



Hurricane!

STEPHEN HOUSTON

Brown University

The Yucatan peninsula and environs often receive the full brunt of hurricanes. In recent memory, the most notable has been Hurricane Mitch, which grew by October 26, 1998, into a category 5 storm on the Saffir-Simpson scale.¹ On October 4, 2005, Hurricane Stan, although weaker than Mitch, resulted in landslides throughout highland Guatemala, with much loss of life in the area around Lake Atitlan.² It would be surprising if the ancient Maya did not take note of such events, too. Hurricanes can be expected with fair frequency during the “official” season from June 1 to November 30, when tropical depressions breed storms that are likely to affect the Maya lands.

The terms for “hurricane” or “strong, revolving winds” vary in Mayan languages yet stress a few consistent themes:

Ch’olti’

numiail “grande tormento [great storm]” (Ringle n.d.)
yaxcaxha “tempestad” (Ringle n.d.)

Ch’orti’

ch’ih chan ik’ar “storm, hurricane (said to be caused by the passing of a chicchan)”
(Wisdom 1950)
noj ik’ar “hurricane [great wind]” (Hull 2004:89)
sian ik’ar “strong continuous wind, wind coming from several directions”
(Wisdom 1950)
sutut ik’ar “whirlwind” (Wisdom 1950)
sutub ihc “remolino de viento” (Wisdom 1950)

Ch’ol

a’ic’ “viento fuerte [madre de viento]” (Aulie and Aulie 1998)
sutut ic’ “remolino de viento” (Aulie and Aulie 1998)

Yukatek

chak ik’ “great wind” (Barrera Vásquez 1980:79)
chak ik’al haa’ “earthquake or tempest, storm...seasonal” (Barrera Vásquez 1980:79)
chak bul ik’ “tempest or wind storm [great dousing wind]” (Barrera Vásquez 1980:79)
keh ik’ “strong whirlwind” (Barrera Vásquez 1980:309)
ma’lay ik’ “huracan [lasting wind?]” (Barrera Vásquez 1980:490)
moson “torbellino [whirlwind]” (Barrera Vásquez 1980:530)
xawal ik’ “hurricane [revolving wind]” (Barrera Vásquez 1980:936)
xaway “viento que corre de todas partes [wind that runs from all directions]”
(Barrera Vásquez 1980:936)

¹ www.osei.noaa.gov/mitch.html

² www.nhc.noaa.gov/archive/2005/tws/MIATWSAT_nov.shtml

Hurricane!

Tzotzil

'ipal chamelal ik' "strong, killing wind" (Laughlin 1988, I:148)

Poqom

kakteu "hurricane [great wind]" (Feldman 2004:79)

kakzut "hurricane of wind, that whirls [great turning]" (Feldman 2004:79)

K'ekchi'

cak-sut-ik'[kaqsut iq'] "huracán [great turning wind]" (Haeserijn 1979:82)

Q'anhob'al

kaq xuchem "remolino (viento) [whirlwind]" (Kaufman 2003:1307)

Teko

sak chum pay "remolino (viento) [whirlwind]" (Kaufman 2003:1307)

This short sample includes terms for "wind" (*ik'* in Lowland languages), with the added meanings of force or strength, seasonality, deadly danger, magnitudes of water, and wind that comes from many directions—all, to be sure, the precise features of a hurricane. Ch'orti' explains such winds as the movement or writhings of a powerful serpent. Testifying to the force of tropical storms, Diego de Landa describes "a hurricane of four winds" that "overthrew all the large trees causing a great destruction of every kind of game ...[:] it looks as if the whole had been cut off by scissors" (Tozzer 1941:40-41).

There are two pieces of evidence that the Classic Maya took note of hurricanes or catastrophic winds. The first is a glyph on Naranjo Altar 1 (Figure 1), a monument now in the Museo Popol Vuh of Guatemala City. The sculpture dates to 9.8.0.0.0 5 Ajaw 3 Ch'en (August 22, AD 583, Julian) but highlights an earlier event at 9.5.10.1.3 5 Ak'bal 11 Sotz' (June 3, 544). There seems little doubt that the text involves a war-like act, with the "mountains of skulls" (G10, *wits u-jol*) and "pools of blood" (H1, *naab ch'ich'*?, David Stuart, personal communication 1998). What follows, at position I1, is a glyph that recalls the passage from Landa, a sky sign surrounded on four sides by the glyph for "wind," **IK'**. What follows is not entirely clear but may record a label linked historically with a woman from the area of Tikal (K2573, Fig. 2). The decipherment of this sign is elusive. Prefixed by the **ko** syllable, it may document some kind of altar or stony feature. A few authors suggest that the



Figure 1. Naranjo Altar 1: G12-I4 (Graham 1978:103).



