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The Meaning of Maya Myths

Aleksandar Bošković

Abstract. – The article deals with the hypotheses and approaches in the study of Mesoamerican religions, focusing on the Maya tradition. Maya myths are examined and compared to other traditions of this part of the world, with the particular stress on the cosmological aspects of the Hunahpu's and Xbalanque's descent in the Underworld. The author also examines some of the evidence on the Maya moon goddess, as well as concepts of fantastic mythological creature(s) uniting in itself the fundamental opposites. – It is suggested that the area of influence of Maya moon goddess is much wider than generally considered; it also seems that the concepts of deities like Itzamná and Kukulcán arose from the biologically impossible creatures that were represented in the "Izapan" or "proto-Maya" culture. [*Mesoamerican religions, Maya tradition, myths*]

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Each thing was made silent,
Each thing was made calm,
Was made invisible,
Was made to rest in heaven.
(Edmonson 1971: 9–10; lines 125–128)

Understanding Maya myths is of supreme importance for comprehending their religion – more precisely, a variety of cults¹, rituals, and beliefs that form their "part" in Mesoamerican religions. This complex is very specific because of the great number of common beliefs and similar rituals, as well as numerous deities that have common traits in different civilizations: from the Olmec and Teotihuacán to the Zapotec, Toltec, Mixtec, and Aztec. In this universe of extraordinary cultures the Maya have a very important place.

However, each study of their religion is rendered much more difficult by the lack of the sources; on the other hand, the little we know comes mostly from the Postclassic period (ca. 10th–16th century CE), and the question about the extent of continuity of the Classic and Postclassic is still open (cf., for example, Edmonson 1979:

157–166). What survived are stelae, lintels, reliefs, bas-reliefs, and figurines and sculptures on one side – and ceramics and oral tradition on the other, with few manuscripts written down during the colonial period, of which "Popol Vuh" is the most important for the subject of this paper. The trails of ancient beliefs could be found even in very "Christian" ceremonies of the present-day Maya, as noted by Thomas Gann (1918: 40): "Nominally, they are Christians, but the longer one lives among them, and the better one gets to know them, the more he realizes that Christianity is to a great extent merely a thin veneer, and that fundamentally their religious conceptions and even their ritual and ceremonies are survivals – degenerate, much changed, and with most of their significance lost – but still survivals of those of their ancestors of pre-Columbian days."

Having in mind all these obstacles, it is no wonder that there are only a few useful studies of Maya religion. But it is in the last 15 years that we are witnessing the gradual accumulation of knowledge on different aspects of their culture, including religion. If we turn to mythology, a very important break has been made by the decipherment of most Mayan hieroglyphs, study of ceramics found in the dignitaries' tombs² started by Michael D. Coe, great progress made in the study of art and iconography, and works that point to the legacy of ancient beliefs in the present-day communities (and among the people who greatly contributed in this part is Dennis Tedlock with his new edition of "Popol Vuh"). There has been a lot of dispute about the

1 For the definition of cult which is in my opinion especially valid for the religious complexes of this part of the world, I refer to Brundage (1985: 4 ff.). He stresses that "Failure in it [cult – A. B.] leads to the disorientation of the group and the unpinning of its value systems."

2 Although this is not a very precise term, since "dignitaries" could have been from the first five groups listed by Hammond (1982: 197) in his general account on the social structure of Maya society.

methodological approach in the study of iconography, which directly influences the study of religion and myths; on the one hand, there is so-called “direct historical approach,” based on the comparative study of other Mesoamerican civilizations (most of all, the Aztec), as well as on modern ethnological research – this approach was accepted by many of the leading authorities in Maya studies today (Gordon R. Willey, M. D. Coe, etc.), and I think that its best presentation and defense against the critics was that of Henry B. Nicholson (1976: 157–175). On the other side is intrinsic configurational iconographic analysis proposed by George Kubler (cf. 1972) – accepted by many European scholars and students, and recently developed by Nicholas M. Hellmuth in his brilliant study of Early Classic iconography, where he proposes the so-called “Mayan model” for the study of ancient Maya culture in its various forms.

