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THE ETYMOLOGY OF QUICHEAN kumáç snake AND
THE LINGUISTIC AFFILIATION OF THE OLMEC¹

James A. Fox

The Mayan and Mixe-Zoquean words for snake are usually reflexes of PM *ka:n snake and PMZ *çáhin snake, respectively, as shown in Table 1.² The Quiché and Pocomchí reflexes of PM *ka:n, however, are used only in archaic senses.³ Proto-Quichean (Quiche-Kekchí in Table 1) *ka:n has been replaced in Quiché, Sacapultec, Cakchiquel, Tzutujil, and Uspantec by kumáç, for which no etymology has been proposed; indeed, no Mayan derivation seems plausible.

A frequent use of kumáç in early post-Conquest Quiché documents is in the compound Gucumatz (usually analyzed as q'uq' feather, quetzal bird + kumáç snake), the name of the Quiché god corresponding to Aztec Quetzal-coatl feathered serpent and Yucatec kukulcan (k'uk'-u1 feathered + kà:n snake). The feathered serpent, god of Venus and culture hero, figures prominently in legends and archaeological motifs throughout Mesoamerica.

The Mixe-Zoquean terms for Venus, the morning and evening star, are compounds of the words for night or big, and star, as shown in Table 2. Assuming that Zoque çuki maça/çuk maça morning star should be analyzed as çu night + -ki at⁴ + maça star, and that Zoque çu, Mixe ço:, and Sayula Popoluca çu? reflect pre-Proto-Mixe-Zoquean **ku:? night,⁵ it is likely that an early version of this compound for Venus might have been **ku:~?ki ma:xça or **ku:? ma:xça (depending on presence or absence of the temporal suffix). The resemblance of these reconstructed compounds to Quichean kumáç is obvious. I believe that the Quicheans borrowed the compound as a name for the feathered serpent, or god of Venus. Eventually, they added q'uq' feather to the borrowed kumáç; by that time, kumáç may already have come to mean snake (displacing the Quichean reflex of PM *ka:n).⁶ Although one cannot be sure when the semantic change took place, the borrowing itself must have occurred very early, since it preceded the Mixe-Zoquean sound shift **k>*ç.

Since Mayan and Mixe-Zoquean constitute a linguistic family, it is possible that Quichean kumáç was inherited from Proto-Maya-Mixe-Zoquean through Proto-Mayan, rather than borrowed. However, several lines of evidence suggest that borrowing is the correct explanation: (1) none of the reconstructed Proto-Mixe-Zoquean forms have known cognates in Mayan (that is, kumáç makes sense in pre-Proto-Mixe-Zoquean, but not in Proto-Mayan); (2) kumáç is found only in those Mayan languages which might have had significant contact with Mixe-Zoquean; and (3) worship of the feathered serpent seems to have originated among the Olmec, with subsequent introduction to the Maya by way of the Pacific piedmont of Guatemala, which lies adjacent to the homelands of Quichean and Tapachultec (now probably extinct), the southernmost member of Mixe-Zoquean.⁷

Primarily because of the close distributional match between Mixe-Zoquean languages and Olmec or Olmec-influenced archaeological sites, and

TABLE 1

MAYAN AND MIXE-ZOQUEAN WORDS FOR SNAKE

	Quiché	kumáɛ	<u>snake</u>
		ka:n	5th day-name; lineage-name
	Sacapultec	kumáɛ	<u>snake</u>
	Cakchiquel	kumáɛ	<u>snake</u>
	Tzutujil	kumáɛ	<u>snake</u>
	Uspantec	kumáɛ	<u>snake</u>
	Pocomchí	a:q'	<u>snake</u>
		ka:n	5th day-name
	Kekchí	k'antíʔ	<u>snake</u>
	Teco	ka:n	<u>snake</u>
	Mam	ka:n	<u>snake</u> ; 14th day-name
	Kanjobal	kan	<u>snake</u>
	Jacaltepec	láb'a	<u>snake</u>
Mayan:	Chuj	čan	<u>snake</u>
	Tojolabal	čan	<u>snake</u>
	Huastec (Potosí)	čan	<u>snake</u>
	Chicomuceltec	čan	<u>snake</u>
	Tzeltal	čan	<u>snake</u> , <u>insect</u>
	Tzotzil	čon	<u>animal</u> , <u>snake</u> , <u>cat</u>
	Chontal	čan	<u>snake</u>
	Chol	lukum	<u>snake</u>
		čan-il	<u>germs</u> , <u>animals</u> , <u>insects</u>
	Cholti	čan	<u>snake</u>
	Chortí	čan	<u>snake</u>
	Yucatec	kà:n	<u>snake</u>
	Lacandón	kan	<u>snake</u>
	Itzá	kan/kʌn	<u>snake</u>
	Mopán	kan	<u>snake</u>
	Mixe	ča:ʔn	<u>snake</u> , <u>intestines</u>
Mixe-	Sayula Popoluca	čanay	<u>snake</u>
Zoquean:	Zoque (Tecpatán)	čan	<u>snake</u>
	Zoque (Western)	čahin	<u>snake</u>
	Sierra Popoluca	ča:ñ	<u>snake</u>

partly because of supposed Mixe-Zoquean loanwords in Mayan and other indigenous languages of Middle America, Kaufman⁸ suggested that the Olmec spoke Proto-Zoquean (as opposed to Proto-Mixean). To date, no detailed etymologies have been adduced in support of this hypothesis. The etymology of kumáɛ supports the identification of the Olmec with the Mixe-Zoquean languages, because (1) kumáɛ was borrowed from Mixe-Zoquean, in which it originally meant Venus; and (2) it is likely that the worship of the feathered serpent, god of Venus, was borrowed by the Maya from the Olmecs, or the Olmec-influenced peoples, near sites which are located precisely where Mayan had contact with Mixe-Zoquean.

