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The Concept of a Life-Death Duality in the Myth of the Hero Twins

“Life contains within itself the fatal disordering germ of death while death contains within itself the fertile ordering seed of life.”¹

In this statement, historian James Maffie eloquently sums up one of the most fundamental, structural principles of Maya thought—the concept of a life-death duality. In an ancient Maya society where war, sacrifice, and illness were part of the normal rhythm of existence, the immediacy of death motivated a search for something beyond this life, for a means of transcendence. The *Popol Vuh*, the sacred mytho-historic text of the K’iche’ Maya, not only sought to explicate such mysteries as the creation of the universe and mankind, the relationship between gods and man, and the laws of cause and effect, but addressed perhaps the greatest dilemma of them all—how to come to terms with human mortality. Its account of the myth of the Hero Twins’ journey into the Maya underworld Xibalbá, and contest with the Lords of Death themselves, attests to the prevalent Maya belief in the concept of a life-death duality. This essay will focus on how particular aspects of the myth of the Hero Twins, namely; the Twin’s conception, the theme of sacrifice, the resurrection of the Maize God, the characteristics of Xibalbá itself, and the creation of the sun and moon evidence this concept of a life-death duality in Maya thought. While many other ancient societies also developed schemas to fathom life and death, the nuances that

¹ James Maffie, *Aztec Philosophy: Understanding a World in Motion* (Boulder, CO: University Press of Colorado, 2014), 158.

distinguish each conception arguably merit individual inquiry. The subsequent analysis serves to deepen our understanding of the K'iche' Maya specifically, and their particular belief that life and death existed in dynamic, complementary opposition. The final section will then briefly suggest how this specific understanding could contribute to the broader scope of Mesoamerican studies.²

The K'iche' Maya observed a conception of the universe whereby everything was bipartite; with simultaneously opposing and complementary aspects.³ Duality was thus seen as the very force which created and sustained the cosmos. It is important to note here that this sense of duality, is radically different from the Western Platonic or Manichaeic understanding of duality as that which separates, or opposes.⁴ As the work of preeminent Maya scholar Dennis Tedlock highlights, there is a dynamic tension inherent in the Maya concept of duality, which is “complementary rather than oppositional, interpenetrating rather than mutually exclusive.”⁵ Likewise, David Carrasco urges us to view this duality as a fluid, dynamic concept wherein it speaks to a balancing of forces as opposed to the rigid establishment of antagonistic opposites.⁶ Historian Robert Carmack points to its relation to the Maya conception of time as cyclical, in which elements remain ever constant despite temporary inactivity, in support of this conception of duality.⁷ The concept of duality served as one of the foundational, organising principles within Maya society.

² Mesoamerica refers to the cultural area comprising southern and middle Mexico, Belize, Guatemala, El Salvador, and parts of Honduras, Nicaragua, and Costa Rica of which numerous indigenous traditions including the Aztec, Nahuatl and Maya, to name but a few, are members.

³ Michel Graulich, “Creator Deities,” in *The Oxford Encyclopaedia of Mesoamerican cultures*, David Carrasco, ed., (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

⁴ Keith Jordan, “Cosmology in Mesoamerica,” In *Encyclopaedia of the History of Science, Technology, and Medicine in Non-Western Cultures*, ed. Helaine Selin, (Dordrecht: Springer, 2016), 225.

⁵ Dennis Tedlock, *Popol Vuh: The Definitive Collection of the Mayan Book of the Dawn of Life and the Glories of Gods and Kings* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1985), 63.

⁶ Jill Leslie McKeever Furst, “Duality,” in *The Oxford Encyclopaedia of Mesoamerican cultures*, David Carrasco, ed., (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

⁷ Robert Carmack, Janine Gasco, and Gary Gossen, *The Legacy of Mesoamerica: History and Culture of a Native American Civilization* (New York: Routledge, 2016), 529.

The Maya considered life and death to be integral stages within the cosmic process. As complementary and opposing forces, they formed part of the infinite cycle of existence—life, death, and rebirth. Defining this perspective as “agonistic inamic unity”, Maffie asserts the dual nature of life and death in a universe in which everything was characterised by these two forces—“Life and death are mutually arising, dependent, complementary, and completing as well as mutually competitive forces interwoven with one another within a single cyclical process... The two are continually creating, nurturing, competing, and overcoming one another; continually transmuting into one another; and continually enabling one another. Life completes death and death completes life.”⁸ As Maffie observes, inherent in the cyclical conception of the universe was the notion of life emerging from death and vice versa. This viewpoint incorporates a belief in an afterlife and in the possibility of rebirth, which for the Maya was possible upon successfully journeying through Xibalbá, the Maya underworld.⁹ Inherent in Maya thought therefore was the idea that life and death were inextricably linked, a belief that, as will be evidenced below, is explicated and affirmed throughout the myth of the Hero Twins.

