

MAYA COSMOLOGY: QUADRIPARTITE OR DUALISTIC?

by

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ABSTRACT

Two conflicting schools of thought regarding one aspect of the cosmological organization of the pre-Hispanic Maya have prompted the author to examine the sources supporting each view. One opinion, deriving chiefly from Highland Maya linguistic data, describes the native Maya world view as being oriented to two primary directions, east and west. Other directions are vaguely defined and appear also to refer to the movement of the sun. A second viewpoint, however, holds that the Maya recognized the four cardinal directions. The data supporting this view are found mainly in Lowland Maya sources. The author has examined references resulting from archaeological investigations, native literature, colonial accounts, and modern ethnological investigations, and concludes that two distinct orientations can be defined: one characterizing the Highland Maya and one characterizing the Lowland Maya. The Highland Maya orientation is one that is dominated by the daily movement of the sun, and recognizes two chief directions: where the sun rises and sets. The Lowland Maya is quadripartite and has directional terminology that corresponds to the cardinal directions, which are also associated with certain colors and deities.