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## Rock Paintings and Lacandon Maya Sacred Landscapes

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For over one hundred years, explorers have documented numerous Maya cliff paintings on lakeshores in the Lacandon Rainforest of lowland Chiapas, Mexico. The designs vary, but recurrent themes include human hands, animals, and geometric shapes. The rock art may span the Classic to Historic Periods, which reflects the long occupation of this zone (see De Vos 1988; Palka 2005; Thompson 1977). Nonetheless, it is difficult to precisely date the paintings for no studies of the art (including radiocarbon dating) nor archaeological excavations in the vicinity have been undertaken. The discussion of the rock art in this article is based on cultural-historical data and comparative iconography.

The Lacandon Maya have known about the cliff paintings for a long period, and I suggest that they and/or their immediate predecessors, created some of the designs. The fact that many designs are simple does not prove that they belong to the Lacandon (see Maler 1901; Tozzer 1907). Until recently, the Lacandon visited these sacred cliff sites to carry out religious rituals related to specific deities and the paintings. It is the Lacandon religious information regarding the paintings that interests us here, and these data provide fascinating insights into native rock art, religion, and world view.

### Culture History of the Lacandon Forest

Classic Maya ruins dot the landscape in the Lacandon Rainforest, with the sites

of Yaxchilan, Bonampak, Lacanha, La Mar, El Cayo, and El Cedro being the better known centers (see Blom and Duby 1957; Coe 1999; Maler 1901). The densest occupation of this area perhaps dates to this period, and the inhabitants utilized the lowland lakes where the rock art is seen. However, the Postclassic to Historic Period occupations in the region are not well understood, and it is possible that extensive populations also existed at these times. Certainly the Colonial Period documents show that people were scattered throughout the Chiapas lowlands (De Vos 1988). Many of these historic peoples were organized under chiefdom-level societies, but tribal-level societies were present as well. Importantly, the land with the cliff paintings presented here is historically associated with Yucatec-speaking Maya, including the Lacandon, but further research is needed to sort out the ethnic and linguistic boundaries of the Chiapas lowlands.

During Spanish Colonial times, the central and southern parts of the Lacandon Forest were inhabited by the Ch'olti-Lacandon—a Ch'olan-speaking Maya people who lived at Lake Miramar and other lakes close by (De Vos 1988; Rivero Torres 1992; figure 1). These people were conquered by the Spanish, and a colonial center was set up to the east of Lake Miramar at the native center of Sac Bahlam (or Sak Bahlan?) in the early 1700s. However, many Ch'olti-Lacandon escaped into the surrounding rainforest at

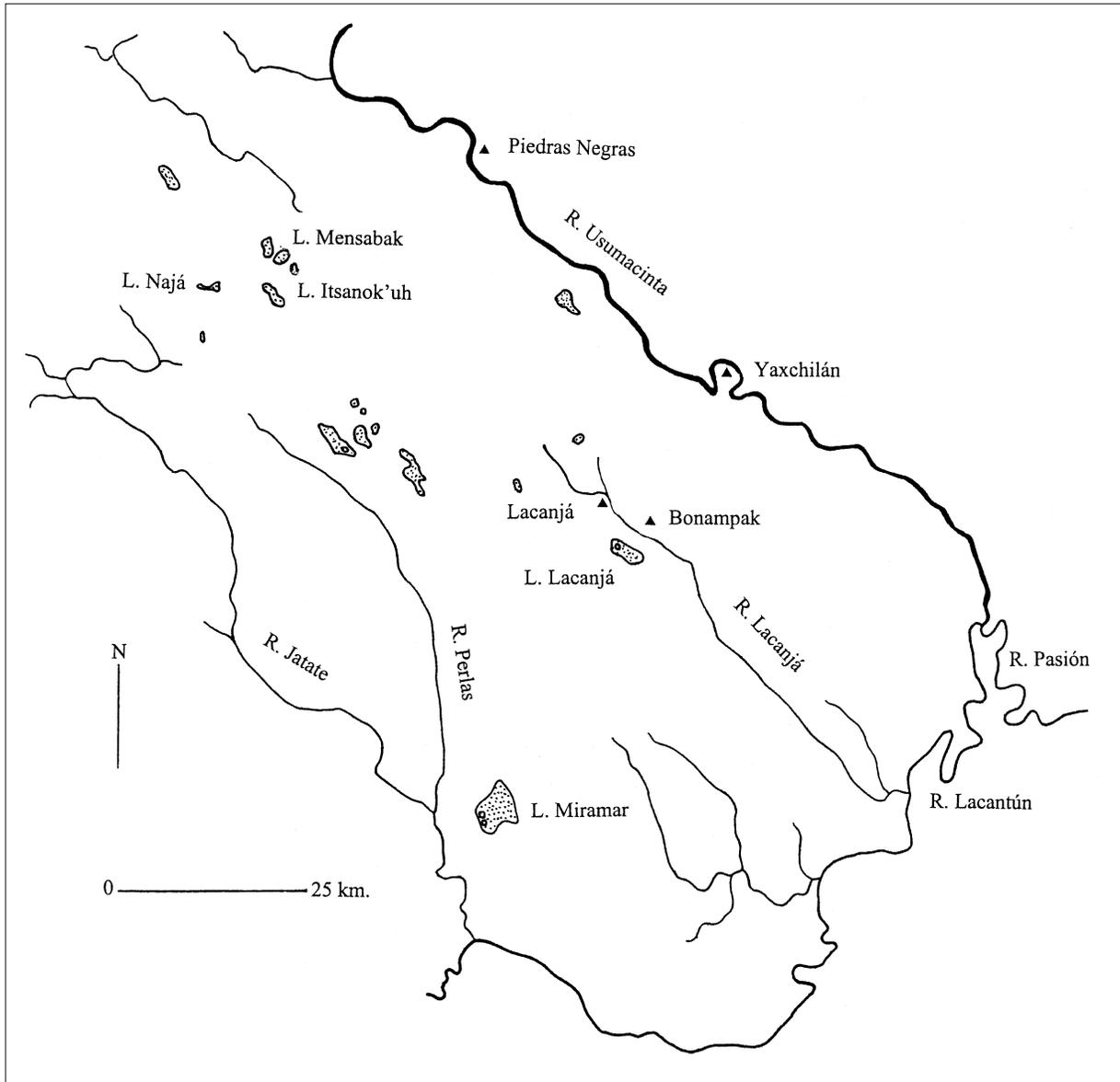


Figure 1. Map of Lakes and Rivers in Lowland Chiapas, Mexico.

