

## **Patron Deities and Patron Saints in the Yucatan**

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*The Classic Maya of the Yucatan Peninsula and other areas venerated patron deities. These gods represented the political community and were closely affiliated with the ruler. After the Colonial encounter, patron deities disappeared from Maya religious life but many of the beliefs and practices associated with them were transferred to patron saints. In this paper, I will discuss the evidence for patron deities among the pre-Columbian polities of the Yucatan, and follow some of the features of patron deity veneration into modern times.*

### *Introduction*

At the last Yucatan in Pennsylvania meeting in 2011, I presented some of my dissertation research about patron deities among the Classic Maya. Here I discuss the Yucatan more specifically and the process of religious syncretism that took place during the Colonial Period. During this process, the veneration of patron deities gave way to the veneration of patron saints. However, many religious beliefs and practices carried over into this new religious system, as has been noted by anthropologists and historians before me. Specifically, I will demonstrate how patron saints, like pre-Columbian patron deities, represented the political communities where they were worshipped and their relationships with other communities.

To quickly summarize what I said in 2011, patron deities among the Classic and Postclassic Maya were gods that existed in the form of effigies. The care and maintenance of these effigies included feeding them, dressing them, bathing them, and housing them. In return, patron deities were believed to contribute productively to the communities where they lived. They accompanied rulers and oversaw important dynastic events such as accessions. They were carried into battle and believed to assist their communities in war. They were even given credit for the passage of time in some inscriptions.

### *Patron Deities at Chichen Itza*

References to patron deities can be found at Classic Maya sites across the Maya area, but here I will simply focus on the patron gods of Chichen Itza to maintain the focus on the Yucatan. There are numerous deities discussed in the inscriptions of Chichen Itza but the two that appear most frequently are *Yax Uk'uk'um K'awiil* (“Green are the Feathers of K'awiil”) (Grube et al. 2003:76) and *Yax Chich Kan* (“First [?] Snake”), probably the Yucatec name for the Water Lily Serpent deity (Boot 2005:321). These gods are described specifically with the phrase, *uyahaw k'uhul ahaw*, meaning “they are the lords belonging to the ruler.” This close association with the ruler is a feature of patron deities that can be seen at other sites and in later periods as well.

Smaller communities in the area recognized Chichen Itza as the dominant political power. The Halakal lintel makes reference to the Chichen Itza deity *Yax Uk'uk'um K'awiil*. However, it also names another deity, who accompanied a local nobleman in a fire ritual (Boot 2005:85). This deity may have been the local patron of Halakal. Lintel 2 from Yula discusses relationships with the king of Chichen Itza and the dedication of a temple for a god who is not named but may be one of the Chichen Itza deities (Boot 2005:312–314). Yula Lintel 1, however, discusses gifts that were given to two other deities, *Yax Ha'al Chak*, (“First Rain Chak”) and *Pomun Chak* (“Thunder Rumbling Chak”) (Boot 2005:314–317). These were probably the local gods of Yula.

The text from the Casa Colorada from Chichen Itza discusses how the fire of two Chichen deities was conjured. One of these deities was *Yax Uk'uk'um K'awiil*. The text then goes on to describe fire rituals that took place on later dates at different locations. It has been proposed (Wagner in Grube et al. 2003:82) that this text records a ritual cycle in which fire was

moved from site to site. Thus, the text may refer to the veneration of the Chichen Itza Patron gods at outlying communities.

### *The Postclassic and Colonial Periods*

These inscriptions demonstrate that the patron deities of Chichen Itza were specifically associated with the political institution of rulership. Outlying communities had their own patron gods while simultaneously recognizing the importance of Chichen Itza's patron gods. A similar situation probably existed in Postclassic Yucatan after the fall of Chichen Itza. Colonial-era documents describe the religious practices in Yucatan and make reference to this arrangement.

