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# Ritual Tradition in Iconography

An Analysis of Three Classic Maya Carved  
Lintels

Cover Image:

Graham, I. and Ew, E von, 1982. *Corpus of Maya Hieroglyphic Inscriptions, Vol. 3 Part 1*. Cambridge (MA): Harvard University Printing Office p.356

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An Analysis of Three Classic Maya Lintels

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15 June 2014 (Final version)

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## **Acknowledgements**

*The author would like to take the opportunity to express his gratitude to the following people:*

*Prof. dr. Maarten Jansen, without whose continuous support this thesis would not have reached completion.*

*Dr. Araceli Rojas Martínez Gracida, who always made time to share her advice.*

*My family and friends for their valuable support and feedback.*

## Introduction

The field of analyzing systems of religious devotion has within the discipline of archaeology long been a popular area of study. As a cultural phenomenon that often leaves tangible remains in the form of visual depictions and monumental architecture, it is clear that a great amount of time and resources gets invested in cultures across the globe and through time.

To be able to come to a meaningful, balanced view of any aspect of society therefore, it is crucial to be familiar with the nature of religious systems and the traditions they are comprised of. It is for this reason that iconography will during the thesis research be used as a means of looking closer at this structure. The analysis will be conducted from the viewpoint that the images depicting ritual that have been selected for investigation, being three carved lintels recovered archaeologically from the site of Yaxchilan, Mexico, contain metaphoric and otherwise semantic expressions that provide information about the way the cosmos was mentally given structure and subsequently expressed in a conventional manner, an area still needing in-depth attention when it comes to archaeological research of Pre-Columbian civilizations and societies around the globe in general.

As a general research strategy, the detailed model of analysis of ritual tradition developed by Roy Rappaport will be used as the main method for dissecting religious convention, and will form an experiment as to the applicability of his theory to visual imagery.

Besides searching for a promising topic and research question, care has also be taken to ensure that the results of the research carry maximal significance within a broader field of academic research. To accomplish this, a dedication to a thorough construction of the theoretical foundation will aim at results useful to study in more general topics also; well beyond the immediate scope of Maya studies. As a result, the first and larger part of the thesis takes the shape of a more theoretical nature.

## **Anticipated obstacles**

As explained, the aim of this thesis will be to reflect critically on the compatibility and usefulness of Roy A. Rappaport's theory as worked out in detail in his 1999 publication "Ritual and Religion in the Making of Humanity", when applied to an example of visual culture of a ritual nature. As Rappaport's focus lies heavily on anthropologically collected data -in which obviously there has been opportunity for correspondence with members of the society being studied- there are a number of anticipated hurdles to overcome when investigating in this case the carvings on some of the lintels found on the site of Yaxchilan. Firstly, there is no way to observe the ritual performance in person, let alone participate in it in order to gain further insight in the social and perceptual implications of the liturgy. This also means that there is no possibility to ask for clarification on any elements that are poorly understood. Secondly, as it is the visual representation of the performance, and not the performance itself that is being investigated, there is a double layer of codification to take into account, as the creation of the image has conventions and indexical qualities all of its own. These issues make it more challenging to apply Rappaport's style of analysis, even though the notion of these scenes being depictions being proper rituals is widely accepted among Mayanists.

For these reasons, the theoretical approach taken, discussed in the first part of this thesis, will have to defend several assumptions. First of all, it must be established that it would be correct to state that ritual is a suitable subject of study to investigate a society's worldview. As the choice of research objects for learning about worldview has fallen upon images with ritual content, the thesis will provide attention to substantiating this decision. Through comparing the research of various scholars engaged with the research of ritual and worldview, the argument will be founded that ritual, being both an integral and highly complex part of the development and working of society, proves to be a representation of cosmovision that is relevant to its study.

Secondly, that visual images with content of a ritual nature are suitable objects for studying the aforementioned rituals. As has been explained above, it is



impossible for the author to observe the rituals elaborated on in this thesis by being present at their performance. Defending the view that analyzing imagery, with all its stylizations, nuances and emphases is still a valuable source of information about the scenes they were intended to depict, is therefore an explicit and argumentatively crucial part of the thesis.

Third and last, there is the view that iconographical analysis can provide valid information to someone from a radically different background, without which any such investigation would be an effort in futility. A point that ties in strongly with the one previously mentioned is the evident difference between the cultural background (and all the knowledge of conventions both conscious and subconscious coming with it) of the author and those responsible for creating the Classic Maya images. A deeper look will be taken into the variability in meaning ascription when it comes to concepts, as well as how information is subconsciously being added during the act of interpretation itself.

As a last remark for the introduction to further chapters, it should be noted that in order to keep this thesis at a manageable size, it will make grateful use of the visual interpretations already published by notable Mayanists like Schele, Grube and Martin. With their long (and in some cases ongoing) contributions to the fields of Maya studies and epigraphy in particular, their insights will provide a solid base of background information when it comes to interpreting both text and image. Likewise, the excellent translations of the epigraphic information accompanying the images published in the Peabody database ([www.peabody.harvard.edu](http://www.peabody.harvard.edu)) will be used to provide the background information needed to understand the context of the creation of the carvings and their depictions.

## **Chapter 1 - Building a theoretical approach**

As mentioned in the introduction, every study in the field of ritual will have to deal with a number of challenges. Although the main question to be answered -what would be the right way to approach ritual imagery of an ancient culture- is central to the thesis, it is a rather large, multi-faceted issue. For this reason, it will be split up into several easier to handle questions.

Firstly, this chapter will take a closer look at how ritual should be viewed within the culture in which it is encountered. To do this, an answer must be found as to what role it generally plays in a functioning society; how it helps the community deal with changing circumstances by providing a sense of order and structure, and how it is tied to a community's vision of the world.

Following this, it will consider the experiential effects that form an integral part of the functioning of a ritual tradition of performances. As perhaps the aspect that is most elusive for the scholar to get a grasp of, the thesis needs a practical approach, so understanding how a phenomenological interpretation can be of aid in achieving the holistic picture of ritual practice will be a priority.

Tying up the chapter, the third part will investigate the issues, both obvious and below the surface, involved in studying a phenomenon that requires a high level of knowledge of contextual meaning in order to make sense of it. Especially the relativity of interpretation will be highlighted here, aiming at better understanding the problems it poses as well as if, and how, the scholar can deal with them.

### **1.1 - Dissecting ritual convention**

Given the enormous number of valuable studies in the field of the analysis of ritual (take for example the works published in the edited volumes by van Henten and Houtepen (van Henten and Houtepen 2001) and Becking (Becking 2001), a conscious decision and selection had to be made as to the theoretical works used in this thesis. Apart from the purely practical reason that this thesis would become a

near infinite task, it is the work of Roy Rappaport that has been chosen to provide the model of analysis for the reason that it shows an innovative way of aiming at a holistic view of ritual practice and religions systems. Although some forays into applying his theory in an archaeological setting have been published (note for example Inomata 2001), no systematic analysis on visual culture recovered from the archaeological record has been attempted yet, and it is exactly at this point a closer investigation will be performed in the research presented in this thesis. Although it would be unfair to attempt to summarize Rappaport's work within the confines of this thesis, it is nonetheless essential to introduce and explain some of the key concepts formulated by him before using them in an investigation of the data. In his approach, Rappaport starts off from the notion that like all aspects of human life, religion and the ritual activity of which it is composed are things that have developed according to the laws of natural selection (Rappaport 1999, 1). Logically following from this, ritual is a phenomenon that is strongly tied to other significant factors in the development of Homo sapiens as a species, factors like a strong social cohesion and the use of an intricate system of language based on indexical and symbolic reference (Rappaport 1999, 1). In light of the ubiquitous and large-scale investments in systems of devotion found in human societies across the globe and throughout history, it is unthinkable that there is not a profound advantage to be ascribed to an active tradition of ritual activity. Efforts like the building of pyramids, cathedrals and the sacrifice of precious goods could not continue to exist if they were completely random and therefore a waste of resources. For this reason, Rappaport's work takes aim at explaining both what it is that ritualized behaviour adds to society as well as how it accomplishes this. What distinguishes his approaches from other research efforts dealing with an evolutionary approach to human society is that it takes great care not to end up in the pitfalls of a reductionist view of human behaviour in relation to the environment. Instead of looking at devotion from a purely functionalist viewpoint, Rappaport attempts to investigate ritual in its own terms, avoiding presumptions and prejudice as well as taking a critical look at supposed human universals. As a subject that relies heavily on its own notions of 'truth' (something this thesis will elaborate on later), this is no easy task for a scholar.

Drawing from the work of Pierce (Pierce 1960), Rappaport distinguishes between different forms of signs found in human culture. As the simplest form of reference, the *icon* can be characterized as a sign that depicts exactly what it refers to. A photograph of a given person could be regarded as a good example of this first class. Up a level of abstraction, the *index* implies or points to a given subject of reference by direct sensory feature. The sight of dark clouds indicate approaching rain; the sound of an alarm call signifies the approach of a predator. More so than the icon, this class of signal is situation-dependent. Only in the relevant situation and to a knowledgeable recipient does the index carry meaning. As the third kind of sign, the *symbol* is the one that can be most remotely removed from the thing it refers to. One example of a symbol is the word 'windmill'. Like most words in the human languages, this combination of sounds has no direct sensory relation to the object it is used to denote. Resulting from this, a symbol can be used in the widest possible context (no windmill need be in sight), as well as be very easily connected to other symbols to form a network of meaning.

It is especially the last two kinds of sign that are used in the explanation of ritual, and are therefore most recurrent in this thesis. Naturally, indices and symbols facilitate social structuring as they allow for the efficient organization of group efforts. Likewise, to use these forms of reference to their full potential, language needs to be available as a form of communication, and it is therefore no surprise that language and ritual are closely interwoven within the larger structure of religious tradition. As will become clear in later chapters of this thesis, acknowledging this makes linguistics available as a powerful tool to investigate the development, consistency and modification of ritual tradition through time, as well as open up iconography as a suitable means of examining it.

Now that these modes of communication are distinguished, how can they be said to relate to the need for traditions of ritual performance observed in society? According to Rappaport, with these intricate ways of conveying information comes the ever-present danger of falsehood. The possibilities of lie and deceit, as he puts it, increase dramatically because of the distance possible between signifier and signified when using indices and symbolism (Rappaport 1999, 11). To counteract

this, it benefits a society -indeed it necessitates this- to construct something that is not only constant, but undeniably true and usable as a measuring device for other statements. In this way, although not taking away the possibility that any statement is false or those with an inclination towards deceit can distort the truth intentionally, the construction of at least an element of conceptualized truth is capable of establishing an order in communication, meaning and its interpretation.

The nature of these truths, as they are considered by those engaged with a system of ritual, takes the form of what Rappaport terms 'Rho-sentences' or alternatively 'Ultimate Sacred Postulates'. These are typically very elemental, concise concepts lying at the foundation, for example, of the major religions discernable today (Rappaport 1999, 290). In this way the statement "Christ is the son of God" would be a good example of a notion that is held to be beyond doubt by practicing members of the Christian Church. Furthermore, it provides the larger religious structure with a foundation upon which the organization can be built and maintained. By continuously making explicit reference to these Ultimate Sacred Postulates, a system of strong convention arises which will allow for morally right or wrong ways to engage in ritual activity. This, in consequence, makes possible the experience of properness, authenticity and effectiveness and will therefore result in participants and observers to give public acceptance to the performance and the structure it promotes. It becomes clear then, that to understand the way ritual in for example a Classic Maya polity like Yaxchilan works, one of the objectives of this thesis following in the third chapter should be the identification of these fundamental truth-constructs underlying the tradition.

