Population and Social Dynamics

The Dynasties and Social Structure of Tikal

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When dealing with a complex society, whether their own, that of the Maya, or any other, scholars generally adopt one of two approaches: they look at the society from the top down, or from the bottom up. Although there are exceptions, historians, in their fascination with the doings of kings or other ruling aristocracies, have favored the "top down" approach. Anthropologists, by contrast, with their traditional interest in what is going on at the "grass roots," have tended to view things from the bottom. Ultimately, both approaches are necessary, be-

cause the interests, activities and lifestyles of governing elites are apt to differ from those of the common people. Thus, to understand a society solely in terms of what is known about its privileged classes is likely to be misleading. Equally true, though, is that the lives of people at the "grass roots" are profoundly affected by decisions made by those who hold power over them; so an understanding of the culture of "the masses" requires a reasonable understanding of elite culture as well.

If historians have often been criticized for paying insufficient attention to the "common people," so have anthropologists for ignoring those who wield power in society. From this standpoint, Maya archaeologists have been somewhat unusual among anthropologists. Until fairly recently, they paid scant attention to what was going on at the "grass roots," concentrating instead on major temples, palaces, and monuments having more to do with the affairs of ruling dynasties than with the lives of ordinary people. The Tikal Project was one of the first to devote "equal time," as it were, to the bottom as well as the top of ancient Maya society.

Thus, while researchers like William Coe, Christopher Jones, and Peter Harrison added immeasurably to our knowledge of "elite culture" at Tikal, through their study of monuments, royal tombs, funerary temples, and palaces, others such as myself, Marshall Becker and Dennis Paleston were providing the necessary information on culture at the "grass roots" of Tikal's society.

One would suppose that glyphs would have little to offer to the study of the lower classes. After all, a main concern of Maya writing was with "dynamite bombast," as rulers...
sought to justify their right to office through descent from previous rulers, to glorify themselves through the assumption of grandiose titles, and to link events in their reigns with important astro- nomical events. Thus, as we began our investigations of Tikal's rank and file, we thought little of hieroglyphic inscriptions, concentrating instead on extensive mapping, excavation of burials and adjacent structures such as family shrines in virtually all parts of the city and beyond, the investigation of associated burials, and the study of underground storage facilities, or *chultuns* (see articles in Expedition 7 [3]). As it turned out, inscriptions were important to us in ways we never expected.

**Glyphs and Social Organization**

My own awareness of the importance of hieroglyphic inscriptions for an understanding of Tikal's demography and social organization took root with Jones' identification of the three Late Classic rulers A, B, and C, and of the tomb beneath Temple 1 (Fig. 1) as that of Ruler A (see Expedition 6 [1] for a description of this tomb). By then, I was analyzing all the human skeletal material from the site, so I was pleased that my diagnosis of sex and age at death of tomb principals could be checked against written records. The prospects were particularly exciting in view of the poor preservation of some skeletons, for which it was difficult to estimate age at death. Already, I had picked up hints of a difference in life expectancy between those buried in tombs and those placed in simpler structures, as well as clear indications that tomb principals were generally taller than other males who lived at Tikal. Both differences are expectable in class structured societies, and the opportunity to achieve greater assurance about the apparent age differential was something of a windfall.

Another hypothesis developed out of our work on burials was that of a strong patrilineal emphasis at Tikal. Not only were males invariably the subjects of the royal tombs in Classic times (AD. 250-880), but in other burials, males were usually more richly supplied with pottery vessels than were females, and their graves were more likely to be placed in favored locations, as on the center lines of shrines or in house platforms. Thus, glyphic evidence for patrilineal succession to rulership was welcome confirmation of our thinking.

Further involvement with the glyphs came with work in a group of structures 1/4 km south of Tikal's Great Plaza. This Group 7F-1 was the site of the University Museum's first excavations by Coe and Broman in 1967, with later work by Becker in 1969 and myself two years later. What attracted Coe and Broman's attention was the presence of Stela 23, on which they
Ruling Dynasty*  
Group 7F-1

Jaguar Head Shell  
Buried in 9.12.10.0.0 (A.D. 527)  
and later on St. 7, 35, 27, 405 (A.D. 57-58).  
from Sr. 370.  

Animal Shell  
Buried in 9.12.10.0.0 (A.D. 527)  
and also at Sr. 370.  

Woman of Tikal  
from 9.12.10.0.0 (A.D. 527)  
and earlier on St. 7.  

Double Bird  
Buried in 9.1.2.0.0 (A.D. 457, 527).  

* Modified from Jones (1983).

Dyamic Reconstruction

When attempting to write up the final report on Group 7F-1, I found myself at a loss to account for the presence of the tomb and monuments, although that it was some sort of elite residential group seemed clear. It was at this point that one of my colleagues, R. Goggin pointed out the connection of the tomb, as well as the burial with the carved bone in it, with Tikal's ruling dynasty. She further suggested that the man in the tomb was the one portrayed on Stela 23, and husband to the Woman of Tikal - Woman of Tikal - Woman of Tikal - Woman of Tikal - Woman of Tikal.

6. Heliographical genealogy of the people buried in Group 7F-1, and their relationships to members of Tikal's ruling dynasty. In the diagram, men are represented by triangles (ruled rulers), women by circles, vertical lines indicate descent, horizontal lines siblings, relationship, and equal signs (==) a maternal tie. The youth in Bu. 132, who probably died ca. age 20, could have several two sons, or a couple of consanguinall marriages in Tikal in times past, which were found by the two children by the time they were 20.

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Jaguar Head Shell  
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also the name of Kan Boar’s mother. What we seem to have here are all the ingredients of political intrigue: a younger half-brother of Kan Boar (same mother, different father) who is a pretender to the throne after the death of Kan Boar. Late in life, either he had Kan Boar’s successor assassinated, or he took advantage of Jaguar Paw Skull’s natural death and the youth of that ruler’s legitimate successor to seize power himself, banishing his rival from the center of power. Being well along in years, he ruled for no more than a decade before he died, whereas Double Bird was able to restore the rightful line of succession until a later dynastic upset occurred.

"Glyphic evidence has permitted the reconstruction of dynastic genealogies.”

The Lower Classes

The reader may be wondering how all this relates to the “grass roots” of Tikal’s society. The answer is: it provides us with a model to test against data from lower class residential situations. Glyphic evidence has permitted the reconstruction of dynastic genealogies to which the sequence of royal tombs can be related. Glyphic evidence has also assisted in the construction of a plausible, if hypothetical genealogy for the occupants of the burials in Group 7F-1. The same conjunction of burials with periodic architectural alterations is seen, though on a far simpler scale, in lower class residential groups (identified as such on the basis of architectural contracts with upper class houses, simplicity of associated burials, and lack of exotic or material belongings in general other than those of obvious “everyday” utility). In lower class households, where we have adequate control of construction sequence, and where we have recovered most, if not all, of the male burials present, it is possible to generate genealogies which are consistent with age at death of the individuals involved, which are consistent with the dating for the burials and contemporaneous structural renovations, and which do not violate to demographic expectations with respect to such factors as age at marriage, reasonable age at birth of offspring, and the like. (Figures 7–12 present such a reconstruction for one non-elite household at Tikal, showing its probable developmental cycle through time.) What we seem to have at the “grass roots” of Tikal society is a sealed-down version of patterns seen among the privileged classes.

Yet though this all seems to be, I feel compelled to end on a note of caution. It has to do with a well-known and widespread phenomenon: the practice of reconstructing history to suit the purposes of those holding power. What is written is official, and what the holders of power do not want known, they suppress or even destroy. My sensitivity to this issue stems from my work on northern New England ethnohistory, where I have seen how the Puritan forefathers adapted truth to their purposes in their writings. Closer to the Classic Maya in time and space is the rewriting or Arzoc history in the reign of Itzam. At Tikal, there were certainly times when dynastic records were “erased” by breaking monuments in half, gouging out whole inscriptions, and mutilating faces. It should not be forgotten that the purpose of inscriptions was aggrandizement of the rulers—perhaps to an impossible extent. It should therefore be a concern in the future to determine how much and how often the Maya altered facts, to make them conform to political expectations.