

# **Ancient Maya Myth, Economy, and Ideology: *A Marxist Interpretation of the Hero Twins Saga***

**Alf H. Walle**

*A close reading of the Popol Vuh (ancient Maya text) provides clues regarding how folk beliefs, legends, and mythology legitimized political relationships by justifying the privilege, wealth, and the dominance of the elite. An interpretation, based on the Marxist social anthropology of Leslie White, uses a folkloristic analysis to explore economic and materialistic influences upon religion and ideology.*

*Keywords: Maya Mythology, folkloristic analysis, Leslie White, Marxist anthropology, ideology*

## **INTRODUCTION**

The *Popol Vuh*, an account of ancient Maya mythology, provides clues regarding life during the classic era of the Maya (in Central America), the dominance of an elite minority, and ideologies that justified the prevailing social hierarchy. The tools used in this examination include Marxist social anthropology coupled with folkloristic analysis.

Originally written in K'iche' Mayan, not Spanish, *The Popol Vuh* is a true product of the ancient Maya, even though some Spanish influences exist. A close reading of the saga of the Hero Twins (contained within the *Popol Vuh*) demonstrates concomitant shifts in (1) evolving methods of economic production, (2) power relationships that built upon and facilitated this materialistic foundation and (3) compatible Maya dogma and ideology. The relationships between economic changes and the prevailing ideology are effectively examined using a Marxist analysis.

The study begins with a consideration of the Hero Twins saga that appears in the *Popol Vuh*, a Maya religious text, followed by discussions regarding the impacts of changing economic, political, and social relationships. The work of Leslie White and his Marxist theories of social anthropology (White 1949) are used to expand Karl Marx's "base and superstructure" paradigm that models how economic trends and pressures influence other aspects of culture and society (Marx 1859). By adapting White's model for use in mythic/literary analysis, a robust rereading of the Hero Twins saga explores tensions and transformations within ancient Maya civilization that, otherwise, could remain unaddressed.

## **THE POPOL VUH**

The *Popol Vuh*, a colonial-era manuscript, composed after the Spanish conquest of the Guatemala highlands, contains important folkloristic and mythological evidence that is unavailable elsewhere. In particular, an extended prose account of the Hero Twins saga is presented. Although written after the arrival of the Spanish, the *Popol Vuh* provides unique and invaluable clues regarding pre-contact Maya folklore, religion, and mythology.

Noted Maya specialist, Michael Coe (1989), suggests that although the *Popol Vuh* is the only intact text regarding the Hero Twins to survive, other variants, no doubt, once existed. Although additional sources (such as the books of *Chilim Balam* (Paxton 2001) provide illusive (but tantalizing) clues, the focus here is upon the *Popol Vuh*.

The *Popol Vuh* showcases three sets of twins; (1) the Hero Twins' father Hun-Hunahpú and their uncle Vucub-Hunahpú, (2) the Twins' half-brothers, and (3) the Hero Twins themselves: Hunahpú and Xbalanqué. The exploits of the Hero Twins recounted in the *Popol Vuh* are illustrated by numerous examples of ancient Maya artwork that depict recognizable components of the saga; doing so documents its age and wide geographic distribution.

One reason for this repetitive use of twins in Maya folklore and myth might derive from the Maya belief that human souls possessed a duality. One half (typically called something like "ch'ul," "k'ul," or "ch'ulel") is the indestructible essence of the individual. The second half is a protector, somewhat similar to a guardian angel. "This is a supernatural companion... The fates...are intertwined, so that what befalls the one affects the other for good or ill" (Freidel et al. 1993:182). Indeed, each pair of twins experiences a similar fate. The father and uncle are killed in the underworld. Both of the half-brothers are transformed into Howler monkeys. The Hero Twins become celestial bodies associated with fertility.

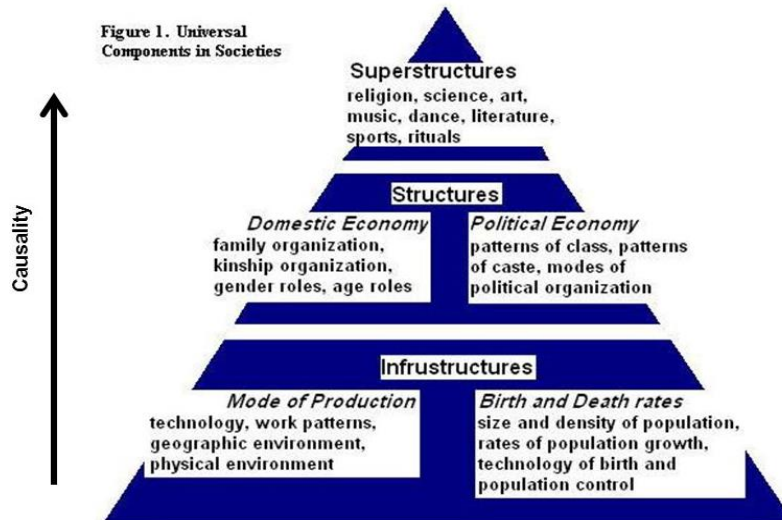
Although the impacts of time, Spanish contact, and Christianity should not be ignored, Maya specialists agree that the scenarios and systems of belief presented in the *Popol Vuh* can be traced back at least to the classic era of Maya civilization (Kerr 1992). Although distortion due to Spanish influences might be assumed, Allen Christenson (2009) observes "There seem to be very few if any foreign influences in the text itself (unlike other contemporary highland Maya documents)... [and] elements of its mythic story are demonstrable in Classic Maya art and culture."

