





## **Rituals of Fertility in the Formative Period of Mesoamerica**

BEATRIZ VALENZUELA EMMITT  
University of Málaga

### **1. Historical Context of Ancient Mesoamerica in the Archaic and Formative period.**

**M**ESOAMERICA is formed by a vast geographical area with a great environmental variety and the origin and evolution of these cultures share a tradition. This region stretched out from central Mexico to Belize, Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua and it was delimited in the north by Mexican states of Sonora and Sinaloa. This area was described by ethnologist and historian Paul Kirchhoff in 1949; he searched for a series of features which were shared by these different cultures. The first criticism towards Kirchhoff was the absence of synchrony in regards to the features; however, what did exist were certain links determined by the origin and common process. Hence Mesoamerica came to be a cultural mosaic produced from the same core.<sup>1</sup>

The shared features we can find are a sacred almanac based upon the combination of two cycles of different duration: the yearly festive cycle, of 365 days, and the augural cycle, of 260 days. Also, we can men-

[1] Rivera Dorado, Miguel y Vidal Lorenzo, M<sup>a</sup> Cristina, «Arqueología Americana», Editorial Síntesis S.A. Madrid, España.1992, p.71-72. (Own translation).

tion that there was a scriptural system with a common root, at least in the early days, later on it was set in three different systems: from Monte Albán, Cerro de las Mesas and the Mayans. Last but not least, we shouldn't forget the important roll which Teotihuacan played, being a great influence in Mesoamerica.<sup>2</sup>

Before going ahead with the historical context let's have a look at their landscape. Their environment offered them a clear contrast from warm, rainy and jungle like, to high lands, which include the Mexican high plateau, the mountains and basin of Oaxaca and the high mountains from northern Central America.

Their annual cycle weather wise consisted of a seasonal rotation between dry and rainy periods and this determined the vegetative growth and agricultural activities. The grand variety of products adapted to the wet and dry climate and provided a relationship based upon economical exchanges between the small territorial communities. Thus the complementarily resources between the high or cold lands and low lands determined an active and permanent activity of people and goods. This cooperation was of great importance as a political projection throughout all the history of this area. In the Valley of Mexico, the great lakes became a union between their residents, which strengthened their economical and social relationships. Therefore, one of the principal supports for the tradition of the Mesoamerican cultures was their agriculture and its origin can be place in the archaic period.

Having said this, we shall proceed to enlighten the historical events that took place in Mesoamerica. Considering that my paper focuses on the fertility rituals, we have to ask ourselves what went on in that moment in time. Let's have a look:

To start we have the Archaic period, then the Formative period, later on the Classic period and then the Post-classic period. Here we are going to do a summary of the events which occurred, although our main attention will be on the archaic and formative period.

The archaic period in Mesoamerica appears to be exceeded by the beginning of the agricultural process around about 7000B.C. and it continues throughout the second half of the third millennium B.C. when the sedentary form of life is established in all the area.<sup>3</sup>

[2] *Ibíd.* p.72.

[3] *Ibíd.*

Archaic Period		7000 B.C.			
		3000 B.C.	Beginning of agricultural process Sedentary lifestyle		Domestication of pumpkins, beans, chilli and other seeds. Corn wasn't cultivated until 3000 B.C.
Formative Period	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Development of the Olmec culture + their influence on the surrounding Cultures</li> <li>- Principal archaeological sites: Pacific coast, Chiapas, Guatemala, Oaxaca, Valley of Mexico, Mayans low lands and the Gulf of Mexico with the Olmec</li> </ul>	Early Formative	2500 B.C.		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- New systems of irrigation</li> <li>- Fishing and hunting still important</li> <li>- Growth of the population</li> <li>- Important economical, cultural and religious developments</li> <li>- Ceremonial centres and stratified societies</li> </ul>
		Mid Formative	900 B.C.		
		Late Formative	300 B.C.		
		0			
		Early Classic			
Classic Period		Mid Classic	400 A.D.	Mythical golden age in Mesoamerica:	
		Late Classic	700 A.D.	- Emerges the classical Mayan Culture and Teotihuacan	
		Final Classic	900 A.D.	- First society states	
			1000 A.D.	- Highly developed Calendaric systems and writing in hieroglyphics	
				- Consolidation of dynasties and kings	
Post-Classic Period		Hegemony of the Aztec	1400 A.D.		

