

The Political Roles of Inter-Hierarchical Agents in the Classic Maya Lowlands

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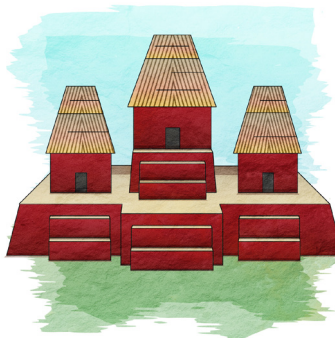
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No ancient polity was solely comprised of kings and commoners. Instead, a broad range of inter-hierarchical actors existed between those situated at the top and bottom of ancient social ladders. Drawing upon epigraphic and archaeological perspectives on Classic Maya political dynamics, this article showcases the importance of investigating intermediate elite agency. Moreover, the article articulates a theoretical framework for investigating the role of inter-hierarchical agents within a political system grounded in the three “faces” which intermediate elites constructed through their relationships with commoner subordinates, peer elites, and apical elite suzerains. The framework provides a novel agent-based perspective on ancient political dynamics.



In ancient and modern polities alike, multiple intermediate actors exist between those at the bottom, and those at the top of the social ladder (Claessen 1978:537-538; Gledhill 2000:127). Examples of such individuals include chiefs, warlords, lineage heads, neighborhood leaders, nobility, governors, gentry, administrators, and so on. By investigating the roles of the sub-royal elites who headed the internal components of polities and interacted with the commoners, we can achieve a more comprehensive understanding of political dynamics (Elson and Covey 2006; Garrison et al. 2019:134; Iannone 2003; Marcus 2006). These intermediate elites walked a political tightrope, balancing the demands of their superiors with the expectations of their subordinates, while simultaneously endeavoring to preserve or amplify their own power (Conlee and Schreiber 2006:95; Connell 2010:313; McAnany 1995:139; Schortman 2010:379-380). This social position,



which is “inter-hierarchical” in nature (*sensu* Gluckman 1968), meant that intermediate elites could foment political change or generate stability, depending on their relationships with their subordinates and suzerains. Although anthropological archaeologists have only recently begun to focus on inter-hierarchical agents (Elson and Covey 2006; Porter 2004), these types of actors have long received the attention of social scientists interested in factionalism, the co-option of client rulers, and patron-client relations (Bailey 1969; Harriss-White 1997; Rudolph and Rudolph 1966).

In this article, I develop a framework which effectively “peoples” the middle hierarchical levels of Maya polities with inter-hierarchical agents (*sensu* Robin 2003:308). This article has three goals: (1) to introduce Classic Maya (AD 600-900) intermediate elites; (2) to showcase the importance and interpretative value of including intermediate elites in reconstructions of political dynamics; and (3) to articulate a framework for investigating political dynamics grounded in intermediate elite agency, which could be employed in any archaeological context. This article presents a research agenda for examining different hypotheses about the roles intermediate elites may have played in Classic period political dynamics. Whereas Classic period epigraphic, iconographic, and archaeological materials offer important insights into the roles inter-hierarchical actors fulfilled, much remains unknown at this time. The framework presented here, coupled with a more explicit focus on intermediate elites, offers one avenue for better understanding these oft overlooked, but influential actors.

Epigraphic and Archaeological Perspectives on Classic Maya Intermediate Elites

The Classic Maya geopolitical landscape was dominated by several larger competing polities like Calakmul, Caracol, Naranjo, and Tikal, which each controlled a hierarchically nested network of smaller polities (Figure 1). The royal courts at the apex of the competing hierarchies were focused on a ruling household whose political power and authority rested on patron-client relationships with secondary and tertiary elites to access their clientage networks of subordinate elites and commoners (Martin 2020; Pohl and Pohl 1994; Sharer and Golden 2004). Generally, polities fell in and out of the aegis of hegemons as the political power of their overlords waxed and waned (Marcus 1993). There are numerous instances in which rulers of smaller polities exhibited all the trappings

