

An Impressionistic Approach to the Maya Arts and the Hieroglyphic Writing System

by *Toshi Ishihara*

I would like to start by introducing two art works. The **cylindrical tripod, cycle monster** (Coe 1982: No. 25) attracts us in that it has layers of meaning.¹⁾ First of all, for a practical purpose, it was used as a cylinder (the lid is missing). It has a small sculpture which is attached to and connects with the cylinder. The effigy is made after a kind of a bird which I cannot identify. According to Michael D. Coe, this “fantastic bird-monster” is associated with the baktun, katun, and tun glyph of the Maya Long Count.²⁾ All we can figure out is that the bird is somehow related to the cycle of time. Coe’s comment on the tripod also informs us that the effigy functions as a whistle when liquid is poured. What did the Maya people hear in this whistle when they poured water from this cylinder? How did it sound?

Then how about the sound of the trumpets which appear on the **polychrome vase, court scenes with musicians** (Coe 1982: No. 1)? The vase has two bands at the top and the bottom with what look like decorative designs on them. Actually the quincunxes is a glyph “be” designating “a way leading to the Underworld.” Knowledge of the meaning of the glyph helps us to understand the message of the picture on the vase.

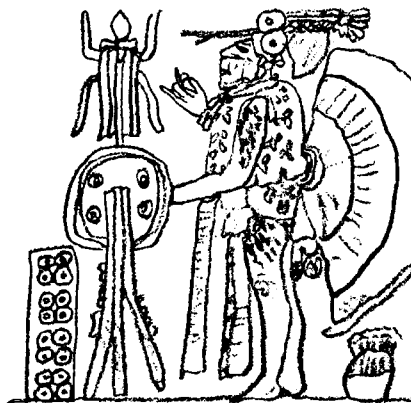
Objects remain through a long period of time and are still talking to the viewer. But the sound is lost. I would like to construct a small world by listening to the sound and speech in the arts left from the Maya past.

It should be reasonable to assume that art works by the Maya are the outcome of the flexible imagination which works in their writing system. In other words, some characteristics we find in their writing can be considered to be present in other artistic and imaginative forms of expression—artifacts, literature, and architecture. The hieroglyphic writing illustrates multi-layered perception of the Maya people. Their writing system

which is a mixture of pictograph, ideograph, and phoneticism gives the Maya a great amount of flexibility and licence in conveying their ideas in writing.

One device that contributes to the multi-layeredness and enriches the semantic universe is the rebus writing: enigmatic representation of word or concept by pictures etc., suggesting its syllables. This linguistic phenomenon remains in a play among children, in which they substitute pictures for concepts by relying on the sound of the target word. For example, the English-speaking children draw a picture of an eye to represent the concept “I.” Plenty of business and institutional logos do similar things in pictorializing concept, as in “I ♥ NY”. The interchangeability in the Maya arts between word (writing) and picture (drawing) is evidenced by a painting on the **polychrome vase, double-throne scene** (Coe 1973: No. 30) where the “maize” glyph is depicted as a substitution for the visual image of the plant.³⁾ In this case, picture is replaced by abstract concept.

Interchangeability never means exclusion. Writing, picture, and sound support one another. As already seen in the case of the **polychrome vase, court scenes with musicians**, the glyph is indispensable in constructing the meaning of the painting. One more example will be enough to show that glyphs and painting help each other. Let us take a vase from Yucatan which depicts a warrior procession (Coe 1982: No. 5). It represents four Maya warriors, proceeding to the left. Each one carries a spear and has a trophy head from a slain captive. A ritual enema vase is drawn on the scene. From those visual informations the viewer may guess that the occasion would be a procession after a war, celebrating the victory. Again in this case, it is the glyphs on the vase that consolidate our reading of the picture. Four repeated circles in each glyph compound must be the *po* affix.⁴⁾ The reduplicated *po* should be read as *pop*. What does *pop* mean, then? [Figure 1]



[Figure 1] Part of Cylindrical Vessel with Warriors (Shele & Miller: Plate 84A)

First of all, *pop* represents “a mat.” Francis Robicsek illustrates that the glyphs for *pop* show crossed and twisted bands, which pattern must have been derived from designs of a woven mat.⁵⁾ The glyphs are pictographs, but at the same time, and more important to us, they are ideographic signs, representing “throne” and therefore “rulership.” This is the meaning of the glyphs in the painting of the warrior procession mentioned above.

Let us further explore the meaning of *pop*. By using *pop* as an example, we could see how the rebus writing weaves up a world richly endowed with meanings. According to J. Eric S. Thompson, *pop* is also “the name of the principal month of the year.” The mat as the symbol of authority and importance is an appropriate sign for what is in a principal position. But for its association with month, we have to have knowledge of how *pop* was constructed. *Pop*, as mentioned above, comes from a repetition of the *po* affix which in turn signifies a few concepts. The first meaning of *po* is “toad” or “frog,” based on the fact that *po*, along with *uo*, is an ideophonic rendition of a croaking voice of a toad. Another meanings of *po* are “number twenty” and “the month.” *Po* also designates “the moon goddess” who is “the goddess of weaving.”

