The Tree of Life Design

From Central Asia to Navajoland and Back (with a Mexican Detour)

Part 2

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The Tree of Life is an archetype that appears in art and literature the world over, from the Biblical Garden of Eden with its Tree of Life and Tree of Knowledge, to India, where the symbol is represented by a voluptuous woman with her arm around a tree that blossoms with flowers. In China it can be seen in ancient “money trees” made of precious metals and adorned with fantastical animals. Let’s examine now the concept’s incarnation in Mexico.

Trees of Life in Mexico

(a) Pre-Hispanic cultures

Depictions of world trees are found in cultures such as the Olmec, Teotihuacan, Izapan, Maya, Aztec, Mixtec, and others, dating to at least the Mid/Late Formative periods of Mesoamerican chronology. Directional world trees are also associated with the four Yearbearers in Mesoamerican calendars, and the directional colors and deities.

Olmec World Tree

A Ceiba tree could be found at the center of most pre-Columbian Mesoamerican villages. The Ceiba is a tall tree with large buttressed roots, a remarkably straight trunk, and a high horizontal crown. A majestic tropical tree and appropriate symbol for the complex interactions within the environment. The giant limbs of the Ceiba’s

Teotihuacan Tree and Great Goddess

Drawing by Linda Schele, courtesy of FAMSI
umbrella-shaped crown are laden with aerial plants and provide a home for countless species of animals. The crown spreads wide over the jungle canopy, often with four branches that would suggest the four cardinal directions that are so significant to the Maya. To them, the sacred Ceiba tree connects the three layers of the world. The roots reach into the underworld of death, the trunk is in the middle world of life, and the branches reach up into the upperworld of paradise. Ceiba flowers served as the pattern for ear flares worn by Classic Maya kings. The sacred ceiba tree stands for the fifth world direction--up/down--and is the roost of Seven Macaw, the Big Dipper bird in the Mayan Popol Vuh.

The Temple of the Foliated Cross is one of the three Maya temples in Palenque, known as the Group of the Cross. This temple was built by King Chan-Bahlum to commemorate and celebrate his accession rites to the throne after the death of his father, king Pacal. The tablet shows Chan Bahlum on the left side, dressed simply with a loin cloth and his long hair wrapped in readiness to don the heavy headdress of kingship. His father Pacal stands on the other side, dressed for burial. Pacal holds the insignia of royal power, the passing of authority will occur at the end of the ten days of accession rites. In the center we see a variant of the tree of life formed by a maize plant rising from a band of water and the Kan-cross Waterlily Monster, which symbolizes the waters of the earth as the source of life. Both reverence the corn or maize plant that has a celestial bird on top, and is growing on a base formed by a k'an or precious glyph on a mask. The symbol of K'an represents the corn seed, from which the plant grows. In the crown of the tree sits a huge water bird wearing the mask of the Celestial Bird. The branches of the tree are ears of maize manifested as human heads since in Maya tradition, human flesh was made from maize dough. Pacal is shown giving to his son a personified blood letter, an instrument for bloodletting rituals and vision quests. It drew the blood of the King and brought on the trance that opened the portal to Shivalva or Maya underworld. (http://www.ancienttreasures.com/lrgtext.php3?product=P-11&CA=11)

Perhaps the best known murals at Teotihuacan (ca. 100 BCE - 700 CE) are the so-called "Tlalocan murals" (Portico 2) at Tepantitla, especially the lower register, the "paradise scene" (Miller 1973:21). These widely used
names reflect Caso’s 1942 interpretation of the Tepantitla murals as representing Tlalocan, the mythical Paradise of Tlaloc, the happy place where those who died honorably in war, mothers who died of childbirth, and those who drowned would arrive (de la Fuente 1995a:154). In 1974, Peter Furst suggested that the murals instead showed a feminine deity, an interpretation echoed by researcher Esther Pasztory. Pasztory concluded that the figures represented a vegetation and fertility goddess that was a predecessor of the much later Aztec goddess Xochiquetzal. In 1983, Karl Taube christened this goddess the “Teotihuacan Spider Woman”. The more neutral description of this deity as the “Great Goddess” has since gained currency. The Great Goddess has since been identified at Teotihuacan locations other than Tepantitla – including the Tetitla compound, the Palace of the Jaguars, and the Temple of Agriculture – as well as on portable art. The Great Goddess of Teotihuacan (or Teotihuacan Spider Woman) is apparently peculiar to Teotihuacan, and does not appear outside the city except where Teotihuacanos settled.

