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THE EXEMPLARY CENTER OF THE LATE POSTCLASSIC KOWOJ MAYA

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The ceremonial architecture of Late Postclassic Maya (A.D. 1268–1441) in Yucatán, Mexico, included repetitive arrangements of buildings known as temple assemblages. Archaeological investigations conducted by the Proyecto Maya Colonial in Petén, Guatemala, revealed a pocket of temple assemblages in a zone occupied by the seventeenth century Kowoj Maya. The Kowoj claimed to have migrated from Maya-pán sometime after the city’s collapse in A.D. 1441. Indigenous documents also describe Kowoj in Mayapán and linguistic data indicate migrations between Yucatán and Petén as well. A specific variant of temple assemblage defines the location of the Kowoj in both Mayapán and Petén. I argue that these assemblages were the exemplary centers or microcosms of the Kowoj social and physical universe and they were transplanted as the Kowoj re-centered themselves in new or, perhaps, reclaimed lands. The temple assemblages also communicated a prestigious connection with Mayapán and differentiated the Kowoj from their neighbors in Petén.

Monumental constructions display shared symbols, materialize group history, and act as stages for public rituals. Such places help create and project the symbolic foundations of society, thereby merging disparate social factions into a single polity. When a social group re-centers itself through the renewal of its central architecture, the symbolic content of the buildings fossilizes the group’s collective memories and core categories. The careful replication of such central places by migrant populations clearly reveals their significance in the grounding of group identity.

While their Colonial period descendents may have been shackled to mission settlements, the pre-columbian Maya were often involved in migration streams extending between what is now Petén, Guatemala, and Yucatán, Mexico. The migration claims of a Late Postclassic (A.D. 1250–1540) to Contact (A.D. 1540–1697) period Maya group called the Kowoj (also recorded as Coguo, Cohuo, Couoh, Kobʼow, Kobʼox, Koj-oʼ, and Kowó) explain precise replications of ceremonial precincts, encountered in Yucatán and Petén, called temple assemblages. These repeated assemblages also demonstrate the importance of ceremonial architecture as a means of grounding uprooted social realities.

Migrating Populations and Ceremonial Architecture

A common attribute of migrant populations is the need to reestablish social foundations in their new

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localities. Origin myths are one of the ways that a group relates itself to the rest of the world. Myths are commonly understood as stories that are untrue; however, myths recount events believed to be factual by the people who tell them and act as paradigms grounding the social system (Malinowski 1948:96–111). Origin myths establish a common history for members of a social group, evoking social unity (Boyarin 1994:25; Malkki 1997:70–72). Mythological events need not occur in the deep past, as clearly exemplified by the symbolic role of the migrant Pilgrims in the United States. This story also illustrates that autochthonous connection between a people and their land is neither natural nor necessary (Malkki 1997:54–56).

Migrations were the focus of origin myths among many Mesoamerican groups including the Itza, Kowoj (Jones 1998:16), K’iche (Tedlock 1985:167–216), Xiw (Landa 1941:29–31), Aztecs (Boone 1991:121–148), Tarascans (Boone 2003:210), Huichol (Myerhoff 1974:54–56), and others. Similar to the migration myths of the Pilgrims and the wandering Israelites (Smith 1992:447–448), the mythic journey tested the mettle or, in some cases, transformed the groups into “superior” peoples, thereby establishing legitimate rights to the land (Boone 1991:148). Mythological events are frequently materialized in monumental architecture (Leach 1976:37–41).

Exemplary centers are representations of the cosmos, writ small, combined with concrete images of the political order (Geertz 1980:13; Wheatley 1971:436–451). They are manifest in the form of events, monuments, and persons considered models of social, political, and cosmic perfection to be replicated by the surrounding, imperfect, world. As archetypes, exemplary centers are closely associated with divine intention or the world as created by deities. They physically schematize the shared categorization of the social and material reality. Besides being representations of perfection, centers mirror the differentiated social reality, reflecting for each person an image of the social self (Lefebvre 1991:220).

Architecture comprising exemplary centers not only resembles the places of mythological events, but are virtually experiencing them; hence, exemplary centers also facilitated the performance and internalization of social memories and, therefore, solidarity (Connerton 1989:43; Lefebvre 1991:222–225). Furthermore, the spaces are socially neutral and places where all members of society interact (Barthes 1997:170–172).

Migrating populations frequently find themselves in existential crises, when they leave the familiar and enter the uncharted. Such groups often imagine their new social spaces similar to those from which they migrated or select another form with which they are familiar (Leonard 1997:118–135). One of the primary concerns of migrant groups is the construction of exemplary centers in their new places (see Waghorne 1999:650). Such exemplary centers are commonly re-created through sympathetic imagery. Migrants may carry elements of the old microcosm and incorporate them into new centers. For instance, in 1883 a faction of the population from San Luis, Petén, migrated to San Antonio. The migrants encountered problems in their new lands and decided that they required the central symbols of their former home city; hence, they raided San Luis, taking the portable images of saints and church bells (Thompson 1930:38–39). Symbolic centers can also be replicated through mimicry, in which “the representation shares in or takes power from the represented” (Taussig 1993:2) and evokes continuity (Stafford 1999:9). For example, the Itza re-created the Castillo of Chich’en Itza in a diminutive form at Mayapán (Milbrath and Peraza 2003:16–18; Proskouriakoff 1954:97).

Discerning migrating groups in the archaeological record is not as straightforward as tracing patterns of monumental architecture. First, since such constructions occur periodically and often involve an individual designer, they can incorporate a great deal of improvisation. Second, “others” can mimic constructions, as in the case of the replication of Western architecture in Meiji Japan (Watanabe 1996:21–22). In addition, migrating groups adjust their ritual system to fit the new social reality (Leonard 1997:118–135). Hence, tracing prehistoric ethnic groups is difficult and, in many cases, impossible. The present paper traces the monumental architecture of a historically known ethnic group whose social memories describe a
migration event that distinguishes the group from its neighbors.

