The triadic causeways of Ichmul

Virtual highways becoming actual roads

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The triadic patterns of Ichmul’s causeways and termini

The two large sites of Ichmul and Yo’okop in the Cochuah region have different layouts that are reflected in their Terminal Classic causeway (sacbe) systems (figure 1). Yo’okop has a linear “beads-on-a-string” pattern with monumental groups connected by causeways, with no apparent hierarchy (but see Shaw (2005) for the possibility of a radial layout of Yo’okop).

Ichmul has a far more “centralized” settlement layout (figure 2). It has a radial pattern of five causeways that indicate two distinct patterns. There are two smaller causeways that appear to have no unified origin in central Ichmul. These two causeways connect central Ichmul with settlement between 1 and 1.5 km away (Flores & Normark 2005a, 2005b). These two causeways (San Cristobal and San Pedro) are called aligned causeways since each causeway is aligned in right angle to the terminus area and each terminus pyramid faces its causeway (Normark 2006a).

This paper focus on three larger causeways, that radiates from one small area in central Ichmul. The place is currently covered by a white Colonial period church dedicated to the Black Blister Christ (Flores & Normark 2005a). The roads did not actually begin at this point, but they all aim towards this area. They were likely all laid out from the area.

These causeways, which all are of similar dimensions, end in triadic plazas that have been constructed in relation to older settlement, between 2.7 and 3 km from the point of origin. The termini plazas consist of one large, older, and central building. This building is flanked by two smaller and newer structures of unequal size that sits on the opposite corners or on the opposite sides of a plaza that appears to have been aligned with the old structure rather than with the causeway (Flores & Normark 2005b). This pattern is called triadic causeways (Normark 2006a).

This pattern is dissimilar to other triadic patterns known from the Maya area. In terms of triadic causeway systems, the Ichmul pattern shares some distant similarities with three radial causeways at El Mirador (Dahlin 1984; Folan 1991). Otherwise causeway systems are either classified as linear, cruciform, radial, or dendritic (Shaw in preparation). On the other hand, the triadic plaza-pyramid arrangements are common, particularly during the Late Formative (Hansen 1998; Stanton & Freidel 2005), but they are known from later periods as well, such as at Caracol’s Caana structure (Chase & Chase 1996) and Palenque’s Cross-temples (Lounsbury 1984; Schele & Miller 1986). The traditional triadic plaza-pyramid pattern usually consists of one large central structure and two flanking and fairly equally sized structures. All three structures have their staircases facing into the same plaza. At Ichmul, the large and old structure’s front does not face the triadic plaza, it faces...
older settlement in the opposite direction which have no apparent monumental architecture. There are also other small foundation braces surrounding the triadic plazas, but the triadic structures are the largest structures around these plazas.

In Mayanist research, it is common to attribute a cosmological model to everything that comes in groups of three. This model is based on the idea that three hearth stones lies at the center of a quadripartite world, and together they form a quincunx (Freidel et al. 1993). In Prehispanic iconography and epigraphy, the quincunx is also the hieroglyph for road (BIH). Some believe that the eastern parts of the E-Groups (Aimers 1994), which consisted of a long platform supporting three superstructures, also resembles a triadic pattern with similar meaning (Aveni 2003; Hansen 1993). The two Late Formative round dance platforms at Yaxuná may have been three (one may be covered by a later structure) (Stanton & Freidel 2005). However, the triadic plazas and triadic causeways of Ichmul seem to be quite a unique pattern.

**Ichmul**

Central Ichmul is dominated by three Colonial period churches and a monastery on the northern and eastern sides of a large plaza. On the southern side of the plaza is the substantial Central Acropolis that covers roughly four hectares (figure 3). The Central Acropolis has eleven range structures and two pyramids that surround six plazas. This pattern of tightly closed units built upon a raised acropolis is quite similar to plaza groups further south in the Petén and Belize (Flores & Normark 2004a:58, 2005a:7). The pyramidal shaped Structure S1E1-1, in the north-eastern corner of the acropolis, is the single largest structure at Ichmul, measuring 70 x 75 x 10 m. At its base is a "stepped" T-shaped vault. An open "toilet pit" also reveals a Terminal Classic veneer wall. The western part of the Central Acropolis has been severely disturbed by the Caste War fortifications from 1847-48 that sit on top of the range structures and the south-western pyramid, S2W1-3 (Flores & Normark 2004a). East of the church area is the two hectares large Eastern Acropolis which has six range structures and a pyramidal structure surrounding a large interior plaza that sits upon a large platform (Flores & Normark 2005a:18f).

Only two test pits have so far been excavated in central Ichmul. One was put in the Central Acropolis. It revealed that the major construction effort of that part of the acropolis was during the Early Classic, with a later flooring episode during the Terminal Classic. Late Formative sherds were encountered but mixed with later ceramics (Flores 2005; Flores & Normark 2005a:12).

The Great Plaza covers about 150 x 100 m. On its western side is a low but wide platform upon which a school stands today. The eastern side has a similar platform, roughly one m tall, upon which the Franciscan monastery from 1571 has been built. One test pit was excavated in this area in order to date the platform. Seven burials were encountered and six of them were of Terminal Classic date (figure 4). During excavations of these burials it was noticed that the Great Plaza actually rests upon a substantial dry core fill. It appears that a large portion of the plaza actually is a platform (Flores & Normark 2005a:19; Kaeding & Flores 2005).

North of the monastery and its church stands a white church, the Black Blister Christ church, which began to be constructed in 1742 (see Flores, this volume). This church stands upon the area where the triadic causeways’ trajectories intersect (figure 4). Textual sources from the late 16th century mention two cenotes (sinkholes with water) at Ichmul (Relación de Ichmul y Tikuch, RHGY 1983:298). These have not been found, but these, or at least one of them might be under the Black Christ
church. If so, it would have been a funnel shaped cenote. As at the town of Maní, the Spaniards may have tried to control the idea of the center, by controlling the cenote (Forrest 1997), and creating new and Christianized wells within the monas tery.

All five causeways’ origins in Ichmul have been destroyed by later settlement (becoming construction material for albarradas (boundary walls without mortar), houses, Caste War fortifications and roads). This has also affected the terminus area at Xquerol.

San Juan
The causeway to San Juan begins in the eastern part of Ichmul. The causeway may have begun in the Eastern Acropolis, as the causeway could not have extended further than the pyramidal Structure N2E3-1, assuming that the pyramid is older. There is an exterior part of the Eastern Acropolis that may have joined up with the causeway.

The causeway’s alignment is 68 degrees from Ichmul to San Juan. The causeway’s present dimension is 1,650 m long, 13 m wide and 0.7 m tall on average. If the origin was in the Eastern Acropolis, it would have been 2,730 m long (Flores & Normark 2005d).

The causeway enters the San Juan terminus in the southwestern corner of a large plaza (figure 5). The angle between the causeway’s eastern side and the plaza is 125 degrees and not the expected 90 degrees. The plaza’s southwestern edge runs parallel with the alignment of the major structure at the site, Structure S1E1-1. This seems to indicate that this structure is older than the causeway and the plaza, since the expectation would be a near right angle alignment if they were contemporaneously constructed. This range structure does not face the plaza or the causeway (Flores & Normark 2005d). Excavation in the intersection part of the plaza/causeway dates the construction to the Terminal Classic (Young 2005:76).

The terminus plaza between the causeway terminus and Structure S1E1-1, measures roughly 45 x 55 m. Directly east of the causeway terminus is a small minor foundation brace, Structure S1E1-7, and a small platform, Structure S1E1-6 (Flores & Normark 2005d:71).

The western part of the plaza has a foundation brace, Structure S1W1-2, and a low mound, bordering the plaza edge, Structure S1W1-3. Facing the mound in the eastern part of the plaza is a larger platform, Structure S1E1-3, upon which two foundation braces were located, Structures S1E1-4 and S1E1-5. Structure S1W1-3 and S1E1-3 were probably later additions, contemporaneous with the construction of the causeway and the plaza or slightly later. However, they are aligned in a manner similar to a triadic pattern, with Structure S1E1-1 to the north (Flores & Normark 2005d:71-73).

The major structure at the site, Structure S1E1-1, consists of a large platform, measuring 50 x 35 x 3 m. In the southern section of the platform stands a transverse vaulted range structure, Structure S1E1-2. The southern section of the vaulted structure is taller than the northern part, indicating that this was the back wall of the structure. It is 6 m tall relative to the nearby plaza. The vaults have all collapsed but there appear to have been three entrances from the north into five rooms.

The lower part of the platform in front of the range structure contains a cluster of nine foundation braces and smaller platforms. The cluster are most likely not contemporaneous with the vaulted structure. Some of them might have been used at the same time, but the area would have been problematic to pass through if they all
were contemporaneous. These structures could be associated with a late Terminal Classic or Postclassic occupation.

These structures may also relate to the smaller structures just below and north of Structure S1E1-1. Terminal Classic ceramics were found south of Structures N1E1-3 and N1E1-4. These were mixed with Late Formative, Early Classic, and Late Classic ceramics, indicating a longer occupation of the general area, but not of the associated late structures (Flores & Normark 2005d:73; Young 2005:76). These structures' presence just north of Structure S1E1-1 is unexpected, as this would have been an older ‘plaza’, or at least an open area. It is likely that the structures are later Terminal Classic additions (Flores & Normark 2005d:73f).

On the eastern side of Structure S1E1-1, is a long double wall of large uncut stones, measuring 1 x 1 m. Its crescent shape begins partially on the eastern slope of Structure S1E1-1. It may have been the foundation for a palisade. Traces of this construction may also be seen west of Structure S1E1-1. The structures to the north of the large platform are bounded on their eastern side by this feature. Its function is unknown, and a defensive purpose cannot be ruled out, indicated by the cluster of the nearby possible “siege” structures. If so, substantial portions of it have been removed at a later time, or it may have been a primarily perishable palisade. Stones may have been used for bracing where there was not enough soil (Palka 2001). It may never have been finished as well. The feature is not similar to Colonial albarradas or Caste War fortifications. This makes it likely to be one of the final Prehispanic constructions at San Juan (Flores & Normark 2005d:74).

San Andres
The largest of Ichmul’s termini areas, in terms of extent and dimensions of structures, is San Andres (Figure 6). The causeway leading here is 2,640 m long in its current state, 13 m wide, and 0.7 m tall. Like at San Juan, the white church in Ichmul can easily be seen from the terminus’s largest structures. The causeway probably originated to the south of a larger unmapped platform, Structure 5, which lies east of the northeastern corner of the Central Acropolis. If so, the causeway could not have been longer than 2,940 m (Flores & Normark 2005b:45). Near its origin in Ichmul, the causeway has been destroyed since an underlying sascabera (quarry for limestone marl) has collapsed, creating a large hole (Flores & Normark 2004b).

Just as at San Juan, the causeway enters the large plaza area at an odd angle. The angle between the western causeway edge and the plaza edge, which is parallel with the large Structure S1E1-8, is 57 degrees. This suggests that the causeway led to an already constructed area, as an alignment of 90 degrees otherwise would have been expected. Near the terminus, the causeway has a visible construction box, indicating that it might have been built in sections (Flores & Normark 2005b). An excavation in the intersection between the causeway and the plaza dates the causeway to the Terminal Classic (Huerta 2005a:53ff).

