

Where Snakes Abound: Supernatural Places of Origin and Founding Myths in the Titles of Classic Maya Kings

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Abstract: Emblem glyphs functioned as exalted regal titles that incorporated place names, some of which refer to primordial locations and the settings of mythic events. The title *k'uhul kanu'l ajaw*, 'godly Kanu'l king', most prominently borne by the Late Classic rulers of Calakmul, is one of these supernatural emblem glyphs. Evidence from hieroglyphic texts on Late Classic ceramics suggests that the toponym *kanu'l* names a cave where the defeat, death and resurrection of the Maize God took place. By incorporating this place name in their regal title, kings of the Classic period (AD 250-950) emulated and fostered ties to events set in deep-time and legitimated their claim for divinity.

Keywords: epigraphy; iconography; emblem glyphs; toponyms; Classic Maya.

Resumen: Los glifos emblema sirvieron como distinguidos títulos reales que incorporaron nombres de lugares, algunos de los cuales se refieren a ubicaciones primordiales y a los escenarios de eventos míticos. Uno de estos glifos emblema sobrenaturales es el título *k'uhul kanu'l ajaw*, 'señor divino de Kanu'l', el cual fue portado por los gobernantes de Calakmul en el Clásico tardío. La evidencia de los textos jeroglíficos en vasijas del Clásico tardío sugiere que el topónimo *kanu'l* denomina a una cueva donde sucedió la derrota, la muerte y la resurrección del dios del maíz. Al integrar el nombre de este lugar en su título real, los reyes del Clásico (250-950 d. C.) emulaban y fomentaban sus vínculos con ciertos eventos del tiempo profundo y legitimaban su demanda a la divinidad.

Palabras clave: epigrafía; iconografía; glifos emblema; topónimos; mayas; periodo clásico.

Introduction

Ever since the ground-breaking discovery of toponyms in Classic Maya texts (c. AD 250-950), it has been known that supernatural localities occupied a privileged position in ancient Maya narratives (Stuart & Houston 1994: 69-80). As to why so many supernatural places are named in the texts, can be explained by the paramount importance of myths in human societies, and the Maya are no exception in this regard. At their most elemental, all myths can be grouped under four major functional headings. The first

views myths as a means of preserving the memory of an event, or series of events, be they historic or allegedly so. In time and with the distortive effects of oral recitation, the events develop into fantastic stories. The second includes myths that serve to explain the advent of certain features of the human world, including social organisation, traditions, rituals and taboos, but also the physiography of valleys, mountains, streams and caves, or even the physical appearance of animals; why some, for example, have long tails and other short ones, why the vulture is bald and why the jaguar has spots. The third category serves to shape and instil moral and ethical values, providing stories wherein right is pitted against wrong. As a didactic means of explaining what something is, by what it is not, trickster tales abound in Amerindian folklore, wherein a supernatural figure – often a shape-shifter – gets involved in predicaments due to antagonistic and asocial behaviour, which are often diametrically opposed to the cultural values of the narrator. By means of humour and antithesis the younger generation is imparted with the moral and ethical values of their society. Finally, the fourth takes into consideration the role of myths in the legitimation of power and the development or maintenance of social inequality. Thus, myths can explain the distinct and in some cases divine origin of those in power and also the necessity of unequal social structure and differential relations.

Whereas these headings provide a framework for understanding the functions of myths, they do little to emphasise the importance of the constituent elements of such narratives, involving at their most basic, the actors, events, timeframe and places where the actions take place. Although most scholars tend to focus on the actors and the events, the supernatural localities of mythological narratives remain resignedly understudied, and it is on precisely such toponyms that we focus here, especially the places that are incorporated into regal titles, known as ‘emblem glyphs’ (hereafter abbreviated as EG). When Heinrich Berlin (1958) described the structure of EGs for the first time, he recognised that they are composed of two elements – today known to be read as *k’uhul*¹ ‘god-like,

1 In this paper, the first level of analysis of glyphs, the transliteration, which represents the way in which glyphic segments are originally written, are rendered in bold typeface, with logograms written in uppercase and phonograms (vocalic signs and syllabograms) in lowercase. Square brackets [...] mark infixed signs, whereas braces {...} are used for reconstructed graphemes. The second level of analysis, the transcription, which provides the assumed pronunciation, or reading, of particular segments, is written in lowercase and in italic typeface. At this level of analysis square brackets mark reconstructed elements not originally rendered in a given segment. Proper names, including anthroponyms, ethnonyms, theonyms and toponyms are rendered in Roman typeface with initial capital letter. Considering the focus of this paper on toponyms, it is at times necessary to morphologically segment and analyse a given toponym. In such cases these are rendered phonemically in forward slashes /.../ and in lowercase italics. Italic typeface is otherwise also used for emphasis and to render foreign terms, especially those from Latin, Spanish and Nawatl, not found in standard English. Single quotes ‘...’ are used for glosses as well as literal and direct translations, leaving double quotes “...” for quotations and “so-called” instances. In spelling Maya terms, we follow the orthography formulated and endorsed by the Academy of the Mayan Languages of Guatemala, with the exception of [b], which is phonemically represented as /b/.

divine' and *ajaw* 'lord, king' – and one variable main sign that changes according to the site under scrutiny. While most researchers associate EGs with socio-political institutions and territorial organisation (Mathews 1991a; see also Freidel 1986; Marcus 1976), it was initially thought that these signs “seem to refer to something closely associated with each place; it could, for example, concern the very name of each locality, of a tutelary deity, of a dynasty, etc.” (Berlin 1958: 111, translation ours). With the discovery of toponyms proper (Stuart & Houston 1994), it has become clear that the main signs of many EGs record toponyms, but that many archaeological sites were equally known by other names than those recorded in the EGs. This allowed scholars to recognise that EGs constitute, first and foremost, the exalted title of royalty, in essence providing a dynastic name, and that the toponyms occurring outside of EGs are place names properly-speaking. In combing through the glyphic corpus and attempting to match these toponyms up with earthly locales, one finds that several instead involve supernatural toponyms (Helmke 2011; Helmke 2012a). Thus, while some EGs appear to refer to actual locations in the natural and physical world, in other cases no historical events are known to have transpired there. The most convincing cases are those wherein the toponym appears widely in mythological texts, such as Matwiil that is referred to so often in the texts of Palenque, which is tied to supernatural entities in the deep past, before the present creation (Helmke 2012a: 95-100; Stuart & Houston 1994: 75-77). In addition, the toponyms of the two EGs associated with the Yaxchilan dynasty can both be related to mythological events. The first, read Pa'chan (*/pa'-chan/*, 'broken-sky') is tied to the myth recounting the defeat of a great celestial bird at the hands of the Hero Twins, and the toponym seems to name the place where the bird descended from the heavens, and where it was ultimately vanquished (Helmke 2012a: 100-107). The second, although it remains undeciphered in its reading, is closely tied with mythological events before and at the time of the last creation, involving long-lived rulers from a dynasty with a bafflingly long line of successors, as well as being connected to the supreme celestial deity, God D, who is somehow involved, if not responsible for the demise of the Maize God (Helmke 2012a: 107-115).

Although it may strike the reader as odd to think that the ancient Maya kings bore titles incorporating the names of distant mythological places, this certainly was the case. Indeed, even a quick foray has identified a whole series of other EGs that appear to be of mythological origin (Grube 2002a; Helmke 2012a: 117-119). Here we will continue the investigation of supernatural EGs and focus on just one toponymic main sign, that of the so-called Snake-head EG, for which some suggestive data exists to propose that it may be of mythological origin as well (Helmke 2012a: 117-118). We will analyse the appearance of this place name in the different contexts in which it occurs, throughout the Maya area, in order to reconstruct the mythological narratives that are tied to this particular toponym. The most important sources for this enterprise are two groups of Late Classic iconographic

programmes, namely the so-called ‘confrontation scenes’ and the Holmul Dancer scenes, both rendered on a series of exceptional ceramic serving vessels, including vases and dishes. By determining the role of the Snake-head toponym in these iconographic programmes we not only shed light on the origins of main signs included in EGS, but also exemplify the discursive functions of mythological scenes as represented on ceramic media.

Our analysis will deal with symbolic spaces, which is to say, places and landscapes that have a meaning and trigger shared, or collective, memories of past events. The power of toponyms, at the mere utterance of their name, to conjure up events that transpired there is truly remarkable (Helmke 2012a: 92, 116-117). However, as with any recall of information, a relationship between the greater conceptual referent and the compact symbolic reference first has to be established and imparted. This relationship can be termed the narrative precedent, wherein an explanation or story serves to better imbue meaning to a given symbolic referent, and toponyms function in precisely the same way. One of the first to point out the function of landscapes as *mnemotopes* was Halbwachs (1941) who realised an extensive study of the symbolic landscape of the Holy Land. Since then, much of the research on the relation between memory and space has focused on physical landscapes and their conversion into cultural symbols of historic episodes (Assmann 1999: 298-339; Meusburger, Heffernan & Wunder 2011). In this chapter we part from a very distinct premise since we do not know where the place in question was located, or if it was thought to be located in the tangible and physical world. Therefore, we cannot study the interaction of the social world with a physical space; on the contrary, we depend on the discursive and emic conception of the location, which is only preserved and conveyed to us in texts and contextualised by graphic representations. In consequence, the places treated in this chapter are not commemoration sites, but they are projections of memories per se, since they only exist in mythological narratives and their reflections in Classic Mayan society.

The narratives that concern us here reflect events of a distant or foundational past in which cultural realities were shaped and the cosmogonic order established. In comparative theoretical terms we can speak of ‘deep-time’ (Bierhorst 1985; Bierhorst 1988; Bierhorst 1990), or ‘cultural memory’ (Assmann 1992; Assmann 1995), on the whole equivalent concepts, set in opposition to the recent ‘historical past’ or ‘communicative memory’, respectively.² By treating myth as a type of social memory it is possible to

2 Some authors, instead, prefer to speak of ‘mythical’ and ‘historical’ past. However, these terms are culturally biased, since a ‘historical’ narrative purports to reflect objective reality, whereas a ‘mythical’ narrative conveys emic and idiosyncratic beliefs. We consider it erroneous to equate accounts of the recent past with historical reliability, since recall sensitivity can only be evaluated by the method of source critique and by a clear evaluation of the information storage technology that is employed. However, for our purposes we require more descriptive terms, which are more sympathetic to emic conceptions, and therefore prefer to use the above mentioned terminology.

notice its dynamic structure. In the same way in which an individual's memory is a subjective recreation of past events, determined by social circumstance and discursive goals (Halbwachs 1925), myths change with every reproduction and adapt to the necessities of those who control and reiterate them. Of course, cultural memory – to which myth belongs – is usually highly canonised and specialised, so that it is less susceptible to change and develops more slowly and gradually than other informal genres of communicative memory, such as eye-witness accounts, gossip, or hearsay (Assmann 1992: 48-56, 87-103). Nevertheless, cultural memory is functional (Assmann 1999: 138-139), and in the following discussion it will become clear how mythological elements were used to legitimate rulers of the Classic period and their claim to divinity, by drawing on each of the basic functions of myths.

The Snake-head emblem glyph

The Snake-head EG is quite simply the most widely cited EG in the entire corpus of Classic Maya texts. While there are still discussions about the Early Classic and even Preclassic origins of this dynastic title (Grube 2004; Guenter n.d.; Hansen, Howell & Guenter 2008: 56-60; Martin 1997; Martin 2004; Martin & Grube 2000: 102-104; Nalda 2004; Velásquez García 2008a), the earliest contemporary examples of the Snake-head EG are found at Dzibanche and the sites of El Resbalón, Yo'okop, Los Alacranes and Pol Box in Quintana Roo, Mexico (Carrasco & Boucher 1987; Esparza Olguín & Pérez Gutiérrez 2009; Grube 2005; Martin 1997: 861; Velásquez García 2004). In addition, one of the earliest potential examples has been found at the site of La Muerta in the Mirador region of the Peten, Guatemala (Suyuc *et al.* 2005: 78-79, 81). It is equally clear that during the Late Classic period (c. AD 600-800) this title was employed by a series of rulers established at Calakmul (as first proposed by Marcus 1973, see also Marcus 1987; Martin 2005). The Early Classic references to the Snake-head EG at Dzibanche and the corresponding absence of the title at Calakmul have prompted researchers to suggest that Dzibanche was the Early Classic seat of the Snake-head dynasty, which ultimately relocated to Calakmul sometime after the turn of the sixth century (Martin 2005: Fig. 1, Fig. 6; Martin & Grube 2008: 103-106; Velásquez García 2008a; Velásquez García 2008b). That this EG was transferred from one site, to another, over the course of the Classic period demonstrates that even though EGs incorporate toponyms, these did not function as toponymic references per se, but are first and foremost titular expressions referring to the exalted ruling elite and dynastic lineages (Helmke 2012a: 93-94; Helmke & Awe 2008: 70-75). However, while it is by now well-known that many if not most EGs are built up on toponyms, this nevertheless needs to be demonstrated on a case-by-case basis, rather than inherently assumed. Below we provide evidence to demonstrate that the main sign of the Snake-head EG is indeed a toponym.

