

MAYA BURIAL CUSTOMS

In Mexico the skeleton of the *danse macabre*, the skeleton of the "triumph of death," has become a sugar candy. It has become a plaything, a caricature.

Why this caricature? The reasons for the contemporary Mexican's feeling about death must not be sought in some psychological defense mechanism consisting of macabre humor in face of an unhappy fate. One must not invoke the consequences of a pseudo-catholicism more or less colored by mystical masochism. Nor must one reduce it to the simple pagan heritage of a poorly defined indigenous past. One must go much further, because, after all, what is dying?

To die is also to be, to appear, and to bear witness one last time. It is therefore necessary to find the deepest roots of a civilization which knew not to confuse funeral with funereal.

I will not pursue my study as far back as the Mixtecs or the Toltecs, nor will I speak of the Aztecs. I will limit myself to the Mayas of pre-Columbian Mexico. To begin with, I will examine the question of their prehension of death which is so unusual to our western eyes. Next, I will try to show how they experienced their own death, and finally I will try to see in what manner this death is or is not a testimony of their life.

Spinden thought that the presence of death and the frequent representation of its attributes, in Maya iconography, was the most "horrible" aspect of Maya art. According to this same

Translated by Allen Grieco.

author the symbols of death were so often found in the codices, in sculpture, in ornamental motifs of buildings, and in personal attire, that one could thereby deduce a predominance of the god of Death above all the other deities.

This affirmation must be tempered because death neither characterizes Maya art nor does it render it horrifying. The principal elements which make up the mortuary iconography of the ancient Mayas appear in the codices: they are so many symbols in a cosmogony of which a definition ought to be attempted. The deity who, by his characteristics and attributes, has been identified as the god of death is generally depicted in the same manner throughout the different codices. A partially decomposed body with a skull in place of a head, a spinal column, ribs sometimes visible, black spots or dotted lines on the body to indicate putrification, a swollen belly, and, usually, legs and arms still covered with flesh.

The god of death does not always appear as a skeleton, but he does always have a skull instead of a head. His finery consists of a halo-shaped head-dress of which the black semi-circle is decorated with bells. The head-dress can also take on the shape of a snail, of a snake, or of a lizard. He also wears a stiff necklace, such as a gorgerin, and bracelets on his wrists and ankles, all decorated with feathers and the same ornaments as are on the head-dress.

He sometimes wears a black cape decorated with cross-bones. His hieroglyph is a death's head with a closed eye. If one examines the three Maya codices known today, one can see the god of death in different attitudes. For example: with the kan sign in his hand, seated and leaning on a bone, facing a living woman, performing the sexual act with a woman, standing with a hatchet in his hand, or seated and leaning on the caban (earth) hieroglyph while smoking.

In this iconography the deity which is most often associated with the god of Death is the one of sacrifice, of war, and of violent death. One often notes as well associations with the Corn god who is presented as an adversary because he is the symbol of life. We will see, when we study Maya ideology, that this association is not contradictory. The god of Death also appears occasionally beside the god of Rain, which, if excessive or inopportune, is no longer a source of life but an accomplice of

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death. Several animals are often presented as accomplices or servants of death. The screech-owl for example, whose head is sometimes substituted for the skull of the god, the moan, a type of falcon, symbol and servant of death, and finally the dog which appears as the guide of the dead in the other world.

Only three pages of the Madrid codex show scenes which inform us about Maya burial "practices." One sees, for example, a few bodies lying on their sides, their arms crossed on their chests and their legs bent inside a sepulchre above which lies a goddess.

The mortuary symbols are both more numerous and more interesting: three dots forming a triangle, two dots separated by an oblique line forming a sign similar to that which expresses, in our language, percentage (%), and the eye, the closed eye, the eye of night. These elements are part of the ornamental motifs of buildings, altars, and steles, but they are at the same time those of the Earth goddess, of that monster in a lizard's shape which floats on water and whose wrinkled skin represents the surface of the earth. But there is no contradiction between the concepts of earth and the concepts of death because the dead return to the earth and nourish it in order that it can be, in turn, a source of life.

