

THE PROBLEM OF RECONSTRUCTING  
A PROTOTYPE FOR *H?IK'AL*

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Introduction

This paper deals with the problem of reconstructing a prototype for *h?ik'al*, or 'black-man.' The origins of *h?ik'al* have been dealt with most thoroughly by Blaffer (1972). Blaffer's account focuses upon *h?ik'al*'s similarities to bats and argues that the Mayan bat deity, which has yet to be proven part of the Classic Mayan pantheon, is the ancestor of the 'black-man' as we know him today. In order to establish a relationship between the two, the analysis centers on the anomolous character of both the bat and *h?ik'al*. However, such analysis relies on connections and connotations that are so apparent they should be accepted with caution, especially in light of the work of Paredes (1977) and Basso (1979) concerning 'the folklore of folklore.'

In the presentation that follows, linguistic, ethnographic and historical evidence is discussed in which *h?ik'al* is viewed as a multivocal symbol that has acquired its contemporary meaning through a dynamic process involving syncretism and socio-cultural change. While the bat and *h?ik'al* undoubtedly share some common symbolic features and are related in such a manner, the probability of a direct and unbroken link between the two is untenable. A more thorough study of the ethno-zoological information regarding bats among the Mayan and Mixe-Zoquean groups, and their representations in folklore and folk art, suggests that the bat's place in Mayan civilization arose through contact with other religious and cultural traditions in Mesoamerica (cf. Williams 1981).

H?ik'al as a symbol

H?ik'al as he exists today is a black demon who is present in the folklore of the Tzotzil and Tzeltal speakers of highland Chiapas in Southern Mexico. I believe that this same black demon motif also occurs in the Cholan Maya community of Tila, Chiapas where he is known as *nec*; a point I will return to later. H?ik'al is conceived of as a small, hairy black demon with a six-foot-long penis. He is said to live in caves and generally behave in an antisocial fashion compared to the non-demonic spirit population. H?ik'al is also said to be able to fly, either by use of his own wings, as in Tzotzil belief, or by using some vehicle according to Tzeltal belief. He exists in both a ritual persona and a mythic form. I am not concerned here with the impersonations of h?ik'al by male members of the community during religious festivals in highland Chiapas, but rather with h?ik'al as he exists in his mythic form.

H?ik'al can definitely be considered as a symbol, in all meanings of the word. Since I will be dealing with the notion of symbol, examples of different ideas concerning the nature of symbols will be useful. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines 'symbol' as follows:

...a thing regarded by general consent as naturally typifying or representing or recalling something by possession of analogous qualities or by association in fact or thought.

From this simple beginning definition of what a symbol can be, it is necessary to consider other aspects of a symbol that are involved in symbolic analysis. Symbols are often discussed in terms of the relationship of signifier (signans) to signified (signatum). The signifier is the object and the signified is its meaning, sense, designation, denotation or connotation. Victor Turner (1975:150) states that a symbol has a single signifier and a multiple of signifieds and that those signifieds often become secondary signifiers.

In brief, a symbol has a multiplicity of meanings, both public and private. This relationship is not static; new meanings (signifieds) may be added to old symbols (signifiers) (Turner 1975:154). Dominant symbols shed and gain meanings through time. This is not an arbitrary process but a product of social dynamics (Turner 1975:155). Most importantly, symbols are multivocal, manipulable and ambiguous (Turner 1975:

146). A symbol cannot function as such if it does not have ambiguity and complexity in situations of conflict and change (Turner 1975:158). The concepts outlined above can be applied to an analysis of *h?ik'al* as a symbol within the Maya symbolic system. The concepts of dynamics, change, multivocality, manipulability, ambiguity and complexity are especially relevant to the 'history' of *h?ik'al* as a symbol.

### History of a Symbol

Mircea Eliade (1959:104) discusses methodological considerations important to the concept of the 'history of a symbol.' He discusses the decipherment of a religious symbol in terms of considering all of its contexts and particularly those meanings that the symbol may have held in what he terms its 'maturity' (Eliade 1959:107). In terms of the present discussion, 'maturity' indicates the time frame of the Classic and possibly the Post Classic periods of Maya civilization.

In discussing a religious symbol, one can not separate it from the religious system within which it exists. The symbol will change along with the system in times of conflict or contact. Blaffer's choice of the so-called ancient Maya bat deity as a prototype for the contemporary *h?ik'al* makes it necessary to deal not only with the changes in the symbol and its associations but also with those of the symbolic or religious system containing it. Blaffer's failure to consider this aspect is a major problem in the reconstruction she gives as the classic Maya prototype for *h?ik'al*.

### The Religious System of the Classic Maya

The decline of Classic Maya civilization with its priestly class and ruling elites coupled later with the destructive onslaught of Catholic missionaries brought about profound societal changes within Maya culture as a whole. Eva Hunt (1977:276) has stated that the abandonment of human sacrifice reflects a fundamental ideological change within the Mesoamerican framework. This radical change in the religious ideology of Mesoamericans, and in particular the Maya, combined with the iconoclastic fervor of zealous Catholics to aid in the downfall of the symbolic hierarchy of Maya deities.

Maya deities in the Classic period were very complex,

possessing a multiplicity of 'code symbols' (Hunt 1977:45). Important deities, if not all, had numerical, calendrical, astronomical, botanical and zoological code symbols that could be arranged within a hierarchical framework, giving layers of meaning that could be manipulated. As deities lost importance, either through a decline in the esoteric nature of Maya religion or through Catholic influence and replacement with saints, they and their attributes or code symbols became blurred with one another; one deity was confounded with another (Redfield 1962:112). Possibly deities with similar code symbols or deities and their own code symbols were merged to create new symbols. Present-day Mesoamerican peasants can provide us with interpretations of only those symbols which are meaningful in their contemporary social context (Hunt 1977:35). Eva Hunt (1977:36) suggests that formerly connected symbols have become disconnected and formerly disconnected symbols have become connected.

Thompson states that moral duality seems to have characterized the ancient Maya deities. Among the Chorti of Guatemala this duality of malevolent and benevolent aspects still exists today. A good example is *ah yum ikar* who is a lord of wind that can be both beneficial and destructive (Wisdom 1940:397). The Chorti, according to Wisdom, also confuse deities, especially those that are closely related (Wisdom 1940:395). This relation may be due to the habitat, behavior, appearance, function or other connotations of code symbols that are similar. The Chorti also have a concept of lesser beings that are 'helpers' of greater beings. It is not known if this concept was one that existed in the Classic period or not. However, I feel that it may have been and may still be responsible, in part, for some of the merging of deities with other deities, helpers and code symbols.

Thompson also discusses the confusion of deities, especially in terms of rain and wind gods. He believes that the wind gods were of little importance to the Lowland Maya. Thompson also states (1970:225) that the *Babatuns (Pauhtuns)* were winds that were servants of the *chacs* (rain gods) and later became identified (or confused) with them. He states that now the *Pauhtuns* are accepted as *chacs*; that the former group has been merged with the later (Thompson 1970:274). The notion that a confusion of rain and wind deities combined with that of the blurring of attributes of deities and the merging of them with their helpers is an important one that I feel should be considered more thoroughly when determining a prototype for a present-day symbol.

Blood, Sacrifice, Fertility and Rain

Blood-letting was an important ritual means for assuring fertility. Thompson states that the *cenote* cult functioned as a means for petitioning for rain.<sup>1</sup> Blood sacrifice and blood-letting were frequent offerings to the *chaacs* for rain. In particular, the blood of the pure - children, was believed to be the most beneficial. Today in the caves of Belize, the skeletal remains of children and infants are found along with objects that have been identified as blood-letting instruments.

Blood is still shed as a means for appealing for rain (fertility). The main difference in the blood-letting of the past from that of the present is that today it is not the blood of humans that is shed but that of animals, particularly fowl. Today in the Yucatan, fowl are sacrificed in rain ceremonies. Blaffer tells us that *h?ik'al* as he exists in Zinacantan goes about raiding henhouses and eating fowl (Blaffer 1972:20). He is also associated with blood in many of the tales (Blaffer 1972:35). In the Aulie and Aulie *Diccionario Ch'ol-Espanol; Espanol-Ch'ol* there is an entry that reads as follows:

*nec* - un espiritu malo. (Dicen que es un hombre negro que vive en las cuevas. Sale durante la cuaresma a comerse las lenguas de la gente. Se toca la flauta para defenderse contra el.<sup>2</sup>

The *nec* spook is quite similar to the *h?ik'al* spook of Zinacantan and other Tzeltal communities that are neighbors of the Gholan speakers of Tila. It is possible that this concept was borrowed from the Tzeltal, however there is one major difference in the *nec* and the *h?ik'al* that refutes this hypothesis. *Nec* comes out of his cave during Lent to 'eat the tongues of the people.' I can find no example of a similar action in the corpus of tales concerning *h?ik'al*. I believe in this case the indigenous Maya tradition of blood-letting has been placed within a Catholic religious framework. Lent is a time of self-sacrifice, a giving up of what is precious to put oneself in a more pure state for the celebration of the resurrection. The ritual of blood-letting for the ancient Maya had a similar function. In particular, blood-letting from the tongue is what I believe is being referred to through the metaphor of 'eating the tongues of the people.' The initial meanings of the black demon are thus retained. What I am proposing here is that *h?ik'al* and *nec* are not contemporary adaptations of an ancient Maya bat deity,

but instead a product of contemporary confusion of rain and deities and their associated code symbols and helpers through time.

### Connections with Deities

Instead of arguing that *h?ik'al* is related to a Classic period Maya deity that has not been positively identified yet, I feel it is more profitable to look at deities that have been identified and they may possibly be related to *h?ik'al*. I believe that Blaffer's tenuous connection of *h?ik'al* to an ancient Maya bat deity thrives on superficial similarities that make the evolution of *h?ik'al* as a symbol seem very simplistic. There are a number of deities with attributes similar to those possessed by *h?ik'al* that may in fact be related to him.

The first of these is found in the *Ritual of the Bacabs*. *Ekel Ahau* (Black Lord) is cited in a particular incantation concerned with a patient that has an obstructed breathing passage (Roys 1965:65). *Ekel Ahau* is one of the supernaturals linked to this condition and must be invoked in curing it. This first black deity is related to choking and therefore to air in the form of breath.

The second is in Thompson's *Maya History and Religion* and is called *Ikal Ahau*. Thompson states that *Ikal Ahau* is a small death god that wanders at night attacking people. He also eats raw human flesh and lives by day in a cave, or inhabits a church tower in one instance (Thompson 1970:323). This description, it appears, comes from a contemporary group of Tzotzil speakers of Larrainzar and may be referring directly to *h?ik'al* as he is called in Zinacantan. Although there is no apparent linguistic connection, Castro believes that this *Ikal Ahau* is lord of a mountain near Oxchuc (Thompson 1970:323). *Ikal Ahau* may be an earth/rain lord (*?anhel* or *chac*) due in part to the description of him as lord of a mountain and also to Castro's belief that *Ikal Ahau* is a shortened form of the true name which is *Ikal Ahau Chaan*, which is translated as 'Swift Serpent.' Snakes are associated with *chacs* and therefore with rain and also in some cases with earth lords. I feel that Castro's *Ikal Ahau Chaan* may be one link between *h?ik'al* as he exists today and what his ancient Maya prototype was in perhaps the Classic period of Maya history.

Another deity previously mentioned is *?anhel*. The *?anheletik* has a variety of functions in different Maya com-

munities. Among the Chorti, the *?anheletik* are rain gods as they are among the Tzotzil of San Pedro Chenalho (Blaffer 1972:71). Thompson (1970:273) talks of a deity with combined features of the rain and earth gods as being called *?anhel* or *Tzultacah*. In one instance in Blaffer's book, an informant told Evon Vogt that the bat (*sotz'*) is called *?anhel* to protect the people from having him come and drink their blood (Blaffer 1972:70). *?anhel* in Laughlin's (1975) dictionary also means 'earth lord' as well as 'bat.' It is here that I believe the blurring of deities has most obviously occurred. *?anhel* can refer to an earth lord, a rain god or a bat and through association to sacrifice, blood-letting, fertility, wind, darkness and caves; all of which I believe are associations of *h?ik'al*.

Blurring also occurs in the case of the *Pauhtuns*. There are four *Pauhtuns* mentioned in the *Chilam Balam of Chumayel* which are called *cangeles ik* in the creation myth found in that text (Thompson 1970:256). Thompson translates *cangeles ik* to mean 'wind *canhels*,' but I feel that it could also mean 'black *?anheletik*' or 'black rain/earth lords.' These *Pauhtuns* are thought to have been winds that were servants of the *chacs* and have now, particularly in the Yucutan, become identified with the *chacs* and merged with them. This is very relevant to the concept of 'helpers' merging with greater deities as discussed earlier.

### Linguistic Connections

Once again Blaffer does not take into account all the linguistic evidence. The word for 'bat' in most of the Mayan languages is either *sotz'* or *sutz'*. The word for 'cloud' in some of the highland languages is *sutz'*. In Chorti, the word for 'bat' is *sutz'* but that is not the word for 'cloud,' which is *tocar*. However, there does seem to be some linguistic connection between the words for 'bat' and those for 'cloud.' This connection is probably related to the ideological one by which bats and clouds come from the same locations - caves.

The root of the word *h?ik'al* is another problem. Blaffer believes that *h?ik'al* stems from *?ik'* which fundamentally means 'black' or 'dirty.' She does however mention alternate meanings as 'wind' or 'air' of the body, but associates these with bad odors of the body which she in turn associates with *h?ik'al*. *?ik'* does mean 'wind,' 'breath,' 'spirit and by extension may mean 'life' according to Thompson. In Chol and other lowland languages, *hik'* means 'to choke' or 'to inhale.' Also in Proto-

Zoquean, \**hi?k* means to breathe with difficulty, suffocate or choke. The cognate set in all instances has something to do with breath, wind or choking. This relates to the passage in the *Ritual of the Bacabs* concerning *Ekel Ahau*, 'the Black Lord of choking.' This linkage can be extended to wind gods since *?ik*' also means 'wind' as well as 'breath.' In this case malevolent and benevolent aspects of a single deity may have been diverged. The malevolent aspect manifesting itself in a Black Lord of evil wind, choking and by extension to death and the benevolent one in a wind god that brings rain and therefore fertility and by extension in this instance - life.

*H?ik'al* himself is both a life-giver and a life-taker. He is ultra-potent sexually, his offspring being born after only a three-day gestation period; however, the woman whom he rapes to create those offspring often dies as a result of intercourse with him. He is life and death at the same time as were many of the Classic Maya deities, according to Thompson's notion of moral duality. Blaffer sees *h?ik'al* only as a death-dealing figure and not as a life-giver, which any progenitor must be in some way.

There is also a Cholan word *nec ek na* which is translated in the Aulie and Aulie (1978) Dictionary as "an adverb related with the sound of falling rain." The appearance of the word *nec* within this adverbial form seems to signal a linguistic association, especially if the previous connections with blood-letting are correct.

### Ethnographic Connections

Ethnographic works by Redfield and Villa Rojas in the Yucatan reveal final connections. In the Yucatan, *cenotes* and caves are the mouths of hell. They have associations with the underworld and therefore with evil; however, they are also the residing places of the rain gods and the sources of winds and rains (Redfield 1962:205). Again the malevolent and benevolent are grouped together, and again through association, life and death are intimately linked as I believe they are in *h?ik'al*.

*H?ik'aletik*, *?anheletik* (earth lords), *chacs* (rain gods), *yumtzilob* (lords) and bats all share the same habitat - caves. In the Yucatan, bats share the same habitat with the *yumtzilob* and through this association become sacred creatures and are not to be harmed or eaten (Redfield 1962:207). I believe the idea of 'helpers' merging with a greater deity can be applied in this case. Possibly in other parts of the Maya area, bats were once



more closely associated with cave deities but in more recent times have been merged with them. In the Yucatan, the *yumtzilob* are given offerings of fowl in order to keep them from sending sickness in the form of evil winds (Redfield 1962:128). Bats are not mentioned as bringing sickness, however it is possible they were associated with this aspect in an earlier time period. It is a biological fact that bats are carriers of many types of respiratory diseases, those most closely associated with choking and shortness of breath.

### Conclusions

All of the deities mentioned throughout this paper share some common attributes and functions; some definite adaptations to local conditions have through time probably also occurred. The loss of esoteric connotations within Maya religion may account for a great deal of the blurring and merging that has occurred. Redfield and Villa Rojas seem to believe this is an ongoing process. They state that the status of gods is diminishing to the level of spooks and goblins (Redfield 1962:121).

In brief, the exact named prototype for *h?ik'al* is probably lost to history. However, a probable candidate can be reconstructed in terms of common associations and also through linguistic, ethnographic and religious connections previously mentioned. The prototype most logical for *h?ik'al* is a deity associated with caves and the underworld that possesses both benevolent and malevolent aspects. *H?ik'al* as he exists today may be an embodiment of only those malevolent aspects, since he possesses no positive qualities in any of the folktales concerning him. This deity prototype was connected with wind and rain and may have controlled one or both. Through this association the deity would be linked to fertility, life, sickness and death. Sacrifice and blood-letting are intimately bound to those concepts in Maya ideology. This serves to link *h?ik'al*'s association with blood and eating human flesh to those of his prototype. Thompson (1970:273) states that passages in folktales concerning the eating of people are references to human sacrificial practices as they existed in the past. Both *neq* and *h?ik'al* are said to eat parts of people at least, completing Thompson's hypothesis.

The bat was associated with this prototypic deity, either through a shared habitat or as a code symbol or possibly in a 'helper'/greater deity relationship. The bat may have been more important to the 'common people' as a more concrete and natural symbol than the more highly esoteric connotations of the

greater deity. If so, the greater deity may have been merged with the bat creating a highly dynamic, ambiguous, multivocal symbol that is known today as *h?ik'al* in Highland Chiapas.

Looking strictly at the bat deity as a prototype for *h?ik'al* ignores other larger connections in the realm of Maya symbolic and religious systems. This interpretation also observes the complexity of syncretization that must have occurred as the entire social universe of the Maya was altered by internal and external events through history.

#### NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> *Cenotes* are considered the symbolic equivalents of caves in the Yucatan.

<sup>2</sup> *nec* - an evil spirit. (They say that it is a black-man who lives in caves. He comes out during Lent to eat the tongues of the people. One should play the flute to defend oneself from him.)

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