
Aspects of Impersonation in Classic Maya Art

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The importance of impersonation—in which ritualists disguise themselves as supernatural, animal, or human characters—cannot be overstated as a contributing factor in the evolution of Mesoamerica. It was an adaptive strategy for the consolidation of power in the political arena and at the same time held a profound philosophical meaning for those who practiced and watched these performances. Impersonation signaled the presence of the sacred to such an extent that as an act, by itself, it held sacred meaning. Townsend (1979:28) found that the Nahuatl expression for impersonator, *teixiptla*, encompasses a broader range of objects, such as effigies and ritual costume, whose common denominator is that they all manifest the divine. This high esteem in which the Aztecs held the living impersonator comes to life in a handsome portrayal of Ehecatl-Quetzalcoatl (fig. 1). The naturalistic zoomorphic body of a writhing serpent seems to portray the “real” Quetzalcoatl incarnate; yet no attempt is made to hide the fact that the head is that of an impersonator of Ehecatl, Quetzalcoatl’s Wind God avatar. On the contrary, this point is emphasized. A clear signal is sent that the act of impersonating the god was esoterically as meaningful as the god’s holy presence. In addition, by impersonating gods, human beings could interject their presence in supernatural affairs. Thus, impersonation provided a powerful interface with the sacred.

Since impersonation allows humans to assume the attributes and sacred powers of the gods, it has a central role in the formation of stratified societies whose political power rests on the divine nature of their leaders. From a political standpoint, impersonation provides a strategy for supporting claims of divinity and wielding supernatural powers—claims that cannot be substantiated through mundane logic and discourse. Such claims rest on a metalanguage of ritual and symbol, which by its sanctity circumvents tests of rational proof (Rappaport 1971:30). Within an ideological system of the divine, impersonation, by its concrete nature of being sensible to sight, gives an illusion of empirical reality, making it



Fig. 1 Ehecattl-Quetzalcoatl impersonator (The Cleveland Museum of Art, purchase from the J. H. Wade Fund).

particularly useful in manufacturing the sacred context in which political leaders want to place themselves.

In fact, the rise of complex societies in Mesoamerica can be directly linked to the development of impersonation cults and the rise of divine right political systems. There also seems to be a correspondence between the level of social complexity and the complexity of the impersonation tradition. Complexity (e.g., the number of beings impersonated, the richness of the iconographic system used to accomplish this end, and the complexity of referential levels) contributes to the persuasive powers

of an impersonation tradition, weaving a thick symbolic web that renders it invulnerable to logical attack.

The artistic evidence suggests that pre-Olmec art is poorly represented in terms of humans dressing as super-naturals or animal-deities. Indeed, the art of Xochipala, which may be the first developed pre-Olmec artistic tradition, consists largely of naturalistic portraits with little concern for symbolic costume (Gay 1972:21). It can be surmised that the Olmec impersonation cult, seen in the wearing of elaborate masks and donning of supernatural attributes, reflects the consolidation of rulership based on associating the elites with cosmic powers. In Mesoamerica impersonation was an important component in the rise of complex societies, and its consequent unprecedented elaboration shows the continuing support it provided as a basis of ritual and power. I might go so far to say that the success or failure of a political system in Mesoamerica was closely tied to the sophistication of its impersonation tradition.

Impersonation in the Maya Area

In the past, as today, impersonation flourished in the Maya area and seems to have held the prestige that we see in Aztec society. An important component of impersonation paraphernalia, masks were held in high regard by the Maya. Figures wearing masks and costumes “X-ray” fashion on Maya vases and on stelae convey a sense of great power (see Robicsek and Hales 1982: no. 3 and Yaxchilán Stela 11). As pointed out to me by Matthias Strecker (personal communication, 1986), Maya caves have yielded both a wooden mask (Strecker, in press) and several carved in stone (Navarette and Martínez 1977: figs. 6 and 7). In light of the sacred nature of caves for the Maya, these masks must have been held in high esteem. Colonial Maya literature reveals that the gods frequently donned masks (Thompson 1970:277; Edmonson 1985:262). In the Madrid Codex and on Maya polychrome vessels the gods are shown carving masks, as well.

The best candidate for a word expressing the idea of impersonator in Maya languages is also the word that means mask, *k'oh*. This word (or a cognate) is recorded in numerous Maya dictionaries.