**Late Postclassic Ceremonial Groups**

With regard to architecture, Maya exemplary centers included symbols of events that brought the society into being and sustained it, such as creation mountains (Freidel et al. 1993:132–172), god houses, council halls, and ancestral shrines. The Maya also integrated natural features such as trees, hills, and caves into their ceremonial areas, often representing the world tree, creation mountain, and underworld, respectively. While “the” Late Postclassic Maya shared certain qualities of monumental space, social factions manifested slightly different idioms of the ideological system (following Barth 1987:77–82). Since microcosms interweave cosmic and political order and embody distinct myths of social origin, their forms should be group specific. The present paper defines a specific dialect of monumental space correlated spatially with the historically described locations of the Kowoj.

Late Postclassic period ceremonial groups of Petén and Yucatán include five primary building types: temples, oratorios, open halls, statue shrines, and raised shrines. These types are fuzzy sets, making some structures difficult to categorize on the bases of form or function (Freidel and Sabloff 1984:40–41). Temples are god houses, generally placed upon artificial mountains (Taube 1998:428), and tend to be the tallest buildings in a group of structures. They contained effigies of multiple deities and were places where participants could interact with and make offerings to supernatural beings (Pugh 2001b:590). Oratorios are smaller god houses occurring in both domestic and public architectural groups. In Petén, oratorios held a single deity separated from the others (Pugh 2001b:542–543). Open halls, long buildings with C-shaped benches, were council houses used for spousal exchange, marriage rites (Carmack 1981:192; Rice 1988:240–241), and divination (Pugh 2001a). Statue shrines are low rectangular platforms containing statues of deities (Proskouriakoff 1962a:136). Raised shrines are small buildings that may have been utilized for ancestor veneration, but their function has not been clearly defined (Pugh 2003:946).

Pre Columbian ceremonial buildings were grouped around plazas. While easy to dismiss as simple flat surfaces, plazas required substantial labor and resources. For example, the plaza of the central group of Zacpetén incorporated more construction fill and plaster surfacing than the central temple. Like other ceremonial buildings, the construction of the plaza was a “social act,” as group members constructed them for the community (Kostof 1995:7–19). Various caches buried within plazas activated them and plazas, rather than the surrounding buildings, may have been the central architectural features and the most critical locations of political ritual (Low 2000:31–37; Ringle and Bey 2001:276–279). The physical and ceremonial efforts associated with plazas reflect that they were critical symbols and important ritual spaces. They were called nab, also meaning “large body of water” and represented the primordial sea and gateways into the otherworld (Freidel et al. 1993:139; Schele and Grube 1990:81). Water draining from their flat surfaces may have been an important resource (Scarborough et al. 1995:115–116). However, their most important role was as open spaces that facilitated gatherings of people.

At many Postclassic sites, the flat open plazas contrasted significantly with surrounding uneven terrain; hence, they epitomize the cultural as opposed to the natural (following Low 2000:32). These large open flat spaces held numerous persons including the audience and ritual performers (Landa 1941:152). Economic activities also took place within plazas. Members of varied social factions and classes including dissidents interacted in these zones, which are frequently socially neutral (Barthes 1997:171; Low 2000:35). Plazas also facilitated movement between buildings; hence, they were spatially nonaligned relative to the structures that they joined (Shaw 2001:267). Constructions with uses comparable to plazas include domestic patios and paved ceremonial roads called sakbeob.

Calendrical cycles timed the construction of public architecture and building events were important rituals (Jones 1969:95–96; Love 1986:177; Taube 1988:193). In many cases, such as at Zacpetén, these events involved the reconstruction of the plaza and most of the buildings surrounding it (Pugh 2001b:584). Temporal cycles also timed
transformations in Maya political structure (Coe 1965:103). In Colonial Yucatán, these rituals represented the primordial flood washing away the former configuration, cleansing the earth, and, then, the reestablishment of the ordered world and society (Edmonson 1986:25–26). Hence, Maya societies re-experienced their origins during these ritualized construction events.

Buildings surrounding plazas often occurred in patterned sets. Proskouriakoff (1962a:91) defined two repetitive conglomerations of ceremonial architecture at Late Postclassic Mayapán (Figure 1) in Yucatán, Mexico: basic ceremonial groups and temple assemblages. Basic ceremonial groups have an open hall with a raised shrine in front of and facing it and an oratorio either likewise centered upon and facing the hall or offset from the medial axis. Temple assemblages (Figure 2) include a temple with raised shrine centered upon and facing into it. Between the temple and raised shrine is a statue shrine. An oratorio lies to the right of and faces in the same direction as the temple. At a right angle to the temple and oratorio stands an open hall.

By assimilating cosmology, temples, open halls, ancestral shrines, and other sacred places, the plaza integrated critical aspects of the social reality into a microcosm (Low 2000:35).

Temple assemblages and basic ceremonial groups are not the only types of Late Postclassic ceremonial group and variation existed within these two sets. Variation in ritual practices and associated architecture can arise for various reasons.
including changes in the social reality (Turner 1982:61–87), innovation, variation in symbolic understanding among individuals and factions (Barth 1987:31–37), and conscious transformations (Wallace 1956:265). For each Late Postclassic community, central architecture intertwined cosmic and political order and helped to structure everyday life (Chase and Chase 1988:71–75; Freidel et al. 1993:162–163).

Temple assemblages exist in other areas of the Maya lowlands and highlands and suggest social interactions between outlying areas and Mayapán (Carmack 1981:385; Rice and Rice 1985:178). These groups were previously utilized to identify Kowoj settlements in Petén (Rice et al. 1998:245). The present paper defines a more specific variant of the temple assemblage occurring at Mayapán and in central Petén and suggests they were the ritual spaces of the Kowoj. The variant includes two open halls and two oratorios and often a western cave feature and will be referred to as the dual hall temple assemblage. These repetitive ceremonial groups are not simply arrangements of buildings, but are also idiomatic metaphors of cosmos and society representing the symbolic foundations of the Kowoj.

