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Personhood in Maya Art : a theoretical perspective

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Conclusion.

This thesis has set out to discuss the applicability of philosophies from the contemporary community of Santa Elena to the art of the pre-Hispanic Maya. Chapter 1.1 examines some European interpretations of the role and reception of stylistic devices. These styles and aesthetics, which form the works art historians define as having artistic force, are judged and appreciated on the basis of how they elicit existential response, how they touch on and illustrate social and personal pain points. The creative material culture of the Maya would certainly do the same thing, using alternative cultural rationality. As such, the analysis of their use of stylistic devices should be as deep, multi-vocal and diverse as those analyses made by art historians. Chapter 1.2 explores the possibility of alternative conceptions of materiality and personhood. Manifestations of these alternative thought structures have been set out in anthropological literature and have shown that Being, as it has traditionally been discussed in European philosophy, can have plural meanings and is not necessarily isolated to the body (as individual). Chapter 1.3 links materiality and personhood, by deconstructing Sartre's philosophies on the experience of the material environment over time. These theories introduce the construction and manipulation of personal and community identity. These are topics that are touched on by contemporary conceptual artists, and so their work can contribute to the discussion of viewer experience in the art of the Maya area. The multi-directionality of identity building is explored in Chapter 1.4, where the role of religion and ritual in mediating these effects are examined; how do religious thought and action attenuate or reinforce historical development?

Chapter 2 forms a series of themes from the interviews and dialogues with the residents of Santa Elena. Discussions centring on the *wayjel/uay* showed that, unlike ethnographic sources pointing to a dual-bodied "animate entity" (Martínez González 2007, 159-160), personhood among the people of Santa Elena is not thought to be split between a person and an animal counterpart. The *wayjel/uay* narratives focus on a bodily transformation, from human to animal. This transformation, a change in material form, could be a metaphor for permeability and the negotiation of substances in nature. Ethnographic theories on these and similar systems in Mesoamerica (Magril 1988, 259, Pitarch 1996, 79, Aulie and Aulie 1998, 55) have stressed the link between people and nature through the animal counterpart (Rosales Mendoza 2008, 116). The interviews at Santa Elena (and in other ethnographic literature) evidence the heterogenous nature of

these theories and so it is probably the case that they are a metaphor for fluid personhood through transfer of substance through natural cycles.

A variety of “animate entities” are the subject of discussion in Santa Elena, most commonly, *vientos malos*, the *aluxes* and the *X’Tabay*. All three of these external forces have the potential to be harmful and only in narratives surrounding the *aluxes* are there examples of positive outcomes upon interaction. These three external forces, two of which are personalised, have links with the natural environment, which is set away from land that is cultivated and the built environment (the town of Santa Elena). The negative impact of these forces is attenuated through prescribed rituals and can be avoided by not engaging with spaces outside of community praxis. In the case of the *X’Tabay*, these forces can be avoided by not believing in her existence. Conversely, the danger of encountering these forces is heightened when in contact with historic worked matter (archaeological sites), as they are areas linked to human action through time. Natural elements that are linked to pre-conquest Maya culture, such as ceiba trees, caves and water sources, are also areas associated with these forces. Although the forces are not transformative, they can affect people’s well-being. They can also be assimilated by materials such as stones (such as the buildings at archaeological sites) and people. As such, not only is personhood directly related to these forceful animate entities, but it is also related to cultural identity and heritage. It is the historic monuments and associated places, for example, which contain the threat of fluid forces. This could, therefore, be a metaphor for the necessity of community ritual praxis and activity.

One of the results of these external forces is that they can animate material entities, such as personalised material culture. The rituals/festivities conducted at Santa Elena for the personalised statue of San Mateo use flowers, impersonation and movement to effect a transition from one place to another. The girls in a K’o che litter mimic the statue, and the flowers that decorate this litter reference fecundity and agricultural processes. These could be seen as metaphors for the transition that is taking place; a new household is assuming the responsibility of the saint. The process involves a significant amount of movement, not just by those carrying the litter but also by the people of Santa Elena, who follow the litter. As such, there is a theme of community participation, rather than spectatorship. The impersonation of frogs by the small boys in the *primicia* ceremonies brings rain. We can assume that impersonation is an effective ritual device, as is group participation. These rituals/festivities are evidence that, although there is, in some sense, reticence to

associate strongly with the historical and natural environment of the area, cultural actions that are specific to Santa Elena are popular and beneficial.

The incursion of new religious sects into Santa Elena society can be correlated to a move away from alternative belief systems. Interestingly, it is not only the belief in, and practice of, new religions but also the materials associated with this practice that can protect from harmful external forces. The focus on the power of the Jehovah's Witness Bible, as an object (Hernández Castillo 2005, 115), indicates that a broad understanding of the power of materiality (and ritual action) is characteristic even to segments of Santa Elena society that negate the existence of alternative beliefs and practices. The interviews at Santa Elena occasionally corroborate each other but can also make for contradictory conclusions, as would be expected. Alongside any conclusions we can make regarding forces through materials and time, it is notable that many of these narratives contain allusions to identity decision-making, specifically in terms of religion and culture. Through philosophies on right practice and behaviour, the people of Santa Elena construct a position on their historical and cultural character.

Chapter 3 explores the possibility that we can interpret the experience of Classic Maya artistic programmes through a lens informed by the interviews at Santa Elena, and by using contemporary conceptual art installations that are experience-based. The first of these programmes is Structure 1 from Bonampak, Yaxchilán. The use of impasto (Miller and Brittenham 2013, 53) on the blue paint that surrounds the figures, and the varying thickness in the contour lines of these figures (Miller and Brittenham 2013, 56), are examples of stylistic devices that could be associated with philosophies of external agency.

The representation of materiality, apart from the corporeal, is also notable. At times, figures transition around the four walls of each room in a fluid manner that negates the agency of the walls onto which they are painted (Freidel, Schele, Parker 1993, 236). To similar effect, figures frequently transcend the divisions that structure the narrative of each room (V. Miller 1985, 143). Furthermore, architecture does not play an imposing role in the composition of the images on the three rooms. However, the shape of the rooms and the necessity of crouching, turning or looking up (substantial movement around the enclosed space) to see the entire image (Miller and Brittenham 2013, 135), shows that the walls have a dominant position over the viewer. The movement in and out of these three rooms may have accentuated the experience of material agency, in its contrast to the open environment surrounding the structure. Here, it is the material that prescribes transition and movement, and so the bodily response to artistic experience.

It is interesting, therefore, to attempt to think about the themes/experiences within the rooms in juxtaposition to those outside the structure. Chiasmic devices, in terms of uses of time and the amount of movement required by the participant, indicate that weight can be attributed both to Room Two and Room Three. Room Two requires the viewer to experience the chaos of a battle, but the viewer is in the position of a stationary viewer, during the presentation of the captives. Following the understanding of history and temporal experiences at Santa Elena, the fact that this scene happens in the past might point to accrued agency. After another pause outside the structure, Room Three requires movement, and it is in this movement that the figures in the image celebrate their success. Alongside these heavily populated, at times historical, scenes that demand movement and a sensitivity to material agency, the participant views the surrounding built and natural landscape. Material agency creates contrasts through a kinetic experiential process, and the ephemeral and the banal may have created transitions of personhood among the viewers of these murals. The images contained symbols, perhaps such as preference of the right hand, which may have spoken of right practice and glorified the Late Maya Court. Creative choices of stylistic device, such as naturalism, metaphor and synecdoche, must have heightened the effect of these programmes on the viewer. These stylistic devices may also speak to the interplay of agencies, forces that are not contained just by the bodies represented in the images. If this is the case, then these are the choices that might illustrate the role of the unknowable and special in everyday Maya society.

The 16th century wall paintings at the convent at Izamal were used pedagogically by Franciscan missionaries in Yucatán (Landa 1566 and Lizana 1893), and the large temporal and cultural distance between this and the painting programme at Bonampak is undeniable. Working under the assumption that abstract philosophical understandings of materials and processes of personhood can be applied, some threads of reception by the viewers and participants in the Catholic rituals at this convent have been pulled out. The convent was built on top of a sacred pre-conquest site and decorated, in parts with *tromp l'oeil* scenes from a natural/forest environment. The juxtaposition of a built environment, so important to the Catholic conversion mission in Izamal, with their representation of what appears to be a magical natural space (Schellhas 1904, Solari 2013, 34), may have defined the convent as a place of ritual behaviour; a place where material agency promoted transitions of personhood. Following Franciscan processions of the Passion of Christ and the tentative route detailed in Chapter 3.2, the participants move through flora that is rendered using a variety of stylistic devices, and these images can disrupt materiality at some points, and accentuate its force at others. These changes in style may

have provided a sense of transition in themselves, perhaps a metaphor for the transitions in nature. The architecture of the convent also enhances a sense of transition, through the participants' experience of the *portería* from different entrance points. This might make the counter-clockwise movement around the cloister (Solari 2013, 14), the central moment (marking a chiasmus). If the ritual participants of the programme at Izamal engaged with these wall paintings, and the architecture that houses them, in some similar ways to the participants at Bonampak, a missing element might be a direct view of the surrounding forest. This might explain the development of narratives among Yucatec communities that relate to the external forces at archaeological sites and the unknown landscape (*monte*).

The Cross Group relief panels from Palenque, which show the *okte*'ship of K'ihnich Kan B'ahlam (Carrasco 2004, Skidmore 2008, Taube 1998, Martin and Grube 2008, Stuart 2012, Houston 1996), contain iconography that relates to the accession/assumption of a new aspect of personhood. This transition is marked by the acceptance of the Ux Yop Huun, represented in the effigies of the "Jester god" and the Principal Bird Deity (Stuart 2012, 119). In these images, it is possible that the "Jester god" is an embodied animate material that is internalised in order to fulfil a social or political function. It is fixed into K'ihnich Kan B'ahlam through ritual action. The crosses on these panels may represent the axis mundi (Skidmore, 2008 and Stuart 2012), a centre of creation and so rebirth. As K'ihnich Kan B'ahlam is reborn into his new aspect of personhood, leadership, he may be associated with this axis mundi, which is how the paper headdress/"Jester god" correlates to the Principal Bird Deity (which sits on top of the central cross) (Stuart 2012, 125).

Taking the philosophies from Santa Elena into account, we could argue that the animate *huun* is an external force or entity, which has an effect on the person wearing the headband. In the Temple of the Cross and the Temple of the Foliated Cross, the "Jester god" is held out on top of another material. This may allude to ritual procedures that would counteract the effect of an animated/powerful material. Given that the image shows K'ihnich Kan B'ahlam assuming the Ux Yop Huun or engaging in the rituals of this transition as he approaches the central crosses, we could posit that external forces have more power in this location. If we can say that this central axis is a tree, we can make an association with Santa Elena, as the *X-Tabay* appears at locations such as trees and wells.

Iconographic elements, such as the cross, the *incensarios* and flowering conch shell, reinforce the concept of centrality and primordial beginnings (Taube 1998 and Stuart 1996). The size of the Temple of the Sun relief, and its divergence from the vertical-horizontal cross of the other two panels, alongside other devices, create a chiasmic effect

for the viewer of these three panels. This stylistic choice is a repetition of the sensation of getting closer to the centre and then moving away. The strong diagonal lines and lack of fluidity in the iconography of the Temple of the Sun may have had the effect of inducing stillness before this central relief. The Temple of the Cross is also rendered in stylised lines (in comparison to Temple of the Foliated Cross, for example). The scene happens within the sky-band, while the censer from which the axes sprout stands in front of this band. This is not the case in either of the other tablet compositions and it may indicate a focus on this object. As discussed, the censer may have embodied the primordial complementary elements involved in birth and beginning. If this was the first temple a viewer might enter, it would make sense, stylistically, to exaggerate the agency of this censer (as a metaphor for birth). The softer and more naturalistic sprouting of the cross in Temple of the Foliated Cross may be a metaphor for re-birth and movement, and so the weight on this last panel might be compared to the celebration in Room Three at Bonampak.

In terms of transferable forces through materials, the mirroring of K'ihnich Kan B'ahlam in all three relief panels and the references to the four directionals might imply that the viewer, facing the panel, would be reflected on the other side of the cross. In this way, the viewer might have participated in a transition of personhood much like K'ihnich Kan B'ahlam participates in his *okte'ship*.

Lintels 24, 25 and 26 at Structure 23, Yaxchilán, show a ritual surrounding the blood sacrifice of Lady Xook. As lintels, the participation in this programme requires movement by the viewer, in terms of entrance and exit and looking up. In this way (as in the case of both Bonampak and the cross group), the viewer is involved in a bodily experience. Various stylistic devices, such as colour, composition and mirroring are used to enhance a chiasmic effect in which Lintel 25 draws the participant deep into the action depicted in the scene (Matsumoto 2013). As in the case of the Bonampak rooms, this central lintel is dated as the earliest lintel.

It has been shown at Santa Elena that we can attribute agency to materials. Within this philosophy, the devices used to immerse the viewer in the ritual that is taking place in the three scenes might have had a transformative effect (mirroring the changes happening for Lady Xook and Itzamnaaj B'ahlam). Internal references in costume iconography (Looper 2000 and Tate 1992), within a framework of material agency, are also used to create a hyperreality of repeated concepts of re-birth and transition. External animate entities in Santa Elena are found at places with significant history and a history of human

action, and so Lintel 25, as the central Lintel, might have had accentuated power over the participant.

If we can surmise that the focus is on transition in these Lintels, perhaps the conclusion, in which Lady Xook hands a helmet to Itzamnaaj B'ahlam, was as transformative for the characters portrayed as for the participant at Structure 23. The iconography may suggest that Lady Xook's femininity/fertility is imbuing the helmet with power, and so her personhood is being transferred through an object to Itzamnaaj B'ahlam (Stone 2011). Perhaps we could say that, through the lintels and narrative, as powerful materials, the viewer might be affected and assume a new aspect of his or her personhood. Entering and exiting these rooms, as in the case of both Bonampak and the Cross Group Tablets, may have had the effect of making the participant engage deeply with the inner space and a private ritual, as well as with the open space that looked onto a more banal environment. This may have made this an existential experience, which could have provoked an intellectual, as well as emotional, response.

The colour and decoration of the *retablos* at Yaxcabá, Yucatán, may have contained references to fertility and transitions between the worldly and the otherworldly. If we assume that the use of flowers on the K'o che are used in this way, then the floral motifs in this sculpture might have been received by the visitors to this church as a symbol of transition. If we can say that the colour of the *retablos* was associated with water, then we can assume that this was an added allusion to this liminality. Interviews at Santa Elena indicated that certain external forces are more present at bodies of water. We might deduce, therefore, that these *retablos* were areas where animate entities were more flexible or fluid.

The space of agency and intellectual shifts at each *retablo* might have juxtaposed with other spaces in the church. As such, moving from one of these *retablos* to another might have produced the same effect as the programmes discussed from Classic Maya art. If this is the case, then the religious weight of these altars would have been enhanced.

This thesis has shown some possible links between the philosophies and themes drawn from thought in Santa Elena, Yucatán, and both pre- and post-conquest art in the Maya area, in the hope of contributing to an understanding of its reception and experience. These philosophies have not been drawn directly from art production, reception or management in Santa Elena, but from thoughts on material agency and personhood that certainly affect the role of creative material culture. These studies cannot be uniformly applied, but they do provide some discussion points. By focusing on the theories put

forward by people in the “Maya” area, the art historical discussion can position itself within a relevant lens.

The people of Santa Elena, who, for the sake of this investigation, have shared their considerable ancestral knowledge, continue to safeguard their cultural heritage through practices and received and transmitted knowledge. In recording this knowledge, the thesis contributes to the preservation of this specific community’s cultural heritage. Investigations in the Maya area aim to learn as much as possible about civilisations of the past. On a transcultural level, this understanding can be of use in academic theory, and can be applied to contemporary social and scientific disciplines. This thesis broadens perspectives on pre-Colombian Maya art but the investigation should not be and is not solely for the academic community. The research was conducted with members of the Maya community of Santa Elena and so it is my intention that this academic source be made to benefit this community.