

Discontinuous Maya Identities

Culture and Ethnicity in Mayanist Discourse

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Maya archaeology has an intimate relationship with cultural anthropology. One could say that they are dependent on each other. Archaeologists use anthropological analogies from contemporary groups in the Maya area to explain their data and anthropologists sometime emphasize the originality of some social expressions as either modern, colonial or pre-Hispanic. Nowadays we have a third actor who criticizes both archaeology and anthropology. This is the Maya movement in Guatemala, led by indigenous scholars, who want to see a more ethical approach to the study of both the past and contemporary ethnic groups. In this text, I shall consider how ethnicity and culture are viewed in Maya archaeology and in this movement and see how they are both the result of a politicised, cultural thinking. The concept of material culture has a central position here, since it is believed to reflect past human culture and ethnicity.

This movement is like the negation of a discourse established by the other dominating party. As such, it is dependent on the former. When a new discourse is being constructed, it resists the dominating discourse or other opposing powers. When such

constructed histories in their turn become the official histories of ethnic movements, they tend to be defined by the very same colonialism that they oppose. They use the same units of analysis, idioms and structures (Wylie 1995:265-266). The group is formed around this discourse and the result is what Fischer writes: “In many ways the pan-Maya movement is a textbook example of an imaged [sic] community” (Fischer 2001:7).

However, this is a result of a need to be heard. The movement has had to adopt a Western discourse. Archaeologists or other scholars from the “Third World” have had to work with concepts that were developed during the colonial era. It is thus difficult to redefine the past (Wilk & Pyburn 1998:205).

What the Maya movement really needs is a complete break with “culture” thinking as this is a main theme in Mayanist archaeological thought. Therefore I shall explore the concepts of culture, ethnicity and continuity and see if they are relevant to our understanding of past identities.

Humanocentrism

Archaeology has rightfully been seen as ethnocentric, eurocentric and androcentric by various groups who have regarded themselves as neglected or marginalized in archaeological discourse. However, I would say that all archaeology is *humanocentric* (not the same meaning as anthropocentric), meaning that we tend to focus initially on the human agent or the ethnic identity, or the culture assumed to be behind the artefact(s). There is often assumed to be a straightforward line between a “chert axe” and the practice of chopping, the human being who chopped and his or her assumed, wider, socio-economic environment, even if we take other formation processes into account (Schiffer 1987). The artefacts are treated as secondary to some unknown phenomenon that we are trying to understand. A humanocentric view relies also on a culturally and even an agent-oriented concept, as we can see in the very concept of material culture. Artefacts are here mainly seen as mirroring human conditions.

However, in studying identity such as culture or ethnicity in the past, we are facing a problem which humanocentric archaeologists often ignore. Our data look different from the culture anthropological data and therefore we cannot straightforwardly use anthropological models that focus on human beings, at least not initially. Fischer argues that “the complexity of identity politics is best understood in terms of culturally logical constructions of self-identity [...] deployed in the context of local, national, and global systems of political economy” (Fischer 2001:246). This may be true for studies of contemporary people but how can we know the local, regional or global systems unless we believe in ontologically secure categories that are forever true? When humanocentric archaeologists assume that material culture reflects human conditions such as ethnic identity, they are therefore attributing to it something not seen in our present.

The important point here, which I shall pursue throughout the text, is that the leaders of the Maya movement, in their critique of non-Maya Mayanist archaeology, create just as stereotyped a view of the “Maya” as the one they criticize by basically trying to take the opposite view held by those researchers. Different people view the past differently, depending on their contemporary needs. Such subjective or collective stances will be less of a problem if we focus on material objects without assuming the contemporary social characteristics associated with them. This is what *polyagentive archaeology* aims to do. I shall make brief trips to the polyagentive world throughout this text.

Before I embark on the journey through contemporary identity politics, I shall define what I mean by the title “discontinuous Maya identities”, so that the reader will understand this from an archaeological perspective rather than any collective, contemporary feelings of continuity. By continuity, I do not exactly mean the duration Bergson (1998) proposed. I agree with him that everything is fluid, there are no strict boundaries in the world, nothing can therefore stay the same. However, I wish to emphasize a dialectic duration that emerges from creative instants (Bachelard 2000), as this, to me at least, seems to be in line with how the archaeological record appears to us: artefacts in the void.

Here we do not need continuity to explain the voids in the archaeological record. The discontinuity lies in the fact that there is in our present no relationship between an artefact and the past human agent, practice or culture (Normark 2000a). The artefact is only what we have left, and it is not the same as representative of an ethnic group or a continuous culture. Artefacts and other materialities make us redefine our identities. Thus, the materiality is continuous and can make a discontinuous identity appear continuous from a humanocentric perspective.

A short history of Maya research

For those not acquainted with Mayanist research, I shall describe this field as it is practised by North Americans, who dominate the discipline.

Even before the lawyer John Lloyd Stephens and the artist Frederick Catherwood travelled around in Mexico and Central America in the 1830s (Stephens 1993), other Westerners had visited ruins in the area, but the knowledge of these ruins was sparse. The origins of the ruins had been attributed to Atlantis, India or Phoenicia. It was with Stephens and Catherwood that Maya research took off and it was realized that the ruins had been constructed by the ancestors of the people who still lived in the area (Coe 1994). Inspired by their travel accounts and naturalistic paintings, several expeditions to the Maya lowlands soon appeared.

The writing system was from the beginning of research one of the prime targets to be understood. It was the numbering and the calendar systems that was first deciphered. Knorosov's breakthrough in the 1950s made researchers understand that the glyphs were part of a phonetic and logographic writing system, not so different from other, early, writing systems (*ibid.*).

Today, epigraphy has become a specialized branch, sometimes connected with the more "traditional", archaeological research. From the 1960s to the late 1970s, Maya archaeology became slightly more processual and materialist, focusing on environmental determinism, economy or related topics, and less interested

in textual remains or images. The aim was rather to objectify people and develop universal laws. However, the old cultural thinking inherited from the older culture-history school continued to linger over both archaeology and epigraphy. Maya archaeology never entered a “pure” processual phase, as archaeology did in the southwestern USA.

Epigraphy and iconography have by tradition been the fields for art historians and they have rarely kept a materialist view of their objects of study. It is for these reasons not much of a surprise that the decipherment of the glyphs only slightly affected the culture-history/processual “paradigm” within Maya archaeology. However, in the last two decades, there have been more studies on the “ideological”, “cosmological” or “symbolic” aspects of material culture (Demarest 2000; Freidel *et al.* 1993; Schele & Miller 1986). There are still problems in part of this field of research since the majority of those who study archaeological remains from a “symbolic” or “ideological” perspective have very little theorization of what they are studying. For example, the popular and influential book *Maya Cosmos* by Freidel and others (1993) is not anchored in any substantial theoretical framework. It is as if the abundance of fascinating iconography, massive structures and the “exoticism” of the environment and the “culture” have made Mayanists pay less attention to what has been done in other fields. Many bibliographies do not include research from other fields than “Mayanist” or “Mesoamericanist” literature. There are some notable exceptions, but mainstream Maya archaeology is still following paths staked out thirty to forty years ago. For instance, the post-processual theories seem not to have come to the attention of most Mayanists, apart from the younger generation. Thus, postcolonial ideas of who interprets what and for whom and why have thus far attracted only a limited few.

Self-reflective analysis of what archaeologists do is often lacking. Archaeologists tend to believe that they have the authority to interpret the past (Zimmerman 2001:174). They also tend to believe that archaeology benefits all people and they seek knowledge just for the sake of knowing (Tsosie 1997:66). To claim that scientific purposes are more important than respect for the

living descendants is ethnocentric (Jemison 1997:61). Archaeology has in some cases denied people's access to their perceived past and sometimes it has supported oppressive regimes. Indeed, archaeology has been used to justify ethnic conflicts and to destroy people's identity (Wilk & Pyburn 1998:197-198). This is part of the colonial environment in which archaeology emerged. We are still biased, as the Maya movement has pointed out.

Old suppositions that have been linked to "objective" western science should therefore be criticized. All knowledge is linked to power relations. So it is today and so it has been in the past. It should therefore be emphasized that most of the epigraphic information is in English. Only a portion has been translated into Spanish, and much less is available in any Maya language. In terms of archaeological literature, the difference is not as great. However, there is thus a substantial power relationship here, regarding who has had the right or rather the ability to interpret the archaeological record. It is time to investigate how this has been done and sometimes continues to be practised.

The archaeological and epigraphic research

There has been an explosion in the search for the doings of "great men" and the pattern of "superpowers", outlined by Martin and Grube (1995, 2000). However, there are several problems with the contemporary focus on rulers, lists of kings and "ideology" in Maya studies. Iconography and epigraphy deal with expressive media but most of the social context surrounding the texts has gone. On the other hand, archaeological interpretations have usually derived from one of many social theories developed elsewhere (cultural ecology, structuralism, Marxism, etc.), most often from theories that try to homogenize a society to a normative ideal. However, in their critique of these different, normative ideals, the leaders of the Maya movement are creating other normative and essentialist ideals which in my view are even more problematic.

