Pre-Hispanic Mesoamerica, a world or cultural region that stretched from the southern limits of the deserts of north Mexico down through much of what is now Central America, was a mosaic landscape that was highly differentiated by rugged mountains, wide, flat valleys, and coastal lowlands. Linguistically and culturally, this world also was characterized by diversity, with scores of languages spoken and many different local and regional traditions. Over the 15 or so millennia between the region’s first human inhabitants and Spanish invasion (ca. 1520 CE), political boundaries, economic networks, and spheres of interaction shifted markedly across time and geographic space. This pre-Hispanic world was never entirely unified politically.

Central places and urban settlements in pre-Hispanic Mesoamerica also rose and fell over time (e.g., Feinman and Carballo 2018). Despite the rough terrain, geographically restricted opportunities for water-borne transport, absence of effective beasts of burden, and lack of wheeled vehicles, pre-Hispanic Mesoamerican peoples, as a whole, shared certain key cosmological elements and belief systems. From group to group and one temporal phase to another, pre-Hispanic Mesoamerican cosmologies were by no means entirely uniform or static, and this variability underpinned differences in practice. Nonetheless, fundamental tenets of worldview were widely held.

For example, the pre-Hispanic Mesoamerican universe was divided into three general realms or levels—a celestial space or overworld, the earthly level or middleworld, and the underworld or “place of the dead” (Carrasco 1990, 51). The conception of these tiered realms should not be equated with Judeo-Christian concepts of heaven and hell. In Mesoamerica, each tier of the universe was associated with different conditions and even animals. In each domain, time and events passed at their own tempos. Across Mesoamerica, dogs were viewed as companions who could lead the dead to the underworld. Representations of dogs, such as the West Mexican ceramic canine in the exhibition, or sacrificed dogs frequently accompanied the dead at interment.

In pre-Hispanic Mesoamerica, movement across these tiered levels of the universe was believed possible for humans, the dead, and supernatural forces, often along some kind of axis mundi, like the trunk of a great tree, that stretched vertically through these tiered domains. Passage from one horizontal realm to others also was seen as possible through caves, fire, sunlight, or the center points of architectural ballcourts where rubber ballgames were played (Carrasco 1990, 52–53). Pre-Hispanic Mesoamerican ballgames were not played with precisely the same rules, or the same accompaniments. Although many ballplayers may have worn padded yokes of leather or rubber around their waists to protect their torso and propel the heavy rubber ball that was used in the game, stone yokes, such as the one exhibited, were limited to the Classic period (500–900 CE) along the Gulf Coast (Veracruz State). Stone yokes (Figure 3.5) were too heavy to wear during the game and likely served as ceremonial emblems or were incorporated into ritual events. Despite differences in the form of the court and the associated artifacts, the game always had a tie to life, death, and a portal between realms of the universe.

In pre-Hispanic Mesoamerican belief systems, death was closely connected to the world of the living. Life and death were conceived to be part of a dynamic and complementary opposition. Pre-Hispanic Mesoamerican thought recognized that the maintenance of the cosmos required both supernatural action and nourishment provided by humans through offerings and other ritual practices (Figures 3.6–3.9). Bloodletting, death, and sacrifice were seen as necessary aspects of life to maintain cosmic order. Furthermore, deceased ancestors had a powerful impact on the living. Not only could they send malevolent forces and disease if not treated properly, but they served as conduits between the living and the supernatural world (Miller and Taube 1993, 74).

Thus, in pre-Hispanic Mesoamerica, the deceased remained social actors. The biological dead continued to be socially alive. For example, in certain representations, they were shown to dance at weddings or bear witness to successions of leadership. The death of an individual began a process of rebirth and renewal in which the deceased was seen as instrumental to what befalls the living (Fitzsimmons 2012, 776–77).

Maize was a key staple crop of most pre-Hispanic Mesoamerican peoples, and the plant’s agricultural cycle, from seed to cob to stalk, served as a metaphor for human life and death (Miller and Taube 1993, 28–32). Humans were viewed analogously to maize and other plants grown on the surface of the Earth, born to perish, serving a role on Earth, but also embodying the seed of regeneration (like the corn kernel that gives rise to the next generation crop). This metaphor, portrayed in distinct ways, was a persistent theme in pre-Hispanic Mesoamerican artistic representations.

Pre-Hispanic Mesoamerican conceptions of life, death, sacrifice, and renewal foster traditions that remain alive today. The active role of ancestors in the world of the living undoubtedly is part of the traditional legacy for contemporary rituals associated with the Day of the Dead. Likewise, Mesoamerican farmers let drops of their own or animal blood and spill alcohol in their nascent maize fields as a sacrifice to the Earth and
supernatural world when planting to ensure a fertile harvest.

