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Scribal Syncretism in Colonial Yucatan, Reconsidered

La influencia de la escritura jeroglífica en el Yucatán colonial, revalorada

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ABSTRACT: Scholars have proposed that for decades after the conquest of Yucatan Maya scribes wielded competence in both the old hieroglyphic and the new Latin-based alphabetic scripts. During that time some scribes apparently worked furtively to transfer parts of their pre-conquest traditions, encoded in hieroglyphic codices, into new forms of alphabetic-based writing such as the *Books of Chilam Balam* and other forbidden works. Various types of evidence —historical and philological— have been offered to substantiate claims concerning the lingering effects of hieroglyphic writing practices upon Maya use of the alphabetic script in early colonial times. In the light of new evidence from twentieth-century Maya scribal practice, this paper demonstrates that previously published arguments, especially those developed in an influential series of papers by distinguished Mayanist Victoria Bricker, can no longer be considered valid.

KEYWORDS: scribes; codices; hieroglyphs; colonial Maya.

RESUMEN: Los estudiosos han propuesto que décadas después de la conquista de Yucatán los escribas mayas seguían siendo capaces de utilizar tanto la vieja escritura jeroglífica como la nueva escritura alfabética. Se supone que durante cierto tiempo algunos mayas trabajaron para transferir parte de sus tradiciones previas a la Conquista, plasmadas en códices jeroglíficos, a los nuevos géneros de textos alfabéticos como los *Libros de Chilam Balam* y otros manuscritos prohibidos. Se han publicado varios tipos de evidencias —históricas y filológicas— para sustentar la idea de que las prácticas de la composición jeroglífica seguían influyendo en la escritura alfabética en los tiempos coloniales tempranos. En vista de las nuevas evidencias obtenidas de manuscritos en lengua maya yucateca del siglo xx, este artículo propone que los argumentos previamente publicados, sobre todo los desarrollados en una serie

de prestigiosos artículos por la distinguida mayista Victoria Bricker, ya no pueden considerarse válidos.

PALABRAS CLAVE: escribas; códices; jeroglíficos; maya colonial.

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In the first few decades after the Spanish conquest of Yucatan, the practice and knowledge of hieroglyphic writing declined, and the use of the newly introduced alphabetic script increased. As an effective means of communicating among Maya and as a means for recording matters to be remembered, the alphabetic script fully replaced hieroglyphs across most of the Yucatan peninsula by a date still uncertain, though likely well before the end of the seventeenth century.

The reasons for this shift have long been known. Spanish assaults upon the Maya priesthood and the confiscation and destruction of Maya codices severely interrupted age-old processes for training Maya priests and scribes in the intricacies of hieroglyphic literacy. Meanwhile Franciscans educated young Maya in the arts of alphabetic writing and the rudiments of Christian doctrine, providing the first post-conquest generation with a new flexible means for written communication and record-keeping well aligned to Spanish traditions and priorities.

Scholars have long supposed that the Maya who penned the earliest passages of the colonial-era *Books of Chilam Balam* worked at least to some extent from copies of still existing hieroglyphic codices. Scribes knowledgeable in both writing systems presumably labored furtively to transfer knowledge from one medium to the other in the early days of the colony. A thorough examination of that possibility by Antje Gunsenheimer yielded scant evidence of a direct transfer of form and content from codices to the *Books of Chilam Balam* (Gunsenheimer, 2002). However the issue is still debatable and enjoys some support among Maya scholars (Treiber, 1987: 16; Love, 1994: 6; Edmonson, 1982: xii; Tedlock, 2010: 2, 246; Bracamonte y Sosa, 2010: 101-102; Restall, 1997b: 230; Vail, 2015: 446). We know from the writings of Diego de Landa (*Relación de las cosas de Yucatán*, written in the 1560s) and Pedro Sánchez de Aguilar (*Informe contra idolorum cultores del obispado de Yucatán*, written in 1613) that for several decades into the colonial period some elderly Maya still understood at least elements of the ancient writing system.¹ Were the early Maya alphabetic scribes and the aging heirs to the hieroglyphic tradition one and the same persons? Did colonial Maya scribes draw

¹ In the case of the Maya of Peten Itza, evidence indicates a much longer period during which hieroglyphic texts were possessed and perhaps understood (Jones, 1989: 307; 1994: 105; 1999: 183; Avendaño y Loyola, 1997).

skillfully on both writing traditions, in a manner Victoria Bricker (1989, 2000) has characterized as “scribal syncretism” or “biscrpturalism”, and which John Chuchiak (2010) has dubbed “graphic pluralism”? Or was there a generational gap between the two traditions from the earliest days of the colony on, with some Maya still literate in hieroglyphs, others, only in the new alphabetic script? In the latter case knowledge and traditions recorded in one had necessarily to pass through an oral medium before being adapted and recorded in the other, as some scholars have suggested (Treiber, 1987; Cunill, 2016: 17).

This paper aims to critically examine evidence that has been published for the first interpretation—that Maya scribal hands could once write both in hieroglyphs and in the Latin alphabet (Bricker, 1989; Chuchiak, 2010; Restall, 1997a). My conclusion will be that the evidence is less than has been supposed and does not support this view. This article, however, does not contest the well-documented facts of the continuity from pre-conquest to post-conquest eras of important elements of style in Maya discourse (e.g. parallelism), insofar as such continuities emerge from the practices of speaking Maya, not the techniques for writing Maya (Hanks, 1989; Bricker, 2007).

Colonial Scribes Following Hieroglyphic Conventions?

Scholars long supposed that some early colonial-era Maya scribes drew content from hieroglyphic codices as they penned in alphabetic script the first chapters of the amorphous genre of writings we know as the *Books of Chilam Balam*. Victoria Bricker was the first, however, to identify specific evidence of the bi-literate competency of such early Maya scribes. Bricker previewed her argument (1985), reprised it (1986), and then revisited it, as part of a broader discussion of bilingualism among Maya scribes (2000). However, the fullest exposition of that argument is found in her 1989 article, “The Last Gasp of Maya Hieroglyphic Writing in the Books of Chilam Balam of Chumayel and Chan Kan.” It is to that presentation of her thesis that I most frequently refer in the pages below.

In that influential article Bricker reported finding in two arguably early-composed parts of the *Books of Chilam Balam of Chumayel* and *of Chan Kan* evidence that Maya scribes had repeatedly modified the correct spelling of certain words. They added extra consonants, frequently when rendering the combination of a Maya root of the form CVC (consonant-vowel-consonant) with a grammatical suffix of the form -VC (vowel-consonant). The word *kinel*, for example, consists of the root *kin* (“day”), and the relational suffix *-el*, as part of a phrase such as *u kinel*, “its day”. In those early texts identified by Bricker, the colonial-era scribes did not, however, write the word as *kinel*, but, rather, as *kin nel*. They parsed the word into two syllables and inserted an extra consonant. In other words, they doubled the “n”. So, too, did they double consonants in this word and others some 148 times in the two sources Bricker noted.

