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The Cultural Languages of Nature Other Voices in the Maya World

The 30 or so Maya peoples who have survived until our day occupy a world as vast as it is full of wonders.¹ Its signs and symbols are very diverse, although often quite close in their meanings, since the descriptions and analyses of morphology, habitats, customs, and attributes of real or marvelous animals, minor deities, and other supernatural beings are part of a taxonomy full of literal, allegorical, and moral meanings. Whether convergent or divergent, these signs and symbols are subjected to cultural reads that determine the way of looking at the world, domesticating it, and living with it.

Other reads, other voices, speak to entities that the Maya consider we share natural and supernatural spaces with; entities in many cases deeply rooted in Mesoamerica, which sometimes combine with the products of baroque curiosity and the “Christianization” of symbols that took

place during the Renaissance, to integrate a complex text that simultaneously writes in past, present, and future, and whose interpretation passes through a culturally determined read.

World-book, universe-text, which from millennia ago has not stopped being written and whose reading is different every time, since they are singular readings that involve reconfiguring the constellation of the memory, which demands reading it with new eyes, different from what eyes like our own can attempt, since they often overflow the containers where the West today deposits the memory, making a privilege of writing and dismissing other forms of registration that may be equally valuable and that, in fact, have been equally valuable in other eras.²

It is by no means strange that, even in different forms, the Maya go through their lives today paying attention to nature’s signs and advisories, bestowing meanings on the elements they are in continual contact with. The slightest variation, the most insignificant exception in the behav-

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ior of the nature around them, is an indication of an event, a change. Throughout their days, the Maya read the nature surrounding them, interpreting it with ancestral memory. But, they are not mere passive readers; they can elicit and establish a profound dialogue with it. They listen and speak, ask and offer, when they know that they are dealing with its gifts and reciprocal gifts. At times, however, they know that the intricate nature of the text requires a more experienced reader, and that is why they must resort to a specialist; while at other times, they limit themselves to waiting because they have learned from common knowledge that, in the face of some advisories, “nothing more can be done.” The only possible option is to accept that the time loaned to them is over, and it is time to return to the primal mother.

Until that moment arrives, the code of the social memory helps them interpret both the common and the extraordinary in day-to-day living. And the thing is, as you frequently hear in the countryside, “It’s not just that; it’s not just that.” Things do not happen without a reason. It is not by chance that a bird sings its portent of illness or death precisely in front of a given house, or that leads a coyote or a deer to cross the streets of the town in the middle of the day, carrying an often ill-fated message.

In fact, not even the scenery that we see when we move through the vast lands where these Maya peoples live is the same as what they see. Although they pass by us, we are not capable of reading the messages that certain plants bring with them, or perceive the vagabond skeletons like the Ch’ol *chechebak*, the Tojolobal *jimjim’echmal*, the “bony woman” of the Yucatán Peninsula, the *okinamá* heads that roll down the roads, or the legs that bleed on Yucatecan plazas like Ekmul’s.³ Our eyes are blind to the serpents with wings or manes,⁴ water dragons, the sirens of the lakes, or the “mothers of cacao,” who protect the precious almond of the mountain and Tabasco’s Chontalpa region.

And there are also celestial singularities. So, a Kaqchikel does not see a Milky Way in the heavens, a road of milk

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spilling from the breast of the goddess Hera to nurse Hercules with, as the Greeks and Romans did, but rather a *Ru bey palama*, a road of the sea tortoise, associated with the track it leaves when it moves through the sand.⁵ And a Tojolabal does not see in the firmament the “little eyes of Santa Lucía,” but rather a pair of “deer eyes”; and he also does not conceive of shooting stars, but rather the excrement of those shining beings who live on the stars and that, when it falls to earth, becomes obsidian, also called defecation of a star, or *k’oy kanal*.

