Groundhogs and Kings: Issues of Divine Rulership among the Classic Maya

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I got to thinking about Maya kings a few years ago on Groundhog Day. The modern form that this folk ritual has taken raised for me some intriguing issues about Classic Maya divine kingship and divine kingship in general. When I was a kid, despondently enduring seemingly endless Minnesota winters, the universalist authority of Punxatawney Phil, that great rodent-diviner in far-off Pennsylvania, was unquestioned. My friends and I eagerly awaited Phil's prognostications, as did everyone else in the frozen regions of the United States, hoping for an auspicious omen of early spring. In 1996 I was startled to discover that groundhog oracles have multiplied wildly. I heard predictions from Seattle Sam, Michigan Max, and even from groundhogs in parts of the country that, properly speaking, do not even have winter.

What bothers me about all this is that I don't know which oracle to believe, or why. There is too much information in the system. Does Phil take precedence because of his venerable lineage? Are groundhog pronouncements still universalist in style, but local in implication? What does one believe when there are contradictory predictions? Will some groundhogs lose their authority and adherents to others? Is a Little Tradition becoming a Big Tradition, or is it the other way around? Most fundamentally I began to suspect, cynical that I am, that public belief in the divinatory efficacy of groundhogs has less to do with this runaway phenomenon than the materialist ambitions of groundhog puppet masters, who anoint and manipulate hapless rodents to further their own small-town economic ambitions.

In the following pages I hope to show that these seemingly facetious thoughts are relevant to larger issues of divine kingship among the Classic
Maya, including how it functioned, how it developed, and how it collapsed as a central institution of Maya culture. This subject is, I've got to admit at the outset, not exactly my area of expertise. Despite a professional lifetime doing Maya archaeology my credentials for discussing Classic Maya kings are pretty minimal. I've never excavated a king's tomb, a royal palace, or a major temple, and the hamblest Maya farmer could probably read more glyphs than I can. What's more, I don't spend much time wondering what the Maya thought about their kings or their cosmos, being much more interested in the more pedestrian problem of what they did. Certainly I can't add much to the admirable recent summary of Maya divine kingship by Stephen Houston and David Stuart (1996). My role here, I think, is instead rather like the slave whose job it was to stand behind the victorious general making his triumphal progress through the streets of Rome and continually whisper into his ear "Remember, thou art a man!" My purpose is to continually remind Mayanists that the ancient Maya, kings or otherwise, were only human, especially when seen in broad comparative perspective.

One reason why divine kingship interests me is its universality. In one form or another it is associated with all early complex societies. In his comparative overview of early civilizations, Trigger (1993b: 75) states that "invariably, rulers claimed to be gods, descendants of gods, or at the very least to enjoy their support." He goes on to point out that divine kingship has independently emerged in so many contexts that it assumes the status of a recurring regularity in cultural evolution — one that reinforces our search for common underlying human responses to change. Not only was divine kingship itself a recurrent pattern, but too were its essential concerns — maintenance of cosmic order and hence human well-being, which in turn legitimated rulership and inequality. While such universality has long intrigued me (Webster 1976), others find it boring precisely because it is so widespread and predictable, and because it neglects culturally-specific manifestations of rulership. For them, the main interest in divine kingship is its implications for "...indigenous conceptions of power, legitimacy, and prosperity" (Feely-Hamik 1985: 274).

We know a lot about such indigenous concepts among the Maya. According to Houston and Stuart, Classic Maya kings were closely associated with deities when they lived, and some of them seem to have become gods after they died. Kings took god-names, impersonated gods in rituals, and identified themselves with particular local sets of patron deities. More tangibly, kings commissioned images in which gods were thought to reside (or at least periodically inhabit), erected houses for them, and in some sense personally owned or cared for god-bundles. During the frequent warfare of the Late Classic all these sacred objects became the targets of enemies, things to be destroyed, defiled, or captured, thus discrediting the rulers associated with them.

I cannot add anything to these (and other) rich new insights concerning the institution of divine kingship. And here, perhaps, is the appropriate place to emphasize that kingship is in fact one of only two institutions we know very much about for the Classic Maya. The other is the household, and particularly the households of commoners. The latter we know about solely from archaeology, and the former predominantly from art and inscriptions. Together, they form two strands of continuity that inform us about the Maya from very early times until the Spanish Conquest, and they form the framework for my own discussion.

Many years ago Colin Renfrew (1971) wrote a classic paper in which he identified a chronological "fault line" between southeastern Europe, on the one hand, and central and western Europe on the other. On one side of this fault line were Greece and the Balkans, so heavily influenced by Egypt and other historical cultures of the eastern Mediterranean that their chronology was relatively secure. On the other side lay prehistoric Europe, where all was chronological surmise. Diffusionistic speculation was accordingly unfettered, resulting in very fanciful interpretations. This fault line was eventually bridged by radiocarbon dating, which revealed some very surprising things.

