The Flow of Nectar and Blood:

Maya Philosophy and World Vision

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Chapter One – Introduction

In 1511, a Spanish caravel traveling from Darién in Panama to Santo Domingo ran aground near the coast of Jamaica during a Caribbean storm. The survivors were able to drift into Yucatan shores but were taken captive by the Maya. A friar in training, Gerónimo de Aguilar, and a professional soldier, Gonzalo Guerrero, reported that the captain, Juan de Valdivia, and a few other sailors were immediately sacrificed in a bloody ritual. After surviving the initial ordeal Gerónimo and Gonzalo knew their time for sacrifice was near, for the Maya seemed to be preparing for an important festival. Not willing to accept their fate, they escaped and their tale is now part of history.¹

Their paths, however, differed significantly. Gerónimo was captured and enslaved for seven years until he crossed the path of Hernán Cortés. Gerónimo had learned Yucatec during his captivity and became one of the two translators in Cortés’s expedition against the Mexicas. The other translator was Malitzin who, with her knowledge of Nahuatl and Maya, became an invaluable addition to the Spanish expedition. Her story is now both fable and history as La Malinche. Together they offered Cortés a window into the Mexica universe. Gerónimo’s choice was clear and he eagerly rejoined his compatriots when the opportunity came.² Gerónimo remained a Spaniard until the end.

After his escape, Gonzalo Guerrero arrived at Chetumal where he adopted the Maya customs, married, fathered three sons, and became a feared warrior for the
Cakchikel Nachan Ka’an. When the summons from Cortés arrived he either ignored or refused them and chose a life with the Maya. In 1536 when Spain was trying to pacify and control the trade routes in Honduras, they confronted Chetumal and its domination of the routes. After a bloody battle the victorious Spanish soldiers were baffled at finding the pierced, tattooed, and lifeless body of their countryman. Gonzalo Guerrero had lived as a Maya and fought for Chetumal until the end.iii

This was a remarkable moment in history. It was not only the first significant encounter between Europeans and the Maya, but the path to the devastation of two of the most advanced civilizations of the Americas. Gerónimo’s vision into the Maya world contributed to the conquest of the Mexica empire thanks to his knowledge of the language and customs. The contrast between the two men who got stranded together is also worth some reflection. History teaches us that people often face similar scenarios and choices when cultures meet. Clearly the Americas were transformed by the invasion of Europeans and to a different degree so was Europe by the Americas. Like our two protagonists, when cultures meet they inform and transformed each other. Between the extremes of full rejection or obliteration and full transformation into and adoption of the culture, lie the myriad of paths that we take when faced with this type of encounter. What is less clear is the choices cultures or individuals control in this transformation. Similarly, when learning about a new culture either in situ or from afar, we are faced with choices on how to learn from the culture and to what degree we must engage it and be transformed by it. To know deeply or be transformed there is no substitute than living in and becoming immersed in the culture, but from afar, the next best option is to learn the deep beliefs and ideas that form the culture. This manuscript presents a philosophical
analysis of some of the most fundamental ideas of the Maya. Some of these ideas are not totally foreign to our conceptions of the world, but some certainly are. The Maya scholar John Henderson acknowledges that “[i]n a deeper sense, the fuller our understanding of the ancient Maya becomes, the more we can appreciate the enormous gulf that separates their culture from any in the European tradition. Nowhere are these differences more apparent than in the Maya philosophy and world view, in which time and space, the physical world and the supernatural universe, are continuous: interconnected facets of a single, seamless reality.”

The central goal of this manuscript is to examine the metaphysical and epistemological implications of the classic Maya world view and philosophy even though our knowledge of the Maya is far from being as clear as it will certainly be, thanks to future scholars, their studies, and new discoveries. Ever since the work of León-Portilla there has been a significant void in the philosophical treatment of the Maya worldview. Many Latin American philosophers do not regard the Maya, or any culture of the Americas, as having developed a tradition of philosophy. This text is set to remedy this void and besides trying to offer a coherent picture of key ideas of Maya philosophy, will offer some serious suggestions on how those ideas can help our current examination of metaphysics, primarily with the concept of spacetime and identity.

