
Introduction

I first met Chan K'in of Nahá* in 1957, when I was twenty-three and on leave from my studies at the University of Oklahoma. To my surprise, he already seemed to know all about me, possibly because of my introduction the year before to the Lacandon Maya community of Monte Líbano in Chiapas, Mexico. There I had administered medicines for the familiar symptoms of malaria, internal parasites, infections and snake-bite. Most of the questions I had asked José Güero, the leader of the community, regarding the gods and the cult I was seeing were met with the evasive "I don't remember . . . but maybe Chan K'in of Nahá does . . ." I had not realized that what he was really telling me, in his own way, was that no one was going to instruct me in the Lacandon religion without the approval of their highest traditional authority. I hadn't even known that they recognized such an authority, although I should have been able to interpret their affirmation that "he knows more than anyone else."

When I first saw Chan K'in I felt at once that I must never tell him the smallest lie, but I was not aware of anything that I would then have called "supernatural" about him. It simply seemed obvious that, just as I can see from a person's eyes and expression whether he is happy or sad, worried or amused, Old Chan K'in could see a bit more of the same; he could also see if a person was lying or telling the truth, if he was hiding something, and if so, make a pretty good guess at what it might be. (All my observations since then tend to bear out my first impression, except for those instances in which he revealed capacities that could be called parapsychological, for lack of a better understanding of them.)

When I told him that I hoped to learn of his traditions and write them

* Technically, Nahá should carry an apostrophe (Naha'), but for typographical convenience we are using an acute accent, as in Spanish (Najá).

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down so they would never be lost, his answer was instantaneous: "Yes, I already know of your interest in our ways. Come to my house and I will teach you what you want to know."

After only a few days of Chan K'in's instruction, listening to the stories of the creation of the earth and the exploits of the gods, I had virtually the same information as the recognized authorities on Lacandon mythology had, only more of it. And there were significant differences in the sequence and structure of the narratives. On these points of difference, I began imagining how their informants must have said it in pidgin Spanish, and how my predecessors must have committed their errors in translation. But then I asked myself, "Or am I the one who has made the error in translation? Or to what degree are we all mistaken?"

Chan K'in would dictate to me something clumsy, unwieldy, which didn't make much sense no matter how hard he struggled for the words in his limited Spanish. Finally, he himself would become impatient and break over into Lacandon Maya, no longer telling the story to me but to any other Lacandon who might be present. The change was dramatic: His voice became smooth and fluid, full of changing inflections, and when I looked at the face of any Lacandon listener, I could see that the old man's words had picked him up and carried him away to some other world. This was not what I had been getting, nor had any of the other investigators gotten it.

There was only one solution to the problem: I must do my study in the original Lacandon Maya and expand my limited vocabulary from a few useful phrases to a proper and fluent command of the language. With Chan K'in's patient coaching and three- and four-hour-long daily drills in grammar and vocabulary, I soon made some progress. Besides the paradigms I made from short phrases with their rough and free translation

into Spanish, my principal texts consisted of the recitations I had transcribed (without ever fully understanding their content), in which Old Chan K'in told of the creation of the earth and how the gods established their respective dominions over the various aspects of reality. I found that these stories often paralleled Genesis or the Quiché Mayas' *Popol Vuh* (Book of Counsel); corrected and somewhat expanded they still form the basis of what I now call *The Book of Chan K'in*.

I dedicated myself not only to studying the Lacandon language and culture full time, but to living as a Lacandon as well. I wore the cotton tunic (*xikul*), went barefoot and let my hair grow halfway down my back, and I carried a machete and a deerskin pouch over my shoulders. Besides cartridges and fishhooks, a file and a pocketknife, I also carried a notebook and pen, the only significant variation on the customary contents of a Lacandon man's *pooxah* (leather pouch). I also preferred a .22 caliber target revolver to a rifle or shotgun, the longer barrel of which would hang up on the brush and vines.

Except when I took out my pen and notebook and became engrossed in my work as an anthropologist and linguist, I began to look and act as much like a Lacandon as my physical and racial type would permit. Months of isolation completed my familiarity with the jungle environment to which the Lacandon culture was so admirably adapted. After three or four months my own adaptation was so complete that even now, years later, one or another professional colleague will say of me, "Bruce is no linguist. He is a Lacandon informant."