It is logical to find the presence of death and of its associated concepts in Maya hieroglyphs since this writing is ideographic rather than figurative. Therefore it could not ignore one of the most important complexes of Maya ideology. We find these hieroglyphs in the expression of certain days of the calendar, the sixth for example. In the other hand the prefix which signifies "end of" takes the form of a minute skull, the variation of zero has one hand on its lower jaw, three horizontal dots on its forehead, the % sign, and the closed eye. The figure corresponding to the number ten is that of the god of Death.

From Maya iconography we can deduce a belief in a god of Death (it often takes a female shape), the influence of the nine men from beyond the grave on the sequence of days, an association of ideas between death and the earth, and an association of ideas between death and the resurrection of the heavenly bodies.

One must not forget either the participation of a dog in voyages to the other world, or the presence of death in sacrificial rituals, but it is perhaps more interesting to note, among the

Mayas of pre-Columbian Mexico, a fairly weak obsession with actual human death in favor of a larger presence of death as an abstraction. This is unlike the other peoples of Central America, such as the Aztecs, to whom the "symbols" of death were less familiar.

Maya iconography provides little information for studies of burial customs. In fact, we find only burials with bent legs inside the tomb, burial in a sitting position with the body enveloped in a cloth, like the foetus in its enveloping membrane, and exhibition of human heads, of skulls which probably belonged to sacrificial victims of the Toltec period in Yucatàn. One also finds common traits between the god of Death and the Earth goddess. In all the Maya codices we see the god of Death engaged in very human everyday activities. This supposes a life beyond the grave similar in every detail to life on earth. In fact we see him weave, smoke, build a fire and make love. The baleful influences of unfavourable forces on agriculture, meteorological phenomena, astronomy, mineralogy, chronology, etc., all the aspects of individual and collective existence reappear. We also see the necessity for ritual ceremonies to conjure the harmful intervention of the powers of death in the destiny of man.

But it is above all the sacred texts which permit us to grasp our subject better. The literature of the ancient Mayas could not disregard death and its destructive action but neither could it limit itself solely to a conception of death as being the destruction of men and the beings that live on the earth.

Death also concerned the gods, the heavenly bodies, concepts, and personified concepts like time and death itself. The *Popol-Vuh*, the sacred book of the Quichés, people of the highlands of Guatemala, is the most precise and complete source currently at our disposal of the mythology of the ancient Maya peoples. This manuscript tells us about concepts relating to death, about the forces which are the enemy of man, about the land of the dead, and about the evil men who reign there. It tells of the successive humanities: the men of mud and the men of wood. It describes the powers of a death which respects nothing, neither divinities nor even the deity of Death. In the stories of the *Popol-Vuh*, we also see that death does not appear as the definitive destruction of man but rather as a "passage" to another state. What strikes the western reader on the first reading is the

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facility with which the creator gods destroy the same beings to which they have given life. This happens to the animals created immediately after the earth and the waters, which are implacably killed as soon as the Great Maker, the Creator, understands that they will not be capable of worshipping him. The first men of mud and the first men of wood meet the same fate.

The artisans of these successive destructions are: a flood, evil forces incarnated in unusual and supernatural animals such as Cotzbalam or Tucumbalam, combats and divine vengeance, the death of four hundred children, and the kingdom of the dead. Xibalba was the name of this kingdom, the underground region where the enemies of man lived. Their messengers were the screech owls whose names in Quiché mean: "screech owl swift as an arrow," "screech owl with only one foot," "screech owl with one red shoulder," and "screech owl with neither feet nor wings." The supreme judges were called Hun-Came and Vucub-Came, whose names mean respectively one dead man and seven dead men. Under their command fall: "he who makes pus," "he who causes dropsy," "he who causes poverty," and "he who causes death on the road by producing vomiting of blood." The road which descends to the underworld consists, firstly, of flights of steps, followed by a rapid river which runs among ravines, another river which runs alongside of thorn covered trees, and finally a river of blood. Then one arrives at a cross-roads, where each road is of a different color, one red, one black, one yellow, and one white. The black one leads to Xibalba. After all this a series of trials begins but the two mythological heroes, Hunahpu and Puchal chah, sacrificed at the end of this voyage, are not destroyed. The heads of the decapitated heroes are placed on a tree which then covers itself with fruit resembles the faces of the heroes. Furthermore they are going to resurrect and their epic ends in an apotheosis when, conquerors of the powers of death, they ascend into the sky. The first becomes the sun and the second the moon. The face of the earth is then illuminated and the four hundred sacrificed children can, in turn, ascend into the sky and form the group of the pleiades.