TABLE 2

MIXE-ZOQUEAN Venus AND ASSOCIATED WORDS

Mixe	ɔo: <u>night</u>	mʌx	<u>big</u>	ma:ɬa	<u>star</u>
Sayula Popoluca	ɬuʔ <u>night</u>	mɨx	<u>big</u>	ma:xɬ	<u>star</u>
Zoque (Tecpatán)	ɬu <u>night</u>	mweha	<u>big</u>	maɬa	<u>star</u>
Mixe	mʌxʌ ma:ɬa	<u>morning star (Venus)</u>			
Zoque (Tecpatán)	mweha maɬa	<u>morning star (Venus)</u>			
	ɬuki maɬa	<u>morning star (Venus)</u>			
	ɬuk maɬa	<u>morning star (Venus)</u>			

Mixe-Zoquean was probably not as differentiated in Olmec times as Kaufman implied, however, since the k of kumáɬ indicates that the phrase was borrowed before a sound shift (**k>*ɬ) which was common to all of Mixe-Zoquean (although it is possible that there were independent shifts). The etymology of kumáɬ also suggests, of course, that the association of the feathered serpent with Venus may have preceded, or at least been more important than, other associations (e.g., with the wind) of the feathered serpent god of immediate pre-Conquest times.

NOTES

1. An earlier version of this etymology appeared in the author's doctoral dissertation, "Proto-Mayan Accent and Palatalization of Velars," The University of Chicago, 1977. The data in Tables 1 and 2 are documented in the dissertation, except that Sacapultec data (from Jack DuBois, personal communication 1977) and Western Zoque data (from William L. Wonderly, "Some Zoquean Phonemic and Morphophonemic Correspondences," *IJAL* 15 (1949): 1-11) have been added.

2. The Proto-Mayan *k/Proto-Mixe-Zoquean *ɬ-correspondence occurs commonly in prima facie cognates. Except for kumáɬ, the Mayan words for snake which are not reflexes of PM *ka:n can be accounted for in terms of Mayan. Pocomchi a:q' is from PM *a:k' tongue, vine. Kekchí k'anti? is from PM *k'an yellow + *t^yi:ʔ mouth; the Kekchí form was probably borrowed from Cholti k'an ti? fer-de-lance (Kekchí has many loans from Cholti), since one would have expected Kekchí *q'an ci?. Jacalteco láb'a is problematic, but certainly related to the Jacalteco day-name áb'ax soot (?), correspond to Quiché ka:n. Chol lukum is related to identical forms meaning worm in neighboring languages.

3. The various Mayan day-name lists are generally cognate, though the days may be numbered from different points in the cycle. The Mam 14th day-name corresponds to the Quiché and Pocomchí 5th day-names, which also correspond to the Aztec 5th day-name, coatl snake. Although Quiché, Pocomchí, and Mam preserve reflexes of PM *k̄a:n in this day-name (Quiché also has it in lineage-names), speakers of these languages are generally no longer aware of the former association of this day-name with snakes.
4. I assume that the -ki/-k of the Zoque colonial source represents Wonderly's (William L. Wonderly, "Zoque V: Other Stem and Word Classes," IJAL 18 (1952): 35-48) suffix 712, -ʔk, a temporal suffix which "may follow certain attributive stems," meaning essentially at, or when it is. I know of no cognate suffix in other Mixe-Zoquean languages, so reconstruction for PMZ is uncertain.
5. That is, by the change Proto-Maya-Mixe-Zoquean **k>Proto-Mixe-Zoquean *k̄, as in snake. Since this change must have taken place after the separation of Mayan from Mixe-Zoquean (or be the very change which defines the separation), yet before the differentiation of Mixe-Zoquean (unless the change occurred several times, independently), 'pre-PMZ' seems the most conservative label.
6. It is possible that the presence of q'uq is due to folk etymology of the original compound, especially if the temporal attributive suffix was present. However, I believe that the k of kuma^{k̄} was derived from the **k of **ku:ʔ, rather than from the suffix; the latter possibility would require a more complex argument for the quality of the following vowel in Quichean.
7. The last claim is based on the fact that the earliest depictions of the feathered serpent are found at Olmec sites of Mexico, which flourished about 1200-600 B.C., and at Guatemalan piedmont sites, which exhibit strong Olmec influence. See Michael D. Coe, America's First Civilization (New York, 1968), pp. 92, 100, 114-114, and S. W. Miles, "Sculpture of the Guatemala-Chiapas Highlands and Pacific Slopes, and Associated Hieroglyphs," in G. R. Willey, vol. ed., Archaeology of Sothern Mesoamerica, Part One; Robert Wauchope, gen ed., Handbook of Middle American Indians, vol. II (Austin, 1965), pp. 237-275 (esp. p. 247).
8. Terrence Kaufman, "Archaeological and linguistic correlations in Mayaland and associated areas of Meso-America," World Archaeology 8:101-118.