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THE CAVE AND THE BUTTERFLY: THOUGHTS ON DEATH AND REBIRTH IN ANCIENT MESOAMERICA

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Abstract

In this brief article I consider a series of religious beliefs and practices associated with death and rebirth in Mesoamerica. Although my ultimate goal is to cast further light on these themes in Classic period central Mexico and more particularly Teotihuacan, I review Late Postclassic and colonial Aztec sources seeking possible analogies and continuities. To begin with, I examine the notion and representations of caves as the open mouth of the earth that devours the bodies of the deceased, but which at the same time was understood as the place where human ancestors were born, and from where they first emerged. This suggests that the underworld was a transformative location associated with death and decomposition, as well as germination and birth. Secondly, I turn to the theme of rebirth and the importance of butterflies in funerary iconography and in the concept of a solar afterworld reserved primarily for warriors. I literally move out of the underworld and up into the sky and the heavenly sphere of the Mesoamerican cosmos. More specifically, I wish to explore the possible symbolic significance of the yearly return of the monarch butterfly from the north to the region west of the Valley of Mexico where they roost during the winter. I suggest that this spectacular natural phenomenon was once perceived as the return of an army of deceased warriors from their distant, northern and otherworldly home.

Keywords: Mesoamerica, religion, death, rebirth, caves, butterflies

Resumen

En este breve artículo considero una serie de creencias y prácticas religiosas asociadas a la muerte y renacimiento en Mesoamérica. Aunque mi objetivo final es echar luz sobre estos temas en el México Central del período Clásico y en particular en Teotihuacán, reviso las fuentes mexicas del Posclásico Tardío y de la época Colonial, buscando analogías posibles y constataando a continuidades. Para empezar, examino la noción y las representaciones de las cuevas como la boca abierta de la tierra que devora los cuerpos de los difuntos, pero también, la que en el mismo tiempo se entendía como el lugar del nacimiento y el principal surgimiento de los ancestros humanos. Esto sugiere que el inframundo fue considerada como una locación transformativa asociada con la muerte y la descomposición, pero también la germinación y el nacimiento. En el segundo lugar, me refiero al tema del renacimiento y la importancia de las mariposas en la iconografía funeraria y en el concepto de un mundo solar del ‘más allá’ reservado principalmente para los guerreros. Literalmente me muevo desde el inframundo hasta el cielo y la esfera celestial del cosmos mesoamericano. Específicamente, quisiera explorar el posible significado simbólico del retorno anual de las mariposas monarcas desde el norte a la región oeste del Valle de México, donde hibernan durante el invierno. Sugiero que este fenómeno natural espectacular era percibido antes como el retorno de un ejército de los guerreros desde su distante hogar del mundo de ‘más allá’ en el norte.

Palabras clave: Mesoamérica, religión, muerte, renacimiento, cuevas, mariposas

THE UNDERWORLD AS A PLACE OF TRANSFORMATION AND GERMINATION

In order to approach the significance and symbolism of the underworld, the “below”, as well as ideas pertaining to the afterlife in pre-Columbian Mesoamerica, a cross-cultural comparative perspective can provide us with a general frame of interpretation and understanding (see also Nielsen 2014). Frequently we find that in early agricultural societies, the underworld was considered morally neutral. In ancient Mesopotamia it was believed that beneath earth existed a cavernous underworld, a dry, dark place where the city of the dead was located, and where the souls of the dead lived, as did the gods of the underworld and the spirits of diseases. In the minds of the Babylonians the underworld was essentially a storehouse of the dead. To the Greeks and Romans of the Classical world the underworld was the recipient of the dead, but equally the: “[s]ource of fertile crops pushing their way upward to the sun, [and] the underworld also symbolized rebirth” (Russell 1997: 18), a “granary for seed [...] and a warehouse for the dead” (Bernstein 1993: 22). As pointed out by Alan Bernstein in his book *The Formation of Hell* the ancient Greek saw an overlap “between the underworld as grave (necropolis, city of the dead, catacomb) and granary, the connection between the inner earth and the fertility of its surface” (Bernstein 1993: 39). To the Inka the realm beneath the earth was known as *hurin* or *ucu pacha*, a locale associated with the forces of the night as well as Viracocha, the creator god who called out ancestral beings from caves and springs (see Urton 1999: 34-37). As archaeologist Bruce Trigger noted:

Most cosmographies posited some form of counterpart of the sky located under the earth. Especially in civilizations that interred the dead, this underworld was equated with death and decay and populated with the deities, spirits, and souls of the dead. Because the surface of the earth provided food for humans, it was often concluded that the underworld was a place of regeneration, where death gave rise to new life.

