

# TIME, MEMORY, AND RESILIENCE AMONG THE MAYA

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*The conservative transmission of cultural form is particularly likely where people are exposed constantly to highly visible examples of material objects invested with authoritative credibility.*  
(Michael Rowlands 1993: 142)

*Collapse, far from being an anomaly... presents in dramatic form not the end of social institutions, but almost always the beginning of new ones...*  
(Shmuel N. Eisenstadt 1988: 243)

## Introduction

The lowland Maya are commonly thought to have experienced several collapses during the more than 1,500 years of their civilization's existence. Maya scholars and the general public alike have been especially captivated by notions of the "mysterious Maya" and their Classic civilization evolving in the tropical forests, followed by their even more mysterious ninth-century "collapse" and Postclassic "decadence." Although certain institutions and practices ended, and many cities were abandoned through the centuries, overall there is more support for Maya cultural survival and regeneration — albeit with significant transformations — as opposed to collapse. Nonetheless, the idea of cultural resilience — of business as usual — fails to capture the collective imagination in comparison to romantic images of a vibrant civilization inexplicably succumbing to ruination in the steamy tropical jungles of Guatemala.

Civilizational resilience, and particularly the millennia of Maya resilience, deserve more investigation, however, and time and memory play key roles in such cultural continuities. Here I discuss three examples: (1) the role of the cycling of time and its passage through Maya calendars, particularly the twenty-year periods known as k'atun; (2) the role of memory in Postclassic architecture in the Petén lakes region; and (3) the persistence of some long-standing symbols of Classic rulership and dynastic authority.

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## Collapse, Resilience, and Regeneration

The notion of societal downfall has a certain macabre, voyeuristic mystique: as with observing the aftermath of natural disasters, we reassure ourselves that although the unpredictable forces of Evil struck Them, We're doing just fine. The simplicity and finality of the word "collapse" makes it an appealing quickie "sound-bite" explanation for the complex and poorly understood phenomena of the decline of a civilization.

But civilizations are complicated entities. Just as their rises had multiple causes, so do their demises. Civilizations are spatially and demographically large, territorially based entities with intricate and usually hierarchically segmented social, economic, and political organization. However, a civilization is generally also recognized by a set of religious and ideological manifestations — often called a "great tradition" — that underwrites its power and is publicly displayed in programs of art and architecture. Because of the complex constructions of these internal organizational systems, the latent possibility of their failure is always inherent within them (Eisenstadt 1988: 242). Collapses can be caused by any number of internal or external mechanisms and forces or stresses, typically in a system-wide cascade.

The idea of collapse of a society or a civilization carries multiple, non-exclusive meanings in political, demographic, and social realms. *Political* collapse refers to the loss of power and authority of the political leadership of the state, that is, the integrity of social, political, and economic institutions of power, authority, and decision-making. Norman Yoffee (2006: 222) refers to this as the "end of a particular form of government," rather than the disappearance or extinction of a civilization. *Demographic* collapse involves abandonment and depopulation through mass death and/or emigration: the loss of commoners and workers who labor to provide food and shelter. *Elite* collapse is the "top-down" failure of the elites and their institutions to maintain societal production and re-production, and social order. A related process involves the loss of salient cultural traditions or great traditions: the religious and ideological belief systems and charters underwriting social and political order that are carried by the literati. And another concept is *devolution*: the movement from something complex, large, and stable, to something simpler, smaller, and unstable (for example, urban cities "collapsing" to small rural villages).

Most of these are top-down, elite-based explanations. But are the "little traditions" of commoners — perhaps household or milpa rituals to assure social reproduction through human and agricultural fecundity — not embraced by what is considered a "civilization," and does their survival not count? A better definition of collapse might be multifaceted — such as, "the end of a social order and its people" (McAnany and Yoffee 2010: 11) — but this too is problematic. Could a particular formulation of social order "end" with the concurrent demise of its people? More saliently, how does one define "end" archaeologically? Where does one draw arbitrary lines across scalar processes of change, such as a "decline" of something through time, so as to demarcate a final collapse or to distinguish a brief hiatus from termination? None of this equivocation is to ignore the reality that the Maya did experience severe crises over the millennia, including environmental degradation, demographic shifts, and significant transformations in leadership institutions (the end of certain "social orders"). But, as Yoffee and Cowgill (1988; see also Eisenstadt 1988: 242) have noted, it is actually rare that any civilizational collapse involves total abandonment or complete disappearance of a great tradition.