But the subject of this article is the meaning of Maya myths, especially regarding customs and beliefs of other Mesoamerican peoples, and the fact that about some of them we know much more (those from the Valley of Mexico in the first place). I prefer to call this a comparative approach, which does not mean that I take data from other cultures to interpret Maya myths – my only interest is in comparing them, because certain “types” or “models” are encountered in different traditions (which doesn’t mean that they were “carried” by someone from culture to culture), suggesting the similar models of the manifestations of the sacred. It will become obvious that in some cases we deal with patterns characteristic for this part of the world, while in others Maya tradition keeps a sort of “exclusiveness.” I must note that I use the word myth to denote a traditional tale, the one aiming at symbolic explanation of the world around us and the paradoxical ambiguity of human existence, as well as at the justification of the present hierarchy and social order (among gods or men). We do not deal with some sort of “pre-scientific” or “proto-scientific” thinking – the point is that everything important and fascinating was to be explained through the mythic thinking as the adequate sphere of symbolic expression. It excludes bivalent logic and many other relations familiar to us (before–after; cause–effect; etc.). Myth as symbol offers ground for development and extension of all human intellectual and creative activity; especially inclination for the gathering and classifying of notions and concepts – very soon enabling mythical heroes to become subject(s) of religious cults. The evidence we have justifies the term “Maya myths”: despite the regional, language, and cultural differ-

ences there is a corpus of myths common to the majority of Maya groups, as well as for their Mesoamerican neighbors. Of course, we shall deal only with characteristic myths: the ones on creation, divine hero-twins, and moon goddess.

1. Ages of the World

[The day] 4 Ahau will be creation.
 [The day] 4 Ahau will be darkness.
 Then were born the heart of creation,
 the heart of darkness. (Roys 1965: 6)

The myth of the periodical cosmic destruction and renovation, the so-called “ages of the world” (or suns in Náhuatl tradition), is common for all Mesoamerican cultures, and has also parallels among the Indians from the Southwest of the USA. According to the version that was given by Tozzer (1907: 153–154) – and based on the informants from the vicinity of Valladolid – the present world is in its fourth “age.” At first, it was inhabited by *zayamuincob* (“the disjointed men”), dwarfs capable of carrying large stones on their hunched backs; this and their miraculous ability to bring firewood to the hearth by whistling, enabled them to build ancient cities and huge paved roads. There also existed a great road suspended in the sky, stretching from Tulum and Coba to Chichén Itzá and Uxmál. A great living rope was also connected with this road (blood flowed in the interior of it), and it served as a mean by which gods were sending food to the ancient cities’ rulers. In the course of time men had become wicked, so gods decided to destroy the world using the flood *hayiokocab* (“water over the earth”). The rope was cut, all blood flowed out, and it disappeared forever. Until then all was still in darkness, but suddenly the sun rose for the first time, and its rays turned industrious dwarfs into stones. In the next creation, there lived people called *dz’olob* (Thompson proposed the translation “offenders,” but it’s far from clear how did he get to it), but they were destroyed with another flood. In the third period, the world was inhabited by *macehualli* (Náhuatl word for “ordinary people”), ancestors of the present-day Mayas, and were destroyed by *hunyecil* (“hurricane and earthquake”) or *bulcabal*. Finally, the present world is inhabited by the descendants of all ancient races, and it is going to disappear after the flood (according to “Relación de Merida,” fire – but we must remember that, for the ancient Mesoamericans, water and fire were not opposites!).

According to “Popol Vuh”, the first people were just “dolls made of wood” – they watched . . .

talked . . . multiplied . . . but had no heart or soul, they were not even aware of their creators – so they had to be destroyed:

Then their flood was invented by the heart of
Heaven
A great flood was made, and descended on the heads
Of those who were dolls
Who were carved of wood.
(Edmonson 1971: 25–26)

Besides this heavy resin, their utensils and domestic animals also had prominent part in their annihilation. From the few survivors descend the monkeys. . . . In the second creation, it seemed that the work of the gods was well executed, since the people were really brilliant:

They came to see;
They came to know
Everything under heaven
If they could see it.
(Edmonson 1971: 150)

But the gods were far from being satisfied with their brilliancy:

“It is not good
What they said,
Our forming
Our shaping:
We know everything great
And small,” they said.
And so they took back again
Their knowledge,
Did Bearer
And Engenderer.
(Edmonson 1971: 151–152)

