
Beyond Belief: Religious Experience, Ritual, and Cultural Neuro-phenomenology in the Interpretation of Past Religious Systems

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While there is growing agreement within anthropology and archaeology that notions of 'experience' can contribute to our interpretations of the past, this article suggests that there is a need to incorporate insight gathered from the fields of cultural phenomenology and cultural neuro-phenomenology into general anthropological understandings of cross-cultural religious experience. Specifically, this article explores the insight offered by cultural neuro-phenomenology into the relationships between religious symbolism, ritual, power, religious belief, and individual religious experience. In assessing the role that belief, as instantiated through ritually-induced religious experience, plays in the maintenance or alteration of state-level religious systems, this article will outline the ways in which this insight may both help us better to understand past religious experience as well as to interpret the maintenance and alteration of past religious systems. To demonstrate the potential of this approach, this article will conclude with a brief discussion of the fall of the Classic Maya state religious system.

*Gods die when people cease to believe in them*¹
-unidentified speaker

Within anthropology there is an increasing drive to bring together experience-based, individualistic approaches with ethnographic research in order to understand better the relationships between individual and culture. In particular the concepts of agency and intentionality have become prominent in recent theoretical discussions within anthropology and archaeology. Several archaeologists have begun to explore avenues through which it may be possible to construct more inclusive interpretations of past cultural systems and the individuals acting within them based on notions of experience (Bender 1995; Bradley 1998; Tilley 1994), cognition (Flannery & Marcus 1996; Mithen 1996; Renfrew & Zubrow 1994), emotion (Tarlow 2000), identity (Jones 1997; Meskell 2001; Meskell 2002b), embodiment (Kus 1992; Rautman 2000), and subjectivity (Meskell 2002a; Thomas 1996).

The theoretical and methodological difficulties in implementing an experience/embodied approach to the past, however, have also become apparent.

Owing perhaps to these difficulties, the majority of archaeological accounts of ancient religion lack any exploration of the dynamic processes of interaction between individual religious experience, belief, ritual, and culturally salient religious symbols. Theoretically, religion is often viewed as an ideological system, internalized by individuals, that tends to serve the interests of the powerful. In general, religious systems are seen as structures perpetuated by the black box of an abstract 'society' while the subjective experience of the individuals that make up society is often ignored. Though we have moved beyond a naïve Marxist interpretation of power, it seems that there is still little attempt to explain why shared religious beliefs are internalized and heeded. In other words, while outlining the specific cultural manifestations of religious symbolic systems is a

vital step, such studies rarely move beyond cultural particulars to explore the larger implications of the relationships between subjective religious experience, shared knowledge and interpretation, and issues of power and ideology. Insight offered both by traditional philosophical and anthropological work on religion, as well as by more recent work in cultural phenomenology and cultural neuro-phenomenology, can perhaps help us to elucidate these processes of the past. They may in particular assist us in exploring the role that individual religious experience may have played in the origins, maintenance, or alteration of shared religious systems and the ideological systems of power built upon them. Likewise, by turning to look at the ways in which subjective experience can impact upon and, in fact, direct such social structures as state-sanctioned religions, we can begin to elaborate our models and interpretations of the relationships between past ideological systems of belief, symbolic systems, and individual interpretations and negotiations with those systems.

In order to elaborate the ways in which these fields can perhaps contribute to archaeological interpretations of past religious systems (including their ideological and individualistic implications), this article will outline some of the recent insights offered by the fields of cultural phenomenology and cultural neuro-phenomenology. These seek to understand the ways in which the relationship between belief and experience is mediated through religious practices such as ritual. To demonstrate the potential of this approach, it will conclude with a brief discussion of the ways in which an understanding of the relationships between religious experience, belief, and shared religious systems can benefit our interpretations of the collapse of the Classic Maya state religious system.

Belief, experience, and ritual: cultural (neuro)phenomenology

Within anthropology, there is a long tradition of interest in the interconnections between belief and experience (Firth 1948; 1996; Geertz 2000; James 1982 [1902]; Needham 1972; Turner 1974; Turner & Bruner 1986). Anthropologist Raymond Firth conceptualizes religious belief as 'a set of ideas more or less integrated by reason but held with conviction that they are true, that they are meaningful in relation to reality' (Firth 1996, 15). Within this definition, Firth argues that we can distinguish elements of knowledge, emotion, and volitional activity acting upon belief. According to Firth, religious belief is charac-

terized by its content, including the supernatural or the 'quality of the sacred' (Firth 1996, 15). Of central importance to this definition is the 'element of *emotion* in whatever kind of *experience* that gives the basis to the belief [and] provides it with a strong flavour of reality' (Firth 1996, 15; emphasis mine).

