

PLACES OF BEGINNING, MODES OF BELONGING: STEAMBATHS AND CAVES IN MESOAMERICA

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Abstract

Caves are commonly interpreted as portals leading into an underworld realm populated by malign supernatural beings associated with death. The association between caves and ancestors in Maya ethnography seems to confirm this death connection, but emergence is an equally prominent theme relating to caves that is attested in Mesoamerican myth and imagery. Caves are linked with the emergence of ancestors and the life-giving water that flows from springs. They are also the source of new human souls, and a strong connection between caves and steambaths underlines a connection with birth. The Mesoamerican symbolic equation of steambaths with caves was in place in the Olmec world by the middle of the first millennium BC. Conflation of the conceptual domains of caves and steambaths, especially in conjunction with the *altepetl* (water-hill) theme, created a powerful array of symbolic associations which could be mobilized in politically charged contexts. Mesoamerican politicians concerned with bolstering and legitimizing their power deployed it to great effect for more than two millennia.

Keywords: caves, ancestors, steambaths, childbirth, legitimization, political, authority

Resumen

Las cuevas se interpretan con frecuencia como portales que conducen al inframundo donde viven seres sobrenaturales asociados con la muerte. Aunque la asociación entre las cuevas y los antepasados en la etnografía maya parece confirmar la conexión con la muerte, temas de emergencia son también conspicuos en relación con cuevas en los mitos y en el arte mesoamericana. Las cuevas tienen conexiones con la aparición de los antepasados y del agua que sale de los manantiales. También son las fuentes de las ánimas y existe una relación fuerte con los baños de vapor que subraya una conexión con el alumbramiento. Existía una equivalencia entre los baños de vapor y las cuevas ya en el mundo olmeca en 500 a.C. La fusión de los conceptos de la cueva y del baño de vapor, especialmente en relación con la tema del *altepetl*, hacía un poderoso serie de símbolos que se movilizaban en contextos de importancia política. Los políticos mesoamericanos los empleaban para aumentar y legitimar su poder.

Palabras claves: alumbramiento, antepasados, autoridad política, cuevas, legitimación, temazcal

INTRODUCTION

Caves and cave symbolism permeate Mesoamerican thought. Caves are commonly interpreted as dangerous portals leading to an underworld realm populated by supernatural beings, many of them malign, but the connection between caves and death is not entirely negative since caves are widely