

**LANGUAGE AND SYMBOLIC REPRESENTATION IN CONTEMPORARY  
MAYAN POETRY: A LINGUISTIC AND LITERARY ANALYSIS OF “YAAN A BIN  
XOOK” BY BRICEIDA CUEVAS COB (2005)**

LENGUAJE Y REPRESENTACIÓN SIMBÓLICA EN LA POESÍA CONTEMPORÁNEA MAYA:  
UN ANÁLISIS LINGÜÍSTICO Y LITERARIO DE “YAAN A BIN XOOK”,  
DE BRICEIDA CUEVAS COB (2005)

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**ABSTRACT:** This investigation, based on the dual analysis (linguistic/literary) of the Mayan version of the poem “Yaan a bin xook”/ “Irás a la escuela”/“You Will Go to School” written by Briceida Cuevas Cob (2005), focuses on how cultural belief, practice, and iconic representation are communicated through language. By working closely with Mayan language and culture expert Rolando Ek Naal, a native speaker of Maya, key terms and concepts throughout the poem have been examined to identify cultural symbolism that is embedded linguistically. Besides the expertise of Mr. Ek Naal, this study has also been guided by the commentary of the poet herself, taken from a personal interview granted in 2012. Although, Cuevas Cob is a contemporary poet and in this poem speaks about issues facing young Mayan women today, many aspects of the language and imagery that she uses (as this study demonstrates) can be traced to ancient belief and expression.

**KEYWORDS:** Mayan contemporary poetry, linguistic/literary analysis, Mayan language, symbolic representation.

**RESUMEN:** Esta investigación está basada en el análisis dual (lingüístico/literario) de la versión maya del poema “Yaan a bix xoo” / “Irás a la escuela” / “You will go to School” escrito por Briceida Cuevas Cob (2005), enfocado en cómo la creencia, práctica y representación icónica cultural son comunicadas a través del lenguaje. Trabajando estrechamente con el experto en lengua y cultura maya, Rolando Ek Naal, un hablante nativo de maya, se han examinado los términos y conceptos clave en el poema para identificar el simbolismo cultural lingüísticamente inserto. Además de la destreza del señor Ek Naal, este estudio también ha sido guiado por el comentario de la propia poeta, tomado de una entrevista personal concedida en 2012. Aunque, Cuevas Cob es una poeta contemporánea y en este poema habla de problemas con los que se enfrentan hoy en día las jóvenes mujeres mayas, muchos de los aspectos de la lengua y las imágenes que utiliza (como lo demuestra este estudio) puede tener su origen en antiguas creencias y expresiones.

**PALABRAS CLAVE:** Poesía maya contemporánea, análisis lingüístico/literario, lengua maya, representación simbólica.

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# LANGUAGE AND SYMBOLIC REPRESENTATION IN CONTEMPORARY MAYAN POETRY: A LINGUISTIC AND LITERARY ANALYSIS OF “YAAN A BIN XOOK” BY BRICEIDA CUEVAS COB (2005)

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Mayan symbology is universally recognized for its intricate conceptualization and representation of this complex way of envisioning the world whether it is transmitted through pictorial, oral or written language reflects culturally specific modes of cognition and communication that have evolved over millennia. Like all contemporary languages, Mayan languages interpret and express their speaker's experience in the modern world. But, because no language exists apart from culture and Mayan languages are the living legacy of ancient cultures, they link the past to the present and communicate a unique world view by conveying historic and contemporary information about belief, practice, and symbolic representation.

This study is based on the dual analysis (linguistic and literary) of the poem “Yaan a bin xook” / “Irás a la escuela” / “You Will Go to School” written in Peninsular Maya and translated into Spanish by Briceida Cuevas Cob (2005). Because this is an investigation on how cultural belief, practice, and symbolic representation are communicated through language and poetic discourse, the focus of the analysis is the Mayan version of the poem. The primary question driving this study is: What role does language play in the transmission and preservation of Mayan cultural belief and symbolic representation?

Our analysis has been accomplished and presented in the following manner. First, the Mayan version of the poem was transcribed section by section.<sup>1</sup> For non-readers of Maya, each section's transcription has been accompanied with the poet's Spanish translation and Donald Frischmann's English translation<sup>2</sup> (Montemayor & Frischmann, 2005). Next, working closely with Mayan scholar Rolando Ek Naal, key terms from the poem were selected and emphasized in bold type. Following the dual analysis methodology, the key terms were then researched

<sup>1</sup> Although we have divided this text into sections and or verses using the poet's punctuation, we acknowledge that these divisions have not been implemented by the poet, but are based on our own interpretation of the poem and have been utilized to assist in our process of analysis.

<sup>2</sup> All other translations into English have been rendered by the author of this article.



and analyzed (within the context of the poem) and their multiple and interconnected meanings have been discussed in detail. The literary facet of this analysis has been shaped by the comments and insights of the poet herself as the result of an interview granted in September 8, 2012.<sup>3</sup> And as stated above, the linguistic dimension of the analysis was accomplished under the tutelage of Mr. Rolando Ek Naal, whose profound knowledge of Mayan language and culture has served as both a point of departure and guide for this investigation.<sup>4</sup> At the end of this study, the poet's mayan and spanish versions of the poem have been transcribed in their entirety alongside Mr. Frischmann's translation so that readers have the opportunity to read the text in full without commentary.

Briceida Cuevas Cob was born in 1969 in the community of Tepakán, municipality of Calkiní, Campeche, Mexico. She is an internationally acclaimed poet with two books of poetry in print. Her poems, which have been included in several anthologies, have also been published in numerous literary journals and newspapers throughout the Yucatan Peninsula and Mexico City. Rolando Humberto Ek Naal was born in 1961 in Ex-hacienda Santa Cruz, Calkiní, Campeche México. He is a well respected musicologist, translator (Maya/Spanish), pedagogue, and researcher of Mexican cultures, specializing in Mayan culture and language.

When interviewed and asked specifically about the origins of this poem and her motivation and/or reason for writing it, Cuevas Cob responded with the following commentary:

These girls today that are going to school are getting a "light" education (as you say in English), in the sense that they aren't very interested in the language. They are passive learners that don't speak the language. They understand some expressions, but don't want to practice them. This also has to do with the politics of education as well as the lack of will and effort of the bilingual teachers that don't continue their own education and don't have a convincing or real plan or any methodology in order to do their work. Consequently, it is our concern or my concern that in the community now only people my age and older are speaking the language while the young people and children are being alienated from their own land and their own language. Precisely for this reason I was motivated to write this text so that yes... you will go to school and you will not be an empty headed child. But, you also know that you must return because here is your place, your natural environment. Here are your roots and you can go wherever you want or are able to go, but you have a tie or connection that invites you... obliges you to return (Cuevas Cob, personal communication).

<sup>3</sup> This is the date for all interview citations for Ms. Cuevas Cob.

<sup>4</sup> To obtain the information for this article, Mr. Ek Naal was interviewed seven times: May 6, June 6, August 20, September 30, October 10, November 3, 2013, and January 14, 2014.

"Yaan a bin <b>xook</b> "	"Irás a la escuela" / "You Will Go to School"
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Although the translations of the title of this poem in both Spanish and English use the term "school" —bringing to mind "formal or state run education"— an examination of the Maya word **xook** (see table 1) reveals its polysemous nature, which in turn gives us insight on the overall message of this poem.

<i>Xook</i> as a noun	<i>Xook</i> as a verb	<i>Xook</i> in composite words
- <b>xook</b> 'lesson'	- <b>xook</b> 'to read, to count, to study, to keep in mind or take into account'	<p>-<b>xookil</b> 'count, calculation or sum; story or tale'.</p> <p>-<b>xooken</b> 'a term referring to the ability to read or to know someone and to know their history'.</p> <p>-<b>xook k'iin</b> 'literally meaning counting/reading the passage of the days or time (such as in weather forecasting) used in relation to agriculture'.</p> <p>-<b>xookbil chuuy</b> 'embroidery' (similar to cross stitch, but with designs relating to Mayan cosmology).</p>

TABLE 1. Semantic analysis of the term *Xook*.  
Adapted from Ek Naal, personal communication; Gómez, 2009: 187.

Table 1 demonstrates that the term **xook** —although translated as school— refers more to the various ways of obtaining knowledge, such as through numbers, stories, people, the passage of days or time, agricultural conditions, and embroidery. This more ample perspective on schooling or education clarifies how the term **xook** in the title of this poem combined with *yaan a bin* 'one must go' is literally a mandate for young women to not be limited by ignorance. Moreover, that they obtain knowledge (an education) from both their own culture and others (Cuevas Cob, personal communication; Ek Naal, personal communication).