I

His name is Chan K'in. Chan means "little" and K'in is "sun, prophecy, prophet." He lives at a place called Nahá (Great Water) on the lake of the same name. Chan K'in ti' Nahá could be translated Little Prophet of the Great Water. He is the firstborn son of the previous "great one," Bol Kas-yaho'.

The "great one" — *t'o'ohil* in his own Maya language — is the religious and civic leader of the northern Lacandon Indians, a small ethnic group in the jungles of the state of Chiapas in southern Mexico. Chan K'in's community has no written traditions, so his genealogy becomes lost after a very few generations, but where it comes to an end it points directly back to the throne of Palenque, one of the most important archaeological sites of the so-called Old Empire of the ancient Maya civilization, which flourished in the seventh and eighth centuries A.D.

There is disagreement among the specialists, but every day it becomes a bit more clearly substantiated that the Maya civilization was a direct continuation or evolution of the ancient Olmec culture, whose origins are as yet lost in antiquity, some three millennia ago. The Olmec civilization rose from 1260 to 1200 B.C., although its formative stages reach back centuries earlier. By 1000 B.C., La Venta, one of its major cities, was built on

the Isthmus of Tehuantepec. Gigantic megalithic stone heads remind us of the Olmecs' presence in the remote past, but no one really knows who they were or where they came from. The remains of all the ancient civilizations of Mexico and Central America — those of the Toltecs, the Aztecs, the Zapotecs, the Otomí and the Mayas — indicate that the Olmec culture was their point of origin. The pantheon of Lacandon gods, and the manner in which they are worshipped in Nahá today, also come, directly and without Christian or any other known influence, from the ancient Mayas.

Chan K'in of Nahá is in his eighties. He is the oldest and the most respected of the Lacandon elders, and the highest authority and spokesman for the religion and cultural traditions of his people. Other Lacandon men a generation younger have lost their vitality and are drifting into senility, while he still has not a single gray hair in his thick, black mane. His eyes, his mind and his voice are still clear and firm, and the youngest of his three wives still bears his children.

He speaks familiarly of the Maya gods, of their individual personalities and functions, and of the details of their proper cult and the manner of addressing them. These are part of the living tradition of Lacandon culture, which came down to them without interruption from antiquity. Chan K'in recites the stories, sings the songs, and dictates the ceremonial formulae of his ancestors just as he learned them from his father.

Sometimes he says things which seem childish and innocent, as when a rainbow arcs across the rainy sky: "It is the road of the Luumkab [rainbow spirits]. See! They were caught in the rain, and the water makes the colors of their clothes fade and run."

Sometimes he pronounces simple truths with dazzling clarity: "How can the missionaries say men shouldn't drink liquor if the gods had liquor first and showed men how to make and drink it? They say liquor makes a man loud and mean, but it isn't true. Liquor only makes a man show how he really is. It is being loud and mean that the gods despise, whether one drinks or not."