The site of Zacpetén rests in an area occupied by the Kowoj (Figure 3). The temple assemblages of Zacpetén provide the detailed data of the present analysis and other such assemblages define the boundaries of the Kowoj and their probable point of origin at Mayapán.

The Kowoj

During the seventeenth century, the Spaniards attempted to convert various Maya populations occupying central Petén to Christianity, and when these attempts failed, they subdued them through
military force in AD 1697. Before and after the conquest, the Spaniards documented the people they sought to control. They described two groups dominating the Petén lakes region: the Kowoj and the Itza (Figure 3). The core Itza region lay to the west and south of the Petén lakes and they either were allied with or controlled the Yalain province to the east and the Mopan province to the south. The Kowoj resided in the northeastern portion of the lakes. “Kowoj” meant “tarantula” or “very poisonous spider” in Colonial Yucatec Maya and was the name of powerful families during the Late Postclassic to Colonial periods in Campeche, Yucatan (Roys 1957:8–9), Quintana Roo (Antochiwi and Dachary 1991:235), Chiapas (Vos 1980:220–231), and Petén (Jones 1998:17–19).

While culturally and linguistically similar, the Itza and Kowoj were distinct social entities and one of the characteristics differentiating the groups was their social history. The Kowoj claimed to have migrated from Mayapán in Yucatán, Mexico (400 km to their north), sometime after the fall of the city in A.D. 1441, while the Itza noted ancestry from Chich’en Itza, also in Yucatán (Jones 1998:16). These origin stories undoubtedly contributed to the social boundaries between groups. The Itza further noted that the Kowoj lived in settlements with “castles and fortresses” (Jones 1998:324–325). The term “castillo” or “castle” might have referred to high temples as it occasionally does today. Archaeological research has revealed that sites in the Kowoj region of Petén were fortified or constructed in naturally defendable locations such as islands. The Kowoj also differed from the Itza, as the community was named after the ch’ibal or “patronym” (Restall 1997:17) of their ruling family (Jones 1998:17).

Ch’ibalob were important foundations of identity and produced factions within the community or kaj, but individuals also possessed a communal identity (Restall 1997:15–17). The designation of the kaj as “Kowoj,” the name of the ruling ch’ibal, is not surprising as this practice was common in Yucatán (Restall 1997:28) and may have formed political systems akin to “house societies” (following Gillespie 2000:472; Levi-Strauss 1982:163–187). Ch’ibal factions were exogamous and marriage relations between them created alliances (Restall 1997:48–49). Ch’ibal allegiance may have once extended throughout the Maya region (Landa 1941:99). A system of long-distance alliance would have facilitated migration and trade within the Maya world. Social organization larger than the kaj is debated and all possibilities cannot be described here. Mayapán and Cozumel had multiple kaj (Freidel and Sabloff 1984:182). Some set-
tlements were organized into *ka tzukil kaj* or paired *kajob*, linked by *sakbeob* (Restall 1997:37–39).

The Spaniards considered the Kowoj to be a defiant and politically motivated group. The primary Kowoj leader, AjKowoj, had attacked the Itza capital a few months before its conquest in A.D. 1697 to depose the Itza ruler who was making arrangements to submit to the Spaniards (Jones 1998:326). While AjKowoj opposed submission to the Spaniards before the conquest, he made a short-lived alliance with them after the conquest to destroy indigenous opposition to his political objectives. Nevertheless, AjKowoj later led a failed rebellion against the Spaniards, which resulted in his execution (Jones 1998:336). Kulut Kowoj, the son of AjKowoj, and Kitam Kowoj were among several other indigenous leaders in a second failed uprising against the Spaniards in 1704 and, in turn, were executed. In 1750, a person with the name Kowoj attempted to incite the inhabitants of San Barnabé to kill the priests and other Ladinos (Jones 1998:413–414). The Kowoj strove to usurp political control of the Petén lakes both before and after the conquest and the Kowoj of Yucatán and Campeche seem to have been similarly motivated.

In Yucatán, the Kowoj ruled the province of Chanputun, likely Champoton, Campeche, in A.D. 1517 and remained a powerful Yucatecan family for another 100 years (Roys 1957:168). The group caused the Spaniards problems during the conquest and was considered “warlike” (Landa 1941:50, 56). Spanish and indigenous documents suggest Chanputun was fortified with a wall and ditches (Landa 1941:26; Roys 1957:167). The Chilam Balam of Chumayel, an indigenous Yucatecan historical document, describes that a Kowoj noble was the “guardian of the east gate” of Mayapán (Edmonson 1986:81). The Codice de Calkini notes that the Kanul migrated from Petén Itzá (Barrera-Vasquez 1957:107). Roys (1957:12) argued that this particular “Petén Itzá” did not rest in northern Guatemala. However, given the evidence of Itza migrations from Petén, it is probable that the Kanul, and possibly the Kowoj, originated in Petén.

Other evidence indirectly supports the Kowoj migration myths. Elite of the various provinces controlled by Mayapán resided in the city (Landa 1941:39). The Colonial Maya considered descent from the city very prestigious and some families had record of where their ancestors had lived within its walls (Landa 1941:98; Tozzer 1941:98). Upon the fall of Mayapán, these elite returned to their home cities bringing codices with them and built temples upon their arrival (Landa 1941:39). The codices and temples are related, as codices were texts containing detailed ritual knowledge (Love 1994:3–13). As described below, the east side of Mayapán and the northeast portion of the Petén lakes region share precise characteristics in their ritual architecture, indicative of Kowoj cosmology.

