

# Mending the past: Ix Chel and the invention of a modern pop goddess

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*For modern communities, she is the moon goddess and protectress of Maya culture and women; for scholars she is one of a number of deities with different roles in the Postclassic period. Which is the real Ixchel? The author excavates the story of the Maya goddess and her re-invention by myth-makers – including archaeologists.*

*Keywords:* Maya, Postclassic, religion, symbolic archaeology, post-modern archaeology, feminism

## Introduction

Archaeologists have begun to examine the ways in which knowledge about the ancient past is consumed and appropriated. The Postclassic period supernatural patron of weaving known today as Ixchel, the Maya Moon Goddess, has become a common image in both modern marketing and cultural revitalisation movements within the greater Maya area. A simple search for 'Ixchel' on Google or any other search engine produces almost 50 000 instantaneous results for everything from resorts to language schools to feminist retreat centres. How has this relatively obscure deity from the Maya ethnohistoric literature penetrated so deeply into modern popular consciousness? This essay explores the history of an idea based on archaeological evidence, and attempts an archaeology of knowledge about an ancient deity with modern significance. The study documents the modern appropriation of academic scholarship for deliberate re-imaginings of the past, by exploring the relevance of a re-imagined ancient deity to modern communities as both a native symbol of gender specific household roles and an exoticised commercial symbol of Maya-ness. I use the popularised spelling 'Ixchel' to refer to the modern re-imagination of the ancient deity known in the academic literature also as 'Ix Chel'. Three well-known modern examples, each using the icon of Ixchel, are examined for evidence of a pattern of interpretation and intention. I conclude with suggestions about why the study of archaeological knowledge production is important today, and why myths about the weaving goddess continue to retain meaning and significance among various modern communities along the Caribbean coast and beyond.

## Modern citations of Ixchel

Perhaps the best-known museum of Maya textile arts is the Museo Ixchel in Guatemala City (Figure 1). Opened in 1973, the museum claims to have taken its name from the

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Figure 1. Museo Ixchel, Guatemala City. Photo courtesy of Barbara Knoke and the Museo Ixchel.

pre-hispanic Maya goddess of fertility and weaving arts. It displays hand-woven fabrics from 120 highland Maya communities, some produced as early as the nineteenth century, but focuses upon a large number of *huipiles* and other fabric arts from Maya weavers working today. Rotating exhibits of photographs, sculpture and painting centre on so-called ‘folk artists’ of Guatemala, some of whom are culturally Maya. The café and gift shop are popular places for tourists, and as one of the most popular museums in Guatemala, the Museo Ixchel receives thousands of visitors a year. One of the explicit aims of the Museo Ixchel is the preservation, promotion and documentation of traditional Maya weaving technology, and to that end weaving classes and demonstrations of the back strap loom are given, and a library of specialised literature on the Maya textile tradition is available to scholars. The Museo Ixchel also publishes books devoted to Maya textiles, such as the *Bibliography of Maya Textiles* (Randall 1993) and *The Maya of Guatemala: Their Life and Dress* (Peterson 1976).

The Ix Chel Tropical Research Foundation in Belize, better known as Ix Chel Farms, is a 35 acre private foundation and forest preserve in western Belize on which popular naprapathic healer Rosa Arvigo lives and cultivates medicinal plants. Dr Arvigo is best known as the author of *Sastun: My Apprenticeship with a Maya Healer* (1994) which chronicles her apprenticeship with Don Eligio Panti, a traditional Maya herbalist of Belize, but Arvigo has also written other popular books on herbal healing and sells a line of products based on Maya recipes called Rainforest Remedies. The remedies use a prominent popularised image of Ix Chel (Figure 2) on their label, and literature from the preserve says Ix Chel Farms is named in honour of the Mayan goddess of healing.

‘Dr Rosita’, as she is known, was a student of alternative healing and moved her family from Chicago to Belize in order to live in a country where herbal healing was culturally accepted. She soon heard of Don Eligio’s practice, and subsequently began a ten-year apprenticeship



Figure 2. Popularised Ixchel on label of rainforest remedies, produced at Ix Chel Farms, San Ignacio.

to the Maya healer that included instruction in traditional herbal and spiritual healing. In *Sastun*, Arvigo explains that Don Eligio introduced her to Ix Chel as the goddess of medicine during a herb gathering session, when he claimed it was easier to find herbs with a female companion because the goddess has her subjects show themselves to the female healer more readily (Arvigo 1994: 56). The lack of young people of Maya descent interested in traditional healing knowledge prompted Dr Rosita to found the Don Eligio Panti Medicinal Trail on her 35 acres, and she subsequently collaborated with scholars like Dr Michael J. Balick of the New York Botanical Gardens on the Belize Ethnobotany Project, and helped to

establish a series of training conferences for Belizean and foreign practitioners of natural or herbal healing (Balick & Cox 1996). Ix Chel Farms is open to the public and has become an important tourist attraction in the popular Cayo district of Belize.

