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Decorous bodies and disordered passions: representations of emotion among the Classic Maya

Stephen D. Houston

Abstract

The Classic Maya (AD 250–850) represented emotion via the human body in stylized ways that reflected their categories of ‘affect’, the subjective states attributed by one person to another through empathy. Such displays, although rare, served as negative contrasts to a more ordered, restrained and controlled state that operated as an ideal for élite comportment. Control equated to morally appropriate behavior, the lack of it to non-human, supernatural or pre-human conduct. In anthropological terms, affect was ‘hypercognated’ – elaborated and explicitly highlighted – through both its presence *and* its absence in Maya images. The inclination of the Classic Maya to display overt affect increased dramatically by the seventh century AD, and was facilitated by the representational conventions of the time, which emphasized close correspondences to a perceived, external world.

Keywords

Mesoamerican archaeology; body symbolism; emotions; representation; Classic Maya.

Anthropology is, in some respects, the struggle against the self-evident. It inquires what the observer thinks or feels, asks whether those thoughts and experiences are directly transferable to other times and settings, and defines the conditions by which understanding can take place. Anthropology happens also to be an optimistic venture. Cultural and social constructions would seem to make rapport difficult to achieve, yet the more common perception is that people from one time and place can potentially be understood by those from another through empathy or analysis (Rosaldo 1984b: 192–3; Spiro 1986: 282). The problem is in weighing what is legitimately and plainly clear to all against the very real differences prompted by culture and history. At the nub of this discussion are the emotions: anger, love, shame, grief, happiness, among others – each freely recognizable by the observer, regardless of background, but inherently problematic because of the varied conditions in which they occur and the different meanings they convey. Emotions



are always prompted by particular circumstances. Archaeologists are at a double disadvantage in studying such feelings. Unlike ethnographers, they do not have living informants capable of clarifying obscure points, and the emotions they perceive are second-order ones, accessible only through representations of embodied passions or, if from literate traditions, of stylized emotions thought suitable for written display. The systems of sentiment underlying such displays are nonetheless crucial in examining past notions of experience and being.

The Classic Maya (c. AD 250–850, from what is now northern Central America and southern Mexico) exemplify the problems and prospects of understanding ancient emotion and its systematic organization. Representations of the human body are, for the ancient Americas, unusually expressive, with a degree of verisimilitude or ‘naturalism’ that is deceptively transparent to Western gaze. As a label, naturalism suggests an unstudied, near-photographic directness between the human subject and the object (or ‘portrait’) that depicts it (Brilliant 1991: 7–8). Nonetheless, Classic Maya imagery is highly conventionalized, and the Western distinction between image and original collapses into shared identities and presences, involving effigies that both represent and *are* the things they portray (Houston and Stuart 1998). Attention to details of body and clothing probably did not arise from the doctrine of shared identities, since these concepts pervade other, more schematic representational styles in Mesoamerica. But they do indicate a choice or strategy of depiction that emphasizes the recording of minute details, including those of faces and bodies in torment, lust and grief, and stresses close observation of an external world. These images provide sufficient raw material for understanding how certain passions were selected for display and what was meant by them.

Emotion, sentiment and affect

The ethological study of emotion goes back to the time of Darwin, who saw feelings and their outward manifestations as signals of human intention and as salves or facilitators of social interaction (Darwin 1998; Ekman 1980). Darwin’s larger project was to draw parallels between human and animal expression, and, by implication, to discern universals in primary emotional states, an effort categorically disclaimed by some (Birdwhistell 1970: 29–30; Barrett 1993; Ortony and Turner 1990) and strongly defended by others (Ekman et al. 1987). A later investigator, Radcliffe-Brown, focused on ‘sentiments’, a series of linked feelings organized unreflectively into systems for regulating conduct (Radcliffe-Brown 1964: 234–7). His advance was in suggesting that emotions varied by society, and that they conformed systematically to the needs and impositions of social structure: ‘the sentiments in question are not innate but are developed in the individual by the action of the society upon him’ (Radcliffe-Brown 1964: 234). The personality and culture school of American anthropology, typified by the works of Ruth Benedict, built on these observations in ways unforeseen by (and probably uncongenial to) Radcliffe-Brown. For Benedict and her colleagues, emotions operated in particular cultures as attributes of ‘national character’ or ‘cultural configurations’ (Benedict 1959: 51–3; see also Daun 1996: 111–34). Useful as cross-cultural comparison, these views could just as easily – and often did – descend into caricature and stereotype.