References

Figure 3.7. Colima dog, likely from a funerary context, front view (FM 95615).
Figure 3.8. Classic-period Zapotec (Oaxaca, Mexico) effigy vessel (FM 51884), generally recovered from funerary contexts.
In Haiti, ritual flags known as drapo serve as a primary sacred art tradition of Vodou (Figures 3.1–3.3), and many feature spirits of the dead. Drapo derive from a blended tradition of European military banners and West African processional tapestries of ritual and warfare. Early Haitian drapo may have simply included different colored fabric sewn together, but beginning in the mid-twentieth century, factory textile workers collected discarded beads and sequins and began incorporating them in innovative new styles of flagmaking (Girouard 1995; Polk 1997). Ritualistically speaking, drapo play a central role within Vodou communities as emblems of a temple's protective patron lwa, and when processed around a temple's sacred center post (the potomitan), their sequins capture the essence of spirits in motion. As ceremonial tapestries, drapo energize the spirits into action, dancing to welcome newly made initiates to a spiritual family and carried as mystic banners to honor the spirits in sacred outdoor processions. This is strikingly similar to the way the ancient Moche ancestors from northern Peru were represented dancing, celebrating, and even copulating for the successful passage of the deceased into the world of the dead (see Muro Ynoñán in this volume, on Moche death and sex). Today's drapo often portray vèvè, sacred symbols unique to each lwa, or artistic interpretations of the spirits in the Vodou pantheon. Perhaps due in part to the harsh realities of life and death in Haiti, the Gede family of spirits are frequently portrayed in drapo.

Gede spirits typically manifest in Vodou ceremony through ritual mountings as powerful yet playful spirits with great wisdom and healing abilities; they tell bawdy jokes and tease uptight devotees about all manners of procreation but as arbiters of life and death, they never tell a lie. In drapo such as those by Haitian artist Ronald Edmond, the Gede are portrayed in their signature top hats, black, white, and purple attire, wearing sunglasses to see simultaneously into visible and invisible worlds, and are often depicted dancing lasciviously to bring in new life. Grann Brijit, the Queen of the Gedes, may be portrayed with a headscarf, broad-rimmed hat, pipe, and sacred liquor offerings in the cemetery. The Gede can also be represented as skeletons performing everyday actions, resembling the pantheon of Mexico’s own vibrant mortuary art traditions of animated skeletons (see Amat in this volume). Spirits of the dead are ceremonially honored in Haiti on November 1 and 2 for All Saints’ Day and All Souls Day, recognized as feast days for the Gede spirit family and all ancestors (zansêt yo). The skeletal Gede portraits very much parallel Mexican ancestors and skeletons honored in Día de los Muertos (Day of the Dead) festivities, some of whom have even taken on sacred personas in a skeleton pantheon such as the well-known La Catrina. Ultimately, Haiti’s Gede spirits remind devotees to live their lives meaningfully and with vitality, maintaining a sense of humor in facing the precarious nature of death.

**Soul Journeys and the Multi-Soul Complex**

A common philosophical quandary in Western society unfolds in considering what happens to the soul when someone transitions in death. In many West African and African Diaspora traditions, this query becomes exponentially more complex with the introduction of the multi-soul complex: the common Africana philosophy that each person possesses multiple souls. In several West African cosmologies, certain soul-selves are embodied in the physical body itself such as the Yorùbá orī odé of southwestern Nigeria and Kongo nítu of northwestern Angola and western Congos (Daniels 2022). Other souls are immaterial, such as the Igbo chi (southeastern Nigeria), Akán kra, Yorùbá orí inú, and Kongo kini, which all manifest a person’s cosmic double in the invisible realm of spirits. In certain contexts, the soul is regarded as a divine breath as in the Fon sè mèdo (southern Benin), Yorùbá èmí, Akán honhom, and Kongo vîmûnu. In all of these regions, this divine breath comprises an aspect of one’s selfhood and is eventually extinguished in death (Daniels 2022). Further, the Akán honhom and Yorùbá orí inú souls have the power to fly, and upon one’s death they transform into bird-like creatures as a person makes their way to the spiritual realm (Ogunnaike 2012). At times, the soul makes its own way to the ancestral world upon someone’s transition to the afterlife, while in other communities, specific rituals such as the smashing of clay pots occurs to release the soul from its human shell. The notion of a fractal or divisible soul that partitions, travels, and transits from one entity to another, either human or nonhuman, is interestingly present in Andean pre-Columbian societies, suggesting some shared notions about the soul(s) and personhood among Indigenous American and African societies (see Williams and also Muro Ynoñán in this volume, on Inca and Moche death rituals, respectively). Consistently across Black Atlantic religious communities however, death liberates the soul(s), and an individual’s personhood as it was once known ceases to exist.

