The Vulture: The Sky and the Earth

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The Nature of the Vulture.

"Bizarre" is used by some naturalists as "the only appropriate description" for the mottled, wattled, and wrinkled, purple, red, and yellow head of the bald king vulture (*Sarcoramphus papa*). The only largely white New World vulture, the king vulture ranges through lowland forests from Mexico to Argentina, roosting in treetops. It lives higher than the other vultures in its range and flies alone in the skies; it is treated with respect by the smaller vultures that fly in flocks, notably the black vulture (*Coragyps atratus*) and the turkey vulture (*Cathartes aura*). (For the natural history of vultures, see Alvarez del Toro 1971, Austin and Singer 1961, L. Brown and Amadon 1989, Burton and Boyer 1983, Dunne et al. 1988, Stiles and Janzen 1983.)

The black vulture is shorter and stockier than the turkey vulture and reportedly dominates it at carcasses. The black vulture has a white patch on its wings; the turkey vulture has a reddish head and a bright-yellow bill. The two species range from the northern United States to southern South America. There is also a Yellow-headed vulture *(Cathartes burrovianus),* found in open fields from Mexico south, which is present at Palenque (Alvarez del Toro 1971:33). Other members of the family—the condors, for example— are not found in Mexico.

The New World family of vultures was long, and appropriately known as *Cathartidae,* 'cathartic cleansers', but they are now called *Vulturidae* by some authors. Long considered to be kin to eagles, vultures have been reclassified with the stork in the order *Ciconiiformes* (Rea 1986:141). Ornithologists note however, that bird-watchers can easily mistake a flying black or turkey vulture for the not-so-Golden Eagle, a sometime carrion eater (Burton and Boyer 1983:83; Dunne et al. 1988:137-140). Eagle and vulture depictions are often confused in Pre-Columbian art, and in the cosmology of the Maya region and Amazonia, the king vulture and the Harpy Eagle are interchangeable or interrelated (Preuss 1988:30; Roe 1982:259). Among the Desana in Colombia, vultures are known as the "ancient eagles" (Reichel-Dolmatoff 1971:43-45, 75, 101).

Vultures are said to be the best of the soaring land birds. Like eagles and hawks, they depend almost entirely on riding air currents. Some of the northern vulture populations migrate, especially those of the turkey vulture. Expert in the use of air currents, the turkey vulture may travel as far as southern South America. Naturalists write of the great migrations in which these vultures travel with Swainson's and Broad-winged Hawks. (Barbara Tedlock [1985] has written on the hawks.) In one account, after a rainy night, the migrating birds sat in trees, orienting themselves toward the rising sun as they spread their wings to dry The scene was described as like a witches' sabbath (Stiles and Janzen 1983:560-61).

Vultures have been called masters of two disciplines: soaring and sanitation (Dunne et al. 1988:136). In towns, villages, and rural communities where there is no modern plumbing or garbage disposal, they provide the only sanitation services. "They eat anything, but especially they like the shit," observed a worker in a slaughterhouse in Guatemala, who also noted that the vultures showed up only on Thursdays and Saturdays, the two days of slaughter (Maslow 1986:200). The black vulture particularly tends to live close to humans and their waste. Vultures lack feathers around their heads and legs, where they have contact with carrion and feces, so the ultraviolet rays of the sun come down directly on their flesh, discouraging bacteria and parasites. Vultures spread their wings after feeding and the sun disinfects them. Their digestive system is so remarkable that the ejecta may kill germs. Moreover, vultures make the environment healthy (see Reichel-Dolmatoff 1985, II:132; Salinas Pedraza and Bernard 1978:132). They turn the vile into something white that glistens in the sun. In a Chorti Maya narrative, the black vulture is a mason with lime on his apron (Fought 1972:180-181). He boasts that he can make lime and that the white houses in the town look beautiful and he alone has plastered them. Vultures make dark things bright. They are associated not only with death but with transformation of the dead.

