MAYA SACRED PLAY: THE VIEW FROM EL PERÚ-WAKA'

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I had one other encounter with Don Pablo and talking stones. One day in the summer of 1989, after he had done some work on the camp kitchen, I found a clear glass marble in the area. Thinking it belonged to Don Pablo and was one of his saso'ob, the 'lights' he used when focusing on spiritual forces, I took it next door to him that evening. He took the marble and inspected it carefully. "Yes," he said finally, "this is a stone of light." Then he smiled, "However, it won't speak until it has been soaked in maize gruel, sak-a', and then it will only speak Maya." (Freidel, Schele & Parker 1993, 179)

PLAY AND RITUAL: MODERN PERSPECTIVES

Sometimes a marble is just a marble, but sometimes it is not just a toy. The marbles left in the dusty main road of Yaxuna village in north-central Yucatán in the summer of 1989 were certainly toys to begin with. The boys of the village amused themselves with games of marbles on the uneven surfaces, gambles that required expertise and were like games of marbles elsewhere vying for the ownership of the marbles. Maya boys play marbles this way everywhere and they are good at it. So, what is the relationship between the casting of marbles as a gambling game and the casting of tokens to divine the future or understand a present circumstance? Don Pablo de la Cruz does not cast his tokens;

he arranges them carefully on his altar, his 'field', and he looks through them and listens to them (Figure 8.1). But elsewhere in the modern world of people who speak Mayan languages, adepts do cast tokens, count them and arrange them with swift, graceful motions of their hands (Freidel et al. 1993, 224–30). For Maya archaeologists, there are many kinds of artefacts represented in the record which probably served as divining tokens and also tokens for gaming and gambling. Other objects, such as whistle figurines, likely functioned both as toys and ritual instruments.

The relationship between play and ritual is enduringly complex in the Maya world. In another example from Yaxuna, young boys play the role of frogs during the 'bring Chahk' rain ceremonies. They process around the field altar with bigger boys who play Chahk'ob, the rain gods, and then sit on rocks at the four corners of the altar. While the older boys sprinkle water on them from small, phallic-shaped gourds and make the sound of thunder, the young boys make the sounds of the night after the rains arrive, mimicking the croak of frogs and the buzz of insects (Figure 8.2). There is quite a bit of giggling during this activity. Meanwhile, Don Pablo stands before the altar oblivious, praying sonorously to the rain gods, to the true god and to the spirits of the place. The ritual continues deep into the night. At one juncture, the best hunter among the older boys is sent off into the dark and the others are tasked with tracking him down and bringing him back to the altar, to bring Chahk, the rains. It is the game

Figure 8.1 Don Pablo with marble *sastunob* light stones for divining. Photograph by Dan Buettner.

of 'hide and seek'. And for the traditional Catholic faithful of Yaxuna, it is heartfelt prayer and ritual.

As playful as this hunt may seem, the rain ceremony today in Yaxuna and elsewhere in Yucatán involves the sacrifice of animals, particularly chickens, whose flesh is offered along with sacred maize breads during the course of the ritual. The hide-and-seek game associated with the rain ceremony can allude to animal hunting, particularly deer, and to the capture of warriors draped in animal hides for sacrifice as depicted on ancient bas-reliefs from the Yaxuna area (Schele & Freidel 1990, 354–5). This example illustrates one of the many connections between the past and the present in the Maya world. In antiquity, Maya rulers played the god Chahk, among other deities. A fourth-century king discovered in a burial at Yaxuna, for example, was wearing *Spondylus* spp. Sprocket-decorated ear flares diagnostic of Chahk (Figure 8.3; Stanton et al. 2010).

Today, baseball is the most popular game in Yucatán, but in pre-Hispanic times, the Maya played a variety of games with solid latex rubber balls. The earliest ballcourts in Yucatán date to the first

millennium BC (Robles Castellanos & Andrews 2003), and there is a Preclassic ballcourt in the ancient city of Yaxuna adjacent to the northern acropolis where the Chahk king was discovered (Stanton et al. 2010; see also Taube, Chapter 17, this volume). In a broad sense, the examples presented here illustrate the pervasive and intertwined nature of play and ritual in contemporary Maya society, and allude to the deep history of this connection, thus setting the stage for the remainder of our exploration of Maya sacred play.

