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978-0-521-89518-7 - Ancestral Maya Economies in Archaeological Perspective

Patricia A. McAnany

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## Ancestral Maya Economies in Archaeological Perspective

The decipherment of Maya hieroglyphs has enabled scholars to better understand Classic society, but many aspects of this ancestral civilization remain shrouded in mystery, particularly forms of economic integration. How were farmers, artisans, and rulers integrated? How did a tropical forest ecology coexist for more than a thousand years with the construction of monumental shrines and palaces? In this study, Patricia A. McAnany suggests that economic integration can best be understood by foregrounding the ritual and social practices of ancestral Maya societies and following the threads of entanglement through the realms of landscape, identity, gender, religion, and power.

The first comprehensive treatment of ancestral Maya economies, this book brings an array of evidence – archaeological, epigraphic, ethnohistorical, and ethnographic – to bear on the question of economic integration. In the process, McAnany demonstrates interconnectivity between ritual practice and indigenous ecologies, gendered labor, and the construction of colossal architecture. Examining Maya royalty as a kind of social speciation, the author shows the fundamentality of social difference in ancestral Maya societies. The pervasiveness of artisan production is understood in terms of identity – both personal and community-wide. Her analysis of royal iconography and hieroglyphic texts provides evidence of a political economy dominated by tribute extraction, thus lifting the veil of opacity over the financing of palace economies. Written in an engaging and accessible style, this book interprets Maya economies in reference to contemporary theories of social practice, gender, actor networks, inalienable goods, materiality, hierarchy, indigenous ecologies, and strategies of state finance.

Patricia A. McAnany is Kenan Eminent Professor in the Department of Anthropology at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, and past President of the Society for Economic Anthropology. She has received fellowships from the National Endowment for the Humanities, Dumbarton Oaks, and the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study at Harvard University. Dr. McAnany is the principal investigator of the Maya Area Cultural Heritage Initiative and also of the Xibun Archaeological Research Project (the latter field site in Belize, Central America). She is the author of *Living with the Ancestors: Kinship and Kingship in Ancient Maya Society* and editor of *K'axob: Ritual Work and Family in an Ancient Maya Village* and *Sacred Landscape and Settlement in the Sibun River Valley*.

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PATRICIA A. McANANY

*University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill*



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*For my mother, Adele, who gave unconditional love to her  
six children and taught us to strive for perfection  
wrought from sustained focus*

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## Preface and Acknowledgments

Sometimes it takes several attempts before a book takes shape and begins to write itself. In this instance, the gestation period has been seventeen years. My dissertation topic, stone tool acquisition and use (McAnany 1986), whetted my appetite for understanding economic process, and I longed to synthesize what I had learned from excavations in dwellings around Pulltrouser Swamp with the larger story of Maya economic practice. I had the opportunity to do that in 1991–1992, as a resident Fellow at Dumbarton Oaks. At that time and as a result of distinctive mortuary deposits that we had excavated at K'axob in Belize, I became deeply engrossed in the topic of ancestor veneration. Elizabeth Boone, then director of Pre-Columbian Studies, consented to my changing the topic of my project. *Living with the Ancestors* (McAnany 1995, second edition to be published by Cambridge University Press) resulted from that period of research. In retrospect, the shifting of gears was more than fortuitous. In 1991, I lacked a perspective that would have resonated with Maya economic practice; I had planned a book similar to the tomes of Old World civilizations such as Diakonoff (1969) or Oppenheim (1964) on ancient Mesopotamia or, more recently, Greene (1986) on the Roman economy. Such studies tended to isolate an economic sector from other parts of society, often relying on a corpus of ancient texts conjoined to various degrees with archaeological information.

While researching *Living with the Ancestors*, I learned of the central role of mortuary ritual in many traditional societies and how ritual

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practice provides a matrix through which people cooperate and struggle through stressful and uncertain, as well as celebratory, times. It became more and more obvious that even fundamental economic processes – such as weaving, gardening, or making stone tools – were entangled with ritual practice that not only stabilized production and reproduction but also provided space for radical transformation. It was the sociality of ritual practice that imbued production with profound meaning and contoured the social identity of those undertaking production activities. I realized that in order to understand Maya economic processes, I would need to embrace the entanglement of social and ritual practices with production rather than artificially carve out an economic sector as is often done in studies of archaic states that are inspired by the “cultural logic” of Western-style capitalism. With this integrated perspective in place, there remained another thorny issue that needed to be resolved.