Figure 2. Close-up, text on K2573 (copyright Kerr Associates).

Hurricane!



Figure 3. Storm as *way*, Museo Popol Vuh (photograph by author, 1986).

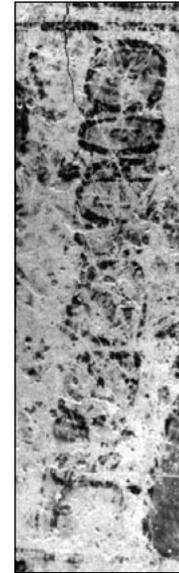


Figure 4. Close-up, caption, Museo Popol Vuh (photograph by author, 1986).

principal glyph is none other than the **WITS** sign, but formal differences make this suggestion unlikely. Nor is it likely that the **ko** yields the value of the logograph. It is instead a descriptive prefix, an abbreviated version of “turtle,” **KOK**, as shown by a recently discovered spelling of the compound, also in a toponymic setting, on the Temple XVII panel at Palenque (David Stuart, personal communication 2006). The point here is that, at Naranjo, the sign may signal an historical location and imply belligerent actions against that place, a view buttressed by the use of this glyphic compound in war-related, toponymic contexts in the Structure B16 stuccos at Caracol, Belize (Simon Martin, personal communication 2006). Presumably, this location lay somewhere within reach of, and perhaps between, Naranjo and Caracol. The events are supervised by a well-known king of Naranjo, “Aj Wosal,” evidently in the guise of the **1-AJAW-wa-K’UH**, the “1 Ajaw god,” the principal Hero Twin.

A mounding of skulls, a pooling of blood—truly this was a landscape of human destruction. Can the event, at I1, simply be a reference to a “hurricane,” taking place at the beginning of the “official season,” on June 3, 544? The iconographic properties of the glyph show the four winds disposed around the sky, so this reading is plausible. Or is the “hurricane” a bold metaphor for damage induced by humans? That these events have an agent, the king of Naranjo, suggests the latter.

“Aj Wosal”—perhaps an inaccurate rendering of his name, as it sometimes ends in the **ji** syllable, and with **CHAN-na-K’INICH** on Naranjo Altar 2 (Stuart and Joel Skidmore, personal communications 2006)—remains an enigmatic figure. There are grounds for believing that his accession occurred on 9.5.12.0.4, June 14, 546 (Stela 25: A8-B8), a date emphasized by repeated anniversaries (Martin and Grube 2000:71-72). The problem arises from the dates on Naranjo Altar 1 (D12-E1), which identify “Aj Wosal” as an active figure by 9.4.10.8.17, February 17, 525. His latest date is on Naranjo Stela 25 (9.9.2.0.4, May 3, 615); another inscription, Stela 27 (Ap1), refers to him as a 5 k’atun lord, between 80 and 100 years of age. The events of June 3, 544, may have prefigured his accession or taken place after his elevation to the throne. At the least, we can agree that he lived to advanced old age, even by the Methuselahean standards of some Maya kings.

The second piece of evidence also comes from the Popol Vuh Museum: this is a vessel showing *way* or “co-essences” from the area of Lake Peten Itza, with mention of Ucanal, too (Fig. 3). The *way* in question is a most unusual sort, consisting of dark whirls around a central disk marked with signs for “fire” or “cloud”—perhaps both. The disk contains four wind signs around a quatrefoil also inscribed with four wind glyphs. The axial symmetry and the markers of violent, multi-directional wind evoke a hurricane, along with a hint, through symmetry, of the vortex or “eye” at its

Hurricane!

center. The caption supports this interpretation, by reading: ‘i-**IK’ CHAN-na U *wa-WAY K’UHUL-?-AJAW**, “the wind-sky is the *way* of the holy lord of ?.” The reference is unsurprising, for whirlwinds are known to have served as *way* among ethnographic Maya (Houston and Stuart 1989:1). Here, as among modern Maya, vortices can be perceived as volitional forces, as entities rather than mere weather systems.

