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## **Cosmological and Ritual Language in Ch'orti'**



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### **Introduction**

The Foundation for the Advancement of Mesoamerican Studies, Inc. (FAMSI) provided the monetary support for me to undertake three months of linguistic fieldwork among the Ch'orti' Maya in southern Guatemala from May to August 2000. One of the primary

goals of the project was to document the surviving cosmological and ritual language still in use among the Ch'orti'. I attended and recorded as many rituals as I was able to and then transcribed and translated each text. These texts then served as the basis for discussions with numerous consultants to determine which lexical items made up part of their daily vocabulary and which were used in these ceremonial contexts. Many weeks were also spent in direct elicitation of select vocabulary which I felt related to ritual or cosmological matters.

The second aim of this project was to attempt to illuminate some of the readings in the hieroglyphic script through Ch'orti'. To do this, I compiled a list of all the phonetically transparent readings in the corpus of inscriptions. This list was then used (after making minor phonological changes appropriate to present-day Ch'orti') in questioning four Ch'orti' elders from different hamlets near Jocotán, Guatemala about each lexical item and what words could be formed from each lexical root.

The following are selections of data from this research project relating to Ch'orti' ritual and cosmological language and the hieroglyphic script.

*Submitted 11/01/2000 by:*  
Kerry Hull  
[kerryasa@aol.com](mailto:kerryasa@aol.com)

## **Cosmological Data**

The following cosmological data was acquired through various means. Many evenings were spent with elders from different hamlets observing the night sky. Unfortunately, few star or planet names have survived in Ch'orti', although many are known by Spanish names. Certain curanderos would regularly invoke the names of numerous stars, such as *Estrella de Katata'* (*star of god*), *Estrella E Travesador*, *Niño Redentor y Pastoreador*, *E Siete Travesia de Katata'*, *Ángel don Pascual de Veronica Estrellador*, *Estrella de Saliente*, *Santa Vieja del Mundo al Saliente*, *doña Vieja al Saliente del Mundo*, *Virgen de María al Saliente de Parindera del Mundo*, *Enclisador*, *Entapiador*, *Encoranador del Mundo*, *Niño Revistador de Pasterador* and *Virgen Santa Teresa* in their curing rites. For Ch'orti' healers, each star is considered to be responsible for a certain kind of illness and has a particular evil spirit associated with it. The position of the stars at the time of the curing rite is determined by the healer so that a proper decision can be made on which star (i.e. evil spirit) is causing the sickness. In practice, however, many healers simply knew the names of the different stars without actually being able to identify them securely in the sky. The consistent association of each illness with its related star seemed common knowledge and therefore made the difficult task of locating stars during the day unnecessary. These evil spirits are said to be

"playing" (*a'si*) above in the sky and for this reason are responsible for the illness (cf. Fought 1982:268-275). This is a ritual use of the word *a'si* (in daily speech simply meaning "to play") that occurs in this context with the meaning of "mischievously causing illness." A good example of this can be found in the following curing rite for a woman who was having trouble giving birth. The curandera on this occasion repeated this prayer during the ceremony:

1. *tu estrella de katata'*
2. *yixto a'si watar ti' chan tu ruedir*
3. *a'si tu travesiar de katata'*
4. *a'si ti' chan*
5. *a'si tama e siete atravesia tekatata'*
6. *juegan con el mal espíritu de la gloria*
7. *juegan arriba*
8. *niño entapiador*
9. *niño enclisdor*
10. *juegan arriba*
11. *juegan al mediante del cielo*
12. *al mediante de la gloria*
13. *juega el mal espíritu de la gloria*
14. *justicia viene del cielo*
15. *justicia viene de la gloria*
16. *virgen santa teresa estrellador aquí al saliente del mundo*
17. *a'si tama enyax a laguna del mundo al saliente*
18. *angel don pascual de veronica estrellador del saliente*
19. *a'si tama e enyax a laguna*
20. *y ensak a laguna dija*
21. *tama e costa mayor*
22. *tama bobita mayor*
23. *santa vieja del mundo al saliente*
24. *doña vieja al saliente del mundo*
25. *virgen de maría al saliente de parindera del mundo*
26. *a'si tama e enyax a laguna*
27. *tama en costa mayor*
28. *en la puerta saliente*
29. *enclisador*
30. *entapiador*
31. *encorandero del mundo*
32. *a'si watar tama e puerta al saliente de cristo*
33. *ch'a'r a'si taka e petejnir uyok*
34. *petejnir uk'ab'*

1. The star of god
2. Still comes playing above in his wheel
3. Plays Travesiar of god

4. Plays above
5. Plays among the seven (Pleiades) Travesia of god
6. They play with the bad spirit of heaven
7. They play above
8. Child Stopper
9. Child Eclipser
10. They play above
11. They play in the middle of the sky
12.       in the middle of heaven
13. They play, the bad spirits of heaven
14. Justice (punishment) comes from the sky
15. Justice (punishment) comes from heaven
16. Virgen Holy Teresa *Estrellador* here in the west of the world
17. They play in the blue of the lagoon of the west
18. Angel Don Pascual of Veronica *Estrellador* of the west
19. They play in the blue of the lagoon
20.       And white of the lagoon *dija*
21.       In the *costa mayor*
22.       In the *bobita mayor*
23. Holy Old Woman of the world in the west
24. Doña Old Woman in the west of the world
25. Virgen of Maria in the west of *Parindera* of the world
26. They play in the green of the lagoon
27.       In the *costa mayor*
28.       In the west door
29. Eclipser
30. Stopper
31. *Encorandero* of the world
32. They come playing in the west door of Christ
33. They are playing with the rolling/crawling of his foot
34.       with the rolling/crawling of his hand