(Trigger 2003: 454)

We thus find a repeated pattern where the underworld is a rather ambiguous and two-sided place, containing both destructive and creative powers. This is also evident in representations of the Mexica earth god Tlaltecuhli which embodies the earth and soil that receives the dead, transforms the corpses and then (re)produces life. Tlaltecuhli is shown devouring the dead, while the birth posture of the same deity clearly refers to the bringing forth of new life (López Luján 2010: 101-118; Miller and Taube 1993: 167-168). The underworld is therefore best conceived of as a place of regenerative powers, a place of decomposing and germination. Similar ideas are encountered among the Maya, and as Allen Christenson points out in his forthcoming book on Maya world renewal ceremonies:

Both life and death must dance together on the great stage of the world or the cycle of the seasons could not continue on their endless spiraling rotations [...] The Maya do not blame the night for being dark, because darkness is neither good nor evil [...] The same is true of death in the worldview of the traditionalist Maya. It is neither benevolent nor malevolent. It simply is what it is.

(Christenson 2016)

In other words, to apply Judeo-Christian notions of exclusively good or evil to supernatural entities, or think of a purely paradisaical heaven and hellish underworld is to simplify, or even neglect, the complex complementary dualism of Mesoamerican religion and cosmology (Díaz 2015; Nielsen 2014).

Turning to the representations of caves in Late Postclassic central Mexico, we find that they are frequently shown as the open mouth of a stone or mountain-like creature, presumably Tlaltecuhli. A wonderful example of this is the relief surrounding the doorway to the magnificent rock-cut temple

at Malinalco in Morelos which represents the jaws and face of the earth monster; the visitor literally stepping on the tongue of the creature before entering the artificial cave – cut into the mountain. In several colonial manuscripts identical imagery are encountered, for example in the *Codex Azcatitlan* (Graulich *et al.* 1995: lám. 5 and 6) and on the *Lienzo of Tlapiltepec* (see Brownstone 2015: 128-129). The Aztec logogram for ‘cave’ **OSTO** is most commonly represented as the open jaws of a similar creature marked by stone-signs. What must be emphasized here, however, is that these cave-mouths are places where the dead enter as well as locations from where people emerge; in other words, places of death and (re)birth, or as Doris Heyden remarked, caves were considered ideal settings for rites of passages (Heyden 2005; Nielsen and Brady 2006). Caves are also frequently the locus of rituals associated with petitions for rain, and are believed to be the abode of rain deities. Today the Nahuas of central Mexico continue to perform rituals at several caves or cliff shelters, including those on the slopes of Popocatepetl (e.g., Glockner 2007), and the sacred mountain of Postectli in Veracruz (e.g., Sandstrom 2005). Numerous other examples can be cited among the Mixe and Mixtec in Oaxaca (Bartolomé and Barabas 2008; Heyden 2005: 22-32) and across most of the Maya area (Vogt and Stuart 2005). Some caves appear to have been of enormous importance, even to the point where they became popular pilgrimage sites, attracting people from beyond the immediate local area. Naj Tunich in Guatemala played such a role among the Classic Maya (Stone 1995) and the caves of Chalma in central Mexico, before being appropriated by the Catholic church in the early 16th century, was an important pre-Columbian pilgrimage site (Turner and Turner 1978: 54).

