

Reconsidering Third Gender In the Ancient Maya World

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Fig. 1: *Naj Tunich* cave (point out person in cave)

In 1979, Maya scholarship was forever changed. The rediscovery of the ceremonial cave *Naj Tunich* – which means “stone house” in Mopan Mayan– brought us compelling images of gender in the Classic Maya world that are over 1,500 years old.

Fig. 2: Maya world map

The Maya are from a cultural region known as Mesoamerica, running from central to southern Mexico, and through Belize, Guatemala, Honduras, and parts of El Salvador and Costa Rica. Around 3000 BCE Maya peoples began developing a network of city-states with complex writing and calendar systems, monumental sculpture and architecture, sophisticated mural and ceramic painting, and a cosmology focused on divine kings and a pantheon of deities. More than 6 million Maya people still live in this region today, speaking more than 29 Mayan languages.

Fig. 3: *Naj* figures

The *Naj Tunich* cave images date to the Maya Classic Period around 700 CE and were drawn by the same scribes and painters working in the royal courts of the Maya city-states. The *Naj Tunich* drawings depict clearly identified gendered bodies, but also include this never before seen¹ erotic encounter between a male and an androgynous figure. Let’s look at these two figures: one of them is male and has an erect penis; the other figure's gender is ambiguous. Some scholars have interpreted this as a homoerotic

¹ UNESCO World Heritage Centre. "The Caves of Naj Tunich." UNESCO World Heritage Centre. April 27, 2012. Accessed January 23, 2017. <http://whc.unesco.org/en/tentativelists/5739/>.

scene; others claim the ambiguous figure is a woman². Though that's not where the discussion ends. I will argue that this remarkable image depicts neither male nor female bodies, but rather a third gender. My argument is based in part on archaeologist Rosemary Joyce's groundbreaking work on sex and gender in ancient Mesoamerica. She has noted that Mesoamerican art contains images of figures that question whether in Maya art and culture there "are only ever two natural, dichotomous sexes defined by reproductive roles"³. I suggest these figures could represent a third gender in both ritual and social roles.⁴

A third gender does not exist in contrast to the other two, but rather, in parallel. The third gender, evidenced in the art of the Maya, contains aspects of binary male and female genders coming together to create a new, third identity.

Fig. 4: Female figure

Joyce's identification of a third gender is significant for the identification of the *Naj Tunich* figures as neither male nor female, because the Maya had very specific ideas about how the human body should be gendered in art. Although there are images of women with their breasts displayed, women are usually fully covered by huipils; woven, tailored, blouses or dresses.

Fig. 5 and Fig. 6: side-by-side comparison of Maya male and female figures

² Joyce, Rosemary A. *Ancient Bodies, Ancient Lives: Sex, Gender, and Archaeology*. pp. 96-99;103-106. New York: Thames & Hudson, 2008.

³ Joyce. *Ancient Bodies, Ancient Lives: Sex, Gender, and Archaeology*. pp. 91

⁴ Stockett, Miranda K.. 2005. "On the Importance of Difference: Re-envisioning Sex and Gender in Ancient Mesoamerica". *World Archaeology* 37 (4). Taylor & Francis, Ltd.: 566-78. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40025092>

Men, on the other hand, often display their torsos and legs, and were otherwise extravagantly adorned⁵. Full nudity is very rare, if almost impossible to find, in ancient Maya art. Therefore the nude figures in *Naj Tunich* are exceptional in the corpus of Maya art and deserve further analysis.

Until the discovery at *Naj Tunich*, scholars believed that third gender in the ancient Maya world was expressed through elites performing gender in religious rituals. According to art historian Matthew Looper, art found at Classic Period cities such as Yaxchilan and Palenque support the claim of the third gender. He states that images of rulers dressing in costumes that were traditionally made for the opposite gender “evoke a third gender status embodied by the Maize god and the Moon goddess”⁶.

