

# New Ideas about the *Wahyis* Spirits Painted on Maya Vessels: Sorcery, Maladies, and Dream Feasts in Prehispanic Art<sup>1</sup>

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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 T539<sup>2</sup> (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 T533<sup>3</sup> 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

<sup>1</sup> 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.

<sup>2</sup> T539 is the glyph's designation in Thompson's (1962) catalog; it is AM7 in the most recent catalog (Macri and Looper 2003).

<sup>3</sup> AM1 in Macri and Looper (2003).

of certain psychic entities that the Maya associate with sleep.<sup>4</sup> 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

<sup>4</sup> 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 Velázquez García 2018; Velázquez García 2009, 2015, n.d.).



**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

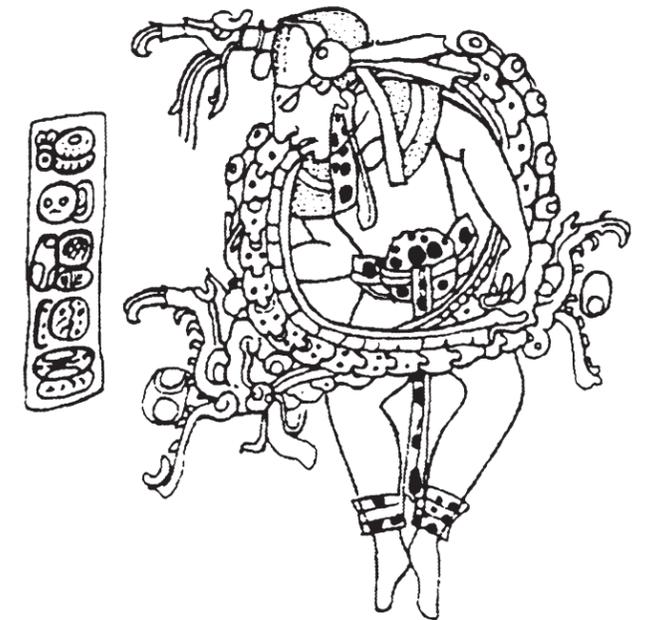


**Figure 2.** Rollout photograph of the famous Altar de Sacrificios Vase or K3120; according to its glyphic text it was consecrated or ritually activated on the date 9.16.0.0.0, 3 Ajaw 18 Soz', April 19, AD 754. Photograph by Otis Imboden, published in George E. Stuart (1975:772-774), National Museum 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 (Velázquez 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 Chapah or “Centipede of the House of White Bones,” nagual or auxiliary spirit of the Lord of Baakle[]; 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).<sup>5</sup> 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).

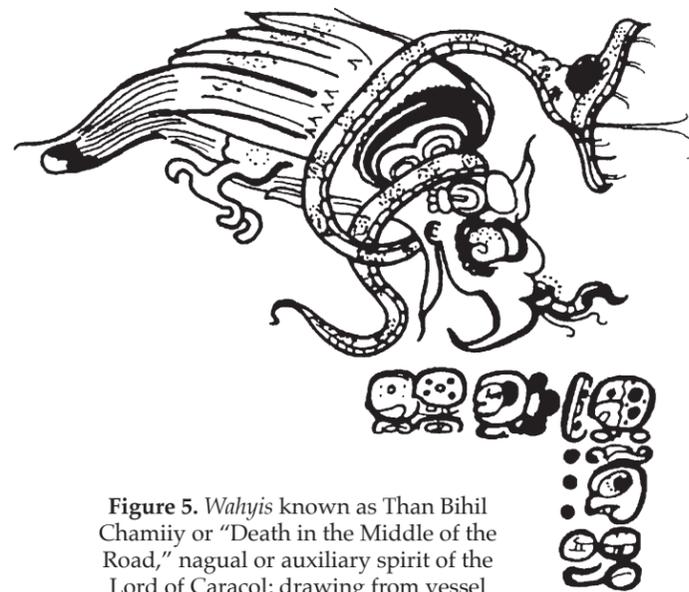
Similar beings are vividly described in the *Popol Vuh* as the macabre retinue of the gods of Xibalba: Xik'iri'i Pat ("Flying Scab") and Kuchuma' K'ik' ("Gathered Blood"), whose function was to cause the spilling of

<sup>5</sup> 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 Uxte'; 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 Uxte' (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 (Velázquez 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 absolute 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 absolute 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; Velásquez 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 *ih̄yōtl* 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 *ih̄yōtl* entity and cloak it in another body, or receive within himself the *ih̄yōtl* 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) (Velásquez 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 (Velásquez 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 (Velásquez 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).<sup>6</sup>

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

<sup>6</sup> 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).<sup>7</sup> 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,"

<sup>7</sup> 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'olol['] 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 *ihyōtl* 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 (Velázquez 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 *ihyōtl* 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 (Velázquez 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).

