



Myth as Religious Phenomenon: A case study of *Popol vuh*

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The *Popol vuh* is a sacred book of the Mayan civilization that inhabited what is now Guatemala. The book compiles the mythology of the Mayan civilization and narrates the origin of the cosmogony, the creation of the first human and the history of the genealogy of Mayan tribe- the quiches. The original manuscript of *Popol vuh* is not divided but it is possible to distinguish it in three different parts. The first part narrates myths of the origin of the world, land, rivers, and animals and the purpose of gods behind their creation. The second part narrates the adventure of the twin gods, Hunahpu and Xbalanque, who are considered to be the incarnations. This part ends with the defeat of the demons and the appearance of the Sun and the Moon. The third part narrates the final effort of gods in creating human beings. In their final effort they used maize to make human beings who could remember and adore their creators. This is where the story of Mayan civilization begins.

In this article I intend to understand the esoteric meaning present in the myths of *Popol vuh*. The myths of *Popol vuh* are considered sacred and real by the Mayas because they believe that the characters who played the protagonists were gods. An understanding of the esoteric present in the myths of *Popol vuh* requires a non reductionist approach as proposed by Mircea Eliade. All the more, many attempts have been made to analyze the myths of *Popol vuh* from different standpoints, like the sociological, anthropological and ethno-historical perspectives i.e. through reductionist approaches but none has attempted to decipher the esoteric meaning of the myths of *Popol vuh* from a religious point of view (Srivastava).¹ Hence, this article aims at analyzing the myths of *Popol vuh* following a non-reductionist approach and focuses on establishing a relationship between the sacred and the profane by way of understanding the purpose of a religious phenomenon.

In order to decipher the esoteric in the myths of *Popol vuh* from a non-reductionist platform it is important to understand certain terms as proposed by Eliade. He has given the term *hierophany* to describe the manifestation of the sacred. The sacred is revealed through a profane object in such a way that objects continue to occupy their place in the cosmos. It means that the Nature or the Cosmos are capable of, in part or completely, converting itself into a hierophany. Eliade adds that myths are constituted by a number of hierophanies i.e. the manifestation of sacred realities. An example of the most elemental hierophany is the manifestation of the sacred in an object like a stone or a tree and an example of the hierophany of highest order is the incarnation of god. The 'tree' or 'stone' are not considered 'sacred' because of the objects that they are, but because they manifest the sacred and cease to be 'any'



stone or 'any' tree (Eliade in Allen, 76).

A *homo religiosus* tends to live in proximity with the sacred or with objects consecrated.² Eliade affirms that *homo religiosus* believes that something comes from somewhere and manifest it to him (*The Sacred and the Profane*, 24). What is manifested is sacred and the medium of manifestation is profane. A symbol is a profane reality and assumes importance for *homo religiosus* when it reveals the sacred. A symbol represents hierophany and results in the unification of the sacred and the profane. It is, at times, difficult for a modern man to recognize hierophany because for him, everything is natural, that is to say, he sees objects naturally whereas a *homo religiosus* sees hierophany. The co-existence of the sacred and the profane makes it possible for *homo religiosus* to transcend the profane reality and unify with the sacred.

Markedly, the survival of the Mayas, their culture and their religious customs are evident of their religiosity. Mary H. Preuss in her book *Gods of Popol vuh: Xmukane', K'ucumatz, Tojil, and Jurakan* has talked about the role of gods in formulating codes of conduct in the Mayan society. The actions of gods put up paradigmatic models for the society, the compliance of which results in formation of patterns of Mayan religious beliefs. *Popol vuh*, considered as Bible for the Mayan community establishes "divine movements in their own deeds" (Poz, 614) and thus orients *homo religiosus* to a world more significant. This paves way for two implications: firstly, the myths of *Popol vuh* are sacred for those who believe in them and try to imitate them; secondly, the myths of *Popol vuh* should essentially be understood as a religious phenomenon.

Myths are the most general and effective means of awakening and maintaining consciousness of another world, a beyond, whether it be the divine world or the world of the Ancestors. This "other world" represents a superhuman, "transcendent" plane, the plane of *absolute realities*. It is the experience of the sacred- that is, an encounter with a transhumant reality- which gives birth to the idea that something *really exists*, that hence there are absolute values capable of guiding man and giving a meaning to human existence. It is, then, through the experience of the sacred that the ideas of *reality, truth, and significance* first dawn, to be later elaborated and systematized by metaphysical speculations (Allen, *Myth and Religion*, 68).

The co-existence of the sacred and the profane although manifests a paradoxical relationship, it also manifests a desire for unification and this concept is called *coincidentia oppositorum* (conciliation of the opposites). Eliade affirms that *coincidentia oppositorum* occurs in all cultures, consciously or unconsciously, and could not be conceptualized through human reasoning. According to him, these two modalities are contradictory but are complementary (Valk, 32).

The dialectic of the sacred and the profane could be understood (without annihilating the one or the other as Robert Avens has pointed out) by following the hermeneutical principles postulated by Mircea Eliade. The myths of *Popol vuh* not only divulge the concept of *coincidentia oppositorum* in all its nuances but also reveal



the purpose of a religious phenomenon.³ Eliade states that the principle function of myths is to show human beings a path to transcendence (*The Sacred and the Profane*, 129).

The myths of *Popol vuh* deals, more than anything, with the creation of the cosmogony. The cosmogonic myths of *Popol vuh* explains the dialectic of the sacred and highlights the religious phenomenon. The *Popol vuh* narrates the beginning of the world in a way that makes the participation of the listeners and the spectators active. It says, "Everything was quiet, immobile, and vacant. There exists no distinction between the sea and sky. There was only air and water, there was no light. Everything was invisible" (Asturias, 5).⁴ Then the gods held a meeting and decided to create the world. They created the world, the land, the mountains, the rivers etc. and then they wanted to create something that could remember them and revere them. So they consulted and made animals. They called them and asked them, "Talk to us, invoke us, and venerate us" (Asturias, 7). The animals created failed to do so, so gods decided to create humans who could invoke them.

The gods created the first humans with mud. The mud models of human could not move their head and when wet, could not retain their shape. This human model, like animals, failed to remember their creators and so the gods destroyed them as well. Their second attempt in creating humans was with wood. They were successful in making humans capable of talking. The wood models of human could talk and call each other but they could not remember their creators, "they had no ingenuity, no wisdom, no remembrance of their Constructors, they walked without motive" (Asturias, 9). So the gods destroyed them as well.

These mythic episodes of creation of human beings on earth demonstrate clearly the *leit motif* of gods: to be remembered and revered by their creations. "What shall we do to create beings who could adore us?" (Asturias, 8). Lastly, gods created humans with maize. This time they were successful in making humans who were capable of invoking and venerating their creators, the gods.

It is important to note that gods (sacred) created earthly things before creating human beings (profane). That is to say that, the sacred maintains ties with the profane through earthly objects (symbols). In order to understand these mythic episodes from a non-reductionist point of view it is important to understand a religious phenomenon. The purpose of a religious phenomenon is to make transcendence (from profane to sacred) possible. The purpose of gods in making world was to establish links between humans (profane) and gods (sacred). The manifestation of the sacred is possible only when the profane is oriented towards the sacred that is to say that the profane should not get lost in the profane space as had happened with the human models of wood. They talked among themselves and did not remember their creators (sacred).

It is clear now that the purpose of a religious phenomenon (myth) is to orient the profane towards the sacred. I shall now try to elucidate the sacredness present in the myths of *Popol vuh*.



These mythic episodes take place when the earth was inhabited by humans made of wood. There was no light, but only land, mountains, rivers, trees, valleys and animals were present. There was neither the Sun nor the Moon. During these times lived Seven Macaw (as the name indicates, his face was parrot like) and his two sons Zipacna and Cabracan. Seven Macaw declared himself to be the sun because he possessed shiny teeth made of jades, his sparkling eyes which were made of jewels, his rich plumage, his shiny beak and his adornments made of gold and silver. He was proud of his existence and his ornamentation. "I am the Sun, I am the light, I am the Moon" (Asturias, 11). But the gods saw his pride as vice.

