

## **Classic Maya Deity Categories**

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Joanne Baron  
University of Pennsylvania

Classic Maya deities have been explored by numerous scholars over the past several decades. Based on this scholarship, certain ideas about the nature of these deities have been proposed. For example, multiple investigators have made the claim Maya deities were not “gods” in the Greco-Roman or Judeo-Christian sense, but representations of natural forces, devoid of the human-like characteristics that define the gods of the ancient Mediterranean world. Others have noted that some gods are specific to certain Maya sites, and that two different sites, while they may have mentioned the same deity name, in fact dealt with these deities distinctly. Finally, many have claimed that such site-specific deities may in fact have been deceased ancestors that were simply deified and merged with these general deities (See Houston and Stuart 1996 for an summary of these theories).

As part of my dissertation research, I have undertaken a re-evaluation of the Classic period Maya texts that deal with deities, to see whether I agreed with these claims. This paper will summarize my conclusions. I will be discussing three types of supernatural being recognized by the Maya in order to highlight the similarities and differences I see between them. These are General Deities, Ancestors, and Patron Deities.

Most scholars who study the Maya are familiar with the main Maya deities, such as the the Sun god, Jaguar God of the Underworld, and the Hero Twins. These deities are known by letter designations, (Schellas 1904, Taube 1992, Thompson 1960) although their names are now being deciphered one by one. As argued by various investigators, these deities do seem to represent natural forces, and do not operate in the way we would expect Greek gods to operate, for example.

For the sake of clarity, I will refer to these as General Gods. They appear at many sites throughout the Maya area, often with a fairly standardized set of iconographic characteristics by which they can be identified. They are most commonly featured in mythological scenes interacting with one

another. From these mythological narratives, we can see that the Maya gave them credit for events which took place in the ancient past before the creation of humans. Sometimes they are shown in scenes with humans, but in ways that suggest that they are somewhat aloof forces of nature. For example, God D, the Principle Bird Deity, is featured in mythological narratives about the ancient past, but in images involving kings, this deity may simply be shown in the heavens above the king's head as an aloof representation of natural forces in the sky.

These deities can be made manifest through god impersonation rituals. Unfortunately, the glyphic term for "god impersonation" has not yet been convincingly translated. However, these examples seem to show that Maya kings adopted the attributes or costumes of General gods in order to re-enact mythological episodes that serve as templates or metaphors for human events.

Texts say almost nothing about the actions taken by these gods during historical times. The only way we learn about these actions is the names of kings themselves. For example, in names such as "Chaak that lights the sky with Fire" and "K'awiil that is Born in the Sky" and "K'awiil that Hammers in the Sky," we learn that these deities light up the sky, are born, and hammer. Direct references to their divine intervention in human affairs are nearly absent from Classic period inscriptions.

Another category of supernatural being recognized by the Maya is that of deceased ancestors. The supernatural nature of ancestors was expressed primarily in the ways in which they were depicted on monuments. Usually, this is in the form of a floating disembodied head that gazes down on descendants from above. At other times, it is the ancestor in the moment of apotheosis, falling into the earth or being paddled to the underworld. In these cases, ancestors are shown with the attributes of general gods. Usually, these are the attributes of the Sun god, maize god, or K'awiil.

Many kingdoms recognize a founding ancestor, who is responsible for the first dynastic events of the community, and from who other kings are counted. These founding ancestors are sometimes projected into the deep mythological past. A good example of this can be seen in the inscriptions of Naranjo. Here, the founding ancestor is given accession dates in the very ancient past, and these dates even vary from monument to monument. However, in spite of the mythological time scale attributed to some ancestors, I

do not believe that these texts truly claim that ancestors are deities. Rather, it is a discursive device still used by modern Maya. In the following quote, an informant from the community of Santiago Atitlan projects a recent ancestor beyond his actual historical time scale into the time of the conquest and beyond:

“He told me that the entire altarpiece was two thousand years old. His grandfather had known the *nuwal* Francisco Sojuel, who was a great sculptor and helped to carve the altarpiece. I asked him when Francisco Sojuel had died and he replied 1907. Was the altarpiece, then, carved about that time? ‘Just so, in 1907, two thousand years ago when the Spaniards first came to Santiago Atitlan’” (Christenson 2001:68).

The accuracy of the timeline is less important than the ancestor’s perceived importance in the community’s life. I believe the same trope is employed in Classic Maya inscriptions.

Scholars have recognized that a god mentioned at one site may have had an entirely different role or identity at another site (Houston and Stuart 1996: 302). They also recognized that some deities are particularly important at certain sites. These deities are now referred to as “Patron Deities.” When I undertook this study, I realized that the only way to sort out the chaos of particular god roles at particular sites was to look at the inscriptions on a site-by-site basis rather than on a god-by-god basis. A god-by-god study will give you a list of all the iconographic and mythological associations of a particular god, but it will ignore the differential importance placed on each deity in different Classic Maya communities. By looking at each site individually, I could isolate certain general patterns of patron deity veneration practices, regardless of which deities were considered patrons.

Of the rather large pantheon of general deities, each community seems to have selected certain deities with which to form a special relationship or a covenant. Often, these special deities are very specific aspects of more general deities. For example, a patron god of Palenque is a specific aspect of the sun god (Stuart 2006:175-176) and a patron of Naranjo is a specific aspect of the Jaguar god of the Underworld. However, other sites have patron deities that are less specific. For example, Moral Reforma recognized the Hero Twins as patron gods without giving them a more specific aspect (Simon Martin, personal communication 2010).

