

THE CROCODILE AND THE COSMOS: ITZAMKANAC, THE PLACE OF THE ALLIGATOR'S HOUSE

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Studies focused on the jaguar, the serpent and the birds have been greatly favored by researchers. Crocodiles instead have hardly been paid any attention, notwithstanding the repeated occurrence of significant representations throughout Mesoamerica since the Preclassic times to our days. Currently, some masks have begun to be identified as crocodiles, while earlier they had been identified as jaguars.

Crocodiles played an important role in some aspects of the Mesoamerican ideology. They were primarily associated with fertility, as they were responsible for the timely arrival of rains and the fertility of the soil. Possibly, such was the great power of the crocodile. Later, they were associated with the elite, as they legitimized power among several Maya groups; according to Eric Thompson, *Itzam Na* was a god of the nobility.

At the archaeological site of El Tigre, Campeche, Mexico (Figure 1), some masks were found in ceremonial contexts integrated to pyramid temples, which indicate some religious use from the beginning of the constructions. Therefore, the peculiar features of these masks should be viewed as part of an extended process of acceptance and profusion where the constitutive elements, the arrangement and the scale of execution represent variations of an identical system of values echoed as well in an extended tradition (Vargas 1999, 2001; Vargas *et al.* 1999).

Masks 1, 2 and 3 from El Tigre (Figure 2) were very common in the Late Preclassic period in almost the entire Maya Lowlands. They were associated with Sierra Rojo ceramics, typical of this period, although this should not be taken as a reliable marker, for it comprises both the Late Preclassic and the Protoclassic periods. In this research it has been dated within that time; however, we must wait for the results of absolute dates.

