

A Comic Guide to the Writing and Reading of Manual Gestures in Ancient Maya Iconography

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A Comic Guide to the Writing and Reading of Manual Gestures in Ancient Maya Iconography

Using Indigenous Sign Languages Epigraphers and historians have long used ancient iconography to guide or verify translations of oral languages in accompanying texts, or to decipher ancient information transmitted in the iconography itself, including both stories transmitted mnemonically and data in written through phonetic and ideographic hieroglyphs representing oral languages.

Yet recent research suggests that ancient Mesoamerican iconography may also have transmitted another mode of linguistic that has not been the focus of much research into ancient or even modern literacy: signed languages “spoken” mostly through gestures and manual signs people articulate spatially and see, rather than the oral-auditory languages that most people articulate orally and hear.

Comparative analysis of modern visuo-spatial languages spoken by Indigenous Mesoamericans today and reconstructing potential proto-signs can assist in the decipherment of gestures in ancient Maya art. This presentation argues that as occurs with all writing systems, reduction and simplification of what aspects of language got recorded was crucial to Mayas' iconographic transcription of ancient gestural/signed language. In particular, ancient Maya artisan-scribes developed conventions for representing only certain parameters of signed languages.

They also preferred to record short polysemic expressions and discourses in signs. Yet they simultaneously developed conventions for depicting movement that enabled widespread gestural literacy: the writing and reading of gestural signs in iconography. This presentation reviews some of these conventions, showing how they were reminiscent of those employed in modern comic strips, and they are crucial for the modern decipherment of gestural language in pre-Hispanic Maya iconography.

This presentation concludes with a summary of approaches that could help speakers of modern sign languages to translate gestures "written" graphically by ancient peoples elsewhere around the world..

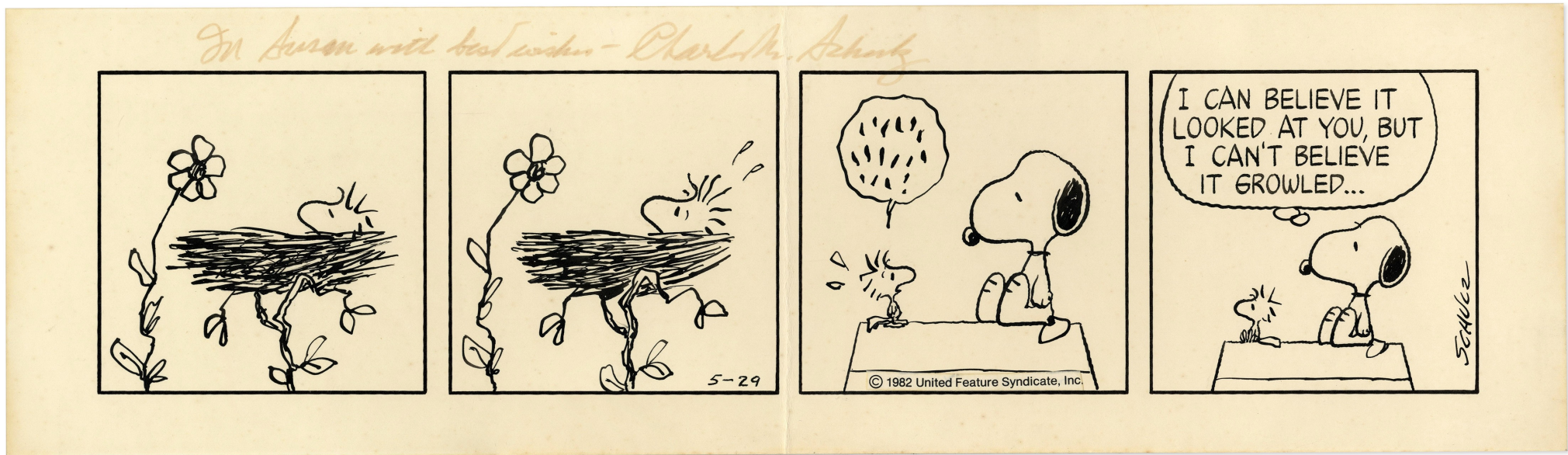
**Is writing without language
possible?**

Is writing without language possible?



A grawlix or obscenicon conveys that speech is profane, without specifying.

Is writing without language possible?



Similarly, the marks in Woodstock's speech balloon communicate only that Woodstock is communicating (Schulz 5/29/82).

Is writing without language possible?



Maya Pseudo Glyphs often don't represent particular meanings, other than the notion of 'writing' itself.

But what if we could systematically decipher complicated meanings from ancient iconography that corresponded regularly to a modern language?

Could we then discern that the ancient language was a *real language*, and that the the modern language likely has ancient roots?



K5094

**Gestures depicted in
ancient Mesoamerican
iconography correspond
uncannily with modern
Mesoamerican gestures.**

SAMPLE SIGNS IDENTIFIABLE IN MAYA ART AND GLYPHS

CL: PERSON

CHILD/VASSAL
WOMAN

MARRIED WOMAN

PERSON1
PERSON2

BABY/MAIZE EAR

CL: PLANT

MILPA/MAIZE PLANT/
EMBODIED MAIZE

FLOWER
SPROUT/REBIRTH
LIFE

CL: ANIMAL

DOG/ANIMAL
COATI
DEER
MONKEY
JAGUAR/PUMA

CL: THING

IT (dr. obi)
EXCHANGE
GROUND

TO RECEIVE
TO GIVE

CL: MOON/DISH

MOON
DRY SEASON
WET SEASON
START OF WET SEASON

Ranks:

RULER/LORD/TO RULE
WARRIOR
SUBJECT
CHANGE OF RESPONSIBILITY

States:

POWER/AUTHORITY
SUBMISSION
HUMILITY/MEEKNESS
PAIN
SADNESS/TO CRY
DEAD/TO DIE/DEATH
EXEMPLARY/NOBLE?/GOOD?

