Proceedings of ICLLCD 2026 Symposium: Intelligent Media for Cultural Bridge: Forum on Global-Local Communication
DOI: 10.54254/2753-7064/2026.BJ34766

Maya Religion and Kingship: A Study Based on the Bonampak Murals

Hongdi Zou

North Cross School Shanghai, Shanghai, China
ranidy_zou090426@sina.com

Abstract. The Maya culture is unique and of great importance to scholars' research. The unusual portraits and carvings are closely related to religion and convey the population's religious devotion to its gods, as well as the immense power of its rulers. These rulers could be portrayed as embodiments of the divine and were admired by the population. The literature analysis approach is used in this research, with the main focus on the murals to examine the relationship between Maya religion and royal power and how this connection affected the Maya population. According to the study, Maya kings presented themselves as representatives of the gods and wielded absolute power. Using their influence, they imbued texts, artifacts, and other cultural objects with religious meaning. It not only encouraged people to admire the kings but also made the population believe that the rulers could provide them with considerable advantages.

Keywords: Maya Civilization, Religion, Royal Authority, the Bonampak Murals

1. Introduction

One of One of the most famous civilizations in the world, the Maya civilization possesses unique cultural expressions that remain a subject of academic curiosity due to the complexity of its religious and political aspects. The portraits, carvings, and murals are among the most important pieces of art created by this civilization, and they are not merely works of art but representations of profound religious symbolism. Such visual accounts indicate how the Maya people rendered homage and veneration to their gods, as well as how they perceived the divine power of their rulers. It was often shown that Maya kings were intercessors between humans and the supernatural world, an image that supported their political dominance and social leadership.

The methodology employed in this paper is a literature review and case analysis with emphasis on Maya murals as a means of examining the relationship between religion and royal power. The paper aims to explain how Maya elite rulers used visual culture to legitimize their rule and influence popular opinion by examining religious symbolism and mythological narratives in mural art. This analysis contributes to enhancing knowledge of the religious background behind Maya political organization and the timeless importance of Maya artistic legacy.

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2. Literature view

The religion of the Maya civilization was highly significant, as it represented not only the people's admiration of the gods but also their veneration of the highest royal authority. Through the analysis of cultural artifacts and murals unearthed to date, it is possible to determine what the Maya people intended to communicate: the worship and veneration of the gods were part of the message. The study of religious elements in the Maya civilization is of great importance. These murals and unearthed cultural relics indicate the worship of the gods by the Maya people. Moreover, the murals may represent significant events in the history of the Maya civilization and provide extensive information about this ancient culture.

The academic Stephen D. Houston has studied the beliefs and practices of the Classic Maya as well as related matters concerning Classic Maya religion [1]. He observes that research on the Maya hieroglyphic writing system has made great advances over the last few years, advances that have shown the close relationship between the Maya people and their deities. Another researcher, Matsumoto, states that those who produced valuable hieroglyphic objects such as monumental inscriptions and polychrome ceramics were educated and employed in the royal court, which implies that literacy and hieroglyphic creation went hand in hand with dynastic power and high culture [2]. A further researcher, Bošković, has observed the relevance of addressing the difficulties in the study of Maya religion and the depth of meaning of Maya myths [3]. The paper explores different features of Maya deities, including their attributes, and examines a great number of artifacts, which also indicate the deep devotion of the people to the gods. The research indicates that most Maya murals remain a mystery; for example, the meaning of most rituals depicted on the murals remains unclear to researchers. Many other similar mysteries should be investigated, as these are of great significance for comprehending Maya religion and culture.

3. Case analysis of mural

3.1. The functional attributes of Maya murals

The Maya murals also cover a variety of topics, including religious symbolism and historical events. In ancient times, most civilizations did not possess a fully developed writing system; therefore, they utilized murals to convey messages when desired, for example, to celebrate military successes and to record ancient customs, which also held great importance in their respective eras.

The Maya civilization possessed a distinct culture, and murals served as an ideal medium for presenting specific cultural heritage, thereby exerting a significant influence. Maya kings also attempted to manipulate the population through murals. Given the strong religious tradition in Maya society, where people deeply respected the gods, the kings associated the worship of the gods with the actions of the king himself. In this way, murals functioned as an instrument of royal will.