In the *Popol-Vuh*, the verbs associated with death all belong to the semantic field of travel. Most of Maya texts of the Yucatán deal with death in mythology: the death of the sun, of the gods, of the heroes, and of the first men. On the other hand the texts

coming from central Mexico, for example, reflect the attitude of man faced with "his" individual death.

Xibalba, the underworld of the Quichés, is situated with precision in a mythological geography, with flights of stairs, rivers, roads, and colours. Those who live there have names which indicate exactly which deaths they instigate. We also know the cruel trials awaiting the condemned, we see that *pelota* is played there, as on earth, with a glove and a ring. The Nahuas, however, had but a vague idea of the other world.

The characters of the *Popol-Vuh* die and come back to life. They can be decapitated, have their bones broken, but their heads, transformed into fruits, will always be a source of life until the final apotheosis when they turn into heavenly bodies. For the human beings in the *Popol-Vuh*, death is a return to the *patria lejana*, to the distant fatherland. Their wives and children in dying will return to their mountains and to their homes. Life, for the Quiché people, continues after death and life can always gush forth like a spring of clear water, even from a dried skull. Life is always victorious over death and the exploits of Hun Hunahpu sum up a whole philosophy of immortality: one inherits from the human condition. Man does not die completely.

Therefore, in this world of signs and symbols, we have been able to have a presentiment of that which could have been the ancient Maya conception of death. We have seen them "be" in death and "apprehend" it, but we have not seen them "experience" their death. The only witnesses of this appearing in death are the Spanish chroniclers of the conquest, archeologists, and travellers like myself who have witnessed burials of Maya Indians, in some lost village of Yucatàn, and who can find traces of that pre-Columbian Maya blood we are looking for. How did the Maya of pre-Columbian Yucatàn experience his death?

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The colonial chroniclers are not very prolix regarding Maya burial customs but one can nevertheless gather some information from them, in particular from the *Relación de las cosas de Yucatàn* by Landa. There one is made aware of a clear difference between the attitude of the Maya and that of the Aztec in face of death. Fear in the former and fatalism in the latter. This difference is

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perhaps due to the fact that the Maya considered death a punishment imposed by an evil deity whereas the Aztecs saw it as a liberation, a means of escaping the sorrows and labours of daily life. The Mayas, like the Aztecs, practiced incineration and cremation, but the two methods were not applied in the same cases.

The Mayas buried the common people, the Aztecs only buried sick people. Burial, for the Mayas, occurred in the house itself or in the lands close to the village, in boxes of stone or wood. In the highlands, burial was accompanied by offerings. These were usually the familiar objects of the deceased, food and drink. A piece of carved jade was put into the mouth of the deceased which was the coin that would permit him to pay his "traveling expenses." In short, everything that he might need during this voyage. It is a sort of "viaticum," an obol for another Charon, the boatsman of Hades, immortal son of Erebus and Night,

... *vieux remorqueur,*
Ecumeur taciturne aux avirons sublimes.

The Mayas reserved cremation for the nobility whereas it was the common practice among the peoples of central Mexico. The ashes were gathered and preserved in vessels of wood or baked clay which could be veritable statues and which were then housed in temples.

When it was a question of sacrificial victims the following customs prevailed. The bodies of certain victims were flayed and the priests wore their dried skin. Sometimes, the bodies of the victims were quartered and used for ceremonial cannibalism. Certain parts of the body were considered amulets, the jaws for example, and for the Aztecs, the left arm and hand as well as the hair of women who died in childbirth. A woman who died in childbirth was deified like the warrior who had died in battle. Giving birth was considered to be a feminine form of combat.

The burial of important people occasioned numerous rites. The body of the deceased was prepared with much care and was dressed in rich mortuary trappings, offerings, jewels and feathers. Sacrifices of slaves and women who were destined to accompany him were also made. For the Mayas, the soul was immortal but, according to certain chroniclers, everyone went to the underworld,

and according to others, only certain people. Their texts do not agree with each other on this point but, on the other hand, they all agree that there was a special paradise reserved for hanged men.

A veritable cult of the dead existed. If the dead man had been an important personage during his life, a temple or altar was raised to him in the place where his ashes were buried.

