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Bethany J. bin Beyette

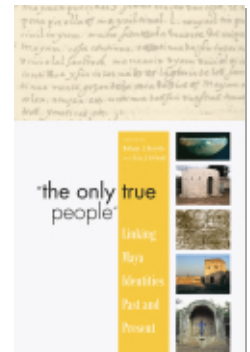
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Conclusion

Identity, Networks, and Ethnicity

EDWARD SCHORTMAN

The chapters in this volume successfully challenge some deep-seated assumptions about the ways we understand: who are/were the “Maya”; how their cultures, past and present, should be studied; and what those investigations imply about those of us who call ourselves Mayanists. An additional theme, more implicitly stressed, concerns the relations that generally exist among materials, agency, and social identity. I will argue that, disagreements among the authors notwithstanding, these essays suggest very fruitful approaches to conceptualizing how we go about comprehending the human condition in general and the lives of those who inhabit(ed) Mesoamerica’s southern lowlands in particular.

WHO ARE THE MAYA?

Under the culture history paradigm that dominated anthropology and archaeology through the mid-twentieth century, the Maya, like other groups, were treated as a spatially bounded entity defined by a package of traits that supposedly spread among closely related societies through diffusion and migration (Dixon 1928; Kroeber 1939; Wissler 1917; cf. Canuto and Bell, this volume). These shared materials and practices, it was argued, directly reflected values that were widely held among members of this “culture” and which emerged in the course of its unique history. The volume’s contributors concur that such traditional definitions of “Mayaness” are, at best, problematic. They differ, however, on whether “Maya” still defines a

useful analytical unit. Central questions here seem to revolve around whether there is such an entity as the “Maya” about which we can make generalizations and how that cultural unit relates, if at all, to living populations so categorized.

Samson, Castillo Cocom and colleagues, and Restall and Gabbert strongly argue that there was no self-conscious sense of cultural solidarity among so-called Maya people prior to the last few decades, a position Macri and Hofling bolster using linguistic data. Protracted, often hostile interactions with Colonial and post-independence governments from the sixteenth through nineteenth centuries apparently exacerbated prehispanic divisions among populations even as they reinforced indigenous allegiances to smaller units such as communities. Affiliations that transcended these identity networks, such as the pan-Maya movement of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, were creative means for mobilizing segments of societies living in the southern lowlands against the incursions of agents representing state and international interests. The notion of “Maya” in the most recent of these contests is a conceptual resource adapted from academic, national, and touristic discourses that has been re-purposed to serve the needs of those it attempts to classify and control (cf. Castillo Cocom’s concept of the “Indian Casino Effect”). This discussion raises important questions about the recursive relations between indigenous populations and the hegemonic discourses that seek to categorize them. Hofling’s discussion of the roles linguists played in the (re)emergence of Mopan and Itza identities addresses many of the same issues.

Why, then, do the archaeologists represented in this compendium remain committed to the existence of a “Maya” culture? One key to the answer may lie in Restall and Gabbert’s argument that cultural similarities can result from experiences shared among people who do not overtly recognize an ethnic connection (cf. LeCount, also Marken and colleagues’ contrast between localized ethnic groupings and a macro-ethnic Maya classification). Distinctive beliefs and practices may thus arise from common approaches to dealing with recurrent factors in the physical and social environment. Consequently, whether the result of an explicitly shared affiliation or the outcome of comparable cultural strategies, “Maya” refers to a unit about which generalizations concerning modern practices and historical patterns can be legitimately made.

However “Maya” is defined, the volume’s authors agree that approaches to its study must stress cultural, social, and political variation within this unit. Territorially defined entities such as society, culture, and culture area do not effectively capture the dynamism of the interpersonal dealings out of which regional differences took shape (cf. Parker 2013; Sugandhi 2013). If that is the case, how should we rethink our research programs, and does ethnicity have a role to play in such studies?

INTERACTION NETWORKS AND ETHNICITY

There seems to be a consensus among the contributors that the diverse material, linguistic, and behavioral patterns which fragment what once had been seen as a unified “Maya culture” are the results of varied decisions made by numerous individuals operating under sundry circumstances. These choices are/were enabled and constrained by the structural positions of the decision-makers and the social networks in which they participate(d). It is not surprising, therefore, that archaeologists, anthropologists, and ethnohistorians are avidly searching for ways of modeling these networks. Ethnicity is an attractive choice. As Beyyette first notes in her chapter, focusing on ethnicity draws explicit attention to sociopolitical divisions within territorial units of varying sizes, how people actively manipulate the trappings of ethnic identities to accomplish specific objectives, and the manners in which diverse assets from different sources are implicated in forging ethnic alliances and staging ethnic conflicts. Ethnic categories, groups, and communities, in short, are units of analysis that are more sensitive to the dynamic and negotiated quality of interpersonal dealings and the ways people shift among regional and local frames of reference in pursuit of goals than are such territorially rooted entities as culture, culture area, and society (e.g., Barth 1969; A. Cohen 1969, 1979; R. Cohen 1978; Despres 1975; Orser 2005; Royce 1982; Vincent 1974).

