emotions do not pertain solely to the infant Jesus. In my book, I examine affective engagement with a single devotional object over almost five centuries of Mexican history, the crucifix known as the Cristo Aparecido of Totolapan. I argue that the themes of pity, compassion, sorrow, grief, penitence, and remorse are often muted in devotion to the Cristo Aparecido and to images of the crucified Christ more generally in Mexico.¹² Instead, the spiritual posture in relation to these Cristos, as beloved santos—that is, as animate, potent, and agentic objects of material religion—is frequently characterized by affection, warmth, tenderness, gentle care, and concern: these religious emotions predominate in Mexican religion and pertain to adult images as well, as I explore below.

¹² Jennifer Scheper Hughes, *Biography of a Mexican Crucifix: Lived Religion and Local Faith from the Conquest to the Present* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 238.

SAINT JUDE IN THE ARMS OF HIS CHILDREN: CRADLING THE ADULT SAINT

Cradling seems a natural ritual gesture when part of a cult of divine infancy, but in Mexico this posture is applied to adult saints as well, as is the case with the growing devotion to Saint Jude Thaddeus, or San Judas Tadeo. Saint Jude is a traditional Catholic saint with a well-established devotional history and is much loved and highly regarded among Catholics in the United States, as documented by Bob Orsi.¹³ Widespread devotion to St. Jude is a more recent phenomenon in Mexico, where the cult has been reinvented in recent years: devotion to St. Jude is currently undergoing an explosion of growth among adolescents and young people from the poor and working-class barrios of Mexico City.

While St. Jude is popular among Mexicans of all ages and walks of life, the association of the image with disenfranchised young people and their myriad social and economic problems has led to the stigmatization of the saint himself. San Judas (or Tadeo, as he is commonly known) is now celebrated also as the patron saint of drug addicts, gangsters, and *reggaetoneros* (followers of the hip-hop-inspired, pan-African/Latin American youth culture and style of dress).¹⁴ Some priests criticize Saint Jude as a foreign import, brought to Mexico via the United States: “He is not authentically Mexican,” they say. More pressing, priests worry that Tadeo is the gateway saint—that from devotion to him young people will be drawn to some of the “darker” and “dangerous” saints, like Santa Muerte, the skeletal patron saint of drug traffickers.¹⁵ On the twenty-eighth of every month, between fifteen and twenty thousand young adults come to the Iglesia San Hipólito in the city’s financial district to celebrate Tadeo. Inside the packed church, a team of rotating priests celebrates Mass every hour. Outside, an elaborate street party spirals out for blocks with young people arriving in large groups of friends, as shown in figure 3. Almost as frequently, they come with their extended families: ancient *abuelas* and small siblings in tow. Almost without exception, each and every one of them carries with them a personal image of Tadeo.

¹³ Robert A. Orsi, *Thank You, St. Jude: Women’s Devotion to the Patron Saint of Hopeless Causes* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1996).

¹⁴ For an important study of devotion to St. Jude among Latino transgender sex workers in San Francisco, see Cymene Howe, Susanna Zaraysky, and Lois A. Lorentzen, “Devotional Crossings: Transgender Sex Workers, Santísima Muerte, and Spiritual Solidarity in Guadalajara and San Francisco,” in *Religion at the Corner of Bliss and Nirvana: Politics, Identity, and Faith in New Migrant Communities*, ed. Lois Lorentzen, Joaquin Gonzalez, Kevin Chun, and Hien Duc Do (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010), 3–38.

¹⁵ Mexican journalist Alma Guillermoprieto labeled San Judas one of Mexico’s “unholy saints,” part of a growing pantheon of unauthorized “narco-saints”; see “Troubled Spirits,” *National Geographic*, May 2010, cover.



FIG. 3.—Teenage devotees display their images of San Judas; the young man on right sniffs paint thinner. Iglesia San Hipólito, financial district, Mexico City, July 2011. Photograph by author.

Images of Judas Tadeo are legion at his Mexico City celebration. Thousands of inexpensive replicas of all sizes, great phalanxes of Judas Tadeos, line up for sale in the monthly market festival in his name. Most impressive are the nearly life-size images made of fiberglass, so light that their proud owners can easily carry them. One sees multiplicity, yes, but not repetition. Although they seem identical, in the hands of devotees the mass-produced images are each transformed into unique expressions and displayed proudly for others to admire—this one has been painted with additional lines of gold; that one wears dozens and dozens of green beaded necklaces; this one seems more antique and more worn than the rest; while that life-size image, proudly carried by its owner, is inexplicably missing its head. During Mass, devotees elevate their distinctly decorated images to receive the priest's blessing of holy water, a baptism of sorts.

The media coverage of the new cult, on both sides of the border, has focused on the spectacle of young people crowding the urban shrine, decked out in their urban street wear and carrying elaborately adorned images of San Judas in one hand while sniffing paint thinner or glue in the other. The squadrons of military police, armed with semiautomatic weapons and positioned around the shrine, add to the ill repute of the maligned saint and his followers. Pastors at San Hipólito have tried to reach out to this new devotional community: Father Frederick Loos, a septuagenarian American priest who has been living in Mexico for almost half a century, gives impassioned homilies directed at the young faithful. Speaking in the street vernacular, Loos leads his unlikely flock in asking God's forgiveness and calls on those present to make a sacred offering of their thinners and glues.¹⁶

The gentleness of the devotional posture engaging Saint Tadeo contrasts starkly with the harsh social context and "tough" presentation of many of his devotees. Although the image is of an adult saint, he is cradled in the crook of an arm, much as one would cradle a real infant or an image of the Niño Jesús (fig. 4). To enhance this effect, adult images are occasionally wrapped in baby blankets, such as one I observed swaddled in pink and white gingham. Pilgrims to the shrine also tuck their image of Tadeo in a backpack or sling bag, which is unzipped and worn hanging in front with the image facing forward, resembling an infant carrier. These multiple mechanisms by which the status of the adult saint as divine infant is reiterated and underscored. In fact, it is quite common to see young parents with an image of Tadeo in one arm and their own infant child in the other. Sometimes real babies are dressed and carried in the posture of presentation, as if they were an image of the saint (see fig. 5). I witnessed a critically ill and emaciated infant

¹⁶ Mark Lacey, "Speaking God's Language, with a Gangster Dialect," *New York Times*, July 7, 2010, http://www.nytimes.com/2010/07/08/world/americas/08mexico.html?_r=0.

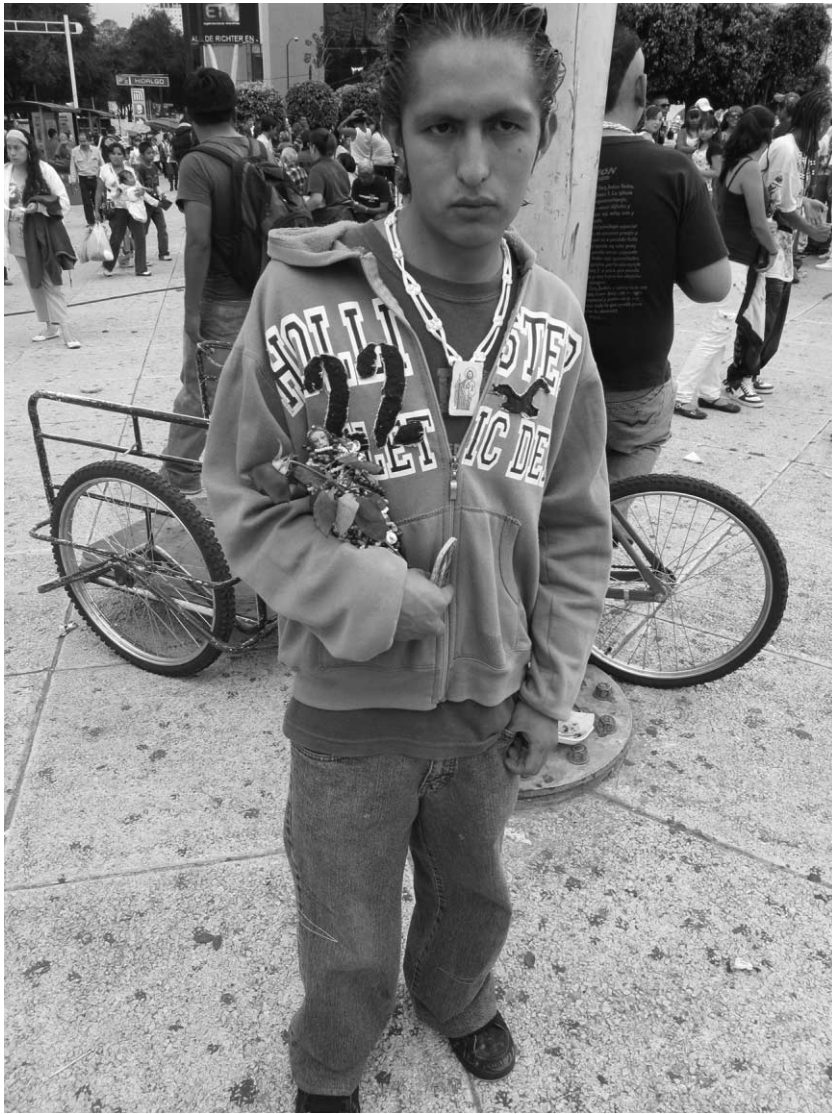


FIG. 4.—Young devotee cradles his small statuette of San Judas. Iglesia San Hípolito, financial district, Mexico City, July 2011. Photograph by author.



FIG. 5.—Devotee carrying his daughter dressed as San Judas Tadeo. Iglesia San Hipólito, financial district, Mexico City, July 2011. Photograph by author.

meticulously dressed in the garb of San Tadeo being carried to the shrine. The painful image is seared in my memory: lying limp and pale in his mother's embrace, he was as still and pale as a statue.

The cradling posture may appear to be an easy or comfortable way to carry an object that is small and precious, yet it is not as natural a position as one might assume. As I attended Mass at the shrine, I grappled awkwardly with the small San Judas image that I had purchased from one of the street vendors. Rigid images do not relax into the cradle the way a real child does. It took deliberate effort and intention to keep my small "statue" from slipping out of his traditional pose into postures that would appear careless or disrespectful.

Although the cradling posture is readily observable at the shrine, it is not the most common devotional posture present. Even more commonly, images of San Tadeo are carried in one arm and raised up slightly in a gesture of presentation and display. Display and presentation of one's individual image make up a key part of the rite as people show off their images of San Judas Tadeo. These are carried facing outward, presumably so that the saint can enjoy the view or can be recognized and admired by others.¹⁷ "I am proud of my santo," one young man at the shrine explained, "I would never carry him facing toward me. . . . I want him facing forward for others to see him and I want him to be able to see as well." In addition to cradling, other expressions of tenderness for the image can be observed: often devotees can be seen absent-mindedly kissing the heads of the images they carry. But casual disregard is also present: one young teenage girl casually put out her cigarette on the head of her image of Tadeo. From one moment to the next the fluid status of the image is saint, then thing, then sacred entity once again: the Mexican analogical imagination.