We also know that mortuary bundles, some presumably containing the remains of deified ancestors, were stored and attended to in caves in pre-Columbian and Colonial times. Evidence of such practices comes from the Huichol and the Mixtec (Headrick 1999, 2007: 44-71), and in 2014 a mortuary bundle, wrapped in a finely woven *petate*, was discovered in a cave in Hidalgo (Perez Ayala 2016). Similarly, the discovery of the partially mummified remains of 11 children in the Cueva del Lazo in western Chiapas has added significantly to our knowledge of caves as repositories for bundles containing human remains (see Domenici 2014). From early Colonial central Mexico there are fascinating indications of similar practices. Thus, a page from the inquisitorial trial of Miguel Pochtecatl Tlayotla from the year 1539, shows several bundles, one identified as that of the Mexican patron deity Huitzilopochtli, placed at the mouth of a cave in a mountain. Tlayotla, a Nahuatl priestly nobleman was accused of keeping the bundles in his house for a period (Lopes Don 2010: 111-145; Russo 2013), but it is also known that such bundles were kept in sacred caves, including Tepuchcalco in the Acolhua area (Lopes Don 2010: 123), and the drawing from the trial suggests that these bundles also originated from a cave. Although little is known about the specific beliefs that motivated the placement of mortuary bundles in caves, it is likely that this practice should be seen in the light of the complementary significance of the cave as a sacred space: The bundles were presented to Tlaltecuhltli (or to a comparable entity), who would devour them – but also potentially enstore them with new life. In their cave shrines such bundles continued to be of tremendous importance to the surrounding communities and the ruling lineages as powerful oracles; dead, but still capable of communicating with and influencing the world of the living (Rincón Mautner 2005: 121-122).

THE TRANSFORMATION OF THE BUNDLED DEAD

Moving back in time to the central Mexican metropolis of Teotihuacan, it has been suggested that the magnificent theatrical incense burners mimic mortuary bundles, the central clay mask representing the stone masks assumed to have been attached to Teotihuacan’s mortuary bundles, as we know was the case among the Postclassic Mixtec and Phurépecha (Young-Sánchez 1990; Muñera 1991; Headrick 1999). The Franciscan friar Juan de Torquemada also noted that among the Aztecs some of the deceased

were wrapped in 15 or 20 wonderful woven *mantas*, and a painted mask was then placed on the bundle (see Muñera 1991: 339). The small ceramic objects, called *adornos*, that are attached to the front of the Teotihuacan incense burners represent a variety of objects, plants and animals, but particularly common are weaponry (mainly shields and darts), strongly suggesting an association with warfare and warriors. Other elements that occur frequently are flowers, vegetables and fruits and butterflies, either complete butterflies or characteristic butterfly attributes (Berlo 1984: 63-65; von Winning 1987, I: 115-124; Manzanilla and Carreón 1991), such as wings, antennae, proboscis and large eyes (Berlo 1983: 83-84; Headrick 2003).¹ Teotihuacan warriors, presumably dead warriors, are frequently portrayed with butterfly attributes (Berlo 1983; Headrick 2003, 2007: 125-145), and as have been noted, these observations dovetails with Bernardino de Sahagún's statement that deceased Mexica warriors were transformed into butterflies and birds after four years in the realm of the sun god Tonatihu. They would then return to earth to sip nectar from the flowers:

And when they had passed four years there, then they changed into precious birds – hummingbirds, orioles, yellow birds, yellow birds blackened about their eyes, chalky butterflies, feather down butterflies, gourd bowl butterflies; they suckled honey there where they dwelt. And here upon earth they came to suck from all the various flowers.

(Anderson and Dibble 1978: 49)

