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## OLMEC RELIGION: INTERPRETATIONS AND PERSPECTIVES

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Hence, Olmec religion is to be understood as much in the  
light of what went before in Mexico as of what came after. (Davies 1983: 48)

While there are hardly any scholars who explicitly deny the importance of religion in ancient cultures, most of them tend to avoid any mention of so-called "ideological" (or "non-materialistic") aspects of ancient Mesoamerican cultures (this attitude has been criticized by Coe [1981: 157-159]). This is particularly the case with first Mesoamerican complex society, the Olmecs. The fact that they left almost no written records that might help us understand their culture is not so discouraging as it might seem; a great deal of controversy standing for example in the study of Maya religion arising from the use of unprovenanced artifacts without known archaeological context (and it could be argued that study of iconography requires mention of at least some artifacts from private collections), does not affect much the subject of present paper. The problem is much more in the tendency to completely ignore work of the people with whom others disagree; while this might be understood (but not justified!) considering Luckert's (1976) highly controversial book and its unorthodox methodology, it is also strange that Pohorilenko (1972; 1977) is also rarely mentioned. Far be it from me to suggest that his works are immune from criticism – I certainly believe that Olmecs *did* have deities and that Pohorilenko's view of their priests is completely dated – but they draw attention to some important points.

Generally speaking, the study of religion of the vanished civilizations poses a variety of problems. The objects of art are very popular for different interpretations, for myth and religion often find most vivid expression in art, but these expressions at different times might be interpreted in different ways, sometimes even with the strong interpolation of interpreter's intellectual and cultural background. There is also a possibility of establishing direct analogies (something resembling something else, where there is for example a statue – and on the other hand, ritual that is still being practiced), but this is very elusive method. Although it sometimes gives hints towards interpreting some aspects that seemed completely unintelligible, it completely abstracts from the possibilities of changing and developing the community where something is studied – adjustment to the change in the way of life, re-structuring of spiritual appearances and creation of new cults, accepting and re-formulating of various influences from other communities, etc. The fact that sometimes people from the ancient civilizations are considered more "primitive" emotionally or culturally, opens another set of problems.

Several important studies on Olmec religion and iconography were published in the last decade. Beside encyclopedic entries by Soustelle (1984) and Diehl (1987), of prime importance are the works of Köhler (1985), Grove (1981; 1984; 1987), de la Fuente (1988) and Bonifaz Nuño (1989).

One of the most controversial issues is interpretation of deities with combined features. In his classic study, Joralemon (1976) has called God I *Olmec Dragon*, and God III *Olmec Bird Monster*. In both cases, representations combine features of different animals (although God III has also been identified as Harpy Eagle God). Moreover, biologically impossible creatures are one of the profound characteristics of ancient Mesoamerican religions – concept that we find most explicit in much later deity called Feathered Serpent. This attitude is confirmed by the recent studies of Mayan iconographers, as well as by analysis of reliefs from Chalcatzingo, where Limón Boyce has identified tiger shark.

Olmec presence in the Valley of Mexico and the state of Guerrero has been interpreted in a variety of ways; but I think that the most acceptable hypothesis is the one concerning control of strategic resources

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(obsidian, jade) through military and economic alliances and intermarriages. Some of the reliefs from Chalcatzingo even pose question whether we deal with people or with deities. For example, Relief 1 shows person (face is badly eroded and it cannot be reconstructed) sitting on a throne and in supernatural surroundings. Soustelle here saw goddess analogous to later Mexican Chalchiutlicue (1979: 183), while Grove wrote about the deceased and probably deified ruler. It is interesting to note that this relief (known also as "The King", Spanish "*El Rey*") has been carved as a sort of modified runoff channel, leading rain to the cultivated fields (Grove 1984: 45), which explicitly connects it with water and fertility.

Evidence from Chalcatzingo also supports thesis of combined deities ("monsters"). Grove has pointed at the fascinating similarity with the Feathered Serpent, but also with the much later concept of the alligator (Aztec *Cipactli*) floating in the primordial waters and holding the universe on its back (1984: 112)! Another interesting example concerns Earth Monster's stylized face connected with the female on Monument 21. Its features are strikingly similar to the ones of Earth Monsters and Jaguar Monsters whose jaws symbolically represented entrance into the Underworld (cf. Grove 1973: 133), and this is a prototype of architectural and artistic expression that we shall later find throughout Mesoamerica. Another, this time primarily ritual prototype, was established by the legitimization of power through blood rituals, as recently shown by Grove and Andrews.

While ethnographic analogies certainly give hints at some aspects of ancient Mesoamerican rituals, it is hard to tell to which extent they might be used in this context – since it seems that Köhler is much more convincing when he criticizes others than when he presents his own views.

One of the foremost authorities on the Olmecs, Beatriz de la Fuente, presented in her recent article excellent summary of the studies that directly influence our understanding of Olmec religion. She pointed at the scheme of Covarrubias that established the "pattern" of development of all the most important Mesoamerican deities from the original "were-jaguar" motif (Köhler and Robicsek already presented detailed criticism of this concept, so it is unnecessary to discuss the motif itself), eventually leading to the establishment of direct analogies with the civilization that appeared on the historical scene 2500 years later (!). "Además de mostrar la presencia regular de las dichas imágenes en periodos sucesivos y rumbos diferentes, que ratificaría sólo la persistencia de su aspecto exterior, sería necesario comprobar, por medio de distintos recursos metodológicos: arqueológicos, etnohistóricos, iconográficos, que las imágenes mantienen el mismo significado desde los tiempos olmecas hasta los aztecas" (1988: 42). So far, evidence for this has not been presented.

De la Fuente shows considerable respect towards the work of her Mexican colleague, Bonifaz Nuño, whose book on the Olmec iconography (the first volume dedicated exclusively to this subject since Joralemon 1971) presents the most complete view starting from the original "were-jaguar" scheme. It also includes author's thesis of the prime importance of serpent in symbolic and artistic expression of ancient Mesoamerica – but the eventual acceptance of his arguments are to the great extent dependent on whether one accepts the "model" proposed by Covarrubias (1961: 68; fig. 22). Although her point of departure is history of art, de la Fuente concludes with very important remarks: "Los olmecas no constituyen una etapa primitiva del desarrollo del intelecto, sino más bien un modo de existencia propia; ellos tuvieron, al igual que otros pueblos, que enfrentarse con las experiencias básicas de la vida y la muerte, a los sentimientos de pequeñez y de finitud ante las fuerzas de la naturaleza y la magnitud del cosmos, y debieron dar respuestas a esos problemas universales. Así, elaboraron mitos comprensibles e ideas que los ordenaron y les dieron sentido" (1988: 43).

Along these lines, most works mentioned in this paper contribute to our understanding of ancient Olmec ideological system. I believe that further progress in this area could be achieved on the lines proposed by Clifford Geertz, when he defined religion as "a system of symbols which acts to establish powerful, pervasive and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic" (1979: 79). Naturally, this approach is impossible if the future researchers enter their own prejudices and presuppositions based more on the opinion of authorities than on factual research. Other Mesoamerican cultures are important for comparisons, as well as part of vast cultural system – but complete ignoring of cultural evolution in this part of the world might not lead us very far.

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