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Abstract

Central to ancient Amerindian cosmologies were the venerations of, mediations by, and rituals performed for ancestors. This short paper reviews some of the fundamental relationships between the peoples of Eastern North America, the greater Southwest, and Mesoamerica and their ancestors, with focus on the past as known through archaeological remains. Examples from each of the three sub-continental areas are highlighted and generalities are identified. There is evidence of practices whereby ancestral spirits were translocated and embodied by material things, physical spaces, and other substances or elements (earth, clouds, water). Likewise, there is evidence that ancestors were subject to selective remembering and forgetting, a process especially important to political and religious institutions. Finally, ancestors provided tangible connections to higher-order supernatural beings or powers.

Introduction

Ancestors figure prominently in human history, mediating the living and the dead, experience and belief, domestic life and institutions, etc. They also figure prominently in classic anthropological studies of kinship, political organization, and religion, many of which seek to reconstruct abstract ideals and shared beliefs of entire peoples, past and present (Frazer 1945; Tylor 1964). This is a perilous intellectual exercise that often assumes cultural uniformity among entire peoples, and flattens the diversity of actual beliefs—as variously enacted, commemorated, or performed by different people in diverse contexts even within the same social landscape (Geertz 1973:113). Performance in some sense is belief (in action), a point made by archaeologists alternately from cognitive, neuro-phenomenological, or practice-based perspectives (Bednarik 1990; Fogelin 2007; Knappett and Malafouris 2008; Malafouris 2004, 2007).

The point is critical to an appreciation of how ancestors mediated New World cosmologies and people. In essence, beliefs cannot be believed without being exposed relationally and continuously through sensory experience. Relational or sensory

experience, in turn, necessitates a material or spatial dimension or some other experiential stimuli to take effect. The upshot: ancestors are engaged by people through things, places, or other beings. To make this point, we briefly outline how ancestors did this in the historically related areas of Mesoamerica, the greater Southwest, and eastern North America. Some commonalities are apparent and briefly discussed afterwards.

Eastern North America

For many analysts, the earthen mounds of eastern North America are the most readily obvious link to the personages of the ancient past (Pauketat and Alt 2003). This is true of the earliest Middle and Late Archaic-period mollusk-shell and earthen mounds in the Southeast (ca. 7000-5000 BP). These, Randall and Sassaman (2010) argue, link human remains and supernatural forces through their structured deposits of shell and earth. The same is true of later Hopewellian earthworks and burial mounds (ca. 100 BCE-400 CE), Late Woodland platforms in the South and effigy mounds in the upper Midwest, and even more recent Mississippian-era packed-earth pyramids (1050-1600 CE). In some sense, all materialized mythical stories of creation or ancestry. For instance, the bear, bird, and water spirit mounds of southern Wisconsin (ca. 700-1050 CE) were built by “Effigy Mound Culture” people who identified with or descended from one or another supernatural being or totemic ancestor (Birmingham and Eisenberg 2000). The mound in this case might have been an embodiment of an ancestral spirit engaged by the living. Other Woodland and Mississippian mounds were earthen roofs for or platforms elevating charnel houses and mortuary temples that housed ancestors (Brown 1997; Hall 1997). There, earth might have evoked ancestors or earth deities.

The temple, or ancestor shrine, was a fixture in Eastern North America at least the last two millennia or since the Middle Woodland period. Those that date to this time in the Ohio valley are elaborate rectangular bent-pole buildings, often found at the base or alongside burial mounds. Inside may be human remains or indications of the processing of the deceased, often in association with dedicatory offerings of hypertrophic material goods: mica cut-outs, copper axeheads, obsidian knives, grizzly bear and wolf teeth or claw necklaces, carved stone smoking pipes, and more. Sometimes, it appears that such artifacts were substituted for human remains, as if the objects were understood to embody an ancestral spirit (Carr and Case 2005). Such was the case in other parts of the Woodlands, although temples gave way to other formal facilities for processing the dead, such as log crypts in the Mississippi valley (from Wisconsin south to Louisiana). Later in time, however, people used both scaffolds and charnel houses (for processing corpses) and temples (for curating the bones, among other things). Temples emerged during these later Mississippian times as defining attributes of the identity of both communities and leaders, which were often one and the same (as evidenced in the conflation of names of historic era rulers and peoples, towns, or polities, from Powhatan in Virginia to Pawhuska among the Osage in Oklahoma, to the Caddi/Caddo in Texas). The temple was home to the ancestors from whom identity

emanated. This is, of course, the reason that a town's ancestors—the bones and temples themselves—were the principal targets of an enemy's attack (Clayton et al. 1993). Successful attacks undermined the town's ancestral heritage.