this time. Yucatec-speaking populations were reported in the northern Chiapas lowlands. For example, the Chinamita and Petenacte peoples were found on both sides of the Usumacinta River (De Vos 1988; Thompson 1977). A Yucatec-speaking community (with some Ch'olan inhabitants) called Nohha was encountered on a lake, which may be Lake Naja, in the mid-1600s. This settlement was visited by explorers and Catholic priests until efforts at colonization were abandoned in the seventeenth century.

The Colonial Period Maya populations in the Chiapas lowlands may have been the ancestors of the contemporary Yucatec-speaking Lacandon. Culturally these Lacandon differ from any previous single group. Lacandon ethnogenesis came about through the

interaction between various Maya groups escaping colonial rule. Documents from the late eighteenth century into the nineteenth century point to a scattered but sizeable population of tribal-level Lacandon in the Chiapas rainforest whose settlements were found on the shores of lakes and rivers (Boremanse 1998; De Vos 1988; McGee 2002; Palka 2005). Rich historical ethnographic information exists on the Lacandon since explorers, priests, and early anthropologists were interested in these so-called "last of the ancient Maya." Subsequently, Lacandon lives were transformed in the twentieth century when extensive regional economic interaction, outside contact, and missionary activity increased (McGee 2002). In this article, I refer to the Lacandon studied before 1980 when their native

religion was recorded before extensive social change.

The earlier Lacandon populations practiced indigenous customs and religious beliefs that can be tied to Precolumbian ways despite extensive foreign contact (McGee 1990, 2002; Palka 1998, 2005). For instance, many of their settlements had a god house (*k'ul na*) where rituals were undertaken to appease deities for health and a good life. In this structure incense was burned and offerings given to deities who were represented by god pots (*u lakil k'uh*), which were ceramic vessels with modeled heads and painted designs in red and black on a white background. In fact, Lacandon designs on god pots and ceremonial robes, such as animals, concentric circles, star shapes, and circles with lines, resemble the cliff images (see Bruce 1968; Maler 1901; Tozzer 1907). Lacandon pilgrimages were made to Maya ruins and sacred places in the landscape for ritual purposes where incense was burned in god pots and offerings were presented to deities. Cliffs with paintings near lakes were some of the most sacred places for the Lacandon.

### The Cliff Paintings and Lacandon Religion

Many of the cliff designs in lowland Chiapas were photographed and drawn for several publications (Bruce 1968; Maler 1901; Pincemin Deliberos 1998; Rivero Torres 1992; Wonham 1985). Examples of the paintings are found at Lakes Mensabak and Itsanok'uh (alternatively Lake Petha, Pelja, or Guineo; Figure 1). This type of art has not received much attention outside of caves in the Maya area (but see Pincemin Deliberos 1998; Stone and Ericastilla 1998; Stone and Kunne 2003), and the Lacandon views of the paintings provide unique possibilities for a greater understanding of them. For the Lacandon, the cliffs, and especially ones marked with paintings, along with lakes, caves, and Maya ruins were homes of the deities (McGee 1990, 2005). Although ancient Maya ruins and distinctive geographical features like cliffs were sacred places, the presence of art at these locales gave them greater religious importance. Like the Lacandon god pots (see Bruce 1968:135-145; McGee 2002:37-38), the designs were seen as being directly connected to the deities who were visited or placated with offerings.

The Lacandon viewed cliff imagery as *ts'ib* or "painting/writing" that was done by their deities or actually represented the gods (see J. Soustelle 1970:28). The Lacandon stated that the drawings were created by the god *Ts'ibatnah*, "Painter of Houses" (Duby 1944:66-67; McGee 1990:58, 63), or the lord of drawing, painting, and writing. It was felt that this god decorated the houses, or cliffs, of the gods with ceremonial designs much like the Lacandon once did in their god houses. A statement by a Lacandon religious leader lamenting

archaeologist/explorer Teobert Maler's presence at a sacred cliff shrine at Petha (Itsanok'uh) as he drew painted designs illustrates one indigenous perception of the site: "No man (*hombre*), get away from there, that is my saint, it is our Christ-Mary, careful man, the jaguar will eat you, let's go man, that is why there is so much water [flooding] due to the bad heart of my saint" (Maler 1901:32). But besides being aware of them, did the Lacandon create these cliff paintings?

Regrettably, there are no recorded Lacandon memories or recorded statements of them making cliff paintings. However, it is still possible that they or their immediate ancestors made them. When one Lacandon was asked by a Western anthropologist about the origins and meaning of some abstract cliff paintings, he sternly responded "You know how to write, you tell me what they say" (Duby 1944:67). These ethnographic Lacandon were largely "illiterate" concerning the symbolism of the designs, and they were hoping for

