

The Meaning of Maize for the Maya

J. Eric Thompson

The Popol Vuh makes clear the importance of maize for the Maya culture: it was of maize that the gods fashioned human beings, and maize has been the staff of life for the Maya ever since. Even knowing this, however, we may have some difficulty understanding precisely what maize meant—and means—in a vulnerable agricultural society such as that of the Maya. In the following reading, a distinguished British anthropologist reflects movingly on the Maya worldview, and how it differs from our own.

Maize was a great deal more than the economic basis of Maya civilization; it was the focal point of worship, and to it every Maya who worked the soil built a shrine in his own heart. Without maize the Maya would have lacked the leisure and the prosperity to erect their pyramids and temples; without their mystical love for it, it is improbable that the peasants would have submitted to the unceasing and stupendous program of building directed by the hierarchy. The Maya laborer knew that he was building to conciliate the gods of sky and soil, on whose care and protection his maize field was dependent.

Love of the soil is found among peasants the world over, but I doubt that there is a more strongly mystical attitude toward its produce than in Middle America. To the Maya, corn is peculiarly sacred. Even today, after four centuries of Christian influence, it is still spoken of with reverence and addressed ritualistically as "Your Grace." It is the gods' supreme gift to man, to be treated with full respect and not a little humility. Before clearing the land or sowing, the Maya fasted, practiced continence, and made his offerings to the gods of the soil. Each stage in the farming round was religious celebration.

More than two hundred years ago a friar summed up the highland Maya's attitude toward maize in these words: "Everything they did and said so concerned maize that they almost regarded it as a god. The enchantment and rapture with which they look upon their milpas is such that on their account they forget children, wife, and any other pleasure, as though the milpas were their final purpose in life and source of their felicity." This is very much to the

point, but the writer made one mistake. The Indians did regard the maize as a god, although they took good care not to let the friars know it.

A somewhat similar attitude is revealed by the comment of a Mam Maya from western Guatemala on the white custom of burying in niches. The Indians, he said, consider it better to feed the earth with their dead bodies in payment for the products it gives them when they are alive—"The earth gives us food; we should feed it."

In our urban civilization the productivity of the land is something rather remote which is taken for granted. It is associated more with chain stores and can openers than with the soil, and, if our thoughts go a step back of that, we envision a man on a tractor or behind a team of horses, something picturesque, but unrelated to our efforts to earn our daily bread.

The Maya, who has to struggle against climate, tropical pests, and a too exuberant vegetation, sees things in a very different light. His livelihood depends literally on the sweat of his brow, not on the steaming flanks of a pair of horses. Even now, with the benefit of crops introduced from the Old World to vary his diet, 80 percent of his food is maize. He eats it with every meal year in and year out, and so the failure of that one crop is a disaster to him. The maize seems to be fighting beside him in an unending defense against every kind of enemy, trying to survive in order that the man and his family may also live.

The conception of a crop as a live being, an ally striving at our side, is utterly alien to our way of thinking, but it was and is fundamental in the Maya pattern of thought. No wonder that the Maya personified the maize and regarded it with a reverential love which we could never feel for anything inanimate. Maize is the gift which the gods could bestow on man only after considerable effort. The story is given in Maya legend:

Maize was once stored beneath a great mountain of rock. It was first discovered there by the marching-army ants, which made a tunnel to its hiding place beneath the rock and began carrying the grains away on their backs. The fox, who is always curious about his neighbors' doings, saw the ants carrying this strange grain and tried some. Soon the other animals and then man learned of this new food, but only the ants could penetrate to the place where it was hidden.

Man asked the rain gods to help them get at the store. In turn, three of the rain gods tried, but failed, to blast the rock apart with their thunderbolts. Then the chief rain god, the oldest of them all, after many refusals, was prevailed upon to try his skill. He sent the woodpecker to tap the surface of the rock to find the weakest spot. When it had been discovered, he told the woodpecker to take cover under an overhanging ledge while he tried to split the rock. With all

his strength he hurled his mightiest thunderbolt against the weak point, and the rock was riven asunder. Just as the thunderbolt struck, the woodpecker, disobeying orders, stuck out his head. A flying fragment of rock hit him on the [top of his head], causing it to bleed freely, and ever since the woodpecker has had a red head. The fiery heat was so intense that part of the maize, which had been entirely white, was charred. Some ears were slightly burned, many were discolored with smoke, but some escaped all damage. There resulted four kinds of maize—black, red, yellow, and white. . . .

BEFORE EACH TASK the Maya makes his offering to the gods who guard his field. Ceremonies at sowing time among the Mopan Maya of southern [Belize] will illustrate the religious setting.

The night before sowing, the helpers gather at the hut of the owner of the field. At one end of the hut the sacks of seed are laid on a table before a cross, and lighted candles are placed in front and to each side of a gourd containing cacao and ground maize. The seed is then censed with copal, and afterwards the hut, inside and out, is completely censed. The men, who have brought their own hammocks, lounge in them, passing the night in conversation and music and the enjoyment of a meal served at midnight. Sometimes the group prays in the church for a good crop. The purpose of this vigil is to ensure that the crop will not be endangered by the incontinence of any member of the group (the Mam, the Chorti, the Kekchi, and other Maya groups observe periods of continence of up to thirteen days at sowing time).