Fig. 6: Pakal as the Maize God

According to art historian Karl Taube, the Maize god is often depicted wearing a netted skirt that is also associated with the female deity, the Moon goddess⁷. This sharing of what according to Rosemary Joyce⁸, is traditionally a female costume, can be used to suggest a link between the two gods, including the transition of the Maize deity from a female figure to a male one; or perhaps even gender fluidity in Maya society.

Fig. 7 and 8: Maize God and Moon Goddess

Furthermore, if people are created from corn as told in the Maya creation narrative the

⁵ Joyce, Rosemary A. *Ancient Bodies, Ancient Lives: Sex, Gender, and Archaeology*.

⁶ Stockett, Miranda K.

⁷ Taube, Karl. *The Major Gods of Ancient Yucatan*. Dumbarton Oaks, Washington D.C. 1992.

⁸ Joyce, Rosemary. “Images of Gender and Labor Organization in Classic Maya Society” in *Exploring Gender through Archaeology*, edited by C. Claessen. Monographs in World Archaeology 11. Prehistory Press, Madison. 1992

Popol Vuh, and the Maize god has been depicted as both male and female, then we are seeing the first instances of how ambiguous gender can be in Maya elite ritual and perhaps in Maya society in general. Therefore I ask if Maya society was centered on the worship of a deity blending aspects of the male and female genders, can we consider this to be a third gender?

Fig. 9: Male figurine bloodletting

Maya King and Queens called upon cosmic power through bloodletting. Bloodletting in Mesoamerica is the ritualized self-cutting or piercing of one's own body. Kings practiced bloodletting by taking stingray spines and piercing their foreskins. Miranda Stockett sees this as kings mimicking female menstruation to appropriate female powers of fertility and procreation. Stockett, Rosemary Joyce, and other scholars have written about kings and queens cross-dressing to express cosmic duality. Beyond just dressing to assume the roles of gods and goddesses that fit their biological sex, elites took the roles of deities of the opposite sex⁹. These were not simply acts of cross-dressing performance therefore, but rather blurred the lines of gender in order to assume the power of the third gender exemplified by the Maize god.

Fig. 10: Lintel 24

An example of an elite embodying a deity of the opposite gender can be seen when Lady K'abal Xook, queen consort of Yaxchilan from 681 – 742 CE, and one of the

⁹ Stockett, Miranda K.. 2005. "On the Importance of Difference: Re-envisioning Sex and Gender in Ancient Mesoamerica". *World Archaeology* 37 (4). Taylor & Francis, Ltd.: 566-78. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40025092>

most powerful and prominent women of the ancient Maya world, wears the headdress of the male Maize god on Lintel 24. Lintel 24 depicts Lady Xoc kneeling before her husband Itzamnaaj Bahlam III (Lord Shield Jaguar) assuming the role of the male Maize god as she partakes in bloodletting¹⁰ by pulling an obsidian barbed rope through her tongue, bleeding upon a piece of fig bark paper that will be burned as food for the gods. This ritual, held in 709 CE, blessed the accession of Shield Jaguar to the throne of Yaxchilan, and used the iconography of the male Maize god on a female body to accomplish it. Is this an expression of a third gender through ritual performance?

Fig. 11: Lintel 26

Lady Xoc of Yaxchilan once again assumes the role of a deity as gender performance on Lintel 26, when during pre-war ritual she is depicted in the role of the Maize god or Moon goddess¹¹. In a scene involving her husband Shield Jaguar, Lady Xoc assists him getting dressed for war. But rather than wearing a typical female headdress, Lady Xoc is wearing a headdress that art historian Carolyn Tate claims is reserved for Maya kings¹². Has Lady Xoc presented herself as a third gender in these scenes codifying Yaxchilan power?

Fig. 12 and 13: Netted skirt

¹⁰ Hughs, Barbara A.. "It's Good to be Queen": The Role of Maya Women in Ritual Practices." Paper presented at the 2008 Chac Mool Conference, University of Calgary, Calgary, Canada. 2008.