In addition to the historical consciousness of the Kowoj and Itza, linguistic data demonstrate relatively recent migration streams between Yucatán and Petén. The modern Itzaj of Petén, who speak Yucatecan Maya and descended from the Kowoj and Itza, claim that their ancestors migrated from Yucatán (Hofling 1991:252). Kowoj is a common patronym among the Itzaj. The Itzaj dialect shares “98% of the basic vocabulary” of Yucatec, while it is only 84% similar to the dialect of the Mopan, the Itzaj’s Yucatecan Maya-speaking neighbors to the south (Hofling 2001). In other words, Itzaj is more closely related to Yucatec than it is to Mopan, and the Mopan predated and were more widespread than the Itza and Kowoj in Petén (Hofling 2001; Jones 1998:19–22).

**Mayapán**

From the mid-thirteenth to the mid-fifteenth century, Mayapán, Yucatán, Mexico was the center of the Maya world (Peraza 1999:48–50; Pollock 1962:2). The city may have mediated contact
between the Maya area and Central Mexico (Milbrath and Peraza 2003:1). The political system of Mayapán, the *multepal*, included representatives from a number of social groups who formed a council dominated by the *jalach winik* (Roys 1943:12). One cannot compare the *multepal* to a senate, as the power structure seems to have been dualistic, controlled by the Itza and Tutu1 Xiw. Central power was more centrally focused in the *jalach winik* of Mayapán and this individual may have ruled the western half and the north coast of Yucatán (Cobos 2002:107–112; Quezada 1998:468–479). The Itza, who founded Mayapán, likely included Chak’an Itza from Chak’anputun to the northwest of Lake Petén Itzá (Schele and Mathews 1998:204). The origins of the Xiw are more obscure. They claimed to have built Úxmal, an assertion Kowalski (1987:52–67) considers a fabrication with political ends, but Schele and Mathews (1998:258–260) found credible. The Kowoj noble associated with the east at the fall of Mayapán in A.D. 1441 may have been allied with or a member of the Xiw (Edmonson 1986:39).

The archaeological ruins of Mayapán (Figure 4) stand roughly 72 km southeast of modern Mérida, Mexico. The walled city, which was constructed over a Classic period settlement during the Late Postclassic period (Proskouriakoff 1962a:132), has more than 4,000 buildings densely crowded in its 4.2 km² area (Smith 1962:171). In public ritual areas, the presence of Chen Mul modeled censers, which have deity effigies mounted on hourglass-shaped vessels, indicate ritual activities of the late Late Postclassic period (A.D. 1300–1450) (Brown 1999:291–298; Smith 1971:254–256). The use of such censers was strongly tied to cyclical rites commemorating world creation and renewal (Chase and Chase 1988:74). Mayapán holds several ceremonial groups with repetitive groupings including temple assemblages and basic ceremonial groups (Proskouriakoff 1962a:91).

Four or five temple assemblages rest inside the walls of Mayapán, most within the central ceremonial group. The central group has five “serpent temples,” which are temples with reptilian decoration on their columns and balustrades (Proskouriakoff 1962a:91). The central radial serpent temple, the Castillo, rests in the center and four smaller temples lie roughly to the cardinal directions and correlate with four central social groups that were also

![Figure 4. Major ceremonial groups of Mayapán, Yucatán, Mexico.](attachment:image.png)
Figure 5. Eastern Ch'en Mul temple assemblage (redrawn from Proskouriakoff 1962b).

cardinally categorized (Pugh 2001c:7–8). The four smaller serpent temples stand in temple assemblages; of specific interest here is the eastern assemblage (Figure 5). This assemblage contains a temple (Str. Q-143) facing west toward a statue shrine (Str. Q-146) and a raised shrine (Str. Q-149). To the right of the temple is an oratorio (Str. 142a). The group has two open halls, one to the north (Str. Q-151) and the other to the south (Str. Q-145). If one stands upon the temple’s medial shrine, the Cenote Ch’en Mul lies 23° clockwise from the medial axis of the temple. A second oratorio (Str. Q-153) lies to the right of the cenote and the northern open hall stands at a right angle to the cenote and oratorio. A second raised shrine (Str. Q-151) faces into the northern open hall. The group held numerous Ch’en Mul deity effigy censers (Shook and Irving 1955:143–144; Winters 1955:413), dating it to the Late Postclassic period.

The Ch’en Mul temple assemblage actually integrates two temple assemblages with the cenote standing in place of the second temple (Pugh 2001c:7). Temples and caves are symbolically related, as both housed deities and other supernatural beings (Stone 1995:35–36). The southern hall, eastern oratorio, southern raised shrine, statue shrine, and temple form an eastern temple assemblage component and the northern open hall, northern raised shrine, western oratorio, and cenote form a western component. The two components are not distinct groups but are combined into a single dual hall assemblage. The two oratorios and two open halls face one another suggesting opposition and complimentarity. Since the opposing open halls
were council houses, the assemblage also accommodated social duality.

The Itzmal Ch'en Group (Figure 6) lies 1.8 km east northeast of the Ch'en Mul Group near one of the gates in the wall surrounding Mayapán (Proskouriakoff 1962a:127–129). Its temple (Str. H-17) resembles an oratorio in form, but it stands upon a high platform. It faces south toward a statue shrine (Str. H-17a) (Thompson 1955:284). In the center of the plaza is an unusual circular raised shrine (Str. H-18), with four doorways facing all major buildings in the group rather than just the temple. Open halls are located to the south (Str. H-15) and east (Str. H-16) of the circular raised shrine. Another open hall (Str. H-12) lies outside the central group. West of the central shrine stands an oratorio (Str. H-14). A line drawn between the medial features of the oratorio and eastern open hall also bisects the Cenote Itzmal Ch'en, indicating this feature helped determine the arrangement of the group. If one stands upon the medial feature of the temple, the cenote lies 62° clockwise from the medial axis extending from the temple. Ch'en Mul censer sherds encountered in the Itzmal Ch'en Group (Chowning 1956:450–451, 456) date it to the Late Postclassic period.

