

Iconic Kenning in the Symbolic Statements of Izapa

John Major Jenkins. © June 2014

In his 2010 book *Maya Creation Myths* (University of Colorado Press), Timothy Knowlton discusses an intriguing concept emerging within Maya epigraphic studies called “diphrastric kenning.” On page 21 of his book, he begins a section titled “Ancient Maya Metaphysics: Complementary Dualism.” It is heartening to see a scholar using terms that I’ve used in my books, with much criticism leveled at me.¹

Within this section, Knowlton discusses diphrastric kennings in Maya writing, which are “couplets that equal more than the sum of their parts” (22). He explains that in the Maya world, “philosophically salient concepts” were expressed with a dual glyph-construct that referred “poetically” to a third, non-explicit meaning. That meaning is a larger one that embraces the inflections of the two visible elements. A classic example is that a glyph consisting of “mat and throne” refers to political authority.

An intriguing diphrastric kenning that Knowlton explores at some length is the “chab akab” construct. He depicts one from Copan Stela 7 (p. 22) and after some explanation offers a good reading as “genesis and darkness”. We see here two seemingly opposed elements united: “genesis” meaning light and birth and “darkness” meaning the fecund night from which the sun, or light, gestates and emerges. With a proper understanding of this glyph construct in this particular diphrastric kenning, we can reach “an emic understanding of Maya metaphysics” (p.22).² It is, essentially, expressing the interrelationship uniting sacrifice and renewal, of how death and birth go together.

Conceptually and visually, we could express the *chab akab* diphrastric kenning as the Yin-Yang symbol,³ which has a parallel in the so-called “Hunab Ku” symbol of the Maya. However, the term “diphrastric” specifically invokes a literary *phrase* that we expect to be expressed in writing. If we want to look for the *symbolic manifestations* of diphrastric kenning, within Maya *iconography*, we must introduce another phrase. I propose this be called “Iconic Kenning”.

¹ For example, as long ago as my 1992 book *Tzolkin* (reprinted with Borderlands, 1994), I discussed the non-dual basis of Maya astrology in metaphysical terms, related partially to Jung’s concept of synchronicity while criticizing the doctrine of astrological causality. Reversible, non-mutually exclusive duality is the same as non-duality. The two pairs are not related as a Cartesian dualism via mutual exclusivity (like “apples and oranges”) but are, rather, two poles of a continuum and belong to a higher oneness. Despite the reappearance of my sophisticated non-dual reading of Maya metaphysics in my later writings after 1992, including extensive discussion in my book *The 2012 Story*, (Tarcher/Penguin), Maya scholar and archaeologist David Freidel called me a “charlatan” in a Newsweek interview for (allegedly) preaching the doctrine of astrological causality to an unsuspecting public (a totally false accusation). Since Knowlton has not been likewise inaccurately skewered, we have a demonstration of the undiscerning double-standard critique policy of Maya scholars. See <http://Update2012.com> (May 2009 update).

² “Emic” means within the framework of Maya thinking and perspectives. This, too, has been a hallmark of my own approach to understanding Maya cosmology, which I discussed in my 1992 book *Tzolkin* through Barbara Tedlock’s ethnographic framework of “human intersubjectivity.”

³ A well-known circular monument in the Great Plaza of Copan precisely replicates the Yin-Yang symbol when viewed from above.

Iconic Kenning

An example of Iconic Kenning in Maya art and symbolic expression, which expresses the complementary death-life construct mentioned above, is a plaque I photographed in a museum in Guatemala:



Figure 1. An example of Iconic Kenning. Maya Classic Period plaque from Guatemala. Skull-face (death) and en fleshed face (right).

A similar image is also found in an expression of Christian iconography, and thus we see the universal nature of this conceptual or “metaphysical” insight:

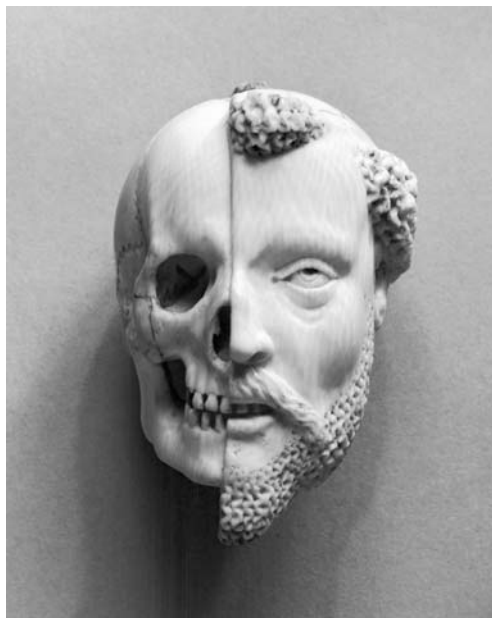


Figure 2. Christian image of skull and en fleshed monk's face.