In the tablero portion of the Tepantitla mural, a World Tree grows out of the head of the Great Goddess. Half of the tree is marked with spiders and the other half with butterflies (Headrick 2002:86). Water flows from the goddess’ hands, and the lower portion of her body assumes the shape of a cave from which water also flows. Beneath, on the talud, water flows out of a mountain while a series of small figures appear to go about their daily activities (Precolumbian Art and Art History http://www.utexas.edu/cofa/art/347/maya_teotihuacan.html). The Great Goddess is thought to have been a goddess of the underworld, darkness, the earth, water, war, and possibly even creation itself. To the ancient civilizations of Mesoamerica, the jaguar, the owl, and especially the spider were considered creatures of darkness, often found in caves and during the night. In many murals, the Great Goddess is shown with many of the scurrying arachnids in the background, on her clothing, or hanging from her arms (Pasztory 1993:61). She is often seen with shields decorated with spider webs, further suggesting her relationship with warfare. In her 2007 book, “The Teotihuacan Trinity”, Anna Headrick is cautious in identifying the murals as portraits of the Great Goddess, preferring the term "mountain-tree”. Headrick (p. 86) identifies the tree which sprouts from the headdress as the Mesoamerican world tree. Some American Indians, such as the Pueblo and Navajo, revered what seems to be a similar deity. Referred to as the Spider Grandmother, she shares many traits with the Teotihuacan Spider Woman.

Mesoamerican codices which depict the tree of life motif include the Dresden, Borgia, Vendobonensis, and Fejérváry-Mayer codices. The Codex Vindobonensis is in the Österreichische Nationalbibliothek (National Library) in Vienna. The front side, consisting of 52 painted leaves, describes the origins of the Mixtec ruling families and the culture’s early history. It records the most important spiritual beings of the creation, the first rulers born of the Great Tree, associated with the city-state of Apoala, and the dealings and rites by which these early rulers founded their cities and established their territories. The reverse side, Obverse 37b, almost certainly by another scribe, has only 13 painted leaves. It records the early genealogy of the important figures of Tilantongo, a prominent city-state. The genealogy is not complete, and the last leaves were hastily drawn. The Tilantongo dynasty is also documented in the Nuttall Codex and other Mixtec documents. Because Apoala and
Tilantongo are referred to repeatedly in the Codex, it is likely that the manuscript came from near those areas in the heart of Mixteca Alta (the Upper area). In the sequence depicting the Era of the Foundation which shows the Great Tree (Tree of Life) giving birth to the first Mixtec rulers, the Great Tree is in the center, and from it emerge the First Rulers, who are listed on leaves 37-35. (Realms of the Sacred in Daily Life: Early Written records of Mesoamerica. UCI Irvine, California, http://www.lib.uci.edu/about/publications/exhibits/meso/mixtec2.html)

The obverse of the Mixtec Codex Bodley begins with Lady One Death’s birth from a tree. The tree is surmounted by a flame suggesting that this particular tree was probably located at Place of Flame or Achiutla. Although we often attribute tree birth legends with Apoala, Friar Francisco de Burgoa tells us that there were at least three different creation places for the Mixtec royal ancestors, and Codex Zouche-Nuttall suggests the existence of several more. In 1910, a Mixtec scholar named Abraham Castellanos published an interpretation of Codex Colombino based upon stories that he had recorded while in the Achiutla and Tilantongo valleys. Castellanos learned that there had once been magical trees growing along the banks of two rivers that flow through the Achiutla valley below a mountain called Hill of the Sun. It was from these trees that the first Mixtec man and Mixtec woman were born and from them were descended the great lords. Confirmation of this origin place is found in Codex Zouche-Nuttall page 21 where Lady One Death appears at Hill of the Sun. Following her emergence from the tree at Achiutla, Lady One Death meets with Lord Six Crocodile who apparently directs her to leave Place of Heaven to join her future husband, Lord Four Crocodile Bloody Eagle, of Rain God Enclosure or Yuhua Dzahui. Their daughter is named as Lady One Vulture. Subsequently a list of eleven place signs is given including Tilantongo, Jaltepec, Rock of Red and White Bundle. Some of the people associated with these places appear in Zouche-Nuttall Page 21 and on the reverse of Codex Vindobonensis.

