



THE TRANSFERRAL AND INHERITANCE OF RITUAL PRIVILEGES: A CLASSIC MAYA CASE FROM YAXCHILAN, MEXICO

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Ritual Privileges in the Americas

What can be termed “ritual privileges” form part of a complex and widespread system surrounding inheritance and ownership in Amerindian societies. As defined here, ritual privileges refer to the exclusive right that discrete social segments possess over the production, maintenance, usage and distribution of particular items of regalia and ritual practices. Classical examples of ritual privileges in Amerindian societies restrict the use of particular feathers, headdresses and ornaments among the South American Kayapó (Verswijver 1992), the use of headdresses, masks, coppers and the right to perform certain dances among the Kwakwaka’wakw [Kwakiutl] and other Northwest Coast groups (Suttles 1991), extending even to the planting of tobacco among the North American Apsálooke [Crow] (Lowie 1919), the use of family and personal songs among the southern Plains tribes (Joe Watkins pers. comm. 2010), and the husbandry of animals among Amazonian groups (Verswijver 1992: 84-86; Fisher 2003: 561, 567) (**Fig. 1**).

Simply put, before one has the opportunity to conduct a ritual act, such as a particular ritual or dance, or wear a particular item of regalia, be it an ornament, headdress, or mask, one has to be invested with the right, which gives an individual the prerogative of its usage. Since at birth one does not immediately hold any privileges, these have to be accrued by bestowal and investiture from others who hold these privileges. Customarily ritual privileges are held by distinct social segments within a community, which can be conceptualized as “houses” that are dominated and defined on the basis of gender, status and/or membership into separate social segments (see Watanabe 2004).

Among the matrilocal Kayapó, for example, ritual privileges are held and owned by distinct residential segments, which are governed by women, but in practice the privileges tend to be wielded by men. Here ritual privileges can be passed from grandfather and maternal uncle to child (Verswijver 1992: 68-70). However, since the society is matrilocal this implies that men, upon marriage, will physically carry the privilege to another house, that of his wife. A means of resolving this pattern is to consider the transferral of privileges

that leave the house as temporary (read “life-long”) loans, on the premise that these privileges are bestowed by the loaner to newborns in the house of origin at the first opportunity, or at least before death (Verswijver 1992: 70). These procedures enable specific privileges to be fixed (in perpetuity, or nearly so) to discrete houses, which each bear distinct toponymic designators and ancestral filiations. By this means, the privileges of the ancestors are maintained in precisely the same house, for as long as the house and/or descendants subsist. The privileges that are held in highest esteem are those that are held by few, and consequently the transferral of privileges is a tactical undertaking that has to be implemented with care. Nevertheless, in certain cases particular privileges that already have wide currency can be bestowed on multiple individuals to ensure the survival of the privilege and foster networks of interdependence. Finally, although the predominant mode of transferring privileges is bestowal unto newborns and young individuals by their elders, the other mode of obtaining privileges is by the forceful acquisition of ritual ornaments and implements – and their associated usage – from neighbouring groups as part of raids or other martial actions (Verswijver 1992: 81).



Figure 1. Examples of ceremonial objects that are controlled by ritual privileges among Amerindian groups. **a)** Kayapó *roriro-ri* headdress (Houston Museum of Natural Science; photograph © E.Z. Smith). **b)** Haida copper depicting a sculpin (Canadian Museum of Civilizations; CMC VII-X-1080 / S94-6768).

Setting aside the clear cultural differences, remarkable similarities can be found among Northwest Coast groups, such as the Kwakwaka’wakw. In addition to items of regalia, great stock is set on the ownership of particular dances and the ability to sing certain songs. Thus as part of ceremonial events efforts are made to formally declare who devised the dance/song, who owns the rights to it, and who has bestowed the right onto the present user (Suttles 1991). The Kwakwaka’wakw are commonly patrilocal and the social segments, known as *na’mima* [numayma], form the socio-political kin groups, or

"houses", which hold the discrete sets of privileges (Suttles 1991: 86-90). Thus in this case privileges as well as names and titles are more commonly bestowed directly from parent onto child, with a pattern of primogeniture being often followed (Rohner & Rohner 1970: 81-83). In many cases "privileges were traced back to myth times ... to the first ancestors, who typically came down from the sky in nonhuman form" (Suttles 1991: 90). Elaborating on this point John Bierhost comments:

Like the Haida, the Tsimshian and the Tlingit pass the clan name from mother to child. In former times a man owning property, which might include lullabies, personal names, hunting grounds, and bathing places, bequeathed it to his sister's son, since he and his own son belonged to different clans. Among the most valued possessions were decorative clan emblems, or crests, roughly equivalent to the heraldic crests of European families. The "totem" poles that stood in front of great houses were actually crest poles, depicting whatever emblems the family had a right to display. All Northwest Coast tribes had stories explaining how a particular clan acquired the beaver, the eagle, the raven, or the killer whale emblem, to name only a few. (Bierhost 1985: 41)

