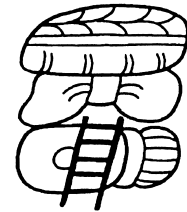


Glyph Dwellers is an occasional publication of the Maya Hieroglyphic Database Project, at the University of California, Davis. Its purpose is to make available recent discoveries about ancient Maya culture, history, iconography, and Mayan historical linguistics deriving from the project. Funding for the Maya Hieroglyphic Database Project is provided by the National Endowment for the Humanities, grants #RT21365-92, RT21608-94, PA22844-96, the National Science Foundation, #SBR9710961, and the Department of Native American Studies, University of California, Davis. Links to Glyph Dwellers from other sites are welcome.

© 2003 Martha J. Macri & Matthew G.Looper. All rights reserved. Written material and artwork appearing in these reports may not be republished or duplicated for profit. Citation of more than one paragraph requires written permission of the publisher. No copies of this work may be distributed electronically, in whole or in part, without express written permission from the publisher.

ISSN 1097-3737

Glyph Dwellers



Report 17

December 2003

The Meaning of the Maya Flapstaff Dance

MATTHEW G. LOOPER

About ten years ago, at the Maya Meetings at Texas, Elisabeth Wagner and I discussed possible meanings of the rituals depicted on Yaxchilan Stelae 11 and 16 and Lintels 9, 33, and 50. These eighth-century sculptures show rulers and subordinates holding or exchanging flapstaves—staff-like objects which incorporate a tubular fabric banners with T-shaped cutouts. The first clue to understanding the flapstaves comes from Carolyn Tate’s observation that the dates of the flapstaff rituals shown on these monuments at Yaxchilan all fall at the end of June, around the time of the summer solstice (Tate 1985; 1992). Because of this correspondence, as well as evidence from building alignments with summer solstice sunrise positions, she links these rituals to the sun, and especially to the *canícula*, the dry period in the otherwise rainy summer beginning at the solstice and continuing until about the second zenith passage in mid-August.

Epigraphic evidence is also relevant to the interpretation of these performances. In each of the examples from Yaxchilan, the image is accompanied by a verbal phrase incorporating the T516 verb followed by a “*ti*” expression” incorporating variable elements. Nikolai Grube’s (1992) decipherment of T516 as a verb meaning “dance” leads to the conclusion that the flapstaff performances are in fact dances. Moreover, Grube observed that the variable elements included in the *ti*’ expression give the name of the dance. Typically, the dance is named by the objects held by the dancers or by their costume. In the case of Yaxchilan Stela 11 and Lintels 9 and 33, the variable elements in the *ti*’ expression are **ja-sa-wa chan**, yielding *jasaw chan* (Fig. 1). Because these elements co-occur with images of the flapstaff, Mayanists have generally assumed that the flapstaves were called *jasaw chan*, without having a very clear idea what this term meant or what the significance of the flapstaff form was (though see discussion by Tate 1992:94-96). Although a celestial (and solar) interpretation of the flapstaff ritual seems likely, it was uncertain how these meanings were embodied in the name of the dance itself.

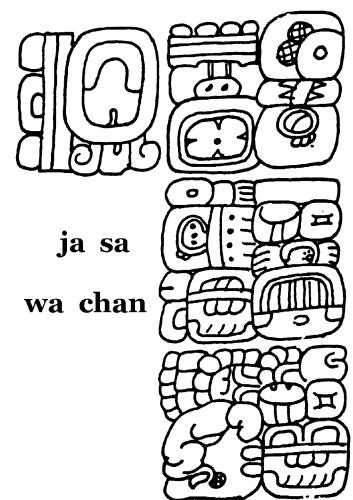


Figure 1. YAX St. 11 caption.

First, we should clarify the grammar of this expression. *Chan* “sky”, of course, is a noun. *Jasaw*, however, is a derived form based on the root *jas* plus a suffix *-aw* (*-Vw*). In the Maya script, in addition to its function as an inflection on transitive verbs, this *-Vw* suffix is used to derive adjectives from certain verbs. A well known example is in ruler names at Naranjo and Quirigua having the form: *k’ak tiliw chan chahk’yo’at*. In this case, *tiliw* appears to be an adjective derived from the intransitive verb *til* “burn” (see Kaufman and Norman 1984:132). Analogously, *jas* should be a verbal root.

