

Time and the Making of “The Maya” as an Archaeological and Ethnographic Object

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Abstract: This paper uses critical approaches to the social construction of time to address archaeological practices of classifying the cultures of the past. The project is informed by recent research in science studies which suggest that one of the most important ways that science exercises power in the world is through naming things and fitting them into taxonomies, recognizing similarities and differences and judging when differences require taxonomic separation. This work makes it clear that the very terms and classifications that we need to make verification and confirmation possible - to know whether we are really studying comparable situations or units - are themselves complex social products that incorporate theoretical assumptions. This poses particular problems for the taxonomies of time which form the bedrock of practice in archaeology, and has relevance to other historical practices.

Time and the Making of Mayan-ness

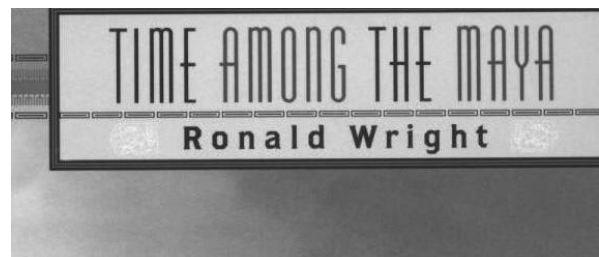
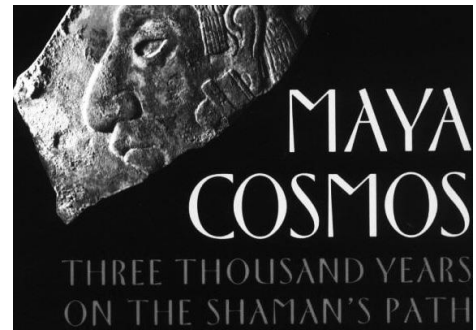
Most of my ethnographic and archaeological field experience has been in the region of Central America which was inhabited in pre-hispanic times by peoples whose languages belonged to what is conventionally called “Macro-Mayan,” and which is today encompassed by the touristic zone of “La Ruta Maya” in Mexico, Guatemala, Belize and Honduras. Beginning with the early explorations of the popular writer (and diplomatic spy) John Lloyd Stephens (1841), the modern inhabitants of the area have lived in the figurative shadow of the ruins of the civilization created by their ancestors, usually dubbed “The Ancient Maya” or “The Classic Maya.” Most of the millions of people who today speak a language in the greater Mayan family do not actually identify themselves ethnically as “Mayan,” but according to many other labels, and ethnologists have divided them into more than 20 separate cultural groups. Many explicitly deny their Mayan identity and their connection to the ancient ruins (Hervik 1999a), despite the recent growth of a “Pan-Maya” movement among indigenous intellectuals and educators (Warren and Jackson 2003, Fischer and Brown 1996). Yet the work of many generations of explorers, archaeologists, novelists, and romantic travelers has created an indissoluble link in the popular imagination between the modern people who live in the “Maya Area” and the ancient people who

built the ruins there, so often the topic of full pictorial treatments in National Geographic (Lutz and Collins 1993, Hervik 1999b).

Time has also been used to exoticize living and ancient Mayan people through numerous claims that their culture is characterized by an experience of time as cyclic rather than linear. Many anthropologists have depicted modern Maya people as 'timelessly' linked to the past by virtue of the survival of particular beliefs, agricultural practices, institutions, myths and stories (Tedlock 1992, Tedlock 1993, Gossen 1997, Hill and Monaghan 1987). The Maya concept of time, we are told, moved in circles, cycles and rounds of endless repetition, expressed in a complex calendric system which was based in sophisticated astronomical knowledge, though more recent translations of hieroglyphic texts reveal a strong preoccupation with linear historical time as a sequence of events, which were reckoned on a directional scheme which fixed events a scale beginning on a starting date in the distant past and extending into an infinite future). Confirmed by modern ethnographers, bolstered by reading calendric inscriptions, the otherness of the Maya time-sense is an article of faith, and appears in the titles of many books and papers.

A fair amount of recent scholarship has been devoted to understanding how archaeology has helped construct the ancient Maya as otherworldly and mysterious, contributing to the modern valuation of ruins and their preservation in particular forms that please the mass tourist. Critical work by Becker on early archaeological interpretation and publication (1979), by Castaneda on the presentation of ruins (1996), and Pyburn's critique of the political effects of depicting the ancient Maya as warlike (1998), and a variety of other work on representation in the media show us how we have marketed an idealized Maya past in ways that tend to dispossess or erase the modern Maya. At the same time, the growth of the field of ethnohistory has begun to redress the elision of past and present, and to restore the historicity of the past of Mayan-speaking people, so it is no longer as easy to make believe the Spanish conquest never happened, or had little effect on the direct cultural continuity from the Classic period to contemporary cultures. More recent ethnographic work which acknowledges the desperate violence of civil war, poverty, migration, neoliberalism and political marginalization, has also gone far to place Mayan people into the present moment, or at least into a recognizably contemporary world (eg. Thompson 2001, Burns 1993).

Nevertheless, the case of the Maya stands as a clear example of the way ethnography can 'deny coevalness' (to use Fabian's term, 1983) to people living in the present, placing them in a time zone where no amount of progress and change can ever break down the barrier between mundane and exotic worlds (see recent discussion by Birth 2008). This argument follows the general direction of critique of textual devices used in ethnography (Clifford 1988),



which has also pointed out how anthropologists use realist techniques to create veracity and bridge distance, making the ethnographer the singular agent who can mediate the gap between cultures.