In my view, we need to abandon the culture concept altogether, since it permeates both sides of thought. Culture has

been used to describe a static totality. Anthropologists, epigraphers and archaeologists alike have talked and still talk about the “Maya culture” as if it existed as the same entity in 1000 B.C. and today. The critique that the Maya movement launches has less impact than it could have, since they have also adopted the culture concept. Any criticism of a certain approach is part of the discourse that it tries to criticise. This is certainly true for my own text, in which I argue that the Maya movement in their critique fall into the same discourse hierarchy that they oppose.

Archaeology has sometimes been the dominant society’s tool. For many native people, it is just another tool of oppression (Zimmerman 1997:54). Some have seen archaeology in, for example, the Maya area as scientific colonialism, since the centre of producing knowledge is to be found among other peoples than those seen to be their descendants (Zimmerman 2001:169). I think that the linkage between culture and materiality (“material culture”) increases the politicised view of the past. Material culture as a concept is used in a humanocentric way to explain something other than the objects. Here, archaeologists tend to use “ontologically” secure categories, believed to relate to material culture, such as economies, gender and cosmology.

However, contemporary categories and abstractions are historically specific constructions and not essential entities (Foucault 1972). Many of the “traditional”, high-level abstract-ions, such as economy, ideology, religion, power, etc., have in this sense been more or less devalued or lost their meaning owing to fuzzy uses of them.

Examples of such concepts are culture and social evolution. Many Mesoamericanists are still thinking in cultural groups; Maya, Zapotecs, Olmecs, Aztecs, etc. are more or less normative descriptions of idealized cultures constructed by modern researchers. In this view, “cultures are superorganic, existing above and determining the behavior of individuals” (Kowalewski *et al.* 1992:260). The fact that ceramics, architecture and art are to some extent similar over a wide area does not indicate that the past people thought of themselves as “Maya” or as members of a specific social group. I doubt that any researcher believes this, but

still they say that the ancient Maya did this and that, implying an ethnic or “cultural” identity. Problems occur when Mayanists try to explain something that is out of the assumed, “Maya”, cultural pattern and does not fit into the general picture, such as “ethnic” traces of Teotihuacanos in the Maya lowlands. We would be better off if we did not use such homogenizing concepts. We should go from a perception of ready-made cultures to social formations that are non-monolithic, always changing and never static.

Lurking beneath the dark waters of the culture concept, we find the concept of social evolution. Social scientists have created the “traditional” society as the opposite of modern society under the influence of an evolutionary and ethnocentric idea of progress (Pyburn 1990:191). The use of evolutionary schemas has also created limitations and stereotypical views of past societies. Stanton and Gallareta Negrón have recently opposed this linear transformation in Mayanist studies, in which variability in social formations is being neglected. Evolutionary schemas “artificially compress similar yet diverse forms of organization into categories that treat them as the same” (Stanton & Gallareta Negrón 2001:231).

In such a view, people are believed to be located at different evolutionary stages. Those contemporary people on a lower stage are seen as exotic, classless and poor. Westerners can give them advancement on the evolutionary ladder and give them democracy (Hervik 1999:172). Such ideas are enforced by popular media, such as the *National Geographic* magazine, which make ahistorical evolutionary generalizations to exoticize non-western people (ibid. 186). The *National Geographic* magazine misrepresents the Maya, since it is not produced to tell the “truth” but is directed toward a particular audience that reads the magazine (Hervik 2003:60).

Westerners have created this view. They invented other words to describe the indigenous people to make them appear more primitive. Examples of such words are chiefs, instead of lords or kings; medicine men, instead of priests; warriors instead of soldiers and tribes, instead of nations (Smith 1994:34). Such a view is also

described by Castañeda (1996:108), who argues that the Maya culture is the result of “discursive practices in which Maya alterity has been appropriated for use in Western constructions of what it is to be ‘civilized’ as measured against non-European derived social forms”.

Maya research has therefore a teleological view, which has been negative in the creation of a modern pan-Maya identity. The most obvious manifestation is in the names of the archaeological periods. In the earlier phases of Maya research, “the ancient Maya culture” was seen as Mesoamerica’s classical Greek period and its “florescence” was labelled “Classic” after the pattern in classical Greek and Roman archaeology. This period was then used to label the preceding period “Preclassic” or “Formative” and the succeeding period “Postclassic”. This view still remains in the field. It is from the “Classic” period that everything else is measured. Art, architecture and achievements are valued and given less scientific and nineteenth-century-style criteria, such as “marvellous”, “greatest king” and “florescence”. Thus, there is less appreciation of the Postclassic, colonial or contemporary groups. For example, in Michael Coe’s fifth edition of *The Maya* from 1993, we can read the following evaluation of Postclassic architecture at Tulum: “The principal temple, a *miserable* structure called the Castillo” (Coe 1993:159, my emphasis). Even more illuminating is this quote from the same book: “The Lacandón appear to be *pathetic* survivors of a larger group” (ibid. 24-26, my emphasis).

Another problem is the use of ethnographic analogies, a tempting, deceiving and dangerous pit into which I myself fell in an earlier study (Normark 2000). Both processual and post-processual archaeology have used analogies, but in a very different sense. Hodder (1982) has argued that some analogies are more valid than others, but how do we decide which ones to use? Analogies are especially common in American and Mesoamerican archaeology, since they have primarily studied the Other, the Indian (cf. Fahlander, in this book). For example, the use of shamanism as an explanation of Mesoamerican art has reinforced the idea of an ahistorical, apolitical and irrational “Other”.

Materialists have focused on social change and cultural differences in the art, but the idealists have seen (religious) ideas as the determinants of art and they have focused on assumed, universal and cognitive similarities (Klein *et al.* 2002:384-388).

Maya archaeology is surprisingly ahistorical, despite the recent focus on political history. Analogies with contemporary Maya groups are frequent, as if time has stood still (Pyburn 1998b:125). Cultural continuity is in some cases taken for granted (but not in other cases, as we shall see) and, since Mayanists tend to follow a meta-narrative, it also describes a static, almost timeless continuity of certain beliefs and practices. This traditional past is contrasted with the modernity of our time (Hervik 1999:190).

Thus, historical analogies give an aura of static societies, despite the fact that every author claims that that is not his or her intention. How long does a “tradition” actually exist (and do they really exist other than in culture-area concepts)? By expanding the area of analogies (both spatially and temporally), researchers can always find an analogy suitable for their objective(s). However, it was not only the Spanish colonialism that affected the indigenous peoples of the Maya area; other “cultures” such as “Olmecs”, “Teotihuacanos”, “Toltecs” and “Aztecs”, did so as well.

The archaeological remains at Maya sites have been used to study the social structure, political complexity, economic foundation and cosmology which are supposed to have existed in these social formations. A discerning trend is toward ethnic studies of the ancient Maya, as seen in the theme of the ninth European Maya Conference in Bonn, Germany, in December 2004.

However, as already mentioned, these given, high-level abstractions are not essential; they are fictions which archaeologists use to classify and order the bulk of the information which they collect during field work. The traditional, analytical abstractions indicate different kinds of interaction that cannot be separated from each other, since they to a large extent overlap.

Instead of trying to fit archaeological or iconographical data into a fixed, anthropological model, I argue that we should start from the material data itself. One solution would be to free archaeological theory from top-down approaches. What joins

ethnicity, economics, politics, social structure and ideology together is not even social practice and discourses, as Foucault (1979) would have argued, but human agency. However, the past human agents are not available to us; our data consist of artefacts. Human beings and artefacts share some similar, causal capabilities. I call this *polyagency* to distinguish it from human agency (Normark 2004a, 2004b). Polyagency is one of the few things that human beings and materiality have in common, no matter real or fictional entities there may be in a social formation, such as ecology, class, ethnicity or gender. Polyagency is cognate with the term “*in-between*” (Grosz 2001). Here the focus is not on the Cartesian dualism of mind or matter, but what is in-between, the becoming.

In this text I use the concept of Maya or Maya culture in the same way as most researchers have done. However, I do not at all agree with such diffuse, culture-group labels. I would like to see a more micro-level-oriented research in Mayanist studies, focusing on polyagency and agency (by agency, I do not mean the simplified version most Mayanists have used see, for example, Fash 2002). There are many problems in what a definition of agency should look like, as most agency-oriented theories have been criticised for focusing on a modern, capitalist, middle-class, western male. This is not the place to discuss agency, but to me there are no such things as “culture” or “ethnicity” in the archaeological record that can be related to human agency. We can only find material evidence of polyagency, what I call *polyagents* (anything that has polyagency) (Normark 2004a). I shall at the end of this text argue that these should be the foundation for studies of past identities and not an imaginary human agent’s mind in the past. But we need to look first at how identities are formed today, to see if such processes can be found in materiality.

