Gods or Ancestors: Worldview of the Ancient Mayas

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Writing the history of the ancient Mayas only began at the end of the nineteenth and early twentieth century; its underpinning and religion were built on foundations pervaded by the evolutionary current with a Western vision of how ancient societies developed. British anthropologist Edward B. Tylor's study of the evolution of religions clearly reflects this tendency, which has marked both research and the study of the cultural manifestations left to us by a society even today. This also applies to the region of the northwest lowlands and the Peten, where urban centres arose at Tikal, Calakmul, Uaxactun, Caracol, Naranjo, Dos Pilas, and many others that declined some 500 to 600 years prior to the discovery and conquest of the West Indies by the Spaniards. The indiscriminate use of information from documentary sources and applied to cultural remains by researchers on Maya culture has led to a series of claims that often confuse and even distort the vision of life and death and worldview among this cultural group. This construction of their history has passed through various phases: from an old to new empire rather like that of the Egyptians, to powerful kingdoms that vied for hegemony over the Peten: from a peaceable culture ruled by priests concerned solely with contemplating the sky and counting time to warriors who decapitated the prisoners they captured in Star Wars. By and large, their religion is regarded as polytheistic, with about a dozen deities, and today a few gods that predominate in their pantheon, such as the god Chaac, Kawiil or the most 'venerated; the corn god, who represented the resurrection of the deceased.

In contemporary studies of ancient Maya religion, the figure identified as the maize god was used to legitimize the divine character of the lords who ruled city-states. For some researchers, death or what is regarded as the transition to the underworld, the realm of the dead, endowed the ruler with divine status. Stuart and Houston (1994) proposed that it was not until after his death that a 'divine lord' was transformed into a deity and more properly into an ancestor, in other words into a deified ancestor in the form of the 'god' of maize. They suggest that despite the central role that Maya rulers might have played in ritual and the list of honorary titles they may have received, there was one name that was prohibited to them in life; their divine rank can be clearly discerned through descriptions in which they are presented as an incarnation (u bah aan) of a god and as a ch'ul ahaw, 'divine lord'. Nevertheless, in life they were never actually given the title of gods (ch'u); instead, it was not until after their death that their transformation into a divinity took place.

Even today, anthropologists and historians of religion specializing in Mesoamerican cultures do not yet fully understand the conception of death and by extension the funerary rituals performed after the demise of an individual in pre-Hispanic Mexico. What's more, we mustn't overlook the veil of time and cultures that prevent us from fully comprehending the information contained in the documents left to us by colonial period chroniclers. In them we can see that the Christian conception of a single soul prevented the missionaries from grasping the notion that the indigenous people believed that each individual had several souls. Despite a considerable number of documentary accounts on religion, our understanding is limited when it comes to how the chronicles describe death (Lopez A. 1999).

Just as among contemporary peoples, the foundation of their cosmogony was based on the veneration of hills, which gave rise to life. Associated rituals were aimed at the worship of ancestors who dwelled in mountains, and not in the underworld. In this belief system, the origin of all things and objects could be found in the mountain and the cave was the portal through which all things, as well as supernatural forces, emerged. In this vision, the mountain and the cave were an inseparable conceptual unit. It is likely that this cosmogony originated in the hunter-gatherer societies that populated the American continent, but it must have been after the first settlements on the Gulf

Coast, where their cultural features and liturgy were established.

In this worldview, the notion of origin focuses on the interior of the mountain and therefore in this ideological system there is no underworld. Therefore, there was no idea of the Judea-Christian opposition between the heavens and hell, between what is above and what is below. The concept is defined in terms of within, in the interior, and not below (evil), the connotation that the term "underworld" conjures in the West. The opposite would be the outside, on the exterior, and not above (heavenly), an attribute commonly linked to the sky.

Given that the mountain is the place of origin and the dwelling place of ancestors, these entities, as living and even inanimate beings, had souls. These souls were known as the way or ch'ulel, which permitted communication between the interior and exterior of the mountain, between the living and their forebears. As time passed, the way of representing the soul or ch'ulel evolved and was transformed to assume distinct forms. For baktuns 6 and 7 (748-354 BC), it was represented as an anthropomorphic being, as depicted in the frieze on Structure Sub 11-c at Calakmul. In the course of katun 9 (AD 435) and especially near the end of this cycle (AD 593), the ch'ulel took on the image or shape of a youth of indefinite age that in recent iconographic studies has been identified as the representation of the maize god. In funerary offerings of rulers from various sites in the Peten region, the ch'ulel is shown with the same attributes. One of these images of the ch'ulel was rendered on the sarcophagus slab of Pakal, the ruler of Palenque. The scene shows the moment when Pakal's ch'ulel enters the mountain, which is depicted as an anthropomorphic figure. The essence of the message was complemented by trilobe mountain forms that were carved on the edges of the slab, below which appear Pakal's ancestors.

By katun 9.10.0.0.0 (AD. 633) this image of the ch'ulel became generalized in Maya art and revealed the diverse environments envisaged in the interior of the mountain, known as Xibalba. On an engraved bone from the funerary offering of Hasaw Chan K'awil, the ruler of Tikal (Burial 116), his ch'ulel can be seen transported in a canoe through one of the regions of Xlbalba.

According to contemporary Maya worldview, the ch'ulel is the entity believed to be comparable to that of the soul and it dwells in hills. Among them an elaborate hierarchy is governed by their height and their relationship with the communities in their surroundings. There are hills associated with hamlets, neighbourhoods, and communities, with a strong connection that is expressed by the magnitude and complexity of the rituals conducted in their surroundings. Mountains need not necessarily be large in scale, but what they share in common is a profile that sets them apart from their surroundings (Pitarch 1996). This geographic universe was reproduced in the urban centres in the Maya lowlands from their inception to the middle of baktun 6 (551 BC), both in monumental constructions and in those that for their content assumed a certain significance in the course of their historical development. The pyramidal shape of platforms allude to mountains where the ch'ulel of their ancestors reside; some pyramidal structures that were built in ancient cities were intended to fulfil this dimension of the magical-religious conception of the ancient Mayas.

The interpretation that rulers or important individuals were transformed into a deity after death, that this status was prohibited in life, and that their divine nature was clearly perceived through phrases in which they were presented as the incarnation of a god lead us to believe that this god would be what is popularly known in the literature as the maize god. However, as we pointed out earlier, what this figure really represents on Pakal's slab from Palenque, on the bone from Tikal Tomb 116 of Hasaw Chan K'awil, and on plates and vessels where this image of the ch'ulel also appears, such as the codex-style vessel from the tomb in Structure 11-D at Calakmul, is the character of the ancestor that a high-ranking individual acquires when he dies. It is reinforced by objects that would identify him as such when he met with his ancestors and that formed part of his burial goods.

One of these objects found in tombs at Calakmul and Palenque are commonly referred to as 'funerary masks', which have been interpreted as the transformation of the deceased into a deity. These visages in reality would have corresponded to the effigy of the deceased and were placed near the mummy bundle, never actually in substitution of the face. The use of the term 'funerary mask' is perhaps misleading and its implications may be attributed to our true lack of awareness of their function; these works of art are, without doubt, the portraits of the individuals interred. Indisputable examples of this include the jade effigy found in the interior of Pakal's sarcophagus that is identical to or a copy of the modelled stucco sculpture of a head found beneath the sarcophagus. In Tomb 1 in Structure 3 at Cakalmul, which is the city where the largest number of these personifications have been found, the deceased was accompanied by a jade effigy similar to the image represented on the lid of a tripod bowl that formed part of a funerary offering. Given this data it is evident that they did not correspond to a god and they did not imbue the dead with the status of a deity; instead, these objects were associated with the deceased to identify the individual as a member of a lineage. The jade vessels bearing an effigy of the ruler on the lids found in Tombs 116 and 196 at Tikal that showed the faces of rulers Hasaw Chan K'awil and Yax Kin would have served this same function. In Copan, a group of twelve modelled clay effigy figures were found as part of the funerary goods in the tomb of Smoke I mix; the sculptures represent his ancestors as well as the ruler himself at the time of his death, when his ch'ulel or soul entered the interior of the mountain to be reunited with his ancestors.

The most significant examples of the concept of the cave as part of the mountain and a place where the deceased would go to be reunited with his forebears are Tombs 1, 19, and 23 at Rio Azul (AD 400-500) and the chamber of Burial 48 of Stormy Sky (AD 456) in Structure 5D-33 in the North Acropolis at Tikal in Guatemala, which were conditioned in natural hollows or portions carved out of the rock. The tomb of Yukom Yich'ak K'ak' (AD 698), the ruler of Calakmul, was built to simulate a barrel vault to replicate the shape of a cave. This is the sole historical individual identified by means of hieroglyphic inscriptions contained in his funerary offering. The effigy of Yukom Yich'ak K'ak; one of the most finely crafted pieces of lapidary work, as well as others with similar characteristics, was created with jade mosaic, and eyes made of obsidian and mother of pearl. On the section that formed the neck, it bore an inscription that referred to his lineage. The first sculpture was carved in wood and covered with a layer of ochre clay. Later it was coated with a layer of stucco, on which the tesserae were attached with a resin-based adhesive. Finally, a bluish-green stucco paste was applied to the back portion of the effigy.

The three aspects that form the essential part of funerary rituals-the representation of the soul as a young male of indeterminate age which the Mayas called ch'ulel, the positioning of effigies with the image of the deceased as part of the funerary offering, and the construction of the tomb almost always in pyramidal platforms that allude to the idea of the mountain-cave that in their worldview was the place of origin and the dwelling place of the ancestors-invite a revision of concepts such as that of the underworld and the sky that predominate in Maya research.

There are scholars who believe that some of the objects and representations in the grave goods associated with high-ranking individuals buried in tombs in cities such as Tikal, Calakmul, Copan, and Palenque may be interpreted as elements that signify the character or transformation of the deceased into a deity. However, based on the ideas expressed above, it is clear that this condition of divinity is absent. As research and work on ancient Maya cities grows, more nuanced information becomes available on this culture and former paradigms would be better revised in light of new data.

Iconographic studies, which in reality should be regarded as iconological, have permeated research on the Maya with a Judea-Christian vision in which the gods, such as the maize god, predominate. The emphasis on deification entered the literature as a widespread assumption starting in 1983

(Taube 1985). In other studies, such as the work of epigraphers, this same tendency to read texts that refer to rulers as 'divine lords: continues, while this status was only assumed upon death.

Among the many questions that arise when dealing with the subject of funerary rituals, and especially that of death and if the Mayas actually believed in gods, the question of special importance that can shed light on other doubts is: did the Mayas believe in life after death? Depending on the how this question is answered, we would be in a better position to approach a clearer understanding of ancient Maya worldview. Data and testimony from mortuary chambers in the ancient city of Calakmul have increased our understanding of the vision and ideas of the ancient Mayas on life and death.

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