Not only have the Maya been portrayed as having an inscrutable sacred time, but those cycles are said to be grounded directly in the experience of natural cycles of the seasons and through the device of the field of 'archaeoastronomy' they are grounded in the periodicity of the heavens and planets (Aveni 2001). The Maya are thus doubly "closer to nature," attuned to natural cycles rather than linear mechanical time, in the sense of difference defined by Lefebvre as the fundamental source of difference between moderns and their others (2004, also Thompson 1967, Hareven 1982). Their otherness is grounded in a materialist logic of subsistence, in the ideological difference of an alternative cosmology, and in the social and structural framework imposed by rulers through their control of history and lineage. This is the full array of anthropological devices about time deployed by scholars from Durkheim through Sahlins.¹

Fabian and other critics have focused their attention on ethnographic devices which manipulate and use time as a trope for difference and distance, but very few have paid similar attention to the role of archaeology, and the collusion between archaeologists and cultural anthropologists, tourism promoters, textbook writers, and other agents of popular history in creating a structure of knowledge which mixes notions of cultural difference and time in an intimate and almost irrevocable way (cf. Leone 1981, Handler and Gable 1997, Castaneda 1996). Through archaeological methods, cultural difference, physical distance, and differences in temporality are blended and then *displaced* into a past where they are only accessible through the scientific tools of expert knowledge. In this frozen state they serve as a charter for naturalizing differences in the present, in a form of circular and recursive reasoning that only a few archaeologists, like Pyburn have recognized.

Naming Objects

Rather than following the ethnological arguments about the different ways that cultures shape peoples' perceptions of time (e.g. Gell 1992), I want to focus on the way time is portrayed and manipulated by archaeologists in order to objectify other groups of people, to distance them and make them mysterious as well as to make them familiar and understandable. I suggest that while archaeology is supposedly the study of time, archaeologists generally have a narrow, stereotypical and unreflective approach to temporality. More than an oversight, this often appears to be a willful blindness, an act which allows archaeology to unreflexively deploy a set of tools and rhetorical techniques which tame and control subjects and objects which live in the present as well as the past. My goal here is to excavate and expose those tools and techniques, to bring them into the open for discussion and debate, with the goal of building a more heterodox archaeology, which allows people to see the tools that are being used to construct their past.

I am not arguing that there is anything inherently wrong or misguided about the various tools and techniques of archaeological timekeeping. But I do think they are complex social products that incorporate theoretical and political assumptions, which

therefore reflect the social and intellectual positions of archaeologists. Historians of science, and those in science and technology studies tell us that very basic processes like classification, measurement and naming are profoundly reflective of the cultures of science. Rather than being simple tools and techniques, close study reveals the intricate micropolitics involved in creating taxonomies and measuring devices, and the subtle ways ideologies are incorporated into them. Bowker and Star (1999) for example, show how innumerable anonymous committees working to create an objective scientific catalogue of diseases, nevertheless ended up creating a classification which gives much less space and elaboration to the diseases of poor people and tropical regions, while making fine distinctions among diseases of affluence. Can we say similar things about the bland elements of scientific archaeology such as ceramic taxonomy, phase terminology and the graphic expression of information?

The ethical dimension is clearer in the case of archaeology than in the classification of diseases or medicinal plants. While the uses of the disease classification or plant taxonomy may cause harm, the microbes and plants themselves do not suffer from scientific mistakes. But anthropology and archaeology have anything but passive objects and subjects. The question here is one of classification without consent (an issue which could be paraphrased in political language as ‘representation without representation’) (see Schmidt and Patterson 1995, Pyburn and Wilk, Tsosie 1997). As long as the processes which create objects, names them and orders them into categories are carried out *sub umbra* (in the shade), there is little chance for broader participation, political critique or even consent.

If naming and classification were simply reversible processes, the practices I discuss in this paper would be relatively trivial. But time has a tyrannical directionality which imposes a heavy burden of responsibility on anyone who projects a new set of names, phases, or taxonomies into the world. Easily spoken, some words can only be unspoken or withdrawn with great difficulty. Once people start calling a period of time “the Preclassic” and the term has been printed thousands of times, it takes public political action to force a change. Pueblo peoples in the U.S. Southwest, for example, have been unsuccessfully campaigning for many years to eliminate the term “Anasazi,” a Navajo word meaning “ancient enemy” which archaeologists assigned to their ancestors in the 1890s. Terms meant simply to describe the order of the world easily become part of it. It took twenty years of work and the leadership of an influential committed politician to change the name of the Belizean town “Stann Creek” into “Dangriga,” even though the latter name had been in the vernacular for over a hundred years. The transformation of the Belizean ethnic group once derogatorily called *Black Caribs* into the *Garifuna* is still incomplete after more than thirty years.