In this definition of belief, it is important to note Firth's assertion that religious belief cannot be seen as 'passive fixed items of mental furniture' and must instead be seen as 'a mode of action' (Firth 1996, 16). Firth focuses on belief as an instrument of personal adjustment to changing external conditions based on 'elaborate intellectual analysis mingled with the statement of what are conceived as the results of experience' (Firth 1996, 26). This notion of belief is similar to that of philosopher and psychologist William James who argues that 'in the distinctly religious sphere of experience, many persons possess the objects of their belief, not in the form of mere conceptions which their intellect accepts as true, but rather in the form of quasi-sensible realities directly apprehended' (James 1982 [1902], 64). In other words, abstract intellectualized ideas are interwoven with actual experiences of being in the world to form a generally coherent picture of the universe and an individual's place within that universe. Ultimately, 'it is not intellectual or moral proofs for belief . . ., or religious concepts that provide validity; it is the *emotional proofs*' (Firth 1996, 30; emphasis mine). From this notion of belief, it is important to note that we cannot dismiss experiences of the sacred as mere imaginal fabrication. As the linguistic anthropologist Sapir points out, within an individual's subjective experience, 'a belief in the reality of molecules and atoms is of exactly the same nature as a belief in God or immortality' (Sapir 1958, 125).

Turning to anthropological understandings of experience, few modern scholars would argue that human experience, cognition, and action are either entirely culturally constructed or entirely biologically determined (see Turner & Bruner 1986). While there is still debate about the exact input which culture and biology each contribute to an individual's behaviour, it is increasingly recognized that these influences work in concert and, quite often, are impossible to parse out. Indeed, the very usefulness of this dichotomy has been called into question. Adding to the complexity, recent work on agency and the ability of individuals to have dissonant experiences and emotions that confound cultural, normative expectations, both point to the necessity of factoring-in the existence of an individual's creative and unique capabilities when discussing experience

(see Dornan 2002; Hochschild 1983; Hollan 2000; Mahmood 2001; Throop 2003a,b).

Because of these complexities, while there has been general agreement about the inextricable tie between religious belief and experience, the actual processes of articulation between belief and experience have rarely been explored within anthropology. Though Firth and James do suggest that religious beliefs are, to a great extent, built upon an individual's sacred experiences, the important question is how individual experiences are transformed into a *shared* belief system. What is the connection between an individual's embodied experience of the sacred and the larger, shared system of belief that is part of a religious structure?

Cultural phenomenology and cultural neuro-phenomenology have both set out explicitly to explore these complex processes of meaning-making and the internalization of cultural forms as instantiated within the individual. In particular, both fields have focused on the complex interactions between biology, the individual, and culture in relation to ritual and religion. Both cultural phenomenology and cultural neuro-phenomenology look to the importance of ritual and religious practices, not only as symbolic performances of culturally salient religious meanings, but also as the central mediator in a dynamic feedback loop between shared religious belief and subjective religious (embodied) experiences.

Cultural phenomenology

A concept that was first advanced by Clifford Geertz (1973), cultural phenomenology is perhaps best represented in the writings of Thomas Csordas (1983; 1988; 1990; 1993; 1994a,b; 1999; 2002). Csordas, who bases his approach primarily upon the phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty and the practice theory of Bourdieu, sets out to explore the various ways that embodiment serves as the existential ground of culture. That is, Csordas seeks to investigate the ways that culture patterns experience as mediated through the body, and the ways that embodiment serves as a generative basis for the creation, maintenance, and alteration of cultural forms.

In response to anthropological approaches to the body simply as a representational function of knowledge, Csordas makes the distinction between the concepts of the 'body' and 'embodiment' — the body being a biological/material entity, embodiment being the 'indeterminate methodological field defined by perceptual experience and the mode of presence and engagement in the world' (1993, 135; see

also Csordas 1994a; Meskell 1999, 36). Arguing that previous anthropological writing on perception and experience tended to rely on studies of perceptual categories and classifications, Csordas suggests instead that anthropology should turn to exploring the dialectic between perceptual consciousness and collective practice through an understanding of perception based on the notion of 'somatic modes of attention' (1993; 1994a; 2002). In other words, Csordas feels that past attempts to study embodiment in anthropology have tended to focus on the representational, symbolic functions of the body as a cognitive way of perceiving the world instead of looking at the various ways in which the body allows for an indeterminate (but culturally elaborated) somatic engagement with the world (1994b).