Here it is necessary to briefly comment on the issue of taxonomy. In Book 11 of Sahagún's *Florentine Codex* butterflies are described and illustrated along with other insects, separate from avians, thus following a European Renaissance taxonomic system (Dibble and Anderson 1963: 94-95). However, in indigenous Mesoamerican taxonomy winged beings, or volatiles, such as nectar-feeding birds and butterflies may well have been conceived as closely related (Hunt 1977: 57-58, 62-63; Furst 1995: 23-27). For comparison it can be noted, that in Hopi iconography it is difficult to distinguish between butterflies and birds: "the word for one is often used for the other, anatomical distinction not being recognized to any extent [...] and a figure of a butterfly with bird characters was not regarded as a violation of primitive art although it would shock the realistic ideas of a naturalist" (Fewkes 1910: 583). The latter point is interesting considering the known examples of "butterfly-birds" in Teotihuacan iconography (Headrick 2007: 131; see also Paulinyi 2014). Another example is the Aztec female deity Itzpapalotl ('Obsidian' or 'Clawed Butterfly'), who was associated with a wide range of phenomena including war, women who died in childbirth as well as a paradisaical otherworld location, thus again linking the butterfly not only with death, but also with rebirth (Mikulska Dąbrowska 2008: 164-167; Miller and Taube 1993: 100). The 'clawed butterfly' is a probable reference to a bat, and Itzpapalotl is indeed sometimes represented with bat wings, suggesting some semantic overlap between these winged creatures (see Hunt 1977: 63-65). Perhaps we need to reconsider whether these are in fact always composite beings, mythological or not, or images of a broader generic, ethnotaxonomic category of winged beings.

There are additional symbolic relations between warriors and butterflies among the Aztec. Early in the 20th century Eduard Seler noted that the central effigy in the yearly *Xocotl uetzi* feast took the shape of a butterfly, and represented: "the god of the warrior's death or the spirit of the dead warrior" (Seler 1904: 1039, cited in Berlo 1983: 85)², and Mexica warriors are sometimes shown wearing

¹ It has also been suggested that a specific deity, the Butterfly God (Dios Mariposa), is represented in the iconography of Teotihuacan (see von Winning 1987, I: 123-124; Paulinyi 2014; see also Manzanilla and Carreón 1996: 304-306).

² As pointed out to me by Katarzyna Mikulska, Diego Durán describes this same effigy as being formed so as to resemble "a bird or as a bat, its wings and crest made of large and splendid feathers" (Horcasitas and Heyden

large butterfly effigies on backracks. From Early Postclassic central Mexico the famous warriors on top of Tula's Pyramid B are wearing stylized butterfly pectorals, suggesting a continuity in the close association between butterflies and warriors. Early scholars like Selser and Hermann Beyer concluded that similar, if not identical, beliefs about butterflies as the souls of deceased warriors existed in Teotihuacan (see Headrick 2003: 158). Karl Taube, in a seminal work from 2000, further suggested that mortuary bundles can be compared to the chrysalis or pupa of the butterfly (Taube 2000: 285-289, 301-309; see also Nielsen and Helmke in press). He summarized his ideas as follows (2006: 154): "[T]he souls of Teotihuacan warriors were transformed into butterflies during rites of cremation. In fact, I have suggested that burning of the warrior bundle symbolized the metamorphosis from the moribund chrysalis to the brilliant butterfly". Taube also argued that the butterflies and birds were closely linked with the concept of an otherworldly realm called "Flower World", references to which is found across Mesoamerica and in the US Southwest (Taube 2004, 2006; Hill 1992; Hays-Gilpin and Hill 1999). Beyond Mesoamerica numerous cultures have perceived, or continue to regard, butterflies as symbols of regeneration or the souls of the departed.³ This includes early Mediterranean cultures, ancient Greece and Rome, and similar beliefs are also common in the East, such as in Japan (e.g., Furst 1995: 35-37; Howse 2010).⁴ To mention one example, in the late 5th century, Pope Gelasius (AD 492-496) issued a decree which metaphorically described Christ as a caterpillar. He was thus believed to have lived a humble "worm-like life" and "having been resurrected miraculously from the tomb of the chrysalis" (Howse 2010: 20): "*Vermis quia resurrexit!* – the worm has risen again" to quote the decree (Rödén 2012: 103). The chrysalis or pupal stage of the butterfly became a symbol of death in Christian thought, and so the life, death and rebirth of Jesus was compared to that of a butterfly, and the imagery of a butterfly, or alternatively a moth, emerging from its pupa as a reference to the rebirth of the soul is not uncommon as a motif on 17th-19th century epitaphs in many parts of Europe (e.g., Keister 2004: 77; de Pascale 2009: 110, 114).

