
Reviewed by: Antonia E. Foias, Williams College, afoias@williams.edu

As the title suggests, the main thrust of the book is to describe all Maya deities associated with warfare, and in particular, to distinguish between autochthonous Maya gods of war and the distinct God of War, Tlaloc, who was adopted by the Maya from Teotihuacan, the large city and probably empire centered on the Valley of Mexico. Bassie-Sweet contrasts the identification of Maya gods of war with lightning and flint (in Maya tok’), to Tlaloc who was identified with meteors and obsidian (in Maya taj). The author also examines the role of Classic Maya lords and ladies carrying the title of Kaloomte’ (generally translated as ‘king of kings’ or ‘conqueror of kings’ and hence the highest political office among the Maya) in leading the cult of Tlaloc. Throughout the book, the author marries epigraphic and iconographic evidence with ethnohistorical and ethnographic materials, and rightfully so, as our knowledge of Classic Maya religion is profound because of the hieroglyphic texts (now deciphered in great part) and because of the continuing traditions of contemporary Maya communities that still hold many of the same beliefs as their Classic ancestors. If the reader is interested in comparative religion and is looking for a more general statement about Maya religion and its general principles, that statement is not in this book. The audience for this book is very much the specialist, and for the specialist, there are lots of rewards. The author has an encyclopedic knowledge of Maya iconography and epigraphy, and although her interpretations may be stretched thin at times, there is much to learn from her analysis of the Maya gods of storm and war called Chahk and the Fire and war Deity GIII (more commonly known as the Jaguar Sun God of the Underworld), as well as the Teotihuacan-derived storm and war god Tlaloc (as he was called by the later Aztecs).

The book opens with an introduction, which is quite detailed in its
overview of Maya calendars; deities and patron gods; titles of Maya nobility, from those at the top as kings and kings of kings to lower level officials named ‘banded-bird’ (a priest in charge of bloodletting paraphernalia and, in some cases, of other kingly costume such as the king’s headdress), ebeet (messengers), etc.; and warfare. These are indeed the main threads of her argument, but it is not always clear why she is focusing on particular aspects of ancient Maya civilization. A case in point, she devotes a whole section to the Ch’ajom title, arguing that it was a low priestly position in charge of burning incense at the required rituals, which was first taken on by young elites. She correlates this title with a set of costuming and hair practices but not all Ch’ajom titled holders are shown with all these elements, so it is hard to then identify just one of these pieces of clothing, adornment or hairdo with the title.

Chapter 1 then follows with an examination of Chahk Thunderbolt deities, the Maya Storm/Rain God. As the rain/storm god, Chahk was also seen as the thunderbolt and lightning by both the ancient and modern Maya. The Rain/Storm God appeared in groups of four, each identified with cardinal directions and their respective colors, and even five, with the addition of the fifth representing the center of the universe; or three, as described in the story of creation in the K’iche’ sacred history called the Popol Vuh, where they are called Thunderbolt or Huracan (hurricane). Bassie-Sweet also points to the depictions of stone as chert/flint from which weapons and tools were made by the ancient Maya, the association with Chahk as contemporary Maya believe that flint is the product of lightning and remains of the thunderbolt axes of these gods. Europeans of the seventeenth century also had similar ideas about the origins of flint when lightning strikes the earth. The importance of Chahk lies in that he is identified with Maya kings and their ancestors through the figure of God K/K’awiil whose axe/torch piercing his forehead and whose left foot ends in a serpent, make him the thunderbolt and lightning. God K is often held as a scepter by Late Classic rulers. In a more innovative manner, Bassie-Sweet deciphers the sign for jade/jadeite celts (identified as T24/T1017 in the Thompson system of naming Maya signs) as luminosity associated with lightning rather than reflectiveness associated with mirrors (the previous interpretation). This is possible as mirrors are also luminous, and because celts do not reflect one’s image back as mirrors would. Although flint is associated with Chahk in Maya art, the more important association is between the luminosity symbol and lightning, which means that jade/jadeite celts represented thunderbolts which sent the energy of lightning to earth. Bassie-Sweet’s interpretation is a break from previous studies where jade/jadeite was closely tied to fertility and the Maize God because of both its green color and shine. Nevertheless, Bassie-Sweet notes that lightning is also im-
important as ‘the spiritual power of the ancestors’ (60) or as ‘life-giving powers’ (61). The author returns to the question of war in the latter part of this chapter since up to now, she had not discussed Chahk as a god of war. First, lightning is associated with fire (and therefore destruction) and for Bassie-Sweet this means that whenever there is a mention of fire, she sees it as a reference to lightning and therefore to Chahk in his more destructive aspect (65–67). This association of lightning with fire then allows her to describe the torch that sometimes replaces the axe in the forehead of K’awiil/God K, as a symbol of fiery destruction, warfare and Chahk. Aside from this connection with fire, the bellicose nature of Chahk is more strongly expressed through the juxtaposition of Chahk with flint axes, that appear together with a shield in the Maya symbol tok’-pakal (flint-shield) for warfare. My only complaint is that the author does not articulate enough such an argument, and thus, it becomes lost at times. Furthermore, the level of detail that only the most dedicated Mayanist would understand can make the text hard to follow at times. But it is certainly a rich source of information for the specialist!!

