

Of Dice and Divination

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Abstract: Three ancient traditions of sortilege, widely dispersed geographically, share remarkably similar features. A “dice” game from ancient India attested in the Vedic literature from ca. 1000 BC, the I Ching oracle from China also dating from about the same period, and a divination method still used among indigenous people in Guatemala that dates from the pre-Columbian period, all share the same underlying structure. Although elaborate systems for interpreting the results of the sortilege differ in each of these cultures, the basic process for casting the dice or oracle — the random selection, the counting in groups, and the determination of the outcome by the remainder — are parallel in all three cases. This paper will describe these three different systems, compare their similarities and differences, and suggest a process by which they may have developed from a common source.

Introduction

In the 2012 publication, *The Origin of the World's Mythologies*, one of the two present authors, Witzel, proposes a process whereby well-developed mythical complexes spread out from ancient cultural centers into previously unpopulated areas of Asia, Europe, and eventually the Americas. He argues that myth is a cultural heritage in the same way that language is. Although languages undergo a process of change over time, these changes occur over a substrate that has its origin in the earliest period of language formation.

Using evidence provided by recent developments in the field of population genetics, Witzel traces two distinct migration streams. The first wave left East Africa some 65,000 years ago and followed the southern coast of Arabia and India, eventually arriving in Australia approximately 50,000 years ago. The second migration originated in Southwest Asia about 40,000 years ago after a period of climatic warming and melting glaciers. This group spread west, north, south, and eastward into areas previously uninhabitable due to extreme cold and/or ice cover. Much later, approximately 20,000 years ago, a part of this group made its way across the land bridge at the Bering Straits and then spread southward throughout both American continents.

These population movements are well-evidenced by genetic material observable in the modern descendants of these earlier migrating peoples. But, in addition to this genetic evidence, Witzel's proposal is corroborated by linguistic, archeological, and mythological data. Taken together, these various disciplines make a strong case for the historical reconstructions that he proposes.

But there is an additional cultural artifact that can be used to trace ancient affiliations between geographically separated ethnic groups. Ritual used on ceremonial occasions — whether in magic, divination, rites of passage, or in certain ritualized games — can provide evidence of common origin or of later cultural influence. The subject of the present investigation is, therefore: What conclusions can we draw from the close relationships observable in rituals that appear in India, China, and pre-Columbian Mesoamerica?

PART 1: DESCRIPTIONS OF THE THREE RITUALS

1. The Vedic Indian Dice Game

Vedic texts¹ describe a game of sortilege that, although it does not employ actual cubical dice, is denominated by the Vedic Sanskrit root, *div-* 'to play dice.' For this reason, we refer to this game as a form of 'dicing.' The structure of this ritual is as follows:

- In the Sabhā meeting place, at winter solstice, the player, one of the teenage Vrātya group (16-20 years old), throw (*ni-vapati*) 'dice'. (The opponents are present but do not act).
- These "dice" consist of 150 nuts (*akṣá*) of the Vībhidaka tree (= Terminalia Bellerica).
- They are put on a cloth. The nuts are then set out in a heap in front of the 'player'.
- Then, the only player of the game takes out, in a series (*áya*) of four 'takings' (*glaha*), a handful consisting of an undetermined number of nuts. This, the *vīj*, is a partial unit at the time of dividing. They are put down, just touching each other, either in a row or in a circle (which is uncertain).
- Each time, they are divided (*ví-cinoti*) by four. This division may be accomplished by separating them into groups of four nuts each, or else by placing them clockwise around a circle leaving one nut in each of the four cardinal directions.²

¹ See Falk, Harry. *Bruderschaft und Würfelspiel: Untersuchungen zur Entwicklungsgeschichte des Vedischen Opfers*. Hedwig Falk. Freiburg. 1986. This text provides an excellent overview and synthesis of the earlier literature dealing with the subject of the Vedic dice ritual. Starting at page 73, Falk describes in detail the mechanics and structure of the dice game.

² An example of ancient rock art from Finntorp in Tanum that appears to depict such a sortilege distribution into the four cardinal directions can be found in: Kristiansen, Kristian. *The dialectics of gender: Ritualizing gender relations in Late Bronze Age Southern Scandinavia*.

- If a *glaha* is divisible by four, this is the best outcome, and the player shouts: *kṛtām* “done!” — *kṛtām vīcinoti* — “to divide completely” means “to win.”
- However, if the *glaha* has a remainder of just one this is called *kali*, which means a loss. The losing player is then called a *śvaghnín*, “the one who is characterized [the ‘-in’ suffix] by ‘dog killing’” (see below).
- The *ayas* called *dvāpara* and *tretā*, with remainders of two and three respectively, do not mean clear loss, but are neither good nor bad, and the game can go on.
- At the end, the player puts the nuts together again.

Interpretation:

- The player who got one of the other three *ayas* of the *glaha*, (*kṛta*, *tretā*, *dvāpara*), is no longer part of the game.
- The aim of the game is to isolate the leader of the Vrātya, the *śvaghnín*. He is the one who produces a *Kali glaha*, a leftover of just one. As such he is connected to Rudra, the dog, and death, as the “non-living” one who rules over the Vrātya gang. Thus, this newly chosen leader embodies the role of the god, Kali/Rudra, who himself holds the power of life and death over all mortal beings.³
- The connection between dog (black/blind/one-eyed) indicates the messengers of death. Indeed, the god Rudra/death enters as Kali into a human, the leader of the wild band of 150 teenagers.
- The background of the game is also found in Greece and Rome (*kúōn*, *canis*, *canicula*), where the ‘dog’ throw is connected with number 1. (Little knuckles, cubes etc. are used).

2. The Chinese I Ching Oracle

Although traditional Chinese accounts claim that the *I Ching* oracle originated some 5000 years ago, modern scholarship dates its current written form to around 1000 BC or somewhat earlier.⁴ Since around the beginning of the modern era it has

Institutionen för historiska studier/Department of Historical Studies, GOTARC Series A, Gothenburg Archaeological Studies, Vol. 5. Göteborg. 2014. p. 347.

³Falk, Harry. *Bruderschaft und Würfelspiel*, p. 133.

⁴ Hans Steininger (1971). in *Bleeker, C. J. and G. Widengren, ed., Historia Religionum, Volume 2 Religions of the Present*. Brill Academic Publishers. p. 478. "Most probably the oldest extant book of divination in the world, dating back to 1,000 BC, and before." See also, Karcher, Stephen. Guild of Pastoral Psychology Lecture No 263, March 1998, *Journal of Religion and Health*, Fall 1998, Volume 37, No. 3: "What we know as Yijing [I Ching] began as a loose collection of omens, a shared divinatory language that goes back at least to 5000 BCE. The words and symbols of this language probably originated with the wu or spirit mediums that could go into trance and speak with the voice of the various spirit-beings. The language existed side by side with another form of divination that used two kinds of sticks or lines to determine whether an action was acceptable to the spirits. The line oracle is the origin of what was later called yin and yang. The first written record of the language occurs in the oracle bones, a vast library of the kind of pyromantic divination used by the Shang

been performed mainly with coins, but in its original form the divination was cast using fifty dried stalks from the yarrow plant (*Achillea millefolium*).⁵ The Confucian commentaries called *The Ten Wings*, describe the process used for consulting the oracle:

“One takes fifty yarrow stalks, of which only forty-nine are used. These forty-nine are first divided into two heaps (at random), then a stalk from the right-hand heap is inserted between the ring finger and the little finger of the left hand. The left heap is counted through by fours, and the remainder (four or less) is inserted between the ring finger and the middle finger. The same thing is done with the right heap, and the remainder inserted between the forefinger and the middle finger. This constitutes one change.



Figure 1. The yarrow plant with its stalk and flower. Photo: G. Haynes, 2013.

Now one is holding in one's hand either five or nine stalks in all. The two remaining heaps are put together, and the same process is repeated twice. These second and third times, one obtains either four or eight stalks. The five stalks of the first counting and the four of each of the succeeding countings are regarded as a unit having the numerical value three; the nine stalks of the first counting and the eight of the succeeding countings have the numerical value two.

When three successive changes produce the sum $3+3+3=9$, this makes the old yang, i.e., a firm line that moves. The sum $2+2+2=6$ makes old yin, a yielding line that moves. Seven is the young yang, and eight the young yin; they are not taken into account as individual lines.”⁶

As described above, the possible counts derived from the yarrow stalk oracle are: 6, 7, 8, or 9. Both the six and the eight yield a line that is *yin*, indicating the yielding, the receptive, the earth, the female. The seven and the nine yield a line that is *yang*, indicating the firm, the creative, the heavens, the male. Of these four possibilities, two are only moderately *yin* or *yang* (the seven and the eight), and are therefore relatively stable. The other two (the six and the nine) are extremely *yin* or *yang*, and therefore exhibit the tendency to transform into their opposites. These latter are

Dynasty kings (1500-1050 BCE). The Shang kings used the Fire and Bone oracle frequently, particularly in their relations with the ancestors on whom their power depended. The symbols of the language of Yi were first codified in the Zhou Dynasty (1050- 600 BCE).”