The first pair of divine hero-twins, 1 Hunter (*Hun Hunahpu*) and 7 Hunter (*Vuqub Hunahpu*), were defeated by the Lords of the Underworld (*Xibalba*, “place of dread”). This world was also inhabited by giants, led by 7 Parrot (*Vuqub Kaqix*, but I find completely plausible Hellmuth’s explanation that this is actually Harpy Eagle God) and his sons Alligator (*Cipacna*) and 2 Leg (*Kaab r Aqan*). They were all killed by the next pair of hero-twins who, afterwards, proceeded to defeat the Lords of the Underworld. Of special interest of all these giants is the story of Alligator, whose only “sin” seems to have been some sort of hybris, and who slayed 400 young men – an episode resembling similar adventure of the great Mexico-Aztec warrior god Huitzilopochtli.

In the third creation dramatic showdown between the hero-twins and the Lords of the Underworld took place; and finally, in the fourth creation, people were made of yellow and white maize.

According to the Mexican tradition, the first

creation was 4 Jaguar (*nauí ocelotl*)³, and the world was inhabited by giants. After 13 periods of 52 years they were devoured by jaguars. Tezcatlipoca was the sun of this age. The second was named 4 Wind (*nauí eecatl*), and Quetzalcóatl was its sun. After 7 periods of 52 years this world was destroyed when terrible winds swept away houses, trees, and people, and survivors were turned into monkeys. The next creation was 4 Rain (*nauí quiauitl*), and Tlaloc was its sun. After 6 times of 52 years it was ended by fire raining down from the sky and volcanic eruptions. This world was inhabited by children, who were afterwards turned into birds. The fourth creation was 4 Water (*nauí atl*), its sun being goddess Chalchiuhtlicue. After 13 times of 52 years the world was destroyed with floods and people were turned into fish. Finally, we live in the time of the fifth creation, 4 Movement (*nauí ollin*), whose sun is Tonatiuh. People were made of bones brought from the Underworld by Quetzalcóatl, and the world will be destroyed during a series of earthquakes.

This symbolism is far more complex when we have in mind that, for example, jaguars were believed to represent “des forces obscures de la terre, de tout le mystère qui rôde ‘au coeur des montagnes’” (Soustelle 1967: 8). The feline cult is the most prominent form of Olmec religion, where it can be traced as far as in the 12th century BCE; but it is also characteristic for the South American cultures (ca. 850 BCE in Chavín, Peru). It seems that many different cultures regarded jaguar as their ancestor, and the continuity of this belief was preserved in the time of the Conquest, since “the jaguar was an important emblem of their [Aztec] all-powerful Smoking Mirror God [Tezcatlipoca]” (Davies 1982: 48).

These myths have numerous variations,⁴ but they all reflect basic concepts of these cultures: that the world is periodically being created and destroyed. Here, destroying should not be taken as a mere destruction; essentially, it represents renova-

3 In this brief account I follow the most widely accepted order, but León-Portilla (1961: 14–17) gives these ages in different order: 4 Atl, 4 Ocelotl, 4 Quiauitl, 4 Eecatl, 4 Ollin – based on the XVI century manuscript known as “Anales de Cuahtitlán.”

4 It is very interesting to compare these traditions with the ones from American Southwest. Hopis believe that they have come to earth, the Fourth world, after passing from three other worlds, and each world is placed in the layer above the former one. A very complex Navaho myth explains how their ancestors reached the Fifth world, the world we live in, using extremely intriguing symbolism (for the Hopi tradition cf. Harold Courlander 1982; and the Navaho myth is reprinted in Frederick W. Turner 1974).

tion, the new world is always better than the former one.