Mac Neish studied the origin of the agriculture in the Mountains of *Tamaulipas* and in the Valley of *Tehuacán*, having only archaeological information from these two areas and the Valley of *Oaxaca*. In the mountains of *Tamaulipas* the earliest stage (7000-5000 B.C.) was characterised by using baskets destined to gather fruits and plants like agave, chilli and pumpkins. In the following stage (5000-3000 B.C.) they proceeded to the domestication of the pumpkins and beans. The maize or corn wasn't cultivated until 3000 and 2200 B.C. its use increased by 2200 to 1800 B.C.

By 1800 to 1400 B.C. thirty percent of their diet was the cultivation of these plants.<sup>4</sup>

In *Tehuacán* the sequence began in 7000 to 5000 B.C. where groups of nomads would live in caves. In these caves there is evidence of seeds, avocado plants, amaranth, walnuts and cotton, even there were different types of bowls for other uses like to grind and crush grain, beans, seeds, among other things. The domesticated corn or maize dates by radiocarbon from 5000 B.C. coinciding with the cultivation of chilli, amaranth, avocado and other types of pumpkins. The cultivation of these vegetables and fruits favoured the prolonged stay in different places. In between 3200 to 2300 B.C. included the hybrid corn or maize and other plants which improved its efficiency. This allowed the development of the permanent villages and towns, which then were of limited size. Other innovations were the obsidian knives and pottery. The use of ceramic appeared within 2300 to 1500 B.C. This way, throughout the archaic period, Mesoamerica attended to the domestication and process of a sedentary way of life, which established the bases for the new conditions of life for the following period, known as Formative.<sup>5</sup>

The Formative Period dates from 2500 B.C. to the beginning of the Classic Period. In this period we find three phases: Early Formative, up until 900 B.C., Mid Formative, from 900 B.C. to 300 B.C, and Late Formative, from 300 B.C. up until the early Classic Period. The dates are only approximate as the dates are divergent in the sense that we are dealing with a great quantity of areas with great distance between them.<sup>6</sup>

Continuing with the agricultural labour, which started in the previous period, we can observe a notable improvement with the variety of maize and the incorporation of new systems of irrigation. This determined a growth in the population and the production of extra nourishment. Also, fishing and hunting were just as important due to the abundance of rivers and lake systems in the surrounding areas. As a consequence, there were important developments in regards to their economy, culture and religion, which produced greater settlements with ceremonial centres and stratified societies. At the same time, the figure of the priest gained an important role in ideological activities, manifested in cults of fertility, like female figurines made out of clay in the celebra-

[4] *Ibíd.*

[5] *Ibíd.* p.73-74.

[6] *Ibíd.*

tion of agricultural labour, religious constructions, like temples, and in regards to the distinction in burials.<sup>7</sup>

The manufacturing of ceramics and other utensils produced the development of barter or, in other words, an interregional trade. Consequently the figure of merchant appeared along with commercial routes. This was another way of spreading out religious beliefs and material culture. On the other hand, artists and artisans expressed in stone, adobe and stucco the legitimate ideology of the new social structure. Finally, the lower social stratum and farmers provided the necessary labour to maintain the recent established order.<sup>8</sup>

## 2. Rituals of fertility and Rituals of sacrifice

Following this historical context, we shall continue with the rituals that Mesoamerican cultures developed. In spite of this historical context, this research does not centre its attention on archaeological facts nor anthropological thesis; instead the area of investigation in this paper is from a philosophy of the culture point of view. Thus, we are going to analyse the philosophical assumptions which these cultures share, for example the burial of the *pretty ladies* as a ritual of fertility.

Hans Jonas, in his book *The Phenomenon of Life*<sup>9</sup>, understands that for the primitive men life with its presences dominates and fills the entire forefront, which humankind can observe. The early humankind couldn't imagine that life was neither an exception nor a secondary phenomenon of the universe. In any case, all experiences in this land comes before the presence of life in everything which exists. With this vision of the world, death is an enigma that contradicts the understood phenomenon, which is the universal life. So at the same time life is a primary state of all things and death is a disturbing secret. Thus, what Hans Jonas is trying to enlighten here is that it is not strange to find in the first stages of humanity the conflict with the enigma of death and where they would answer it with myths, cults and religion.

[7] *Ibíd.* p.74-75.

[8] *Ibíd.*em.

[9] Jonas, Hans, *El principio vida: hacia una biología filosófica*, Editorial Trotta, Madrid, 2000, p. 21-23. (Own translation). The English version of his book is *The Phenomenon of Life: Toward a Philosophical Biology*.