In sum, when confronted by the Maya world Gerónimo chose to remain a Spaniard while Gonzalo chose a Maya existence. We cannot see with full clarity the choices of Gerónimo and Gonzalo for history only reveals partial answers. Yet, the choices these two personages made are analogous to the choices that the European culture faced in large, when confronted by the Maya and other indigenous cultures of the
Americas. Europe, as a visitor to these lands, had the choice between the extremes of adopting the customs of the new culture or rejecting them. In between full acceptance and full rejection there are many possibilities, so there are many responses when being confronted by a distinct culture. Some would claim that the Europeans imposed their superior culture on the less sophisticated and barbarous indigenous Americans therefore choosing to ignore them. Others may suggest that the Maya merged fully into the new European order offering some influence into the colonial period. While others may suggest that there was a missed opportunity to get to know and understand the American civilizations, as often occurs in human history when a culture conquers another. Full vision on how the merging of these cultures occurred is a complex historical, archaeological, anthropological, linguistic, and philosophical question. Ultimately, the complex choice of being confronted by a new culture is also a simple one. Once more: do we choose, both as a culture and as individuals, to embrace it or do we reject it? What parts will you adopt and which ones will you reject? Do we choose to learn from it or do we deem it inferior a priori?

This text cannot and does not want to attempt to figure out or resolve the question of how the European culture merged with the indigenous cultures of the Americas. What it will do is offer a glimpse into the philosophical background of Maya culture before the conquest. Doing so will provide a small contribution to the understanding of Maya culture then as well as today and offer us a chance to redeem the missed opportunities of the past.

Some scholars of philosophy and humanities would scoff at the idea of the Maya having more than a general rudimentary intellectual tradition. They may indicate the lack
of texts, or contributing authors, or evidence of a clear line of critical inquiry, or a lack of abstract formulations, or a set of schools of philosophical learning, or signs of criticism of the culture are a lack of philosophical engagement. Recent scholars have avoided, with few exceptions, the investigation of the philosophical contributions of the Maya. This may have to do with two main circumstances. First, early scholars of Maya culture Eduard Seler and Eric Thomson, for instance, argued without full epigraphic and anthropological evidence that the Maya had been a complex philosophical culture. They were philosophers of time. Even though these scholars are still giants in the field of Maya studies, were well intended and roughly speculated in the right direction, their work romanticized Maya philosophical contributions and has now been superseded by a new wave of authors who have deciphered and interpreted the Maya glyphic texts with greater accuracy but have restrained from speculating on the philosophical insight to the Maya.\textsuperscript{vi} Second, some philosophers, like Susana Nuccetelli, have offered brief investigations of Maya culture and concluded that they lacked a complex systematic rational philosophical approach.\textsuperscript{vii} In her view, the Maya did not do philosophy and thus are not worth studying for philosophical insight. While a few will boldly assert without proper inquiry that the Maya did or did not have original philosophical contributions, the aim of this text is to dispel the philosophical worth of Maya culture by a careful examination of their texts. Let’s now turn to a brief examination of the Maya world and the extant texts to set up our inquiry into Maya philosophy.

When the Europeans arrived to the Americas most of the splendid civic centers of the Maya laid already in ruins, with the exception of a few smaller inhabited cities like
Tulum. In spite of this fact, the 16th century Maya still lived and thrived in a significant portion of Mesoamerica. Their territories, then and during the golden classic era of the civilization, comprised most parts of the actual nations of El Salvador, Honduras, Guatemala, Belize, and Southern Mexico. Today, Maya culture is still alive and dotting the same landscape they have occupied for thousands of years. Who are and who were these people that now we call the Maya?

The Maya were and are a heterogeneous group of people that lived in the area of Mesoamerica from 7000 BCE until this day. Before the arrival of the Spanish this area of Mesoamerica was predominantly Maya. But the Maya were not alone. With the Olmec to the West and the Nicas to the south, the Maya groups existed in the midst of several other cultures. So what distinguishes the Maya from other Mesoamerican groups? The most distinctive difference is the languages that they spoke. Originating in a proto-Mayan language developed around 2500 BCE in the highlands, two main roots developed; one forming Huastec and Chicomultec and another larger branch eventually developing into the more than thirty Maya languages of today: Yucatec, Tzotzil, Tzetzal, Mam, Quiché, Chol, among others. The linguistic picture, currently and historically, is quite diverse.

