

Of Day Names, Kin Names, and Counting: Cultural Affinities and Distinctions among the Mayan Languages

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It is now generally recognized that the most basic division among Mayan languages is the separation of Eastern from Western Mayan. Campbell (1977: 101) observes that there is

a split into two branches, Eastern Maya (Quichean and Mamean) and Western Maya (Huastecan, Cholan-Tzotzil, and Yucatecan) with the residue problem of not knowing exactly how the languages of Chujean-Kanjobalan group fit in.

The aim of this paper is to shed more light on the nature of the Western/Eastern bifurcation¹. The evidence presented below leaves little doubt that Eastern Mayan (hereafter Mamo-Quichean) had an extremely homogeneous culture during the formative period of Mayan culture, whereas such homogeneity is less apparent for Western Mayan.

The evidence for the Mamo-Quichean homogeneity has heretofore been based on linguistic evidence, be it phonological, morphological or even lexical. Kaufman (1968: 227), for example, states that "on historical phonological grounds, a Western Mayan area may be recognized ... as contrasted with an Eastern Mayan area.... On lexical distributional grounds the same groups can be set up."² But the interest of this paper is to

present further evidence for the Eastern/Western split based upon the vocabulary of social and cultural institutions.

Three of the most significant measures of Mayan culture are 1) the twenty calendric day names, 2) the kin system, and 3) the system of counting. As will be demonstrated below, the compelling similarities found in the Mamo-Quichean subgroup with respect to these three systems leave little doubt that the early Mamo-Quichean people were members of a strong, tightly knit religious and social order. This prehistoric fact must be inferred from the phonological and grammatical evidence upon which the Eastern/Western split was based, but it is explicitly shown in the vocabulary of the social institutions discussed below.

1. The Day Names

The 20 day names were more than just names for days; they were in the minds of the Mayan people literally gods who ruled the events of their daily lives. These "names," therefore, are of profound social and religious importance. An investigation of their similarities and differences is particularly revealing in showing cultural and even linguistic affinities.

To make such a comparison, I have day name lists from the following languages³:

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¹ The data presented in this paper suggest that the Chujean-Kanjobalan group is not Eastern Mayan; rather it seems to be more closely related to Western Mayan, though even here some characteristics make it a less-than-perfect fit.

² Kaufman includes Chuj and Kanjobalan with Western Mayan.

³ The day names were taken from the following: Yucatec: La Farge and Byers 1931: 176; Jacaltepec: La Farge and Byers 1931: 156; Kanjobal: Termer 1957: 122-123; Chuj: Maxwell 1980; Tzotzil: Termer 1957: 124; Ixil: Lincoln 1946: 113; Aguacatec: Tax 1947; Lansing n.d.; Pocomchi: Gates 1932; Quiche: Campbell 1971: 393.