

Mirrored Poeticity

Chiastic Structuring in Mayan Languages

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The last quarter century has seen a marked shift in Maya hieroglyphic studies in recognition of the presence of poetic language in the script. Poetics in indigenous Mesoamerican tradition is based primarily upon the principle of parallelism, most often in the form of coupleted discourse. Chiasmus, a rhetorical feature fully dependent upon parallelism, was one such poetic device used by ancient Maya scribes and colonial period indigenous authors, and it is still found among modern ritual specialists in some Maya communities. In this study, I explore the use and forms of chiasmus over time among various Maya groups and languages. As I show, ancient Maya scribes incorporated chiasmus into hieroglyphic texts at particular moments for emphasis, as a means of highlighting key narrative events. Furthermore, scribes would at times display considerable poetic prowess through the use of what I term “rhetorical stacking,” that is, a multiplicity of rhetorical features used simultaneously within a larger poetic construction. Chiasmus, as it turns out, is often the larger rhetorical unit within which other forms of verbal art are expressed. As a poetic tradition established in the Late Classic period (250 AD–900 AD), chiasmus still flourished in colonial period documents and has survived into modern Mayan languages for ornamental and emphatic purposes.

Expressing through Chiasm

Chiasmus, according to Pelkey, is “the parallel, or (a)symmetrical, inversion of two or more terms framed as antithetical pairs, being held in something of a mirror image relation in order to suggest processes of

tension, reversal, or exchange.”¹ At its most basic level, a chiasm has the shape AB-B'A', a parallelism built upon the formal symmetry of both progressive and regressive movement. Poetic effect is sufficiently realized through the repetition of the constituent line of the divided couplets. However, chiasmus often does more by creating a focal point at the axis of the chiasm. As Welch has noted, “[a]n emphatic focus on the center can be employed by a skillful composer to elevate the importance of a central concept or to dramatize a radical shift of events at the turning-point.”² The importance of the center of the chiasm has been described by Lissner as “betweenity,” i.e., the way the chiasms, in crisscross fashion, point attention to an intermediate region. Lissner explains:

The cross's constituent lines “take off” from the concurrence of the midpoint to “then proceed in their own direction” (“Focus”). The pair of lines of equal length that compose the oblique cross gradually and evenly incline toward one another and meet up at a point absolutely inter-medial. Then from that intermediate place, a loci of adjoining or impinging, the lines “re-commit” (“re-turn”) to their “movement” or “action,” but with a decided difference. The resumption demonstrates decline and separation: the lines gradually and evenly decline away from one another in a precise, reverse mirroring of their inward motion.³

A chiasm engages the audience in narrative movement through its lines. The processional pivot or axis, especially when consisting of two semantically related lines, encourages reflection.

Cross-cultural Use of Chiasmus

In *The Arte of English Poesie* (1569), George Puttenham describes “anti-metavole” (antimetabole, from Gk. ἀντιμεταβολή), a closely related or equivalent poetic figure to chiasmus, as a form of playful speech in which “Ye haue a figure which takes a couple of words to play with in a verse, and by making them to chaunge and shift one into others place they do very pretily exchange and shift the sence.”⁴ He illustrates this “antimetavole” with the following example:

We dwell not here to build us boures,
 And halles for pleasure and good cheare:
 But halles we build for us and ours,
 To dwell in then whilst we are here.⁵

Puttenham also termed this construction “Counterchange” (a translation of *antimetavole*), reflective of the reversive or oppositional binary that a chiasm often entails. While chiasmus can certainly project coordination and balance, additional rhetorical impact accompanies antithetical or oppositional pairings. For Merleau-Ponty, a chiasm can represent “the idea that every perception is doubled with a counter perception . . . an act with two faces, [in which] one does not know who speaks and who listens.”⁶ Chiasmus, according to Pelkey, may function both “to vividly frame the contradiction or rupture between some set of oppositions and simultaneously to bring these differences into dialogue.”⁷ Quintilian, a Roman rhetorician, stated: *Non ut edam vivo, sed ut vivam edo*, “I don’t eat to live, but I live to eat,” exemplifying what Paul refers to as “mirroring,” in which the elements of the second half contradict those found in the first.⁸ In such constructions, chiasmus engages two or more ideas in a balanced, dialogic process, but whose internal dynamics “are characterized not by consonance but by dissonance, not by stabilizing resemblance but destabilizing antimony.”⁹ Antithesis, therefore, becomes a potent motivator toward cognition and contemplation; for example: “For whosoever will save his life shall lose it: and whosoever will lose his life for my sake shall find it” (Matt 16:25). Chiasmus invites the reader or hearer to ponder both bilateral symmetries and asymmetries, what Lissner calls the associative–dissociative dichotomy, contained in its structure.¹⁰

Chiasmus, as the present volume makes clear, is particularly prevalent in Near Eastern texts, but as a linguistic or cognitive phenomenon, it must be recognized as a global feature of discourse. From Greek writers such as Homer, to Roman writers such as Quintilian, to Beowulf, to Shakespeare, who used chiasmus in *Hamlet* and *Macbeth*,¹¹ to Lévi-Strauss, who had a penchant for chiastic logic,¹² and up until present times, such as in Indonesia,¹³ chiasmus has enjoyed a wide degree of usage. Without a doubt, the basic AB-B’A’ pattern is most commonly attested, especially today.¹⁴ While most people would not recognize them as a chiasmus per se, balanced chiastic phraseology is common in our day; for example, “Ask not what your country can do for you; ask what you can do for your country,”¹⁵ or the famous jingle “I am stuck on Band-Aid brand ‘cause Band-Aid’s stuck on me!”¹⁶ Thus, while often thought to be primarily an ancient mode of poetic expression, chiasmus is still used for rhetorical effect in cultures around the world, possibly containing insights into culturally specific notions. Chiasmus has traditionally been viewed as an organizing feature of discourse; however,

recent research is beginning to urge us to look beyond its use as simply a rhetorical tool and into its direct ties to conceptual patterning and human thought.¹⁷

Chiasmus in Ancient Mesoamerica

When one speaks of poetics in Mesoamerican tradition one speaks of parallelism. The rhyming schemes common to Western poetry play no role in Mesoamerican poetic styles. Instead, the building blocks of poetic discourse are parallel lines. The most common manifestation of parallelism in Mayan languages is the semantic couplet wherein a thought is expressed in two lines that have a close semantic or morphological relationship to each other, often only differing in a single element. For example, in an excerpt from a Tzotzil Mayan curing ritual, the shaman importunes:

I shall visit your shrines a little,
 I shall entrust my soul to you a little,
 To your feet,
 To your hands,
 For your sons,
 For your children,
 For your flowers,
 For your sprouts,
 For these I beseech divine pardon,
 For these I beg divine forgiveness . . .¹⁸

The prayer is almost fully composed of semantic couplets. What could be stated in a single line is amplified by repeating the thought in a second, augmented line (e.g., “beseech divine pardon” and “beg divine forgiveness”). Repetition, therefore, not rhyme, renders poeticity.

