

Bacabs

Maya tradition

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Adapted by Fishtank Staff

Wardens of the sky: four pillars, four colors, four Bacabs.	They never tire, they never die. They are the healers: they keep the rites.
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Before time began, there was Itzamna. He was the universe, and within him all things existed: white and black, good and bad, woman and man, stone and water. One day, Itzamna noticed a woman weaving the hems of the cosmos. She was beautiful to his eyes, so he called her to him. Her name was Ix Chebel Yax. She wore snakes as a headdress and loved color and beauty. With a soft brush, at the edge of space and time, she had painted red the clay she loved, the leaves of some trees, and the crest of the woodpecker.

In those distant days, the thirteen levels of heaven creaked and groaned, threatening to collapse upon the heads of all living beings.

Itzamna and Ix Chebel Yax, universe and weaver, husband and wife, looked each other in the eyes, worried. He said:

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"My wife, as creators, our duty is to endow the world with what it lacks."

"You speak of the weight of the heavens?" she asked.

"Indeed. I had a dream, perhaps a vision, in which I saw the sky fall upon the earth. We must provide the heavens with supports. I thought about the trees, but none grows high enough to reach from its roots to the clouds."

"Leave it to me," said Ix Chebel Yax. "I am a diligent weaver. Besides, I am your wife."

As she left to craft a solution, Itzamna crossed his arms and bowed his head, seeking to rest at the edge of a cenote. At that moment, a piece of heaven fell at his feet, disturbing his peace.

A few days later, Ix Chebel Yax informed her resplendent husband that they now had four sons. She had borne them all at one time: that was how things were done during the age of the gods.

"They are called Bacabs," said Ix Chebel Yax to Itzamna, "each one a different color. They are the product of my hard work and of your concern for the welfare of all living things. They are already prepared to shoulder the weight of heaven. They will stand forever at the four corners of the world, keeping the vault of the sky aloft. The red Bacab, Kantziknal, will guard the East; the

white one, Saksini, the North; the yellow one, Hobnil, the South; and the black one, Hosanek, the West."

Itzamna gave each of the Bacabs a huge ceiba tree to lean upon should they feel fatigue. But it was not necessary, since they had inherited the diligence of their weaver mother. They never tired—though their muscles were tense and their eyes fixed, unblinking—of fulfilling their task of holding up the sky.

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At first, the Bacabs were visible to human beings, since women and men were dedicated to understanding the world and always in need of cures for their hunger and thirst, their worries and their illnesses. People of those early ages asked the Bacabs for advice, and the gods answered willingly, without ceasing to support the sky. They smiled sweetly when they revealed what plant or root could treat some disease.

Over the centuries, the Bacabs became covered with foliage and earth, with clouds and dust storms, until their beautiful faces were no longer visible. However, their teachings became rituals, and their words of healing and consolation were engraved in stone using the beautiful glyphs invented by their father, Itzamna, who also was the universe.