

**Cultural and Historical Views of Women  
in Ancient Mayan Civilization through Sculpture**

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### Abstract

My hypothesis is that most women were oppressed to a specific gender role in the Maya culture until Yohl Ik'nal became the first female ruler in their history; this event created a new culture of respect and acceptance for females in higher castes from then on. Women in the Mayan society prior to the reign of Yohl Ik'nal were viewed only as maternal and supportive symbols to the community; however, elite women were treated with a greater degree of respect but not quite as equals to the men until after her reign. Not only were these women only viewed as motherly and nurturing, but they were also placed into set gender roles that shifted based on their age. This is shown strongly through Mayan lore and deities. One, amongst several pieces of evidence regarding females being held in lower regard before the reign of Yohl Ik'nal, can be seen through the tale of the hero twins where one of the brothers loses his level of deference because he becomes a female in the afterlife. Another can be seen through Ix Chel who represented women throughout the stages of their lives; however, more often than not she was more closely associated with pregnancy, which shows how women were forced into a set gender role until after the crowning of Yohl Ik'nal, despite this particular goddess having a multitude of other godly gifts. There are very few exceptions to the role of women in society until Ixtab who is not as much of an anomaly as she may seem and is not completely out of the realm of female gender roles because she was created to serve men, which was how females were regarded before Yohl Ik'nal. The mythological aspects and folklore of a society helped to shape how this society interacted with one another within their community, which is how the Goddesses served to connote females as a weaker gender but was quickly disproven by Yohl Ik'nal which is shown through the later crowning of another female queen. It wasn't until Yohl Ik'nal that the noble woman had the ability to gain respect because she defied previous standards that had been held over their heads since the beginning of civilization. Although Mayan women were gaining new found respect among their male peers, it was only for those who were fortunate to have been born into an elite position of the caste system; this is due to one not being able to marry outside of their caste, which means that one could not travel up in the hierarchy, leaving the change in society that Yohl Ik'nal set in motion only to this group. Yohl Ik'nal was the first liberator and rebel against the Mayan female gender roles set upon elite women, disproving the heavily connoted assumption of weakness in females, which created a new dynasty of respect for this subgroup of people in the Mayan society.

## Introduction

Mayan art contains some of the most unique and mystifying works of physical history in existence today. It is a time capsule into the ancient world of Kings and Queens who ruled over their people, as well as a way of seeing through their eyes on how they viewed life from the tiniest beetle to the mightiest thunderhead. Mayan sculptures were never made just for aesthetic pleasure; rather, everything had a reason and a purpose, all the way down to the materials they used to the very last mark they etched on to the stone. They often used sculpture to depict their respective deities, but it could be used to respect long dead ancestors, Kings and even Queens. Sometimes they were used to display the everyday life of the Maya through the common folk and nobles, while at other times they were used to tell a story and to keep records over the passage of time.<sup>1</sup> Women have always been a large aspect of the Mayan culture. Based on my analysis of Mayan sculptures of women they represent everything divine and good about the world, such as motherhood and youth. The Maya took great care to show this through their female sculptures, often adorning them with bright colors and jewelry depending on the caste they were representing. They are more filled out and curvy than the typical male statue and were often sculpted with their chest exposed and holding a child. It was largely assumed by archeologists that women were "...subordinate to men" ("Women in Mayan Society," par. 1). There are, however, a few exceptions to this trend in the Mayan social hierarchy, which began after the crowning of the first Mayan Queen, Yohl Ik'nal, in their history. My hypothesis is that most women were oppressed to a specific gender role in the Maya culture until Yohl Ik'nal became the first female ruler in their history; this event created a new culture of respect and acceptance for females in higher castes from then on.

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Richardson, an Associate Professor of Art at Midland College, and I had a conversation about symbolism in various fields of art that helped me to better understand the usage and purpose of sculpture.