I suggest that several such fault lines obscure our understanding of Maya kingship, divine or otherwise. One lies between our increasingly sophisticated grasp of how the Maya conceptualized kingship, and the actual lives and challenges that real kings and their subjects experienced. Another divides our understanding of how Classic kingship emerged from its Preclassic antecedents. A third obscures how conceptions of kingship contributed to, and were altered by, the Classic collapse. Finally, the deepest fault divides all we know about royalty, and to an increasing extent lesser elites, from what we know about the bulk of the population in any Classic Maya polity. Whether these fault lines will ever be as effectively bridged as was Renfrew's remains to be seen. My concern is that, in the meantime, our surmises about how kingship emerged, functioned, and declined in its larger sociopolitical contexts are firmly grounded. Broader comparative perspectives are useful in such an effort, and what follows is primarily intended to raise issues, rather than resolve them. Put another way, what follows is a set of things we should know if we are to in any sense "understand" Maya kingship.
Kings, Leadership, and Power

A convenient place to start is with several historically-known sets of monarchs whose divine affinities were noted by Houston and Stuart -- the Tudor monarchs of England, the emperors of Japan, and Kamehameha the Great of Hawai'i. The Tudors emerged out of civil war and survived endless rebellions and court intrigues (Erickson 1980). Henry VIII, the most celebrated Tudor of them all, was variously admired and hated by his people and was so obsessed with dynastic succession that he executed several of his queens and fostered the English Reformation. His children squabbled over the throne and, according to one account, his own daughter Mary disinterred Henry's body and burned it -- if this really happened it was a peculiarly Maya-like act of symbolic political revenge. The emperors of Japan, the most ancient surviving exemplars of quasi-divine kingship, in fact never ruled in any meaningful sense in historic times. Instead they were maintained as divine validators of secular authority, endlessly manipulated by powerful court nobles or military families. Finally, Kamehameha the Great was a usurper sufficiently outranked by one of his wives that he could only approach her on all fours (Daws 1968; Norbeck 1977:70).

I bring up all these messy facts because they remind us of the disparity between the ideologies or indigenous conceptions of divine kingship and the realities of individual kingly existence. So far as I know, close examination of all other historical traditions of divine kingship would reveal similarly messy tales. Here lies yet another fault. We cannot ignore the realities evident in such accounts. We can, however, be overly seduced or charmed by the highly abstract, edited, restricted, and only incipiently historical political rhetoric left us by the Classic Maya in their art and inscriptions. Minimally anchored by the messy details, our concepts of Maya kingship can easily float free of their sociopolitical contexts and the real lives of royal protagonists.

The first issue I want to raise is how Maya kings related to Maya commoners and to other elites. The fundamental questions here are the nature of royal leadership and power. One perspective on this issue is offered by Nancy Farriss:

The Maya conceived of survival as a collective enterprise in which man, nature, and the gods are all linked through mutually sustaining bonds of reciprocity, ritually forged through sacrifice and communion. This collective enterprise, provided the organizing principle of Maya society, incorporating the individual in widening networks of interdependence from extended family through community and state and ultimately the cosmos. The elite directed this enterprise in all its aspects. Above all, they ensured the flow of offerings and benefits between society and the sacred order, and thus the survival of both.[Farriss 1984:6]

This is a fairly widespread view. For example, Carolyn Tate (1992) asserts that the art and architecture of Yaxchilán project a similar tradition-directed and collective mind-set. Such views emphasize "a collective aspect of power, whereby persons in cooperation can enhance their joint power over third parties or over nature" (Mann 1986:5).

I submit that this perspective is a resurgent version of the old theocratic model of Maya society. It is a charming but unconvincing conception of seamless social cooperation and benign hierarchy, mediated by selfless, system-serving elites and kings supported by compliant commoners, in which everyone benefits, or is at least satisfied. It is also at odds with everything we know about any historically-documented complex society. Worse yet, it is anthropologically unfashionable. Where are the individual agents using culture to further their own ends? Where are the factions, jockeying for position? Where are the conflicting agendas? Now I personally never aspire to be fashionable, but in this case I have to come down on the side of those who find such cooperative conceptions unconvincing. I suspect: messiness.

Central to the view just cited is leadership -- hands-on elite and royal management of things important, even essential, to society at large. A simple definition of leaders is that they are individuals who make decisions and consistently originate the actions of others (Chapple and Coon 1942:59). Were Maya kings leaders in this sense? If so, what kinds of actions did they initiate, and how did their divine pretensions facilitate their leadership roles? Embarrassing, we have few hard and fast answers to these questions. Presumably Maya kings had some sorts of leadership roles in negotiating foreign relations, waging war, levying taxes or tribute, and initiating royal building projects. All of these things, however, concerned not just rulers, but elites in general, and kings might not have been free agents with regard to any of them.

If Maya kings performed wider, more mundane, system-serving functions, we are quite ignorant of them, partly because royal inscriptions and art fail to address such matters even indirectly. A pertinent comparison here is the oracle inscriptions of the later Shang kings of China. These, although almost entirely divinatory in content, reveal an extremely businesslike, rational, often impersonal, and incipiently bureaucratic attitude toward the ancestors and the high God Ti. David Keightley (1978a, 1978b) has argued that the style of the inscriptions reflects the political culture, with its complex offices and partitioned
jurisdictions. Keightley (1978b: 53) infers that "The Shang king... was a powerful theocrat presiding over economic, military, and religious structures of considerable administrative complexity". Writing surely played an important role in the administration of the Shang state, instead of its more restricted role (as far as we know) for the Maya. Shang kings, or at least their officials, seem to have been hands-on managers.