At the American Indian city of Cahokia and its outliers during the 11th through 13th centuries CE, human remains and sacred earth were routinely associated with large timbers or upright marker posts, mortuary temples, and remains of a subset of the population (Pauketat 2008). Such places were portals between worlds precisely because the temples and earthen layers “presenced” the ancestors and interceded, through priests, in the world of people. Among some likely descendants of Cahokians or their Mississippian neighbors, such as the Omaha in the west or the Choctaw in the south, sacred poles were specially housed or prominently set in plazas, there to be venerated as living ancestors (Adair 1930; Ridington and Hastings 1997). At Cahokia, great posts up to a meter in diameter were set in the ground individually, in rows, or in groups. But these were not left to rest for more than a few years, at which point they were extracted and reset elsewhere (as attested by both insertion and extraction ramps dug to emplace and remove them). In this way, such things could be seen and periodically engaged by living people as ancestors, perhaps not unlike stone *chulpas* in the Andes or upright megaliths in southern England, among many other examples worldwide (e.g., Nielsen 2009; Parker Pearson et al. 2006).

Evidence is mounting among both the Cahokians and their Ohio Hopewell precursors that such monuments to the ancestors, and the sites where they stood, were destinations of great pilgrimages that were, in turn, timed to coincide with astronomical events. Near Cahokia, new evidence suggests that three special shrine complexes consisting of arrangements of posts and mounds atop prominent hills were aligned to both major and minor lunar standstills, or the extreme rising and setting positions during the moon's 18.6 year cycle (Pauketat 2011; for a comparable case in the Southwest, see Sofaer 2008). Processional avenues entered one of these sites from the east and west. Such arguments have been made for features at several of the great Hopewell ceremonial centers—each of which covered up to 50 ha—in the Scioto River valley in Ohio (Romain 2000). Great embanked avenues also connected these places with each other and, perhaps via alignments to key astronomical events, with the heavens.

Thinking of wooden posts and pilgrimages in this way is consistent with the views of indigenous priests and elders in many eastern Woodlands and Plains societies, who appear to have considered poles as a virtual means of accessing the ancestors who resided in the heavens which, in turn, were themselves in motion. That is, the celestial objects and asterisms of the night sky—as George Lankford (2007), Robert Hall (1997), and others have pointed out—were commonly purported to be ancestors. The greatest or brightest of these—such as Venus, Mars, Saturn, or the stars of the Pleiades or Big Dipper—were gods or god-like ancestors (Chamberlain 1982; Lankford 2007; McCleary 1997). Thus, in a way, upright poles embodied in tangible form the spirit trail visible as the Milky Way along which souls of the departed would make their own pilgrimages to be with the ancestors and gods in the netherworld. Not surprisingly, massive wooden posts at Cahokia—perhaps the apical ancestors and mediators of the cosmos—were

sometimes associated with female sacrifices, ancestral temples, and specially processed earth (Alt and Pauketat 2007; Fowler et al. 1999; Hargrave and Hedman 2004). Presumably, the post (read ancestor or ancestral pathway) connected the earth and earth mother in which it was embedded with the sky into which it projected and the sky-beings beyond.

Besides buildings and posts, ancestral spirits were widely reported to occupy other objects, especially bundles of human bones and stone carvings of masculine and feminine ancestors, all held within mortuary temples (Smith and Miller 2009). But these spirits were also mobile, and might visit a living person in a dream or be held or kept by priests in or as things in other sorts of medicine bundles. For instance, in one well-known Hidatsa bundle, skulls of the mythical hero twins—who were said by the bundle keeper to have descended from the sky at some distant point in the past—were bundled and, on special occasions, reanimated in the midst of these Plains people. Such bundles were themselves powerful animate persons (Zedeño 2008), revered and cared for by the living, and the source of nearly all religious practices (which were impossible to perform without them).