The eastern Ch'en Mul temple assemblage has two open halls, two oratorios, two raised shrines, and a cenote northwest of the temple. The Itzmal Ch'en group includes two open halls and a cenote to the southwest of the temple. Since the temple faces south instead of west, the position of the cenote, relative to the temple’s medial axis, is the same as the eastern Ch'en Mul assemblage. In both, a cenote is in the quadrant directly clockwise of the medial axis and a western oratorio mediates interaction with the cenote. The cenote and second hall form a second complementary temple assemblage. As places of the deities, temples embodied the heavens and cenotes were entrances into the underworld. The temple to the east and cenote to the west reveal that the larger symbolic underpinning of the dualistic assemblage is the heaven/underworld contrast. One of the dual hall assemblages rests near one of the east gates of Mayapán and the other in the east part of the ceremonial core. While documents link the Kowoj with the east sector of Mayapán, just before its collapse, the connection of the Kowoj with the Ch'en Mul and Itzmal Ch'en dual hall temple assemblages gains even greater credibility through the examination of temple assemblages in the Kowoj area of the Petén lakes region.
As mentioned, the Kowoj resided in the northeast portion of the Petén lakes region (Figure 3). Archaeological investigations have revealed that the spatial distribution of Mayapán-style temple assemblages is also limited to the northeast part of the lakes (Rice 1988:234; Rice et al. 1998:245) and all have similar layouts (Pugh 1999, 2001b:581).

The Petén temple assemblages match those of Mayapán except that the raised shrine faces the open hall rather than the temple. Furthermore, at Mayapán, the temple occasionally faces west, while in Petén, temple assemblages always face to the west. Surveys by the Proyecto Maya Colonial have indicated that the Itza region of the Petén lakes lacks temple assemblages. In those areas, basic cer-
Figure 8. Patojo Modeled deity image censer from Structure 602, Zacpetén. The figure is approximately 38 cm tall (photo by Don S. Rice).

ceremonial groups or variants of such groups compose ritual spaces (Pugh 2001a, 2001b:594). Hence, temple assemblages clearly define the Kowoj area in Petén and many replicate the Kowoj-specific dual hall layout. Temple assemblages are found at Zacpetén, Muralla de León, Topoxté Island, Paxte Island, Cante Island and possibly Tipú and Ixlu. Zacpetén has the best-documented dual hall temple assemblage in Petén and will be the focus of the present section.

Zacpetén is located on a peninsula in the northeast corner of Lake Salpetén (Figure 7). A defensive system, including a canal, ditch with bordering parapets, and a high wall, separates the peninsula from the mainland. The dense Late Postclassic settlement of Zacpetén is focused around two ceremonial groups, Group A and Group C, and two elite domestic groups, Group D and Group E. A Terminal Classic twin-pyramid complex lies in Group B in the northern part of the peninsula. Zacpetén had heavy occupations in the Middle Preclassic (1000–300 B.C.), Late (A.D. 600–830) to Terminal Classic (A.D. 830–930), and Late Postclassic (A.D. 1250–1525) through Contact (A.D. 1525–1697) periods. In the early fifteenth century, the inhabitants reconstructed Group A and Group C as temple assemblages (Pugh 1999) and began to make Clemencia Cream Paste Ware ceramics (Cecil 2001:546). The predominant effigy censers were large Patojo Modeled censers (Figure 8) depicting various deities similar to the Ch’en Mul censers of Mayapán (P. Rice 1987:184) and smaller Kulut Modeled censers depicting a single deity. These innovations along with an ossuary holding
numerous dismembered adults and children date to the early fifteenth century and suggest the arrival of a new population.

Group C initially contained a temple facing west toward two rectangular altars and one circular wedding cake-shaped altar, which were aligned with the temple’s medial axis. In the late fourteenth or early fifteenth century, Group C was reconstructed in a new form—the basic version of a temple assemblage (Figure 9) including a temple (Str. 764) on the east side of the plaza with a statue shrine (Str. 766) to its west. An oratorio (Str. 1002) likely stands north of the temple, though this area was only partially excavated. At a right angle to the temple is an open hall (Str. 767). A raised shrine (Str. 765) on the northern edge of the plaza faces into one side of the open hall. West of Str. 765 (northwest of the temple) lay a bundle of human long bones including remains of at least one adult and one child. A large stairway with 20 steps rests on the north side of Group C. A smaller stair with nine steps lies to the west of the plaza opposed to the temple’s 13 steps. For many Maya groups, nine and thirteen are complementary opposites associated with west and east, darkness and light, female and male, down and up, burial and rebirth, underworld and sky, respectively (Coggins 1988:69). In situ Patojo Modeled deity effigy censers (Figure 9) were only encountered in a zone that included the western half of the temple superstructure and the

Figure 9. Distribution of Patojo Modeled deity image censer sherds, Group C, Zacpetén.
Table 1. Radiocarbon (AMS) Dates from Ceremonial Groups at Zacpetén.

<table>
<thead>
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<th>Sample Number</th>
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<th>δ¹³C</th>
<th>¹⁴C Age (2-σ)</th>
<th>Calib Range (2-sigma)²</th>
<th>Probability</th>
<th>Material</th>
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<td>building collapse, Str. 764, Grp C</td>
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<td>585±45</td>
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<td>95.40%</td>
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<td>ritual refuse pit, Str. 602, Grp A</td>
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<td>500±50</td>
<td>A.D. 1300–1370</td>
<td>15.30%</td>
<td>copal resin</td>
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<td>A.D. 1380–1490</td>
<td>80.10%</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>A.D. 1380–1440</td>
<td>68.90%</td>
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²Calibrated with OXCal Version 3.8 using INTCAL98 calibration curve (Bronk Ramsey 1995, 2001; Stuiver et al. 1998).

eastern half of the statue shrine; hence, this area was clearly the focus of interaction between humans and celestial deities.

