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Rethinking Ancient Maya Social Organization:
Replacing "Lineage" with "House"

Long-standing disagreements concerning prehispanic Maya kinship and social organization have focused on the nature of their corporate groups, generally presumed to have been lineages. Specific debates center on whether the lineages were patrilineal or incorporated some kind of double-descent reckoning, how descent was combined with locality to define a group, and the status of lineage-outsiders within a group. It is argued here that Maya social organization is better approached within the contemporary critique of kinship, replacing "lineage" with Lévi-Strauss's model of the "house"—a corporate group maintaining an estate perpetuated by the recruitment of members whose relationships are expressed "in the language" of kinship and affinity and affirmed by purposeful actions. In this perspective, the operation of corporate groups is the primary concern, and relationships construed in terms of consanguinity and affinity are seen as strategies pursued to enhance and perpetuate the group. [ancestor veneration, house society, kinship, Maya, social organization]

The prehispanic Maya civilization of southern Mexico and northern Central America was characterized by complex societies composed of at least two social estates, the aristocracy and the commoners.[1] Evidence for an emergent aristocracy by about A.D. 250 (the start of the Classic period) includes masonry structures in central locations, hieroglyphic inscriptions, well-built tombs, and finely crafted portable objects. The rapid acqui- sition of information on this civilization, fueled by numerous archaeological projects and advances in deciphering inscriptions, has elicited new interpretations of Maya political organization. Various political models, many drawn from outside Mesoamerica (Southeast Asia, feudal Europe and Japan, and Africa), have been offered to describe and explain the structure and function of Maya cities and states.[2] Some propose a landscape dominated by unstable polities whose populace was held together by ideological and kin ties, with political authority based on the ranking of noble lineages, frequently using a segmentary state model (e.g., Fox 1987; Hammond 1991:270; Sanders 1989:102). Others argue for large centralized states with administrative institutions that operated beyond the limits of kinship (e.g., Chase and Chase 1992, 1996; Chase et al. 1990; McAnany 1995; see Demarest 1996:822).

It is difficult to choose which scenario is more correct, in part because both types of states could have developed in this large region prior to the sixteenth-century Spanish conquest (Marcus 1993). Furthermore, evaluating these models depends on an accurate assessment of how kinship functioned to integrate society, especially the role of lineages

(Henderson and Sabloff 1993:455). A common presumption among strong and weak state proponents is that noble lineages interacted with one another within and across polity boundaries, although whether commoners were grouped into lineages and how these were linked to the nobles are less certain.

Some uncertainty is predictable given the difficulty of understanding social organization from the archaeological record (Henderson and Sabloff 1993:450), but in the case of the Maya, it is exacerbated due to long-standing disagreements concerning kinship and social organization as interpreted from ethnohistoric, epigraphic, archaeological, and ethnographic evidence. Marcus's (1983:469) observation of nearly two decades ago—"[t]he social organization of the Classic Maya has been a subject of argument for years"—is still pertinent today. One aspect of this debate concerns rules used to restrict membership in descent-based corporate groups. The lineage is the most commonly invoked model (cf. Wilk 1988:142), and a major argument is whether the Maya were organized exclusively by patrilineal descent.

A related concern has been to recognize the structure of residential groups from their material signifiers and to discern how these groups also were organized by kinship. Here debate often turns on whether descent or residence was a primary determinant of group membership. The residential groups are often considered to be the same as the descent groups, requiring the reconciliation of contradictory principles in group definition (Murdock 1949:42). Another problem is the noncomparability of the different

kinds of evidence, in that much of the ethnohistoric information cannot be confirmed in the archaeological record, and the material remains sometimes contradict interpretations derived from other sources. The postconquest ethnohistoric and ethnographic data have tended to be used normatively, assuming one set of kinship principles was applicable to all of the Maya despite considerable variation in time and space (Sabloff 1983:416; Wilk 1988:135).

One proposal for resolving these disagreements is to avoid the use of abstract kinship types and external analogies in favor of the information provided by the Maya themselves.[3] However, given that analogy is fundamental to archaeological interpretation (Wylie 1985), others have suggested that the major impediment is the lack of "rigorous and testable models from relevant analogies" (Sharer 1993:101; also Marcus 1995a:27; Sabloff 1983:418). Furthermore, the contemporary critique of classificatory approaches to kinship (e.g., Carsten and Hugh-Jones 1995; Kuper 1982; Lévi-Strauss 1987) does not require eliminating models or comparative analyses, although to be useful, such models must "tell us more, and differently from, the data" (Lévi-Strauss 1960:51). As I will show, the difficulties experienced in attempting to explain Maya social groups result primarily from the imposition of an inadequate and under-conceptualized analogy, namely, the patrilineage as an ideal type.

This paper highlights key issues where analysts have encountered problems or have disagreed in interpreting the evidence for Maya kinship and social organization. Specific topics are (1) the characterization of residential groups as descent groups, (2) the descent principle(s) used to organize those and other groups, and (3) ancestor veneration as a mechanism for defining descent groups. This review reveals some of the shortcomings of the traditional approach to kinship that privileges descent principles in the division of society into discrete corporate units such as lineages (Lévi-Strauss 1987:153-154; Scheffler 1964: 127).

A different approach to social groupings utilizing the "house" construct (Lévi-Strauss 1982:174, 1987:152) is proposed as better explaining the Maya data. Houses are corporate, long-lived units that are organized for specific ends. House members strategically utilize relationships of consanguinity and affinity, real and fictive, in order to legitimate expressions of unity and perpetuity. The house has been well described ethnographically in complex societies (e.g., Boon 1990; Macdonald 1987; McKinnon 1991, 1995; Sellato 1987a; Traube 1986; Waterson 1990, 1995a). Furthermore, this approach has great value for understanding past societies known only archaeologically because it emphasizes the significant material manifestations of the house as a social grouping, namely, the dwelling and other physical property maintained by a house (Gillespie 2000). The utility of the house derives from its status as a heuristic model based on pragmatic actions rather than as an ideal classificatory type determined by kinship rules. It

can help resolve current debates in Maya kinship and facilitate the integration of social and political organization.

Maya Social Organization: The Debates

The uncertainty regarding Maya social organization focuses on the nature of their social groups. Archaeologists tend to be concerned with how the populace was organized into discrete segments whose members engaged in collective activities and drew aspects of their social status from that membership, what has been called a "group" "in the sociological sense" (Fox 1967:168), especially where the actions of those groups are archaeologically visible. In traditional kinship approaches, it has been important to distinguish between consanguineal and residential groups (following Murdock 1949:42–47). The first is composed of persons bound together exclusively by consanguinity, primarily on the basis of descent. These include lineages and sibs, defined as groups produced by either unilinear descent rule (patrilineal or matrilineal), which are differentiated in that members of a lineage can trace their common relationship through remembered genealogical links in the prevailing line of descent, whereas members of a sib claim common descent but cannot trace actual genealogical ties. In this configuration, parental sex is the chief criterion used to restrict group membership (Goodenough 1970:54–55). Descent groups tend to be exogamous, in which case they cannot form residential groups because some members must marry out. In addition, there are instances of double-descent systems involving matrilineal and patrilineal groups (Murdock 1949:45), as well as nonunilineal or cognatic descent groups tracing descent from a common ancestor(s) not restricted by sex of the linking individual (e.g., Fox 1967:49, 172; Goodenough 1970:46).[4] These are all corporate groups (Murdock 1960:5), which theoretically exist in perpetuity and which may act or be treated in certain circumstances as a single entity, especially in relationships with equivalent groups (Fox 1967:163–164).