From the information above, it is clear why *pop* contains both implications of “the month” and “weaving.” It should also be noted that for the Maya people with flexible mind, it presented no problem to represent “twenty days” by a moon glyph, the head of a frog or toad, or a geometric sign.

As is clear by now, sound draws different concepts onto one word and it is due to the mixed system of the hieroglyphic writing that many substitutions are made possible. As Linda Schele and Mary Ellen Miller point out in *The Blood of Kings: Dynasty and Ritual in Maya Art*, artists had to be creative with their means since the media and the function of their art had been rigidly established as code through education and tradition.⁶⁾ The only way to show their art and skill was through innovation and refinement of the materials transmitted to them.

Artistry and expertise in the art of writing seems to have been judged not only by standards of calligraphy and the conventions of literature but by the measure of innovative and humorous uses of substitution and word play, in both the lexicon and the visual identity of signs. . . . The scribes at Copán during the Late Classic period seem to have been the most advanced in the pursuit of this art [visual pun]. To the epigrapher struggling to unravel these complex inscriptions, it seems as if the Copán scribes agreed among themselves never to write a king’s name twice in exactly the same way.⁷⁾

I would like to draw an analogy to the rebus writing in the Maya hieroglyphic writing from the Japanese language. It is well known that the Japanese invented their system of writing, called *kana*, to reflect the inflected nature of the language and that those syllabaries are appended to the Chinese characters. However, another ancient spelling system is seldom mentioned since it is no longer in use. In this system, to transcribe the inflected parts in the Japanese language, the Chinese characters were used for the sake of the sound, not as ideographs but as logographs. Since the Chinese language is rich in a sense that there are many characters which are pronounced with the same sound value the possibility of options for substitution is very high. The system is called *Manyo-gana*, according to the title of an anthology of poetry, *Manyo-shu*, compiled in the eighth century in which this system was frequently used.

Another interesting fact about the Japanese writing system is how, in addition to the borrowing of the Chinese characters, the Japanese adopted and adapted some Chinese characters. It was through combining simple Chinese ideographs into another ideograph. For example, by combining “fire” and “field,” they invented a new character to distinguish a dry field from a wet one. Addition of a pictograph, “man” beside a letter, “to move,” makes another verb “to work” since work requires more than a simple movement of animals. When “mountain” is written with “up” and “down,” it designates the top of the slope, because beyond this point, there is only going down. In this way, the artisans of those characters were creative and imaginative. This practice of creating new words by combining already existant words resembles to what the Maya scribes did with their given glyphs.

Now referring to the work by the Maya scribes, it should be noted that sound play is not practiced only as artistic expertise and intellectual amusement but for a more serious purpose. The importance of the sound texture in divinatory words is emphasized by Barbara Tedlock in her “Sound Texture and Metaphor in Quiché Maya Ritual Language.”⁸⁾ Serious intention can be a motive also for visual pun. As we know from examples of the European arts of *trompe l’oeil*, visual pun helps the objects assume more than one level of meaning, and a hidden and deeper meaning is expected to be accurately grasped by the viewer. The Maya’s visual punning has an esoteric goal, to which I will come back later.

How is the meaning/message conveyed? How is it revealed and concealed? Weaving is a key image in our understanding the nature of the hidden message in the Maya arts. It is important to recall the fact that the Maya people used one same term, *tz’ib’*, to describe

drawing, writing, and weaving, as can be seen at the beginning of the *Popol Vuh*.⁹⁾ This proves that in their mind, those activities were regarded as closely related to one another.

An interesting feature in the way of story-telling of the *Popol Vuh* is that the story does not follow a sequential time. The intricate time structure and accordingly the complex narrative sequence remind me of the elaborate pattern which is created by weaving. When many threads of different colors are used for weaving to design an intricate pattern, we do not know where a thread escapes and emerges again on the surface. The inscriptions written in this “woven” pattern, for example the Stela J at Copán, requires our effort to find out the order for reading just like tracing threads in the woven material.¹⁰⁾ We cannot depend on a sequential flow to construct a whole story since we cannot see the entire movement of woofs and warfs in one view.

Schele and Miller cite an interesting fact from Gene Stuart’s *The Myterious Maya* about a 20-year-old weaver from the village of Magdelanas who wove symbols of the rain god and the earth lord in positions of power so that fertility would be brought to the earth.¹¹⁾ Stuart comments that her design is very subtle so that ordinary viewers will not notice, but that it should be recognized by keen eyes for its repetitive pattern.

