Chapter 5

Ethnogenesis, Social Structure, and Survival: The Nahuaization of K'iche'an Culture, 1450-1550

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In the academic world, the separation between prehistory and history—the traditional realms of archaeologists on the one hand, and of ethnohistorians, historians, and cultural anthropologists on the other—often is absolute and unequivocal. Yet the division between Precolumbian and Colonial times was not as impermeable as it now seems. Of course, Maya people born before 1524 continued their lives after the arrival of Spaniards. In many cases, new conditions dramatically changed those lives. It should be no surprise, then, that many of the strategies used to approach the challenges of the pre-Conquest era were re-employed in attempts to mitigate the adverse effects of Colonialism.

One such strategy, which I believe began in the Guatemalan highlands about 1450 and became more prominent during the years immediately before and after the arrival of Pedro de Alvarado, was the adoption of a pseudoethnic identity by the elite of K'iche'an society. This process of ethnogenesis, for which the rather unwieldy term "Nahuaization" is used, served five purposes. First, it stabilized the elite in a progressively more class-based society. Second, in a factionalized environment, it was a useful tool for forging alliances with more-powerful polities on the far side of the Isthmus of Tehuantepec. Third, it facilitated participation in transnational exchange networks. Fourth, it may have forestalled an eventual Aztec incursion. Fifth, it aided the K'iche'an elite in maintaining their high status after the arrival of the Spaniards. The last two of these five results of Nahuaization are related to the theme of cultural survival, albeit through the seemingly paradoxical process of ethnogenesis.

All of this presupposes that the K'iche'an elite were native to the Guatemalan highlands, and were not Postclassic newcomers who brought with them the trappings of hybridized Nahua-Maya society. Moreover, if, as I propose, K'iche'an social and political structure were progressively more class-based and less determined by kinship, we will have to give up lineage models that have been proposed not only for the K'iche'an people of the Postclassic, but also for all Maya societies. More than anything, my purpose in this chapter is to challenge these two orthodoxies: the myths of migration and lineage-based society. I then return to the subject of why the elite of K'iche'an society adopted a vigorous program of ethnogenesis.

K'iche'an migrations

The notion of long-distance K'iche'an migrations is an old one. The goal of much archaeological research conducted during the

first half of the last century was to determine if central Mexican cultural traits found in the Guatemalan highlands were more properly associated with the arrival of "Toltecs" or with the Aztec expansion into Xoconochco (e.g., Borhegyi 1965; Lothrop 1933, 1936; Thompson 1943, 1954; Wauchope 1949, 1970, 1975). More recently, a variation of Thompson's Putun migration hypothesis has been championed by ethnohistorians as accounting for a mexicanized Maya presence in the Guatemalan highlands (e.g., Carmack 1968, 1973, 1981; Fox 1978, 1980, 1991; Fox et al. 1992; Nicholson 1957; Recinos and Goetz 1953). Although these scholars are concerned with temporal issues, their research has focused on reconstructing a migration route for K'iche'an "lineage" founders from the Gulf Coast.

This interpretation is based on a rather literal and selective reading of certain K'iche' texts, most notably the *Popol Wuj* (Brasseur de Bourbourg 1861; Saravia E. and Guarchaj 1996) and the *Título de Totonicapán* (Carmack and Mondloch 1983; Recinos and Goetz 1953), which are notably vague about the place of K'iche' origin and the location of the mythical Tulan. The more specific descriptions of migrations presented in the Kaqchikel *Memorial de Tecpán Atitlán* (Arana and Díaz 1573-1605; Brinton 1885; Recinos and Goetz 1953) and *Título de Jilotepeque* (Crespo 1956) have received comparatively less attention. The first of these two texts describes a journey limited to the highlands and Pacific slopes of northern Central America, and notes that the ancestral founders of the Kaqchikel passed through a town called Teozacuanco before fighting the Nonoalca (Arana and Díaz 1573-1605:22). Teozacuanco, Nonoalco, and Tula all are toponyms from El Salvador, suggesting that the Xajil faction of the Kaqchikel may be describing an expedition into the lands of the Pipil. Thus the Nonoalco of the *Popol Wuj* may not have been located in the lowlands of Veracruz or Tabasco, and we need not turn to a variant of the Putun hypothesis to explain K'iche'an origins. The *Título de Jilotepeque*, the principal document of the Kaqchikel-speaking Chajoma' (or Aqajal Winäq), is even more specific, noting that their place of origin was just north of the Río Motagua in the area of Joyabaj and Zacualpa: two *municipios* in the department of Quiché.

