"The Only True People"

Bethany J. bin Beyyette

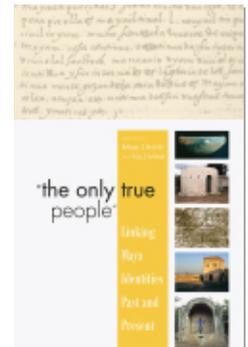Published by University Press of Colorado

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Part II

Archaeological Explorations of Identity Construction

Establishing the Preconditions for Ethnogenesis among the Classic Maya of the Upper Belize River Valley

Lisa J. LeCount

Ethnicity is an uncomfortable topic for many Maya archaeologists, particularly those who work with groups pre-dating the Late Postclassic Kowoj or Itza. The subjective nature of ethnicity does not easily lend itself to the study of ancient groups understood only through patterning in material cultural and practices. For cultural anthropologists, ethnicity is "the most general identity determined by origin and background" (Barth 1969:13) that can be narrowed or broadened to fit the specific needs of a social group as it mobilizes to negotiate social relations and access to resources (Cohen 1978:391). Identities, therefore, are situational depending on the context and scale of interaction and who is doing the categorizing. If ethnic group membership is fluid, then it seems that archaeologists are ill-equipped to examine it. However, I argue that this is not the case because the processes that give rise to ethnic groups, as well as the shared practices of cultural differentiation and common descent that maintain boundaries and structure social interactions, can be recognized by archaeologists through careful analysis of archaeological patterning (Jones 1997). Although cultural anthropologists are correct in pointing out the problematic nature of ethnicity, ethnicity is "not random within particular sociohistorical contexts" (ibid.:125). The study of ancient Maya ethnicity, therefore, can contribute specific case examples surrounding the development and maintenance of identities, as exemplified in the chapters that follow in this volume.

Some researchers may deny the existence of ancient Maya ethnic groups, but it seems to me simplistic to suggest that Classic period peoples who occupied the vast

terrain of southern Mesoamerica somehow lacked it. To do so assumes an undifferentiated cultural group without regard for social differences based on languages, histories, geopolitics, and adaptations to diverse highland-lowland environments. Given that boundary maintenance and political opposition trigger ethnogenesis, it is plausible to postulate that the roots of ethnicity were established in the Classic period when states attempted to consolidate control over people and tribute. Maya archaeologists, therefore, are in a good position to document the preconditions under which identity groups arose, the range of identities they achieved, and the processes of assimilation, hybridity, and creolization that blur identities and ethnicity in the archaeological record.

Others may reject the presence of Classic Maya ethnicities because epigraphers have yet to recognize named ethnic groups. When the Classic Maya identified themselves in hieroglyphics, it was in terms of places, ruling dynasties, specific royal individuals, and deities linked to local landscapes (Tokovinine 2013:98). Emblem glyphs, titles, and names speak more about places and individuals than peoples; however, the Mayan term *tzuk* is considered the best candidate for indexing membership in larger groups. Following Dmitri Beliaev (2000), Alexander Tokovinine (2013) suggests that *tzuk* meant a person from a "part" or "division" of a specific geographical area that was evoked only when one's political status was subverted. In other words, it was an explicit reference to "the other" as opposed to the implicit reference to the in-group. In this regard, the term's use is similar to the way historical Native Americans recognized differences between themselves and others. In-group members were called by the linguistic term for "people," but "the other" was a named entity, such as the title Anasazi, which means "ancient enemies," "enemy ancestors," or simply "ancient non-Navajos" to Navajos. Given that there were no explicitly named Classic Maya groups, it might be prudent to avoid the term *ethnic group* altogether. However, I continue to use it because in this chapter I attempt to demonstrate that the processes that gave rise to ethnogenesis are evident in the Classic period.

From an archaeological perspective, an argument for ethnicity must be built up from a number of intersecting lines of evidence documenting differences in cultural practices, boundary maintenance, and conflicting interests. Gone are the days when archaeologists could simply assume that ancient ethnic groups constituted a homogeneous society of bounded and discreet practices and material cultures on either side of a geographical boundary (Jones 1997). While some ethnographic studies document strong material culture patterning at ethnic boundaries, the expression of ethnic differences more often involves a limited range of marked styles or practices (Hodder 1985). Although some actively communicate difference (Wobst 1977), others are recognizable only to those people who have intimate knowledge

of them (Wiessner 1983, 1985). Differences in ethnic practices and symbols may also be so completely habituated, subconscious, or hidden that analyses of production techniques are required to discover them (Gosselain 2000; Stark 1998). Little wonder that attempts to map the distribution of styles and practices across cultural landscapes result in blurred boundaries (Jones 1997:124; Lightfoot and Martinez 1995:487). Rather than bemoan our ambiguous data, archaeologists should embrace these patterns as reflecting multiple and overlapping interactions between groups at the nexus of social boundaries.

Today, social boundaries are conceptualized as zones of cross-cutting networks where interactions between and within groups result in cultural dynamism. The dynamic character of boundaries is one reason many ethnoarchaeological studies have demonstrated no necessary correlation between diacritics (marked material culture or community practices) and identities (Dietler and Herbich 1998; Gosselain 2000; Hodder 1979). In fact, social boundaries may actually display *greater* diversity in these items and practices than those found in cultural heartlands. Frontier communities can contain diacritics that reify those in homelands, as well as display entirely new or hybrid styles and practices that reflect novel involvements experienced in these locations (Jones 1997; Schortman and Nakamura 1991). Given this dynamism, it may be more productive to first establish the saliency of long-term traditions within specific domains, such as house layouts, pottery styles, and burial practices within a particular region, before charting how the processes of ethnogenesis lead to material cultural change, similar to the way Richard Reycraft (2005) identified ethnogenesis among the Chiribaya of Far South Coastal Peru.