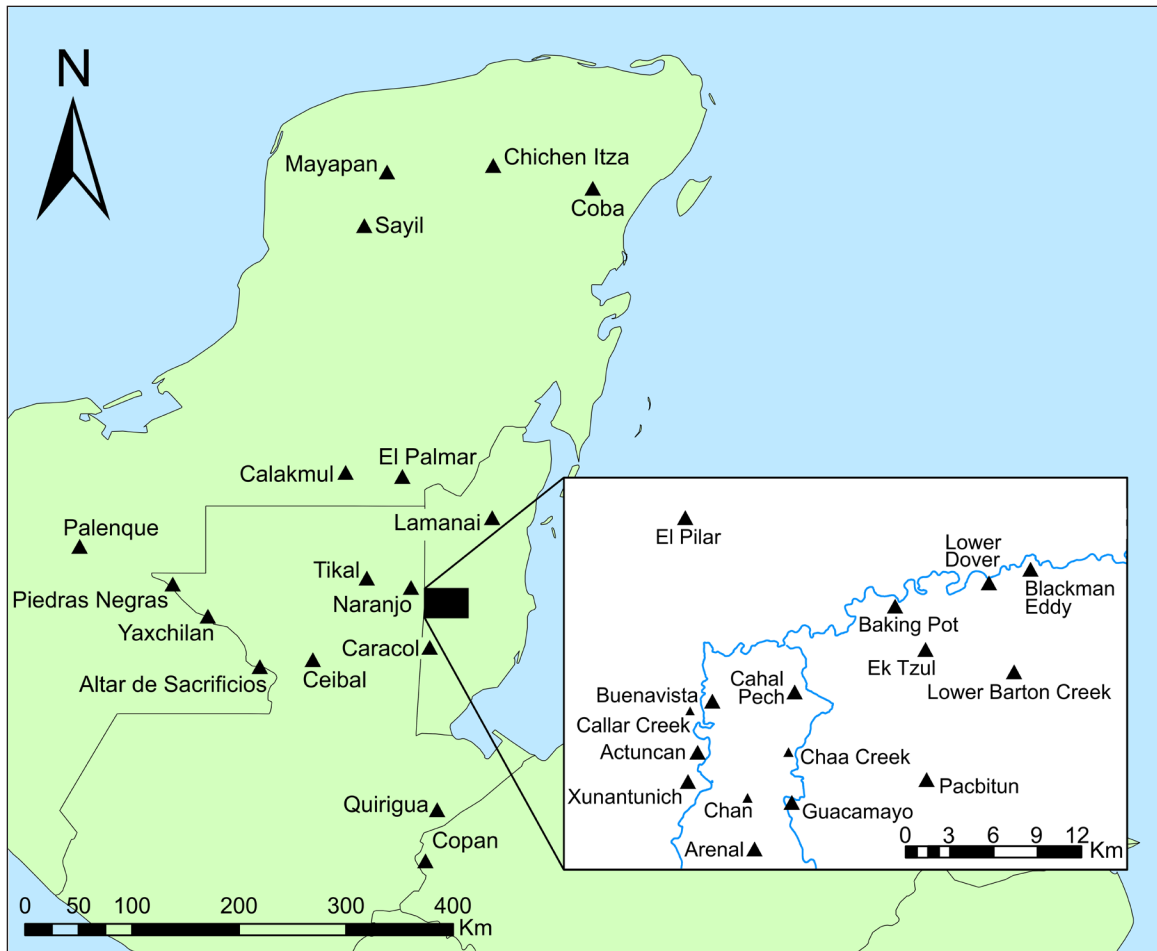


Figure 1. Map of the Maya Lowlands showing important political centers and those noted in text (map by J. Walden).

of autonomous kingship (Awe 2013). While some of these seemingly autonomous polities only came to manifest such traits when larger regional hegemonies were in decline, other smaller polities were bound together through lateral alliances allowing them to resist hegemonic co-optation (Foias 2013:89). The proliferation of this patron-client system engendered high degrees of intermediate elite agency resulting in polity-level instabilities. Fear of losing clientage networks to rivals could impede elite's coercive abilities (Pohl and Pohl 1994; Robin 2012:330). The degree of intermediate elite agency is evident in the numerous examples of intermediate elites maintaining diplomatic relationships across great distances, and potentially using these contacts when scheming to overthrow their suzerains and appropriate their power (Foias 2013; Golden and Scherer 2013; Martin 2020; Tsukamoto 2020).

Advances in epigraphic decipherment have revealed numerous elite titles including *ajk'uhuun* (worshipper, scribe or political mediator), *chak tok wayaab'* (a priestly position), *sajal* (provincial

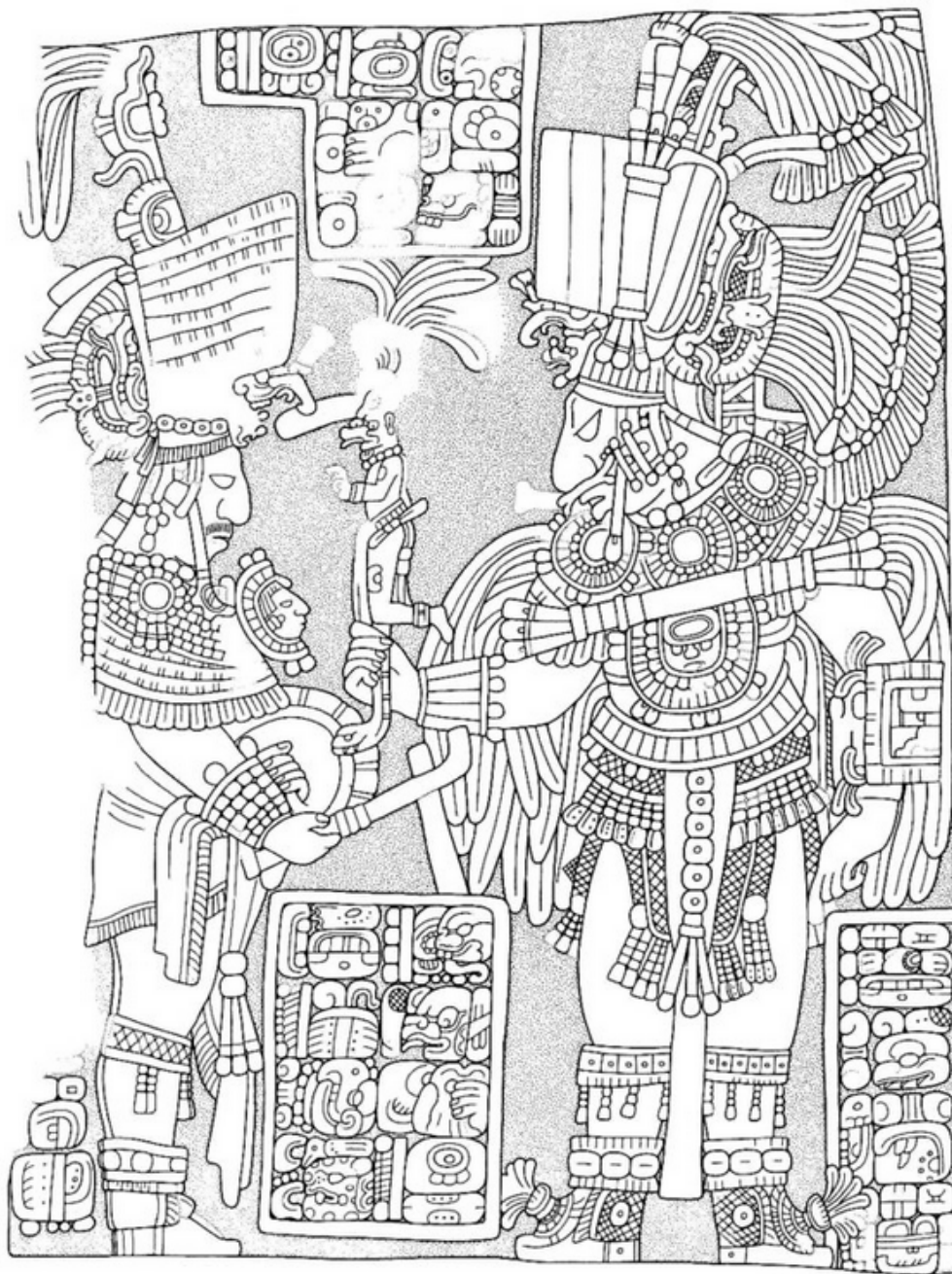


Figure 2. Yaxchilan Lintel 42, Head-*sajal* K'an Tok Wayaab, and Yaxun B'ahlam IV and performing a K'awiil scepter and axe-dance together (Yaxchilan, Lintel 42, drawing by Ian Graham. © President and Fellows of Harvard College, Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, 2004.15.6.6.13).

lord), *b'aah sajal* (head sub-lord), *sajalob'* (those beneath him), and *lakam* (a neighborhood-level official; Beliaev 2004; Estrada-Belli et al. 2009:246–48; Jackson 2013, 2015:245–8; Lacadena 2008:269; Tokovinine 2013). Descriptions of the roles and duties associated with these positions partially reflect the primacy afforded to ritual in the inscriptions. Many duties performed by these titled elite are indeed ritualistic in nature, such as scattering offerings, fire drilling, conjuring, commissioning civic-ceremonial architecture, playing ball, and venerating ancestors, often with their overlords (Jackson 2015: Table 9.1; Beliaev 2004; Estrada-Belli et al. 2009:246–48). Figure 2 provides an example of this dynamic, Yaxchilan Lintel 42 shows the ruler Yaxun B'ahlam IV performing a K'awiil scepter and axe-dance dance with head-sajal K'an Tok Wayaab. Yet, these titles also reflect multifaceted positions related to intermediate elite actors and not purely a priestly, warrior, or scribal class (Jackson 2013; but see Zender 2004). The *ajk'uhuun* title has been translated as “One who keeps, guards” or “One who worships, venerates” (Jackson and Stuart 2001:226; Zender 2004:194). Despite these recorded roles, there are numerous examples of *ajk'uhuuns* bearing multiple different courtly titles throughout their lifetimes. Examples include Kelen Hix of Toniná who was both an *ajk'uhuun* and a *ti'huun*, Ahkmo' of Yaxchilan held both the *ajk'uhuun* and *sajal* titles at varying times, Mak'an Chanal of Copan held the *ajk'uhuun* title simultaneously with a local lordship “Lord of Koxop” (Jackson 2013; Martin and Grube 2000:206), and K'ahk' Way Na' of La Corona held an *ajk'uhuun* title and was an *anaab* (a priestly office) of the ruler Ti K'awiil (Lamoureux-St-Hilaire 2018:450-451). These examples suggest that at least some of the epigraphically documented elite roles were filled by intermediate elites with their own domains and client bases. These elite titles could become hereditary in polities with less centralized political control of intermediates. Lords of the K'utim family of El Cayo retained their *sajal* title after the death of the Piedras Negras ruler who appointed them, a pattern which stood in stark contrast to the situation at Yaxchilan, where titles were reallocated following the death of an incumbent in office (Golden et al. 2008:253).

