

Sowing and Bundling: Maya Maize-god Rulers and the Origins of Complexity

Short Abstract: Maya thought, ancient and modern, is rich in conceptual metaphors. We explore two related and foundational metaphors that potentially led to innovation and complexity. The first involves the *sowing* of seeds and cultivation of food while the second refers to the *bundling* that is necessary to harvest, transport, store, and ultimately prepare food. Social complexity often emerged in the context of domesticated foodstuffs and emphatically so in the Maya region where low-density horticulturalists were replaced/transformed during the first millennium BCE by a place-focused farming population vested in horizon-based astronomy, rulership, and social differentiation. This historical trajectory inspires us to consider that the explicit invention of cultural precepts fostering and legitimating the inequalities that inevitably accompany societal complexity may have been anchored in pervasive experiences surrounding the production and consumption of foods.

Maya Conceptual Metaphors

In *Men of Maize*, Miguel Angel Asturias explores the indigenous ontology of Guatemalan Maya people and its suppression by elite of European descent and culture. While magical realism is a literary trope, it manifests the animist alternative to Cartesian reasoning that is now coming into favor in archaeological interpretation generally and in reference to the Maya past specifically (Hodder 2012; Hendon 2010). In the Maya region, this ontology equates the cultivation of maize with the human life cycle and also with the diurnal solar cycle. All can be described in terms of the sowing and dawning of creation. In this ontology immortality and divinity exist not in a perpetual state of being, but rather within a cyclical and transformative reiteration. In contrast to the metamorphosis of Ovid, the succession of human species in the 18th century K'iche' Maya Book of Council, the *Popol Vuh*, is organically transformative and moves sequentially from a being that is god-like in vision and made of wood—the flesh of trees—to our current species that is myopic, made of maize, and dies to be reborn. The *Popol Vuh* also reveals that a motivating factor in the creation of humans—on the part of the creator deities—was to form a community of humans who would revere and remember the gods—the establishment of memory communities as a distinctly human innovation.

Although disparaged by contemporary philosophers such as Deleuze and Guattari (1987), the tree (for Classic Maya calligraphers) provided a potent metaphor for lineage, and the primordial trees were the gods. As children of a precious jade-green “tree” (otherwise known as maize), Mayan peoples do not consider themselves lesser beings that inhabit a Platonic shadow of a true reality known only to the gods. Rather they are the offspring of creator ancestors and are collaborative in shaping the future, even if the future can be only dimly discerned—through “breath on a mirror.” The perceived task of humans is to nurture the gods by sustaining the world.

Innovation through Sowing and Bundling

We offer the following working scenario for how complexity emerged in southeastern Mesoamerica. In the context of an emerging dependency on maize that invited episodes of hunger or famine among communities most committed to it, Preclassic Mesoamericans articulated creation narratives that declared the original creator, and his progeny the hero ancestor, to be an androgynous god who was maize. The first human descendants of maize were “natural” rulers as well as apical ancestors. These narratives both legitimized rulers and required rulers to be like maize, capable of being sown into the earth and resurrected as a source of food. Most likely, the ability to die and be reborn was well understood among First Americans of the Western Hemisphere where the presence of ritual specialists who already provided community services that referenced this transformation must have been commonplace. Communities that adopted this conceptual innovation may have formed regional sodalities that linked archipelagoes of agrarian communities in a sea of semi-sedentary horticulturalists. Initiation rituals formalized the death and rebirth of maize as a human experience. Sodality members maintained solar calendar-scheduled pilgrimages and festivals (visible in early E-Group constructions) that moved maize and other foods in risk reducing networks of gift giving and soon thereafter of exchange. But while sodality membership was guided by kin group affiliation, it was determined by selection and election of initiates, who governed in council with patriarchs and matriarchs of the community. Sodality members elected rulers and while these kings and queens were no doubt powerful patriarchs and matriarchs, they were ritually transformed into divine beings that separated them from their kin and made them responsible to communities and regional networks of communities. We propose in the next section some metaphorical means by which separation of authority predicated on lineage and kin from authority based on sodality membership and kingship. But to continue the bundling metaphor, we suggest the following.

