

A Classic Maya Term for Public Performance

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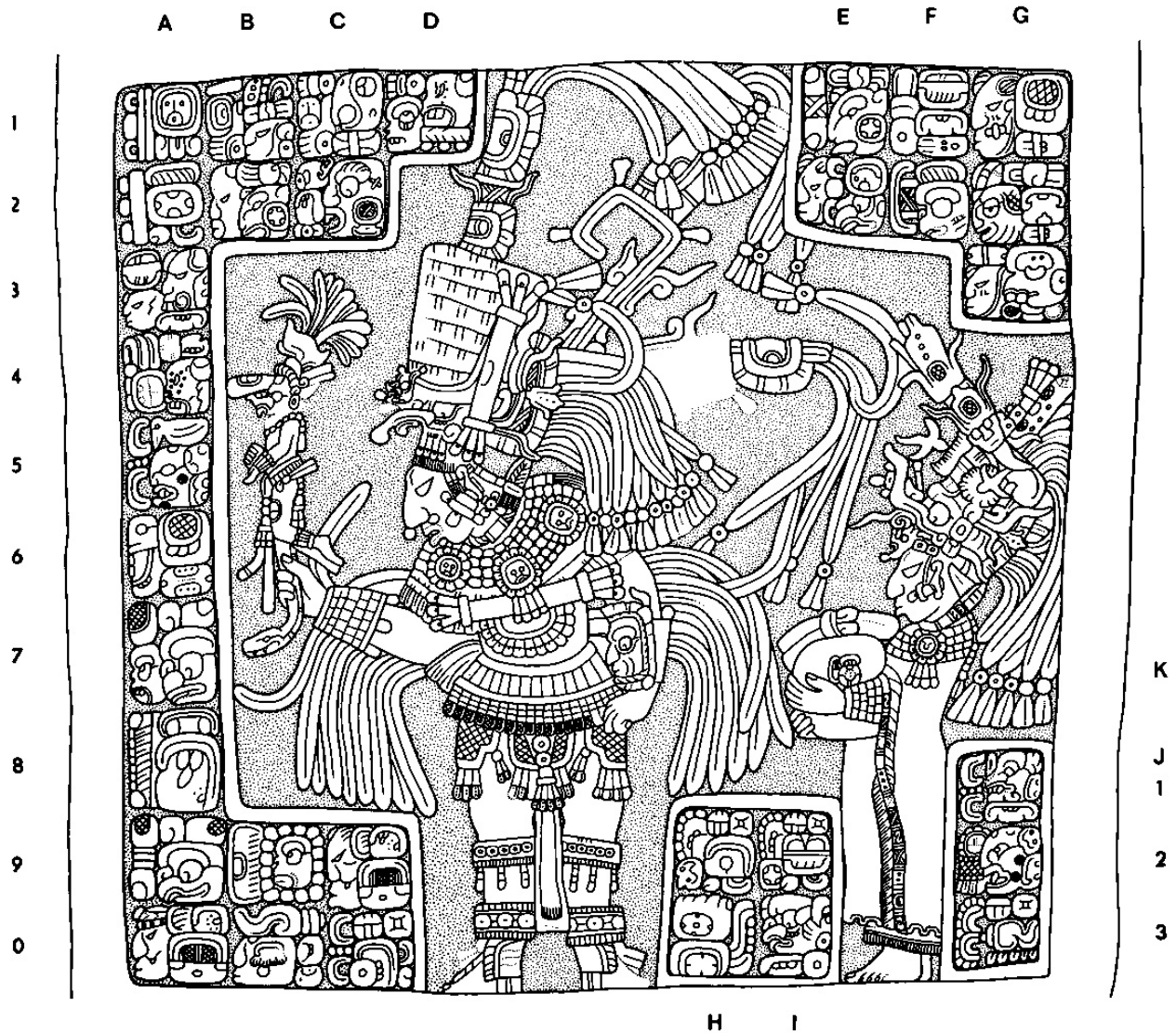


Figure 1: Lintel 1, Yaxchilan (drawing by Ian Graham, *Corpus of Maya Hieroglyphic Inscriptions* 3:1)

Probably every epigrapher has at least once been puzzled by the passage on Lintel 1 at Yaxchilan (Figure 1) describing the actions of the queen *Chak-Joom* as she accompanied her royal husband, the famous Bird-Jaguar, in a ritual dance that he did upon his accession. The 'holy lady' is depicted standing beside Bird-Jaguar who performs his 'taking-dance' (*ch'am-ak'ta'*). She holds a bundle labeled (at glyph K) *ikaats* ("bundle"). However, the hieroglyphic caption that refers to the queen is quite obscure:

(E1) 'u-B'AH-hi (F1) ti-CHAN-na-li (E2) IX-JUN-? (F2) NAJ-ka-CHAN (G1) IX-WINIK?-ki (G2) ?-WINIK-ki (G3) IX-CHAK-JOL?-mi (J1) ya-?-na (J2) ITSAMNAJ-B'ALAM (J3) ?-hi-AJAW

'u-b'aah ti cha'nill/cha'naal Ix-Ju'n-...-NaaJ-Kan Ix-Winik -...-Winik Ix-Chak-Joloom(?) ... Itsamnaaj-B'ahlam ... ajaw

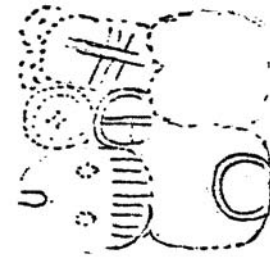
"...[it is] her image in/with *cha'nill/cha'naal Ix-Ju'n-...-NaaJ-Kan ... Ix-Chak-Joloom*, mother of *Itsamnaaj-B'ahlam*, lord of ..."

Leaving aside this set of rather cryptic titles², I want to call attention to the hieroglyphic block (F1) that names the action itself. There are two alternative readings of the spelling **CHAN-na-li**. One can treat the final **-li** as a phonetic complement in the disharmonic spelling of a long vowel, resulting in *cha'naal*. Two corresponding entries in Ch'orti' would be *ti cha'n* "up, upward, high" and *cha'nar* "high, high up" (Wisdom 1950:697).

However, taking into account an acknowledged phenomenon of 'orthographic boundaries'³, **CHAN-na-li** could belong to the same group of 'deviant' spellings as **AJAW-wa-li** for *ajawil* (Figure 2a) and **AJ-K'UH-na-li** for *ajk'uhu'nil* (Figure 2b). In other words, it could be an abstract noun derived with the *-il* suffix but with the phonetic complement of the logogram (that spelled the original word) embedded within a spelling of the derived form.

There are two reasons to expect an 'orthographic boundary' in this case. First, there would be no plausible explanation for a long final vowel in *cha'naal*. An adjective *cha'nal* ("celestial") and a noun *cha'nal* (*cha'n-nal* "sky place") are never spelled as **CHAN-na-li**. Nor can this spelling be considered a mere accidental scribal mistake since it occurs at least twice in the inscriptions at Calakmul (Miscellaneous Stones 541-21 and 541-3; see Figure 2c).

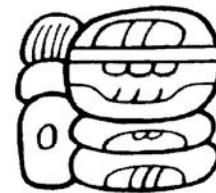
Second, **CHAN-na** is a so-called 'fossilized spelling' – a class of spellings identified by Lacadena and Wichmann (in press). These are nouns with linguistically reconstructed complex vowels, which, however, are always spelled synharmonically, for example, **CHAN-na** for *cha'n* "sky" (Proto-Mayan **ka'ng* [Kaufman and Norman 1984:117]), **K'IN-ni** for *k'iin* "sun" (Proto-Mayan **q'iing* [Kaufman and Norman 1984:124]), **CHAN-na** for *chan* "snake" (Proto-Mayan **kaan* [Kaufman and Norman 1984:117]). Lacadena and Wichmann suggest that such spellings were fixed before the conventions of disharmony and synharmony were established. These logograms complemented by syllabic signs were probably treated as whole units, which could have been used to spell derived words like *cha'nill*.



a



b



c

Figure 2: (a) **ta AJAW-wa-li** spelling for *ta ajawil* ("in the lordship"), Stela 1, El Zotz (field drawing by Ian Graham); (b) **ta AJ-K'UH-na-li** spelling for *ta ajk'uhu'nil* ("in the *ajk'uhu'n*-ship"), Monument 183, Tonina (drawing by David Stuart); (c) Miscellaneous Stone #541-3, Calakmul (after field drawing by Ian Graham).



Figure 3: Stela of unknown provenance, Stendhal Galleries, Los Angeles (drawing by A. Tokovinine, based on the photograph published by Karl Mayer [1980: Plate 79])

This translation has some implications. It is the first clear epigraphic evidence that events such as royal dances were indeed public ceremonies performed in the presence of a broad audience. Moreover, although there are only four examples of *cha'nil* known so far, it is probably significant that this word is never spelled with the 'SNAKE' logogram used in the spelling of the "one's guardian" title ('*u-cha'n*) despite the fact that both nouns are based on the same root ("to see, to watch"). Such a distinction may be due to different spelling traditions. It is important that no proper logogram for *cha'n* as "to see, to watch" has been attested. Instead, other logograms were used to spell this word. I would speculate that one spelling precedent established a tradition

Is there a translation for *cha'nil* that would fit the scene depicted on Lintel 1? I believe that such a translation is "show, public ceremony, pageantry". *Cha'n* or *cha'nil* as a term for public ceremony is attested in Ch'orti' (*cha'an* "ceremony", *noh cha'an* "important ceremony, rain making ceremony" [Wisdom 1950:690]) and in Yucatec (*cha'an* or *cha'anil* "diversion o fiesta en que se ve o expone al publico" [Barrera Vasquez 1995:83]) where it is probably a loan from Cholan languages. The word is likely to have the same etymology as the "one's guardian" title that, according to Lacadena and Wichmann (in press), was based on the verb *cha'n* "to watch", attested as *chan* (the glottal is lost in the Late Classic inscriptions) in Chol and Chontal. Therefore, *cha'nil* as a term for public ceremony may be translated literally as "something being watched" and implies performing before an audience.

Support for my hypothesis comes from an unprovenanced stela that depicts an individual in elaborate attire including a Teotihuacan War Serpent helmet (Figure 3). The protagonist is clearly shown as dancing. Nevertheless, the caption that accompanies him does not mention any dance. Instead, it states:

A
1
2
3
4

(A1) 'u-B'AH-hi (A2) tu-CHAN-li (A3) ya-ja-wa (A4) ?
'u-b'aah t-u-cha'nil y-ajaw ...
"... [this is] his image in his public ceremony ..."⁴

Not only is "public ceremony" appropriate for the scene, it also bridges the inscriptions on this monument and on Lintel 1 at Yaxchilan through defining the occasions of ritual dancing as public performances.

for the "one's guardian" title, whereas another precedent led to a distinct convention for "public ceremony". Another possibility is that the scribes tried to avoid any visual association between the two terms as they defined very different aspects of royal culture.

Notes

¹ A curious term that also occurs in the inscriptions on Lintels 3 and 42.

² One title is a name of the so-called 'Water Lily Serpent' (Stuart and Houston 1999:II-55-56); the other is a truly confusing sequence that also appears on Stela 4, although there it looks somewhat reordered.

³ 'Orthographic boundaries' are breaks in conventional reading order when a word is spelled in two distinct parts, the second being a derivational morpheme or morphemes. 'Orthographic boundaries' usually occur in multi-syllable words with the signs spelling the derivational suffixes attached directly to the spellings of the original words even when such spellings include phonetic complements, which mark the quality of the preceding vowel and are not supposed to be read (Houston et al. 2001:21-23).

⁴ Since the final block is not deciphered, it is hard to understand the context of the *y-ajaw* expression. It could be part of the protagonist's name (David Stuart, personal communication 2003). Alternatively, it might state that the protagonist was a vassal of the lord mentioned in the final block. Therefore, I chose not to translate this passage.

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