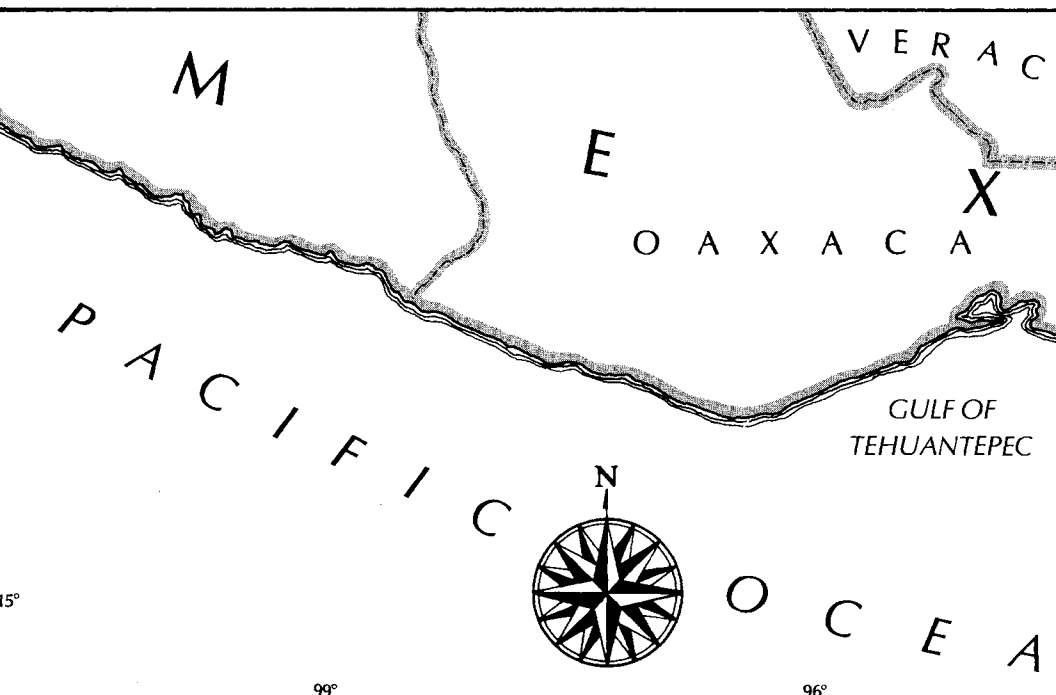
Sometimes he overlaps physical and metaphysical realities: "They are only stones, but they are not only stones. Long ago the Chukuch Nok' " — the Long Tunics, as he calls the southern Lacandones — "used to behave correctly in the homes of the gods. They would say, 'If a person breaks a stone, he dies,' and they knew that it was true. But now the young Chukuch Nok' break the stones and shout, 'It is not true! See! I break the stones in the house of the gods and I do not die.' But they do not see that they die each time they break a stone."

The term "Lacandon"* is used indiscriminately to refer to both the northern and the southern Lacandones, two of the groups that comprise the Peninsular Mayas — the Mayas that live on the Yucatán Peninsula and in the adjacent lowlands. Only the Lacandones escaped assimilation

* The stress is on the last syllable — La-can-DON; custom omits the acute accent.

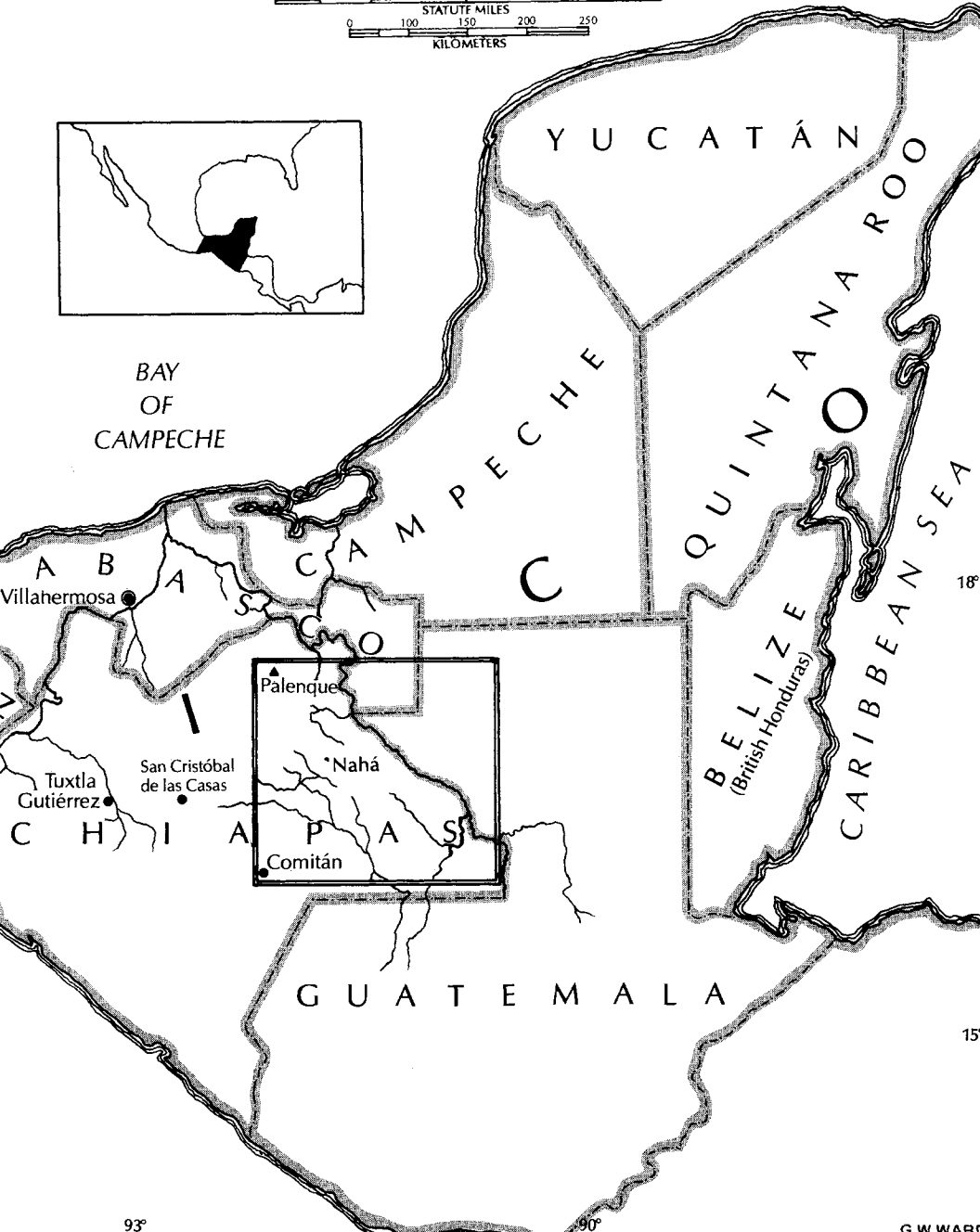
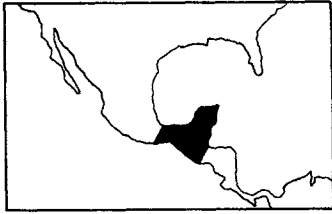
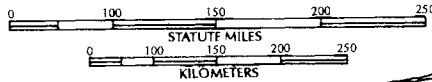