Measurements:

ONE
MANY
TWENTY
LITTLE BIT/SMALL
HANDSPAN
FULL
ZERO/NONE

Communication:

TO SAY SOMETHING
TO SAY TO SOMEONE
TO TALK/SPEAK
TO DISCUSS
TO COMMUNICATE/TO SIGN
TO COMMIT
TO TAKE ON

Assorted:

CACAO/CHOCOLATE
STAR
MANY
CONJUNCTION or ECLIPSE
FART/SHIT
TO LEAVE/DEPARTURE
TO OFFER/OFFERING
TO SCATTER
BLOOD
SEED
TO PLANT
PROMISE
CEREMONY
FROG
BIRD (POULTRY)
TAMALE
TO BEAR
T' O GIVE BIRTH

Correspondences with signs in Indigenous sign languages are especially strong.

Indigenous Sign Languages of Mesoamerica



Meemul Tziiij

VS.

Meemul Ch'aab'al

**Correspondences
correspond most strongly
with signs or gestures
reconstructed by
comparing multiple
modern sign languages
as if they were related
phylogenetically.**

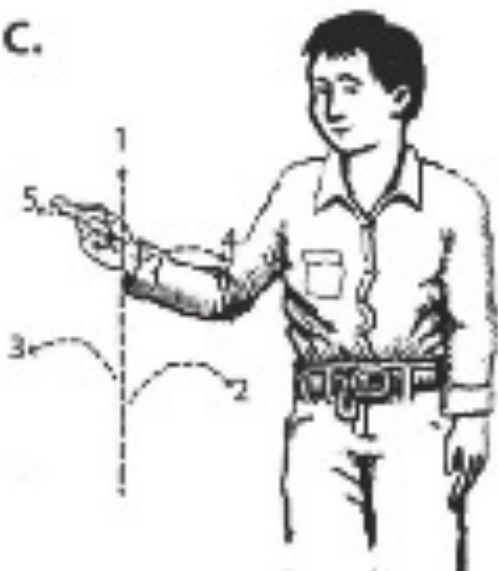
A.



B.



C.



D.



E.



F.

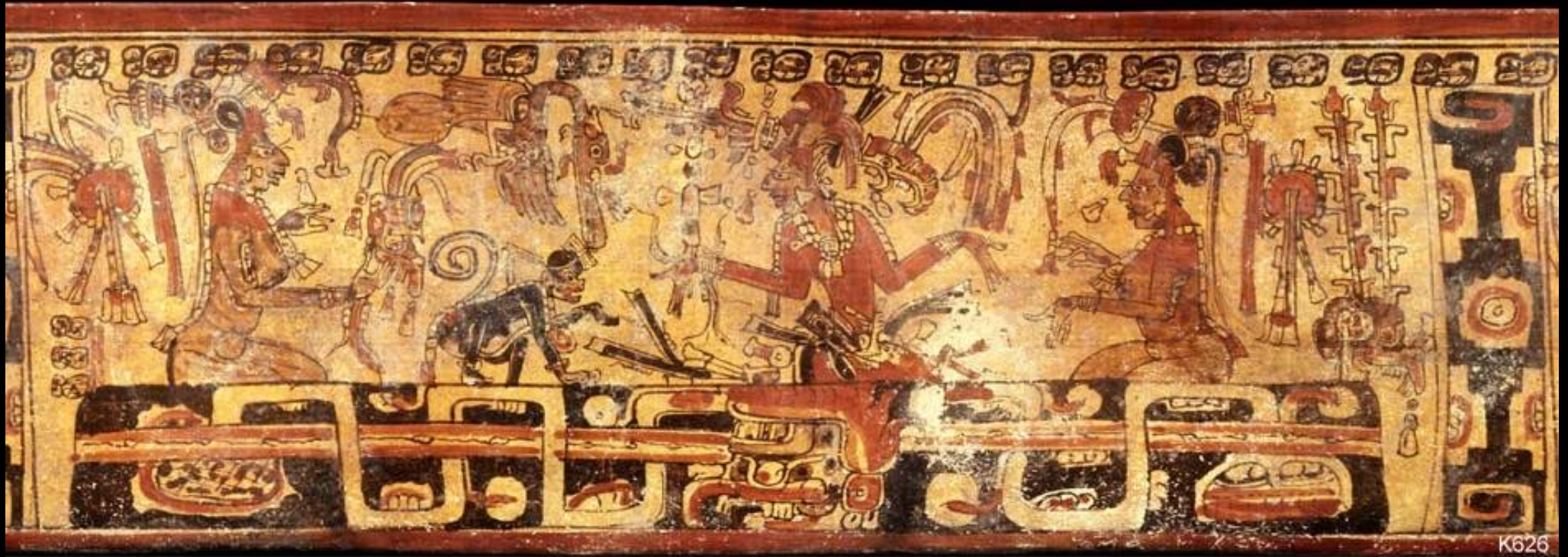


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© K1271

K3933



K626

Photograph © Justin Kerr File no. K626

The Madrid Codex depicts the Moon Goddess emptying water from a gourd.