A wood fragment from construction material of the temple of Group C (AA35235) produced a two sigma (95 percent probability) calibrated date of A.D. 1290–1430 (Table 1). A lead musket ball resting in a ceremonial activity area just west of the temple indicates that the group was utilized well into the Contact period.

The basic pattern of Group C is repeated in Group A (Figure 10), but with the additional elements of the dual hall assemblage. The temple (Str. 602) is on the east side of the plaza with an orato-
In the northwest corner of Group A is a circular borrow pit (Op. 1000) enclosing the partially dismembered remains of numerous adults and children (Figure 10). Cut-marks on some of the remains indicate that their mutilation had been systematic (Duncan 1999). On the southern edge of the borrow pit stood a second oratorio (Str. 614). In the center of the west side was an open area of plaza (Op. 1001), below which lay numerous caches of human mandibles with articulated vertebrae, a skull, and a bundle of long bones. Paralleling Group C, Patojo Modeled deity effigy censers were only found as primary refuse in the western half of the temple and the eastern half of the statue shrine of Group A (Figure 11). Kulut Modeled censers were only encountered in the eastern portion of the Structure 605. Hence, deity effigy censers and, therefore, deity veneration were clearly focused in the eastern portion of both Group A and Group C.

Two AMS radiocarbon dates were obtained from Group A: one from a ceremonial refuse deposit adjacent to the west side of the temple and...
another from the circular borrow pit. Incense from the refuse deposit (Beta-112316) had a two sigma calibrated range of A.D. 1300–1370 and A.D. 1380–1490 (Table 1). A wood fragment encountered directly beneath the human remains in Operation 1000 (Beta-112318) produced a two sigma calibrated range of A.D. 1310–1360 and A.D. 1380–1440 (Table 1). Several fragments of miscellaneous iron and a white clay pipe stem indicate that the group was in use well into the seventeenth century, if not later.

Discussion

Group A forms a dual hall temple assemblage strikingly similar to that in the eastern side of the Ch’en Mul Group at Mayapán (Figures 5 and 10). The most obvious traits are the presence of two open halls and two oratorios. Northwest of the temple (30° clockwise of the medial axis) lies a large pit rather than a cenote. The contents and position of this “borrow pit” indicate that it was a ceremonial feature—likely a dedicatory cache. A cenote in the northwest position of another ceremonial group at Mayapán includes a similar deposit of dismembered human remains (Smith 1953:72). Cenotes are more common in Northern Yucatán than Petén. For the Maya, both natural and artificial caves entered the underworld and served as symbols of cave origins (Brady 1991:7). These features play a critical role in the placement of surface architecture at various sites throughout Mesoamerica (Brady 1997:610–613; Heyden 1981:1–6; Pugh 2001c:251–252). Primordial cave origins of social groups in Mesoamerica suggest that the caves and tunnels represented womb-like formations (Brady 1988:52; Heyden 1981:20; Hunt 1977:107–109). On the edge of the artificial pit at Zacpetén rests the second oratorio paralleling the western oratorios of the Ch’en Mul and Itzmal Ch’en groups at Mayapán. These oratorios likely mediated access to the artificial pit and cenotes.

The dual hall temple assemblage arrived, in complete form, at Zacpetén in the early fifteenth century—around the time that Mayapán collapsed. The east and west sides of Group A of Zacpetén exhibit dualism characteristic of Maya cosmology, but in a manner unique to the Kowoj. With the exception of the statue shrine, all constructions to the east of the sakbe rest upon high platforms, while those to the west have no platforms or are subterranean. Two of the buildings to the east of the sakbe are god houses with numerous deity effigy censers. Such censers do not occur in primary refuse on the west side of the plaza. The artifact inventory on the west side of the plaza included dismembered human remains and several speleothems, the only such objects found in Late Postclassic deposits at Zacpetén. Speleothems are not indigenous to Zacpetén and were obtained by pilgrimages to caves (following Brady et al. 1997:728–730). The eastern side of the plaza emphasizes height and deities while the west embodies lowness, caves, and dismembered human remains. Like the Ch’en Mul group, the two sides of the plaza of Group A refer to the cosmos with the east signifying the heavens, and the west the underworld.

Metaphors of heaven and the underworld are common in Maya architecture and are often represented through repetitions of 13 and nine, respectively (Ashmore 1992:176; Kowalski and Dunning 1999:280). Late to Terminal Classic ceremonial groups at Tikal incorporate heaven-underworld duality in the form of the rising sun and setting sun or light and darkness (Coggins 1980:731; Guillemin 1968:10). The east-west struggle of light and darkness is often symbolized in ballcourts (Gillespie 1991:318–321), a feature suspiciously absent from most Late Postclassic lowland Maya sites. The rising sun and setting sun are paralleled with up and down, male and female, and east and west, respectively (Coggins 1988:69; Gossen 1965:140; Joyce 1996:174). Group A at Zacpetén and the Ch’en Mul group at Mayapán were likely dual-gendered with the west side being female, given its lowness and artificial cave feature, and the high east side being male. In Group A, the essential dichotomies of east and west, of light and darkness, of heaven and underworld, and of male and female were mediated by the small sakbe.

