Maize and Community: Examining a Ritual Sequence at Kixpek, Guatemala

J. Raúl Ortiz
Universidad del Valle de Guatemala
ortiz.jose.raul@gmail.com

María Estela Flores
Universidad de San Carlos de Guatemala

In Mesoamerica and the Maya area, ritual events associated with the construction of new architectural features are common in the archaeological record. Rituals may have different meanings and effects on people based on the performance and experiences of people and objects. In the 8th century AD, the community of Kixpek, Guatemala, engaged in a construction-related ritual involving maize, fire, water jars, and architectural fill. We describe the archaeologically recovered sequence of actions performed by the residents at Kixpek while they built a new version of Structure B6: the central plaza’s south platform. Drawing on the ethnography, epigraphy, iconography, and archaeology of past and present Maya rituals, we contend that this ritualized sequence had many purposes and meanings, such as animating the platform and uniting the community at Kixpek.

Keywords: Highland Maya, maize, ritual, dedication, Classic period
The archaeology of ritual discusses the dichotomous relationship between human actions and religious beliefs. By studying material traces, archaeologists can understand both the structure (symbolic system) and practice (actions and experiences) of rituals (Fogelin 2007; for a broader anthropological discussion, see Bell 1992). Ancient Maya archaeology is full of examples of deposits described as remnants of “ritual.” While there has been a rich discussion on how we could classify and interpret these deposits (e.g., Becker 1992; Coe 1965; Kunen et al. 2002; Newman 2019; Stanton et al. 2008), terms such as offerings, caches, deposits, or burials indicate that rituals have been analyzed from an “object-centered” perspective. More recently, the emphasis has not been on the artifacts themselves but on the sequences of ritual actions and experiences (Johnson 2018; Vadala and Duffy 2021). Here, we do not discuss the theoretical underpinnings of the archaeology of ritual; we study rituals as actions, arguing that they had distinct meanings and effects based on the performances and experiences of participants (Inomata 2006). We also expand upon Scott’s (2009:93) metaphor of contemporary Maya ceremonies as “snowflakes,” where no ceremony is ever alike, to include experiences and meanings involved in rituals.

The excavation of a ritual sequence in Structure B6 from Kixpek, located in the Lower Chixoy Drainage of the northern highlands of Guatemala (Figure 1) – which included maize, fire, ceramics, and clay fill – highlights the actions and experiences associated with ancient Maya construction rituals. We suggest that the whole renovation of Structure B6 was a ritual sequence, from the burial of the old structure to the completion of the new building. In between these moments, several other events occurred in which participants and spectators experienced them differently based on their conditions in life. An important component of the ritual at Kixpek is the occurrence of maize remains. Maize has been widely valued as a staple food and symbolic component in the Maya area, but its occurrence in ritual events at surface sites is rare. This exceptional discovery thus can provide significant insights into the use of maize in ancient dedication events. We first draw on ethnographic, ethnohistoric, epigraphic, iconographic, and archaeological data to illustrate the role of maize in past and modern Maya religious beliefs and rituals. Second, we present a brief description of Kixpek and the key excavations in Structure B6. Third, we discuss the possible meanings and performances/experiences as we move along the reconstructed ritual sequence.

Rituals With Maize

Maize or corn (Zea mays) has been of utter importance for Indigenous cultures in the Americas for millennia. In Mesoamerica, where maize was first domesticated (Blake 2015), humans and maize developed a significant relationship of dependence and reciprocity that has permeated the symbolic systems of most communities. For example, the Popol Vuh (the 16th-century K’iche’ Maya text) records how the gods formed humans with maize dough (Christenson 2007:181). As the sacred substance of human life, the Maya need to “tend, care for, and nurture” maize (Christenson 2022:41). Humans must also give back to the creator deities through ceremonies and offerings. Although the human-maize relationship in the Maya area first developed in the Archaic period
(before 2000 BC), there are more Classic (AD 250-900) and Postclassic (AD 900-16th century) iconographic and epigraphic data on how the Maya conceptualized the Maize God. For instance, the Late Classic (AD 600-900) Maize God variant is usually represented as a beautiful young man with an elongated head and tonsured coiffure (Taube 2018:78-80). This deity is commonly portrayed in dance, rebirth, and other mythological scenes (Chinchilla 2017:192-223).