*Tu estrella e travesador* is the star thought to be responsible for the pain of the woman in labor. The evil spirit associated with this star was in a position over the woman at the time of this ceremony and was a'si, or "playing" (i.e. mischievously causing the illness) above. The star is called the Child Stopper and Child Eclipser because it is thought to be interfering with the birth of the baby. These are also the proper names of this illness. The star is called Travesia or Atravesia because it has caused the baby to be horizontal in the womb and therefore prohibiting its birth. In lines 19 and 25 the colors blue and white are used to describe a lagoon in the sky. *Costa mayor* is probably the north according to one elder's commentary on this. It stands to reason that these colors and costas are related to cardinal directions, although little contemporary knowledge of these associations is found today. In Fought's texts a similar mention is made of a place "where you are coming to play in the blue ring, the white ring" as well as "the blue basin, the white basin," both in connection with a curing rite (1972:272). In line 32 and 33 the

baby is said to be "rolling" or "crawling" around in the womb. The evil spirit is causing this movement that creates the pain of the woman. The purpose of this curing ceremony is to locate the evil star (read spirit) and to rid her of its influence so that her baby can be born and her pain alleviated. This ceremony makes use of the strictly ritual use of a'si as "mischievously cause illness" instead of its colloquial usage as "play." The Lord/Goblin of the Night (see discussion below), an evil nawal, is also said to "play" with the spirit of a young baby, referring to 'killing' it (*uyasru yar umeyn yar e chuchu*).

Some stars and constellations still have Ch'orti' names such as the Venus, as the Morning Star, Sakojb'ix Tob'ix Ek' (lit. "it just dawned-it just jumped-star"). The Pleiades are known as *Mormorak'* or *Mormorek'*. The true term is likely *mormorek'* since its meaning is "group of stars" (*mormor*, "group" and *ek'*, "star"), whereas *mormorak'* means "group of grass." While there were numerous informants who believed one or the other was the correct word, the most commonly encountered was *mormorak'*. During the summer in Jocotán the Pleiades appear around ten or eleven o'clock at night. One of the seven stars cannot be seen with the naked eye. Girard notes that they appear from November to December at midnight and between April in May they appear in the morning during the passing of the sun at its zenith (1949:453).

The belt of Orion is known as the Arador. Estrella Arador is a group of five stars with the shape of an upside-down letter "U." La Estrella Polar, or North Star is also known by most of the older generation. La Cruz de Mayo can only be seen in the month of May (*anumuy tama uyuxinar e jab'*, "it passes in the middle of the year") and consists of 7 stars, among which one is particularly big and another noticeable small. Some consultants only figure in four stars for the Cruz de Mayo (Girard mentions seven, 1949:455). They are well ordered to make a cross. Near Jocotán it can be seen rising in the west and then resting on the mountains in the east during the course of an evening in May. This group of stars plays an important role in determining when the rainy season is coming for the Ch'orti'.

"Niño Pascual Veronico" is a star that appears around three or four o'clock in the morning, but I am presently unable to identify it. "Niño Revistador de Pasterador" is a star that appears where the sun sets in April and May when it can be seen the best. Osa Mayor is commonly recognized but nothing was known about it. Girard does mention that Osa Mayor is important for the Ch'orti' in conjunction with the Milky Way (1949:456). Osa Mayor appears in the north simultaneously with the appearance of Osa Menor in the south. There seems to be nothing relating to either of them in the folklore or traditions that I have found to-date.

Comets are simply known as "bolas de fuego," or "balls of fire." They are considered to be a very bad sign of an impending evil. One story told to me said that fire was first brought to the earth when a comet hit just after the creation of people. Another tradition says it was a comet-like lava rock spewed from a volcano.

Eclipses (*eklis* as the Ch'orti' pronounce it) are greatly feared and are believed to be an evil omen. Eclipses are especially dangerous for pregnant women. During a lunar eclipse, pregnant women rush to wrap their stomachs with a red cloth (*chakchak payuj*)

so that their unborn baby won't be "eaten" by the sun (*yer e chuchu' xe' kuchur umenerob' tunakob' ma'chi ak'ujxa uti' y ya yo'pa imb'utzyer uyerorjir*, "(so that) the little baby that is carried in their bellies is not eaten by the mouth and that it will come healthy in its appearance"). This belief stems from their view that during a lunar eclipse the moon is 'eaten' by the sun (*k'ujxa e katu' umen e kilis*) and vice-a-versa during a solar eclipse. This custom may help to explain a possible eclipse scene ([Figure 1](#)) from a Classic Maya vessel (Kerr 5359) which depicts the moon and the sun (as rabbit and human) in an eclipse cartouche.



Figure 1. Image K5359 – Photograph © Justin Kerr.

All the individuals in the scene who are looking up at the eclipse have a red cloth tied around their waists, some in addition to other clothing they have on. This could represent an early form of this tradition to protect oneself from the dangers of an eclipse by tying a red cloth around one's waist that was applied more broadly to both men and women in the Classic period. Just such a red cloth is also placed over a peppermint plant, according to Wisdom, to protect it from sorcery (1950:151).

The Ch'orti' also believe that when the moon rises with a certain planet (*e katu' nu'tur a'xin taka e ek'*) during the day or night it is a sign that the moon is "selling her children" (*uchoni umaxtak*) and that something terrible like a fight or a murder is going to happen. Most of my older informants knew of this tradition. From discussions with informants it was very clear that the planet was Venus. In Fought (1972:427-428), the same phenomenon is referred to without any identification as to which planet it is: "When that

star unites its body with the moon, that is a sign that someone is going to kill himself in the villages. If not, a war is going to be made in the towns." The importance of identifying this star as Venus relates the Classic-period belief in Venus warfare (Schele and Freidel 1990). While early interpretations of the "star-over-earth" war glyph were probably overzealous in finding connections to Venus in some cases, there is an undeniable relationship between war and Venus. These references in this Ch'orti' data seem to confirm this association.