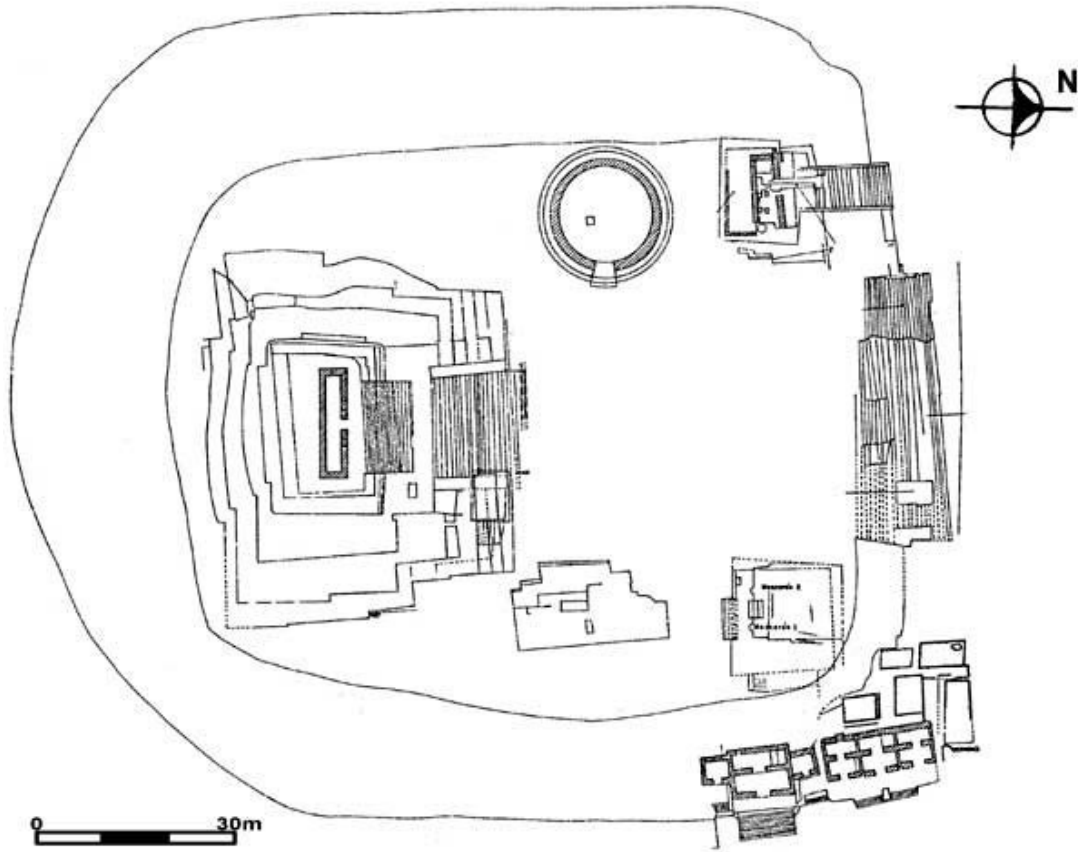


Figure 2. Location of Masks 1, 2 and 3, El Tigre.



Figure 3. Central portion of Mask 3, El Tigre.

It is believed that the central portion of the mask represents a crocodile without its mandible and that it may correspond to *Itzam Na*, that in ancient times it was covered and that the tradition persisted in the region; also, by being of the Late Preclassic, we could think that the emergence of that great creator god might have occurred precisely within this region full of rivers and lakes.

WORLD VIEW

To the Maya, the world was formed by three superimposed but closely related realms; they believed that there was life in all three realms and that they were imbued of some sort of sacred power. In their view, the human world was a region that floated in the primordial sea. At times the earth was depicted like the back of a caiman and sometimes like the back of a turtle. The geography of the human world was made up of plains, mountains, caves, cenotes (sink holes), rivers, lakes and swamps, in addition to places and buildings made by men: cities and towns with houses, palaces, temples and ball games. That world had a life of its own, imbued with a sacredness concentrated in particular points, such as caves and mountains. When the cosmos was created, the major power points were made sacred and the model of the sacred landscape was created. Human beings, as they built their communities, blended their creations with those patterns the gods had generated, while a second matrix of power points, made by men, came to life. Both systems were considered to be complementary and not independent one from the other.

Animals were part of this geography and natural setting, and were as well elements of their world view, integrated into everyday life and to different processes of observation and knowledge, all of which resulted in attributions of divine forces, both in time and space. Animals are seen as interlocutors between men and the gods, like fathers, like souls. *"They are epiphanies of the gods and at the same time their companions"* (De la Garza, 1998).

THE CROCODILE AND THE COSMOS

Some animals, like big cats, birds and reptiles (animals that give shape to *Itzam Na*), mysterious, awesome and frightening, bear multiple magic and religious meanings: that's why they have been placed in the realm of the sacred. They are, above all, symbols and incarnations of divine energies that get in contact with human beings.

One of the most serious problems encountered by the few studies conducted on crocodiles/iguanas, is the change of roles they have experienced through time, making research extremely confusing. Perhaps at the terrestrial level is where crocodiles find their most important and clear attribution and representation, revealing their major significance within Maya world view. They are represented as terrestrial monsters, but

are identified with the underworld and with heaven. We shall briefly refer to the three realms and their relationships.

The Maya conception of earth was that of a crocodile: “[...] the Maya [...] believed that the world rested on the thorax of a huge caiman or alligator, and that this, in turn, floated on a vast lagoon” (Thompson 1975).

“Here, two important elements meet, earth and water. Thus, the crocodile clearly is a fertility character. It is an animal that lives in the water and on the land; he impregnates one with the other and creates life” (Arias 2004:62). This notion of fertility refers to the belief that *“[...] it was responsible for the timely arrival of rains, and with those rains of the fertility of the lands”* (Vargas 2001a:204). Because *“the notion of terrestrial fertility was also expressed among the ancient Maya with a serpent head located in tree roots”* (De la Garza 1998:205). Following this idea, it is believed that the case of crocodiles might have been rather similar, as there are several examples -in archaeology and in the codex-type manuscripts- that point to that direction.

Fertility is birth, it is life; it is what crocodiles do. One of the tasks of crocodiles with nature is to search for life: they search for water, a crucial element for the fertility of the earth; like a terrestrial element they can obtain it in the sources of water, and like a celestial element, through rainfall. Therefore, the crocodile is terrestrial, celestial, and from the underworld as well.

