

LEÓN-PORTILLA, MIGUEL. *Tiempo y realidad en el pensamiento maya. Ensayo de acercamiento*. Prólogo de J. E. S. Thompson. Apéndice de A. Villa Rojas. Instituto de Investigaciones Históricas de la UNAM. México, 1968. 177 pp., 34 ilustraciones, 8 láminas.

The contemporary Mayas with whom I am most familiar are the 8 000 Zinacantecos who live just to the west of San Cristobal Las Casas in the Highlands of Chiapas. For eleven years now my Harvard Chiapas Project has focused most of its field research on an attempt to describe and understand the intricate culture of Zinacantan.

In the course of our research we have discovered that one of the key features of Zinacanteco culture is an almost obsessive emphasis (compared to other Indian tribes I have studied) upon "time", and that one of the key domains of the culture is expressed by the Tzotzil word *K'in* which designates a period of time in which a regularly scheduled ceremony takes place.

The emphasis upon "time" as an ordering principle in the culture is clearly manifested in the punctual way in which the Zinacantecos keep appointments, and more especially in the way they schedule their activities during the course of the week, month, and year, and wait many years for cargos in the religious hierarchy. Unlike the Navahos (with whom I previously worked in the Southwest) who do not make appointments more than three days ahead of time, and often seem incapable of keeping a fixed appointment for a day in advance, I find I can make appointments with Zinacantecos for as much as a month ahead and that they will meet me punctually on the appointed day and hour. Busy Zinacantecos, such as the shamans, will usually have their days scheduled for as much as three weeks in advance, each day being booked for some special ceremony they have agreed to perform. And it is often necessary for us to wait two or three weeks before we can schedule an appointment for an interview with a busy shaman. Even more impressive is the future planning of the Zinacantecos for their cargos, some of which are now being requested for up to 22 years hence. There are many Zinacantecos who are now waiting for cargos which they will not enter until 1990! But each year they appear before the Elders to make certain their names are on the list for 1990, and they are constantly talking about and making plans for that distant year. If a stronger emphasis on time planning for the future exists in any other culture, I have yet to hear about it. Even contemporary industrialized nations like the USA or the USSR do not, to my knowledge, make plans that far ahead.

In Zinacantan many of the regularly scheduled "fiestas" or cere-

monies, whether for the saints in the ceremonial center or for lineages and waterhole groups out in the parajes, are referred to by the generic term *K'in*. For example, in Zinacantan Center there is the *K'in Santorenso*, the fiesta which lasts from August 7 to 11, with the culmination on August 10 which is San Lorenzo's Day. During this period each year there is intense ceremonial activity since San Lorenzo is the patron saint of Zinacantan. Out in the parajes, there is the *K'in Krus* (Fiesta of Santa Cruz) celebrated for lineages and waterhole groups in May, usually on or near the "Day of the Cross", but repeated in late October. These dates suggest an important relationship with the beginning and end of the rainy season in the Highlands of Chiapas.

While I knew from the research of the linguists McQuown and Kaufman that *K'in* is a proto-Maya word meaning "sun, day, time", I was unaware of its more general significance and rich symbolic meanings for Maya thought until I read Miguel León-Portilla's brilliant work on *Tiempo y Realidad en el Pensamiento Maya*, with its significant Appendix by Alfonso Villa Rojas on "Los Conceptos de Espacio y Tiempo entre los Grupos Mayances Contemporáneos".

León-Portilla has produced in this work a genuinely exciting synthesis of the available data from the glyphs, the codices, and the post-Conquest texts such as the *Chilam Balam* and the *Popul Vuh* on the remarkable Maya concepts of time and the relationship of these concepts to the master idea of *kinh*. Following a succinct summary of the various aspects of Maya calendrics, León-Portilla proceeds to analyze how time is expressed symbolically in the various glyphs of *Kinh* which especially represent or connote "sun" or "sun god". He concludes, I think correctly, that "Sol, día y tiempo no son entidades abstractas, sino realidad inmersa en el mundo de los mitos, aspectos de la deidad, origen de los ciclos que gobiernan todo lo que existe" (p. 45). *Kinh* seems therefore to be loaded with "...connotaciones religiosas y de sinos buenos y malos, inherentes a la realidad cíclica del universo y muy probablemente también a la esencia de la divinidad misma" (p. 45).

Once having established that *kinh* has a divine nature in Maya thought, León-Portilla discusses more specifically how time is an attribute of the gods. Each period of time is associated with the face of a god, and is "carried" by the god and then turned over to his successor at the end of the period. *Kinh*, therefore, is primordial reality, divine and without limits. In *kinh* are distinguished the innumerable moments of time, each having a divine face which manifests the attributes of his particular moment. These divine faces therefore constitute the most significant nucleus of the pantheon of the Mayas (p. 62), and their universe is the changing scene of the sum of the presences and actions of the

various divine forces that coincide in given moments of time. The Mayas, in a word, seem to believe in a kind of pantheism that might best be called "pan-cronoteísmo" (p. 63).