Having said this, the reason we also mention sacrifice is that when sacrifice comes into play it resembles the death of a seed or the death after the hunt for an animal, meaning these actions are connected to life and life itself fills with the life of the animal that has been sacrificed and, for that reason, we are going to study the sacrifice.

### **3. Sacrifice in the Formative Period; Symbolism of the Moon in regards to the Female embodiment.**

If we peek back in to the Pre-Neolithic period, Paz Cabello, fully aware of the dilemmas in regards to the origin of the first Americans, explains there are three major migrations. Paz Cabello infers that the pre-Colombian cultures derived from the first migration, which reached all America between 35.000 and 12.000 years. Their main resource for nutrition was by hunting. However, by 5000 B.C. the small groups or tribes started to cultivate pumpkins, beans and maize. From then onwards, everything started to develop as a culture. By 3500 B.C., the structure of the tribes grew in sophistication and in 2.500 B.C. is when archaeologists suggest that the Formative period or as Paz Cabello names it Preclassic Era, commences.<sup>10</sup>

Nevertheless, concentrating a little bit on the Palaeolithic, a culture is formed and developed due to rituals in general. However, it is from the hunting rituals of the first sapiens, where they have established the cultural poiesis. Jacinto Choza uses some examples like the bear hunt and the peace pipe from North Americans. In all those rituals and sacrifices in general, they have some living creature from earth with a celestial origin, which will be taken, killed, torn apart, burnt and some of its parts would go to the sky or heavens. Its life, which comes from a sacred place, it is spread out and brings life to everything, returning to the sacred power, to the celestial beginning.

Having said this, when we talk about the Formative period in Mesoamerica it is impregnated with religiousness, where they still maintain ritualistic acts and sacrifices that appears to be Palaeolithic. However, they have an agricultural way of life, which points to the Neolithic period. Sacrifice is a religious practice, which is apparent in the Palaeolithic

[10] Cabello, Paz, *América Precolombina, textos y catalogación*, Museo de Benalmádena Colección Precolombina, Editorial: Ayuntamiento de Benalmádena, Málaga, 2007. p.15,19. (Own translation).



age. Nevertheless, when it is a Neolithic practice, it also changes. During the Palaeolithic, sacrifice rituals have to do with the animal that must be hunted. In the Neolithic age, sacrifice rituals are related to the harvest, which is related to the fertility of the Earth. In the Palaeolithic, the religious act is directed to the heaven and the stars, where the animal deity lives. On the other hand, as previously mentioned, in the Neolithic it is directed to the Earth. Hunting rituals are, quite often, a mimesis or imitation of the hunting practice. Fertility rituals are developed as a *mimesis* of the human reproduction.

When we talk about the Neolithic life terms change, relying more on their harvest and agriculture, than on hunting. Agriculture is an activity with a lot of rules. There is a time to sow, to prune and another to reap. Moreover, before sowing, one must prepare the soil. This fact implies two important consequences: (i.) agriculture has a strong need for a calendar system. And (ii.) agriculture implies rules and norms. If agriculture is the only way of surviving, these norms are ethical norms, because life depends on its fulfilment. The entire city, all the civilization and all the society depends on the exact accomplishment and realization of this behaviour. However, it is not only a custom or pattern of behaviour, as it is nowadays. They are activities, which founded the life for all the people of these societies. And as Emil Durkheim would say, for that reason they are sacred activities.

We can observe that in Mesoamerica in the Formative period, they carry out their rituals to fertilize the earth and being earth known as mother earth. Nevertheless, we shall look into the symbolism of the Moon that is related to what happens on earth. And this will give meaning to the Formative period of Mesoamerican cultures.

If we think back to the archaic period in Greece, the word «μήν», «μηνός» means month, and from the root of that word they form the word «μήνας», which means moon. It isn't rare to see the same word for month, menstruation and moon, used by different cultures and where they would divide the months in two, three or four parts, which coincide with the phases of the moon. In Mesoamerica, the Nahua called the moon 'Meztli', which is the counterpart of the sun according to the concept of duality; in other words, it is the female principle which cooperates with the sun in the creation. Also, the moon nearly always has a snail, which is related to the womb, and therefore with birth. Meztli is an agriculture goddess and what seems to be a little more important, is that she is a goddess of the night, of darkness. That means it is a principle,

which lives in the middle of chaos or darkness, giving force or strength to new beginnings. She is the goddess of regeneration and as goddess of darkness its kingdom extends to the subsoil. The soil can be an excellent metaphor of origin, as it is the sphere where the seeds are placed, and where life could grow. Moon, soil, darkness are related to origin. But it is not enough to have just soil; the fertilization of the seed is also in need. One needs another principle in duality with the chaotic one. For that reason, one must think that one principle is masculine and, the other, feminine. The feminine is Meztli and the male, Tecciztecatl. It is the generation between these two gods what dominates the universe.