In the Yucatán, México, there is a tradition of a "living cord", called the *kuxan sum*, which came down from heaven and nourished the ancient Maya rulers (Tozzer 1907:153-154). The *kuxan sum* can also be readily identified on ceramics, stone monuments, and in Paris and Dresden codices. I found a similar tradition of a cord from heaven among the Ch'orti'. One tale told to me by one of my consultants told about the *kumix anxer*, or Penultimate Angel (see discussion below), whose father and mother died and went to heaven. The young angel wanted a sign from his mother that they were well and so the mother let down a small section of cane filled with milk down from heaven by a thread (*tz'ojnok*) as nourishment. A lizard leaped up just before it got to the ground, broke the cord, and drank the milk before the boy could get his hands on it. There seems to be a strong similarity in this version of the rope from heaven sent down to nourish those on earth with that of Yucatán and the pre-conquest Maya.

The Popol Vuh records that in the first creation the universe was established by "the fourfold siding, fourfold cornering, measuring, fourfold staking" (D. Tedlock 1985:72). This mention of the "measuring" of heaven with cords is also known by some Ch'orti'. One very old consultant explained to me how at the creation a "*sonda*," or cord was used to measure the distances between all the planets and stars and that this cord was critical to the whole creation process. When I asked him just what kind of cord this was he said it was like a modern-day intravenous tube used in hospitals that is hollow so nourishment could flow through it. This description parallels remarkably the account of the *kuxan sum* found in Tozzer (1907:153-154) as well as in other Yucatecan traditions (Freidel *et al.* 1993, 425, note 60).

## **The Moon**

One of the most productive areas of my research was in gaining an understanding of the role that the moon plays in Ch'orti' society today and in their oral traditions. The moon is known today as *katu'* ("our mother"). In Girard's day the term *uj* was still being used for moon but I could not find anyone of any age group who knew of the existence of this word. Some were familiar with the fact that Girard had recorded it but have never heard it used. The only meaning of *uj* that I encountered was a 78 year old man who said his grandfather used *uj* in the expression "*uj taka ixin*," or "Come back quickly!" No one knew of this word except this one elderly man.



The different phases of the moon, according to Girard, were viewed as a water pot at different levels (Girard 1949:466-7). The following are the names of the phases of the moon I was able to identify:

<i>ujamir e katu'</i>	The phases of the moon ("the spaces of the moon")
<i>uxejrib' e katu'</i>	The phases of the moon ("the divisions of the moon")
<i>ch'ok e katu'</i>	New moon ("the moon is tender")
<i>satar e katu'</i>	New moon ("it is a new moon")
<i>ch'ok katu'ike</i>	New moon
<i>yuxin k'inix e katu'</i>	Quarter moon ("the moon is already in the center of the sky")
<i>chuchu' e katu'</i>	Quarter moon ("the moon is small")
<i>ne'b' e katu'</i>	Full moon ("the moon is ripe")
<i>b'ut'ur e katu'</i>	Full moon ("the moon is full")
<i>k'in katu'</i>	Full moon ("sun-moon") (because the moon's shape is compared to that of the sun's)
<i>pechka e katu'</i>	Full moon
<i>ch'okix e katu'</i>	Waning moon ("the moon is already tender")
<i>orajix e katu'</i>	Waning moon ("the moon is already a quarter")
<i>ch'okto e katu'</i>	Waning moon ("the moon is still tender")

Girard (1949:466) recorded the additional term *туру uh*, "quarter moon." In Wisdom we also find *anamtz'ah e katu'*, "waning moon," and *nohta' e katu'*, "full moon" (Wisdom 1950:124, 129).

During a new moon when the moon is not visible the Ch'orti' believe the sun and moon are having sexual relations. Various activities are prohibited during this time. Most importantly, couples cannot themselves have sexual relations on this day out of fear that they will have pains in their groin or that their baby will be born with defects. Planting is likewise avoided during a new moon. They strongly believe that if you plant during a new moon that the roots of the corn will be very short and the plant will fall down before maturing. There are also special provisions on cutting corn stocks. If the leaves on the corn stalks are green the Ch'orti' do not cut them during a new moon because they fear they will dry up and be of no use. If a person cuts palm leaves during this time the vein of the leaves will shrink up and lose its strength. Similarly, if ditch reed is cut around the time of a new moon its leaves will be thin. If, however, you wait until a full moon, the leaves will be wide and more useful. Finally, if you cut wood on this



day they say that your machete will turn "azul" or "pintado" because the trees produce a lot of sap on this day.

The moon and the Morning Star were also used in the past as a means for telling time at night. Older consultants said that when the moon was in the center of the sky at night (*ak'b'ar tuyuxin k'in turu e katu'*) they knew it was still the middle of the night. The Morning Star was then used to tell them when they should get up to start their walk to their fields to work. Just before dawn, the Morning Star appears (around 4:00 a.m.) in the sky and signals that morning is coming soon (*asakojpa ek' ira t'erpix sakojpix era ra''jxa asakojpa*, "this star already turned over/around, already dawned now, it will dawn").

The Ch'orti' believe that the moon's light is soft "like a woman" and so they believe the moon is female (the Ch'orti' see a seated woman with a turban wrapped around her head in the moon). On the other hand, the sun's light is strong (*e'rach' u't e katata'*) and burns you and therefore the sun is believed to be a male who disciplines (hurts) his children with his rays.

### **The Relationship of the Moon to Rainy Season**

Beginning in March and continuing through April 15 the moon provides certain signs whether rainy season is forthcoming or not. If the quarter moon appears *t'erer ch'u'r*, or "tilted" in the sky, it means that the moon is 'bringing' the rainy season (*uk'eche e jaja'r e katu' t'erer ch'u'r*, "the moon brings the rain") (cf. Fought 1972:387). However, if the quarter moon is not tilted in one direction but appears level in the sky, the moon is said to not be bringing with it the rainy season (*ma' chuk e che e katu' tu k'atarir ch'u'r*, "the moon doesn't bring the rain because it is level").

Other signs of rainy season are found in the color of the moon. In April, if the moon has a red glow (*e katu' watar chakopen inyajrer uwirna'r uwarar*, "the moon comes very red in its appearance, its reflection"), this is interpreted as a bad sign that a dry summer is coming (*syau k'in uk'eche e katu'*). If the moon appears with a yellow tint it is thought to have a "sad" or "tired expression" (*tzajtaka yar uwirnar'*), or to be "simple" (*uyajch'i*) ("simple" means 'having no reflection' or 'soft light') and is a sign that rainy season is coming.

The moon and the sun (*k'in*) both appear at times with rings around them. In both cases these are considered to be signs of the rain season. If the ring around the sun starts in the morning and disappears around noon this means a short summer (about 8 more days) is coming. If, however, the ring lasts until 3:00 in the afternoon, then the summer will last between 20 and 30 more days. One night I was walking along a dirt road with a Ch'orti' family when there was a ring around the moon and one of the young boys looked up and said "*e katu' a'ti*," "the moon is bathing." I was able to confirm this belief with many other Ch'orti' speakers. One elder told me that the ring was "una pila de agua," or "a trough of water" (cf. Fought 1972:267). The ring around the moon and the

sun are thought to be basins of water in which they are "bathing." This may have interesting implications for two images on Ixlu Stela 3 and Jimbal Stela 1. Both scenes depict the Paddler gods (representing the sun and darkness) floating in the air above standing rulers. The Paddlers are surrounded by a dotted-scroll motif that represents clouds. Stuart, Houston, and Robertson have recently suggested that these scenes show the Paddlers "bathing" in a kind of purification ritual (Stuart *et al.* 1999:169-70). They argue that the verb that is usually associated with the Paddler gods can be read as **at-i**, "to take a bath" (Houston views this more as "his watering"). The data from my field research offers significant confirmation of this interpretation. Remembering that the Paddler gods represent the sun and darkness, it is possible that the watery rings around them were indeed thought to represent the idea of the "bathing" of the sun and moon as this Ch'orti' data suggests. A Ch'orti' healer put it this way: "*e katata' ch'a'r te rueda, ayan e katata' war ajchi a'tesna, k'ani ak'axi e jaja'r*," "god is laying down in a ring, there god is indeed taking a bath, it is going to rain water." Since these rings are considered a sign of impending rain, it is then perhaps no coincidence that on Jimbal St. 1 the text specifically mentions Chaak, the rain god, immediately after the Paddlers' names.

## Lightning

Lightning is much feared and numerous beliefs are associated with it. The Ch'orti' see lightning as the 'machete of god' (*umachit e katata'*) that is wielded by various angels (*anxerob' e katata'*) working under the auspices of god. Lightning is generally known as *jijb'ya'r*. However, special lightning bolts contain small, sharp stones on their tips so that when the angels of god throw them to the earth the Ch'orti' believe you can go to the strike spot and find the small flint point (also called "la hacha de dios"). These dangerous bolts are called *senteyo*, a term specifically used for the powerful, deadly lightning bolts that are accompanied by thunder (which, they say, is caused by the angels playing their drums or by angels chopping at the clouds with their machetes). The angels regularly kill snakes and scorpions with these lightning bolts. It is also believed that a strike from a *senteyo* will make that spot of the earth infertile for many years.

The angels who are given charge over lightning are known as "the first angels" (*e b'ajxan anxerob'*), "the first children" (*e b'ajxan maxtak*), or as "the first youths" (*e b'ajxan ma'nob'*). They are divided into two groups. The first are the "our older brother angels" (*e kasukun anxerob'*) or simply "older brothers angels" (*sakunb'ir anxerob'*). These angels "work" (*apatna*) from January to August but do their principal work between April 25th and May 5th since they are responsible for bringing the rain for spring planting. After the first planting season is over (*e b'ajxan pa'k'ma'r*), these angels are said to *a'xin ajiryo'b'*, or "go to rest." Another set of angels, known as "the younger angels" (*e kumix anxerob'*) begin their work in September. The most powerful angel among this group is the "penultimate angel" who is known as Angel San Miguel or Angel San Gabriel. He begins to work on the first day of September and goes though the middle of November. The rest of the "young angels" continue to work until

December (the time between September and December is known as *pejwa'r*, or the Second Period).

All of these angels must be shown respect when it is raining. A family must sit quietly without movement during the lightning storm to be safe. Still today even young children know of the custom that one should not play or move around when there is lightning. They believe that if children are playing on the patio or even swinging their legs from a bed (*kayujku kojktuti' e ch'akte'*) god or his angels will send a *senteyo* to kill them. Also, small babies laying down in hammocks are particularly at risk. A baby swinging in a hammock is thought to resemble the movements of a snake and so the angels might mistake it for an actual snake and strike it with lightning. Some say that a moving hammock actually turns into a snake (*ab' asutpa chan*) when the rains begin. Men must avoid cutting trees above all during this time. Women are prohibited from weaving and grinding corn during lightning storms since these activities make them especially susceptible to being struck. All of these actions are viewed as being disrespectful to the angels and invite a swift punishment in the form of a lightning bolt. The Ch'orti' also believe that one can get possessed by an evil spirit if lightning strikes close to where one is. A curandero must be called in order to rid one of this "*espanto*" (*b'ajkut*), or "fright."