While not listed as a constituent of temple assemblages, sakbeob are often coupled with these ceremonial assemblages (Ringle and Bey 2001:280). The north to south sakbe dividing the plaza of Group A of Zacpetén in half was the focus of the tension between the east and west sides. A north to south sakbe divides the courtyard of the Nunnery Quadrangle at Uxmal (Schele and Mathews 1998:286) and another leads to the Sacred
Cenote of Chich’en Itza. North-south axes may be paralleled with up-down or heaven-underworld dichotomies (Ashmore 1991:216). The Milky Way, which seasonally extends north to south, dividing the night sky, is *Xibal Be*, ‘the road of awe’ (the road of death) and the Maya also considered the Milky Way a manifestation of the world tree bridging the earth, sky, and underworld (Freidel et al. 1993:76). The Northern Lacandon also consider the Milky Way a road and an *axis mundi* called *sak bel akyum* or ‘white road of our lords’ (McGee 2002:129). The *sakbe* in Group A rested upon the plaza/primordial sea; therefore, the assemblage depicted not just the divided universe, but also the universe at creation. Hence, this *sakbe* likely represented the Milky Way as the world tree parting the heavens and the underworld.

Small *sakbeob*, similar in length and width to that of Group A at Zacpetén, also divide plazas at Cozumel, though these features extend east to west (Freidel and Sabloff 1984:83). The use of *sakbeob* to create symbolic boundaries was widespread, though orientations varied.

The *sakbe* in Group A of Zacpetén had been cleaned, with the refuse being swept to the west. *Sakbeob* were sacred features (Freidel and Sabloff 1984:83) and the cleaning of *sakbeob*, called *miz be*, was conducted according to yearly cycles (Bolles and Folan 2001:307). Among Yucatecan Maya groups, cleaning and sweeping creates boundaries (Hanks 1990:337–36). The *sakbe* separated the plaza into dual barrios similar to imaginary lines in modern highland Maya plazas (Hunt and Nash 1967:262) and ballcourts at Postclassic highland sites (Fox 1991:224–227). *Sakbeob* also joined communities and helped create solidarity (Freidel and Sabloff 1984:84; Kurjack and Andrews 1976:322–324; Shaw 2001:267–269). The term *ch’abal be* ‘lineage road’ indicates “the main road from which side roads branch out” and may refer to *sakbeob* that connected the residential groups of kin and stood as metaphors of kinship relations (Bolles and Folan 2001:300–304). The Itzaj Maya term *tz’o’ok b’el* or ‘to end one’s road’ denotes marriage (Hofling and Tesucun 1997:29). Given linguistic and functional values of *sakbeob*, the small causeway in Group A embodied social solidarity, but the sweeping and linearity of the *sakbe* indicated and effected boundaries between social factions.

Corresponding with images of cosmic duality at Zacpetén and Mayapán was social duality manifest in the two open halls. As mentioned, these halls were council houses of *ch’ibalob* and places for spouse exchange. The *ch’ibalob* in this particular case appear to have paralleled the *kajob*, as the microcosm of Group A depicts a *ka tzukil kaj* or paired *kajob* bridged and divided by a *sakbe*. The open halls surrounding Postclassic plazas facilitated the sharing of power among factions (Blanton et al. 1996:12; Freidel and Sabloff 1984:182; Masson 2000:272–276). Since elite marriages create social alliances, the presence of two parallel buildings associated with marriage rites and councils in a single architectural group may metaphorically embody the marriage ties and alliance of two *kajob*. Furthermore, the possible male: east/female: west duality and the open hall tied to each element in Group A at Zacpetén and the Ch’en Mul group at Mayapán exemplify a bond between two factions metaphorically understood as a male/female dyad. The Kowoj microcosm communicated by the dual hall temple assemblages paralleled social with cosmic division and interaction.

Maya nobility were persons whose fathers and mothers belonged to quality lineages (Restall 1997:88), and dual descent was the common pattern among seventeenth-century elite of Petén (Jones 1998:75–82). The paired open halls of dual hall temple assemblages may have been architectural correlates to this pattern among the Kowoj elite, with the eastern hall standing for the paternal line and the western hall the maternal line. Similar practices of “gendering” sociopolitical alliances are evident on Classic period monuments and these relationships likely involved economic exchanges (Gillespie and Joyce 1997:198–207). As microcosms, these groups testified to the dual heredity of the Kowoj “house” and communicated this alliance as a unifying metaphor for the entire *ka tzukil kaj*.

*Sakbeob* comparable to that of Group A of Zacpetén were not evident in the dual hall assemblages at Mayapán, though *sakbeob* paired some residential groups (Jones 1952). However, at both sites the existence of subterranean features to the west and temples to the east in dual hall temple assemblages evoked the complementary oppositions of east/west and heaven/underworld duality.
Plazas also symbolically parallel sakbeob, as they merge the spaces of discrete architectural forms (Shaw 2001:267). In addition, as the primordial sea, plazas are symbolically neutral. Hence, ceremonial groups without sakbeob are still unified through the surface and symbolism of the plaza, but groups with plazas divided by sakbeob redundantly communicated solidarity, while concurrently demarcating boundaries.

Group C of Zacpetén contains a simpler form of temple assemblage with a single open hall, but it also has east/west symbolism. As mentioned, the temple has 13 steps, the number of heavenly levels and the western stairway has nine steps, the number of chthonic planes. The 13 steps ascend to the east and the nine steps descend to the west, perhaps paralleling the rising and setting sun, respectively. The nine steps lead to a lower platform to the west of Group C, which is unexcavated. The Chilam B’alam of Chumayel describes nine steps descended in a ritual reenacting the “founding of the flowers,” likely representing the birth of gods and/or lineage ancestors (Edmonson 1986:162–165). Flowers are also indicative of the female aspect of the male/female dyad (Brady 1988:51; Thompson 1939:140), as suggested by the notion of flower births. Flower birth myths parallel cave births and both signified earth births (James Brady, personal communication 2001). Hence, Group C may have also had east: heaven/west: underworld symbolism, but in an abbreviated form.