Greater Southwest

The Greater Southwest, as we define it here, comprises the southwestern United States and northern Chihuahua and Sonora in Mexico. Many ethnic groups live in this region today and have lived there historically, but here we limit our focus to the recent ancestors of Pueblo peoples, sedentary farmers. These comprise archaeological cultures called Ancestral Pueblo (including “Anasazi,” an out-dated term for Ancestral Pueblo people of the Colorado Plateau, Mogollon, Sinagua, and Cohonina) and to some extent Hohokam, a southern Arizona culture that probably comprised ancestors of contemporary Piman peoples as well as some Hopi and Zuni Pueblo clans.

Pueblos share architecture, worldview, and economy, but they are diverse in language, social organization, ritual practices, degree and kinds of social hierarchy, and historical relationships to each other and to territory. Pueblos speak Hopi (Uto-Aztecan), Zuni (isolate), Keresan (isolate), three Tanoan languages, Piro and Tompiro (unclassified). Reckoning kin varies among Pueblos (matrilineal, patrilineal and bilateral forms occur) so kinship, descent, and relationships to ancestors vary. In Southwest Pueblo communities today, ancestors are important in several ways that probably varied over time and space.

Each Pueblo has a unique history and unique sets of ancestors. Most Pueblos recount migration histories, with one or more social groups traveling and settling together. Due to dramatic demographic shifts and population aggregation in the late 13th to 14th centuries, archaeological “culture areas” are difficult to connect to specific contemporary Pueblo communities. At the maximum geographic extent of Puebloan sites

in the early 1100s, communities were smaller and more widespread than the Pueblo villages encountered by the Spaniards in the 1500s.

Pueblo people today explain that ancestors are still present in places where they once lived and were buried. Thus, archaeological sites are still inhabited, and excavated human remains should be reburied so that ancestors can continue their journey or cycle from life to death to life again. Relationships between ancestors and descendants are based on reciprocity. Descendants pray for ancestors and give them offerings. Ancestors reciprocate by returning as rain that nourishes crops (Ferguson et al. 2001). Whereas ancestors and maize are closely linked in Mesoamerica, in the Southwest this link is mediated by moisture. Ancestors are usually conceived as breath and clouds (Parsons 1939:170-172).

Almost all Pueblos practice katsina rituals. Katsinas personify all good things in the world, especially moisture—clouds and rain. They are ancestors in a general sense in that the dead become clouds (Parsons 1939:170-172). Initiates become katsinas during katsina performances. This role is an honor and a responsibility requiring physically and mentally demanding initiation. In Pueblos today katsinas are considered benevolent anthropomorphic or zoomorphic beings that live in mountains, lakes, and springs. Nonetheless, they can be provoked to anger, and are therefore dangerous; Acoma used to re-enact the “katsina war” every four to six years (Stirling 1942:61-66, 86-89).

Pueblos also have other ideas about ancestors: sodality/clan ancestors, and reincarnation in other lifeforms. For example, Hopi clan ancestors (wuuyas) embody clan knowledge and responsibilities. Some clan wuuyas are responsible for certain ritual sodalities. At Zuni, people go to katsina village (a lake west of Zuni pueblo) when they die, and some say they are then reincarnated as animals or insects (see also Ferguson et al 2001 for Hopi parallels). So all katsinas are ancestors, but not all ancestors are katsinas, at least not all the time. Katsinas began to be depicted in graphic form in the AD 1300s, but we do not know whether the concept of ancestors as clouds and moisture is older than that, or whether the earliest katsinas were thought to be clouds and moisture, or whether other roles, such as warriors, were more important (compare, for example, Plog and Solometo 1997 with Adams 1991).

