



The PARI Journal

A quarterly publication of the Ancient Cultures Institute
Volume XX, No. 4, Spring 2020

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Marc Zender
Editor
marc@ancientcultures.org

Joel Skidmore
Associate Editor
joel@ancientcultures.org

The PARI Journal
202 Edgewood Avenue
San Francisco, CA 94117
415-664-8889
journal@ancientcultures.org

Electronic version
available at:
www.precolumbia.org/
pari/journal/2004

ISSN 1531-5398

A “Maizedancer” Vessel Dedicated to Yax We’n Chan K’inich, Lord of Xultun

SEBASTIÁN MATTEO

Independent Researcher

GUIDO KREMPEL

Textdatabase and Dictionary of Classic Mayan, University of Bonn

Coordinación Nacional de Conservación del Patrimonio Cultural-INAH

In 2014, a Guatemalan private collection comprising several Precolumbian objects was donated to La Ruta Maya Foundation in Guatemala City.¹ The collection belonged to Guatemalan resident Christian Siebold and were, after his death, handed over voluntarily by his son. Among other small-sized artefacts, the donation included an elaborately painted cylindrical vessel, registered as No. 1.2.179.7 in the Registry of Cultural Property,² dedicated to Yax We’n Chan K’inich, the Late Classic ruler of Xultun, whose reign and ceramic heritage have been discussed in previous publications (Garrison and Stuart 2004; Matteo and KrempeL 2011a; KrempeL and Matteo 2012, 2013; Rossi et al. 2015). Regrettably several eroded parts of the iconography and glyphs have been repainted in modern times (Figure 1). However, Sofia Paredes Maury, executive director of La Ruta Maya Foundation, was able to obtain photographs from the donor prior to the modern repainting of the vessel (Figure 2), which enabled us to discern sufficient details for a visual representation of the former condition of the imagery and glyphs, and further resulted in a preliminary photo-stitching and drawing thereof (Figures 3 and 4).

The vessel measures 14.7 cm in height and 6.9 cm in diameter, and apart from its relatively small size it is similar to a number of other cylindrical vessels of comparable painting styles. Following the Type:Variety classification system, the vessel can be described as Cabrito Cream-polychrome: Unspecified Variety. Ceramics of this type and theme are commonly labeled as

“Holmul Dancer” vessels in the literature (see Reents-Budet et al. 2000:107). The Holmul Dancer theme is characterized by multiple depictions of a dancing Maize God, or “Maizedancer,” and the present case features two representations of the young male figure whom Karl Taube (1985, 1992) has nicknamed the Tonsured Maize God (see also Braakhuis 2019).

Iconographic analysis

The vessel shows one Maizedancer in a static pose while the other is in the act of dancing, with his left leg lifted as he points with his flat right hand to the huge backrack device of the opposing Maizedancer (Figures 3 and 4). Comparable to other well-known Maizedancer vessels from the wider Naranjo-Holmul-Xultun region (see Figures 5–8), the backrack device of

¹ La Ruta Maya Foundation is the only private organization in the region that seeks to recover archaeological objects that left Guatemala illegally in past decades, with the purpose of repatriation. It also receives donations in Guatemala. Therefore, it is responsible for the custody and management of more than 3,000 Precolumbian objects, duly registered as National Cultural Heritage at the Registro de Bienes Culturales of the Instituto de Antropología e Historia. All objects of the collection are accessible for research by scholars and students, as well as to the general public through temporary exhibitions organized each year in Guatemala. The collection is also available for loan to national and foreign museums and exhibitions.

² This registry is maintained by Guatemala’s Institute of Anthropology and History (IDAEH). The vessel is also registered by Dorie Reents-Budet as MS2322 for the Maya Survey Project.



Figure 1. Inv.-No. 1.2.179.7 in the custody of La Ruta Maya Foundation, in its current, repainted condition (photographs by Jorge Pérez de Lara, 2018, used with kind permission).



Figure 2. Pre-restoration photographs of the Maizedancer vessel (Inv.-No. 1.2.179.7 in the custody of La Ruta Maya Foundation; photographs courtesy of La Ruta Maya Foundation, used with kind permission).



Figure 3. Preliminary photo-stitching of the Maizedancer vessel (Inv.-No. 1.2.179.7 in the custody of La Ruta Maya Foundation), based on pre-restoration photographs (stitching by Guido Krempe).



Figure 4. The dedicatory text and imagery of the Maizedancer vessel (preliminary drawing by Guido Krempe).

the dancing figure is composed of a skyband atop the zoomorphic head of a mountain. Such mountains are known to represent specific place names (Reents-Budet 1991:221; Houston et al. 1992; Tokovinine 2013:115-123; Helmke and Kupprat 2016:67, Table 2). The orthogonal skyband is simply decorated with a series of crossed-band motifs. On top of this roof-like construction is sitting the celestial bird Itzamnaaj Yax Kokaj? Mut (see Boot 2008; also known as the "Principal Bird Deity," first described in Bardawil 1976), here represented with long

feathers, "zoomorphic wings" symbolizing agitation, and the head of God D with facial attributes of K'awiil. The body of both maize deities is adorned with kilts of jade beads, a prominent pectoral at chest height, and a huge belt decorated with crossed bands and the head of a centipede. The two dancers also feature a headdress with centipede-maw elements topped by the head of K'awiil with long protruding feathers. Out of the top of the zoomorphic mountain head emerges a snake which shows conspicuous similarities in rendering when compared to



Figure 5. K1837 (rollout photograph © Justin Kerr, www.mayavase.com).



Figure 6. K5976 (rollout photograph © Justin Kerr, www.mayavase.com).

K1837 (a vessel of unknown provenance now in a public Belgian collection, Museum aan de Stroom, Antwerpen, Inv.-No. MAS.IB.2010.017.084; see Figure 5). The latter shows additional maize leaves (*nal*) and fire-volutes featured in the snake's head, possibly indicating the place name Wak Chan Nal (see also Tokovinine 2013:117-121). A very similar snake that emerges from the animated

mountain also appears on K7720, which is dedicated to K'inich Lamaw Ek' from Río Azul (Matteo 2007), suggesting that the snake is not necessarily a local trait of Xultun artists but rather a regionally common variant that was also rendered by other scribes bearing the Uxlajun Tzuk title (Beliaev 2000; Tokovinine 2013:123; Helmke 2018:42-43). Remarkably, the maize snake is not

depicted as sitting on top of the zoomorphic mountain but is instead merged with the supraorbital region of the face of the animated mountain. This pattern featuring a snake merged with the mountain instead of distinct supernatural animals that are usually sitting within the niche of the Maizedancer’s backrack as his burden can be observed on only a few other Maizedancer vessels, as, for example, the already mentioned vessel of K’inich Lamaw Ek’ (K7720) or K1837 (Figure 5).

Maizedancer vessels frequently depict certain animals as burdens carried within the backrack which usually specify the proper name of the place associated with the depicted Maizedancer. As such, the place names Wak Hix Nal (“Six Ocelot Place”), Wak Chuwen Nal (“Six Monkey Place”), Wak Ok Nal (“Six Dog/Coyote Place”), and Ux Haab Te’ (seemingly associated with Río Azul and related sites) are attested on “Holmul-style” ceramics (for a more in-depth discussion of the Maizedancer theme and its toponymic significance see also Tokovinine 2013:117-121; Helmke and Kupprat 2016:59-69; see also Braakhuis 2019).

Yet another Maizedancer vessel with stylistic

parallels, K5976 (Figure 6), is dedicated to a female member of the Xultun court (*ixik baax witz ajaw*) and provides additional evidence for a close affiliation of Xultun artists with the Holmul Dancer theme (to be discussed further below; see also Helmke et al. 2015:25 for the Cuychen Cave vessel as another Maizedancer example that may eventually be attributed to the Xultun region). Contrary to many Maizedancer vessels, the example discussed here does not show renderings of dwarfs that often accompany the scene, nor any secondary texts associated with the maize deities, which might be due to the small size of the vessel and the scribe’s intention to fill the space with renderings of the huge backrack devices.

Epigraphic and Paleographic Analysis

The dedicatory formula encircling the upper rim (see Figure 4) is composed of ten glyph blocks, of which three (3–5) are partially eroded but can confidently be reconstructed. For the full text see Table 1.

The syntax of this dedicatory formula is comparable

(1) a-ALAY?-ya (2) T’AB-yi (3) u-tz’i-bi* (4) na*-ja* (5) yu*-k’i*-bi* (6) ti-tzi-hi (7) YAX?[WE’]-ne
 (8) CHAN-na-K’INICH (9) BAX-WITZ-AJAW (10) ba-ka-ba
alay t’ab[aa]y u tz’i[h]bnaja[l] y-uk’ib ti tzih yax we’n chan k’inich baax witz ajaw ba[ah] kab
 “Here is consecrated(?)/presented(?)/lifted(?) the painted drinking vessel for *tzih* of Yax We’n Chan K’inich, ruler of Baax Witz, chief of the land”

Table 1. Dedicatory formula of Inv.-No. 1.2.179.7.



Figure 7. K0633 (rollout photograph © Justin Kerr, www.mayavase.com).

to several other vessels that can be attributed to the palace schools of the Xultun ruler Yax We'n Chan K'inich (Figure 8; see also Krempel and Matteo 2012). Following the vessel type (*uk'ib'*) appears a mention of the vessel content, a specific beverage called *tzih* that is often mentioned on Late Classic Xultun vessels (see, e.g., K3743, K4388, K4572, K4909, K6882, K7055, K8728, K9153, K9271). There follows the nominal phrase of Yax We'n Chan K'inich, probably rendered with a head variant for **YAX** "green-blue, first" (Boot 2004) merged with the common **WE'-ne CHAN-na** sequence forming his nominal phrase (7–8), and accompanied by his regal titles (9–10): *baax witz ajaw baah kab*, "lord of Baax Witz, chief of the land." These titles are also attested on several other ceramics dedicated to him (Figure 5; see also Krempel and Matteo 2012, 2013) and serve to link Yax We'n Chan K'inich with the capital of Xultun named Baax Witz "Hammerstone Mountain" (Prager et al. 2010; Zender 2010:8, n.10).

As for its paleographic peculiarities, the specific renderings of glyphs differ conspicuously from the corpus of ceramics known so far. As such, the initial **ALAY** logogram (1) is rendered differently when compared to the rest of the known corpus (see Figure 8). The same holds true for the **T'AB** logogram (2). A very distinct rendering can be observed in the third glyph, for which the scribe wrote the syllabogram **u** by means of two thin "whiplash" lines that are not present in any other vessel associated with Yax We'n Chan K'inich (3). Furthermore, in the same **u-tz'i-bi** sequence, the scribe used a head-variant for the syllabic sign **bi**, whereas in all other known examples the scribes used an abstract variant for the **bi** syllabogram. Yet another difference can be observed in the penultimate glyph compound (9) that forms the Xultun emblem glyph, which is here written with a **WITZ** "hill, mountain" logogram without "dented" contours, almost resembling a common **TUN** logogram, a peculiarity which is also rendered on other vessels attributed to members of the Xultun polity (e.g., the two vessels dedicated to Ixik We'om Yohl Ch'e'n, K5976/MS1721 and MS5320) including at least one more vessel dedicated to Yax We'n Chan K'inich, namely K4572 (see Figure 8c).

In sum, these rather individualistic renderings of glyphs and their respective calligraphic traits suggest that the vessel was painted by a previously unknown scribe from the palace schools of Yax We'n Chan K'inich, an assumption that is supported by the relatively uncommon imagery (in terms of local Xultun production) showing the Maizedancer theme.

The composition of the dedicatory text and specific calligraphic traits are comparable to some Chinos Black-on-cream ceramics predominantly associated with the northeastern Peten region and in particular with Xultun workshops (Reents-Budet et al. 1994:43, 2000:101-107; Krempel and Matteo 2012:148-150). For example, a

similar sign repertoire and renderings of glyphs showing thick outlines and distinct square-shaped signs with rounded corners can be observed on K4388 (see Figure 7d), which is also dedicated to Yax We'n Chan K'inich. Yet other stylistically related vessels supposedly originate from the same workshop but were painted by other scribes whose identity remains to be revealed since there are so far no known attestations of scribal signatures on Xultun ceramics (see Figure 7e, f; see also Matteo and Krempel 2011a). Also comparable in style and calligraphy is K1547, which bears the common Xultun titles but no personal name. These distinct calligraphic renderings lead one to assume that those vessels were painted by different artists in local workshops under the patronage and/or linked to Xultun's ruler Yax We'n Chan K'inich as well as to contemporary Late Classic nobles from this capital.

A sampling and analysis of the Maizedancer vessel in the custody of La Ruta Maya Foundation was undertaken by Dorie Reents-Budet and Ronald Bishop, the results of which suggest that its chemical data match with ceramic samples from Xultun or close surroundings (Dorie Reents-Budet, personal communication 2017). This provides independent support for the assumption that this vessel was fabricated and painted by a local artist from Xultun.

Some Stylistic Considerations

The specimen discussed here is the first known Maizedancer vessel painted with the Holmul theme that is properly dedicated to Yax We'n Chan K'inich (Figure 1), and it is the second in this group that is directly related to *baax witz*, the capital of Xultun. As already mentioned, the other vessel pertains to another member of the same court, Ixik We'om Yohl Ch'e'n, a female ruler of Xultun (*ixik baax witz ajaw*), whom we know from two other attestations on ceramics (K5976, Figure 6; as well as a plate now in the FUNBA collection, see Polyukhovych and Looper 2019). It is interesting to note that for her nominal phrase the scribe used the root *we'*, "to eat, consume," which is also an integral part of the name of Yax We'n Chan K'inich. This, combined with the stylistic similarities, again hints at close ties between this lord, his assumed master scribes, and the probably contemporaneous female noble Ixik We'om Yohl Ch'e'n (see also Garrison and Stuart 2004; Matteo and Krempel 2011a; Krempel and Matteo 2012; for yet another female ruler, namely Ixik Yax W'en Chaak, who perhaps was likewise contemporaneous with Yax We'n Chan K'inich, see Rossi and Stuart 2020).

As mentioned initially, the figurative scene (Figures 1–4) shows two renderings of the dancing maize deity, a theme often labeled the Holmul Dancer in the literature (Reents 1985; Reents-Budet 1991). This term derives

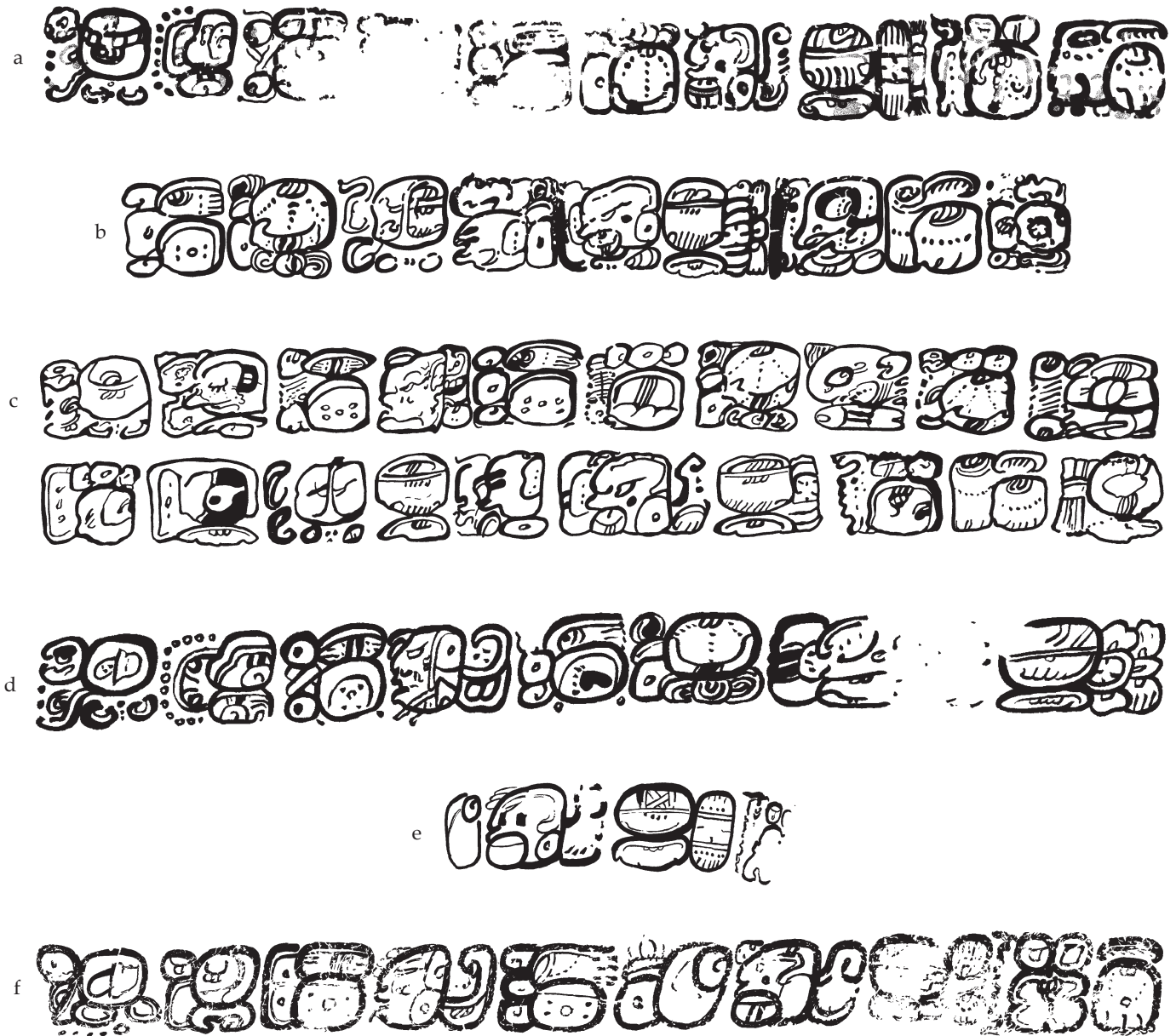


Figure 8. Dedicatory texts of different painting styles with mentions of the nominal phrase of Yax We'n Chan K'inich: (a) Inv.-No.: 1.2.179.7 in the custody of La Ruta Maya Foundation; (b) K9271; (c) K4571; (d) K4388; (e) after Robicsek and Hales 1981:204, Table 2G; (f) vessel in private collection. Drawings by Guido Krempel (a, b, f) and Sebastián Matteo (c, d, e).

from the first published specimen that was excavated at the archaeological site of Holmul at the beginning of the twentieth century (Holmes 1911; Merwin and Vaillant 1931). First established as Zacatel Cream Polychrome by Smith and Gifford (1966:172), Dorie Reents-Budet (Reents 1985) named the type known today as Holmul style for the northeastern Peten region as Cabrito Cream Polychrome: Cabrito Variety (see also Reents-Budet et al. 2000). According to Reents-Budet, who studied the Holmul Dancer ceramic corpus thoroughly, it is defined by "red and orange paintings on a cream

background, accompanied by specific iconographic programs, including the one known as the 'Holmul Dancer'" (Reents-Budet et al. 1993:79, translated from the Spanish). She further states: "These vessels are characterized by variations in the quality of the painting, in the background colors, in the iconography and in the hieroglyphic texts. All this suggests that this style is not specific to a particular place, but was produced in a diverse number of workshops located in different places around Holmul" (Reents-Budet et al. 1993:79, translated from the Spanish).