What seems unusual is the difference in number of the “ages of the world” in two Mesoamerican traditions: (usually) four for the Maya; and (usually) five for the people from the Valley of Mexico. But both numbers mark the same basic concept: Maya tradition mentions four cosmic trees (*yaxche*) placed at the four world directions – which denote their color: red at east, white at north, black at west, and yellow at south. This idea unites the image of the “tree of life” (with treetop belonging to the heaven, trunk to the earth, and roots to the underworld) as axis mundi with the idea of numinous “bearers” (which, like Hellenic Atlantes, hold the sky on their shoulders). Such “fusion” of two cosmological concepts have in the course of time caused the change from the belief that the world is “supported” by four trees into the one more anthropomorphic; i.e., that it is “supported” by four gods. The Náhuatl myth explains that, when Tezcatlipoca and Quetzalcóatl have destroyed the world with a flood, four men survived – so the gods transform them into the trees and place them at the four corners of the world. The Maya “bearers” were known as *Bacabs*, and their oldest representation was found at the Temple 22 at Copán, dating from the 8th century CE (Baudez et Becquelin 1984: 384). In his “Relación de las cosas de Yucatán” Landa (Tozzer 1941: 135–136) wrote about them: “Among the multitude of gods which this nation worshipped they worshipped four, each of them called Bacab. They said that they were four brothers whom God placed, when he created the world, at the four points of it, holding up the sky so that it should not fall. They also said of these Bacabs that they escaped when the world was destroyed by the deluge.” By determining four basic points they also determine the disposition of particular years towards people (Landa witnessed the New Year ceremonies where Bacabs were of great importance) – and that is where the role of priests as “mediators” became very important.

But why number 4? – In Mesoamerican iconography, that number is connected with the sun (Beyer 1928: 32 ff.) – representing its creative power as “life-giver” and “fire in the sky.” When the sun appeared for the first time (13.0.0.0. 4 Ahau 8 Cumku), the Maya started their “Long Count” (Spanish *Cuenta larga*). It is quite predictable that the sun, whose daily and nightly journey⁵

dominate the great part of Maya religion,⁶ and which witnesses and participates all the important events in the sky and in the realm of Xibalba, determines the ages of the world. And it is quite natural that these ages were called “suns” in the Náhuatl tradition.

The fifth age is a sort of “appendix” derived from the need to “unite” four sides of the world; so beside four sacred trees (*yaxche*), the fifth – green one – will be placed in the center. On the other hand, great importance of rain and related divinities throughout Mesoamerica must not be forgotten, since 5 is also a cipher that “symbolizes” rain (Beyer 1928: 36). And this also reminds us of the cosmological concepts of North American Indians, where beside four points for the world directions, the fifth (*pou sto*) is added in the very center, signifying the observer (Alexander 1920: 52).

Sun symbolism in Maya myths is connected with many scenes, mostly on ceramic vessels, but it is also very intriguing when we follow the adventures of the divine hero-twins.

The myth of the divine hero-twins is characteristic for all the American Indian traditions. They are present in myths and tales both as legendary ancestors and heroes that are about to overcome various trials. The most interesting detail regarding 1 Hunter (*Hunahpu*) and Jaguar-Sun (*Xbalanque*) is their role in the creation of the world. Edmonson’s “Second Creation” obviously places them in the same world as the giants. Their ancestors, the Maize Twins (1 Hunter and 7 Hunter), were defeated in the sacred ball game by the Lords of Xibalba and ritually decapitated. Therefore, Hunahpu and Xbalanque went to “avenge” them and to (on the cosmic level) defeat Death.

Their descent metaphorically represents the descent of the sun, and, on a broader scale, it serves as an example of what trials the deceased

underworld jaguar – analogous to the Aztec Tepeyollotl (“Heart of the Mountain”) – will just before dawn give birth to a new sun, now led by the old moon goddess towards the place where it is supposed to start another day.

6 For the astronomical details and data in Mayan inscriptions, cf. Dütting (1984). It is interesting to note that the only tomb on whose walls the cardinal points were marked in a right way has been recently excavated at Río Azul, Guatemala (cf. Adams 1986). The meaning of number 4 can also be very significant regarding the Aztec ritual sacrifice of the *ixiptla* of goddess Xilonen: “it was said ‘she enters the sand’ because in this way she made known her death – that on the morrow she would die – . . .” (Dibble 1980: 199). The Maya Great Goddess (which I consider to be the moon goddess in her various manifestations) could be mentioned here, for one of her names was, literally, “The One that Emerges from the Sand.”