The idea of the lagoon itself –the caiman rests on a lagoon- and his connection with the earth are an evidence of this (Thompson 1975; Eliade 2000; Vargas 2001a; De la Garza 1998), because it is the crocodile’s responsibility to keep it alive by preventing the lagoon to go dry (pond or *jagüey*), as it will provide the liquid of life. This is consistent with the natural function of the crocodile, as he is always on the lookout for the fresh water his body requires. And this is not only a herpetological knowledge; it is a task which humans are familiar with, one that has persisted up to our days in the observation and the coexistence with this animal. From all this could be derived the fact that he was given this fecundating attribute.

“[...] jagüeyes or ponds are made here, and they use to place an alligator in it so that it wont go dry, while the reason I find for this is that alligators are capable of finding water sources, water springs, and they, well... somehow they break this water source for ventilation, and this is the reason I find, besides alligators are not fond of being in dirty waters and what water sources do, precisely, is to renew the water, in other words, they are natural springs, alligators have [...] one, because in those water springs I have seen shrimps [...] they go out there, as these are subterranean rivers which somehow flow away, probably alligators do not do this for ventilating or for water but rather because it may be, it is the reason I find, eating, because they can eat shrimp [...] because these things are like tubes, then alligators try to find these water sources, they liberate them, and then wait for the animals to come out, because they eat frogs, they eat raccoons, but they try to take advantage of that extra source of food, and besides it is fresh

water what goes out, it is never hot water, it is fresh, so the water will not be hot, that's what I believe, I don't think there may be other reasons and in that case I am not aware of them, I am only inferring, and then people say that no, that this is so simply because they are alligators [...] I don't think so, they are after the springs no matter how small they may be because they want to freshen up and search for food" (Julián Soler, personal communication 2002).

The life of a crocodile is linked to water, an all-fecundating and primordial element; it allows for birth and rebirth, for purification, and for achieving life, strength and eternity. Characteristics such as these may only be possessed by great deities, celestial deities. Consequently, it may be inferred that within this process of fertility and rebirth, crocodiles are associated with the celestial plane; isn't it rain the one that fecundates? And, aren't the sun and the moon born and reborn day after day? Considering that immersion in water symbolizes a regression to pre-form, a complete regeneration, a rebirth, because immersion is equivalent to an immersion of the forms *"[...] the coming out of the water is a reproduction of the cosmogonic gesture of formal manifestation. The contact with water always implies regeneration; on one side, because the dissolution is always followed by a 'new birth'; on the other, because immersion fertilizes and increases the power of life and creation"* (Eliade 2000:297).

That is what crocodiles do; the crocodile may submerge and be reborn, it does not die, but instead, it returns from the origin, and origins were made by the celestial gods, it is a donor of life, which is also celestial, and fecundates like rain does. All these celestial processes are accomplished by this animal with a terrestrial though largely aquatic life, through water, seen both as a cosmic and a catastrophic symbol. Besides, the crocodile is associated with the celestial monster *"which was represented as a great monster with the shape of a crocodile. It would [...] create rain whenever his blood was poured"* (Schele and Freidel 1999:73), which may also be terrestrial.

The relationship of the crocodile with the underworld, home of the dead, may be suggested for different reasons. One of them is that actually crocodiles may live (in fact they only stay there for a certain amount of time) underwater, and water is also a feature of the underworld and one of the component parts of *Xibalba*. Here, there's supposed to be a river which souls and spirits must cross to continue their way. This relationship also involves that which has been explained about immersion and its meaning, because *"immersion is equivalent, in the human plane, to death, and in the cosmic plane, to the catastrophe (flood), that periodically dissolves the world..."* (Eliade 2000:304). Thus, water is also an element of mortality, because the great natural catastrophes, those related to the weather (Folan 1989) and to water are usually the most destructive ones; the region of the Candelaria River was exposed and still is, to great catastrophes caused by water.

One additional aspect to be noted is that crocodiles live in caves. *"The caves, like the openings in the surface of the earth that they are, are viewed in general [...] as entrance points to the underworld [...], fertility and abundance"* (Brady and Bonor 1992:78). Besides, they have been connected with the gods of rain and earth, elements entirely

associated with the crocodile, with the underworld. *“The gods of the underworld ruled on rain and fertility; they inhabited the caves, places of transition between day and night, life and death, they represented the open jaws of the earth”* (Vargas 2001a:148). Besides, caves have been related to the maternal womb, as a passage to, or from, the underworld.