The Cozumel-Playa del Carmen area along the so-called Mayan Riviera of Quintana Roo, Mexico, supports an escalating tourism industry based primarily upon marine or coastal diversions for foreign visitors. The scuba and snorkelling opportunities off Cozumel island are world renowned, and the comfortable coastal village of Playa del Carmen now sees thousands of cruise ship visitors on an almost daily basis who wander the main pedestrian walkways looking for souvenirs. Many commercial enterprises in the Playa-Cozumel area use the name Ixchel or other closely related appropriations of an imagined Maya-ness based in part on the actual prehistory of the area (Figure 3). The pricey Villas Ixchel on Cozumel is a bed and breakfast in a residential district in San Miguel, the main city on Cozumel, but also the point from which John Lloyd Stephens and Frederick Catherwood toured the ruins on the island in the nineteenth century (Stephens 1841). La Ruina campground and restaurant in Playa are popular spots located literally next door to a small Postclassic temple like the ones Spanish accounts describe as dedicated to the worship of idols of Ixchel.

Although the use of Ixchel and related iconography of Maya-ness for commercial purposes is overwhelming along the Riviera, a popularised icon of Ixchel is also the 'patron saint' and logo for the very large local tricycle taxi union of Playa, whose members are required to wear their union t-shirts to work. In this small beach town tricycle taxis remain the preferred means of transportation for locals, and the union established in the early 1980s claims thousands of members. In this case the iconography of Maya-ness is more closely bound to Maya people and presumably in some way to their identity as Maya, than to the touristic gaze.

Although separated by significant geographical and cultural differences, these three examples of the numerous uses of the Ixchel signifier share certain characteristics which



*Figure 3. Ixchel convenience store, Playa del Carmen.*

illuminate how archaeological knowledge about the past is consumed in the modern setting. All three locales represent a relatively modern use of the Ixchel icon, certainly post 1970. Each makes explicit claims to Maya-ness, including in some cases the preservation of, and education in, Maya cultural values. These claims are used to support institutional roles as cultural mediators or translators, and the prehistoric iconography of Ixchel is used to authenticate their position of legitimate cultural translator. One might even argue that while simultaneously using the Ixchel icon for authenticity, there is an invocation of Ixchel as exotic – a representation of Maya cultural values perceived as ‘lost’ in the ancient past, especially aspects of female power and knowledge that appeal to western desires (Ardren 2004).

### **Scholarly images of Ixchel**

Let us now review the scholarly discourse on Ixchel for evidence of how this image entered mainstream popular consciousness. A self-reflexive history of knowledge production and consumption will also illuminate the interpretive gap between popular and scholarly understandings of Ixchel. The history of scholarship on Ixchel is intimately connected to the exploration of the Caribbean coast of Quintana Roo and especially the island of Cozumel. The earliest contact between Maya people and Spanish invaders occurred in this corner of the world, and a flourishing religious practice dedicated to ‘aixchel’ or ‘yschel’ is briefly reported by Spanish travellers from each of the earliest voyages in 1517, 1518 and

1519 (Roys *et al.* 1940). Worship of Ixchel persisted until at least 1579 when Diego de Contreras Duran, the *encomendero* of Cozumel, recorded the practice this way:

*'And of the island of Cozumel . . . all the Indians of this land commonly went to the said island to worship a certain idol . . . And this idol was named "yschel", and by this name they called this idol. And the Indians were not able to inform me what "yschel" meant nor why they gave it that name.'* (Diego de Contreras Duran in Roys *et al.* 1940: 5)

Worship of Ixchel perhaps continued into the early seventeenth century when Lopez de Cogolludo wrote his *Historia de Yucatan*, although it is certain that Cogolludo read earlier sources. In 1841, when John Lloyd Stephens and Frederick Catherwood visited the ruins of San Miguel on Cozumel, they found the island abandoned, and the resident population of Cozumel apparently suffered tremendous decline during the seventeenth century along with the rest of Yucatan.

