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Tradition and Historicity in Ch'orti' Oral Narratives: The Story of the Cave of Copan

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Throughout much of the classic period (AD 250–900) the Mayan sites of Copan and Quirigua had a complex relationship forged from common beginnings. Both sites traced the establishment of their dynastic orders to the same year, AD 426, and both met their demise within the first few decades of the ninth century. Roughly fifty kilometers separate these two cities famed for their exceptional artistic and architectural achievements. The presence of a large number of hieroglyphic inscriptions at both sites allows for the reconstruction of several important interactions, some even before the official founding of the Copan dynastic lineage. This article explores the diplomatic affiliation that existed at a few key junctures in time between Copan and Quirigua in the classic period. Hieroglyphic texts provide crucial clues to their mutual origins and give us some indication of the internal affairs that governed their alliance. This brief discussion will set the historical context for an analysis of a Ch'orti' folk tradition concerning a king of Copan and his interaction with the site of Quirigua. The premise of this article is not to argue for the historical accuracy of the Ch'orti' tale, but rather to locate this genre of oral literature within a larger socio-cultural context *vis-à-vis* notions of historical identity and perceived heredity in Mayan communities.

The relatively small site of Quirigua is situated along the Río Motagua in southeastern Guatemala. Its larger neighbor to the south, Copan, is located in the lush Copan Valley of northwestern Honduras. The area surrounding Copan today is inhabited by indigenous populations of Ch'orti' Maya. The Ch'orti' of northern Honduras have, except for a handful of elderly speakers, completely lost their knowledge of the Ch'orti' language. The majority of Ch'orti' speakers today can be found in the Department of Chiquimula in and around the town of Jocotán, Guatemala. Oral tradition still plays an equally important role in Ch'orti' communities that actively use Ch'orti' and those that do not. Fortunately, in recent years there has been a sharp increase in the documentation of oral traditions by the Ch'orti' themselves. The first published work on the oral traditions of the Ch'orti' was John Fought's *Chortí (Mayan) Texts* in 1972. The PLFM (Proyecto Lingüístico Francisco Marroquín) has also published a short collection of texts titled *Leyenda Maya Ch'orti'* (Martínez 1996). The *Academia de las Lenguas Mayas de Guatemala* is currently involved in several projects to document oral traditions among the Ch'orti'. Two of their most recent publications are *Concurso Literario Idioma Ch'orti'* (Ramírez 1999) and *Utwa'chir e Ojroner Ch'orti': Tradición Oral Ch'orti'* (Camposeco 2001). Presently, the author of this article is preparing a collection of about sixty texts for future publication.

In June of 2000 Kerry Hull recorded a story told by an informant, identified here as Raúl, about an underground tunnel built by a king of Copan. He has found several other Ch'orti' speakers who knew this story or parts of it. A striking feature of this narrative is the mention of contacts between Copan and Quirigua. The very notion of interaction between these two sites is a significant aspect of the text since my oldest consultant first heard the story in 1930, predating the decipherment of the hieroglyphic texts. With the advances in the last thirty years in hieroglyphic decipherment, we have come to know much more about the political relationship in place during the classic period between Copan and Quirigua (Stuart 1992; Schele andLooper 1996; Schele and Mathews 1998;Looper 1999; Martin and Grube 2000).

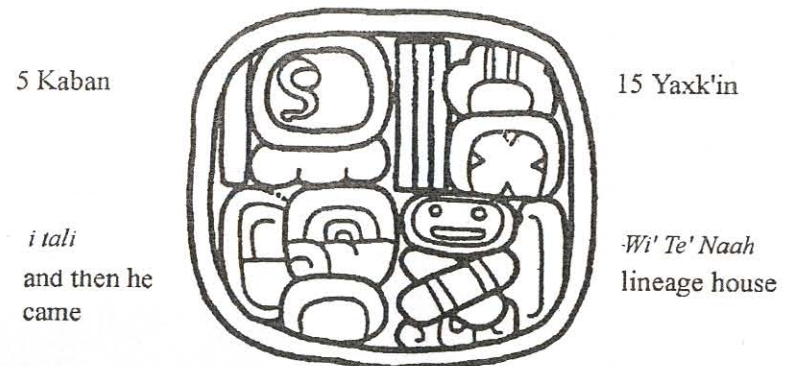


Figure 1. Zoomorph P, Quirigua.