In the Fejervary-Mayer Codex, leaves 1-2, the symbolic representation of the universe, space, time, and the realms of heaven and earth are integrated into one whole. The four directions are distributed around a sacred center, shown here as Xiuhtecuhlti, the god of fire. Within each quadrant, two gods in a dynamic relationship rule and characterize life. At each point of the linear design that traces a cycle around the page (and through the four quadrants) is the symbol of one of the 20 sacred named days. Additional layers and cycles of meaning are represented, such as the year bearer symbols in each corner. (Realms of the Sacred in Daily Life: Early Written records of Mesoamerica. UCI Irvine, California, http://www.lib.uci.edu/about/publications/exhibits/meso/borgia2.html)
The best-known depiction of indigenous traditions from central Mexico during the Colonial period is the Mendoza Codex, prepared on 71 folios of Spanish paper in Mexico City in ca. 1541 to acquaint the Emperor Charles V of Spain with his new colonial subjects. The Mendoza is in three parts: the first 19 folios narrate the history of the conquests of the Aztecs and the founding of Tenochtitlán, the next 37 folios enumerate the tributes received from the empire’s 38 provinces, and the final 15 give an ethnographic account of public and everyday life. The first page depicts the founding of Tenochtitlán by the Aztecs in 1325. According to the mythical narrative, the Aztecs had originally lived as nomadic hunter-gatherers in the deserts of northern Mexico. They began migrating southward early in the 12th century, becoming the last in a series of cultures to arrive in the Valley of Mexico. The only place left for them to settle was an island, where they found the omen their god had promised: an eagle perched on a cactus growing out of a rock. This site inspired the glyph of Tenochtitlán, "Among the Stonecactus Fruit," and can be considered a variant of tree of life with bird on top. With the addition of a snake in the eagle’s mouth, this symbol now serves as Mexico’s national emblem. (Realms of the Sacred in Daily Life: Early Written records of Mesoamerica. UCI Irvine, California, http://www.lib.uci.edu/about/publications/exhibits/meso/colonial2.html)

Tableaus from the Western Mexico shaft tomb tradition, showing a ceramic village model with a multi-layered tree with birds (West Mexico, Nayarit, Postclassic (1000/1100-1521 CE). It has been proposed that the birds represent souls who have not yet descended into the underworld, while the central tree may represent the Mesoamerican world tree. These cultures were culturally and commercially linked to the Northwest/Southwest region astride the USA-Mexico border, and I will deal with it in the part about the Puebloans and the Casas Grandes Paquimé center.

(b) Ceramic Trees of Life Candelabras, A Post-Colonial Symbol

Around the middle of the 20th century, ceramic candelabra-like Trees of Life became popular objects for visitors and collectors. By the early 1970s, when 52 trees were placed in Mexican embassies throughout the world, the Tree of Life had become a quintessential symbol of Mexican culture.
An exhibition at the UCLA Fowler Museum of Cultural History “Ceramic Trees of Life: Popular Art from Mexico,” explored the historic roots of this tradition and the tree’s evolution as both ritual object and highly-prized collectible. Made of hand-modeled clay, some of the trees are fired and burnished, retaining a reddish terra cotta color, while others are painted with bright colors after firing. Human and animal figures, as well as floral and decorative motifs, festoon these objects that range from a few inches tall to twenty feet high. (Abarbanel 2003) Contemporary trees from Mexico embody aspects of ancient indigenous traditions as well as customs of European Catholicism. The depiction of a “tree of life” in paintings and other mediums was introduced as a way to evangelize Biblical stories to the native population. After the Mexican Revolution (1910-1920), the government eagerly promoted local arts as part of an effort to articulate a new, post-war identity for Mexico. Muralist Diego Rivera, painter Frida Kahlo, artists Miguel and Rosa Covarrubias, and education minister Jose Vasconcelos collected and displayed Trees of Life and other popular arts, finding inspiration in the lives and traditions of rural Mexico, and bringing them to a wider audience. The completion of highways linking the United States and Mexico facilitated travel, and more Mexicans and Americans began to visit one another’s country. Around the middle of the 20th century, the Trees of Life became popular as various villages and regions developed their singular styles of expression.