The inhalation of paint thinner and other easily affordable and accessible chemical agents accompanies the cradling and presentation of the images. Though these agents cause neurological damage they also serve a sacramental purpose, heightening the high of the experience of *communitas*. Using inhalants, or huffing, adds great stigma to the emerging *culto*. At the San Hipólito shrine, the thinner-sniffing posture, that which most indicates errancy to outsiders, is in fact integral to the cradling rite. Devotees embrace the *santo* in one hand while with the other, forefinger latched over their nose, they sniff small corners of thinner-soaked fabric, as does the young man in the green sweatshirt seen in figure 3. The overall effect, though jarring at first for the outside observer, is of a small child sucking his or her thumb while cradling

¹⁷ Ivan Gaskel, "Display," in "Key Words in Material Religion," ed. Birgit Meyer, David Morgan, Crispin Paine, and S. Brent Plate, special issue, *Material Religion* 7, no.1 (2011): 34–40.

a beloved doll. In a sense, the devotee him or herself becomes a small child: the finger latched over the nose is a gesture of childlike self-soothing. Thus, the “gangster” is transformed into innocent child, just as the adult saint becomes a baby to be cuddled, held, and doted upon.

The association between image and infant is underscored in the San Judas *culto* in the individual practice of fabricating infantilized images of San Judas for devotional use. In the current moment there is an emerging devotion to the Niño Tadeo, St. Jude figured as a baby. In this practice, images of the baby Jesus are converted into a Niño Tadeo by clothing the infant in the particular garments and iconography of Saint Jude. At the Iglesia San Hipólito, one woman in particular drew my attention as she gently cradled a sweetly sleeping image of the Niño Tadeo, shown in figure 1. She explains that she has made this image herself: “It was originally an image of the Niño Dios, an image of the baby Jesus, that I dressed in a beautiful costume as Señor Tadeo.” She has hand-sewn the *traje*, or ritual clothing, with small golden *milagros* in the shape of leaves that sparkle delicately against the deep green fabric. She beams proudly at the uniqueness of her image: “I never saw Tadeo shown as a baby before,” she told me, “but I love all the baby-*dioses* [the infant gods], including the Niño Doctor, and Jesús de las Ovejas [the infant Jesus figured as the good shepherd].” She rocks the infant effigy gently as she speaks to me: “A *santo niño* is treated differently,” she explains, “It is a different feeling to take care of an infant saint; there is *mas cariño* [more affection].”

In spite of her claims to the singularity of her *santo*, she is not the only one to have engaged in the innovation of the Niño Tadeo. On the very same day, a younger woman cradles her image of the infant Saint Jude, carefully shielding him from the pressing crowds inside the church sanctuary. She describes a similar story of innovation: “My aunt made this *santo*. She converted an image of the baby Jesus into an image of the infant Tadeo as a gift to me. My sister is his *madrina* [godmother] and gifted me his new outfit.” Inside the shrine, her repurposed infant, in his new garb as Tadeo, greets an image of the Niño Dios carried in a sling by a male devotee, as shown in figure 6. Thus the identity of the saint is reworked, and the original infant Jesus image repurposed, his original identity erased, and the image refashioned and transposed in an artistic and creative act that expresses the profound centrality of infant deities in lived religious expressions of Mexican Catholicism.

As of 2012, images of the infant Niño Tadeo were not yet available for sale by the vendors outside the shrine. However, statues of St. Jude as a round-faced, large-eyed child have been readily available for purchase at vendor stalls alongside the more traditional adult representations. The Virgin of Guadalupe is also commonly figured as a child, as the *Virgen Niña*, or as an infant, the *Divina Infantita*. These infantilized saints are often purchased for



Fig. 6.—An image of the infant Tadeo greets an image of the Niño Dios carried as if in an infant carrier by a male devotee. Iglesia San Hipólito, financial district, Mexico City, July 2011. Photograph by author.

children and I have observed even very young children expressing affection and tenderness for these child deities. At the San Hipólito shrine, a young toddler, perhaps two years old, hugged, kissed, and caressed the face of a small plaster image of a child Tadeo. The boy gazed into the face of the small statue, studying its features for long minutes: locked eye to eye, he was enraptured. The mother vigilantly labored to keep the plaster image from tumbling out of the boy's grip and crashing to the ground. Indeed the image was already very chipped from use. "*Es mía* [it is mine]!" the boy repeated possessively as he yanked his mother's protective hands away from the image. Gathered around the scene, other pilgrims looked on with gentle admiration. "He already has so much love for the image," I observe aloud. "Yes, yes he does," she replies as the crowd continues to smile, nodding appreciatively encouraging the boy's fledgling devotion. In the Mexican Catholic analogical imagination, images are understood to be living embodiments of the sacred, material forms marked both by potency and frailty, a combination that evokes feelings of tender regard and care in devotees.

CRADLING BEFORE THE CONQUEST: RITUAL ENGAGEMENT WITH THE
MATERIAL PANENTHEON IN MESOAMERICAN CULTURAL PRACTICE

I now turn my attention to a discussion of Mesoamerican cradling rites before the conquest in which the cradler and cradled object were wedded together in a ritual embrace. Together human devotee and cradled infant bundle constituted a dyadic pair that defined one of the fundamentals of Mesoamerican religions: the religious union of human beings with material numina as the locus of sacred and transformative power. Representations of ritual cradling from the long pre-Hispanic period can be found carved in bas-relief, large as life, onto great limestone panels, temple piers, and basalt monumental sculptures. They are also cut into lintels, incised onto small jadeite celts, sculpted as diminutive figurines, and painted onto brilliantly colored murals.

I trace the archeological evidence chronologically, beginning with an examination of Olmec depictions of cradled babies and other sacred object-entities on the altars at La Venta, in the Las Limas figure, on jade celts from Río Pesquero, and in figurines from various sites. My attentions then turn to the historically subsequent Maya: cradling rites are depicted in the murals of San Bartolo and on reliefs and tablets from Palenque. I conclude with a reflection on analogous ritual practices appearing in subsequent Mesoamerican indigenous cultures. Two distinct forms of cradling are represented in the record, one in which the infant or cradled object lies on two outstretched arms, and one in which the object is supported gently in the crook of an arm. In my interpretation of these sources, the major Mesoamerican formative cultures, the Olmec and the Maya, engaged in the ceremonial cradling of various types

of sacred objects and object-entities, including effigies, sacred bundles, celts, ceremonial bars, and scepters. Later cultural groups, including the Huasteca, the Nahuatl, and others, participated in analogous ritual traditions in which material sacra were held, carried, handled, or otherwise ritually manipulated in ways that asserted and emphasized their dependent status as divine infants and similarly affected the cultural association of sacredness, religious materiality, and infancy. In these and other preconquest Mesoamerican cultures, the ritual relationship between human beings and material numina creates, opens, and occupies the potent, liminal boundary between celestial and terrestrial realms.

The materials and sources under analysis here indicate that cradling may have been one of the earliest ritual practices in the Americas for which evidence exists. However, these diverse materials have never been considered as a group, nor has cradling been recognized or interpreted as a distinct ritual practice within Mesoamerican religion. Instead, two interpretations have dominated the individual study of particular works examined here. The first interpretive line emphasizes sacrificial traditions and imagines that the cradled entity is a deceased victim of child sacrifice or some other inert ceremonial object somehow being “offered.” As early as 1995, Patricia McNany criticized the preoccupation of Mesoamericanists with the theme of human sacrifice, which she perceived as being applied too loosely and too frequently in interpretations of the material cultural record.¹⁸ Yet her criticism seems to have done little to foster alternative analyses. The second and most often circulated interpretation is a political one, concluding that the sources in question represent the ceremonial performance of elite claims to political power and royal lineage.¹⁹ It seems clear that cradling was a potent ritual that could function to imbue the cradler with political or other forms of social power, for example, in the cradling of ceremonial bars and scepters as I discuss below. However at no point did the sacrificial or political meanings encompass all of its ritual or symbolic potency, even in the context of coronation and ascension rituals.

¹⁸ Patricia McNany, *Living with the Ancestors: Kinship and Kingship in Ancient Maya Society* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1995), 62–63 and passim.

¹⁹ For example, see Christina Halperin’s labor to recover the political significance of domestic figurines in Petén, Guatemala, in order to measure the reach of the state. Christina Halperin, “Figurines as Bearers of and Burdens in Late Classic Maya State Politics,” in *Mesoamerican Figurines: Small-Scale Indices of Large-Scale Social Phenomena*, ed. Christina T. Halperin, Katherine A. Faust, Rhonda Taube, and Aurore Giguet (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2009). Kent Reilly similarly emphasizes the political significance of cradling scepters as in the figurine known as “Slim” in “Iconographic Influences on the Symbols of Maya Rulership: An Examination of Possible Sources,” in *Sixth Palenque Round Table*, ed. Virginia Fields (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991).

The sacrificial and political lenses have dominated scholarly interpretations of the archeological record to the exclusion of other interpretations. Rarely have we received more nuanced analyses that center on the profoundly religious nature of such phenomena and embed these religious rites within a complex cosmological and cultural frame. In spite of the astonishingly rich archeological record that includes many dozens if not hundreds of depictions of religious rituals engaging effigies and images, many scholars of Mesoamerica appear to be reluctant to or simply disinterested in drawing on this data to identify and interpret religious ritual practice or belief. In fact, critics inside the field, most notably Kent Flannery, have commented on the absence of theoretical frameworks for the interpretation of religious phenomena in Mesoamerican archeology more generally.²⁰

My analysis of these “abundant objects” takes seriously the distinctly religious nature of the phenomena under consideration. Bringing to bear the tools of religious studies in the interpretation of these sources, my discussion of cradling rites emphasizes the animate and agentic nature of the objects, the religious experience of the person doing the cradling, the power of the ritual to transform the identity of the object as well as the person, and the cosmological function of the ritual. As in the ethnographic present, cradling in the pre-Hispanic period is better comprehended as a pluripotent devotional posture that is often accompanied by an attitude of reverence and care and sometimes tenderness for particular material manifestations of the sacred. Furthermore, the ritual of cradling or carrying simultaneously activates, acknowledges, and maintains the sacredness of the object-entities being cradled. Effigies, images, and bundles are not just instruments of power to be wielded by human agents but are themselves numinous entities, persons, and actants whose vital potency and dependent vulnerability are both asserted and honored in these rites.

In the vital materialist religious cultures of Mesoamerica, the Western ontological distinction between being and matter does not exist, and the sacred is encountered first and foremost in its penetration and animation of the material world. While not all the cradled objects under scrutiny here can be precisely understood as deities, they do all belong to what I term the Mesoamerican “pantheon”: the entire conglomeration and congregation of sacred thing-beings that includes natural, geological, and worked objects as well as particular sites, plants, and animals recognized as “special” (to borrow Ann Taves’s

²⁰ Flannery writes, “Mesoamerican archeology has absolutely no coherent and consistent theoretical framework by means of which ritual or religious data can be analyzed and interpreted”; see Kent V. Flannery, “Interregional Religious Networks,” in *The Early Mesoamerican Village: Archeological Research Strategy for an Endangered Species*, ed. Kent V. Flannery (New York: Academic, 1982), 331.

recent designation).²¹ Within this ontological frame, human beings do not simply engage the pantheon as devotees but rather recognize that they are themselves encompassed within and coidentified with it: humans are also thing-beings, particular kinds of en fleshed persons relating to other kinds of materially manifest persons (i.e., object-deities) through lived religious practice.²² Most important, the cradling gesture embodies and communicates the reciprocal relationship between these divine beings and their human devotees.

