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Author(s): Karl A. Taube

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## THE MAIZE TAMALE IN CLASSIC MAYA DIET, EPIGRAPHY, AND ART

Karl A. Taube

*Iconographic, epigraphic, and linguistic data provide new evidence that the tamale constituted the primary maize food of Classic Maya diet. Archaeological and ethnohistoric data pertaining to the tamale and tortilla are reviewed and discussed in terms of the widespread representation of the tamale in Classic Maya epigraphy and art. Iconographic forms of the tamale are isolated and compared with hieroglyphic signs. Glyphs T:14, 39, 86, 130, 135, 506, 507, 754, 577, 584, and 739 are identified as representations of the tamale. Affix T130 contains either of two tamale types, both possessing the phonetic value wa or wah in the ancient script. This syllable provides readings for the Postclassic water group, the action of standing, and an unusual emblem glyph possibly referring to a supernatural region. In addition, the two tamale forms of T130 provide partial readings for the Classic terms for the numbers six, eight, and the name glyph of God N. It is suggested that the tamale constituted an important offering in Classic ritual, and is a principal subject of 819-day cycle texts.*

In the past decade of Classic Maya research, the study of iconography and epigraphy has not played a major role in the formulation of archaeological research designs. Site excavation and settlement reconnaissance strategies tend to focus on gathering information relevant to topics such as relative and absolute chronology, settlement patterns, technology, subsistence, and exchange. Most recent epigraphic and iconographic work has focused upon less-material aspects of culture, including calendrics, the compilation of king lists, war events, and the delineation of particular ceremonies and gods. The differences are an expected consequence of increased specialization, but they should by no means be considered as constituting a hard and fast dichotomy. Some of the most exciting and important work results from exchange between the two general disciplines; the calendar correlation problem is an obvious example. Yet another is Dennis Puleston's (1977) work on the iconography of raised field agriculture. According to Puleston, the abundant representation of water lilies, fish, aquatic birds, and caimans in Classic Maya art graphically depict a distinct environmental niche—the artificially created raised fields.

A considerable body of data now exists on Maya raised fields, but little subsequent work has been published on the iconography of raised fields or even Classic Maya agriculture. In part, this may relate to Puleston's failure to define the entire agricultural complex. Although acknowledging that maize probably was the principal crop, he made no mention of maize imagery in his cluster of symbolic traits. In a recent article (Taube 1985), I have noted that one of the principal figures depicted on Classic Maya vessel scenes is the maize god. The deity is found with water lilies, fish, aquatic fowl, and frequently stands in waist-deep water; in short, he constitutes a pivotal feature in Puleston's suggested agricultural complex. Because of his distinctive coiffure, I have labeled him the Tonsured Maize God. Most relevant to the present study is his name glyph, a youthful head with a curling element infixed in the parietal region of the skull (Figure 1a). I identified this globular device, or corn curl, as a maize grain (Figure 1a–e, h); however, it appears to have had a different meaning. I will demonstrate that the corn curl is one of a number of Classic elements that represent the tamale, a cooked, vegetal-wrapped mass of maize dough. In addition, the present study provides glyphic and iconographic evidence that the tamale was known widely as *wa* or *wah* among the

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*Karl A. Taube, Department of Anthropology, Yale University, Box 2114 Yale Station, New Haven, CT 06520*

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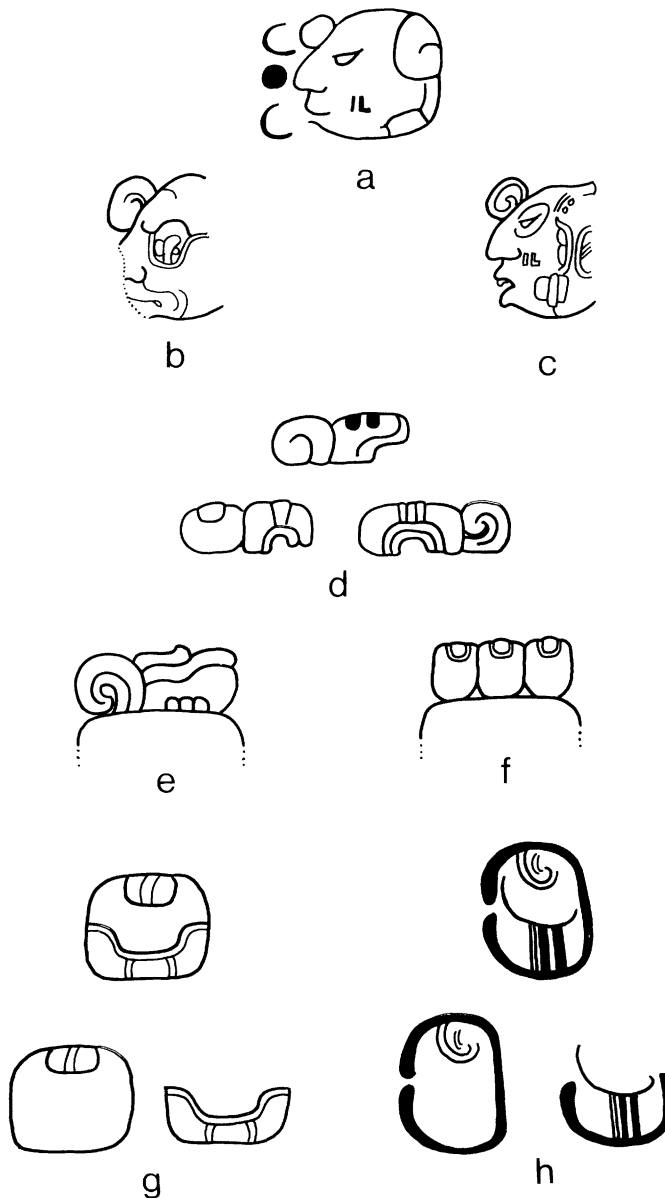


Figure 1. Examples of notched-ball and corn-curl tamales in Classic Maya epigraphy: (a) Name glyph of Tonsured Maize God, note curl in back of head (from Taube 1985:Figure 3c); (b) number six head variant with forehead curl (after Thompson 1971:Figure 57j); (c) head variant of number eight with characteristic brow curl (after Thompson 1971:Figure 24-43); (d) affix T130, the tamale with leaf wrapper; above, Postclassic form, below, Late Classic forms (examples after Thompson 1962:447); (e) affix T86, the foliated corn curl (after Thompson 1962:446); (f) affix T135, a series of notched-ball tamales (after Thompson 1962:447); (g) T506, the Kan sign; below, constituent elements, notched globular form and leaf wrapper (after Thompson 1971:Figure 6-54); (h) T574 or T575; constituent elements of sign below, spiral globular form and leaf wrapper. Calligraphic example from rim of Tepeu 2 Uaxactun dish, turned 90 degrees for comparison (after Smith 1955:Figure 73a-l).

Classic Maya and that it, rather than the tortilla, constituted the primary maize product in the Classic Maya diet.

### THE ANCIENT MAYA TAMALE

#### *The Tortilla and Tamale in Prehispanic Maya Diet*

The dietary basis of contemporary Maya peoples is the tortilla, a disk of baked maize dough usually prepared on the flat *comal* griddle. It thus may come as a surprise to those familiar with modern Maya groups that there is very little evidence for tortilla consumption among the Classic Maya. Half a century ago, Thompson (1938:597) cited archaeological and ethnohistoric evidence for the relatively recent introduction of the tortilla in the Lowland Maya area. Thompson noted that the ceramic *comal* virtually is absent at Lowland Maya sites, both in the Peten and in the northern Yucatan Peninsula. Subsequent excavation has supported Thompson's early observation. Smith (1955:100) noted that none were found in the extensive excavations at Uaxactun, and cites only one instance of the *comal* in the entire Peten. Borhegyi (1959) later demonstrated that these examples, excavated at the site of San Jose by Thompson (1939), actually were the covers of composite incense burners.

Following a decade of intensive excavation by the Tikal Project, Harrison (1970:289) noted that no *comales* were found at Tikal. In his comprehensive study of Prehispanic Yucatan ceramics, Brainerd (1958:81, Figures 66, 97) stated that the *comal* is "exceedingly scarce," and mentioned but two possible sherds, both from Chichen Itza. Smith (1971:84) later noted the limited presence of *comales* at the Late Postclassic site of Mayapan, but suggested that these examples also may have been used to roast cacao and other seeds. In highland Guatemala, ceramic vessels of *comal* form occur during the Esperanza phase at Kaminaljuyu (Kidder et al. 1946:208, Figure 200g, h). However, Borhegyi (1965:55) has suggested that not until the protohistoric period was the *comal* widely introduced in highland Guatemala, presumably from Central Mexico. In contrast to the Maya area, the *comal* has a long tradition in the Basin of Mexico, and has been found at Teotihuacan (Linné 1942:130, Figures 225, 229), Tula (Chadwick 1971:237), and at many Late Postclassic sites in the Valley of Mexico (Tolstoy 1958:63–64).