The Paxbolon-Maldonado Papers were written in the early 17<sup>th</sup> century and record the merits of Don Pablo Paxbolon, governor of Tixchel (translated by Scholes and Roys 1968). Part of the text tells the story of the conversion of the Acalan Chontal by Fray Diego de Béjar:

“He wanted everyone to come and display his idols. Having heard what the father told them, they began to bring out their idols, first the idol of the ruler which bears the name of Cukulchan, and also the devil of Tadzunum, and those of Tachabte, Atapan, and Taçacto, and the other idols.... The idols hidden in their secret places by the Indians, such as Ykchua, for so this idol was called, another called Tabay, another called Ixchel, another called Cabtanilcaban, and many other places of idols were sought out in all the pueblos” (Scholes and Roys 1968:395).

The first effigy to be given up is named Cukulchan, and is thus a version of Quetzalcoatl/Kukulcan. This effigy is said to belong to the ruler of Acalan. Following Cukulchan are listed the four effigies of the four quarters of the city of Itzamkanac. These quarters are called Tadzunun, Tachabte, Atapan, and Taçacto and their deities are listed respectively as Ykchua, Tabay, Ixchel, and Cabtanilcaban (Scholes and Roys 1968:395). The implication is that each district of the city had its own patron deity. Like the texts of Chichen Itza, this document associates the main deity of the city with the ruler himself.

References to patron deities can also be found in Spanish chronicles of the Itza Maya of Lake Petén Itza in northern Guatemala. This region was severely depopulated after the Classic collapse around 800 AD. However, in the Postclassic and Colonial periods, groups from Yucatan repopulated the region. They spoke dialects of Yucatec and had political relationships with the Yucatec polities further north.

Various Spaniards visited the island capital of the Itzas and described a large number of temples. The Franciscan missionary Avendaño visited the island in 1696 and reported “nine very large buildings, made in the form of churches of this Province [Yucatan]” (Means 1917:18). Jones (1998:73) reports that the nine tallest of these sanctuaries were described as “*adoratorios*” by the conquering Spaniards, perhaps corresponding to the nine described by Avendaño. He argues that these nine temples corresponded to the eight districts of the Itza kingdom, with the extra, main temple corresponding to capital itself (Jones 1998:73). If Jones’ theory is correct, each of these temples would have housed the patron deities of the nine districts, with the main temple housing the patrons of the whole kingdom.

Specific deities were described by Villagutierre which can be classified as patron gods and appear to be unique to the Itzas.

“They had two other idols which they adored as gods of battle: one they called Pakoc, and the other, Hexchunchan. They carried them when they went to fight the Chinamitas, their mortal frontier enemies, and when they were going into battle they burned copal and when they performed some valiant action their idols, whom they consulted, gave them answers, and in the mitotes or dances they spoke to them and danced with them” (Villagutierre Soto-Mayor 1983:302–303).

This description matches what is known about patron deities from the Classic period and the Postclassic highlands. These accounts all seem to demonstrate that the Postclassic Maya of Yucatan had patron deities that corresponded to political groupings. As at Chichen Itza, the main

patron deity represented the highest political authority, while subordinate communities or districts maintained their own patron deities as well.

The same identification of the saint with the political community evident among the Maya in Colonial Yucatan. Here also, the church took over the role of the pre-Columbian temple as a reflection of the prestige and autonomy of the town. Restall (1997:151) notes that several Colonial-era churches in Yucatan carry dedicatory plaques proclaiming the names of the indigenous governors at the time when the churches were completed (much like pre-Columbian inscriptions proclaiming the construction of patron deity temples by Classic Maya rulers). Restall claims that “saints, like churches... were representations and expressions of their [communities]; the more extravagant the image and its celebration (and the larger and more elaborate the church), the better the projection of [community] pride and importance” (Restall 1997:153).

