A Pre-Columbian World

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Animal Transformations:
The Mixing of Maya and European Fantasy and Belief

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Introduction

If we are to approach the question of continuity of Maya thinking over time, there are many places to look, yet few as complex and pervasive as the idea of animal to human transformation and hybridity. One might argue at the outset that during the pre-history and the first 1,000 years of historical time most cultures conceptualized the world through some form of the binary opposition animal/human, human/animal; that the development of civilization itself provoked some form of mixing and demarcation in the human mind between the animal and the human, between nature and culture. And, that in the midst of this frontier, the representation of transformation and hybridity has been and remains something like a tool to shape thinking. The Maya, however, have formed these concepts for themselves of what is animal and what is human in distinctly visual and performance arts. Equally distinct is the Maya’s persistence, from the Pre-Classic period to the present day, in fantasizing and believing in animal/human integration.

There is a kind of conspicuous excess of examples of animal/human hybridity amid the Maya archaeological, historical, linguistic, and ethnographic artifacts and literature. As quickly as the Maya produce them or scholars reveal them there seems to be someone, beginning with the generation of Landa up until today, myself included, that has felt compelled to describe, preserve, or analyze these instances, as if in them we were looking at something unique, slightly more precious than other persistent trains of thought. This curious and dual attraction to animal human hybridity within both the Maya and ourselves is the topic of this essay.
TOWARD AN UNDERSTANDING OF ANCIENT MAYA HUMAN/ANIMAL FORMS

In the Late Pre-Classic Period, between 300 BC and AD 250, the Maya began their most extensive architectural projects in the lowlands on the borders of present-day Mexico and Guatemala. In this period of sustainable agricultural development, they chose to socially stratify, create, and dominate markets and trade routes. As a young, burgeoning society, well beyond their origins as clusters of subsistence-level villages, the Maya sought to represent their desire, and ability, to dominate the natural and social world around them. From this period of intensified social stratification emerge some of the earliest artifacts through which the Maya show their fascination with animal/human hybridity, and especially with how it relates to social power and transcendence.

To the northeast of the Maya lowlands, on the Pacific Coast of Mexico, the Olmec had lived and dominated for hundreds of years, predating, then dovetailing in space and time with the early growth of Maya culture. During this period of extensive growth, the Maya studied their neighbors' artifacts and emulated Olmec strategies of image making and displays of opulence and power. An example of this emulation is evident on a jade pectoral, carved by the Olmec between 1000 and 600 BC (Fig. 1). The central portion of the carving is of a face with a human nose and eyes, but the mouth of a jaguar. This hybrid jaguar/human form represents an acquisition and
demonstration of power through a combination of human and animal attributes. To be somewhere in-between, with both human and animal characteristics, was to be potentially more powerful than either alone, and to be linked to the unknown or supernatural.

Claude Lévi-Strauss specifically reflects on these issues of animal/human representation in his 1963 Totemism:

The animals in totemism cease to be solely or principally creatures which are feared, admired, or envied: their perceptible reality permits the embodiment of ideas and relations conceived by speculative thought on the basis of empirical observations. (Lévi-Strauss 1963: 89)

The "perceptible reality" of animals, he says, "permits the embodiment of ideas and relations." Lévi-Strauss implies that something about the minute details of specific animals as they are "conceived by speculative thought" allows, and I would add invites, the creation and representation of thought. Lévi-Strauss goes on to conclude in one of his more famous lines, "natural species are chosen not because they are 'good to eat' but because they are 'good to think.'" And what animals help us to think about are ideas most basic to the formation of culture-ideas about origins, efficacy, and power.