In addition to illuminating the various titles and duties of intermediate elites, the epigraphic corpus provides an understanding of the indirect strategies of incorporation whereby client elites were recruited in brokerage positions (Carter 2016; Sharer and Golden 2004:41). Autonomous local elites were potentially offered honorific titles with a restricted array of duties to incrementally curtail their political agency. These titles are far more common in the western Maya Lowlands and are sparse in the hinterlands of larger polities like Tikal, Calakmul, and Caracol. The geospatial distribution of titles may reflect more powerful apical regimes not needing to rely on honorifics to recruit client elites (Carter 2016:235; Foias 2013:155, 225; Jackson 2013:86-87). The growing awareness of the role of patron-client relationships within Classic Maya politics means that inclusion of intermediate elites within discussions of ancient politics is essential for achieving a holistic reconstruction of society.

Archaeology provides a complementary and contrasting picture. Maya archaeologists traditionally connected minor centers with rural nobility who possessed less wealth, power, and authority than apical rulers who resided in the major centers (Bullard 1960:369; Willey et al. 1965:580). The inter-hierarchical capacity of such actors is perhaps most evident in their location at the epicenters of large clusters of commoner settlement. Despite being enmeshed in commoner networks, intermediate elites frequently possessed ostentatious and sometimes sumptuary wealth

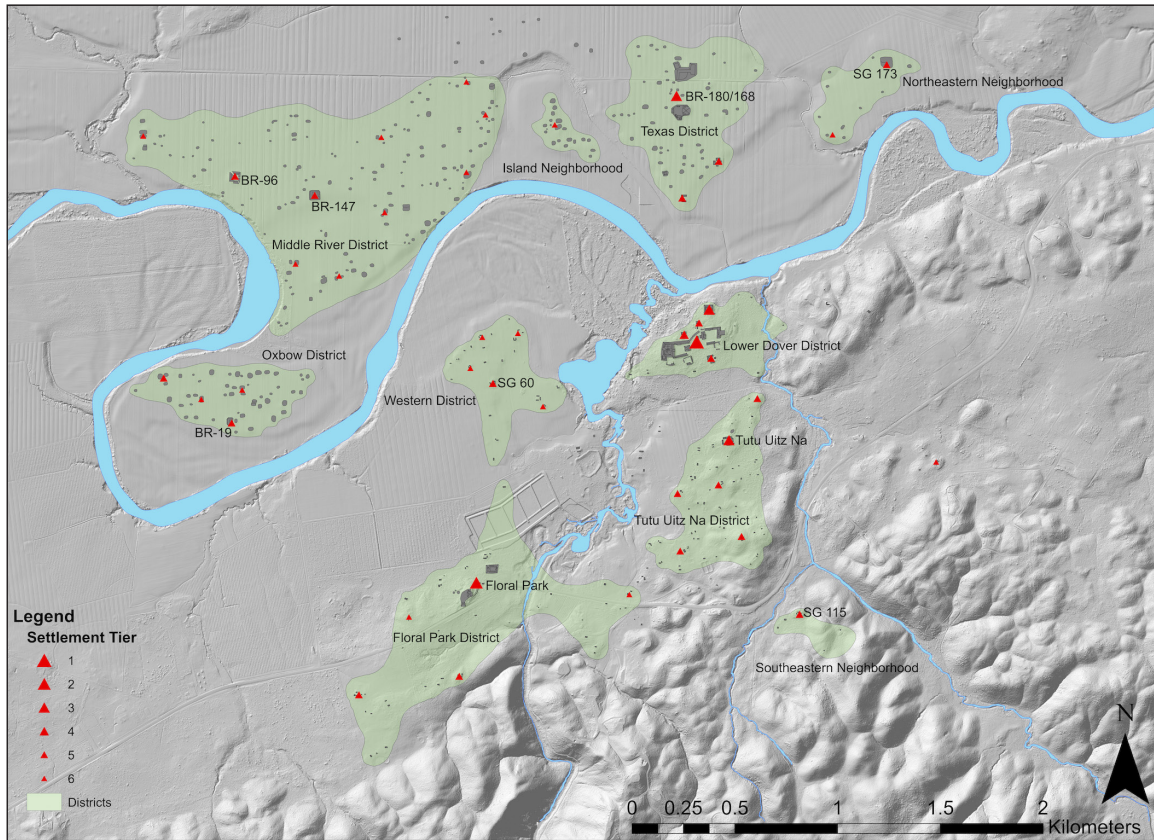


Figure 3. Map of Districts with Minor Centers at Lower Dover, Belize (map by J. Walden).

