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A Mixe-Zoquean Origin for the Name of Tikal

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This report argues that an unusual spelling of the Tikal emblem glyph¹ on Tikal Stela 31, **ku-ku**, is consistent with a **MUT** value for the tied hair bun, HB1.² It appears to be a play on the Mixe-Zoquean word for 'spring', a reading proposed in Macri (2000). A unique variant of the Tikal emblem glyph as a Mixe-Zoquean pun adds support for a non-Mayan origin for the name of the site.

The tied hair bun motif appears in Mesoamerican art and scripts from Late Formative period through the Maya Classic period on rulers' headdresses: **Fig. 1a.** a face from the Bone from Kichpanha, Belize, **b.** glyph from Tak'alik Ab'aj Stela 87 (Mora-Marín n.d.), **c.** a face from a stone sphere at Los Angeles County Museum of Art, and **d.** the Isthmian sign MS182.³ Note that for **Fig. 1a, b,** and **c** the hair bundle is tied pointing to the back (Mora-Marín 2021:8–9).

¹ Emblem glyphs, composed of signs for 'holy' and 'ruler, lord' with a variable central sign, associated with a specific site, polity, or lineage were first recognized by Berlin (1958). Martin (2020) lists an inventory of over one hundred emblem glyphs known today.

² Maya graphemes are referred to the three-digit code developed for the Maya Hieroglyphic Database (Looper and Macri 1991–2023). For a full listing of Maya graphemes with their codes see Looper et al. (2022).

³ Isthmian graphemes are referred to by numbers preceded by MS (Macri and Stark 1993; Macri 2017)

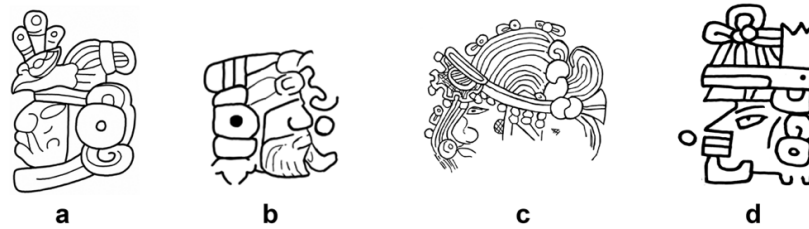


Fig. 1. Tied hair bun: **a.** Face from Kichpanha Bone, Institute of Archaeology, Belmopan, Belize (drawing by Peter Mathews (Gibson, Shaw, and Finamore 1986)), **b.** Tak'alik Ab'aj Stela 87 (drawing by David Mora-Marín), **c.** Face from a stone sphere at Los Angeles County Museum of Art, M.2010.115.247 (drawing by David Mora-Marín), **d.** Isthmian sign MS182 (drawing by author after George Stuart).

In Classic Maya texts the hair bun sign, HB1, itself occurs as a grapheme exclusively to refer to the site of Tikal, and after 652 CE, to the site of Dos Pilas/Aguateca.⁴ It does not have any other known reference in Maya texts.⁵ Its earliest attestations are on an Early Classic shell (**Fig. 2a**) and on a mask on the chest of Chak Took Ihch'aak I on Tikal Stela 29, 8.12.14.8.15 (278 CE; **Fig. 2b**). Two examples of HB1 as a Tikal toponym, not yet as a full emblem glyph, occur on Tikal Stela 39, 8.17.0.0.0 (377 CE) in the phrase *yax mutul/mutal chan ch'en?* 'first Tikal realm [sky cave]' (**Fig. 2c, d**)

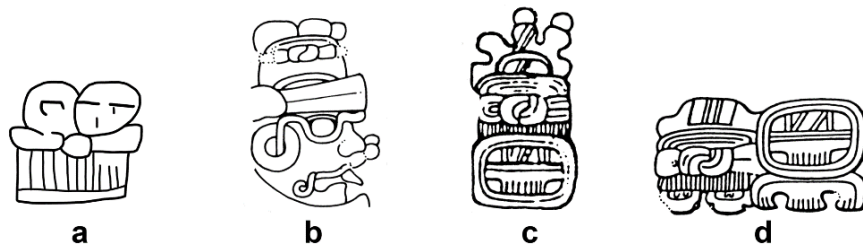


Fig. 2. Early examples of HB1: **a.** Shell Depicting a Marine Deity, Princeton Museum of Art, y1985-48 (drawing by author), **b.** Tikal emblem glyph, Tikal Stela 19 B8 (drawing by William Coe, Jones and Satterthwaite 1982), **c.** Tikal Stela 39 front detail, **d.** Tikal Stela 39 A8 (**c-d** after Laporte and Fialko 1995:fig. 37).

