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 flapstaffs—staff-like objects which incorporate a tubular fabric banners with T-shaped cutouts. The first clue to understanding the flapstaffs 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 flapstaffs 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.
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 Yukatek 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 Yukatek 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 Yukatek 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’ínich 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’*.

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 Yukatekan 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’**


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

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

jab’a (vt.) ‘desocurar, 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.

While Tate suggested that the flapstaffs 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.

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