THE MAYA CREATION STORY, THE BALLGAME AND ANIMAL SYMBOLISM

Despite his sometimes controversial beliefs, Joseph Campbell (1988, 48) wisely articulated the idea that myths are public dreams. In a communal context, the spectacle re-enactment or tangible reimagining of myth is a critical element which reinforces a similarly shared understanding among often disparate groups of people participating in the same social and political network. What is a toy whistle in the hands of a child in the kitchen of a humble home can be an offering made by adults in the ceremonies of the city plaza. Yet the public performance of myth – from monumental representations of kings as Chahk or the Maize God erected on public plazas to hand-held portable items shared in domestic contexts – can have multiple implications. These objects and performances can simultaneously bolster notions of sameness and strengthen community identity, while also highlighting social difference and reinforcing hierarchy. This type of multivalency is seen in both play and ritual, which seem to fall along a spectrum of formality from spontaneous improvisation to rule-bound enactment, and the tension between these expectations can be not only entertaining, but even cathartic. Indeed, that would seem to be precisely the goal in many instances of public spectacle performed by ancient Maya leaders seeking to strengthen their charisma (Inomata 2006). Spectacle of the kind represented by ballgames and funerary proceedings, among other ceremonial occasions, clearly engaged the kind of enactment of public dreaming Campbell imagined in his view of

Figure 8.2 A mid-1980s Cha-Chahk rain ceremony at Yaxuna in Yucatán. Photograph by Debra Selsor Walker.

Figure 8.3 Fourth-century AD Maya king buried with the *Spondylus* ear flares of Chahk, visible at far right. Burial 23, Yaxuna. Photograph by Jeanne Randall.

myths. We will return to some of these themes, but here we continue our consideration of cross-cutting notions of play and myth.

Playful boys are featured in the famous eighteenth-century creation story called the *K'iche' Popol Vuh* from highland Guatemala (Tedlock 1985; Christenson 2003). In this story, the Maize God and his twin brother are defeated by the Death Lords in a series of ballgames played with the rubber ball, invented by 1600 BC (see Taube, Chapter 17, this volume). The Death Lords place the severed head of the sacrificed Maize God on a tree growing from the 'dusty court' as a warning to others not to challenge their power. The head spits on the hand of a maiden, engendering twin sons of the Maize God named

Hunahpu and Xbalanque. These twins also eventually play ball against the Death Lords, and win this match with the help of magical animals. Hunahpu and Xbalanque then voluntarily submit to sacrifice by the Death Lords so that they can be reborn as fish-men magicians who ultimately defeat the Death Lords decisively. Along the way, they transform their elder brothers into monkeys and these two deities, known as Monkey Scribes, become the patrons of both scribes and artists. This creation story undoubtedly constitutes a redaction of a myth cycle that was thousands of years old, and multiple lines of archaeological evidence suggest it was factored into the foundation of Classic Maya politics and religion. Within the *Popol Vuh* creation story are many

episodes of play beyond the ballgame contests and, as already noted, often these exchanges feature animals. These episodes of play include divining by the gods to chart the ways to create the universe, contests between the human-form gods and the macaw spirit companion of the original old creator god, contests between the sons of the Maize God and animals in the maize fields, and gambling between these boys and the Death Lords. These scenarios imply the same type of supernaturally themed cognitive connections between animals and culture referenced by Lyvia Morgan (Chapter 14, this volume) in her discussion of bull sports as a ritualized transition for young men approaching manhood portrayed in the art of Ancient Egypt and the Aegean. These are worlds in which the lines between sacred and secular play are more connective than divisive.

We are still exploring our understanding of the sacred relationship between play, ritual and animals, and are open to suggestions, but, as outlined in the anecdotes of this preamble, we are convinced that these associations were as complex in the experience of the ancient Maya as they are among modern Maya. In the case of the ancient Maya, this is more than merely a reasonable hypothesis. The ancient word for spirit companion, *way* (pronounced like *why*), is intimately linked in Mayan languages to sleep and the dream state (Houston and Stuart 1989; Freidel Schele & Parker 1993, 188–93; Grube & Nahm 1994). The *way* creatures are often animals with extraordinary powers and human characteristics. Karl Taube (2003a, 476) has suggested Classic Maya *way* characters are frequently depicted as hideous, frightening deathly beings, jaguars and other wild forest creatures that clutch bowls of bones, eyeballs, severed hands and other gore as their food. *Way* spirits are indeed macabre and death-related in many scenes painted on Classic-period Maya polychrome vases. Yet there is at least one example where we believe a *way* deer spirit is not cursing, but rather healing. This is illustrated in the narrative figurine scene discovered in El Perú-Waka' Burial 39 (Freidel, Rich & Reilly 2010), which will be addressed shortly (Figure 8.4).