In contrast, residential kin groups are defined by their common residence and therefore include consanguineal and affinal kin, as in a family composed of spouses and children (Murdock 1949:41–42). Many residential groups are short-lived, ceasing to exist, for example, when the founding couple dies and adult children leave. A third group type, which Murdock (1949:66) termed a "compromise kin group," reconciles unilocal residence and unilineal descent in that it is larger than an extended family and consists of a core of co-residing persons related by unilineal descent, with descent being as important as residence for group identity. Murdock (1949:67, 1960:1) called this group a "clan," while recognizing that British anthropologists (e.g., Fox 1967:49) used this term for what Americans called a "sib." It has also been called a "localized lineage" in response to the need to label units in which both descent and residence play a role in defining group

membership—"a problem that has plagued anthropology from its very beginnings" (Scheffler 1973:774). Unilineal descent is privileged as the basis for group definition even though all co-residents will not be related to one another by that means (Scheffler 1973:774). Maya groups more often corresponded to this third type (Freidel 1983:382), reflecting the reality that kinship and locality are joint principles for group organization here, as elsewhere in Mesoamerica (Hunt 1976:103; Nutini 1996:84) and the world (Kuper 1982:72; Leach 1968; Lévi-Strauss 1987:181).

Localized Lineages

One difficulty in interpreting Maya social organization has precisely been to understand how descent was integrated with residence to form corporate groups. The common residential unit today and in the Colonial period as well (Farriss 1984:132; Wilk 1988:137–141) is the patrilocal extended family, often residing in multi-dwelling compounds on or near their jointly held farmland, especially in the Maya highlands. Family unity will span only a few generations before inevitably fissioning and dividing the common property (e.g., La Farge 1947:114–115; Vogt 1969:129–134; Wisdom 1940:249). However, some permanent residential clusters of related extended families have been referred to as localized lineages, for example, in Tzotzil Maya Zinacatan, where they are literally called the "houses" (sna) of a specific family surname (Vogt 1969: 140). They represent a type of localized, customary societal subdivision, often referred to as barrio or calpulli, that occupies an intermediate position between family and community and that still exists among some highland Maya peoples especially (Mulhare 1996:98).

For the prehispanic Maya there is also archaeological evidence for larger or more permanent groupings than the extended family, especially within the upper stratum of society. Well-built houses, arranged around one or more common patios, were continuously occupied, enlarged, and renovated and often had shrines presumably devoted to the residential unit's common ancestors, some of whom were buried within the compound (e.g., Ashmore 1981; Bullard 1960; Haviland 1968, 1981, 1988; Leventhal 1983; McAnany 1995:66, 104; Tourtellot 1988). These relatively self-sufficient economic units composed the most visible corporate groups in Maya society (Hendon 1991:911). Because the extended family cannot persist over such a long period, many scholars have interpreted these prehispanic data to indicate the existence of lineages, sometimes specified as localized lineages (e.g., Haviland 1968:100, 109, 1971:102; Hendon 1991:912). However, some archaeologists are less willing to apply a descent-group type in the absence of further evidence and conservatively refer to "generationally extended family residential groups" (Sharer 1993:97) based on an "accretionary family-growth model" (Tourtellot 1988:97).

The prehispanic residential groups were not equal in status. Only the well-made masonry structures preserve the long histories of these units, and the many perishable houses of the lower societal stratum leave fewer traces. Sanders (1989:102), who favors the segmentary, kin-based model of political organization, envisioned Maya society as divided into a ranked series of lineages using an East African analogy (Sanders 1981). The minimal lineages were composed of individual house compounds and were organized into maximal lineages whose heads formed a noble class under the authority of the king, the head of the royal lineage. In addition, there was considerable intra-group differentiation, as measured by access to valued space, objects, and burial treatment (Hendon 1991:911). Sanders (1989:102–103) suggested that the aristocratic households included close and distant kin as well as unrelated clients, estimating that the noble lineage head of the residential complex labeled Group 9N-8 at Late Classic Copan held sway over a core population of at least 200 and likely additional groups up to 1,000 people.

Given that these were lineages, evidence for low-status residents has been interpreted to indicate the presence of outsiders, possibly "servants, laborers, or in-laws" (McAnany 1995:107; see Haviland 1968:113; Leventhal 1983: 75; McAnany 1993:80). Early Colonial census data from Yucatan also show that larger residential groupings often included many apparently nonrelated persons (Roys et al. 1940:15). However, Hendon (1991: 912) suggested that even low-status members were kin, even if they were, in effect, servants or retainers. She observed that lineage structure is often a means for ranking individuals, for example, based on genealogical closeness to group founders, along the lines of the "status lineage" described by Goldman (1970:420) for Polynesia (see also Haviland 1973:139). Hence, kinship "structured social relations at all levels, including those between the ruler and the elite and the elite and the commoners" (Hendon 1991:913). Ethnohistoric evidence for the Pokomam Maya of highland Guatemala may support this position, but it reveals the potential for ambiguity in kinship status. There the household head used the same term for his son and heir as he used for a male house servant (acun) and additionally added the normal term for "son" (kahol) to refer to servants. Since a different term was used for slaves and wage laborers, Miles (1957:758) suggested this could mean that servants were relatives. Alternatively, however, a single kin term may have been extended to them because they were household residents.

Societies of highland Guatemala have also been interpreted as organized into localized lineages in the Postclassic (after A.D. 1000). The information comes from early Colonial native histories and other documents, matched against the settlement plans of late preconquest archaeological sites (e.g., Fox 1989; Guillemin 1977).

Even with documentary information, the organization of these groups as based primarily on descent or residence remains unclear. The Quiche Maya are believed by some scholars (Carmack 1981:156–163; Fox 1987; Fox and Cook 1996: 811) to have been organized into a ranked series of localized lineages, forming a segmentary system like that described for the African Nuer. However, the referents for these lineages vary from usage elsewhere. The "minimal lineage" was an extended family of brothers and their children; the "principal lineage" included grandparents and grandchildren (five generations), forming an *amak* (actually a hamlet); and a "major lineage," composed of several principal lineages, could span more than five generations (Carmack 1981:59, 161; Fox and Cook 1996: 811–812).

