

‘Flaming Akbal’ and the Glyphic Representation of the *aj-* Agentive Prefix

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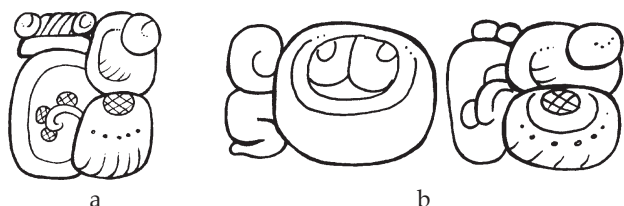


Figure 1. The *bubulha'* toponym: a) Unprovenanced miniature altar, side, glyph 8 (after Mayer 1980:plate 28); b) Piedras Negras Panel 2, I'2-J'2. (All drawings by the author.)

Some years ago now, I pointed out a potential substitution between T12 **AJ** and an uncommon sign dubbed ‘flaming akbal’ in the context of an obscure toponymical title from the Upper Usumacinta region (Zender 1999:115).¹ Thus, on a miniature memorial altar in the collections of the Art Institute of Chicago (Mayer 1980:20), a Late Classic lord of Lacanha named Ahkul Paat bears the title **AJ-bu-lu-HA'**, *ajbulha'* or “He of/from Bulha'” (Figure 1a). A very similar reference appears on Piedras Negras Panel 2 (Figure 1b). Here, a much earlier Lacanha lord named Yich'aak Paat carries a title composed of the ‘flaming akbal’ glyph followed by **bu²-lu-HA'**, or *bubulha'*. The similarity in these two designations—*bulha'* and *bubulha'*—is striking, especially when the tendency of Maya scribes towards haplography (the omission of duplicate signs) is taken into consideration (Zender 1999). As such, it seemed at least plausible that both spellings might have signaled *bubulha'*, and so I suggested that the ‘flaming akbal’ glyph might be considered analogous to T12 **AJ**,

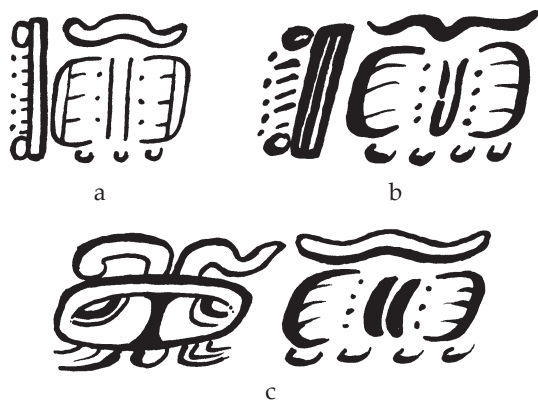


Figure 2. Phonetic substitution in name of Naranjo Ruler 1: a) NAR Alt.1, G2; b) TIK MT-16, burial 72; c) Vase K6813 (after a photograph by Justin Kerr).

perhaps providing a distinct spelling of the agentive prefix *aj-*.

On the whole, this suggestion has been well received, and a number of colleagues have found the **AJ** value to be productive in other contexts (e.g., Martin 2000, Tokovinine 2003). However, there has also been some confusion arising out of the nature of the posited equivalency between T12 and ‘flaming akbal’. In what follows, I provide further support for an **AJ** reading of ‘flaming akbal’, and also highlight what I take to be its essentially morphemic function as an agentive prefix.

One key context for the ‘flaming akbal’ sign is to be found in the name phrase of Naranjo’s Ruler 1. Typically, as on Naranjo Altar 1 and Tikal MT-16 (Figures 2a-b), the core part of this ruler’s name is spelled **AJ-?-sa-ji**, where T12 probably provides the agentive prefix *aj-*.² However, in one virtually identical spelling on a late sixth-century vessel (K6813), T12 is replaced by the ‘flaming akbal’ sign, suggesting that it marks the agentive prefix in this instance (Figure 2c). While unfortunately unprovenanced, both the style of the vessel and the surrounding titles leave little doubt about the attribution to Naranjo’s Ruler 1 (Martin and Grube 2000:71).

Another important substitution can be found on the Group IV head from Palenque, excavated by Roberto López and Arnoldo González in 1994 (López 2000:43). Its ample hieroglyphic text references the accession of one K’abis Uchiñ Aj Sik’ab to the priestly office of *ti’sakhuun*, before going on to describe his supervision of the accessions of acolytes and his participation in various other ritual activities (Zender 2004). Interestingly, while the latter part of his name

¹ Due in part to its rarity, this complex sign has yet to be satisfactorily cataloged. Thompson (1962:99-101) did not provide it with a unique number, and instead considered it a compound of T122 **K’AHK’** and T504 **AK’AB**. Nevertheless, the sign’s contexts urge its reappraisal as a single, complex unit. For their part, Macri and Loooper (2003:171-172) accept the unique identity of ‘flaming akbal’ — which they designate ‘SSF’ in their system — but erroneously equate it with a series of signs and sign-compounds involving **K’AWIIL**.

² While the second sign in Ruler 1’s name has long been read as **wo**, Simon Martin (personal communication, 2004) points out that the outward flanges of the **wo** sign always fold in towards accompanying signs, whereas this sign flares outwards and is therefore likely to have a different value.

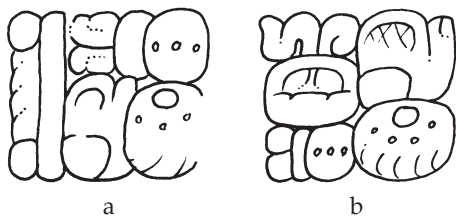


Figure 3. Phonetic substitution in name of Aj Sik'ab, Palenque: a) PAL, Group IV Head, A7 (after author photograph); b) PAL, Group IV Head, F3 (after author photograph).

is typically written **AJ-si-k'a-ba** (Figure 3a), with T12 providing the **AJ**, this is replaced in one instance with the 'flaming akbal' sign (Figure 3b). Again, this suggests an equivalency between the two signs.

Perhaps the most intriguing substitution occurs at Tonina, where the name of the high-ranking *ajk'uhuun* Aj Ch'aaj Naah appears on some four monuments from the late seventh and early eighth centuries. A typical spelling of the name (**AJ-CH'AAJ-NAAH**) can be seen on Monument 140 (Figure 4a) and clearly involves T12 **AJ** as the initial agentive prefix. On Monument p38, however, and as first pointed out by Simon Martin (2000), the head variant of 'flaming akbal' apparently substitutes for T12 in the spelling **AJ-CH'AAJ-NAAH-hi**.³ As with the previous substitutions, it would seem that 'flaming akbal' here provides the agentive prefix on the name.

Important as they are for establishing the value of a sign, substitutions like the foregoing are most noteworthy for the insights they can eventually lend to unique contexts. By way of example, late in November of 2000, INAH excavations at Tonina uncovered a remarkable stela bearing one of the earliest known portraits of an *ajk'uhuun* (Yadeun, in Schwartz 2001; Yadeun, personal communication 2002), recounting and depicting his supervision of the period ending on 9.9.0.0.0 3 Ajaw 3 Sotz' (May 12, A.D. 613). Most importantly for present purposes, a small interior text (Figure 5) also recounts his **CHUM-ji-ya ta-AJ K'UH-na-IL**, *chuhmjiiny ta-ajk'uhuun-il* or "seating in *ajk'uhuun*-ship" some 203 days prior to the period-ending, on 9.8.19.7.17 8 Caban 5 Ceh (October 21, A.D. 612) (Miller and Martin 2004:188; Zender 2004:156-157).

Whereas almost all other spellings of the *ajk'uhuun* title involve T12 **AJ**—save for a few late examples

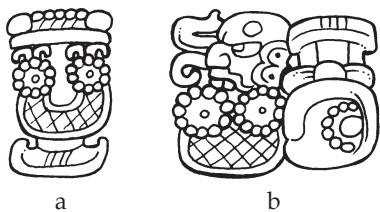


Figure 4. Phonetic substitution in name of Aj Ch'aaj Naah, Tonina: a) TNA M.140, pN; b) TNA p.38, O.

involving **a** (see below)—this unique spelling can now be accepted as a reference to the same title on the strength of the substitutions set forth above. Similarly, the frequent occurrences of the 'flaming akbal' sign on pottery (e.g., K4333, 4340, 4481) and a number of other occurrences on monuments (including two others on Piedras Negras Panel 2) can now be understood as agentives as well. In numerous script contexts, then, the 'flaming akbal' **AJ** sign plays a part in personal names and toponymical titles predicated on the presence of the prefixed *aj-* agentive.