More straightforward is the task of documenting the hegemonic processes of conflict and oppression that give rise to ethnic affiliation and attribution. Oppression—whether by empire, state, or other foreign agents—sets in motion strategies to resist subordination that is foundational to the construction of identity. But given that conflict and oppression do not necessarily result in ethnogenesis, the question remains: what actions or series of actions trigger strong emotional attachments to homeland, people, and symbols that underlie collective identity and promote the mobilization of resources in support of it (Cohen 1978:396)? Although archaeologists may never know these details, they can document the degree to which the hegemonic process materializes differences between, as well as groupness among, peoples. To that end, in the next sections I discuss the ways social boundary maintenance, communities of practices, and conflict have been shown to lead to ethnogenesis in the anthropological literature and then apply these insights to archaeological data from the upper Belize River valley to argue for the creation of a social boundary along the eastern periphery of Petén in the Classic period.

SOCIAL BOUNDARIES

Fredrik Barth's (1969) seminal work on boundaries is a logical starting point because he was more interested in exploring boundaries as expressions of cultural differences than in defining ethnic units and content (Hegmon 1998:271). Barth identified three important factors— sustained interaction, complementarity, and interdependence—that lead to the creation of social categories and how this process results in boundary maintenance.

For Barth (1969:10; also Naroll et al. 1964), ethnic categories originate not from conjecture but from a clear understanding of social differences. These differences arise from sustained interaction, since without it there can be no basis for dichotomous classification of groups into exclusive categories. Although Barth does not fully explain why differences emerge from sustained interactions, once they do, members of exclusive categories express a separate range of "value standards" or "orientations." Members canonize roles because they are reluctant to act outside them for "fear that such behavior might be inappropriate for a person of their identity" (Barth 1969:18). In this way, categories naturalize differences and take on the "appearance of being an autonomous factor in the ordering of the social world" (Comaroff 1987:313).

Ethnogenesis involves complementarity and interdependence, since without them there is either "no interaction or interaction without reference to ethnic identity" (Barth 1969:18). Barth dichotomized the social roles of males versus females, and John Comaroff discussed how elite and common classes underpin many societies. At the polity level, Barth (ibid.:19–21) approached these processes from ecological and demographic perspectives. For him, ecological interdependence may have several forms. Emerging ethnic groups may occupy distinct environmental zones, in which case they are in minimal competition for resources and interdependence is sustained through trade goods. Or they may occupy separate territories in the same environmental zone, in which case they are in direct competition for resources, especially along their borders. In this case, each group may produce and trade important goods and services in a classic symbiotic relationship in which it monopolizes a particular economic resource. These forms of ecological interdependence refer to stable landscapes, where persistent and sustained interaction leads to close contact between groups and boundary maintenance. Although social differences can be attributed to ecological adaptations, rarely are they the source of cultural boundaries. Even in situations where boundaries may be rigidly maintained, people continually flow across them as competition for resources or labor stimulates migrations. The recruitment and assimilation of individuals often hinge on incentives for changing identity, including access to economic resources, and the presence of mechanisms that ease incorporation, such as shared religion and kin relations (ibid.:22–24).

Ancient Maya groups illustrate Barth's mechanisms associated with social categorization and boundary maintenance. Rosemary Joyce (2000, 2001) suggests that social categories—particularly gender, age, and status—are evident in monumental images and small-scale human figurines that illustrate people and activities. As early as the Early Preclassic period, costume ornaments cast in pottery, stone, and shell were particularly salient mediums for the creation of social identities. In terms of differences between social classes, Mayanists fiercely debate the nature of social stratification but not the existence of endogamous royal, noble, and commoner groups (Sharer 1993:93). Asserted status was displayed through the differential distribution of prestige goods, a pattern that has its beginnings in the Preclassic villages (Clark and Hansen 2001; Demarest 2003; Garber et al. 2004; Hammond 1991; Healey 1990).

Interdependence with outside groups is also well documented for the Maya. Sustained interactions with other Mesoamerican groups were foundational to ideas about the nature of the universe and society, which were expressed, modified, and contested through material styles and practices. Olmec-style pottery and figurines, as well as standardized site plans and civic monument styles, were widespread from the highlands to the lowlands during the Early to Middle Preclassic period (Flannery and Marcus 2000), and Maya populations actively engaged in their creation and manipulation by 1000 BC (Inomata et al. 2013). Highland-lowland interactions were also pronounced in the Early Classic period when Teotihuacanos and/or Teotihuacan-inspired groups influenced politics, architecture, and art at major Maya capitals including Kaminaljuyu, Tikal, and Copán (Braswell 2003). Similarly, interaction between Maya and Mexican groups also occurred in the Postclassic period. According to William Ringle and colleagues (1998), the much debated Toltec-Maya connection is best understood as the expansion of a world religion focused on the feathered serpent deity called Kukulcan by the Maya and Quetzalcoatl by Nahuatl speakers. The international character of the religion, the influx of elite pilgrims who belonged to distinct ethnic groups, and the increase in trade relations resulted in similar architecture and art styles at Chichén Itzá and Tula. Long-distance trade and international relationships continued in the Late Postclassic when Mayapan maintained or renewed economic ties with central Mexico (Masson and Peraza Lope 2010). On the Southeast Periphery of the Maya lowlands, Copán may have always been a frontier center where lowland Maya interacted with non-Maya peoples living in the area (Fash 2004; Schortman and Nakamura 1991).

Most Classic period political boundaries were not new frontiers between settled and unsettled lands but rather zones through which people and goods moved. Recent strontium isotope research provides detailed examples of elite leaders and

brides who traveled long distances from homelands to their final resting point (Buikstra 1997; Wright 2004; Wright and White 1996). Most of this research focuses on individuals within royal tombs in a few large sites, specifically Tikal, Kaminalujuyu, Copán, and Teotihuacan; but Lori Wright's work at Tikal also demonstrates the presence of several non-local skeletons in non-elite domestic contexts. She contends that "the multiethnic nature of ancient Mesoamerican states is becoming increasingly apparent, as are the extent and intensity of interactions between distant cities" (Wright 2004:207).