Before presenting an English translation of the story of “The Cave of Copan,” we will first review some of the historical data that sheds light on the interactions between Copan and Quirigua found in the hieroglyphic texts at both sites.

From the very beginning Copan and Quirigua shared more than just geographical proximity. Several key hieroglyphic texts recount important events that historically link the political history of the two sites from the early classic period. On Zoomorph P at Quirigua the short caption texts record the establishment of a new dynastic order at Quirigua. The inscription in Cartouche number 7 contains the date of the arrival, 5 Kaban 15 Yaxk'in, or Sept. 5, AD 426. The text continues with *i-TAL-li WI'-TE'-NAH*, for *i tali wi' te' naah*, “and then he came to the *Wi' Te' Naah*” (“lineage shrine”) (fig. 1). No specific mention is made of exactly who arrived. Significantly, this event occurs precisely on the same date that Altar Q at Copan records the “taking of the K'awiil scepter by the Copan lineage founder Yax K'uk' Mo” (later known as K'ihnich Yax K'uk' Mo'). The text on Altar Q then states that three days later K'uk' Mo “came to the ‘lineage shrine’” (*tali wi' te' naah*) (fig. 2). The implication of both of these inscriptions is that K'ihnich Yax K'uk' Mo', the lineage founder of the Copan dynasty, received a powerful symbol of authority, the K'awiil scepter, as part of a series of rites performed outside of the Copan area. Altar Q at Copan explicitly

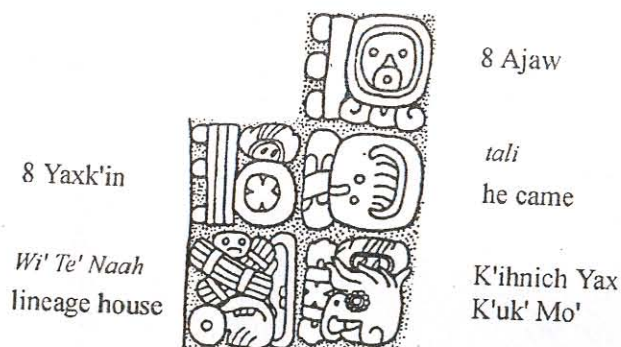


Figure 2. Altar Q, Copan.

states that it was 152 days later that K'ihnich Yax K'uk' Mo' and his entourage arrived at Ux Wi'tik, the early name of the site of Copan. Martin and Grube suggest that the "coming" and "taking" of the K'awiil scepter ceremonies probably took place at a site somewhere in the Peten or even, perhaps, at Teotihuacan in present-day Mexico (2000:421). This would account for the 152 days intervening between these events and the arrival of K'ihnich Yax K'uk' Mo' at Copan on Feb. 8, AD 427. In addition, Stuart has suggested that Yax K'uk' Mo' was not a native to the area but may have come from the city of Teotihuacan (1998:25). What is most remarkable about this historical scenario is that it paints a picture of seemingly amiable political relations between Copan and Quirigua from the very inception of both dynasties. While the exact nature of their alliance is not clearly expressed, there remains the possibility that a powerful outside influence was in some way overseeing their interaction.¹

There is no direct evidence of any major change in the nature of the alliance between Copan and Quirigua until the rebellion of the Quirigua ruler K'ahk' Tiliw in A.D. 738. Through much of his reign (from A.D. 724-785) K'ahk' Tiliw was a vassal of Copan, as is evidenced by a statement of subordination on Quirigua Stela E. Quirigua Stela E records a "taking of the K'awiil scepter" ceremony by K'ahk' Tiliw that Waxaklaju'n Ub'aah K'awiil (the seated ruler of Copan) "oversaw" (*ukab'jiyy*), a nearly certain reference to a