The earliest examples of HB1 as a Tikal emblem glyph occur on the 'Hombre de Tikal', 8.18.10.8.12 (396 CE) (**Fig. 3**). One variant has the **K'UH** 'god, holy' prefix (**Fig. 3a**), two have the **AJAW** 'lord' superfix (**Fig. 3a, c**), and three have the **la** subfix, frequent on toponyms and emblem glyphs, probably representing a

⁴ At Copan, an eroded glyph on the Motmot floor marker at B8 was tentatively identified as HB1 in what appears to refer to the Motmot temple, named for the Tikal-style, later called Peten-style (Traxler 2004:59), apron moldings on its east side.

⁵ HB1 may appear in the name of a captive on an eroded monument at Dzilam, near the town of Motul (Martin and Grube 2008:30).



locative suffix *-al* 'place of _', a derivational suffix also known as a morphosyllable⁶ (Fig. 3b, c, d). These differences as well as the tie around the hair, depicted slightly differently in each example, demonstrate the Maya scribal preference for artistic and spelling variation.

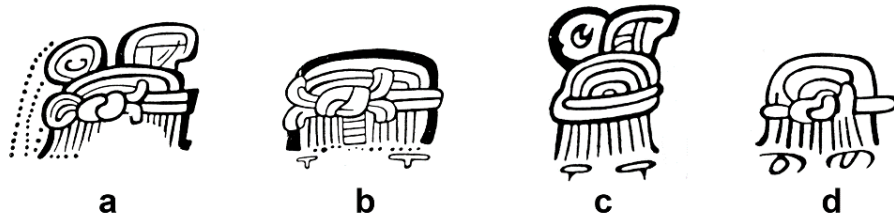


Fig. 3. Earliest Tikal emblem glyphs on Hombre de Tikal: a. C5, b. F4, c. F6, d. F7 (drawing by Rene Ozaeta, Rafael Pinelo, Rolando Caal; Fahsen 1988).

In 1993 David Stuart proposed a **MUT** value for the main sign of the Tikal (and Dos Pilas/Aguateca) emblem glyph as hair twisted or coiled and tied into a bun, HB1, with phonetic complements **mu** and **tu** (Schele, Fahsen, and Grube 1995:5). Stuart recently noted an additional example of a full syllabic spelling of **mu-tu** on Dos Caobas Stela 2 confirming the reading of **MUT** (Stuart 2023). Relevant words in Yucatec Maya include:

mut 'rodete para asentar olla o vasija' [coil for setting a pot on] (Barrera Vásquez, Bastarrachea Manzano, and Brito Sansores 1980:542).

mu'ut 'abultado' [mounded, bulging] (Hofling and Tesucún 1997:459)

mut pol and *mut k'ax pol* 'rodete hacer la mujer de sus cabellos' [coil women make with their hair] (literally 'head twist' 'head mountain twist') (Barrera Vásquez, Bastarrachea Manzano, and Brito Sansores 1980:542).

The meaning 'hair bun' would seem an unusual toponym. Several years ago I suggested that the proposed value of **MUT** for the main sign of the Tikal emblem glyph originated as *mu't*, the Mixe-Zoquean word for 'spring' (Macri 2000),⁷ evidence of an early presence of Mixe-Zoquean speakers in the Maya lowlands. The Mixe-Zoquean root **mu't* 'manar/spring (water)' or **mu't-ä* 'manar/to well up' (Terrence Kaufman personal communication, March 2000), however, aptly describes the location of the earliest human settlement at the site. Peter Harrison writes:

"... Tikal's swampside location readily suggests an excellent reason for its settlement in addition to trade considerations... . In all likelihood, these earliest settlers reached the Tikal location by water routes and settled there because of ease of access, fertility of the uplands surrounding the

⁶ For more on morphosyllables see Mora-Marin (2010); Houston (2011:28–29); Justeson (1989).

⁷ All Mixe-Zoquean words, including protoforms, are from Wichmann (1995) unless otherwise specified. All Mayan protoforms are from Kaufman (2003).

flanks of the swamp, and the prominence of the ridges that characterize the center of the site" (Harrison 1999:15).

More recently Scarborough and Grazioso note that the springs "associated with the head end of the original arroyo now defined by the descending Temple-Palace-Hidden Reservoir chain were a colonizing attraction," and that the "elevated spring access set the Tikal ridgetop apart" (Scarborough and Grazioso Sierra 2015:37–38). Additional detail about early settlement at Tikal and the importance of water management is described by Lentz and team (Lentz, Dunning, and Scarborough 2015; Lentz et al. 2018). Interestingly, one interpretation suggested for the modern name for Tikal is *ti ak'al* 'at the waterhole' (Martin and Grube 2008:30).