¹¹ Hughs, Barbara A.. "It's Good to be Queen": The Role of Maya Women in Ritual Practices." Paper presented at the 2008 Chac Mool Conference, University of Calgary, Calgary, Canada. 2008.

¹² Hughs, Barbara A.. "It's Good to be Queen": The Role of Maya Women in Ritual Practices." Paper presented at the 2008 Chac Mool Conference, University of Calgary, Calgary, Canada. 2008.

Another example of elite clothing that may express a third gender is a netted skirt that once was believed to be only associated with women. At the Classic Period city site of Copan, however, the king 18 Rabbit is seen wearing this netted skirt, as are both men and women in the art of Classic Period Palenque. To wear a gender-neutral skirt is interesting, given that the Maya had very gendered costumes. Female costumes had elaborate woven textiles that were decorated on a horizontal surface, while men's costumes "employed a wide range of products from the forest, notably animal skins and skulls"¹³ and were orientated more vertically. Today this netted skirt is associated with the iconography of the Maize god¹⁴, once again supporting the idea of a third, more fluid gender. Rosemary Joyce also suggests that male and female costumes were meant to be worn together to act as complementary parts¹⁵. This suggests the importance of expressing conjoined male and female aspects through participation in rituals, and also once again raises the possibility of a third gender.

Fig. 14: Princeton Vase

The elite and ruling class had many responsibilities, as their art suggests. They were in charge of inter-city-state relations, leading rituals and sacrifices, and were scribes and calendar specialists, among other sacred and secular roles. Maya courtly life has been depicted on murals, vase painting, stelae and other sculpture, and in glyphic texts, almost all of which was created by elite and highly trained scribes and artists. From present

¹³ Joyce, Rosemary. "Negotiating Sex and Gender in Classic Maya Society" in *Gender in Pre-Hispanic America: A Symposium at Dumbarton Oaks, 12 and 13 October 1996*. Edited by Cecelia F. Klein and Jeffrey Quilter. Washington, D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection. 2001. Accessed April 11, 2016. dio.doaks.org

¹⁴ Taube, Karl. *The Major Gods of Ancient Yucatan*. Dumbarton Oaks, Washington D.C. 1992.

¹⁵ Joyce, Rosemary. "Negotiating Sex and Gender in Classic Maya Society"

evidence, there may have been both male and female scribes. On the well-known Princeton Vase though, the scribes do not depict themselves as definably male or female, but rather as rabbits – which have a connection to the Moon goddess. As we have seen, the Moon goddess might well be an expression of the Maize god. Thus depicting the scribe as a rabbit could be a way to keep the field of scribes equally representative of all genders, or may serve as a symbol representing scribes themselves as a third gender.

Fig. 15: Rabbit close up

If the image from *Naj Tunich* discussed at the beginning of this paper is indeed that of a third gender encounter, and moreover was painted by scribes who depicted themselves and other elites in third gender roles in rituals, then perhaps a third gender in the Maya Classic Period wasn't just seen in performance or drawn on walls and ceramic vessels, but rather was also an actual social identity.

Fig. 16: *Naj Tunich* figures

In conclusion, research surrounding *Naj Tunich*'s controversial image, and the many images of gender expression in the art and society of the Maya Classic Period is in its infancy. Nonetheless, the image found in *Naj Tunich* cave has offered a new way to examine third gender in the Classic Maya world. From what were once thought to be ritual performances of gender cross-dressing, as seen with Maya rulers like Lady Xoc, third gender as a social category of person beyond royal ceremonies can now be posited and explored. Thanks to the scribes of the ancient Maya – who have already given us

infinite amount information about their time and place – we can further complicate gender stereotypes and create space for those who identify as neither male nor female.

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Illustrations

Fig. 1: Clark, Chip, and Jennifer Clark. *Entrance hall as seen from the Balcony*.