Since then, there have been two principal positions with respect to the ‘passions’. The first asserts that anger, love, shame, etc., are largely physiological and basic to human nature, without any necessary influence from culture or society. To claim the opposite is, in one notable riposte, little more than ‘rubbish’ (Leach 1981: 32). The physiological or biological approach has been described as ‘universalist’ or ‘positivist’ (Lutz and White 1986: 406). It views emotions as the result of chemical and electrochemical interactions between brain structures introduced at different moments in the evolutionary career of human beings (Damasio 1999: 280–1). In its less extreme form it regards the emotions as internal feelings with a natural origin, yet, following Radcliffe-Brown, may also acknowledge the role of overt ‘sentiments’, which invoke norms and appear ideally in certain, well-established contexts (Lutz and White 1986: 409, 410). As such the emotions spring from an ‘open genetic program’ that is subject to modification and adjustment during the lifetime of an individual (Mayr 1974: 652; see also Darwin 1998: 386). A mind–body dualism – the mind assembling the ‘sentiments’, the body experiencing the ‘emotions’ – would seem implicit in these descriptions, to the firm objection of Michelle Rosaldo, who argues persuasively that ‘feeling is forever given shape through thought and that thought is laden with emotional meaning . . . [feelings] are *embodied* thoughts, thoughts seeped with the apprehension that “I am involved”’ (Rosaldo 1984a: 143).

The second perspective, very much in agreement with Rosaldo’s, interprets the emotions as social constructions, or at least as an ‘ethos’ of culturally arranged feelings (Bateson 1958: 32; Lutz 1988). They come into play according to particular situations or scenarios involving specified audiences. In its more extreme form this perspective might be described as ‘constructionist’, according little if any weight to the possibility of universal emotional attributes (Reddy 1997: 329). An intermediate view contends that emotion and sentiment are physical experiences that nevertheless take place in social settings (Kövecses and Palmer 1999: 253). This approach allows universalist and constructionist models to be reconciled by seeing them as complementary descriptions of linked phenomena (Hinton 1999: 9–10). Another means of bridging internal states and external perceptions is by using the term ‘affect’, defined by Besnier as ‘the subjective states that observers ascribe to a person on the basis of the person’s conduct’ (Besnier 1990: 421). Affect is inherently a social understanding, collectively held but credited to another human being through an act of individual empathy.

Ancient images can neither document ethnographic subtleties nor resolve difficult issues in cross-cultural psychology. However, they can reveal what was thought compelling enough for permanent record. Through such displays, long-deceased informants highlight concepts of importance to them, at great convenience to those who no longer have access to this information. Gombrich has described displays of emotion or ‘expression’ in terms of ‘pictographic’ modes designed to facilitate non-verbal communication (1996: 121, 123). Contexts help determine the meaning of certain gestures and allow a gesture of the hand or look on a face to engage and move the viewer. Of necessity the entire process relies on conventional images, understood by artist and spectator alike, that communicate the meaning of an expression (Montagu 1994: 105–6). Another art historian, David Freedberg, has similarly focused on the intentions behind images, which require ‘a public trained to respond in particular ways to particular scenes’ (1989: 169). Levy points usefully to the variable visibility or salience of affect, with consequences for visual displays

of affect. Some emotions, those best described as *hypercognated*, can be elaborately labeled and articulated in particular societies; other, *hypocognated* emotions are muted, ignored or, in his words, ‘underschematized’ (1973: 324–5, 1984: 218–19; see Besnier 1993: 80). Note that ‘hypocognated’ does not mean the same thing as unexpressed, since the latter, although not immediately visible, could still have been discussed and analyzed. It is impossible to reconstruct precisely how images might have been received (Iser 1978), even in the most abundantly documented instances from the historical past (Meskell 2000: 737). Any presumed empathy is potentially misleading, since the ‘trained public’ mentioned by Freedberg is long gone, and contextual clues no longer as obvious as they once were. But, by their very selection, these displays of emotion represent hypercognated affect and as such penetrate to the core of culturally salient feelings.