Thompson (1938:597) also noted that descriptions of the tortilla and *comal* curiously are absent in a number of early ethnohistoric accounts. Thus Landa states that the Yucatec Maya prepared "good and healthful bread of different kinds," but mentions neither the tortilla nor the *comal* (see Tozzer 1941:90). In the Peten, tortillas appear to have been absent until colonial contact. According to the Dominican friars, it was necessary to teach the Manche Chol how to manufacture tortillas (Thompson 1938:597). Whereas Thompson discussed only the Lowland Maya area, Carmack (1981:108) has made a like case for the Protohistoric period highland Quiché: "Maize in form of the tamale was the staple, and was eaten with boiled beans, squashes, and chile sauce."

Previous studies on the antiquity of the Maya tortilla have omitted an important body of data—Prehispanic representations of maize foods. Whereas the tamale is depicted widely in ancient Maya art, tortillas and tortilla making rarely occur. I know of no evidence for the tortilla in the Postclassic codices, and Classic depictions of the tortilla and *comal* are rare. Female ceramic figurines in the coastal Campeche style of Jaina occasionally are represented with tortillas and even *comales*. However, because the vast majority of Jaina-style figurines lack provenience, the few tortilla-bearing figurines may not derive from the Campeche region or may not even be authentic.

Some of the earliest representations of maize foods in the Maya area appear in the Early Classic Esperanza phase of Kaminaljuyu. One Tajín-style mirror back bears a scene of two males facing a bowl of large rounded elements (Figure 2a). The balls clearly are offerings, quite probably tamales, as a stalk of maize sprouts from the top of the mounded mass. However, as a probable Gulf Coast import, the mirror back does not relate to food preparation at Early Classic Kaminaljuyu. Another Esperanza phase piece, a locally made basal-flange bowl, depicts four individuals carrying bowls containing either deer haunches or fish. Between each of them are two bowls, one containing tamales, the other stacked tortillas (Figure 2b). Although on a Maya vessel, the scene is depicted in pure

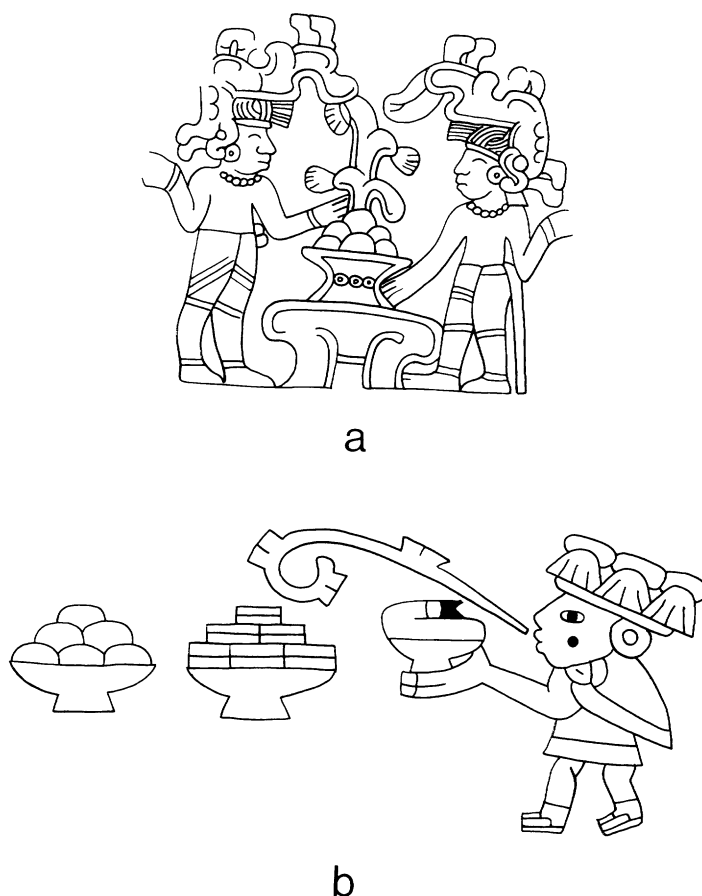


Figure 2. Early Classic representations of maize foods, Esperanza phase Kaminaljuyu: (a) detail of slate mirror back in El Tajin style; bowl containing tamales placed on platform between two young males, note maize foliation affixed to top of balls (after Kidder et al. 1946:Figure 156); (b) detail of stuccoed basal flange bowl painted in Teotihuacan style; figure holds bowl containing deer haunch, two other bowls nearby, one mounded with tamales and the other, stacked tortillas (after Kidder et al. 1946:Figure 207).

Teotihuacan style. It has been noted that actual *comales* are known both for Teotihuacan and Esperanza phase Kaminaljuyu. The presence of the *comal* and tortilla preparation at Early Classic Kaminaljuyu may be yet another example of Teotihuacan influence.

Although of local manufacture, the Esperanza phase bowl is not a reliable indicator of Maya food preparation. It could be argued that the scene relates to Central Mexican food preparation, and reveals no more on native Maya diet than does the Veracruz mirror back. In this light, both the tamale and tortilla could be viewed as foreign foods that sporadically occurred in the Maya area. Maya epigraphy supplies the most convincing evidence that the tamale constituted the principal maize food of the Classic Maya. It will be seen that tamales represented in Classic period texts and iconographic scenes were known widely by the Mayan term *wa* or *wah*, a word also signifying food or sustenance in a number of Mayan languages, while the tortilla was primarily a Central Mexican product introduced during times of strong Mexican influence.

#### *The Phonetic Value wa in Classic Maya Script*

In his study of the “ben ich” compound, Lounsbury (1973:138) suggested that affix T130 has the phonetic value of *wa* (cf. Figure 1d). Noting the occasional presence of affix T130 in the “ben ich”

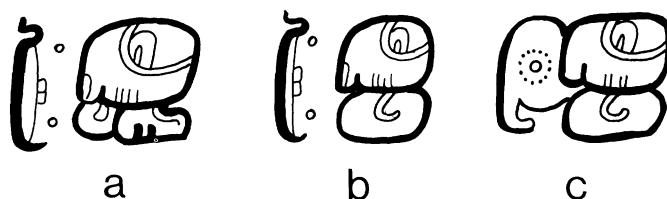


Figure 3. Substitution of the corn curl for T130, Codex Dresden (1972:33c): (a) T667:130 prefixed by T1 *u*; (b) similar compound with corn curl substituted for T130 affix; (c) compound identical to example (b) save that prefixed by T238 *ah* rather than T1 *u*.

symbolic Ahauc compound, which he proved should be read *ahaw*, Lounsbury suggested that the T130 postfix serve as a phonetic marker for the word final *w*. As supporting evidence, Lounsbury cited page 91a of the Codex Madrid, where T130 serves as final *w* in a compound read as *ca-ca-w(a)*, the Yucatec term for cacao. Fox and Justeson (1980:212–213) mentioned other readings of T130 in relation to three recorded Maya month names, *kasew*, *uniw*, and *mwan*. In these cited cases T130 appears as *wa* or word final *w(a)*. More recently, Mathews and Justeson (1984:205) have noted that in the codices, T130 is affixed to the Kan sign (T506) to provide a reading of *wah*, the Yucatec term for tortilla.

The reading of T130 as *wa* now is accepted widely, but little mention has been made of the formal significance of the sign. Both Knorozov (1967:81) and Kelley (1976:126) have identified T130 as a young ear of corn, presumably because of the leaf-like codical form. Affix T130 actually is composed of two parts, a globular element as well as the curving leaf form (Figure 1d). The round object is represented either curled or as a ball with a small infix or notch in the uppermost center. The two variants are present in affixes T86 and T135 (Figure 1e, f). These two affixes, one containing the corn curl, the other the notched ball, occur in free variation in G9 of the Supplementary Series (Taube 1985:173). In view of their shared occurrence in T130 and the substitution between affixes T86 and T135, it is clear that the two globular forms have similar if not identical meanings. The curving device constituting the other half of T130 usually is transected by a broad band identical to the bracket element contained in the day signs Cib, Ben, and Kan. Broken into its constituent parts, the Kan sign is found to be composed of the same elements that form T130, the globular device as well as the curving element (Figure 1g). This is not coincidental; both the Kan sign and T130 are recognized maize signs (Kelley 1976:126; Thompson 1971:75).