The practice of doubling consonants, also referred to as “consonant insertion,” had, according to Bricker, “no phonetic source or grammatical functions in Classical Yucatec (i.e. in Yucatec Maya as spoken and written around the time of the conquest and for some time thereafter)” (Bricker, 1989: 41). To explain this seeming anomaly in colonial-era scribal orthography, Bricker pointed instead to some conventions of Maya hieroglyphic writing. As Bricker illustrated in her figure 4.3, to assemble a collocation of graphemes that together represented the phrase *u kinel*, a hieroglyphic scribe would utilize phonetic complements that in effect doubled the final consonant of the main sign, *kin*. Using glyphs, the *-el* suffix of the expression *u kinel* would be formed by affixing to the main sign *kin* two additional signs with the syllabic values /ne/ and /le/, together signifying the consonant-vowel-consonant cluster /nel/. The entire collocation of glyphs yielded *u kin nel*, producing the same kind of “consonant insertion” found in samples of early colonial alphabetic from the *Books of Chilam Balam*. Bricker made similar arguments concerning smaller numbers of examples of vowel insertion, consonant deletion, and vowel deletion found in the Chilam Balam texts. Noting the formal similarity of the Maya scribal practices, one in pre-conquest hieroglyphic writing, the other in post-conquest alphabetic writing, Bricker also noted that the practices were temporally proximate. The Chilam Balam texts in question “were written not long after the Conquest, when the traditional calendar and script were still in use” (Bricker, 1989: 41). Bricker suggested that colonial-era Maya scribes writing the *Chilam Balam* passages in alphabetic script were conversant with hieroglyphic writing conventions —indeed, that they were adapting the latter to the former.

Maya epigrapher Stephen Houston has questioned some of the glyphic evidence Bricker presented as examples of consonant and vowel insertion similar to that found in the alphabetic books of Chilam Balam (Houston, Baines and Cooper, 2003: 466 fn. 9). A few errant readings of the glyphs do not invalidate Bricker’s thesis, as at least some of her readings are correct. Bricker’s argument concerning the influence of hieroglyphic conventions on alphabetic writings contains, however, a different, more significant flaw. The temporal proximity of similar kinds of scribal practices —pre- and early post-conquest— does not imply they are causally related. We can be sure of that, because Maya scribal practice very distant in time from when hieroglyphs were still known or used also displays an abundance of the same orthographic anomalies of consonant and vowel deletion and insertion that Bricker detected in the early passages of the *Chilam Balam of Chumayel* and *Chan Kan*.

Between 1934 and 1936 Maya officials of villages in central Quintana Roo exchanged correspondence with the American archeologist Sylvanus Morley who was then directing the Carnegie Institution of Washington’s researches at Chichen Itza and elsewhere on the Yucatan Peninsula (Sullivan, 1989). Thirteen of the Maya letters to Morley have survived (Figure 1).² They are each handwritten

² These letters, and most of Morley’s responses to them, are archived at the Peabody Museum of Harvard University under “Correspondence between S.G. Morley and Various Maya Indian Chiefs from

on letter-sized, legal-sized, or occasionally smaller cuts of paper and total some 30 pages of text. The Maya letters were drafted by two different scribes –Apolinario Itza and Antonio Xiu.

The image shows a single page of a handwritten letter in Maya script. The text is written in a cursive, flowing style on lined paper. The lines of text are closely spaced and cover most of the page. The script is a form of the Maya syllabary, with characters that are somewhat rounded and connected. The paper has horizontal lines and some faint markings, possibly from the original document or the scanning process. The overall appearance is that of a historical document, likely a letter from a Maya official to Sylvanus Morley.

Figure 1. Maya Officers to Sylvanus Morley, 9 February 1935
(Peabody Museum, Harvard University).

Xcocal to [sic] the Territory of Quintana Roo, Mexico, and Various Associated Villages, from November 1934 to June 2, 1936.” Parts of additional correspondence from Morley to the Maya offices were still to be found in private Maya hands in the 1980s. The Maya letters to Morley are dated 18 November 1934; 9 February, 3 May, 9 May, 13 June, 30 September, 25 November 1935; and an additional letter from 1935 not specified as to month; 2 June, 5 June 1936. On some days more than one letter was drafted.

Consonant insertion of exactly the same type detected and discussed by Bricker for the early colonial period appears in abundance in these twentieth-century texts. Vowel insertion, and consonant and vowel deletion, occur also, though much less frequently than consonant insertion. All of these processes are exemplified, for example, in the Maya officers' 3 May 1935 letter to Morley (The first line of each triplet in the transcription below mirrors the handwritten original. Consonant and vowel sequences involving one of the processes of insertion or deletion under discussion here are highlighted by underlining. The second line of each stanza provides a normalized transcription; the third line, a free English translation. Corrections and insertions made by the Maya scribe in the original are indicated by strikethrough and superscript insertions).³

tix ca cal cah ti uardial mayo 3 de 1935 años
ti' škakal kàah ti' guardial mayo 3 de 1935 años
 In Xcocal Guardia town May 3, 1935.
 Bey u oh rail_l ja cu llantal in men t̃iç u con des
bey u 'òorahila' ku yàantal in mèentik u kontesto
 This is the hour of the making of my response
 to le car ta ah ɔa ma ex ti ton_u nah Sēr he peeh yannil
le karta a tz'ama[h]je'eš ti' to'ona' señor hepe yàanileč
 [to] the letter you (pl.) have given us, Sr. Jefe you who are
le ech uail ti tu ca hil uail chi chen_u neh Sēr he pee
wayil ti' tu kàahil wayil čič'ene' señor hepe
 here in the town, here [in] Chichen, Sr. Jefe.
 hach manal ci ma cil in uol u chic in Ka mic xan
hač màanal ki'imak in wóol 'úučik in k'amik šan
 How exceedingly happy I was to receive it, too,
 ten S̃r D., pe dro pas cual ba rerat
 — *t̃en señor don pedro pascual barrera*
 I Mr. Don Pedro Pascual Barrera
 y ten S̃r D., con sepe cion que tuk y D., per dro bareral
yetel t̃en señor don konsepsión kituk' yetel don pedro barera
 and I Mr. Don Concepción Cituk and Don Pedro Barrera,
 y ten S̃r Ebaris to Zu luub y D., ah ponario y tzab
yetel t̃en señor ebaristo zulub yetel don apolinario itza
 and I Mr. Evaristo Zulub and Don Apolinario Itza,
 y ten S̃r D., pran sis co chaac tu en car co he pe D., Cituk
yetel t̃en señor pransisko čak tu enkargado hepe don kituk'
 and I Mr. Francisco Chac the representative of Chief Don Cituk,
 y ten S̃r D., ah po nario y tzaab ten ca pi tan ta al_ulique

³ As Victoria Bricker (1986) has noted for the Maya hieroglyphic script, a Maya scribe's syllabic scanning of words and phrases did not respect morpheme boundaries —i.e. parts of two different morphemes might be comingled in one single phonetic syllable. So, too, with scribes working with the alphabetic script, as in the letter discussed here. For that reason the lines of the transcription of the original letter will not align perfectly with the lines of the following normalized transcription (which does respect morpheme boundaries).