It is also the case that interaction with magical animals in the context of the Maya creation myth, as well as the existence of *way* spirits, illustrates a

Figure 8.4 The deer *way* spirit praying over the penitent dead king. Narrative figurine scene, Burial 39, El Perú-Waka'. Ministerio de Cultura y Deportes de Guatemala and Museo Nacional de Arqueología y Etnología de Guatemala. Photograph by Jenny Guerra. Courtesy of the El Perú-Waka' Regional Archaeological Project.

further notion: animals factor deeply into human play and ritual practice. While some animal species carry out certain forms of play (see Burghardt, Chapter 3, this volume; Bateson, Chapter 4, this volume), we observe that people relate to animals in a complex fashion, incorporating them into play, ritual and belief systems in such a way that animals cannot replicate. In light of this, we have elaborated on the theme of this volume by exploring the relationships between play and ritual, as well as representations of animals in ritualized contexts, in ancient Maya society using archaeological evidence from the Classic period (ca. AD 250–900) city of El Perú-Waka', Petén, Guatemala.

MAYA SACRED PLAY: THE VIEW FROM EL PERÚ-WAKA'

The ancient toponym for the city of Waka' was deciphered by Simon Martin (2000), which translates as 'Wakwater' or 'Wak-place'. Stanley Guenter (2007, 23), via the continued study of epigraphic and iconographic materials, proposed that 'Wak' refers to either a centipede or similar creature, or its jaws or teeth. As such, the name of the royal dynasty at El

Figure 8.5 As depicted on a Late Classic-period Codex-style vase, scribes make offerings to a Monkey Scribe seated on a cushioned throne. Note the centipede maw at the tip of his tail. Photograph by Justin Kerr.

Perú-Waka' references centipedes, and may suggest Waka's royalty had a particular affection for or focus on the aforementioned Monkey Scribe gods, whose tails end in centipede maws (Figure 8.5).

The dynastic kings and queens of Waka' participated in the great wars of the Classic period as key vassals to aspiring emperors, particularly the Snake dynasty king, Yuhknoom Ch'een the Great of the city of Cakalmul, but also his successor, Yuhknoom Yich'aak K'ahk'. Divining, conjuring with dice and tokens, consorting with animal-spirit companions, as well as ballgame play were expressed in central ritual performances as evidenced in the archaeological, epigraphic and iconographic record at Waka'. Many of these activities were represented in miniature images and figurines. Contextual analyses at other Classic-period Maya cities show that figurines, often also functional whistles or ocarinas, and other musical instruments were associated with the intimate settings of household kitchens and were likely toys for family entertainment (Triadan 2007). At Waka', however, figurines have been excavated in several ritually charged, elite primary contexts. This is one aspect in which the medium of the message bridges from the public arena of the mighty to the homes of their sustaining followers, demonstrating that the interweaving between ritual and play was a vital web of common experience in this complex society.

The city centre of Waka' covers approximately one square kilometre of hilltops and levelled land along an escarpment next to the San Pedro Mártir River in north-western Petén, Guatemala. Archaeological research has been conducted by the El Perú-Waka' Regional Archaeological Project (PAW) since 2003 (Navarro-Farr & Rich 2014). The city was founded in the Preclassic period, at least by 200 BC, and it flourished until the ninth or early tenth century AD (Eppich 2011; Marken 2011). Waka' has two major public foci: first, a western centre built around two long east-west oriented plazas, which is surrounded by an impressive concentration of elite residential groups. It features west-facing temples and pyramids at the eastern end of the plazas, including Waka's principal public shrine, Structure M13-1 (Navarro-Farr 2009). The palace acropolis anchors the western end of the centre and faces east (Lee 2012). Adjacent to the palace acropolis is the city's masonry ballcourt, built and used in the Late Classic period (Meléndez 2007). The second civic-ceremonial location is the tripartite Mirador Group to the south-east of that western centre, which is comprised of two large pyramids and a smaller temple group atop a natural rise levelled in antiquity (Rich 2011).