The hypothesis that the site was known to Mixe-Zoquean speakers as *mu't* 'spring' does not mean that Mixe-Zoquean speakers were necessarily the earliest inhabitants of Tikal, but that they gave it a name in their language, and the Maya of the Classic period continued to refer to it by that name.

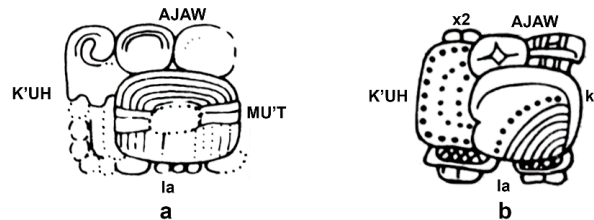


Fig. 4. Tikal Emblem Glyph variants: **a.** Tikal Stela 19 B8, **b.** Tikal Stela 31 E11 (drawings by William Coe; Jones and Satterthwaite 1982).

One reason for questioning the **MUT** reading is the presence of a unique variant of the Tikal emblem glyph on the Early Classic Stela 31 at E11. The stela records the half-k'atun ending 9.0.10.0.0 (435 CE). Where one would expect HB1 there is a doubling of the syllabogram **ku** (**Fig. 4b**). Dmitri Beliaev proposed that this syllabic spelling is evidence that HB1 should be read **KUK**, instead of **MUT** (Beliaev and de León 2013:45). The variant begins with the sign **K'UH**, Epigraphic Mayan *k'uhul* 'holy',⁸ with a doubling sign for ZC1s **ku**, followed by **la**, spelling **K'UH ku-ku-la AJAW**, SG1 22A ZC1s ZA2 ZB1, *k'uhul kukul/kukal ajaw* 'holy lord of Tikal'.

In the Yucatec language and in proto-Maya *ku'k* is 'squirrel', suggesting literally 'place of squirrels' or 'place of the/a squirrel'. This alternate form of the main sign of the Tikal emblem glyph could simply mean that Tikal was named for an abundance of squirrels. I propose that this unique, variant confirms the correctness of the **MUT** reading. The **ku-ku** spelling can be explained by the homophony of words for 'squirrel' and 'spring' in Mixe-Zoquean languages. The proto-Mixe-Zoquean word for squirrel, **mu:tu*, is nearly homophonous with **mu't* 'spring'. Thus, the *kukul/kukal* variant can be explained as a translation into Mayan of a play on the similarity of the Mixe-Zoquean words for 'squirrel' and 'spring'. Either the

⁸ Epigraphic Mayan is a term that refers to a lexical form known from glyphic texts used by Kaufman (2003).

scribes responsible for the text of Stela 31 were familiar with Mixe-Zoquean vocabulary, or the pun on Mixe-Zoquean 'squirrel' for 'spring' was a known alternate name, based on the nearly homophonous words, but frozen by the time of writing.

This marked spelling of the name of Tikal is only one of several "foreign" (non-Maya) elements on Stela 31 (Coggins 1975; Martin and Grube 2008:29–35; Proskouriakoff 1993; Schele and Freidel 1990:153–164; Stuart 2000; 2011). The front of the stela features Sihyaj Chan K'awiil II, while the sides of the stela show two images of his father, Yax Nuun Ahiin I, dressed as a Teotihuacan warrior. Yax Nuun Ahiin I, whose father may have been a ruler of Teotihuacan, is also pictured floating above the portrait of Sihyaj Chan K'awiil II, who holds a headdress containing a Teotihuacan war emblem (**Fig. 5a**). Nielsen and Helmke credit David Stuart with pointing out another element of central Mexican influence in the text above the left image of Yax Nuun Ahiin I at L2 (2011:346–47). This is a syllabic spelling **ko-sa-ka**, *koska-tl* a Nahuatl word for 'jewel, ornament, necklace' (Karttunen 1983:43), which sits above a unique sign depicting a woven mat throne, typical of central Mexico (**Fig. 5b**).



Fig. 5. Elements on Tikal Stela 31: **a.** Front: Teotihuacan war emblem, **b.** L2: **ko-sa-ka-chi-THRONE** sequence (images modified after William Coe, (Jones and Satterthwaite 1982).

The proposed pun demonstrates that the **ku-ku** spelling, once seen as a challenge to a **MUT** reading of HB1, as well as the hypothesis that Mixe-Zoquean speakers referred to the site using the word for 'spring', is in fact consistent with a **MUT** value for the sign. The presence of Mixe-Zoquean speakers in the central Maya lowlands would seem to date no later than the Late Formative period, perhaps as early as the Middle Formative. It would have probably preceded any central Mexican influence. In having their name for Tikal adopted by the Maya, Mixe-Zoquean speakers had to have had considerable authority and prestige, whether or not their population was sizeable or their residence long-lasting.

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