None of the Spanish accounts mentioned above was particularly accessible to the general intellectual community until after the late nineteenth century when Bishop Diego de Landa's *Relación de las cosas de Yucatán* was published for the first time (Restall & Chuchiak 2002). Written in part in the 1560s while he awaited trial for an overly aggressive campaign of extirpation in Yucatan, the *Relación* is a curious assemblage of recollections and observations meant to vindicate Landa in the eyes of the church. Although of dubious authorship, the *Relación* has come to be used as a key ethnohistorical source on early contact Maya culture and spurred many scholars to examine Colonial documents for evidence of pre-contact Maya culture (Restall & Chuchiak 2002). Landa described many Maya gods and goddesses; relevant to this study he says:

*'So many idols did they have that their gods did not suffice them, there being no animal or reptile of which they did not make images, and these in the form of gods and goddesses . . . at the time of accouchement they went to their sorceresses, who made them believe all sorts of lies, and also put under their couch the image of an evil spirit called Ixchel, whom they call the goddess of childbirth . . . there were many who in times of lesser troubles, labors or sickness, hung themselves to escape and go to that paradise, to which they were thought to be carried by the goddess of the scaffold whom they called Ixtab.'* (Gates' translation of Landa 1978: 47, 56, 58)

Notably none of the early sources indicates that Ixchel was a moon goddess, but rather confirm her role as patroness of childbirth and healing.

Following upon the popularity of Stephens and Catherwood's travel accounts, many late nineteenth–early twentieth century scholars such as Daniel G. Brinton attempted a reconstruction of indigenous religious practice from ethnohistoric accounts and newly published iconography (Brinton 1896). Ralph Roys added to this intellectual trajectory with his publication of previously obscure native language documents such as the late Colonial *Chilam Balam of Chumayel* (Roys 1933) (in which Cozumel is described as a centre of pilgrimage) and his synthesis of earlier ethnohistoric sources, *The Political Geography of Yucatan* (1957). But ultimately it was two publications by the eminent Mayanist, Sir J. Eric S. Thompson, that most directly influenced the elevation of Ixchel from one of

many deities in the ethnohistoric documents to the well-known and popular Maya Moon Goddess.

An entire chapter is dedicated to the influence of Thompson upon the early history of Maya hieroglyphic and iconographic decipherment in Michael D. Coe's *Breaking the Maya Code* (1992). Regarded in his era (and today) as an intellectual powerhouse, Thompson was both a prehistorian and an ethnographer, and spent many years working in Belize where he made close friends within the Mopan Maya communities near Socotz. He held research positions at the Chicago Field Museum and the Carnegie Institution, finally retiring to his native England, and published well over 250 articles, monographs and notes on various aspects of Mesoamerican prehistory. While the influence of Thompson upon Mesoamerican studies was immense, his intellectual heritage is mixed. With Juan Martinez Hernandez, Thompson proposed a system for correlating Maya and Christian calendars that remains the standard today as does his classification system for glyphic elements. But Thompson's lifelong insistence that Maya hieroglyphic inscriptions did not represent a phonetic writing system is now completely disproved. Many scholars, like Coe, agree that while Thompson's influence upon Maya studies remains great, certain modern trends such as the advancement of phonetic decipherment only flourished after his death, given his force of personality and scholarly influence.

In 1939 Thompson published a study entitled 'The Moon Goddess in Middle America', a largely iconographic analysis of images from central Mexican and Maya codices, in which Thompson chose to illuminate iconography through the use of ethnographic analogy to the modern mythology of Middle America and the North American south-west. Thompson stated his conceptual model was that of Imperial Rome, where deities were absorbed due to contact between cultures and attributes of nature were both personified and later codified by clergy (Thompson 1939: 127). Also significant to an understanding of this study is the perception held by Thompson, following Edward Seler, that the Maya area was '*profoundly influenced by Mexican concepts even before the development of their specialised art and writing concepts*' (Thompson 1939: 127). Despite no mention in any of the Spanish or other ethnohistoric literature of an association between Ixchel and the moon, Thompson used a modern (c. 1940) Mopan Maya myth which describes the Moon as the wife of the Sun, as his basis for designating the deity described by Cogolludo and other Spaniards as the wife of the Sun and the patroness of weaving, to be the deified Moon. Thus the one Maya moon goddess was born. Likewise, Thompson made weak arguments for Xochiquetzal and Tlazolteotl-Toci being the two moon goddesses of central Mexico, and acknowledged his epistemological difficulty in the statement, '*thus the Mexicans obviously had confused ideas concerning the moon*' (Thompson 1939: 130).