Dennis Tedlock's 1996 translation of and commentary on the *Popol Vuh* (an updating of his earlier 1986 work) and Allen J. Christenson's 2003 translation and commentary have been particularly useful in this study. My truncated synopses of various segments of the Hero Twins cycle (presented below) are abstracts of what appears in these works. I am responsible for any distortions caused by the concise summarizing of mythological accounts that, in their entirety, are more complex than the brief overviews presented here.

## MARXIST ANALYSIS

Folklore and mythology often deal with cross-cultural parallels that are supposedly related to the "psychic unity of mankind" (as argued by Lord Raglan 1936, Karl Gustav Jung 1981, and popularizers such as Joseph Campbell 1949). To whatever extent investigators focus upon universal human traits or responses, however, they are likely to downplay or ignore specific and unique influences such as economic pressures. Because this discussion examines how particular conditions and situations influenced the ancient Maya, alternative methods are employed. Marxist analysis is useful in this regard.

Although a social anthropologist (not a literary critic, folklorist, or mythologist), Leslie White provides a materialist and socio-economic framework for analyzing myths and folk tales. White's classic monograph *Science of Culture: A Study of Man and Civilization* (1949) argues that societies, most basically, are energy harnessing devices. He overtly embraces a materialist and Marxist foundation. In doing so, White points to three distinct, but interrelated, aspects of culture: (1) infrastructure, (2) structure and (3) superstructure. White's model, of course, is an expansion Karl Marx's "Base and Superstructure" paradigm (1859) that by including three components instead of two is better prepared to analyze transformations in ideology that supports the prevailing economic system. Figure 1 portrays these components and their relationship to each other:



**Figure 1.** Universal Components in Societies

Source: <https://image.slidesharecdn.com/socanthro-150804144257-1va1-app6891/85/cultural-materialism-30-638.jpg?cb=1666027595>

Each of White’s three elements is briefly introduced below:

- **Infrastructure:** “Infrastructure” includes significant economic/energy producing methods employed by the community. These dominant forces exert significant influences upon other cultural elements that rely upon the economic foundation that the infrastructure provides. To use the jargon of science, the infrastructure is a *primary variable*” that exerts significant influences upon other cultural components that can be viewed as “*secondary variables*”.
- **Structure:** The “structure” includes social relationships (such as class distinctions, political arrangements, the division of labor, etc.) Structure can function both as a secondary variable (influenced by the infrastructure) and as a primary variable (that impacts and influences other aspects of life and society).
- **Superstructure:** Both the infrastructure and the structure influence the superstructure (that includes ideology, religion, and other supports that justify the prevailing socio-economic system). Although in the short term, these primary/secondary relationships may not completely hold true, as demonstrated by Max Weber’s analysis of the Protestant ethic and the rise of capitalism (1905), in the long flow of history White assumes that they tend to operate in such a manner.

According to “materialist” paradigms, such as White’s refinements of Marxist theory, folklore, myth, and religion are aspects of the superstructure and can be viewed as dependent variables that evolve in ways that reflect and reinforce the dominant means of production (infrastructure) and the social relationships (structures) that support it. Thus, the ideological superstructures reflected in folklore and myth are artifacts or reflections of the dominant economic system and the social and political systems that arise from it. As a result, White’s model can be used to analyze folklore and myth in terms of powerful socio-economic influences.

As ancient farming techniques evolved in Central America, maize emerged as the chief staple of Maya culture and civilization. As a result, it came to dominate the infrastructure and, as a result, it emerged as a primary variable that influenced secondary variables including the social/political structures and the superstructure that included myth, religion, and ideology. Keeping these relationships in mind, this paper theorizes that (1) more efficient methods of production based on intensive maize agriculture (2) triggered changes in the Maya social structure (3) that are reflected in and justified by the mythic and ideological superstructure. The resulting transformations legitimized the prevailing political/economic system.

The strategy to be followed in this paper (1) summarizes key components of the Hero Twins saga (2) in order to identify their basic threads of narrative. (3) Doing so is accomplished using a form of “motif analysis”, inspired by methods frequently used in folklore scholarship. (4) Having identified the key components of these narratives, relevant interpretations are extrapolated using a Marxist analysis that is based on the work of Leslie White.

