

In Search of the Mayan Animal Master: A Short Review



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Abstract

Among the majority of native people practicing hunting, this practice is imbued with an important cultural and religious significance; far from being conceived as a mere subsistence activity, it develops into a complex social and religious construction, conceptualized as a mutual agreement established between humans and non-human agents who protect the fauna (deities, spirits of the forest, the “masters” of the animals). One of the most important actors involved in this negotiation is the Master (or Lord) of the Animals, ubiquitous in the native hunting accounts. We will focus on this character, describing his features and his significance in Mayan culture. Firstly, we will seek to elucidate his origins, in the Classic era and in the Colonial periods; secondly, we will search for his counterparts among the contemporary Mayan groups. We will argue that the relationship established between human beings and supernatural, in the framework of hunting, can lead us to understand other crucial aspects of Mayan cosmovision: the conception of personhood, the importance of the relationship between humans and non-humans as one of the pillars of the cosmic order, and finally the eschatological beliefs.

Keywords: Mayas; Hunting; Personhood; Lord of the Animals; Zip; Hunting rituals; Bones; Ceremonial caves

Introduction

From the point of view of native hunters, game provision can't be considered as a bare exploitation of natural resources, since it encompasses a complex social construction, involving religious beliefs and ritual practices, which enlighten different aspects of indigenous cosmovision's, such as the notion of personhood and otherness, the relationship between humans and super naturals, up to the eschatological beliefs. In the first place, it is necessary to clarify the notion of animal -and personhood- possessed by indigenous people. Traditionally, among animistic people, animals are considered as spiritual beings and members of societies identical to those of humans. They have in fact the status as social persons, for they share with humans the same sacred essence (the “spirit” or “soul”). Therefore, they are believed to live in villages, where they are socially organized: they have families, chiefs and shamans; they work in their crops or in the households, and they see each other as people [1]. Moreover, the endowment of the soul turns them into conscious subjects: they possess a language, social rules and a material culture; also, they show the whole range of human feelings and emotions. Accordingly, to this conception of “extended personhood” [1], the act of killing an animal is equivalent to killing a person. Animals are protected by specific deities, by the Lords of the Forest and by their “masters”: supernatural beings who consider the animals as their “children” or as their cattle. In order to take the life of an animal, the hunter is obliged to negotiate with these powerful supernatural. In this way, hunt

ing takes the form of a contract established between the hunter and the game masters, where specific rules and taboos must be respected, in order to ensure both hunting success and the safety for the hunter. The hunter shall kill an animal only when it's necessary, it's forbidden to kill more than it's required to satisfy his family's alimentary needs; animals should never suffer: they must be killed quickly and any unnecessary pain must be avoided; it's mandatory to consume all the meat, no wasted is allowed; finally, bones must be returned to the Animal Master through specific rituals. The Lords of the Animals protect their progeny and, in case the hunter does not respect the rules, they strike him with accidents and sickness.

Looking for the ancestor of the Mayan Game Master

Ethnographic, ethnohistorical, and epigraphic evidence suggests that the belief in an animal guardian has great historical importance throughout Mesoamerica and, as we will discuss later, it is almost ubiquitous among contemporary Mayan groups. According to Braakhuis, hunting scenes are one of the prominent themes of Classical iconography; on many classical vases it's possible to recognize the presence of a powerful Owner participating in the hunting scenes [2]. Taube exposes that portrayals of an Animal Master, called *Zip*, were found on many Classic Period ceramic vessels and murals, where he's represented as an old man with deer-features: «The aged deity illustrated in this scene is clearly

the hunting god, who grasps a deer displaying the lob' gesture of woe. *Wuk Zip* has an antler, a large lower lip, and the "death collar" found with the Maya god of death [...] In Classic Maya scenes, the deity often wears hunting costume and accoutrements, such as a grass skirt, a broad-brimmed hat, while sometimes holding a conch trumpet, which is probably used both to flush game and to communicate during communal hunts» [3].