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Figure 3.9. Incense burner from the pre-Hispanic valley of Oaxaca (FM 191593).
The Inca rite of *capac hucha*, the “royal obligation,” brings into question the fundamental aspects of death in society. It involves the offering of young children as sacrifices to important sacred entities in the Inca world. It is, in many ways, the sacrifice of the future potential of humanity. The *capac hucha* is not a moment in time, however, as it involves an extensive process of transformation. Those chosen for the ritual of *capac hucha* may have been removed from their home months or a year or more before their biological deaths in many cases. And they were conceived of as intermediaries to the ancestral deities. The Inca empire prepared for these cases well in advance. Some of the young women may have been taken into service as *aqllakuna* (chosen women) and destined for this rite. Other girls and boys were chosen from communities throughout the empire. While often the sacred entities to whom they were sacrificed were lofty mountain peaks, in at least one case it was a sacred island in the Pacific Ocean.

In 1892, George Dorsey, future curator at the Field Museum, conducted excavations on the Isla de la Plata off the coast of Ecuador for the World Columbian Exposition. On a triangular point of land between two ravines, at 16 feet below the surface, the excavations revealed the remains of two poorly preserved skeletons and numerous grave offerings (Dorsey 1901). Based on the grave offerings, we presume these were the remains of two young women, although their bodies were not collected nor identified on site. The excavations revealed many ceramics and stone sculptures of the local Chorrera culture and the remains of a sacred Inca child sacrifice, the *capac hucha* (McEwan and Silva 2000).

The grave offerings accompanying the two individuals included five female figurines (three of gold, one of silver, and one of bronze), six *tupu* pins (used to fasten a woman’s shawl), and several Inca ceramic vessels which were made in the Inca capital of Cusco, over 1000 miles to the south (Bray et al. 2005) (Figure 3.10). This assemblage of grave offerings is characteristic of the *capac hucha*, a rite of sacrifice that took place on important occasions in the Inca empire. Such occasions may have been on the coronation or death of the emperor, the birth of a royal heir, a great victory in battle, or in response to a natural disaster. The ceremony did not always involve human sacrifice, which was reserved for the most powerful sacred places, often the peaks of great mountains, or *apu*.

According to early Spanish accounts, a *capac hucha* ceremony was preceded by a call to all the provinces of the empire to send as tribute boys and girls between the ages of four and ten years old. Some were required to be children of local lords, and all were to be examples of physical perfection. In some cases, the children were paired as male/female couples and buried as a pair. The children and visiting dignitaries that accompanied them participated in ceremonial feasts, performances, and ritual events for days or weeks in Cusco. At the designated time, the children and their attendants would begin the journey to the sacred places of sacrifice, sometimes hundreds of miles away, dressed in fine clothes and with the various precious offerings to the *huaca* (sacred entity). Their physical cause of death may have been exposure in the cold mountain air, a blow to the head as they sat in their tomb, strangulation, or intoxication to the point of death. In all cases, the integrity of the body was critical to the ritual.

The examples of *capac hucha* told in early historical accounts illustrate diverse origins and interment locales for these children. A young girl named Tanta Carhua was buried alive at a *huaca* in her homeland in the central highlands of Peru after returning from the ceremonies held in Cusco. Another, named Cauri Paccsa, from the northern highlands of Peru, was sacrificed in Chile (Hernández Principe in Bray et al. 2005). Archaeological research on the bodies of children from the Llullailaco *capac hucha* burial in Argentina show they consumed coca and large amounts of alcohol in the month before their interment; intoxication may have opened paths to the spiritual realm in Inca beliefs (Wilson et al. 2013).

The *capac hucha* demonstrates that death is not a single moment in Inca conception. The moment the children are chosen for the *capac hucha*, they begin a process of transformation. The Jesuit priest Bernabe Cobo indicates that parents obliged to give up their children were not allowed to express any sadness, but rather gestures of happiness that the honor was a great reward were required (Wilson et al. 2013). The moment of transfer from their previous social existence to an Inca offering represented a fundamental transformation in their being. As they left their village, never to return again, they left their social world forever. Their social death preceded by months their physical interment on a mountain summit or in an island tomb.

The days or weeks of ceremonies in Cusco represented the transformation of the children from earthly beings to offerings to the sacred. The moment of biological death, be it through physical violence at the site of their interment, or intoxication and hypothermia that led to the ceasing of their heart and brain to function, was not a clear break either. In fact, the physical preservation of their bodies, surrounded by the precious offerings that made them sacred, was likely intended for them to serve as conduits to the *apu* and the sacred realm. In a spiritual sense, it is unclear if they may continue to exist in a spiritual cognizance with the *huaca* in which they were interred.

We cannot know how these children felt about their sacrifice on the mountain summits and in the island grave.