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The Ritual Participation of Elite Children in the Classic Maya Period

Finding material evidence for participation of children and young people in the religious activities of ancient societies can be difficult, and the lack of archaeological research on this topic reflects this. Some researchers have begun to approach the subject, but much more investigation needs to be done. In this preliminary essay, I hope to review the evidence for the involvement of elite Maya children in the rituals and ceremonies of the Classic period.

The religious obligations of the ancient Maya elite involved numerous rituals, both public and private, throughout the year. For the ruler and his family especially, these rituals reinforced their special relationship with the gods and their position at the top of Maya society, both spiritually and politically (Stuart 2005). The training for and performance of these rituals began at an early age, with elite children participating in a wide variety of religious activities, both by themselves and accompanied by elite adults.

This paper will examine some of the rituals that children participated in during the Classic period and the impact these rituals had on elite society. Some of these were exclusively children's rituals, and others were performed throughout a person's life. The evidence for these rituals comes from

monuments, murals and hieroglyphic inscriptions. The types of activities involved include dancing, bloodletting, and many others whose exact nature is unknown. Hopefully, by examining the ways that elite children participated in religious life, the role they played in Classic Maya society can be better understood.

Dance

For the Classic Maya elite, ritual dancing was a vital part of their role as religious specialists and guardians of the universe. They danced to communicate not only with the spiritual realm, but also with their subjects. The dances involved many participants, elaborate costumes and accessories, and occurred throughout the year (Taube 1992). Images of these events were recorded on stone monuments, ceramic vessels, and murals, so that their impact would extend beyond the moment of their performance. In a few representations, elite children participate alongside adults in these coordinated ritual events.

At the site of Yaxchilan, a large number of carved lintels located in buildings around the site portray the ritual activities of kings, their spouses, and in a few cases, their children (Tate 1992). Most of these panels were commissioned by Shield Jaguar III, his son Bird Jaguar IV, and his grandson, Shield Jaguar IV (Martin and Grube 2008: 123-137). As they are located inside elite buildings, the access to these works of art was probably limited to select,

high-ranking members of society, unlike other monuments such as stelae, which were often located in prominent, visible places like plazas. The location of the panels may give an indication of their intended audience.

Lintel 2 (see Figure 1), located in Temple 33, depicts Bird Jaguar IV with his son and chosen heir Chel Te' Chan K'inich (later known as Shield Jaguar IV), who is approximately 5 years old at the time of the ritual depicted. They are performing a dance (MatthewLooper has identified it as a *xukpi* dance, but this translation is not secure [Looper 1991]) involving flowered staffs topped with birds. The king and his son are dressed nearly identically; the only notable difference between the two is height. As we have other examples of this dance being performed at Yaxchilan by adults only, it does not appear to be a ritual that requires the participation of children. This leads to questions about the motivation for the king to include his son in this type of ritual, assuming that the lintel depicts an event that actually took place.

In the same theme as Lintel 2, Lintel 52 (see Figure 2) also depicts the future Shield Jaguar IV dancing with his father, this time both holding *k'awiil* scepters, which are potent symbols of kingly authority and royal lineage (Miller and Taube 1993: 110; Coggins 1988). In this example, the child does not wear the same costume as his father; he lacks the portraits of ancestors around his waist, and his headdress differs significantly from his father's, in that it lacks the "jester god" pendant (another symbol of kingship [Miller and Taube 1993: 104-105]),

and the jaguar tail is replaced by a bird's head. Because this ritual most likely is related to royal authority and kingship, a possible explanation for these costume differences is the status of the individuals. Bird Jaguar IV is the king and is dressed as such, and as his son has not yet acceded to the throne, he wears an outfit that lacks certain symbols that indicate rulership.

These panels are very unusual in the Maya area. The prominent and repeated depiction of a single royal child involved in ritual performance is rare, and clearly was meant to communicate an important political message in this context. All the above mentioned lintels were most likely commissioned by Shield Jaguar IV (the child featured in the lintels) as an adult, and reveal a possible strategy of self-legitimation. Shield Jaguar IV's father, Bird Jaguar IV, did not have a smooth transition to leadership. He was the son of a junior wife of Shield Jaguar III and most likely not his chosen heir. When his father died, there was a struggle for the throne; Bird Jaguar IV was not actually crowned until 10 years later (Martin and Grube 2008: 127).