## **1.2 - The experience of ritual**

When aiming to understand the environment of a culture, the first question one should necessarily ask oneself is the obvious "what is the environment?". It would be worthwhile to consider the work of anthropologist Tim Ingold, as this is a topic he has engaged with in-depth throughout his academic career. His background of viewing

society not as something anthropocentric but focusing instead heavily on ecological awareness; the perception of individuals and the way traits like these are culturally transmitted will benefit the understanding of how ritual is experienced by those participating in it, and will shed light on the merit of its survival from one generation to the next. As explained by Ingold in his 2011 publication “Being Alive” however, the environment is something that cannot be answered in the form of a single clear-cut definition. If even a scholar like Ingold himself, with a background in ecological anthropology, is puzzled by this, can any academic effort hope to construct a clear image of the conceptualization of the world found in a centuries’ old society, expressed through visual conventions which we only recently have started to decipher?

To make this task even remotely possible, it would be beneficial to once again break the question up into several segments. First, it could be wondered what the relationship is between the environment and members of the human species. Secondly, being social beings with a high level of symbolic expression, how does the concept of culture figure into the ordering of our surroundings?

Far from being two very separate realms, the human being and the environment are in close entanglement with each other. Instead of an absolute, it would be more productive to view the world as how it is experienced and simultaneously ordered by the living organism. Coming back to the role of ritual in this, it seems worth arguing that besides the fact that a being cannot exist without the environment, the concept of the environment would also be absent without the organism (Ingold 2011, 77). In stating this, this thesis is by no means aiming at a philosophical statement about realism in terms of the measurable reality of the physical universe, nor investigating in what way non-human species differ in the way they construct their environment (both of these topics would unfortunately fall well beyond the scope of the research). Instead, its sole purpose is to demonstrate the importance of accepting that the realization of the world humans live in is a *process* of continuously making sense and cognitively imposing structure on the body of perception.

As argued by Ingold (2011, 85-88), what can be said about human-environment interaction regardless of individual experience, is that there is an ongoing flow or exchange that does not limit itself to the body. Moving beyond the Cartesian division of the mental and the material, he argues that the skin is not the definite boundary between organism and outside world it is often thought to be. Drawing on the work of scholars like Andy Clark (Clark 1997) and Gregory Bateson (Bateson 1973), he provides a line of argument that proposes beings, objects and actions form a meshwork that can take forms, dissolve and reform in a limitless number of ways (Ingold 2011, 86).

So how can this -admittedly abstract- envisioning of the way this interaction works be used in understanding ritual performance in general? As has been mentioned before, it will become apparent in later chapters of this thesis that there is a gap in the information available to researchers when they deal with ritual in an archaeological setting. Difficult though it may be to study ritual anthropologically in terms of understanding 'insider' experience (even with personal participation), having no actual people to ask questions makes this puzzle even more obscure. However, it would be an interesting experiment for the purpose of this thesis to view a concrete ritual performance in the way Ingold describes the interaction: a coming together of perceiving human beings, material objects and predetermined actions. It is the aim of this thesis to not get stuck in purely material considerations, but also to resist the temptation of losing the argument in implications that are so abstract as to have no value for future research. Instead, the challenge will be to reach a balance between the valuable conceptual re-evaluations as offered by scholars like Ingold and Rappaport, and the decades of investigative results regarding iconography, epigraphy and socio-ecology.

In another chapter of the same diverse publication discussed earlier, Ingold describes space as one of the most meaningless yet often-used term in the humanities (Ingold 2011, 145), arguing that in daily life, the human being is not consciously engaged with space but with concepts like 'indoors', 'on the ground', 'on the road', and so on. This stands in some contrast with the popular conceptualization of 'space' composed of a number of enclosed 'places'. When we look at ritual

performance, it is important to contemplate which model seems the most accurate in describing how location, movement and orientation fit into a convention of devotion. This important question is something this thesis will return to when discussing the ritual traditions depicted on the Classic Maya carvings and their relation to how human beings are necessarily constructing a four-dimensional image of the world to situate themselves in.

As has been shown with regards to how the performance places strong emphasis on linking the participants both in time and space to not only the creation of the cosmos, but more importantly to each and every previous performance, it may be concluded that Ingold was correct in stressing how place and time are not enclosed but rather a process of movement from one to another (Ingold 2011, 148). It is this interconnection or pathway that gives the tradition meaning, for as Rappaport explains it is the canonical aspect, the fact that the ones before current performers adhered to the same convention, that makes the practice authentic and valid.

### **1.3 - Acknowledging relative meaning**

In trying to come to a deeper understanding of any aspect of a culture one has not from birth been involved in, a scholar will immediately have to deal with concepts he or she is familiar with, as well as those more difficult to place within an interpretative framework. Although the latter category seems the most deserving of intensive study, it is often the first one that poses an immediate threat to the integrity of any conclusions. As it is relevant to any archaeological study, not least of all an analysis of ritual convention, this part of the thesis will take a closer look at how conceptual interpretations are not as static or universal as they often seem. To do this, it will make use of the work done by scholars like Hodder and Insoll, linking them both to the previous parts of the chapter as well as to the published work of theorists such as Hilary Putnam in an attempt to get a better grip on the epistemological consequences. The subchapter will start off by looking at how even the most basic



classifications, distinctions and comparisons will show a culturally schematized influence.

One of the main points Hodder tries to make to demonstrate his point is that objects cannot be seen as powerless things that can do nothing but undergo the influence of human agents (Hodder 2011). Quite to the contrary, humans are as much dependent on things as the other way around, finding themselves in an interdependent situation that changes through time, but nonetheless remains inextricably merged. In recent theory, the notion of the agency of things has been given increasing attention. No longer are objects viewed as matter without any intrinsic meaning, waiting to become endowed with a human mental template (Olson 2010, 38).

The implications of this come into focus of course, when we link them to the aforementioned ideas expressed by Ingold. It would seem that the boundary which has long been seen between material and social is both artificial and increasingly hard to defend. Instead, humans and the environment should be viewed as integrated, developing together according to evolutionary models, implying that material has been actively shaping human society. Their influence on the identity of members of a society, therefore, can be concluded to be substantial. Yet for a long time, both anthropology and archaeology have largely chosen to marginalize or even ignore this particular role of objects and physical environment, instead approaching society as something centered on humans alone. In this way, authors like Ingold and Hodder demonstrate the need to rethink even the concepts which seem most obvious and self-explanatory.

Another influential scholar aiming at a reconceptualization in the humanities whose work can be useful in this research is Insoll. Like Rappaport, his focus lies for a large part on linguistic implications to the way we, as humans, construct our image of the world (Insoll 2007). To accomplish his goal of an acknowledged conceptual framework, Insoll uses the work of Wittgenstein as a linguistic philosophical perspective on conceptual creation. The amount of relevance Insoll ascribes to this way of looking at the matter is justified since, as already argued by discussing the work of Rappaport, language lays at the foundation of human culture. As such, it

presents itself as a way of being easily influenced, leading to the drawing of unsubstantiated conclusions based on 'common sense'. At the same time, Insoll argues, language forms the key in his approach to fighting this very problem. In his arguments regarding the practice of interpretation all archaeologists rely upon in their daily work, Insoll makes it clear that the problem lies in the false belief that we have understood something. Instead, he argues, we recognize it as something fitting our previously understood impressions, even though it is often something very different. Although perhaps somewhat optimistic about the scholar's ability to "break through it [familiarity] and look at something anew" (Insoll 2007, 17) it is his plea for *awareness* of the subjective bias often overlooked in research that has the potential to truly contribute to an investigation such as that of Classic Maya imagery.

The way things are, one of the greatest issues would be the tendency to mistake culturally subjective ideas and meanings for being the same in all societies. As an example of how notions that are more often than not taken for granted can still be far from universal, Insoll looks at the way recent technological innovations and processes of globalization have radically altered the perception of distance, place, materiality and diversity. Since the introduction of public air travel, large scale import and the internet, the way humans look at objects, the world and its size has been unlike the way past societies viewed them. Even though this point is not new (to give just a few examples, Emma Blake (Blake 2004, 235) previously explored how modern concepts of society and spatiality have the potential of deforming our view of the past, while Hodder and Hutson (Hodder and Hutson 2003, 196-197) likewise pointed out the influence of the interpreter's particular, relative conceptual background), Insoll's example illustrates the point he is making quite well. For an inhabitant of a society centuries removed from the present day, daily life and the most basic concepts shaping its experience must have been very different from the modern Western one. Likewise, the human lifespan has through advances in medicine increased dramatically. This means that terms such as 'youth' and 'elderly' have lost most of the meanings they had in societies like the one studied here, and taken on new ones corresponding to the lengths of our current average life phases.

All these examples go to demonstrate the need for a strong awareness of the relative and highly dynamic concepts in use by archaeologists every day.

Reflecting on this, the question that should be asked as a result of this is a troubling one. Can a scholar in the 21st century, with a Western background, make any meaningful interpretations of Classic Maya worldview? The importance of properly understanding the problem is exemplified by a misunderstanding of other societies as much as it is between scholars themselves. As Hilary Putnam's proposed model of conceptual relativism aims to show, many of the heated debates about what appear to be even the most objectively unambiguous, 'hardest' data are the effect of a highly relative and culturally dependent way of interpretation. According to his epistemological view, all concepts including classifications and periodizations are part of a specific theoretical discourse, and inextricably connected to other notions in this discourse (Raatikainen 2001, 61). As data are paradigm-dependent, even the most fundamental concepts like language, syntax, culture, and even theory itself can be hotly disputed by those from different backgrounds. Even though anthropology and archaeology are data-driven, the underlying conceptual schemes are often left unscrutinized. Since these schemes guide data-collection and interpretation, one can speak of metaphysical assumptions (Raatikainen 2001, 61).

As argued by Putnam, it is better to speak of acceptability or plausibility of an interpretation within local conceptual settings than it is to speak of truth or certainty. "The" reality only holds value within a very specific discourse. Truth, in this view, is idealized rational acceptability, as there is no one ultimate perspective. The value of his approach is that he makes these statements without advocating extreme realism, as within a paradigm concepts can be unambiguously defined. Researchers can therefore be criticized, and a shared physical world helps researchers from different backgrounds understand each other.

To shortly illustrate Putnam's point regarding a pragmatist approach to realism, it would serve to use his example of the mereological argument. The mereological argument (after Mereolog, a theory of numbers), also known as the 'Carnapian world argument', aims to demonstrate how basic concepts as numbers show that simple questions like 'how many individuals exist in a given world?' are

misguided. To give just one example, every two objects can also have a sum. The conclusion is that it is the choice of language (and their definition of concepts) is what determines if an interpretation is correct. Objects exist, but concepts like fact and reality vary according to specific schemes. According to 'internal realism' (or as later also called 'pragmatic realism' or 'pluralistic realism') therefore, all views are right as long as they meet the criteria of their own discourse. There is an interpenetration of convention and fact, but also a continuum between the two making it nonsensical to see them as black and white. Analyzing these points, they do not make the distinction useless, it simply means something is only conceptually true *to a degree*.

