Deciphering Ontologies: Divination and "Infinition" in Classic Maya Inscriptions

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ABSTRACT

In many forms, important trends of current anthropology, like the ontological turn, have been left aside in the analysis of the ancient artistic testimonies of the indigenous people of the Americas, thanks to the inevitable gap and lamentable misunderstandings between ethnology, archaeology and art history. In this text, we retake the notion of "infinition", a term coined by Martin Holbraad in his work about Cuban divination, *Truth in Motion* (2012), to explore two epigraphic and artistic testimonies from the courts of the Classic Maya period (AD 250-900) and see how what has been seen as mere calendarical manipulation by scheming rulers and elites can be read as ritual acts of divination which created new identities, altered the ontological constitution of their participants and challenged the boundaries of human (and divine) time and space. By reading Maya art à la Roy Wagner, that is, as invention, we want to encourage the very much needed criticism of the tired notion of "justification of power" that seems to pervade Maya Art interpretation among archaeologists and epigraphists.

KEYWORDS

Maya Art, Long Count, Palenque, Maya Epigraphy, Ritual , Power, Divination, Infinition

INTRODUCTION

Our vision of Classic Maya art has long been shaped by the long debate surrounding what is perhaps its most striking feature: its complex epigraphic inscriptions and the logosyllabic writing system[1] on which they were written. Unlike the sudden and spectacular nature of the deciphering of Ancient Egyptian hieroglyphs, the history of Maya decipherment has been arduous and long, and its advancement has been tightly linked with the paradigmatic shifts in our views on the purpose and nature of Maya writing[2].

Classic Maya culture is still the center of an intense ongoing debate, not only on the grammatical nature of the inscriptions – issues like morphosyntactic alignment and syllabic patterns have proven themselves as veritable schisms among the epigraphist community[3] –, but on the nature of inscriptions themselves. Are they history, in our sense of the word?

Scholars like Erik Velázquez (2011) urge us to rethink this matter carefully: Mayans were far distant from our nineteenth-century inspired conception of "history", and to consider Maya inscriptions, which had complex purposes, as only historical sources in the positive sense is nothing short of anachronistic. Therefore, in Velásquez's opinion, despite the bulk of historical material that has been discovered by epigraphists, we lack a true understanding of what was history to the Maya.

Also, as David Stuart has remarked, despite the majority of inscriptions being indeed oriented to the deeds of royal persons among the Maya, the true focus of most inscriptions are in fact ritual events and objects:

> *A basic tenet of Maya archaeology holds that the inscriptions of the Classic period are principally documents relating the glorified lives of rulers and their close kinsmen and associates (e. g. Santley, 1991: 92; Marcus, 1992), largely for political or legitimating purposes. However, to cast the ancient texts in a purely political light is to impose our own Western historical template upon theirs (...) public inscriptions emphasize ritual accounts above any other life events of royalty or nobility (...) long texts listing births, deaths, inaugurations, and so on, usually serve as simple prologue to the culminating event of a dedication rite -whether dedicating a building, a stone monument, a vessel or other object. This is not to argue that the Maya were not interested in relating "history"; rather, this was their history (Stuart, 1995: 154-155).*

However, this emphasis in objects and rituals *per se*, rather than as simple vehicles of royal power, clashes with the widespread understanding of the purpose of Maya art and inscriptions. The all-encompassing formula that currently

1 A logosyllabic writing system is one that combines signs representing words (logograms) with signs representing syllables. The definitive reference world on the subject of grammatology, the study of writing systems around the world and along human history, is still Daniels (1996).

2 For a good overview on the subject, see Houston et al. (2001).

3 See Wichmann (2004).

explains the aforementioned expressions is "ideological legitimation" or "justification" of the power of elites: "Many scholars believe that these polities were, indeed, very heavily dependent on religion, ritual, and monumental propaganda as "ideological legitimation" to bolster their rulers' rather insecure hold on power" (Demarest, 2004:45). This perspective on Maya power is functionalist in essence, and basically asserts that the purpose of Maya art was: "the justification of political power based on the cosmovision of the group, trying to maintain the cohesion of all the subordinate groups and the power of the elites over the common folk and guaranteeing harmony and fertility" (Vargas Pacheco, 2010).

The purpose of this paper is to draw inspiration from the contemporary "ontological turn" to examine the complexity of Classic Maya carvings and writings and the notion of power underlying them. It is undeniable that the spectacular art of the Maya courts manifested the power of the elites behind them; however, as we shall see, the problem is trying to understand this power as some sort of simple projection or mere facade – an ideological justification of a cosmovision. In fact, some scholars have even drawn a more extreme parallel, stating that Maya art is equal in nature to that of twentieth-century totalitarian regimes, "the official propaganda of an elite that wanted to remain in power, similar to the billboards of the Mexican Institutional Revolutionary Party" (Navarrete, 2000). Instead of falling in this kind of empty clichés, we ask ourselves whether the empowerment shown in Maya pieces has a peculiar nature to it, and whether we can discover in it a relationship between art and power that is very different from the Western notion of "propaganda".