Let us begin with the archaeological site of Calakmul, a site of profound paradoxes. For one, it is among the largest archaeological sites in Mesoamerica and commensurate with its size, the ancient rulers oversaw the erection of at least 117 monolithic monuments (Marcus 1987; Morley 1933; Ruppert & Denison 1943). Despite this staggering number, the glyphic corpus of Calakmul is that which represents the smallest fraction of preserved texts, for any site in the Maya area. Thus, only a handful of examples of the regal Snake-head emblem have been documented at Calakmul itself. To blame is the local limestone, which is soft, porous and friable. Centuries of downpours and tropical growth have extensively weathered, toppled and broken these monuments, with sculptural details and associated texts remaining as nothing but faint outlines (Marcus 1987: 195-197; Martin & Grube 2000: 101; Morley 1933; Ruppert & Denison 1943). Consequently, apart from Dzibanche and the sites of Quintana Roo, the majority of references to Snake-head rulers are found outside of Calakmul itself, at surrounding sites such as Uxul and El Palmar, among others (Grube 2008; Grube *et al.* 2012; Tsukamoto; López Camacho & Esparza Olguín 2010), and from a wide array of distant sites, including Edzna, Palenque, Moral-Reforma, Piedras Negras, Yaxchilan, La Corona, El Perú, Tikal, Naranjo, Holmul, Caracol, Dos Pilas, Seibal, Cancuen, Quirigua, as well as Copan, and possibly La Milpa (Estrada-Belli 2013; Grube 1994: Fig. 3b; Martin 2003; Martin & Grube 1994; Martin & Grube 2000; Pallán Gayol 2009: 265-268). This wide collection of sites is truly astounding and to this we should also add the foreign mentions made to the two principal toponyms of Calakmul, namely Chikunaahb³ (*Ichiku-naahb*), ‘coati

3 The toponym written **chi-ku-NAB** poses problems in its transcription. For starters we prefer to see the final term ‘pool, lagoon, *aguada*’ transcribed as *naahb*, with a long vowel due to the occasional phonetic complementation of this term with **-bi**. Particularly revealing cases from the fallen stuccoes of Temple 18 at Palenque spell the same term as **NAH-bi** (n. 438, 450, 514), using the logogram ‘house’ **NAH** by means of rebus, here demonstrating the presence of the post-vocalic glottal fricative /h/, a reflex of the proto-Mayan *najt (Brown & Wichmann 2004: 174; Kaufman 2003: 429). One might be tempted at first sight, to view **chi-ku** as an example of disharmonic spelling, thereby prompting the transcription *chi’ik - chi’k* ‘coati’ (Kaufman 2003: 581; Lacadena & Wichmann 2004: 142). Nevertheless, bearing in mind that the lexeme is a loanword from proto-Mije-Soke *tziku ‘coati’ (Boot 2010: 138-139; Campbell & Kaufman 1976: 87) it seems more plausible to view the Classic Maya spelling as an attempt to represent an open syllable term, in a language that is characterised by closed syllable structure. Supporting this claim is the Chontal form attested as *laj-chikul*, ‘AG-mapache’ (Keller & Luciano 1997: 13), duplicating the case at hand and confirming the incidence of the terminal vowel in a Ch’olan language. The deeper meaning of Chikunaahb – ‘coati pool’, or more probably ‘coati *aguada*’ – remains still unknown. Whereas it was long thought that the large reservoir or *aguada* to the north of Calakmul was the reference of Chikunaahb (Martin & Grube 2000: 106), there is now some evidence to suggest that this toponym designated the North Acropolis of the epicentre of Calakmul (Carrasco Vargas & Bojalil 2005; Vázquez López 2006: 107-108).

aguada) and Uxte'tuun⁴ (*/ux-te'-tuun/*, 'three-NC-stones') (Martin 1997: 852; Tokovinine 2007: 19, 20; Tokovinine 2008: 99-104). Both toponyms were cited at Dos Pilas, Naranjo, La Corona and Cancuen, but Chikunaahb was also mentioned, farther afield, at Tonina, and Quirigua. This can hardly be compared to the next runner-up, the toponym of Tikal (Mutu'l), which was referred to by as many as thirteen sites, whereas the toponyms contained within the EGs of both Palenque (Baake'l) and Yaxchilan (Pa'chan), in comparison, were only cited at seven sites (Tokovinine 2007: 21). Yet these are the sites that figure most prominently in the epigraphic record, making clear the significance and extent of the influence that the Snake-head kings exerted across the Maya area.

As with other EGs, the Snake-head emblem is composed of the characteristic logograms **K'UH** and **AJAW** and features a distinctive emblematic main sign, in this case the eponymous head of a snake (Coe 1978: 28; Marcus 1973: 912; Marcus 1976: 9; Martin 1997: 851-852; Martin 2005) (Figure 1a). In its most basic form the Snake-head EG can thus be read as *k'uhul* 'snake' *ajaw*, or 'godly snake king'. Whereas in other contexts the head of the snake typically functions as the logogram **CHAN** 'snake' (T764) (Davoust 1995: 603; Justeson 1984: 357; Kaufman & Norman 1984: 89, 117), there are instances wherein the same logogram receives an initial, or prefixed, phonetic complement **ka-** (Grube 2010: 31), cueing the spelling **ka-KAN** and the reading *kan*. The main sign of the Snake-head EG is one of these cases that regularly receives an initial **ka-** phonetic complement, to such an extent that it can be deemed a diagnostic trait (Figure 1a). The same snake head logogram thus functions to convey two variants of the word for 'snake', a more standard Classic Ch'olan lexeme *chan* that has already undergone the *k > ch* palatisation sound change (Houston, Robertson & Stuart 2000; Lacadena & Wichmann 2002), and a more archaic form *kan*, which deviates from the standard pronunciation, and therefore requires initial phonetic complementation.⁵ Earlier researchers puzzled over the spelling of the velar form *kan*, and attempted to link it to vernacular Yukatek forms *kaan* - *kàan* or even with the proto-Maya forms **kaan* - **kaahn* (Bastarrachea, Yah Pech & Briceño Chel 1992: 25, 94; Bricker, Po'ot Yah & Dzul de Po'ot 1998: 122; Brown & Wichmann 2004: 134, 145, 171; Gómez Navarrete 2005: 33; Grube 2004: 119; Grube 2010: 31-32; Justeson *et al.* 1985: 19; Kaufman 2003: 636; Kaufman & Norman 1984: 89, 117; Lacadena & Wichmann 2002: 312; Martin 2005: 5, n. 2).

4 The toponym Uxte'tuun can be deemed to be a trigger for cultural memory. Uxte'tuun is probably related to the first hearth that was established at the creation event on 13.0.0.0.0. There might have existed a specific place within the ancient city of Calakmul that served to emulate this primordial place, although it has not been identified at present.

5 The same pattern can be seen in the spellings of the logograms for 'earth' and 'sky', **CHAB** and **CHAN** or **CHA'AN**, respectively in standard Classic Ch'olan. The palatised, or palato-alveolar reflexes do not receive initial phonetic complements, whereas the velar forms *kab* and *kan* - *ka'an* tend to be written **ka-ba**, **ka-KAB** and **ka-KAN** - **KA'AN**.

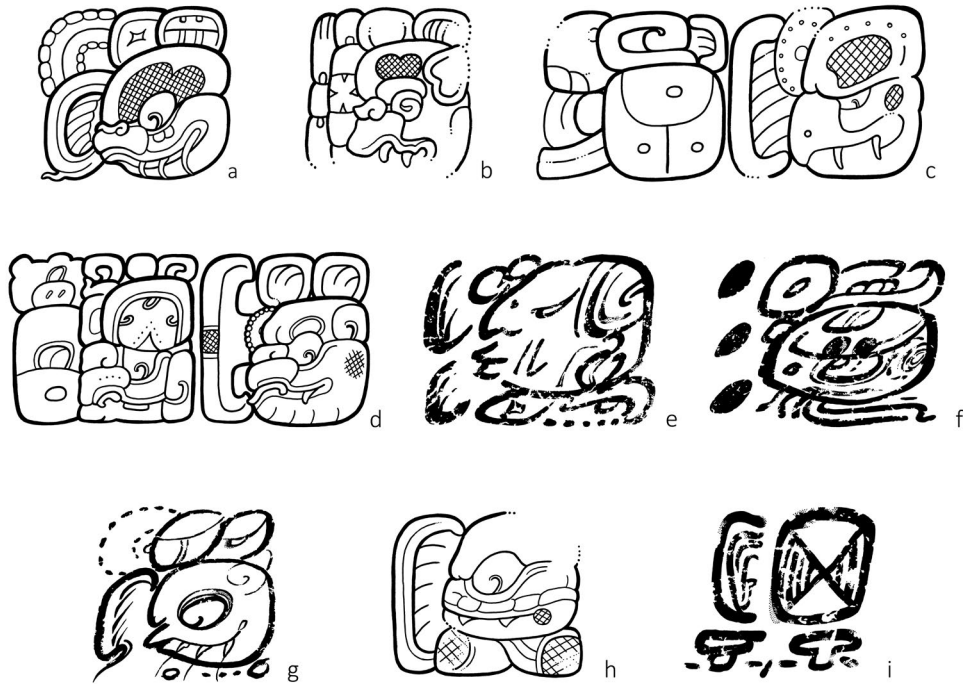


Figure 1. The Snake-head main sign in various contexts: *a)* The Snake-head EG (La Corona, HSB, Monument 15). Anthroponyms involving Kan: *b)* K'ihnich Kan Bahlam III of Palenque (Pomona, St. 7, verso), *c)* Ahne'l Kan (Jonuta Panel). *d)* The supernatural entity Yax Chit Juun Witz' Nah Kan (Pomona, Pan. 1). *e)* The toponym Kana' paired off with *f)* the toponym Uxte'tuun (details of vase K1457). *g)* The Snake-head sign in an EG written **ka-KAN-la** (K1344); *h)* The Snake-head sign involved in a collocation written **ka-KAN-nu** (Copan, St. 13); *i)* Complete phonetic spelling **ka-nu-la** (K1901) (drawings by Christophe Helmke).

Despite these hypotheses it is most likely that the spellings involving the voiceless velar stop [k] reflect an earlier Greater Ch'olan (proto-Ch'olan-Tzeltalan) form that subsisted in deferential contexts, such as 1) the names of the nobility, including K'ihnich Kan Bahlam of Palenque, Ixk'awiil Kan of Tonina, or Ahne'l Kan of Jonuta (Figure 1b-c), 2) the theonyms of certain supernatural entities such as the Yax Chit Juun Witz' Nah Kan (e.g. Pomona, Pan. 1, pL1; Yaxchilan, HS2, Step 7, R4) (Figure 1d) as well as 3) toponyms, which are characteristically conservative and resilient. That this is the case with the Snake-head EG is substantiated by two clear phonetic spellings rendered on vase

K1457 wherein the usual snake head is replaced with **ka-na**, cueing the reading *kan*, rather than the putative forms with long vowel or falling tone (Figure 1e).