Classic Maya affect

Classic Maya images present only a few categories of obvious affect, identifiable to modern viewers with relatively little difficulty. The more usual image shows stolid warriors or expressionless queens and rulers. Even figures in dance appear to perform in barely perceptible motion, with legs slightly bent, one foot lifted (Grube 1992: fig. 16). At the same time there existed a rich gestural language, with hands in various positions of animated gesticulation. These signals might have been a rich mine (and mime) of affect, but the system underlying this language has proved strikingly resistant to interpretation (Ancona-Ha et al. 2000: 1083; Miller 1983). Given the right ‘trained public’ or appropriate contextual understanding, certain poses of the hand might well have elicited emotion, yet viewers will not easily understand the cues, and the effect is now lost to present-day spectators. Instead, the overriding impression one gathers of Classic imagery is of calculated restraint, decorous movement and economy of expression, of bodily practices that were at once improvised and highly regulated (Appadurai 1990: 92). These traits are fully consistent with the rigid etiquette and finely tuned social encounters that characterized court societies of the Classic Maya (Inomata and Houston 2001). Overt, bald emotion would seem to have been negatively valued by those making and commissioning these images.

The exceptions are all the more noteworthy for their rarity. The kinds of affect openly emphasized in Classic Maya imagery tend to fall into four categories: (1) the terror and distress of captives; (2) drunken abandon or delirium; (3) lust; and (4) grief and mourning. The accompanying glyphs provide no ‘emotion words’ for such scenes, but they clearly represent bundles of emotional states (Tarlow 2000: 716). The first category is by far the most abundant, in that captives represent a central theme in Classic Maya imagery. For them and other minor figures Maya artists reserved their most experimental and fluid depictions of the human body. By the seventh and eighth century AD, they succeeded in drenching some scenes with clear signs of their distress, including hands clenched in mouths, pitiable glances to their captors and slumped resignation (Miller 1999: 153, 157). Representations of emotion, like the senses (Houston and Taube 2000), have histories that reflect changing views as well as firmly rooted continuities: a signal shift in the representational resources of the Maya during the Late Classic period (AD 600–850) was a

heightened transparency of such emotional effusions – aside from their contorted and deliberately uncomfortable body positions captives in the Early Classic period typically register the same facial expressions as their tormentors.

Panel 15, a recently discovered monument from Piedras Negras, Guatemala, that dates to AD 706, illustrates the change (Fig. 1). The bodies of the captors, the ruler *Itsamk'anahk* and two lieutenants, are shown in stiff vertical poses, eyes looking directly ahead and mouths closed. In contrast, the captives stroke their bodies, their mouths open, perhaps as cues to cries of pain or entreaty. This same format (captives, ruler, two lieutenants with distinctive staffs and headdresses), begun in the reign of his father *Yo'nalahk* or *Yopnalahk* (Panel 4, AD 658), achieved its most elaborate development on the front of