The culture of the Maya is as diverse as the languages they speak. So to talk of a single Maya culture is a generalization that must be used with care. This text will speak of a Maya culture and will focus on the examination of certain ideas that most Maya groups shared. For instance, we will discuss the meaning and significance of the concepts of blood-nectar and day-flower, and the use of the ritual and solar calendar in unison. Among other shared cultural practices, the game of pelota stands out. As a matter of fact,
it was played throughout Mesoamerica to reenact the creation of the world and humanity. Different Maya groups had their own idiosyncratic way of playing the game, while some used hips and knees only, others allowed the use of elbows and wrists. The purpose and celebratory aspects of the games also varied significantly from locale to locale sometimes just a few miles apart. Examination of these differences across Maya groups would help color and refine the ideas presented in this text, but a complete differentiation falls outside the scope and intention of the book.

The most fecund era of Maya civilization occurred between 200 BCE to 900 AD, an era known as the Classic Period. It was at this time that the marvelous pyramids and buildings of Tikal and Palenque were build. During this era Maya culture reached an apogee of precision with their astronomical measurements and calendrical computations. During this time the Maya had several calendars in use, including the Tzolkin, the Haab, and the Long Count. This Classic era was also the most prolific in the creation of artifacts, stelas, documents, and historical accounts.

Scholars nowadays, however, have found that there was also great cultural and economic development during the Pre-Classic (1800-200BCE) and the Post-Classic (900-1500 AD). The main question that still puzzles mayanists today is the seemingly sudden departure of the Maya from the great civic centers in the 9th and 10th century. Was it war that destroyed and forced the abandonment of the sites? Was it an ecological disaster or famine? Was it disease? Although several scholars have emphasized the ecological changes, it is clear that war and other factors were also involved.

Yet some raise another puzzling question: since they Maya survived the changes of the 10th century, why did they not return to the great civic centers they had built?
Linda Schele postulates that the answer to this question lies, not just in historical, economical or ecological reasons, but in the Maya metaphysical worldview as well.

For them, the civic centers were a locus of power and connection with the divine in the sense that it would allow them to investigate the secrets of the cycles of nature so they could learn to control them. For instance, the detailed investigation and knowledge of the rotation of moon, stars, and planets was applied to controlling the cycles of planting corn every season. If there were a series of years were the rituals and astronomical information failed to ensure good food production leading to difficult periods, it may have persuaded them to abandon the cities. The sacred sites had lost power and they were spent. People of those cities often moved elsewhere, sometimes to nearby locations, as a way to find new sacred locations that ensured better crops and existence.

This explanation does not take away from other reasons as to why the classic Maya’s left their urban centers. War, change of climate, and ecological destruction are often cited as possible reasons for the classic Maya demise. The continual warring among nation states or an invading group from the north may have destabilized the cities to a breaking point. Scientists also have determined that a long persistent drought may have contributed to a weakening of the agricultural system of production. Furthermore, the majority of Maya lands in the lowlands had a thin layer of productive soil that could be easily exhausted after a few years. Sometimes these fields needed and still need long periods of rest before they could be cultivated again.
Figure 1 - Map of the extent of Maya culture with some Classical period cities superimposed on current political boundaries.

The geographical area considered part of the classical and postclassical Maya world is similar to the current cultural and ethnic boundaries of the modern Maya world. The different contours of the geography serve as designators for the different Maya cultures that emerged. There are three main areas of Maya culture: the Northern lowlands of the Yucatan peninsula, the Southern lowlands of Campeche and Northern
Guatemala, and the highlands of Chiapas and Southern Guatemala.