The primary element of T130 is not the curving leaf but the round ball. At times, the ball alone can provide the phonetic *wa* value. On Dresden pages 30c to 41c there is the repetitive compound T667:130 prefixed either by the phonetic T1 *u* or the T229 *ah*. However, on page 33c, T130 is twice replaced by a single large corn curl, although in the second case the compound is prefixed by the T238 *ah* rather than T229 (Figure 3).

The corn curl also occurs as a forehead element affixed to the Classic head variant of the number eight (Figure 1c). In his identification of the numeral head variants, Goodman (1897:46, 51) noted that this spiral is a diagnostic element of the number eight head variant and its jawboned counterpart serving to represent the number 18. Seler (1902–1923:III:593) was the first to identify the foliated head as the maize god, and also stressed the importance of the brow curl. The maize curl is associated with the number eight in a number of other ways. At times, the curl-infixed head of the Tonsured Maize God substitutes for the usual foliated form of the personified number eight (Taube 1985:173). On Copan Stela I, the maize-curl affix T85 lies immediately above a cartouche containing the conventional sign of eight, a bar and three dots (Maudslay 1889–1902:I:Plate 65). Another maize affix occurs above a number eight cartouche on Dresden page 67a, though in this case the affix contains not the spiral but the notched globe of T130.

The pervasive identification of maize with eight does not derive from any obvious numerical quality of the plant, such as the number of cobs, leaves, or time of development. Thompson (1971:99) suggested that the personified numerals 1 to 13 correspond to the day signs Caban to Muluc,

with eight being the coefficient for Kan. However, it appears that the head coefficients have a phonetic component as well. On one of the stucco glyph blocks excavated from the Olvidado Temple at Palenque, the corn curl is affixed not to the brow of the number eight head variant, but to that of the number six (Figure 1b). In Yucatec, the word for six is *wak*, and eight, *wašak*; clear cognates occur in all other recorded Mayan languages, including Huastec. Of equal interest, *wa* or *wah* is an almost pan-Mayan term signifying tortilla, tamale, or general sustenance (Table 1). As a maize symbol, the globular spiral serves as a phonetic marker *wa* for the reading of *wašak*, and at times, *wak*.

The Postclassic codical glyph of God N usually is a tun sign, T528 or T548, topped by a cross-hatched superfix (Figure 4a, b). Coe (1973:15) noted that the crosshatched device is a version of T586, a glyph read as *pa* (Justeson 1984:346). Because T528 and T548 both can be read *tun* (Justeson 1984:340, 342), Coe (1973:15) suggested that the nominal glyph of God N be read *pawahtun*, the name of a protohistoric and colonial Yucatec deity. The proposed reading is apt, but one problem remains. Given the suggested phonetic values, the compound should be read *patun*, although Landa and the Yucatec sources write the name Pauah Tun or Pauhtun. Coe (1973:15) called attention to an "eye-like element" lying in the center of the suggested *pa* superfix. This is the globular element forming one-half of T130, in this case the notched-ball counterpart of the corn curl. In several Dresden scenes of God N, maize foliage sprouts from the top of the device (Figure 4d). With the maize *wah* sign, the Postclassic God N compounds are phonetically transparent as *pa-wah-tun*. The corn curl substitutes for the notched ball in Classic glyphs of God N (Figure 4b). When God N is represented ideographically in the Classic script, the curl frequently is infixes upon the cheek, probably again to supply the *wah* reading (Figure 4c). In both the Classic and Postclassic periods God N was known as *pawah* or *pawahtun*.

The globular elements of T130 also occur in two codical forms of the water-group prefix (Figure 4e). The stream of beaded dots, or "water," falls from both the notched ball (T14) and the corn curl (T39). Classic forms of the water group constitute an important part of the emblem glyph compound identified by Berlin (1958), typically composed of a water-group prefix, a "ben ich" *ahaw* superfix, and the main sign which varies according to the particular site or region. A number of researchers (e.g., Barthel 1968:168; Seler 1902–1923:III:649; Stuart 1982) have identified the water group with blood. Although I agree in general, I find that as a sign for blood, the water group also was identified with maize, hence the green *yax* and yellow *k'an* signs commonly occurring within

Table 1. Terms for Six, Eight, Tortilla, Tamale, and Sustenance in Ten Mayan Languages.

	Chorti (Girard 1949)	Chol (Beekman and Beekman 1953)	Tzeltal (Slocum and Gerdell 1965)	Tzotzil (Laughlin 1975)	Tojolabal (Jackson and Supple 1952)	Jacalteca (Church and Church 1955)
Six	wak	włc	waqueb	wak	huaque'	wajeb
Eight	wahik	waxłc	waxaqueb	vašak	huaxaque'	waxajeb
Tortilla	pa	waj	waj	vah	huaj	waj
Tamale	pak at'pa		nolbil waj	pisil vah šohem vah		
Sustenance	pa	waj			hua'el	

*Note:* The voiced bilabial spirant *w* has been transcribed variously in Mayan orthographies. In sources cited in the present study, it is written *w*, *u*, or *v*. The situation is slightly complex, as in Tzotzil the voiced labiodental spirant *v* replaced *w* save in loan words and words medially, where *w* may be present when followed by *a* (see Laughlin 1975:22). Rather than ignore such phonetic distinctions, I have left the original transcriptions intact. For the purposes of this study, *w*, *u*, and *v* should be considered as phonemically equivalent. In my own use of Mayan terms, I will be using the orthographic system adopted by Barrera Vásquez (1980) for Yucatec.

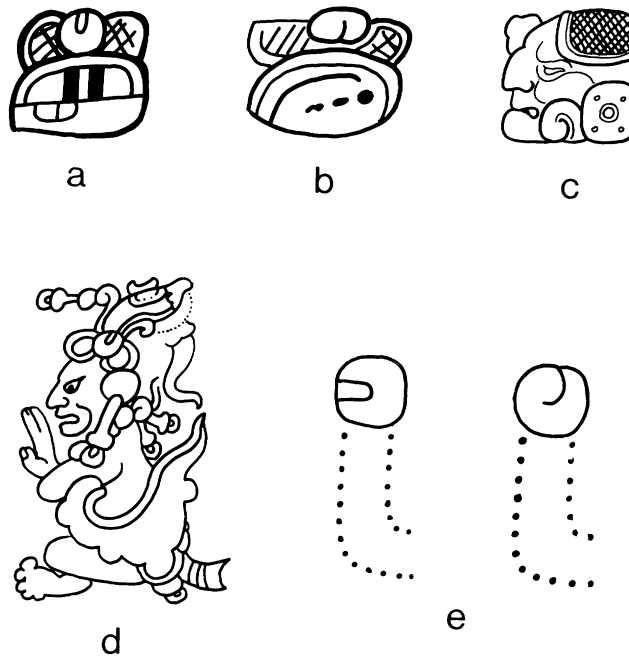


Figure 4. The phonetic value *wa* in Maya epigraphy and iconography: (a) Postclassic name glyph of God N; note notched-ball tamale variant in center of netted element, compound read *pa-wah-tun* (Codex Dresden 1972: 47); (b) Classic period example of God N nominal glyph; corn-curl tamale in center of netted superfix (after Coe 1978:Vase 11); (c) Classic glyph of God N; note netted headdress and corn curl on cheek, Palenque Tablet of the Sun; (d) Postclassic codical representation of God N; tamale with maize foliation in center of headdress (Codex Dresden 1972:41b); (e) codical examples of water group with T130 tamale signs; prefixes probably read *wah*; left, T14, right, T39 (after Thompson 1962:445).

Table 1. Extended.

Quiché (Edmonson 1965)	Pokomchi (Fernández 1937)	Yucatec (Barrera Vásquez 1980)	Huastec (Alejandro 1890; Larsen 1955)
vaq	uakip uakim	wak	acac
vahāxak	uaxakil uaxajim	waxak	huaxic
va		wah	bacan
va		tuti wa yahau wah	bolim cuatsam
va	ua		



the affix (Taube 1985:180). The aforementioned codical water-group affixes probably also refer to both blood and maize.