items which likely trickled down tributary networks from apical elites (see Figure 3 for an example of settlement clustering at Lower Dover in the Belize River Valley). These larger settlement clusters are roughly akin to those termed districts by Smith (2011; for examples see Adams and Smith 1981; Arnauld et al. 2012:209; Ashmore 1981:51; Eberl 2014; Hutson 2016:80; Iannone 2004; Lemonnier 2012:194; Lohse 2013; Pruffer et al. 2017; Robin et al. 2012:114; Thompson et al. 2018; Yaeger 2000, 2010b:245). The sociopolitical implications of this hierarchical nesting have long been clear to archaeologists; “this overall design of Maya settlement of community units arranged in an ascending hierarchy suggests a parallel structure of organization in society, of similarly ascending foci of authority with minor leaders in minor centers and paramount rulers governing from major centers” (Willey et al. 1965:579-580).

The elite occupants of minor centers have become the explicit focus of attention in recent years. While archaeology has complemented epigraphic perspectives in documenting intermediate elite engagement in ritual and feasting (Ceballos et al. this volume; Connell 2010; Iannone 2003; Tourtellot et al. 2003; Tsukamoto 2017; Walden et al. 2019; Yaeger 2000), myriad other activities and roles are apparent archaeologically in contrast to the epigraphy. These include

hosting marketplaces (Chase and Chase 2003; Chase et al. 2015; Dahlin et al. 2007; Longstaffe et al. this volume), trade (McAnany et al. 2003), water management (Iannone 2003), agricultural management (Iannone 2003, Connell 2010; Conlon and Powis 2004; Chase and Chase 2003), border control (Driver and Garber 2004; Tourtellot et al. 2003), and craft production (Masson 2003). The variability in intermediate elite roles likely reflects the different degrees of integration in different polities, local resources and trade networks, and the agency of the intermediate elites themselves (Robin et al. 2014). The role of inter-hierarchical actors in trade and exchange in the Classic Maya Lowlands is comparatively under-examined. Recent revelations about the significance of marketplace exchange in Classic Maya economies suggests that various elites probably stood to gain from patronizing merchants and marketplaces (Eppich and Freidel 2015; King 2020:18), although it remains highly likely that in addition to sponsoring commerce, some elites engaged in mercantilism themselves (for ethnohistoric perspectives see Feldman 1985:15–21; Tozzer 1941:39). Archaeological reconstructions of the role of intermediate elites in Classic period mercantilism are sorely needed as our understanding of the status of merchants is problematized by the fact such aspects of life were rarely, if at all, documented epigraphically and iconographically (Tokovinine and Beliaev 2013). To summarize, epigraphic sources and archaeological data do sometimes overlap; the most obvious being the presence of ritual paraphernalia and ceremonial architecture at minor centers which seems to corroborate the idea that junior elites possessed ritual duties (Walden et al. 2019). There are, however, many contrasts between the two sources. In many instances it remains entirely possible that the epigraphically known intermediate elites are individuals of much higher status than those commonly investigated through settlement archaeology. For instance, *sajals* were lords of very large subordinate centers with scaled-down “micro courts” (Webster 2002:158). In the absence of hieroglyphic evidence, such major centers may be misinterpreted as autonomous capitals. These issues are exacerbated by the fact that known intermediate elite titles are less common in certain regions. Our understanding of how the epigraphy and archaeology intersect will improve over time as more residences associated with known titled intermediate elites, like Mak’an Chanal of Copan, or Ajpach’ Waal of the Guzman Group, El Palmar are uncovered (see Jackson 2013; Tsukamoto 2020).

The Importance of Including Intermediate Elite Perspectives in our Discussions of Classic Maya Political Dynamics

Scholarly interpretations of the role of Classic Maya intermediate elites have often been tied to preconceptions about the degree of political centralization (or how much power was nucleated at the apex of society), hence intermediate elites came to represent “lightning rods for arguments over the structure of total societies” (Schortman and Urban 2003:137). Generally, advocates of more centralized scenarios envisioned intermediate elites as passive automatons who unquestionably served apical elite interests in a well-developed bureaucracy (see critiques in Foias 2013:61; Schortman and Urban 2003:131). Proponents of decentralized or segmentary scenarios considered power to rest in the hands of recalcitrant intermediate elites seeking the disintegration of their overlord’s political authority (Ek 2020; Walden et al. 2019:2). These sorts of blanket interpretation can only gain from a focus on intermediate elites as proactive political agents—an approach which

promises to illuminate the circumstances under which they acquiesce, quietly resist, or revolt. In some instances, intermediate elite resistance could result from overwhelming tribute demands on the part of their suzerains, but in other instances intermediate elites took advantage of power vacuums to topple their overlords. In some cases, commoner dissatisfaction towards apical policies could even manifest as intermediate elite resistance (Berdan 2006:163; Brumfiel 1994a). It seems likely that multiple different factors could arise simultaneously, a power vacuum or problems at the apical level, coupled with commoner unrest over apical tribute demands, and historic mistrust between an intermediate elite and their suzerains could result in an attempt to break away (Golden and Scherer 2013).