More to the point in such discussions are the apparent cycles of rise and fall in societies' histories in various areas of the world (e.g. Anderson 1994; Marcus 1993; Yoffee 1979). If such cycles exist, archaeologists and historians must try to explain not only what brings about the declines, but also what underlies the recoveries (Schwartz and Nichols 2006). Three interrelated concepts are important here: resilience, regeneration, and survival.

*Resilience* can be defined in several ways. One refers to the ability to recover from stresses and adversity, or to adapt to changed circumstances; a second refers to the "ability of a system to absorb disturbance and still retain its basic function and structure" (McAnany and Yoffee 2010: 10). Closely related to, or an outgrowth of, resilience, the notion of *regeneration* is often framed in terms of cycles of centralization and decentralization: it refers to the "reappearance of societal complexity . . . after

periods of decentralization, but not to the reappearance of *specific* complex societies” (Schwartz 2006: 7, emphasis in original). The *survival* of “pre-collapse institutions” is the critical point here. The persistence of these institutions, whether social, political, economic, or ideological, is key to resilience and regeneration after “collapse,” however defined. Survival may often occur through the continuity of “lower-level administrative units or personnel” (Schwartz 2006: 10; Yoffee 2006: 223).

Returning to the lowland Maya case specifically, we can note at least three episodes of major transformation, decline, or seeming collapse (in the sense of an ending/abandonment) in pre-Hispanic times. The first occurred at the end of the Late Preclassic period, with the decline of large cities such as El Mirador and Cerros. The second and most (in)famous occurred at the end of the Late Classic period in the southern lowlands, marked by the disappearance of the institution of *k’uhul ajawlel* (divine or sacred kingship) and related phenomena (associated royal mortuary ritual, the “stela cult,” etc.). The third instance, similar to the second, supposedly occurred in the northern lowlands around AD 1100-1200, after the fall of Chichen Itzá (Sabloff and Andrews 1986; cf. Milbrath and Peraza Lope 2009; Sabloff 2007).

Through these vicissitudes, however, many aspects of lowland Maya civilization did not collapse. One of the most striking of these is language: millions of people in eastern Mesoamerica still speak thirty-some Mayan languages in the twenty-first century. A few of these languages have disappeared (e.g. Ch’olti’) and others, such as Itzaj, have come perilously close to extinction, but the contemporary Maya themselves are working to salvage these linguistic legacies. Another example of continuity is seen in the role of time in underwriting legitimate rulership and cosmo-political order. This is evident in great-tradition k’atun celebrations (and in naming Lords of K’atun), which endured from the Classic period through the Postclassic and into the nineteenth century (Edmonson 1986: 46), as attested in the *Books of Chilam Balam*. Related to this, Maya calendars were maintained for millennia: Long Count and k’atun celebrations continued through the Postclassic period at Mayapán. The widespread and perduring Mesoamerican 260-day calendar was maintained as a “little tradition” used by Maya diviners and daykeepers in some highland areas into the late twentieth century. Additional continuities can be identified in certain symbols of kingly power, such as the manikin scepter and God K/K’awiil as patron of k’atun.

In sum, the ancient lowland Maya civilization allegedly experienced three collapses in pre-Hispanic times, yet archaeologists, anthropologists, historians, and linguists recognize Maya cultural persistence and trace Maya culture as a definite entity through the sixteenth century and later. I consider the continuities evident in language, time concepts, calendars, and symbols of legitimate lordship to be evidence of, and keys to Maya resilience, regeneration, and survival.