⁵ *I Ching, or Book of Changes*. Wilhelm/Baynes, translators. Bollingen Series XIX. Princeton University Press. 1967 (First edition 1950). *liv*: “As products of the vegetable kingdom, these were considered to be related to the sources of life. The stalks were derived from sacred plants.” Note: All references to the *I Ching* in this paper are to the edition cited here. Also note that in ancient India, punched coins were also later substituted for the nuts of the *Vibhīdaka* tree; see Falk, p. 73.

⁶ *I Ching*, 311. For a fuller description of the yarrow stalk method for consulting the oracle, see page 721 in this translation.

called “changing lines,” and, as such, they receive special commentary within the received text of the *I Ching*. In addition to this commentary, a new hexagram (unit of six lines) is formed from the first, with the changing lines now bearing the complimentary character: *yin* becomes *yang*, and *yang* becomes *yin*. Thus the changing of one hexagram into the other is seen as capturing the cosmic process in effect at the time of the oracle.

“The hexagrams and lines in their movements and changes mysteriously reproduced the movements and changes of the macrocosm. By the use of the yarrow stalks, one could attain a point of vantage from which it was possible to survey the conditions of things. Given this perspective, the words of the oracle would indicate what should be done to meet the need of the time.”⁷

“This view is associated with the concept expressed in the teachings of Lao-tse, as also in those of Confucius, that every event in the visible world is the effect of an “image,” that is, of an idea in the unseen world. Accordingly, everything that happens on earth is only a reproduction, as it were, of an event in a world beyond our sense perception; as regards its occurrence in time, it is later than the suprasensible event.”⁸

Although for much of China’s history it has been common for soothsayers and street-corner fortune-tellers to employ the *I Ching* for their purposes, the oracle is really meant to be used only by shamans or mediums who are able to properly interpret the hexagrams in relation to the life and situation of the client requesting the consultation.

“The *Book of Changes* is founded on the plant oracle as manipulated by men with mediumistic powers.”⁹

“All individuals are not equally fitted to consult the oracle. It requires a clear and tranquil mind, receptive to the cosmic influences hidden in the humble divining stalks.”¹⁰

By this we know that consulting the oracle is not a mere mechanical process. The resulting hexagrams hint at the subtle processes that define the present moment for the client, but the macrocosmic forces that impinge on earthly life only manifest themselves through the actions of the holy man who is spiritually in touch with them. Thus both through his channeling of the cosmic influences and through his ability to interpret the results, the shaman complements and supplements the oracle to provide the guidance requested by the client.

As a result of using the yarrow stalks to consult the oracle, sixty-four possible hexagrams can be obtained. Each of these hexagrams is composed of two trigrams,

⁷ *I Ching*, liv.

⁸ *I Ching*, lvii.

⁹ *I Ching*, 263.

¹⁰ *I Ching*, Liv.

of which there are eight basic forms. According to the *Sequence of Later Heaven*, or *Inner World Arrangement*, we begin in the East with the trigram, “The Arousing”. Thence we proceed clockwise through the eight trigrams, passing through each of the four cardinal directions.

“God comes forth in the sign of the **Arousing** [East]; he brings all things to completion in the sign of the **Gentle**; he causes creatures to perceive one another in the sign of the **Clinging** (light) [South]; he causes them to serve one another in the sign of the **Receptive**. He gives them joy in the sign of the **Joyous** [West]; he battles in the sign of the **Creative**; he toils in the sign of the **Abysmal** [North]; he brings them to perfection in the sign of **Keeping Still**.”¹¹

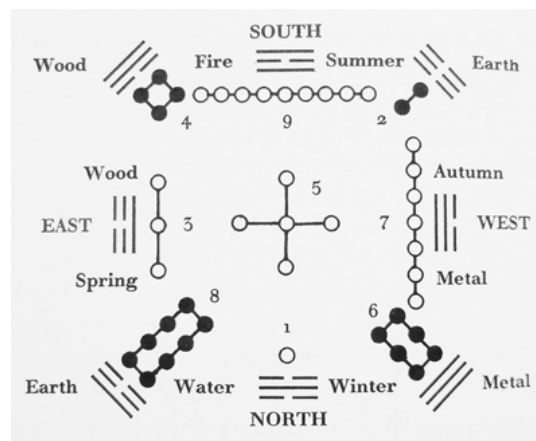


Figure 2. The *Sequence of Later Heaven*, or *Inner World Arrangement* of the Eight Trigrams in Relation to the Four Cardinal Directions. Reproduced from the *I Ching*, Fig. 5, page 310.

The relationship between the central point and the four cardinal directions is represented by the quincunx at the center of the diagram. The text of the *I Ching* states:

“There are five heavenly numbers. There are also five earthly numbers. When they are distributed among the five places, each finds its complement.”¹²

Although there are only fifty yarrow stalks in the bundle used to consult the oracle, still there is an implicit relationship to the number of days in the sacred year. The Chinese year contains 360 days, equivalent to the number of days used by the fifth century B.C. Athenian astronomer, Meton, who based his calculations on the lunar cycle. To this number is later added the five intercalary days in order to complete the full solar year.

¹¹ *I Ching*, 268.

¹² *I Ching*, 310. For an extensive treatment of the quincunx in Mesoamerica, see Hunt, Eva. *The Transformation of the Hummingbird*. 99, 177, 180-183, 197.

“The numbers that yield THE CREATIVE total 216; those which yield THE RECEPTIVE total 144, making in all 360. They correspond to the days of the year.”¹³

So, the connection to the number of days in the sacred year is indirect, based upon the total number of stalks needed to form a hexagram composed entirely of old *yang* lines plus the total number of stalks needed to form a hexagram composed entirely of old *yin* lines. The complementary sum of these both is 360, the average number of days in the Chinese sacred year.

The *I Ching* oracle is thought to be of foreign origin.

“In Chinese literature four holy men are cited as the authors of the Book of Changes, namely, Fu Hsi, King Wên, the Duke of Chou, and Confucius. Fu Hsi is a legendary figure representing the era of hunting and fishing and of the invention of cooking. The fact that he is designated as the inventor of the linear signs of the Book of Changes means that they have been held to be of such antiquity that they antedate historical memory. Moreover, the eight trigrams have names that do not occur in any other connection in the Chinese language, and because of this they have even been thought to be of foreign origin.”¹⁴

The same can be said for the word *Tao*, the philosophical expression for the ultimate unity of opposites that underlies both Confucian thought and the philosophy of Lao-tse as expressed in his *Tao Te Ching*. This word is thought to be borrowed as well, the ultimate meaning of which is “way.”¹⁵

3. The Maya-K'iche' Oracle as performed in Momostenango, Guatemala

The following are two field studies of traditional divination methods that were observed in the town of Momostenango in the spring of 2013 by Gregory Haynes.

¹³ This is a quote from the *Ta Chuan, The Great Treatise* (1150 B.C.), included as additional explanatory text in the Wilhelm translation of the *I Ching* (p. 311). The commentary by Wilhelm explains this in more detail: “When THE CREATIVE is made up of six old yang lines, that is, of nines only, the following numbers result when the oracle is consulted. Total number of stalks: 49. When this is subtracted the first time: $5+4+4=13$, leaves 36. When this is repeated six times (for the six lines), the total of the six remainders (36×6) is 216 stalks. When THE RECEPTIVE consists of sixes only—that is of old yin lines—the following numbers result. Total number of stalks: 49. When this is subtracted for a six (old yin): $9+8+8=25$, leaves 24. When this has been done six times (for the six lines of the hexagram), the total of the remainders (24×6) is 144 stalks. If now one adds together the numbers obtained for THE CREATIVE and the numbers obtained for THE RECEPTIVE, the result is $216+144=360$, which corresponds with the average number of days in the Chinese year.”

¹⁴ *I Ching*, Introduction by Richard Wilhelm, lviii.

¹⁵ *I Ching*, 298. Victor H. Mair argues that both the *Tao Te Ching* of China and the *Bhagavad Gītā* of India share fundamental features of content and language, suggesting either early contact between these civilizations or possible inheritance from a common source. See, Lao Tzu, *Tao Te Ching: The Classic Book of Integrity and the Way*, Victor H. Mair (translator), Bantam Books, New York, 1990, pp. xv, 135, 140, 160.

