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THE IMAGE OF MAN AND NATURE IN CLASSIC MAYA ART AND ARCHITECTURE

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In the long darkness before creation, the Maya gods pondered the dawning of a new age and the making of a people who would give them honor. They sought yellow corn; they sought white corn, for, as the Maya later wrote in the 16th century narrative, the Popol Vuh, "these were the ingredients for the flesh of the human work, the human design" (Tedlock 1985:163). Water was ground with the maize to yield blood and flesh. The gods had tried to create humankind before, but their first attempt at creation, the animals of the earth, could not praise their makers. When the gods formed humans of earth, they collapsed as mud; when the gods carved humans out of wood, the forms looked like people, but they could not worship the gods and so the gods destroyed them. The gods succeeded in populating the earth only when humanity was shaped from maize, the very staff of human life.

We know this belief was held by the Maya at the time of the Spanish Conquest of the New World, but the Maya had held this to be true for generations, perhaps for more than two thousand years before the Conquest, when high civilization first began to rise and when we first find the Maya confirming such beliefs through works of art that gave permanent form to those beliefs. From the beginning of their recorded time, sometime in the first millennium B.C., the cycle of maize, the cycle of seasons, and the cycle of life guided the understanding of the world shared by Maya king and Maya peasant, man and woman, victorious warrior and humiliated captive, hunter and hunted.

Accordingly, humankind held maize to be sacred. During Classic times (A.D. 250-900), The Maize God figured prominently in Maya art. Recognized as young and beautiful, the image of the Maize God was the image emulated by Maya lords, many of whom donned his attire. Handsome young faces, multiple Maize Gods, formed ears of maize, their luxuriant tresses creating the corn slid, and a strand for every kernel. In life, maize plants sway to and from, their crisp green leaves moving like limbs of the human body; the Maize God, too, is in motion, often seeming to dance and sway. The Maize God wears enormous back racks in which small creatures are wedged among mat and feather frame; he often dances in the company of a tiny dwarf of hunchback. Usually attired in a netted hip cloth or skirt, perhaps strung with green jade beads, the Maize God also characteristically wears a carved *Spondylus princeps* shell, concave face outward, at the groin. Such *Spondylus* shells are bright red-orange and give the wearer a symbolic vagina. In this attire, then, the Maize God was both male and female, progenitor and progenitrix, or what the modern Maya might call a "mother-father" (Tedlock 1985:350).

Like maize itself, the Maize God moves through the cycle of life: in one season, he is the handsome young man, alive and in motion; in another, he is decapitated, the harvested head resting on a plate as offering. Ground into masa and formed into tamales (corn cakes) and tortillas (corn pancakes), maize nourishes and sustains humankind, but humans return some seeds to the ground to start the cycle anew. The barren earth yields to the forces of regeneration: the young Maize God emerges once again, ready to dance to the tune of life.

Humankind supported and acknowledged this cycle of renewal and regeneration. Many Maya rituals imitated the actions of the natural world. When the king or queen of a Maya city donned the attire of the Maize God, he or she became the maize God, the source of fertility, the very flesh of all humanity and many Maya rulers chose to be commemorated as the Maize God. On Dos Pilas Stela 17, for example, King Flint Sky God K wears the richly detailed back rack assemblage of the maize God as well as attributes of other deities. Maya lords became one with the gods in whose costumes they dressed: as the Maize God, the king was giver of life and renewal; he himself insured future fertility.

Although much of the realm inhabited by the Classic Maya lies far from mountains and though the most dramatic topography visible from the great cities is no more than hills, the Maya shared the pan-American notion of the sacred mountain. To them, such a mountain was the source of sustenance, the source of maize. Sacred mountains took the form of the wits glyph in Maya writing (Stuart 1987:16-25). The Maya formed mountains of their temples and palaces. They oriented their buildings to any powerful topographic feature, thus channeling the power of nature into human architecture. The Maya described their structures - buildings that we may call shrine or temple or palace - as special kinds of "houses", or na's of one sort another in Classic Maya inscriptions, but they created interiors and exteriors that formed symbolic caves. Many such sacred chambers were dedicated to the earth and conceived of as the stony hearts of mountains, places of regeneration for maize.

At Copan, Structure 22 formed a great man-made sacred mountain. The essence of stone and earth, any live rock formation or anything made of stone, even a sacred mountain, could take form as the Cauac Monster, the personification of the wits glyph. Seen in its most complete form, the Cauac Monster is a frontal, craggy and usually cleft zoomorphic head, from which maize foliage and fruit may emerge. Stacks of these Cauac Monsters formed the corners of the building and continuous rows of them ran along the cornice; richly three-dimensional young maize gods then sprouted from the clefted heads, silhouetted against the sky and seemingly swaying to and from. The approaching supplicant could have seen it all from distance.