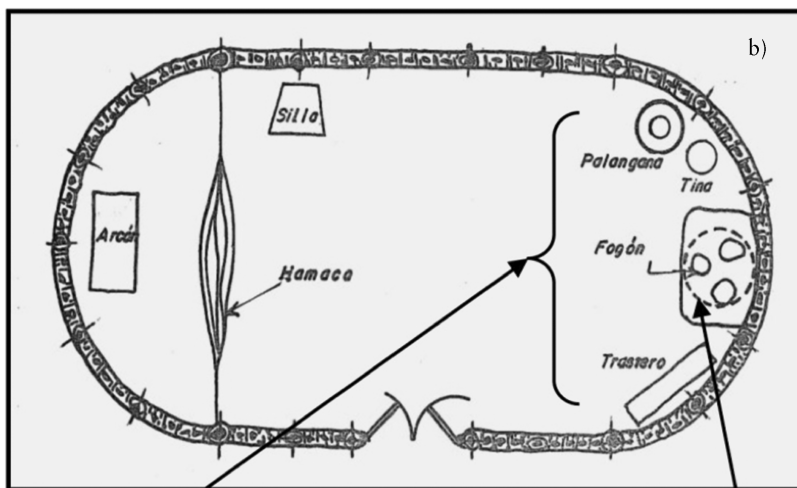


On a more earthly level, given that ants are important indicators of rain, it explains why in the fields —a traditionally male space— men would welcome them. Nevertheless, although they signal the coming rain (which is needed for the crops) the fact that they do this by seeking refuge on higher and dryer ground, which is often in the *yáalanaj* ‘kitchen’ —a traditionally female space— where they can be quite destructive to foodstuffs. Therefore, making it understandable why they are not welcomed by women, who are traditionally responsible for the preparation of meals for their families (Mariaca, 2003).

In Maya there are two common expressions for kitchen, *k’óoben*, which is a direct reference to the traditional three stones of the hearth and *yáalanaj* (Ek Naal, personal communication; Gómez, 2009). Besides the musicality of its pronunciation (which is important to the poet), it is also possible that the word *yáalanaj* linguistically conveys information about the kitchen being a gendered environment. The compound term *yáalanaj* combines *yáal* ‘part of’ or ‘layer’ with *naj*<sup>5</sup> ‘house’ (Bricker, Po’ot Yah & Dzul de Po’ot, 1998; Ek Naal, personal communication). It is interesting to note that the term *naj* ‘house’ shares the root morpheme “*na*” with expressions such as *na* ‘mother,’ *nak* ‘womb,’ and *chuun u nak* ‘stem or origin of the womb’ (Ek Naal, personal communication; Gómez, 2009). Rolando Ek Naal (personal communication) explains that in Mayan traditional culture —and in the context of Cuevas Cob’s poem— the concept and term *yáalanaj* ‘kitchen’ poetically creates the image of the kitchen as being a part of (or the womb of) the mother house: a feminine and protected environment where the hearth and heart of the family reside (see figure 1).

By using this folk expression as the epilogue of this poem, Cuevas Cob is critiquing the traditional notion of a woman’s sphere and work from her own perspective of living both in and outside of her community of origin. She explains that this type of traditional division of labor within the family locates women in the home and not in school (personal communication). But at the same time, she laments that young women (young people in general) are distancing themselves from the home and more specifically the kitchen and are now eating pizza instead of tortillas (*id.*). She emphatically affirms that young people can and should study and go on to the university, but “you have to return to your roots and reevaluate your identity so that you don’t lose where you come from or where you are going” (*id.*). She also explains that in her own life, along with all that she has learned from living outside of the community, the sacrifices she has made for her professional and artistic development, there is also a process of learning how to return to the community because “many do it in a conscious way and others without being conscious” (*id.*).

<sup>5</sup> Although there are alternative spellings for *naj* and other terms, we have based this study on the poet’s choices in spelling.



The kitchen in the floor design  
of a traditional Mayan house  
in the Yucatan Peninsula

The three stones  
of the fogón/hearth

FIGURE 1. Images of the *naj* 'house' and *yáalanaj* 'kitchen'.  
(a) Traditional Yucatec Mayan *Naj* 'House'. (b) *Naj* Floor Plan.

Image (a) photographed by Huchim Herrera, was retrieved June 26, 2014, from <<http://maya.nmai.si.edu/gallery/santa-elena-and-san-simon>> and has been reprinted with permission.

Image (b) has been adapted from Moya, 1984: 79.

For this reason, the epigraph is used by the poet intentionally to place women in the home. And, because it is a sphere associated with explicit responsibilities and production, as Cuevas Cob makes clear, in many respects it designates a place and a role that are privileged and respected because they are based on time honored knowledge, ability, and values. To better understand what these values, abilities, and knowledge are and how they take place in the traditional home and correspond to the notion of femininity in Mayan culture, it is important to explain that in agricultural (more specifically, corn growing) Mayan communities it is customary that a family's various systems of production and socialization take place in two gender specific yet complementary spheres; one located within the house and its immediate surrounding area (patio, etc.) and the other located —outside of the house and patio— in the *milpa* 'corn fields,' farming/grazing areas, and beyond (Ayllón & Nuño, 2008; Rosado, 2003). Although women traditionally work in the home and men work in the fields, as the system is based on cooperation, there are circumstances where women participate in field work and men in the home (*id.*).

María Teresa Ayllón Trujillo and María Rosa Nuño Gutiérrez (2008) describe the home ideally as the place where all members of the family find affection, understanding and security. It is (as they explain) where family members learn “all of the signs of identity that permit them to socialize on the outside without losing the roots that will give meaning to their lives and reasoning to their ethics and particular aesthetic” (*ibid.*, 282). Moreover, according to these authors the home is the locus and foundation of the Mayan conception or construction of femininity:

The familial territory within —what is really considered the home— with its kitchen garden, corral or backyard economy, is the foundation of the construction of femininity. The house with all of its activities: intensive agriculture, intensive animal husbandry, artisan industry, commercial activities, etc., are the symbolic and material responsibility of the women of the family from the moment that they are born until the day that they are gone. In the house is where human reproduction, health care, the infrastructure for the transformation of foodstuffs into nutrition is all carried out. (Ayllón & Nuño, 2008: 282).

By describing the distinct activities performed in the home and its immediate surroundings (the patio), it becomes clear that the home in a traditional Maya community is considered the family's spiritual, social, and economic base. The home is where these systems (or ways) of being culturally, spiritually, and economically active are organized, implemented and passed on to future generations. Although the home is a place for the entire family, it is (as stated above) a traditionally female sphere where women take care of children, tell stories, prepare food and health products, tend animals, kitchen gardens, fruit trees, and participate in various types of commercial activities such as embroidery, ceramics, etc. In this community setting, women are responsible for the social, cultural, linguistic education of their children and are the primary caregivers of their fami-

lies (Ayllón & Nuño, 2008; Guzmán, 2007). Consequently, women and the home and kitchen they manage, represent a societal role and locus that are essential for cultural continuity (*id.*).

(l) Teche' yaan a bin <b>xook</b> . Ma' tun <b>p'áatakech polwech</b> . Yan a táats'máansik u <b>páakabil</b> <b>najil a tuukul</b> yo'olal a woko'j ta <b>wotoch</b> ma' táan a k'opik <b>joolnaj</b> .	(l) Tú irás a la escuela. No serás cabeza hueca. Traspasarás el umbral de tu imaginación hasta adentrarte en tu propia casa sin tener que tocar la puerta.	(l) You will go to school. You will not be empty-headed. You will cross the threshold of your imagination going all the way into your own house without having to knock on the door.
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In the first verse of the poem the poet by using the imperative, commands that the subject (or subjects) of her message—young Mayan women—will/must go to **xook** ‘do lessons, read, count, study, take into account,’ in other words, they need to get an education and think. By getting an education and using their mind, these young women will not be **p'áatakech** ‘left behind’ like a **polwech**. **Polwech** although translated as ‘cabeza hueca/empty headed’ in Spanish and English, in Maya it is a composite term that combines **pol** ‘head’ with **wech** ‘armadillo’ and signifies the head of an armadillo. When asked why she utilized the expression **polwech**, Cuevas Cob (personal communication) explained that:

It is an expression that is used often in my community. I work a lot with common expressions because they make a lot of sense and involve a great deal of philosophy and information. This expression **polwech** means armadillo head and is always used by people from the communities. My dad, the neighbors, all of the people from the community use it to refer to a person who is a brute. It makes a comparison with an armadillo (which I don't believe is anything like a brute) and its especially hard covering or shield. And because of the tough protection that it has, they compare it with a person's head. Their head is very hard and because of this the lessons don't penetrate their thick skull, and what they explain in class and knowledge in general doesn't either. That's why the expression means that someone doesn't understand or that they have difficulties learning something.