Looking back thirty years, I can see the group, most of them deep in shadow, for the guttering candles throw only a small circle of light. One or two are sitting in their hammocks; a third is lying back in his hammock with one foot dangling over the edge. Everyone is wrapped in a thin blanket, for the April night is cold and the chill air has no trouble in finding the spaces between the poles that form the walls of the hut. Conversation in soft, sing-song Maya starts and dies like puffs of wind. Outside, the constellations of the tropics dawdle across the sky; they seem so close, one feels like raising his hand to push them on their course. Curiosity can hardly be delaying them; they have seen such vigils for many centuries. At daybreak the owner of the land goes to his field ahead of the rest of the party. There, in the center of the field, he burns copal and sows seven handfuls of maize in the form of a cross oriented to the four world directions, and recites this prayer:

O god, my grandfather, my grandmother, god of the hills, god of the valleys, holy god. I make to you my offering with all my soul. Be patient with me in what I am doing, my true God and [blessed] Virgin. It is needful that



Religious ritual celebrated in Yaxuná, Yucatán, in 1986. The ritual is descended directly from pre-Columbian practice. (Photo by Debra S. Walker)

you give me fine, beautiful, all I am going to sow here where I have my work, my cornfield. Watch it for me, guard it for me, let nothing happen to it from the time I sow until I harvest it.

Rites of the same general type precede clearing the land and burning off the scrub when it is dry. Typical of the religious context of the agricultural year are the ceremonies to the Chacs still held in villages of Yucatán when rain is needed. Not a man in the village fails to attend. The first task is to fetch the water needed in the preparation of the food offerings. This has to be virgin water from a sacred cenote where women never go. Once this has been brought, no one must return home, for if anyone had intercourse with a woman during the ceremony, the rains would not come. Accordingly, the men sling their hammocks within the cleared area, usually on the outskirts of the village.

Following two days of preliminary ceremonies, the shaman offers at dawn of the third day thirteen tall gourds and two shallow gourds of *balche* [Mayan wine] to the Chacs and the guardians of the milpas. Following a chant by four assistants, the *balche* is distributed among the assembly, and everyone must take a little, for the *balche* purifies one of evil. Birds are then brought forward. Four assistants called chacs hold each bird in turn by its wings and legs while the shaman pours *balche* nine times down its throat and dedicates it to the rain gods. After that the birds are killed.

Thirteen times *balche* is sprinkled on the altar, and after each sprinkling is offered to the members of the congregation. By noon the food is ready, and the main ceremony can commence.

A boy is tied by his right leg to each post of the altar. These four boys represent frogs, the attendants and musicians of the rain gods. As the ceremony proceeds, they croak in imitation of frogs announcing the approach of a storm. An older man, selected to impersonate the chief Chac, is reverently carried to a cleared space a few yards east of the altar. He is provided with a calabash and a wooden knife, for . . . calabashes are carried by the Chacs and water sprinkled from them causes rain. The wooden knife represents the implement with which they produce the lightning.

From time to time this impersonator makes sounds like thunder and brandishes his wooden knife. Sometimes in place of a single impersonator of the chief Chac, four men, one at each corner of the altar, represent the four Chacs of the world directions. Each time the shaman recites a prayer or offers *balche*, they dance nine times around the altar.

The altar is piled with food and drink. Thirteen tall gourds and two dishes of *balche*, nine pails of broth from the sacrificial birds, four lots each of nine piles of tortillas made of maize and squash seeds, and nine piles of various other kinds of tortillas are placed on it.

After this provender has been offered to the gods (a time-consuming ceremony), all retire so that the gods can feast on the offering without interruption. When it is judged that the gods have concluded their repast, the shaman returns and pours *balche* on the head of the impersonator of the chief Chac. The food, minus the spiritual essence already extracted from it, is divided among the men, and except for one or two minor ceremonies the rain petition is finished.

Great stress is laid on imitative magic. The croakings of the frogs, the noises like thunder, the impersonation of the rain god with the symbols of rain and lightning are basically magic. Important, too, is the use of the sacred numbers seven, nine, and thirteen. The purification pattern runs through the ceremony: virgin water must be used, theoretically the sacrificed birds are virgin, continence is essential, and *balche* is a purifier. In ancient times this ceremony would probably have been not a village, but a district, rite, and children might have been offered instead of turkeys.

Yet, these rites must not be regarded as so many ethnological data; they are the expressions of Maya preoccupation with the living maize and the gods who nourish him and give him drink. Much of the ancient pomp and ceremony is no more, but we can be sure that the Maya peasants, gathered in the courts of Tikal or Palenque for some ceremony, recognized with satisfaction

the representations of the maize god, the Chacs, and the earth gods carved on the façades and roof combs of the temples, and were content to continue building to their glory and serving the priests who served them. They had given their hearts to the land and could have anticipated Kipling's lines: "And Memory, Use, and Love make live us and our fields alike."