

**Uncovering the Defense Mechanisms in the Maya Epigraphy**

**D. Michele Ellis-Thomas A.T.R.**

**Independent Study-Archeology**

**Research Paper**

### **Introduction:**

This is a pilot study reviewing the psychoanalytic interpretation of some of the Maya symbolism in the epigraphy in order to determine the state of psychological development in a very general sense. For this reason, this study is hoped to be expanded upon by the professionals with the appropriate academic background to enhance any validity or non-validity of the initial interpretations.

### **The Purpose of the Study:**

Much of the psychological and psychiatric literature on the topic of graphic depiction correlate to the age at which the individual experiences a developmental stage. Many individuals do not believe in stages as such due to the fact that stages imply a beginning and an ending. Development in the individual is more and likely to be re-experienced over time, due to the fact that in theory resolution is never really found as human nature re-examines most aspects of life throughout his life. There are considered to be five developmental stages in psychosocial development: the oral, anal, oedipal, latent stage and genital stage. This paper initially anticipated dealing with all of them and subsequently the author decided to focus on the oral stage symbolism and the graphic depiction one would find within this area in the Mayan epigraphy.

Typically, the fourth stage of development is referred to in Freudian theory as the latent stage of development where more or less, in layman's terms, the defense mechanisms have temporarily gone to sleep until they are reawaken in the

adolescent stage. At that time, the recapitulation of the oral, anal and oedipal stage development issues/conflicts are revived adolescent and resolution begins again. The author will in future papers propose to look at this stage of development in the Maya epigraphy; however as of to date, none has been found. This is not to say, that it is not there. It remains to be explored.

The goal of this research paper was to look at the graphic depiction used in the epigraphy, and to determine the defense mechanisms used in order to see how the Maya culture psychologically adapted to their environment and insured their survival. The decline of the Maya culture has often been the source of controversy; however, in a research paper this author presented in Dr. Supek's class last Spring, it was largely agreed upon in the literature that the Maya's decline appeared due to the overpopulation during abundant times. It led to the depletion of resources that created leaner times, and as a result the Maya civilization dissolved in order to survive by blending outward and losing their original hierarchal structure. The Maya culture is alive and thriving within the borders of Central America, including Belize, Guatemala, Honduras, as well as the Yucatan. Their creative processes in the artwork still maintain much of their ancestral graphics although developmentally there are added elements which support an increase in their level of sophistication.

The Maya epigraphy contained minute graphics resembling miniature drawings or pictorial compositional art, syllabic. It is upon this aspect that this author decided to explore the mechanisms of defense, to understand how the Maya psychologically viewed living and how well they were adjusted and coped with it. It is not within the realm of this paper to explore all aspects of defenses utilized in the epigraphy, as this paper would have to be much expanded which is beyond the material available and time constraints.

### **Hypothesis for this Paper:**

Due to the underlying basis of religiosity, focus on resources for survival, and the struggle for power, the Maya symbolism in their epigraphy show predominating elements of first stage level oral defense mechanisms, resulting in excessive defensive mechanism of incorporation.

### **Importance of the Paper:**

The questions both stated and implied in the following observations and developments hold importance not only for the Maya culture as a whole, but also, to add the unseen universal dimension of psychological development of both the individual and the culture make up. Other supportive professions such as those involved in the mental health field, may also find this study interesting.

### **Literature Review:**

In theory as standardized by Elizabeth Koppitz (Koppitz, E. M., *Psychological Evaluation of Children - Human Figure Drawing*), Viktor Lowenfield (Lowenfield, V., *Creative and Mental Growth*), and Dr. Myra Levick, (Levick, Dr. Myra F., *They Could Not Talk and So They Drew*.) age appropriate drawings tend to developmentally correlate specifically to psychoanalytic stages of development (A. Freud, "Normality and Pathology in Childhood, Assessments of Development.") There are, of course, drawings which can begin to show emotional disturbances in those stages of development (E. Koppitz), not only in the human figure drawing, but also in the symbolism found in the pictorial composition. This is the area that this author is

brought to speculate on. In artwork, there are numerous ways to assess the emotional content, but without associations from the artist, the most valid method of divining the psychological truth is to look at the structure of the art symbolism. Unfortunately, we do not have the ability to return in time and ask questions about the process; we are left with the artistic product to give us whatever information we can glean from it.