Revealingly, Shang royal inscriptions include apparent references to commoners -- "people of the masses" (Yang 1986:59) -- as a subject ignored in known Maya inscriptions. It appears likely that Shang kings had dependent subjects, while we can only be sure that Maya kings had political adherents -- a subtle but important distinction.

We are certain from art and inscriptions about some of the activities of Maya kings. They most obviously initiated rituals, the main purpose of which was to maintain cosmic order -- exactly the predominant concern of Shang royal rituals. Kings were, in this sense, exemplars of a basic postulate of their society -- that the moral order and the natural order were one. By the time Maya kingship was well institutionalized in Late Classic times, however, ritual events and cycles themselves might have been so codified that royal leadership, as opposed to participation, was no longer very operative. Japanese emperors retained their identities as symbolic exemplars that even as their more general leadership roles declined. Some emperors, in fact, were so circumscribed and overloaded by ritual obligations that they abdicated in favor of their young heirs, and continued to exercise influence behind the scenes as "cloistered emperors", although this was surely not a Maya pattern.

We also know, or can reasonably assume, that Maya kings initiated war and sometimes participated personally in battles, presided over ceremonies of political significance such as heir designation, and visited and entertained one another and lesser elites at impressive feasts, which might have included ball games as central events (Fox 1996). They certainly consumed precious items that were widely exchanged between polities, although it is unclear how much rulers were involved in their production and distribution. Certainly the elaborate courts of Maya kings, which were essentially immense royal households (Webster 2001), emanated powerful cultural influences, setting aesthetic and behavioral standards for lesser people, as royal households everywhere tend to do.

With respect to more mundane functions, my own suspicion is that Maya rulers and elites had few managerial roles in terms of the all-important subsistence economy, apart from extracting the proportion of it necessary to underwrite their own activities. I also suspect that the Maya lacked anything we might consider well-developed bureaucracies, but rather that decisions were implemented mainly on a case-by-case basis by a small coterie of talented royal relatives or court nobles who had very flexible administrative roles.

This brings us to two less collective dimensions of power (Adams 1977; Mann 1986). First, power is a relationship between two or more parties in which one is perceived to be able to exercise influence over the other(s), whether by social, economic, political, or religious means. In Old Kingdom Egypt the powers, authority, and status of lesser nobles or officials were delegated to them by the king, as theoretically, were all economic resources (Bleiberg 1995:1379). However such a conception might be subverted in reality by individuals or factions, its political style obviously emphasizes the centrality and divine pretensions of the ruler.

We are in a serious quandary in evaluating either kind of power in Classic Maya sociopolitical contexts. While Maya kings certainly made symbolic assertions of centrality, whether they did so in terms of political and economic power remains unclear. Most importantly, we do not know whether Maya kings had unimpeded access to the producer/commoner households that formed the bulk of any polity, or whether instead they had to act through or negotiate with other individuals or households of high rank that retained such direct access. In short, we do not know how kings related in fundamental ways to either other elites or to commoners, or how these lesser people regarded their kings.

Most interesting to me in this respect is a second dimension of power: the ability of one party to carry out its decisions in the face of resistance by dissenters (Weber 1968: 1, 53). Although we have evidence of how assertions of divine power were projected by rulers, we have very little evidence of what qualities lesser people attributed to their kings. And most fundamentally, we do not know how lesser people were organized, apart from the local nuclear or extended family household. If power is a set of relationships between parties the problem is that the nature and perceptions of the non-royal participants are virtually unknown. Our portrait of Maya social relations is a kind of caricature, in which the wafts and pores of the royal visage are increasingly visible in Vermeer-like detail, while all else is impressionistically vague, or not shown at all.

Underlying this ignorance are the almost exclusively royal concerns of Classic Maya epigraphic discourse, which only occasionally addresses the king's relationships with nobles, and never with commoners. The situation is different in Egypt, which has the world's earliest and most centralized tradition of divine kingship. From the point of view of Egyptian political rhetoric, kingship constituted society, rather than existing to serve it (Baines 1995a:135), and in fact the first rulers -- Re,
Osiris, and Horus – were gods, ideological predecessors of later human pharaohs. Royal presentations took little account of ordinary people, focusing rather on the achievements of the king, and societal discontent or dissent were never publicly recorded (Baines 1995b:10-11). As in the case of the Maya, there is thus plenty of top-down definition of kingship, but for Egypt this was not a one-way process. As Feeley-Harnik (1985:20-81) notes, many different Egyptian individuals, groups and factions were interested in defining the nature of kings for their own purposes.

Unlike the Maya, the Egyptians, fortunately for us, produced many kinds of non-monumental, secular literary discourse that reveal these alternative conceptions of kings, including correspondence, histories, recreational literature, fables, and graffiti (Silverman 1995) to which many people had access. Scribes and officials, for example, were exposed to royal tensions and uncertainties in the king’s foreign political correspondence. Popular traditions of parody and satire extended not only to kings, but to gods. All these written sources show not only that notions of kingship changed through time, but that lesser people recognized many different aspects of kings, some less than divine. Kings could be anxious, confused, deceived, less than omniscient, and often powerless to change the will of the gods. Some of them were also identified (albeit after the fact) as evil or repressive. According to later folk tales, Snecferu of the Third Dynasty, the archetypal good king, addressed his subjects as “brother” or “friend” (Stadelmann 1995:719), while some later kings were remembered as oppressors. Clearly Egyptians distinguished between the eternal institution of kingship and its specific human manifestations, prone to mortal and moral weakness.