It seems the Tree of Life form evolved out of the tradition of “incensing” newlywed couples as a form of purification. Polychrome candelabras, said to ensure progeny and successful harvests, were also given as gifts to newlyweds by the godparents. The Trees may feature the Eden, Nativity scenes, birds and farm animals, Day of the Dead figures. Today the Mexican Tree of Life is associated with three villages: Izucar de Matamoros and Acatlan de Osorio, both near Puebla, and Metepec, near Toluca. The construction of clay tree sculptures with the Biblical theme of the Garden of Eden began in Izucar de Matamoros in Puebla State and spread to other areas, particularly to Metepec, Mexico State, which distinguished their trees by painting them in bright colors. In Izucar de Matamoros, these trees appear in processions such as those for Corpus Christi.

Teotitlan del Valle, at the foothills of the Sierra Suarez, is a Zapotec community of approximately 5000 inhabitants located 29 kilometers from the state capital, Oaxaca, Mexico. The period from 1870 to 1930 was marked of economic activities by independent Zapotec merchant capital – local capital not directly tied to the larger industrialization. The completion of the American Highway in Oaxaca in 1948 facilitated further integration with the Mexican national economy. The second US-Mexican bracero program was a major factor in the penetration of capital into Teotitlan: a large number of Zapotec people emigrated to the USA, and when men returned home, they invested their savings in land, animals and very often in looms and wool. As the tourist and US market for Teotiteco weavings opened up in the 1960s, local entrepreneurs began to reinvest in weaving.
production and to employ laborers not belonging to their families as before, paying them initially with money earned in the United States. As the Mexican state began to promote indigenous crafts, Zapotec weavings were transformed from everyday use objects to art objects and handicrafts as it had happened to those of the Navajos. (Stephen 1993).

Despised as manufacturers of fake Navajo weavings until few years ago, Zapotec weavers are rediscovering their ancient weavings and are now capitalizing on their newfound identity by weaving tapestries with ancestral designs. It is a little dizzying the thought that, in a strange, circular way, Navajo textile manufacturing went back from where it began with the Saltillo serapes: Mexico.

Like the Navajos before them, Zapotec weavers were given card models by USA American traders to reproduce cheaper Navajo-style rugs and wall hangings, the Tree of Life rugs among them. They did not weave Mexican or pre-Columbian ‘Trees of life’ in these imitations, although they also started an ‘ethnic’ production of rugs inspired to pre-Columbian designs, such as the Macaw on top of the Tree of Life. A Mural depicting a weaver working on an ethnic Tree of Life Pictorial (Cohen 2013:40) shows a version of the tree of life which is more Zapotec than Navajo. A kind of corn stalk/tree stands with two- and one- headed birds on its leaves/branches, and two lizards are symmetrically positioned near the roots. The corn cobs are more similar to gourd flowers, while the tassel reminds bean or pea flowers.

In Mesoamerican society, the Tree of life traditionally represents harmony with the four cardinal directions achieved through the vertical reach of the tree and the horizontal extension of its branches as well the coexistence of the terrestrial domain with the sky, or heavenly realm. A powerful cultural symbol, the corn plant serves to represent the continued practice of subsistence farming alongside other money-making practices. (Cohen2013).