Although it could be argued that in a way, Putnam's relativity undermines itself by logically implying it itself is just another way of gathering and interpreting data no more reliable than any other, it seems to be the practical value that redeems it. As mentioned, keeping this relativity in conceptual paradigmatic interpretation in mind it will be possible to share and synthesize data more efficiently. Furthermore, and relevant to the discussion in this thesis, it follows from his arguments that if an analysis of data gathered from the archaeological remains of another society is conducted in a conscientious manner, the interpretation resulting from it will not be meaningless.

As a second argument, important though it is to pay attention to the differences discussed above, it is no less vital to realize there are (some) universals to be found in the human species. Although highly culturally relative in the way it occurs, all human societies have an intrinsic and apparently universal need to structure the world. Looking back at Rappaport, it seems that the reliance on cognitive universals to an extent is not in contradiction, as long as one *acknowledges* the variability and relativity of the way these concepts take shape. Furthermore, although interdisciplinarity is a goal worth aiming for, care should be taken to never let the goal justify the means. When approaches are taken from sociology, psychology or ethnohistory, the archaeologist should always employ diligence to make sure it fits the research strategy and realize he or she is using data and conclusions they are not necessarily an expert on. Disciplines and their theoretical

counterparts should not, as Insoll puts it, become a 'toolbox' out of which the scholar haphazardly picks what seems useful (Insoll 2007, 111). If the concepts are not carefully weighed, the researcher runs the risk of opening up their research to the use of concepts that do not sit well together, or even simply contradict one another, compromising the integrity of any conclusions.

#### **1.4 Conclusions**

Coming to an end to this chapter, it can be concluded that some relevant insights have been provided by looking at and comparing the work of scholars like Rappaport, Ingold, Hodder and Putnam.

First off, it seems Rappaport's approach to the establishment of a convention that makes heavy use of iconic reference is a promising way of investigating ritual tradition, as it aims at a very broad definition allowing it to be applied in any given society. The explanatory aspect of his theoretical foundation permits the scholar to find a form of 'common ground', the basic nature of ritualized behaviour and *why* it takes the forms that it does. Keeping in mind that it is a combination of public acceptance of social relations, a distinct level of invariance without excluding the possibility of adaptation and a powerful ability to structure and maintain order in the conceptualized environment, Rappaport's model of analysis is a good starting point for this thesis and confirms that ritual is a suitable subject of study if one wants to gain insight into a society's vision of the cosmos.

Coming to the second issue, that of the experience of actual ritual performances, it would serve the investigation well to keep in mind what Ingold argued to be the shared aspects of existence. Although we must always be aware of the variability in the way concepts are used, an attempt at coming to understanding how a tradition and its separate expressions are perceived and experienced is not doomed to fail from the start. As long as we keep the focus on the process instead of viewing each performance as an isolated incident, it will be possible to come to meaningful conclusions.

As a final point, it will be very important not to ignore the plea for an open mind when it comes to re-evaluating one's own concepts. As has been argued, even the most common sense interpretations can be wildly inappropriate when applied to another cultural setting, and this has to be kept in mind at every stage of the analysis.

In looking back at the subdivision of theoretical research questions made in the introduction to the chapter, the thesis can now move on in discussing the central question. The next chapters will do so in trying to apply the approach outlined above to the example of three carved limestone lintels recovered from the site of Yaxchilan, Mexico.

## **Chapter 2 - Placing the ritual in context**

This chapter will be dedicated at building a greater understanding of the societal context in which the depicted ritual took place. To do this, a short overview will be given of the site of Yaxchilan, the precise location of the carvings and the members of the court depicted in the images, before moving on to a descriptive stage of analysis of the series of lintels which will in chapter 3 be investigated in-depth.

### **The settlement**

Located in the present day Mexican state of Chiapas, the Classic Period starting from 200 AD saw the rise of what was to become one of the most important Maya city states in the region (fig 1). Located on the bank of the Usumacinta River now dividing the modern states of Mexico and Guatemala, the development of the settlement reached its full stride during the Late Classic in 681 AD (Garcia Moll 2004, 268; Miller and Martin 2004, 99). Besides a large expansion in architecture, this period of bloom lasting until 810 AD also produced a large number of carvings displaying both images and epigraphic texts. A notable motif among the corpus of these sculptural monuments is the display of individual rulers and the activities they engaged themselves with. As part of an intricate system of trade, political interaction including military campaigns and artisanal production networks, rulers of the polity were able to distinguish and profile their identity through the monumentalization of important events (Garcia Moll 2004, 268).



**Fig. 1 (drawing by author)**

### **Depicted individuals**

After a long period of difficulties involving threats both from outside as well as dissent from within, the settlement of Yaxchilan finally manifested itself as a powerful state with the ascension to the throne of Lord Itzamnaaj B'ahlam (Shield Jaguar) III (Garcia Moll 2004, 268). Judging from the commission of a great number of monuments promoting his rule, as well as the many successful military campaigns he led against rival states, the reign of Itzamnaaj seems to have revived Yaxchilan and led it to new heights (Miller and Martin 2004, 99, Martin and Grube 2000, 124). The reason for this opportunity is not clear beyond any doubt, although clues from the larger interstate political landscape in the Maya area seems to suggest that with the diminishing of some other large states a power vacuum arose, one which Shield



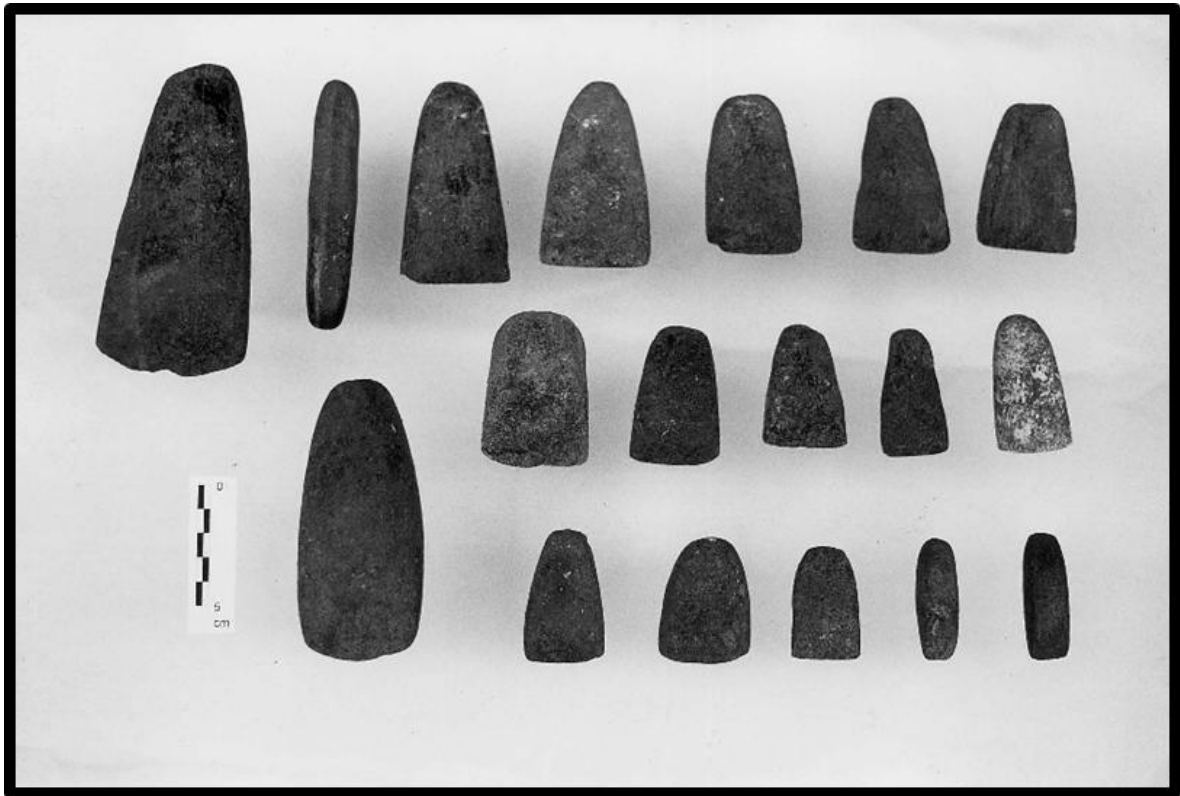
Jaguar may have used to full effect (Martin and Grube 2000, 123). Remarkable is the fact that at the time of his greatest expansion, Shield Jaguar was had well passed his eightieth year (Martin and Grube 2000, 124). Artisanal productions reached such levels of specialization due to his success, that a distinct style can nowadays be seen by archaeologists when it comes to the many low-relief carvings found on the site and prized by museums throughout the world. Even so, many things about his life remain quite enigmatic (the only exact dates related to his period at the court known to scholars are that of his throne ascension and that of his death in 749 AD, at which time his age had advanced well into his nineties (Garcia Moll 2004, 268).

Far from being a figure overshadowed by her husband, the consort-wife of Itzamnaaj B'ahlam named K'ab'al Xook developed herself into a prominent member of the court. The legacy of Lady Xook is clearly discernable from the period of her life. Not only did the detailed limestone carvings of her image survive as part of the settlement's architecture, later reliefs appear to even have been modeled after the conventions set by these images (Miller and Martin 2004, 101). Leaving her husband to rule seven more years before he too would pass, Lady Xook died in 742 AD (Miller and Martin 2004, 101).

### **Limestone lintels**

Limestone is a sedimentary rock with marine origins (composed of calcite, the most stable form of calcium carbonate). It is relatively soft and can come in a variety of textures in the Maya area, ranging from very coarse chippy material, to the dolomitic limestone found in the area of Yaxchilan, and even that with a lithographic texture which is abundant around Palenque.

Although not to the point of stone types like marble, limestone is capable of being worked to a level of fine detail with the use of the right tools. One such set, recovered in the site of Aguateca in Guatemala (fig 2) (Inomata 2001, 328), consists of no less than 18 differently shaped obsidian chisels, allowing the craftsman a wide range of methods for creating the characteristic low-relief images found throughout the Maya area.



**Fig. 2 (Inomata 2001, 328)**

Although subtle differences in carving style and hieroglyphic writing manners can be observed and have served as a source of information for spotting the ‘hand’ of individual craftsmen (see for example Carolyn Tate’s analysis (Tate 1992, 38-49)), verifying the identity of the creator(s) of these three lintels –let alone drawing definitive relevant conclusions from it- has remained highly problematic due to the lack of written documentation on the production process.