## Time and Calendars

Building on Nancy Farriss’s (1987: 574) assertion that time represented cosmic order in Mesoamerica, I (Rice 2007, 2008) argued that the foundation of social order and political power among the Classic Maya was promulgated by the illusion that kings “controlled” that cosmic order by celebrating and “controlling” time. Using cross-cultural ethnographic analogies, I proposed that meteorological time-reckoning in what is now Mesoamerica might have begun five thousand or so years ago, with shamans developing special abilities to “read” the skies and learn the patterns of seasonal weather changes and the movements of celestial bodies.<sup>1</sup> Salient points include the fact that the names of the twenty days in the 260-day calendars throughout this culture area were drawn from nature: rain/storm, grass/reeds, earth, crocodile, snake, wind, death, sun, and so on. Day-names were shared — and often occurred in the same order — in Mesoamerica’s numerous calendars (Edmonson 1988: 169). This suggests the likelihood that the Mesoamerican calendars were developed well before the differentiation of

<sup>1</sup> It is only relatively recently known that the Plains Indians of North America maintained records of winter weather in “texts” of pictograms on buffalo skins (Therrell and Trotter 2011). Such a practice might be very ancient there and elsewhere in the world.

languages and cultural traditions (Oaxaca, Gulf coast) in the Early Preclassic/Formative period.

The illusion of controlling time and the cosmos was made possible by the shamans' (or other ritual specialists') early development of multiple calendars based on the apparent movements of celestial bodies. Of particular interest were the cyclical movements of the sun, the moon, and Venus tracing paths in the sky or on the earth's horizon from one point to another, then eventually back to the origin. Understanding these cycles permitted not only various measurements of time and its passage, but also prediction of inflection or intersection points in these paths — such as the occurrence of eclipses and solstices — as well as the coming of the rains and so on. Cycling underlies myriad aspects of life and time in Mesoamerican worldview, especially cycles of death followed by rebirth.

Cyclical time was tracked internally within linear time. Among the Maya, the key is the Long Count: a tally of days beginning in mid-August of 3114 BC. This was almost certainly a retrospective start date, not the actual date of invention of the Long Count. To keep the Long Count, days were counted in “bundles” that were primarily multiples of 20, such as the k'atun (or *winikhaab'*, 20 “years” of 360 days, or 7,200 days total) and b'ak'tun (20 k'atun or 144,000 days; approximately 400 solar years). Although the Long Count was a register of linear time, beginning more than 5,000 years ago, these bundles of days cycled recursively in the Long Count. Thus there were 13 b'ak'tun in the present era: the Preclassic began in very late B'ak'tun 6; the Late Classic period ended at the end of B'ak'tun 9.

Rulers publicly proclaimed their “control” of time and cosmic order to their subjects in multiple ways, for example by asserting their dynastic connections to gods and ancestors, displaying symbols of time in their regalia, and performing familiar rituals at designated calendrical intervals. The period known as the k'atun/*winikhaab'* is of particular interest. The Maya identified a k'atun by the name of its final day, always a day Ajaw, combined with a numerical prefix (e.g. K'atun 8 Ajaw). The completion of full twenty-year k'atun or their five-year quarters were regularly celebrated by rulers in what Mayanists call “Period-Ending” (hereafter PE) ceremonies. These calendrical rituals and the rulers' associated performances, including the enigmatic “scattering” rite and dancing, were publicly attested by texts and images on Classic-period carved stelae. Textual records of PE celebrations begin to appear in the Early Classic period, but it is not unlikely that the actual ritual practice began significantly earlier in the Formative/Preclassic, especially if the two main Maya calendars originated as early as I think they did.

PE celebrations are particularly well known from Tikal. David Stuart's (2011) reading of Tikal Stela 31 makes reference to three early k'atun celebrations. One occurred at 8.14.0.0.0 (completion of the fourteenth k'atun in B'ak'tun 8, a K'atun 7 Ajaw in AD 317), but no monument from this date is known. Two PEs were celebrated even earlier, at least as early as 8.13.0.0.0, AD 297, and possibly even before that. The best known examples of PE commemorations are the Late Classic twin-pyramid complexes at Tikal. Long Count dates continued to be carved on monuments through the early tenth century, the latest occurring in 909 or 10.4.0.0.0.