Prior to AD 1300, burials usually are in ash piles (middens). Today, ash piles with quotidian refuse are sacred areas where things return to the earth. Ash piles are and were communal spaces, so the literal ancestors are part of the whole community, not just one household. In the archaeological record of the Eastern Pueblos, most burials are flexed and oriented to face east, although within and between settlements orientation may be patterned. In Rio Grande sites, kiva features (such as ventilators) are generally also oriented east or east-west. Individuals are frequently interred with pottery and jewelry, although not differentially. Infants and children were often buried with shell beads. At Rowe Ruin (an ancestral Pecos/Jemez site), two individuals were buried in extended positions (one with a stone projectile point embedded in a cervical vertebra), layered head to toe, which is a pattern noted as well in Sopris Phases sites (Trinidad Lakes). Pueblo sites not uncommonly include different mortuary treatments that may

have nothing to do with social status. Within single, aggregated villages after 1300, different burial modes were practiced. Some—most often infants and young children—were buried under room floors (Cordell 1999). Ancestors were certainly kept within the community but not treated differentially.

Chaco is noteworthy for supposedly not having enough burials to account for its population size, as inferred in architecture, and for “high status burials” from Pueblo Bonito Room 33. Plog (2008) and others who have studied archival excavation accounts conclude that there are no missing burials nor was there a low resident population at Chaco. Early investigators described burial mounds or ash piles on the south side of the canyon, some associated with smaller ruins but some *eight miles west* of Pueblo Bonito (Hewett 1936 cited in Plog 2008). Chacoans’ use of separate burial areas potentially distorts our understanding of their society. Plog (2008) notes that secondary burials are not unusual at Chaco, where partial skeletons and human bones are found in marked contexts (e.g. Room 33 and the western burial cluster at Pueblo Bonito, small sites Bc 50 and 51). Pepper’s records suggest to Plog that the Room 33 burials represent four complete individuals. The remaining “10 burials” included isolated skulls, mandibles, a leg, and a foot. Elsewhere at Chaco, human bones are found in kivas and embedded in masonry structures. At Bc 50 a human femur was reported encircled by six bands of dark paint (Senter 1937 cited in Plog 2008). Plog sees these bones as sources of power. Display of human remains in sacred contexts as powerful legacies of the ancestors is certainly well-known in many contexts the world over. Relevant here are possible parallels between Chaco and sites in northern Mexico, such as Paquimé and La Quemada, as well as sites in Mesoamerica. What meaning disarticulated human remains carried at Chaco is unknown.

Western Pueblo burials are just as varied. In the Kayenta region, burials were placed in middens, and are often flexed. In the Sinagua and Salado regions, burials are often extended. Few have more than a handful of associated funerary objects. One exception is the “Magician’s Burial” at Ridge Ruin (McGregor 1943), a late 12th century site with connections to both Sinagua and Chaco. This extended inhumation of an adult male had beads, projectile points, pigments, painted baskets, pottery vessels, carved and painted sticks (interpreted by Hopi excavators as swallowing sticks), and other ritual paraphernalia. Hopi interpretation is that an important priest and war leader died before he could transmit his knowledge and ritual paraphernalia to a successor; he was therefore buried with items that would normally have been passed on to another generation, or ritually retired and replaced when worn out or used up. In short, Chaco and Ridge Ruin seem to be examples of places where not all ancestors were generalized cloud people, and indeed, we have no evidence for katsina iconography, nor cloud-terrace designs, in these times and places (prior to the late 1200s in the eastern pueblos and after 1300 or 1350 in the west).

In the Mogollon region sub-floor burials are common and layers of sub-floor burials are not unusual. Shafer (2010:50-51) notes that some individuals were buried under the floors of large rooms that were probably kivas. He suggests that they were lineage or clan members. In Mimbres/Mogollon sites cremations also occur, and after

1340 or so, mixtures of inhumations and cremations occur from the Rio Puerco out to the Salinas Pueblos across central New Mexico. We are not aware of differentiation of cremations vs. inhumations in terms of grave goods.

In Pre-classic Hohokam sites, McGuire (1992) notes that both inhumation and cremation was practiced throughout the sequence, although cremation is the more common form. He finds more grave goods with subadults—mostly males—than other sets. He argues that the cemetery areas represent residential house clusters, and that the richer burials reflect attempts to recruit residents for their labor. McGuire does not see evidence for hierarchical status. Different burial areas were used at the same time at the same site, something that may have been the case at Grasshopper Pueblo, and apparently Chaco Canyon. The implications of separate burial areas for one site are important. For example, at the Hohokam site of Pueblo Grande one cemetery contained malnourished individuals and another did not. Therefore, the generalization of pervasive illness and malnutrition during the Hohokam Classic Period (Van Gerven and Sheridan 1994) may not be correct (Hill and Lincoln-Babb 2008).