The Yucatec Pío Pérez Dictionary provides the following entry for *wah*: “*chorrear, salirse el grano o líquido por la hendidura o rotura*” (Barrera Vásquez 1980:906). This could be paraphrased in English as “to spout, for the grain or liquid to leave by the cut or fracture.” This closely compares to the Classic act of bloodletting, where the liquid commonly is seen falling as a stream from the loins or mouth. The root *wah* carries a similar meaning in Zinacanteco Tzotzil, where *vahahet* means “sprinkling,” *vahluh* “sudden splashing,” and *vahel* “sowing” (Laughlin 1975:361–362). The term *waj* in Tzeltal denotes the act of sprinkling or scattering (Slocum 1953:68). In Quiché, *vah* signifies “overflow,” *valih* “wet, dampen, give water to,” and *avah* “sow” (Edmonson 1965:10, 140–141). The notched ball and corn curl found in the two codical water-group prefixes again provide a *wah* reading, here to describe the action of showering liquid or seed.

In the context of blood offerings, the term *wah* may have had a meaning aside from sprinkling or scattering. In a number of Maya languages, forms of the term *wah* can signify food in general (see Table 1). By extension, *wah* signifies not only sustenance but life itself. Thus in the colonial Yucatec *Motul Dictionary*, *wah* is glossed as “*la vida en cierta manera*” (Barrera Vásquez 1980:905). The term *wa'l* in Quiché refers to vital bodily fluids, such as blood, breast milk, tears, semen, and vaginal fluid (Tedlock 1988). In Postclassic Mesoamerica, blood offerings widely were considered as maize food for the gods. In an Aztec speech attributed to Tlaccatelel, the sacrificial victims to Huitzilopochtli were compared to tortillas: “They will be in his sight like maize cakes hot from the griddle ready for him who wishes to eat” (Durán 1964:140). Schele (1976:46) has suggested that Classic Maya bloodletting was to provide sustenance to the gods and ancestors. In support, Schele cited the Quichean *Popol Vuh*, where the offering of sacrifice is compared to “suckling” the gods. The individuals created to nourish the *Popol Vuh* gods were the men of maize. A more direct association of blood with food is expressed in the widely reported sixteenth-century cases of Yucatec Maya placing sacrificial blood upon the mouths of deity images so as if to feed them (e.g., Tozzer 1941:118).

Although there is little documentation of penitential blood sacrifice among contemporary Maya peoples, offerings continue to be considered as maize food for the gods and ancestors. In the Mam community of Chimaltenango, the *chiman* soothsayer and prayer maker is believed to feed the divine through prayer and offerings of candles and incense: “Each year when the *chiman* renews his power with God, or with Christ . . . he prays, ‘Open your stomach God,’ to accept the *tortillas* of next year” (Wagley 1949:69). According to one Mam *chiman*, God is dependent upon religious observations for sustenance: “Without the *chimanes* God would have no *tortillas*, he would starve” (Wagley 1949:69). The contemporary Zinacanteco Tzotzil make offerings in the form of white wax candles to their deified ancestors, the *totil me'iletik*. Vogt (1976:50) states that because candles symbolically are identified with human beings in Zinacanteco ritual, they are sacrificial offerings of the self: “The candles, firmly planted and standing up straight before mountain shrines and saints, appear to symbolize an offering of human life.” The act of offering candles to the ancestors resembles the Classic pattern of bloodletting and ancestor worship, but the similarities go further. The candles are considered as food for the ancestors. They specifically are referred to as “tortillas” (Vogt 1976:50), which in Tzotzil is *vah* (see Table 1).

The corn curl appears as the main sign of an unusual Classic emblem glyph (Figure 5). A striking feature is the T86 maize superfix, the foliated corn curl, which probably serves as a semantic determinant for maize. At times, a “ben ich” *ahaw* superfix is placed above T86. On the Altar de Sacrificios vase, the main sign is the simple corn curl, which can carry the phonetic value of *wa* or *wah* (Figure 5a). However, the corn curl also can be supported upon a pair of standing human legs (Figure 5b, c). Aside from the corn curl and foliated superfix, the two forms at first appear to have little in common. However, in many Mayan languages, the root *wa* signifies “to stand.” Atinasi (1973:332) gives this value for *wa* in Chol. The Quiché terms *va* or *val* mean “stand up,” *valah* “rise, arise,” and *vakat* “walk along” (Edmonson 1965:140). In Tzotzil, the words *va'an*, *va'can ba*, and *va'i* all signify “to stand” (Laughlin 1975:513). Another example comes from Yucatec, where

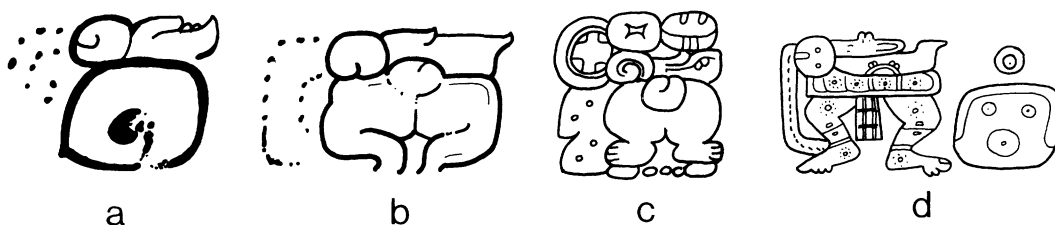


Figure 5. The *wah* emblem glyph, a possible emblem glyph for supernatural beings: (a) example from Altar de Sacrificios Vase, corn-curl tamale as main sign (after Adams 1971:Figure 94); (b) standing corn-curl variant from unprovenienced Late Classic vessel (after Robicsek 1978:Figure 37); (c) standing corn-curl variant from Tablet of the Foliated Cross, Palenque; (d) Late Postclassic example of legged emblem glyph with maize superfix (T84), accompanied by 1 Ahau; from now-destroyed murals of Santa Rita, Belize (after Gann 1900:Plate 29).

*wa'an* and *wa't* denote standing, and *wa'laha'an* denotes standing or placed upright (Barrera Vásquez 1980:910, 912, 913). The human legs placed beneath the corn curl serve to reinforce the *wa* or *wah* reading.

An interesting feature of the corn-curl emblem glyph is that it cannot be identified with any of the presently known emblem glyphs associated with specific archaeological sites or geographic regions. Furthermore, it frequently appears in Classic vessel scenes in association with supernatural figures (e.g., Robicsek 1978:Plate 176; Robicsek and Hales 1981:Vessel 95, Figure 22a). The example from the Altar de Sacrificios Vase (Figure 5a) accompanies a death deity which has been identified as a Classic form of Schellhas's God A' (Kevin Johnston, personal communication 1985). The second example also serves as the emblem glyph of a death deity, in this case the skeletal God A (Figure 5b). On Classic period monuments, the sign also is identified with gods. Appropriately enough, this emblem glyph is carved on the Palenque Tablet of the Foliated Cross, a monument rich in allusions to maize and the mythical past (Figure 5c). The sign is preceded by two glyphic compounds at L 16 and M 16. Floyd Lounsbury (personal communication 1985) has mentioned that the first compound, the 6-Sky expression, is identified with the first creator G I of the Palenque Triad. The following glyph is the bestial form of G I, in this case affixed with the numerical coefficients three and nine.

Use of the *wa* or *wah* emblem glyph continued into the Late Postclassic period, and it appears in one of the mural scenes from the northern Belize site of Santa Rita (Figure 5d). Again the main sign is a standing lower human torso supporting a maize element, in this case T84. As in Classic emblem glyphs, a clear water group is prefixed to the main sign. The procession of gods in the Santa Rita scenes are identified with specific Tun ending dates. The date associated with the emblem glyph is 1 Ahau. In the context of the Palenque Tablet of the Foliated Cross, this *tzolkin* date has special import, as it marks the birth of God K, also known as G II of the Palenque triad. God K is identified closely with the Tonsured Maize God, who appears to have been the Classic counterpart of the *Popol Vuh* Hun Hunahpu (Taube 1985). Of course, the Quichean name Hun Hunahpu is equivalent to the Yucatec calendric date 1 Ahau, *hun* meaning "one" in both languages. In protohistoric Yucatan, 1 Ahau clearly was identified with the underworld. Landa describes Hun Ahau as the ruler of hell: "They maintained that there was in this place [Metnal] a devil, the prince of all the devils, whom all obeyed, and they call him in their language Hunhau" (Tozzer 1941:132). In the colonial Yucatec *Ritual of the Bacabs* (Roys 1965:9) the opening to the underworld is identified with Ix Hun Ahau and Uaxac Yol Kaul. Roys suggests that the latter term is a name for the maize god. Immediately below and to the left of the Santa Rita glyph is a representation of the aged God L, a well-known underworld god.