After insisting that young women get an education so that they do not get left behind as a “armadillo head,” she exhorts them to **táats'máansik** ‘cross, go through’ the **páakabil** ‘threshold, limits’ of the **najil** ‘this house’ **tuukul** ‘to think / of thought, intelligence, wisdom’ in order to **woko'j** ‘enter’ **wotoch** ‘their home’ without **k'opik** ‘knocking’ on the **joolnaj** ‘door’ (Bolles, 2001; Ek Naal, personal communication; Gómez, 2009). The term **páakabil**, although it is translated by the poet as ‘umbral’ in Spanish and ‘threshold’ in the English translation, is a complex



term with no direct translation found in any of the various dictionaries consulted. Nevertheless, the terms *páak*, *paak* and *páak'al*, *paakal* did have lengthy lists of meanings. In table 2 is a sampling of definitions that are the most recurrent in the dictionaries perused, as well as being the terms that appear to be the most applicable to the context and message of the poem.

Term	Possible Meanings
<i>páak</i>	Remove weeds Remove the weeds or clean the underbrush in a plot or area
<i>paak</i>	To save or guard To wait or hope Surprise (noun) / to be surprised Fright (noun) / to be frightened / to cause fright or surprise /to be frightened or surprised in a dream To pull weeds /weed / prepare for planting
<i>páak'al</i>	To plant or cultivate
<i>paakal</i>	To be frightened or surprised between dreams with physical trembling To pull out plants by the roots

TABLE 2. Semantic Analysis of the Term *Páak* (*paak*, *páak'al*, and *paakal*).  
Adapted from Bolles, 2001; V. Bricker, E. Po'ot & O. Dzúl, 1998: 206; Gómez, 2009: 161.

From the above definitions, it is possible to interpret this term (like that of a threshold) as an intermediate space or moment before a transition or change. The term *páakabil* in the context of this poem appears to refer to a mental transition, such as the shift in consciousness between dreams or between dreaming and waking or metaphorically as the transition between an uncultivated plot (or area) to a cultivated one. In other words, the transition or shift from an armadillo head into a thinking or conscious person.

This section of the poem (an example of parallelism<sup>6</sup>) builds on a series of couplets or corresponding elements that focus on and develop the notion of head or consciousness in reference to the home or house where a child (more specifically

<sup>6</sup> The Merriam-Webster's Encyclopedia of Literature (1995: 856), defines parallelism as the following: "In rhetoric, a component of literary style in both prose and poetry, in which coordinate ideas are arranged in phrases, sentences, and paragraphs that balance one element with another of equal importance and similar wording. The repetition of sounds, meanings, and structures serves to order, emphasize and point out relations." It is important to note that parallelism is one of the most emblematic poetic elements in Mesoamerican literature that in some cases has hardly changed since ancient times (Bricker, 2007; Craveri & Valencia, 2012; Monod-Becquelin & Becquely, 2008).



a girl) is indoctrinated in and learns her own culture (cultural knowledge/wisdom) and identity. Table 3 demonstrates how the five verses of this section work off of each other to construct this conception.

Verse in Maya	Analysis in English Focusing on Key Terms
<i>Teche' yaan a bin xook.</i>	You will get an education and <i>think (go to school)</i> , and in the context of this poem, <i>consciously return to your community and home</i> ).
<i>Ma tun p'áatakech polwech.</i>	You will <i>not be empty-headed</i> (an armadillo head, <i>be unconscious</i> ).
<i>Yan a táats'máansik u páakabil u najil a tuukul</i>	You will cross the threshold of <i>your house (to think/ house of thought, intelligence, wisdom)</i> .
<i>yo'olal a woko'j ta wotoch</i>	going all the way into <i>your own home (the source of your culture knowledge, imagination, and identity)</i> .
<i>ma'táan a k'opik joolnaj</i>	without having to knock on the <i>door (the entrance to your own cultural heritage and way of thinking)</i> .

TABLE 3. Couplets or Corresponding Elements that Focus on and Develop the Notion of Head or Consciousness.  
Adapted from Bolles, 2001; V. Bricker, E. Po'ot & O. Dzul, 1998; R. Ek Naal, personal communication; Gómez, 2009.

The final term *joolnaj* 'door' is an effective conclusion to the couplets of this section in that although it clearly refers to door of a house, it also appears to be symbolically related to the notion of head. It is interesting to note that in ancient Mayan pictorial writing the notion of 'house' was depicted as a human head (see figure 2) and its 'door' was expressed as its mouth (Martel & López, 2006). This section of the poem corresponds with the general conceptualization of the house as a head by creating a concept within a concept effect in which the protagonist is returning home to her own head or house of thought.



FIGURE 2. Glyph for *Naj (Nah)*. Adapted from Stuart, 1998: 377.

In the context of Cuevas Cob's poem, the house, like a head is a protected place of memory and imagination where cultural knowledge is generated and preserved. The young woman on returning home does not have to knock on the door because it is her own cultural identity and wisdom she is coming back to. The door in this sense is the portal to her own way of thinking that has been formed by the cultural knowledge and identity passed down from generations of women.

(II) Le ken a <b>paktabaj</b> tu <b>yich</b> a <b>láak'</b> bin a wil ti' a <b>maatsab</b> ,  <b>box jul</b> ch'iikil tu <b>puksi'ik'al</b> lu'um, ku taal u yéemel a <b>juntatz óol</b> ti' xan ku bin u <b>na'akal</b> u <b>nojil</b> a <b>chi'i'bal</b> .	(II) Y contemplándote en el rostro de tu semejante descubrirás que desde tus pestañas,  flechas nocturnas prendidas en el corazón de la tierra, desciende tu sencillez y asciende la grandeza de tu abolengo.	(II) And seeing yourself in the faces of your peers you will discover that from your eyelashes, nocturnal arrows buried in the heart of the earth your simplicity descends, and the nobility of your lineage rises forth.
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On returning home the young woman will *paktabaj* 'see herself' in the *yich* 'eyes/face' of her *láak'* 'siblings, others or those who accompany her'. The term *yich* also spelled *ich* in the dictionaries used for this study, signifies not only eye (or eyes in the context of this poem), but also face and fruit (Ek Naal, personal communication; Bolles, 2001; Bricker, Po'ot & Dzul, 1998; Gómez, 2009). Gabriel Bourdin (2008: 60) in his study on the human body in Peninsular Maya vocabulary affirms that: "when a term is polysemous [such as *yich*], in each one of its distinct contexts of utilization, the term expresses different yet interrelated meanings. Rolando Ek Naal (personal communication) explains that a person's eyes are representative of their entire face and in the same vein as a synecdoche, are the synopsis of a person's entire body and on an even larger scale, a reflection of their humanity. In this sense, like fruit being conceptualized as the product of a tree, the eyes (or face) of a person are the visible results or the products of that person's life and efforts (*id.*). In consequence of returning to her home consciously, the young woman recognizes herself reflected in the *yich* 'eyes/face' of her *láak'* 'siblings, others or those who accompany her' and sees the product or fruit of her cultural heritage both in them and herself.

In the next section of the poem the poet states that once home, the young woman will see from her *box* 'black, darkly colored' *maatsab* 'eyelashes' that are like *jul* 'a ray, beam or streak of light or lightening' *ch'iikil* 'that pierces' the *puksi'ik'al* 'physical heart' of the *lu'um* 'earth, land or soil' the *yéemel* 'decent' of her *juntatz'ool* 'sincerity, humility, sincere or pure heart or spirit' and the *na'akal* 'ascent, rise' of her *nojil* 'great' *chi'i'ibal* 'race, noble ancestry, lineage, blood origin' (Bolles, 2001; Bricker, Po'ot & Dzul, 1998; Ek Naal, personal communication;

Gómez, 2009). The image of the young woman's black eyelashes as streaks of light or lightening piercing the physical heart of the earth refer to the act of humility or sincerity of lowering her gaze. In other words, because of her *juntats'ool* 'sincerity, humility, sincere or pure heart or spirit' she lowers her eyes and her straight *box maatsab* 'black eyelashes' penetrate the earth like arrows (Montemayor & Frischmann, 2005). When interviewed, Cuevas Cob spoke in length about how pressures from the dominant society have made many young women turn away from or undervalue the more culturally traditional conceptions of beauty for Mayan women. For this reason she uses the image of the young woman's lowered or humble gaze accentuated by her naturally straight (uncurled) eyelashes to describe how with the descent of her *juntats'ool* 'sincerity, humility, and sincere, pure heart,' she is able to see 'recognize and appreciate' the *na'akal* 'ascent' of her *nojil* 'great' *ch'iibal* 'race, noble ancestry, lineage, blood origin'. Within the context of the poem, the terms *nojil* 'great' and *ch'iibal* 'race, noble ancestry, lineage, blood origin' refer directly to older generations of women such as the young woman's mother, aunts, and grandmothers as members of the community worthy of admiration and profound respect.