Did low-ranking Classic Maya people have anything like this kind of earthly skepticism? We don’t really know, but there are hints in this direction. Certainly Maya gods were themselves fallible and in some sense even mortal – they are of course routinely tricked by the Hero Twins in the Popol Vuh. Extending this analogy, ordinary Maya people might well have had similar anti-authoritarian attitudes toward their kings. Given the small size of Maya cemeteries, most commoners certainly must have been frequently exposed to the persons of their kings, and able to directly observe their human foibles and weaknesses. Low-born Maya people might have seen the king as benign leader as Farriss suggests, or alternatively, as was the case in both Hawai‘i and some African societies, as a capricious and dangerous force that could metaphorically “eat up” his subjects (Houston and Stuart 1996:289-290).

Those individuals closest to rulers for extended periods of time, of course, were the members of royal courts and especially the high-ranking courtiers who were potent political players in their own right. For such individuals human dimensions and political vulnerability of the royal person must certainly have been obvious. Even as Egypt achieved its Old Kingdom splendor there is considerable evidence for short reigns and harem intrigues (Leclant 1999), indicating that succession was not smooth or predictable and that royal power must have depended heavily on the abilities of the ruler and the devotion and strength of the court factions who supported or opposed him. Leclant points out that after the death of Khufu himself, builder of the Great Pyramid, there was so much squabbling among the claimants that work on the mastaba tombs of many royal princes was abruptly stopped. If the Westcar Papyrus is to be believed, a royal magician in fact predicted to his master Khufu that his dynasty would eventually fail, with rule shifting to the sons of a priest of Re (Leclant 1999:7). Even if this story is apocryphal, its narrative structure suggests that criticism of royal people by courtiers was allowed.

What about the attitudes of highly ranked Maya, who were just as intimately acquainted with royal persons? Here we do have a few examples of non-regal discourse, such as on the inscribed stones from Copán (Webster 1999). In all such examples, however, elites are concerned with emphasizing their positive and subordinate relationships with rulers, and we see no signs of disrespect. The mere possession by such nobles of carved benches, altars, and elaborate façade sculpture, of course, can itself be interpreted in terms of lèse-majesty, and certainly there are increasing indications in the archaeological record at Copán and elsewhere of internal factional conflict (Laporte and Fialko 1990; Miller 1993).

We know, as Houston and Stuart (1996) have pointed out, that Maya people below the rank of king were able to participate in very important rituals, such as deity impersonation. Elites, at least, might well have retained some ritual functions that we generally attribute to kings. Even in Egypt private people were portrayed as performing wonders, and early on they claimed to have sufficient command of hieroglyphs, secret knowledge, and magic to guarantee an exalted state after they died (Silverman 1995:51, 81).

Let us now return to the all-important issue of how non-regal people involved in power relationships with divine kings were organized, bearing in mind that social arrangements were probably varied. Our conceptions of power and relative powerlessness turn on this issue, and in a sense Maya elite organization is the key to understanding it. Despite the apparent restriction of the Ajaw title to kings and their very close relatives
cloud the issues of to whom Maya divine kings were responsible (in some non-democratic sense of the word), and over whom they had some sort of jurisdiction. Were responsibility and jurisdiction defined in territorial or kinship terms? We simply do not know.

This brings us to the issues of inequality and coercion, which are related to the second dimension of power. Trigger (1993b: 76) asserts that "No ancient civilization was a theocracy in the sense that the authority of its rulers rested solely on a claim of divine support." In Farris's conception quoted earlier, of course, divine authority was buttressed by the practical actions of kings and nobles, undertaken for the overall social good. Lesser people helped kings and nobles as a kind of political covenant in return for the obvious advantages of elite and royal service. Not only was there social inequality, however, but also inequalities of wealth, conceived of as unequal rights over the products and services of other people that resulted, among other things, in considerable material comfort for the political elite. Ostenso display of status items strongly signaled privilege and high rank. Earobate elite household architecture and the detailed palace scenes painted on polychrome vessels remind us that, in Mel Brooks's words, "It's good to be the king", and this sentiment obviously applied to great nobles as well. But how would such inequalities be maintained if the low-rank, producing segments of Classic society benefited minimally from royal or elite service?

As I have pointed out elsewhere (Webster 1985; Webster and Kirker 1995), one answer is that royal and elite requirements in the form of goods, labor and service were normally quite minimal. However much temples and palaces impress us, costs borne by Maya commoners were probably quite low. Nevertheless, these costs were real and I think it is naive to assume that they were always paid willingly. This is not to say that Classic Maya people questioned hierarchy or kingship itself. As Trigger (1993b: 53) has noted, following Max Weber, "The early civilizations were societies in which inequality was accepted as a normal condition and injustice viewed as a personal rather than systemic evil". Royal decisions may nevertheless have often caused discomfort and anxiety, and even been resisted or disobeyed. Returning to Egypt for a moment, the builders of the two largest pyramids were afterwards popularly remembered as oppressors, and we may reasonably assume that, although the work got done, widespread discontent, at the least, was clearly signaled at the time, causing later kings to scale back their enterprises.

When their divine suasion was ineffective, did Maya rulers have recourse to coercion? Here we have to consider two kinds of coercion,
given what we know about the ethnographic record. The first kind is based on the perception that rulers possess supernatural sanctions, and acceptance of etiquettes of authority (Norbeck 1977). Probably the best-known example is the system of kapus at the disposal of Hawaiian rulers, ultimately deriving from their superior spiritual force, or mana. Application of kapus created not only social stigma, but could be used as a political tool to restrict peoples’ actions and their access to resources. Compliance reflected either commonly held values or calculation of self-interest, but there were those who resisted. Hawaiian chiefs accordingly had followings of men who could mete out actual violence -- the second form of coercion of interest here -- when the occasion arose.

Another example of supernatural sanctions is the witch-sniffers utilized by Zulu kings to eliminate, apparently in very calculated ways, dangerous subordinates or rivals (Morris 1965:36-37). But of course Zulu kings also possessed very real military resources as well. In both these cases cultural values and ritual are related to coercion and force in complex ways. Although rulers and elites generally in Mesoamerica were thought to possess unusually strong concentrations of spiritual vitality, and were certainly the objects of elaborate etiquettes of authority, as shown in Maya art. I know, however, of no ethnographic accounts of any kapu-like applications of these in Mesoamerica.

Late Classic Maya royal rhetoric, like that of Egypt, frequently depicts kings as aggressive and powerful, and of course they depict themselves as actively taking part in warfare and its subsequent sacrificial episodes. In these actions they are often abetted by other powerful warriors of obvious elite status who increasingly appear, like Aztec warriors, to benefit from their military success as recipients of royal rewards (Stuart 1995:297). Quite possibly Late Classic Maya kings had retinues of warrior-clients who formed a core of military supporters whose interests were bound up with their own, and who were prepared to resort situationally to force on their behalf. I agree with Trigger (1993a,b) however, that the coercive powers of divine rulers were feeble, and developed only to the degree that they could deal with minor resistance. No doubt much royal time was spent in complex negotiations to ensure that the king’s faction of supporters was larger than any other. And no doubt, like groundhog oracles, some kings were manipulated by non-royal people.

While their subjects might sometimes have resisted Maya kings, or even overthrown them, this never in Classic times seems to have reflected any kind of egalitarian political impulse. Apparently, as among the Egyptians, divine kingship itself was not called into question as an

enduring institution before the 8th-9th centuries A.D. However Egyptians may have regarded their kings, there can be no doubt that they lacked alternative political models. Egypt was, according to political convention, a single kingdom and there could be only one divine king, despite the fact there had undoubtedly been many contemporary rulers before the unification of the Egyptian state around 3000 B.C., and that many later local upstarts had royal pretensions during times of political fragmentation. Egyptian rulers never addressed foreign rulers as equals in their royal terminology, reserving specific exalted titles for themselves (Trigger 1993: 18).

It is tempting to assume that the Classic Maya, like the Egyptians, had only a single political model, but here there is a kind of tautology at work. Because we infer concepts of Maya divine kingship mainly from inscriptions, those centers and polities associated with inscriptions become our own models for Lowland Maya politics. What are we to make, then, of political arrangements in regions like the Chenes-Río Bec zones, where inscriptions are almost non-existent, as are artistic representations of rulers. Moreover, as Merwin (1913) noted long ago, the settlement systems of these zones, including elite establishments, show very different configurations than those further south, and political arrangements seem quite distinctive and less centralized. We cannot assume that the southern Maya lacked knowledge of these differences, especially if Calakmul was actively expanding into these regions as well as to the south. I think we should seriously question whether there was only a single model of Maya political hierarchy in Classic times.

Origins of Maya Divine Kingship

No one doubts that generalized forms of kingship were features of the Classic period. Houston and Stuart (1996: 295) believe, however, that we can discern divine elements in royal titles only after about A.D. 500. They suggest that these new titles were adapted to differentiate kings from lesser burgeoning elites. There is broad disagreement about the existence and nature of Preclassic kingship. Houston (personal communication) is impressed by the lack of Preclassic royal images and symbolic rhetoric. Others, such as Schele and Freidel, and Kaplan (this volume), are convinced that we have good evidence of the Preclassic roots of kingship. Probably all of us would agree that kingship develops out of society, in the sense that the emergent Big Tradition of kingship builds on institutions, beliefs, and postulates already present in more egalitarian, Little Tradition contexts (another echo of the groundhog phenomenon). For example, many studies of recent Maya people emphasize their well-developed
concepts of hierarchy and opposition, which in turn relate to power (e.g. Stross 1977). Complex ritual and kinship hierarchies have been described for other recent small-scale tropical forest societies as well (Goldman 1993). If such concepts existed in Early and Middle Preclassic Maya communities, they would have provided fertile ground for the emergence of new forms of political centralization and hierarchy.