It is precisely these lines of evidence that allow us to ascertain that the main sign of the Snake-head EG records a toponym. In the example just cited, the phonetic spellings actually record **ka-na-a**, yielding */kan-aʔ/*, ‘snake-water’ (Figure 1e) including a well-known toponymic suffix, naming a variety of bodies of water, including springs, streams and lakes. This suffix is also seen in place names such as Yaxaʔ (*/yax-aʔ/*, ‘blue.green-water’), Ikʔaʔ (*/ikʔ-aʔ/*, ‘wind-water’), and Uxwitzaʔ (*/ux-witz-aʔ/*, ‘three-mountain-water’), the ancient names of the archaeological sites of Yaxha, Motul de San José and Caracol, respectively (Helmke 2009: 196; Stuart & Houston 1994: 5, 7, 27-28, 52-53; Zender 2005). This *-aʔ* suffix is thought to attest to a Preclassic Yukatekan stratum that was originally present in the central lowlands, whereas toponyms including the allomorph *-baʔ* reflect the later spread of Chʔolan during the first millennium BC, resulting in the displacement of Yukatekan populations to the northern lowlands (Kaufman 1976; Zender 2005).⁶ As such the toponym Kanaʔ would seem to attest to the great antiquity of this place name. The same Kanaʔ toponym occurs in a controlled occurrence since it is paired off with **3-TEʔ-TUN-ni**, *uxtétuun*, the primary toponym of Calakmul (Grube 2005: 96-97; Martin 1997: 852; Martin 2005; Stuart & Houston 1994: 28-29) (Figure 1f). As such there can be little doubt that **ka-na-a** is a purely phonetic spelling of the toponym that is usually rendered in abbreviated form as **ka-KAN**. Aside from these exceptional examples, the main sign of the Snake-head EG is occasionally written **ka-KAN-la**, or even **KAN-la**, accompanied by a syllabogram **-la** in final position (Figure 1g). Although it is difficult to ascertain the intervening vowel, it is clear that this syllabogram serves to spell a *-Vl* suffix. Comparing this and other similar toponyms to attested colonial forms, Lacadena & Wichmann (n.d.: 22) have proposed that the missing vowel should be [u], providing the toponymic suffix *-uʔ*, which designates localities wherein a particular qualifying feature occurs in abundance (Lacadena & Wichmann n.d.: 21-28). Thus, the colonial and modern forms Canul, San Juan Acul, Motul de San José and Motul de Carrillo Puerto, appear to be reflexes of Classic period toponyms Kanuʔ, Ahkuʔ and Mutuʔ, reflecting also the start and end points of the suffix’s evolution (i.e. *-uʔ > -uul > -ul*). These toponyms occur in a variety of spellings

6 Alexandre Tokovinine (pers. comm. 2013) suggests that this suffix could function as an agentive or *gentilicio*, to be understood as part of ‘person of ...’ constructions, rather than toponymic suffixes in their own right. The most supportive example is that found in the text of the Tablet of the Foliated Cross at Palenque wherein a coronation (lit. *kʔal-huun* ‘paper-fastening’) is written, rather unusually as **u-KʔAL-HUN-a**. Nevertheless, the example in question may be the inflection for the active voice of non-CVC transitive verbs (which take a Set A or ergative pronominal prefix and an *-a* suffix) and it is highly significant that all other examples of *-aʔ* in Classic Maya writing appear as suffixes to toponyms, including even the name of a mythic ballcourt Ux Ahaal Ehb (‘three conquest stair’).

including: 1) the fully-phonetic **a-ku-la** > *a[h]ku'l*, 2) what can be termed truncated logographic **AK-la** > *a[h]k[u]l*, and 3) underspellings **a-ku** > *a[h]ku[l]* (Lacadena & Wichmann n.d.: 21). The same paradigm is attested for Kanu'l, with a predominance of truncated logographic spellings **ka-KAN-la**. Possible examples of underspellings, such as **ka-KAN-nu** > *kanu[l]*, are also attested (Figure 1h), although these may cue and be fixed to spelling the name of the Teotihuacan War Serpent (Simon Martin, pers. comm. 2013). However, it is a unique and fully-phonetic example written **ka-nu-la** that betrays the phonetic constituents of the toponym and confirms the incidence of the *-u'l* suffix (Dmitri Beliaev pers. comm. 2007) (Figure 1i).⁷ As such there can be little doubt that in most cases the toponym of the Snake-head EG was read Kanu'l /kan-u'l/, with the meaning '(where) snakes-around'. But, how are we to resolve that in some instances the toponym is recorded as Kana' and in others as Kanu'l? In fact this is not the only example wherein we see differing locative suffixes attached to toponyms. Other examples include the ancient toponyms of Motul de San José, Piedras Negras, Caracol and Palenque:

Locality	predominant form	variant	text
Motul de San José	/ik'-a'/	/ik'-iil/	K2573; K4996; Tamarindito vase
Piedras Negras	/k'ihn-a'/	/k'ihn-nal/	Palenque, House C
Caracol	/uxwitz-a'/	/uxwitz-nal/	Caracol, Stela 17; La Rejolla, Stela 3
Palenque	/baak-e'l/	/baak-a'/	Palenque, TC, Central Panel

Table 1. Variable suffixation of select Classic Maya toponyms.

Based on these examples it seems that there is a certain flexibility as to which suffix could be employed in the formation of a place name. Nevertheless, these deviations are mostly found in foreign references, which may help to explain these alterations. Thus, we find the mention to a captive from Piedras Negras as an Ajk'ihn'al (*laj-k'ihn-nal*, 'AG-hot-place') in the panels of Palenque's House C (Zender 2002: 170-176), and Stela 3 at La Rejolla records Uxwitznal in place of the expected Uxwiza'. Similarly, the patron of vase

⁷ That this particular example can be taken to record a toponym is based on the regular structure of captions accompanying supernatural spirit companions, or *wahy* creatures. These captions start off naming or describing the *wahy*, which is then followed by a possessive construction /*u-wahy'l* '3SA-nagual', and closed either by an EG, anthroponym or toponym to which the *wahy* is tied (Helmke & Nielsen 2009: 53). In the case at hand the caption consists of three glyph blocks, the first two recording the name of the *wahy*, and the final the toponym. The name indicates that this is a type of *masaakoowaatl* or 'deer-snake', since it is named a *chijil tal chan*, lit. 'deer's plait snake' (Grube & Nahm 1994: 693-694; Helmke & Nielsen 2009: 69-80). The medial possessive construction is completely omitted and is not represented with any of the *wahy* on this bowl. As such the **ka-nu-la** segment must record the toponym to which this beast is associated, not the least since other examples make it clear that this particular *wahy* is connected to the Snake-head EG (Grube & Nahm 1994: 693-694; Helmke & Nielsen 2009: 78-79).

K4996 was a lady of Xultun, possibly explaining the use of the alternate Ik'iil in the EG of a king of Motul de San José (Lacadena 2008: 25; Tokovinine & Zender 2012: 31, 35; Valdés 1997: 327, Fig. 11). Based on present evidence, these instances involve toponyms whose original forms were appended by the archaic *-a'* suffix, only to be reinterpreted and replaced by the more productive Ch'olan suffixes *-iil* (Lacadena & Wichmann n.d.: 16-19) and *-nal* (Schele, Mathews & Lounsbury 1990; Stuart & Houston 1994: 20, 21, Fig. 22). In the case of the Snake-head toponym we appear to have a reversed situation since the vast majority of examples record the place name as Kanu'l, and it is in an exceptional and relatively late instance that the Kana' form of the toponym appears. If our line of deduction is sound, it stands to reason that the late form is a deliberate archaism as if to underscore the great antiquity and permanence of the Kan place name. A precedent for this might be seen in the texts of Palenque where the toponym that is involved in the local EG occurs with an *-a'* suffix as Baaka' instead of the more typical *-e'l* (Helmke 2012a: 97, n. 5). Significantly, the Baaka' toponym is used in conjunction with the quasi-mythical dynastic ruler known as Ukokan Kan (Mathews 1991b: 120; Stuart 2005: 113, 124-125), again as if to create a deliberate archaism and cast this place name within the deeper reaches of pre-dynastic history.

In sum, considering the regular occurrence of the locative suffixes, there can be little doubt that this central portion of the Snake-head EG records the toponym Kanu'l (*/kan-u'll*, '(where) snakes abound') and its rarer variant Kana' (*/kan-a'*, 'snake-water'). The toponym, in and of itself, could very well derive its name from a feature of the natural landscape, in this case an abundance of snakes, following the same processes and principles in which other toponyms are formed and named. Here for example, we can think of the Yucatec toponym Acanceh (*/ahkan-keejl*, 'groan-deer'), or even the Aztec toponym Coatepec (*/koowaa-tepee-kl*, 'snake-mountain-place'). In much the same way, Kanu'l may thus be the name for a less than desirable place, one that is allegedly infested with snakes. Nevertheless, although Kanu'l on the surface appears to provide a natural toponym, close inspection of the Classic Maya historical narratives reveals that not a single event, political encounter or ritual action is said to have taken place at Kanu'l. Furthermore, as we have seen, the city of Calakmul was associated with the toponyms Uxtetuun and Chikunaahb (Martin 1997: 852; Stuart & Houston 1994: 28-29), and at present there is no evidence that any site of the Classic period was named Kanu'l. One is thus left to wonder what Kanu'l is and where it is meant to be. The answer can be found by looking outside of EGs and historical narratives, and delving into mythological texts. The vantage provided by the mythological text could not be more different. There the Kanu'l toponym is one of primordial importance, where a whole series of key mythological events are said to have transpired, events that are integrally connected to the shared memories of the Snake-head kings and other elite groups throughout the

Maya area. We will look at the events that occurred at Kanu'l, by combing through the mythological texts, so that we can learn more about this locality and the events that have transpired there. Before proceeding, however, we need to consider the relationship between myths, rulers and divinity.

The mortality paradox

In considering the evolution of EGs we can see that in their most basic form these are produced by the simple addition of the titular logogram **AJAW**, *ajaw* 'king' to a given toponym. Such early EGs have been termed partial or "Problematic Emblem Glyphs" (Houston 1986: 1; see also Grube 2005: 87, 97, 98; Mathews 1991a: 24) precisely because they are seen to lack the qualifier **K'UH** of complete and exemplary Late Classic EGs. The qualifier is usually read *k'uhul*, lit. 'godly' and by extension 'divine', although we now know that this is a feature that was first developed in the latter half of the Early Classic. The earliest examples suggest that this practice stems from Tikal since it is found in the texts of the statue known as the Hombre de Tikal (AD 406) and Stela 9 (AD 475). The addition of the qualifier *k'uhul* to early (or partial) EGs undoubtedly served to create status inequalities between kings at the end of the Early Classic and was initially a prerogative reserved to the most important dynasties. Eventually this trait was assumed by all ruling monarchs, irrespective of actual power or influence, and by the end of the Late Classic even the smallest kingdoms could claim to be ruled by 'divine kings'. It is precisely this trait that has attracted the attention of scholars since it necessarily implies that rulers viewed themselves as akin to gods or exhibiting god-like features. Examinations of regal names, or the regnal names taken upon accession, reveal that Classic Maya monarchs considered themselves to be the incarnation of a particular aspect of a deity (Colas 2004; Colas 2006; Grube 2002b). Thus, whereas they did not perceive themselves as equal to gods, or gods *per se*, they certainly were conceived of as an earthly representative of one specific facet, or multiple facets, of a much larger supernatural entity (Helmke 2012b: 77). Unlike the deification and mortuary cults known from other civilisations, such as the pharaonic cult of Ramses II, who achieved the status of god in 1250 BC, during his own lifetime (Clayton 1994: 155; Hart 1990: 66-68; Wilkinson 2003: 54-59), or even the posthumous deification of Julius Caesar in 42 BC by his adopted son Augustus (Matyszak 2003: 228; Scarre 1995: 17), no good evidence exists to suggest that ancient Maya rulers were worshipped as gods, not during their lifetime nor posthumously. That being said, the question remains then, as to how Maya rulers bolstered their claims to divinity thereby effectively segregating themselves from the population not only socially, economically, politically and even genetically, but also supernaturally.

For one, this required monarchs to first resolve and explain what can be termed the mortality paradox. Considering the divine status of rulers, why then would they be subject to death as all common mortals? This seems to have constituted the greatest slight to claims of divinity and was therefore an aspect that absorbed considerable attention in early civilisations (Trigger 2003: 79-87). To draw an analogy from the Old World, in ancient Egypt attempts to resolve the mortality paradox drew on the mythological precedents of deities, in particular the mythic narrative known as the Osiris cycle (Hart 1990: 29-41; Richter 2001; Wilkinson 2003: 118-123). This myth relates the death and dismemberment of Osiris, primordial ruler of Egypt, at the hands of his brother Seth – the epitome of disorder and chaos – in order to seize the throne. Isis sets out to recover all of the dismembered body parts of her defunct husband, in hopes of reassembling him, but finds only thirteen. The last missing part, his penis, has been swallowed by a catfish, so Isis magically fashions one instead. Using a series of spells and incantations she is able to bring Osiris temporarily back to life, just long enough for Isis to copulate with the mummy of her husband and to be impregnated. Thereafter she gives birth to their son, Horus, who defeats Seth, restores order and thereby avenges the murder of his father. It is this myth that provides the foundation for considering Horus as the resurrected form of Osiris, the life that has been conceived in death.⁸ The Osiris cycle also sets the precedent for the idealised rule of succession from father to son, in perpetuity. Thus, as Trigger relates, each individual pharaoh “represented the rebirth and earthly renewal of the previous monarch (and ultimately of Horus), while dead kings were identified with Osiris, the unchanging ruler in the realms of the dead” (Trigger 2003: 80). The existence of Osiris and Horus thereby revolved around a relation of interdependence, a cycle of life, death and resurrection, the cyclical permanence of impermanence.⁹ In a deeply agrarian society the life, death and resurrection cycle was naturally enough conceived in analogous terms to the growth, harvest and sowing cycles of cereal crops. As such, Osiris was associated with the growth of grain and regeneration, and it is in his guise as Osiris-Neper, the personification of wheat, that cult figures of the mummified Osiris were made, serving as germination beds for sprouting wheat (Budge 1973: 58; Pinch 2004: 171; Wilkinson 2003: 117, 122).