Investigation of political centralization has recently gone out of fashion in favor of localized agency perspectives (LeCount and Yaeger 2010:21; Marken and Fitzsimmons 2015). However, as Pohl and Pohl (1994:144) argue, “the degree of centralization in a polity depended on the relative power of the ruling patrilineage, subterritorial rulers, and local elites”, meaning that apical elite centralization and intermediate elite agency can be construed as flip sides of the same coin (Roscoe 1993:114). Monitoring the waxing and waning of intermediate elite agency over time provides a mirrored picture of apical elite centralization. Teasing apart the complex webs of interaction between intermediate elites and other hierarchically situated agents highlights political dynamics and overcomes the “sterility” of the centralization debate (Marken and Fitzsimmons 2015). Essential to this endeavor is a social network approach which, following Mann (1986:1), conceptualizes polities as “overlapping and intersecting socio-spatial networks of power”. The political process unfolded through networks of personal patron-client relationships between hierarchically nested agents situated within and between polities (Davenport and Golden 2016; LeCount and Yaeger 2010:28-30; Marken and Fitzsimmons 2015; Martin 2020; Munson and Macri 2009). As such, focus on the strategies and agency of intermediate elites in relation to their suzerains and commoner subordinates simultaneously provides bottom-up and top-down views of political dynamics.

Articulating a Framework: Agency, Practice, and the “Faces” of Classic Maya Intermediate Elites

The intermediate elite concept is employed as a heuristic to shine the analytical spotlight on the agency of those situated in brokerage positions within social networks (Walden et al. 2019:2). Rather than replacing a dichotomy (elite vs. commoner) with a trichotomy, an intermediate elite focus provides a fleshed-out, agent-driven approach which effectively “peoples” the nested hierarchical levels of Maya polities with agentive actors (Robin 2003:308). The concept retains the most explanatory potential when reflexively applied to study the fluid behavior, political strategies, and interaction born of an inter-hierarchical position (Tung and Cook 2006:69; for political strategies see Bailey 1969; Kurnick 2016). In other words, intermediate political actors should not be envisioned as static. The rise and fall of polities and overarching political networks could suggest that if an intermediate elite actor usurped power from their suzerain, they could potentially become an apical elite themselves. Similarly, if the political power of an apical suzerain was eclipsed by a higher-level hegemon, then the intermediate elite concept would become useful for studying how this deposed ruler retained power in the face of co-option. This interactional approach studies the

interactions of elites with one another, subordinates, and various institutions to model upward and downward pressures and examine the agency of intermediate actors within these dynamics (see Marcus 1983:12-13). Such an inter-hierarchical lens may actually inform us about apical elite power structure and political centralization at the polity level, while also speaking to commoner lived experiences. In acting as a buffer between commoners and apical governance, and in encouraging compliance or resistance, intermediate elites play pivotal roles in defining how commoners articulate with overarching leadership structures. While intermediate elites are well positioned to mobilize commoner subordinates for their own political machinations, in some contexts, commoner clients could shift allegiance to other intermediate elite patrons, meaning commoners could exert agency over their patrons (Bailey 1969:54). While an inter-hierarchical position could provide substantial scope for intermediate elite strategizing, intermediate elites could end up becoming subservient to the demands of their commoner clients to an even greater degree than their apical elite patrons (Lemarchand 1977: 291-292).

A practice-based approach is ideal for examining intermediate elite agency (Bourdieu 1977; Giddens 1984). Following Gardner (2008), agency is defined as the extent to which humans actively shape the world around themselves. While it is simple to map a monolithic division of elites and commoners onto Giddens's 'hierarchically flat' vision of a dichotomy between actors and institutions (see critique in Gardner 2004:35), agency and structure only take us so far because the structure (commoner subordinates, peer intermediate elites, and apical elite overlords) needs to be construed not as institutions in the Giddensian sense, but agents who fluidly reacted to one another (Kurtz 2001:175-177). One solution, following Mouzelis (2003:26-27), is the division of actors based on their inherent agency. This scheme involves construing apical elites, who possessed the most power and authority, as "macro-actors". In contrast, intermediate elites could be considered "meso-actors", because they possessed some degree of agency yet less than the ruling elites. Lastly, commoners can be considered "micro-actors" as these individuals had the least capacity to effect political change. This method works when approaching the agency of an individual actor however, each class of social actor could enhance their political agency through alliance with peers. This logic is most often attributed to the lower classes who are regularly seen as possessing collective agency (Robin 2003), although a similar logic is true of actors of all statuses. For instance, a closely allied cabal of intermediate elites would possess greater bargaining power in negotiating relationships with their commoner subordinates or apical elite suzerains, just as a league of apical elites could better quell internal factionalism (Brumfiel 1983). As such, actors of a specific hierarchical status may actively encourage competition among actors situated above or below themselves with intent to prevent collusion and the formation of lateral coalitions which would allow subordinates or suzerains to renegotiate power relations (Conlee and Schreiber 2006; Morris 1998:307-308).