Vultures will eat fresh meat, but they do not have raptor feet, and so cannot hunt as eagles do. A vulture can plant its feet firmly, but it does not grasp well. Its eating habits are described as methodical or clinical. Typically, vultures first pluck out the eyeballs of the prey, consume them, and then, pull out the intestines. These are common motifs in Pre-Columbian art. An anthropomorphic vulture pulls the entrails from a sacrificial victim on

a column at El Tajin (Wilkerson 1984:fig. 10). A Classic-period stone ballgame *hacha* from highland Guatemala has a representation of a black vulture standing atop a human skull, plucking at or near the eyes (Wilkerson 1984:fig. 9; Grossman and Hamlet 1964:47). Vultures removing eyes are also to be seen on Codex Madrid pages 86 and 87. The disembodied eyes on stalks that appear on the outspread wings of Killer Bats on Classic Maya vases were likely plucked out by vultures. On Codex Madrid pages 40 and 42, a vulture eats the entrails of a deer. In a Maya creation myth from Honduras, a vulture with a colored bill plucks the eyes of dead cattle to take to the white-billed vultures. Vultures have the right to eat dead animals in the field but not to eat dead people (Chapman 1982:121). In some myths described below, vultures note a moving eye as the sign of a false corpse, as the eye is perhaps the most likely part of the body to move.

The Iconographic Vulture.

In Pre-Columbian times, vultures were appreciated as extraordinary beings and they had high iconographic status. They stand on their prey as Maya rulers on their portrait stelae stand on their symbols of power. In an Early Classic cache at Tikal, the remains of four king Vultures were found along with those of a macaw (Pohl 1983:83). Vultures are prominent in the art at Izapa and Kaminaljuyu (see Taube 1980:30-34). They are featured also in Central Mexican and Veracruz art and in that of Central and South America.

An Early Classic Maya tripod vase from the Peten shows an incised scene with a spread-wing bird on a platform and a man seated at the side (Coe 1982:no. 28). The bird has been called an eagle, but the cere with opening ("nostril") is indicated, and the bird has a thick beak and a wrinkled, therefore bare neck, and so is a king vulture. The man's arms are crossed in a gesture of submission and he faces upward with an anguished or dying expression. This scene may relate to ritual sacrifice, or it may illustrate a myth described below in which the hero dies to attract the vulture.

Vultures are also frequently depicted on Late Classic Maya cylinder vases. A somewhat modified vulture is presented as a major motif (Coe 1973:59, 105; 1982:no. 28; Kerr 1989:104 [1698]; 1990:214 [2085],274 [2717]). On an unusual vase, a man in a hunter's broad-brimmed hat (possibly one of the Twins of the Popol Vuh) holds a vulture that faces an apparent anthropomorphized insect, while on the other side of the vessel, a vulture stands on a bundle, tugging at its tie as if it were pulling at entrails (fig. 1). Sometimes a vulture is seen on the top of the cosmic-diagram backrack on the maize-god figures on the Holmul-dancer vases (Kerr 1992:498 [4464]; see Houston, Stuart, and Taube 1992). A vulture with a serpent looped around its neck looms over a scene of ritual dancing and sacrifice: one figure has flint knives; another has a bloodletter; another blows a conch shell (fig. 2). A carved scene shows two vultures flying above a figure being given a ritual enema (fig. 3; see Furst and Coe 1977; Stross and Kerr 1990). A painted cylinder pot shows a group of vulture-headed male figures with enema pots (Kerr 1989:85 [1451]). Vultures are present in scenes of sacrifice, hunting, the ballgame, and other rites, as well as in probable Underworld scenes. Dennis Tedlock (1985:107, 110, 366) translates the name of one of the Popol Vuh lords of the Underworld as Trash

Fig. 1 Painted cylinder vase, rollout. A man and an insect with two vulture. Photograph © Justin Kerr 1985 (2668).

Master, 'owner; filth (or trash)', which suggests possible vulture association or derivation.