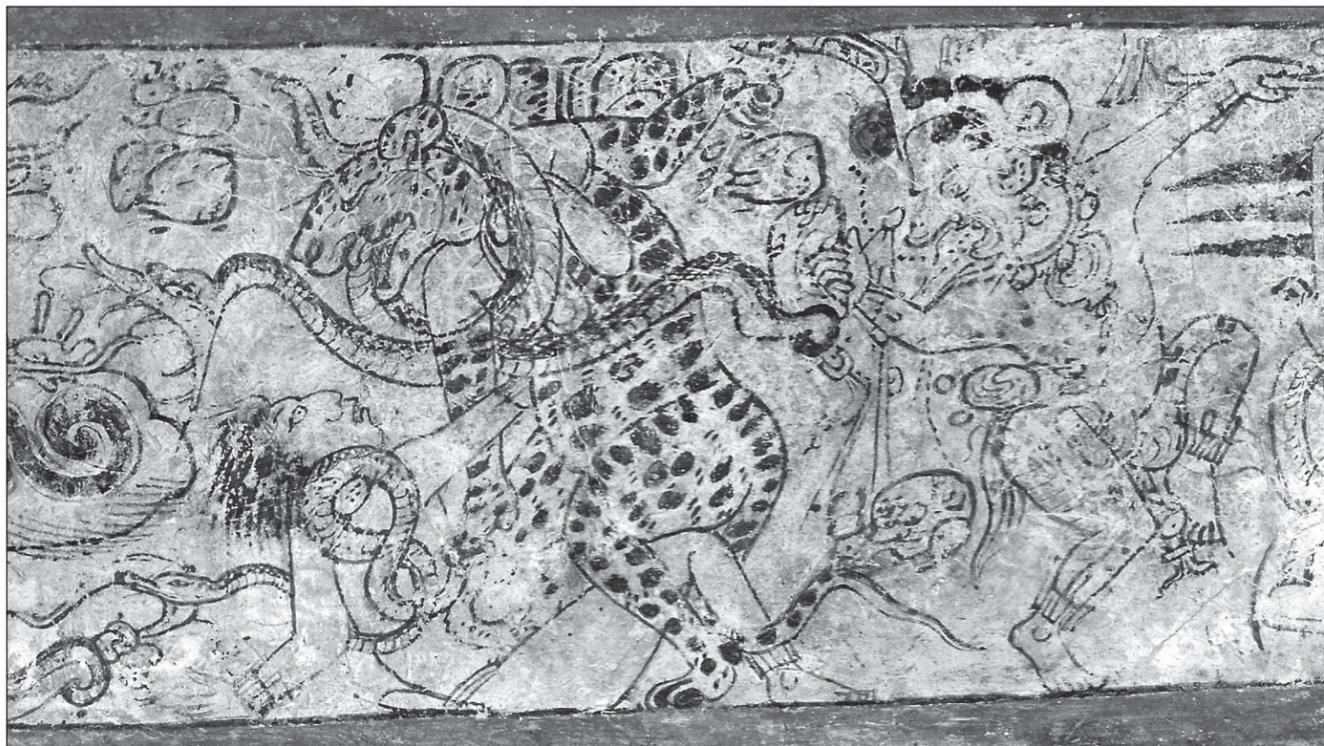
ingest their remains (Stratmeyer and Stratmeyer 1977:146). These references may evoke the metaphor of biting flesh, which is used among the Tzeltal of Pinola to allude to spiritual cannibalism; the bite does not leave physical marks on the body but is evidenced in the sudden appearance of an ailment (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 (Velázquez 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 *humpedzkin-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 *humpedzkin* [*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 *humpedzkin*-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 K’aua* 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 (Velázquez García 2009:605-607). The word *wahyaw* has various cognates, including Yucatek *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.

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