With regard to the themes of play and ritual, we briefly address relevant evidence from the palace complex in the west, particularly Structure L12-4 (Lee 2012); the main city temple, Structure M13-1

at the eastern end of the centre (Navarro-Farr 2009); and Structure O14-04 in the Mirador Group (Rich 2011). These localities have all produced significant archaeological evidence bearing on the way that the people of Waka' thought about play, ritual and animals, but we will especially focus on artefacts from Burial 39's mortuary assemblage discovered inside Structure O14-04.

The Ballgame at Waka's Royal Palace

The royal palace acropolis, researched from 2003–6 by David Lee, anchors the north-western end of the centre, and is adjacent to the Late Classic ballcourt excavated by Juan Carlos Meléndez. Lee discovered 14 carved masonry stair-tread blocks portraying portions of ballplayer scenes in a late version of the Classic period palace stairway. His research demonstrated these treads originated from an earlier, unknown stairway and were reset in this location. As argued by Lee and epigrapher Stanley Guenter (2010), several of the carved treads depict the most famous Late Classic king of Waka', named K'inich Bahlam II, and his overlord, emperor Yuhknoom Yich'aak K'ahk' of the previously mentioned Snake dynasty, sometime after AD 687 (Figure 8.6).

From El Perú Stela 33 we know that K'inich Bahlam II had been placed in power by the previous Snake dynasty emperor, Yuhknoom Ch'een the

Great. The carving on the stair treads evidently portrays him engaged in play at the base of a staircase with Yuhknoom Ch'een's successor, named as part of his reaffirmation of his vassal status to this new Snake lord. K'inich Bahlam II and Yich'aak K'ahk' are both sporting royal ballplayer regalia, including elaborate headdresses. K'inich Bahlam (on left) is wearing a Waterlily Jaguar headdress, a creature that has multiple connotations, including a battle deity and a *way* spirit. Ballgame play was a major ritual means of sustaining political and military alliances among Late Classic kingdoms, cross-cutting *ritual* and *game* as defined by Vanghelis Kyriakidis (Chapter 18, this volume), particularly with regard to the concept of risk. It is not surprising to see a king depicted as wearing the Waterlily Jaguar headdress on the stair block which dates to a period of great political strife in the southern Maya lowlands.

These scenes related to alliances between overlords and vassals are well represented in the Classic period of western Petén, and it is clear that the deadly serious business of military alliance was celebrated in sacred play. While Waka's real ballcourt is near the palace acropolis, sculptured tread stairways of other sites in western Petén, such as La Corona located north of Waka', demonstrate that rituals of ball playing and likely of sacrifice alluding to creation myths took place on stairways as often as in actual ballcourts (Miller & Houston 1987). The animal headdresses worn by royal performers in these scenes link

Figure 8.6 Two Maya rulers engaged in a dynamic ballgame scene. Stair blocks excavated at the El Perú-Waka' royal palace. Ministerio de Cultura y Deportes de Guatemala. Photograph by Patrick Aventurier. Courtesy of the El Perú-Waka' Regional Archaeological Project.

the ritual play of ball represented in them to animal headdresses worn by warriors in battle. Furthermore, the broad connotations of the creation myths which feature the death lords also connect these performers to the death-related *way* spirits. This conflation of play, ritual, animal representations, myth and sacrifice could generate just the kind of tension alluded to earlier with its cathartic appeal.

Signs of Sacred Play in Surface Deposits

K'inich Bahlam II and ball playing are also represented at the grand stairway of the main temple in the city centre, Structure M13-1. In 2012, Olivia Navarro-Farr and her colleagues discovered the fragments of the preserved upper half of a stela that likely depicts K'inich Bahlam II embedded into the walls of the final stairway of this building (Navarro-Farr, Pérez Robles & Menéndez Bolaños 2012). Unfortunately, the headdress portrayed on this stela is not preserved. On well-preserved Stela 33, however, K'inich Bahlam II wears a water monster headdress with a tied waterlily diadem, so his performance incorporating animal allusions is consistent. Earlier excavation at this important temple conducted by Navarro-Farr from 2003–6 exposed a palimpsest of Late to Terminal Classic period ritual deposits (Navarro-Farr, Freidel & Arroyave Prera 2008; Navarro-Farr 2009). The massive deposits appear to have been layered onto Structure M13-1 over a long period of time – both during and following the demise of Waka's royal court. They also appear to be the offerings of ordinary people who continued to worship at this temple building, located at the east end of Plaza 2. The deposits, made in this tumultuous era, are of particular interest here, and in addition to broken ceramic vessels, include a wide array of artefacts. Among these are ceramic figurines, whistles and other musical instruments relevant to ritual play and performance. Some of these artefacts, perhaps once even children's toys, were transformed into ritual objects of memory in their final use, during what were, probably at best, uncertain times (see Watkins, Chapter 10, this volume, for a discussion of ritual and collective memory as a means to sustain cultural identity).

Figure 8.7 Ballplayer figurine wearing a deer headdress. Ministerio de Cultura y Deportes de Guatemala. Photograph by Patrick Aventurier. Courtesy of the El Perú-Waka' Regional Archaeological Project.

Ceramic figurine fragments were also found in other areas at the site. For example, one of these fragments, recovered near the surface in test excavations associated with a series of small structures adjacent to Plaza 2 (Pérez Robles 2003, 258), depicts a haughty individual, likely a king, wearing the thick, padded belt of a ballplayer and a large deer headdress in profile (Figure 8.7). It is possible that this elaborate figurine fragment, along with others found in the test excavations, washed downslope from Plaza 2, but it is also the case that figurine fragments are found in diverse contexts in the Maya world, for example as components of architectural construction fill, including in small buildings.

The Royal Mortuary Assemblage in Burial 39

Structure O14-04 is the second largest building within Waka's Mirador Group (Rich, Piehl & Matute 2006; Rich, Matute & Piehl 2007) and is

architecturally similar to Structure M13-1. The royal mortuary assemblage in Structure O14-04's Burial 39, excavated by co-author Rich and her colleagues (Rich, Matute & Piehl 2007; Rich 2011), provides several points of discussion in regard to sacred play. The tomb's elaborate elite artefacts and its location in one of the grandest temple-pyramids at the site convey that the interred individual was a ruler of Waka' and also signify the wealth of Classic-period nobility. Burial 39 was located under the floor of a distinctively Early Classic style of stairway shrine atop the pyramid's frontal platform. This frontal platform, called an *adosada*, is an architectural feature noted at the highland Mexican city of Teotihuacan. Thirty-three ceramic vessels were recovered, and the various types identified by PAW ceramicist Keith Eppich suggest indicate interment occurred between AD 600 and AD 650 (Rich et al. 2010). This suggests the tomb possibly contains the immediate predecessor of the aforementioned Waka' king K'inich Bahlam II and dates to the reign of Calakmul's Yuhknoom Ch'een the Great, who ruled Calakmul from AD 636–86, and was likely the overlord of Waka' from at least 657 until his death. We documented unequivocal evidence that the tomb was re-entered in antiquity through the roof, in

approximately AD 770–820. During the re-entry, the interred individual was covered with carefully laid flat stones, after which the western side of the tomb's vault and the capstones were intentionally collapsed into the chamber. Subsequently, the chamber was filled with a matrix containing rocks and miscellaneous artefacts, but also with what can only be categorized as trash (Rich 2009). Many of the objects comprising the original mortuary assemblage were damaged when the tomb chamber was infilled, particularly the ceramic artefacts, a number of which have been restored.

One of the most fascinating components of the mortuary assemblage is the elaborate ritual tableau of 23 ceramic figurines, placed at the feet of the ruler (Figure 8.8). The narrative figurine scene depicts the resurrection ceremony of a deceased king kneeling as the penitent Maize God being cured of death by a magical deer or *way* spirit. His transformation into a healed and reborn ancestor is aided and witnessed by a presiding king, queen and royal courtiers, as well as a cluster of supernatural performers in the centre of the circular arrangement (Freidel et al. 2010).

Claire Halley (Chapter 9, this volume) offers an illuminating discussion of circular space in ritualized contexts as a symbol and metaphor providing a

Figure 8.8 The narrative figurine scene from Burial 39, El Perú-Waka'. Ministerio de Cultura y Deportes de Guatemala and Museo Nacional de Arqueología y Etnología de Guatemala. Photograph by Ricky López Bruni. Courtesy of the El Perú-Waka' Regional Archaeological Project.