Yucatec: *koh* (*k'oh*): *carátula o máscara; el que está en lugar de otro, que es su teniente y represente su persona*. [Martínez Hernández 1929:519]

Mopan: *c'ooj* (*k'ooj*): *máscara*. [Ulrich and Ulrich 1976:62]

Cholti: *choh*: *máscara*. [Moran 1935:43]

Tzotzil: *c'oj* or *c'ojil* (*k'oh* or *k'ohil*): *máscara*. [Hurley and Ruíz 1978:32]

Tzeltal: *c'oj* (*k'oh*): *máscara*. [Slocum and Gerdel 1976:73]

Mochó: *k'oh*: *máscara*. [Kaufman 1967:78]

Quiché: *qoh* (*q'oh*): *máscara de teatro*. [Brasseur de Bourbourg 1862:211]

In colonial Yucatec dictionaries *k'oh* is defined in the most complete terms and means representative, substitute, an image or figure that stands in for something else (Barrera Vásquez 1980:27), which seems close to the idea of impersonator. In Quiché the word *q'oh* is incorporated into the word for “custom” as *q'ohlem* (Brasseur de Bourbourg 1862:211).

For the Maya, impersonation could be viewed as an act of literal transformation, an event of supernatural significance. An observation by Thomas Gage (Thompson 1958:247) bears witness to this fact. Upon hearing confession from Highland Guatemalan Indians just prior to their impersonation in a religious dance drama, he commented: “When I lived among them, it was an ordinary thing for the one who in the dance was to act St. Peter or John the Baptist to come first to confession, saying they must be holy and pure like that saint, whom they represent, and prepare themselves to die.”

Switching Gender and Status Roles

The Classic Maya elite engaged in one form of impersonation that involved switching gender and status roles. This tradition of what might be termed “social impersonation” is well attested in Maya culture. Characters portrayed in colonial and modern festival dramas quite often fall into such a category. Bricker (1973:215) reported that masquerading as women is one of the major themes of ritual humor in the Maya area. According to Cogolludo (1867–1868:I, 300), in the early colonial period actors dressed up in the white robes of priests, suggesting a form of social parody.

Recognizing social impersonation in Classic Maya art may be difficult, because it is less obvious than donning the grotesque attributes of the gods. Hieroglyphic texts and analysis of complex iconography often provide the necessary clues. One case, demonstrated by Linda Schele (1984a), showed that the Orator and Scribe Tablets from Palenque portray elite Palenquano males impersonating captives. They are “bound” with loosely hanging strips of cloth and seem to be engaged in autosacrifice.

Another case of role switching is seen in the Maya ruler taking on the persona of women, the subject on which I wish to focus. This is an extremely important aspect of the Maya impersonation cult: it draws attention to the significant role of fertility in Maya kingship. It is my view that in Maya kingship the traditional fertility role of women was appropriated and relexified through the symbol system, especially the bloodletting complex, so that it appeared to belong “naturally” to the male ruler. Social impersonation was a primary means of accomplishing this transferal.

Schele brought up one case in point in regard to the bloodletting ceremony. She stated that in shedding blood Maya kings were fulfilling the female role of nurturer. She pointed out that Chan Bahlum is called, glyphically, the “mother” (T1.I:606:23) of the gods in the Cross