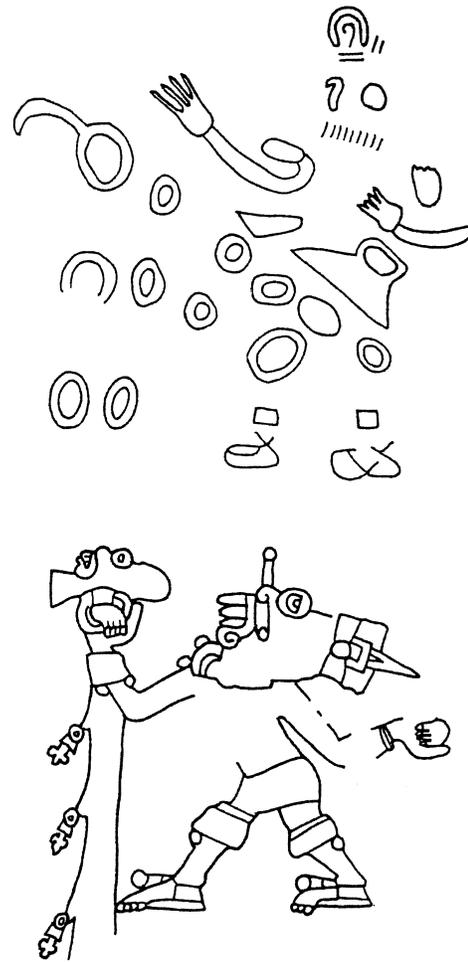


Figure 2. Images of Tlaloc: Lake Mensabak, Chiapas (top, after Bruce 1968:146) and the Codex Borgia (bottom, after Díaz y Rodgers 1993:50) (not to scale).

explanations from outsiders regarding what they felt was actual writing. However, Lacandon religious beliefs regarding the paintings indicate knowledge of the works and sacred sites that were passed down to the twentieth century.

*Mensabak and Tlaloc*

On a cliff at Lake Mensabak (sometimes “Metsabok”) Bruce sketched a complex design while suspended from a rope (Bruce 1968:146; Figure 2). There is an anthropomorphic figure with a head, arms, hands, legs, and feet. I suggest that this painting represents the Precolumbian deity *Tlaloc* (its Nahuatl name) known throughout Mesoamerica (Palka and Lopez Olivares 1992). This deity was depicted in Mesoamerican and lowland Maya art from Early Classic to Postclassic times (see Miller 1986:80, 147, 177; Pasztory 1974). Tlaloc, possibly related to butterflies or insects, is often recognized as having round “goggle” eyes, a curving proboscis, fang-like teeth, and a “year sign” or “trapeze and ray” headdress (Langley 1992). In Precolumbian art, Tlaloc frequently holds lightning bolts, incense bags, *atlatl* darts, *planchas* (clothes iron-like objects), and water jars with water spilling out of them. In ancient central Mexico, Tlaloc was associated with storms, rain, thunder, lightning, warfare, caves, and hills. In Maya iconography, this deity was related to warfare (Schele and Miller 1986:212-213) and shown on ceramic vessels in watery caves (Gallenkamp and Johnson 1985:210-211).

The Mensabak painting appears to contain features of Tlaloc that are seen in Postclassic imagery in the Codex Borgia (Figure 2). The Mensabak image shows a goggle eye, lines of fang-like teeth, a curled nose/proboscis, an abstract year-sign headdress, and a geometric *plancha* with loop handle and water drops flowing from it. Although it is difficult to place rock art in a chronological sequence, this image probably dates to Postclassic/early Colonial times (ca. A.D. 1200-1600) because of comparative design elements. However, a Classic Period date is also plausible. Regardless of its origin, the religious beliefs related to this cliff have been handed down over a long period.

The Lacandon considered that this lakeside cliff with paintings, or actually a cave within the cliff, to be the home of their deity *Mensabak* (Duby 1944:65-66; G. Soustelle 1961:47, 66). The name can be glossed as “the Lord that Guards Gunpowder,” and this deity is related to the Yucatec Maya deity *Yum Chak* or *Chaak*, who is connected to rain, clouds, and the cardinal directions (Bruce 1968:126-127; McGee 1990:68). What is fascinating is that for the Lacandon, the god *Mensabak*, like Tlaloc, is also the deity of storms, rain, thunder, and gunpowder (this entity even wars with other gods, and perhaps lightning and thunder are

related to warfare). Hence, the cliff image may actually represent the Lacandon deity *Mensabak*. In this case, the Lacandon may have a direct historical connection to the persons who created the paintings and worshiped at the lake cliff, or at least had some knowledge of them. It is not known at this time, however, whether the ethnographic Lacandon recognized this particular image as Tlaloc or *Mensabak*.

*Itsanok’uh and Crocodiles*

The Lacandon also made religious pilgrimages to

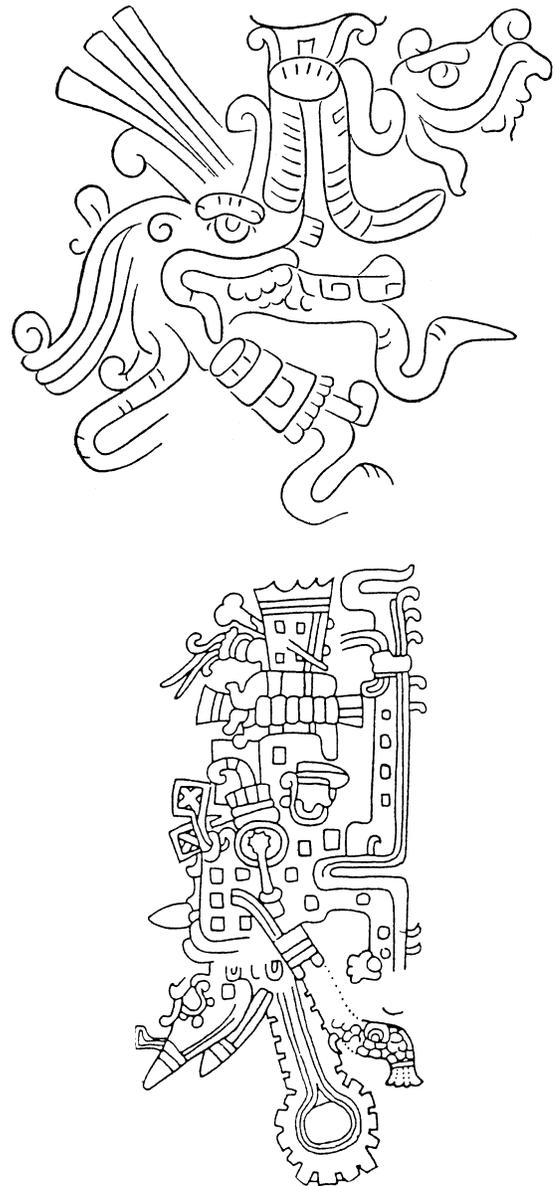


Figure 3. Images of Itsamna: Lake Itsanok’uh, Chiapas (top, from Maler 1901:30) and Santa Rita Murals, Belize (bottom, after Taube 1992:38) (not to scale).