Cross-cutting social networks are most easily seen at the nexus of environmental zones where trade goods were bulked and shipped. Highland obsidian and jade, coastal salt, shell, fish, and lowland high-status goods such as cotton and cacao established interdependence between regional groups through trade relations. Arthur Demarest (2013) illustrates how Cancuen nobles regulated the supply of highland Guatemalan obsidian and jade into the lowlands from their port at the head of navigation on the Pasión River. Distinct artifact distributions within the site are associated with city sectors and architectural features, including a highland-style ballcourt, that suggest multiethnic populations. Hybrid styles indicative of frontier dynamism are also found at nearby sites that exhibit synchronized religious architecture, such as the "lowlandized" mountain shrine at Raxruja Viejo.

When populations reached their apogee in the Classic period, groups occupying the same environmental zones were in direct competition for good farmland, fresh water, and labor. Some populations colonized remote regions, such as southern Belize, to gain access to land (Braswell 2007), but those in Petén were largely circumscribed on all sides by existing groups. Conflicts between Tikal and Calakmul and their allies for control of people and tribute are recorded in Late and Terminal Classic hieroglyphs (Martin and Grube 2008). However, peripheral centers they subjugated often did not figure prominently in Petén hieroglyphic texts, presumably because they were unfamiliar or alien people.

Based on this brief summary of Maya social categories and boundaries, it is apparent that Barth's prerequisites for ethnogenesis among the Maya were in place by the Classic period. But from a practice perspective, ethnogenesis also involves the construction of groupness not addressed by an adaptationalist model. More recent anthropological models focus on the ways conventional ways of understanding and acting in the world give rise to collective sentiments and actions within ethnic groups.

COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE

Ethnicity is the mechanism by which groups use "culture to symbolize their within-group organization in opposition to and in competition with other interest groups"

(Hodder 1979:452). Similarly, G. Carter Bentley (1987:26) suggests that ethnicity involves recognition of likeness and differences that derive from *habitus*, the lifestyle, values, and dispositions of particular social groups internalized early in life and reified through life experiences. Habitus, as defined by Pierre Bourdieu (1990), provides cognitive distinctions of difference because the emotional responses to unfamiliar situations or people are not voluntary but come from internalized expectations. Development of schemas of perception, thought, and action constitutes the "microprocesses by which collectivities of interest and sentiment come into existence that dispose people to act, think and feel in different ways" (Bentley 1987:26). These schemas constrain how people respond to phenomena and supply the sentiments and symbols by which shared identities are recognized.

Working from this perspective, Siân Jones (1997:13) suggests that ethnicity is based on shifting categorizations of self and others, "which are rooted in ongoing daily practice and historical experience of community members." The term *community* in this context is not a small village or town but a social field, a network of likeminded people such as a class, religion, region, and other associations (Roseberry 1996). Given its unbounded nature, a community can be imagined (Anderson 1991:15), but William Roseberry (1996:83) concedes that social fields within "primordial villages of face-to-face contact" are not. They exist in Bourdieu's (1977:80) "commonsense world" and as such are grounded in the social nature of learning in groups. By participating, people negotiate identities and cultural meaning and produce material culture that reflects shared experience in communities of practice (Lave 1988; Wenger 1998).

Ethnic symbols and practices, as well as those that embody other identities, commonly derive from widely available practices or objects. For Roseberry (1996:82), they are the "words, images, symbols, forms, organization, institutions, and movements used by subordinate populations to talk about, understand, confront, accommodate themselves to, or resist their domination." They draw upon primordial associations that illicit an emotional response and convey ideological frameworks understood by all members of a community. Language, food, clothing styles, burial practices, and other dimensions of common ancestry and cultural tradition provide these internal sources of identification as well as differentiation.

Symbols and practices that convey explicit references about groups of people have been called emblemic (Wiessner 1983). Portable or personal items are effective for signifying identity, since members may encounter affiliates in widely dispersed locations (Schortman, Urban, and Ausec 2001:314). The same can be said of practices, such as speech patterns and bodily gestures. However, emblemic symbols and practices need not derive from local contexts or common items; nor do they need to be portable or obvious to all. Elites may select foreign symbols and

goods to symbolize relations to distant supernatural or unknown powers (Helms 1993). These may be large, immovable objects requiring high labor costs or esoteric knowledge to impede emulation by non-members (Schortman, Urban, and Ausec 2001:314). More problematic is the fact that very few symbols and practices communicate explicit meanings. Most don't "mean" something; rather, they "evoke" emotion and intellectual responses (Dietler and Herbich 1998:244). Recent ethnoarchaeological studies demonstrate how basic level features of material culture, such as the color of pottery framing lines (Bowser 2000) or design symmetry (Washburn 1989), signify social and political boundaries. However, while designs can provide group members with clues as to the makers of these items, outsiders may only recognize their foreignness (Bowser 2000:237; Wiessner 1983:269). Further, some community practices or symbols are not at all obvious to outsiders, such as burial practices or house-building techniques that are hidden from view most of the time (Reycraft 2005). They are learned through relationships with family, kin, and community members and prescribed by ritual. They endure because they are rooted in habitus, unlike emblemic or assertative styles and practices that are situational and fluid, rapidly changing depending on the circumstances of time and place.

Community styles and practices can materialize social boundaries, but often they do so through the expression of dialectical opposition *within* ethnic groups. Genders, age cohorts, kin groups, and polities can be marked by symbols, and trade relations may distribute them widely beyond group boundaries. Boundaries become marked not because they are emblematic of political or ethnic differences but because these items are less popular outside the group. For instance, Polly Wiessner (1983) illustrates how a shared projectile point style among the San of South Africa helped to resolve rival claims to animal kills between hunting partners and to distribute meat widely within the group rather than establish hunting territories between themselves and outsiders. Similarly, Ian Hodder's (1985) research on Kenyan calabash designs found that styles had more to do with tensions between men and women over children and economic activities than with ethnic tensions. In both cases, "emblemic" attributes were those that played the most salient role in negotiating social relations inside, rather than outside, the group.