## Historical and Cultural Context of Women in Mayan Society

In Mayan civilizations women serve in an understated role in society. They cook, clean, and serve their male counterparts. They tend to the house and groom their children. In the ancient Mayan civilization there is a "...clear division of labor..." (Schele and Freidel 42) that begins the moment the child is born. Children attain their gender identity and role in society through their parents (42-44). Males are often given toy field tools and females are given toy household tools (42-44). How women were treated in the ancient civilization also depended on their caste (42-44). For example, the implication of this is that a common male could not ask a woman of a higher caste to do something for him without the permission of her husband. He could however order any woman of lower caste to do it instead. The Maya believe the caste an individual was born into was given to a person for a reason; and because of this, he or she is not allowed to move through the ranks of the caste system. This ultimately means they can only marry within their own caste (45). *Na ahua's*, or noble ladies, and common women were viewed in the same light, as the backbone of the household making economic and social decisions concerning the family with the senior male approval (43). This changed slightly with the crowning of the first Mayan queen, Yohl Ik'nal. According to Hailey Ruckle in the article "History of Noble Women," she was crowned by her father Kan Balam and later became the grandmother of one of the greatest kings in Mayan history, Pacal (par. 2). Yohl Ik'nal came to rule after the death of K'uk' B'alam I (par. 2) It is believed that she was his daughter; however, some suspect her to have been his sister (par. 2). It was unheard of at the time for a female to rule, especially when they bore a son. It was expected of them to relinquish the title upon that event, but she held on to it for 21 years in 583 A.D. (par. 3). This, among several other aspects, made her dynasty one of the most significant turning points in Mayan history.

## Representations of Goddesses, Noblewomen, and Common Women

Women in the Mayan society prior to the reign of Yohl Ik'nal were viewed only as nurturing and motherly symbols to the community; however, elite women were treated with a greater degree of respect but not quite as equals to the men until a later date. Representation of that can be seen in almost every aspect of their culture, with one of the largest being through sculpture and how they choose to represent female common folk, nobles, goddesses and even their Queens—see Figure 1 below.

Figure 1: Tlazolteotl



(“Tlazolteotl”)

This statue of Tlazolteotl, one of the Mayans most predominate goddesses, rests in a seated position with her hands (which are missing in this statue) facing palms up. Two snakes lay curled on her lap. The serpent is an important religious symbol, revered by the Maya. The shedding of the snake’s skin made them a symbol of awakening and revival (“Sacred Animals in the Mayan Culture,” par. 6). They also represented the “...terrestrial world and the mankind knowledge...” (par. 6). This can connote snakes as a feministic symbol. Her feet are uncovered and bare, which is not uncommon in Mayan culture. She wears only a cloth about her waist and a headdress. The headdress has four twisted prongs around the top with small engravings. The necklace over her

chest connects and then lays in one long piece. Her facial features are very round, and her lips are slightly parted. Her ears appear to either be very large or have earrings on. There is a veil-like piece behind her head and the statue itself is very worn down and scratched. The initial layer of clay has chipped away. Her figure is very curvy. Tlazolteotl is the goddess of filth, the goddess of child birth, and of harvest (Dhwty, “Tlazolteotl” par. 1). She can be depicted in three different stages of life. The first being a carefree temptress, the second is gambling and uncertainty, while the third is a hag who preys on the youth (pars. 3-5). In this particular figure she is depicted in her second guise, which can be seen by her headdress and figure. She is the goddess who purifies the guilty of their sins through devouring them (par. 7). She is often depicted with blackened lips; however, this figure does not have color (par. 5). When filth is interpreted as rotting organic matter, it makes sense that she is also symbolic of new life (par. 5). In this particular figure however she is associated with agriculture, cotton to be specific, as well as activities surrounding it: on her headdress there are spindles of unspun cotton. Coincidentally the activity of spinning and weaving were done for the most part by women and required a goddess to oversee (pars. 7-8). The arts tended to be female dominated as they were seen as delicate work that only a woman could possibly be able to do well. This is part of the illusion that Ancient Mayan society wrapped their females in. They were depicted as fine delicate creatures who wouldn't be able to survive without the strong sturdy hand of the male population.

