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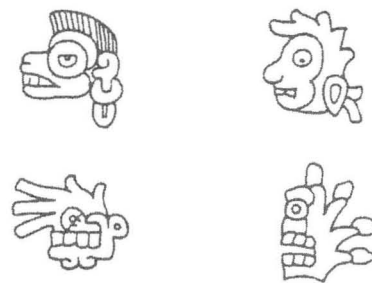
Highland Maya Polities

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My view is that the lineage model, its predecessors and its analogs, have no value for anthropological analysis. Two reasons above all support this conclusion. First, the model does not represent folk models which actors anywhere have of their own societies. Secondly, there do not appear to be any societies in which vital political or economic activities are organized by a repetitive series of descent groups. (Kuper 1982:92)

Highland Guatemala, an area rich in resources, was the setting of a number of dynamic and competitive polities during Late Postclassic times. These polities have been characterized by a variety of scholars as empires, segmentary states (Fox 1987, 1994), or segmentary chiefdoms (Brown, in Fox et al. 1992). These disparate views are rooted in the contradictory assumptions that K'iche'an polities were similar to—but not quite as complex as—centralized states, and that social organization was based on elementary principles described by traditional kinship studies. To resolve these seemingly opposing reconstructions, and at the same time move toward a more accurate view of political structure, it is necessary to reexamine the nature of K'iche'an social structure.

TRADITIONAL VIEWS OF K'ICHE'AN SOCIETY: KINSHIP VERSUS TERRITORY

The predominant view is that the fundamental unit of K'iche'an society was the patrilineal descent group. In fact, the lineage concept has become so central to 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",[1] and "groups") formed out of "principal lineages" and "minimal lineages." According to this scheme, the K'iche' *Ajpop* (king) came from the Ajpop principal lineage, the *Ajpop K'amja* (king receiving-house) from the Ajpop K'amja principal lineage, and lesser titled lords from inferior principal lineages. The rank and priority of different titles were reflected in the rank of competing lineages. Moreover, 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 Carmack considers the patrilineal descent group the basis for K'iche'an social structure, he also argues for the existence of "castes" and "classes" (1981: 148–156). Lords (*ajawab*), commoners (*alk'ajol*), and slaves (*munib*) formed endogamous strata in society, but classes such as warriors (pigeonholed within the ajawab stratum) contained both lords and social-climbing vassals (Carmack 1981:152–153). Thus, K'iche'an society also is depicted as stratified, but containing the potential for mobility among classes. Finally, a lord could have a walled-in country estate, called a *chinamit*, that housed both commoners and slaves (Carmack 1977:12–13).

A very different perspective is offered by Hill and Monaghan. They consider kinship to be unimportant 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. Hill and Monaghan (1987) elaborate on this idea, and discuss the similarities between the chinamit and Aztec *calpolli*. 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 (Hill 1984:314–316). 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 (Braswell 2001a). Economic specialization could focus on natural resources, such as salt (Hill and Monaghan 1987), located within the chinamit's territory. 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 (1996; Hill and Monaghan 1987) further argues that larger social units, such as the *amaq'*, were forged through alliances between chinamita'. Such alliances could be formed through exogamy practiced by chinamit leaders, but also through common economic or military concerns, often related to territorial contiguity. Capitals such as Kaqchikel Iximche' and Chajoma' Saqikajol Nimakaqajpek may have been established to further cement even larger confederacies comprised of distinct *amaq'i'*. Thus, in this model, K'iche'an polities were fragile alliances between factions and superfactions formed of corporate groups.

A NEW MODEL OF K'ICHE'AN SOCIAL STRUCTURE

These apparently contradictory perspectives have less to do with K'iche'an society than with traditional taxonomic approaches to kinship and social structure. Many contemporary scholars (e.g., Bourdieu 1977; Kuper 1982; Leach 1961; Schneider 1984) have argued that the unilineal descent group is an ideal analytical type that does not, in fact, exist. Similarly, others view the division of society into mutually exclusive economic units based on residence or localized settlement ("corporate communities") as an artificial construct of Anglo-American anthropology (Lévi-Strauss 1987:153–154). Thus, the dichotomies of kinship versus residence, and lineage versus territory may be more important to some anthropologists and ethnohistorians than they were to K'iche'an peoples. Moreover, both theoretical positions tend to give priority to deterministic rules and normative behavior at the expense of agency and practice.

