

The Sun Binding Ritual on Tortuguero Monument 8

John Major Jenkins. *The Center for 2012 Studies*, Note 11
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Tortuguero Monument 8 has some really nice glyphs and an intriguing overall iconography. There are glyphs around the perimeter of the rectangular sides, as well as glyphs along the edges on the top of the monument. The ends of both of the long sides depict the head and open mouth of a reptilian being, which Sven Gronemeyer, in his study of Tortuguero monuments, characterizes as a variant of the so-called “Celestial Monster.” This “Celestial Monster” or “Cosmic Monster” is widely recognized as representing the Milky Way. Heads of the Sun God protrude from the open maws of the Celestial Monsters on Monument 8. The maws are positioned at both ends of the elongated monsters, and there are four of them, one on each end of the two long sides of the monument. As such, the four mouths that contain Sun-God heads are positioned at the four corners of the monument. It is possible that, as with pawatuns, bacab, inverted serpent columns, and others corner marker symbols, the mouth-enclosed Sun Gods may represent the cosmic quarters of time and space. They would designate the four spatial corners of the quadripartite cosmos and the four temporal corners of the year (the two equinoxes and the two solstices (as evidenced in Mixe-Zoque cosmography and at Palenque). They would therefore embody a calendrical analogy with the four year bearers, the *mam*. The ideological association between the four seasonal quarters and the four year-bearers is symbolic in nature, and was not maintained as the calendar systems evolved and year-bearer systems shifted over many centuries of use. Nevertheless, the quadripartite symbolism of Monument 8, with the four corner deities in association with a Milky Way “monster,” may reiterate a theme because, as I will show, the primary rite documented on Monument 8 occurred around the time of the December solstice.

The rite, or ceremony, described in the text on Monument 8 occurred at the 7-Tun anniversary of Bahlam Ajaw’s accession and involved the reenactment of what appears to



be a local redaction of the well-known Creation Myth. There are deities present who are known to attend accessions, so this was an additional status that Bahlam Ajaw achieved or that was granted to him. As Gronemeyer noted, he performs a version of the Creation Myth in a “Sun God binding” ritual, which involves “binding” a solar deity, most likely in preparation for sacrifice or offering.

← *Diagram 1. The Sun God Binding glyph, TRT Monument 8. Drawing by the author, after Gronemeyer (2006).*

The ritual construct of this act is seen in later cult sacrifices, such as with Maximon, where deity sacrifice precedes a new Creation, or worldrenewal. Based upon a variety of

contextual facts surrounding this event, I think we can recognize that it sets the stage, in a manner of speaking, for a similar rite that is documented on Monument 6 for the 2012 date. Here's why I think so.

Monument 8 may have served as a throne bench. Dedicated on 9.10.18.3.10 (December 29, 650 AD (J)), the rite it describes occurs at the time of year just after the winter solstice, when the sunrise hovers around the same southeastern rise point. The northward motion of the sun's rising azimuth has not quite asserted itself. The sun hangs in a dangerous place of death-rebirth, a liminal zone of uncertainty. The old year is passing, and the new year is being born. The text reads: "On 12 Ok 8 Pax, the Sun God was bound..."

The Sun God is also named with two other epithets, including "Ebeet," which means "scribe" — a recorder of calendrical and ceremonial rites. The text further states that "Bahlam Ajaw was seated as the first image." Gronemeyer writes: "It is reasonable to suppose that Bahlam Ajaw re-enacted his accession as the embodiment of the Sun God. The emphasis of this circumstance surely is a status statement of political, social, or religious nature" (Gronemeyer, p. 173 of the English version of the 2004 thesis). As Bahlam Ajaw re-enacts his accession, one year after his most triumphant war victory, he emulates or embodies the Sun God, he who triumphs over the darkness. This is an appropriate rite for the solstice time, when the old year dies and the new year, era, or sun, is born. (The levels are interchangeable; the same rite would be applicable to a larger period ending, such as 13.0.0.0.0 in 2012.) In this act there is a paradoxical death and rebirth of the Sun God, who after triumphing in rebirth appears to have sacrificed or transformed the old "Sun" God, who with the waning year has become bereft of his light and vitality — a manifestation of darkness.

The key act is the "binding" of the Sun God. This is an act that typically precedes sacrifice and renewal. It is part of a ritual ceremony, associated with period endings, that involves the ideology of offering a sacrifice in order to affect renewal. Rather than embodying or personifying the Sun God, Bahlam Ajaw is perhaps elected to be the sacrificial priest *of* the Sun God, which nevertheless somewhat paradoxically entails a kind of mystic identification with the Sun God — the sacred union of the sacrificer and the sacrificed that is an underlying tenet of sacrifice doctrines worldwide. So, in a sense he accepts a new identity, a new status, of playing an indispensable role in the sacrifice and renewal of the sun, of the year. This, of course, is exactly what happens at the time of the solstice, when Monument 8 was dedicated. *The calendrical nexus fudges to coordinate with the 7-Tun anniversary.* Bahlam Ajaw may have thus taken on, or was granted, the status-upgrade of Sacrificial Priest, now qualified to officiate the kind of ceremonial rites that occur at period endings. The date of the sun binding was an *astronomical* period ending, that of a solar year, rather than a *calendrical* period ending (in the Long Count), although it could be said that both are true because the stated "7-Tun anniversary" signals a 7-Tun period ending as measured from his accession date.

I propose that the event recorded on Monument 8 anticipated another "deity binding" that Bahlam Ajaw was involved with — that of the "encircling" or "wrapping" of Bolon Yokte at the 2012 period ending. The terminology and interpretation I adopt here is drawn from the new epigraphic decipherments that were offered by Maya scholars Gronemeyer and MacLeod (2010) for the inscription connected to the 2012 date in the Tortuguero Monument 6 text. But I take it a bit further in identifying the accession

upgrade on Monument 8 as the necessary prelude to Bahlam Ajaw's role in the 2012 "ceremony." More on this in a moment.

This binding of the Sun God on Monument 8 thus symbolizes a sacrifice, which must then be followed by a renewal or birth. The text that follows the sun binding reads "Bahlam Ajaw rested his foot onto the Sky Place." The expression is nearly identical to one used on Copan Altar Q and refers to an emergence from a Sky Place that is synonymous with a birth portal. On Izapa Stela 25, one of the Hero Twins (probably Hunahpu, a *sun god*) rests his foot on the snout of the caiman-tree which is an early version of the Starry Deer Crocodile (the Milky Way). On the Stela 25 carving, the snout leads in a serrated step pattern (suggestive of the serrated edges of sacrificial obsidian knives) directly into the caiman's maw. To be consistent with the celestial topography alluded to in the iconography of Stela 25, the maw of the caiman must correspond to the dark rift in the Milky Way, the "road to the underworld" that is also an *emergence* or *birth* place. Accession and birth are conceptually connected in Maya thought, and thus the 7-Tun anniversary of Bahlam Ajaw's accession is a kind of "birthday" celebration. But also, because of the solstice position, it is the sun's birthday (or re-birth day). Here we see analogies between Bahlam Ajaw's birth and the sun's rebirth that were probably a major implication of the rite. Perhaps it is the rite that forged the analogy, consecrating it as a key to Bahlam Ajaw's identity and his subsequent role in the worldrenewal (the birth of a new "sun") associated with 2012. The worldrenewal component here is the implied outcome of the "wrapping" of Bolon Yokte. The probable relationship between Bolon Yokte, God L, and the modern cult figure Maximon allows us to anticipate that the "wrapping," "adorning," "encircling," or "binding" of Bolon Yokte leads to, as with Maximon, his sacrifice. (MacLeod recently argues for "great return" as her preferred meaning for this image-complex; I don't think these variant suggestions are mutually exclusive or contradictory). The deity sacrifice is the necessary prelude to worldrenewal, a fundamental principle in Mesoamerican religion and mythology. It may be that the acts are linked in a unity that does not require explicitly spelling out a sequential process.

The glyphs at A10 and A11 should be analyzed as they may provide references to the "6" Sky Place which corresponds to the part of the sky that was rising heliacally before the sun on the date given. There is a bar with a dot inside of it; although the dot is not next to the bar, perhaps this nevertheless represents a 6. In any case, two days before the rite, on December 27 (J), Venus was in very close conjunction with Mercury just before sunrise, with a waning sliver of an old moon nearby. (This date was not a first appearance of Venus in the eastern sky; it was rather preceding, by a few weeks, Venus's last appearance as morning star.)

The "completion" of the 7th Tun is then stated, followed by a parentage statement for Bahlam Ajaw, noting that he is "the image" of "the cherished one" named Lady Nay Amay Noh, and he is "the child of the father" (unnamed, but reconstructed from evidence elsewhere as Ik Muuy Muhwan I). Then, continuing with the Monument 8 text, comes the arrival of a ruler on 9.11.?? .14.11. Happening before the arrival of this ruler was a marriage (of Bahlam Ajaw) with a woman on 9.10.15.1.11 (December 6, 647 AD), which is linked with DN to the Hotun ending 31 days earlier (9.10.15.1.11). Both of these dates are also recorded on TRT Monument 6, where it is stated that the "Word was bound" (a vow was made) on the December 6th date. On TRT Monument 6, this date is linked with a large DN to another "word binding" on February 26, 353 AD. As I pointed out and

explored in my booklet called *Lord Jaguar's 2012 Inscriptions* (September, 2011, Four Ahau Press):

...between the two dates linked by the DN (December 6, 647 and February 26, 353) Uranus has shifted from one Crossroads to the other, on opposite sides of the sky. In other words, the DN (294.7 years) is exactly 7 half-cycles of Uranus (42 years each). If we think this to be a coincidence, it is additionally striking that, on the date in 353, Jupiter (“K’awil”) was positioned at the Crossroads in very close alignment with Uranus. It’s one thing to have a perhaps coincidental commensuration of astronomical periods found in random data samples, but when multiple planets are alignment at significant sidereal locations (the two Crossroads on opposite sides of the sky), an intentional construct becomes the most likely interpretation. In this case, the Sun and Uranus at one Crossroads in 647 counterposes Jupiter and Uranus at the opposite Crossroads in 353, and both of those dates are linked with an explicit Distance Number. Stating the facts of the matter in this simple and accurate way, which I doubt anyone has had the audacity or clarity to do, really drives home what we are dealing with in these complex narratives — a level of complexity and multi-leveled meaning that very often escapes our attention. ... In addition to Jupiter and Uranus being aligned with the Gemini Crossroads in 353 AD, the moon also happened to be right there as well (Jenkins 2011:30).

These connection were first explored in December 2009, in the original version of my SAA presentation (April 2010), but were excised due to the time limit of the presentation. The Uranus parallels are nevertheless retained in Chart 1 of the presentation (see the PDF at <http://thecenterfor2012studies.com>). See also the evidence that the magnitude of Uranus is within the range of naked-eye observation (see essay on *The Center for 2012 Studies* website.)

Returning to Monument 8, a date of an unknown event occurring a short time after the 9.10.15 Hotun nexus can be reconstructed as 9.10.15.6.6. Then, 9.10.16.13.6 is followed by 9.10.16.15.0, 9.10.17.1.2, and 9.10.17.2.14. All of these dates occurred in the three years (1,150 days) before the sun binding rite on 9.10.18.3.10, the last date in the sequence (9.10.17.2.14) being Bahlam Ajaw’s victory over Comalcalco on the winter solstice in 649 AD.

Comments

The Sun God binding rite may have occurred over several days. It occurred at the time of the sun’s standstill around the solstice. The “binding” act recalls the sacrifice act necessary for renewal. What appears happening in this rite is Bahlam Ajaw’s investiture as a servant to or embodiment of the Sun God — a new status granted at the 7-Tun completion after his accession. Bahlam Ajaw is touching the Sky Place with his foot, a gesture that may indicate contact with and/or emergence from the underworld. The “birth” implication is also suggested by the accession anniversary. This may signal Bahlam Ajaw’s facilitation of the Sun God’s rebirth, or perhaps Bahlam Ajaw’s actual

transformation into and embodiment of the reborn Sun God. That this all happens around the winter solstice is very suggestive and appropriate, as the sun-year dies and is reborn around the winter solstice. (It's important to note that, in terms of the sun's motionlessness on the horizon and subsequent turnabout, the process occurs over several weeks and there is no need to hold the timing of dates and events to precise occurrence on the exact solstice. The dating of the rite to the 7-Tun anniversary of his accession probably had priority over precisely timing the rite with the exact solstice. Nevertheless, solar rebirth during the solstice standstill is clearly a critical astronomical component of Sun God binding rite.)

The dark rift was rising heliacally just before sunrise on December 29, 650, the date of the rite, and appeared earlier over the subsequent weeks as the year got underway, the length of daylight increased while the sun rose further and further north along the horizon. The larger cosmogonic renewal in 2012, with Bolon Yokte and Bahlam Ajaw playing partnership roles, seems presaged by the rite portrayed on Monument 8 (with "the Sun God" rather than Bolon Yokte being sacrificed, or "being seen at" or "witnessing" the sacrifice). The text describing the rite was probably recorded around the beginning of 651 AD, some 18 years before the 2012 text was carved in stone on Monument 6, dedicated on January 11, 669 AD. In a parallel way, the 2012 date might have been seen as an "anniversary" of Bahlam Ajaw's birth because of the shared astronomical alignment of sun-in-dark rift. Since the interval between Bahlam's birth and 13.0.0.0 in 2012 is only about 20 days past 1,400 tropical years, perhaps this was seen as an anniversary of 7 two-hundred-year periods, providing a 20-day shift for precessional calculations. Gronemeyer notes that the number 7 is a frequent calendrical player in many of Bahlam Ajaw's monuments, as is 13.

My interpretation cannot at this point be proven definitively. Very few interpretations in any field of study ever can. But it arises from an understanding of the Maya ceremonial rites, calendrics and astronomy, and by drawing parallels to similar contexts and inscriptions. The decipherments offered by epigraphers are important keys to interpretation, but they alone do not provide a clear understanding of the overall intent of Maya writing. The bare bones, stated in syntactical terms, make little sense and are filled with assumptions and ambiguities. Some kind of interpretive prioritizing takes place when epigraphers try to flesh out a real translation. A problem here is that the translation may contain interpretive *bias*. Since many epigraphers have little interest in astronomy, the possible astronomical references in a text will therefore be stripped away. When and if they try to apply astronomical principles or specific events, there may be a tendency to disqualify astronomical events because 100% astronomical accuracy in modern scientific terms may not be supported in a calendrical nexus that stretches over several days to embrace astronomical alignments, calendrical anniversaries, and/or numerological strategies. This disallows the mythic interests of the Maya and the compelling visual quality of celestial events, which the Maya no doubt wove into their texts and ceremonies — even if, for example, a nearby period ending in the Long Count was chosen as a marker while the intended astronomical target occurred days earlier. This apparently ambiguous situation actually appears to be the case with the solstice reference of Monument 8 date under question, which coordinates with the 7-Tun anniversary of Bahlam Ajaw's accession but in fact occurs eleven days after the precise solstice date. The "discrepancy" is allowable, for the reason just given and also because, if you take

into account the slow turnabout process of the sun on the solstice, the idea that the specific solstice date would of necessity have to have been the target is not very reasonable. By December 29 it was just barely starting to move away from the horizon rise position it was at on the precise solstice. It was being reborn after the death at the solstice.

More importantly, some sense of the multiple meanings inherent in a text should be preserved, as it will honor the multiple inflections, puns, and analogies that the Maya themselves understood and utilized in the weaving of their hieroglyphic texts. Thus, “encircling” or “wrapping around” could mean both a ritual procession around a deity *and* the binding of arms and body, in preparation for sacrifice, as happens with period-ending deities such a Maximon.

Monument 8, I believe, documents the investiture of Bahlam Ajaw as something more than a victorious warrior and king. The Sun God binding rite in late 650 came after his amazing series of war campaigns that stretched over the first six years of his rule, culminating in the victory over Comalcalco at the winter solstice of 649 AD. Embedded within these events are references to the Tun-period endings of 9.10.12 and 9.12.13, linked to 9.11.0.0 (See [2012 Center Note 4](#)), and the first evening star appearances of Venus. On his birthday, evening star Venus aligned with the new moon.

Curiously, the Sun God binding rite around the winter solstice in 650 AD corresponds to a *last appearance* of Venus as Morningstar. Also, in the days leading up to the rite on December 29 (J), a syzygy with Mercury, Mars and Venus occurred, right at the southern terminus of the dark rift within the nuclear bulge of the Galactic Center. On December 15 (J), just before the first lightening of the eastern sky before dawn, Mercury rose, followed quickly by Mars and Venus. They were all very close to the Milky Way/ecliptic crossing point in Sagittarius, at the dark rift/Crossroads. In the following days they moved further off to the east, closer to the horizon. The sliver of an old moon crossed the dark rift on the 26th, and then joined the triad on the morning of the 27th, creating what must have been an awesome celestial spectacle: the moon, Mars, Mercury and Venus all rose together in the eastern predawn sky as the Milky Way and dark rift loomed above them, rising only 20 minutes earlier. In their day-to-day shiftings, they were all (except Mars) falling closer toward the sun, sacrificing themselves into the solar fire. And the Sun God itself was reaching its southernmost horizon position, hovering at the solstice standstill; it too was dying, was needing to be bound up and sacrificed, so that it could be reborn as the new year began. These are the astronomical corollaries of the rite described in the inscription on Monument 8. The congruence either informed the ceremonial timing or it was merely a huge unintended coincidence.

Note: It may be of interest that Uranus, which was involved in the dark rift alignments of several years earlier (during the war campaigns in the mid to late 640s) was in close conjunction with the sun on December 29, 650 AD. See essay on *The Center for 2012 Studies* website for a discussion of naked-eye observations of Uranus.

<http://thecenterfor2012studies.com>.