- ▲ RUINS
- RAILROAD
- TOWN/SETTLEMENT
- ROAD





The Lacandon Forest



or extermination during the Spanish Conquest and the nationalizing influences that came later. The southern group remained culturally intact on the Lacanjá (or Chan Sayab) river, not far from the ruins of their ceremonial center, Yaxchilán; the northern group lived not far from the ruins of Palenque. Each speaks its own dialect of Peninsular Maya, the language of the region. Culturally and linguistically, the degree of difference between them might be compared to that between a New Yorker and a Texan. The two belong to the same culture and they speak the same language. Just as the natives of New York and Dallas all speak English and can converse, so can northern Lacandonese and southern Lacandonese speak and converse in Peninsular Maya, though they often misunderstand local terms and always despair of each other's "atrocious pronunciation." Inevitably, when members of the two groups converse, there will be one who has no immediate wish to understand the speaker of the other dialect, and will categorically declare it "totally unintelligible."

The origin of "Lacandon" is the Maya plural form *äh akan-tun-oob*, which derives from the agentive *äh*, meaning "the" or "they"; *akan*, "standing" or "set up"; and *tun*, "precious stone" or "stone idol(s)." Thus the *äh akantunooob* were "those who set up (and worship) stone idols." This name was simply a term by which their Christianized Maya neighbors called them the "stone worshippers" or the "pagans." The term also may — or may not — have implied or alluded to "masons" or "builders of temples." Early Spaniards wrote of the Acantunes (the "Pagans" or "Maya wild Indians") and referred to their jungle habitat as El Acantún. Then at one time or another, some early author heard this form as El Lacantún (one of the major rivers in the area still bears this name). Finally, El Lacantún became further deformed to El Lacandón and its inhabitants became the Lacandonese.

In the beginning, at the time of the Conquest, the Lacandonese were simply the Mayas. Eventually, however, the Spaniards began to distinguish between already dominated and Christianized Maya groups and others — among them the ancestors of the present-day Lacandonese — who continued the practice of their traditional, "pagan" religion. Just how many independent groups of Peninsular Mayas may have at one time or another been known as Lacandonese we may never know, but they were all Peninsular Mayas. Each group had regional peculiarities of custom and dialect characteristic of their individual city-states or communities, which centered about one of the ancient Maya ceremonial centers. It is probably quite valid to compare them with the ancient Greeks, who didn't consider themselves Greek at all, but rather Spartans or Athenians or members of whatever city-state.