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Figure 1. The Bonampak Murals [4]

3.2. The overall religious core and mythological implications of the Bonampak Murals

To begin with, the Classic Maya were above all a highly religious society. The Maya used corn extensively, as they believed it was an important part of their daily lives. Many activities required the use of corn; therefore, corn elements can be observed in the murals, reflecting the Maya belief that corn could bring happiness.

Through these murals, the deep religious meaning behind them becomes evident. They also represent mythical content that shows the respect of the Maya people for mythology. Although the Bonampak Murals mainly depict conventional rituals, including sacrifices and other religious rites, they indicate the profound religious importance within Maya culture. This centrality of religion also explains why the Maya held such powerful superstitious feelings. The Maya believed that cosmic order depended upon energy exchange. By performing sacrifices and traditional rituals, they sought to gain divine safety and ensure a prosperous life. Such actions were strongly connected with religion and became a way of survival for the Maya. Essentially, this system formed the core belief they followed.

In addition, the strong religious meaning is highlighted by the murals located in three rooms. This arrangement may also suggest that the ancient Maya possessed an extremely high sense of group identity. They were very religious and held great respect for the gods: they worshipped various deities, constructed temples, created intricate theologies, and perceived the world as filled with living essences. Religion was closely related to the lives of the Maya; it was not merely one aspect of daily existence but was also integrated into much of their cultural heritage and other essential activities, such as farming, which they highly valued. These components were not only used to support life but also carried religious value.

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3.3. Analysis of the Bonampak Murals by chamber

3.3.1. Left chamber

As shown in Figure 1, the separation phase enables a transition from the profane stage to the sacred and supernatural sphere, wherein children become participants engaged in exploring the divine history or ancestral mythology of their culture [3]. This image illustrates nobles and priests preparing to conduct a ceremony, with the participants carrying ritual objects of great importance to the entire Maya population. Those objects, decorated with images of the Corn God and the Sun God, hold deep religious value. According to historical records, the Maya believed that the Corn God and the Sun God brought them luck, granting them endless prosperity [5]. The main aim of such a ceremony is to demonstrate that the king can communicate with the gods, a method he applies to manipulate the Maya population [1]. This act also strengthens the belief that the ritual requires human sacrifice. In the context of Maya sacred imagery, the cord serves as a sign connecting the womb of heaven and the womb of earth, indicating the four corners of the universe, defined as the furthest points of the sun on the horizon during the solstices.

3.3.2. Central chamber

The central picture of the murals depicts the trial and sacrifice of captives. The visual contrast in the mural emphasizes the elevated position of the Maya king. The king is seated on the throne, nobles carry shields behind him, and captives, naked and stripped, are placed before him. The scene appears to commemorate military success through sacrifice; yet in a religious context, it holds greater meaning than simply marking a triumph of conquest. The Maya believed that captives possessed the power of the Underworld. The king, fearing his mortality, attempts to harness this Underworld power by sacrificing captives, believing it would keep death at bay [1]. Additionally, the king seeks to prevent the sun from setting each night and to beseech the Sun God to provide the Maya with a bountiful harvest each year. The ritual also includes invocations to the Corn God, who was viewed as a sponsor of agricultural success.

3.3.3. Right chamber

This chamber indicates that the celebration of the sacrifice was conducted through singing and dancing by the nobles and priests. The Maya king is depicted wearing an object of power associated with the divine, symbolizing the rebirth of the Maize God. This imagery conveys the significance of the Maya king's power as well as the occurrence of maize growth in the background. The Maya king was content, as he believed that such a method of sacrifice would ensure a prosperous future for the Maya people. It is worth noting that the mural reinforced the idea of rebirth, which helped the Maya king recognize that this practice would bring advantages to his people.