According to S. Freud and A. Freud, the formation of the id is inherent at birth and is expressed unconsciously throughout the individual's life time; it can, also, be expanded toward the psychological disposition of a family or of a group. Dr. M. Levick feels that while the manifest content that one can readily observe is the product of the art, the latent content is the window into the psychological disposition of the artist. Due to the fact that the epigraphy tells a story of the Maya exploits, survival, warfare, and in general, their history, it also gives the viewer insight into the unconscious mind of their religious and spiritual practices. The latter finally become the hub for the spokes of the entire wheel that give us the artistic insight into the Maya cultural mindset, or at the very least, general areas of it.

When examining the epigraphy from a psychoanalytic art psychotherapist point of view, it must be kept in mind that, "The kind of information and results an investigator obtains from his observations will to a large extent, depend on the questions he sets out to answer." (Koppitz, 1968, p.3). Koppitz feels that as a result of an individual's (or the Maya in this study) cultural maturation evolutionary process, the art will reveal that individuals. This concept will look at the Maya concerns and attitudes through their epigraphy. This should collaborate the research done in the professional archeological field. It is hoped that it will support the current opinion that religion was at the hub of the Maya culture and paralleled their every day existence.

As previously stated, there are five psychosexual stages of development. There are also, three levels of consciousness: Id, (the unconscious), the Ego( the conscious) and the Superego ( conscious or ego-ideal). Due to the time constraints and limitation of the scope of this paper, give a rather simplistic view of these aspects of development, it should be adequate to understand its relationship to the epigraphy.

Here are some basic definitions of the levels of consciousness:

Id: In Freudian theory, the division of the psyche that is totally unconscious and serves as the source of instinctual impulses and demands for immediate satisfaction of primitive needs.

Ego: In psychoanalysis, the division of the psyche that is conscious, most immediately controls thought and behavior, and is most in touch with external reality

Super-ego: In Freudian theory, the division of the unconscious that is formed through the internalization of moral standards of parents and society, and that censors and restrains the ego.

### **Dynamics in the Artistic Expression:**

One small way in which ideology and organization is observed in the artwork is through the concretization of the latent and unconscious material which we have internalized. Our perceptions on a conscious level are often protected through our defense mechanisms (Levick, 1983). We rarely perceive the underlying reasons for the discharge of our

actions, but can certainly feel the emotional impetus for their affectual expression. Once having graphically depicted the organization of our thoughts and affects, with associations we can begin to gain insight, into the unconscious underlying dynamics and defense mechanisms.” ( Levick, 1983).

### **Symbols of Incorporation:**

The relationship between the manifest symbolism in early Mayan epigraphy and the latent unconscious symbolism and the primary defense mechanisms can be observed in the epigraphy. The macrocosm of Mayan myth and symbolism is a metaphor that explains the Maya story. It is a story of the relationship between the known aspects of the natural world and the obscure amplitude of that same realistic and tangible world. The known aspects of this realistic and biological sphere are the ones in which the Mayans have instantaneous contact with. These known aspects circumscribe the material and actual realities of the surrounding environment as the five senses perceive them. Included in this known realm is the terrain, the topography and other various human inhabitants of that region. The known aspects of the natural world are the ones that lie within the breadth of the five senses. The genesis of which does not originate with in the material world. Through the dome of the senses lie the portal for their fingertips grasp, the smells, the vision, the taste and the sound, the psychological aspects in the logograms are reflected in the epigraphy on a latent level, or a level that is visually known but not consciously understood. It begins in the physic of the human intellect. It lies deeper than words can often express. It is the unconscious of the individuals of a civilization that has yet gone unexplored and yet lies right before our eyes. In the search for the psychical

unconscious Maya identity in the context of these known and unknown boundaries, Anthropologists are often cognizant of the Maya myths or stories of Maya creation, the symbols that interpret and explain these myths. The rituals that are present and continually recreate these same myths, as well as, the hidden force of the unconscious drive that exist behind the symbolism. This drive is what this paper proposes to explore through the repetition of the symbolism that gives insight into the unconscious motivations behind the symbolism. Through repetition of pattern and mark, I hope to see a pattern emerge that will give some insight to the unconscious of the Mayan culture that will directly collaborate to what is generally known about their culture to date.

One of the most difficult and elusive pictures to recreate is the way of life and the belief system of the ancient Maya civilization of Mesoamerica. Without the associative references to their art it is almost absurd to make a statement as to the conflicts they lived with from day to day. With extensive exploration at least to a certain degree, it may be possible to understand the primary defense mechanisms underlying their perception of the world around them. Understanding what psychologically underlies that belief system flourishing from approximately 200 B.C. until 1500 A.D. is the real journey. Looking at the early epigraph, again, complete examination of their graphics is not within the scope of this paper. The ancient Maya world was a highly organized civilization grounded in a very specialized religious and mythological belief system. And, while the Maya religion is filled with myths, symbols, and rituals that offer a definition for the nature of the known and unknown world, the origin of humanity, and the purpose of human life on earth, the real truth about their survival and their evolution that is in the art and the symbolisms found in the epigraphy that give insight into their unconscious foundation.