<p>(III) Teche' yaan a bin tu <b>najil xook</b> ti' tuun u <b>lóoch'</b> u <b>k'ab</b> a <b>na'at</b></p> <p>bin a chuk u póojol u <b>chun</b> u <b>nak'</b> u <b>ko'olelil</b> a <b>ch'iibal</b>.</p>	<p>(III) Tú irás a la escuela y en el cuenco de las manos de tu entendimiento contendrás el escurrir del vientre de la mujer de tu raza.</p>	<p>(III) You will go to school and within the cupped hands of your understanding you will hold the flow from the womb of the women of your race.</p>
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The third section of the poem reiterates the command that the young woman goes to school, but this time the poet couples the term *najil* 'house of' with the term *xook* 'school'. As the verse continues we understand that *najil xook* although meaning school house or formal education, in this case also (and more emphatically) refers to the home as the house of learning. In this house of learning and/or thought the poet explains that in the *lóoch'* 'hollow or scoop' of the young woman's *k'ab* 'hand' her *na'at* 'understanding, good sense or judgment, reasoning, intelligence, wisdom' will *chuk* 'apprehend, capture, reach' the *póojol* 'what has flowed or drained' from the *chun* 'root' of the *nak'* 'womb' of the *ko'olelil* 'women' of her *ch'iibal* 'race, noble ancestry, lineage, blood origin' (Bolles, 2001; Bricker, Po'ot & Dzul, 1998; Ek Naal, personal communication; Gómez, 2009).

The term *na'at* 'good sense or judgment, reasoning, intelligence, wisdom' is described by María Dolores Cervera (2007: 6) as the development or unfolding of a child's understanding that is "[a] gradual process, progressive and natural that depends on internal and innate forces". She further explains that in Mayan society when a child acquires *na'at* he/she becomes aware of "the consequences of his/her behavior and becomes responsible for the work that corresponds to his/

her gender" (*id.*). By describing that the young woman is able to feel/experience the vital fluids of the women of her noble ancestry through the cupped hands of her *na'at*, the poet is demonstrating that because the young woman has returned consciously she will be able to understand, appreciate, and physically feel the life-fluid / experience / knowledge of the women who have come before her. In this section Cuevas Cob is describing two processes of human development and knowledge acquisition: 1) *na'at*, the socially taught awareness and cultural intelligence that also depends on the individual characteristics of the child; and 2) the more visceral experience of the transference of vital fluids from the *chuun u nak* 'stem or origin of the womb' to the child.<sup>7</sup> Both of these processes of human / intellectual development are directly related to the knowledge passed down from one generation of women to another, either in the form of cultural indoctrination (what a mother teaches her child in the home including language and stories) and the more physical and fundamental elements passed on to the child through the womb'. For the young woman whom this poem addresses, even though her life plays out in a complicated dance between cultures (Maya and non Maya), because she will return home consciously and not be a *polwech*, she will be able to recognize and honor (and appreciate in herself) the strength, wisdom, and beauty of the *ko'olelil* 'women' of her own blood origin and ancestry.

As stated above, in traditional Mayan society women and men have specific spheres, roles, and principles that influence or guide the development of their identities (Ayllón and Nuño, 2008; Güémez, 2000; Guzmán, 2007). According to Rolando Ek Naal (personal communication), the term *ko' olel* 'woman'<sup>8</sup> (*ko'olelil* 'women') because it used to define the *Ko'olel Kaab* (Apis Mellifica and Melipona SSP, stingless honeybee) reveals cultural evidence related to the term *ko'olel* (woman, lady) that is indicative of the importance of women's role in traditional Mayan society. He explains (*id.*) that the *Ko'olel Kaab* 'lady/woman bee' (the stingless honeybee) are producers of some of the "best honey in the world" and like respected women in Mayan society, are appreciated for qualities such as their physical strength and capacity for "intensive work," their "social organization," as well as their ability to collaborate, and their resourcefulness, knowledge, and skill in using what nature has to offer (Chemas & Rico-Gray, 1991: 16). It is interesting to note that the *Ko'olel Kaab* or "lady/woman bee" (also referred to as "goddess bee") has been revered in Mayan society for over a thousand years, as is evident in the multiple references to her and her highly valued production in the Madrid Codex (see figure 3), one of the three existing pre-Columbian texts (Vit, Pedro & Roublik, 2013: 222).

<sup>7</sup> It is important to note that this image of the transference of vital fluids and manner of communicating knowledge echoes how in Mayan cosmology sacred information (vital energy/intelligence) is believed to have been transmitted through a snake symbolizing the cosmic umbilical cord or Milky Way that connected the sky (the divine) to the earth (Freidel, Schele & Parker, 1993).

<sup>8</sup> There are two terms that signify 'woman' in Peninsular Maya *ko'olel* and *x ba'al*, our focus is exclusively on *ko'olel* because it is the expression Cuevas Cob utilizes in this poem.



FIGURE 3. *Ko'olel Kaab* 'Lady Bee.' Images adapted from the Madrid Codex p. 105.  
Retrieved from <<http://diccionariodesimbolos.com/abejasyhormigas.htm>>,  
July 19, 2014. Reprinted with permission.

(IV) Ti' u tuunkuy bin a <b>na'ana'ajo'ot</b> u <b>wo'oj ts'ñib</b> <b>mamaiki lu'um</b> , sñis yéetel <b>k'iin</b> .  U <b>nukuch yich</b> a <b>cha'an óolal</b> bin u cha'ant u <b>yiim saatal u</b> <b>yóol</b> u ts'o'okol u <b>wekik kuxtal</b> <b>yóok'ol kab</b> .	(IV) De su calcañal descifrarás los jeroglíficos  escritos por el polvo, el viento y el sol. Grandes los ojos de tu admiración contemplantán sus senos desfallecientes después de haber derramado vida sobre la tierra.	(IV) From their heels you will decipher hieroglyphics,  written by dust, wind, and sun. Your eyes, wide with amazement, will contemplate their weakened breasts, having poured out life upon the earth.
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In section four, the poet writes that from her *tuunkuy* 'heels' the young woman will *na'ana'ajo'ot* 'decipher, read with her intelligence' the *wo'oj* 'letter, symbol, glyph' *ts'ñib* (or *dziib*) 'writing' in the *mamaiki lu'um* 'dust,' *sñis* 'cold' and *k'iin* 'sun, day, time'. And, with her *yich* 'eyes' *nukuch* 'great, large' with *cha'an óolal* 'admiration, astonishment' she *bin* 'will go' on to *cha'ant* 'admire' the *saatal u yóol* 'weakened' *yiim* 'breasts' that have spilled *kuxtal* 'life' over the *yóok'ol kab* the 'earth'. When asked about this passage, and particularly about the symbolism of the woman's hieroglyphic footprints in the dust, Cuevas Cob (personal communication) responded with the following communication:

It is a little about accepting this way of seeing us as people from the community, and it is also a little the rejection, but not total rejection. It is this way of appreciating beauty. Many women today don't want children because they do not want to lose their figure. Or if they do have children, they have one or two, while for the woman from the community they don't care if their stomachs get extended as a result of pregnancy, which many women in the community have because, at least until some years ago, they had as many as ten or eleven children. My mom had eleven children [. . .]. Well, this is the way it is, the girls today watch their figure and there is also a little... the word disregard is a bit strong in this sense, but it is more like

a feeling of looking down on —whether it be— the mom or the neighbor whose heels are like this because they use sandals and have contact with the climate, by washing, by always having contact with water, with dust, with this environment, and because they use shoes that don't have any support. The poem is a description of all of this. It is also a description utilizing a metaphor whose objective is to speak about how this part of the woman's foot suffers because of the nature of being from the community. In this text at least I try to make it so that it is seen in another way, that this part of the body that is affected by the dust, the humidity, is part of our history as a community. It is the metaphoric description of Mayan woman. It is a characteristic that we have. It happens to me too, when I spend a lot of time in the community and use sandals. It is simply the contact with the elements of the environment. My work is a description of this.

From our semantic analysis we understand that the term *na'ana'ajo'ot* 'decipher, read with intelligence' is a compound construction that reduplicates the term *na'at* 'understanding, judgment reason, intelligence' (*na'ana'a*) and then combines it with *jo'ot* 'scratch, etch, sculpt' (Gómez, 2009; Bolles, 2001). Rolando Ek Naal (personal communication) explains me that the reiteration of this term not only emphasizes its meaning to decipher, but also describes the process of using one's intelligence to read and reflect profoundly to get an even deeper understanding of what has been written or etched. In the case of this poem, what is being deciphered is the *wo'oj* 'letter, symbol, glyph' *ts'iib* 'written, inscribed' in the dust by the woman's weathered heel.

It is clear from her communication above that Cuevas Cob is speaking about the present, yet she does so by using imagery and terminology that evoke an ancient past. By utilizing terms also used in the discussion of pre-Columbian writing systems, she is referring to the lives and experience of Mayan women (particularly of older generations such as mothers, aunts, and grandmothers, etc.) with the wonder and awe that is generally used to describe Mayan hieroglyphics. She does this to show respect for the tremendous contribution these women's lives, knowledge and work have made through the centuries without glossing over the hardship of their experience of having multiple children and doing manual labor in the humidity and heat of the tropics without the benefit of more protective shoes. Furthermore, that these glyphs are in the dust (and not in stone) presses the point that although what these women have accomplished is not visible to all, their legacy *is* evident in all that survives of Mayan culture that has been painstakingly nurtured and passed down from mother to daughter for centuries.