Let us now turn to recent questions concerning the likely function of the 'flaming akbal' sign. Wichmann (2002), for instance, has recently proposed that both 'flaming akbal' and T12 are in fact syllabic signs. Yet while it is true that T12 has traditionally been read as phonetic **a** and included as such in a number of popular works on Maya writing (e.g. Coe and Van Stone 2001:157, Macri and Looper 2003:272, Montgomery 2002:132), it is nevertheless clear that the sign has a predominantly logographic value of **AJ** (Grube 2004; Jackson and Stuart 2001:218-219). Evidence for this value spans phonetic substitutions with **Ca-ja** syllables in both possessed (**ya-ja-K'UH-na**, on K4340) and unpossessed forms (**'a-ja-ko-ba-'a**, on Edzna St. 20), and also encompasses linguistic reconstruction of the agentive prefix (Proto-Ch'olan **aj-*, Kaufman and Norman 1984:139).

Further, lest we indulge in the synoptic fallacy of deriving canonical values from the results of diachronic change, it is critical to note that neither T12 nor 'flaming akbal' ever substitute with bonified **a** syllables prior to the mid-eighth century A.D. (Zender 2004:165). Thus, only in inscriptions dating after ca. A.D. 750 is this sign acrophonically reduced to the purely phonetic sign **a** (as in a late **a-ku**, *ahk* "turtle" spelling from Yaxchilan HS.2, Step VIII, D1-3). Moreover, it is at about this same time that the purely phonetic **a** signs—such as the T743 "parrot head" **a** and its abbreviated T228/229 "parrot beak" **a**—begin to invade substitution sets previously closed to all but T12 and 'flaming akbal' (e.g., **a-K'UH-HUUN-na** on K1728, dated after A.D. 740, and **IX-a K'UH-na** on Yaxchilan L. 32: K1-K2, dated to ca. A.D. 756) (Zender 2004:180-186). When examined from a diachronic perspective, long accepted patterns of substitution between T12 (and 'flaming akbal') and the **a** syllables turn out to be the sporadic and late markers

³ While admittedly unique, this compound is quite easy to explain, since it is comprised of a T122 **K'AHK'** affix (itself part of the more typical 'flaming akbal' glyph) and T1009, the well-known head variant for T504 **AK'AB**. It is interesting to note that, as in the case of **TZ'AK** (Stuart 2003) and a few other playfully complex signs, the 'flaming akbal' compound permitted such variation in its constituent signs. Other complex signs, like the 'dawn' glyph **PAS**, do not permit even the most basic substitutions for their constituents.

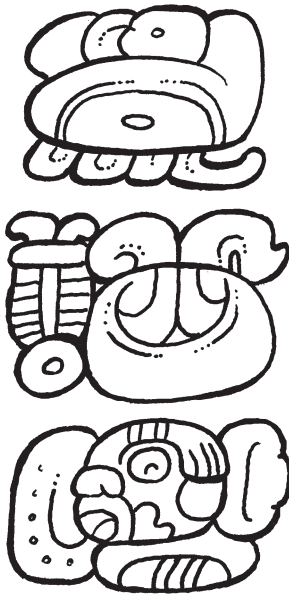


Figure 5. Accession phrase of early seventh-century *ajk'uhuum*, TNA M.183.

of sound change and/or orthographic reform in action (Grube 2004; Houston et al. 2004). Given the rigid distinction between these sign sets that characterizes most of the Classic era, a more convincing explanation for these patterns is to see both T12 and 'flaming akbal' as **AJ** logographs, largely distinct from the "parrot"-based **a** syllables.

But this is not to say that both of the **AJ** signs are functionally equivalent as markers of the agentive prefix. On the contrary, for while T12 **AJ** certainly spells the agentive in many of its occurrences, it is also regularly employed to write an as yet undetermined suffix in the distance number introductory glyph (**U-TZ'AK-AJ?**), frequently marks a suffixed agentive (**K'AHK'-AJ**, **EHB-AJ**; Houston et al. 2001:6-7), and occasionally appears as a toponymical suffix (**IK'-AJ?**). On the whole, then, it would probably be unwise to link T12 **AJ** with any single script function. By contrast, however, and to judge solely from current evidence, the 'flaming akbal' sign is employed for no other purpose than to write the agentive. Nor is there any indication that this sign was ever employed in a purely phonetic capacity—i.e., as a phonetic complement, or as part of the spelling of a wholly unrelated word. Of the two signs, 'flaming akbal' therefore emerges as the better candidate for a morphemic sign. Indeed, considering both its strong restriction to the agentive context and its eschewal of purely phonetic environments, the sign certainly bears comparison to the class of 'morphosyllables' proposed by Houston et al. (2001) and suggests that there may yet be other purely morphemic signs in the corpus.

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