In the *Popol Vuh*, the sacred book of the Quiché, in the ontogenetic myth it is mentioned that the gods, after forming the earth and all the natural elements, created the animals along with their guardians and "spirits" [4]. Regarding Colonial Period sources, In the Guatemalan highlands, the Archbishop Pedro Cortéz y Larraz document that in 1769, in the parish of Güegüetenango, Indians worshipped an Animal Lord, named *Xaqui Coxol*, to whom natives asked for the permission to hunt wild animals. Natives paid him with food and copal incense offerings, accompanied with songs and prayers [5]. As for the Mexican context, in the Yucatan lowlands, the Franciscan friar Diego de Landa describes some hunting ceremonies in his famous book *An Account of the Things of Yucatan*; one of those rituals took place on *7-Zip*; the Fray relates that hunters gathered in a household, where their priests burnt copal resin to honour the gods of hunting, called *Acanum*, *Zuhuyzib* and *Ziptabai*. Afterwards, hunters purified their arrows, along with some deer skulls, in the smoke and finally, they performed a dance, holding the arrows and the skulls in their hands. The friar explains that these celebrations were meant to placate the hunting gods' wrath, and that these deities were also invoked before any hunting expedition [6].

The Game Master in contemporary Mayan groups

In general, the "lord" or "owner" of the fauna is a powerful supernatural animal that shows peculiar characteristics, for example it can be significantly larger or smaller than the other animals of its species [7]. It can also show himself to hunters in anthropomorphic form, or as a creature featuring both animal and human traits. In some cases, those supernatural beings are endowed with magical powers and are invulnerable to the weapons of hunters [8,9]. Among contemporary Yucatec Mayas, deer are protected by supernatural beings called *zip* [9,10], the ancient name of the Mayan Animal Master. The Lord of *Zip* considers the deer as his domestic animals, and the hunters are forced to appease him if they wish to kill one of these creatures. The *zip* look like a deer, but they're the size of a small dog, and they hold a wasp-nest between their horns; the insects oversee attacking those who try to harm the spirit-animal. In addition, in Yucatan natives conceive the existence of other guardians: the *Yuntsilob* ("the lords") and the *Yumilk'aax* ("masters of the forest"); they are powerful supernatural beings that roam around the forest and punish those who harm the plants, the trees and the animals [10]. In many native legends, it's possible to find the stories of reckless hunters who break the rules imposed by the game masters, those rules are believed to be enforced by supernatural sanctions; the most common punishment consists in the loss of the soul of the hunter (or one of his relatives); the Lords can also strike their victims with

deadly diseases and, sometimes, reckless or disrespectful hunters might pay their offense with their own life.

Among Lacandon Maya of the Lacandon rainforest (Chiapas, Southern Mexico), the supernatural game master is called *Uyum'il bāk* (the Lord of Animals), he protects the forest and its denizens and is believed to live in the woods. Moreover, any group of animals -conceived as a social specie- has its own master, who protects his subjects from abusive hunters: The Lord of Peccaries, the Lord of Spider Monkeys, the Mother of Bees, The Queen of Ants, and so forward. When my informants describe those supernatural beings, they often depict them as animals presenting anthropomorphic traits; for example, the Lord of Peccaries is a hefty man, wearing a fur-coat, and the Lord of Vultures is a bold, skinny and toothless man, wearing a feather-attire [11]. We should also highlight that, in the groups where we find syncretism with the Catholic religion, some saints (*santos*) are today considered as the protectors of the fauna, and they work together with the traditional deities and masters of the animals; thus, among the Mayas of Quintana Roo, San Sebastián protects wild boars and San Jorge protects the deer [12].

From ancient times, we can observe a strong connection between the guardians of the fauna and the deities of the mountains. Among many indigenous people, the supernatural guardian of the animals is believed to be a powerful man who lives in a farm located inside a mountain. He lives with his "children" or "cattle", meaning "the animals he guards". For example, in the Quechua culture this god is called *Apu*, while in the Aymara culture is the *Mallku*; they reside in the mountains and consider animals as their progeny [13]. Likewise, among the current Mayan people we find the connection between mountains and the Animal Lords: for the K'ekchí of Guatemala, *Tzuultaq'a* is a being that resides within a mountain and performs multiple functions, among which we find the care of birds and livestock [14]. The Tzotzil of Mexico also connect the gods of the hill to the care of wild animals; the *yajval vitz* ("owner of the hill") lives inside the mountains along with their domestic animals: deer, wild boar and tapirs [15]. In the last section, we will explain the correspondence existing between the Game Masters and the mountains.