Among the Classic Maya, community symbols and practices reflect the nested and overlapping nature of social relations expected for highly sophisticated, state-level societies. Membership in international circles was expressed through the display and exchange of elite symbols (Schortman, Urban, and Ausec 2001). A prime example is illustrated by the elaborately painted and inscribed Classic period vases, which are easily tracked across political boundaries based on their distinctive iconography and paste composition (Reents-Budet 1994:153–57). The most widely recognized political symbols are emblem glyphs, which describe kings as divine lords

of a particular kingdom, found inscribed on monuments (Martin and Grube 2008) and possibly abstract motifs painted on pottery vessels (Ball and Taschek 2004; Schortman, Urban, and Ausec 2001:321).

A community identity, one based in the commonsense world of practice, has also been identified through patterned aspects of ancient Maya settlement organization, house orientation, and access to water and other resources. Jason Yaeger (2000) illustrates multiple lines of evidence for community identity at the rural settlement of San Lorenzo near the provincial capital of Xunantunich in Belize. There, houses cluster together along the alluvial terraces of the Mopan River, and their orientation is statistically different that those in nearby settlement clusters in a way that suggests they were laid out using a reference point such as a celestial body or prominent landmark. Further, all members used a local chert quarry to make their stone tools, which were distinct from those manufactured at other sources nearby. Within the Copán Valley, communities were defined by waterholes, which based on Maya hieroglyphs are referred to by place names (Fash and Davis-Salazar 2006). Copán residential clusters shared waterholes in ways similar to the modern Maya at Zinacantán, Chiapas, where kin-based residential units formed social groups (Vogt 1969). These groups maintained the waterhole and performed offerings to ancestors and water deities who resided there (ibid.:387). At Chan Nòohol, located in the greater Xunantunich hinterlands, houses were also situated adjacent to a waterhole and formed waterhole groups (Robin 1999). These studies suggest that ancient Maya community symbols and practices occurred at multiple societal scales and among many social categories.

THE HEGEMONIC PROCESS

If micro-processes shape the practices and symbols of communities, past and present, macro-processes of domination and subordination trigger ethnogenesis. Subordinate populations are subject to forms of prejudice, discrimination, segregation, and persecution at the hands of the dominant group that triggers the psychological dichotomization of "us" versus "them" (Vincent 1974). To counter these forces, they mobilize common symbols, cosmological frameworks, and everyday practices that allow them to confront or accommodate domination (Roseberry 1996:80). William Roseberry and Jay O'Brien call the strategies and outcomes of competition and conflict with outside groups, as well as internal conflict and contention within a community, the hegemonic process (Roseberry and O'Brien 1991). It is a dual process involving the internal dynamics of affiliation, in which individuals self-identify as members of an ethnic group, and external processes of attribution, in which individuals are placed in social categories by outsiders.

State leaders and bureaucracies are important agents in the hegemonic process because they have the power "to name, to identify, to categorize, to state what is what and who is who" (Brubaker and Cooper 2000:15). Leaders may instigate aggression or defend against it by allocating public goods and other resources, and they have the authority to declare the official stance in relations with outsiders (Barth 1994:19). They may allocate or deny valued resources to particular factions, fomenting self-awareness of subaltern groups and their formal legal status. In this process, some practices and symbols must be masked and others must be discovered to create dichotomous groups. It is erroneous to suggest that social cohesion, solidarity, and group consciousness are automatic within groups (Gabbert 2004:xii); rather, they must be forged through collective social action and practice. Strategies may also be implemented to foment ethnic attribution and discrimination against outsiders. For instance, the Inka and Aztec states attempted to naturalize differences between themselves and subordinate populations as a means of social and ideological control (Brumfiel 1994; Patterson 1991; Rodman and Fernandez Lopez 2005). Indeed, some of the best-recognized archaeological examples of ethnogenesis are found on the margins of expanding states (see Emberling 1997:308).

Most archaeologists agree that salient identities are forged in the face of unresolved contests and stress associated with group competition (DeBoer 1990; Hodder 1979; Jones 1997; Longacre 1991; Shennan 1989; Wiessner 1983; Wobst 1977). Among the Classic Maya, conflicts between polities are well documented in hieroglyphic texts and the building of defensive earthworks (Webster 1993). At contact, warfare was "carried out for land, slaves, control of trade routes, and for elite prestige, revenge, intrapolity political advantage, and tribute" (Webster 1999:349). With help from their allies, the Late Classic centers of Tikal and Calakmul engaged in conflicts for similar reasons. Political aggression created powerful "overkings" who brought subordinates under their control (Martin and Grube 2008). Subordinate and dominant relations were cemented through marriage and military threat. By the Terminal Classic period, warfare and raiding were endemic in many parts of the central lowlands, creating an ever-shifting landscape of political power.

Political titles and possessive prefixes that denote vassalage of one ruler to another also illustrate subordinate-dominant relations (ibid.:19). Paramount rulers held the title *k'uhul ajaw* (divine lord) or *kaloomte'* (no translation available), establishing themselves at the top of the political hierarchy that included *ajawtaak* (lords), *sajalob'* (loosely translated as regional governors, war captain, or feared one), and possibly *aj-k'uhuun* (often referred to as the "God C" title) (Houston and Inomata 2009; Jackson 2013). Possessive prefixes on titles, as illustrated by the verb clause *u-kab'jiiy* or "it was done by him," were used to refer to actions and relations between paramount and subordinate kings (Martin and Grube 2008:19).

In contrast to practices surrounding domination and subordination, resistance to oppression is not well understood for the Classic Maya. After centers were defeated in war, they often experienced architectural hiatuses, suggesting that labor and authority were siphoned off by the victors; but others, particularly those involved in status rivalries between kings, sustained only low-level effects (Webster 1993:428). Less frequently, centers were completely abandoned (Inomata 2006). Therefore, resistance may be best understood by the *consistency* of local practices through time within polities most heavily involved in conflicts. Along the peripheries of powerful regional states, kings of smaller polities were only loosely bound into multi-polity networks or eschewed interactions with paramount capitals altogether (Braswell 2007; LeCount and Yaeger 2010).

For these reasons, ethnogenesis may have occurred first in geographical regions at the boundaries of core polities in Petén. In peripheral areas, members may have maintained numerous interconnected affiliations across social networks, marked by the proliferation of community practices and symbols and the creation of new or hybrid forms. In the next section I demonstrate these ideas using data from sites in the upper Belize River valley.