Another vase is important in this context of hidden sequence and hidden message: the **vase of the thirty-one deities** (collection of Marianne Faivre, Dixon, Illinois) (Coe 1973: No. 37). The deities are arranged in four horizontal stages, separated by black lines. According to Coe, the hierarchical arrangement should represent four of the supposedly nine layers of the Underworld.¹²⁾ What interests me is that the gods, in ten groups, are represented as conversing with each other. This representation reminds us that in the *Popol Vuh* it is through the council that gods determine the creation of the world.¹³⁾ The comment by Coe on the arrangement of the gods is insightful. He describes it as a “stage play” which is “divided into scenes (the groups) which in turn cluster into acts (the tiers).”¹⁴⁾ The viewer cannot see the whole picture on the vase at one time and do not know where to start and which way to go. It may be that the order does not matter. The way we see is the way a story is written. The viewer’s eyes and mind move back and forth as they follow the dynamics which we also find in the pattern of the movement of woofs and warfs.

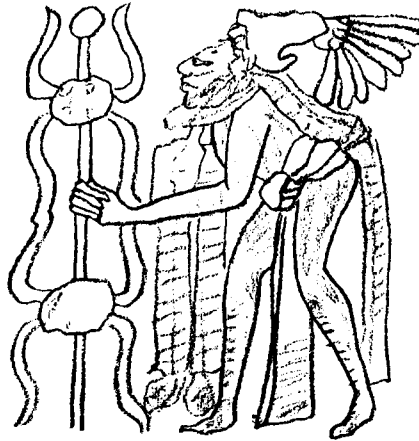
Studying designs in Quiché Maya weaving, Barbara Tedlock and Dennis Tedlock illustrate two patterns of designs which also appear in other forms of the Maya arts: syncopation and symmetry.¹⁵⁾ Syncopation describes an effect of repetition with modification, such as a change of element or an omission of what is expected to come. This is what hap-

pens when we read about the Twins in the *Popol Vuh*. The reader would expect that what happened to the Twins' father and uncle will again happen to the Boys, but the book tells a different story. The Boys' visit to houses to pass test in the Underworld is another example of syncopation.

The design on a Guatemalan scarf, given as an example of syncopation by Barbara Tedlock and Dennis Tedlock,¹⁶⁾ reveals a characteristic mode of perception of the Maya people. The rhythm created by repeated figures is modified by showing the last figure only in half and the other half will never appear on the scarf. The rhythm of the repetitive appearance of monkies is disturbed by presenting monkies without head. I propose that the easiness in amputating human and animal organs may be seen in the episodes of decapitation of Hunahpu and his father, One Hunahpu in the *Popol Vuh*. The former's head is easily replaced by a squash and the latter's, placed on a tree, changes into a calabash fruit. The sensibility which allows this kind of amputation may operate in the procedure of free substitution of elements and addition of affixes as glyph components. Just as *po*—frog head—is substituted for the moon goddess, the boy's head is replaced by a squash.

Whatever substitution takes place, components should keep the balance within a glyph. The Maya people show intense interest in glyph symbol within a square of small area; the self-containedness of the symbol within a glyph. They tend to fuse and incorporate ideas within a single glyph. Doesn't it explain the technique which the Maya artists use to render a sense of three dimensionality in painting? When we want to represent an object as existing in volume and dimensions, we add shadow for highlighting the object against its background. In the Western (?) concept, shadow is something added to the object on its outside. But in some paintings by the Maya artists, we see a different technique to attain a similar effect (Coe 1982: Nos. 1, 11) [Figure 2].¹⁷⁾ Instead of adding shadow on the exterior of the object, they darken the interior of the object. The technique is called "the reverse chiaroscuro" by Coe. This unique technique explains some aspect of the Maya sensibility to regard things as being self-contained.

Here we should recall the painting on another Yucatan vase which depicts a warrior procession (Coe 1982: P.2). It should be noted that the left hands of the warriors are drawn as right hands. Coe describes this representation as "misdrawing" but I am not sure whether this was a genuine mistake or intentional one.¹⁸⁾ Another vase (collection by Edwin Pearlman) (Schele & Miller 1986: Figure V.96) [Figure 2] which was painted by the same artist in a similar style also has left hands drawn as right hands. The painting by the same painter we have seen [Figure 1] shows right hand like left hand. On the




[Figure 2] Part of Warrior Scene from a Vessel (Shele & Miller: Figure V. 96)