Not only were women only viewed as motherly and nurturing, but they were also placed into set gender roles that shifted based on their age. The gender role of a young woman was to get married and procreate. This is why women in Mayan art in their prime are often depicted with delicate feminine symbolism, such as flowers and hummingbirds, to showcase their coming into sexuality and purpose—see Figure 2 below.

Figure 2: Xochiquetzal



("Xochiquetzal")

Xochiquetzal, a goddess symbolizing feministic youth, has been carved sitting in a half raised position with her legs crossed. Her hands are slightly raised and appear to have held a staff or ink bowl with pen etc. She has a sharp, angular face with high cheek bones and tilted mouth suggesting youthfulness. Her headdress goes out from the sides of her head. She wears very large plated earrings. On her collar bone appears to be a thick neck piece covering her chest, depicting some kind of monster; and there is a hole between two of the fangs. On her right arm she wears a gauntlet. The statue's legs are adorned with blooming flowers with ankle bracelets and her feet are covered with sandals. The pedestal she sits upon has a large flower in the middle with a figure rising up from the bottom. To the right of that it appears to be a bird, and the image to the left of that is similar in structure to the one in the middle. Xochiquetzal is the goddess of beauty, pleasure and love (Whelan, par. 1). She is associated with exquisite things such as flowers, dance, song and plants. Despite this she is not a goddess to be trifled with. Some of the rituals around her involve human sacrifice and flaying (Dhwty, "Xochiquetzal" par. 1). Her name can be translated to mean "precious feather flower" (Whelan par. 2). It is believed that she was the patron of prostitutes, lovers and artisans (Dhwty, "Xochiquetzal" par. 2). She is often depicted holding weaving tools in her hands or flowers (par. 2), which will explain her empty hands and

various flower designs. She is a symbol of feminine youth in its prime and represents how society viewed young women in Maya culture.

The evidence of females being held in lower regard before the reign of Yohl Ik'nal can be seen through the tale of the hero twins, in which one of the brothers loses his level of deference because he becomes a female in the afterlife. Women were not only given set gender roles they were also seen as naturally weaker and more dependent than the males of society. This can be seen through the relationship of the hero twins Xbalanque and Hunah, who were the tricksters of death. Between them it is often said that Hunah was the most dominant, even though in the tale they are displayed as equals. This may have something to do with Xbalanque becoming a female moon goddess after his death, which would then connote him as the weaker brother due to the feminine aspect he possessed—see Figure 3 below.

Figure 3: Xbalanque and His Twin Hunah



(“Xbalanque”)

This statue depicts the two siblings. The twin to the left side of the image has a large snake like headdress upon its head and appears to be more metal in depiction. Perched on its arm is a hawk/eagle etc. and it appears to be feeding the bird. The arms are adorned with several scratch like markings and a bracelet. The stomach as well as the leg also have these markings. He is bare



foot and a symbol rests in his lap. The twin on the right has a much taller/thinner headdress that is more cloth like in depiction. Her ears are long and sharp. A snake is wrapped several times around her neck, and its head appears to rest on her back. Her arm is half covered by a gauntlet and her feet also remain bare. A thick patterned cloth wraps around her stomach and another lays on top of that tying around her waist. Between the two, Hunah seemed to be the dominant figure; however, Xbalanque saved his brother's life on at least one occasion (Schele and Freidel 76). After his death he ascended into the heaven to become the Mayan moon goddess (77-78). Every day when the sun goes down she tosses the stars across the heavens to practice her throwing arm ("Xbalanque - the Mayan Hero God," par. 1). The tale of these siblings is a tale of wit and perseverance showing them as equals in their cunning and intelligence; however, Mayan society dictated that Xbalanque was weaker than the other brother. This begs the question of why it was Xbalanque who became a female in the afterlife and not his brother. It presents an underlying theme of female oppression because Mayan society implied that because Xbalanque became a woman he was the weaker of the two brothers.