In this passage Bierhost makes clear that crest items, governed by the mechanisms of ritual privileges, were deemed to form part of one's "wealth". To this can be added the observation that crest stories reach back to the myth age in order to justify the acquisition of particular privileges as well as to underscore their antiquity and agelessness. Clearly then, mythology is subservient to the ritual privileges that they validate and from this vantage mythology serves first and foremost as an explanatory framework for the acquisition of ritual privileges, and only secondarily as grand narratives explaining the origin of the world, humans, and food, or the deeds of divine heroes and tricksters (see e.g. Beliaev & Davletshin 2006). Here too oral history plays an important role in memorizing and recounting the names of successive ancestral figures, reaching back to the myth age, forming lengthy pedigrees, since privileges and their transferral are wholly intertwined with parentage and kinship. Considering the hierarchical import among the Kwakwaka'wakw and other Northwest Coast groups it is salient that the chiefly social stratum holds many privileges, whereas the lower segments hold few, if any (Rohner & Rohner 1970: 79). Akin to the Kayapó, privileges among the Kwakwaka'wakw can be gathered through belligerent acts, in which ritual implements are recovered as war booty from neighbours (Suttles 1991: 90). In much the same vein privileges could be acquired by assassination, in which claim can be laid on the privileges of the deceased by the one who committed the act (Rohner & Rohner 1970:81).

While the prevalence of such systems of ritual privileges is known for many Amerindian cultures, it does not really figure in the literature on Mesoamerican cultures. This lacuna or omission is all the more notable for the Mesoamerican context, precisely considering the prevalence of ritual privilege systems elsewhere in the Americas. Nevertheless, due its pervasiveness elsewhere in the Americas it would be surprising if similar mechanisms had not been operative in ancient Mesoamerica controlling the production, use and dissemination of ritual implements and their associated actions. At least somehow suggestive are the possible survivals that can be ascribed to the practices, regalia and vestments of the *cofradía* orders in the Maya Highlands (e.g. Mayén de Castellanos et al. 1993; Christenson 2008). In turn, were mechanisms of ritual privileges present in Mesoamerica, as will be suggested here, these would go a long way to providing a coherent explanatory model that makes sense in emic terms.

Yaxchilan: A Case Study

Following this cursory survey I now turn to the Late Classic texts from the ancient Maya site of Yaxchilan and related satellite sites and review them in light of the ritual privilege system and the mechanisms of their transmittance. While several lines of evidence may be pursued, the existence of similar privilege practices would certainly be suggested if specific ceremonial implements, or ritual actions, were seen to be consistently wielded by the same select few individuals over the course of their lives, and were not used by others until these had been formally invested by former owners. With this premise to guide this study it has been found that monuments recording events at Yaxchilan and key satellite sites are invaluable in this regard, since they record the particular types of dances and/or the implements employed in these dances, when these took place and the protagonists involved. The dance texts in question have previously been cogently discussed by Nikolai Grube (1992), Stephen Houston (1984), Matthew Looper (2004) as well as Ana García Barrios and Rogelio Valencia Rivera (2007). Comprehensive site-whole treatments on the corpus of Yaxchilan have been undertaken by Peter Mathews (1988, 1997), Linda Schele and David Freidel (1990: 262-305), Carolyn Tate (1992), as well as Simon Martin and Nikolai Grube (2008: 116-137). Other relevant treatments of the monuments from El Kinel and Retalteco, two satellites of Yaxchilan have been published by Stephen Houston and colleagues (Houston et al. 2006a: 89-92 & 2006b). A summary tabulation of the dance monuments from the Yaxchilan kingdom is presented below (Table 1) as it forms the backbone of the present study.

Mon.	Date	Dance	Individual 1	Individual 2	Relation
Lin. 50	---	Flap-staff	K'inich Tatbu Skull II?	---	---
Lin. 32	9.13. 5.12.13	K'awiil-sceptre	Itzam? Bahlam III	Lady Ik' Skull	man-wife
Lin. 53	9.13. 5.12.13	K'awiil-sceptre	Itzam? Bahlam III	Lady Ik' Skull	man-wife
St. 16	9.15. 4.16.11?	Flap-staff	Itzam? Bahlam III	---	---
St. 11	9.15. 9.17.16	Flap-staff	Itzam? Bahlam III	Yaxu'n? Bahlam IV	father-son
Lin. 33	9.15.16. 1. 6	Flap-staff	Yaxu'n? Bahlam IV	---	---
Lin. 1	9.16. 1. 0. 0	K'awiil-sceptre	Yaxu'n? Bahlam IV	Ix Chak Joloom	man-wife
Lin. 5	9.16. 1. 2. 0	Bird-staff	Yaxu'n? Bahlam IV	Ix Wak Jalam Chan	man-wife
Lin. 42	9.16. 1. 2. 0	Axe-dance?	Yaxu'n? Bahlam IV	K'an Tok Wayaab?	ajaw-sajal
Lin. 43	9.16. 1. 8. 6	Basket-staff	Yaxu'n? Bahlam IV	Ix (Mut) Hix Witz	man-wife
Lin. 6	9.16. 1. 8. 6	Basket-staff	Yaxu'n? Bahlam IV	K'an Tok Wayaab?	ajaw-sajal
Retalteco	9.16. 1. ?. ?	Flap-staff	Yaxu'n? Bahlam IV	K'an Tok Wayaab? Ix (Mut) Hix Witz	ajaw-sajal man-wife
Lin. 7	9.16. 1. 8. 8	K'awiil-sceptre	Yaxu'n? Bahlam IV	Ix #	man-wife
Lin. 3	9.16. 5. 0. 0	K'awiil-sceptre	Yaxu'n? Bahlam IV	K'in Mo' Ajaw	ajaw-sajal
Lin. 54	9.16. 5. 0. 0	K'awiil-sceptre	Yaxu'n? Bahlam IV	Ix Chak Joloom	man-wife
Lin. 2	9.16. 6. 0. 0	Bird-staff	Yaxu'n? Bahlam IV	Chelte' Chan K'inich	father-son
R, Lin. 5	9.16.14.17. 2?	Macaw-face?	Yaxu'n? Bahlam IV	Yax Tok Wela'n?	ajaw-sajal
Lin. 52	9.16.15. 0. 0	K'awiil-sceptre	Yaxu'n? Bahlam IV	Chelte' Chan K'inich	father-son
R, Lin. 4	9.16.16.12. 2	Snake-dance	Yaxu'n? Bahlam IV	Ukan Ahkmo'?	ajaw-sajal
Lin. 9	9.16.17. 6.12	Flap-staff	Yaxu'n? Bahlam IV	Chak Joloom	yichaan
Lin. 58	---	Axe-dance?	Itzam? Bahlam IV	Chak Joloom	yichaan
K, Mon. 1	9.18. 0. 0. 0?	Captive-dance?	Itzam? Bahlam IV	---	---