To this, the significance of crocodile representations in the most important, celestial gods among which is *Itzam Na*, should be added. This god was observed in *“[...] skies in the form of a celestial dragon iguana [...] [and]. Apparently, there were four such beings”* (Thompson 1975:244). Each one of the *Itzam Na* was assigned to each one of the directions and colors of the world. It is believed that they might be the four celestial monsters that appear frequently in all periods. This god, as well as many others, has an anthropomorphic representation of its own in the form of the so-called Gods D and K (Figure 4).



Figure 4. Itzam Na, God D.

ITZAM NA

Itzam Na is the depiction of a fantastic animal that combines the traits of serpents, crocodiles, alligators, birds, and at times deer hoofs or antlers. It usually appears like a beast that seems to represent the sky, with water spouting from its jaws, or the anthropomorphic face of some god, and displays aquatic and celestial symbols over its body. Its most important representations are both the celestial monster, *Itzam Caan* (Wizard of the Celestial Water or Celestial Alligator), and the earthly monster, *Itzam Cab Ain* (water sorcerer, crocodile earth). *Itzam Na* was the creator god, associated with good crops, the rain, the sun, and the earth. It is identified with the underworld, but also with the sky.

Colonial sources state that the *Itzam Na* dragon was identified with the creator gods who acted in the motionless times of the origins. It is said that *Itzam Na* lived in heaven and used to send the rain. At the same time he was a cultural hero, as it was said that he invented agriculture, writing, the calendars and all other human creations, he dictated the laws and ruled through his chosen ones.

The complexity of *Itzam Na* is evident from its very name; for example, De la Garza (1998:190) has defined it like “*an underwater magician, the one with hidden powers in the water, and iguanas are called that name because the god looks like a reptile, and not the other way around*”.

To have an idea regarding the meaning of his name, we should recall that *Itzam Na* is the form of an almighty, creator god. Besides, this name is found and still used nowadays (though not as a deity). Freidel *et al.* (1999:47) say that *itz* is a blessed substance from heaven, a celestial element “*that flows through a portal represented by the celestial platform that hangs from the shaman’s altar; this is the itz of Itzamna*”. *Itzam* is the term for *shaman*, “*the person who opens the portal to bring itz into the world*” (Freidel *et al.* 1999:47). Then, *Itzam Na* was the First Shaman, and one of the gods who drew the images of constellations in the sky during the time of the creation.

Itzam Na has been the primary god of the Mayas from Yucatan, but in a way the most confusing one; he was the god of the hierarchs, while the *Chacs* were the favorite of peasants. *Itzam Na* was the creator god, associated with good harvests, the rain, the sun and the earth. He has been identified with the underworld but also with the sky, while in his advocacy of *Itzam Cab Ain* (Iguana Earth or iguana earth caiman) he was associated in terms of his earthly divinity. Referring to *Itzam Na*, Thompson (1975:286) states the following:

“The conception of Itzam Na is certainly a majestic one. It is understood that Maya princes were led to consider him the sole great god, because it would

seem that the Maya of the Classic period made of the cult to Itzam Na something similar to monotheism, while all other beings, like the sun and the moon, probably the Chacs, and so on, would be Itzam Na's servants or his manifestations, expressed by placing their heads inside his open mandibles. We have found the god under the shape of an iguana, but with two anthropomorphic manifestations as well, the Gods D and K. Perhaps such ideas were far too abstract to appeal to Maya peasants, because as we have seen, the cult to Itzam Na faded away when the ancient ruling class collapsed, after the Spanish conquest".