As mentioned earlier, North American or European researchers are doing most of the epigraphic research. Can these ever get an emic view of the past “Maya” societies? Neither can an indigenous researcher; the past is just as much the Other for those of the present who claim to be their descendants. It would be odd for me to suggest that I have an emic “Viking” view, since I come

from the same area and most likely have distant “blood ties” with this people. Anyway, in the Maya movement, there is a belief in cultural continuity of this sort. Clearly, the Maya movement has a political agenda different from mine.

I hope that both Maya archaeologists and members of the Maya movement can abandon the infected culture concept, since it reflects ideas that emerged at the beginning of our discipline and in the contra-enlightenment (Wolf 1999). There are other ways to study the past material remains without using rigid culture concepts. Less rigid but more wide-ranging and less clearly defined, “culture” or “ethnicity” concepts are even worse, since they definitely lack any operational value (cf. Johannesen, in this book).

Since the Maya movements want to take part of the growing data and knowledge of those who lived in their area before the arrival of the Spaniards, I hope that they can contribute a view that is not anchored in the old archaeological discourse that permeates processual and post-processual archaeology. This is not so now.

Guatemalan identities

The last century has brought considerable changes and transformations of the localized identities of the Guatemalan indigenous population. They are now developing the national and international identity of a “pan-Maya culture”. A thirty-year-long civil war, which officially ended in 1996, has to a greater extent than anything else formed these new identities. Indigenous leaders have in this process created a movement which emphasizes the pre-Hispanic cultural heritage. In the search for and creation of an independent and unaffected “Maya culture”, they have turned to archaeological remains, the vigesimal number system and the calendars. The hieroglyphic writing has gained a central position in this movement, since it is believed to give “authentic voices” of the past (Houston 2000:141). Often they use the results from archaeological and epigraphic research, which is dominated by Americans and Ladinos. Thus, there is a conflict between the

Maya leaders, the Maya commoners, the Ladinos and foreign researchers.

A discussion of what the Maya were and are has partially its origin in the colonial and the post-colonial environment, since the discussion of the relation between the Maya and the Ladino is unavoidable in Guatemala. Ladinos consider themselves to be a biologically distinct group. In reality, they are a mixture of “Europeans” and “Maya” (Fischer & Brown 1996:9).

The Maya movement claims that 50-60% of Guatemala’s approximately twelve million people are Maya. Guatemala also has Garifuna, European and Asian immigrants, but these only make up 1 percent of the total population. The rest are Ladinos, who can be defined as those who do not fit into other categories. They dominate the country’s politics and economy (Fischer & Brown 1996:9; Warren 1998:8). The total number of Maya-speaking people in the world is seven to eight million, if we include groups in Mexico, Belize, Honduras and El Salvador (Cojtí Cuxil 1996:21). Twenty Maya languages are spoken in Guatemala and nine in Mexico. Some languages are spoken by over a million people, whereas others are near extinction (England 1996:178).

The long civil war in Guatemala had profound ethnic and racist currents. It created a wave of revitalization in several communities and led to the formation of the Maya movement. The long road towards a more rightful treatment of the indigenous population was noticed in 1992, when the K’iche’ woman Rigoberta Menchú received the Nobel Peace Prize. An agreement on the indigenous population’s rights was signed in 1995. This document states that the contemporary Maya are descendants of an ancient people who speak different but historically related languages. Further, the Maya languages are supposed to be taught in schools, the syncretic religion of the Mayas is recognized and the indigenous population should participate in the administration of archaeological sites (Warren 1998:53, 56). Maya people are still underrepresented at universities in both Guatemala and Mexico. One percent of the Maya population gain university education. These universities do

not teach Maya history or glyphs, so they have to study abroad (Grube & Fahsen 2002:218).

Undoubtedly, there will be more archaeological researchers who are indigenous themselves in the future. The question is how the Maya movement, which was formed during the civil war, will affect archaeology and anthropology, since they want researchers to adapt to their objects of study. To make things good after centuries of oppression, archaeologists are urged to interpret the result according to contemporary political and social needs. Requests are being made for artefacts that are now in foreign collections to be returned and the activists want the lowland archaeological sites to be declared as sacred sites (Houston 2000:140).

Although I welcome this in general, I believe that there will be problems for research if archaeologists are to view their data through a contemporary, outspoken, political agenda. What kind of stereotypical ideas will archaeologists be writing if they cannot write what they feel is the current “truth”? One can, of course, claim that Maya research has always been political but that has for the most part not been intentional. It is to be hoped that we will not need to continue this conflict, which derives from similar discourse that has generated stereotyped versions of each other.

Stereotypes

All groups so far mentioned have their own stereotyped versions of the contemporary and ancient Maya. There is usually a discrepancy between how the ancient Maya are seen, as compared with the contemporary groups. The former’s “material culture” is seen as high art and the latter is seen as folk art. The present people are dismissed and the past is patronized in this way (Pyburn 1999a:111). The contemporary Maya are seen as subordinate to supposedly purer ancestors (ibid. 116). Among earlier archaeologists, such as Morley, the authentic Maya culture was that of the pre-Hispanic era (Hervik 1999:182).

The contemporary Mayas of Guatemala see themselves as harmonic, altruistic, righteous and disciplined (LeBaron

1993:269). People of the Maya movement see the Maya as the prime movers of Guatemala. The country's identity is given through Maya symbols, and economically the Maya also contribute by being exploited in modern plantations (Montejo 1999b:18-19). Ladinos describe the contemporary Maya of Guatemala as lazy, evil, drunks and immoral (LeBaron 1993). Anthropologists have described the contemporary Maya as conservative keepers of a timeless culture. This is often seen as a choice and not as the result of poverty or oppression (Pyburn 1998a:124).

Archaeologists have slightly different views of the past Maya, owing to the content of archaeological data. Eric Thompson saw the Classic period Maya as peace-loving priests (Wilk 1985). Linda Schele, Mary Miller and David Freidel have emphasized a violent past, which has received great popular attention (Schele & Freidel 1990; Schele & Miller 1986). In this view, war followed astronomical constellations and ecstatic states following blood-letting (Castañeda 1996:148-149).

There are many different stereotypes of archaeologists as well. The predominant one is that archaeologists are looters, despite the fact that most looting is performed by non-archaeologist Guatemalans. However, some people living near archaeological sites see no difference in the sites being destroyed by construction companies or when archaeologists "save" them (Wilk & Pyburn 1998:199). For indigenous people, there is seldom any distinction if a burial is destroyed for commercial reasons or to gain knowledge about the past (Tsosie 1997:74). Archaeologists are sometimes blamed for exploiting sites for their own careers and for caring less about the descendant community (Hanna 1997:74). In any case, archaeologists have often been ignorant of how the natives feel about human remains (Nicholas & Andrews 1997:9) or how they interpret the archaeological data (Wilk & Pyburn 1998:204-205). However, some people do see the archaeologist as someone who may restore or protect a cultural heritage (Zimmerman 1994a:211).

The archaeologists' own view of archaeology is that it is something that they are doing for the natives (Pyburn 1999a:356).

Archaeologists tend to see themselves as “discoverers and protectors of the past” (Zimmerman 1994a:213), since the native Americans’ belief systems are often seen as antithetical to science (Pyburn 1999a:358).

However, the attacks on archaeology by the Maya movement and some anthropologists usually have patronizing tendencies themselves. The Mayas are told by the movement that archaeology is not good for them, that is, they tend to have some “colonizing” attitudes themselves. I dare say that most archaeologists know more about the past Maya than most contemporary Maya do. Those people who tend to generalize both Maya and archaeologists into opposing collectives create an unnecessary dichotomy that rests on the culture concept.

Origins of the Maya movement

Fischer claims that “ethnicity has eclipsed the importance of class identity in stimulating struggles of resistance” (Fischer 2001:24). This trend may have been fuelled by the “decentralization of capital accumulation at the global scale”, which has benefited marginal groups (ibid. 66).

The modern ethnification in the Maya region had its origin in the mid 20th century. Leading Ladinos in Guatemala tried to integrate the Maya population into the national state between 1944 and 1954, in the hope of a better economic development in Guatemala. This development frightened important, conservative, Ladino groups and the Ladino reformists were overthrown by the military, who were supported by the USA (LeBaron 1993:272-273).

In the civil war that eventually broke out, the Evangelists grew in importance during the 1960s and 1970s. Their success depended on social marginalization, lack of property, migration and urbanization. The Evangelist missionaries worked with the indigenous population in their own languages, which the Catholics had not done, despite the fact that few of the Mayas were bilingual. The Evangelists were positive to the Maya

languages and their clothes but they rejected the saint cult that had been central in the syncretic religion (Wilson 1995:169-170).

The civil war in Guatemala strengthened the consciousness of ethnicity among both Ladinos and Maya. This was partly due to the ethnic oppression of the indigenous people in the late 1970s and early 1980s (Fischer 1996:63). The government tried to integrate the Maya into the Ladino society as a second class, by destroying the indigenous identities, but this had the opposite effect (Fischer & Brown 1996:12; Wilson 1995:29).