Ix Chel<sup>2</sup> is the true moon goddess representing women throughout the stages of their life; but more often she is more closely associated with pregnancy, which shows how women were forced into a set gender role until after the crowing of Yohl Ik'nal, despite this particular goddess having multiple other godly gifts. In nearly all depictions of this Goddess she is shown with a rabbit. The rabbit is symbolic of fertility and is also viewed as prey being of a weaker species. Her tale also depicts how males were viewed as dominant over females by the way she is treated by Itzammas as something that belonged to him. When she defied his expectation of female subservience, his rage sent her into hiding for the rest of her life—see Figure 4 below.

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<sup>2</sup> The spelling has two different variants, Ixchel and Ix Chel. I will be using Ix Chel due to it being more common.

Figure 4: Ix Chel Goddess



("Ixchel")

She is the goddess of the moon; as the moon waxes and wanes the transitions in form from maiden, to mother, to crone ("Mayan Gods: Ixchel," par. 2). This figure has a twisted snake upon its head instead of a headdress. The snake is baring its fangs. Her mouth is partially open. She wears a thick necklace and holds an urn with one hand pressing it against her wrist as her other hand opens out towards the ground (one hand has six fingers while the other has four...). She has a layered dress on, and her feet are bare. She stands on a rabbit, and he rests on either grass or blades. She wears two rings around her wrist and her ear has a gage in it. Ix Chel is the figure in this sculpture. The snake in her hair is an ancient Mayan symbol of wisdom and medicine (par. 2). She is also associated with rabbits because they are "symbols of fertility and a nod to the lunar landscape," which can often look like a rabbit in the color and craters (par. 3). As the story goes, Ix Chel dies and dragonflies sing over her for 183 days and after this time she arises as a maiden once more to find Itzammas (the Sun king) brother the Morningstar and flirts with him (pars. 4-10). This sends him into a jealous rage, which causes Ix Chel to become fed up with him

and resolve to hide in her temple of night to nurture earth's pregnant women (pars. 4-10). This is a prime example of how woman were shown as the property of their male counterparts in Mayan society. She was driven to the point of hiding forever in the night sky in order to free herself from the invisible rope that was the feminine gender role.

There are very few exceptions to the role of women in society until Ixtab who is not as much of an anomaly as she may seem and is not completely out of the realm of female gender roles because she is created to serve men, which was how females were regarded before Yohl Ik'nal. This is one of the more grotesque Goddesses who is not often displayed as beautiful unlike the others. She presides over suicide, which is not something often connected to females but to men and especially to men of war ("Ixtab-Mayan Goddess of Suicide," pars. 1-4). Despite these exceptions it can be said that she is acting as a nurturer by guiding the men's souls to paradise. In a way she is serving men, which is how women in society are often depicted—see Figure 5 below.

Figure 5: Ixtab, Suicide Goddess



("Jaina Hanging")

This figure is hanging from a noose. Its lips are slightly parted and sideways in death. There are two holes in the stomach and it appears to be bloated. One arm (which is missing a hand) is reaching up towards the noose while the other is slightly bent against the leg. The legs hang

loosely and the toes are curled in. She is completely stripped of clothing. The goddess of the Hanged is shown in this figure. Most female goddesses are depicted with the female vision of motherly forms, someone to turn to in times of illness, famine, or sadness; however, Ixtab is the only one who does not do any of this. In the Maya culture it was honorable to die at the end of a rope (par. 1). Ixtab would accompany the deceased to the afterlife of paradise but only if they died by hanging themselves from the yanxcha tree, the sacred tree of the Maya (par. 2). Ixtab was also linked to solar and lunar eclipses (par. 3). It was said that if a woman had a child during these times, the newborn would have a high risk for death or deformities (pars. 4-5). Despite the outer layer of non-conformity that makes up Ixtab's creation, it is shown under deeper analysis that her character is very similar to the other goddesses in Mayan society. In her physical representation she is molded to be disturbing and gruesome; but in her story, she guided the souls to paradise like an angel of sorts. She didn't destroy the souls or devour them; rather, she guided them. "Guided" is a very soft word that can be easily be a synonym for nurturing, showing that Ixtab, under great duress, fits perfectly into the standard gender role that was forced upon women of the time.