This approach yields a distinct set of interpretations of the art historical record. Consider, for example, the carved lintels from the Yaxchilán Maya archeological site in Chiapas, Mexico, dating from the eighth century CE, depicting a series of public ritual performances. Similar in composition to ritual scenes represented at other Maya sites in which humans appear holding or otherwise engaging small effigies, Lintel 3, shown in figure 7, depicts the ritual manipulation of two diminutive effigies of the god K'awiil by the Maya king Bird Jaguar IV and his governor. Traditional interpretations of these lintels have described the small effigies as scepters that are wielded by human actors—focusing attention wholly on human action and agency. Yet, the original artist's attention focuses instead on the effigies themselves that occupy the center of the ritual scene. While the human actors are nearly motionless, casting their eyes downward, the two effigies greet one another in a face-to-face encounter, gesticulating and touching hands—seemingly more alive and animate than their human counterparts. The ritual actions depicted here are not dissimilar from those performed in figure 6. Small effigies like these, including those misnamed “manikin scepters” in the archeological literature, cannot be fully comprehended as inanimate, wielded, “offered,” or “presented” objects, but rather in many cases should be understood as numinous entities who themselves observe, bless, receive blessing, or otherwise interact with other persons in a given ritual context. This interpretation is consistent with the analysis of Linda Schele and others that identify K'awiil scepters as one of the “most venerable and popular soul containers wielded by Maya lords.”²³ Evon Vogt describes such ensouled staffs as “newborn infants” in need of special ritual protection.²⁴ K'awiil's serpent leg is not so

²¹ Ann Taves, *Religious Experience Reconsidered: A Building-Block Approach to the Study of Religion and Other Special Things* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011).

²² For a publication that takes seriously the notion of the personhood of objects, see Miguel Angel Astor-Aguilera, *The Maya World of Communicating Objects: Quadripartite Crosses, Trees, and Stones* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2011).

²³ David Friedel, Linda Schele, and Joy Parker, *Maya Cosmos: Three Thousand Years on the Shaman's Path* (New York: Morrow, 1993), 272.

²⁴ Evon Vogt describes the “staff of office” as having a “strong inner soul which is placed in it by the Ancestral Gods, and like a newborn infant, a newly acquired staff must be baptized to lock the soul in and guard against soul-loss”; Friedel, Schele, and Parker, *Maya Cosmos*, 270, quoting

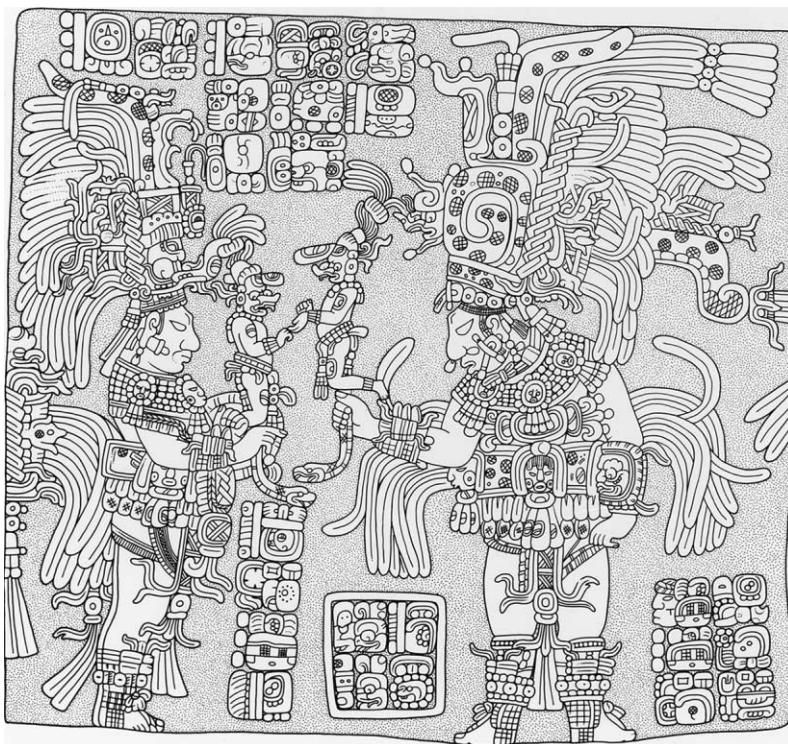


FIG. 7.—The Maya infant god K'awil in the form of a “manikin scepter,” Yaxchilán, Lintel 3, underside. Chiapas, Mexico, eighth century. Drawing by Ian Graham, © President and Fellows of Harvard College, Peabody Museum of Archeology and Ethnology, PM#2004.15.6.5.3 (digital file #99200055).

much a “handle,” as other scholars have described it, but rather his elongated serpent foot is, in my interpretation, a sort of conductor rod through which the human actors enliven the effigy. My analysis of Lintel 3 reflects an approach that I sustain in my reinterpretation of some of the most important works of Mesoamerican sacred art.

FROM WERE-JAGUAR BABIES TO EMBRYO AXES: INTERPRETING THE INFANT
CULT IN OLMEC CULTURE

Olmec culture is the earliest complex culture in Mesoamerica, long understood to be the *cultura madre*, the generative mother culture of Mexico. The

an unpublished manuscript by Vogt titled “Indian Crosses and Scepters: The Results of Circumscribed Spanish-Indian Interactions in Mesoamerica.”

Olmec first emerged as a distinct culture sometime around 1500 BCE in the area of the contemporary Mexican states of Veracruz and Tabasco. By 1200 BCE, they were a complexly organized, socially stratified society with relatively widespread geographic influence. This influence was facilitated through regional trade as well as through multiple ceremonial centers defining a trans-local and regional religious nexus.²⁵ The Olmec were the first in Mesoamerica to create stone monuments, but certainly the portable images that I examine here did at least as much to facilitate the transmission of the Olmec religious cosmovision that was fully materialized in them.

The greatest evidence for a cradling tradition among the Olmec dates to the middle formative period from about 900 to 400 BCE, in which scholars identify a preoccupation with childlike forms in the archeological record, leading them to hypothesize an infant-deity cult. In fact, baby-faced iconography was one of the original markers used to identify an object as belonging to Olmec culture.²⁶ Many of these fantastic and otherworldly (not quite human) infants have long been homogenized as were-jaguar babies, although this designation has been recently challenged.²⁷ Subsequent interpretations have variously identified these figures as were-toad mothers, humanoid crocodilian creatures, supernatural dwarves, infant maize gods, and so forth.²⁸ Most recently, art historian and curator Carolyn Tate has offered a highly suggestive new interpretation of many well-known Olmec works that she rereads as evidence for a cultural preoccupation with various embryonic and fetal stages of human gestational development. That is, Tate sees many of these infant-beings not as other worldly human-animal hybrids but as representations of human embryos, embryo axes, and children wearing embryo masks.²⁹ Tate's conclusions have been contested by other scholars in the field, yet the resemblance of some of these figures (especially some of those previously designated as "squatting" or "dwarf" figures) to the human fetus is so striking that it is perplexing that Tate is the first to suggest or contemplate the possibility.

²⁵ F. Kent Reilly, "Art, Ritual, and Rulership in the Olmec World," in *The Olmec World: Ritual and Rulership*, ed. Michael D. Coe (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995), 29.

²⁶ David Grove, "Olmec Archeology: A Half Century of Research and Its Accomplishments," *Journal of World Prehistory* 11, no. 1 (1997): 53.

²⁷ Miguel Covarrubias, "El arte Olmeca o de La Venta," *Cuadernos Americanos* 4 (1946): 153–79, esp. 178. See also Agustín Delgado, "Infantile and Jaguar Traits in Olmec Sculpture," *Archeology* 18, no. 1 (1965): 55–62.

²⁸ For decades, were-jaguar dominated the interpretation of Olmec culture so that many deities were misrecognized by archeologists as were-jaguar when in fact they were not. Mary Ellen Miller and Karl Taube argue instead that the were-jaguar is really only evident in his infant form as rain god; see *The Gods and Symbols of Ancient Mexico and the Maya: An Illustrated Dictionary of Mesoamerican Religion* (New York: Thames & Hudson, 1993), 185.

²⁹ Carolyn Tate, *Reconsidering Olmec Visual Culture: The Unborn, Women, and Creation* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2012), 55–58.

Although the exact nature of these babies is profoundly significant for understanding Olmec culture and religion, their precise identity does not significantly affect my argument about cradling rites, at least not at this stage of interpretation. For my purposes, they can be regarded as diverse representations of anthropomorphic infant sacred beings with some nonhuman features.³⁰ After many years endorsing the were-jaguar interpretation, Mesoamericanist Peter Joralemon subsequently came to a similarly inclusive categorization, writing about these figures as “composite mythological creatures with celestial and telluric aspects.”³¹

Although babies appear in many forms in the Olmec archeological record, here I focus on sculpted depictions in which an adult personage (a divine guardian or human devotee) cradles an otherworldly or otherwise not-completely-human infant, either in a presentational gesture on two arms held out or cradled in the nook of an arm. At least some of the Olmec cradled babies share common features: gaping downturned mouth, large almond eyes, oversized (often cleft) head. The gaping or snarling maw of some of these figures was previously designated one of the identifying characteristics of the were-jaguar. Today, scholars have proposed that it is, rather, a more generic marker of divine status.³² Among the most revealing evidence for cradling are the bas-reliefs on the basalt altars (or thrones) at the La Venta archeological site in Tabasco, the Las Limas monument from Veracruz, and several exemplary sculpted figurines and celts of Olmec provenance. Taken together, these sources suggest that the Olmec culture included a tradition of cradling effigies, ceremonial bars, scepters, and bundles in diverse ritual contexts.

At its apogee from 900 to 500 BCE, La Venta was the largest and most important Olmec cultural and civic city, a religiopolitical power center with far-reaching influence. The site is dominated by a large ceremonial center organized on a north-south axis. Along this axis were constructed several stelae and figurative monuments, four colossal heads, dozens of ritual mounds (or platforms), a stone tomb, a pyramid, and a number of other complexes of clustered earthen structures. Among these structures were seven massive, basalt monumental thrones, four of which are paired together in mutually referential engagements with the cradling theme.

³⁰ Here I use the term “deity” in the broadest and most inclusive sense (animate, otherworldly sacred entities).

³¹ Tate, *Reconsidering Olmec Visual Culture*, 26.

³² Karl Taube explains, “Rather than alluding to an ancestral union of human and jaguar, the jaguar maw probably marks potent supernatural beings.” That is, the downturned, curved jaguar mouth may be a more generic symbol of spiritual power; see *Olmec Art at Dumbarton Oaks*, Pre-Columbian Art at Dumbarton Oaks, no. 2 (Washington, DC: Dumbarton Oaks and Trustees for Harvard University, 2004), 34.