In the old, local, Maya villages, where “mountain cults” had been predominant, the Bible came to be more important and this initiated the idea of a more universal society (Wilson 1995:179-204). This led to a different view of the society and the search for a new identity.

The Evangelists’ success also affected the Catholics, who began to use the Maya languages in their mission. The Catholics, who held Bible studies at, for example, Coban in Alta Verapaz, taught that the Kekchi Maya were descendants of the Classic Maya culture. The ancient Maya’s social structure was idealized and it was argued that a collective had owned land and property. Alcoholism did not exist in the past. Central Mexican people or conquistadors were to blame for less pleasant social traits, such as human sacrifice and warfare (Wilson 1995:269). Such ideas are legacies from the Carnegie institution which created the dichotomy between the Maya and the central Mexican cultural areas. The Maya were thought to have given the Mexicans civilized culture, such as writing and art. The central Mexicans gave the Maya war (Castañeda 1996:140). The biblical courses also taught that the ancient Maya worshipped a Jewish-Christian god. The similarities between the depiction of the World Tree and the Christian cross were thought to be the evidence for this idea (Wilson 1995:270).

In short, Bible courses held at various places and the chaos of the civil war led to the formation of an imagined, pan-Maya tradition. These courses encouraged the re-creation of older traditions and a political agenda for the Maya movement.

The Maya movement and its critics

The Maya movement seeks to study what is uncontaminated by Spanish influence. They emphasize language revitalization, schools where Maya languages are to be spoken, the study of Maya chronicles, history and hieroglyphs, the recreation of old norms and the rights of indigenous people (Warren 1998:39). The movement therefore emphasizes the essence of “Maya culture”.

Essentialism makes “simplistic or universalising assumptions about domination and uncritically assumes the possibilities or impossibilities of resistance based on a particular form of collective identity” (Knauft 1996:255). In essentialism, the diversity is reduced to social categories. Such essentialism is the trait list of what is needed to be a Mesoamerican culture (Kirchoff 1943). Archaeologists often use such trait lists.

The Maya movement to reclaim authority from the state uses essentialism. Thus, there is a conflict between the movement and post-modern thinkers, since they emphasize plurality and relativity (Fischer & Brown 1996:4). Anti-essentialism is relativistic and this makes it morally ambiguous. It is for such reasons that the movement questions the intention of foreign researchers. Instead, the leaders of the movement claim that there are culturally specifically Mayan ways of knowledge, something others cannot have (Warren 1998:37).

Thus, there is also an anti-anti-essentialism, in which commonality and continuity found in the culture concept are still used, while also accounting for individual variation (Fischer 2001:14). Still, in such a view, culture becomes deterministic and more important than the individual. Individual variation is depended on the culture. Transformed into archaeological contexts, we would still need to focus on economy, ethnicity or culture behind the artefact. We would still maintain a humanocentric view. Thus, I reject deterministic and essential approaches in archaeology that try to homogenize the artefacts into something that they are not. We must therefore separate archaeology from anthropology; we are simply not dealing with the same data. There are historical and contemporary reasons why the Maya

movement uses essentialism, but I see no reason for archaeology to do so.

The essentialism that the Maya movement proposes has several sources. One is that indigenous groups do not like to be described as victims of progress, as this excludes them from economic opportunity (Pyburn 1999b:195). Therefore, the Maya movement seek to undermine the authority of *kaxlan* (foreign, Spanish, non-Maya) beliefs that have dominated our understanding of past people in the Maya area (Warren 1998:37). European sources have always been seen as more relevant for history-making (Wylie 1995:259). Ladinos present chronicles from the contact period as neutral sources to study and describe the nation's history. For these reasons, the native's explanations have usually been seen as ignorant (Hanna 1997:74).

Works written by non-Maya are therefore critically examined. Texts by Sam Colop, Cojtú Cuxil, and Raxche' are all polemic in their character and indicate a stubborn resistance to the assimilation policy of the Ladinos. Colop attacks the common idea that the contact-period Maya thought that the Spaniards were gods. It is argued that this is no more than a Spanish fabrication to make the indigenous population look superstitious or retarded and to justify oppression. Colop, on the other hand, describes, in a traditional manner, the Spanish conquest as a genocide. Others have questioned this cruelty, since the English deliberately created the idea of cruel Spaniards during the Reformation (Warren 1998:137-155).

Ladino critics claim that the "Maya culture" is ladinoized and that Guatemala is part of a globalisation process in which a particular "Maya culture" cannot exist. Some Ladino historians argue that the history or languages of the Mayas should not be studied at all, since this may threaten the unity of the nation and thus is dangerous for the Mayas' own cause (Warren 1998:137-138). The Maya movement rejects such criticism and sees, for example, the *titulos* (chronicles and legal documents) as sacred Maya texts and uses them in the political discourse. Some of them believe that the colonial documents are direct translations of hieroglyphic codices. Thus they believe that there is continuity in

content, despite the change in writing system (Houston 2000:129; Tedlock 1996:28-29).

Members of the movement do not call themselves a nationalistic movement, since that may recall the conflicts in former Yugoslavia or Rwanda. The movement is national and sometimes transnational, which is a remarkable contrast to the local identity that for a long time dominated in the Maya area, where sharing the same space as other people generated a shared idea of community and of how to behave properly (Fischer 2001:17). Most contemporary Maya trace their identity to the local place and a known genealogy. These people trace their identity maybe four generations back (ibid. 84).

As a contrast, the pan-Mayanists trace their identity roots to pre-Hispanic societies. Some Maya activists, such as Cojtú Cuxil (1996), want to see a return to ethnic sovereignty, followed by the re-establishment of territories that existed before the conquest. The movement has therefore produced new maps, instead of Guatemala's administrative departments. These show the extent of the language groups (Fischer 2001:128).

The Maya movement thus reclaims land, both for economic and for religious concerns (Cojtú Cuxil 1996:31). For these reasons, they have been accused of separatism and ethnic polarization. They are also blamed for being racists, since they emphasize the Maya languages and are opponents of marriages across the language barrier.

The movement is also criticized for being an elitist construction by people who seldom speak fluent Maya. They are well educated, economically independent, and seldom represent the conditions under which the majority of the Maya population live (Brown 1996:170; Warren 1998:11, 22). A common critique of the movement is that it idealizes the Maya community and that it focuses on culture and not on poverty or landholding issues. Some Ladinos go so far as claim that the movement has been constructed only to support the tourist market. The Maya leaders see these arguments as disturbing and argue that these Ladino critics deprive the Maya of their humanity and treat them as objects of consumption (Warren 1998:41-43).

The Maya movement does not have the same impact in Yucatán in Mexico. Hervik explains the differences between ethnic revitalization in Guatemala and in Yucatán by saying that the one in Guatemala is better organized in a social movement, whereas in Yucatán it is more sporadic and individual. Yucatec Maya put less emphasis on shared ethnic identity (Hervik 2003:129). There is so far less of an imagined community of essentialism from the past to present among Yucatecs. For instance, people in the Yucatec town of Oxkutzcab do not consider themselves to be the descendants of those who constructed the nearby pyramids (ibid. 94). Further, “contemporary [Yucatec] Mayas do not see themselves as survivors of a lost civilization, but rather as modern people in a modern nation” (Hervik 2003:108). “Westerners” like to see the Maya groups as survivors of the past. But then how many Americans see themselves as survivors of the pilgrims of the Mayflower?

As mentioned before, I see the Maya movement as the negation or reaction to a discourse established by western scholars. Knowledge and power are connected, since discourses produce what is reality. Discourses create subjects, and affect the way in which they view themselves, their own position and what the world is like. This is structured by symbolic schemes (Foucault 1979:194). These discourses are then taken for granted. This seems to be the case with the Maya movement. They use the same categories established by the scholars whom they oppose. Bhabha (1994:95) argues that an indigenous population’s “culture” is not imposed by a colonial culture, but rather that both they and the colonisers are created within colonialism. Modernity is therefore not only the creation of western values. However, all “cultures” are hybrids; there are no “pure cultures”. They have all participated in the creation of modernity. “Cultures” are not homogenous but are built up from many different agents and fractions, in which ethnicity and identity derive from different sources. Thus, Ladinos and Maya have emerged in the same discourse.

Bhabha uses the third space as a metaphor for this kind of hybrid. The archaeological discourse can be seen as such a third

space. In this space, practices and values must be negotiated and this may lead to misunderstandings (ibid. 37). Norms are changed in this third space. Those that are contradictory create conflicts (ibid. 218). Conflicts within the third space may actually increase differences rather than homogenize them. Some groups may thus search for their own roots and will create a continuous sequence to form a unified identity. However, is the Maya movement's view of cultural continuity real or fictitious?

Problems of cultural and ethnic continuity

The general view of an old and "uncontaminated" culture from the pre-Hispanic time is, of course, not accurate if we look into our available data. The contacts between the Ladinos and the Maya have undoubtedly changed the Maya societies, and the Ladinos as well.