The use of parallelism can be traced back to the very earliest texts in ancient Mesoamerica. Indeed, the oldest example of writing ever found in Mesoamerica, the Cascajal Block, dating to the Early and Middle Formative period, between c. 1200 and 900 BC,¹⁹ seems to have a couplet of the paired signs of “throne” and “mat,” a well-known diphrastic kenning in Mesoamerican texts and iconography meaning “authority.”²⁰ For example, the Maya hieroglyphic *pohp/tz'am*, the Yukatek Maya *pop/tzam*, the Nahuatl *petlatl/icpalli*, are kennings literally translated

as “mat/throne” but representing the metaphorical notion of “authority” or “rulership.”²¹ The occurrence of the “mat/throne” couplet on the Cascajal Block speaks to the antiquity of the expression and the presence of poetic couplets and kennings at this early stage in Mesoamerican writing.²²

Maya hieroglyphic writing is replete with parallelism from some of the earliest texts until the last vestiges of the script fell into disuse in the seventeenth century. The great Mayanist J. Eric Thompson was the first to recognize parallelism in postcolonial writings in Mesoamerica, around the middle of the twentieth century.²³ Floyd Lounsbury successfully identified the presence of semantic couplets in the Maya hieroglyphic texts of Palenque, Mexico, in 1978.²⁴ Since then other researchers have expanded our understanding of the use of parallelism by the ancient Maya.²⁵ Chiasmus, a complex form of parallelism, however, has received relatively little attention in Maya hieroglyphic studies.

Chiasmus as used in Mesoamerica shows a clear intent to highlight the contents of the central axis. Furthermore, the paired constituent lines on both sides of the axis fit perfectly into the deeply rooted, standard system of parallelistic expression in Mesoamerica. In 1986, Josserand first noted the presence of chiasmus (which she also referred to as “nested couplets”²⁶) in the hieroglyphic script in the texts of Palenque, Mexico.²⁷ Josserand found an AB-B’A’ pattern on the Tablet of the 96 Glyphs, forming a textual “mirrored image.”

Chiastic patterning also appears outside of a strictly linguistic context at the site of Palenque, Mexico. The dynastic ruler list at Palenque includes seventeen names, beginning with the founder, K’uk’ Bahlam. Stuart has recently noted that five of the rulers’ names are ordered precisely in reverse order: 1-2-3-4-5, 5-4-3-2-1 (fig. 1).²⁸ In essence, five rulers took earlier dynastic names but did so in chiastic-like form, terminating with the last king, K’inich K’uk’ Bahlam, who bore the founder’s name. Stuart states: “Palenque’s later kings, it seems, deliberately chose to ‘fold’ time back on itself, and repeat the sequence of the kings who came before them.” Stuart finds this “odd, wonderful pattern” to possibly suggest a kind of dynastic “closed system” at play.²⁹

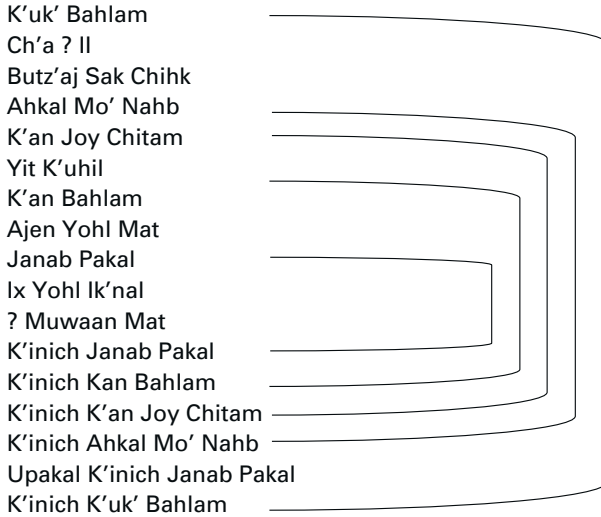


FIGURE 1. The Palenque dynastic list showing a chiastic patterning in certain names (modified after Stuart 2011:280).

Maya hieroglyphic writing boasts various lengths of chiasmi, both micro as well as macro structures. An example of an AB-B'A' pattern is found on Pusilha Stela D, first noted by Kinsman³⁰ (fig. 2):

<i>K'awiil Chan K'inich</i>	K'awiil Chan K'inich,
<i>Ux Buluk Pik Ajaw</i>	3-11 Lord, [title]
<i>Chan Winikhaab Ch'ahom</i>	4-Score Year Scatterer, [title]
<i>K'awiil Chan K'inich</i>	K'awiil Chan K'inich,

The repeated name of the protagonist, K'awiil Chan K'inich, envelops two titles that he carries, forming a chiasm.

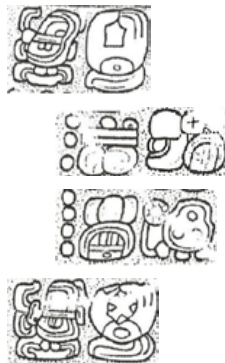


FIGURE 2. The text of Stela D at Pusilha containing an AB-B'A' chiasm (drawing by Christophe Helmke).

A slightly longer possible chiasmic structure has been suggested by Josserand³¹ with the shape of ABC-C'B'A' on the front edge of Yaxchilan Lintel 23 (A1–C2).

Carrasco has discussed an intricate chiasm at the site of Palenque, Mexico, that incorporates iconography and monument placement into the message of the chiasm.³² The text is divided between two monuments—the Tablet of the Orator and the Tablet of the Scribe (fig. 3a–b). The tablets depict two individuals flanking either side of a short staircase. The king's throne was positioned between the two tablets, which is important since the two individuals on the tablets gaze toward the throne. The second-person caption texts around the heads of the two individuals form a chiasm that is independent of both vertical texts. Thus, focal narrative begins on the Tablet of the Orator (lines 1–2) and terminates on the Tablet of the Scribe (lines 3–5).