In the final verses of this section, the younger woman looks upon the older woman with her *yich* 'eyes' *nukuch* 'great, large' with *cha'an óolal* 'admiration, astonishment'. The term *cha'an óolal* is a compound expression combining the notion *cha'an* 'astonishment, admiration' with *ól* 'breath, spirit, energy, force'. Together these two terms refer to the profound astonishment and respect coming from the very spirit or soul of the young woman when she *cha'ant* 'admires' the *saatal u yóol* 'weakened' *yüim* 'breasts' that have spilled *kuxtal* 'life' over the

*yóok'ol kab* 'earth'. The term *saatal u yóol* translated as 'weakened' is also a compound construction that combines the notion of *yóol* or *óol* 'breath, spirit, energy, force,' but in this instance with the term *saatal* 'to lose,' signifying spent energy or life force. This expression is used in reference to the older woman's breasts after having *wekik* 'spilled, sprinkled' *kuxtal* 'life' (mother's milk) over the *yóok'ol kaab* 'the earth'.

Miguel Güémez (2000) states that in Yucatec Mayan communities there exists a traditional perspective on female beauty that is quite distinct from urban Occidental expectations for women's physical aesthetics. As important aspects of this perspective, being beautiful for a woman includes that she: "[e]njoys good health, has a healthy and full (not skinny) body, is capable of having healthy children, is able to breast feed, and has strength for work" (Güémez, *ibid.*: 313). Although this description does not sit well with many precepts of occidental feminism, it does correspond to the context of this poem. If we go back to Cuevas Cob's remarks to when she discusses a shift in attitude in many young Mayan women, who in the process of adopting Occidental standards of beauty, are rejecting (to a certain extent) traditional aesthetics concerning women. We can see that in this text, by demonstrating admiration for a woman, who has clearly birthed several children and nourished them with her own body, the poet is critiquing this trend. At the same time that this work honors this woman's experience as a Mayan mother and her ultimate contribution to cultural continuity, it also advocates for young Mayan women to be conscious and educated both in and out of the home (and home community). Consequently by coming home consciously, the young woman is able to reclaim her own cultural identity through her respect and appreciation for this older woman's knowledge and contribution.

As a final comment on this section, it is interesting to note that the compound expression *yóok'ol kaab* 'earth' combines the term *yóok'ol* 'above, over, up' with the term *kaab* 'honey.' While in the poem it is translated into Spanish and English as 'on this earth,' in Maya it is an allusion to the earth being an agreeable (sweet) and productive place (Bricker, Po'ot & Dzul, 1998; Ek Naal, personal communication; Gómez, 2009). Although Cuevas Cob's poem does not romanticize the notion of home as paradisiacal, linguistically speaking this is a particularly lovely description of the earth, especially if we take into consideration the correlation between the term *ko'olel* 'woman' and bees.

In the fifth section of the poem, Cuevas Cob reaffirms that the young woman will *[t]eeche* 'you with the final "e", which emphasizes the you (in this case, that young woman specifically) *yaan a bin* 'will go' to *najil xook* 'house of learning, school', but will *suut* 'return' to your (her) *taanaj* 'house', to your (her) *yaalanaj* 'kitchen'. The next six verses, as an example of anaphora, all begin with the term *ka* 'in order to, in order that'. The poet uses this rhetorical technique to emphatically describe what the young woman *will do* or what *will happen* once she is in her kitchen:







Beginning with the first verse, *ka* ‘in order to’ *bon* ‘paint’ with *k’uxub* ‘annatto’, the *chun* ‘root’ of the *nak* ‘womb’ of the *ka* ‘metate’, Cuevas Cob describes two elements that have tremendous history and relevance in Mayan culture. *K’uxub* ‘annatto’ and *ka* ‘metate or flat grinding stone’. Annatto (*Bixa Orellana*) is a small tree native to the tropics of Central and South American that has been extremely important to the Maya (as a spice, medicine, and colorant) for home consumption, ritual, and trade for millennia (Caso & Aliphath, 2006; Vásquez, Batista, & Yusá, 2010). Cultivated both in home gardens and large orchards or plantations, annatto is noted for its distinctive red color and taste. Although the paste (actually made from the seeds or *k’uxub*) has been (and is) utilized for various purposes, in ancient times—as a symbol for human blood offering—one of its uses was in the preparation of chocolate to give it its reddish hue, as well as to add flavor (Freidel, Schele & Parker, 1993). For the ancient Maya, chocolate was considered “a precious fluid” due to its symbolic representation as blood and was drunk solely by nobles and the elite (Caso & Fernández, 2006: 36). Today, *k’uxub* ‘annatto’ maintains its cultural importance in that it is used in regional medicines, dyes, and delicacies such as *cochinita pibil* (pork in annatto paste traditionally roasted in underground ovens) (Anderson, 2010).

The *ka* ‘metate, flat stone for grinding mostly corn, but also spices such as annatto, is an essential item for Mayan households that has also been in use for millennia. When Cuevas Cob writes that the young woman will return to her home, to her kitchen in order to’ *bon* ‘paint’ with *k’uxub* ‘annatto,’ the *chun* ‘root’ of the *nak* ‘womb’ of the *ka* ‘metate,’ she is not only referring to the grinding of annatto on the *metate*, but also to how this essential tool is culturally conceptualized. As corresponds to Cuevas Cob’s description of the young woman painting its *chun* ‘root’ of the *nak* ‘womb’ with annatto, in Mayan culture the *metate* is thought of both physically and symbolically in conjunction with a woman’s body and besides having a womb, is described as having a back, feet, breasts, and even teeth (López, 2002). *Metates* are generally made out of hard but porous stone, such as volcanic rock and are rectangular or oblong with a concave center that fits exactly the dimensions of the smooth hand held grinding stone called a *k’ab* ‘mano or hand’. Lisa Lucero (2010: 144) states that the *metate* “represent[s] the never-ending importance of maize in daily life.” She goes on to illustrate the historic importance of the *ka* ‘metate’ by explaining that it is common among the ancient sacred artifacts found interred under houses by archeologists. Janet Long (2008) affirms that the *metate* is one of the most important implements used in pre-Hispanic kitchens and its value and utilization continue to this day. The connection between the *metate* and the traditional role of the women in the kitchen is further emphasized by the ritual practice maintained to this day in various Mayan communities of burying a baby girl’s umbilical under the grinding stone or close to the hearth, so that she will feel rooted in her home and kitchen (Freidel, Schele & Parker, 1993; Güémez, 2000; Long, 2008). That the young woman will ‘paint’ with *k’uxub* ‘annatto,’ the *chun* ‘root’ of the *nak* ‘womb’ of the *ka* ‘metate’

not only refers to the passing from generation to generation cultural knowledge through traditional methods of food preparation, it is also a multisensory conceptualization of a woman's work in the kitchen that evokes smells, tastes, colors, textures, images, sounds, etc.

The second verse evokes the experience of cooking over an open hearth and dealing with the realities of *sabak* 'soot' while wearing the *sak* 'white' *piik* 'petticoat, underskirt' of traditional Yucatec clothing. According to Rosalía Hernández (2012), clothing (and more specifically women's clothing) for indigenous peoples in Mexico is both an important aspect of daily life and a form of resistance. She further explains that as well as being a way to visibly express cultural identity and to distinguish distinct communities, it is also a source of income, especially for women (*id.*). In the Yucatan as in other Mayan communities, the designs incorporated in the style and adornment or embroidery of the clothing (especially the huipil, see figure 4) relate to Mayan cosmology and draw from an ample and ancient symbology (Hernández, *op. cit.*). As seen above in table 1, the term *xookbil chuuy* 'embroidery' (similar to cross stitch, but with designs relating to Mayan cosmology) contains the term *xook* 'to read, to count, to study and lesson'. Thus, as it is with the use of the *metate* and *annatto*, the use and production of traditional clothing are a tangible manifestation of women's participation in cultural continuity and an important aspect of the young woman's education.

The third verse continues to describe the young woman's experience in the kitchen by focusing on the most important of its aspects, its hearth and fire. In Mayan cosmology the three sacred stones of the hearth —which are still in use in many Mayan homes— are a symbolic reference to the locus of Creation (Freidel, Schele & Parker, 1993). Because of their profound significance, the three-stone hearth and the daily tending of the fire are reminders of the act of Creation, the maintenance of cosmic order, and the intergenerational passing of cultural knowledge (*id.*). That the young woman inflates with the *yik* 'breath' from her *sak óol* 'lungs' the *p'ulu'usk'áak* 'globe-flame, we know that she too by tending the fire plays an important role in the preservation and transmission of culture.