Figure 8.9 Figurine king as a ballplayer wearing a Monkey Scribe headdress. Narrative figurine scene, Burial 39, El Perú-Waka'. Ministerio de Cultura y Deportes de Guatemala and Museo Nacional de Arqueología y Etnología de Guatemala. Photograph by Jenny Guerra. Courtesy of the El Perú-Waka' Regional Archaeological Project.

setting for individuals to forge and renew bonds – a pursuit surely intended to be conveyed in this resurrection tableau. Although not communal in the egalitarian sense Halley discusses, the scene exhibits the complex interplay between ritual and play in Maya culture and ritual: two women gesture as dancers; one of the men is carrying a ball for the ballgame; and the living king presiding over the funerary ritual is certainly a ballplayer, for he is outfitted in garb appropriate for such a match (Figure 8.9). He also wears a monkey headdress and a limpet shell pectoral called an *oyohualli* carved in the form of a vagina (Coe 1973).

The later Aztecs, according to Michael Coe, would combine these elements in ribald farces featuring monkeys and female genitalia, and this idea of sex play was part of ancient Maya ritual in ways that still need to be elucidated. The king's monkey headdress also likely alludes also to the Monkey

Figure 8.10 The monkey-shaman figurine. Narrative figurine scene, Burial 39, El Perú-Waka'. Ministerio de Cultura y Deportes de Guatemala and Museo Nacional de Arqueología y Etnología de Guatemala. Photograph by Michelle Rich. Courtesy of the El Perú-Waka' Regional Archaeological Project.

Scribe gods, who, as mentioned earlier, have tails that end in centipede heads, and are also represented in the Popol Vuh. Karl Taube (2003b) has cogently suggested that scribal lords are linked to centipedes because the cosmic centipede maw leads into the underworld, the land of the dead and divine. Scribes, through their capacity to read, can access the words of the dead and the divine. But it is also the case that Waka' means Centipede Water, and the kings of Waka' were Holy Centipede Lords. The king in this figurine scene surely represents just such a lord.

The monkey theme carries over into the cluster of performers, where a seated shaman is portrayed as an old monkey woman (Figure 8.10). She is carrying several objects under her arm which we believe may be a set of stick dice and a divining board, instruments of her conjuring craft. One of her companions is a male dwarf figurine who wears a large deer headdress, echoing the figurine depicted in Figure 8.7, and he carries a conch shell trumpet

with which to call forth the deer spirit. This may be the *Chijchan*, the snake/deer spirit companion of the Snake dynasty kings and of Yuhknoom Ch'een the Great, Calakmul's ruler, in particular. The penitent deceased king is prayed over by a magical deer, possibly another *Chijchan*. This magical deer spirit is adorned with a blue-green painted *Ik* jewel around its neck (Figure 8.4). Identical artefactual jade pectorals exist, likely worn by royals, carved as effigy shells with *Ik* glyphs depicted on them (see Finamore & Houston 2010, 122–3, pls. 40–1). The *Ik* glyph denotes wind, breath or spirit, and greenstones such as jade have been cogently argued by Karl Taube (2005) to be a material embodying breath and spirit, and thus, life. We propose, therefore, that this *way* spirit wearing the *Ik* pendant is resurrecting the deceased king, rather than cursing him.

Circumstantial evidence of both an archaeological and epigraphic nature may support the hypothesis that the presiding king in the figurine scene actually represents the aforementioned Yuhknoom Ch'een the Great, the king who certainly oversaw the accession of K'inich Bahlam II, as attested by El Perú Stela 33. As intentionally arranged in the ceremony represented by the figurines, this king was placed next to the queen figurine, who is flanked on the other side by the kneeling deceased king and deer *way* spirit. Iconographically and temporally, it is possible this queen figurine represents Lady K'abel (Figure 8.11), the wife of K'inich Bahlam II and the probable daughter of Yuhknoom Ch'een the Great.

In terms of written history, Lady K'abel is the most important ruler of Waka' during the Late Classic period. As previously mentioned, the *Chijchan* is the snake/deer spirit companion of the Snake dynasty kings and of Yuhknoom Ch'een the Great in particular. As such, the deer curing the deceased king of death may represent the spirit companion of either Yuhknoom Ch'een the Great or Lady K'abel.

