
The “Holmul Dancer” Theme in Maya Art

DORIE REENTS-BUDET
DUKE UNIVERSITY MUSEUM OF ART

Among the many styles of Late Classic Maya polychrome pottery, the Holmul-style vessels painted with the “Holmul Dancer” (Hellmuth 1982) pictorial program provide fertile ground for iconographic studies. Holmul-style pottery (fig. 1) is characterized by a red-and-orange on cream slip palette whose primary pictorial program is that of a male dancing figure accompanied by a dwarf or hunchback, with horizontal and vertical hieroglyphic bands. Scores of vessels painted in this style are known; although most are without archaeological provenience, tandem stylistic and chemical analyses identify the Holmul-Naranjo area as the location of the workshops that created this pottery (Reents 1985).

Vessels painted in this style were first identified during excavations at the site of Holmul in eastern Guatemala (Merwin and Vaillant 1932), and numerous researchers have since discussed the pottery in terms of both style and iconography (cf. Coe 1978; Hellmuth 1982; Reents 1985). In light of recent developments in our understanding of Maya hieroglyphs and iconography, another

look at the pictorial program is in order, particularly the principal figure and his costume.

The “Holmul Dancer” (Hellmuth 1982) was recently identified as a male figure dressed as the Young Corn God (Taube 1985). He is adorned with jewelry, sports a monster headdress with flowing feathers, and wears an elaborate backrack. The figure strikes a dancing pose with outstretched arm, bent knee, and angled torso. Similar dancers are found on stone monuments such as the Dumbarton Oaks Tablet, a scene that Linda Schele (1980) identified as the dead ruler at apotheosis dancing out of the underworld after defeating the netherworld lords. This theme is repeated on many objects in many media, including the so-called Tikal dancer plates (see Coggins 1975: figs. 86, 88) and other styles of pottery (fig. 2; see also Robicsek and Hales 1981: fig. 60), and an incised jade plaque dredged from the cenote at Chichén Itzá (Proskouriakoff 1974: fig. 79-16).

This study focuses on the pottery presentations of the Holmul Dancer theme in which the vessel’s pictorial surface is divided into equal sections by two short vertical



Fig. 1 Holmul-style vessel, MS 1374 (photograph copyright Justin Kerr 1976).



Fig. 2 A "Holmul Dancer" from a non-Holmul-style vessel, MS 0159 (drawing by Dorie Reents-Budet; vessel in the collection of the Duke University Museum of Art).

texts. Between these texts is found the theme of dancer and accompanying dwarf or hunchback. Minor variations occur in each of the two scenes, such as the presence of a hunchback on one side and a dwarf on the other (V. Miller 1985).

A vase, MS 1374, presents the most detailed ceramic version of the Holmul Dancer (fig. 1).¹ This cylinder vase is unusual for its height and wide diameter, which provide additional pictorial space for the dancer theme

to be repeated three times. These three repetitions exhibit noteworthy iconographic and hieroglyphic substitutions, particularly in the dancers' backracks and the accompanying vertical texts.

Coe (1978:94) first described the backrack's constituent parts, which include the Principal Bird Deity at the top standing on a celestial band that bends to form part of the vertical upright of the backrack. On vessel MS 1125 (fig. 3) the sky band takes the form of a feathered serpent surmounted by a downward-looking feathered monster head, and the second dancer's backrack is composed of an arching serpent surmounted by a feathered Venus sign.

Returning to MS 1374 (fig. 1), the sky band and a plaited ribband create the upright section of the backrack, which terminates with a Cauac Monster head forming the bottom of the backrack. In the concavity created by these elements sits a supernatural zoomorphic character holding a God K head upside down in one hand. A "personified banner" composed of a plaited band, skeletal serpent head, and long quetzal feathers hang below the Cauac Monster and reach to the ground line.

