

Bird Jaguar IV and Lady Six Sky: Methods of Obtaining and Maintaining Power

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Introduction and Thesis

Throughout the history of the world, leaders of various nations have had to execute their power in different ways in order to keep their subjects in line. From peaceful and quiet to the violent and gruesome, obtaining and maintaining power have been issues most leaders have had to face at some point during their reigns. The Maya kingdoms, in this regard, are no different from other countries in that they have had to use less-than-savory techniques in order to restore order to their domain.

Untested kings, queens who have come to power through circumstance, and leaders whose claim to the throne was tenuous at best have all had to face one challenge: how to subdue the masses and assert their right to rule while keeping the status quo. Utilizing a theory of performances written by Takeshi Inomata, I will analyze two leaders: Lady Six Sky of Naranjo and Bird Jaguar IV of Yaxchilan; whose reigns all started from questionable circumstance. I will then compare and contrast the methods of these leaders to understand the variances in their styles as well as to pinpoint why the methods the kings and queens chose were effective. Both leaders in this analysis have had to use some amount of manipulation and tricks in order to create a legitimate right to rule; furthermore, all of these methods have been successful in not only establishing their lordship, but also created an opportunity for their respective kingdoms to grow positively economically and politically.

Plaza, Performers, and Spectators: Political Theaters of the Classic Maya

Takeshi Inomata's article on the Maya and their performances is key to understanding how leaders were able to sate their subjects need for a proper ruler. To quote from the article, Inomata states, "I define performance as creative, realized, achieved acts which are interpretable, reportable, and repeatable within a domain of cultural intelligibility." (2006) Within this article, Inomata usually talks about the literal performances such as bloodletting rituals and dances, but I feel the meaning of performance can be stretched to other concepts. For example, the completion of a temple or the commission of a stela could also be analyzed underneath the umbrella of Inomata's definition because

these are acts which can be reported on in historical contexts. Also, the act of war, especially a successful one, would be seen as a performance due to the rituals which come both before and after the battle is completed. It is through this lens which I will perform my analysis of the three rulers.

Plazas played a crucial role in allowing a political stage for Maya rulers. These wide open areas served several purposes, but from the political point of view it gave rulers a place to provide a physical representation of their strength to their people. Kings and queens were often seen as divine rulers, and in order to make this assertion they would often appear as an emulation of the god of their city. Many rituals involved this particular physical spectacle, such as victories in battle, commemoration of a major structure (aqueduct, etc.), and the passing of a major milestone in time (k'atun's, etc.). (Inomata, 2006) However, as we near the end of the Classic period, we notice a lot of the traditional functions of Maya society begin to fall apart as a lack of resources and growing populations begin to take its toll on the civilization as a whole, and the performances were no exception. During the early and middle Classic period, performances, while being performed by the elite, were a chance for the commoners to interact with the elite in a more casual, personal setting. With the building of more temples around the plazas, such as the case in Tikal, the amount of space available for the public to view performances dwindled as these performances became almost specifically for the elite of the city. Moreover, with population density increasing along with the amount of construction, performances became more impersonal as time passed. (Inomata, 2006)

In an article by Lisa Lucero titled *Lowland Maya Political Organization: A Review*, she supports Inomata by explaining the importance of understanding how ritual progressed and changed over time. (1999) The expansion of cities required the necessity to change how rituals were used in order to not only accommodate for the population, but to also feed the political purpose of an increasingly complex government. Offices were being created just for the purpose of establishing a way to complete these rituals. Often the leader in charge could be put into a compromising situation

where they would not be able to complete a ritual, such as when they lose a war and get executed by the victors. (Inomata, 2006)

It is essential to analyze Lady Six Sky, Bird Jaguar IV, and (other ruler) through Inomata's lens because without performances which could gain the appeal of the public these rulers would never have been able to hold the influence they did. The amount of power these rulers had over the whole of political dynamics of Maya civilization can be questioned and will not be discussed in this essay. Nonetheless, the fact that they had any amount of sway at all is an indication of the charisma they held as well as the knowledge of how performances appeased the masses. It does hold true that all rulers have had to complete rituals or performances, but I would like to analyze these three rulers in particular because their climb to the top, over most others, were some of the hardest to make.

