

Body and Soul among the Maya: Keeping the Spirits in Place

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ABSTRACT

The prehispanic Maya are known to have commonly interred their dead beneath the floors or within the platforms of domestic structures. This custom has been interpreted as part of a larger complex of rituals and beliefs associated with ancestor veneration. By continually curating the bones of deceased family members within their own domestic space, the surviving members of the household may have strengthened their rights to material property believed to have been acquired by these ancestors. Maya residences have thus been considered domestic mausolea: “places of death.” However, archaeological interpretations of burial practices should take into account the likelihood of customs and beliefs regarding the proper disposition of the *nontangible* components of deceased persons along with their physical remains. These components include names and souls, which may have been the property of specific corporate groups who transferred them from the dead to the newly born as an expression of group continuity. Archaeological, historical, and ethnographic evidence from Maya peoples is examined here to suggest that residential interments may have served to ensure control over the souls of the dead. Ancestral spirits were important nontangible property belonging to prehispanic Maya corporate kin groups, known as “houses.” They were carefully safeguarded for reincarnation in subsequent generations, thereby perpetuating the kin group. Rather than a place of death, Maya domestic space is therefore better considered a place of curation, transformation, and regeneration of enduring social personae.

Reconstructing a society of living individuals from the physical remains of its deceased members presents a conundrum for archaeology: social persons are composed of both material and nonmaterial components, and only the former appear most obviously in the archaeological record. When archaeologists encounter the dead, they are most immediately confronted by the physicality and mortality of individual human beings. Typically only those parts of the body that are hard and enduring, such as bones and teeth, are recovered. The more perishable flesh, muscles, and hair rarely survive to be discovered. Archaeologists also frequently encounter objects that were placed with the deceased and are considered to be their property or indicators of their social persona in life (e.g., Binford 1971; Peebles 1971; Saxe 1970). Again, except in rare instances, archaeologists recover only those things that are hard and enduring,

such as items of stone and ceramic. Cloth, food, basketry, leather, and similar perishable materials that may also have been put into the grave typically disintegrate and become archaeologically invisible.

There may also be other nonperishable and enduring phenomena associated with the deceased individual and represented in the burial event. However, to archaeologists they are just as invisible as the perishable organic materials and thus are difficult to incorporate into interpretations of social statuses and social organization. I refer to the *nonphysical* components of human beings that can be considered their *nontangible* property or integral aspects of their personhood. Every individual has a unique personality, and there may also be culture-specific notions of personal sensibility and morality. Examples of the latter include the notion of *naab'í* among the contemporary Mam Maya of Guatemala (Watanabe

1992) and *yam* among the African Tallensi (Fortes 1973:309). Some kind of inherited or individual destiny may also be an important aspect of personhood (e.g., Fortes 1973:304; Kan 1989:68). In prehispanic Mesoamerica, destiny was determined from one's date of birth within a ritual almanac. It was uniquely realized by each individual, yet at the same time it was part of a collective representation, since all destinies were linked together by their origin within the same calendrical system (Monaghan 1998).

These aspects of personality are typically ephemeral and idiosyncratic, whereas other intangible components of personhood are more enduring, outliving the human being who appropriates them. These components include names, titles, prerogatives, and also souls, which are often collective property rather than individualized or random elements. There is a near-universal belief that each individual possesses one or more animating forces or potencies—souls or spirits. Indeed, archaeologists often fall back on the notion of the soul when interpreting grave goods as needed essentials for a noncorporeal afterlife. In addition, there is also considerable ethnographic and historical information from around the world that souls are frequently linked with names and prerogatives to create specific social personae. The persona may represent an image of, or an actual belief in, the reincarnation of the dead (e.g., Kan 1989:70–71; Mauss 1969:138; Wachtmeister 1956).