First Observation of the Oracle

On March 31, 2013, I observed an instance of the K'iche' Maya *vara* oracle performed by Don Arturo¹⁶ in Momostenango, Guatemala. The client who requested the session had recently suffered a serious illness, and he wished to consult the oracle in order to determine the cause of that illness. He suspected witchcraft on the part of two enemies living in an area called *Los Cipreses* (The Cypresses) and wished to either confirm these suspicions, or else to determine that no such threat was menacing him.

Don Arturo is a younger (perhaps mid-thirties) daykeeper/diviner/shaman¹⁷ who was willing to help by consulting his *vara*, that is, his collection of *tz'ite'* (coral tree) seeds used for divining. He did not request payment for his services. The various invocations (which are many), the counting of the *Nawales*, and all other dealings with the *vara* were spoken in K'iche'. Communication with the client, on the other hand, was mostly in Spanish.

Because I had requested information about the functioning of the *vara*, Don Arturo prefaced his use of the oracle with a brief description of the twenty *Nawales*.¹⁸ These were enumerated and described briefly by him as follows:¹⁹

1. **B'atz.** The Mayas represented this as a ball of string rolled up. In life, one comes in as though walking and rolling up a thread. He comes asking for well-being, security, peace... He goes along as if sowing seed. And finally, when it is fulfilled, he then begins to harvest what he has sown. He is going to encounter the payment, or recompense for his actions, whether for good or for ill.
2. **E.** What is E? To encounter a good passage, a good road. It is said that this is the road of truth, following the good road. If one walks the road of evil, then he goes astray. But one needs to go along the straight road.
3. **Aj.** It is said that this concerns the home. For example, if someone has a dream, then he has the opportunity to ask for guidance about its meaning. Aj pertains to the home, the family, the house, or the situation that one finds oneself in.
4. **I'x.** This has to do with money, resources. It is a level that falls toward Tz'ikin.
5. **Tz'ikin.** This is a bird or a beak. It relates ultimately to issues of money.

¹⁶ Names and identities have been changed to protect the privacy of the persons involved.

¹⁷ The K'iche' word for such a shaman is "*ajq'ij*." *Aj* (the 'j' is pronounced as an 'h') signifies the agent, the one who performs the action. *Q'ij* means the sun or the day. Hence: 'daykeeper,' or 'one who counts the days.'

¹⁸ The word *Nawal* is variously translated as 'spirit lord, protective spirit, supernatural being.'

¹⁹ For a much fuller treatment of these twenty *Nawales*, see Tedlock, Barbara. *Time and the Highland Maya*; For an early (1929) description of the K'iche' Maya divination ritual, see Schultze-Jena, Leonhard. *Indiana*. Vol. 1 of *Die Quiche von Guatemala*. Gustav Fischer, 1931. A Spanish translation of this work is available as: *La vida y las creencias de los indígenas quiches de Guatemala*. Trans. Carrera and Sapper. Vol. 49 of *Biblioteca de Cultura Popular*. Ministerio de Educación Pública. Guatemala City, 1947.

6. **Ajmaq.** This is related to matters of God. God is unique and without evil.
7. **No'j.** With this come knowledge, talents, and exploration.
8. **Tijax.** This day governs problems. It has double energy, so that if you go astray on this day, you will compound your problems. For this reason, some people consider Tijax to be an evil day, but this is not so. Dangerous yes, but this lies more in its intrinsic power than in any particular malevolence. It is the point at which one can fall into complete evil.
9. **Kawoq.** Also a very powerful day. Kawoq is strongly related to the earth. It is a day in which evil words, criticisms, slanders, and all such things can enter.
10. **Ajpu'.** This is connected with those who have died. The word Ajpu' means "one who hunts with a blow gun." Hence, since the hunter kills, this nawal is intimately concerned with death and those who have experienced death, in particular, the ancestors. It is there that one closes all issues.
11. **Imox.** On a day falling under Imox, one asks that his own spirit should not fall into a rebellious frame of mind. Imox is a negative energy which can be used if one is very careful, but otherwise it can lead one into difficulties and dangers. It must be controlled.
12. **Iq'.** This nawal is related to the energy of a person who is very angry. Therefore one must assume something of a passive reaction to this energy in order to keep the negative energy from coming out. Otherwise, things that are not normal can occur.
13. **Aq'ab'al.** This is a generally very good day, when all things come to fruition. Everything comes out well.
14. **K'at.** The energy of this day can tie one up in knots, as if one is entangled in a net. A person doesn't know how to move either forward or backward.
15. **Kan.** The energy of Kan is quick and agile. It has a double meaning in that it can come from behind, or from ahead.
16. **Kame.** This is a special day of the dead, and can announce one's death.
17. **Kej.** This is an energy that is stable like the four legs of an animal. Momostenango, for example, has four spiritual supports, one in each of the four cardinal directions: These are the Mayan altars of Kija', Tz'ocop, Tamango, and Tipic [spellings uncertain], with Paclom in the center.
18. **Q'anil.** This is called upon when everything is becoming mature, no longer in the flowering stage, but now in full ripeness when all is now clear and approaching perfection.
19. **Toj.** This is when one has fallen back in everything, when one can't even sense which limitation he has fallen into. Many people call this day a day of payment. One pays the consequences of one's errors.
20. **Tz'i'.** This day brings announcements. It is like a secretary or an advocate. Many people say that it is a day of judgment. From it come presentiments—the knowledge carried by the blood, for example. It shudders and vibrates in all parts of the body.²⁰

²⁰ It is said that the shaman's blood "jumps" when it bears a presentiment of some event or carries a "yes" or "no" answer to a question. If it jumps on the left side of the body, this signifies a different answer than if it jumps on the right. Barbara Tedlock's, *Time and the Highland Maya*, gives an in-

At this point Don Arturo asked the client to state his question clearly and simply. After hearing this formally stated, he began to rub the pile of seeds (which had been placed on a table covered with a cloth) with the palm of his hand, repeating the question using several different forms and phrases until he seemed satisfied that it had been thoroughly absorbed into the energy of the seeds. As he invoked the assistance of the mother-father, grandmother-grandfather, Tz'aqol-B'itol²¹, and Father-Son-Holy Spirit²², he grabbed an arbitrary number of the *tz'ite'* seeds²³ in his right hand and moved these into another pile.

From this second pile, he began separating the seeds into groups of four. These he arranged in an orderly pattern of four columns with as many rows as necessary to use up all of the beans.²⁴ After forming as many groupings of four seeds as possible, the remainder (in this case, one seed) was placed at the end of the series of piles.

Because a remainder of one single seed is negative or inconclusive, Arturo felt the need to be more specific in the questioning, or to formulate the question in a different way. After a few more casts of the seeds with inconclusive results, he decided to ask the very specific question as to whether evil magic was proceeding toward the client from the area of *Los Cipreses*. Again, grabbing an arbitrary number of seeds, he began separating them into piles of four seeds each. The remainder in this case was an even four, and this, he said, indicated conclusively that the answer to his question was "yes."

Don Arturo then began to count the piles in the order of the days of the Mayan calendar with its twenty *Nawales* and its thirteen days.²⁵ Beginning with the day 10 *Kej*²⁶, he proceeded as in the ordinary calendar cycle, with each succeeding day

depth treatment of shamanism in the western highlands of Guatemala, particularly in Momostenango, where she herself was initiated as a daykeeper.

²¹ Mayan creator god(s) often translated as "maker-modeler" who figure prominently in the *Popol Wuj*.

²² Syncretism is very active in this part of Guatemala. In many cases, Christian saints have taken on attributes of the earlier Mayan deities.

²³ He informally referred to these seeds as *frijoles* (beans) or *frijolitos* (little beans). When asked, he explained that the total number of beans in his *vara* was 260, because, he said, this is the number of days in the Mayan sacred calendar and also the number of days during the human gestation period. He added that some daykeepers use 265 beans because of the five extra days at the end of the year.

²⁴ The reason for dividing the seeds into groups of four, he said, is that this is the number of the cardinal directions. The words he used were: sunrise, sunset, *heart of sky* (pointing north and presumably indicating the north star), and *heart of earth* (pointing south). These latter two designations occur numerous times in the *Popol Wuj*. For a K'iche' version of the *Popol Wuj*, see the on-line text (along with a good, scholarly English translation) by Allen J. Christenson at www.mesoweb.com/publications/christenson/popolvuh.pdf and www.mesoweb.com/publications/christenson/PV-Literal.pdf.