### **Representation of the First Mayan Queen**

Yohl Ik'nal was the first liberator and rebel against the female gender roles set upon elite women, disproving the heavily connoted assumption of weakness in females creating a new dynasty of respect for this subgroup of people in the Mayan society—see Figure 6 below.

Figure 6: Yohl Ik'nal



(“In Her Own Voice”)

The first Mayan queen ascended the throne and led a prosperous dynasty for 21 years and was followed by her daughter Sak K'uk after her older brother's death (“Mayan Queens - Women Rulers,” par. 2). She ruled even after marrying her husband, even though in most civilizations the power would transfer to the male; however, this would shift the power to a different family name and so it remained Sak K'uks' regime, making her husband a royal consort and not a king (par. 2). This began a trend of more females in higher positions. One of these women was Lady K'abel, who is known as the Supreme Warrior and/or Lady Snake Lord (“Ancient Mayan Life,” par. 1). She was alive during the last half of the 600s A.D. (par. 1). She had the most powerful position in the classic period, even more powerful than her husband (pars. 1-2). She stayed in her position for twenty years similar to Lady Yohl Ik'nal (par. 2). A pattern I have noticed in the Mayan hierarchy is that before Yohl Ik'nal ruled there had been only predominately male-ruled kingdoms, but afterwards there is was an increasing number of females ruling. Their eldest sons, in most cases, have ruled after them, such as Pacal, the son of Sak K'uks, grandson of Yohl

Ik'nal ("Mystery of the Red Queen," par. 8). He led one of the most prosperous dynasties in history, and it was through his mother's example that this was possible (Boyd, par. 3). This shows an increasing respect for females in government, as well as an acceptance of it.

### **Representations of Elite Women after the First Queen, Yohl Ik'nal**

The mythological aspects and folklore of a society help to shape how that society interacts with one another within the community, which is how the Goddesses served to connote females as a weaker gender but was quickly disproven by Yohl Ik'nal; and this is shown through the later crowning of another female queen. Lady K'abel is one of the many exceptions to the gender bias that the Mayan goddesses represent. This is due to Yohl Ik'nal being the first woman to break the standard, paving the way for other women in the higher caste to do the same—see Figure 7 below.

Figure 7: Lady K'abel, Stela<sup>3</sup> 34



(Eichenseher and Palus)

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<sup>3</sup> A stela is another word for a relief, which is a carving jutting out of a flat stone slab.

This figure of Lady K'abel has several hieroglyphics on the upper left corner and the bottom right corner. The figure itself has a very detailed headdress that connotes masculine war helmets. It rises up to about the size of her torso with a piece draping down her back. Her ear has been stretched out to fit an enormous gage, while her nose is very long and pointy, unlike most of the normally flat noses of the Maya women. She wears a tunic that covers her arms to her ankles and displays three different faces each with their own headdress with what appears to be swords or knives pointed upwards towards them. Further down the tunic, a monster like figure is depicted. A man with the head of a bird appears farther down the tunic. Her feet are completely covered up to the ankle. To the left of the image the figure is holding a short staff. There appears to be a flower towards the top of it and several parts separate from the staff itself. Farther down it looks like piles of treasure. To the left side of the image, she is holding a small shield that only covers up to her wrist. Lady K'abel was also called "lady snake lord" (Owen, pars. 2-10). Further, "She governed the Wak kingdom for her family in the kan (translating to snake) dynasty" (par. 5); and "[s]he ruled with her husband K'inich Bahlam with the title Kaloomte [supreme warrior], which gave her higher authority than the king" (par. 6). She stayed in her position for twenty years (Ruckle, par. 2). In this stela she is with her attendant who is suspected to have had dwarfism and is playing music ("Ancient Mayan Life," par. 10). This is stela 34 and is part of a pair; the other depicts her husband (par. 11). The evidence of women in the higher castes gaining new levels of respect is shown through the fact that it was Lady K'abel's stela that is one of the most important works of Mayan art and not its counterpart depicting her husband.