## THE HERO TWINS

The Hero Twins saga is a major component of Maya folklore and myth that depicts the challenges facing gods who are involved with maize: the primary staple of classic Maya civilization. The fullest existing account of this mythic cycle occurs in the *Popol Vuh*, although enticing clues are found elsewhere (especially in ancient Maya Art.) The principal figures include Hun Hunahpu, the father of the Hero Twins (who had been decapitated but even in this weakened condition was able to impregnate their mother.) If we accept Michael Coe’s suggestion that Hun Hunahpu is the god of maize, the miraculous impregnation of the twins’ mother metaphorically underscores that maize, appearing to be dead following the annual harvest (after its “heads” of grain have been cut off), is destined to regenerate and become fruitful once more.

Although Coe’s argument is compelling, Allen Christenson (2009) reminds us that “the *Popol Vuh* never directly associates Hun Hunahpu with maize.” Nonetheless, Christenson continues, “The twins Hunahpu and Xbalanque... are definitively associated with maize (the maize cobs they plant in the grandmother’s house, for example, die and are reborn at the same time as the twins.)” Revealingly, the beginning of life for the twins (their conception) involves the introduction of water (spittle in the mother’s hand), a replication of the agricultural technique of planting and watering seeds so the maize will grow.

Eventually, the twins emerge as the gods of the sun and the moon that symbolically represent fertility, the nurturing that these celestial bodies provide, and the ever-transitioning seasons that facilitate rebirth and growth). In this role, the Twins represent the natural environment that supports their father (who according to Coe is the god of maize) as he engages in the annual life cycle of growth, harvest, temporary death, and rebirth.

Three aspects of the Hero Twins cycle are discussed: (1) a symbolic portrayal of the rise of the Hero Twins and the maize-based infrastructure, (2) a depiction of ideological changes that were compatible with this infrastructure, and (3) an analysis of what the “common people” had to gain by supporting the Hero Twins. Each component is analyzed by culling the story down to its essential components in order to more effectively analyze the dominant motifs.

## THE HERO TWINS’ RISE TO POWER

The first section of the Hero Twins saga includes (1) an account of their mother’s miraculous impregnation by their supposedly dead father, (2) the boys’ difficult early years, (3) struggles with their half-brothers, and (4) eventual success. A typical narrative account can be presented as:

*A woman named Xquic was speaking with the decapitated head of Hun Hunahpu (the Maize God) when the severed head spat on her hand, miraculously making her pregnant with the Hero Twins. Given her condition and facing death from her shamed and angry father, Xquic went to Hun Hunahpu’s mother and asked for help. Because Hun Hunahpu was the father of Xquic’s unborn children, the older woman reluctantly took her in.*

*After birth, Hunahpu and Xbalanque (the Hero Twins) were poorly treated by the grandmother and their half-brothers. When they were helpless infants, the grandmother threw the twins out of the house because of their loud crying. The two half-brothers used this situation as an opportunity to place the babies on an ant hill in an attempt to kill them. The plan was unsuccessful, and the Twins survived. The older boys were motivated to kill the Twins because they feared that the newcomers might usurp the privileges they enjoyed.*

Surviving, the Twins are put to work hunting and gathering food that the half-brothers ate as they frittered away their days pursuing economically unproductive artistic and literary activities. Eventually, the Twins gained the upper hand by enlisting the aid of the half-brothers to help retrieve dead birds that are lodged in a tree. The request was a ruse, however, and once the climbing begins the Twins used their power over nature to make the tree grow quickly and trap the half-brothers high above the ground.

When the grandmother inquired about the half-brothers, the Twins explained what they had done; outraging the grandmother who was afraid the boys might be hurt. To relieve the woman's fears, the Hero Twins allow the half-brothers to return home, but not before turning them into howler monkeys. Seeing the boys transformed into monkeys, the grandmother broke out laughing causing the shamed monkey-boys to run away.

Presenting these motifs and their significance in tabular form, the story can be depicted as:

**TABLE 1**  
**HERO TWINS RISE TO POWER**

<b>MOTIF</b>	<b>EVENTS</b>	<b>ANALYSIS</b>
<i>Twins marginalized</i>	Grandmother doesn't want to accept pregnant mother of twins. Grandmother throws twins out of house due to their crying.	Even though they are clearly associated with Maize, the Twins are not initially viewed as important and are shabbily treated.
<i>Twins face death</i>	Half-brothers (associated with art and writing) unsuccessfully attempt to kill the Twins by placing them on an anthill.	The elite of the existing social hierarchy fear the Twins may gain attention and power. They make a preemptive strike to destroy them.
<i>Twins become providers</i>	While the half-brothers pursue their economically irrelevant diversions, the twins become primary providers of food.	The existing elite, pursuing materialistically irrelevant activities, loses power as the Twins come to dominate food production.
<i>Power over nature</i>	Twins lure half-brothers to a tree to retrieve killed birds. While in the tree, the twins make it grow, trapping the half-brothers.	The Twins use their power over nature to gain an advantage over the half-brothers who are economically unproductive.
<i>Half-brothers transformed</i>	Before the half-brothers are released, the Twins transform them into howler monkeys.	As a result of the growing power associated with the Twins, the old elites are denied their former status.
<i>Half-brothers lose power</i>	Becoming monkeys, the half-brothers are laughable and shamed.	The old elite are toppled from their privileged positions.
<i>Old elite become apologists</i>	The old elite, possessing the skills of art and writing, emerge as apologists for the new social structure that is based on maize.	The old elite and their skills become subservient to the new power structure that is supported by a maize-based economy.
<b>DISCUSSION</b>		
The saga of the hero twins metaphorically reflects the rise of an infrastructure based on maize coupled with the decline of the old structure. The Hero Twins (associated with maize) are initially marginalized, but topple the old regime and establish a new structure based on the maize infrastructure. Remnants of the old structure survive by adapting to serve the needs of the new order.		