It is necessary to distinguish the types of burial valid for the whole region and period in question from the types of burial which are particular to a place or an era, to a village or to a specific date.

One can find, of course, in the whole of Yucatàn, and at every moment of its pre-Columbian history, simple burials, burials in ceremonial constructions, burials in specific places (*cista*, grave, or funeral chamber according to the social or religious status of the dead man), individual burials, primary ones, secondary ones, stretched out, bent, with or without funeral offerings according to the social category of the deceased, and burials accompanied by offerings of animals. One also finds burials of sacrificed people as offerings on the occasion of the construction of a religious monument. But the types of burials sometimes differ according to the region or the epoch considered:

- in caves: meseta de Chiapas, Puuc (post-classic)
- in wells (the *cenote*): Yucatàn, Chichen-Itzá
- in pottery: Chiapas, northern Yucatàn (post-classic)
- collective burials (late classic), ossuaries: Chiapas, Yucatàn mountains (post-classic)
- remains of cremation: meseta de Chiapas, northern Yucatàn, Chichen-Itzá and Mayapan (post-classic)
- cremation: meseta de Chiapas, northern Yucatàn, Chichen-Itzá and Mayapan (post-classic)
- stretched out body (early classic), bent body (late classic) in Guatemala, on the other hand stretched out body (late classic) in the meseta de Chiapas. One finds that attendants were sacrificed at Petén in the early classic period while in Guatemala this happened from the pre-classic to the post-classic periods.
- presence of red paint: meseta de Chiapas (late pre-classic)
- a jade bead in the mouth: meseta de Chiapas (middle pre-classic), Guatemala (proto-classic)
- mother-child association: Petén (pre-classic, for example)
- burial with the head protected: Jaina (late classic)

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- under the platforms of dwellings: Uaxactun, Mayapan (in this case the burial is often located above the domestic altar)
- in very small funeral chambers: Copán (late classic)
- in a sarcophagus: Palenque (late classic)
- in a funeral chamber with a magic access to the temple: Palenque
- the head pointing towards the west: Chiapa de Corzo (late pre-classic)
- the head pointing towards the north: Chiapa de Corzo (late proto-classic)
- with the offering of a dog: Kaminaljuyu and Zaculeu
- as an offering to a stele: Nebaj (classic)

The orientation of the body is most often towards the east, the cardinal point the rising sun, a jade bead may be found in the mouth, and the head is sometimes protected by a plate which has been perforated to permit the soul to escape.

The Mayas of today, descendants of the ancient Maya culture, experience their death by closely associating the Catholic and indigenous elements which they have inherited. The Mayas have been taught the cross, holy water, and the fifty knots of the rope that bind the dead body (the fifty *Ave Marias* of the Catholic rosary). But the Mayas remember burial in a blanket in order to reach the Last Judgement and in order to return to earth on All Souls' Day in the beginning of November. They also remember music and dancing, and burning chile in the houses to make the spirit flee. They do not bury suicides in the same way. There is a whole rite which is particular to each one of these dead people. All Souls' Day is celebrated with banquets in the cemeteries. Everyone drinks, listens to music, and eats a lot sitting on the tombs. The objects which were used at the burial are afterwards destroyed and purified with copal. The dying person is whipped until his soul has left his body. The Mayas make a hole in the roof of the house so that the soul can escape. They open and close the eyes of the dead man nine times and, as soon as death comes, the Indians of present day Yucatàn take sewing machines, alarm clocks, and seeds out of the house. They wash the corpse and then drink the water in order to divide the sins of the dead man amongst all of the participants and then leave kernels of corn along the route from the house to the cemetery in order that the soul find its way. Every two or three years the skeleton

is taken out of its tomb and, once more, festivities and a new burial are celebrated. However the spirit of the departed is greatly feared. An Indian once told me that he had held back his tears in order that the way to the cemetery not be wet and that the spirit not find his home again. Nonetheless he sowed the kernels of corn...

Today's Indians conceive of heaven as a place where everything that lacks on earth may be found. That is to say: an abundance of water, of corn, of women, of children in good health, of strong people, of good clothing, and of food. The heaven of the Mayas does not discriminate between the good and the bad. Good and evil exist but they believe neither in a Hell nor in a Paradise despite the Catholic contributions to their religion. On the other hand, the myth of the Redemption has been perfectly assimilated and accepted because their own God had experienced the resurrection. On that level, a simple transposition sufficed.

