# The Birth of the Universe:
## The Maya Science of Pregnancy

**Apab'yan Tew's new book describes Maya birth practices and the sacred calendar**

### by Zach Lindsey

*The Birth of a Universe*
*Ri utik awex jun Kajulew*

*The Maya Science of Pregnancy*
*by Apab'yan Tew*

*High above a sea of clouds, Apab'yan Tew contemplates the beauty of the Highlands of Guatemala.     Book cover image by Walter Paz Joj.*

Birthdays are important in the Maya sacred calendar, so it is no surprise the daykeepers who use the calendar today in Guatemala know a thing or two about birth.

But *ahq'ij* (daykeeper) Apab'yan Tew knows more than a thing or two. In addition to his training in the sacred calendar, he is one of very few men trained as midwives in the Maya tradition.

Fearful of the loss of traditional knowledge happening in indigenous communities where he worked, Tew recently published: *The Birth of the Universe: The Maya Science of Pregnancy*. In the text, Tew lays out the Maya philosophy surrounding birth and the way pre-birth stressors and traumas on a mother can affect the future development of a child.

Under this idea, the day we are born is no accident: It is influenced by the experiences of the mother and her relationship with the mother's companion, if that person is around. The day, in turn, imbues the child with certain sacred forces which daykeepers call *Nawalib'*, a word many readers may recognize.

That stressors experienced by mothers can affect fetuses is almost certainly accurate, but Western psychology is only now beginning to work out the implications; Tew says the Maya have known it for 3,000 years.

The book has a metaphysical component, and Tew is interested in the epistemology of Maya knowledge. But Tew is also a more direct practitioner of Maya science. He is an instructor at the Kaqchikel Maya University in Guatemala who has aided in the delivery of many babies, as he says, in the "misty mountains" of the highlands.

There, patients often lack access to hospitals and give birth in their homes. But the ancient Maya practices still save lives. For example, breech births often require cesarean sections, which women in the rural areas cannot get. However, according to Tew, Maya midwives have the skills to avoid breech births altogether, using a combination of massage techniques and song vibrations.

Western doctors have typically lost these sorts of skills, but at least some people are learning them again. San Antonio-based *doula* (Greek for birth servant) Xelina Flores brought him to speak to *doulas* and midwives in Austin, which is where I got to see him. But he's spoken around the United States, and plans to come back in November if he can raise the funds. Until then, he's teaching Flores what he can so she can incorporate into a training

*L) Apab'yan stays true to his roots and is also an accomplished musician and dancer; original painting by Julia Elena Zavalia. R) Tew sings a birth-day song for a participant in the Austin, TX, sessions that Zach attended.*

session for other *doulas* and midwives, and he's providing Skype consultations of birthdays in the Maya calendar. If you're interested in one, email Flores at *xelinaflor7@gmail.com*

Mayanists both interested in the contemporary culture and the past will find insights of value in Tew's work, and you may just find some spiritual solace in it as well. Tew's website: *https://mayanscience.net/*

**Speaking of the past,** Tew and I chatted about many things after his presentation, but one thing I wanted to share with readers is the way contemporary Maya can provide important interpretations of their own past. I asked Tew about Palenque leader K'inich Kan B'ahlam, whom I'm studying at the university.
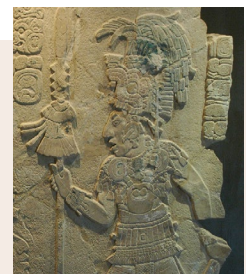
Kan B'ahlam's father was the great and successful Pakal... but Pakal was not the direct descendant of the Palenque founders. The lineage had been interrupted. When I asked Tew about Kan B'ahlam's birthday, the daykeeper was immediately suspicious. Kimi is a day associated with ancestors; people born on that day are intimately connected to the past and their ancient ancestors. It would be quite appropriate for a man who is trying to prove his right to rule to be born on the day Kimi.

We may never know for sure if Kan B'ahlam lied about his birthday, but doing so would certainly match with other propaganda pushed by the Palenque kings.