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### **Community Gods and Community Conflicts: Patron Deities at La Corona, Guatemala**

Although scholars of the Classic Maya have spent many decades exploring Maya religious beliefs about life, death, fertility, and ancestors, less attention has been paid to the religious aspects of community formation. The Maya of the Classic period, as well as later and probably earlier periods, venerated specific gods belonging to their home communities (Houston and Stuart 1996). Often, these gods were simply aspects or versions of more widely venerated deities. For example, a patron deity of Palenque is a local version of the Sun God, while a patron of Naranja is a version of the Jaguar God of the Underworld. Evidence for these community-based religious practices can be found in numerous inscriptions from the Classic period that mention these gods; in the archaeology of sites like Palenque, with its Cross Group temples devoted to local deities (Berlin 1963); and in later accounts such as the Popol Vuh (Christenson 2003) and Titulo de Totonicapan (Carmack and Mondloch 1983), which recall a recent pre-Columbian past. After the Spanish Conquest, the veneration of local patron deities turned into the veneration of local patron saints, with many associated religious practices remaining similar or unchanged. In this paper, I will discuss how patron deity cults among the Classic Maya were used as a political tool by the ruling elite, which they used to present themselves as both members of the communities they ruled as well as unique from other community members.

The discourse of hieroglyphic monuments and later accounts such as the Popol Vuh emphasize the special relationship between patron gods and human rulers. Rulers had the responsibility of supplicating gods on behalf of the rest of the community. This supplication involved offerings such as food and incense, as well as auto-sacrificial blood. Before rulers could

perform supplicating rituals, they were required to go through purification rites, often involving fasting or sexual abstinence. In the Popol Vuh, these responsibilities are represented as particularly arduous, and a heavy burden carried by the ruling elite. But the ruler's willingness to carry these responsibilities ultimately made him worthy of lordship:

“Thus it was that the lords fasted during the nine score days, the thirteen score days, and the seventeen score days as well. They fasted often, crying out in their hearts on behalf of their vassals and servants, as well as on behalf of all their women and children. Thus each of the lords carried out his obligations. This was their way of showing veneration for their lordship.... In unity they would go forth to bear the burden of the Quichés. For this was done for all. They did not merely exercise their lordship. They did not merely receive gifts, nor were they merely provided for or sustained; nor did they merely receive food and drink. All this was not without purpose” (Christenson 2003:290–91).

On the other hand, the rest of the human community also had a relationship to patron gods. Firstly, it was on their behalf that the ruler made these offerings, asking for things such as agricultural abundance, human fertility, security, and protection from shame, misfortune, injury, illness, etc. Secondly, membership in the human community was defined in relation to which patron gods were venerated. For example, the Popol Vuh defines members of the Kiché nation by the fact that they worship Tohil (Christenson 2003:213). In the Classic period, patron deities persisted at particular sites even after ruling dynasties underwent change, indicating that these gods were associated with the entire community, rather than just the ruling kings.

We can see modern ethnographic parallels in patron saint veneration in modern Maya communities. Ritual obligations to the patron saint (called cargos) are taken on by different community members on a rotational basis. Usually, the most arduous responsibilities are taken on by advanced cargo holders, those members of the community who are older, wealthier, and more respected (Brintnall 1979; Cancian 1965; Hill 1986; Redfield and Villa Rojas 1962).

However, the rest of the community also participates in patron saint veneration by identifying the

saint as a member of the community (Watanabe 1990; 1992) and by celebrating the saint's day with an elaborate fiesta, which I will discuss further.

One of the most interesting aspects of patron deity veneration during the Classic period is the introduction of new patron deities. Sometimes, patron deities were introduced after warfare. For example, after successful battles against Calakmul, Naranjo, and El Peru, Tikal captured deities from these communities and brought them back to Tikal where they were worshipped as new patron deities (Martin 1996; Martin 2000). They did not, however, replace older Tikal patrons. At Copan, the introduction and accumulation of patron deities can be easily observed in the inscriptions of the site. However, the motivation of each king for introducing new gods is never made clear.