Throne 5, the least eroded and most visually complex of the thrones is a quadrilateral, basalt monument two meters high and almost four meters wide. The west-facing panel is carved in high relief with two lateral panels, north and south, in low relief. Panel 1, the frontal view of the altar/throne, shows a larger-than-life-size human figure in high relief cradling an anthropomorphic infant in his lap. As seen in figure 8, the seated adult figure inclines slightly as he emerges from a recessed niche, widely accepted to be the mouth of a cave, with the child in his arms. The infant lies in still repose, reclining on the adult's outstretched arms. The lateral panels, 2 and 3, are nearly identical to each other in content: each shows two adult figures holding a pair of active toddlers. One toddler stands, while the other is seated on his guardian's lap. The south-facing side panel, shown in figure 9, is better preserved: here each child is shown with an arm draped over the corresponding adult's shoulder. The naked, chubby children appear human, except for their distorted heads and faces, which feature oversize, extended foreheads, almond-shaped eyes, and exaggerated, downturned mouths.³³ The chubby twins appear elsewhere in Mesoamerican iconography.

Interpretations of Panel 1 have focused on the image as a representation of mythological origin. The motif of an adult figure at the mouth of a cave or cavern appears on other thrones at La Venta, some bearing children and others not. Human emergence from a cave of origins is one of the anchoring narratives of Mesoamerican cosmogonic mythologies and is variously represented in Maya and Central Mexican cultures, for example, in Aztec paintings of the Chicomoztoc, or cave of cosmogonic emergence. Such caves were sacred gateways, "allowing for supernatural forces of life, water and fertility to emerge from the underworld to the surface of the earth and sky."³⁴ The motif of a person cradling a sacred bundle in the mouth of a cave appears at later epi-Olmec sites. For example, the most famous relief from the archeological site at Chalcatzingo in the Mexican state of Morelos, dating from around 700 to 500 BCE, depicts a life-size representation of an elaborately adorned human figure seated at the mouth of a cave and cradling a highly stylized and abstracted rain cloud. The similarities with the La Venta altar are unmistakable, as archeologist Karl Taube notes.³⁵

With respect to the reclining infant on La Venta Throne 5, interpretations have focused almost exclusively on the theme of child sacrifice. Beatriz de la

³³ Tate describes them as "feisty embryo-headed toddlers . . . children who have been granted wondrous transformative power" (*Reconsidering Olmec Visual Culture*, 196).

³⁴ Karl Taube, "Gateways to Another World: The Symbolism of Supernatural Passageways in the Art and Ritual of Mesoamerica and the American Southwest," in *Painting the Cosmos: Metaphor and Worldview in Images from the Southwest Pueblos and Mexico*, ed. Kelley Hays-Gilpin and Polly Schaafsma, MNA Bulletin 67 (Flagstaff: Museum of Northern Arizona, 2010), 118.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 79–82.



FIG. 8.—Cradling an infant effigy (Olmec), Altar 5, Panel 1, La Venta, Tabasco, Mexico, circa 600–400 BCE. Photograph by Ruben Charles.



FIG. 9.—Squirming toddler twins (Olmec), Altar 5, Panel 2, La Venta, Tabasco, Mexico, circa 600–400 BCE. Photograph by Ruben Charles.

Fuente's analysis reflects this general approach. She observes of the infant: "Its lack of animation seems to indicate, in spite of its open eyes, that it is profoundly sleeping or newly dead. The scene may represent a precious offering, as in the blood of Christ; in Olmec iconography, it is the sacrificed supernatural child."³⁶ According to this interpretive line, the large stone throne is a sacrificial altar, the stage upon which actual child sacrifice was performed. Contemplating the monument as a whole, some have seen the three panels as indicating the contrast between life and death, between the living child and the sacrificed infant: "The contrast between the postures of these figures cannot be accidental: some embody life, the others seem to be dead."³⁷ Thus, the lateral panels with the squirming toddlers are interpreted to show the moment before sacrifice while the front panel, with the cradled, motionless infant, reveals the moment after sacrifice has been completed. One scholar imagines the movements of the squirming toddlers as "frantic," presumably as they resist their impending violent end.³⁸

The sacrificial interpretation cannot encompass the full significance of this and other similar works of Olmec sacred art, in particular because it does not take seriously the vital materialist culture of Mesoamerica, nor does it allow for the broader religious complex that frames the practice. The womb-like cave is indeed the location of cosmogonic emergence. The adult figure is both god-bearer and midwife, delivering the primordial infant from the otherworldly realm into the realm of human action. At the same time, in binding human and material entities, the ritual cradling act itself caused the gateway between worlds to open. The slight incline of the adult figure can be interpreted either as a reverential bow or as a protective gesture. Here, the cradling act is formalized as a significant ritual gesture for honoring sacred beings and sacred objects, indicating honor as well as parental care, guidance, and protection, enacting the reciprocal relationship between human beings and material entities.

The side panels, in which two human guardians hold active, squirming, toddlers on their laps, present ritual postures that can be read as similarly indicating care and possibly also affection for these infant deities. These chubby infants literally wiggle with life: their guardians expend effort to steady and contain them. Their movements are not "frantic," as is evident by the casual way each toddler drapes their arm around their guardian. The interpretation I propose of the panels and their relationship is that together they contemplate

³⁶ Beatriz de la Fuente and Nelly Gutiérrez Solana, *Escultura huasteca en piedra: catálogo* (Mexico City: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 1980), 45; translation mine.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 46.

³⁸ Billie J. A. Follensbee, "Formative Period Gulf Coast Ceramic Figures: The Key to Identifying Sex, Gender, and Age Groups in Gulf Coast Olmec Images," in Halperin et al., *Mesoamerican Figurines*, 108.

the distinction between inanimate object and living matter, between stasis and motion, and between the icon and its prototype or referent.³⁹ That is, the motionless, “inanimate” cradled infant may appear as the lifeless divine effigy, rigid as the rock from which it is carved. Although the infant effigy appears static and frozen in stone, like so many carved Olmec figurines, the cosmic reality to which it points is discovered on the lateral panels.

The vital materialism of this effigy is only properly understood in reference to the cosmic actions occurring on Panels 2 and 3. In the cosmic plane, the infant effigy is a moving, living (even squirming) entity. This interpretation is supported by the stylistic differences in the two panels: the dimensionality of Panel 1 in contrast to the low relief of the lateral panels.⁴⁰ The La Venta altar provides an interpretive frame for the cradling rite by contemplating the distinction between earthly actions and their celestial referents: while we may observe the rigid form, a static object, cradled stiffly in our arms, we are to understand that what we hold is a dynamic, sentient, and vital child, a sacred entity for whom we must care.⁴¹

Ritual cradling appears in other significant Olmec works. The Las Limas figure from Veracruz is one of the most studied Olmec works and an interpretive anchor for Olmec iconography.⁴² The monument, carved in greenstone, measures 21 5/8 inches high and is roughly coterminous with the La Venta images, from around 600 BCE. Much like the throne reliefs at La Venta, the Las Limas monument, shown in figure 10, shows a seated figure holding a celestial infant on his lap. The reclining infant appears here again with a human body and fantastic head: almond eyes, gaping, downturned mouth, and cleft forehead.⁴³

Discovered by two children in 1965, the Las Limas figure was subsequently exhumed from the earth. Local indigenous Christians erected it upon an altar and adored it as an image of the Virgin Mary for its clear resonance

³⁹ For example, in Von Winning’s analysis of a ceramic pot that depicts seven figures in linear procession, four of those (identified as “*portadores*”) are carrying smaller figures, some dead and some alive, or, I would argue, some in stasis and some in motion. Hasso Von Winning, “Procession of God-Bearers: Notes on the Iconography of Classic Veracruz Mold-Imprinted Pottery,” in *Pre-Columbian Art History: Selected Readings*, ed. Alana Cordy-Collins and Jean Stern (Palo Alto, CA: Peek, 1986), 6.

⁴⁰ As Tate explains, “Olmec sculptors used various techniques to suggest temporal displacement, cosmic spatial frameworks, and narrative action” (*Reconsidering Olmec Visual Culture*, 200).

⁴¹ Art historian Carolyn Dean, who has spent some time considering the paradox of living stone and enlivened rock, affirmed my interpretation of Throne 5 in her response to my paper on this topic presented at the 2012 Latin American Studies Congress.

⁴² Peter David Joralemon, “In Search of the Olmec Cosmos: Reconstructing the World View of Mexico’s First Civilization,” in *Olmec Art of Ancient Mexico*, ed. Elizabeth Benson and Beatriz de la Fuente (Washington, DC: National Gallery of Art, 1996), 53–54.

⁴³ The clearly cleft head of the infant is associated with rain, storms, and agricultural plants—throughout Mesoamerica the cleft is a common symbol for maize.



FIG. 10.—Cradling effigy in stasis (Olmec), Las Limas monument. Veracruz, Mexico, 900–400 BCE. Catálogo digital/Museo de Antropología de Xalapa; used with permission.

with the Christian motif of the Madonna and Child: the *Virgen de las Limas*. As with the La Venta thrones, archeologists have offered both political and sacrificial interpretations of the Las Limas figure. The adult figure is said to be presenting the child for sacrifice, although it is not made clear to whom such an object is being offered or for what purpose. Others identifying the Las Limas infant as the were-jaguar have argued that as such the infant is

“the principal emblem of rulership, the divine ancestor, the progenitor and protector of the ruling Olmec lineage.”⁴⁴ The Las Limas child is also frequently described as inert, limp, or dead. I reject these interpretations, suggesting again that the gesture is not one of presentation or sacrifice but rather of ritual devotion. The sacred object-entity is in fact the recipient of human devotion: the infant is not offered, but he himself receives the offering and honor inherent in the cradling gesture.

In Las Limas, the supernatural infant is neither sacrificed nor dead but rather may be understood to appear here again in its effigy form. Elizabeth Boone demonstrates that it is possible to distinguish effigies, or various material representations of deities, from their celestial referents, in the context of Aztec pictographic codices.⁴⁵ As an effigy, the infant is motionless and in stasis—not limp, but rigid. The Las Limas cradling gesture both acknowledges the life within the effigy and recognizes the mystery of living matter. The infant is no more “dead” than is the young man who cradles him. Indeed there is a resonance between the two entwined images, a shared monumental presence that reflects their joined union: both are static and poised, eyes open, with parted lips curving downward. The representation of rigid stasis in Las Limas refers to the paradoxical union of matter and being. The effigy is ensouled stone: at once static and inert and pulsating with life. Other Olmec works make explicit the vitality of the infant effigy. A jade figurine depicts the same fantastical infant being in effigy form but held in a variation of the cradling theme: the chubby infant is presented face forward toward the viewer, dangling awkwardly between the bearer’s arms. Here the infant effigy is not in stasis but appears dynamic and in motion, actively supporting himself in the arms of his carrier.⁴⁶

The motif of the cradled, rigid infant effigy appears elsewhere in the Olmec figurative tradition. There are striking resonances between the La Venta reliefs, the Las Limas monument, and smaller, carved stone figurines. Take, for example, a carved serpentine figurine 4 1/2 inches high, also dating from the middle formative period (fig. 11); a person seated on a throne cradles the celestial human infant on his lap. Joralemon has also noted the remarkable rigidity of this particular figurine as well as other cradled infants and has searched for interpretations other than sacrificial death, comparing

⁴⁴ Benson and de la Fuente, *Olmec Art of Ancient Mexico*, 211.