Nevertheless, punishments exist for those who have committed certain sins; for example, thieves and adulterers are punished by the sun. Furthermore, the Mayas believed in metempsychosis, the soul of the dead person appearing in the soul of the last-born. Some dead are transformed into stars while the souls of sinners go into the bodies of animals, in particular of insects, does, or stags. The souls of those who have committed the sin of lust are transformed into whirlwinds of hot air. One thinks of the same kind of sinners in the *Divine Comedy* who float in the second circle of hell, blown, like dead leaves, by an eternal wind, symbol of the passion they did not know how to resist. We hear again, in the company of "princesses of ancient times" and of "warriors of old" the piteous story of Francesca and Paolo, the tragic lovers of Rimini, carried off forever by the *bufera infernale*.

We have seen the Mayas "live" in the signs. We have also seen them "appear" in their individual death. But to die is also to bear witness, to bear witness of life.

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It is evident that the level of technological, economic, and, more generally, cultural development is reflected in funeral practices. However; it would seem perilous and inexact to try to trace an evolutionary curve from the most simple burials, with a minimum of offerings and dating from the preclassic era, to the most

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elaborate sepulchers garnished with abundant offerings. All of these evolutions do not follow lines parallel to architectural progress. The examples of Uaxactun, of San José, and of Copán which belong to all these periods show that the different types of burial do not always correspond to a different level of culture; they more often correspond to a difference in social rank of the person buried.

Nevertheless, it is significant to notice that the most simple burials correspond to the pre-classic period, that the richly furnished tombs are found in the proto-classic period, and that the most sumptuous tombs belong to the Maya golden age, the late classic, of which Palenque is an example. The ceramic, lithic, and lapidary production is reflected in the offerings found beside the bones. The commercial exchanges between the different regions of present day Mexico are made apparent by the presence, for example, of pottery from Teotihuacán in Maya territory. It is difficult to draw conclusions of a sociological order from a study of burial customs because the sites hitherto explored were all places for religious ceremonies, which considerably limits the scope of all studies.

A good part of the social reality is, for that same reason, veiled. The case of Jaina is an exception. It was a necropolis to which the dead were brought from all around and, it seems, given the diversity and the richness of the offerings, that these dead once belonged to certain high spheres of society. The reduction of the field of research is further explained by the difficulty which archeologists encounter in exploring this region, principally because of the coral snake which is found in the trees surrounding the temples and whose bite brings instant death. However, it is possible to deduce some information from existent data, in particular concerning the birth and death rates of this period. The data gathered so far obviously does not permit us to plot graphs describing the variation of the death rates in function of period, age, and sex as we do today. Nevertheless, the elements we have at our disposal permit us to say that infant mortality was very high: 35% to 44% of the burials at San José were burials of children's bodies. It is difficult to know whether they were natural deaths or sacrifices given that, for example, under the threshold of a building used for a funeral ceremony one finds only children's bodies. It

could therefore be a question of sacrifices made after the construction of the temple in order to consecrate it. At Zácaleu 45% of the skeletons were skeletons of men, 15% skeletons of women, and 40% could not be identified. At Mayapán 67% were skeletons of men and 33% skeletons of women. These figures demonstrate a preponderance of male skeletons, but as these figures concern places destined for religious ceremonies, this disproportion is certainly due to the fact that the religious orders were chiefly composed of men.

We can perceive the social structure of the ancient Mayas through a certain amount of elements associated with funeral customs, namely: the location of the body, the types of burial, the quantity and quality of the offerings. The common people were buried under platforms which served as foundations of their own cottages while, on the contrary, the dominating classes, secular or religious, were buried in the buildings dedicated to the cult or in more elaborate residences than cottages.

The type of burial also permits us to establish a hierarchy which is as follows: simple burial, *cista* (the body is placed on the ground and stones are piled all around, sometimes a slab of stone is placed on top), in graves, and in mortuary chambers.

The offerings, by reason of their quantity and quality, provide an interesting ground for study. The chronicles tell us that the objects left at the foot of the dead man were familiar objects which characterised his profession and his age. We therefore have information on tools, weapons, toys, dress, and different attributes. The presence of red paint on the bones and the offerings seems to be associated with the burial of important people.