CASE STUDY: SOCIAL BOUNDARIES IN THE UPPER BELIZE RIVER VALLEY

The upper Belize River valley sits at the nexus of ecological and political boundaries along the eastern periphery of the Maya lowlands (map 7.1). Comprising the area bounded by the Mopan and Macal tributaries of the Belize River, it is positioned between the hilly karst plateau of Petén and the coastal plain. Although freshwater is more abundant in Belize than it is in Petén, both have well-drained uplands and rich Mollisol soils capable of providing high returns in crop yields. As a consequence, settlement densities in the well-drained uplands of the upper Belize River valley are nearly as high as those in Petén (Ford and Fedick 1992:39). However, Petén was the home of the largest Maya cities, which far exceeded the size and population densities of centers in the eastern periphery. Nonetheless, upper Belize River valley sites, particularly Actuncan, Xunantunich, and Buenavista del Cayo overlooking the Mopan River, were strategically located and long-lived.

In the Late and Terminal Classic periods (AD 600–1000), people in this area were referred to as members of a distinct geopolitical group called the *Huk Tzuk*, or "Seven Divisions," in hieroglyphic inscriptions (Tokovinine 2013:98). Huk Tzuk people resided in Holmul, Yaxha, Naranjo, and Buenavista but were also differentiated into western and eastern groups. By the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries this region was part of a native province called Tz'ul Winikob, occupied by Mopan Mayan–speaking peoples (Jones 1998:3–5). It stretched from the New River in the
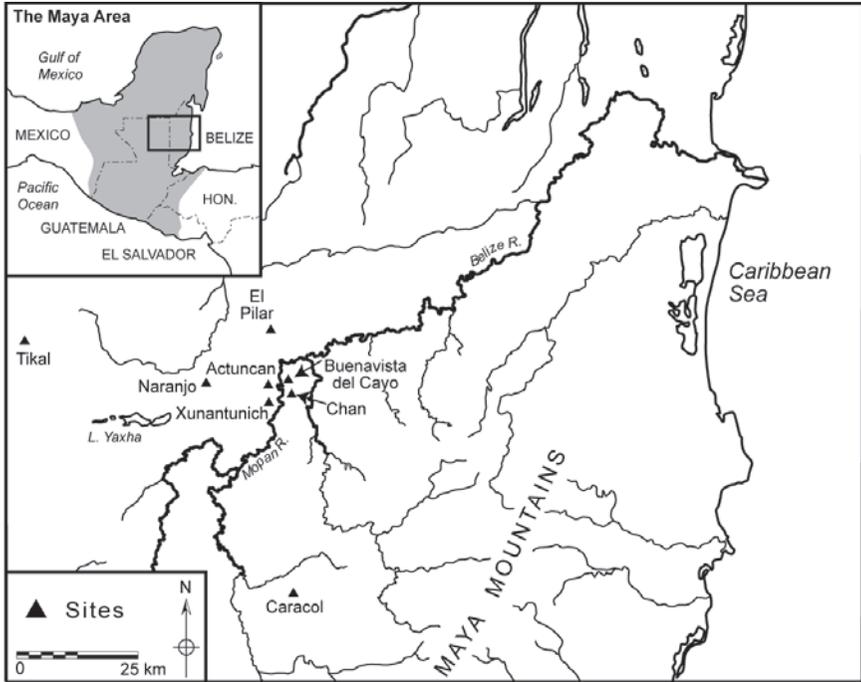
MAP 7.1. Upper Belize River valley and sites mentioned in the text

north to the Sittee River in the south and from the present-day Guatemalan border in the west to the sea. Tipuj, the political center, was located east of modern Benque Viejo del Carmen in the upper Belize River valley. It is interesting that the modern-day border between Belize and Guatemala lies very close to an ancient boundary established as early as the Classic period by the eastern Huk Tzuk people and reified by Mopan Mayan speakers of Tz'ul Winikob.

Languages spoken in the eastern periphery changed through time. Based on phonetic differences identified in hieroglyphic texts, Søren Wichmann (2006:283) suggests that Classic Ch'olan had split into eastern and western languages by AD 600. Petén texts, as well as Caracol's, contain features of both, while those within the upper Belize river valley do not demonstrate strong eastern or western features (ibid.). Apparently, Belizean texts remained linguistically neutral or followed the lingua franca of the dominant state discourse. These patterns suggest that Mayan speakers in Petén may have spoken multiple languages, but it is difficult to determine what language was spoken in the eastern periphery. The residents may have been Mopan Mayan speakers. But regardless of what language they spoke, the

dynamic nature of Petén texts is in stark contrast to the texts of the upper Belize River valley and other Belizean sites.

The boundary between the upper Belize River valley and Petén regions can be explored through the three factors discussed above for ethnogenesis: sustained interaction, communities of practice, and the hegemonic process.

Sustained Interaction

Actuncan, Xunantunich, and Buenavista del Cayo are located on hilltops above the fall line of the Mopan River and thus oversaw the flow of people and goods, as well as participated in ideas, moving along the major transportation route from the Caribbean Sea to Petén. The distribution of obsidian, perhaps more than any other trade item, illustrates sustained interaction between upper Belize Valley and Petén sites. Imported from highland Guatemala, Honduras, and Mexico, it was used by lowland populations for making fine cutting tools, projectile points, and esoteric cache objects. Availability of particular obsidian sources to centers depended on trade relations, politics, and exchange modes that shifted over time (Hammond 1972; McKillop 2004). The two most common sources—El Chayal and Ixtepeque—were traded through competing routes in the Classic period. El Chayal obsidian was transported overland from the Guatemalan highlands to the lowlands, while Ixtepeque obsidian traveled inland from the Yucatán coast after it was transported down from the highlands via the Motagua River. According to Geoffrey Braswell (2010:135), Tikal controlled interregional trade in the central lowlands.