Both the terms *yik* 'breath' and *sak óol* 'lungs' are essential elements in the significance of this verse. *Yik* (*iik*, *ik*) as a noun is glossed as 'air, wind, breath, life, and spirit,' and as a verb, as 'to puff or blow air' (Bolles, 2001; Gómez, 2009; Martínez, 2006). Martínez (2007: 156) states that the concept of breath is not only associated with the function of breathing, but also with "vitality, effort, virtue, and power" of the person. It is interesting to note that the glyph for *na* 'mother' is the depiction of a woman's head<sup>9</sup> with the *ik* sign prominently displayed on her cheek (see figure 5). This perhaps has to do with her sacred role of preserving the vital fire by relighting it every morning with her own breath, symbolically helping "the sun be reborn, to regenerate itself every day after its journey through the darkness" (Guzmán, 2007: 107).

<sup>9</sup> Note similarity to the glyph for *naj* 'house' in figure 2 of this study.



a)



b)



c)



d)

*Jubón*: embroidered collar

*Hipil, huipil*: white embroidered dress

*Fustán*:  
white petticoat with lace.

FIGURE 4. Images of essential Mayan kitchen elements. (a) *k'uxub* 'achiote, annatto', (b) *ka* 'metate or flat grinding stone', (c) *xáamach* 'comal, flat pan for making tortillas' and (d) *piik* 'petticoat, underskirt' of the traditional women's dress in the Yucatan. Note: Although the *jubón*, *hipil*, and *fustán* in (d) is obviously an elegant and expensive outfit used for festivities (not in the kitchen), it does give an idea of women's traditional clothing and the tremendous skill required for its creation.

Adapted from: (a) <<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Annatto>>, (b) <[http://p2.la-img.com/1103/37241/15932169\\_1\\_1.jpg](http://p2.la-img.com/1103/37241/15932169_1_1.jpg)>, (c) <<http://alonzonovelo.com/canciones-ninos/el-comal-y-la-olla/>>, and (d) <<http://tusamigosenmexico.tumblr.com/post/40368982997/trajes-tipicos-de-yucatan>>. Permission was received to reprint both (b) and (c) and the photographs (a) and (d) come from digital open sources.



FIGURE 5. Glyph for *Na*, 'Mother'. The graphic in her cheek is the *ik* sign for 'wind/breath/life/spirit'. Adapted from Montgomery, 2002: 178.

*Sak óol* glossed as 'lungs' is a compound expression combining the term *sak* 'white' with *óol* 'breath, spirit, energy, force.' Roland Ek Naal (personal communication) explains that life begins with breath and the reason that lungs are referred to as *sak* 'white' with *óol* 'breath, spirit, energy, force' is because this expression describes where in "the geography of the human body" the breath originates. In Mayan cosmology each cardinal direction has its specific color, and *sak* 'white' relates to the cardinal direction north. Ek Naal (*id.*) further states that the term *sak* indicates a part of the body that is tranquil and clarifies that generally speaking, winds coming from the north are peaceful and beneficial. Sanja Savkic (2010) affirms that the expression *sak ik* signifies a fresh wind that is soft and delicate, which corresponds well to Cuevas Cob's description of a woman's task of breathing on the hearth to start the morning fire. In Paul Worley's (2013: 155) discussion of this section of the poem, he writes that when the young woman returns to her ancestral home and kitchen "[a]s much as [she] keeps the kitchen's flame alive, so too is she produced by it, her subjectivity as a Maya woman formed through this creative act of tending the flame that connects her with previous generations of women". For this reason, it is her *yik* 'breath, life, and spirit' and "vitality, effort, virtue, and power" that will maintain the *p'ulu'us k'áak* 'globe-flame' the heart of her home and source of identity and cultural legacy.

As with the description of the soot licking at the young woman's *sak piik* 'white petticoat', Cuevas Cob does not gloss over the realities or hardships of cooking over an open flame. When she states that the *k'ak'al* 'hard, tough' *yaal u k'ab* 'fingers' of the *buuts* 'smoke' *ch'op* 'pokes, probes' your *wich* 'eyes' she is clearly referring to the health issues (most specifically eye irritation) experienced by women due to their daily exposure to smoke in poorly ventilated kitchens. However, in addition to this physicalized description of the smoke's hard fingers probing the young woman's eyes, the primary images presented in this verse also have a symbolic connotation that corresponds with the overall message of the poem.

For ancient and contemporary Maya, smoke symbolizes breath as well as a means of transmitting information to and from ancestors and supernatural beings (Freidel, Schele & Parker, 1993; Houston & Taube, 2000). Building off of this concept that smoke represents a form of communication between the living and the beyond,

Karl Taube (1998: 446) states that “incense burners are the kitchen hearths of the gods and ancestors”. Smoke in this sense is the obvious link between incense burners and the Mayan three-stone kitchen hearth. As incense burners give off smoke—as a form of communication between the living and beyond—the hearth does the same. In the context of this poem, smoke is a form of communication between the generations of women (past, present, future) whose task it was, is, and will be to tend the fire (Hoppan & Jacquemot, 2010). Furthermore, since eyes in Mayan cosmology symbolize human mirrors and two way communication between the living and their ancestors, the image of the young woman getting smoke in her eyes reinforces this conceptualization (Rivera, 1999).

In the fifth verse of this section, Cuevas Cob reiterates that the young woman will come back to her home and kitchen in order to *xook ti* ‘read there’ on the *paach* ‘back, reverse’ of the *xáamach* ‘comal, flat pan for making tortillas, the *p’ilis* ‘sparks’ of the *k’áak* ‘flame, fire’. To appreciate the significance of this verse it is necessary to understand what a *comal* is, does, and symbolically represents. The *comal* is a flat circular pan—traditionally made of clay—that is predominantly used to cook corn tortillas (see figure 4), but is also used for toasting coffee beans and other foodstuffs. Corn, as the ideological and physical “basis of life” provides between 50-75% of the calories consumed in Mayan communities (Anderson, 2010: 460). Because corn tortillas are a staple food for many Maya, with grown men eating from 30 to 50 a day, for the women who still boil the corn and grind it into “*masa*” on their *metates*, shape the tortillas by hand, and cook them on a *comal* on the hearth, their preparation translates into a significant amount of time and labor (*id.*). Nevertheless, this entire process is so important to Mayan culture that Julián López (2002: 112) states that without the *metate* or *comal* “there is no house, there is no home”.

Although the *comal* and *metate* as tools in the kitchen are complementary, what they symbolically represent is quite distinct (López, *op. cit.*). The *comal* being made of clay, breaks relatively easily and needs to be replaced on a regular basis. The *metate* on the other hand, is made of stone and is passed down for generations from mother to daughter (*id.*). The *comal*, because of its round shape and red color when it is hot is identified with the sun and more specifically, the sun at noon (*id.*). The more ephemeral nature of the *comal*—because it breaks and is replaced regularly, and like the sun goes through cycles of being hot (day) and cold when it is not being used (night)—is representative of the day to day (*id.*). While the *metate*—made of stone and passed down through the generations—represents perpetuity (*id.*).

On returning to her kitchen the young woman will *xook ti* ‘read there’ on the *paach* ‘back, reverse’ of the *xáamach* ‘comal’ the *p’ilis* ‘sparks’ of the *k’áak* ‘flame, fire’. By sitting by the fire and participating in the process of making tortillas, she undoubtedly will gaze into the fire and watch the sparks of the fire as they come into contact with the *comal*. It is possible that this part of the verse is a reference to the skill it takes to cook on a *comal* on an open flame. In that it is necessary to work

with the fire —understanding it and reading it— in the effort to maintain a steady temperature and not break the *comal*, burn the tortillas, or waste wood.

The final verse of this section reiterates that she will *xook ti* ‘read there’ the *tóoch* ‘rising, lifting’ *waak* ‘burst’ of *k’áak* ‘flame, fire.’ In closing this section with the image of the young woman reading the rising or lifting flame or fire it is as if Cuevas Cob —as a call to arms— is imploring the young woman to remember all that she has been taught, in the kitchen, in the home, from her mother, grandmothers, etc. and more than just remember, keep the flame alive by active participation. If we go back to our analysis of the term *xook*, which as a noun is glossed as ‘lesson’, but as a verb as ‘to read, to count, to study, to keep in mind or take into account,’ it is clear that reading the fire is not a passive distraction. Reading the flame or fire in this sense is understanding its cultural symbolic significance as creation and continuity and the tremendous responsibility and effort of keeping it alive.

Finally, it is important to point out that in this section of the poem there is a definite reference to color, and more specifically the four colors that correspond to the Mayan conception of the cardinal directions or sectors of the universe:

- Red/east—*k’uxub* ‘*achiote*, annatto’.
- White/north—*sak* ‘white’ *piik* ‘petticoat, underskirt’.
- Black/west—*sabak* ‘soot’.
- yellow/south—*K’an xixim* ‘yellow corn’.