In order to reinforce *his* legitimacy, Bird Jaguar IV dedicated multiple monuments featuring he and his mother participating in rituals with Shield Jaguar III which may have never happened, or at least were not documented when they occurred. In this way, he visually rewrote history and reinforced his position as his father's rightful heir. If the events in the lintels discussed above (Lintels 2 & 52) actually occurred, they may represent an attempt by Bird Jaguar

IV to ritually reinforce his son Shield Jaguar IV's status as his chosen heir.

Perhaps learning from his father's lesson, Shield Jaguar IV may have dedicated the lintels featuring him as a child to monumentally re-state his status as chosen heir and regular participant in royal religious rituals to the various members of the elite who were probably the lintels' intended audience. In this way, he may have hoped to avoid any challenges to the legitimacy of his rule.

A more complex and extensive representation of youth participation in Classic Maya dance ceremonies is found on the murals at Bonampak. These murals, found in 3 structures at the site, represent the designation of the royal heir to the throne of Bonampak and also associated activities, such as dancing, elite processions, a military battle, and ritual sacrifice (Sharer and Traxler 2006: 449-450). These painted scenes are one of the best sources for information on the complexity and extent of Classic Maya court life and ritual behavior.

At multiple locations within the murals, ritual dancing is depicted. These dances include many participants in elaborate and varied costumes. Thankfully, in some areas the mural has preserved well enough so that we can read the associated glyphic captions that name the participants in the dances. In one panel in Room 1, three men dance dressed in enormous quetzal-feather backracks (see Figure 3), and the dance is named hieroglyphically as a quetzal dance (Houston 1984). The shortest of the participants is identified as a *ch'ok* or "youth" and appears again participating in a different dance in Room 3. Unlike in the

Yaxchilan lintels, the murals at Bonampak do not focus specifically on the ritual dancing of young people. This activity is merely one of the many portrayed, probably indicating that it was not an unusual occurrence.

Autosacrifice

The act of bloodletting (called *ch'ab* or “penance” [Montgomery 2005: 72]) was one of the paramount ritual duties of Classic Maya rulers. The shed blood of the king and his family sanctified and strengthened the earth and the gods and ensured fertility and cosmological balance. Both men and women participated in this activity, with males using obsidian blades and stingray spines to let blood from the foreskin, and females using thorned ropes pulled through the tongue (Schele and Miller 1986: 175-184). While most portrayals of this ritual feature adults, a few examples indicate that children also participated in this important event.

One of these examples comes from the Panel 19 of Dos Pilas (see Figure 4). In this small stone image, a child (labeled as a *ch'ok ajaw* or “young lord”) stands in elaborate ritual attire as a kneeling priest helps him to let blood from his penis using a stingray spine. To the left are Ruler 3 of Dos Pilas, (who may have served as king because the royal heir was too young to do so) and a royal woman (most likely his wife, or the mother of the young heir), and to the right are two elite men, one of whom is labeled the “guardian” of the boy. The associated text also states that 28 lords witnessed the event (Stuart 2008).

This scene probably illustrates the childhood ritual known as *yax ch'ab*, or “first penance” the first act of ritual bloodletting by a young male (Stuart 2008). This ritual initiated elite boys (we have no evidence of female participation in this rite) into their auto-sacrificial responsibilities as members of the elite, whose blood was required to nourish the gods and sustain spiritual balance. Panel 19 provides evidence that this ritual was highly important in elite society, as it was witnessed by a large number of people, and commemorated by a carved monument.

A ritual of this type is again commemorated on the unprovenanced Hauberg stela (see Figure 5). Based on its iconography, this stela was carved in the early Classic period, and depicts a figure holding a staff. Although the image is not one of bloodletting, the associated hieroglyphic inscription documents a *yax ch'ab* event. In addition to this epigraphic information, the stela is of very small stature (approximately 80 cm). Although miniature objects cannot be automatically classified as related to children, David Stuart hypothesizes that the stela may be “child-sized” because of the childhood ritual it commemorates (Stuart 2008).

Often there is little archaeological evidence of the participation of young people in religious ritual. But Piedras Negras burial 82 provides data that supports the involvement of subadults in bloodletting rituals (Fitzsimmons, et al 2003). This burial in the West Group Plaza contained the skeletal remains of a 15

year old boy, accompanied by many high status objects.

Among the burial goods associated with him was a bundle of bloodletting implements such as bone needles and obsidian blades. Included among these was stingray spine (most often used in bloodletting rituals) inscribed with hieroglyphs (see Figure 6) that tentatively read: *u kix? ? ahk ch'ok k'in ajaw*, which roughly translates to “it is the stingray spine of ‘night-time’ turtle, young sun lord” (Fitzsimmons, et al 2003: 458-459). The bloodletting implements included in this burial indicate that autosacrifice was an important ritual responsibility of young elite males, and also demonstrate that young people owned ritual objects in their own right.