The craftsmanship of the specialists responsible for the creation of the stelas discussed in this thesis cannot be denied however when looking for example at the detailed patterns visible on the textiles (see fig. 3 for a close up). As can be demonstrated on a number of limestone examples found throughout the Maya region, the carvings were often painted in polychrome. Despite erosion, traces of pigment sometimes remain within the deeper recesses of the reliefs, and should

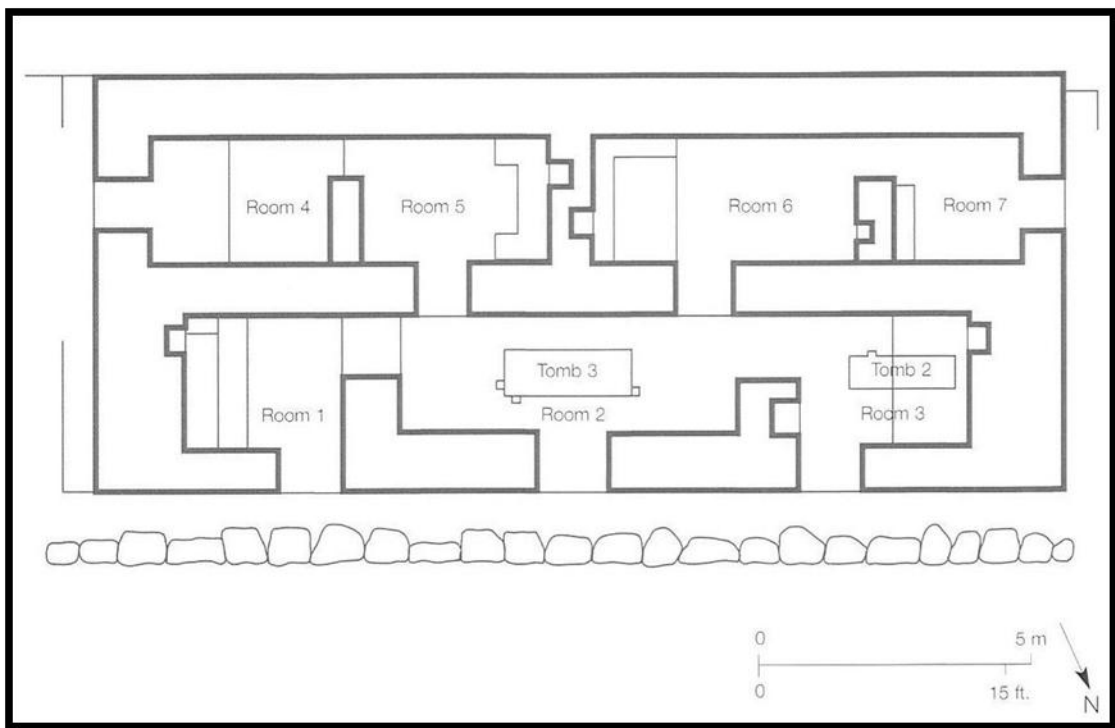
indicate that at the time of creation and initial display within the architectural setting of their ceremonial centers their physical appearance was quite distinct from the way these objects look at present. Not only would the experiential impact be different, it also cannot be excluded that with the loss of colour, part of the meaning has been obscured as colours played a large role within the cosmological structure of Maya cultures as it did in Mesoamerica in general (Miller and Martin 2004, 51).



**Fig. 3 (after Graham and Euw 1982, 3:54)**

The lintels presented in this thesis were all found in the context of what is known as structure 23, a building of which the tombs under the floors may well have been the final resting place of both Itzamnaaj B'ahlam and his consort-wife Lady Xook (Garcia Moll 2004, 268; Miller and Martin 2004, 100). Testimony to the importance of Lady Xook in Yaxchilan's society is the fact that the building is denoted as the '*yotot'*, or the 'house' of Lady K'ab'al Xook (Martin and Grube 2000, 125). As can be seen on the layout of the building (fig 4), the structure with an outside wall height of 2,59 meters (Tate 1992, 203) was divided into two vaults alongside each other in an east-

west orientation. The part of the building in which the lintels were found (rooms 1, 2 and 3 in the image) is the portion first accessed when entering the building (Garcia Moll 2004, 269). Although the lintels presented here were found in the context of interiors not likely to have been open to the general public, it has been suggested that ceremonies involving the physical proximity (and therefore visual presence) of the images may have been integrated into larger ritual performances extending into public locations (O'Neil 2011, 245).



**Fig. 4 (Garcia Moll 2004, 270)**

## Lintel 24

Brought from Mexico to the British Museum by diplomat and archaeologist Alfred Maudsley in 1882 where it currently still resides in exhibition, the lintel designated as number 24 has dimensions of 1.04 by 0.74 meters (Tate 1992, 203-204) (fig 5). Traces of blue paint in the background indicate that at one time the image was more colourful than it is in its present condition. On the left, it shows a male figure identified as Lord Itzamnaaj B'ahlam, who can be seen to hold a flaming torch over the sitting female figure on the right. The female, his consort Lady Xook, is shown to draw a piece of string studded with either thorns or shards of obsidian through a hole in her tongue, sitting behind a bowl containing pieces of paper (Martin and Grube 2000, 125). As the accompanying text explains (translation will be given shortly), the scene is a depiction of the first part of a ritual performance involving the sacrificial burning of a blood offering. The Lord, presiding over the scene, watches as Lady Xook collects the blood drawn from her tongue in the bowl. As the Long Count date on the lintel states, the performance took place on the date of 9.13.17.15.12 5 Eb 15 Mak, which corresponds to 24 October 709 AD. The hieroglyphic text on the carving has been largely successfully translated and appears in the Peabody database as follows ([www.peabody.harvard.edu](http://www.peabody.harvard.edu)):

**ti- 5- EB 15- ma-MAK-U-BAAH-hi ti-CH'AJB-li ti-K'AHK'-la-ju-lu U-CH'AJB-4- WINIKHAAB-AJAW ?- BAHLAM-U-cha-CHAN-nu a- ?- ki K'UH- [ PA ' ] CHAN-AJAW-wa**

"On 5 Eb 15 Mak it is his image in penance with the fiery spear. It is the penance of the four k'atun lord, Shield Jaguar III, captor of Aj-?, holy lord of pa'chan."

**U-BAAH-ti-CH'AJB-li IX-AK'IN?-na-XOOK?-ki IX-k'a[ba]-la-XOOK?-ki IX-KAL-TE'**

"It is her image in penance, Lady Ak'in? Xook, Lady K'abal Xook, Lady Kaloomte'."

**T'AB?-yi yu-lu- ? MO'-CHAHK-ki? a- ?- la**

"Is elevated? the carving? of Mo' Chahk."

It is interesting to note the relation between the lintels and other archaeological remains found in their immediate vicinity. The discovery of 146 prismatic blades made of obsidian found under the stucco floor of room 1 of structure 23 seems to be a deposit linked to the ritual practice exhibited by Lady Xook on lintel 24, namely the piercing of the tongue using precisely such an instrument (Garcia Moll 2004, 269).

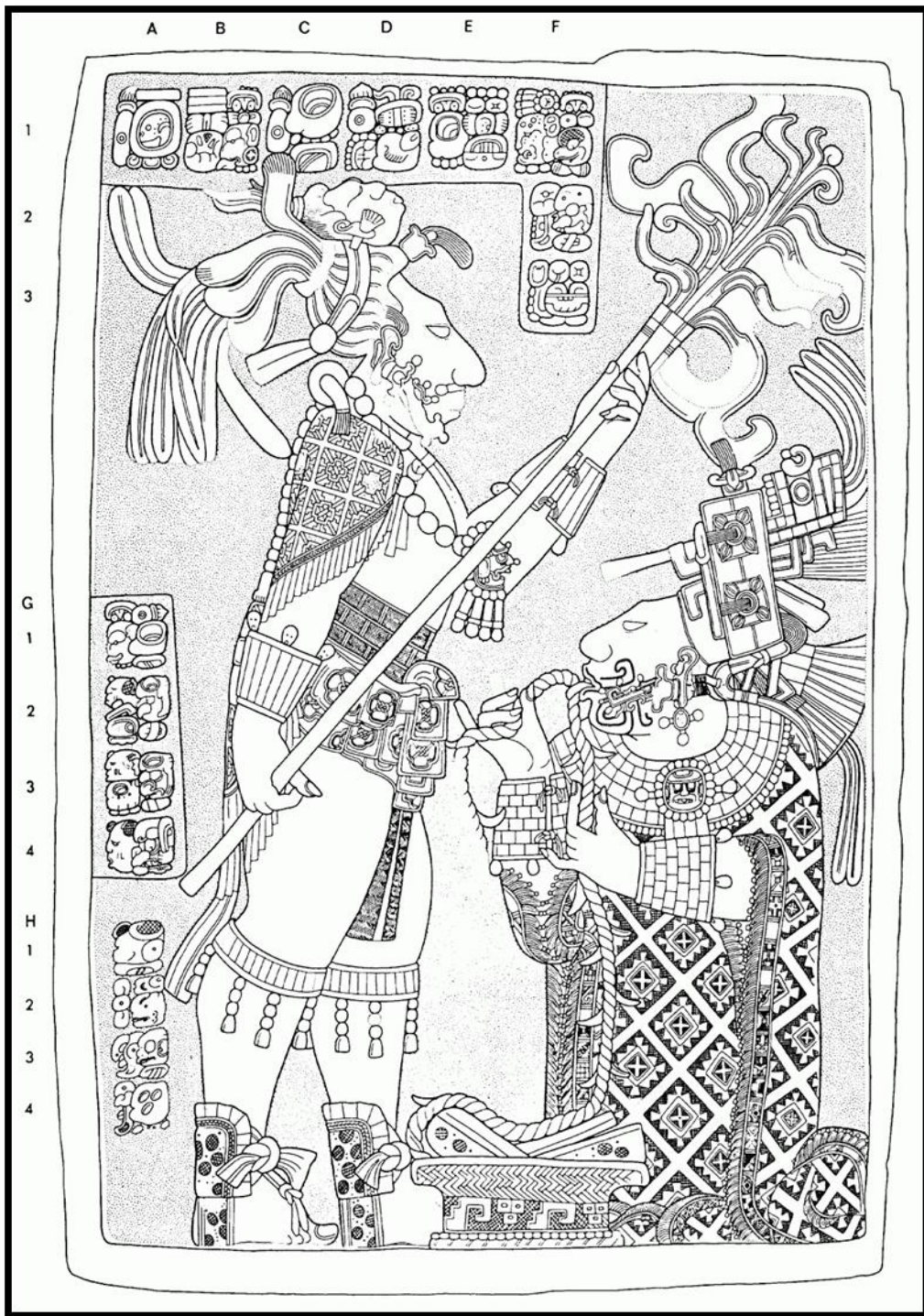


Fig. 5 (Graham and Euw 1982, 3:53)



## Lintel 25

Like its counterpart lintel 24, 25 (fig. 6) was removed from its place in structure 23 and brought to London where it is now on permanent display. Showing a scene that follows chronologically from the one depicted on lintel 24, it again shows Lady Xook, this time not accompanied by Lord Itzamnaaj B'ahlam III. Instead, on the right is depicted a large spiritual entity emerging out of smoke rising from the bowl containing the blood-soaked paper introduced in the previous scene. Holding both the instrument used in the previous scene to perforate her tongue, as well as a skull in her other hand, Lady Xook looks up at the apparition. Both the figure's dress, which has been interpreted as related to Teotihuacan, as well as the fact that he is holding a spear and shield, give him a militaristic appearance. Some scholars have interpreted the figure as a representation of Itzamnaaj B'ahlam as a defender of the state (Martin and Grube 2000, 125) although the view that it is an ancestor which appears to Lady Xook is a distinct possibility. The translation of the hieroglyphics, again taken from the Peabody database ([www.peabody.harvard.edu](http://www.peabody.harvard.edu)), is given as this:

**5- IMIX- 4- ma-MAK U-TZAK-wa-U-K'AWIIL-wi-la-li U-to-k'a-PAKAL AJ-K'AHK'-o-CHAHK-ki U-K'UH-ju-lu-tza-ku 4- WINIKHAAB-AJAW ?-BAHLAM U-cha-CHAN-nu-AJ- ?- ki K'UH- ?- AJAW-ba-ka-ba**

"On 5 Imix 4 Mak he conjured the (lightning-)power of the flints and shields of the god Aj K'ahk' O' Chahk. It is the god-spear-conjuring of the four katun lord, Shield Jaguar III, the master of Aj-?, the holy lord of ?, the baahkab."

