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Tawaddud and Maya Wit

A Story from the Arabian Nights Adapted
to the Community Books of Yucatan

En los libros de Chilam Balam de Yucatán se encuentran varias traducciones mayas de textos del Viejo Mundo. La mayor parte de ellos fueron tomados de los almanaques o reportorios que empezaron a aparecer en Nueva España poco después de la llegada de los españoles. Los libros de Kaua, Mani y Chan Kan contienen una traducción que es de especial interés por ser de un texto literario y por la manera en que se incorpora en la tradición literaria maya: 'La doncella Teodora' o 'Suhui Teodora', que tiene su origen en "Las mil y una noches". Al traducir esta historia los mayas eliminaron su comienzo novelesco y acentuaron su carácter filosófico, estableciendo conexiones entre su astronomía y la de Mesopotamia. En particular, dan relieve a las adivinanzas propuestas a Teodora, asimilándolas a la tradición maya denominada Zuyua than, que es de estirpe shamanística y se encuentra también entre los algoquines.

From the time that they first got hold of printed books from Spain, in the mid 16th century, the Maya of Yucatan examined them with a certain literary and philosophical professionalism. They did not have a great choice of imported texts, partly because of the restrictions imposed by the Spanish on printed matter in the New World, and partly because of the power of the Inquisition within Spain itself. But the devotional works, almanacs, reportorios (an early form of newspaper) and occasional works of fiction which they did get hold of were scoured, appraised and in some cases translated into Maya. The results



INDIANA 7 (1982): 131-142
ISBN 3-7861-1377-7
Ibero-Amerikanisches Institut, Stiftung Preußischer Kulturbesitz

of this curiosity are plain to see in the 'Chilam Balames' or Community Books of Yucatan, normally named after the towns in that peninsula to which they severally belong. Above all, these books continued in the Roman alphabet the tradition of Maya hieroglyphic writing begun in the Classic period (about 200 A.D.) into which however they painstakingly incorporated material from the remotest sources. The Books of Chumayel, Ixil and Kaua, for example, are distinguished by the attention they pay to the Biblical Genesis and to commentaries by such major Christian scholars as St. John of Damascus and Alfonso X, which are integrated with Maya cosmogony, to produce wholly ingenious accounts of the 'beginning of time'. In the Book of Tusik, with its selection of hagiographical and apocryphal tales, there is a more thoroughgoing involvement with narrative as such. As for the Arabian Nights story of Tawaddud, which concerns us here, it appears in no fewer than three of the dozen or so Community Books extant, those of Kaua, Chan Kan and Mani (1).

Though hypothetical, the bibliographical source of these Maya translations of Tawaddud's story may be exactly identified; further the differences between them suggest that they were done and re-done over two centuries or longer and reveal a good deal about the linguistic development of Yucatecan Maya during this period. Their literary interest lies mainly in the way that they excise and re-arrange Tawaddud's story in order to incorporate it into its new context in the Community Books. Looking at this process, especially at the few small but significant changes of actual detail, tells us something about why the story was lighted upon in the first place.

As a character in the Arabian Nights (Nights 436-462), Tawaddud bears a certain resemblance to the narrator of that work, Shahrazad, who saves herself by her tongue, winning the challenge of filling successive nights with her wit and imagination. Tawaddud's predicament is that of the only slave-girl remaining to Abu al Husn, the self-impoverished son of a rich Bagdad merchant; she urges her master to sell her to Harun al Rashid, the fifth Caliph (and Charlemagne's contemporary) for as high a price as he can get, since she is not just beautiful but erudite in religion and philosophy and all the arts and sciences, and an expert musician and chess-player to boot. The bulk of the narrative consists of her being tested at the Caliph's court by a series of sages, not least by Ibrahim bin Siyyar summoned from Basra for the purpose. Though omitted from Lane's English translation of the Arabian Nights because 'extremely tiresome' (Burton 1885, V: 189) (2), Tawaddud's story was extremely popular on first contact with Europe, in the Renaissance; it went through several editions in Spain, one of which was exported to the New World and furnished the Maya with their original.