One early Maya ruler, between 100 BC and AD 100, recognized the inherent power in hybrid imagery when he took this Olmec pectoral and had his image carved on the back of the jaguar face (Fig. 2). Seated, cross-legged, as if on a throne, he wears an elaborate headdress with representations of natural and supernatural forces. To the left of him are four rows of glyphs. What we can read of them confirms that he is announcing himself here as ascending to the role of king (Schele and Miller 1986: 119–120). In addition to the glyphs, there are other iconographic elements that visualize his power, such as his headdress, which is made up of two complex components. The form jutting

FIG. 2 Maya Lord incised on the backside of Olmec Flanged Pectoral. 100 BC–AD 100.
out to the left is associated with a head ornament worn by a deity known as the Jester God, whose pre-history is linked to the shark, a powerful sea fish that often found its way from the Gulf of Mexico into the rivers of the lowland Maya. Jutting out from the right of his headdress is a personified plant, the axis mundi or World Tree, that links the sky, the underworld, and the earth. In addition, Maya hieroglyphic writing, invented as a linguistic system to represent human thought, is visually made up of an ever-shifting combination of elements of animals, plants, humans, and supernatural and geometric forms.

Within the Maya hieroglyphic system found on pots and stelae throughout the ancient Maya world, Stephen Houston and David Stuart have identified the way glyph as that which logographically names a particular entity as a co-essence, or alter ego, of another being. In Maya dictionaries dating back as far as the sixteenth century and as recent as just a few decades ago, the spoken word way was translated as sleep, transformation, other spirits, metamorphosis into animals, and the very concept of dreams. Thus the word, the glyph, and concept way represent a deeply rooted idea amongst the Maya that they do not walk alone in this
world, nor do they exist in simply one world. Each person is made up of not only a waking and sleeping self but also a human and potentially animal self. Together they constitute a consciousness, a body in a state of transformation, a human power imbued beyond its boundaries into other visible and invisible realms.

On a Classic Maya pot from the eighth century depicting the ruler known as the “Fat Cacique,” one can see in each carefully drawn figure human bodies heavily layered with multiple identities (Fig. 3). The Cacique is drawn with jaguar paws that appear to be part of his body, rather than placed on him. His face is drawn in profile, yet, just millimeters away, is another face, at once a mask, an echo hovering before him with mouth open and bared teeth. The glyphs above name him as “with or on” a jaguar throne (Reents-Budet 1994: 167). This linguistic ambiguity of “with or on” is visually reinforced by the lyrical movement of the line that renders ruler and throne, human and animal, as intertwined and floating together in this procession. Standing to the left and right of him are two equally hybrid forms wearing jaguar pelts that cleave to their dancing bodies. The figure to the right of the Cacique has a human head clearly depicted beneath the head of a jaguar, with a third head protruding beneath his chin with grotesque eyes, nose, and teeth. At the level of his heart is a small naked human form in a pose of ecstatic surrender, perhaps depicting the subordination of the figure with whom he links arms. In this highly sophisticated art of painting, Maya artists and calligraphers invent techniques that allow them to specifically express the multivalent nature of physical and metaphysical worlds as they combine and mutate into new visual forms that represent a constant transformation and integration of the animal and the human.

Within this idea of animal human hybridity, as it is depicted through visual forms such as the Olmec pectoral and Classic Maya pot, there is a vertiginous irony, or pulling in two directions at once. Explicit in attempts to master surroundings, build pyramids, invent writing, and create intricate visual representations is a move away from animalness as it manifests itself in any other creature besides humans. Yet, as the Maya moved more forcefully in these directions, they held onto and expressed a fascination with man’s relation to animals, not simply their relation through cohabitation, but their integrated, multivalent, and at times shared nature. This propensity to think about origins, power, social differences, or ideas of time and space through animals is something the Maya had done from the very beginning of their culture and would continue to do throughout their history into the present.
On the Colonial and Contemporary Descriptions of Maya Animal/Human Beliefs

In the sixteenth century, with the exception of those from the Uatlan highland region, the majority of the Maya that the Spanish encountered did not have the same stratified society of the Classic periods. The sixteenth-century Maya were village-based farmers, artisans, or traders with a limited degree of social hierarchy that supported priests and caciques. Without an elite class to demand or display visual evidence of power, these early conquest Maya contained their culture in their spoken language, in their memories, and in weaving and other traditions that do not easily survive the decay of time. In addition, under Spanish domination so much was destroyed, as in the most famous auto de fe in the New World, when the Franciscan Friar Diego de Landa burnt hundreds of ancient Maya books and artifacts of living Maya culture in Mani in 1562.