**U-BAAH[AAN]-li-IX-OHL-la wi- ?- TE'-NAAH ch'a-ho-ma IX-k'a-ba-la-XOOK-ki U-yo-OOK-TE'-le TAHN-HA'-[PA']CHAN-na**

"She is the likeness of Lady Yohl, the ch'ahoom of Wite'naah, Lady K'abal Xook. She is the pillar before the waters at pa'chan."

**U-TZ'AK-ka-AJ mi- 7- WINIK-ya 2- HAAB-ya 2- WINIKHAAB-ya TZAK-ji-ya K'AWIIL-la TAHN-na-HA'- [ PA' ] CHAN i-u-ti 3- IMIX 14- IK'-SIHOOM ? T'AB ? -yi yu- ?[ lu ]- li yo-OTOOT-ti ?- IXIK-K'UH IX-AK'IN ?- XOOK-ki IX-**



**k'a[ba]-la-XOOK-ki IX-KAL-TE' yo-OHL-la TAHN-na-li TAHN-na-HA'- [ PA '  
] CHAN U-KAB-CH'EN U-cha-CHAN-nu AJ- ?- ki ?- BAHLAM K'UH- [ PA' ]  
CHAN-AJAW-wa**

"It counts 0 days, 7 winals, 2 tuns and 2 katuns since k'awiil was conjured before the waters at pa'chan, and then it happened 3 Imix 14 Ch'en. Is elevated, the carving of the house of the holy woman, of Lady Ak'in? Xook, of Lady K'abal Xook, of the lady kaloomte', at the heart of, at the front of the waters of pa'chan. It is the land and well of the master of Aj-?, Shield Jaguar III, holy lord of pa'chan."

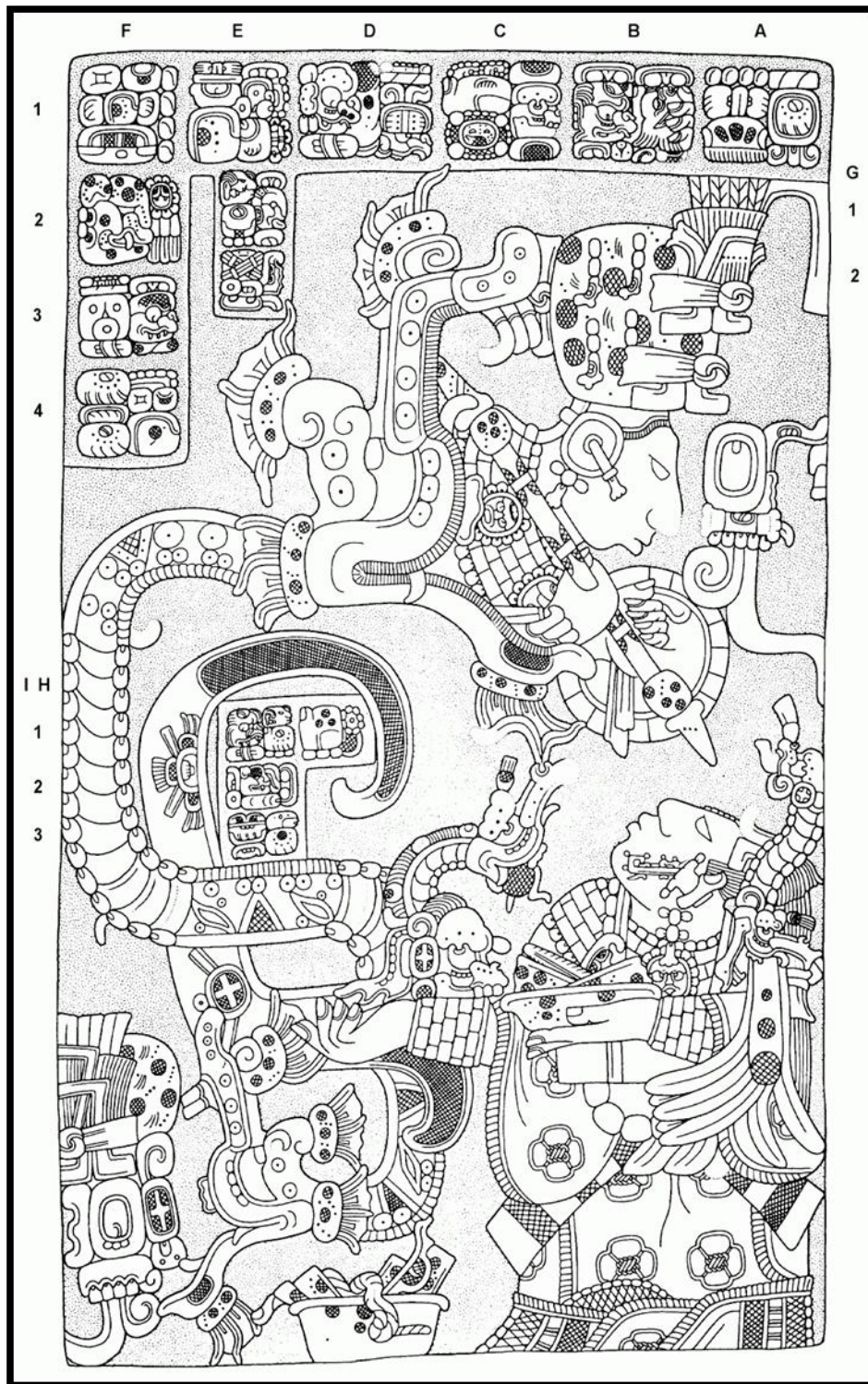


Fig. 6 (Graham and Ew 1982, 355)

## Lintel 26

Discovered later than the other two lintels in the series, lintel 26 (fig. 7) was found during excavations led by Teoberto Maler in the early 20th century (Tate 1992, 204). At the time of discovery, the carving had already been broken in two parts, with the upper half in good condition but the lower half showing signs of severe erosion. Unfortunately, some of the glyph blocks have deteriorated significantly further since its excavation, having adverse effects on the translation of the text and the interpretation of the scene (Tate 1992, 205).

Like lintel 24, this carving shows the royal pair consisting of Itzamnaaj B'ahlam and his consort Lady K'ab'al Xook. This time, the lord is wearing the traditional Mesoamerican cotton armour, holding an obsidian blade in his right hand with his left extended towards Lady Xook. The lady appears to be holding Itzamnaaj's shield as well as his helmet in the form of a jaguar head, ready to hand them to him as he prepares himself, seemingly for war (Martin and Grube 2000, 125). As mentioned, the damage to the date glyphs problematize figuring out what year and date this scene is a reference to, as the surviving date refers to the carving of the lintel itself.

The decipherment of the legible portions of the glyphic text yield the following information ([www.peabody.harvard.edu](http://www.peabody.harvard.edu)):

**U-BAAH-ji ti-[jo]JOY?-ye-la ti-xi-ki-ba-le ?- na 7- CHAPAHT-TZIKIIN-K'INICH[AJAW]-wa 4- WINIKHAAB-AJAW-wa U-CHAN-nu-AJ- ? ?- BAHLAM K'UH- [ PA' ] CHAN-AJAW-wa**

"It is his image in accession? with the ? as the god Huk Chapaht Tzikiin K'inich Ajaw, the four katun lord, the master of Aj ?, Shield Jaguar III, holy lord of pa'chan."

**ti- 12- EB CHUM-K'AN[JAL]-wa T'AB?-yi yu-?[lu] K'AWIIL-CHAHK AJ-SAK-o?-ka**

"On 12 Eb 0 Pop, it is elevated, the carving of K'awiil Chahk of Sak Ook."

?- **K'IN-HAAB** \*9- \*PIK 14- \*WINIKHAAB ?-\* HAAB 12/13- WINIK ?- \*K'IN  
?-? NAAH-TI'-hu-na 6-? 8- HUL-li-ya U- 4- K'AL-ja- ? ma ?- U-[ch'o-  
ko]K'ABA' 20-10 13?- YAX-K'IN-ni OCH-K'AHK' ?-? U-K'ABA' yo-to-ti ba?-  
ILA?-ni ? 3- AK'IN ? ? ? ?- IXIK U-KAB-U-CH'EN ?-BAHLAM K'UH- [ PA' ]  
CHAN-AJAW

"It is the k'in time of the year?, 9 baktuns, 14 katuns, ? tuns, ? winals and ? k'ins. It is  
? (G6), 6th day of ?, 8th day of the moon's arrival, the 4th jaguar-god moon, there is  
no name for this 30-day moon. It is 13? Yaxk'in. Fire enters into ?, which is the  
name of the house of ... ?-Lady. It is the land and well of Shield Jaguar III, holy  
pa'chan lord.





Fig. 7 (Graham and Euw 1982, 3:57)

Due to the relatively fragmentary nature of the cultural context around lintel number 26, it will largely be the previous two in the series of three that will be subject to in-depth analysis. Nevertheless, as the lintel is undeniably tied to the other two both in terms of its image content as well as its location in physical proximity to the other two, it would be wrong not to at least attempt to investigate the ritual connections.

It is interesting to take a look at the order in which the three lintels appear; the fact that the first two are standing in clear chronological relation to each other (the offering of blood compared to the subsequent vision emanating from the smoke it creates) might lead us to believe that the third scene follows this rule, and is not unrelated at all. If this scene is indeed part of the performance, it would suggest that this ritual carried military connotations. This interpretation is based on very little evidence however, as the placement of the lintels does not necessarily form a single narrative. Instead, it is not even clear how the third lintel relates to the first two temporally, they may be years removed. For this reason, it would be best to be careful in overanalyzing how lintel 26 relates to the other two, as the only thing known for certain is that they all revolve around the same protagonists.

## Chapter 3 - Analyzing the ritual

### Introduction

With the theoretical approach clearly laid out, and the contextual setting of the ritual to be studied in mind, this chapter will move on to the actual analysis of the ritual content displayed in the series of lintels from structure 23 in Yaxchilan.

Shortly summarizing what the last chapter has established, the ritual seems to be performed by a member of the royal dynasty of Yaxchilan, in this case clearly named as Lady Xook. The performance consists of the drawing of blood from the body of the performer by means of incising the tongue and drawing a barbed wire through it. The blood being spilt is collected in a shallow bowl already containing pieces of paper. The total is afterwards burnt, apparently yielding the performer a vision of an ancestor or divinity rising from the smoke in the form of a vision serpent.

The canonical aspects as being part of a longer tradition are clearly demonstrated in the image this way, as communication is sought with predecessors from the same ritual tradition. The significance of this is to demonstrate consistency with the practices of the ones performing the ritual during earlier times, stressing tradition and invariance. Added to this, the ritual seems to be a means of reinforcing and accentuating social structuring through the notion of a holy duty of the rulers of society, something that will be discussed further shortly.

Rappaport's compound notion of the Holy seems from the available information to apply quite well to this performance, although as has been previously mentioned, one is unfortunately unable to inquire about the specific experiences of the performing ritual specialists as well as cooperators and spectators. In this way, further investigation from Rappaport's proposed point of view will have to be conducted to properly judge how applicable it is to examples of visual culture like the Yaxchilan carvings.