But k'atun and the Long Count were not forgotten in the Postclassic period. At Late Postclassic Mayapán, informants told Bishop Landa in the sixteenth century that the residents had erected carved stones every twenty years (in Tozzer 1941: 38-39) — in other words, the Classic stela cult was reinvigorated long after its Classic abandonment. K'atun also structured the recording of the history of various polities in the Postclassic period. For example, the “prophetic histories” in the *Books of Chilam Balam* from northern Yucatán consist of k'atun-by-k'atun synopses prepared by the priests of these intervals. In the *Paris Codex* ten pages were devoted to the Lords of the K'atun and associated rituals (Love 1994). And the Long Count continued to be used into the early seventeenth century: the *Book of Chilam Balam of Chumayel* refers to a date of 11.17.0.0.0 (1559), beginning a K'atun 9 Ajaw (this is found in the section on “The count of the Katun”). Munro Edmonson claims the Xiw in Merida celebrated the b'ak'tun ending in 1618 (1985, 1986: 9-10, 44).

## Memory: The Central Petén Postclassic

I have been drawn to the role of cultural memory through the projects that Don Rice and I directed in the Petén lakes district, named by a series of lakes formed in a fault line along roughly 17° north latitude. Several large Classic-period sites existed in these lake basins and, like most of the southern lowlands, the region experienced a population decline during the Terminal Classic. Nonetheless, we know from early Spanish accounts — for example that of Hernán Cortés, who passed through the lakes area in 1525 — that substantial populations lived in the region. This gives the lie to the idea that central Petén was completely (or forever) depopulated after the Classic period. But who were these residents?

In the early 1970s, Don and I began working as graduate students with a historical ecology research project in the easternmost pair of these lakes: Yaxhá and Sacnab. The project director, ecologist Dr. Edward S. Deevey, Jr., was interested in assessing the impact of an urban population — the Classic city of Yaxhá — on a tropical lacustrine environment. Through archaeological and limnological analyses, we reached several conclusions that affirmed the resilience of the Maya people occupying the Lake Yaxhá basin and of the environment itself. One finding was that exponential population growth at the site of Yaxhá, from the Middle Preclassic period through the Terminal Classic, resulted in massive sedimentation into the lake and a dangerous change in productivity in the lake waters called eutrophication (overgrowth of algae causing a decline in oxygen). But the lake recovered (Rice and Rice 1984; Rice, Rice and Deevey 1983). A second finding was that although population declined in the Terminal Classic period, Postclassic settlement in the lake basin was reorganized on the Topoxté Islands.

Over the next decade these archaeological and ecological investigations continued, moving westward to Lakes Macanché and Salpetén, Quexil and Petenxil, Petén Itzá, and Sacpuy (for an overview, see Rice and Rice 2007). As we moved from lake to lake, we found much the same thing in the other basins. Populations declined at the end of the Classic period but continuity was re-established through a Postclassic settlement focus not on the mainland but rather on the lakes' easily defended islands and peninsulas. In this pattern, settlers essentially recapitulated the lakes district's initial occupation in the Middle Preclassic.

We also recognized significant differences in Postclassic pottery assemblages and architecture between the eastern lakes and the western lakes, only making sense of them when we began collaborations with ethnohistorian Grant Jones. His studies revealed that, at the time of Spanish contact and conquest from the early sixteenth through the late seventeenth centuries, the region was occupied by two groups. In the west were the Itza, well known historically albeit not archaeologically; in the east were the poorly known Kowoj. And the two were engaged in civil war (Jones 1998).

The site of Zacpetén, occupying a small peninsula in Lake Salpetén, has two distinctive architectural complexes known as temple assemblages, Group A and Group C, which closely mimic those of Mayapán. Various kinds of data led us to conclude that Zacpetén was specifically a Kowoj site (Rice and Rice eds. 2009). For example, in the late sixteenth century the Kowoj in the eastern lakes region told a Spanish officer that they had migrated to Petén from Mayapán. We suspect that there were a series of such migrations, perhaps going back to the fourteenth century. We also suspected that the Kowoj were related to the Xiw in Yucatán, perhaps biologically or only through alliance. The Xiw were traditional enemies of the Itza.

Through fieldwork directed by Timothy Pugh (2001, 2003), it became apparent that the Kowoj, by building temple assemblages at Zacpetén, were recreating the sacred landscape of the built environment at Mayapán. Furthermore, the Kowoj who migrated from Mayapán to the eastern Petén lakes area may have been returning to an ancestral homeland. In constructing their temple assemblages, they gave voice to memories of earlier Classic-period life on the peninsula. For example, the foundation alignments of certain Postclassic buildings were perfectly oriented to the underlying walls of Classic buildings; dressed stones from Classic structures were incorporated into the facades of Late Postclassic structures; and Late and Terminal Classic carved monuments were embedded into

the highly visible facades of the platforms of two buildings in one of the twin-pyramid groups. Pugh (personal communication, 2011) has noted some of the same phenomena in his recent excavations at the Itza-occupied site of Tayasal to the west... and there we *know* the Itza were returning to a homeland on the western shores of Lake Petén Itza.<sup>2</sup>

Terminal Classic Altar 1, which had been broken in half, was reset in the Group A temple assemblage at Zacpetén. Stuart (2009) interpreted its quincunx design and text as having cosmological implications, the latter referring to the birth or rebirth of the sun on the winter solstice. He (Stuart 2009: 324) sees it as a “text version” of the iconography on Pakal’s sarcophagus lid at Palenque.

Classic carved monuments were signposts, mnemonic devices strategically placed in the sacred landscape of temples and palaces. For Classic and later Postclassic peoples alike, they were indelible reminders of rituals carried out by rulers to ensure the continuity of the cosmos. The embedding of these monuments into the exteriors of Postclassic structures, where they were obviously intended to be seen, means that Zacpetén’s past was “literally built into Late Postclassic architecture” (Pugh and Rice 2009: 172; for parallels at Mayapán, see Milbrath and Peraza Lope 2009). By this action, the Kowoj immigrants consciously “appropriated the sacred power of earlier Classic groups to symbolically integrate themselves into Zacpetén and its past” (Pugh and Rice 2009: 172). Thus, these embedded monuments and stones represented a strong statement of authenticity for the immigrants: they were literal incorporations of backing by the power of ancestors. And for archaeologists, they make a strong statement of cultural continuity between Classic and Postclassic.

In other words, complex society in the Petén lakes region was regenerated in the Postclassic by way of in-migrations from the north and the reproduction of ancient sacred landscapes and monuments. Both the Itza at Tayasal and the Kowoj at Zacpetén appear to have proclaimed their temporally distant but spatially proximate local connections through the display of Classic stelae. They also advertised their more temporally recent but spatially distant connections through the construction of ceremonial groups associated with Yucatán. The emphasis on local history tied the elite to ancient ancestors, while the monumentalization of distant ties evoked the deeds of more recent ancestors. These displays were part of a conservatism associated with continuation of a politico-religious ideology that emphasized a ruler’s obligations to sustain cosmic and earthly life through proper rituals, performed according to the rhythms of a calendar.

### **Continuities in Objects Linking Kingly Power and K’atun: God K**

The Classic Maya articulated their beliefs about social and cosmic order on scales and in media varying from site layouts (sacred landscapes) and architectural complexes to individual objects. Carved monuments and civic-ceremonial buildings establish appropriate theaters for asserting public statements that help reinforce cultural transmission, resilience, and history. Additional statements are registered in smaller-scale displays of portable and perishable objects (see Rowlands 1993: 150). These messages may be textual, iconographic, or performative.

Classic Maya public art focuses on portraits of ruling elites, their performances and successes in war and ritual, with emphasis on details of costuming and power-conferring regalia. As discussed elsewhere (Rice 2012), several objects of kingly power and ritual are representations of a supernatural known as K’awiil in the Classic period and personified as God K in the Postclassic. K’awiil (*k’awiił*: ‘sustenance’ in Yukateko Mayan) and God K are recognized iconographically by the head: this supernatural has a large, decorated, up-turned nose or snout, and a smoking ax, celt, cigar, mirror, or torch on the forehead or temple. God K/K’awiil is associated with storms, lightning, sky, ancestors, serpents, and the planet Jupiter (Taube 1992: 69-79). Most significantly, God K/K’awiil is the patron of royal dynasties and bloodlines (Stuart 1988), and of rulers as guarantors of cosmic sustenance for the ruled, through sacrifice and bloodletting.