In the Spanish versions of the story Abu al Husn becomes a Hungarian merchant, Tawaddud is christened Theodor/Teodora and made captive at Mansur's court in Tunis and Ibrahim's name is recast in the more familiar form Abraham. These changes do nothing to alter the basic idea of the story; but they do introduce complication and a certain dramatic potential, exploited to the full by Lope

de Vega in his comedy "La doncella Teodor" (ca. 1612) (McKendrick 1974: 222-223), in which how and why the heroine came to be interrogated, and not the interrogation itself, provides the main substance of the plot. The first and most obvious change made by the Maya to the Spanish translation was to counter-act this tendency. In their version of the story, the Maya cut out that opening part of the narrative, before the heroine arrives at the royal court. No account is taken of prior personal motive here, nor indeed later on, when Teodora makes a bargain with the third and chief of Mansur's sages, Abraham, that whoever loses the contest of wits should strip before the assembled court. It is to save Abraham from this humiliation that Mansur agrees both to pay Teodora's master and to let her leave with him. In the Maya texts this generosity goes unexplained. In other words the emphasis is less on the motivation and behaviour of individual characters than on the actual testing of Teodora, as an intellectual experience in its own right.

In the Arabic original the questions asked of Tawaddud before the Caliph Harun al Rashid are very much bound up with the Koran, directly so in the first two 'rounds' with the first two sages (Nights 438-448), and indirectly in the examinations proper to medicine, astronomy, philosophy, poetry and logic (Nights 449-460). In all, the exchanges between Tawaddud and the sages amount to a compendium of the religion, and of the science of the day, as it was to influence medieval Europe - via Spain - and as it had been handed down over millennia from the earliest astronomers, mathematicians and scribes of Mesopotamia. In this respect, the 'wisest of the sages', Ibrahim bin Siyyar, precisely invokes his namesake the original Abraham, the Sabian philosopher of Ur, whose astronomical knowledge goes unmentioned in the Biblical Genesis (12: 1-3) but is meditated upon a length by Mahommed in the Koran (chapter VI). In the Spanish version of the story, this corpus of knowledge is Christianized, condensed and set out according to the expertise of sage-examiners whose number is reduced to three: cosmogony and divine law; astrological medicine and natural science; and third, Abraham's speciality, philosophy proper. In their turn, by further excision and re-working of certain small details, the Maya suggested a new taxonomy of their own, in accord with the categories of knowledge found in the Yucatec Community Books as a whole.

In the Maya translations, the first round of questions, about genesis and the creation of the world, matters of theological dogma are suppressed in favour of problems of temporal sequence, of the kind tackled by Maya calendrics. In the second exchange, the timing of cures, by bleeding, purging and so on, according to the zodiac, becomes the main focus, 'phlebotomist' incidentally finding an exact equivalent in the old Maya term 'Ah toc'. In the Kaua, though not in the Mani, Teodora's detailed month by month account of these practices, adopted in the Spanish from a reportorio compiled by Andres de Li, Zaragoza 1495 (Mettmann 1962) is given a chapter to itself after the 'end' of the story. This device concords with the general 'de-characterization' of Teodora and her companions in the story, and with the corresponding importance of knowledge itself as something formally transacted.

As for Teodora's third examiner, Abraham, he comes to be defined as supreme among the sages, a 'prophet', because of his astronomical knowledge. Through the medium of the altered Spanish version of Tawaddud's story the Maya thus contrive to recover something of its original emphasis. They show an affinity with the spirit of the original, recently described as 'elegant' by a Yucatec Maya (3), which is best accounted for by recalling the paramount roles played in the Old and New World respectively by Mesopotamian and Maya astronomy. In both cases the development of this science went hand in hand with a mathematical expertise, including the use of place-value notation, unparalleled in world history. Like the ancient Mesopotamians, the forebears of the Maya translators of the Arabian Nights story 'did not revile time', as the Koranic phrase has it, but rather explored the sky, accounting phases and movements of celestial bodies over thousands of millions of days, and their rhythms and resonance in the cycles of the Maya Era, with their effects on dynasties and ordinary mankind. Indeed, Maya calendrics led to the development of hieroglyphic writing itself, the tradition of which is directly continued in the Community Books of Yucatan. This tradition of Maya literacy takes to an extreme the principle invoked by Tawaddud herself, when she matches the twenty-eight mansions of the moon with the letters of the Abjab-hawwaz or original alphabet; and for that matter by the very title of the work she appears in: The Thousand and One Nights (i.e. 10×10^2 , plus 1).

