

A new proposal for the transcription of the *a-k'u-na/a-k'u-HUN-na* title

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The **a-k'u-na** compound (Fig. 1a-c) was identified in the last decade by several epigraphers as a title borne by subordinates. A first transcription of the signs as *a[h] k'u na* offered interesting translations: «he of the temple» (Ringle, 1988: 9-11), «mason» (Schele, 1994: 42 related it with the tzotzil entry *jch'ul na*, «mason») and some kind of «oficial» (Houston and Stuart n.d. related it with postclassic yucatec *ah k'u*). Subsequent research independently held by Houston (personal communication) and Martin and Grube (in Schele and Grube, 1995: 19-20) showed that a HUN logogram was often involved in the glyphic compound (Fig. 1d-e). It became clear that the glyphic compound **a-k'u-na** was but an abbreviated form of a larger expression, **a-k'u-HUN-na**. From this evidence, a better transcription and a new morphological interpretation was reached: **a-k'u-na/a-k'u-HUN-na**, *ah k'u hun*, «he of the divine book(s)».

As it has been pointed out, the relation explicated in the title with some activity concerning books and writing is also clear attending to the iconographic representations of such *ah k'u hun*s, mainly on pottery. Those representations display the *ah k'u hun*s with scribe headdresses or with folds of bark paper and pencils tied in their heads (Fig. 2).

As other noble titles, the *ah k'u hun* title is also borne by women. In those cases, as usually, a NA'/IX female head sign prefixes the compound (Fig. 3a-d). Nevertheless, as it was noticed (Houston and Stuart n.d.), when women bear the title, «*the ah male agentive prefix is often not deleted but remains between the female head and the k'u sign*» (Schele and Grube, 1995: 19).

The problem with the morphological analysis and translation of *ah k'u hun* as «he of the divine book(s)» arises precisely from those cases in which the title is borne by women. The glyphic compound with *na'/ix* retains the **a** sign, putative *a[h]*, but, as gender agen-

tives, the *ah* male agentive and the *na'/ix* female agentives are mutually exclusive¹.

A single **a** sign is usually employed in the glyphic grammar to render the male agentive *ah*, as in **a-ts'i-ba**, *a[h] ts'ib*, «scribe», **a-ba-ki**, *a[h] bak*, «he of the captive(s)» or **a-CHAK-HA'**, *a[h] Chakha'*, «he from Chakha'»². The abnormal retention of the *a* sign in the female titles (NA'/IX-**a-k'u-na**) must move us to look for another possible transcription -and consequently another morphological explanation- that might overcome the linguistic anomaly. So if we start with the premise that the presence of the **a** sign in the female title rejects the **a** sign as an abbreviation of the *ah* male agentive, the compound **a-k'u-na/a-k'u-HUN-na** should be transcribed not as *a[h] k'u [hu]n*, but as *ak'hun*, often abbreviated as *ak'[h]un*. Most interestingly, there is an entry in Chol, *ac'jun*, with the meaning of «mensajero» (messenger) (Aulie and Aulie, 1978: 27), literally, «(he who) gives/bears book(s), paper(s)».

Classic *ak'(h)un* and present-day Chol *ac'jun* share a linguistic peculiarity: seemingly, the *ah* male agentive is absent of the compound, only becoming explicit the *ak'* verbal root, «give, carry», and the (*h)un* noun, «book, paper». Nevertheless, I propose that the required *ah* male agentive is present, but contracted in a single *a* with the initial *a-* of *ak'hun*. We may prove that the contraction of the male agentive is certain attending to the ways in which the two Chol dialects, that of Tumbala and Sabanilla, present this form. In Tumbala Chol dialect, where the male agentive is *x*, the attested form of messenger is *x'ac'jun* (Aulie and Aulie, 1978: 136); in Sabanilla Chol dialect, where the male agentive is *aj*, the attested form is *ac'jun*: the required *aj* male agentive has been contracted: *aj-ac'jun* > *ac'jun*³.

The contraction is surely concerned with morphophonemics. Fought (1967: 112-113) documents a simi-

¹ The **a** sign in the first examples of Figure 3 may function as a phonetic complement of NA' (NA'-**a**), but the last example shows clearly that the **a** sign is not working as a phonetic complement, function done by T23 **na**. Interestingly, only in context of female **a-k'u-nas** -and not in other female titles-, an **a** sign is present in the spelling.

² I do not consider that T12 **a** is also **ah** or **AH**, as it is usually accepted. As in other examples of the glyphic grammar, in some environments, not all the sounds of a word are explicated by glyphs. As in other writing systems, sometimes readers must supply some sounds in uncomplete transcriptions.

