Redefining the Past: Women in Classical Mayan culture

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Women in Classical Mayan culture

By Lucia Aguilar

Agriculture

The Maya have a culture that has grown and depended on agriculture for centuries. A large portion of studies done about gender roles in Maya agriculture in the past have been done using ethnographic analogies and focusing on maize farming in certain locations like in the Yucatan peninsula. The problem with using ethnographic analogies is the lack of acknowledging colonial Spanish influences on Postclassical Maya society (Robin 2006). To do good archaeology researchers should be aware of androcentric biases and understand that, “contrary to historic and ethnographic sources, farming was not strictly men’s work” (Geller 2009:69). It should be obvious that when the Spanish came in and settled in the New World they imposed their cultural practices over the traditional practices of native cultures like the Maya. Standards of living changed as well as agricultural practices in which maize farming, “seen as a idea of masculinity”, becomes prominent and Maya women begin to sway towards Western living changed as well as agricultural practices in which maize farming, “seen as a idea of masculinity”, becomes prominent and Maya women begin to sway towards

Women Existed in the Past Too

When trying to develop a clearer interpretation of the range of gender roles, especially in relation to agriculture, that could have existed in Classical Maya society it is important to not only look at a variety of evidence, but also the lack of evidence. The Maya had a complex form of hieroglyphs and created lots of imagery which help give clues into the gender roles in the Classical Maya world. The odd thing is that images of farming were abundant in Maya imagery even though it was important to the way of life, but there are images of an important maize deity (Robin 2006). The deity is expressed as having traits from both genders and it not defined as being one specific gender. The Maya maize deity an example of “idealized representations relating to maize in Classic Period highlighting gender ambiguity rather than singularly male or female identities” (Robin 2006:413). The absence farming imagery, the gender ambiguous maize deity, and evidence that some villages thrived because of collaborative farming efforts help paint a more diverse image of gender roles in Classical Maya agriculture.

The Importance of Incorporating Feminist and Gender Theory

Gender and Feminist archaeology has helped to pave a broader road of possibility in archaeology and many archaeologist that pursued research in Mesoamerica focus on incorporate feminist and gender theory in their interpretations of the past. When finding Maya burials archaeologist have been able to compare goods left behind which help with interpreting possible gender roles. Some research shows, “there is little to distinguish between male and females in quantity and ‘wealth’ of grave goods… males were buried with spinning and weaving tools almost as often as females” (McCafferty 2012:73). This type of evidence is not just seen in burial studies. In other studies there is evidence showing “males and females combine their talents in the construction of the artifacts, with the object being fabricated by the female and the decorations applied by the male or vice versa” (Allen, Richardson, James 1971: 50). Pursing gender roles in the past can be challenging due to how easily one can let Western androcentric biases slip into one’s interpretations. How the past is interpreted all depend on the perspective of the archaeologist and gender archaeology struggles against “the cross-cultural subjectivity attributed to being a man or woman in each and every society” (Gilchrist 2009:498). The application of feminist and gender theories has only gained moment in recent years, but has yielded interesting new ways of interpreting Classic Maya society and the history of other parts of Mesoamerica. Archaeology all over the world done recently or even in the past can benefit from applying feminist and gender theory.

Power and Status in Writing and Imagery

Women even in Classic Maya culture rarely held positions of status and power, but that does not mean women never held power. There are depiction of women rulers and elite through out the Classic Maya world. Reevaluating the roles women were able to fit in Mesoamerica has been researched only in the last couple decades, but has contributed to more knowledge of the Classic Maya world especially through their hieroglyphs and imagery. In Hewitt’s research she examines three female rules as well as “woman warriors” of the Classic Maya period. The glyphics related to woman rulers share the trait of a lack of female prefixes. The lack of defining these women as female emphasizes the unique status they held in society (Hewitt 1999). In Maya glyphs prefixes are not present typically when referring to men, so these women of exceptional status “no longer fit within traditional realm of female” (Hewitt 1999:251). The Maya were able to express a shift in the gender of these elite women through the use of their unique hieroglyphs. The “redefinition of syntactic rules” set these women apart and emphasized their role in Maya history (Hewitt 1999:256). Developing a clear understanding of Maya hieroglyphs has allowed for a closer look at how gender can be complex in the elite structures of Maya society.

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There are also the references in glyphs to ‘woman warriors’, na bate, in Maya culture. The warrior status does not always mean that the person with the title was a warrior, but held an elite position in society. Elite positions were predominantly male and in most of the research done of Classic Maya culture “masculine attributes were linked to power” (Hewitt 1999:258-259). The title of warrior, typically held by men, was one of honor that could have been given to elite women “in order to imitate their power” (Hewitt 1999:258). Women take on masculine traits when achieving an elite status in society. While women were clearly able to reach elite status in society this is not the norm for every women in Classic Maya society. But the biggest fault would be “imputing that her primary responsibilities involved childbearing, child caring, lactation, and family maintenance”(Geller 2009). Women in the past were capable of achieving more.