This mythic account can be read as a component of the superstructure that symbolically depicts an economic transition in ways that are consistent with Leslie White's Marxist model. A brief analysis is presented below:

- **Infrastructure:** Initially, an economy based on maize did not dominate. The half-brothers, being involved in non-economic pursuits, represents this earlier era. Fearing a potential loss of status within the structure of Maya society and economy, however, the half-brothers make a preemptive strike to destroy the Hero Twins, but fail. In spite of perceived threats, the half-brothers (representatives of the old status quo) do not enhance their economic skills in a quest to remain in power. As a result, over time the Hero Twins (closely associated with maize) become the essential economic providers while the importance of the half-brothers (old status quo) shrinks. Eventually the hero twins emerge as the primary economic providers although, initially, their status within the structure of Maya society does not reflect this reality.
- **Structure:** Dominating the infrastructure by using their agricultural skills and power to control nature, the Twins wrestle power and control from the status quo elite. Doing so transforms the structure. Not only do the Hero Twins gain social standing and recognition, the old status quo, represented by the half-brothers, lose significance (the old elites are transformed into monkeys). These shifts in power and status are consistent with the growing economic contributions associated with maize and those (represented by the Twins) who possess control over maize. As a result, the structure evolves in ways that reflect and serve the infrastructure.
- **Superstructure:** Although the old status quo is replaced, the half-brothers possess a variety of skills (such as writing and artistic pursuits) that are useful in transforming the superstructure in ways that reflect the changing infrastructure and structure. This emerging role of the displaced former elites is symbolically represented by the fact that in the Maya tradition artists and writers are depicted as monkeys. Thus, Eidt (2012) observes: "To the Maya of the Classic Period, they [Howler Monkeys] were the divine patrons of the artisans, especially scribes and sculptors".

This Marxist reading is consistent with the Mayan *Chilam Balam* books (written in various Yucatan towns shortly after contact) that offer clues regarding how Maya society functioned before Spanish interventions.

Ralph Roys' *Book of Chilam Balam of Chumayel* (1933:189) reports that "Maya society, broadly speaking, was divided into two classes, nobles [almehen] and commoners [mazeual.] ... In the Nahuatl language as well as in Maya it meant the ordinary agricultural laborer who was not eligible to political office." The account goes on to indicate that status and social class were static and did not allow lower case individuals to advance. A forceful alternative was needed for a meaningful adjustment to take place.

Christenson (2003:26-27) acknowledges, however, that changes in status did occur:

Although the highland Maya have lived [in Guatemala]... for two thousand years, the *Popol Vuh* suggests that they came to be dominated by a militaristic group of relative newcomers who claimed to have come from somewhere in the East.

Thus, Christenson suggests that changes in status could have resulted from physical (and possibly military) force. As an alternative, increased economic dominance (such as controlling the food supply) might have provided an alternative form of leverage.

In any event, this account of Hero Twins rise to power and its ideological implications are consistent with a Marxist analysis that is based on the work of Leslie White.

## AN IDEOLOGICAL TRANSFORMATION

In the above analysis, the possible impact of an internal power struggle within Maya society was discussed. According to that analysis, an emerging elite appears to have gained dominance by controlling the food supply. Viewed symbolically, the story and plotline depict a growing transformation of the

economic base of Maya society towards maize production coupled with concomitant adjustments in power, status, and political supremacy.

When such power shifts occur, the prevailing ideologies typically adjust to justify the privileged position of the dominant force that emerges. Elements of the Hero Twin cycle recorded in the *Popol Vuh* indicate this kind of transformation. A brief narrative of these elements can be presented as:

*Huracan, a major Maya deity, enlists the aid of the Hero Twins in order to oppose Seven Macaw (whose name refers to the 7 stars in the constellation of the Big Dipper, thus his title means something like “Sky Bird.”) Seven Macaw presents himself as the god of the heavens: in doing so he challenges the roles of the Hero Twins, who are destined to become the gods of the sun and the moon. Thus, Seven Macaw and the Hero Twins are in direct competition with each other. The fact that an important god enlists the aid of the Twins, however, is evidence of their legitimacy.*

*As in earlier accounts of the Twins’ struggle with the half-brothers, they must confront arrogant and privileged rivals, such as the rich and elegantly dressed Seven Macaw. Most notably, Seven Macaw has an impressive set of false teeth that are adorned with valuable gems, indicating wealth and high status.*