A great monster maw once formed the entrance to Structure 22. Anyone entering the structure would have stepped right into the gaping mouth, the heart of the sacred mountain. Teeth of the lower jaw protrude, and in one's mind, they seem to close behind as one steps into the chamber. Once within the chamber, the supplicant faces yet another doorway, this time the entrance to a smaller, elevated chamber that may have functioned as one large throne. This second doorway is framed by bacabs, the pillars at the corners of the earth, who support a richly carved Celestial Monster, the very arc of the heavens, the diurnal path of the sun as it is borne by Morning Star to zenith and then delivered back to the Underworld. The text that runs under the threshold tells us that King 18 Rabbit of Copan dedicated this building sometime before 737. When he sat in this doorway, he was at the heart of the mountain, framed by cosmic movement. He was a seed, a dernel.

What happened in a building like Structure 22? to become a king or to renew his kingship, a young man entered such a chamber and made sacrifices of human blood, but all Maya nobility offered blood - both of captives and from their own bodies - to nourish the earth and to link themselves with their ancestors. A series of lintels from Yaxchilan shows Lady Xoc, wife of the powerful king Shield Jaguar, during and following bloodletting from the tongue. First she ran a rope of thorns through her tongue, and she collected the precious flow on strips of paper in a bowl. Then, once she had set the paper afire, she saw a vision of an ancestor in the swirls of smoke in front of her. Through bloodletting, Maya lords communicated with beings of the past and future, channeling their power into rulership. At Copan Structure 22, S-shaped blood scrolls form the body of the Celestial Monster, giving permanent architectural form to the scrolls conjured up by visions. Each king at Piedras Negras commissioned a monument to celebrate his installation as king, and these accession stelae reiterate the image of sacred mountain.

Each depicts the new king in a niche, sitting atop scaffolding draped with cloth, mats, and pelts, and framed by the body of a Celestial Monster whose two heads hang upside-down, underneath the king. Some of the niche monuments include sacrificial victims; such victims may have been paraded about in the scaffolding and then slaughtered before the king, in turn, ascended to the niche.

Seated in the elevated niche and framed by the Celestial Monster on the Piedras Negras stelae, the new king appeared in the same frame created by the interior doorway of Copan Structure 22. Simply attired, these Piedras Negras kings may have sought identity with the young Maize God. On Stela 6, maize is stacked behind the webs of scaffolding - as if it was also a granary - and then issues forth from the very top of the king's headdress, as if to show that the young king is the very matrix in which the plant can flourish. The slain captive at the base, as on Stela 14, fertilizes this regeneration. At the moment of inauguration, the king is the conduit for regeneration and the guarantor of plenty.

In the design of Copan Structure 22, we can see the workings of the symbolic sacred mountain, entered through the exterior monster jaws. Inside the rear chamber framed by the Celestial Monster, members of the royal family drew blood, either their own or captives, to fertilize regeneration. Through a window at the back of this rear chamber, nobles gazed at sharp hills to the north, seeing both the summit and sharp cleft to which so many of Copan's sacred buildings were oriented. When a noble emerged from Structure 22, he was like a kernel of maize brought from these sacred mountains. The exterior of Structure 22, the Cauac Monsters, that tells us that the building was a man-made mountain, a transformation of the mountains to the north, the fertile medium in which the Maize Gods at the cornice could thrive. Maya kingship was conduit between earth and sustenance: maize sprouts from the heads of rulers in their portraits and from the cornices of temples, confirming in stucco and stone the fertility sustained by kingship, land, and mountain.

To the Maya, the powers of regeneration and renewal held by the earth were sometimes opposed to the movements of Venus, Jupiter, the moon, or the sun. The sun may have been recognized as the most powerful natural force, given form both as the squint-eyed sun of the day and as the Jaguar God of the Underworld, the sun at night. The sun formed ruler's thrones and shields to protect and guide during war. Early kings adopted the awe-and-terror inspiring image of the Principal Bird Deity, the false sun of the era just previous to the one in which we live, as the guise of rulership; later ones perceived that the Bird sat atop the World Tree, the axis mundi, or rested over the Celestial Monster. The stars that we perceive as the belt of Orion or the feet of Gemini were also keenly observed and commemorated in works of art that survive today. Carefully charted by priests, the movements of Venus and Jupiter aided and provoked Maya raids and battles, and with the particular guidance of Venus, the most bellicose planet, one Maya king could target another as his prey.

In their daily lives, the Maya must always have been stalking and hunting wild animals, particularly the brocket deer that inhabit the rain forest. From time to time, the Maya identified the hunting of deer and the hunting of men and brought the two acts together in a single ritual of renewal, as Karl Taube has recently argued (Taube 1988: note 7). On one Maya painted vessel, hunters stalk an anthropomorphic deer who wears a cape covered with crossed bones; on another, warrior's torture and sacrifice a man who has taken on the role of the deer. His hair bound into two "ears", the victim adopts the deer posture atop a scaffold. While musicians play, other attendants set the captive on fire. A ritual of springtime, the hunting, baiting and burning of deer and deer-men brought on the rains and the return of agriculture after the fallow dry season of winter.

