Evidence for linguistic conservatism in the hieroglyphic script of the Central Petén

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ABSTRACT

Recent research has shown that the Classic Period Maya script (AD 250-950) represents a single prestige language, Classic Ch'olti'an. It was used across the Maya Lowlands, yet local languages and dialects «percolated» into Mayan writing within particular areas. Loan words, grammatical elements, and other linguistic markers indicate that specific areas outside of the central Maya Lowlands (Central Petén, Guatemala) may have been inhabited by Yukatec, Chontal, Tzotzil, and possibly Ch'ol Maya speakers. In contrast, linguistic patterns specific to the central lowlands have not been so closely studied. This problem is intimately tied to the question of how and why the Classic script was grammatically homogeneous over such a wide area.

Two different case studies of verb morphology are presented that suggest (1) writing in the Central Petén was more conservative than other regions of the lowlands; and (2) the central lowlands may have been the homeland of the language known as Classic Ch'olti'an. Trends of linguistic conservatism in the central lowlands may be related to a community identification with the origins of Lowland Maya statehood and religion, and with the common language spoken there. The use of Classic Maya script resembles other cases of linguistic conservatism in Old World sacred languages and texts. The likelihood that aspects of Maya writing were «canonized» or formalized at major central lowlands site such as Tikal is briefly discussed.

Key words: Mayan Languages, historical linguistics, sacred language, scribes, codices, linguistic conservatism, Maya hieroglyphs, Central Maya Lowlands.

RESUMEN

Recientes investigaciones han demostrado que la escritura del periodo Clásico maya (250-950 d.C.) representa un único lenguaje de prestigio, el Ch'olti' Clásico. Esta lengua fue utilizada a lo largo de la Tierras Bajas Mayas, aunque lenguas locales y dialectos «se infiltraron» dentro de la escritura maya en áreas particulares. Palabras prestadas, elementos gramaticales, y otros marcadores lingüísticos indican que áreas específicas más allá de las Tierras Bajas Centrales (Petén Central, Guatemala) pudieron ser habitadas por mayas hablantes de yucateco, chontal, tzoltzil y posiblemente ch'ol. En contraste, los patrones lingüísticos específicos de las las Tierras Bajas Centrales no han sido tan intensamente estudiados. Este problema está intimamente ligado a la cuestión de cómo y porqué la escritura clásica fue gramaticalmente homogénea a lo largo de un área tan amplia.

Dos casos diferentes de morfología verbal que se presentan sugieren que, en primer lugar, la escritura de Petén Central fue más conservadora que la de otras regiones de las Tierras Bajas y, en segundo lugar, que las Tierras Bajas Centrales pueden haber sido el hogar de la lengua conocida como Ch'olti' Clásico. La tendencia lingüística conservadora de las Tierras Bajas Centrales puede estar relacionada con una identificación comunitaria de los orígenes del estado y la religión de las Tierras Bajas, y con el lenguaje común hablado allí. El uso de la escritura clásica maya recuerda a otros casos de conservadurismo lingüístico en lenguas y textos sagrados del Viejo Mundo. Por último, se discute brevemente el hecho de que ciertos aspectos de la escritura maya fueran «canonizados» o formalizados en un sitio tan importante de las Tierras Bajas Centrales como es Tikal.

Palabras clave: Lenguas mayas, lingüística histórica, lenguaje sacrado, escribas, códices, conservadurismo lingüístico, jeriglíficos mayas, Tierras Bajas Mayas.

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INTRODUCTION

Recent research shows that although the Classic Period (AD 250-950) Maya script represents a prestige language used across the lowlands (Houston *et al.* 2000), local languages and dialects «percolated» into Mayan writing. Loan words, grammatical elements, and other indicators of outside influence on the script have been interpreted as evidence for diglossia; in this case, a common language and a sacred language spoken within the same community (Houston *et al.* 2000; Hruby and Robertson 2001; Hruby and Child n.d.; Lacadena and Wichmann 2000, 2002). Research on these external linguistic elements shows that specific areas of the Maya Lowlands may have been inhabited by Yukatec, Chontal, Tzotzil, and possibly Ch'ol Maya speakers (Lacadena and Wichmann 2000, 2002; Hruby and Child n.d.). In contrast, language characteristics of the central lowlands have not been systematically studied. This problem is intimately tied to the question of why the Classic script was grammatically homogeneous over such a wide area in the first place.

In this paper I shall present two different case studies of Classic period verbal morphology that suggest (1) writing in the Central Petén was more conservative than other regions of the lowlands; and (2) the central lowlands may have been the homeland of the language known as «Classic Ch'olti'an». Trends of linguistic conservatism in the central lowlands may be related to a community identification with the origins of Maya statehood and religion, and possibly with the common language spoken there: Classic Ch'olti'an (Houston *et al.* 2000).