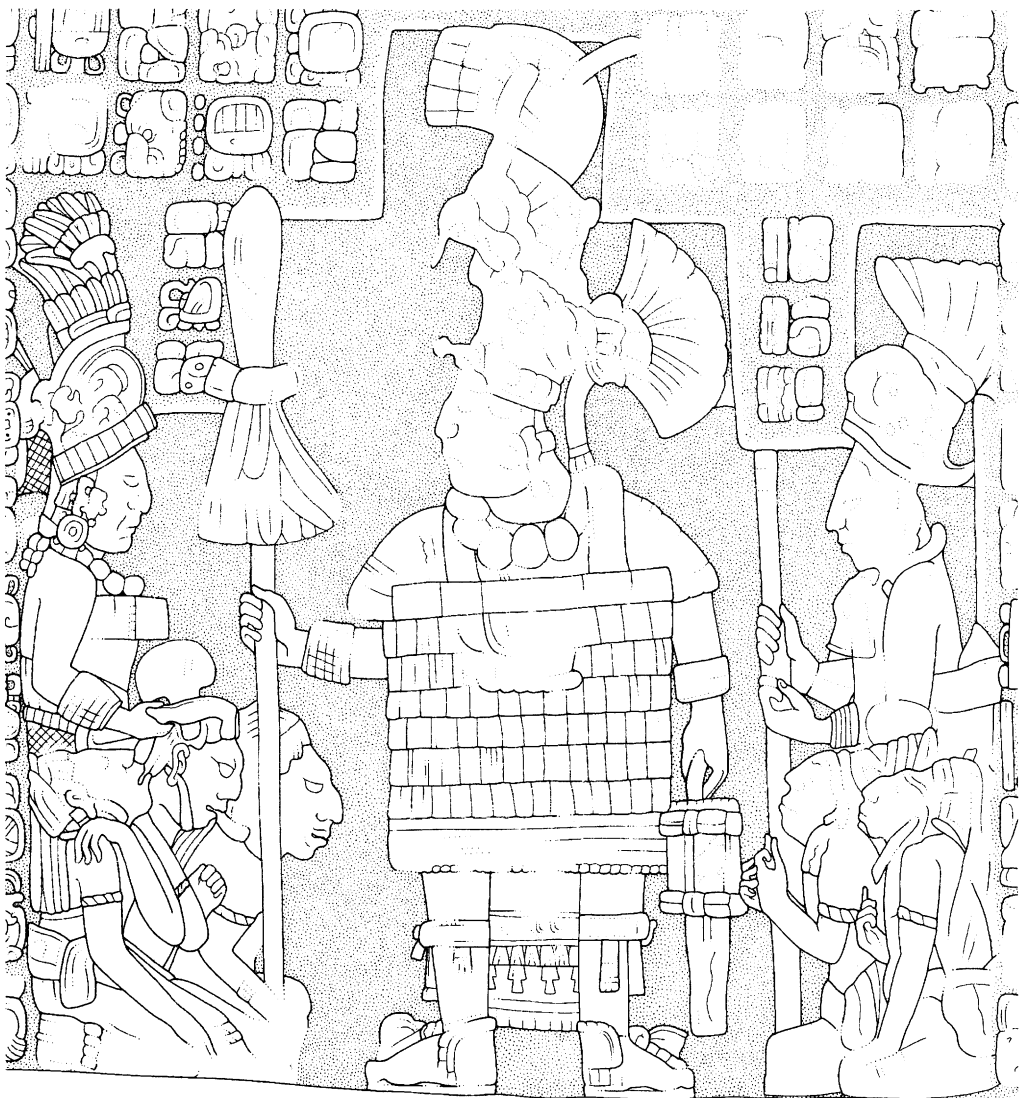


Figure 1 Piedras Negras Panel 15.

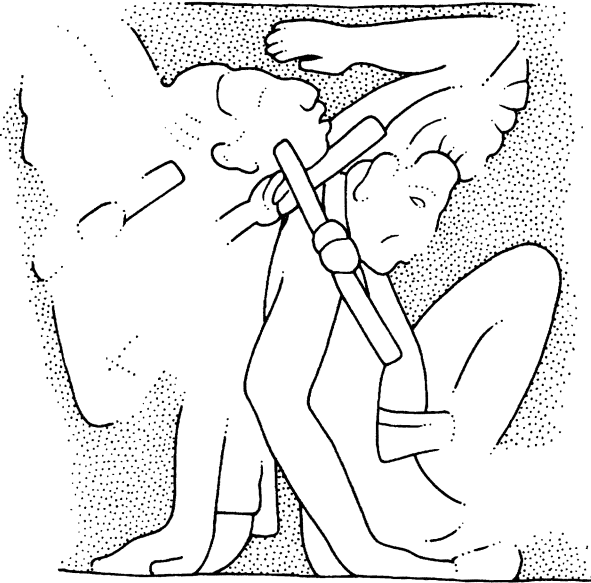


Figure 2 Tonina stucco relief, showing three captives with sticks and ropes for garrotting (after drawing in the Corpus of Maya Hieroglyphic Inscriptions Project, Peabody Museum, Harvard University).