An alternative approach to K'iche'an society is to consider 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. *Molab*, the Poqomam equivalent of the chinamit (Hill 1984), is derived from the common highland root <mol>, which means "together." It does not imply anything more than a group or community of people, though it may suggest common residence within a single territory. The remaining three terms, however, all share one thing in common: they refer to physical structures, buildings, or households. *Chinamit*, borrowed from Nahuatl, seems to mean a "fenced-in place," leading Carmack (1977:12–13) to interpret it as a feudal estate. But it also may refer to the corn-stalk enclosures built around many highland Maya houselots.

In Kaqchikel, *amaq'*, most often translated as "tribe," has numerous meanings that combine ethnic connotations with a sense of otherness. Coto (1983:LXXXV) gives "place" as one definition, suggesting that it is a kind of territorial unit. The morpheme can be combined to form a verb meaning "to settle as a neighbor," which has the sense of both place and otherness. It is often used to describe something lasting or permanent. Most interestingly, in Colonial times *amaq'* could be combined to form *amaq'ib'äl*, meaning "old or former household." Finally, *nimja* has only one literal translation: "big house." I suggest, therefore, that the predominant metaphor used by the Postclassic Maya for social order was the house (i.e., a physical structure) and the household. Membership in a household is determined not only by kinship, but also by marriage and alliance, so it is likely that affiliation was as important as kinship in determining membership in K'iche'an social groups. In addition, *molab* and *amaq'* suggest neighborly residence, supporting the notion that social structure was derived at least in part from a sense of community that was not rooted in kinship (Hill 1984; Hill and Monaghan 1987). Despite Hill's (1996) cogent arguments, I remain unconvinced that the amaq' always differed in scale and kind from the chinamit. To me, the hierarchical and qualitative distinctions between amaq' and chinamit/molab/nimja are not particularly clear (Braswell 2000b).

Analysis of kinship terms employed by the Kaqchikel and K'iche' does indeed support the assertion that the building blocks of social structure "sound like lineages" (Tedlock 1989:498). K'iche'an kinship is weakly patrilineal, but it is difficult to see how a structure as fragile and prone to conflict as the patrilineal descent group could have grown to be as large as some K'iche'an nimja or chinamita', which contained thousands of members. Thus, it is more likely that kinship provided the *language* 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" (Bourdieu 1977:37). The use of kinship as a metaphor rather than as a social

principle also resolves Carmack's (1981) seemingly contradictory assertion that K'iche'an society was both class- and kinship-based.

Social units such as the chinamit did control property. Such property included territory, resources, shrines and temples, and the physical buildings (nimja) where leaders of the chinamit conducted their affairs. The chinamit also controlled intangible possessions, including titles. Such titles described roles not only within the chinamit itself, but also in the greater political system. Hence, they were the subjects of competition both within and among chinamita'.

K'iche'an social units were both endogamous (Hill 1984) and exogamous (Carmack 1981). I argue that endogamous marriage was a strategy designed to maintain the wealth of the chinamit within the group, and that exogamous marriage was practiced in order to increase the property of the social unit. In other words, marriage practices were pragmatic rather than normative, and complex rather than elementary. Finally, the basic unit of K'iche'an social structure persisted over time, a fact reflected in the term *amaq'*. It existed as an organic being, 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's (1987) definition of the *maison* (house), an organizational institution that he intended as a classificatory type characteristic of certain societies. According to his formulation, 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" (Lévi-Strauss 1987:174). *Sociétés à maisons*, or "house societies," may be composed of just one such social house, but their full expression is manifest only when more than one house interacts. This is because the relationships maintained between groups are more important than the criteria used to establish group membership. In fact, the house is a "dynamic formation that cannot be defined in itself, but only in relation to others of the same kind, situated in their historical context" (Lévi-Strauss 1987:178).[2] In this sense, a house society with numerous social houses may be consistent with the concept of city-state culture described in chapter 4.