a sacred cliff on Lake Itsanok'uh until the end of the twentieth century (G. Soustelle 1961:41, 66-67; Tozzer 1907:69, 148). Here they left offerings and performed rituals to *Itsanok'uh* ("Great Alligator Lord"), the Lord of Hail, Lakes, and Alligators (McGee 1990:62), who lives inside the cliff or within a fissure there. Itsanok'uh makes hail, guards lakes, and controls the alligator population (Bruce 1968:128). This god is more than likely related to the Yucatec deity *Itsamna* who is associated with alligators, the earth, the axis mundi, and the creation of the world (Arnold 2005; McGee 1990:69; J. Soustelle 1970:33; Taube 1992:31-41).

Ceremonies were undertaken here by the Lacandon in devotion to Itsanok'uh to enlist the deity's protection from supernatural evils. The rites were actually carried out at the edge of the water near the base of a large crack in the cliff (Tozzer 1907:149). This cliff wall exhibits a "serpent or monster" drawing in black discussed in many reports (Bruce 1968:148; Maler 1901:30; Wonham 1985). Yet the painting on the cliff face at Lake Itsanok'uh may not be a serpent at all (Figure 3). With its elongated snout and multiple teeth in a long jaw, the image closely resembles a creature with crocodilian aspects. Furthermore, the main head in this figure appears to be devouring a human with only the back and a leg protruding from its mouth (Maler 1901:30). In Mesoamerican myths, people near water are often attacked by crocodilian or piscine beings (Arnold 2005). However, the devoured human in this image may actually just be the front leg of the crocodile. The smaller upper head in this image may be that of a serpent which is often associated with Itsamna (Taube 1992:35), and Itsamna usually has a second head on top of its body (Villa Rojas 1985:330).

In Mesoamerican art and lore, crocodiles are frequently conflated with sharks and serpents (Arnold 2005), which explains the confusion in previous interpretations. This image then may literally be related to the Precolumbian Itsamna or the historic Lacandon deity Itsanok'uh; this point was hinted at, but not further explored, by Villa Rojas (1985:330-331). Most importantly, one Lacandon ritual specialist, Chan K'in, explained to an anthropologist that this specific image was indeed the "God of Cold and Hail," referring to Itsanok'uh (see Wonham 1985:18). This painting probably dates to Precolumbian times on stylistic grounds, perhaps the Postclassic Period, but it may also have been made in early historic times. However, it is possible that it was created in Classic times, and it probably was not made by the ethnographic Lacandon since no comparable images are known. As with the connections between Tlaloc and Mensabak, there may be long-standing beliefs with regards to this cliff and an alligator deity/Itsamna that have been handed down to the historic Lacandon.

### Hand Symbolism

Hands are ubiquitous in rock art in lowland Chiapas, and their high frequency is found in similar contexts the world over. Across time and space, human hands were painted usually in red although many have been rendered in black, and they may contain stylized fingers or geometric shapes within the palm. The human body is also generally an important icon. Some enlarged red hand images and black human stick figures are seen in the cliff at Lake Itsanok'uh (Maler 1901:30; Figure 4). For the Lacandon, the color red is significant, for some believe that it is pleasing to the gods (McGee 2002:29-30). It was also stated that human blood was used specifically by the gods to make the paint for their cliff houses since they love the odor of blood (Boremanse 1993:332). Red hand prints, drawings, and negative images appear on the cliff at Lake Mensabak, but they are particularly frequent at Lake Itsanok'uh. Paint was often applied to the hands and then to the rock faces (or brushed) as positive images, or pigment was blown from the mouth onto the hand resting on the surface for silhouettes. It is unknown whether the prints outnumber the stencils or if right hands predominate over left hands.

Some Lacandon mentioned that the hand images are the prints of the deities who placed their mark on the cliffs when the paintings were created. One Lacandon said of the hand prints: "The hand is the last drawing after when the people/helpers of Ts'ibatnah finished the [painting on the deity's] house, the god [Ts'ibatnah] has put his hand here to say that the work is finished" (Duby 1944:67). Similarly, hand prints have been universally interpreted by scholars as representing signatures by the artists of the rock art or labeled as signs denoting the presence of particular people. The hands produce the images, so it is natural that hand prints appear on the walls. Individual hands may mark the specific works of people and are recognizable because of the different sizes and types of renderings.

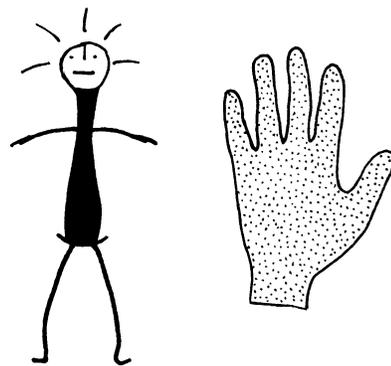


Figure 4. Rock Paintings from Lake Itsanok'uh, Chiapas (after Maler 1901:30): Human Figure, Black and Red Hand Print (not to scale).

They also may mark ownership of a painting.

