



Review Article

Alterity and domesticity: limning the ambit of ancient Maya civilisation

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CHRISTINA HALPERIN. 2023. *Foreigners among us: alterity and the making of Ancient Maya societies*. Abingdon & New York: Routledge; 978-1-03-226320-5 paperback £36.99.

TRACI ARDREN. 2023. *Everyday life in the Classic Maya world*. Cambridge & New York: Cambridge University Press; 978-1-107-68291-7 paperback £22.99.

These are, as their titles indicate, two very different Maya books: Christina Halperin's is at the hard-core end of theoretical interpretation and aimed at the professional market, while Traci Ardren's is an attempt to explain ancient Maya civilisation to a general audience. Both succeed in their basic objectives and both have annoying minor flaws.

Halperin, after a useful Introduction explaining her employment of identity studies, standpoint theory and alterity—who or what was 'foreign'—has five substantive chapters: 'Tropes of the foreigner'; 'Captive performances'; 'Cuisines'; 'Pilgrimages'; and 'Representations of Mayas'. The narrative, at just under 150 pages, is succinct, imaginatively illustrated and in a jargon-free style that belies the subtitle. There is also a very useful 40-page bibliography (with occasional errors, as risibly elsewhere in the narrative).

What we call 'Maya' culture was never a unity: it was, Halperin emphasises, riven by Otherness at all levels from the polity down through the family, across the whole region and through all periods from the ancient to the contemporary. Some of this comes through in art—a looted Classic period (AD 250–900) polychrome vase shows intentionally exotic dancers with stylistic traits commonly found in Teotihuacan hundreds of kilometres to the west (fig. 1.4)—and much in Colonial terminology.

'Tropes of the foreigner' employs both familiar concepts, such as those of the Stranger King and Stranger Queen—elite individuals who arrived in new places by marriage, militarism or migration and noted as such in hieroglyphic texts—and recently also isotopic evidence supporting such narratives: Yax K'uk Mo', founder of Copan's documented dynasty in AD 426, was found buried at the heart of the city's acropolis but the isotope analysis shows he was born far to the north, probably in Belize. The artefacts of diaspora document the movement of individuals at both elite and lower levels of Classic Maya society: vases of Teotihuacan origin accompanied Yax K'uk Mo' to the grave in AD 435, but equally telling are the asphalt-daubed spindle whorls from Veracruz that Eric Thompson found in the palace of the minor centre of San Jose in central Belize (fig. 2.9), adumbrating the distant origin of a woman in that much later household.

Halperin's book comes with a trigger warning that "this chapter [on 'Captive performances'] features images of violence and human remains" (p.50) (there is in fact just one small and murky photograph of a skull). The illustrations stem mainly from Classic period

vase painting (the pots, alas, looted and thus unable to contribute to context) and sculpture, and much of the imagery is of bound captives, some being sacrificed or otherwise humiliated. Males, some named and presumably of elite status, may be captured warriors, but the presence of females suggests both servitude and possible acquisition for their craft skills such as weaving: human capital. A tabulation (pp.66–70) of colonial Maya terms for servants, captives and slaves (the bulk of the last from very few pages in only two sources) makes the emic distinctions clear, and Halperin notes the social interpenetration that would have occurred with such control. An appended discussion of slavery in comparative historical context notes a currently fashionable topic.

Sculptures such as the bound portrayal of K'an Joy Chitam, king of Palenque in AD 711, at Tonina hint at the capture of rulers themselves (Waxaklajuun Ubaah K'awiil of Copan was in AD 738 taken and beheaded by K'ahk' Tiliw Chan Yopaat, his erstwhile vassal at Quirigua). But such captures may also have been synecdochic, the 'ruler portrait' symbolising a polity defeat. Thus a lintel in Temple I at Tikal records how the king interred there, Jasaw Chan K'awiil (ruled AD 682–734), defeated the ruler of Calakmul, Yukno'm Yich'aak K'ahk' (ruled c. AD 686–?695) in AD 695—it reads 'his flint spear and shield were brought low' but the richly stocked tomb of that self-same monarch has been found in his home city. These may be aspects of the 'battle-trial' elucidated by Barbara MacLeod and Péter Bíró as the import of the hieroglyph T78:514, "the most elusive interpersonal agency expression", a "sacred service" (MacLeod & Bíró 2023: 1–2) imposed by the gods on the ruler.

Cuisine is an often-invisible aspect of alterity, although the artefacts of food preparation may leave solid evidence. In the Maya area, the late appearance of flat ceramic *comales* indicates the introduction of *tortillas*, toasted maize cakes, perhaps from central Mexico, while spouted vessels record the early use of cacao to make a beverage. Halperin notes its function as a widespread social lubricant, along with more regional fermented drinks such as *balche'*, a form of mead found in honey-rich Yucatan, and agave-based *pulque* originating in the arid highlands of Mexico.