Returning to Mesoamerica, we see very similar processes at play in the resolution of the mortality paradox. For the ancient Maya, the life-spans of rulers and their heirs

8 In an earlier Egyptian version of the myth the penis of Osiris is said to be buried in Memphis. Moreover, Abydos was the main cult centre for Osiris precisely because, according to the myth, it is at Nedyet in the district of Abydos that Osiris was murdered and dismembered (Hart 1990: 31).

9 Intriguingly, from archaeological evidence it is clear that Seth is a deity of much greater antiquity than Osiris and there is in fact no evidence for the existence of Osiris before Dynasty V (Hart 1990: 30). From this follows a whole series of important ramifications concerning the use of development of myths in regal ritual and pageantry.

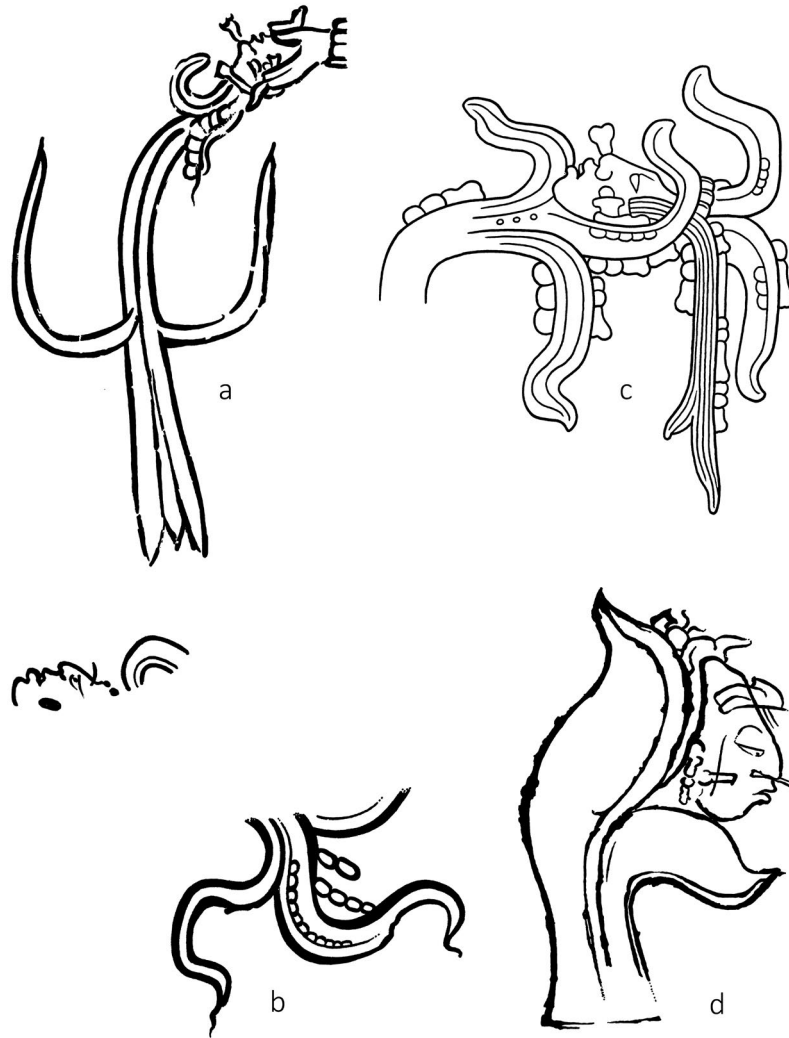


Figure 2. Depictions of maize cobs as the head of the Maize god. Offerings clasped by the burdens of the Maize god, as depicted on the *a)* Buenavista vase and *b)* the Cuychen vase; *c)* Tablet of the Foliated Cross, Palenque; *d)* The head of the Maize god emerging from a young leafy stalk. Post-slip incised graffito, Balanza black vessel, from Calakmul, Str. 2, Tomb 4, the final resting place of Yihch'aak K'ahk' (drawings by Christophe Helmke).

were also, in essence, if not in words, conceptualised as cycles of life, death and rebirth, permutations that were inevitably set in analogy to the growth, harvest and sowing of maize, the paramount crop of Mesoamerica. It is in this capacity that Maya rulers were the earthly incarnations of deified maize (Freidel, Schele & Parker 1993: 139; Nehammer Knub, Thun & Helmke 2009: 189-190; Schele & Mathews 1998: 115-117; Stuart & Stuart 2008: 172-180; Taube 1985; Taube 1992: 41-50) and it bears remembering that the Maya maintain that the gods fashioned humanity from maize dough (Christenson 2003: 180-184; Freidel, Schele & Parker 1993; Taube 1992: 54-55). Based on iconographic examples and onomastic patterns, it is now also known that in certain instances Maya rulers were posthumously identified with an aspect of *ajan*, the deification of young maize (Colas 2009: 201-203; Taube 1992: 48-50). Completing the pattern of personification, maize plants naturally embodied the Maize God, the cobs representing the head, the maize silk the fine hair of the divinity (Taube 1985: 175) (Figure 2). Thus the harvest of maize, wherein the cobs are twisted and torn from the stalk is equated with the decapitation of the Maize God. All of these features lie at the basis of intricate myths involving the Maize God. As is so commonly seen, myths and their iconographic representations focus on episodes of disjunction, as if events in mythic deep-time are breaches of otherwise uninterrupted stability and order (Helmke 2012c: 163-165). Maize God myths, thus almost out of necessity focus on one of the three major junctions – also called a nexus – in the life-cycle, and especially the dramatic moments of death and resurrection.

It is precisely these two principal turning points that are emphasised beyond any other in the iconography of the Maize God. The nexus comprising the death of the Maize God was expressed by a whole series of euphemisms including *och-bihil*, ‘road-enter’, *och-ha*, ‘water-enter’, and *och-ch’è’n*, ‘cave-enter’. All of these expressions were also used as death euphemisms for earthly kings, but it is unknown to what extent the metaphors were reciprocal or reserved for the Maize God, thereby heightening relations between kings and deified maize. In mythical contexts, these metaphorical constructs are known from a series of alternate motifs, and it is not always clear if these were meant to represent sequential episodes in the same narrative or regional variations of the same myth. In Classic Maya imagery the death euphemisms were variously illustrated as the Paddler deities ferrying the Maize God in their canoe, until it sinks into the underworld (Freidel, Schele & Parker 1993: 89-94; Quenon & Le Fort 1997: 886, 891), as the Maize God’s entry into the watery underworld, where he obtains his prized and characteristic item of regalia – a thorny oyster shell (*Spondylus* sp.) set in the maw of a stylised shark (Helmke 2012a: 111-113; Helmke 2012c: 171-173; Taube in press) – and as a confrontation scene in which the Maize God and his acolytes are pitted against a group of heavily armed Earth Lords, in the cavernous underworld (García Barrios 2006;

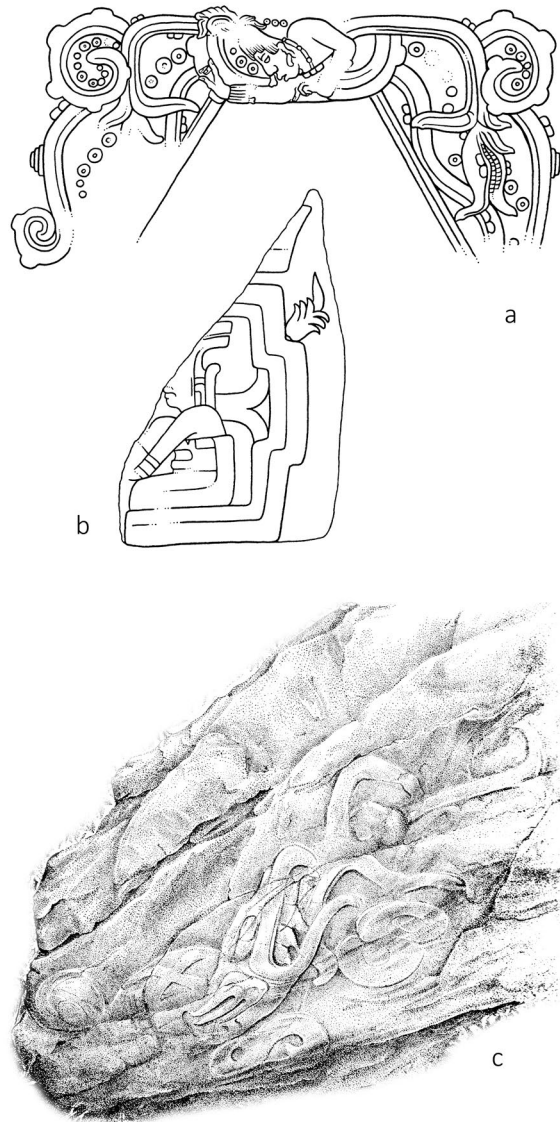


Figure 3. Key events in the mythology of the maize cycle: *a)* The death nexus, wherein the Maize god dives in the tumultuous waves of the aquatic underworld. Palenque, Palace, Subterranean passages, Western Vault. *b)* The Maize god seated within in a quatrefoil, Chalcatzingo, Monument 13 (drawings by Christophe Helmke). *c)* The Maize god in the maw of the leviathan, Chalcatzingo, Relief 5 petroglyph (after Gay 1971: Fig. 25).

García Barrios 2011: 85-87; Helmke 2009: 90-98). The rebirth nexus is also preserved in a series of different myths, one representing the Maize God in supine foetal position, emerging from a supernatural seed (Stuart, Houston & Robertson 1999: II.47; Stuart & Stuart 2008: 175; Taube *et al.* 2010: 70-71, Fig. 45), or spewed from the maw of a monstrous shark (Coe 1975: 19-21; Quenon & Le Fort 1997: 886-890; Taube 2004: Fig. 4d; Taube 2010). Another variant depicts him growing like a maize stalk out of a cracked turtle carapace symbolising the earth (Coe 1987: 175-177; Freidel, Schele & Parker 1993; Quenon & Le Fort 1997: 887; Schele & Mathews 1998: 115-117; Taube 1985: 173, 177; Taube 1993: 66-67). Naked at his rebirth, the Maize God is tended by female attendants who dress him in his rich attire (Freidel, Schele & Parker 1993; Quenon & Le Fort 1997: 892), and finally, the Maize God is also represented dancing in glory, in a motif known as the Holmul Dancer scenes (Coe 1978: 94-99; Houston, Stuart & Taube 1992: 504-512; Reents 1985; Reents-Budet 1991).