So what is the meaning of this verb? One possibility Elisabeth Wagner and I entertained many years ago was to interpret *jas* in relation to Yucatek terms for “separate,” “divide,” or “clear.” In particular, we noted the dictionary entry <has muyal> “aclarar el tiempo quitándose las nubes” (Barrera Vasquez 1980:181). The same page includes the similar term <haatsal muyal> “aclararse el tiempo descubrirse el sol cuando está el cielo nublado o cuando llueve” (Barrera Vasquez 1980:181). Elsewhere, *hatz* <hats> is listed as a transitive verb meaning “parte dividida o apartada así de otra” and “repartir y dividir; apartar, separar” (Barrera Vásquez 1980:182, 183) and “divide; diminish” (Bricker et al. 1998:92). Nevertheless, there are significant phonetic differences between the Classic period term and this dictionary entry. First, the Yucatek term begins with a soft /h/ rather than the hard /j/ which is apparently signaled by the use of T181 in the inscriptions (see Martínez H. 1929:204r). Moreover, the final consonant of the Classic period term is clearly /s/, while the Yucatek term ends in /tz/. These phonemes are clearly differentiated in the Classic inscriptions.

Fortunately, another lintel from Yaxchilan, Lintel 50, provides evidence that the flapstaff dance was indeed based on a term for “divide/separate.” This lintel portrays the ruler K’inich Tatb’u Skull II performing the flapstaff dance on an unknown date (Fig. 2). However, in place of *jasaw chan*, the variable element of the dance expression that accompanies this image is spelled with two *hab’* signs (Fig. 3). I believe that this collocation spells the word *hab’ab’*. This is likely to be a derived form, based on the verb *hab’* and a suffix *-ab’*.

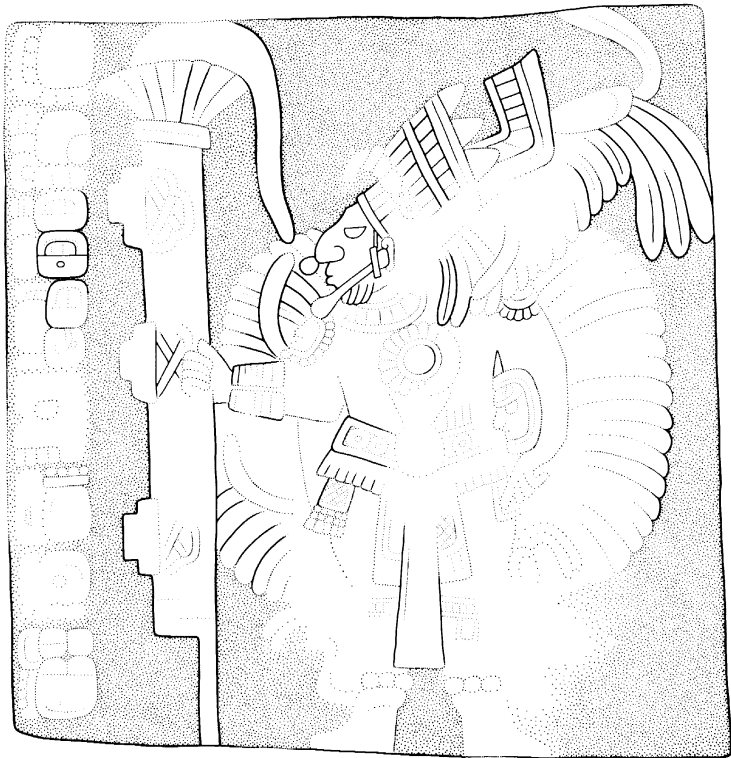


Figure 2. Yaxchilan Lintel 50. Drawing by Ian Graham.

In many lowland languages, a *-Vb’* suffix is used to derive instrumental nouns from verbs. For example, Kaufman and Norman (1984:145) reconstruct **-äb’* as the proto-Ch’olan instrumental suffix. However, the Ch’olan languages actually exhibit considerable variation. In modern Ch’ol, the instrumental suffix is *-ib’*, while Classical Chontal has *-Vb’* and modern Chontal *-ip’/-äp’*. Classical Ch’olti’ has *-Vb’*, while modern Ch’orti’ has *-ib’*. In my view, the evidence favors **-Vb’* for the proto-Ch’olan instrumental suffix. The same form exists in Yucatekan languages (In contemporary Itzaj and Lakantun, /b’/ becomes a glottal stop). Classic-period texts preserve several examples of this construction, including *uk’ib’* or *uk’ab’* “cup,” derived from *uk’* “drink” (Houston and Taube 1987:40; MacLeod 1990:327-328; Mora Marín 2000:10-18).

