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The Power of Flowers:
The Philosophy of Organism of the Maya

Juan Ferret

> "The ancient Maya civilizations are often popularly conceived as being strikingly unusual or strangely mysterious. Much recent research has served to dispel at least partly the aura of mystery, but a great deal remains to be learned…"[1]

Introduction

A few years ago, when I just began to examine the philosophical, astronomical, and cultural contributions of the Maya, my good friend and colleague John "Jack" Haddox told me about some materials he had that might prove useful for my research. The next morning, as I walked into the office, I found a large stack of materials in my mailbox. During the following weeks and months, more materials kept periodically appearing.

One of the most interesting pieces that Jack gave me was an unpublished manuscript he had written about the indigenous and colonial past of Mexico and their influence in contemporary society. His manuscript represents a survey of the cultural and philosophical development of ideas in Mesoamerica and how they may connect with contemporary Mexican thought. The passage quoted at the outset of this essay presents the type of motivation I used to examine the thought and culture of the Maya. In the spirit of Jack's manuscript, this paper is a brief analysis of the Maya's concepts of *k'in* and *nik*—literally, sun and flower—and how these concepts illustrate and encapsulate the metaphysical idea of organism that Alfred North Whitehead developed in the tradition of American pragmatism and process ontology.

After retelling the Lacandón story of creation in order to illustrate the importance of flower organisms in their view of creation of the Maya cosmos, the essay turns to a brief examination of Alfred North Whitehead's ontology of process. I will show how the

Maya concept of *k'in*, symbolized by a flower, turns out to be a powerful embodiment and illustration of three key concepts of Whitehead's philosophy of organism.

The Lacandón story of creation begins with *K'akoch*[2] creating all things including the sun and the earth. He next created a flower, the *bak nikte'* (plumeria rubra). From this flower the other Lacandón divinities were born. The *bak nikte'* is a plumeria flower (the same flower some scholars think is represented in the symbols of *k'in*) with great beautiful leaves and white four-petaled flowers.[3] The gods of the Lacandón that dealt with human affairs and were the carriers of time were born from this flower. These divinities went forth and created animals and humans, who were supposed to praise the gods. Since a plumeria gave birth to these gods, it became a symbol of regenerative power of immortality. For the Lacandón, the *bak nikte'* is a symbol of divine knowledge, immortality, life, and power.[4] A flower lies at the origin of creation.

1. American Philosophy: Whitehead's Philosophy of Organism

In the American philosophical tradition, the culmination of Alfred North Whitehead's philosophy of organism came as a development of ontological ideas about processes. In *Process and Philosophy*, Whitehead credits William James, John Dewey, and Henri Bergson as the main influences in his metaphysics. From Bergson, Whitehead uses the concept of time as duration where duration is the dynamic non-spatialized flow of existence. From Dewey, he borrows the concept of organism where an organism is primarily an entity constituted by the interaction with its environment. From James, Whitehead uses the spirit of pragmatism or the notion that a fruitful idea must match well with the demands of our reality.

For Bergson, time as duration entails the idea that entities are constituted by the dynamic evolution of existence. To think that an entity exists at an instant, at a point where time stops, is inconceivable. Entities are inherently dynamic and that dynamism puts them in contact with other entities around them. From his work as a mathematician and logician, but more significantly, from his analysis of relativity and quantum mechanics, Whitehead found that process metaphysics—where duration is treated as fundamentally entangled with the constitution of entities—matched more closely the

lessons from fundamental physics. Whitehead found in Bergson and James an ontology that treated dynamic evolution as fundamental to the constitutions of entities, rather than a phenomenon that *happens* to entities.

For Dewey the concept of organism represents the starting ground from which to develop epistemology and a theory of values. The relationship between organism and environment is a necessary one.