The Tree of Life in the American Southwest: the Puebloans

Several researchers link the northward spread of Uto-Aztecan languages to the adoption of agriculture and the spread of shared cosmologies, symbols and rituals (Gregory and Wilcox 2007; Hays-Gilpin 2006; Hays-Gilpin and Hill 1999; Hays-Gilpin, K.A., LeBlanc, S.A., 2007). Many of the most fundamental parallels between Mesoamerican and Pueblo religions may spring from this linguistic linkage: in particular, Kelley Hays-Gilpin and Jane Hill (1999) suggest that Uto-Aztecan peoples of Mesoamerica and the U.S. Southwest, together with neighboring Pueblo and Mayan groups, share a system of verbal imagery evoking a flowery spirit world.
However, the linkages that connected Mesoamerica to the Pueblos did not become apparent until the Mesoamerican Post-Classic Period.

The Epiclassic, or Late Classic Period of Mesoamerica spanned the time between the fall of Teotihuacan around 600/700 and the beginnings of the Post-Classic ca. 900. By the end of this period, Mesoamerican elements began to show up in Chaco Canyon, the Mimbres, and the Sedentary Period Hohokam (McGuire 1980). As Hays-Gilpin and Jane Hill (1999) point out, Flower World imagery appears most coherently in the twelfth century, in Mimbres mortuary ceramics and painted wooden ritual regalia from the Mimbres and Chaco Canyon areas, in thirteenth-century Kayenta Anasazi wooden ritual regalia, and in fifteenth-century Hopi and Rio Grande kiva murals. These scholars argue that Flower World imagery played an important role in the emergence of the Puebloan Kachina religion and the broader iconographic complex which Crown (1994) terms the "Southwest Regional Cult." Moreover, they believe that Flower imagery may represent recruitment of a female symbol into an increasingly formal male-dominated ritual system.

McGuire (1980) remarks that clear evidence exists to connect the Chalchihuites regional centers with Mesoamerica, West México, and the Southwest/Northwest. The icon of the humpbacked flute player, for example, originated in the southwestern United States and spread to the Chalchihuites. Southwest turquoise occurred in Chalchihuites along with West Mexican copper bells and scarlet macaws. Archaeologists have recovered the remains of macaws and parrots from contexts in the Southwest as early as A.D. 200-600 in the Hohokam region of southern Arizona and dating to A.D. 1200-1450 at Paquimé in northern Chihuahua (Wyckoff 2009:2). These Sonoran traditions became more integrated into networks of cultural and economic relations extending north and west to the Pueblos and Casas Grandes.

By the early twelfth century, the regional centers of the Hohokam, Mimbres, and Chaco Canyon were in decline or had been deserted. Over the next 50 to 100 years, the social networks of the Southwest/Northwest reorganized in ways that erased the boundaries between the Hohokam, Mogollon, and Ancestral Pueblo and established new webs of social relations. In the late pre-Hispanic period, several polychrome ceramic wares express a rich iconography replete with parrots and other birds, horned serpents, water imagery, butterflies, flowers, the sun, stars, and masked dancers. McGuire (1980) writes that the iconography does not, however, manifest the wholesale adoption of the Post-Classic Quetzalcóatl cult. Rather, it exhibits a convergence of select elements from it, from older Mesoamerican beliefs such as Tláloc, from earlier Southwest/Northwest beliefs, and probably from West Mexican cosmologies as well.

Several common factors mark the reorganization of the Southwest/Northwest at the beginning of the fourteenth century. Trade expanded with a shared set of prestige goods. Whole communities migrated and merged with others to form multiethnic towns. Pueblo peoples describe this time in their stories of emergence and the migrations they undertook to find the center place. The Mesoamerican elements of post-thirteenth-century Pueblo religion arrived in the region via many routes, from many sources, and over a time span of more than a millennium. Mesoamerican-derived rituals, cosmologies, and iconographies provided common threads that ran through Casas Grandes religion, the Salado religion, and the Katsina religion. The three movements, however, wove these threads into different designs and patterns that varied in how much they resembled the patterns of Mesoamerica (McGuire 1980).