The recently revised translation of the *Popol Wuj* by Dennis Tedlock is unsurpassed for its rendering of the K'iche' text into English poetry, but the Christenson translation is a bit more faithful to the original. Christenson also provides a word-by-word literal translation, in addition to his final rendition of the text, which is very helpful for the non-specialist.

²⁵ 20 *Nawales* times 13 days equals a total of 260 possible days in the sacred year.

²⁶ He explained that the questioner of the *vara* is always designated by the *Nawal* "*Kej*," and for this reason, the count starts with *Kej*. He seemed a bit less sure why the numerical count of the first group began with ten. He said that one could start with other numbers, but that he was taught to begin with ten. The initial number does not change the *Nawal* of the remainder, which is the most important determination. But, as he explained, the number of the remainder does indicate whether the problem

named for the following *Nawal* and the incremented number. The order of the twenty *Nawales* is given above. So, at the second pile of four beans, he counted 11 *Q'anil*. At the third pile of four beans, he counted 12 *Toj*. At the fourth pile, he counted 13 *Tz'i'*. At the fifth pile, he counted 1 *B'atz* (since there are only 13 numbers, the count must begin again at 1). At the sixth pile, he counted 2 *E*. And so the pattern of the count continued, concluding with the pile of the remainder (in this case, four seeds), upon which he counted 13 *Aq'ab'al*. He commented that since *Aq'ab'al* represents clarity and light, this adds certainty to the answer of the oracle. Without doubt, he said, the malefactors are sending evil magic toward the client from the area of *Los Cipreses*. It is a certainty.

He then proceeded to count the piles a second time, continuing the count from 13 *Aq'ab'al*, which was the number of the remainder. So, at the first pile of four seeds, he counted 1 *K'at*. At the second pile, he counted 2 *Kan*. At the third pile, he counted 3 *Kame*. Proceeding in this fashion, he counted 5 *Ajpu'* at the final pile. This, he said, indicates that the matter is before the ancestors (governed by *ajpu'*). Those who are practicing black magic in *Los Cipreses* have enlisted the assistance of the ancestors in their evil designs. Their intentions are to interrupt the life-path of the client, whatever that may be.

He said that some local shamans have copies of a book that originally came from Mexico — written and used by the Aztecs — that contain powerful curses that can be used to attack or to counter-attack people through the use of black magic. Don Arturo, however, only uses peaceful methods to calm and pacify both the ancestors and those *Nawales* that have been incited by the practitioners of evil. His opinion is that those extreme methods only intensify the conflict and require greater and greater amounts of resources to offset the escalating scope of the spiritual battle. He recommended a series of four ceremonies to feed the ancestors, who would then be inclined to intercede in the matter on the client's behalf. Materials to be sacrificed were: *copál*²⁷, sesame seeds, candles, incense, and sugar. The cost for these items was estimated at 35 Quetzals (about \$4.60 US dollars) per ceremony.

The client then agreed to go forward with this recommended procedure. The first of these sacrifices was held within a week of the initial consultation. The day for the ceremony is always carefully chosen according to the *Nawal* governing it. I was present at this first of these ceremonies and can testify that the proceedings were held in the highest solemnity at the sacred altar of *Paclom*. The items for sacrifice were divided into three portions, with each portion dedicated to a different aspect of life. The first group of objects was placed into the hands of the client, who was told to imbue them with his request for all of the normal things a person typically desires: health, well-being, security, and so on. When he indicated that he had done this, Don Arturo carefully placed these items into the fire with lengthy invocations

is of recent origin, or if it has originated in ancient times among the ancestors. Numerical results from one to seven indicate a more ancient origin. Numerical results from eight to thirteen indicate a more recent origin. Other shamans begin the count with the actual day of the consultation.

²⁷ Pine resin mixed with various substances and formed into round, flat cakes for use in ceremonial offerings.

to all the spiritual powers to please grant the request. Then the second group of these sacrificial items was placed into the hands of the client, and he was told to imbue them with appreciation for all that he had in his life, with special appreciation to the ancestors who had bequeathed his very life to him. These items were then placed into the fire as before. Finally, the third group was given to the client with instructions to request that harmony, tranquility, and love should fill his home and his life. These then were added to the fire with many formalized ritual invocations in the K'iche' language, and thus the ceremony was complete. The whole process took about one hour.

At the conclusion of this ceremony, the client was told to pay close attention to his dreams during the next month or so, and to report anything unusual to the shaman. After a few days had passed, I was informed by the client that, indeed, several unusually powerful dreams had come to him. He also reported that immediately after the ceremony he began to feel a far greater degree of tranquility and happiness in his daily life. The ceremony, apparently, was a success.

Background of the Oracle in Momostenango

Many scholars consider Momostenango to be the most culturally conservative part of Guatemala. Linguistically-archaic features are still used there in everyday speech, as for example, the K'iche' formal manner of address that indicates a heightened respect for the person being spoken to. As one example: "*K'o atem*" is the usual way of addressing peers or persons younger than the speaker; it means "There is a chair for you." or literally: "There is your chair." On the other hand, "*K'o tem la*" has the same meaning, but is used to address persons older than the speaker or persons deserving of special respect. This linguistic feature has been lost in many other Mayan-language speaking areas.

Similarly, the observance of the 260 day sacred Mayan calendar is nowhere stronger than in Momostenango. The day that begins the new sacred cycle (*Wajxaqib' B'atz*) draws novice daykeepers to the Mayan altars of Momostenango for their ritual initiation. That day is officially designated as the first on which a new shaman can practice independently. Of all the sacred altars, Paclom, located near the center of Momostenango, is the most important. It stands at the very center of the quincunx that underlies the spiritual geography of the region.²⁸ Every new shaman must burn sacrifices on the altar of Paclom as part of his/her initiation. It is not surprising, therefore, that the use of the *vara* oracle should also be well preserved in this area. I have witnessed many such sessions, and believe that the details of the practice are fairly uniform among the shamans in the region. Most of the indigenous people in Momostenango hold the *vara* in high respect and they tend to follow the advice that they receive in this way.²⁹ A few years ago, a young

²⁸ For the pervasive use of the quincunx in American Indian cultural life, see Hunt, Eva. *The Transformation of the Hummingbird: Cultural Roots of a Zinacantecan Mythical Poem*. Cornell University Press. 1977.

²⁹ The growing influence of the Evangelical churches has changed this somewhat, as they strongly condemn the use of the *vara*. The Catholic Church, on the other hand, seems to coexist quite

woman invited me to accompany her on a visit to her rural village where she intended to consult a shaman using the *vara* oracle. She had been abandoned by the father of her child and was unclear how to handle the expenses of the family on her own. She asked the oracle if she should attempt to enter the United States illegally, to which the *vara* said, “no.” She then asked if she should try to make her way to Spain in order to seek employment, to which the *vara* said, “That course of action has a reasonable chance of success.” She subsequently found a sponsor in Spain, obtained a reasonably good job, and is still working there. For many people in Momostenango then, the *vara* oracle is no mere anachronism; on the contrary, it is an important part of daily life.

A Second Observation of the Oracle

On May 6, 2013, I observed an instance of the K'iche' Maya *vara* oracle performed by Don Pedro in Momostenango, Guatemala. The client who requested the session had wanted to purchase a piece of land in the area and had been offered two separate parcels. He was unsure which was more acceptable and wished to consult the *vara* so as to avoid falling into problems.

Don Pedro is an older, very experienced and respected *ajq'ij* (shaman) who lives in a small rural settlement not far from the town center of Momostenango. Upon arrival at the place of the consultation, he requested water to wash his hands. By the thoroughness and intensity of the washing process, I concluded that this was probably a ritual gesture of respect to the *Nawales* and to his *vara*.

Don Pedro sat down, placed the cloth bag containing his *vara* on the table, and commenced to pray for divine assistance in the divination that was about to begin. He first invoked Father-Son-Holy Spirit, and then asked permission from the Lord to use his *vara* on behalf of the client who wished to conclude his land transaction without complications. He requested that the Lord grant that the *vara* should give the result of four if the proposed land purchase was propitious³⁰, or if not, that the *vara* should so indicate. He called on the saints, the ancestors who have died, the *chuchkajaws*,³¹ and the Mayan ancestors, requesting that they attend this sacred session of the *vara* to judge the merits of the proposed purchase. After reciting the

comfortably with the ancient practices. One man told me that when his grandfather converted to an Evangelical religion in the 1940's, he burned, along with his *vara*, the only manuscript of the verbal accompaniment to an ancient traditional dance that had been performed in Momostenango for centuries. That dance has now become extinct. But to underline the conservative culture in Momostenango, the *tz'ulab'* dance, described in the *Popol Wuj*, is still performed there several times in the year. I last witnessed this dance during Holy Week, 2013. For more on the traditional dances of Momostenango, see Cook, Garrett. *Renewing the Mayan World: Expressive Culture in a Highland Town*. University of Texas Press. 2000.

