

Review of: "The World of Perception — Comparative Philosophy of the Ancient Mayan Bird Totems"

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Potential competing interests: No potential competing interests to declare.

The article is refreshing by its interdisciplinary approach, which I believe is the horizon towards which human sciences ought to walk. I just have a couple brief technical remarks, the rest is just a complementary ethnological approach to the meaning of the bird among ancient traditional communities and its general reflection of social structures (and are not necessarily aimed at modifying the content of the present article.

1. The article has two authors, so use 'we' instead of 'I' if you can't do otherwise, but, generally speaking, try to reformulate the sentence so as to you avoid mentioning yourselves.
2. Be careful with the word 'race', it has no scientific value and is strongly connoted. Use culture, people, civilization, society or whatever term fits best the concept you want to express in each sentence.

Bird, the soul and the exogamic principle

I study the Mesopotamian Prehistoric symbolism from an ethnoarchaeological perspective and because the bird is a common theme, and beyond that, because the main themes developed in very many traditional mythologies around the world, in particular that of life, death, exogamy and dualism (*infra*) are universal, universally related to basic social structures (like kinship and marital pattern), I thought it interesting to present briefly this 'universal' symbolic scheme as it seems to fit some aspects of the Mayan symbolism quite well.

First of all, as you note, symbols are never random and should never be taken at face value but are always used as a metaphor (p.12), for people who have no writing to stand for the specific *concepts* that matters for them. Such symbols certainly come from the prehistoric ancestors of the Mayans for example, but as you showed well, it works for the Egyptians, the Greeks the Chinese, and certainly the Mesopotamians as well, that is, to all these societies that have developed as states and later left written documents. Ethnology makes it clear : what matters for them are the organization of the community, and especially the rules according to which they exchange sexual mates. For this matter, every traditional society (see Frazer, Lévi-Strauss, Freud etc.) is divided into, at least, two subgroups (moieties, lineages, sections) reciprocally exchanging their mates at every generation.

In the particular case you mention here, you are certainly correct to say (p.21) that the bird is "an independent reflection of the soul's free body". But calling the bird symbol a "totem" needs an explanation; a totem represents, and thus differentiates the individuals belonging to one particular exogamic subparts of the community as just mentioned. For

Australian Aborigines, it is usually an animal from the Dream Time considered as a mythical ancestor of the moiety bearing its name.

Universally speaking, the bird is indeed often a 'psychopomp' animal, that is, a 'leader of the soul to the underworld'. The bird thus represents spiritual death, and thus, as you mention for Egypt (p.2), 'rebirth' (especially in case of a migratory bird).

As you highlight the importance of literature, there is an interesting comment in the famous novel by DH Lawrence (1926) "the Plumed Serpent" about the Aztec god Quetzalcoatl. He writes (p82) that Quetzal is the name of a bird that lives very high in the mist of the mountain top and Coatl is the serpent, and that he is hideous, represented convulsed with its protruding teeth... The serpent (which you also mention often in a bird 'reproductive parts' or in its mouth- teeth) is a probable symbol of the human lineage, and teeth are a universal symbol of (physical) death as they destroy through the act of swallowing. So this creature seems to combine both physical death and the escaping soul. In ancient conception indeed, death is often not represented alone but together with symbols of (re)birth, as one is nothing but the complementary pendant of the other, mixed in the same regenerative principle. It is thus not impossible that the birds you mention have a similar psychopomp function. However I was struck by other details that made me think that the Mayan iconography related well with the universal dualist narrative.

You mention twin heroes and pairs of gods to explain the beginning of the universe in Mayan mythology (p. 13). This is a very common symbolization derived from the natural complementarity of men and women or male and female for life to reproduce itself, but, again, the aim of the metaphor is the organization of the human society. The dualistic disposition undeniably appears in the symbolism of all traditional societies from Australian Aborigines (Frazer) to Malinowski's Trobrianders. The Chinese counterpart is of course the Yin (feminine, winter, wet) and Yang (male, summer, dry) composition, which permanent interaction is indispensable for life. A full explanation can be found in my article on the Neolithic Dualist. In the illustrations you provide, among other dualist signs, we can mention the intermingled double tree topped by a bird (symbol of death) in fig. 11.

Fig. 15 is also interesting with the two parallel legs (dualist principle ?) of a bird (spiritual death) centered around a circular motif with possibly dental motives. I wonder whether this motif is not a 'teethed vagina' known from other cultures, a symbol of the feminine regenerative principle: the vagina gives life (through the exogamic duality – the legs?) and takes it back with the teeth, the circular form recalling possibly the endlessly continuity of the process.

In every culture, there is a level of expression dealing with the mythology. But there is an abstract level of the reading, where very fundamental principles are in play such as death, life, eternal return or exogamy. If the first three are natural or cosmic (often symbolized by the moon, where the black moon is always followed by a waxing and waning moon and again a black moon – see Eliade), exogamy (between the society's two moieties) appears next to them, that is, just as natural, eternal and inescapable as life and death. However, and this is the whole difference, exogamy is in the hand of humans. It is them who must respect it and therefore mobilize this concept through symbolism. It is in fact a moral duty that is

constantly remembered for humans to follow.

You end up saying that Chinese traditional philosophy is necessary to understand Mayan culture even though no contact is known between these populations. Probably this statement could work just as well the other way around. And taken from the structural point of view of the society's kinship pattern, as I have tried to show, it can be used to understand the Mesopotamian Neolithic and the Australian Aborigenes. I even mention a clear dualistic representation in the Neandertal cave of Bruniquel. And there has surely never been any contact between any of these cultures. The conclusion is that when it comes to matters of social structuration and perpetuation, society comes naturally to develop an internal system of division in order to reproduce, and the reciprocity between them becomes the most crucial principle that appears in the center of their symbolism. Probably just like the Yin and Yang symbol.

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