The illustration is reminiscent of how contemporary Maya signers sign "wet season" by extending one hand with the fingers in a C-position, as if to represent a vessel tipped so that its contents flow out.

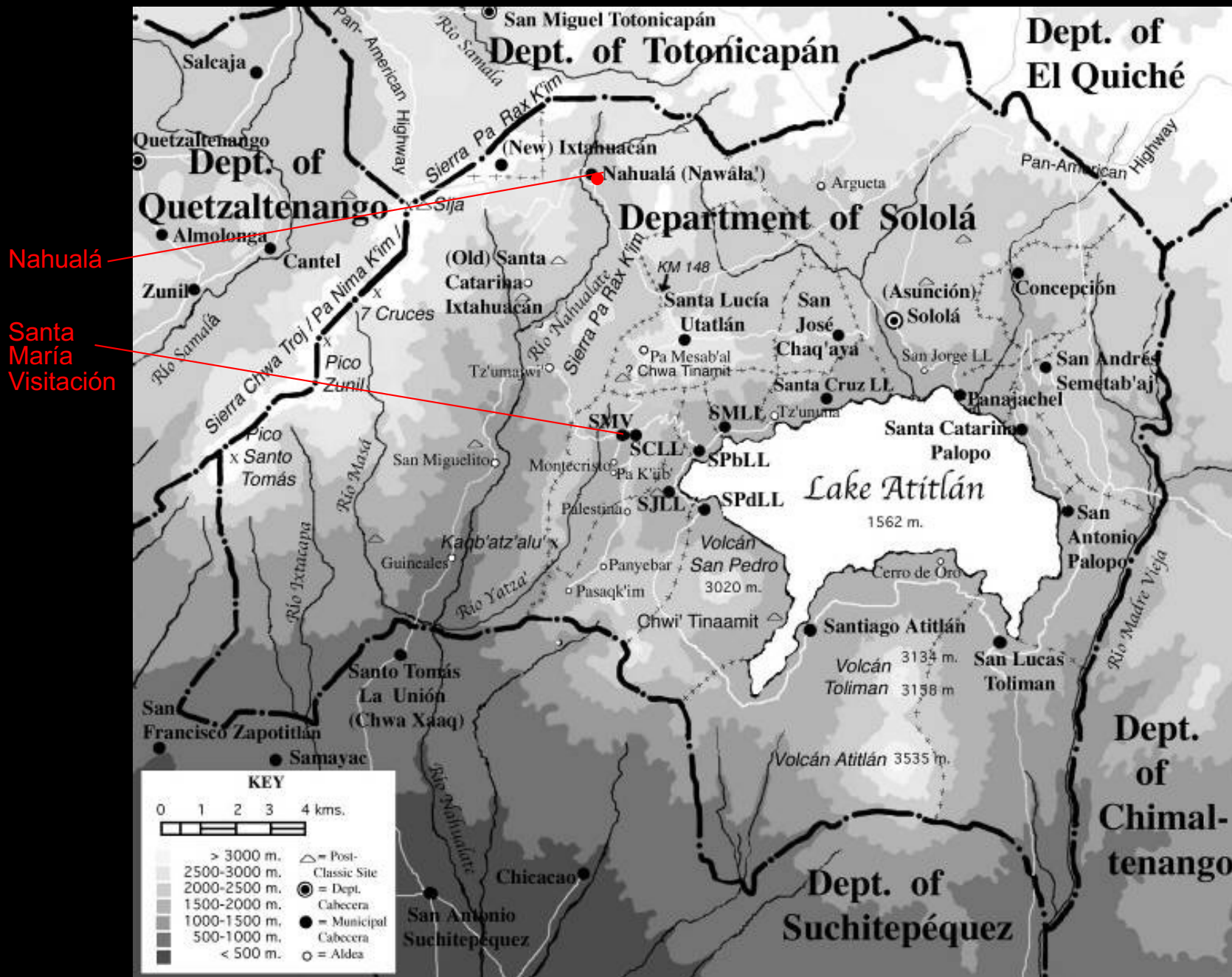


The Moon Goddess signs “wet season” or “rising wet season moon,” while cradling her rabbit-shaped child, a symbol of fertility.



**If a system of meaning is
written, can we work
backwards to say it is a
language?**

THE DEPARTMENT OF THE SOLOLÁ



Nahualá

Santa Maria Visitación

Compiled and drawn by Erich Fox Tree in February 2002, using a hypsometric line-map of piedmont topography from Shook (1965: 180-194) as a preliminary reference.

Antonio Simaaj, or Taat Tuun, in Santa Maria Visitacion (2010)



Deaf weavers and a hearing interpreter (in red) in Nahualá



TZIJJ = [IT'S] TRUE = [ES] VERDAD

'May I be chopped open if I lie (or fail to fulfill this promise), as God / the ancestors above are my witness'



**Signature glyph /self-portrait
of Antonio Achiteotl (16th cen)**

Achi-teotal means something
like “little god” or “little bit
divine.”



[https://aztecglyphs.wired-
humanities.org/content/achiteotl-
mh507r](https://aztecglyphs.wired-humanities.org/content/achiteotl-mh507r)

Most signs and gestures are not static; they involve movements.

All sign languages require hand movements.

Bats sign FLY (which is the final part of BAT)

For BAT, one signs SMALL ANIMAL/ MOUSE in one's palm, followed by FLY/ WING, flapping both arms and hands, or just one's hands, up and down in unison.



Artwork typically represents bats with their wings spread as in this image from a Classic period vase.