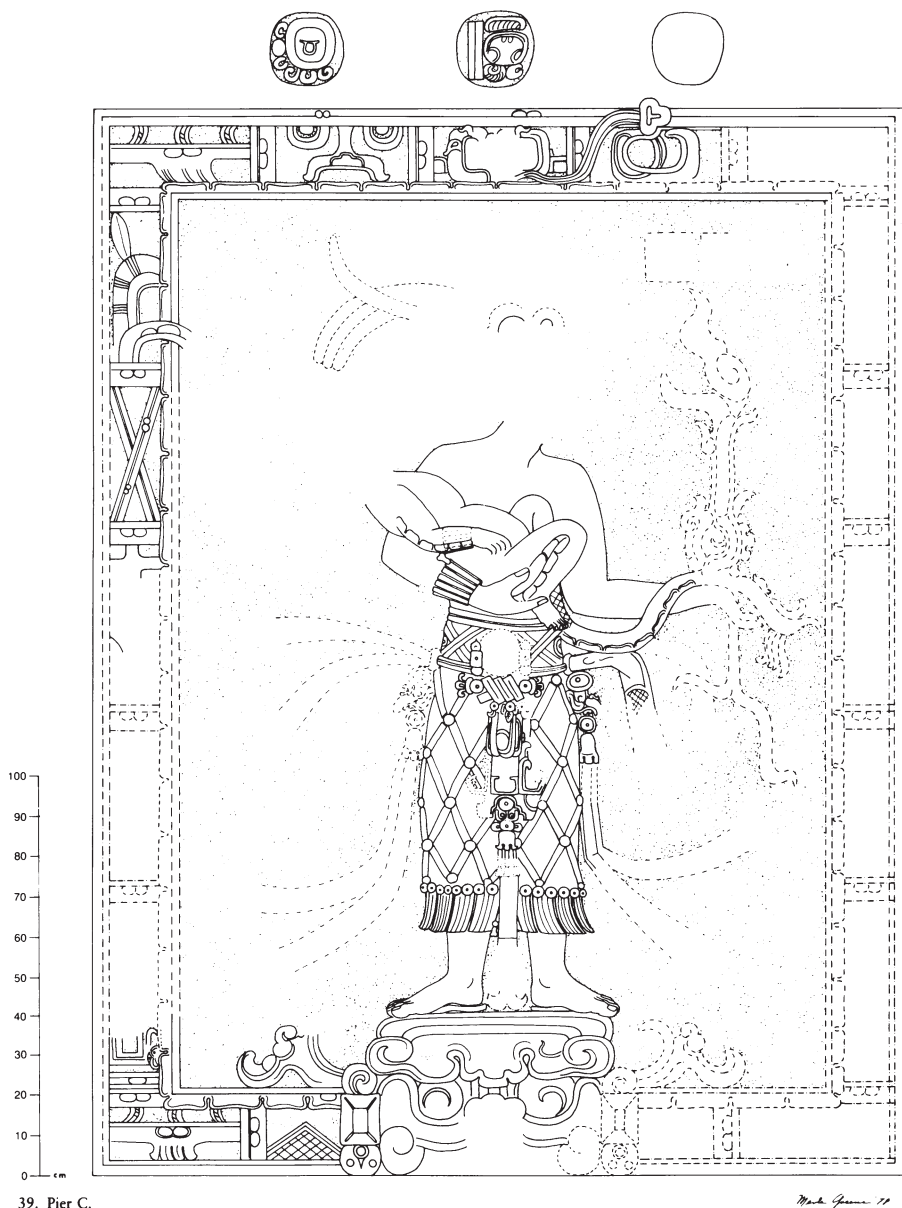


Fig. 2 Temple of the Inscriptions, Palenque, Pier C (after Robertson 1983: fig. 39).

Group inscriptions (1978a). Similarly, David Stuart (1988) showed that in a glyphic text from Dos Pilas (Stela 25), the ruler is said to have “given birth” (T740) to the Paddler Gods through the bloodletting act. We might recall that, in ancient Greek mythology, Zeus gave birth to Athena through his skull. Such male parthenogenic acts impute a nonexistent level of creative ability that greatly enhances the illusion of cosmic powers.

Another form of assuming the guise of women can be seen in the male ruler’s association with the holding of children. This is infrequently shown in Maya art, though it is much more emphatic in Olmec art, as noted below. Men are shown holding children in their arms at Bonampak (Room I mural), at Palenque (fig. 2) on the

Temple of the Inscriptions piers,¹ and occasionally on polychrome ceramics (fig. 5 below).

The Ceremonial Bar

The image of infant holding is relevant to the image of the ruler holding the ceremonial bar (fig. 3), another form of social impersonation.

The ceremonial bar first appears in recognizable form in Lowland Maya art in the Classic Period, the earliest known examples being Stela 29 from Tikal (292 A.D.) and the Leiden Plaque (320 A.D.; fig. 3). Two methods of holding the bar, either horizontally or diagonally, already appear at this time, as do the flexible and stiff bar,



Fig. 3 Leiden Plaque (after Schele and Miller, 1986: pl. 33b).

so it is not clear if one or the other has priority. Many of these early renditions show a flexible bar formed from the body of a serpent, especially in the Early Classic Period. The flexible bar appears on the Leiden Plaque, Calakmul Stelae 9 and 28, and Tulum Stela 1, among

other examples, and is particularly prevalent at Copán, appearing on the earliest stela, Stela 35, as well as on Stelae 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, I, N (north), and P.

The association of the ceremonial bar with serpents seems quite certain. In searching for antecedents to the ceremonial bar in the Guatemala Highlands, where we find many precursors to Lowland Maya art, the best parallel can be found in Abaj Takalik Stela 5, dated by Long Count to 8.4.5.17.11 (Graham, Heizer, and Shook 1978:92 and plate 3). This sculpture is the closest to the Lowland Maya style of any Highland Preclassic sculpture; as can be seen by the date, it is close in time to the earliest Lowland inscriptions. The right-hand figure exhibits the bent arms and “crab-claw” hand position associated with carrying the ceremonial bar, but what he holds is a serpent, which, though lacking detail, is unmistakable.

In Lowland Maya art the flexible bar takes the form of a two-headed serpent with the body bearing serpent markings and/or divided into segments (fig. 3). Polychrome vases show a serpent flowing out of the ends of the rigid ceremonial bar (Robicsek and Hales 1981: vessel 6 and other unpublished examples). The rigid bar sometimes bears sky band markings, an excellent example appearing on Toniná Monument 20 (fig. 4). These data strongly suggest that the ceremonial bar, especially in its beginning “ophidian” stages, was an embodiment of the serpent/sky homophony. This idea seems to be generally accepted by scholars. In more specific terms, Freidel and Schele (1988) suggested that the ceremonial bar drew its inspiration from sky images on Preclassic decorated pyramids (J-scrolls brackets plus serpents). On Stela N from Copán the north side shows a flexible bar with serpent segments and the south side shows a rigid bar. This suggests a substitutional equivalence for the flexible serpent bar and the rigid bar at quite a late date, 9.16.10.0.0.