Furthermore, Thompson conflated the various female deities from the Postclassic Maya codices or sacred almanacs, into variations of a single goddess. Although he acknowledged that there were older and younger female deities, Thompson interpreted the different glyphic phrases or names associated with the younger set as various titles for the same goddess, a deity he had already assumed to represent the moon. In discussion of the many different activities portrayed in the codices he concludes that the largely domestic activities in which codical goddesses were portrayed such as spinning, weaving, sending water from above, holding children and cohabitating with other deities all '*accord*



well with the exploits, functions, and character of the moon goddess' (Thompson 1939: 163).

His insistence on the conflation of Ixchel into the moon/weaving/healing goddess of Maya culture was repeated in the less academic but very popular *Maya History and Religion* (1970). This book is surely responsible for the penetration of Thompson's ideas about Ixchel as moon goddess into the mainstream popular consciousness, both in the English speaking world, but also importantly in the Spanish speaking world, where *Maya History and Religion* was one of the first popular paperbacks available on this topic and remains in print today in its tenth edition (Thompson 1997).

In addition to his universalising ideas about a single all powerful lunar goddess in ancient Maya culture, in *Maya History and Religion* Thompson choose to illustrate the moon goddess with a page from the Dresden codex that depicts the young goddess I, known today as 'Ixik Kab', an earth-related deity (Figure 4). The young goddess I is not typically named 'ix chel' or the related 'chak chel' in the hieroglyphic corpus, and probably represents not the younger version of the moon deity as Thompson hoped, but a separate earth and fertility goddess with some lunar aspects (Vail & Stone 2002). Because of the popularity and accessibility of Thompson's book, it is the young and voluptuous Ixik Kab who has been appropriated and reinvented in the popular imagination as 'Ixchel'.

Recent careful considerations of the iconography of Maya goddesses have set aside Thompson's notion of a single moon goddess in favour of strong evidence for at least two deities with moon-related attributes, as well as the recognition that in both Maya codices and highland Maya mythologies of the ethnographic period, the moon and the earth are closely associated with a number of male and female deities (Taube 1992; Brisko 1994; Milbrath 1999). While certainly less well known than Thompson's popular works, a parallel intellectual trend established the existence of multiple Maya goddesses as early as the turn of the twentieth century. This interpretation includes the younger female goddess known as Goddess I and named 'Ixik Kab' (lady earth) in the Dresden and Madrid codices who has earth, fertility and lunar aspects, and the aged Goddess O named 'Chak Chel' (red rainbow) in the codices who is the female half of the original creator couple (Seler 1904; Knorosov 1958; Kelley 1976; Coe 1977; Stone 1990; Taube 1992, 1994; Vail & Stone 2002)



Figure 4. *Ixik Kab*, from Dresden Codex. Illustration courtesy of Gabrielle Vail.

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(Figure 5). This older figure is most closely associated with all aspects of weaving and cloth production, but also with water, curing, divination and even destruction, and most closely corresponds to the deity known as Ixchel in the ethnohistoric literature (Vail & Stone 2002: 211). A distinctly aged version of the earth goddess Ixik Kab is also present in the codices, and is associated with weaving and bee-keeping activities.

Thompson's misidentification of Ixchel as the moon goddess was consistent with the intellectual trends in the time in which he worked – Ronald Hutton has shown that in



Figure 5. *Chac Chel*, from *Dresden Codex*. Illustration courtesy of Gabrielle Vail.

the 1800s the Romantic Movement in Europe and the United States searched for the divine feminine as an antidote to the growing industrialisation of Europe (Hutton 1997). In writings of the early 1800s the divine feminine was seen as personified by either the moon or the green earth, and by the late 1880s, the idea of a single idealised, all powerful goddess worshipped by prehistoric cultures was a well-accepted idea within archaeological circles. In 1901 Sir Arthur Evans (a contemporary of New World scholar Daniel G. Brinton) published his analysis of figurines from Knossos in which he associated them directly with a mother goddess of Babylonia and, by 1921, Evans was convinced they were evidence for a Great Goddess who encompassed elements of the earth and moon (Evans 1921: 45-52). Similar interpretations of archaeological materials as evidence for a unifying faith in a single great goddess were written by English intellectuals between 1940-1960, such as Jacquetta and Christopher Hawkes, Gordon Childe, Graham Clark and O.G.S. Crawford, all contemporaries of Thompson during his

retirement in England and subsequent induction as a Fellow of the British Academy (Hutton 1997: 96; C. Hawkes 1940; J. Hawkes 1945; Childe 1954; Crawford 1957; Daniel 1958).