<sup>2</sup> Inscriptions suggest that a group of Itza had a long history in the western lakes region going back into the Classic period (see Boot 2005). The Kowoj arrival may be as early as AD 1200.

The “manikin scepter,” a baton or short staff in the form of God K or K’awiil, is an object of kingly power. This scepter displays the characteristic head of God K, plus an elongated leg with a serpent head as the foot. The manikin scepter is grasped and displayed by Classic rulers at accession, often depicted in a dancing posture. A related object is an eccentric flint or obsidian chipped in the God K/K’awiil profile, commonly recovered archaeologically from dedicatory caches in buildings and under stelae, but rarely in tombs. Eccentric flints or other representations of God K are frequently paired with a shield, a “flint-shield” (*took’-pakal*) object that may be depicted textually and iconographically. Imagery related to Maya God K/K’awiil can be traced from the Preclassic through the Postclassic periods (in the post-conquest Xiw family tree, the ancestral ruler carries a manikin scepter; Cortez 2002), and has parallels in the central Mexican supernatural Tezcatlipoca.

It is of particular interest that in the Postclassic period, God K plays a central role in k’atun ceremonies. For example, the *Paris Codex* k’atun pages show a God K head being carried, sometimes in a bag (Love 1994), and the incorporation of the K’awiil epithet into Classic-period rulers’ titles continued into post-conquest times as names of Lords of K’atun. This raises the possibility that the Classic rulers displaying God K/K’awiil symbolism, such as manikin scepters, were Lords of K’atun seats in the cycling of centers of geopolitical organization (the “*may* system”; Rice 2004, 2012). The God K/K’awiil complex can be considered a particularly long-lived symbol of the resilience of the lowland Maya’s overarching principles of rotating, calendrically-based geopolitical organization based on cycling of k’atun, despite varied institutional constructions of the role of the human, earthly leader.

### A Maya “Ideology of Statecraft”

In discussing the Classic Maya collapse and the succeeding Postclassic period, Yoffee (2006: 224) commented that “[N]ew political formations, regional alliances, and regional economic interactions ensued in the Postclassic. What had collapsed were not only the Classic Maya city-states, but also the ideology supporting them. Regeneration could take place only in the drastic rearrangement of social and ideological systems.” Besides disagreeing that Classic Maya polities were city-states, I also disagree that the ideology supporting those polities “collapsed.” It is clear that change occurred in the *operational mechanics* or sociopolitical institutions through which Classic political order was maintained — that is, leadership changed from sacred kingship (*k’uhul ajawlel*) in the Classic period to an unknown system in the Early Postclassic period to councilial (“*multepal*”) government in the Late Postclassic — but I would argue that the underlying *ideology* of legitimacy did not.

What was that ideology? By “Maya ideology of statecraft” I mean a set of interrelated beliefs about, and associated practices derived from, the power relations underlying production and reproduction of social, natural, and supernatural order, and thereby underwriting leadership and decision-making. Perhaps a better term is *model*, a “model of statecraft.” The key elements in this model-cum-ideology were time and cosmic cycling: for the Maya, time was the foundation of “cosmo-political” power (Munn 1992: 109) and cosmic order (Farriss 1987: 574). That Classic Maya sacred kings often identified themselves with the sun (*k’inich*) is hardly surprising because, to the Maya, the sun embodied spatio-temporal cycling on a cosmic scale.

Time is a cultural construct. Its units of measurement, meaning, and so on are unique in terms of legitimizing power and authority (Rice 2008). For the Maya, time was simultaneously linear and cyclical, an endless — “timeless” — rotation of k’atun, b’ak’tun, and multiple eras of creation (as in the *Popol Vuh*). Time did not ever end because endings were always also beginnings, and new life always emerged from death. This continuous cycling of simultaneous endings/deaths and renewals/rebirths pertained not just to the natural world but also to the political world. Upheld by Maya rulers, priests, scribes, and astronomers, this was the operative principle underlying the Maya ideology or model of statecraft. Among the Postclassic Maya, the basic unit of political time — the “standard temporal reference framework” — was the rotational cycling of k’atun and their subunits and multiples. Earlier, the k’atun was also the basic unit for geopolitics in the Classic period (Rice 2004). This ideology was maintained for centuries, despite crises and dynastic collapses.

To facilitate maintenance and implementation of this k'atun-based ideology, Maya rulers made use of calendars. Powerful models of cosmic and sociopolitical order, calendars can be seen as instruction manual-like charters for Maya kings to aid them in pursuing internal and external affairs. As one calendrical period drew to a close, such as a k'atun or a b'ak'tun, the next one simultaneously began. Calendars registering the endless march of days and their supernatural patrons were key to cosmic continuity and to Maya resilience, regeneration, and survival.

What was important in Maya resilience and regeneration was the survival of “pre-collapse institutions,” be they social, political, economic, or ideological. The institution of *k'ubul ajaw*, or divine kingship, clearly disappeared. But as suggested, the persistence of other elements of “great traditions” in civilizations' declines may be due to the survival of lower-level or secondary elites (Schwartz 2006: 10; Yoffee 2006: 223). In the Maya lowlands, such personnel might have been *sajal*, *aj k'ubun*, or other functionaries knowledgeable in aspects of courtly administration. Such survival often leads to increased social mobility and opportunities, which is evident in the Terminal Classic period (Rice n.d.), but is beyond the concern of the present essay.

## Conclusions

We cannot deny pronounced changes in the institutions and material remains of the lowland Maya civilization, if we are comparing the Classic and Postclassic periods. These are evident in short- and long-term Maya experience and practice, irrespective of how we archaeologists in the twenty-first century perceive and choose to label them and their aftermath: as collapse, transition, transformation, disjunction and restructuring (Cohodas 1989), regeneration (Schwartz and Nichols 2006), reorganization and social boundary reconstruction (Eisenstadt 1988), or resilience (McAnany and Yoffee 2010; Redman 2005). But might there be more specific and nuanced interpretations? Is it possible that we are mislabeling — and reifying — certain *kinds* of changes in lumping everything as “collapse” rather than focusing on exactly what it was that collapsed? For example, if a decline can be identified in production or trade in exotic goods, might it be more appropriate to call it an economic recession or depression rather than a collapse? In the case of demographic declines, have abandonment processes been thoroughly considered: duration of depopulation, scavenging or recycling of goods, “re-purposing” of cities as pilgrimage destinations?

The catastrophist and apocalyptic and millenarian belief systems that underlie traditional interpretations of the Classic “collapse” (and also the idea of the end of the world in December 2012), are common tropes in western histories, particularly religious histories (see Aveni 2009). It is convenient and easy and therefore popular to take hugely complex social processes that involve human behavior, like the decline of civilizations, and reduce them to one single cause (warfare, disease, drought, etc.). But these simplistic, monocausal explanations are seriously misguided. This reductionism diminishes and dishonors the survivorship of human groups and institutions and both great and little traditions through the stresses, internal and external, natural and societal, that they invariably experience.

In studying apparent civilizational collapses, archaeologists make choices as to how to frame issues: whether to emphasize continuities and resilience or breaks and collapses, choices that might be considered “glass half-full vs. glass half-empty” viewpoints. Operationally, this comes down to selection of which cultural variables or practices on which to focus. Here I took a “glass half-full” view and highlighted the role of time and memory as keys to the resilience of the southern lowland Maya from three perspectives: calendars and cycling of time, particularly k'atun succession; Postclassic architecture in the Petén lakes region; and long-standing symbols of rulership and dynastic authority.

My focus on continuities and resilience in political ideology and its textual and iconographic manifestations privileges elite phenomena and, admittedly, Maya calendars and their workings are primarily elite phenomena, too. We still have a long way to go to understand resilience in the commoner sector. A large part of the resilience of commoners was their readiness to leave their homes in order to survive. Many Spanish-colonial officials and ethnographers commented on the

fact that, when the going got tough, the Maya got going: they headed out from urban centers deep into the forests. Similarly, with respect to the Postclassic period there are textual attestations in the *Books of Chilam Balam* that this is how the Itza of Yucatán responded to the stresses of the fall of Chichen Itzá. Such movements likely included not only commoners but also elites at various levels. These responses to sociopolitical and socioeconomic stresses are not readily visible archaeologically but, given calendrical and sociopolitical cycling, they were probably regular occurrences as various dynasties and cities rose and fell in power. Examples of such displacements likely included the partial abandonment of the eastern lake-basin mainland areas in the Terminal Classic, as well as Postclassic in-migration of Itza and Kowoj back to the lakes in response to stresses at Mayapán — migrations that we believe represent memory of, and return to their Classic homeland.

Shmuel Eisenstadt (1988: 243) noted that societies experience different kinds of “collapses” because they possess “different modes for ensuring continuity.” Time and memory — memories of places and times — were fundamental elements of Maya cultural resilience, and these socialized memories are tied to both linear and cyclical concepts of time. Over the long-term, Maya elites *chose* to emphasize these elements to ensure both social and cosmic continuities, the importance of which can only be understood in light of myths of multiple destructions of humans and the natural world. Time and calendars were part of an ideology of statecraft that was regularly proclaimed in rulers’ public displays and performances, such as scattering and dancing as part of PE celebrations, and concretized in stelae and other objects both monumental and portable. These are the “highly visible objects invested with authoritative credibility” mentioned in the epigraph, and these objects allow “direct re-engagement with past experience in ways that are prevented in language” (Rowlands 1993: 144).

The images carried by these objects are accessible to the unconscious in ways that words cannot capture (as known as, tritely, “a picture says a thousand words”). Although Maya commoners were illiterate, it has often been commented that the pictographic content of the hieroglyphs likely allowed some level of perception of the messages in the inscriptions. Similarly, the use of the distinctive bar-dot numbers and glyphs of Calendar Round dates on PE stelae, such as those in the k’atun-ending twin-pyramid assemblages at Tikal, may have been a conscious effort to make their significance more readily comprehensible to a non-literate audience.<sup>3</sup> To Postclassic peoples returning to abandoned Classic cities either as pilgrims or as new residents, the highly visible stelae on display symbolized a conservative, stable tradition and ideology focused on a ruler’s sacred duty to sustain the life-renewing cycles of the cosmos by performing proper rituals timed by several carefully constructed and maintained calendars. For the Maya, calendars were the “ritual codifications [that] structure memory in cultural transmission” (Rowlands 1993: 14).

Did the Maya civilization truly “collapse,” by any of the definitions given earlier, at any point before Spanish conquest? Answering this question is every bit as complex as defining the word, but from my perspective the answer is: No! I see demographic, political, social, and economic changes, but I also see significant evidence for continuities, resilience, regeneration, and survival derived from Maya practices rooted in a calendrically based ideology or model of statecraft. Throughout the millennia Maya actors responded actively to changing circumstances in their social and natural environments.<sup>4</sup> They transformed, restructured, and reformulated their key institutions for maintaining social and cosmic order, institutions with their ultimate foundations in temporal cycling. The salient components of this ideology were remembered over the long term, aided by writing among the literati and with visual, material cues among the commoners, and so underwrote a shared understanding of continuity

<sup>3</sup> The most obvious example of a calendar as a “highly visible object invested with authoritative credibility” is, of course, the so-called Aztec calendar stone.

<sup>4</sup> The conservatism underlying this resilience calls to mind an ideological version of “Romer’s rule”: the ecological principle that many evolutionary changes develop to allow organisms to maintain their old way of life, rather than adapt to a new one.

of political (and hence cosmic) power, order, and authority. Thus time, memory, and calendrical cycling were the basis for Maya resilience.

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