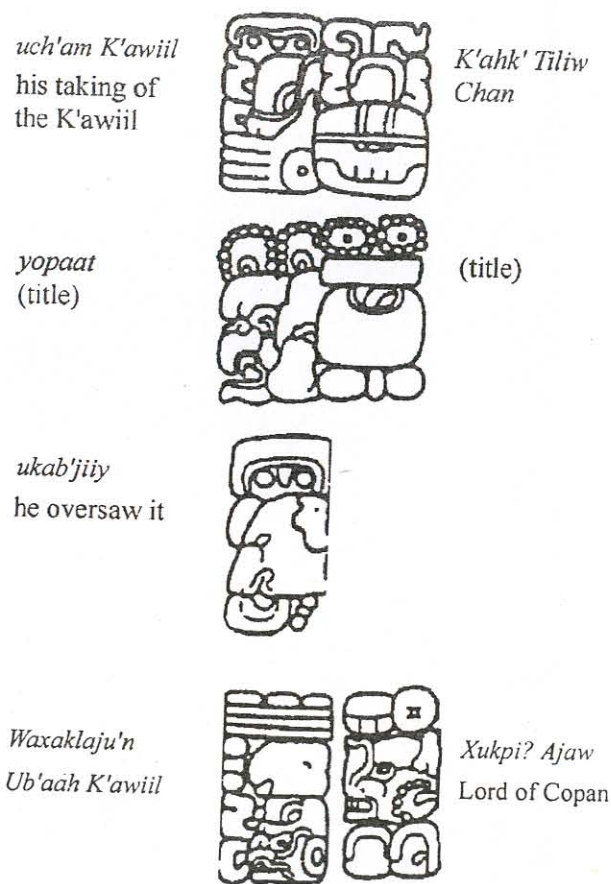


Figure 3. Stela E, Quirigua.

vassal-lord relationship (fig. 3). However, the centuries of shifting political winds and vacillating loyalties provided K'ahk' Tiliw an opportunity to break off subordinate ties with the thirteenth Copan ruler, Waxaklaju'n Ub'aah K'awiil. Four separate monuments at Quirigua (Stelae E, F, G, H) record the death of Waxaklaju'n Ub'aah K'awiil at the hands of K'ahk' Tiliw on 29 April A.D. 738. On Quirigua Stela E, for example, the inscription reads, **u-CH'AK-B'AH-ji 18-u-B'AH K'AWIL**, for *uch'ak b'aahji 18-ub'aah k'awiil*, "was the head-chopping of Waxaklaju'n Ub'aah K'awiil"

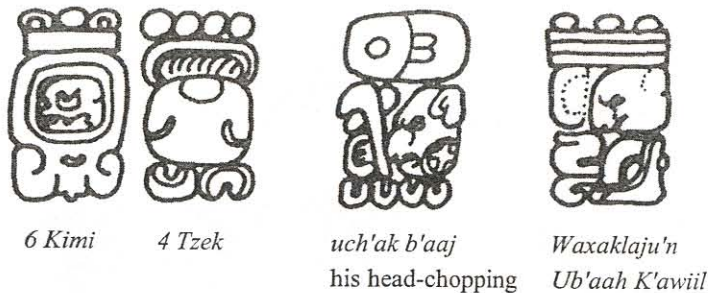


Figure 4. Stela E, Quirigua.



6 Kimi 4 te Tzek i k'a'y usaknik tu to'k' tu pakal Waxaklaju'n
ik'[aa]l by the flint of, Ub'aah k'awiil
and then he died by the shield of

Figure 5. Hieroglyphic Stairway, Copan.

(fig. 4). It is interesting to note that on Stela E his death is said to have occurred at the Black Portal Place, a location generally associated with the Underworld (Schele andLooper 1996:118; Freidel et al. 1993:222), with caves (Bassie-Sweet 1991:79), and ballcourts. Independent confirmation of Waxaklaju'n Ub'aah K'awiil's demise can be found in an inscription from the site of Copan. The Hieroglyphic Stairway at Copan records Waxaklaju'n Ub'aah K'awiil's death in battle as, **i-K'A'-yi u-SAK-NIK?-IK'-li tu-TOK' tu-pa-ka-la**, for 'i k'a'[aa]y usak-nik? ik'[aa]l tuto'k' tupakal, "and then his white flower (?) wind finished (i.e., he died), by the flint, by the shield, Waxaklaju'n Ub'aah K'awiil" (fig. 5). This stark reversal of patronage may not have been simply the result of an isolated conflict between two polities. There is evidence that Quirigua had established a political connection with the powerful site of Calakmul who may have played some role in this bold military action.²

This historical reconstruction of some of the events that occurred between Copan and Quirigua sets the stage for a discussion of a Ch'orti' oral tradition that makes reference to interactions between a king of Copan with Quirigua. Kerry Hull recorded this story in Oken, a small hamlet about two miles above Jocotán, Guatemala, in 2000. The forty-five year old informant who related this tale said that when he was a young boy, he first heard it told by his grandfather and that his father also enjoyed reciting it.

The following is a fairly literal translation of the Ch'orti' original. Due to line divisions that the author wanted to keep consistent in both versions (see Appendix A for bilinear text) the syntax is occasionally somewhat stilted in order to remain generally faithful to the Ch'orti' word order.