Prominent figures on Late Classic cylinder vases wear vulture headdresses in similar contexts, including palace scenes (Coe 1973: 67, 89, 105, 113). A scene with dancing and flint knives shows a man in a vulture headdress blowing a conch shell trumpet above a kneeling figure, with both facing the major, dancing figure (Kerr 1992:397 [3247]). On another vase a man wearing a vulture headdress and a feathered backrack or cape leans in a dancing pose over a supine supernatural figure, while a deer and a conch-trumpet appear in the opposite scene (Kerr 1990:307 [4336]). A scaffold-sacrifice scene shows a figure in a vulture headdress facing the sacrifice, with a probable deer-headed figure behind him (Kerr 1990:289 [2781]. On another vase, a figure on a throne wears a possible vulture headdress and facing him is a man in a hunter's hat (Kerr 1990:298 [2923]). In another palace scene, an enthroned figure holds a bloodletter and faces a figure in a vulture headdress with a snake looping around its beak. A smoking figure dances on the other side of the pot (Kerr 1990:258 [2698]). In one palace scene, the ruler's headdress is a vulture head with a stingray spine through the nostril (Coe 1973:113). On a cylinder vase on which a regal figure taps with a bloodletter the head of the man facing him (wearing a feather cape), anthropomorphic vultures appear in separate panels; with them is a figure surrounded by detached eyes (Kerr 1989:83 [1440]. In a throne scene on a painted vessel, a figure seated on the floor wears a vulture headdress and is back to back with a figure in a deer headdress who faces an enema jug (fig. 4). A figurine in the new museum at Palenque is seated on a large throne and has a vulture head inserted in his neck in place of a human head.

A ballplayer may wear a vulture headdress, and a hybrid vulture appears in a tree in a sacrificial ballgame rite (Coe 1982:no. 10). In the Popol Vuh, the ballplaying Twins take on the false sun, Vucub Caquix, the god in the era of chaos after the flood and before the new creation (D. Tedlock 1985:89ff.). This was a bird creature whose teeth were knocked out by the twins' blowgun and replaced with maize. Vucub Caquix, translated as Seven Macaw, is generally considered to be the Principal Bird Deity (Miller and Taube 1993:137-138, 182; see also Bardawil 1975), a supernatural hybrid. This bird, often a complex, unnaturalistic vulture or part-vulture, perhaps a super(natural) vulture, sits in the World Tree in a number of Maya scenes (see Kerr 1990: 241 [2356]). It appears in various settings, including a vase scene in which it is in a tree, and one of the Twins, in a hunter's hat, aims at it with a blowgun (Kerr 1989:68 [1226]). At Palenque, the bird is seen on the tree in the central panel of the Tablet of the Cross, on the lid of the sarcophagus in the Temple of the Inscriptions, and at the top of some incensarios.

In the Codex Dresden (p. 3), a vulture sits in a quadripartite tree that rises from the open chest of a sacrificial victim. In the vulture's beak is an eye, pulled by an elongated optic nerve from the victim's socket. This image caused Eric Thompson to recall the colonial Yucatec ritual phrase *colop u uich,* 'pull out his eye'. A Maya god or god title was *colop u uich kin,* 'Tear Out Sun's Eye' (Thompson 1970:337; 1972:34).