Table 1. The dance events documented in the corpus of Yaxchilan, ordered in chronological sequence of event, from earliest to latest. Legend: K = El Kinel, Lin. = Lintel, Mon. = Monument, R = Site R (La Pasadita), St. = Stela, # = eroded.

Dances were prominent ceremonial occasions which, based on present evidence from throughout the Maya Lowlands, were performed in connection with period ending celebrations (e.g. El Kinel, Monument 1), jubilee celebrations of accession to the throne (e.g. Yaxchilan Lintel 2), on prominent astronomical events (e.g. a complete solar eclipse as documented in the texts of Lintel 3, Temple 4 at Tikal), in preparation for raids, as part of the dedication of buildings (as in the case of Copan, Temple 11), on salient inter-site royal visits, and possibly as ritual petitions for rains (Grube 1992; Houston 1984).

What stands out from this tabulation is that the dance monuments associated with the rulers of Yaxchilan record an intense and nearly continuous record spanning over 93 years (i.e. A.D. 697-790) that encompasses the successive reigns of *Itzam? Bahlam* III (a.k.a. Shield Jaguar the Great), *Yaxu'n? Bahlam* IV (Bird Jaguar IV), and *Itzam? Bahlam* IV (Shield Jaguar III).¹ Of the 22 distinct records of dances, these involve at least six different types with the *K'awiił*-sceptre (7) dance being the most common along with the flap-staff (6), whereas the bird-staff (2), basket-staff (2), and axe-dances (2) all occur in equal frequency, whereas the possible macaw-face (1), captive (1) and snake-dance (1) are rarer (for a discussion of these various dances see Grube 1992: 206-213; see also Looper 2004; García Barrios & Valencia Rivera 2007). Another relevant feature is that ten of the dance events were commemorated on two to four different monuments, clustering in four distinct celebrations (i.e. Oct. 697, Jun. 752, Oct. 752, and Apr. 756). These monuments emphasize the importance of such events, the individuals that partook, or the different dances took place on the same days (or multiple days), much in keeping with other Amerindian practices. Thus the first dance event known for *Itzam? Bahlam* III was recorded on two different monuments (28th of October, A.D. 697) (**Fig. 2**), whereas three of *Yaxu'n? Bahlam* IV's celebrations involving dances were celebrated on as many as eight different consecutive monuments. The first such dance for this ruler was a bird-staff and an axe-dance both of which took place on the same date (8th of June, A.D. 752 – 9.16.1.2.0), involving one of his wives and one of his subordinates. Four months later there are records of dance events over the course of three days (12th-14th of October, A.D. 752 – 9.16.1.8.6-8) in which *Yaxu'n? Bahlam* IV conducted a basket-staff, a flap-staff and a *K'awiił*-sceptre dance involving two of his wives and one of his subordinates.² Lastly, his wife and one of his subordinates jointly conducted a *K'awiił*-sceptre dance four years later in time for the hotun ending (8th of April, A.D. 756 – 9.16.5.0.0). Based on these records we can see that it is not only the type of dance that was deemed significant, but also when and with whom the event was celebrated, since that seems to account for what might otherwise be seen as a duplication of records.

¹ Although an interregnum, lasting from 742 to 752, occurred between the reigns of *Itzam? Bahlam* III and *Yaxu'n? Bahlam* IV (Martin & Grube 2008: 127, 149), it is glossed over here, not the least since later kings did not identify themselves with the interregnum ruler(s). The one monument of significance during this period is Panel 3 of Piedras Negras that mentions the short-lived Yaxchilan ruler *Yopaat Bahlam* II and a 'descending macaw' dance conducted by the local lord in 749. Interestingly this type of dance appears to be particular to Piedras Negras, since it is one that does not appear at Yaxchilan.

² It is to this span of dates that I assign the Retalteco lintel, since it duplicates the mentions made to *Ix Mut Hix Witz* and *K'an Tok Wayaab* seen on Lintels 6 and 43 that commemorate events in Oct. 752. Nevertheless the mention made to *Yaxu'n? Bahlam* IV as 4-k'atun king on the Retalteco lintel suggests that it was executed sometime shortly after 768 and before the enthronement of his son and successor (see Houston et al. 2006b: 5, 7). I take this to mean that although the monument was carved towards the end of the reign of *Yaxu'n? Bahlam* IV, it commemorated an event from around 17 years before. Similar discrepancies have been noted for other monuments at Yaxchilan that bear not the dedicatory dates on which monuments were completed, but instead refer to the earlier events that these commemorate (see Mathews 1988: 329-337).