Recent discoveries in the Benisè valley would tend to demonstrate that Maya society was not as stratified as has often been thought. Cremation was, nonetheless, uniquely reserved for the most important personages. Landa points out that ashes were put in large vases of pottery on which the temples were built, or in hollow statues made of wood or dried mud which were cult objects in houses or palaces. The construction of sumptuous tombs like those of Palenque imply a political regime whose power was necessarily centralized, strong, stable, capable of efficiently controlling the social body and of imposing on the population the execution of a non-productive work which

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sometimes necessitated the help of hundreds of men for a long period of time, the only purpose of this work being that of assuring the religious or political chief of a burial worthy of his hierarchical rank. This is the first political conclusion that one can draw. The second is that the absence of burial customs valid for the whole Maya era implies the idea of a territory divided into provinces which were relatively independent from each other, even if they were united by a strong and centralised power on the political level. The plurality of styles, which Maya art presents, has been interpreted in the same manner. It must not be forgotten that the Spanish found a multitude of little reigns on their arrival in Yucatàn.

Just as political life may be seen through funeral customs, so also does Maya philosophy appear at every turning. In effect one can very well see that death was not considered by the Mayas as a simple, biological, and ineluctable phenomenon. For them it was a "change of state" and they believed in a life after death. In the codices the god of Death pursued very "human" activities. Next to the dead, familiar everyday objects were discovered. Priests were buried with their books, and nobles with their weapons, their jewels, their servants, and their wives. When a child was buried, the Mayas put some of his mother's phalanges in his tomb in order that he take with him part of the body that had given him life, but also so that his mother might help him walk in the other world. All these customs strongly suggest the idea that the deceased was capable of experiencing sensations, needs, feelings, and of leading a life similar to that which he had led on earth.

Other funeral practices imply the wish to give the corpse a life-like look. The mask of Palenque testifies to this. On these masks, made of mosaic or jade, were inlaid eyes made of very white shells and obsidian. It must be noticed, however, that this intention of giving a living aspect to the corpse never led the Mayas to practices of mummification. On the other hand, the presence of a limestone serpent at Palenque, which seems to spring from the sarcophagus and join it with the threshold of the crypt, has led certain archeologists to affirm that it was a passage for the soul of the dead person. Certain of the objects which accompanied the dead seem to have been intentionally broken, killed in a way. Moreover, most of these same objects

have a hole in the center. Some think that this hole was destined to let the spirit of the dead person escape. Finally, the practice of cremation must have been destined to separate the soul from the body, to permit it to attain immortality by freeing it from every contingency and from every material restraint.

The theme of resurrection is not foreign to the Maya system of thought. Like the sun after an eclipse, the Maya can be resuscitated or metamorphosed; this was the case of Hun Hunahpu who was transformed into a fruit, as well as of Hunahpu and Ixbalanque who became the sun and the moon. This was also the fate of the four hundred children of the Pleiades. We have pointed out the presence of red paint on bones and on funeral objects. Now it must not be forgotten that in the Maya cosmogony every cardinal point corresponds to a color. Red corresponds to the east, region of the rising sun and therefore of resurrection. The orientation of the head towards the east would seem to imply the same idea.

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The cavity of the sarcophagus where the bodies lay buried in the temple of the inscriptions of Palenque summarises, in a few symbols, the death of the pre-Columbia Maya. According to the archeologists who discovered it, this cavity had the form of a uterus. Thus burial would be a kind of return to the mother for a future rebirth. It seems that the scenes sculpted on the stone slab, which covered the sarcophagus,¹ comprise a whole symbolism of resurrection. This sculpted stone is a plastic synthesis of the mystery of Maya religion.

In effect, corn becomes man and, buried as such after its death it returns to its vegetable phase, after the miracle of germination, in order that its fruit be converted once more into the flesh and blood of man, thus eternally repeating the cycle of life. This makes us think of the sentence of André Malraux who, while watching the constellations reflected in the Nile, under which Isis performed her funeral rites, said: "There is only one act over which neither the negligence of the constellations nor the eternal murmur of the rivers prevails. It is the act whereby man snatches something from the jaws of death."

¹ Reproduction of the stone slab in *Bulletin de la Société de thanatologie*, 7th year, bulletin n° 3-4, as well as the documents illustrating this text.