The *Itzam Caan*, a celestial monster, includes the cosmic opposites of the great: he is the light, the masculine, order, rationality, life, heaven, in conjunction and harmony with darkness, the feminine, chaos, irrationality, death, and earth. Such contraries are represented through the animal symbols par excellence of opposed forces: the bird, personifying heaven, and the serpent, image of the earth, and then the sacred ones like the jaguar, the crocodile, and the deer. Thus, the celestial dragon integrates the vital force of earth (serpent, deer), of mother earth's womb, that is of the underworld (jaguar), of the waters (alligator), and of heaven (bird). *"In concordance with the celestial plane it was represented like a huge alligator covered with astronomical signs"* (Villa Rojas 1994), which might be Venus, Mars, Mercury, Jupiter, the Sun and the Moon.

Montoliú (1989:53) notes that: *"A thin rain or torrential downpours fall from his jaws, which may become planetary signs. They are also associated with several constellations, as they represent the sky, being particularly linked to the Pleiades"*. This monster is a representative of the entire sky and the solar elements, because *"the Sun is the burning eye or face of the sky and is given, in Maya mythology, the name of Kinich Ahau Itzam Na, Lord-Water-Magician-Face-of-the-Sun"* (Montoliú 1989:55). He is the god of rain and fertility, just like the crocodile.

In art it is found in the form of a serpent or a two-headed dragon, of a feathered serpent, of a winged serpent, as a serpent-bird, as a dragon with the body of an astral band showing its identification with the Milky Way denominated *Sacbe*, and like an old man with serpentine facial traits.

ITZAMKANAC: THE PLACE OF THE HOUSE OF THE ALLIGATOR

Itzam Na was a most important god in Yucatan, where he was apparently considered as a foreign god and associated with the elite. It is believed that the central character of Mask 3 from El Tigre, Campeche, may be identified with a very early representation of *Itzam Na*, and that it comes from this region, although alligators are found in other regions as well. Besides, it should be noted that, although asserting its value is rather difficult, the word *Itzamkanac* (Figure 5), capital of the Acalans at the time of the Spanish conquest, includes the term *Itzam*, and like Otto Schumann has noted, it well might have stood for *The second house of the Itzam*, this name referring to the second

arrival of the group at the region; in addition, *Itzam* is the name of more than just one god, and according to Viena's dictionary it would translate as alligator (Thompson 1975); also, some incense burners in the shape of crocodiles have been found (Figure 6). Their closeness to the Candelaria River and to several lagoons might have been the origin of these beliefs and advocations on the side of the elite. The face of the mask has been transformed into a mythical animal, possibly an alligator-iguana-feline (Figure 7). The features displayed are very typical of alligators. The snout is flat because the Maya did not represent it as it really is. Undoubtedly this mask might be of the greatest importance to the site, as it might be identified as *The two-serpent alligator*; *Itzamkanac* could be *Itzam* (alligator), *kan* (serpent), *na* (house), and *ac* (place), *place of the house of the alligator and the serpent*. All such notions and arguments assume that a cult to the *Itzamna* crocodile might have emerged, as of the Preclassic period, in this region full of rivers and lagoons.



Figure 5. El Tigre archaeological site.



Figure 6. Incense burners in the shape of crocodiles, from El Tigre.