³⁰ If, when all of the beans have been counted out in groups of four, the last remaining beans are also four in number, this is the most affirmative result of the oracle.

³¹ The word *chuchkajaw* literally means “mother-father.” This is how shamans are referred to if they have attained a degree of renown and responsibility in the community. This designation reflects the belief that an *ajq'ij* shaman has, through the initiation process, integrated the two genders within himself and that he therefore speaks with the authority of a complete rather than a fragmented consciousness.

Lord's Prayer and invoking the blessed virgin mother of God, he opened the bag containing his *vara* and emptied the contents out onto a table that had been covered by a cloth.

After removing two small quartz crystals³² from the pile of tz'ite' seeds, he began to rub his hand over the pile, gathering any stray seeds back into the fold and reciting various invocations in the K'iche' language. He asked for clarity in the oracle from the mothers and fathers who have now died, and from the four cardinal directions. He specifically began to ask about the first property under consideration, one located in a nearby district called Xekemeya.

Then he grabbed a handful of the beans, as many as his hand could hold, and with his other hand, pushed the remaining beans to one side. Depositing the handful back onto the table, he began to separate them into groups of four beans each. When he saw that the last remaining group consisted of exactly four beans, he declared the result to be positive. Then he began to count the Nawales. Beginning with 1 Noj, he counted 2 Tijax, 3 Kawoq, etc., finally arriving at 6 Tz'ikin on the last pile. This, he said, indicates that the client merely has to prepare his money for the transaction (Tz'ikin being the Nawal of money and wealth). He then proceeded to count again, this time beginning with 1 Q'anil, he went through the days of the calendar again, counting 6 Kame on the last pile. This, he indicated was a very good outcome and very positive, although this was only the first of the necessary four throws.

Gathering up the beans, he recommenced to rub them while reciting invocations, and then grabbed a handful as before. Again separating them into piles of four each, he found that the result in the last pile contained only one bean. Counting out the calendar days beginning with 1 Noj, he arrived at 8 Noj at the last pile. He commented that, although the remainder was not even, still the result in Noj tended to be positive (Noj being the Nawal of wisdom and knowledge). Counting again, he arrived at the final result of 8 Q'anil, which he declared to be good (Q'anil being the Nawal of ripeness and perfection).

Repeating the process a third time, the result again was one single bean, with a calendar count of 6 Ajmaq. Continuing the count a second time, the result was 7 Kej. Again he expressed the opinion that although the result was one, still the count in Kej was not bad. He seemed now to be less sure about the positive outlook, and immediately commenced the final of the four throws.

Here again, the result was one single bean. Counting through the days of the calendar, beginning again with 1 Noj, he attained the result of 6 Tz'ikin. At this point he remarked that, while the first throw had yielded a result of four, the three succeeding throws had resulted in one each, a negative indication.

³² These crystals have various uses. I once had a shaman remove a crystal from his *vara* and examine me with his eye through its semi-transparent stone. He then declared to those present that I was a trustworthy person.

He then asked the client where the other property was located. The client replied that it was in a place close by called Patukur (Place of the Owls). Taking a handful of beans as before, he commenced with a new series of four throws focused on the question regarding the suitability of the property in Patukur. The first throw resulted in four beans, this being considered a positive answer. The count, starting as before with 1 Noj, yielded a result of 5 I'x. The second counting, beginning with 1 Q'anil, yielded a result of 5 Kan, a very negative finding, he said. Kan is an enemy, he stated with a grimace, clearly repulsed by this result. Even though the last pile had four beans, the count of Kan turned the whole thing horribly negative, he said. In preparation for the next throw, he proceeded to rub the pile with an intensity and force that I had not seen before, obviously agitated by the previous result in Kan. This throw resulted in a remainder of three, which he separated into two piles, the first with two beans, the second with one.³³ The count, beginning with 1 Noj, yielded 5 I'x. Counting the second time, beginning with 1 Q'anil, yielded a result of 5 Kan, just as in the last throw.

The next throw had a remainder of one bean. The first count, beginning with 1 Noj, yielded 7 Ajmaq, the second count, beginning with 1 Q'anil, yielded 7 Kej. The fourth and final throw of the series resulted in one single bean with a count of 6 Tz'ikin. At this point, Don Pedro seemed to have reached a definite conclusion about the whole business. He said that while Xekemeya was a possibility, Patukur was clearly a bad choice. Twice it had given the result of Kan, he said, and this was impossible. Kan is enemy... very bad, he added. Then he proceeded to count the second time, this time beginning with 1 Kej. The result was 6 Kan. "Again the bad result of Kan," he said in disgust. "No," he said, "I don't advise it (the purchase in Patukur)."

At this point, Don Pedro turned his attention back to the property in Xekemeya. He declared that we would make a *vara* of one throw instead of four. First he asked the *vara* if the owner was willing to sell. The result was four beans with a count of 2 B'atz'. This, he said, indicates that, yes, the owner is willing to sell, but that the resulting count of B'atz' means that the client must put up some protection (presumably with ceremonial offerings). A second counting, beginning with 1 Q'anil, yielded a result of 2 I'q. "This means that there is some anger or bad blood involved in the deal in Xekemeya," he said. "I'm sorry, he told the client, but I don't advise you to proceed with either purchase. You're in worse trouble here in Patukur, that's for sure, but there are problems in Xekemeya as well. It would be best to drop both prospects and look for something else," he advised. "I'm sorry."

Clarifications about the *Vara*

After he completed the consultation, I asked Don Pedro a few questions about the *vara*. First I asked how many beans his *vara* contained. He replied that he had originally been given only one hundred beans, but that he had filled it out later to a

³³ This is typical. A result of three is uneven, and basically equivalent to the negative result of one, but is always separated into two piles for the purposes of the count, at least in Momostenango.

complement of two hundred. The man who had initiated him had had doubts about Pedro's vocation as a shaman, and so was somewhat cavalier about the make-up of his *vara*, he explained with a smile. In addition, some of the beans were ridiculously small, making it hard to count out the piles accurately. And adding insult to injury, some of the beans were as dark as night.³⁴ But the *vara*, as it is received from the shaman's teacher, is sacred and shouldn't be changed. The correct number to work with should be 265, he explained.

Regarding the results, he repeated that four beans in the remainder was the most positive. Receiving four throws, each with a result of four, is unequivocally a positive answer. A result of two beans is still positive, although less so than four. A result of either one or three beans is negative.

Don Pedro did not have an explanation for why the beans are divided into groups of four. "It's just not correct to do it any other way," he said.

When asked about the origin of the *vara* tradition, he described the history as he understood it. "Long ago," he said, "the Mayas used one hundred small stones for the *vara*. Later, the sons of those original Mayas began to use grains of corn instead of stones. But in the third generation, they began to use the seeds of the tz'ite' because corn was not given for purposes of divination.

"Some shamans charge a lot of money for a consultation, but this is a sin. Here on earth we are all brothers. There is only one God for all people... Adam and Eve were the parents of everyone. Blacks, whites, orientals... we all share the same parentage. A shaman's job is to advise the best way. If the shaman accepts a large amount of money in order to use his powers to harm someone, then it's a double-edged sword. Because by involving himself in evil doings, he tarnishes his spirit. Ever afterward he will be shunned by the good powers, the just God, and thus he becomes unfit for helping anyone. Such a person chooses his road, and if he chooses evil, then that is the wide road which many travel. He doesn't travel the narrow road of purity, but rather the wide road of all the sinners.

"In my own case, I suffered considerably in my youth, but it was due to my own error. Eventually my father-in-law told me that I was on a bad path. He took me aside and told me that my destiny, based on the day of my birth, was that I would give good counsel to the sons of the people. "But don't get your hands dirty with evil doings," he said. "Don't be demanding large sums of money for your consultations because in that way you will end up poorer. If you are willing to follow the good path, then I'll speak for you." I didn't know what to say. He said that he would give me my *vara*, that I would someday be a great *chuchkajaw*.

"Hell, I never imagined that I would be a great *chuchkajaw*. Ha, I thought, that can't be right. I felt bad because he said that I'd be a great *chuchkajaw*, that I'd be

³⁴ Typically the tz'ite' beans are bright red; see Figure 3.

wise. (laughter). So then I cleaned myself for nine months.³⁵ At the end of that time he gave me my *vara* on *Wajxaqib' B'atz'*³⁶ and he told me at which altars I could make my offerings. But I was embarrassed. I asked the other shamans what day it was [in the Mayan calendar], but they just jokingly told me, "Monday." But I was humble and little by little I learned to be professional.