One way this could have happened, as I argued many years ago (Webster 1975, 1977) was through warfare, which allowed successful leaders to centralize some forms of wealth and build up political followings. Here though, it is more appropriate to pursue the idea, traceable at least back to Weston La Barre (1972) and Peter Furst (1976), but most fully developed by Friedel, Schele, and Parker (1994), that divine kingship emerged out of the institution and postulates of shamanism, and that Classic Maya kingship retained a strong shamanistic core. Interestingly, Chinese political myths are explicit about the emergence of Shang kingship out of earlier shamanistic roles (Chang 1983: 44-45). Not everyone would agree that this happened in Maya prehistory, but for the sake of argument let us suppose it did, and investigate some of the issues it raises.

First, although it is possible to identify a cross-cultural suite of shamanistic beliefs and practices (Thomas and Humphrey 1994; Vitebsky 1997) in fact there are many culturally-specific variations, particularly in the ways shamans are recruited. In some societies, shamanistic roles can be adopted broadly by people who undergo the proper initiations (horizontal shamanism); among the Yanomami, for example, the role is widely accessible to all adult men, although some are more accomplished than others. Other societies, particularly those of northeastern Asia, have less communal forms in which particular individuals, often socially marginal ones, experience some sort of personal calling and are apprenticed to established shamans. In this tradition (vertical shamanism), esoteric knowledge and spiritual efficacy are concentrated in a few individuals, whose powers can be both benevolent and dangerous. In other cases heads of lineages or sibs might have inherited shamanistic roles and responsibilities, as Freidel, Schele, and Parker (1994) have suggested for the Classic Maya. Nor are all these variants necessarily independent in Mesoamerica. Furst (1976: 153) notes that among the Huichols shamanism is broadly practiced by adults, although heads of kin groups provide particular shamanistic functions for their families. As we shall see shortly, the specific nature of shamanistic recruitment is an important question.

Whatever form shamanism took, two processes of co-option and political centralization must have been at work if centralized kingship emerged from it. First, individual shamans had to become preeminent within particular Preclassic communities. Second, one local shamanic line had to become dominant over multiple communities in a region. This centralization process involved the appropriation by one individual of the esoteric prerogatives of others in otherwise quite egalitarian sociopolitical contexts. This is just the process mythically portrayed for the Shang kings. According to Shang myths, when everyone had access to ritual, relationships with heaven became confused, and spirits were inappropriately loosed on humanity, with calamitous results. Centralization of shamanistic rituals by Shang kings placed both spirits and people in their proper order, and legitimated royal dominance.

So far as I know no one has ever suggested a convincing model of how or why such expansion of shamanistic jurisdiction might have developed among the Maya. The trouble from an ethnographic standpoint is that although there have been many studies of particular shamans in particular communities, we know very little about interaction among shamans in multiple folk communities over large regions (although some of Mary Helm’s ethnographic work on Panamanian chieftains [Helm 1973] addresses similar issues). I believe strongly, as I have asserted elsewhere (Webster 1995a:121), that Maya kings did not emerge because they were successful shamans, but rather their shamanistic personae were grafted onto other, more fundamental evolutionary changes, a historically documented process elsewhere. Shaka Zulu, for example, suppressed Zulu rainmakers and usurped their power (Trigger 1993a:85) but did so as an adjunct to his coercive military ascendency.

Recently an apostate Yanomami shaman has provided hints from a participant’s perspective on how such a process might have taken place (Cajicuwa 1974:46-47). At the beginning of his career he was asked to diagnose the causes of the illness and misfortune that plagued his village. He focused blame on shamans in adjacent, independent villages and in revenge led lethal raids on these enemies, killing men, and raping and stealing women. Here we see shamans exercising both ritual and military leadership. Although such actions did not solve the problems of the Yanomami village, in other cultural and ecological contexts they might have been a potent mix. Elimination of ostensibly powerful rivals would elevate the apparent supernatural efficacy of the successful warrior-shaman, and provide real benefits to his followers in terms of security, booty and, possibly other resources. Outsiders might be attracted as supporters and clients, eventually promoting the regional fortunes of one community over others.
How such situationally upstart roles might have been parleyed into more permanent, and especially heritable offices is, as always, the evolutionary problem. Possibly, as Freidel, Schele, and Parker suggest, ancient Maya shamanism was already heritable within lineages, and if so the point is moot. Ambitious shamans already had reliable kin constituencies at the beginnings of their careers. Kinship might be differentially rewarded by their successful shaman-leaders, and there would be an obvious concern with retaining dominant shaman roles within powerful lineages, and demoting or co-opting the prerogatives of other shamans within the central community and elsewhere. A process of this sort could have created multi-community systems with incipient central places and privileged kinship groups. Restricted claims of leaders to divine access to gods or ancestors, and to cosmic regulation for the common good, would have helped legitimate such a new political order, and in Preclassic and Early Classic times the ecological underpinnings and economic infrastructures of Maya societies were sound enough to allow successful expansion of this syndrome of incipient kingship. Of course this process itself introduced new forms of disorder. One was situational—the failure of royal efficacy. The second was unavoidable—the death of kings. Both could be overcome, for a time, by the transcendence of kingship as an institution.

All this, as Kent Flannery would say, is a just-so story that is probably impossible to document archaeologically. It does, however, lead us to another question—whether Maya kingship had polycentric origins. Did something like the above take place more than once? Or did kingship at the end of the Preclassic eminate and proliferate from some single precocious center or region, as competing groundhogs currently derive from Punxatawney Phil? Some Classic centers such as Tikal certainly had very long dynastic sequences, reaching back perhaps to the first century A.D., and are widely credited with spinning off cadet ruling lines, but the answer to my question is still far from clear. Whatever did happen, however, resulted in a proliferation of royal centers and lines during Classic times. Divine kingship was polycentric in distribution, if not in origin, and resulted in one of the most unique patterns of divine kingship anywhere in the world.

Egyptian divine kingship, as we have seen, was a unitary concept. There was only one divine king with universalist pretensions over a well-defined territory that was conceptually equivalent to the world. Though doubtless the early Egyptian state emerged out of the struggles of many contemporary local kings, such royal multiplicity was utterly suppressed and forgotten after 3000 B.C.—in political rhetoric there had only ever been one king, and there only would ever be one.

How were the Maya able to reconcile the proliferation of divine kings, many of whom reigned in centers no more than 20-30 km apart, with the apparent claims of cosmic efficacy of each? My groundhog story points up the serious question of the cosmological jurisdiction of the divine Maya king, who is always presented to us as having universalist pretensions, but who was closely hedged about with rulers making independent, but similar claims. In particular, could Maya commoners defest from a polity whose ruler seemed ineffective? And what happened when kings failed, as they often did in spectacular ways. Certainly capture and sacrifice by enemies must have suggested a certain amount of royal inefficacy. And how do we square universalist claims with the increasing hierarchical relationships among individuals bearing royal titles apparent in the inscriptions after A.D. 650? What does it mean to be a subordinate divine king?

One possibility, as John Monaghan (1997) has recently suggested, is that such self-reflexive, theological, and to us paradoxical issues did not plague Maya religious sensibilities. Another possibility is that kings carefully avoided trying to order by ritual means unpredictable forces beyond their control, so that the inefficacy of their actions was not apparent in highly specific ways. Still, Maya rulers clearly could not avoid the invidious comparison. Their nobles, and probably many commoners, could weigh the performance of more than one king or royal lineage, whether in terms of well-being of their subjects, ability to mobilize labor, or success in war. And ultimately what made the system endure as long as it did, as in Egypt, was support for the office of kingship, not its individual kings or perhaps even specific dynasties.

Tip O'Neil remarked that in the U.S. all politics is local. Houston (1995:7), echoing this theme, observes that despite our tendency to generalize about Maya political culture, and despite the undoubted visits, alliances, and intermarriages we know took place among royal people, most inscriptions are concerned with particular rulers and their local affairs. Such parochialism suggests that Maya ruling traditions were strongly tethered to specific places on the political landscape. New royal places could be established, and old royal places perhaps abandoned, but it was difficult for a Maya ruler's authority to transcend the place where his line was once established. This was, after all, where the royal ancestors were buried and where the great royal images and buildings, imbued with power, were concentrated. Houston and Stuart (1996: 302) note our increasing ability to identify localized patron deities focused on particular dynasties and centers, and there was probably a great deal of local idiosyncratic self-identification of this sort.
Kingly authority, derived from a traditional identification with particular ancestral places, was augmented by another feature of local Maya society -- the apparent lack of multiple collectivities (possible corporate kin groups aside) to which people felt conflicting obligations. There was little or no potential divisiveness focused on diverse ethnic groups, religious sects, or ancestral traditions (as, for example, the ability of Mexican dynasts to emphasize Chichimec or Toltec origins). It is also possible that the fiction of all-inclusive kinship links between king and people was plausible on a local scale, although if such a conception were important we might expect to see more symbolic evidence for it (see Smith 1993 for a discussion of the significance of such homogeneity in the invention of new royal traditions in Japan).

Mayanists disagree on the extent to which any particular line of Classic period kings was able to create large, stable, territorial polities that were highly centralized, although undoubtedly such attempts were made (Martin and Grube 1995). That no such enduring polities unambiguously emerged may in part be due to the cultural logic of kingship which emphasized its local associations and jurisdictions. Conquering Akkadian kings in Mesopotamia in the late third millennium promoted themselves by emphasizing the ostensibly pan-Sumerian and ancient title "King of Kish" (Yoffee 1988). So far as I know, no expansionist Maya king seems to have devised similar new forms of political rhetoric aimed at creating any kind of political superidentity, although such attempts may lurk in poorly understood royal titles such as kalomte 'el, which some rulers used. In any case, increasing warfare and territorial assertions during the Late Classic seem to have undermined the institution of kingship, as David Stuart (1993:336) has recently asserted, even as royal discourse becomes most strident and assertive.

Kingship and the Classic Maya Collapse

The "collapse" of Classic society in the 8th-9th centuries was partly a failure of a particular kind of kingship, and at this point I would like to elaborate on a set of ideas I published elsewhere (Webster 1995, 1999; Webster et al, 2000).