Of the three Southwest/Northwest religions, the Casas Grandes religion most closely resembled the Mesoamerican Post-Classic Quetzalcóatl cult. Casas Grandes (1250–1450) is the most Mesoamerican of all the archaeological sites in the Southwest/Northwest. VanPool and VanPool (2007) hypothesize that Casas Grandes priests embodied the horned serpent to undertake shamanistic journeys between worlds. However, Mesoamerican things did not enter the Southwest/Northwest only through Casas Grandes, and the Salado had their own connections to the south.

Kayenta migrants living in settlements along the Mogollon Rim apparently created Salado Polychrome ceramic ware in the 1270s. The ceramic ware and Kayenta migrants spread from this area to much of southern Arizona, including the Phoenix and Tonto basins, and to southwestern New Mexico. Salado Polychromes incorporate symbols from the Mesoamerican Early Post-Classic International Symbol Set, including horned serpents, the sun and stars, and parrots or macaws. Crown (1994) interprets many designs as indicating masked dancers and suggests that people practiced the religion to ensure fertility and to control the weather. In these ways, Salado religion resembles the Mesoamerican Post-Classic Quetzalcóatl cult and the Katsina religion. Salado elites used a
common set of objects and symbols such as conch trumpets, turquoise on shell mosaics, copper bells, and macaws, to legitimate their power. This cult incorporated many Mesoamerican elements but lacked others, such as extensive human sacrifice, and common ritual uses of human bone.

Pueblo IV period religion developed on the margins of the Mesoamerican connection to the late pre-Hispanic Southwest/Northwest. Archaeologists, however, find more evidence of Mesoamerican connections among the Salado (including the Classic Period Hohokam) and Casas Grandes than in the Pueblo IV period pueblos. McGuire (1980) suggests that the Katsina religion was not simply an offshoot or variant of the Salado religion. Pueblo IV period religion clearly has a more complex origin than simply being the Pueblo version of a Salado religion.

Birds are among the most ubiquitous and ancient religious symbols in the Pueblo iconographic system. Many modern Pueblos associate macaws and parrots with the south and with the sun, and these birds do not represent a recent adoption. As Wyckoff writes (2009), archaeological evidence of exotic trade birds has been discovered from Chaco Canyon to the San Francisco mountains and areas of the Rio Grande, including an ancient Basketmaker trade route. Feathers have been found at many early Pueblo sites, indicating their wide-ranging ritual use. Kiva murals at Pottery Mound and Kuaua illustrate the widespread use of songbirds, waterfowl, turkey, gray hawk, golden eagle and macaw feathers in Pueblo IV period ceremonial contexts. Villgrá, a member of the 1598 Oñate expedition, observed bird iconography in the kiva murals of the Rio Grande pueblos. As Tyler (1979) has shown, feathers in the Pueblo cosmological view have close connections with sky powers, to deities such as the Sun Father and the twin war-gods. Yet in another sense birds are considered kin to men, and as such powerfully symbolic connections to the spirit world. Birds are also among the most common Katsina symbolism seen in the “Rio Grande style” of rock art and kiva murals.

One of the richest sources of bird and feather iconography is Pueblo ceramics. As Ruth Bunzel (1972:106) quoted a Zuni potter, “Women do not prepare prayer sticks, and that is why we always put feathers on the jars.” Also similar to the Katsina cult, it appears that the use of the feather motif moved from west to east (largely due to the influence of the Sikyatki Polychrome style of the Hopi region) to become one of the most common symbols seen on Pueblo pottery. The arrival of Mogan immigrants in the 14th century also introduced new ceramic designs and life-like depictions of birds and animal forms. In H.P. Mera (1970:8) one can find many examples of the “Rain Bird” motif, which moved from the west into the Rio Grande Pueblos.

As Kline (2012) remarks, throughout the Pueblo Revolt period, birds and feathers acted as symbols of resistance. A cross would not be seen as a bird by European eyes, but could be read that way in symbolic language of the Pueblos. Crosses were already integrated into Pueblo symbolism as representations of birds and indicators of ritual space. Along with the reclamation of the cross as an abstracted bird motif, feathers can be represented as nearly geometric elements of design, and feather motifs may have seemed innocuous to the Spaniards. Hence, visual symbols such as birds and feathers enabled the Pueblos to continue their symbolic language also in colonial times.

The importance of parrots and macaws as well as other birds in Pueblo religion can be further understood if we consider the ‘shamanic’ aspect of it. Christine S. VanPool (2009:177–190), basing her assumptions on Lamphere’s (1983:755) conclusion that modern Pueblo religion has an underlying shamanic framework, suggests that the term shaman or shaman-like are therefore more useful in many cases.

According to Christine VanPool (2009), in Medio Period iconography (AD 1200–1450) at Paquimé, the ceremonial center of the Casas Grandes world a classic shamanic journey can be identified by following a “pound sign”. This curious design is found only on a subset of males smoking, dancing, and transforming into macaw-headed individuals to interact with the spirit world. The macaw-headed man is the shaman fully transformed into a spirit creature. A macaw on the macaw-headed individual’s leg suggests that it is a tutelary bird travelling with the shaman’s spirit. Furthermore, the macaw-headed anthropomorphs are sometimes depicted in a horizontal position indicative of “soul flight”. Finally the macaw-headed shamans with pound signs on their bodies are seen interacting with two liminal creatures (feathered horned serpents and double-headed macaw diamonds) that, VanPool suggests, are the primary deities of the Casas Grandes world (see also VanPool and VanPool, 2007). VanPool thinks that evidence indicates that datura and tobacco visions inspired some of the imagery found on the Pueblo IV kiva murals at Pottery Mound, a late prehistoric pre-Pueblo site dating to the 16th Century in New Mexico. Collectively the kiva murals at Pottery Mound and in fact kiva murals from
throughout the region are dominated by entoptic images with vortexes, liminal creatures such as horned serpents, winged anthropomorphs including “hawkmoth” men, ghost-like birdmen, lots of birds (especially macaws), and colour symbolism that is consistent with both datura and tobacco induced visions. All of these are consistent with shamanic imagery.

Parrots also play a prominent role in Acoma oral history as well as other Pueblos’. According to their origin stories, when the world was created, the creator’s daughter, Iatiku, instructed the tribe to search for a place called Ha’aka (Acoma). She gave them two eggs, one a dull color and the other bright blue, telling them one was a parrot, and the other a crow. They should break open the parrot egg, she said, when they reached Ha’aka. After generations of traveling, the Acoma found Ha’aka. Assuming the blue egg contained parrots, the majority of the tribe chose to remain at Ha’aka and cracked open the egg. Imagine their surprise when crows flew out. The remainder of the group took the dull egg and traveled south—some say to Mexico—and settled. To this day, parrots remain an elusive but important symbol to Acoma people. They say they still paint parrots on their pottery to remember the day they lost the parrot egg.

Archaeological excavations found evidence of parrot-raising in Acoma dating to 1100 AD, indicating the birds have been significant to the Pueblo for centuries. Parrot imagery became common on pottery starting around 1860, and remains a popular today. Acoma people wear parrot feathers in their hair, and use them to adorn masks, fetishes and prayer sticks. The Parrot Clan is an important part of Acoma social structure, since they are responsible for gathering salt for the tribe: they gather the salt to the south of the pueblo (parrots are related with the Southern direction).

In the naturalistic style of the Acoma and the Sia pottery water jars there are always birds and plant forms. The bird is always represented in profile, with curved beak, three or four separate tail feathers with rounded ends, a single pointed wing rising from the back. The heart is indicated, connected by a line with the mouth. Frequently the bird is nibbling at a branch of berries held in the claws. This bird has been variously identified as a parrot, a turkey, a chicken, or simply a ‘bird’. Generally two such birds appear on a jar, each framed in an arch of red or yellow paint. Spray of leaves and flowers fill the spaces within and without the arches. The favorite floral ornament is a round-petalled flower, resembling a wild rose. Sometimes three, rather than two, of these birds are used. Rarely the arches are omitted, in which cases three or four birds are used (Bunzel 1972:32). The round-petalled flowers usually have five or seven petals, and also fleur-de-lis-like flowers may appear.