Group A is not the only dual hall temple assemblage and Group C is not the only abbreviated version of this assemblage in Petén. The assemblages on Cante Island and Paxte Island have two open halls, but lack a western oratorio and borrow pit/cenote. Topoxté Island included a simple temple assemblage like Group C at Zacpetén. However, northwest of the temple, in the same position as the borrow pit in Group A at Zacpetén, was a platform (Str. L) containing the dismembered remains of numerous adults and children (Bullard 1970:267).

The dismembered human remains in Operations 1000 and 1001 at Zacpetén, and Structure L at Topoxté, may be explained by a Tzotzil cosmogram (Gossen and Leventhal 1993:198–200). According to this cyclical archetype, the Tzotzil associate the northwest with violence, which includes losers tied to defeat and death. It seems hard to imagine a symbol of defeat more overt than the dismembered individuals in the various Kowoj northwestern and western deposits. Like the use of effigy censers and caching (Chase and Chase 1988:74), dismemberment was associated with cyclical time (Gillespie 1991:333–334). They may have been recreations of primordial sacrifice that brought the world into being. The sacrifice, dismemberment, and deposition of these individuals played a role in the dedication of the ceremonial groups by the Kowoj.

Dual hall temple assemblages were involved in a larger ritual landscape of Mayapán, just as the Kowoj were only a faction of its diverse social network. A Kowoj noble was the guardian of the east gate and a dual hall temple assemblage was adjacent to one of the east gates. The central ceremonial group of Mayapán also represents the “easternness” of the Kowoj. This group contains four cardinally oriented assemblages, the eastern of which is a dual hall temple assemblage. Hence, the Kowoj exemplary center had been integrated into the larger more inclusive exemplary center of Mayapán, which modeled the city’s divided, yet unified, social universe.

The dual hall assemblages are located in spaces associated with the Kowoj at Mayapán and in Petén. While temple assemblages are not found in other areas of Petén, social duality is evident in the architecture of the Chakan Itzá, who controlled the site of Nixtun Ch’ich’ on the west shore of Lake Petén Itzá. Excavations at this site revealed two conjoined open halls facing in the same direction (Pugh 2001a). Hence, the Chakan Itzá also incorporated dualistic social organization into their ceremonial architecture, but they did so in their own idiom.

The architecture of Cozumel is very similar to that of Mayapán and includes at least one temple assemblage (Group C22-4 through 10), which may have also helped mediate an alliance between factions (Freidel and Sabloff 1984:95–97 and 160). This group contains one temple and two oratorios and three or four open halls. Apart from the additional halls, the plaza layout is very similar to that of the dual hall temple assemblages. While the Kowoj patronym was found among Cozumel elite (Antochiwi and Dachary 1991:235), it is unlikely that this assemblage was tied to that group, as this
was the central ceremonial area of San Gervasio, the island’s capital (Freidel and Sabloff 1984:177). A ceremonial group with two open halls facing each other is found at Cancun (Lothrop 1924:150), but does not appear to be a temple assemblage. The similarity between Mayapán and sites on the east coast of Yucatán is not surprising as Mayapán and Cozumel appear to have been allied and Cozumel was an important pilgrimage site (Freidel and Sabloff 1984:160 and 179). Furthermore, Cozumel may have been a trading center and trade networks extended along the east coast from Yucatán to Honduras (Freidel and Sabloff 1984:179). One such route likely led to Tipú and ultimately Zacpetén, providing a vehicle for migration streams (Pugh 2001b:575–576).

**Conclusions**

The replication of extremely complex ceremonial architectural forms occurs for a variety of reasons including common religious affiliation and mimicry of architectural styles. However, in the present case, the Kowoj specifically claimed to have migrated from Mayapán, colonial records of the Maya of Yucatán describe Kowoj at Mayapán, Spanish documents describe that elites fleeing Mayapán built ceremonial architecture in their new locales, and linguistic data indicates migrations between Petén and Yucatán. The argument that the Kowoj constructed dual hall temple assemblages in Petén and at Mayapán is not based upon material remains alone, but is strongly supported by historical and linguistic data.

Historical connections with Mayapán added to the symbolic capital of the Kowoj in Petén; hence, they had good reason to replicate the architectural forms of their ancestors. The migrants symbolically grounded themselves by reenacting cosmogony and re-creating a ceremonial group typical of Mayapán; commemorating and, therefore, remembering ties to that city. They juxtaposed these ancestral ties with the dual descent of the Kowoj nobility. Each time they replicated its form, whether in full or abbreviated form, the Kowoj celebrated their most outstanding collective memory: origins in the heart of Mayapán, which differentiated them from the Chich’en Itza-derived Itza.

Dual hall temple assemblages were idiomatic exemplary centers—microcosms of the surrounding physical and social universe. Their constructions mimicked creation and their forms represented the divided cosmos and social differentiation. Within the buildings and upon plazas of the ceremonial groups stood the Kowoj, whose interactions were orchestrated by ritual order and tradition of the temple assemblages. These individuals experienced not only the partition of the universe through sacrifice and dismemberment, but also social factionalism, embodied by the two gendered open halls, paralleled with cosmic division. The divided universe was not equal, as the eastern factions symbolically dominated the western factions (Fox 1994:169–170), and this relationship was manifest by the high east and the low west of Group A at Zacpetén. From a materialistic perspective, the highness and lowness of this group translates into a far greater investment of labor and materials on the eastern side of the plaza. Dual hall temple assemblages were exemplars of society, malleable mirrors into which the Kowoj projected and experienced their social reality and history.

Social identity is not a byproduct of autochthonous territoriality, but an artifact partially manifest through a sense of place. Migrating people carry with them an image of the world and themselves, which they externalize in their ritual practices and materialize in their monumental constructions. Re-centering society in microcosmic self-reflections bridges discrepancies in time and space, thereby anchoring the social formation in a new place. While such collective images transform through time and are subject to strategic and practical manipulations, they intimate a veneer of continuity by linking people with their ancestors and the places, events, and form of social foundation.

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