The *chinamit* is a group mentioned in the native histories and often translated as "lineage" (e.g., Edmonson 1971:250 ff.; Tedlock 1985:210 ff.). However, in the segmentary model it is described as composed of two or more minimal or principal lineages "plus perhaps several families of recent arrival who shared lands and a temple or shrine complex; thus the term *chinamit* is used when referring to territory," like the amak (Fox and Cook 1996:812). Carmack (1981:164) explained that territorial organization "was challenging lineage in importance as an integrational mode." The chinamit ("fenced-in place") was therefore not really a lineage but "a territorial unit of people related by virtue of being subject to the same chief" who took the lineage name of their overlord, now drawing on the model of clients attached to a European feudal lord (Carmack 1981:164). (In fact, a similar emphasis on residential over descent criteria applied as well to the "so-called patrilineal lineages of the Nuer" [Goodenough 1970:66].) Finally, the lineages of the lords, which engaged in closed bride-exchange, were called *nimha* ("big house"), a name Carmack (1981:159–160, 192, 288) suggested derived from the fact that lineage business was conducted in large structures, some of which have been identified at the ruins of the Quiche capital, Utatlan.

As a segmentary structure, this model of organization presumes that the smaller lineage segments were organized via patrilineal ties into larger units headed by the lords, although the native histories themselves do not contain this information and only name the leaders of successive generations of major lords or title-holders. Other scholars have considered that the case for a segmentary structure using purely patrilineal connections to bind the Quiche population into ever larger units for state organization purposes is not supported (Chase and Chase 1992:307–308; Hill and Monaghan 1987:74). It has been argued that the chinamit and other units are better treated as territorial rather than descent groups, whose members represented their group identity through the adoption of a common surname (Hill and Monaghan 1987:34).

In sum, for the lowland and highland Maya there is evidence for corporate residential groups of various sizes, some of whose members were related by descent and possibly affinal ties, but others were not related. Nevertheless, descent is generally considered the primary criterion in group affiliation. Nonrelated residents may have been referred to by kin terms or may have assumed the common name of the group as if they were related. However, they, like in-marrying wives, could not have been members of the lineage per se (Carmack 1981:63), and the segmentary model in particular cannot explain their integration within the group.

Descent Rules

Lineage is the most common descent group type applied to the ancient Maya, but how their lineages were organized is another major topic of debate, and the evidence and arguments over its interpretation have become well known among Mayanists. *Lineage* is seldom defined by Maya scholars who use the term, the notable exception being Haviland (1968:100), who cited Murdock's (1949:46) definition. Murdock's kinship types became popular in archaeology in the 1960s (Allen and Richardson 1971), and the Maya literature reveals adherence to his definition, namely, of persons tracing descent exclusively through either the male or female line. The consensus today (e.g., Carmack 1981:63; Haviland 1992; Hopkins 1988; McAnany 1995:22 ff.; Schele and Freidel 1990:84–85; Sharer 1993) is that the totality of information indicates a specifically patrilineage organization with patrilineal rules of descent, inheritance, and succession.

The presumption that the Maya were organized into patrilineages by the beginning of the Classic period, perhaps a development out of cognatic groups (Haviland 1968:111), has been construed to mean, among other things, that an androcentric ethic prevailed and that males and their genealogical links to one another were valued over females. Archaeological findings that contradict these expectations are treated as aberrations or problems to be explained. These aberrations have also been used to support the existence of other descent constructs and descent groups and are not simply considered to fall within acceptable parameters of lineages as described by ethnographers, who have demonstrated the lack of fit between idealized rules and real life that makes even "classic descent groups [appear] problematic" (Carsten and Hugh-Jones 1995:15).

One domain of Maya society that has been considered not to match the patrilineal model is burial treatment. Some high-ranking women received elaborate mortuary ritual on par with that of men (e.g., Burial 162 at Tikal [Haviland 1981:107]); indeed, the most elaborate burial at Altar de Sacrificios, Burial 128, was that of a female (Haviland 1971:103). Classic royal tombs housing females as the principal interments have recently been discovered at

Palenque (*Arqueología Mexicana* 1994) and Copan (Stuart 1997). Furthermore, men and women of both commoner and noble estates received fairly equivalent grave goods in the Classic period lowlands (Haviland 1971:104; McAnany 1995: 123; Welsh 1988:146); however, the evidence is not equally distributed from one polity to the next, indicating significant variability.[5] In addition, monumental imagery at some cities, but not all, prominently depicts named females as protagonists (Marcus 1976:157 ff.; Proskouriakoff 1961). They are shown alone or paired with males on equal footing, and they often hold valuable items or participate in rituals with males (Joyce 1996; Proskouriakoff 1993). This evidence has also been interpreted as not conforming with strict patrilineality (Marcus 1983:470).

Similar discordances with patrilineality have been interpreted from hieroglyphic inscriptions that record succession to the paramountcy. From Tikal's inscriptions, Coggins (1975: table 4) reconstructed instances of the throne seeming to pass from father to daughter's husband. Haviland (1977:64, 66) dismissed these as special-case suspensions of the rule of patrilineal succession, but other scholars (Fox and Justeson 1986:26–28; Joyce 1981:53; Proskouriakoff 1993:115) argued that they reveal more complex succession patterns that regularly incorporated links through women (cf. Hopkins 1991). Royal women who married paramounts of some secondary centers are interpreted as having thereby elevated that polity's status (Marcus 1983:470). After a seventh-century royal woman from Tikal married a local lord of Naranjo (a Tikal dependency), her son (but not his father) became the ruler of Naranjo (Marcus 1976:60; Proskouriakoff 1993:71). At Palenque women even apparently ruled as regents or as paramounts in their own right, and one transferred her office to her son, meaning that rulership shifted to a different patrilineage. Again, this has been treated as something out of the ordinary, a problem that the ruler himself had to explain and justify (Freidel 1992:124; Hammond 1991: 272–273; Marcus 1983:470; Schele and Freidel 1990:221). Proskouriakoff (1993:30, 173) observed that such women should be considered founders of ruling dynasties. From all this evidence, Marcus (1983:470–471) suggested that "double descent" was practiced among ruling lineages.

This same suggestion was made earlier based on data from early Colonial documents, although other scholars examined the same information and reached different conclusions. Much of the ethnohistorical evidence consists of name inheritance patterns, resulting in the formation of name groups, which are not typically found elsewhere in prehispanic Mesoamerica (Restall 1997:47). However, the question as to whether a name group is the same as a localized lineage or an archaeologically recognizable residential group has yet to be adequately addressed. For example, the sixteenth-century highland Pokomam Maya inherited names from their fathers. Miles (1957:758) noted that the

resulting groups of persons with the same patronym must be those referred to in a colonial dictionary as *ilatz*: a "linage de gente, los de tal apellido" [a lineage of people or those of the same name]. Despite the absence of other evidence for lineage structure, she suggested that patrilineally inherited surnames would indicate the division of society into lineages (more likely sibs). Significantly, the sources indicate no corporate functions for the name groups, with the possible exception of the nobility, because rulers and high office-holders were said by Fr. Las Casas (in the sixteenth century) to belong to particular "lineages" (Miles 1957:759; Las Casas [1967, II, ch. 234:501] actually referred to "linajes y familias nobles").

More information concerning name groups pertains to the lowland Yucatec and closely related Peten Itza Maya. In his sixteenth-century description of Yucatecan customs, Bishop Landa (1982) stated that persons who inherited the same name were obligated to help one another, that it was very wrong to marry someone else with the same name, and that a man could not marry a woman of his father's family, although there were fewer restrictions on maternal relatives (pp. 41–43). From these statements, Beals (1932: 473) concluded that the Yucatec Maya had non-localized paternal sibs. Like Miles did for the Pokomam, Roys (1939:40, 1940:35) proposed that people with the same inherited name formed a patrilineage, and he linked this group to the term *ch'ibal*, translated in colonial dictionaries as *linage*. The name group, he argued, "was called *ch'ibal* ('lineage in the male line'), and the Maya thought of it as, and called it, a lineage . . . although a good many of them contained too many members and were too widely dispersed to be considered lineages in the anthropological meaning of the term" (Roys 1957:4). That is, Beals was more correct in calling them non-localized sibs (see Haviland 1972:64) with no functions other than providing mutual aid and regulating marriage. Nevertheless, the translation of "lineage" for *ch'ibal* and Roys's tentative assumptions that this group was the same as the patronym group and that it had some structural significance as a "sociological group" have come into common usage.

In a recent analysis of colonial documents from the Yucatec town of Ixil, Restall (1997:17) similarly assumed that individuals who referred to themselves as "person of the [name]" formed a group that he called the *ch'ibal*, although that term itself was rarely used. He noted that such name groups did not constitute geopolitical or socio-political units but that they should have been composed of related households and that documented name-group exogamy should have resulted in strategic marriage alliances, especially among the wealthier groups (1997:29, 92, 133). However, he could not find evidence for a formal organization of ch'ibal members across town boundaries (1997:17), as Roys had suggested should be the case given the wide distribution of many of these names. If this name

group was indeed a sociological group beyond the extended family, it was apparently most operational as localized to a specific community.

Significantly, Landa and other colonial Spanish sources indicate that names were also inherited from one's mother. Landa (1982:58) stated that upon marriage, men and women assumed both their parents' names. Moreover, he said,

> They place much emphasis on knowing the origin of their lineages [*linajes*], especially if they come from some house of *Mayapán*; and they seek to find that out from the priests, [since] it is one of their sciences; and they boast much about the men who have been famous in their lineages. The names of the fathers always endure in the sons; in the daughters no. They always call their sons and daughters by the name of the father and of the mother—that of the father as proper [*propio*], and that of the mother as appellative [*apelativo*], so that they call the son of *Chel* and *Chan*, *Nachanchel*, which means sons [*sic*] of so-and-so people. This is why the Indians say that those of one name are relatives and are treated as such. [pp. 41–42, translated in Jones 1998:79][6]

A similar system of name transfer is documented for the Peten Itza of the southern lowlands. Fr. López Cogolludo (1867–68, II, bk. 9, ch. 14:227–228) mentioned a 1618–19 account that recorded the Itza practice of prefacing the father's name with the mother's name, explaining that the ruler, Canek, was called Can from his mother's side and Ek from his father's. On a 1696 trip among the Itza, Fr. Avendaño y Loyola (1987:54) observed that commoners had their own surnames, "each one from the father and mother," but that many called themselves Caneks, like their ruler, although they were not his relatives, because they "take their names from those who rule the said districts." The adoption of a surname based on residence or political loyalty occurred as well among some highland Maya (see above).

Name transfer represented patriline continuity in that a man's name (e.g., Chel) was carried by his son, his son's son, and so on through the male line, while his daughter's children took their own father's name. Roys (1940:35) believed that people of the same patronym saw themselves as descended from a common ancestor, and he noted that some Inquisition proceedings recorded the names of deities (possibly ancestors) venerated by specific lineages. Colonial records support Landa's statement that persons of the same patronym tended not to marry (Restall 1997:48). Furthermore, Landa and López Cogolludo seem to have considered the mother's name to be her own patronym (Jones 1998:79), an opinion more recently propounded by Haviland (1972:65, 1992:940) in support of patrilineality.

Other scholars, however, have considered the mother's name a matronym, and this has been used as an argument against the exclusivity of patrilineal descent. It would mean that the names of mothers endured through their female progeny, such that there were two parallel lines of names, one transmitted through males and one through

females. Roys (1940:37) cited an oft-repeated example from the *Crónica de Calkini* of a man named Na May Canche and his wife named Ix Chan Pan whose son was named Na Chan Canche (*na* and *ix* are prefixes used by males and females, respectively). If the son had taken his mother's pat-ronym (her second name), he would have been named Na Pan Canche (Jones 1998:79). From this Roys (1940) concluded that it was the mother's mother's name and not her father's name that was passed on to her children, "which she could have inherited only from a female line of maternal ancestors" (pp. 37–38).[7] Furthermore, he observed that only prominent men prefixed their father's names with the na + mother's name, suggesting that this linguistic reference to the mother's family was used only among the aristocracy (p. 37). Restall (1997:41) accepted Roys's interpre-tation, noting that there is "not one instance in the colonial record of a Maya using his or her maternal patronym." Jones (1998:80–81) considered this practice as evidence for an entire matrilineage into which at least the ruling patri-line always married, for every king was known as Can Ek, with Can as the mother's name and Ek as the father's.[8]

Additional documentary evidence has been added to name inheritance practices to support a matriline construct, if not a matrilineage as a corporate group. Roys (1940:38) suggested that the name pattern explains why there were two terms in colonial Yucatec for *lineage*: *ch'ibal*, "linaje; descendiente en linaje, generación por vía recta de varón" (Barrera Vásquez et al. 1980:134), and *ts'akab*, "generación por vía recta de parte de la madre, descendiente en linaje" (Barrera Vásquez et al. 1980:387), the first referring to progeny in a straight line from a male and the second to progeny in a straight line from a mother. Haviland (1973:139) and Hopkins (1988:94) inferred that the term indicated a linkage to mother's kin in her patriline. However, Jones's (1998:446) analysis of the dictionary examples for each word led him to see the ts'akab as a matriline through which noble titles, ritual identifications, and even personal qualities were transmitted, in contrast to the ch'ibal, a discrete group to which one belonged. Thus, members of a patrilineal ch'ibal also inherited intangible property through maternal ties to a ts'akab.

A final bit of linguistic evidence is the Yucatec word for a noble person, *almehen*, which joins *al*—the word for child used by a mother—and *mehen*—the word for child used by a father. Some highland Maya used a word with the same meaning—*alk'ahol* in Quiche—to refer to "lords born outside the noble patrilines," in a position of subservi-ence translated as "vassal" (Carmack 1981:148). The Yucatec Motul dictionary defined *almehen* as a child with re-spect to father and mother (Barrera Vásquez et al. 1980:14). Roys (1940:38) interpreted this to signify someone who claimed descent through maternal and paternal lines. (However, the parent, not the child, is ego for these kin

terms, so *almehen* is more literally the progeny of a bi-parental entity.)