I will begin by reviewing recent epigraphic studies before turning to a brief discussion about conservatism in sacred languages and texts. I will then use cross-cultural examples to explore some of the ways that Classic Ch'olti'an may have been a sacred language in its own right, and how it became formalized, and possibly canonized as sacred text.

EPIGRAPHIC RESEARCH

A current debate in Maya epigraphy and historical linguistics concerns the language of Classic Maya writing. Houston, Robertson and Stuart (2000) have pro-posed the «Ch'olti' hypothesis», which states that an ancestral version of Ch'olti', or Classic Mayan, was the prestige language recorded in Classic inscriptions. This language was used throughout the lowlands by the elite and royalty, partly a status marker related to Maya religion and culture, but in some areas as a local vernacular[2] (Houston *et al.* 2000).

Recent distributional analyses, based on the Ch'olti' hypothesis, examine how Classic Ch'olti'an changed through time by tracking specific glyphic elements in the hieroglyphic script. These studies focus on the intransitive positional verbs (Hruby 1996; Hruby and Child n.d.), and the completion verb *tzutz* (Hruby and Robertson 2001). External factors stimulated changes in the intransitive positional morphology; while internal factors, following general patterns of language change associated with -*Vy* «change-of-state» verbs, affected the distribution patterns of the verb *tzutz* (Houston *et al.* 2000; Hruby and Robertson 2001).

The intransitive positional verbs are of prime interest because two distinct affixes, -*wan* and -*laj* (Figure 1), were employed interchangeably in Classic period inscriptions. According to historical linguistic, epigraphic, and archaeological evidence (Hruby and Child n.d.; Robertson personal communication), -*laj* had its origins in Common Mayan, while -*wan* was introduced from Classical Chontal. Furthermore, -*wan* first occurs in the inscriptions of the northwestern lowlands; a region composed primarily of Chontal-speakers at the time of the Conquest (Figure 2).

The adoption of -*wan* throughout the lowlands coincides with evidence of increased warfare in the western lowlands as documented in hieroglyphic texts (Hruby and Child n.d.), and the trade of Chablekal fine grey ceramic which was produced in the
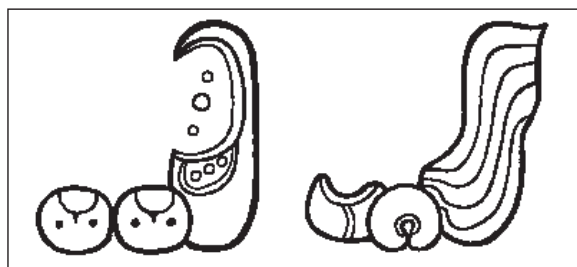

Figure 1.   Most common positional affixes -*laj* and -*wan.*

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[2] Despite some scholar's heavy criticism of the conclusions and methods presented in the Ch'olti' hypothesis (Fought 2000, Brody 2000, Hofling 2000, Taladoire 2000), opposing views have not produced substantive evidence to the contrary, nor a productive alternate proposal. Furthermore, Robertson's historical method and model of language change, has been verified by decipherment and distributional analyses of the hieroglyphs themselves (Hruby and Child n.d.; Hruby and Robertson 2001). The following study builds distributional evidence further supports those theories.
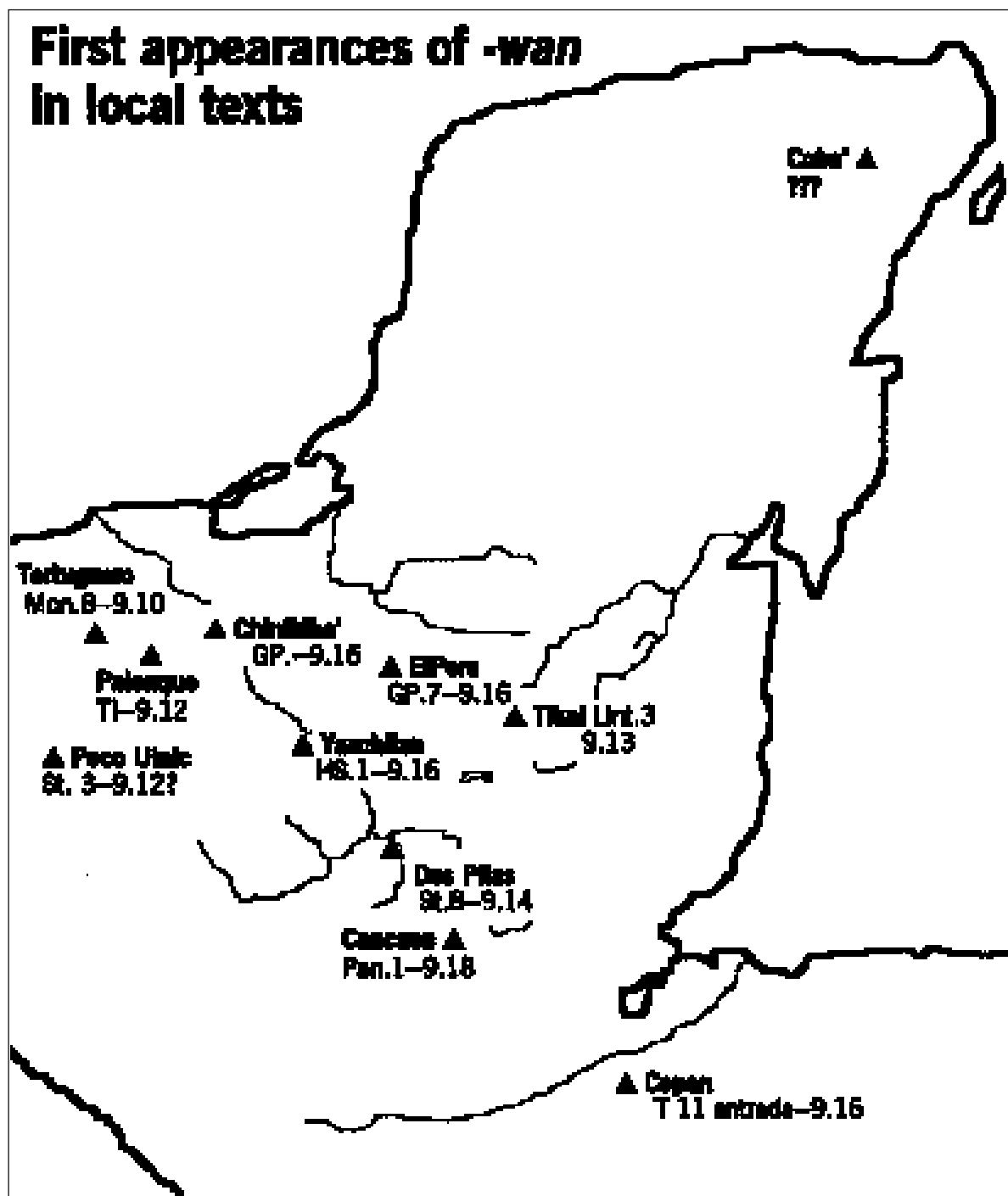
Figure 2.   First appearances of *-wan* in local texts.

Chontal-speaking region (Foias and Bishop 1994, 1997) at about 650-700 AD. In other words, a change in grammar was paralleled by evidence for contact with Chontal speakers, both in war and trade. The social mechanisms stimulating this change have not been defined, but circumstantial evidence supporting this idea include inter-site alliances based on marriage, and common enemies (Hruby and Child n.d.). Conversely, the more archaic -*laj* was most consistently used in the central lowlands with only a few exceptions (see below).

The distributional analysis of *tzutz* is important for examining variability in verbal morphology, since it appears with a unique combination of verbal affixes. The most common affixes attached to *tzutz* were the medio-passive -*Vy*, active transitive -*Vw*, and also the passive marker -*h*-. . .-*aj* (Figure 3). Other -*Vy* change-of-state verbs rarely feature the active transitive -*Vw* ending (Hruby and Robertson 2001). Thus, *tzutz* should be considered an archaism in the script that used -*Vy* as a passive marker, not as a medio-passive marker. After 9.9 *tzutz* began to be inflected with the normal passive,-*h*-. . .-*aj,* at most lowland sites. This pattern of language change can be seen in Table 1 where the active transitive form is slowly phased out of the script. After 9.8.0.0.0 *tzutz* is treated as a normal -*Vy* change-of-state verb, with a derived intransitive version written as *tzu-h-tz- aj.* The trend shown in this chart suggests that the glyphs often record evidence of language change in process. *Tzutz* follows the normal rules of historical parameters laid out by Robertson (1992) for Mayan languages, but at a slightly different pace than most other verbs. *Tzutz* can be characterized as an archaism in the script, which eventually fell in line with more typical morphological patterns. The central lowland polities, however, do not seem to prefer the more innovative passive construction of the verb.
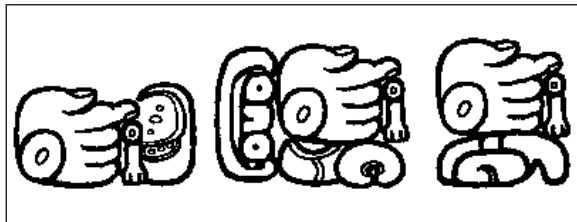

Figure 3. The three most common affixes associated with the verb root *tzutz*; the intransitive transitive (passive) *tzu-h-tz-aj*, the active transitive *u-tzutz-uw*; and the medio-passive *tzutz- uy*.

Table 1. Distribution of *Tzutz* Though Time*

Dates in 20 year periods or *k'atuns*	*u-tzutz-uw* Active	*tzutz-uy* Middle	*tzutz-aj* Passive
8.17	●[1]		
8.18		●[2]	
8.19			
9.0	●[3]	●[4]	
9.1		●[5]	
9.2	●[6]		
9.3	●[7] ●[8]	●[9] ●[10]	
9.4			
9.5			
9.6			●?[11]
9.7		●[12]	
9.8	●[13]		
9.9			●[14]
9.10		●[15]	
9.11			●[16]
9.12	●[17]	●[18]	●[19] ●[20]
9.13	●?[21]	●[22]	●[23] ●[24] ●[25]
9.14	●[26]	●[27] ●[28] ●[29]	
9.15		●[30]	●[31] ●[32] ●[33]
9.16		●[34] ●[35]	●[36] ●[37]
9.17			●[38]
9.18		●[39]	●[40] ●[41]

● *Designations for the monuments featured in Table 1:* 1/ Tikal St. 2/ Uaxactun St. 4. 3/ Tikal St. 31. 4/ Tikal St. 31. 5/ Tikal St. 1. 6/ Tikal St. 3. 7/ Uaxactun St. 22. 8/ Uaxactun St. 3. 9/ Tikal St. 8. 10/ Tikal St. 7. 11/ Caracol St. 14. 12/ Copán St. I. 13/ Naranjo Alt. 1. 14/ Copán St. P. 15/ Xultun St. 5. 16/ Copán St. 2. 17/ Pusil Ha St. D. 18/ Palenque Temple of the Cross. 19/ Copán St. 12. 20/ Palenque Temple of the Cross. 21/ Palenque Temple of the Sun, Alfarda. 22/ Copán St. J. 23/ Aguateca St. 5. 24/ Copán St. J. 25/ Lacanha St. 1. 26/ Piedras Negras St. 3. 27/ Piedras Negras St. 3. 28/ Naranjo St. 23. 29/ Tikal St. 16. 30/ Unprovenanced Monument. 31/ Copán St. A. 32/ Copán St. 4. 33/ Copán St. B. 34/ Piedras Negras Alt. 2. 35/ Piedras Negras St. 23. 36/ Piedras Negras Lintel 3. 37/ Cayo Alt. 1 38/Pomana Pan. 1. 37/ Tikal St. 19. 40/ Pomana Panel Fragment. 41/ Copán Altar G (agentive title w/ passive marker).

(* This table does not record every appearance of *tzutz*. It is a distribution of the word *tzutz* with active, middle, and passive constructions; regardless of how many times a given version of tzutz appears on the monument. For example, Tikal St. 31 has three instances of *u-tzutz-wa* but it is counted as one. Entirely questionable glyphs were excluded.)

A RE-EVALUATION OF THE DATA

The focus of these initial studies is language change, and as a result, emphasis is put on what, when, and where changes materialized in ancient Maya writing. The question remains, where do these changes *not* occur? In contrast to the innovation found in the western and eastern lowlands, the central lowlands appear to be relatively unaffected by newer grammatical forms. Thus, *chum-laj, u-tzutz-uw*, and *tzutz-uy* represent archaic forms more closely identified with the original prestige language, and *tzu-h-tz-aj* and *chum-wan* would reflect more recently introduced linguistic forms.

In the tables (2 and 3) presented here, I have compiled all available examples of the above verbs, including repeated verbal clauses from the same monument. Although the initial studies were interested only in *where* and *when* a particular form existed, the present research has the secondary goal of determining the *extent* that a verb was used. Consequently, each phrase is counted because it represents an opportunity by the scribe, or commissioner, to use either the archaic affix, or a more recent or local affix. It should be noted, however, that including all of the examples from a given monument does not affect the overall pattern of usage.

As illustrated in Table 1, ten examples of *tzutz* from five different texts are in the original active transitive voice. These glyphs represent the total of the Early Classic examples (8.19-9.8). Other occurrences of the active transitive come from the western lowlands, but there are only two examples from Piedras Negras and Palenque (9.13-9.14). The reason for this relatively brief resurfacing of the active transitive *tzutz* is unknown, but we see a reemphasis on archaic morphology associated with the intransitive positionals at this same time, during the reign of *K'inich Kan Balam* at Palenque, for example.

The *-Vy* is by far the most widespread affix known for *tzutz*, and can be found at all times in most areas, because *-Vy* is used as the passive marker during Early Classic, and as the medio- passive during the Late Classic. In the central lowlands *-Vy* is present throughout the history of the script, but the active transitive ends in usage at the end of the Early Classic period. I interpret this as a conservative tradition because the passive *-h-. . .-aj* is never used. Table 2 reveals that none of the 22 examples of *tzu-h-tz-aj* (9.6-9.18) occur in central lowlands. Even though the active transitive falls out of use, the passive marker, featured so

commonly in the both western and the eastern texts, is not represented.

The distribution of intransitive positional affixes is similar to *tzutz*, because the older affix dominates the central lowlands during the Early and Late Classic periods (Table 3). The earliest intransitive positionals from the central and western lowlands take the *-laj* affix, (9.5-9.8), suggesting that its use was a Pan-lowland phenomena, and that *-laj* is indeed the more ancient intransitive positional affix. Alternately, *-wan* is introduced in the Chontal region at Tortuguero and Palenque (9.10), and later used to an exceptional degree in the eastern lowlands at Copán (Figure 2). In the central lowlands, however, *-wan* was used infrequently. Only four out of a total of 43 examples of *-wan* were found in the central region. It has been argued that the brief usage of the Chontal affix at Tikal may have been related to alliances with Palenque during k'atuns 9.11-9.14 (Hruby and Child n.d.). Nevertheless, *-laj* was by far the most common intransitive positional used in the central lowlands.

ANCIENT WRITING, SACRED LANGUAGE, AND RELIGION

Looking at changes or deviations from the norm in Classic Maya script opens up questions of how and why was it homogenous in the first place. Houston, Robertson and Stuart (2000: 338) raise some relevant questions, such as «why the special quality and prestigious persistence of an ancestral form of Ch'olti'?». They speculate that Classic Ch'olti'an may have been the language of Preclassic Tikal or Calakmul, cities of abiding stature (Martin and Grube 1995), or of the Mirador Basin at an earlier time when it hosted the first regionally monumental florescence of Lowland Maya civilization». Since these speculations appear to be true, then it is necessary to ask what questions about the social mechanism that spread the sacred language and sacred writing over a multi-ethnic landscape. In many parts of the world, this kind of cultural transmission is accompanied by a formal body of knowledge or canonized text.

Kings and other royal personages wrote sacred narratives which «worked to explain the patterning of natural events, but could establish charters for human, usually royal, behavior» (Houston and Stuart 1996: 292). These texts, partially attested on monumental inscriptions, reveal local elite religious traditions and relationships with local deities. Local tradi-

Table 2. Distribution of *Tzutz* verbal affixes

Date	Affix	Site	Area	Monument/text	Date	Affix	Site	Area	Monument/text
817	wa	TIK	C	St. 39	917	yi	QRA	E	Mon. 1
900	wa	TIK	C	St. 31	917	yi	QRA	E	Mon. 7
900	wa	TIK	C	St. 31	912	aj	PAL	W	T. Cross
900	wa	TIK	C	St. 31	913	aj	LAC	W	St. 1
902	wa	TIK	C	St. 3	913	aj	AGT	W	St. 5
903	wa	UAX	C	St. 3	914	aj	PNG	W	St. 8
908	wa	UAX	C	St. 22	914	aj	BON	W	UP Col.
908	wa	UAX	C	St. 22	915	aj	ADP	W	St. 2
908	wa	NAR	C	Alt. 1	915	aj	PNG	W	St. 7
818	yi	UAX	C	St. 4	915	aj	ADP	W	St. 2
819	yi	PRU	C	St. 15	915	aj	DPL	W	HS. 1, #3
900	yi	TIK	C	St. 31	915	aj	DPL	W	St. 5
900	yi	TIK	C	St. 31	916	aj	CAY	W	Alt. 1
901	yi	TIK	C	St. 1	917	aj	POM	W	Pan. 1
903	yi	TIK	C	St. 8	917	aj	PNG	W	Lint. 3
903	yi	TIK	C	St. 7	917	aj	POM	W	Pan. 1
910	yi	XUL	C	St. 5	917	aj	YAM	W	Lint. ?
914	yi	NAR	C	St. 23	918	aj	POM	W	Pan. Frag.
914	yi	TIK	C	St. 16	913	wa	PAL	W	T. Sun
914	yi	NAR	C	St. 30	914	wa	PNG	W	St. 3
915	yi	PRU	C	Alt. Of St. 38	912	wa?	PAL	W	T. Inscr.
915	yi	CAL	C	St. 8	912	wa?	PNG	W	St. 37
918	yi	TIK	C	St. 19	913	wa?	PAL	W	T. Cross
906	aj	CAR	E	St. 14	910	yi	PNG	W	St. 30
909	aj	COP	E	St. P	912	yi	PAL	W	T. Cross
911	aj	COP	E	St. 2	912	yi	DPL	W	HS. 4, #1
911	aj	COP	E	St. 5 Alt.	912	yi	DPL	W	HS. 2, #2
912	aj	COP	E	St. 12	913	yi	PNG	W	Alt. 1
913	aj	COP	E	St. J	913	yi	PNG	W	Alt. 1
915	aj	COP	E	St. 4	913	yi	PNG	W	Alt. 1
915	aj	COP	E	St. B	914	yi	PNG	W	St. 3
915	aj	COP	E	St. A	914	yi	PNG	W	St. 3
916	aj	QRA	E	Mon. 6	914	yi	PNG	W	St. 8
917	aj	QRA	E	Mon. 5	914	yi	PNG	W	St. 23
918	aj	COP	E	Alt. G	914	yi	DPL	W	St. 14
919	aj	QRA	E	Str. 1B-1	915	yi	PNG	W	St. 9
912	wa	PSH	E	St. D	915	yi	DPL	W	Pan. 18
907	yi	COP	E	St. I	916	yi	PNG	W	Alt. 2
913	yi	COP	E	St. J	917	yi	PAL	W	T96G
916	yi	QRA	E	Mon. 4	917	yi	PAL	W	T96G
					917	yi	PAL	W	T96G

Table 3.   Intransitive positional affixes. Distribution of the *laj* affix

Date	Distribution of the WAN affix.	Affix	Site	Area	Monument/ text	Date	Distribution of the WAN affix.	Affix	Site	Area	Monument/ text
818	chum	lag	LP/TIK	C	Leyden Plaque	910	chum	wan	TOR	W	Mon. 8
818	chum	lag?	TIK	C	Hombre de TiK	911	chum	wan	TOR	W	Mon. 1
900	chum	aj?	TIK	C	St. 31	912	chum	wan	TOR	W	Box
900	pat	aj	TIK	C	St. 31	912	chum	wan	PAL	W	TI
905	chum	laj	YAX	W	Lint. 47	912	chum	wan	PAL	W	TI
906	chum?	laj	TIK	C	St. 17	912	chum	wan	PAL	W	TI
906	chum	laj	TZB	C	Lint. 3	912	chum	wan	PAL	W	TI
908	chum	laj	CAR	E	St. 6	912	chum	wan	PAL	W	TI
908	chum	laj	CAR	E	St. 6	912	chum	wan	TOR	W	Box
908	chum	laj	CAR	E	St. 6	912	chum	wan	TOR	W	Box
908	chum	laj	CAR	E	St. 6	912	chum	wan	TOR	W	Box
908	chum	laj	CAR	E	St. 6	913	pat	wan	TIK	C	Lint. 3
908	chum	laj	PNG	W	St. 25	913	chum	wan	TOR	W	Mon. 6
910	chum	laj	CAR	E	Alt. 21	913	chum	wan	TOR	W	Mon. 6
910	chum	laj	CAR	E	Alt. 21	913	chum	wan	TOR	W	Mon. 6
911	chum	laj	Q	C	GP. 7	913	chum	wan	TOR	W	Mon. 6
911	chum	laj	Q	C	GP. 7	913	och	wan	TOR	W	Mon. 6
911	chum	laj	Q	C	GP. 7	914	chum	wan	DPL	W	St. 8
911	chum	laj	Q	C	GP. 7	914	chum	wan	PAL	W	PT
911	chum	laj	Q	C	GP. 7	915	chum	wan	CHI	W	GP
911	chum	laj	Q	C	GP. 7	915	chum	wan	CHI	W	GP
911	chum	laj	Q	C	GP. 7	915	pat	wan	DPL	W	Pan. 18
911	chum	laj	TON	W	Mon. 28	916	pat	wan	PRU	C	GP. 7
912	pat	laj	DPL	W	HS. 4, Stp. 2	916	chum	wan	COP	E	T. 11 entrada
912	pat	laj	TOR	W	Box	916	chum	wan	COP	E	T. 11 entrada
912	chum	laj	TON	W	Mon. 29	916	chum	wan	COP	E	T. 11 S. Pan.
912	chum	laj	TON	W	Mon. 30	916	chum	wan	COP	E	HS
913	chum	laj	TIK	C	Lint. 3	916	chum	wan	COP	E	HS
913	chum	laj	BON	W	SS. 5	916	chum	wan	COP	E	HS
913	chum	laj	PAL	W	TFC	916	chum	wan	YAX	W	HS. 1
913	pat	laj	PAL	W	TFC	916	chum	wan	YAX	W	HS. 1
913	pat	laj	PAL	W	Pan. Frag.	916	chum	wan	YAX	W	HS. 1
913	pat	laj	PAL	W	TFC	916	chum	wan	YAX	W	HS. 1
913	chum	laj	TON	W	Mon. 113	916	chum	wan	YAX	W	St. 12
913	chum	laj	TON	W	Mon. 111	917	chum	wan	COP	E	Alt. U
915	pat	laj	LAL	C	St. 8	917	chum	wan	COP	E	Alt. U
915	chum	laj	TIK	C	St. 21	917	pat	wan	COP	E	Alt. U
915	chum	laj	LAC	W	Lint. 2	917	pat	wan	COP	E	Alt. U
916	chum	laj	COP	E	HS	918	pat	wan	COP	E	Alt. G
917	chum	laj	TIK	C	St. 22	918	chum	wan	CAN	W	Pan. 1
917	chum	laj	TON	W	Bench FH	918	chum	wan	CAN	W	Pan. 1
917	chum	laj	PAL	W	96G	918	pat	wan	CAN	W	Pan. 1
917	chum	laj	PAL	W	96G	919	chum	wan	COP	E	Alt. L
917	chum	laj	PAL	W	96G						
917	pat	laj	PNG	W	Th. 1						

tions were a combination of autochthonous historical and political factors and «more broadly held concepts about the nature of the universe» (*ibid.*: 309). Royal groups wished to control interaction with supernatural forces, largely through institutionalized writing and ritual practice. This display of control may have been an attempt to influence local religious traditions, but also peripheral ones not under the direct purview of the king. Thus, the sacred language and the sacred texts were probably important to both royal and nonroyal practitioners, but to varying degrees (Houston 1994; Houston and Stuart 1992).

Sacred languages in the Middle East ranged from being a variety of one's own dialect, such as Koine Greek was to citizens of Greece, to being completely unintelligible to worshipers as it was in Zoroastrianism (Sawyer 1999: 23). The reasons for this difference results from historical, political, and economic factors affecting a particular religious group. Some religions wish to preserve a particular language because «it is the language of the angels, or the language by which the world was created, or the original language from which all other languages are derived» (Sawyer 1999: 25). Sawyer notes that bilingualism, nationalism, ethnocentrism, or dominant authority «at a crucial point in the canonization process» are all significant factors in marking a language as sacred (Sawyer 1999: 25). Once canonized, a language or text is not likely to be changed or modified in any way because of a want to maintain continuity with the past (Santoni 1968). «Words, phrases, even sounds hallowed by centuries of use in the highly charged context of religious ritual, can have a hold on worshipers which makes it difficult for them to even contemplate changes in language» (Sawyer 1999: 26). Thus, linguistic archaisms are not necessarily valued for being old, but rather as historically salient connections with religiously significant events.

Old World sacred languages were understood by a large percentage of religious followers. Even those who could not understand spoken or written sacred texts, nonetheless understood the importance of the sacred language to religious practice. The widespread use of Classic Ch'olti'an among elites may have resembled Koine Greek as a language of the learned, as a local language to those who lived near the center, and as a language of economic and religious necessity to those on the periphery. In the case of Hebrew, bilingualism was the norm, and was actually encouraged depending on the political climate of any given area (Sawyer 1999).

For the Classic Maya, codices may have been the most potent connection between priest and follower. From the perspective of state religious control, the creation and use of books necessary to elite and commoner religious practice would have provided a significant pathway for royal groups to maintain patronage over daily religious activities. On the one hand, monumental inscriptions and large scale rituals in city centers would have been important in fields of warfare, local elite mythologies, and dynastic power; and on the other, holy books set the stage for agricultural rituals and auguries, land tenure, and general mythologies important to all social groups. Pan-Maya myths may have represented the most conservative tradition, and a possible locus of textual canonization.

The creation, canonization, and widespread use of sacred books is well known for other culture groups in Mesoamerica. For the Aztecs the most common book, the *tonalamatl*, and its prognosticator the *tonalpouhqui*, was important to all social groups in Aztec society (Quiñones 1995: 154). Quiñones Keber (*ibid.*) states: «The prognostications of the *tonalamatl* governed every aspect of human endeavor at every level of Aztec society, sacred and secular, public and private, from birth to death, from commoners to rulers». One of the most important applications of the *tonalamatl* was birth and naming rights, because the day you were born on determined much of your fate. Ultimately, sacred books played a major role in the formation of personhood in Aztec society.

There was a similar situation in contact period northern Yukatan where the *maestro cantor* or «choirmaster» was probably the title given to *ah-k'in* or Classic period *ah-tz'ib* (Coe and Kerr 1998: 220). Coe states: «The *maestro cantor* acted as parish secretary, keeping notes for entry into registries of births, marriages and deaths; he supervised catechism; selected and taught youngsters to be trained in reading, writing and church duties; and he controlled who would become church functionaries, *escribanos* (scribes), and his own successor to office» (*ibid.*). The *maestro cantor* seems to have played a role similar to that of the *tonalpouhqui* with clear associations with both commoners and elites. If the role of the *maestro cantor* resembles those of the Classic period scribes, priests, and daykeepers, then the transcription and maintenance of sacred script and sacred language could have been extremely regularized. The cases of Hebrew and Avestan provide a cross-cultural parallel for this kind of institutionalized conservatism. Classic period scribes are depicted iconographically in similar positions
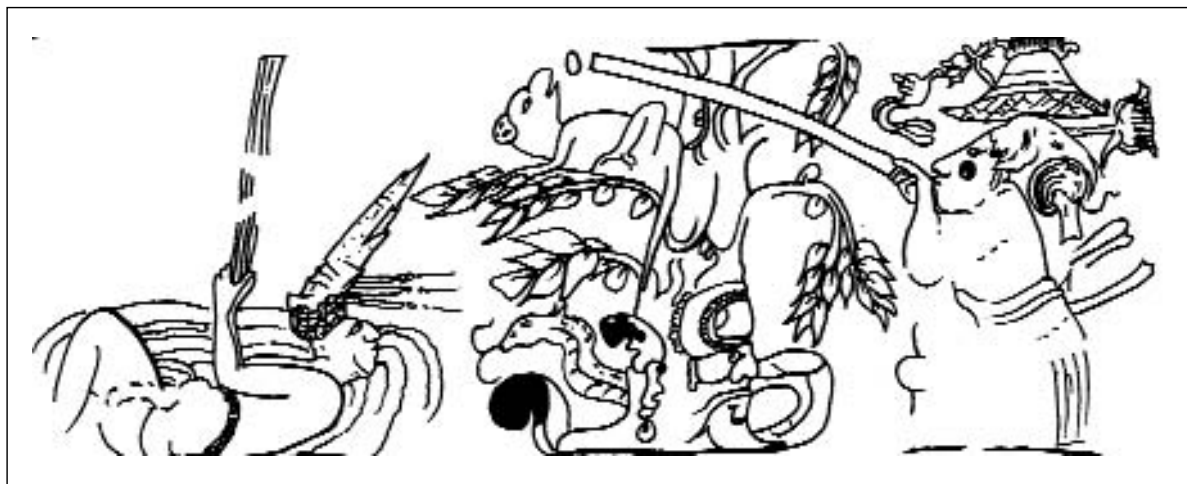
Figure 4. Hunahpú with blowgun hunting salamander? (Vase 110 in Robicsek y Hales 1981: 84).

of prominence and power; as those who record myth and history in first person. Scribes are often shown in palace scenes, as either reading key parts of a codex, or writing down important historical events. Supernatural scribes also witness and record key moments in mythological scenes. Scribes appear as witnesses in unlikely, and even covert, contexts, for example in the forest while Jun Ajaw is hunting with his blow gun (Figure 4). The scribe is able to transcend the constraints of time, not as an active participant, but as a passive witness. The codex is where all of these actions are initially recorded.

Houston (2000: 148, 2001: 337) refers to another mythological scene where writing is symbolically passed to humans from the gods; an act that is itself recorded by the gods. The rather humble dress of the couple emerging from a cave in the scene, leads Houston to suggest that «nonelites were regarded as stripped-down people who lacked the full range of human endowments (i.e., the ability to write)» (*ibid.*). However, this scene also shows the general interest of human beings in writing, as well as the material products of mythological events (i.e., codices books). Scribes were not simply furniture in mythological scenes, but were quite active witnessing and recording key mythological events. These scenes not only provided charter and legitimization for the role and behavior of scribes in the Classic Maya palace, but also gives primacy to the codices book as the record *par excellence* for general mythology.

FINAL COMMENTS

The epigraphic evidence presented here suggests that there were more conservative tendencies in the script of the central Petén region. In the two presented case studies, the central lowland sites rarely participate in newer, more innovative forms of writing. Furthermore, the central lowlands contains the earliest texts, and may have provided a linguistic template for writing traditions in other parts of the Maya area. It is suggested here that the codices, as a precursor to the stela complex, could have been a locus of canonization of general mythologies, and that uniformity in writing began in the central lowlands using these canonized texts as a source. Sites in the central lowlands maintained older traditions in writing and language for two possible reasons: the commoners spoke Classic Ch'olti'an , and the sacred language was formalized, if not canonized there.

The use of earlier grammatical forms, or more accurately, the refusal to use new ones, is more of a sociolinguistic choice than a purely linguistic matter. The Classic glyphic traditions established by sites in the central lowlands were used by all areas of the lowlands at a later date, which again indicates a central place of origin. These writing traditions were maintained by the center suggesting that these archaic traits (by the Late Classic) were valued as part of the patrimony of the central lowlands. The conservative nature of the script at Tikal, in particular, suggests that

it was a major locus of early writing and script development, probably extending back into Preclassic or Proto-Classic times. The grammar of Tikal texts and other conservative trends there (e.g., monumental art style), may be a fruitful place to continue investigation of this subject.

However, the data presented here are meant to represent only some indicators of conservatism in the central lowlands. To better demonstrate the propositions laid out here would require not only an in-depth analysis of all aspects of central lowland writing, but also a better understanding of Early Classic grammar, which seems differ markedly from Late Classic grammar. The distributions of *tzutz* and the intransitive positionals serve only as a starting point to understand the nature of the language of the script, and subsequent changes to it after its establishment. Future studies must also strive to further understand the morphological variation found in both the east and west regions represented in these distributional analyses.

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