Case Study: A Childhood Ritual at Palenque

As discussed above, children took part in many of the rituals that were a part of elite Classic Maya life, such as dancing and bloodletting. Although children clearly played an important role in these activities, the majority of known artistic portrayals depict adults as the main participants. Separate from these types of rituals are those whose only documented participants are children. These activities took place at a certain time in an elite child’s life, and, as far as we know, ceased when an individual reached adulthood. An example of this type of child-specific ritual comes from the site of Palenque, which is notable for its extensive written documentation of the ritual activities of its rulers.

Within the site of Palenque lies the Cross Group temple complex (see

Figure 7). These three temples are dedicated to the patron gods of Palenque, otherwise known as the “Palenque Triad.” They were commissioned by King K’inich Kan Bahlam (son of K’inich Janaab Pakal) in 692 AD and feature elaborate carved panels that include both iconographic and hieroglyphic data (Stuart 2006). The associated hieroglyphic texts record mythological events, and events in the lives of past Palenque kings. Included among these events is a youth ritual whose precise nature is unknown, but which was clearly a notable occurrence in the life of the young king.

Each of the three monumental panels features historical information about the birth and succession of individual rulers of Palenque. The focal imagery of the panels depicts K’inich Kan Bahlam as a young boy and as a young adult, surrounded by symbols of the sky, earth, and underworld (see Figure 8). The young Kan Bahlam wears an identical costume in all three portraits, consisting of twisted and knotted strips of fabric that hang loosely from his body and head, which may be related to the ritual that is referenced in the secondary texts associated directly with his portrait.

These secondary texts differ in content, but all appear to refer to the same childhood ritual that took place in 641 AD, when the king was 6 years old. The first reference (see Figure 9), on the Temple of the Cross panel, documents the young K’inich Kan Bahlam’s “house-climbing” (the verb phrase features a glyph frequently interpreted as a pyramid) as *b’alb’ojte’*, a title of unknown significance,

on the date 9 Ak'bal 6 Xul (Stuart 2006: 130). The second reference (see Figure 10), included on the Temple of the Foliated Cross panel, describes the portrait of the young prince: "it is his image as the *ookte'* (literally "pole" or "support"), the head youth" (Stuart 2006: 151). The third reference (see Figure 11), on the Temple of the Sun panel, contains the most detailed information. It states: "On 9 Ak'bal 6 Xul, he 'house-climbs' as *ookte'*." This is followed by a title presumably belonging to K'inich Kan Bahlam. The following clause describes an event that happens approximately a year and a half later, on the tenth K'atun period ending: "[On] 13 Ajaw 18 Kank'in they descend, the four youths" (Stuart 2006: 171).

Though its exact nature is unknown, this event may be related to the *volador* ceremony (Stuart 2009, class notes), which is still performed today in parts of Mexico and Central America (see Figure 12). In this ritual performance, five young men ascend a tall pole. Four of them jump from the pole with ropes tied to their feet, and spin around the pole 13 times before reaching the ground, totaling 52 spins which parallel the 52 year cycle of the Mesoamerican calendar (Gipson 1971; Beekman 2003: 300-301). Although there is currently no archaeological evidence to support this interpretation, both the "pole" title and the "descent" of the four young men recorded in the Cross Group inscriptions make this a tempting connection.

This childhood ritual was clearly an important part of the early lives of the kings at Palenque. Evidence that this was a ritual that many rulers participated in

comes from a reference to K'inich Kan Bahlam as "the tenth *ookte*" in an inscription from the Temple of the Cross (see Figure 13). It is likely that the costume worn by the youthful version of the king in the three panels of the Cross Group is directly associated with the performance of this ritual. The repetitive documentation of this event in all three temples of the Cross Group indicates that K'inich Kan Bahlam considered it to be of great significance.

Conclusions

Although this examination was broad, my goal is to demonstrate that children were a vital part of elite Maya religious life. In order to gain a thorough understanding of Classic Maya ritual practices, the participation of all members of society in these practices must be investigated. By analyzing the part that elite children played in Maya religious ceremonies, we can better comprehend how their social roles and duties were constructed and how they learned to be elite adults. Hopefully, this will lead to a more complete understanding of both Classic Maya religion as well as how elite children functioned – socially, spiritually, and politically – in the complex culture of the Classic period.

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