Archaeological evidence for religious practice dedicated to Ixchel is similarly ambiguous. The dense prehistoric settlement of Cozumel, where over 30 distinct sites have been identified, has not yielded specific evidence of ritual activities, although generations of archaeologists have used the ethnohistoric documents described above to interpret the large number of temples on Cozumel as evidence that the island was the seat of a cult dedicated to Ixchel (Sabloff 1977; Freidel & Sabloff 1984; Ramírez & Azcárate 2002; Sabloff 2002; etc.). Distinctive features of this settlement are the isolated shrines located along the eastern coast of the island, which, although they have yielded very little artefactual data to confirm or deny a religious function, are interpreted as pilgrimage shrines and



defensive outposts as mentioned in early Spanish accounts. The largest site on the island, San Gervasio, has long been identified as the commercial hub of the extensive Postclassic trade network through which the Cozumeleños were linked to other coastal trading centres throughout Mesoamerica. In addition to a market area and extensive residential zones, San Gervasio is described in the archaeological literature as the seat of the main shrine to Ixchel. The Harvard–Arizona Project identified structure C22-41-a, a complex tandem plan structure with a prominent central altar on which an idol of the deity could have been visible to pilgrims climbing the 4m pyramid, as the structure most similar to Spanish accounts of Ixchel worship written by Gomara and others (Freidel & Sabloff 1984: 64). This identification was based on architectural design, and not on the presence of an actual ceramic or wood idol, the remains of offerings or other artefactual debris. Such ritual debris is rare at prehistoric Maya temples, and the absence of evidence for ritualised practice certainly does not negate the hypothesis offered by Freidel and others, but archaeological evidence for the worship of Ixchel, especially as the pre-eminent Postclassic Maya moon goddess, remains slight, despite decades of research on the island (Lothrop 1924; Sanders 1960; Freidel & Sabloff 1984; Robles Castellanos 1986; Sierra Sosa 1994; Ramírez & Azcárate 2002).

### **Issues surrounding the re-invention of the past**

Thus an interpretive gap exists between the current scholarly perception of the existence of a multiplicity of ancient Maya deities with moon and weaving associations and the popular conception of a single Maya deity of healing, weaving and the moon, named Ixchel. We have seen that the gap was caused in large part by the wide distribution of an incomplete or simplified representation of Classic Maya religion, but the western public's willingness or need for compartmentalised prehistoric deities that correspond in some way to those of the Classical Mediterranean is also an obvious factor. These issues are reinforced by the current use of Ixchel as a modern representation or convention of pre-contact Maya female power, in such places as the Ix Chel Farms and Museo Ixchel, but also in less visible locations. At Ixchel, a Women's Development Center in rural Guatemala, a sustainable agroforestry programme aimed at education and empowerment of Guatemalan Maya women draws upon the name Ixchel in order to 'rescue and support an ancient cosmovision'. At Ixchel Restaurant in Mexico City, an upscale crowd enjoys pasta dishes in an historic building where the Ixchel signifier is used to accentuate an imagined 'Mexican-ness' comprised of exotic indigenous influence and modern buying power. These are only two appropriations of the prehistoric icon (among many) in which very different motivations serve to perpetuate the reinvention of Maya-ness along modern agendas.

Stephanie Moser recently argued that it is dangerous for archaeologists to assume we are the only people to create meaning out of the past (Moser 2001: 281). Post-processualism has taken care to demonstrate that archaeological knowledge generated by academics is produced in historically contingent ways, but more importantly for this analysis, such knowledge is also consumed (much as any text is read) in diverse ways by various interested sectors – the meaning drawn by an academic from a field report is not equivalent to the meaning drawn from the same text by a member of the public. This observation has long been acknowledged, and although the production and consumption of archaeological

knowledge within the academy has been the subject of recent study, few attempts have been made to follow and analyse how archaeological knowledge is consumed by non-academic communities. A perception that such arenas are less important is not sustainable when one acknowledges that visualisations about the past, especially visualisations within popular media, directly and deliberately blur the boundaries about how one knows the past. In the examples analysed here, the popular or commercial appropriation of the icon of Ixchel has become an unavoidable way for many tourists and local inhabitants of the Maya region to know the past. In this case, the introduction of tourists to Maya prehistory is not via scholarly discourse but popular representation and reinterpretation, an especially powerful means by which to experience a reconstructed 'past' (Moser 1998).