When there is agricultural work to be done, the Lacandon day begins with the first light of dawn. Thick white mist rises and gently billows above the mirror surface of Lake Nahá, and the myriad leaves of the exuberant vegetation hang low and heavy with the cold dew over the jungle trails. Any shady place near Nahá is always cool because of its elevation

(twenty-seven hundred feet above sea level). At this altitude the banana plants and similar tropical vegetation meet the pine forests, which thrive on the surrounding hilltops. But the sun of latitude $15^{\circ}1'20''$ N becomes uncomfortably hot in the open clearings when it reaches zenith, so work in the fields needs to be done by noon, or not long after.

Chan K'in's house has a two-sided roof some thirty feet long, thatched with leaves of the thorn palm (*kun*). Its rounded ends add another ten feet or so to its length. Rough planks of light balsa wood form the walls, which are without windows or other openings except for the several doors, but the cracks between the planks provide ventilation and, to the practiced eye, vision to the outside.

Apart from his three wives and their eight unmarried children, Chan K'in has three married sons and five sons-in-law living nearby, all willing to do for him any work that is required. But he takes pride in working his own land, his *milpa*. *Milpa* is a Nahuatl word which it is really only ninety percent correct to translate as "cornfield." The remaining ten percent of the *milpa* produces beans, squash, chili peppers, cassava, sweet potatoes, tomatoes, and an ample variety of other fruits and vegetables. Chan K'in also raises tobacco, the traditional commercial crop, which is planted between corn crops.

With the help of his wives and unmarried children, Chan K'in lives a life made up of one yearly *milpa* cycle after another. An area of forest is cleared. When the cut trees and brush have dried they are burned, and seeds are planted in the bare ground among the blackened remains of the charred tree trunks. The *milpa* is then periodically weeded, and is visited almost daily to protect it from the depredations of deer and boar, parrots, squirrels, gophers and anything else that might eat the growing crops. Though the Lacandon traditionally lives from his *milpa*, he must also be a good hunter. A deer that discovers a Lacandon *milpa* must be killed. Either the family eats venison, or later it will eat no beans, as only a few nightly visits of a gluttonous deer will cost the Lacandon his entire bean crop, and then the squash and corn.

When Chan K'in returns from his work in the *milpa*, he sits in his short traditional hammock woven of *majaua* bark. It is slung near one of the fires that burn between three hearthstones on the dirt floor at either end of the house. A calabash plate hangs from a thin fiber cord run through three holes in the edge and suspended from one of the roof beams near his hammock. It is full of *hach k'uuts* (real tobacco; original tobacco), as they call their traditional homemade and homegrown cigars. He is almost always smoking one of them, and generously offers them to the visitor who may come and sit in one of the nearby hammocks to chat and joke with him.

The visitor may often have a pressing motive for coming, but the traditional norms of Lacandon conduct demand that all things — especially the vitally important ones — be treated with calm and poise. Old Chan K'in has a well-earned fame among his people for his powers of *k'in yah* (divination). In the Lacandon view, he has the ability to sound those real-

ities that are not yet manifest (what any occidental language calls foretelling the future).

When asked if he is the *t'o'ohil*, Old Chan K'in of Nahá usually denies it. He will say, "No. Today no one is the *t'o'ohil*. In my grandfather's time, and even in my father's, there were *t'o'ohil* who were clairvoyant and could speak with the gods." But should one ask any other Lacandon of Nahá or the other northern Lacandon community of Mensábäk, "Who is the *t'o'ohil*?" the answer is unhesitating: "Old Chan K'in of Nahá!"

Old Chan K'in's manner is much like the simplicity and unpretentiousness of his house: He makes no display of his noble birth nor of the great respect in which his people hold him.