In answering a question about the planets and the zodiac and their place in computation of time, the Maya Teodor actually introduces into the narrative a technical term of Maya calendrics. This small detail implies a great deal about the attitudes of the Maya translators, and their involvement with this dimension of their chosen story. The term in question, pop, is the name of the first in the cycle of 19 Maya weeks and hence means the conventional time of their day calendar, unaffected by, because the measure of astronomical time. It further denotes the 'mat' of authority on which the ruler of a set time-period is seated, and which as a woven or textile object becomes synonymous with writing itself, as for example in the title of the 'Bible of America', the "Popol Vuh" written by the Quiche Maya in highland Guatemala. In lowland Yucatan, in the post-Classic period, these same calendrical ideas of authority and government underlay the arrangement by which the principal towns of the peninsula each ruled federally for a katun or 7,200 days, over a total period of 13 katuns, about 256 years. The literature proper to this system, hieroglyphic and alphabetic, forms the backbone of the Community or Chilam Balam Books of Yucatan: an elaborate rhetoric of both forecast and resumé in public affairs, the basis of personal prophecies (like those of Chilam Balam or the Priest Jaguar) and of historical chronicles alike. Above all, katun literature fostered exactly the literary form used in the climax of Tawaddud/Teodora's exchange with the wisest sage Abraham: riddles.

The riddles recorded in the Community Books of Chumayel (pp. 28-42 and 67-71) and Tusik (pp. 32-54), and used traditionally to test candidates for political power in the katun system, leave no doubt that the Maya were well equipped to tackle this last part of Tawaddud/Teodora's story. Drawings among the

few included in the Community Books, certainly bring out the connection. For a woodcut copied by hand to embellish the Book of Kaua translation shows Abraham suffering the indignity, public nakedness, which would have been Teodora's had she failed to answer his riddles and which is exactly the same as that suffered by the failed Maya candidate in the katun system, as a drawing in the Book of Chumayel confirms. Also the word chosen to translate Teodora's title of doncella or maid, suhui, closely echoes the term for riddle language in the Community Books: Suiua. Having their own familiarity with riddle literature the Maya asserted their priorities more in this than in any other part of their translation, trenchantly reducing the number of questions asked by Abraham and subtly reshaping those retained. What these priorities were can best be understood through considering Maya riddles in their immediate context: American shamanism.

That riddles form part of the transfer of power in North American shamanism generally is shown by texts of the Navajo in the Southwest - the dialogues of the Twins with their Sun-father - and of Algonkin tribes like the Arapaho further north again (Bierhorst 1976: 141-148, 335). In this last case the future chief symbolically redeems himself from the murder of his elders and predecessors by correctly answering a set of Seven Riddles. These invoke as an innocent or unincriminated pair the rabbit and the left-hand, proper 'alternatives' to aggression once he has power; another pair invokes the 'paths' of the body, dual in the nose, and distant in the brain which travels fast and far; the remaining three riddles deal with the basic needs of shelter and clothing: the tipi with its flaps that wave 'invitingly' and its 'sentinel' pegs; and the mocassin 'essential for any purpose' along the path of life. These topics reappear in the set of Seven Riddles with which the Suiua or Katun Riddles of the Maya begin. Just as the 'harmless rabbit' is the emblem of the ruler-victim, one shared by the Great Rabbit Manabozho of the Algonkin and the Toltec hero Quetzalcoatl, so in the Maya system on attaining power the successful candidate enters 'the second childhood at midday', on all fours, throwing the smallest shadow, with his wife like a faithful dog beside him, the honey candle of sweetness between her teeth. As for the anatomical references of the Algonkin to nose and brain, the corresponding Maya riddle - the second - equates copal incense with the 'brains of the sky'. Shelter and clothing, the subject of the third of the Seven Riddles of the Maya, produce a whole series of images, in which a house is a huge hat and footwear (mocassin) is the sandal woven of henequén which with a Shank's pony kind of irony has to be 'mounted' like a giant horse. Further basic needs are emblemized by dishes of maize pasta and meats characteristic of Maya cuisine, and by the xicama fruit.