The ethnographic and ethnohistoric records represent rich sources of information on rituals for Maya archaeologists. Both ancient and modern ceremonies attest to the wide range of purposes of rituals, including gratitude, petition, and dedication—either associated with temporal cycles (e.g. agriculture) or special events like weddings, funerals, and house construction (Menchú 2013; Scott 2009; Stross 1998; Vogt 1976). Such rituals include a variety of actions and offerings dependent on the event and the availability of materials. In most cases where maize is an active participant,
these rituals are connected to its agricultural cycle. For example, the northern Lacandon performs eight offerings of the first fruits of corn to censers (Boremanse 2020). Maize is offered in different preparations, including roasted, boiled, gruel, tortillas, and tamales. The night before sowing, the Q’eqchi’ conduct a vigil (Yo’lek) when maize seeds are fed, paralleling a vigil for the dead (Wilson 1995). Christenson (2001, in Christenson 2007:note 445) recorded a Tz’utujil planting ceremony in which the ashes of special maize cobs called yo’x were buried at the center of the maize field. Both the Q’eqchi’ and Tz’utujil examples associate maize with death and regeneration. Non-agricultural rituals can also involve maize. In Zinacantan, Chiapas, the Tzotzil place charred tortillas and other foodstuffs with the deceased during funerals (Vogt 1998). In Santiago Atitlán, various Tz’utujil rites and feasts – performed by the cofradia or during the bride petition – involve consuming maize atole and tamañitos (Christenson 2022).

Although ethnographic evidence suggests that various forms of maize (both raw and processed) were employed in multiple ritual events and in various forms, there is little available archaeological evidence for Maya ritual maize use. Current data include maize recovered mostly in carbonized form (as kernels or partial cobs/ears) from potential ceremonial, cooking, or undefined contexts. While some carbonized maize has been recovered at a few surface sites, most of it has been recovered from caves, including the Cueva de las Pinturas, Balam Na, and Naj Tunich (Petén, Guatemala),

Figure 2. Map of Group B of Kixpek.
Gordon’s Cave 3 (near Copán, Honduras), Mayahak Cab Pek rock-shelter, Actun Chechem Ha, Actun Chapat, and Barton Creek (Belize; Brady 1989, 1995; Brady et al. 2003; Morehart 2005, 2011). In the highlands, Sharer and Sedat (1987) report finding maize cobs, bones, and other organic debris in a cave 3 km east of Chicruz, in the Middle Chixoy Drainage. In Maya cosmology, caves are associated with the supernatural realm and were home to deities (Moyes 2020; Prufer and Brady 2005), reflecting the predominantly ritual archaeological materials found in them.

In comparison, surface sites have yielded less evidence for ritual maize use. Lentz (1991) reports finding carbonized maize kernels within small caches at Copán, and Cagnato (2016) describes maize cupules and a kernel from rituals at a shrine at El Perú-Waka. Most surface carbonized maize has been recovered from food preparation contexts: for example, at Copán (Lentz 1991), Pueblo Viejo-Chichaj (Ichon 1975), and Kaminaljuyú (Popenoe 1997). This review points to an important question: if maize is symbolically charged in past and present Maya society, why have so few examples of its ritual use been found? Here, we report a new instance of ritual maize context from the site of Kixpek. The ritual sequence, which included maize, is associated with the construction of a new building in the site’s main plaza.