The Nahuas had four Lunar Goddesses, these represented the four stages of the Moon cycle, which are: Tiacapa «the first-born», the one that guides; Ixcuina «the one that takes away the face», this is to depersonalise, to make the people lose themselves in their passions; Tlaco or Tlaco-coa, «the one in the middle» or «the following one»; Xoctzin «precious fruit» or Xocoyolt «fruition, tree», these are names which were given to the last one and the smallest of the children. These are goddess of lust and carnality; they also helped towards childbirth and they unleash passions.

This admiration towards the female deities came from the Palaeolithic, where they connected the moon to the female. In this way, the women would experience the changes in their body resembling the stages of the moon and they would behave differently according to each stage. Consequently, what the women experienced in their bodies could be gazed by the tribes looking upon the sky. In that manner they knew what was going on in earth and, specially, in the females womb. Therefore, the Palaeolithic Goddess was not a representation of intelligence; it was the representation of Life and symbolisms of fertility. This means, each Palaeolithic woman was a goddess of fertility; they were Mother Goddess and all in relation to the astral calendars, and of course, the moon. So this binding of the Moon and the woman endured throughout the ages, represented in hieroglyphics', iconographies, scriptures, etc.

If we interpret the four Lunar goddess we can appreciate not only the cycle of the human gestation, but a representation of the cycle of life and of the plants. Tiacapan or Tlazoltéotl is the goddess of lust, carnality, of sexual misdeeds. It is the principle of desire. It is the origin of the process of life in earth. And it needs a male principle to find fertilization. Ixcuinan is the goddess who loses people, which also loses the identity of the seed. The fertilized plant is the same as the seed, but it has taken

away her face and, consequently, has another appearance. It has been metamorphosed. The third phase of the Moon is Tlaco or Tlacocoa, «the following one». It governs the growth of the plant: the developing of leaves and roots, even flowers. Then, we come to the full Moon or Xocztzinthe «precious fruit» or Xocoyolt «fruition, tree». That is the peak or the crowing of the plants life, its reason of being, its fulfilment or its zenith.

If one thinks about the Mesoamerican Temple, even in the formative period, one realizes that it has a square structure. Four equal sides at the basement. This structure is repeated in steps until the upper square, on top of the temple, which is looking at the sun or the moon, and it is the sacrifice altar. The four phases of the moon, the four sides of the temple and the altar, the four phases of the plants growth, and the four sides of the Mesoamerican calendars are related, as the unique cycle of the generation and regeneration of the cosmos and of the life on Earth.

So if we look back, all the ancient cultures of the world have observed the cycles of nature, including all the entities which are extended over the sky: like stars, planets, constellations, the moon and the sun. These were objects of veneration and in other cases; they were identified as good or bad actions, which would alter the life of humankind on Earth. The same happens in Ancient Mesoamerica, they were great observers' of the cycles and celestial phenomena's like the movements of the sun, the phases of the moon, the eclipses' and planetary cycles. Their knowledge was represented on hieroglyphics, symbols, paintings, sculptures', buildings and cities. The ancient Mesoamerican believed that everything, from their homes, to the mountains, rivers and caves, were sacred. In this way, the movement of celestial entities was interpreted as the cyclical movement of their divinities. Consequently, they thought that the phenomena's, which would occur in the sky, are intimately connected to the earth: so whatever happens upstairs had repercussions down here. In other words, the earth was a reproduction of the universal cosmic order of the skies. They expressed it in this way: *bey ti 'ka 'an, bey ti 'lu 'um*, meaning 'As the sky is, like this is the world'.<sup>11</sup>

Having said this, in the Formative period of Mesoamerica, the Olmec shinned as one of the first cultures, which influenced Mesoamerica. The Olmec were the first culture with a complex social system and a developed world view, which was reflected in their art of exceptional

