

Phantom Black Dogs in Prehispanic Mexico

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In *Phantom Black Dogs in Latin America* I arrived at the conclusion that the Black Dog apparitions of Latin America have their origin with the Spanish Conquest, although dogs already occupied a powerful place in prehispanic myth and legend. Since then I have come across a passage in an early Colonial-era book that has forced me to re-evaluate this conclusion.

Bernardino de Sahagún was a Franciscan friar who arrived in Tenochtitlán (modern Mexico City) in 1529, some eight years after the Conquest of the Aztecs. He learnt Nahuatl, the Aztec language, and interviewed the surviving Aztec priesthood upon their beliefs and practices for the express purpose of evangelising the natives - he wanted the Church to be able to recognise survivals of pre-Conquest belief when it saw them, so they could be eradicated. Leaving aside his motivations and how they appear to modern eyes, he left an invaluable work entitled *Historia General de las cosas de Nueva España* (General History of the Things of New Spain) a monumental catalogue of Aztec beliefs and customs and the natural history of central Mexico. A large part of what is now known about Aztec religious practices comes from this work, which he took some fifty years to complete.

In Chapter XIII of Book 5, entitled *Which is about other ghosts that appear at night*, we find the following passage:

... they said that Tezcatlipoca often transformed himself into an animal that they call cóyutl [*i.e. coyote – SB*], that is like a wolf. And thus transformed it would place itself in the path of

travellers, blocking their path so they could not continue. And in this the traveller understood that some danger of thieves or robbers lay ahead, or that some other misfortune would occur upon the road ahead.

(Sahagún 1577, 1989: 296)

This sounds very much like the actions of a typical Black Dog! That this is not a normal coyote is indicated by the fact that it is said to be a transformed god (Tezcatlipoca, Smoking Mirror, was one of the most important Aztec deities) and that this paragraph is included in a chapter that deals largely with supernatural apparitions. This short chapter contains details of three evil spirits that were said to appear in pre-Conquest times, followed by a brief note that the cry of the woodpecker was a bad omen, followed by the section that I have translated above. The only note of caution is that it places this reference directly after the only reference to a natural animal (the woodpecker). However, omens to do with natural animals were placed in preceding chapters, and Sahagún's entry on the nature and habits of the coyote contain no hint of such behaviour (in Book 11, Chapter I).

The *Handbook of Mesoamerican Mythology*, embedded in its entry on Tezcatlipoca, merely has:

One had to watch out for Smoking Mirror (so named because one could not easily see him), for this skilled nahualli or magician...appeared in many places at many times, shape-shifting into many things. Sometimes this was helpful; if a coyote suddenly sprang at you, Tezcatlipoca was warning you that robbers were nearby and you ought to go home...

(Read and González 2000: 252)

The entry cites Sahagún, presumably the same passage that I have translated, but interprets it as merely the sighting of a normal coyote - which would not be my interpretation at all.

Although the conquistadors identified all pre-Columbian deities as demons, Tezcatlipoca was quickly (and specifically) branded as the Devil by the conquistadors. Sahagún identified him as Lucifer himself (Sahagún 1577, 1989: 70–1). In prehispanic times he was seen as the first magician and the embodiment of the forces of fate, night, darkness, violent storms and, interestingly, of crossroads. Whatever fortune or misfortune befell a man was laid at the door of this deity. Tezcatlipoca was also responsible for creating the first dogs - by transforming a man and woman into the

animals. (Sahagún 1577, 1989: 38) (Read & González 2000: 165, 251) (Fernández 1992, 1996: 83–5).

Of interest here is that, with the Devil specifically being associated with Tezcatlipoca by the Conquistadors, we have the seamless merging of two traditions. The apparition of a supernatural coyote is a direct parallel to the phantom black dog of European tradition, which was associated with the Devil. This would help explain the transference of specifically European characteristics, such as the goat's hooves of the Mexican *nahual* or Central American *cadejo*.

In Mexico at least, the Black Dog is not just an incarnation of the Devil or a transformed sorcerer, it is the hybrid offspring of Tezcatlipoca, the Smoking Mirror. This seems to place Phantom Black Dogs in prehispanic times...it is not conclusive, of course, but is probably the closest that we can possibly get to a prehispanic account of a Black Dog apparition.

A phantom black dog that appeared to some highland Maya girls at a crossroads, a typical Black Dog habit, places it in the domain of Smoking Mirror, Tezcatlipoca (Lara Figueroa 1997: 52–3). The equivalent among the Maya of the Classic Period was Bolon Dz'acab (also known as K'awil or God K) who possessed many of the attributes later associated with Tezcatlipoca, such as a mirror on the forehead and a serpent in place of one leg (Garza 1999: 124–5), his Postclassic K'iche' Maya equivalent was Huracan. The modern highland Maya are obviously not prehispanic Aztecs but they both lie within the context of the same larger Mesoamerican culture - even if one ignores that the highland Maya kingdoms immediately prior to the Spanish Conquest were already strongly influenced by customs and beliefs from the distant Valley of Mexico (Adams 1977, 1996: 314–15), and the Conquistadors' Nahuatl-speaking Mexican allies left a lasting influence on the region (as demonstrated by placenames throughout the Guatemalan highlands now known by their Nahuatl equivalents).

That the long tradition of shape-changing sorcerers goes back over a thousand years is demonstrated in the photo overleaf, of a tenoned head which would once have projected from a prehispanic building. This sculpture was produced by the Cotzumalhuapa [sic] Culture, named from the nearby lowland Guatemalan town of Santa Lucia Cotzumalguapa, and dates to the Classic Period (250–900 AD). This poorly-studied culture showed strong affinities to central Mexico. It appears to show a priest or sorcerer, or perhaps a deity, transforming into a canine and would therefore be a direct forerunner of the modern Black Dog sightings which



This Classic Period (250–900 AD) sculpture on display at the Finca El Baúl near Santa Lucía Cotzumalguapa, Escuintla, Guatemala, appears to show a sorcerer transforming into a canine. Photo by the author.

locals identify, in Mexico, as the *nahual* or the *hauy chivo*. Finca El Baúl, the sugar plantation on which it is found, is only 5 km from Finca Los Tarros, the site of a *cadejo* sighting recorded by Guatemalan folklorist Celso A. Lara Figueroa (Lara Figueroa 1997: 63–4).

A continuation of this tradition is evident in a tale told to me one night somewhere in the vast suburbs of Mexico City. My informant's family is originally from Nogales, a small village in Veracruz state, and the events described probably occurred in the 1930s. Around Nogales the *nahual* was said to be a sorcerer who could turn into a big black coyote or dog, with very big ears, but that was neither wolf nor truly a coyote. Some rumours started that various local people had animals stolen, from young goats to chickens. The local men gathered together to see what was going on, and they started talking about the *nahual*. Suspicion fell upon a newcomer to the village who had lived there some months but was still regarded with mistrust, since he lived alone and rarely spoke to anyone.

About a dozen men gathered at night, armed with rifles and sticks. They took turns to keep a lookout at night in the fields. In the early hours of the morning on a dark, moonless night, the mysterious beast appeared. Two young men were sat on the ground, in their ponchos, smoking and chatting, when they felt an eerie presence. They turned to see an enormous animal that was practically on top of them, close enough that they could smell its foul breath. They could see it was neither a dog nor a coyote and had big red eyes. They were paralysed with fear but one friend was a little braver, he grabbed his rifle and fired but didn't hit it. Finally they recovered enough to shout the alarm but the creature had gone. Very early the next day they followed the tracks, which disappeared by the shore of the nearby lake. The villagers took the decision to seek out a sorcerer from Catemaco, a village famous for having the best sorcerers in Mexico. This sorcerer confirmed that a *nahual* was stalking the village and explained how to trap it.