yetel t'een seño don apolinario itza t'een kapitan ta a'alike'
 and I Mr. Don Apolinario Itza. I am captain as it is said.
 y ten Sēr D., Juan Po ot y D., Au ta sio ta May [blank space]
yetel t'een seño don hwan po'ot yetel don anastasio tamay
 And I Mr. Don Juan Poot and Don Anastacio Tamay.
 hach manal ci ma cil ol ton u ch_iic Ka mic tu la ca
hač m'anal ki'imakil óol to'on 'úučik k'amik tuláakal
 How exceedingly happy we [are] to have received it, all of us.
 lon Bey xan li cil con des tar ti_iic u hel ti tech xan
bey šan likil kontestartik u h'el ti t'eeč šan
 So too arises the answering of another to you, also
 u hel Sēr he peeh tu men ɔoc [o]hel ti_iic xan bix than ni_l
u h'el seño hepe tum'een ts'o'ok [óo]heltik šan biš t'áanil
 another, Mr. Chief, because it is already known also which speech
 u yan tal a be ti xan hach ma nal ci ma cil in uol ua
u y'antal a bèeti[k] šan hač m'anal ki'imakil in wóol wah
 there is you make [i.e. what you have said] also. How exceedingly happy I
 am if ...
 tu ~~ma~~ men ca yan_i na cil a hol kol ti uay tin ca ha_ile
tum'een kah y'anakil a hóok'ol ti' way ti' in k'ahale'
 because when it happens you come here to my town
 ca tun yan_i na cil in than ta uee tel tun Sēr he peeh
kah tun y'anakil in t'áan tawéetel tun seño hepe
 when it happens I speak with you Mr. Chief,
 hach ci mac ol lon_i ta tu la ca lon Bey xan tu la cal
hač ki'imakóolo'on tuláakalo'on bey šan tuláacal
 how happy we are all of us, also all
 tac tin tro pa il_iloob mix man bal ca tu_iuc li_iic xan
tak ti' in tropailo'ob miš manbal ka tuklik šan
 including my troops. Nothing should you worry about.
 [--] den_ipen_i tir yan xan ⁱⁿ a denpen tir ti_ic que xan he bix xan
y'án šan in dependertike' šan hebiš šan
 I am going to take care of everything like also
 gas tar ^{ti_c} in hen te tan ku chul te lo ta cahal chi ne bey xan
gastartik in hente táan k'uchul te'elo' ta k'ahal čič'e]ne' bey šan
 [you] provide [for] my people [who] are arriving there in your town of Chichen.
 Thus too
 ua tu men_i nel ca yan_i nac a ho kool ta uai tin cal hal
wah tumenel kah y'anak a hóok'ol way ti' in k'ahal
 whether because you come here to my town
 xcacal caheh yan in gas tar ti_iic quech xan hach ma nal
škalal k'aahe' y'án in gastartikeč šan hač m'anal
 Xcacal town I will provide for you too. How exceedingly
 ci ma cil in uol ca lii ki tu be se bal p hach u pa ba
ki'ikmakil in wóol kah lūk'il tuséebal hač u paboril
 happy I am [if] it occurs quickly. The favor
 bor ri cin kat ya tziil ti tech ca yan_i na cil ^a talel tu hach
kin k'áatyatsil ti' t'eeč kah y'anakil a t'áalel tu hač

I beg you for, that you come very
 tu se bal tu man^e nel Bey u o r a hach ya ab bax Kas
tuséebal tumenel bey u 'òorah hač ya'ab ba'aš k'às
 quickly because this is the hour [when] very many bad things
 tu man u be toob le me hil ca noš soob ti ton tux yan
 tu[n] máan u bèeto'ob le mehikanoso'ob ti' to'on tu'uš *yàano'on*
 they are going around doing, the Mexicans, to us where we are
non chan S man nes o tzil liil la Sēr he pee le ti tuok
čan manes otsilila' señõr hepe lèeti tu [y]ok'lale'
 [unclear] poor, Mr. Chief. That is the reason
lal le in Kat ca yan nac a ta lel tu se bal Sēr he pee
in k'áat kah yàanak a tàalel tuséebal hepe
 I ask that you come quickly,
 tu men tial le Uar tia yan ni lon Uay ye
tumèen [u]tial le guardia yàanilo'on waye'
 because of the Guardia we have here.
 tan u lus co b tan u ya lol tic xan lo ba
tàan u lu[k]'siko'ob tàan u yah'óoltik šan lo'obal
 They are removing, they are harming, too, for sure
 tu men yan humpel cah ɔoc u lu sa al u
tumèen yàan hunp'el kàah ts'o'ok u lu[k]'sika'al
 because there is one town [where] have already been removed
yum mil loobi tu men or den Me gi ca na
uyüumilo'obi' tumèen 'òorden mehikana
 its people because of a Mexican order.
 le ti cu ɔoc co u ta lob u tuc lic coob lo ba
lèeti ku ts'o'oko[l] u tàalo'ob u tukliko'ob lo'oba[l]
 That done, they come to think for sure . . .
 le ti le chan cah bal che cah ɔoc u lu sa lo bi
lèeti le čan kàah ba'alče' kàah ts'o'ok u lu[k]'sa'al lo'obil
 that little town [is] an animal town. They have already been removed like that.
 le ti cu yan ta al in Sa Si cun sic ti te ech xan
lèeti ku yàantal in sasilkunsik ti' tèeče' šan
 That is what there is for me to clarify to you, too
 [--] sřio Do,, he pe ya ni lech Uay tu cah il
[–] señõr don hepe yàanileč way ti u kàahil
 [--] Mr. Don Chief you are here in your town
 chi chen ne [space] tu men ɔoc ol he tic yan
čič'èene' [space] tumèen ts'o'ok 'òoheltik yàan
 Chichen. [space] Because it is already known there is
 hun tu ul Ma ya than ɔoc ađ no bra tic
hun tul maya t'àan ts'o'ok nombrartik
 a Maya-speaking person already named
 [back side of sheet one]
 utial htha na balon y e le xan le ti in ka at ca
utial t'àanalba'alo'on yetele'[/] lèeti in k'áat kah
 in order to discuss things with us. That is what I want
 in Ui la e es Sř nřo Do,, A pon so vi la le ti ol