Few artifacts that could reveal Maya thoughts about animal/human hybridity survive from this violent colonial period. What we do have, however, are the countless descriptions of Maya belief and daily life written by the conquistadores, priests, and travelers. The English traveler Thomas Gage wrote many such descriptions. In 1612 Gage first traveled from Protestant England to Spain to study and become a Dominican. Between 1625 and 1637 he traveled through Mexico and Central America, mostly on his own, sometimes seeking to convert or preach to the native populations, but primarily on a mission of observation and self knowledge. In his writing he reveals his increasing distrust and disdain for the Spanish due to their cruel treatment of the Maya. In fact, it is his experience in the New World that caused him to abandon Catholicism and return to England as an Anglican. Ten years after his return, in 1648, he would publish his text Travels in the New World. There, in a chapter entitled “Indians of Guatemala,” he describes the Maya in terms of religion as:

outwardly such as the Spaniards, but inwardly they are slow to believe that which is above sense, nature and the visible sight of the eye. Many of them to this day do incline to worship idols of sticks and stones, and are given to much superstition concerning the observation of cross-ways and meeting of beasts in them. (Gage 1958 [1648]: 234)
Gage goes on to observe that,

[many are given to witchcraft and deluded by the devil to believe that their life dependeth upon the life of such and such a beast (which they take unto them as their familiar spirit) and think that when that beast dieth, they must die. When he is chased, their hearts pant; when he is faint, they are faint. (Gage 1958 [1648]: 234)

Gage denies the Indian the ability to think metaphorically or abstractly, a stereotypical trope of European writing about Indians well through to the end of the nineteenth century. He considers their interest in animals as that of a gullible, infantile, awestruck gaze out onto the visible effects of the world. He mentions in passing the importance of the “cross-ways” especially in terms of animals, yet has no interest or incentive to reflect on what he is seeing and describing. It is inconceivable to Gage that meeting an animal at a crossroads could have significant cultural or symbolic meaning. Instead of attributing to the Maya any capacity for philosophic or metaphysical thought, he explicitly claims that it is the devil or Satan that controls their belief in their individual animal component.

In spite of himself, however, Gage does allow the Maya to leave traces of their beliefs through his description. Well into the colonial period, behind a veneer of Spanish-appearing religiosity, Gage does record their persistent belief in an animal component to themselves, a component he calls a “familiar spirit.” And though these animals do not appear so clearly or complexly as the co-essences that appear in our Olmec/Maya pectoral or Maya pot from the Classical period, they do accompany the Maya with a similar closeness and formal alignment inadvertently recorded in the detail of the “cross-ways.” The Maya rulers of the past encounter the cross-ways in forms such as the axis mundi. The colonial Maya may have found echoes of this in everyday life each time they approached two pathways, a place in the landscape where different worlds of human, animal, and the supernatural could meet.

Nineteenth- and twentieth-century ethnographers, the inheritors of Gage’s attempts at objective descriptions, have continued to be fascinated by Maya beliefs of animal/human continuity. In his exhaustive and highly idiosyncratic 1894 study “Nagualism,” Daniel Brinton combined an analysis of colonial testimonies and contemporary ethnographic research to make sense of this persistent strain of Maya thought. At one point he referred to the Maya belief in an animal-spirit companion as a “Freemasonry of Nagualism,”
through which the Maya of the colonial past and present centralized their divergent beliefs in secret against the plethora of Christian beliefs forced upon them (Brinton 1894: 16). Brinton meticulously sought out the intricacies of Nagualism to find that its foundation was the Maya calendar itself, with each day of each month assigned to a particular animal. When a child was born, an indigenous “magician,” as he called them, would inform the family what animal spirit would accompany this child through life. January 1st was the lion, the 2nd the snake, the 4th an alligator, and so on (Brinton 1894: 22). Briton would go on to propose a complex analysis of modern Nagualism, as “neither a pure descendent of ancient cults, nor yet a derivative from Christian doctrines or European superstitions” (Brinton 1894: 50). He saw it rather as a compromise between both and ultimately as a particularly Maya way of thinking through the animal as a survival strategy in a European-dominated world. At the very outset of his study he notes, “wherever we have any full accounts of the revolts against Spanish domination during the three centuries of its existence in New Spain, we can manifestly trace the guiding fingers of the powerful through the hidden hand of Nagualism” (Brinton 1894: 31).