I would like to turn now to the site of La Corona, Guatemala, where I have been conducting dissertation research since 2008. La Corona provides us with a clear case study in the introduction and veneration of patron deities, as well as the probable motivations of the site's rulers. By combining epigraphic and archaeological data, it is possible to gain an understanding of the motivations and consequences of particular religious practices within this community.

La Corona appears to have been founded around AD 300. Archaeological evidence indicates that the site remained relatively poor and isolated during the Early Classic. In 2011, I excavated the tomb of a 6<sup>th</sup> Century ruler of La Corona. Obvious effort had gone into the tomb: it was cut into bedrock below an 8 meter platform. The ruler had been interred with hundreds of freshwater shells as well as other freshwater fauna including a turtle and a crocodile (all locally available). The tomb contained 15 ceramic vessels, and was sealed with a woven mat and tens of thousands of chert flakes. However, the tomb was sparse in exotic wealth items. It lacked jade entirely. A mere 15 small fragments of marine shell were recovered. Obsidian fragments were

found mixed with the chert flakes, but the obsidian consisted of spent prismatic blade cores, unlike the chert flakes which were all previously unused. Finally, none of the ceramics had hieroglyphic writing or painted designs, probably indicating a lack of esoteric knowledge or scribal training.

A similar tomb from an adjacent structure was discovered in 2010 but unfortunately looters had destroyed much of the context and robbed most of the contents. However, radiocarbon dates from human bone and associated ceramics indicated that it was also a 6<sup>th</sup> century tomb, and its location cut into bedrock below another 8 meter platform indicates that it probably also belonged to a ruler. A third temple in this group may contain another example of a 6<sup>th</sup> century royal tomb, making these temples some sort of Early Classic royal necropolis.

La Corona's relative poverty and isolation ended dramatically in the mid 7<sup>th</sup> century. In 658, the king Chakaw Nahb Chan acceded as ruler of La Corona. There is evidence to indicate that he rose to power after an inter-family feud. His father, Sak Maas, had been a ruler previously, but epigraphic evidence suggests that he may have been killed violently (Grube in Grube et al. 2002:85) and another man, K'uk' Ajaw, took power. The death of K'uk' Ajaw also appears to have been violent, and Chakaw Nahb Chan acceded to power on the same day, possibly after avenging his father. Chakaw Nahb Chan then made an alliance with Calakmul, sending his son and heir to reside there in 664. This alliance allowed Calakmul for the first time to control a trade route stretching through the sites of the western Peten, all the way to Cancuen, the gateway to the highlands (Freidel et al. 2007). As new exotic wealth now flowed through La Corona, the site was transformed. The most obvious change is the sudden appearance of carved monuments at La Corona. New building programs were put into place in different parts of the

site core. One of these new building programs was a new patron deity temple complex, in the 13R group.

Information about the temples in the 13R group comes from both archaeology and epigraphy. In 2005, a hieroglyphic panel from one of these temples was discovered. It was carved in 677 to commemorate the dedication of a temple by Chakaw Nahb Chan's son. However, it also recalls Chakaw Nahb Chan's own temple dedications in 658 and tells us that they were built for three gods: "Yellow Chaak," "Great Temple Chaak," and "First Lord." This temple construction took place in a hurry: a mere 35 days after assassinating his rival and seizing power, Chakaw Nahb Chan dedicated the new patron deity shrines.

This epigraphic evidence corresponds to the archaeological evidence from temples 2, 3, and 4. These temples are immediately adjacent to the structure where the hieroglyphic panel was found, indicating that they are probably the structures referred to in the text. They are all of similar size and their Classic period phase consists of a single simultaneous construction program. Furthermore, consistent with the short construction time, this new program consists of a thin veneer of new architecture that was added to the front of older construction, leaving the original back terraces exposed. These original three platforms are sequential, rather than simultaneous, and are the very same temples discussed above, where 6<sup>th</sup> century rulers of La Corona were buried. Thus, the thin new phase essentially cancelled out the previous use of these structures as ancestor shrines, replacing them with a new religious function as patron deity temples.

