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# Personal interactions: the implications of spatial arrangements for power relations at Cerén, El Salvador

Tracy L. Sweely

## Abstract

Anthropological theorizations of power have shifted from a focus on hierarchy and the overarching social structures and institutions that members of society operate within, to a focus on personal interactions as a basic unit of analysis. This paper employs theory on the relationship between spatial arrangements and power, in order to propose some possibilities for the power relations among the individuals who occupied specific spaces at Cerén, El Salvador. A primary assertion of this paper is that a focus on interpersonal relations is not only essential for understanding how power operates in societies but also for addressing questions of culture change.

## Keywords

Maya; Cerén; women; power relations; spatial analysis.

## Introduction

The sounds are the most notable to a stranger: the rhythmic grinding of stones against stones. Chatter fills the warm, already heavy morning air, the sun barely over the horizon. Occasionally the stones stop and a singular voice calls out to the others immediately followed by uninhibited laughter as the six women are perhaps reminded of the conspicuous actions of someone not in attendance. They work quickly, as it appears that much more corn needs to be ground and much more cooking and ritual preparation needs to be done before the ceremonies can begin and the large number of people expected begin appearing from the north. The women know they will not rest until far into the night if at all, but the excitement around the event they are participating in gives them little reason to care.

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Or, perhaps it is quiet, except for the rhythmic grinding of the stones. The six women do not speak beyond the occasional direction murmured by the eldest. They may find the heat as oppressive as the amount of work that lies ahead and long for the moment when they are dismissed to return to their other duties or to rest, having completed their responsibilities for the ceremony that is to take place later in the evening and in which they will not participate. One woman wishes she were elsewhere, thinking of other things she could be doing instead of grinding this mountain of corn.

Five metates carefully placed in five locations within a dwelling compound. They are visible to and within 10 meters of one another, with yet another slightly further away around the wall of a special non-household building but possibly still visible from two of the other metates. I assume the metates were used in the locations from which they were excavated, and there were occasions when all the metates were used simultaneously. I also assume the users of these metates were Maya and I subsequently assume they were women, based on both prehistoric and ethnohistoric evidence. I make the additional assumption the women used the metates for the purpose of ritual food preparation evidenced by the nearby special building which seems to have the function of serving large quantities of food during a ceremonial event. But why were these particular individual women here? What was their relationship to one another, to the buildings they worked in and around, and to the ceremony they were helping to prepare for? Did they want to be there? Did they choose to be there or were they obligated or forced to be there? If they were obligated, to whom? Did they receive something for their labor? Was the compensation they received something they negotiated for? Could they leave at any time and go somewhere else, do something else? What roles did their relationships with this ceremony, with one another and with other members of the community play in the larger society?

Questions, regarding what kinds of power relations these women were involved in while performing the laborious task of grinding corn for a community-wide ceremonial event, compound and multiply, forcing one to choose between alternative scenarios and between scenarios within scenarios. How should we choose so that our interpretations can be accurate? What else do we need to know, what else can we know? Most importantly, what do we already believe to be true, i.e. what theories do we hold, about power, women, metate locations, and ceremonial events that lead us to the questions we ask and the answers we choose to accept as probable? In this analysis, I begin by presenting a set of theoretical formulations on individual agency and interaction in order to demonstrate the importance of incorporating personal interactions into analyses of power. Next I present a specific subset of the spatial and artefactual data from the remarkably well-preserved archaeological site of Cerén, El Salvador. The subset I use is comprised of the locations and orientations of metates, commonly called grinding stones. This kind of data is rarely used in discussions of power since it is assumed that these items do not relate to, reflect or implicate power relations in any way. As I will show, this kind of data can be used successfully in such an analysis. In the final part of this paper I draw upon theories which link space and power in order to arrive at possible power relations among individuals represented by the Cerén data. The goal of this paper is to demonstrate the importance of including theories of interpersonal relations in models of power relations based on archaeological data.

## Rethinking power

Since the 1980s theoretical conceptions of power in archaeology have undergone major revisions, primarily as a result of parallel developments in post-processual, feminist and post-modern thinking (Wylie 1992; see specifically Miller and Tilley 1984; Conkey and Spector 1984). Conceptions have shifted away from a focus on a reified version of power as a negative force imposed through dominant factions within a society which determine what members can and cannot do, either through ideological control or sheer force (Wylie 1992; see also Paynter and McGuire 1991). This hegemonic perspective may yield an interpretation and an understanding of power relations similar to the second scenario given in the introduction above.