Chapter 2 then takes on another god, God GIII, one of Palenque’s three patron gods. God GIII is typically identified as the Jaguar Sun God of the Underworld, a version of the Sun God when he passes through the underworld in the nighttime. GIII’s connection to war is revealed by his appearance on war shields and association with rulers during battle when they become this deity. However, the chapter suffers from the same problem as the previous one: too many disparate details that are not well connected to the overall argument. For example, a section is devoted to the Celestial Place of Duality, but we are not told why this place is important to her argument about GIII being a Maya god of war. In the latter part of the chapter, Bassie-Sweet focuses more on GIII and his association with fire as the fire cord above his nose is his central identifying characteristic, and his association with war as GIII is the central symbol in the Temple of the Sun at Palenque dedicated to warfare. Bassie-Sweet argues that Chahk is connected to the flint axe, while GIII is linked with spears and their flint blades as the archetypical Maya weapon. When she concludes the chapter with two different interpretations of GIII as ‘the deity who drilled the first fire of the current era and from whom the Sun God obtained his heat and flint weapons’ or as ‘an avatar of the Sun God... in a jaguar warrior manifestation’, it comes as a surprise. These hypotheses should have been presented at the beginning of the chapter, and then the argument should have been developed in a logical manner throughout the ensuing text.

The next four chapters are then devoted to Tlaloc deities (Chapter 3), the Kaloomte’ lords associated with this Teotihuacan-derived god of storms and war (based on their costume laden with Tlaloc sym-
bols) (Chapter 4), the offices and regalia of the Tlaloc cult (Chapter 5), and the noble women that also appear in the Tlaloc cult (Chapter 6). Thus, it becomes clear that the real thrust of the book is meant to be this deity that the Maya integrated from Teotihuacan, which probably functioned as the capital of an empire antecedent to the Aztecs, and which may have conquered Tikal (or placed on its throne, the son of a Teotihuacan king or lord and a local Maya lady or princess). According to Bassie-Sweet, in many Mesoamerican societies, meteors are seen as a type of lightning, and obsidian as the product of meteors striking the earth. Since Teotihuacan is located in the Valley of Mexico and close to a number of obsidian sources, it would not be much of a jump to argue that its storm/war god was associated with obsidian weaponry. But I was not convinced that Tlaloc in Maya art was exclusively connected to obsidian, which according to Bassie-Sweet is represented by a zig-zag pattern. Most of the chapter is devoted to describing the multiple manifestations of Tlaloc beyond its skeletal form, all of which are presumably the animal ‘coessences’ (avatars) of this deity: a caterpillar-snake being called ‘18 are the faces of the snake’; a jaguar; a butterfly/moth, that is probably the Black Witch Moth; and an owl. All these animal avatars are harbingers of death, illness or destruction, connotations that would strongly be associated with warfare.