The Northern low-lying area of the peninsula of Yucatan is a subtropical area where fresh water is hard to find during the dry season and the Maya often resorted to cenotes for fresh water. Water, for these Maya, was of great periodic significance, since a late rainy season could be a great disaster. It is no surprise, then, to find Chac, the god of rain and storms, to be one of the most worshipped and observed deities among the Yucatec. The soils of this area are very thin and prone to becoming barren if proper agrarian practices are not observed. This is the area of major development during the Post-classic period: Chichen Itza, Mayapan, Tulum and Uxmal are some of the most renowned civic centers.

The Southern lowlands begin the transition from the Northern drier lowlands to the wet highlands. This intermediate lowland area offers the visitor great diversity of flora and fauna. Adding to the rich flora and fauna, the highlands contained a great density of peoples during the classical period. Cities like Yaxchilán, Bonampak, Piedras Negras, Uaxactún, Tikal and many more dot the landscape at short intervals.

The highlands offer a completely different spectacle with lush forests and an eternal mist hovering over the canopies of trees. Precipitation is more common and the soil is rich and abundant. Copán and Quiriguá were great cities of the Pre-classic period. Bordering the southern lowlands, Palenque is a recognized civic center of the Classic period.
Much has been lost, however, so the re-composition of the complex ideas of the Maya about time and space demands careful interpretative analysis of the extant texts. So what legacy did the pre-colonial Maya leave behind? What are the texts of the Maya? The Maya “texts” can be separated into four categories: (1) the Precolonial codices, (2) the texts in stones and murals, (3) the postcolonial indigenous narratives and transcriptions, (4) the accounts of Europeans of the Maya during the conquest.

(1) Codices are painted glyphic texts on folded flattened bark in accordion style. At one point there were hundreds or thousands of these painted books all over the Maya world. They were records of astronomical measurements and predictions as well as accounts of the metaphysical considerations and interpretations of those measurements. There were also narratives of Creation and expository of the complex theology of the Maya. In 1562, however, most of these texts were lost to humanity. The Franciscan priest, soon to become Bishop of Yucatan, Diego de Landa, found these texts to be the source of the metaphysical and religious foundation of the Maya, deemed them “lies of the devil” (Tozzer 169) and burned a great number of them. Only four codices, written primarily in Yucatec Maya, survived and remain extant: The Dresden Codex, the Madrid Codex, the Paris Codex and the Grolier Codex. They are named after the place where they surfaced and are now kept.

The Dresden Codex, the most complete of the pre-Hispanic codices, was found in 1739 when the director of the Royal Library of Dresden purchased it from a private collection in Vienna. It wasn’t, however, until 1810 when Alexander von Humboldt discovered it in the Royal Library and reproduced part of the manuscript in his *Vues de cordilleras et monument des peoples indigenes de l’Amérique*. During the heavy
bombardment of Dresden by Allied forces in World War II the original document was damaged. Scholars believe that the codex was written in Chichén Itzá in Northern Yucatan around the turn of the first millennia. The text is an astronomical, calendrical, and agricultural almanac that includes calculations of solar eclipses and careful computations of the synodic period of Venus.

Part of the Madrid codex was in the hands of Juan de Tro y Ortolano when in 1860 it was studied and published by Brasseur de Bourbourg. In appreciation for lending the manuscript for study, Brasseur named it the Tro Codex. A few years later another part of this codex appeared at the hands of José Ignacio Miró who sold it the Archaeological
Museum of Madrid. Curators of the museum thought this was a manuscript associated with Cortés and they baptized it Cortesiano. Now this codex is also known as Tro-Cortesiano or Madrid.

Besides being the longest and better-preserved manuscript, the text includes rites of Itzamná, practices of cultivation and associated divinities, precise account of the calendar round of 52 years.

Figure 3 - Sample page of the Madrid codex
The Paris Codex was found by Léon de Rosny in 1859 in a very odd place: a garbage bin in the Imperial Library in Paris. After such fortunate recovery, Rosny analyzed the text and found it to be about Maya rituals about cycles of the *katuns*. Scholars speculate that it could have been written in Palenque around the 13th century.
The Grolier codex was bought in 1965 by a private Mexican collector, José Saenz, after he was flown to a secret location in the Mexican jungle by illegal artifact diggers. They had supposedly found it in inside a cave in the mountains of Chiapas. After buying the manuscript he took it to the Grolier club in New York for examination. It now resides in Mexico City.