5 After sunset it is to become a “Jaguar-Sun,” which is led by the young moon goddess towards the place where it will be ritually decapitated; but the female counterpart of the great

ruler is about to encounter on his journey. But they will be much wiser and more skilled than their father and uncle (although Hunahpu will, during the night in the house of Killer Bat, also be decapitated, but his brother will for some time replace his head with a squash), and finally defeat the “Lords of the Night,” sacrifice two lords, and disperse others. After all their exploits,

. . . they walked back up
 Here amid the light,
 And at once
 They walked into the sky.
 And one is the sun,
 And the other of them is the moon.
 (Edmonson 1971: 144)

A new ritual pattern is established after their victory.⁷ Until their descent, the Lords of the Underworld were absolutely merciless: Death was the supreme ruler, and its superiority was confirmed by the sun sacrifice already mentioned above.

Hunahpu and Xbalanque did not abolish the sacrifice: Hunahpu (Quiché day corresponding to Yucatec 1 Ahau, day that “belongs” to the sun god [Thompson 1950: 87–88] – but among the Quiché Maya today the word *junajpu* also signifies player par excellence) will be decapitated – but he will get his head back in a miraculous way. (The defeated players in the sacred ball game were also decapitated.) Death and rebirth are suggested with the appearing of hero-twins in the form of men-fish (cf. Tedlock 1985: 289–290); furthermore, it seems that many Mesoamerican Indians believed that gods “catch” fish – representing human embryos that float in the mythical lake whose Náhuatl equivalent is Tamoanchán (Dütting 1976: 42–43 ff.). This is also suggested on the Bone MT-51:A of Tikal Temple 1, Burial 116, in the scene showing three long-nosed gods (identified as Chac Xib Chacs, but it should not be forgotten that long-nosed heads were also aspects of Itzamná) capturing fish. And that is another aspect as resurrection, perhaps the most important mark of the victorious divine twins. Except this establishment of a new ritual pattern, this victory was eternalized in the sun’s “taking over” of the ball game; and in that extraordinary ambience the sun’s underworld suffering will be experienced forever.

7 In his edition of the “Popol Vuh,” Dennis Tedlock stresses the ritual significance of their exploits; they are most likely representing the sun and Venus (cf. Tedlock 1985: 296–297).

2. The Great Goddess and the Mystery of Creation

Who is your tree? Who is your bush?
 What was your trunk when you were born?
 (Roys 1965: 4)

The above incantation reflects an ancient belief that can be found even today among the Maya: that a certain animal or plant “watches” the fate of each individual. “Ritual of the Bacabs” shows the shaman’s and medicine man’s efforts to “reveal” which plant “guards” the sick one; this knowledge would enable him to cure the plant, too, and to find the exact place where sickness is located. This belief probably results from the ancient fascination with the mystery of life, imposing veneration of ancestors (ancestor cult among the Maya had enormous significance for all aspects of life; evidence for this are burials of the descended under the floor of the house, and keeping their skulls on the special place, where they would receive ritual offerings, etc.). More generally, it resulted in the connecting of the human birth and plants’ germination, which puts man’s fate in the hands of the Great Goddess. Furthermore, everyone has its “animal spirit companion” – Náhuatl *nahual*. (On its underworld journey, the deceased is led by the horrible dog known among the Yucatec Maya as *Xul* – Náhuatl *Xolotl*, Aztec *Xulotl*.) Or, as summed by Vogt (1969: 372): “Each person and his animal spirit companion (*vay-j-el* or *wayhel* in most Tzotzil communities, but *chanul* in Zinacantán) share the same soul (*ch’ulel* in Tzotzil). Thus, when the ancestral gods install a soul in the embryo of a Zinacanteco, they simultaneously install the same soul in the embryo of an animal. Similarly, the moment a Zinacanteco baby is born a supernatural jaguar, coyote, ocelot, or other animal is born. Throughout life, whatever happens of note to the Zinacanteco happens to the animal spirit companion, and vice versa . . .” These “animal spirit companions” are kept in some sort of corral by the ancestral deities.

