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A Flexible Corporation: Classic Period House Societies in Eastern Mesoamerica

Abstract

House society models, based on the work of Levi-Strauss but since refined by cultural anthropologists and archaeologists, provide a good model for understanding social organization among the ancient Maya and their neighbors in Mesoamerica based on a comparative study of societies in the Copan Valley, the lower Ulua Valley (Sula Valley), and the Cuyumapa Valley, all in Honduras. Social Houses are flexible, enduring social groupings that define kinship flexibly, recognizing adoption, marriage, shared residency, and other factors as ways to create ties that endure over generations.

Keywords

Mesoamerica, Maya, Honduras, House society, social organization

Disciplines

Anthropology | Archaeological Anthropology

Comments

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A Flexible Corporation: Classic Period House Societies in Eastern Mesoamerica

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© 2001 (*Paper presented at the 66th Annual Meeting of the Society for American Archaeology, in the session, "Corporate Groups in Prehispanic Mesoamerica: Studies in the Variety of Social Organization and Resource Mobilization" in New Orleans, LA, in 2001.*)

Based on the clustering of buildings in sites, researchers have long proposed that Classic Maya society was composed of some kind of extended kin-groups. While the corporateness of residential groups has long been accepted, the nature of that corporation has been subject to debate. Scholars of ancient and contemporary Maya society and culture have not been immune from assumptions about kinship that, although they served as the underpinnings for much anthropological work on the definition and structure of corporate groups, have also been the focus of considerable criticism and rethinking (see Schneider 1984; Yanigasako and Collier 1987). In particular, the equation of group membership with some sort of "blood" relationship, one of the founding assumptions of the anthropological conception of kinship, has led to unfruitful attempts to identify lineages, clans, and moieties. Recently, Rosemary Joyce and Susan Gillespie have demonstrated the utility of Claude Lévi-Strauss' concept of sociétés "à maisons" for Mesoamerica (Gillespie 2000a, 2000b; Joyce 2000, 2001; see also Chance 2000). They argue that the "house societies" model foregrounds archaeologically visible phenomena, the social negotiation of continuity, and the material symbolization of stability for social groups that are flexible in membership but enduring in practice. We demonstrate how this emphasis on social negotiation and materiality facilitates archaeological investigation. Comparing data from three archaeologically studied areas of Honduras -- the Copan Valley, the lower Ulúa Valley, and the

Cuyumapa Valley -- we illustrate the flexibility of the “House” as a social unit.

House Societies

The House offers a useful alternative to other ways of talking about the social relations usually subsumed under the term kinship and to traditional concepts of corporate kinship groups. Lévi-Strauss (1982, especially pp. 172-174; 1987:151-196) originally developed the concept of House societies as a means of categorizing societies which presented problems for his kinship analyses. Thus the House, according to Lévi-Strauss, was a combination of lineal consanguineal kin and affines. But while a rhetoric of relationship is commonly employed in House societies, the material grounding for relationship is not uniquely or uniformly blood ties, but common investment in the House estate. This alternative way of looking at social relations, as the product of common activity rather than as a reflection of some essence, aligns the model of the House with contemporary anthropological approaches concerned with agency and the negotiation of social reproduction.

Summed up in *The Way of the Masks* as “a corporate body holding an estate made up of both material and immaterial wealth, which perpetuates itself through the transmission of its name, its goods and its titles down a real or imaginary line, considered legitimate as long as this continuity can express itself in the language of kinship or of affinity and, most often, of both” (Lévi-Strauss 1982:174), the House stands as a model social formation that is distinguished by its attention to a number of material domains. Among these, land, the dwelling, and heirloom wealth items are the enduring material embodiment of the continuity of the House. They are the focus of strategies for conservation and transmission on the part of members contending for position within the House, and for prominence of the House over neighboring Houses or distant allied rivals (Gillespie and Joyce 1997; McKinnon 1991). The concept of the House provides a

way to attend to the role of material goods in creating relationships between social actors, and to foreground the ways histories accrue in material things, and through their anchorage in those things, facilitate the continuity of particular forms of social relations.