Although there is no specific mention of corn (and there are various colors of corn), corn and specifically yellow corn is implied in conjunction with the *metate* and the *comal* in that the *metate* grinds corn and the *comal* toasts corn tortillas. Moreover, in traditional stories on the origin of corn, symbolically it is yellow corn that has gotten its color because it has been toasted for consumption (Huff, 2006). It is also very interesting to note that in Mayan cosmology the universe is conceived as a quincunx (a cross with the fifth point at its center) (Freidel, Schele & Parker, 1993). In this conception of the universe, each direction or sector of the universe with their corresponding colors mark the extremities of the quincunx, while the center point where the lines intersect (designated as *ya’ax* ‘green’) is considered the heart or hearth of the universe (Guzmán, 2007; Savkic, 2010; Taube, 1998). On the macro level this is where the First Mother/Father “set up the first three stones of Creation to establish the cosmic center” (Freidel, Schele & Parker, 1993: 130). On the human or micro level, this center is replicated in the home with the traditional three-stone hearth. It is the hearth where “the vital fire is preserved” and creation and regeneration are made possible on a daily basis (Guzmán, 2007: 107). It is the hearth where women light and tend the fire and prepare the food (corn in the form of tortillas) that sustains their families.



(VI) Yaan a <b>suut</b> ta <b>yaalanaj</b> tumen wa'ala'an u <b>pa'atech</b> u <b>k'anche'il</b> tu'ux ka <b>pak'ach</b> <b>waaj</b> , tumen <b>k'óoben</b> u ta'akmaj <b>jump'éeel</b> <b>neen</b> tu chuun u <b>nak'</b> . <b>Jump'éeel neen</b> tu'ux <b>ts'aalal</b> a <b>pixan</b> .  <b>Jump'éeel neen</b> ku yawat páaytikech yéetel u <b>juum</b> u <b>t'aan</b> u <b>léets'</b> <b>jul</b> .	(VI) Volverás a tu cocina porque la banqueta te espera.  Porque el fogón guarda en sus entrañas un espejo. Un espejo en el que estampada se halla tu alma.  Un espejo que te invoca con la voz de su resplandor.	(VI) You will return to your kitchen because your bench awaits you.  Because the fire holds a mirror in its depths. A mirror upon which your soul is imprinted.  A mirror that calls to you with the voice of its brilliance.
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The final section reiterates that the young woman will *suut* 'return' to her *yaalanaj* 'kitchen, daughter house' because her *k'anche'il* 'bench' where she *pak'ach* 'makes, pats out' *waaj* 'tortillas' *pa'atech* 'awaits' her. Lauren Wynne (2013: 33) states that for the Maya in the Yucatán "tortilla making is required female knowledge, understood as crucial to the complementary gender roles that have organized household production for centuries". In our discussion about this last section of Cuevas Cob's poem, Roland Ek Naal explains me that the term *pak'ach* specifically refers to the preparation of tortillas, in that it literally recreates the sound of the patting out by hand the corn dough or *masa*. In her description of the process of learning how to make tortillas, Wynne (*op. cit.*) states that because it takes a significant amount of time and practice to become an adept tortilla maker, girls start learning the entire procedure when they are little. She also explains that in their training period girls are rarely in charge of the fire, but "tend to play a supporting role, patting out tortillas while an older female relative judges the 'cooked-ness' on the xamach [*comal*]."

The last four verses of this section are presented in the form of parallelism, with the first two verses or couplets beginning with the term *tumen* 'because,' and the third and fourth verses or couplets beginning with *jump'el neen* 'one/a mirror.'

- 1) *tumen wa'ala'an u pa'atech u k'anche'il tu'ux ka pak'ach waaj.*  
'because your bench awaits you where you make tortillas'.
- 2) *tumen k'óoben u ta'akmaj jump'éeel neen tu chuun u nak'.*  
'because the three-stone hearth guards or keeps in its womb or depths a mirror'.
- 3) *Jump'éeel neen tu'ux ts'aalal a pixan.*  
'A mirror on which your soul has been imprinted'.
- 4) *Jump'éeel neen ku yawat páaytikech yéetel u juum u t'aan u léets' jul.*  
'A mirror whose shout or call attracts or invites you with the sound of the word of the flame or streak of light'.

From our analysis of the first verse of the first couplet, we know that the young woman will return to her kitchen because her bench for making tortillas awaits her by the hearth. The second verse explains that guarded or kept in the *nak* 'womb, depths' of the *k'óoben* 'kitchen, cooking hearth, three stones of the fire' there is a *neen* 'mirror' (Bolles, 2001; Gómez, 2009). In Maya the term *neen* besides signifying the noun 'mirror' also refers to the verbs 'imagine, contemplate, think, meditate and consider' (Bolles, 2001; Rivera, 1999). Brian Stross (1986: 296) affirms that in ancient Mayan writing mirrors relate directly to a person's "spirit, soul, or inner self" and are a powerful tool used in divination and curing. Miguel Rivera (*id.*, 92-94) explains that in ancient Mayan symbology mirrors were conceived as "the vehicle of a privileged communication with the spiritual powers residing in the otherworld" and/or centers through which it was possible to establish "communication with other cosmic dimensions". Moreover, in David Bolles' (2001) dictionary of the Yucatecan Mayan language there are multiple entries that utilize the term *neen* as a two way mirror for seeing and being seen by powerful entities and the divine.

The third verse of the second couplet continues with the image of the mirror and emphasizes that it is *jump'éeel neen* 'a mirror' on which your *pixan* 'soul' has been *ts'aalal* 'imprinted.' Although the term and notion of *pixan* is normally glossed as 'soul', because it is a complex and culturally (and even regionally) specific concept, it is helpful to reiterate some of the most salient characteristics of its Peninsular Maya definition. As this is a particularly complicated concept and a more in-depth examination is not in the scope of this study, we will only give a brief explanation to support our poetic analysis.

According to Gabriel Bourdin (2008), in the Peninsular Maya vocabulary there are numerous terms corresponding to the culturally conceived physical and non-physical attributes of the human being. Among the list of non-physical attributes, *ik*, *óol*, and *pixan* are some of the most fundamental elements used for describing emotional and spiritual states of the human experience that are usually associated with what is described as a soul and/or spirit in English and Spanish. *Ik* glossed as 'spirit, and vital breath' is normally referred to as breath, wind, spirit, energy, exuberance, power, and effort. *Ool* (*óol*) glossed as "'formal" heart, will, and desire' is used in reference to the spirit, energy, force, vitality, and movement that is the very essence of a person. In contrast to *ool* as the "formal" or energetic heart, the term *puczical* is used in reference to the physical heart organ. Finally, *pixan* 'soul' is the term used when referring to what is left of a person, who has died and no longer has *ool*. In other words, that aspect of a person that remains close to family and loved ones even after he or she has died (Bourdin, 2008; Cervera, 2007; Martínez, 2006; Tuz, 2009).

When Cuevas Cob describes the mirror as bearing the imprint of the young woman's *pixan* 'soul', the understanding that the soul is that element of a human being that remains with family and loved ones after death alludes to a core aspect or piece of the young woman that has never left home. Carlos Montemayor



(2005: 192) maintains that this is an allusion to the Mayan custom of burying a baby's umbilical cord "where she will work when she grows up," which in the case of a female child means beneath or close to the hearth and cooking fire. Rolando Ek Naal (personal communication) explains that even though people might leave their homes, the fact that Mayan children have their umbilical cords buried in a specific place (girls under or close to the hearth and boys generally in *la milpa* or *el monte* 'the corn fields or the woods') designates where they must return in order to not lose their identity. In other words, it is the place where they come back to their own way of thinking and to themselves (*id.*). Cuevas Cob completes the couplet and the entire poem with the verse *[j]ump'él neen* 'a mirror' whose *yawat* 'call, shout' *páaytikech* 'attracts or invites' you with the *juum* 'sound' of its *léets' jul* 'flame or streak of light' (radiant) *t'aan* 'word'. Once again she refers to the mirror that has been imprinted with the young woman's *pixan*, and emphatically states that it will attract/invite her with the radiant sound of its *t'aan* 'word'. *T'aan* minimally glossed as 'word', is a most appropriate term to conclude this work, taking into consideration Cueva's Cob's passion and commitment for cultural and linguistic continuity.

*T'aan* as a noun, signifies 'word, speech, and voice' and as a verb, 'to speak or to express oneself'.<sup>10</sup> Hilario Chi (2012) in his article on how language is taught in the home by Mayan mothers explains that the process these women use (which he calls *u j'ook'ol t'aan*)<sup>11</sup> focuses on how cultural knowledge is embodied in every word. Cuevas Cob begins this poem by stating that the young woman will go to school, that she will be educated (both at home and out in the world), but that she will also come home conscious, able to appreciate her cultural heritage and the women who have come before. She will understand that the knowledge that she has inherited —embodied in the very language she speaks— has been passed down to her through generations of women, the same grandmothers and mothers who have lit and tended the hearth's fire for millennia and whose umbilical cords are also buried in the kitchen. It is their hearth, her hearth, the ancient symbol of Creation and regeneration and the heart and center of Mayan cultural identity.