Karl Taube demonstrated that in Mesoamerica much of the symbolic complex of corn developed during the Middle Formative period, when more modern and productive forms of maize appeared at La Venta and other Olmec sites. However, the relation of corn to the four directions and center appears even earlier at the Early Formative Olmec site of San Lorenzo, Veracruz (Taube 2010:76). A quatrefoil is a representation of a flower with four petals. In ancient Mesoamerican art, caves are commonly quatrefoil, which in their very form allude to the four directions. The quatrefoil cave is a convention originating from the Middle Formative Olmec art, also appearing in Classic Maya art. In ancient Mesoamerican thought flowers are cave-like passageways for supernatural forces, including the breath spirit. The Olmec portrayals of flowers are especially early versions of the Flower World complex noted by Jane Hill (1992) for Mesoamerica and the Greater Southwest (Taube 2010:82). The Flower World complex is very widespread among the Uto-Aztecan speakers, and also influenced the Keresan-speaking Acoma, Zia and other Pueblos. Hence, we can interpret the figures of the Acoma pottery jars as symbols of the Flower World complex: the round-petalled flower sporting either five or seven petals symbolizes the five directions (north, south, east, west, center) or the seven directions (north, south, east, west, center, zenith, nadir). The fleur-de-lis flower usually represents the ‘breath’ of the flower, invoking the rain clouds. The arch of red or yellow paint, sometimes identified as a rainbow, is an abstract figure for the horned serpent, the Southwestern version of Quetzalcoatl. Moreover, the jar itself can be considered a ‘rainmaker’. As Shafisma and Tauber (2006:248) point out, bowls and jars often symbolize springs, and by extension, passages to the underworld; pottery vessels are intimately connected to landscape metaphors and sources of moisture. ”The synthesis of water jars and other containers with the concepts of springs, and the sources of clouds and storm is expressed in diverse ways in Mesoamerica and the Southwest.”
Pueblo flutes are explicit flowers; they seem to be of considerable antiquity in the American Southwest. The flaring mouthed flutes are symbols of the reed which was used by the First People and the ancestors of the Pueblo to emerge from the underworld into this world. Therefore, the flute/reed is conceptually a type of tree of life.

In Hopi thought, the center of the underworld is Sitsomo, Flower Mound, the dwelling place of Muy'ingwa, god of maize, growth and germination. Muy'ingwa means Cloud, god of all clouds, there being a cloud associated with each direction. Note that the god of Clouds (as well as maize, growth and germination) lives in the underworld, not close to the sky on the San Francisco Peaks. He wears a mask of five colors, and before it flutter all the sacred birds and all the butterflies. Taube (2010) notes that this hill, Flower Mound, recalls the widespread concept of Flower Mountain. Among the Mayas, Flower Mountain was closely related to both the maize and sun gods, serving for a daily place of emergence for the sun and annually for maize. Examples of the Flower Mound have been identified in the Pueblo IV murals of Awat'ovi and Kawayka'a. A number appear as gently rounded mounds with projecting flowers, resembling both contemporary ritual sculptures of Hopi Sitsomo as well as Teotihuacan censer portrayals of the Flower Mountain. In addition, the Pueblo IV examples are portrayed with corn, either as a central stalk growing atop the mound or as a series of mature corn ears. The cornstalks topping rounded mounds (representing the Flower Mound) also appear in Pueblo sandpaintings. Being conceptually linked to the reed of the emergence into this world and representing the world center in the underworld, the corn stalk on a (Flower) mound can be considered the Pueblo version of the Tree of Life. Moreover, as such, this cornstalk on the Flower Mound is connected to the concept of Flowering Mountain Earth of the contemporary Tzutuhil Maya of Santiago Atitlan, Guatemala, that is the pivotal axis mundi supporting the stump of the ancestral maize tree, the "Father/Mother" (Taube 2004:81). Hence, a very ancient symbol of the tree of life, the cornstalk, is still a vital religious symbol spread over a very wide area, from the arid American Southwest to the jungles of Guatemala.