**Kixpek**

Kixpek consists of several mound groups located in the southern Saquixpec valley, a narrow valley sitting between folds of the Chamá mountains. To date, only three mound groups have

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**Figure 3.** Excavation units on Structure B6.
been identified: Groups A, B, and C. Robert Burkitt was the first scholar to conduct excavations at Kixpek in 1922 (Ortiz 2023). His work focused on the only mound in Group A and on two Group B mounds. In 2019, the Kixpek Archaeological Project resumed scientific explorations at the site. We prioritized the excavation of two Group B mounds left unexcavated by Burkitt. Group B (Figure 2), the site’s largest architectonic compound, sits on a natural hill with sharp north, west, and south slopes, making Group B resemble an acropolis. Group B’s six structures are centered around a plaza defined by Structures B1, B3, B5, and B6. Structure B2 is a small platform located in the center of the plaza. The group is completed by its eastern ballcourt composed of Structures B3 and B4. Group B was a focal point of ritual activity, as suggested by its enclosed plaza, sizable architecture, multiple burials, and the ritual discussed below.

The current project was unable to relocate Group A, composed of a single mound apparently located west of Group B. Group C sits about 250 m east of Group B and consists of a single mound and possible open areas. A water spring and a creek run along the southern border of the site, south

Figure 4. East Profile of Units 8 and 9 showing the stratigraphy of Structure B6 (drawing by J. Raúl Ortiz and M. Mercedes Acevedo).
of Group B, and confluence into the Quebrada Saquixpec. The valley contains other notable natural features, including caves and karst towers, which have not been archaeologically explored. Based upon Burkitt's data (including the ceramic chronology developed by Mary Butler in the 1930s) and our own, Kixpek seems to have been occupied from about AD 650 to 1050 (Ortiz 2023). Below, we briefly describe the life history of Structure B6, with special emphasis on its construction and ritual sequence.

**Structure B6**

Structure B6 occupies the south side of the Group B plaza. Before excavation, its dimensions were calculated at 35 m in length, 8 m in width, and 2.1 m in height. We placed 11 excavation units on and near the mound, although only five units (2, 3, 4, 8, and 9), placed in a trench near the center of the mound, provided most of the information about its construction and ritual sequences (Figure 3). The earliest evidence on the south side of the Group B plaza, located directly below the building’s architecture, is the modification of the natural soil for use as a platform or surface. Burying the natural layer, Structure B6 Sub-1 was raised about 1 m from the plaza level. The façade’s composition and dimension are unknown, but we identified the floor of that early building (Floor 2) and documented that its construction fill consisted of distinct clay layers (Figure 4).
Kixpek residents conducted a ritual during the renovation of Structure B6. The sequence of events started by burying the “obsolete” Structure B6 Sub-1 with a thin (3-5 cm) layer of brown soil. This layer was particularly noticeable on the east profile of Unit 8 and likely extends into Unit 9. A layer of yellow soil, about 12-20 cm thick, sat above this dark soil, belonging to the new structure’s construction fill. Both layers suggest that the surface of the old structure was protected from subsequent actions. Kixpek residents placed ears of corn and possibly other perishables atop this yellow layer and set them on fire, creating a feature we call the “charcoal bed” (Figure 5). Although we have noted certain spots of charcoal while excavating Unit 9, more details of this feature were fortuitously exposed by an overnight rain event. The charcoal covered an area of about 0.50 x 0.75 m in the south and center of Unit 9, but did not extend into Unit 8. We identified partial ears of corn and loose maize kernels within the large quantity of charcoal (Figures 6 and 7). Two samples of charred grains were submitted for radiocarbon dating (AA115334-AA115335) and yielded calibrated date ranges of cal. AD 678-878 and AD 665-774 (2σ; calibrated using OxCal 4.4 [Bronk Ramsey 2009]). The highest probability of the combination of these samples with Bayesian statistics falls between AD 692-778 (Ortiz 2023). Both samples also yielded δ13C values of -9.5 and -9.9, corresponding to C4 plants—most likely maize (following Bender 1968).