In proceeding along these lines, I recommend thinking very carefully about the appropriateness of using ethnicity in its various guises to model interpersonal interactions. As Samson, together with Restall and Gabbert, warn, the ways ethnicity is employed in studying modern populations may make its application to the analysis of past settings questionable. Ethnicity generally implies the emic acknowledgment by a group’s members of a common history from which arises a perceived shared essence (e.g., Barth 1969; R. Cohen 1978; Royce 1982; Vincent 1974). These perceptions can almost never be established from archaeological data alone and are hard to document in many historical cases (Orser 2005). Hence, when imputing ethnicity to past societies, we run the risk of imposing senses of the self that the data do not warrant. In addition, confusing a specific form of affiliation—ethnicity—with all manner of identities may well obscure the wide array of social networks in which past people engaged, not all of which were ethnically defined.

The ethnicity literature is therefore a fertile source of ideas about the diverse ways people create and use social webs to define themselves and accomplish objectives. How we might use such insights in understanding the “Maya” is suggested by the volume’s authors.

All of the contributors endorse the important point made by Beyyette that people deal with each other as members of social networks with which are associated specific identities, or senses of the self, acknowledged by those within and outside

one's social web (Earle 1997; Galaskiewicz and Wasserman 1994:xiii; Knox, Savage, and Harvey 2006; Mann 1986; Marcus 2000:239; Ortner 1995:187, 191; Preucel 2000:59–61; papers in Brumfiel and Fox 1994). Whether defined ethnically or not, these nets are the means by which people exercise agency as they cooperate in mobilizing economic, political, and cultural resources in support of shared objectives (Schortman and Urban 2011, 2012).

As Goffman (1997:36) noted, individuals can be treated as managers of holding companies, deploying identities linked to distinct social networks strategically, in different situations, and with varying degrees of freedom to achieve diverse ends. The notion of people moving among affiliations is also captured in the concept of *ethnoexodus* offered by Castillo Cocom. Following these views fragments a society into numerous, variably well-integrated networks that people traverse with differing ease at diverse times for sundry reasons. Some of these affiliations may extend beyond a society's borders. Though the latter networks are often thought to result from elite initiatives, it is very likely that people of lower rank also forge(d) ties with their compatriots residing in different polities in pursuit of their own aims. Thus, Macri's observation that the Classic Maya "understood themselves through multiple layers of identification" could be usefully extended to their predecessors and descendants.

Canuto and Bell, Marken and his colleagues, as well as LeCount stress that these multiple social nets often emerge in the context of enduring competitions over resources. Networks, from this instrumentalist perspective, are means for marshaling efforts to secure at least a share of contested assets needed for sustenance, self-definition, social reproduction, and advancement (Barth 1969). Focusing attention on social networks, therefore, encourages appreciation for the relational processes and the assets that fund them, which operate over diverse spatial scales and out of which appear political, social, and economic structures (Orser 2005:86–87).

Thus, Restall and Gabbert argue that indigenous residents of the southern lowlands during the Colonial and early independence periods subscribed to identities that were rooted in specific places. These communities (*cahob*) were composed of people who resided together, interacted regularly, and were bound to each other by kinship and shared claims to the land's spiritual as well as economic resources. Cahob were, in turn, cross-cut by exogamous patronymic groups (*chilabob*) whose members were dispersed across numerous settlements. As Restall and Gabbert note, neither cahob nor chilabob were ethnically defined. They were, however, important touchstones of identity and formed bases for cooperative actions in pursuit of important aims.

This same integration of parochial and territorially diffuse identities is carried back into prehistory in the contributions of LeCount, Marken and colleagues, and

Canuto and Bell. On the one hand, spatially bounded polities were linked by inter-site elite affiliations that united rulers within class-based networks. On the other, identities tied to particular places joined leaders and followers through their common engagement in a wide array of practices employing objects distinguished by styles closely associated with localized social nets. These authors contend that elite power may well have depended on the abilities of potentates to participate in both parochial and dispersed social webs. By doing so, magnates could mobilize both the local and foreign assets they needed to sustain themselves and claim preeminence at home.

Balancing the potentially conflicting demands of at least these two affiliations makes for a tense and volatile situation within all complex polities (Schortman and Urban 2011, 2012; Schortman, Urban, and Ausec 2001; Yaeger 2000). One way of defusing such stresses, as Marken and colleagues and LeCount discuss, may have been by naturalizing membership claims to identity nets through participation in public rites that elevated such assertions to the sacred plane where they were beyond question (Bloch 1977). Even the most spectacular and compelling religious observances probably did not completely and permanently resolve strains born of the discordant demands made on elites by virtue of their allegiances to local and spatially extensive identity networks. Appreciation for such intra-societal tensions and their political implications is facilitated by the network perspective these authors propose.