This hierarchical approach to agency can be situated within a traditional processual action framework, where political systems are envisioned as arenas where actors, arranged into coalitions and factions would pursue strategies to negotiate power and outcompete rivals (Bailey 1969). This agent-centric approach goes hand-in-hand with a focus on hierarchically nested patron-client relationships (Bailey 1969:43), which maps well onto our current understanding of Classic period political dynamics (Arnauld et al. 2017:33-34; Martin 2020). The goal then becomes diachronically charting the political agency of intermediate elites, and identifying their shifting roles and strategies

as they articulate with suzerains, peers, and subordinates. These may be surmised as intermediate elite “faces”, where each face represents a distinct inter-hierarchical relationship (Marcone 2012; Walden 2021). A downward face was projected to their client commoners, a lateral face to their peer intermediate elites, and an upward face towards their apical patrons. These faces did not exist in isolation. Intermediate elites with a strong downward face would have a greater follower base to negotiate their upward face. By charting how elites articulated specific faces towards peers, suzerains, and subordinates, we can reconstruct whether such relationships were exploitative, collectively beneficial, or a combination of both (see Feinman 2017:463-464). Examining these overlapping intermediate elite faces highlights the intersection of elite and non-elite levels of organization (McAnany 1995:91). The theoretical approach presented is sufficiently abstract to be applied to inter-hierarchical actors situated in a range of positions, be they of *sajal* or similar rank and running a secondary center, or *lakam*, or similar rank and situated at the head of a neighborhood or district within a larger polity. Ultimately, employing this approach to study political dynamics requires a firm understanding of the geographical landscape (and its productivity and resources), the relative wealth and power of intermediate elites, commoners, and apical elites, and the specific strategies employed by these various actors (such as ritual strategies and economic roles). Fortunately, archaeological reconstruction of this overarching context is entirely possible.

The Downward Face

Intermediate elite interaction with subordinate followers can be construed as a downward face. Cultivating respect, legitimacy, or authority with commoners allowed elites to attract clients, preserve their loyalty, and rely on their followers (Eisenstad and Roniger 1984; Scott and Kerkvliet 1977). In essence, a strong client base would grant intermediate elites’ access to commoner labor and military support, staple goods such as basic foodstuffs, and locally produced prestige goods or locally grown high-value crops (Arnauld et al. 2017:33-34; Baron 2018; McAnany et al. 2002; Neff 2010; Ringle et al. 2020). In theory, the policies intermediate elites used to secure a strong client base could vary along a coercive/consensual spectrum (Miller and Tilley 1984:7, 14). For instance, intermediate elites might garner the loyalty of their followers by shouldering the burden of top-down tribute extraction, distributing wealth items, engaging in kinship/marriage alliances (Blankenship-Sefczek et al. 2019), hosting large feasts and rituals to perpetuate shared identities, or employing ideologies to mask status distinctions between themselves and their subjects, or accentuate differences between themselves and other intermediate elite/commoner dyads (Walden et al. 2020). In essence building group identity and integrating people on one scale, like the district, would inherently undermine commoner integration into other hierarchical social units like the polity. Subsequently, if intermediate elites built long-lasting bonds with their subjects it would have implications for broader patterns of commoner integration into a polity. Intermediate elites could also employ less benevolent strategies to ensure the compliance of followers (Bentley 1986:290). While these may eventually build resentment, they could be combined with more communally beneficial strategies to alleviate hostility. A loyal commoner base would prove fundamental to intermediate elites who were actively resisting, or seeking to topple their apical suzerains (Brumfiel

1994b:92; Pohl and Pohl 1994). Intermediate elites would also exercise a downward face to commoners outside their patronage. Elites may attempt to poach the client base from under rival intermediate elites by offering incentives to their clients. Obviously, intermediate elites would not have complete free reign in constructing a downward face as their agency would be impacted by that of other intermediate elites, commoners, and apical elites. A range of physical geospatial factors may likewise function to delimit an intermediate elite's ability to recruit and cajole client commoners. For instance, apical elites would rely on intermediate elites for tax or tribute collection from their subordinates, although intermediate elites would always have options about whether to pursue these duties, and how. Ultimately, understanding the intermediate elite downward face requires an understanding of how their policies impacted – and were impacted by – commoners. While a research focus on intermediate elites can provide a mirrored image of the governance policies of the apical elite, investigation of commoners can provide clues about how intermediate policies shaped commoner lifeways.