*When the Hero Twins attempt an assassination, Seven Macaw, although wounded, is able to defend himself. One of the Twins, furthermore, has his arm torn off in the conflict. The success of Seven Macaw demonstrates the Twins are unable to defeat him (i.e., the status quo elite) by force. The Twins, however, have a plan. They enlist the aid of lesser gods who, posing as doctors, tell Seven Macaw that they will be happy to treat his wounds. Seven Macaw, unaware of the ruse, complains that his false teeth have been damaged and that his eye was hurt in the fight.*

*Pretending to repair the teeth, the valuable gems that adorn the teeth are replaced with kernels of maize. When working on Seven Macaw’s eye, the valuable ornaments surrounding them are removed. Stripped of his wealth, Seven Macaw weakens and dies.*

*Seven Macaw’s equally egotistical son is also defeated as a direct result of his overpridefulness. Fancying himself as the only force that can move mountains, the twins invent the story of a moving mountain and then volunteer to take the unsuspecting god on an expedition to find it. This gives the twins an opportunity to poison the unsuspecting rival. In a weakened condition, the overconfident god is buried, eliminating his threat to the Twins.*

Presented in tabular form, the story can be depicted as:

**TABLE 2  
AN IDEOLOGICAL TRANSFORMATION**

<b>MOTIF</b>	<b>EVENTS</b>	<b>ANALYSIS</b>
<i>False claims</i>	Huracan (a major god) seeks an alliance with the Twins to challenge Seven Macaw who claims to be the god of the heavens. A rich and vain god, Seven Macaw is elegantly dressed with beautiful false teeth adorned with gems.	Seven Macaw usurps the twins’ position identifying himself with the heavens. A part of the status quo, he is vain and rich. A rival god enlists the Twins in a campaign against Seven Macaw. This action underscores the Twins’ legitimacy.
<i>Use of force fails the Twins</i>	The Twins attempt an assassination in which Seven Macaw is injured but lives. In the battle, he pulls off the arm of Hunahpu (a twin.)	Physical or military force is not enough to dislodge the status quo and its ideology. The Twins are the losers in such an attempt.

<i>Maize destroys rival's power</i>	Allies of the Twins, pretending to be doctors, offer to tend Seven Macaw's wounds. They replace the jewels in his false teeth with kernels of maize. Valuable items around his eyes are also removed.	A rich, powerful, and vain god is stripped of his wealth and privilege. Kernels of maize (item associated with the Hero Twins) are placed in the mouth and exchanged for wealth.
<i>Seven Macaw dies</i>	Stripped of his power, prestige, and privilege, Seven Macaw dies	Seven Macaw is eliminated when his wealth is exchanged for food.
<i>Arrogant son is destroyed</i>	Seven Macaw's arrogant son prides himself as the only force that can move mountains. On the expedition to find a moving mountain, the Twins poison the son and eliminate him as a threat.	Seven Macaw's son, (arrogant like his father) is defeated as a direct result of being overly prideful. Not subdued by force, his vanity is used against him in ways that ensure success for the Twins.

**DISCUSSION**

The existing religious tradition (superstructure) that supports the old status quo is replaced with one that revolved around maize and those who control it. The new superstructure is purged of components that do not serve the new infrastructure and structure. Components of the old superstructure, such as deities that ally themselves with the Hero Twins, survive within the new superstructure and prosper.

This account appears to symbolically depict the decline of a preexisting religious tradition (superstructure) and the concomitant rise of an alternative that is hinged around maize (the emerging infrastructure). Some elements of the old religion accept the dominance of maize/the Hero Twins; they are able to adjust to new circumstances and prosper. Others, who resist (such as Seven Macaw and his son), are eliminated. Analyzed in Marxist terms, we find:

- **Infrastructure:** Seven Macaw is identified with the old infrastructure that existed before the domination of the maize economy. Although the Hero Twins attempt to do so, they cannot use force to dislodge Seven Macaw and the system he represents. Physical attempts to remove the old infrastructure by force fail.
- **Structure:** Structural adjustments were needed in order for the new infrastructure to function and dominate. Maize in the mouth emerges as a means of weakening the old structures (status quo) in ways that demonstrate the dominance of a new infrastructure. When maize takes wealth from the old elite, the old structure loses its power. Alternatives that are more compatible with the new infrastructure emerge.
- **Superstructure:** Gods and priests who support the new infrastructure and structure survive and prosper. Those who support the old infrastructure and structure (such as Seven Macaw) lose and are eliminated. Ultimately, the superstructure is reframed to reflect the new economic infrastructure and structure.

Thus, the depiction of the emergence of a new infrastructure, structure, and superstructure symbolically portrays ideologies that are centered around maize; they replaced rival beliefs that had previously reinforced the old status quo.

**AN ANTIDOTE FOR FEAR AND ANOMIE**

Folklore, mythology, and ideology are complex and multidimensional. Among other roles, they can create a sense of identity, depict appropriate behavior, provide a model for social relationships, and explain the mysteries of existence. In this regard, Michael Coe (2009) indicates that Maya religion and ideology are, perhaps, best explained using a style of analysis reflective of the work of French anthropologist Emil Durkheim.