> The notion that in actual existence everything is completely determinate has been rendered questionable by the progress of physical science itself. Even if it had not been, complete determination would not hold of existences as an *environment.* For Nature is an environment only as it is involved in interaction with an organism, or self, or whatever name be used.[5]

Whitehead borrows this notion of organism and makes it central not just for a theory of values or epistemology but for his metaphysics. The metaphysics of organism makes central the interactions or processes between entities where the organism is not predetermined, but is rather determined by the interactions or processes. An organism is defined by its relation to the world and not prior to it.

From the idea of pragmatism, first conceived by Charles Sanders Pierce, James developed a framework for the examination of experience where one must seek to match ideas with what goes on in reality. An idea is as good as its consequences in the life-world. Whitehead adopted this attitude to craft his metaphysics of process, since entities need to be defined by the interactions or the effects they will experience.

Whitehead took the seed of Bergson's notion of duration, Dewey's concept of organism, and James's pragmatism to cultivate a metaphysics of process—a philosophy of organism, as he preferred to refer to it—where "the subject emerges from the world."[6] The purpose of the philosophy of organism is to "explain the emergence of the more abstract things from the more concrete things."[7] In this metaphysics, relations supplant substance as the fundamental element of reality and becoming trumps static being.

There are three main ideas supporting Whitehead's metaphysics of organism: actual entity, prehension, and the ontological principle. For Whitehead "[a]n actual entity is a process, and is not describable in terms of the morphology of a 'stuff.'"[8] An actual entity is not already there in the world. Rather, an entity is made by the interactions that occur.

These interactions are what Whitehead describes as prehensions and a prehension is the relation or bond of the actual entity to the world. Without prehensions, there are no entities. The relations or bonds that make the entities are both actual and potential so "that everything is positively somewhere in actuality, and in potency everywhere."[9] This is the ontological principle. In short, the philosophy of organism is the metaphysical position that states that actual entities are processes formed by prehensions or relations to other actual entities in the making of actualities from potentialities.

3. The Maya Concept of *k'in*

The Maya concept of *k'in*, as illustrated by the symbol of *nik*, can be understood in light of Whitehead's concept of organism.

According to León-Portilla, *k'in* is a variation of a Maya term that primarily means *sun* in the proto-Maya and classic Maya languages.[10] *K'in* is therefore a term that can be considered properly Mayan since variations can be found in the different Maya languages. Most importantly, however, is that the term connotes and denotes similar ideas throughout the different Maya groups.

The fact that this term is present—not only at the time of the Conquest, but in our own time in the vocabulary of such separated groups as the Yucatec Maya as compared to the Quiché, Cakchiquel, Mam, Pocomán, and others of the Highlands of Guatemala as well as the Tzotzil and Tzeltal of Chiapas, themselves groups considerably different from the Maya communities of Honduras—is proof of the ancient origin of the semantic complex "sun-day-time" connoted by *k'in*.[11]

K'in, furthermore, is a pluralistic term when it comes to its associated meanings. Besides meaning *sun, k'in* means *day*. The movement of the sun, as it rises (*lak-k-kin*) through the celestial abode making things visible and as it sets (*chi-kin*), constitutes the visible presence of the sun. The daylight part of day is the visible part of *k'in*. But *k'in* also designates the full complete cycle of the movement of the sun through the dark hours when it travels through the underworld, coming to a full circle. This complete cyclical movement is also designated as *k'in*: a day cycle. Since, as we have seen, the days are the fundamental units of calendars and of the keeping of time, *k'in* also comes to signify

the movements of the cycles themselves, time. *K'in*, then, primarily represents the concept of sun-day-time. What is remarkable is that *k'in* is not only one of the most frequent hieroglyphs throughout the Maya kingdoms but a term that became associated with the Maya divinities.[12]

> …in the case of *k'in*, the concept itself was firmly embedded in Maya mythology and world view. Apart from secondary aspects, the variants of the *k'in* hieroglyph point at the symbolism proper to the solar deity, among others that known [sic.] as *God* …when treating of the figures of the gods that appear as 'bearers of the burdens of time', there will be seen the consistent relationship between the deities and each distinct period or cycle.[13]