In the Suiua Riddles this initial set of seven is succeeded by one or more scores of requests from father, examiner, to son or 'childe', candidate, to fetch this or that object, mostly items significant in the complex rituals of Mesoamerica. Special attention is devoted to the Turkey for example, the domestic member of, and number 9 in the set of Thirteen Birds. The Quails, 4 in the same set, are alluded to as a 'score of smooth stones in the field' to be clutched to the chest or sacrificed, their punishment for balking the Venus figure Quetzal-

coatl on his epic journey back up from the underworld (4). In turn, the substance Quetzalcoatl found there and made man from – the buried parental bones – are revealed as manioc roots; the Suiua riddles thus serve to decode the saga of Quetzalcoatl, as it is told in the Nahua "Annals of Cuauhtitlan", for example. At the same time they preserve specifically Maya beliefs within the Mesoamerican tradition as a whole. This is a difficult point because the very name of the Maya riddles, Suiua, coincides with the Nahua place-name Zuyua, the homeland of the chief rivals of the Maya in Mesoamerica, the Toltecs who invaded Yucatan several centuries before the Spanish did (5). Yet there can be no doubt about the resolve with which Toltec ways are rejected in the Chumayel and other Community Books; the Toltec shaman-priests adapt at mass-ecstasy are repeatedly derided as 'lewd' and incapable of mastering, with their 'two-day thrones' or leap years, a calendrical system as perfect as the Classic Maya day-count.

Hence, within American shamanism and Mesoamerican ritual in particular, Maya riddles demand acquaintance with alien ideas precisely in order to affirm the value of their own. This special quality comes out strongly in the first of the Seven Riddles which, like the 'sandal-horse' riddle, refers to the foreign invaders who succeeded the Toltecs, the Christians. This inaugural riddle superbly announces the range of perception needed for this highest form of Maya wit. For in protecting 'Maya men' (Maya uinicilob) from imposters and foreigners and from the dire chaos loss of their tradition would bring about, riddle language has its model in the hieroglyphic script peculiar to the Maya, with its puns and conceptual leaps; and this language itself acts as the political medium. The 'right' answer is less a national password than the proof of a way of thinking or consciousness.

talez kin, mehene, cas a lathab
 tin plato;
 ti chican lansa caanil cruz tan
 chumuc u pucsikal;
 tiix culac yax balam yokol kin
 ukic u kikele

Fetch the sun, childe, carry it
 to my plate;
 the lance of the heavenly cross is
 thrust right into its heart;
 a green jaguar sitting above it
 drinks its blood.

(Book of Chumayel p. 29; translation adapted from Roys 1933: 89).

The answer to this request is: a fried egg blessed with the sign of the cross and garnished with a green pepper just turning red. The lesson of the riddle is manifold. The Christian hand-gesture of blessing, associated with bloodthirstiness, is exposed as a threat to the integrity of the Maya calendar, based on the day-sun unit denoted by the round 'kin' hieroglyph. Yet in this same hieroglyphic system the switch from green to red is also one from new to full, as in astro- and agronomy, and thus suggests some benefit or 'food' for that most Maya of sages, the Balam or jaguar of the Community Books. Moreover, in Zen fashion, the whole perception moves between the grand and the kitchen of everyday, a reminder of the basic needs of any community which thinks to survive.

By its very nature the equivalence here, between the components of request and response, works politically in favour of a shared consciousness (the 'dream hieroglyph') and against the rigid hierarchy implied in some of the questions put to Tawaddud by Abraham, agent of the all-powerful Caliph. Rather than affirm the authorized version of enigmatic speech or explain 'metaphor', Maya riddles identify qualities which may be perceived in either of two phenomena according to point of view: firefly = cigar in the dark = firefly, to quote one example, which is also found in the "Popol Vuh" (line 3650). Hence while one riddle may request 'a bunch of evenly-spaced white flowers with tomorrow's sun on them' meaning maize roasted with honey (the 'light born of earth'), in another these same flowers appear in the response not the request and are what is called for as a white rattle or asperger.