At Medio Period Paquimé, fewer than half the burials have offerings and of those only 4.2 percent were accompanied by shell, copper or other minerals, according to Whalen and Minnis (2001), who suggest that the level of hierarchy may approximate that known among certain pre-Mississippian peoples of the Eastern Woodlands.

In summary, mortuary treatment varies. Patterning is often regional, and after 1300, there seems to be more diversity in mortuary treatment within single sites, as would be expected when people with different histories and geographic origins aggregate into composite communities. We see no indications of pronounced social hierarchy or wealth differences. Few burial goods reflect a role someone may have assumed in life, such as a personator or dancer.

When and how did the dead become clouds and katsinas? Archaeologically, some, but not all, elements of katsina practices and iconography appear at Paquimé and in the Mimbres area. The katsina religion spread through the Puebloan Southwest by AD 1350 (Adams 1991; Adams and LaMotta 2006; Schaafsma 1999, 2000). Katsinas are depicted in kivas murals, on pottery, and in rock art. At the same time, aggregating communities organized into roomblocks that surround large plazas (small plazas do occur in earlier sites). Modern katsinas dance in plazas as well as in kivas, but plaza dances are visible to visitors as well as community members (Adams and LaMotta 2006; Ruscavage-Barze and Bagwell 2006). Katsina depictions and large plazas throughout much of the Southwest suggest that the supporting ancestor cosmology was largely or wholly in place by AD 1350. On the other hand, early katsinas may have had roles and meanings that differ from those that are emphasized today. Efforts to pinpoint the “origins” of the katsina religion reach no consensus, and it is probable that there is no single origin, but rather a convergence of “part ideologies” in different areas at different times. Even today, katsinas are very diverse, and their roles differ from Pueblo to Pueblo. Their association with ancestors probably is secondary to their association with moisture and the agricultural cycle. While they model correct human behavior, and

embody reciprocity between the living and the dead and between the upper world and underworld, they do not represent specific, individual ancestors.

Water ritual was paramount at Paquimé (VanPool and VanPool 2007). We find “gifts to the water” with deliberate placement of artifacts such as offerings in the House of the Walk-in-Well, or the Playas Red jar with necklaces of shell, slate, and turquoise around it and in it, placed at the bottom and center of the Reservoir 2 (DiPeso 1974:347). The importance of water and gift giving at Paquimé, and the frequency of cloud terrace imagery there (and not until later at Pueblos further north) may indicate an ancestor/clouds cosmology similar to today’s Pueblos. Stone effigies of humans with cloud terrace headdress were found in the Central Plaza, the context in which ancestral cloud beings would dance today.

Rakita (2009) suggest that an “Ancestor Cult” was present at Paquimé. This type of cult according to Victor Turner (1969) emphasizes power divisions within a society, and involves conquering foreigners. Rakita (2009) suggests that ball courts, presence of Ramos Black vessels in ritual spaces, revisiting of the dead during rituals, and use of human bone relics like human skulls and a necklace made from human metatarsals reflects such an “ancestor cult.” The use of human bones for rituals and during rituals indicates a direct connection with the “ancestor.” This particular form of ancestor cult is not typically found in the Greater Southwest and appears to have been lost with the Paquimé abandonment.

Apart from Paquimé, the only time and place we see secondary burials in a form that reminds us of Mesoamerican ancestor bundles, bundles of human bones in Southeastern temple mounds, or isolated bones in ritual structures in Durango and Zacatecas is a very few apparent secondary burials in Pueblo Bonito in Chaco Canyon. A few “mummies” in Arizona rockshelters, especially that of Hidden House in Sycamore Canyon (Dixon 1956), may also qualify. The Hidden House body was wrapped in elaborate textiles that include items more similar to those found in northern Mexico than in the Southwest Pueblo region (L.Webster, personal communication 2010). There is, then, only a little overlap between the Southwest Pueblos, Mesoamerica, and the Southeast in terms of evidence for ancestor cults that kept some human remains “in use” in ritual contexts. There seems to be even less overlap in terms of the use of posts and trees as described in this essay for the Southeast and Mesoamerica. The Southwest Pueblos did build structures that echo the concept of a layered universe (see especially Shafer 2010), but the *axis mundi* of kivas and pithouses is a ladder rather than a tree or post, and the ladder does not seem to refer to ancestors.