Students of social theory have grappled with the issue of “class” and its instrumentality in analytical perspective. I place class in quotation marks because it is far from an unproblematic term. But it suffices here to characterize a society in which there were hierarchically structured sectors inhabited by people with different interests, degrees of influence, power to effect agency, and resources at their disposal. Archaeologists often characterize study of this type of situation as “top down” (focusing on elites and power brokers) or “bottom up” (framed on primary producers and their negotiations with those in power). A real understanding can be achieved only by synthesizing the two perspectives and by moving away from a simplistic “dominator/dominated” approach to archaic states to a study of the “diversity of responses to situational and institutional inequality” (Lohse and Gonlin 2007:xxxiv). Practice and structuration approaches pioneered by Bourdieu (1977, 1990) and Giddens (1984) provide a framework with which to tear down the divide and focus on the dialogue, the negotiations, the practices of both the powerful and the not-so-powerful. Differential archaeological visibility can frustrate the desire to include all agents in a study of the Maya past, but with a perspective in place to do so, efforts hopefully will yield a closer approximation of life as it was lived in the Maya lowlands in the two millennia before and after the start of the Common Era. Another perspective, that of *thing* theory or materiality (Latour 2005; Miller 2005, among others) provides a powerful way to conceptualize

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bidirectional relations between people and their material “record”; I employ this perspective throughout this study.

In December 2004, I was awarded a National Endowment for the Humanities fellowship, which provided a second opportunity to write a book on ancestral Maya economies – one that focused on the threads of entanglement that knit together social and ritual practice with considerations of power, identity, and materiality. The NEH fellowship was conjoined with a sabbatical from Boston University; with both, I was able to spend calendar year 2005 away from the classroom and committee assignments. I cannot express sufficient gratitude to NEH for providing me with the luxury of time to develop my ideas and commit them to print.

For nearly twenty years, the Department of Archaeology at Boston University served as my home base and provided the intellectual and physical space for the maturation of my research and ideas about ancestral Maya societies. Although the seat of much struggle and contestation over university policies and faculty valuation, my colleagues within the Department of Archaeology were without parallel. Boston University also attracted many talented and dedicated students of archaeology at both the graduate and undergraduate levels. These students worked closely with me in field and laboratory research, and I will be forever grateful for their enthusiasm and keen insights. Since 2008, the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill has been my academic home. My fellow faculty members at Chapel Hill have been exceptionally collegial and supportive of my human frailties. By arranging time away from teaching, Anthropology Chair Paul Leslie indulged my single-minded desire to complete final revisions of this book before the end of the current Maya calendrical cycle. Many Maya colleagues provided valuable published and unpublished data and images that helped to form and shape my ideas, notably Miguel Aguilera, George Bey, Mark Brenner, Jason Curtis, Tomás Gallareta Negrón, Elizabeth Graham, David Hodell, Allan Maca, Simon Martin, Marilyn Masson, Robert Rosenswig, and David Stuart. I wish to thank Stephen D. Houston for innumerable suggestions and incomparable insights on Maya epigraphy. A seminar on ritual economy held in March 2005, sponsored by the Cotsen Institute at UCLA, provided a venue for important feedback on this book, particularly on the topics of “feeding” a hungry landscape (Chapter 3) and the naturalized authority of the royal court (Chapter 6). For his

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support of the conference, I wish to thank the director of the Cotsen, Charles Stanish – *maestro* of economic anthropology and source of great ideas – and Julia Sanchez, then assistant director of the Cotsen Institute. I benefited greatly from the free exchange of ideas with my co-organizer – E. Christian Wells – and the session participants: E. Paul Durrenberger, Rhoda Halperin, Susan Kus, Walter Little, John Monaghan, Jerry Sabloff, Alan Sandstrom, Katherine Spielmann, and our unofficial but honored participants, Cathy Costin, Colin Renfrew, and Lothar Von Falkenhausen. Thanks to Ian Hodder for urging me to finish this book while also serving as a reminder that one cannot sacrifice the richness of contextual detail when writing a synthetic narrative. I have worked to balance the two.

Many persons and institutions were generous and provided help with the time-consuming process of securing images and permission to reproduce images; they include Sheldon Annis, Tomas Barrientos (Edwin Shook Archive), Oswaldo Chinchilla, Barbara Fash (Harvard Peabody Museum), Thomas W. Killion, Walter E. Little, Matthew Looper, Michael Love, Sandra Noble (FAMSI), Jorge Perez de Lara, Ruben Reina and Robert Hill, and Dennis Tedlock. Along with the intellectual nurturing that I received from colleagues, the following institutions provided financial support: National Endowment for the Humanities, National Science Foundation (by way of several research grants), Boston University Division of International Programs for support of field research, and the Ahau Foundation (Peter D. and Alexandra Harrison). Josh Feola, Satoru Murata, and Pablo Robles provided assistance with the preparation of graphics. Many thanks to Adam Kaeding for compiling the index. Shoshaunna Parks, along with members of the Maya Area Cultural Heritage Initiative ([www.machiproject.org](http://www.machiproject.org)) that works to provide descendent Maya people with access to information about their deep history, directed field operations ably even when I could not give full attention to MACHI. To my partner, Peter D. Joyce, I will be forever grateful for the loving care and feeding that he provided and his endless tolerance for scholars who write books that inevitably contain a colon in the title.

This book is dedicated to my mother, Adèle M. Waser McAnany (1924–2007), who reared me as an orthodox Catholic and provided me with an intimate lived experience of the profound manner in which ritual practice is entangled with economic process.