"Some *ajq'ijab'*³⁷ charge thousands of quetzals for a ceremony... up to two or three thousand. But it evaporates. They drink it up, they fall into ruin. For a little while they glory in it, but then they fall. I don't live that way. I'll drink a little atole [corn gruel], eat a little bread, a piece of fruit, and that's enough for me. I said to myself that if it's my destiny, that my mother bore me on such a day that I carried this destiny, then I'll accept the vocation. Immediately after my initiation, I stopped drinking alcohol. My life straightened out. So now I walk in tranquility.³⁸ When somebody asks me what they owe for a consultation, I just tell them, 'Whatever you want to give is fine.' And whatever they give me is perfectly fine with me. I go home contented. But those who demand high fees, they begin to drink, and their lives go to hell. They pass out in the streets. Maybe it's a sin that I'm judging them, but that doesn't seem very good to me.

"One time a man came to me and said that his son was so sick he was sure the boy would die. I told him that, on the contrary, he would live. It was just that he had a vocation as an *ajq'ij*, and if he accepted his destiny, then he would live. The man said that he would pay whatever I asked to initiate the boy, so that he wouldn't die. I could have charged thousands. But I told him that it would be 400 quetzals [about \$50 US] for the nine months of training I would give him, and that's just for the materials he would need to make the required offerings. On the day in which I give him his *vara*, you give me 35 quetzals [about \$4.50 US] for my lunch, I told him.

"There are many who go through the motions of being an *ajq'ij*, but not all have the vocation. They don't have the power to really do anything. Others, yes, are called to it by destiny. But some go the way of evil. How can I presume to take the life of my fellow man if I myself am a sinner? A lot of them charge large sums of money to hurt people, but they don't last. After five or six years, they're done. Finished."

Use and Misuse of the Mayan Divination Tradition

Throughout Guatemala one finds shamans of three types: The first is a humble servant of the people who does not see his calling as a business or as a primary source of money. He has the duty to perform the oracle for a petitioner even if that person has no money to give at all. It is a sacred service. Yes, he will intercede with

³⁵ This is the required time of preparation for initiation.

³⁶ This is the day of completion of the period of initiation for new shamans. *Wajxaqib'* is the number eight. So: "8 Batz" in the Mayan calendar.

³⁷ The suffix *-ab'* is a plural indicator. Read *shamans*.

³⁸ It is not uncommon that a person with a vocation as an *ajq'ij* suffers severe illness or other serious problems in life. It is believed that this is because he has not yet accepted his vocation. After initiation, these issues typically clear up.

ceremonial offerings if requested to do so, but these will be modest and his fees will be minimal. Such a man will be respected in his community and will probably eventually be asked to take on other forms of public service and leadership as well.³⁹ The second type of shaman is the charlatan who is primarily looking for an income stream as a result of his work. These persons may prey on tourists who visit the various “sacred places⁴⁰,” but they also seem to have success with some of the more credulous locals. These practitioners are never awarded posts of responsibility in the community. They demand inflated prices for their consultations, but will bargain if necessary.

The third type of shaman is one believed to possess real power, but he uses it for financial gain by practicing black magic. I know of one family who suffered greatly, and they attribute their ordeal to this type of activity. A man was in love with a certain woman, but she left him for another man before they were married. Later, her lover died, and so she repented her earlier decision. She wanted to return to the first man, but he had married another woman in the meantime and so was not available. She went to an evil shaman and paid him to cause the wife’s death. After she died, her husband refused to reunite with the first woman, and so she paid the shaman to have him also killed by black magic, which was effective. The four orphans of that family are now living with their grandparents.

This account was told to me by the oldest of the four, a young man of about eighteen years of age. I had known him for some time, but had never heard this story. It only came out because a strange man approached me on a visit I made to their rural village. This man began to ask me many questions about myself and the family that I was staying with (the aforementioned grandparents). When the boy saw me speaking with this man, he called me back to the house and explained that he was the shaman who had caused the deaths of his parents. He described this history to me and warned me not to speak any further with that individual. Such matters are not taken lightly in these areas.

The actual practice of the *vara* oracle in Momostenango is fairly standard, in my observation. The only significant difference between the consultation given by Don Pedro and the one given by Don Arturo is that the count of the calendar days begins

³⁹ There are many female *ajq’ijab’* as well as male.

⁴⁰ Especially the shrines to *Maximón* (or *San Simón* as he is sometimes called) located throughout the country. Maximón is said to be an incarnation of Judas Iscariot, though one sometimes hears other explanations (for example, that the name is a contraction of the K’iche’ *mam ximon* “grandfather tied-up,” referring to the custom of tying the wooden effigy of Maximón to his chair with a rope). In Momostenango he is brought out into the public square on the Thursday before Easter and he stays until Saturday night. Thus he rules the world for the three days while Jesus Christ is dead, only losing his power on the day of resurrection on Easter Sunday. The custom is to purchase liquor and pour it down the throat of the wooden effigy of Maximón in the belief that, thus propitiated, he will intercede on behalf of the petitioner. This appears to be a vestige of the ancient Maya Tohil worship, where the stone idol of Tohil was venerated by pouring the blood of sacrificial victims into the mouth of the sculpture. I have even seen small stone Tohil idols placed inconspicuously among the potted plants and other decorations surrounding the Maximón figure, though never in Momostenango. See the *Popol Wuj* for an early account of the Tohil human sacrifice ritual.

with a different Nawal. Don Arturo began with the day “10 Kej,” whereas Don Pedro began with “1 Noj.” On the second count, Arturo continued from the place where the first count ended, whereas Pedro began the second count on “1 Q’anil,” calling this second count, “the earthly count.” Other very experienced shamans have told me that the proper method is always to begin the count on the actual day the oracle is cast. This is a matter of some disagreement among practitioners.⁴¹

But the practice of grasping an arbitrary number of seeds, dividing them into groups of four, and reading the result by the remainder is standard procedure. In addition, the most affirmative result being four beans is the standard view in Momostenango.⁴²



Figure 3, Tz'ite' seeds used in the vara oracle. Photo: G. Haynes, 2013

⁴¹ See, for example: Johnson, Kenneth. *Jaguar Wisdom*, Revised Edition. Archive Press. 2009. p.170.

⁴² The Mayan oracle has been described by other investigators. See the above reference to, Tedlock, Barbara. *Time and the Highland Maya*; See also the early description by Leonhard Schultze-Jena in “*Die Quiche von Guatemala*” (Jena, Gustav Fischer, 1931).

PART 2: SIMILARITIES IN THE CHARACTERISTICS OF THE THREE TRADITIONS

1. In both the Chinese and the Mayan traditions, it is believed that the oracle should be performed only by a qualified shaman.
2. In all three traditions the oracle kit is composed of a large number of plant objects: seeds in the Mayan oracle, stalks in the Chinese I Ching, and nuts in the Indian dicing tradition.
3. In both the Mayan and Vedic traditions, the seeds or nuts are placed on a cloth.
4. The number of these plant objects is related to the number of days in the sacred year in the Mayan oracle (260) and in the Chinese I Ching (360). The nuts used in the Indian tradition (150) do not appear to be related to a sacred calendar, but rather to the number of members in the teenage Vrātya group.⁴³ Warrior bands in traditional Indo-European cultures were commonly organized in groups of 50, or in the multiples of 3 x 50 (see below). Therefore, the prescribed use of 50 yarrow stalks in the Chinese I Ching oracle, like the number of nuts used in the Vedic dicing ritual, may also reflect this ancient tradition.
5. In the Chinese and Mayan traditions, the handling of the oracle-objects is seen as a process whereby the essence of the client's question, as transmitted by the shaman, is absorbed into the objects of the oracle so that they can exhibit a meaningful response to the issue being addressed. Mayan shamans rub their hands over the tz'ite' seeds as they formulate the question.
6. In all three traditions, an arbitrary number of these plant objects are selected by the shaman (or player) in order to perform the count. When used in divination, this random chance-occurrence is the key to the working of the oracle, since it is believed that the subtle forces of the universe influence the number of objects selected. As such, the "chance" number of objects selected reflects and reveals the forces at play at that precise moment in the larger cosmos. The macrocosm of the great world manifests its nature in the microcosm of the yarrow stalk or tz'ite' seed configuration.⁴⁴
7. In all three traditions, the objects are divided into groups of four, leaving a final remainder consisting of one, two, three, or four.⁴⁵
8. In all three traditions the result of the oracle (or dice game) is read primarily by the number of objects in the remainder.
9. In both the Vedic and Mayan traditions, a remainder of four is the most favorable result.