## Spirits and Souls

There is quite a debate among many speakers of Ch'orti' today about the meaning of the word *meyn*. Girard (1949) and Wisdom (1950) both give it as "shadow" as well as "spirit." Speakers today have for the most part lost knowledge of its meaning of "spirit" but still regularly use it for "shadow." My oldest consultants knew of "spirit" as well as some curanderos with whom I spoke. The meaning of "spirit" is clear in the following prayer of a curandero during a healing rite:

*tya' chukur umeyn e chuchu', tya' nat'ar umeyn kone'r inwajk'ox, ilok'er,  
inwajk'ox y b'i'r twa' y wakta wiktir, ib'ani umeyn yer e chuchu' e sitz' era*

Where the spirit of the child is held, where his spirit is trapped, I give them,  
I give them their way out, I give them their way so that they will let them  
go, the spirit of this little child, this son

One curandero explained to me that the term *meyn* was used for more formal or ritual contexts. It may, however, have had a slightly more common usage too based on discussions with other elders.

Another word for "spirit" that is not commonly encountered today is *ch'u'r*. Some consultants translated it as "life force of the hills" or, simply "life force." *ch'u'r* may be equivalent to *nawal* but there is no agreement on this point among different speakers. The word *ch'u'rir* may mean "spirit," "life," or "god." One expression I heard used *nich'u'rir* to mean "my god." Another expression said when something happens is *uch'u'rir tari*, "it came with the wisdom of god," and seems to be equivalent to "Things

happen." Cognates for *ch'u'rir* can be seen in *k'uhul* "sacred" and *k'uh* "god" in the hieroglyphic script.

When speaking specifically about the spirit of a deceased person the term *xerb'a* is used. *Nawal* is often a way to refer negatively to "spirits" in daily speech. Another term for spirit is *umajin* which probably comes from the Spanish "imagen." The use of the Spanish "*alma*" is also very popular for "spirit." *u-tak'nar u-b'aker* is a metaphorical reference to "soul" and seems to translate literally as "his heart, his bone." The Spirit or Lord of the Mountain is known as *uwinkir e witzir*. The large-hatted dwarf who tricks people out of their souls for money is the *ajnoj b'itor* (lit. "he of the big hat"). The Siwanaba is a spirit who lives in the mountains and is said to be a woman with backwards feet. In Ch'orti' she is known as *k'ech'uj*. Some people equate her with the Lord of the Mountain, others believe they are separate beings. She is believed to be the same as the Sisimite by some, but others make a distinction that the Sisimite is a man. The Siwanaba accosts people on the road and plays tricks on them or even kills on occasion.

A very dangerous *nawal* is known as the *tz'u'max*. Another name for this spirit is *uwinkir ak'b'ar*, or "Lord/Goblin of the Night." In Spanish it is called by various names; *zuzuco*, *limbo*, or *jicaro* and is believed to enter houses where young babies are and kill them by sucking their blood out from their nose (*utz'u' uni' yar e chu'rkab'*). Many informants were quick to blame the *tz'u'max* for the death of any infant who died in its sleep in their hamlet. The *tz'u'max* changes into the form of a rat or other small creatures to safely sneak in the house. Parents can protect their babies by always sleeping close to them since the *tz'u'max* is repelled by the "heat" or "sweat" (*ub'urichir*) of the father. If a father leaves the house, he can hang his hat near the baby since the shadow (*meyn*) of his hat will fool the *tz'u'max* into thinking the father is present. Interestingly, the term *tz'u'maxto* is used to refer to "unbaptized children" (who are therefore especially susceptible to this *nawal*).

## Ritual Language in Healing Rites

Ritual language comprised the majority of the healing rites that I was able to witness and record. Curanderos, prayer-reciters, and midwives are known as *ajnirom*, from the verbal root *niruj*, "to heal; pray." The term *ajmornak* is reserved for midwives because they are the ones who feel the stomach (*nak*) to see if the baby is straight in the womb. Curanderos are also called *chukudero* from the Ch'orti' root *chuk* "grab, seize." This name stems from the belief that they can "grab" evil spirit and cast them out. *Nuch* is a term applied to both Maya and Christian priests. Another word for 'priest' or 'padrino' is *ajk'aj jaja'r*, "he who asks for the rain." Witches are known as *ajpus o'jroner* (lit. "one who throws words") since they can 'cast' a spell on another person. A person "bewitched" is *xerorti'*. *Ajb'a'x* is another term for "witch." The name for the priest who baptizes children is *ajk'ech ch'uyma'r*.

A good example of ritual speech in healing rites comes from a healing ceremony I attended for a young woman who had a high fever. The woman laid down on a bed and a transparent dish partially filled with water was placed under the bed below her head. The curandera put tobacco (*k'ujtz*) in her mouth and began chewing it. An egg was then broken and placed in the water-filled dish under the bed. It is believed that the fever will be "sucked" from infirm and that its heat will "cook" the egg and allow the healer to identify from the form of the cooked egg the witch or evil spirit that is causing the illness. The curandera took another egg in her hand and, beginning from the head, she passed the egg over the woman's body down to her feet and then from one arm to the other in order to form a cross. When the cross was complete she spit a spray of tobacco over the woman. In a discussion with the curandera after the healing ceremony I asked her what was the significance of passing the egg over the body of the woman. She said, "*Kasujk'ik e ku'm, kasujk'ik ek'um y e ruda, t'oxpe' y u't e ajo y e k'ujt taka e k'ujtz twa' a lok'oy e mwak,*" "we cleanse the (with) the egg, we cleanse (with) the egg and the *ruda* plant, (with) the *t'oxpe'* plant and (with) garlic seeds and tobacco, with tobacco so that the sickness will leave." The word *kasujk'ik* means "we pass over" in daily speech but in this ritual context, as she explained to me, means "we cleanse/make clean of an illness."