In his *Magnus Opus, The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (1912), Durkheim views religion as a means of maintaining social cohesion. His perspectives foreshadow British structural/functional



anthropology that explores the functions played by various cultural components. Although the universal application of Durkheim's theories has been questioned by critics (such as Jack Goody), a Durkheimian perspective (as Coe has pointed out) is useful when dealing with the Maya and is employed here for that reason.

Durkheim's views of religion can be usefully intertwined with his perspectives of anomie (Durkheim 1893) that deal with the disruptions and impacts of social and economic change (See Walle 2020 Chapter 1.) Robert Merton further expanded Durkheim's views by noting that "anomie" exists when society provides goals and roles that cannot be achieved in socially acceptable ways (Merton 1938; Merton 1957.) This situation can lead to social tensions that are explored by "Strain Theory" (a branch of sociology he helped create) that deals with why people act in deviant ways (See Agnew and Brezina 2010).

When people deal with the stress associated with anomie, Merton emphasizes that a variety of options are available including what he calls "conformity", "ritualism", "innovation", "retreatism", and "rebellion" (See Walle 2020 Chapter 2). Conformity and ritualism tend to support and perpetuate the existing social structure. In specific, conformity involves seeking to achieve socially acceptable goals in socially acceptable ways. Ritualism involves adhering to the norms of society even though there is an intuitive understanding that personal success will probably not result from such culturally correct behavior.

Other options have the potential to be socially disruptive. Innovators seek to achieve socially acceptable goals in unacceptable ways. Retreatism involves rejecting both the goals of society and the means of achieving them, causing people to fall outside of the social system and its moral code. Rebellion involves the substitution of both new methods and new goals. These last three responses potentially undercut the social structure, reduce the cohesion of society, and weaken the position of the existing structure.

In order to foster social stability and the population's acceptance of the new order, the emerging Maya elite needed to encourage ideologies reflecting conformity and/or ritualism. Where such traits and responses existed, the emerging structure could be more effectively maintained in ways that served the prevailing infrastructure.

Karl Marx's perspectives on religion, in conjunction with Durkheim's and Merton's views of anomie, can be used to suggest that Maya ideology prompted people to act in ways that reflect conformity and ritualism. In specific, Marx suggests that people under stress tend to be more obedient if they are given a rationale that convinces them to conform to the prevailing norms and demands. Aspects of such a superstructure (including religion and ideology) often guide people to respond in such a manner.

A well-known Marxist orientation (his "opium of the masses" theory), for example, asserts that the ideology and religion promoted by the elite often promise future rewards to those who are obedient to the status quo. When people accept this ideology, their behavior is channeled in ways that promote social cohesion via conformity and ritualism. As a result, social disruption can be minimized.

Maya civilization fits this Marxist/anomie paradigm quite closely: a small upper stratum of society dominated and was sustained by a large underclass. The elite lived well while the vast majority experienced a modest and stressful existence.

As in earlier discussions (above), a narrative retelling of the *Popol Vuh* is useful. A Narrative overview of this portion of the Hero Twins cycle can be presented as:

*Before the Hero Twins were born, their father and uncle were playing ball. The noise of the game inadvertently disturbed the people of Xibalba, the Maya underworld. In order to restore decorum, they were invited down to the underworld so they could play their game there. The idea, however, was to give the men a blade-laden ball to play with that would cut off their heads. Once dead, the bodies and heads were hung up and the underworld was quiet once more. The residents were happy.*

*After the Twins rediscovered the gaming equipment used by their father and uncle, they took up the sport. Their playing eventually set up the same situation that led to the death of their father and uncle. As before, the people of the underworld became annoyed by the noise and decided to kill the Twins just like they had previously done.*

Fortunately, the Twins found out about the plot and were able to take action to avoid death. Nonetheless, they purposefully lost game after game to their underworld opponents so they would be subjected to tests that showcased their prowess. Finally, the Twins allowed themselves to be put into an oven so their enemies could destroy them. Although the Twins realized what was happening, they went along and were incinerated. The delighted residents of the underworld cast the Twins' ashes into the water, convinced their problems with noise pollution were over.

Miraculously, the Twins were resurrected, eventually taking the form of young boys. Anonymously returning to Xibalba, they became celebrities because they could magically return the dead to life and perform similar tricks, such as restoring burned houses to their former condition. The boys gained further fame when one killed the other only to have the dead corpse return to life. Intrigued, the highest-ranking lord of the underworld demanded that the trick be performed on him. The Twins obliged, but once he was dead, resurrection was denied.

At this point, the Twins revealed their true identity: the ball players that the people of the underworld had killed. Defeated by the death of their leader, the people of the underworld begged for mercy and were spared although they were told Xibalba would never again be a place of greatness.

Their work on earth completed, the Twins ascended into heaven; one became the sun, the other the moon.