Within the plaza area is an alignment of stones that continues in the same direction as the causeway. Thus, the plaza was extended out over an existing portion of the causeway. There is another line of stones in the plaza that runs parallel to the plaza edge, about 12 m south of the edge. It can be found directly south of Structure S1E1-1. This was the older plaza edge that the causeway originally went to. This might indicate that the structures on the northern corners of the plaza, Structures N1E1-1 and S1E1-5, were later additions, not originally part of the plaza layout, or that they were older structures only later joined with the plaza (Flores & Normark 2005b:45). This also indicates that the causeway entered the older terminus plaza in
its northwest corner, similar to the San Juan terminus. This might also indicate that Structure S1E1-9, the western unfinished portion of Structure S1E1-8, probably was laid out when the plaza was extended to the north and west. The northern edge of the plaza west of the causeway is a bit further south of the plaza edge on the eastern side of the causeway.

The whole final plaza area measures 110 x 40 m. The northern part of the plaza is elevated about 1.5 to 2 m above the surrounding terrain, but it levels out to the south, and portions of it are almost level with the ground surface (Flores & Normark 2005b:45).

West of the causeway/plaza intersection is a 1-m-tall mound, as measured from the plaza, or almost 3-m-tall from the nearby terrain. This substructure, N1E1-1, stands in the northwestern corner of the plaza. The structure has a foundation brace. South of this structure is a rectangular foundation brace with a circular interior foundation brace, Structure S1W1-1. It is lying directly on the plaza’s western edge. It is believed that this and other smaller structures that surround the plaza were part of the original layout as they follow the plaza edges. If they were additions after the plaza ceased to be used in its original way, they probably would have been more randomly distributed, such as in the center of the plaza, as appears to have been the case at San Juan (Flores & Normark 2005b:45ff).

Directly upon the eastern side of the plaza-causeway intersection is a low mound with a foundation brace, Structure S1E1-1. This is a pattern similar to San Juan; a low platform close to the causeway-plaza intersection.

Further to the east, in the north-eastern corner of the plaza, stands Structure S1E1-5, a 4-m-tall pyramidal structure. It has no preserved exterior architecture, apart from traces of a foundation brace on its top. South of the pyramidal structure, on the plaza’s eastern side, are two foundation braces, and a possible double wall, forming Structure S1E1-6 and the smaller Structure S1E1-7. In the southern end of the plaza, directly north of the large Structure S1E1-8 are three low structures.

An excavation in the southern edge of the plaza reveals mainly Terminal Classic ceramics. Late Formative and Early Classic sherds were also found but in a secondary context mixed with later samples (Huerta 2005b). The Terminal Classic ceramics are similar to the ones at Ichmul, but San Andres has a high relative frequency of Yokat Striated. Johnstone (2005:180) argues that these were used for heating liquids and may relate to domestic use.

On the southern edge of the plaza is the largest mound at San Andres, Structure S1E1-8, measuring roughly 75 x 35 x 6 m. It consists of three different components, Structures S1E1-9, S1E1-10, and S1E1-11. The lowest section, Structure S1E1-9, is located to the west. This part consists of unconsolidated rubble. It may have been a late and unfinished addition to the rest of the structure, probably contemporaneous with the final plaza extension.

East of this is the largest section of the structure. It has an inner patio with two columns in situ that are about 0.5 m in diameter. These are badly burned from multiple milpa firings. Such a patio with inner columns is very rare and it is reminiscent of structures at Chichén Itzá. Some other column fragments lay nearby in the patio. The patio is surrounded on all sides by a mound that is 0.5 to 1.5 m taller, which form a quadrilateral structure, S1E1-10. The very presence of columns in this patio is suggestive that they upheld a perishable roof, which would have created an interior space of roughly 15 x 7 m. The southern edge of the central part of S1E1-8 is extended outward by a terrace on top of an outset stairway. The stairway is not aligned towards Ichmul and the causeway, but towards what seems to be a
residential zone to the south of Structure S1E1-8. The entranceway into the patio from the stairway has remains of columns of similar dimensions as the ones in the patio. However, these were not in situ (Flores & Normark 2005b:47).

East of this patio is another patio but at a lower elevation. Structure S1E1-11 encircles the patio on three sides. The patio is open to the south, which indicates that the structure faced to the south and not towards Ichmul.

The whole of Structure S1E1-8, together with Structures S1E1-5 and N1E1-1, form a triadic pattern, if we ignore the smaller structures also bordering the plaza.

South of Structure S1E1-8 are several structures. As at San Juan, these "smaller" structures near the larger structure are located where we would expect an older open area. In San Juan, these small structures could be later additions, since they only had foundation braces. This may not apply to San Andres, however. The buildings here are larger than at San Juan. They are built upon substantial platforms. These could also be later, such as from the Postclassic, judging from the presence of small shrines, but most of the structures appear, from their architectural style, to be contemporaneous with Structure S1E1-8.

During an extensive survey to the east and southeast of San Andres, several mounds and foundation braces were encountered and located with GPS. The easternmost mound that was observed is only 300 m from the northwest corner of the mapped area around the site of Nohcacab. This suggests a continuous settlement between San Andres and Nohcacab (Figure 2) (Flores & Normark 2004b:84; 2005b:51). Nohcacab is a dense settlement located around depressions that appears to have been used for agricultural purposes (Normark 2003a, 2006b; Shaw 2004).

Xquerol
The causeway to Xquerol was first described in the mid-1950s (Stromsvik et al. 1955), when there was only a small road between Xquerol and Ichmul (figure 7). Since then the winding dirt road has been widened, re-graded, and re-surfaced.

The causeway is 13 m wide, 0.8 m tall, and 2,530 m long in its current state of preservation, following an alignment of 193 degrees east of north in a straight line from Ichmul to Xquerol. At some places, the causeway is considerably taller (roughly three m).

The causeway could not have gone further north than the Central Acropolis, since the acropolis is older than the causeway. However, the first known portion of the causeway near Ichmul is 450 meters south of the Central Acropolis. Thus, the causeway had a maximum length of 2960 m. The preserved section begins 30 m north of a 5-m-tall and heavily looted pyramid, Structure S7W2-1. It was not possible to see if the causeway and the pyramid are separated or if they overlap. A nearby test pit revealed only a mixed deposit with artifacts from the Middle Formative to the Postclassic. Approximately 40 m northwest of this causeway/pyramid intersection is a platform with two lower structures on its top, Structure S7W2-1, and Structure S7W2-2 (Flores & Normark 2004b:75).

The alignment of the causeway seems to indicate a terminus near Structure N1E1-1 in Xquerol. Only chac luum (red soil) has been found in the area between where the causeway ends today and the pyramid. There are no traces of chich (pebble sized stones) or other components of a causeway or a plaza. It may lie below the chac luum, similar to portions of the terminus plaza at San Andres. However, the causeway most likely ended in a relatively open plaza area, judging from the patterns at San Andres and San Juan.
Xquerol is dominated by the 9-m tall pyramid, Structure N1E1-1 which is found directly north of a Catholic church, northeast of Xquerol’s modern plaza. It was possible to locate what remained of a south-facing stairway, a superstructure on its rear northern side of the top, as well as a ramp or a platform that extended roughly 5 m from the northern edge of the pyramid (Shaw 2003a). Excavation on the south side of N1E1-1 detected two major phases of construction of the plaza south of the pyramid: Late Formative and Terminal Classic (Normark 2003b).

Northeast of Xquerol’s Structure N1E1-1 is Structure N1E1-2, a 2.5-m-tall structure lacking any in situ architecture on the surface. There is an *albarrada* that divides *solares* (house lots) and a pig feeding area near this mound. This *albarrada* may follow a past plaza edge. It is at least parallel with Structure N1E1-1’s northern alignment. The intersection angle between the causeway and the possible plaza would have been 80 degrees, also off the expected 90 degrees. Following the triadic pattern, the west structure would have been where the road passes today or under a nearby house. The plaza would have been roughly 50 x 30 m.

A large underground *sascabera* lies directly southwest of the pyramidal structure, extending under a nearby modern house that lies south of the pyramid (Shaw 2003a). Structure S1E1-1 is located between the colonial church and a modern school. Directly south of N1E1-1 are the heavily disturbed remains of Structure S1E1-2.

**Summarizing the triadic pattern around Ichmul**
The similarities between the three causeways indicate that they may have been constructed at the same time and may have had similar intentions behind their construction (figure 8). The similarities and differences are:

- The causeways have the same area of ideal origin in central Ichmul.
- The places where the three causeways probably physically originated in Ichmul were close to the site’s three pyramidal structures. The Xquerol causeway began near Structure S2W1-3, the San Andres causeway began near Structure S1E1-1, and the San Juan causeway began near Structure N2E3-1.
- The causeways are single phase constructions.
- The causeways have similar width, height, and length.
- A small platform extension exists halfway along the course of the causeways to Xquerol and San Juan.
- The causeways and their termini plazas appear to have been constructed in a joint effort.
- A low platform sits at two of the causeway/termini plaza intersections. Its presence at Xquerol is unknown.
- The termini are all dominated by one major structure and a large plaza which are not in right angle alignment with the causeways suggesting that the causeways led to older settlement. The plazas are aligned along the major structure at the site.
- The major structure of the triadic assemblages faces in the opposite direction of the causeway and the plaza. It faces older settlement.
- Two smaller, but unequally sized structures are located to the sides or corners of the termini plaza. Xquerol lacks a western structure, but it may have been destroyed by later road or house constructions.
• The major structures at each termini are of different sort; a pyramid at Xquerol, a transverse range structure at San Juan, and a quadrilateral range structure at San Andres.
• The major termini structures have all different alignments compared to each others and to the major structures in central Ichmul. This might indicate that the termini structures originally were part of separate sites, thus not following a grand plan, like that of Yo’okop. This suggests that the integration was late.
• Another difference is the pyramid bordering the Xquerol causeway’s present area of origin in Ichmul. No similar structure has been encountered along the other two causeways.

Interpreting the causeways from a cosmological model
Most Mayanists would probably interpret this triadic pattern within the framework of cosmology (Freidel et al. 1993; Stanton & Freidel 2005; Taube 1998). Indeed, it would be a tempting and an easy way out. Here I give such a speculative interpretation.

The triadic pattern is most often associated with the three hearthstones of creation, the place from where the world tree (yax te) or the axis mundi (wakah chan - “raised-up-sky”) was raised (Freidel et al. 1993). Therefore, the triadic pattern has been related to depictions of three stones lying on the back of a turtle, an animal considered to be the surface of the Earth (Taube 1998). The possible presence of a cenote in the center of Ichmul, from where the causeways radiate (Flores & Normark 2005a), could be seen as the crack in the turtle’s carapace from where the Maize god emerged. Cenotes, caves (aktun – “turtle stone”), and other karstic features are sometimes associated with the hearth stones (Brady 2004; Moyes 2004) and causeways (Lorenzen 2003; Walker 2000). However, we do not know what originally was located at the intersection of the triadic causeways. It could have been a cenote, a cave, a temple, a platform, a tree, etc. It would have been a feature that did not perish since the Black Christ church was constructed upon the location almost a millennium later. It would have been a crucial node for generating new beliefs, such as that of the Blister Black Christ. If the majority of the stones in the monastery and its church were taken from structures around the Great Plaza, this may have revealed a possible cenote or cave that had been covered by a Prehispanic structure. Such a feature, possibly together with findings of artifacts, could have triggered the “Black Christ Cult” at the site in the 17th century (Carrillo & Ancona 1979:495). The miracle figure was brought to Merida sometime between 1657 and 1676 and this led to Ichmul’s demise (Caseres et al. 1998:356f).