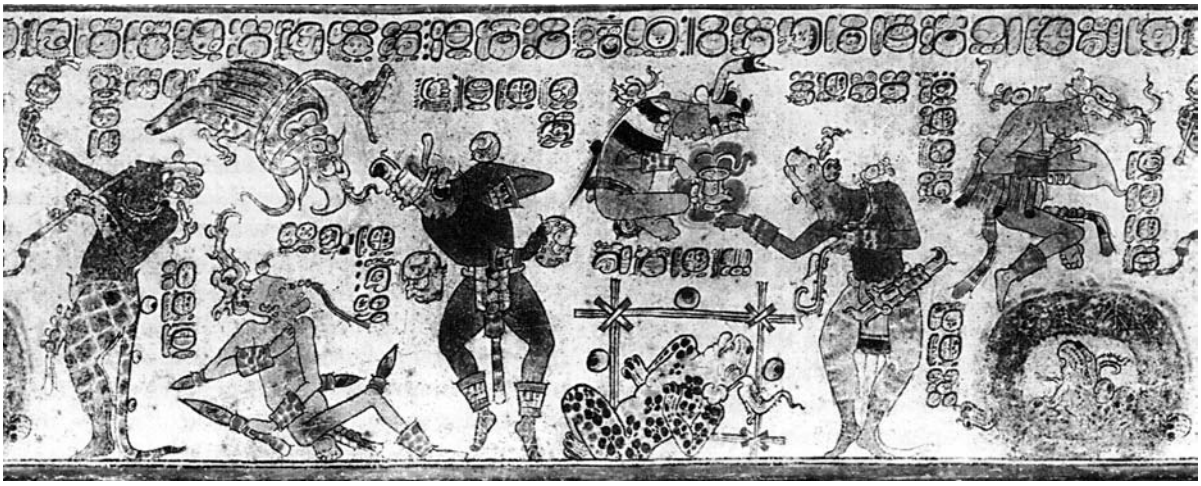

Fig. 2 Painted cylinder vase, rollout. A sacrificial scene with music and dancing, and a vulture with a snake around its neck. Photograph © Justin Kerr 1978 (791).

Fig. 3 Carved cylinder vase, rollout. A man being given an enema, with two vultures above him. Photograph ©Justin Kerr 1981 (1550).

The Vulture and Agriculture.

Probable king vultures appear on Copan Stela D and Altar T, on Quirigua Altar 16, and on Piedras Negras Stelae 11 and 14, all Late Classic sculptures. Taube (1988:343) notes that vultures carved on the top of niche stelae at Piedras Negras, descending from above the seated lord, are part of the iconography of renewal associated with the scaffold sacrifice. Vultures are important characters in Maya agricultural-renewal rites; they are a part of the cycle, part of the process (Pohl 1981). The association that Taube (1980:36-38) finds between the vulture and jade may be related to the bird's agriculture relationships.

Vultures are connected with fire and rain. On Codex Dresden page 73, a vulture has a flame prefix. Vultures and other birds of prey circle above field fires, which drive out or destroy small animals, even providing the vulture with the cooked meat mentioned in a number of folk narratives. These fires relate the vulture to slash-and-burn agriculture and to maize, the basic crop of that agriculture. The vulture circles the fields like a guardian angel of the crops. In the Codex Madrid (pp. 26 and 28), a vulture pecks at the Maize God and at maize glyphs. There is a parallel between the fire clearing the fields for planting and the sky vulture clearing putrid flesh from the earth's surface. Taube (1980:35-36) points out that vultures are associated with ritual incense-burners in both Maya and Zapotec iconography. In a Mexican myth, the vulture lives on a mountain in which fire was born (Meza 1988:73). Fire associations are widespread (see Levi-Strauss 1969; Reichel-Dolmatoff 1985). In a South American myth (Iranxi), the vulture is the donor of tobacco (Moura, in Levi-Strauss 1983:61).

Fields are burned just before the rains begin and the smoke is said to become the cloud from which the rain descends (Guiteras-Holmes 1961:154). In Guatemala, when the Maya dream of vultures, the rainy season is approaching (Maslow 1986:101). A Yucatec narrative tells that the vulture loses its feathers in a rainstorm (Burns 1983:157-163). The Codex Dresden (p. 38b) shows an anthropomorphic vulture standing in rain. The Chilam Balam of Chumayel mentions rains "of little profit" coming from a vulture sky (Roys, cited in Thompson 1972:53, 87, 100).

A narrative about a lazy farmer who changes places with a vulture so that he can fly around in a leisurely way appears in several regions of Mesoamerica, notably with the Maya (Blaffer 1972:79-85; Gossen 1974:262; Guiteras-Holmes 1961:204; Laughlin 1977, passim; Sexton 1992:147-150; Taggart 1983:209-211). The man and the vulture change clothes and the vulture-turned-man goes home to the farmer's wife. In one version, the husband-turned-vulture sees smoke rising from a burning forest and flies toward it to find a dead animal to eat. In another version, he is burned to death while seeking his food in the burning field. In yet another version, the wife asks her husband why he has feathers on his legs, and, when she sees the vulture perched on the edge of a pot, she throws boiling water at his head; thus, vultures have red, featherless necks. Sna Jtz'ibajom, in highland Chiapas, has made a play of this narrative,

Fig. 4 Painted cylinder vase, rollout. Palace scene, with a man in a vulture headdress, back-to-back with a man in a deer headdress. Photograph ©Justin Kerr 1982 (1775).

in which the vulture-husband works so hard that everyone admires him; he stinks because he works.

The vulture, circling over a dead animal, is associated not only with the farmer but also with a man in a hunter's hat in Maya art. A vulture-shaman interacts with the hunting gods in a Mexican narrative (Meza 1988:73-74). In Aguaruna beliefs (Peru), a king vulture must be killed, left where it falls, and covered with a shelter to protect it from other vultures (M. Brown 1986:90,159). After the body has rotted, it is burned, and from the ashes will spring a plant that the hunter carries for improved hunting abilities.

Vulture Symbolism in Central and Northern South America.

Costa Rica has vulture symbolism similar to that in the Maya area (Ferrero, in Bardawil 1981:102-103; Gonzalez Chaves and Gonzalez Vasquez 1989:112,129-134,137,138; see also Stone 1972:200; Tillett 1988:61-62). In Bribri and Cabecar cosmology of the Talamanca region, the four supports of the world were placed (or sown) by vultures, and a vulture (black or turkey) holds the central pole of the cosmic house with his feet — he was the only being who could climb high enough to hold it. He helped the major god, Sibo, construct the house. Sibo took the form of a vulture when he came to earth to teach people to dance. He brought the seeds from which people sprouted, and he selected the clans that had the right to produce shamans. The son of the god was charged with teaching agriculture, song, and dance. Vultures are culture heroes in Costa Rican lore, and they are a prominent motif in Pre-Columbian art there (Bardawil 1981:nos. 31, 146, 156, 249-254; Stone 1972:173, 191, 200).

For the Waiwai, in Venezuela, vulture people are at the top of the sky world (Fock, in Bierhorst 1988:70-71). The chief/shaman of a Kagwahiv origin myth ascended to a superior level of the sky, "above the vultures" (Roe 1982:131). In a variation on a frequent theme, vultures in a Kamairu (Brazil) narrative rescue the hero from the top of a tree that his brother caused to grow taller (Villas Boas and Villas Boas 1973:221-222). On the Guajiro Peninsula, the vulture has a reputation as a good dancer (Wilbert, Simoneau, and Perrin 1986:53).

In Kogi myth, from the Santa Marta region of Colombia (the old Tairona heartland), Duginavi, who lived in the sky, went to the king vulture and said: "Lend me your clothing, so that I can descend to earth" (Reichel-Dolmatoff 1985, II:38-40). Each day Duginavi went down to earth to plant, returning to the sky at night. Another supernatural being, Nyiueldue, who admired and wanted his feathers, caught him and kept him imprisoned. His daughter however, went to the bird, and they fell in love. When the daughter was inside with the bird, the father burned the house, but Duginavi protected the girl with his open wings (thus, the king vulture has dark shoulders). He had put two squashes in the house, which burned, so that the father thought they were the remains of the lovers. Later, hungry because of the damage of the fire to his crops, the father went to Duginavi's field, not knowing it was Duginavi's because he had seen him only as a vulture. Nyiueldue asked for food, and Duginavi told him to go to the middle of the field. Then Duginavi set fire to the field and burned him. From the remains rose up the king vulture, the same one who

had lent his garments to Duginavi.

The Vulture: flood, Fire, and Sun.