### 3.1 - Public acceptance

To start off on this task, a closer look will be taken at the part of Rappaport's publication devoted to an examination of the referential aspect of ritual performance. This will allow for a better understanding of how it influences both prerequisite demands to successful participation, as well as the effects of the ritual. As Rappaport continues his line of reasoning explained in the first chapter of this thesis, he further elaborates on the way indices form a crucial aspect of ritual. Indexical references are used not only to state, but also to *demonstrate* (Rappaport 1999, 55). In this way, ritual relies heavily on indices that are particularly resistant to falsehood.

When contemplating the ritual depicted on the Yaxchilan lintels, it is especially the notion of a public act of acceptance (Rappaport 1999, 120) which clearly has some direct and interesting links to the Classic Maya ritual here discussed. The fact alone that the ritual was after its performance displayed as part of the architecture of the settlement itself goes to indicate the social significance of performing this sacrifice.

In a society displaying inseparable connection between political power and devotion to divinity, Rappaport's argument about the relationship between belief and acceptance is of great relevance. To a great extent differing from a contemporary European society in which bureaucracy provides a level of stability, Classic Maya culture of a polity like Yaxchilan relied heavily on the divine characteristics of its rulers. The factor of *accepting* the validity of rituals like the ones performed on the lintels in question was likely to be paramount for the survival of the social organization. In this respect, Rappaport provided an interesting point of view when writing "*insincerity does not nullify acceptance*" (Rappaport 1999, 121), meaning that the act of publicly participating in the ritual, or even recognizing its validity while not having been present during the event -regardless of inward belief- will still allow the ritual to be successful and therefore allow the larger system of tradition, convention and hierarchy to remain on its feet.



As one of the main criteria for judging the moral value of performance, strong emphasis is placed on the identity of the individual performing the ritual. If the same ritual would have been performed by a random member of society, the performance would logically speaking have been without meaning. A proper authority under proper circumstances (Rappaport 1999, 124) is required to adhere to convention, making a member of the royal dynasty in this case eligible to carry out the sacrifice and receive meaningful information from the vision. Viewed in the larger societal context it is clear that several obligations are established with each and every performance of the sacrifice. Firstly, it is established that the performer holds a privileged role in the community, since they form a medium between the community and the divine beings it is dependent on. The fact that this role is accepted is indicated by the very continued existence of this convention, and furthermore, the relative consistency in the functioning of society itself. Secondly, the obligation of the dynastic rulers towards all members of the community is established, for without the mediation and proper paying of respect to divinities and ancestors, society would cease to function. Thirdly, the obligation of the entire community to these divinities is stressed, since the success of the ritual is indicated by a meeting with them in order to receive council and pay respect and tribute.

Rappaport's justified emphasis on the importance of a notion of morality (Rappaport 1999, 132-134) is quite applicable to all of these aspects of obligation, as it is clear the performers have a prescribed concept of what is supposed to be done and how to do it right. This holds up regardless of whether or not subsequent acts will honour the obligations being made during performance and, as has been discussed above, whether or not there is full sincerity and personal conviction to be found in the ritual act.

Reflecting on this notion, it can be said that in the case of lintels 24 and 25 his analysis seems to fit rather accurately, demonstrating the fundamental ritual concepts in his work like acceptance, morality and obligation to be valid and useful for the analysis of any specific ritual, regardless of context. Furthermore, the obstacle of using this method of analysis on examples of visual culture instead of anthropological data has so far not seemed to make the task impossible.

### 3.2 - The substantiation of reference

Rappaport moves on in writing a chapter dealing with ways in which ritual substantiates that which it signifies. The chapter aims to illuminate the relationship between speech and act, as well as what the cumulative of the two can say about the conventional nature of ritual (Rappaport 1999, 139-169).

At the start of his chapter, Rappaport poses the question of why an expensive aspect of ritual, the use of physical objects and substances, has not long since the origin of its performance been completely substituted by the use of words (Rappaport 1999, 139-140). Although of course Rappaport's arguments about objects being able to communicate ideas in ways that words could not are perfectly valid, it would seem that there is another side to it not explicitly discussed in the chapter.

It is, for example, an important point Rappaport raises that words are particularly suited to making a reference to the past (Rappaport 1999, 152), possibly -and in practice indeed commonly- to a mythical episode in history. It is in this argument it seems that the tremendous significance Rappaport ascribes to the development of language as a foundation of ritual and humanity itself is most clearly justified.

In order to incorporate this aspect into the analysis, it is necessary to take a closer look at the actual wording used in the inscriptions accompanying the images on the lintels. It is for example very interesting to note the verbs that have been translated on the three different reliefs. As can be seen, even though they were found in the same architectural context and depicting the same historical individuals, the words used to describe the rituals being performed are each different. As it is already known about lintel 26 that it marks the throne accession of Itzamnaaj B'ahlam, it makes sense that it is exactly this that is explicitly stated on the carving. However, when looking at the epigraphic text on lintel number 24, it is the glyphic expression CH'AJB, referring to being in penance, which appears both in respect to the Lord

and his Lady. The connotations this carries for the ritual it describes, that it is performed for the purpose of being forgiven, result in quite a different view of the ritual than when only lintel 25 would be considered, whose glyphic expression states it is a practice of conjuring. When the order the images appear in is once again considered, it becomes clear that the apparition of the spiritual being is one that occurs within the context of a request for forgiveness either on the part of the rulers or the members of society they represent in this ritual.

This is a point which is important to keep in mind during the next subchapter, which will deal in-depth with the role of rulers as mediators between society and divinities.

Rappaport's consideration of the material aspects of a ritual involving communication between the living and the spiritual (Rappaport 1999, 142) quickly demonstrates that both functions it can have seem to apply to the ritual commemorated in the Yaxchilan lintels. On the one hand, it is clear that one of the major goals of the performance is to achieve a form of communion between Lady Xook and the ancestral being depicted in the form of a Vision Serpent. On the other, the fact that it is the actual blood of the Lady that is being drawn and burnt in the context of being in penance, indicates that this communion would not come about of its own accord: it needs a sacrifice to allow the divinity to participate.

A closer look can be taken at the different physical objects and substances involved here. Firstly, the image clearly depicts a length of cordage infixed with sharp objects possibly being thorns or slivers of obsidian. Besides being the actual instrument used to obtain the blood, it could be argued that the particular method it employs would contribute to the potency of the resulting vision through inducing an amount of pain.

Secondly, the images on both lintels 24 and 25 show the actual bowl containing the paper used to light the offering on fire. The type of paper used is likely to be *amate* made from the bark of species of tree belonging to the *Ficus* genus, and has throughout Mesoamerica long been in use and is in itself not at all without a strong ritual significance. It is however the third factor - the blood being offered - which might for this assignment be the one best suited to closer examination in light of Rappaport's notions.

Although not quite the same as a relic being handled or a cathedral in which a ritual is being performed, the sacred aspect of Classic Maya royal blood is no less important in this example. For one thing, it provides a notion of proper performance versus unconventional and therefore meaningless performance, since not just any member could perform the ritual. They would, quite simply, lack the sacredness required. Being part of a dynasty of rulers succeeding each other, the endurance of these sacred properties is made very tangible and -per definition- canonical. One set of physical objects not depicted in the images on the lintels, but quite obviously closely linked to their performance are the limestone lintels themselves. The context in which they have been found, being part of the actual architectural complex of the settlement of Yaxchilan, displays a two-fold role. First of all, as Rappaport explained (Rappaport 1999, 144-145), this position canonifies the performance as it serves as a monument that is literally infixed in a cultural tradition. Secondly, as the lintels explicitly identify depicted characters like Lady Xook and Itzamnaaj B'ahlam, it can be interpreted as being quite a fitting example of words being the self-referential counterpart to the canonicity of act and object. In this way, the commemoration of the performance by carving it into stone is both very much a statement (this person hereby wishes it to be known that on that date, he or she made a public act of acceptance) as well as a chance for every viewer of the lintels to show acceptance of the message.

As can be concluded from this, both materials and utterances come together to provide substance to the abstract devotional liturgy. As the physical objects used as well as the offering itself carry deep meaning that would be hard to substantiate with only words, it is understandable how the investment in these materials was necessary for the ritual to meet the moral criteria of the society it stabilized.

### **3.3 - Measuring and marking time**

In the sixth chapter of Rappaport's 1999 publication he explores in more detail one of the most interesting aspects of his work: the social experience of time (Rappaport 1999, 169-216). As an archaeologist (or anthropologist for that matter), scholars

invariably have to deal with ways in which a society deals with the concept of temporality. Although it would be quite easy to take for granted a universal experience of the progression of time, this subchapter will keep in mind the conceptual relativism discussed in Chapter 1 and look at differences in the way a four-dimensional environment is envisioned and subsequently expressed through ritual performance.

It may for the benefit of this discussion be interesting to shortly compare Rappaport's work with that of the 20th century Russian philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin, who (although applying it to the field of artistic literary theory (Bakhtin 1981, 84-85)) wrote extensively about the ways in which time and space were visualized and documented in writing. His concept of the 'chronotope' does, upon closer inspection, hold value for the analysis of much more than modern literature alone. In fact, through its allowance for variation (Bemon *et al.* 2010, 5-6) the concept of the chronotope, in its full diversity of varying forms and shapes, can potentially apply to any culture in any time or geological region. Since narratives are to be found in all of these cultures, in fact being made inevitable by the development of language and the construction of conventions (Rappaport 1999, 4-5), every community must have its notions about how the four-dimensional environment it inhabits is to be given shape in verbal communication, stories, images and ritual performance.

As noted by Rappaport however: "*temporal experience itself may not be constant or uniform*" (Rappaport 1999, 176). This naturally has great implications for any study of a society. When investigating the Western European experience of time, it would appear to be a rather linear thing, or, as described by Eriksen: "*a line with an arrow at the end, where a moving point called the "present" separates the past from the future*" (Eriksen 2001, 241-242). Linguistically, the variations in these chronotopes are clearly observable as some languages for example do not make use of the future tense when conjugating verbs (Eriksen 2001, 242). Relating this to the Classic Maya ritual under the magnifying glass, it can be observed that in this case also the cognitive conceptualization of time differs greatly from a simple linear view. Although the Classic Maya Long Count has often been pointed out as evidence that, at least on an overarching scale, the Maya concept of time is a linear one, it

would seem that the situation is much more complicated.

One of the central factors in Classic Maya Society, and indeed in most of the Mesoamerican world, is the planting and harvesting of maize (Miller and Martin 2004, 52). As the main component of the inhabitants' diet, the dependence on successful crops was high. This omnipresent notion was inextricably interwoven in the socio-political situation of polities like Yaxchilan, as the rulers were quite explicitly identified with the maize divinity. As such, the successful performance of rituals by members of the royal dynasty were supposed to ensure a proper functioning of the maize cycle. The ideal scenario for the court among the Classic Maya seems in this way to have been a ruler and cosmos which are in unified harmony (Miller and Martin 2004, 51)

To demonstrate just how crucial this conflation of ruler and divinity was, it is necessary to shortly demonstrate the cult that formed around the Maize deity. Strongly connected to the Maya origin story as known from sources like the 16th century K'iche document known as the Popol Vuh (Anonymous 2005 (1701)), the maize god served as the father of principle characters like the Hero Twins defeating the lords of Xibalba (Miller and Martin 2004, 56). One of the most common depictions found on ceramics, the life, death and subsequent rebirth of the maize deity serves as a constant metaphor for the cycle of life as well as community (fig 8). Often shown wearing precious costumes with many jade ornaments, it becomes clear from funerary deposits that there was a strong connection between this character and deceased lords. Often, ceramic plates decorated with maize imagery were perforated with a number of holes and deposited upside down on the head of the ruler being buried in his tomb, a reference to the movement of the spirit and its path towards rebirth (Miller and Martin 2004, 57). Likewise, the wearing of entire jade costumes together with the well-known jade masks (fig 9) by dead rulers upon their interment is a clear message that the lord was considered to perform the role of the maize god in his eternal cycle of death and re-emergence.