Ringle (1999) discusses the way in which causeways were used for transporting ch’ulel (divine essence), from center to periphery. The causeways could represent the cordage/umbilicus radiating out from the center, which consisted of either an obliterated structure, a cenote (“navel”) or “heart” (sometimes associated with umbilical cords) to peripheral parts of Ichmul, to smaller hearths of creation or world trees found at the termini. Such interpretations are in line with the idea that some settlements represented parts of the human body rather than a macro-cosmic model (Maca 2002; Plank 2003).

Ringle and Bey (2001:270) argue that the Colonial period concept of tzucub te meant capital or polity. Thus, the political units may have been seen as world trees (Stanton & Freidel 2005:235). If such a concept existed earlier than the Colonial period, the causeways could be the branches of this world tree. The branches of the tree could have sheltered the smaller “sprouts” in the periphery (the termini sites), like
grandparents (old trees) give shelter to their grandchildren (sprouts) in several contemporary highland communities (Carlsen & Prechtel 1993).

North-south aligned causeways in themselves have also been seen as world trees, the Milky Way, or the Cosmic Monster. The east-west bound causeways have been seen as the ecliptic, associated with the sun and the emergence of the Maize god (Stanton & Freidel 2005). It is assumed that the causeways’ different alignments, preferably the cardinal directions, related to royal ancestors in the heavens (north), the watery underworld (south), sunrise (east), and sunset (west). Another possibility is that the quadripartite world relates to the sunrise and sunset during the solstices. However, no causeway at Ichmul is aligned in any of the cardinal directions. Folan (1991) has also attempted to link the causeways at Cobá to various celestial objects. Since Cobá had at least 45 causeways radiating out in all directions one could easily link a few causeways to various stars or planets at particular times of the year. The Andrews, Bullard and Gifford causeways at El M irador forms a “triadic” pattern, similar to that of Ichmul. Folan argues that these causeways represent an astronomical alignment similar to the openings in the Caracol of Chichén Itzá which is believed to have been aligned with the sun and Venus (Folan 1991:226f).

Ashmore and Sabloff (2002) among others (Dunning et al. 1997; Iannone 2002) have attempted to fit the cosmological models within a political history as well, arguing for either the emulation of, or the mimicking of site plans for assumed political benefits. In such a model, Ichmul would have mimicked the layout of some other higher ranking site. The unity of the triadic layout could therefore also indicate other cosmological reasons behind the expansion of Ichmul’s causeways. This could potentially relate to Rice’s (2004) may-cycle model, in which Ichmul could have been the seat for one k’atun (roughly 20 years, or more precisely 7200 days) within the realm of an unknown may k’u center (Chichén Itzá?) that acted as the seat for 13 k’atuns (roughly 256 years).

These would be plausible explanations, often applied when explaining site layout at various settlements (see Stanton & Freidel (2005) for one of the most recent attempts). One could go on forever, bringing in more or less plausible analogies from near and far, past and present, in order to strengthen ones speculations. Researchers search for the original patterns, preferably at sites with a short history and no later polluting activities (Fedick & Mathews 2005). It is often assumed that the material patterns at such sites often reflect a quadripartite pattern, from caches to regions and from the earliest time to the present (Mathews & Garber 2003). By finding the “original” layout, it is assumed, one gets the key, the true cosmological principles shared among the ancient people that once lived at a site.

The cosmological entrapment

However, the main problem is not that later settlement disturbs the original cosmological/geomantic layouts, and that we need to use a “biographical” approach to see how this is modified by the accretion of later structures (Normark 2004b; Stanton & Freidel 2005). No, the main problem with using the cosmological models is that they act as straitjackets since they reduce everything to the same. In Stanton and Freidel’s (2005) “biography” of Yaxuná’s causeways, they maintain that the Kan-cross and its associated cosmological metaphors were used from the Middle Formative to the Terminal Classic, a period of more or less 1500 years. All modifications were done to follow a cosmology which Mayanists have created by using bits from here and there, then and now. Differences in layout are only seen as
differences of degree to this one great shared cosmology. This is the cosmological entrapment (Normark in preparation 2).

This entrapment constrains us from seeing the “new” and variability as we use static representations, such as models of cosmology. These act as blueprints, a ready and fixed model to be used at any place and at any time. Once a triadic pattern is found, such as three similar causeways radiating out from one point and ending in triadic plazas, this particular triadic pattern can, as we have just seen, be followed up by turtles, hearth stones, quadripartite principles, the Kan cross, the quincunx, the idea of the center, heart, umbilical cords, serpents, the Maize god, the world tree, the Milky Way, the ecliptic, etc. Mayanists have created a swelling balloon of cosmology. There is nothing substantial in the balloon, just traces on its surface that sits on empty quasi-objects that are swelling near bursting point. When it bursts it loses whatever expanded it and all that will remain are the material traces. These are what we can account for, nothing more, and nothing less. Back to basics is where we need to go.

We could rather see the material pattern as differences in kind, always diverging from itself, never being the same. It needs to differ from itself, otherwise it will be static, lingering in an eternal present (Normark 2004a, in preparation 3). What one would ask to oneself is; how does the idea of ancient people having a simple quadripartite “cognitive model” (Stone 2004) relate to “reality”? What would the equivalent to our own present cosmology be? If one cannot give an adequate answer to such simple, but basic questions, then maybe one should not attribute past social formations with various static and highly reduced cosmological models. The world cannot be reduced to such static representations. It would not account for what past “subjects” experienced. If I was to reduce my own “cosmology” to certain key features or principles that are believed to be more or less the same as they were in the “Early Iron Age” (the same time as the late Middle Formative), this would lead to absurdity, particularly since “Sweden” never went through such a drastic change as the Spanish conquest. The way Mayanists use ethnographic analogies is to make every Other to the Same, reduce differences in kind to differences of degree, to something known. This way of reasoning among Mayanists has created the World’s most conservative “culture” or “tradition”. For recent examples see the contributions in Brady and Prufer (2004). This method is not in contradiction to the political interests of the contemporary Maya movement. They wish to essentialize the “Maya culture”, to claim that their traditions are age old (Normark 2004c). Unfortunately, archaeology has contributed to this tendency by making the “Maya culture” into one and the same thing, evolving in an ontogenetic view of evolution (Normark in preparation 4). The cosmological entrapment is therefore a treacherous path if it maintains that everything stays more or less the same. However, some researchers have tried to pierce the cosmological balloon by pointing out that one key ingredient that Mayanists have assumed to have been there from the start; ancestor veneration, most likely was not. Joyce (2004) has shown that ancestral veneration may have been an unintended outcome of social activities, rather being a constituent principle in the earliest sedentary villages.

I am aware that most Mayanists will disagree with me here. They do believe that they study changes in the past and they do not believe that the past was static. This is why Stanton and Freidel (2005) use a biographical approach. Thus, they do believe that things changed, but that is not how the past is represented in their Kan-cross model. The model is, as all models are, static in itself. The quadripartite principle is not questioned. It acts as a backdrop, a metaphysics of presence, to
which changes are projected but which in itself remains unaltered. This is true for other kinds of models as well, they all rely upon essential and ontologically secure categories.

As the termini of Ichmul’s causeways lies in older settlement, some of which were fairly densely settled, and having rich agricultural areas in the neighborhood, would it be better to use models focusing on ecology, social integration, economy, or politics (Chase & Chase 2001; Cobos & Winemiller 2001; Fedick 1994; Folan et al. 2001; Shaw 2001)? Or maybe a mixture of them, to get a “holistic” view? My answer is no, because this assumption relies on a belief that the past is empty and needs to be filled with economies, ecologies, human agencies, gender, practices, world systems, institutions, cosmologies, etc. The assumption is that the past needs these essential quasi-objects, derived from other sources than the materialities we do have. The unifying quasi-object is the “Maya culture”, a catch-all term with no operational use (Normark 2004a, 2004c, 2006a, 2006b). These quasi-objects are all social constructions externalized from the objects and these will never stand the test of time (Latour 2003).

What unites these different approaches is that the human being and the culture are the primary objects of study, not the causeways or other materialities. None of the functionalistic interpretations, the umbilicus, the “market” economy, the polity, the kinship or the kingship are “real” objects derived from the causeway. The causeway is mute about these things. It is here where “culture-history”, “processualism” and “post-processualism” all fill in the “blanks”; they create an archaeology of false fullness. These approaches look for the Being, what is never changing. Even if researchers fall back upon social constructivism, the social, the culture, or the human agent are still something believed to be ever present.

Therefore, I search for the basis elsewhere. The basis should not be based on social constructions as it is unclear from where and what the “social” “constructs” (Hacking 1999). These constructions are never durable and cannot be used at other places or times. The basis cannot be in materialities either, as these changes, they become. The basis must be found in what persists despite changes and which lack a self-identity and thus can be found in all possible ontological orders, what forms an ontology of ontologies.

An ontology of virtuality

I choose here to emphasize an ontology based in temporal movement rather than those entrapped in substance (materialism) or constructions (idealism). By using ideas developed by the philosophers Henri Bergson (1998, 2001, 2004), Gilles Deleuze (1991, 1994), Elizabeth Grosz (1999, 2001, 2004, 2005), Manuel de Landa (1999, 2002) and Keith Ansell Pearson (1999, 2002), I claim that everything in the world is in a constant flux and that our intellect cannot understand this as it has evolved in order to analyze and communicate. This it can only do from static units such as language and objects. Our intellect is formed around spatiality and therefore it creates static actual multiplicities from a virtual multiplicity. The virtual is pure duration that is ever changing, and in which the past is the force for the present. In Bergsonian philosophy, the past is not over or empty, it is just virtual.

It is from the actual multiplicities that I form a polyagentive archaeology which associates the philosophers above with the sociologists Bruno Latour (1987, 1993, 1999, 2000, 2002, 2003) and Andrew Pickering (1995, 1997, 2003). These researchers have emphasized how materialities and technology affect people. I call the process of how the changing becomes static, or the actualizations of the virtual,
for polyagency and all actual multiplicities are polyagents, or things which has been formed or form individuations from the virtual. These generate polyagentive assemblages (physically connected polyagents) that spread spatially in polyagentive networks (Normark 2004a) and polyagentive phyla (polyagentive lineages) that evolve in an open-ended world (Deleuze & Guattari 1980; Normark 2006b).

The human is only one of several polyagents. The networks are therefore also analyzed from the anthropologist Alfred Gell’s (1998) conceptions of index and prototype in order to account for the reproduction of materialities (indexical polyagents) in which the human agent mainly acts as a catalyst (Normark 2004a, 2004b, 2006a). The polyagents become the basis from where the social later is constructed from virtual ideologies (Normark in preparation 1).

Humans share the virtual, but we try to explain it from the actualizations (symbols, languages, materialities) to generate a totality. The external quasi-objects; ideologies/cosmologies discussed by Mayanists are therefore formed around actualizations. These ideological models seek the totality from the outside, from the macro-level, from structures, that we think embrace everything. Since these are believed to be static, they generate a security and stability in a changing world. The intellect creates and seeks this stability to be able to work, calculate, communicate, etc. We also think we share this ideology with others since we have spatialized and externalized it to a quasi-object that is believed to exist beyond us, that there is a higher order to which we are subjected. This is why we use hylomorphic models that see materiality as inert and dead. We only see materiality as active if there is an external agent (Normark 2006a).

Therefore, Mayanist researchers use symbols, pyramids, caves, and causeways as nodes in establishing a non-complete cosmological or economic model. From the virtuality, we all know what they are, but once we try to explain it, it comes out as different actualizations, actualizations that may generate conflicts as they may not coincide with others’ views of the same actualizations (Normark in preparation 2). The imagined voids are filled with different quasi-objects depending on ones preference or suppositions. Some see the causeways as either functional or symbolic, without seeing that these perspectives are just fragments of the whole.