Upon death, Middle Preclassic peoples--rulers and ordinary people alike—often were buried within residential spaces or kept as bundled bones on domestic altars. Not until the Classic period would monumental ancestor shrines come to shape the topography of the lowland Maya landscape. We propose that the wrapped or bundled bones of ancestors—whether displayed or secreted beneath living surfaces—formed the basis for memory communities and provided a material focus for larger organizational groups, such as sodalities. The scaling up of this practice to create massive ancestor shrines during the Classic period indicates the success of this strategy of claiming place through ancestor interment. Maya called pyramids and related monumental buildings mountains and regarded the bundled or wrapped remains of people placed within them as planted seeds. The word for great seed, as in tree seed, and for bones is homophonous in Classical Mayan texts. From the earliest Middle Preclassic architectural decorations to the time of the European encounter, Maya buildings were bound with cloth knots, textile inspired panels, and binding ropes. Buildings as metaphorical bundles could bind and hold the remains

of particular ancestors and lineage trees or they could bind and bundle the gods of the realm. These distinct functions had potentially great implications for the development of political institutions. The same could hold for other expressions of this metaphor, particularly for bundles as burden, which expanded metaphorically to the burden or responsibilities of political office.

Bundles, Burdens, and Maize-god Rulers

Guernsey and Reilly (2006) observe that bundling conceals and unbundling reveals, allowing contents to be transformed in the process. Another way to look at bundling and wrapping is that bundles establish a boundary between what is outside and what is inside. Viewed in this light binding or wrapping can function as a metaphor for the establishment of a boundary between basic dichotomies like past/future (bundles of days, year-bearing burdens), dead/living, unmoving (inert, inanimate)/moving (charged, animate.) These are not only contrastive but also through the dichotomy rendered conceptually equivalent. The same generally holds for binding, in which insides and outsides are more transparently juxtaposed but still clearly defined. Using Yucatec Mayan linguistic categories, Hanks (1990) distinguishes between absolute presence and relative presence in spatial location. Absolute location is established through the definition of a space usually by laying out the four quarters and the center and then by binding the space through procession. On the face of it, such bundling of space creates qualitative distinctions between what is inside and what is outside and contemporary Yucatec ritual specialists will often make the argument that binding space prevents sacred power held within from leaking out or from the contamination of interior space by that which is outside. In fact, bundled space creates an equivalency between interior and exterior. In the research into Preclassic contexts at K'axob the role of mortuary deposits (sowing) in the establishment of ancestors we address bundling and the establishment of sacred spaces (crosses, quincunx.)

The point here is that when such a boundary is established the things on each side can become equivalent and inter-changeable. So binding a bundle of bones establishes a link between them as unmoving and dead on one side and the living beings around them on the other. Through this link the bundle becomes a living ancestral spirit. A living human leader in the Pre-Columbian Maya world bound inside a headband made of tree bark paper with the sprout of maize as a jewel on his forehead became metaphorically the outside, the land, trees, and crops for which his soul force was responsible.

The earliest Maya sedentary communities, and their contemporaries in the Olmec heartland, shared the understanding that objects could be imbued with the sentient intention of ancestors, be they bones or a cherished heirloom talisman of an ancestor. Both heirlooms and bones of ancestors were very likely curated as bundled objects, always potentially agentive subjects. Bundling, in ethnographic contexts among Mayan peoples today, is a means to conserving and protecting the power of the agency of ancestors and deities. But the rendering of people to

disarticulated bones is also actually a way of objectifying and potentially generalizing ancestors into corporate groups beyond their immediate families. In the art of the Middle Preclassic period, rulers are depicted with celts bound to their limbs, denoting symbolic equivalency between bones and polished stones—these celtiform objects evolved by Classic times into lozenge-shaped symbols on limbs denoting brightness, shininess, and divinity. Polished stones could be cenotaphic representations of ancestral dead. At the Olmec site of La Venta no bones were discovered in what were intended to be tombs and burials. While some scholars think that the bones disintegrated entirely, the arrangements of artifacts suggest cenotaphic burials. Polished stone images were also used to depict spirit children, were-jaguar babies, which were bundled and possibly displayed by rulers at La Venta. These images were made from celtiform blanks. Bone equivalencies and precious talismans were insignias of royal status and possibly a means of disengaging power from lineages and investing it in sodalities of rulers.

It is no accident of discovery that during the Middle and Late Preclassic periods, high elites and potential rulers were buried in domestic lineage contexts and not in elaborate tombs within massive mortuary shrines. Rather, cenotaphic representations of rulership were buried as bundle caches in those buildings, as should be the case if the ruler was representative of the community through sodality rather than the representative of a ruling lineage. A possible representation of such a sodality was excavated from Middle Preclassic La Venta where a cache of figures carved in precious stones and arranged in a group before a symbolic scaffold—possibly a reference to accession to a throne—was recovered. These figures were buried in a circular tableau in a rounded hole representing a bundle cache on the threshold of what may have been an actual royal accession scaffold platform in the northern precinct of the site. They were worn from repeated handling and bundling before being deposited. This cache was part of the ritual termination and abandonment of La Venta as a ceremonial center. The individual figures have the almond eyes and scowling visage of the Maize God, and they depict rulers in Olmec civilization.

