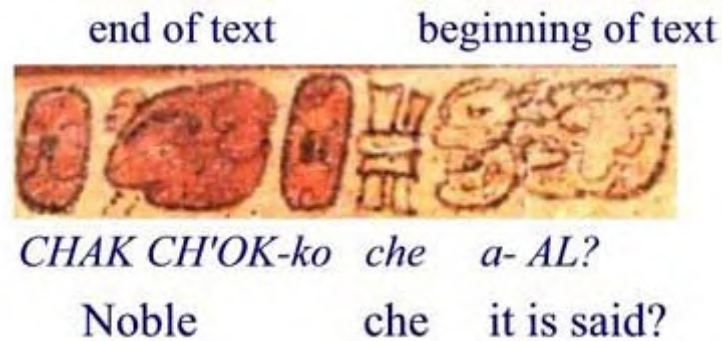


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A Comparative Analysis of Ch'orti' Verbal Art and the Poetic Discourse Structures of Maya Hieroglyphic Writing



Research Year: 2001

Culture: Ch'orti' Maya

Chronology: Classic

Location: Jocotán, Guatemala

Sites: Jocotán, Escobial, Amatillo, Kanapará Arriba, Las Lajas, Guareruche, Quebrada Seca, Pakrén, Titikopote

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Introduction

This project, funded by the Foundation for the Advancement of Mesoamerican Studies, Inc. (FAMSI), focused on documenting forms of poetic discourse in Ch'orti' Maya. The principal goal of this project was to record, transcribe, and translate the various prayers and oral histories which contain poetic structuring in Ch'orti'. This effort was in a large part motivated by the fact that such speech forms are rapidly disappearing among the Ch'orti' today. The younger generation has largely abandoned the use of poetic discourse in conjunction with their ceremonial contexts. This project was an attempt to document to the fullest degree possible the various manifestations of verbal art (in their ritual performance whenever possible).

The second goal of this project was to gain an understanding of the structuring methods and poetic imagery associated with Ch'orti' verbal art. The dominant use of poetic language in ceremonies assures the presence of archaic referents and highly metaphorical expressions that may not appear outside of these ritual contexts. Poetic structuring aids in the preservation of fossilized relationships between concepts through couplets and other devices. Ch'orti' poetic forms of speech are themselves a boon for decoding the complex mythology and metaphors underlying Ch'orti' ritual discourse.

The final goal of this project was to undertake a comparative analysis of Ch'orti' verbal art and the poetic discourse structures of Maya hieroglyphic writing. Support from FAMSI made possible the fieldwork portion of this project necessary to gather sufficient data on Ch'orti' poetics for this final comparative analysis. The research aim of this final stage in the project is to use the Ch'orti' data as a kind of template for a large-scale study on the poetic discourse forms found in the hieroglyphic script. Current research (Houston *et al.* 2000) has shown that Ch'orti' closely reflects the language of the Maya inscriptions grammatically, phonologically, and lexically. I believe that this tight-knit relationship between Ch'orti' and the language comprising most of the hieroglyphic texts anticipates the presence of shared poetic features and metaphorical imagery as well.

The research for this stage of the project funded by FAMSI began in May of 2001 through January of 2002. Further fieldwork will be carried out from January through July of 2002. Fieldwork took place in Jocotán, Guatemala and its surrounding hamlets such as Escobial, Amatillo, Las Lomas, Las Lajas, Guareruche, Quebrada Seca, Suchiker, Pelillo Negro, Kanaparé Arriba, Pakrén, and Titikopote. Data gathered from this portion of the project supported by FAMSI resulted in the collection, transcription, and translation of over 40 curing prayers from 16 different Ch'orti' healers. Four non-healing related ceremonies were also recorded. In addition, 22 folktales from nine individuals were also collected and analyzed for poetic content. In terms of lexical content, the analysis of these texts resulted in the documentation of well over 100 archaic terms that are restricted to these ritual contexts and do not appear in any Ch'orti' dictionary to-date. Once gathered, these texts, in addition to another 35 texts from previous fieldwork supported by FAMSI, then served as a basis for detailed discussions with these and other healers about their poetic forms, metaphors, and concepts related to healing. The summary presented below is a preliminary assessment of the data collected thus far.

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Ch'orti' Poetic Structuring

The most commonly occurring instances of poetic discourse today are in healing ceremonies. While *curanderos* (traditional healers) are becoming increasingly difficult to find in many hamlets, there are a sufficient number who share a common tradition to provide a substantial amount of poetic texts. Inherent in such healing rituals is the consistent presence of archaic terminology that is not well understood by the even the healers themselves at times. An immediately apparent characteristic of Ch'orti' curing rites is the generous use of Spanish forms by *curanderos*. This represents a complicated mix of incorporating the 'language of power' into their speech for reasons of prestige and, more pragmatically, being an aid in completing couplet halves when a close match may be difficult to find in Ch'orti', e.g. *tu't e rum, tu't e tierra*, "on the earth, on the land." This has also resulted in the replacement of many ritual terms with Spanish "equivalents," though in reality many the Spanish lexical items are heavily reinterpreted.

John Fought's important contributions to understanding Ch'orti' time narratives (1976) and cyclical patterning in Ch'orti' discourse (1985) stand as the only aspects of Ch'orti' verbal art that have been studied to-date. In his article "*Time Structuring in Chorti (Mayan) Narratives*" (1976) Fought argued that the Ch'orti' order events in narratives based on deixis, relational elements in addition to a combination of semantic components and linguistic devices, and rhetorical means (such as narrative particles and repetition). In another study titled "*Cyclical Patterns in Chorti' (Mayan) Literature*" (1985). Fought argued that couplets arise through "the exploitation of the most basic syntactic resources of the Mayan languages" (135). Fought contends that Ch'orti' couplets are based on two fundamental classes of predication. The first is equational and intransitive which he defines as "two items [that] are juxtaposed, [and] placed on symmetrical and equal footing" (135). The second form is the possessive type of predication in which "the possessed constituent bears a prefix (or occurs with a specialized particle) which subordinates it to the possessor (135). Couplets in Ch'orti', according to Fought, operate on a large-scale and multiple level organizational cycle (136).

In terms of poetic content, Ch'orti' follows closely in the tradition of most Mayan languages in employing couplets at the primary poetic structuring mechanism. Thus far in this project my research has focused on documenting poetic speech within prayers from healing ceremonies whose core composition consists of parallel couplets. Of

primary importance in Ch'orti' curing rites is the description of the evil spirits who are responsible for the illness by means of synecdoche in the couplet lines. The most common is to refer to the body of the evil spirit through different combinations of certain elements such as "hand," "foot," "face," "walking," and "running."

<i>takar umakje'yr uyok</i> <i>takar umakje'yr uk'ab'</i>	with the water-stopper of its foot with the water-stopper of its hand
<i>takar usututjutir u't</i> <i>takar usututjutir uk'ab'</i>	with the whirlwind of its face with the whirlwind of its hand
<i>takar usakb'urichir u't</i> <i>takar usakb'urichir uxamb'ar</i>	with the simple heat of its face with the simple heat of its walking
<i>takar ufiebrir uk'ab'ob'</i> <i>takar ufiebrir u'tob'</i>	with the fever of their hands with the fever of their faces
<i>takar umalairir ixamb'ar</i> <i>takar umalairir iwajner</i>	with the bad air of your walking with the bad air of your running

In these cases the body of the malevolent spirit that causing the illness is referred to through synecdoche by either mentioning two of its body parts or the actions associated with them. This use of synecdoche in these couplet structures acts as a framing device for the structure of much of the prayer. In the example cited above the synecdoche of "their hands/their faces" stems from the Ch'orti' belief that evil spirits residing in one of some 500,000 (or so) different levels of the underworld 'play' (i.e. 'mischievously cause illness', see [Hull 2000](#)) with people in this world by using their whole body. In this last example from a prayer for a woman who has a fever the evil spirits are the ones responsible for infecting her with a form of their 'mal calor', or 'evil heat.' (The translation of all terms relating to 'heat' and 'sweat' in these curing contexts are approximate renderings since the concepts do not lend themselves to a simple definition). There are many distinct forms of injurious heat that these spirits possess that they can transfer to humans (see description of some of them below).

Couplet Deletion

Couplets in Ch'orti' consistently make use of verbal phrase deletion in the second half of the couplet line. For example,

<i>A'si wato'b' tamar enyax alaguna</i> <i>tamar ensak alaguna</i>	They come to play in the green lagoon in the white lagoon
---	--

The second half of the couplet truncates the verbal phrase and only a prepositional phrase follows. The lagoons referred to here are large basins of water in the sky in which evil spirits "play." There are varying opinions on how many of these basins there are but the number is usually put at between two and four. Some place them at each corner of sky. The constant repetition of *enyax* and *ensak* by Ch'orti' *curanderos* is today primarily a poetic framing device for a given couplet. No *curandero* with whom I have spoken has offered an explanation for their usage in general. Most say they probably refer to the colors "green" (*yaxyax*) and "white" (*saksak*). Indeed, in references to water and watery places these color associations are directly relevant, e.g. *enyax mar* (sea), *ensak playa* (beach), *enyax pila* (trough), *enyax corriente* (gutter), *ensak alaguna* (lagoon). Such an explanation, however, simply does not fully explain the hundreds of contexts in which they can occur. (For example, *enyax* and *ensak* appear with table, temple, prince, shade, patio, corral, graveyard, oven, highway, intersection, street, chicken, cemetery, incensario, pan, house, grinding stone, lightning bolt, and cross of Christ, just to mention a few). Instead, I believe they are usually gratuitous and decorative and used as a stock structuring technique for encasing any reference within a poetic framework. A good example of the use of *enyax* and *ensak* can be seen in the following prayer which mentions different names of copal:

a'si tamar enyax de munición
ensak munición
a'si tamar enyax palanqueta
ensak palanqueta
a'si tamar enyax copal
ensak copal
a'si tamar enyax bamba
ensak bamba
a'si tamar enyax xarten
ensak xarten
a'si tamar enyax ollita
ensak ollita
a'si tamar enyax bambita
ensak bambita
a'si tamar enyax incensario
ensak incensario
a'si tamar enyax humazón
ensak humazón

Ch'orti' curing rites and ceremonial prayers make use of common pairings of terms that together form that basic structure of a couplet phrase. Examples of this can be seen in antithetic parallelisms such as "day/night":

ch'a'r a'syob' atz'i ya' tamar e silencio día
tamar e silencio noche
 They are playing indeed in the silent day
 in the silent night

Another prominent couplet combination is *jarari'/b'aki* (woven-like pain/bones) that are used together to represent the idea of a 'pain over the whole body' caused by the menacing spirits. Note their structural use in the following curing prayer for a patient with diarrhea:

war ijolchan jarari'
war ixtijb'ya'n b'aki
war ixloch'te'yr b'aki
war ixloch'te'yr jarari'
war ijolchan b'aki
ch'a'r ijolchan jarari'
war ixtijb'ya'n b'aki
war ixtijb'ya'n jarari'
ch'a'r ijolchan b'aki
war ijolchan jarari'
war ixtijb'ya'n b'aki
war ixloch'te'yr b'aki
war ixloch'te'yr jarari'
ch'a'r takar uch'ajrje'yr ixamb'ar
ch'a'r takar umalairir ixamb'ar
ch'a'r ijolchan jarari'
war ijolchan b'aki
war isaksak b'aki
war isaksak jarari'
war ixjolchan b'aki
war ixjolchan jarari'
ch'a'r takar e Niño Colerín de Cristo
Cristo Colerín de Cristo

The content of this section of the prayer provides a clear example of the often rigid couplet patterning found in Ch'orti' and many other Mayan languages. In most of the couplets in this section of the prayer there is no alternation in the verbal phrase. The changes in the different couplet lines occur in the final element *jarari'/b'aki* and sometimes in the present participle *war* which can be substituted by *ch'a'r* (from a verb meaning "to be lying down" but in Ch'orti' is used much like the verb "*estar*" in Spanish in many cases). "Niño Colerín de Cristo, Niño Colerín de Cristo" is the name of the "*dueño de la enfermedad de diarrea*" (the master of the sickness of diarrhea). It is interesting to note the variability between the second person singular (*i-*) and plural pronoun (*ix-*) on the intransitive verbs. The healer is speaking directly to the evil spirits causing the pains of this female patient. He uses both singular "you" and the plural "you all" interchangeably, even varying them within a single couplet phrase, e.g. *war ijolchan jarari'*, *war ixtijb'ya'n b'aki*, "you are 'evil heating' with woven-like pains, you all are jumping (as from fright) on the bones." Such uses of paired terminology are frequent with *curanderos* from all different Ch'orti'-speaking areas I have worked and show them to be part of a common poetic tradition.

For illustrative purposes, here are just a few other regularly-encountered paired or triplet terms and phrases (note most of them are in Spanish) used by Ch'orti' *curanderos* today:

puerta nacimiento de Cristo, puerta saliente de Cristo (birth door of Christ, eastern door of Christ)
camposanto mayor, camposanto real [graveyards in the other world where evil spirits reside]
mesa antibano, mesa anterior [altars in heaven]
sombra, nawalch'u'r (shade, house) [*nawalch'u'r* is a word for "house" only used by *curanderos*]
mesón del mundo, peteción del mundo [types of altars]
estumeka, sendeyu't (this world, blurry eye disease)
silencio hora, silencio noche (silent hour, silent night, i.e. between 12:00-2:00 am)
silencio hora, silencio día (silent hour, silent day)
día, hora (day, hour)
ángel, criatura [both refer to an innocent person afflicted by an evil spirit]
espíritu, ángel [both refer to an innocent person afflicted by an evil spirit]
4 esquinero del mundo, 4 pilastre del mundo (4 corners of the world, 4 pillars of the world)
mediante cielo, mediante gloria (middle of the sky, middle of the heaven)
hierbita llana, nawalch'a'n [names for the tobacco used in curing]
ajxujch'a'n, nawalch'a'n [names for tobacco used in curing]
defensor, abogado (defender, lawyer)
mundo, cielo (earth, sky)
Santa Madre, Santa Tierra (Holy Mother, Holy Earth)
grado, estado (grade, level) [levels of the underworld]
pan, agua (bread, water)
oro, plata (gold, silver)
sagrado, bedecido (holy, blessed)
ángel, senteyo, estrella (angel, lightning bolt, star)
tijtijutir, b'ajk'ut (intimidation that weakens another's spirit, fright)
sin falta, sin causa, sin delito (without fault, without cause, without sin)
jolchan, mundo (type of evil heat, world)
agua, mundo (water, world)
criatura, angelito [both refer to an innocent person afflicted by an evil spirit]
espíritu, umajín (spirit, 'soul')
mesa olvidado, mesa desconocido [altars in heaven]

Deletion

Deletion as a poetic device also occurs with the erasure of certain elements in the second half of the couplet. In the following example, the preposition in the second line is deleted:

takar uk'uxujrterir uwaporyantir u'tob'
uwaporyantir uk'ab'
with their stomach pains, the evil heat of their faces
the evil heat of their hands

The term *uwaporyantir* refers to another brand of bad heat that the evil spirits use to "grab" people (i.e. make them sick). *Uwaporyantir* comes from the Spanish word "*vapor*" and is conceived of as a kind of sweat-like heat that permeates from the bodies of the evil spirits and infects the person when they come in contact with these spirits.

Augmentative Couplets

Augmentative couplets often show deletion of the first part of the second line but then further explain or clarify the following term in the second half of the second line:

Example 1:

A'si watar puerta saliente
puerta saliente de Cristo
They come to play at the eastern door
the eastern door of Christ

Example 2:

A'si wato'b' tamar e 17 cementario
e 17 cementario infernal
They come to play in the 17 cemeteries
the 17 infernal cemeteries

In the first example, "the eastern door" is amplified with the additional description of it being "the eastern door of Christ." This is an important poetic technique of Ch'orti' formal discourse that adds a sense of "elegance," one informant put it, to the prayer. It is at "door of Christ" (there is one door at each of the four corners of the universe) that the malevolent spirits are said to both "play" and pass through on their way to cause a particular sickness. In the second example, the poetic effect is realized by augmenting a more detailed description of the 17 cemeteries as the "17 infernal cemeteries." This refers to the important 17th level of the underworld where some of the most dangerous spirits are thought to reside.

Triplet Constructions

Triplets are standard occurrences in Ch'orti' formal discourse. They usually consist of ellipsis in the verbal or prepositional phrase and the subsequent alteration of a single term in each of the following lines:

Example 1:

A'si taka uyatruvesir ujolchanir ukolera

yususirantir ukolera
 usakb'urichir ukolera.
 They play with their inhibiting force of the heat of their cholera
the sigh of their cholera
 the simple heat of their cholera

Example 2:

<p style="text-align: center;"><i>a'si tamar enyax rueda</i> <i>tamar enyax rueda</i> <i>tamar uruedir a'syob'</i></p>	<p style="text-align: center;">They play in the green ring in the white ring in the ring they play</p>
--	--

Example 3:

<p style="text-align: center;"><i>A'si tame' gotera</i> <i>tame' enyax gotera</i> <i>sak gotera</i></p>	<p style="text-align: center;">They play in the eaves [of the house] in the green eaves white eaves</p>
---	---

In terms of content, in Example 1 the evil spirits are said to "play" (*a'si*, the plural is commonly not marked in Ch'orti') with *uyatavesir*, "their inhibiting force." This refers to the fact that the spirit is 'blocking' or in some way 'obstructing' the well being of the person. In contexts of pregnant women it usually means that the spirit is sideways in the womb and blocking the passageway of the child. It is interesting to note in Example 1 that it is the 'inhibiting force' of the spirit's *jolchan* that is responsible for the sickness. The term *jolchan* is a kind of 'bad heat' that is inherent at each level of the underworld. Informants regularly translate it as "*sudor*" (perspiration), "*calor*" (heat), "*calor peligroso*" (dangerous heat), "*el calor del mundo*" (the heat of the world). It is transferred between menacing spirits and humans as well as between humans. If a man arrives at a house angry the Ch'orti' say that his *jolchan* can "*domina el espíritu*" (overpower the spirit) of a child and cause them to fall ill. In other cases the *jolchan* of a man and a woman engaged in sexual relations can be passed to a man who may see them by accident. Through this it can cause him to get sick since his *me'yn* (shadow or spirit) was weakened by being embarrassed. Lightning strikes are called "*mal jolchanes*" (bad heats) which can infect or "grab" ("*agarra*") a person near the strike spot. These lightning bolts are sent by sub-group of the God's angels who are said "to live below" and do their evil "work" when God sends his primary angels to do their "good work."

The second line of the triplet of Example 1 uses a form of the word for "sigh," *yususiryantir*, that refers to the exhaling of an 'evil breath' that is akin to the bad heat I have described earlier. The third line of this triplet uses a specialized compound that is only used in healing contexts. *Usakb'urichir* is the possessed form of *sak*, meaning here "simple," and *b'urich*, meaning "sweat; evil heat." So whereas some other forms of 'heat' are stronger, *sakb'urich* is a milder yet still potent form of bad heat.

The structure of Example 1 shows verbal and prepositional deletion in the second and third line of the triplet. Such syncope is a hallmark of Ch'orti' verbal art.

In Example 2 a triplet is formed when referring to the watery rings in which the evil spirits are thought to play. These are specifically the rings that occasionally appear

around the sun and moon that usually signal the coming of the rains. The structure of this triplet is noteworthy in that the verbal phrase comes at the beginning of the first line and is repeated at end of the third. This is a type of poetic enveloping of the triplet as a unit of discourse.

Finally, the text of Example 3 describe the eaves of a house as the location for the "play" of the evil spirits. The Ch'orti' believe that evil spirits come down when the rains begin and play around the eaves of houses. Families are taught to avoid sitting or standing under the eaves during rain storms since one will surely get "grabbed" by one of these spirits and will fall ill. This triplet shows continual deletion as the triplet progresses as is commonly observed in Ch'orti' poetic structuring.

Chiasmus

Christenson's (1988) landmark article on chiasmus in Mesoamerican poetic texts showed how often large portions of oral texts were constructed in complex chiastic forms. Ch'orti' poetic tradition does make use of chiasmus, albeit on a limited scale. The majority are no longer than the following excerpt from text from a curing rite:

Ajtamu de Estumeka
Ajtamu Sendeyu't
Ajsokyan de Estumeka
Ajsokoyan Sendeyu't
Ajgranillo de Estumeka
Ajgranillo de Sendeyu't
Ajsokolyan de Estumeka
Ajsokolyan de Sendeyu't
Ajtamu de Estumeka
Ajtamu de Sendeyu't

This segment of the prayer shows the common ABCDD'C'B'A' pattern of chiastic structures. The chiasm is comprised of five couplets whose order is reversed as the chiasmus declines. Within this chiasm several other poetic devices are likewise in use. For example, assonance is found in the opening syllable of each line. The axis of the chiasm focuses on the *granillo* or lumps that appeared on the body of the afflicted person. Their position at the center of the chiasm serves to emphasize this aspect of the illness in the healers prayer (as is the case for nearly all chiastic structures in Ch'orti' that I have noted). *Estumeka* is a reference to "this world" (but it can also be used as the name of a sacred place, like an altar, where incense is burned). The term *ajsokolyan* means "Shaker" and refers to the shaking and chills that this evil spirit is bringing to the person. *Sendeyu't* is the name of a kind of eye disease.

In this second example of chiasmus the central focus of the construction is the location of the afflicting spirit — the eaves of the house. This is also emphasized by repeating the pivotal phrase twice verbatim at the axis of the chiasm.

uyatavesir uyok
uyatavesir uk'ab'
uxek'onir yer uyatavesir uyok
uxek'onir yer uyatavesir uk'ab'
ya'syob' tama e gotera
ya'syob' tama e gotera
uxek'onir yer uyatavesir uyok
uxek'onir yer uyatavesir uk'ab'
uyatavesir uyok
takar uyatavesir uk'ab'
the inhibiting force of their legs
the inhibiting force of their hands
the stabbing pains of the inhibiting force of their legs
the stabbing pains of the inhibiting force of their hands
there they play in the eaves
there they play in the eaves
the stabbing pains of the inhibiting force of their legs
the stabbing pains of the inhibiting force of their hands
the inhibiting pains of their legs
with the inhibiting pains of their hands

Poetics and the Hieroglyphic Script

Perhaps one of the more unappreciated aspect of the Maya hieroglyphic writing system is its underlying poetic composition. Jossierand (1991) has laid an important foundation by sectioning texts into structural units of narrative. Coggins (1992) study on Copán Stela A succeeded in showing the metaphorical and highly poetic structure of this marvelous monument. My Master's thesis on the poetic forms of the hieroglyphs was the first large-scale study on the poetics of the hieroglyphic script (Hull 1993). Schele and Ayala's (1993) analysis of the Tablet of the 96 Glyphs from Palenque was pioneering effort to treat the hieroglyphic texts as literature, not simply as historical or mythological documents.

The following is a brief description of some of the poetic devices that were employed by the Maya scribes of the hieroglyphic script.

Couplets and Parallelism

It is safe to say that couplets are the primary poetic device found in all varieties of hieroglyphic inscriptions. Even very short texts on portable objects often make use of couplet structures. This inscription ([Figure 1](#)) from an unprovenanced text records the death of a ruler in couplet form:



Figure 1. Unprovenanced text. Drawing by Stephen Houston.

k'a'y usakik' it was finished his white wind (spirit)
utis his bad wind

The second line of the couplet shows verbal deletion (as is regularly found in Ch'orti' and other Mayan languages today). In fact, identical couplets, where the second line is exactly the same as the first, is very rare in the hieroglyphic inscriptions (as it is in Ch'orti' poetic texts). One of the few examples in the glyphs comes from the text of Quiriguá Altar P' (Figure 2), *uhub'uul nik? sak chan, uhub'uul nik? sak chan*, "its descending, the flower? white sky, its descending, the flower? white sky."

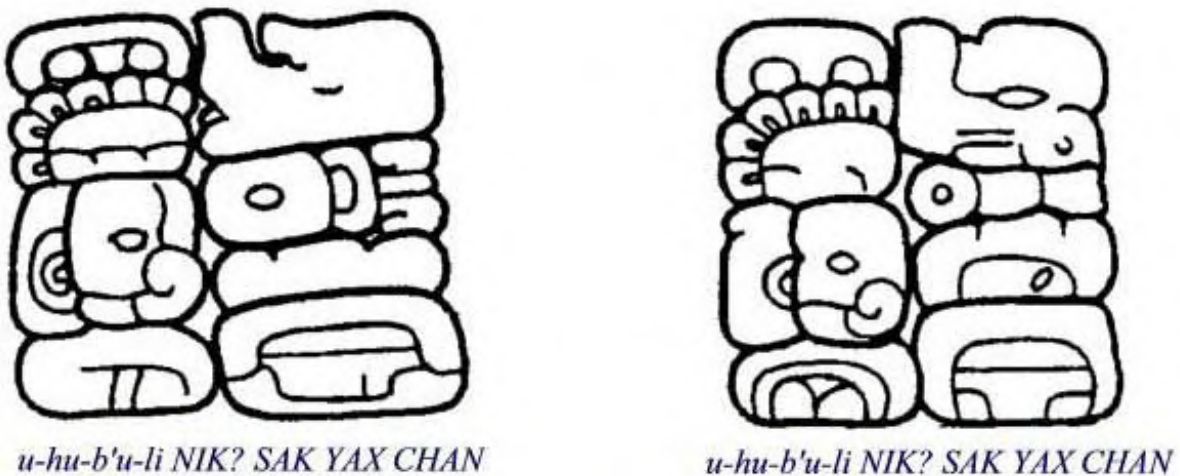


Figure 2. Quiriguá Altar P'. Drawing by Matt Loper.

In one case the Primary Standard Sequence ([Figure 3](#), and [Figure 4](#)) on a ceramic vase repeats the phrase *yuk'ib'*, "his drinking vessel". It may not be a simple coincidence that this repetition appears near the center point of a 13-glyph text. While it could be attributed to scribal error, this may also be an attempt to highlight this portion of the text through exact repetition in a couplet phrase.

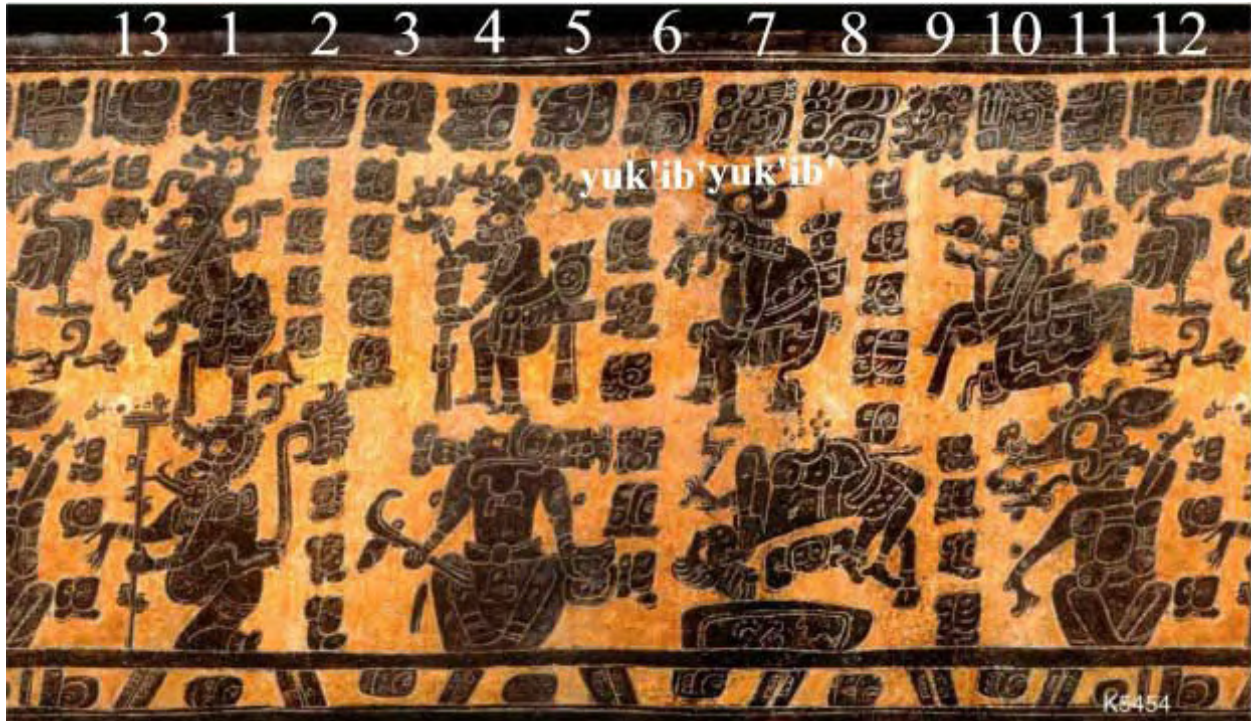


Figure 3. Kerr 5454.



yuk'ib yuk'ib'
his drinking vessel, his drinking vessel

Figure 4. Kerr 5454.

An incised Chochola-style vase from Xcalumkin (Kerr 8017) shows both a high level of visual and verbal artistic skill ([Figure 5](#)). The text of Column AB contains two successive, well-balanced couplets following the initial verbal phrase ([Figure 6](#)).



Figure 5. Kerr 8017.

A B

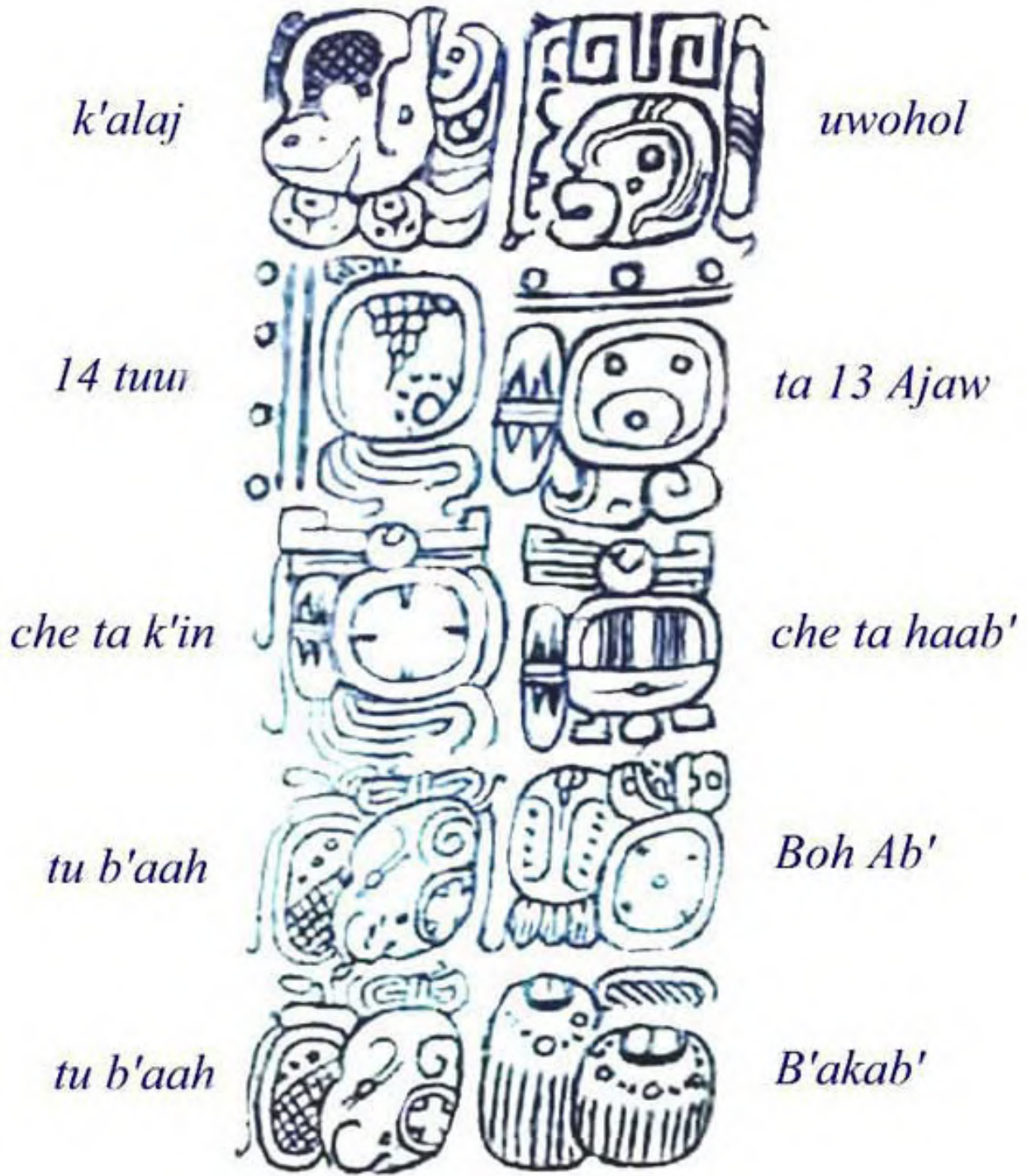


Figure 6. Kerr 8017. Drawing by Kerry Hull after K8017.

<i>k'alaj uwojol</i> <i>14 tuun ta 13 ajaw</i>	it was tied his glyphs the 14 th year in the k'atun 13 Ajaw
<i>che ta k'in</i> <i>che ta haab'</i>	it was said in the day / count of days it was said in the year / count of years
<i>tu b'aah boh aab'</i> <i>tu b'aah b'akab'</i>	his portrait Boh Aab' his portrait B'akab'

The inscriptions at Palenque represent the apogee of poetic achievement of the Classic Maya scribes. The long, well-preserved texts at Palenque show poetic structures that operate at both the macro and micro level. The Middle Panel of the Temple of the Inscriptions contain a number of couplets within the text:

B4-A5	'split-earth'- <i>laj tzuk?-uh-te'</i>
B5-A6	'split-earth'- <i>laj jo'-Mars Deity'-te'</i>

The text continues with yet another couplet:

B6	<i>chan-nal ikatz?</i>	heavenly bundle?
A7	<i>kab'al ikatz?</i>	earthly bundle?

Later in the same text appears the following couplet:

H7-G8	<i>elk'in ajawtak</i>	east lords
H8-I7	<i>ochk'in ajawtak</i>	west lords

In addition to the couplets mentioned above, there are also larger parallels structured throughout the text. For example,

<i>yak'aw</i>	??	<i>ukohaw hunwinik upik</i>	'G1'
<i>yak'aw</i>	<i>tzi-? 'G1'</i>	<i>ukohaw hunwinik upik</i>	<i>k'awiil</i>
<i>yak'aw</i>	<i>sak?hun</i>	<i>ukohaw hunwinik upik</i>	<i>ajaw</i>
	<i>uk'al-hun</i>	<i>ya-?? ux-?-ti-k'uh</i>	'G1' <i>k'awiil</i> 'G3'

he gave it 'quadripartite badge'	his headdress, twenty his bundle	G1
he gave it ??	his headdress, twenty, his bundle,	K'awiil (G2)
he gave it, the white headband,	his headdress, twenty, his bundle,	G3
his tying of the headband	??-three-??-for the gods,	G1, K'awiil, G3

Similar patterns of parallelism and other poetic devices can also be found later in this panel. This inscription is a masterpiece of verbal artistry among Maya hieroglyphic texts.

Even long texts on portable objects such as ceramics can be constructed nearly completely in couplet form. On Kerr 1440 about half of the text is comprised of various types of couplets ([Figure 7](#)). The following is a simple transcription (without translation) of sections of the text in order to show at a glance the conscious couplet structure of text:



Figure 7. Kerr 1440.

R1 – *k'uh ?-wa*
 S1 – *k'uh 4-?-na*
 R2 – *ta k'an matotib'ik*
 S2 – *ta k'an ta yotoot*
 R3-T2 – *naknaj san winik*
 S4-V1 – *liptaj san winik*
 A'2-Z3 – *4-ub'il k'inich*
 A'3-Z4 – *8-ub'il chij?*

A'4- A'5 – *ha-i ik' k'uh awax?*
 B'1-B'3 – *ha-i ak'aywi ek' hul? kab'*
 B'4-D'2 – *hina ?-yiyas tz'i?-na chehen utz'ib'-k'och? ti*
 E'1-F'2 – *?-yiyas tz'i?-na upi?-na sahal*

The inscriptions from this ceramic vessel exemplifies the sophisticated poetic tradition that was in place during the Late Classic. The text is quite difficult to translate at parts, a feature common to many poetic texts among the Ch'orti' also. Highly poetic inscriptions often show an increase in metaphorical content and complex imagery. Perhaps the best example of this level of poetic style is Stela A from Copán ([Figure 8](#), [Figure 9](#), [Figure 10](#)). Of this text Clemency Coggins (1992:102) has written: "This inscription employs ritual sets that have symmetries and closures at many levels – formal, iconographic, semantic, and phonetic..." Excluding calendrical information and eroded sections the core of the text reads:

<i>tz'ap lakam tun</i>	was erected, the great stone
<i>wa'wan yax sak tomaj</i>	it was stood up, Yax Sak Tomaj
<i>tz'apji(y) lakam tuun</i>	was erected, the great stone
<i>wa'wan k'an tuun(?) -il uk'ab'a'</i>	it was stood up, Precious Stone was its name
<i>chami tzipti' ch'ahom</i>	he died Tzipti' the youth (?)
<i>tzipti' nuun</i>	Tzipti' the broken speaker (?)
<i>uxte' maax pujwi ajaw</i>	3 Monkey Lord of Pujwi
<i>'kak' ti' chan ma ajaw</i>	Fire-is-the-Mouth-of-the-Snake Lord of Ma
<i>b'olon iplaj b'aak nab' (?) k'in</i>	many strengths bone painting (?) ceremony
<i>susaj b'aak uchamali(y)</i>	the bones of the dead one were cut
<i>ha'oob' chan te' chan</i>	chan te' chan
<i>chan na chan</i>	chan na chan
<i>chan ni chan</i>	chan ni chan
<i>chan may chan</i>	chan may chan
<i>k'uhul xukpi (?) ajaw</i>	Divine Lord of Copán
<i>k'uhul mutul ajaw</i>	Divine Lord of Tikal
<i>k'uhul kan(al) ajaw</i>	Divine Lord of Calakmul
<i>k'uhul b'aak ajaw</i>	Divine Lord of Palenque
<i>u(?) -niyil tzuk (?) chan</i>	?? of the sky
<i>u(?) -niyil tzuk (?) kab'</i>	?? of the earth

elk'in
ochk'in
nohol (?)
xaman

east
west
south
north

ha'oob'
pasnoom 'portal'
maknoom 'portal'

these
the 'portal' will be opened
the 'portal' will be closed



tz'ap[aj]
was erected



tuun
the stone



wa'wan
it was stood up



Yax Sak Tomaj



tz'apiji(y)
was erected



lakam tuun
the great stone



wa'wan
it was stood up



k'an tuun?-il
precious stone(?) of



uk'ab'a'
was its name



chami(y)
He died



Tzipti'



ch'ahoom
Youth?



Tzipti'



nuun
broken speaker??

Figure 8. Copán Stela A. Drawing by Linda Schele.



Oxe'Maax
3 Monkey



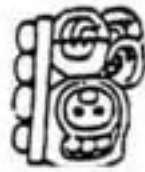
Pujwi Ajaw
Lord of Puwi



K'ak Ti' Chan
Fire is the Mouth
of the Snake



Ma Ajaw
Lord of Ma



b'olon iplaj
many strengths



b'aak nab'?
bone painting (?)



k'in
ceremony



susaj
were cut



bak
the bones



uchamali(y)
of the dead one

Figure 9. Copán Stela A. Drawing by Linda Schele.

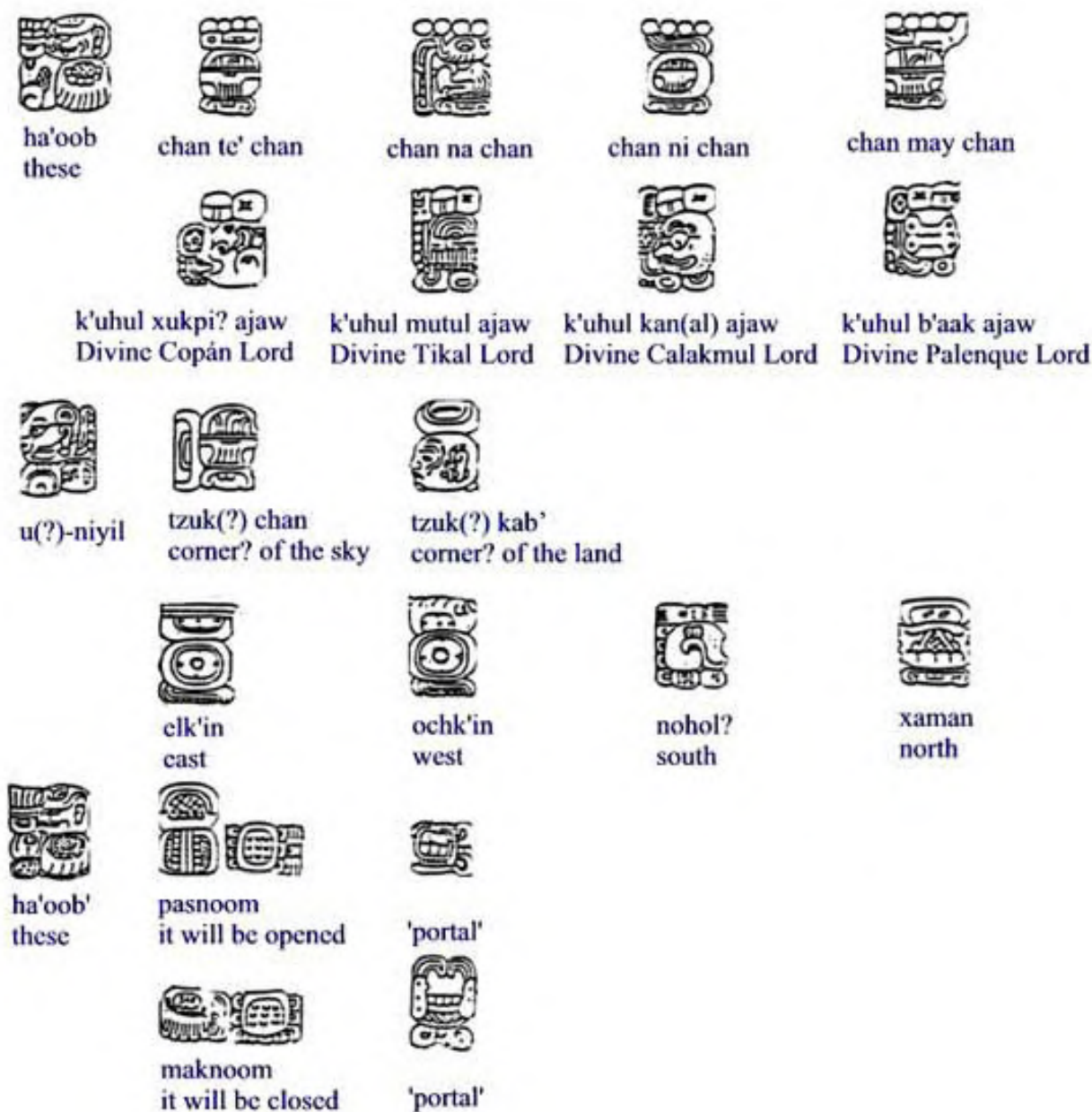


Figure 10. Copán Stela A. Drawing by Linda Schele.

The first two are crafted with *synonymous parallelism*, that is with "the repetition of elements that are similar in meaning or significance" (Christenson 2000:14). The first line uses the verb *tz'ap*, meaning "to plant" or "to erect," while the second line uses the positional verb *wa'wan* "is stood up" (Figure 8). Three quatrains are present in this text in which four related elements are repeated in order (Figure 10). The final couplet *pasnoom* 'portal', *maknoom* 'portal' for "the portal will be closed, the portal will be opened" is a type of antithetical parallelism that refers to the ritual opening and closing

of a cache chamber ([Figure 10](#)). In terms of verbal art in the Classic inscriptions this monument is a veritable tour de force.

The Tablet of the 96 Glyphs from Palenque is another prime example of a well-crafted poetic text ([Figure 11](#)). The majority of the inscription is built into three parallel couplets. The line preceding these couplets (artificially numbered "1" here for convenience) acts as an introductory phrase that sets the pattern for the couplet. The skeletal couplet structure is:

Temporal indicator	Verbal Phrase	Protagonist	
		Verbal Phrase	Locative

The text (B6-I7) reads as follows (with some deletion of calendrical notations):

(1) fire enters		in the white skin (?) house	in the house of (name)
(2) he was seated		into lordship	
(3) his seating on the jaguar throne (?)		in the white skin (?) house	
(4) he was seated		into lordship	(name)
(5) his ???		in the white skin (?) house	
(6) he was seated		into lordship	(name)
(7) his seating on the jaguar throne (?)		in the white skin (?) house	

The second strophe of each couplet (lines 3, 5, and 7) show ellipsis of the prepositional phrase "in the white skin (?) house." A melodic cadence is the result of this type of poetic structuring in texts with multiple related couplets. It is perhaps significant that this section of the text that records the accession of kings is placed in couplet forms. Maxwell (1997:101) has noted that in Chuj poetic texts couplets often appear at episode peaks or at the climax of a story. Strictly part of this tradition, the hieroglyphic corpus consistently accentuates such episode peaks by incorporating poetic devices at these points in the texts.

<i>verbal phrase</i>	<i>locative phrase</i>	<i>prepositional phrase</i>	<i>nominal phrase</i>
 OCH-K'AK' fire enters	 SAK nu-ku NAH white skin(?) house	 ta yo-OTOOT-ti in his house	 name
 CHUM-la-ja he was seated		 ta AJAW-le(I) in reign	 name
 u-CHUM-TZ'AM? his throne seating	 SAK nu-ku NAH white skin(?) house		
 CHUM-la-ja he was seated		 ta AJAW-le(I) in reign	 name
 u-b'u?-k'e?-ji-ya his ???	 SAK nu-ku NAH white skin(?) house		
 CHUM-la-ja he was seated		 ta AJAW-le(I) in reign	 name
 u-CHUM-TZ'AM?-" his throne seating	 SAK nu-ku NAH white skin(?) house		

Figure 11. Tablet of the 96 Glyphs from Palenque. Drawing by Linda Schele.

Triplets, Quatrains, and Polystylistic Phrases

Triplets are a powerful poetic device that allow for a higher level of description and emphasis. The inscriptions record a number of examples of triplets constructions. Stela B from Copán speaks of events at a period ending rite on 9.15.0.0.0 ([Figure 12](#)). Before describing the actions that took place on that day, the text first mentions three gods within a triplet construction who were overseeing the ceremony:

mi-OL-la Sky God
mi-OL-la Earth God
mi-OL-la Venus God

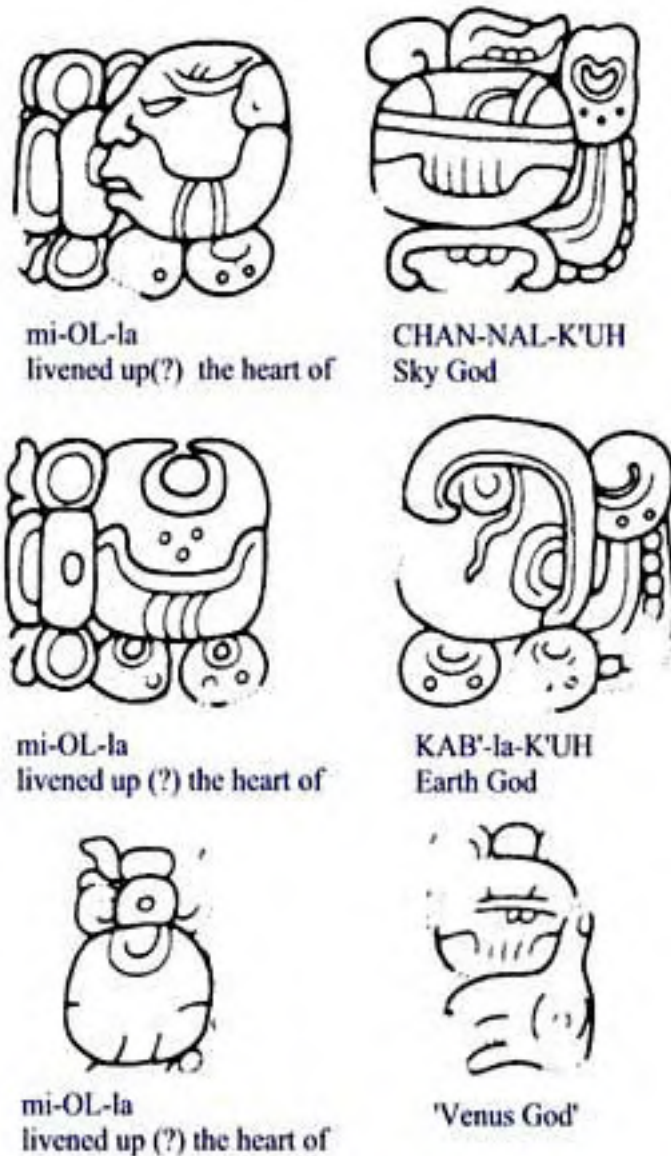


Figure 12. Copán Stela B. Drawing by Bill Fash.

The expression *mi ol* has been somewhat problematic to translate. It refers to some action or state of being relating to the hearts of these three gods. I suggest that the meaning of *mi* (or perhaps *mih*) can be found in a term *mijmij* in Ch'orti'. The bound root **mij-* is reduplicated in the verb *mijmijres*, meaning "*avivarlo, ponerlo más activo, contemplar* (to enliven, to make more active, to make content)." An adjective form

inmijmij means "está vivito (he is full of life)." For example, when a child is sitting quietly on the ground and an adult picks her up and starts swinging or bouncing her around they say, *e winik war umijmijres e mimi'* (the man is livening up the baby)." There is also an older expression the Ch'orti' use when a child is sitting alone and starts smiling for no apparent reason. They then say, *war amijmijresna e chuchu' umen e katu'*, "the child is being cheered up by the Virgen." (The Ch'orti' believe that for babies "el cielo está abierto," "the sky is open" and they can see right through to heaven). Since *mi* on Stela B has no overt affixation, it may be best translated simply as "livened up" (though its exact grammatical function remains unclear). This triplet would then perhaps read, "the heart of the Sky God was livened up, the heart of the Earth God was livened up, the heart of the Venus God was livened up." This would thematically parallel an expression found three times on the Western Panel of the Temple of the Inscriptions at Palenque. Barbara Macleod (personal communication, 2000) has recently suggested that the phrase at A7-A8 reads, *utimiy yol uk'uhul*, "he appeased the heart of his gods." I propose that the triplet construction on Stela B at Copán likewise refers to the 'livening up' or the 'making content' of the hearts of these gods during this k'atun ending ceremony. In terms of structure, the fact that this triplet precedes the description of events suggests a conscious highlighting of the names of these gods (a poetic device known as *fronting* or *topicalization*). There are an ample number of instances of this kind of poetic fronting in the hieroglyphic inscriptions.

The Palace Tablet at Palenque contains a structural triplet that records the death of K'inich Kan B'alam II on 9.13.10.1.5, Feb. 16, 702 ([Figure 13](#)). The text makes use of three separate expressions, two of which are metaphoric, to describe his death. The first is *och-b'i*, "he road-entered," the second is *ub'ut'uw*, "they filled it up (i.e. they buried him)," and the third is *hamalijji(y)* "the untying (of the headband) back then." The use of this triplet was a clear effort on the part of the scribes to emphasize the death of K'inich Kan B'alam II as the foremost event of the monument.

One final example of poetic structuring from hieroglyphics is especially instructive in that it employs several poetic devices simultaneously. The text comes from the well-known Stela C at Quiriguá that contains one of the most important inscriptions relating to the events of Creation ([Figure 14](#)). The text reads:

- 1- *k'alaj-ux-tuun*
- 2- *utz'apaw tuun 'paddler gods'*
- 3- *uti(y) na-jo'-chan jix-tz'am-tuun*
- 4- *utz'apaw tuun ek'-na-yax-??*
- 5- *uti(y) kab'-kah chan-tz'am-tuun*
- 6- *k'alaj tuun na itzamnaj ha'-tz'am-tuun*
- 7- *uti(y) ti'-chan yax-??-nal*

- 1- were tied three stones
- 2- he planted the stone, 'the paddler gods'
- 3- it happened at Na Jo' Chan, Jaguar Throne Stone
- 4- he planted the stone, Ek' Na Yax ??
- 5- it happened at Earth Town, Snake Throne Stone
- 6- was tied the stone, Na Itzamnaj, Water Throne Stone
- 7- it happened at the Edge of the Sky, First Hearth Place



i-OCH-b'i-ja
then he 'road-entered'



ha-i u-b'u-t'i-wa
he, they buried



ha-ma-li-ya SAK-HUN-na
his untying of the white headband

Figure 13. Palace Tablet, Palenque. Drawing by Linda Schele

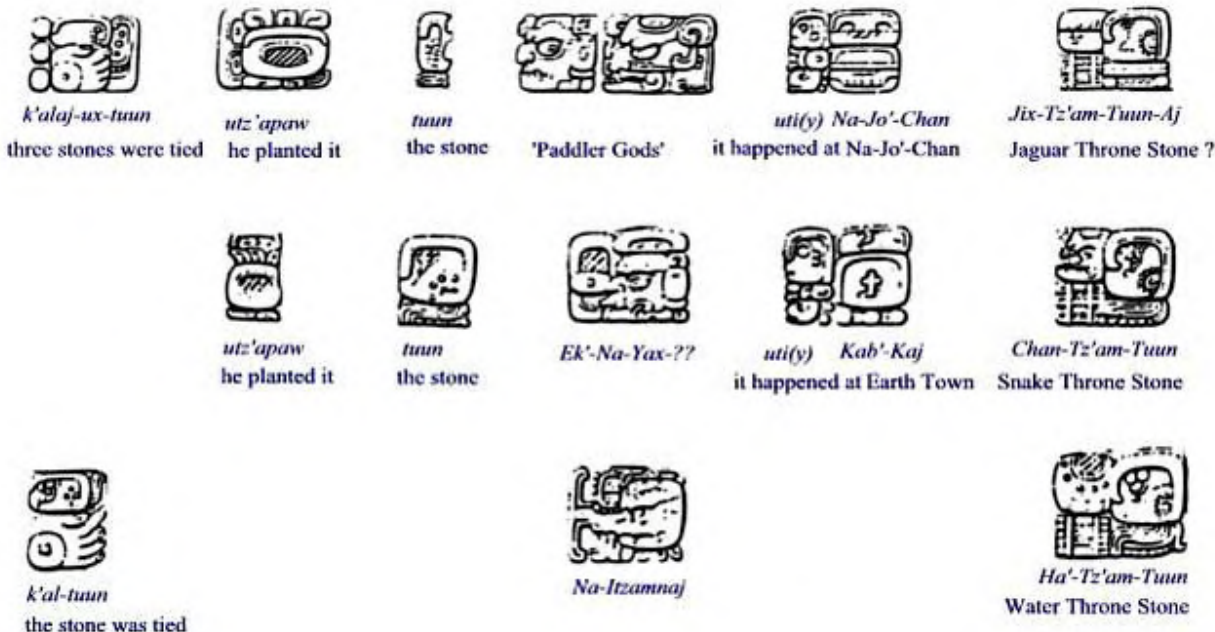


Figure 14. Stela C from Quiriguá.

The scribes who created this inscription framed this discussion of the Creation in a couplet that makes use of *breaking*, i.e. the intervening of text between two lines in a couplet. In this case lines 1 and 6 form a couplet yet they are separated by four lines of text (two additional couplets). At the same time, however, line 6 is also part of a triplet expressed in lines 3, 5, and 6 ("Jaguar Throne Stone, Snake Throne Stone, Water Throne Stone"). Lines 2-3 and lines 4-5 form synonymous couplets in which both lines refer to the action of 'planting' the stone, the first directly ("he planted it") and the second indirectly ("it happened..."). In addition, lines 3, 5, and 7 make up an internal triplet in that they repeat the same phrase ("it happened at") at identical points in the strophes. It is also possible that parallelism the first phrase in line 1 ("were tied three stones") and the final glyphic collocation of this portion of text in line 7 ("[at the] First Hearth Place") is an additional enveloping device to delineate the beginning and the end of this section of inscription. The use of multiple, interwoven poetic structures in one text allow us to appreciate the verbal artistry of the scribes who produced this monument.

Ch'orti' Poetics and the Hieroglyphic Script

I believe that within the poetic traditions of Ch'orti' (and other languages Mayan relevant to the hieroglyphic script) there remain vestiges of poetic structuring that reflect elite or ritual discourse forms found in Mayan hieroglyphs. Since the language of the hieroglyphs was highly conservative (Houston *et al.* 2000:123), it stands to reason that the Classic poetic tradition would also likely show little change over time. In addition, metaphorical references and archaic imagery that are so tightly bound to poetic forms

would logically be later preserved in memorized texts as well as the discourse structures found in ritual prayers in modern-day descendant languages. (Sadly, the Ch'orti' have largely abandoned the practice of most of the ceremonies in which much of this poetic tradition once flourished). This project looked to both structure as well as content in Ch'orti' poetic oral texts for points of correlation with the hieroglyphic inscriptions.

The following is a preliminary comparison of some of the related poetic structures and imagery in Ch'orti' and the hieroglyphs that I have observed so far.

Metaphor and Couplets

Floyd Lounsbury first noted the presence of a semantic couplet at C17 and E2 from the Temple of the Cross at Palenque (Lounsbury 1980:107-115). The first verb reads *'i-hu-li*, for *'i-huli*, "he arrived." At E2 the collocation is comprised of a hand on top of the syllable *ka* and the logogram *kab'* for "earth." Lounsbury connected this to a metaphorical reference to birth in Ch'ol, *huli ti panimil, täl lum*, meaning "to arrive on the topside, to touch earth." This connection showed a close affinity in this case between Ch'ol and the language of the hieroglyphic script. It is also interesting to note that in Ch'orti' a somewhat similar couplet is used to describe the birth of a child. In Ch'orti' the expression "to arrive (here) on the earth" (*ayo'pa to'r e rum*) is a common metaphor for birth. It can be seen in the following couplet:

tya' ak'otoy yajk'in akuxma e yxik
tya' ak'otoy ajk'in twa' ayo'pa to'r e rum

when the day arrives for the woman to give birth
 when the day arrives to arrive (here) on the earth

While Ch'ol more closely retained this metaphor for birth, the Ch'orti' idiom does combine both the "arriving" and the "earth" elements similar to the Palenque text.

Merismus

One of the most common couplets in most Mayan languages is the pairing of "sky" and "earth." A good example can be seen in lines 640-641 of the Book of Chilam Balam of Chumayel (Edmonson 1986) (Edmonson's orthography retained):

elom caan burned will be heaven
y etel luum and earth

As did the writers of the Chilam Balam texts, the scribes of the hieroglyphic script often used references to "sky" and "earth" in couplet form to represent the idea of "totality," or "everywhere." (This concept of "everywhere" for "sky" and "earth" is common in most

Mayan languages). At Copán and other sites the term *k'uh*, "god," was coupled with "sky" and "earth" to record "sky god, earth god," i.e. 'all gods.' The pairing of such complementary elements that represent a whole is known as *merismus*. For example, on the West and South Side of a bench from Palenque it records the following identical parallelism that expresses just such a *merismus* ([Figure 15](#)):

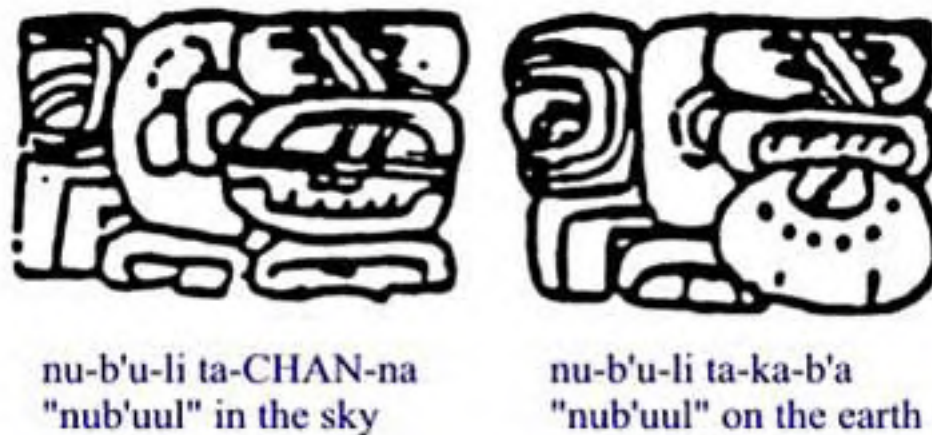


Figure 15. Palenque bench. Drawing by Linda Schele.

nub'uul ta chan, nub'uul ta kab'
"nub'uul" in the sky, "nub'uul" on the earth

The verb *nub'uul* remains undeciphered but the structure of the couplet suggests "*nub'uul*" happens "everywhere." Ch'orti' likewise makes constant use of the couplet "world, sky" to express the idea of "everywhere." For example,

ya' ch'a'r tama e Puerta Mundo
Puerta Cielo
 there they are laying down in the Door of the World
 in the Door of the Sky (i.e. all the doors / corners)

a'si tama oriente mundo
oriente cielo
 they play in the eastern world
 in the eastern sky (i.e. everywhere in the east)

Episode Peaks

One of the more poignant couplets the corpus of Maya hieroglyphic writing appears on the East Panel of the Temple of the Inscriptions at Palenque. The text records that on April 4th of 611 Calakmul performed an 'axe event' against Palenque (*ch'a[h]kaj lakamha'*) against the ruler Aj Ne' Ohl Mat as well as the ruling family in power. This devastating moment in the history of Palenque is memorialized in the couplet *satay k'uhul ixik, satay ajaw*, "lost is the divine lady, lost is the lord." Translations of this phrase usually interpret the root *sat* to mean "lost" (see Martin and Grube 2001:161). While the primary meaning of the verbal root *sat* in Ch'orti' is also "to lose," a secondary but still common meaning of *sat* in Ch'orti' today is "to destroy." For example, in a Ch'orti' story about the first people on the earth that I recorded God is said to have gotten angry with some of his early creations and so they were subsequently "destroyed by God" (*sajtab' umen e katata'*). A couplet in another Ch'orti' text I collected used the verb *sat* in a very similar context to this and to the Palenque example. Its text reads, "*usati e pak'ab', e gente*," "he destroyed humanity, the people." I would argue then that the ruler of Palenque and perhaps many in the ruling family were "destroyed" when Calakmul attacked the city. Along these lines a better translation of this section of the text would be, "the divine lady got destroyed, the lords got destroyed." While perhaps only a slight semantic difference between "lost" and "destroyed" in this case, the more precise meaning of "destroyed" would suggest perhaps an even more hostile defeat for the many in the ruling family. The very fact that this couplet appears in an otherwise unpoetic section of this inscription strongly suggests that it was meant to draw attention to this even as the episode peak of the text.

Nikolai Grube has recently proposed a decipherment for the quotative particle *che* or *chehen*, "so they say, they say" (Grube 1998). Ch'orti' makes regular use of the quotative particle *che* in reported speech. In poetic contexts, however, a seemingly different *che* is used as a kind of discourse marker that terminates lines. It is part of a group of affirmative particles (which are occasionally difficult to translate in context) that appear as *atz'i, ya', atz'i ya',* and *atz'i ya' che*. Most traditional healers sprinkle this *che* particle throughout curing prayers without adding much to the meaning of the phrase. Instead, it seems to mark the end of a line or thought and is usually the point where the healer takes a breath. Its function seems rhythmic as much as it is grammatical at times. The following are examples of these affirmative particles in use.

watar **ya'**
watar **atz'i**

yes they are coming
they are coming **indeed**

ch'a'r a'syob' **atz'i ya'** [breath]
tamar e silencio hora **che** [breath]
tamar e silencio noche **che** [breath]

they are **indeed** laying down there playing
in the silent hour (between 12:00-2:00 am)
in the silent night

ch'a'r a'syob' **atz'i ya'** [breath]
tamar e silencio hora
tamar e silencio día **atz'i ya'** [breath]

they are **indeed** lying down there playing
in the silent hour
in the silent day **indeed**

twa' iche soltar e angelito angel atz'i ya'	so that you let loose the little angel angel indeed
a'si tamar enyax nawalch'u'r che ensak nawalch'u'r che	they play in the green house they play in the white house
ch'a'r ijolchan jarari' che ch'a'r ijolchan b'aki atz'i ya' che	they are lying there infecting with woven-like pains they are lying there infecting the bones indeed
ch'a'r takar uyansir uyok che takar uyansir uk'ab' che	they are lying with their anxiety of their feet with their anxiety of their hands
ch'a'r takar umakje'yr b'aki che takar umakje'yr jarari' che	they are lying with their water-stopping of bones with their water-stopping of woven-like pain

All of the *curanderos* with whom I have spoken tell me that *che* in these ritual prayer contexts does not mean "they say" but instead, as one old *curandera* explained, "*es como una afirmación*" (it's like an affirmation) that does not translate easily. Some prayers make use of this *che* discourse marker at the end of nearly every line to mark a pause point. (It should be noted that I still think this needs further confirmation as a separate discourse marker, but all indications now are that this is precisely its function in these contexts). It may resemble more closely the Chontal *che'en* "thus is is" (Knowles 1985:242) or the Ch'ol *che'* "así" ("thus") (Aulie & Aulie 1978:47). This discourse marker in Ch'orti' may have some relevance to a small number of texts from Primary Standard Sequences that end the clause with a single *che* ([Figure 16](#)). I suggest that this *che* that appears, as Grube has pointed out (Grube 1998:169), on a few ceramics of unknown provenance where it ends a phrase is parallel in usage to the discourse termination device *che* in Ch'orti' that is preserved in these ritual poetic texts.

he is bothering our Most Holy Mother (earth) asking for [her] children
[her] offspring

Some Ch'orti' believe that the eclipse "spirit" is a large snake (a few say it is a lion) with a long tail with its jaws open to swallow either the sun or moon. (Note this exact snake with a long tail and open maw on Kerr 5359 is poised to swallow the sun and moon in an eclipse cartouche). Another common interpretation is that the eclipse is caused by the wings of the evil spirit "Great King the Eclipser." This curing text contains a crucial reference to the wings of the eclipse that are blocking the sun or moon before they are eaten by a snake. The wings of the eclipse are said to be what is responsible for causing most of the illnesses that follow an eclipse. The healer explained his use of the couplet *uyala, uwich'* "his wings, his wings" in the prayer cited above:

Por eso hoy Ángel Satanás de Malo, eso es Satanás, Ángel Kilis pero Satanás.
Entonce, lo fabricó todo las criaturas que está encerrando, utraivesiyir, umakajrir,
usaktokarir. Ja'x uwich' e Noxi' Kilis.

This is why today Angel Satan of Evil, that is Satan, Angel Eclipse but Satan. So, he made all of the children who are closed off (in the womb), his blocking (in the womb), his stopping up (in the womb), his blinding of the eyes. *These are the wings of the Great Eclipse* (emphasis mine).

This notion of a 'winged eclipse', preserved in this Ch'orti' couplet from a healing prayer, helps to explain the origin of 'winged cartouches' used in depicting an eclipse in the hieroglyphic texts.

Conclusions

This brief synopsis of poetic structuring methods in Ch'orti' and in the hieroglyphic script show them to be related on many fronts. In many cases very similar poetic styles exist in many other Mayan languages. In a forthcoming study I will examine in detail the historical development of poetic devices in the hieroglyphic script. This study will also include a more thorough analysis of the Ch'orti' data in order to flesh out archaic references that may relate to the hieroglyphic script. The much understudied area of poetic discourse in the Maya hieroglyphic inscriptions is potentially a rich arena for understanding the conceptual patterning of the ancient Maya.

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