The confusion surrounding the K'iche'an migrations frequently is exacerbated by the misconception that Tulan was a place of origin. The *Popol Wuj*, the *Memorial de Tecpán Atitlán*, and the *Testimonio de los Xpantzay* (Recinos 1957) all describe how mythical ancestors *arrived* at Tulan and were given images of their gods. Tulan, therefore, was a place of gathering and legitimization, but not a homeland. By asserting that their progenitors and the ancestors of their neighbors were at Tulan, the authors of K'iche'an documents contextualize themselves at the center of the Mesoamerican world. This portion of the migration myth also serves to partition that world, in the sense explored by Dumézil (1973). From this perspective, Tulan is structurally analogous to the biblical Mount Ararat, from which the sons of Noah dispersed and populated the globe. The *Testimonio de los Xpantzay* illustrates the principle of contextualization taken a step further. In this work, the Xpantzay claim that they are descendants of Adam, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and that they helped build the Tower of Babel, another center in the judeo-christian myth of partition. After dispersing from Babylon, the Xpantzay assembled in Tulan, only to move to the central highlands of Guatemala. Thus, in this seventeenth-century legal document, the Xpantzay contextualize and legitimate themselves before both Spanish and Maya audiences. Documents intended for a purely Maya audience, in contrast, tend to focus only on Tulan.

Which origin story should we use to reconstruct migration routes? The modest migration myth of the Chajoma' recounted in the *Título Jilotepeque*, the detailed account of the Kaqchikel Xajil faction described in the *Memorial de Tecpán Atitlán*, or the vague claims laid out in the *Popol Wuj*? Or, for that matter, why not try to reconstruct a migration route from ancient Babylon to Tulan, a journey that the Xpantzay and the authors of the *Título de Totonicapán* claim to have made with other K'iche'an peoples? In the end, the origin and migration stories of the Maya of the Guatemalan highlands are not sources of western-style history. These portions of the documents relate much about how Maya people viewed their past. They also show us how certain Kaqchikel and K'iche' factions intended others to perceive their histories. But the documents are not convenient Postclassic road maps, and to treat them as such is ethnocentric.

Two additional lines of evidence—one linguistic and one archaeological—have been used to support a K'iche'an migration from the Gulf Coast. The first is derived from dialect studies of Nahua loanwords that appear in highland Maya languages. In his analysis of these loans, Campbell (1977) noted that they came neither from Pipil, which was spoken in El Salvador and portions of the Pacific coast of Guatemala, nor from central Mexican Nahua dialects. Instead, the best source seemed to Campbell (1977:109) to be versions of Nahua spoken in the Gulf lowlands. Since making this argument, Campbell (1988) has compiled comparative information on the descendants of Nahua dialects that were spoken in Xoconochco before the Aztec conquest of 1510. A review of these data shows that the pre-Aztec Nahua dialects of the Pacific coast of Chiapas are just as likely to have been the source of the loans in K'iche'an languages as Gulf coast Nahua (Braswell 2001b). That is, K'iche'an people may have picked up Nahua loan words by interacting with their neighbors to the southwest, and it is not necessary to posit a long-distance migration.