4. The symbolic language of Maya religion

4.1. The role of myth in the construction of royal authority

The mural is an embodiment of the strong relationship between Maya culture and its myths. The manipulation of the Maya population by Maya kings through myth represents one of their primary methods of control. The kings also seek to apply myth in order to achieve their mission of

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preserving the cosmic order and proving themselves to be representatives of the gods. This approach reveals the powerful religious implications embedded within myth.

The Bonampak Murals are filled with core divine symbols of Maya religion. The initial use of military force by Maya kings aims to unify the population into the Maya civilization. Nevertheless, the kings also employ methods of control that operate through mental processes, manipulating the Maya people by means of the writing system, caves, and rituals. These elements carry profound religious significance that requires comprehension by the people. The Maya value the gods because they believe that the gods provide a good life and assist them during times of difficulty. The discovery of art and other artifacts with religious significance, including buildings, murals, and cave art, further attests to this belief. All these things are of great importance to the Maya.

4.2. The Sun God and the Maize God: divine metaphors for royal power

As shown in Figure 2, the Sun God is depicted in the mural as an image representing a combination of symbols: a sun disk and eagle feathers. These are the famous symbols of the Sun God and can be seen on the clothing of the king and the nobility [1]. The Sun God is considered the Mayan protector of the order of the day. If the king displays the symbols of the Sun God, it signifies that he is the earthly representation of the Sun God and that his reign possesses the absolute power of the sun [3]. At the same time, in the sacrifice ritual depicted in the Central Chamber, a weak relief of a sun disk appears, suggesting that the Sun God is the main recipient of the sacrifice. The purpose of this sacrifice is to guarantee the rise of the sun each morning and the banishment of Underworld darkness [5].

In terms of religion and culture, the core of the Bonampak Murals can be defined as a visual statement of theocratic politics. The Maya kings exploit the murals to fully integrate the concept of royal power into the religious system and to make it an element of religious ceremonies.

The Role of the King as Mediator: In all the murals, the king is located and depicted in a central and elevated position: on the high platform in the Left Chamber, on the throne in the Central Chamber, and at the center in the Right Chamber. He is the only person wearing a double headdress, with the lower layer containing serpentine Underworld symbols and the upper layer containing Sun God and Maize God symbols [6].

Figure 2. The Sun God [7]

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5. Cultural media and religious expression

Culture can also function as an instrument of influence. Historically, many Maya buildings are highly religious in nature. Maya priests construct altars and other structures, and their designs and carvings are deeply connected to religious beliefs, employing religious symbolism. The majority of the Maya writing system documents information concerning astronomy, calendars, and religion, and much of this material contains myths and references to the gods. Each of these factors contributes significantly to the deep veneration that the inhabitants of that time felt toward the highest god. For instance, the shell covering the girls' private areas is very likely a Maya icon related to the Moon Goddess. This goddess represents the mother goddess and guardian of medicine, weaving, sexual freedom, earth, and agriculture [8].

The Maya document their distinctive culture through murals, cultural artifacts, writing, and other media, such that people are able to perceive the strong religious value embedded therein and the profound veneration of the gods by the people. The gods, whom the Maya believed could provide plentiful joy and rescue them in times of danger, are trusted. The people are greatly influenced by the Maya, which represents a deep religious sensibility.

6. Conclusion

The interface between religion and royal power in Maya civilization has been examined through close analysis of the Bonampak Murals. By exploring religious imagery within these murals, the study has demonstrated how Maya monarchs strategically employed visual culture to justify their rule and reinforce social hierarchy. The analysis of each chamber reveals that every stage of the ritual, including preparation, sacrifice, and celebration, carries cosmological meaning. Various deities, such as the Sun God, the Maize God, and God K, are used to express the king's role as an intermediary between the mortal and the heavenly realms.

Several limitations are present in this research. The mechanism is examined primarily from the perspective of murals, resulting in a relatively narrow analytical focus. More literature and cultural artifacts are needed to fully comprehend the religious uniqueness of Maya civilization. The profound cultural significance of Maya civilization extends beyond religion and continues to exert influence today. However, due to insufficient literary and archaeological records, constraints remain in the current study. With further archaeological investigations and deeper exploration of prehistoric human history, the unique mysteries of Maya civilization will eventually be revealed.

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