⁴⁵ Boone does as much in her study of Huitzilopochtli and his various manifestations in sixteenth-century codices. That is, she is able to identify *tzoalli* (larger-than-life molded representations made of amaranth dough) in at least three different codices (Duran, Sahagun, and the Codex Magliabechiano); see Elizabeth H. Boone, “Incarnations of the Aztec Supernatural: The Image of Huitzilopochtli in Mexico and Europe,” *Transactions of the American Philosophical Society* 79, no. 2 (1989): 1–107.

⁴⁶ See “Standing Figure Carrying Were-Jaguar Baby” (Middle Formative, jade, 8 5/8 inches), fig. 48 in Benson and de la Fuente, *Olmec Art of Ancient Mexico*, 210.



FIG. 11.—Seated figure on throne cradling an infant bundle (Olmec), figurine. 900–500 BCE. Metropolitan Museum of Art, Michael C. Rockefeller Memorial Collection, bequest of Nelson A. Rockefeller, 1979. <http://www.metmuseum.org>; used with permission.

the stiffness and immobility of the infants to the rigidity of ceremonial bars and bundles.⁴⁷

An important variation of the cradling motif appears in many Olmec figurines and incised celts: rather than infants, the human figures are shown cradling diverse nonfigurative, abstracted objects identified in the literature as scepters, ceremonial bars, or rigid bundles. Literally hundreds of small, portable Olmec celts with incised imagery, including ritual and cosmological scenes, have been found, over 370 at La Venta alone.⁴⁸ Their various meanings and uses have not been fully ascertained. Some have described Olmec celts as ornamental agricultural tools of both a decorative and possibly utilitarian nature. Others suggest that they served as a kind of currency for trade, while still others note their resemblance and connection to the large, monumental stelae.⁴⁹ I emphasize their ritual use as objects of sacred power, particularly with respect to those celts carved of the more rare, purer, and therefore more precious forms of stone. Depictions of humans engaged in ritual labor shown with celts bound to their limbs appear in the archeological record.⁵⁰ Divine and sacred figures also are shown with celts on their arms and legs, such as in the young male figurine known to archeologists as “Slim.”⁵¹ The ritual binding of sacred stone to the human body in this way deserves further attention and might help us to better understand the relationship between human flesh and living stone that inflects so many of Latin America’s indigenous religions.⁵²

The Río Pesquero jade celt (fig. 12) shows a powerful or divine personage, either a king wearing the accoutrement of an Olmec god or an anthropomorphized maize god. The anthropomorphic figure joins with other objects in forming a quincunx: maize kernels mark the four corners with the figure standing at the center marking the axis mundi. The motif of cradled ceremonial bundle and quincunx appears on at least one other celt from the Río Pesquero site. Here, the figure cradles a rigid snake bundle or serpent

⁴⁷ Joralemon has similarly suggested that the rigidity of these cradled figurines has a significance beyond sacrifice: of the Olmec cradling figurines he writes that “the remarkable rigidity of [the] baby is reminiscent of the ceremonial bar held in the lap of the elaborately costumed figure [such] as in Chalcatzingo Relief 1.” See Benson and de la Fuente, *Olmec Art of Ancient Mexico*, 218.

⁴⁸ Grove, “Olmec Archeology,” 61.

⁴⁹ Friedel, Schele, and Parker, *Maya Cosmos*, 137. We know, for example, that celts were paired with figurines in ceremonial contexts, such as La Venta offering 4, a cache of sixteen standing figurines posed and arranged with six standing incised celts, perhaps as part of a dedication ritual.

⁵⁰ Karl Taube, “The Olmec Maize God: The Face of Corn in Formative Mesoamerica,” *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics* 29/30 (1996): 39–81, 52.

⁵¹ Benson and de la Fuente, *Olmec Art of Ancient Mexico*, 213.

⁵² See, e.g., Carolyn Dean, *A Culture of Stone: Inka Perspectives on Rock* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010).



FIG. 12.—Maize god with rigid snake-bundle (Olmec), incised jade celt. Río Pesquero. 900–600 BCE. Drawing by Linda Schele; used courtesy of the Foundation for the Advancement of Mesoamerican Studies, Inc. (FAMSI).

scepter. Scholars have argued that the scepter and the positioning of the figure as the axis mundi, or world tree, symbolize a particular ruler's expressed claim to political power and earthly authority. Michael Coe may have been the first to argue that Olmec divine genealogies have long been understood as serving primarily to legitimize royal authority. Kent Reilly has continued to push this interpretive line, emphasizing the connection between kingship rituals and shamanic power.⁵³ Rather, I see the joined pair—the dyad of human subject (or anthropomorphized divinity) and material sacra joined in a ritual embrace—together forming the center of the cosmos. While it is true that political power often flows from and coincides with religious power, there is much more at stake in this formulation than a simple claim to political rule. Indeed, this celt reveals that the physical, ritual embrace of material numina opens and occupies a gateway between earthly and celestial realms.

Representations of cradled bars and bundles appear in other Olmec carved figurines, such as in one bearded figure cradling a ceremonial bar or bundle and in a carved serpentine figurine of a standing human figure cradling a maize ear fetish in one arm, as shown in figure 13.⁵⁴ Although all of the works I have considered thus far represent male cradlers, at least one ceremonial Olmec figure—a small hollow figurine twelve centimeters high from San Lorenzo that dates from the early formative period, around 1200 BCE—shows a woman, possibly a goddess, cradling an infant in her left arm.⁵⁵

The concept of cradling and its attendant cosmologies might provide a helpful context for interpreting poorly understood Olmec archeological objects and monuments. For example, Monument 41, shown on the left in figure 14, is one of the oldest and most perplexing monuments from the earliest Olmec site, San Lorenzo Tenochtitlán. Commonly referred to as “El Gigante” for its enormous size (about ten feet tall), it is a rounded, columnar monument showing an enormous sleeping or peacefully resting figure; a small smile may be perceived. The figure appears to be baby-faced: Tate has identified this monument as an embryo drawn on a phallus.⁵⁶ Most perplexing,

⁵³ Reilly writes, “Much of the value of the Olmec portable objects must have been in their ability to convey the iconography of this ideology. The right publicly to display and manipulate this iconography system may have been the motivation for elite participation throughout Mesoamerica in the Formative Period Ceremonial Complex”; see F. Kent Reilly, “The Shaman in a Transformational Pose: A Study of the Theme of Rulership in Olmec Art,” *Record of the Art Museum, Princeton University* 8, no. 2 (1989): 6.

⁵⁴ Karl Taube offers a study of various objects being held in “Lightning Celts and Corn Fetishes: The Formative Olmec and the Development of Maize Symbolism in Mesoamerican and the American Southwest,” in *Olmec Art and Archeology*, ed. John E. Clark and Mary E. Pye, Center for Advanced Study in the Visual Arts Symposium Papers 35 (Washington, DC: National Gallery of Art, 2000), 297–337.

⁵⁵ Michael Coe and Richard Diehl, *In the Land of the Olmec* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1980), 1:282, fig. 395.

⁵⁶ Tate, *Reconsidering Olmec Visual Culture*, 102.

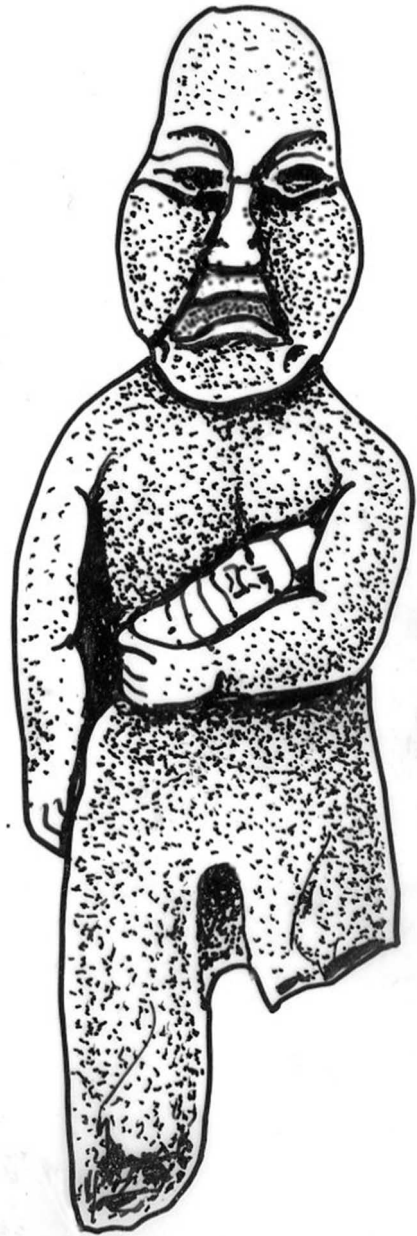


FIG. 13.—Figure cradling a maize ear bundle (Olmec), provenance unknown. Drawing by Karl Taube; used with permission.



Fig. 14.—Cradled infant bundle from “El Gigante” monument (left) as compared with the beholder’s view of the Las Limas infant bundle (right). “El Gigante” Monument 41 (Olmec), San Lorenzo Tenochtitlán, circa 1200–900 BCE. Drawing by author. Las Limas monument (Olmec), Veracruz, Mexico, 900–400 BCE, Catálogo digital/Museo de Antropología de Xalapa; used with permission.

the only other visible feature on the monument is a large, disembodied hand placed on top of a far smaller hand and forearm. One interpretation suggests that “the crab pincer appearance of the hand is due to the superimposition of the enlarged left hand over a withered right arm.”⁵⁷ With the intention of being suggestive rather than conclusive, I propose that this large monument may represent a cradled infant bundle in which a large being or person (represented only by the abstracted, disembodied hand) wraps an arm around the smaller entity’s swaddled form in a nurturing embrace. The juxtaposition of El Gigante with Las Limas (fig. 14) underscores this interpretation. The distinct perspective of the photograph on the right reveals the Las Limas infant bundle from the point of view of the cradler. Note the contrast in the size of the infant’s hand with that of the adult devotee who honor’s him. The El Gigante monument, with its vast size, speaks to the paradoxical contrast between infancy and divine power in Olmec cosmology. This same contrast is evident in the Maya archeological record, as I explore in the following section.

CRADLING RITES AMONG THE MAYA: CARE AND AFFECTION FROM THE MAIZE
INFANT TO THE DIMINUTIVE GOD, K’AWIIL

Evidence of cradling rites exists for the later Maya in the preclassic and classic periods, at two archeological sites in particular: San Bartolo, in the Petén in northern Guatemala, dating to as early as 100 BCE, and classic-era depictions at Palenque, from around 600 CE, in the modern-day Mexican state of Chiapas. At these sites, one finds evidence of the ritual cradling of ceremonial bars and bundles as well as of an infant-maize deity. My discussion of Maya practice focuses mostly on cradling rites engaging the infant god K’awiil, a motif that figures prominently at Palenque in several striking reliefs. In devotion to K’awiil we find the clearest evidence for the religious emotions that likely accompanied the ritual act of caring for infant-effigies. That is to say, the archeological record for the Maya offers more data from which we may hypothesize religio-affective postures than is afforded by the Olmec record.