The following Chapter 4 is devoted to a careful historical review of the many lords who carried the title of kaloomte’, ‘conqueror’. Not everyone agrees with this interpretation; Simon Martin sees it as an honorific, originally attached to Early Classic foreigners from Teotihuacan, but its meaning broadened in the Late Classic to approach the superlative of ‘great/powerful [king]’ (2020: 77–83). The kaloomte’ kings are often dressed in Tlaloc costumes, headdresses, or insignia, which in Maya religion, means they became Tlaloc and took on all the powers of this god. There are some major exceptions to this pattern, though: kings at Dzibanche or Calakmul, although named kaloomte’, do not appear with Tlaloc costume (but Bassie-Sweet notes that these monuments are very eroded); the most successful ruler of Naranjo, K’ahk’ Tiliw Chan Chahk, does not carry the title of kaloomte’ although his mother, a princess of Dos Pilas, does (Martin 2020: 83) and both of them participate in the Tlaloc cult based on their regalia; the Tikal king Yax Nuun Ahiin I also does not carry the title of kaloomte’ although his depictions are replete with Tlaloc imagery. So, there is some conceptual space between the title and the Tlaloc cult. Nevertheless, the association of many kings with the kaloomte’ title and Tlaloc costumes does suggest a religious aspect to these titles, and this is not surprising since the Maya kings were seen as divine rulers, closely connected to religion. This chapter also presents a good summary of all the individuals and events involved in what has
become called the 378 CE ‘entrada’ by Teotihuacan warriors at Tikal led by a kaloomte’ (Sihyaj K’ahk’), which may have been a conquest or possibly the forced placement on Tikal’s throne of a young lord (Yax Nuun Ahiin I) who was the son of a Teotihuacan king or lord (Spearthrower Owl) and a local Maya lady or princess.

Chapter 5 continues with an examination of the regalia associated with the Tlaloc cult as a window into the rituals and activities involved in the cult itself. The first half of the chapter focuses on a particular type of kingly headdress called k’ohaw or ux yoop huun, a helmet-like construction built of small platelets (possibly shell or jade) and hence often nicknamed as the mosaic headdress. This headdress is often covered with Tlaloc symbols, although not all examples have such imagery. Because of this link, Bassie-Sweet concludes that the individual who acquires it, is being inducted into the Tlaloc cult. She then presents the evidence for such headdresses being powerful heirlooms passed down through the generations by the kings of Palenque and Piedras Negras, including the possibility that descendants reentered their ancestors’ tombs to take their kohaw headdress because of the power inherent in such objects. The second half of the chapter devotes itself to how one could become kaloomte’ (through induction by other members of this cult, although not all scholars would agree with this interpretation) and on the office of yajaw’ak’ (‘fire’s vassal’) which Bassie-Sweet interprets as an official in charge of ‘war-related paraphernalia’ such as the ux yoop huun headdress of the kings.

Chapter 6 follows several Late Classic queens at Yaxchilan and Naranjo that often carry the kaloomte’ title and wear the Tlaloc costume to show that women were integral to the Tlaloc cult, and that such a cult involved not only incense offerings but also blood offerings and the conjuring of ancestors and gods.

Chapter 7 dedicated to God L, a denizen of the Underworld and patron god of long-distance trade and merchants, appears out of place as the last chapter in a book about Maya gods of war. Bassie-Sweet advances two hypotheses in this chapter: first that God L is the model for later gods, such as Gathered Blood, also a deity of the Underworld, who appears as the grandfather of the K’iche hero-gods, the Hero Twins, in the K’iche sacred book called Popol Vuh; second, that God L was associated with a particular mountain, Xucaneb on the Coban plateau, an important landmark on the major trade route connecting the Guatemalan highlands with the Maya lowlands. This trade route would have allowed the flow of important raw materials from the Guatemalan highlands into the lowlands, such as obsidian and jade. Bassie-Sweet demonstrated again an encyclopedic knowledge of trade routes and local topography in this area, as well as of the iconography and my-
Theology connected with God L. But one is still left asking if this chapter belongs here.

The book ends with a short summary and conclusion that recaps her overall argument. There has been a lot of recent interest in the relationship between Teotihuacan and Maya cities like Tikal, and this book engages with this topic, but very much from a religious perspective rather than a historical or social one. In other words, Bassie-Sweet’s interest is not to contest whether the entrada was a conquest or not, but rather to shed light on the religious aspects of this entrada long after Teotihuacan had collapsed. The images, symbols and regalia of Tlaloc continue to be used by Maya kings and queens into the Late Classic, and so Bassie-Sweet pursues the meaning of such symbols. She argues that these symbols can be explained as the Maya’s assimilation of Tlaloc into the pantheon as a thunderbolt/storm god like Chahk, but differentiated from Chahk by its connotations with meteors, obsidian, moths, and caterpillar-snakes. As a god, when the Maya kings or queens dressed as Tlaloc, they became Tlaloc and gained his powers. But such impersonation of Tlaloc must have involved a Tlaloc cult with its own rituals which she then pursues in Maya images and texts that show kings and queens in their Tlaloc costumes. This seems a worthy proposal, although the link to kaloomte’ is not as central to her argument as she would propose. The wealth of details in this book will reward every reader who has a foundation in Maya archaeology and art but may be difficult to follow by those who are not experts.