TOWARD A NEW MODEL OF K'ICHE'AN POLITIES

House societies do not correlate well with standard political models. They range from the egalitarian societies of Australia, to the ranked societies of northwest North America, to the highly stratified societies of medieval Europe and feudal Japan (Lévi-Strauss 1987). Most important, they span the analytical gap between the preliterate "primitive" societies usually studied by anthropologists, and the literate civilizations that are the focus of historians. Thus, the recognition that Postclassic highland Guatemala was organized in a large number of great houses will not enable us to resolve the question of whether or not K'iche'an political organization had crossed the essentialist rubicon between the "chiefdom" and the "state." On the other hand, the house society model does allow us to understand certain aspects of the structure and dynamics of K'iche'an polities, because the great houses were the building blocks that formed these polities and the agents of political action.

First, K'iche'an great houses are best viewed as localized groups that competed for property and prestige. Since land and natural resources were controlled by great houses, competition often was manifest in territorial warfare. Boundary maintenance was a common concern of all great houses, and the maps and geographical descriptions that frequently make up indigenous *títulos* attest to the continuation of long-standing competition well into the Colonial period.

Second, the desire to generate more wealth and prestige within great houses led to the formation of alliances. This cooperative strategy created greater concentrations of force and hence led to the emergence of factions. Marriage alliances commonly were used to cement ties within factions such as the Kaqchikel Tuquche', Sotz'il, or Xajil, and also helped hold together even larger alliances between factions. Still, the principle that provided the basis for alliance was mutual interest rather than kinship. Power-sharing strategies between great houses and larger factions developed in order to ensure that no particular group would emerge as the single dominant power. Thus, K'iche'an polities are correctly depicted as segmented, but the units of segmentation were the great house and faction (an alliance of great houses) rather than the lineage.

Third, although the greatest concentration of coercive force was controlled by the leading alliances of great houses, the mandate to use force was not restricted to these factions. Numerous powerful groups, such as the Kaqchikel Xpantzay and the K'iche' Tamub' and Ilokab', lived outside of the political capitals and engaged in aggressive competition designed to increase their wealth and prestige. Coercive force, then, seems to have been the right of whoever could control it, rather than a monopoly held by a state. Indeed, since each great house within a given faction was responsible for enforcing codes of conduct, it was imperative that each exert at least enough coercive force to control its members and defend its property.

Fourth, the notion that highland Maya groups such as the Kaqchikel of Iximche' or the K'iche' of Q'umarkaj controlled "kingdoms" with meaningful territorial boundaries is erroneous. These regions also were home to other factions—including the Xpantzay, Tamub', and Ilokab'—that sometimes supported and sometimes struggled against the great houses centered at regional capitals. Again, the meaningful territorial unit was not the polity, but the land controlled by each great house or alliance of houses (see chapter 4 for a discussion of the lack of territory-based principles in Postclassic Mesoamerican polities).

Fifth, K'iche'an capitals are best interpreted as sites where allied great houses maintained important residential and administrative buildings. They were little more than palace complexes, whose locations were determined more by administrative and military necessity than by central-place economic concerns. Capitals also served as defensive military strongholds (Borhegyi 1965) and offensive bastions from which punitive raids could be launched (Braswell 1996:329–330). Their locations changed as alliances between great houses or among factions coalesced and disintegrated, and as interests in controlling particular resources shifted.