As his pivotal theoretical concept, Csordas defines somatic modes of attention as 'culturally elaborated ways of attending to and with one's body in surroundings that include the embodied presence of others' (1993, 138). In general, this notion of somatic modes of attention provides a way for Csordas to conceptualize an individual's attending 'with' and 'to' the body, not as an isolated object, but through sensory engagement with the intersubjective world. In particular, Csordas suggests that we can understand the embodied actions of religious ritual as being about both the patterning of religious/bodily experience and the intersubjective constitution of meaning through that experience. For example, in discussing the differing symbolic elaboration of two religious healing movements (Catholic Charismatic Renewal and the Puerto Rico Espiritismo), Csordas explores the somatic means through which these charismatic healers come to know what afflicts their patients (1999, 151). This engagement of the healer's sensory modalities in their patient's illness defines 'a mode of intersubjective perception and attention to the distress of another' (1999, 152).

Using the notion of indeterminacy as a theoretical ground upon which to collapse the dualities between subject and object, mind and body, self and other, Csordas argues that the use of analytical categories (such as perception and sensation) to interpret embodied experiences leads to imprecise understandings of human practice because of the fundamental indeterminacy of existence (1994a). To correct this, Csordas instead argues that we should turn to look at the ways in which embodied experience and perception of the cultural world is both interpreted through and experienced by the body in the context of ritual and religious practice. Put differently, it is through the embodied engagement in

the world, through our culturally encouraged shifting somatic modes of attention to particular aspects of our bodies, that we can explore the relationships between religious experience and the more 'cognitive' functions of religious belief (1993; see also Meskell 1999).

Cultural neuro-phenomenology

By incorporating insight from a wide variety of fields (anthropology, psychology, phenomenology, and neuroscience), cultural neuro-phenomenology likewise seeks to explore the processes of articulation between experience, meaning, and practice as manifest through the embodied individual. In particular, cultural neuro-phenomenology is focused on the relationships between cognition, consciousness, experience, embodiment, and culture, based on the assumption that there 'there exists no reality intervening between the human body and its environment, and that includes the body's nervous system' (Laughlin pers. comm.; see also Laughlin & d'Aquili 1974). In Charles Laughlin's words, this field

takes the view that the structures producing universal patterns in culture . . . are in fact neuro-physical organizations . . . It is neurognosis that accounts for the regularities in language, dreaming, intuition, feeling, archetypical imagery, etc., found cross-culturally and that are ubiquitous to the human species (<http://www.neurognosis.com/history.htm>; see also Laughlin & d'Aquili 1974; d'Aquili *et al.* 1979).

Research suggests that experiences of 'god' or communion with the cosmos are sensory-somatic experiences that are neurologically mediated (Persinger 1987). There is growing evidence that religious experiences that are directly apprehended are, in fact, based in part on the normal functioning of the human brain and central nervous system. Indeed, d'Aquili & Newberg (1998; 1999) have found that even everyday religious experiences cause distinct shifts in brain activity. MRI research indicates that, during a religious experience, the part of the brain that distinguishes between self and other often goes quiet, leading to the very real perception of becoming one with the universe (d'Aquili & Newberg 1999, 110). This sense of wholeness or union is often interpreted as 'feeling god' or communing with the sacred (see also Spezio 2001, 480).

In addition to d'Aquili & Newberg's cultural neuro-physiological model of religious experiences, there is growing agreement that particular religious concepts, such as the belief in doorways to alternate

realities and transformations into spirit beings, are also based on the human central nervous system and the shared human experience of an extra-mental reality. The belief in 'portaling' is indeed well-established across cultures, ancient and modern (see Langdon & Baer 1992, 3). The physiological basis for this cross-cultural phenomenon has been explored in great detail by cultural neuro-phenomenologists who, drawing from cross-cultural anthropological data as well as from the neurosciences and the phenomenological tradition, suggest that the structure of the human mind encourages the *experience* of transformation and world-shifting, particularly during activities which cause alterations in an individual's state of consciousness. For example, some argue that the experience of portaling can be 'explained in terms of radical re-entrainment of the neurological systems mediating experience in the brain' (MacDonald *et al.* 1989).

The fact that all human perceptions and experiences of the world are mediated through people's shared central nervous system explains many of the cross-culturally shared aspects of religious belief and imagery. Entopic imagery is a good example. These scholars are careful, however, not to present a biologically deterministic view of the complex feedback cycle that occurs between biologically-based (but not determined) experiences, individual interpretations of those experiences, and the elaborated cultural systems of shared meaning both influencing and building upon them. Instead, these experiences can be viewed as the phenomenological starting point in pre-objectified experiences that are then individually and culturally mediated. At the same time it can be acknowledged that cultural meaning is intrinsic to embodied experience (see Csordas 1994b).