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Fig. 2: Map of Maya Caves, Cartography Services. *Image from the*

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Fig. 3: *Drawing 18*. Classic or Post Classic period. Naj Tunich. *Image from the*

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Fig. 4: Panel of a Woman with God K (K'awil). 600-800 AD. El Coya. *Blood of Kings:*

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Fig. 7: Sarcophagus Lid of Pakal. 684 CE. Palenque.

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Fig. 8: *Maize god*. Postclassic. University of Virginia Art Museum, Virginia. In *The Maya Book of the Dead: The Ceramic Codex*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Art Museum, 1981.

Fig. 9: Moon goddess. 650-850 CE. University of Virginia Art Museum, Virginia. In *The Maya Book of the Dead: The Ceramic Codex*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Art Museum, 1981.

Fig. 10: *Figurine bloodletting*. 600-800. American Museum of Natural History, New York. In *The Blood of Kings: Dynasty and Ritual in Maya Art*. Linda Schele and Mary Ellen Miller. New York: George Braziller, Inc, 1986. Page 203.

Fig. 11: *Lintel 24*. 723-726. The British Museum, London. In The British Museum. Accessed February 8, 2017.

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Fig. 17: *Drawing 18*. Classic or Post Classic period. Naj Tunich. *Image from the Underworld: Naj Tunich and the Tradition of Maya Cave Painting*. Andrea Stone. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1995. Plate 12. Print

The Maya people created one of the most original and grandiose ancient civilizations in the world. Discover the history and origins of this ancient culture. The ancient Mayas did not constitute a homogeneous group, but rather a collection of ethnicities with distinct languages, customs and historic realities, but who share features which allow us to integrate them in a cultural unity. At the same time, this unity, along with other ancient civilizations of Mexico, formed a part of another greater one, the Mesoamerican culture. Ancient Maya civilization. Ancient Maya Civilization. Contents. The first book to examine how the ancient Maya defined gender. Contributors explain what it meant to be male and female. The mapping of gender roles into the public/private dichotomy places men in the public world of politics and women in the private, domestic, and, presumably nonpolitical world of the home. View. Show abstract. Feminist archaeology has prompted scholars to reconsider gender roles in ancient Mesoamerica. Current research, however, tends to focus on elite women, classes and sites. Although I do not ignore the potential of these sources, in this paper I am mainly concerned with issues such as the phenomenology of bodies and spaces, subroyal ritual actions, and daily activities such as cooking and weaving. The Maya civilization (/ÉˆmaÉˆÉ™/) was a Mesoamerican civilization developed by the Maya peoples, and noted for its logosyllabic script—the most sophisticated and highly developed writing system in pre-Columbian Americas—as well as for its art, architecture, mathematics, calendar, and astronomical system. The Maya civilization developed in an area that encompasses southeastern Mexico, all of Guatemala and Belize, and the western portions of Honduras and El Salvador. This region consists of the northern Ancient History in the New World: Integrating Oral Traditions and the Archaeological Record in Deep Time. *American Antiquity*, Vol. 65, Issue. 2, p. 267. Gougeon, Ramie A. 2017. Considering gender analogies in southeastern prehistoric archaeology. *Southeastern Archaeology*, Vol. 36, Issue. 3, p. 183. CrossRef. Google Scholar. By showing how a modern Maya myth reveals significant information about an ancient Maya site, the study illustrates the complementarity of archaeology and ethnography through a suggested relation between myth and history. Export citation Request permission. Copyright. In *Ancient Maya Art at Dumbarton Oaks*, edited by Joanne Pillsbury, Miriam Dutriaux, Reiko Ishihara-Brito, and Alexandre Tokovinine, 390–93. Washington, D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks, 2012. The Stars of the Palenque Sarcophagus. Cacao Beans and Chili Peppers: Gender Socialization in the Cosmology of a Yucatec Maya Curing Ceremony. *Sex Roles* 39 (1998): 603–42. Feldman, Lawrence H. *A Dictionary of Poqom Maya in the Colonial Era*.