⁴³ See Falk, *Bruderschaft und Würfelspiel*, p. 104-105.

⁴⁴ See I Ching, 301. See also, Karcher, Stephen. *Divination, Synchronicity and Fate: Guild of Pastoral Psychology Lecture No 263, March 1998, Journal of Religion and Health, Fall 1998, Volume 37, No. 3*: "We tend to think of chance as "meaningless co-incidence" or "random activity." Traditional cultures saw it as the work of the gods and spirits."

⁴⁵ One informant in Guatemala, Don Arturo, gave as the reason for dividing the tz'ite' seeds of the K'iche' *vara* into groups of four, that this was because of the four cardinal directions. The *I Ching* says that it is because of the four seasons: "The number of the total is fifty. ...They are counted through by fours, to represent the four seasons." *I Ching*, 310. But since the *I Ching* equates the seasons and the directions (see above Fig. 2), these two statements could be seen as equivalent.

10. In both the Vedic and Mayan traditions, a remainder of one is the least favorable result.
11. In the Vedic tradition and in the divination performed in Momostenango by Don Pedro, the process of selection and counting is repeated four times.
12. In all three traditions the operation of the oracle relates to the four cardinal directions.
13. The cosmology behind the oracle in both Chinese and Maya traditions makes reference to the quincunx. A variation of the Vedic dice ritual also describes the four cardinal directions together with the zenith as the fifth, creating, in essence, a quincunx.⁴⁶

The results of the Chinese and Mayan oracles indicate one or more unique but complex representations: the Chinese hexagrams and the Mayan Nawales. These entities have characteristic qualities that suggest a mental attitude or a course of action that the client must take in order to harmonize his actions with the spiritual demands of his situation, thus maximizing his success.⁴⁷

PART 3: ADDITIONAL INDO-EUROPEAN CONNECTIONS

The Vedic dicing tradition does not appear to be a cultural isolate, but rather the later development of a ritual that extends at least as far back as the Proto-Indo-European period. Such a conclusion is supported by the appearance in Greece and Rome of a dice game with some points of similarity to those which we have examined above. While we lack details that would substantiate a structure like that employed in India, China, and America, there is one important feature that has been preserved in Classical literature: In both Greece and Rome, a dice game existed that had the characteristic such that the worst result was a losing throw of “one.” This was called the “dog” throw (*kúōn*, *canis*, *canicula*), and as such, corresponds to the description we have of the Indian dice game where a throw of “one” also resulted in a loss and was denominated the “*śvagnín*” or *dog killer*. We also know that, in ancient Rome, dice playing was only legally permitted during the midwinter Saturnalia festival.

While our knowledge about the structural details of the Greek and Roman dice games is scanty, there is ample evidence that the context in which the games were played was common to the Proto-Indo-European period. Gangs of young men, parallel to the dice-playing Vedic Vrātya groups, existed as a near-universal feature of Indo-European society.

The following characteristics of the Vedic Vrātya groups will serve as a basis of comparison with similar groups in related Indo-European cultures:

⁴⁶ See Falk, *Bruderschaft und Würfelspiel*, p. 130.

⁴⁷ For an additional reference to the 50 yarrow stalks employed by the I Ching, and a formal/structural analysis of the Chinese hexagrams, see Davis, Scott, *The Classic of Changes in Cultural Context: A Textual Archaeology of the Yi Jing*, Cambria Press, 2012.

- A general feature of ancient Vedic cultures is that first-born sons inherited the family patrimony. Later-born sons thus found themselves dependent on their elder brothers and therefore socially marginalized. The Vrātya groups provided an alternative to this economic disadvantage because by participating in cattle raids, etc., they could acquire personal wealth sufficient to establish their own independent households.⁴⁸
- These groups generally consisted of 150 youths from the wealthier classes, aged 16 to 20 years old, pledged in absolute obedience to one leader (the śvahnín) chosen by the dice game. This structure reflected the mythological parallel of Indra and his Maruts.
- Members of the Vrātya groups strongly identified themselves with dogs and wolves.⁴⁹
- They lived apart from civilized areas, making their simple dwellings in forests and other deserted places. Raiding parties alternated with periods of religious study and memorizing texts from the Vedas.⁵⁰
- Cattle sacrifice played a significant part of their practice.
- The dice game was originally a religious ritual. Its object was to select the person who would have to bear the responsibility for the evil incurred in the killing of the sacrificial cow.⁵¹
- Human sacrifice and cannibalism was associated with these Vrātya groups.⁵²
- Vrātya members typically dressed in animal skins with black hats or turbans. Often the animal skins bore a fringe.
- Periodic raids for cattle, women, and other goods were a regular characteristic of Vrātya society. They were known and feared for their aggressive behavior. Women were ritually insulted and beaten with bundles of grass to induce fertility. Sexual licentiousness was practiced.⁵³
- Initiation ceremonies within the Vrātya groups were held at midwinter. Animal sacrifices, soma intoxication, riddle contests and dice playing were features of these festivals.⁵⁴

PART 4: COMPARISONS TO OTHER YOUTHFUL WARRIOR GROUPS WITHIN INDO-EUROPEAN CULTURES

The existence of youthful warrior bands, parallel to the Vedic Vrātya groups, is widely attested in other Indo-European cultures outside of India. Numerous

⁴⁸ See Falk, *Bruderschaft und Würfelspiel*, p. 49-55.

⁴⁹ See Falk, *Bruderschaft und Würfelspiel*, p. 18-19, 21, 40-41, 62, 64.

⁵⁰ See Falk, *Bruderschaft und Würfelspiel*, p. 66-72.

⁵¹ See Falk, *Bruderschaft und Würfelspiel*, p. 81, 136.

⁵² See Falk, *Bruderschaft und Würfelspiel*, p. 16, 37-39. The initiation practice of young Spartan men also included the requirement that they travel out of Sparta (to Laconia/Messenia) and kill a Helot as proof of their manhood.

⁵³ See Falk, *Bruderschaft und Würfelspiel*, p. 29-30, 90.

⁵⁴ See Falk, *Bruderschaft und Würfelspiel*, p. 28, 40, 49, 95-96.

instances point to the membership of these groups as being multiples of 50; often they number 150 as in the Vedic example.⁵⁵

While excavating a Bronze Age site near Samara, Russia, David W. Anthony, Dorcas R. Brown, and their associates discovered archaeological evidence of wolf and dog-sacrifice rituals that had been performed during the midwinter period, and which dated from 1900-1700 BC. Among the other finds at the site, they unearthed eight dice made from the knucklebones of cattle and sheep. Taken together, the evidence led them to conclude that they had found a site with characteristics matching those in which initiation ceremonies were held for young Indo-European warrior bands. The following paragraphs are quoted from their report:

“Youthful war-bands, symbolized by wolves and dogs, operated on the edges of society, stayed together for a number of years, and were disbanded when their members reached a certain age and rejoined society as men. They can be found in mythological and legendary traditions in Germanic (where they are called *Männerbünde*, a label often applied to all similar Indo-European institutions), Celtic (*fian*), Italic (*Luperci*, *sodales*), Greek (*korios*, *ephebes*), and Indo-Iranian, particularly Vedic (*Vrātya*), sources.

... According to Das and Meiser (2002) and Mallory (2007), youthful war-bands shared many features across the Indo-European ancient world: they were composed of boys of about the same age who fought together as an age set or cohort; in some versions of the institution, they came from elite families (Latin, Germanic, Vedic); their activities were principally raiding for cattle and women but could also include learning poetry and athletics; they lived “in the wild,” apart from their families, without possessions; they wore animal skins, appeared as if they were wolves or dogs, and bore names containing the word wolf or dog (Celtic, Greek, Germanic, Roman, Indic, Iranian); and they were noted for sexual promiscuity, thievery, and attracting outlaws to their camps. Occasionally, their raids resulted in the founding of a new settlement, and it has even been argued that the legends of Romulus (who took in thieves and landless young men) suggest that youthful war-bands played a role in the founding legends of that city (Bremer 1982:136–137).