1. *Ubaah ach'ahb ak'abil,*
 2. *Yajaw K'inich Ahkal Mo' Nahb Baahkab.*
 3. *Ilaaj abaah,*
 4. *Matwiil Ajaw,*
 5. *Usih ach'ahb ak'abil.*
-
1. The image of ? is **your creation in darkness,**
 2. **Lord of** Ahkal Mo' Nahb, Baahkab.
 3. Your image was seen,
 4. **Lord of** Matwiil,
 5. The gift of **your creation in darkness.**

At the axis of the chiasm is the phrase “Your image was seen,” precisely the spatial arrangement found in the two individuals who are shown “looking” at the king from each side of his throne. Thus, we have a text, iconography, and spatial layout all mirroring the message of the text, which itself is expressed in a chiasm that centralizes the image of the king in the stanza.

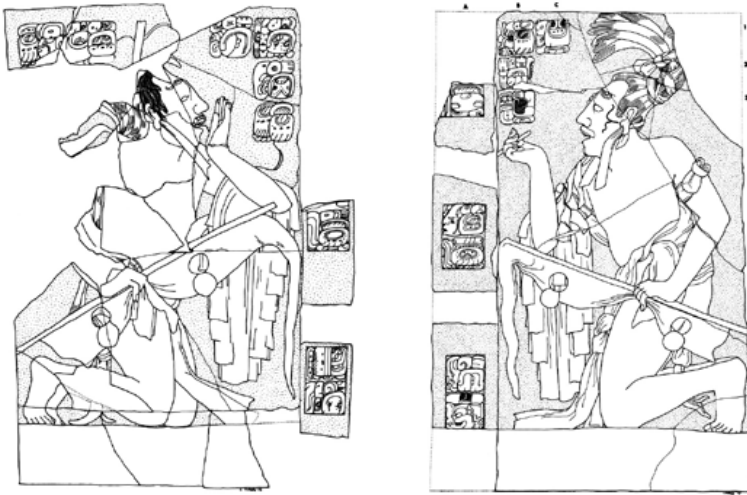


FIGURE 3. (left) The Tablet of the Orator from Palenque, Mexico. (right) Tablet of the Scribe from Palenque, Mexico (both drawings by Linda Schele, courtesy of the Foundation for the Advancement of Mesoamerican Studies, Inc.).

Emotive events are prime candidates for parallelism and, more specifically, chiasmus.³³ One particularly clear example comes from the Dresden Codex, one of the only four remaining hieroglyphic “books” to have survived the Spanish conquest. While the codices themselves are replete with semantic couplets, Craveri and Valencia have also identified several chiasmi in the Dresden Codex. On page 22 of the Dresden Codex, the death of the Moon Goddess is lamented through a poetic, chiasmic construction (fig. 4).

1. *Chamal 'U Ixik*
2. *umu'k*
3. *xib*
4. *chamal*
5. *xib*
6. *umu'k*
7. *Sak Ixik*

1. Death, the Moon Goddess,
2. its augury
3. is fear,
4. Death,

5. fear
6. is its augury
7. of the Moon Goddess.³⁴

The word “death” or “dead” (*chamal*) appears at the axis of the chiasm as at the beginning of the first line of the stanza, stressing the importance of her passing and the negative augury that accompanies this occurrence.



FIGURE 4. Detail of page 22 of the Dresden Codex (photo courtesy of the Foundation for the Advancement of Mesoamerican Studies, Inc.).

An Elaborate Chiasm: Quirigua Stela C

A chiasitic structure in the text of Stela C from the site of Quirigua, Guatemala was first identified independently in 1992 by Josserand and

Hopkins and by Hull.³⁵ Stela C has arguably the longest and most complex chiasm of the ancient New World (fig. 5).³⁶ Elegant in its narration, Quirigua Stela C employs numerous poetic devices simultaneously, including identical structure and related meaning parallelism, synonymous parallelism, triplets, embedding, and couplet breaking.

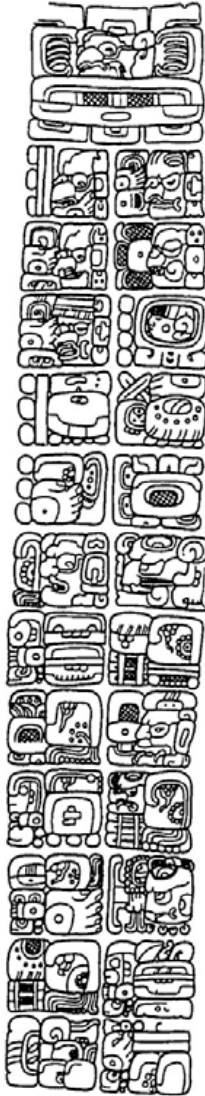


FIGURE 5. The creation text portion of Stela C from Quirigua containing the longest and most elaborate chiasm in the ancient New World (drawing by Matthew Looper).

The theme of the inscription revolves around certain events involved in the creation of the universe. In the Maya calendar these creation events corresponded to or near to the Long Count date of 13.0.0.0.0, equivalent to 13 August 3114 BC in the Gregorian calendar. Twelve specific creation events took place around this date, a number of which are discussed on Stela C. The text describes the manipulation of three hearthstones that were set up in the sky into what we now identify as the Belt of Orion. In addition, various gods “plant,” that is, erect stones in sacred mythological locations. This section of the text that narrates these creative events is presented in an elaborate chiasm that also exhibits rhetorical stacking. The underlying structure of the chiasm is AB[a]C[b][c][a]C'[b][c][a]C''[c][b]B'A'.

A 13.0.0.0.0, 4 Ajaw 8 K'umk'u jehlaj k'o'b.

B 3-kahlaj-tuun

a Utz'apaw tuun “Paddler Gods”

C b Uhtiiy Naah Ho' Chan;

c Hiix Tz'am Tuun-a';

a Utz'apaw tuun Ihk' Naah Chak Chahk,

C' b Uhtiiy kah?-kab;

c Chan Tz'am Tuun.

a Uhtiiy kal-tuun Itzamnaaj;

C'' c Ha' Tz'am Tuun.

b Uhtiiy Ti' Chan;

B' Yax “hearth”-nal.

A' Tzutziy 13 “Baktuun”.

A 13.0.0.0.0, 4 Ajaw 8 K'umk'u, the hearthstones were changed.