In the stunning Protoclassic (c. 100 BC) murals at the site of San Bartolo, Guatemala, the whole three-part cycle of the Maize Gods' birth, death and resurrection is vividly displayed. In the southern portion of the west wall murals is the first nexus, the birth, wherein the Maize God is depicted as an infant, cradled by an unidentified supernatural figure, wading through tumultuous waters (Taube *et al.* 2010: 70, Fig. 45a). To the north is the second nexus, the death of the Maize God, here represented as if diving, a snake coiled around his abdomen, hauling him along a stylised water band into the aquatic underworld (Taube *et al.* 2010: 81-83, Fig. 54a). Finally, in the centre is the third nexus, the resurrection, a scene dominated by a large stylised quatrefoil turtle, symbolising both the earth and a cavernous hollow, wherein the Maize God undergoes his resurrection, under the watchful gaze of the rain and thunder deity Chaahk as well as the deity of bodies of water (Taube *et al.* 2010: 71-75, 80). The Maize God dances out of the underworld, to the sound of solemn drumming, that he produces by striking deer antlers against a turtle carapace, as a percussion instrument (Taube 2009: 48-49). This remarkable triptych scene is the most comprehensive portrayal of the life-cycle of personified and deified maize, and in one measure or another, all later depictions pertaining to the Maize God cycle, are resounding echoes of the myths represented in these early murals. Actually, comparable elements and mythic motifs can also be found elsewhere in Mesoamerica, demonstrating the antiquity of shared pan-Mesoamerican conceptions. At Early Classic Teotihuacan (c. AD 470-540), for instance, shell-diving scenes are also represented, apparently a local variant of the Maize God's death, analogous to the Maya tale recounting the immersion of the Maize God into the watery underworld (Helmke 2012a: 113; Taube *in press*) (Figure 3a). However, the great antiquity of these myths is nowhere clearer than at the Middle Preclassic (c. 900-500 BC) site of Chalcatzingo, where we find a clear depiction of the Olmec Maize God, within a quatrefoil cave, antici-

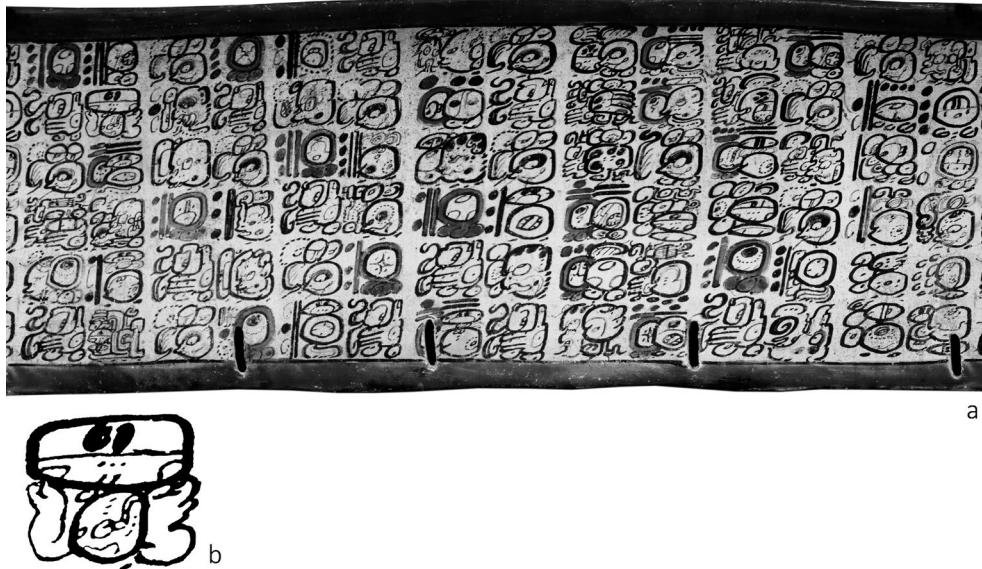


Figure 4. The longest and most complete of the Kanu'l king lists. *a)* Roll-out photograph of the codex-style vase K6751 (photograph © Justin Kerr). *b)* The sequence is initiated by the accession of the dynastic founder, a figure dubbed “Skyraiser” (drawing by Christophe Helmke).

pating his resurrection (Angulo V. 1987: Fig. 10.12; Taube 1996: 48-49) (Figure 3b), while a petroglyph represents one of the earliest examples of the Maize God within the maws of an aquatic monster (Gay 1971: 56-59, Figs. 25-27) (Figure 3c).

Armed with this overview, we can now turn to the fascinating mythic narratives that are directly related to the founding myths of the Kanu'l kings, namely the confrontation scenes and the Holmul Dancer scenes. As such, let us consider each of these narratives in turn, below.

Confrontation scenes

Before turning to a discussion of the Maize Gods' resurrection, let us first explore the confrontation scenes, involving his demise. This mythological narrative was first studied by Robicsek & Hales (1981: 71-74, 80-82), who identified 15 codex-style ceramics from the Mirador region of northern Peten and south-eastern Campeche, as forming part of a series that they named the confrontation scene. Nowadays more than two

dozen examples are recognised for this group of figurative ceramics.¹⁰ Taube (2004: 74-76) was among the first to analyse the iconography of the confrontation scenes and interpreted them as representing the capture of the Wind God at the hands of Chak Xib, an aspect of the thunder deity, here rendered in an anthropomorphic guise (García Barrios 2006: 137-138; Martin 2004: 107). Martin (2001a: 178-179; Martin 2004: 105-109), who focused on the verbal expression *och-ch'en* 'cave-enter' that is found in these scenes, was able to identify that these represent euphemistic expressions for martial actions. Three years later Grube (2004: 118-120, 123-127) successfully linked the confrontation scenes with the founding myths of the Kanu'l dynasty, by identifying the name of the mythic founder on vase K4117. Another series of codex-style vases is crucial in this regard. Known as the painted king lists, these vases provide a register of royal accessions for the earliest Kanu'l monarchs of the remote past, and although they provide several names of historical rulers, these appear to be much earlier, pre-dynastic namesakes (Martin 1997: 857-862). On vase K6751 – the most complete of the painted king lists – 19 separate accessions are recorded, starting with the dynastic founder, a figure dubbed Skyraiser (Guenter n.d.; Martin 1997: 857; Martin & Grube 2000: 102) (Figure 4). Since then, the senior author has reinterpreted the confrontation scenes as depicting not the capture of the Wind God, but the defeat and eventual decapitation of the Maize God at the hands of Chak Xib and his warriors (Helmke 2009: 90-98). The discovery of codex-style specimens at Calakmul over the past decade, including complete vases and dishes from tombs and sherds from midden deposits, have since prompted a whole new phase of research, including the instrumental neutron activation analyses by Dorie Reents-Budet and her colleagues (Reents-Budet & Bishop 1998; Reents-Budet, Bishop & Bell 2004; Reents-Budet *et al.* 2010), as well as the extensive iconographic and epigraphic analyses of Ana García Barrios and her colleagues (Boucher Le Landais 2014; Delvendahl n.d.; García Barrios 2006; García Barrios 2010; García Barrios 2011; García Barrios & Carrasco Vargas 2006; Salinas Méndez & Valencia Rivera 2012).

The many Calendar Round Dates that caption the various scenes are one of the noteworthy features of the confrontation scenes. The Calendar Round dates associated with 14 of the vessels are inconsistent and difficult to fix into absolute time due to the absence of anchors to the Long Count. However, three basic events in this series can be recognised, starting with the date 7 Ajaw 7/12 Sak or even 7 Ak'bal 8 Sak, at which time the Maize God is said to die. On K6979 the event is cited as *och-ha* 'water-enter',

¹⁰ The vessels that form part of this series are: K1224, 1248, 1333, 1338, 1343, 1346, 1365, 1366, 1395, 1489, 1562, 2011, 2096, 2710, 3428, 4117, 5002, 8201 (Kerr 2008), as well as Vessels 91, 95, 98, 100 and 106 in the Maya Book of the Dead (Robicsek & Hales 1981: 70-74) and another in the collections of the Fundación Ruta Maya, Guatemala (Michelet 2011: 172). Related to the confrontation scenes are vessels K1202, 1488, 1566 and 6979, which depict the death of the Maize God.



Figure 5. The death of the Maize god: a) K6979 with the *och-ha* verb enlarged; b) K1202 with the *och-bihil* verb enlarged (photographs © Justin Kerr).

whereas on K1202 the expression is *och-bihil* ‘road-enter’, both of which are known euphemisms for ‘death’ that we have already touched on above. The scenes depict what is clearly the Maize God, standing waist-deep in water with one or both of his sons, Juun Ajaw and Yax Bahlam, surrounded by four to six nude women with death markings, denizens of the underworld (see also Boucher Le Landais 2014: Figs. 4-5) (Figure 5).

The following event takes place on the date 1/3/12 Ik’ 12/15/19 Kej, at which point an individual named Chak Xib is said to *och-ch’én* ‘cave-enter’. The scenes associated with this event depict two groups of people standing waist-deep within the same watery netherworld, confronting one another (Figure 6). One group is heavily armed, menacingly wielding spears and round shields, wearing elaborate avian, cervid and cranial headdresses and have facial markings that convey their identity as Earth Lords. The other group is headed by the Maize God, who attempts to placate and appease the bellicose group of armed Earth Lords by bringing tribute consisting of large bundles and stacks of cloth mantas, each topped by bunches of long quetzal feathers and *Spondylus* shells. Members of the Maize God group wear simpler accoutrements and at times have bunches of writing quills tucked into their wrapped cloth headdresses. In many respects the dress of the figures in the Maize God group

closely corresponds to that of the priestly order known as the *ajkuhu'n*, lit. 'worshipper' (Zender 2004: 139-152, 164-195) (Figure 7). In one example the Maize God has dauntingly set his index finger on the spear point of his opponent, to mollify the Earth Lords (Figure 8a). Tensions running high, the events appear to culminate on the date 9 Ajaw 7/15 K'ayab at which point a *ch'abkaj* 'axing / beheading' is said to take place. The accompanying scenes are mostly the same as those of the foregoing event and the beheading is not in fact depicted. In one case, however, (K5002) we see the lone Maize God surrounded by armed figures brandishing their shields and raised axes and the inevitable is easily imagined (Figure 8b).

Since the decapitation of the Maize God is a pervasive and well-known theme of Maya mythology (Miller & Martin 2004: 54-58, 72; Miller & Taube 1993: 108-110; Taube 1992: 41-50), we suspect that the decapitation cited in the texts is none other than that of the Maize God.¹¹ The basic thread of this mythological narrative then is the decapitation and death of the Maize God, which serves as the leitmotif of life, death and rebirth, but also as the underlying template for war (or at least a particular type of martial conflict), since this very same expression is seen in more than a dozen historical examples from the sites of Copan, Dzibanche, Naranjo, Palenque, Bonampak and Tikal (examples dating to between AD 416 and 702). Working from an earlier study of this expression (Martin 2004: 105-109), it can be argued that the historical use of the *och-ch'e'n* expression is based on this particular mythological event, in which a cave was entered and an armed conflict ensued. This mythological confrontation between the Maize God and Earth Lords, primeval opposites and antagonists, thus served as the conceptual framework and template for later historical events that were likened to and metaphorically framed within that narrative.¹²

11 On K4117 the text refers to a decapitation, but strangely the patient of this verb is not recorded by the typical name of the Maize God. On this vessel the Maize God appears to be replaced by another figure wearing regalia that are usually associated with Chak Xib Chaahk, a particular manifestation of the storm and rain deity Chaahk. This is peculiar since in all other scenes it is the Earth Lords who wear the knotted pectoral, and at times the *Spondylus* earspools of Chak Xib Chaahk, which suggests that the Chak Xib cited in the accompanying glyphs is a reference to the Earth Lords or their leader.

12 The demise of the Maize God represented in the confrontation scenes may also have served as the mythological precedent for certain rituals. In the confrontation scenes, companions to the Maize God bear what appear to be tribute offerings, including not only stacks of cloth mantas, but also large cloth bundles that are marked with the glyphic caption *juun pik* (see K1366, K2096 and K4487). These glyphic captions can be understood as the numeral 'one' followed either by a numeral classifier or by the noun 'cloth'. The former reading suggests that the bundles may have contained 8000 unspecified items (Houston 1997; Schele & Grube 1993: 3), whereas the latter simply may designate the bundles as 'one cloth'. The fragments of cloth which were found in association with macro-floral remains, including maize and other domesticates in Barton Creek Cave in Belize (Morehart *et al.* 2004) are therefore all the more significant. Such food offerings that were wrapped into cloth bundles and deposited in caves, may therefore be re-enactments taking as their precedent the mythic event depicted in the confrontation scenes. Were this hypothesis to be corroborated it would demonstrate the importance and influence of this myth for the ancient Maya.



a



b



c



d

Figure 6. Examples of the confrontation scenes: a) K1248, b) K1338, c) K1365, d) K1366 (photographs © Justin Kerr).