in wilahes seňor don alponso vila lèeti ti' 'óolal
 when I see Mr. Don Alfonso Villa, for that reason
 al tan len Uay ye Sř nřo Do., he pe
htàalen waye' seňor don hepe
 I came here, Mr. Don Chief.
 [three line space]
 tu men tonne le ti le pa la bra yan tu cah gil
tumèen to'one' lèeti le palabra yàan tu kàahil
 Because we, what was said in the town of
 chi chenne le ti tuc lic al ca paach tic xan
čič'ène' lèeti tuklik 'áalkabpàačtik šan
 Chichen, that is was we think to pursue also
 yani lon xan Uay ye le ti Ka at ~~om~~ ohe te
yàanilo'on šan waye' lèeti k'áat ohelteh
 here where we are. That which we want to know,
 bix cu bin ~~o~~ col xan [space]
biš ku bin ts'o'okol šan
 how it will end, also.
 y u lak bax cin sa sil cun sic ti teche Sēr he pee tuok
yetel u láak ba'aš kin sasilkunsik ti' tēēčē' seňor hepe tu yok'lal
 And another thing I clarify for you Mr. Chief, because
 lal le tropa cu be ti ic u uardia loobh bo Sēr uay ti ih
le tropa ku bēetik u guardialo'obo seňor way ti'i
 the troops who perform guard service Mr., here in
 ix ca cal cah he [space] 100 50 ombres le tr
xkakal kàahe' [space] 100 50 hombres le tropa
 Xcacal town, 150 men are the troops
 o pa cu be tiic u de uardia lo bo Sēr le ti cin ~~caic~~ ah
ku bēetik u de guardialo'obo seňor lèeti kin ts'aik
 who do guard service, Mr. That I make
 uo hel te Sēr hepeeh [space]
awóohelteh seňor hepe
 known to you Mr. Chief.
 [Line space]
 Bey cin sa sil cun^{techcho} Sēr hep hach ca yun hahal Dios
bey kin sasilkun tēēčo' seňor hepe hač k yùum hahal dyòos
 Thus I enlighten you Mr. Chief. May our Lord True God
 uta cun te ah pi xan y ah uincil Sēr he peeh
u ta'akunteh a pišan yetel a wīnikil seňor hepe
 protect your soul and your body Mr. Chief.
 ten Sēr D., pedro pas cual ba le ral
tēen seňor don pedro paskual barera
 I Mr. Don Pedro Pascual Barrera,
 y Sēr D., con sep cion qui tuk
yetel seňor don konsepsion kituk'
 and Mr. Don Concepción Cituk,
 y ten Sēr D., Ebaris to Zu luub
yetel tēen don ebaristo zulub

and I Don Evaristo Zuluub,
 ʔ ten Sēr D., paran sis co chac
 yetel tèn señoṛ don paransisco chac
 and I Mr. Don Francisco Chac,
 ʔ ten Sēr D., ah po lli na rio y Tzaab
 yetel tèn señoṛ don apolinario itza
 and I Mr. Don Apolinario Itza,
 ʔ ten Sēr D., Juan bau tis ta poot
 yetel tèn señoṛ don hwan bautista po'ot
 and I Mr. Don Juan Bautista Poot.
 [line space]
 Sṛ D., apo li nar rio tzaab tu en car co yum hepeeh
 señoṛ don apolinario itza ti' u encargado yum hepe
 Mr. Don Apolinario Itza as the representative of the chief.
 ten ta len tun ca pi tan pri mero
 tèn htàalen tun kapitan primero
 I then came as first captain.
 Sṛ D., Uay bau tis ta pot chan hepe
 señoṛ don hwan bautista po'ot çan hepe
 Mr. Don Juan Bautista Poot as lesser chief.
 Sṛ D., ta sio ta may sa rin to primero
 señoṛ don atanasio may sarhento primero
 Mr. Don Atanasio May as first sergeant.
 Sṛ D., pe dro Ju sar into
 señoṛ don pedro hu sarhento
 Mr. Don Pedro Hu as sergeant.
 [line space]
 ka at tun ca tun ya nac humpel a
 k'áat tun kah yàanak hump'el
 Asking then that there be an
 le gar ta Ue te Sṛ D., ge pe
 alegar [=arreglo] tawéete[] señoṛ don hepe
 arrangement with you Mr. Don Chief
 leti le con tr a bando ka tic ti te ech
 lèeti le kontrabando [k] k'áatik ti' tèeç
 [regarding] the contraband [i.e. weapons] we ask of you
 u tial ca nan tic ba on Uay ye
 utial [k] kanantik kbaho'on waye'
 in order to protect ourselves here,
 ʔ hun tzaan⁴ bantra ka tic ti te ech xan

⁴ The use of the word *tsaan* here is curious. The scribe wrote it very clearly so there is no mistaking the sequence of letters, but he may have had in mind the root *ts'aan*. That word is poorly attested in Maya dictionaries, but Bricker, Po'ot and Dzul have one entry that is likely apropos. They provide an example of *ts'áan* used as a numeral classifier meaning "a pair of" (Bricker, Po'ot and Dzul, 1998: 48). On the other hand, a different scribe who authored the Maya officers' 13 June 1935 letter to Morley used the same word *tzan* three times as a numeral classifier in conjunction with the word *carta*, once even striking out his first choice, the most common numeral classifier *p'éel*, in order to replace it with *tzan*. The phrases as written were: *humpe tzan car ta*, *huntzan car ta*, *humtzan car ta*.

yetel hun ts'aan bandera [k] k'áatik ti' téeč šan
 and a couple of flags we ask of you, too.
 Sř D., A po li nar io i tzab Sř D., ta sio ta May
señor apolinario itza señor don atanasio tamay
 Mr. Apolinario Itza, Mr. Don Atanasio Tamay,
 Sř D., pe dro Ju Sř D., pe dro Ɔiib
señor don pedro hu señor pedro ts'iib
 Mr. Don Pedro Hu, Mr. Pedro Dzib,
 Sř D., ti no May
señor don tino may
 Mr. Don Tino May.
 [end of letter]

In the entire *Book of Chilam Balam of Chumayel* Victoria Bricker counted some 148 instances of consonant insertion. In sections with heavy concentrations of such orthographic anomalies she found 22 examples on 3 pages of the book, and 27 examples on another 9 pages of the book (Bricker, 1989: 41). In the two-page letter from 1935 quoted above I count 36 instances of consonant insertion, a frequency comensurate with that found by Bricker in sections of the *Chilam Balam of Chumayel*. The types of consonant insertion found in the 1935 letter are like those found by Bricker in the Chilam Balam texts. They included:

- a) -Vʔ enclitic written as -CV or -CVh, as in *uay ye, ton nah, ton ne, cah he, ca hal le, chi chen neh, oh rail la, tech cho, depen tir tic que*
- b) -VC noun suffixes (-il and -el) written as -CVC, as in *cah gil, yan nil, than nil, yum mil, tu men nel, otzil lil, pa bor ri[l]*
- c) -VC or -VʔVC pronominal and plural suffixes (-ʔoʔob, ʔoʔon, and ʔech) written as -CVC or -CVVC, as in *yan non, tu la cal lon, tuc lic coob, yum mil lob, ci mac ol lon, me hil can nos soob*
- d) -Vk, Vl verbal suffixes written as -CVk or -CVl, as in *yan nac* and *Ɔoc co[l]*.