1. I want to relate something I heard told and that
2. I keep here in my mind and I will not forget. Today
3. I now know that what my grandparents told me is true
4. that Copan was a great city. There they used to live
5. in the city those whom we call kings
6. who used to be very wise. They
7. had great power over the people.
8. They had to be obeyed. And if they were not
9. obeyed they made the others suffer.
10. It is told that when there was a war
11. with others who lived far away (they say
12. that there was another king who lived
13. over there also) he gave orders to the first people who
14. lived there (since he had great power
15. he made the people who lived there suffer).
16. They say he ordered that a cave be excavated there.
17. Just how it was excavated we do not know either.
18. Long ago there was no metal in order to dig out
19. the walls of the hill. They say he went and ordered to be
excavated
20. the walls of the hill. He passed below the river
21. that goes to a large city called Puerto
22. Barrios. He passed underneath it and he came out in

23. the city called Quirigua where there used to live
24. other kings. They say that there he would go out
25. on the road that was inside the hill when there was
26. a war there with other kings.
27. He would enter inside the hill
28. in order to hide. He would flee to a city there.
29. There he would protect himself.
30. The road he would go out on was never found out by anyone. So
31. they say that when the day arrived
32. of the destruction by God, he still entered,
33. they say, to hide himself in his cave. He thought, they say,
34. that it was just like a war with
35. other kings. There they say he protected himself.
36. But this time he couldn't. There he remained lying down
37. inside the hill. He is still there lying down
38. today and we can see him if we go to
39. the place where the king used to enter into
40. in order to flee. It is told that
41. a foreigner arrived and went in
42. there but never came out. Instead, he remained inside
43. the hill. It is also said that inside the
44. hill in the middle of the tunnel there, they say,
45. that king is resting. He never left
46. out one side nor the other but he remained there hanging
47. in a hammock. When people arrive
48. who want to go inside even a little they say
49. they remain there. Their souls are eaten by the nawal of
50. the king who is enclosed there.

Before beginning, the narrator, who had told Hull this story before, had asked him directly if the hieroglyphs mention any contact between Copan and Quirigua. He recounted some of their interactions (mentioned above) and other details from the inscriptions at both sites. It is interesting, then, that this narrator begins his narration by stating in line 3 that "I now know that what my grandparents told me was true." He felt a sense of gratification to

discover confirmation of what he had been brought up to believe about these two great cities of the past.

In this story it is evident that Copan and Quirigua have sufficiently stable political relations as to allow the king of Copan to take refuge at Quirigua whenever Copan was attacked by a foreign army. The route used by the king of Copan was an underground passageway that he had his people excavate. The opening to the tunnel in line 25 is called a *ch'en*, "cave," and the tunnel in line 20 is referred to as *b'i'r makwi'r e witzir*, "road within the hill." In line 19 the text states that the king ordered the people to dig out *unak' e witzir*, "the walls of the hill." There remains an intriguing question as to whether this was a natural hill or a man-made pyramid that was being tunneled out. In the classic period the word *witz*, "mountain," was commonly applied to pyramid structures. For example, on Structure 10L-22 at Copan, completed by Waxaklaju'n Ub'aah K'awiil, the large mask sculptures that adorn the corners of the building are repeatedly marked with the symbols *witz tuun*, "stone mountain" (Stuart 1987: 16-19; Fash 1991:123). It is possible that a cave was excavated from within a standing structure at the site of Copan.

In line 20 we are told that the tunnel went underneath a river (*yeb'ar e xukur*). This almost certainly refers to the Río Copan that runs through the Copan valley. The Río Copan, however, does not extend all the way to the eastern port city of Puerto Barrios, as the text states. It meanders in a northwesterly direction until it joins the Río Motagua near Zacapa, Guatemala. From Zacapa the Río Motagua continues along past Quirigua and extends to Puerto Barrios and into the Gulf of Honduras. The narrator of this story most likely assumed them to be part of a single river system. The king would pass under the Río Copan and travel in his subterranean passage to the city of Quirigua. According to lines 29-30, the king of Copan was able to maintain this escape route hidden from the knowledge of his rivals.

