

Review of Aveni's comments on the Izapan Ballcourt Alignment

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In his 2009 book (*2012: The End of Time*), Aveni mentions my Izapa ballcourt alignment discovery. I had calculated this from the BYU maps, which were misleading because it was not clear if the 7° magnetic deviation had been applied. Consequently, some Izapa scholars (Timothy Laughton, personal communication 2001) did not think it was a valid solstice alignment and it has not factored into the purportedly thorough Izapa studies of Guernsey, Norman, and Rice. The BYU scholars themselves (Lowe et al., Norman) did not explicitly recognize it. My discovery (1996, 1998) was subsequently confirmed with my observations at Izapa, visually and with an azimuth-calibrating instrument.¹

In surprisingly vague language Aveni writes that I “claim” there is “creation imagery” “displayed” in the “vicinity” (54) of the Group F ballcourt. With Aveni & Hartung’s own measuring of the ballcourt (2000) I hoped he might concur with my evidence-based reconstruction of the ideology in the Group F ballcourt. But he doesn’t mention it (it is solar deity rebirth & worldrenewal facilitated by deity sacrifice). Instead, Aveni offers mitigating comments and ignores my arguments and the evidence I cite. He states that “we found it [the ballcourt] to align approximately 1 degree off the December solstice sunset/June solstice sunrise direction” (54) He continues: “However, the entire site exhibits the same orientation” (54) and “it’s a bit risky to pin all of one’s conclusions regarding orientations on a single ballcourt at an early site — and a non-Maya, peripheral one at that” (54). There are several factual and conceptual problems with Aveni’s critique, as well as omissions of relevant data.

1) The monuments containing imagery, events, and deities from the Maya Hero Twin Creation Myth are mostly *inside* the ballcourt (either along the walls or on the low walls and at the two extreme ends of the ballcourt). There are about a dozen relevant monuments, including a throne on the west end that defines the relevant direction of observation.

2) That these monuments depict creation imagery is not solely my “claim.” In my 1998 book (which Aveni is referring to) I cite and discuss the identification of creation imagery at Izapa in the work of Beatriz Barba de Piña Chan and Garth Norman. Later, I also discussed Timothy Laughton’s essay that explores the same thing. It’s true that these scholars barely note the ballgame’s important function in the creation mythology, or the ballcourt itself, but nevertheless the idea of creation imagery and deities at Izapa is there. It took my own detailed examination to clarify the interplay between ballgame symbolism, solar rebirth ideology, archaeoastronomical solstice alignment, and the Creation Myth deities depicted on the ballcourt monuments (the Hero Twins, Seven Macaw, and One Hunahpu). Aveni neglects a clear accounting of my work.

3) I do, however, argue my own unique “claims” in my book, the well-informed cogency of which should be obvious to anyone reading the lengthy and well-documented Part IV of my 1998 book *Maya Cosmogogenesis 2012*, which is the source Aveni uses.

¹ Online Izapa essays at <http://Alignment2012.com>, chapter in Jenkins (2002) and anthology article (2007). My elaboration of the “spiritual teachings” at Izapa (deity sacrifice techniques of letting go of false rulers) and a detailed summary of my Izapa work is found in the 3-CD audio program *Unlocking the Secrets of 2012* (Sounds True, 2007).

4) It's not clear how "1 degree off" is calculated or if Aveni's comment is supposed to cast doubt on the alignment. Sunrise observations can occur some distance above the horizon, and we can't assume that native skywatchers who constructed alignments as in the Izapa ballcourt were targeting the precise horizon sunrise azimuth. For example, there may have been a platform at the eastern end of the ballcourt. I've observed the solstice sunrise from the ballcourt. The sun must clear the low eastern mound and as it does so it angles to the south.² I documented that the ballcourt's angular direction afforded an excellent alignment to the sunrise.

5) The alignment is not to the "December solstice sunset/June solstice sunrise direction", as Aveni writes, but to the *December solstice sunrise/June solstice sunset* direction. Furthermore, the direction of viewing is obviously to the December solstice sunrise, because of the direction of the head on the front edge of the throne (on the west end of the ballcourt) and the six flat seating/viewing stones on the rise behind the throne, which overlook the ballcourt toward the southeastern sunrise horizon. The June solstice sunset azimuth is visually blocked by the high Mound 125a, which also probably had a wooden structure on its summit. The general June solstice sunset direction is, however, part of a death-rebirth dialectic I have identified at Izapa: it is the "death" direction of astral and solar falling, in which case the *fall* of Seven Macaw depicted on Stela 60 (east end of ballcourt, facing west) is a perfectly appropriate counterpart to the solar god-head *deity rebirth* on the throne that faces the December solstice sunrise azimuth. (Thus follows my interpretation of "deity sacrifice and solar renewal" in the World Age context at Izapa, via the dynamic interplay between Seven Macaw and One Hunahpu.)