Two central themes in the theorization of power have arisen following this shift. One is that power is constitutive of all social structures and relations. The other is that individual agency plays an important role in the reproduction and manipulation of power relations (Hodder 1994; Miller and Tilley 1984; Wylie 1992). These themes have shifted our attention from a focus on relationships between groups and social institutions to a focus on social relationships between individuals.

While there has been substantial and highly productive theorizing about the active roles of individuals within overarching structures composing the social world in which they live (see Bourdieu 1977; Giddens 1991; Cohen 1994), there has been insufficient theorization of personal interactions and insufficient application of the theory of individual agency to archaeological data. This is due to the perceived intractable nature of archaeological data for these purposes which has essentially resulted in the denial of the individual as an agent capable of affecting society.

New conceptions of power construct the individual as able to see, reflect upon, understand the social reality in which they exist, and actively manipulate and reinterpret symbols and ideological understandings for their own purposes (cf. Cohen 1994). Strauss and Quinn (1994) propose an experientially based model for the development of ideological understandings of the individual that accounts for both the development of dominant ideologies as well as ideological change. For example, the development of an individual's sense of what is natural and desirable first occurs through personal interactions within some type of familial context and only later through interactions with others beyond the family. Ideological change is instigated when an individual's sense of what is natural and desirable, based on their experiences, comes into conflict with what 'most people' see as natural and desirable, i.e. the dominant ideology of what is natural and desirable (*ibid.*). If the individual acts and interacts with others in accordance with their own set of beliefs, in opposition to the dominant set of beliefs, the conceptions of others involved in such interactions will either be reinforced or changed in some capacity (*ibid.*). Dominant ideologies then change as a result of some critical mass being met in the number of individuals who no longer subscribe to a given set of ideologies as a result of their experiences with others. Sahlins (1985), for example, documents instances of this occurring in Hawaii during the contact period. Strauss and Quinn do not deny that ideologies are shared, they simply wish to reveal the complexity of social relations within groups. This indicates the resistance such relations have to analytical reduction, and provides us with a direction for considering questions of social change.

An important implication follows from this theoretical position. Given that individuals' interpretations of ideological frameworks develop first in interpersonal contexts, the power that is associated with these contexts for shaping, first, individuals, then the larger society through the actions and interactions of those individuals, needs to be acknowledged. Joyce's (1996) assertion, that progressively more intimate spaces provide progressively greater opportunities for resistances to dominant or normative discourses embodied in public and highly visible settings, is analogous.

Below I present data representing a set of household activities from a dwelling compound found at the site of Cerén. I analyze the arrangement and orientation of the metates, in terms of the implications they hold for power relations among the individuals who used them. I also consider some implications these interpersonal relationships might have had for power relations within the village.

### Cerén

The following discussion of the data from Cerén is based on the preliminary reports of the Cerén Research Project (Sheets and McKee 1989, 1990; Sheets and Kievit 1992; Sheets and Simmons 1993; Sheets and Brown 1996), unless otherwise specified. Cerén was a pre-historic village located on the Maya periphery. It appears to have been primarily a farming village but there is evidence of some specialization within households, either for exchange within the village or for exchange at a regional market located at the site of San Andres. It is believed that Cerén was part of a regional political hierarchy. In this hierarchy elites from the regional center of San Andres controlled trade and redistribution of important resources, as well as important religious and judicial enterprises (Sheets 1992).

Cerén was buried in volcanic ash during the eruption of Loma Caldera volcano in about AD 600. Because of the nature of this disaster the preservation of material remains is exceptional. The inhabitants must have had some forewarning because they managed to escape, at least from the areas of the village that have been excavated thus far. Because of their haste to depart, much of the material culture of these people was left behind, *in situ*. It has therefore been possible to reconstruct the buildings themselves, the pre-eruption locations of artefacts that have been found within and around them, and the locations and contents of gardens and milpas.

Figure 1 is a map depicting Dwelling 1, one of the three distinct dwelling compounds, and Structure 10, one of the five special buildings that have been recovered from Cerén thus far. Each dwelling compound probably included a domicile, a kitchen and a bodega or storehouse. Figure 2 is an artist's reconstruction of Dwelling 1, the most fully excavated dwelling compound, and the only dwelling that currently demonstrates all three types of structures. In this paper I focus on spatial and artefactual data only from Dwelling 1 and the nearby special building, Structure 10 (Fig. 3). Elsewhere I discuss implications for power relations of the spatial and artefactual data from other areas of the site (Sweely in press).