B **Three (hearth)stones** were wrapped.

a The Paddler Gods planted **a stone**,

C b **It happened at** the First Five Sky Place;

c it was the Jaguar **Throne Stone**.

a The god Ihk' Naah Chak Chahk planted **a stone**,

C' b **It happened at** the Great Town Place;

c it was the Snake **Throne Stone**.

a Then it came to pass **a stone** wrapping by Itzamnaaj;

C'' c it was the Water **Throne Stone**.

b **It happened at** the Edge of the Sky;

B' New "hearth" Place.

A' 13 **Baktuns** were completed.

This chiasm shows complex, multiple layers of poetic forms. The axis of the chiasm (CC'C") focuses the narrative on the location of the manipulation of the stones during these creation events. Three internal triplets are present ("abc"), the second element of each also serving as the "C" element of the chiasmic lines. Also, the last triplet construction inverses the order of "b" and "c," creating a poetic focus through the breaking of the clear expectation established in the previous two triplets, exemplifying, in Jakobson's words, when "the poetic function projects the principle of equivalence from the axis of selection into the axis of combination."³⁷ Jakobson defined poetics as the projection of the paradigmatic, i.e., the vertical substitution set of signifiers or signifieds that operate on the notion of interchangeability within a particular class, onto the syntagmatic axis, i.e., the horizontal or diachronic relationship among signifiers in a particular code. Thus, any alteration in syntagmatic axis can break the audience's expectation with a resulting poetic effect—precisely what occurs on Quirigua Stela C.

Chiasmus is the narrative frame of the creation narrative on Quirigua Stela C. The inclusion of three triplets within the chiasm is an example of what I refer to as "rhetorical stacking": the use of multiple poetic devices simultaneously in a pericope. The high degree of poeticity attained through rhetorical stacking serves to bring narrative focus and emphasis to this most important of events: the creation of the cosmos. Quite remarkably, the use of chiasmus when discussing creation events is also well attested in colonial and modern Maya creation accounts (see discussion below). What Quirigua Stela C makes clear is that the Late Classic Maya used intentional chiasmi to highlight important narrative content but also that they could do so in extraordinarily poetic fashion by intermingling other rhetorical features into the chiasmic structure.

Chiasmus in Colonial Mesoamerica

Chiasmus is, at its heart, simply a form of parallelism. Early research by Garibay, Edmonson, and León-Portilla in the 1960s made the case for the presence of parallelistic discourse in several Mesoamerican languages, particularly in the Yukatekan Mayan Books of Chilam Balam and the K'iche' Mayan Popol Vuh. Couplets were soon recognized as the primary vehicle for poetic expression in ritual speech in Mesoamerica. Miguel León-Portilla³⁸ initially identified couplets in the Popol Vuh,

a mytho-historic account of the K'iche' Maya. Soon thereafter, Edmonson, who had completed an English translation of the Popol Vuh, declared the text of the Popol Vuh to be "entirely composed in parallelistic (i.e., semantic) couplets."³⁹ However, this all changed when Allen Christenson, who had published a two-volume critical translation of the Popol Vuh,⁴⁰ first noted clear examples of chiasmus in the Popol Vuh. In the early 1990s, Christenson sent a letter to Edmonson detailing his discovery to see if he would accept the possibility that the Popol Vuh was not solely composed in parallel couplets. In Edmonson's brief response, he wrote to Christenson that he was convinced of the chiasmic passages Christenson sent him from the Popol Vuh. According to Christenson, Edmonson "was enthusiastic about its presence in Maya literature and arranged his letter of response in the form of an 'enthusiastic chiasmus.'"

Axial focus is considered to be one of the common motivators for the use of chiasmus in cultures around the world.⁴¹ Similar to other cultural traditions, in colonial and modern Mayan languages, the chiasmic axis can have a single branch or two lines forming a couplet at this narrative pivot locus.

In the following example, from the Chilam Balam of Tizimín, composed in Yukatek Mayan, has a couplet at the center of the chiasm, as first identified by Christenson.⁴²

1. *U koch bal cah.*
2. *Ti y ulel **Hun Pic ti Ax**;*
3. *Ti y emel **Can Ul***
4. ***ti chibal i.***
5. *Uuc ppeh hab u **chibal***
6. ***Can Ul;***
7. *Uuc ppeh hab u chibal **Hun Pic ti Ax i.***
8. *Ti tal i y emel **u Koch Chakan.***

1. **The taxation** of the world.
2. That will be the coming of **Hun Pic from Ax**;
3. That will be the descent of **Can Ul**
4. by **succession.**
5. Seven years will be the **succession**
6. **of Can Ul;**
7. Seven years will be the succession of **Hun Pic from Ax.**
8. Then came the descent of **the tax** on fields.⁴³

As noted earlier, in many colonial and modern Mayan narratives, chiasmus is often used when recounting the acts of creation of the world or universe. For example, a Lakandon Mayan creation myth with clear resonances to the narrative on Quirigua Stela C is presented in chiastic form.⁴⁴ In this mythic account, the first three gods of the Lakandon pantheon, *Hachäküyum*, creator of human beings, *Sukunküyum*, lord of the underworld, and *Äkyantho'*, the god of foreigners, are in dialogue during the first creation of the world:

59. *Ne tsoy tu yilab netsoy*
60. *Tan u yilik holri' tunich*
61. *Yan tunich yokol k'ax*
62. *Tsok u mentik k'ax*
63. *Tu wolol ch'ik binih*
64. *Bähe' ne tsoy lu'um*

59. It is **good** they saw it **good**,
60. They are watching **stone emerge**,
61. There is stone in the **forest**,
62. They finish making the **forest**,
63. All the **stones** were **raised up**,
64. Now the earth is very **good**.⁴⁵

The events of creation include the emerging or raising up of stones in the “forest,” clearly parallel to the stones that were said to be “planted,” i.e., stood up straight, on Quirigua Stela C. The opening and closing lines in which the gods pronounce what they saw as “good” (*tsoy*) are likely influenced by the biblical narrative in Gen 1:31, “And God saw every thing that he had made, and, behold, it was very good (*tov*)” (NIV).

Many years ago, I noted a chiasm in the Book of Chilam Balam of Chumayel,⁴⁶ the context of which is, yet again, creation.

1. Çihci can y *etel luum*,
2. *Eb haa*,
3. *Luum, tunich, yetel che:*
4. *Cihci ubal kaknab*,
5. *Y etel luum*.

1. Heaven **and the earth** were created,
2. The stairway of **water**,

3. The earth, rocks, and trees:
4. The things of the **sea** were created,
5. **And the earth.**⁴⁷

When one considers that chiasmus as a poetic form is used conservatively in Mayan languages, it is therefore telling that so many creation accounts are narrated in chiastic form.

Finally, in the mytho-historical account of the K'iche' Maya, the Popol Vuh, the creation narrative is also couched in a chiastic structure, as first identified by Christenson (see below). According to Christenson, the Popol Vuh recounts the first creation in a large chiasm. "Each phase of the creation is outlined in detail from the primordial stillness to the formation of the face of the earth, along with its mountains and rivers. The final portion of this section then recapitulates the events of the creation in reverse order."⁴⁸

Creation begun with a **declaration of the first words** concerning the creation
(lines 97–117)

The **sky** is in suspense and the **earth is submerged in water** (lines 118–36)

The creation is to be under the direction of **Its Heart Sky** (lines 137–92)

The **creation** of all things begun (lines 193–201)

The creation of **earth** (lines 202–32)

The creation of **mountains** (lines 233–55)

The **division of the waters** into branches (lines 256–58)

"Merely **divided** them existed **waters**," (line 259)

"Then were revealed great **mountains**." (line 260)

"Thus its creation **earth** this," (line 261)

"Then it was **created** by them" (line 262)

"**Its Heart Sky**, [who first conceived the creation]" (lines 263–67)

"It was set apart the **sky**, it was set apart also **earth within water**," (lines 268–69)

"Thus its **conception** this, when they thought, when they pondered"
(lines 270–74)

The gods Heart of the Sky, Sovereign, and Quetzal Serpent counseled together to create the physical earth. The creative actions are narrated in elegant, chiastic form (lines 253–61):

1. First the **earth**
2. Was **created**,
3. The **mountains** and valleys.

4. The **waterways were divided**,
5. their branches coursing among mountains.
6. Thus the **waters were divided**
7. revealing the great **mountains**
8. or thus was the **creation**
9. of the **earth**.⁴⁹

In each of the cases, including the Late Classic period example from Stela C at Quirigua, the salient events of creation are recounted in chiasmic form.

Chiasmus in Highland Mayan Languages

Chiasmus also appears in noncreation contexts in colonial and modern Mayan cultures. Highland Mayan languages, especially during the colonial period, contain numerous examples of chiasmus.

The first chiasm identified by Christenson in the Popol Vuh has an AB-B'A' structure.

32. *I 'yom,*
33. *Mamom,*
34. *Xpiyakok,*
35. *Xmuqane, u b'i',*

32. **Midwife,**
33. **Patriarch,**
34. **Xpiyacoc**
35. **Xmucane**, their names,⁵⁰

Christenson notes that the proper names of the couple are out of their normal order, something that puzzled Edmonson⁵¹ since the female deity name (*Xmucane*) always comes first in other pairings. The problem is solved when one understands the names have been purposely put into a chiasmic construction, thereby reversing the standard order of occurrence.⁵²

Further examples of chiasmus can be found in other colonial highland Mayan languages. The *Annals of the Kaqchikels* was composed in Kaqchikel Mayan between 1571 and 1604 by Francisco Hernández Arana Xajilá and Francisco Rojas. Stylistically the document is written in traditional, native parlance, capturing many pre-Columbian cultural conceptions. On a literary level, the authors show themselves to

be well-trained in traditional Maya forms of poetry and expression. In Maxwell and Hill's important translation and commentary on the text, they point out various occurrences of chiasmus.⁵³ In an excerpt from the *Xajil Chronicle*, a straightforward AB-B'A' chiasmus appears.

1. *K'oj xb'e chi kaj,*
2. *k'oj xqa pan ulew*
3. *K'oj xxule',*
4. *xjote' chi qichin qonojel*

1. **Some** [of us] **went up** into the sky,
2. **some** [of us] **descended** into the earth.
3. **Some** of us **descended,**
4. **some** of us **ascended.**⁵⁴

Maxwell and Hill note that in this excerpt the chiasmus is not based on syntactic inversion since the structure of existential (*k'oj*), intransitive verb, and prepositional phrase remains consistent. Instead, the inversion takes place in the directionality of each intransitive verb of motion.⁵⁵

A number of other chiasmi appear in conjunction with descriptions of implements of war: the shield and the arrow. The pairing of shield and arrow, however, carries a special significance in several Mayan languages, including the hieroglyphic script, as they create a diphrastic kenning representing the idea of "warfare" or "military might." In the *Annals of the Kaqchikels*, the two lines of the kenning are poetically divided when fit into chiasmic form. The two terms, *ch'a'* ("arrows") and *pokob'* ("shield"), appear elsewhere in the text as a kenning for "military might," but likely without losing their original, literal connotations. In the following example, the warriors going to battle are told of the armor and armament they will carry into battle. Rather than simply state the arrows and shields they would bring, the author creates a chiasm by adding descriptive substitutions of each. The descriptions do not always form adjacent semantic couplets, however, since they are presented in an AB-B'A' structure (i.e., a chiasm wherein only the B-B' lines are proximate).

Example 1:

1. *Ja ruma ri' xtiwiqaj re':*
2. *setesik che',*
3. *q'i'om aj;*
4. *ch'a',*
5. *pokob';*

1. Therefore, you will bear these:
2. **rounded wood,**
3. **straight cane;**
4. **arrows,**
5. **shields;**⁵⁶

Example 2:

1. *a kà ri ajlabàl*
2. *xa ruyon ch'a,*
3. *pokob';*
4. *xa setesik che',*
5. *xa q'ìom*
6. *aj riqan' òq xpe Pa Tulla*

1. As for the warriors,
2. just **arrows,**
3. **shields;**
4. Just **rounded wood,**
5. just **straight cane**
6. was their burden when they came from Pa Tulan.⁵⁷

As Maxwell and Hill point out, the chiasmus is formed by a mention of the physical objects in one line of the couplet, but in the second it is “their form rather than by the nominal referent.”⁵⁸ Thus, in example 1 the descriptor “rounded wood” is paired with “shields,” and “straight cane” is associated with “arrows.” In terms of presentation, the order is “round wood–straight cane–arrows–shields.” In example 2, however, the constituents are reversed, with “arrow–shields–rounded wood–straight cane.” Regarding the use of chiasmus in Kaqchikel, Maxwell and Hill conclude: “In chiasmus and coupleting, parallelisms and inversion may focus on different structural levels; morphemes may be lexically or grammatically identical; identity may not be at the morphological level but at the syntactic level; equivalence may be shifted out from the syntactic level to the semantic. Lines may be paired to balance the weight of syllables as well as the content. The Kaqchikel authors exploit the full range of the grammatical potential of the language in creating the parallel tropes of formal exposition.”⁵⁹