Now, why would a Maya ruler want to show himself holding the sky? The fact that the sky is held is important to the meaning of the ceremonial bar and distinguishes it from the function of a sky band, which primarily conveys spatial information. The manner in which the bar is held, usually horizontally, lying across both arms, suggests the act of guardianship, reminiscent of the way an infant is held.

The Yucatec Maya make a conceptual distinction between holding a child in the arms, as the ceremonial bar is held, and carrying a child astride the hip. In addition, in Highland Maya languages there are specific words for carrying a child in the arms, notably *chel* in Quiché (Brasseur de Bourbourg 1862:176) and *cheleh tu* in Cakchiquel (Saenz de Santa Maria 1940:85). In Yucatán the distinction is marked by the Hetzmek ceremony, celebrated when a child is three or four months of age. The ceremony marks a rite of passage for the child, who is carried astride the hip and at the same time ritually passes out of a stage of infantile helplessness. As de-

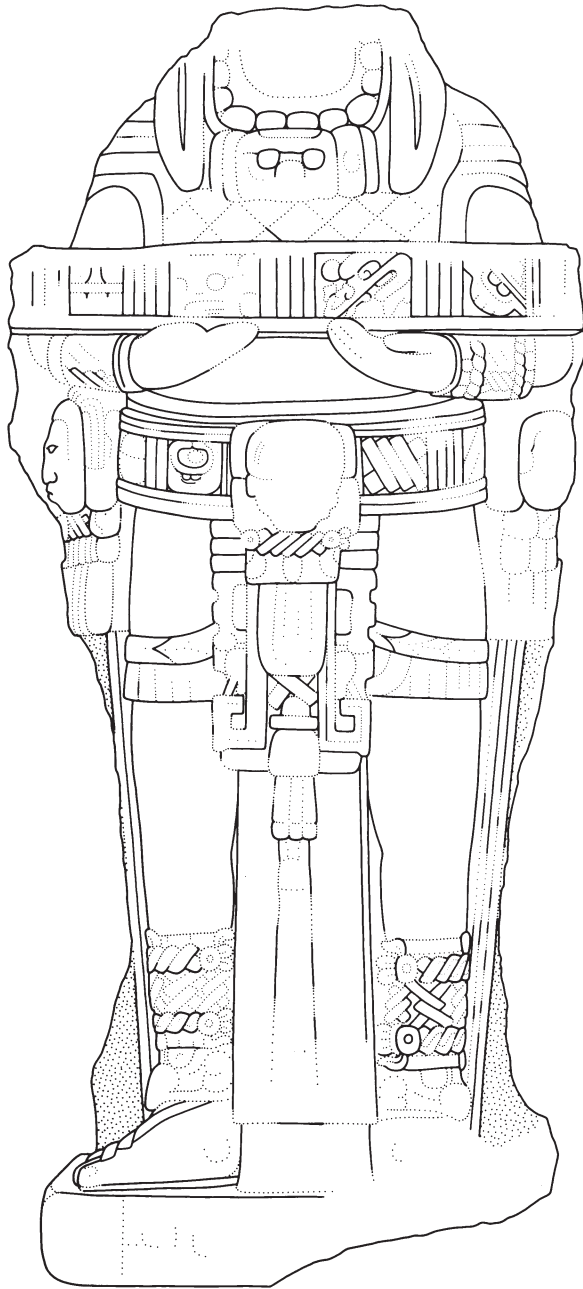


Fig. 4 Toniná Monument 20 (after Mathews 1983a: fig. 6:54; courtesy Peabody Museum, Harvard University).

scribed by Redfield and Villa Rojas (1962:189), “The ritual is supposed to awaken the physical and intellectual faculties of the child and make him useful for the future.” Objects are placed on a table that will be instrumental in the future life of the child; they vary according to the child’s sex. Common objects are a book, pencil, hatchet, food, and money. They are introduced into the child’s hand by the godparents, who circumambulate around the room holding the child astride the hip.

Prior to the Hetzmek the child is carried in both arms by the parents. Presumably this manner of support is associated with a “pre-Hetzmek” stage of infantile helplessness. I propose that this association was made by the Maya in carrying the ceremonial bar. The structure of my argument is straightforward. The ruler holds the “sky” in the form of a ceremonial bar in the pre-Hetzmek fashion. He is being portrayed as assuming supreme parental responsibility, essentially for the celestial cosmic order. Creating such a persona for the ruler—guardian of the cosmic order—was a priority of Proto- and Early Classic iconography. Freidel and Schele (1988) showed this to be true in the carved stucco masks of Cerros. Structure 5C-2nd would position the ruler at the top of a pyramid that meshes a symbolic reference to the motion of Venus and the sun with the actual movement of the sun across the heavens.

In the Early Classic we commonly see GI of the Palenque Triad or the ruler dressed as GI, carrying the Quadripartite Monster headdress. Lounsbury (1985) convincingly argued GI’s association with Venus, and Schele (1977) showed that the Quadripartite Monster on one level can be identified with the cyclical sun. The GI/Quadripartite Monster headdress theme is an astronomical paradigm for kingship that portrays the ruler’s responsibility as Venus for the safe cyclical passage of the sun. Holding the ceremonial bar in the pre-Hetzmek fashion essentially expresses the same idea, which might be translated into modern vernacular as “he’s got the whole world/sky in his hands.” We might note, too, that carrying the ceremonial bar is often coupled with GI impersonation. In a sense, carrying the ceremonial bar or sky is a redundant expression of the ruler as GI carrying the Quadripartite Monster.

If we look at the Leiden Plaque (fig. 3), one of the earliest representations of the ceremonial bar, we see God K and the Sun God popping out of the serpents’ maws. These two gods (in the case of the Sun God this may take a variety of substitutional forms, such as the Jaguar God of the underworld) are most commonly associated with the ceremonial bar. It is noteworthy that these two gods are also associated with infants and may take an infantile form.

God K appears as a supine infant glyphically in the texts of the Palenque Cross Group and Palace Tablet. On the piers of the Temple of the Inscriptions from Palenque, Pacal holds the child Chan Bahlum, who is impersonating God K, in the manner of a helpless child (fig. 2). Significantly, one of the most common appearances of GIII, the jaguar sun (Lounsbury 1985) is as a supine helpless infant about to be sacrificed (Robicsek and Hales 1981: vessels 19–26). The figure on El Zapote Stela 5 (9.0.0.0.0) holds a supine jaguar contained within a square cartouche, prefixed by the number twelve and the Mexican year sign. Xultun Stela 10 shows a ruler holding both God K and a jaguar.

I think part of the meaning of these gods associated

with the ceremonial bar, especially considering that they do take an infantile form on many occasions, is again the notion of guardianship. This idea also accords with the fact that GI is the holder of the bar, that is, the guardian of the other two gods. If we consider a correspondence with the Palenque Triad, GI is the oldest brother, and GI is also the name of the Triad's father (Lounsbury 1985). The idea of showing infantile gods recalls Nancy Farriss's (1984:286) statement that "Mesoamerican gods were like extremely powerful infants . . . likely to go into tantrums and eventually expire if neglected."

The supine infant held in the arms, which I claim is a prototype for the ceremonial bar, is a highly charged image in Maya art. It has multiple levels of meaning, one of the most important being sacrifice. The supine infant in Maya art was so strongly associated with the notion of sacrifice that this posture essentially became emblematic of sacrifice.² We know from early colonial sources that the Maya were especially fond of sacrificing children, so much so that they would kidnap them from villages for that purpose (Roys 1943[1972:81]). Archaeologically, infant sacrifices are not uncommon in the Maya area. Petroglyph Cave in Belize revealed now a dried up pool of water where six young children had presumably been submerged (Dorie Reents, personal communication, 1980). Maya art is rife with images of infant sacrificial victims, always supine and often lying in bowls.

This strong association between the supine child and sacrifice is further evidence of the highly charged ritual meaning with which this pose is imbued. We see this again in a painted polychrome cylinder that shows a supine helpless child being held by a Death God (fig. 5). The context is clearly one of sacrifice and again we have a male figure holding the child in this manner. Though the two ideas of holding a helpless child and sacrifice may appear to contradict one another, they really do

not. For both sacrifice and an infant embody the idea of fertility and ritual duty. Furthermore, as discussed earlier, it is through the sacrificial complex that the female domain of infant holding becomes transferred to the male.

It might be expected that the Maya would portray women holding infants in their arms, for is this not part of their special role in child-bearing and rearing? Indeed, Wisdom (1940: note 40) reported that among the Chortí only the women would carry the saints in ritual processions "since it is said only women carry infants both before and after birth."

Yet the only instance of which I am aware of a woman holding a supine infant in Maya art is a Jaina figurine that portrays an elderly woman (fig. 6). I have already stated that holding the supine infant had special ritual, sacrificial status, and the fact that this one example of a woman in Maya art is an aged "grandmother" confirms this observation.