[11] Torres Rodríguez, Alfonso, «*La observación astronómica en Mesoamérica*», Article from Google Scholar, Ciencias 54, 1999, p.16-17, URL <http://revistas.unam.mx/index.php/cns/article/viewFile/11675/11000> (Accessed 5/8/16) (Own Translation).

beauty and quality, and as well a beginning of a science based on the agricultural and religious calendar systems. By 900 or 800 B.C. cultures from central Mexico, from Oaxaca and from the Mayan southeast area, developed on a higher level their agricultural production and there was a growth in the population. They did this by following the Olmec culture and one of the best examples is Tlatilco, situated in the basin of México. Tlatilco stands out due to their necropolis were they have many funerary offerings with beautiful female figurines. These Formative female figurines, related to fertility, appeared in burials. Nevertheless, these figurines were influenced by the Olmec as they had similar figurines for similar purposes. The Olmec figurines were hollow due to their sizes; however, the ones from Tlatilco were small and solid. Due to their preciousness, these figurines were known as *pretty ladies* or *mujeres bonitas*.<sup>12</sup>

In the Pre-Columbian Museum of Benalmádena, there is an exquisite collection by Felipe Orlando of these *pretty ladies*, however, it is necessary to understand that apart from being part of a burial act, they also resembled fertility. The *pretty ladies* or *mujeres bonitas*, which are in the Museum date to the Late Preclassic Era or Late Formative period (500 B.C – 200 A.D.) from the culture *Chupícauro*, situated on the Occident of Mexico. Nevertheless, it was in *Tlatilco* where their main influence was followed by the *Chupícauro* developing their own culture, but setting forth their own style within the same tradition. In this way, we do come across different types; all of these figurines represent naked women with pronounced hips, marking their sexual attributes, with pronounced wombs and breasts. They also have characteristic hairstyles with numerous adornments. In some, we can observe as well the skull deformation, tattoos, even dental mutilation, which is an element that characterises the Gulf of Mexico. These *pretty ladies* were full of grace and beauty, each of them individually different from the rest and they are related to the cults of fertility. This tradition started around about 1.500 and endured until the conquest.<sup>13</sup>

[12] Cabello, Paz, *América Precolombina, textos y catalogación*, Museo de Benalmádena Colección Precolombina, Edita: Ayuntamiento de Benalmádena, Málaga, Spain, 2007. p.20-21. (Own translation).

[13] *Ibíd.* p.74-75.



Having mentioned the *pretty ladies*, we should remember that in the Palaeolithic the goddess, female deities and divinities that we know of were all related to fertility. At the same time they determined the concept of the cosmos, the disposition in space and time, they also gave certain standards and elements for the construction of temples and sacred buildings. Each female deity represented in clay or in paintings, would have an ovoid shape, whether they showed it with pronounced breasts, womb, and even in the entire shape of the female body. This takes us to the obesity of the female body, which could be a factor they would look for, as it would mean the female body is nourished enough to bear life. Hence, they looked for that ovoid shape, because the egg has the embryo from which life is born like fishes, amphibians and birds. In the same way, the female womb would have the same purpose for the mammals as the fishes, birds and amphibians did. Thus, the egg and ovoid form is the beginning of life.<sup>14</sup>

On that note, in Mesoamerica the seed of maize was their main nutrition, there were even Gods which would resemble the maize seed. There were many rituals to fertilize the earth with this seed, because it would break in the earth and life then was born, new life that would bring nutrition and life to humankind. Earth for the Mesoamerican was mother earth, a goddess, and as she brings life she can bring devastation too. Nevertheless, what we find also in the Pre-Colombian Museum of Benalmádena is a female figurine from Tlatilco, which dates to the Formative period (1500B.C.-500B.C.). This female figurine has her arms spread

---

[14] Choza, Jacinto, «*Culto originario: La religión paleolítica*», Editorial. Thémata, Sevilla, Spain, 2016, p.196 - 198. (Own translation).

out, a high headdress semicircular and earlobes. Her legs are mammaliformes with adornments, which could represent strings with seeds and how they are tied to her legs, it would make a jingling or rattling sound when she danced.<sup>15</sup> It seems this figurine might resemble a ritual act of fertilization with the seeds as well.