### Ritual Language and Ritual

Apart from select healing rites, the Ch'orti' people have not preserved many of the traditional ceremonies from even the past generation. Many from the older generation recall participating in or hearing about numerous ceremonies that are no longer practiced today. One of these is known as the *Limosna* or "Payment to the Earth" ceremony. The word *tojma'r*, "payment" is used for all types of payments today but several consultants informed me that its usage used to be more restricted to mean specifically "payments to the gods." The ceremony today is considered one of many obligations involved in planting the milpa or building a new house. There are some who still do certain parts of this ceremony today but the most do so clandestinely for fear of persecution for practicing "witchcraft." The ceremony, as described by my oldest consultants, does not seem to be practiced today in the same way. All the elders with whom I spoke agreed with this assessment. These same elders did, however, remember significant details about it.

The ceremony takes place in the beginning of April just before planting. The farmer takes the cooked meat of a chicken, a turkey, *pixon pa'* (memelita tortillas), and *chilate* to the milpa for this ceremony. Often a *padrino* is sought who knows how to perform the prayer if the person does not know himself. The person in charge then begins walking a ritual circuit. If the head of the milpa faces to the west he must begin in the north-east corner of the milpa. If the head of the milpa faces the east he must start in the south-west corner of the milpa. This ritual circuit (*xoyojb'ir*) is begun by walking in a counter-clockwise direction and, using copal, he censes the entire outer rim of the milpa. This action is viewed as defining a sacred space "*kochwa' temakte*" or "like a fence" since this ritual circumambulating is conceived as making a 'fence' or protection around the

milpa. It is the very act of prayer and censing that creates this spiritual barrier around the edges of the milpa. As he performs this circuit he repeats the following prayer:

*Te pido Madre Santissima  
Ink'ajti yajgorgortu'  
yajgorgortata'  
yajgorgor-espíritu santo  
twa' akuxpa  
twa' uche prosperar  
grano de oro  
y grano de plato.  
ajkotoj k'ya'n-tu'  
ajkotoj k'ya'ntata'  
ajkotoj k'ya'n espíritu santo  
ajch'antu'  
ajch'antata'  
ajch'a'n espíritu santo*

I plead with you Holiest Mother  
I ask for the mother round-thing  
The father round-thing  
The Holy Spirit round-thing  
So that they may grow  
So that they may prosper  
Grain of gold  
Grain of sliver  
Mother Shelled-seed?  
Father Shelled-seed?  
Holy Spirit Shelled-seed?  
Mother Vine  
Father Vine  
Holy Spirit Vine

During the entire ritual circuit the prayer is repeated over and over again. After completing the circuit he proceeds to the center of the milpa where he places candles all around the two holes he has made in the center of the milpa. He then pours a bowl of chilate and caldo in one hole. The turkey and chicken are also placed in the other hole in the center of the milpa as offerings or "payment" to Mother Earth so that the harvest will be bountiful and the field protected. After this, he begins the following prayer:

*katata' tya' inyo'pa tara inwarajse katu'rum inyo'pa inwarajwye't tara taka  
yar e tz'akarir ira takar yer niware'ynib' ira ink'ajti takaret y takar e katata'  
xe' turu tu't e k'in twa' ne't ajajpi ak'ek'war ima'chi awkta asatpa tuno'r yar*

*e ixim ira xe' taryo'nix kapak'i tamar usijik'ir unik o'k y b'an kochwe'ra ink'ajti takaret che taka e katata' twa' tuno'r ya're yer e ajch'antu' ajch'antata' e gorgortu' aj gorgortata' ya tara ejsaksaktu' ajsaksaktata' acho'ji ya tara asijki ya tara achojres jay ayan tya' watar inte' xeror o'jroner o'nte k'anto xeror ne't ma'chi awakta ak'axi tama yar e pak'ma'r ira tama yer e pak'tzaj ira ink'ajti takaret twa' b'an kochwa tarye'n inyari yar e ixim ira to'r e rum b'an a'chpama tuk'a a'xin asatpa b'an ub'an ink'ajti takaret taka tuno'r awanxerob' y tz'akon aweb'ta e jaja'r aweb'ta watar ajk'in ajk'in twa' atz'ajya yer pak'b'ar ira manik ja'x sub'ar niweroj y sub'ar niyu't tya' atarye'n inpak'i tya' yopenix inpak'i yar u't eyxim ira manik majchi uch'ami uchanar tamaren tuno'r xe' inchix ira tuno'r alok'oy imb'utz tamar taka ak'oter ink'ajti takaret kocha inte' tu'b'ir achojres tuno'r yer ajch'antu' ajgorgortata' twa' matuk'a unumse ub'a y ja'x era ink'ajti takaret twa' tuno'r e jab' twa' alok'oy tuno'r e k'ux xe' no'n kak'ampes twa' kab'ixirar*

God, since I have come here to visit our mother earth I have come to visit you here with all things necessary with our father who is in the heaven above so that you might take strength to not allow all these little maize plants to perish. We have now come here to plant under the skirt/veil of your feet and also in this way I ask you, together with our father god, for all the little mother vines, father vines, mother round things, father round things, mother white things, father white things, here grow in abundance, here you protect, here you show mercy if there comes here a plague of worms, even a yellow plague. You will not let it fall on this little crop, on this little crop. I ask you since I have come here to plant these little maize plants in the earth that they grow and that nothing will be lost. I also ask you together with all the angels that you send us rain, that you command it to come every day in order to water this crop, that my face would not be embarrassed nor my eyes be embarrassed where I have come to plant, where I have come to plant this little grain of maize. May there not be anyone to make fun of me and all I have done and so that all will turn out well. Only with your power I ask you, as a mother shows mercy, that all the little mother vines, father round things, so that nothing bad happens. And it is this that I plead with you so that every year all goes well with the food that we use to live.