There is abundant evidence from the colonial and modern Maya that old women held any ritual status that could be compared with men. Landa mentioned repeatedly that only old women were allowed to enter the temples and participate in ceremonies (Tozzer 1941: 143, 145, 147, 152). Both Landa and Lopez Medel stated that old women baptized the young girls, while the priest baptized the boys (Tozzer 1941:103, 226). In the celebration in the month of Mol, an old woman called Ix Mol administered blows to the young girls (Tozzer 1941:159).

Thompson (1930:62) reported that among the Kekchi old women are major participants in the ceremony called *tzen huitz*, "the feeding of Huitz." They are the only women to take a role in the ritual portion of this ceremony. Vogt (1969:266) stated that elderly women past menopause, *hchik pometik*, serve in a special ritual capacity to the mayordomos of Zinacantan.



Fig. 5 Rollout of Polychrome Vase (photograph copyright Justin Kerr 1985).



Fig. 6 Jaina figurine (courtesy Heye Collection, Museum of the American Indian, New York).

By restricting the holding of infants to males (or old women), by the association of supine infants with sacrifice, and by the holding of the ceremonial bar, female fertility associated with holding infants was absorbed into the masculine office of kingship.

Fertility and Maya Kingship

A superb rationale for the importance of fertility among male elites was offered by Maurice Bloch (1977). The gist of his argument might be summarized as follows: in order to receive compliance from those subjected to authority, they must believe that they are receiving compensation for their obedience and material support of the ruling hierarchy. This compensation often takes an intangible form, channeled through the belief system, of the ruler's blessing of fertility. These mystical powers appear to be god-given and place the ruler at the center of the natural reproduction cycle.

Bloch (1977:330) also raised the point that powers based on associations with cosmic forces often "link up with the process of nature and its beneficial cyclical aspects, fertility and reproduction." Cyclicity in nature is a redundant, self-manifesting statement of "truth."

Thus, rulers who align themselves through ritual and symbol with natural cycles seek corroboration of their (in fact nonexistent) cosmic powers through truth that is perceived through regular redundant acts and not through logical argument. Repetition, seen in codified ritual or natural phenomena, becomes a corroboration of sacred propositions.

Cyclicity and redundancy were central to the strategy of creating the illusion of cosmic power among the Classic Maya. The astronomical, calendrical, and agricultural cycles became the symbolic and ritual vehicles of kingship. Fertility is at the heart of the agricultural and reproductive cycle, and the Maya were clearly trying to confer an exalted fertility status on the male ruler. Impersonation of the female procreative role, to the exclusion of female portrayals of this theme, was one means of achieving this end.

Social Impersonation in Olmec Art

Many of the patterns outlined here are applicable to the Olmec. An important comparison comes in the theme of the adult male holding a supine infant (e.g., La Venta Altars 2, 3, and 5, San Lorenzo Monuments 12 and 20, and the Las Limas Figure). Joralemon (1981: note 5) brought up the possibility that the infant in Olmec art is related to the Olmec ceremonial bar.³ Similarities between the Olmec and Maya versions of these themes are: (1) this is the exclusive prerogative of males, (2) with exceptions only being found in old women (Joralemon 1981), (3) the supine infant posture had special ceremonial significance, and (4) the supine infant may also be associated with sacrifice for the Olmec. While most of the infants are not well preserved, that of the Las Limas Figure has a limp, lifeless look.

Chalcatzingo Relief 1 (fig. 7) also recalls these ideas. The main figure holds a symbolically marked box much the same size as a child, as noted by Joralemon (1981: note 5). The importance of rain and agricultural fertility in this scene is quite pronounced. The symbolic markings on the bundle and throne are similar to the cloud-like forms that emerge from the symbolic cave in which the figure sits. The figure, be it male, as I believe, or female as others believe (Joralemon 1981: note 5), could be holding a symbolic representation of rain or weather. This idea ties into the fact that the supine baby god, Joralemon's God IV (1971), has been interpreted as a Rain God (Coe 1973a). For the Olmec, holding the baby God IV associated the ruler with the fertility cycle, an idea also espoused by Grove (1973:134). To speculate along the lines of what we have seen for the Maya, the fertility connections with this image are amplified by the idea of holding a supine baby, a traditionally female activity. The Olmec may have participated in a game of female impersonation, not unlike the Maya, and may even have set the precedent for it. The Olmec, like the ancient Maya, lack a significant artistic tradition of showing women as the bearers of the gift of fertility. In-