A brief summary of the myth of the Hero Twins based on Tedlock’s 1985 translation of the *Popol Vuh*, is outlined below, so as to better situate its later analysis vis-à-vis the concept of a life-death duality. It must be noted that the *Popol Vuh* was composed in its present form in the sixteenth century by Dominican friar, Francisco Ximénez. While a cautionary approach is necessary when studying texts originating in the colonial period that claim historical precedence, the *Popol Vuh*’s pre-colonial antecedents have been affirmed by an array of ethnohistoric and

⁸ Maffie, *Aztec Philosophy*, 157-158.

⁹ Karl Taube and Mary Miller, *An Illustrated Dictionary of The Gods and Symbols of Ancient Mexico and the Maya* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1993), 39.

archaeological records.¹⁰ The myth of the Hero Twins was set in a time before man walked on the earth. The Hero Twins, Hunahpú and Xbalanqué, were the sons of a previous set of mythological twins, Hun-Hunahpú and Vucub-Hunahpú, who were summoned to Xibalbá to play a sacred ball-game versus the Lords of Xibalbá. They lost the contest and were sacrificed and buried in Xibalbá. Years later, their sons faced similar challenges, whereupon entering the underworld they were confronted with a series of trials. These included a Dark House, a Razor House full of blades, a Cold House of numbing wind and hail, a Jaguar house, a Fire House and a Bat House. The Hero Twins managed to survive all these tests through a mixture of intellect, strength and determination—“They did not die from all the things that were done to them, nor were they defeated by all the voracious animals that inhabit Xibalba.”¹¹ The Lords of Xibalbá so angered by their success, decided to burn them alive in a great stone fire-pit, however, the Twins discovered their nefarious plans in advance. Upon the advice of two seers, the Twins jumped into the pit voluntarily sacrificing themselves. The Lords thinking they had won, dumped their ashes in a nearby river. However five days later, the Twins regenerated as catfish before regaining human form. Disguising their true identities, they performed miracles, sacrificing and resurrecting each other. Impressed, the Lords of Death demanded that the same be done for them however, the Twins tricked the Lords by neglecting to bring them back to the life after the initial sacrifice. This marked the defeat of the Lords of Xibalbá in their own court. The Twins then resurrected their father, the Maize God, from the Place of Ball Game Sacrifice in the underworld—“And here their father is

¹⁰ Some examples of the extensive archaeological evidence includes stelae at the Preclassic site of Izapa and artwork at the Classic site of Quiringuá that depict the Hero Twins and other scenes that correlate closely with the *Popol Vuh*. This has led many of Mesoamerican Studies’ most preeminent scholars to regard it as a rich source of information on the Maya’s cosmological and mythological belief systems. For more information see Tedlock’s introduction (1985), Coe (Chap. 3, 2015), Carmack (2016, p.238-240) and Carrasco (2014, p.32-34). This material evidence also testifies to the ancient origins of the myth and suggests the enduring importance of the concept of a life-death duality for the Maya people.

¹¹ Tedlock, *Popol Vuh*, 147.

put back together by them.”¹² The Maize God rose to the surface to initiate the mythic life cycle. Meanwhile Hunahpú and Xbalanqué climbed back up from the watery depths of the underworld and rose into the sky to become the sun and the moon respectively—“they ascended straight on into the sky, and the sun belongs to one and the moon to the other.”¹³ Light spread across the sky like never before, and life began for mankind.

The origins of the protagonists, that is to say the very conception of the Hero Twins themselves, demonstrates the Maya concept of a of life-death duality. According to the *Popol Vuh*, they were in fact conceived in Xibalbá, the land of the dead. After their fathers lost the initial ball game to the Lords of Xibalbá and were sacrificed, One Hunahpú’s head was staked upright on a stick and planted in the ground where it grew into a calabash tree—“And when his head was put in the fork of the tree, the tree bore fruit”.¹⁴ The Xibalbáns dared not eat the fruit, with the exception of a daughter of one of the Lords’s of Xibalbá. Upon approaching the tree, One-Hunahpú spoke to her and spat down upon her. The saliva landed on her hand, magically impregnating her with the Hero Twins—“Right away something was generated in her belly, from the saliva alone, and this was the generation of Hunahpú and Xbalanqué.”¹⁵ Firstly, it is significant that this episode occurred in the underworld as it shows the land of the dead’s deliberate association with the most primordial life-generating process. Secondly, the mother of the Twins was the offspring of the Lords of Xibalbá, who travelled back to the terrestrial realm in order to give birth to the Twins. Furthermore, the conception was enabled by the already dead/ sacrificed One-Hunahpú, thereby reinforcing the concept of life emerging from death. As such, before the Hero Twins had even take

¹² Ibid., 159.