The queen figurine carries a battle shield on her left arm that is unlike any other in the Maya corpus, as it has a stick element attached to it that points upwards. This is not a product of the conservation process conducted by Licda. Griselda Pérez Robles, PAW archaeologist, and Lynn Grant, head conservator at the University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, to restore the

Figure 8.11 The queen figurine. Narrative figurine scene, Burial 39, El Perú-Waka'. Ministerio de Cultura y Deportes de Guatemala and Museo Nacional de Arqueología y Etnología de Guatemala. Photograph by Jenny Guerra. Courtesy of the El Perú-Waka' Regional Archaeological Project.

figurines after they were crushed in the ancient infilling of the tomb chamber; rather, it is the actual placement of the element on the shield by the Maya craftspeople who fashioned the figurines from clay. Lady K'abel does carry a battle shield on El Perú Stela 34, a well-preserved stela raised in AD 692. Artefacts generally interpreted by Maya archaeologists and art historians to be divining mirrors are paired with sticks in several painted vase scenes, and while we agree that mirrors were used for divining, we suggest they were not only for looking, but also for casting. The battle shield carried by the queen figurine may have served a dual function of a divining board, because the surface of the miniature shield is painted with distinctive geometric lines similar to the calculating and divining surfaces noted by Anthony Aveni (2005) along the southern side of the Pyramid of the Sun at Teotihuacan (Freidel & Rich 2015).

As Karl Taube (2004) has noted, a well-preserved Late Classic scene on a polychrome vessel shows a lord throwing elements directly onto a small table and not into the adjacent brazier as might be appropriate if it was a burnt offering. We suggest this scene represents divination casting of tokens such as practised widely on small tables and on boards in the Maya area today. The Conquest-Period game of *Patolli* used such lined boards and casting tokens – large, flat beans called *patoles*. *Patolli* was thought to have a relationship to divinatory and solar cycles (Soustelle 1964). A number of other artefacts found in Burial 39 are suggestive of small objects that may have served as divinatory casting tokens, including spangles or flat beads fashioned from *Spondylus spp.*, and 64 miniature spindle whorls (Masson, Freidel & Rich 2016). The quantity of spindle whorls and their context in this tomb may point to a function other than prosaic cloth manufacture, such as tokens for divinatory casting. Interestingly, weaving and its implements, such as the spindle, are particular insignia of the goddess *Chahk Chel*. This goddess, called *Ix Chel* at the time of the Conquest, was the protector of the shaman and blessed their divining instruments according to the clergyman Diego de Landa. But the most remarkable potential set of gaming devices in the tomb was composed of elaborately carved and painted bone sticks. Stick dice are still used for gaming today in Mexico, and while the subject has not received the study it deserves, there is every reason to believe that the pre-Hispanic people of the region also used sticks for gaming and divination. The carved sticks in Burial 39 have a variety of ends that include birds, flowers and hands holding masks (Figure 8.12).

Stick bundles are common regalia for scribes in painted Maya vase scenes, and stick bundles appear in settings suggesting that they are part of tribute and commercial negotiations. Lady K'abel wears a stick in her hair on El Perú Stela 34, and similarly, the figurine queen wears stick bundles in her headdress, reinforcing the activity suggested by the stick and divining board shield.

Additionally, we have evidence that gaming or divining sticks might not have been the exclusive prerogative of the royalty at Waka'. In 2005, Juan Carlos Ramírez discovered a set of carved bone sticks in a burial in one of the plazas north-east of

Figure 8.12 Carved bone from the El Perú-Waka' Burial 39 stick bundle. Ministerio de Cultura y Deportes de Guatemala and Museo Nacional de Arqueología y Etnología de Guatemala. Photograph by Denis Paz. Courtesy of the El Perú-Waka' Regional Archaeological Project.

the palace. One of these sticks has a brief glyphic text on it and another has an ornamented end. These differ from the Burial 39 sticks in being pointed on one end like styluses, but they are related.

Moreover, one of two dwarf boxers in the narrative figurine scene wears what might be a stick bundle on his headdress (Figure 8.13). Karl Taube has suggested (pers. comm., 2010) that the other boxer's headdress (Figure 8.14) is adorned with a distinctive obsidian sacrificial knife of a kind favoured at Teotihuacan, but this decorative element may possibly represent an abstracted centipede maw depicted in the *pars pro toto* ('part for the whole') style. If we are right, then a ritual boxing match that may have been part of the funeral games might have pitted a champion representing the Wak dynasty and its new king, K'inich Bahlam II, against a champion representing Lady K'abel.