If some actualizations/polyagents and polyagentive phyla are more persistent and similar among a wider populace, these could be formed into nodes of an actualized ideology. The creation of actualized and external ideological elements is a need to form a totality out of discontinuous actualizations. It will never completely succeed, the solids and statics will not generate the totality, and thus leave it open for various interpretations and representations that our intellect contemplate upon. But what we really share, the virtual memory of what is becoming and changing (what Bergson attributes to instinct), is neglected and shall generate misunderstandings. Differences in understanding the actualizations exist; they are the foundation for social constructivism. It is from the actualizations that the social is constructed. It is also the way in which different ontologies of the world are created. These ontologies are non-complete statements of the world. Taken together they would still not come near the undivided flux of the world. There is a possibility to maneuver, to gain power, by emphasizing certain aspects of ontologies and reproducing some polyagentive phyla, polyagentive assemblages, and polyagentive œuvres (the total amount of indexical polyagents within a social formation) (Normark 2006a).

The virtual continues even though it diverges along different tendencies. Continuity and differentiation thus exists in the virtual, but we seek this continuity in something that does not bear continuity. The differences that exist between
actualized ideologies are the result of the becomings of actual multiplicities from a virtual totality. This is why there are similarities between a typical quadripartite world in the contemporary town of Ichmul and in the Late Formative Cerros despite great social upheavals in between, such as the Spanish conquest. The virtual has been continuous, generating certain actualizations that look the same as others as these have followed different polyagentive phyla and being indexes of earlier actualizations. However, the actualizations of the virtual have diverged, forming new sets of ideologies with different meanings, but with similar representations. These have a multitude of interpretations and need not be the same from the Late Formative to today (Normark in preparation 1).

With the approach of distinguishing between the virtual and the actual (which are not dialectical opposites), it is the hope that one can circumnavigate the great danger inherent in social constructivism - its potential to relativism. It may also be possible to circumnavigate the culture-historical generalizations and essentializations that are to be found in the cosmological entrapments. This will be one step closer to a posthumanist archaeology and a rehabilitated view of evolution, beyond current neo-Darwinian usage in archaeology (Normark in preparation 4). In the posthumanist world, the human and even the organic are no longer in the center. Here, the virtual becomes the ground for an ontology of ontologies (Aijmer 2001; Wittgenstein 1998), in which post-positivist mantras such as practice and social construction are of secondary concern.

The virtual highways becoming actual roads
The triadic causeways were and still are complexifying polyagents that affects the extension of the material networks. They were important nodes in the discursive, ethological, and iconic orders, to use the anthropologist Göran Aijmer’s (2001) concepts. However, these are all anchored in an ontology of virtuality and not in universal essential human subject (Smith 2005) or brief social constructions (Hacking 1999).

Therefore, the causeways are not just memories of the past that can act as backdrops for maintaining culture, traditions, or ideas over centuries (Bradley 2003; Olivier 2004; Stanton & Freidel 2005). Causeways, as a polyagentive phylum, are active forces, that “will their power” upon other polyagents. In their particular actualizations from the virtual, they change form from earlier actualizations. The human ideas concerning these were also diverging. Thus, the resemblances and differences among triadic patterns throughout the Maya area cannot be reduced to an external quasi-object, such as cosmology or a quadripartite principle that is believed to be reproduced, and internalized through socialization processes. When Mayanists describe traditions or cultures it is as if these exist without human agents, as a social substratum in an invisible ether (Turner 1994). The Mayanists’ created meta-narrative of the “Maya culture” acts as a structuring element. When this is done, there is continuity of cosmograms and cosmology as it only is seen as a difference of degree.

The virtual ideology is the way in which humans form actualizations from the tendencies inherent in the polyagent. The mind can choose any tendency and contrast it with another tendency in another polyagent. In the intersection between these tendencies, a node for an actual ideology is formed based upon people’s habits. The actual ideology needs many nodes that are connected by the human agent’s mind’s capability to form connections between actualizations that in the
virtual may not be connected (differences of degree vs. differences in kind). Thus, a “false” or non-complete view of the world emerges (Normark 2006a).

The virtual ideology of interest in the triadic causeway is the tendency among past constructors to emphasize the straightness, height, width and length of the causeways. There is also another tendency to align structures at a near right angle, either plazas with causeways or plazas with pyramids and platforms. When the tendency of causeway straightness meets other tendencies inherent in the other indexical polyagents within the polyagentive assemblages (plazas, pyramids, range structures, etc.), this virtual tendency is maintained and right angle alignments are suppressed. The triadic causeways would have turned to meet the terminus plaza in a right angle if a right angle alignment was of primary concern. This never occurs (this is also true for the other two causeways at Ichmul and those at Yo’okop). The actualized pattern that emerges within the triadic assemblage becomes the basis for local actualized ideologies. These local actualized ideologies were differentiated, and past human agents would have filled them with information dependent on their earlier habits, experience and collectively derived quasi-objects.

The straightness would still be a main factor long after the assemblages ceased to function as an entity. The decision to transform the San Andres causeway to a modern dirt road a few years ago (which never was realized) may have taken place because of the straightness and materiality of the causeway. This decision was related to other actualizations than in the Terminal Classic, such as the need to have a substantial and wide road bed to support heavier motorized vehicles to the San Andres rancho. Thus, the tendency towards straightness would fit later people’s intellect as well without any “cultural” transmission needed other than the physical “straightness” of the causeway. Thus, in some cases the transmission goes through the virtual tendencies inherent in the actualized material patterns rather than through a macro-cosmological ether.

There have only been limited excavations within central Ichmul. However, the result so far may indicate that the major portion of the Central Acropolis dates to the Early Classic, and that the Terminal Classic expansion of the site relates to the causeways, their termini, and raising the Great Plaza and the platform upon which the east churches stand in central Ichmul. The area of intersection of the triadic causeways may not have become important until the Terminal Classic.

There are great differences in terms of construction material invested in the two causeway assemblages at Ichmul. The total volume of the triadic causeways, excluding the extensive plaza constructions is at least 65,350 cubic m. For the aligned causeways the combined total is at least 4,610 cubic m. The difference between these assemblages is 14 times, which is not merely a result of different lengths as Shaw’s (2001) typology would show. Thus, the two polyagentive assemblages at Ichmul may be the result of two different sequences, related to different actualized ideologies like ‘old Chichen’ and ‘late Chichen’ (Cobos 2003). The smaller causeways could be the older ones that connected two locations in a smaller area. The triadic examples may be the result of a short and later expansion (Flores & Normark 2005f:84).

What actualized ideologies do these different polyagentive assemblages reflect, being the becomings of a virtual ideology? The aligned assemblage reflects another actualized ideology of the same virtual ideology that emphasizes straightness and alignment.

When it comes to the consistency of the triadic assemblage and its apparent joint effort, this likely occurred during a brief period. One plausible actualized ideology
that could be used to explain this large scale project is a modified version of Rice’s (2004) recent socio-political model of *k’atun* cycles. Ichmul could have become the seat for at least one *k’atun*. This would imply that Ichmul had developed institutions found at other locations that became nested in larger entities (the *may k’u* seat) but which need not always exist at every large site. Participating in the *k’atun* cycling may have proven to be positive for the site. Ichmul would not likely have been a *may k’u*, or a seat for all 13 *k’atuns*. Ichmul could potentially have been a *k’atun* seat within Chichen Itza’s realm as a *may k’u* center, but the Chichen Slatewares found in the area are later and the major concentration has been found four km from Ichmul at the small site of Nohcacak (Normark 2006b; Shaw & Johnstone in press). The expansion of the settlement during the Terminal Classic could have taken place during such a *k’atun* and, if so, it might have been an inward expansion. People at the termini sites may have wanted to join with the center for various benefits. This could possibly explain the seemingly homogeneity in the layout of the two polyagentive assemblages at Ichmul. They may have been constructed during different *k’atuns*. The aligned causeways could have been an earlier pattern when Ichmul maybe was not a *k’atun* seat.

The triadic causeways’ alignments may have originated from a funnel shaped cenote, but their true physical origins, if they proceeded further into Ichmul than is currently known, would in all cases have been fairly close to each of the three pyramidal structures. If these pyramids were part of the triadic pattern is less clear. In the Central Acropolis, the northeastern pyramid is fairly detached from the rest of the acropolis. If this was so, the Xquerol causeway was associated with the main portion of the acropolis and the southwest pyramid, the San Andres causeway was associated with the northeastern pyramid (it is also the causeway that comes closest to the ideal intersection). The San Juan causeway would have been associated with the pyramid in the Eastern Acropolis. This could potentially relate to a tripartite organization at the site with three focal pyramids, three causeways, three termini plazas, and three times three termini structures.

The Central Acropolis plaza-range structure layout may be Early Classic in origin. As such it could have affected later Terminal Classic layout of the final versions of the range structures and the plazas even if there had been changes in social organisation from the “divine” kings towards a “multepal” organization. Maybe the Eastern Acropolis, with its large interior plaza, is a later construction, reflecting a different organisation, not to mention the Great Plaza and what appears to be a necropolis with no apparent hierarchy among the burials near the center of the triadic causeway intersection or the different origins of the causeway reflects a triadic organisation all together. These are questions that archaeology cannot answer.

From the polyagentive approach, it is the virtuality inherent in the physical structures that affect their reproduction, but the past discursive formations (the actual ideologies) that related to the causeways, which we shall never know, changed along other trajectories. In short, the Terminal Classic triadic pattern at Ichmul may have no connection to triadic patterns seen at Palenque and particularly from other time periods, such as the Late Formative. The cosmological entrapment constrains researchers from seeing this, they see the difference only of degree, not in kind. Ichmul’s triadic pattern may be a difference in kind from that of Caracol and El Mirador. Thus, the pattern is more local than reflecting the generalized “Big Picture” of differences of degrees to which so many Mayanists adhere. These Mayanists have a pessimistic view of archaeology (Cornell & Fahlander 2002), as archaeological remains are not enough for them and they need to be filled with or complemented
with other data (iconography, epigraphy, ethnohistory, and ethnography). The polyagentive approach has an optimistic view and claims that all we need are the materialities we do find. There are no voids of the past to be filled with quasi-objects, not even with past subjects or humans. Thus, the virtual tendencies of causeways, “the virtual highways”, become actual nodes for us to study. We can reach a postsubjective and posthuman condition that is the foundation for material studies beyond naïve realism (Landa 2002) or constructivism (Hacking 1999).
Figure 1. Investigated sites in the Cochuah region.
Figure 2. Ichmul, its five causeways and surrounding sites.
Figure 3. The Central Acropolis in Ichmul.
Figure 4. Area of causeway intersection and location of burial platform.
Figure 5. The San Juan terminus area.
Figure 6. The San Andres terminus area.
Figure 7. The Xquerol terminus area.
Figure 8. Comparison of the triadic termini at Ichmul
Ethnicity and the Shared Quasi-Objects: Issues of Becoming Relating to two Open-fronted Structures at Nohcacad, Quintana Roo, Mexico

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Abstract
Two open-fronted structures associated with minor numbers of Chichén slate wares have been found at the minor site of Nohcacab in Quintana Roo. These could potentially be interpreted as either conquest by Chichén Itzá, the spread of a “Quetzalcoatl cult”, trade, or “diffusion”. Such interpretations necessarily touch upon the idea of ethnicity. However, the evidence for ethnic groups from material remains is problematic for several reasons. The major obstacle is the tendency among archaeologists to attribute to materiality, what is not there, such as quasi-objects. Such quasi-objects are believed to be shared among past humans, and materialities are forced to fit these quasi-objects. Ethnicity and culture are such quasi-objects, external to the materialities. These “traditional” quasi-objects are rejected as levels of analysis and a polyagentive approach is proposed that break with culture-history and social constructivism. Here, social groups are first replaced by series, and focus is laid upon the nodes around which series form: the materiality of actants. However, these are just actualisations or becoming of a virtual multiplicity that always is in change, free of essences and externalities. Becomings are what make materialities form the trajectories of human action through their causative capabilities, or polyagency. These processes are exemplified by the materialities at Nohcacab and the causeways of nearby Ichmul.