As Thomson, Seler, and León-Portilla point out, the many different divine figures become *bearers of the burden of time*. This means that different divinities would come into prominence during a certain cycle that could be determined by the sages from previous experiences and close examination of past histories. These divinities would be the divinities that had to be worshiped during that particular cycle. At the end of the cycle another would substitute the divine being and a new cycle would begin. Taking care of *k'in* during the cycle became the responsibility of that divinity. The divine being would have to carry *k'in* to fruition; that is, the particular divinity would have to make sure that the cycle was properly fulfilled so life would continue. The continuation of existence would become a burden for the different divinities carrying *k'in*. "Throughout the cosmic ages, life was reborn thanks to *k'in*. Man recognized and thus approached the gods as bearers of the different periods: their faces were living portraits of time."[14] The gods were the carriers of the burden of time, *k'in*.

This association of *k'in* with the divine indicated that *k'in* was not just merely an abstract concept that would aid the understanding of the different cycles of existence. Rather, *k'in* was a concept that denoted the most profound elements of existence from the minute cycles of earthly things to the divine. León-Portilla says: "*K'in*—sun-day-time—was not an abstract entity but a reality enmeshed in the world of myths, a divine being, origin of the cycles which govern all existing things."[15]

There are many representations for *k'in* but the most common is a glyph image of a four-petaled flower. Eric Thomson says: "The glyph resembles, and in all probability

represents, a four-petaled flower. It seems very probable that this is a conventionalized picture of some species of plumeria."[16] Why use a flower to represent more complex concepts like sun, day, and time? The simple answer is that a flower grows thanks to the appearance of the sun. Even some flowers are able to follow the daily cycle by opening its petals in the morning, following the circling movement of the sun, and closing its bloom when the sun gets devoured by the earth monster as it continues its cycle through the underworld. A flower also attentively follows the other cycles of the sun. It grows when it's time and returns back in death into the earth to replenish and regenerate new flowers. Flowers share in the movement of the sun, and like the sun have a life above ground and a life below ground by way of their roots. Like the sun and the gods, they have the power to help regenerate and aid procreation. Thomson writes: "The plumeria is a symbol of procreation…"[17] Paying attention to a flower (or some flowers at least), furthermore, reveals the movements of the sun and simultaneously the days, months, and years. So a flower would be a good representative image of the sun here on earth. No wonder then that a flower becomes the principal symbol for *k'in* and can be found in the backs or foreheads of many of the divinities that carry the burden of time.

Moreover, the appreciation for flora goes beyond the mere need of sustenance or beauty. As we will see, certain flowering trees, like the ceiba tree, were primordial for their understanding of space-time and were the foundation of the human plane of existence. The ceiba tree reached for the heavens but also reached, with its roots, to the underworld as it shared existence in this horizontal plane. That is, trees and flowers share, like the gods, in all levels of existence. This is unlike humans who can only really live in the horizontal plane. Flowers and flowering trees became a symbol for *k'in* because they shared the vision and existence of the gods.

But what is *k'in*'s precise epistemic role? Can human beings fully understand *k'in*? Could human beings have a certain amount of control of the movement of *k'in*? Can *k'in* give further knowledge? It is clear from the intimate connection of *k'in* with the divine that that which possesses *k'in* possesses some sort of knowledge. It is unclear, however, what its precise epistemic role was in classic Maya society or the extent that the sages, the *ah kinob,* dwelled on this question. The sages came to knowledge of the cycles by paying close attention to the different elements involved in the calendrical cycles and

their connection to earthly events. From the initial pages of the Popol Vuh, however, we know that knowledge of all cycles and their complex interconnections escapes human vision. It is only for the gods to grasp the full set of interconnections. But while full comprehension of *k'in* is not humanly possible, humans can get quite good at grasping the most significant cycles and interconnections. Since knowing existence is tantamount to knowing *k'in* and its movements, to have knowledge is tantamount to grasping *k'in*. Hence, the Maya concept of *k'in,* sun-day-time, becomes closely associated with knowledge.[18]