Archaeologists working in the Guatemalan highlands have noted dramatic changes in material culture that occurred during the Postclassic period. From this, they have posited a site-unit intrusion, that is, either a migration or an invasion. But more recent work contradicts this conclusion (Braswell 1996; Braswell and Amador 1999:908-909; Popenoe de Hatch 1997, 1998). To begin with, most of the items of material culture that reflect some sort of connection to peoples on the other side of the Isthmus come from contexts dating to the years immediately before the arrival of the Spanish, in particular, to the final occupation phases of paramount sites like Saq Ulew, Iximche', and Saqik'ajol Nimakaqapek (see Navarrete 1996). That is, foreign items and styles are found in very late fifteenth or early sixteenth century contexts, long after any possible migration suggested by some indigenous documents. Moreover, Postclassic shifts in material culture appear to be gradual rather than punctuated. For example, I have demonstrated that the ceramic complex of the Early Postclassic Chajoma' region contain types and traditions represented in both earlier Classic and later Late Postclassic complexes (Braswell 1996). Therefore, we now can tie certain ceramics produced in the Conquest and Colonial eras to traditions that spread to the central highlands of Guatemala at the beginning of the Early Classic period, around A.D. 250. It seems likely, then, that the ancestors of the K'iche', Kaqchikel, Tzutujil, and Chajoma' had been living for some 1,200 years where the Spaniards found them (Popenoe de Hatch 1998).

K'ichean social and political structure

Before returning to the question of why the elite of K'iche'an society adopted a Nahua cultural veneer, I would like to propose a new model for highland Maya social and political systems. For some years, the predominant view has been that the fundamental unit of K'iche'an society was the patrilineal descent group. In fact, the lineage concept has become so entrenched in Maya studies that many archaeologists, ethnohistorians, and epigraphers do not even consider alternative social "types." To a great degree, this perspective is derived from the pioneering work of Miles (1957), Carrasco (1964), Carmack (1977, 1981), Fox (1987), and other ethnohistorians of the Guatemalan highlands. Carmack (1981) proposes that K'iche'an society was arranged in a nested hierarchy of strictly exogamous patrilineages, with larger groups (called, in ascending order, "major lineages," "moieties," and "groups") formed out of smaller "principal lineages" and "minimal lineages." In this scheme, each principal lineage had its own titled positions, which often replicated titles used in the greater political structure. According to Carmack (1981:157), segmentation and the proliferation of lineages occurred as a natural result of political expansion and the competition for new titled offices. Principal lineages were closely identified with the structures in which they conducted their affairs, called *nimja* ('big houses').

Although the patrilineal descent group is considered the basis for K'iche'an social structure by Carmack, he simultaneously argues for the existence of both "castes" and "classes." Lords (*ajawa'*), vassals (*alk'ajola'*), and slaves (*muna'*) formed three endogamous strata in society, but classes such as warriors (classified within the *ajawa'* stratum) contained both lords and socially-climbing vassals. Thus, K'iche'an society also is depicted

as stratified, but containing the potential for mobility from one stratum to another (Carmack 1981:148-156).

A very different perspective is offered by Hill and Monaghan. They consider kinship to be irrelevant to K'iche'an social structure (Hill 1984, 1996; Hill and Monaghan 1987). According to Hill (1984), the basic unit of K'iche'an society was the *chinamit*, which he interprets as a closed corporate group defined by territorial concerns, rather than as a walled estate or a lineage group. In this model, *chinamita'* were largely endogamous communities that shared a group identity defined by localized settlement and the common ownership of land and other resources. Members of the *chinamit* shared responsibilities such as the cost of marriage feasts, the upkeep of temples and shrines, and the maintenance of law and order. Certain individuals within the *chinamit* held titled offices, some of which became fixed within certain families. Economic specialization could focus on natural resources, such as salt, located within the territory of the *chinamit*. Finally, group membership could be expressed through the use of a common surname, borrowed from the leading officeholder, but not determined by kinship or marriage ties (Hill 1984, Hill and Monaghan 1987).