Bird Jaguar IV

In 742, the then-ruler of Yaxchilan, Irtamnaaj Bahlam III, had died after over 60 years of being the king. However, due to a massive power struggle which occurred immediately after his death, the city was plunged into the famous era known as the 'Interregnum' from 742 CE until 752 CE. He did have a primary wife, known as K'abal Xook, but it is not known if she had produced an heir to the throne. The role of polygamy in Maya society is especially highlighted in this particular incident because "would-be" rulers who held any amount of lineage, and even those without, all made an attempt at becoming the next king. Eventually the son of one of the lesser wives, Bird Jaguar IV, took the reins of the city in 752 CE and led the citizens of Yaxchilan into a state of prosperity. (Martin, 2008) How did Bird Jaguar IV manage to take control of kingship, and why were these methods so effective?

First, we need to look at the Interregnum and examine the potential existence of a proper heir to the throne. Kathryn Josserand has studied Maya discourse and glyphs, especially at Yaxchilan, and through her analysis she has assessed that a proper heir to throne did exist before Bird Jaguar IV came into the picture. Nicknamed Aj Tzik, this proper heir has been deemed to be the proper heir, but he

suddenly disappeared at the start of the Interregnum. Due to the wear and tear of over a thousand years of damage done by weathering to glyphs and the sometimes uncertain readings it is impossible to know if there was a legitimate heir. However, a key piece of evidence at Dos Pilas shows someone with Lady Xoc's (K'abal Xook) glyph, indicating perhaps the rightful heir was the target of a raid and then executed. More evidence is being searched for, but for the time being this particular heir seems to be a key piece of evidence in understanding the occurrences at Yaxchilan. (Josserand, 2007)

Acknowledging that an heir did exist means the next logical step is coming to terms with how Bird Jaguar IV took power at the age of 43. Since the art of performance is so important to Maya society, he needed a ritual which could solidify his grasp on the city. One of these rituals was a bloodletting ritual of his mother and wife (Lady Ik'skull and Lady Great Skull, respectfully) on Stela 35 which showed them having visions. This was important because it created an image that Lady Ik'skull, despite being a lesser wife, had great standing in the court of Yaxchilan. An additional rite to kingship was an important ritual known as the flapstaff ritual, which is an indication of the acknowledgement of the next in line. (Bardsley, 1989; Martin, 2008)

A powerful tool Bird Jaguar IV used in his quest for holding his power was coincidence. Halfway through his reign he produced a stela with an image of the flapstaff ritual was done as well as a date. This date, while seeming innocuous at first, holds high value in the eyes of Maya astronomy and dates. His choice of date, June 22, 741, fell in line with three important midway points of various Maya calendars: the 365-day solar calendar, the 584-day Venus cycle, and the 7200-day *lahuntun* of the *k'atun* cycle. The midway of any one of these calendars is significant because it represents the ideal of "transformation and succession", but the coincidence of these three dates meant many could not argue Bird Jaguar IV's succession. (Bardsley, 1989)

More so than any other king at Yaxchilan, Bird Jaguar IV's building projects aspired to the ideal of quantity over quality. Despite having been in charge for only 16 years, he created many new

temples with repeated images of his successful wars and bloodletting rituals. The incredible wealth displayed by Yaxchilan can be seen in Bird Jaguar IV's success at war. Usually utilizing the title "He of 20 captives", he used this title on the various projects he commissioned in order to portray his prowess at war. The reality, however, being that most of the successes he had in combat were against minor enemies at best, giving little-to-no real military or political value. (Martin, 2008)

Analysis

Between Lady Six Sky and Bird Jaguar IV, the claim Bird Jaguar had to the throne was tenuous at best, but he also had some of the best performances in order to sedate the wonder of his people. Lost potentially to Dos Pilas in a raid, the only person who could have potentially risen as the true leader, and the only obstacle to Bird Jaguar IV, disappeared into the lost histories of the Maya. One of the best political moves he made was identifying his mother as one of the key players. His mother, despite not being the principal wife, had a connection with Irtzamnaaj Bahlam III which Bird Jaguar IV highlighted to an almost paranoid extent. In this particular case, the ritual performance of bloodletting and the flapstaff ritual practically cemented his future as a king. The use of the June 22, 721 date late into his reign came across as nothing more but a desperate ploy to stretch his namesake out for the rest of Maya history. Even if he was lying about the truth, the constant manipulation of truth using both ritual and construction projects as propaganda clearly worked in his favor. Seeing as Yaxchilan prospered underneath his rule, it is safe to stay that the population may have content enough with accepting the status quo rather than challenging, though there is no proof that the populace knew of any of the deceit they were being dealt with. Though I am unfamiliar with how other kings portrayed their right to rule via commissioned art, stelas, etc., considering the evidence stacked against him by various researchers, it is very hard to rule out that his accession to the throne was illegitimate. It is easy to say that he used ritual performances which were easily identifiable by the people of Yaxchilan to ensure no one could challenge him, and perhaps Bird Jaguar IV, out of no other king, could be the master of