Archaeologists have invented entire cultures like the first millennium civilization along the Gulf coast of Mexico who were dubbed “The Olmec,” early in the twentieth century. Once invented, cultures are given territories and art styles, their history can be written, and we can even speculate about their motives and personalities. Their living descendants can argue about the names, but have little access to the technologies of creating and naming ancient people. Once “The Chol” have been willed into existence, they have a kind of animation and agency which

gives them the appearance of (extinguished) life. This godlike power of creation, includes the power to name types of artifacts, sites, ceramic types, phases and regions. Archaeologists name and create taxonomies for ancient subsistence techniques, dwellings, civic architecture, settlements, the clothes people wore and the ways they died.

Many of these names are supposed to be temporary placeholders, substitutes for terms which are unknown and are often unknowable. But once objects are conjured into being, their ghosts remain even after science has moved on. So the people called “The Mound Builders” and “The Red Paint People” still exist in the popular imagination, long after archaeologists have changed their minds and given them up. Once an ancient society called “The Maya” became an object of western imagination, it became just as real as any other imagined community like “The USA” or “Europe.” The science which creates equivalent Mayan regions called “the Puuc” (defined through a particular kind of stone mosaic frieze on the front of certain buildings) from another called “the Peten” (where a vertical style of pyramid was favored, but also the name of a modern province of Guatemala) can never completely unmake the entity that has been called forth, even if their validity is questioned on the basis of further research. Once modern boundaries have been legitimized through the discovery of ancient cultural differences, it is extremely difficult to put the magic of the past back into a bottle and make it go away.

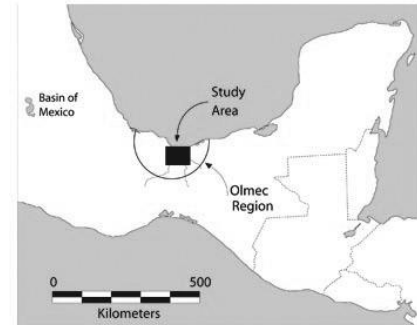


Figure 1. Southern Gulf lowlands of Mesoamerica showing Olmec Heartland and study area.

Orientalism and Occidentalism

One theoretical background for this discussion is the twin movement of mystification and demystification which define the anthropological effort, and at the same time create alterity and identity. One movement creates a category of “The Maya” and Orientalizes the group, setting them apart as irreducibly different, and in the process making all those in this ‘other’ category appear alike by virtue of their sharing their polarity on the point of difference (what Lyotard labels the *differend*, 1988). Once you have found the item that truly separates us from them, you have created a category of ‘them’ which has a categorical uniformity. In the process, Orientalism also Occidentalizes, creating a uniform group of modern observers who share their alienation from the other (see Carrier 1992). This can be seen as an example of what Latour (1993) calls “the work of purification.” He suggests that at times when hybrid forms proliferate, when things get mixed up and no longer fall into familiar categories, the work of finding and purifying essences and recreating divides must intensify.

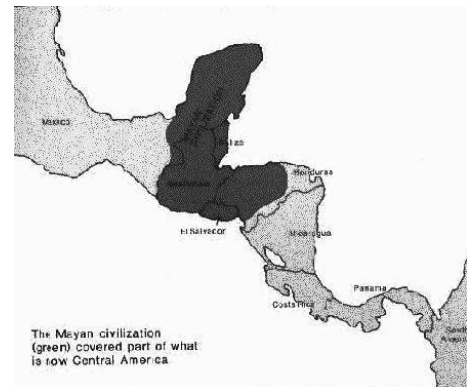
The other movement of archaeology is uniformitarian and demystifying, a process of making the alien seem familiar. Metaphor and analogies can forge connections and find parallels, emphasizing the common human qualities and cultural universals, while more formal tools objective tools can reduce complex multidimensional variation to a single scale, which even as it preserves difference,

still flattens it to a common simplified dimension, so the differences appear to be of degree rather than of kind. When we speak of Maya *cities*, or call their ritual specialists *priests* and their leaders *kings*, we demystify and forge connections which make the *differend* disappear.

Archaeological storytelling usually completes at least one cycle of mystification and demystification, first making the mundane pile of rocks into an exotic temple of mysteries, and then closing the circle by showing how it is really a royal palace. The tools and technologies that archaeologists use to name, classify and depict time are used for both purposes; they can create continuities and discontinuities, borders and routes, and more elaborate schemes of nested contrasts and similarities. The further one gets into the practical toolkit that archaeologists use among themselves, the less one sees of the mystifying tools which are regularly brought out for public presentations and communication with a lay audience. The ultimate goal is, after all, to bring all the people of the world living at all times into the compass of social science, to regularize and describe their differences in terms that have universality. And the terminology of that universal science has its roots ultimately in nineteenth century European sciences, and we can therefore expect them to reflect the concerns and interests of that particular time and place.

This is why archaeology uses a taxonomic and descriptive apparatus which extends the shape of nineteenth century nation states onto the past. It was after all the 'folkloric' impulse which drove the invention of archaeology, the attempt to trace the roots of the modern nation back in time. As Lofgren (1990) and others have shown, the European ethnological impulse made all earlier people into "pre-nations," who embodied the qualities which were sought in each project of nation building. Archaeology provided the genealogies of what Lofgren calls the national 'identikit;' a national language, a flag, an anthem, emblematic dance, a founding figure and event (a battle, treaty, or invasion). Today this has been elaborated to include a world heritage site, a major national university, a single capital city, as well as mammals, plants, butterflies and fish.