The cultural neuro-phenomenological concept of the 'cycle of meaning' is particularly useful when looking at the ways in which ritual, belief, and experience tie into a shared cosmology (see Laughlin *et al.* 1990). A 'cycle of meaning' is the process through which shared meaning is constructed. It may be conceptualized as a sociocultural process that integrates an individual's knowledge, memory, and experiences. A cycle of meaning is thus a dynamic process of revitalization that, over time, maintains the cyclical feedback between a belief system and individual experience. A shared religious belief system is symbolically and performatively expressed (for example, through ritual) in such a way that it evokes memories and experiences which in turn can serve to vivify that belief system. In this way, there is an ongoing dialogue between a world-view and an in-

dividual's experience of that world which must reaffirm each other in a feedback loop (a cycle of meaning) in order to remain valid.

Ritual, belief, and meaning-making

As the work of these scholars shows, ritual and shared religious practices are central mechanisms through which belief and experience are articulated and instantiated. Ritual can both channel experience based on belief, and alter belief in accordance with experience. Indeed, ritual events allow individuals to trigger religious experiences, acting as a pivot on which participants can frame those experiences within a shared interpretation of the perceptions and emotions arising during that ritual. Durkheim noted in 1912 that the act of sharing not only communion with the cosmos, but also the understanding and interpretation of that cosmos, can create a powerful sense of community between participants (Durkheim 1995 [1912]; see also Throop & Laughlin 2002). Importantly, ritual experience is not solely collective. As Sapir argues, 'socialized rituals are not the primary fact in the structure of . . . religion; they are rather an extended form of the nuclear individual experience' (Sapir 1958, 128). In this way, through ritual participation, belief can be both extended from the individual to the social as well as become instantiated within an individual's subjective experience.²

With this in mind, the role of ritually-induced religious experience in the support of a given belief system is central (d'Aquili *et al.* 1979). As cultural phenomenology and cultural neuro-phenomenology demonstrate, within any belief system ritual plays a vital role not only in expressing that belief system but also as a way of directly experiencing that system through emotive and somatic means. According to Sapir, 'it is precisely under the stimulation of collective activity, as in the sun dance of the Plains Indians or in the Roman Catholic mass, that the most intense forms of individual experience are created' (Sapir 1958, 126). In other words, ritual performance is more than representation or symbolic expression of belief — it is the actual practice of ritual that both instantiates, reinforces, and authenticates belief through subjective experience.

The importance of ritually-induced experience in authenticating a belief system is shown by William Hanks in his discussion of the Yucatec Maya *saantiguar* ritual (1984). Hanks argues that symbolic normative structures must have experiential correlates and it is in fact this *experiential* aspect of the *saantiguar* ritual

that makes it effective, in that it can itself both reflect and transform individual experience. In general, Hanks argues that the 'effectiveness' of a ritual relies on both the abstract symbolic system referenced and on situational/experiential aspects. The normative symbolic structure provides the backdrop for the type of ritual but it alone cannot 'explain the shape of the text, nor its social effectiveness. For these, one must look to performance' (Hanks 1984, 153). In other words, the symbols and abstract ideas of a religion do not have the social force of belief unless there is some performative, experiential aspect to provide meaning and import to those symbols (see also Butler 1990). Some aspects of performance or practice will also be systematic but it is the variation within actual performance, based on novel situations and the shaman's and/or participants' personal experience or desire, that creates 'tension between constituted structure and ongoing experience' (Hanks 1984, 154). According to Hanks, it is within the process of rearticulation between symbol and experience that the ability of ritual to transform experience lies. He suggests that symbolic systems 'have the potential to categorize and transform experience, but they can affect transformation only insofar as they are realized' experientially (Hanks 1984, 147). If ritual is not only an essential part of shaping individual experience, but experience is an essential part of the creation, maintenance, and alteration of ritual, we cannot simply focus on the symbolic meaning of past ritual if we hope to understand the belief system on which and within which those rituals act. Instead, we must also address the notion that each ritual performance happened and *experientially authenticated a belief system*.

Power and religion

If belief gains meaning and authenticity through experience, a collectively perpetuated belief must have some resonance with the individuals that perpetuate it. How then can we tie this understanding of the inextricable link between ritual, experience, and belief with notions of power and ideology as promoted through state level religions? An important element of this conceptualization of ritual, belief, and experience is based on normative structures of 'knowledge'. Current debates about the construction of knowledge and the subjective nature of knowledge come interestingly into play here. Ideologies, defined here as constructions of knowledge that naturalize and/or legitimize social inequality, are often couched within state-sanctioned religions. As the

above discussion of belief has shown, it is naïve to view state-level, institutionalized religion as nothing more than an ideological system of symbols internalized and accepted by a community suffering from false consciousness. Weber's acknowledgement of the force of belief in legitimizing authority points to the central importance of an individual's subjective experience in the maintenance of collective meanings. As Weber argues, it is always the individual's *belief* in the legitimacy of authority that gives it power (1978 [1914]).³ Thus there is a much more complex relationship between a system of authority and the people that *consent* to that authority.

According to Firth, '[f]or belief to be effective as an instrument of personal adjustment . . . one expects to find [that] elaborate intellectual analysis mingles with the statement of what are conceived as the results of experience' (Firth 1948, 31). From the notion that belief relies on a feedback loop between meaning and experience, we must explore the extent to which an individual's experience and collective, more abstract intellectualized ideas mutually confirm each other. Moreover, since we should never assume a simple mapping of cultural meaning upon individual experience, there are a number of important theoretical and practical questions concerning the effects that resonance or dissonance between these spheres can have for understanding the processes underpinning the authenticity of belief in any given community. This points to the importance of exploring the relationship between ideologies and the symbolic systems on which they are constructed, and how those symbolic systems are or are not meaningfully internalized by individuals.

The central questions that can be asked here are:

1. If an ideology is based upon the 'elaborate intellectual analysis' of human experience, to what extent must constructions of that ideological knowledge adhere to individual experience and subjective reality in order to maintain its power of legitimization?;
2. If intellectually-supported belief requires that abstract knowledge be applied to the emotive aspects of religious belief, where does this knowledge come from? In other words, how does a state-sanctioned, institutionalized religion interact with an individual's subjective religious experiences and to what extent must they mutually support each other?

Firth, drawing on the ideas of William James, asserts that the '[f]ormalization of belief and conduct is a necessary step in the institutionalization of religion. But this is *constantly being challenged by assertion of a*

more individual relation to the transcendent' (Firth 1996, 196; emphasis mine). Similarly, Laughlin argues that,

the social construction of knowledge and individual experience are clearly involved in a reciprocal feedback system the properties of which may be changed by circumstance in such a way that the link between knowledge and experience may be hampered . . . a religious system may become moribund due for some reason to the failure of the dialogue between worldview and direct experience (<http://www.neurognosis.com/tutcycle.htm>).

As both Firth and Laughlin indicate, an individual's faith in a state religion is based not only on their relationship to what is socially and/or institutionally sanctioned as sacred or transcendent, but also on their own subjective experiences and memories within that religious system. In other words, 'to get the stamp of conviction' (Firth 1996, 42), religious belief must fit somehow into an individual's intellectual and experiential systems. Should either one of these fail, should a religious belief no longer support or fit in with an individual's experiences, that belief will often undergo alterations in order to resolve the dissonance.

That the authenticity of belief is importantly grounded in the individual's relationship with the transcendent can be observed across cultures both past and present. The Protestant Reformation, for example, was fuelled partially by the desire of individuals to have more direct access to their God through religious ritual. As individuals were increasingly denied direct communion with God within the ritual atmosphere of the Roman Catholic church, the role of a church-sanctioned intermediary came to be seen as unnecessary and was therefore rejected. This ultimately reduced the power of the Roman Catholic church and fractured Europe. Indeed, a dissatisfaction with the rituals promoted by Roman Catholic orthodoxy, coupled with increasing tension between local versus central religious authority and the perception that the church hierarchy was corrupt, led to the assertion that individuals did 'not need the Roman hierarchy as a middleman' because every individual 'has direct access to God' (Barzun 2001, 6). In other words, by asserting their ability to have authentic religious experiences through direct participation in non-mediated religious rituals, early Protestant leaders and their followers were able to undermine the sacred power of the pope, which served as the pivotal basis for maintaining his legitimate authority.⁴ The Protestant Reformation, driven in part by individual desires to directly experience the sacred, shaped the social and political history of

Europe. Here we can see the direct link between the nature of individual experience, the relationships between religious experience and shared systems of knowledge, and the larger cultural structures of power and ideology within which that knowledge is constructed, maintained, or altered. More specifically, the Protestant Reformation shows that power can be predicated on access to rituals believed to induce veritable or authentic communication with the sacred. To restrict unmediated access to authentic religious communion with god (or the gods) is to disrupt the 'cycle of meaning', thus denying individuals the lived experience of that god, a feeling likely exacerbated when the religious mediator is perceived to be un-eficacious or corrupt.

These insights from traditional anthropological understandings of belief and experience and from cultural phenomenology and cultural neuro-phenomenology enable a number of conclusions to be drawn that will allow these ideas to be applied to interpretations of past religious systems:

1. basic religious experiences are embodied, subjective experiences contextualized by an individual within a shared belief system;
2. the authenticity of religious experience is often contested;
3. the authenticity of religious belief is grounded in individual experience and;
4. there is arguably a shared human drive for some form of direct experiential access to the sacred.

The ideological power of a religion is dependent upon a general belief in the basic religious proposition of that religious system, and if the general belief in those religious propositions are in part based on ritually-induced religious experiences that verify and vivify those propositions, it follows that support for an ideological religious system is partially based upon the ability of individuals to ritually induce experiences that promote their belief in that religious system. How, then, can this understanding of the role of ritual and experience in supporting a belief system be utilized to interpret ancient belief systems?

A Maya example

Though there are clearly exceptions (Fash 2002; Meskell 2002a), the majority of archaeological approaches to religion and religious systems disregard this dynamic process of feedback between shared cultural symbols, the individual and subjective experience. This lack of attention to the role of religious experience and belief is a feature of existing explanations of the eventual collapse of the Classic

period lowland Maya state religion. From Copán to Tikal, a cycle of rise and fall can be observed at numerous Maya centres. Prime-mover explanations of what is called the 'collapse' of these Maya states has long been viewed as simplistic and is now somewhat outdated. There is still, however, a great deal of speculation and research into the historically-repeated events and changes that accompanied the gradual abandonment of the large centres and the dispersal of the general population away from centralized control (see Webster 2002). While these prime-mover explanations have rightly been discarded, I would suggest that we do not dismiss all big-picture attempts to understand better the role that numerous changes in ongoing social relationships between Mesoamerican individuals and larger social structures may have had in these events.

It is widely accepted that, across the Maya world, kings were religious figures and that religion played a central role in the origin and maintenance of Maya state authority (Fash 2001; Friedel & Schele 1988; Houston & Stuart 1996; Joyce 2000; McAnany 1995; Tate 1992; Webster 2002). Scholars also generally agree that a cycle of increasing centralization, increasing restriction of ritual activity away from the non-élite, and a rise in local 'cult' and household ritual is associated with the state collapse. Despite general agreement about the stages of the process, there is no consensus on how these pieces fit together or why this cycle occurred across the Maya lowlands. David Webster suggests that the Maya state decline might be attributed to a 'rejection of collectively held postulates and values concerning religion', yet he does not detail why or how these postulates and values were first accepted, then rejected by the non-élite population (2002, 74; see also Webster 2002, 320).

One of the missing connections in this process can be found in the relationship between religious symbolism, power, and subjective experience.⁵ While scholars acknowledge that the Classic Maya religious system 'did not provide an integrating mechanism sufficiently powerful' to maintain centralized rule (Fash 2001, 183), it is by including individual experience, and the role it plays in the maintenance of a state religious system, that we can perhaps generate a better understanding of the lowland Maya collapse.

I should clarify here that, while we may be able to access meaning through an in-depth exploration of a broad base of material culture, assessing the experiential content of Maya religion is not the aim of this article. Indeed, as Meskell suggests, any experience-based interest in generalizing categories such

as 'religious belief' must be coupled with a 'recognition of local patterns of meaning-in-practice' (2001, 203; see Houston & Taube 2000 for the detailed content of Maya religious experiences). Instead, this article will attempt to incorporate the role that those varied experiences will likely have played in larger, shared religious systems through a more general understanding of the relationship between shared religious structures and the individuals that functioned within and acted upon them.

Briefly, my argument is that the support for the Maya state religious system was built upon Maya individuals' subjective experiences. These experiences of the world, its cycles and realities, eventually coalesced through shared participation in ritual into a coherent cosmology that then acted as the basis for shared aspects of Maya religious and ritual systems (see Houston & Stuart 1996). As Tate suggests, these 'shared experiences develop among members of a community a common cognitive map of reality' (1992, 33). This early, shared religious system is revealed in architecture of the Preclassic period (before AD 250) which was generally characterized by household altars, with more open, public plazas acting as the setting for local religious specialists (Blanton *et al.* 1996, 12; Friedel & Schele 1988, 550; Scarborough & Robertson 1986, 156; see also Joyce 2000; Schele & Mathews 1998).