... Several researchers (Falk 1986:37–56; Heesterman 1962; White 1991:95–100) have suggested that the Vedic midwinter sacrifice by dog-priests had parallels in the Roman Lupercalia, with its midwinter sacrifice of a dog, and the Scandinavian Twelve Nights of Christmas, originally a pagan festival

⁵⁵ See, Bremmer, Jan. *The Suodales of Poplios Valesios*. Utrecht. p. 138: “The boys were organised in groups of fifty, and this fits in perfectly with an observation of Geo. Widengren that Indo-European youths were normally grouped in gangs of fifty, as he was able to show for the ancient Persians, Celts and Slavs... moreover, the number of 3 x 50 is also found in the Irish *CúChúlainn* legend. Similar groups of 50 youths we already find in the very ancient tradition of Tydeus' expedition against Thebes, and in the story about the destruction of Siris, an event that has to be dated about 530 B.C.” See also, Falk, *Bruderschaft und Würfelspiel*. p. 105.

during which the hunter-god Odin roared through the forests with his wolves or hounds, exactly like Rudra in midwinter in the Vedic tradition. The Roman Lupercalia required a winter-season dog or wolf sacrifice⁵⁶, the skin of which was carried or worn by the adolescent sons of the aristocrats, who ran around the walls of Rome, symbolically protecting the community, while striking women with goat skins to encourage conception and pregnancy (Harrison 1991 [1903]:51–54). Although the Lupercalia was no longer understood by its participants by the time it was described, it contained elements that connected it to the old institution of youthful war-bands that seems to have faded away with the rise of the state: adolescent sons of the elite, dressed in dog or wolf skins, ran around at the border of the community and were associated with sexual fecundity and generation.

The Greek ephebes were young men who lived on the border, dressed in skins, and fought on the frontier (Cebrián 2010:351–352). In Archaic Greek initiation rituals, boys moved from the city center to a temple dedicated to coming-of-age deities, often Apollo or Artemis, on the frontier, where they took part in rites that manifested a temporary inversion of values and then returned to the center (de Polignac 1995:60). One last analogy should be mentioned: the Celtic sources describe the fian as “landless, unmarried, unsettled, and young men given to hunting, warfare, and sexual license in the wilds outside the túath [the tribe or people].”⁵⁷

From the foregoing descriptions, it should be evident that the Vedic Vrātyas represent an institution of youthful warrior bands that were firmly rooted in earlier Proto-Indo-European society. While textual evidence of a dice-playing tradition within other Indo-European youth-band cultures is limited, it is well attested for the Vedic Vrātyas and undoubtedly goes back to the Proto-Indo-European period as well.

PART 5: CONCLUSIONS

Similarities between the Chinese I Ching and the Mayan oracle are so numerous as to preclude any doubt that they share a common origin. While it is probable that

⁵⁶There is a similarity between the Indo-European and Native American relationships with dogs. Iroquois (among others) had the White Dog ceremony in which a dog was sacrificed in a mid-winter ritual, including an association of warriors with dogs and/or wolves, particularly among the Plains Indians. Many Northeastern American Indians also practice dice/bowl games. The game bowl is divided into quadrants and the playing pieces are flat, round beans or peach stones. Plains Indians have similar games using sticks and round pieces. David W. Anthony and Dorcas R. Brown, personal communication.

⁵⁷ Pike-Tay, Anne, and David W. Anthony, ‘Dog Days of Winter: Seasonal Activities in a *Srubnaya Landscape*’, in Anthony, David W., Dorcas R. Brown, Aleksandr A. Khokhlov, Pavel F. Kuznetsov, and Oleg D. Mochalov (eds.), *A Bronze Age Landscape in the Russian Steppes: The Samara Valley Project*. The Cotsen Institute of Archaeology Press. Los Angeles: 2016 (in press). p. 379-80. This chapter also provides an up-to-date bibliography of literature describing the Indo-European Männerbünde tradition, including citations for the references provided in the selections quoted here.

this ritual formed an original part of the shamanic tradition of Northeast Asia that traveled with early migrants across the Bering Straits, we cannot absolutely rule out a more recent contact between the two civilizations. Other scholars have pointed out striking similarities between writing and calendar systems in both Mesoamerica and Shan or Zhou China, but further evidence is needed before any conclusions can be reached that would support more modern transoceanic contacts.⁵⁸

The underlying selection and counting methods of the Vedic dice game also argue strongly for a common origin with the Chinese and Mayan systems. The basic substructure of the three traditions — the random selection of plant objects, the counting by groups of four, the determination of the result by the remainder (where the Vedic and Mayan traditions agree that “four” is the most favorable result and “one” the least favorable) — these are characteristics that could easily have shared a common origin and persisted for many thousands of years in the sacred traditions of migrating peoples. The similarities in the basic structure of the rituals are complex and multifaceted, rendering doubtful any argument that they are merely a result of chance separate developments.

If this is indeed the case, then we must finally ask ourselves when and where any such point of common origin of the dice and divination tradition might have occurred. At what point would Proto-Indo-Europeans, ancient Chinese, and the Northeast Asian peoples that eventually migrated into the Americas, have shared cultural artifacts?

Leaving aside any consideration of possible later transoceanic contacts, we are left with the observation that the initial migrations from Northeast Asia into the Americas took place between approximately 20,000-13,000 years ago. People who later became known as the Maya would have been descended from this initial wave. Subsequent migrations of Eskimo-Aleut speaking peoples and, finally, of Na-Dene language groups, exerted limited cultural influences on the Amerind populations that had earlier settled in the Americas. With the end of the last glacial maximum, approximately 11,000-7,000 years ago, the melting ice flooded Bering Land, effectively closing the door to further migrations from Asia.⁵⁹

Eurasian cultural contacts with respect to dice and divination traditions, if they occurred, could not have taken place any later than that date, and most probably not later than the close of the initial wave of migrations some 13,000 years ago. This would have been long before the Proto-Indo-Europeans, as we have come to know

⁵⁸ See, for example, Gordon Whittaker, ‘Writing systems’, in Patrick Colm Hogan (ed.), *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of the Language Sciences* (New York 2011), pp.935–9; *The Alphabet and the Ancient Calendar Signs*. Hugh A. Moran and David H. Kelley. Foreword by David Diringer. Palo Alto, CA: Daily Press, 1969. xviii +; among other works. For another perspective on possible ancient transoceanic geographical knowledge, see Haynes, Gregory. *Tree of Life, Mythical Archetype*. Symbolon Press. San Francisco. 2009.

⁵⁹ See, Witzel, Michael. *The Origin of the World’s Mythologies*. Oxford University Press. 2012. p. 231, 249.

them, even existed. Similarly, no recognizable Chinese culture can be identified for that early prehistoric period.

The migrations to the Americas were only possible during this time because a major ice age was in progress, and much of the world's water was locked up in glaciers. Sea level had dropped sufficiently to allow passage over dry land from Northeast Asia to Alaska. Those intrepid souls who braved the journey were most likely driven by severe food scarcity and general desperation. Most of the remaining Eurasian population had taken refuge in isolated geographical pockets where the winters were less harsh, or had moved much farther south. The possibilities for wider communication and significant cultural exchanges were, no doubt, very limited during this Last Glacial Maximum (25,000-15,000 years ago).⁶⁰

In contrast, an interglacial warm period (beginning approximately 45,000 years ago) had ushered in a time of great expansion throughout Eurasia. New hunting techniques had been introduced, and what has been called an "explosion of symbolic thought" was occurring. The very end of this interglacial warm period (ca. 25,000 years ago) saw a particularly dynamic increase in human migration activity.⁶¹ Thus the period between these two major ice ages (from 45,000 to 25,000 years ago) may be the time period that would have been most conducive for the interchange (or common origin and subsequent dispersal) of the peoples later identified as the Indo-European, the Chinese, and the Mayan civilizations whose divination methods we have investigated here.

Based upon consideration of evidence provided by numerous fields of inquiry, including: population genetics, myth distributions, comparative linguistics, and archaeology, Witzel concludes that the date for the initial development of the religious-mythological outlook that later characterized the Indo-European, Chinese, and pre-Columbian American civilizations should probably be set nearer the earlier limits of this period of interglacial warming, that is: approximately 40,000 years ago. Since the dice-divination systems that we have investigated here fall into the general category of religious ritual, it would not be unreasonable to assume that they shared the same developmental history as the overall mythical complex that they are a part of.

As for the place where this general religio-mythological system originated, the same fields of inquiry point to an area generally localized in Southwest Asia. As it is well beyond the scope of this investigation to reiterate the arguments that Witzel makes for this conclusion, readers are directed to his recent (2012) publication, *The Origin of the World's Mythologies*, for a full treatment of his reasoning process.⁶²

⁶⁰ Witzel, Michael. *The Origin of the World's Mythologies*. p. 234.

⁶¹ Witzel, Michael. *The Origin of the World's Mythologies*. p. 229. (Figure 4.13)

⁶² See, in particular, p. 273. (Figure 4.18)