It is noteworthy that the emblem glyph at Santa Rita, the only example known for the Postclassic period, does not appear to be tied into historic events. Rather, like the Classic examples, it appears to refer to a mythical region independent of the actual events which led to the Classic collapse and disappearance of historic emblem glyphs. Just where this place may be is unknown, but given the

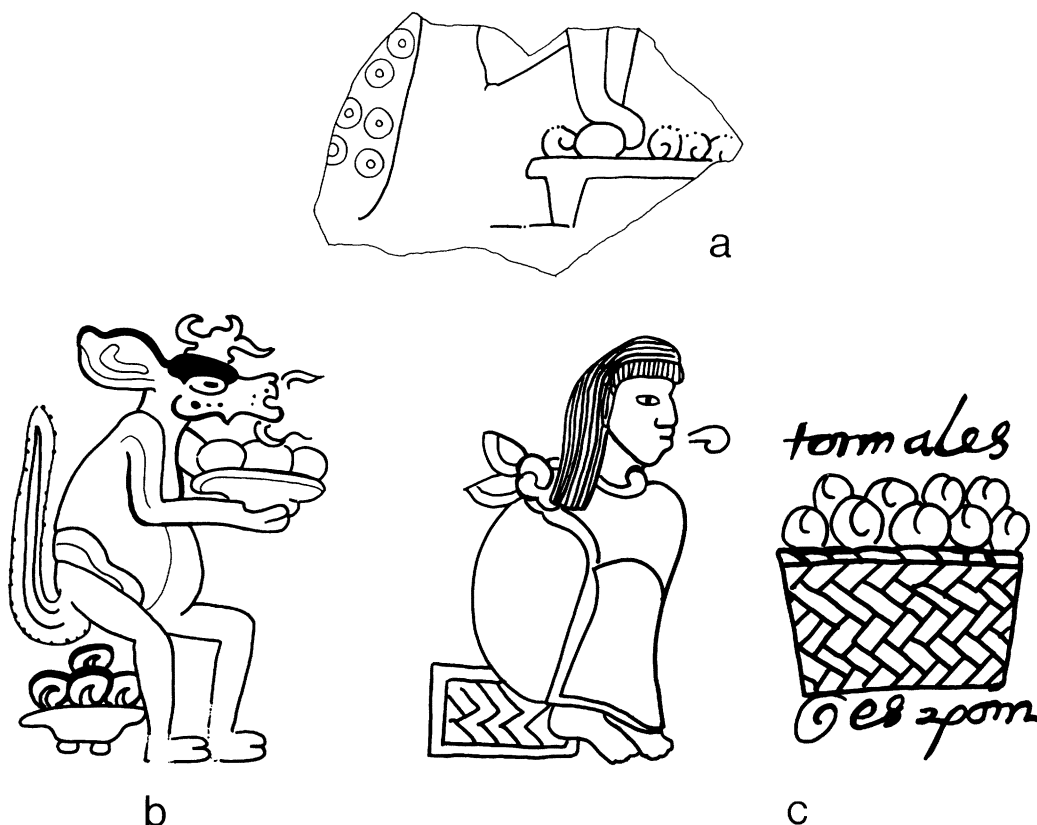


Figure 6. The corn curl as a ground maize product: (a) Late Classic polychrome sherd excavated at Lubaantun portraying a woman grinding over a *metate*, with dough depicted as corn curls (after Hammond 1975:Figure 116c); (b) anthropomorphic deer with bowls containing probable tamales, from unprovenienced Late Classic Maya vessel (after Hellmuth 1978:182); (c) Contact period Aztec representation of young man in front of tamale-filled basket, accompanying Spanish gloss reads *tamales que es pan* (Codex Mendoza 1972:68).

prevalence of death-related and chthonic gods, it is possibly the underworld. At present, however, the emblem glyph should be considered best as simply a place identified with supernatural beings.

#### *Representations of the Tamale in Classic Maya Epigraphy and Art*

It has been noted that the globular elements within affix T130 can independently carry the phonetic value *wa* or *wah*. In colonial and contemporary Maya languages where *wah* or *wa* signify sustenance, a phonetically similar or equivalent term usually designates a cooked maize product, usually the tortilla, but often the tamale as well (Table 1). The classificatory distinction between the tamale and tortilla in colonial and contemporary Mayan lexicons tends to diminish on close inspection. In Quiché, *va* can refer to the tortilla, tamale, or food in general (Edmonson 1965:140). According to the colonial Yucatec *Motul Dictionary*, *wah* is the specific term for tortilla (Barrera Vásquez 1980: 905). However, one type of Yucatec ceremonial tamale is termed *noh wah* (Villa Rojas 1945:109); *noh* in Yucatec means "great" or "large," and the ritual food thus may be paraphrased as "great *wah*." Although such tamales often have been labeled as "breads" or "cakes" in the ethnographic literature, they cannot be described as tortillas. Among the Zinacanteco Tzotzil, the two women who prepare the bean wedding tamales are called *hpat wah*, *hpat* being an agentive noun signifying "maker of" (Laughlin 1975:269). In other words, the Zinacanteco women who fashion the ceremonial tamales are termed "the makers of *wah*."

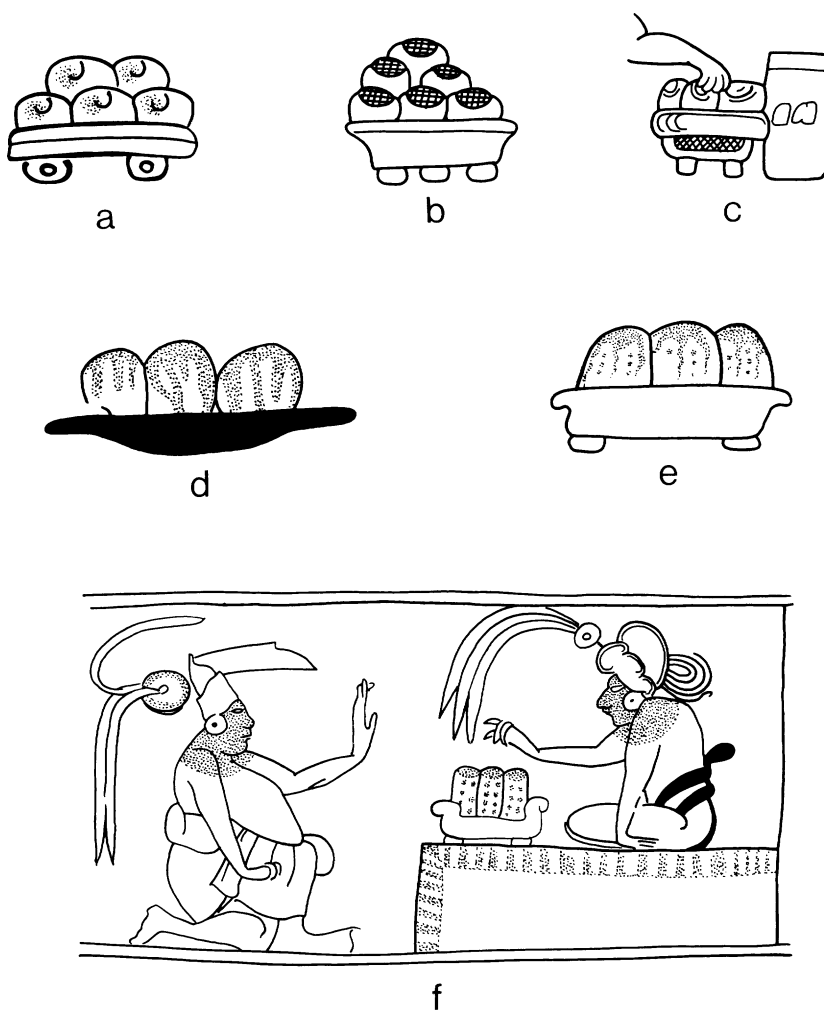


Figure 7. Late Classic representations of tamales in shallow vessels. (a) corn-curl tamales in legged plate, from unprovenienced vessel (after Stierlin 1981:Plate 75); (b) legged bowl of stuffed tamales, from Lower Temple of the Jaguars, Chichen Itza, Terminal Classic (after Maudslay 1889-1902:III:Plate 51); (c) vessel filled with tamales, accompanied by ceramic vase, detail of carved vase from Altar de Sacrificios (after Adams 1971:Figure 79); (d) three large painted tamales in broad plate tentatively identified as tamales by Coe (1973:105), from unprovenienced vase (after Coe 1973:104); (e) painted tamales in legged vessel, from unprovenienced vase (after Reents and Bishop 1984:Figure 1); (f) detail of polychrome vase from Burial 116, Tikal, note tamales in ceramic vessel (after Coe 1967: 52).