The main problem between most archaeologists and the Maya movement is whether there is a cultural continuity or discontinuity. Several archaeologists use ethnographic analogies with contemporary Maya groups and they thus believe in continuity. This is the main theme that I criticize in this text. However, the opposite view is also problematic. In general, archaeologists all over the world tend to see cultures of the past as extinct and therefore claim to have the right to investigate them. Continuity between the past and the present people is therefore neglected. There is a tendency among these archaeologists to think that, without archaeology, the indigenous people do not have a past (Zimmerman 1994b:64). Social change after the Postclassic period in the Maya area tends to be seen as contamination by Europeans. This has given rise to the idea that cultures have collapsed rather than adapted to changing circumstances.

The chronological division of the past into different and often unrelated periods creates a belief in a disconnection between the distant past and the not so distant past (Schmidt & Patterson 1995:16). Some archaeologists deny that there is a continuous, native, cultural tradition related to the archaeological remains (Layton 1994:1). For example, the bones of white people have

been seen to represent a continuous, cultural tradition, whereas native bones tend to be attributed to an extinct, cultural tradition and only serve as biological data (ibid. 14-15).

No matter what standpoint we take, we must acknowledge that there are “cultural” elements that have survived better than others. But this is not a complete culture. It would thus be better to investigate such patterns through a genealogy developed by Nietzsche and Foucault (1979).

This is not done, since such “surviving” elements are used to strengthen the pan-Maya identity of an essential Maya culture for the Maya movement or help to interpret mute material culture among archaeologists. For example, the most common visible identity marker in the present, and maybe in the past as well, is the clothes. Female Maya movement activists point to the design of their clothes and the old traditions of their weaving technique (Otzoy 1996:148). Critics claim that the Maya clothes are a colonial creation, but there are too many iconographic depictions of pre-Hispanic clothes for there to be any doubt that there is a long continuity from the pre-Hispanic times. Monumental art from the Classic period sites of Yaxchilán, Palenque and Naranjo, as well as several ceramic paintings and figurines show clothing that has similar modern versions (Looper 2002; Reents-Budet *et al.* 1994; Tate 1992). However, this shows continuity in cloth production and design. Is it a continuity of cultural or even ethnic markers? Apparently, people in contemporary Oxkutzcab emphasize that changing clothes does not create cultural change and that people are still the same. *Catrínes* (“Maya” with western clothes) are therefore not bearers of Hispanic culture (Hervik 2003:34). What then is ethnicity if it is not connected with material objects that archaeologists may find?

To begin with, ethnicity is not biology. The beliefs in the similarities between “race” and “culture” have not had many followers in the past fifty years or so. Sociobiologists have tried to link biology with culture. They argue that material culture, language and customs are affected by people tied to each other genetically (Gosden 1999:195). I do not believe that this connection is biologically derived. For example, the Lacandón

have been formed from several subgroups that have run away from Spaniards and thus they form no biological continuity for this particular ethnic group (Hervik 2003:25).

Ethnicity is therefore a social construct, but is it essential to all “cultures”? Ethnic and culture thinking are linked to the rise of nationalism. There were other identity markers in the past (Anderson 1991). This is something researchers tend to forget.

Ethnicity demands a common history that will become the group’s myth of origin. There is a feeling of cultural continuity, which is also seen as natural and which has roots into the distant past (Eriksen 1995:252-255). Ethnic identity is often more important between groups that are “culturally” similar and they tend to develop strong, ethnic-identity markers (Eriksen 1993:38).

Hervik uses the concepts of materiality and semantic density to develop an idea of ethnicity. Categories, such as the Maya, coexist with materiality and perception. However, this term cannot in itself indicate the meanings associated with it. The semantic density is therefore only revealed through practice. When it comes to the social categories in the Maya area, there are some meanings that we consider to be more important than others (Hervik 2003:25). Archaeologists and anthropologists alike have created their own “Maya”, because we believe some categories are more important than others. In archaeology, we have focused on style, but does style really reflect ethnicity? I shall return to this later.

Further, “the study of ethnicity and ethnic groups needs to take self-identifications as its point of departure rather than turning to comparisons with neighbouring groups, abstract theories of ethnic identity, and political ideologies in search of analytical terms” (Hervik 2003:53). How can we reach the self-identifications in the archaeological and epigraphic record? Maybe emblem glyphs on a rough scale can do that trick, but these are just titles used by rulers and cannot relate to ethnicity as such.

As Eriksen writes, “we should keep in mind that neither ethnic groups nor nations are eternal. They appear, flourish and vanish” (Eriksen 1995:277) and “ethnicity is relational and processual: it is

not a ‘thing’, but an aspect of a social process” (Eriksen 1995:250). These are critical statements whose contents are problematic to apply in archaeological settings. Ethnicity does not lie in artefacts. The past does not exist and we only have artefacts and no past processes available to us. However, let us focus on how ethnicity is seen in cultural anthropological discourse.

Instrumentalism and primordialism

According to Warren (1998:70-71), there are four misconceptions about Maya ethnicity (among the Maya movement, archaeologists and anthropologists alike). The first is that “indianness” is the product of one historic period (either pre-Hispanic or colonial). The second is that cultural changes will lead to the loss of a culture. The third is that ethnic identity will disappear with social changes. The fourth is that ethnic identity is created in relation to the dominant culture. Most anthropologists who follow these misconceptions tend to romanticize the contemporary, indigenous population. They want to protect them, a concept that has its predecessor in the Indian reservations in the USA (Houston 2000).

These misconceptions lay the foundations of two distinguishable traditions within the Mayanist view of cultural and ethnic identity and continuity. The first is in a Barthian tradition and emphasizes ethnic dualism. Banks (1996) calls this *instrumentalism*. Barth argued that it is boundaries that define a group and not the cultural content that they surround. We should thus care less about dress, language or custom, since the markers of ethnicity are arbitrary and can vary and change. The past has just a little effect on cultural markers and these are only an ideological construction of the present (Barth 1969:15). People change or reconfigure their ethnic identities for beneficial reasons. Ethnic identity is thus not static. The Maya identity has in this view been shaped in opposition to the Spaniards and the Ladinos. The identity is thus a colonial and post-colonial product (setting earlier contacts between, for example, the Maya area and Teotihuacán aside for a while).

The other tradition is one of *primordialism*, in which ethnicity is a natural human identity (Banks 1996:39). Here the ethnic differences have always existed and the origin of ethnic differences is not of major concern. Ethnic identity comes from kinship (both affinal and consanguine) and a shared custom and language that tie people together (Gosden 1999:190). In the Maya area, primordialists claim that the Maya identity is an indigenous tradition from pre-Hispanic times until the present. This view derives more from the content of ethnicity. To this tradition, we can ascribe most Mayanists and the Maya movement's "pan-Maya" approach. The Maya movement ascribes new meanings to "traditional" symbols in an attempt to construct a unified and internally defined, Maya identity.

The primordialists thus invent traditions (Hobsbawm 1983) and imagine a community (Anderson 1991). To do this, they sometimes use publications by well-known epigraphers and archaeologists. Ethnic markers are tied to historical meanings studied by these researchers, a cultural content that Barth rejected. Identity is created around symbols that over time can describe totally different meanings. The problem is thus to trace the ethnic history or identity without falling into essentialism, as the Maya movement has done. Most researchers would not agree to this, but, by using analogies, we do in fact claim cultural continuity.

There is some continuity from the past that has been transformed by colonialism and industrialism, but these traditions have always been subject to changes. The traditions and rituals that are associated with imagined traditions from the industrialism have older origins or parallels (Ranger 1993:7-24), something that epigraphy and archaeology sometimes indicate. Societies were thus not static before the arrival of the Europeans. The "Maya" were in contact with "Olmecs", "Zoqueans", "Teotihuacanos", "Toltecs" and "Aztecs".

Since it is now possible to read most of the hieroglyphic writing, it is possible to see contemporary similarities with older social practices. However, the encouragement of studies which emphasize the vitality of the Maya culture and continuity in

language, culture and religion from pre-Hispanic times has led to the emergence of a problem. A huge portion of past and present Maya archaeology and epigraphy makes analogies with colonial or modern societies in the Maya area. Popular sources for analogies are Diego de Landa's account (Tozzer 1941), Popol Vuh (Edmonson 1971; Tedlock 1996), the Chilam B'alam books (Liljefors Persson 2000), ethnographic research by, for example, Vogt (1969, 1976), Gossen (1984), Redfield and Villa Rojas (1962) or the Tedlocks (Tedlock 1992; Tedlock & Tedlock 1985). If we ignore these facts, then we undoubtedly see continuity, but it is continuity with little support. The use of the results of the latest research to show a vital and ancient culture is thus problematic. A circle is created in which the present confirms the past and the past confirms continuity with the present, since the Maya activists are convinced that very little syncretism has occurred.