Resumen
En el sitio menor de Nohcacab, Quintana Roo, han sido encontradas dos Estructuras de frente abierto así como muestras de la vajilla Chichén Pizarra. Esto puede ser potencialmente interpretado tanto como una conquista de Chichén Itzá, la dispersión del "culto de Quetzalcoatl", comercio o "difusión". Tales interpretaciones involucran la idea de etnicidad. Sin embargo, la evidencia de grupos étnicos en los restos materiales es problemática por varias razones. El mayor obstáculo es la tendencia entre los arqueólogos a atribuirles materialidad, que no está presente, como si fueran quasi-objetos. Se cree que dichos quasi-objetos son compartidos entre los humanos del pasado, y los materiales son forzados a encajar en estos quasi-objetos. Etnicidad y cultura son tales quasi-objetos, externos a la materialidad. Estos cuasi-objetos "tradicionales" son rechazados como niveles de análisis y se propone un acercamiento a través de la poliagenciación que rompe con la historia cultural y constructivismo social. En este enfoque, los grupos sociales son reemplazados por series, concentrándose alrededor de los nodos que forman las series: la materialidad de los actantes. Sin embargo, estas son sólo actualizaciones o conversiones de una multiplicidad virtual que siempre está en cambio, libre de esencias y externalidades. Conversiones son lo que hace que las materialidades formen trayectorias de acción humana mediante sus capacidades causativas, o poliagenciación. Estos procesos son ejemplificados por las materialidades en Nohcacab y las calzadas del cercano sitio de Ichmul.

The teaching of Being, of things, and of all those constant entities, is a hundred times more easy than the teaching of Becoming and evolution... (Nietzsche in Pickering, 2003:104)

Being and becoming are two different philosophical views of the world with far-reaching effects in scientific research. Do such philosophical problems have anything to contribute to archaeology? Perhaps not, if we are to follow the culture-historical approaches that dominate the field of Maya studies, which are concerned with those constant entities Nietzsche mentions in the quote above. Quasi-objects are such constant entities. By this is meant the idea of tacit collective objects that are assumed to be shared by people. Such quasi-objects are: “culture”, “tradition”, “practice”, “paradigm”, etc. (Turner 1994). These concepts are commonly used in social sciences. Could other concepts be used that allow for multiplicity and change?

It is never possible to completely break with past thought despite numerous attempts. For
example, “processual”, “behavioral”, and “post-processual” archaeology all use the concept of culture (Schiffer 1976; Binford 1983; Shanks & Tilley 1987; Hodder 1994). Culture has thus become a premise for everything archaeologists do; it has become a static being, a quasi-object, used to find regularities and simplistic causality to fit the data into predefined anthropological models. This is far from the ideas of becoming, differentiation, and the multiplicity of existence. This article shall explore the possibilities of an archaeology of the becoming in relation to ethnicity that takes a critical stance against culture-history, social constructivism, and those approaches lumped together as processual and post-processual archaeology.

I shall first give a traditional culture-historical account of the Terminal Classic remains at the major site of Ichmul in southeast Yucatán, and the tertiary site of Nohcacab in west-central Quintana Roo, before I choose another path of understanding.

**Nohcacab and Ichmul**

The little-investigated Cochuah region, in which Ichmul and Nohcacab are located, has a high density of Prehispanic settlement, spanning from the Middle Formative to the Postclassic (Fig. 1). Ongoing archaeological fieldwork, taking place here since 2000, by the PAY (Proyecto Arquelógico Yo’okop) and the consecutive CRAS (Cochuah Regional Archaeological Survey) project, has investigated two major sites; Yo’okop (also known as Okop and La Aguada) and Ichmul.

![Fig. 1. Investigated sites in the Cochuah region](image)
The contemporary town of Ichmul appears to have been an important Terminal Classic site. Ichmul has two acropoli. The Central Acropolis dates back to at least the Early Classic and consists of six plazas surrounded by eleven range structures and two pyramidal structures. Several Caste War fortifications crown the western section of the acropolis. The Eastern Acropolis consists of six range structures and a pyramid. Apart from the two acropoli, there are several large platforms with foundation braces in various solares of this town (Flores & Normark 2004b, 2005a; Johnstone 2005).

A dominant feature is the Great Plaza, located north of the Central Acropolis (Flores & Normark 2005a). There is a low and wide platform of at least Terminal Classic age on the east side. Portions of six Terminal Classic burials were found here in 2005 (Kaeding & Flores 2005). This platform is the foundation for a ruined colonial church and convent. North of the convent is a white church where an image of the Blister Black Christ (*El Santo Cristo de las Ampollas*) is located. Older textual sources mention the existence of two cenotes (sinkholes) at Ichmul (RHGGY 1983:298). These have not been located and it is suspected that one of the cenotes may be located under the white church which was built after the textual sources were written.

Fig. 2. The causeway system of Ichmul
Ichmul has a radial causeway system, with at least five causeways extending to secondary sites (Fig. 2). Three major causeways were all aligned from the same point, which today is covered by the white church, the possible location of one of the cenotes (Flores & Normark 2005b). One of the major causeways runs southeast from Ichmul, for almost three kilometres, to a terminus called San Andrés, which is located one kilometre northwest of a densely populated area called Nohcacab (Fig. 3). There is a continuous settlement from San Andrés to Nohcacab, suggesting that the two sites were part of the same settlement during the Terminal Classic (Flores & Normark 2004a:81-84, 2005c).

Nohcacab is located within a rancho. Most of the site has medium-to-small depressions and modified hillocks, a quite unique topography for the region. The depressions are open, rock-free and they contain deep soil with only a few sherds on the surface. In contrast, nearly every hillock at the site has artefacts, structures, and other features. It is suspected that the depressions, because of their thick soil, were used for agricultural purposes, perhaps even specialized crops such as cotton, as two spindle whorls were found (Johnstone 2004c:44; Shaw 2004b:15). Apart from a historical well associated with the rancho, there is no known water source at Nohcacab. In Prehispanic times, water catchments from rain and storage seem to have been needed at the site. Natural basins and nearby channels were modified to manage the water (Shaw 2003:9). Two chultuns have been located and they were found in depressions to collect surface water (Johnstone 2004c:44).
The ceramics at Nohcacab date from the Middle Formative to the poorly defined Early Classic and from the Terminal Classic to the Postclassic. The site may have reached its greatest extent during the Late Formative, but most visible structures appear to be Terminal Classic (Johnstone 2004a).

The two tallest mounds at Nohcacab are only 3 meters tall, but the site has a great density of structures in between the depressions. Some structures were built directly on the ground; others had raised platforms (Shaw 2003:9). The site may cover more than one square kilometre, with the density of structures (residential platforms, foundation braces, and shrines) and artefacts dropping off when the hillock/depression area is followed by flatter area (Johnstone 2004c:44).

The largest Terminal Classic structures were capped by an unusually high concentration of small Postclassic altars and shrines, built by reusing material from older structures, such as door jambs, cut stones, metates, and other architectural elements. Most of the shrines were not larger than a few square meters, and they were one-room constructions with one entrance. The surface around these shrines sometimes contains Chen Mul incensario fragments (Normark 2003).

Two open-fronted structures

An interesting discovery at Nohcacab in 2003, and the focus for excavations in 2003 (Operation 1) and in 2004 (Operations 2 and 6), were two open-fronted or “Post-monumental” structures (Bey et al. 1997) and Chichén slateware sherds at a site with predominant Florescent-related, Puuc-style architecture and ceramics during the Terminal Classic (Shaw 2003:12) (Figs. 4 and 5). Other investigated sites in the Cochuah region, such as Yo’okop, Xquerol, Sacalaca and Ichmul seem to lack a Chichén Itzá affiliation.

Most Florescent-style buildings at Nohcacab had closed fronts that utilize continuous foundation braces interrupted by doorways. The two structures discussed here were different, as they were open-fronted with one line of stones upon which a perishable, largely open front wall would have been constructed. They also had unusual semi-circular indentations with plastered surfaces. These were most likely used as doorways. The back and side walls consisted of core-veneer masonry that supported poles. The back walls had low benches. Another critical difference, most consistent through open-fronted structures regardless of their form, is a double wall line in the rear and sides, and a single line in the front. There is also a lack of a subfloor sequence since plaster was directly placed upon the ground surface (Shaw 2004a).

Structure N1E1-8

The largest of the open-fronted structures is the L-shaped Structure N1E1-8 (Operation 2, Fig. 4), located in an older Late Formative plaza that is surrounded by Nohcacab’s largest Florescent-style related architecture. The L-shaped building has a parallel wall at the back and at the sides. The back wall had at least six courses of stone, but the side walls appear to have been lower. The front of the structure has four inset entrances. A bench is located in the centre of the northern wing. It seems that the cut stones in the wall lines, particularly the front wall, have been taken from nearby structures. Puuc-style cut stones were only used in the single front line and entrances; sides and rear were much larger and less well-shaped. The structure is also built in front of Structure N1W1-1 which disturbs the centre of the plaza that this older Florescent-style structure shared with Structure N1E1-2 to the east (Shaw 2004b:9).

A test pit excavation in 2003, Operation 1, was located west of the building. It provided a sample of Chichén slateware that could be associated with the structure (Johnstone 2003). However, there is still no absolute date for this building. The results from Operation 1 led to the full-scale excavation in 2004 (Operation 2). Middle Formative sherds were found in a 1x1 meter test pit within Operation 2. Two plaza floors beneath the structure date to the Late Formative. These older phases relate to the construction of the plaza upon which N1E1-8 rests. The fill from when Structure N1E1-8 was constructed contains Puuc slateware, suggesting a Terminal Classic date (Shaw 2004b:21). These ceramics are similar to ceramics found at other locations at Nohcacab with Puuc/Florescent architecture. Chichén slatewares surround the building and have been found upon the floor level, but not in any subfloor deposits. These slatewares are still a minority of the ceramics associated with this occupation. A fragment of Pachuca green obsidian was found in front of the building (Shaw 2004b:24).
The structure seems to have perished in a fire, indicated by burned floor fragments found in the eastern part of the structure. This area also collapsed fairly intact, whereas the rest of the structure gradually collapsed. A Postclassic shrine was later constructed on top of nearby Structure N1W1-1 with its altar, Structure N1E1-10, placed in the area of the back wall of Structure N1E1-8 that was removed for the altar. The altar was constructed from stones in Structure N1E1-8’s front wall (Shaw 2004b:24).

This building had a lower masonry wall. The height was probably less than one m. There was an earlier building, Structure S3E2-2 sub-1, associated with Floor 1. All that remained within the excavated area was a three m section of a platform edge with cut veneer stones, which were smaller and more uniform than in the later structure. These are consistent with Florescent-style architecture. The floor that would have covered sub-1 was missing. In contrast to lots related to the later structure, the lot excavated in the fill of sub-1 had no Chichén slateware (Johnstone 2004b:40).

The west wall of Structure S3E2-2 had been built directly upon sub-1. Thus, before the construction of the open-fronted structure, the walls of the older structure were curtained, and its plaster floor was destroyed. Most of the structure burned, as the heat-spalled sherds and burnt plaster indicate. The new floor that was laid out contained Chichén slateware ceramics and obsidian microblades. Chichén slateware ceramics were found adjacent to the structure’s exterior (Johnstone 2004b:43).

Structure S3E2-2

The other open-fronted building, Structure S3E2-2 (Operation 6, Fig. 5) is 280 meters southeast of N1E1-8. It has a T-shaped foundation brace and shares with the former structure the parallel walls in the rear and sides, and a single-walled front that may have been a retaining wall for a raised floor. There was also a semi-circular indentation in the front (Johnstone 2004b:40). There could have been another indentation since there was a gap where the other would have been.

A poorly preserved plaster floor (Floor 1) was found below the level of the double wall. It had been burned to a bluish grey. Puuc slateware sherds were found at the level of this floor. Several sherds had also been burned and were severely spalled (Johnstone 2004b:40).

Fig. 4. Plan of Structure N1E1-8

Fig. 5. Plan of Structure S3E2-2

Chichén Itzá and Chichén Slateware

Structures of similar design are known from several other lowland sites including Chichén Itzá (Rupert & Smith 1957), Uxmal (Rupert & Smith 1957; Barrera & Huchim 1990), Sayil (Tourtellot et al. 1992), and Ek Balam (Bey et al. 1997). What is common among them is that they had the double and single wall lines, were either built on top of earlier Florescent-style
buildings, or disturbing older site layout, or they were made from recycled Florescent façade elements. For these various reasons, it has been argued that they are contemporaneous, forming a “Post-monumental” phase of the late Terminal Classic (Bey et al. 1997). Bey and others (1997) argue that these structures are a final attempt to maintain centralised control on a local level. However, Carmean and others (2004) rather argue that they relate to Sotuta-using people related to Chichén Itzá. These structures would reflect an attempt to take control over these sites.

Sotuta-associated ceramics have been found outside the Sotuta sphere (Shaw 2004a:4). In the case of Nohcacab, Chichén-affiliated ceramics at the open-fronted structures were more common than elsewhere at the site: 5.8% of the total Terminal Classic sherds consisted of types associated with Chichén’s Sotuta complex. At other locations of Nohcacab, the same figure is 0.4% (Johnstone 2004a:96).

The foreign ceramic wares, in combination with the reused stones in the new buildings, and the violation of a previously open plaza in the L-shaped case indicate an architectural and ceramic shift at Nohcacab. It is less likely that the two ceramic assemblages were chronologically separated. No break in settlement before the construction of the open-fronted structures was found, suggesting that the changes affected an already resident population (Shaw 2004b:24).

Some recent research in the northern lowlands (Dahlin 2002; Andrews et al. 2003; Carmean et al. 2004; Suhler et al. 2004), suggests that Chichén Itzá conquered other sites and extracted tribute, possibly creating either a territorial or a hegemonic empire. This may have been a strategy to survive the drier conditions during the Terminal Classic (Hodell et al. 1995; Gill 2000; Hodell et al. 2001; Dahlin 2002). If this was the case, Ichmul and its surroundings may have been one of the targets to expand their domain into the central parts of Yucatán.

One hypothesis that may explain the open-fronted structures at Nohcacab is therefore that an occupying population from Chichén Itzá ordered the construction of the buildings. It is less likely that the Chichén slateware came to Nohcacab as a result of market exchange since the ceramics are not evenly distributed at the site (Johnstone 2004a:96).

Ringle and others (1998) have proposed another scenario, since they find the evidence for a conquering Chichén Itzá empire to be slim (Stanton & Gallareta Negrón 2001). Instead, they suggest that a wide spread state “cult” of Quetzalcoatl can explain why there are similar imagery and beliefs at some centres in Mesoamerica. This “cult” would have related to an ideology of leadership associated with militarism, long-distance trade and pilgrimage. The similarities between certain sites as would have been the result of investiture rituals. Ringle (2004:213) sees the investitures as a way to form loose and extensive political alliances within a religious hegemony. This would explain why Chichén slatewares are only found in small portions outside Chichén Itzá. Chichén Itzá’s typical architecture, such as gallery-patio, colonnaded halls and serpent temples are only found at Chichén Itzá. In this model, Chichén Itzá only intervened in factional dispute rather then going on in massive campaigns. A colonnaded patio was found at San Andres, near Nohcacab, but it is not enough to suggest a Chichén presence (Flores & Normark 2005c).

It seems that the Florescent architectural style is contemporary with the open-fronted architecture at Nohcacab. Could the architecture and ceramics also be a way to maintain a distinct ethnicity, as an ethnic enclave? Spence (1996:335-336) suggests that ethnic enclaves can be detected in the archaeological record. However, what began as an enclave may not persist as one (Smyth & Rogart 2004:38-39). But Chichén slateware was used by other households as well. The users of the open-fronted structures were mainly using local ceramics (Johnstone 2004a:96). Shaw believes that open-fronted structures are not necessarily associated with a specific political entity (Shaw & Johnstone in press).

The shared invisible externalities – ethnicity as a quasi object

The presence of Chichén slateware and open-fronted architecture at other sites has thus been interpreted as either the spread of a cult, trade/exchange or conquest. Despite which interpretation we choose, we will come in contact with the idea of ethnicity since the material remains at Nohcacab indicate social relations with people of another identity, origin
or with other ideas than originally lived at the site.

However, are we dealing with distinct ethnic groups at Nohcacab? Archaeologists often turn to stylistic criteria in search for answers. For example, it has recently been argued that there might be an eastern-western split of the Northern Lowlands that is ancestral to the documented Late Postclassic division between the eastern Kokom-Itzá and the western Xiw. This older “ethno-political” division is based primarily on distribution of ceramics and obsidian (Rice & Forsyth 2004:53). This division is pushed further back into the Classic period and also further south, into the Petén Lakes region (Rice & Rice 2004:129-133). This way of reasoning from material remains is in line with how the archaeologist Siân Jones argues; “distinctive forms and styles of material culture may be actively maintained and withheld in the process of signalling ethnicity” (Jones 1997:120).

I question Jones’ statement. Even if hieroglyphic data would show a distribution similar to the ceramic pattern, it is not sufficient to speculate around past identities. How are we to differentiate between ethnicity and other identities, such as lineage, house, gender, community, class, faction, occupation, status, age or some other categories unknown to us? Archaeologists interpret too much out of their data, interpretations they seldom have support for, since they often use ethnographic analogies from another time and place. Analytic concepts, such as ethnicity, tend to become objects of study in themselves. A few ceramic sherds and scattered ruins come quickly to represent culture, economy, politics, social organisation, cosmology and ethnicity that are then analysed along other venues, bringing in information not present in our dataset: ethnographic analogies or ethnohistoric accounts.

Therefore, whether or not there was an intrusion of another ethnic group at Nohcacab is not the issue of the remaining part of the article. The issue is partly to question the validity of ethnicity as an operational concept in archaeology, something I have discussed at greater length elsewhere (Normark 2004b). However, the issues run much deeper than questioning ethnicity, which is just a problem on the surface. As mentioned in the beginning, Maya archaeology is still largely influenced by culture-history, most clearly seen in its continuous use of culture areas. But as Barth (1969:38) has shown, if an ethnic group is tracked through time, a cultural history is not followed. Thus, “Maya ethnicity” and “Maya culture” should diverge from each other in time, but they are not treated in that way. It should be noted that Barth’s contemporary standpoint is more in line with how I, myself, view “culture”. That is, as a concept that is an obstacle in seeing social variability and heterogeneity (Barth 2002).

Thus, was style used to signal ethnicity or do we attribute ethnicity to style when there might have been other processes going on? As will become apparent, ethnicity is one category of a set of similar categories that is used to explain something people are believed to share.

For Barth (1969:9), ethnic groups are “categories of ascription and identification by the actors themselves.” Siân Jones further defines ethnic groups as “culturally ascribed identity groups, which are based on the expression of a real or assumed shared culture and common descent” (Jones 1997:84). A group like this is also believed to share the same norms, laws and cosmology.

Jones characterises ethnic identity as a shifting, situational and subjective identifying of oneself and others. This is supposed to be founded in daily activities and historical experience. It is seen as a process that transforms and is discontinuous (Jones 1997:13-14). This definition also emphasizes the construction of ethnic boundaries from and within social interaction. Ethnicity is here seen as how people recognize identity towards other groups in a binary opposition between “us” and “them”. These ethnic boundaries can consist of language, dress, economic roles or geographical location. The boundaries determine and signal membership in a specific group. The boundaries are dynamic and for an ethnic group to persist, the interaction with other groups needs to allow for a continuance of differences (Barth 1969:16). Otherwise, one group may be assimilated in the other.

However, this kind of definition of ethnicity describes processes that also can be applied to other groups, such as gender, class and lineage (Johannesen 2004). To use a distinction from Bergson (1998), identities are seen as dualistic, as differences of degree rather than differences in kind. An identity consists of one group at one extreme end, and the other group at the other extreme, the differences is then just a matter of degrees between them.
A pattern seen in the study of ethnicity, gender or classes is, thus, the somewhat arbitrary creation of at least two different groups, as shown by Turner (1994, 1997) in his critique of the theories of practice. A common way to proceed is to apply an anthropological model that explains differences between groups, as that people in group A share y and people in group B share x. The difference between these groups is that they possess x or y. This difference is not individual differences but rather difference between the “thing” that one group shares and the other “thing” the other group shares. The problem is therefore the shared “thing” (in this case, the culture an ethnic group is believed to have shared), and the sameness of this “thing” that people are believed to possess (Turner 1997:346). How can this “thing”, this quasi-object, become internalized and still share the sameness? This has been solved by using generalizations such as culture, tradition, ideology, discourse, paradigm, episteme or practice, to name a few. What these generalizations have in common is the sharing of something external, invisible and structural to the human agents sometime relying on social constructivism.

The most obvious of these shared external invisibilities is culture. Culture as a macro-level concept has been used to describe a changing totality, which still remains the same. Mayanists talk about “Maya culture” when they describe the present and also when they describe people during the Middle Formative, as if it was the same, only a difference of degree (Normark 2004b). In fact, people at Cuello, in 1000 B.C. had much more in common with contemporaneous people, such as at San Lorenzo in the Olmec area, than they have with present “Maya”. However, to use the Postcolonial theorist Homi Bhabha (1994-95) insights, it might be argued that a population’s “culture”, such as the one at Nohcacaab, is not imposed by a new “culture,” such as the Itzá’s. Both are created within the encounter, within a third space. All “cultures” are hybrids; there are no “pure cultures”. “Cultures” are not homogenous but are built up from many different agents and fractions, in which ethnicity and identities derive from different sources.

In contrast to Bhabha, I argue that there is no culture at all if by culture is meant this fuzzy structural element that persists externally of the human agents. To me, there are only individual habits. Culture as an analytical concept has no operational use, and since ethnicity relies on culture, neither can ethnicity be a functioning operational analytical concept. Culture is nothing more than an assumed shared external invisibility that researchers too easily rely upon. Archaeology beyond culture is a difficult but necessary task. We need to find a more basic analytical level, and this cannot be found in culture-history, processualism, or post-processualism.