The totality of the Yucatec evidence for name inheritance and descent lines led Roys (1940:38) to conclude that "a matrilineal reckoning of descent paralleled the socially more important patrilineal system in Yucatan." This statement has since been taken to mean "double descent" (e.g., Haviland 1968:101, 1972:68; Hopkins 1988:93; Jones 1998:447), apparently following Coe's (1965:104, 1966: 144–145) interpretation from this evidence that the Maya had a "double unilineal descent" system (see also Thompson 1982:267–268). This idea was echoed by Edmonson (1979:9–10) based on his own studies of Yucatecan documents and was repeated by Marcus (1983: 470–471) for the archaeological evidence. Roys himself did not use this term (Haviland 1973:137), although the facile inflation of a descent concept into a corporate group reflects the archaeological emphasis on identifying sociological/residential groups. The lack of evidence for matri*lineages* was therefore used to debunk the existence of a double descent construct (Haviland 1968:101, 1972:66, 68, 1973:137 ff.; Hopkins 1988:93–99). Furthermore, the documentary information indicates that maternal descent was emphasized by the nobility (Haviland 1973:139; Marcus 1983:470), meaning that this concept did not apply to all of society.

Ancestor Veneration

Ancestor veneration practices provide additional information on descent groups and the construction of jural authority, when it is vested in leaders who are recognized as heads of groups claiming descent from a common ancestral source. Maya ancestor veneration has also been used to support the patrilineage model, although the evidence is equivocal. Ancestor veneration in the sixteenth century (Landa 1982:59; Las Casas 1967, II, ch. 240:526–527) involved the curation of body parts, the building of an altar or mound over the burial, and continued rituals to the dead, especially deceased leaders—exactly the same indications that have been found archaeologically (Gillespie 1999: 237–238; McAnany 1995:26 ff.; Welsh 1988:186–193). Given the material evidence of these practices, the jural and moral authority vested in ancestors is considered to have been critical to Maya sociopolitical organization as early as the Preclassic (Formative) period (Adams 1977:99; Leventhal 1983:75). Ancestors are still the moral arbiters in traditional Maya communities, especially in the highlands, and are the subjects of profound ritual recognition (e.g., Nash 1970:19–23; Vogt 1969:298–301; Watanabe 1990:139–141).

McAnany (1995, 1998) has recently drawn attention to how Maya ancestor veneration was correlated with the legitimacy of authority and the organization of corporate groups. Whereas many peoples worship the dead or spirits, such a "cult of the dead" or simple "memorialism" can be distinguished from practices in societies in which a specific ancestor is the focal point for the collective identity of persons who recognize their relationship to one another by their common descent from that ancestor and often invest authority in those persons who are closest genealogically to that ancestor (Calhoun 1980:310; Fortes 1965:124, 137, 1976:4; Freedman 1958:84; Goody 1962:381). McAnany (1995) followed Fortes (1965:124) in his limiting of the designation "ancestor veneration" to rituals devoted to *named* ancestors (the practice of geneonymy) whose actual ties to their descendants were known. Any other practices, involving, for example, unnamed antecedents whose ties could not be traced to their putative descendants, were lumped into Fortes's other category as a cult of the dead. Furthermore, in order for ancestor veneration to divide everyone in society into mutually exclusive groupings, descent must be traced unilineally, so that the apical ancestor or ancestors are "exclusive to the worshipping group" and thereby distinguish one group from another, while also relating them collaterally when they share a more remote ancestor; this is especially exemplified in segmentary systems, such as that of the African Tallensi (Fortes 1965: 123). McAnany (1995:7 ff.) interpreted the Maya practice of burying important family members within the residential compound as evidence that remembered ties to actual agnatic ancestors was a critical means for restricting descent group membership, correlated with the distribution of economic rights (including land use) and political organization; hence, the Maya must have been organized into patrilineal descent groups.

However, some anthropologists (e.g., Keesing 1970: 758; Newell 1976:19–21) have taken issue with the claim that the structural functions of ancestor veneration are dependent on the division of society into groups based on known unilineal descent ties to named ancestors and that these cannot occur in cognatic societies. Among the prehispanic Maya, as noted, archaeological data reveal that high-ranking males and females were sometimes given equally elaborate funeral treatment, such that both were symbolically marked as ancestors (McAnany 1995:123), "despite the tendency toward patrilineal descent and inheritance" (McAnany 1995:60). At Palenque both males and females are depicted and named as the parents and other presumed ancestors of a seventh-century paramount on the sides of his coffin (Robertson 1983:65–66; Schele and Freidel 1990:220). Paired royal male and female ancestors are frequently shown on stelae at Yaxchilan (Proskouriakoff 1963; Tate 1992:59–61). In the hieroglyphic inscriptions, a ruler would frequently name both his mother and father as his antecedents, mother first.

The noble, and especially royal, members of ancient Maya society certainly venerated their own corporate group ancestors, which often included females. These practices were part of the display of political authority, especially

visible in the continued veneration and rebuilding of tomb-shrines (e.g., at Tikal [Jones 1991]), the repositioning of stelae naming predecessors, and, in the Late Classic period, the erection of huge pyramidal temples atop the burials of prominent predecessors. However, detailed genealogical information is scarce in the Maya inscriptions. In most cases individual texts provide little more than the names of a ruler's parents (Jones 1977: 41–42), and epigraphers have had to reconstruct tentative genealogies from these data. Even when many individuals are named in one inscription, these tend to be lists of kings or title-holders rather than genealogies (Marcus 1995b; Schele and Freidel 1990: 218, 311).

Contemporary Maya ancestor worship is often used to elucidate prehispanic practices, although the modern political situation is vastly changed from the past, and these practices would seem to fit Fortes's second category—a cult of the dead. The ancestors today are an amalgam of usually anonymous spirits, from most of whom no genealogical ties are demonstrated. Nevertheless, ancestors provide a focus for group identity, a mechanism for the construction of group authority, and a means to control access to property rights, especially to land:

> The Maya call these ancestors "mother-fathers" or "grandfathers," although these figures rarely represent named ascendants of specific kin groups—evidence of the general attenuation of Maya blood relations beyond the immediate extended family. Ancestors most often betoken social affiliations based on land and locale rather than strict descent. . . . Many Maya consider these generic community forebears the primordial claimants of lands now held by the living. [Watanabe 1990:139]

While recently deceased individuals are remembered by their immediate descendants, who often name children after grandparents (Watanabe 1990:139), over time the dead become fused with the anonymous ancestors. This process takes about four generations for the Tzotzil Maya of Zinacantan before the dead become one of the *totilme'iltik*, the "father-mothers" (Vogt 1969:144). Similarly, the highland Kanjobal Maya were described as "a people who ordinarily do not know the names of their great-grandparents—a fact which causes the element of ancestor-worship to be rather vague" (La Farge 1947:115). Quiche Maya ancestry was ideally traced back four to six generations (Carmack 1981:161; Tedlock 1985:296), but after death the "individual lost his personal identity" (Carmack 1981:150).

Furthermore, as "mother-fathers" these ancestors include females and males. Among the Quiche, the elected head of a localized kin group, who together with his wife performs ceremonies to that group's ancestors, is likewise called the "mother-father" (Tedlock 1982:35, 59), a title mirroring the bi-gendered quality of the ancestors from whom his authority derives. This practice actually does correspond with Fortes's model of jural authority based on

ancestor veneration, for such a person should represent the deceased ancestor, but for the modern Maya that "ancestor" is bi-parental, collective, and anonymous. Moreover, such an antecedent entity is also what was conjectured from the Postclassic Yucatec term for "noble," *almehen*, the progeny of a "mother-father" unity. As a "vassal," as in the Quiche alk'ahol, such a person would serve under the authority of a leader in the position of his "mother-father."

Contemporary practices reveal how the ritual recognition of ancestors is tied to the construction of social identity and the delimitation of a corporate group, sometimes at the level of an entire community but also for individual residential groups. It is widely held that people today owe the land they work and its continuing fertility to the ancestors or equivalent spirits who first lived there and to whom periodic offerings must be made (Watanabe 1990:139); ancestors may be considered the true land owners (Bunzel 1952:18). The Tzotzil Maya of Zinacantan say that ancestors first obtained the use-rights to land parcels and waterholes, and claims to those resources by individual multifamily local groups (sna [house]) are maintained by rites of veneration that they perform (Vogt 1969:145–147). In fact, the act of participating in biannual rituals to ancestors—more so than agnatic descent—is what "links together the descendants as common worshipers and members of the same sna . . . [and] symbolizes the unity of the sna as a structurally significant unit in Zinacanteco society" (Vogt 1969:144).

In considering the structural role of ancestor veneration, the authority of a corporate group to enjoy certain proprietary and jural rights, and to limit the number of persons entitled to share in those rights, is based on establishing an idiom for expressing continuity with the past, when, it is believed, such rights were first created or distributed. Fortes considered genealogy a premier mechanism to homologously link people in the present with those who represent the past. However, another mechanism, based on analogy (Lévi-Strauss 1987:161), seems to better fit the Maya evidence. Continuity is demonstrated by actions that create an identification or feeling of similarity between people of today and those of the past, who are therefore invoked as ancestors. By engaging in such actions, the living see themselves as replicating the constellation of practices—characterized in contemporary Maya belief as *costumbre* (custom) (Watanabe 1990:139)—that was initiated by their ancestors. In the past the Maya may have more literally reenacted events in the lives of their ancestors, who were objectified by heirloomed goods they had once owned, as observed in the form of "prohibited dances" that the Spaniards had still not completely abolished by the late seventeenth century; some of them survive today (Carlsen 1997:82). In so doing, they become their ancestors' latter-day manifestations. The people of the present may thereby perceive themselves as "instances of the same kinds of beings that came before" (as in Sahlins's [1985:59] Maori

example). By ritually constituting themselves as their ancestors' "descendants," the living Maya are connected to the past and are anchored to the specific locale that was first inhabited by these now legendary figures, many of whom are buried in the community (Watanabe 1990:140).

Furthermore, the Maya today see themselves more literally as the replacements of their forebears, based on a pan-Maya concept of *k'ex*, meaning substitute or replacement. Children are named for older relatives, often grandparents, thereby replacing them and manifesting the continuity of persons over multiple generations (Carlsen 1997:55; Carlsen and Prechtel 1991:26; Guiteras-Holmes 1961:143; Montagu and Hunt 1962; Watanabe 1990:139). Added to this use of names to represent continuity over time (as also manifested in the sixteenth-century naming patterns) is the belief that the eternal souls of the ancestors are recycled into the bodies of their descendants, sometimes together with the names (Carlsen and Prechtel 1991:28; Gillespie in press; Montagu and Hunt 1962:141; Thompson 1930:82; Vogt 1969:372). Thus the living become their immortal ancestors, incarnated in a different body (Carlsen and Prechtel 1991:26).

The evidence from ancestor veneration practices suggests an important insight into the construction of "descent" groups in the prehispanic era. Rather than record agnatic descent per se, social memory was innovated in collective efforts toward the erection, dedication, and continued use of dwellings for the living, tombs for the dead, and shrines for the ancestors in order to maintain continuity with the past (see Fox 1993:1). Actions directed toward ancestors' bodies and spirits were used to create social and political differences between nobles and commoners and among different noble groups. The curation of heirloomed property, together with a history explaining how ancestors acquired it, is another means for manifesting continuity to the past while simultaneously signifying differences among each group via their unique property (Weiner 1992:42). Such objects possessed by Maya noble families, typically items of adornment, often have hieroglyphic texts naming their owners, and many are known to have been curated for generations before they were deposited in ritual caches or burials (Joyce 2000). Ancestor veneration thus provides an additional means for understanding group organization based on references to common origins, social memories, the curation of land and other property, and collective ritual activities, but the evidence downplays the demonstration of strict descent ties.

Replacing "Lineage" with "House"

The ongoing debate concerning Maya social organization ultimately turns on whether or not people were organized primarily by unilineal descent rules into certain kin group types. The presence of practices such as marriage regulation and the veneration of ancestors and of rules of descent, succession, and inheritance has been used to argue for lineages, which are usually qualified as localized lineages rather than strictly consanguineal groups. The key problem is that "lineage," as it is generally understood, does not completely explain the evidence for Maya social organization, despite widespread evidence for long-lived multi-family groups expressing a patrilateral bias in descent, inheritance, succession, household authority, and control of agricultural land and most ritual offices. It is therefore prudent to consider other possibilities.

An obvious alternative is a cognatic descent group; such a group is structurally similar to a lineage and "involves principles relating to the inclusion and exclusion of descendants of the focal ancestor" (Goodenough 1970:46). (Cognatic descent groups are different from the double unilineal descent systems some Maya scholars have proposed.) Studies of cognatic societies have shown that these peoples effectively divide themselves into corporate groups that resemble unilineal descent groups in that their members recognize a common ancestor, control their collective property, maintain names and identifying emblems, and regulate marriage (Barnes 1962:5; Davenport 1959: 558–559). Residence patterns are such that these groups could be relatively dispersed or more localized (Davenport 1959:559; Goodenough 1955)—all characteristics shared by the Maya. Haviland (1968:104, 1970:97, 1973: 147–148) has suggested that cognatic groups may have existed in some parts of the Maya area at certain times. Indeed, they may have been more widespread in the Classic and Postclassic periods than previously considered, although the evidence reveals likely significant inter-polity variability.

Substituting one descent group type for another is not the best solution, however. A noted shortcoming of the descent group model is that it says little about the mechanisms that linked groups together into networks encompassing different levels of society (Henderson and Sabloff 1993:456). Moreover, as the ancestor veneration data demonstrate, rethinking Maya social organization requires acknowledging the critique of the lineage as a "type" and the privileging of consanguinity as a determining factor in the configuring of social relations (Carsten and Hugh-Jones 1995; Kuper 1982; Schneider 1984). Explaining the existence of social groups should begin with the purpose or function of the group and should only then proceed with how its members conceive or enact relationships to one another (Scheffler 1964:130). As Sahlins (1965:106) observed, "ancestral facts appear subordinate to doctrines of organization, not the doctrines to the facts" (see also Lévi-Strauss 1987:178). The common assumptions that social organization is best understood according to rules for dividing the populace into units, and that the classificatory terminology of anthropology is sufficient for this task, are no longer acceptable (Lévi-Strauss 1987:153–155). Lévi-Strauss (1982, 1987) and Bourdieu (1977:33 ff.) called

attention to local understandings of social arrangements as they are enacted in daily practice (see also Fox 1980; Waterson 1995a). Kinship is better considered "the product of strategies (conscious or unconscious) oriented towards the satisfaction of material and symbolic interests and organized by reference to a determinate set of economic and social conditions" (Bourdieu 1977:36).

More specifically, Lévi-Strauss noted that in many societies the people themselves refer to their "houses"—a word often taken to refer only to dwellings—as the units from which they derive their identities. From these examples, Lévi-Strauss (1982:174, 1987:152) defined the house as a recurring social phenomenon—a *personne morale* (a corporate entity with its own identity and responsibility) that maintains an estate composed of both material and immaterial property over many generations through both descent and marriage ties. A house "perpetuates itself through the transmission of its name, its goods, and its titles down a real or imaginary line, considered legitimate as long as this continuity can express itself in the language of kinship or of affinity and, most often, of both" (Lévi-Strauss 1982:174). Although Lévi-Strauss (1987:151) considered the house as a kinship "type," subsequent scholarship has shown that it is too vaguely defined for that purpose, and is more useful as a corporate group with specific functions, often better described as an economic, political, or ritual unit (Carsten and Hugh-Jones 1995:19; Gillespie 2000; Sellato 1987a:200). Descent and affinity are representations by which the house's integrity and perpetuity are expressed, but "they do not construct or define the house as social group, they follow from it" (Marshall 2000:75). The dwelling or some other structure—for example, a temple or tomb—serves to signify the group and its perpetuity in a fixed locale (Gillespie 2000; Waterson 1990, 1995b).

The question has been raised as to whether a house is not ultimately the same as a lineage, especially since no lineage has ever operated according to ideal rules and lineage members make pragmatic adjustments to real life (Carsten and Hugh-Jones 1995:15–16). In fact, many of the units labeled lineages are being rethought as houses (Carsten and Hugh-Jones 1995:16); indeed, many of them are actually called "houses" (Lévi-Strauss 1982:172; McKinnon 1991: 29). A major difference is that a lineage is considered a consanguineal group, with descent the primary basis for group membership, and other considerations, such as residence or joint property, are treated as derivative. Hence, a group that utilizes both descent and residence in its definition is considered a "compromise" between two more fundamental principles, something that has been difficult to name even as its widespread existence was becoming better known (Murdock 1949:66, 1960; Scheffler 1973:774). Furthermore, houses, unlike lineages, inherently incorporate affinal as well as descent ties. Both consanguinity and affinity form a "language" for relationships by means of

which members' actions are considered legitimate. Another difference lies in the presumption that lineage-based societies typically divide everyone in society into equivalent units, which is not the case in house societies in which only certain persons may be members of a house or in which individuals may claim membership in multiple houses. Finally, the organization of society in terms of lineages—that is, in terms of kinship—has been considered inappropriate for the Maya given the evidence for large hierarchical polities and does not match the expectations of some proposed models of political organization (Chase and Chase 1996; Marcus 1993). Houses, as Lévi-Strauss (1982:186–187) noted, are most visible in societies that seem to be transitional between kin-based and contractual-based organization, those in which differential access to wealth, rank, and power are salient features (McKinnon 1991:31). Relationships are expressed in "the language of kinship," but kinship itself is subverted in the process (Lévi-Strauss 1982:187).

Medieval Europe, characterized by aristocratic houses to which many commoners were attached, is a familiar example of this phenomenon (Lévi-Strauss 1982:174 ff.). The identity of noble houses depended less on descent and instead was "assured by a landed estate, claims to office, titles or other relatively exclusive rights," and it was this unit that the Spanish *linage* and French *lignage* signified (Goody 1983:228). Where this term appears in Colonial Maya documents, as noted above, it has often been taken to mean lineage in the anthropological sense, although medieval dictionaries translate *linage* as the "descent of houses and families" and "a line of descent" (Hill and Monaghan 1987:31). The Spanish *linage* better reflects the Maya situation; Las Casas (1967, II, ch. 234:501) in the sixteenth century recognized the equivalence between the "big house" of the Quiche nobility and the noble houses of Spain, such as the "casa de Guzmán."

The intact preservation of house property by members legitimately recruited through the "language of kinship and affinity" may seem to be the most apparent reason for the house's existence (Sellato 1987a:197) or, better said, the material means by which the house is socially reproduced (Weiner 1992:11). In the case of patrifilial-biased descent, males born or adopted into the house usually retain lifelong identification with their house of origin, although they may opt to affiliate with their wives' houses. Marriage brings specific material and intangible property rights from the wife-giving house, many of which are transmitted to children from their maternal relatives upon payment of the bride-price. Women often marry out to form alliances with other houses, although endogamy may be practiced among the aristocracy to keep property from leaving the house through marriage exchange (Boon 1990). High-ranking houses may engage in asymmetric marriage alliance to maintain high-status brides and restrict the valuables they bring in marriage to a small, usually closed group of allied

houses (McKinnon 1991). Houses as entities may therefore be most visible in their alliance interactions with other houses (Barraud 1990).

House identity is maintained based on continuity with both agnatic and uterine ancestors, from one's own house and those of spouse-giver houses. Ancestors represent the origin of the house, and the heirlooms they acquired objectify house history and prestige. Continuity is also represented in narratives detailing how the ancestors acquired those valuables, and it can be reduced to a recital of titles acquired by the house as immaterial property (Barraud 1979, 1990; Fox 1980; McKinnon 1991; Traube 1986; Weiner 1992). Ancestors are therefore a focus of group identity without necessitating recourse to a genealogy that encompasses the entire membership, although a pedigree for high-ranking members may be preserved (Goody 1983:231).

The house is an extremely flexible entity, open to multiple forms of expression (Lévi-Strauss 1987:160) even within a single culture area, such as Indonesia (Fox 1980) or the Maya area. It has been recognized in many types of societies (Waterson 1990:140 ff.) and at different levels of society, from large (like a clan) to small (like an extended family) (Fox 1980:330). Houses provide a framework for internal as well as external ranking, as house members may occupy ranked positions or strata (Boon 1990:215; Lévi-Strauss 1982:169). Houses are often most manifest in the upper levels of society, while commoners may lack the wherewithal to maintain an estate and to attract sufficient new members to perpetuate it (Boon 1990; Lévi-Strauss 1982; McKinnon 1991; Sellato 1987b; Waterson 1995a). Commoners may be attached to specific noble houses without recourse to genealogical ties as with a cadet lineage, becoming thereby part of the estate of noble houses (McKinnon 1991:97–101). Noble houses display their status in various ways, including their management of land and resources; the embellishment, size, and renovation of their structures; heirloomed valuables and titles that represent house history and status; elaborate wedding and funeral rituals that manifest exchange relations with spouse-taker and spouse-giver houses; and shrines to ancestors—all of which reiterate the active and material existence of the house.

These characteristics can readily be applied to the prehispanic Maya, substituting "house" where one normally reads "lineage"; this would also better match Maya terminology. In highland Guatemala, where territory and ostensible descent group membership somehow overlapped, Carmack saw the parallel with feudal Europe for the attachment of non-kin to the noble house—the nimha (big house)—and to the chinamit (fenced-in place). The Yucatec data analyzed by Roys—in which maternal ties, along with patrilineal descent, were maintained especially by elites—are fully in keeping with house societies elsewhere.

The noble house is an apt interpretation of the archaeological and epigraphic evidence. Masonry dwellings, which were rebuilt and elaborated to parallel changes in the life histories of their occupants (some of whom were literally incorporated into the structures), are the most salient physical evidence of the longevity of a house as a social group. Furthermore, royal houses are named as such (na [house] and otot [a possessed house]) in acts of dedication recorded in monumental inscriptions that often refer to the house ancestors (e.g., Palenque's Cross Group [Schele 1990:149]). The monuments incorporate pictures and texts describing house heirlooms, sometimes as the original property of gods (e.g., the central panel in Palenque's Temple of the Inscriptions [Schele 1983:98–99]), or refer to supernatural patrons, as at Copan (Fash 1991).

As stated above, there is textual evidence for a few marriage alliances among high-ranking houses and the inheritance of significant property rights, even political power, from females (Marcus 1976:157, 1983:466, 470; Proskouriakoff 1993; Schele and Mathews 1991:243–245). The use of marriage as a means to ally different Maya polities is also characteristic of house societies because " 'house' can relate to 'house,' even across presumed boundaries of society, nation, or other construction" (Boon 1990:n.439). Maya marriage exchanges also conformed to a pattern noted among Indonesian house societies in which wife-giver and wife-taker houses must offer certain types of items to one another (Gillespie and Joyce 1997).

The prehispanic Maya nobility, and especially the ruling house, expended tremendous efforts toward the veneration of their own ancestors, as described above. This suggests that the demonstration and renewal of ancestral ties to the past was part of the construction of political authority, but only as that political authority was itself tied to the positioning or ranking of the individual noble houses with each other and within the larger society. Historical studies of some house societies (Geertz and Geertz 1975; Lévi-Strauss 1982) reveal that in the continual competition among noble houses for rank and for the labor of attached commoners, and in the maneuvering of lower-ranked houses to elevate themselves, houses will rise and fall in status over time (Boon 1990:217). This situation appears to be the case for the Postclassic Quiche Maya, whose dynastic histories were "subject to conflict and change with the rise and fall of various 'houses' [nimha]" (Edmonson 1971:157). Thus, this scenario may help to explain the waxing and waning of political influence at some Classic Maya centers (Demarest 1992; Marcus 1993, 1995a) as correlated with the ability of a ruling house to maintain or raise its position.

Conclusion

The common assumption that the Maya were organized into localized corporate groups on the basis of unilineal

descent ties, whether as patrilineality or some kind of double descent, has resulted in decades of disagreement and an inability to account for the totality of the evidence concerning Maya social and political organization. The lineage model is simply not a "relevant analogy" for the Maya, to use Sharer's phrasing. Furthermore, it privileges descent over other factors and relationships in group organization and operation, including constructs that are employed by the Maya themselves. Fortunately, out of the critique of kinship have come more practice-based understandings of how kin and kin-like relationships are strategically operationalized and understood by the persons who enact them.

One such concept is the house, providing a heuristic model that may tell "us more, and differently from, the data" (Lévi-Strauss 1960:51). Sabloff (1983:418–419) suggested that a way out of the current impasse in studies of Maya social organization was to look for ethnographic analogies that were well understood and whose variations were well known. The operation and variability of "houses" are becoming much better known ethnographically (and this brief article cannot fully review that literature), but as of yet there have been few applications to archaeology (e.g., Gillespie 1999; Gillespie and Joyce 1997; Joyce 1999; Kirch 2000; Tringham 2000), despite its great potential for this purpose, in that houses are long-lived corporate groups with significant material signifiers that tend to exist in middle-range, nonclass societies. Understanding the operation of Maya noble houses will allow for a closer integration of social organization with political, economic, and religious configurations within the Maya civilization. In fact, the world areas from which models of political organization have been borrowed to apply to the Maya—Southeast Asia, feudal Europe and Japan, and Africa—are precisely those where social organization is now being characterized in terms of houses.

Because of the interconnected structural principles that underlie the conceptualization of the house, this model can provide many new avenues of research into intricate social and political processes, as well as the variability of their expressions as historically situated strategic actions. It should also give additional insights into similarities between the Maya and other peoples of Mesoamerica and move scholarship further away from the old attitude that the Maya were "unique" (Marcus 1995a:4). Indeed, central Mexican (Aztec) society was similarly organized: the nobility as members of a *teccalli* (lord-house), which exercised control over commoner labor (Chance 1996, 2000 [this issue]), and commoners as members of a *calpulli* (big house), a corporate group with territorial implications. Even some contemporary Mesoamerican societies manifest "embryonic houses" (Sandstrom 2000), offering the opportunity to investigate why certain societies do not have houses, which is as important a question as why others do. Such pursuits should also reiterate the value of cross-cultural comparison in anthropology and the productive

use of ethnographic analogies in archaeology and archaeological analogies in ethnography.

Notes

1. Nutini (1995:8) has argued that social organization in precontact and early Colonial Mesoamerica is better characterized by estates than by classes:

> Estates are major subdivisions of society, based largely on occupation, ruling (political) attributes, and/or lineage and heredity. Estates are unequal before the law or customarily entail differential access to whatever economic, political, and social rewards the society offers; they are largely endogamous, without approaching the structure of castes; and they are characterized, particularly superordinate estates, by a high degree of consciousness of membership and status.

2. See reviews by Fash (1994), Fox et al. (1996), Hammond (1991), Houston (1993), Marcus (1995a), McAnany (1995), Potter and King (1995), Sharer (1991), and Yoffee (1991).

3. This opinion is expressed by Chase and Chase (1992: 307), Marcus (1993:116), Sharer (1991:185, 196), and Vogt (1983:104–105). Other scholars have extolled the benefits and necessity of cross-cultural comparison and ethnographic analogy at the level of systemic societal configurations (Adams and Smith 1981:336; Demarest 1996:823; Fash 1994:192; Houston 1993:143–144; Sabloff 1983:418–419; Sanders 1981; Yoffee 1991:288–289).

4. Cognatic groups as descent groups should not be combined with bilateral groups of related kinsmen or personal kindreds (Firth 1963:23; Goodenough 1955:72, 1970:42 ff.; Scheffler 1964:131), as is found in, e.g., Murdock (1960).

5. Haviland (1997) determined that "androcentrism" in burial treatment and representation in monumental imagery was strongly pronounced at Classic period Tikal, one of the largest Maya centers. See Haviland (1997) and McAnany (1998) on changes in Maya burial patterns through time correlated with the development of political structures.

6. Jones (1998:446) interpreted Landa's calling the father's name the "proper" name as indicative of a person's principal name, while the mother's name was an "appellative" in the sense of adding a name to the principal name.

7. Roys (1940:37) further suggested that the mother's name was called the *naal* name (*na'* is mother, *al* is mother's child). This term for the matronym has since come into common usage, although it is known to appear in only one document, the *Crónica de Calkini.*

8. A simpler explanation would be that Canek was a title inherited by the ruling paramount, possibly a reference to a founding ancestral couple.

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