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The Power from the Maize

The Maize God and His Significance to the Maya Society

The Maya religion was one of the most important parts of the ancient Maya civilization. It was deeply integrated with everything within the Maya society. There were rituals that connected the Maya rulers to their ancestors, stories surrounding everyday activities linked the Maya people to larger and supernatural events, and even planting a maize seed invoked a mythic journey of the maize god. For such a huge and complex system, the Maya gods are the foundation as they are the main body that makes up the religious beliefs and mythical stories. Among all gods, the central figure is the maize god, who is strongly associated with the Maya agriculture, ideology of cyclic life, and the divine kingship.

The origin of the maize god is no doubt from the most widely used food in Mexico and Central America, maize. It is a “miracle food,” called by the French historian Fernand Braudel, for its productivity. One planted seed of maize yielded one hundred to two hundred grains in the Maya area, while wheat planted in Europe during the same period only produced a meager four to seven grains from one planted seed. It is also notable for its adaptability that could grow well and fast in various geological and climatic conditions (Houston 2009: 218-220). Because of these two traits, maize became not only the major crop for the ancient Maya civilization but also the key to the subsistence of the entire civilization. Its significance was reflected in the *Popol Vuh*, the Maya “bible” of the mythical creation story, that maize was both the material from which

humans were formed and the material that provided nourishment to that form (Huff 2006: 84). However, there were prolonged and possible periodical droughts during the Maya period which would have led to difficulties growing maize crops, and such a poor harvest could cause extreme hardship and possible starvation. As limited by the agriculture technology, the Maya turned to the god who was responsible for food, rain and fertility as a solution of seeking for reliable food source, from which the ideology of the maize god took shape.

The agricultural origin of the maize god directly suggests his strong connection to the Maya agriculture. It is the maize god who the Maya would pray to and worship for a good maize production. Bishop Landa has written about this association in his texts. At the time he arrived Chichen Itza and wrote *Relacion de las Cosas de Yucatan*, memories were still vivid of the 1536 Xiu pilgrimage that ended in their massacre at the hands of the rival Cocom lords. The Xiu lineage, a significant Maya family in Northern Maya lowlands, was making an attempt to offer both male and female slaves to the Cenote, the “holy well” near Chichen Itza; it was brought on by famine, rather than by a desire for rain. This might seem like a technicality, but indeed a plea for rain to sustain maize, may have been conducted through the entity of the maize god. In fact, the larger concern of abundance and sustenance of maize crop production was more important than just the problem of lack of rainfall, which was exactly what the maize god embodied with (Miller and Samayoa 1998: 55). Another clear evidence is in the Maya writing that maize is shown sprouting from the glyph for the day Kan, which is the symbol for corn in the Maya codices. The patron of Kan was the maize god, and a wide variety of agricultural pursuits were shown engaged with the Kan glyph in many Postclassic scenes as well (Sharer and Traxler 2006: 742). No matter whether the worship of the maize god was technically effective or not, for the

Maya, the maize god was important as he represented their desire and faith in a good agriculture production, which directly determined the survival of the Maya people.

The appearance of the maize god also indicates his role as the source and guarantor of agricultural abundance. Classic representations show the maize god as a youth with a shaved, elongated head, a mark of beauty in the Maya society, or with a headdress adorned with an elaborate ear of corn (Sharer and Traxler 2006: 741). The aliveness and freshness presented by the youth and beauty of the maize god elaborate the desire of good quality for crop production. Similarly, his custom with extensive adornments such like diadem and headband with quetzal feather, necklace and face pendant, bands for wrists and cuffs, and jade ear flares and counterweights also epitomize the pursuit of high quantity for agriculture production (Miller and Samayoa 1998: 57).

Besides to the agriculture, the ideology of cyclic life is another aspect embodied by the maize. The most important evidence is the hero twins story of the *Popol Vuh*, which expressed the death and rebirth of the maize god and embedded idea of the cycle of life. As Karl Taube first pointed out in his article *The Classic Maya Maize God: A Reappraisal*, the Maize God is Hun Hunahpu, father of the hero twins, and one of the original pair of brothers to enter the Xibalba, the name for the Maya underworld (Taube 1983: 175-177). He and his brother were tricked by the Xibalba lords who later sacrificed them. His head was decapitated and stuck in a tree, and both bodies are laid to rest in the ballcourt. From the tree, Hun Hunahpu's head spoke to a daughter of one of the underworld lords by which impregnated her and led to her escape to the earth's surface to deliver the hero twins. After the hero twins grew up, their main task is to get revenge on the underworld lords. They had been through a series of challenges, and eventually they achieved the final triumph and brought their father back to life, indicating the rebirth of the

Hun Hunahpu and the complete of his cycle of death and resurrection (Miller and Samayoa 1998: 56-57). Correspondingly, the cycle of life, death, and resurrection of Hun Hunahpu is also in Maya art. On a Classic ceramic plate, he emerges through a crack in the carapace of a turtle with his sons' assistance, which is the scene of rebirth. Besides, San Bartolo west wall murals is another great art example. The consecutive imageries of the second half portray the birth of the Maize God in water, his death, and his rebirth and emergence from the earth turtle with the company of two other deities (Taube 2010: 72-75).