The major obstacle in using ethnicity as an operational concept in archaeology is that “the study of ethnicity and ethnic groups needs to take self-identifications as its point of departure rather than turning to comparisons with neighbouring groups, abstract theories of ethnic identity, and political ideologies in search of analytical terms” (Hervik 2003:53). Thus, we should go from internal differences in kind rather than external differences of degree. However, there are no ways in which we can reach self-identifications in the archaeological record. Epigraphy cannot help us here since what may have been “true” for some ancient high ranking kings may not have been the same among other high ranking people at a neighbouring site, for their descendents a century later, or among other social groups from which we have no written sources. The common approach to study the “Maya culture” - to take a little here and then, add something from there and now, and voilà, we have a “Maya culture,” - cannot be used if we are to understand differentiations.

If we turn to the micro-level instead, will we find ethnicity there? Do all ethnicity and culture come down to the individual human agent? Bourdieu’s (1977) concept of habitus has been used to explain how ethnicity is formed from both conscious and unconscious interactions. However, ethnicity is a conscious difference that relates to others. It is not constituted by subliminal consciousness of shared similarities (Johannesen 2004). Ethnicity is all about externalised differences. That is, differences between groups that share something.

Turner (1994) views Bourdieu’s habitus as a quasi-object, because it is believed that people with similar practices share a habitus, which therefore needs to be both internal and external. Turner rather focuses on habits which are not shared but are different for every person. If an external performance becomes habitualized, it does not mean that the habits are the same as that of others participating in
the same performance, but the externals must be the same (the performance and its location). They have been trimmed to look the same externally (Turner 1994:58). In terms of habits, similarity in external performance is thus not dependent on similar internal structures. People understand the same external “thing” in different ways depending on experience and feedback. The understanding may be similar to that of others (Turner 1994:74). People need to learn and acquire habits to be able to act in the world. These habits are often fairly consistent and predictable and can therefore be manipulated (Turner 1994:112).

Setting Turner’s critique aside for a moment, should we in any particular analysis consider or rather speculate around the intersection of different kinds of identity, such as; ethnicity, class, gender, lineage, “house” or even individual habits? Should we study the way these identities become institutionalized, internalized or socialized in different social settings and how they interact with each others to get a more complete view?

No. Such approaches will create a mess of assumed ontologically secure categories (see Smith 2005). These secure categories reflect a metaphysics of presence in Derrida’s sense (Hägglund 2002). That is, the need of a static presence of a timeless entity (“being”) that we depend upon in our analysis. This entity is believed to remain stable even though its content has a tendency of becoming something else. The belief is that the contents of culture and ethnicity change but that culture and ethnicity in themselves as concepts remain the same. We thus freeze a changing world to static frames, to beings such as ethnicity, and generate a deceptive stability that reduces differences in kind to differences of degree. Ethnicity as a concept becomes eternal and external.

Can we use other tools that reduce the stability and dissolve the sharing of external structures, tools that help us to see the world in all its becomings of differentiation?

Yes. However, these are not to be found in culture-history. Alternatives are to be found among those French philosophers that Rice and others (2004:7) recently have dismissed by claiming to cling to what they appear to see as “true” archaeology. However, we do not need to use the French philosophers through their “British archaeological ‘translators,’” (ibid), since Hodder, Shanks, and Tilley are too caught up in the culture concept and social constructivism.

**Serial action, fibres and threads**

One possible way to get around too static, non-operational, and all encompassing categories, such as culture and ethnicity, can be found in Sartre’s writings, something used by the founders of microarchaeology (Cornell & Fahlander 2002a, 2002b). However, Sartre needs to be modified to fit my particular archaeological perspective, since Sartre deals both with a social totality with structural elements and individual intentions and perspectives (Sartre 1988). Contrary to Turner (1994), Sartre sees the social world not as constituted of atomised and autonomic subjects but as a total process where the plurality of the social world is integrated (Sartre 1991:257). Thus, it has been argued that Sartre’s concept of *series* fit both individual agency, social and structural forces, or *structurating positivities* in Cornell and Fahlander’s (2002b) microarchaeological terminology. What I see as a problem here is how to define and detect these structural elements. What do they consist of, and how are they shared and reproduced? The structural elements might be institutions or materialities, but what the social theorists usually mean by structural force is an external quasi-object that is assumed to be shared, reproduced, and internalized into the human agents, such as ideology, practice, ethnicity and so on. I do not believe there are any such structural forces, basically because no theory has been able to explain how they are reproduced or transmitted, and how they still are shared (Turner 1994). There is a gap between the social sciences and psychology that needs to be explained (Normark in prep 1).

What I take from Sartre is the notion of *seriality* and *serial action* (Sartre 1991:256-269). According to him, most social collectives should be regarded as series and not as groups. A series is the result of different activities and is not a socially defined group or category (such as ethnicity or lineage). To be part of a group, one needs to act consciously and both adhere to and share a common cause. What we generally call social groups does not fit this description. Women, for example, do not necessarily share and adhere to the same cause. Some are wealthy, others are oppressed, some have children and so on. Women could rather
be seen as a serial category than as a group (Young 1997).

Serial categories are formed from temporary series. These are constituted by common circumstances among some individuals in a particular situation (Sartre 1991:258). Thus, serial action comes from individual habits.

A useful analogy of how this works is a bus queue that consists of people with different “gender”, “ethnicity”, “ages”, “status”, “occupation”, etc. The individuals in the queue probably do not see themselves as a group and they do not share a common social milieu or identity. The people in the bus queue have acted according to different agendas before they end up in the queue (Fahlander 2003). This is more closely related to the archaeological situation. We never find the “polity”, or the “kingship”, or the “lineage”, or the “community”, but we find places, locations and objects that were used in serial action.

Serial categories (such as women) are defined from set, repetitive, serial acts, instead of simple, temporary series, as in the bus-queue example (Fahlander 2003:34). Such categories form around nodes for repetitive activity. Such a node can, for example, be a cenote where rituals or water collecting would be done on repetitive occasions. Around such a feature, different people would gather but they would not necessarily form a group, they would, however, always form a series.

Hägerstrand’s (1970) time-geography is a good way to describe how a set of serial actions replaces each other at various material nodes. Most individuals participate in several serial collectives through their daily activities. After the bus queue, some individuals form other types of series at work, or at supermarkets, etc. If we focus on such a performed action-perspective, serial situations may be analyzed instead of past subject roles, status roles or ethnic identities which we will never know in any sufficient way (Fahlander 2001).

The serial approach thus emphasizes the local level. Most agents act in a local setting for most of their lives. Thus, the local environment affects people’s life more than an assumed regional “tradition” or “culture”. Most important here is that people form temporary or repetitive series through their action and these series relate to materiality. The focus should therefore be on local materialities and not on a fuzzy and regional royal ideology/cosmology as is the most common approach in Maya studies that emphasizes epigraphic and iconographic remains. All too often mayanists search for the “big picture” and leave the micro-level and local level fairly unproblematized. A typical example of the latter approach can be seen in the recent revival of the may cycle to explain long-term socio-political and economical changes (Rice 2004).

The “cosmological entrapment” runs throughout much of the mayanist literature, all too often based on ethnographic analogies of cultural continuity (Normark in prep 2). One wonders how much the Western academic person’s daily life is affected by “contemporary Western cosmology” (whatever that may be). But we tend to attribute these things to others. The strength of focusing on serial action is that the series is not defined by the subjects’ intentions, or cosmology, but by their activities. What people do and what they think they do are different things. For example, garbological studies have shown that what people think they consume and what is actually found in their garbage tend to be very different (Rathje & Murphy 1992).

Before I continue, it is important to note that I make a distinction between action, act and practice. Action is solely related to the human agent’s duration and its habits; it cannot be broken down into fragments. An act is such a defined sequence of action. It is non-durational, isolated from true duration as it is spatialized. Practice is also spatialized, but it has taken the act to a level of continuity and persistence beyond the single human agent as a quasi-object (Normark 2004a:75).

In microarchaeological terminology, the serial actions are like the fibers of a thread (Cornell & Fahlander 2002a). However, as will be argued, the fibre and threads are spatialized ideals, devoid of true duration. The Wittgensteinian (1998) derived metaphor of a fibre represents a repeated practice, such as burning copal incense. Several other fibres of related practices that persist through time are called a thread, and can be labelled “ancestor veneration” in some cases. However, the copal burning fibre can appear in other threads as well, such as “house dedication”. In some cases, the copal burning fibre is missing, but with the other fibres left, the thread could still be called “ancestor veneration”.

Thus, it is argued that these threads or positivities form and are being formed by the subject and the collective in relation to the
materiality; but this makes it an external quasi-object as well. These are often unconscious and can operate in different fibres. Although the series are brief, the materialities that shape these series may persist longer than serial action, such as monumental architecture or causeways (Normark 2004c). Materiality has therefore been seen as nodes of the structuring of activities (Fahlander 2003:41).

The fibre metaphor has value as an analytical concept, but I think that the only “structuring positivity” (thread) we have in the archaeological record lies in the materialities themselves. The fibre metaphor relies on the idea of a shared externality. If we add quasi-objects, such as practices and positivities, these have to be our own presently known quasi-objects. The problem is therefore that they are assumed to explain past human behaviours. The unknown other is turned into the known same. Further, the practices are seen as being both in duration and existing as multiple (numerical) separate fibres. However, the idea of the extended fibre relates to a spatialized view of time and is not true duration, which is non-numeric and non-geometric (Bergson 1998, Normark in prep 3).

Apart from the problem of using quasi-objects in archaeological settings, there is yet another major problem in most archaeologists’ use of social theory and that is the differences in terms of our dataset contrary to that of other social sciences. Do we ever, in the “archaeological record”, see even the “real” objects that archaeologists think they study, the past human agents or their societies? I am not talking about dead people found in tombs here. Obviously, we do not see them, so why do we ascribe them with the imprisoning present?

The archaeological record derives from many events and from many agents. A midden is compiled from a multitude of acts, most likely not all derived from one single agent. Many agents have added to the midden at different times. The past human agent who performed a set of acts at different material nodes, such as the midden, is the one who unified a certain temporal sequence, a trajectory between the series, in Hägerstrand’s (1970) sense. This sequence included events at several other places, perhaps not visible for us. If we only look at a set of acts performed by different human agents, the gaps between the acts at a particular midden would create a void as the agent’s relation to the midden is gone in an instant moment. We try to fill this void with a human-centred narrative, add quasi-objects that we believe are continuous across this instantaneous ‘event horizon’ (Normark in prep 3). What we have is materiality and not human agents, but the archaeologist search for the human or that created by humans, what lies beyond our reach. This is what I call humanocentrism.

**Humanocentrism**

With humanocentric archaeology is meant the idea that: (1) models of the past are formed from our desire to understand the past human being or past society. This past is presently known social relations projected backwards into a spatialized and static time. Thus, the focus is on what is not present in our dataset; (2) materiality is forced into these models since it is seen as passive reflection of this past; (3) materiality is secondary and human agents are primary in archaeological studies; (4) in most cases, but not all, humanocentric categories are believed to be ontologically secure.