A century after the publication of Brinton’s text Gary Gossen, like many ethnographers of the Maya from Brinton to the present, has focused intensively on the question of animal spirit companions or co-essences of the Maya. He too identifies this belief as one central to the Maya from the their pre-history to the present. In his 1994 study “From Olmecs to Zapatistas: A Once and Future History of Souls,” Gossen identifies the animal companion spirit of the Tzotzil Maya of Chamula as their chanul, derived from the word chon, meaning animal. According to Gossen, the Chamultecos believe
to this day that their chanul has twenty-six components, thirteen of which reside in the mountains of their municipality and thirteen of which reside in the third level of the sky (Gossen 1994: 564). After tracing the multifaceted nature of these animal components to their souls, Gossen concludes: “I want to emphasize that I am dealing with a conceptual universe that is not only very ancient and very widespread in contemporary Mesoamerica but also, apparently, highly adaptive in our fast-changing times” (Gossen 1994: 567).

As Gossen points out, these Maya beliefs about the animal elements of their soul linking them to temporal and spatial forces, are part of the private life of the Tzotzil, and not overtly displayed. Throughout contemporary Maya life in southern Mexico and the highlands of Guatemala, however, other aspects of animal/human hybridity are very much part of public performances, visually woven into their lives like the hybrid forms of Classic pots. For instance in Santiago Atitlán, several times a year in the cofradía of San Juan, Atitecos put on deerskins, antlers, and other pelts to perform the dance of the Deer and the Jaguar (Fig. 4). This dance re-enacts the story of a bewildered first human unable to inhabit the world without at first mastering and melding with the power the deer and jaguar embody. Through a rouse of language and action, the first human sacrifices the deer, places its pelt on his body, and then engages the jaguar in a hunt and chase that ends in the jaguar’s death in the branches of a cyrus tree (Carlsen 1997: 179). With music made on the hollowed shell of a turtle in the background and heavy incense burning, dancers, whose minds are altered from drinking heavy grain alcohol, appear from down the road with animal skins and parts on their bodies. These dancers are not really masked at all, but rather fused with elements of the deer and jaguar like the Classic Maya Cacique on his jaguar throne (Figs. 3, 5). With the rhythm of the shell drum combined with their altered senses, the dancers begin to appear as hybrid forms, deer for a while and then human, as the dance continues through the day and sometimes into the night.

Whether in the form of the privately assigned personal nagual or chanul, or in public dances, the mixing of the animal and the human continues to have an explicit life among the Maya from prehistory to the present. Through such beliefs and performances the Maya continue to re-invent themselves as multifaceted beings contiguous with animals integrated into their souls and covering their bodies.
The Animal/Human as Theory: A Closer Look at European Views

Among the Ancient Maya and the Maya of today there is undoubtedly a particular and persistent propensity to think about the world and about thought itself through a mixing of animal and human forms. In the West this notion or structure of thought is not as alien as one might think. Angels in the West have been described as early as biblical times as partial human beings with wings sprouting from their backs. In the Christian era, the concept of God itself shifted from an Old Testament overarching single deity into the hybrid Father, Son, and Holy Ghost visualized as a winged dove, thus uniting deity, man, and animal. And the devil himself, that other force beyond the Trinity, was described and depicted as an angel—half man, half bird—fallen into the form of the nocturnal bat or partial earthly goat.

