

The Sowing and the Dawning: the Origins of Ancestral Maya Complexity

Conceptual Metaphors

In his novel *Men of Maize* Miguel Angel Asturias explores the indigenous ontology of Guatemalan Maya people, and its suppression by elite of European descent and culture. While magical realism is a literary trope, it manifests the animist alternative to Cartesian reasoning that is now coming into favor in archaeological interpretation generally and of the Maya past specifically. And it is predicated on the conceptual metaphor that the cultivation of maize is the same as the cycle of human generation, which is the same as the cycle of the sun: the sowing and dawning of creation. True immortality and divinity in this ontology is to be found not in a perpetual state of being, but rather in this cyclical and transformative one. In contrast to the metamorphosis of Ovid, the succession of human species in the 18th century K'iche' Maya Book of Council, the *Popol Vuh*, is not simply the degeneration of the magical but inanimate metal of men, rather it is organically transformative and moves from a being that is god-like in its vision and made of wood, the flesh of trees, to one that is myopic and is made of maize, the tree that dies to be reborn, the flesh of true god. The *Popol Vuh* also reveals that a motivating factor in the creation of humans—on the part of the creator deities—was to form a community of humans who would revere and remember the gods.

The tree, for Classical Mayan writers, was like it is for English speakers a metaphor for lineage, and the primordial trees were the gods. The Maya are children of precious jade green tree, the maize god, shaped as food from the flesh of that sown and dawned deity sprouted from his seed skull in the womb of the mother world, a pool in a mountain cave. That same mother in human form, as Maya mothers repeat and celebrate, transformed the kernels of maize into dough with her sweat. In this ontology people are not lesser beings inhabiting a Platonic shadow of the true reality known only to the gods, they are the children of those creator ancestors and collaborators with them in shaping the future of existence, even if they discern the future as through breath on a mirror. Their task is to nurture the gods by sustaining the world.

Adaptation and Innovation through Celebration

In the context of an emerging dependency on maize that invited episodes of hunger or famine among communities most committed to it, Mesoamerican sages articulated in narrative form creation stories that declared the original creator, and his progeny the hero ancestor to be an androgynous god who was maize and the first human descendants of maize to be rulers as well as apical ancestors. These creation stories both legitimized rulers and required rulers to be like maize, capable of being sown into the earth and resurrecting as sources of food. The ability to die and be reborn was already well understood as all people had a ritual specialist in their communities, a basic sensibility Western Hemisphere wide and established with the migrations from Asia. The rulers who came to power in the context of this

era were at once patriarchs and matriarchs of large kin groups in the first agrarian sedentary communities and sages well versed in curing, divination, ecstatic visioning, and questing. They formed regional sodalities linking up archipelagoes of such agrarian communities in a sea of hunter-gatherers and semi-sedentary peoples with initiation rituals formalizing the death and rebirth of maize as a human experience. Sodality members maintained solar calendar scheduled pilgrimages and festivals that moved maize and other foods in risk reducing networks of gift giving and soon thereafter of exchange. But while sodality membership was guided by kin group affiliation, it was determined by selection and election by existing initiates who governed in council with patriarchs, matriarchs of the community. Sodality members elected rulers and while these kings and queens were no doubt powerful patriarchs and matriarchs, they were ritually transformed into divine beings that separated them from their kin and made them responsible to communities and the regional network of communities.

Upon death, Middle Preclassic peoples--rulers and nonrulers alike—often were buried within residential spaces or kept as bundled bones on domestic altars. Not until the Classic period would monumental ancestor shrines come to shape the topography of the lowland Maya landscape. We propose that the bones of ancestors—whether displayed or secreted beneath living surfaces—formed the basis for memory communities and provided a material focus for larger organizational groups, such as sodalities. The scaling up of this practice to create massive ancestor shrines during the Classic period indicates the success of this strategy of claiming place through ancestor interment.

The maize-based sodalities of the Middle Preclassic expanded the regional networks to include more areas and resources in the exchange networks, and recruited new agrarian communities as they did so. The success of the emerging world of complex societies brought more people into the communities prepared to exchange labor and goods for food security. By the Late Preclassic Period the lowland Maya polities had emerged as larger and more powerful than the original lowland hearth area of the Gulf Coast Olmec, but they maintained the original sodality political structure of elective divine kingship. We propose that Late Preclassic Maya divine kings were initiated in the regional capital of El Mirador and then ruled in local councils of patriarchs and matriarchs, and the politics of kinship and kingship were likely complex and variable as is normally the case with pre-industrial states.

Background

Iconographic, pollen, and settlement evidence from the Gulf Coast and the Maya region suggests that while Archaic (4-3,000 BC) and Early Preclassic (2000-1000 BC) peoples engaged with maize, a commitment to maize as a core dietary staple did not happen until the Middle Preclassic Period (1000 BC.). This commitment was rapid and pervasive across Mesoamerica, a region characterized by significant variability in risk factors for a crop that is drought and pest sensitive. During the

Middle Preclassic, the basic cuisine of the Maya region was established: maize, beans, squashes, peppers, avocados, cacao and other tree fruits.

The agrarian lifestyle of Mesoamericans was scheduled by the seasonal cycle of the solar year. The commitment of Mesoamericans, including the Maya, to staple maize was concomitant with the florescence of complexity as identified in material symbol-systems, growth of ceremonial centers and sedentary communities, social differentiation, and long-distance trade. People buried their dead as revered ancestors, often with material symbols of their statuses and roles. The burial of young people with such symbols registers the importance of kinship and the assignment of ascribed social statuses and roles through it. The Gulf Coast Olmec of San Lorenzo established kingship in the context of a large ceremonial center and elaborate material symbol system. Emergent complex societies elsewhere in Mesoamerican show ties to the Olmec through the material symbol system and through long-distance trade in imperishable exotic commodities. But while there is evidence of emulation of the Gulf Coast Olmec, the maize god rulers do not emerge clearly until after the fall of San Lorenzo and the rise of La Venta in this region. The contribution of the lowland Maya and other peoples to the consolidation of the maize god kingship remains to be elucidated in the field. By the 8th century BC the institution of maize god kingship is well established in the Olmec region. By 400 BC it is present in the Maya lowlands. By 150 AD it is the basis for a regional civilization, potentially a hegemonic regional state, in the Maya lowlands.