Iconographic evidence demonstrates that the T130 balls portray a maize product, this being the tamale, not the tortilla (see Figures 6 and 7). A remarkable Late Classic polychrome sherd from Lubaantun depicts a woman grinding maize upon a metate. The lumps of ground dough are almost identical to the T130 corn curl (Figure 6a). A number of sixteenth-century Aztec sources depict the tamale as a spiral ball. Thus on page 68 of the *Codex Mendoza*, spiral balls identical to the corn curl are glossed in Spanish as “*tamales que es pan*” (Figure 6c). Broad, shallow bowls containing tamales commonly are represented in Late Classic Maya art, especially in palace scenes (Figures 6b, 7). In profile, the Classic tamale vessels virtually are identical to actual ceramic bowls and plates having the Tonsured Maize God depicted in their interiors (e.g., Coe 1973:Number 11; Coggins 1975:Figures 72b, 74a, 86c, 88a, 90a; Smith 1955:Figure 73). The iconography found within these

ceramic vessels provides a clue to function. Like their counterparts depicted in palaces, such dishes probably were used as serving vessels for tamales.

The tamale appears in a variety of forms in Classic Maya art. It commonly is depicted in vessels either as the notched ball (Figure 7b, c) or as the corn curl (Figures 6b, 7a). The two forms may reflect different methods of manufacture; whereas the corn curl clearly is rolled, the notched ball appears as a more solid mass. The notch occasionally seems to be hollow, but usually it is filled with another substance. Villa Rojas (1945:54, 109) recorded two common Yucatec forms of tamale preparation that correspond closely to the two T130 types. One method is the placing of maize dough and other foods in superimposed layers which then are rolled up into a ball-like mass. Another contemporary method, however, employs congealing rather than rolling:

Zacan [maize dough], mixed with a little water, is boiled until it becomes thick; then with lard and salt added, it is cooked again until of a pasty consistency. The paste or dough is divided into small pieces on each of which is placed a piece of fowl, pork, or other meat, and then *kol* (thick broth) seasoned with tomatoes, annatto, and salt; each piece is then carefully wrapped in banana leaves and set to bake in the earth oven or, less frequently, in a pot [Villa Rojas 1945:54].

This type of tamale, with its central dollop of food, closely resembles the representations of the notched-ball variety contained in Classic Maya vessels. A third form of tamale found in Late Classic art generally is larger than the T130 types and, rather than having the notch or spiral, it often is painted with some sort of liquid or paste (Figure 7d–f). In form, it resembles the large loaf-like Yucatec tamales prepared in pit ovens for milpa ceremonies (see Figure 8). Often these include *sikil*, a paste made of squash seed, and the material painted on the Classic forms could be either honey or the brown *sikil* paste.

The curving bracket of T130 remains to be discussed. The Postclassic variant surely is a green leaf; the two infixed notches also are present in the *yax* sign for green (T16). Both the Classic and Postclassic forms probably denote a vegetal wrapper, such as would surround the tamale and, possibly, balls of wax. It was mentioned previously that the day signs Kan, Ben, and Cib contain this element. In Yucatec, Cib signifies wax (Thompson 1971:84), and the sign may depict a wrapped ball of this substance. Both the Kan and Ben glyphs are well-known maize signs (Thompson 1971: 75, 83). Following an early identification by Thomas (1882:80), Thompson (1971:75) stated that the Kan glyph (T506) represents a maize kernel: “There can be no question that the Kan sign represents grains of maize since young maize plants are frequently depicted in the codices issuing from a Kan sign.”

For much the same reason, I interpreted the corn-curl and notched-ball forms as representations of maize seed (Taube 1985). However, the maize growth has been taken too literally; rather than a sign of sprouting, it serves as a semantic indicator for corn. The Kan sign is a graphic representation of the notched-ball tamale within the vegetal wrapper (Figure 1g). Thus it is not surprising that T506 also is depicted within serving bowls in Late Classic art (Figure 9a, f). The Cumhu month glyph is a Kan sign with a T155 superfix. Noting that T155 has the phonetic value *o'*, Lounsbury (1983:46) has suggested that the compound is to be read *och*, a Yucatec term meaning food, sustenance, or maize bread. It has been noted that when supplied with T130, the Kan glyph is read *wah* (Mathews and Juteson 1984:205), another Mayan term of almost identical meaning. Moreover, the Kan sign alone also can carry the phonetic value *wa*. Stephen Houston (personal communication 1985) has mentioned that at A3 on Machaquila Stela 5, T506 substitutes for T130 in a compound written as T1:74:738:130 on Machaquila Stela 2. Houston suggests that both compounds are to be read *u-ma-ka-w(a)*. In a recent study, Love (n.d.) independently has noted the *wah* value of T506, and identifies the sign as maize bread, in other words, the tamale.

The Spotted Kan (T507) is identical to T506 save for the radiating lines of dots running down its upper side. The pattern of spots is very similar to the dribbled painting found on large, Late Classic tamales (Figure 7e, f). Stuart (1987) has proposed a *tzi* reading for T507. A compound appearing on Classic ceremonial bundles provides direct support for this reading (e.g., Taube 1985: Figure 7). Composed of T507 preceded by Landa's “*i*” (T679) and “*ca*” (T25), the entire compound could be read *ikatz(i)*. Delgaty and Ruíz Sánchez (1978:53) gloss the Tzotzil *icatsil* as “*bulto, carga*,”



**Figure 8.** Preparation of *nabah wah* tamale during Yucatec *ch'a chaak* ceremony. Tamale one of many prepared at dawn following night vigil, with this particular form being composed of intermixed maize dough and *sikil* squash seed paste (photo by author).

and forms of *ikatz* or *ikatzil* have a general meaning of “burden” in Tzeltal and Tzotzil. The T507 *tzi* value may relate to the diagnostic spots. Fray Coto (1983:73, 449, 506) translates the Cakchiquel *tzic* as “*la gotilla*” or “*puntillo de tinta*,” and mentions that it also means “to spot or spatter.” Similarly, *tzikilik* signifies “spotted” in Quiché (Edmonson 1965:134). In Yucatec, *tzitz* signifies “to sprinkle or asperse.” Of special interest, it also can signify the dressing of food, as in the expression *tzitz u pach manteka*, “*lardear lo que se asa*” (Barrera Vásquez 1980:862). I suggest that the *tzi* value of T507 refers to the liquid dribbled on the surface of the tamale.

The Ben sign (T584), the third of the discussed day signs containing the bracket, differs from the Kan glyph only in that the uppermost surface is marked by the two notches also found with the *yax* sign and the Postclassic leaf portion of T130. In an interesting Pasión variant of the “ben ich” compound, the conventional Ben sign (Figure 9b) is replaced by the corn curl, though the two markings remain at top (Figure 9c). A similar substitution occurs in the female parentage indicator sign identified by Schele et al. (1977), in which two of the hand-held elements are the corn-curl tamale and the Ben sign (Figure 9i). The highland Maya term for the day Ben is *ah*, a word denoting green corn or reeds (Thompson 1971:81–82). Among contemporary Tzeltal Maya, the dough ground