LeCount and Canuto and Bell remind us that agents are more than capable of taking advantage of structural shifts by reorganizing social nets and redefining the symbols that materialize those affiliations (cf. Yaeger 2000). El Cafetal's rulers in the Late Classic El Paraíso basin, for example, exploited Copán's defeat by its erstwhile vassal at Quiriguá to proclaim network memberships previously denied them. These allegiances were expressed using architectural symbols formerly monopolized by representatives of the Copán state. Along similar lines, Hofling notes that Colonial policies implemented in Petén by the Spanish, such as *congregación*, established new structural conditions that discouraged some interaction strategies while encouraging others. Identity networks were reorganized as former enemies found themselves sharing the same community. Language patterns then shifted, in part to facilitate communication within the new webs.

These and other cases suggest that a recursive relation exists among social nets, the assets that travel through them, and the political, economic, and cultural structures in which these webs operate. Shifts in the movement of resources, broadly defined, across this matrix of overlapping social networks provide novel opportunities to make new choices even as they may preclude pursuit of established practices (Giddens 1984). Such choices can contribute to structural

transformations through the institutionalization of novel rules by which assets needed to exercise power are acquired and deployed (*ibid.*; Sewell 1992). Tracing the passage of those resources and describing the varied ways they are employed by agents working in diverse social webs may be a profitable approach to understand structural change.

Reimagining the southern lowlands less as a unified culture area and more as a network of networks directs attention to how people of varied backgrounds together, if not always in harmony, create(d) cultural, political, and economic structures through their participation in social networks; the varied resources that flow(ed) through these webs and how they are/were used to underwrite political projects initiated by diverse agents; the differing spatial and temporal scales over which these nets operate(d); and the dynamism of the structures that emerge(d) as people variably cooperate(d) and compete(d) for assets across and within social nets.

This instrumentalist approach to the operation of social networks simplifies reality. Interactions are goal-oriented, with alliance networks functioning to secure resources needed to accomplish specific aims. Interpersonal dealings are not invariably calculating and competitive. It may be that such a goal-driven view of interaction is most applicable to analyses of political processes (Orser 2005:83) because efforts to secure and defend power require forging enduring alliances that link collaborators in explicit opposition to those organized along similar lines in pursuit of comparable political objectives (Hodder 1979; Knox, Savage, and Harvey 2006:125; Lightfoot and Martinez 1995:483–84). Recurrent mobilization of material and ideological resources during oft-repeated confrontations in which all parties have significant stakes reinforces a pronounced sense of self among web members who come to see each other as allies and opponents in important, life-defining transactions. Shoring up and conveying such feelings of distinctiveness often involves mobilizing physically prominent symbols of network affiliation (Goffman 1997:57–58; Hodder 1979; Lightfoot and Martinez 1995:485; Lightfoot, Martinez, and Schiff 1998:202; Schortman 1989; Spence 2005:175–76; Wiessner 1983; Wobst 1977, 1999). It is through such salient identity nets that claims to various forms of preeminence are established and legitimized.

The fact that most of the volume's chapters deal to some extent with political competition is therefore probably not accidental. Much of the ethnicity literature also relates processes of ethnogenesis to contests over political prominence. Network analysis may thus illumine competitive interactions in which securing power is at least one goal. Its relevance to describing and understanding other sorts of interpersonal dealings remains to be seen.

MATERIALITY AND SOCIAL NETWORKS

Material styles were traditionally seen as among those traits that together reflected a widespread, homogeneous, and enduring Maya identity. Ways of decorating pots, designing buildings, and organizing sites thus passively expressed widely shared assumptions and values that supposedly characterized a pan-lowland Maya culture. Recognition of considerable stylistic variation within the southern lowlands led many archaeologists in particular to question this view. Having shed old assumptions, how are we to understand the places of material styles in interpersonal interactions? The archaeologists contributing to this volume argue that distinctive motifs in diverse media were either strategically deployed to instantiate identities associated with specific social webs or arose unconsciously from the habitual practices that characterized holders of differing affiliations (this parallels Restall and Gabbert's distinction between explicit and implicit expressions of ethnicity).