The Lateral Face

Much of the archaeological literature on politics is concerned with how elites maintained their authority and power over their subordinates. Less ink is spilled on the articulation of a horizontal face with their competing peers (Bailey 1969:60; Spencer 1994; see Renfrew 1986). Relationships among intermediate elites could vary greatly based on the effectiveness of top-down apical strategies applied to ensure competition to prevent the formation of a unified intermediate elite front and ensure ongoing relationships of dependence. Such intermediate elite collaborations could vary greatly, depending on their own historically contingent relationships, those with commoner subordinates, and geospatial factors such physical distance from one another. Likewise, competition could develop between intermediate elites which was not fomented top-down, examples include raiding between centers, or competition for client commoners. In many instances intermediate elites could form horizontal alliances which could in theory signal bad news for apical elites and commoners alike since lateral unions would have effectively increased intermediate elite negotiating power (Jacobson 2001). Commoners could not easily switch patrons to avoid onerous tribute burdens if most of their potential patrons reached agreement on tax rates (Brumfiel 1983:277), although a range of subtler forms of resistance could arise (Scott 1985). Switching patrons may involve physically shifting residence, although this may be less problematic if a household possessed kin in nearby polities. A similar but different dynamic could play out at the apical elite level. Numerous hypothetical situations could result in intermediate elite horizontal alliances, but one likely possibility involves apical elite overreach or abuses of power (McAnany 1995:141).

Upward Face

Intermediate elites also possessed an upward face directed to their suzerains. Intermediate elite clients were vital for ongoing apical elite governance, but apical elites were well positioned to offer incentives for compliancy on the part of their subjects. Essentially, intermediate elites

could maintain their upward face by regularly and routinely ensuring tribute and/or taxation was passed up tributary networks to their patrons (LeCount and Yaeger 2010). In addition to staple goods, intermediate elites may be responsible for conscripting war parties from their client bases or labor gangs for monumental construction (Abrams 1994). Intermediate elites may also play a vital role in the dissemination of polity-level identities and ideologies which legitimated the apical ruler of a polity (Tung and Cook 2006; Walden et al. 2020). The range of incentives apical elites could offer for intermediate elite compliancy was often extensive (LeCount and Blitz 2005:68-69; Martin 2020). Apical elites could ensure the downward flow of prestige items and material wealth to their subordinates (LeCount 1999), honorifics and titles (Golden and Scherer 2013), marriage alliances (Martin 2020), land grants (Taschek and Ball 2003:385), and skilled workers and artisans (Houston 2016:403). Moreover, less tangible benefits of a strong upward face might involve the ideological benefits of an alliance with a divine lord (Fitzsimmons 2015; Houston and Stuart 1996). Intermediate elites may also be able to draw upon apical elite military resources giving them a military edge over other peer intermediate elites and potentially allowing them to resort to a more coercive downward face with their commoner subordinates (Canuto and Barrientos Q. 2020:194).



Just as the downward face could engage with commoners outside the immediate patronage of an intermediate elite, the upward face could also articulate with other apical elites, or even their apical elites' overlords. For instance, rather than topple their immediate patron, intermediate elites may seek patronage under one of their peers or even their suzerain. The upward intermediate elite face may also extend emically to ancestors or patron deities, since the Maya construed their social/ritual obligations to non-human entities in a similarly hierarchical manner (Baron 2016:111; Trigger 2003:412-3).

Ultimately, all three intermediate elite faces operated in articulation with one another. For instance, the construction of mortuary shrines may appease the ancestors but could escalate competitive rivalries with other intermediate elites. Generosity towards certain subordinates might ameliorate that relationship but undermine the authority of peer elites. A strong upward face may require exploitation of subordinates to move sufficient tribute and taxation up the hierarchy, thus destabilizing the downward face. The picture, then, may become far more complex than outlined here—for instance empirical investigation of the downward face may reveal different strategies targeted at high and low-status commoners or different strategies and associated faces may be targeted at commoners residing in different places. The same may be true of lateral relations—no doubt some relationships and associated faces would involve alliances while others might be competitive or even outright hostile. An intermediate elite may similarly have a compliant relationship with the local apical elite regime, but also a close alliance with a foreign regime which they could use for leverage. All of these different faces articulate with the others and have meaningful political consequences. The techniques adopted by intermediate elites can serve to ameliorate or exaggerate these interactions whether intentional or not. For example, an intermediate elite desirous of territorial expansion may push client commoners to settle contested borderlands to pull an apical elite into a border conflict. Ultimately the proposed framework allows us to explore multiple scenarios and eventually understand how different intermediate political actors navigated their distinct relationships.

Conclusion

I argue that an intermediate elite perspective on political change is particularly important, because of the extent of patron-client relationships in Classic Maya political dynamics, and the correspondingly high degrees of intermediate elite agency. Moreover, the inter-hierarchical role of such actors means that adopting this perspective can also offer insight into commoner lifeways and apical elite governance (see Walden 2021; Walden et al. 2023). Focusing on the different intermediate elite faces directed at distinct political actors has the potential to document complex local political dynamics. The approach facilitates the investigation of polities not as monolithic, but as socio-politically divided entities. Ultimately, this approach adds much needed dynamism to ancient political interactions, and embraces the factionalism which no doubt was at the heart of Maya politics, whether it be within polities, or at the regional scale. The approach eschews classification for a strong focus on behavior, practice, and the actual functioning of political systems. The intermediate elite lens on these dynamics is fundamental to achieving this due to their unique positioning at the interstices of different hierarchically arranged groups.

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