Without us noticing, tiny imps, blacks with outsized penises, and formidable *tsuk* it, who have only one arm and one leg and lack anuses, move about, while in Tseltal lands wander the fearsome *lab*, the embodiment of Jesuits, religious, bishops’ deputies, and bishops hunting spirits to devour; and in the mountains the *wilikok* midgets meander with inverted feet. In the same way that the giant *ua’ay kot* walk along Yucatán’s walls—one foot on each, because they choose the parallel ones—, those same walls where lovers of tradition lay out food and offerings to tiny imps like the *aluxo’ob* and terrifying nocturnal personifications like the jaguars; those same walls where a *kakasbal* might lean, with his monstrous hair-covered body, his hundreds of feet and arms ending in crow talons, and monkey balls hanging in clusters.⁶

No matter how we try, we cannot perceive them. Even though our retinas have similar cones and rod cells, we are not culturally trained to see them; nor are our ears—no matter how hard we listen—capable of hearing and interpreting with the subtlety required the murmur produced by the leaden wings, bristling with small, razor-sharp slivers of flint of flesh-eating birds like the *Uay pop* or other voices of nature. Our touch cannot feel the texture of certain winds. How could we, without having been culturally educated, hear that “noise of the waters that run without making noise” or “run the [placid] waters in silence,” as the Tseltal language so exquisitely expresses the word *tzananet*?⁷

It is the exclusive privilege of the Maya to fully interpret the nature surrounding us; to make it comprehensible, domesticate it, read it, and propose different visions. Because landscape is clearly text susceptible of many readings; readings that, whether we know it or not, are done through a cultural present, pregnant with collective historical memory, which usually transmits the oral tradition, expressing personal experiences or communal myths

that can date back to creation itself, capable of manifesting themselves in dress, as shown by certain Maya *huipil* tops that feature planes of the cosmos, cycles of maize growth, or real or fantastic animals, or perpetuate themselves through ritual. Whether we say it or not, those rituals centered on maize, the sustenance of Man, forger of his flesh and architect of his bones, are at the same time the guardian of the spirit—it is not by chance that the Tseltal of Bachajón, Chiapas continue to leave an ear of corn next to a baby to prevent an evil being from stealing its soul. An authentic hierophany of the deity with which a mystical relationship existed and exists; that accompanies the individual from birth to grave, since some groups continue to cut their children's umbilical cord over an ear of corn and sow the child's first cornfield with the bloodstained kernels; and others place kernels or beverages made with the precious grain in the mouth of their dead. Or place on the breast of a dead mother an ear of corn for every child she leaves behind, so she will not miss them. . .

A grain of origin, linked to the divine as shown not only by mythology, but even by historical linguistics, since Maya texts from the colonial period like the *Chilam Balam* mention “divine grace,” even using the term in Spanish. This is, in effect, the “grace,” the evangelizers conceived as the gift of the deity, that makes it possible for the Christian to be fully Christian, that allows him, after death, to accede to blessedness. But, when the Maya texts speak of “grace,” they are referring euphemistically to maize. The theologians’ “grace” is an intangible, non-corporeal gift, a timeless well-being, personal, and out of this world; that of the Maya has another, tangible corporeal meaning: collective, daily, Earth-bound pleasure.

And even in the Great Beyond, the landscapes are different. Do the Tsotsil not speak of gardens where nursing babies suckle on the breasts hanging from a *ceiba* (a silk-cotton tree, the equivalent to the Nahuatl *Chichihualcuaauhco* and identical to the *ceiba* Landa described for the sixteenth-century Yucatecans), while the dead children of the Achi from Rabinal, metamorphosed into butterflies or hummingbirds, drink from the flowers? Do the Tseltal not affirm that in the sacred *ch'iibal* mountains, a parallel world where souls are watched over, nurseries of girlchild-souls are kept? Are not those caves in which those who sold their soul to the Owner of the Hills labor healing deer wounded by hunters with bad aim common in Maya

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world views? And what of the mirror-towns that lie beneath the lakes of the Guatemalan West, watching over the dead of the lakeside communities?⁸

There are even places where our familiar order is reversed, and it is not men who govern, but who are judged. So, in the language of the Kaqchikel of Santa Catarina Palopó, “In the other world, the animals rule. Thus, like here on the Earth where men rule, there the animals do. In the other world, just like on the Earth, there are mayors, aldermen, city councilmen. The *xoch* [owl] is the police commissioner, and the other animals hold other posts.” This opinion was shared by Don Sebastián Ordóñez, an outstanding Mam Ixtahucan wise man (†), who spoke to me about an Animal Council that meets in the hills “every four or five days,” and is responsible for judging and punishing human beings who mistreat animals.