These shared experiences and interpretations of the world also provided the foundation on which the rising elite built an institutionalized religious system. Many scholars have suggested that it was the appropriation of the power of the sacred through the restriction of access to the ritually-induced religious experiences that initially allowed a rising Maya elite to legitimize their right to rule (Farriss 1984; Fash 2001; Friedel & Schele 1988; McAnany 1995; see also R. Joyce 2000). From as early as the first century AD, this religious system and the manipulations of its symbolic power within ritual played a central role in the rise and legitimization of social inequality in the Maya region. The Maya belief in ritually-induced access to non-visible layers of the universe through portals such as mirrors and smoke, mind-altering dancing, drumming, enemas, and body piercing, demonstrates that Maya ritual tapped heavily into embodied aspects of ritual experience (see Fash 2001; Friedel & Schele 1988; Houston & Taube 2000). This embodied nature of much of Maya ritual, and the more general Maya emphasis on the human senses point to the importance of ritually-induced religious experience in the maintenance of the shared Maya religious belief system (Houston & Taube 2000).

Over time, access to ritual communication with the gods was increasingly restricted by the rising elite (Fash 2001; McAnany 1995; Webster 2002). Though local and domestic ritual did not disappear, by the peak of the Classic period (approximately AD 600–800), the Maya elite were viewed as the 'central mediators' between the non-elite and the gods (Farriss 1984, 309; Houston & Stuart 1996; Webster 2002). The underlying assumption of the elite's role as central mediator was that the non-elite could *not* directly access these important gods. In their discussion of the Classic Period concept of *ichnal*, an embodied field of interaction with the world crucial for validating the efficacy of a ritual, Houston & Taube argue that an *ichnal* belonged 'either to a ruler or a diety' and never to the non-elite. This denied the ability of the non-elite to perform valid ritual engagement with the sacred (2000, 287). Furthermore, elite ritual communications were increasingly restricted from public view and public participation. This restriction can be seen architecturally at some Maya centres in the increasingly blocked public access to elite ritual spaces, the increasing distance between non-elite observers and elite ritual participants, and the more general centralization of their 'regal-ritual cities' (Webster 2002, 151; see also Fash 2001; Harrison 1999; Leventhal 1997; Leventhal pers. comm; Schele & Mathews 1998). In order to maintain authority, the elite also must have increasingly asserted their privileged ability to communicate with the gods, thus discouraging non-elite household rituals. According to Haviland, by the Late Classic it appears that only elite residences maintained any substantial evidence of an ancestral shrine (1968, 112). While this could be a reflection of preservation, there is clear evidence that the Maya elite asserted their more efficacious and direct link with the gods and ancestors (Houston & Stuart 1996; Tate 1992).

The process of removal from public, state-sanctioned ritual likely created a distance between individual religious experiences and the state religion. The elite monopolized access to the numinous powers of the universe, ultimately undermining elite rule. The initial power of the elite may have been based on the *belief* of the non-elite in the state religious system and the associated religious power of the elite. Conviction in that belief system required ritually-induced experiential correlates for the non-elite, and removal of the ritual inducement of those experiences could effectively have contributed to a process of disillusionment with that state religion and, thus, with state power. While this ritual system may have been able to induce shared experiences at a

smaller scale, eventually the non-élite no longer had the ability to induce authentic religious experiences within state-sanctioned events. Like the Protestants who lost faith in the sacred power of the Pope over seven hundred years later, Maya individuals thus turned to local or home-based ritual to fulfill their desire to commune directly with the gods and ancestors.⁶ This important support for power derived from religious belief was therefore lost, and contributed to a loss of faith in the ideas on which the power of the sacred king was based.

Indeed, as state-sanctioned ritual reached its maximum restriction, we see a rise in what have been referred to as cult or domestic ritual activities and more accessible public ritual spaces (Fash 2001, 183; Houston & Stuart 1996). According to Rosemary Joyce, changes in ritual during the period of Maya collapse include an 'upsurge in the burning of incense within domestic groups' (2000, 91). Likewise, Farriss notes the post-collapse 'fragmentation of Maya religion into almost purely family devotions' (1984, 289). The proliferation of household shrines and evidence of increasing home-based ritual indicates a growing desire of individuals for direct access to and experience of the sacred. Indeed, Houston & Stuart argue that the 'chief disjunction between the Classic and Postclassic religious paradigms concerns the changing nature of royal oversight of ritual activity' (1996, 305). Similarly, Webster suggests that the most dramatic event of the collapse is the 'abrupt decline of the Classic Maya institution of kingship' (Webster 2002, 215). By asserting and enacting their personal link to the gods, the non-élite were, perhaps unintentionally, eroding the very basis of the power of the state (see Webster 2002, 346). Lacking conviction in the sacred power of the Maya élite, the force and legitimacy of élite power slowly wore away.

