Sacred Monkeys Among the Maya

Emile Durkheim stated that all known religious beliefs classify objects as either sacred or profane and thus view their world through this lens. Sacred objects are seen as superior to those objects that are profane in both power and dignity (Durkheim 1912). Specific examples of animals being seen as sacred objects are howler and spider monkeys among the ancient Maya of Central America.

The region associated with ancient Maya civilization is home to only one family of non-human primates, Atelidae. The genera Alouatta (howler monkeys) and Ateles (spider monkeys) are both seen in myths and iconography amongst Mesoamerican cultures as a whole, though some anthropologists consider Ateles to have a greater ethnozoological role than Alouatta (Bruner & Cucina 2005).

These two types of monkeys, though similar in size are very different (Radetsky 1995). Howler monkeys might be considered a “fear species” based on their loud, booming vocalizations, which could cause negative feelings amongst local people groups (Bruner & Cucina 2005). Howler monkeys are not as active as spiders monkeys, travel mainly on all fours, and other than their booming calls, they are fairly quiet animals. (Radetsky 1995).

Spider monkeys are mischievous, playful and have been described by primatologist Katharine Milton as being “...mean little devils.” They are more active than howler monkeys, are fairly noisy (though they do not make loud calls like howlers), have long arms and legs and have been observed picking on howler monkeys in the wild (Radetsky 1995).

To the ancient Maya, monkeys were symbols of intelligence, spirit, arts, luxury, immortality and fertility (Bruner & Cucina 2005). Though they have been called “gods” by some (Braakhuis 1987) others say that there is little evidence within iconography to suggest that these creatures were seen as gods. In classic Maya art, animals are often depictions of ritual clowns (Taube 1992).

The majority of the information that exists on ancient Maya beliefs have come from the post classic period (10th-16th century CE) in the form of stelae, reliefs, ceramics, lintels and very few manuscripts (BoÅ¡koviÄ‡ 1989). The most important of
these is the *Popol Vuh*, the sacred book of cosmology from the Quiche-Maya region that dates to the 16th century (Taube 1992).

There are different myths that represent these monkeys in different ways. In the *Popol Vuh* they are seen as evil, pleasure seeking older brothers. A myth from the Poqomam Maya portray them instead as beneficial younger brothers (Braakhuis 1987). In other areas of Maya mythology monkeys are seen in scenes depicting the underworld (Bruner & Cucina 2005). Therefore, they are depicted in various forms throughout myths and iconography.

According to the *Popol Vuh* there were four attempts at the creation of mankind with the aim being to create a species worthy of worshiping the gods. The first attempt resulted in wooden dolls that had no heart nor soul and were destroyed (Bošković 1989). The second attempt created beings that were more intelligent, though not capable of speech, and were also destroyed (Braakhuis 1987).

With each new attempt being better than the previous, the third resulted in intelligent humans with speech capabilities. However, after disrespecting the gods they were destroyed by a flood. The survivors of this group were transformed into monkeys. The fourth and final attempt resulted in the ancestors of the Quiche people and the beginning of human history (Braakhuis 1987).

In the *Popol Vuh*, Hun Batz and Hun Choven, are the jealous older step brothers of the Hero Twins. While still in their human form, the older brothers were skillful craftsmen and believed to originate the fine arts, including dancing. Their younger brothers were more intelligent and were able to defeat the Gods of death and darkness. Jealous of their younger brothers, Hun Batz and Hun Choven attempted repeatedly to destroy them (Bruner & Cucina 2005).

To get their revenge on their jealous brothers, the Hero Twins tricked Hun Batz and Hun Choven into climbing a magic tree that started to grow when they reached the top. When they were trapped high up in the canopy, Han Batz was transformed into a howler monkey and Hun Choven into a spider monkey (Bruner & Cucina 2005).

In iconography, Hun Batz and Hun Choven are seen repeatedly on funerary vases depicted in the act of writing or carving. They are considered to be the gods of
the fine arts and reshape space and time specifically using carving and writing. Death is seen as the reincorporation of man’s soul and their significance to the creation myths ties in their relevance to funerary practices (Braakhuis 1987).

Within the Long Count of the Mayan calendar, the head of the Howler Monkey occurs as a variant of the eleventh day. This day is referred to as *cheun*, meaning “to beautify” and “embellish” in the Yucatan region, and *batz*, meaning howler monkey, in other regions. Within the calendrical system howler monkeys are not only day units but also appear on the heads of higher time units (Braakhuis 1987).

The Maya would consider individuals born on this day to be destined to become skilled craftsmen, corresponding to the view of the howler monkeys as the god of fine arts. Specifically, the Popol Vol states that the monkey gods are flautists and singers, writers and carvers, and jewellers and silversmiths- considered the most highly esteemed artisan professions (Braakhuis 1987).

Full figured calendrical representations of monkeys are seen in various forms. One example is a figure whose hand placement and appearance of the birth plant rising from his body symbolizes him as a diviner. Another example symbolizes death and sacrifice by having a full figured howler monkey with his arm depicted as a skeletal snake (Braakhuis 1987).

Different variations of monkeys within the calendrical system and the link between these monkeys to the Calendar Round, shows that the Howler Monkey God acts as a count-indicator. This role symbolizes his intelligence, wisdom and experience. The Monkeys were also gifted in the art of divination, and are referred to as “magicians” and “sages” in the Popol Vol. This documents states, “For they had grown up in great suffering. They underwent pain; they were tormented. So great men and sages they became then” (Braakhuis 1987).

Monkeys are associated with arts and craftsmanship because, despite their complex social structures and similarities to humans, they are still seen as being free from moral or cultural constrictions- much like artists. These characteristics cause the spider monkey to be depicted more often in iconography, as it is considered to possess these attitudes. In modern Maya festivals, clowns dress like monkeys and are allowed to behave in ways that that would not be considered culturally appropriate for humans. (Bruner & Cucina 2005).
There is generally a large percentage of zoomorphic iconography amongst animistic religions, with primates specifically playing a large role. This is due in part to their complex behavior and similarities to humans (Bruner & Cucina 2005). The emerging field of ethnoprimatology studies the interactions and attitudes between humans and nonhuman primates (Fuentes 2012), which can be important, especially for the area of primate conservation.

Today, of the two species of howler monkeys in this region one, *Alouatta pigra*, is listed as endangered on the International Union for Conservation of Nature’s Red List of Threatened Species, and the other, *Alouatta palliata*, is considered a least concern. The one species of spider monkey, *Ateles geoffroyi*, is listed as endangered (IUCN 2013).

Drawn from their origins within Maya cosmology as seen in the *Popol Vuh*, as well as from other myths and sources, it can be seen that spider and howler monkeys were viewed as intelligent creatures that are similar, yet still different from humans. They were seen as being an attempt at the creation of man, as creatures capable of artistic expression, yet free from the constrictions of moral beliefs. This topic could be further researched by a project that looks for connections between Maya religious views towards non-human primates with that of the views of modern Maya populations.
Works Cited