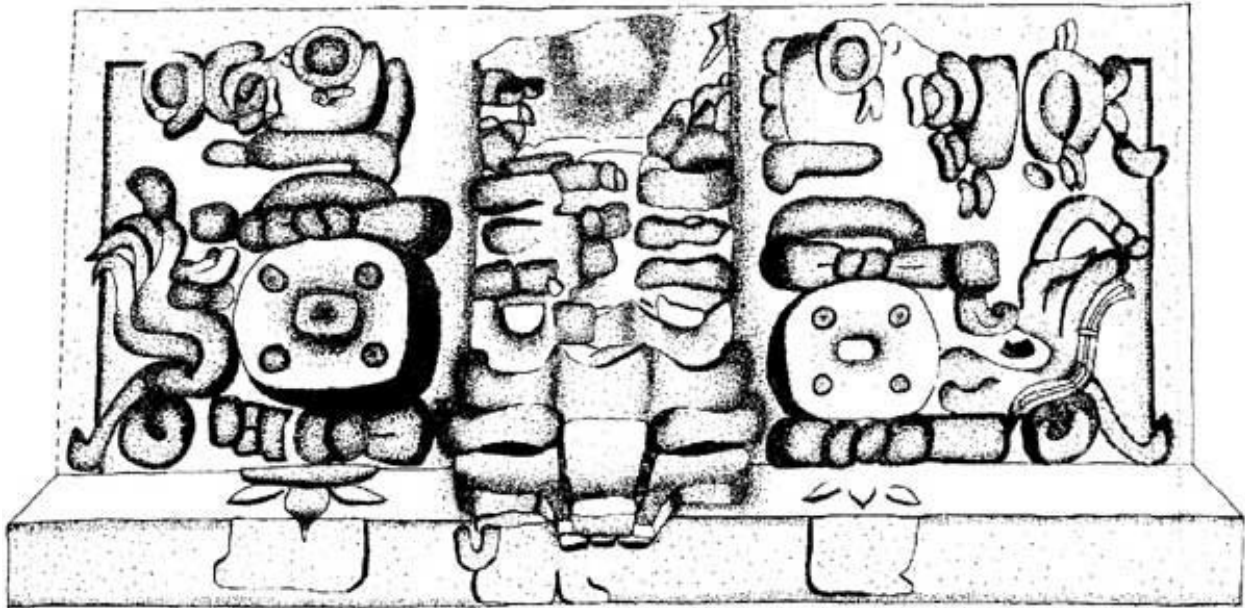


Figure 7. Mask 3, from El Tigre (drawing by Teri Arias).

This group is known mostly for having been the best navigators and traders, called by Thompson the Phoenicians of America. Through their mastery in the waters (rivers, lagoons and seas), they managed to travel from Laguna de Términos, the perimeter of the Yucatán Peninsula and up to Naco and Nito in Honduras. *“The natural means of transportation was [...] a major factor in the economic progress of the Putuns [...] that network of rivers, swamps and pools was only navigable for those who had it closely surveyed in their memory since their childhood”* (Thompson 1975:25); most probably they were experts in all activities related to crocodiles, as well as bearers of different beliefs and traditions, influencing the Yucatán Peninsula.

This Chontal or Putún Maya group gave way to a subgroup or branch, the Itzá, well-known for their migrations (Figure 8), always related to the *katuns* and their conquest of Chichén Itzá. Their migrations are well documented in colonial sources. We share the view that this was a Chontal Maya group, and as such, its world view was dramatically influenced by their original environment: rivers, lagoons, swamps, and crocodiles. Thus, it is believed that this group is responsible for introducing the cult to *Itzam Na* into the Yucatán Peninsula.

Itzamkanac might be the place that depended on the crocodile the most, in its representation of *Itzam Na*. The arguments that could be used to analyze this issue are varied; the people from *Itzamkanac*, like others from elsewhere in the region, were also skilled navigators, and trade along the rivers brought them power, in addition to the fact that they would not always use the *cayucos* (canoes), as at some points navigation was difficult and probably they traveled on foot. No doubt, this resulted among many other things, in a thorough knowledge of all dangers water could involve, crocodiles being one of them. The attacks, the nests, the food, in sum, all things that such trips involved were accomplished thinking, among other things, about this animal.



Figure 8. The Itza migration (Vargas 2001).

Itzam Na and *Ixchel*, the divine couple, the creator pair, is closely related to the Acalan region, and they possibly gave some unit to the province, considering the regional proximity of their gods.

“Two of the great cities of the Putun Acalans were Itzamkanac and Tixchel. The first may well stand for ‘in the second house of the iguana’. Otto Schumann suggests it could also stand for ‘in the second waistline of the iguana’, in other words, this name would involve the primary god of the Yucatec, Itzam Na, suggesting that the second house of the Iguana-Crocodile could also mean that it

was located in the middle of a region [...]. Tixchel means 'At the place of Ix Chel' (Vargas 2001a:153).

The link of these beliefs with crocodiles is clear, because of the zoomorphic representation of *Itzam Na* seen at *Itzamkanac* (today known as El Tigre), and the relationship with his wife *Ixchel*. In turn, Potonchan also reveals evidence of the significance of crocodiles: “[...] after the Conquest, Francisco Zippaque was in charge there. Cippaque, which seems to have been, then, the surname of the Potonchan dynasty is most probably the name of the Nahuatl day ‘Cipactli’” (Thompson 1975:27). And the first name corresponds, at the center, to the crocodile.