But there still remains the problem of the relationship of time to space in Maya thought. Here León-Portilla considers the Maya conceptions of the four directions and the center, all associated with colors (red, white, black, yellow, blue-green), and the layers of the upper and under-world, and comes to the most novel conclusion of all: that "space", with its color-directions and its layers, is merely a kind of "stage" for the basic conjunctions of the various cycles of time. The same gods of the numbers, days, months, years, and other cycles, which in essence are distinct bundles of time, appear simultaneously in the upper and lower worlds (p. 88). And hence.

...el universo espacial existe, se altera, muere y renace en cada uno de "los soles" o edades, en función de las actuaciones y presencias de los dioses o rostros del tiempo. El espacio no es algo estático. Es complemento, marco de colores, que fija por momentos el escenario de *kinh*, el cual como con las reglas de un juego o de un drama que se desarrolla por ciclos, sucesivamente va mostrando sus distintos rostros y máscaras, vivifica y destruye y mantiene sin término la realidad en que se mueven y piensan los hombres (pp. 90-91).

This leads to the fundamental question as to whether time and space form a homogeneous reality in Maya thought. León-Portilla concedes that he cannot answer this question, but adds that

Lo que sí puede afirmarse es que si el espacio existe por obra de los dioses y tiene en sí mismo connotaciones divinas, las deidades presentes y actuantes en él son precisamente los rostros cambiantes del tiempo. Fuera de éste el espacio resulta impensable. Más allá de los ciclos, no hay vida y nada acontece (p. 91).

In a final chapter on "El Hombre Maya en el Universo de *Kinh*" León-Portilla explores the meaning of all this symbolism for the Maya. He concludes that the Maya universe is populated with faces of gods that are forces activated through the directional colors and in both the celestial and underworld regions. The difference from any ordinary form of animism is that the Maya discovered the means for measuring the cycles so that the divine forces are neither indeterminate nor obscure, but rather can be precisely predicted by means of their observations and calculations. As León-Portilla states it so elegantly,

como en el caso de ninguna otra cultura, los sabios hacen de los cálculos del tiempo fórmulas de rito y adoración. En las inscripciones se conmemoran con rigor matemático los momentos en que la acción de los dioses-periodos se ha dejado sentir en el mundo...

La vida entera de los mayas se presenta así orientada por un *patrón* cultural manifiesto en el conjunto de sus instituciones relacionadas esencialmente con el tema del tiempo... Por esto la obsesión por el tiempo llegó a ser factor aglutinante de esta cultura (pp. 106-107).

K'ih for the Maya is thus the "cosmic atmosphere" with faces of gods that manifest themselves cyclically, and the spacial universe is an immense state on which the forces of divinity are oriented, entering and leaving the stage in unbroken order. "La norma de vida es ponerse a tono con lo que son y habrán de ser las cargas de tiempo" (p. 108). A succinct summary sentence expresses the essence of Maya thought about time:

Si otros pueblos alcanzaron a forjar para sí diferentes visiones del mundo, ventanas para asomarse a la comprensión de su universo, los sabios mayas inventaron una cosmovisión que, por ser historia, medida y predicción de la realidad total cuya esencia es el tiempo, con mejor nombre habría que llamar *cronovisión* (p. 109).

In my judgment, León-Portilla has produced a work that will become a classic in anthropology. Certainly it has immensely stimulated my thinking about the possible meanings of concepts of time and of *K'ih* in contemporary Zinacanteco culture. Yet, there is more to be done. What, for example, is the relationship of cycles of time to Maya social structure, and in particular to the worship of the ancestral gods that figures so prominently in contemporary cultures like Zinacantan? We need also to consider the relationship of these Maya concepts of time to such ideas as those presented by Edmund Leach on role-reversals as markers in the flow of time (see Leach's article on "Two Representations of the Concept of Time"),¹ as well as to the "binary oppositions" in Claude Lévi-Strauss's theories about the basic structure of human thought. Finally, it should be intellectually rewarding to explore the relationship of these Maya concepts to the theory of relativity being developed by our modern physicists.

¹ Artículo publicado en la obra de W. A. Lessa and E. Z. Vogt, *Reader in comparative Religion: An Anthropological Approach*. 2nd edition. Row, Peterson & Co. Evanston, Illinois, 1958. xiii + 598 pp. e ilustraciones.

In the Appendix, Alfonso Villa Rojas has produced a masterful synthesis of what is known of the concepts of time and space among the contemporary Maya. He considers especially the quadrapartite conception of the universe, the problem of the location of the "corners of the world" (whether these are cardinal, inter-cardinal, or the solstitial points), and the vertical dimensions of the universe, with layers above and below. He then demonstrates how these ancient Maya concepts and the methods for measuring time have persisted (for now over 1000 years) in the least acculturated Maya areas: the Highlands of Chiapas, the Northwest Highlands of Guatemala, and the hinterlands of Yucatan and Quintana Roo.

This small volume, handsomely printed and illustrated, is a *must* not only for all Maya specialists, but for all scholars interested in the processes of human thought.

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