In the Quiché Maya Council Book of Vision, or the *Popol Vuh*,[19] the dawn of creation finds the sky and a pool of water at rest in the universe. In the water there is *Gucumatz*, Heart of Earth, the Plumed Serpent whose body is covered with quetzal feathers, and in the sky there is *Tepeu*, Heart of Sky, whose name is also Hurricane. "They are great knowers, great thinkers in their very being."[20] *Gucumatz* and *Tepeu* talked, meditated, and united their thoughts in the night so that humanity and the world should come into existence. They discussed who would be in charge of light and darkness, life and death, sustenance and nurture. They created the mountains, valleys, and rivers first. Then they created the trees and bushes on those mountains and valleys followed by animals that would have a voice, so the deer and birds were created next. Then *Gucumatz* and *Tepeu* asked them to praise them for having been created, but the animals only squawked and howled. *Gucumatz* and *Tepeu* were then displeased for their creation was not able to speak properly. They said:

> You will simply have to be transformed. Since it hasn't turned out well and you haven't spoken, we have changed our word: what you feed on, what you eat, the places where you sleep, the places where you stay, whatever is yours will remain in the canyons, the forests. Although it turned out that our days were not kept, nor did you pray to us, there may be strength in the keeper of the days, the giver of praise whom we have yet to make.[21]

So *Gucumatz* and *Tepeu* experimented with the creation of a being that would be responsible for the counting of the days and that would praise the creator gods, but they made beings of mud who could not turn their heads, would easily crumble, and could not keep count of the days. They asked: "What is there for us to make that would turn out

well, that would succeed in keeping our days and praying to us?"[22] Then they invoked Grandfather of Day and Grandmother of Light, *Xpiyacoc* and *Xmucane,* to be the day-keepers and to design humans that would glorify the Lords of Creation as well as keep track of the days. *Xpiyacoc*, the divine matchmaker, and *Xmucane*, the divine midwife, made beings out of wood that resembled carvings. But these beings failed to keep track of the days and thus failed in the performance of daily worship and were destroyed by *Gucumatz* and *Tepeu* with floods from the sky, with animals tearing their flesh, and, if that wasn't enough, animating their wooden and stone tools which then turned against them, destroying their faces. They became the monkeys of today.

In their fourth attempt to make beings that will keep track of days and worship, *Xmucane* was told by fox, parrot, crow, and coyote of a place where corn grew. She mixed grounded corn and water to create human flesh and blood. Humans were crafted on the divine *metate* out of white and yellow maize. The first four androgynous humans, aptly named "mother-fathers," received the names *Jaguar Quitzé, Jaguar Night, Not Right Now*, and *Dark Jaguar*. This time the gods got it right and the humans worshipped at the right time and kept track of the cycles of existence with precision. The knowledge obtained from keeping track of the days in the calendars made the gods worry that they had created beings too divine and thus too knowledgeable, such that after a dialogue the gods decided to blur their vision. "They [the four humans] were blinded as the face of a mirror is breathed upon. Their vision flickered. Now it was only from close up that they could see what was there with any clarity. And such was the loss of the means of understanding, along with the means of knowing everything, by the four humans. The root was implanted."[23] This is why humans long for knowledge and understanding sought through the keeping of the days and cycles of existence.[24]

4. Flowers and Philosophy

Flowers are the epitome of what constitutes an organism and thus humans must grasp their dynamic essence. Treated this way, flowers are the most visible and necessary of actual entities. Their prehensions with the earth, sun, humans, water, etc., form them and in turn inform those in contact with them. A flower's power comes from the actual and

potential interaction with others in their environment and not from their constitutions as isolated objects. The power of the maize flower comes from its potential interaction with humans. The power of many plumerias comes from the potential to heal and kill with their poison. A flower, understood like the Maya did as illustrative of the all powerful cycle of *k'in*, embodies the essence of Whitehead's philosophy of organism, as an actual entity defined by its prehensions in the movement from potentiality to actuality. Conceived this way, the Maya understanding of existence fits the mold of Whitehead's philosophy of organism, focusing less on abstract notions and perhaps more on necessary relations of the everyday, with a flower at the center of culture.

