

Spreading Wings: A Possible Origin of the **k'i** Syllable

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This note offers a possible explanation for use of a bird's wing (Figure 1) as the syllable **k'i**. A **k'V** value had been considered for many years for the sign commonly found in the “wing-quincunx” glyph, and Mora-Marín (2000) has now presented strong evidence in favor of a **k'i** reading. As support for this we can point to a text excavated recently at Piedras Negras, where the bird wing precedes the local title **K'IN-ni-AJAW** (*K'in Ajaw*, “Sun Lord”); in this context, it can only serve as a phonetic complement in the spelling **k'i-K'IN-ni-AJAW** (Houston, personal communication, 1998).



Figure 1

Following some earlier observations by Macleod and Stross (1990), Mora-Marín suggests that Yucatecan *xik'*, “wing” (< proto-Mayan **xiik'*) might be the origin of the **k'i** value, but such a derivation seems overly complex. Here I would like to offer an alternative, based on the Tzeltalan verb *k'iy*, “spread out.”

In early examples the wing regularly takes the form of *two* wings (Figure 2), indicating that the graphic origin of the sign is more complex than we might imagine from the common Late Classic form. These are representations of “spread” wings in numerous early cases, and it is therefore probably significant that **k'iy* means “to spread (out)” in proto-Tzotzil-Tz'eltal (Kaufman 1972). Today the verb can be traced in Tzotzil, Tzeltal and in Ch'ol (where it may be a borrowing, in fact).

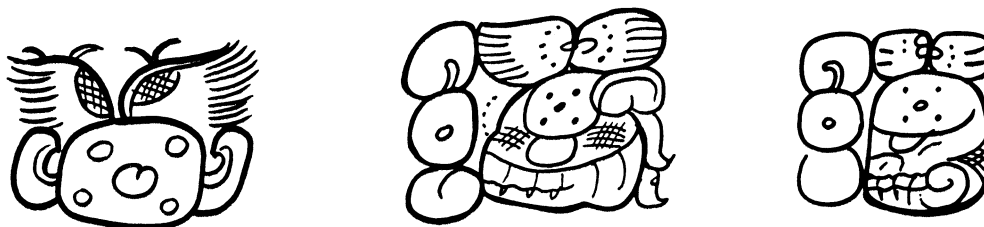


Figure 2

Several different words are glossed as “spread” among Tzeltalan and Ch’olan languages, but the semantics of *k’i(y)* specifically revolve around spreading things out in the sun—items such as cloth, beans, one’s hair, and so on. Significantly, *k’iy* can refer also to the “spreading” of wings. One example comes from modern Tzotzil, in a text collected by Laughlin (1977, no. 134) and grammatically analyzed by Ringe (1981):

k’ot s-ta li pepen-e, x-k’i-et ta ti’ barko
“Butterfly reached them, sprea...ding [its wings] alongside the ship”

Here, admittedly, the wings are of a butterfly and not a bird, but an extension to birds’ wings does not seem far-fetched. Perhaps a question posed to a native speaker of Tzotzil and Tzeltal could determine if *k’i(y)* can refer to the spreading of birds’ wings during drying or at other times.

In sum, the semantics of *k’i(y)*, “spread out,” seem a reasonable explanation of the visual origin of the **k’i** syllable.

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