This backrack can be identified as a model of the universe as conceived by the Classic Maya. The Principal Bird Deity marks the zenith above the arch of heaven (Stone 1983), that is, the celestial band (or feathered serpent as on MS 1125) that symbolizes the sky. The Cauac Monster symbolizes the earth below. The supernatural character sits in the space between the earth and the sky above, which can be interpreted as the realm of humans (that is, the earth and the center of the cosmos).

Like the dancer theme, this cosmographic backrack is not restricted to the Holmul-style pottery. It is worn by rulers in many contexts as an integral part of royal costuming. For example, two versions of the backrack are worn by the standing figures on the Initial Series Vase from Uaxactún (fig. 4; compare the righthand figure's



Fig. 3 Holmul-style vessel, MS 1125. Note the feathered saurian backracks (drawing by Dorie Reents-Budet, copyright 1985).

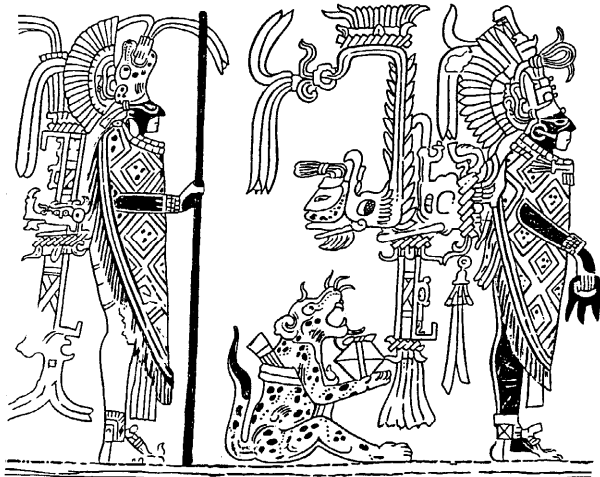


Fig. 4 *The Initial Series Vase*. The figures wear two versions of the cosmographic backrack (drawing courtesy Stanford University Press, copyright 1983).

backrack with those on MS 1125). The backrack is also part of the royal costumes seen on Late Classic monuments such as Tikal Temple IV Lintel 2 (fig. 5a) and possibly on Stela 11 (Jones and Satterthwaite 1982: fig. 16). The full backrack assemblage is depicted on Dos Pilas St. 17, complete with a water-lily jaguar seated within the cosmic frame (Greene, Rands, and Graham 1972: pl. 93). An unusual rear view of the backrack is depicted on Quiriguá Monument 9 (Stela I; fig. 5b).²

An elaborate representation of the backrack imagery is found on Lintel 3 of Temple IV at Tikal (fig. 6). Here

the ruler (Ruler 8) does not wear the backrack but rather is surrounded by the components of its cosmographic imagery. Ruler B sits upon a throne set atop steps that terminate in Cauac Monster heads. Replacing the sky band of the backrack, a feathered serpent arches over the ruler while the Principal Bird Deity perches atop the arching serpent.³ This imagery recalls the rear of Monument 9 of Quiriguá (fig. 5b) where the ruler also is set within the cosmogram of the backrack, the same space occupied by the supernatural characters on the Holmul-style pottery. In both cases, then, rather than carrying the burden of the universe on their backs, these rulers appear to declare their central position within the cosmos.

The cosmographic backrack worn by the dancers depicted on the Holmul-style pottery appears frequently in Classic Maya art and is an integral part of royal Maya costuming. Its rendition on this pottery is particular to the style group, however, and represents a local iconographic interpretation characteristic of this ceramic tradition.

The Holmul Dancer's Backrack and Hieroglyphic Texts

The uniqueness of the Holmul-style pottery's iconographic interpretation pertains to the presence of three different supernatural creatures seated in the backracks and the accompanying vertical hieroglyphic texts. Returning to vessel MS 1374, a vertical text accompanies each dancer (figs. 1, 7). Coe (1978:96) suggested that the first two glyphs, which are the same in each ex-

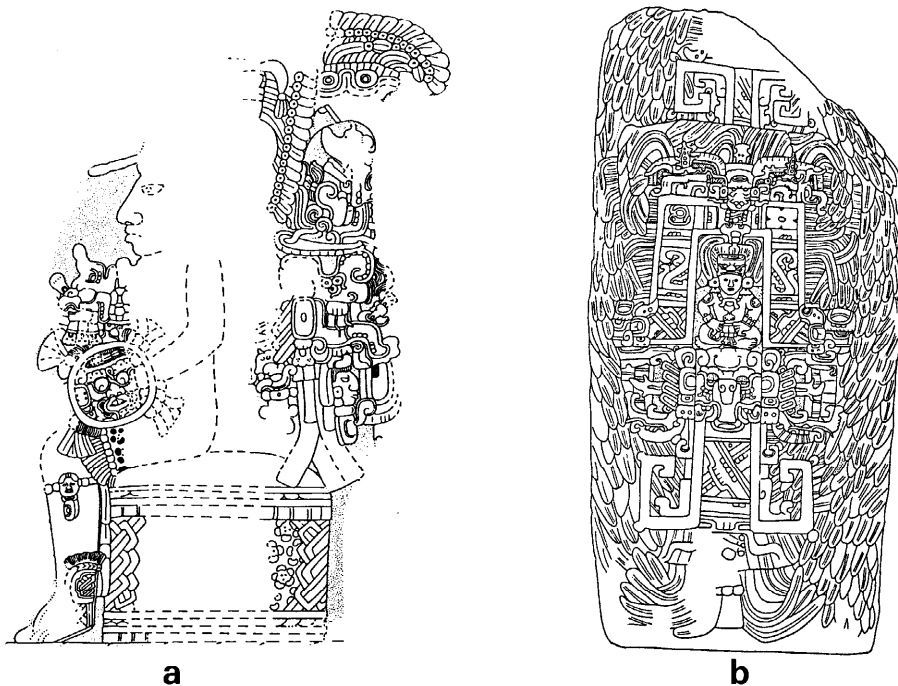


Fig. 5 (a) Tikal Temple IV Lintel 2. Profile view of the cosmographic backrack (drawing by William Coe; courtesy of The University Museum, University of Pennsylvania, copyright 1982). (b) Quiriguá Monument 9 (Stela I). Frontal depiction of the cosmographic backrack (drawing by Andrea Stone, copyright 1983).

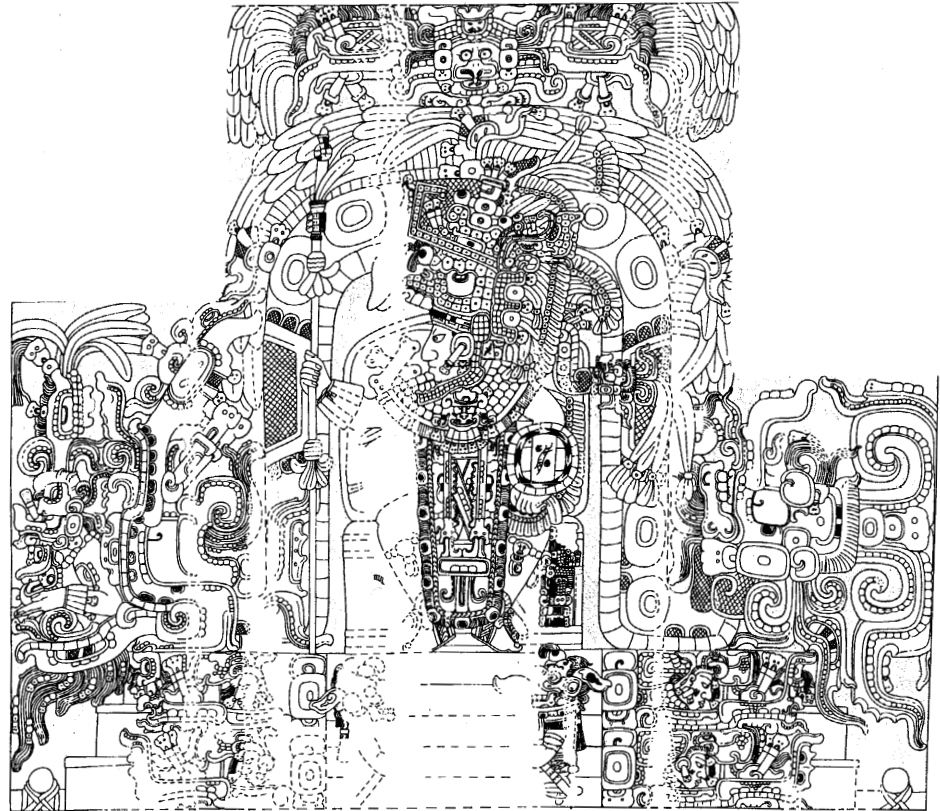


Fig. 6 Tikal Temple IV Lintel 3 (drawing by William Coe; courtesy of The University Museum, University of Pennsylvania, copyright 1982).

ample, refer to the “Young Lords” (the dancers), whom he identifies as the Hero Twins of the Popol Vuh.

Although I agree that these vertical texts are nominal in nature, recent hieroglyphic decipherments suggest a slightly different interpretation. I propose that the first two glyphs in each vertical text function as nominal in-

roducers (after Schele 1982:191). That is, the first glyph T757 is a general verb that introduces name phrases, and the second glyph T1000b is a head variant of *ahau*, “lord,” with a more general connotation than Coe’s (1978:96) “Young Lords” (the Hero Twins).

Coe (1978:96) noted that the third and fifth glyphs in each text differ from each other and must refer to the different supernaturals seated within the backracks. He suggested that the third glyph names each creature in the respective backracks. At A3 (fig. 7a), ten.T86.524 (Ix) names the water-lily jaguar. The glyph compound at B3 (fig. 7b), six.T86.561, names the long-snouted furry-bodied zoomorph, and at C3 (fig. 7c), ten.T86.520 (Chuen) names the anthropomorphic monkey. Coe proposed that the final glyph in each text, which is composed of the mainsign of an emblem glyph (Berlin 1958), associates each of the dancer and dwarf pairs with a particular archaeological site. I propose instead that these final glyphs are additional parts of the names of the supernaturals and make no reference to Classic Maya sites.

The nominal concordance is particularly clear in the case of the water-lily jaguar supernatural (fig. 7a). The third glyph at A3 is the day sign Ix, which is associated with the jaguar and the underworld (Thompson 1950: 82). The final glyph T569 depicts bundled or twisted cords, a sign that is also the main component of the Tikal emblem glyph. Here, however, the water-group

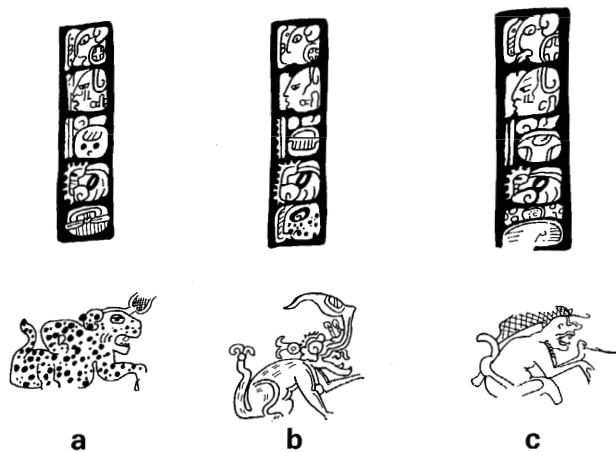


Fig. 7 MS 1374 backrack creatures and their accompanying hieroglyphic texts. (a) the water-lily jaguar (Ix balam); (b) the sky supernatural (“10-sky” Chicchan); (c) the monkey supernatural (“10” Chuen) (drawings by Dorie Reents-Budet, copyright 1985).

prefix (T36) and *ah po* (T168) are absent, affixes whose presence is mandatory for the identification of a glyphic compound as an emblem glyph (Berlin 1958). Schele (1985a:63) suggested that T569 is read *balan*, “coiled up, bundled,” which is nearly homophonous with *balam*, “jaguar.” Therefore, these two glyphs together name the water-lily jaguar as Ix Balam or “(underworld) jaguar-jaguar,” a supernatural who figures prominently in underworld scenes on Classic Maya pottery.

Following the pattern established by the water-lily jaguar and its accompanying text, the second backrack creature is a long-snouted furry-bodied supernatural (fig. 7b). He is named by the compounds at B3 and B5, a “6-sky” (six.T86.561) compound, and T25.764 (phonetic *ca* and the day sign Chicchan) or “serpent” (Thompson 1950:75). Similar long-snouted saurians represent the sky on other Classic monuments (e.g., the stucco long-snouted saurian from Palenque House E, east chamber). This visual similarity suggests that the furry-bodied long-snouted supernatural from the Holmul-style vessels, named “6-sky serpent” in the vertical text, is a sky deity.⁴ Although Coe (1978:96) noted that T764 is the main sign of the emblem glyph of Calakmul and identified the dancer and dwarf with this site, I suggest that here T764 is part of the name of this sky-related supernatural and makes no reference to Calakmul.

The last of the three backrack creatures is an anthropomorphic simian named by the glyphs at C3 and C5 (fig. 7c). The first nominal is ten.T86.520, whose main component is the day sign Chuen. Thompson (1950:80) noted that the day Chuen is associated with the Monkey God (Hun Chuen and/or Hun Batz from the Popol Vuh), who is associated with the arts. The glyph at C5 is composed of T174:563var, the latter being the main sign of the Machaquilá emblem glyph. As noted above, I do not believe that the reference is to the archaeological site of Machaquilá. Instead, this final

glyphic compound must be part of the name of the anthropomorphic monkey deity, although I cannot explain the connection.

The fourth glyph in each of these three vertical texts is the same (fig. 7), and bears some resemblance to Coe’s “Step glyph” of the Primary Standard Sequence (Coe 1973b:159). However, the affixes are different (T331 in Coe’s compound and T166 *akbal* here on the vessel); given the compound’s position within a nominal phrase, it is more likely that this glyph functions nominally much like the T1000b *ahau* title in the second position.

These vertical texts, then, function primarily as nominal phrases and name the supernaturals seated in the dancers’ backracks. As such, they operate like many of the short texts in the monumental art (cf. Yaxchilán Lintel 8 and the Bonampak murals) that identify the participants. The last glyph in each phrase, composed of the main signs of various emblem glyphs, does not make reference to any Maya site, polity, or dynasty. Instead, these glyphs are additional parts of the supernaturals’ names.

Implications for Emblem Glyphs

If the above hypothesis is correct, a logical conclusion is that the emblem glyphs of at least some Maya sites are derived from the names of supernaturals, a pattern consonant with Maya naming practices, wherein the names of supernaturals are incorporated into those of royal individuals, polities, and ruling families.

Many examples can be cited of rulers’ names incorporating those of supernaturals. For example, the nominal main sign (T844) of the Early Classic Tikal ruler Curl Snout is the front head of the contemporary Celestial Monster (see the incised tripod cylinder vase in Berjonneau and Sonnery 1985:219). The glyph for the deity Gou K figures prominently in the name of Curl Snout’s son Stormy Sky, and many of the Late Classic rulers of the Petexbatun area include this deity name in their nominals (Johnston 1985). Another example is that of the Early Classic Palenque ruler “Casper” (Schele 1978d) whose name glyph main sign (T628) marks the ear of a supernatural Deer Monster depicted on a Late Classic cylinder. A final example is the second zoomorphic glyph of Lord Smoking Shell’s name on Lamanai St. 9. This zoomorphic monster glyph is the same as that found within an isolated glyphic cartouche inscribed on the lid of an Early Classic vessel in the Dumbarton Oaks Maya Photographic Archive (EC-p4-17) and may refer to a supernatural saurian.⁵

The naming of rulers after deities is not restricted to the Classic Period. In the Tizimin and Mani Chronicles of Yucatán (Brinton 1882) we read that the head chief of Chichén Itzá was named Chac Xib Chac (Tozzer 1941:138). David Stuart (in Schele and Miller 1986: 304, 307) identified Chac Xib Chac as the Post-Classic version of the Classic Period deity GI as evening star. The ruler Chac Xib Chac was defeated by Ah Nacxit Kukul-

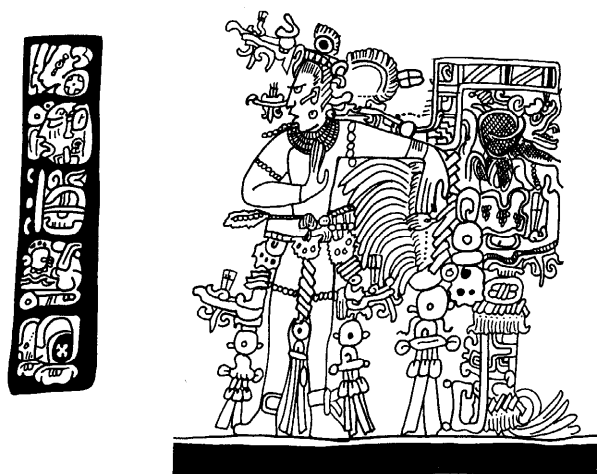


Fig. 8 Holmul-style vessel, MS 0603. Holmul dancer with “6-sky” supernatural seated in his backrack (drawing by Dorie Reents-Budet, copyright 1985).

can (Brinton 1882:146), the name Kukulcan being the Maya name for the Mexican deity Quetzalcoatl.

Turning to emblem glyphs, these glyph compounds refer either to a specific Maya site or polity or to its ruling family. Although most remain undeciphered, in the case of the Tikal emblem glyph cited above a reading for the main sign coincides with the name of a jaguar supernatural (Schele 1985a). Additional examples of emblem glyph main signs making reference to supernaturals include what may be an Early Classic version of the Piedras Negras emblem glyph main sign (T585c) incised on the back of an aged supernatural that may name this character (Easby 1966:101). The Copán emblem glyph is composed of the head of a bat (T756) and may refer to the underworld supernatural Camazotz of the Popol Vuh.

Such polity naming practices would be consonant with findings from Late Post-Classic Yucatán, where settlements characteristically had tutelary idols whose names were applied to the towns as well.⁶ Bruce Love (1986:160) cited the *Relaciones de Yucatán*, which lists at least eight towns that carried the same name as their respective idol (supernatural). For example, Campeche was named for an idol whose attributes included a coiled snake (*kaan*) with a tick (*pich'*) on its head. It would not be improbable, then, for the Classic Period emblem glyphs, which name sites or their ruling families, to be derived from the names of supernaturals. One could further suggest that these supernaturals or idols would have held a special place in the socioreligious life of the site in question.

In conclusion, the Holmul dancers' backracks contain different supernaturals who are named by the accompanying vertical texts. Their respective names include the main sign of various emblem glyphs that here do not refer to Maya sites or ruling families, but rather are part of the names of the supernaturals. It would appear, then, that at least some emblem glyphs may be derived from the names of supernaturals in a manner similar to that of Post-Classic Yucatán, where the nominals of the towns' tutelary idols were employed to name the towns as well. Given the vertical texts on vessel MS 1374, the emblem glyph main signs of Machaquilá and Calakmul (or Site Q) may be derived from the names of the two supernaturals seated in the dancers' backracks, although their identifications have yet to be made.

Notes

1. When possible, the Holmul-style vessels are referenced by their archival numbers from the Maya Ceramic Archive, Conservation Analytical Laboratory, Smithsonian Institution (e.g., MS 1374).

2. Claude Baudez (personal communication, 1986) brought to my attention the backrack on Copán St. H as another cosmographic image, although here the Cauac Monster is replaced by a sun visage wearing a quadripartite badge headdress.

3. Schele (1985a:142) interpreted this arching serpent on Tikal Temple IV Lintel 3 differently. She identified it as her "Vision Serpent" associated with bloodletting rites, an entity seemingly separate from the cosmographic backrack saurian. Schele also identified the backrack on Tikal Temple IV Lintel 2 as the Vision Serpent, although here a feathered Venus sign replaces the Principal Bird Deity atop the serpent. This feathered serpent and Venus symbol motif recalls the dancer's backrack on vessel MS 1125 (fig. 3). In both these examples the Cauac Monster is found below the serpent, and on Tikal Lintel 2 an eroded figure sits inside the backrack, which may be one of the backrack creatures like those from the Holmul-style pottery. Because of these close iconographic and positional similarities, I would identify the backrack from Tikal Temple IV Lintel 2 as the cosmographic backrack like those on the Holmul-style pottery and not as Schele's Vision Serpent.

4. This "10-sky" glyph compound (or "6-sky" in the case of MS 0603; see fig. 8) also names Schele's (1985a) Vision Serpent. I am not certain whether her Vision Serpent is synonymous with or substitutable for the "10/6-sky serpent" backrack supernatural, who in turn resembles the long-snouted sky saurians. It would seem that, although the backrack "10/6-sky saurian" and Schele's Vision Serpent (and possibly the arching feathered serpent with Venus sign of MS 1125 and Tikal Temple IV Lintel 2 as well) are separate entities, some kind of acceptable substitution or convergence exists among these saurian images.

It should be noted that on MS 1374 the creature with the "10-sky" name does not resemble any of the Vision Serpents identified by Schele (1985: figs. 8, 9, 10). Instead, his body is that of a furry zoomorph. This creature appears on another Holmul-style vessel, MS 0603 (fig. 8), whose body is marked with cross-hatching rather than fur. Here he has an elongated snout and his name includes the "6-sky" title. However, the second nominal compound is not the Chicchan glyph but rather is that of an undeciphered title (T606:23.565var?:23) that appears on a third Holmul-style vessel, MS H13, naming another furry-bodied zoomorph (Merwin and Vaillant 1932: pl. 30c).

If one is to suggest that the "10-sky" creature from the MS 1374 backrack and Schele's "6-sky Vision Serpent" are the same creature, one would have to explain their different depictions. For example, on stone monuments Schele's Vision Serpent can appear with a beard and/or feathers. It is possible that these stone monument versions of the serpent are depicted here on the pottery vessels in full detail, the beard being expanded into a furry body and the "serpent" portion referenced by the "10/6-sky" glyph compound and the cross-hatched body of the creature (see MS 0603; fig. 8). Such an explanation may be stretching the point, however, and leads to the conclusion that we do not yet understand the iconographic domains of these various serpents.

5. An equivocal example is the Naranja Ruler Ah K'ak ("Lord Fire"), whose name glyph main sign (T563a) constitutes one of the nominals of a jaguar being sacrificed on a polychrome vessel (Robicsek and Hales 1981: fig. 22c). On the vessel, however, the wavy line above the T563a in Ah K'ak's name is replaced by a subfixed T61, which may distinguish these compounds as two separate nominals. This "fire" glyph (T563a) repeatedly names the flaming jaguar found on Classic Period vessels, however, and Ah K'ak's name may refer to this underworld supernatural.

6. Bruce Love brought to my attention these idol/town naming practices in Post-Classic Yucatán.