It wasn't until Yohl Ik'nal, that the noble woman had the ability to gain respect because she defied previous standards that had been held over their heads since the beginning of civilization. The noblewoman did not have to work quite as hard as women of the lower castes

and were usually better fed and better dressed, but the standard of deeming gender roles remained in place until after the crowning of the first queen—see Figures 8 and 9 below.

Figure 8: Noble Woman with Child



(“Seated Woman with a Child”)

In this figure the woman wears a very tall cloth like headdress with three circular pieces connected to the top of it. She has very short, ribbed hair with small (compared to the norm) earrings. There is a small symbol on her forehead. Around her neck lays a necklace with large beads. The woman wears a sleeveless dress and holds a child in one arm. The child appears to be feeding. Her other arm is resting in her lap and both arms have studded gauntlets. Her feet are bare. It is worth noting that both figures 8 and 9 have very similar aspects—see Figure 9 below.



Figure 9: Woman Seated with Pot



("Seated Woman Figurine")

This figure has a very tall headdress and she is seemingly bald. Her facial features are very angular, but she still has a rounded face. Thick pearl like beads wrap around her neck; however, some may have fallen off over the years. Her blue dress droops off her shoulders and falls off about her elbows. It appears as if it was once detailed in gold along the seams of the dress. She wears four bands around her right wrist and a studded gauntlet around her left wrist. Her feet are bare. There is a thicker piece of fabric on her right elbow and she holds a pot of some kind in her hand, resting it on her legs, which are crossed in front of her. This figure displays a *Na ahua*, or noble lady. Women as well as men were subjugated to a rigid social structure that did not allow them to leave that position. They were required to marry within their own caste. The upper caste were nobles and Shamans/Priests; while the middle caste were the working class (i.e., merchants, warriors); and the lower caste were the farmers and slaves ("Maya Social Structure," pars. 1-3). No matter what caste women were born into (with the exception of slaves), she had to leave with

her husband to live with his parents (“Maya Women,” par. 4). His parents could not kill her; however, they could beat and starve her until their first child was born (pars. 4-5). This happened often (mostly in the middle caste) (pars. 4-5). They would then be given their own land and could live on their own (par. 5). Divorce was not hard for women as long as her father consented but she did not remain unmarried for long (par. 5). Divorce is one of the more unusual aspects of the Mayan culture, being that it gives the woman some leverage and power over the man. The reason it fits within the trend of female oppression however is because her father would have to approve of it giving him even more power over her. If he did approve, he would then most likely pick her new husband.

### **Conclusion**

Although Mayan women were gaining new found respect among their male peers, it was only for those who were fortunate to have been born into an elite position of the caste system, which was due to one not being able to marry outside of their caste. The caste system prevented one from traveling up in the hierarchy, which left the change in society that Yohl Ik’nal set in motion only to this group of women in the upper castes. Women of lower caste were still treated as property and as a way to form alliances between families, yet despite this they held significant economic status within the family (“Maya Women,” pars. 1-4). This is still seen in the higher caste system; however, it was more of a way to assure power and healthy alliances. The oppression of women due to gender roles was not addressed or changed for every caste. The view that society held over females, including females themselves, was only broken by a select few in the higher caste. Even though this was a small victory during the time, it was something drastic. It was all due to Yohl Ik’nal setting the example for her future generations to follow suit.

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