The *Título Sacapulas* is a document composed in 1551 by Canil and Toltecat, K'iche' Maya lords residing at Sacapulas, Guatemala.⁶⁰ The

literary style of the composition is often distinctly pre-Columbian, as is its historical contents. Christenson has noted the following example of an ABC-C'B'A' chiasmus in the *Título Sacapulas*:

1. *Ta xepetic ruc' jun can saketzal ajaw ubi chuchaxic ta xpetic; mana cò ta xquitzucuj waral;*
2. *Ma jabi c'a chila omuch inop omuch cakja ubi juyub ta xepetic c'a chila c'ut,*
3. *Xepe wi chak'acho*
4. *Chak'apalo*
5. *Xa xecojena chiri oomuch inop comuch cakja*
6. *Xecokena chiri ta xepetic chaumal k'ak' a kajajaw;*

1. **Then they came with a lord named Can Saketzal, it is said that they came together;** they did not seek this place;
2. **There were not 400 ceiba trees and the 400 red houses,** as the mountains were called when they came;
3. They came **from the other side of the sea,**
4. **From the other side of the water;**
5. **They lived there in the 400 ceiba trees, the 400 red houses;**
6. **They lived there when came Chumul K'ak', the powerful lords.**⁶¹

After his extensive study on colonial and modern highland Maya use of chiasmus, Christenson came to four key conclusions,⁶² which are summarized below.

- There is a high frequency of chiasmus in texts with dialogues.
- There is an increase in chiasmus in texts that discuss or depend upon pre-Columbian religion or traditions.
- There is more chiasmus in texts with little Spanish intrusion (unlike other documents).
- The author(s) of chiastic texts almost always belonged to ruling dynastic lineages, perhaps suggesting a formal training was involved in the production of chiastic structures.

In the case of the highland Maya, chiasmus, in many cases, seems to be a poetic feature of purer, traditional texts, with less Christian or Western influence, written by those trained in traditional practice and rhetorical skills.

Lowland Mayan Languages and Chiasmus

Lowland Mayan languages share the use of chiasmus with highland Mayan language counterparts; however, chiasmus seems to be used in a wider range of speech genres in lowland languages, sometimes including oral traditions or explanations about the meanings of cultural traditions.

Ritual and elevated speech contexts show more parallelism across Mayan languages, and concomitantly, chiasmus has a stronger presence in ritual or formal discourse. Just as parallelism is found in quotidian contexts among Maya groups as a means of structuring conversations,⁶³ a short chiasm can occur in oral tradition recitation. For example, Rodríguez has noted a simple chiasm at the end of an oral tradition in Ch'ol Mayan, a language spoken in Chiapas, Mexico.

27. *Che' ta' mi yäl aha, kpapa, kmama bajche' jiñ.*

28. *Mm, che' añ bajche' jiñi.*

29. *Che' mi yäl ah bajche' jiñi. Aha.*

30. *Jiñ ah mukbä yäl kpapa wajali bajche' jiñi.*

27. That's what **my dad**, my mom **told** me **like this**

28. Mm, that's **how it is**.

29. So they said **like this**. Aha.

30. That's what **my dad** used to **tell** me back then, **like this**.⁶⁴

Rodríguez points out the rhetorical stacking within this stanza, wherein a couplet is placed “inside another to form a chiasmic structure, for example, two couplets AA BB rearranged as ABBA . . . Lines 27–30 and 28–29 are semantically and syntactically parallel.”⁶⁵

A similar set of couplets is put into a chiasm in the Book of Chilam Balam of Chumayel, written in Yukatek Mayan, where an AB-B'A' chiasm appears near the beginning of the section entitled “The Count of the *Katuns*.”

1703a. *U uayas ba*

1703b. *kab can*

1704a. *Ytz can*

1704b. *uayas ba*

1703a. **Shaped**

1703b. **by the juice of heaven,**

1704a. **By dew of heaven**

1704b. **shaped**.⁶⁶

In this passage, a group of “flower stones” (*nitic tun*) or “red stones” (*chac tun*) are “shaped by the juice of heaven, the dew of heaven, shaped,” a poetic reference to rain. The syntax of the construction with the final line “*uayas ba*,” “shaped,” is not natural but forced by the desired chiasm, and it is clearly distinct from the subsequent semantic couplets that follow with a more standard syntax.

Whereas the use of chiasmus in colonial K'iche'an texts diminished when nonindigenous topics or content increased,⁶⁷ this was not true in other cases, such as with Ch'olti' Mayan, a language that went extinct sometime in the beginning of the eighteenth century. Only a single written document in Ch'olti' survives, known as the Morán Manuscript,⁶⁸ which consists of a grammar and four Catholic doctrinal sections: (1) *Las Preguntas*, “The Questions,” (2) *Ucian Soneto Sacramento*, “The Great Holy Sacrament,” (3) *El Santo Rosario*, “The Holy Rosary,” and (4) a final section with confessional questions and some of the Ten Commandments.⁶⁹ In the doctrinal sections, especially the Holy Rosary, chiasmus and other traditional Maya poetic styles were “intentionally imitated” by the authors, according to Danny Law, and “imbued the Christian language with esoteric, religious, and emotional power recognizable to their intended audience but also lent an air of authority to the performer of the language.”⁷⁰ Axial prominence seems to have been a primary concern in most of the attested chiasms:

Example 3:

1. *Cha' k'otoy ox k'otoy taba, natz et kawahawil Jesucristo,*
 2. *Hatz'na et, lapa et, umenel katahnal.*
 3. *Utzil chakchak apat.*
 4. *Che ne utzil chakchaklaw apat*
 5. *Nohnoh ya'il amuku umenel katahnal.*
 6. *Ahtahnalon tati', tawut.*
 7. *Cha' k'otoy ox k'otoy taba, hunte' kami ti chan, Lahunte' Santa Maria chumul et.*
1. **Praise be to you, O, our Lord Jesus Christ.**
 2. **You were beaten and whipped because of our sins.**
 3. **For righteousness' sake your back was red.**
 4. **It is said that for righteousness' sake your back turned red from the whip.**
 5. **You endured great pain because of our sins.**
 6. **We are sinners before your mouth, before your face.**
 7. **Praise be to you, One Our Father in Heaven, Ten You are Holy Mary's.**⁷¹

