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## Creation and the Ritual of the Bacabs by Linda Schele

The Ritual of the Bacabs is a collection of curing chants for the treatment of disease. Since the publication of its translation by Roys (1965), the *Ritual of the Bacabs* has received sporadic attention from scholars studying Classic Maya cultural traditions (Freidel and Schele 1988), perhaps because the reference system in the Bacabs is so obscure as to appear unintelligible to a person not raised in the tradition. This state began to change when Schele and Freidel were preparing their study of the Creation myths of the Classic Maya period for *Maya Cosmos* (Freidel, Schele, and Parker 1993). In a study of the Milky Way in Maya myth by Peter Dunham (1980), we came across a reference to a passage in the *Ritual of the Bacabs* as a reference to the Pleiades. In reading this passage, we realized that it described not only the Pleiades, but the entire area of the sky the ancient Maya saw as one of the two celestial nexus of Creation. Eventually we were forced to remove that section of information from our book because of editorial reasons, but the importance of the passage stayed with me waiting for a moment in which I could focus on the problem.

In preparing for this presentation, I enlisted the help of Barbara MacLeod to aid me in generating a new translation. I am not an expert in Yukatek, especially of metaphorical conventions so important to the *Ritual of the Bacabs*, but I believe that the Classic Maya story of Creation informs our understanding of the *Ritual of the Bacabs* in ways that were previously unexpected. Any translator faces the problem of choosing one of many meanings to translate into the second language. Roys's knowledge of Yukatek ethnohistorical sources was encyclopedic, but he did not have the Classic-period texts to help him in his work. In this note, I will present alternatives, based heavily on his translations, but choosing meanings that make sense in light of the Classic-period texts.

In my view, the chants in the *Ritual of the Bacabs* attack disease within the context of Maya Creation. The version of Creation in the *Bacabs* is close if not identical to the versions recorded in the Classic-period texts and perhaps earlier. Most passages begin with a descriptions of the moment of Creation that establishes time and place. Thereafter, the text recounts the genealogy, place, and context of the birth of the disease. By knowing the parentage and origin of the disease, the *h-men* gained control over it.

This note offers translations of a few particularly relevant sections and suggests ways in which they

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reflect the Classic-period version of Creation.

Manuscript pages 4-5: The incantation for jaguar-macaw-seizure.

|  |                 |                 |
|--|-----------------|-----------------|
| <i>Hun Ahaw</i>                              | <i>hunuk</i>    | <i>Kan Ahaw</i> |
| One Ahaw                                     | now and forever | 4 Ahaw          |
| One Ahaw, the everlasting (recurring) 4 Ahaw |                 |                 |

Roys suggested that Hun Ahaw was a god of death known to the Yukateks, but according to the Tablet of the Cross at Palenque, Hun Ahaw was the day on which the Hun-Ye-Nal, the First Father (also the Maize God) was born. *Hunuk* is “perpetual and the only.” Roys translated it as “unique,” but the purpose is to mark this 4 Ahaw as the day of Creation—that is the “one and only 4 ahaw” or 4 Ahaw 8 Kumk’u.

|                         |            |              |
|-------------------------|------------|--------------|
| <i>Kan Ahaw</i>         | <i>bin</i> | <i>ch’ab</i> |
| 4 Ahaw                  | went [was] | creation     |
| 4 Ahaw was the Creation |            |              |

|                         |            |              |
|-------------------------|------------|--------------|
| <i>Kan Ahaw</i>         | <i>bin</i> | <i>Ak’ab</i> |
| 4 Ahaw                  | went [was] | the darkness |
| 4 Ahaw was the darkness |            |              |

This section is a formulaic couplet identifying 4 Ahaw as the day of Creation and Darkness. Classic-period scenes of Creations show 4 Ahaw 8 Kumk’u event against a black background, because the sky was not raised up to give room for the light to appear until 542 days after 4 Ahaw. Later in the manuscript Roys translated *bin* as “would be.” It is a future imperfect in Yukatek, but Barbara MacLeod (personal communication, 1993) feels a more likely reading to be *bin* as “to go.” In her opinion this *bin* is equivalent to the *bah* “to go” verb that appears with such frequency in the inscriptions. She pointed out that *bah* appears both in the incompletive as *u bah* and in the completive as *bahah*. In Yukatek, the completive would be *h-bin*, which is often realized simply as *bin*. I accept her interpretation for these passages because of the relationship to Classic-period texts.