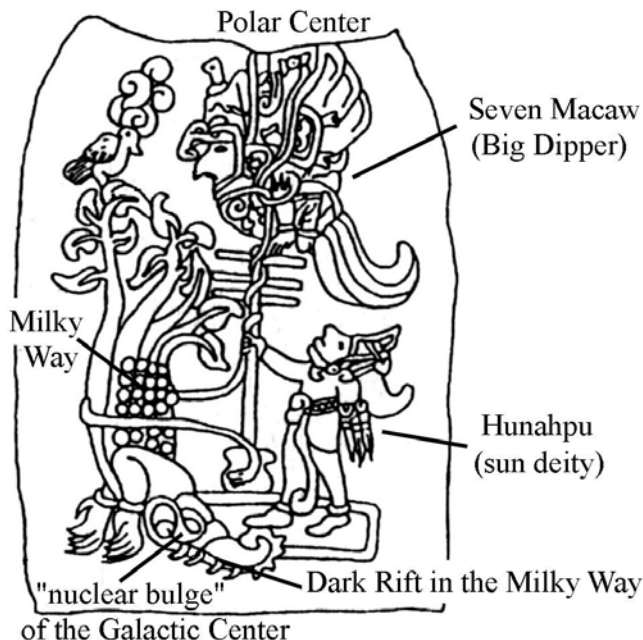
I've frequently used Figure 1, for years, in my presentations. It expresses the non-dual metaphysics of Maya thought, uniting a death and life face in one form. The Maya believe that life and death go together. So too, "sacrifice and renewal", like "genesis and darkness", go together.

The term "iconic" is perhaps not totally satisfying, but I can think of no better alternative. It preserves the reference to "iconography", which in many examples antedates later glyphic forms of Maya writing. For example, the upturned frog-mouth icon, so prevalent in the pre-Classic iconography at Izapa (e.g., Stelae 6 and 11), becomes the "to be born" glyph used in Maya hieroglyphic writing to indicate the accession of a king to rulership — the symbolic birth of a new being. The mouth of the frog is thus likened to a birthplace, a vagina.

This provides a curious parallel to a central form of the "akab" part of the diphrastic kenning focused on by Knowlton, and links nicely into my interpretations of the "metaphysics" of sacrifice and renewal I've long identified at Izapa (Jenkins 1996, 1998). Knowlton writes that "The iconographic referent of T504 *akab* is most likely, in my evaluation, a stylized representation of the inside of the human mouth" (24). Furthermore, the "chab" component consists of the male genitalia or a sacrifice tool for bloodletting, expressing the idea of penance. Overall, Knowlton sees the meaning as birth or "genesis." Together, the solar male symbol at the female "mouth" (transformational darkness-place) combine to reference a larger meaning that "expresses gender in terms of complementary, rather than hierarchical dualism" (25). Yes, "complementary dualism", also known as "non-duality" in that the "dualism" is not a true duality, but one that is united on a higher plane of reference in which the two aspects are perceived to be two sides of the same coin. That's what I've been describing for years, in my work to reconstruct ancient Maya cosmology and metaphysics.

We can now, with Iconic Kenning, understand that Diphrastic Kenning is not merely a clever literary device invented during the Classic Period and employed solely in epigraphic writing systems. *It is an expression of an underlying mode of perception that*

can be identified as a profound metaphysical or philosophical understanding. We can expect to also find it in other modes of expression, beyond hieroglyphic writing, such as Mesoamerican art and iconography. And we do find it there. In addition to the death-life face depicted above we also have, for example, Stela 25 from Izapa.



<= Figure 3. Stela 25, Izapa.

Here we see two complementary references: bird in sky above and caiman under earth below. This is, in fact, the well-known bird-snake symbol, a non-dual form at the

core of Mesoamerican religion.⁴ Similarly, also at Izapa, we can look at the three monument complexes on the west end of the Group F ballcourt.