“Maya” identity in the past

As already mentioned, I believe that both Maya archaeologists and the Maya movement have fallen into the same trap of “culture” thinking. When the Maya movement in their essentialism claim continuity with the pre-Hispanic people, they use a high level of generalization and see their “culture” as static and immune to external influences. Unfortunately, this is also true for the archaeologists who use analogies to explain what they cannot explain otherwise.

Processual archaeology has focused on local adaptations to the environment. The culture has in this tradition been seen in a functionalistic fashion. Post-processual archaeologists introduced Barth's ideas and studied differences in identity in the past. However, many Mayanists maintain a much older, culture-area thinking.

The Mayanist “culture” concept is one of essentialism. Central to this is the “Maya culture”, which is used in most archaeological and epigraphic publications. What are the evidences of a “Maya culture” in the past? What were the past inhabitants' own identity markers? I am convinced that we shall never know the answers to

these questions, because they rely on a third attitude to ethnicity, apart from primordialism and instrumentalism. This is the one that the analyst makes and that has little existence in the real world. Were the emic identity markers the same etic ones that we use (Long-Count calendar, ballcourt, etc.) over hundreds of years? Thus, would the ancient people recognize their modern descendants as being the same “people”, “lineage”, “house”, “clan” or whatever identity they had?

I doubt this, since continuity is only seen retrospectively (Bachelard 2000). I argue that the past Maya “culture” or “ethnicity” constructed by archaeologists from “material culture” has been adopted by the Maya movement and transformed into a primordial ethnicity.

Trigger shows that people living within the same area with similar material cultures can see themselves as very different and people who have different material cultures can view themselves as the same (Trigger 1984). We can thus never tell from material remains the ethnicity or identity that the people felt.

Further, the very concept of Maya is highly problematic. The word “Maya” is first mentioned in the Spanish chronicles. Restall (1997:14) writes that: “We cannot be sure how the word Maya would have been understood by the colonial-era Mayas. The term appears in the Maya notarial record almost always in reference to the language”. The word was never used in everyday speech. Restall (1997:15) further states that “the way in which the term [Maya] is used certainly does not seem to indicate an ethnic homogeneity of self-perception among colonial-era Mayas. This is not to suggest that the Mayas did not view themselves as distinct in some ethnic sense from non-Mayas”. The colonial-era Maya preferred to use nonethnic categories of identity. Thus, “the fact that these categories-*cah* and *chibal* [community and lineage]-carried ethnic connotations after the conquest reflects not a continuity or profundity of Maya ethnic consciousness but rather the racist constraints of a colonial system that imposed such a consciousness while paradoxically encouraging its weakness by offering partial social mobility to those who collaborated economically or biologically with the colonizers” (ibid.).

The word Maya has a Yucatec origin and originally did not relate to the populations that lived and still live in the highlands of Guatemala. There was thus no ethnic meaning for the word in its original use.

Even among the contemporary Yucatec, the term “Maya” is ambivalent. Hervik explains the situation: “Anthropologists, folklorists, the *National Geographic*, and tourist brochures all refer to the people of the Yucatán as *Maya* when the people themselves think of the Maya as their long dead ancestors and themselves as *mestizo*. Maya is the name that is meaningful within the field of anthropological studies. *Mestizo* is a name that is meaningful within the field of local practice” (Hervik 2003:xix, emphasis original).

For example, in Oxtutzcab there are two social categories, *mestizo* (what anthropologists call Maya) and *catrín* (what some anthropologists call Ladino). The Yucatecan term *mestizo* has been in use since the 1850s and should not be confused with the conventional use of the word in Mexico (*ibid.* 24). People sometimes call themselves Maya but not true Maya, since those were the people who fought during the Caste War and who lived before that (*ibid.* 26).

Many representations of the Maya are thus socially distant, meaning that they were constructed about and not by the Maya (*ibid.* 59). Anthropologists see milpa farming as a cultural identity for the Maya. However, the people identify themselves also with other forms of cultivating the soil (*ibid.* 17-18). These external misunderstandings of social categories are common, since the semantic density of identity categories tends to be hidden in daily usage (*ibid.* 36). If this is a problem for cultural anthropologists, it must be even more problematic for archaeologists.

However, the Guatemalan Maya movement tries to erase such differences, in both the past and the present. The glyphs that are used by the Maya movement in the highlands of Guatemala are of lowland origin, although Kaminaljuyu in the highlands had writing in the same language as that found in the lowlands (Fahsen 2001). Thus, the movement eradicates both historical and geographical details to create a pan-Maya identity and unity.

Important for the imagination of a unity is the Maya language tree created by historical linguists. It is used in the movement's publications to point out that the different languages of today have a common past (Warren 1998:13). This unity is used as an argument in trying to create one common Maya language. Instead of choosing an existing language, an artificially written standard based on the combination of different languages is now being created (England 1996:185-187; Warren 1998:59).

The acceptance of the old idea that the Maya languages have a common origin and a similar culture does not completely collide with research on the macro-level. Researchers such as Houston, Stuart and Robertson (2000) show that all Maya writing during the Classic period was written in an ancient language (*Ch'olti'an*) which was probably spoken in the Late Formative (400 B.C. – A.D. 250) sites in the Mirador basin in northern Guatemala. This elitist tradition spread to a larger geographical area during the Classic period. From Palenque in the west, to Copan in the east and to Chichén Itzá in the north it seems as if the elite used the same language in their writings during the Late Classic period. The elite used this dialect, which probably functioned like Latin in the Middle Ages. Whether the Late Classic elite spoke this archaic language in their daily lives is another matter. Writing eventually faded away in the central lowlands during the Terminal Classic and was finally abandoned and replaced by the Latin alphabet during the colonial period (Houston *et al.* 2003).

What the identities as between different Maya groups above the level of the family or extended family looked like during different periods is a difficult problem to solve. The presence of so-called emblem glyphs, titles associated with kingship and dominion over places, and specific, place-name glyphs indicates that at least the elite identified themselves with their geographical location (Berlin 1958; Palka 1996; Stuart & Houston 1994).

The identity that the kings may have shared may not have been the same for the “commoners”, but I would guess that the “commoners” had an identity not too different from the local identity that still exists in the highlands of Guatemala and was thus related to topographical places. It cannot have been a

linguistic affiliation, since the language seems to have been homogeneous throughout the central lowlands. However, that is what is known for the elite and the “commoners” may have had a far greater diversity in dialects than we may know from today.

One possible physical node for identities may have been the *cenotes* (sink holes) or *aguadas* (water holes). Water holes are known to form units of social organization in contemporary Chiapas (Vogt 1969). The importance of water in the settlement layout and organization has been noted by several researchers (Davis-Salazar 2003; Lucero 2002; Scarborough 1998). However, such an identity would only be one of several identities.

There were many different identities and on different levels: personal, gender, family, lineage, “house” and site. I doubt that any identity a “commoner” felt, apart from a greater possible lineage affiliation, extended beyond the area of day-to-day interaction. The exception may, of course, be the ruling elite but I doubt whether their identities were based on ethnic affiliations.

All ethnicity thus comes down to the individual agent. Bourdieu’s (1977) concept of *habitus* has been used to explain how ethnicity is formed from both conscious and unconscious interactions (Gosden 1999:196). However, the tendency to use structuration or practice theories à la Giddens (1984) and Bourdieu (1977) reflects another humanocentric view of the past, in which materialities are the sources of either past practices or human agencies. In common humanocentric, archaeological discourse, there is then a direct link between artefacts and agents or collective identities or structures. Thus, I do not believe that objects give us straightforward answers to practices and human intentions as well.

Art, ceramics and architecture differed within the Maya area and they should not be straightforwardly used to claim any macro-level identity markers, such as ethnicity. The monumental art can probably give us an indication of identity markers in the past but to equate it with ethnicity is doubtful. Important here is the contact between the central Mexican site of Teotihuacán and the Maya area during the Early Classic period.

Before this short discussion, I must mention the association between style and ethnicity that seems to be central to any archaeological discussion of ethnicity or other identities. Pasztory claims that style can be used to study how people viewed style and how this related to politics and neighbours (Pasztory 1993:140). For Sackett, style is a way of conveying ethnicity. Style is a specific way of doing something that is time- and place-specific (Sackett 1977:377).

Other researchers, such as Wiessner (1983:257-258), differentiate between emblematic style and assertive style. The second is personally based and relates to individual identity. The first relates to a group through conscious affiliation with shared norms. It is thus tempting to equate this with ethnicity and Jones argues, that “distinctive forms and styles of material culture may be actively maintained and withheld in the process of signalling ethnicity” (Jones 1997:120).

There have been intensive discussions as to whether Teotihuacán was a hegemonic empire (Nielsen 2003) or whether the presence of Teotihuacán style in the Maya area was due to elite interaction (Braswell 2003). One of the best examples of this is Stela 31 at Tikal. It depicts king *Siyaj Chan K'awiil* in a “Maya” style, whereas his father *Yax Nuun Ayiin*, who, some argue came from central Mexico, was depicted in a “Teotihuacán”-inspired style (Harrison 1999; Stuart 1999). With our modern concepts, this looks as if the Maya-speaking groups saw themselves as different from at least the Central Mexican groups. Whether this can be called an ethnic differentiation is another matter. Teotihuacáños were clearly seen as different, but was the difference based on “ethnicity”, “race”, “religion”, “status”, “citizenship in the empire” or “marking social or geographic distance”? In this context, it is usually important to know if the depicted person was a “Teotihuacáno” or a “Maya” dressed in Teotihuacán symbols. Even if osteological analyses of *Yax Nuun Ayiin's* bones in burial 10 would indicate that he spent his youth at Teotihuacán (as a son to *Spearthrower Owl*, possibly the ruler of Teotihuacán), this is not enough to ascribe to him a Teotihuacán ethnicity, since ethnicity can change and is part of our discourse,

not the Early Classic discourse(s). We can never know his past emic identity, since “members of any ‘ethnic group’ may combine internal resources from their own history with non-ethnic external resources and conceptions about being part of an ethnic group in the creation of their own particular ethnicity” (Hervik 2003:53).



Figure 1. Altar Q at Copan, Honduras (Photo: Johan Normark).

Another example comes from Copan. The founder of the Copan dynasty was king *Yax K'uk Mo'*, who is believed to have been a foreigner, judging from later monuments, such as Altar Q (figure 1). Analysis of his bones indicates that he was not native to Copan but spent his childhood in the Tikal area (Sharer *et al.* 1999:20). An early monument soon after his death (the motmot marker) depict him as a “typical” Maya ruler. The later monuments depicting king *Yax K'uk Mo'* assign him a *west kaloomte'* title, usually associated with *Spearthrower Owl*, *Siyaj K'ak* (*Spearthrower Owl's* “warlord”) and some following rulers of Tikal. However, the motmot marker, carved during his son’s reign, did not assign him with this title (Golden 2002:403). It was not until the Late Classic period that the founder came to be portrayed with goggle eyes, to be represented as a person with Teotihuacán associations (*ibid.*

403-404). Clearly, the later Copan kings emphasized a tradition from contemporaneous needs. The same holds true for *Yax K'uk Mo's* son. He did not portray his father in "Teotihuacáno style", but we should not assume ethnicity here.

Ceramics in particular are used to study political extensions and possible ethnic identities in the past. Ball (1993) shows an increasing balkanisation of ceramic styles during the Late Classic period. This pattern is believed to relate to the balkanisation of political units that occurred at the same time. A relatively homogeneous ceramic style diverged into several local styles. This would indicate less contact and isolation from the surroundings. Societies went through a period when older identity markers changed to fit the emerging, Postclassic, socio-political and economic structure (Joyce 2000).

However, the problems in relating a particular material category, such as ceramics, to political, social or ethnic categories, imply concepts that have emerged within a modern discourse. I want to view materiality as being as free from such categories as possible, since similarities in ceramics or architecture are not always dependent on "cultural" affiliation or identity. It may be the same, but the true basis is that producers of materiality mimic what others have done in the same social setting, reproducing an iconic order that is not language based (Aijmer 2001).

Here Alfred Gell's concept of style may be of interest. For him, "the function of 'style' in associating individual artworks with the totality of artworks in the same style is not confined to the 'taxonomic' domain, but is equally pertinent with respect to the use of 'style' as an explanatory concept with cognitive, as well as classificatory implications" (Gell 1998:162).

To be able to describe "Maya" art style in a way that cannot be applied to other art styles, we cannot simply detect symmetry and asymmetry in the art. We have to focus on the stylistic attributes that tell us that this is "Maya" art, without reference to "cultural patterns". Any artefact made by agents socialized in a social formation is a representative of the whole corpus. This representation is a semiotic relation, in which the object signifies stylistically related objects. However, every work in the corpus

signifies all the other objects in the corpus except itself. Each object is thus a microcosm of the whole corpus (ibid. 163-166). The problem here is, of course, the corpus is often the same as “material culture”. This corpus should therefore not be seen in static terms but should have fluent borders interacting with more distant styles (through trade and exchange) that create a third space in Bhabha’s (1994) sense.

Gell’s (1998:218) *principle of least difference* is when one form has a minimum modification compared with neighbouring forms, enough to make a distinction between them. Parts are related to wholes by the same principle. This principle cannot be found in a specific object, only in relation to other objects.

Objects thus gain forms similar to those of other objects made by agents within a social formation, owing to the agents’ socialization and their copying of what others have done. Therefore it is no need to put a macro-level, culture area or ethnic identity on top of these polyagents. Language and ethnicity may be related between social formations with similar styles and objects, but there may be other processes at work here, such as within the non-language-based, iconic order that forms aesthetics. Materiality can thus be used to reproduce iconic codes. This is critical for polyagentive archaeology, as some polyagents are used to reproduce the iconic code while generating different discourses (Normark 2004a, 2004b).

Maya identity and archaeology in the present

Still, the proposed continuity between the archaeological past and the present is a vital one. The use of hieroglyphic inscriptions in modern political discourse can be exemplified by the neighbouring country of Belize (a country which Guatemalan leaders have claimed to be a province of Guatemala). The city of Caracol in Belize defeated Tikal, which lies in Guatemala, in A.D. 562 (probably with the help of Calakmul in Mexico) (Martin & Grube 2000). This information is something that is used by the Belizean tourist industry to show that Belize is not part of

Guatemala (personal observation). This use of ancient politics in contemporary politics is clearly found in the use of hieroglyphs.

However, Maya who want to learn glyphs are dependent on foreign epigraphers. Some epigraphers, such as Schele and Grube, have transmitted knowledge to Maya groups and they have also criticised archaeology for not doing the same (Schele & Grube 1996:139). Thus, they have overlooked the fact that epigraphers' interpretations have had more severe consequences for the contemporary Maya than most archaeological interpretations.

Recent cleansing of ethnic groups in Guatemala was partly justified by the violent past of the victims' ancient ancestors (Sturm 1996:117-128). The Maya movement has criticized research into such topics as warfare in both archaeology and epigraphy. For instance, Montejo (1999a) criticizes the bloody view of the Maya developed by westerners. In these models, the "Maya collapse" is to blame for a bloodthirsty, royal ideology of warfare. When the civil war was at its peak in Guatemala, it gained less media attention than the theories concerning warfare and human sacrifice among the ancient Maya (Montejo 1999b:15). Grube and Fahsens' (2002:232) claim that "epigraphers leave their data as found" and that this makes them different from archaeologists is thus not true. However, one can wonder whether Montejo's critique is just, since it can be doubted that the generals of Guatemala ever knew that much about the past Maya. The civil war had another background.

Most non-Maya Mayanists have been attracted to this field by its "exotic mystique". As we all believe that the world is meaningful, we are affected by the popular ways of thinking about the Maya (ibid. 170). The popular view of the ancient Maya in the media is usually based on stereotypical Maya. In *National Geographic*, there is often a juxtaposition between living Maya and ruins to dramatize archaeology as an Indiana Jones experience (Hervik 1999:180). The ancient Maya are seen as either bloodthirsty warriors, superstitious, great astronomers or the inventors of a complex writing system, and one of the most common and popular topics dealt with is the "Classic Maya collapse".

This “collapse” has had several theories. However, the already mentioned, war-related answers have been popular during the past two decades. Before that, models focusing on ecological disasters caused by the Mayas themselves were most popular. Montejo also dislikes the idea that the natives are to be blamed for ecological disasters in the past. Those proposing the ecological disasters ignore forest conservation and management among the Maya farmers. This trend reflects our contemporary inability to manage such resources, not the past peoples’ capabilities according to this critique (Montejo 1999a). Hervik’s claims that “the slash-and-burn technique is not a primitive destructive form of agriculture, but the most ecologically balanced method to cultivate these stony, hilly plots of lands” (Hervik 2003:74).

However, contemporary settlement density in the central Maya lowlands is lower than in the past. We must also separate the different eco-zones of the Maya area. Agriculture in the northern and southern lowlands was not practised in the same way, owing to differences in soil quality, vegetation, climate, etc. (Fedick 1996). Montejo and Hervik cannot ignore the sediment cores from the Petén that show substantial deforestation during the Late Classic (Dunning *et al.* 1997). This, in combination with a drier climate may be one of several causes of the depopulation (Gill 2001). However, adaptations to drier conditions occurred.

What can be questioned is the presentation of such results in the popular media. These often emphasize catastrophes or “bizarre” practices. Recent upswings for “new” models of the collapse are the climatic ones (Hodell *et al.* 1995). A recent BBC-produced television program on the “mega-droughts”, with Richardson Gill, claimed that four millions of people died. One part of the program has an in-depth look at human sacrifice, and particularly how they had to chop more than once to cut off an infant’s head. This part did not contribute anything to the program (although it claimed to relate to a mass sacrifice of priests and their families, because they could not foresee the drought). It was only there to be spectacular, since drought itself may not attract enough viewers. Blood, sex and violence sell, as Paul Bahn (1989) writes in his book “*Bluff your way in archaeology*”.