Some foodstuffs were also regionally concentrated: the gastropod *juté* (*Pachychilus* spp.) flourished in the rapid freshwater streams around the Maya Mountains, and provided a reliable, collectable protein complement to chancier game such as deer and peccary. Even the empty shells had ritual importance: at several sites including Lubaantun and Ucanal large deposits were associated with ball-game courts, which were prime ceremonial foci in city centres. Halperin cites a Q'eqchi' Maya informant who explained that the *juté* lived in water that flowed from caves and was "Mother Earth's sacred water" (p.95). Thus the meat was sacred and the shells retained sanctity.

In areas with still or stagnant water such as lakes, the escargot-like *Pomacea flagellata* was collected and consumed, sometimes in large quantities: at the Preclassic Maya site of Cuello we found hundreds in middens and also in possible ritual deposits. Measurement established a unimodal dimension of 38mm, an optimal size: tenderness ratio tested by gastro-experiment on a modern sample and indicating thoughtful exploitation of a natural resource.

Some foods outgrew their regional origins and became part of an "international culinary tradition" (p.100) across the whole Maya area and even much of Mesoamerica: steamed maize *tamales*, tortillas and cacao drinks made the 'foreign' domestic, perhaps by the same social processes that moved women across boundaries for marital and other political purposes.

Another cross-cutting mechanism was pilgrimage: there were places such as Chichén Itzá in northern Yucatan and the great cave of Naj Tunich on the western fringe of the Maya Mountains that have yielded epigraphic and artefactual evidence of distant domains. Some Maya rulers, including kings at Copan, Tikal and Cancuen, specify their distant voyaging—apparently even as far as Teotihuacan near modern Mexico City—as part of a rite of passage for subsequent leadership. Pilgrimages by women for medical reasons, including the desire for conception (or otherwise) took place to shrines of the goddess Ix Chel, patroness of childbirth, along the Caribbean coast of Quintana Roo at temples on Isla Mujeres and Cozumel. West of the Maya area, at Isla de Sacrificios in Veracruz and Xochitécatl in the highlands, Ix Chel was paralleled by Tlazolteotl, the ‘eater of filth’, portrayed with a black-smearred mouth. Pilgrimage can be local (like most of those documented in medieval England) as well as distant: abandoned Classic ceremonial precincts at sites such as La Milpa and Coba saw repositioning of fallen stelae and offerings made to their graven images, over a time-span embracing the late first and much of the second millennium AD (the most recent La Milpa offering being a bottle of rum of AD 1820±12, crushed by Stela 11 as it fell later that century).

In her final chapter, “Looking in from afar”, Halperin traces Maya iconography beyond the Maya lands, suggesting that small carved-jade plaques or pendants showing a cross-legged youthful ruler with a zoomorphic feathered headdress, and often wearing jade jewellery, spread the image across Mesoamerica. Such jades have been found in Oaxaca, Teotihuacan and Xochicalco in the highlands, and at the latter site the Temple of the Feathered Serpent bears almost life-sized images within the coils of an ophidian who is an aspect of the pan-Mesoamerican Quetzalcoatl/Kukulcan. Maya people, shown in Maya graphic style, are on the murals of Cacaxtla adjacent to Xochitécatl: Mesoamerica was a true artistic *oikumene*.

With the recent flood of hieroglyphic decipherments, the focus on ancient Maya civilisation has been on the ruling elites, exemplified by Simon Martin’s *Ancient Maya politics* (2020). Traci Ardren’s account of everyday life is a welcome complement (more or less the same length as Halperin’s, and updating Whitlock 1976 and Phillips 2007), reminding us that much of the fieldwork over the past seven decades has been on houses and households rather than tombs and temples. She also takes an overtly female-oriented stance. Using the large Classic period site of Cobá in Quintana Roo with its 50–70 000 people in the seventh century AD as the model for her imagined Maya city, she uses its Queen K’awiil Ajaw as her regal epitome. “She commemorated her military successes on huge carved stone monuments that display her captives, and demanded that her portraits include full military regalia” (p.20). Ardren’s subjects are created with data gleaned by many scholars from many sites, “the very best information we have about what life was like for women, men, non-gender binary people, children, elders, royals, farmers, artists, and so many more ... not just numbers in an archaeological report” (p.21)—an academic version of the non-fiction novel. Like Halperin, but with less justification, she uses the pseudo-scientific ‘BCE/CE’ dating convention, for an intended audience that is more familiar with ‘BC/AD’. The Introduction also includes a capsule summary of Maya ecology, chronology and cosmology, and a guide to the five substantive chapters that follow.

Ardren begins with ‘The domestic world’ and the daily round, emphasising the roles of women in food production and preparation and in crafting the artefacts of everyday life.

Between evening occupations and the visiting midwife, Ardren smartly shoehorns in a couple of pages on “people who had formerly been enslaved” (pp.41–2), while much later in the book admitting that “the evidence for slavery is scant” (p.95). She then segues to ‘Fields and forest’ beyond the household, where maize and other crops were cultivated, mainly by men. The iconographic as well as economic importance of maize as the one cereal staple is well brought out, also the creation of artificial environments such as hillside terracing and wetland drained fields to supplement the swidden *milpa* fields as population burgeoned from the Late Preclassic (300 BC–AD 250) for more than a millennium. A strikingly original emphasis comes in a section on apiculture: the indigenous stingless bee *Melipona beecheii* was a vital pollinator as well as providing honey (often fermented into *balche*) and wax. The Maya housed them in hollow logs end-stopped with limestone discs, with a score or so mounted in a wooden A-frame near the house, and paid them ritual respect, the importance of which is reiterated in the Conclusion.