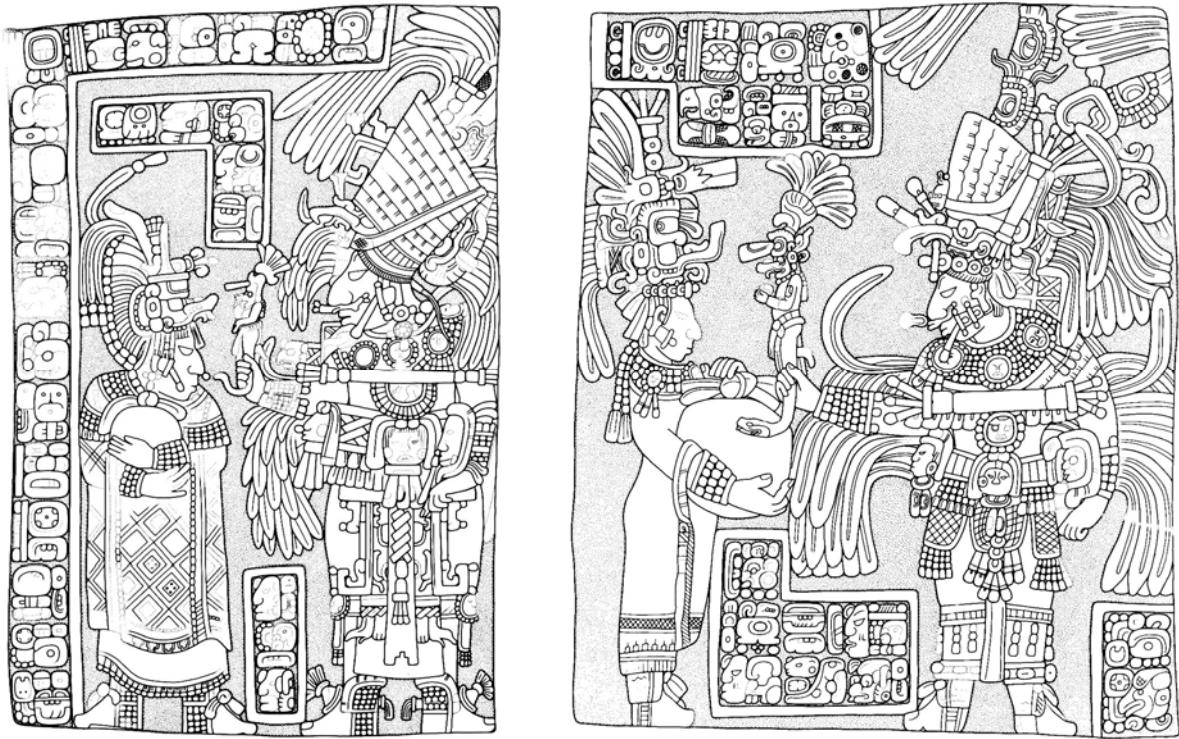


Figure 2. The earliest dance monuments of *Itzam? Bahlam III*, depicting him with his spouse during a *K'awill*-sceptre dance. **a)** Lintel 32. **b)** Lintel 53. Drawings by Ian Graham (1979: 73, 115).

Based on the pairing of primary and secondary individual in the iconography, and often in the associated textual captions, these monuments can be viewed as records of the transferral of ritual privileges between key members of Yaxchilan's ruling elite. Supporting this conclusion are the dance events celebrated at the juncture between reigns where we see key examples of father-to-son transferral of ritual privileges. Significant here is that the particular dances were indeed wielded singly by a monarch for the length of his reign and that it was only transferred to close kin towards the end of his reign. Thus on the period-ending celebrated on the 22nd of June A.D. 741 (9.15.9.17.16) and commemorated on Stela 11, we have a clear record of a flap-staff dance between *Itzam? Bahlam III* and his son and future successor *Yaxu'n? Bahlam IV* – an event that took place just a year before the passing of the father (Martin & Grube 2008: 129) (**Fig. 3**). The earliest records of *Yaxu'n? Bahlam IV*'s dance events, date to some six years later, on the 21st of June, A.D. 747 (9.15.16.1.6) and it was precisely such a flap-staff dance. Significantly on Lintel 33, which provides this earliest record, he is depicted by himself, as if to reiterate that he is now the sole holder of the ritual privilege of the flap-staff and its associated dance (**Fig. 4c**). Using Lintel 33 as the template it would seem that it seeks inspiration from his father's Stela 16, owing to the similar execution and



Figure 3. Stela 11 depicting a flap-staff dance involving *Itzam? Bahlam III* and his son *Yaxu'n? Bahlam IV*. Drawing: Linda Schele.

iconographic programme, since *Itzam? Bahlam* III is also depicted alone with his flap-staff (**Fig. 4b**). Lintel 50, which cannot be adequately dated, since it never bore a date, is clearly rendered in the style that characterizes the monuments of *Yaxu'n? Bahlam* IV's reign (**Fig. 4a**). However, close inspection of the eroded text indicates that the glyphs record the protagonist as *K'inich Tatbu* Skull II, the name of an illustrious predecessor (Martin & Grube 2008: 129). Thus with the carving of Lintels 9 and 50 *Yaxu'n? Bahlam* IV not only underscores his prerogative to the flap-staff dance, which he inherited from his father, but likens himself and retrospectively traces this privilege to a predecessor who ruled more than two centuries earlier. As such this duplicates patterns seen in other Amerindian groups wherein ritual privileges are retrospectively traced to the distant, sometimes mythic past. Together Stela 16, Lintels 9 and 50 exploit the iconographic programme to underscore the underlying message and to create a strong contrast with the other monuments that depict two or more individuals engaged in dance.

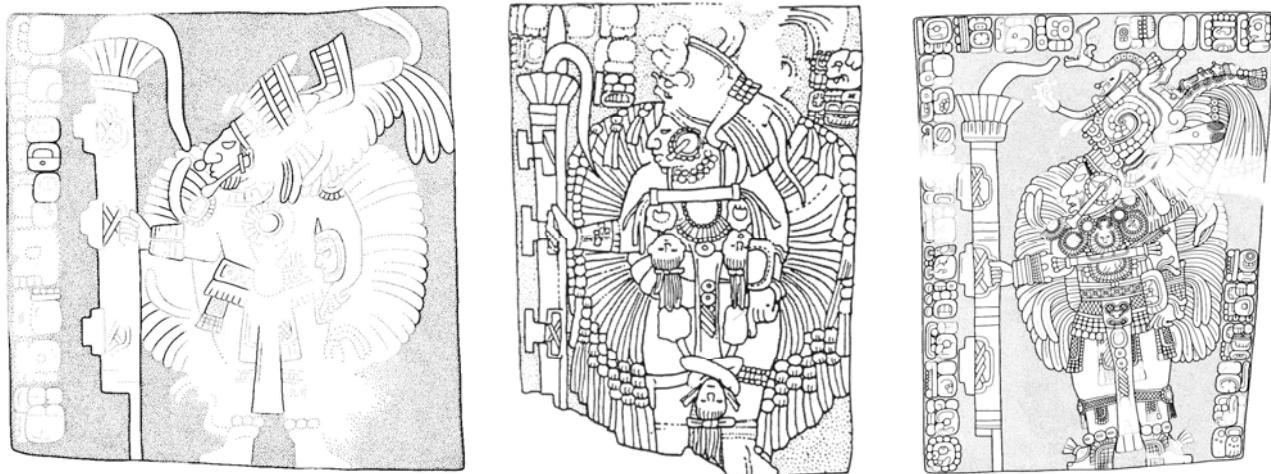


Figure 4. Monuments depicting singular lords with flap-staffs. **a)** Lintel 50, *K'inich Tatbu* Skull II. **b)** Stela 16, *Itzam? Bahlam* III. **c)** Lintel 33, *Yaxu'n? Bahlam* IV. Drawing of Stela 16 by Linda Schele; lintels by Ian Graham (1979: 75, 109).

Another crucial transferral would appear to be depicted on Lintels 2 and 52 at Yaxchilan, which record some of the penultimate dance events of *Yaxu'n? Bahlam* IV at Yaxchilan. On these monuments, dated to the period endings of A.D. 757 and 766, *Yaxu'n? Bahlam* IV is shown undertaking a bird-staff and a *K'awii*-sceptre dance with his son *Chelte' Chan K'inich* (the future successor, known on accession by his grandfather's epithet as *Itzam? Bahlam* IV) (**Fig. 5a**). Again these examples may well represent the father-to-son transferral of the ritual privilege, entitling the latter and making him the rightful owner of the bird-staff and *K'awii*-sceptre dances. Remarkably the very last dance event recorded for *Yaxu'n? Bahlam* IV is the flap-staff dance that he inherited from his father, 22 years earlier. However, instead of dancing with his son, as would be expected, we see him trading flap-staffs with an individual named *Chak Joloom* (**Fig. 5b**), who is termed the *yichaan ajaw* 'maternal uncle of the lord' (see Stuart 1997: 7-8).³ Apparently *Chak Joloom*, was the brother of *Ix Chak Joloom* and thus the brother-in-law of *Yaxu'n? Bahlam*

³ Regarding this titular segment Alfonso Lacadena (pers. comm. 2010) has expressed some reservations noting that the original monuments may instead only record *uchaan ajaw* 'king of Uchaan' as a title of origin and not as a parentage statement. However, Lintel 58 complicates matters since it records both a clear **yi-cha-ni** (C1) as well as **u-[cha-ni]AJAW** (D3), suggesting that both readings should be maintained.

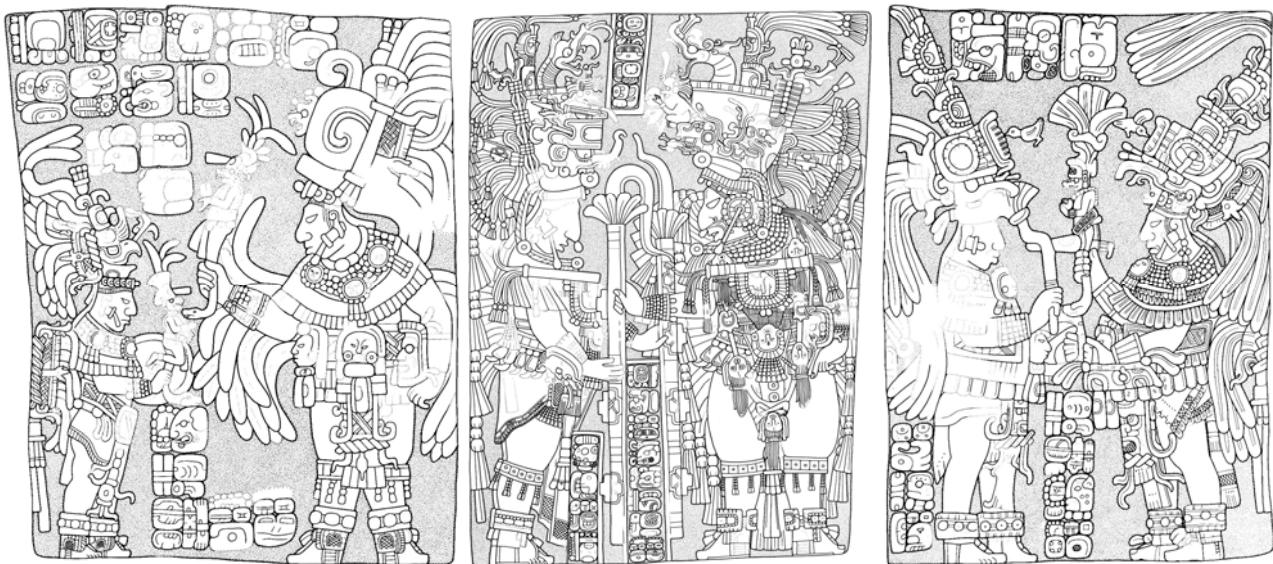


Figure 5. The late dance monuments depicting *Yaxu'n? Bahlam* IV his son and brother-in-law. **a)** Lintel 52, *Yaxu'n? Bahlam* IV and his son *Chelte' Chan K'inich* in a *K'awiil*-sceptre dance. **b)** Lintel 9, *Yaxu'n? Bahlam* IV and *Chak Joloom* exchanging banners in a flap-staff dance. **c)** Lintel 58, *Itzam? Bahlam* IV dances with *Chak Joloom* in a *K'awiil*-sceptre and axe-dance. Drawings by Ian Graham (1979: 113, 125; Graham & von Euw 1977: 29).

IV. What is more is that the next event in the sequence, depicted on Lintel 58, although it remains difficult to date in the absence of an associated calendrical statement, depicts the now reigning *Itzam? Bahlam* IV with *Chak Joloom* conducting a *K'awiil*-sceptre and axe-dance (**Fig. 5c**). As such *Itzam? Bahlam* IV is shown exerting his privilege to dance with the *K'awiil*-sceptre a right imparted to him by his father, and not the flap-staff dance as would otherwise be expected by the precedent set on Lintel 33, Stelae 11 and 16. That *Itzam? Bahlam* IV does not wield the flap-staff on Lintel 58 may well be accounted for if the privilege had been exclusively transferred to *Chak Joloom* shortly before the passing of *Yaxu'n? Bahlam* IV. As such the final monument of *Yaxu'n? Bahlam* IV (Lintel 9), represents less the ceremonial elevation of *Chak Joloom* to the position of regent and guardian of the young *Itzam? Bahlam* IV (Martin & Grube 2008: 132), and more a celebration of the transferral of an important ritual privilege to a maternal uncle of *Itzam? Bahlam* IV. The regularities of the patterns observed conform to the mechanisms of transferral and inheritance of privileges as known among colonial and modern Amerindian groups and it thus seems likely that it is precisely these investitures that the monuments commemorate.

Other dance celebrations engage the ruling monarch and his underlords, the *sajal*, most notably his leading subordinate *K'an Tok Wayaab* and the little known *K'in Mo' Ajaw* (**Figs. 6 & 7**).

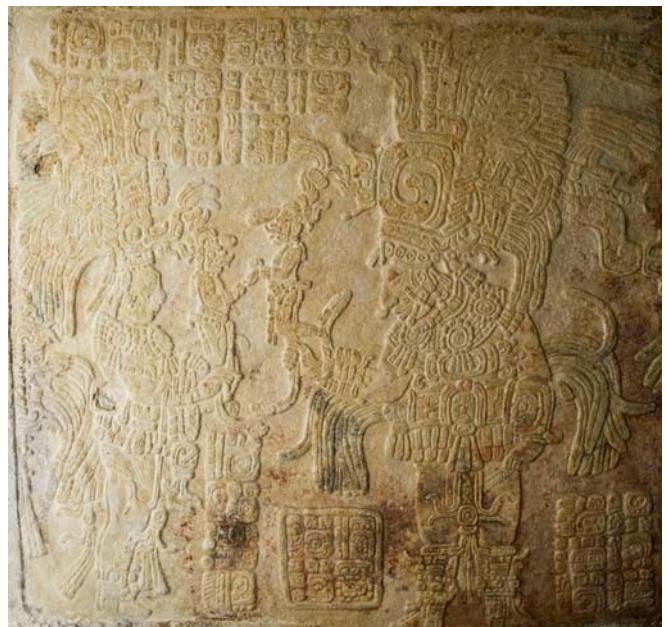


Figure 6. Lintel 3, *Yaxu'n? Bahlam* IV and *K'in Mo' Ajaw* engaged in a *K'awiil*-sceptre dance. Photograph by Christophe Helmke.

On Lintels 42, 6 and 3 *Yaxu'n? Bahlam IV* is engaged in an axe-dance, a basket-staff dance and a *K'awiił*-sceptre dance with his *sajal*, which if the model adduced to is correct depicts the king in the act of sharing the privileges of these dances with his subordinates. As such these events would represent a significant ritual investment by the king in his subordinates, although it is likely that these were drawn from the elite and may even have been (more distantly) related to the king (see Houston 1992: 129-136 *passim*; Houston & Stuart 2001: 61-64). In these cases it is supposed that the privileges transferred were not exclusively tied to a singular person and could thus be spread to multiple individuals, without diminishing the potency of the privileges too much. If this conclusion is correct it would stand to reason that the flap-staff and possibly the bird-staff dances were limited to few and were thus of exalted value, whereas other dances such as the *K'awiił*-sceptre dance were already more widely disseminated and therefore less worthy and more liable to sharing with subordinates.



Figure 7. The king and head-sajal *K'an Tok Wayaab* dancing together. **a)** Lintel 42, performing a *K'awiił*-sceptre and axe-dance. **b)** Lintel 6, depiction of a basket-staff dance. Drawings by Ian Graham (1979: 93; Graham & von Euw 1977: 23).

Interestingly, all of these apparent transferrals to subordinates were dance events that were jointly celebrated with four different spouses of *Yaxu'n? Bahlam IV*, as has been mentioned previously. However, the monuments commemorating dance events that involve spouses exhibit a different iconographic programme (**Fig. 8**). In these the wife is shown cradling a bundle that undoubtedly contained a particular item of regalia held in high esteem (see Stuart 2006) and plausibly was also controlled by privileges related to the dance. The bundling of ritual objects is well-known for Mesoamerica (Guernsey & Reilly 2006) and finds close analogues for the Plains Indians where important rituals involved "the solemn opening of the bundles containing sacred objects of an individual or a group and the ceremonial uncovering of a warrior's shield" (Clark 1966: 12). Considering that privileges tend to be transferred in near-exclusivity between males, it is suspected that the lintels pairing off the ruler and his spouses are not intended to depict the transferral of such privileges. Instead, it is assumed that these may depict

preparations for the dances themselves in which the bundled element that is borne by the women contains an item of the dance regalia that served an integral part of the ritual celebrations (see also Christenson 2005: 93-95).