The sophistication of these Suiua riddles explains both Maya interest in Tawaddud's story and their handling of her final exchange with Abraham the philosopher. For of the several dozen riddles put to her, in the Spanish version, the Maya chose only six. Few as they are, these illustrate equally the two main types of riddle found in the Spanish: 'What is X?' and 'What is more or most X?'. Of itself this suggests a theoretical interest in Abraham's riddles on the part of the Maya, which is confirmed by the fact that each of the three riddles in the latter category involve a different kind of translation into the Maya world, as we shall go on to show. The three riddles are:

<p>Alten zuhuye macalmac hach chich xma azeroe lay u cantabal hahe xmanan yocoh tuzie ichile Ca u alten zuhuye macalmac chacuc xma cabe lay hunppel u yutzil mehentzil lay mac cu dzaic utz ti Cayumil ti Dioz yetel ti u yume Alten zuhuye macalmac hach zeb u pec ichil tulacal balobe Yume lay u tucule uinice helae tac uayane helae tac ti yan Spana xane uaix tac tu xul yokol cabe.</p>	<p>Tell me, maiden, what is stronger than steel? - He who tells the truth, who never lies. Then tell me, maiden, what is sweeter than honey? - That one is a good child, who serves well the father in heaven and on earth Tell me, maiden, what is the swift- est of all things? - Father, man's thought: now it is here, now it is in Spain too, that is, at the end of the world.</p>
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(Book of Kaua, Maler photographs 53v-54r; author's translation).

In the Spanish text these riddles are widely separated as the ninth, fifth and twenty-seventh asked of Teodora by Abraham; however, when we compare them with their prototypes in the Arabic (there, the teller of truth is the tongue, and thought is the envier's eye), we find that they originally did appear together, as they do in the Maya (the order of the first two being inverted), and indeed constitute the first three riddles asked of Tawaddud by Ibrahim. Since as height-

ened language riddles encapsulate so much, and since the selection made by the Maya is so precise here, the three are worth examining one by one.

The proposition that honey is like a good and loving child (compare the chapter 'The Bee' in the Koran) proves completely translatable from the ancient Middle East to Yucatan and survives quite unaltered, except that the Maya specify the two parents not as mother and father, as the Spanish did, but as celestial and human. For their part, identifying honey as 'the light born of earth, tomorrow's sun', the Suiua Riddles draw on a whole corpus of hieroglyphic texts about bee-keeping and kinship. The choice of this riddle is, then, partly a matter of well-established perception and taste, as is the case with the only other question asked of Teodora by Abraham to survive in the Maya, where womanly beauty is described in parts and qualities (3x6) in exactly the vocabulary used in the Suiua Riddles (e.g. 'white face', zac u uich; 'white plump calf', zac uouol ppul yoc). But it also goes beyond this to the defence of the ethos embedded in the very idea of the Suiua Riddles, in which the 'good child' is the ideal candidate. This implies a social model found in the Middle East; there, however, the 'promised land' flows more with milk than with honey and the wants of the flock-folk are measured chiefly in the pastoral economy: the cattle/capital ownership which utterly transformed society in the Old World as it did only among the Inca in the New, introducing values expressed as concisely in the alphabet (alpha, ox; gamma, camel) as those of Maya bee-keeping are in its Mesoamerican equivalent, the ritual 'alphabet' of Twenty Signs (XVI, beeswax; XVII, honey). Given the range of their information from within and outside the New World, there can be little doubt that for the Maya Teodora's honey riddle epitomised economic and social practices defended consciously by them, then as now.

The riddle about the truthful man is slightly different, for it mentions something unknown to the Maya before the invasion from the Old World: smelted steel. This difficulty is however turned to double advantage. For rather than find a local substitute for 'hardness', the Maya give prominence to the Spanish word for steel (acero); they thus intimate that the weapons used against them by the speakers of that language (cf. 'Iansa' above) must ultimately prove weaker than their own truth (hahe). Such use of European vocabulary is commonplace in the Community Books, the Christian priest, for example, is typically contrasted as 'holy' or santo with the 'lewd' Toltec shaman, and clearly means the opposite of what anthropologists term 'acculturation'. In fact, the riddle invites us to enquire further into the ethos pre-Columbian metallurgy. For while gold and silver were specified as 'divine' (teo- in Nahua), base metal (e.g. copper) was typically shown as human artifact, the axe held by the Mesoamerican forces of thunder and lightning (the Toltec Tlaloc and the Maya Chac). Since there was no iron smelting and steel was known only in meteoric form, metals did not come to qualify the ages of the world as they did in the fourfold set of the Old World (gold, silver, bronze, iron), though the first two of these ages were acknowledged as more celestial in American cosmogony. To that extent at least, the mention of Spanish steel in the Maya Teodora's riddle must link the European invasion of Yucatan with the more general idea put forward in Hesiod's "Works and Days": that advanced metal technology means moral regress.