Example 4:

1. *Ma ka a **hatpa***
 2. *ma ka a **xehela***
 3. *ubaktal kawahawil Jesucristo*
 4. ***tuxelpahel***
 5. ***tuhatpahel** upat ne pa'?*
1. It is **split**
 2. it is **divided**
 3. the flesh of our Lord Jesus Christ
 4. in the **dividing**
 5. in the **splitting** of the back of the bread?⁷²

In example 3, the axis of the chiasm projects focus on the importance of Christ suffering “for righteousness’ sake.” In example 4, a discussion on the Christian sacrament, it is the body of Christ that is emphasized at the center of the ABC-B’A’ chiasm. In both examples 3 and 4, various poetic forms are employed simultaneously in addition to chiasmus. Semantic couplets abound and underlie the chiasmus lines. In addition, in example 3, the phrase “*Cha’ k’otoy ox k’otoy*” is highly metaphorical in Ch’olti’ and is likely only marginally adequately translated by “Praise be to you.” The consistent exploitation of Maya verbal art throughout the liturgy, according to Law, strongly suggests “the author(s) either consulted heavily or were themselves native Ch’olti’ speakers with training in traditional (elite) Mayan forms of discourse . . . [with] a firm grounding in Spanish and Catholic doctrine.”⁷³

In a similar context, the Christian authors of the Teabo Manuscript used native Maya poetic forms. The Teabo Manuscript, composed in Yukatek Mayan, originates from the town of Teabo in the Yucatan, Mexico, and dates to the late eighteenth or early nineteenth century.⁷⁴ In one particular section, heavily influenced by the biblical narrative of Adam and Eve, God speaks in a parallelistic form common to Maya literary discourse, including chiasmus:

1. *a cici **ɔobesex yetel a cici tacuntex tulacal yn ualmah Mahthanile,***
2. *bin yn hach yacunt tech ʔ bin yn uilabeex yetel **a kaMycex Utz yetel tibil Uay,***
3. *yokol cabe bayix ti can xan Matan U yantal Numyaa uichilex.*
4. *Bay bin **a kaMycex Utz yetel tibil ua,***
5. *bin a **ɔoc lukeseex yn ualMahthanile.***

1. **[If] you keep and guard well all my commandments,**
2. I will really love you and you will be seen by me and **you will receive good and virtuous things,**
3. here on earth as it is in heaven you will have no misery inside you.
4. Thus **you will receive good and virtuous things**
5. **if you will keep perfectly my commandments.**⁷⁵

In this case, as in many others, it is likely that traditional, formal Maya speech styles were being imitated when presenting Christian teachings to a Maya audience.

Chiasmus has also been documented in another lowland Mayan language among the Ch'orti' Maya of southern Guatemala. Based on an extensive analysis of all known Ch'orti' Mayan literature, I concluded that chiasmus only appears in two discourse genres in Ch'orti': ritual healing rites and traditional practice or belief recitation.⁷⁶ For example, in an oral tradition recorded by the *Academia de Lenguas Mayas de Guatemala*, the commonly held belief among many Maya groups that frogs announce the coming rains is recounted:

1. *E pekpek che ke' una'ti'x tuka' ajk'in twa' ak'axi e jajar che ke' e pekpek xe' chuchu'taka xe' uche tya' una'to'b'ix.*
 2. *akay umorojse ub'ob' twa' usajko'b'*
 3. ***tya' twa' a'xo'b' uk'ajtyo'b' taka e Katata',***
 4. *I ak'aywyo'b' twa' e Katata' uyeb'ta watar e jaja'r*
 5. *che ke' tya' utajwyo'b' tya' twa' uk'ajtyo'b' taka e Katata',*
 6. *Che ke' umorojse ub'ob' i ak'aywyo'b' ayi tuno'rob'*
 7. *Ak'aywyo'b' kochwa' ja'xob' una'to'b' tuka' ajk'in twa' e katata' uyeb'ta e jaja'r.*
1. Frogs, they say, **already know on what day it will rain**, they say the little frogs do it when they **already know**.
 2. They begin to **gather themselves together** to search
 3. **when they should ask God.**
 4. And they croak to God to send the rains.
 5. They say that when **they find when to ask God**,
 6. They say that **they gather themselves together** and they croak, they say.
 7. They croak since **they know on what day God should send the rains.**⁷⁷

The crux of the story is that frogs “croak to God to send the rains,” which is placed at the axial position of focus in an ABCDC'B'A' patterned chiasmus.

The following passage comes from the explanation of how the Ch'orti' protect themselves from eclipses as explained to me by a Ch'orti' ritual specialist, one who was fully trained in traditional poetic speech forms. His commentary is composed in a beautifully balanced, chiasmic pattern of ABCB'A'.

1. *Twa' ma'chi uwiro'b' ub'an,*
2. *Twa' ma'chi ak'ujxa e ch'urkab'.*
3. *Ukacho'b' ani*
4. *twa' ma'chi ache'na kilisar,*
5. *Entonses ma'chi uwiro'b'.*

1. So that **they do not see it** either,
2. **so that the children are not eaten.**
3. They used to tie them up,
4. **so that they would not be “eclipsed.”**
5. So **they do not see it.**⁷⁸

Eclipses are considered by the Ch'orti' to be extremely dangerous for pregnant women. The cultural practice of the Ch'orti' is to tie a red cloth around the waist of a pregnant woman to protect her and her baby from the damaging effects of an eclipse.⁷⁹ The specific language in line 2 of the child being “eaten” speaks to the pan-Mesoamerican indigenous notion of an eclipse being caused by a giant creature who “eats” the sun or moon. The child, therefore, could likewise be “eaten,” i.e., harmed by the eclipse. The corresponding line in the second half of the chiasm (line 4) contains the expression *ache'na kilisar* (“be eclipsed”), a compound verb derived from a metathesized form of the Spanish *eclipse* with the meaning “to cause birth defects.” Finally, the main point of the description is stated at the axis of the chiasm, that the best protection is to tie a red cloth around the stomach of the pregnant woman.