Presented in tabular form, this narrative can be abstracted as:

**TABLE 3**  
**SAGA OF THE UNDERWORLD**

<b>MOTIF</b>	<b>EVENTS</b>	<b>ANALYSIS</b>
<i><b>In father's footsteps</b></i>	Paralleling their father and uncle, the Twins accept an invitation to go to the underworld to play ball. Knowing this is a ploy to kill them, they use the situation to demonstrate their powers. Eventually, they knowingly accept death.	The actions of the Twins replicate those of their father and uncle who were killed. Their success in meeting challenges demonstrates their powers. Although invincible, the Twins accept defeat and death as part of their larger plan.
<i><b>Defeating death</b></i>	Although the residents of the underworld celebrate the Twins' death, they are resurrected as two anonymous boys who return to the underworld unrecognized.	The Twins' return to life demonstrates that they possess the powers of immortality that go beyond regeneration within the plant world.
<i><b>Resurrection</b></i>	In the underworld, the Twins demonstrate an ability to resurrect the dead. When an enemy wants to participate, they kill him but refuse to bring him back to life.	the Twins use the powers of resurrection selectively. Dissenters, opponents, and enemies and/or those who are disliked by the twins might not be resurrected.
<i><b>Punishing opponents</b></i>	Due to poor treatment of the Hero Twins, the underworld will never again be a place of greatness and people from the surface will not provide offerings.	Communities or segments of the population who do not please the Hero Twins will be punished and their status diminished.
<i><b>Assent</b></i>	Their work completed; the Twins ascend into heaven. One becomes the sun, the other the moon.	Emerging as gods that control the sun and seasons, the Hero Twins are the most powerful forces of fertility.

## DISCUSSION

The rank and file of the population are provided with reasons to support the Hero Twins and the elite who are identified with them. On a macro level, the twins are identified with the forces of nature that lead to the bountiful harvest that is essential for survival. On a micro level, the twins become associated with personal resurrection that will be selectively offered to some and denied others.

Earlier segments of this paper (1) provide a symbolic account of how the Maya elite rose to power and (2) analyze how the emerging ruling class could justify a new social structure. The current discussion demonstrates how the Hero Twins saga could provide typical members of Maya society with motives to act in ways that Robert Merton would depict as “conformity” and/or “ritualism”. Reinforcing the infrastructure and structure, they could enhance social cohesion, cultural stability, and a willingness to for people to accept the status quo.

Thus, the Hero Twins saga appears to have provided ideologies and belief structures that encouraged people to accept the existing social hierarchy. They include:

- **Infrastructure:** The infrastructure/primary method of production (maize production associated with and represented by the Hero Twins) is depicted as a reality that some people ignored at their own peril. The people of the underworld, for example, forfeit future greatness because they act in ways that are hurtful to and mistreat the Twins). This example demonstrates that failing to adhere to infrastructural demands is a poor strategy with dreadful implications.
- **Structure:** After the infrastructure came to revolve around maize, the elites of Maya society assumed control over fertility, the bounty of nature, and, by extension, the wellbeing of society. The Twins, for example, become the gods of the Sun and the Moon that are closely identified with fertility and the harvest of maize that the Maya depended upon for survival. Under these conditions, obedience to the elites (who asserted they were the interface between society and the gods), was portrayed as essential for the survival and wellbeing of the people. This ideology provided people with a strong “macro” reason to conform to the prevailing structure.
- **Superstructure:** Not only would society benefit by adhering to the demands of the elite, specific people were also potential benefactors if they acted in appropriate ways. Thus, although the Twins have an ability to return the dead to life, they use this ability selectively. Thus, individuals who anger the Twins (such as the leader of the underworld) risk being denied resurrection. Those holding such beliefs would be more likely to conform to the demands of the elites (who interface with the gods) because doing so would enhance their possibility of gaining immortality. An ideology that presented such a view would serve the needs of the elite and its attempts to manipulate the general population. Thus, Maya ideology provided both personal and community-based motives for people to conform to the demands of the elite.

In these discussions, modes of analysis that combine folkloristic methods with Marxist analysis inspired by anthropologist Leslie White have been used to illuminate aspects of Maya prehistory that otherwise could be ignored. Building upon the hypothesis that the folklore, myth, and creative works of a people often provide the basis for ideological foundations, a cultural materialist interpretation of the Hero Twins saga suggests that the economic underpinnings of society (infrastructure) exerted a profound influence upon the structures that facilitated the means of production. The resulting relationships, furthermore, can be viewed in terms of how they promote beliefs and ideologies of the superstructure that reinforce the prevailing infrastructure and structure.

## ANALYSIS AND CONCLUSION

According to Karl Marx’s paradigm of the Base and Superstructure, in the long flow of history, the economic Base impacts and molds the Superstructure that arises to facilitate the dominant means of production. Marxist anthropologist Leslie White expands and refines Marx’s thinking by identifying three instead of two components: the “Infrastructure” (primary mode of production), the Structure (social and

technological aspect of culture that supports the infrastructure), and the Superstructure (a range of ideologies, beliefs, and so forth that justifies and facilitates the Infrastructure and Structure). Although not specifically designed to do so, White's model can be adapted for analyzing a wide range of cultural artifacts including literature, folklore, and myth. In this paper, an examination of ancient Mayan mythology has been used as an example of this potential.