There is thus a tight relationship between how archaeological research is presented, and performed and the social environment in which it takes place (Trigger 1984:356). Archaeologists' works are formed within a field of power relations. Past facts are always affected by present values. We decide what is right or wrong (Tilley 1989:110-111).

Who then has the right to interpret the past? Clearly, no one has a monopoly to do this. Archaeology developed in capitalist countries where the ownership of land, property, etc. is important. Echo-Hawk therefore criticizes the Western view of personal-property rights and the idea that an artefact belongs to whoever finds it. Those who find them tend to be archaeologists who control excavation and sometimes tend to see sites as theirs (Echo-Hawk 1997:107). Ancient objects in the Maya area are usually regarded as the property of Ladinos and looted objects are repatriated to the Ladinos (Cojtí Cuxil 1995:49, 58).

Clearly there are other opinions as to who has the right to the past's present remains, especially now that many sites are under severe threat. Ruins in the highlands of Guatemala have been partially destroyed by Evangelists, and lowland sites are looted and artefacts are sold on the illegal market (Warren 1998:57). Villagers have after the peace in Guatemala begun to lay claim to archaeological sites and monuments (Houston 2000:138). The worst looters are heavily armed groups, some being ex-soldiers, who are also involved in the narcotics trade. Are archaeologists to blame for initiating or maintaining a discourse that makes such practices desirable? I shall return to this question.

Is any solution to the conflict between archaeologists and indigenous movements in sight? Wilk and Pyburn (1998:203) argue for a collaborative model, in which archaeology can be integrated with local history and traditions, so that the public will support archaeology and the preservation of the site.

This would benefit Maya groups, since there is a critique of how the Maya are presented at tourist sites. Institutions in Guatemala and Mexico have created large, outdoor museums at archaeological sites. Castañeda shows how anthropologists, archaeologists, tourists, local entrepreneurs and Maya intellectuals

are using the archaeological construction of a peculiar Maya culture, such as Chichén Itzá in Mexico, in different ways. Anthropology and tourism inhabit each other as they share practices, goals, strategies, etc. (ibid. 71). He argues that “Chichén Itzá was invented as a tourist attraction to showcase not only an ethnic-class identity, but the modern science of archaeology” (Castañeda 1996:6). Even in Guatemala, institutions have invested great resources in archaeological reconstructions, particularly at Tikal. The Maya movement wants these sites to be treated as sacred places and says that they should be open to Maya without any entrance fees. Today, Mayas are usually treated as secondary citizens at these places (Cojtí Cuxil 1996:43). Belize is another country that has and is developing several archaeological sites to receive hordes of tourists.

Leaders of the Maya movement criticize this tourism and the reconstructions. It does not give the Maya groups anything in return and maintains the myth about the differences between modern and ancient Maya. The contemporary Maya are often portrayed archaeologically as living relics of the past, in travel books and other media (Hervik 1999:185)

The remains of the ancient Maya are used to draw tourists to Guatemala. The ancient Maya are described as a great people and are used to glorify Guatemala’s history. The Kiché king *Tecún Umán* has a national day and the *Popol Vuh* is considered to be Guatemala’s national book. Despite this, the Ladinos do not want a development of cultural pluralism in Guatemala. They want the country to be unified into one nation (LeBaron 1993:275). The contemporary Maya are therefore not shown in similar, positive ways, with the possible exception of popular tourist destinations, such as Panajachel and Chichicastenango.

However, we cannot blame archaeologists solely for initiating the stereotyped view of the past and initiating a static view of the Maya. Interestingly, local or regional interests have also manipulated western scholars. Stephens’s *Incidents of Travel* (1993) was used by Spanish-speaking Yucatec intellectuals who wanted to use the Maya heritage to claim a politically independent Yucatán (Castañeda 1996:5). In Mexico, the focus is set on central Mexico

as being the core of Mexican identity (Grube & Fahsen 2002:225). The Yucatec intelligentsia thus used foreigners to introduce new ideas about the Maya, in order to be able to create an identity separated from central Mexico (Castañeda 1996:109).

Nowadays, no negative things can be said about the past Maya without one's risking being labelled ethnocentric. Archaeologists are told not to say that the ancient Maya performed human sacrifices, mismanaged the ecological mosaic, etc., even though there is compelling evidence that they did so; no matter if archaeologists' interpretations are following other trends in society. Maya archaeologists' research is blamed for following trends in other parts of the world or in the USA. For example, Wilk (1985:313) argues that warfare became a more important research topic during the Vietnam war. However, the critiques of archaeology also follow trends. Montejo follows the postcolonial critique developed by others. It is easy to criticise but do these criticizers come up with alternative approaches to the past? If they do, they tend not to be radically different from the cultural history developed more than a century ago. The main obstacle is the culture concept, but both sides cling to it even if the ship is sinking.

Abandoning the culture and ethnic concept(s)

Being a *kaxlan* and archaeologist myself, I am biased. I support the Maya movement's political agenda in general, but I cannot help seeing that the movement is a mirror image of contemporary archaeology and anthropology. I therefore do not side with anyone. My aim is rather to abandon the humanocentric view of the past and look at how materialities affect and have affected human agents and even how they have formed human agency. Materialities defined and formed the identities of past people. We need to see what lies *in-between* mind and matter, nature and culture, etc.

Throughout this text, I have argued for an abandonment of loosely defined and essentialist, culture concepts. An approach to the past in a greater variety (Barth 2002) has been proposed in this

text. What we know of a contemporary “culture” is often based on one or a few informants who have an incomplete knowledge of everything that goes on (Fischer 2001:10). The same accounts for the past; we attach much more to the artefact than we see. We let a few artefacts in our present stand for a whole generalized and static “culture” of the past.

To me, archaeology is not anthropology, simply because the latter term relates to the “society” or “human agent”, seldom present in the archaeological data (human bones included). Archaeologists study past societies in ways completely different from those of cultural anthropologists. We have accepted the fallacy of attaching anthropological models to the material remains. However, since “cultural logics are realized (and thus, for the observer, can only be meaningfully analyzed) through practice” (Fischer 2001:16) and “all cultural models are by their nature internalized, and thus integrated into an idiosyncratically unique gestalt: culture does not exist independent of the mind” (Fischer 2001:21), we definitely should not use a cultural anthropological approach. In short, “Culture consists not of things and events that we can observe, count and measure: it consists of shared ideas and meanings” (Keesing 1981:70). Archaeologists do not study human agents in their practices or their minds. An artefact is silent, since it has no mind and no intention, but it is a trace of what lies in-between, the force of becoming (Bergson 1998), which all polyagents share.

The same problem concerns ethnicity. Gosden (1999:194) argues that, since it is too late to stop using the term ethnicity, we should continue to use it, but realise that the concept shapes the way we perceive the world. I suggest that we should have another approach to materiality than from a “cultural” or “ethnic” point of view. Materiality is used to form people’s identities, but the past is gone and we can never get a complete understanding of it. Rather than filling out the vast blanks of the past with guesses, let us focus on the artefacts, the only known and visible points of becoming in a void of nothingness.

I want to suggest what I feel is a possible way of studying the archaeological record without using cultural essentialism and the

use of modern identity markers on artefacts and ruins. This is to view the material remains as being as free as possible of “cultural” markers, without trying to see the agents behind them in the first place. The obvious fact is that all artefacts have been detached from their original users and we cannot get first-hand glimpses of those who manufactured, used and discarded the material remains.

The late Alfred Gell (1998) argued that art (and artefacts) has its own agency, that is, the capability of affecting its surroundings, either intentionally or unintentionally. Other researchers have focused on the socialness of materialities (Latour 1999; Schiffer 1999). There is thus no need to attribute human agency on top of materiality, since it has its polyagency. However, this polyagency was in the past always in relation to other objects or human beings and their polyagencies. Archaeological artefacts are detached from this past relationship (the practice or action). It is like this that I believe we should start our understanding of materiality (Normark 2004a). Only after analysing an object’s biography of becoming, in which we can understand the object’s different, agent-patient relationships, can we attribute the different practices that went on. These practices were then not dependent on “cultural identities”, such as ethnicity; they could just as well be analysed through serial action (Cornell and Fahlander 2002). However, polyagents make people reproduce polyagents, but the identities may not have been reproduced. The artefact is silent about such things. Social identities are never solid and they change within discourses.

Polyagents persist through time, identities do not. While reproducing polyagents, new identities are formed. We can therefore use a genealogical approach that emphasizes polyagents rather than human beings. The objects will be the reference points that affected people’s identities in the past.

We shall thus not need to focus on a “culture area” concept of the Maya, since we can work ourselves up from the objects themselves without calling them “Maya” objects. There will thus not be pre-conceived concepts of culture and ethnicity. This will, in my view, benefit both the Maya movement and Maya archaeology.

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