Bats sign FLY

More commonly, bats are represented with one wing or (cape-carrying) hand raised, and the other lowered, as in these images (from K1901, K9254, Seler 1902:113).

Alternating limbs represent of flight and the indigenous gesture or sign, FLY, not only with bats, but also with some images of birds and fireflies.



Fig. 310. The Bat God, on a painted clay vessel from Chamé (Alta Vera Paz). Erwin P. Dieseldorf Collection, Coban. Cf. Verhandlungen of the Berlin Anthropol. Society, December 15, 1894.

Other animals also sign their identities.





K4548

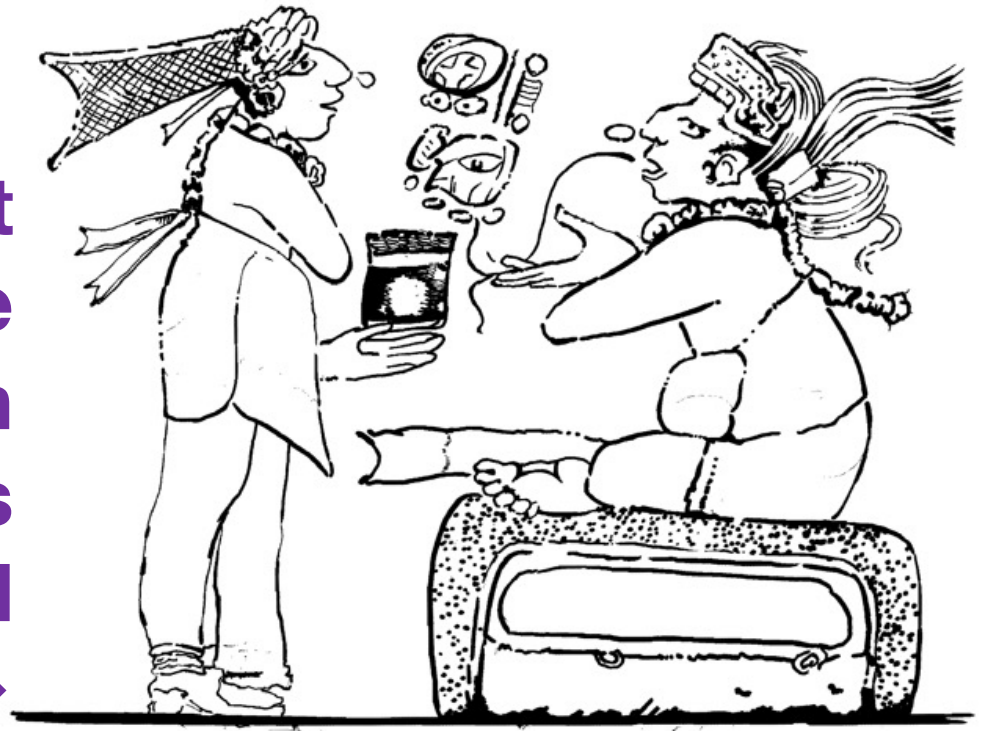


K1181



← Left: Common sign / gesture for SAY(S) THIS

(Right) An ancient lord makes the same gesture, with a speech scroll connecting his mouth to his words and the vase discussed. →





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- A seated noble signs “[I] Say it,” while a speech scroll emerging from his mouth rolls off his hand toward a vessel of chocolate.

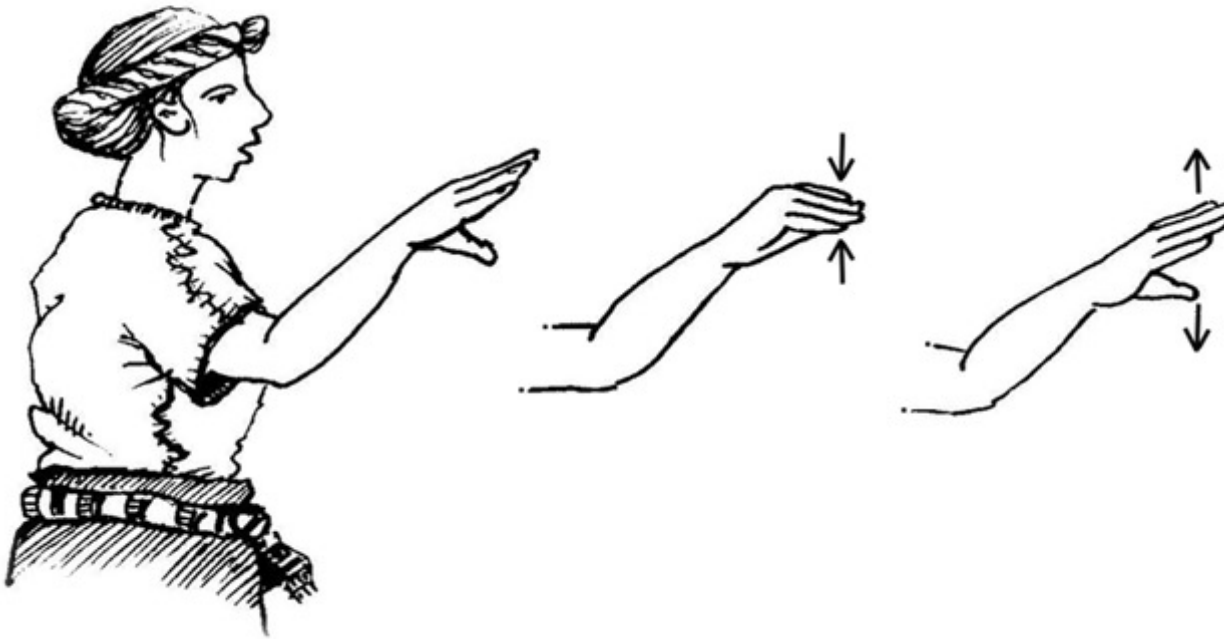
Some Maya iconography details that movement for us...



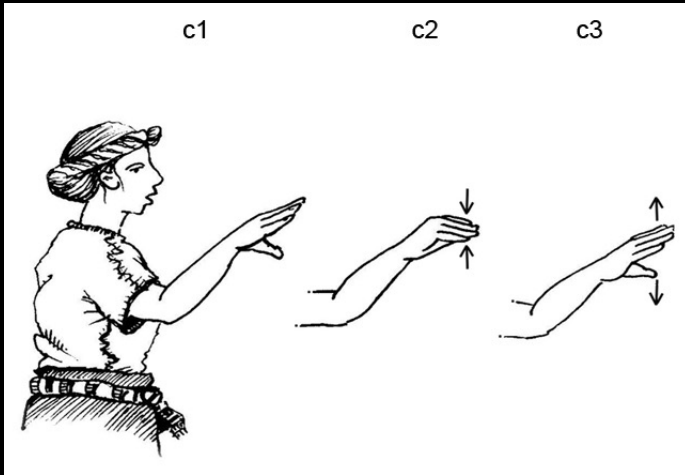
c1

c2

c3



**Left: a common
sign for SPEAK
/ TALK**



**Left: Common sign for
SPEAK / TALK**

**(Below) An ancient lord
gestures as if to say 'conversation' (a
sign made b say 'speak / talk' or 'talk
with both hands.**







The so-called 'Berlin Tripod'

d1



d2



d3



Left: Common gesture denoting 'star(s)' or 'blinking' or 'twinkling'

(Right) Section of the "Vase of the 7 Gods" with an Underworld lord gesturing in front of the glyph STAR



Close analysis allows modern scholars to decipher how ancient Mayas represented movement.

That, in turn allows scholars to translate or 'read' gestures more completely.

But gestures do not just exist in isolation.

Gestures and glyphs can combine to form bimodal orations. This painted Classic-Period vase offers a comic-strip-like rendering of the motions of a sign related to the moon or night (read in the direction of the faces). The main first consults with Figure O, to learn of a lunar event (1, 2) involving some convergence and separation: perhaps an eclipse. At the close, a hieroglyphic text (G) reports that the event (3,4,5) happened.



G = *Uti'* = "Then, [the event represented by 3+4+5] happened."

FULL MOON ¿ECLIPSE?

(Kerr 3876)



(Kerr 114)



But isolated signs do not offer proof of language.

That requires transcribed discourse, such as **multiple full sentences.**

**A Gesture Previously identified as a “salutation”
of some sort.**



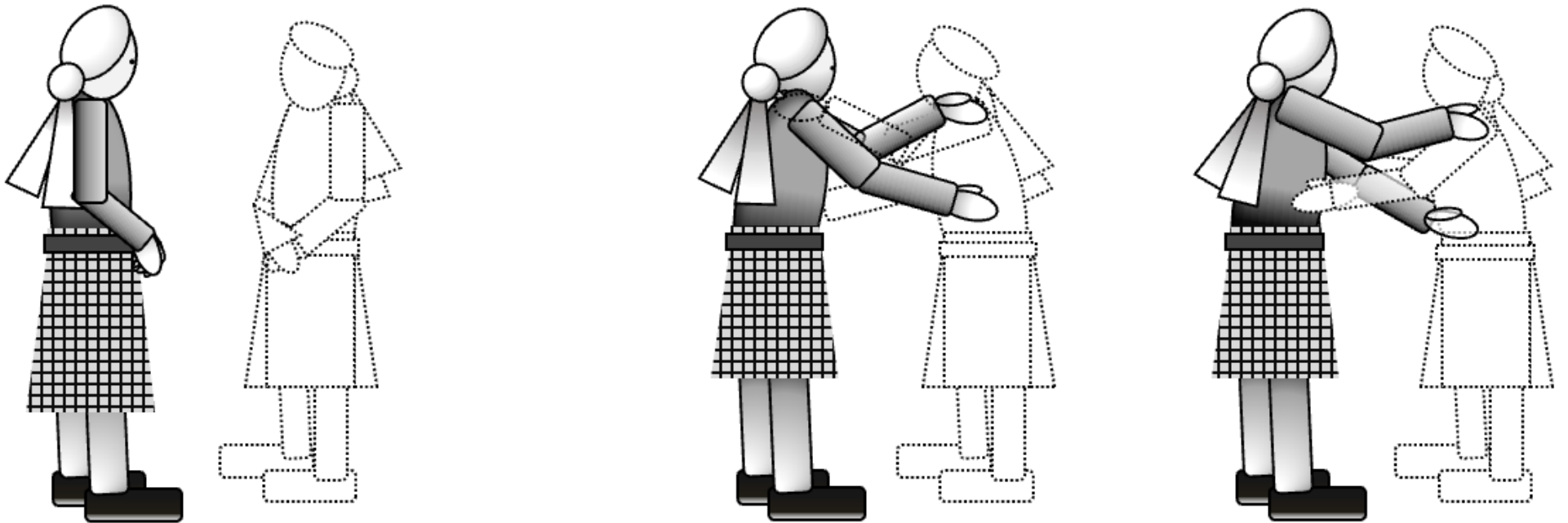
(Art by Ancona-Ha,
Perez de Lara, and Van
Stone 2000: 1080)

It is more likely a specific salutation: one's 'greeting' of a new office or responsibility.



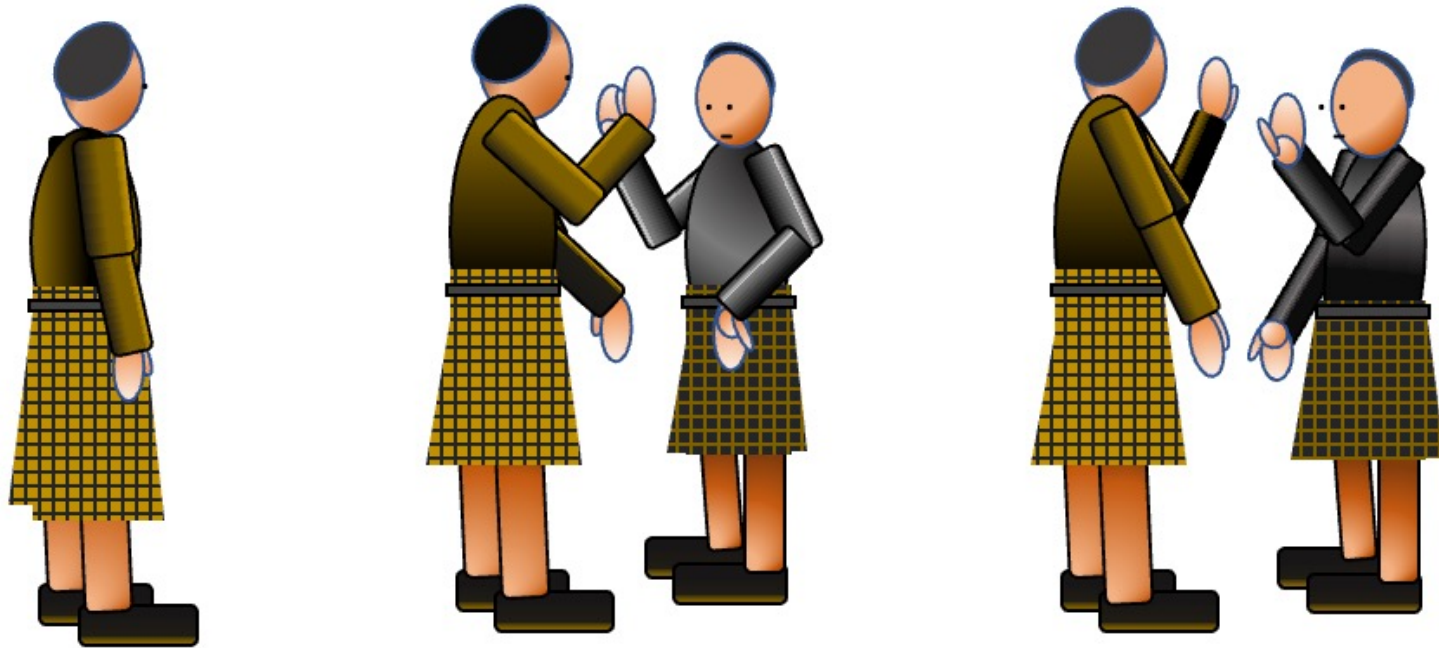
(Art by Ancona-Ha,
Perez de Lara, and Van
Stone 2000: 1080)

The gesture is still made today in many parts of the Maya area. It is known in K'ichee' as the *Jalk'ateem*.



(Art by Erich Fox Tree, 2022)

Today, the *Jalk'ateem* is articulated in two ways:
straight....



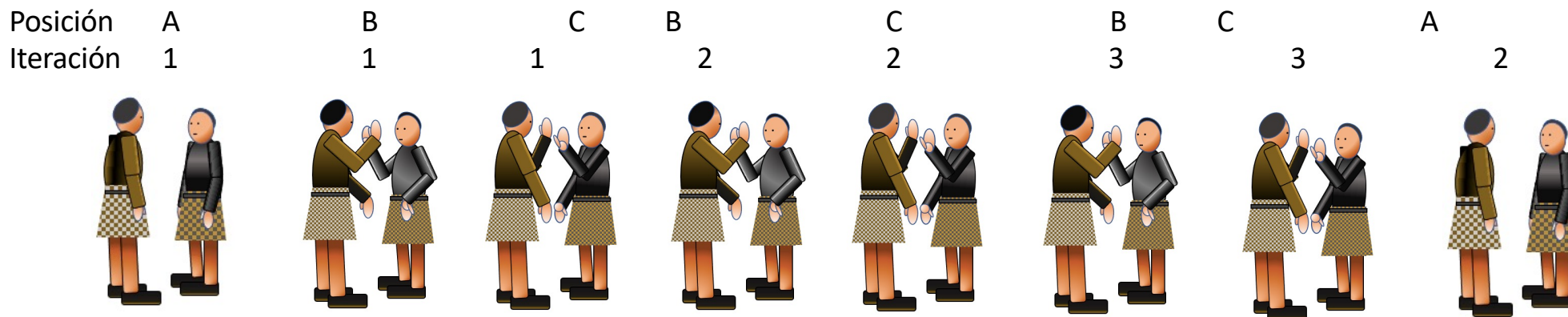
(Art by Erich Fox Tree, 2022)

... and curved or bent.

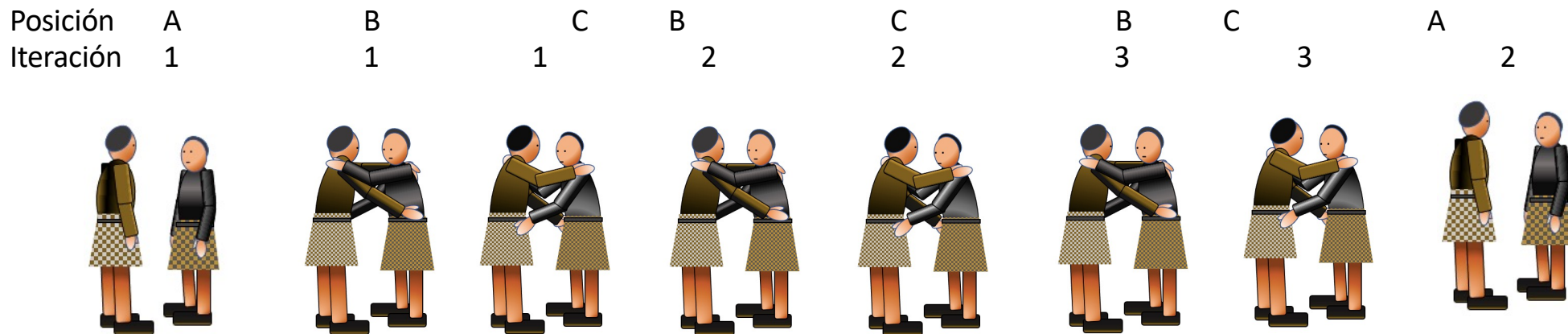


(Art by Erich Fox Tree, 2022)

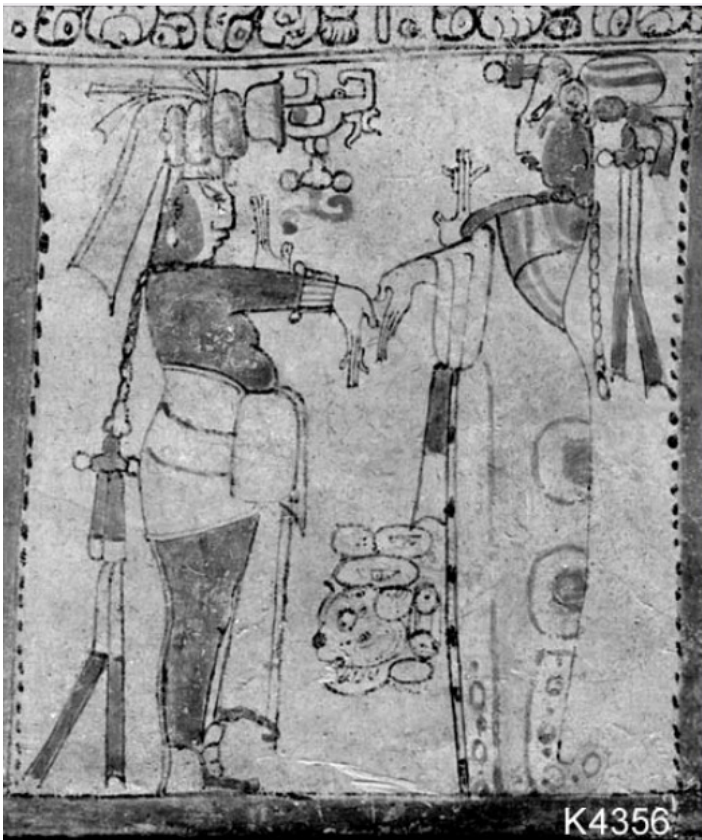
Version 1: "Straight"



Version 2: "Embracing"



Possible images of the central transition of the Jalk'ateem



A



B



C

A One of two related images from K4356. Kerr (1999) asked, "Is this a marriage portrait?"

B A bust recovered from Temple 22 of Copan. Although frequently described as depicting the Maize God, it might in fact be a depiction of a king dressed as the Maize God, perhaps as part of a ceremony of accession, and making the Jalk'ateem to represent the change of position ceremony and his new political role.

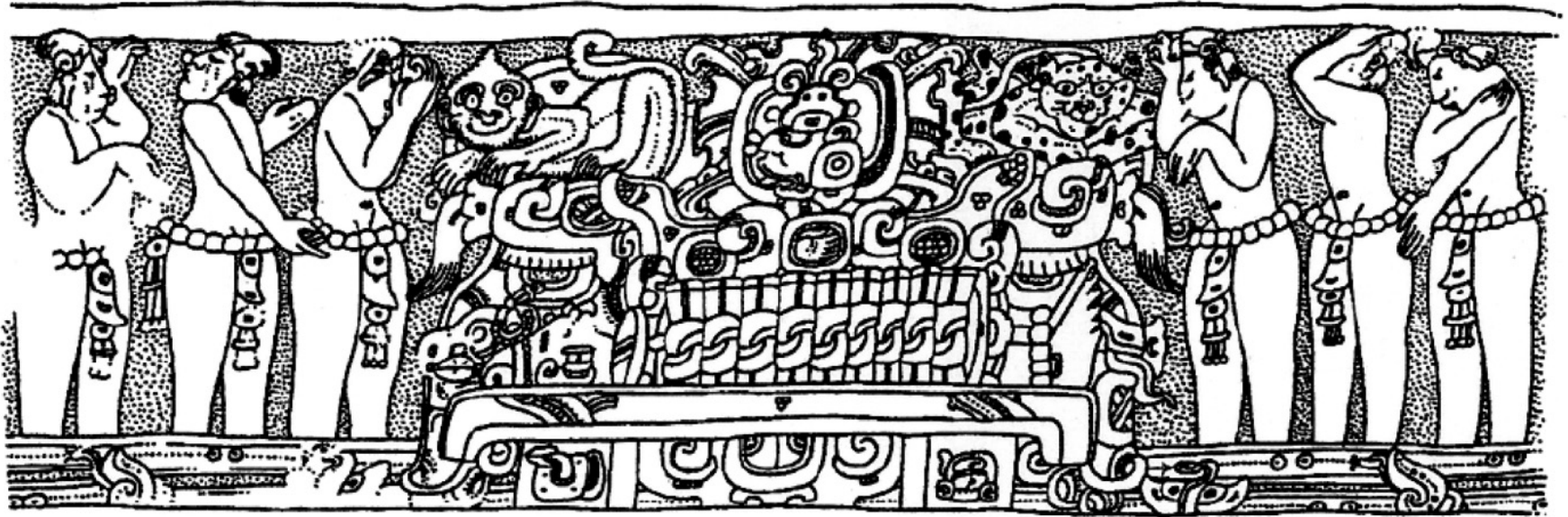
C A Palenque King makes a sign that resembles the Jalk'ateem, to symbolize his accession to power after the death of his father. However, the sign is combined with a gesture representing an offering of blood. While not dressed completely like the Maize God, he is accompanied by some Maize symbolism.

The incised cylindrical vase belonging to an Early Classic Period (250-600 CE) Itza lord vase depicts the funeral and rebirth of an elite individual.



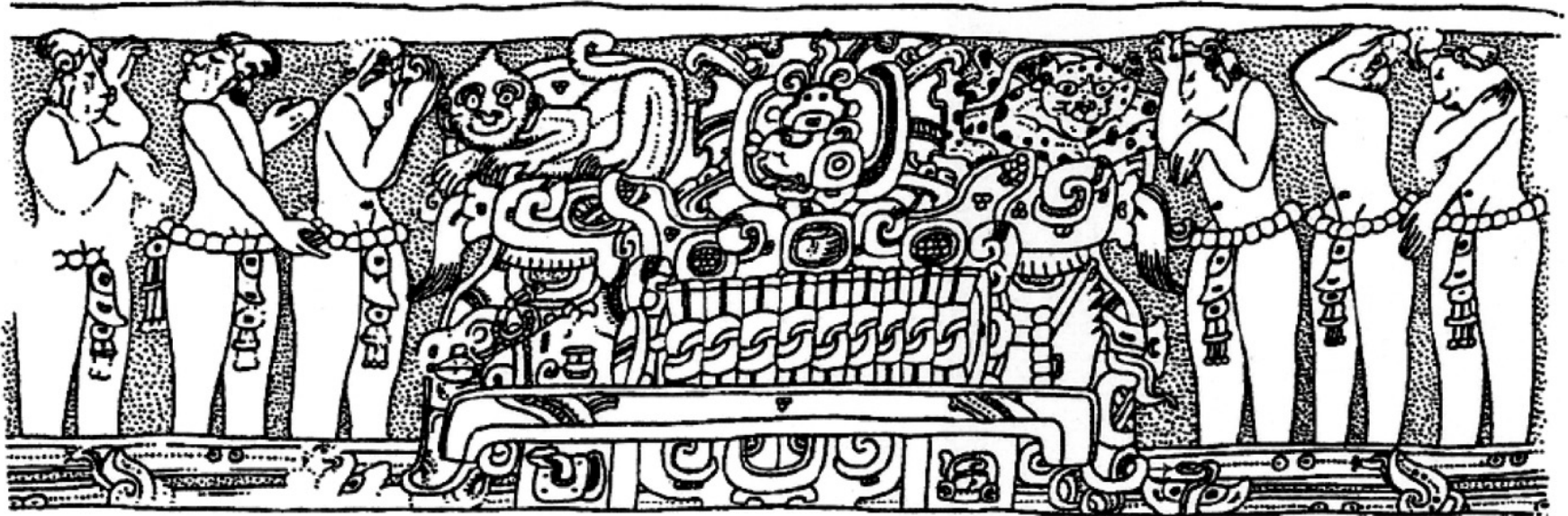
(K6547 --The 'Berlin Tripod', Museum für Volkerkunde, Berlin, Germany)

The Mourner(s) in focus...



(K6547 --The 'Berlin Tripod', Museum für Volkerkunde, Berlin, Germany)

The Mourner(s) in focus...



1. 2. 3.

6. 5. 4.

Translation of signs

1. SAD + CHANGE-DUTIES
2. LEAVE.
3. CRY/SAD.
4. HUMILITY
5. SUFFERING/AGONY.
6. SAD + CHANGE-DUTIES

Translation of (typical K'ichee' funerary discourse)

- = 1. You leave behind your duties/work/responsibility/example.
(*Chakanaaj kanoq lee aapataan.*)
- = 2. You went. (*Xatb' eek.*)
- = 3. We are sad. (*Kujb' isonik.*)
- = 5. We resign then, to this sadness.
(*Kaqaak' aamawa' j b' a' , we b' iis.*)
- ≠ 4. We are left alone. (*Xqaatokelaaj kanoq.*)
- = 6. We take on from here your duties/work/responsibility/
example. (*Chiqak' ama ub' iq lee aapataan.*)

(K6547 --The 'Berlin Tripod', Museum für Volkerkunde, Berlin, Germany)

FINIS

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