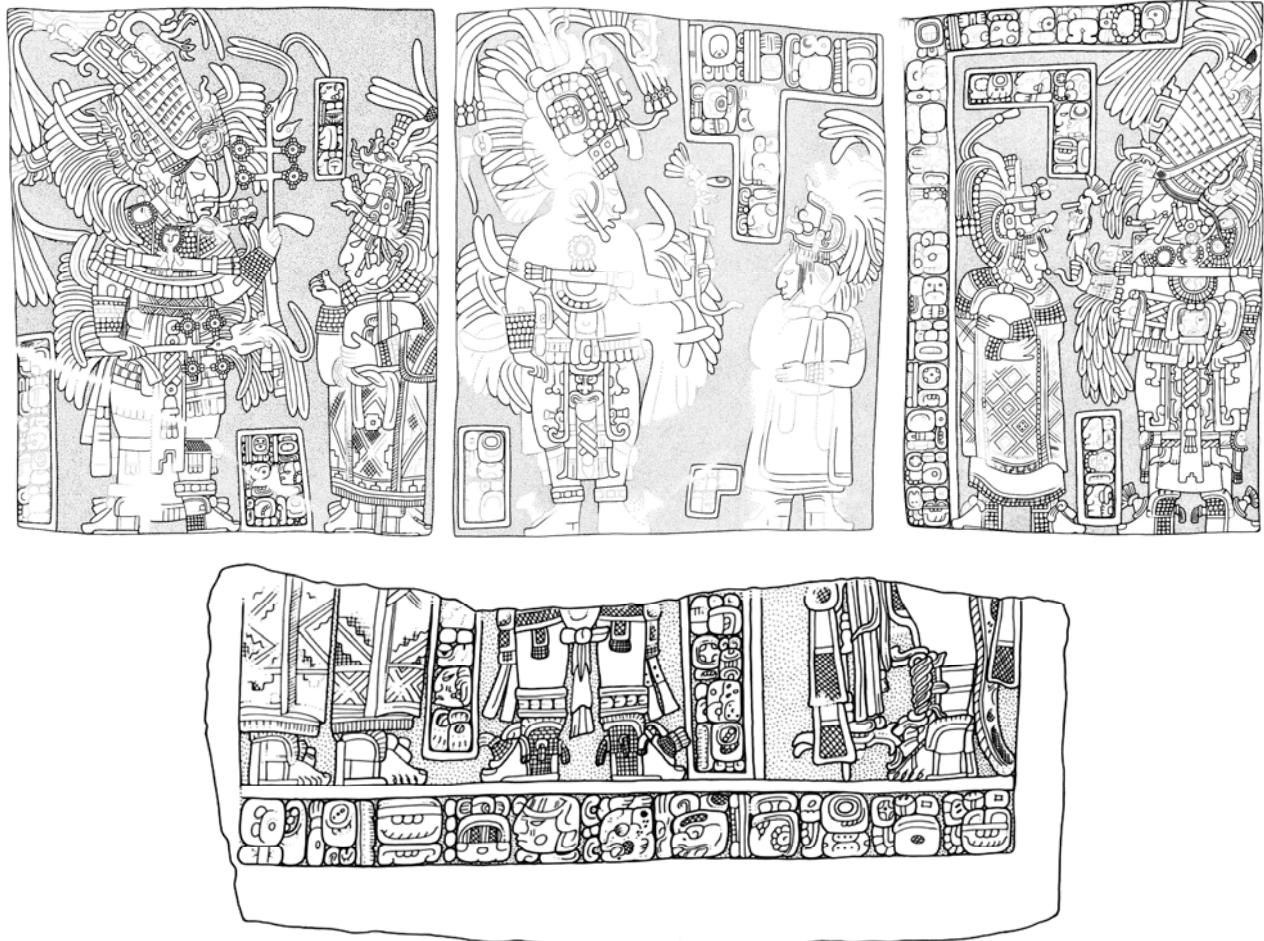


Figure 8. Dance events representing the ruler in the act of dance with the diagnostic implement and his wife holding a ritual bundle. **a)** Lintel 5, *Yaxu'n? Bahlam IV* and *Ix Wak Jalam Chan* in a bird-staff dance. **b)** Lintel 7, *Yaxu'n? Bahlam IV* and unidentified spouse performing a *K'awiil*-sceptre dance. **c)** Lintel 32, *Itzam? Bahlam III* engaged in a *K'awiil*-sceptre dance with Lady *Ik'* Skull. Drawings by Ian Graham (1979: 73; Graham & von Euw 1977: 21, 25). **d)** The Retalteco lintel, *Yaxu'n? Bahlam IV* and two women (one of which is his wife *Ix Mut Hix Witz*, the caption of the other is not preserved) in a flap-staff dance with *K'an Tok Wayaab* (drawing by Stephen Houston).

Closing Remarks

The emphasis on depicting close kin as well as powerful and possibly related underlords not only reifies the importance of familial ties, it serves as a commemoration of the investiture ceremonies at which particular privileges were transferred from, or shared with, one closely-related individual to another. Based on known parentage and the transferrals that the dance lintels may commemorate, these can be seen to have taken place between father and son (*Itzam? Bahlam III* to *Yaxu'n? Bahlam IV*; *Yaxu'n Bahlam IV* to *Itzam? Bahlam IV*), as well as between brothers-in-law (*Yaxu'n? Bahlam IV* to *Chak Joloom*), and possibly between maternal uncle and nephew (*Chak Joloom* to *Itzam? Bahlam IV*) (Fig. 9). The inheritance patterns from father to son are in keeping with those known for the patrilocal Northwest Coast, whereas the possible example of maternal uncle to nephew would follow the mechanisms known for matrilocal Amazonia. The

implications of this study are many, and to this should be added that just about all references to maternal uncles in the Classic Maya corpus are confined to similar ceremonial engagements in the texts of Yaxchilan (see Stuart 1997: 5, 7-8). This feature cannot be entirely coincidental, not the least when we consider the emphasis that the lords of Yaxchilan placed on dancing and other important ritual celebrations. Taken together there does then seem to be a coherent overlap between the sequence of these ceremonial events, the ritual objects and the individuals involved that all align themselves to the overall pattern of mechanisms surrounding ritual privileges in Amerindian societies, suggesting that this is the pattern at Yaxchilan also.

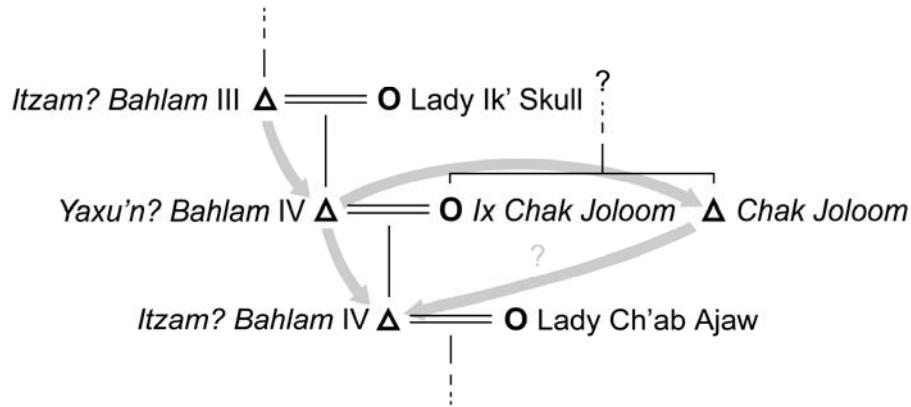


Figure 9. Simplified family tree of the seventh and eighth century rulers of Yaxchilan who commemorated dancing events, with possible transfers of ritual dance privileges marked. Diagram by Christophe Helmke.

Finally, the connection of flap-staffs and basket-staffs with captives in the iconography of Palenque and Chichen Itza (Grube 1992: 208-213 *passim*) may well tie in with the acquisition of ritual implements and their associated privileges from neighbouring sites as part of martial actions. Such a finding meshes well with the present model and as such deserves further scrutiny as it pertains to different ritual implements at other sites. In this regard the palanquins seized by Tikal from El Perú and Naranjo are just one such example (see Martin 1996). In the case of Yaxchilan the interpretation of the dance monuments as commemorations of privilege investitures goes a long way to explaining the very purpose of the monuments and their inherent message and has repercussions for the patterns of inheritance from what is known of the dynastic sequence at the site (see Martin & Grube 2008: 116-137). That ritual privileges and their transferral may have motivated the creation of the very monuments that record these events greatly resonates with David Stuart's (1998: 374) claim that "dedicatory texts constitute the true emphasis of Classic Maya inscriptions".

While it has been attempted here to make the case for the existence of ritual privileges at Yaxchilan and to examine the patterns of inheritance, transferral and sharing, what remains is to extend this study to other ceremonial objects, items of regalia and ritual actions at other sites in the Maya area to see if additional evidence can be garnered to support or refute this model.

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