|                    |            |            |
|--------------------|------------|------------|
| <i>ka</i>          | <i>sih</i> | <i>ech</i> |
| when               | born       | you        |
| when you were born |            |            |

|                                    |            |              |
|------------------------------------|------------|--------------|
| <i>makech</i>                      | <i>tah</i> | <i>ch’ab</i> |
| whoyou                             | lord       | creation     |
| Who was the lord of your creation? |            |              |

|                                    |            |              |
|------------------------------------|------------|--------------|
| <i>makech</i>                      | <i>tah</i> | <i>ak’ab</i> |
| whoyou                             | lord       | darkness     |
| Who was the lord of your darkness? |            |              |

|  |                        |  |
|--|------------------------|--|
| <i>u ch’ab bech</i>  | <i>k’in chak ahaw,</i> | <i>kolop u wich k’in</i>               |
| he created you   | Sun-Great-Lord,        | Blind the face of the Sun <sup>1</sup> |
| The Great-Sun-Lord, Blindfolded Face of the Sun, created you |                        |  |

This passage has the first question about the conditions of birth for the disease. The *h-men* begins by establishing the being who created the disease, here the Creator is identified as the sun god. Next the *h-men*

1. Roys translated this name as “Snatcher of the eye of the sun,” but Barrera Vásquez (1980:334) translates *kolop* as “lagrimas.”

begins his enquiry about the genealogy of the disease.

*ka sih ech*  
when born you  
when you were born?

*Max a na*  
Who your mother  
Who is your mother?

*Max a koob cit*  
Who your genital father<sup>2</sup>  
Who is your genital father?

*ka ch'abtab ech*  
when was created you  
when you were created.

*Chakal Ix Chel*  
Red Ix Chel

*Sakab Ix Chel*  
White Ix Chel

*Ix Hun ye ta*  
LadyOne its point lancet  
Lady Universal<sup>3</sup> One Point of the Lancet

*Ix hun ye ton*  
LadyOne its point penis<sup>4</sup>  
Lady Universal Point of the Penis

*la a na*  
this your mother  
This is your mother

*la a kob a kit*  
this your genital your father

The mother and father of the disease are named. Hun-Ye-Ta and Hun-Ye-Ton seem to be forms that are directly equivalent in structure to Hun-Ye-Nal, the Classic-period name of the First Father. Notice that both names have the *Ix* prefix that usually marks female names. Here, however, the last two lines clearly indicate that both the mother and father have been named. The *Ix* may be a diminutive in this context, rather than a female marker. I also suspect that the *Hun-Ye-Ta/Hun-Ye-Ton* pair may refer to bloodletting as one of the parents. Bloodletting and the resulting vision rites were couched in metaphors of birth during the Classic period.

2. "Genital father" seems to have the same meaning as "birth father" in modern English. The *h-men* does not want to know who raised or nurtured the disease, but rather who fathered it.

3. Barrera Vasquez (1980:246) glosses *hun* as "cosa general y universal."

4. *Ton* is usually taken to mean "testicles," but Barrera Vásquez (1980:807) has it as *miembro viril*.

*kan ki tu pach-e*  
 ascended at its back  
 ascended behind it

*kan ki tu pach che*  
 ascended at its back tree  
 ascended behind the tree

*Maxkal sih kech*  
 Maxkal born you  
 The steam bath bore you

*u kol ch'abe*  
 its frenzy<sup>5</sup> creation  
 The frenzy of creation

*u kol ak'abe*  
 his frenzy darkness  
 the frenzy of darkness

Here the place of Creation for the disease is given as a place called Maxkal. Roys took the Maxkal to be a tree. However, David Bolles (n.d.) cites evidence from many Yukatek sources that Maxkal is a Mayanization of the Aztec word *temazcalli*. “maxcal 1) db) steam bath house, sauna. Called *temazcal* in Spanish, from *temazcalli* = bath house in Nahuatl (*tema* = bath and *calli* = house). From the archeological evidence in Yucatan and from the present-day existence of *temazcallis* in the highlands of Mexico it seems that *maxcals* were mostly either in-ground structures with a wickiup type roof or occasionally below-ground structures. In the “Ritual of the Bacabs” Roys translates *maxcal* as being a plant (see second entry for *maxcal*), but *maxcal* is often paired with the word *acantun*, which might be an alternative spelling for *actun* = cave, and in two instances with *dzulbal* = arbor, which Roys believes to be a ceremonial hut (See Roys/Bac/5 below). Further, *acantun* and *dzulbal* are often paired in the Bacab manuscript without *maxcal*. It would thus seem that Arzápalo is correct in his translation of *maxcal* as *temazcal*.” (Bolles n.d.) This fits the Creation story at Palenque, because Houston (n.d.) has identified the sanctuaries inside the temple of the Group of the Cross as effigy steambath. They are called *pib-na* in the texts of the Group.