Fig. 8 (Miller and Martin 2004, 73)



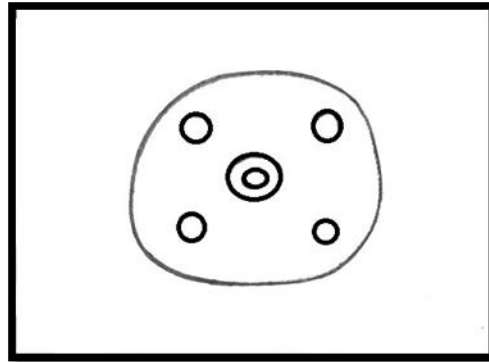


**Fig. 9 (Miller and Martin 2004, 69)**

This aspect does not fully explore the experience of time and how it was seen on an individual level however, and it is in this respect that Rappaport's work sheds light on the cognitive construction of the environment's temporal dimension. In Maya cosmology, the world was typically divided into three planes: the human-occupied earth; the underworld strongly connected to caves, sinkholes and the ubiquitous ball courts found in urban centers; and the sky inhabited by some of the most important Maya deities like Itzamna and the Sun (Miller and Martin 2004, 51). On a horizontal level, the world gets divided according to the four directions. A visual depiction often found in Classic iconography, the epigraphic logogram 'BIH' meaning road, can safely be regarded as the cosmological four corners of the world in their relation to its central axis (fig 10) (Freidel *et al.* 2001, 130).



As ethnographic analogies have shown, this visualization of the world which imposes a clear structure on it is still in heavy use among present day Maya communities where ritual specialists recreate it to convey a sacred value to places of performance (Freidel *et al.* 2001, 128-129).



**Fig. 10 (drawing by author)**

Quite like this spatial visualization of the cosmos, time as well was ordered in well-arranged segments. Although natural cycles provide society with a rough sense of cyclicity and order, the use of the impressive Mesoamerican calendar made this process exact and accurate enough to be used on a large scale for agriculture, divination and, as shown on the lintels, ritual performances like offerings. As is the case for many Classic Maya monuments, the temporal aspect is demonstrated to be of high importance by the inclusion of a Long Count date accompanying the image. In the same way that Maya rituals -ranging from royal offerings to the clearing of a field for the planting of crops- use cosmograms to recreate the world (and moreover - its creation), so does the use of the calendar in ritual reach back to the origins of the cosmos each time it is performed. In this way it can be said that the ritual tradition truly is a process of cognitively shaping and continuously reaffirming the order of the world, something that according to understanding of sources like the Popol Vuh is something of a profound cyclical nature, despite the seeming rectiliniarity of the Long Count.

As Rappaport points out, the most prominent socially constructed marking of time is the recurring performance of ritual (Rappaport 1999, 178). He then goes on to describe the different manners in which this happens, but focuses largely on contrasting cases found in different societies (time-dependent regulation in the form of calendric convention versus environmental variable-dependent forms). It would seem from the arguments elaborated upon above however, that in one and the same liturgical order composites of these forms are to be found. In this case, an

overarching linear view of the passing of time encompasses the more tangible smaller cycles dictated by ecological variables.

As hinted at earlier, it is especially in respect to the keeping of time that ethnography can be a valuable source of information to complement what epigraphers and archaeologists have gained by examining the ancient remains of Maya settlements. As has been established by researchers like Freidel, Schele and Parker mentioned earlier, there is a clear link between traditions related to temporality among present-day Maya communities. Since Maya languages strongly related to the Classic Maya language have continuously been spoken in the area without interruption, its expressions, terms and concepts can be linked and used to enhance insights into the Pre-Columbian past. In investigating the research already performed, it is the work done by Barbara Tedlock that stands out as a thorough examination of the presence of conventions and ritual specialists in the anthropological present. Her 1982 publication "Time and the Highland Maya" especially sheds light on the way the use of the Mesoamerican calendar has remained in use in the region and is still important when it comes to planning agricultural activities as well as practicing divination (Tedlock 1982, 93). The insights gained from her fieldwork among indigenous communities has been invaluable in adjusting ideas about temporality among the Maya, especially given the scarcity of information available to early scholars engaged in the field (Tedlock 1982, 94). As she found, a lot of effort goes into recruiting and training specialists like the so-called 'daykeepers' responsible for providing the local community with an impressive range of ceremonies including but not limited to curing the ill, performing weddings, blessing harvests and looking after the spirits of the deceased (Tedlock 1982, 71). It is therefore clear that the social aspects of time, including the life cycle of human members of society, planting and harvesting, as well as the proper time for all the ceremonies mentioned above, pervade daily life to the finest detail. Furthermore, far from being a cultural system of temporal experience that has vanished with time, it is something that holds a nuanced but strong and tangible relation with practices still found today.

What becomes clear from this diachronically is that ritual performance does not only refer back to earlier performances, it has the ability to reach forward through time, creating a strong sense of continuity to the participants of any given ritual (this ritual will now be performed as the ancestors did before, and the heirs will do long from now). It is clear how Ingold's view of cultural phenomena as ongoing processes instead of isolated occurrences comes into play here, as it is the invariability and convention that, according to Rappaport, cause the form ritual tradition takes. It is important to understand that whether or not the ritual develops in a way that changes its form (or, due to drastic circumstances, disappears entirely) does not change its ability to provide order to its performers in this way.

Moving on with his elaboration on the temporal effects of liturgical orders and their individual performances, Rappaport focuses on the altered awareness of participants and the seeming contradictions liturgy displays in its ordering of time.

When analyzing Rappaport's arguments on the transformation of social time towards a smaller scale, it seems that the organic rhythm ritual achieves (Rappaport 1999, 224) is solely this way in the respect of a unified body composed of the participants, not necessarily having an impact on the temporal scale being brought to the same frequency as things like breath and heartbeat. It could therefore be said that -somewhat in contrast to the shift to what he terms cosmic time- this shift to so-called organic time is rather metaphoric instead of literal, something Rappaport maybe implies, but never states explicitly in his line of reasoning. It should be noted that Rappaport chose rituals involving dance or other performances involving pronounced rhythmic components to illustrate this part of his chapter, and to these rituals (the constant beating of a drum; repetitious utterance and reply between specialist and participant; or even the sounding of church bells) this synchronization of social time with organic time may be -or appear to be- obvious and self-demonstrative. For other examples such as the making of an offering it would seem that a shared organic rhythm may not necessarily be perceived by participants, or can even be said to be as intrinsic as the shift towards a cosmic tempo, which by arguments elaborated upon by Rappaport in his earlier chapters must by definition of the ritual be a part of it.

It may therefore be the case that Rappaport somewhat overanalyzes this particular part of his theory by focusing too much on a universal shift to organic time during ritual performance in its general definition (Rappaport 1999, 225-226), even though the argument he makes about social bonding being a crucial part of ritual activity seems well-substantiated enough to stand on its own legs. Rappaport's shift from social time to the cosmic timeframe, in itself, can therefore be demonstrated without any issue (Rappaport 1999, 224-225). However, when looking at Rappaport's simultaneous notion of a shift towards the organic tempo, the small-scale repetitions of breath, heartbeat, anything internal to an individual organism, it instantly becomes quite a lot more difficult to see it in process when looking at this Maya ritual. Unfortunately, the available sources are lacking in determining the exact frequency of the performance of the sacrifice, and it is therefore difficult to say what scale of rhythm we are dealing with (Rappaport 1999, 225-226). This does not mean that the ritual cannot create a sense of unification, or that the 'time out of time' concept no longer applies. Its strength in doing so is not confined to all participants becoming subject to a shared mood, emotion or rapid rhythmic motion, but rather lies in the transition from analogue to digital, a *marked* interval in time for an *affirmed* state of acceptance. The explicit mention of Long Count dates to denote the ritual was performed on its proper point in time seems to corroborate this view quite strongly. In this way, Rappaport's method of analysis seems to apply fully to this case, as he emphasizes the difference between the mundane progression of time and the liturgically governed ritual time as the contrast between analogue versus digital (Rappaport 1999, 217).

### **3.4 - Experiencing the ritual**

Coming to the purely experiential hurdle anticipated in advance, it is here that we run into some significant problems. As the temporal awareness, among other aspects of the performance, deals heavily with experiences shared between participants of the ritual, there is a huge lack of information when all there is to go on are a number of carvings. In a larger study, ethnographic data collected from present day Maya

communities would be a viable option of gaining insight, but for now there is no informant to ask for clarification and, more significantly, no way of participating personally to experience the ways in which the ritual neurophysically alters perception and states of connectedness.

Based on the information that *is* available, it would not be unreasonable to state that the ritual provided a heightened awareness of the significance of time during its performance (Rappaport 1999, 217). The large role of time measuring in the properness of the ritual and what it means for the signifying aspect have, after all, been elaborated upon previously. Likewise, the images give great plausibility towards the notion of a tremendous amount of sensory input, the combined stimuli of the ritual including the smoke of the offering undoubtedly having an effect on the nervous system and therefore the awareness of participants. Exactly what these effects were, however, is not easy to ascertain for reasons outlined above. However, the information we have on the ritual does, of course, not exclude additional activities like food- sleep- or sensory deprivation; dancing as well as the consuming of hallucinogens that may just not have been depicted (Miller and Martin 2004, 100). Coming back to temporality however, it is Rappaport's proposed notion of the 'eternal', that could shed some light on how the ritual was perceived.

It is in this very aspect of unchangeableness that Rappaport once again finds a paradoxical aspect of ritual order. Just as, like he states in one of his earlier publications, the essence of adaptation is to change circumstances in order to keep them consistent (Rappaport 1971, 24), so too does ritual at the very same time create a supposedly unending cycle of repetition and oscillation as well as a notion of seamless progression making possible a sense of the eternal, something that does not come or go like a series of successions would imply (Rappaport 1999, 231). The fact that this does not seem to cause any disharmony in a society's worldview or functioning conventional order is demonstrated by examples such as the polity of Yaxchilan, in which these temporal considerations were made to work through calendric ingenuity as well as a state of mind resulting from an active ritual aspect in everyday life.

As an interesting side-note, Rappaport's point about eternity being driven from the Western worldview in favor of innumerability is a relevant one, further stressing the importance of being careful in attributing meaning to the conceptual framework found in other societies (Rappaport 1999, 235). It seems unavoidable that the two notions have always been in interaction with each other from the moment man began to count the days however, and Classic Maya ritual specialists -being highly occupied with mathematical analysis on a high level- must surely have been dealing with this as well.