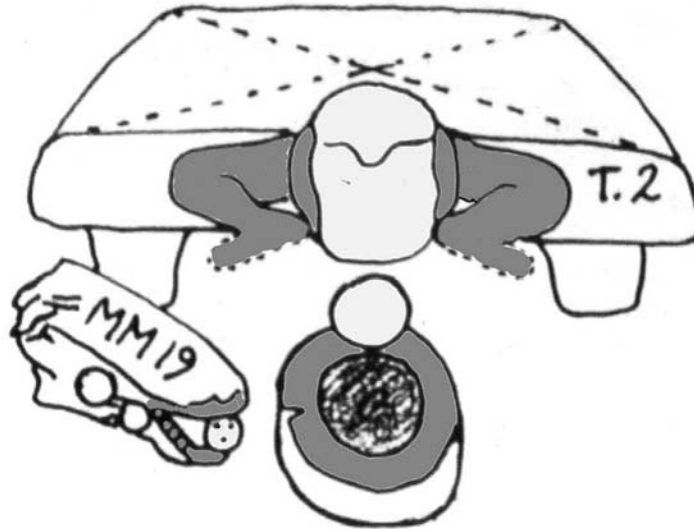


Figure 4. The three symbolic statements on the west end of the Izapa ballcourt. Drawing by the author.

We see the sun-head emerging from between the legs of the throne — a birth image. Underneath we have the spherical stone gameball poised at the circular stone goalring. Head in vagina is being compared to ball in goal ring. The symbolists of Izapa have conflated two different meanings here, united by the similar iconographic forms. Meanwhile, a foot to the left is the toothy serpent head, a reused ballcourt marker that, like many of these markers, appears to have had a ball or little head in its mouth, held by sharp teeth. I've interpreted this as a devouring image of death and translation. All three of these symbolic forms complement each other, yet are united in referring to a larger meaning — that of sacrifice/transformation and renewal in the ballgame Creation Myth.

And a larger, astronomical level of meaning is also indicated, because the Izapa throne-complex and ballcourt point to the December solstice sunrise horizon, over which the Dark Rift in the Milky Way rose during Izapa's heyday. The sun of genesis and the Dark Rift place of darkness. I can easily point out that the alignment of the solstice sun with the Dark Rift in the Milky Way — the galactic alignment that happens in era-2012 and which is the centerpiece of my reconstruction work — is the astronomical inflection of *ch'ab ak'ab*. New birth, or a *cosmogensis*, from the dark place of transformation.

Izapa provides other examples for Iconic Kenning; for now, this will suffice. Diphrastic Kenning appears to be a specific application of a type of perception embraced by the ancient Maya and pre-Maya, one that is non-dual in nature and that should not be limited to a Classic Period context of hieroglyphic writing.

⁴ And this image, like the Izapa ballcourt statements (Figure 4), has an astronomical reference. This suggests that Iconic Kenning can operate on multiple levels beyond the two-part (“di-phrase”) of diphrastic kenning. We could entertain a “Triconic Kenning”, or simply acknowledge that symbolic (iconic) statements may combine more than two components under a larger united meaning.

Appendix 1: Email Notes to Maya Scholars, June of 2014

Dear -----, -----, -----, and -----,

Karl Taube, 2009: <http://www.mesoweb.com/articles/Taube2009.pdf>. Titled “The Womb of the World.” Figure 7d on page 94 of Taube illustrates the womb-place of a sky deity. This is much like the inverted T-shaped carving at Izapa that contains the Hero Twins. This inverted T-shape is replicated in a plain stone placed in the center of the ballcourt’s south wall at Izapa. In an interpretive strategy that I would now call Iconic Kenning, I interpreted this long ago as indicating that the Izapans thought of the ballcourt as the Milky Way and its center as a womb.

There’s a piece by Knowlton online: <http://www.mayacodices.org/help/slides/SAA-Knowlton-08.pdf>. I’ve been reading Timothy Knowlton’s 2010 book *Maya Creation Myths*. Are you aware of his elaboration of the **diphrastric** kenning approach to decipherment, particularly the ch’ab-ak’ab diphrastric and all its implications? And his discussion of correlative monism and complementary dualism? I’ve actually had a profound realization of how his approach supplies a conceptual framework, expressed in apparently acceptable clinical terms, for the non-duality I’ve been chastised for as well as for the “sacrifice and renewal” complex I’ve languaged. Have you read *Parallel Worlds* ed. by Carrasco and Hull (2012)? There seems to be a new open-minded languaging of Maya philosophy afoot, that does justice to a profound Maya “metaphysics” (to use Knowlton’s term). I never would have imagined that the term would ever be allowed into scholarly discourse, considering how rudely I’ve been flailed for using it. The inflections of ch’ab-ak’ab are mind blowing and evoke the non-dual compact of sacrifice and renewal not to mention — to apply the very same technique of dialogical metaphor evocation of the deeper “abstract” meaning — the sun in the Dark Rift (male and female symbols). I kid you not — read his comments on page 24. AND, the phrase is associated with the GI deity at Palenque, on the Tablet of the Temple of the Cross.

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Excerpt from my personal communication to scholars (Appendix 1): June of 2014.

Figures 3 and 4 were drawn by the author. Figure 1 photographed by the author.