THE WEST, REGION OF THE UNDERWORLD, ORIGIN OF SEVERAL MAYA GROUPS

The Zuyua region comprised the territory between Xicalango, Isla del Carmen and Champoton, and was apparently the home or concentration point of a number of groups (K'iche', Kaqchikel, Itza', Cocom, Xiu and Canul, among others) before they dispersed in different directions to establish their villages and to achieve splendor for their lineages, under the guidance of Quetzalcoatl (Gucumatz, Tohil, Kukulcan).

When the Popol Vuh and the Memorial de Sololá refer to Zuyua, they both refer to the west. When Piña Chan interprets the passages of those books, he states that both the K'iche' and the Kaqchikel left the western city (Tulan Zuyva) after receiving their gods. They headed to the Gulf Coast where they fought against the Nonoualcas from Tabasco and the Xulpiti, probably the Xiu, as this group also had its home in Nonoualco; then they passed to Zuyva (Zuyua or Laguna de Términos), where they were defeated, and from there they went back to Guatemala, going across the mountains. The Tutul Xiu (Blue Birds), left Tulapan Chiconautlan; their homes were based in the Nonoualco region (Tabasco), west of Zuyua (Laguna de Términos); later, some of them headed towards Yucatán, to reach Uxmal and to settle there around A.D. 987-1007, almost at the same time that the Itzas departed towards Chichén Itzá, penetrating from the west through Champoton.

This may be due to a variety of reasons: on one side their point of departure was Cozumel, while Isla Mujeres was the place where the most important center for *Ixchel* (goddess of the moon, of childbirth, of weaving, etc.) was located. This deity was also associated with fertility and water, and she was *Itzam Na's* wife. Besides, after their stay at Chichen Itza they migrated west, towards *Zuyua* (Chakamputun) where they settled for 260 years, and this place is the entrance to the underworld where they were reborn and purified. *“In that migration, they shifted from the east to the center, from the center to the west, from the west to the center, from the center to the north, and from the north to the south: they spread towards the four corners of the world, and remained 260 years in each one of those places, and in each one of them the act of birth, growth and death was repeated”* (Vargas 2001a:240).

The notion and image of the four directions of the world, as well as the *axis mundi*, are connected with the notion of ceiba tree-crocodile, because a crocodile lied under each ceiba-tree, and obviously under the fifth point. Most probably the Itzas shared this notion, because those who migrated constituted a selected, elite group, fully familiar with this thinking. The acts of being born, growing up and dying refer to the crocodile; it is the source of life, through its connection with caves (whenever they come out), fertility, earth and rain, it develops and dies when submerging into the water when entering the caves, and these cyclical ideas typify the advocations about the crocodile that existed in those days.

One may think that the appropriation of the *Itzamn Na* crocodile by the Itzas took place not because it was their primary god, which in fact was *Kukulkan*, who actually was expected to return, but rather it had to do with their life style, with their interpretation of space and time. It is quite clear that through their migrations they understood cyclical time, and therefore these migrations were part of a great divine passage of death, birth, death and rebirth, and these actions had to be performed with their *Great Father Itzam Na* an their *Great Mother Ixchel*, with the cosmic opposites that facilitate a cyclical understanding.

The crocodile was a special god, his association with the *katuns* leaves no doubt about this; more than an expected god he was a companion god, an elite god, a god connected to cycles. And perhaps we will not find significant archaeological remains, because what would be the point to venerate him through 10 or 40 years of pilgrimage, if what they needed during those motionless moments were not the benefits and knowledge they could receive from the crocodile, because its remarkable significance had to do with precise moments, those moments the elites were so familiar with and manipulated to increase their power.