Scholarly inquiry is not immune from the influence of such popular reconstructions, just as scholars are not divorced from popular culture – reinvented versions of the past shape academic research by affecting scholars and those who fund or consume the products of scholarly discourse, ultimately colouring the lens through which everyone sees the past (Castañeda 1996). A study by Sandra Cypess documented how scholarship on the historic person of the contact period known as 'Malinche' evolved from the depiction of her as an important elite woman within the Cortez expedition during the early colonial period, to a traitor to the Mexican people during the nineteenth century, to a modern symbol of Chicana identity and power today, largely due to shifts in political consciousness (Cypess 1991).

Thompson's portrayal of a single Maya moon goddess as one of the major figures of ancient Maya cosmology has been uncritically adopted by later scholars within the fields of archaeology and art history but also by historians and scholars of religious studies who are less qualified to evaluate Thompson's intellectual biases and the recent progress made in hieroglyphic decipherment. A large body of scholarly secondary literature employs the concept of a single pre-eminent moon goddess of ancient Maya culture, further cementing the misperception published first by Thompson, but also adding intellectual legitimacy to this modern reconstruction. Historian Pete Sigal's *From Moon Goddesses to Virgins: The Colonization of Yucatecan Maya Sexual Desire* is a perfect example; in the course of conducting an important analysis of changing ideas towards sexuality in early Colonial Yucatan, Sigal accepts the pre-contact existence of a single moon goddess wholeheartedly, and proceeds to utilise this deity as a metaphor for pre-contact Maya notions of female sexual roles (Sigal 2000). In *The Cosmos of the Yucatec Maya*, art historian Meredith Paxton continues to conflate the young goddess I, 'Ixik Kab' and the older deity of the moon, 'Chak Chel' based on a single example where the young goddess is named with the older goddess' glyph (Paxton 2001). Despite many examples in the codices and ethnohistorical literature of a multiplicity of female deities, the intellectual urge to meld them into a single all powerful goddess is still very much alive.

As archaeological knowledge of the 'Neolithic Great Goddess' is consumed and appropriated by the feminist theological community, archaeological knowledge of ancient Maya culture is actively deployed in modern ethnic claims and identity politics. As Lynn Meskell observed in a critical evaluation of scholarship on the 'Great Goddess', '*archaeologists often function as external judges of what is meaningful in other cultures*' when claims of scientific legitimacy are employed to justify a re-imagined past (Meskell 1995: 75). The

interface between academic scholarship and popular movements is a particularly sensitive one, an arena in which intellectual agendas must be made explicit and misrepresentations of the past exposed as much as possible. Certainly the use of a modern image of Ixchel as a logo for a Mexican tricycle taxi union or Maya women's weaving cooperative is a fully legitimate deployment of iconography in service to modern identity issues. As Joan Townsend has said about modern scholarship on goddesses, '*the argument is not with the myth and use of the myth . . . but with the tendency of some to treat the myth as historical fact*' (Townsend 1990: 182).

## Conclusions

The modern appropriation and mobilisation of Ixchel as a symbol of Maya-ness takes a bewildering array of forms. Spanish citations of 'yschel' provided a template on which early scholars projected western notions of female roles and reproductive capacities. Modern revitalisation movements have utilised these imaginations as a way to empower Maya ethnic identity and authenticate their roles as cultural mediators. Simultaneously, western imaginations of Ixchel were appropriated by commercial enterprises as a satisfyingly exotic representation of Maya-ness, a conflation of female sexuality and traditional gender roles comprehensible to foreign tourists. Popular representations of Ixchel now far outnumber academic decipherments of her prehistoric record, and thus the production of meaning about this particular aspect of the ancient past is contested and has shifted largely out of the hands of anthropologists or archaeologists and into the less predictable arena of public imagination. Situated in this locus of power, the icon of Ixchel need not bear any strong association to actual archaeological data, but only to the popular imagination of an archaeological past. An investigation into why one particular contact period Maya deity has become so deeply entrenched in popular consciousness does little to diminish the presence of that icon in common parlance of the past, but it does illuminate the ways in which popular imaginations are drawn only in part from academic scholarship and why archaeologists must acknowledge their role in myth-making, no matter how complicated that may be.

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