From this perspective the shape of the modern construct called 'the Maya' becomes more understandable. Long before there was ever a serious debate about whether or not the ancient Maya formed a 'state' level society, they had already been put into the confining terminology of western ethnic/political unity. Instead of starting their thinking, with, say the multiethnic Ottoman empire, where the political elites were often foreigners, and there were institutions like the seraglio; instead of beginning with the imperfect European nation states of the early nineteenth century like Germany and Italy, riven with interregional strife and conflict, they started with an idealized Britain or France, the idea that states and nations are congruous (or trend in that direction) and a teleological notion that nations always move in the direction of greater centralized authority and cultural unity.



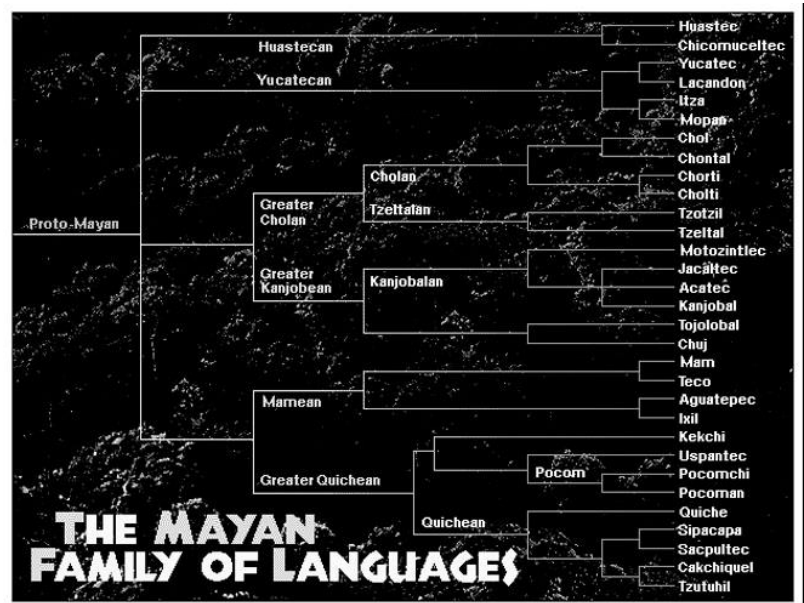
Tools for Shaping the Past

While naming and basic forms of classification are the primary means through which archaeologists control the flow of alterity and identity between present and past, there are a number of more specific tools which form part of the ‘normal science’ of archaeology which also incorporate and enforce particular temporal perspectives. Here I will briefly sketch a series of them, and discuss the assumptions upon which they are based.

Geneology has proven one of the most important tools in the creation and animation of imaginary social entities, through a direct analogy between cultures and individual organisms. Once named, societies or cultures are placed in families, related by common descent from ancestors. There is an inevitable uniformity about the language of descent and affiliation, founded in Western ideas about the supreme importance of blood, and later genetics, in the formation of the individual. The metaphor of sex and descent is used by human beings to describe all sorts of other processes they observe in the world, from the breeding of animals to weather (as in the spawning of storms). And these metaphors have real power in the world: as the Tiv people of Nigeria showed Laura Bohannon more than half a century ago, the power to control genealogy is an essential political tool (1952).

It should come as no surprise that archaeologists have been prolific genealogists of ancient people, often drawing on the genealogies of language groups which have been assembled by historical linguists. They have identified ‘mother cultures’ and trace lines of descent based on similarities of architecture and settlement, techniques of burial, and the use of similar kinds of artifacts or even design motifs. The image of the family tree and the notions of

descent and filiation are so taken for granted that most people who read archaeology completely lose sight of the fact that they remain no more than metaphors. Ethnic groups emphatically do not have sex with one another, and they do not have ‘offspring’ in any literal sense (cultural evolutionists are still arguing over what might be the unit of cultural evolution, and some continue to use that singularly obscure metaphorical construction, the ‘meme’). But the descent and tree metaphors give the archaeologist a tremendous rhetorical power, a concrete control over the way debates about the past are framed. So we might argue over whether the Chontal people were descended from earlier Mayan groups, or should be traced to “Mexicanized” groups in southern Veracruz, but it is much harder to argue that they



had *no* specific ancestors or descendants, because societies do not reproduce by the same means as individuals.

Specialists in cultural evolution and culture change are quite aware of these facts, and that ‘horizontal’ transmission of culture through communication, trade, and intermarriage is just as much a part of culture change as ‘vertical’ transmission between generations. Some admit that a lattice-like array or a ‘shrublike’ tangle is a better description of how groups are related in time (see Latour 1993), but in general when archaeologists draw something more tangled than a descent tree, it indicates uncertainty - insufficient data - rather than an alternative vision of how culture reproduces itself through time. The public face of archaeology still offers normative sequences which end up reading as genealogical descent stories, rather than admitting the possibility of miscegenation, mixed ancestry, multiple parenthood, or even illegitimacy.

Emblemising is an exaggerated form of synecdoche, which takes one element and makes it stand for the whole. For example, the step-pyramid becomes the emblem of ancient Maya cities, even though very few buildings actually take the iconic form. By subsuming all the many different forms of ‘temple’ under the iconic emblem of temple 1 at Tikal, the many different “Maya cities” lose their individuality and become a class which in turn stands for a culture, a religion, a philosophy and a ‘people.’ Conspicuous examples of pottery, art, and other crafts which were discovered during early stages of exploration, which have been shown in well-known museums, and published often easily became emblematic of huge populations of other objects and artifacts, destined for obscurity.

Many of the exploratory and publication practices of archaeologists have the effects of making particular places or objects emblematic and stereotypical. This is part of the continual contest among archaeologists for the publicity and fame which inevitably surrounds the discoveries of the earliest, biggest, and most spectacular sites and objects which Pyburn discusses (2008). She also points out the way particular ancient cultures become iconic emblems of particular human moral failings - for example the ancient Maya are often portrayed as the victims of a cultural collapse caused by their overpopulation and overexploitation of the rainforest environment.

It could be argued that the emergence of the celebrity archaeologist is a recursive form of emblemizing, through which the “Mayanist” him or herself becomes the active agent for the absent and passive ancient people whose lives and beliefs are “channeled” through lectures and presentations. This was especially evident in the long series of “Maya Weekends” and annual hieroglyphic conferences which gathered hundreds of amateur archaeologists and enthusiasts around charismatic archaeologists during the 1980s and 1990s.



Mnemonic Decapitation is a term coined by Zerubavel (2003:93-4). The process of setting a zero point (the beginning of civilization, arrival of Columbus) inevitably turns one part of history into a mere prologue for subsequent events. Zerubavel gives the example of textbook New World national histories that start with the arrival of Europeans. Just the naming of the ‘Precolumbian’ period defines a whole period not by what happened during it, but what ‘ended’ it, as if everything on the whole continent was just building up to the arrival of Columbus and the beginning of history. This is especially ironic given that Columbus never even saw Mesoamerica, and it was almost thirty years after his first voyage that the first major phase of Mexican conquest was completed. And what happens to the more than two hundred years between the arrival of Columbus and the conquest by Hispanic and Mayan troops of the Itza nation? Is this pre-Columbian, Columbian, or just some awkward unnamed interstitial space?

The archeological vocabulary is filled with teleological labeling of periods on hundreds of years as pre- or post-, early, middle or late, in ways which mark certain time periods as central and other peripheral, usually on the basis of some unmeasurable quality of ‘greatness’ or ‘height of civilization’ or ‘extent of political control.’ Narrations of the past also identify particular periods of rise and collapse, in ways which serve as watersheds, dividing everything which comes before from subsequent cultures and changes. In speaking of the ‘origin of agriculture’ or the ‘invention of writing’ or the ‘explosion of trade’ archaeologists are labeling real historical processes, a preliminary to any scientific effort to understand major processes of change in the human past. The advanced student, however, quickly discovers that there were rarely ‘moment’ or ‘events’ which marked the absolute beginning or ending of major changes - instead the origin of agriculture, for example, is revealed as a millennium-long and multidimensional complex process. Even when it is possible to define ‘horizon markers’ like the first appearance of pottery in a site, or the beginning of a new form of burial, the suddenness of the change is hard to pin down. Did it take 10 years or 100 years for a group to begin using pottery every day, and was this ‘sudden’?

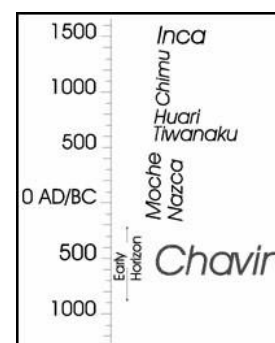
Gregorian	Radio Carbon	Maya Long Count	Phase
AD 1700	1300	12.0.0.0	Colonial
1500		11.10.0.0	Postclassic
1300			
AD 1100	900	10.10.0.0	Classic
900		10.0.0.0	
700		9.10.0.0	
500		9.0.0.0	
300		8.10.0.0	
AD 100	-100	8.0.0.0	Late Preclassic
BC 100		7.10.0.0	
300		7.0.0.0	Middle Preclassic
500		6.10.0.0	
700		6.0.0.0	
900		5.10.0.0	
1100		5.0.0.0	
1300		4.10.0.0	Early Preclassic
1500		4.0.0.0	
1700		3.10.0.0	
1900		3.0.0.0	
2100		2.10.0.0	
2300	-2000	2.0.0.0	Archaic
2500			
3114			
BC 9000		0.0.0.0	

Normalization is a consequence of dividing the past into periods of time and ancient terrain into territories, which has the effect of making an area of period appear homogenous, like stuffing a container with a single ingredient. Any border creates a categorical homogeneity or identity on each side, divided by the *differend* of alterity in the middle. Normalization requires methods to foreground commonalities and suppress differences. We could, for example, define a region based on a common red slip used on serving dishes. If we can find one more common characteristic - the same people who use red slip also buried their dead lying down on their backs - we have normalized the region. It really does not matter if these traits are trivial, or if some of them actually extend beyond the putative boundary. Drawing on the aura of

normative energy that emanates from the nineteenth century notion of the nation-state, a uniform substance within a container, it becomes possible to make almost any association of artifact types or dwelling styles into a cultural entity. In some cases it is as easy as putting different colors in the spaces on a map.

Synchronism manipulates the ordering of events to create an impression of commonality and contemporaneity. Historians tell us that synchrony is often an afterthought, a post-hoc attempt to work things into some kind of order which they did not follow at the time. Synchronism groups a large number of events at many different times in many different places together and gives them all a common name which makes them seem part of the same phenomenon. We know, for example, that the phenomenon called ‘the Maya collapse’ took more than 250 years to occur, a period of time which is longer than some earlier ‘phases.’ Another kind of synchronism sets a particular absolute date (580 AD) and decrees that all events taking place on that date are related to one another, as in the complex attempts to designate the short interval between the Early Classic and Late Classic as the ‘Maya Hiatus.’

“Horizon” styles are a common tool of synchronism, even though the line that defines the horizon is rarely dated with any accuracy (sometimes from a single site or burial). Real-world studies of social and technological change never find the kinds of synchrony imagined by archaeologists. Most social phenomena show complex spatial heterogeneity, with numerous centers and subcenters, periods of lag, places which maintain archaic institutions while others have shed them, places that always seem ‘out of step.’ Synchronism must therefore be seen as a means of creating objects in the past which can be manipulated for the purposes of mystification and demystification, distancing and control.



Phasing is a technique for organizing normalized and synchronized periods of time (phases) into sequences, usually stacked one atop the other in a column that represents the history of a particular site or region. Once named, ‘periods’ acquire a misplaced concreteness. “The Renaissance” for example, was only named as such in 1855 - before that the Renaissance did not exist (Zerubavel 2003: 96). Even such common-sensical ideas as naming wars as distinct periods often conceals particular kinds of political handiwork. World War II, for example, only lasted from 1939-1945 in Europe. For the hundreds of millions in China, WWII was just one phase of a war with the Japanese which began with the invasion of Manchuria in 1931. Naming is also a process of classification, and like all taxonomists, archaeologists and historians can be either lumpers or splitters, creating many short periods or tiny territories, or a few longer ones. As biologists have observed, the desire of each individual researcher to find and name a unique species inevitably leads to continual splitting, which requires further efforts by other taxonomists to reunite and amalgamate back into larger taxa.

Zerubavel also says that there are two essentially different modes for graphically depicting the rhythm of change in past processes. The first, which he calls *legato*, depicts a continuous line or curve of change, the second a series of *staccato* steps.

Archaeologists use both methods, but the normative method is a staccato of named phases. There are logically two ways to arrange the phases as boxes with lines between them; the first

is to have the lines represent changes in state, and the boxes periods of stability, and the other is to have the boxes represent periods of change, with the lines indicating changes in direction. Thus, we can think of the Maya “classic” period as a steady state, a singular life-phase with constant qualities, which arose at the early/late classic transition, and ended at the classic/Postclassic transition. Or we can think of the “classic” period as one of growing state power and the amalgamation of city states into an empire, which ended with the transition to a Postclassic period of warfare, dispersion, and abandonment of cities.

DATES		MAYA		OTHER CULTURES		MAYA AREA			BELIZE	
AD/BC	Maya Correlation	Period	Phase	Old World	Meso-america	Highlands	Southern	Lowlands Northern	Sites	Ceramic Complexes
1750	12.0.0.0.0.	Colonial					Spanish Conquest			
1542							Acalan-Chontal			
1450	11.10.0.0.0.		Late	Columbus discovers America	Aztec			Independent States		
1250	11.0.0.0.0.	Post-Classic	Middle		Totonac	Utlalan	Villages			Waterbank
900	10.10.0.0.0.		Early	Norse voyages to Vinland	Toltec	Quiche	Peten deserted	Mayapan		
800	10.0.0.0.0.		Terminal	Confucian Revival	Huastec	fortified hilltop sites		Tulum cultural upheaval		
700	9.10.0.0.0.	Classic	Late	Coronation of Charlemagne	Zapotec	decline	centers abandoned	Chichen Itza Uxmal		Santana
400	9.0.0.0.0.		Early	Fall of Roman Empire	Teotihuacan		Palenque	Rio Bec		Tepau
250 AD	8.14.0.0.0.		Proto-classic	Birth of Christ		regionalization	Copan			Nuevo Tzakol
BC	7.0.0.0.0.	Formative	Late	Alexander the Great	Izapan		Uaxactun			Freshwater
353				Golden Age of Greece			Maya calendar invented			Floral Park
400				Chou Dynasty						Cocos
1000			Middle			Kaminaljuyu	social stratification			Chicanel
2000			Early	Rameses II	Olmec	Tzeltalan	Cholan	Yucatec		Tulix
9000		Archaic				village farming				Sarstoon
										Lopez
										Mamon
										Blanden Xe
										Swasey
										Lithic complexes
										Progreso
										Melinda
										Belize
										Sand Hill
										Low-Ha

My impression is that in most cases, archaeologists start with the former notion, that the phases are periods of change, but because they disagree on the nature of the changes, the boxes end up being just shorthand for uniform steady state chunks of time, recognizable stereotypical snapshots, where one picture, place or event stands for a whole period of time. Thus the graphic means of depicting complex change readily becomes a simple staccato narrative of stages, of rise and fall. Once the notion of history as a sequence of steady

states becomes established, the full array of tools to create political time is available—choosing particular points as ‘breaks’ with the past, choosing one period as a model for the present or future (classic revival). Legato narratives, or sequences defined as