Vultures appear in many origin myths, including Mesoamerican flood stories. In a Maya narrative from Chamula, the flood that destroyed the wooden men receded only when a vulture alit on a floating box containing the lone surviving couple (Gossen 1974:321). In another Chamula narrative, Santo Tomas hurled a rotted cow skin into the air to create a vulture to consume the foulness left by the flood (ibid.:335). The vulture is associated with eating flood remains also in Zinacanteco accounts (Laughlin 1977:260). In various Mesoamerican narratives, a vulture ate carrion or the maggots from it and thereafter was condemned to eat these things forever. A dove, not having eaten for forty days, descended, ate the dead, and became a vulture. Even angels ate carrion after the flood and became vultures (Burns 1983:58; Madsen 1960:126; Morris 1987:111; Taggart 1983:192-196). In a tale from Yucatan, the vulture is caught after he has incited the other birds to eat a feast that a great prince had laid out (Abreu Gomez 1985:64). As punishment, his head was shaved and he was condemned to eat putrid meat. Food, not flood, is the motivation for this narrative.

A narrative from Paraguay (Mbya) tells that the gods, having recreated the world after the flood, placed their son on earth (Cadogan, in Levi-Strauss 1969:140). He created new humans and set about getting fire for them from its sole owners, the vulture-sorcerers, by having his son (the toad) simulate death to attract the vultures. The vultures built a fire, pretending that they wished to revive him. The hero and his son were successful and stored the embers in wood which humans would use to create fire by rotating a drill. As punishment for attempted cannibalism, the sorcerers were doomed to remain carrion-eating vultures.

This myth is one of a large group of vulture narratives found from the Maya area well down into South America (see, for example, Roe 1982:260-261). Maya and other Mesoamerican vulture narratives have been published by Thompson, Taube, and others. What is perhaps not so well known to Mayanists is the range of such narratives to the south.

In a Kekchi and Mopan Maya myth, Moon, who was then as bright as her husband, Sun, was unhappy with him (Thompson 1930:129-132). Moon was weeping when a black vulture came along. She told the bird her problems, and he took her off to the king vulture. Sun, learning of this, hid under a deerskin and persuaded a horsefly to make a vulture think it was carrion. The vulture arrived, and Sun grabbed the bird and made it take him to the palace of the king vulture. “See how white is the fine stone house of my master,” said the vulture. Sun reclaimed his wife by tricking the king vulture, causing him to have a toothache through magic use of maize grains, a motif that takes us back to Vucub Caquix in the Popol Vuh.

In one version of the myth, Sun and Moon leave the king vulture to go to a small hut to spend the night (Thompson 1930:136-137). The king vulture sets the hut on fire, and Sun sets fire to a piece of brush in the hut. Concealed by this fire, the couple ascends to heaven to take up their celestial duties. The king vulture finds the charred wood of the brush and thinks it is the remains of their bodies. This has the pattern of the Kogi myth, related above.

In Colombia, the Barasana tell that Yawira, one of the first women, eloped with the king vulture (Hugh-Jones 1979:300-301). She was a fish-producing anaconda who became a frog that was the mother of feathers and dance ornaments. The first man, who was the son of Jaguar Woman and the Primal Sun, followed her to the vulture’s home, where he destroyed all the vultures save Vulture Chief.

Women figure in a number of vulture myths. In Yucatan, the vulture’s sister was a beauty and the man who married her had to do bride service in the house of her family, which was a cave (Burns 1983:163-170). When they were in the cave, they were people, but when they left, they were vultures. In an inevitable inversion of the beautiful-woman theme, a “spirit” in Belize has the body of a woman and the face of a vulture (Thompson 1930:110).