Beyond the fields was the tropical forest, some old-growth but much of it secondary recovery from cyclical *milpa* clearance. In it lived the animals that supplied most of the meat the Maya ate—white-tailed and brocket deer, peccary, agouti and the occasional tapir. Domestic dogs were a controlled protein source, puppy-farmed for a year on a soft maize diet and then killed. Turkey and Muscovy duck were also kept; streams and ponds yielded freshwater fish and turtles, while the coast and its cays and reefs provided marine protein from species up to the size of sharks. Caves such as Naj Tunich were the source of *zuhuy ha* (virgin water) as well as the abode of chthonic deities and potent sites of interaction with the Other.

From the forest to the city, from the rural to the urban landscape, Ardren notes the impressive size of some Classic Maya centres. They were garden cities, with populations up to 100 000 suggested by recent lidar surveys, and loosely scattered houselots gathered round a massive ceremonial precinct of temples and palaces, not the densely packed compounds seen at Teotihuacan or Aztec Tenochtitlan. Her estimate that it could take two days to walk from one side of the largest urban communities (such as Cobá, Calakmul, Caracol or Tikal) to the other may be somewhat high: at normal walking speed this would approximate 80km (50 miles). As her imagined protagonist, the grandmother Sak Kab’, walks from suburb to centre. Ardren conjures an evocative account of a Maya market in full swing, with its myriad varieties of foodstuffs and crafts, noises and smells, similar to the Spanish conquest-era description of the great Aztec hub at Tenochtitlan-Tlatelolco. Also in the centre were stelae, carved and inscribed monuments to the martial and marital exploits of rulers, which is the cue for a brief disquisition on Maya hieroglyphic writing, its content, and the Long Count calendar recording elapsed time since 3114 BC, in the mythic origins of their culture. The 52-year Calendar Round, meshing cycles of 260 and 365 days, was used throughout Mesoamerica and survives in part today. The other widespread ritual was the ball-game, seen as a metaphor for war: actual war between Maya states was common in the Classic period, as populations and competition for resources grew and was marked in both art and inscriptions, as Halperin analyses in considerable and convincing detail.

Control of calendric commemoration, as of almost everything else above household ritual and subsistence, was in the hands of the ruling elite, where the *kuhul ahaw*, ‘holy lord’, had a semi-divine status and was the conduit between the people and their gods, offering his or her blood and incense in sacrifice commemorated on monuments such as the lintels of Yaxchilan.

The royal palace was both the house-compound writ large and a machine for ruling, housing skilled artisans in ceramic, lapidary and textile production, receiving such goods in tribute from both subjects and vassals, hosting feasts and visitors and controlling external relations embracing both enmity and amity. Royal marriages were not just diplomatic acts, Ardren argues, but at their heart was “control of female sexuality, especially female reproduction” (p.107) for the fusion and continuation of dynasties.

The final chapter deals with the coasts, with trading ports and ports-of-trade and the exploitation of marine resources. Decorative shells and dried fish were transported to inland cities, and salt production from both boiling brine and sun-dried salt-pans was on a scale greatly exceeding local needs. Log canoes, some very large, plied the coast from the Uluva Valley north around the Yucatan Peninsula. Cacao and traceable goods such as jade and obsidian travelled over long distances; the network extended south-east to Costa Rica and west into the Gulf of Mexico to the ports serving highland cities such as Teotihuacan.

The Conclusion briefly covers the ‘Classic collapse’ of the ninth–tenth centuries, this Terminal Classic being “not a final chapter but rather an internal response to an array of very significant forces ... decline and growth, silence and activity” (p.150) marked by the rise and fall of Chichén Itzá. The sequent Postclassic (AD 1100–1519) saw a geopolitical shift in the rise of the Aztecs in central Mexico and the marginalisation of the Maya world, where fractious statelets warred until the arrival of the Spanish. Most Maya were subjugated under the pitiless iconoclasm of the Catholic Church, but their rural culture survived into nineteenth-century independence, impoverished under the inequalities of Latino society. That some six million adapted to the machine age and are taking active interest in their heritage is, as Ardren details, a cause for celebration.

Ardren has a good six-page bibliography, but some of the recommended readings are unsuited to the target general audience due to being too specialist or hard to get hold of. Cambridge University Press has done a poor job—the illustrations largely are in dim monochrome (and many are of unprovenanced artefacts from Ardren’s own university museum). On the contrary Halperin’s book successfully combines colour, monochrome and line art, sometimes in the same figure. Both books would have benefitted from a copy-editor, who might have spotted the glitches. The production standards of Ardren’s book do not encourage the general reader to buy this otherwise very worthwhile book, while Halperin’s appears fresher and more approachable despite its intellectually high-end content. Halperin extracts telling detail from sometimes obscure sources, while Ardren paints a genially comprehensible portrait of ancient Maya life: both books advance our understanding of this most fascinating of prehispanic civilisations.

References

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