Although like predicted, the experiential side of the convention proves problematic, Rappaport introduces and explains a concept that will allow scholars to make tangible this elusive aspect of ritual performance: the *numinous* or sensation of what is considered holy. He starts off by defining the part in which he believes the numinous quality to be imbued (Rappaport 1999, 371). In what is a somewhat counter-intuitive statement, he argues that in the system of Christianity, it is not Christ himself who is sacred, but rather the means of communicating it that are.

Even so, considering earlier notions introduced Rappaport seems to be correct in this distinction, as it is the canonical postulates that give a central figure of divinity or political ruler its position. It does become clear what Rappaport means by the numinous as something overwhelmingly more powerful that is both allowed to dominate and to support (Rappaport 1999, 178).

Rappaport's example of the Native American vision quests as a powerful indicator of the numinous is to some extent reminiscent of the Maya offering ritual performed and documented in Yaxchilan. It is to Rappaport's credit that he acknowledges and analyzes the potency of numinous experience instead of dismissing it as mystical, impenetrable and unquantifiable stories (Rappaport 1999, 180). Like in the example, the lintels suggest that impressive and powerful experiences resulted from the neuro-psychological input during the performance of the offering, making a classification of the numinous applicable.

### 3.5 - Invariability as a way to convention

Here one of the central lines of reasoning in Rappaport's work will be considered, in which he delves deeper into what it is that allows canonical liturgies to be invariable. Through discussion of his definitions of sacrality and truth a closer look will be taken at the ritual and how these factors recur throughout them. In this way, the thesis starts to move in on answering some of the main questions posed in the introduction.

As introduced earlier, the concept of the Ultimate Sacred Postulates as non-falsifiable statements underlying ritual indexicality is something that seems highly applicable to any aspect of systems of devotion (Rappaport 1999, 280-281). Indeed, to return to the example of Catholicism, whether there is a God in heaven who sent his son to earth for mankind's salvation is very difficult to disprove by examining worldly affairs. It is clear therefore that Rappaport is quite right in stating that as long as *some* aspects of the statement are non-material, it is per definition resistant to being falsified (Rappaport 1999, 280).

When referencing this insight with what has already been established earlier in this third chapter, it would be safe to conclude that the notion of Yaxchilan's ruler as being one and the same as the maize divinity is one such Ultimate Sacred Postulate within the state's system of reverence. It is this divine characteristic that at once makes him indispensable (for every inhabitant would perish without successful harvests) as well as provide him with an obligation or sacred duty towards the ones he asserts power over.

His other point, that the sacred is not reliant on logic, is also very easy to demonstrate in ritual and liturgical order in general, leading in modern societies to the often-seen discussions between those with an active aspect of devotion in their lives and those with a desire to empirically substantiate the system. Due for a large part to the perceived circularity of religious reasoning, logic is not needed -and possibly not even desirable-, as it requires a different view or state of mind that is capable of accepting contradictions and logical incongruity, even though this should not to be confused with naivety or irrationality (Eriksen 227-244). Participation of a

given ritual does not require any form of internal faith, but this does not mean that emotional responses and sense of moral appropriateness will not vary greatly.

As challenging as it is to deal with this in research of something like a ritual found in contemporary anthropological contexts, the analysis of the nature of indexical references within Classic Maya performances is even more difficult in this respect. If, for a true grasp of the convention, mundane understanding must be left behind in favor of acceptance of axioms and otherwise un-disprovable statements, this seems to create a disparity with academic lines of reasoning used in its analysis. It is unfortunate that in the case of the Yaxchilan lintels there is no possibility of engaging ritual participants in conversation to have some sort of sounding board, a means of testing whether or not the signified is interpreted correctly. Although so far not made impossible, it has become clear that ethnographic data to complement archaeological research would be a valuable research strategy.

This, in itself, would not be a great problem. Virtually any study of ritual performance relies on further bases of knowledge: a Christian ritual would not be analyzed while ignoring the Bible since the cryptic nature of much of its convention would make it an effort in futility. Likewise in this case, ethnographic research results and analysis of literary sources like the Popol Vuh can be consulted to provide the background; other as of yet unclear Sacred Postulates or Rho sentences as Rappaport classifies them (Rappaport 1999, 290). As long as one keeps in mind that despite the sacrality, conventionality and eternal nature of ritual order it still can and does take on a dynamic, changing nature, connections can be made in an attempt to apply Rappaport's style of analysis to visual depictions of ancient ritual.

Rappaport touches upon an interesting distinction between what can be described as natural truth and humanity's cultural truth (Rappaport 1999, 296), namely that these truths of nature are factual regardless of whether they are known or not. It is the moral aspect that makes this not the case for sacred truths, as they are cognitively constructed, dictate what is right and wrong, and therefore can only be true if they are *known*. Since to participate in the ritual is to accept the absolute verity of the Rho sentences of the system in question, and furthermore to accept that there is no way to ever test it seems to preclude all forms of doubt. It is obvious



however that doubt does have its place in religion, or conversion and disappearance of liturgy would never occur. It is in this respect that one must not lose out of mind the foundation provided by Rappaport for his theoretical works, namely that ritual, language and other social products are adaptations in their nature, offering benefits under ever-changing situations. If a liturgical order becomes inefficient, dysfunctional or even harmful to its subjects, reform is likely to occur or in extreme cases an abandonment of the order altogether.

As a final point, it is a logical development for the divine to be identified with truth, like Rappaport argues (Rappaport 1999, 299). This makes the acceptance of the ritual as valid a commitment to authority. To deny the verity of the ritually signified is to deny the extraordinary status of the original speaker, generally a figure of great importance regarding the origin of society. No example could be more tangible than the ruler of Yaxchilan and his identity as one of the pantheon's principle deities. This convention dictates the way the ritual is supposed to be performed, but in turn is also fully reliant on the continuous performance and acceptance of that very ritual.

## Conclusions

As was discussed in the introduction, the main aim of this thesis has been to investigate to what degree models of analysis like the one developed by Rappaport can be applied to cultures not found in the context of the anthropological present, as well as how useful it is when the object of study is an example of visual culture. As outlined at the start, a number of hurdles were anticipated in the investigation of a ritual performance which cannot be participated in, and whose performers are not available for clarification. It has in this respect been the combination of Rappaport's work with that of more generally theoretical works by scholars like Ingold, Insoll and Hodder which served to establish to what degree any meaningful information can be gained by analyzing messages from senders coming from greatly differing backgrounds. Without resorting to a viewpoint of total universalism, it can be concluded that on a basis of the development of human language, social relationships and the very necessity of establishing a mental structure to the environment one finds oneself in, valid interpretations of a society's worldview are not completely outside of reach. As has been argued, the constant awareness of the relativity of conceptual constructions is a great step forward in coming to a more balanced view of a cultural ordering of the world.

Another standpoint discussed in the thesis, the one that ritual -being a phenomenon that both necessitates and provides means for an active cognitive structuring of the world- is a suitable subject for the study of a society's worldview, can be concluded to be defensible. As became clear in the analysis of Rappaport's work, ritual tradition with its many facets is an important (arguably the principle) way for a community to create and maintain social order. With its crucial aspect of the constant acknowledgement of moral obligation and acceptance of social structure, the series of performances are a way of linking the world together. As shown, this works both in terms of orientating and relating the physical world to other realms, as well as providing a tangible tether between the current performance and every single earlier instance in which

predecessors uttered the same sounds, made the same gestures and publicly accepted the same relations. Through its heavy reliance of convention, it is a way of reaching back to the time perceived to be the society's period of origin, something clearly demonstrable by looking at the relation between Maya rulers, their role in religion and cosmology and the observance of their ritual duty.

As the examples of analysis have shown, the central concepts of Rappaport's dissection of ritual tradition and how it serves in the context of a society turn out to be highly relevant and applicable to human cultures in general, even if removed temporally and geographically. Though by no means an exhausting analysis of the series of lintels, the effort of this paper has been to highlight the canonical and self-referential aspects of the rituals and can furthermore conclude Rappaport's main concepts to be useful in archaeological research, even if the dataset consists of visual imagery.

At the points where this distance forms a problem, namely the more experientially defined aspects of any given ritual performance, a careful examination of some phenomenological approaches such as the one taken by Tim Ingold can serve as a means of navigating the hiatuses that would otherwise stand in the way of coming to a holistic view of the tradition within the context of its own culture. By acknowledging that there is a shared level of cognitive processes while still keeping in mind the way conceptual interpretations can vary, a general understanding of how ritualized behaviour alters the perception of the environment can be gained.

It is, however, in the aspect of social interaction and cohesion that Rappaport's views show their full value. Largely compatible with other scholars engaged with the subject like Mikhail Bakhtin as well as scholars within the field of Maya studies, Rappaport facilitates the investigation of ritual by his division of what he calls the Holy into manageable phenomena, each contributing to the stabilizing effect provided by the practice of a canonized but dynamic tradition of reverence.

Besides a general rethinking of archaeological approaches like argued by scholars such as Ingold, Insoll and Hodder, a holistic approach such as the

one proposed by Rappaport can provide valuable insights into the ritual tradition, social relations and worldview of ancient cultures, and deserves more attention in archaeology.

When looking back at the case study and related research approaches, there is another important conclusion that can be drawn. Having discussed the possibilities of involving an ethno-archaeological approach to complement fragmentary archaeological data, it seems some self-reflection can be done regarding research methods.

When accepting the paradigmatic subjectivity of conceptual discourse as well as the continuity in traditions found in cultures like those in the Maya area, it becomes apparent that by involving living indigenous experts on the area of ritual a in research, not only would a step be made in remedying the discipline's practice of underrepresenting or even ignoring the indigenous perspective (something that fortunately is receiving increasing attention, some examples include Jansen 2006, 236; Shanks 2006, 493, 495; Orser 2006, 277-278; Geurds 2007, 150), the scope would be opened up to a wealth of information non-Western specialists can contribute.

Reflecting on the gaps in information encountered when investigating the Classic Maya ritual convention, this approach seems highly promising in allowing for a more interdisciplinary, ethically aware representation. Especially in areas like the Usumacinta river basin still inhabited by Maya communities, the amount of insight to be gained by acknowledging the valuable points of view offered by indigenous people is crucial in understanding past societies. If enough attention is devoted to a self-reflective way of performing academic research, indigenous people can be given a voice and have influence in how both they themselves as well as the cultures of which they are the inheritants are represented.

It is in light of this that the investigation presented in this thesis opens up several doors for interesting future studies. It would for example be worthwhile to compare the analysis of the carvings expressing Classic Maya worldview with the narratives and ritual practices still found today among indigenous communities in the state of Chiapas, Mexico. Being able to lay the

archaeological remains of the ritual tradition side by side with an ethno-archaeological approach would allow for further testing of social convention and the way it continues to function despite a technological and political environment that can and does change dramatically through time. Investigation of historical sources dating from the colonial period can be a third option for cross-reference, and would only aid in achieving the interdisciplinary, holistic view the research of ritual convention tries to achieve.

## **Abstract**

*The field of analyzing the ritual traditions found in societies around the globe has long been an area of fruitful study in both archaeology and anthropology. Besides reflecting on some significant reconceptualizations relevant to the investigation of ritual, the aim of this thesis is to approach visual imagery as a way of investigating ritual conventionality. In this effort, the compatibility of Roy Rappaport's model of investigation will be tested on several examples from the archaeological site of Yaxchilan. Working from a theoretical framework focusing on the mental ordering of surroundings manifested in ritual forms, this thesis will explore the value of further interdisciplinary research of the system involving constructed world visions and ritual performance.*

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