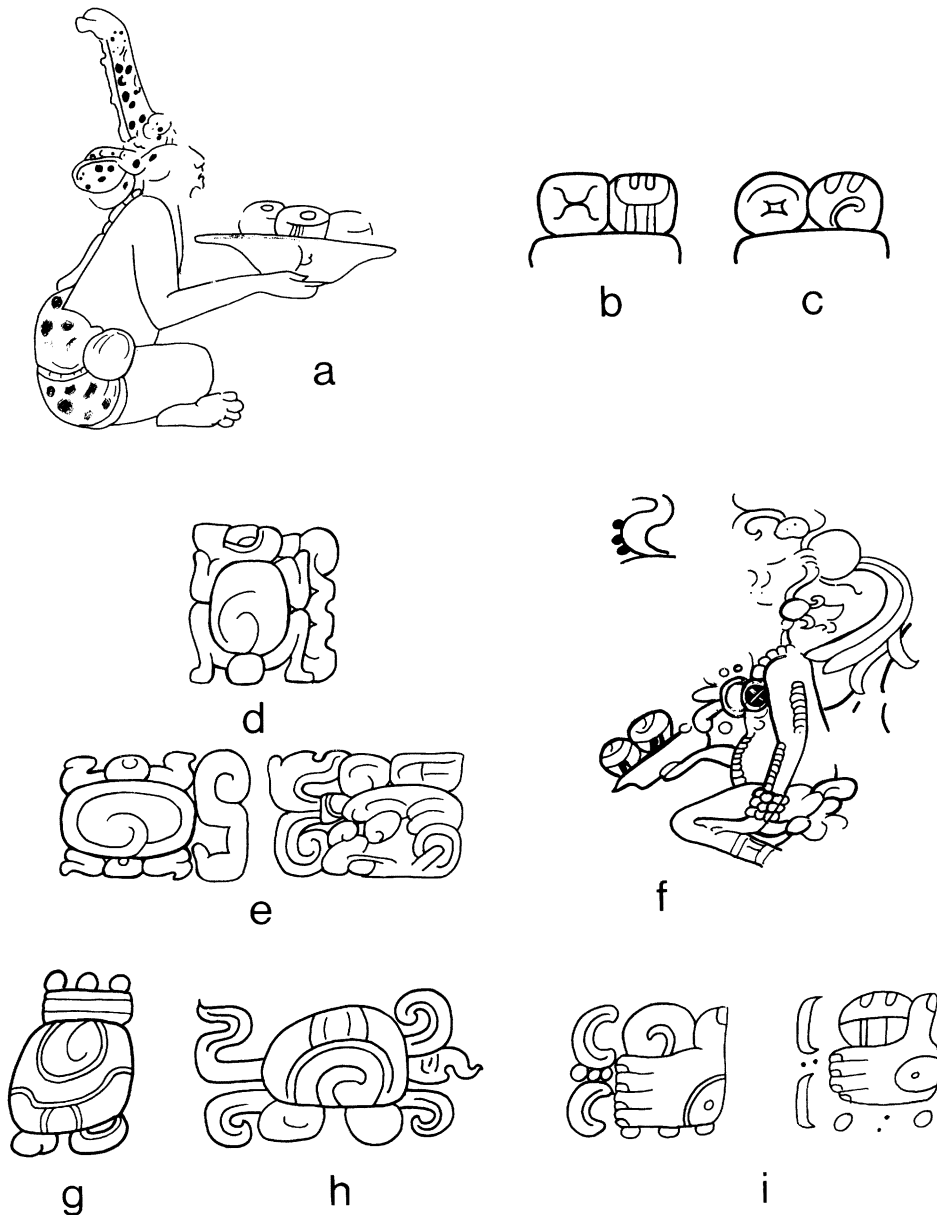


Figure 9. Tamale signs in Classic Maya writing and iconography: (a) seated male with bowl containing Kan sign tamales, from unprovenienced vessel (after Coe 1973:70); (b) conventional "ben ich" superfix (T168), Dos Pilas Stela 16; (c) T168 variant, rolled corn-curl tamale replaces Ben sign, Aguateca Stela 1; (d) T739, the personified God K tamale, curling element at right possibly steam, Yaxchilan Lintel 29; (e) portion of 819-day cycle text, T739 followed by head of God K, Yaxchilan Lintel 30; (f) painted Chenes capstone from Santa Rosa Xtampak (after Pollock 1970:Figure 74b); (g) T574, kin variant of distance numbers, note T130 suffix, Yaxchilan Lintel 23; (h) T575, with smoke prefix, Lamanai Stela 9, Early Classic period; (i) Late Classic examples of the female parentage indicator (after Schele et al. 1977).

from tender fresh corn is termed *noybil ahan*. Tamales made from this dough, stuffed in corn husk and boiled, are termed *šohbil wah* (Berlin et al. 1974:114). In Quiché, similar green-corn tamales are called *ahel vah* (Edmonson 1971:100). The Ben sign may well represent the *tamal de elote*, or tamale prepared from fresh, green maize.

The vegetal wrapper present in T130, T506, T507, T525, and T584 previously has been interpreted in an entirely different light. Due to its upper curl, Beyer (1936:13) identified the Kin sign variant (T574) present in Classic distance numbers as a spiral conch shell (Figure 9g). The bracket device forms a prominent part of the glyph, and for this reason it often has been considered a shell attribute. Thus Thompson (1971:85) stated that the Cib sign represents the conch, though in this case the spiral is not clearly present. It is interesting that elsewhere, Thompson (1962:127) mentions that “Cib is hardly distinguishable from an inverted Kan,” though no rationale is offered as to why the Kan sign is identified with shells. The shell identification of T574 rests only on vague visual similarity, and is not supported by any semantic or phonetic evidence. Of course, the snail is not the only spiral form in Classic epigraphy and art; the corn curl is yet another. Much as the Kan sign represents the wrapped notched-ball tamale, T574 appears to depict a rolled maize ball placed in its vegetal wrapper (Figure 1h). Frequently, T574 contains the T130 phonetic *wa* affix (Figure 9g). At C6a on Copan Stela I, T574 is affixed by T130 and the aforementioned cartouche of the number eight topped by a foliated corn curl. Rather than depicting a conch, T574 represents a mass of ground maize, probably in the form of a rolled and wrapped tamale.

Another reputed shell sign is T575 (Figure 9h); Thompson (1962:203) stated that in form, the glyph is identical to an inverted T574. Spinden (1924:Figures 8, 9) first identified the device as a shell, and this interpretation also has fossilized in contemporary epigraphic studies. Thus an important war glyph has been termed the “shell-star” event because of the occurrence of T575 as the main sign (Kelley 1976:38–42). Thompson (1962:203) stated that T575 is identical to some forms of T17, and that affix T17 also can serve as the sign for *yax*, signifying green or new. The association of the shell with green is not clear; but, if the bracket is considered as leaf or husk wrapper, it has every reason to be present in the sign for green. Although T575 also seems to represent the corn-curl tamale in its leaf wrapper, the sign still is understood poorly. Until the significance of T575 is studied more adequately, there is little reason to rephrase the war event as “tamale star.”

An interesting Classic variant of the corn-curl tamale is a quadruped form found both in Glyph Y of the Supplementary Series and the 819-day cycle (Kelley 1976:Figure 17; Thompson 1971: Figures 31, 35). The glyph, T739, often is accompanied by smaller notched-ball tamales and a coiling rope-like form (Figure 9d, e). The latter element resembles, but also differs from, conventional Classic representations of smoke; the billowing curls may represent steam rising from the rolled tamale. The crouching posture of T739 recalls the aforementioned standing-tamale emblem glyph, and this also may be an intentional pun on *wa*. However, the limbs have another significance, as they serve as the arms and legs of a curious God K. The diagnostic God K mirror and torch forehead usually rests at the top of the glyph, with the rolled tamale forming the body of the deity. At times, the spiral is composed of contrasting bands, as if the tamale was rolled from alternating sheets of maize dough and other foods (e.g., Coe 1973:29). In the 819-day cycle, the head of God K often follows the legged tamale as well; the head may be supplied with a maize superfix (Figure 9e).

Berlin and Kelley (1961) compared Classic 819-day cycle inscriptions to a Postclassic Yucatec text on Dresden pages 30b and 31b describing God B and the offering of foods with the four cardinal points. The four directions, with their associated colors, form an important part of 819-day cycle texts. Moreover, the codical verbal main sign describing the event is identical with that of the 819-day cycle, though the head of God B, or Chac, substitutes for the Classic head of God K (Berlin and Kelley 1961:15). In the four Dresden phrases, the particular type of meat offered varies according to direction, but the Kan sign supplied with T130 follows immediately in every case. Although Mathews and Justeson (1984:205) suggest that the Kan sign with T130 should be read as *wah* for tortilla, it surely refers to the tamale. In contemporary Yucatec milpa ceremonies, the large tamales known under such epithets as *noh wah*, *tuti wah*, and *yal wah* (Villa Rojas 1945:109) commonly are offered to the Chacs of the four directions. In other words, the Dresden passage varies little from



contemporary Yucatec ceremonial practice. The T739 personified tamale strongly suggests that the Classic 819-day cycle also entailed the offering of maize tamales.