Interestingly, many Mayan languages preserve verbs for “divide” and “clear” having a form similar or identical to *hab’*. In some cases, the term means “open,” but is used with reference to clear skies:

Yukatek

hab ‘desembarazar, abrir, limpiar lo montuoso; desyerbar’ (Barrera Vásquez 1980:166)

hab’ (tv.) ‘clear away; separate/faggots so they will go out/; consume’ (Bricker et al. 1998:91)

xhab’ab’ (instr.) ‘extinguisher’ (Bricker et al. 1998:92)

Ch’ol

ham ‘open, clear’ (Attinasi 1973:267)

jam (vat.) ‘abrir (casa, libro, caja)’ (Aulie and Aulie 1978:62)

jamäl ‘buen tiempo’ (Aulie and Aulie 1978:62)

Ch’orti’

hahp [ha-h-p] ‘gape, gap, opening, passage’ (Wisdom 1950:459)

hebe ‘pull apart, open up, separate, place thing apart’ (Wisdom 1950:467)

hehb [from *hep*] ‘separation, cleavage, division’ (Wisdom 1950:467)

jab’a (vt.) ‘desocupar, abrir camino’ (Pérez Martínez et al. 1996:76)

Ch’olti’

hebe ‘abrir (verbo activo)’ (Moran 1935:4)

Chontal

häb (tv.) ‘open (e.g. doors)’ (Knowles 1984)

Tzeltal

jamal ‘abierto, claro’ (Slocum and Gerdel 1976:145)

Tzotzil

jam ‘open’ (Laughlin 1988, vol. II: 429)

jam ‘osil ‘have clear sky [have sky open]’ (Laughlin 1988, vol. II: 373)

If the meaning "divide/separate" or “clear” applies to the T516 expression on Yaxchilan Lintel 50, then the name of the dance may have been *hab’ab’*, “divider/clearer.” I suspect that this term referred directly to the flapstaff itself. Such a reading would fit the Yaxchilan flapstaff contexts well, for, as Tate discusses, the dances took place around the summer solstice, which marks one of the main divisions in the solar year. At this time, the sun reaches its northernmost position on the horizon, at the same time that the rainy season is interrupted by the *canícula*, during which the sky is relatively clear.

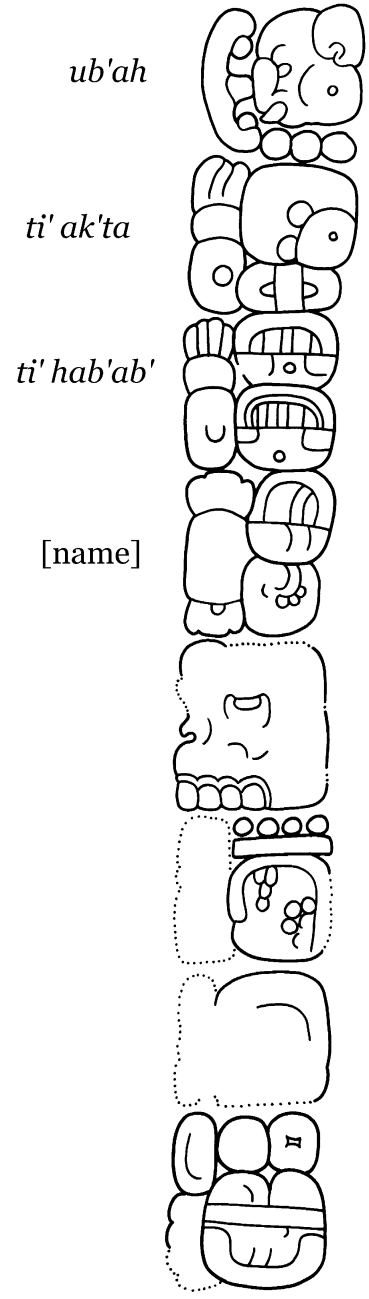


Figure 3. YAX Lnt. 50, text.
Drawing by author.