Figure 9. Recently auctioned Maizedancer vessel of unknown provenance, dedicated to Itzamnaaj? K'awiil (photo-stitching by Guido Krempel, based on photograph courtesy of Donald M. Hales).

These ceramics thereby provide evidence for the existence of multiple Maizedancer-theme traditions during the Late Classic period in different parts of the Central Lowlands (see Reents-Budet 1994:337).

The geographic limits of this Holmul style remain to be defined, a task which is greatly hindered by the large number of looted pieces. In fact, within the currently known assemblage, only a few examples of Holmul Dancer vessels with readable dedication texts have a known archaeological context. For example, these finds include the Maizedancer vessels excavated in Buenavista del Cayo (Taschek and Ball 1994), Baking Pot (Grube and Martin 2004:67; Helmke and Awe 2008), Yaloch (Gann 1918), Holmul (designated as MSH019; see Holmes 1911; Merwin and Vaillant 1932:15; see also Callaghan and Neivens de Estrada 2016:178-182, Fig. 7.10.b13), Río Azul (MNAE Inv.-No. 20073), Naranjo (Fialko and Barrios 2016; see Figure 11), and Cuychen Cave (Helmke et al. 2015). Many of these might have been imports produced elsewhere, as exemplified by the famous “Jauncy Vase” (K4464) found at Buenavista del Cayo, but manufactured and painted at Naranjo (Taschek and Ball 1992; Reents-Budet 1994:290-311) or the famous “Holmul plate” that probably came from a Naranjo workshop as well. Such vessels were likely offered to high-ranking nobles from neighboring as well as distant kingdoms, presumably gifted as part of alliances and through specific court visits for vassals and subordinate nobles.

The specific emblem glyphs identified to date in dedicatory formulae and thus directly dedicated to or commissioned by the owners of such vases include: Río Azul (K7720), Xultun (K5976), Naranjo (K0633, K4464, MS0605, MSH019; Fialko and Barrios 2016, see Figure

11; and one in a private collection supposedly mentioning Itzamnaaj? K'awiil, see Figure 9), and Ucanal (K1698). Besides the toponyms attested in dedicatory formulae, some mythological place names also appear as secondary texts that often accompany depictions of Maizedancer figures. As such, mythological place names using main signs of emblem glyphs that are also tied to (or inspired by) the names of dynasties such as the one associated with Machaquila (the emblem glyph of which has not yet been deciphered satisfactorily), Calakmul (*kanu'l*), Tikal (*mutu'l*), and Río Azul (*ux haab te'*) are attested (e.g., K0633, one of the most elaborate Maizedancer cylinders known so far, see Figure 7). Other known elaborate examples are, for example, the fragmented vessel found in Cuychen Cave, Belize (Helmke et al. 2015) and one found at Naranjo, Guatemala (Fialko and Barrios 2016, see Figure 11), as well as examples of unknown provenance, such as the composite vase Inv.-No. 1.2.144.651 in the custody of La Ruta Maya Foundation (Figure 10).

In conclusion, it seems that the Holmul style can be roughly outlined within a wide area encompassing Xultun, Río Azul, Buenavista del Cayo, and Naranjo. Reents-Budet et al. (2000:109) describe this zone as covering western Peten and Belize, with Río Azul and Ucanal as its extremities.

Chronological Considerations

In previous studies, the chronology of Xultun monuments did not allow the monumental corpus to be correlated with certainty with the suspected local ceramics (Garrison and Stuart 2004; Matteo and Krempel 2011a; Krempel and Matteo 2012:148, 157, Table 2). Even

though there are noteworthy in situ finds of local ceramics, as demonstrated for example by at least one Zacatal Cream Polychrome: *Panela* variety fragment that was reportedly found in Xultun (see Hermes Cifuentes 1998: 340-341; Figure 14a), there is currently not sufficient data from the ceramic corpus to establish a clear chronology of the local Late Classic pottery production at Xultun. The uncertainty regarding a clear chronological setting is further complicated by extensive looting and the poor preservation of monumental texts (Von Euw 1978; Garrison and Stuart 2004; Saturno and Rivera Castillo 2014). The first chronological framework for the reign of Yax We'n Chan K'inich, around the mid-eighth century, was based on similarities between ceramics bearing records of his personal name and comparable material (Krempel and Matteo 2012:148, 157, Table 2).

Meanwhile, the results from more recent archaeological excavations provided us with additional clues for the reign and lifetime of Yax We'n Chan K'inich. For instance, with the discovery of the mural paintings in Structure 10K2, a Calendar Round date has been added to the textual corpus, which, according to a recent proposal by David Stuart, can be associated with a text caption that refers to Yax We'n Chan K'inich (Rossi et al. 2015:672). The caption "begins with the Calendar Round date 11 Oc 13 Pop, most likely corresponding to the Long Count date 9.15.17.13.10, or February 12, 749" (Saturno et al. 2017:4). Thus the text caption of Xultun Structure 10K2 provides us with at least one firm chronological setting for the reign of Yax We'n Chan K'inich, likewise placing him in the middle of the eighth century.

Furthermore, Dorie Reents-Budet (personal communication 2017) has informed us that the results from chemical analysis of samples taken from one of the mentioned *Chinos-Black-on-Cream* vessels belonging to a Chanek' / Kanek' individual from Xultun (K4909/MS1445) indeed matches samples taken from two distinct specimens (MS1446/K4572 and MS2256/K9153), both of which pertain to the *Panela* group and can be associated with one and the same scribe working for Yax We'n Chan K'inich (see Krempel and Matteo 2012:154, 2013:13). In sum, the assumptions based on epigraphic and iconographic evidence are supported by the sampling results and serve to link the ceramic heritage of Yax We'n Chan K'inich with the archaeological evidence, roughly leading to an assignment of his reign to the middle of the eighth century.

The chronology of the *Holmul* style itself constitutes another window into the context in which Yax We'n Chan K'inich commissioned this vase. The *Holmul* style chronology relies in large part on Buenavista del Cayo's archaeological record (Reents-Budet et al. 2000) and Naranjo's historic timeline, for which, fortunately, the monumental as well as ceramic texts can be outlined at least in part (Grube 2004; Martin and Grube 2008; see also Tokovinine 2006; Martin et al. 2016). It seems clear that the palace schools of both cities contemporaneously produced this style with depictions of *Maizedancers* during the second part of the eighth century. It is noteworthy that the painting schools of Yax We'n Chan K'inich (AD ~749) were at work at least during the end of the intense production span of *Holmul*-style pottery at Buenavista del Cayo (AD 650–825, Reents-Budet et al. 2000:111). In fact, Dorie Reents-Budet and her colleagues were able to clarify that the *Zacatal/Cabrito Cream-polychrome: Cabrito* variety pertained to ceramic phases from AD 650 to 925, while especially for the site of Buenavista del Cayo (Reents-Budet et al. 2000:111) the vast majority are associated with the earlier facet of this range (a period roughly estimated as AD 650–825). The authors further clarified that these ceramics are all chemically and stylistically related, and thus were made by workshops that maintained continuous relationships (Reents-Budet et al. 2000:13). Although archaeological data are missing, we find it reasonable to suggest, based on epigraphic and stylistic analysis alone, that due to the presence of many distinct painting styles associated with artists commissioned by Yax We'n Chan K'inich, as well



Figure 10. Composite vessel Inv.-No. 1.2.144.651 in the custody of La Ruta Maya Foundation (photograph by Sebastián Matteo, 2010).



Figure 11. Maizedancer vessel in the Museo Nacional de Arqueología y Etnología, Guatemala (MUNAE), found in Naranjo (photographs by Sebastián Matteo, 2017, digitally enhanced by Guido Krempel).

as contemporaneous nobles of his court and his successors,³ there existed a major pottery workshop operating at Xultun during the end of the eighth (and beginning of the ninth) century. At this time, master scribes and their apprentices painted several different regional styles in a highly elaborate manner. The Holmul Dancer style at Xultun may have been a later continuation of themes that previously were more commonplace at Naranjo and surroundings, but not at Xultun proper, as the current lack of earlier Maizedancer ceramics dedicated to Xultun nobles leads one to suggest. As stated earlier, another anchor for the Holmul Dancer style is the ceramics made for Naranjo lords whose vessels can be correlated with the chronology as reconstructed from the corpus of monumental texts.

The first lord mentioned on a Maizedancer vessel is K'ahk' Tiliw Chan Chaahk (AD 693–728, see K4464). Shortly after his reign, a gap in the chronology can be observed during the reign of the two following lords, Yax Mayuy Chan Chaahk (AD ?–744) and K'ahk' Yipiiy Chan Chaahk (AD 746–?) (see Martin and Grube 2008:78), since there is no known attestation of Maizedancer vessels associated with or dedicated to the latter two individuals. Nonetheless, at the latest with the reign of K'ahk' Ukalaaw Chan Chaahk (a.k.a. Aj Tok' Ti', AD 755–780>), the Maizedancer theme continues at Naranjo (plate in private collection, MSH019 found at Holmul, MS0605), and is further pursued by the next lords,

Itzamnaaj? K'awiil (AD 784–810>) and “Bat” K'awiil, as well as by the contemporary artist Yal ...? Leti' Itz'aat⁴ (K0633, Fialko and Barrios 2016:Fig. 11). This artist may also have worked for K'ahk' Ukalaaw Chan Chaahk (see K0635), the predecessor of Itzamnaaj? K'awiil (Figure 9). Thus, Yax We'n Chan K'inich of Xultun was contemporaneous with the reigns of K'ahk' Ukalaaw Chan Chaahk (AD 755–780>) of Naranjo, which accords well with the recognizable stylistic and thematic similarities between the palace schools of Xultun and Naranjo during this period.

Final Remarks

The Maizedancer vessel now in the custody of La Ruta Maya Foundation provides us with a significant addition to the corpus of vessels painted in the workshops commissioned by Yax We'n Chan K'inich. As has been pointed out previously (Krempel and Matteo 2012, 2013), the Late Classic master artists of this ruler were capable of painting a wide range of

³ See, for example, recent evidence based on Xultun Stela 30 and vessel K8007, by means of which Franco Rossi and David Stuart (2020) identified the heretofore unknown eighth-century female ruler named Ixik Yax We'n Chaahk.

⁴ This artist is better known by the toponymic title *aj maxam* “He of Maxam” (see Aimi and Tunesi 2017:4).

different styles, and this recent addition provides us with supplementary proof of this presumption. Among the painting styles dedicated to Yax We'n Chan K'inich, we can now securely distinguish five different groups: the Chinos Black-on-cream: Chinos Variety (K4388, Robicsek and Hales 1981:Table 2g, unprovenanced vessel in private collection, see Figure 6f); the Zacatel Cream-polychrome: Panela Variety (K4572, K9271); two heretofore unpublished vessels that relate to the Zacatel Cream-polychrome type but pertaining to unspecified varieties, both in private collections; to which we can add the Cabrito Cream-polychrome: Unspecified Variety presented here. It is noteworthy that the Panela varieties together with the Chinos Black-on-cream varieties were strongly associated with Yax We'n Chan K'inich and his palace workshops, and as such form a sort of trademark of the production realized during his reign (Krempel and Matteo 2012:150-154), an assumption that is further backed up by the aforementioned results from chemical analysis by Dorie Reents-Budet and Ronald Bishop (who confirmed a match between K4572, K9153, and K4909; personal communication 2017). In sum, at least nine vessels bearing the personal name of Yax We'n Chan K'inich are known to date (Ruta Maya Foundation Vase Inv.-No. 1.2.179.7k; K2324; K4388; K4572; K8007; K9271; Robicsek and Hales 1981:Table 2g; an unpublished vessel in the bodega of Tikal, for which see Krempel et al. n.d.; and an unpublished vessel in a private collection, see Figure 8f). In addition, there are numerous vessels without mention of a proper nominal phrase or with pseudo-glyphic texts that can, however, be attributed stylistically to the same "Palace schools" of Xultun.

All of these examples suggest an exceptionally wide range of distribution and to a certain degree the continuity and consistency in themes, painting styles, and calligraphic traits in which Xultun seems to have played a significant role as one of the major production centers of the eighth century.

Nevertheless, further investigations of the mural texts and archaeological excavations, as well as paste and chemical analysis of ceramics are needed in order to confirm the chronological setting of Late Classic Xultun styles proposed here and to further distinguish the ceramic legacy of Yax We'n Chan K'inich from the workshops of his predecessors, contemporaneous members of the Xultun court, and his successors and descendants.

Acknowledgements

Our sincere gratitude goes to Fernando Paiz and especially Sofia Paredes Maury for her continued support and enthusiastic sharing of the materials in the custody of La Ruta Maya Foundation, to Dorie Reents-Budet and Ronald Bishop for kindly having shared the results of their highly appreciated analysis of Xultun ceramic samples that provided us with independent support of

our assumptions, and to Donald M. Hales for comments, previous communications, reviews of the present note, and his permission to reproduce the photographs used as the template for Figure 9. Our sincere gratitude also goes to Jorge Pérez de Lara for his photographs of the vessel presented here. For a thorough review and useful comments on an earlier draft we thank Christophe Helmke and Elisabeth Wagner. Finally, thanks to Franco Rossi for his comments related to Xultun Stela 30. As usual, all mistakes in terms of contents, citations, and/or interpretations thereof remain the sole responsibility of the authors.

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New Ideas about the *Wahyis* Spirits Painted on Maya Vessels: Sorcery, Maladies, and Dream Feasts in Prehispanic Art¹

ERIK VELÁSQUEZ GARCÍA

Instituto de Investigaciones Estéticas, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México

The indigenous chronicles of Guatemala relate that on February 12, 1524, on the so-called plains of El Pinar near Quetzaltenango, the decisive battle took place between Spanish troops commanded by Pedro de Alvarado and the K'ichee' host led by the hero Tecum Uman. "Captain Tecum took flight, having become an eagle, replete with feathers sprung from himself, not false ones; wings also he had, and three crowns, one of gold, another of pearls, and the third of diamonds and emeralds. Captain Tecum had come to kill Tunadiú [Tonatiuh, i.e., Alvarado], who was on horseback..." (Carmack 2009:109, translated from the Spanish).

The men who accompanied Alvarado surely experienced an unknown mode of warfare in that battle, in which the K'ichee' frequently called on magical powers and transformational abilities, as related by Francisco Antonio de Fuentes y Guzmán from the Spanish perspective 166 years after the event: "they tried to make use of [...] greater than human forces [...] from the art of spells and Naguals" (Fuentes y Guzmán [1690]1882:1:84). Nor were these beliefs that the K'ichee' of Guatemala had only recently come to entertain. Rather, the indigenous combatants who fought alongside Tecum Uman were heirs to an ancient cultural tradition wherein magic and dark powers of the night were conjured to cause damage to their enemies and protect their people.

The currently prevailing point of view in the international Mayanist community—especially among epigraphers and linguists—is that nagualism was a complex belief system associated with the casting of spells, curses, misfortunes, diseases, and death, as wielded by ancient rulers of the Classic period (AD 250–909) to attack their enemies. Almost all specialists have defended variants of this idea, first derived from a proposal by David Stuart (2005:160–165).

However, Mercedes de la Garza Camino has offered a different perspective, suggesting that nagualism was a highly regarded symbol of wisdom in the Precolumbian world that was demonized and reconceptualized as a result of the Conquest, as the Christian evangelizers considered it a supremely evil practice (de la Garza Camino 2012:169–175). My point of view is that de la Garza Camino is right that there has been a tendency to overlook nagualism as an instrument that could be used for good governance and to bring benefits like

restoring health, winning wars, bringing rain, or finding lost objects (see Martínez González 2011:505–507). But the etymological and contextual evidence of the glyphs, together with painted scenes on ceramic vessels, supports the idea that nagualism was used to harm enemies (Helmke and Nielsen 2009:49–98; Matteo and Rodríguez Manjavacas 2009:27–28; Sheseña Hernández 2010; Moreno Zaragoza 2011, 2020). As de la Garza Camino herself acknowledges, "the shaman's extraordinary powers can be directed towards the good and health of others or towards their destruction [... such that] in Maya thought shamans could be either beneficent or malevolent" (de la Garza Camino 2012:46, 157, translated from the Spanish). Thus the intention of this article is to explore the harmful uses of these superhuman powers by the Maya of the Late Classic period (AD 600–810), leaving aside for the moment its beneficial applications.

The WAY Glyph and Its Associated Lexemes

Little was known about either the origin or development of this Maya belief system until 1989 when epigraphers Stephen Houston and David Stuart (Houston and Stuart 1989) and, independently, Nikolai Grube (Freidel et al. 1993:442 n. 33) deciphered the sign T539² (Figure 1a) as a logogram with the value WAY, and linked it to widespread Mayan terms for "sleep" and "dream."

Perhaps for this reason the most frequent variant of the logogram is a geometric human face, half-covered by the spotted skin of a jaguar (Figure 1b). Its head variant is the feline itself, with the sign T533³ as its eye (Figure 1b). The jaguar's association with this concept may arise from the fact that it inhabits the dark and frigid areas of the wilds, evoking the mysterious and unknown experience of dreams (see Valverde Valdés 2004:264–265). The glyphic iconography may also be explained by the resemblance of feline behavior to the nocturnal habits

¹ An earlier version of this paper was published in Spanish (Velásquez García 2013). I dedicate this version to the memory of my friend María del Carmen Valverde Valdés, a great student of Maya religion with the nocturnal powers of the jaguar.

² T539 is the glyph's designation in Thompson's (1962) catalog; it is AM7 in the most recent catalog (Macri andLooper 2003).

³ AM1 in Macri andLooper (2003).

of certain psychic entities that the Maya associate with sleep.⁴ De la Garza Camino (1987a:192, 199, 200, 207, 1987b:89-105, 2012:149, 151) has observed that the jaguar symbolizes the *other*: the other in the forest and the other inside a human being, given that the jaguar was associated with the destructive, instinctive, and irrational force of the psyche, as well as darkness and evil, the nocturnal side of life, and the realm of mystery and chaos. Moreover, Mesoamerican ritual specialists were held to transform preferentially into jaguars, since these animals were associated throughout their natural habitat with the powers of transformation and spiritual incarnation. Perhaps for these reasons, the lexeme *wahy* is associated with both wilderness and dreams in the Colonial Tzeltal dictionary of fray Domingo de Ara ([1616]1986:402-403).

The Nature of the *Wahyis* Beings: Auxiliary Souls of the Elite

The WAY logogram (Figure 1) frequently alludes to mysterious beings that to Western eyes appear grotesque, bloody, or violent, as depicted on Maya vessels where they are suspended in supernatural environments (Figure 2). As a general rule, the only suggestion of space is the distance between one figure and the next. Today we know that these images represent the naguals of Maya rulers in a supernatural or ethereal environment, possibly a dreamlike evocation of the underworld or some sacred mountain. To suggest dreamscapes, Maya artists created continuous compositions with an empty, negative, neutral, or unelaborated background where the characters could be suspended in the air, without any representation of their surroundings (Schapiro 1953:308-309).

Houston and Stuart (1989:13) recognized that in Maya art and writing the presence of *wahy* beings—now known as *wahyis* (Zender 2004b)—constituted a mark of personal status on the part of rulers and gods. The elite character of the *wahyis* spirits is confirmed by the fact that they belong to the realm of the supernatural and are reserved for a very few men. Among the Tojolabal, for example, that special spirit, nagual, or soul is reserved for the “living,” a small group of people with supernatural powers or a singular grace that they have received from God (Ruz Sosa 1982:56, 58, n. 15, 1983:427). The Tz’utujil of Santiago Atitlan consider the nagual to be “that which separates a man from other men” (Garza Camino 1987a:203). Among the Tzeltal of Oxchuc, only the oldest and most prestigious men possess nagualistic powers, which enable them to discharge the responsibilities of their public or ritual office; only men who have reached a certain hierarchy in the political or religious



Figure 1. (a) The WAY logogram in its geometric variant (from Macri andLooper 2003:67); (b) the WAY logogram in its head variant (from Macri andLooper 2003:80); (c) the noun *wahyis* in its absolute unpossessed form (WAY-ya-si), vessel K2777 (from Zender 2004:201, Fig. 8.2a) (all K-numbered vessels may be consulted online at <http://research.mayavase.com/kerrmaya.html>); (d) example of a typical *wahyis* clause in a scene with an esoteric theme; observe how the noun *wahyis* loses the suffix *-is* when accompanied by possessive pronouns: HA? HIX u-WAY-ya ZC6 AJAW-wa, Ha? Hix uwahy ... ajaw, “Ha? Hix [Water Jaguar] is the nagual of the lord of Ceibal,” vessel K791, Princeton Art Museum (from Stuart 2005:162).

structure are able to acquire this psychic entity (Vogt 1969:412; Hermitte 1970:81; Villa Rojas 1995a:537, 1995b:526-527). Finally, the Yukatek Maya believe that these beings are reserved for individuals with physical abnormalities, strange diseases, or eccentric habits (Redfield and Villa Rojas 1934:178-179; Garza Camino 1984:114).

Officials who possess such a soul never reveal that they have a *wahyis* spirit; they are men without mercy towards their enemies who cloak themselves in anonymity (López Austin 2000:33). They also refrain from providing their names in order to protect themselves against witchcraft, hiding their anthroponym or putting on a false one (Köhler 1995:6). Finally, there is the precaution of not mentioning a sorcerer by name due to fear of retribution, although all

⁴ Diverse Maya peoples, present and past, hold and have held numerous distinct views of what we imperfectly call the “soul” and “spirit.” The difficulty of expressing these indigenous concepts in Indo-European languages has led to the coining of academic terms of art—not entirely satisfactory ones—such as “psychic entity” (López Austin 1989:1:197-198), “psychic force” (Martínez González 2007:154), or “psychic component” (Martínez González 2011:29). For some years I have specialized in studying this topic among the Lowland Maya of the Classic period (see López Austin and Velásquez García 2018; Velásquez García 2009, 2015, n.d.).



Figure 2. Rollout photograph of the famous Altar de Sacrificios Vase or K3120; according to its glyphic text it was consecrated or ritually activated on the date 9.16.0.0.0, 3 Ajaw 18 Sotz', April 19, AD 754. Photograph by Otis Imboden, published in George E. Stuart (1975:772-774), National Museum of Archeology and Ethnology of Guatemala.

enchanters are said to know who possesses a nagual soul (Stratmeyer and Stratmeyer 1977:137).

Accordingly, Classic Maya rulers never recorded their names in the glyphic captions of the *wahyis* (Figure 1d); they were simply alluded to by their titles or the toponyms over which they ruled (Freidel et al. 1993:191-192). This data has been interpreted as proof that *wahyis* spirits were associated with kingdoms or lineages (Calvin 1997:868, 876; Eberl 2005:62; Moreno Zaragoza 2011:47-50). But although this seems to be true, the use of *wahyis* was perhaps only exercised by the individual (always a ruler) as a hereditary right, predicated on lineage membership (Moreno Zaragoza 2020:39-40). In this sense, it is more logical to suppose that the owners of *wahyis* souls sought to hide their personal names or at least not mention them overtly since their mere utterance implied that the sorcerer was present. They only allowed themselves to be alluded to in an indirect or euphemistic manner, through their titles of office and rank, as a way to protect themselves against the witchcraft of other sorcerers (Velásquez García 2009:631-632, 2015:188, n.d.).

Inga Calvin (1997:879) observed that the iconic appearance of the *wahyis* depicted on the vessels is clearly not that of ordinary animals; their activities do not appear to be restricted to the physical or real world, and their attributes are associated with sacrificial victims (see Figure 2). Stuart (2005:160-165) highlighted the sinister or threatening nature of *wahyis* iconography: skeletons, bats, snakes, jaguars, and unnatural beings connected with blood, death, and sacrifice, as well as chimaeras

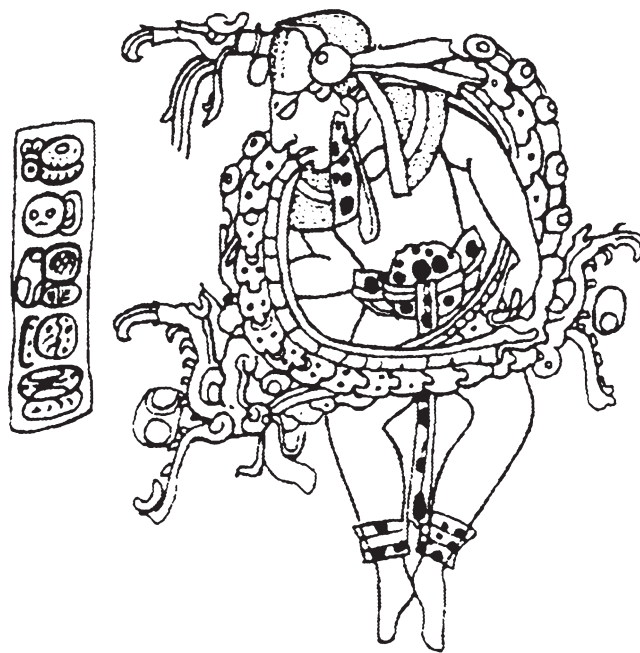


Figure 3. *Wahyis* called Sak Baak Naah Chapaht or “Centipede of the House of White Bones,” nagual or auxiliary spirit of the Lord of Baakle[1]; drawing by David Stuart from vessel K1256 (from Stuart 2005:162).



Figure 4. *Wahyis* called Ch'akba Ahkan or "Moan of Decapitation," nagual or auxiliary spirit of a holy lord of Chatan; detail of Altar de Sacrificios Vase (see Figure 2) (from Grube and Nahm 1994:708).

combining the attributes of various biological species, especially eagles, hawks, or centipedes whose bites are like fire (Figure 3) and owls whose songs presage bad omen, as well as jaguars, coyotes, and other predators with bright eyes, large fangs, and of prodigious size. A good example is Ahkan (Figure 4), an important *wahyis* associated with darkness, violent death, disease, suicide, enemas, and vomiting (Taube 1992:14-17; Grube and Nahm 1994:708-709; Grube 2004:59-76; Sheseña Hernández 2010:20-21).⁵ The etymology of the name—*ahkan*—refers to the last lament or moan emitted by the dying at the precise moment that they take their last breath. Another case is the Tojolabal spirit known as K'ak' Choj, "Fire Puma," a feline with a fireball or brazier on its forehead; this igneous creature enjoys frightening laggard walkers or making them lose their way (Ruz Sosa 1982:57, 1983:428). The name K'ak' Choj has affinities with the Classic period *wahyis* K'ahk' Hix, "Fire Jaguar" (Grube and Nahm 1994:687; Stuart 2005:164), a feline wrapped in flames, wearing a water lily on its head and a red scarf perhaps associated with sacrifice (Coe 1978:28). This *wahyis* apparently served as the nagual of the lord of Ucanal (Grube and Nahm 1994:687; Stuart 2005:164; Sheseña Hernández 2010:7, 21, 30).

Similar beings are vividly described in the *Popol Vuh* as the macabre retinue of the gods of Xibalba: Xik'iri'i Pat ("Flying Scab") and Kuchuma' K'ik' ("Gathered Blood"), whose function was to cause the spilling of

⁵ In 1994 Nikolai Grube and Werner Nahm published an innovative and influential roster of *wahyis* entities in Maya art. An updated catalog is almost finished in Daniel Moreno Zaragoza's doctoral thesis (2020).

blood; Ajal Puh ("He Who Makes Pus") and Ajal Q'ana' ("He Who Makes Jaundice"), whose job was to cause men to swell up, make pus come out of their legs, and dye their faces yellow; Ch'ami'abaq ("He Who Carries a Staff Made of Bone") and Ch'ami'ajolom ("He Who Carries a Staff With a Skull"), whose task was to make men weaken until they died; Xik ("Hawk") and Patan ("Pack Strap"), whose specialty was to squeeze a man's throat and chest until he vomited blood and died in the road; Ajal Mes ("He Who Makes Trash") and Ajal Toq'ob ("He Who Causes Misery"), whose job was to cause men to experience some misfortune along the way (Christenson 2004:66-67; Recinos Ávila 2012:202-204; Craveri 2013:55-57). This last function is reminiscent of another Classic period *wahyis*, Tahn Bihil Chamiiy ("Death in the Middle of the Road") (Figure 5), whose form was a bird of prey apparently being strangled by a ferocious snake (Grube and Nahm 1994:704; Sheseña Hernández 2010:17-18).

The terror evoked by the names of these beings, cited in written documents from the Colonial era, agrees perfectly with the iconography of *wahyis* painted on Prehispanic Maya vessels: hybrid or chimeric animals or humanoids. Many of them appear in acts of beheading (Figure 4), self-sacrifice, and bloodshed, carrying knives and strips of paper or cloth splashed with blood. These mortifications were surely not acts of religious piety, but rather malicious acts to kill enemies, a practice reported among indigenous post-Conquest sorcerers, who sought to pour out their vital and destructive energy on their victims (Garza Camino 1990:34, 2012:48).

Similar beliefs are found among the Tzotzil of San

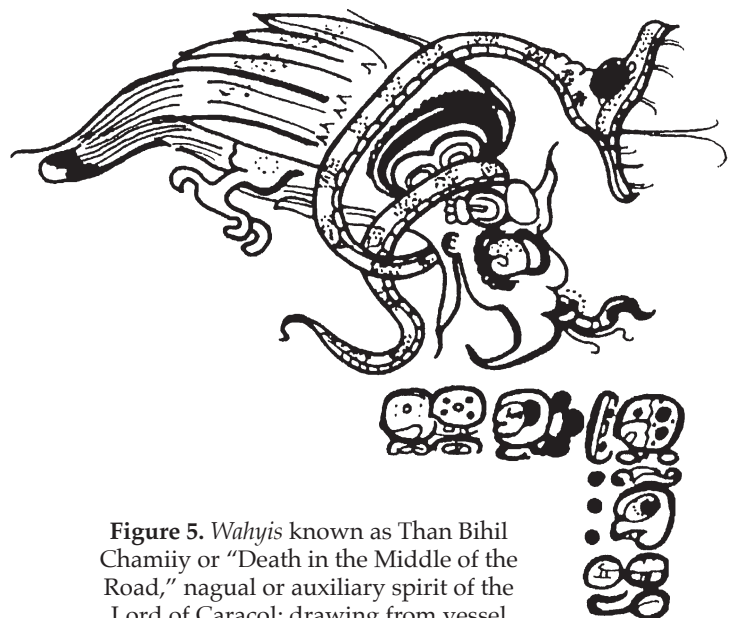


Figure 5. *Wahyis* known as Than Bihil Chamiiy or "Death in the Middle of the Road," nagual or auxiliary spirit of the Lord of Caracol; drawing from vessel K791, Princeton Art Museum (from Grube and Nahm 1994:704).



Figure 6. *Wahyis* called Labte' Hix or "Tree Spell Jaguar," nagual or auxiliary spirit of the lord of Uhxe'; drawing by David Stuart from vessel K3395, Popol Vuh Museum, Universidad Francisco Marroquín de Guatemala (from Stuart 2005:165).

Andrés Larrainzar, who attribute all their ills, accidents, diseases, and misfortunes to anthropomorphic supernaturals of Olontik or the Underworld. These strange beings attack at night and rest during the day in the depths of the earth, which they enter and leave through the openings of caves. They are all at the service of the god of the underworld called Pukuh (Holland 1989:96-98, 124-130)

Grube (2004:67-71, 75-76) observed that some *wahyis* beings with enema syringes, such as Mok Chih, Sitz' Chamiiy, and Ahkan, are associated with bloated bodies, disease, and death. As I have mentioned, Stuart (2005) reevaluated these beings in light of ethnographic data on the practice of witchcraft, particularly its modality of nagualism. He noted for example that the cognate word *vayihel* in Tojolabal was directly associated with witchcraft, sickness, and misfortunes sent by curses or spells (Stuart 2005:160-161).

It should be noted that the Tzotzil call the nagual *lab*, "a term that refers to animals that roam at night" (Garza Camino 1984:116). According to Alfonso Villa Rojas, *lab* also means nagual in the Tzeltal of Bachajon, while among the Tzeltal of Oxchuc the *labil* is the supernatural animal that each brujo possesses (Villa Rojas 1990:337-338, 342, 1995a:540). The Tzotzil of San Pedro Chenalho refer to *labtawanej*, a spiritual power that serves to harm the soul of other men (Guiteras Holmes 1965:242). Lexicographical sources reveal that the morpheme *lab* probably always had to do with magic, since in proto-Mayan **laab* had the sense of "witching" (Kaufman and Norman 1984:124). One of the most interesting naguals of the Classic period, Labte' Hix, "Tree Spell Jaguar," is painted on vessel MS739 (Figure 6) and glossed as the *wahyis* of the lord of a place called Uhxe' (Stuart 2005:165). It is the only example I know of in Precolumbian Maya art where the morphemes *lab* and *wahy* are recorded together. The fact that it is a jaguar reminds us that among the Cancuc Tzeltal most *lab* are thought to be felines (Pitarch Ramón 2006:56, 71).

In short, we have before us a special psychic entity or soul that

can be acquired supernaturally at some point in life (Velásquez García 2009:595-596, 2015:191, n.d.; Moreno Zaragoza 2011:54-72).

Marc Zender (2004b:200-204) has pointed out that the morpheme *wahy* was part of a set of nouns used to designate intimate parts of the human body; when not associated with a possessive pronoun, it is always accompanied by the absolutive suffix *-is*, that is, *wahyis* (Figure 1c). According to Alfonso Lacadena García-Gallo (2010:4), the *-is* suffix had an allomorph *-al* in the western lowlands, such that at Yaxchilan or Palenque the noun in the absolutive state—not owned—could have been *wahyal*. What is relevant here is that the *wahyis* or *wahyal* beings were parts of the human body whose habitual state was to be possessed (*uwahy*, "their nagual" [Figure 1d]), and even more importantly, the suffixes *-is* or *-al* denote sections of the body over which, under healthy conditions, one usually has control.

Markus Eberl (2005:62) suggests that *wahyis* beings were transmitted from one ruler to the next in the same dynastic line. This is supported by the fact that among contemporary Maya groups lightning, whirlwinds, or meteors operating as *wahyis* survive the death of the physical being and continue their life within caves. When the brujo dies, his nagual goes to reside in a cave, waiting for another owner (Hermitte 1970:82-83).

As noted above, the Classic Maya word *wahyis* has cognates in other Mayan languages. The Yukatek Maya call it *wáay*, a term defined in the colonial Motul Dictionary as a "familiar of the necromancer, wizard, or sorcerer, which is some animal that, by virtue of a pact made with the devil, can fantastically transform into him; and the evil that happens to such an animal also happens to the wizard of which he is the familiar" (Arzápalo Marín 1995:745-746). Perhaps for this reason, and continuing into the twentieth century, the inhabitants of Chan Kom translated *wáay* into Spanish as *familiar* (English "familiar") and believed that it was a power of voluntary transformation acquired through a pact with the devil (Redfield and Villa Rojas 1934:178). In Spanish this meaning of "familiar" may be of medieval origin judging by its use in the early Motul Dictionary, composed during the second half of the sixteenth century, as

well as by other Colonial authors (Moreno Zaragoza 2011:11, n. 8, 2020:25, n. 10). The dictionary of the Royal Spanish Academy still defines *familiar* as “a demon who is supposed to have a relationship with a person whom it accompanies and serves” (Real Academia Española 2001:703). That this description accords with European black magic and a Catholic religious background raises the question of its relevance to Prehispanic beliefs (Garza Camino 2012:170).

From my point of view, the term *espíritus auxiliares* (“auxiliary spirits”), coined by Daniel Moreno Zaragoza (2011:41-47; Velázquez García 2015:189, n.d.), is a good option for translating *wahyis* or *wahyal*. The *wahyis* spirits of the Classic period (Figures 2–6), the *wáay* of the Colonial and modern Yukatek Maya, the *swayojel* of the Tzeltal of Amatenango, or the Tojolabal *wayjel* are the names of a special psychic entity, as well as an animal, being, object, meteorological or astronomical phenomenon in which that entity externalized at will.

The Tzeltal of Amatenango call this entity *swayojel* (“transformation during sleep”), and believe that one way to acquire it is to capture the soul of a dead man within twenty days of his death (Nash 1975:150). The Tzeltal of Pinola believe that the power to harm other men can be acquired by exhaling a sorcerer’s last breath or ingesting some of his saliva (Hermitte 1970:61). The mere possession of this soul entity does not necessarily imply that a sorcerer uses it against another person, since he must have undergone supernatural instruction for this. Some brujos received their call or training in dreams, because this type of magical learning was only achieved with the spirit separated from the body (Garza Camino 1990:113, 149). Those sorcerers who already had a nagual could acquire a more powerful one through a pact with Niwan Pukuh or Niwan Winik, the Tzotzil god of the underworld, or with the Mukul Ajaw or Ch’ul Ajaw, the Tzeltal equivalent. In the *Popol Vuh* the lords Jun Kame and Wukub Kame preside over the court of the terrifying beings responsible for causing diseases (Christenson 2004:66-68; Recinos Ávila 2012:202-204; Craveri 2013:55-57). As among the Tojolabal, this suggests that it was the god of the underworld who granted sorcerers their soul, “familiar,” or auxiliary, and he was also the one that helped them to do harm. The Colonial Yukatek Maya believed that the god of death was to blame for sending and spreading disease (Chuchiak 2000:291-293). The need for a more powerful nagual therefore seems to be due, at least in part, to the desire to cause harm or take revenge on others (Ruz Sosa 1982:57, 1983:428; Holland 1989:132), to punish the conduct of one’s subjects (Villa Rojas 1995a), or to sicken, torture, or murder one’s enemies, in which contexts the motivation was hatred, envy, rancor, or revenge (Vogt 1969:407; Nash 1975:151; Pitarch Ramón 2006:75), regardless of the extent to which the moral values of these cultures are mixed with Christianity. One could even enlist the services of a brujo’s *wahyis* soul in the context of

a personal quarrel (Villa Rojas 1990:355, 1995b:532; Chuchiak 2000:411).

As already mentioned, the suffix *-is* indicates that the *wahy* lexeme was an intimate part of the body in Classic Maya belief. However, it should be said that there are no direct epigraphic or iconographic data that clarify the precise region of the body where the soul was housed. It is well known that the *ih̄tyōtl* entity that Alfredo López Austin (1989:1:424) has associated with nagualism seems to be focused on the stomach or liver. However, Roberto Martínez González (2006:181-182) argues that this is not the case among all Mesoamerican peoples. Ethnographic data suggest that the Maya *wahyis* resided in either the heart or the stomach (Hermitte 1970:78; Stratmeyer and Stratmeyer 1977:131; Villa Rojas 1995b:530; Pitarch Ramón 2006:74; Moreno Zaragoza 2011:31, 33, 43), although among the Tojolabal this force seems to have retained its vigor only through the periodic ingestion of the liver of a dead or murdered enemy, a ritual meal that also served as an initiation ceremony (Ruz Sosa 1982:57-58, 1983:428).

Exoteric (Public) and Esoteric (Private) Images

López Austin (1989:1:422, 2:294) has made a useful distinction between two points of view about nagualism in indigenous communities. He calls one *exoteric* and describes it as simplistic in nature since it implies a naive acceptance that a sorcerer transforms himself bodily, transmuting his physical matter into an animal, a meteorological or astronomical phenomenon, or some fearsome creature, and then later returning to normality. The second point of view is *esoteric*, meaning that a person can externalize his *ih̄tyōtl* entity and cloak it in another body, or receive within himself the *ih̄tyōtl* of another.

A reassessment of this phenomenon suggests that both types of nagualism existed among the Maya of the Classic period. From my point of view, the exoteric aspect of nagualism was manifested in rituals or public exhibitions, such as a dance or theatrical performance (Figure 7) (Velázquez García 2009:352-458, n.d.), and it is depicted on the vessels and in ancient Maya reliefs following the conventions of open composition, where the characters are juxtaposed on horizontal lines suggesting the ground plane, but without a horizon line, unique perspective, or vanishing point, while the size of the elements is due to their degree of importance and not their distance from the viewer (Velázquez García 2009:213-259). A constant in this type of public or exoteric nagualism is that human performers disguise, dress, or wrap their naguals, personifying them (Velázquez García 2009:405-458, 2010, n.d.), but the glyphic texts never expressly state that they are *wahyis* beings. They are usually captioned with the phrase beginning: *ubaah ti ahk’ut ubaahila’n...*, “it is the image in dance of the representative of the [numinous being].” Sebastian Matteo



Figure 7. Scene of a rite of public or exoteric character, where the ruler of the kingdom of Ik'a?, Yajawte' K'inich, engages in a dance where he personifies or becomes one of his *wahyis* spirits, in the company of other nobles; vessel K533, Princeton Art Museum (photograph © Justin Kerr).

and Asier Rodríguez Manjavacas (2009:21-28) have called these performers the “other *wayob*”; according to these authors, by taking part in rituals where masks (Velásquez García 2007:7-36, 2009:352-404) and costumes are used, they demonstrate “in a theatrical way their offensive and destructive power, both as internal social control and as a warning to enemy political systems” (Matteo and Rodríguez Manjavacas 2009:28).⁶

In other contexts, I believe it is the esoteric or private aspect of Classic Maya nagualism that predominates, as on the Altar de Sacrificios Vase (Figure 2), where fantastic characters operate disconnectedly at different levels in space, suspended in the air, painted on a neutral and flat background devoid of any suggestion of environment, floating and rotating independently, without attempt at a narrative link between them and the *uwahy* glyphic phrase “his nagual/auxiliary spirit” (Figure 1d). In such cases, I agree with Zender (2004a:74-76) that there is no reason to identify these painted *wahyis* characters with specific Maya rulers, and no suggestion at all that these

⁶ De la Garza Camino (2012) also interprets the scenes on Maya ceramics as nagualistic rituals of transformation, but she does not distinguish between exoteric (involving the use of costumes) and esoteric (where it is the dream experience rather than transformation that is important). That difference is already hinted at in the work of Matteo and Rodríguez Manjavacas, and I reaffirm it based on a distinction between pictorial conventions and the use of different glyphic expressions. In other words, my opinion differs from that of de la Garza Camino in that I do not think that all of the Maya vessel scenes with *wahyis* themes represent humans transformed or disguised.

are human beings in a state of transformation in this or the other world.

According to Maya sources that hold to the esoteric or private point of view, the rite necessary to externalize the *wahyis* spirit begins with the execution of three, four, or nine somersaults on the ground or on the body of another sorcerer, an act that precedes the externalization of the nagual (jaguar, puma, etc.), which comes out as breath through the sorcerer’s mouth, leaving him dreaming and senseless (Redfield and Villa Rojas 1934:179; Stratmeyer and Stratmeyer 1977:138; Garza Camino 1984:115, 1987a:205, 1987b:100; Valverde Valdés 2004:271; Pitarch Ramón 2006:74-76, 82). To return to the waking state, the somersaults and contortions have to be reversed. The *wahyis* soul is returned to the body by entering through the mouth, concluding the dream experience of the sorcerer.

Externalization of *Wahyis* and Devouring Souls

The *wahyis* soul was thought to be nocturnal since it rested during the day inside the body—almost certainly in the heart—while at night its owner sent it at will to monitor the behavior of his neighbors or cause them harm; thus it worked its owner’s will while the soul’s receptacle slept (Hermitte 1970:78; Stratmeyer and Stratmeyer 1977:137; Villa Rojas 1990:337-338, 342, 1995a:536, 541, 1995b:530).

The possessors of this special psychic entity entered into a deep, ecstatic sleep, while externalizing their “familiar” or auxiliary spirit through the mouth, a belief that



Figure 8. *Wahyis* beings who carry plates or bowls with human bones, eyes, feet, and skulls, codex vessel K1080, Museum of Fine Arts of Boston; one of the *wahyis* is a headless, half-disembodied bird, while the other is called K'ahk' Ti' Suutz' or "Fire-Mouth Bat" (photograph © Justin Kerr).

has been recorded among several Maya groups, including the Poqomam (Garza Camino 1987a:205, 1987b:100). It should be noted that this fits perfectly with the suffix *-is* for inalienable or inherently relational parts of the body (Figure 1c), which in the inscriptions accompanies the morpheme *wahy* in its absolute state and has linguistic descendants in the Colonial and modern Poqom languages (Morán 1991:8; Zender 2004b:200-204; Mó Isém 2006:71-73, 293).⁷ Dennis and Jean Stratmeyer (1977:152) affirm that the nagual, familiar, or auxiliary spirit lives within the body. Stephen Houston, David Stuart, and Karl Taube (2006:35) suggest that the *wahyis* was an aspect of the soul capable of leaving the body at night, in addition to being very dangerous and disease-bearing. Various ethnographic references suggest that this soul or "familiar" entered the body of a brujo through the mouth (Ruz Sosa 1982:59-60), at which time it became his ally and at the same time an additional part of his body. Once the sorcerer had the "evil inside," he was able to externalize it at night and reingest it at dawn. Where such descriptions are explicit, the exit and arrival hole is always the mouth.

According to Calixta Guiteras Holmes (1965:123), it is during sleep that brujos cause misfortunes, diseases, and other ills. Perhaps for this reason, Colonial Yukatek preserves words for "sicken, poison" or "bewitch,"

⁷ In modern Poqomchi' the inalienable nouns that acquire the *-is* absolutive suffix include not only body parts as we understand them, but also clothing, diseases, and certain actions and nouns related to emotions (Mó Isém 2006:71-73, 293), which reveals only the surface layer of a complex conception of the human body alien to both Judeo-Christian and Classical traditions.

deriving from the same morpheme for "sleep" or "dream" (Arzápalo Marín 1980:915, 1991:89, 1995:745). This external soul, however, is conceived as "pure air," since it is invisible to ordinary eyes in a waking state (Garza Camino 1984:115; Villa Rojas 1990:355, 1995a:536, 1995b:530), although it cannot be described as metaphysical since it is material.

Also of vital importance in understanding the Maya vessel scenes (Figures 2–6) is the aforementioned point that Maya ritual specialists externalized their naguals by vaulting or pirouetting in the air, while the auxiliary spirits performed the same acrobatics to return to their owner's interior (Redfield and Villa Rojas 1934:179; Stratmeyer and Stratmeyer 1977:138; Garza Camino 1984:115, 1987a:205, 1987b:100; Valverde Valdés 2004:271; Pitarch Ramón 2006:74-76, 82). Several scholars have noted that the *wahyis* painted on Maya vessels dance, contort, or float in the air (Freidel et al. 1993:191). Among the Zoque of Chiapas, neighbors of the Maya, the nagualistic pirouettes include somersaults and contortions that turn the brujos upside down, transforming them into jaguars (Valverde Valdés 2004:271-272, 2005:537-544). This brings to mind several images from Late Classic vessels, such as that of Saw Hix (Grube and Nahm 1994:691-692), a spotted feline that contorts on bundles of tied femurs. Another well-known example is the contortionist jaguar *t'olo[l] bahlam* (Velázquez García 2009:612) taking part in the dance painted on vessel K1439 (Reents-Budet 1994:166; Just 2012:183). Among the Prehispanic Nahuas, the rite for externalizing the *ih̄iyōtl* included rolling in ashes (López Austin 1989:1:428), which suggests a practice of deep antiquity in Mesoamerica, since both nagualistic traditions seem

to derive from an older common source.

Once the *wahyis* soul was externalized, it could be projected at will into animals, comets, stones, pools of blood, or meteorological phenomena such as wind, lightning, whirlwinds, rainbows, or fireballs, while the body of its possessor remained asleep.

But the most aggressive practice of the sorcerers was to send their nagual or familiar to cause death by slowly devouring the soul of an enemy (Velásquez García 2009:627-630, 2015:190, n.d.). Apparently, sleeping brujos experience this devouring of souls as a simple dream where they savor delicious foods (Guiteras Holmes 1965:125). Another point raised by López Austin (1989:1:431) is a nagualistic belief in the devouring of soul forces of the head and heart, as a complement to the *ih̄yōtl* entity associated with the liver.

In my opinion, Maya vessel scenes allude to these feasts of the *wahyis* (Figure 8) by means of bowls or plates full of human remains carried in the spirits' hands. The bones, severed hands, skulls, and eyeballs usually appearing in these containers could symbolize the human soul, perhaps because these parts of the body were centers for the concentration of soul forces (Velásquez García 2009:628, 2015:190, n.d.). In this regard, the Tzeltal of Cancuc believe that bones are discarded from the souls devoured by naguals (Pitarch Ramón 2006:64-65, n. 15), while the Jakalteek think that sorcerers usually gather on the grave of one of their victims to



Figure 9. This *wahyis*, Jatz' Tok[a]l Mok Chih or “Spark That Whips Knot Mouth,” holds in his hands an *ahk'ab* vessel surrounded by wasps; detail of the codex-style vessel K2284 (photograph © Justin Kerr).

ingest their remains (Stratmeyer and Stratmeyer 1977:146). These references may evoke the metaphor of biting flesh, which is used among the Tzeltal of Pinola to allude to spiritual cannibalism; the bite does not leave physical marks on the body but is evidenced in the sudden appearance of an ailment (Hermitte 1970:106-107).

Villa Rojas (1990:355, 614, 1995a:541) collected ethnographic information among the Tzeltal of Oxchuc and Pinola that greatly improves our understanding of the feasting scenes of the *wahyis* painted on Classic vessels. According to Villa Rojas, when the “familiar” or auxiliary spirit of a wizard steals the soul of an enemy, it is taken to a lonely mountain where he celebrates a feast in the company of the naguals of other sorcerers of the community and their guests. The ceremony takes place during the night while the sorcerers sleep in their houses; therefore it would appear that they meet in dreams to celebrate the triumph of an ally. Perhaps, then, vessel scenes where the *wahyis* fly, jump, and contort themselves while holding dishes with human remains are actually representations of these soul feasts: the dreamlike counterpart of the court banquets that took place in the waking state (Reents-Budet 2001:195-233). What both types of feast have in common is that they served to make or reinforce alliances against common enemies, some on the plane of daytime experience and others in a dream state (Velásquez García 2009:197-210, 630, 2005:190, n.d.).

This interpretation agrees with the fact, already well-attested in Maya ethnographies, that wizards and sorcerers do not typically act alone, but more frequently act in teams under the authority of one of their number, holding periodic meetings attended by the most powerful members of the alliance (Hermitte 1970:61,117; Stratmeyer and Stratmeyer 1977:145). Therefore another function of the elite vessels of the Classic period may have been the political need to seal covenants, which were not only celebrated in Maya courts but in the solitary mountains where the lords met in dreams.

The *Ahk'ab* Vessel and the Binding Serpent

In addition to nagualistic contortions (Figures 2–6) and scenes of soul cannibalism (Figure 8), painted vessels often depict the sending of misfortunes and illnesses. For instance, the so-called *ahk'ab* vessel carried in the hands by many *wahyis* beings (Figure 9) has been interpreted by Edwin Braakhuis (2005:186-188) as a kind



Figure 10. Bloody scene where a *hix* or jaguar-like *wahyis* immobilizes the soul of a victim by means of a serpent binding in order to assault her, codex-style vessel K1653 (photograph © Justin Kerr).

of “biological weapon,” since it would contain various biting, burning, and destructive vermin capable of producing diseases, such as poisonous snakes, centipedes, bees, wasps, etc., an interpretation that he supports with ethnographic and Colonial data related to witchcraft practices involving pots full of insects.

An additional instance is the aforementioned snakes that surround the body of some *wahyis*, as if they were being strangled (see Figure 5). Moreno Zaragoza (2011:40, 105-107) has found accounts in the ethnography of the Ch’ol of Chiapas suggesting that these serpents were conceived of as companions or accomplices of the ancient *wahyis* that helped them to threaten or subdue their victims, as in a bloody scene depicted on vessel K1653, where a jaguar nagual is fiercely attacking the soul of an enemy immobilized or subdued by means of a snake (Figure 10).

Around 1692, father Francisco Núñez de la Vega (1988:758) affirmed that tying up by naguals was an “oppression that the Indians [of the bishopric of Chiapa] greatly lament,” adding that “every day you complain that the naguals have tied you up; if you had not received them, they would not tie you up [...] tie you with the diabolical ties of the naguals and then put you in the formidable prison of Hell.” Further north, in Yucatan, a spell from the *Ritual of the Bacabs* aims to undo a certain oppressive disease produced by the

binding of the serpent Ix Juun Peetz’ K’iin, “The Only One That Crushes Destiny,” *peetz’* being a word that means “crush, squeeze, oppress, press, snare.”

I stand ready to break the binding of the snake (or “shoot,” *can*), the *hunpedzkin-can*. Four (*can*) times was he bound; four times was he seized.

I grasp the bowl (*lac*) of my red release (*choch*). I untied the binding of the *caan* (“sky,” “snake,” “shoot?”), the *hunpedzkin* [*can?*]. I grasp the bowl of the cock-birds (*ah ch’ich’il*), the red *ek-pip*-hawk. Thus then was the seizure of the binding of the snake, the *hunpedzkin*-snake... (Roys 1965:34-35)

As Christophe Helmke and Jesper Nielsen (2009) have observed, the Classic Maya imagery of these *wahyis* is highly analogous to the “bad winds” mentioned in texts from the Colonial era (mainly the *Chilam Balam of Kaua* and the *Ritual of the Bacabs*) as the actual agents and personifications of disease. In addition, the excellent etymological study of the glyphic names of these beings by Alejandro Sheseña Hernández (2010:23-24) reveals that their harmful effects are frequently equated with fire and fog.

The *Wahyaw*

The ritual specialist who possesses a *wahyis* is named in Classic Maya inscriptions as a *wahyaw*, “wizard,

enchanter, sorcerer, magician, nagual” or, if you will, “shaman,” though the lexeme is presently attested only at Palenque (Velásquez García 2009:605-607). The word *wahyaw* has various cognates, including Yukatek *wáay* (Bastarrachea Manzano et al. 1998:129), Itzaj *ajwaay* (Boot 1995:4), Tzotzil *wayajom* (Laughlin and Haviland 1988:326), and Tzeltal *wayajom* (Ara [1616]1986:402), which suggests that its meaning of “wizard” is of great antiquity.

The word *wahyaw* is comprised of two morphemes: *wahy* and *aw*. According to Erik Boot (2006:14), the lexeme *aw* means “shout, howl” or “call.” This suggests that the word *wahyaw* can be translated as “he who calls the auxiliary spirits” or “he who calls the naguals,” a very appropriate term to describe the behavior of the sorcerers who possessed a *wahyis*.

As noted above, for the Tzotzil the necrological forces that transmit disease are at the service of the lord of the underworld called Pukuh. The word *pukuh* also means “wizard,” because sorcerers are considered to be the human counterparts of the gods of death (Holland 1961:171).

Conclusions

Before 2005 scholars had no clear idea of the Prehispanic concept of evil, since the complementary nature of the dualities good/bad, life/death, light/dark, etc., did not fit within the absolute or Manichean values of the Western tradition. The concept of evil only begins to reveal itself now, as we begin to explore indigenous conceptions of the soul, of consciousness, and of the spirit. The vase painters of the Classic period captured the images of those agents of power that could potentially be used to harm, while they orchestrated a series of pictorial conventions to represent the subject in both exoteric states (i.e., public, or waking) and esoteric ones (i.e., private, or dream-related). The discovery that Maya rulers were not only scribes, astronomers, and patrons of the arts, but also sorcerers who could be moved by visceral passions focused on revenge, hatred, and the desire to harm their enemies, allows us to recognize our own world in theirs, to achieve a more sympathetic understanding of those ancient times. As Mercedes de la Garza Camino (2012:170) wisely observes, the nagualistic powers in ancient Mesoamerica were inherently neither good nor evil. Rather, the ritual specialist who wielded them could work either harm or benefit at will. In this paper I have addressed only the deadly or harmful aspects of the *wahyis* that served the Maya rulers of the Classic period—beings which lived inside flesh-and-blood bodies during the day, but exploded into the untamed arena of dreams during the night—as well as the pictorial conventions that Maya artists exploited to represent both exoteric and esoteric aspects of this theme.

Acknowledgments

I wish to express my gratitude to the editors of *The PARI Journal* for inviting me to publish the English version of this article in its prestigious pages. Over the years I have had benefited greatly from dialogues on this topic with many colleagues, especially Mercedes de la Garza Camino, Alfredo López Austin, Romelia Mó Isém, and Daniel Moreno Zaragoza. Finally, I thank María de Lourdes Padilla Cabrera and Jaime Soler Frost, from the editorial department of the Instituto de Investigaciones Estéticas, for their assistance with the illustrations.

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