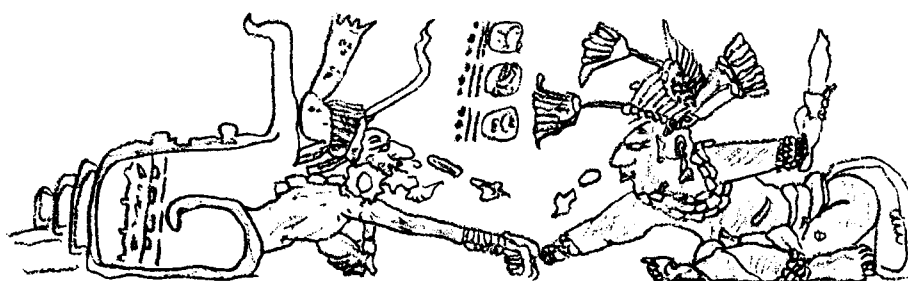
polychrome vase with battle scene (collection of Edward H. Merrin Gallery, New York) (Coe 1973: No. 26), the left hand of the eleventh figure, holding a spear, is drawn as right hand. Though we cannot determine whether those “misdrawings” are intentional or not, I want to propose a possible reading of this mode of drawing in relation to the hieroglyphic writing. In pictograph, details should be suppressed and only the abstract element receives attention. If we apply this principle to the paintings we are dealing with here, it does not matter whether the painter draws a left hand or right hand. The quality of being a hand is good enough. The Maya artists aim to grasp the state of things being within themselves, and pile up and arrange the components to compose a whole figure. The capturing of the abstracted features remind me of modern abstract paintings.

Thinking about the Mayan mode of perception found common in writing and drawing, we will take a brief look at another Oriental language. It is interesting to know that the Chinese writing, according to David N. Keightley, originated in pictures and that the rebus writing was a common feature in the development of the Chinese language.¹⁹⁾ Keightley further points out that there should be some analogous connection between the componential pots and the componential writing system. His argument is based on the contrast between the pots of the Northwest tradition which were made “with natural, globular, smooth-contoured shapes,” and the pots of the east-coast tradition with the “arbitrary, carinated profiles in which shape took priority over efficiency.”²⁰⁾ And he associates the latter with the writing which originated in the same area. By referring to the origin of the Chinese writing system, I am not trying to explain the mode of perception of the Maya in association with

the Oriental language. Keightley's argument will at least support my proposition that there is a likely connection between the writing system and art forms in the Maya culture.

Let us again follow the thread of "self-containedness" in the Maya arts. Another instance of self-containedness which I find in the *Popol Vuh* is an episode in which a louse who claims, "My word is contained in my belly," is swallowed by a snake, and this animal is again swallowed by a toad, and then by a falcon.²¹⁾ Though this kind of repetitive eating of animals is not limited to the *Popol Vuh*, and can be found in folktales from other continents, something similar to this inclusion of one element by another is seen in glyph formation. In hieroglyphs, an affix is sometimes taken by and fused into a main element as in the case of the month sign *uo* . Also when a message is carried around in a double and triple quotation in the *Popol Vuh*, I cannot but regard the original message as one solid element which can be inserted in another context.

The notion of the message as being "portable" could be explained in terms of the idea of speech. A device used for the **vase of the thirty-one deities** reveals an important fact about the perception of speech among the Maya people. In some paintings as the one on this vase, the fact that gods are in the act of articulation is often made clear through speech scroll (Coe 1973: Nos. 16, 25, 28), or what looks like a bubble (Coe 1973: No. 37) drawn in front of their mouth [Figure 3]. Sometimes the flowing and fading quality of speech is captured by a more subtle and delicate representation as on the **vase in "codex" style, palace scene with beheading** and the **vase in "codex" style, throne scene** (Coe 1973: Nos. 42, 43). It is helpful for our understanding to know that a



[Figure 3] Part of Cylindrical Vessel (Shele & Miller: Plate 118 A)

similar representation appears on the **polychrome vase, enthroned ruler with two attendants** (Coe 1973: No. 48) to show something coming out from a pot. This fact allows us to associate the speech with the quality of “foam and vapor.” Also we should not forget that scrolls are often used as smoke volutes (Coe 1982: Nos. 21, 23).

The representation of deities in conversation, sometimes with the help of speech scroll surprises us for its frequency. Speech scroll appears either with or without glyph texts. In some cases, hieroglyphic texts are linked to the speaker’s mouth with scroll-like lines (Robicsek 1981: Vessels 2, 56) [Figure 4]²²⁾. The act of singing is distinguished from



[Figure 4] Part of Cylindrical Vessel (Shele & Miller: Plate 115 A)

that of speaking by more widely opened mouth as we see on the **polychrome vase, palace scene** (Coe 1973: No. 27).