Structure 1 is the domicile of Dwelling 1. It is a place where the inhabitants ate, slept and carried out activities. There may have been other structures to the north of Structure 1 but this area was bulldozed during modern construction prior to the discovery of the

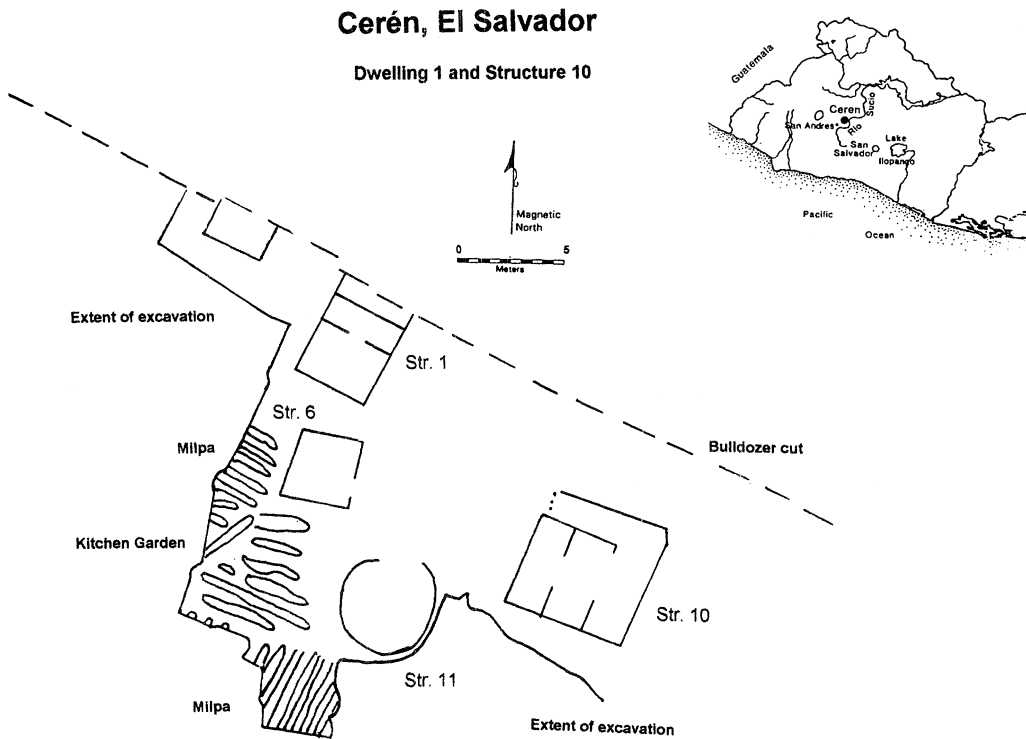


Figure 1 Detail of the plan view of the Cerén site showing Dwelling 1 and Structure 10.

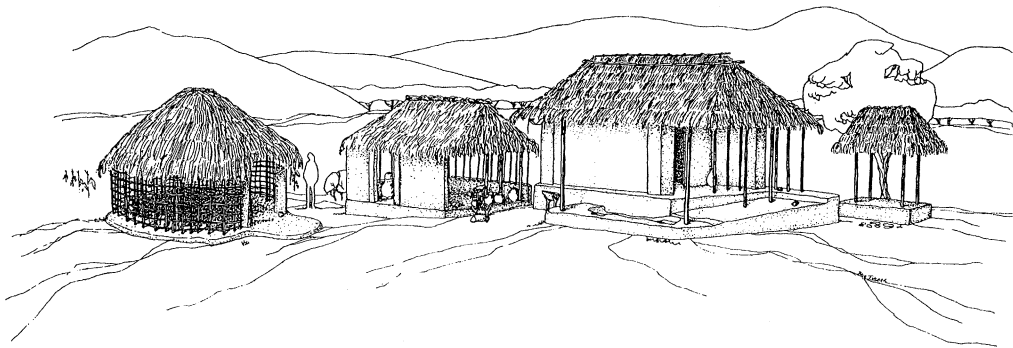


Figure 2 Artist's reconstruction of Dwelling 1. By David Tucker.

site. Any other buildings that may have been north of Structure 1 were destroyed. It is evident that the structure opened on the north side.