The protagonists of *Popol vuh*, Hunapuh and Xbalanque, were sent by the gods to the earth to punish them.⁵ The gods wanted to punish him because he acted according to his whims and fancies; he thought himself to be the greatest of all creatures on earth and had forgotten his creators so the gods decided to destroy all the things which led him to forget his creators. The twin brothers played a trick in order to defeat him. They hid in the branches of a tree where Seven Macaw used to come for food. Hunahpu shot him when he climbed the tree to eat the fruit. The bullet struck him in his jaw and he fell from the tree, shouting with pain. Seven Macaw escaped taking one arm of Hunapuh when he tried to grab him.

To defeat him, they asked an old couple for help. The twin brothers accompanied them to the house of Seven Macaw. On arriving there, the old couple said to Seven Macaw that they cure teeth, bones and eyes and also that the twin brothers are their grand children and they give a part of their earnings to them for their survival as their parents were dead. Seven Macaw asked them to cure him. The old couple suggested that he should get his teeth of jades replaced with teeth of maize grains. He did not like the idea but he had no option but to agree. The moment his teeth of jades were replaced by maize grains and eyes made of precious jewels were taken out; he ceased to be the king of earth. "I was the king because of them: my ornaments, my teeth and my eyes". In this way he was defeated and it happened because "gods considered pride as evil" (Asturias, 14).

The two sons of Seven Macaw; Zipacna and Cabracan were also defeated by twin brothers. Zipacna, the elder son of Seven Macaw believed himself to be the god of mountains. He said, "I am the maker of mountains" (Asturias, 17). The twin brothers defeated him through a magic trick. Zipacna used to feed upon fishes and crabs. One day when he was very hungry, the twin brothers appeared. They met him and told him that there is a big crab stuck under a hill and could serve a mouthful for him. They took him to the hill and asked him to make a hole in order to enter. As soon as he was inside the hill with only his feet visible, the hill fell upon him and he was turned into a stone. Zipacna was defeated.

Cabracan, the younger son of Seven Macaw, was the third on the surface of the earth to be defeated before gods created humanity. Cabracan believed himself to be the destroyer of mountains. "I destroy the mountains" (Asturias, 18). He used to



hit the land and would destroy great mountains to pieces. He was proud of his power and so the gods wanted to punish him. The twin brothers, one day, met him and told him that there is a mountain that continues growing up in height and is overshadowing all other mountains and so it is getting difficult for them to shoot birds with their blowpipes. Cabracan requested them to show him that mountain. They took him to that place. "Well, follow our path" said the twin brothers (Asturias, 18). On reaching there, they shot some birds and wrapped them with earth and roasted it over fire. The smell of roasted bird aroused hunger in Cabracan. The twin brothers wanted to destroy him with the help of the bird. They offered him the bird. No sooner had he eaten it than he started to lose his strength and turned into mud. In this way he was defeated. Gods wanted to defeat him because he praised himself, his glory and his power; instead of glorifying the gods, his creators. And so, gods ordered the twin brothers to "attract him softly towards *Oriente*" (Asturias, 18).

It is possible to deduce from the above-mentioned mythic episodes of *Popol vuh* that the central theme of the episodes was destruction of evil. This defeat could be interpreted in different ways. From the point of view of sociologists or religious anthropologists, the myths constitute an important element in the formation of the society. The destruction of evil is important so that there resides harmony in the society (Kirk, 45). In a social context, myths postulate actions which teach morality and ethics, and at the same time help people live in fraternity and brotherhood. In this way myths are defined in terms of cause and effect; myths are the cause and the creation of different institutions are the effects. The structure of the institutions created in the society is analogous to the actions of the characters present in the myths. For example, Mayas consider the maize field as the world in miniature because they planted a maize plant at the centre of their house when they were going to defeat the demons. "By laying out the maize field, the Maya transforms secular models into sacred space. With regard to the maize field, this charges the ground with the power of creation to bear new life" (Christenson, 57). The presence of sentiments in individuals of a community developed as result of myths controls their behavior towards each other. This helps in having an ordered social life. Myths underscore norms of living in a society. In this way myths carry with it specific necessary functions required to organize and continue the culture of a community from generation to generation. Myths become the pillars on which are dependent the formation of a civilization.