6) Aveni writes that "the entire site exhibits the same orientation" (54). This is not exactly true when you examine the details. The main baseline of the site measured by the BYU surveyors has a 21° azimuth alignment, very precisely to the peak of Tacana volcano to the north. The perpendicular to this is 111°, some 3.5° away from the solstice sunrise azimuth. However, the Mound 40 alignment in Group B defines many of the perpendicular stela alignments in Group B (including Stelae 11 and 50) and is skewed about 2° further east, apparently to target the shallow cleft on the eastern flank of Tacana, which is about 2° down from the peak. That brings the perpendicular to 113°, which is closer to the solstice sunrise azimuth. Most interestingly, in Group F the ballcourt does not display "the same orientation" but is skewed a little further southward of the perpendicular to the nearby mound axis focused on Tacana, bringing it to 114° and very close to the December solstice sunrise alignment azimuth. This seems to be a consciously performed angular shift to make a more precise solstice sunrise orientation of the ballcourt. So, a more precise examination of the site's archaeoastronomy suggests that consciously manipulated adjustments put a special focus the ballcourt aligning to the solstice, which makes total sense considering the solar rebirth symbolism of the ballgame, reinforced by the congruent iconography of the ballcourt monuments.

7) Aveni's comment that I "pin all of [my] conclusions regarding orientations on a single ballcourt" is superficial and misleading. It apparently needs to be repeatedly emphasized that my conclusions about Izapa are based on an interdisciplinary integration of evidence from the ballgame symbolism, from the Creation Myth, from the monumental iconography of Izapa, and from the archaeoastronomy of all the groups. But the Izapa ballcourt is indeed an important source of evidence for my work, richly containing many iconographic statements, Creation Myth themes, and the ballgame symbolism itself provides a perfect confirmation of the "solar rebirth" facet of my conclusions. Izapa and Tak'alik Ab'aj are relevant sites for Maya calendar origins.

8) It's irrelevant that Aveni considers Izapa to be non-Maya (Michael Coe, by the way, considers

² See photos and calculations at <http://www.alignment2012.com/izapa-solstice-2006.html> (Jenkins 2007).

it Maya) because the Hero Twin episodes on Izapa's monuments have a historical continuity into the nearby highland post-Classic Maya regions. We might say that the Izapans clearly influenced the later Maya, or that Izapan ideas and traditions were adopted by the later Maya (possibly via Copan). Or, perhaps, that the Izapans *became* the later Maya, and thus were "early Maya."³ More relevant to my methodology, the pre-Classic Izapan-Isthmian culture is credited by many scholars with having been involved in the formulation of the Long Count calendar. For example, in her book *Maya Calendar Origins*, Prudence Rice adopts this viewpoint. She wrote the introduction to Aveni's book. Izapa may simply be "one site" but it is one site we should be studying for information about the Long Count's origins. Izapa certainly wasn't "peripheral" in this important context — on the contrary, it was *central*. Misleading assertions like these are useful in Aveni's polemical dismissals. His critique sounds perfectly logical and agreeable to the undiscerning reader who doesn't know much about Izapa and who trusts Aveni's judgments.

Aveni next summarizes the solstice-oriented cosmology in the Izapa region that he and Hartung proposed, but favors the June solstice because it "marks a more important time of year in the agricultural year" (54). This simply is not true in the hot and rainy lowlands of Izapa; the rains just keep coming all through June and July and *the winter solstice* marks a second maize harvest. He concedes that the December solstice "cannot be ruled out" because it "does happen to mark the Maya Long Count turnover." He nevertheless doesn't seem to fully acknowledge the iconographic, mound, and monumental placement evidence that rules out the June solstice as Izapa's primary concern, and that fully utilizes and supports the December solstice sunrise azimuth. That conclusion can be clearly seen in my discussions of the Group F ballcourt, and it should be mentioned that Norman did not write much at all about the ballcourt and neither did Guernsey, who Aveni mentions in subsequent paragraphs and who many oddly believe provides the most complete account of Izapa's monuments and cosmological thought.

In conclusion, it may seem trivial but Aveni's conceptual inversion error that states the ballcourt aligns to the December solstice sunset needs emphatic correction because other writers could pick up on this, as Restall & Solari (2011) did in reporting Aveni's error about the precession of the equinoxes, thereby supposedly "debunking" my 2012 alignment work. Such errors make it through the fact-checking of university press publication, go officially unacknowledged, and apparently serve a purpose (consciously applied or unconsciously desired) of mitigating and diluting my work. Typically of Hoopes, his 2011 review of Aveni failed to note these errors. Whitesides, in his multi-part Amazon review, perceived many shortcomings in Aveni's book and took him to task for them, including loose language and mistakes that never should have made it through the supposedly rigorous process of a university press's fact-checking standards.

Van Stone likes to say there are only a few books on 2012 by "scholars", with Aveni's being the only one published by a university press. However, with many conceptual biases, relevant omissions, anecdotal personal asides, wan dismissal of Tortuguero Monument 6 (he repeats Stuart's flawed reading that it involves a "descent" of the deity), and factual errors, Aveni's book is not as well documented or argued as, for example, my *Maya Cosmogogenesis 2012*, whose content 2012 critics like Van Stone don't even treat (unless through distorted secondary appropriations pulled from marketplace).

³ It's been suggested that Copan received Izapa settlers and cosmological ideology circa 150 AD because they are on the same latitude. Dennis Tedlock suggests that the post-Conquest Quiché Maya (who recorded the *Popol Vuh* Hero Twin myth) came from Copan, the "place of the bat" alluded to in the *Popol Vuh*.