Middle to Late Preclassic centers such as Mirador, Nakbe, and Cerros are remarkable for their scale and complexity, and presumably the roots of kingship appeared during these times, although the oldest historically documented dynasties can be traced back only to the third, or perhaps the second, century A.D. Some sorts of political or economic stresses affected these Preclassic centers and their polities, judging from their eventual abandonment, but certainly by the third century stable dynasties and polities appeared at Tikal and elsewhere. Thereafter royal lines proliferated and spread widely, established new centers and polities, and disseminated the Great Tradition elements of Classic Maya kingship, which by the 6th-7th centuries were reasonably mature. This process was accompanied by the rapid growth of regional populations (Culbert and Rice 1990). During this heyday of Classic Maya kingship most rulers most of the time must have been perceived by their subjects to be able to deliver the prosperity and order that their emergent royal ideologies promised, although any particular dynasty might experience embarrassing situational setbacks, particularly as a result of warfare. Over the long run, however, most people did pretty well, and had reason to accept, or at least tolerate, the authority and pretensions of their kings. As Mann (1986:23) puts it, "Powerful ideologies are at . . . cast highly plausible in the conditions of the time, and they are genuinely adhered to".

After about A.D. 650 there are many signs of strain in Maya polities, including increasingly frequent and violent interpolity warfare, more internal status rivalry and, in some places, sure signs of environmental deterioration (Webster 1994, 1995, 1998). At Copán, the polity that I know best, neither kings or elites seem to have been able to manage in any effective sense the problems caused by too many people, and too many competing factions trying to make a living from a deteriorating landscape. Revelancing, the institution of kingship was the first casualty of this situation. Large-scale construction at the Copán Main Group ceased shortly after A.D. 800. The last known feeble attempts at dynastic assertion occurred in A.D. 822, and what seem to be the household facilities of the royal line were abandoned, and partly burned, shortly thereafter (Andrews 1994). Some noble households survived this royal debacle and continued to be occupied and even enlarged for another century and a half, showing that parts of the old hierarchical system survived.

This pattern of political collapse is extremely suggestive. I think some elites outlasted kings at Copán for three reasons. First, some of them were not related to the royal dynasty, or at least were sufficiently distanced from it to avoid implication in royal failures. Second, I think elite families probably did have large kin or client constituencies, and that in times of internal upheaval and competition elite leadership and managerial functions became more crucial than before for the survival of such groups. Third, elites had long before relinquished to rulers most of the ritual responsibilities they originally had to maintain the order and prosperity of the cosmos and the polity. I believe that the process of co-option, by which kings eventually arrogated to themselves and promoted powerful
rituals and ideologies formerly more widely held by prominent individuals or families, eventually backfired. Lesser elites had been ultimately excluded from certain ritual and ideological avenues of social power, and were thus in a sense insulated from the immediate effects of disorder. As economic and social conditions deteriorated at Copán and elsewhere, not only commoners, but also these sub-royal elites were able to point to rulers as scapegoats. One can imagine the “don’t blame us” assertions of nobles attempting to hold on to their own privileges as order and prosperity were undermined.

Another fascinating possibility must be brought up here. Local shamans, diviners, and prophets have all been potent in the Maya cultural tradition in more recent times, acting as influential commentators and critics of their own political history, and agents in resisting the Spanish and the Mexican governments. Such Little Tradition agents might well have existed in Classic society as well. Abetted, perhaps, by powerful lords who also retained or reasserted some residual religious functions, they might have added significant dimensions of ideological resistance to otherwise powerful currents of social and political discontent. Grant Jones (1998) describes how similar opportunist manipulations of prophecy by both Maya and Spaniards contributed to the downfall of the Itza polity in 1697, which occurred against a backdrop of both external military pressure and internal political rivalry.

All this, of course, is not an argument for an ideological explanation for the collapse of Classic Maya kingship at Copán or elsewhere, but rather an attempt to show how ideology and prophecy might have been part of a larger series of changes, more fundamentally triggered by demographic pressure, ecological deterioration, and internal dissension. Traditions of divine kingship everywhere are based on the central assumption that the moral order is identical with the natural order. Robert Smith (1993:65) puts it this way: “...people must act in historical time, lacking any other dimension, [so] they must necessarily operate through expedient action, the only technique available. The paradox lies in the notion that the ultimate purpose of action is permanence and universality”.

Ultimately divine kings at Copán, and probably elsewhere in the Maya Lowlands, were unable to deliver permanence and uphold their pretensions to universality. Order was undermined at the end by the expedient ambitions of kings and nobles, and much more fundamentally by the actions of countless common people, who altered their agrarian landscapes in destructive ways. Always in the past the institution of kingship had weathered the occasional failures of individual rulers or dynasties, but finally even the institution itself was rejected. The conditions of royal time had changed. This political and ideological vacuum could not be filled by the nobles who survived, for a time, the collapse of the royal lines, and they also eventually lost their own privileges as well. Lest we think that all this is ancient stuff, remember that the last exemplar of divine kingship abdicated within living memory. In Emperor Hirohito’s own words, “The ties between us and our people have always stood upon mutual trust and affection. They do not depend upon mere myths and legends. They are not predicated on the false conception that the Emperor is divine” (quoted in Smith [1993:51]). Less disingenuously, the moral order and the natural order were not the same for the Maya or the Japanese. As it always does in the long run, the natural order of things prevailed, and the moral order changed.

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