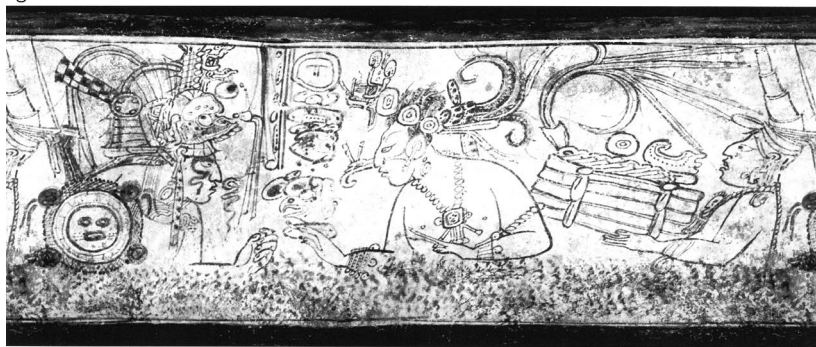
e



f



g



h

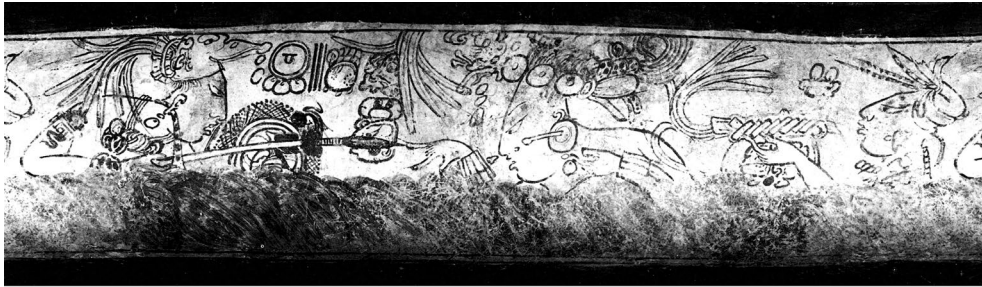
Figure 6. Continued: e) K1489, f) K2011, g) K4117, h) K8201 (photographs © Justin Kerr).



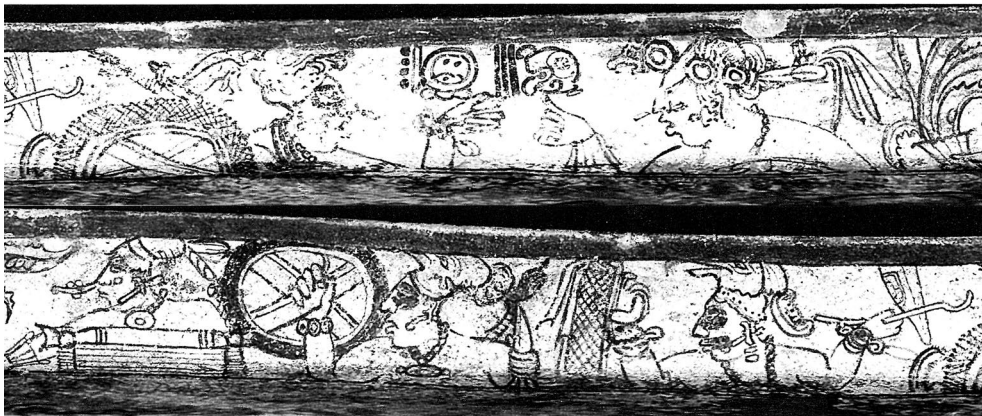
Figure 7. Examples of *ajk'uhu'n* religious specialists in Classic Maya iconography. Note the characteristic headdress, the bundle of quills tucked into the headdresses and the simple garb. It is significant that such individuals are depicted in cave contexts at Najtunich and in the confrontation scene. *a)* Detail of polychrome vase from the vicinity of Motul de San José (K1728); *b)* Detail of Codex Style vessel (K1248); *c)* Detail of Codex Style vessel (K2011); *d)* Najtunich (Drawing 76); *e)* Najtunich (Drawing 72); *f)* Najtunich (Drawing 22) (photographs © Justin Kerr; drawings after Stone 1995: Figs. 6-21, 6-34 & 6-37 © University of Texas Press).

That an entry into a cave would be deemed a bellicose act is not something inherently given, since one could surmise that it refers straightforwardly to peregrinations into caves. However, none of the glyphic texts present in caves record such *och-ch'è'n* events and examinations of historical texts, reveal the distinctly martial connotations of this verbal expression (Helmke & Brady 2014: 203-205; Martin 2001a: 178-179; Martin 2004: 105-109; Martin & Grube 2000: 181). In addition, considering the absence of outright terms for 'war' and 'warfare' in the Classic script, verbal expressions for martial actions are by necessity euphemisms, or metaphorical constructions, to varying degrees. The historical use of the *och-ch'è'n* expression therefore appears to be entirely metaphorical and serve to relate military engagements, in terms of the mythical confrontation between the Maize God and Earth Lords, primeval opposites and antagonists.

What is remarkable is a codex-style sherd (Fragment 7 of Vase 23) discovered in the midden associated with Str. XX at Calakmul, during the 2003-2005 excavation seasons (García Barrios 2011: 86; García Barrios & Carrasco Vargas 2006: 129-130, 136; Helmke 2012a: Fig. 16b) (Figure 9). This sherd depicts a warrior with a large avian headdress, brandishing a spear or an *atlatl* dart. Another now-missing figure – only a hand subsists – appears to be thrusting what may be a spear. Based on these features it seems evident that this vase depicts a segment of a confrontation scene. However, what is truly astounding is the accompanying glyphic caption. Although it is partially eroded, and only preserved in parts, it is headed by the verbal expression *och-ch'è'n* (here written as {OCH}-CH'EN-na) followed by the name of the cave that was entered. This toponym is written **ka-KAN**, recording the place name *kan[u'l]*. As such we are finally in a position to understand that the toponym Kanu'l names the cave where the Maize God is said to have been defeated by the Earth Lords. The Snake-head rulers who bore the corresponding EG thus all inherently claimed an affinity to this place and may even have conceived their lineage to have emerged from the cave of the same name. This certainly goes a long way to explaining why on one of the vases depicting a confrontation scene (K4117), the Maize God is replaced by a human ruler, who is captioned as Skyraiser, the name of the dynastic founder. After the mention of *kanu'l* the clause continues, but only parts of the following glyph block remain. Clearest of all is a **jo** syllabogram, subfixed by what may be a very simplified **ma** syllabogram. Initially, we entertained the idea that this segment might record the name Tajo'm Uk'ab K'ahk', as mythic namesake of the historical ruler (Martin & Grube 2000: 106), one who appears as the 15th ruler in the mythical king lists (Martin 1997: 860). Considering that the confrontation scenes appear to involve Skyraiser, the mythical dynastic founder, it seems unlikely that Tajo'm Uk'ab K'ahk' should be named. We now speculate that the poorly preserved segment might instead have recorded a **ha-jo-ma** expression akin to that found on the newly discovered stairway panel of La Corona (HS2, Bl. V, G6a). In the La Corona text it



a



b

Figure 8. a) The Maize god sets his finger on the spear point of his opponent (K2710). b) The Maize god is attacked by the Earth Lords (K5002) (photographs © Justin Kerr).

occurs in a Distance Number and precedes the intransitive *uhto'm* 'it will happen'. Stuart (2012) proposed the reading of *!hal-j-ò'm!* wherein *hal* is the Ch'olan temporal adverb 'a long time', closed by the future marker *-ò'm*. To this, Dmitri Beliaev (pers. comm. 2013) has remarked that this expression may be related to several intransitive forms, including: Tzeltal *halaj* 'durar, permanecer'; proto-Tzeltal-Tzotzil **hal* 'largo (tiempo)'; Ch'ol *jal'an* 'tardarse'; and proto-Ch'olan **hal* 'long time' (Aulie & Aulie 1978: 62; Kaufman 1972: 102; Kaufman 2003: 1269). If a similar expression were represented on the codex-style sherd we suspect that it may record a temporal adverbial expression, thereby providing an emic label for 'deep time'. Instead of the intransitive interpretations that require the reconstruction of the clear *!ll* to form the root *hal*, it remains possible that both the sherd and the La Corona panel record *hajo'm - !ha'-j-ò'm!* wherein the first element is

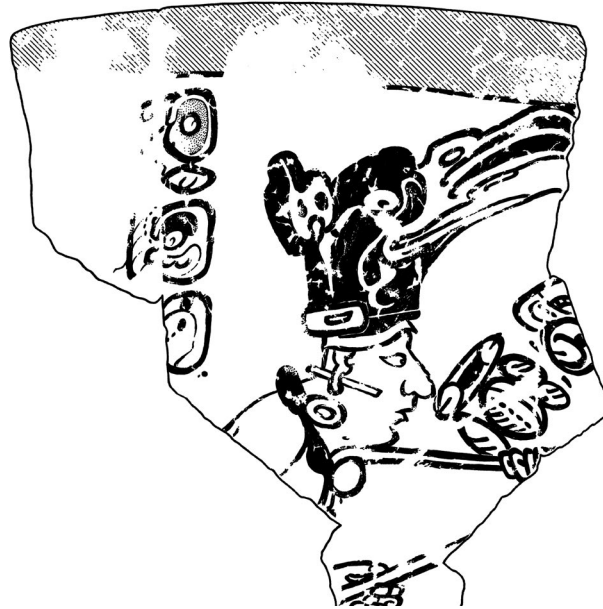


Figure 9. Detail of a confrontation scene depicting a cave-entry event into a cave named Kanu'l. Fragmentary codex-style vase, Calakmul, Str. xx (Fragment 7 of Vase 23) (drawing by Christophe Helmke).

the demonstrative particle that is otherwise seen as the root of independent pronouns (Hull, Carrasco & Wald 2009: 36; Lacadena 2010: 36; Stuart, Houston & Robertson 1999: II.24; Stuart 2005: 52-53), followed by a denominaliser *-j* and closed by the future participial *-o'm*, leading to the free translation 'this will be'. In this case, the future reference could reflect another temporal perception of the Maize God myth as ongoing and perpetually repeating. Having tied Kanu'l to the defeat and death of the Maize God, in the next section of this chapter the same toponym will be connected to another nexus of the myth.

Holmul Dancers

As has already been mentioned above, the so-called 'Holmul Dancer' scenes are part of a narrative that symbolises the resurrection of the Maize God (Coe 1978: 94-99; Reents-Budet 1991; Tokovinine 2008: 130-133, 280-282). These scenes represent groups of two, sometimes three and rarely four youthful Maize Gods (Taube 1985: 172-174), wearing opulent jewellery and sumptuous backracks (Figure 10a). As the name implies, these Maize Gods are depicted in an attitude of dance, with knees partly bent and

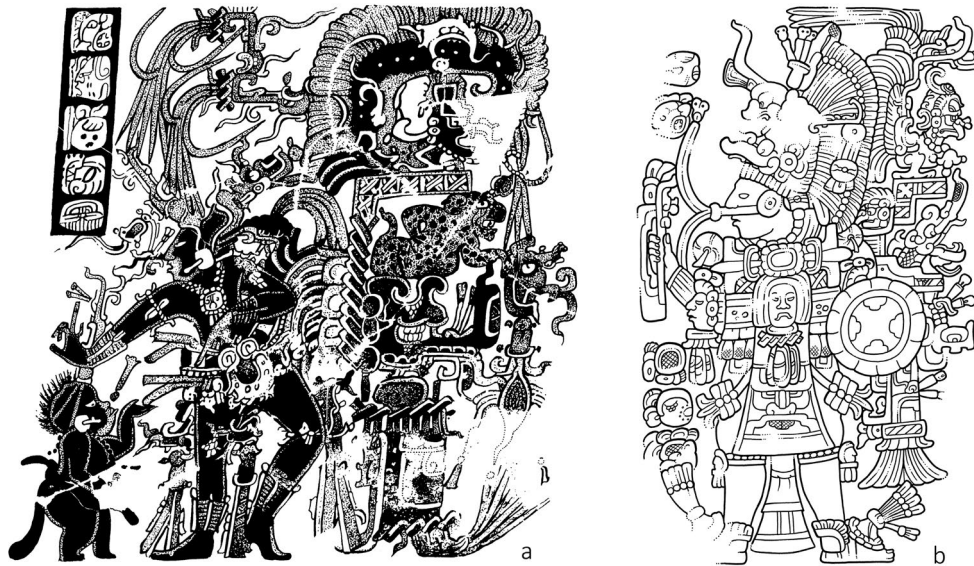


Figure 10. Holmul Dancers in mythology and historical pageantry: *a*) The Maize god associated to the Tikal toponym and bearing an ocelot burden in his backrack (K0633). The caption is written: **u-BAH / 1-IXIM / 6-[HIX]NAL / T'AB?[yi] / MUT**, and can be read as *ubaah juun ixim wak hixnal t'abaay mutu'l* (after Miller & Martin 2004: 58); *b*) The historical figure, K'ihnich Yook wearing the backrack of the Maize god, with the saurian burden associated to the Kanu'l place name (La Corona, Panel 1b) (drawing by Christophe Helmke, based on photographs by Felix Kupprat and a preliminary drawing by David Stuart).

left heel raised (Grube 1992: 201, 204; Proskouriakoff 1950: 28, 145, Fig. 9.J1), as well as one arm raised, the other lowered, another characteristic of dance portraitures (Looper 2008: 3, Fig. 1; Taube 2009: 46-47). Typically, the belt assemblages worn by these Maize Gods are composed of a *Spondylus* shell set in the maw of a stylised shark. It is this item of regalia that the Maize God obtained from the watery underworld, and displaying it served to reify and make manifest his resurrection and the defeat of death (Helmke 2012a: 111-113; Helmke 2012c: 171-173; Taube in press).¹³ The very

13 From extant iconography, we know of a myth that recounts the emergence of the Maize God from the maw of a giant sea monster, designated in the glyphic captions as a type of shark (Coe 1975: 19-21; Taube 2004: Fig. 4d; Taube 2010). This myth may represent yet another variant of the Maize God's rebirth nexus, wherein his emergence from the maw of the aquatic creature and his return to dry land are conceived of as his resurrection. Several supernatural entities, including the deity Chaahk and the more elusive deity named Sibikte' (i.e., the so-called patron of the month Pax), set out to vanquish the shark, and eventually spear it, thereby releasing the Maize God, who is disgorged from the jaws of the

same belt assemblage was worn by Classic Maya royalty and forms part of the netted jade-bead garment worn as part of important ceremonies (García Barrios & Vázquez López 2013; Miller 1974: 153-155; Nehammer Knub, Thun & Helmke 2009: 190, 192; Proskouriakoff 1950: 71, Fig. 26.J) (Figure 11). As such, historical figures assumed the guise of the deity, by wearing the Maize God's own distinctive regalia. It is precisely such correspondences that allow us to argue that Maya nobility sought to overcome the mortality paradox by seeking affinity to the Maize God.