Common to House societies is the ability to define a physical estate through which members of a “House” conceptualize themselves as a single group. The physical expression of House unity is usually, although not always, a building, a house, the dwelling or ceremonial residence of the House elders, or sometimes of the spirits of the ancestors. Houses, as a social group, it should be explicitly said, are not identical to individual house buildings (dwellings) or groups of buildings (house compounds), nor is co-residence a requirement for House membership. Instead, a dwelling, ceremonial building, tomb, or the house compound of some members, may serve as the physical location on the landscape where House continuity is anchored and made materially evident. House compounds form the basic structure of all Mesoamerican settlements. Residents of house compounds in Mesoamerican sites formed part of actual or potential Houses, whose wealth, renown, and even survival depended on the actions of individual members. But the House itself was a social unit, given form and continuity by the work of its members.

This social unit, the social House, embodied by people, endures over time. The estate of the House can be, as Lévi-Strauss noted, “made up of both material and immaterial wealth”: in addition to such forms of property as agricultural land, heirloom valuables, and the house building, Houses may own rights to perform particular ceremonies, to produce particular craft goods (often regalia used in such ceremonies), and to employ particular names and titles. It is through the transmission of House names that the members of the House are publicly marked as part of the group, and through their actions that the names of the House continue to be manifest.

The House seeks through alliances to improve its situation vis-à-vis other houses, while at the same time members of the House seek to improve their individual standing with whatever resources are available. The interests of individuals are sometimes advanced with those of their group, and sometimes held back by within-group obligations. In negotiations between Houses, both House and individual identities are defined.

In the rest of this paper, we demonstrate the utility of this model by comparing three Mesoamerican societies based on archaeological data from the Copan Valley, the Ulúa River Valley, and the Cuyumapa Valley in Honduras. The three societies that we discuss overlap in time but differ in environmental setting, degree of political centralization, and evidence for social differentiation. Despite these differences, we argue that they can all be viewed as House societies and that this model helps us understand the similar processes of social negotiation and interaction engaged in by members of each society.

The Copan Valley: Internally Stratified Houses

The Copan River, in western Honduras, creates a series of linked mountain valleys located 600 m above sea level. The largest valley was home to a centralized polity dominated by a dynasty of paramount rulers. Monumental architecture and art along with hieroglyphic texts make it clear that, at least in terms of written and visual expression, the society falls within the Maya pattern during the Classic period. Nevertheless, substantial numbers of polychrome pottery vessels and pottery figurines imported from the Comayagua, Ulúa or Naco Valleys, and similarities between Copan Valley and central Honduran storage vessels, show that the Copan people maintained important connections with their eastern neighbors (Joyce 1988a, 1993a; Longyear 1952; Viel 1993a, 1993b). Settlement in the Copan Valley peaks during the Coner phase (ca. AD 650-800) but continues until at least AD 1000, into the Ejar phase, after the

diminution and perhaps end of centralized rule (Viel 1993a, 1993b; Willey et al. 1994).

Surrounding the Main Group, the civic-ceremonial center of the polity, is a dense area of residential settlement occupied by members of the society's elite status group (see Baudez 1983; Hendon 1991; Sanders 1990a, 1990b, 2000; Webster 1989). The rest of the valley is home to a more dispersed settlement of farmers and some rural-dwelling elite (see Fash 1983; Freter 1988; Gonlin 1993; Whittington and Zeleznik 1991).

The noble residential compounds close to the Main Group vary in size but share a common pattern. The smallest unit is the patio group which is made up of buildings, including residences, temples, and storage and work areas, that face inward onto a paved patio. In many cases, the compounds consist of multiple patio groups that have attached themselves to one another or that have grown up around a central core over time. One of the largest such compounds, labeled Group 9N-8, was made up of at least fourteen patios. Other compounds contain two or three patio groups. Because each patio group maintains its inward orientation, even in the largest compounds, the sense is that of a set of separate units joined together but retaining their own internal cohesion, both spatially and functionally. Nevertheless, there are signs of cooperation such as the construction of stairs, the shared use of space between structures to deposit trash, and the use of one building to define the edges of two compounds.

Based on an analysis of the architecture, artifacts, and contextual associations in three compounds¹, Hendon (1991, 1997) has identified distributional patterns that show that essential

¹ Groups 9N-8, 9M-22, and 9M-24 were excavated from 1980-1984 by the Proyecto Arqueológico Copán Fase II, directed by William Sanders and sponsored by the Instituto Hondureño de Antropología e Historia. Our analysis of elite Houses at Copan derives primarily from Hendon's work on the artifacts and architecture from these compounds but applies equally well to other compounds in the area, some of which are discussed in Willey and Leventhal (1979), Fash (1983), Ashmore (1991), and Webster et al. (1998).

activities of daily living, including food preparation, food consumption, and storage, are found in all patios of each compound. The repeated occurrence of such basic activities indicates that each patio functioned as a separate social and residential unit for the carrying out of certain repetitive aspects of daily life. Crafting, such as weaving, or shell and bone ornament making, and the production of useful implements, such as obsidian tools, occurs in many patios (Hendon 1997; Widmer 1997). Shared ritual activities reinforced the solidarity of patio residents.

Nevertheless, despite their evident autonomy in matters of provisioning, manufacture, and ritual, the patios also display patterns of difference that argue for the existence of status inequities and hierarchical relations within and between compounds. These differences, evident both within patios and between them, include the materials used in building construction, the quantity and themes of architectonic sculpture, the presence, nature, or absence of ritual structures, the occurrence of imported polychrome pottery, and burial practices (Abrams 1987; Hendon 1991, in press). Most patios studied have a dominant structure, a residence that is similar in plan but differs in the quality of its construction and decoration (Hendon 1991). In addition to showing unequal access to resources and human energy, these patterns also indicate variation in the use of (and by implication the right to use) material symbols of cultural significance, such as greenstone, shell, and imported polychrome pottery from west-central Honduras. The location and sponsorship of certain important events, such as feasting, coincides with these markers of high status (Hendon n.d.). At the same time, the highest status compounds conceal stored goods far more than those of lower or middle status (Hendon 2000b).

In an earlier study of Copan social organization, Hendon (1991) drew on Irving Goldman's (1970) concept of a "status lineage" to model social relations of the residents of the compounds in this high status zone. Goldman emphasizes that the Polynesian societies that he

studied accepted multiple determinants of group membership, including descent, seniority, gender, residence, and marriage. The very ambiguity of such a system leads to greater flexibility in the distribution of power, assignment of rank, and maintenance over time of “status lineage” identity. In its concern with the flexible negotiation of membership in groups and the relationship of this flexibility to status, Goldman’s analysis was an early precursor of House societies models that have since been elaborated for the Pacific (see Gillespie 1999, 2000b; Joyce 2000), with implications for Hendon's (1991) analysis of Copan that we explore here.

The variation at Copan, described briefly above (and more fully in Hendon 1991, 1997, 2000b, in press, n.d.), reflects the existence of ranking and differences in role among the House members living in the residential compounds. The residential compounds, whether consisting of a single patio or many patios joined together, are physical manifestations of the estate of the Houses which inhabited them. The presence of multiple residential patios in the larger groups, each the locus of a similar range of domestic activities, indicates that the members of many of the Houses would have had a multi-level sense of social cohesion, first with their patio group and then with the compound as a whole. Differences in social status within the larger compounds, marked, for example, by the smaller and shoddier houses and the people buried with less regalia and wealth, make visible the presence of lower-ranking members of the House who have been accepted as members of the group and thus allowed to reside in the patio but whose low rank or indirect connection places them in a subordinate position.

As we noted above, Houses are defined as much by their “estate” as by their individual members or a particular kinship pattern. The physical houses, the group-owned ritual paraphernalia, the regalia, and the wealth are property and heirlooms of the overarching social entity, not the individuals who make up the living members of the House at any given point in

time. The presence of multiple burials within compounds, usually below the patio floor or within the buildings themselves, some of which contain objects of value, such as jade or shell jewelry, or finely made pottery vessels, speaks to the connection between living and dead House members (compare McAnany 1995). But the extreme variation in the presence and quality of such valued objects among the buried members of the House testifies to the enduring nature of differences in rank within the social group. The flexible means of creating affiliation in House societies also served as grounds on which to differentiate between House members, allowing for the assertion of extreme differentiation among the members of single social groups (compare Boon 1990).

The Ulúa Valley: Houses Negotiating Difference

The communities of the lower Ulúa Valley exhibit a range of material culture styles and settlement types (Henderson 1988; Joyce 1991; Robinson 1989). One of the major rivers in the country, the Ulúa River drains north into the Caribbean. Located in the southwest valley, Cerro Palenque covers 26 hectares in an area of low hills rising to an elevation of 232 m above sea level. The hills sit at the confluence of the Ulúa and Comayagua rivers, giving the inhabitants of this ancient community an excellent view of the river and surrounding flood plain. The earliest settlement is located on the highest hill, at site CR-44. Excavations here recovered Ulúa Polychrome pottery, indicating that the occupation dates to the Late Classic period, or between AD 500 and 850 (Joyce 1991). They revealed a well-built and architecturally elaborate patio group (Group 2), with cut-stone buildings covered in plaster and decorated with carved sculptural elements.

CR-44 is contemporaneous with the peak occupation in the Copan Valley. People of the lower Ulúa Valley clearly participated in Classic Maya traditions, but most documented

interaction from the lower Ulúa Valley was directed toward the Maya lowlands through maritime links to Belize, or else east and south, to Honduras, Nicaragua, and Costa Rica outside the Maya sphere (Joyce 1988b, 1991, 1993a; Henderson 1992). Copan occupied a marginal position in the social networks of late Classic people of the lower Ulúa Valley. But the practices evident at Late Classic CR-44 were well within the range described above for Copan (Joyce 1988b, 1991).

The excavated Late Classic group included a building on the north with a looted, center-line tomb constructed of cut stone slabs that was as elaborate as any excavated in residential groups at Copan. This building, lacking internal benches, provided with tenoned sculpture representing an abstract animal head, and raised above the rest of the group by a cut block staircase, corresponds to some of the ritual structures found in the most differentiated residential groups at Copan. A low platform in the center of the patio, on the centerline of the stairway of this ritual building, contained caches containing obsidian blades, an obsidian biface, and a *Spondylus* shell and jade bead, the latter a type of deposit found in public buildings at Copan (Joyce 1986). The other buildings surrounding the patio were apparently used for everyday residence. Those on the west and south had simple rectangular plans, with cobble platforms covered with plaster. In contrast, the larger platform on the east supported a cut-stone superstructure with a substantial plaster bench, with massive block stairs to the patio and abundant fragments from an upper stone sculptural frieze. Identifiable blocks present geometric motifs related to the iconography of noble Houses at Copan and in the central Maya lowlands of Belize and the Peten (Joyce 1988b). During the early occupation of this cluster of buildings, residents of the eastern building discarded green obsidian blades and stucco-painted pottery, exotic goods of Central Mexican style (and in the case of the obsidian, possibly Central Mexican origin). In other sites in the Middle Classic Maya lowlands and highlands, such Central Mexican-

style goods were preferentially consumed by selected noble houses, differentiating their residents from other social groups within these communities (compare Ball 1983).

While the basis for comparison between Late Classic groups is lacking, the variation within the one documented group at CR-44 is as extreme as that noted in contemporary noble House compounds at contemporary Copan. We consequently conclude that, like Copan, the Late Classic community of Cerro Palenque was composed of internally stratified Houses. While the forms of political organization at the two sites were quite distinct, as suggested by the absence at Cerro Palenque (and in the lower Ulúa Valley in general) of the use of writing, using House societies models, we can productively compare development and change in social organization in the two areas.

Between AD 850 and 1000 (the Terminal Classic period), residences at CR-44 were abandoned but the community of Cerro Palenque expanded, becoming much larger and denser with over 500 residential structures spread over the lower series of ridges, at elevations of 100-200 meters, north of Cerro Palenque's peak. Residential and special purpose structures are found in several distinct groups on these ridges, with the largest designated sites CR-157, CR-170, and CR-171. During this late period Cerro Palenque became the largest settlement in the valley. Residents of the site consumed locally produced fine-paste ceramics, which replace earlier polychromes as the fancy or special occasion ware of choice. The new fine paste ceramics have stylistic affinities with the contemporaneous Fine Orange pottery of the western Maya Lowlands (Joyce 1987, 1988a, 1991, 1993b; Joyce and Hendon 2000; Lopiparo et al. 2000). CR-157, the largest group of structures at Cerro Palenque, contains a 300-meter long plaza incorporating a large ballcourt. This plaza is the political heart of the ancient settlement during its Terminal Classic occupation (Joyce 1991). Although by this time centralized rule had broken down at

Copan, occupation continued in the Copan valley and the high-status Houses discussed above continued to carry on practices initiated by their Late Classic predecessors in residential compounds located around the Main Group. From a similar beginning point of Late Classic stratified houses, development at Cerro Palenque took a somewhat distinct turn.

Excavations in five clusters of small structures distributed throughout the periphery of Terminal Classic Cerro Palenque documented relatively regular architectural features and artifact inventories (Joyce 1991). Compared to similar compounds at Copan, the range of variation at late Cerro Palenque is more limited, but like the pattern seen at Copan, variation independent of function is present both between groups and within groups. Between groups, the most obvious variation is in architectural mass and use of less common architectural materials. Group 1, located immediately adjacent to monumental terraces of CR-157, includes a building with a carefully constructed cobblestone bench, elevated on the highest terrace in this group. Buried within the bench as an apparent cache was a complete, unused basalt mano. The doorway into this building has a single stair made of a cut and faced block of vesicular basalt, available across the river from the site, and otherwise used only for sculpture in the ballcourt and another non-residential structure. The significance of the use of this exotic material is reinforced by the fact that a second structure in this group included a slab of schist, a stone available no closer than 15 km northwest. Like the basalt, schist has otherwise been documented only as part of nonresidential structures at the site.

The features that distinguish these structures in Group 1-- exotic stone, built in bench, cache, and high substructural terraces-- serve to set this House apart from others in its cluster, and link this House with similar focal houses in other excavated clusters. For example, in Group 3, located further away from the monumental terraces on the northeast of the site, a cobblestone

bench distinguished the structure built on the highest terraces in one patio from all other structures of similar plan and dimensions in the group, which featured simple cobble wall bases defining rectangular rooms on lower terraces. This bench also incorporated a complete, unused ground stone artifact in its fill. In Group 5, located to the northwest, the single structure with benches again yielded cached stone artifacts, in this case obsidian points buried under the doorsill.

Proportions of imported raw material used in chipped stone in small trash concentrations dumped immediately behind such focal structures are the highest in their groups, and artifact inventories in these associated trash concentrations are the most diverse. Use of imported stone and diversity of artifact inventories may both be taken as proxies for wealth (Smith 1987), and suggest that within each of these groups there were subtle differentials in access to resources.

The shorter span of time of the Terminal Classic occupation at Cerro Palenque (estimated at 100 to 200 years) limited the development of complex clusters like those that characterize the high status residential area of Copan, where construction of some large groups began in the early Classic Acbi phase (ca. AD 400-650; Viel 1993a, 1993b). It is consequently notable that the focal buildings documented at Cerro Palenque, which correspond to the dominant structures at Copan, were features of the few multi-patio groups at the site, and likely reflect the kind of extended multi-family compounds that made up the Copan elite zone. But at Cerro Palenque we can say with relative certainty that these multi-patio compounds are not simply reflections of growth over time, but were instead *founded* as larger residences of already internally differentiated social groups. From the perspective of House societies models, the founding of these compounds in the emerging regional center of the Terminal Classic Ulúa Valley represents a materialization of social Houses of greater size, wealth, and internal complexity than the

majority of most house compounds at the site. As at Copan, these Houses invested more resources in architecture that simultaneously distinguished the group and marked one residence within the group as focal. And it was the residents of this focal residence that were engaged to a greater degree in external exchange, and in sponsoring feasts.

The largest and most centrally located house compound in Terminal Classic Cerro Palenque is immediately south on the same raised terrace as the ballcourt of CR 157, which excavation has demonstrated was constructed during the initial Terminal Classic (Joyce 1991). Recent excavations of this compound by Hendon have extended the range of variation documented for Terminal Classic residential groups at the site (Hendon 2000a; Hendon and Lopiparo in press). Hendon found that a pavement links the southern end of the ballcourt to the interior of this compound, the northern end of which remained open to the ballcourt area throughout its occupation. This suggests that residents of this compound could have observed, and may have sponsored, ballgames taking place in the court adjacent. Evidence for the production of fine-paste pottery vessels comes from a dump associated with the western structure of the group. This same trash deposit also contained numerous examples of fine-paste vessels, such as Baracoa Fine-Paste tripod dishes, perhaps used in sponsored feasts in conjunction with ballgames (Hendon 2000a; Hendon and Lopiparo in press; Lopiparo et al. 2000).

The residents of this group were apparently wealthier than those of other contemporary house compounds at Cerro Palenque. Higher proportions of imported obsidian have been recovered from this compound than were found in any other documented residential group in Terminal Classic Cerro Palenque. Furthermore, a cache associated with the eastern structure of this group incorporated part of a carved marble vessel, a unique luxury good at the site, representative of the most restricted form of manufactured good in the region (Luke et al. 2000;

compare Luke in press, Luke and Tykot in press). This single patio residential compound clearly presents evidence of a much greater labor investment, of greater involvement in long distance exchange and craft patronage, and of unique levels and types of engagement in public activities, related to the ballcourt, than any of the previously investigated compounds at Cerro Palenque.

From the perspective of social models based on class stratification, the subtlety of the distinctions between this compound and others at the site would be a weak basis for postulating social difference, despite the fact that the differences are quite striking within the local context. But from a House societies perspective, the compression of variation is less important than the existence and nature of the differences evident between this compound and the others. All compounds discussed here can be considered focal locales for social Houses (whether all the members of each group resided in these compounds or not). Like the residential compounds at Copan, each of these focal groups was actively engaged in a similar range of strategies of negotiating and marking social distinction, with some (most notably the compound south of the ballcourt) being able to stand out more than others through their control of resources, the design of their dwellings, and the activities in which they engaged. The archaeologically perceptible traces of the negotiation and marking of social connections and distinctions, and of economic cooperation, rather than of some presumed form of kinship, are the basis for defining these sites as locales of social groups like ethnographic Houses.

The Cuyumapa Valley: Nascent Houses

Our final example, from a project we jointly directed along the drainage of the Cuyumapa River in upland valleys east of the lower Ulúa Valley, serves to underscore the flexibility of the House societies model. In the Oloman (85 sq km) and Cataguana (80 sq km) valleys on the drainage of the Cuyumapa River, we documented and mapped 511 structures. The *number* of

structures suggests a population scale approximately equal to that of Cerro Palenque, but distributed across a much larger area resulting in a much lower *density* of population (Joyce and Hendon 2000; Joyce et al. 1989). Among the mapped structures, we have identified a relatively homogeneous class of 456 small-scale structures, ranging up to 1.25 m in height, that co-occur in groups. Most are between 3.4 and 8.48 m long, and between 2.64 and 6.41 m wide. A second group of large-scale structures is made up of those with approximate dimensions between 15.81 and 30.65 m long, and between 7.92 and 24.06 m wide. This group includes all the structures over 1.25 m tall, but also some broad but lower structures. Among the large-scale structures are included seven examples of ballcourts, identifiable by their paired, parallel buildings. Based on our survey and mapping, we have shown that small-scale and large-scale structures are grouped into 71 spatial clusters, separated from one another by expanses of unbuilt land.

The majority of large-scale structures were associated with each other. Clusters of large-scale structures usually incorporated small-scale structures as well. They include all seven ballcourts identified. In a few cases single large-scale structures were located in clusters otherwise composed only of small-scale structures. But the vast majority of the clusters documented are composed solely of varying numbers of small-scale structures. The degree to which such small-scale clusters were concentrated near large-scale clusters varied substantially. The major determinant of the location of small-scale structures that is evident is placement along streams. We argue that this type of settlement location reflects the interests of farmers in being located close to land and water for agriculture (Joyce and Hendon 2000).

Excavations at one site in the region, PACO 2, explored both a ballcourt (Fox 1994) and small-scale clusters located in close proximity (Fung 1995b). Both were occupied in the Terminal Classic period, allowing close comparison with features of Cerro Palenque, described

above. In fact, based on analysis of ceramics from both sites, they were engaged in some form of contact, resulting in exchange of a small number of Baracoa Fine Paste vessels from the lower Ulúa Valley found at PACO 2, and of Blanco Grey dishes made in Yoro, recovered at Cerro Palenque. Given the low numbers of foreign vessels found at each site, the contact between them was more likely some form of social interaction than economically significant trade (compare Ball 1993).

While there was significant differentiation in intensity of production in different compounds at PACO 2, and differences in the presence and diversity of imported materials (including obsidian and non-local pottery), architectural differences were very slight (Fung 1995a, 1995b). Thus, while it can be said that households were actually engaged in different levels of production, and were distinguished by unique external social links, these differences were almost invisible in everyday life and materially impermanent over the span of occupation of the site.

Unlike the situation at Cerro Palenque, ballcourts in Yoro were not linked architecturally to specific house compounds (Joyce and Hendon 2000). Nor did they form part of a closed complex of monumental architecture as at Copan. While there was substantial evidence in each of the ballcourts investigated for feasting and for ritual practice (Fox 1994), it seems problematic to associate these activities with factions linked to particular residences (contrast Fox 1996). Instead, the most salient pattern among the multiple ballcourts in Yoro is a strong association between directional orientation and location on major or minor drainages of the river, which we have suggested reflects seasonal use of different ballcourts as regional and subregional points of assembly and community integration for residents of clusters from a wider area (Joyce and Hendon 2000).

While the material differences among house compounds in Yoro are the subtlest in our three examples, they are, like those at Cerro Palenque, potentially significant markers of traits we can associate with social groups deploying labor to distinguish themselves within their localities (compare Fung 1995a). It is those groups with evidence of greater economic production which also produced evidence of imported materials, especially pottery and figurines from the lower Ulúa Valley, some most likely from Cerro Palenque itself. Rare examples of Baracoa Fine Paste tripod dishes in Yoro represent a type distinctive of Cerro Palenque's sphere of influence in the Terminal Classic, and the rare examples of Blanco Gray dishes of the same form at Cerro Palenque can now be identified as imports to that site from Yoro, where they are abundant and their distinctive paste is common to other local pottery (Lopiparo et al. 2000). The focus on a specific vessel form, the tripod plate, along with imported fine paste, mold-made figurines of types like those documented as being produced at Cerro Palenque in the compound south of the ballcourt, suggests that some nascent Houses in Yoro were creating external links to powerful Houses elsewhere as part of strategies to distinguish themselves within the society of the Cuyumapa drainage. House societies models easily accommodate this kind of peer relations between Houses in different areas that are much different in relative wealth and degree of social distinction.

Conclusion

Gillespie (2000a:42-43) observes that because the ideal of the house is not based on fixed requirements of kinship, residence, or class, analysts can use it to examine "variations on a theme" (Waterson 1995:48) between societies with different levels of social stratification. She notes that the house can be employed in the analysis of societies manifesting "proto-houses" that emulate high-ranked houses (Schrauwers 1997), or "embryonic" Houses (Sandstrom 2000) that

lack the economic resources to keep their property in perpetuity (Gillespie 2000b, 2001). She points out that Lévi-Strauss (1982:186-187) found that the House consistently appeared in societies that were too complex for kin ties alone to organize social relations but in which class- or contract-based relationships were not developed.

Linked by social ties, perhaps including marriage alliance but not limited to relations defined solely or primarily through some notion of descent, the nascent Houses of Yoro and the more established noble House of Cerro Palenque drew on a similar range of material practices to perpetuate themselves, as did the larger, internally more diverse, and absolutely wealthier noble Houses of Copan. What House societies models let us focus on are the ways that Houses in these three distinct areas used materiality to create enduring identities and represent them through specific material practices, including architecture. As archaeologists, we can foreground those practices to which we have most direct access-- construction and elaboration of buildings; creation and maintenance of storage facilities; production and consumption of both local and imported goods; burial of the dead and conversion of the dead to ancestors; and social and ritual performances-- instead of seeking unfruitfully for material signatures of specific forms of kinship organization, which ethnographers have in fact questioned or even abandoned (compare Schneider 1984; Gillespie 2000a, 2000b; Yanigasako and Collier 1987).

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