Maya Social and Political Organization

Social Structures

- Knowledge emphasizes elite.
- Lives and activities of ordinary people much less known.
- Ethnohistory: Spanish records of early contact.
- Research into settlement layouts and reconstructions.

Settlements

- Ordinary Maya people likely lived in small, single or extended family dwellings.
- Population estimates: made from size and number of house platforms.
- Problem: determining proportion of residence units in use at the same time.

Population Estimates

- Examples of population estimates:
  - Tikal: 92,000 people in Late Classic. 235 structures/km²
  - Copan: most densely settled, with 1,449 structures/km²
- Population estimates in time
  - Tikal: peripheral areas peak population during Early Classic, but central areas peaked later.
  - Some cities have waves of growth, with increase in Preclassic, drop, then another period of growth in Late Classic (e.g. Becan, Seibal).

Lowlands Settlement Patterns

- House: primary residential unit, probably single family.
- House group (extended family residential group)
- Barrio (cluster of residential groups)
- Town (Cah)

House Group
Maya House

Residential Groups
- Consist of 2 to 6 units.
- Extended family group – either generational or collateral.
- Craft specializations noted from remains.
  - Toolmakers
  - Extensive pottery production
  - Suggest family-based occupations.

House Components
- Burials found in some houses under the floors.
- Hearth areas.
- Workshop areas, with evidence of stone tool making.
- Storage pits for food and water.
- Household debris – pot sherds, broken grinding stones, and old stone tools.

Residential Groups
- Residential groups sometimes have suggestions of status differential: leader with larger, more elaborate house.
- Patio group organization: houses around central patio area.
- Special purpose buildings:
  - Kitchen, or common cooking areas.
  - Ancestral family shrine - small building with higher platform. Burial place for revered ancestor.

Barrios
- Possibly included all members of lineage group.
- Lineage shrine with common ancestor.
- Separate clusters of houses for slaves, separated from main lineage houses.

Maya Center
- Center of settlement dominated by special-purpose structures for elite use.
- Common features:

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Maya Life

- Clothing: Same for elite as for commoners, but elite clothing highly decorated:
  - Men: loincloth, wrapped around waist and between legs.
  - Sometimes additional cloth around shoulders.

Clothing

- Women:
  - Sack-like dress, with side seams sewn to waist and open arm holes, square neck. Similar to dress still worn today by Maya women.
  - Sandals: ancestral sandal had 2 thongs (modern sandals have one).

Elite Dress

- Elite clothing added status items:
  - Belts with jade masks and jade plaques on strings.
  - Chains
  - Pectoral mask of a god worn on chest.
  - Jade necklaces
  - Cape of jaguar pelt, or cotton with feathers.
  - Headbands with jade attached.
  - Classic period headdress: wicker frame in shape of jaguar, bird, or snake, with jaguar pelt and feathers.

Maya Life Cycle

- Childhood:
  - Date of person’s birth controlled by certain deities, who would be important in life (form of astrology).
  - Head shaping: objective of achieving very flat forehead. Cradleboards used for this purpose.
  - Crossed eyes a mark of distinction.
Hetzmek: acknowledging a child

- All societies have ceremonies - formal or informal – for recognizing new children.
- Hetzmek: performed by Maya at 3 mos for girls, 4 mos for boys: first time baby carried on hip.
- Symbols for children, at age 3 or 4:
  - Boys have small white bead fastened in hair.
  - Girls have red shell on string around waist.

Puberty

- 4 elder males (Chacs) preside at ceremony.
- Chacs also assist in sacrifices.
- First step: evil spirits driven out by ritual.
- Priests then cut white bead out of boys’ heads, and mothers remove red shell from girls’ waist.
- Adolescents than considered adults.

Training for young men

- Young men moved out of mothers’ house and into men’s house as growing up.
- Skin painting used by body decoration before marriage; tattooing after marriage.
- Boys and young men worked with fathers, while girls and young women worked with their mothers.

Sickness and Death

- Shamans treated illness with combination of ritual and herbal medicines.
- Herbals often have chemical efficacy.

Commoner Death Rituals

- Dead wrapped in shroud, mouth filled with ground maize and jade beads.
- Commoners buried under house floors or on grounds of residence group.
- Grave goods for commoners:
  - Objects used in life activities and occupation.
  - A few ritual objects.

Elite Death and Burial

- Elite often buried in shrines or under plaza floors in stone vaults.
- Elaborate grave goods with elite burials.
- Ahaus often buried inside great temples – e.g. Temple of Inscriptions at Palenque, tomb of Pacal.
Elite Burials

- Cremation practiced in some areas during Postclassic period, in Yucatan.
- Some had wooden or pottery statue created, as repository for some of ashes.
- Mayapan: bodies of dead lords boiled, flesh removed, and back half of skull removed. New face built for storage in shrines, and “fed” ceremonially.
- Bottom line: ancestor veneration a significant feature of culture.

Marriage

- Maya clearly patrilineal, in dominant king succession lines.
- In some cases, though, the Ahau position passed through female line.
- Palenque: lineage of Pacal derives through 2 women: Lady Kanal-Ikal and Lady Zac-Kuk.

Political Structures

- Political structure became increasingly complex through time.
- Classic period:
  - Ahau – ruler
  - Cahal – subordinate ruler, younger brother (or sister).
  - Nacom – priest who removed hearts.
  - Chacs – assisted Nacom
- Postclassic period: council of elite leaders developed.
Relationships among Centers: Tikal and Uaxactun

- Smoking-Frog, with the help of Tikal’s Ahau, Great Jaguar Paw, conquered Uaxactun and became Ahau.
- Curl Snout, son of Great Jaguar Paw, succeeded at Tikal, but was subordinate to Smoking Frog at that time.

Relationships: Copan and Quirigua

- Smoke Imix God K of Copan conquered Quirigua.
- 18 Rabbit, son of Smoke Imix, became Ahau at Copan.
- 18 Rabbit launched great campaign to elevate status of lesser elite, allowing them to erect monuments to themselves.

Copan and Quirigua

- After ruling 29 years, 18 Rabbit rewarded a loyal elite, Cauc-Sky, by making him the Ahau at Quirigua. Subordinate to 18 Rabbit, but still an Ahau.
- 13 years later, Cauc-Sky captured 18 Rabbit and sacrificed him, interrupting the power of Copan.

Identifying Maya States

- Simple approach to this question: assumes that regions around major power centers would have been the main players among Maya states.
- We know the stories of some of the states and their interactions with neighbors, but not all.
Maya States through Time

- General trend through time: fluctuation between consolidation of large area under one center, then splintering and dispersal into autonomous towns.

Model for Maya States: Galactic Polity

- Elite lineage rule, with authority determined by birth.
- Power consolidated through ritual and supernatural activity.
- Unstable, competitive kingdoms in each region.
- Each unit had capital with subordinate, smaller centers.
Galactic polity model

- Political instability occurs as subordinate centers periodically break free or shift alliances to other capitals.
- Subordinate centers seek to centralize own control, challenging the capital while seeking autonomy.
- Stability dependent on the charismatic leadership ability of the ruler and performance in war - not strict control over people or economics.