A Tukano (Colombia) narrative tells that a man, looking for a woman, realized how beautiful the vulture’s daughters were (Reichel-Dolmatoff 1988:75-76). In an Arawak (Arecuna) myth, a man who was chasing a toad got stranded on an island at the foot of a tree. The vultures in the tree covered him with white excrement (Koch-Grunberg, in Levi-Strauss 1978:139-140). Venus and Moon refused to help him, but Sun took him in his canoe, ordered his daughters to groom the man, and offered him one of his daughters. The man was attracted to the daughter of the king vulture however, and so he stayed with her and lost his chance for immortality.

The hero of a Yekuana (Guiana) narrative smeared himself with foul-smelling grease and lay

down next to a putrescent tapir carcass (Bierhorst 1988:71; see also Wilbert 1970:118-20). When the vultures arrived, he picked out the one he thought was the chief. It was not the chief however, but his daughter, who turned into a beautiful woman, and to marry her, the man had to undergo a series of Herculean labors.

The stories of culture heroes who hide under a deerskin or inside a tapir carcass to attract a vulture can be traced at least down to the Gran Chaco. The wide distribution of the myths and the importance of vulture iconography in Pre-Columbian art suggests time depth. There are variations and substitutions, but many of the heroes of these narratives probably became the Sun. The narratives often concern twins, or older and younger brothers, who are or will be heavenly bodies. Again, this is a common Maya theme. In all of these narratives, there are surely astronomical identities that vary considerably.

In northeastern Brazil, a Tupi group (Tembe) believed that the king vulture possessed fire, a frequent theme in these myths (Nimuendaju, in Frazer 1974:130; Levi-Strauss 1969:140-141). The people killed a tapir and when it was full of maggots, the king vultures came down, pulled off their feather garments, and appeared in human form to gather the maggots to roast. (Myths about vultures tend to emphasize their "humanness," for example disrobing or changing clothes is a theme, as is cooking food.) The Indians had built a shelter for their shaman near the carcass, and the shaman grabbed the fire while the vultures rushed for their clothes. The hero stored the fire in the trees from which the Indians now extract fire.

Although many narratives describe the stealing of fire from the vulture, a myth from the Gran Chaco tells that the ancestors of the Choroti, having survived the destruction of the world by fire, came out of the hole in which they had taken refuge, but had no fire. A vulture voluntarily gave them the fire that he had kept smoldering in a tree (Frazer 1974:124).

In a Kuikuru myth from the Xingu region of Brazil, a two-headed king vulture is the master of fire (Villas Boas and Villas Boas 1973:108-110). The hero draws a picture of a large deer and hides under it. Vultures come, and when the king vulture arrives with "a great light," they all start to eat the "deer." The hero grabs the king vulture and tells the bird that he wants only the fire. An ember is brought and fanned into flame, but frogs squirt water at it. At last a flame is burning, and the king vulture gives instructions about making fire from wood.

For the Tapiete of the Gran Chaco, the black vulture was the keeper of fire. As in a number of other narratives, this one involves frogs or toads that help or hinder (Frazer 1974:125; see also Wassen 1934:644-649). In a Guarayu myth, a man bathed in putrid water and lay down as if dead (Nordenskiold, in Levi-Strauss 1969:141; Wassen 1934:644). The black Vultures, masters of fire, settled on him and started a fire to cook and eat him. The man got up and scattered the embers, and his ally the toad swallowed one.

The Shipaya of Brazil tell of a vulture flying with a firebrand in its talons, who mocked the culture hero because he had no fire (Nimuendaju, in Frazer 1974:129; Levi-Strauss 1969:141). The hero, after watching the vulture gorge on carrion, lay down on the ground, died, and rotted. The vulture came, but he left his fire on a tree-stump beyond the hero's reach. Nothing was left of the hero but bones, so he turned himself into a stag and died again. His arms penetrated the ground like roots and emerged as two bushes, each with five branches. The vulture arrived and placed his fire in the branches—the hero's hands. Then the vulture, in a helpful mode, instructed the hero in the art of making fire by rubbing sticks together. In another version, it is the eagle who is the guardian of fire, and the instructor in its use.