However, if we analyse slower this figurine, Paz Cabello mentions that the seeds on the legs would make a sound when she dances, this would infer that this can form part of a ritualistic dance. If we look at how Jacinto Choza defines dance it can help us understand better how a culture flourishes and their cultural system too. Jacinto uses as an example the ballet by Manuel de Falla, ritualistic dance of fire, which is a prayer, a dance of devotion, and this is how the sapiens tribes use to take control of the fire or produce it, hunt an antelope, fertilize the females, or even when the new period of the days getting longer starts. In some places each year they would sacrifice an animal or even a human, to guarantee the force of a new spring, which would save them from the night and darkness, from hunger and death, just like Van Der Leeuw and Eliade refer to. In Mesoamerica, they would carry out human sacrifices in a ritualistic act to honour the Gods and to guarantee the continuation of the cycle of life. However, all this would be expressed by dancing and this, as we have said, are prayers. The colours and graphic art which they would draw on their bodies, with branches and feathers, shouting and screaming, it was also a way in which the community would take conscience of itself. If we think about it, language itself and spoken language are quite limited when it comes to express the movements and rhythm of the cosmos and of the human communities. In this way, the harmony of the movements and rhythm of the cosmos with the ones of the humans can be expressed better with corporal mimesis. Consequently, each individual forming part of a group moving in harmony with the cosmos, is the true communication between humankind and the cosmos.<sup>16</sup>

In the Palaeolithic the predominant figurine is the female one and we can see that the Mesoamerican cultures in the Formative period had an example of this. which are the *pretty ladies*. However, there is something important we must add, which is that the basic aesthetic principles

[15] Cabello, Paz, *América Precolombina, textos y catalogación*, Museo de Benalmádena Colección Precolombina, Edita: Ayuntamiento de Benalmádena, Málaga, 2007. p.72. (Own translation).

[16] Choza, Jacinto, «*Filosofía de la Cultura*» Editorial Thémata, Sevilla, Spain, 2013, p. 49 – 51. (Own Translation).

in Mesoamerica could be summed up in two concepts: first one is the importance of duality – life and death, sky and earth; female and male; and the second important concept is the union of the opposites.<sup>17</sup> In this way, we can interpret that life and death went hand in hand and that by burying these figurines it would resemble the new life, which would sprout from the earth. If we sum up both concepts, it seems it is representing the cycle of life.

A figurine that helps enlighten the duality and that we can find in the Museum, is a female figurine with two heads: it dates to the Formative period (1500 – 500 B.C.) from the culture we have just mentioned, *Tlatilco*. This figurine with adorned earlobes and necklace appears to be naked and with child. Even so, it could be a representation of a natural phenomenon. Nevertheless, what is important about this figurine is the duality as it is an important element in the native thought of mind. It is known that this is related to fertility as it is to the concept of a dual world, which is born due to the opposition of the contraries.<sup>18</sup>



There are more of these female figurines with two heads, as it was another way of symbolising duality, life-death. In the Formative period we find, in different Mesoamerican cultures, similar pieces. We have to

[17] Cabello Carro, Paz, *México Antiguo*, Museo de América, Técnicas Gráficas FORMA, S. A. Ministerio de cultura, Mayo 1986. p.20. (Own Translation).

[18] Cabello, Paz, *América Precolombina, textos y catalogación*, Museo de Benalmádena Colección Precolombina, Edita: Ayuntamiento de Benalmádena, Málaga, 2007. p.71. (Own translation).

remember that in this moment their harvest was their economical subsistence. Therefore, the earth and the water was a fundamental element for their small villages. On account of this, the concept of duality was a central part in their thoughts and world view. The Mesoamerican cultures observed that in nature there is a cyclical change of seasons, where life and death are present. Seems that duality is an important concept in the world view of the Mesoamerican cultures and from where myths, rituals and the structure of the cosmos order emerged.<sup>19</sup>

The interesting thing about these figurines is that from an early age each rural culture would warn of the changes in nature and express it through handling clay. In this way, Mankind and the Gods have in themselves that duality so significant in the pre-Hispanic world view. On the other hand, in the Formative period, various regions realized that this representation of life and death are present like a cyclical unity in which one follows the other, as it happens with the rainy and dry periods. The Mesoamerican cultures have this concept related to everything that they rely on to survive and for their own development, being the harvest their main substance. Therefore, water and earth are going to be deified and from death life will be born, like a constant presence in nature.<sup>20</sup>

On the other hand, the process of life and the world are arranged in four moments too, ranging from being born, growing up, reproduction and death; childhood, youth, maturity and old age; spring, summer, autumn and winter; this is so similar to the processes in rituals. The rituals helped as a guide to organize life and the world, to fill the vast emptiness of the memory and the ignorant intelligence, which with an initial content it can be developed and completed throughout time. Hence, when we see a bone or shell of a tortoise which has been carved or drawn on, what we have then is a *Mandala*. In other words, it is a drawing of the entire cosmos with its parts and indications of what to do in each stage of life. *Mandala* comes from a Hindu, a word which means circle and it is with the circle how they develop their calendars, divided in four parts that are the season of the year. A *Mandala* has the stages of human life, the knowledge of the positioning of the stars in each season, also repre-

[19] Turner, «*Dioses del México Antiguo*», Ediciones del Equilibrista S.A. de C.V./Turner libros S.A. 1995, Antiguo Colegio de San Ildefonso p.87. (Own Translation).

[20] *Ibíd.* p.88-89.



senting animals. Consequently, a *Mandala* integrates the whole universe, its processes and rituals.<sup>21</sup>

In Mesoamerica, we see they have an approach to life and death that can be interpreted as a cycle of life. There are more figurines, ceramic bowls, clay figurines of deities and Gods, which would tell a story. A piece that we can find in the Museum would be these two figurines, which are characterised as culture *Remojada*, dating to the Late Formative period (400 B.C. – 200 A.D.). These two have some interesting features, for example the female is holding her womb as she's sat down, with a crest, big-nosed, and wearing a shirt with a necklace. She is also accompanied by a male partner, which is sat down with his legs crossed, arms up front and with similar features to the female.<sup>22</sup> However, there is a last detail, which can be interpreted in two ways: the first interpretation, made by Juan José Padial, is that the female is wearing something similar to a belt, in the centre, near her arms; also, there is a piece on the 'belt' that looks like its representing a male's virility. Nevertheless, the other interpretation, made by Paz Cabello, is that it isn't a belt, but a baby's face with his arms stretching out as it holds his mother. In this way, these figurines present an aesthetic principle with their clothing, which characterizes their culture, at the same time we have both male and female figures, the opposites, and the symbolization of fertility. This might seem to infer an aspect of the cycle of life after all.



[21] *Ibíd.* p.16.

[22] Cabello, Paz, *América Precolombina, textos y catalogación*, Museo de Benalmádena Colección Precolombina, Edita: Ayuntamiento de Benalmádena, Málaga, 2007. p.67. (Own translation).

Another characteristic practice of the Mesoamerican would be the ritual of the *ball game*, where they would resemble the cycle of life and the representation of the cosmos, almost like what has been mentioned in regards to the *Mandala*. In Mesoamerica and Central America, where ever there was a temple there would be a ball court. One version of the myths is that in the *Annals of Cuauhtlán* it is said that Topiltzin, the incarnate King Quetzacoalt, invented the game played in them, however the real origin of this game is unknown.<sup>23</sup>

The Mexicans had a strong urge towards symbolic representation, even every human act was considered symbolic, even to the games they played, it always reveal something deeper. Therefore, we should interpret the ball game as a symbolism of man's struggle to master his fate, remembering that the game was impregnated with religiousness and it wasn't a mere pastime. As we have mentioned there isn't an exact knowledge of the origin and symbolism of the ball game as such. However, there is an interpretation by Cottie Burland<sup>24</sup>; she suggested that it represents the play of cosmic forces. The ball is at mercy of the players, who use their elbows and buttocks to try and send it through one of the stone hoops, placed high on the court walls. In this way, it would look like there was a loophole for change in the cycle of heavenly movements.

In the Formative period this game was a profound ritual. Another main suggestion about this game is that it is thought that the practice of this game was related to the rituals of fertility and the harvest. By the Classic Era this ritual had expanded over all Mesoamerica, so it became part of their World view.<sup>25</sup>

This game was known by Mesoamerica and we might be able infer that it could be the basis to understand their world view. This game in the different surrounding cultures had a distinctive way of playing, but sharing important features. Let's briefly show the minor differences: Nowadays, it is thought that there were four ways to play this game: one could be with their hands, using a glove and a stick; another way was

[23] Nicholson, Irene, *Mexican and Central American Mythology*, by O.G.A.M., Verona, printed in Italy, 1967, p. 17-18.

[24] *Ibidem*.

[25] «*El juego de la pelota en Mesoamérica*», México: FCAS-Fundación Cultural Armella Spitalier, 2009, ProQuest ebrary. p.4. (Own translation).

with their legs; another was with their heads; and the last one with their hips.<sup>26</sup>

The field or open grounds in the *ball game* were well known by the Mexicans. At first they used open fields for this ritual, but as they grew the ground did too with greatly built stands. They recognised these grounds as a sacred space, a *teotlachco*, a place destined to the Gods. In each different object of this place you can observe the illustrations of their rituals, hence the importance of this place, for example you can see it in their wall paintings, sculptures and codes. In their game they would hit the ball with their feet, hips or stick, and it would represent ritual events.<sup>27</sup>

Having said this, the *ball game* is connected to the movement of the sun round the firmament, this symbolised the cycle of birth and death of the harvest and life, of which it needs death to access the new life.<sup>28</sup> However, there is more to this game; the cult to fertility in their ritual was mostly present in the majority of Mesoamerican cultures. From early days, you can see this represented on most pictures expression and sculptures related to the *ball game*.<sup>29</sup>

At the same time, this game, related to rituals and religion, encouraged human sacrifice. The connection between the *ball game* and the sacrifices dates to three thousand years ago with the Olmec and these practices grew by the Classic Era all over Mesoamerica. As a matter of fact, the features that they represented have human or animal heads, and it is thought that this could be related to the idea of beheading. An example we can observe is Teotihuacan where they have located traces of beheading. However, these rituals of sacrifice and death were inseparable conditions for the everyday birth of the sun. Also, it is thought that the *ball game* was a cult of sacrifice related to the Moon to maintain agricultural fertility.<sup>30</sup>

Going back to the Mandala, at first they were simple and would represent the cycle of life. In Mesoamerica, it seems the ritual of the ball

[26] *Ibíd.* p.5.

[27] *Ibíd.* p.6-10.

[28] Cabello, Paz, *América Precolombina, textos y catalogación*, Museo de Benalmádena Colección Precolombina, Edita: Ayuntamiento de Benalmádena, Málaga, 2007. p.26-27.

[29] «*El juego de la pelota en Mesoamérica*», México: FCAS-Fundación Cultural Armella Spitalier, 2009, ProQuest ebrary. p.18.(Own translation).

[30] *Ibíd.* p.18-21.

game could reflect the cycle of life, as this game would resemble the movement of the sun, the sky, the earth and, overall, the cosmos. With the Mandala, throughout the Palaeolithic and Neolithic, they would manifest their ritualistic practices and, therefore, their forms of cult. However, to carry them out they would have to have certain knowledge, beliefs, morals and an existential attitude.<sup>31</sup>

#### 4. Conclusion

Overall, what we find in this first part is that from the Archaic period and Formative period, it was a momentum of formation for the Mesoamericans and it is when they developed the basis of their culture, which endured the following generations. Having analysed the Formative period, we can see they were impregnated with religiousness, practicing ritualistic acts and at the same time they had a great dependence on their harvest, almost so, that earth was mother earth to them and they would try to fertilize the earth. Hence, the earth or mother earth had to be fertilized like the female in order to survive.

Consequently, the analyses of the Formative period in Mesoamerica and the importance of their agriculture, made us stop and think a bit deeper about the female figure in this time and what she represented to them as they flourished as a culture. In view of what we have explained prior, the female embodiment, from an early age, was connected to the moon and this meant that the female was recognized as a goddess. This shows how ancient cultures observed the cycle of nature and Mesoamerica was no exception; they observed the cycles and celestial phenomena's. Thus, the earth was a reproduction of the universal cosmic order of the skies or heavens.

On the other hand, a characteristic fact from the Mesoamericans was the concept of duality, which was present in their worldview, and it is with this concept how we can sum up the aesthetic principal in Mesoamerica: firstly, the importance of duality, female-male, sky-earth, life-death, etc. And secondly, it is the union of these forming a life cycle or, in other words, a cyclical unity. This is important on account of that the Mesoamericans observed that in nature there is a cyclical change of the seasons, where life and death are present.

[31] Choza, Jacinto, «*Culto originario: La religión paleolítica*», Editorial Thémata, Sevilla, Spain, 2016, p.192-193. (Own translation).

To conclude, Mesoamerican cultures from the Formative period had a strong urge towards symbolic representation. These representations, whether it would be in the form of rituals, the ball game, ceramic figurines, temples, cities, etc. would manifest their forms of cult, their world-view. However, to carry those out they would have certain knowledge, beliefs and morals.