The etymology of the term “god,” *4abauil*, will increase our familiarity with the idea of the deities with open mouth. Dennis Tedlock suggests that based on the *4ab*, “to have the mouth open,” the word as a whole could mean “open-mouthed.”²³⁾ He also reports an ancient practice (and its modern counterpart) in which drinks of sacrificed blood (and liquor) are given to the sacred stones as embodiment of deities through their mouths.²⁴⁾

The visualization of speech act can be explained to be based on the Maya belief in the power of breath and its physical quality. The Maya’s understanding of speaking as physical action is established by the following literary and visual evidences. The connection is clearly seen in the *Popol Vuh*, when the first human beings are asked by the creators, “Isn’t your speech good, and your walk?” (165).²⁵⁾

Visual evidences are found in the pictorial plates with a hole drilled in the middle (Coe

1982: Nos. 40, 41, 42, 43, 48). The hole is explained as a “ritual liberation of the spirit” before the object is put into a tomb as offering.²⁶⁾ Coe goes one step further by proposing that the hole must have been meant for the spirit of the dead person to rise through it, on whose head such a plate was generally found inverted.²⁷⁾ If the spirit has such physical quality to pass through an actual hole, so does the breath which consists the spirit.

Another art object consolidates our understanding of speech/breath as embodying physical quality. Some incense pots were made in human form with mouth as an opening for the fume to come out from it. The incensor, No. 68 in *Arts Mayas du Guatemala: Grand Palais*, is a good example. The figure is made as if he/she were singing. A similar feature is seen on the **realistic human mask** (*Arts Mayas du Guatemala*, No. 250). The mouth along with eyes, and nose, is perforated. Here again we see a round open mouth as if in the act of singing. The purpose of the mask is not known to me, but at least it is clear that it was intended to be worn as is evidenced by the holes on it, instead of being kept as an ornament.

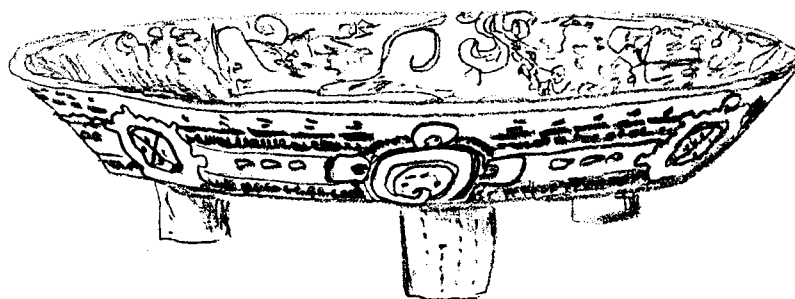
The speech scrolls attached to the monkey scribes who are depicted in the midst of the act of writing reveal a close relationship between writing and oral tradition (Robicsek 1981: Vessels 56, 58, 61, 63, 69, 71) [Figure 5]. As pointed out by Dennis Tedlock, it is



[Figure 5] Part of Cylindrical Pot with Monkey Scribes (Shele & Miller: Plate 47 A)

significant to note how the following artistic skills of One Monkey and One Artisan are grouped in the *Popol Vuh*: “flautists, singers, and writers; carvers, jewelers, metalworkers” (105).²⁸⁾ That writing is grouped under the category of performing arts while the other group represents handicraftship deserves our attention. If we recall the fact that the term, “writing” in the Maya languages, is associated with “drawing” and “weaving,” it is natural to find the scribes presented here engaged in the activity of writing/performing/drawing/weaving their words/pictures in the scroll/in the air.

Still the thread of weaving is pulling us back. We have to consider the second pattern of design which is seen in the Maya arts: symmetry. Symmetry can be easily found in the rendition of glyphs on inscriptions, and also in frequently used couplet in poetry. (I am aware that their poetry is not always written in couplet form.) In a wider sense, symmetry can be found in the Maya cosmology: the Heaven is reflected by the Underworld with the Middleworld in between. This cosmology is reflected in art form.



[Figure 6] Tripod Plate (Schele & Miller: Plate 122)

The **tripod plate** (Schele & Miller 1986: Plate 122) [Figure 6] concretizes the concept of the universe of the Maya people. The outside of the plate, depicting a water band with water lily pads and shells, can be identified as the surface of the Underworld. Inside the plate, conceived as floating on this watery level, we find a representation of the cosmos. The inside surface is divided into two. The bottom half shows the Underworld, depicted with the head of the Vision Serpent, water lilies, and blood. The upper half represents the Heaven with the Celestial Monster.