Whatever the final answer to the question concerning the motifs of the boxer headdresses, it is clear

Figure 8.13 Boxer dwarf with stick bundle adorning helmet. Narrative figurine scene, Burial 39, El Perú-Waka'. Ministerio de Cultura y Deportes de Guatemala and Museo Nacional de Arqueología y Etnología de Guatemala. Photograph by Jenny Guerra. Courtesy of the El Perú-Waka' Regional Archaeological Project.

that funeral games such as ritualized boxing (Taube & Zender 2009) accompanied the resurrection of this king, as the Maize God was resurrected following the ballgames of *Xibalba* (the Maya underworld) in the *Popol Vuh*.

Christina Halperin (2014, 200–3), in her important recent synthesis of Maya figurines, underscores the complex relationship between ritual and play. She notes the presence of figurines in public monumental contexts, as well as households, and this invites the subtitle of her book, “Intersections between State and Household”. Her wide-ranging review of figurine contexts shows clearly that these artefacts occur frequently in above-surface contexts (both common and public), midden especially, and rarely in burials and cached offerings. She arrives at the conclusion that figurines generally appear to be commodities available to all and not privileged ‘inalienable’ things worthy of special treatment in curation or disposal. Testament to play or ritual in their casual dismantling

Figure 8.14 Boxer dwarf with helmet supporting what may be a Teotihuacan-style sacrificial knife or an abstracted centipede maw. Narrative figurine scene, Burial 39, El Perú-Waka'. Ministerio de Cultura y Deportes de Guatemala and Museo Nacional de Arqueología y Etnología de Guatemala. Photograph by Jenny Guerra. Courtesy of the El Perú-Waka' Regional Archaeological Project.

and discard in public places, figurines bring clues to the witnessing of the humble devout to the pomp of state ceremony. While in general we do agree with this conclusion, her analysis puts into bold relief the figurine scene from Waka's Burial 39. Carefully made in royal workshops, featuring an array of Maya elites and an animal of extraordinary power and presence engaged in a resurrection ritual, the figurine scene we describe transcends the custom highlighted in Halpern's book, elevating the disposable ordinary to the status of inalienable and eternal icon.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS ON MAYA SACRED PLAY AT WAKA'

Synthesizing the rich information addressing Maya sacred play deserves far more research than

presented here. The opportunity to participate in the symposium from which this volume was developed, and the contributions of other participants – those cited and others who were not cited in the present chapter – opened new avenues of thought regarding how we conceive of the potential ways that play, ritual and representations of animals may have intertwined in lives of ancient Maya people, as they continue to among modern Maya we know and with whom we have worked. In addition to the abundant ballgame imagery and animal depictions available in the Maya artistic corpus, the text of the Popol Vuh creation myth clearly highlights those topics. Using archaeological evidence from Waka', we addressed the various themes at hand, yet many examples remain to be explored. For example, the performers at the centre of the narrative figurine scene in Burial 39 allude to sacred buffoonery in the deformed bodies of the dwarves, and are depicted boxing, trumpeting and carrying writing implements along with a hunchback scribe (see Taube & Taube 2009 for a related discussion of Maya figurines, ritual clowning and aesthetics). These figurines were arranged around the seated singing shaman. Commensurate with this imagery, Lady K'abel is depicted on El Perú Stela 34 performing with a court dwarf, who played his musical rattles while she danced, and it makes sense to us that a conjuring and healing ceremony would be accompanied by such characters. The monkey-faced singing shaman (Figure 8.10) is a strange and powerful figurine completely different from the rest in shape and execution. She is hollow and filled with bright red cinnabar, a symbol of life force and blood often found painted on the bones of deceased royalty, but she is not unique. Daniela Triadan (2007) found a similar monkey-faced old woman figurine cradling a child in a domestic context at the site of Ceibal south of Waka', and she concluded that it was a child's toy. Like the marble discovered in the dusty road of Yaxuna that ended up in a gourd cup of clear liquor on Don Pablo's altar as a light stone, some artefacts bind playful things in sacredness and remind us that the human imagination is not easily constrained by the categories of reason. Indeed, it is the breaching of such categories that inspires liminal experience often expressed through play and ritual.

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