

# The Transformation of Xbalanqué or The Many Faces of God A<sup>1</sup>

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In Maya mythology, the Hero Twins appeared to have served many functions. Through time, and surely influenced by geography, they evolved the various aspects of their personas. They seem to have accumulated many roles as Maya civilization became more complex. In this paper, I will explore a succession of changes in behavior and role.

Maya deities, as we have come to know them from the Post-Classic codices, are quite different from the earlier versions of the Early Classic and the Classic periods. Particularly, we will examine one such meld of characteristics, the metamorphosis of the Hero Twin Yax Balam (Xbalanqué) from his role of hunter, scribe, and magician, to also include the role of beekeeper or possibly as the patron of the beekeepers. Although Landa tells us that the Bacabs and especially Hobnil, were the patrons of the beekeepers, the Maya themselves may tell us otherwise. In this paper I will also suggest that there is more than one way to understand the scenes on Maya vessels. It has been assumed, when we see a series of individuals on a vase that they should generally be read sequentially as a group of related scenes. I would like to show that, in some cases the same individual can appear on a vessel in a number of transforming guises or activities.

To paraphrase Michael Coe (Coe, 1989), "The overwhelming significance of the Popol Vuh in solving many problems of Classic Maya iconography and epigraphy has been overlooked by many scholars." Aside from the Quiché Popol Vuh, there must have been numerous versions and regional additions to the basic tale. For example, in the Hebrew bible, many stories from the oral tradition as well as from ancient written sources were combined and edited. It is certainly possible that the Popol Vuh, as we know it, represents only one of many attempts to coalesce the oral and written traditions of the Maya.

As we know, the Popol Vuh presents us with three sets of twins; the eldest, Hun-Hunahpú and his brother Vucub-Hunahpú, the sons Hunahpú and his brother Xbalanqué, and their half-brothers Hun Batz and Hun Chuen. Their exploits and accomplishments are set forth in the Quiché story, but there are images from earlier times that fill out and enhance some of the themes that we are familiar with. There are

images from Izapa (Figure 1) and on Early-Classic vessels, (Figure 2) which for example, confirm the story of the killing of Vucub Caquix, the major bird deity.



Figure 1



Figure 2

These and other images suggest that the underlying religion, with its heroes and demons was in place very early in the history of Mesoamerican peoples. I believe we must draw on these images to show the transitions and changes that took place over time.

In his seminal work, *The Maya Scribe, His Art and World*, Michael Coe identified the two characters he called "The Head Band Twins." (Figure 3) The headband is probably the most important iconographic tool that we can use in identifying the Hero Twins. I believe that all of the characters wearing the headband, (other than the Ahaw vulture who also wears the headband), are related to either the Hero Twins, their fathers, or their half brothers in one way or another. However, along with the headband, there are other symbols which the Maya use to define the Hero Twins. Blowguns for example, are their choice of weapons. To emphasize their roles as ballplayers, they wear animal headdresses as well as yokes, often decorated with a sky-band. The eye "cruller" and a thick round knot at the neck or waist, are shared with G1 (God I) and G3 (God III). The "death's eye" collar is shared with God A and others. An olla marked with the ak'bal glyph, carried or worn as a pendant, is shared with God A<sup>1</sup>. These aspects help to identify the many forms of the ubiquitous Twins.



Fig. 3. K1183 Itzamná, the head of the Maize God, and the Hero Twins.

Even these strange characters, (Figure 4) largely ignored, are headbanded Hero Twins. These depictions of the Hero Twins do not fit the standard form of the twins, yet the figure on K1207 (Fig. 4) bears a striking resemblance to the pose and action taken by the Hero Twin Yax Balam, on the Resurrection Plate. (Figure 5) On K1207,

(Figure 4) he holds the olla in the same manner as the Twin on the plate. The cruller of G3 over his eyes establishes his identify with his namesake, the jaguar (note the jaguar-skin skirt and he wears the headband as well).



Fig 4 Hero twin with olla



Fig 5. The Maize God, Hun Ahaw, Yax Balam

The Twins on K1254 (Figure 6) also wear the headband and the G3 "cruller". One sits facing the toad, who acts as messenger, probably bringing a message from the Lords of The Otherworld to the Twins to come and play ball with them.



Fig 6. The Hero Twins, called to Xibalba to play ball.

The figures on another vase K7821 (Figure 7) help to corroborate this identification. In the first panel the Twin kneels before Itzamna; in the second panel, the Twin kneels before Itzamna's avatar, Itzam Ye. The text indicates this composite character at glyph D1, and the names of the Twins appear at glyphs D2 and C3. Both kneeling figures have the same olla-like mouth, as well as headbands, upswept hairdos, and yokes.



Fig. 7 The Hero Twins and Itzamná

An early image of a Hero Twin is painted on the wall of the South Patio of Group 6C-XVI in the Mundo Perdido at Tikal. (Figure 8). The excavators, Laporte and Fialko named the panel the Mural de los Jugadores. The mural depicts the great mythic ball game, pitting the Hero Twins against the Lords of the Otherworld. Examining the iconography of this figure in this enhanced slide (Figure 9), we can easily see the headband and yoke which help to identify him as a Twin. Part of his regalia is a death's eye collar and an upside-down olla from which descends a snake. Although the collar and ak'bal pot do not constitute the normal costume of the Hero Twins, they play an important role in recognizing cognates of the Twins.

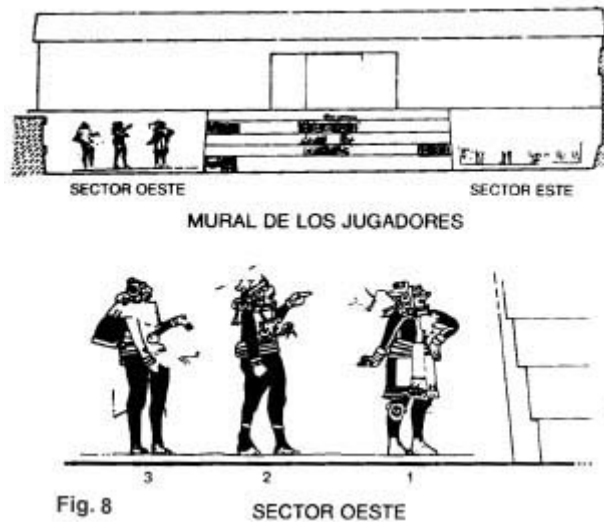


Fig. 8

SECTOR OESTE



Fig. 9 From the Mundo Perdido, Tikal

I will attempt to separate out the various attributes of a group of deities and demonstrate that they function relative to the situation in which they appear. Certain figures depicted on vases as ways, gods, or heroes, may in fact, be different aspects of the same characters, the Hero Twins. I will concentrate on examining the glyphically named supernatural, Mok Chi' and some of his counterparts. It will become clear that although they are depicted as distinct beings and even named differently, they are merely correlative parts of the same being, with a specialty. That is, the activities of bees, beekeepers, and the product of their respective labors. Beekeeping has been a respected occupation from earliest times. In the ancient New World where sugar-bearing plants were a rarity, the raising of bees for honey became so significant that deities associated with bees and honey were necessary. Honey, aside from its function as a sweetener, provided a base for the production of alcoholic beverages by fermentation alone. (The art of distillation did not enter the New World until the arrival of the Europeans.) These fermented alcoholic beverages were ingested by imbibing (Figure 10) and also through the enema ritual (Figure 11).

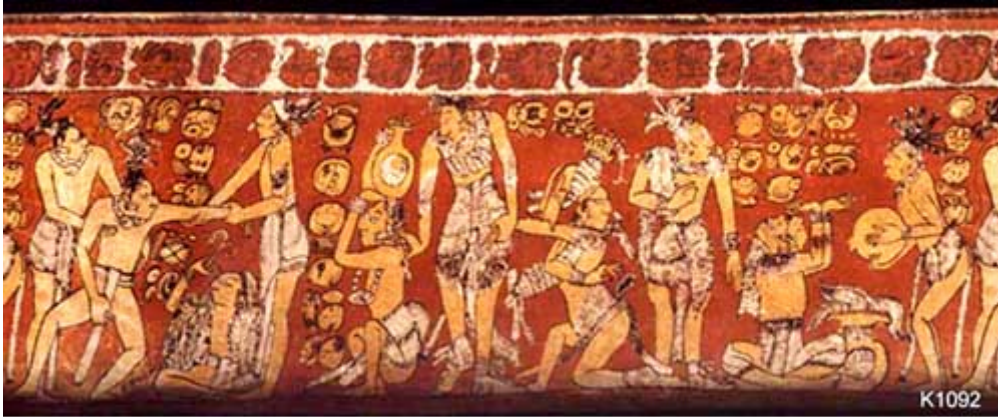


Fig. 10 K1092 The Drunkards.

One reason for taking the liquid in enema form is that in this process, the alcoholic content does not have to pass through the stomach or the liver. Therefore, the entire volume of alcohol goes quickly and directly into the blood stream, providing a faster "high". There are depictions on Maya vases of both supernaturals and mortals ingesting alcohol by both methods.



Fig. 11 K 1890 Enema Scene



Waterlily Jaguar

Some of the supernatural animals, such as the Waterlily Jaguar and old gods, are shown with enema paraphernalia. In order to satisfy the desires of the peoples of the New World in their quest for entry to the other world, shamans enlisted the use of alcohol and hallucinogens as the vehicles that opened the path to the other side.

A supernatural (whose glyph is the hand grasping mok chi') appears on a number of vases in both polychrome and codex styles. On vase no. K2284 (Figure 12) he is seated with his name glyphs above him and he holds a large narrow necked olla marked with the ak'bal glyph. Bees emerge from the mouth of the olla as though the vessel is the hive in which they lived. (Dorie Reents-Budet sent me a photograph of a contemporary Maya in the Campeche area who was raising bees in just such a vessel.) It is reported that in colonial Yucatán, bees were kept in hollow logs marked with the sign ak'bal.

This supernatural wears his hair up-swept, tied with three large knots reminiscent of the skeletal God A; In this case, a bone with attached death's eyes becomes the brim of a hat. Tendrils creep out from under the brim and he wears a shadow or mask across his eyes. A kimi sign decorates his cheek and body, and knots appear in front of his face.



**Fig. 12. The Water-lily Jaguar and Mol Ko Chi'**

The individual wearing the bone sombrero-brim has been identified as one of the aspects of the deity God A<sup>1</sup> because of the mask and the kimi (death sign) glyphs that appear on his face and body (Figure 12). Shamans and nobles probably dressed in the costume of this deity to carry out the necessary funerary rituals. On Altar 5 from Tikal, (Figure 13), we begin to get some clues as to how these characters adopt the attributes of other deities. The most compelling identifications are the knots worn in front of the face and the broad brimmed hat, the crown tied with the same knots worn by Mok Chi' on his sombrero. They also carry long tubes or staffs, which I suggest, are blowguns; tendrils peek from under the brim of their headgear and the G3 "cruller" adorns their faces. All these attributes indicate the deity God A<sup>1</sup> as well as the Hero Twins. One carries an obsidian knife, which is the instrument of self-decapitation, and the other, the tri-pointed handstone. The individual in the broad brimmed hat wears a rosette with a knotted element in its center, over his loincloth, an article of attire used in a bloodletting ceremony.

The same individuals also appear on Lintel 2 from Tikal (Figure 14), accompanying a great ruler wearing a jaguar costume. In this scene, they again carry blowguns and wear knots in front of their faces. They both wear the rosette-with-knot over their loincloths and pendants composed of the knot often worn by Chac Cib Chac and G1. Rulers will often wear these knots, simulating the costume of those deities. Their hair is bound in the up-swept hairdo, which is a point of identification, and they both carry tri-pointed handstones.



Fig. 13 Altar 5

Tikal



Figure 14

Mok Chi' appears on K2942, (Figure 15) in an elaborate costume. Two of the four figures illustrated on K2942 reiterate Mok Chi's role as self-decapitating God A<sup>1</sup>, who performs this feat with his own knife. On this vase K2942 (Figure 15) he also takes on the character of the beekeeper aspect of Mok Chi', holding bees and displaying them on his cape. "Jaguar-in-flames," is not a distinct individual but one of the many transformations of the Hero Twin, Yax Balam.



Fig. 15 K 2942 Three versions of God Aprime and Jaguar in flames, all aspects of Xbalanqué

We can now make a number of points of identification. The rosette-with-knots on the costumes are immediately evident; the tendrils under the headdress are also of importance in identifying these individuals as an aspect of Mok Chi', as are the knots that appear in front of the noses of these dancers. Two of them wear the specific knot worn by the figure on the Tikal lintel. Moreover, a third element is apparent; the ak'bal olla that is carried by two of the four individuals on this vase. This is the ak'bal olla that we saw worn by the Hero Twin ballplayer of the Mundo Perdido. It is the same type of olla that Mok Chi' holds on vase K2284 (Figure 12). It is my contention that on this vase, we are not looking at four different beings, but four aspects of the same individual in various movements of his dance.



Another instance of self-decapitation is seen on K1230 (Figure 15b).



Figure 15b

There is precedence for this kind of depiction in Maya vase painting. The dancer on a vase from the Ik site K1452 (Figure 16), is shown in three separate aspects of his ceremonial bloodletting, twirling dance. These are not three separate individuals, but a sequential presentation of three actions of the ceremony performed by the same person.



Fig. 16 K1452 A dancer in three poses



Fig. 17. Detail from K3924

A number of vessels have depictions of Jaguar-in-flames and Man-in-flames, obviously substituting for each other. On K3831 he wears his headband and appears in flames; on K3924 (Figure 17), it is the Jaguar-in-flames and Mok Chi' as

beekeeper, who appear together. On K5112, (Figure 18), it is Mok Chi' marked with kimi glyphs and his head totally severed who appears in conjunction with the headbanded Man-in-flames. (The companion to Mok Chi' on vase K2284 is also the Waterlily Jaguar.) ([Figure 12](#))



Fig. 18 K5112 God Aprime severs his head Man in flames



Figure 19

Yax Balam (Xbalanqué) as jaguar may be seen in a number of instances. A composite of this jaguar/Hero Twin transformation can be seen on the Altar vase with the name nupul balam at glyphs A1 and A2. (Figure 19).

Now we must examine another vase, K2286, (Figure 20) where we are confronted by three individuals. One is named the familiar Mok Chi', the center figure is the female aspect of this deity, and a third figure with a bloated belly. His name according to Grube and Nahm is gluttony or swollen man. Aside from his swollen belly he also brandishes the tri-pointed obsidian in one hand and the obsidian knife in the other. Attached to the front of his headband is the long nosed monster that is indicative of the headbands that the Hero Twins wear. An ahaw spot appears on his cheek. From under the headband spring the tendrils that are part of the costume of Mok Chi', as he appears on the Tikal lintel and on numerous vases.



Fig. 20 K2286 Mol Ko Chi in three guises

Swollen man is seen on a number of other vessels such as K927 (Figure 21) where he also has an ak'bal vase hanging from his neck. Another occurrence on a vessel, K7795 (Figure 22) shows a bloated face and closed eyes, wearing the typical Hero Twin headband. He also carries the blowgun. The bloated body and closed eyes may signify the representation of death, However the chronicler,



Fig. 21 From K927



Fig. 22 From K7795



Fig. 23 From K927

Bernal Diaz del Castillo relates, "I wish to note only one here which we found in the province of Pánuco; they make an injection by the anus with some (hollow) canes and distend the intestines with wine, and this is done among them in the same way as among us an enema is applied..." and the El Conquistador Anonimo writes, "...bored drinking wine with their mouths, lie down and, extending their legs, have the wine poured into their anus through a tube until the body is full."

"Gluttony man" or "swollen man" is an apt name for this aspect of Mok Chi'. Other components of this complex character may be seen, but again depicted and named differently, (Figure 23). In this aspect the character is named Enema God A<sup>1</sup>. The same components that we have been dealing with are apparent in his costume. The ak'bal olla worn as pendant, the kimi glyph and mask, and the characteristic hair design. He holds an enema clyster which is likely to be filled with an alcoholic liquid.

Perhaps at this time we should stop and review the components that appear in overlapping usage in conjunction with the Twins and their alternates. These are headbands, the broad-brimmed hat with snakelike tendrils, the ak'bal pot, the death-eye collar and a knot at waist or chest as a pendant. Also, blowguns, the spot on the cheek, masked eyes, the 3-point obsidian handstone and the knife. The up-swept hairdo and the bee iconography can be added to the group, along with the swollen belly and kimi signs. The selection of these components delineate the distinct and various aspects of the interrelation of the following figures: the Hero Twins, God A<sup>1</sup>, aspects of G1 and G3, the beekeeper, and the "swollen man".



Fig. 24 K7912 The Maize God, Hun Ahaw, Mol Ko Chi

The images on vase K7912 (Figure 24) illustrate the combination of attributes that characterize this composite being, the Hero Twins and God A<sup>1</sup>. The seated figure in the upper register has all the diagnostic qualities that establish him as a Hero Twin.

The headband with deity attached in front sweeps around his head ending in flared ties. The "hun" dot on his cheek is prominent, "godmarks" on his upper arm, back and thigh, along with his yoke are all idiomorphic to the Hero Twins. In the lower register, another version of the Twin with headband. He has spots on his cheek and body. Added to these attributes are the death's-eye collar and the knot at his waist. The third figure, also in the lower register has the indicative "hun" spot on his cheek, the headband with bound, upswept hair, the knot on his chest, and kimi glyphs on his body. I believe, that the text as well, at glyph G6, relates to his name. This glyph has the knots of Mok Chi' in front of face. There is also the possibility that the inverted triangle of three dots that marks the Hero Twins, is present. Although there are only two dots showing on the vase, it is possible that the third one was eroded away.

The figure named Mok Chi' on Vase K2286 ([Figure 20](#)) has some different characteristics from the version holding the ak'bal olla. Here he wears a hat, which I believe is a version of the broad brimmed hat often associated with the Hero Twins. From under the brim of the hat and his very narrow headband, spring the snaky tendrils. The same headband appears on the female counterpart as well. He wears the ak'bal sign as pendant, with abstractions of the snake emerging from the ak'bal olla as we saw on the figure from the Mundo Perdido wall painting. But most telling are the bee-wings that emerge from under his hat. These wings assign to him the beekeeper's role and suggest that he is able to transform into the bee itself.

Still another image of Mok Chi' appears on a polychrome vessel, K3924, ([Figure 17](#)) where the artist does not try to disguise the Hero Twin aspect of the beekeeper. He kneels, holding a bee in each hand with the ak'bal olla on his back. He wears the headband and yoke and his name glyphs appear in front of him. Here is another example of the myriad aspects of the Hero Twins. What is missing in this depiction of Mok Chi' are the knots in front of his face that appear on vases K2284 and K2286, suggesting that this depiction is that of the Hero Twin form rather than the God A<sup>1</sup> form.

Michael Coe points out: that in the Madrid Codex Xbalanqué materializes in a beekeeping section on page 104b ([Figure 25](#)); in this section, the glyphic passage associated with each supernatural usually reads, as it does here, u pak' u kab (name of god), in this case, "he hived his bees, Xbalanqué".



Figure 25

As we pointed out in the beginning of the presentation, it is often a combination of attributes and icons that define a supernatural being. We have been illustrating figures who have been giving us clues that there is a strong connection between the Hero Twin Yax Balam (Xbalanqué) and the beekeepers and bees.

Many of these attributes and icons are brought together in one final image; a mother-of-pearl shell pendant that sums up and unites many of the points that have been discussed previously ([Figure 26](#)). The face of the pendant is that of Yax Balam (Xbalanqué). The patch on his face as well as an inverted triangle of three dots, his headband and up-swept hairdo, all identify him precisely. Another element can be

added to his attributes, a deer's ear worn in his headband, is another icon, which identifies the Twins.



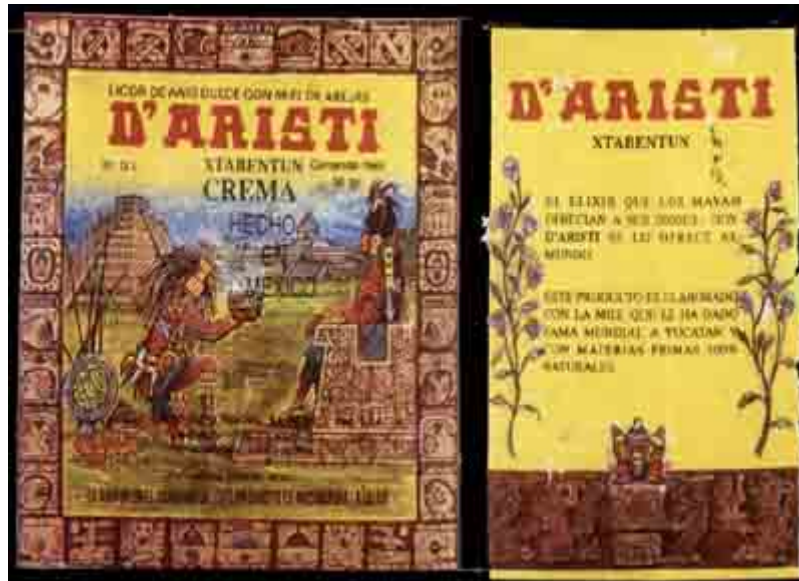
Figure 26

To return to the pendant, his body however, is that of a bee, combining wings and bulbous body with human legs, joining together those elements that describe the character Mok Chi'.

I would like to conclude with a brief comment on the name of this deity. David Stuart and Nikolai Grube included this supernatural, Mok Chi' in their paper, "Observations on T110 as the Syllable ko". In this paper they suggested a reading of Mok Chi' with the Yucatec meaning of "knot mouth", certainly appropriate for this deity. We have seen how he can be identified in certain of his guises by the knots in front of his mouth. ([Figure 12](#)).

However, we have seen at least one aspect of this being, named as Mok Chi' who does not have this feature, instead, he is shown as the Hero Twin beekeeper. I would like to suggest that the pictures themselves, that the Maya made, may be a language that needs to read and interpreted with as much care as the text. We have shown Mok Chi' as Hero Twin, God A<sup>1</sup>, a female version of God A<sup>1</sup>, the Swollen Man, the Waterlily Jaguar, the Man in Flames and above all, the bee emulator and beekeeper. Another curious aspect of the glyphic name emerges, in that, if the glyphs are read as separate components, we find that MOL (T581) can mean "to gather" and MANIK (T671) can mean "sweet". The written name then means to "gather sweet" and that is exactly what Mok Chi' does.

The Maya traditions of beekeeping and the production of alcoholic beverages has not ceased. In Yucatán today, one may obtain Xtabentun, a delightful anise-flavored liquor made from honey, produced by the descendants of the people who created Mok Chi'.



Xtabentun

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