At Actuncan and Xunantunich, populations had adequate amounts of obsidian required for daily activities and rituals, but access was more limited in scope than that reported for Petén sites (Keller 2006:474; Shults 2012). El Chayal obsidian dominates Actuncan's household assemblages, making up 77 percent of all sources, while Ixtepeque (20 percent) and other sources make up the rest. These data are consistent with those from other eastern periphery sites (Bill and Braswell 2005:311), lending evidence to suggest that much of the obsidian arrived from inland routes controlled by Tikal. In exchange, eastern periphery sites may have traded cacao and staple crops grown in the rich alluvial river valleys (Ashmore 2010:61; also McAnany et al. 2002) or served as middlemen for marine items such as shell, dried fish, and salt. Upper Belize River valley sites, therefore, may have been in direct competition with Petén polities for control over coastal resources moving along the river, or they may have established interdependent relationships with them through trade.

People, however, moved more freely across the eastern periphery boundary. What is perhaps most telling about upper Belize River valley settlements is the abundance of small house sites. Roughly 61 percent of all settlement is made up of one- or

two-mound house sites (Robin, Yaeger, and Ashmore 2010). Although some of this growth was a result of household developmental cycles, it is possible that new sites in the hilly uplands east of Xunantunich housed recent immigrants (LeCount and Yaeger 2010). Here, evidence points to homogeneous settlements composed of self-sufficient, single-family households, a pattern suggestive of recently founded communities (VandenBosch, LeCount, and Yaeger 2010). Although homogeneous settlements are not definitive evidence of migrant status, they are unusual in a mature landscape as historically deep and densely populated as the upper Belize River valley.

Carolyn Freiwald's (2011) strontium isotope studies also provide evidence for the movement of peoples in this area during the Late and Terminal Classic periods. She found that 24 percent of individuals in her upper Belize River valley samples were not born near the site in which they were buried, and more than 40 percent of the Xunantunich burial population had non-local origins, the highest non-local population in her sample. Non-local individuals at Xunantunich have strontium values similar to the central Petén region, and these people were buried in non-standard body positions and orientations for the upper Belize River valley (ibid.:94). These data indicate that valley sites experienced high rates of in-migration from Petén.

Architectural styles indicate that interaction between the upper Belize River valley and Petén had a long history beginning in the Late Preclassic period around 400 BC. At Actuncan (map 7.2), the presence of Petén-style monuments attests to the site's close affiliation with other centers to the west (Mixter, Jamison, and LeCount 2013). The E-group is comparable to that found at the site of Cenote near Lake Petén Itzá (Chase and Chase 1995:93), and the "Capitoline" Triadic Group is diagnostic of Triadic Groups elsewhere in the central lowlands (von Faulkenhausen 1985:120), as is Stela 1, which depicts a dancing individual rendered in a style similar to murals at San Bartolo (Fahsen and Grube 2005). At Xunantunich, the construction of a Petén-style royal compound indicates that Xunantunich's Late Classic ruler participated in the same sociopolitical kingship system as that found in larger lowland sites (Yaeger 2010).

Pottery assemblages at Actuncan and Xunantunich contain both Petén and local Belize Valley types (Gifford 1976; LeCount 1996). Starting as early as 1000 BC, these sites shared types and styles linked to central lowland ceramic spheres, a pattern interpreted by archaeologists as indicative of widespread interaction (McAnany 2001). Types did not diverge significantly until the Classic period, when many ceramic complexes in the eastern periphery developed local style zones (Gifford 1976; LeCount 1996). Marilyn Masson (2001) also documents shrinking Classic period interaction spheres across the central lowlands in her study of common slipped wares. Royalty and nobles, nonetheless, continued to exchange pottery and ideas about what luxury pottery should look like.
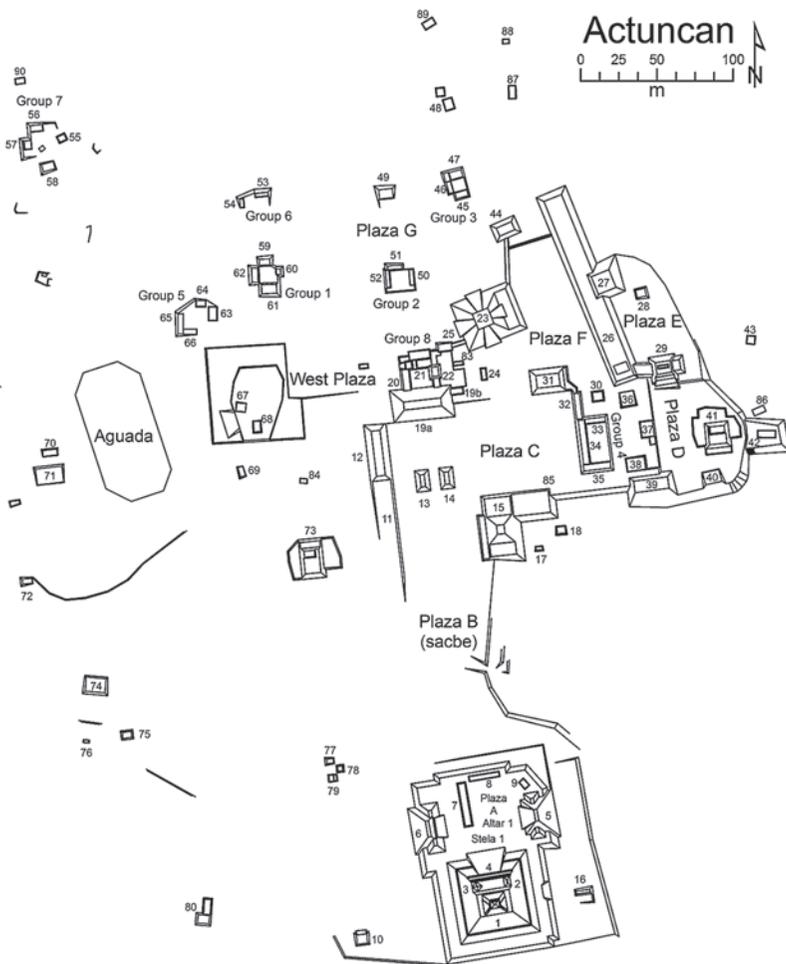
MAP 7.2. Site of Actuncan. Note the styles of the Triadic Group of Plaza A and the Cenote-style E-Group of Plaza F

One of the best examples of international-style pottery in the upper Belize River valley is the Juancy vase, which displays a Holmul dancer and a primary standard (hieroglyphic) sequence along the rim. Based on the translation of the text, it was a gift from a Naranjo k'uhul ajaw to a subordinate king who lived at Buenavista del Cayo (Houston, Stuart, and Taube 1992; Reents-Budet 1994; Taschek and Ball 1992). Sites in the region also share a black-on-cream fine-line painting style, possibly associated with members of the Naranjo ruling lineage (Reents-Budet 1994:156).