Given that the landscapes of the imaginary have memories—in fact, they *are* memory—the meaning of not a few messages is obvious: the adulterer, the gossip, the drunkard, the night-owl, he who hunts excessively or attacks young animals, or he who is irreverent or disrespectful all clearly know what to expect when this or that being reveals itself to them with their centuries-old *exempla*. Dealing with the possible consequences, however, may require specialized help. Not just any human is capable of holding the necessary dialogue; direct exchange with the supernatural demands not only strength, diplomacy, and aplomb, but also a special state of grace that the very deities bestow. This specialist, called a *chimán*, *balbastix*, *h-men*, *chichqajau*, *aj'quin*, and a long etcetera, will then resort to his own forms of memory.

Forms that are not even immutable. Some indigenous writings from the colonial era tell us about how the Maya peoples, descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, left Babilonia; how their languages were born at the same time that the Tower of Babel was collapsing; how their leader, Balám Quitzé, opened the waters of the great sea with his staff; and, in *Chilam Balam*, conflate the Antichrist

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with the Spaniard, “[who] sucked dry the poor Indian.” Today, a Tsotsil may narrate how Jesus Christ comes down out of a plane to visit men, while a Tselal will describe the *ch'iibal* mountains (the parallel world mentioned above) as having not only cornfields, but also helicopters, computers, and televisions, and a Maya from Campeche will identify the Antichrist with the plumed serpent.⁹

Disturbingly up to date, the Maya live amidst a continual updating that cannot allow anyone to ignore the cybernetic changes or escape the buffeting of globalization. Does not a Quiché association use video-cameras and laptops to log the memories of their elders? Have the Maya from Quintana Roo not changed the objects linked to the cornfields and housework that were given to infants during the *hetz mek* ceremony, replacing them with English dictionaries and small plastic computers, without doubt more useful for their children's future work lives that seem inevitably tied to the service sector in Cancún and the Maya Riviera? Have not certain Protestant Maya from southern Yucatán opted to ask their pastors for a ceremony equivalent to the ancient *ch'a cháak*, a supplication for rain, next to an irrigation pump. Tradition and modernity, telescoped.

Determined to remain, the Maya peoples are putting their trust in re-creating their memory, abandoning, rearranging, mystifying, and even inventing meanings and signifiers, with the dual intent of invoking what has been forgotten and continually updating their own and others' versions of the past, in order to make them not a mere recounting of memory, but an authentic program for the future. ■■■

Notes

- 1 Located mainly in what are now Belize, Mexico, Honduras, and Guatemala, but also, due to emigration, in growing numbers in the United States and Canada.
- 2 Jean-Claude Schmitt speaks of this in *La raison des gestes dans l'Occident médiéval* (Paris: Gallimard, 1990), as does Simon Schama in *Landscape and Memory* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1995), among various others.
- 3 Terry Rugeley, *De milagros y sabios. Religión y culturas populares en el sureste de México, 1800-1876* (Mérida, Yucatán: UADY, 2012), p. 79.
- 4 Roldán Peniche Barrera, *El libro de los fantasmas mayas* (Mérida, Yucatán: Maldonado Editores, 1992), pp. 100-101.
- 5 René Acuña, ed., Fray Tomás de Coto, *Thesaurus verborum. Vocabulario de la lengua cakchiquel vel guatemalteca* (Mexico City: UNAM, 1983), p. 223. Certain colonial sources identify the tortoises called *Yax Coc Ah Mut* or *Yax Cocay Mut* as Gemini.
- 6 Peniche, op. cit., p. 61.
- 7 Domingo de Ara, *Vocabulario de lengua tzendal según el orden de Copanabastla*, Mario Humberto Ruz, ed. (Mexico City: UNAM, IIFL, 1986), p. 395.
- 8 Perla Petrich, “Tipología nocturna en los pueblos de Atitlán,” in Alain Breton, A. Monod, and Mario Humberto Ruz, eds., *Los espacios mayas: representaciones, usos, creencias* (Mexico City: UNAM, IIFL, and CNRS, 2002).
- 9 Pedro Pitarch, *Ch'ulel: una etnografía de las almas tzeltales* (Mexico City: FCE, 1996); Manuel Gutiérrez Estévez, “De la conversación yucateca al diálogo cristiano y viceversa,” in *De palabra y obra en el Nuevo Mundo* (Madrid: Siglo XXI de España, 1995) pp. 171-234.

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