Couplet-Level Chiasmus Lines

Chiasmus lines in Mesoamerican texts can sometimes operate at the level of couplet.⁸⁰ Couplet-level chiasmic lines occasionally appear in Ch'orti' Maya ritual discourse. This “stacking” of rhetorical devices results in an increased and intensified poeticity in the text. The fact that the line is operating at the level of couplet explains why there is not a strict reversal of the component nominals; rather, the chiasm progresses in clusters of two lines (i.e., one couplet) at a time. The following

example of couplet-level chiasmic lines comes from a Ch'orti' Maya ritual healing prayer I recorded in 2002.

1. *Ajtamu de Estumeka,*
2. *Ajtamu Sendeyu't.*
3. *Ajsokoyan de Estumeka,*
4. *Ajsokoyan Sendeyu't.*
5. *Ajgraniyo de Estumeka,*
6. *Ajgraniyo de Sendeyu't.*
7. *Ajsokoyan de Estumeka,*
8. *Ajsokoyan de Sendeyu't.*
9. *Ajtamu de Estumeka,*
10. *Ajtamu de Sendeyu't.*

1. Poisonous Dust of This World,
2. Poisonous Dust Eye Disease.
3. Chill Causer of This World,
4. Chill Causer Eye Disease.
5. Skin Bump Causer of This World,
6. Skin Bump Causer of Eye Disease.
7. Chill Causer of This World,
8. Chill Causer of Eye Disease.
9. Poisonous Dust of This World,
10. Poisonous Dust of Eye Disease.⁸¹

The single underlined term “*Estumeka*,” a ritual term meaning either “this world” or a type of ceremonial altar, has its couplet partner in the double underlined noun “*Sendeyu't*,” another ritual term referring to a type of eye disease.⁸² In this context, however, they are names of certain evil spirits that cause disease. Used together, they form the poetic framework for each couplet line in the chiasm.

Another Ch'orti' Maya curing prayer I recorded in 2001 near Jocotan, Guatemala further illustrates couplet-level chiasmic lines. Lines 1 and 2 constitute the first line of the chiasm; lines 3 and 4 the second, etc.

1. *Uyatradesir uyok,*
2. *Uyatradesir ukab'*
3. *Uxek'onir yer uyatradesir uyok,*
4. *Uxek'onir yer uyatradesir ukab'*

5. *Ya'syob' tama e gotera,*
6. *Ya'syob' tama e gotera.*
7. *Uxek'onir yer uyatravesir uyok,*
8. *Uxek'onir yer uyatravesir uk'ab'*
9. *Uyatravesir uyok,*
10. *Takar uyatravesir uk'ab'.*

1. The inhibiting force of their legs,
2. The inhibiting force of their hands.
3. The stabbing pains of the inhibiting force of their legs,
4. The stabbing pains of the inhibiting force of their hands.
5. There they play in the eaves,
6. There they play in the eaves.
7. The stabbing pains of the inhibiting force of their legs,
8. The stabbing pains of the inhibiting force of their hands.
9. The inhibiting force of their legs,
10. With the inhibiting force of their hands.⁸³

The axis of the chiasm contains a repeated line, “There they play in the eaves,” drawing upon a Ch’orti’ belief that evil spirits “play,” i.e., mischievously cause illness, at certain locations on earth, the eaves of houses being a prime example.⁸⁴ Additionally, note again that the repeated pair “legs” and “hands” does not reverse order after the axis of the chiasm because the two terms form a unit themselves. The combination of the terms *uyok* (“their legs”) with *uk’ab’* (“their hands”) creates a diphrastric kenning—one found in numerous Mayan languages, usually metonymically referring to “all the body” or another similar semantic extension. For example, in Tzeltal Mayan, the pairing of *okil kabil* (“feet” and “hands”) means “secretary.”⁸⁵ In Ixil ritual discourse, the couplet “over on his foot, over on his hand” is a metonymic reference to what is “beside him.”⁸⁶ In K’iche’ Mayan, *aqan, q’ab* (“foot, hand”) refers to a “human being,” precisely as the Nahuatl diphrastric kenning *in maitl, in icxiltl* (“hand, foot”) does also.⁸⁷ Similarly, in colonial Yukatek Mayan, the expression “*taclacal yalan auoc yalan akab*” (“we all beneath your foot, beneath your hand”) denotes “a whole person.”⁸⁸ In the above Ch’orti’ example, the kenning “legs/hands” is used to express the idea that the entire body of the evil spirit is at work causing illness upon an individual. The repeated use of “legs/hands” shows the conceptual structure of the chiasm operates at the couplet level.

Couplet-level chiasmic lines also appear in other Mayan languages, such as in the highland language of K'iche' in the Popol Vuh.

4948. *XA tz'aq,*
 4949. *Xa b'it ke'uchaxik*
 4950. *Maja b'i ki chuch,*
 4951. *Maja b'i ki qajaw.*
 4952. *Xa u tukel achij chiqab'ij.*
 4953. *Ma na ixoq xe'alanik,*
 4954. *Ma nay pu xek'oajolaxik*
 4955. *Rumal ri Aj Tz'aq,*
 4956. *Aj B'it,*
4948. **MERELY framed,**
 4949. Merely **shaped** they are called.
 4950. **There was no their mother,**
 4951. **There was no their father.**
 4952. Merely lone me we would say.
 4953. **Nor surely woman gave them birth,**
 4954. **Nor also were they begotten,**
 4955. By the **Framer,**
 4956. **Shaper,**⁸⁹

Lines 4948 and 4849 of the Popol Vuh are themselves a semantic couplet, as are lines 4950 and 4951, 4953 and 4954, and 4955 and 4956. The “nesting” of couplets within a chiasmic framework, whereby a two-line couplet becomes the first stich of another two-line couplet in the second half of the chiasm, shows the extent to which parallelism is valued and exploited in Maya discourse for aesthetic purposes.

Conclusion

Parallelism forms the rhetorical backbone for Mesoamerican indigenous poetry. There is little doubt, therefore, why chiasmus, or inverted parallelism, has been embraced by Maya narrators for millennia. Pithy AB-B'A' style chiasms, common to cultures around the world, are likewise found in abundance in Mesoamerica. Pre-Columbian scribes, native colonial writers, and modern ritual specialists among the Maya strategically have used longer, more complex or elaborate chiasms. Not always content with a single poetic device, Mesoamerican indigenous

writers often treated chiasmus as first-stage framing, a polished veneer, open to further verbal artistry through “rhetorical stacking.” Chiasmus has now been firmly established as one of the more than twenty poetic figures employed in Maya hieroglyphic writing,⁹⁰ which has confirmed a deep Mesoamerican literary tradition stretching back three millennia.

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