During the medieval period, an historical age just before the years of European global exploration and subsequent conquests, literate nuns and monks were apt to engage and train their minds with a combination of enigmatic animal/human images combined with equally enigmatic verses. The Abbess of Hohenbourg, in her Hortus deliciarum included such composite meditation images/texts known as Versus rapportati (Fig. 6). In one such image from her book two hybrid creatures appear, one of a composite ox, hare, bird, horse, man, serpent, peacock, lion, crane and one of a stag, man, horse, bird, scorpion, cat. Caroline Bynum writes of these images that, “they could be ‘read’ only by a process of deconstructing and recomposing that trained the memory and carried its contents” (Bynum 2001: 153). In other words, composite forms of animals and humans combined with words not only contained memories but served as tools for the
development of memory, meditation, and reflection, activities of the mind used to orient the world and the self toward contact with the elusive theological or ontological realms. Cloistered in monasteries or convents, images of animal/human hybridity functioned as keys into secret chambers of the mind and spirit.

In the secular medieval world there is further evidence of the operative use of such hybrid images, especially in attempts to illustrate or describe the unknown encountered through travel and trade in the fourteenth century. The most stunning example of this is the Livre des Merveilles, an illuminated manuscript given by the Duc de Bourgogne to the Duc de Berry (Figs. 7, 8). This manuscript was only one of many in Europe at the time that reproduced the wondrous texts of travelers such as John Mandeville or Marco Polo. At one point in his narrative, illuminated in the manuscript, Mandeville describes an encounter between European merchants (on the left) carrying a barnacle branch mysteriously bearing fruit of geese to their Eastern counterparts carrying an equally mysterious Scythian gourd out of which a lamb is born. Here West and East, near and far, self and other are literally on equal footing, each displaying their own inexplicable wonders of hybridity in nature. What is newly encountered is wondered at with the implicit
acknowledgment that the onlookers themselves must appear from another world of comparable strangeness and delight. In the same book, other stories depicting the travels of Marco Polo reveal a European propensity to see in foreign lands extreme evidence of animal human forms such as the dog-headed inhabitants of the Andaman Islands. And here, as in the Mandeville image, the hybrid forms of dog and man seem to have lived lives similar to those of their European counterparts, dressed much like them, partaken in commerce and trade. One can only ask what Marco Polo actually saw that in turn got etched in his mind as this hybrid animal/human form. Some mechanism of thinking prompted this translation of experience into a projection that on a fundamental level was part of an attempt to understand difference and the unknown.

It is no wonder, then, that in early encounters in the New World learned priests, conquistadores, and travelers alike continued to represent the unknown through mental and physical images of hybrid animal/human forms. In the post-medieval period, however, there would be a marked shift in European thought and iconography, one where difference defined through hybrid forms acquires a much more malevolent tone, signaling a divide between “us” and “them” and ultimately a divide

**FIG. 8** Dog-headed Cynocephali described by Marco Polo in his late thirteenth-century travels in the Andaman Islands. Boucicaut Workshop, Livre des merveilles du monde, MS fr. 2810, fol. 76v, 1412 (photo courtesy of Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Paris).
between the animal and the human. In one section of her long and masterful paper on the many incarnations of Huitzilopochtli, Elizabeth Boone writes extensively about what she calls a “diabolical analogy” projected from the minds of Europeans onto native beliefs (Boone 1989: 67–83). One of the most striking visual accounts of the colonial interpretation of native beliefs that she publishes is Allain Mallet’s image of Huitzilopochtli that appeared in his 1683 Description de l’Univers (Fig. 9). Here the Aztec deity is monumentally displayed as the devil incarnate, equipped with bat wings, the hooves of a goat, and a stomach transformed into a lion’s face. This hybrid animal/human demon holds forth a shield and baton of flames, which is located between sketches taken from Aztec codices above him, and the sketchy lines depicting native worshipers below him. The European fantasy of Huitzilopochtli is given more weight and space than the other comparatively extraneous ethnographic elements of the print. Just forty years after Thomas Gage published his Travels describing the Maya as Satan-driven in their rituals of animal transformation, Mallet constructs and projects onto the Aztecs a European fantasy no less fused with similar elements.