During the Classic period, God K was identified with maize and its principal product, the tamale. Thus the central mythical event mentioned on the Palenque Tablet of the Foliated Cross is the birth of G II, or God K (Kelley 1965:108). On one Chenes painted capstone from Santa Rosa Xtampak, a somewhat effaced but still identifiable God K holds a dish containing two Kan sign tamales (Figure 9f). Following an early identification by Seler (1902–1923:I:376–377), the Yucatec deity Bolon Dzacab generally is accepted as a form of God K (e.g., Kelley 1976:6, 65, 97; Thompson 1970:227; Tozzer 1941:note 673). The colonial Yucatec Chilam Balam of Tizimin contains the expression *bolon dzacab uah, bolon dzacab ha* (Edmonson 1982:62), which could be translated as “Bolon Dzacab tamale, Bolon Dzacab water.” The Chilam Balam books of Chumayel, Tizimin, and Mani mention the creation of Bolon Dzacab from edible seeds. The following is an excerpt from the Chumayel version:

Then shoots of the yaxum tree were taken. Also Lima beans were taken with crumbled tubercles, hearts of small squash seeds, large squash seeds and beans, all crushed. He wrapped up the seeds composing the first Bolon Dzacab and went to the thirteenth heaven. Then a mass of maize dough with the tips of corn cobs remained here on earth [Roys 1933:99].

The final sentence is open to reinterpretation. Roys translates *madz* as “a mass of maize dough,” although the term also signifies the glume surrounding the individual seed. The cob tips mentioned are of *bacal*, that is, degrained corn cobs. Thus, it appears that what were left on earth were the discarded remains of the prepared seed bundle—glume and stripped cobs.

Three large rectangular reliefs lie in the West Court at Copan (Figure 10c). Each represents a long-nosed god whom Thompson (1970:227, Plate 6) identified as Bolon Dzacab. Thompson (1970) considered Bolon Dzacab as an aspect of God K identified with growing crops and seed, particularly maize. The Copan figure is seated on a nest of radially placed leaves. In Yucatan, the ceremonial tamales are prepared on similar beds of leaves (Figure 8). The god holds a bowl of maize that has an infixed cartouche containing the T617 element, first identified by Jeffrey Miller as a sign for mirror (Schele and Miller 1983:3–21). The ball-like mass also occurs as an affix, here with maize foliation as well as the infixed-mirror sign (Figure 10a). The association of the mirror sign with maize is pervasive; the T617 cartouche frequently forms the “notch” of Classic Kan signs (Figure 1g; Thompson 1971:Figure 6, 54–57). Although Thompson identified the Copan figure as an aspect of God K, the forehead lacks the mirror and torch conventionally found with the deity. However, the identification is supported by an entity represented on Lintel 3 of Tikal Temple IV (Figure 10b). The figure, again holding the mirrored maize ball, emerges out of the jaws of a serpent. His fan-like crest of hair closely resembles the Copan example, though here it is topped by growing maize. The prominent forehead mirror identifies him as an aspect of God K. The Tikal and Copan examples probably are representations of the same God K aspect, a personification of sustenance possibly equivalent to the Postclassic Yucatec Bolon Dzacab.

## CONCLUSIONS

Both a basic commodity and an esteemed ceremonial food, the tamale permeates Classic Maya ideology, writing, and art. Glyphic forms of the tamale are many and suggest a complex lore and terminology surrounding this food. The identification of T130 as the tamale with its leaf wrapper provides strong epigraphic evidence that the tamale was the principal maize product of the Classic Maya. The phonetic value of T130 is *wa* or *wah*, a generally pan-Mayan term designating the basic, daily consumed maize product. Whereas there is no evidence of the tortilla in prehispanic Maya script, the tamale clearly was termed *wah*. The term *wah* usually refers to the tortilla in most modern Mayan languages, though when modified with another word, it also may designate the tamale. The distinctions between the tamale and tortilla do not alter radically the underlying meaning of *wah*, because the word appears to refer to the basic, daily food of the Maya. As the tortilla supplanted the tamale in Maya diet, the term was reapplied to the introduced food item.

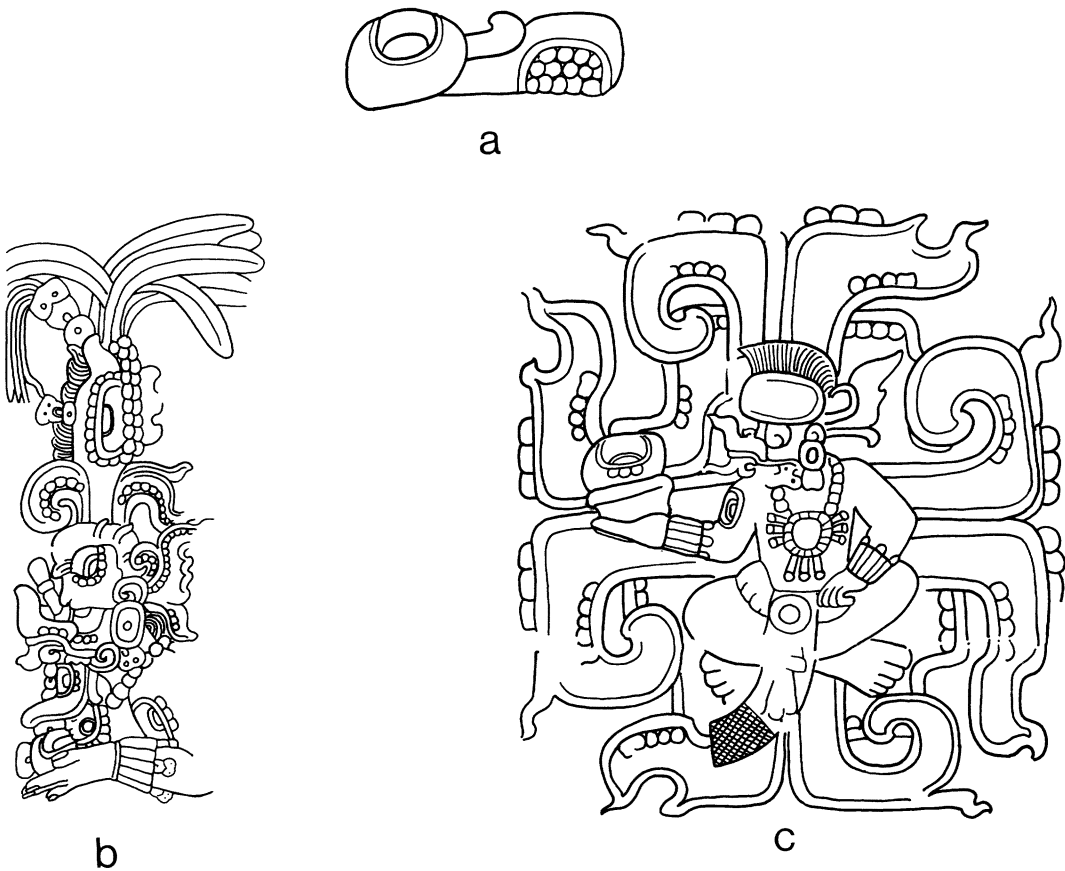


Figure 10. Late Classic maize signs containing T617 mirror device: (a) affix composed of mirrored ball with maize foliation, Yaxchilan Lintel 23, M6; (b) aspect of God K holding mirrored dough ball, note cranial maize foliation, Lintel 3 of Temple IV, Tikal (after Jones and Satterthwaite 1982:Figure 74); (c) probable form of God K seated on bed of leaves, deity holds maize ball in bowl, one of three panels in West Court, Copan (after Maudslay 1889-1902:1:Plate 9a).

The tamale was identified with important Maya deities, such as the Tonsured Maize God, God K, and God N. In addition, an emblem glyph termed *wah* actually may have referred to a particular supernatural region, possibly the underworld. The association of the tamale with deities partly may be because it was one of the principal sacrificial offerings, as it is in the 819-day cycle, the Postclassic codices, and contemporary Maya ceremonies. The modern Zinacanteco Tzotzil consider the candles offered to the ancestral gods as *wah*, and the Classic act of bloodletting also may have been couched in terms of offering sustenance, or *wah*. The rich ethnographic lore surrounding the tamale has been but spottily treated in the present paper. An in-depth study of contemporary Maya tamale preparation and ceremonial use would open broad vistas into Classic Maya subsistence and ideology.

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