Stela 12 (AD 795), which displays the same contrast between impassive victors and affect-laden images of the defeated. The exhibition of affect takes its meaning from this very contrast: the successful warriors exercise tight control over their self-presentation, the vanquished do not and thereby accentuate their humiliation and drastically reduced status. Maya depictions of captives vividly underscore the absence of constraint, in that hair is disheveled and arms akimbo, again with evidence of acute physical discomfort, as in the anticipatory scene of garrotting with rope and stick that is shown here (Fig. 2; this action was evidently known as *hatza* or *biti* in colonial-era Ch'olti', a language with strong connections to Maya script). In some respects they are treated almost as bound game, and, indeed, the glyphic verb for 'capture' or 'seize' (*chuhkaj*) applies both to people and animals.

Scenes of drunken abandon are far less common, but their most dramatic expression occurs in a monumental setting, at the Yucatec site of San Diego (Fig. 3; Barrera Rubio and Taube 1987; Mayer 1984: plates 143–9). The occasion is the ingestion of alcoholic drinks (probably of fermented agave, or *chih*, David Stuart, pers. comm., 1996) in enema rituals. The figures are violently agitated and off-balance, hair unkempt, faces occasionally obscured: clearly, as with captives, they are people no longer concerned with appearances and self-projection. A similar scene occurs on an unprovenanced vessel (Reents-Budet 1994: fig. 3.14, Kerr 1092), showing the consumption of agave brews by youths (*ch'ok*), perhaps in the men's houses attested ethnographically and archaeologically for the Maya (Tozzer 1941: 124; Webster 1989: 22). The age of the drinkers differs from customs in other parts of Mesoamerica, where drinking in small, non-intoxicating quantities by the elderly was acceptable but draconian penalties awaited those who chose to ignore such injunctions (Coe 1994: 84–7). Among the Aztec, hortatory tales moralize the excessive consumption of alcohol, which led, ineluctably it would seem, to material loss, exile and other forms of punishment.

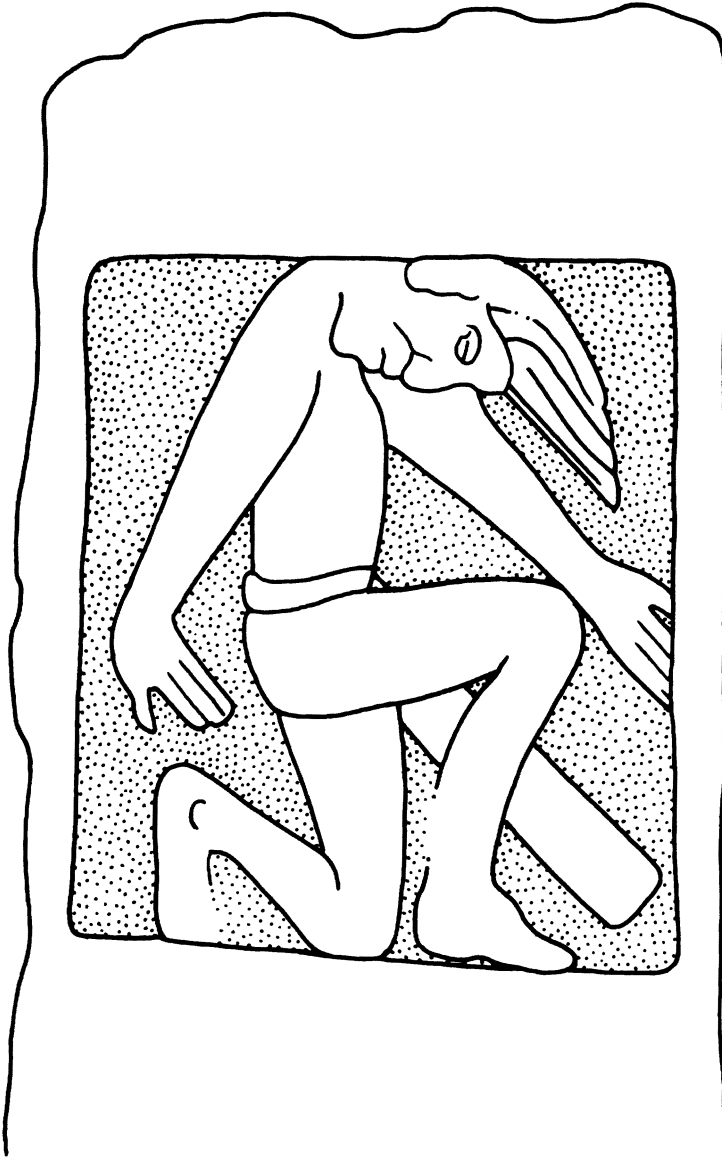


Figure 3 Relief from San Diego, Yucatan (after photograph in Mayer 1984: plate 149).

Lust in Classic Maya imagery can be recognized in several scenes. One typically shows an elderly man, chapfallen, scoliotic, creased with wrinkles, fondling the breasts of a young woman or tending to a harem of beauties (Kerr 4485; see also Miller 1999: fig. 139; Taube 1989: 367). Another discloses acts of bestiality between women and spider monkeys or, bizarrely enough, an insect, as on a well-known vessel from Uaxactun (e.g. Fig. 4). A smoking figure nearby tells us, by this convention, that the lewd fumblings are taking place at night. Some of the scenes are almost certainly representations of dances,

doubtless representing impersonations of supernaturals (Taube 1989: 371). A unique, recently excavated altar from Tonina, Chiapas, exhibits a scene of coupling, again with a female bearing prominently displayed breasts, perhaps as an example of publically sanctioned rape, since the woman appears to be resisting (Corpus of Maya Hieroglyphic Inscriptions Archive, Peabody Museum, Harvard University). Regrettably, the text is eroded, but might well have explained the appearance of this singular image in such a public setting. At the least, a date tells us that this was an historic act that is otherwise unattested thematically in the corpus of Classic Maya sculpture.

For a society that found the display of genitalia repugnant or distasteful – outsized, slightly tumescent genitalia occur mostly on captives and animals – these images must be understood as ‘marked’, in the sense of out-of-the-ordinary, contrary to usual practice and deserving of special notice. (Carvings of penises appear in some parts of Yucatan, as, for example, water spouts on the Temple of the Phalli at Uxmal (Pollock 1980: 262), but the likening of rainwater to urine or sperm suggests a broader mythogenic intent behind these sculptures.) Moreover, the identity of some of the participants is patently supernatural, given their distinctive clothing and other attributes. Constructions of sexuality are as culturally informed here as elsewhere (Clarke 1998: 7–18), and such images may be best explained, not as prurient erotica, but as comments on illicit, disapproved or abnormal behavior, distinguished from everyday human acts by exceptional settings. The few Classic Maya images of sexual acts, including a painting, apparently, of an ejaculating member and another of autoeroticism, occur in the ‘dark zone’ of the Naj Tunich cave, whose texts refer to pilgrimage visits and visions of supernatural paths or companion spirits (*il-b'i, il-way*), hardly the stuff of commonplace behavior (Stone 1995: figs 8–17,