Structure 6, the bodega of Dwelling 1, is also located less than 5 meters from Structure 1. This building is curious because the front of the building containing the door was the only complete adobe wall. At the time of the eruption the other walls were made simply of poles, somewhat widely spaced, and sunk into very low adobe walls located on the low building platform. These walls were probably in the process of being rebuilt (Sheets pers. comm.). The door in the finished adobe wall of Structure 6 opened near to the doorway

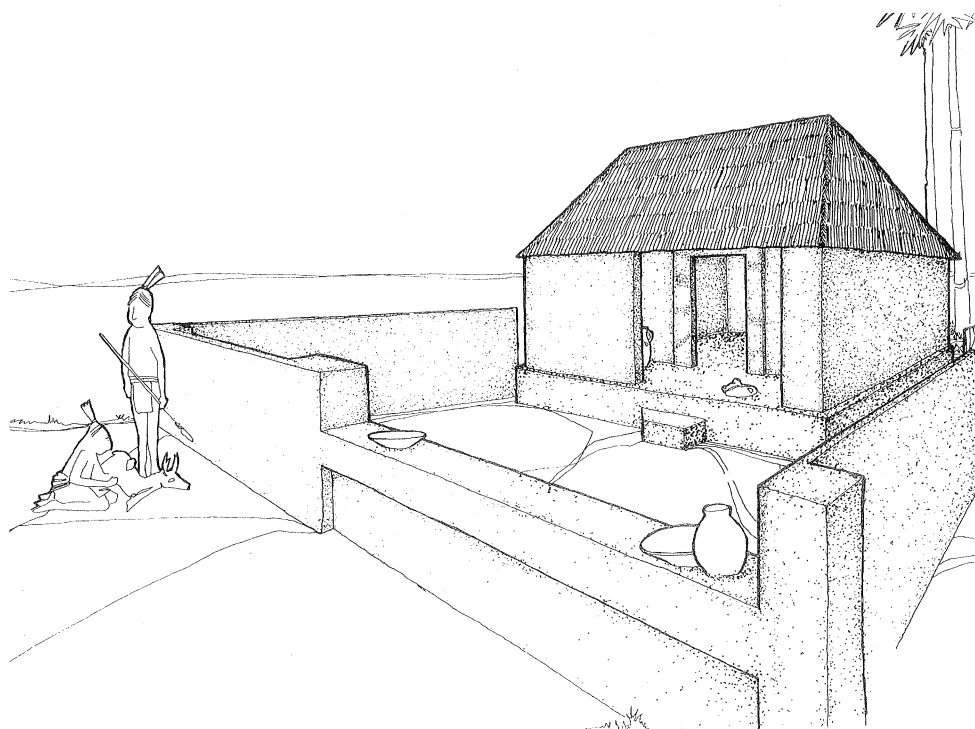


Figure 3 Artist's reconstruction of Structure 10. By Karen Kievit.

of Structure 11, the kitchen. Structure 11 was also somewhat open-air since its walls were made of poles and thatch (not shown in the reconstruction (Fig. 2)). Two adobe columns just beyond the porch in the doorway to the building suggest earlier wattle and daub walls. A kitchen garden containing manioc, corn and possibly medicinal plants was located between Structure 6 and Structure 11.

Less than 5 meters from the Dwelling 1 kitchen is a special building designated Structure 10. This building is interpreted as having a *cofradia*-like food serving, religious association (Sheets 1993). It contained items that have been interpreted as ceremonial, such as a deer antler headdress and a caiman vessel with achiote seeds, used for making red pigment (Sheets 1993). It also contained the greatest quantity of vessels and the largest vessel storage capacity found at the site to date. The evidence for food preparation and storage in Structure 10 indicate larger-scale activities than those taking place in the kitchen. At the time of the eruption most items appear to have been in storage locations, suggesting that a ceremony had been completed prior to the eruption (Sheets pers. comm.). Previous analyses have suggested a relationship between Dwelling 1 and Structure 10 (Brown 1996; Simmons 1996). The large number of functioning metates found in Dwelling 1 and Structure 10, six in all, and the proximity of the dwelling to Structure 10, suggest that its inhabitants may have processed food to be dispensed to guests from Structure 10. Heavy foot traffic to the north of Structure 10 indicates that guests arrived from that direction (Simmons and Villalobos 1993). Brown (1996) has suggested that the household participated in a religious ceremony, possibly the *cuch* ceremony with its emphasis