These vessels indicate that elites interacted through exchanged gifts across polity boundaries in the eastern periphery of the Maya lowlands.

Ancient Maya Communities of Practice

Although Petén influence was widespread in the eastern periphery, material culture in the area is best understood as an amalgamation of local- and Petén-style cannons. Acropolises, such as those found at Xunantunich, Caracol, and Altun Ha, were constructed in a particular eastern style, with broad and terraced platforms supporting range structures on medial terraces and multiple-story buildings on summits. In Petén, in contrast, acropolises were built on relatively low platforms and funerary structures were freestanding, such as Tikal's Temple 1 and Temple 2, which are taller and narrower than eastern pyramids. Indeed, city architecture is easily identified based on its distinctive monumental styles (Miller 1999). Monumental art programs also played an important role in creating visually distinctive regional styles. Virginia Fields (2004) suggests that a localized tradition of modeled stucco architectural sculpture occurred at Xunantunich in the Late Classic period. It combines the large facade masks reminiscent of the Late Preclassic period with the narrative style of Late Classic architectural relief sculpture.

Community identities rooted in concepts of home, village, and place on the landscape are also evident by the Late Classic period. In previous publications, I have focused on how common pottery used to cook and serve food figured prominently in the formation of a social identity (LeCount 2010a, 2010b). Common pottery displayed identity through the use of bold, simple colors, similar to the way modern Maya today express community identity on common pottery and dress (Reina and Hill 1978). Bold colors and shapes create a lasting impression of group prosperity and unity in contested environments (DeBoer 1990; Hodder 1979; Longacre 1991; Sackett 1985, 1990; Wiessner 1983). In the upper Belize River valley, two common pottery groups—Garbutt Creek and Mount Maloney—display either red- or black-slipped surfaces on similar sturdy vessel forms. These dichotomously colored pottery groups segregate into distinct style zones in the valley. The black-slipped Mount Maloney is prevalent around Xunantunich (figure 7.1), and the red-slipped Garbutt Creek is prevalent downstream (Connell 2010). Masson (2001) also documents shrinking Classic period interaction spheres across the central lowlands in her study of common slipped wares.

Other pottery styles have been postulated to signal local political affiliations. According to Joseph Ball and Jennifer Taschek (2004), Buenavista del Cayo in the upper Belize River valley expressed its political identity through the display of an emblematic device painted on fine-ware pottery. Classic period pottery motifs
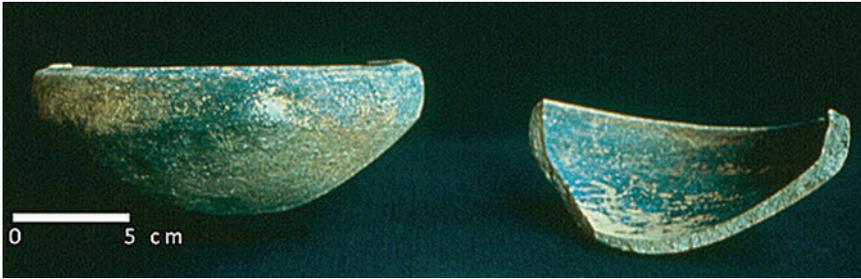
FIGURE 7.1. Mount Maloney Type bowl from Actuncan

may have acted as emblematic devices because they are based on the same kind of explicit symbolism seen in Postclassic Aztec town glyphs, Classic Mayan emblem glyphs, and modern Maya *huipil* elements. If these motifs were toponyms, they were fundamental to the way ancient people expressed place and territory (Marcus 1992:153). It is also possible that they may represent totems, a practice identified through the animal surnames of K'iche' houses (Braswell 2008) and Lacandon patrilineages (Soustelle 1935).

More hidden community practices, including burial patterns, reflect local identities. In the Belize Valley, individuals were consistently buried in an extended position with the head to the south (Awe and Helmke 2005). At Actuncan, this burial practice was maintained for more than 1,000 years, from the Terminal Preclassic through the Terminal Classic periods (figure 7.2). In Petén, Late Classic internments were more often buried oriented in the opposite direction (north), albeit there is greater variation in burial practices across Petén than in other parts of the lowlands—possibly because of greater differences in class, gender, or ethnicity in this area (Welsh 1988:221; figure 7.1).