This “installment of the soul” was probably done by the Great Goddess, and in the Maya pantheon we meet her in at least two important aspects: as young moon goddess (Yucatec *Ixchel*), and as an old goddess with jaguar claws and spouse of the creator god, *Ix Chebel Yax*. Both can be recognized among the four goddesses that Landa (Tozzer 1941: 10) mentions as the ones venerated at the island Cozumel – *Ix Chel*, *Ix Chebel Yax*, *Ix Hunie*, *Ix Hunieta*. There is some evidence that suggests the latter two are the same deity, and the question about the actual relationship between *Ix-*

chel and Ix Chebel Yax is very interesting (cf. Tozzer 1941: notes 46, 47); Thompson (1939) regarded them as the same deity, but later (1970) changed his mind. It seems that Landa considered them to be mother and daughter, as did Knorozov (1964: 3). However, if we accept the general notion that Maya deities (and Mesoamerican as well; for the detailed treatment of the attributes of merchant gods see Thompson 1966) revealed themselves in various aspects, these two could be treated as one deity. Ixchel is also being mentioned as a goddess of childbirth and medicine in Landa's manuscript, while Scholes and Roys give more information in their excellent monograph (1948: 57): "Ix Chel was evidently a very popular deity among the Chontal generally. Her shrine on Cozumel Island off the northeastern coast of Yucatan was visited by pilgrims from Tabasco, and the site of Tixchel, which was twice occupied by Acalan, was apparently named for her. As Selser pointed out, the names of Cuatapan ('palace of the woman') on the Usumacinta and of Ciuatán ('the place of the woman') in central Tabasco must refer to her worship. Landa notes that Isla de Mujeres ('island of the women') north of Cozumel was named for the idols of goddesses which were found there. He names Ix Chel and three others, but Tozzer suggests that at least two of them were the same deity. In Tabasco on the Río Chico, a branch of the Usumacinta, is a site named Cuyo de las Damas, which may well refer to Ix Chel also. She was probably the goddess to whom, according to Cortés, the people of Teutiercas in Acalan dedicated their principal temple. In her 'they had much faith and hope.' In her honor 'they sacrificed only maidens who were virgins and very beautiful; and if they were not such, she became very angry with them.' For this reason they took especial pains to find girls with whom she would be satisfied and brought them up from childhood for this purpose."

While the reliability of Cortés' account can be doubted, this sort of sacrifice is similar to the one that Aztecs had in the month Ochpaniztli, particularly to the sacrifice of the *ixiptla* of the goddess Chicomecóatl ("Seven Snake") (Brundage 1985: 51–54) – but they made sacrifices to the four aspects of their Great Goddesses. Of these aspects very interesting is Toci ("Grandmother"), since her equivalent among the Yucatec Maya would be Ix Chebel Yax. Originally the Great Goddess (and the moon goddess, too) of the Huastecs, she was "via Culhuacán" absorbed into the Aztec pantheon (Brundage 1985: 51). As an old goddess, she reminds us of the image of the Ix Chebel Yax on the page 74 of "Codex Dresdensis"; but it is also worth



Fig. 1: Ixchel as a goddess of fate as depicted in the "Codex Dresdensis," 19 c. [All drawings by Lidija Taranović]

noting that weaving and embroidering, which are attributed to wanton Ixchel,⁸ are supervised by (and actually are emblems of) Ix Chebel Yax. Her role as the goddess of fate is in the "Codex Dresdensis" stressed with the prefix *zac*. This prefix means white, chastity, and virginity – and all this is also connected with the name of the young moon goddess as White Ix Chel (Roys 1965: 154). Besides page 19 of this codex, which shows Ixchel carrying man's fate on her back, this is also suggested by the analogy between *kin* (meaning sun, day, time), and *k'in* (to weave, to weave cotton on the loom, cloth) (Dütting 1974: 13).

Ixchel was also known as "The One that Emerges from the Sand" – and, taking into account the Náhuatl belief (cf. note 6!), this could express her superiority over Death. This could also explain her role in bringing the sun to the underworld altar. She was also considered as an ances-

8 Her connection with the spindle associates her with the spider (Thompson 1939: 147–149), but also with fate (Bošković n. d.).