Farriss (1984) argues that patron saint cults served to organize the community around shared ritual practices. Unlike other organizational principles, such as lineage or occupation, patron saint veneration was organized around territory and physical boundaries. Thus, the presence or absence of the church marked whether the community was autonomous or part of another town with its own church. For this reason, when Spanish authorities attempted to shift administrative boundaries for their convenience, they were met with resistance by villagers who wished to remain part of the original town: “Maya calculations of who belonged where were not based on physical distance and certainly not on the bishops’ criterion of equalizing parish incomes. People belonged to the pueblo where their local saints were honored” (Farriss 1984:330).

Patron saints were venerated primarily through fiestas. Large sums of money were spent on patron these fiestas, often the majority of the town’s income (Restall 1997:153). While fiestas

brought the community together in a shared experience, they also served to highlight hierarchical differences in the group: who paid for the fiesta, who ate where and in which order, etc. This is because in the Colonial period, patron saint veneration was closely tied to political hierarchies and prestige. During pre-Columbian times, patron deity veneration had been associated with the authority of the ruler. According to inscriptions and historical documents from other parts of the Maya area, rulers and elites had the sole responsibility for supplicating the gods on behalf of the community, often after strenuous fasts and auto-sacrifice. They also sponsored public feasting events. In return, they were claimed the legitimacy of their lordship and the support of the community, in the form of tribute, service, and obedience.

After the Conquest, the role of ritual specialist was taken over by the Spanish catholic hierarchy. Only Spanish priests could hold mass and perform the sacraments, thus displacing the indigenous nobility. The indigenous nobility still existed, however, and during the Colonial period enjoyed a gradually-eroding set of special privileges under Spanish rule (Farriss 1984:334–35). However, although the nobility, due to their indigenous blood, could not enter the Catholic priesthood, they did manage to monopolize other positions of religious authority during the Colonial period. These included the *maestro cantor* of the local church, who was responsible for educating youths in the new doctrine, assisting the priest, serving as parish secretary (thus literacy was a requirement), appointing other church functionaries, advising community members on matters concerning marriage and the family, organizing music and liturgy, caring for priestly vestments, and burying the dead. In other words, except for providing the actual sacraments, they did everything to keep the religious life of the community functioning and were therefore the face of the church in the community (Farriss 1984:335–36). The *maestro cantor* also had a staff of assistants, often consisting of members of the same families that had ruled

before the Conquest (Restall 1997:150). In some cases, this staff was organized into formal religious brotherhoods known as *cofradías*. The members of these groups had the day-to-day responsibility to care for the saint's images and keep them dressed and clean. The organization as a whole was responsible for holding the fiesta, either through its own resources or with funds derived from the working of *cofradía* land. The same elite that had once commanded tribute from commoners now mobilized surplus wealth in order to hold the fiestas and honor the saints (Farriss 1984:339). Thus, patron saint cults became a means through which the traditional nobility could maintain their high status even after the profound changes of the Conquest.

### *Patron Saints among the Modern Maya*

There are numerous ethnographies that discuss Maya patron saints. Most of these were conducted in the Highlands of Guatemala and Chiapas and there is comparatively little published material from Yucatan. I will describe some of the features of modern patron saint veneration that seem to carry over from earlier time periods.

The fiesta remains an important aspect of patron saint veneration. Throughout the year, special days are set aside to celebrate the fiestas of the saints. In addition to fiestas specifically celebrated for the saint, other holidays such as Easter often incorporate the saint, and many of the rituals are the same for these additional holidays. Redfield and Villa Rojas (1962:155–56) argue that social dancing (*jarana*) is the defining feature which separates a fiesta from everyday religious activity in Yucatan. Although this is a social dance used by young people as an opportunity to see and be seen, it is also for the saint: “the *jarana* must take place where the *santo* can watch it; it is therefore held at the door of the oratorio, or else the image is moved to a place where the dance may be more conveniently held” (Redfield and Villa Rojas 1962:155).