Humanistic and cultural criticism with a Marxist slant often examines creative works (such as myth and literature) in order to better understand the relationships between (1) strictly materialist considerations, (2), other aspects of culture and society, (3) as well as the stresses in society triggered by dialectical processes.

Much Marxist criticism and interpretation of creative works, for example, employs the dialectical method that examines the Thesis/Antithesis/Synthesis process to extrapolate revealing insights about the relationship between economy, the power structures of society, and ideology. These analyses are praised. By adapting Leslie White's Marxist model, however, another tool emerges that can be used to examine such phenomena. The fruits of doing so are discussed here.

Although I agree with Nickolas Brown (2019) who suggests that artists are more than automatons reflecting social and economic pressures and influences, I also recognize that humanistic expression often provides insights regarding the underlying infrastructure and structure that influence it. A Marxist method of investigation, based upon the work of Leslie White provides specific techniques for examining such phenomena.

Using this approach, a Marxist analysis was used to tease out aspects of ancient Maya myth in ways that explore how shifts in the economic foundation of Maya life exerted a range of multi-dimensional impacts. It is hoped that this example of adapting Leslie White's Marxist social anthropology for use within humanistic analysis will prove useful in other contexts.

## REFERENCES

- Agnew, R., & Brezina, T. (2010). Strain theories. In E. McLaughlin & T. Newburn (eds.), *Sage Handbook of Criminological Theory*. London: Sage.
- Brown, N. (2019). *Autonomy: The Social Ontology of Art Under Capitalism*. Dutham, North Carolina: Duke University Press.
- Campbell, J. (1949). *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. New York: Pantheon.
- Christenson, A.J. (2009). *Personal communication*.
- Coe, M.D. (2009). *Personal Communication*.
- Coe, M.D. (1989). The Hero Twins: Myth and Image. In B. Kerr & J. Kerr (eds.), *The Maya Vase Book: A Corpus of Rollout Photographs of Maya Vases* (Volume 1). Justin Kerr, illus. 161–184. New York: Kerr Associates.
- Durkheim, E. (1997) [1951]. *Suicide: A Study in Sociology*. The Free Press.
- Durkheim, E. (1912). *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*. English translation by Joseph Swain: 1915. (The Free Press).
- Eidt, J. (2012, November 15). Howler Monkeys Among the Maya: Divine Patrons of the Artisans. *Wilderutopia*. Retrieved September 20, 2024, from <https://wilderutopia.com/environment/wildlife/howler-monkeys-among-the-maya-divine-patrons-to-the-artisans/#:~:text=Two%20howler%20monkey%20brothers%20play%20a%20role%20in,Cop%3A1n%20is%20often%20described%20as%20a%20howler%20monkey>
- Freidel, D., et al. (1993). *Maya Cosmos: Three Thousand Years of the Shaman's Path*. New York: William Morrow.
- Harkin, M. (2010). Ethnohistory's Ethnohistory: Creating a Discipline from the Ground Up. *Social Science History*, 34(2), 113–128.
- Jung, C.G. (1981). *The Archetypes and The Collective Unconscious*, Collected Works, vol. 9 (2 ed.), Princeton, NJ: Bollingen.

- Kerr, J. (1992). The Myth of the Popol Vuh as an Instrument of Power. In E.C. Danien, & R.J. Sharer (eds.), *New theories on the ancient Maya, Volume 77 of University Museum monograph*. University Museum Symposium Series. University of Pennsylvania. University Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology.
- Lurie, N. (1961). Ethnohistory: An Ethnological Point of View. *Ethnohistory*, 8(1), 83.
- Marx, K. (1859). Preface. In *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (Many publishers, many printings).
- Merton, R.K. (1938, October). Social Structure and Anomie. *American Sociological Review*, 3(5).
- Merton, R.K. (1957). *Social Theory and Social Structure* (Rev. ed.) New York: Free Press.
- Paxton, M. (2001). *Chilam Balam*. In *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Mesoamerican Cultures*. Oxford University Press.
- Raglan, L. (1936). *The Hero: A Study in Tradition, Myth and Drama* by Lord Raglan. Dover Publications.
- Roys, R. (1933). *Book of Chilam Balam of Chumayel*. Retrieved from [www.sacred-texts.com/nam/maya/cbc/index.htm](http://www.sacred-texts.com/nam/maya/cbc/index.htm).
- Teclock, D. (1996). *Popol Vuh: The Mayan Book of the Dawn of Life*. Revised and expanded edition. Translated, with introduction, commentaries, and glossary. New York: Simon & Schuster.
- Walle, A.H. (2020). *Economic Development and Mental Illness: Anticipating and Mitigating Disruptive Change*. New York: Routledge.
- Weber, M. (1905, original German version). *The Protestant Ethic and "The Spirit of Capitalism"*. Penguin Books, translated by Peter Baehr and Gordon C. Wells 2002.
- White, L. (1949). *The Science of Culture: A study of man and civilization*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux.