ANCIENT MAYA RITUAL PATHWAYS: PERFORMING POWER OUTSIDE THE CAVE AT LAS CUEVAS, BELIZE

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Abstract

From as early as 1000 B.C., the Maya considered caves to be sacred features of the landscape and used them as ritual performance spaces. These performances became increasingly important during the 8-10th centuries Late Classic Maya ‘collapse’ when a series of events caused the localities in the Southern Lowlands to grow increasingly dissatisfied with their rulers. Las Cuevas, Belize is the most salient example of the strong tie that existed between monumental centers and ritual cave sites of the ancient Maya during this period. Using a combination of perceptual approaches grounded in cognitive methods, traditional excavation techniques, and a Geographic Information System (GIS) to analyze artifact densities, the sinkhole outside the cave at Las Cuevas is shown to be a physically and socially restricted space which reveals political control over ritual resources and the appropriation of sacred space by the elite in reaffirming their right to rule in a time of crisis. It is also shown to contain a Late Classic ritual procession route connecting the main plaza and underlying cave, which further suggests the need to refine existing models of ritual circuits in order to include these vital yet previously neglected features of the sacred landscape.
From as early as 1000 B.C., the Maya considered caves to be sacred features of the landscape and used them as ritual venues in the foundational rites that aided in establishing their right to rule (García-Zambrano 1994; Moyes et al. 2009). Such state-sponsored rituals rely on group participation to reinforce a sense of social solidarity while simultaneously reifying the elite positions within the community (Durkheim 1912; Kertzer 1988; Turner 1969; Whitehouse 2002). These performances became increasingly important in times of crisis, such as during the 8-10th centuries Late Classic Maya “collapse” when a series of droughts aggravated the overcrowded, over-farmed, and deforested localities which grew increasingly dissatisfied with their rulers.

Ethnographies of modern Maya in Mexico, Guatemala and Belize show that not only are caves still used for ritual purposes, but that the area outside the cave is also used as a ritual space (Christenson 2008; Demarest and Woodfill 2009:119; Scott 2009). Unfortunately, the overwhelming majority of Maya cave studies have focused exclusively on the often small and constricting interior of the caves as the singular space associated with cave-related rituals and, until recently, no one has systematically examined how these spaces functioned for ancient people.

In the past few years archaeological excavations in Belize including these areas outside of cave entrances demonstrated that they were indeed often modified and used as part of the ritual program related to activities in the cave itself (Arksey 2014; Spenard 2014). Because these spaces are much more open than the extremely physically and socially restricted spaces inside caves, the implications of the transition from the interior of caves to the
exterior cannot be understated. In this paper, I describe some of the preliminary findings from my ongoing doctoral research showing that the sinkhole outside of the cave at Las Cuevas contains a Late Classic ritual procession route connecting the main plaza and cave, and suggest the need to include these vital yet previously neglected features of the sacred landscape in a new category of ritual circuit: a “Ritual Descent”.

A Brief History of Maya Cave Use

Caves for the ancient Maya represented, among other things: an origin of ancestral lineages, the source of water and rain, the source of sacred/holy water, sources of drinking water, sources of “virgin water” for religious rites, ceremonial dumps, the entrance to the underworld, a meeting point between the living world and the dead, and the location from which the maize god was born (Lorenzen 1999; McAnany 1995; Thompson 1966). As such, control of this pervasive feature of the landscape, and indeed any cleft in the earth, was of chief importance to rising classes of elite who wished to demonstrate their power to the masses.

The earliest evidence of regular ritual cave use comes from the Early-Middle Preclassic period (~1000 B.C. – 400 B.C.) (Moyes 2006, Moyes et al. 2009) and there is growing evidence that by the Late Preclassic (~400 B.C. - A.D. 250), rulers and elites, along with other high status individuals and priests, sponsored or conducted cave rites of caves for ritual purposes (Lorenzen 1999; Stone 2005). It is also in the Late Preclassic that the concept of “divine kingship" arose in which the populace placed complete reliance on one
*k’ul ajaw* (holy ruler) who maintained a tenuous balance of power largely through ritual performances (McAnany 1995; Schele and Miller 1992).

During the Terminal Late Classic period (~A.D. 700-950) in the Southern Lowlands, an assortment of events occurred which are believed to have culminated in the Classic Maya “collapse” including: climate change, exhaustion of soils, epidemic disease, earthquakes, war, religious and superstitious, revolts, disruption of trade networks, and ideological breakdown (Chase & Chase 1992; Demarest et al. 2005; Thompson 1966; Webster 2002). Recent theories argue that numerous successive and overlapping factors led to the fall of the foundational concept of divine kingship (Webster 2002; Demarest et al. 2005). This loss of faith led to the rulers being forced out of their positions and migrate elsewhere, causing further social, economic, and ideological failure and eventual abandonment of numerous sites in Southern Lowlands (Webster 2002). It is also during this time period that there is a dramatic increase in water-related ritual activity at cave sites in areas for which there is strong evidence for concurrent periods of significant drought (Moyes et al. 2009).

Ethnographic records of modern Maya in Guatemala and the Yucatan show that caves remain strongly associated with water and agricultural cycles (Adams and Brady 2005; Vogt and Stuart 2005). Most notably, studies of modern Maya demonstrate several instances of Maya groups making use of spaces outside of caves through the deposition of material remains or the creation of altars either because the space is in proximity to a cave or as part of a ritual procession to a cave (Christenson 2008; Demarest and Woodfill 2009;
Scott 2009). Demarest and Woodfill (2009:124) describe how the structure of longer modern Maya rituals are often divided into discrete multiple stages progressively closer to the cave and with increasingly private participation. Despite this, archaeological investigations have neglected to incorporate these spaces into the overall cave ritual repertoire.

**Las Cuevas: An Ancient Ritual Circuit Linking the Surface to the Underworld**

*Ritual Circuits*

“Ritual circuits” were first defined by Kathryn Reese-Taylor (2002) as pathways which a ritual specialist and select participants will follow over the course of a political or religious ceremony. These can take three forms:

1. **Ritual Circumambulation** is described in Classic period texts and modern ethnographies as a circuitous movement, often counter clockwise, through the ritual landscape. They are designed to create and maintain boundaries and involve ritual actions at cardinal directions around a central point.

2. **Periphery/Center processions** involve the ritual specialists moving from the center of the community to the periphery and are suggested to reinforce social integration and solidarity. They are recorded in modern ceremonies as well as on the Bonampak murals as including banners or flags.

3. **Base to Summit processions** proceed in both directions from the base to the summit of a mountain or temple. This type of procession has been linked to
supplications for rain in modern ceremonies, is argued to unite the three realms of the cosmos, and to symbolize the transformation of the ruler from mortal to deity as he ascends the steps of temple structures (Reese-Taylor 2002).

Previous archaeological circuit or procession research has focused primarily on site cores and have relied mostly on stelae, "banner stones", architecture, iconography, and ethnography to enable interpretation of these ancient spaces (Ashmore 1991; Demarest et al. 2003; Morton 2012; Moyes 2005; Reese 1996; Reese-Taylor 2002). However, nowhere are caves included in as the destination of any ritual circuits, and the identification of these likely procession routes has rarely revealed any formalized pathways other than *sacbes*. Because of the proximity of a large cave to its main plazas and ballcourt, the site of Las Cuevas provides an ideal case in which to investigate the possibility of ritual processions and circuits by the ancient Maya linking a site core to a cave.

*Las Cuevas*

The Las Cuevas Archaeological Research Project (LCAR) has been operating at the site of Las Cuevas in the Chiquibul Reserve in western Belize since 2011 (Moyes 2012; Moyes et al. 2012). A mid-sized site constructed and used almost exclusively during the Late Classic, it is one of the most salient examples of the tie between the monumental plazas and ritual cave sites. The site’s main plaza and Eastern Structure lie directly above a large cave set in the western side of the base of a sinkhole. The large East-facing entrance chamber has over 70 plastered platforms surrounding an actively flowing cenote. The tunnel system of the cave circles around underneath the monumental center and terminates as a window at the
top of the entrance chamber overlooking the cenote and facing the platforms in the entrance chamber (**Figure 1**). The cave at Las Cuevas provides concrete evidence that at least some cave rituals were meant to be viewed by large numbers of people.

The sinkhole outside the entrance to the cave is approximately 80m in diameter and 10m deep. Around the top of the sinkhole, linear structure and the main plazas of the site are all concentrated to the West and South – there are no linear structures or other monumental architecture on the northern and eastern edges of the sinkhole. Inside the sinkhole there are three main slopes with a level area at the base (**Figure 2**). Slope 1 is the Western slope and has a slight draw in the middle of it leading from Structure 11 to the base of the slope, as well as several rock outcrops and natural terraces. There is a gap between Structures 11 and 12 providing possible access to the sinkhole and the cave entrance. Slope 2 is the northern slope which has a steeper entry to the sinkhole than Slope 1 but quickly becomes gentler at the base, to the same degree as Slope 1. While it is steep at the top, it is not outside of the bounds of possibility to be modified. Slope 3 is the Southeastern slope and is similar in many respects to Slope 1. There is a gap between linear Structures 8 and 25 at the top, it has a draw in the middle of it and it also has several rock outcrops and natural terraces, lending to the possibility that it was also an entry to the sinkhole. While the visible natural terraces in the sinkhole were hypothesized to provide a possible amphitheater-like viewing space for large numbers of people, no formal architecture or cultural material was visible on the surface during survey of the sinkhole.

*Excavations*
In order to test the possibility of the sinkhole being a public viewing space, shovel test pits were placed throughout the sinkhole to quickly and efficiently determine where any further cultural material might be found to delineate the boundaries of activity in the sinkhole (Arksey 2014) (Figure 3). The most frequent artifacts found were ceramic sherds, the only identifiable fragments belonging to the Late Classic. Slope 2 and 3 had next to no artifacts within the shovel test pits. In those dug on Slope 1 however, a high concentration of ceramics sherds and occasional lithics, jute, chert flakes, sandstone, and quartz fragments in a matrix resembling midden/construction fill were found. This spike in artifact density on Slope 1 was unmistakable, with several pits less than 50cm deep having more than 120 sherds (Figure 4). The densities of sherds in the shovel test pits in this area revealed that this slope and the bottom terrace leading towards the cave entrance may have been heavily modified. This activity closely followed the natural terracing of the slope, curved around a large bedrock and boulder outcrop, and ended at the cave entrance (Figure 5).

Following these finds, larger horizontal excavation units were placed at the top, middle and base of Slope 1, outside of the cave entrance to the South of the gap in boulders leading into the cave, and directly inside the gap in the boulders leading into the cave (Figure 3). These demonstrated a high concentration of cultural material most closely resembling midden fill mixed with pebbles which appears to have been placed in a natural terrace for the purpose of leveling it off in relation to the gaps in the linear structures at the top of the sinkhole in this area. Small boulders appear to have been strategically placed within the bedrock and large naturally placed boulders of the slope to shore up certain areas for the retention of fill
(Figure 6). Close inspection of the taphonomic processes occurring on the slope, specifically large voids between the boulders below depths of 50cm, indicate that this matrix is likely intentionally placed fill and not a slower natural deposition coming off the backs of degrading linear structures.

Apart from ceramic sherds, rarer items recovered from the layers of fill in the larger excavations included chert flakes, jute, obsidian flakes, slate fragments, a river cobble at the base of a wall, a mano fragment, two *olivella* shell tinklers (one from Unit 22 and one from Unit 31), and a shell pendent. As with the shovel test pits, all datable material indicated a Late Classic origin. Most strikingly, two stalactite fragments were found. One was recovered in amongst some of the smaller boulders placed at the base of the natural terrace midway down Slope 1 in Unit 22 where the small boulders of this terrace appear to have been placed to create a flat front to the terrace where the bedrock had a break in it. The second speleothem fragment was found in the fill of a constructed terrace in front of the cave entrance in Unit 31. Based on the alignments of boulders in the area directly outside of the cave entrance, there appears to be steps leading to the first natural terrace at the base of Slope 1 (Figure 7). This confirms the density analysis of the shovel test pits indicating that there is a pathway that extends from the linear structures down to the cave entrance.
Discussion

The construction during this time period around the top of the sinkhole and along the slope to the cave entrance clearly restricted access to the cave. This restriction of access reveals the deliberate strategy on the part of the ruling classes to control ritual resources through the appropriation of sacred space, to both enhance social solidarity during the ‘collapse’ and publicly reify their own positions in the social and ritual landscape. These findings do not necessarily counter previous hypotheses that the sinkhole may have been used for large-scale and publicly accessible performances, but may provide for the possibility of placing the elite members of society who were allowed to partake in rituals taking place within the cave on a formalized and scripted display during their procession into the cave. The creation of formal and bounded enclosures enforces hegemony by controlling who has access to view the performances and restrict access to only those who support the elite agenda (Kertzer 1988; Wa Thiong’o 1997). At a time when the commoners of the Southern Lowlands were growing dissatisfied with their rulers’ abilities to control the universe, making the elite participation in such efforts conspicuous, while still maintaining the secrecy of the actual ritual efforts inside the cave, could have provided the elite classes a means of mollifying their followers.

While there is clear evidence for activity outside of the cave entrance, it is limited to a narrow area along one side of the sinkhole yet dispersed in a way that does not lend itself to a single performance platform or space. It does however appear to indicate that this space was modified and used as a pathway as part of a ritual activities inside the cave. The
inclusion of numerous water-related objects within the fill of the modified terracing, nested in the foundation of terraces, and potentially deposited on the surface of this pathway are all consistent with ethnographic accounts of artifact deposition along ritual circuits in a process of consecration and delineation of sacred boundaries.

The pathway from the monumental center to the cave at Las Cuevas is very similar to Reese-Taylor’s (2002) Base-to-Summit type of ritual circuit in its attempt to unite the three levels of the cosmos. However, Base-to-Summit circuits take place very specifically from the base to the summit of a mountain or temple, symbolizing the transformation of the ruler from mortal to deity as he ascends the steps of temple structures. Not only are caves not mentioned in this type of ritual circuit, but this symbolic transformation is nowhere proposed to occur in relation to cave ceremonies. I suggest that current models of ritual circuits need to be geographically expanded upon to include cave sites as the ultimate third tier of the cosmos. The intended destination and final goals of cave rituals suggest that a fourth type of ritual circuit, “Ritual Descents”, is needed to account for these underground spaces which have been thus far neglected by modern scholars on the subject of ritual processions.

Ritual Descents are directional processions, connecting a surface site to an underground location. Not just representing, but existing as the underworld, caves are by necessity the final destination of Ritual Descents. This type of procession has communion, supplication, and offering to the deities of the underworld as its goal. These types of procession routes conspicuously link all three realms of the cosmos, but with the emphasis on bringing the
forces of underworld under control of the performers of the rituals – the elite in the Late Classic, and ritual specialists of the modern Maya (Christenson 2008; Scott 2009). At Las Cuevas, this pathway would have led participants from light to progressively darker spaces as one moved through the daylight-accessible sinkhole, to the light entrance chamber, and through the progressively darker interior chambers of the cave. This Ritual Descent reinforces the deliberate site plan placing the Eastern Structure over the cave entrance.

Conclusions

Hegemony is by nature a group agreement enacted through public performances and practices. These performances became increasingly important in times of crisis, such as during the Late Classic Maya ‘collapse’ when the dissatisfaction of the commoner classes with their rulers became a problem all ruling groups had to contend with in one way or another. The marked increase in this time period in longstanding ritual cave practices (Moyes 2006; Moyes et al. 2009) is now being correlated with new evidence showing rituals taking place outside of the caves that date exclusively to the Late Classic.

The spaces outside of caves are much more open than the extremely physically and socially restricted spaces inside of caves, and the social implications of the inclusion of these spaces as formalized ritual pathways for the first time in the Late Classic indicates a fundamental change in ritual practice. This strategy by the ruling classes during this time period is exemplified by the site of Las Cuevas with its clear association of a cave site with a monumental center. Where Las Cuevas stands apart from previous archaeological ritual
procession studies is that it actually has a modified pathway that is quite visible in the data collected, but unfortunately remains invisible on the surface. As such, Las Cuevas has provided the means for expanding upon current ritual circuit studied to include a fourth category, Ritual Descents, which should prove valuable as a framework for the search outside of other cave entrances for ancient ritual pathways which might also remain otherwise invisible.

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**Figure 1.** The tunnel system of the cave circles around underneath the monumental center and terminates as a window at the top of the entrance chamber overlooking the cenote and facing the platforms in the entrance chamber.
Figure 2. Inside the sinkhole there are three main slopes with a level area at the base.
Figure 3. Map of the sinkhole showing the location of the shovel test pits and excavation units.
Figure 4. Density map of the test pits shows from which pits artifacts were recovered. It shows that not only was approximately 75% of the sinkhole unmodified, but that there is a distinct pattern of intense use and modification leading down Slope 1 from gaps in the linear structures to the entrance of the cave.
Figure 5. Map of Slope 1 including the shovel test pit densities, the location of the excavation units, and the natural features of the slope, showing that activity closely followed the natural terracing of the slope, around a large bedrock outcrop, and ended at the cave entrance.
**Figure 6.** Small boulders appear to have been strategically placed within the bedrock and large naturally placed boulders of the slope to shore up certain areas for the retention of fill.

**Figure 7.** Based on the alignments of boulders in the area directly outside of the cave entrance, there appears to be steps leading to the first natural terrace at the base of Slope 1.
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