This deity belongs to the sacred times that predict a departure and an arrival. Because it should not be forgotten that *“The Itzas handled two different timeframes: the katun cycle and the great katun cycle with an approximate duration of 769 years. They both were physical representations of the horizontal and vertical aspects of the Mayan cosmos, with which the indigenous scribes attempted to legitimate the political power of the Itzas, by placing them in their cosmology and cosmogony. In this view, the Itzas appear not only like those who represent cosmic order, but also as the creators and begetters of the universe”* (Okoshi 1997:189).

Based on the indigenous tradition described by the Chilam Balam de Chumayel, Tizimin and Mani, the Itzas ruled ten times twenty years in Chichén Itzá, and then left and went to Chakamputun. There, they remained thirteen times twenty years and once that period of time was concluded they returned once more, conquered the place and settled again. Shortly before the Xiu had arrived to the peninsula of Yucatán, they fought at Mul Chic and later settled at Uxmal; there were also other groups that departed from Tabasco, Campeche; that is why they would accuse each other of being foreigners. They came from the region of Zuyua, a mythical and at the same time real place which some have

identified at the west of Tabasco, while others merely place it in the realms of myth; in other words, they basically exclude it from the process of material history.

The *8 Ahau katun* was the katun of war, conquest and change; every 260 *tuns* a city was abandoned or destroyed and the Itzas were torn away from home no matter where they were living at that time. By the end of the seventh century they were expelled from Chichén following their first occupation. By the mid-ninth century they were expelled from Chakamputun, and late in the thirteenth century they were once again evacuated from Chichen Itza by *Hunac Ceel*. Around the mid-fifteenth century Mayapan was sacked and destroyed, and again during an *8 Ahau katun*, late in the seventeenth century, the Spaniards conquered the last bastion of the Itzas in Tayasal (Roys 1933:136, in Vargas 2002).

The pilgrimage of the Itzas throughout the entire Yucatán Peninsula unfolded in five different places and obeyed a certain conception of sacred space: they arrived from the east, they moved to the center of the sacred space that is Chichén Itzá, they moved west and returned again to Chichén; from there they migrated north and later settled at the south, at Tayasal. This pilgrimage took them through different stages: they were born-reborn, they grew up and abandoned their places. According to Nancy Farris (1985), the cyclic timeframe revealed by the katunic wheel represents cosmic order, inasmuch as the cosmos needs to periodically renew its own life. The cosmic cycle (Eliade 2000) includes a creation, an existence, and a return to chaos, and such returns to chaos are a necessity of the universe, shown as an imbalance of forces that give way to a new cosmic order and thus, to another world period.

The sojourn of the Itzas back to Chichén Itzá refers to this cosmic order par excellence; they come from the west, the underworld, from Zuyua, an indispensable place to achieve the wisdom of the gods, then they spend a few decades roaming to finally become rulers, somewhere, with the acknowledgement of the legitimacy of their political power in the terrestrial world. There is no doubt that the myth of the Zuyua region exists, but at the same time, there is no doubt that back then, the region was imbued with a mythical sacredness whereby political government was legitimated, and rulers used the names of mythical characters and acted based on their representation.

The idea that the cult to *Itzam Na* was born in this region of rivers and lagoons (Figure 9), has achieved now a greater strength than in the past, because the Chontal region is the Zuyua, it is the place of the underworld, the place of the primordial waters and the place where the divine couple, the creator pair, *Itzam Na* and *Ixchel*, were born or came from. This is probably the reason why many Postclassic Maya groups declare they come from that region: it's enough to recall the Xiu, Itza', Cocom, Canul, Cupul, K'iche' and Kaqchikel, among others, who in the words of the last two "*abandoned the Western city*" (Tulan Zuyva), after receiving their gods.



Figure 9. Region of rivers and lagoons.

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Figure 1. Map of El Tigre (Vargas 2001).

Figure 2. Location of Masks 1, 2 and 3, El Tigre.

Figure 3. Central portion of Mask 3, El Tigre.

Figure 4. Itzam Na, God D.

Figure 5. El Tigre archaeological site.

Figure 6. Incense burners in the shape of crocodiles, from El Tigre.

Figure 7. Mask 3, from El Tigre (drawing by Teri Arias).

Figure 8. The Itza migration (Vargas 2001).

Figure 9. Region of rivers and lagoons.