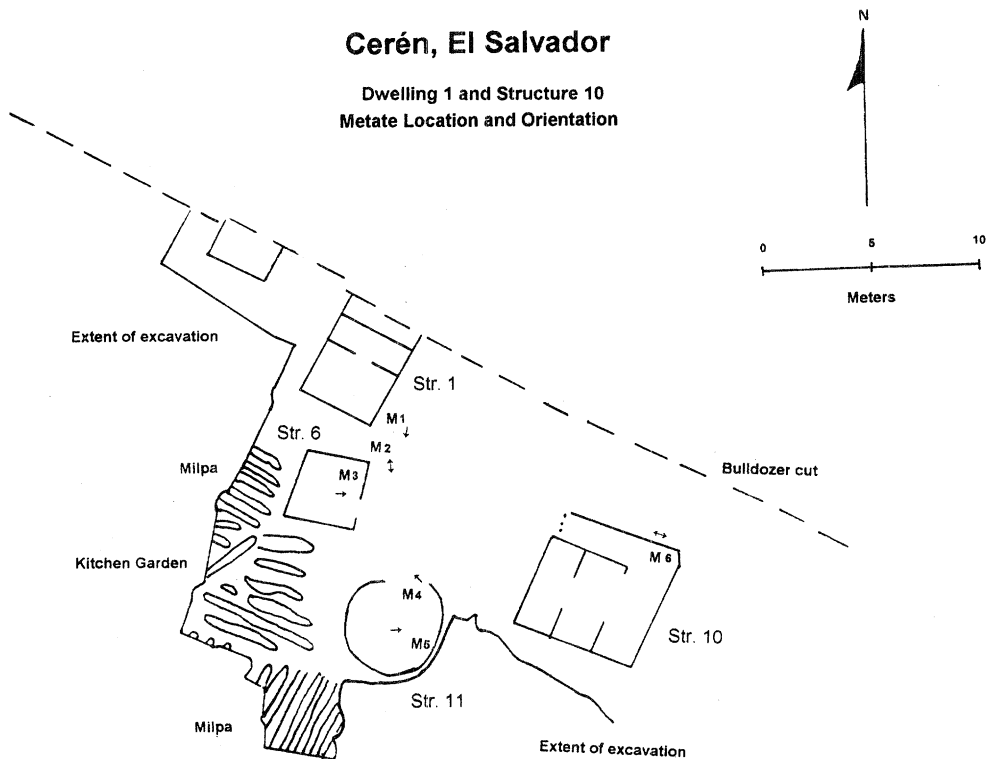


Figure 4 Plan view of Dwelling 1 and Structure 10 showing locations of the metates and the direction the user would face. Double arrows indicate either/or orientations.

on white-tailed deer, or in some other type of religious organization antecedent to the contemporary Maya fiesta system. Of the many interesting implications of the artefactual and spatial data recovered from Dwelling 1 and Structure 10, it is the orientation of the metates and their proximity to one another that I want to utilize in my discussion of interpersonal power relations.

### Power and place: the analysis of spaces

Figure 4 shows the location of each metate found within Dwelling 1. Arrows indicate the direction that a person using each metate would be facing. Double arrows indicate either/or orientations. It is interesting to note that at the time of the eruption users of all the metates in the dwelling compound would have been visible to one another. Metates 1 and 2, located between Structures 1 and 6, are within 5 meters of Metate 3, inside Structure 6. Because of the pole wall the three metates would have been visible to one another. However, if the pole walls of Structure 6 were built with wattle-and-daub these metates would no longer be inter-visible. This may have been the usual situation and the simultaneous use of the metates may not have been coincident with the open pole walls of Structure 6. Two pieces of information support this. First, Metate 1 and 2 were intended to be mounted on two sets of sticks when in use, but Metate 2 was not mounted and so



was not in use. Second, the items found in Structure 10 appear to have been in storage, indicating that the building was not being used for its ceremonial purpose at the time of the eruption. Large-scale food preparation was probably not taking place.

Metates 4 and 5 in Structure 11, the kitchen, are interesting. From either metate, all of the other metates in Dwelling 1 are visible. If the door in Structure 6 was open, there would be a direct line of sight between Metate 3 and Metate 4 through the doorways of Structures 6 and 11. If Metate 4 was occupied, then a person using Metate 5 further inside and facing virtually in the opposite direction would not have a direct line of sight to any of the other metates, even when turning to the left. In fact, if Metate 3 was not normally visible to Metates 1 and 2, then there is no other position within the compound from which to see all of the metates other than from Metate 4, or, in the event that it was not occupied, from Metate 5.