Maya territories were extensive, reaching beyond Olmec areas to the north, east, and south, and encompassing the greater part of southern Mexico, Guatemala, and the Yucatan peninsula. The extent of Olmec influence on Maya and other subsequent Mesoamerican cultures is contested, but evidence is strongest for Olmec influence at the earliest Maya sites.⁵⁸ Indeed, the earliest evidence for a cradling tradition among the Maya comes from the recently

⁵⁷ Coe and Diehl, *In the Land of the Olmec*, vol. 1. For another discussion of the El Gigante monument, see Ann Cyphers, *Escultura Olmeca de San Lorenzo Tenochtitlán*. (Mexico City: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 2004).

⁵⁸ See, e.g., the discussion of the Olmec as “the Maya inheritors” in Friedel, Schele, and Parker, *Maya Cosmos*, 138–39.

excavated site at San Bartolo, the location of the oldest Maya murals yet discovered. These extraordinary early classic murals appear on the walls of the room at the base of the temple pyramid, and they contain elaborate depictions of at least two creation myths with strong evidence of Olmec influence.

Cradling rites appear at San Bartolo on three mutually referential figures in a scene appearing at the center and extending to the right third of the west wall. A standing human figure cradling a flailing infant with arms outstretched is flanked on either side by a royal figure seated on a scaffold-throne. Each of the two seated figures cradles a distinctive ceremonial scepter-like object in what is likely a coronation ritual: each receives a headdress. The Maya archaeological record contains numerous representations of the cradling of so-called ceremonial bars and scepters. Yaxchilán Stela 10 shows a celestial pair of royal ancestors cradling animal-headed bars, or “scepters.”⁵⁹ Stela 31 at the Tikal site depicts a Maya ruler cradling a “scroll baby” with a large head in his left arm.⁶⁰ Lintel 1 at the Lacanjá site shows a seated governor cradling a long double-headed bar with K’awiil’s face at either end.⁶¹

In the San Bartolo mural, the scepter-cradling gesture of the coronation ritual draws much of its significance from the central figure standing between them. Knee-deep in water, a standing figure embraces a reclining infant, the maize god, in the ritual cradling posture.⁶² The reclining maize infant, arms thrown over his head, writhes with life, nestled safely in the cradlers arms.⁶³ This ritual gesture provides the cosmological and religious referent for the coronation rite as depicted at San Bartolo. The childlike maize god appears elsewhere in Maya iconography, including on two painted vessels in which he reclines in the infant pose.⁶⁴ The status of maize as divine infant persists in subsequent Mesoamerican cultures, as I discuss below.

Although further analysis of the San Bartolo murals must remain pending, it is possible to contextualize the cradled infant scene within Maya iconography and cosmology more generally. In particular, the scene should be

⁵⁹ David Freidel and Linda Schele, *A Forest of Kings: The Untold Story of the Ancient Maya* (New York: Morrow, 1990), 86.

⁶⁰ For a discussion of the scroll baby at Tikal, see Joyce Marcus, *Emblem and State in the Classic Maya Lowlands: An Epigraphic Approach to the Classic Maya Lowlands* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1976), 117.

⁶¹ Freidel and Schele, *Forest of Kings*, 89.

⁶² Taube identifies the infant as the maize god, based on the distinctive features of his “curved cranium, slanted eyes, and projecting upper lip” and references other similar depictions of the birth of the maize god in standing water; see Karl A. Taube, William A. Saturno, David Stuart, and Heather Hurst, *The Murals of San Bartolo, El Petén, Guatemala, Part 2: The West Wall* (Barnardsville, NC: Center for Ancient American Studies, 2010), 70–71.

⁶³ The infant with raised arms often indicates life and animacy, I argue. See, e.g., the infant bundle with raised hand carried as a backburden in the carved reliefs at El Tajín, in Vera Cruz.

⁶⁴ Andrea Stone and Marc Zender, *Reading Maya Art: A Hieroglyphic Guide to Ancient Maya Painting and Sculpture* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2011).

framed in relation to the Maya understanding that cosmic power, divine infancy, and sacred materiality are wedded together in a potent yet paradoxical relationship. The Maya understood that diverse ritual practices, including common bloodletting rituals such as those shown elsewhere in the San Bartolo murals, were used to open otherworldly portals, allowing human beings to engage with materially manifest deities and ancestors. That is, bloodletting and other rituals served to make manifest and materialize divine beings. According to Schele, the Maya conceived of specific ritual processes as giving “birth to the god or ancestor, enabling it to take physical form in this plane of existence,” ultimately to make these available for human engagement and interaction.⁶⁵

Not dissimilar to the Olmec, among the Maya, human ritual actors were thus midwives who ushered images into life. After an image was birthed, human devotees assumed the role of nurturing parents to the materially manifest god. The *Popol Vuh*, the Maya myth of origins, recounts the struggle of the gods to create beings who could “reciprocate their love and care by returning nourishment to their [divine] creators.” The gods finally succeeded when they formed human beings from maize dough and water: humans were perfectly able to worship their creators by providing “sustenance for their gods by ‘suckling’ them,” for example, through the rituals of bloodletting and sacrifice.⁶⁶ That is, within Maya cosmology the model for human devotion to the sacred is that of a nurturing parent, a nursing mother who provides loving care for gods who understand themselves to be dependent and vulnerable children. The motif of human devotee suckling a divine infant appears elsewhere in Mesoamerican pre-Hispanic art. In the San Bartolo mural, we can understand the human guardian as shepherding this divine infant into life, even as he is now responsible to care for, nurture, nourish, and protect him.

Perhaps the most important cradling images in the Maya archeological record are those depicting ritual engagement with the infant god K’awiil. We previously encountered K’awiil in his apparition as an effigy scepter in the Yaxchilán lintels, as in Lintel 3. K’awiil appears in many diminutive forms and postures in Maya iconography—all of which, I argue, emphasize or articulate his status as divine, but dependent, infant—including riding his manikin scepter, seated on the outstretched hand of a lord, seated in a lap, or carried on a devotee’s or caretaker’s back.⁶⁷ K’awiil is recognizable by his serpent foot, which often appears curled and in motion, and his masked head with flared or flanged snout. The serpent foot is his *way* (animal spirit com-

⁶⁵ Freidel and Schele, *Forest of Kings*, 89.

⁶⁶ Freidel, Schele, and Parker, *Maya Cosmos*, 195.

⁶⁷ See Taube, *The Major Gods of Ancient Yucatan* (Washington, DC: Dumbarton Oaks, 1992), 84, fig. 41.

panion).⁶⁸ Although he is sometimes shown as an adult, K'awiil most commonly appears in his diminutive effigy form and is affectionately (it would seem) referred to in inscriptions as *unen K'awiil* (the infant K'awiil).

The infant-effigy K'awiil, reclining in a cradled posture, figures quite prominently at Palenque. Located in the state of Chiapas, the Palenque archeological site dates from as early as 200 BCE, although the long-lived civilization reached its apogee only in the seventh century CE. K'awiil appears in the tablets of the group of the cross, in the palace tablet (now at Dumbar-ton Oaks), and on the piers at the Temple of the Inscriptions. The Temple of the Inscriptions is the royal tomb, the funerary temple, of K'inich Janaab' Pakal I, the most famous of all Palenque kings, whose reign spanned the seventh century (615–83). Schele confirms the identity of the small figures in these disparate ritual scenes as effigy gods.⁶⁹

In scenes from the Palenque Tablet of the Sun and the Tablet of the Foliated Cross, the diminutive K'awiil appears in a seated position on outstretched hands. The Tablet of the Foliated Cross depicts the birth of K'awiil in what is referred to in the inscriptions as a “god-conjuring” rite. Here the animation of sacred image as ritual birth is made explicit. At the center of the image is a maize world tree. To the left of the tree, the divine lord, K'inich Kan Bahlam II, raises a seated K'awiil sacred effigy. The accompanying inscription reads: “Third, born was ? the K'awii[l] person?, the thrice manifested? god, the sprout, the Infant K'awiil.”⁷⁰ In a single line, this inscription contains three distinct references to K'awiil's infant status—a reference to his birth, to K'awiil as “the sprout” and the pairing of his name with his status as infant.

The Tablet of the Cross (fig. 15) shows K'awiil in what has been erroneously interpreted as a gesture of offering, presentation, or display. The cradled K'awiil effigy, reclining in the arms of the incumbent ruler, K'inich Kan Bahlam II, is not a passive ritual object. Rather, he is a materially manifest deity who fully participates in the referenced rites as a religious actor, the recipient of devotion. Indeed, the word *k'awiil* also refers to the generic for statue, or material image, in various Mayan cultural texts. Schele explains that in sixteenth-century Spanish-authored Mayan dictionaries *cavil* (a phonetic variation) is translated as “figure of the gods,” “statue,” or “idol.” In the *Popol Vuh*, the word *q'abawil* refers to “wood and stone images of the titular deities.” And, in contemporary K'iche Mayan, the word *q'abwil* trans-

⁶⁸ Freidel, Schele, and Parker, *Maya Cosmos*, 196.

⁶⁹ Linda Schele, “Observations of the Cross Motif at Palenque,” in *Primera Mesa Redonda de Palenque I*, ed. Merle Robertson (Pebble Beach, CA: Robert Louis Stevenson School, 1974).

⁷⁰ “The K'atun Histories and Period Ending Rites of the Temple of Inscriptions,” http://learningobjects.wesleyan.edu/palenque/structures/temple_foliated_cross/texts.php. Question marks indicate possible inaccuracies in transcription and are present in the published transliteration.

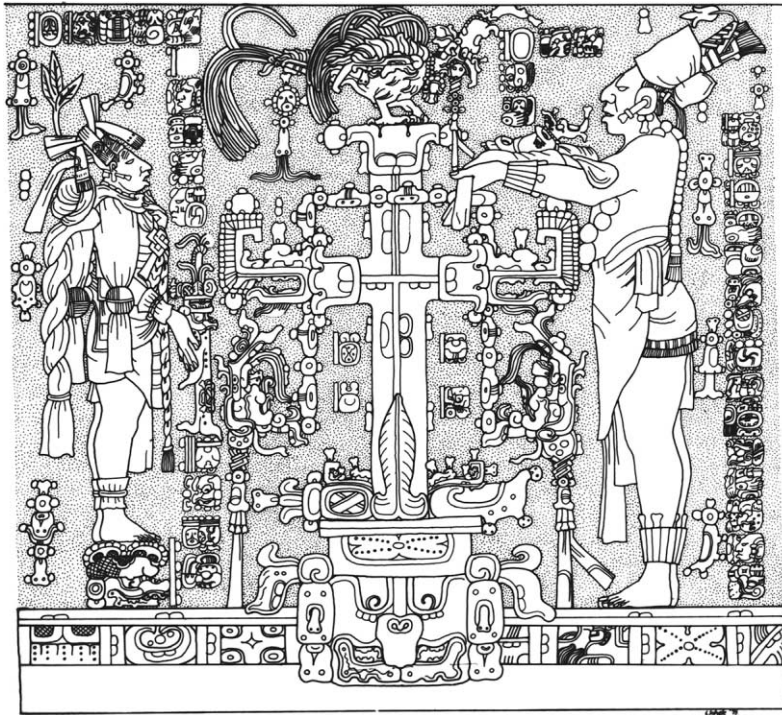


FIG. 15.—Reclining K'awiil effigy in Kan Bahlam ascension ritual (Maya), Tablet of the Temple of the Cross. Palenque, Chiapas, Mexico, 684–702 CE. Drawing by Linda Schele, courtesy of FAMSI.

lates as “the statue of saint and its spirit”;⁷¹ *k'awiil* may thus refer to a specific Maya deity or to a divine effigy and its *way*, the spirit being that resides within. K'awiil effigies also appear in the record participating in rituals that bring about the material “birthing” of deities. K'awiil's own infant status facilitates the birth of other materially manifest gods or effigies.⁷²

K'awiil also appears at Palenque in a reclining position in the larger-than-life-size stucco reliefs on Piers B through E at the Temple of the Inscriptions, Pakal's mortuary shrine. As shown in figure 16, four standing figures, possibly guardians or sentinels, enfold K'awiil in their embrace (two cradle him in their left arm, two in their right). Each of the four piers clearly depicts

⁷¹ Freidel, Schele, and Parker, *Maya Cosmos*, 197. The choice of the word “statue” is Schele's. I argue “effigy” is a more accurate translation.

⁷² “Rulers donned K'awiil's burning forehead device or brandished images of K'awiil when overseeing the ritual birthing of gods” (Stone and Zender, *Reading Maya Art*, 49).

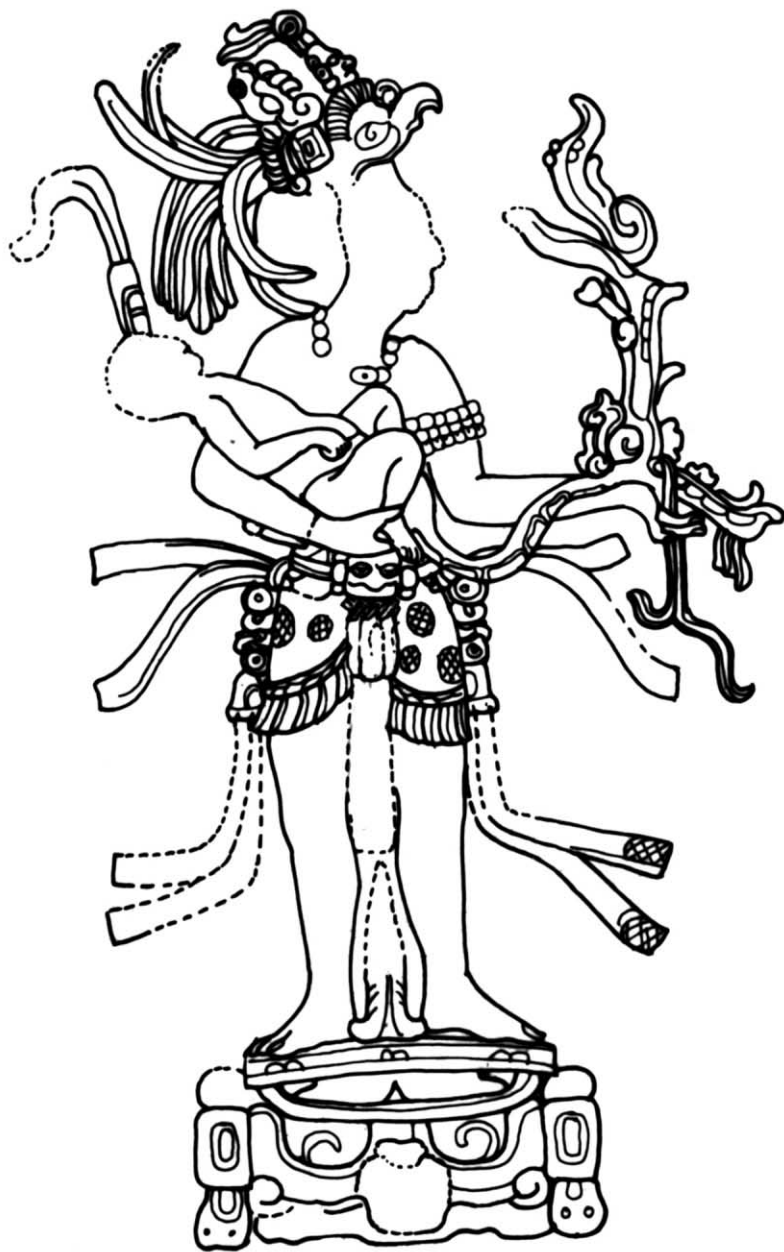


FIG. 16.—Cradled K'awiil (Maya), Piers B through E, Temple of the Inscriptions, Palenque, 683 CE. Drawing by Linda Schele, courtesy of FAMSI.

K'awiil's identifying serpent leg. Pier C preserves traces of a distinctive, celestial blue, the color of the Maya sacred, on K'awiil's torso, leg, and foot. Other intriguing details are also evident: red serpent scales appear on K'awiil's human leg, and Piers B and C show K'awiil with six toes.

On the temple piers, K'awiil assumes his reclining infant pose but he appears not as a baby per se but rather as a lanky, large child sprawled out across the arms of his guardian. The cradling of a noninfant child is itself noteworthy, as the position in which a child is carried at distinct developmental stages is ritually significant within Maya culture.⁷³ The cradling posture maintains the older child's identity as dependent divine infant. In Mayan writing the baby glyph, *unen*, is a reclining infant with its limbs flexed and head held up," such as in the baby jaguar glyph, the *unem b'alam*.⁷⁴ That is to say, the reclining posture is explicitly associated with infancy in Mayan writing.

Elsewhere in Maya art and iconography, the reclining pose indicates infancy, birth, rebirth, and the attendant qualities of helplessness and vulnerability.⁷⁵ The otherwise powerful god K'awiil is revealed to be vulnerable when represented in the reclining baby pose suggesting the deity's dependence on human care and nurture. The act of reclining in this manner, in which the divine makes itself vulnerable and dependent, also implies profound trust in the human caretaker without diminishing sacred power. For example, great lords are also sometimes shown reclining in the vulnerable baby pose. Indeed, Lord Pakal himself appears as an adult assuming the reclining infant pose on the lid of his sarcophagus at the Temple of the Inscriptions. I hypothesize that the cradled, reclining infant posture signifies and stands for the related emotional content that I describe here: a visual articulation of the emotions of nurturing care and even tenderness for manifestations of sacred power. Nancy Troike argues that gestures in the Mixtec codices were used pictographically to signify particular emotions: a raised weapon indicates hostility in various contexts (not just battle), grasping a pilgrim's staff indicates commitment and dedication, and so on.⁷⁶ In *The Memory of Bones*, David Stuart also identifies specific emotions in the pre-Hispanic art historical record.

⁷³ The *hetzmek* (or *jetsmeek*) ritual among the Maya, documented at the middle of the twentieth century, ritualized the transition from cradling to carrying. This domestic ritual marks the first time a child, at age three, is no longer "cradled" but carried by straddling the hip. See, e.g., Nancy Beatriz Villanueva Villanueva and Virginia Noemí Prieto, "Rituales de hetzmek en Yucatán," *Estudios de Cultural Maya* 33 (2009): 73–103. Also see Patricia Fortuny Loret de Mola, "Transnational Hetzmek: From Oxkutzcab to San Francisco," in Lorentzen et al., *Religion at the Corner of Bliss and Nirvana*, 207–42. There is no documentary evidence for the presence of this ritual before the conquest.

⁷⁴ Stone and Zender, *Reading Maya Art*, 31.

⁷⁵ Chac appears as a chubby toddler or in the reclining pose associated with babies.

⁷⁶ Troike, "Interpretation of Postures and Gestures," 180.

The Palace Tablet offers further evidence for the affective engagement that material manifestations of infant deities elicited and evoked. The carved limestone panel from Palenque, dating from the eighth century CE, offers one of the most suggestive images of the infant K'awiil (or *unen* K'awiil) for the purposes of this study. The panel in figure 17 shows the Palenque king, K'inich K'an Joy Chitam II (previously identified as Kan-Xul), at the moment of his elevation, or accession. At K'inich K'an's feet sit his parents, K'inich Janaab' Pakal I and his wife, Sak K'uk' (previously identified as Lady Ahpo-Hel). Each seated royal figure holds an infantilized deity. On the left of the tablet, Pakal holds K'awiil on his lap. To the right, similarly, Sak K'uk' holds a diminutive effigy of the jester god. Each appears to gently tickle the rounded toddler tummy of these infant deities.⁷⁷ This intriguing gesture, the tickling of the effigies of infant gods, is the ritual performance of affection and play. Archeological evidence for the existence of small wooden seated K'awiil effigies, such as depicted here, has been found at Tikal,⁷⁸ suggesting that the tickling images refers to actual ritual objects and actions. Affection and tenderness for the sacred, as manifest in this ritual scene, constituted a key part of the emotional vocabulary of Mesoamerican religious culture.

Glyphic inscriptions that appear at Palenque offer textual evidence that elaborates the visual and material record. These glyphs identify the emotions of nurture and care (as if for an infant) as important religious feelings or sentiments expressed in relation to K'awiil. In the K'atun histories, the infant K'awiil is described with the glyph *u-JUN-TAN*, the "one at the center," or the "cared-for one."⁷⁹ Elsewhere, the same glyph is also used to describe the care of a woman for her children: in the Palace Tablet the glyph appears in the context of a parenting statement.⁸⁰ The "beloved," "cherished," "cared-for" glyph used in relation to the infant K'awiil is further evidence that nurture and parental affection were important emotions in devotional engagement with materially manifest deities.

RELIGIOUS LEGACIES OF CRADLING IN SUBSEQUENT CULTURES:

THE *TEOMAMAQUE* AND THE INFANT MAIZE GOD

While there is little evidence that the cradling ritual was adopted by or sustained in subsequent pre-Hispanic Mesoamerican cultures, there were practices

⁷⁷ Linda Schele, Mary Ellen Miller, and Justin Kerr interpret this scene as a ritual enactment of ancestral claims to sacred lineage; see *The Blood of Kings: Dynasty and Ritual in Maya Art* (Fort Worth, TX: Kimbell Art Museum, 1986), 275.

⁷⁸ Stone and Zender, *Reading Maya Art*, 49.

⁷⁹ "K'atun Histories and Period Ending Rites."

⁸⁰ I am grateful to Gerardo Aldana of the University of California at Santa Barbara for drawing my attention to the Palenque "cared-for" glyph.