The symmetrical structure of cosmology is also reflected in architecture. The Temple 11 at Copán is a good example. The temple was built during the reign of the Copán king Vax-Pac ("First Dawn") and completed in A.D. 775. Huge stairway leads to the north façade. Scholars assume that at the entrance there must have been a sculpture of the Celestial Monster arching over the dome of heaven. The temple has four corridors which start from the four cardinal points and converge in the middle of the building in cruciform. In the middle of the temple is located a reviewing stand which served as a throne for the king when he watched the ballgame that was played in the backyard of the temple. This backyard can be approached by stairs leading down from the south façade of the temple. The court—a place for the ball game and ritual of the sacrificial death—is marked by

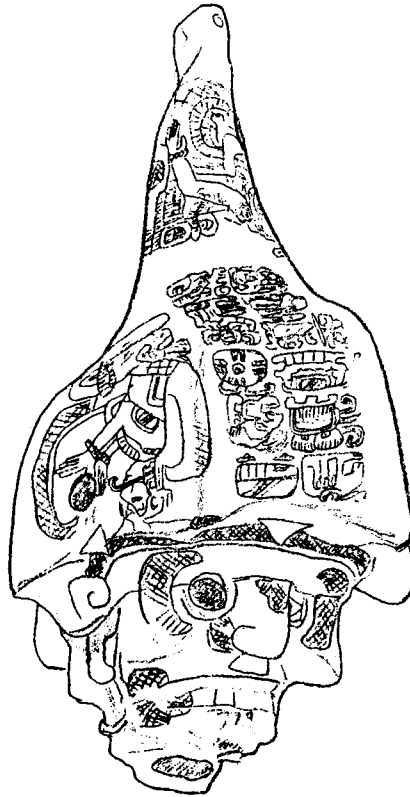
three stone conch shells which symbolize the surface of the water. Thus the symbolic reading of this construction is clear: the north façade—the Heaven, the inside temple—the Middleworld, and the south façade—the Underworld.

It is interesting to find an object in common in the tripod plate and the Temple 11 at Copán: conch shell. Different from the Western view of nautilus as symbol of richness and fecundity, the Maya people seem to have regarded shells, particularly conch shells and other univalves, as a symbol of the Underworld. The association of the shell with death is evidenced by the frequent appearance on the Maya pottery of a painting of a man coming out from the throat of the Deer Dragon and blowing a conch shell (Robicsek 1981: Vessels 33-38). On all the vases the man, drawn sometimes young and sometimes old, has a similar facial features and deer ears. He appears with Water Lily Jaguar and sometimes with Death God and a toad. In those cases the conch shell is associated with death caused by deer hunting.

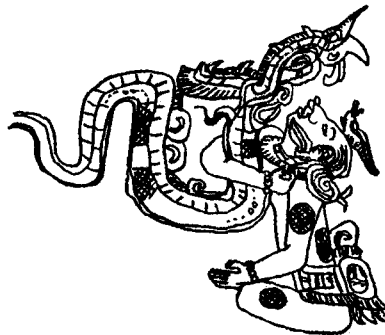
Now it is obvious that in both cases of the tripod plate and the temple at Copán, the conch shell works as an indicator of the Underworld. The conch shell is important in that it transforms the simple material/architectural space into comological location. This function of the shell as determinant of the meaning of the object/place is similar to what the shell symbol as component does in glyph formation.

A shell symbol, when used as an affix, changes the sun glyph to designate the nocturnal sun since the sun was considered to travel back to the east point through the Underworld during the night.²⁹⁾ Also the glyphs designating the south have shell element in them since that direction is associated with the Underworld.

Now let us focus our attention on transformation of a simple object into sacred object. A real trumpet survives to this day which suggests the association of conch shell with ritual death (Coe 1982: No. 63) [Figure 7]. A conch shell is turned into a trumpet by carving off the end of the spire for a mouthpiece. Four holes are drilled to produce different notes. When viewed with the spire at the bottom, the trumpet looks like the head and the headdress of a god. It was suspended in this position in a temple when it was not used. Schele and Miller point out that this god must be God Y whom we saw appearing from the Deer Dragon and blowing a conch shell. The cultural relevance of this trumpet resides not only in its reflection of the Maya perception of the Underworld and death. It embodies a ritualistic function to convert mundane into sacred object.³⁰⁾ Turning this trumpet upside down, we find two figures and glyphs. Both of the figures are seated on the *po* symbol which I mentioned before. One figure with mirror-markings on the right arm and the



[Figure 7] Conch Shell Trumpet (Shele & Miller: Plate 121)



[Figure 8]

upper leg is identified as the moon god (though Coe identifies as moon goddess) and holds a hole for a scale as if by touching it he could make sound.³¹⁾ The other figure who is

holding the Vision Serpent is considered to be Hunahpu, one of the Twins in the *Popol Vuh* [Figure 8]. It should be mentioned that the Serpent is emerging from a hole on the shell. By this device, the artist seems to say that with the sound of the trumpet a vision appears to the person who sacrifices oneself.³²⁾ A simple object is thus transformed into sacred object.