Even though almost four dozen examples of ceramic vessels depicting Holmul Dancer scenes are known, only a small fraction have known archaeological proveniences (Looper 2008: 4-7) (Figure 12). Yet as recently as 2010 a stunning example was found in Cuychen, a small and remote cave in western Belize (Helmke *et al.* 2015) (Figure 12f), and another one was discovered in Naranjo in 2014 (Fialko & Barrios 2016). The origin of the specimens without archaeological provenience can be reconstructed on the basis of stylistic traits, execution of the iconography and glyphic texts, citing the names and titles of the individuals who once owned these vessels. With this footing, it can be said that the majority of Holmul Dancer vessels were produced at ceramic workshops attached to the court of sites in the eastern Maya lowlands, including Naranjo, Holmul and Xultun (Helmke *et al.* 2015; Reents-Budet, Bishop & MacLeod 1994: 179-188). This grouping of sites is not only the primary production area for Holmul Dancer vessels, but was also where this particular mythic motif occupied a particularly predominant role.

Earlier iconographic studies of Holmul Dancer scenes have focused on the symbolism of the elaborate backracks worn by the dancing Maize Gods (Coe 1978: 94, 96; Houston, Stuart & Taube 1992: 502-503; Reents-Budet 1991; Tokovinine 2008: 130-133). These studies have demonstrated that the backracks worn by the Maize Gods essentially represent cosmograms wherein the terrestrial realm is represented by a personified mountain, or *witz* monster, and the heavens are symbolised by a stepped sky band, atop of which is perched the Principal Bird Deity (Bardawil 1976; Taube 1992: 29-31, 36, 40, 118, 145) (Figure 10a). Seated atop the mountain sign, in the cavernous space framed by the stepped sky, is a small figure. Although there is some variability, the figures, or burdens, that are usually seated within the niches include an odd hairy

shark. We suspect that it is this mythic narrative that explains the origin of the Maize God's distinctive belt insignia, comprising the head of the defeated shark, with the valve of a *Spondylus* shell set within its maw. Thus in much the same way as the head of the defeated Principal Bird Deity serves as the primordial headdress of the elder Hero Twin (Nielsen & Helmke 2015), the head of shark symbolises the fall of the leviathan and the Maize God's triumph.

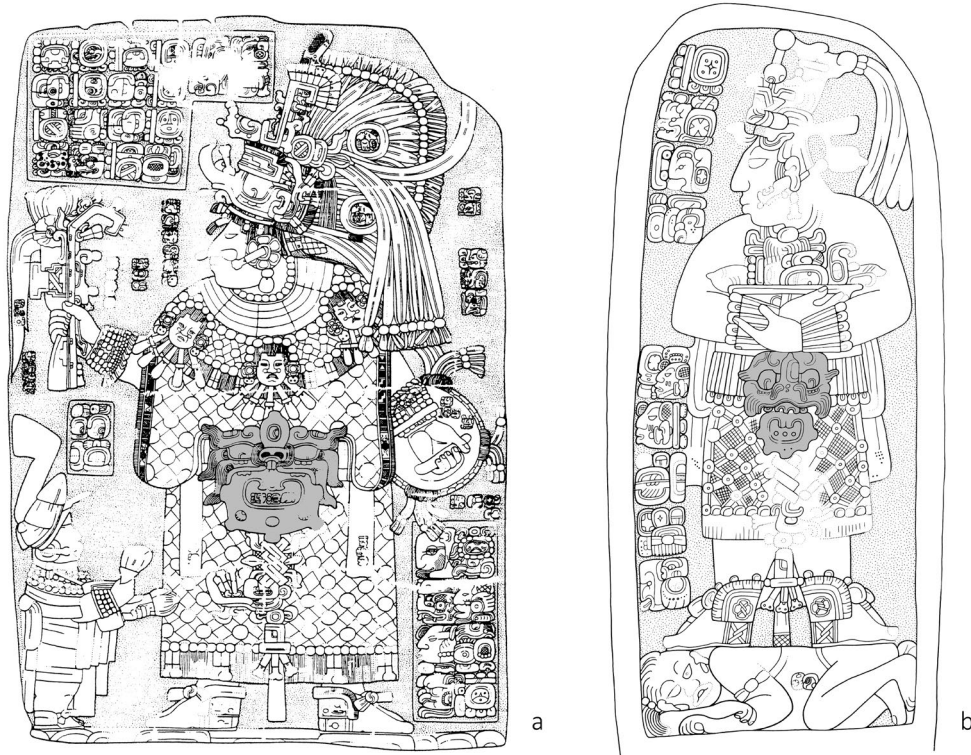


Figure 11. Examples of the shark's head and *Spondylus* shell regalia of the Maize god, worn by historical figures (shaded grey): a) El Perú, Stela 34 (drawing by John Montgomery © Foundation for the Advancement of Mesoamerican Studies, Inc.); b) Drawing of Naranjo, Stela 24, Front, by Ian Graham, Corpus of Maya Hieroglyphic Inscriptions © President and Fellows of Harvard College, Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, PM# 2004.15.6.2.45 (digital file #99100038).

saurian creature, a simian entity and a spotted feline (Table 2).¹⁴ Importantly, accompanying glyphic captions make it clear that the small figures seated in the backracks were specifically tied to the toponymic main signs of select emblem glyphs (Coe 1978: 96; Houston, Stuart & Taube 1992: 502-503; Tokovinine 2008: 130-133, 280-282). As a result, the different maize divinities depicted in the Holmul Dancer scenes would seem to represent distinct and localised manifestations of the same deity, each embodying mythological beings of particular city-states. The question rapidly arises as to what the guiding principle, or underlying rationale was, which dictated the representation of these particular groupings of Maize Gods and not any other.

To take an illustrative example, by matching the glyphic captions to the iconography on K0633, a vase originally from Naranjo, we can see that the saurian creature was viewed as a 'snake' (*chan*) and paired, aptly enough, with the toponym Kanu'l of the Calakmul EG; the spotted feline, termed 'ocelot' (*hix*), was associated with Tikal's place name (Mutu'l 'where reed effigies (?) abound') (Figure 10a); and the simian, named 'monkey' (*chuw'en*), was tied to the toponym of the Machaquila emblem (as yet undeciphered). The same pattern is seen for the most part on other Holmul Dancer vases on the basis of accompanying glyphic captions and the burdens depicted (K3400, K4464, K7814, K8966, as well as the Río Azul, Baking Pot and Naranjo vases) (Table 2). Whereas the Holmul Dancer scenes make it clear that these particular backracks were intimately tied to the Maize God, key examples are known from Classic Maya monuments at Tikal, Dos Pilas, La Corona and Quirigua wherein historical kings are depicted carrying the same backrack (Coe 1978: 96; Houston, Stuart & Taube 1992: 502-503; Reents-Budet 1991: 219). In historic contexts these backracks were probably borne by kings who ceremonially took the guise of the youthful Maize God, as part of particular dance and impersonation ceremonies (Nehammer Knub, Thun & Helmke 2009: 187, 189-190, 191). These examples make it clear that deity impersonation rituals were utilised to make manifest mythological precedents and foster links between rulers and the Maize

14 Some surprising parallels to the composition of the backracks are depicted on the north wall of the San Bartolo murals (Saturno *et al.* 2005: Figs. 5, 12): The central scene depicts the Maize God, surrounded by four female and three male characters. The scene broadly resembles the dressing scenes mentioned above (Saturno *et al.* 2005: 31; Taube, Saturno & Stuart 2004: 855). The left part of the mural is dominated by a cavernous feature, inside of which the hairy saurian is clearly visible. A spotted feline is also present, atop of the cave entrance. Most importantly, on the lower bottom of the cave a snake is slithering out of its burrow. Another snake is depicted on top of the cave, coiled around a tree and devouring bird and most significantly, a giant feathered serpent slithers out of the cave, forming the ground-line for the whole scene (Saturno *et al.* 2005: 21-25). Is this a Protoclassic depiction of the snake-infested cave that was named Kanu'l? Another interesting coincidence is the presentation of maize. On the San Bartolo mural a kneeling woman offers a bowl of tamales (Saturno *et al.* 2005: 31), while the animal burdens in the Holmul Dancer scenes offer maize ears in the form of diminutive Maize God heads in a very similar gesture. This indicates, once again, that it is from primordial caves that maize stems from.



Figure 12. Examples of Holmul Dancer vases with archaeological provenience: *a)* Recovered by Thomas Gann in a cave in the vicinity of Benque Viejo (after Gann 1925: 72), *b)* Uaxactun (after Smith 1955: Vol. 2, Fig. 2b); *c)* Río Azul; *d)* Buenavista del Cayo; *e)* Baking Pot; *f)* Cuychen. Cabrito Cream-polychrome copies of Holmul Dancer vases: *g)* Lower Dover (courtesy of Jaime Awe) and *h)* Cahal Pech (where unspecified, photographs by Christophe Helmke).

God. Intriguingly, the same backrack with the ocelot burden was carried by Bajlaj Chan K'awiil, dynastic founder of Dos Pilas (Martin & Grube 2008: 56-58; Schele & Miler 1986: 77). This indicates that Dos Pilas and Tikal shared not only the same EG, but also the mythology and supernatural entities attached to the dynastic title (Houston, Stuart & Taube 1992: 503), as well as the ritual privileges tied to dance pageantry (Helmke 2010). Even more importantly, on Panel 1 from La Corona, the local ruler, K'ihnich Yook is shown wearing the Maize God's backrack, complete with its saurian burden (Guenter 2008: 18; Martin & Stuart 2009: 31; Michelet 2011: 164) (Figure 10b). Besides him, the glyphic caption provides a synoptic description of the event. The caption can be read *ubaah ti paat piik*, lit. 'it is his image with the *paat piik*', wherein we have a reference to the backrack itself (Tokovinine 2008: 281). Here the backrack is designated emically as a 'back cloth', or more freely, 'that which is behind/covers the garments', or even the 'outer garment', since in several Mesoamerican languages the word 'back' also refers to the outermost layer, such as the bark of a tree (Smith-Stark 1994: 18-19). The caption therefore not only draws attention to the backrack, but serves to make clear that the backrack was the feature of import in the scene. The panel's main text makes it clear that K'ihnich Yook lived for several years at Calakmul and from other texts we know that he was the son-in-law of the Kanu'l lord Yukno'm Ch'e'n II (Martin 2001b: 183-184). By wearing the saurian backrack he asserted his ties to the Kanu'l lineage and the ritual privilege to bear the regalia of the Maize God, a right that he obtained from the Calakmul sovereigns.