¹³ Ibid., 160.

¹⁴ Ibid., 113.

¹⁵ Ibid., 115.

their first step on the treacherous journey through Xibalbá, their very conception speaks to the concept of a life-death duality within Mayan thought.

The theme of sacrifice which appears throughout the myth of the Hero Twins and records of Mesoamerican society in general, links death to the very beginning of life in the Maya world. Blood sacrifice was a way of praising, thanking and nourishing the gods. It formed part of an unspoken agreement wherein, in exchange for creating humans and allowing them to live, humans were required to express their gratitude and indebtedness to the gods through sacrifice.¹⁶ The *Popul Vuh* recalls the fate of previous generations who had failed to and were thus subsequently destroyed. The act of sacrifice is thus inseparably linked to the creation of humanity. The pivotal act of sacrifice in the myth of the Hero Twins occurs when the Twins choose to voluntarily sacrifice themselves by jumping into the fire pit made by the Lords of Xibalbá. “They grabbed each other by the arms and went head-first into the oven. And there they died together...”¹⁷ Their ashes were disposed of in the river but five days later they reappeared having “germinated in the waters”, in the form of catfish and later as vagabonds, endowed with their own sacrificial and regenerative powers.¹⁸ They effectively defeated death by voluntarily submitting to sacrifice which allowed them to re-establish contact with the supreme gods, and then hoodwink the Lords of Xibalbá into requesting their own sacrifice.¹⁹ In conclusion, this aspect of the myth asserts sacrifice as the essential exordium of the process of rebirth, without which, death would certainly be fatal.

Eduardo Matos Moctezuma was one of the first scholars to claim that the annual observation of the abundant growth of the rainy season followed by the dearth of the dry season

¹⁶ Taube and Miller, *An Illustrated Dictionary*, 144.

¹⁷ Tedlock, *Popol Vuh*, 149.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ Timothy Knab, “Underworld,” in *The Oxford Encyclopaedia of Mesoamerican cultures*, David Carrasco, ed., (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

initiated the concept of a life-death duality within Maya thought.²⁰²¹ Whether or not this is true, agriculture, in particular the cultivation of maize, was crucial to the survival of the ancient Maya. According to the *Popol Vuh's* account of the creation of humankind, humans were originally fashioned from maize after mud and wood had proven inadequate—“the making, the modelling of our first mother-father, with yellow corn, white corn alone for the flesh.”²²²³ In some regions, this was taken figuratively and maize was regarded as the substance of human flesh.²⁴ Considering the close correlation between life and maize, it is highly symbolic that the Hero Twins resurrect their father, the maize god One-Hunahpú, from Xibalbá, the land of the dead. On one level, this episode of the myth proclaims maize as a fundamental life-giving force introduced not only to create but also to sustain humankind, while simultaneously at a more profound level, the Maize God's resurrection from the underworld can be interpreted as a metaphor for the cycle of life, death and rebirth. A Late Classic painted, ceramic vessel from the Maya Culture which depicts this exact scene, testifies to the endurance and importance of this concept of a life-death duality.²⁵

The graphic description of Xibalbá in the myth of the Hero Twins, presents one of the most detailed surviving sources on the Maya's belief in the underworld and their conception of the afterlife. Xibalbá itself, embodies the concept of a life-death duality by simultaneously existing as a place of death and of regeneration.²⁶ References to the Hero Twins in Xibalbá feature heavily in Classic Maya ceramics, sections of the *Book of Chilam Balam of Chumayel* and the Codex Borgia,

²⁰ Eduardo Matos Moctezuma “Death,” in *The Oxford Encyclopaedia of Mesoamerican cultures*, David Carrasco, ed., (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

²¹ Eduardo Matos Moctezuma, “En el umbral de la muerte... y de la vida,” *Artes de México, Muerte Azteca-Mexica: Renacer de Dioses y Hombres*, No. 96 (Noviembre 2009): 23.

²² Tedlock, *Popol Vuh*, 79-86.

²³ *Ibid.*, 164.

²⁴ Taube and Miller, *An Illustrated Dictionary*, 29.