³ Compare Tumbala Chol *e'tyel*, «trabajo» («work»), *xe'tyel*, «trabajador» («worker»), and Sabanilla Chol *toñel*, «trabajo» («work»), *ajtoñel*, «trabajador» («worker») (Warkentin and Scott, 1980: 19).

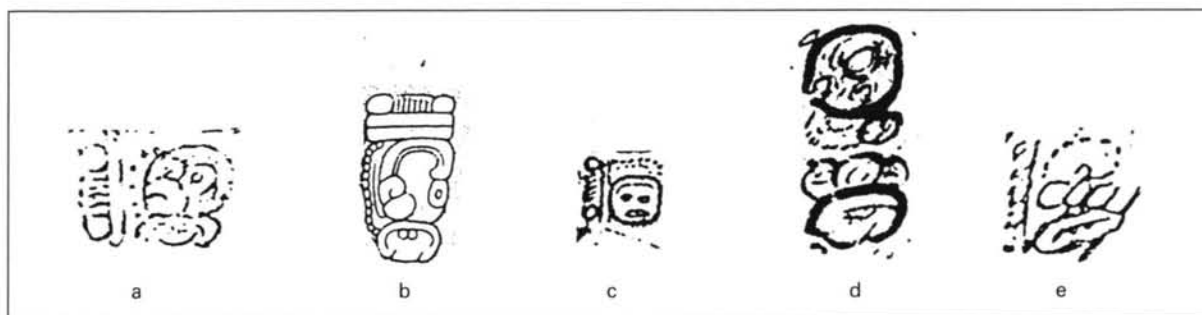


Figure 1. **a-k'u-na** spellings: *a*= K-4340 (Kerr: 1992: 474); *b*= Tonina, M. 110, N (Becquelin and Baudez 1982: fig. 135); *c*= K-1606 (Kerr 1989: 101); **a-k'u-HUN-na** spellings: *d*= K-1728 (Kerr 1989: 105); *e*= Vase of unknown provenance.

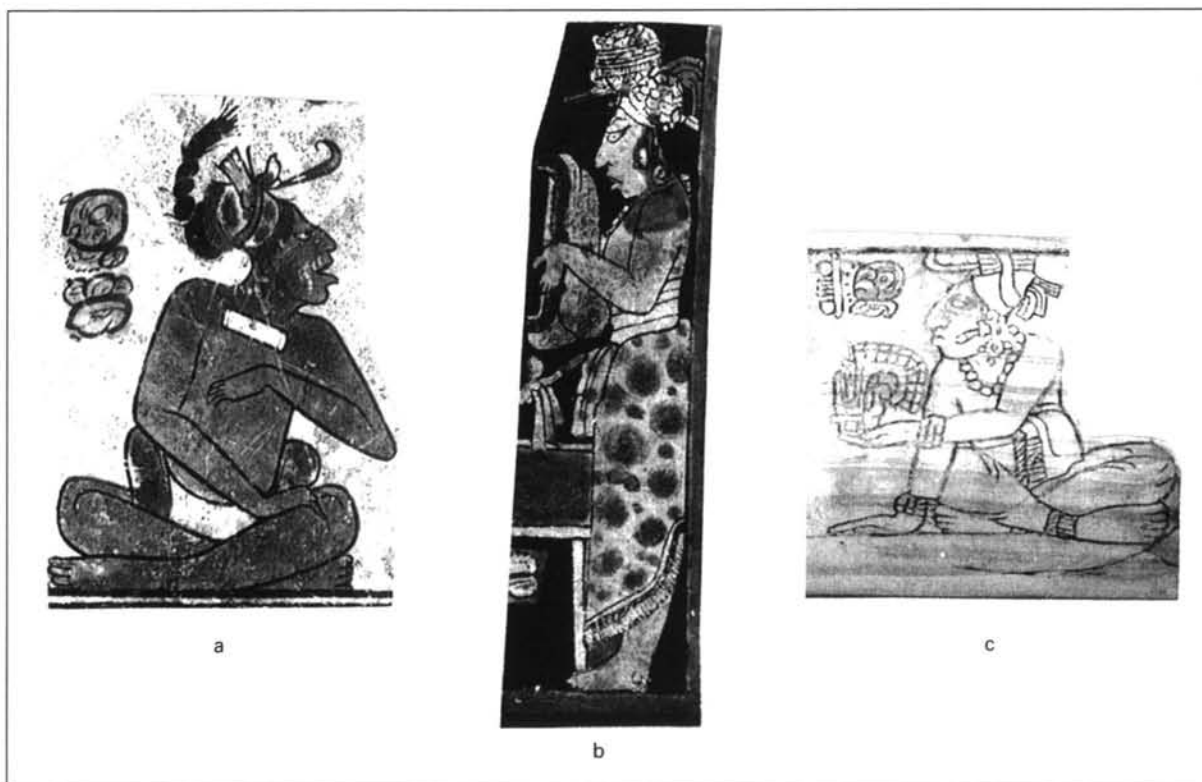


Figure 2. *a*= K-1728 (Kerr 1989: 105); *b*= K-2695 (Kerr 1990: 255); *c*= K-4340 (Kerr 1992: 474).