This prayer makes copious use of ritual language and metaphorical referents. The petition states that the farmer has "come here to plant under the skirt/veil of your feet." The Ch'orti' visualize the protective power of Mother Earth (now equated with the Virgin Mary) as if she were standing over their milpa with the hem of her skirt ("the skirt of your feet", *usijik'ir unuko'k*) forming a protective barrier around its edges. The possessed noun *u-sijk* means "nest" but in this ritual context it means the protective "skirt" of Mother Earth. Likewise, the verb *asijki* also base on "nest" here means "to protect."

The farmer makes use of ritual words for some of the vegetables he mentions in his prayer. His petition asks for the protection of *yer e ajch'antu' ajch'antata' e gorgortu' aj*



*gorgortata' ya tara ajsaksaktu' ajsaksaktata'*, "all the little mother vines, the father vines, the mother round things, the father round things, here the mother white things, the father white things." Yellow squash, usually *ch'um* in daily speech, is called *e gorgortu' ajgorgortata'*, "the mother round thing, the father round thing." Corn is called *ajsaksaktu' ajsakaktata'* "the mother white thing, the father white thing." Beans are known by various names but here are specified as a kind of bean that grows on a vine, hence the term *ch'an*, or "vine". They too are put into this poetic patterning of *ajch'antu' ajch'antata'*, "the mother vine, the father vine."

At the beginning of this ceremony (see above) many of these same terms were used to talk about the farmer's vegetables:

*Ink'ajti yajgorgortu' yajgorgortata' yajgorgor-espíritu santo twa' akuxpa twa' uche prosperar grano de oro y grano de planto, ajkotoj k'ya'ntu', ajkotoj k'ya'ntata', ajkotojk'ya'n-espíritu santo, ajch'antu', ajch'antata', ajch'an-espíritu santo*

In this case, the vegetables were put into a triplet construction instead of couplets. The phrase *ajkotoj k'ya'ntu', ajkotoj k'ya'ntata', ajkotojk'ya'n-espíritu santo* is difficult to translate but seems to refer to a kind of shelled bean (?). What is significant about these words is that the various vegetables that are staples of Ch'orti' diets have ritual names that are uniquely employed in these ceremonial contexts.

## Terms Relating to Ritual

I want to include a few other words here that are related to ritual practices.

<i>туру</i>	idol
<i>uyototir uyojroner e katata'</i>	church
<i>uyeroj katata'</i>	image of god
<i>puñib' ujt'zub'</i>	incense burner
<i>ujtz'ub'</i>	incense
<i>e turer katata'</i>	Otherworld
<i>la'ba'</i>	Satan
<i>ch'ujb'en</i>	hearth
<i>ajb'ax mut</i>	omen
<i>makat</i>	vision
<i>ajk'in</i>	ceremony

## Ch'orti' and Hieroglyphic Studies

One of the goals of this project was to compile a list of the phonetically transparent readings in the hieroglyphs and discuss them with various Ch'orti' speakers to look for alternative translation possibilities. Appropriate phonological alterations were made to accommodate Ch'orti' phonology. I stressed the root form of each word and tried to elicit as many combinations as one could make with each root. In this section I want to review a few of the terms that I think may have bearing on our understanding of the hieroglyphic inscriptions that to my knowledge have not been discussed before in relation to these Ch'orti' terms.

Many Ch'orti' words have semantic domains in both ritual and everyday speech. A good example of this is the term *pekaj* which in common usage in Ch'orti' means "to speak; to call; to invite; to notify." However, curanderos often make use of this word in the context of "invoking spirits." It is a distinction in usage that many older consultants were very aware of. The meaning "invoking spirits" may be applicable to pages 4a, b, 5a, b, and 6a-10a of the Dresden Codex where the verb *pekaj* is repeated various times. The verb has been read as *pek* meaning "read" by Werner Nahm (Schele and Grube 1997:96-97) in reference to the reading of the prophecies (**tu chich**). It is important to note that in sections 4b-5b a large earth caiman is shown with God D (Itzamnaaj) emerging from its open jaws. This context of an emerging god from an open-mouthed caiman suggests that reading *pek* as "invoking spirits" may be more appropriate. I would read the part of the text above the caiman as **pe-ka-ja K'UH, pe-ka-ja ITZ-AM-na**, "was invoked the god, was invoked Itzamnaaj." In the other sections, 4a-10a, I would interpret the texts which read **pe-ka-ja tu-chi-chi** as "was invoked, by his prophesy, God XXX."

Kerr 1728 shows a group of visiting dignitaries bearing various tribute items to a seated ruler. In one of the texts the term **u-tojol** is spelled out phonetically. Many scholars have noted that this surely refers to the common Maya root *toj* meaning "pay." In Ch'orti', *tojma'r* has the additional sense of "partial payment of a debt" which seems to describe the idea of continual 'tribute' more explicitly. As I noted above, some older consultants told me that *tojma'r* used to have a more narrow meaning of specifically "payment to the gods." This may also be a useful analogy for the relationship between subordinate and supraordinate in tribute situations.

T843 is a dedication verb that probably reads *t'ab'ay* meaning "go up," in Ch'orti' and "to polish" in 16th century Tzotzil. It commonly occurs in the Primary Standard Sequence and on numerous stone monuments. This term has other meanings in Ch'orti' such as "to save" and "to keep." It is used in the expression *t'ab'sen mukur*, "to keep a secret." The word for "prostitute" is *ajt'ab'er*. One intriguing meaning of this word is "to clear; put in order." It occurs in phrases such as *t'ab'sen e k'aj*n, "to clear the table." Perhaps the idea of "put in order" may be applicable to some glyphic contexts (such as the Tablet of the Cross at Palenque in reference to the 'eight-partition house' that was 'dedicated' 542 days after the rebirth of the Maize God).