Finally, Metate 6 inside the enclosed courtyard in front of Structure 10 may have been visible to Metates 1 and 2, but it is not yet clear which direction the user of this metate was facing. If the user of Metate 6 was facing west this person would have a direct line of sight to Metates 1 and 2 through the entrance to the courtyard. This person would also have a direct line of sight into Structure 10 through the doorway. There is evidence of a pole door at the entrance to the courtyard, so visibility would have been blocked if this door was closed. If the user of Metate 6 was facing east, the users of Metates 1 and 2 would not be visible but visibility into Structure 10 would still be possible.

What could this arrangement of metates tell us about power relations between the individuals using them? Can this arrangement tell us anything about power relations between the users and the other inhabitants of the village? In Spain's (1992) spatial analysis of gender and power she draws a connection between spaces that either facilitate or discourage communication of knowledge, especially culturally valued secret knowledge, among inhabitants and the relative status or power that those inhabitants wield as a result. Interactions involving the communication of secret knowledge take place in spaces with limited access, such as commonplace structures with limited visibility from outside as well as special structures devoted to secret societies. For my purposes, secret knowledge can refer to either knowledge in conflict with dominant ideologies or valued and guarded knowledge, such as knowledge associated with male or female initiation rights. While Spain emphasizes that differential access to knowledge fosters the 'mystification' of the economically exploited or manipulated, I diverge slightly in an attempt to depart from a 'hegemony-as-given' framework. Her focus on the communication of knowledge is analogous to a focus on personal interaction as the nucleus of power relations. But I assert a framework that does not assume asymmetry or the conscious authoring of social conditions by a dominant faction (cf. Strathern 1988). The result is a much more negotiated character to the operation of power relations which leads to a specific set of social conditions, not intentionally developed by anyone or any group, and which may or may not be asymmetrical (see Sweely in press).

Figure 5 illustrates various permutations of the power relations which could be reflected in the arrangement of these metates. Interpretation of this arrangement is possible if seen in the light of the relationship between communication and secrecy, and an individual's visibility to others and their level of ceremonial participation. In Tier 1 of the graph, visibility to one another would indicate the ability to communicate and invisibility to one another would indicate lack of communication. While it is possible that a few of the metate

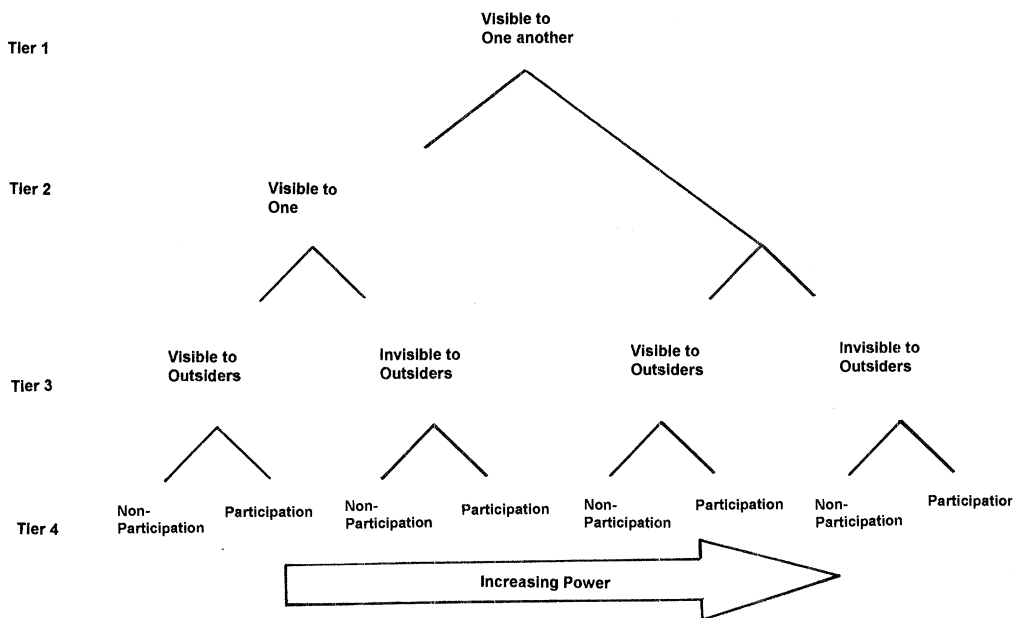


Figure 5 Permutations of the relationship between visibility, ceremonial participation and power.

users were not visible to one another, under no circumstances were all of the metate users completely segregated and invisible to one another. Nor were they completely segregated from individuals outside the dwelling compound so this possibility is not included in the figure. The spatial arrangements generally fostered rather than prohibited communication among the metate users, especially the ones located near to and visible to one another. The actual locations of the metates, one separate within Structure 6, one separate in the courtyard of Structure 10, two together between Structures 1 and 6, and two together inside the kitchen, may represent preferences for particular interactions by the users of the metates.