In a Xingu (Juruna) myth, the hero (the son of the jaguar), in order to get fire from the eagle, transformed himself into a dead tapir and lay waiting with one leg in the air (Villas Boas and Villas Boas 1973:242). The vulture saw him first. Then, the eagle came and hung his fire-carrying bag on the leg, but he saw the eyes of the tapir move and flew off, "saying that it was a fraud and no tapir." The hero made his arm into a dead branch, and the eagle came back to light a fire, so that the vulture could have roast tapir. The eagle hung his carrying case on the branch, and the hero stood up with the bag.

With the Apapocuva, in the extreme south of the Mato Grosso in Brazil, the hero pretended to die, so realistically that his body began to decay (Nimuendaju, in Levi-Strauss 1969:139-40). King Vultures gathered around the corpse and built a fire. In a shorthand version of the myth, the hero, "the older of the twins," says, "I will make myself stink, and let's see if we find fire" (Bierhorst 1988:32).

In a Shipibo myth from eastern Peru, a spark was stolen to start a fire in a tree. A storm put it out, but vultures and curassows protected the fire with outstretched wings, which used to be all white, and were now partially blackened by fire (Roe 1982:68). The species was probably the king vul-

ture. A number of myths explain how the king Vulture's wings were blackened by fire, or his body whitened by the Sun. In a Waiwai myth, vultures paddling the Sun's canoe were blackened by his fire (Roe 1986:fig. 2 and personal communication, 1990).

According to a Xingu (Kamaiura) origin myth, the king vulture owned not fire, but the day (Villas Boas and Villas Boas 1973:89-93). Because their starving people could not work in the dark to get food, Sun and his brother, Moon, wanted the day. Sun made a tapir effigy and filled it with decaying things. The king vulture was leery of the world below, so he made the vultures shave themselves bald before the trip down (presumably so that they would not be grasped by the "hair" in capture). When the birds arrived at the "tapir," Sun and Moon were hidden inside. The king vulture came last. Sun caught it and held it hostage until the guan brought the day in the form of the Scarlet Macaw.

The importance of the king vulture in this myth is indicated by the bird's instructions to the hero and his people. He explains that the day is born in the morning and fades in the afternoon, that night will return. "Don't think that… we stole the day from you… It will always come back." He says that the day is for making gardens, hunting, and fishing, and the night is for sleeping. He speaks primarily to the Sun, but the advice is social.

The Vulture and the Sky.

In nature, the vulture flies toward the sun. In myth, the vulture is not a solar symbol, as the eagle, hummingbird, and macaw are, but it interacts with the sun. It transports the sun and the moon. The king vulture, or another vulture, is the keeper of bright things—fire, day, moon, and the wife or daughter of the sun—at least temporarily, like the false sun, Vucub Caquix. In a Caraja myth, from the Ge region in Brazil, the hero feigned death to lure the king vulture, whom he asked for the celestial lights—the stars, the sun, and the moon, all the things that lighted the earth (Baldus, in Levi-Strauss 1969:161). He also asked the vulture to teach man the arts of civilization, including how to make fire. In a Tukuna myth, the hero kills a tapir, which he gives to the vultures on the condition that they take him to the sky, where he becomes the constellation Orion (Nimuendaju, in Levi-Strauss 1969:223n). There was and is a Maya vulture constellation according to Thompson (1972:48, 53), although he does not identify it. The moon's concupiscence with the vulture in the Codex Dresden (p. 19) is presumably a metaphor for conjunction.

The vulture was an important being in the everyday lives of ancient peoples. According to the Kogi today, "No one hates this animal, because it does not do anything bad" (Reichel-Dolmatoff 1985, II:132). Its presence in art and origin myth reflects its positive, transforming character and its importance in the cosmological structure. Both the vulture's natural history and its mythic roles indicate its importance and its connotations for the Classic Maya and other Precolumbian peoples. It is a soaring, shamanic bird, associated with highness and brightness. It is a transformer of death and sacrificial offerings. It is related to agriculture, for which the rulers were responsible. It is a civilized being of many talents.

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