When did agriculturalists in the Southwest adopt their conceptual package of wind, water, and breath that represents the cosmological force shared by humans, ancestors, places, animals, and other things? Many people from distinct language groups represent wind with scrolls and spirals. Water as clouds, which can be ancestors, is represented by terrace motifs (Bunzel 1929; Newsome 2006). Cotton and cotton textiles, particularly open-work net-like textiles, represent clouds and water, and fringe can represent falling rain; textile-like designs are common on painted pottery, especially

after about 1150. Depiction of breath is more difficult to identify, but among the Hopi and Zuni, feathers can represent breath (Parsons 1939), and feather designs commonly appear on ceramics, rock art, kiva murals (Sekaquaptewa and Washburn 2010). This conceptual package is therefore widespread throughout the Southwest—at least by the mid-1300s and possibly earlier in some areas, such as the 11th and 12th century Mimbres. The breath/ clouds/ moisture/rain/ ancestors complex does not seem congruent with the contexts of disarticulated human bones found in ritual contexts at Chaco and Paquimé. There were, therefore, at least two kinds of relationships with ancestors (and probably many more), in the ancient Southwest.

Mesoamerica

Ancient Mesoamericans transformed the dead into ancestors by preparing, through arrangement and disposition of the corpse and accompanying offerings, their remains as conduits enabling their enduring spiritual presence among the living. Age and status were sometimes but not always qualifying conditions determining appropriate mortuary preparation. For example, at Yaxuna in Yucatan a Late Classic pubescent girl was interred in the sleeping bench of an ordinary home, the deer tibia insignia of womanhood in this time period by her thigh, a striated water jar signifying the waters of the mother world below her feet and a bowl ornamented with three kan or Greek Cross (precious, yellow) glyphs that mark the resurrection turtle carapace of the Maize God over her face (Stanton et al. 2010). The symbols are commensurate with those ushering Maya royalty into the afterlife. From the beginning of the record people buried their dead close to home, in the patio or under the house. J. Eric Thompson (1971) noted that at the time of the Conquest Maya in Yucatan were in the habit of abandoning the home of an illustrious patriarch and he used that argument to suggest that the estimation of contemporaneously occupied homes in Late Classic Tikal had been overblown by William Haviland (1972) in his characterization of Tikal as a populous city. Such abandonment following interment of the patriarch did occur in some cases—Keith Eppich discovered a Late Classic house converted into an ancestor shrine at El Perú-Waka' for example (Eppich 2007). But this is the exception proving the rule of continued occupation following interment of ancestors under the floors of occupied homes.

In the case of the Maya, primary burial was the norm for the preparation of ancestors, but some people did practice secondary burial following exposure in caves and rock shelters. On Cozumel Island, the Classic period communities had some elaborate masonry tombs designed not for exalted individuals but rather as charnel houses for the collection of the bones of groups, perhaps extended families (Rathje and Phillips 1975). During the Classic period the tombs of important people were sometimes reentered and relic bones, particularly skulls and long bones, were taken and displayed to demonstrate connection between the living and the ancestors. The evident Preclassic founder of the Tikal dynasty, Yax Ehb Xook, was buried in Burial 85 of the North

Acropolis (Coe 1965) bundled without his head and one of his thigh bones, but with a large fuschite face mask wearing the crown of kingship. The North Wall of the Late Preclassic San Bartolo murals (Saturno 2009) shows two young men carrying bundles above their heads that are ornamented with face masks wearing the trefoil crown of majesty and also a second royal insignia from Middle Preclassic times featured by Olmec kings. Bundling of the deceased is clear in such cases as Yax Ehb Xook when the arrangement of the skeleton shows that the individual was placed in a seated position, but sometimes preservation of sewn on elements and fabric impressions, especially in masonry tombs, show that prone individuals were also bundled—the spectacular case is king Yuknoom Yich'aak K'ahk', Burial 4 of Structure 2 at Calakmul, who was buried in bromeliad fiber shrouding that was soaked in resin forming a cocoon (Renata Garcia Moreno, personal communication, 2008). Bromeliads flourish on the great Ceiba trees, symbol of the world tree of the center, and kings regularly costumed themselves as the world tree, both in life and in death. Mesoamericans generally revered some form of World Tree of the center that, as Mircea Eliade (1970) proposed, functioned as an *axis mundi*. This is a topic to which we will return shortly.