Sixth, given the desire of different great houses to increase their wealth and the concomitant intensity of between- and within-group competition, it is not surprising that inheritance was based as much on capability as on kinship. K'iche' and Kaqchikel titles sometimes were passed from father to son (especially if a father was a strong leader), but often went to more-able kinsmen, in-laws, or even rivals within the great house. Although kinship principles *did* play a role in determining who inherited particular titles, affiliation and ability also were important factors. Rigid models focused on lineage and descent fail to account for the pragmatic manner in which power and position were negotiated in K'iche'an society.

Seventh, factionalism often was manifested through warfare. Rebellions were not uncommon, and factions sometimes were expelled from alliances. The Kaqchikel Tuquche' faction, for example, was ousted from Iximche' and was "annihilated" in battle (Arana X. and Díaz X. 1573–1605:49–50). Constant factional struggle caused K'iche'an society to become militarized to a surprising degree. Occasionally, powerful rulers emerged, such as Kikab' of the K'iche'. Such rulers are accurately depicted as military despots. But during most of K'iche'an history, power within the major polities was much more fragmented. We may characterize such times as periods of factional balkanism. In Marcus's (1993, 1998) dynamic model, these are the "valleys" rather than the "peaks."

Eighth, the local resources that supported the power bases of the K'iche'an great houses were augmented by goods extracted from territories beyond their direct polit- ical control. The desire to tap distant sources of wealth played a key role in the formation and maintenance of alliance groups. In most cases, distant territories were not directly integrated into K'iche'an polities, and access to resources was maintained through the threat of force. Thus, beyond the immediate territory of the chinamit, K'iche'an great houses jointly commanded access to the "means of destruction" (Goody 1971) and did not directly control the means of production. Wealth acquired by this piratical strategy could be received in the form of gifts or tribute. Joint rulership and the complex system of aristocratic authority allowed equitable distribution of these resources to individual factions and great houses.

CONCLUSIONS: THE SMALL POLITIES OF THE K'ICHE'AN HIGHLANDS

K'iche'an society was based as much on affiliation or alliance as on kinship. As such, it cannot be described using elementary terms of social structure. Moreover, the notion that social units were closed corporate communities seems somewhat in error. Instead, the best model for K'iche'an social structure is Lévi-Strauss's house society. The fact that terms for K'iche'an social units refer to houses or households is strong evidence for this identification.

K'iche'an polities were formed of alliances of great houses, where the pragmatic concerns of the maintenance and increase of great-house prestige and wealth were the overriding factors determining membership. The factions formed even larger alliances out of which coalesced the various "kingdoms" of the K'iche', Kaqchikel, Tz'utujil, and Chajoma'. Within the polity, balance was maintained through elaborate strategies of power sharing that, along with marriage ties, served to diffuse rivalries between individual great houses and among factions comprised of great houses.

K'iche'an polities should not be considered as controlling large territories of the sort that are easily represented on maps, because the basic territorial unit was the chinamit or great house. Capitals were built at strategic, defensible locations and served as "power centers" out of which punitive raids could be made on recalcitrant neighbors. K'iche'an polities, therefore, were poorly integrated territories held together by the threat of military destruction.

The Late Postclassic K'iche'an polities—including those of the K'iche', Kaqchikel, Chajoma', and Tz'utujil—fit well with the definition of small polities adopted in this volume (chapter 4), though none are rightly called city-states. Instead, they were networks of great houses linked by alliance. At their largest, they were hierarchically organized, and demanded services and extracted surpluses from conquered (or at least intimidated) territories. At their smallest, K'iche'an polities consisted of

the territories, resources, and titles controlled by one or a few great houses. As the Postclassic period progressed, there was a tendency for these small polities to proliferate as rival factions coalesced in the central and western highlands. What is not clear is when this process of balkanization began. Little is known about the Early Postclassic period, largely because the methodological tools needed to distinguish Early Postclassic occupations from Late Classic and Late Postclassic components have not been developed (Braswell 1993, 1996). In fact, settlement hierarchy studies suggest that the highlands west of the Valley of Guatemala may have been divided into small polities since the beginning of the Early Classic period, when K'iche'an peoples first spread into the departments of Sololá, Chimaltenango, and Sacatepéquez.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS