



Precolumbian syncretism among the Classic Maya, a review of *Maya Gods of War*

Review by Keith Eppich

KAREN BASSIE-SWEET, 2021, *Maya Gods of War*. Louisville: University Press of Colorado, 340 pp., ISBN: 978-1646421312.

Religious syncretism, in a Latin American context, usually refers to the Colonial period and the imposition of Old World deities on native belief systems. Yet the idea of comingled religions is not limited to colonial settings. The concept can be applied, with great effect, to earlier blends of religious beliefs. Karen Bassie-Sweet's latest book focuses on one such Precolumbian syncretism, the adoption of Central Mexican gods into Classic Maya pantheons. Specifically, she discusses how the Classic Maya incorporated deities of Teotihuacán into their own religions. They did this for distinct political, military, and theological reasons, not wholly importing foreign gods, but fusing them with pre-existing ones. "The Teotihuacán Tlaloc God," she writes, "did not displace or supersede the local thunderbolt Chahks; rather, he was incorporated into Maya cosmology..." (260). This work is *Maya Gods of War* and, with it, Bassie-Sweet has written a particularly brilliant blend of iconography, anthropology, and art history. She uses these to chart the introduction, modification, and spread of Teotihuacán deities across the Classic Maya world and the means by which Maya rulers put such gods to use. In doing so, Bassie-Sweet's text consists of a deep dive into the complex cosmology of the period. The book strongly resembles the great art histories of the 80s and 90s, and it is something of a throwback to the works of Linda Schele and her collaborators. This is much to its credit and *Maya Gods of War* stands as a prominent contribution and worthy successor to those landmark texts. One could say of this book, that the "Blood of Kings" flows in its veins.¹

The book itself is organized with an introduction and seven succeeding chapters, each addressing Classic Maya Gods, as well as their uses, their iconography, their role in the politics of the day, and their syncretic aspects. This all centers on the goal of the volume, "...to analyze the attributes and nature of the Teotihuacán deities found in the Maya region and to explore how these gods were introduced into the Maya region and then incorporated into Maya worldview"

(4). The introduction frames the text, providing necessary background information on the nature of these Mesoamerican gods and their place within Classic Maya civilization. This includes their roles within the military conflicts of the day, the words, deeds, politics, and scenes of Classic period warfare. After this, the seven following chapters consist of detailed essays on the blending of Maya and Teotihuacán deities. This begins with a discussion of the Chahk Thunderbolt Gods and the Fire Deity GIII, Chapters 1 and 2, through the Classic Maya Tlaloc deities, the Kaloomte' lords and their associated Tlaloc cult, Chapters 4, 5, and 6 respectively. It concludes with Chapters 6 and 7, discussions of the critical role of women within the Tlaloc cult and the place in the Maya cosmos held by God L and his many friends. The book then ends.

While *Maya Gods of War* is a very good book, it is not a perfect one. It has three distinct problems, and while not crippling, they do hamper the point that the book is trying to make. They are organizational, evidentiary, and illustrative. Organizationally, the book is not constructed around a single, focused thesis, but consists of seven loosely interconnected essays, each forming its own chapter. Even within each chapter, the text meanders. In the middle of a discourse on Classic Gods, Bassie-Sweet spends long pages discussing minor titles of nobility. In the midst of a discussion on warfare, the narrative will pause for a lengthy treatment of ceremonial helmets. The result is a text that wanders far afield, resembling a lecture from a brilliant professor who just cannot stay on a single subject for very long. This is most evident in the introduction, which should have focused on the role of gods within Classic society and in Classic military ideology, as well as the Maya cosmos and the historical sequence of Classic civilization itself. Instead, it wanders in a long discussion of titles and offices, which would have been better served in its own chapter. On opening the text, non-specialists are likely to be quite baffled. There is no real conclusion, either, just a brief summary of the major themes of the book, which would function as a better introduction than the actual introduction. Hence, this review recommends that readers should actually read the last seven pages first.