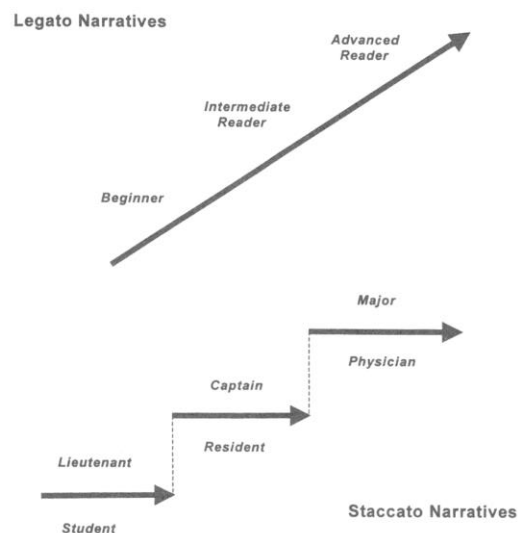


Figure 10 Historical Phrasing

Zerubavel 2003:35

periods of change always emphasize continuity. Staccato narratives offer the additional possibility of creating discontinuities, which are convenient political mileposts in the construction of particular stories about the past. Of course, in reality both continuity and discontinuity are nothing more than creations, an ongoing project of reflection, storytelling and hindsight.

Density is another important quality of historical narratives which is explained by Zerubavel. Some periods are historically “busy,” while others are ‘slow,’ and this perception is a product of both individual and collective efforts to mark certain events and remember them. Zerubavel draws ‘comemograms’ which map the density of official historical events, showing that they have a tendency to cluster in periods which are historically identified as the origins of nations, religions and groups like political parties.

No nation in Latin America, for example, commemorates any event before the arrival of the Spanish with an official holiday. Public commemoration is almost entirely in the hands of political elites, who create event-dense spaces which tell their own stories and naturalize their dominance. In this, the people who raised stone monuments in the cities of ancient Mesoamerica were using exactly the same

temporal technology that politicians have used elsewhere in the world throughout history to legitimate their own particular view of the past, to make particular memories concrete and legitimate. The designs may be unfamiliar, but in other respects there is no mystery about these objects at all.

Archaeologists’ ideas about density are portrayed graphically by the ways they subdivide *time columns* in phase diagrams. The periods are shorter in times when many events were supposedly taking place, and longer in the stable, boring periods when nothing much was going on. Sometimes the periods are normalized, so the thousands of years of the archaic are the same length as the hundreds of years of the Preclassic. Both conventions send subtle messages about who, what and where is important. They also legitimize the political intentions of the ancient people who built the pyramids and monuments, and concur in silencing those who spent their time and effort in other ways.

Perhaps the most curious and revealing attribute of phase diagrams is the way they so often float in the past, untethered to the present. In Mesoamerica archaeological phases usually stop at the Spanish conquest, or they have a colonial period perched uncomfortably on the very top, but they very rarely extend to the twentieth century. The visual message is clear; this is not the past which extends back from *our* present, when *we* live. It is another past altogether.

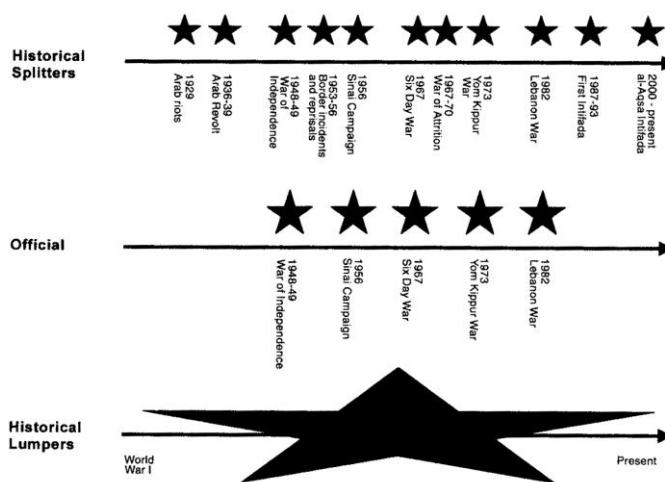


Figure 21 Israel's Mnemonic Visions of the Arab-Israeli Conflict

The visual technology used by archaeologists to depict the past has a strong tendency to limit and tame unruly cultural processes, and force everything into a boxlike progression of equivalent units. There is no graphic convention for the melting of boundaries, for appropriation, creolization, hybridity, bureaucratization, revolution, or any of the other kinds of complex cultural processes which we see and describe in the contemporary world. The stacked-phases chart, like the tree, is unable to represent interconnections, amalgamations, blends, uncertainties or cycles; it is unrelentingly linear and flat, not to mention visually boring. Most importantly, the stacked-box convention limits has pre-determined the nature of the cultural processes which are supposedly being studied. They cannot break out of the little boxes, and the techniques which created the boxes are Oz-like mechanisms hidden behind a curtain of complex technical terminology. The visitor can only kneel in awe or turn away in disgust, but cannot take the controls.

Placing names and defines points and spaces on maps. All of the practices I have discussed in the manipulation and control of time can also be applied to the way archaeologists divide up ancient geography, setting boundaries around areas and naming territories. This is a clear extension of the nineteenth century ethnological program, which envisioned a world where each ethnic group was like a little nation, with boundaries, language, dress, diet, art, and contiguous territory, an ancestral homeland or heartland (Wilk 1999).