After this ritual maize burning, loads of yellow soil were laid down over the still-hot charcoal.
bed, giving the soil a reddish coloration and partially hardening it (Figure 8), indicating direct thermal alteration (following Inomata 2014). Community members then placed several large pottery fragments (mostly body sherds, four handles, and a complete jar neck) while continuing to add construction fill. A few groups have been identified among the sherds, which were mostly dispersed throughout the lower section of the fill, corresponding to what we labeled as Cache 101 (see Figure 4). The neck and handles were discovered near the border between Units 8 and 9 (Figure 9), whereas the jar base and lower segment appeared on the north side of Unit 9. While it was impossible to refit them, both sherd concentrations likely belonged to the same jar of the Late Classic Cebada Porous type (Arnauld 1987; Forné et al. 2011; Ortiz 2023). The ceramic sherds did not show significant evidence of direct fire exposure. The yellow fill of the new building buried and hid the charcoal bed and pottery fragments. An additional small deposit of ceramic sherds, Cache 102, was intrusive into the structure and probably deposited after Cache 101 (see Figure 4).

The terminal architecture of Structure B6, described above, has a confirmed length of 9 m (north–south). Since we did not discover the remains of a staircase, we hypothesize that its access was aligned with Structure B5 across the plaza. Both versions of Structure B6 were associated with the same plaza surface, represented by a leveling of the natural soil. A last, small addition occurred only at the top of the structure with the placement of a low, east-west wall composed of large rough stones, most likely dated to the Early Postclassic (AD 900-1200).

**Discussion**

The ritual event sequence at Kixpek consists of various actions with multiple durations, participants, objectives, and meanings. Overall, it is bounded in time from the deposition of a thin clay layer above Structure B6-Sub 1 to the placement of the final loads of earth and stones of the renovated building. We assume that other episodes were part of the ritual sequence, such as consultation with specialists, procurement of materials, pilgrimage to other sacred places, and ritual meals (Scott 2009; Vogt 1976). In this discussion, we divide the ritual sequence into four discrete actions and address their potential meanings and experiences.

**Action 1: Protecting the ancestors.**

Two clay layers were deposited atop Structure B6 Sub-1, although it is unclear whether the thin clay layer covered the whole building. At several Maya Lowlands sites, white stucco, saskab, or a grey coating have been found sealing complete buildings (Wagner 2006). Leaving intact architectural features such as stucco sculptures or hieroglyphic stairways are cases of a reverential practice in “termination” rituals (Eberl et al. 2019; Stanton et al. 2008; Tsukamoto 2017; Wagner 2006). By protecting the old platform, the individuals who conducted the ritual may have claimed ties with the original owners/users of the platform through ancestor veneration (McAnany 1998).
The superposed, thicker yellow soil layer served as a base for the subsequent charcoal bed. In the absence of special features (e.g. altars) for conducting the ritual, we interpret this deposition of clay as an altar preparation and a way for Kixpek residents to protect the “old” structure from the fire ritual.

**Action 2: Maize as substance and rebirth.**

The carbonized ears of corn found at Kixpek represent a new example of unprocessed maize as an offering in a ritual not directly related to the maize agricultural cycle. In Maya cosmology, maize symbolically embodies the transition from death to rebirth. In the *Popol Vuh*, sprouting maize was used to symbolize that the Hero Twins were alive after confronting the lords of the Underworld or *Xib’alb’a* (Christenson 2007:146, 175-176). According to Akkeren (2012), the northern Verapaz mountains are the likely location of the entrance to *Xib’alb’a*.

The Classic Maya portrayed several Maize God’s rebirth scenes, and in one variant, the deity emerges from a cleft in a turtle’s shell, possibly symbolizing his rise from the earth (Chinchilla 2017:218-223; Taube 2018:83-84). Northern highlands elite groups worshipped the Classic Maize God (God E) as depicted in Chamá-style vessels, which were produced in the Chamá valley in the
Lower Chixoy Drainage, about 12 km from Kixpek. It could be that Kixpek residents deposited and buried maize as a simile for planting, with the expectation of its rebirth altogether with the new construction. This action could be analogous to contemporary Maya rituals involving the “feeding” of the maize seeds and the cornfield in anticipation of good sowing (Carlsen and Prechtel 1991; Christenson 2007; Wilson 1995).

Action 3: Animating the new construction.

Apparently, laying a maize bed was an insufficient offering for the new construction, and Kixpek ritual specialist(s) lit the ears of maize on fire. While past and present fire ceremonies have been recorded across the Maya area, the burning of maize is rare in ethnographic and archaeological sources, yet a few ethnographic examples could be compared to the Kixpek fire ritual. In a few Q’eqchi’ modern ceremonies, maize is presented on altars (see Prensa Comunitaria 2023), but it is unclear whether it is burned after. Still, there are at least two examples from the Q’eqchi’ and Kaqchikel areas in which tortillas are burned or left as offerings on altars (Scott 2009:Figure 3.42; Woodfill 2019:Figure 2.1). The Zinacantecos placed charred tortillas among the deceased (Vogt 1998), whereas the northern Lacandon offered roasted corn to the gods to initiate the first fruits

Figure 9. Pottery fragments of a neck and handle of a Cebada Porous jar (Photo by M. Mercedes Acevedo).
ritual cycle (Boremanse 2020). But perhaps the closest parallel is among the Tz’utujil from Santiago Atitlán, where the ashes of special maize are buried in the maize field before planting (Christenson 2007). Another significant fire reference is the Mesoamerican and Maya myth of the Hero Twins’ self-sacrifice. In the Popol Vuh, the heroes jumped in a pit oven and became the sun and the moon (Chinchilla 2018; Christenson 2007:163-167, 176-177). Furthermore, Chinchilla (2018:37) has proposed that the Maize God could be the lunar hero of Mesoamerican myths. These ethnographic and ethnohistoric accounts suggest that the action of burning maize is strongly associated with death and rebirth.

The available archaeological data indicate that, although charred maize has been found in ritual contexts in cave sites, they are much rarer in surface sites. Maya fire rituals in surface sites seem to primarily include woody materials. For instance, pine and sapote were among the preferred wood taxa employed in termination fire rituals at Naachtun (Dussol et al. 2019) and pine was used exclusively in funerary rituals at Rio Bec (Dussol et al. 2016). Resins, including copal, are commonly burned in contemporary Maya rituals (Menchú 2013; Scott 2009). We do not discard the idea that other perishables, such as woods, resins, and flowers, may have been used in the ritual burning at Kixpek.

The role of fire in Maya rituals is widely attested in past and modern ceremonies (Christenson 2016; Stuart 1998), where it is conceived as a form of communication with the supernatural realm (Molesky-Poz 2006:156-168). Morehart (2011:13) has suggested that the action of burning food may have aimed at releasing the “soul” of food. Epigraphic research has shown that Late Classic expressions from the Maya Lowlands include several rites involving fire, such as “fire entering” (Och k’ak’) and “house censing” actions (Stuart 1998:384-393). The Maya believe that before temples, houses, censers, and many other artifacts can be used, they must be ritually animated (Stross 1998). At Kixpek, fire could have been necessary for animating the new building, as a medium of communication with deities, or for transforming maize from the world of the living to the realm of the dead, with the hope of regeneration and fertility.

Regardless of its meaning, this ritual maize burning would have had various effects on both direct and indirect participants. For instance, the spectacle of fire could have been more potent at night. During the day, the smoke emanating from the maize burning could have been seen from further away from Group B. Furthermore, the smell of roasted maize may have provoked sensory reactions in participants.

**Action 4: Fragmented ceramics and filling the building.**

Kixpek residents tossed clay fill over the charcoal bed while the maize was still burning and placed what was likely a whole jar within it. The recovered jar sherds correspond to the local unslipped Cebada Porous type, whose technological style is shared with the Transversal region and a few sites in Alta Verapaz (Ortiz 2023). While the function of this jar is unclear, we hypothesize that it may have originally contained a liquid—either water or a ceremonial drink. Drinking and pouring liquids for the gods during rituals are common actions in Maya religious ceremonies (Christenson 2022; Vogt 1998). After finishing the liquid contained in this jar, it was possibly broken and carefully scattered within the new construction fill as a dedicatory act. Although broken objects in rituals are usually considered evidence of termination rituals (Stanton et al. 2008), their use in
dedicatory deposits is also common (Moholy-Nagy 1997; Lucero 2010).

Kixpek residents may have collaborated in adding loads of fill, even when the charcoal bed was still hot, to raise the platform about 1.25 m above the old structure. While construction activities are straightforward, it is less known if the deposition of clay, rubble, and stones was “ritualized” or has any other symbolic connotations. The role of construction fill-in rituals has not been thoroughly discussed by scholars (Walker 1998:261; but see Kidder and Sherwood 2017). Nonetheless, the construction of public spaces is a significant process of community-making which involves the bodily participation of many individuals.

We assume that many community members engaged in the various stages of the public event. While most of the participants were likely mere spectators, others may have played active roles in ludic activities such as processions, dances, and songs (Christenson 2016), as portrayed in the local iconography of Chamá-style vessels. Some of these vessels, for example, depict a procession of animals carrying and playing musical instruments, or a dancing Maize God (see Van Akkeren 2012:51-52). This iconography suggests that tunes may have been played with percussion instruments such as rattles, drums, and turtle carapaces. Van Akkeren (2012) points out that the animals depicted in procession scenes are symbolic representations of lineages – e.g., Sis (coati), Ib’oy (armadillo), and B’a (gopher) – which could have been present at Kixpek. Other musical instruments, such as aerophones (instruments that produce sound by air), may have been employed as well. In our excavations at Kixpek, we recovered two mouthpieces of aerophones. At Los Quetzales, a cave in the southern Lowlands, Brady and Rodas (1995) found musical instruments, including ceramic whistles and drums, in a ritual assemblage. In contemporary Q’eqchi’ rituals, traditional harps and drums are played in wa’atesink (“to feed”) or yo’lek ritual events (Demarest and Woodfill 2012:125; Wilson 1995:96).

A series of scenes on polychrome ceramic vessels represent the Maize God, fully attired with jade and feather ornaments, in the act of dancing. Taube (2009) interprets that elites impersonated the Maize deity and performed a dance of resurrection. Other iconographic and epigraphic evidence shows that multiple kinds of dances existed among the Classic Maya for various occasions, including temple dedication, war events, accession to office, astronomical events, and human sacrifice (Grube 1992). For example, the murals of Bonampak depict both music and dance during the celebration of a new heir’s accession (Miller 2001). In sum, the ritual specialists and main lineages of Kixpek may have overseen and performed the fire ritual, along with accompanying music and dance, which occurred as part of the ritual sequence that underpinned the dedication and construction of Structure B6.

**Final Remarks**

In this article, we have argued that various religious beliefs and practices were entangled in the rituals performed at Kixpek. We focused on the sequence of actions and possible meanings and experiences that occurred during the renovation of Structure B6 in the 8th century AD. Although Maya dedication rituals related to architecture are documented extensively, we presented evidence
for the use of maize, a material rarely found in “surface” dedication deposits but also of wide importance in ancient and modern Maya ideology. We highlighted the significance of maize as death and regeneration in a construction sequence within which each action—from burying the old structure to completing the new building—can be analyzed independently. Kixpek residents celebrated the cycle of death and life by depositing construction fill and ceramics, laying down and burning maize, and possibly feasting and performing music and dances. Participating in these public activities as performers and/or audience could have helped foster the community of Kixpek.

Kixpek residents attending rituals may have experienced each action differently, as they sensorily received distinct stimuli based on their age, status, gender, education, and proxemics. In this regard, experiences and meanings involved in public rituals are also like “snowflakes,” where no two are ever alike (Scott 2009). Considering how variable Maya religion is and was, we should expect that the actions and experiences involved in rituals varied from person-to-person, community-to-community, and region-to-region.

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