performance manipulation to get his way.

Lady Six Sky

Lady Six Sky ruled at Naranjo, but initially came from Yachilan's enemy, Dos Pilas. After suffering a terrible defeat to Caracol, the initial ruling lineage of K'ahk' Skull Chan Chaak disappeared and needed a suitable replacement. Sent as a way to reestablish the dynasty at Naranjo, three days after she had arrived at the city she had completed the ritual necessary to continue the lineage at Naranjo. Five years later, she managed to have a son named K'ahk' Tillw Chan Chaak who eventually became one of the youngest leaders in the Maya world at the age of five. (Martin 2008; Doyle 2005) I will now explore how Lady Six Sky achieved her status as a legendary queen of the Maya through her figurehead son, despite the many successes he had.

It is safe to assume that at the age of five, a child would not have the capacity to make war, debate on economics, or do anything which would be considered even remotely political. Lady Six Sky, already having done the necessary rituals to be a part of the Naranjo nobility, had to create a legacy in which the young king could continue on the path set by his mother. She went to war in his name, taking captives and defeating minor entities which surrounded Naranjo. Eventually she turned all of those minor successes into one major one with assisting Calakmul in a major victory over the battered Tikal.

Through art, Lady Six Sky was able to achieve a certain level of success in status that no other woman ruler had achieved throughout the rest of Maya civilization. Amanda Hardman wrote an article titled *Classic Maya Women Rulers in Monumental Art*, where she does an analysis of three primary female figures in Maya society, including taking a look at Lady Six Sky. Hardman noted Lady Six Sky as the only woman in Maya history to be seen in a position where prisoners are being shown underneath her as spoils of a conquest. (2011) This would seem to make sense considering much of the time when K'ahk' Tillw Chan Chaak was young was also the time when Naranjo had most of its wars

in the span of their lifetimes. Another fascinating observation Hardman made was that Lady Six Sky was also the only queen who was alive when the stelas honoring her were commissioned, making it very likely that she used this for propaganda and altered the images to create a more powerful picture. Other work she had commissioned, much like the stela which depicted her on top of some prisoners, also created an atmosphere of strength. For instance, one of the earliest commissions by Lady Six Sky is Stela 24, which shows her impersonating a moon goddess while being on top of a naked male figure. (Doyle, 2005)

In *Lady Six Sky and the Definition of Ritual Space at Naranjo* by James Doyle, he identifies a factor which could be deemed as a key piece for the use of propaganda at Naranjo. According to Doyle, “Before his first k’atun, K’ak’ Tiliw Chan Chaak and his mother placed more emphasis on their relationships with the dynastic lines of his mother and their subsequent vassal status under Calakmul.” (2005) However, once their first k’atun passed, they started to place more emphasis on the Naranjo lineage and their connection to it more than anything else.

Analysis

While Lady Six Sky did use her son as a way to assert her dominance throughout the rest of Maya civilization, it almost seems like after a while it was pointless to do so. I would imagine that at the very least, the ruling elite understood the circumstances, but I have to wonder if the normal citizens of Naranjo just accepted the idea of a son-king without a second glance. Even though she completed the necessary rituals to become a part of Naranjo nobility, I would imagine some people would have had a hard time accepting her because she came from a different city. Nonetheless, she also shows a masterful use of performances as a puppeteer and as a traditional leader in keeping everyone in her domain under control. Going to war against minor cities within twenty days of the start of her son’s rule, despite seeming to be an attempt at grabbing low hanging fruit, gave her a stage to proclaim the “victories” of her son. Even when she finally became a leader for her people, she

continued to use the necessary amount of propaganda in order to show her and her son's legitimacy to the throne. Having the power to commission stelas about her while being alive is a strong, yet subtle indication of the power she maintained while she was alive. Even if she gave the credit of the victories to her son, she still had commissioned stelas which showed her on top of the defeated foe. Images of her imitating the moon goddess also lent itself to a physical representation of the extent of her power. Further performances were seen with the use of propaganda of attaching Lady Six Sky and her to the heritage of Naranjo rather than. She has shown through her actions that kings are not the only people capable of twisting a performance for their own benefit.