INVENTION AND INFINITION

My proposal draws inspiration from the theoretical insights and ethnographical findings of Martin Holbraad in his monograph on divination in Cuba, *Truth in Motion* (2012). In many respects, Holbraad is a disciple of Roy Wagner, one of the most important precursors of modern ontological anthropology and who, in his ethnography of the Daribi of New Guinea (1973), questioned our assumptions regarding the concept of culture in a provocative way. While studying a curative ritual called Habu, Wagner realized something: the ritual itself was not a mere confirmation of Daribi conventions, but rather, Daribi conventions and assumptions were merely the base, the starting point from which ritual activity created something paradoxical and unique. As Holbraad summarizes:

> *Wagner argues that the aspects of life the Daribi consider most salient (ritual, myth, exchange, magic, naming, and more) are directed not toward controlling the world by subjecting it to collective conventions, but rather toward the oppo-*

> *site, namely using conventions as a base-line from which to engage in acts that are meant to transform them by way of improvisation into something novel and unique. So, from the Daribi point of view, all the things that the anthropologist imagines as "culture" (...) are not conventions for which people are responsible, but rather the taken for granted constituents of the universe that form the backdrop of human activity. They are "innate", in Wagner's terms, inasmuch as they belong to the order of what just is rather than that of what humans have to do. Conversely, the things that the anthropologist imagines as "nature", including not only the unpredictable facts and forces of the world but also our own incidental uniqueness as individual persons, for the Daribi constitute the legitimate sphere of human artifice (...) Human beings, according to this image, do not stand apart from the world, bringing it under control with their conventions, but rather partake in the world's inherent capacity to transform itself by transgressing the conventional categories that the Daribi take for granted (Holbraad, 2012: 39).*

For example, in the Habu ritual, men impersonate the very spirits that bring diseases in order to heal the sick. This action implies that categories such as "spirits", which we see as a cultural convention, are rather something given in Daribi cosmos, but also something that can be transgressed by the means of an artifice that brings about new, unpredicted interactions and effects. So, in non-Western cultures, culture is not convention or confirmation of pre-existing world views but invention, that is, anti-conventional actions taken against the very world view of the group in order to bring new effects and relationships into existence:

> *Hence, if our slot for "culture" is the slot of what people "do", and our slot for "nature" is for that to which they do it, then in the case of the Daribi the slot for "culture" is taken by the activity of invention and that of "nature" is taken by innate conventions. In that sense, Daribi culture is invention (2012: 41).*

One of the most important aspects of the Wagnerian critique is that it challenges our notion of *power* in traditional societies. For us, the underlying assumption is that rituals are a mechanism that so-called primitive societies "use" to impose some kind of order onto the world by submitting it to symbolic conventions (gods, myths, etc.). However, culture as invention implies a different notion of power altogether:

> *If Americans and other Westerners create the incidental world by constantly trying to predict, rationalize, and order it, then tribal, religious, and peasant*

> *peoples create their universe of innate convention by constantly trying to change, readjust, and impinge upon it. Our concern is that of bringing things into an ordered and consistent relation — whether one of logically organized "knowledge" or practically organized "application" — and we call the summation of our efforts Culture. Their concern might be thought of as an effort to "knock the conventional off balance," and so make themselves powerful and unique in relation to it. If we understand "power" to represent invention, an individual force or element that impinges upon the collectivities of society, then the urban Westerner "is" power (in the sense of his "innate" individuality and special gifts and talents) and "does" morality (his "performance"), whereas the religious or tribal person "does" or "follows" power (special roles, guiding magic, or spiritual helpers) and "is" moral (Wagner, 1981: 66).*

We can advance the notion that rulers, shamans, and other agents of power in traditional societies like the Classic Maya were not mere representatives of power under the formula of "smoke and mirrors", projecting the illusion of their symbolic power on unenlightened masses, but rather they constructed their power by posing themselves in complex relationships with innate categories like calendarical gods, writing, art, and ritual in order to create their own power – that is, in a way, to alter their ontological configuration as humans. In this sense, what we perceive as natural dispositions could actually be radically altered in an "artificial sense" thanks to ritual. It was not a matter of symbols, but something else: the construction of their own persons as something unique and powerful.

Assuming the Wagnerian provocation and the concept of invention, Holbraad brings about something we may call the ''recursive turn'' of anthropology in order to invent a new notion of the phenomena we call "divination". He saw an essential misunderstanding between our notion of divination and the notion of divination in the Afrocuban Ifá oracles. For us, divination is a series of predictive statements that try to assert some state of affairs about the world. It is obvious that these statements may or not be true – they are falsifiable. But, when interviewing Ifá practitioners and clients, Holbraad discovered that Ifá statements were something that could not be untrue – they were, *a priori*, incapable of being false: "to doubt oracular truth is to doubt whether it is oracular" (2012: 68). This, of course, does not imply that people don't have a valid notion of truth, but that this kind of statement operated on another level and with another dynamic – not one of truth as representations (true or false) of reality, but something else entirely.

> *My central claim (...) is that familiar assumptions about truth as a property of representations that reflect reality are inadequate for understanding these*

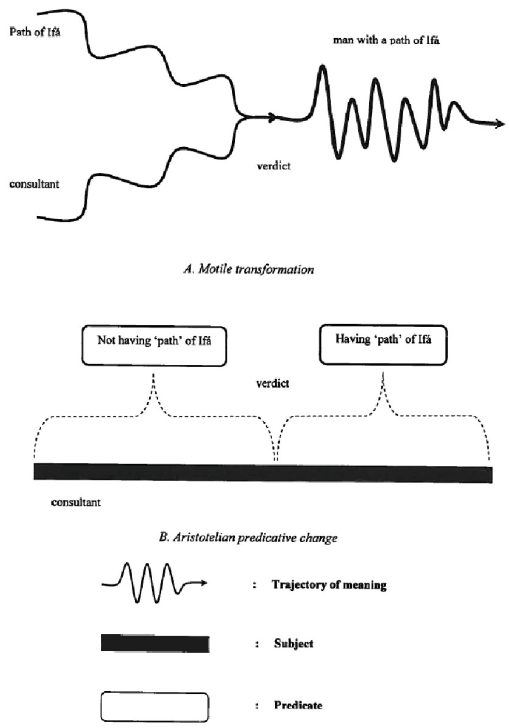
> *practices' own claims to truth. Rather than producing representations, diviners' truth-claims induce something resembling an eureka moment, by bringing the rich mythical narratives on which Ifá divination is based to bear on the personal circumstances of the client. So, oracular truth does not depend on the possibility of comparing the oracle's pronouncements with the world as it is, as a representationist image of truth might have it. Rather than representing the world, the oracle transforms it by interfering with its very meaning -an ontological rather than an epistemic operation (Holbraad, 2012: 3).*

Similar to what happened with the notion of culture as invention, divinatory truth "interferes" with the very assumptions that constitute the subjectivity of their practitioners and clients. But, what happens? The oracle produces a series of statements about a subject indeed. These statements are, in fact, based on a rich mythology: the myths of Ifá, a complex religious system originated in West Africa with a canonical literary corpus of its own, the Odu Ifá. In a very rough manner, we can say that the purpose of the oracles of Ifá is to successfully establish a relationship between the consultant of divination and these series of myths (the Path of Ifá): not primarily a matter of interpretation, but of relation. The result, however, is not some sort of descriptive or predicative statement, but something else: the consultant becomes a "man with a path of Ifá".

This process can be analyzed in some sort of Kantian way. The Path of Ifá – exemplar myths – is an analytic, *a priori* series of divine or mythical events. The consultants' life is a series of human experience, a synthetic, *a posteriori* collection of events. Divination, in a way, is the successful link between both, the expression of a synthetic series in the terms of an analytic one.

However, there are substantial differences in relation to the famous synthetic, *a priori* judgments: while Kantian judgements are universal, oracular truths are particular. Scientific, Kantian truths are, in a way, punctual, they state a world state; oracular truths are motile, they try to alter completely the becoming of their subjects. However, more importantly, the success of divinatory activity lies not in the creation of truth statements, but in the successful redefinition of the consultant into a new kind of subject, someone capable of being the receptor of the path of Ifá: "Rather than ascribing to the consultant a set of properties that may be falsified in light of experience, divination defines the consultant as a new kind of person" (Holbraad, 2012: 220).

Figure 1.
Infinition according to Holbraad (2012).



In a Deleuzian fashion, that new kind of "definition" is termed "infinition" by Holbraad: not the assignment of different predicates or *definiens* to a subject, but the transformation of a subject into an *infinitive* form itself. So, in a Wagnerian sense, infinitions are "inventive definitions". They create the entities they define, but, as Holbraad warns us, not in an idealistic sense – immanence to transcendence –, but in an opposite, motile and materialistic direction, rendering abstract and transcendental divinities as something present and concrete: "Ritual is fundamentally oriented toward overcoming the forms of transcendence that myth posits, by rendering divinities temporarily present in the world of humans" (120). So, the true merit of infinition is rendering the transcendental as something immanent.

What has all this to do with our subject matter, Classic Maya? Well, we have seen that time and calendar among the Maya posits a formidable challenge in terms of the anthropology of time and the anthropology of ritual. When Ancient Maya, as we shall see, linked the mythical deeds of the gods and the lives of their rulers through complex calendarical associations, or spoke about the reoccurrence of calendrical configurations in the future, it has been interpreted in terms of mythical exemplarity or as an apology of power. However, Wagner's words on what is innate and what is artificial among non-Western people can be taken as a comment on the nature of Mesoamerican and Amerindian power in general. Amerindian rulers were not powerful because they represented things, they were powerful themselves, masters of ritual relationships, of ontological transformations. Art did not justify their power: it created their power.