Summary

If earthquakes were known to the Classic Maya, hurricanes would have posed even more of a risk. Two contexts, one a possible metaphor, the other couched in supernatural soul-essence, suggest a reference to cataclysmic wind and point to ancient Maya in the path of “wind-skies” during the first millennium AD.

Acknowledgements

The title gusted into my mind from another essay, by David Stuart (2001), on earthquakes, which also merits the exclamation point. In 2004, Dr. Oswaldo Chinchilla of the Museo Popol Vuh allowed me to examine the vessel in that collection; the author’s photograph was taken long before, in 1986. Michael Coe, Simon Martin, Joel Skidmore, and David Stuart helped with useful comments.

Sources

AULIE, H. WILBUR, AND EVYLN W. DE AULIE

1998 *Diccionario Ch’ol de Tumbalá, Chiapas con variaciones dialectales de Tila y Sabanilla*. El Instituto Lingüístico de Verano en México: www.sil.org/mexico/maya/chol-tumbala/S121a-Diccionario-CTU.htm.

BARRERA VÁSQUEZ, ALFREDO, ed.

1980 *Diccionario Maya Cordemex: Maya—Español, Español—Maya*. Mérida: Ediciones Cordemex.

FELDMAN, LAWRENCE H.

2004 *A Dictionary of Poqom Maya in the Colonial Era*. Culver City, CA: Labyrinthos.

GRAHAM, IAN

1978 *Corpus of Maya Hieroglyphic Inscriptions, Volume 2, Part 2: Naranja, Chunhuitz, Xunantunich*. Cambridge, MA: Peabody Museum, Harvard University.

GRUBE, NIKOLAI

2004 *Ciudades perdidas mayas*. *Arqueología Mexicana* 67:32-37.

HAESERIJN V., PADRE ESTEBAN

1979 *Diccionario K’ekchi’ Español*. Guatemala: Piedra Santa.

HOUSTON, STEPHEN, AND DAVID STUART

1989 *The Way Glyph: Evidence for “Co-essences” among the Classic Maya*. Research Reports on Ancient Maya Writing 30. Washington, DC: Center for Maya Research.

HULL, KERRY

2004 *A Dictionary of Ch’orti’ Maya, Guatemala*. A report submitted to FAMSI: www.famsi.org/reports/03031/index.html.

Hurricane!

KAUFMAN, TERRENCE

2003 A Preliminary Mayan Etymological Dictionary (with the assistance of John Justeson). A report submitted to FAMSI: www.famsi.org/reports/01051/index.html.

LAUGHLIN, ROBERT

1988 *The Great Tzotzil Dictionary of Santo Domingo Zinacantán*. 3 vols. Smithsonian Contributions to Anthropology No. 31. Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press.

MARTIN, SIMON, AND NIKOLAI GRUBE

2000 *Chronicle of Maya Kings and Queens: Deciphering the Dynasties of the Ancient Maya*. London: Thames and Hudson.

MORÁN, FRANCISCO

1689-1695 *Arte en lengua Cholti que quiere decir lengua de milperos*. Gates collection. Box 42. Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University.

RINGLE, WILLIAM R.

n.d. Concordance of Moran's Cholti' dictionary. Unpublished computer file in possession of author.

ROBERTSON, JOHN R.

n.d. Maya Language Database. Unpublished computer file in possession of author.

STUART, DAVID

2001 *Earthquake! Mesoweb*: www.mesoweb.com/stuart/notes/Earthquake.pdf.

TOZZER, ALFRED M.

1941 *Landa's Relación de las cosas de Yucatan, A Translation*. Papers of the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, Harvard University, v. 18. Cambridge, MA.

WISDOM, CHARLES

1950 *Materials on the Chorti Languages*. Microfilm Collection of Manuscripts on Middle American Cultural Anthropology, No. 28. Chicago. Transliterated and computerized by Brian Stross. www.utexas.edu/courses/stross/chorti/