Comparison

Through my research and analysis I have established both Bird Jaguar IV and Lady Six Sky were masters of the performance who utilized the tools necessary to win over people who may not have supported them otherwise. The primary theme in comparing these two rulers was the use of heritage. In both cases heritage was a weapon almost completely necessary to use if they wished to rule. Bird Jaguar IV had to prove to his subjects that even though he was the son of a lesser wife of the king, he still had a legitimate connection to the throne. Almost all of the images he had created had the sole purpose of being necessary to cement his heritage. Nothing more was more essential than the supposed flapstaff ritual as that was an indication of who the next heir was. In the case of Lady Six Sky, she had to not only make a case for her son, but also had to separate herself from her initial Dos Pilas heritage. Once K'ak' Tiliw Chan Chaak had finally hit the proper age to rule, they transitioned from focusing on their initial heritage and began to focus on solely the Naranjo heritage. If she had not done so, the people would have resisted her reign because despite having completed the necessary rituals, would have just seen her as person from another city trying to be in charge.

Heritage was the overarching theme of their attempts to hold down the throne, but they had to utilize cultural resources in order to achieve the acknowledgement of their right to power. Art was

actively used as a performance by both rulers to emulate to their subjects they had the ability to rule. Stelas were a common way of doing this because they could be commissioned only by the ruling elite. Bird Jaguar IV used Stela 11, which had the flapstaff ritual as well as several prisoners acting as spoils of war after a defeat, as a stepping stone for the rest of his years that he was on the throne. On the other hand, Lady Six Sky, while still using her son as a puppet for her rule, essentially created and commissioned art which showed her strength to the rest of the Maya world. Images such as her being shown as a moon goddess or warrior queen allowed for an atmosphere in which she could be seen as a powerful being without needing any other support, including from her own son when he died before her.

War was also a common theme associated with these two. Within the context of Inomata's definition of a performance, war was something which could be easily understood within the cultural context. Winning equaled power. If either one of these two leaders had lost one of the minor skirmishes they had started, there was a great chance that no one within their city would have been willing to support them. Lady Six Sky, unlike Bird Jaguar IV, had even further support from Calakmul when they had gotten a key victory over Tikal. Even if it was only an assist, the fact Naranjo was on the winning side clearly indicating that the correct leader was on the throne.

One key difference between the two of these rulers is the reason for establishing the rule. Bird Jaguar IV, despite clearly needed to make up some facts in order to prove his legitimacy, already had a tie-in to the direct lineage. Lady Six Sky, on the other hand, had to build her credibility from the ground up. Another difference when it came to obtaining the right to rule was there was no clear indication Lady Six Sky had used building projects anywhere near the same extend Bird Jaguar IV had. Bird Jaguar IV, for almost the entirety of his reign, became obsessed with proving he deserved to be on the throne.

Conclusion

Performances by these two leaders were necessary in order to create a situation where they

would be allowed by the people to rule. Bird Jaguar IV took the proper course in establishing his connections with his father. Furthermore, he effectively used dates and kept his people prosperous enough so that they would not question whether or not he was the right person for the job. Lady Six Sky, on the other hand, had a different objective: getting people to follow her despite being from a completely different city. Her skillful use of different cultural performances created a scenario where everyone would be able to prosper underneath her. They also have several similarities in the way attacked their issue, though of course the methods were not the exact same, and obviously they should not be. Both of these leaders came from different points, but eventually came together on one singular idea: control over the people they were supposed to rule. Also, both of these leaders are some of the most famous of the Maya kings and queens, and rightfully so. They were put into a position which should not have worked out to any great degree of success, and then eventually put their respective cities on the map with great architectural or war-based deeds. While these two have both had to execute their power in rather manipulative ways, I will always be able to respect these two leaders for their ability to persevere through extreme political minefields.

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