lar phenomenon in Chorti, in which the /h/ sound of the *ah* agentive is lost before an *a* (the /h/ sound is also lost between vowels in other environments, besides its position before or after a morphological boundary):

Basic Alternants
Phonemic shapes
Glosses

AH AT ER
'a?a"ter
bather

I propose the same process AH AT ER › 'a?a"ter

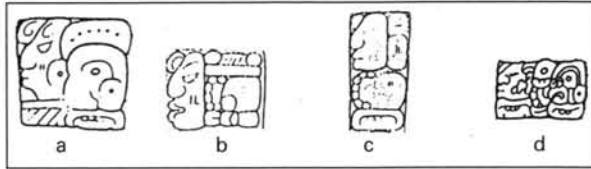


Figure 3. NA'/IX-a-k'u-na, NA'/IX-a-k'u-HUN spellings: a= Stokes Panel, B9 (Houston 1989: fig. 5b); b= Yaxchilan, Lintel 53, G2 (Graham 1979); c= Yaxchilan, Lintel 32, K1-K2 (Graham 1979); d= Yaxchilan, Stela 11 (Schele and Miller 1986: fig. V.5a).



Figure 4. ya-ha-k'u-na spellings: a= Palenque, Tablet of the Slaves, H1 (after drawing by L. Schele); b= K-4340 (Kerr: 1992: 474).

for *ak'hun*: *ah ak'hun* › *a'ak'hun*, having been written *a'a* (probably even contracted in *aa*) with a single **a** sign.

When the title is possessed, the contraction is often broken, then becoming explicit the *ah* male agentive (Fig. 4): **a-k'u-na**, *ak'(h)un*, «book(s) bearer»; **ya-ha-k'u-na**, *y ah ak'(h)un*, «his book(s)-bearer»⁴. It may be that the *y* possessive pronoun reinforces in some way the /h/ sound. Regrettably, I have not found any example of *ac'jun* in a possessed form in Sabanilla Chol to compare with the classic possessed form, nor any example of possessed agentives before *a-* initial stems.

The alternative analysis here proposed *-ak'hun* instead of *ah k'u hun*, «(he who) gives/carries book(s), paper(s)» or rather «book(s) bearer» instead of «he of the divine book(s)»- does not imply any change in the social and political role suggested for the bearers of the title. *Ak'huns* maintain their relation with books and writing -also explicited in the title *ak'hun*, as former *ah k'u hun-*, and they surely have other functions derived from the importance of their high status:

besides their relation with books and writing, *ak'huns* participate in lord-dressing (see K-1454 and K-2695), a honorable activity supposedly of great confidence and privacy; and if present-day chol *ac'jun*, «mensajero», has retained at least one of the classic functions, perhaps they were concerned with some kind of ambassadorship too.

The folds of bark paper and pencils often worn in the head by the *ak'(h)uns* (see Fig. 2), may have an occasional paralelism in Postclassic times: there is some evidence which points that messengers used to carry the letters wrapped in their hair. The passage is from Landa's *Relación*, when Cortes sent a letter to the shipwrecked Spaniards⁵:

«Que Cortés supo allí que unos hombres barbados estaban camino de seis soles en poder de un señor y que persuadió a los indios que los fuesen a llamar, y que halló quién fuese, aunque con dificultad, porque tenían miedo al señor de los barbados. Y escribióles esta carta: (.../...).

Que los indios llevaron esta carta envuelta en el cabello y la dieron a Aguilar (...)»⁶ (Landa, 1985: 46-47).

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⁴ As far as I know, the glyphic explicitation of the /h/ sound of the *ah* male agentive is restricted to the **a-k'u-na** title; other possessed titles based on *ah* male agentives are written with a *ya* sign; thus, «his scribe», is written **ya-ts'i-bi**, *y a[h] ts'ib*, without making explicit by glyphs the /h/ sound of the *ah* male agentive.

⁵ I am grateful to J. José Batalla, who pointed out to me this passage.

⁶ «Cortés knew there that some bearded men were six days away in the hands of a lord and he convinced the indians to go to call them, and he found who went, but with difficulty, because they were afraid of the bearded men's lord. And he wrote them this letter (.../...).

The indians carried this letter wrapped in their hair and they gave it to Aguilar (...).

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