Modern Maya fiestas emphasize the participation of the saint himself/herself. Often, the ritual feeding of saints is made explicit by informants. Usually, saints are described as “eating” candles and incense, as if this was food (e.g. Bunzel 1959:166; Vogt 1993:1). As one informant stated, “The saints and God want candles and incense and flowers, but we, the persons who take care of them, want food and drink, to enjoy our bodies” (Reina 1966:120). Another informant claimed that without candles, rum, and incense, God and the Saints “would have no tortillas” (Wagley 1949 in Watanabe 1992:76). In other instances, however, saints are believed to actually partake of food and drink (e.g. Reina 1966:115; Wisdom 1940:376). In Yucatan, the act of food sharing with saints is referred to as *matan*, or “offering.” In *matan* rituals, special ritual foods are prepared and arranged on an altar. Supernatural beings such as saints are then invited to partake of the spiritual essence of this food before it is eventually distributed to human participants (Sullivan 1989:96).

Modern Maya saints in Yucatan serve as symbols of their home communities vis-à-vis other communities (e.g. Redfield and Villa Rojas 1962:107–8) just as their Colonial counterparts had done. Saints often visit one another to celebrate fiestas. For example, if one town holds a fiesta for its patron saint, images of saints from other communities may come to the fiesta to pay respects. In return, the visited saint will travel to the other community for its own fiesta (Redfield and Villa Rojas 1962:153).

Maya saints are seen as inhabiting the physical effigies that depict them. This is demonstrated by an anecdote mentioned by Thompson (1960:25). In 1883 some residents from San Luis, Petén, crossed into British Honduras and founded the town of San Antonio. But after a year of bad luck they determined to kidnap Saint Luis, who they had left behind in the original

town. They successfully carried out the raid, capturing all the saints from their former hometown, thus conferring their divine powers on the new town of San Antonio.

Because the saint is thought to inhabit the image itself, rather than a distant heavenly location, patron saint veneration in the highlands is closely tied to maintaining the images themselves. Under normal circumstances, this means simple ritual acts such as providing the saint's altar with flowers (Bunzel 1959:166; Cancian 1965:34; Reina 1966:102; Siebers 1999:53; Wisdom 1940:376), incense and candles (Bunzel 1959:166; Cancian 1965:34; Oakes 1951:60; Valladares 1957:148; Vogt 1993:18; Watanabe 1992:124; Wisdom 1940:381), sweeping and maintaining the church building where the saints reside (Cancian 1965:34–35; Oakes 1951:60; Reina 1966:102; Siebers 1999:53; Watanabe 1992:109), making sure the clothes of the saint are washed and in good repair (Cancian 1965:34; Christenson 2001:92; Reina 1966:105, 145; Vogt 1993:118; Wisdom 1940:417), and making sure the saints are generally comfortable (Reina 1966:121).

In exchange for ritual practices of saint devotion, modern Maya community members say that their patron saints provide them with general protection and well-being (e.g. Reina 1966:122). More precisely, the saint has the ability to bring either good or evil to the community, depending on whether the community properly carries out the prescribed rituals. In Santiago Chimaltenango, for example, it is said that the saint protected the community from the worst atrocities of the Guatemalan Civil War, while their immediate neighbors suffered far worse under the army occupation (Watanabe 1990:134). Additionally, individuals can seek the aid of the patron saint for help against specific misfortunes (Redfield and Villa Rojas 1962:108). However, if the rituals are not properly carried out, the saint has the ability to punish the whole town (Reina 1966:18) or the individual ritual specialists (Cancian 1965:28).

## *Conclusion*

Patron deities during the pre-Columbian period resemble modern patron saints in many ways. They were closely associated with political institutions like the ruler and represented the political community more broadly in its relationship with other communities. Members of outlying political communities or districts had their own patron deities but recognized those of the dominant polity as well. The veneration of patron deities, as with modern patron saints, involved the care and maintenance of the deity effigy. In return these supernatural patrons were believed to protect the political community and to assist it.

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