By the seventeenth century, European thought was on the verge of an enormous sea of change that would become the foundation for the Enlightenment. Thoughts traversed through animal/human hybrid forms would be redefined, marginalized, or simply, as we see in Mallet’s print, projected as if they existed only in other cultures for Europeans to observe from a distance. This would be the age in Europe when René Descartes would claim to depart from all previous thought and learning. Alone in the
small German town of Ulm, he redefined Philosophy is West, writing the famous axiom “cogito ergo sum,” “I think therefore I am.” In his new model for meditation he not only separated the mind from the body but the human from the animal. Through Descartes we were to become entirely rational beings, equal to animals as we were to machines, but above and beyond both in our capacity to think.

In such an age the wonders of the animal world were collected, dissected, catalogued, and contained in museums like that of Olaus Worms or that of the Francesco Calzolari depicted in a 1622 print whose caption reads (Figs. 10, 11): “Viewer, insert your eyes. Contemplate the wonders of [Calzolari’s] museum and pleasurably serve your mind.” The species of the world were thus to be known in a new way, not as contiguous, but rather as apart. They were now part of a world to be mastered and manipulated for the purposes of rational science and the burgeoning commerce of a nascent industrial age.
It is again Descartes, at the edge of the Enlightenment, who would predict for us the place of science as a new way of thinking through animals and all collectible or quantifiable entities. For the new science, as he would define it in his *Discourse on Method*, would allow him to discover, “a practical philosophy that might replace the speculative philosophy taught in schools.” And, “through this philosophy” he would claim that, “we could know the power and action of fire, water, air, the stars and the heavens and all other bodies in our environment…and thus make ourselves, as it were, the lords and masters of nature” (Descartes 1985 [1537]: 142–143). Descartes’s lords and masters, like the Maya lords of the Classical past, or the deer dancers in Atitlán today, would reach out to all four cardinal points, to the elements and stars and even the heavens, but unlike them, they would do so not to share in nature’s richness through line, color, music, dance, and poetry, but rather as rational lords of numerical computations and exactitudes of supposed objectivity meant to set us apart and above, to give us a hold on nature’s bounty.
CONCLUSION

In this essay I have only begun to trace images of animal/human hybridity in Maya and European thought. Among the Maya hybridity materialized early on in their fascination with the Olmec Pectoral and has continued as an explicitly vital concept and strategy through which they know and experience the world (Figs. 1, 4). In the West our propensity to think through animals has had a different history. Such constructs have gone underground only to resurface as the return of the repressed. In the mid-nineteenth century, at the height of European global expansion, Juan Carlos María Isidro de Borbón, otherwise known as Count de Montizon, forfeited all of his claims and ambitions to the crown of Spain to his rival, the infanta Queen Isabel II.

Rather than rule the European country that had once dominated global expansion and economies, he took himself to England to become a gentleman of sorts, dabbling in the new sciences and technologies of his
time. Photography was just one of his interests, and through it he could instantaneously record the visible world and the unexpected juxtapositions of modern urban life. Among his array of photographs, in 1852 he published one striking image of a hippopotamus that had been taken from the banks of the White Nile and given by the Pasha of Egypt to Queen Victoria (Fig. 12). Lying there in the Zoological Gardens of Regent Park this animal is boxed in on all sides, first in the foreground by the reflective pool that echoes his sleep and boredom, then again by the bars of his cage and the onlookers behind it. To the left and right of him are the borders of the photograph itself, tightly containing the hippopotamus within its logic. Through this photograph, Europeans, like our Maya counterparts, even after Descartes into the modern age, are still thinking about existence through a mixing of animal and human forms. For who is really caged here, or what is it in us that we have tried to separate out, only to look at with longing and sadness? Science, the academy at large, provides us with the possibility of considering all the intricacies of history and pre-history so that we too may remain connected, even if through an echo, to what is animal in us. As Lévi-Strauss wrote so succinctly, “animals are good to think.” How a society thinks through animals, however, is distinct, and haunts the understanding of what is history and what is human.

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