There are other representations of Olmec-era Maize God kings as bundles in the Early Preclassic monumental basalt head portraits at San Lorenzo and on the Middle Preclassic scaffold sculptures at La Venta that depict what appear to be metaphorical scaffold corncribs as discussed by Freidel and Reilly (2010.) Mesoamericans have stored maize in a variety of cribs above ground. The simplest are made of lashed poles that impede vermin and enhance circulation of air to slow fungus growth. The use of the simple scaffold as a royal throne for kings impersonating the Maize God continues in the Maya lowlands from the Late Preclassic Period depiction in the Pinturas Building of San Bartolo (Saturno 2009, Taube et al 2010) to the Late Classic Period Piedras Negras rulers (Taube 1988.) And there are also depictions of Olmec kings wearing bundle capes or animal pelts of the kind used for bundling (Reilly 2012, Freidel and Reilly 2010). Many peoples of southeastern Mesoamerica and the lowland Maya continued this metaphor of the ruler as the bundled embodiment of staple food and of maize in particular. The San

Bartolo king on the West Wall of the Pinturas building referenced above carries a large bundle knot of white cloth in his arms while seated on his scaffold next to his World Tree. A animal pelt of the kind used to bundle divinatory tokens (Freidel and Reilly 2010, Reilly 2012) hangs on the tree, for the king is unbundled and about to be bundled again by the crown being placed on his head. By the Late Classic Period both Maya kings and queens danced in a netted skirt or dress symbolizes the macramé net bag for carrying maize from the field.

The maize-based sodalities of the Middle Preclassic expanded the regional networks to include more areas and resources in the exchange networks, and recruited new agrarian communities as they did so. The success of the emerging world of complex societies brought more people into the communities prepared to exchange labor and goods for food security. By the Late Preclassic Period the lowland Maya polities had emerged as larger and more powerful than the Gulf Coast Olmec, but they seemed to have maintained the original sodality political structure of elected rulership. We propose that Late Preclassic Maya rulers were initiated at the regional capital of El Mirador and then ruled in collaboration with local councils constituted through kinship. The politics of kinship and kingship were likely complex and variable as is normally the case with pre-industrial states.

Background to Archaeological Evidence

Iconographic, pollen, and settlement evidence from the Gulf Coast and the Maya region suggests that while Archaic (4-3,000 BC) and Early Preclassic (2000-1000 BC) peoples engaged with maize, a commitment to maize as a core dietary staple did not happen until the Middle Preclassic Period (1000 BC., Vanderwarker and Kruger 2012). This commitment was rapid and pervasive across eastern Mesoamerica, a region characterized by significant variability in risk factors for a crop that is drought and insect sensitive. During the Middle Preclassic, the basic cuisine of the Maya region was established: maize, beans, squashes, peppers, avocados, cacao and other tree fruits.

The agrarian lifestyle of Mesoamericans was scheduled by the seasonal cycle of the solar year. The commitment of Mesoamericans, including the Maya, to staple maize was concomitant with the florescence of complexity as identified in material symbol-systems, the emergence of ceremonial centers and sedentary communities, social differentiation, and long-distance trade. People buried their dead as revered ancestors, often with material symbols of their status and community role. The burial of young people with such symbols registers the importance of kinship and the assignment of ascribed social statuses and roles through it. Arguably, the emergence of rulership as a political form first occurred at the Early Preclassic Gulf Coast Olmec site of San Lorenzo and pre-dated widespread dependence on maize agriculture. Emergent complex societies elsewhere in Mesoamerican show ties to the Olmec through material symbol systems and through long-distance trade in imperishable exotic commodities. While there was emulation of the Gulf Coast

Olmec, the Maize God rulers did not emerge until the fall of San Lorenzo and the rise of La Venta. The contribution of the lowland Maya and other peoples to the consolidation of the concept of Maize God rulers remains to be elucidated by further fieldwork. By the 8th century BCE, the institution of Maize God kingship is well established in the Olmec region. By 400 BCE it is present in the Maya lowlands. By 150 CE it is the basis for a regional civilization, and possibly a hegemonic regional state, in the Maya lowlands.