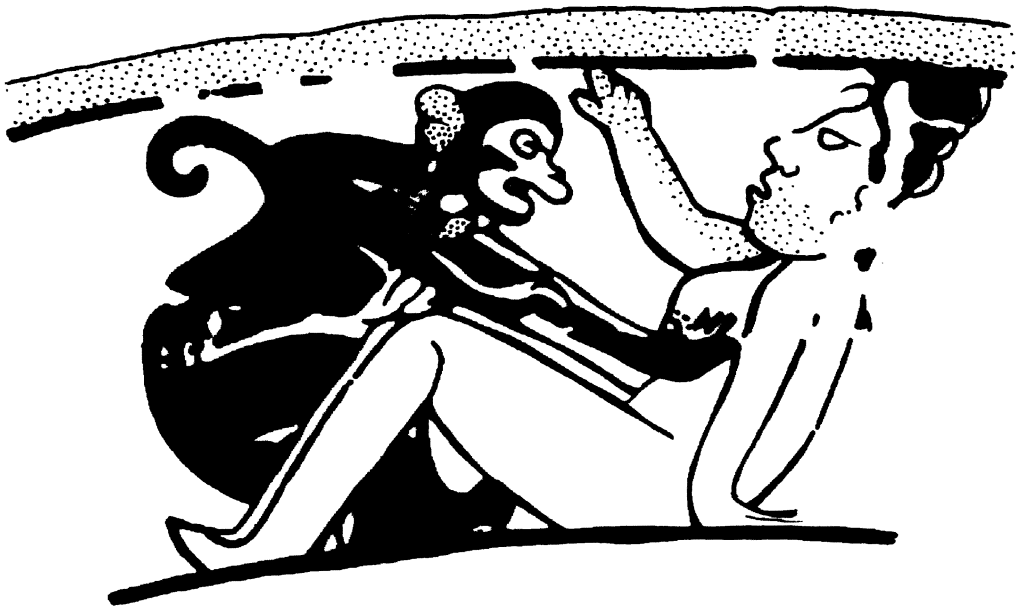


Figure 4 Scene of cross-species lovemaking (after Smith 1955: fig. 2g).

8–18, 8–20; see also fig. 7–9). One scene on a Late Classic vessel combines licentiousness with drunkenness and enema use, possibly in a sweat bath or the antechamber of such a building (Coe 1978: plate 11). Young women fan and massage old deities, all in attendance on Chaak, the rain god. As social commentary, such images may epitomize subtle and subversive parables of unrestrained rulers – examples of ‘anti-courts’ that inverted appropriate behavior (Taube, pers. comm., 1994).

The rarest affects are those of grief or mourning, so far found only on a few painted or incised vessels (Schele and Mathews 1998: fig. 3.27). The vessel in Figure 5 is of Early Classic date and unknown provenance, but likely to be from Peten, Guatemala, because of its textual allusion to the area of Lake Peten Itza. Although highly complex, the tableau presents an unmistakable scene of grief and mourning, again, however, in supernatural circumstances. The body is that of the Maize God, and his mourners are other, androgynous maize deities (the metaphoric remnants of a crop or seed stored for another year?). His wrapped body lies atop a throne. To either side the mourners weep, raise their hands to their forehead in a Classic Maya gesture for death and lamentation (Stuart, pers. comm., 1986) or conceal their faces. Once more, the affect makes its appearance in a ‘marked’ or supernatural context. By Late Classic times, this scene had been stripped of most affect and signs of mourning, showing rather the dressing of the Maize god in the process of departing on a ‘journey’, in Maya parlance a metaphor for death (*ochb’il*, Taube, pers. comm., 2000; Robicsek and Hales 1981: fig. 82).

Discussion

For the Classic Maya, affect was seldom shown or emphasized. Its appearance was highly marked, and those who displayed it likely to be in extraordinary settings. Comparisons

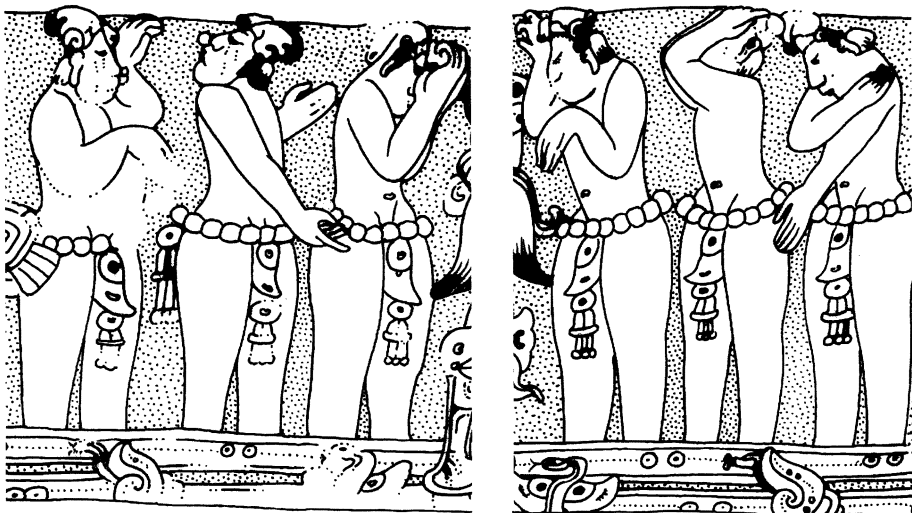


Figure 5 Mourning scene on Early Classic vessel (after rollout photograph by Justin Kerr).

with what appears to be a stolid ideal of comportment are overt and covert: overt in the case of calculated contrasts between victorious warriors and kings and their captives; covert in the frantic displays associated with drunkenness, lust of the elderly and grief, in which viewers (members of a 'trained public') served as witnesses, involved as spectators but otherwise detached from such lush exhibitions of affect. In visual terms, the Classic Maya unquestionably found an ideal in unexpressed emotion and rigid self-control, insofar as they associated it with the principal illustrations of their lords and members of royal courts. Open expressions of emotion in unusual, often supernatural contexts, point to the opposite: a lack of control, a wildness of appearance and bodily position, remarkable for its rarity in the corpus of Classic Maya imagery. The bestial associations of the emotions – note the monkeys in lovemaking or captives as trussed prey – recall the K'iche' Maya epic, the *Popol Vuh*, which linked such creatures with prior, unsuccessful stages of humanity, banished for being unworthy simulacra of the real thing (Tedlock 1996: 73). In Classic Maya imagery monkeys are exceptional by being shown in the act of urination or defecation, an act presumably expressing their lack of control – and also, as the author can attest, to a form of self-defense and enraged response by spider monkeys in the forest.

Levy's discussion of hypercognated and hypocognated affect has bearing here. By their very appearance in painting and sculpture, affect, fear and despair, drunkenness, lustful abandon and grief must have been subject to comment and dissection. In a word, they were hypercognated by the Classic Maya. But the absence of such affect must also have been hypercognated, as part of an idealized mode of self-constraint and concealment of emotion behind stylized gesture. Morally, both modern and ancient Maya countenance misbehavior in isolated ritual contexts, in which humor defines and ridicules the deviant so as to underline that which is normative (Bricker 1973: 151; Taube 1989: 352). The contemplation of affect is thus evaluative and contrastive with the decorum prized by the élite in Classic Maya kingdoms. A similar concern may explain the negative and morally dangerous value assigned to wild forests and uncultivated, natural spaces (Hanks 1990: 306): these landscapes manifestly do not lie under human control. By analogy, the openly affective have, for the ancient Maya, reverted to an undomesticated or pre-domesticated – almost inhuman – state, as figures of ridicule, fun, contempt, fear and anomaly.

Speech styles in non-egalitarian, cephalous societies tend to use an élite pose of affective flatness, while the low-ranking may counter with 'highly demonstrative' displays (Besnier 1990: 435–6). Among the Wolof of Senegal 'laconic, bland, unelaborated' are adjectives that best characterize 'noble speech', used by aristocrats who in turn value 'restraint, self-control, and *sangfroid*' (Irvine 1985: 575–6, 1990: 131, 133). Similar patterns occur among the Fulani of West Africa, for whom a lack of emotional expression signals and undergirds the communications directed by nobles to their former slaves (Riesman 1983). Courty societies in Java likewise linked emotive, 'angry' speech to lower registers of discourse; the 'polite' levels associated with people of high status expressed tranquility and orderly behavior (Irvine 1990: 129). In these cases the 'truth' of an emotion – whether it is honestly and deeply felt, an external state congruent with an internal one – is irrelevant to particular moments of personal interaction (Besnier 1990: 423). The intensified exhibition of affect in Late Classic imagery may reflect a growing concern with social differentiation in unequal encounters between members of burgeoning courts and assertive nobles. Unfortunately, the anthropology of emotion among the Maya, both

ancient and modern, is still underdeveloped. Much of it, particularly anger, relates to the heart (e.g. Laughlin 1988, II: 577–97), perhaps for the universalist reason that strong emotion triggers a more rapid heartbeat. Similarly, hieroglyphic phrases in Classic Maya at Palenque, Chiapas, record emotional states with the phrase, *tim*, a root-transitive, coupled with the term for ‘heart’, *ool*, perhaps meaning ‘satisfy’ (*ti-ma-ja/a-wo-la/a-TS’AK-b’u-ji*, Stuart 2001). One presumes that the Classic Maya recognized and discussed a wide variety of emotions that vexed their tumultuous hearts. Yet their representations do not promote the forthright expression of the passions, which lie distant from us, in images at once remote and empathetically near.

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