An alternative approach to K'iche'an society is to consider emic indigenous terms for basic social units and to try to understand their characteristics. Important structures of highland Maya society include the *molab*, *chinamit*, *amaq'*, and *nimja*. The common semantic thread shared by all these terms is togetherness, the house, and most importantly, the household. Membership in a household is determined not only by kinship, but also by marriage and alliance. Since K'iche'an people used the household as an analogy for their larger social and political groups, it is likely that affiliation was as important as kinship in determining membership. Thus, kin terms provided the *vocabulary* used by large-scale social groups to interpret their integration, but did not serve as the sole principle defining group membership. In other words, kinship may have been more "practical" than "official." The use of kinship as a metaphor rather than as a social principle also resolves the seemingly contradictory assertion that K'iche'an society was both class- and kinship-based (Carmack 1981).

The social units of K'iche'an society controlled property, including material holdings such as land and access to resources, and also intangibles such as noble and priestly titles. Moreover, the basic unit of K'iche'an social structure persisted over time, a fact reflected in the meaning of the term *amaq'*. Such social units existed as organic beings, and engaged with similar units in agency-based strategies designed to increase group property and to prolong group survival. Together, these characteristics satisfy Lévi-Strauss' (1983, 1987) definition of the "house," an organizational institution that he intended as a classificatory type. According to his formulation (Lévi-Strauss 1987:174), a social house is: "a moral person holding an estate made up of both material and immaterial wealth, which perpetuates itself through the transmission of its name, its goods, and its titles down a real or imaginary descent line, considered legitimate as long as this continuity can express itself in the language of descent or of alliance or, most often, of both." The house society model fits very well the highly militarized and factional climate of the Maya highlands during the Postclassic (Braswell 2001a; see also Gillespie 1995, Gillespie and Joyce 1997; Joyce 1996, 1999; Ringle and Bey 2001).

Nahuaization and the context of ethnogenesis

Central Mexican cultural traits adopted during the Late Postclassic are limited to the social and spatial contexts of the apical elite. These include gold artifacts from burials in Iximche' and Saq Ulew, mural paintings at Iximche' and the palace at Q'umarkaj, imported and imitation Mexican pottery from Saq Ulew and Q'umarkaj, and cremation burials at all the Late Postclassic capitals (Navarrete 1996). Other examples include titles and even names of elite members of the most-powerful great houses (Braswell 2001c). Thus, the social context of symbolic emulation was the uppermost class of K'iche'an society.

If we rule out migration as an explanation for the Nahuaization of K'iche'an elite culture during the Late Postclassic, we must conclude that a central Mexican cultural veneer was *adopted* by K'iche'an peoples. Although interregional interaction led to cultural borrowing in many areas and at many time periods in mesoamerican prehistory, the degree to

which K'iche'an peoples emulated Nahua culture is striking. The Nahuaization of K'iche'an culture was transformative, to the extent that we may consider it an example of ethnogenesis.

Why did K'iche'an elite find it advantageous to create a new hybrid identity for themselves? As I outlined above, I believe there are five factors that account for the process. First, K'iche'an social structure, though stratified, was conceptualized in terms of kinship. The metaphor of kinship used by house societies acts to undermine the elaboration of class structure. Since K'iche'an origin myths do not propose a separate divine creation for the ruling class, alternative distinctions were needed to sustain class structure. Two ways that elites can justify their elevated status is through the monopolization of esoteric knowledge and the adoption of a foreign identity. The fixing of religious titles in certain lines and the creation of a new hybrid Nahua-K'iche'an ethnicity served to create social distance between classes, and justified the subordinate status of members of the *alk'ajol* class (Braswell 2001a). The use of imported items, the practice of cremation, the erection of temples and palaces with Mixteca-Puebla style murals and central Mexican architectural features, and the adoption of Nahua-derived names and titles all engendered and supported social distinction. Stone (1989), who studied this process in the art of Piedras Negras, calls this the "disconnection" of the elite. Although it is difficult to understand why it would happen in a lineage-based society, it is fully consistent with a house society that is class-based.

Competition and factionalism are common in house societies, and are manifested not only in conflict between different houses, but also within the great house. The adoption of a hybrid ethnicity seems to have played a role in competition among families within K'iche'an great houses—families that vied for titles and privileges. But the display of a hybrid identity seems to have been particularly important in the factional conflict between great houses. As elevated status and Nahua-derived titles became associated with a hybrid ethnicity, great houses competing for those titles foregrounded their Nahua-K'iche'an identity.

