



# A Possible Full Form of the <yu> Syllable

Dmitri Beliaev and Raphael Tunesi

During the Eighth European Maya Conference in Madrid in 2004 the authors found out during a discussion that they had independently observed unusual spellings involving the **yu** syllable. One example is Early Classic, the other Late Classic. Both examples appear in the same context: the Primary Standard Sequence (PSS).

## Example 1

The first example is an Early Classic incised bowl with the Kerr number 6642 (Fig. 1). The text consists of two columns of two glyphs each, divided by two mythological heads. The text is:

	A	B
1	<b>yu</b> (Fig.2)	<b>IX</b>
2	<b>k'i-b'i</b>	<b>ka-ka-wa</b>

*y-uk'ib' [ta] ix [te'] kakaw*

“It is his drinking vessel (for) cacao with gogo fruit.”

Our focus is on the collocation A1, which *seems* to be formed by the syllables **yu** and **b'a**. Since this combination is followed by the syllables **k'i** and **b'i** the first thing one could think is that the **b'a** is not to be read and is used as a decoration by a “liberal” artist. This interpretation doesn’t convince the authors, who think instead that this **yu-b'a** compound comprises a single syllable **yu**. For B1, we present two ideas currently discussed by epigraphers: one is Alfonso Lacadena’s, whose dictionary gives a reading *ixte'*, “gogo (fruta)” with the derived adjective *ixte'el*. The other is *iximte'el*, proposed by David Stuart, with a still unclear meaning and association with maize.

## Example 2

This extraordinary vase (Fig. 3) is discussed for the first time in this note. Said to be from Belize, it is now in a private collection. The style seems to be more from Northern Yucatán. A possible explanation is that this vase was exported from northern Yucatán to Belize in Precolumbian times. The scene (Fig. 4) represents Itzamna (God D) during a discussion with a figure which might possibly be human. The content of that discussion is mentioned in the S-shaped text which contains the name Itzamna and another unrecognized name following the quotation-verb *che'en* (Grube 1999). On the vase we find two different texts, the main vertical text in two columns is a very elaborate PSS; the smaller S-shaped text is a caption describing the scene. Our focus is on the PSS, which can be read as:

	A	B
1	<b>a-AL</b>	<b>T'AB'</b>
2	<b>yi-chi</b>	<b>yu-</b>
3	<b>xu-lu</b>	<b>li</b>
4	<b>yu-</b>	<b>k'i-b'i</b>
5	?	?

*al[ay] t'ab'[aay] y-ich y-uxulil y-uk'ib' ...*

“Here (or “It says”) it got finished the surface of the carving...”

A1 *alay*: Recently Barbara Macleod and Yuriy Polyukhovych suggested that *alay* is related to Classical Yucatec <*lay*> and Classical Chontal <*analay*>. According to them, *alay* means “here” and so introduces the text. However this glyph is far from being fully understood.

B1 *t'ab'aay*: In this context, this expression has the meaning “to finish.”

A2 *y-ich*, “its surface.”

B2-B3 *y-uxul[i]l*, “his carving.” Here we can observe the **yu-b'a** collocation. The **lu** syllable is infixed in the bat head with the value **xu** (Fig. 5).

A4-B4 *y-uk'ib'*, lit. “his drinking instrument” or vessel (Fig. 6).

A5-B5 (signs cannot be recognized).

The blocks that are interesting for us are B2-B3 and A4-B5. In the first (B2-B3), we find the *apparent* sequence **yu-b'a-xu-lu-li** that reminds us of K6642. As there, the **b'a** is not likely to be a mistake or an example of fancy orthography. It is clearly a new version of the syllable **yu**. This allows us to read **yu-xu-lu-li** or *y-uxulil*. The next example is in A4-B4, where we find another classic expression of the PSS: *y-uk'ib'* or “his drinking vessel,” spelled as **yu-b'a-k'i-b'i**. As in the earlier case, we find the complex **yu** variant.

## Discussion

We believe that in all three of the cited examples we deal with a full form of the **yu** syllable. In both Early and Late Classic inscriptions the element which is combined with the common **yu** looks like **b'a**. This is a good argument for identifying this compound as a standardized full form of this syllabic sign.<sup>1</sup>

It is very important to remember that the syllable **yu** is one of the most frequent on ceramics due to its use in key expressions like *y-uk'ib'* or *yutal*, but nevertheless *this* variant, even if used both in Early and Late Classic texts, is very rarely found. *Ergo* if this sign is the full form of **yu**, why is it

<sup>1</sup> As this article was in press, Joel Skidmore pointed out how our identification of the full form of **yu** might serve to solve the apparent mystery of the inscription on K5514, the twin cartouches of which appear to have **yu-k'i-b'i** and **yu-k'i-b'a**, respectively.

so infrequently adopted? Probably, the very fact of the frequent use of the syllable could explain the privileging of the quicker version. It is also interesting to compare this situation with the syllable **no** recognized by David Stuart several years ago. Although this sign was relatively frequent in the Classic inscriptions, there were few instances where it appeared in its full form.

Even if the first survey seems to confirm its rareness, we hope that future research will increase the number of appearances of the full form of the **yu** syllable.

### References cited

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Figure 1



Figure 2



Figure 3



Figure 4



Figure 5



Figure 6