Names, titles, specific rights, and souls, along with material goods, are typically the property of corporate groups, who express their continuity by the bestowal of this property on their members across generations (e.g., Kan 1989:70–72; Mauss 1969). The living thereby link themselves to their ancestors, whose names and personae live again in their descendants (e.g., Lea 1992:129; Hugh-Jones 1977:188; Sangree 1974:66). Name transmission, rather than descent, may be a society's principal scheme of social reproduction (e.g., Lea 1992:147–48; Rivière 1980:539). It is the people who are given to the names and not the reverse (Miller 1998:670), such that the names, not the people, are the true members of the corporate group (Kan 1989:72). Names are said to outlive even bone (Hugh-Jones 1979:133). In some instances the same indigenous word may translate as both "name" and "soul" since both refer to the collectivity of ancestors represented as an individual's nontangible self (Crocker 1977:247).

When archaeologists investigate emic attitudes toward the placement of the dead, they should realize that people are concerned not only with the disposition of the body but also with the disposition of the soul and the

other metaphysical components of the deceased. This was the thesis of Hertz's (1960) classic 1907 essay on secondary mortuary rites, in which he demonstrated that death is considered a transformative process, not just a biological event. The changing condition of the decaying body is paralleled by changes in the status of the soul and other nonmaterial components, as they become separated from the deceased. These both correspond with changes in the social relations of the mourners with respect to the newly dead, as they take it upon themselves to reclaim and redistribute the intangible properties of the deceased.

Physical and Nonphysical Components of the Maya

Where there is available historical or ethnographic information, it may be possible for archaeologists to interpret burial events and their spatial contexts in ways that account for both the physical and nonphysical components of the dead. The prehispanic Maya civilization (encompassing southern Mexico and much of northern Central America) is an appropriate case study for this purpose. There is considerable historic, ethnographic, epigraphic, and suggestive archaeological evidence for the belief in souls, the transmission of names, and the reincarnation of ancestral personae into newborns, embedded within the context of the maintenance of property rights by long-lived corporate groups. Maya burial practices are also intriguing because of where the dead were placed, namely, within the residential areas. In this chapter I examine the evidence for these Maya "places of death," highlighting the significance of the linkage of the mortal body with the immortal soul and persona as corporate group property and as collective representations.

Maya religion is believed by scholars such as Michael Coe to have been based on a "cult of the dead" in large part because of where the dead were placed (Coe 1988:222; see also Coe 1956, 1973, 1975, 1978; Chase and Chase 1994:54). Although there is some variation across the Maya area, the prehispanic Maya typically buried their dead within or adjacent to architectural constructions that formed the residential compound, rather than in spatially separated cemeteries. Beginning as early as the Early Middle Pre-Classic (ca. 1200–900 B.C.) at Cuello, Belize, graves were excavated into house floors during their initial construction, while the house was being occupied, and after the house was abandoned (Hammond 1999:51). Because these interments contain both sexes and all age groups, they are believed to rep-

resent the entire families that occupied the houses (Hammond 1999:62). This practice continued at Cuello and is also known for a number of other sites by the Late Pre-Classic (after 400 B.C.; Freidel and Schele 1989:242; McAnany 1995:161, 1998:272–73). Subfloor burial was common in the Classic (A.D. 250–maximally 1000) and following Postclassic periods, enduring even beyond the sixteenth-century Spanish conquest (Welsh 1988:186). However, by the Classic Period some of the more important persons were buried in special structures, even great temple-pyramids, as certain functions of the residence gave way to separate shrines, although these were still located in the vicinity of the residential group (McAnany 1998:279).

Although today most Maya communities use cemeteries, ethnographic information indicates that some Maya peoples continued to inter their dead on their own land in recent times (Guiteras-Holmes 1961:141; Wisdom 1940:302). J. Eric Thompson's 1930 description of lowland Maya peoples of Belize included remembered practices of burying the dead under the house floors, a custom he reported was still carried out in the Guatemalan highlands at that time (Thompson 1930:82; see also Wisdom [1940:302] for evidence of this practice among the Chol Maya). Blom and LaFarge (1926–1927[II]:362) reported that in the Chiapas highlands the dead were specifically buried under their own beds in their houses.

The discovery of so many fine tombs and ordinary graves within and under buildings at prehispanic Maya centers led Coe (1956, 1988) and others (e.g., Miller 1974) to suggest that these cities were “necropolises, in which the living were gathered to worship the honored dead” (Coe 1988:234). As Coe (1988:235) observed, “If subfloor burial was the rule...as it seems to have been, then every Maya house was a sepulcher. The great Maya temple-pyramids [built over royal tombs] were house-sepulchers writ large.” In discussing this practice at the Classic Period site of Uaxactun, Wauchope (1934:146) suggested that only abandoned houses would have been used for burial, considering it “most unlikely” that the living would “continue to live in such a graveyard-home.” His opinion conforms to our Western sensitivities but is contradicted by the archaeological, historic, and ethnographic evidence.

This rather macabre view of ancient Maya cities and houses as “places of the dead” is contested by other scholars who emphasize that Maya centers were built and maintained not simply to house the dead or to facilitate rituals to them, but also to serve a complete range of social and economic activities (Foncerrada de Molina

1974:77–78; Ruz Lhuillier 1968:171; Welsh 1988:186). Furthermore, historic information concerning the disposal of the dead indicates that burial location was linked to practices of ancestor veneration—an important component of Maya social and political organization since the Pre-Classic (Adams 1977:99; Leventhal 1983:75; McAnany 1995:7; Welsh 1988:186–93)—and not simply to a “cult of the dead” (McAnany 1995:1). Primary and secondary mortuary rituals (e.g., Chase and Chase 1994, 1996) transformed the dead into ancestral spirits, who, if modern practices can be used as a guide to the past, were mediators between living human beings and powerful cosmic forces. Even today traditional Maya peoples see themselves as engaged in a social contract with ancestors that is the basis for structures of moral authority and identity (e.g., Nash 1970:19–23; Vogt 1969:298–301; Watanabe 1990:139–40).

In Bishop Diego de Landa's (1982:59–60) description of sixteenth-century Yucatan, he stated that the dead, sometimes provided with a precious stone placed in the mouth, were interred under house floors or behind the house. The house was usually abandoned afterwards except in the case of large households, which continued to reside there. However, lords and people of high esteem were cremated, and their ashes were put in large vessels or hollow clay statues placed in temples. Other principal persons, Landa said, made wooden statues of their deceased forebears for the same purpose, leaving the back of the statue's neck area hollow. Part of the deceased's body was burned and the ashes placed in that hollow, which was then covered with skin taken from the back of the neck of the cadaver. These statues were kept in the shrine areas of houses and venerated alongside images of gods. The images were offered food on ritual occasions to ensure that the souls of the dead, in the other life, would also have food. Landa further reported that the lords of Cocom, upon their deaths, were beheaded. The skulls were cleaned of flesh and the front half of the cranium was saved to be venerated alongside the statues containing ashes.

Fr. Bartolomé de Las Casas (1967[II]:525–27), in his sixteenth-century report on Guatemalan customs, also provided information on the veneration of deceased lords. They were often buried in a seated position on mountaintops, and an altar was built over the grave for the burning of incense and the offering of sacrifices. Among some of the Guatemalan peoples, deceased kings were cremated, and from the ashes and bone an artificial body was made. The body parts were bound with a thick gold thread, and the whole was adorned with many precious green stones. These little images were kept in stone

or wooden boxes and were greatly venerated and offered sacrifices. These material representations or images of the dead, composed of their actual body parts, indicate a desire to maintain the visibility and active presence among the living of certain important deceased persons, heads of the major corporate and political groups.

Alfred Tozzer (1941:131) observed that both altered crania and statues were recovered archaeologically in Postclassic Yucatecan contexts, just as Landa described them. Welsh (1988:193) similarly noted archaeological evidence for the processing and curation of specific bones, especially of the face, during the Classic Period in the southern Maya lowlands. Furthermore, there is widespread evidence in the prehispanic era for the construction of special shrine buildings above the graves of prominent persons. For burials within the house, an altar, bench, or similar structure was commonly placed over the grave (Welsh 1988:188). Unlike the later highland Guatemalan situation described by Las Casas, this was done for many people and not just for lords. All of these constructions were loci for commemorative rituals to ancestors, including incense burning, like the rituals described historically and ethnographically (Welsh 1988:192–94; see Gillespie 1999:237, 2000b). At the same time these constructions also served other functions required by the living, including use of the house altars and benches for sitting and sleeping (Gillespie 1999:237–38). Thus the presence of the dead within the house did not greatly disrupt the activities of the living but actually enhanced the sacrality and ritual status of the house (McAnany 1998:273).

An important aspect of identity linking the dead with the living—or ancestors with descendants—is their joint association with the space and place they both occupy: the house. Wauchope's reservations aside, archaeological data indicate that Maya residential compounds were continuously occupied over many generations. Indeed, burials within house platforms typically occurred just prior to, or in concert with, the structure's architectural renovation or alteration (Coe 1956:388; Hammond 1999:62; Haviland et al. 1985:152; Welsh 1988:186; see also McAnany 1995:50, 58, 161). In other words, the realignment of social identities and relationships within the family, necessitated by the loss of one of its members, was mirrored in the material sphere by changes to the buildings that the family occupied and with which it was identified (Hendon 1999:98–99). As part of this process of resignification of the statuses of the deceased and the mourners, the house itself was modified, and the body was physically incorporated into the house structure.

Patricia McAnany (1995:58) has called attention to the significance of the long-term occupation of places that co-housed the living and the dead in Maya settlements. Following Coe, she refers to residential compounds as “domestic mausolea” (McAnany 1995:50) and as sacralized buildings (McAnany 1995:58). Nevertheless, she suggests that rather than view this as evidence of Maya religion focused on a cult of the dead, we should consider its sociological implications (see also Middleton et al. [1998] for a Oaxaca example). The prehispanic Maya were curating the bones of the dead of presumably a single family group over many generations in a single place. This was the same place where the living resided and where they could easily conduct rituals to commemorate deceased members of their group in close proximity to the actual skeletal remains (McAnany 1995:49–50). As McAnany (1995:50) observed, “[T]he Maya convention of intracompound interment of ancestors could be viewed as a type of safeguard insuring that ancestors were kept on the land where their descendants lived.” From this she concluded that “burial places of the ancestors create a genealogy of place that links descendants to that land” (McAnany 1995:65).¹

McAnany further proposed that by preserving the bones of their ancestors over time, the living family members maintained their exclusionary rights to material property, especially land, that was first acquired by those ancestors. That is, their continued ownership rights were evidenced by the fact that the enduring material signifiers of that family group's ancestors—their bones, some of which were kept separately for ritual purposes—remained on the very land that they claimed was theirs (McAnany 1995:65). This explanation for the Maya placement of the dead is far more encompassing in its sociological, political, and economic, as well as religious, implications than is a mystical “cult of the dead.” It also fits better with historical and more recent Maya data concerning a key organizing principle of Maya society: ancestors are the ultimate origins of property rights, and their active presence should be ritually maintained within the houses or land belonging to their living descendants (McAnany 1995:49–50; Vogt 1970:1153; Welsh 1988:193–97).

However, other information allows us to broaden our understanding of the placement of the dead to consider the curation of a nonphysical component of the ancestors: their souls. Historic and ethnographic accounts provide many references to Maya beliefs in one or multiple souls. Landa (1982:60) reported that the sixteenth-century Yucatec Maya believed in the immortality of the soul and in different afterlife possibilities. Las Casas

(1967[II]:525) provided the additional information that the precious stone placed in the mouth of a dying lord was meant specifically to catch his soul on its departure from the body, and the stone was rubbed over the face of the man upon his death. The stone was then curated by the high-ranking deceased's family, and it was esteemed and offered sacrifices as if it were divine, just as the ash-containing effigies of the dead were treated.

Some suggestive evidence for a belief in souls in the prehispanic era comes from both textual and archaeological sources. For example, the "death event" in hieroglyphic inscriptions has been read as referring to the exit of the *sak-nik-nal*, the "white-flower-thing," which is interpreted as the soul that departs the body upon death (Freidel et al. 1993:183). As for archaeological evidence, scholars point to the two tombs at Classic Period Palenque (Tomb III of Temple XVIII-A and the Temple of the Inscriptions tomb) that were equipped with a hollow tube leading from the tomb to a temple chamber above. These are interpreted as "psychoducts," material conduits for the egress of the soul (Ruz Lhuillier 1992:119, 270; see also Coe 1988:234; Schele and Mathews 1998:109, 130). Ruz Lhuillier (1992) compared this device, which has been found in tombs elsewhere in Mesoamerica (Ruz Lhuillier 1992:271), to the hole in the thatch roof created in contemporary Yucatec Maya practice directly above a dying person's hammock in order to assure free passage of the soul upon death (Ruz Lhuillier 1992:272), as reported by Redfield and Villa Rojas (1934:199).

The historical and archaeological evidence suggest that the disposition of the soul is linked to the disposition of bodily remains, and that these two separable components of persons maintained a "sympathetic" relationship with one another after death. Curating the body or the image of the dead was a means of curating the soul. Historical descriptions of the salvaging of ashes or crania of high-ranking persons, especially the placing of the ashes in artificial bodies and venerating them as if they were alive, indicate that these relics of the dead possessed an animating force. They were apparently invoked and petitioned by supplicants as the material loci for ancestral spirits, putting them on par with deities in that respect, and thus they were kept alongside the household's god-images.² The highland Guatemalan people described by Las Casas sought to capture and contain the soul of a dead lord within the precious stone that had come into contact with his face. The Palenque psychoducts actually terminate below the floors of the temples above the tombs, rather than opening out to allow the soul to escape into the air. They pro-

vide a means for the living to use the temples as a place to control ongoing metaphysical communication with some vital essence of the deceased entombed below (Ruz Lhuillier 1992:270; Schele and Mathews 1998:109).

Most significant in this respect is the explanation given by lowland Chol Maya informants to Thompson (1930:82) for the common practice of burying the dead under their house floors. They said this was done in order to safeguard not just their bones, but also their souls. It was believed that if this practice were followed, the souls of the dead buried there would eventually enter the bodies of children subsequently born in that house or a neighboring house, indicating a mystical link between body and soul involving the place of burial. These beliefs and practices concerning the conservation and control of souls are ultimately associated with the ties the living envision and enact with the dead in order to maintain the continuity of proprietary rights within kin-based corporate groups.

Ethnographic observations may allow us to deepen our understanding of this concern for the soul. While specific beliefs vary from one society to another, there continues to be a widely shared Maya concept of an "eternal and indestructible" (Vogt 1969:370, 1970:1155) soul or vital force that animates, and outlasts, the body that houses it. After death the soul may go on a journey to somewhere else or stay near the grave for a period of time, but eventually it will be placed into a newborn to give life to another individual (Earle 1986:170; Guiteras-Holmes 1961:143; Redfield and Villa Rojas 1934:199; Vogt 1969:370, 1970:1155). As the Tzotzil Maya of Zinacantan explained to Evon Vogt (1969:370), the soul (*ch'ulel*) "rejoins a 'pool' or 'supply' of souls that are kept by the ancestral gods, to be utilized for another person." The Yucatec Maya stated that all souls return to earth to be reincarnated in newborns. Even the souls of the wicked condemned to the underworld will eventually return, along with those who dwell in the paradise of heaven, for "God has not enough souls to keep forever repopulating the earth" (an informant quoted in Redfield and Villa Rojas 1934:199).

Soul movement from the dead to newborn individuals is not arbitrary or random. This process is part of a widespread Maya concept known as *k'ex* or *k'exel* (Carlsen 1997:51; Carlsen and Prechtel 1991; cognates include *c'axel* [Earle 1986:162], *k'esholil* [Vogt 1969:372], *jelol* [Montagu and Hunt 1962:141]; see Watanabe 1990:139). *K'ex* is translated in early Yucatec, Cholan, Tzotzil, and Quiche dictionaries in verb and noun forms referring to an exchange, trade, conversion, sub-

stitution, or succession of one thing for another (Barrera Vásquez et al. 1980:397; Kaufman and Norman 1984:124; Laughlin 1988:231; Ximénez 1985:483).³ For example, the idea of *k'ex* applies to the annual replacement of village officials by the new title-holders who succeed them (Laughlin 1988:231; Montagu and Hunt 1962:142). More important, it is associated with the transfer and thus continuity of human life (Carlsen 1997:50). *K'ex* is manifest in the common practice of "replacing" or "substituting" an older or deceased person, especially a grandparent, by giving a child born in his or her family the same name (Carlsen and Prechtel 1991:26; Guiteras-Holmes 1961:110; Mondloch 1980; Montagu and Hunt 1962:141; Stross 1998:35; Vogt 1969:372, 1970:1158; Warren 1989:57; Watanabe 1990:139; Ximénez 1985:483). For example, among the Quiche *nu c'axel*, "my replacement," is the term used reciprocally by a grandfather and his patrilineal grandson (Cook 2000:260; see also Carlsen 1997:54–55). *K'ex* therefore has important references to generational change and the continuity of personae within a social collectivity in association with ancestor commemoration (Carlsen and Prechtel 1991:26).

Names are not the only intangible property that is maintained thereby within a family group, for among the Maya as elsewhere, names are often linked to the soul "as a package" that moves together (Vogt 1970:1158; see Guiteras-Holmes 1961:110). Many Maya peoples insist that the soul or life essence is transferred to a descendant of the deceased, frequently to a grandchild (Carlsen and Prechtel 1991:28). In some cases informants assert that souls (or names) move specifically through the patriline or agnatic kin group (Cook 2000:260; Montagu and Hunt 1962:141; Stross 1998:35; Vogt 1969:372, 1970:1158). In those instances in which the older person and the younger relative of the same name are both alive, they are thought to share the same vital essence; conversely, in some Maya societies infants are not given the name of a living family member because it is believed that they would thereby fully acquire the soul of the older person, causing that person's death (Montagu and Hunt 1962:144). This constellation of beliefs may resolve a recurrent conundrum in Maya archaeology: whether it is appropriate to label rites of veneration of the dead as "ancestor worship" when many of the burials encountered are those of juveniles who could not possibly have left any descendants (e.g., Hammond 1999:55). The ethnographic information indicates that everyone, even a newborn, is an ancestor reincarnated.

Thus, in *k'ex*—considered as the transfer of a name and accompanying soul from one body to another, or as the exchange of one body for another—the Maya have achieved a form of immortality (Carlsen and Prechtel 1991:26) even as their mortal components, the flesh and bone, constantly wear out and must be replaced. That this was a concern in the prehispanic era is suggested by Classic Period hieroglyphic inscriptions that reveal the reuse of the same names and titles by persons of different generations in a single ruling house, for example, in the king lists of Palenque (Freidel and Schele 1990:219) and Yaxchilan (Tate 1992:9). A text at Palenque has been interpreted as recording a ritual by which the name transfer was effected from a king who had died 94 years previously (Freidel et al. 1993:190). The subsequent name-bearers can be seen as the *k'ex*, the substitutes or replacements, of the persons who came before them.

Conclusions

We therefore see that among the Maya, as among many other peoples, names and souls were valuable, enduring intangible property that, like material property such as land, buildings, and heirloom objects, belonged first to the ancestors. All of this property must be curated by the living descendants in order to maintain its continued existence. In the process, the living become the reincarnation of their ancestors, as an image and means of social reproduction. As in similar ethnographically described situations, the names are considered to be the actual property, while the people and also objects or houses that carry names are considered to be the current material instantiations of that intangible property (Kan 1989:71; Küchler 1997:48; McKinnon 2000:173). The physical existence of objects and houses, like bodies, may be impermanent, but they can all be replaced or succeeded by others as long as they carry the name and vital essences, which, as intangible phenomena, are theoretically eternal. And just as elsewhere in the world where "soul" and "name" are seen as equivalent, the Tzotzil and Tzeltal Maya of highland Chiapas, Mexico, explain that the names and titles themselves contain a vital essence, which is accrued by the individuals who acquire them. Old men who have held many titled offices will thereby have accumulated a larger share of the available vital force in the world (Montagu and Hunt 1962:146).

The maintenance of family-owned property over many generations was a major feature of Maya sociopolitical organization in the past and has survived

to a certain extent today. The prehispanic Maya were organized into corporate kin-based groups that they called "houses," and their overall social organization matches the configuration that anthropologists have labeled "house societies" (Gillespie 1999, 2000b, 2000c; Gillespie and Joyce 1997). The "house" in such societies is a corporate body that acts as a collectivity to acquire and preserve an estate, composed of material and immaterial property, by creating linkages across many generations of house members via kinship and marriage ties (Lévi-Strauss 1982:174, 1987:152; see Gillespie 2000a). The noble houses of medieval Europe, such as the House of Tudor, are perhaps the most familiar examples of houses as long-lived corporate jural and economic units.

The success of a prehispanic Maya "house" in maintaining its material property can be gauged in part by the continued rebuilding of the residential compound, which, as noted above, was a common occurrence at Maya centers, especially among the upper stratum of society. In addition, Joyce (2000) has shown how Maya noble "houses" managed to curate valuable named heirloom objects over many generations. I suggest that there is also evidence for the maintenance of a considerable portion of a "house's" *nonmaterial* property in the interring of the dead on the "house's" land or within the residential compound, as a means of preserving perpetual ownership rights of souls and names. Ancestral spirits, as well as their bones, are an important resource to be safeguarded, as Waterson (1995:211) observed for an Indonesian house society.

The Classic Maya further reiterated their claims to the souls of their ancestors by engaging in secondary mortuary rituals, sometimes utilizing the curated bones of the dead (Chase and Chase 1996:77; Gillespie 2001; McAnany 1998:288–89; Welsh 1988:193). Certain kings acknowledged the participation in ritual activities of the spirits of their named deceased predecessors, as recorded in hieroglyphic inscriptions (Fitzsimmons 1998). These instances, like the Palenque psychoducts and the venerated relics described by Landa and Las Casas, should be seen for their sociopolitical implications as expressions of ownership of valuable "house" property associated with the "house's" claims to continuity with the past, thereby helping to make manifest the "house's" prestige and status.

Given its role in curating the eternal souls of its inhabitants, and in facilitating and localizing their transfer from one body to another over time, the Maya dwelling should be looked upon as something more than a "place

of death," a sepulcher or domestic mausoleum. The residence was continually rebuilt to correspond with the changes in the life histories of its occupants (e.g., Waterson 2000), for it, like the social "house" as a corporate body, endured beyond their individual life spans. From this larger temporal perspective, we see the dwelling as the place where the corporeal and noncorporeal elements of humans intertwined in an unending cycle of death and renewal⁴; hence, it was equally associated with regeneration and immortality. The physical house is better understood as a locus for the enactment of claims to group continuity through the curation, transformation, and renewal of that group's material and immaterial property. It was thus a place of life.

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Notes

1. A somewhat contrasting view is provided by Watanabe (1990:139) in his ethnographic study of the Mam Maya, for whom the importance of the community as the place of the ancestors creates a sense of continuity tied to the landscape in the absence of demonstrated genealogical ties.

2. Howes (1988) developed an earlier thesis of Maurice Leenhardt for comparing Melanesian beliefs, namely that the less differentiated the notions of "corpse" and "god," then the less differentiated the space that the living and the dead occupy. The prehispanic Maya may conform to this thesis to a certain extent.

3. Taube (1994) discussed several manifestations of the concept of *k'ex* as sacrificial replacement and generational continuity in prehispanic Maya iconography.

4. *K'ex* is only one-half of this dynamic cycle of death and renewal, termed *jaloj-k'exoj* by Carlsen and Prechtel (1991:25–26; see Carlsen 1997:50–51). *Jal* refers to external changes through an individual's life cycle (from birth to death), while *k'ex* is the "seed" that provides for the continuity of life across individual life cycles (i.e., rebirth or reincarnation).

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