Consonant deletion occurs with Spanish borrowings as well as with Maya original words, as shown in the examples above. Bricker noted that in her colonial-era sample consonants subject to doubling included the plain consonants *b, c, h, l, m, n, s, t, w (u), x* and *y* (Bricker, 1989: 41). So, too, in the 1935 letter quoted here or in other letters from the Maya-Morley correspondence can one find all these consonants doubled (except *w (u)*), as well as two not noted by Bricker, *ch* and *ts*.

As was the case with Bricker's colonial-era sample, analagous instances of vowel insertion (19 tokens), and consonant or vowel deletion (eight tokens) are much less numerous, but nonetheless present in the 1935 text under consideration

These examples of the use of *tsan* with a flag and with letters suggest an unattested numeral classifier, *tsan* or *ts'an* (scribes sometimes failed to note glottalization of this consonant) used with flat, rectangular objects. The correct spelling is probably *ts'áan*, since it can also denote "flattened," an adjective that could describe both a sheet of paper and a cloth flag (Bricker, Po'ot and Dzul, 1998: 48).

here. The twentieth-century Maya scribe, like his colonial-era counterparts, did not consistently nor frequently note vowel length or -V?V- occurrences. Sometimes he appears to have done just that by doubling the letter for a vowel, as in, from the letter quoted above, the words *Jooc* (ts'o'ok), *ta uee tel*, (tawéetel), *tro pa il loob* (tropailo'ob), *u be tooob* (u bèeto'ob), *u tuc lic coob* (u tukliko'ob), *hun tzaan* (hun ts'áan). However in other instances, as Bricker found, vowels were doubled unrelated to the need to convey vowel length, tone or the glottal infixes of Maya roots. Bricker found that vowel insertion in the colonial texts she discussed all pertained to roots of the form CV?, CVh, and CVy, and to suffixes of the form -VC. Concerning the latter, Bricker noted the three -VC suffixes -ac, -ah, and -al were sometimes written with inserted vowels as -aac, -aah, and -aal in order to facilitate syllabification as in examples such as *chu ca ah*, *mu ca ah* (Bricker, 1989: 41-43). The only similar examples that can be found in the 1935 letter quoted above, or in other letters from the Maya-Morley correspondence, involve the -al suffix as in *yan ta al* (*ku yàantal*). In the modern correspondence one finds additionally the vowel of the suffix -ik frequently doubled, with the scribe thus altering the form CVC-t-ik into CVC-ti-ik, or the form CVC-ik into CV-Ci-ik, as in *men ti ic* (mèntik), *be ti ic* or *be tiic* (bèetik), *ohel ti ic* ('oheltik), *con tes tar ti ic* (kontestartik).⁵

The examples of vowel deletion and consonant deletion which Bricker found in Chilam Balam passages were both limited and mixed. Her tokens of vowel deletion included numerous examples of the use of abbreviation by the Maya scribes who wrote certain pages of the *Chilam Balam of Chan Kan*, produced presumably by Maya scribes already familiar with Spanish abbreviation conventions. In those examples scribes not only elided unwanted vowels, but also marked the resulting sequence of letters for syllable boundaries as well. For example, as Bricker noted, one finds the word *ayikal* rendered in abbreviation as *āy.k.l*, and the word *yahalcab*, as *y.h.l.cab*. That suggested to Bricker that the Maya scribe was treating the Latin alphabet as a syllabary, with each consonant in these abbreviations standing for a consonant-vowel combination (Bricker, 1989: 44-45). That suggestion seems unwarranted, however. In the examples she gave not every consonant represented a consonant-vowel combination. The final *l* in *āy.k.l* represented just the sound /l/. So, too, the *.l* in the abbreviation *y.h.l.cab*. The scribe who wrote these abbreviations intended a reader to reconstitute the full expression based upon an awareness of the syllabification of the spoken expression—hence the dots between the consonants. But this is not the same as treating the Latin alphabet as a syllabary, even in this limited, somewhat idiosyncratic corpus of abbreviations. In any event, the Maya scribes who penned their leaders' correspondence to Sylvanus Morley in the 1930s appear to have been less familiar with Spanish abbreviation conventions than was the scribe of the *Chilam*

⁵ Concerning some additional examples of vowel doubling, it is not possible to determine whether the scribe intended to indicate vowel length/tone, or was inserting vowels to promote convenient syllabification. As in the examples *te ech* (tèèč), *ka at* (k'áat), *tu ul* (túul).

Balam passages to which Bricker made reference. In the Maya-Morley letters one finds only abbreviations for the words *año*, *señor* and *don*.

Drawing again from pages of the *Chilam Balam of Chan Kan* Bricker pointed to the use of consonant deletion to facilitate a syllabic rendering of words and phrases. She suggested that was done sometimes to eliminate consonant clusters that would impede writing in preferred CV- syllable sequences, as with the example of *numya* rendered as *nu ya*. As one might by now expect, this practice is also found in the Maya-Morley letters. In the 1935 text quoted above one finds such examples as (brackets indicating the deleted consonants and sometimes vowels) *lu[k]s[i]cob*, *lu[k]saal*, *ohe[l]tic*, *alca[b]pachtic*. Bricker also noted in the *Chilam Balam of Chan Kan* instances in which the final consonant *l* was omitted from expressions, and this one finds also in the Maya-Morley letters with such examples as *ta ue te[l]* (*tawéetel*), *ka nan ta[l]* (*k'a'ana'antal*), *yanta[l]*, (*yàantal*), *hunpe[l]*, (*hun p'éel*).

From the *Chilam Balam of Chumayel* Victoria Bricker extracted one more token of a curious orthographic practice that appeared to point to borrowing from hieroglyphic scriptural conventions —a case of rebus writing (Bricker, 1989: 41). In that book one finds the expression *2n hele* which Bricker surely correctly read as meaning *can hele*. The numeral 2 stood for the sound of the word for “two” in classical Yucatec, /ka/ (a phonetic suffix, *n*, was added to transform that into the word *can*, meaning “four”, with the expression as a whole presumably meaning “four *hel*”).⁶ This appeared to Bricker a possible borrowing from hieroglyphic writing presumably because it involves the combination of the (logographic) sign for *ca* with a phonetic complement, just as one finds so often in hieroglyphic inscriptions. Virtually the same practice, however, is found instantiated twice in the Maya-Morley letters from the 1930s, once each in a letter penned by each of two scribes. Both involve the use of the numeral 5 to represent by itself not the number “five”, but a sequence of sounds used with a “phonetic complement” to make a complete word meaning in one case “five of them” and in the other “the fifth”. In the letter from Maya officers to Sylvanus Morley dated 2 June 1936, one finds:

5 cob li cil uta lel loob
siinko'ob liik'il u tàalelo'ob
 five of them rose up to come (i.e. five men were sent to see you)⁷

⁶ There is some uncertainty concerning the meaning of the expression *cangel* that appears at various points in the *Chilam Balam* books. Bricker and others interpret it as a Maya adaptation of the Spanish word *arcángel*, “archangel,” which, thanks to the felicitous sense of the phoneme sequence *can* meaning four, Mayas syncretized with the winds of the four directions (Bricker and Miram, 2002: 78; see also Knowlton, 2010: 57-59). On the other hand, Ralph Roys in his English translation of the Chumayel interpreted the expression to refer to a scepter, perhaps the object known to Maya iconographers as the Maniken Scepter (Roys, 1967: 67). Each argument has its merits. My preference is here irrelevant.