INFINITION AND RITUAL POWER: PALENQUE, PLATFORM OF TEMPLE XIX, SOUTH PANEL

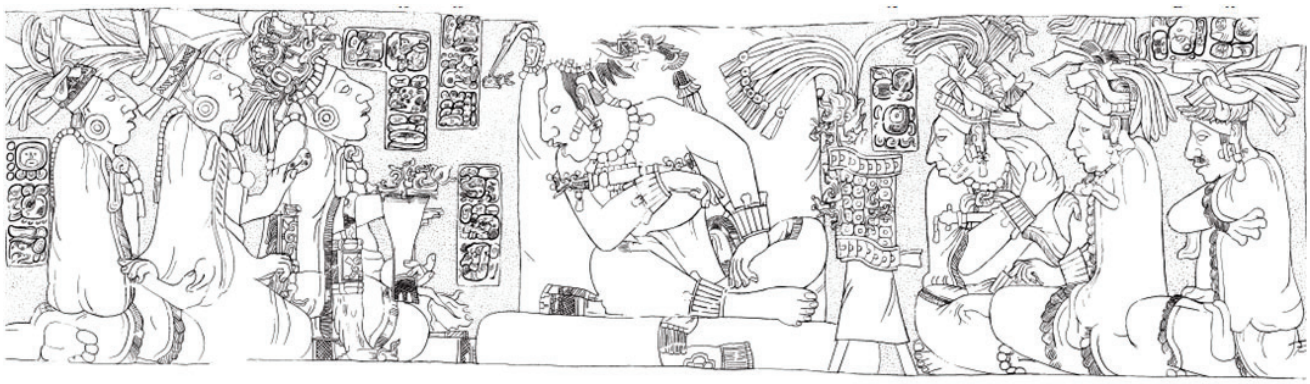


Figure 2.
Central detail of the south face of the Temple XIX Platform (drawing by David Stuart).

On the surface, most Maya inscriptions conform themselves to the pattern of royal history that has dominated our view of them: a powerful ruler erecting a monument and stating the date of his deed. However, we have seen that this vision is partial. As Stuart reminds us, the true protagonist of inscriptions in most cases are the consecration rituals of the very objects that bear the inscrip-

tion: stelae, altars, pottery, etc.[4] Not only that, in some cases – certainly not the most, not in all sites, and in very different ways depending on geographical and historical context –, special relationships with the past (and the future) that can only be conceived in a ritual way. They are the key to understanding these pieces. One of these is the decorated Platform of Temple XIX, in Palenque. Discovered on March 15, 1999, as part of the "Proyecto Grupo de las Cruces" excavations in a structure facing the famed Temple of the Cross, at Palenque, it has been recognized since then as a masterpiece of Classic Maya bas-relief and as an extraordinary inscription. It is too, as we shall see, an anthropological masterpiece of sorts, a commentary on ritual action that manifests Maya thought in a clear and amazing fashion.

4 "To cast the ancient texts in a purely political light is to impose our own Western historical template upon theirs (...) public inscriptions emphasize ritual accounts about any other life events of royalty or nobility (...) long texts listing births, deaths, inaugurations, and so on, usually serve as simple prologue to the culminating event of the dedication rite – whether dedicating a building, a stone monument, a vessel or other object" (1995: 155).

It has been analyzed in a preliminary fashion by Bernal (2002) and, later, *in extenso* by Stuart (2005a), who translated the inscription and analyzed the iconography of both of its sculpted panels, South and West. This section will mirror the analysis of this remarkable epigraphist. Both faces of the platform form a diptych of sorts, but we will concentrate on the South Panel, which reflects in a clear fashion the ritual mechanism of "infinition" exposed above. The subject matter of this inscription is the parallelism between the ritual acts of the ruler K'ihnich Ahku'l Mo' Naahb' III (who reigned from AD 721 to 736) and his mythical counterpart, the God GI. For those not acquainted with the mythology of Palenque during the Classic Period[5], GI – whose name has not been deciphered and thus is called by a mere abbreviation, "God I" – was part of the so-called 'Triad' of Palenque: three gods born of a somewhat mysterious progenitor (perhaps an aspect of the maize God) that ruled over each of the Temples of the vitally important group of structures known as the Cross Group. They were most certainly the main patrons of the whole site.

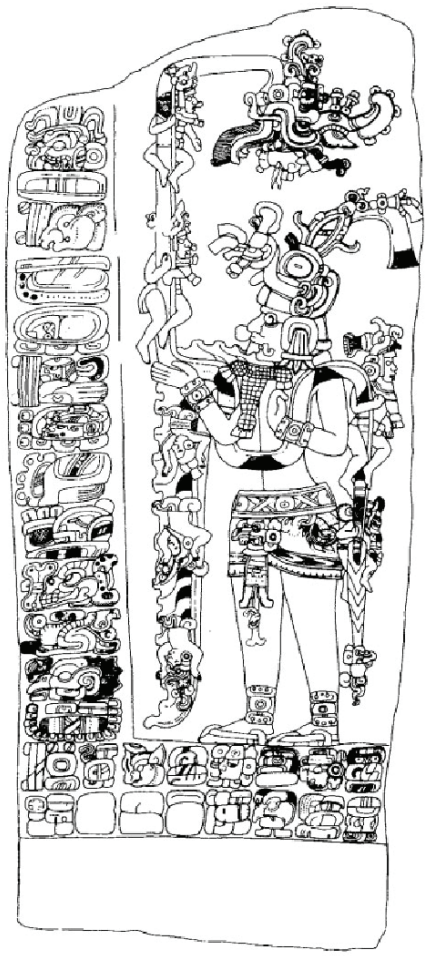


Figure 3.
The Hauberg Stela (drawing by Linda Schele, 1985).

5 A good reference is Stuart (2005b).

GI has long puzzled epigraphists: his true name remains unreadable, one variant is merely a portrait of his face and the other, the expanded name phrase [Figure 90 Stuart 2002 etc.],

remains uncertain too. As Stuart remarks (2012a: 161), he cannot be connected to any of the Postclassic gods studied by Schellhas in his classic catalogue (1904). He is not a mere local god of Palenque, though; he appears in major sites like Tikal and Copan, and also in an unprovenanced monument from the Maya Lowlands, the Hauberg Stela. He usually has fish-like features – a barbel on his cheek, for example – and he is associated with the so-called "era event" on the date 13.0.0.0.0 4 Ajaw 8 Kumk'u, as we can see on the famous Vase of the Seven Gods (Kerr no. 2796), on which several deities are set in order in the beginning of the current era. On a local level, he was a crucial deity of Palenque's Pantheon, and the offering of clothing and gifts to his effigy is recorded on a notable passage of the central tablet of the Temple of the Inscriptions.

As we mentioned above, this piece is an extensive comment on the chronological and ritual parallel of GI and the ruler K'inich Ahku'l Mo' Naahb' III. We can see this K'uhulAjaw ("sacred lord") reclined on a throne towards a priest, Janaab' Ajaw, who gifts him the royal headband, the symbol of his rule. Surrounding them, five lords, each with its name in captions, contemplate the scene. However, only K'inich Ahku'l Mo' Naahb' III and the priest Janaab' Ajaw are identified by a peculiar phrase: *u-baah-ilahn*, indicating them as ritual personifiers of Maya gods. In a concret sense, the ruler is presented as the *baahila'n* of GI, while the priest is the *baahila'n* of Itzamna' – the Maya avian deity. Accordingly, both have elaborate headdresses representing both deities: Janaab' Ajaw's headgear is the head of Itzamna', while K'inich Ahku'l Mo' Naahb' III has a headdress with a cormorant or heron, an iconographic attribute of GI himself and a possible allusion to his birthplace, the mythical location known as Maatwiil.

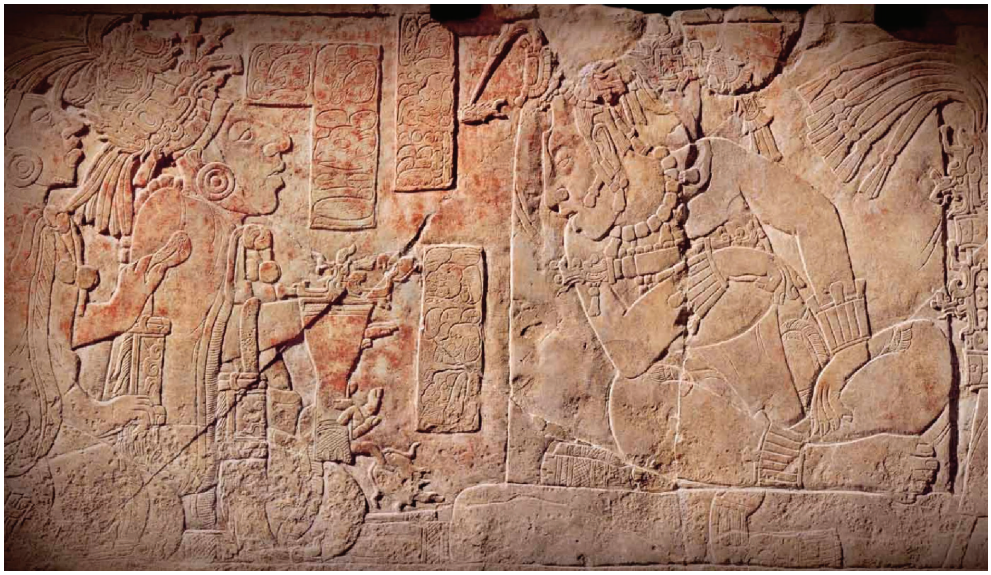


Figure 4.
K'inich Ahku'l Mo' Naahb' III and his priest, Janaab' Ajaw as ritual personificators (*baahila'n*).

Classic Maya monumental inscriptions usually consist on a series of dates, linked by the so-called "distance numbers". They are, in a way, a count of days, generally culminating in the dedication of the very monument on which the inscription is written. In this case, the text presents a series of parallels between the life of the god GI and the Life of K'inich Ahku'l Mo' Naahb' III. The text begins with the evocation of the accession to the rulership of GI on March 10, 3309 BC or, in Maya calendar, 12.10.1.13.2 9 Ik' 5 Mol[6], under the supervision of the god Itzamna' – the divine scene mirrored by the human personificators portrayed on the monument. Then, the inscription makes a chronological shift: a little later, on 12.10.12.14.18, 1 Tok', 6 Yahxk'in, GI cuts the head (*ch'ahkajubaah*) of the Starry Deer Crocodile, a cosmic monster that can be identified with the starry sky. Later, we are presented with the birth dates of the Triad gods: first, 1.18.5.3.2 9, Ik' 15 Chaksijo'm, an event not yet clearly understood happens: the second birth of GI; then, the birth of GIII or K'inich Ajaw on 13 Chamiiy, 19 Chaksijo'm and finally the birth of K'awiil or GII, on 1 Ajaw 13 Mahk. To end the mythical section, we are presented with the accession of the Progenitor of the Triad, Akan Nal Ixiim Muwan Maat, on 2.0.0.10.2 9 Ik' seat of Sak.

After this, we are presented with the subject matter of the iconography of the monument: the moment when K'ihnich Ahku'l Mo' Naahb' III takes the rulership, on January 1st, AD 722, or 9.14.10.4.2, 9 Ik' 5 K'ayab, thousands of years after the events on the divine chronology. Both the accession of the human ruler and the divine ancestor happen on a 9 Ik' day, on Stuart words, they are made to be "like-in-kind". Later ceremonies are mentioned: the first "binding of stone" of the ruler, an important ritual, and the taking of the "crocodile throne" before the patron gods: GI, GII, and GIII.

Anthropologically, we can see how this monument is a perfect example of "divination" as infinition. Through a series of calendarical, iconographical and ritual associations, K'ihnich Ahku'l Mo' Naahb' is identified with GI. His own royal person is transformed and reformulated in the terms of the ancestral mythology. It is not a mere commemoration and not a mere *a posteriori* association: here we see the core of ritual power and rulership at Palenque. Two temporal series are linked, the one of the god and the one of the king. The *a posteriori*, human series expresses itself in the terms of a divine, *a priori* series. The result is a new kind of subject: a powerful agent, the divine king, master of ritual relationships.

In this monument we can see the ritual power of the Maya calendar, too: it was not a mere device to measure time, but to create powerful subjects.

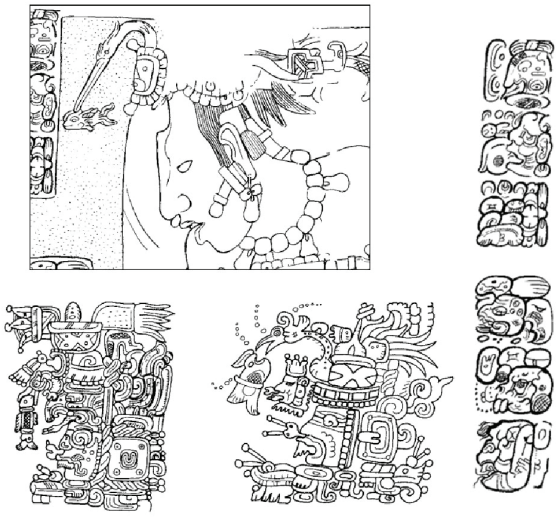


Figure 5. To the left, the iconographic affinities of the ruler K'ihnick Ahku'l Mo' Naahb' III hairdress and GI. To the right, the name caption of the king, specifying his ritual role as baahila'n (Stuart, 2005a).

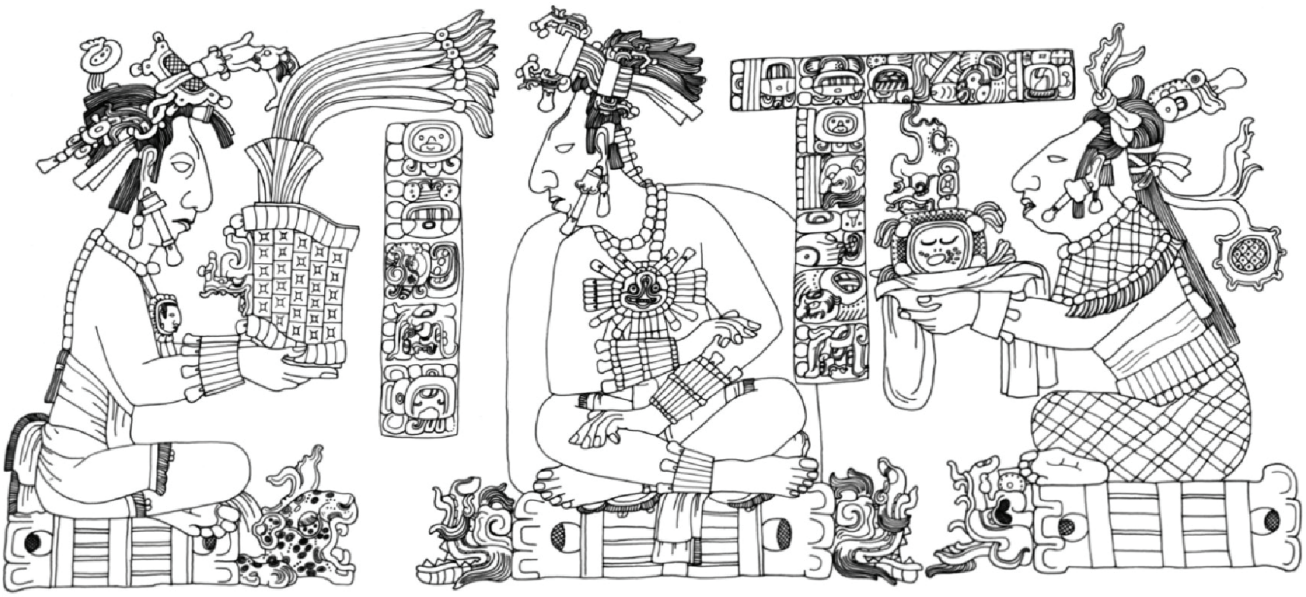
6 Maya dates are an interrelation of three elements. The first is a "Long Count" number, that is, the count of days passed since the Maya creation date (August 11, 3114 BC) in a base 20 and base 18 calendar formed by a succession of progressively larger periods, beginning with the k'in or day, then the winal – winik, in the classic Maya language, eastern ch'olan, the usual names are colonial yukatek – or 20-day period, only counted up to 18; then the tun (haab), the 360 year; the k'atuun (winikhaab), 20 tuns, almost 20 years; then, the b'aktun (pik), 20 kátuuns or 144,000 days, roughly 394 years. The second element is a Tzolk'in date, that is the date of a cyclical 260-day ritual calendar; finally, the Haab' or solar calendar of 20-day 18 months plus a 5-day "nameless" period (wayeb'). The most usually accepted correlation is the one established by Goodman in 1905, later modified by Martínez (1926) and Thompson (1927) – it is called the GMT or Goodman-Martínez--Thompson correlation.

In this case, the purpose was to reproduce in a concrete and immanent way the archetype of rulership as a person. In deeper terms, it is an ontological transformation: the nature of K'ihnich Ahku'l Mo' Naahb' III is altered and he becomes something else. However, as Holbraad reminds us, we can look at this process from another point of view: gods and myths, enclosed in a distant time, in virtuality, gain actuality through ritual. This gives way to an interesting distinction we must make in order to understand Maya ritual. Facing the problem of the anthropology of divination, which clearly establishes a relationship between two different ontological levels, Holbraad reflects upon the difference between shamanism and divination. While shamanism presents a world of horizontal transformations (animals become persons, the warrior acquires the point of view of his enemy, and so on), divination presents a vertical world, where the shift is that of transcendence to immanence: "The problem is how to elicit the deities' presence in these concrete forms – how to elicit immanence, having posited transcendence. One might say that if the shaman's task is to see what is present, the diviner's is to render present what is seen". (Holbraad, 2006: 53). Let's see an example of such procedure not pertaining to ritual actors, but to objects.

MOTILITY AND CONSECRATED OBJECTS

Maya ritual and calendarics not only transformed the path of kings' lives into veritable incarnations of gods and myths, objects were also redefined through calendarical affinities. Let's take an example, also from Palenque: the well-known Palace Tablet.

Figure 6.
The Palace Tablet of Palenque.



This monument, dedicated in AD 720, was "a large panel bearing hieroglyphic texts with a bas-relief pictorial scene carved at the top of the tablet" and it "functioned like a throne back" (Spencer, 2007: 177). Unearthed by Alberto Ruz Lhuillier in 1949, it pertains to the House A-D of the northern side of the so-called Palace Complex. The picture shows the parents of king K'inich K'an Joy Chitam, Janaab' Pakal and Lady Tz'akbu Ajaw, offering his son royal regalia. The father tends him a headdress; the mother, a military insignia known as *took' pakal*, the image of warfare. The long text below the image is well known and it conforms to the pattern of royal history: it relates important events of K'an Joy Chitam's life, such as his birth, his celebration of calendarical rituals, the death and ascension of some of his predecessors, and the dedication of the whole structure. However, the caption besides the figures has been a headache to epigraphists. It was recently re-examined by Stuart too (2012), and his findings reveal again the ritual patterns of Palenque in action.

As we can see, there's a little caption right next to the headdress. It gives a date, the verb *siyaaj* (being born) and a name that has long puzzled epigraphists, since it has no human counterpart. In fact, it is the birthdate of the god of paper, Uhx Yop Hu'n, the material from which royal headdresses were made, on the mythic (and imprecise, given the absence of a Long Count number) date of 1 Ajaw 3 Wayhaab'. The character is mentioned as the object of a consecration fire-ritual elsewhere at Palenque, and, in fact, it is assumed that the structure A-D is his temple. The texts makes a chronological jump: 56 years later, according to Stuart's reading, "the name of Uhx Yop Hu'n is fastened"; later, the royal names of the Dynasty (the so-called "sequential lords", *B'alun Tz'aakb'u Ajaw*) are "formed", using the same verb that is used to denote the creation of images, statues and the like: "The take-turn (?) name for the dynasty is formed".[7]

K'an Joy Chitam was 58 years old when he took the power in AD 702. As Stuart notes, this age similarity has an obvious subtext of identification. However. we can see the identification is complex: the god of paper is himself the royal headdress, but there's an affinity between this god and the king. So, in a way, myth is embedded in both agent and object, in a game of mirrors: the substance of the king is identified with the substance of his power, the royal headdress. However, this transformation is not a mere issue of fluid or ambiguous identities. It

Figure 7.
Paper gods emerging from a book's binding on the vase K760 (Stuart, 2012).

7 The expression, bolon t'zakabil ajaw, literally meaning "The nine sequential lords", is a figurative expression that means something like "many lords of a sequence", "perpetual lords". Stuart says that it was the expression most suited to render the meaning "dynasty". However, it is also a title that appears in the Dresden Codex as the title of some gods as "perpetual lords".

articulates the relationship between different orders of time and exemplifies the notion of "paradigmatic" versus "syntagmatic" transformations, as described by Holbraad. While shamanism tries to relate the transformation of paradigmatic states of being (animals and humans, living beings and spirits), divination renders the shift of different ontological status in a vertical way, translating – using a structuralist expression – paradigms into syntagms. In other words, it renders the abstract and the transcendent into concrete instances that can be related in an ordinal sequence, and, as such, be subject to direction, motility and change:

> *the fact that these transformations scale themselves as changes of ontological status shows that deity–human relations are not given as cosmological fait accompli, but rather have to be accomplished by eliciting the deities from the relative ontological distance of transcendence to the relative proximity of immanence (Holbraad 2012: 54).*

CONCLUSIONS

As we have seen, ritual is one of the most powerful protagonists in Maya art. As Houseman and Severi have remarked (1998), the work of ritual can be characterized as the establishment of complex relationships and the enactment of paradoxical states of being. Of course, time can be one of the dimensions of ritual. Some Maya testimonies, both Classic and Postclassic, seem to point towards the idea of time as a ritual construct.

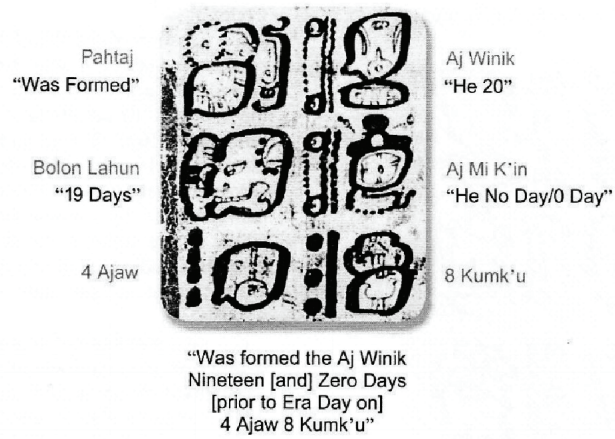


Figure 8.
The creation of the 20-day period in the Dresden Codex (Callaway, 2006).

We have mentioned the Maya verb *pat*, which denotes the creation of such things as statues and buildings. However, in the so-called "Serpent Numbers" passages in the Dresden Codex, commented by Carl Callaway (2006), the very same verb is used to allude to the creation of the *winal*, the number 20 that was also synonym of the 20 day period of the Maya calendar. As Erik Velázquez García comments:

> *In these passages, the origin of the chronological cycles of the Long Count, born before the creation, is referred. But there is something very important there: the verb used is the same that Maya people used to talk about the building of houses, edifices and statues: pat, to form, as a transitive, or "to be formed", as a passive. It can be suggested that in the Maya Chronotope time was "build" in the same way*

> *that the sculptures and buildings that housed them. Callaway suggests that time periods had consciousness, will, personality and a human-like behavior (Velázquez García, 2011).*

Not only that. We have seen that "royal names" were also subjects to this process of form giving. Following Wagner (1981), I suggest that this process of artificial rendering can be extended to the notion of power in Maya courts, a power that is "done" through art and ritual and not merely projected through it.

In the more ritual sense, the life of the gods and ancestors was given by myth, but its relationship with living humans was not given, it was constructed. Divination can be said to be the becoming of *a priori*, mythic time and calendarical beings unto subjects, objects, and events. In this case, however, the result is none other than the invention of man. In a similar way to Viveiros de Castro's claim (1992) that cannibalism was the anthropology of the Araweté, we may say that Maya Calendarics were Maya anthropology: the very conception of man that emerged of Maya ritual and art.

Another conclusion, via Holbraad (2006), can be made: the dissolution of "the problem of concept versus thing" in the anthropology of art. In his paper on the ritual role of the *aché* powder used by Ifá diviners or babalawos, Holbraad demonstrates that concrete material determinations (divining boards, powders, etc.) encompass the very notion of ontological power and are *identical to it*:

> *Just like in a motile logical universe powder can be power, deities can be marks on the divining board, and so forth, so concepts and things can also be each other. All it takes is to stop thinking of concepts and things as self-identical entities, and start imagining them as self-differential motions (Holbraad 2012: 54).*

In Classic Maya world, the "names" of dynasties were created in the same way that ritual objects were created. That is, Maya ritual objects were Maya power. Maya artistic treasures were, then, not only a matter of iconic representation or the desire of posterity. They encompass the very notion of man, power, and nature among Classic Maya people, all of which were radically different from ours.

In a perhaps premature and preliminary way, this article tried to seriously take the thoughts embedded in this material legacy ("thinking through things", as Holbraad proclaims) and give some steps towards the endeavor of the Anthropology of Mesoamerican art.

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