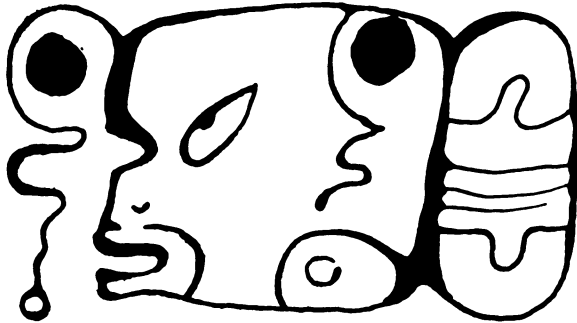


Fig. 2: Glyph of the Maya moon goddess.

ress of the ruling dynasties in several Maya cities, and her power was symbolically given to the ruler in the form of a “bundle of power.”

3. Résumé: The Character of Maya Deities

He is both male and female, and it is the union of this pair which brings about the birth, or sprouting, of the cultivated plants, which are said to be their offspring. . . . Ihp'en, as the passive spirit of maize, is said to be a single being and of male sex only. In this role he is the male consort of the female spirit of the beans, ixq'anán.

(Wisdom 1940: 402; Dütting 1981: 205)

The concept of a fantastic mythical being that in itself unites the opposites earth–sky, life–death, male–female, etc., is characteristic for the variety of religions, and there is no reason to consider the Maya as an exception. This uniting was sometimes expressed in the idea of a dual ancestor deity (like the Central Mexican Omēteotl), or the pair of creator gods (Mixtec 1 Flower and 13 Flower); and the trails of this relatively late concept are still kept in the notion of “mother-fathers” in contemporary Quiché communities (cf. Tedlock 1982: 52–53). The fantastic mythological being is also considered as a “supporter” of the universe, and, in Maya studies, is designated as Itzamná.

Although some of his statements are no longer valid (like the one that “Itzam Na was primarily god of the hierarchy” [Thompson 1970: 210]), Eric Thompson, in his excellent study of this deity, has pointed (1970: 209–233) at its many different aspects. The famous representations from Copán (Altar D), Palenque (House E), and Piedras Negras (Stela 25) were also designated as Terrestrial, Bicephallic, and Celestial Monster, respectively⁹, and these manifestations were summed

⁹ Although Baudez et Becquelin (1984: 394–396) take into account only the first two, and treat them as separate deities.

up by Clemency Coggins (1985: 53–54): “As the reptilian structure of the universe, Itzamná encompasses phenomena that transcended and are antithetical to the sun. It does, however, have distinct celestial and Underworld components like the sun. . . . Supernatural beings often emerge from the open jaws of the celestial serpent and its body may consist of a Sky Band, a sequence of celestial signs. This serpent is also commonly represented as the ‘serpent bar’ carried by many Maya lords in their official portraiture, showing that the lord and his lineage worship and many descend from Itzamná. Beneath the human realm, Itzamná symbolized the structure of the earth, and in the waters of the earth and Underworld, where death reigns, it takes the skeletal forms of such aquatic reptiles as crocodiles. These are usually portrayed as Long Nose Heads, either skeletal or with no lower jaw (which means the same thing).” But it is not only Itzamná that is involved with the different aspects; many Maya deities are found in pairs (Maize Twins, hero-twins, the Paddlers from the Underworld, Hun Chuen and Hun Batz, etc.), a thing not very common for non-American traditions.

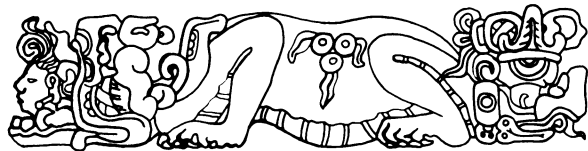


Fig. 3: Bicephallic Monster. Altar D, Copán.

On the more abstract level, there is *ch'ab* (in Yucatec: creation) and *akab* (darkness, night). The first is connected with sky and male; the other with earth and female. In the “Ritual of the Bacabs” their union is designated with the word *al* (birth). At this point it would be very interesting to point at the symbolism of the day *Akbal* (in other dialects also: *Akabal*, *Uotan*, *Watan*) – whose Yucatec equivalent is *akab*. It is associated with night, interior of the earth, caves (Thompson 1950: 73–75), and also a jaguar (God L according to Schellhas' classification) as Lord of the Night. According to Tzeltal Maya belief, the same day (*Uotan*) represents the name of their ancestor, that came probably from the east, distributed land among the people, and introduced the art of hieroglyphic writing – the same thing attributed to Itzamná. Moreover, earlier authorities (Brinton, Selser) supposed that *Uotan* is a deity analogous to the “Heart of the Sky” from the “Popol Vuh” (cf. Thompson *ibid.*). This complex is derived mostly

from the 16th century sources and has many parallels with the myths of the Quetzalcóatl. In this specific mythic history ancient gods (obviously belonging to the variety of biologically impossible supernatural beings) are being “transformed” in what is generally called “culture heros,” leaving their primary associations obscured in the past.

Besides this duality and its manifestations, it seems that we can talk of the two basic groups of the relevant mythological material. The “Popol Vuh” complex forms only one part of the so-called “Ceramic Codex,” but there are many episodes whose ultimate meaning remains unknown. One example is suggested by Fig. 4: Apparently clear, the vase presents images of a deer and a frog. But the frog is also known as *Uinal* Monster, patron of the month (*uinal*). In the new edition of “Chilam Balam of Chumayel” there is a beautiful version of a myth named “The Birth of the *Uinal*,” but on the conceptual scale, this also presents the birth of a mankind (Edmonson 1986: 30–31; 120–126). It is the woman that comes first, and I propose that here we encounter the Maya goddess of birth, Ixchel. The evidence for this comes from the same vessel: the deer (animal almost exclusively associated with the moon goddess) has human eyes on its ears, which suggest his supernatural character (possibly, in connection with death and the Underworld). On the vessel designated by Robicsek and Hales with number 15, there is a curious scene which includes three persons with characteristic elements of glyph *Caban* and the moon goddess (lock of hair); and also two girls with deers (cf. Robicsek and Hales 1981: 110–111). This vessel was put in the same “Codex Fragment” as the ones that present a love affair of wanton Dragon Lady with the old god. Taking into account not only vessel 15, but also the numerous double ceramic figurines showing the moon goddess and the old god, I prefer to call this lady Ixchel. Furthermore, on these vessels she is associated with the Bearded Dragon – and, please, note the beard of our *Uinal* Monster.



Fig. 4: Vase in private collection; height 14 cm, diameter 12 cm. Drawing after Justin Kerr's photograph published in Robicsek and Hales 1981: vessel 43.

But of the majority of episodes from ceramics we know almost nothing. The interpretations that considered everything as some episode from the “Popol Vuh” did not lead us too far, and the number of scholars attempting with other approaches increases. The great progress made in the decipherment of Maya hieroglyphs might increase our knowledge – but it still does not mean that we will automatically be able to understand their myths. As was already mentioned above, we need sources.

Even without them, it seems that there must have been another corpus of myths: since the Maya believed that in some sense everything was divine (including rivers, trees, stones, etc.) and had to be treated in the way that would ensure manifestation of only the benevolent side of the object or thing, there were probably tales about the encounters of the young men with the different “sacred” things, about the wanderings of men and/or women far away from home, etc. We can only hope that new achievements will bring forth the data about this other corpus.

A very important feature of the Maya deities is that we cannot speak of a hierarchy among them (or even of a “pantheon” in the strict sense). Undoubtedly, the roles of some were considered to be of special relevance for the specific activities (besides the examples already mentioned, the Jester God is always associated with the ruler; Xtabai with hunting, etc.), although, being essentially dual, they could belong both to the Underworld and Overworld (as designated by “mirror” signs on their bodies). Some were associated with particular sites (the Palenque Triad; Water-Lily Jaguar with Tikal), where they were represented more often and possibly were (especially those in animal forms) venerated as ancestors of the ruling dynasties. Only very few were represented in the human form, and although humans occasionally wore masks of the particular deities, the difference was always made clear.

Whether Maya deities were actually “organized” as to belong to different “complexes” (as seem to be the case with Aztecs) remains unknown; as well as the extent to which they accepted deities and cults of other Mesoamerican cultures. Some, like the Teotihuacán Rain God in the Classic period and the Toltec Quetzalcóatl in the Postclassic, they did – but since they did not have a strong, united state, the “taking over” of “foreign” deities was not necessary.

These are only some of the characteristics of Maya deities; the choice is arbitrary and there is still much more to say and explore. And I do hope

that the difficulties in this "part" of the Mesoamerican studies will be considered as a challenge and (why not?) as an invitation.

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