The second issue with the text is evidentiary. The book restricts itself to well-known, well-published Maya artworks, eschewing discoveries made within the past decade. *Maya Gods of War* is heavily slanted towards the sites that produced classic iconographic studies of the Classic Maya, the art programs of Yaxchilán, Tikal, Copal, and Palenque. Largely absent are the art and iconography of Calakmul, Cancuén, La Corona, Motul de San Jose, Chunchucmil, Naachtun, among others. Even my own site of El Perú-Waka' is given short shrift, despite being a major player in the introduction of Teotihuacán to the region. Bassie-Sweet describes it as being a "small site" (169) despite that fact that, as a major Classic city, El Perú-Waka' dwarfs Palenque and many of the other places she discusses. The whole of Belize is mostly absent. Admittedly, many of these newly-discovered texts are fragmentary and difficult with a scattered publication history. Yet, these new-found texts played a vital role in the syncretism of Teotihuacán beliefs into Maya cosmology. For instance, Chapter 6 addresses the role of women in the Tlaloc cult, yet

focuses on the relatively smaller, but well-published sites of Naranjo and Yaxchilán. The long tradition of female Kaloomte' associated with Calakmul, La Corona, and El Perú-Waka' appear slightly, if at all.

The third issue is illustrative, being that the book simply does not have enough drawings and photographs of the art and iconography referenced in the text. To do its subject justice, *Maya Gods of War* needed double its number of illustrations. This is admittedly an unfair criticism and it is one that Bassie-Sweet herself addresses. Nevertheless, it is one that readers should be aware of, given that readers will need internet access to fully appreciate this book in order to look up some of the monuments mentioned in the text.

On the whole, though, these are minor issues in a major work on Classic Maya religion. This is a complex, layered subject requiring a strong familiarity with the iconography of the Classic period and an appreciation of the multivocality of Maya imagery. This is an art program where a sky-band can also be jade illuminated with thunderbolts, where an axe in the forehead can also be a smoking obsidian mirror and both can be references to godly luminosity. This is in addition to the idea that mortals, during performance, can take on the aspects of gods and that gods can also perform and take on aspects of other gods. Thus, a Maya Chahk deity can perform as a Teotihuacán war-serpent and mingle the iconography of both. Performance itself functioned as a type of conjuring magic, with gods summoned through theatrical acts. Writing and iconography seems to have functioned in a similar way, with the depiction of a deity serving as a way that tombs and temples can themselves “perform” as the god whose image they bear. Bassie-Sweet handles such intricacy and complexity very well and her text is able to explain how such performative magic worked and created the icon-covered architecture known for the Classic Maya.

A distinct strength of the text is her treatment of a suite of images and individuals that she terms “the Tlaloc Cult,” making use of the much-later Nahuatl term for this serpent god of Mesoamerica. The cult itself seems to have consisted of a series of religious practices centered on the Teotihuacán war-serpent and the special importance held by the practitioners of that cult. These are the royal kaloomte' lords long-noted in the Maya epigraphic corpus. Usually interpreted as “emperor” or “over-king,” Bassie-Sweet’s research suggests that the political authority of the kaloomte' was likely secondary to their role in sacred cult. “High Priest” rather than “High King” would be the better translation. After all, the title extended to both kings, queens, and non-royals alike. This would fundamentally alter what we know the Teotihuacán Entrada of the 4th century with the appearance of Mexican imagery being less of a political conquest and more of an influx of religious-military ideologies. The use of the kaloomte' title by the 7th century hegemony of Calakmul would then be that of newly-fashioned state-sanctioned

cult, not the appropriation of foreign titles from an earlier era. This is an astute piece of iconographic analysis, which will take scholars years to fully appreciate. Yet, it is only one of several novel perspectives on Classic Maya religion in the book. Chapter 7, focusing on the obsidian/merchant deity God L is equally masterful, although a much less contentious subject.

The whole book is as such, a close reading of the complex iconography of the Classic Maya that results in a new understanding of, and deep appreciation for, Classic religion. It is packed with this evolving interplay of icon and imagery. Maya gods could perform as Teotihuacán deities and Maya nobility, in theatrical display, could appear as both, simultaneously. A Maya artist could portray a Thunderbolt Chahk with the serpentine aspects of Teotihuacán god, blending the two. Maya rulers could appear as high priests of a Tlaloc cult and conjure alien gods with performative magic. Such deities would be novel and potent yet contain familiar aspects. This sheds new light on the very concept of religious syncretism itself and how two different religions can co-mingle, transforming into a single, blended entity. *Maya Gods of War* is a book that could have easily been twice its length and, perhaps, should have been. However, this is a very rich subject and, I suspect Bassie-Sweet will explore such topics in forthcoming volumes. They will be eagerly anticipated. *Maya Gods of War* is highly recommended and deserves a place on the shelf of any serious Maya scholar.

¹Schele, Linda, and Mary Ellen Miller, *The Blood of Kings: Dynasty and Ritual in Maya Art* (1992)

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