Though I do not suggest that this shift in ritual participation and access can provide a 'prime-mover' explanation for all aspects of the Maya state collapse, the weakening of faith in the sacred power of Maya kings could have set the stage for an eventual combination of events (be it warfare, drought, overpopulation, ecological decline, or any general disturbance in the balance of social relationships) that would have destroyed the perceived role of the state in supernaturally maintaining the well-being of the populace. Ultimately, I agree with Webster's conclusions that, with an increasingly weak claim to the power of the sacred, small factors could have caused the centralized state to collapse (2002, 318).

It is this basic element, the fact that Maya indi-

viduals came to first consent to and then, over time, reject centralized, religion-based rule, that is overlooked in most attempts to understand the mechanisms through which the Maya state and the associated state religion eventually fell. The notion that, in general, the non-élite at first *believed* and then *ceased to believe* in the sacred power of the élite is essential to understanding the general acceptance of and eventual rejection of the Maya state. This interpretation of the lowland Maya state collapse is indicative of a struggle by Maya individuals to access something most likely important to them. The downfall of the lowland Maya state can therefore be viewed as, at least in part, a result of Maya individuals asserting their desire for an individual relationship with the gods and the sacred realms. As Barzun, explaining the success of the Protestant Reformation, argues, '[w]hen people feel that accretions and complications have buried the original purpose of a [religious] institution', when the 'meaning of the roles have been lost', people will assert their own means of communicating with the sacred (2001, 10).

Conclusion

We are beginning to seek more complex nuances in our understandings of religious belief systems and the role those beliefs may have played in larger social change. The nature of individual experience and ritual in religious belief can play a key role in our interpretations of the continuity and change that is observed in the practices and symbols of past religions. This is only a preliminary study of the potential of an experience-based approach to past religious systems. Further research into the findings of cultural phenomenology and cultural neuro-phenomenology, may allow us to expand our interpretations of the complex relationships between individual experience, shared practices, and cultural meaning-making.

Though this interpretation of the collapse of the Maya state is not revolutionary, a more sophisticated recognition of the implications and influences of individual religious experience within larger social events can only move us closer to a better interpretation of past social change. As a more complex understanding of the intersection between the subjective individual and the larger social structures is developed within an anthropology of experience, archaeology can and should begin to learn from and contribute to anthropological discourse in general. It should do this on the basis of our unique set of information about human culture that is able to en-

compass both our innumerable unique cultural constructions as well as our shared experiences as human beings.

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Notes

1. Cited in Firth 1996, 80.
2. Ritual is defined here as an experiential practice of symbolic movement of the body through space and time with formalized actions, accompanied by material symbols based on (often traditional) specific interpretations of a symbolic system.
3. Weber (1978 [1914]), noted for his distinction between charismatic, traditional, and legal authority, asserts that compliance with domination may be 'based on the most diverse motives' (212) that are founded upon an individual's 'subjective meaning-complex of action' (13). This compliance is thus based on the 'belief in legitimacy' (213) and 'the belief in the validity of an order . . . constitutes the valid order itself' (33).
4. This is, of course, a simplification of the complex political and religious reasons for the success of the Reformation. (For more information see Elazar 1995; Hillerbrand 1990.)
5. Throughout this article, I will refer to the 'Maya state' as an analytical category. Clearly there was considerable ethnic and internal variation within the Maya that I gloss over here. While this may seem contradictory in an article focused on the inclusion of the individual, I should clarify that I am not arguing that through this analysis we can actually access 'the individual' of the past. Instead I am suggesting that through a better understanding of the more general relationship between cultural systems and the experiences, beliefs, and actions of individuals within those systems, we can in fact produce more nuanced and in-depth explanations of past social change. I therefore refer to the Maya only in the most general terms. Likewise, I refer to the rise and fall of 'the Maya' as if it were monolithic. This is not the case and I over-simplify this long-term, non-linear process for the sake of this discussion.
6. Data also suggests that many lowland individuals migrated to rising centres to the north in the Yucatán peninsula, perhaps turning to new, presumably more effective, religious leaders.

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