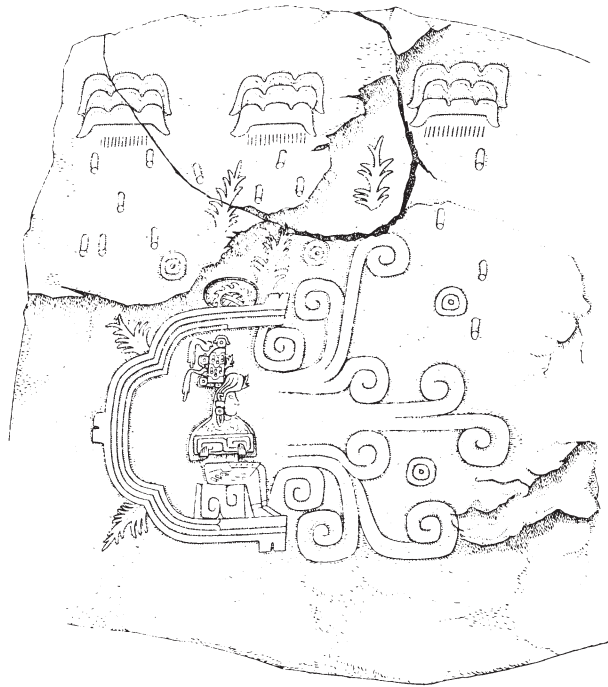


Fig. 7 Chalcatzingo Relief 1 (after Coe 1965a: fig. 10).

deed, especially in elite art, this role was reserved for the male ruler. Thus, we see the Olmec and Maya sharing in this important strategy of kingship.

Net Skirt-Xoc Fish-Shell Costume as a Male Costume

One other point to raise concerns the netted costume with “xoc fish” and shell around the waist, often accompanied by the Quadripartite Monster headdress (fig. 8). This costume is generally referred to as a female costume (J. Miller 1974; Marcus 1976:159), yet it is worn by men, some clear examples being Caracol Stelae 1 and 3, the Time Museum Stela, and Chan Bahlum on the Tablet of the Foliated Cross. Schele (1978a) suggested that these instances may reflect a kind of female impersonation related to the nurturing aspect of blood sacrifice.

Yet I think the idea can be advanced that women wearing this costume are impersonating a male image of power, specifically a view of kingship that iconographically condenses the ruler’s connection to the cyclical forces of nature. If specific meanings are sought in an iconographical analysis of the costume, the contexts in which they are found feature male protagonists.

The most common depiction of the “xoc fish” and shell motif is on *male* dancing figures, especially seen in Holmul-style pottery and on architectural sculpture from Copán. Karl Taube (1985:178) identified the dancing figure as a representation of the “tonsured young lord” who is a Maize God. Thus, the “xoc fish” and shell motif seems to have some connection to a maize complex and a male Maize God. It is not found in any specific way associated with women.

A second important iconographic component usually accompanying this costume consists of the Quadripartite Monster headdress. Iconographically the wearing of the Quadripartite Headdress is associated with the Maya deity GI, whom Lounsbury (1985) has identified as Venus, Hunahpu. The connection of GI to the Quadripartite Monster complex is especially evident in the Early Classic period, on cache vessels, on Stela I from Copán, on Stela 2 from Tikal, and on the superb jade head from Río Azul. This complex can be interpreted in essence as Venus carrying the cyclical sun and a sacrificial bowl. It is a theme of responsibility for the cosmos as expressed through an astronomical paradigm. Both Venus and the ruler who portrays him take responsibility for the astronomical cycle. There is no evidence for any special relevance of these ideas to women.

