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THE ETYMOLOGY OF QUICHEAN kumá¢ snake AND
THE LINGUISTIC AFFILIATION OF THE OLMEC

James A. Fox

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

A frequent use of kumá¢ in early post-Conquest Quiche documents is in the compound Gucumatz (usually analyzed as q'uq' feather, quetzal bird + kumá¢ snake), the name of the Quiche god corresponding to Aztec Quetzalcoatl feathered serpent and Yucatec kukulcan (k'uk'-ul feathered + ka: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 čuk ma:x¢a/čuk ma:x¢a morning star should be analyzed as ču night + -ki at4 + ma:x¢a star, and that Zoque ču, Mixe go:, and Sayula Popoluca ču? 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:x¢a or **ku:? ma:x¢a (depending on presence or absence of the temporal suffix). The resemblance of these reconstructed compounds to Quichean kumá¢ 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 kumá¢; by that time, kumá¢ 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>*¢.

Since Mayan and Mixe-Zoquean constitute a linguistic family, it is possible that Quichean kumá¢ 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, kumá¢ makes sense in pre-Proto-Mixe-Zoquean, but not in Proto-Mayan); (2) kumá¢ 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
partly because of supposed Mixe-Zoquean loanwords in Mayan and other indigenous languages of Middle America, Kaufman 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 kumáč supports the identification of the Olmec with the Mixe-Zoquean languages, because (1) kumáč 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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Language</th>
<th>Word 1</th>
<th>Word 2</th>
<th>Word 3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mixe</td>
<td>÷o:</td>
<td>MAX</td>
<td>ma:fa</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sayula Popoluca</td>
<td>÷u?</td>
<td>mIx</td>
<td>ma:xfa</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zoque (Tecpatán)</td>
<td>÷u</td>
<td>mweha</td>
<td>ma:fa</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mixe</td>
<td>÷a:</td>
<td>ma:fa</td>
<td>morning star</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zoque (Tecpatán)</td>
<td>÷uki</td>
<td>mafa</td>
<td>morning star</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>÷uk</td>
<td>mafa</td>
<td>morning star</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Mixe-Zoquean was probably not as differentiated in Olmec times as Kaufman implied, however, since the k of kumáξ indicates that the phrase was borrowed before a sound shift (**k>*t) which was common to all of Mixe-Zoquean (although it is possible that there were independent shifts). The etymology of kumáξ 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


2. The Proto-Mayan *k/Proto-Mixe-Zoquean *ξ-correspondence occurs commonly in prima facie cognates. Except for kumáξ, 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:ξ' tongue, vine. Kekchi k'anti? is from PM *k'an yellow + *t'yi:? mouth; the Kekchi form was probably borrowed from Cholti k'an ti? fer-de-lance (Kekchi has many loans from Cholti), since one would have expected Kekchi *q'an ci?. Jacaltec láb'a is problematic, but certainly related to the Jacaltec day-name ab'ax soot (?), corresponding to Quiche 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 Pocomchi 5th day-names, which also
correspond to the Aztec 5th day-name, coatl snake. Although Quiché,
Pocomchi, and Mam preserve reflexes of PM *ka: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, -?k, 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 recon-
struction for PMZ is uncertain.

5. That is, by the change Proto-Maya-Mixe-Zoquean **k>Proto-Mixe-Zoquean
*¢, as in snake. Since this change must have taken place after the sepa-
ration 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¢ was derived from the **k
of **ku:, rather than from the suffix; the latter possibility would re-
quire 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 Southern Mesoamerica, Part One;
Robert Wauchope, gen ed., Handbook of Middle American Indians, vol. II

8. Terrence Kaufman, "Archaeological and linguistic correlations in
Mayaland and associated areas of Meso-America," World Archaeology 8:101-
118.