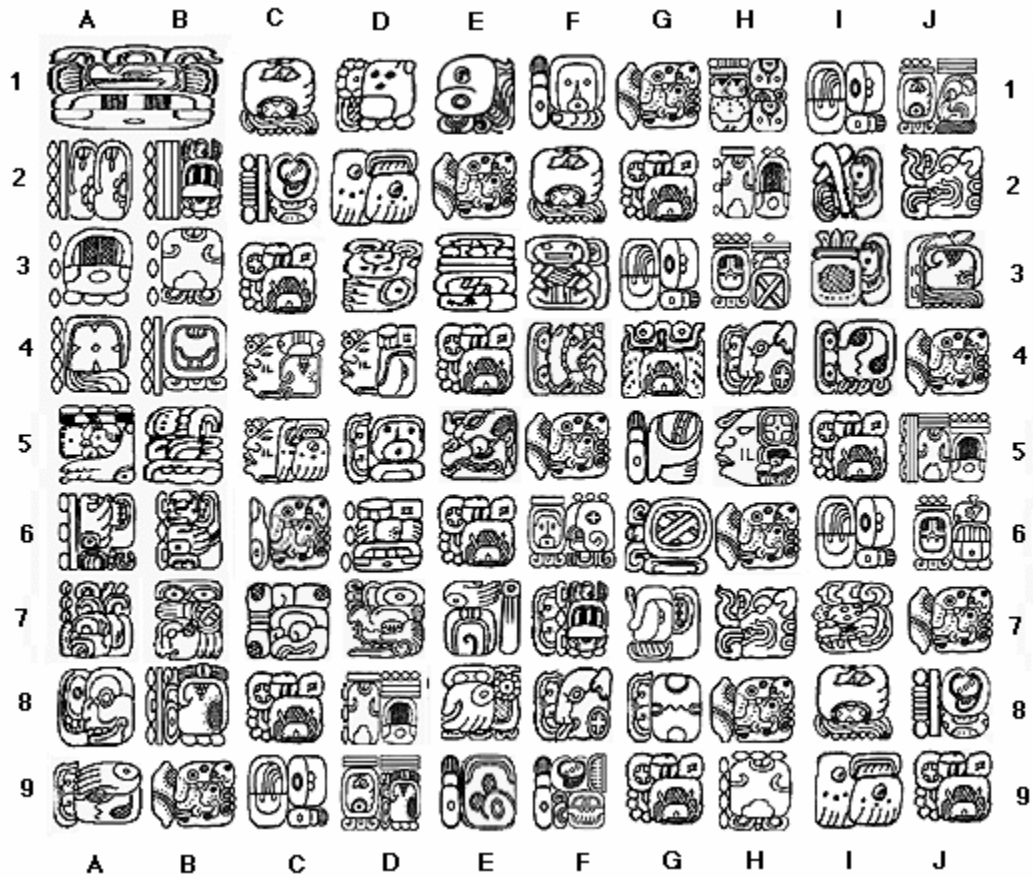
A persistent thought should be kept in the back of the readers mind as this paper is read is that the Maya civilization was a complex and very structured civilization. They build architectural structures of monumental size that were so well designed still stand today. They had a calendar and mathematical system that is still unrivaled. They cultivated enough maize to feed multitudes of Mayan. Religion was again at the hub of their daily existence and it appears that every action thought word and deed surrounded the God deities they worshiped.

Into the world of the Maya 900 B.C.-50 A.D.( epigraphy observed beginning at approximately 600 B.C. to 50 A.D.), we cannot obtain individual associations, and if we could, it would most likely not be relevant to our purpose in this paper. We can look at the content, the overall structure, and perhaps identify a few of the defense mechanisms that are expressed in the epigraphy that will collaborate the understanding and beliefs we currently have about the Maya culture.

In Freudian theory, during the oral stage, which lasts throughout the first 18 months of life, pleasure centers on activities of the mouth. Properly defined, incorporation is one of the earliest mechanisms utilized during the oral stage of development. The parent becomes almost literally a part of the child. Food becomes the primary source of gratification. Sound is either soothing or harsh. Parental values, preferences, and attitudes are acquired. In Freud's theory, defense mechanisms are the ego's methods of unconsciously protecting itself against anxiety by distorting reality. Although there are

several defense mechanisms developed at this stage of development, such as repression, denial, and projection, each of these are reinforced by the other, the defense mechanism that focused on in this paper is incorporation. This is because incorporation or "taking into ones self" is primarily the defense that stands out readily, be it nutritional substance," identification with the aggressor" (Oedipal stage developed defense) or the "Maya God of choice" the rules or attitudes and lifestyle that is acquired through the legacy the culture has passed on to the group or individuals within that culture, the individual or culture accepts without question that lifestyle. It is upon that structure or organization that the culture was able to thrive. We have, also, seen through our discoveries also the rise and fall of the Maya civilization.

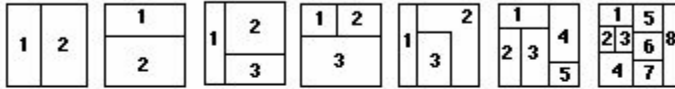
Below are Maya glyphs. If one were to eliminate all the numbers and separations which would be the actual presentation of these glyphs ( they are separated below for further reference.), the overall picture would be one of incorporation. Take each glyph singularly or individually, that glyph would have elements and symbols that are incorporated into the outside boundary of the composition or glyph. Additionally, each glyph is a symbol with the elements incorporated inside. Manifest examination reveals what they are intended to be, a sound that put with other glyphs make a form of communication: however, looking at them from an artistic and psychoanalytic viewpoint, they become a window into the psychological mindset of the Maya culture.



**Observations on the Glyphs:**

Each separate glyph is called a logogram (symbols that represent whole words). Within each logogram is a set or sets of visual symbols that correlate to a sound and a meaning. They are constructed in several sequences depending on what is communicated in the logogram. Each combination of symbol is a Maya meaning and also a combination of sound that will not be addressed in this paper although has been fertile ground for additional exploration in deciphering glyphs. The visual aspect of the glyphs is pertinent to this study only. The sequences can appear below:

Examples of syllable order within glyph blocks

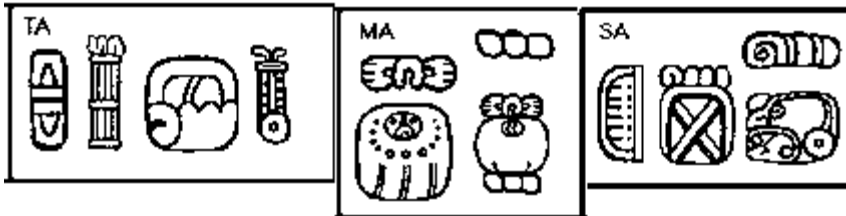


Order in which glyphs blocks are read



“Within glyph blocks, syllable signs and logographs are generally ordered to be read from top to bottom and left to right. Text composed with these glyph blocks is most often arranged to be read in the same directions, but with the glyphs read in pairs as in the diagram given below.” ( Schele, L, Maya Cosmos, 1995).

Understanding how the glyph is assembled visually is done in this manner below using the writers’ last name of Thomas:

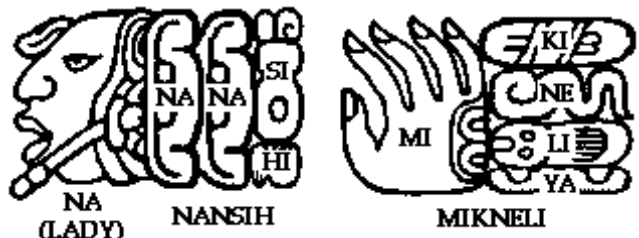


The choice and combination of symbols are up to the individual as to how it is assembled into the word and the logogram:



Ta Ma Sa= Thomas

Any one of the above symbols is the glyph for "Thomas" What is important for this study is not only in understanding but to observe the repetition of the orality or "rounded" symbols that allude to orality and the images within images that also are elements of incorporation or "taking into oneself". Even the shape of the entire glyph still strongly suggests a rounded square, rather than the intersecting lines produced by the image of a square. Square and intersecting lines in textbooks often appear in this manner as they are taken out of context of the series of hieroglyphs from which they are taken. The glyphs always state who and what they are referring to and in the instance of peaking of a woman and not a man, the glyph is first followed by the Moon goddess's head and then



the name:

It is still obvious and apparent that the glyphs no matter what the context And communication is about continues to be "incorporated symbolism".

In the hieroglyph below, from the temple at Palenque, the symbols are incorporated by the margined area even though appearing as a square, incorporation is still obvious.

The symbols in the margined area around the figure, relates a story about the figure inside the margined area. Within that pictorial area of the figure, there are still images with images or symbols within symbols:



The excessive amount of repetition and the pattern established is the strongest indication of the oral fixation of the Maya culture. In an oral fixation, derived from psychoanalytic theory and refer to "fixation" of libidinal energy, in which the fixation is derived from the pleasure principal or fixated on orality, or to give ones self pleasure; to take into one's self is not necessarily limited although may include food, but the concept that the fixation occurs in an arrested stage of development and the inability to move past this easily is usually impaired. The culture then focused on excessive religiosity which is evidenced in some forms of psychosis ( a mental disorder that can often accompanies oral stage psychological impairment)) i.e. the inability to separate reality from fantasy. The Mayan civilization live in a world of religious fantasy. Their human sacrifices support that phenomena. They made human sacrifices to the Gods in hopes for

rains that would nourish their maize and feed their people. In the age of the Maya civilization it was an accepted way of life to make human sacrifices, a way of life that is reflected in the orality of the hieroglyphs. Bu today's standards, it is considered murder and completely intolerable by society. Nor is orality of incorporation, within symbolisms, reflected in the writing styles of today's civilizations.

### **Conclusion:**

In short, what do we now know from the examination and analyzing of the aspect of incorporation in the Maya symbolism. Essentially, it cannot be said that all that exists is the one defense of incorporation but that this defense is obviously prevalent. It can be said that systemically most of the defense mechanisms are developed as one defense mechanism builds upon another from one stage of development to another. Oral fixation may have occurred predominately in the oral stage of development. More importantly, it might be said that their writing was a true reflection of their fixation of orality, given the definition of oral fixation and the defense of incorporation by Freudian psychoanalytic terminology, as found in the hieroglyphs. We will go through the stages of development regardless of the number of defenses we have successfully developed. Like an advancing army, if the defenses are impaired in one stage of development, we will be limited as to the available number in our "army" or defenses that we have to continue to develop in the succeeding stages of growth. Therefore, we would have less defenses to defend with against the demands of reality. The Maya Culture's belief system appeared to certainly be fixated upon the religious aspects of their survival. Their glyphs, I feel strongly point to this as well based on my analyses. How this brief interpretation supports and collaborates with the knowledge the Anthropological professions has thus far reported is substantial in that, the Maya have deep roots in their spiritual and religious awareness.

When discussing a conceptual problem such as a long expired culture, caution should be exercised and also because this paper has not been refined enough to thoroughly support the hypothesis and arguments even though I am convinced what I have reported in this paper is accurate. It would take further examination to add and explain the extent of the defenses used in the symbolism and in the glyphs. The main hypothesis is to recapitulate: Excessive defensive mechanism of incorporation will be noted in the glyphs of the Maya epigraphy. A conceptual problem of this nature appears to be difficult to measure unless refined and then possibly re-defined, and then it may take generations to isolate and control for specific variables and influences. The hypothesis involves a series of steps: How to conceptualize it, how to measure it, how to distinguish it from any other related variables, how to obtain data, and how to analyze the data. The glyphs are actually the only consistent variable. Of importance is the application of this study to other cultures, populations, and settings as well. Replication of this would be valuable in order to gain more reliability of the findings for validation.

What are the broader implications for this paper regarding the mechanisms used? Perhaps the implications are, as a result of the findings from this and in the future, that there is a need for inquiry into the level of psychological behavior in direct response to the circumstances surrounding Maya demise or fall.

There are factors that may account for some discrepancies in my design. First, examination of the hypothesis that the major defense is incorporation is limited to the glyphs that I have access to.

The author would suggest that the following is needed:



- 1) Devise a more sensitive method to correlate the symbols and standardize via percentages noted in the number of glyphs that have incorporation to those that do not.
- 2) Do it two or three times over and cross-reference comparing data to previous data.

Another way to test the hypothesis is to do this several months or even years later and compare data of one tester to another. External factors and subsequent discoveries may change the perception.

Further research in the following areas is recommended:

- 1) Social and Cultural aspects of the Maya system as reflected in the glyphs.
- 2) Choose a random culture to compare the defense mechanisms in the epigraphy to.

These are suggestions for further study. They were formulated on areas that the author felt had a weakness in the concept and in redoing and redesigning might offer further insight in the psychological development and its impact on the Maya demise.

If current research could be compared to previous research, it may account for the similar amount of incorporation found in the glyphs.

In order to conscientiously examine specifics and even generalities on defense mechanisms and the psychological attribute of the Maya culture, further research should be done by adding more controls, i.e. factors including social and cultural characteristics of present day Maya, as well as their history in more present times.