In order to confirm sacred intention in visual punning, we have to get into the temple at Copán and study the inside. As mentioned above, the four corridors are crossing in cruciform in this building. On the walls at each entrance, there are carved two texts of twenty-four glyphs. The texts are about the date of the accession of Vax-Pac, an appearance of Venus, an eclipse, and the date of dedication of the temple. What attracts our attention is that on one wall at each entry point, one half of the text is represented with glyphs inscribed in normal order—from right to left, but that on the facing wall, the other half of the text is carved in mirror image and backwards—from left to right.³³⁾

The function of the mirror-image is not clear to me. But interestingly enough, this kind of symmetrical mirror image writing existed in China in the twelfth century B.C.³⁴⁾ Oracles—reading of cracks which appeared on the burnt tortoise shell—were rendered in a symmetrical form with the spine of a turtle as a center line. The texts are repeated on both sides of the line starting from the outside toward the center, from top to the bottom. The only difference in the texts is that the oracle on the left half is given in a negative sense, with one additional word of negation. But unlike the Maya texts in mirror image, the characters are not reversed here. The fact, however, that the tortoise shell was used for divinatory purpose may suggest association of reversing with sanctity.

Now back to the Maya arts. Glyphs written “backwards” can be seen on the **polychrome vase, with two gods with smoking tubes** (Coe 1982: No. 13). They are possibly Monkey-man Gods, the scribes in the *Popol Vuh*, who are changed into monkeys by the Twins. The smoking tube is an attribute of God K who is a deity associated with rulership. Why the glyphs are written in the reverse way is not clear. According to Coe, the Secondary Text has T. 617 (a mirror) as a main sign. God K again appears with glyphic text written in mirror image on the **vase of God K and the Serpent Dragon** and the **vase of God K with webbed fingers** (Robicsek 1978: Plates 197-200, 204).³⁵⁾ But nothing solid can be established about the relationship between God K and the mirror image.

Another example of reverse glyphs is seen on the **Chama vase, with Killer Bats** (Coe 1982: No. 22). The text has glyphs representing God A who is the Ruler of the Dead and a glyph of death-eye. It is clear that the text concerns with death and the Underworld.

The figures, depicted with smoke around their faces, and “death-eyes” on their outstretched wings, are the Killer Bats of the *Pool Vuh*, and they are facing “backwards” (from right to left). If we consider only this case, we may be tempted to conclude that what happens in the Underworld is the reverse of the things happening in the Heaven. But it is not appropriate to make a case only with this example. To my knowledge, there are three more vases which represent the Killer Bats in a very similar style and are considered to be from Chama area. On the vases in the University of Pennsylvania Museum, Philadelphia, bats are looking towards left and glyphs are written in normal order (Gordon 1925: Plate 9. Mason 1928: Plate 13)³⁶⁾. The third vase has two bats looking right and glyphs are written in normal order. Thus the choice of the direction in representing the figures and glyphs may solely depend on the artist. But we may only assume that by using the reverse mode, the artist could emphasize the negative side of the world—death. It may mean that there is no other way but to reverse the mode of writing in order to describe what is unknown—what cannot be described in ordinary way. The use of reverse mode of writing may refer to what is beyond the reach of human capability.

As we have seen, many works of art of the Maya convey meanings on multiple layers, through sound play and visual play. Pots and plates, with their pictures and glyphs, convert mere vessels into speaking objects, revealing the perception of the Maya people. And their architectural construction embodies their cosmology and corresponds to their macrocosm. Flexibility of their mind and esemplastic imagination make it possible for the Maya to move across levels of meaning and communicate beyond them. The subtle pattern in modern weaving as well as the inscription in Temple 11 at Copán, as Schele and Miller suggest, is not meant for humans who cannot view the whole text at once.³⁷⁾ The message is rather intended for the divine. The art works are silent prayer and dedication to gods.

It is interesting to note that not a few mathematical mistakes have been left uncorrected in glyphs drawing. Schele and Miller state that it was either that the first drafts made by the masters were not proofread or errors were “considered to be divine invention.”³⁸⁾ They also suggest that the process of making the master drawing was an important ritual occasion accompanied by fasting, blood-letting, and drinking.

Another interpretation is given by Thompson, following G.B. Gordon.³⁹⁾ Since it is inconceivable that for such an important project as erecting a stella, a master drawing was not proofread, the mistakes must have been left uncorrected with intention. He suggests

that it was a humble gesture to show that no human beings can attain perfect understanding of gods' plans. Human beings whose ancestors, as the *Popol Vuh* tells us, were created bestowed with perfect vision, no longer enjoy this privilege. The first people's vain boast of their perfect knowledge incited gods' anger and anxiety. The result was that "they were blinded as the face of a mirror is breathed upon. Their eyes were weakened" (165-166).

The best human beings can do is to show towards gods readiness and willingness to communicate with them and to have dialogue with them, and to wait for their visitation. The prayer is constant but silent until the time comes when men can sing to the wind in the sky as the the bird holding the cylinder still whistles with the flowing water.