The relationship between ancestors and descendents was, and is, characterized among the Maya as analogous to that of seeds to plants, and particularly to the flowers and fruit of plants. In this way, an iconic image of the resurrection of the spirit in Classic Maya times was the sprouting of the youthful Maize God from the severed head of his previous incarnation. That great seed (bak, skull, and tree seed) was called “the kan (precious, yellow) torch skull.” Today among some Yucatec Maya, shaman will clean the skull of an ancestor three years after the death to release the spirit to ascend the flowery path of heaven, the path of the sun at dawn. In Classic times, as Karl Taube (2004) has documented iconographically, the Maya believed that the deceased, if well prepared, could return to a flowery mountain heaven and be reborn, metaphorically represented as a sprouting tree. This belief is clearly anchored into observation of nature, as flowers give way to seeds, which in turn sprout with new plants.

Other Mesoamericans had related but distinct cosmological notions of ancestors and descendents. In Teotihuacan, the Tetitla murals depict a deity, formerly termed the Great Goddess, who is worshipped by two possible rulers (Headrick 2007; Pasztory 1993). The Goddess (as I still believe this is a female *genetrix*) is composed of a funerary fire shrine censer of the kind typically used in Teotihuacan culture to revere ancestors. This censer is discernable by the “lazy diamond” eyes of the deity, symbols that often ornament the fire bowls of important censers. The Goddess has two entwined trees growing out of her head, one full of butterflies and the other with spiders (community spiders weave enormous cloud like webs in Mexican forests, moving slowly gathering insects, butterflies congregate in forests, as in the case of the famous Monarchs.) The spider is sacred to women and the genetrix, as it represents weaving, the primal female craft. The butterfly represents the souls of valiant warriors and other important men. The Goddess wears the goggles and fangs of Tlaloc, lightning, rain, and war god, flames and flowing abundance pour from her outstretched hands, and life-sustaining waters flow

from her womb, an upturned basin. Headrick and others associate her particularly with the Moon Pyramid, which is visually and conceptually an effigy of the great volcano Cerro Gordo. On the head of the volcano grow the forests sprouting from the Goddess' head; from its base flow the spring waters that nourish the city. While the Goddess is represented as an effigy censer, she can also be represented as a masked bundle, as can other deities of Teotihuacan. Annabeth Headrick argues that apical ancestors of major elite families were bundled and installed in temples along the Avenue of the Dead. The bundles were ornamented with the stone masks that are a famous genre of Teotihuacan art. The advantage of ancestors as bundles was their immediate and tangible presence among the living. The disadvantage is that the bundles could be easily captured and burnt by enemies, as we know bundled ancestors were in the case of the Mixtec, and as we surmise they were in the sacking of downtown Teotihuacan. Other important people at Teotihuacan were buried in shrines in apartment complexes, and still others were interred in the cosmic heart of the city underneath the Temple of the Sun in the artificial cave comprising the origin place of humanity. Nuances aside, ancestors were a pervasive living presence in Teotihuacan as in Maya cities and towns.

Headrick (2007) has proposed that the people of Teotihuacan, like the later Aztecs, had major tree raising ceremonies, and that the plaza fronting the Pyramid of the Moon was where a tree post was ritually placed on top of a Great Goddess effigy. The Classic Maya clearly associated the Maize God's resurrection with the sprouting of a cosmic maize plant (the Kan Naab Isimte', "precious pool maize tree") (Stuart 2007) and this god is the primordial ancestor of humanity in Maya religion. Cosmic tree pole-raising is one of the cultural traits originally that defined Mesoamerica. The Classic Maya of Tikal identified 14 "trees" (family lines) in the royal dynasty, and a sixteenth century depiction of the Xiu family genealogy showed the descendants on branches of a tree growing from the prone body of the founder. Based in the painted Early Classic tombs of Rio Azul, Mary Jane Acuña proposes that royal soul seeds sprouted to form the living presence of the pyramids over them.