The last of the three riddles, 'What is the swiftest of all things?' (compare the Algonkin 'brain' riddle above), is yet more pointed in its new Maya context, because of the intriguing insertion of the word 'Spain' into Teodora's answer, which indeed would have quite confounded the sense in the original. Naming distant Spain as the 'end of the world' (*cabó del mundo*; *xul yokol cabe*) gives a definitely local home to the riddle. It also plays on the notion that the Old World invasion begun in the 16th century could amount to the end of the world for the Maya, in the American system of world ages referred to above. This in turn involves us in a literary device much favoured by the Maya in their writing. For just as the authors of the "Popol Vuh" rue man's 'loss of knowledge' of the world and its ages while in fact recording and preserving that very knowledge in that work, so the Suiua Riddles chapter in the Community Books notes that these texts are 'copied down' in order to prevent just the catastrophe anticipated by 'thought' in this last of the Maya Teodora's riddles: the end of a world-age, an apocalyptic break in time and political continuity, heralded by the 'wretched star inset black into the night, its awful home' (Book of Chumayel). In other words, as long as these riddle-tokens of 'man's thought' can be at all understood and 'interpreted', they of themselves keep alive the tradition they defend, against all ending.

In preparing Teodora for her new home in the Community Books of Yucatan, the Maya translators of her story neglected the mere circumstances of her narrative in favour of intellectual exchange; and by this they meant not just the supplying of facts that are correct according to the scientific orthodoxies of the day, or of answers that are right in terms of pre-defined authority. Rather it involved the process of thought itself, the capacity to hear a question in more than one way. To this end they turned to American shamanism with its long-standing tradition of texts and initiation, which in Yucatan had been adapted to the particular needs of their *katun* system of federal government.

NOTES

- (1) The Book of Kaua: nos. 50-59 of T. Maler's photographs in the Ibero-Amerikanisches Institut, Berlin; pages 99-117 of R. Roys's transcription, University of Tulane, New Orleans. The Book of Chan Kan: pages 74-99; seen briefly in a copy held at Mérida, by the courtesy of A. Barrera Vásquez and W. Brito Sansores. The Book of Mani: in *Códice Pérez* 1949: 62-74. The source of these translations is discussed in detail by Peter Tschohl (1972) and identified as an edition of the group denominated 'PT' by Walter Mettmann in his fundamental treatment of the story (1962). On the literacy and literature of the Maya and native America generally see my "Image of the New World" (1979); this article forms part of the forthcoming sequel to that work which is concerned more narrowly with translation and exchange between Amerindian and western literature.
- (2) On the translations of Lane, Burton and others see J.L. Borges 1953.

- (3) This was reported to me by the Mayan scholar Günter Zimmermann in conversation in Hamburg in July 1971, shortly before his death.
- (4) 'Smooth stones' (ziniltunob) is one of the three emblems of 'ancient lineage', mentioned in the Book of Chumayel (p. 19) and depicted on Stela 13 at the Olmec site La Venta (cf. Brotherson 1979: 71).
- (5) Much is made of this by Lanczkowski (1965) who traces Toltec elements throughout the Suiua Riddles and reconstructs their function as 'Initiations-mittel'; what he does not suggest is their protective quality under the threat of not just Toltec but Christian military power. For his part Boggs (1964) simply describes the 'folkloric' nature of the Maya riddles and hence avoids their political dimension altogether. Useful information is given by Roys in his translation of the Book of Chumayel (1933), especially on the differences between the Itza and other Maya groups. The Book of Tusik awaits critical edition.

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