One significance of the represented cycle of life and death by the maize god is to support the central religious beliefs of the ancient Maya. Buried within the story, the related beliefs of the maize god were more central to the Maya religion than the hero twins' narrative. This might be because the origin and the cyclic idea associated with the maize god were formed earlier than the hero twins story, and to the writers and tellers of *Popol Vuh*, the maize god story was so obvious and need no explanation. Nevertheless, it is clear that the cycle of life, death, and resurrection of the maize god constituted the fundamental religious narrative of the ancient Maya as their underlying logics. Besides, similar periodicity has also been seen in other mythical stories such like the daily journey of the sun god that he goes across the sky during the daytime and travels through the underworld at night. Those stories are not directly connecting to the cyclic life and death, but the logic of periodical activities is definitely what the maize god embodies.

Without a doubt, another significance is the close connection to the maize fertility. Towards the end of the dry season, the Maya farmers symbolically sent the maize god to Xibalba by planting maize seeds in the hole made with his digging stick, which also represented his temporary death. Then due to the underworld journey of the maize god's sons, the maize god reborn as maize rose to the surface, sprouted, and matured with the nourishment of rains. At the

end of the agriculture season, the maize god was believed to be decapitated once maize harvesting began and later reborn again in the next season (Coe and Houston 2015: 70-71). This metaphor might be the first motivation for the Maya to embedded the maize god with the cyclic life as an explanation of cyclic maize production, which made the maize god even more important to the Maya society since he “was” the maize production.

The function of the maize god also expands to the field of politics as he involves with the divine kingship. It has to be clarified that the maize god is not the direct representative of the divine kingship, but the deity whom the rulers would like to identify themselves closely with to strengthen their divine kingship. Clear evidence is that royal iconography and performances are usually filled with maize god symbolism. For example, Ukit Kan Le’k Tok’, the king of Talol, portrayed himself as the youthful maize god on the capstone in the most important Acropolis room in Ek’ Balam, which was a representation celebrating resurrection and apotheosis (Coe and Houston 2015: 193-194). Also in the San Bartolo murals, the northernmost scene depicts a scaffold accession of a human king, whose identity is still unclear, with a clearly identified “*ajaw*” sign in the middle, and on the west of this scene, there is another scaffold accession of the maize god. This arrangement emphasized the rightness of the following human king’s rulership as he is the acceding ruler after the maize god (Taube 2010: 60-69). Besides, from Preclassic through Classic times the seating of a new Maya king was usually celebrated as the conjoint birth of a new *uinal*-based year and the rebirth of the maize God. In such a way, the new king justified his rightness to rule by his “connection” to the maize god (Estrada-Belli 2006: 63). In general, the maize god serves a role to justify and strengthen the widespread divine kingship.

The royal preference on the maize god is probably derived from the heavy reliance on maize cultivation. Maize is not only the essential crop for subsistence but also the provider of

economic stability, wealth, and power, and the maize god represents and controls the maize production. Therefore, a close relation between a Maya king and the maize god helps to identify him as the ruler who could provide stable maize production and improve his people's confidence in him. A clear architecture evidence is the marvelous Temple 22 constructed by the thirteenth ruler of Copan, Waxaklahun Ubaah K'awill. The structure is adorned with numerous busts of the maize god and symbolizes the "Mountain of Sustenance," a mythical place where all the crops – especially maize, that sustain the human race are derived. (Coe and Houston 2015: 136). The Temple 22 is clearly a place for Copan rulers to perform ritual practices to keep their close relation to the maize god and make sure their ability to bring stable maize production to the city-state.

As reflected in the Maya art and literature, the maize god is the most important deity for the ancient Maya civilization as his association with agriculture, the ideology of cyclic life, and the divine kingship. For the subsistence of the civilization, the maize god represents the stable food production, for the religion, his cycle of life and death constitutes the foundations of mythical narratives, and for all Maya rulers, he is the source of the power and wealth. Strictly, it is hard to find another deity in the Maya religion who could potentially parallel to the maize god regarding the significance to the overall Maya society.

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