



The Way of All Flesh

Sexual Implications of the Mayan Hunt

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Abstract. – The Mesoamerican deer hunt serves as a metaphor for war. It is here argued that it equally represents alliance. The quarry is viewed by the hunter as a wife and by the hunter's wife as a male partner. The Owner of the Game corresponds to a father-in-law for whom the hunter performs bridal service (e.g., the sexual regeneration of the deer bones). The ensuing idea of antagonistic sexual exchanges between the hunter and the game informs Mayan deer dances and Kekchi Mayan Hummingbird myth. Vase scenes from the Classic Period of the Mayas demonstrate the antiquity of the above concepts. [*Mesoamerica, Mayas, deer hunt, sexuality, myth, iconography*]

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1 The Deer Hunt: Between War and Alliance

The deer hunt is one of the prominent themes of Classical Mayan vase representations. Scenes of deer hunting and warfare – especially head-hunting parties – often alternate or are fused together. As Taube has shown, killing and slaughtering a deer is a favored image for sacrificing and butchering a prisoner of war (1988: 331 f.). What seems to have been generally understated, however, is that the deer hunt equally implies alliance and, more particularly, marriage. It is the principal aim of this study to explore this theme and thus fill a gap in the literature on Mesoamerica and the Mayas.

That the deer hunt means both war and alliance is already suggested by the succession of events

in the myth of those deer hunters par excellence, the Mesoamerican Twins (cf. Thompson 1970: 355–369). First they capture, sacrifice, and butcher the stag (or, according to the Kekchis, tapir) lover of their old stepmother and distribute its meat, an episode which amounts to the founding act of war cannibalism (Braakhuis 2001a). This stag, or tapir, had been the paradigm of unsociability, which had to be eliminated before the hunt could acquire a more socializing quality. In the continuation of the story in Kekchi Maya Twin myth (Thompson 1930: 119–140), the deer hunt runs parallel with a quest for women, ending with the deer consecrating the main Twin's marriage. This myth, together with its other Mayan versions, forms a focal point of this article.

To state my argument in more abstract terms, war has been aptly characterized as a “continuation of policy by other means” (Clausewitz). Since Mayan policy was largely affinal policy, the imagery of the hunt should logically embrace the opposite of war as well, i.e., marriage and alliance. If the war in question is a mere raid for acquiring sacrificial victims, it can entail kidnapping foreign women so as to absorb them into one's own group and completely strip them of their former social identity. But if a war is to be a war of conquest, it should lead to marriage alliances between the nomadic “hunters” and the indigenous population of the “deer,” or their Owner.

The ambiguity inherent in the hunt made it particularly useful as a symbol, and it is quite probable that, for this reason, the hunt has always