"All they did was ask: they had reverent words."

(*Popol Vuh*, 169)

NOTES

- 1) Michael D. Coe, *Old Gods and Young Heroes: The Pearlman Collection of Maya Ceramics*. (Jerusalem: The Israel Museum, 1982).
- 2) Coe 1982: 57.
- 3) Michael D. Coe, *The Maya Scribe and His World*. (New York: the Grolier Club, 1973).
- 4) Figure 1, which is a partial reproduction of **Cylindrical Vessel with Warriors**, is helpful here in that it represents an enema vase and *pop* glyphs. All the figures reproduced in this essay are my own copying from Linda Schele & Mary Ellen Miller, *The Blood of Kings: Dynasty and Ritual in Maya Art*. (Fort Worth: Kimbell Art Museum, 1986).
The following explanation of *pop* is based on J. Eric S. Thompson, *Maya Hieroglyphic Writing: An Introduction*. (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1960). 47-48.
- 5) Francis Robicsek, *Study in Maya Art and History: The Mat Symbol*. (New York: The Museum of the American Indian Heye Foundation, 1975). 38-39.
- 6) Schele & Miller 1986: 33.
- 7) Schele & Miller 1986: 326.
- 8) Barbara Tedlock, "Sound Texture and Metaphor in Quiché Maya Ritual Language." *Current Anthropology*. Vol. 23. No. 3. June 1982. 269-272.
- 9) Pointed out by Dennis Tedlock. All the references to *Popol Vuh* will be made to the *Popol Vuh: The Mayan Book of the Dawn of Life*, translated by Dennis Tedlock. (New York: Simon & Schuster, Inc., 1985).
- 10) Robicsek 1975: 42-43.
- 11) Schele & Miller 1986: 305-306.
- 12) Coe 1973: 81.

- 13) Dennis Tedlock points this out in "Beyond Logocentricism: Trace and Voice Among the Quiché Maya" (248), and in "Creation and the *Popol Vuh*: A Hermeneutical Approach" (269-271). Both articles are found in *The Spoken Word and the Work of Interpretation* by Dennis Tedlock. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1983).
- 14) Coe 1973: 81.
- 15) Barbara Tedlock & Dennis Tedlock. "Text and Textile: Language and Technology in the Arts of the Quiché Maya." *Journal of Anthropological Research*. Vol. 41. No. 2. Summer 1985: 121-142.
- 16) B. Tedlock & D. Tedlock 1985: 132-133.
- 17) Schele & Miller (1986: 35) also point out the absence of shadow in the Maya art.
- 18) Coe 1982: 22.
- 19) David N. Keightley, "The Origins of Writing in China: Scripts and Cultural Contexts." In *Origins of Writing*, edited by Wayne M. Senner. (Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 1989), 187-192.
- 20) Keightley 1989: 192-193.
- 21) The repetitive containing of animals is regarded by Dennis Tedlock as a "symbolic acting out of the structure of the speech of messengers." D. Tedlock 1985: 281, 282-283.
- 22) Francis Robicsek, with comments on the hieroglyphic text by Donald M. Hales, *The Maya Book of the Dead, The Ceramic Codex: The Corpus of Codex Style Ceramics of the Late Classic Period*. (Virginia: The University of Virginia Art Museum, 1981).
- 23) D. Tedlock 1985: 247.
- 24) D. Tedlock 1985: 247-248.
- 25) Dennis Tedlock's comment drew my attention to this passage. D. Tedlock 1985:298.
- 26) *Arts Mayas du Guatemala: Grand Palais*. (Paris: Ministère d'État Affaires Culturelles, Réunion des Musées Nationaux, 1968), 48, No. 73.
- 27) Coe 1982: 86.
- 28) D. Tedlock 1985: 269.
- 29) Thompson 1960: 49.
- 30) Schele & Miller 1986: 303.
- 31) Coe 1982: 122.
- 32) Schele & Miller 1986: 308-309.
- 33) Schele & Miller 1986: 123.
- 34) Keightley 1989: 180.
- 35) Francis Robicsek, *The Smoking Gods: Tobacco in Maya Art, History, and Religion*. (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1978).
- 36) G.B. Gordon (ed.), *University of Pennsylvania, The University Museum, Examples of Maya Pottery in the Museum and Other Collections*. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, the University Museum, 1925).
- Alden J. Mason (ed.), *University of Pennsylvania, The Museum, Examples of Maya Pottery and Other Collections: Part II*. (Philadelphia: The Museum of the University of Pennsylvania, 1928).
- 37) Schele & Miller 1986: 123, 302, 306.
- 38) Schele & Miller 1986: 45.

39) Thompson 1960: 15.

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