On the other hand, the metates may have been arranged according to a different rationale for visibility and communication. It is possible that communication was neither multi-directional nor the prerogative of the metate users. The metates may have been arranged to ensure that all, with the exception of the one in the courtyard of Structure 10, were visible from only Metate 4 or 5, but not both simultaneously. Upon completion of the wattle-and-daub wall, Metates 1 and 2 were probably not going to be moved to maintain visibility with the metate inside Structure 6. Since these metates were intended to be mounted on two sets of sticks sunken into the ground they would have been semi-permanent. This arrangement may have been designed so that the user of the metate in the doorway of the kitchen, or the one further inside given that the other was not in use, could preside as an authority figure. Such a person might be a senior woman of the household. This arrangement of the metates suggests asymmetrical power relations. The person using Metate 4 would be in a position of surveillance, able to control the behavior and communication of the users of the other metates, in a divide-and-conquer or 'panoptic' (cf. Foucault 1977) fashion. This situation is indicated by Tier 2 on the left side of Figure 5 and is illustrated by the second scenario offered in the introduction.

Tier 3 of Figure 5 refers to the relationship that the users of the metates had to individuals beyond the compound. It may not have been important for the users of Metates 1 and 2 to be invisible to other members of the community, but it may have been important for the users of Metates 3, 4 and 5 not to have been seen. The implications for power depend on whether the arrangement of the metates reflects the preferences of the individual users or that of an authority figure. For example, if the arrangement reflects personal preferences and if the metate users are invisible to outsiders, interactions between the users could include the communication of secret knowledge, perhaps knowledge in conflict with dominant ideologies. This would be a more powerful position than if the metate users were visible as for those located outside, using Metates 1 and 2.

Both of these options would offer more powerful positions for the metate users than in the case that the location of the metates is dependent on another's preference. In this case communication between metate users would be inhibited by visibility to outsiders and by the surveillance of an authority figure. Metate users could be in a slightly more powerful position if their interactions are visible to an authority figure but invisible to outsiders. This could have been the case for interactions between an authority figure in Structure 11, the other metate user in Structure 11, and the lone metate user in Structure 6.

Tier 4 in Figure 5 addresses the issue of whether or not these women participated in the ceremonies, beyond the food preparation phase. Participation could indicate their access to special, secret knowledge and impact on the positions of power they could occupy. It is difficult to tell what level of participation these women had in the ceremonial events which took place in Structure 10. The activities represented in Structure 10 are interpreted as being similar to those of the *cuch* ceremony. If this is the case then the women using the metates may have raised and provided white-tailed deer for use in the ceremonies (Brown 1996). This would confer a certain amount of prestige upon the donor. In terms of access to knowledge, there is evidence that women were present in Structure 10 (Sweely in press). The structure has limited access since there is only one entrance into its walled courtyard, implying an element of secrecy and exclusion. Structure 10 is accessible from Dwelling 1 since the entrance into its courtyard opens onto the patio of Dwelling 1. But, most activities within Structure 10 are not directly visible to the metate users in Dwelling 1. The exception would be if the pole door in the entrance to the courtyard of Structure 10 was open. In this case the activities of the user of Metate 6 would be visible to Metates 1 and 2. If this were the case then the user of Metate 6 would also have a direct line of sight into Structure 10 and, therefore, access to secret knowledge which could be shared with the other metate users. Finally, items used in ritual have been found in the kitchen and in the bodega of Dwelling 1. An incensario has been excavated from the kitchen as well as five pigment cylinders, and a pigment that appears to be a hematite-mica mixture. A hematite-mica mixture was also found inside the bodega, Structure 6. If these items were not used exclusively for household ritual or in household craft activities, they could have been used by the metate users for ceremonial events taking place in Structure 10.