Additional reasons that highland Maya elites may have adopted a new ethnic identity during the Late Postclassic are external to the dynamics of K'iche'an society, involving economic and political relations with the Aztecs. The first *entrada* of the Aztecs into the Guatemalan highlands took place in 1501, during the reign of Ahuitzotl. According to Fuentes y Guzman (1932-1933:6:47-48), *pochtecas* sent by Ahuitzotl to the south coast of Guatemala visited Q'umarkaj, and then were ordered out of the K'iche' kingdom. Perhaps their presence was viewed as imperiling K'iche' interests in the Pacific region.

K'iche'an polities and the alliances of great houses of which they were comprised competed with each other and with their Maya and Nahua neighbors for access to the cacao, cotton, fish, salt, and other resources of the Pacific piedmont and coast. The Aztec conquest of Xoconochco in the early sixteenth century must have been viewed by K'iche'an elites as both a threat and an opportunity. On the one hand, K'iche'an elites may have been concerned that encroachment would limit their own access to coastal resources. On the other, the Aztec presence in Xoconochco presented an unrivaled opportunity for trade and the formation of alliances against traditional competitors, some of whom were Nahua speakers. From either perspective, an increase in the pace and intensity of ethnogenesis would have been a pragmatic strategy for the K'iche'an elite.

Cortés' (1961:218-219) fourth letter to the crown describes a meeting with a delegation of Kaqchikel ambassadors, an encounter that is extraordinary because it took place near Pánuco, Veracruz. These Kaqchikel ambassadors sought an alliance with the Spaniards against the K'iche'. It is reasonable to speculate that other *lolmay* or *lolmet*, as K'iche'an ambassadors were called, visited the Aztecs in nearby Xoconochco for similar political reasons. K'iche'an lords probably viewed the Aztecs as powerful potential allies who could aid them in their own ambitions. By adopting a hybrid identity, K'iche'an elites could cast themselves as being closer to the Aztecs—potential partners in both trade and war—and distinct from other Maya or even Nahua groups living in northern Central America.

Navarrete (1976, 1996), in two thorough evaluations of the material evidence for Postclassic contacts between central Mexico and the southern Maya region, suggests a fourth reason for the process of Nahuaization. He

sees it as a prologue to an eventual Aztec invasion that was aborted because of the arrival of the Spaniards. Although I hesitate to predict what would have happened had Cortés and Alvarado not interrupted the flow of New World history, Navarrete's suggestion is intriguing. But it also may be that Nahuaization was adopted as a tactic to forestall an Aztec incursion, or at least to allay its affects. Thus, ethnogenesis may have been a strategy that fostered cultural survival.

All of the documents from which non-material evidence for Nahuaization have been culled date to the Colonial period. In these documents, we see that the process of elite ethnogenesis persisted long after the Spanish Conquest, and, in fact, continues to this day. Although a Hispanicized-Maya identity eventually became preferable to a hybridized K'iche'an-Nahua ethnicity, the process of Nahuaization continued well after 1524. Many of the same advantages afforded in pre-Conquest days, such as the maintenance of class boundaries and the desire to participate in more global trade networks, continued to be relevant to K'iche'an elites of the early Colonial era. But a new reason also developed; Nahua—and in particular Nahuatl—became both an economic *lingua franca* and a language of legal importance. K'iche'an elites who maintained the airs of a hybrid identity could participate more fully in the emerging colonial system. In addition, Nahuaization allowed K'iche'an elite to identify themselves more closely with the Tlaxcallans and other central Mexicans who accompanied Alvarado and settled in the highlands of Guatemala. Finally, not all Indians were viewed equally by the Spaniards. I suggest that the skillful manipulation of a hybrid identity maintained the social position of the K'iche'an elite in the new political world of the Colonial era. Membership, then as now, had its privileges.

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