Classic Maya Hegemonic Process

The large centers of Naranjo and Caracol are located within a day's walk of sites in the upper Belize River valley, a distance that placed Xunantunich, Actuncan, Buenavista del Cayo, and other sites easily within their sphere of influence (Schele and Mathews 1991). Naranjo's incursions into the eastern periphery are well-documented through hieroglyphic texts that describe this region as part of Naranjo's hegemony (Audet and Awe 2005:362; Houston, Stuart, and Taube 1992; Reents-Budet et al. 2005). Naranjo's rival in the area was Caracol, whose leaders also attempted to claim portions of western Belize (Iannone 2005). Caracol's efforts were aimed particularly at Cahal Pech, Baking Pot, and Pacbitun. Accounts
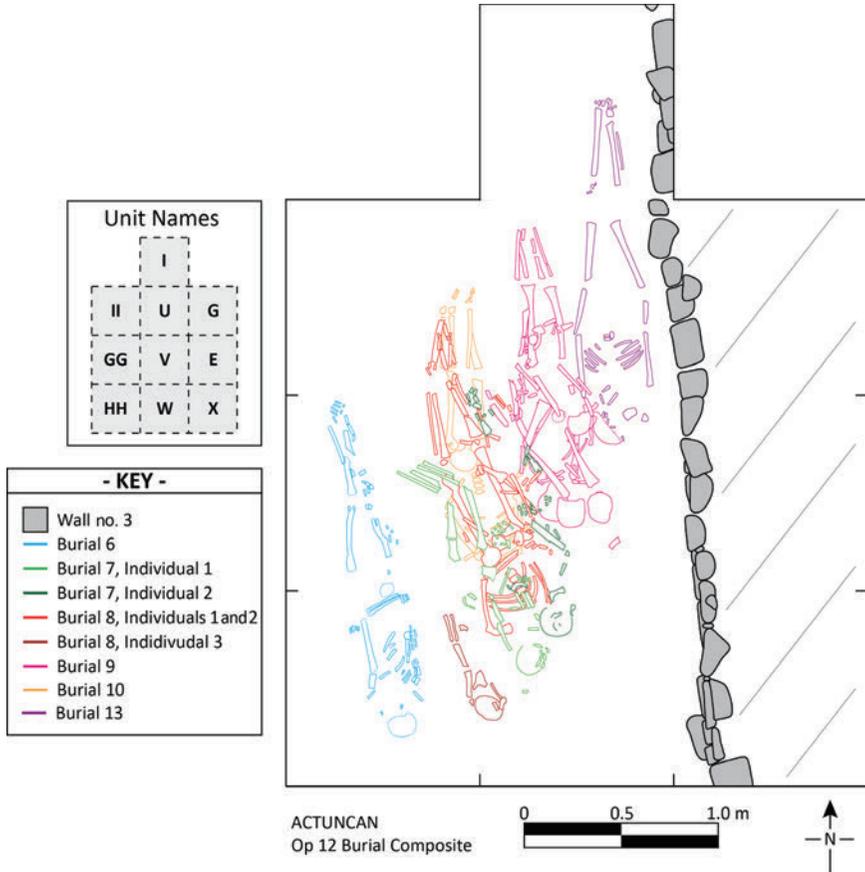
FIGURE 7.2. Upper Belize River valley burial practices at Actuncan Group 1. Courtesy, Kara Fulton, Carolyn Freiwald, and Destiny Micklin

of warfare between sites within the upper Belize River valley centers and adjacent regions indicate that competing polities struggled to maintain autonomy from the advances of both local and foreign kings (Helmke and Awe 2008).

During the Terminal Classic period, the political landscape balkanized as the hegemonies maintained by the most powerful states collapsed, and smaller polities claimed regional authority. At Xunantunich, leaders displayed their own local emblem glyph starting sometime after AD 800 and began erecting stelae not long thereafter (Helmke, Awe, and Grube 2010). At Xunantunich, Panel 2 contains a full emblem glyph, including phonetic complements and a main sign toponym translated as "divine mountainous place lord" (ibid.:106). Panel 2 also mentions a place called

Monpan, which may reference the river or possibly a region where Mopan Mayan was spoken. The final statement on the panel tells of a triple alliance of lords involved in a martial conflict, possibly a raid within the greater Naranjo area (ibid.:107). This statement appears to have been a harbinger of things to come or a commentary on continuing disputes. During the final years of the Late Classic period, Structure A-11, the ruler's residence, was marked by a desecratory termination of the kind that signaled a site's conquest (Yaeger 2010:156). Palace rooms were dismantled, vessels were smashed on the floors, and an adult male was sacrificed and left on the floor to be buried when the building was entirely filled with marl. A non-local red-slipped bowl, probably Garbutt Creek Red type, was placed on top of the marl fill. This desecratory termination, along with its symbolically charged diacritic, may have been one of many emotional actions that sparked identity politics in the region.

CONCLUSION

In sum, I make a case for Classic Maya ethnogenesis based on three cultural processes: sustained interaction, practices of identity, and the hegemonic process. Evidence for sustained interaction across lowland populations can be seen in shared material culture, religious ideology, and concepts of kingship developed by the Preclassic period. Though time, polythetic identities developed, as evidenced by the emergence of nested and overlapping symbols of international, political, and class statuses and community practices by the Late Classic period. Hegemonic processes associated with expansionistic states may have been the trigger that resulted in more explicitly differentiated cultural groups. Although elites may have continued to share cultural and political ways of understanding and acting in the world, they prompted ethnogenesis within regional populations through political aggression and subordination. Powerful polities such as Tikal and Calakmul may have facilitated the creation of basic identity groups as they subsumed allies and enemies into their hegemonic sphere of influence.

In the upper Belize River valley, the coalescence of a social boundary by the Late Classic period is marked by (1) the proliferation of symbols linked to complex networks including kin, class, and political identities, (2) stylistic diversity representing social dynamism along a zone of interaction, (3) substantial population movements, and (4) internal differentiation in the form of political groups. In the Late and Terminal Classic periods, upper Belize River valley sites were dynamic places displaying amalgamated architecture, sculpture, and pottery styles that reflected their border zone status.

Does this mean that ethnic groups can be identified in the upper Belize River valley? Part of the reason this is such a difficult question to answer is that ethnic groups

in the past may have been fundamentally different from modern ethnic groups that inform our models and definitions. Modern ethnic groups arose from interactions with Colonial powers and are embedded in capitalistic social, political, and economic structures. This situation makes extrapolating our definitions of ethnicity, ethnic identity, and ethnic groups into the past problematic. Another problem is our lack of understanding of the relationships between leaders and followers, which are not recorded in Maya hieroglyphic texts and not easily elucidated from the archaeological record. Leadership is a critical component of ethnogenesis because the creation of group identity requires the mobilization of images, symbols, and actions to resist assimilation by dominant forces. Although recognizing a common enemy or foreign people is a relatively straightforward process, creating ethnic unity is not. It requires charismatic leadership and coordination. Among the historic Yucatán "Maya," kinship and town interests superseded ethnic concerns even in the face of hundreds of years of Colonial oppression (Restall 2004). Therefore, for the Classic Maya of the eastern periphery, ethnicity may have been more implicit than explicit (ibid.:75), not developing fully until the Postclassic period when groups like the Itza arose.

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