Returning the bones: when life arises from death

In the introduction, we briefly mentioned the rules that must be respected by hunters in order to placate the super naturals' wrath. The negotiation with the game master fulfils when the hunter returns the bones of the killed preys after consuming the meat. This ritual takes place in natural caves and rock shelters, where the guardian is commonly believed to reside, and where the bones of the preys must be deposited. This ritual act is usually accompanied by the deposit of offerings and prayers [16]. It's important to emphasize that caves have always been worshipped by the Mayas, as they were believed to be sacred sites, place of birth and residence of many earthly gods; and they were also thought to be points of access to the underworld, called *Xibalbá*. Moreover, in Mayan conceptions, caves were intimately associated with

mountains, as Coe writes: «It is in such caves that it was and still is believed that fertilizing rain is created before being sent to the sky [17] ». The association between mountains-caves and fertility should explain why many hunting rituals take place in these natural shrines.

Bones acquire a deep signification in Mayan ideology: since ancient times, they are considered to retain part of the spiritual essence of their deceased owners; this essence is eternal and endure after death [18,19]. For this reason, bones of important people, such as kings or rulers, were conserved near the households, in order to preserve the spiritual essence of their owners, thus livings could remain in contact with their ancestors and communicate with them [20]. It is known that the Mayas don't conceive death as the total annihilation of the being, but as a phase of the eternal cycle of life, according to their cyclic conception of time. For example, in the famous episode narrated in *Popol Vuh* [4], we find that, after being defeated by the Xibalbá Lords, the Hero Twins' bones are burnt and thrown into a river but, instead of dying, the young men are regenerated from their own bones. This account became one of the most powerful metaphors in Mayan eschatology: death is a necessary condition for life, a being must die, so that a new one can be generated. Considering that bones are symbols of regeneration and of generational continuity, we shall now apply this metaphor to the behaviour of hunters towards the preys' skeletal remains. We argued that animals are the "children" or "folks" of the Animal Masters, who give people the permission to take the life of one of their creatures. Therefore, to allow game killing, a regeneration of the species must be implied. In this way, returning the bones allows the Master to recreate life from death, starting from a fertile matter: the bones [21]. Through the ceremonial deposit of the bones into a sacred cave or natural shelter, the hunter assures the restoration of the animal's spirit, which will be taken by the Lord of the Animals, who will be able to generate a new creature and guarantee the generational continuity of his progeny.

The sanctions inflicted by the masters can now be explained within the framework of Mayan eschatology: the never-ending cycle of life-death-regeneration can't be interrupted; the animal must be respected when it's alive, thus native hunting implies an ethical behaviour, moreover, it's necessary to allow the regeneration of the killed creatures, to permit life arise from death again. As we can see, these rules are mandatory to maintain a good relationship between humans and supernatural beings, and finally enable the maintenance of the cosmic order.

Conclusion

In the present paper, we underlined the main aspects of the beliefs inherent to the Animal Lord or Master. Starting from the analysis of this character –it's history and the beliefs connected to it– we could elucidate that hunting is a complex social construction involving many aspects of native cosmology's. Firstly, we argued that indigenous people possess an idea of personhood different from the one present in Western culture, since animals and masters are considered as people, living in a social context. Secondly,

we explained the ontological consequence implied in this idea of "extended personhood": the killing of a person-prey can be justified only if hunting involves specific rules and ceremonies, which have the purpose of maintaining a peaceful and harmonic relationship between the human society and the super naturals. This mutual agreement takes the form of a contract involving specific laws, that can't be broken in order to preserve the hunter's health and life, and to maintain the cosmic order. Finally, we sought to find a further justification to these beliefs according to the Mayan eschatology, explaining the hunting rituals in the framework of the native conceptions about the soul and death.

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