Side B of Stela H from Copán contains the phrase, **su-sa-ja b'a-ki u-CHAM-ya-li**, which Nikolai Grube (Schele and Grube 1992:7) has suggested means "cut bone of the deceased" and refers to a re-entering of a tomb to ceremonially cut the bones. The root *sus* does mean "to cut" in several Mayan languages including Ch'orti'. In addition, in Ch'orti' *susma'r* also has the meanings of "to polish." This re-entering of the tomb to perform this bone ceremony may then have involved a kind of 'polishing' or perhaps 'painting' of the bones.

On Tikal Stela 5, zA1-3 a captive from Naranjo named Yax Mayuy Chan Chaak is shown bound with a Tikal lord standing on above him. *Mayuy* is a Ch'orti' word that has an interesting usage today. It is translated by some dictionaries as "*neblina*," or "fog" (Pérez Martínez 1996:138). This, however, is not the correct nuance of the term according to most of my consultants. *Mayuy* is a kind of haze, smoke, or cloud that carries no moisture and settles on the mountain sides. It sometimes comes as far down as the valley floor, often just before raining season. It can also be the name for the smoke from burning fields (some consultants said *mayuy* was the same as *b'utz'*, "smoke." Others use them together at times as *b'utz' mayuy*). The Ch'orti' harbor a strong disdain for *mayuy* since they consider it an "*argénia*", or "plague." They believe that it is responsible for turning the milpa yellow (*k'antorán e jinaj*) and is therefore known as *k'anto xero'r* ("yellow blight"). This *xero'r*, according to Fought, "is caused by the ah-pos-on-er" or 'witch' (1972:436). Therefore, the name of the Naranjo noble was perhaps "Green Smoke Sky Chaak" or "Green Haze Sky Chaak."

T573, known as the DNIG (Distance Number Introductory Glyph), reads *tz'ak* and is usually translated in various ways such as "completed; changed; put in order." The 'swastika' design on the main sign has not been well understood to-date. I did find two terms that may relate to this. The first is *tz'akemar*, which means "crack" or "split." This may be the iconographic representation of the glyph itself and the source of its reading. Another possibility is that it is related to the Ch'orti' *tz'ajkib' ja'*, which means 'the intersection point of two rivers or streams', an excellent description of the iconography of the sign itself.

The 'child of parent' statement using T712 has been read as either *ch'am*, meaning "to harvest," *ch'ab'* for "to create," or *ch'ab'* for "penance" by various scholars. The opaque reference of this metaphorical expression signifying the relationship between child and parent has never been fully explained or universally excepted. In Ch'orti' the term *ch'ab'u ku'm* means "to lay eggs." In addition, *u-ch'ab'u* is a transitive verb that also is used for humans to mean "to bear, give birth to." I suggest this meaning of "to bear" may be the correct interpretation of this compound even though it be only a slight semantic departure from previously proposed reading of *ch'ab'* "to create."

The Primary Standard Sequence contains numerous references to different kinds of drinks for which each vessel was used. Drinks such as *kakaw* or "chocolate," and *sa'*, "atol" and many others commonly are written in the PSS text. *Sakja'* is another drink that is mentioned in the PSS. In Ch'orti' *sakja'* is a kind of atol that has no sweetness or salt. They say it keeps the thirst away better than any other drink precisely because it contains no sweet or salty flavor. In addition to these, another drink name that occurs in

the PSS is **ch'a-ja-te'**, or *ch'ajte'*. I suggest that this drink derives from the Ch'orti' flower name of *ch'ajte'* or Flor Amarillo (*tecoma stans*). The petals of this flower are commonly ground up and mixed with lemon juice to make a drink that is medicinal for fevers, sore throats, as well as malaria. The term *ch'ajte'* can be applied to the drink itself and so I propose this as a translation of this collocation in the PSS.

## Conclusion

The Ch'orti' language has been shown by current linguistic research to be closely related to the language of the hieroglyphic inscriptions (Stuart *et al.* 1999; Houston *et al.* 2000). This project attempted to find linguistic and ethnographic connections between Ch'orti' and the ritual practices and cosmological observations of the Classic Maya. Further research will certainly yield additional areas of convergence that will aid in our understanding of the early Maya.

In addition to this sampling of the data that was collected during this project, I also recorded, transcribed, and translated 40 stories, legends, and creencias and have another 15 untranscribed. These were used to locate ritual and cosmological words in their context. I recorded numerous ceremonies that I attended as well as many more descriptions of others that are no longer practiced. These provided significant data in Ch'orti' about ritual practices that are not known by the most of the younger generation. In the future I hope to document more ceremonies and the ritual and poetic language that accompanies them. During this project I also did a fairly thorough study of noun classifiers in Ch'orti' using Wichman's compilation and other sources as a starting point for research (Wichman 1999; Wisdom 1950). Even noun classifiers can have ritual applications that differ from everyday usage. Interestingly, the noun classifier reserved for living things, *-kojt*, can in ritual contexts be used for bananas (*inkojt kene'*) and tortillas (*inkojt pa'*) because they have such an intimate relationship to 'life' for the Ch'orti'. A lot of the data on noun classifiers that I collected is to my knowledge not published and I will hopefully make it available in the near future. I have also gleaned over 4,500 terms from the data I collected this summer that will be part of a future dictionary of Ch'orti'. I wish to thank FAMSI for their most generous support of this project.

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