The clear air, the uncontaminated environment and the privileged climate of Nahá, with the innumerable greens of its surrounding hills and the ever-changing blues of its lake, give it a unique place in the memory of the visitor. But the cultural and human atmosphere of the community — to the visitor who is sensitive to such things — is even more striking. One usually becomes aware that these people are somehow different from any others he has ever known, but to define and evaluate the differences is another matter.

The Spaniards were not unaware of the Lacandon community, but it was too small and too poor to provide a proper incentive for repeated expeditions into the inhospitable, malaria-infested area. Unlike the Yucatán Peninsula, Lacandon was plagued with marshes, flooding rivers, rough outcroppings of rock and impenetrable vegetation. These conditions made the forest impassable for horses and extremely difficult for mules; gunpowder quickly became damp, and Spanish cannons and armor were more of a handicap than an advantage. The few incursions attempted were, no matter how brilliant the apologies and excuses, either partial or total failures.

If the Spanish conquistadores deserve our admiration for their courage, this admiration should not be confused with justification of their deeds. Their derring-do was so spectacular, and is so often recognized, that at times we tend to forget that the Conquest was one of the most immoral and criminal offenses that man ever perpetrated against man.

Fray Diego de Landa, bishop of Mérida, was perhaps the occidental who came the closest to the Mayas' extraordinary knowledge and to the grandeur of their civilization. He was even given some instruction by the Maya nobles in their hieroglyphic writing, and in their sacred calendar, which combined astronomy, astrology and all major physical and metaphysical phenomena into a single, harmonious system. He collected the greatest possible number of these native books, representing one of the most profound bodies of scientific, philosophical and aesthetic knowledge the world has ever known — and burned them in the Plaza de Maní when he became aware that they contained "lies of the devil."

In place of the extraordinary library he burned, Landa left us his book, *Relación de las cosas de Yucatán* (An account of the things of Yucatán).

In this book we find, besides constant reiteration of farfetched apologies for the atrocities committed by the Spaniards, numerous data on the Maya culture at the moment it was being destroyed. Occasionally there will be lucid descriptions of ceremonies, rites, customs and beliefs, but they are inevitably followed by passages of ranting in which all the previously mentioned deities are called devils indiscriminately.

Once the Conquest had begun, the Spaniards were clearly in no position to expend too much admiration or sympathy on Maya culture; they had to destroy the Mayas' functional social organization before it would destroy them. Soon the deed was done: The great teachers and leaders were murdered, the books burned, the schools and temples razed, and from the fine limestone blocks of their rubble, new Catholic churches, chapels, monasteries and cathedrals were built. The traditional arts, sciences and ethnic values were lost. The people were confused, leaderless and enslaved.

Maya culture survived intact only in the most remote communities, and in ones small and economically unimportant enough to escape notice. These were cut off from traditional Maya commerce, and as the peasant population dwindled, the nobles had to lower their standard of living. From a leisured, esoteric elite, the astronomers, mathematicians and warriors became proletarians: *milpa* farmers, fishermen and hunters.

How long did their calendar, mathematics and hieroglyphic writing survive? Did they disappear in the first generation after the remaining Mayas lost contact with the Classic Maya city-states, which had been destroyed by the Spaniards? Or were they only slowly and gradually worn down, to become totally lost only a generation or two before the present? However the reduction of their cultural inventory may have occurred, it is clear that they clung to their religion and gave the metaphysical preference over the physical. Their hieroglyphic writing was reduced to a few abstract paintings on the backs of their incense burners. Their mathematics were reduced to the most basic elements. Their astronomy became only the recognition of the major planets and constellations — and an occasional declaration of awed admiration that their grandparents could look at the sky just after dark on the day a child was born and there read the child's destiny. Their vast calendrical lore survives only in a few lunar formulae for planting, and the few ceremonies that are determined by the solar year are not corrected by astronomical observation (with one or two exceptions), but by the time of flowering of one or another tree. Even so, the cultural fragments and incomplete formulae one finds fossilized in Lacandon culture are such that they could only have had their origins in a great civilization like that of the Classic Mayas. And the ancient Olmec civilization from which it derived could only have had its beginnings in some exaltation of human genius so radically different from our own that we are incapable of understanding it.

The Olmec-Maya calendar was an incredibly complex and sophisticated system of knowledge that tied together astronomy, astrology, climatology, meteorology and tellurological activity, together with the col-