Yet the sacredness of hands and hand imagery has been overlooked in rock art studies. For instance, they are indispensable for “ritual touch,” such as the laying on of hands in curing, and in manipulating religious items. The symbolism of the “powerful hand,” “placing of hands,” and “at the right hand” are well-known examples from Christianity. Interestingly, in the inscriptions of Palenque, Chiapas, there are hieroglyphs that usually depict a right hand (*k'ab?*) touching an earth sign (*kab* or *kaban*) (Montgomery 2002:163). This glyph may be a metaphor for birth, or it may actually refer to touching the earth at sacred places (like *Matawiil*). Also, ritual significance and left/right symbols are attached to hands in Maya culture (Palka 2002). Hands are also conduits or portals of supernatural energy flowing through them much like sacred cliffs or fissures. Hence, the touching, grasping, and laying on of hands dispenses this energy—particularly during rituals at cliff shrines. In general, the human body is an important cultural symbol; thus it is pervasive in many art traditions—particularly in rock paintings.

In the past, hands were important in Maya art: hand images appear on ceramic vessels and are depicted on animals and people in Classic Maya vases (see Coe 1999:52, 147, 179). The hand as a portal is seen as a hand print over the mouth on both the Maya God of the Number Zero and on war shields, such as the name glyph for Pakal of Palenque (see Montgomery 2002:48; Palka 2002:435). Cliffs and caves are also supernatural entries into supernatural realms, and their connection with hand prints can be recognized. The Lacandon believe that the cliffs are special entryways into the supernatural world and that the presence of the rock paintings confirms this, but it is unknown whether they felt that the hand prints were also portals or sacred entries. Clearly, the ritual importance and sacred nature of hands were not lost on the creators of the rock paintings nor the Lacandon.

## Conclusions

Previous studies of cliff paintings in other areas have demonstrated that ethnographic information is valuable for the interpretation of indigenous rock art (Layton 2001). Although there are frequent cultural discontinuities between the contemporary societies and the past peoples who created the art, a greater understanding of the designs can be achieved with the help of local indigenous persons, especially if they have some cultural-historical connection to the artists. Information may be passed down through generations, or certain images and associated beliefs

may be recognizable to descendants. Regardless of their accuracy, the indigenous interpretations of past rock art contain interesting information on native beliefs regarding the designs and the sacred places where they are found. Additionally, shamanistic rituals in addition to neurophysiological and psychological factors have gained favor in the interpretation of rock art (see Lewis-Williams 2001). However, due to the symbolism and context of the Chiapas cliff paintings, they probably do not function entirely within altered states of consciousness. Instead they were symbols in sacred landscapes where religious forces regarding nature could be contacted by ritual specialists. The designs are merely things that occur in the world of the deities or represent ways that communication occurs between the different realms.

Lacandon beliefs regarding the rock art discussed above are important for the study of Precolumbian art in the lowlands of Chiapas. The analysis of Lacandon religion and their continued participation in the interpretation of the paintings will be fruitful. Importantly, there is evidence from Lacandon religion and the presence of specific images in rock art that beliefs related to sacred locales, deities, and perhaps place names themselves were transmitted from late Precolumbian times to the twentieth century. Past peoples made pilgrimages to and carried out rites at the same sites, and the ceremonies may also have centered on the earth, rain, portals to the supernatural realm, and communication with deities. These are religious themes seen elsewhere in Mesoamerica regarding rock art and cliff shrines (see Pasztory 1983:124-134). Some of these past lowland peoples may have been among the ancestors of the modern Lacandon, or religious information was passed through the generations by locally interacting peoples. Besides the rich cultural-historical information, future studies of the cliff paintings themselves and archaeological investigations at nearby sites are crucial for comprehending the origins and meanings of lowland Chiapas rock art.

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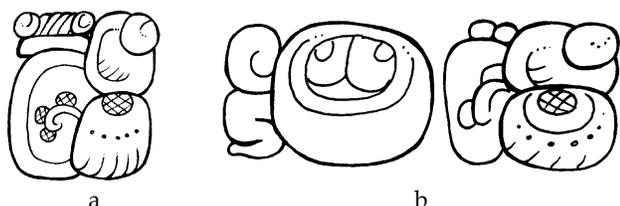
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# ‘Flaming Akbal’ and the Glyphic Representation of the *aj-* Agentive Prefix

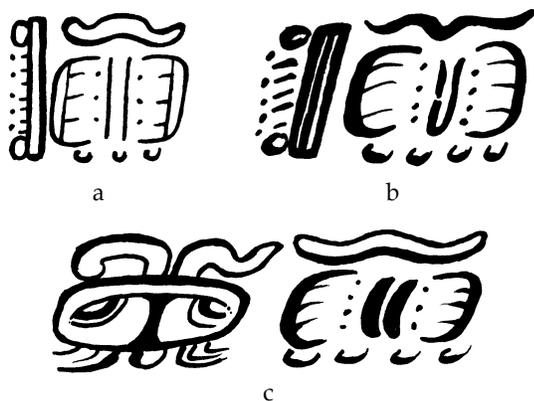
MARC ZENDER

Peabody Museum, Harvard University



**Figure 1.** The *bubulha'* toponym: a) Unprovenanced miniature altar, side, glyph 8 (after Mayer 1980:plate 28); b) Piedras Negras Panel 2, I'2-J'2. (All drawings by the author.)

Some years ago now, I pointed out a potential substitution between T12 **AJ** and an uncommon sign dubbed ‘flaming akbal’ in the context of an obscure toponymical title from the Upper Usumacinta region (Zender 1999:115).<sup>1</sup> Thus, on a miniature memorial altar in the collections of the Art Institute of Chicago (Mayer 1980:20), a Late Classic lord of Lacanha named Ahkul Paat bears the title **AJ-bu-lu-HA'**, *aj bulha'* or “He of/from Bulha'” (Figure 1a). A very similar reference appears on Piedras Negras Panel 2 (Figure 1b). Here, a much earlier Lacanha lord named Yich'aak Paat carries a title composed of the ‘flaming akbal’ glyph followed by **bu<sup>2</sup>-lu-HA'**, or *bubulha'*. The similarity in these two designations—*bulha'* and *bubulha'*—is striking, especially when the tendency of Maya scribes towards haplography (the omission of duplicate signs) is taken into consideration (Zender 1999). As such, it seemed at least plausible that both spellings might have signaled *bubulha'*, and so I suggested that the ‘flaming akbal’ glyph might be considered analogous to T12 **AJ**,



**Figure 2.** Phonetic substitution in name of Naranjo Ruler 1: a) NAR Alt.1, G2; b) TIK MT-16, burial 72; c) Vase K6813 (after a photograph by Justin Kerr).

perhaps providing a distinct spelling of the agentive prefix *aj-*.

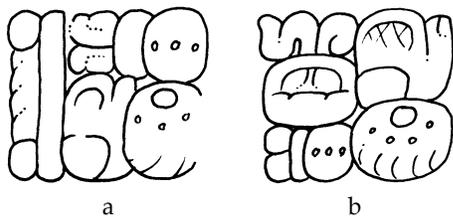
On the whole, this suggestion has been well received, and a number of colleagues have found the **AJ** value to be productive in other contexts (e.g., Martin 2000, Tokovinine 2003). However, there has also been some confusion arising out of the nature of the posited equivalency between T12 and ‘flaming akbal’. In what follows, I provide further support for an **AJ** reading of ‘flaming akbal’, and also highlight what I take to be its essentially morphemic function as an agentive prefix.

One key context for the ‘flaming akbal’ sign is to be found in the name phrase of Naranjo’s Ruler 1. Typically, as on Naranjo Altar 1 and Tikal MT-16 (Figures 2a-b), the core part of this ruler’s name is spelled **AJ-?-sa-ji**, where T12 probably provides the agentive prefix *aj-*.<sup>2</sup> However, in one virtually identical spelling on a late sixth-century vessel (K6813), T12 is replaced by the ‘flaming akbal’ sign, suggesting that it marks the agentive prefix in this instance (Figure 2c). While unfortunately unprovenanced, both the style of the vessel and the surrounding titles leave little doubt about the attribution to Naranjo’s Ruler 1 (Martin and Grube 2000:71).

Another important substitution can be found on the Group IV head from Palenque, excavated by Roberto López and Arnoldo González in 1994 (López 2000:43). Its ample hieroglyphic text references the accession of one K’abis Uchiñ Aj Sik’ab to the priestly office of *ti'sakhuun*, before going on to describe his supervision of the accessions of acolytes and his participation in various other ritual activities (Zender 2004). Interestingly, while the latter part of his name

<sup>1</sup> Due in part to its rarity, this complex sign has yet to be satisfactorily cataloged. Thompson (1962:99-101) did not provide it with a unique number, and instead considered it a compound of T122 **K'AHK'** and T504 **AK'AB**. Nevertheless, the sign’s contexts urge its reappraisal as a single, complex unit. For their part, Macri and Loooper (2003:171-172) accept the unique identity of ‘flaming akbal’ — which they designate ‘SSF’ in their system — but erroneously equate it with a series of signs and sign-compounds involving **K'AWIIL**.

<sup>2</sup> While the second sign in Ruler 1’s name has long been read as **wo**, Simon Martin (personal communication, 2004) points out that the outward flanges of the **wo** sign always fold in towards accompanying signs, whereas this sign flares outwards and is therefore likely to have a different value.



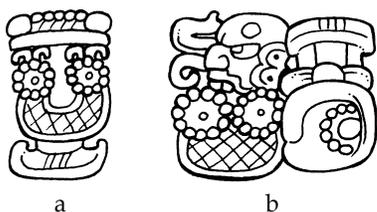
**Figure 3.** Phonetic substitution in name of Aj Sik'ab, Palenque: a) PAL, Group IV Head, A7 (after author photograph); b) PAL, Group IV Head, F3 (after author photograph).

is typically written **AJ-si-k'a-ba** (Figure 3a), with T12 providing the **AJ**, this is replaced in one instance with the 'flaming akbal' sign (Figure 3b). Again, this suggests an equivalency between the two signs.

Perhaps the most intriguing substitution occurs at Tonina, where the name of the high-ranking *ajk'uhuun* Aj Ch'aaj Naah appears on some four monuments from the late seventh and early eighth centuries. A typical spelling of the name (**AJ-CH'AAJ-NAAH**) can be seen on Monument 140 (Figure 4a) and clearly involves T12 **AJ** as the initial agentive prefix. On Monument p38, however, and as first pointed out by Simon Martin (2000), the head variant of 'flaming akbal' apparently substitutes for T12 in the spelling **AJ-CH'AAJ-NAAH-hi**.<sup>3</sup> As with the previous substitutions, it would seem that 'flaming akbal' here provides the agentive prefix on the name.

Important as they are for establishing the value of a sign, substitutions like the foregoing are most noteworthy for the insights they can eventually lend to unique contexts. By way of example, late in November of 2000, INAH excavations at Tonina uncovered a remarkable stela bearing one of the earliest known portraits of an *ajk'uhuun* (Yadeun, in Schwartz 2001; Yadeun, personal communication 2002), recounting and depicting his supervision of the period ending on 9.9.0.0.0 3 Ajaw 3 Sotz' (May 12, A.D. 613). Most importantly for present purposes, a small interior text (Figure 5) also recounts his **CHUM-ji-ya ta-AJ K'UH-na-IL**, *chuhmjiiny ta-ajk'uhuun-il* or "seating in *ajk'uhuun*-ship" some 203 days prior to the period-ending, on 9.8.19.7.17 8 Caban 5 Ceh (October 21, A.D. 612) (Miller and Martin 2004:188; Zender 2004:156-157).

Whereas almost all other spellings of the *ajk'uhuun* title involve T12 **AJ**—save for a few late examples



**Figure 4.** Phonetic substitution in name of Aj Ch'aaj Naah, Tonina: a) TNA M.140, pN; b) TNA p.38, O.

involving **a** (see below)—this unique spelling can now be accepted as a reference to the same title on the strength of the substitutions set forth above. Similarly, the frequent occurrences of the 'flaming akbal' sign on pottery (e.g., K4333, 4340, 4481) and a number of other occurrences on monuments (including two others on Piedras Negras Panel 2) can now be understood as agentives as well. In numerous script contexts, then, the 'flaming akbal' **AJ** sign plays a part in personal names and toponymical titles predicated on the presence of the prefixed *aj-* agentive.

Let us now turn to recent questions concerning the likely function of the 'flaming akbal' sign. Wichmann (2002), for instance, has recently proposed that both 'flaming akbal' and T12 are in fact syllabic signs. Yet while it is true that T12 has traditionally been read as phonetic **a** and included as such in a number of popular works on Maya writing (e.g. Coe and Van Stone 2001:157, Macri andLooper 2003:272, Montgomery 2002:132), it is nevertheless clear that the sign has a predominantly logographic value of **AJ** (Grube 2004; Jackson and Stuart 2001:218-219). Evidence for this value spans phonetic substitutions with **Ca-ja** syllables in both possessed (**ya-ja-K'UH-na**, on K4340) and unpossessed forms (**'a-ja-ko-ba-'a**, on Edzna St. 20), and also encompasses linguistic reconstruction of the agentive prefix (Proto-Ch'olan *\*aj-*, Kaufman and Norman 1984:139).

Further, lest we indulge in the synoptic fallacy of deriving canonical values from the results of diachronic change, it is critical to note that neither T12 nor 'flaming akbal' ever substitute with bonified **a** syllables prior to the mid-eighth century A.D. (Zender 2004:165). Thus, only in inscriptions dating after ca. A.D. 750 is this sign acrophonically reduced to the purely phonetic sign **a** (as in a late **a-ku**, *ahk* "turtle" spelling from Yaxchilan HS.2, Step VIII, D1-3). Moreover, it is at about this same time that the purely phonetic **a** signs—such as the T743 "parrot head" **a** and its abbreviated T228/229 "parrot beak" **a**—begin to invade substitution sets previously closed to all but T12 and 'flaming akbal' (e.g., **a-K'UH-HUUN-na** on K1728, dated after A.D. 740, and **IX-a K'UH-na** on Yaxchilan L. 32: K1-K2, dated to ca. A.D. 756) (Zender 2004:180-186). When examined from a diachronic perspective, long accepted patterns of substitution between T12 (and 'flaming akbal') and the **a** syllables turn out to be the sporadic and late markers

<sup>3</sup> While admittedly unique, this compound is quite easy to explain, since it is comprised of a T122 **K'AHK'** affix (itself part of the more typical 'flaming akbal' glyph) and T1009, the well-known head variant for T504 **AK'AB**. It is interesting to note that, as in the case of **TZ'AK** (Stuart 2003) and a few other playfully complex signs, the 'flaming akbal' compound permitted such variation in its constituent signs. Other complex signs, like the 'dawn' glyph **PAS**, do not permit even the most basic substitutions for their constituents.

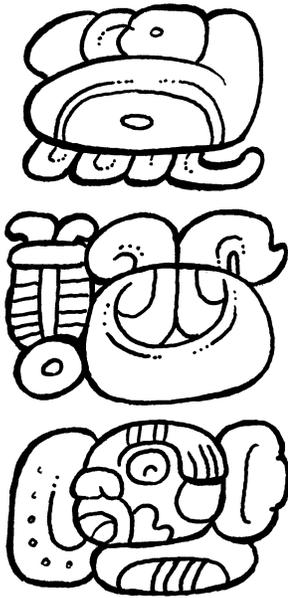


Figure 5. Accession phrase of early seventh-century *ajk'uhuum*, TNA M.183.

of sound change and/or orthographic reform in action (Grube 2004; Houston et al. 2004). Given the rigid distinction between these sign sets that characterizes most of the Classic era, a more convincing explanation for these patterns is to see both T12 and 'flaming akbal' as **AJ** logographs, largely distinct from the "parrot"-based **a** syllables.

But this is not to say that both of the **AJ** signs are functionally equivalent as markers of the agentive prefix. On the contrary, for while T12 **AJ** certainly spells the agentive in many of its occurrences, it is also regularly employed to write an as yet undetermined suffix in the distance number introductory glyph (**U-TZ'AK-AJ?**), frequently marks a suffixed agentive (**K'AHK'-AJ**, **EHB-AJ**; Houston et al. 2001:6-7), and occasionally appears as a toponymical suffix (**IK'-AJ?**). On the whole, then, it would probably be unwise to link T12 **AJ** with any single script function. By contrast, however, and to judge solely from current evidence, the 'flaming akbal' sign is employed for no other purpose than to write the agentive. Nor is there any indication that this sign was ever employed in a purely phonetic capacity—i.e., as a phonetic complement, or as part of the spelling of a wholly unrelated word. Of the two signs, 'flaming akbal' therefore emerges as the better candidate for a morphemic sign. Indeed, considering both its strong restriction to the agentive context and its eschewal of purely phonetic environments, the sign certainly bears comparison to the class of 'morphosyllables' proposed by Houston et al. (2001) and suggests that there may yet be other purely morphemic signs in the corpus.

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Neg. No. 10313, Courtesy of the Museum of New Mexico.

## Morley's Diary, 1932

### *Editor's note*

*A leading archaeologist of his time, Sylvanus Griswold Morley was an Associate of the Carnegie Institution of Washington, the foremost organization excavating archaeological sites in Mexico, Guatemala and Honduras in the early part of the twentieth century. This diary continues his account of the Carnegie Institution's expedition to Calakmul begun on April 3, 1932. Morley's professional companions were his wife Frances, Karl Rupert, John Bolles and Gustav Stromsvic. Reference is made to biologist Cyrus L. Lundell, who conducted the first scientific investigations at Calakmul and brought the site to the attention of the Carnegie Institution.*

### **April 21 - Thursday**

Many surprises today including five new Initial Series bringing our total up to a round fifty but these can wait for their proper place in the story of the day.