Returning to the topic of Teotihuacan incense burners and their possible role in a cult oriented towards dead warriors, an incensario workshop was discovered by archaeologists in a compound attached to the Ciudadela in the southern part of the city. Saburo Sugiyama suggested that the state controlled the manufacture and distribution of these elite items, and that: "some censers were used for mortuary rituals, representing specific dead soldiers or groups affiliated with each social unit" (Sugiyama 1998: 5). As is well known, the Pyramid of the Feathered Serpent is embellished with images of the War Serpent, and the numerous sacrificed warriors placed within the building further accentuates the importance of the military in the ideology of the Teotihuacan state (Taube 1992; Sugiyama 2005). Knowing that butterflies (represented as complete beings or *pars pro toto*) is one of the most frequent *adorno* motifs on Teotihuacan incense burners, we may surmise with some degree of certainty that in Teotihuacan beliefs related to death and the afterlife, an association did indeed exist between butterflies and the souls of dead warriors as were the case among the Late Postclassic Aztec.

Seeking possible explanations for this metaphorical relationship, it has previously been pointed

1971: 207), thus apparently once again underscoring the importance of a winged creature rather than a specific species.

³ As pointed out by Eva Hunt in her excellent book *The Transformation of the Hummingbird* hummingbirds appear to have carried some of the same associations in Mesoamerica (Hunt 1977: 60-62).

⁴ It has been suggested that anatomical and physical phenomena may explain the relationship between death, the soul and winged creatures, and in particular butterflies. Thus, the structure of the human heart and its placement between the lungs and above the liver can be compared to the shape of a butterfly. In addition, a corpse lying on its back will produce a contact pattern where the body touches the surface beneath it. The pattern is formed by the settling of the blood, and as has been noted a "butterfly-shaped spot" appears on the upper part of the back (see Furst 1995: 38-41, Figs. 12-14). However, it is difficult to provide evidence that such observations in fact played any role in the origin of Mesoamerican beliefs concerning butterflies and the afterworld.

out that butterflies undergo an almost miraculous transformation which probably served as the model for the transformation of dead. Following their cremation bundled warriors would be reborn in the shape of butterflies or other winged beings (see also Nielsen and Helmke, in press). However, this relationship can be further explored, and I suggest that apart from the metamorphosis that all butterflies undergo, a yearly, spectacular natural phenomenon taking place to the west of the basin of Mexico also played a central role in the formation of these beliefs. Thus, the observation of the annual return of billions of one particular species of butterfly, the monarch, from the cardinal direction associated with death, the north, may have been the basis for notion of a return of the dead and transformed warriors. The monarch butterfly (*Danaus plexippus*) is famous for its astonishing migration from the overwintering areas in the western central Mexican highlands and California in the spring to most of North America, and their return in the fall, in late August to October, covering distances up to more than 4 800 kilometers (Solensky 2004a). The majority of the monarchs overwinter in the central Mexican highlands, more specifically in what is today a limited number of locations in the states of Mexico and Michoacan, all situated within a 11 700 km² area.⁵ The butterflies seek out these areas, located some 2700-3600 m AMSL, as they prefer the oyamel fir and pine forests for their long roosting period. These important locations are the home to colonies with up to an estimated 61 million monarchs per hectare (Solensky 2004b; García-Serrano *et al.* 2004). Amazingly, these sites remained unknown to the scientific community until 1975 (Urquart 1976). Today several of these are protected and serve as butterfly sanctuaries, and have also developed into popular tourist attractions. The monarchs' overwintering areas and their immediate surroundings have never been subject to careful archaeological surveys or excavations, and little information can be gained with regards to pre-Columbian settlements and activities. Nevertheless, I would like to propose the tentative hypothesis, that the yearly return of the monarchs was instrumental in the formation of the belief that the souls of the dead could return at specific intervals of time. In fact, this is something Janet Berlo briefly mentioned more twenty years ago, shortly after the discovery of the overwintering areas in 1975 (Berlo 1984: 65). We know that the passage of the year was observed with great attention in Mesoamerica, and as agricultural societies the central Mexican cultures had for millenia put emphasis on different weather phenomena, as well as the behaviour of birds and animals, to predict the changing of the seasons. Many religious beliefs and practices were directly associated with and modeled upon phenomena observed in the surrounding landscape, and an event like the return of billions of monarchs is unlikely to have gone unnoticed. Every year the monarchs return from the north, the direction often associated with death, in uncountable numbers. It really must have been like an army of dead soldiers coming back to the world of the living.