FIG. 17.—Lord Pakal tickles a diminutive K'awiil effigy while his son dances (Maya), Palace Tablet. Palenque, Chiapas, Mexico. Dumbarton Oaks tablet. Drawing by Linda Schele, courtesy of FAMSI.

that can be understood as ritual analogs. Both the Nahua and Huasteca of central Mexico engaged in devotional practices in which they cared for sacred effigies, especially swaddled bundles, as dependent infants.⁸¹ The *teomamaque* (from the Nahuatl *theo* ‘God’ and *mama* ‘to carry or assume a burden’) were priests identified as god-bearers on sacred pilgrimage.⁸² Indeed the carrying of sacred bundles as back burdens was one of the definitive ceremonial acts for the priesthood among the Nahua and other cultural groups of central Mexico. In some instances, this practice formed part of a ritual re-enactment and memorialization of historically significant migrations. As shown in figure 18, the Codex Boturini (ca. 1540 CE) depicts a group of four god-bearers on procession, each with their sacred bundle. The lead priest carries an effigy bundle in which the diminutive deity’s head emerges from the swaddled cloth. Sacred bundles, whether carried, cradled, or at rest, whether they include effigies or not, were engaged as infants: swaddled, nurtured, and gently and lovingly cared for.⁸³ Headrick and Koontz describe the *teomamaque* as doting upon and “ministering” to bundles: “these priests cared for their bundles, fed the bundles and managed the temple in which the bundle was housed.”⁸⁴ Sacred bundles were not just collections of seemingly unrelated objects bound together but were, more importantly, “regarded as persons.”⁸⁵

Teomamaque and their bundles appear in the archeological and art historical record in many classic and postclassic Mesoamerican cultural contexts (Huasteca, Purépecha, Tajín, and others): depicted in codices, painted on ceramic vessels, and sculpted as figurines. Like cradling, carrying diminutive effigies, effigy-bundles, or other object-entities in this particular fashion, swaddled and strapped to the back precisely as one might carry a small child, reiterates and underscores the status of the divine effigy as an infant. Ritual carrying may have been a cultural adaptation of and variation upon the original cradling gesture, or it may have asserted a particular ethnic identity as

⁸¹ For more on bundles in Aztec culture, see Molly H. Bassett, “Wrapped in Cloth, Clothed in Skin: Aztec Tlaquimilolli (Sacred Bundles) and Deity Embodiment,” *History of Religions* 53, no. 4 (2014): 369–400.

⁸² Jennifer Schepher Hughes, “God-Bearers on Pilgrimage to Tepeyac: A Scholar of Religion Encounters the Material Dimension of Marian Devotion in Mexico,” *Journal of Religion and the Arts* 18, nos. 1–2 (2014): 156–83.

⁸³ Allen Christenson discusses the cradling of the San Martín bundle in contemporary Maya practice in highland Guatemala; “Sacred Bundle Cults in Highland Guatemala,” in *Sacred Bundles: Ritual Acts of Wrapping and Binding in Mesoamerica*, ed. Julia Guernsey and F. Kent Reilly (Barnardville, NC: Boundary End Archaeology Research Center, 2006).

⁸⁴ Annabeth Headrick and Rex Koontz, “Ancestral burdens in Gulf Coast Cultures,” in Guernsey and Reilly, *Sacred Bundles*, 185.

⁸⁵ María Nieves Zedeño, “Bundled Worlds: The Roles and Interactions of Complex Objects from the North American Plains,” *Journal of Archaeological Method and Theory* 15, no. 4 (2008): 362–78.

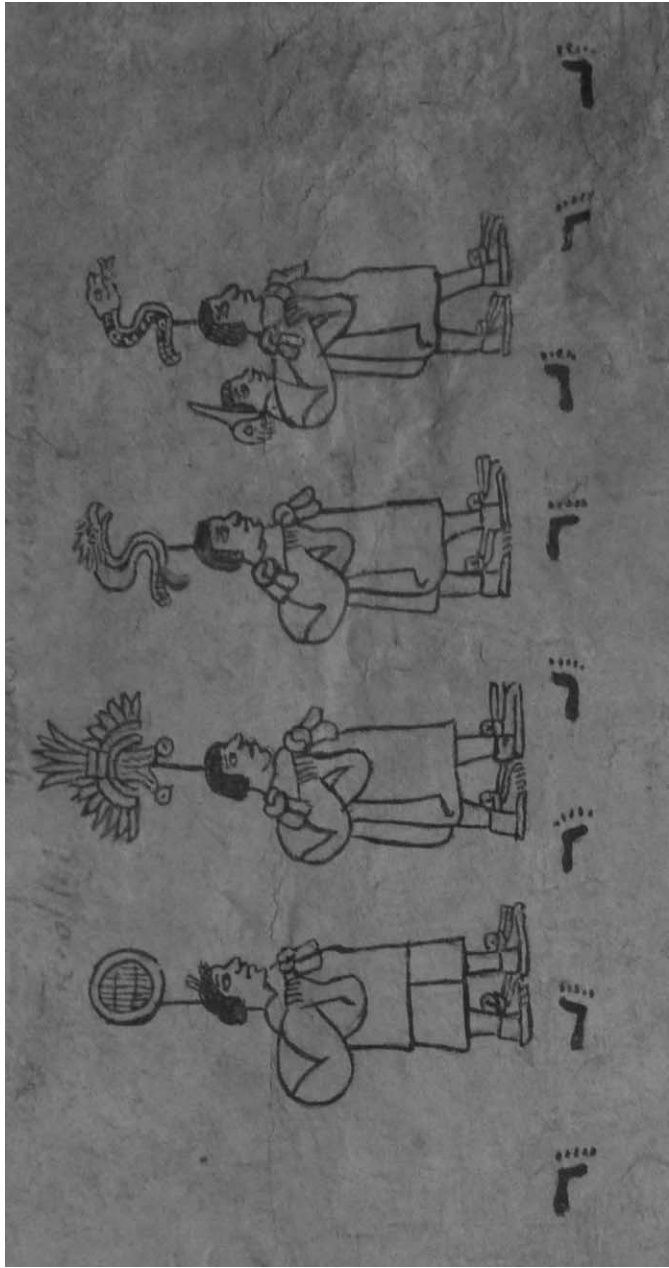


FIG. 18.—*Teomamaque* on procession (Aztec/Nahua), Codex Boturini circa 1540 CE.

distinct from the cradling engagement of other Mesoamerican cultures, distinguishing the Nahua (for example) from their Olmec and Maya predecessors.

Among the Nahua, tender regard and affection for the sacred as if for a precious and vulnerable infant are present in devotional engagement with the infant maize god. In Mesoamerican culture before the conquest, corn was regarded with “special tenderness.”⁸⁶ This attitude of tenderness finds expression in ritual engagement with corn manifest as an infant deity. The infant maize god appears in diverse cultural traditions, including those we have already examined here. One of the carved columns from el Tajín portrays a “swaddled baby lying atop a tasseled maize plant with a second corn stalk rising from its belly.”⁸⁷ Another column at el Tajín depicts the infant maize god being nursed by a woman (possibly a goddess).⁸⁸ The maize deity is also represented as a woman with an infant or as an infant or young child being cared for by a woman, as in the Codex Fejérváry-Mayer.

Similar ritual practices also can be found in contemporary indigenous cultures. Among the Huasteca today, corn is commonly imagined as a weeping infant. In his community of study, Adam Sandstrom explains that if someone dreams of a weeping baby, they quickly comprehend that the corn plants in their *milpa* are suffering distress, the dream communicating the young corn’s fear to the farmer.⁸⁹ One of Sandstrom’s informants further elaborates, “the corn plant’s roots, stalk, and tassel . . . correspond to its feet, body and head. In her arms, the corn mother holds the precious baby with the golden hair.”⁹⁰ When Sandstrom is ceremonially presented with a swaddled bundle, carried (or cradled) protectively in his neighbor’s arms, he observes: “we opened it and found an enormous tamale the size of a newborn infant, steaming hot and wrapped in banana leaves. . . . The festal dish is called a ‘*xamconetl*,’ or ‘corn baby.’”⁹¹

⁸⁶ Inga Clendinnen writes, “Women breathed softly on the maize kernels before they were dropped into the cooking pot, the warm moist breath giving them courage for the fire. Spilt kernels were carefully gathered up so that famine would not come and every eighth year the long-suffering maize was ‘rested’ for a period by being cooked without condiments”; *Aztecs: An Interpretation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 53.

⁸⁷ Taube, *Olmec Art at Dumbarton Oaks*, 92. See also H. E. M. Braakhuis, “The Bitter Flour: Birth-Scenes of the Tonsured Maize God,” in *Mesoamerican Dualism: Symposium of the 46th Annual International Congress of Americanists*, ed. Rudolf van Zantwijk, Rob de Ridder, and Edwin Braakhuis (Utrecht: ISOR Universiteit Utrecht, 1990), 125–47.

⁸⁸ Jürgen Brüggemann, Sara Ladrón de Guevara, Juan Sánchez Bonilla, and Rafael Doniz, *Tajín* (Mexico City: El Equilibrista, 1992), 125.

⁸⁹ Alan Sandstrom, “The Weeping Baby and the Nahua Corn Spirit: The Human Body as Key Symbol in the Huasteca Veracruzana, Mexico,” in Halperin et al., *Mesoamerican Figurines*, 270.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 274–75.

I suggest that the ritual cradling of effigies, the carrying of effigies as back bundles, and devotion to the maize infant are ritually analogous practices. Each of these contemplates the paradox of sacred power and powerlessness and the responsibilities of human agents vis-à-vis the vulnerable dependency of the divine.

CONCLUSION: IMAGE, RITUAL, AND AFFECT IN MESOAMERICAN RELIGION

An image of the infant Jesus nestled protectively in the arms of a loving devotee, the diminutive K'awiil effigy who reclines into his guardian's embrace, the *tamal* bundle whose steamy warmth is like that of a baby pulsating with heat and life: all of these traditions bear witness to a vital materialist religious culture in which materially manifest divinities thrive under the tender care and nurturing affections of human devotees. It may appear a risky venture to enter the murky territory of reading human emotions across time and culture. Yet, based on the materials examined here, it seems likely that tenderness, affection, and nurture for the sacred were common emotional expressions in ritual engagement with materially manifest infantilized deities and that this composed a key part of the religious matrix of Mesoamerica before the arrival of the Spanish. This observation complicates the popular conception of pre-Hispanic indigenous Mexican ritual traditions as violent and fearsome. That effigy gods are depicted as infants communicates to us something essential about the reciprocal relationship between deity and devotee beyond simplistic and flattened notions of propitiation.

The material entities that I have considered here, in both contemporary and historical contexts, are typically misrecognized by scholars as passive objects devoid of life or agency. The concepts of abundant objects and the Mexican analogical imagination broaden scholarly attention to include the religious experience of both the human devotee and the infant effigy, joined together in a ritual and affective bond. It should be noted that cradling is not the only form of ritual engagement with infant-size and diminutive effigies in Mexico and elsewhere. That is, in many of the world's religious traditions small effigies are manually manipulated by devotees in a variety of gestures that activate and honor their potency, divinity, and personhood. This concept further illuminates our understanding of ritual as play.⁹²

Interpreting contemporary rituals alongside analogous practices in pre-Hispanic cultures indicates that cradling is an important strand of Mesoamerican ritual practice both before and after the Spanish conquest. The association of contemporary rituals with pre-Hispanic practice is meaningful for

⁹² Paul Sillar has described a similar ritual manipulation of sacred effigies as "playing with god" in the Andes; see "Playing with God: Cultural Perceptions of Children, Play and Miniatures in the Andes," *Archeological Review of Cambridge* 13, no. 2 (1994): 47–64.

some (even many) Mexican and Latino religious practitioners today, who find it obvious, natural, significant, and often deeply moving that there are resonances and continuities between their past and present cultures. To some extent then, my interest follows theirs. More than any other feature of indigenous religious life, these affective postures may indeed be what best survived centuries of colonial rule and Christian evangelization into the present day. Perhaps it is the religious feelings that have most persisted, pulsing beneath the surface, feelings anchored, preserved, and archived in sacred objects and things.

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