We are really rounding up on the work and from now on it is a sapping up process.

After breakfast we went first to the two stelae in front of Structure Q which are now Stelae 93 and 94. The latter I had identified as an Initial Series on our original tour of inspection a week ago last Sunday. This records the date 9.12.10.0.0 9 Ahau 18 Zotz quite clearly.

I had given the companion monument, Stela 93, up as a lost soul but in order to make sure this morning I set two boys clearing along the two sides.

The boys cleared the right side first — the stela had fallen over backward — and this showed a line of two

or three glyphs across the top of the monument and a figure facing to the observer's left below them. The left side was more promising. There had been an I. S. here our 46th, the introducing glyph of which had disappeared all but its lower left corner.

The baktuns were very clear as 9. The katuns are gone, but the tuns are 10; the uinals 0, and the kins 0, and the day of the terminal date 9 Ahau.

With only the katun coef. missing it can be shown that the only lahuntun ending in Baktun 9 ending on the day 9 Ahau is 9.12.10.0.0 9 Ahau 18 Zotz. Moreover I find the coefficient of 18 at A10, and this moreover is the date surely recorded on the companion monument, Stela 94.

An interesting item of evidence came up about the day-sign. The piece of stone recording this was loose and we found it and put it back in its proper position.

Gustav had his quadrilla, which had raised Stela 8 so that we could photograph it, come over to Stela 93 and 94 to raise the latter just as I was finishing Stela 93.

I came back to camp and went over to look at the fallen Stela 59. A little digging along the side convinced me there had been an I. S. on its right side, the katun coef. of which is 15. I left Jesus and Lino to dig along both sides of this while Frances and I set out photographing, or rather she did it, while I did other things, notably note taking.

We went first to Stelae 28 and 29 but the light was not right for these so we continued on to Stelae 38, 39, 40, and 41.

Here I picked up my second I. S. for the day on Stela 38. This monument had been on the suspect list before and I had had to take it off as I could not be sure that it had one.

The morning, however, the light was just right and I could be sure that it was an I. S. I could not decipher this exactly but since its tun coef. is surely 10, and since the two adjacent stelae, 39 and 40 both record the lahuntun ending 9.13.10.0.0 7 Ahau 3 Cumhu it is not unlikely, indeed it is probable, that Stela 38 records the same date. This is our third I. S. for the day.

While Frances was photographing Stela 45 which fortunately was in good light, I went over and took notes on the nearby Stela 35, where she later joined me. This monument seems to have 2 Initial Series on it but I believe the one on the right side records the contemporaneous date of this monument, i.e. 9.11.10.0.0 11 Ahau 18 Chen.

The luncheon bell rang while Frances was photographing Stela 35 and as soon as she had finished we repaired to camp.

Here a funny thing had happened. Gustav and Karl had excavated one of John's two small new steale in the Main Plaza — the one just south of Stela 9 and had found it is not a new stela at all but the upper part of the left side of Stela 13. It begins very clearly with an Initial Series, the variable central element is a grotesque head, the baktuns 9, the katuns probably 12 (7 is the only other possible reading), the tuns, uinals, and kins being 0. The best reading here, very much the best reading, is 9.12.0.0.0 10 Ahau 8 Yaxkin. This is the 4th I. S. today.

After lunch I went over to Stelae 59 or 60 where I had found or thought I had found an I. S. on the former this morning. Jesus and Lino had this well outlined and I could read this date surely as 9.15.10.0.0 3 Ahau 3 Mol. While I was writing up the notes on this I sent my boy Genaro to fetch Frances and she came out and photographed Stela 62 and Stela 64 while I was finishing Stela 59.

I have had my suspicions of Stela 60 ever since reading the date of the companion monument, Stela 59. This is standing and I finally made out on the left side facing it the glyph 3 Mol.

Close study showed there had been 8 glyphs on each side, and after Rafael and Lino had built a scaffold I climbed up and found that the second glyph on the right side is 9 baktuns. This is a dead give away for an Initial Series and I am practically certain that Stela 60 records as an I. S. the same date as Stela 59, that is 9.15.10.0.0 3 Ahau 3 Mol. This is the fifth I. S. for the day and brings our total up to 50.

I then joined Frances at Stelae 75-79, where she was taking 79 when I got there. She also photographed 78 and 77 before the sun got too low, and we returned to camp.

I had managed to get my 50 feet of Lufkin tape hopelessly tangled, and Frances and later Karl succeeded in unraveling it.

While they were doing this I had my boys and Karl's Francisco fell the trees near Stelae 13, 14, 15, and 16, so that a flood of light came in. It was too late to photograph these today but they will show up well in an early afternoon light.

In felling the trees necessary to let this light in, I blocked up not only our own path but also the boys and it took my cuadrilla a good hour to hack and cut a way through all the fallen foliage. Finally in the case of our own road it was easier to open up an entirely new path.

It's an ill wind that blows nobody good, however, and some of the trees felled were ramon. I noticed after five that Jesus aided by Demetrio and Onesimo were lopping off some of the leafiest branches to take back to Jesus' mule.

Before closing I had them set up the top fragment of Stela 13 so that it would catch the light. They also reassembled the two pieces of Stela 9, which I thought we might photograph by night.

I had a hot bath and felt greatly rested.

Tonight there was no bridge and no gramophone. Karl seems to have caught a cold in his head and went to bed immediately after supper.

Gustav stayed up for a little while hacking out a semblance of John from a block of limestone that was as soft as sascab. When he got to the nose he inconsiderately broke it off and abandoned the head, which at one time Frances thought looked like George Washington.

John tried to improve this but also gave it up as a bad job and both of them were off to bed by seven.

Frances, like my own one, stayed up with me until after I had finished today's entry. We too were in bed by eight.



Calakmul stela. 1982. Photo: Merle Greene Robertson.