Jack Haddox also represents this image of flowering *k'in* and lies therefore at the center of his community. Through his teaching and his writings many have benefited from the fruits of his intellect and provided the fertile ground for future minds to grow. His selfless dedication to the pursuit of knowledge has always entailed making his community and his environment richer, fuller, and more productive. He is celebrated for these fruits, and these fruits are precisely what the divinities in the Popol Vuh set us out to do. Jack is indeed an *ah kinob*, one who knows, a sage, the personified flowering *k'in*.

Notes

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[1] Jack Haddox, from an unpublished manuscript on the thought and culture of Mesoamerica, p. 88.
[2] *Xpiyacoc* in the Popol Vuh and *Hunab Ku* for the Yucatec Maya.
[3] For an image of a plumeria rubra, go to http://www.killerplants.com/goodies/plumeria.asp. The Mexica referred to this highly praised flower as *cacaloxochitl*. A flower that was a divine symbol of regenerative immortality and could not be picked or even smelled by mere commoners. "Roys/Bac/124: Sac-nicte ("white nicte"). Plumeria alba, L. Prescribed for throat complaints, aching bones, convulsions, and as a charm for flatulence. The chac-("red") nicte and the sac-("white") nicte were considered to be the father and mother of the head of the Lacandón pantheon (Roys, *Ethno-Botany*, 306; Tozzer, *A comparative Study of the Mayas and the Lacandóns*, 93). The sac-nicte is cited in an incantation for erotic-seizure (MS p. 31)." http://www.famsi.org/reports/96072/zdic1.htm.
[4] As we will see in the next section, the Earth Monster that holds the world plain of creation is sometimes referred to as the Water Lily Monster, *nik te' ha.*
[5] Dewey, John. *John Dewey, Volume 12: 1938, Logic: The Theory of Inquiry*. Carbondale: Souther Illinois University Press, 1991 (orig. 1938). p. 110.
[6] Sherburne, Donald W. "Whitehead, Alfred North," in Robert Audi (ed.), *The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy,* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995.
[7] Whitehead, Alfred. (1978) *Process and Reality*. New York: The Free Press, 1978 (orig. 1929), 20.
[8] Ibid, 41.
[9] Ibid, 40.
[10] Following the work of the linguist Norman McQuown Miguel León-Portilla adopts the spelling *kinh* instead of the Yucatec kin and the Quiché *kih. Yet, to be consistent I have used my preferred spelling* k'in. León-Portilla 1988, 17.
[11] León-Portilla 1988, 17
[12] Thomson 1960, 22 and 142.
[13] León-Portilla 1988, 24.
[14] León-Portilla 1988, 37.
[15] León-Portilla 1988, 33.
[16] Thomson 1960, 142.
[17] Thomson 1960, 142.
[18] More would need to be offered in terms of evidence to make this claim truly convincing, but there is no room to do so in this short essay.
[19] The *Popol Vuh* or council book of the Quiché Maya was written in Santa Cruz Quiché Maya around 1550-55 in Quiché Maya using the Latin alphabet. It is a historical, theological, metaphysical, astronomical, agricultural, literary, ethical text designed to give vision and knowledge to the highland Maya of the Quiché area.
[20] Tedlock, Dennis. *Popol Vuh: The Definite Edition of the Mayan Book of the Dawn of Life and the Glories of God and Kings*. New York: Touchstone Books, 1996. p. 64.
[21] Ibid, 68.
[22] Ibid, 69.
[23] Ibid, 148.

[24] Ibid, 145-151.