²⁵ A detailed drawing of this vessel by Linda Schele can be found online at: http://research.famsi.org/schele_list.php?rowstart=15&search=maize%20gods%20or%20corn%20gods%20or%20corn%20god%20or%20maize%20god&num_pages=3&title=Schele%20Drawing%20Collection&tab=schele

²⁶ David Carrasco, *Religions of Mesoamerica (2nd ed)* (Longrove, IL: Waveland Press Inc., 2014), 141.

again testifying to the ingrained nature of this myth and by extension the significance of the concept of a life-death duality.²⁷²⁸ On the one hand, the myth of the Hero Twins undoubtedly portrays Xibalbá as a place of danger, deception and sacrifice where the twins face numerous ordeals from crossing Pus and Blood River, to overcoming multiple deadly “Houses”. On the other hand, it would seem to simultaneously present an opportunity to understand the many mysteries of life while also giving consent to the notion of an afterlife. Historian Robert Sharer contends that it was only through experiencing the tortuous ordeals of the underworld, through dying, that the twins could gain the “knowledge of self-transformation” that ultimately allowed them to overcome death.²⁹ Similarly, Bethany Myers interprets the myth of the Hero Twins as, “a metaphor for understanding and justifying the process of death, and giving hope through the explanation of life after death.”³⁰ By surpassing all obstacles, vanquishing the Lords of Xibalbá and rising as immortals in the celestial realm, the myth of the Hero Twins supposes the possibility of overcoming death and achieving rebirth.³¹ As such, the myth of the Hero Twins provides a blueprint of how to achieve rebirth. Therefore, while death was undoubtedly perceived as something to be feared and to prepare for, it was also seen as a crucial, life-generating, process of renewal.³²

The conclusion of the myth of the Hero Twins, whereby Hunahpú and Xbalanqué ascend into the upper, celestial level as the sun and moon, vividly showcases the concept of a life-death duality. Firstly, one notes the profound action of the Twins clambering up from the darkness of

²⁷ Michael Coe, *The Maya Scribe and His World* (New York: The Grolier Club, 1973), 13.

²⁸ The *Book of Chilam Balam of Chumayel* is a sacred book of the Classic Yucatán Maya written in the colonial era. The *Codex Borgia* is an Aztec manuscript made during the late Postclassic period.

²⁹ Sharer, with Loa Traxler, *The Ancient Maya*, 730.

³⁰ Bethany Myers, "Hero Twins: Explorations of Mythic and Historical Dichotomies," (Honours Thesis, Southern Illinois University, 2002), 31.

³¹ Carrasco, *Religions of Mesoamerica*, 141.

³² Linda Schele and Mary Miller, *The Blood of Kings: Dynasty and Ritual in Maya Art* (Fort Worth: Kimbell Art Museum, 1986), 266.

Xibalbá to become immortalised in the heavens, which symbolises their escape from the clutches of death itself and their final, triumphant rebirth. Secondly, one can interpret Hunahpú's transformation into the sun—the universe's single, greatest source of life—as establishing the necessary pre-conditions for the creation and survival of humans. It must be noted that the Maya Creation myth, also detailed in the *Popol Vuh*, is taking place simultaneously and as these myths intertwine and align with one another, they culminate in the creation of the human race.³³ As mentioned above, the Twins' sacrifice re-establishes their reciprocal connection with the gods, and thus enables the creation of humans. Their transformation evidences the possibility of emerging from the underworld triumphant to be immortalised in the celestial realm. The conclusion of the myth of the Hero Twins stands as a metaphor for the cycle of life, death and rebirth wherein the cycle of the sun's rise and replacement by the moon mirrors the eternal life-death succession wherein life emerges from death and vice versa.³⁴

The myth of the Hero Twins exemplifies the Maya belief that life and death existed in dynamic, complementary opposition. The Twin's journey, from their conception in the underworld, subsequent re-entry and sacrifice to overcome the Lords of Xibalbá, to their triumphant resurrection of the Maize God and ascent into the celestial realm as the sun and moon, serves as a metaphor for the Maya belief in a cycle of life, death and rebirth. The above analysis concentrates on the K'iche' Maya specifically, however it could also potentially contribute to the broader scope of Mesoamerican studies, in particular the investigation into the extent to which a cultural unity existed across Mesoamerican societies. Further research could benefit from placing the *Popol Vuh's* representation of the Maya concept of a life-death duality in conversation with

³³ The Creation Myth in the *Popol Vuh* describes the origins of the universe, the creation of animals and the creation of humans made from maize.

³⁴ Robert Sharer, with Loa Traxler, *The Ancient Maya (6th ed)* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2006), 730.

other Mesoamerican cultures such as the Aztec's or Mexica's conception of the interaction between life and death. An analysis of sources such as the *Popol Vuh*, in conjunction with other ethnohistoric sources and the results from on-going archaeological excavations and innovative LIDAR technology projects, presents an opportunity to enhance our understanding not only of the ancient Maya culture, but also of the broader, ever-evolving and dynamic field of Mesoamerican studies.³⁵

³⁵ LIDAR (Light Detection and Ranging) is a relatively new, remote sensing technology that can be used to examine the earth's surface.

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