What were Chakaw Nahb Chan's motivations for this patron deity introduction and why was it so important to be completed quickly? Although he never states these motivations in his monuments, circumstantial evidence allows me to propose a possible scenario. It is probably that

the early tombs in the 13R group belonged to the ancestors of Chakaw Nahb Chan's rivals, including the recently deceased K'uk' Ajaw. Chakaw Nahb Chan's own ancestors were probably buried elsewhere, possibly in Group 12R, where a stela celebrates the life of one of them (Stanley Guenter, personal communication 2010). Introducing patron deities thus would have accomplished two goals: neutralizing the ancestor shrines of a deadly rival lineage, and providing an alternative religious practice meant to bring the community together under a single religious identity.

Construction and use of this new patron deity temple complex continued under the descendants of Chakaw Nahb Chan. His son built one or possibly two new temples, introducing additional gods. He also constructed an adjoining palace and associated structures where ritual events associated with patron deities appear to have taken place. Excavations on all of these structures provide us with a look at 150 years of patron deity veneration practices.

The most prominent religious practice observable in the archaeological record from this complex is feasting. We can correlate these archaeological remains to two different types of feasting activities, referred to by LeCount (2001) as inclusionary and exclusionary feasting events. Exclusionary feasts are held only for elite members of society. Only specialty food is served such as high quality meat and chocolate. Special serving vessels are also used marking the status of the participants. Inclusionary feasts, on the other hand, are meant for the entire community, or at least a large proportion of it. These events emphasize the abundance of food rather than its specialized nature. Both of these types of events have ethnographic parallels related to patron saint veneration.

Modern patron saints are celebrated with community fiestas, in which the entire community partakes of food and drink (Bunzel 1959; Cancian 1965; Redfield and Villa Rojas

1962; Siebers 1999; Siegel 1941; Watanabe 1992; Wisdom 1940). In modern times, these feasts are paid for by cargo holders themselves. In the colonial period, however, they were paid for with public resources such as taxes or the profits from the lands worked by communal labor (Chance and Taylor 1985; Hill 1986). Evidence for inclusionary feasting in the La Corona patron deity complex can be found in the form of very large serving and storage vessels. Some of these large serving vessels have been recovered from the front terraces of the temples themselves, probably indicating food sharing with the deities. A large chultun—an underground storage pit—behind the palace complex was filled entirely with the remains of a single such inclusionary feast. It included the bones of a wide variety of animals, including both high-status meats like deer and peccary, as well as other species such as opossum, dog, turtle, fish, and frog.

Modern patron saint celebrations also include exclusionary feasts, however (Bunzel 1959; Brintnall 1979; Christenson 2009; Cancian 1965; La Farge 1994; Redfield and Villa Rojas 1962; Reina 1966; Siebers 1999; Watanabe 1992; Wisdom 1940). These are held only for cargo holders and are characterized by highly formalized speech and eating practices. They often occur in the days leading up to fiestas or during fiestas at special times of day. It is believed that these feasts are meant to honor the saints and that by holding them, cargo holders act on behalf of the entire community, even if the community itself cannot participate. Archaeological evidence for exclusionary feasts can also be found at the patron deity complex at La Corona. Another midden deposit contained only deer and peccary bones, while a third deposit contained finely painted polychrome pottery with royal titles.

The archaeological and epigraphic evidence from the site of La Corona thus provides us with a detailed look at the importance of patron deity veneration within the politics of a Classic Maya community. Patron deities were introduced to La Corona at a time of great political

change: the conflict between two important families and the alliance with the Calakmul superpower. Deities appear to have been introduced to neutralize the veneration of the king's ancestral rivals, while at the same time uniting the divided community under a new religious ideology.

Patron deity veneration at La Corona is thus an interesting example of the negotiation of contradictions presented by political authority. Exclusionary feasts allowed the ruler to demonstrate his unique burden of responsibility that set him apart from his subjects. However, inclusionary feasting allowed him to participate in events which marked all participants as members of the same religious community and worshippers of the same gods. However, other contradictions were also negotiated by these ritual acts. Chakaw Nahb Chan, by forming new political alliances and by introducing patron deities at La Corona, was making a clear break from the past. These changes transformed the site both religiously and economically. However, he chose to construct patron deity temples atop older ancestor shrines, thus linking this new religious practice with sacred spaces that already existed. This allowed him to co-opt these potentially dangerous ancestor cults for his own purposes.

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