



## A NEW LOOK AT THE NAME PHRASE OF THE "SNAKE LADY"

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In the corpus of Codex-Style vessels, one of the most important mythical episodes is one in which a lady lying on the ground conjures K'awiil (Coe 1973, 1978; Robicsek and Hales 1981). The long snake foot of this deity curls around the Lady and opens its maw just in front of her to reveal an old god. Often the scene is observed by bundled (recently born?) gods such as Chaahk and the Pax God as well as other individuals.

Paradigmatic among these scenes, and perhaps the most exquisitely executed, is that on vessel K5164 of Justin Kerr's Maya Vase Database (Kerr n.d.) (Fig. 1).



**Figure 1:** K5164 (photo by Justin Kerr).

The main text on this vessel is probably a long single sentence, which may be transcribed as follows, starting with the date:



**Figure 2:** Detailed view of the hieroglyphic text containing the name phrase of Snake Lady on K5164 [blocks 12-15] (photo by Justin Kerr).

[1] HUXLAJUN-"MULUK" [2] HUKLAJUN-PAAX [3] SIY-ya-ja [4] HUK-? [5] CHAK-K'AWIIL? [6] u-MAM? [7] a-ku [8] ?-IK' [9] a-mu-chi [10] TUUN-ni-AJAW [11] ya-AL [12] IX-TZAK [13] ko-tz'o?-ma [14] "ANIMAL HEAD" [15] IX-WAY[b'i]

Apparently, the text tells us of the birth of a deity with a somewhat long name phrase ending at position [10]. The name of the lady in the scene follows the "child-of-mother" collocation at [11] (Fig. 2). Her nominal phrase, and in particular its interpretation, will be the topic of this note.

There is some evidence that the rabbit head (T759) at [13] may be a syllable with a value /tz'o/ (Stuart 1999:173-174). The transitive CVC root *kotz'* has the meaning of "to roll, wind, wrap" in some Maya languages such as Ch'olti' (Moran 1935) and Colonial Yucatec (Vásquez 2001:339). A syllabic value of /pe/ has also been proposed for this glyph which is productive in some contexts. Curiously, both roots *kotz'* (Vásquez 2001: 339) and *kop* (Vásquez 2001: 336) have similar meanings in Colonial Yucatec.

The unusual sign at [14] bears some resemblance with T790 in Thompson's catalogue (Thompson 1962). However, some of the details are not quite right. In some examples the teeth are usually fang-like and the nose is too long and thin. The glyph appears in several places in the Dresden Codex (pages 52-57, 61, 69). In page 52 it is preceded by a compound that may be **to-TOOK**´. In page 54 it is preceded by a /**NAAH**/ sign and the teeth and body markings are very characteristic of snakes. In page 69 it appears with a **-/na/** suffix which is consistent with /**CHAN**/, snake. In the sequel, I will use T790 to refer to this sign but with reserves.

David Stuart (1999:173-174) has tentatively assumed this sign to read /**CHAN**/, thus yielding the plausible interpretation of the phrase as *kotz'o'm chan*, "snake winder" and referring to the iconography of the scene on K5164. Thus, the name of the lady is commonly assumed to read "Lady who conjures, snake winder" (Stuart 1999:173-174). This interpretation, however, poses some problems. Besides the still uncertain reading of T759, there is the question of the animal head in glyph [14] being read as

/CHAN/ (“snake”) since it seems to represent a different animal. If present at all, a snake head must be conflated.

The first clue to the identity of this glyph comes from another vessel depicting the same mythical episode, K2067 (Fig. 3).



Figure 3: Kerr 2067 (photo by Justin Kerr).



Figure 4: Detail of the Old God on K2067 (photo by Justin Kerr)

The text is essentially a compact version of the one found on K5164 and seems to be composed mostly of name tags. The most interesting information here comes from the name tag for the old god emerging from the snake’s mouth (Fig. 4). The text may be transcribed as follows:

[1] “JEWEL”-UK’ [2] T790-na

The main sign at [1] is clearly /UK’/ (or perhaps UCH´, “to drink”) as may be verified by the /HA’/ (“water”) sign in the mouth of the T1008 head variant. This reading is also in close agreement with the iconography since the old god presents a vessel (presumably with some kind of drink inside) to the reclining lady.

The glyph at [2] is very likely the same animal that appears at position [14] on K5164. The black spots above the eye, the mouth and nose seem very much the same. The final -/na/ is likely a phonetic complement since it is apparently optional. The suffix, however, is also consistent with a /CHAN/ reading for the main sign and so the identification of the glyph is not only secure from this example alone.

The next clue to the identification of this glyph comes from a vessel apparently not connected, at least based on iconographic grounds, to the “Snake Lady” complex. This vessel, K4113 (Fig. 5) represents a court scene where a form of God N talks to a seated lord in the presence of a dwarf. The old god may be presenting the vessel to the lord, a pattern also seen on K2067.



Figure 5: K4113 (photo by Justin Kerr).



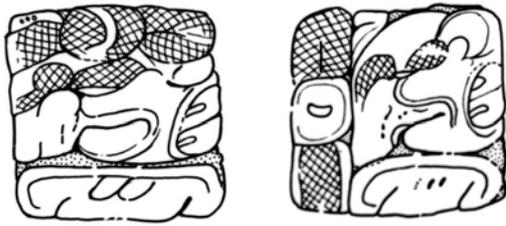
Figure 6: Detail of the old god on K2067 (photo by Justin Kerr)

The main text (Fig. 6) may be transcribed as follows:

[1] HUL-li [2] ji?-ya? [3] ya-EK'-AJAW [4] YAX-ba-? [5] wi-WINIK-ki [6] PAWAJ?-TUUN-ni [7] "JEWEL"-UK'-Ia? [8] T790-na [9] ? [10] u-BAAH [11] u-CH'AB [12] ya-AK'-li

The inscription starts with the arrival, *hul-i*, of an individual who is named in the following collocations. The subject of the verb appears to be the old God N. The collocation at [6] may represent the headdress of God N followed by **TUUN-ni**, yielding *pawaj?-tuun*. It is also possible that it reads **hi-ni**, yielding *hin*, a possible demonstrative pronoun meaning "this one", albeit in a rare synharmonic (late?) spelling. In the collocations [7] and [8] we have the same sequence found on K2067: "JEWEL"-**UK'** T790-na. The appearance of this sequence on both vessels in association with an old god presenting a vessel is evidence that T790 is in fact part of the name phrase of the god N individuals in K2067, K4113 and K5164. It is also clear in this example that the main glyph is not a snake (**CHAN**) but appears to represent the head of a small mammal.

Finally, T790 also appears in the Initial Series of several Classic Period inscriptions (Grube 2000:101, Fig. 16). In this context, it functions as the name of a deity that performs some form of fire ritual associated with the given calendar cycle. The two most common deities are a form of the Maize God and the other a form of God N with the animal head. Its name is often written as: **PAWAJ?-** T790-na (Figure 7).



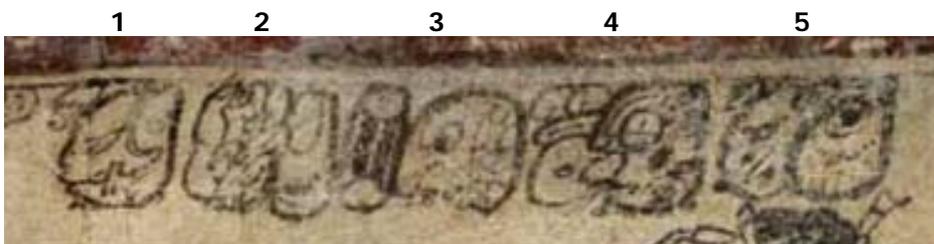
**Figure 7:** The T790 variant in the fire rituals of the initial series, stucco glyphs from Palenque (from Schele 2005).

If we assume that the T790 collocation in K5164 is in fact part of the name of the God N being born then the interpretation of the name of the lady as “lady who conjures, snake winder” must be revised. Indeed, if the *kotz'* root is the correct reading, the “wound up thing” must be the newly born God N and not the snake.



**Figure 8:** K1382 (photo by Justin Kerr).

In the other vessels of the “Snake Lady” complex: K719, K1079, K1081, K1198, K1382, K1813, K3202, K3702, K3716, K4485, K5230, K5862, K6754 and K7838, only one other contains a similar name phrase for the “Snake Lady”, K1382 (Figure 8).



**Figure 9:** The name phrase of Snake Lady on K1382 (photo by Justin Kerr)

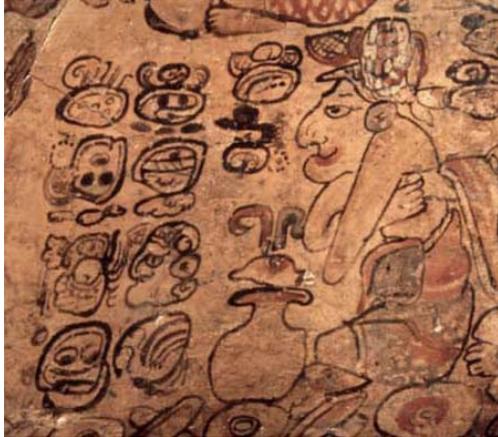
The text (Fig. 9) may be transcribed as:

[1] IX [2] TZAK-ja [3] ko-tz'o? [4] SAAK -“NEW ANIMAL HEAD” [5] IX[WAY]-ba

Thus it is rather similar to that on K5164 but the T790 sign is replaced with a **SAAK** followed by a different animal head. This may be related to the form of God N being born. Indeed, the appearance of this God N is rather distinct from that in K5164,

with an almost Spartan outfit which includes simple earrings and a star-shaped necklace.

From the above discussion, the deity named at position [4] in both K5164 and K1382 must represent the form of the God N emerging from the mouth of the snake.



**Figure 10:** The phonetic evidence on the available examples is not sufficient to provide a reading for the sign T790. However, the final **-na** on K2067 and K5164, as well as on the examples from Initial Series contexts together with a possible collocation **sa-bi** on the text of K530 associated with God N (Figure 10, position [1]) may be of relevance (assuming an underspelled final **-na**). In fact, in many Maya languages *sajbin* or *sahbin* is the word for “weasel” (*Mustela sp.*) (Kaufman 2003:572):

Proto-Maya	* <u>saq=b'iin</u>	“weasel”
Proto-Chol	* <u>sahb'in</u>	“weasel”
Yucatec	<u>sahb'in</u>	“weasel”
Itza	<u>sab'in och</u>	“comadreja”
Ch'olti'	<u>sajb'in</u>	“comadreja”
Ch'orti'	<u>sajb'in</u>	“comadreja”
Tzeltal	<u>sahb'in</u>	“comadreja”

This would be a plausible match for the animal head visible on these examples, apparently that of a small mammal.



**Figure 11:** The Long-Tailed Weasel (photo by Alden Johnson, copyright © 1999 California Academy of Sciences)

The Long-Tailed Weasel (*Mustela frenata*, Fig. 11), for example, is rather common in the Maya area and presents similar attributes to T790 glyph such as the pronounced nose, dark markings near the eyes and round ears. The “ak'bal” marks in the examples from Figure 7 likely identify the depicted animal as nocturnal as is the case with weasels, although they sometimes can be seen by day (Kerry Hull, personal communication 2005). This connection with the night is further supported by the fact that, among the Ch'orti', there are several naguals (some quite fearsome) in the form of weasels (Kerry Hull, personal communication 2005). Also, the Tayra (*Eira sp.*), a larger cousin of the weasel also common in the Maya area, is known in Spanish in Cent-

ral America as “cabeza de viejo” (Kerry Hull, personal communication 2005). If this Spanish name is a translation from a native Maya language, this could provide the rationale for associating the head of a weasel or tayra with the old God N. These bits of information support the idea that these small mammals likely played an important role in Maya myths and that their association with God N in the script is not that unlikely.

Finally, there is the question of the interpretation of the name of the “Snake Lady”. On the scenes associated with this myth, other gods often appear in bundles and their births are mentioned in the accompanying texts. A particularly good example is that of K1813, where the names of several gods, including the bundled Chaahk and perhaps the Pax God appear in a list of born deities. A possible interpretation is that this “winding” or “wrapping” refers to the act of taking the newly born God N and wrapping it in a bundle, like a baby (Fig. 12). Indeed, Moran (1935) gives the following entry for *kotz'* – “wrap up in leaves, roll up in leaves” which conceivably may be extended semantically to “making a bundle”. Another possibility is that this “winding, wrapping” refers to the act of taking the baby God N in her arms, winding her arms around him.



**Figure 12:** Detail from K1081: baby Chaahk and Pax God wrapped in bundles witness the birth of God N (photo by Justin Kerr).

If this conjecture is correct, these scenes represent the consecutive births of deities by the conjuring of the “Snake Lady”. Each deity born is wrapped in a bundle, much like a baby, and is placed on a platform where it witnesses the following births. Apparently, the God N in these scenes is the next one in line after Chaahk and the Pax god.

## ***Conclusions***

In this note I analyse the name phrase of the “Snake Lady”, one of the leading characters in an important mythical episode represented on Codex Style Ceramics from the Late Classic Period. Based on this analysis I propose that there is no direct reference to the snake that curls around the lady on these scenes. Instead, it is the name of the newly born God N that is attached to her name phrase and involved in the still problematic *kotz'o'm* collocation.

## ***Acknowledgements***

I would like to thank Kerry Hull for his insightful comments on this work and Justin Kerr for providing the Maya Vase Database. Any mistakes or misapprehensions are my own.

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