From the data, it is difficult to assess to what extent the women participated in the ceremony beyond possibly providing meat, certainly preparing food and possibly serving it under ceremonious conditions. As can be seen in Figure 5, the possibilities for power based, first, on whether or not the metate arrangement is due to individual preferences

or the dictates of an authority figure and, second, on visibility or invisibility to outsiders, can be extended to include participation or non-participation beyond food preparation. To give an extreme example, recall the scenario where personal communication among metate users is inhibited by both visibility to an authority figure and visibility to outsiders. If we assume that the metate users did not participate in the ceremony beyond food preparation, these individuals would be quite powerless, since they are not only inhibited from communication with each other but also excluded from possible secret knowledge available to participants in the ceremony. To give the other extreme, if communication is uninhibited among the metate users and invisible to outsiders, as is the case for the metates in the kitchen, and if we assume that the metate users participated in the ceremony beyond the food preparation phase, they would be quite powerful individuals. These women would be able to interact freely with one another, reinforcing or contesting dominant ideological constructions, and they would have had access to secret knowledge.

These permutations are intended to be used heuristically rather than viewed as absolute relationships between visibility, ceremonial participation and power. Branches in the diagram may cross-cut one another in a way not discussed here. For example, participation in a ceremony may mean more for an individual's ability to exercise power in one context than in another, even if that individual's interactions with others are visible rather than invisible to outsiders. But these permutations do provide an entry point into an exploration of how such factors affect power relations. Essentially, visibility between individuals provides opportunities for communication, invisibility to outsiders provides opportunities for uninhibited communication as well as the potential for the exchange of secret knowledge whether it be in special or mundane contexts. Finally, participation in ceremonial events provides access to culturally valued secret knowledge. In the positive sense, uninhibited personal interactions, and participation in ceremonial events can increase power for individuals since they generate conditions under which they can affect the social conditions in which they operate, either reinforcing those conditions through support of the ideological foundations upon which they rest or undermining them through the contestation of those foundations. In the negative sense inhibited personal interactions and limited participation in ceremonial events can increase control over individual behavior which is born of, and intended to maintain, asymmetrical power relations.

## **Conclusion**

Where we decide to place the metate users of Dwelling 1 and Structure 10 in the graph in Figure 5 has implications for the kind of social conditions we visualize for the villagers of Cerén. We could decide that because prehistoric Maya social relations have been interpreted as hierarchical, based almost entirely on evidence from the elite segment of the society, hierarchy should be expected here and therefore the 'authority figure' scenario described above is most likely. But my intention has not been to assume hierarchy, since doing so will obscure the process of the development of the ideologies in which power relations are embedded, including the manner in which they change. Moving up from

small-scale social interactions rather than down from large-scale social structures to examine social operations does not obscure this process. If we decide the most probable scenario is that an authority figure, such as a senior woman, oversaw the other metate users, then we imply that hierarchical power relations were likely present in the village. This would imply the existence of the rigid control of individual behavior and personal interactions designed to maintain asymmetrical power relations. If we decide that communication between the metate users was uninhibited by the visibility of either an authority figure or outsiders, then we imply that dominant ideologies were not rigidly enforced and that power relations were more egalitarian, flexible and more easily altered. In order to choose between options for power relations at Cerén presented here it will be necessary to examine spatial and artefactual relationships in other areas of the site for confirmation or contradictions of specific scenarios. It has been my aim here to point out that the exploration of these relationships demonstrates how the possibilities for personal interaction affect, and reflect, the character of the social conditions of a society and demonstrate the need to incorporate evidence for interpersonal relations within interpretations of overarching social conditions.

The importance of interpersonal relations to society that I have asserted here reveals the necessity of envisioning societies in dynamic process and resistant to analytical reduction. I have attempted to show that a particularly well-preserved spatial orientation can be used to examine personal interactions and some possible power relations that may have been in operation. These data constrain the possibilities of interpretation to a certain degree; for example, the six metates were not all located within the walls of Structure 10, or sequestered away from one another. These arrangements would have very different implications for power relations. The theory I draw upon permits further interpretation, allowing for a range of scenarios for power relations among individuals, beyond the conclusion that Dwelling 1 was supplying ground corn for a ceremonial event that took place in Structure 10.

A light breeze stirs in the silent darkness as a solitary woman idly traverses the house compound. As she enters the ceremonial building to insure that the vessels still containing food are properly covered and stored for the remaining brief night ahead, she hears in the distance the raucous laughter of a ceremonial participant still feeling the 'glory' of a ritual successfully carried out. She smiles and recalls the commencement of the event so much earlier in the evening. She makes her way back across the compound to her sleeping platform and mentally thanks the other women who have carried out their tasks so well, ensuring that all the preparations and supplications were made properly. As she finally lays down to take her rest she is assured that there will be yet another period of bounty for all and she drifts into a deep and contented sleep.

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