As is evident in the Spanish translation of this poem, Cuevas Cob communicates a unique world view that conveys not only information about Mayan belief and practice, but also her personal beliefs on how important it is for younger generations to consciously understand and value their cultural heritage. Although this is essential information about the meaning and message of the poem, it is only in the Mayan version of the poem where the poet articulates a much more

<sup>10</sup> *T'aan* is also used in the expressions *lik't'aan* 'poem', which literally means *lik* 'to lift or elevate' the *t'aan* 'word, voice, etc' and *iik't'aan* 'poet', which is a compound word that combines the term *ik* 'spirit, and vital breath' with *t'aan*. Ek Naal affirms that an *iik't'aan* 'poet' is known by this name because they have the ability to "hablar con el espíritu adentro / they speak using the spirit within them".

<sup>11</sup> *U j'ook'ol t'aan* glossed as "la salida del habla" 'the door of speech' by Chi (2012: 221).

complex perspective in which culturally specific symbolic representation and meaning becomes more explicit and accessible.

This distinctive form of interpretation and expression of the world reveals modes of conceptualization that are unique (that is to say conventionalized) to Mayan culture (Lucy, 2005; Wierzbicka, 1992). For this reason, on returning to the initial question that has served as the basis of this investigation—“what role does language play in the transmission and preservation of Mayan cultural belief and symbolic representation?”—we understand that language does indeed play an integral role. In fact, as is demonstrated throughout the analysis of this poem, aspects of Mayan symbology are woven into the very morphological fabric of the language. Moreover, as this symbolic representation is not just articulated through poetic (or ritual discourse), but also through daily speech, we know that one fundamental reason that so many aspects of ancient Mayan perspective, expression, and practice have survived is because they have been encoded and transmitted linguistically. Thus, emphasizing the depth of Cuevas Cob’s concern for the future if younger generations do not learn Maya.

“Yaan a bin xook” by Briceida Cuevas Cob (2005)

“Yaan a bin xook”	“Irás a la escuela”	“You Will Go to School”
<p>Le tuun le <b>síniko’ob</b> ka’ach tu che’<b>éjo’ob</b>, tu k’<b>ayo’ob</b>, tu yóok’oto’ob tan xan u báaxal u machmaj u k’abo’ob, léek u yok’olo’ob. Ko’lel síisa’abil, leti’e kun <b>jóo ychokoja’atiko’ob</b> wa ku manak’ ta’alo’ob ich yaalanaj.</p>	<p>Y aquella hormigas que reían, cantaban, ballaban y jugaban a la ronda, comenzaron a llorar:  Había nacido una hembra, quien les echaría agua hirviendo cuando aparecieran en la cocina.</p>	<p>And those ants that laughed, sung, danced, and played in the round began to cry.  A female child had been born, who would toss boiling water on them once they appeared in her kitchen.</p>
<p>(I) Teche’ yaan a bin xook. Ma’ tun <b>p’áatakech polwech</b>. Yan a táats’ máansik u <b>páakabil najil a tuukul</b> yo’olal a woko’j ta wotoch ma’ táan a k’opik joolnaj.</p>	<p>(I) Tú irás a la escuela. No serás cabeza hueca. Trasasarás el umbral de tu imaginación hasta adentrarte en tu propia casa sin tener que tocar la puerta.</p>	<p>(I) You will go to school. You will not be empty-headed. You will cross the threshold of your imagination going all the way into your own house without having to knock on the door.</p>
<p>(II) Le ken a <b>paktabaj</b> tu yích a <b>láak’</b> bin a wil ti’ a <b>maatsab</b>, <b>box jul</b> chi’ikil tu <b>puksi’ik’al</b> lu’um, ku taal u yéemel a <b>juntatz óol</b> ti’ xan ku bin u <b>na’akal u nojil a chi’i’bal</b>.</p>	<p>(II) Y contemplándote en el rostro de tu semejante descubrirás que desde tus pestañas, flechas nocturnas prendidas en el corazón de la tierra, desciende tu sencillez y asciende la grandeza de tu abolengo.</p>	<p>(II) And seeing yourself in the faces of your peers, you will discover that from your eyelashes, nocturnal arrows buried in the heart of the earth, your simplicity descends, and the nobility of your lineage rises forth.</p>
<p>(III) Teche’ yaan a bin tu <b>najil xook</b> ti’ tuun u <b>lóoch’</b> u k’ab a na’at bin a chuk u póojol u <b>chun u nak’</b> u <b>ko’olelil a chi’i’bal</b>.</p>	<p>(III) Tú irás a la escuela y en el cuenco de las manos de tu entendimiento contendrás el escurrir del vientre de la mujer de tu raza.</p>	<p>(III) You will go to school and within the cupped hands of your understanding you will hold the flow from the womb of the women of your race.</p>

<p>(IV)</p> <p>Ti' u tuunkuy</p> <p>bin a na'ana'ajo'ot u wo'oj ts'ñib mamaiki lu'um,</p> <p>sñis yéetel k'iin.</p> <p>U nukuch yich a cha'an óolal</p> <p>bin u cha'ant u yiim saatal u yóol</p> <p>u ts'o'okol u wekik kuxtal yóok'ol kab.</p>	<p>(IV)</p> <p>De su calcañal</p> <p>descifrarás los jeroglíficos</p> <p>escritos por el polvo, el viento y el sol.</p> <p>Grandes los ojos de tu admiración</p> <p>contemplarán sus senos desfallecientes</p> <p>después de haber derramado vida sobre la tierra.</p>	<p>(IV)</p> <p>From their heels</p> <p>you will decipher hieroglyphics,</p> <p>written by dust, wind, and sun.</p> <p>Your eyes, wide with amazement,</p> <p>will contemplate their weakened breasts,</p> <p>having poured out life upon the earth.</p>
<p>(V)</p> <p>Teeche' yaan a bin tu najil xook</p> <p>ba'ale' yaan a suut ta taanaj,</p> <p>ta yaalanaj,</p> <p>ka bon yéetel k'uxub u chun u nak' ka',</p> <p>ka u léets a sak piik u yaak' sabak,</p> <p>ka u p'ul yéetel u yik' a sak óol p'ulu'us k'áak',</p> <p>ka u ch'op a wích u k'ak'al yaal u k'ab buuts',</p> <p>ka a xook ti' u paach a xáamach u p'ilis k'áak',</p> <p>ka a xook ti' u tóoch' k'áak' u waak'.</p>	<p>(V)</p> <p>Irás a la escuela</p> <p>pero volverás a tu casa,</p> <p>a tu cocina,</p> <p>a pintar con achiotte el vientre del metate</p> <p>a que lama la lengua del tizne tu albo fustán,</p> <p>a inflar con tus pulmones el globo-flama,</p> <p>a que hurguen tus ojos los delgados dedos del humo,</p> <p>a leer el chisporroteo en el revés del comal,</p> <p>a leer el crepitar del fuego.</p>	<p>(V)</p> <p>You will go to school</p> <p>but you will return to your home,</p> <p>to your kitchen,</p> <p>to paint the <i>metate's</i> belly with <i>achiotte</i></p> <p>so the embers' tongue may lick at your white underskirt,</p> <p>to inflate the balloon-flame with your lungs,</p> <p>so the thin fingers of smoke may poke at your eyes,</p> <p>to read the sparking on the <i>comal's</i> back</p> <p>and the fire's crackling.</p>
<p>(VI)</p> <p>Yaan a suut ta yaalanaj</p> <p>tumen wa'ala'an u pa'atech u k'anche'il tu'ux ka pak'ach waaj,</p> <p>tumen k'óoben u ta'akmaj jump'éeel neen tu chuun u nak'.</p> <p>Jump'éeel neen tu'ux ts'aalal a pixan.</p> <p>Jump'éeel neen ku yawat páaytikech</p> <p>yéetel u juum u t'aan u léets' jul.</p>	<p>(VI)</p> <p>Volverás a tu cocina</p> <p>porque la banqueta te espera.</p> <p>Porque el fogón guarda en sus entrañas un espejo.</p> <p>Un espejo en el que estampada se halla tu alma.</p> <p>Un espejo que te invoca</p> <p>con la voz de su resplandor.</p>	<p>(VI)</p> <p>You will return to your kitchen</p> <p>because your bench awaits you.</p> <p>Because the fire holds a mirror in its depths.</p> <p>A mirror upon which your soul is imprinted.</p> <p>A mirror that calls to you</p> <p>with the voice of its brilliance.</p>

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