The text in line 32 contains an interesting mention of *e satpa'r umen e Katata*, "the destruction by God." This is probably

in reference to the eventual collapse of the site of Copan that historically began to take place just before the beginning of the ninth century AD. Several Ch'orti' speakers have told me that the fall of Copan, according to their traditions, was the result of *el castigo de Dios*, "the punishment of God." It is perhaps telling that in line 33 of the text the king is said to have mistakenly "thought... that it was also just like a war with the other kings" (*ub'ijnu. . .ke' la'r ub'an kochwa inte' tz'ojyir taka e morj noj winikob'*). The root *sat* in Ch'orti' means "to lose, to destroy, to erase, to disappear." The exact nature of this destruction (*satpa'r*), however, is not specified in this account. The text simply notes that the king entered into his cave as he had done many times before but this time he never came back out. Lines 45-47 state that he did not surface at either end of the tunnel but remained inside permanently, resting comfortably in his hammock within the cave (a metaphorical allusion to his physical death but also of the continual presence of his spirit in the cave). This image of the king hanging in a hammock in a cave is reminiscent of a Q'eqchi' tradition in which Tzultacaj, the god of mountains and valleys, "lives in large caves in the mountains... [where] he lies in a hammock whose hangings are big snakes" (Sapper 1925:192, cited in Villa Rojas 1985:378). That the king would die in the cave is in line with what we know about the meaning and function of caves in the classic period, which were considered passageways to and from the underworld (Bassie-Sweet 1991:79, 87). Today the Tzeltal of Chiapas fear caves at noon and midnight since the menacing spirits of their ancestors can pass through the cave and cause problems for them (Stross 1994:161).

In lines 40-43 a foreigner, in modern times, is said to have discovered this cave and went inside but never reappeared. The narrative ends with a warning that the *nawal* ("spirit" or "soul") of the king will eat the *me'yn* ("soul," lit. "shadow") of anyone who tries to enter in this cave. A number of Ch'orti' have told me that it is still possible to find this cave today, although none of them had first hand knowledge of its exact location.

This Ch'orti' story is representative of a somewhat complicated genre of oral tradition among all Maya groups who live near

archeological sites and have in their oral tradition stories about their ancient inhabitants. This often presents a dilemma for the modern researcher in determining whether they contain historical data or are simply creative story telling. While *The Cave of Copan* most likely belongs to the latter, it does seem to retain vestiges of ancient concepts and correlations. A much more revealing aspect of this story, however, is that by the very retention of such oral traditions relating to the classic period sites of Copan and Quirigua, the Ch'orti' overtly display a perceived affinity to them. Many of Hull's informants simply refer to the great kings of Copan as *kanoy*, or "our grandfathers." Indeed, current linguistic research has shown Ch'orti' to be the extant Ch'olan language most closely resembling that of the Mayan hieroglyphic script (Stuart *et al.* 1999; Houston *et al.* 2000). In addition, Søren Wichmann (2002) has identified specific linguistic continuities between the inscriptions of Copan and present-day Ch'orti'. As an indigenous group who has been so heavily marginalized to the present day, the Ch'orti' maintain their historical relationship to the ancient inhabitants of the site of Copan as a marker of their identity and a source of cultural pride.

Notes

1. Martin and Grube suggest that Siyaj K'ahk' of Tikal may have been responsible for "the installation of a new political elite at a number of centres in the Peten" (2001:420). Copan itself was probably given immediate control of the Motagua Valley, including Quirigua.

2. An inscription from Quirigua contains a reference to a divine ruler of Chiik Naab, a location within Calakmul (Looper 1999, cited in Martin and Grube 2000:234).

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Appendix A

Literal bilinear translation of Ch'orti' text:

1. K'ani ink'ajti xe' u'mb'i ani ak'ajna i ke' tara
want I relate what I heard (past) told and that here
2. keter ta nijor i ma'chi innajpes. I kone'r
my head and don't I forget it. And today
3. inna'tix ke' e'ra'ch xe' uk'ajtyo'b' ninoyob'
I now know that it is true what they related my grandparents
4. ke' e chinam noxi' chinam ani. Ya ani turanob'
that the city great city was. There they lived
5. tama e chinam, xe' kawa're e noj winikob',
in the city, whom we call the great men,
6. ke' ja'xob' ani xe' una'to'b' me'yra. I ja'xob'
that those (past) who they knew much. And they
7. ani ayan uk'otorerob' me'yra twa' e mojrob'.
(past) had their powers much over the others.
8. Uk'ani ani twa' ak'ub'esno'b'. I jay ma'chi
It was necessary they are obeyed. And if not
9. ak'ub'esno'b' ja'xirob' ucho'b' ani tzajtaka e mojrob'.
they are obeyed they they made (past) sad the others.
10. Ak'ajna ani ke' konde ayan inte' tz'ojyir
it was said that when there was a war
11. taka e mojrob' xe' turo'b' innajt che
with the others who lived far away they say
12. ke' ayan inkojt noj winik xe' turan
that there was a great man who lived

13. yaja' ub'an kay uya're ani e pak'ab'ob' b'ajxan xe'
there also he ordered (past) the people first who
14. turano'b' yaja' (i koche ja'x ayan me'yra uk'otorer
they lived there (and since he had lots of his power
15. uche tzajtaka e pak'ab'ob' xe' aturanob' yaja').
he made sad the people who lived there).
16. Kay ayi uya're yojra e ch'en yaja'
They say he ordered was excavated the cave there
17. i koche yojra ma'chi kan'ata ub'an
but how was excavated not we know also
18. Ixni'x ma'ni tuk'a e tak'in twa' ayojra
Long ago there was no the metal in order to is dug out
19. unak' e witzir. Kay ayi uya're yojra
the walls the hill. They say he ordered was excavated
20. unak' e witzir ixin. Numuy yeb'ar e xukur
the walls the hill went. He passed below the river
21. xe' a'xin tente' noj chinam xe' uk'ab'a Puerto
that he goes to a big city that its name Puerto
22. Barrios. Numuy yeb'ar i ja'xir alok'oy tama
Barrios. He passed below and he comes out in
23. e chinam xe' uk'ab'a Kiriwa tya' turanob' ani
the city that its name Quirigua where they lived (past)
24. inmojrix noj winikob'. Ya e'yni ja'xir alok'oy
other great men. There they say he goes out
25. tama e b'i'r yaja' makwi'r e witzir konde ayan ani
on the road that inside the hill when there was (past)
26. yaja' e tz'ojyir taka e mojrob' e noj
there the war with the other the great

27. winik'ob'. O'choy a'xin makwi'r e witzir
men. He enters he goes inside the hill
28. twa' amukwan. I a'xin alok'oy tente'
in order to hide. And he goes he goes out to a
29. chinam ya. Yaja' akorpa. I mamajchi' ani umen
city there. There protects. And no one by
30. atajwina ub'i'r ani tya' alok'oy a'jni. Inton
is found his road where he goes out he runs. So
31. che ke' konde k'otoy e ajk'in tari
they say that when it arrived the day it came
32. e satpa'r umen e Katata' ochoyto
the destruction by the God he still entered
33. e'yni mukwan makwi'r uch'en. Ub'ijnu e'yni
they say he hid inside his cave. He thought they say
34. ke' la'r ub'an kochwa inte' tz'ojyir taka e
that equal also like a war with the
35. morj noj winikob'. Ya e'yni ukorpes ub'a.
other great men. There they say he protected himself.
36. I ma'chi'x ub'na. Ya ketpa ch'a'n
And now no he couldn't. There he remained lying down
37. makwe' e witzir. Ya ch'a'r turuto
inside the hill. There lying down he lives still
38. kone'r i ererto kawira yaja' jay kak'otoy
today and can still we see there if we arrive
39. tya' ochoy ani a'xin e noj winik
where he entered (past) he goes the great man

40. twa' alok'oy a'jni. I ak'ajna ke'
in order to he leaves he runs. And it is told that
41. k'otoy inte' ajnajtir winik. Ochoy ixin
he arrived a foreigner man. He entered went
42. yaja' i ma'chi'x lok'oy i ketpa makwi'r
there and now didn't he left and he remained inside
43. e witzir. Inton ak'ajna ub'an ke' makwi'r e
the hill. So it is told also that inside the
44. witzir yaja' tu'yuxinar e b'i'r ya ayi
hill that in the center the road there they say
45. war e'yni e noj winik yaja'. Ma'chi'x lok'oy
is resting the great man that. Now no he left
46. teynxejr nen teynxejr i ketpa ch'uwan
to one side nor to one side and he remained hung
47. tante' ab'. I konde ak'oto'b' e pak'ab'ob'
in a hammock. And when they arrive the people
48. xe' k'ani o'cho'b' makwi'r ya'taka ayi
who they want they enter inside nearby they say
49. aketpo'b'. Ak'ujxo'b' ume'ynob' umen unawalir
they remain. They are eaten their souls by his nawal
50. e ajnoj winik xe' makar yaja'.
the great man who is enclosed there.

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