⁷ I mention here again that twentieth-century Maya scribes did not always distinguish between glottalized and un-glottalized consonants, so I interpret the scribe's *licil* as *liik'il*, a word choice that occurs various times throughout the letters to refer to the initiation of an action.

In this case the numeral 5 is not employed to represent the entire word *cinco*. Were that the case one would have articulated this as /sin ko kob/, producing a kind of stutter which does not conform to any example of syllabification or consonant insertion found in these letters. Rather, the numeral 5 is used to represent only the initial syllable /sin/, with the expression then read as *sin cob*.

A second, slightly more elaborated instance of rebus writing, also involving the use of the numeral 5, is found in the Maya officers' letter to Morley dated 5 June 1936. Here the scribe wrote:

u tiah ya 5in co de jun n̄on tuhabil de 19^o36 An n̄on
utial siinko de hunio ti u ha'abil de 1936 años
 on the fifth of June of the year 1936 years

Here the numeral 5 is reduced to representing only the initial consonantal sound /s/. What is more, the scribe merged the graphic qualities of the written numeral 5 and the written, capital letter S to produce a hybrid 5/S, as can be seen below in the facsimile of this section of the letter. Note the difference between the modified 5/S, and the way the scribe wrote otherwise ordinary capital S's elsewhere in this sample (Figure 2).

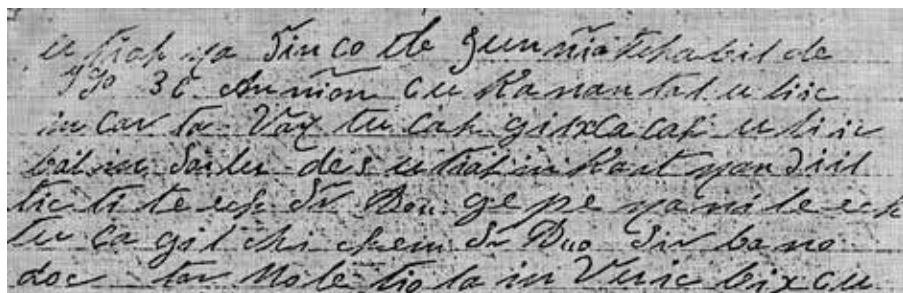


Figure 2. Maya Officers to Sylvanus Morley, 5 June 1936
 (Peabody Museum, Harvard University).

In summary, both the early colonial texts analyzed by Victoria Bricker and the twentieth-century samples of Maya writing presented above display virtually the same practices of consonant and vowel insertion and deletion, and rebus writing. Bricker had argued that these practices possibly evidenced a carry-over of hieroglyphic scribal practices into the handling of the new alphabetic script in the preparation of Maya-language documents. Formal similarity and temporal proximity of the two scribal practices —hieroglyphic and alphabetic— made this possibility seem likely. The twentieth-century examples I have provided, however, lack the element of temporal proximity, leaving only formal similarity to suggest a link to the hieroglyphic past. One might argue, I suppose, that this evidence points to a continuation of the influence, if not the very practice, of

hieroglyphic writing far into the colonial, even into the modern period. John Chuchiak, for example, claimed that he found in post-conquest Maya scribal practices “evidence . . . [that] points to the preservation, propagation, and pluralistic use of both writing systems [hieroglyphic and alphabetic] long into the colonial period and, in some regions, into the dawn of the nineteenth century” (Chuchiak, 2010: 90). Yet this is surely flight of fancy, with no evidence actually provided to support such an extraordinary assertion. Perhaps practices once derived from hieroglyphic writing and transferred by early scribes into the handling of an alphabetic script were subsequently passed down, generation after generation, from one Maya scribe to another to the very men who penned Maya letters to Sylvanus Morley in the 1930s? This too seems doubtful. The chain of transmission is too long and was broken here and there by the intervention of non-Maya literates uninfluenced by Maya hieroglyphic practices. We know that the predecessors of our scribes from the 1930s, the scribes and secretaries of the Caste War Maya, were not always Maya, and not members of an age-old guild of scribes preserving writing traditions through the ages.⁸

An Alternative Hypothesis

The fact that examples of twentieth-century Maya orthography match examples gleaned from colonial-era writing is sufficient to invalidate the argument that such orthographic anomalies reflect a lingering scribal knowledge of hieroglyphic writing conventions. Refuting this prior, well-established notion opens the door to consideration of alternative explanations for anomalous Maya orthographies. Limitations of space and available research permit me here to only suggest one alternative hypothesis. Namely, that the examples of consonant/vowel insertion/deletion discussed in this paper reflect heretofore poorly researched aspects of Yucatec Maya accoustical phonetics and syllable formation and recognition.

The letters to Sylvanus Morley penned by Maya secretaries in the 1930s were the product of dictation. Officers spoke, the scribes jotted down what was said, offices spoke on, the scribes wrote on. This much is evident from the numerous self-referential phrases in the letters that do not refer back to the scribe who wielded the pen, but to their superiors who imagined themselves speaking directly to Sylvanus Morley through the medium of the written word. “Thus then this holy hour, thus then this holy day, there is then the great necessity of my making this letter for me to give to you” That letter from 20 September 1935 was signed by Evaristo Zuluub alone. But he didn’t actually “make the letter.”

⁸ I have in mind here Juan Bautista Vega of Chum Pom in the early 20th century; Gerardo de Castillo who was secretary in the 1860s to rebel generals Zapata and Santos in Santa Cruz; José María Rosado, a captive in the late 1850s; along with countless other literate captives of the rebel Maya from the mid nineteenth-century into the twentieth.

His scribe did, by trying accurately to capture in writing, syllable-by-syllable, the sounds of Zuluub speaking.

*bey tun u santo oh raiil la bey tun u santo kinnil la cun
llan tal tun u hach kan nan tal in mentiic lay hunpeel car ta ah
u tial in ja ah teeoh*

Sometimes the scribe used blank space to separate syllables —*kan nan tal*— sometimes he did not —*kinnil, santo, mentiic*. But the orthography nonetheless provided a prospective reader with information necessary to reproduce the corresponding syllables as articulated by Zuluub (or as the scribe imagined they should be articulated). A consonant was inserted in the writing of the word *kinil* (in the phrase *u santo kinnil* —“the holy day [for]”) not to conform to a standard preference, or to produce a favored CVC-CVC syllabification for a word that otherwise would be rendered as CVC-VC. The consonant was inserted because that was how the word is articulated — /kʰin nil/. The twentieth-century scribe, otherwise inexperienced in finer orthographic practices, was simply trying to render exactly what he heard. So, too, I imagine, for the colonial-era scribes who penned the books of Chilam Balam. In this sense I disagree with Bricker’s assertion that “words written with double consonants . . . have no phonetic source or grammatical functions in Classical Yucatec” (Bricker, 1989: 41). They do, rather, have a phonetic function —to accurately reflect in writing one aspect of the articulatory phonetics of carefully spoken Yucatec Maya. So, too, in colonial times when written texts were already “pervaded by oral features” as William Hanks has observed (2010: 112, 287; 2015: 659-661) (Since her 1989 article Victoria Bricker [2015] has, in fact, identified such oral bases for types of aberrant orthography other than consonant/vowel insertion/deletion in colonial Maya documents.)