The incantation for the Traveler’s sickness is one of the most revealings of the passages in the Ritual of the Bacabs. It begins in the standard way—by setting the time and place of Creation.

*Kan Ahaw bin ch'ab*  
 4 Ahaw went creation  
 4 Ahaw was creation

*Kan Ahaw bin ak'ab*  
 4 Ahaw went darkness  
 4 Ahaw was darkness

*ka sihi ki*  
 when was born  
 when it was born

---

5. Roys (1965:4) translated *cool* as “lust” but Barrera Vásquez (1980:332) has it as “excitación.”

*uy ol ch'ab*  
 his heart (hole) creation  
 the heart of creation

*uy ol ak'ab*  
 his heart (hole) darkness  
 the heart of darkness

The crack in the back of the Turtle in Orion is named glyphically as the *ol* in several Classic-period texts. The heart of creation, the heart of darkness mentioned very like *ly* refers this part of the sky.

*tal tu ho tas ka'an*  
 came from its five level sky  
 he came from the fifth level of the sky

The Creation text of Quirigua says that the jaguar stone of the first three stones of Creations was set up at *Na-Ho-Chan*, "House (or First or Female) Five Sky. The gods who painted the images of the creation places on the sky are called *Na-Ho-Chan Itz'at*, "First-Five-Sky Sages (or Artists)."

*yalix ti tzab*  
 her child in Snake-Rattles [or an alternative translation is]  
 and then it was thrown into (from) the Snake-Rattles  
 the child of the Pleiades<sup>6</sup> [or the alternative would be]  
 and then it was thrown into the Snake-Rattles

*yalix ho ti munyal*  
 her child five in clouds [or alternatively]  
 and then it was thrown five into (from) the clouds  
 The child of Five in the Clouds  
 and then it was thrown five into the clouds

The Snakerattle is widely accepted as the Yukatek name for the Pleiades. They are in the constellation of Taurus very near the Gemini-Orion nexus named by *Na-Ho-Chan*. "Five in the Clouds" may refer to the same general area. The disease is called the child of these regions.

*ten ch'uch'wah batan tancase' ok*  
 I, the one, made speechless him Seizure Foot  
 I am the one who made him speechless, Traveler Seizure.

Barbara MacLeod pointed out to us that *Tamakas* is a Yukatek name for the Milky Way as well as the word for "seizure." Since the Milky Way crosses the ecliptic at this point in the sky, the double reference may be intended.

6. Roys (1965:7) made this connection. This places the location in the Taurus-Pleiades region.

7. Barbara MacLeod (personal communication, 1993) pointed out to us that Barrera Vásquez (1980:768) lists *tamakas* as "locura, frenesí," the word used here as "seizure." He also glossed *tamakas* and *tamkas* as *Via Láctea*." She suggested there may have been a play on words. We agree, especially since we have references to snake-rattles in the same passage.

## page 17

*macx u na*  
 who his mother  
 Who is his mother?

*yal bin ix K'ak' tan chel*  
 her child, they say, Lady Fire in the center Rainbow  
 they say he was the child of Lady Fire in the center of the Rainbow

*yal bin ix k'ak' te ka'an*  
 her child, they say, Lady Fire in the Sky  
 they say he was the child of Lady Fire in the Sky

*yal bin ix k'ak' te munyal*  
 her child, they say, Lady Fire in it Clouds  
 they say he was the child of Lady Fire in the Clouds

Here the parentage is given, again as a place in the sky. The child of woman who is named Fire in the Rainbow, Fire in the Sky, and Fire in the Clouds.

## page 19

*u lubul bin*  
 he falls they say  
 they say he falls

*tu kan be*  
 at its four roads  
 at the four crossroads

*tu kan lub*  
 at its four resting places  
 at the four resting places

I think the four roads and four resting places are symbolized by the K'an-cross with its perpendicular crossings and its four marked corners. The k'an-cross is at the base of the foliated cross on the Tablet of the Foliated Cross, which symbolizes the reborn Maize God. It is also at the point of the crack on the Orion turtle's carapace. The four roads are made by the crossing of the Sak Be (the Milky Way) and the ecliptic.

