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WRITING THE HISTORY OF THE WORD FOR CACAO IN ANCIENT MESOAMERICA

INTRODUCTION

In this issue we introduce a new, occasional feature in *Ancient Mesoamerica*: longer, sustained, detailed papers that elaborate the finer points of controversial culture-historical issues or theoretical debates in Mesoamerican studies. Each of these longer pieces will be followed in a future issue by invited commentaries. This first paper involves a debate that has been brewing for some time: the origins of the words for cacao (*Theobroma cacao* and congeners [McNeil 2006b:341]) and chocolate and the culture-historical implications. Few things of ancient Mesoamerica have whetted both the intellectual and the culinary appetite like cacao and and its derivative, chocolate. Cacao and chocolate, in fact, have represented many things in Mesoamerica and all over the world: food, beverage, commodity, money—and words that evoke lively scholarly debate.

A bit like maize in that it rose from humble origins to claim an exalted status in Mesoamerican economy and religion, cacao, as every student of Mesoamerica knows, served as a medium of exchange, an item of trade and tribute, a status marker, and a drink consumed by elites, especially on ritual occasions. Where, when, and how did cacao become so important in Mesoamerican culture? Most specialists accept an origin for cacao in the upper Amazon basin, although some have suggested an independent tropical Mesoamerican origin (Coe and Coe 1996:26; McNeil 2006a: 4–6; Young 1994). It may have appeared as a domesticated crop and trade item in lowland Mesoamerica by the Early Formative although the supporting archaeological and linguistic evidence remains elusive (Pool 2007:103). The existence of a chocolate beverage is indicated in the early Middle Formative by finds of flaring-neck, spouted bottles containing the chemical residue of cacao in contexts dated to about 1000 B.C. in Belize (Powis et al. 2002). Such vessels are found at sites all over the Maya area beginning in the Middle Formative, although in many cases the dating is not secure. Similar vessels are securely dated in the Ulua Valley of Honduras to 1000-700 B.C. (Henderson and Joyce 2006:143). By Late Formative times cacao must have been an important item in long-distance Mesoamerican exchange (Parsons and Price 1971: 183). Clear and abundant evidence demonstrates the importance of cacao throughout Mesoamerica during the Early Classic, especially in central Mexico, the Gulf Coast, and the Maya lowlands. This last point returns us to the topic of the origin of the word for cacao.

In a landmark paper, Campbell and Kaufman (1976:84) indicated that **kakaw(a)* could be reconstructed for proto-Mixe-Zoquean (PMZ), dated to ca. 1500 B.C., associated with the origins of Olmec civilization on the Gulf Coast. They also indicated that *kakaw(a)* was borrowed from PMZ into Mayan (Chol and Tzotzil), Nahua, Totonac, Jicaque, Paya, Huave, Lenca, and Tarascan. Most aspects of Campbell and Kaufman's PMZ-Olmec hypotheses have held up remarkably well, although some points have been modified.

Justeson et al. (1985:57–59) signaled an important modification when they discussed the linguistic evidence supporting a new dating for the diffusion of variants of *kakaw(a)* to other Mesoamerican languages, particularly Mayan, during post-Olmec, Late Preclassic times, to sometime between 400 B.C. and A.D. 100.

Dakin and Wichmann (2000) offered the counterproposal that Nahua *kakawa-tl* was the source for *kakaw*, *kakawa*, and related forms in other Mesoamerican languages. Providing their argument for rejecting the Mixe-Zoquean etymology, they asserted:

> Our reinterpretation of the history of the word for 'cacao' as seen from a Mixe-Zoquean point of view leads to the conclusion that it is not possible to continue to attribute a Mixe-Zoquean origin to it. Instead we argue that the word *kakawa*—most likely pronounced *kàkawá* by its donors—entered from the outside at an early stage of the differentiation of the language family into proto-Mixean and proto-Zoquean. (Dakin and Wichmann 2000:57)

Dakin and Wichmann thus placed the time of the word's diffusion in the Early Classic period and associated it with Teotihuacan dominance in Mesoamerica. They inferred that the language of origin was Eastern Nahuatl ("Pipil" [Campbell 1985]).

Kaufman and Justeson's refutation of the Dakin and Wichmann analysis follows this Introduction. They argue that **kakawa* has an "unimpeachable pedigree as a native Mixe-Zoquean word" and that a Nahua origin is implausible. They do agree, however, with Dakin and Wichmann that a language spoken by the elites of Teotihuacan was the most likely source. That language, they argue, cannot have been Nahua, but was very likely Northern Mixe-Zoquean which they place in the Basin of Mexico as early as about 1200 B.C. Revising the earlier dates from Justeson et al. (1985:59), Kaufman and Justeson posit that the diffusion of *kakak(a)*, or at least its borrowing into Mayan, took place between 200 B.C. and A.D. 400.

Kaufman and Justeson register the caveat that while the linguistic data may indicate that Mixe-Zoquean speakers were responsible for the diffusion of the word for cacao throughout Mesoamerica, they shed no light on the nature of the interaction behind this process. True enough; these are questions that must be explored through other lines of investigation. It is worth noting, however, that careful historical linguistic research is one of the ways in

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which students of ancient Mesoamerica can fill in gaps in culture history, particularly in terms of interaction across social networks that do not necessarily leave other traces for archaeologists, epigraphers, or art historians.

As mentioned above, a future issue of *Ancient Mesoamerica* will feature commentaries on this new addition to the debate.

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