Patron deities behave very differently from general deities and from ancestors. These deities form a special relationship with human beings. This relationship is recognized in many inscriptions by overt statements of a personal relationship: “X is the god of King Y.”

Importantly, these deities existed in the form of effigies. Although they are rarely depicted, there are numerous glyphic references to deities as objects, which almost certainly refer to their effigies. This is distinct from the general gods, who are treated as aloof natural forces outside of material form.

The descent of the patron deities into material form is expressed uniquely at Palenque as the “birth” of the gods and alternatively as the “touching of the earth at Palenque.”

The inscriptions of Seibal indicate that once a community formed a relationship with a patron deity, this relationship stuck, even after episodes of dynastic change. One of the patrons of Seibal was the deity GI K’awiil, who also appears in inscriptions of other sites of the Petexbatun. The first reference to him at Seibal is in the year 721. During the Late Classic, Seibal underwent a series of dynastic disturbances. In 735 the site was conquered and made subordinate to the Dos Pilas dynasty. GI K’awiil appears again after this conquest. Then a splinter of this dynasty made Seibal its capital in 771, also making reference to GI K’awiil. The region collapsed entirely by the end of the 8<sup>th</sup> century. 30 years later, a new dynasty re-founded the kingdom. We see GI-K’awiil during the 9<sup>th</sup> century until the site’s final abandonment. All of these different Seibal dynasties recognized GI K’awiil as a patron deity despite their diverse origins. This indicates that this patron was seen as the patron of the place itself, rather than the royal family that ruled it.

However, there are some indications that communities could form relationships with new deities at significant points in history. Unfortunately, the acquisition of certain deities is not always explicit in the inscriptions. For example, at Copan, a set of deities appears in the inscriptions with King Wi’ Ohl K’inich and another set is added with 18 Ubaah K’awiil. But neither king’s inscriptions give an explanation for these gods appearance.

The inscriptions of Tikal are more forthcoming. The Tikal Marcador indicates that the “entrada” event of 378 was accompanied by the “arrival” of a god called 18 Ubaah Kan, who was conjured. This is

the first example of this god's name in the Maya area, but he subsequently became an important patron deity at Tikal and at other sites, probably because of his Teotihuacan associations. Furthermore, during Tikal's 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> century conquests, it managed to capture deities from Calakmul, Naranjo, and El Peru. These captures are followed by a series of ritual events such as dancing, conjuring and building, possibly to form a new covenant with these foreign deities and make them work in their new home.

Thus, communities probably acquired new deities after important events, while maintaining old cults at the same time. The result seems to have been a slow accumulation of patron deities throughout the history of the community.

As part of the covenant with the patron deities, Maya kings had certain ritual responsibilities. These included the care and maintenance of deity effigies. For example, deities required bathing, and dressing... as well as food and shelter. The term for patron deity temple is *wayib*, which means "sleeping place," where the god could rest between ritual events. Palenque texts refer to the relationship between kings and patron deities using the same term that expresses the relationship between mother and child. Rather than implying a genetic relationship between kings and their gods, this term probably expresses the loving care that the king gave to his gods to sustain them.

In exchange for this loving care, deities provided particular services to their kingdoms. The most common thing we see patron deities do is "oversee" events. This is expressed with the term "*yichonal*." Deities "oversee" all kinds of events. The most common are period ending rituals but they also oversee the accession of kings and other events.

Another term attributed to gods is "*ukabjiy*." This term that defies easy translation, but indicates the person who is ultimately responsible for an action, and is thus stronger than *yichonal*. Deities are said to be directly responsible for certain events such as accessions, period endings, or success in war.

Patron deities are often represented as kings in one way or another. Sometimes, they have the word *Ajaw* in their names. At other times they are given emblem glyphs of their local sites. Occasionally, they are even said to "accede to power." However, such accessions always occur in the mythological past before the creation of humans. Furthermore, even if a patron deity is represented as a king, he never starts

a dynastic count, which always originates with the dynasty's ancestral founder. Thus, a trope of kingship is applied to patron deities in Maya inscriptions. However, they were distinct from ancestral kings.

Because of the kingship tropes applied to patron deities, as well as tropes applied to ancestors, such as projection into the mythical past and depiction with the attributes of general gods, many scholars have claimed that patron deities are simply deified ancestors. However, a careful examination shows that this is clearly not the case. While ancestors are shown with deity attributes, they do not take on the attributes of their sites' own patron deities. Furthermore, ancestors do not take an active role in dynastic events by overseeing or *ukabjiiy*-ing events. Unlike patron deities, their bodies or effigies are not fed, bathed, or clothed. Their temples are not referred to as *wayibs* but simply as "houses." Like general deities, ancestors are aloof, their only role that of eternal onlookers.

Given this evidence, it is clear that the Maya saw patron deities as fundamentally different from the pantheon of general gods and from deceased ancestors. Of the three categories discussed, only patron deities formed special relationships with humans and actively participated in human affairs.

Although patron deities have not been given much attention in the scholarly literature about Classic Maya religious practices, they appear frequently in the epigraphic record, and were clearly important aspects of community religious life. As with patron deities in other societies, or patron saints of modern Maya communities, they almost certainly served as a symbolic representation of community identity and autonomy. Thus, the study of patron deity veneration and the adoption of particular deities at particular historical junctures can tell us more about the process of community formation and internal politics among the Classic period Maya.

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