

Maize and Native American Cultures

Many of the great American civilizations were based on maize agriculture. The Aztec, Mayan, Anasazi, and Mississippian cultures all relied upon corn to sustain their people.

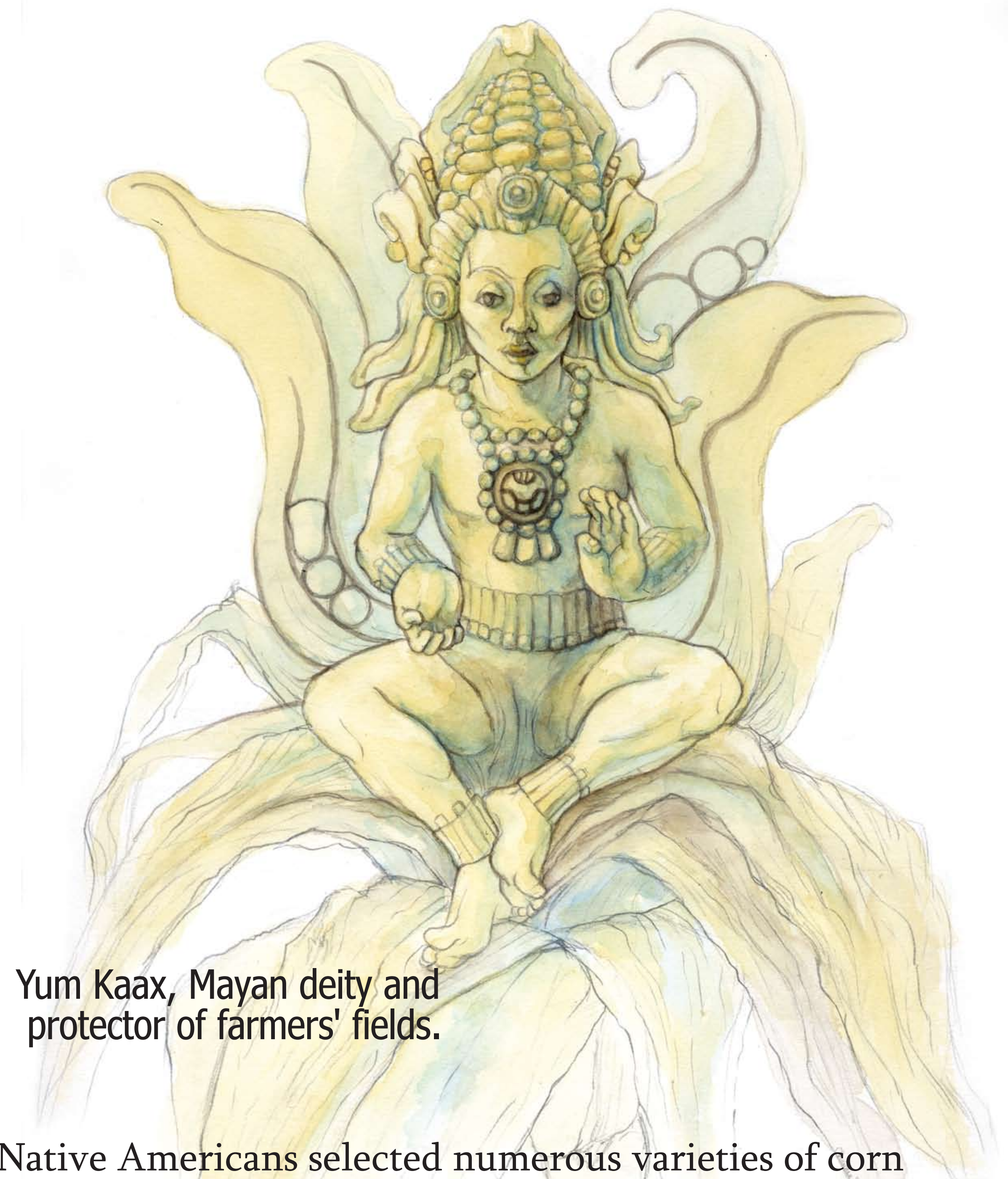
Native American religions included maize gods. One of the oldest is an unnamed god of the Olmecs (1200 BCE) depicted with corn growing out of a cleft in his head. The Aztec god Centeotl and goddess Chicomecoatl ensured the success of the maize harvest. The Maya god that protected farmers' fields was Yum Kaax. Maize and the maize gods were symbols of life itself for Native Americans.



Two girls in the Village Santa Domingo de Albarradas in the State of Oaxaco, Mexico shelling kernels from the cobs of a blue-black maize called Bolita. This maize is a traditional variety used for tortillas and special drinks called Tejate and Atole.



Corn, beans, and squash are called the three sisters.



Yum Kaax, Mayan deity and protector of farmers' fields.

Native Americans selected numerous varieties of corn for culinary and ceremonial uses. Among the Hopi, blue corn is deemed a gift from the gods, and is used to make Piki bread. This thin, flat bread is baked by women and girls and is traditionally used by Hopi women to propose marriage to a man.

Typically, Native Americans cultivated a trio of crops in a single field. Corn, beans, and squash, called the three sisters, complemented each other nutritionally and ecologically. Nutritionally, the three crops provide all the essential amino acids needed for a balanced human diet. Ecologically, beans, through the nitrogen-fixing bacteria in their roots, provide nitrogen fertilizer to corn and squash. The tall stalks of corn provide a trellis for beans vines, so they can grow upward and capture more sunlight. Squash vines cover the ground between corn plants and shade out weeds.