Following Smalley in his *Manual of Articulatory Phonetics* by “syllables” I refer groups of sounds out of a stream of speech, each grouping of which carries its own beat (Smalley, 1963: 152). The pattern or rhythm of such beats in a stretch of spoken language one readily notices. The precise boundaries between sound groups —between syllables— can be much less obvious, as Smalley noted: “It is not always possible, however, to determine an exact syllable boundary.” Smalley provided the example of the spoken English word “money”. Rendering the word phonetically, he stated that “it is clear what the syllabics and non-syllabics are” —i.e. which sounds bear stress, which do not— “however in the [n] in the middle is a boundary between two syllables, and does not belong more completely with one than with the other, unless you pronounce the word in an over-precise way” (Smalley, 1963: 154). Smalley noted that in some languages “syllable division is [always] clearly audible”. That is not, however, the case in English.

Nor is it the case in Yucatec Maya. The problem that Smalley alluded to with the example of the word “money” is the same Maya scribes confronted when he chose to “insert” consonants, or to double consonants, in so many written

words and phrases. Every syllable peak in Yucatec Maya —the point of greatest stress in a sequence of phonemes— is a vowel, and, Robert Blair tells us in his 1964 study of the morpho-syntax of Yucatec Maya, every vowel “constitutes the occurrence of a syllable peak” (Blair, 1964: 21-22).⁹ Consonants are relegated to the sometimes vague boundaries between syllables, with Maya scribes assigning a consonant to the final sound of one syllable, or to the initial sound of the next syllable, or to *both*.

That is the phonetic source of what Bricker has named, and others have followed, “consonantal insertion”. One should keep in mind that inserting an extra letter in written words and inserting an extra articulated consonant in the spoken word are not the same thing and will not always correspond. Consonant/vowel insertion/deletion should refer ultimately not to the writing of letters but the articulation of sounds, and where the latter seems impossible or unlikely, one is not really dealing with this practice, but, rather, with scribal error or something else still. Matthew Restall in his article “Heirs to the Hieroglyphs” (1997a) followed Bricker in noting “logosyllabic principles” in colonial-era alphabetic writing that hark back to corresponding practices displayed in pre-conquest hieroglyphic inscriptions. Some of the additional examples he provided, however, fail the test I have suggested above and are not examples of the practices that Bricker highlighted. For example, Restall found in documents he consulted the phrase *hun p’éeł* (meaning “one inanimate object”) written variously as *humpel*, *hunnpel*, *hunpell*. The extra “n” in the second version, and the extra “l” in the third, however, cannot plausibly be articulated as separate syllables. All three versions are just ways of writing (one version more accurate than the other) the sequence of syllables *hun p’éeł* (Restall, 1997a: 248).

A case somewhat different from that I’ve made concerning the cause of consonantal insertion will need to be made for the less common occurrences of “vowel insertion”. Because, as noted above, every vowel is syllabic in itself, with or without consonantal accompaniment. If a scribe inserted a letter representing a vowel, it implied the scribe imagined articulating an additional syllable. Restall provided an example of this noting that a Maya scribe wrote the word *cruz* as *curuz*. This would appear to be a valid instance of vowel insertion, as the scribe likely intended that the latter be articulated as two syllables, *cu ruz* (Restall, 1997a: 248). Not every instance is so clear, however. Bricker found the word *chu cah*, “caught”, (written thus it is a two-syllable word) rendered by Maya scribes sometimes as *chu ca ah*. As an example of vowel insertion we would have to read this as a three-syllable word. However I must suppose in this instance and similar examples given by Bricker or found in the 1935 letter cited above that we are dealing not with an accurate rendering of the spoken word /čukah/, but with a scribe who stumbled for a moment attempting to spell out the word. Neither can one rule out a scribal effort to capture junctural variations in vowel

⁹ For a different explanation of syllabification in Yucatec Maya, see Sobrino, 2007: 203-205.

tone and length of the sort enumerated by Blair who noted that “contour junctures [pauses in speech we represent with commas, semi-colons and periods] are generally characterized by a pause (of unspecifiable length) as well as by features of deceleration in the rate of phonation, intensity decrescendo, and pitch-turn, these latter three extending over the previous syllable” (Blair, 1964: 4).

As for consonant and vowel deletion, these processes also seem to reflect the morpho-phonological processes of consonant cluster reduction, vowel elision, and contraction evinced commonly in the spoken language and noted by students of the language even in colonial times (Blair, 1964: 34-37; Tozzer, 1977: 23-26; Beltrán, 1859: 39-45; Sobrino, 2007). In his 1742 *Arte del idioma maya reducido a sucintas reglas* (1859: 39), Pedro Beltrán observed that

Porque en este idioma no se habla en todo como se escribe, ni se pronuncian muchas voces conforme lo piden las reglas (y es lo que causa, que algunos que lo hablan parezcan forasteros ó se juzgue que no pronuncian como deben; siendo así, que hablan según las reglas del arte) se advierta que es tan necesario el uso de las sinalefas y sín copas, que sin hipérbole se puede afirmar, que todo el ser y hermosura de esta lengua es el uso de ellas

[Because in this language not all is spoken as it is written, nor are pronounced many letters as the rules suggest (it is what causes some who speak it to seem like outsiders or to be judged as not pronouncing it like they should; because they are speaking according to the grammar rules), one is advised it is very necessary the use of elision and syncope, such that without hyperbole one could say that all the being and beauty of this language rests in the use of them]

By saying the language is not spoken just as written, Beltrán was referring, of course, to how Spaniards wrote the language following rules laid out in grammars like his own. Those of his colleagues who spoke just what they read did not sound right, he observed. Maya scribes did not have that problem—at least some did not. They did not speak as rules dictated they write; rather, they wrote as oral practice dictated they speak.

That the peculiar orthography of some Maya scribes, from the colonial period to modern times, reflects their pronunciation and perception of syllables must remain now just an hypothesis. As Bennett (2016: 503) has recently noted, “two major areas of phonetic research —articulatory phonetics and speech perception— remain essentially unexplored for Mayan languages”. Only skilled phonetic research, including likely spectrogram analysis combined with studies of native-speaker intuition regarding syllabification, will enable a test of the hypothesis I have outlined above (see, for example, Kidder, 2013.)