It is the manuscript in worse shape, but is of great interest for it is of Toltec-Maya style from around the 13th century.

(2) Luckily, the Maya did not restrict their scriptures to bark paper. Scattered around the valleys and mountains of Mesoamerica stone stelae and architectural constructions carry on their surfaces full texts of the historical, calendrical, astronomical, and metaphysical
considerations of the Maya. These texts range from short calendrical notations of the ascension of a king of Piedras Negras to extensive political and metaphysical justifications for the change of dynasty, as in the case of the inscriptions of Pacal and Chan Balum in Palenque. Only in the past 30 years, the ideas behind these glyphic texts have begun to be transcribed and interpreted.\textsuperscript{x1}

(3) After the conquest, Maya scribes and scholars began to reproduce the oral and written traditions that were in peril of being lost. These accounts were often written in Maya but transcribed into the Latin alphabet. From the Chilam Balam of Northern Yucatan\textsuperscript{xii} to the Popol Vuh of the Quiché Maya, these texts contain stories, calendrical accounts, agricultural advice, meteorological warnings, and metaphysical speculations. Some scholars feel that these texts are heavily “tainted” by the Spanish influence and
should not be examined as part of the investigation of pre-colonial Maya. Some others, however, feel that these texts, although written to include some of the teachings of Christianity, reflect a clear indigenous worldview that cannot be ignored. The metaphysical accounts of these texts often resonate with the pre-colonial codices and stone texts.

(4) Another source of texts and information on the Maya comes from the European colonial administrators, religious figures, advocates and historians who for different reasons, wanted to chronicle the Maya culture and their beliefs. Almost ironically, Diego de Landa is a great source of pre-colonial Maya thought for he put together a detailed account of their calendrical, astronomical, cultural, and linguistic contributions. In his *Relación de las cosas de Yucatán*, Landa transcribes information from indigenous Maya sources about the culture, language and customs of the Yucatec Maya. His text has been an invaluable resource for epigraphers and linguists for it offers one of the few sources of information on the meaning and interpretation of the Maya glyphs.
Chapter Two will be an examination of Maya mathematics, the complex calendar system and an introduction to the most fundamental concept making part of the calendar and their understanding of life’s cycles. Chapter Three will be an examination of the Maya notions of k’in (sun-day-cycles), flowers (nik), and nectar (itz) and their role in sacrifice and ritual as well as in Maya cosmology and metaphysics. Chapter Four will investigate the conception of organic spacetime that emerges from analyses of textual accounts. Chapter Five constructs the metaphysical picture of the Maya notion of identity and brings together the different insights from previous chapters.
Good websites to visit:

http://www.famsi.org/ - Foundation for the Advancement of Mesoamerican Studies

http://www.d.umn.edu/cla/faculty/troufs/anth3618/ma_timeline.html  - Good overall time line

http://www.mesoweb.com/welcome.html - Great site on Mesoamerica and the Maya

Further links:


Notes


ii Tzvetan Todorov argues in *The Conquest of America: the Question of the Other* that the ability to read the signs of the Mexica culture via this dual translation was the key factor (besides disease, of course) for Cortes’ ability for easily conquering of the Mexica empire.


v In 1998 there was a conference in … where participants debated the possible motivations of the choices made by Gerónimo and Gonzalo. Among the supported arguments and speculations some scholars suggested that Gonzalo may have been a converted Jew while others that he was a gypsy.

vi Coe, Michael. *Breaking the Maya Code*. Thames and Hudson, 1999. Linda Schele was not afraid to give philosophical credit to the Maya, but she never provided an examination of those philosophical contributions. León-Portilla has been one of the very few scholars to attempt an investigation of Maya epistemology and metaphysics. This text is a continuation of Léon-Portilla’s work, taking into consideration the new epigraphical research, as well as the new texts that have become available.


ix Cenotes are sink holes that opened up due to erosian from the many underground rivers of the Yucatan peninsula.

x There are some great resources about the codices on the web. For instance:
among others.

xi Ibid.

xii http://www.sacred-texts.com/nam/maya/cbc/