Close to a chicken shed they had to sacrifice some hens and a goat, and put a candle inside a barrel lying on its side. They spilt the fresh blood of the sacrificed animals around the barrel and left a live hen there, then they began to wait. On the second night the creature came and the villagers shot and killed it, although they couldn't say what kind of animal it was. They dragged it away and hung the carcass up from a tree, and went home to rest. The next day when they came back, instead of an animal hanging from the tree, they found the stranger who had come to the village some months before. It was this person who turned himself into a Black Dog with spells in order to steal food (based upon a conversation with Roberto Sánchez, recorded by the author on the evening of 3rd March 2007 in Lomas de Atizapán, Atizapán de Juárez, Mexico City).

Returning to pre-Columbian times, when Aztec commoners died, they passed through the nine levels of the underworld, Mictlan. The first level was known as Apanoayan 'Where one crosses the river'. The deceased person found themselves on the shore of a wide, deep river. This shore was inhabited by many dogs that walked and swam there. If a dog recognised its former owner, it would swim to him and carry him across on its back (Sahagún 1577, 1989: 221). Since many dogs waited in Apanoayan for their owners, Apanoayan was also known as Itzcuintlan, the Place of Dogs. Whereas, red dogs helped their owners cross, white and black dogs refused - leaving our phantom dogs to roam the eternal twilight of the near shore, neither in the land of the living nor of the dead, a fitting place for the black and the white *cadejos* (Fernández 1992, 1996: 37-8)... although

among some Mesoamerican cultures, it is a black dog that helps the dead to cross (Burchell 2007: 10).

People who drowned were said by the Aztecs to be victims of a monster called the *Ahuizotl*, the water-thorn beast. The *Ahuizotl* was a dog that dwelled underwater, by springs, river banks and canals. It would seize anyone who came too close with its claws or the hand on the end of its long tail and drag them into the depths. Their souls would be carried off to Tlalocan, one of the three Aztec paradises, ruled by Tlaloc, the god of rain (Fernández 1992, 1996: 46). This creature is rather like the Roy Dog of Portland, which also drags the unwary to a watery death. The *Ahuizotl* is portrayed in Aztec art as a dog with a long tightly coiled tail, and Sahagún has a lengthy description of it included in Chapter IV of Book 11 of his work, a section concentrating on the animals and plants of New Spain, where he supposes it to be a real animal:

...an animal called *ahuizotl*, notably monstrous in its body and in its acts...lives in springs or underground streams...It is the size of a small dog. Its fur is very *lezne* and short. Its ears are small and pointed. Its body is black and smooth. It has a long tail, and at the end of the tail a hand, like a person's hand. It has...hands and feet like a monkey...And if someone comes to the shore of the water where it lives, then it seizes them with the hand on its tail and drags them underwater, and carries them into the depths...In a few days, the water casts up the body of the drowned person, and it comes up without eyes and without teeth and without nails. The *ahuizotl* took all these from it. The body has no wounds, except that it is covered with bruises...And...they used to say...that the *tlaloques* (*rain gods* - *SB*) had carried his soul to the Earthly Paradise...They also said that if someone saw this animal and was not afraid, then the animal would not attack him, which was a sign that he would die soon.

(Sahagún 1577, 1989: 720–1)

Some cryptozoologists have supposed this to be a description of some kind of otter, not unreasonably from its physical description, if one ignores the hand on the end of its tail and its unpleasant habit of dragging people to a watery death (e.g. Gable 1997). However, depictions in Aztec art are not particularly otter-like, looking very similar to Aztec depictions of coyotes, except for the tail. Here then, we have another phantom dog, carrying its victims across a body of water to the land of the dead. In the account of the *nahual* of Nogales, above, the tracks of the Black Dog disappeared near a

body of water. It had disappeared back into the unknown, and returned across the water to the lands of myth and legend, where it rightly belonged.

These early-Colonial Era excerpts suggest that there was already a body of lore relating to paranormal canines in prehispanic Mesoamerica, which acted in many respects as phantom Black Dogs act today. They were already associated with omens of death, warnings of danger, water and crossroads, even before the presumed reinforcement of these associations when the pre-Columbian Mesoamerican tradition merged with the European tradition of Black Dogs as introduced in the cataclysmic clash of civilizations represented by the Spanish Conquest.

Note

The excerpts from Sahagún are my own translations from the Spanish text referenced below.

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