*yiknal Ix Ho Kan Be*  
 in the company of Lady Five<sup>8</sup> Four Roads  
 in the company of Lady Five Four Roads

*yiknal Kit Ho Kan Lub*  
 in the company of Father Five<sup>9</sup> Four Resting Places  
 in the company of Father Five Four Resting Places

Here personalities of this place are named as Lady Five Four-Roads and Father Five Four-Resting places.

8. Roys (1965:148) transcribes this name as Ix Hol Kan Be, "Lady Opening at the Four Roads."

9. Following Roys's translation of the name in the previous phrase, this name may be Father Opening at the Four Resting Places.

The number five must refer to the Na-Ho-Chan references discussed above. Apparently the parents of this disease like the sky artists of Creations carry the number of this sky location in their names.

|   |               |             |                |
|---|---------------|-------------|----------------|
| <i>ten</i>                              | <i>k luba</i> | <i>ch'u</i> | <i>tankase</i> |
| I, the one,                             | makes fall    | ???         | Seizure        |
| I am the one who makes ??? Seizure Fall |               |             |                |

|  |              |                |                     |                               |
|--|--------------|----------------|---------------------|-------------------------------|
| <i>ki bin</i>  | <i>yalab</i> | <i>tumenel</i> | <i>Ix Ho Kan Be</i> | <i>Ix Ho Kan Lub</i>          |
| it will  | said         | by             | Lady Five Four Road | Lady Five Four Resting Places |
| it will be said by Lady Five Four Roads, Layd Five four Resting Places |              |                |                     |                               |

Now Lady Five Four-Road and Lady Five Four-Resting places are named as the agent of the defeat of Traverler's Seizure.

The encantation for fire also relates to the sky and the first fire of Creation. (p. 150)

|                        |            |             |
|------------------------|------------|-------------|
| <i>Hun</i>             | <i>Kan</i> | <i>Ahaw</i> |
| One                    | Four       | Ahaw        |
| The Everlasting 4 Ahaw |            |             |

This establishes the time frame as that of Creation.

|             |                  |
|-------------|------------------|
| <i>tunx</i> | <i>bakin bal</i> |
| where?      | How thing?       |
| Where?      | How?             |

|  |              |            |           |                    |                |
|--|--------------|------------|-----------|--------------------|----------------|
| <i>tux</i>   | <i>bakin</i> | <i>oci</i> | <i>tu</i> | <i>wayasba</i>     | <i>a k'ak'</i> |
| where?   | how?         | enter      | in its    | sign <sup>10</sup> | your fire      |
| where and how did it enter into the sign of your fire? |              |            |           |                    |                |

|                          |            |                  |            |
|--------------------------|------------|------------------|------------|
| <i>cech</i>              | <i>Yax</i> | <i>winik</i>     | <i>che</i> |
| you                      | first      | humanwood [tree] |            |
| you the first wood human |            |                  |            |

The encantation begin asking the first wooden man how the sign (wayasba) of the fire enter into the world.

|                            |           |              |            |
|----------------------------|-----------|--------------|------------|
| <i>u kum</i>               | <i>ix</i> | <i>bolon</i> | <i>puk</i> |
| her pot                    | Lady      | Nine         | Hills      |
| the pot of Lady Nine-Hills |           |              |            |

|  |            |           |                |          |                 |                |
|--|------------|-----------|----------------|----------|-----------------|----------------|
| <i>la</i>  | <i>oki</i> | <i>tu</i> | <i>wayasba</i> | <i>u</i> | <i>k'obenil</i> | <i>a k'ak'</i> |
| that   | entered    | into its  | sign           | its      | hearth stone    | your fire      |
| That one entered into the sign of the hearth stones of your fire |            |           |                |          |                 |                |

|                        |            |                 |            |
|------------------------|------------|-----------------|------------|
| <i>kech</i>            | <i>yax</i> | <i>winik ki</i> | <i>che</i> |
| you                    | first      | human           | wood       |
| you First Wooden Human |            |                 |            |

This passage established that the pot of Lady Nine-Hills entered into the heath stones of the fire. Lady

10. Barrera Vásquez (1980:917) glosses *wayasba* as "figura o parábola, señal, adivinar por sueños o signos."

Nine-Hills (Bolon-Puk) in Yukatek is Bolon-Witz in the Classic system. Although Bolon-Witz is not yet associated directly with Creation, it does occur in ritualistic contexts at Copan. The sign of the hearth stone is a triangle of stars in Orion—Alnitak, Saiph, and Rigel. According to the modern K'iche', the Orion nebula is the flame in the hearth. According to the Aztecs, the belt of Orion was the fire drill for making first fire.

*u chakbakel Ix Hun Itzam Na*  
 its thigh Lady One Itzam Na  
 The thigh of Lady Everlasting Itzam Na

*la oki tu wayasba*  
 that one entered into its sign  
 that one entered into its sign

This reference is very obscure, but I (Freidel et al 1993) have evidence that Itzam-Na was both a paddler of the Milky Way canoe and a rider of peccaries. The constellation of Gemini was *ak ek*. *Ak* is "peccary, turtle," and "drawf." Thus, Itzamna as the peccary rider and the canoe paddler is associated with Gemini and Gemini lies adjacent to the Orion hearth. This passage too may be describing the sky.

*u nach cheil a k'ak'*  
 it takes into its tecth wood your fire  
 that one entered into the sign of your fire biting on wood

*kech yax winik che*  
 you First Human Wood  
 You First Wooden Human

*Oxlahun tun munyal*  
 thirteen stone cloud  
 Thirteen Stone Cloud

*tunxtun bakin oci tu wayabas u butzil a k'ak'*  
 where? How? entered into its sign its smoke your fire  
 Where? How did it enter into the sign of the smoke of your fire?

*kech yax winikil che*  
 you first human wood  
 You First Wooden Human

*oxlahun ka'an*  
 Thirteen Sky  
 Thirteen Sky

*tunxbakin Ia oki tu wayabas yeI a k'ak'*  
 Where? How? that one entered into its sign its flame your fire  
 Where and How did that one enter into the sign of the flame of your fire

*kech yax winikil che*  
 you first human wood  
 Your First Wooden Human



*utunichil tun bakin sayab oci tu wayasba u chukil a k'ak*  
 its stones where how spring entered into its sign its soot your fire  
 Where and how did the stones of the spring into into the sign of the soot of your fire

*kech yax winikil che*  
 you first human wood  
 Your First Wooden Human

*ox niki b sus tunx bakin oci tu wayasba u tanil a k'ak'*  
 3 small piles sand where how?entered into its sign its ashes your fire  
 How and where de 3 small sand piles enter into the sign of the ashes of your fire

*kech yax winikil che*  
 you first human wood  
 Your First Wooden Human

This last long passage is less transparent, but it seems to related a series of things—thirteen stone clouds, thirteen sky, stones from a spring, and three small piles of sand—to the various parts of the fire.

And finally, there is an encantation for scorpion bite which seems to describe the constellation of Scorpio against the background of the Milky Way (p. 161). It is a counter for scorpion bite.

*pichin<sup>11</sup> tech tan k'ula*  
 poured out you in the center of the *k'ula*  
 you were poured out into the center of the *k'ula* (holy water?)

*ti bin a ch'ah u yamulil a pachi*  
 there they say you took its undulations your back  
 There, they say, you got the undulations in your back

I am not sure what the *k'ul a* was, but it could be either the ocean or the deep waters of a cenote.

*pichin tech bin tan yol che*  
 poured out you they say in the center its heart tree  
 you were poured out, they say, in the center of the heart of the tree

The reference was obscure to Roys, but it clear to me. *Sinaan*, the scorpion, was poured into the center of a tree that can only be the Milky Way in its north-south orientation. The Classic-period Maya called this the Wakah-Chan (Raised-up or Six Sky) and understood it to be the tree at the center of the cosmos.

*ti bin ta ch'ah u yax cheil a pachi*  
 there they say you took the First Tree your back  
 There, they say, you took the First Tree (the World Tree) at your back

*a yax cheil nak'i kech*  
 you First Tree belly you  
 you First Tree as your belly

11. Barrera Vásquez (1980:652) glosses *pich* both as “echar de alguna vasija” and “sacar espina o sangrar tumor con espina.” *Pich* can be pour out, as Roys translated it, or it can be perforate.

Here the tree is clearly identified as the Yax Che, the First-Tree, or ceiba that many sources identify as the Yukatek version of the tree at the center of the world. The passage say that the Yax Che is at the back and the belly of Sinaan, and so it is. Scorpio's head lies outside the Milky Way, but its curving body is surrounded at the belly and back by the crystalline beauty of the Xibalba Be.

### Conclusions

There are many other passages that can be directly mapped onto the sky and associated directly with Classic-period Creation mythology. The assortment of references that have so confounded interested students now make growing sense as a strategy of combating disease by known the original and genealogy of the disease at the time of Creation. The descriptions of Creation and the portions of the sky related to it in the Ritual of the Bacabs matches closely and in detail the cosmology of the Classic period as it was associated with the sky.

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