Looking for comparable examples of cultural interpretations of butterfly migrations, a fascinating case from Java must be mentioned. In 1883, shortly after the disastrous eruption of the volcano Krakatau, the migration of large swarms of butterflies is said to have been seen as the incarnation of the more than 30 000 people killed by the eruption (Rödén 2012: 103). While it would thus seem that butterflies, more generally speaking, are understood as the transformed dead, the conceptualization of a return with a regular, annual interval could have been fostered by a migration pattern like that of the monarchs. As said, the archaeology of the overwintering areas is not well known, and we have little information about archaeological sites such as temples, shrines or burials, in the vicinity of the sanctuaries. Interestingly, Agapi Filini recently noted that in the Classic period iconography of the Cuitzeo Basin in Michoacan, less than 100 km from the monarch areas: "the butterfly complex

⁵ In pre-Columbian times monarchs may have overwintered in the Valley of Mexico, much closer to Tenochtitlan and Teotihuacan. The vegetation and climatic patterns and the extent of the fir and pine forests have undoubtedly changed since over the past 500 years, partly due to increased human activities such as deforestation (Sanders *et al.* 1979: 293).

constitutes a major iconographic theme” (Filini 2004: 66). Evidently, much more research is required to clarify whether pre-Columbian peoples ventured into these montane forest areas and whether their presence can somehow be explained by the overwintering monarchs.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Beliefs about butterflies as the souls of the deceased can still be found in indigenous communities in the states of Michoacan and Oaxaca (e.g., Leifer 1997; Manzanilla and Carreón 1991: 305). Linda Manzanilla and Emilie Carreón specifically refer to a myth from Michoacan which relates that the monarchs are the souls of the dead, and that this is the reason for their arrival in late October and early November (Manzanilla and Carreón 1991: 305). It would thus seem that the arrival of the monarchs have been correlated with the *Día de los Muertos* or Day of the Dead, a celebration that is predominantly of Euro-Christian origins (Brandes 2006; Lomnitz 2005). While monarch butterflies have not until quite recently taken on any role in the iconography of the popularized Day of the Dead celebrations in Mexico (Carmichael and Sayer 2001), it is interesting to note that they have done so for at least the past ten years in children’s literature about the Day of the Dead. Here the return of the monarchs serves as a beautiful and emotional symbol of the yearly return of departed family members. As in *Yo Recuerdo a Abuelito* (Levy 2007) and *Uncle Monarch and the Day of the Dead* (Goldman 2008) where the process of mourning, coping with the loss of loved ones and learning to cherish the memories of them, is set in the context of the Day of the Dead, where two, small girls imagine how they are being visited by their recently dead grandfather and uncle. With coming generations of children growing up with this direct association between the Day of the Dead and the monarchs it seems inevitable that this will become a more common and mainstream perception. Thus, the ancient Mesoamerican notion of butterflies as the souls of the dead, seems to be on its way to its own rebirth, taking wings in a new, historical and cultural context. Caves, on the other hand, play no role in present burial ceremonies, but remain to be important loci in rituals and beliefs related to ancestor worship and origin mythology (e.g., Christenson 2001, 2008; Vogt and Stuart 2005; Brady 2009), and echoes the fundamental belief that the earth, the soil, has the regenerative powers to ensure the transformation of the body of the deceased, be it a plant or a human being, into new life (Christenson 2001: 206). As such, the cave and the butterfly both continue, although in altered forms, to represent one of the fundamental aspects of Mesoamerican religions: the close, interrelated association between life, death and rebirth.

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