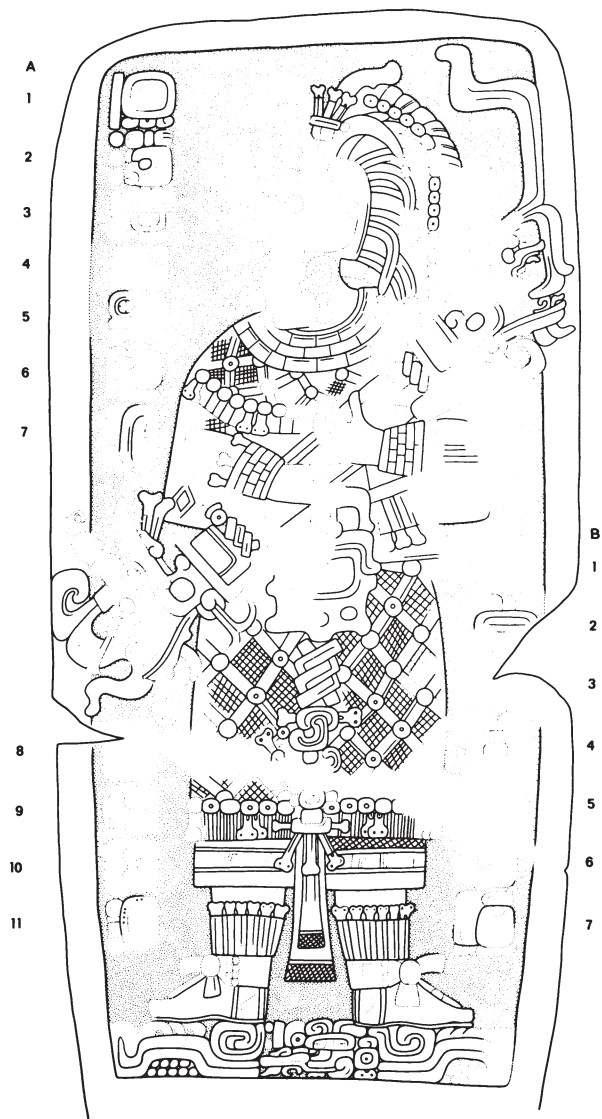


Fig. 8 Naranjo Stela 31 (after Graham 1978:II, pt. 2, fig. 2:83; courtesy Peabody Museum, Harvard University).

Nor are the components of the so-called female costume found in general thematic contexts relating to women. In fact, the opposite seems to be true. Women shown wearing this costume are more often associated with male activities, and they are always women of great importance, often featured in a cameo stela portrait.

Women who wear the complete costume seem to have had enormous power; they appear to be among the most powerful women we have yet identified from the Classic period. We might start with Lady Zac-Kuk of Palenque. Evidence of her enormous power is seen in the inscriptions of Palenque, where she is noted as having acceded to the throne in 9.8.19.7.18, and celebrated katun endings 9.9.0.0.0 and 9.10.0.0.0 (Mathews and Robertson 1985:16). In her portrait on the Oval Palace Tablet she wears, in addition to the net skirt, “xoc fish,” and shell costume, a headdress adorned with Jester Gods, a device usually identifying lordly status (Freidel and Schele 1988). In awarding the royal crown to her son, she is clearly fulfilling a role usually assumed by men.

Another important series of female figures wearing this costume comes from Naranjo, Stelae 24, 29, and 31 (fig. 8). The protagonist can be identified as a woman, Lady Six Sky, who carries the Tikal/Petexbatun emblem glyph. She was the mother of an important Naranjo ruler, Smoking Squirrel (Marcus 1976:60; Closs 1985), and seems to have been especially powerful during the early years of his reign. Her own parentage is given on Stela 24 (E7–D13) and she celebrates the lahuntun 9.13.10.0.0 (St. 24, D15–E18) as well as other royal events. The unusually large quantity of pictorial and epigraphic information about Lady Six Sky suggests that she was a woman of exceptional power. Closs (1985:72) believed that on Stela 31 Lady Six Sky is shown acceding to the throne.

On Stelae 24 and 29 she is shown standing on a bound captive, a type of pose generally reserved for portraits of male rulers going back to the Leiden Plaque. It is a militaristic theme that does not seem to be fostering a female context. In fact, many examples of women wearing this costume have a decidedly military flavor.

We see this in the Cleveland Stela where the woman holds a shield (J. Miller 1974: fig. 2). Stela 28 from Calakmul shows a woman standing on a captive and holding a ceremonial bar (Marcus 1976: fig. 5.5).

There is abundant evidence that women shown wearing the net jade skirt, “xoc fish,” and shell costume are carrying out tasks typically associated with men and that they are women of enormous prestige, whose power and status are exceptional. If the costume had a general connection to women, it might be found with secondary women and with specifically female themes.

Ironically, one of the primary themes associated with women wearing this costume is holding the ceremonial bar (fig. 8). Here I believe we witness the complexities of the Maya tradition of social impersonation. We can observe a woman impersonating a male image of power by costume who is impersonating a woman by the underlying meaning of holding the ceremonial bar, that is, fertility and duty associated with holding a helpless infant.

Notes

1. Robertson (1983:35) identified the figure on Pier C, wearing a long beaded net skirt, as Lady Zac-Kuk, Pacal's mother, though she admitted, “Long beaded skirts are known to have been worn by both men and women [at Palenque].” A case in point is the series of crypt figures from Pacal's tomb. While most of the figures wear a short skirt, one figure, clearly male, wears a long beaded skirt and cape. A net skirt and cape is also worn by the male protagonist on the side of Altar T from Copán. This costume, then, is not necessarily an identifying feature of women. Robertson argued for a female identification based on the fact that the psychoduct that leads into the crypt begins at Pier C. This she interpreted as an umbilical cord: ergo, the figure is female. Since there is no clear sexual dimorphism or glyphic evidence to make a positive identification of the figure, I feel judgment must be reserved. A male identification could just as easily be suggested by the fact that the figure stands above a stingray spine, an emblem of the male penis perforation rite. According to my view, it would be unlikely to see a woman holding a child in this manner in Maya art—though if the Pier C figure were Lady Zac-Kuk, her extraordinary power might allow such a transgression.

2. This idea is in accord with those of Mary Miller (1985) in her analysis of the Mesoamerican Chacmool.

3. See also Henderson (1979:77).