While Tate suggested that the flapstaves might have been used as gnomens to mark solar positions, it is also possible that the shape of these objects might relate to the long sticks used for planting seeds, since the *canícula* marked the occasion for the second planting of the agricultural year. It is possible that the staffs were the instruments of sympathetic magical rituals which the Maya used to influence the weather, not unlike those documented by Girard for the Ch’orti’. Whatever the significance of this paraphernalia, it seems very likely that the name of the flapstaff, “divider, clearer,” refers explicitly to the astronomical division of the solstice and/or to the *canícula* it inaugurates. The more common term for the flapstaff dance, *jasaw chan*, may also have been based on a term for “divide,” or “clear,” although the phonetics are not entirely consistent with this interpretation. Further research on the root *jas* is needed.

REFERENCES:

- Attinasi, John Joseph
1973 *Lak T'an: A Grammar of the Chol (Mayan) Word*. Ph.D. diss., University of Chicago.
- Aulie, H. Wilbur, and Evelyn W. de Aulie
1978 *Diccionario Ch'ol-Español, Español-Ch'ol*. Serie de Vocabulario y Diccionarios Indígenas "Mariano Silva y Aceves" 21. Instituto Lingüístico de Verano, Mexico City.
- Barrera Vásquez, Alfredo
1980 *Diccionario Maya Cordemex: Maya-Español, Español-Maya*. Ediciones Cordemex, Mérida.
- Bricker, Victoria R., Eleuterio Po'ot Yah, and Ofelia Dzul de Po'ot
1998 *A Dictionary of the Maya Language: As Spoken in Hocabá Yucatán*. University of Utah Press, Salt Lake City.
- Grube, Nikolai
1992 Classic Maya Dance: Evidence from Hieroglyphs and Iconography. *Ancient Mesoamerica* 3: 201-218.
- Houston, Stephen, and Karl A. Taube
1987 "Name-Tagging" in Classic Mayan Script. *Mexicon* 9:38-41.
- Kaufmann, Terrence S., and William M. Norman
1984 An Outline of Proto-Cholan Phonology, Morphology, and Vocabulary. In *Phoneticism in Mayan Hieroglyphic Writing*, edited by Lyle Campbell and John S. Justeson, pp. 77-167. Institute for Mesoamerican Studies Publication 9. Institute for Mesoamerican Studies, State University of New York, Albany.
- Knowles, Susan
1984 A Descriptive Grammar of Chontal Maya (San Carlos dialect). Ph.D. dissertation, Tulane University.
- Laughlin, Robert M.
1988 *The Great Tzotzil Dictionary of Santo Domingo Zinacantán*. Smithsonian Contributions to Anthropology 31. Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press.
- MacLeod, Barbara
1990 Deciphering the Primary Standard Sequence. Ph.D. dissertation, University of Texas at Austin.
- Martinez Hernandez, Juan
1929 *Diccionario de Motul Maya-Español*. Mérida: Talleres de la Compañía Tipográfica Yucateca.
- Mora Marín, David F.
2000 The Syllabic Value of Sign T77 as **k'i**. *Research Reports on Ancient Maya Writing* 46. Washington, DC: Center for Maya Research.
- Moran, Pedro
1935 *Arte y diccionario en lengua Choltí*. Baltimore: The Maya Society.
- Pérez Martínez, Vitalino, Federico García, Felipe Martínez, and Jeremias López
1996 *Diccionario del idioma Ch'orti'*. La Antigua Guatemala: Proyecto Lingüístico Francisco Marroquin.
- Slocum, Marianna C., and Florencia L. Gerdel
1976 *Vocabulario Tzeltal de Bachajon*. Serie de Vocabularios Indígenas "Mariano Silva y Aceves," 13. Mexico: Instituto Lingüístico de Verano.
- Tate, Carolyn
1985 Summer Solstice Ceremonies Performed by Bird Jaguar III of Yaxchilán, Chiapas, Mexico. *Estudios de Cultura Maya* 16:85-112.
1992 *Yaxchilan: The Design of a Maya Ceremonial City*. Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Wisdom, Charles
1950 *Materials on the Chortí Language*. Microfilm Collection of Manuscripts on Cultural Anthropology 28. Chicago: University of Chicago Library.