A closer look at the glyphic captions on the remarkable Cuychen vase provides us with detailed epithets for the three Maize Gods depicted on the vase, as well as their associated burdens (Figure 13). Each is headed by *ubaah juun ixim* 'it is the image of One maize' (R1-2, S1-2, T1-2). The third glyph block of each caption makes reference to the burden, wherein the first two match well-known examples, namely **6-[CHAN]NAL**, *lwak chan-nall*, 'six snake-place' (R3) and **6-[HIX]NAL**, *lwak hix-nall*, 'six ocelot-place' (S3). Unusually, the third is the otherwise rare **6-[OK]NAL**, *lwak ook-nall*, 'six coyote-place' (T3), tying the Cuychen vase to the other Holmul Dancer vase discovered at Río Azul (Figure 12c). Combining these spellings it is evident that the central element of the name provides us with the emic zootaxon of the supernatural burden (i.e. snake, feline, canine), but it is equally clear that these form part of toponymic constructions, since each is suffixed by toponymic suffix *-nal* 'place'. As such the burdens and their mountain seats together constitute important physiographic features in the sacred landscape to which the toponyms refer. The fourth glyph block (R4, S4, T4) records a rare spelling for what seems to function as a verbal form, here written **KAL-wi-TE'** and read *kalaawte'*. This same segment is seen in the glyphic captions of other Holmul Dancer vases (e.g. K3400 and K8966), but the Cuychen vase provides the only complete

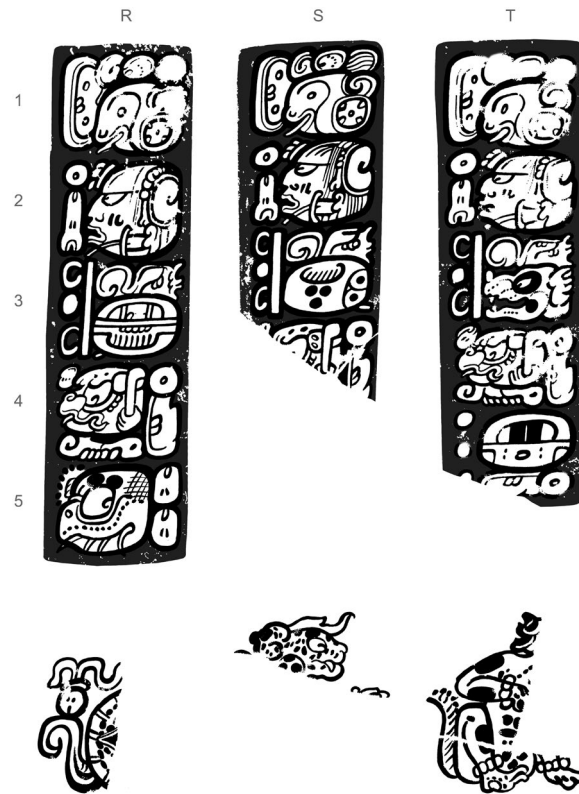


Figure 13. Glyphic captions to the Maize Gods (top) with their associated animal burdens (below), as rendered on the Cuychen vase (drawings by Christophe Helmke).

spelling. Furthermore it bears remarking that *kalaawte'* directly substitutes for another verbal expression, possibly read *t'abaay* (the so-called mediopassive inflection of the verb *t'ab* 'lift, raise, ascend'; see Stuart 1998: 409-417; Stuart Houston & John Robertson 1999: II.28, 30), which is seen in precisely the same syntactic context in the captions of another Holmul Dancer vase (Figure 10a). As a result, one possibility is that there is some semantic equivalence between *kalaawte'* and *t'abaay*. However, it is also possible that the two verbal expressions refer to different, and even consequent actions that form part of the same narrative.

specimen	saurian	feline	simian	canine	rodent	avian	ungulate	unknown
K0517	X			?				
K0633	X	X	X					
K3388	?							X
K3400	X	X						
K4464	X	X						
K4619		X		X				
K4989						X		X
K5169					X	X		
K5723		X						
K5976		X	?					
K5977	X	X						
K6002		X						X
K6679	X							
K7434	?						?	
K7814	X	X	X	?				
K8088		X	X					X
K8533		X						X
K8966	X	X						
Baking Pot Vase	X	X						
Cuychen Vase	X	X		X				
Naranjo Vase	X	X					?	

Table 2. Some Holmul Dancer vessels and the incidence of the different animal figures, or burdens, depicted in the iconography. Vessels wherein the burdens are missing or could not be identified are not tabulated above (for additional examples see Loope 2008).

We wonder if these expressions do not somehow provide emic labels for the resurrection of the Maize God, who ascended or was raised out of the underworld and acceded to the supreme title of *kalòmté'* (assuming that *kalaawte'* is the de-nominalised form of the title). The final glyph blocks (R5, S5, T5) record the place-names ascribing the resurrection of the Maize Gods to particular mythic locations, including Kanu'l and Mutu'l. In contrast, the third is not the toponym of Machaquila, as might otherwise be expected,

but a dynastic title (*uxhaabte*) connected to the lords of Río Azul. Appropriately enough this title also closes the caption on the Holmul Dancer vase from Río Azul. Compiling all the known examples of Holmul Dancer scenes we can see that these involve a rather great variety of burdens, of which the saurian and the spotted feline are the most common, underlining the pre-eminence of Kanu'l and Mutu'l as supernatural places (Table 2). It is by these means that we are able to identify Kanu'l as the place where the Maize God was resurrected – ascended or lifted, to use the emic wording – and the place where he became the king of kings, ruler of all, the primordial *kalò'mte'*.

To summarise, let us provide a précis of the mythic narrative, wherein the Holmul Dancer scenes depict but one event. As such, the Holmul Dancer scenes collapse a complex narrative into a single powerful scene that epitomises the mythology of maize. In Classic period mythology it is the Hero Twins, the sons of primordial maize that resurrect him, by literally watering the seedling, as he emerges from the back of a cracked turtle carapace embodying the earth (Coe 1987: 175-177; Freidel, Schele & Parker 1993; Quenon & Le Fort 1997: 887; Schele & Mathews 1998: 115-117; Taube 1985: 173, 177; Taube 1993: 66-67). Based on natal analogies, the reborn Maize God is represented as nude, and a key episode represents this divinity being dressed by a series of female attendants while the Hero Twins carry platters brimming with their father's regalia (Coe 1987: 177-178). The growth of maize and his resurrection was portrayed as a dance (Taube 2009) and as such the Holmul Dancer scene represents maize in apotheosis, after his rebirth, donning his majestic jewellery and regalia. The Holmul Dancer scenes do not only provide a snapshot of maize in glory, having vanquished death, but what is equally significant is that the growth and resurrection of maize was conceived of as a dance. Although so much of Classic Maya culture has been lost, it is conceivable that the Maize God is depicted performing a particular kind of dance, perhaps on par with the *danza del maíz* known from the Huasteca region (Croda León 2000; García Franco 2000) and the so-called green-corn dances that are well-known among North American Indians, especially in the Southwest and Southeast (Laubin & Laubin 1977: 171-228). The Holmul Dancer scenes may thus provide the mythic origin of the young maize dance that would have been celebrated and performed in the Classic period.

It is intriguing in this regard that so many Holmul Dancer scenes emphasise the multipartite aspect of divine maize, which is differentiated in large measure by the animal burdens, tied to different dynastic houses. It is noteworthy that some of the animal entities closely match the three named stone thrones depicted in the iconography of Palenque and cited in Classic period creation accounts, such as the text of Quirigua, Stela C (Looper 2003: 158-160). The latter text relates that at the last creation, in 3114 BC, three throne-stones were planted at the edge of the sky to form the first three-stone-hearth by the Paddler deities and goes on to name each stone in turn as “Ocelot”,

“Saurian”, and “Water” (Freidel, Schele & Parker 1993: 64-67). Are these triadic stones the premise that warranted the existence of three different incarnations of the reborn Maize God? If this is the case then it follows that the Late Classic ‘divine kings’ of Kanu’l and Mutu’l – and the other places named in the Holmul Dancer scenes – could claim affinity to a particular aspect of the maize God, but also tied their reigns to the last creation, with their seats of power located at the very place where the Paddlers planted the stone and where the Maize God was resurrected in the deep mythological past.

Conclusions

While we have focused on just one particular toponym and its titular use, we have been able to show that Kanu’l was a place that referred not only to a dynasty of Classic Maya kings and their kin, but also to a mythic location that was strongly connected to the Maize God and the myth of his death and resurrection. It is at Kanu’l, that cavernous and watery underworld, where the Maize God was overcome and beheaded by the Earth Lords. It is at Kanu’l that the Maize God dances out of the underworld in glory, at his resurrection. At present, we do not know if the ancient Maya associated this supernatural place with any physical location; in the corpus of Classic texts there is not a single reference to Kanu’l as the setting of contemporary events. However, considering the importance of caves in the sacred geography of Mesoamerican cultures, it is highly probable that, somewhere, a cave was indeed regarded as the original Kanu’l.

The depictions of Kanu’l in the confrontation scenes makes it clear that the rulers who bore the *k’uhul kanu’l ajaw* title, consciously embraced the origins of this title in mythic deep-time to legitimise not only their political power, but also their claim to divinity. In calling themselves ‘divine Kanu’l kings’ they associated themselves directly with the Maize God, and especially his localised manifestation. Since Kanu’l was a key location in the narrative of the Maize God’s death and resurrection, historic Kanu’l lords also could claim to overcome death, on par with the mythic precedent. Not only the Kanu’l EG but also the *kalòmt’e* title reflect this claim, since the latter may be the nominalised form of the verbal expression *kalaawte’* that appears in the context of resurrection scenes depicted so prominently on the Holmul Dancer vessels. Thus whereas the *kalòmt’e* title has usually been connected to a distinct manifestation of the thunder deity Chaahk, we now have the impression that this title connects monarchs to the Maize God. This intimate relation between the Kanu’l rulers and the Maize God goes even further, since in the confrontation scenes the Maize God is occasionally substituted by the pre-dynastic namesakes of Classic period rulers, thereby establishing a more concrete link between the historical present and deep-time – a materialisation of the past in the present.

Panel 1 from La Corona shows that rulers expressed their connection to the maize God of Kanu’l very explicitly, and assumed his guise as part of impersonation rituals,

dancing like the Maize God at his resurrection and wearing his ritual attire, including the backrack with the saurian burden. However, the Holmul Dancer vessels make it clear that the Kanu'l Maize God is but one of many aspects of this deity, which were linked to other dynasties and place names associated with the archaeological sites of Tikal, Machaquila, Río Azul, and several more. Since all these toponyms appear in a mythological context as settings for the Maize God myth, this leads us to deduce that all these places might have been supernatural in origin – or at least attributed retrospectively to the mythical past. This conclusion is supported by some Late Classic texts that feature groupings of emblem glyphs in contexts wherein the particular *k'uhul ajaw* do not seem to refer to historical persons but rather to supernatural beings (Helmke & Kupprat 2013). For instance, on Stela A, at Copan, four EGs are mentioned in association with the 'four skies' and the four cardinal directions (Barthel 1968; Marcus 1973: 913; Marcus 1976: 17-22; Wagner 2006: 157-159). Among them is not only the Kanu'l EG (Calakmul), but also the Mutu'l EG (Tikal), both of which occur so frequently on the Holmul Dancer vases. Another EG in the same grouping has Baake'l (Palenque) as its main sign, and it too can be traced back to the distant past (Helmke 2011, 2012a: 95-100). The fourth and final EG is that of Copan (T756[528]-**pi**), and although an extensive study of that EG remains within the purview of future research, based on association alone, and the contexts wherein it appears, we propose that such groupings refer mostly, if not exclusively, to emblems that are supernatural in origin.

Although supernatural toponyms employed as the main signs of EGs seem to have their origin in the cultural canon of narratives and beliefs that were shared among many regions, city-states and dynasties of the Maya area – and also in Mesoamerican cultures beyond the Maya area – we cannot dissociate them from the ruling elites who styled themselves with such regal titles, thereby preserving them for modern scrutiny. As such it seems patently clear that the 'divine lords' not only used myths and cultural memory to legitimate their power, but made recourse to narratives, ritual actions and regalia so as to more adequately adapt to and shape their socio-political context. These processes help to explain, for example, the bewildering diversity of mythic narratives at each nexus of the Maize God cycle, why so many different burdens are depicted in the backracks of the Maize Gods, or even how the Maize God could be substituted by the mythical dynastic founder in the confrontation scenes. It is these variations and local adaptations that betray the dynamic role that these vibrant narratives played in the lives of royalty, and the power of place in mythic narratives.

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