Other Evidence for Scribal Syncretism Is Also Invalid

Victoria Bricker's influential studies are not the only ones presenting evidence and arguments in favor of the notion of scribal syncretism in colonial Yucatan. Colonial historian John Chuchiak (2010) added to Victoria Bricker's arguments concerning scribal syncretism in an article in *Ethnohistory* titled, "Writing as Resistance: Maya Graphic Pluralism and Indigenous Elite Strategies for Survival in Colonial Yucatan, 1550-1750". In that publication and others Chuchiak offered evidence for the continued use of hieroglyphic codices and for bi-literacy (in hieroglyphic and alphabetic scripts) among some Maya on the peninsula in the early colonial period. Chuchiak noted that before the conquest hieroglyphic literacy was restricted to priests and some nobles, contributing to their prestige and influence over commoners. The Spanish conquest and the gradual imposition of new forms of governance jeopardized the power of the surviving priesthood and nobility. As Franciscans favored elite children for religious instruction and literacy training, Maya nobles came to perceive in the cultivation of new literacies an opportunity to shore up influence over commoners. Retention of hieroglyphic literacy and mastery of the new means of alphabetic writing would allow them to retain access to ancient sacred knowledge, a source of their original legitimacy, while making them indispensable cogs in the new machinery of colonial rule. Bi-literate nobles came to dominate the important new writing-dependent salaried positions of *escribano* and *maestro de escuela* even as they kept alive the remnants of hieroglyphic writing into the early 19th century.¹⁰ In sum,

By adapting and utilizing both styles of writing, the colonial Maya elite created a system of graphic pluralism that enabled the Maya nobility to better defend their elite interests in a manner consistent with both pre-Columbian and colonial forms of writing, address, religion, and government administration (Chuchiak, 2010: 87).

As an hypothesis, Chuchiak's portrayal of the surviving nobility's interest in scribal posts is not implausible, but it suffers from poor evidentiary support. Due to limitations of space, only one of the deficiencies in his argument can be addressed in this paper. Having argued that noble lineages successfully dominated offices requiring alphabetic literacy under Spanish rule, Chuchiak asserted that "both the alphabetic script and the traditional Maya glyphs became the sacred knowledge of this apparent noble scribal class" (Chuchiak, 2010: 100). Moreover, Chuchiak argued, echoing Victoria Bricker's argument concerning scribal syncretism discussed above, Maya scribes of the early colonial period left linguistic evi-

¹⁰ Chuchiak asserted that "evidence from their Latin-based literacy points to the preservation, propagation, and pluralistic use of both writing systems long into the colonial period and in some regions, into the dawn of the nineteenth century" (Chuchiak, 2010: 90). Concerning the extraordinary claim for a late use of hieroglyphic writing, Chuchiak cited no evidence.

dence of their ability to manipulate the multiple literacies of the colonial world (Chuchiak, 2010: 93). Chuchiak noted, for example, that Maya scribes varied in their knowledge of the correct spelling of Spanish loan words. Scribes further east away from the capital in Merida were less familiar with the Spanish language and Spanish spelling conventions, so they displayed more variability in how they wrote Spanish loanwords in Maya documents. The ways those eastern scribes rendered Spanish loanwords in writing, Chuchiak claimed, suggests that they “preserved an understanding of the phonetic Maya script longer than the Maya scribes in the west” (Chuchiak, 2010: 103). According to Chuchiak that is evident in the way Maya scribes syllabically parsed Spanish loanwords as they carefully committed them to paper. He asserted that “no matter how many true syllables a Spanish loan word had, the Maya of the eastern peninsula almost always attempted to break it down into four parsed syllables so that it fit into their understanding of a proper [i.e. hieroglyphic] writing system” (Chuchiak, 2010: 104, table 4). That argument is invalid.

Chuchiak provided no evidence for the claim that “the most common form of Maya hieroglyphic inscription that was rendered into phonetic or syllabic glyphs was made up of four readily separable phonetic syllables”, which was the origin, supposedly, of the colonial Mayas’ preference for rendering Spanish loan words as four-syllable words (2010: 104, table 4). Here Chuchiak was likely referring to the frequency of alternative patterns of glyph blocks or glyph collocations (see his illustration —“Example of Most Common Phonetic Order of Maya Glyph Blocks”, page 104, table 4). Perhaps collocations of four glyphs were especially common in Maya hieroglyphic inscriptions (I do not know). Whatever the frequency of four-glyph collocations, combinations of four glyphs do not necessarily represent words that when spoken could be parsed as four-syllable words. A main sign alone may represent a two-syllable word —*balam*, *kisin*, *winik*, *muyal*, *áakab*. Collocations of a main sign and affixes may sometimes have represented four-syllable words. But they could as well represent words of more or less than four syllables —depending upon the meaning of the main sign and whether affixes represented phonetic complements to the main sign (adding no additional articulated syllable to the expression) or syllabic complements. Finally, glyph blocks do not only represent words, but phrases, too. A main sign and three affixes do not necessarily yield a four-syllable word. Nor need a collocation of four syllabograms yield a four-syllable word. A block of four glyphs readable as *chu-ku-ji-y(a)* was to be read as the two-syllable word *chukjiy*, “he was captured”, for example (Coe and Van Stone, 2001: 33).

Having posited a preference on the part of pre-Hispanic Maya scribes for parsing words into syllables four in number, Chuchiak attempted to show that colonial Maya scribes labored under a similar preference, manifest in how they wrote some Spanish loan words. To illustrate his point, he claimed that Maya scribes in the east of the Yucatan Peninsula, where they were less familiar with correct Spanish orthography, tended to write the word *información* as though it were a

four-syllable word, rather than the five-syllable word that Chuchiak supposed it to be. They might write the word, for example, as *in por maz çion*. Here Chuchiak made an error. The less experienced scribes of the east were scanning the word syllabically, just as Chuchiak suggested. However they did so correctly, not under the influence of a pre-Hispanic preference. Contrary to Chuchiak's assertion that *información* is a five-syllable word, as articulated by native Spanish speakers, it is a four-syllable word, the final syllable being a diphthong not to be separated into /ci-on/ as Chuchiak evidently assumed. Chuchiak's example of an alleged Maya preference for four-syllable scanning is invalid, and he offered no other evidence to back up his assertion for such a preference.

Conclusions

Arguments put forward by Victoria Bricker, John Chuchiak and Matthew Restall suggesting that the orthographic anomalies of colonial-era scribes utilizing an alphabetic script evince the lingering influence of hieroglyphic writing conventions cannot be sustained in the light of evidence from modern Maya handwritten documents. The anomalies noted by Bricker are real, patterned, and significant, but not unique to early-colonial writing. They are evident in some modern Maya writing, too. Further research is necessary to explain these anomalies which may be attributable to the acoustical phonetics and syllabification of spoken Yucatec Maya and to the inexperience of the scribes in whose writing such anomalies are found. Space prohibits discussing here still other claims concerning the coexistence and interaction of scribal competencies in both hieroglyphic and alphabetic writing in the early colonial period. They will merit close scrutiny elsewhere.

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