How objects are implicated in social processes is not solely of interest to archaeologists. Samson, for example, references the use of painted images in ongoing contests over "Maya" identity among indigenous populations and agents of the state and tourism. More broadly, the nascent field of "materiality" is explicitly concerned with the recursive relations among agency, structure, objects, and action in all time periods (e.g., Gell 1998; Hodder 2012; Ingold 2007, 2012; Knappett 2011; Latour 2005). Debate in this domain centers especially on questions of how and to what extent objects exercise agency in their interactions with people. The archaeological case studies presented in this volume, like much of the work my colleagues and I have pursued (e.g., Schortman, Urban, and Ausec 2001), treat objects as relatively passive instruments deployed to achieve the goals of those who made and used them. Castillo Cocom's concept of *iknal* provides a provocative way of imaging a more active role for items. As a "spatial marker disembodied from the individual," a person's *iknal* could be indexed in part by objects intimately associated with her or him. Such associations form in the course of those interpersonal dealings in which the items figure, the objects then becoming parts of contexts that shape future interactions (cf. Gamble 1998; Orser 2005:82). Concepts such as *iknal* call on us to see materials as significant participants in social networks in that, once incorporated within these webs, they have the power to shape transactions in the absence of the agents the objects reference.

Rather than representations of homogeneous cultures, objects are now seen as means of expressing explicitly social affiliations that fragment and transcend territorially defined units (Allison 2008; Hart and Engelbrecht 2012; Hodder 1979; Jones 1997; Naum 2010:115; Walker and Schiffer 2006; Wobst 1977, 1999; Yaeger 2000); as instantiating, consciously or not, interpersonal connections through their exchange and use in various contexts (Chapman 2000:171; Gamble 1998; Gell

1998:83, 123; Gosden 2004:33–36; Hodder 2012:22; Hutson 2010:35, 38, 131–132; Ingold 2012:438; Latour 2005:74–75; Mauss 1967; Owoc 2005:262; Strathern 1988:164; Van Buren and Richards 2000; Walker and Schiffer 2006); and as playing active roles in shaping interpersonal dealings in which they are included (Gell 1998; Hodder 2012; Latour 2005; Wolf 1990:586). Objects are also among the assets people seek to acquire by participating in social networks (Gosden 2004:36; Schortman and Urban 2011, 2012).

As Marken and colleagues, LeCount, Canuto and Bell, and Storey note, specifying the roles materials play(ed) in these processes depends on describing the manners in which they are/were used by people operating within social nets. It is not surprising that the authors give special attention to sacred architecture and ritual paraphernalia in modeling the existence, operation, and spatial/temporal/distributions of social networks given the importance of religious observances in promoting intra-affiliation solidarity (cf. Samson, this volume). This is true whether we are considering how the Talking Cross or images of the Triad Gods figured in actions through which social webs were materialized among the *cruzob* in nineteenth-century Yucatán or members of different social classes at Late Classic Palenque. Storey's use of burial treatments to ferret out social affiliations elaborates on this theme, as how people are interred often speaks directly to deeply held values that are central to defining specific affiliations and their associated networks. Beyette, LeCount, Marken and colleagues, and Canuto and Bell are careful to add that mundane objects are essential to the multiple quotidian behaviors through which people perform their senses of self in dealing with others on a daily basis.

There are clearly different approaches to modeling the ways objects ranging from pots to temples to murals are implicated in the activities through which identities are formed and social life proceeds. There is no denying, however, that it is crucial to understand the recursive relations among people and objects in the creation, maintenance, and transformation of social nets.

WHO ARE WE?

Castillo Cocom challenges us to think beyond the “Western imagery.” The latter consists of such etic concepts as ethnic groups and ethnogenesis that we use to tell people who they are, how they came to be, and why they behave as they do. In keeping with the volume's theme, one might argue that this “imagery” consists of symbolic resources by which we as researchers not only understand others but enact our own social networks. The idea of a “Maya” ethnic group, in other words, defines our places in the academic firmament, positions we embody through such practices as teaching, writing, and organizing museum exhibits about the “Maya.” Being a

“Mayanist” is therefore an important part of our professional identities and is integral to the strategies by which we seek employment and renown.

What are the implications of these observations? At the very least, we should acknowledge that there is a recursive relation between how we envision ourselves and the subjects of our analyses. Our senses of who we are and the manner in which we relate to others within and beyond academia are strongly conditioned by how we divide up the continuum of human cultural variation into analytical units. To be sure, as Castillo Cocom points out, power plays a large part in determining in what ways and by whom cultural variation is compartmentalized. Once created, however, these ideas have a power of their own to shape those who use them. Changing visions of the “Maya,” even questioning whether such a group has ever existed, are about more than capturing and conveying the reality of indigenous behaviors and beliefs. These transformations involve a deep probing of disciplinary habitus, calling on us as investigators to reconsider seriously who we are and how we relate to the people with whom we work (Bourdieu 1977). The present volume successfully raises these disquieting issues and suggests ways we might profitably deal with them. The concept of social networks has, I believe, an important role to play in understanding and conveying the rich contingency of human lives, those we investigate, and those we ourselves pursue.

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