What does it tell us to draw a place on the map and call it “The Maya area?” For one thing it frames all further questions; once the box has been constructed, the argument is over what is inside. We can argue about how homogeneous the Maya culture was, how its borders changed over time, and what the sub-areas might have been. The imagined space on the map has the kind of agency that sociologists of technology have called “scripting” (Verbeek 2006). Once created, many kinds of material culture are no longer passive, animated only by human beings. Just by their existence, they make choices for people, they include scripts which direct their own uses. And like other inventions, once they are known, they cannot be ‘unknown’ without some extremely powerful tools for erasure.

Archaeologists deep preoccupied with maps and plans is not just a passion for recreating ancient landscapes, but a practical extension of their own power as creators and inventors into the world of the living (Castaneda 1996). Archaeologists have their own territories and domains, a recognized code of rights to dig and interpret, name and publish in a particular piece of the world. The places they create that are supposed to represent the ancient world are just as much self portraits which inscribe their own biographies, voyages, and careers. But like all inventors - as Latour so beautifully documents in his detailed studies of scientists creating real technological systems (e.g. 1987, 1996) - they inevitably lose control of their inventions. In the hands of tourism promoters, the



strange geography of the past created by archaeologists is crisscrossed with tourist trails, itineraries and sites that zigzag between past and present, scientific and popular. The people who are usually left out of this geography are the living descendants of the ancients who built what have now become 'sites,' people who also live in categories and spaces largely defined by a dominant political order from which they are largely excluded.

Conventionalized Ontologies are narrative forms that are drawn from western religious and historical traditions, which are used by archaeologists to gloss the long term cultural processes they study. One simple but very common kind of ontology used by archaeologists is a kind of *progressivist teleology*, where archaeologists like Richard MacNeish find exactly the same sequence of progress and increasing complexity in all the many parts of the world where they excavate. Like early evolutionists who assumed that all of evolution was building up to modern humans, progressivist teleology assumes that 'complex society' or some other construct is the ultimate and highest form of development, and all preceding periods are stages in its development. This way the 600 years of the Maya 'preclassic' becomes less a time and civilization in and of itself, but a kind of setting-up, which built the foundations for what came after. The teleological story can be broadened to recognize sequences of 'rise' and 'fall' that may implicate catastrophes or cultural failures, and history becomes a kind of passion play on which we can project whatever particular cast of characters and dramatic elements we wish at the moment (Wilk 1985).

Marshall Sahlins hints that moral storytelling in anthropology has antecedents in biblical narrative (1996). Familiar ontologies resonate with diverse audiences already habituated to them through repetition in popular culture. To give an example, the Garden of Eden ontology tells us that about a utopia of peace and harmony, a dystopia of discord and ungodliness, and then makes it clear that the fall from one to the other was caused by not following god's law, which created the moment of rupture. Archaeological ontologies tell stories of rise and fall, and the point of change is typically something like ecological inattention, uncontrolled tyranny, inflexibility, invention, or migration. There is a small number of story lines, which include favorites like "the precocious climber who is punished for getting too close to the sun," "the heroic passage through trials to emerge into a new golden age," "the long rise to enlightenment followed by corruption and fall from grace."

There are perfectly good and defensible reasons why archaeologists want to tell stories that carry convincing weight with their audiences. I take the same position as McCloskey (1985) in her writing about the persuasive rhetorical tools used by academic economists; we should acknowledge that anthropology and archaeology depend on such tools, open them up to critique and make use our audience knows that we are stakeholders rather than passive scientific observers.

Conclusion: A Level Playing Field?

Some Mayanist scholars have condescended to the idea that Maya people may have progressed far enough now that they can be 'given back' some of their history. This can only be considered a 'gift' if we presume that the donors are ahistorical

disinterested parties, rather than descendants of the very same European civilization that took that history away in the first place. I am sure Mayanists don't see themselves as descendants of the Spanish conquistadores, but would they admit at least that their social science is a European invention? Classification is everything in this argument. If you classify archaeologists along with other northern-educated, powerful, wealthy and mostly white people (not an unreasonable taxonomic distinction), then you would see this 'gift' as no more than a belated return of stolen property. And that property is hardly in the same condition it was when it was taken away.

This shifting of perspective should make it clear that admitting indigenous, poor, powerless and uneducated people to the playing field of historical knowledge and reconstruction is not the same thing as playing fairly. There is no level playing field here, but instead a game where the rules, implements, language, timekeeping and audience are all controlled to a greater or lesser extent by one side. This is very much like the international beauty pageants I have written about, where people of all nations are welcome to enter and compete, but each country must buy a franchise from Ruppert Murdoch (Miss World) or Donald Trump (Miss Universe), and contestants have to be single, with no children, and between 5'7" and 5'9" tall. In other words, in order to compete you have to express your differences through an idiom of beauty defined by those who already dominate the system.

To stretch the game metaphor in a slightly different direction, it is useful to distinguish between frontstage and backstage. On the front we have different kinds of histories, different interpretations of events, and a variety of ideas about who are the real heroes and villains, who should count as a major character and who is playing a bit part. In the backstage arena we have an entire toolkit of scripts, plans, conventions and specialized professionals who work together to stage the play. So far, I would suggest, most of our efforts have been about admitting a more diverse group of people to the stage, rather than opening up the production process. If people are no longer willing to sit and watch, or get jobs as actors, at a certain point they are likely to get up and leave and look somewhere else, and maybe start their own theater with a different set of rules and players.

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