The rituals represent the actions of the characters of the myth. Rituals make possible the re-creation of space where such actions were performed by mythological characters. Rituals not only give encouragement to the individuals but also contribute in maintaining stability in the society. Rituals become a need instead of a belief or a faith and consequently, myths are understood by way of its functions in the society. The need obliterates the religious sentiment hidden in the myths. In this way, the role of myths become didactic and postulates the rules and norms of living in a society. If the understanding of the myth shifts from a religious to a sociological context, it would result in reducing the sacredness involved in it and would take us on a reductionist



platform.

The shift from belief to an objective purpose reduces the sacred element present in the myths and hinders in understanding the esoteric meaning present in the myths. From a non reductionist point of view, myths are essentially religious phenomenon and should be considered neither dogmatic nor normative. In a religious context, myths tell ways of transcending the profane reality for reaching the sacred. The transcendence is a universal characteristic of a religious phenomenon. Eliade claims that the principal function of the myths is to give meaning to the human existence and show path that leads to the world of supernatural which is full of transcendental values. The sacred is present in the myths (but are not apparent to non-believers) because the characters in the myths are supernatural beings with magical powers.

Now I would try to look at these mythic episodes whose central theme is defeat of evil from a non-reductionist point of view in order to maintain the sacredness involved in them. The transcendence is the most important element of a religious phenomenon and the purpose of religious phenomenon is to unite the sacred with the profane in order to establish coincidentia oppositorum. In the above mythic episodes, the evil is represented in form of pride and pride is due to wealth, precious metals, false power etc. The gods saw pride as evil and ordered the twin brothers to punish them by destroying the things that fill them with pride and make them forget their creators (as happened with the human models of wood). Seven Macaw with his ornamentation, Zipacna and Cabracan with their false power represent profane. They think themselves to be the greatest of all the creations of god because of their wealth and power. The gods destroyed them (like they have destroyed human models of mud and wood) and those things that obstruct alienating the sacred with the profane.

At this point it is important to note the difference between the conception and the perception of reality. Identifying reality through data (that could be verified empirically) takes the reductionist position and limits the experience. "Awareness of a miracle is only straightforward for those who are prepared by their personal experience and their religious background to recognize it as such. To others the miracle is not evident, thus it does not exist; in fact it remains concealed in mundane objects and events" (Eliade in Rennie, 186). The perception of reality is subjective and is based upon experiences beyond the apparent understanding by the five senses. Religious experience is understood by some and remains occult for the others but it, in any case, does not imply that this reality (of believers) does not exist.

The modern man is lost in the profane reality. He neither knows the exit from the profane space nor does he know the road to sacred. The desire to escape from the profane reality exists in all humans, consciously or unconsciously. Zipacna and Cabracan asked the twin brothers to show them the way and the twin brothers responded, "Choose our way" (Asturias, 18). The twin brothers have been sent to earth by god (from sacred space) and gods ordered them to bring them to *Oriente*. The *Oriente* means a place of greatest power, the favorite place of the luminous gods



who reside in the east (Asturias, 86). To a homo religiosus “our way” would mean the way to god, to sacred space. The gods’ verdict also shows clearly the intense and eternal desire of the sacred to attract the profane. Seven Macaw, Zipacna and Cabracan used to praise themselves instead of remembering gods because they were surrounded by profane space and was delimiting the sacred space.

Besides, the act of destruction of the ornamentation of Seven Macaw and annihilation of Zipacna and Cabracan represents hierophany. This hierophany orients profane towards sacred by way of destroying evil attributes that were obstructing the union of the sacred with the profane. The union of sacred and profane could be formed only after the destruction of vices and thus creating coincidentia oppositorum. Apparently, the earthly things and vices hinder the union between the sacred and the profane, and fail to act as *axis mundi* between the creator (sacred) and their creations (profane).

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¹ For greater understanding of works on *Popol vuh*, see Srivastava, Lovey. "Esoterismo en los mitos sagrados del *Popol vuh*" Dissertation, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, 2010.

² The term *homo religiosus* refers to humans as religious beings.

³ *Coincidentia oppositorum* signifies the conciliation of the opposites.

⁴ All translations are mine unless indicated.

⁵ Hunapuh and Xbalanque would be referred as 'twin brothers' in some places.