There are cosmic referents for these ideas that still need to be worked out systematically. Schele proposed that the cycle of the Milky Way marked its transformation from crocodile to canoe, to tree in the case of the Classic Maya (Freidel et al. 1993). This idea has yet to be fully field tested, although most Mayanists agree that the east-west position of the Milky Way was observed as a mother cosmic crocodile. That people saw this rotation as a tree-raising makes sense of the pervasive presence of this ritual and conceptual syndrome. That they associated the sun cycle with death and resurrection is a certainty. That celestial body was an important god and; in the case of the Maya, an ancestor (the watery sun at dawn). The Great Goddess at Teotihuacan seems to have a name made of three large dots in a row over the up-turned basin that is her womb. It may not be coincidence that the Belt Stars of Orion, a very visible configuration, were identified by the Maya as a great turtle, the womb from which the Maize God ancestor sprouts in many depictions. The up-turned bowl over the face of the

beloved little girl transformed into an ancestor at Yaxuna was no doubt a turtle carapace metaphor. So the goddess lived in the dreams of her family.

Conclusions

From eastern North America to the Southwest and Mesoamerica, ancient people regarded their ancestors in similar ways. The most obvious commonality, not surprisingly, was the importance of actual human remains, which might be kept close to families or near homes either in the ground or in sacred bundles. In such ways, human remains were a tangible or remembered link between past and present. However, equally common were practices that recognized ancestors to be spirits, the transmogrified aspects of past people, who may have been deceased but were not gone. In other words, ancestral spirits did not necessarily remain with the bones of the deceased individual.

This was a salient characteristic of all Eastern, Southwestern, and Mesoamerican people reviewed here. The deceased remained active in the present, although their presence might be unseen. Then again, ancestors or ancestral spirits might assume or inhabit material forms. Objects, buildings, places, or substances (such as clouds or water) might embody or contain ancestral spirits and, in this way, visit or live alongside the living. Material things also enabled the transfer of ancestral (and other cosmic) powers. Such was the case, at least metaphorically, with posts among the Mississippians, katsinas among the Pueblos, or mountains and sacred trees among the Maya, among many other examples.

There is a second salient characteristic worth mentioning that make ancestors so important in any understanding of cosmologies. The deceased did not necessarily become ancestors automatically. This is especially obvious in Mesoamerica but also apparent in the Southwest and Eastern Woodlands. The deceased, to be ancestors, might need to be ritually transformed and thereafter provisioned or cared for. And some, clearly, were more important than others. The ancestors of elites in the world of the living were always the most important or powerful ancestors. The ancestors of Mesoamerica's rulers, for instance, were the apical ancestors of all the people. The identities of the people hinged on their treatment of these elite ancestors and their living representatives.

This brings us to a third salient characteristic of ancestors. Through ancestors, one was ultimately connected to even higher powers in the spirit world. In the case of the Effigy Mound builders and other Woodland peoples in the Mississippi valley, these powers were animal spirits, or the spirits of earth and sky. In the case of later Plains and Mississippian peoples, ancestors were linked to celestial objects, some of which were gods. In the case of the Southwest and Mesoamerica, one's ancestors might be rather directly tied to clouds, water, or mountains, also the domain of deities.

These qualities, the abilities of ancestral spirits to reside in things or with people and their intercessions between the living and the gods, is the essence of the power of ancestors and the reason why they are so important in understanding cosmologies. Whether seen in the sky or on a mountain top, or held in a bundle, post, temple, mound, room block, or pyramid, ancestors engaged people in the real world as real entities, not abstract beliefs. They moved among people and people moved among them. They visited people, and people made pilgrimages to great places to bring their bodies in alignment with the ancestors and the order of the cosmos. The movements of the living and the dead, of course, were changeable—as was the course of human history—contingent on how the ancestors were cared for or otherwise engaged by the living through things and lived space.

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