Other types of sacrifice also generated renewal and abundance. Although heart excision was known and practiced by the Maya, most sacrificial victims were decapitated (Schele 1984). The sacrifice of a decapitated head was analogous to the harvest of maize; each fruit lopped off the stalk in succession and then eventually planted to regenerate new life. But perhaps as acts of humiliation and domination--and even to prevent regeneration, Maya lords retained some heads as trophies.

Certainly sacrifice played a role in the Maya ballgame. But like all Mesoamerican peoples, the Maya seem to have recognized in play of the ballgame a metaphor for the movements of the heavenly bodies, particularly the sun, moon, and Venus, and the renewal and cyclical nature of life and humankind. In the Popol Vuh, the Maya story of creation and history, two pairs of brothers enter the Underworld and play the ballgame against the Underworld gods. As a character in the Popol Vuh, the Maize God, or Hun Hunahpu, is one of the first pair of brothers who enter the Underworld to play the ballgame against its evil denizens.

The First Fathers, as this first pair are known, are defeated and sacrificed by the gods; but the offspring of one of them, the Hero Twins, overcome the Underworld gods and outwit them at every turn. Even when the Underworld gods believe they have bested the Twins at the ballgame, the Hero Twins still return to defeat and sacrifice the Underworld gods. They resurrect their father, the Maize God, and then they ascend into the heavens. Ball courts were often thought to have been entryways to the Underworld, liminal places where man and god met.

Many aquatic creatures dwelt in the still, swampy water on the surface of the Underworld, the place and the medium for human transitions between the world of death and the world of life (Hellmuth 1987). Objects representing this liminal world move between two and three dimensions as if to emphasize their mutability. At death, lords traveled through the still water to begin a new journey, and we see them in canoes as they embark for Xibalba, the Underworld. Two deities that modern scholars have nicknamed the Paddlers guide the canoe, even as water raises over its gunwales, just like the Hero Twins, the lords face the Underworld gods - the putrefying lords of death - in Xibalba. The Hero Twins provided a model for overcoming death: they did not overpower the evil gods, but they outsmarted them. Deep in the Underworld, many layers below the swampy water that obscured the entrance to Xibalba, and dressed as ragamuffin tricksters, the Twins fooled the lords of death into bagging for their own sacrifice. The Hero Twins then took new form in the heavens, whence they reign as the brilliant heavenly bodies of night (Tedlock 1985:159-160).

For the Maya, this imagery of death and rebirth can also be seen in light of the life cycle of maize. On the Tikal bones, at the moment of death, a dead king may be depicted as the young Maize God. The same imagery is created on the lid of the Palenque Sarcophagus. There, the dead king Pacal (an old man of 80 years who died in 683) is rendered with characteristics of both the young Maize God - whose costume he has donned - and God K - whose axe or smoking tube punctures his forehead (Taube n.d.). Semi-reclined, in a posture not only of rapture and repose but also of sacrifice, as if his death is self-sacrifice, he sits atop a cache vessel of miniature canoe borne by the rear head of the Celestial Monster. Simultaneously, the World Tree, surmounted by the Principal Bird, shoots fully developed from the dead king's body, as if regenerated through his death.

Before his death, King Pacal of Palenque had planned and commissioned the Temple of Inscriptions, the building that would give him permanent memorial. Set directly into the hill behind, it is given prominence by the surrounding topography. Ancient engineers excavated into the bedrock so that the sepulchral chamber falls below ground level, as does the sarcophagus itself, but its lid rests just at ground level, in that mutable place between life and death. The sarcophagus takes the shape of an enormous, lidded cache vessel, but the opening within is in the form of a human uterus: when Pacal died, he entered the womb of the earth. A kernel of regeneration, he spawned the World Tree. Within the sarcophagus, Pacal wore a green mosaic mask that transformed the face of an old man into the face of youthful maize for all time.

The Maya understood the cycle of human life and death as only one of the many allied cycles: the passing of the year and seasons, the movements of heavenly bodies. But the most fundamental cycle was the cycle of maize, for it is not only the metaphor for human life, death, and renewal, but the very stuff of which man was formed. The Maya recognized that the blood flowing in human veins was that very corn masa from which the gods had shaped them. Maize sprouted from sacred mountains, and humans propitiated maize and mountain through the offering of human blood. And finally, when a great noble died, that lord was buried at the base of a pyramid, a great symbolic mountain. Resting in the womb of the earth below, that lord, like the maize he emulated in life, was also the seed of renewal and regeneration.

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