The key problem is the humanocentric belief in ontologically secure categories that can be used at all places and in all time periods. We can of course dwell in the extremes of psychoanalysis or world systems theory in trying to figure out what the past was like, but these will fail to see the millions of years of biological evolution, of creative becomings (Bergson 1998). The human or humanoid psyche has never been truly constant in a long evolutionary sequence and the same goes for world systems. So, why should we then focus on something not seen in our present? We cannot assume that the human mind was the same in the past and that the world systems worked the same in the past. If we do, we take the world out of its own duration and make it static. True, we could argue for some kind of Nietzschean “eternal return” to explain why certain events and processes are similar (such as decaying, erosion, etc.) (Olivier 2004). However, even if past human minds and past world systems worked the same as today, we would simply not be able to verify or falsify it. We have no way to know this; the ‘arrow of time’ cannot be reversed. We do have artefacts in our present but humanocentrics tend to make a fairly straightforward connection between artefact and the assumed past human agents or past world systems. The present is projected backwards.
For example, there is a widespread belief, or at least an assumption, in a pan-Maya tradition, “mayaness”, or a Maya culture in the “mayanist” camp (Normark 2004b). Clearly, there are similarities in “cosmology” and linguistic expressions from the Classic period to the present, but where are these similarities located? From an archaeological point of view, these have to be found on the level of materiality that was interpreted or used differently among the past human agents. The series of past human agents may not have shared a culture but they would all have been living in a material world.

Most models used in Maya studies have the purpose of explaining social processes in a simplistic fashion. Such processes are therefore explained through general social laws, usually from a socio-evolutionistic and linear perspective. Social formations are described in mechanical ways and humans are only passive recipients of the macro- and micro-structures (Giddens 1984). These models demonstrate ‘static processes’ but they do seldom explain them from the perspective of our data. Social interaction between human beings is complicated, but we try to make it simple and in this process we forget that our only dataset is only materiality. Humans need to be decentralized.

The same critique has to be applied to social constructivism, which focuses on the human, the social, and the cultural. However, if something can be constructed, it can also be deconstructed, or as the constructivist Latour puts it: “If X is constructed, then I can easily ‘deconstruct’ it to dust” (Latour 2003:41). If we are to find something that is unaffected by constructivism, and its potential to relativism, where are we to search? This is particularly important in archaeology, where there is no chance for us to understand past social constructions in any detail. Thus, we should not focus on social construction since “only what has not been constructed will stand the test of time” (Latour 2003:36).

Possible ways out of this social constructivism can be found in “Deleuzanism,” ideas developed by the French philosopher Gilles Deleuze’s readings of yet another French philosopher; Henri Bergson. Manuel de Landa describes the difference between social constructivism and Deleuze like this: “…unlike social constructivism, which achieves openness by making the world depend on human interpretation, Deleuze’s approach achieves it by making the world into a creative, complexifying, problematizing cauldron of becoming. Because of their anthropocentrism, constructivist philosophies remain prisoners of what Foucault called the “episteme of man,” while Deleuze plunges ahead into a posthumanist future, in which the world has been enriched by a multiplicity of nonhuman agencies…” (Landa 1999:41).

Materiality – actants in a network

As indicated earlier in this text, human action generally follows a fleeting serial pattern in space, which is temporarily concentrated around nodes in the material world (Fahlander 2003: 42). A social relation is rarely an activity between social subjects alone; materiality is always involved in one way or another. Materiality may act as actants in a social network as discussed by Latour (1987, 1993, 1999, 2000, 2002). Related concepts are used by other technoscientists (Pickering 1995, 2003; Haraway 2003; Ihde 2003). An actant is any human or non-human entity that can affect and change processes. One can be held back or be stimulated by materiality, both consciously or unconsciously. The mere possibility to interact with materiality means that it will be treated as an actant (Callon & Latour 1981).

Materialities may be produced or adapted to specific intentions and still influence future action in an unforeseen way. For instance, in Sartre’s bus-queue example, the bus or the presence of a public transportation system is the central focus where this particular series takes place. The bus is not just a material symbol, but more interestingly, it is an important part of people’s daily life. The material properties of the bus are therefore important (Fahlander 2003).

Examples of how materiality affects people’s behaviour are numerous: when the earthwork surrounding Tikal fell into disuse, it may have been good to settle near it since rock and sascab (powdered limestone) could be mined from it, water would have been collected at various places, generating deep moist soils. These effects were not anticipated by the original design (Webster et al. 2004:32). Neither were the later effects of Sacbe 3 at Yo’okop in Quintana Roo anticipated. The causeway heads down and up a slope and have since its construction during the Terminal Classic accumulated eroded soil along its
western sidewall. Today, the soil layer there is deeper and contains more moisture than the soil east of the eastern sidewall (Johnstone 2003: personal communication). The area west of the west side wall is thus preferable for agriculture among the milperos, an effect not possible without the causeway (Normark 2004c:160). A final example is the topes (speed bumps) in the contemporary Yucatec villages. These have become places for commerce as vehicles need to slow down. This opens up opportunities to sell various things (Burns 1992:44).

The human mind is extended and embodied. Our cognition depends on our material environment. We use our hands and materiality externally to gain effects internally, like when you turn a page in this book to be able to read (Norman 1993). However, the book as an actant cannot be fully understood if we do not include manufacturer, user and non-user of the book (Latour 1999). We thus need a network. This network is not symmetrical for Pickering (1995), as it is for Latour. Pickering argues that the symmetry between material agency and human agency breaks down when it comes to intentionality. Humans have goals and may plan whereas materiality does not. These plans emerge in time but they will transform in the encounters with materiality (Pickering 1995:17-18). The human agents are still part of the archaeological investigation, but they cannot be separated from the nonhuman, no longer the centre of attention and action (Pickering 1995:6). My agenda here is therefore to go beyond the human condition, to find something free from constructivism, to begin from where constructivism “constructs” and form “virtual” ideologies.

Virtuality, actuality and polyagency

There is much more to say about the causative capabilities of materiality. However, there is a major problem with focusing on materialities as well. Archaeologists believe that the events of the past are gone and that the materialities persist (Olivier 2004). This is true to some extent, but is a broken vessel the same object as when it was a complete vessel? What is it that lasts? Clearly not the physical and chemical characteristics of materiality. What existed in relation to the vessel before it broke into sherds, which also exist in the present sherds? In short; what can differentiate from within and still be a unity without adding an external quasi-object?

We need to raise the level of abstraction and elaborate upon the idea of virtuality (Deleuze & Guattari 1988; Deleuze 1991, 1994; Bergson 1998, 2000, 2004; Ansell-Pearson 1999, 2002; Grosz 1999, 2001, 2004). The virtual here is not to be confused with virtual reality. The virtual is short for virtual multiplicity. Before I explain this I need to explain the other form of multiplicity that exists. This is the actual multiplicity. Actual multiplicities are for example numbers, words and matter or anything that can be seen as a quantity that can be counted, added and divided because it is, in fact, juxtaposed in a homogenous medium (space). These are all differences of degree of an assumed essence. In this sense, time and space have been seen as different degrees of the same thing, space in one end and time at the other end. Time has become spatialized, in that it can be compared to space as its dialectic opposite (Bergson 2000). This is how philosophy and science have seen things, as differences of degree, as actuals (Bergson 1998).

Bergson and his followers, argue that this is not the reality of the world. The world does not consist of static entities, the world is changing, it is becoming and this process cannot be reduced to anything static, such as numbers, words, or matter. If we go from the static to the moving, then we generate a cinematographic view of the world in which static frames follow each others, like periods follow each others in chronological tables. Time cannot be divided like space; it is a duration, a virtuality that differs in kind. The virtual multiplicity can be likened to the colours of a rainbow. We see that there are many colours, but they glide into one another. If we try to define the colours, we actualise them and make them static and spatial (Bergson 2004). Thus, duration is continuous but our mind makes it discontinuous, projected into space.

Now, following Bergson’s reworking of Darwin’s ideas, he points out two tendencies of consciousness. One is intelligence and the other is instinct. Intelligence has not evolved out of instinct; they are rather different tendencies of the same need to manipulate matter. Intelligence does this by externalising itself out of duration, to spatialize the world and time, to be able to find those actualisations from where it can analyse, calculate, and even to communicate through signs and language.
Instinct, on the other hand, follows duration, and is well more adapted to an understanding of life, but it will never seek it (Bergson 1998).

From this comes the argument that what we see and analyse are just statics, actualisations of the virtual. Our own language inhibits us from understanding the becoming of the world. The virtual is continuous, but the actualisations we describe are not, they are just representations. So, when we study ethnicity, we use actualisations, such as dress in iconography and language affiliations in hieroglyphs and view them as differences of degree of an essential ethnicity, add them with other actualisations, “cultural markers” such as ceramic sherds or architecture, that we think are of another degree, but still of the same kind (ethnicity), to be able to get the “big picture”. We will never succeed in this endeavour. We cannot set fragments together and believe we know the totality. The attempt to find the continuity in the actualisations, such as ceramic sherds, hieroglyphs, iconographic elements, etc, will fail to see that there is no continuity there. Therefore, we have added something external, the quasi-object (“Maya culture”), that frames our investigations and we believe that this quasi-object is continuous or eternal. However, the continuity comes from within the virtual, but we will never reach it empirically. This was also the case for the past human agents and this opens up for a way to study virtual ideology, in which conflicting views of the world come from our different constructions of the actualisations, based on an ontology of virtuality (Normark in prep 1).

Since we are stuck with these actualisations that affect us in several ways, we should focus upon these and not claim any continuity between them. However, what they do have is a capability to affect their surroundings in networks of actuals. This capability has been labelled polyagency by me (Normark 2004a, 2004b, 2004c, in prep 4). A polyagent is any entity that has polyagency, something similar to Latour’s actant, but with the idea of virtuality, Deleuze and Guattari’s (1988) machinic phylum, Gell’s (1998) index and prototype and the idea of an ontology of ontologies added (Wittgenstein 1998; Aijmer 2001).

What primary differentiates the polyagentive approach from humanocentric archaeology is that it tries to decentralise the human, to give an account of active archaeological materialities and immaterialities (anything that can be perceived but which is not solid or palpable). This approach also aims to deculturalise and de-socialize the past by emphasizing what lasts, differentiates and becomes. Neither the cultural nor the social lasts.

How is a polyagent defined then? Since polyagents can be defined as anything that has ‘causative’ capabilities, it means that, in theory, each soil particle in the ground is a polyagent. Although, this is true, that is not an operational archaeological unit, unless we are studying soil. It is up to the researcher to define the spatial extent of a polyagent of interest to analyze, only virtuality and polyagency lacks a spatio-temporal extension, but for different reasons. Polyagency lies in-between and virtuality lies within (Normark in prep 4). For the sake of simplicity and textual space, in the final discussion of this text, the polyagents are seen as the open-fronted structures and other material objects commonly known by mayanists.

Have virtuality and polyagency replaced the quasi-objects, and become yet other quasi-objects? One might well think so. Virtuality is something invisible to the human intellect who only understands solids and beings. Polyagency is shared among the actuals (polyagents). However, this sharing is either internal (the virtual) or in-between (polyagency), and never truly external. Both concepts are not social and therefore they are not internalized. Virtuality already exists in relation to anything material or immaterial. It is what lies beyond the human condition. We can only see traces of it as actual multiplicities, as polyagents. Polyagency is in-between the actual and the virtual; this has no social significance and therefore it is not a quasi-object.

It is important that virtuality is not understood as the least common denominator from where we can reconstruct everything else. Thus, it does not aspire to be like Pickering’s (1995) “mangle”; a theory of everything. We cannot say anything about social organisation, “super-powers”, or cosmology from a pure polyagentive approach. However, being a complex ontology of ontologies (Aijmer 2001), it may be useful to integrate “human agents” or other analytical levels for those who prefer that, with Turner’s critique of quasi-objects in mind.

To make the final discussion less abstract, I shall provide a narrative that mixes the
polyagentive ontology with a human perspective.

Discussion

Let us now return to Nohcacab and Ichmul to see which material nodes that may have acted as polyagents and then formed series with human agents.

Initially, I described two post-monumental, or open-fronted, structures at Nohcacab. In a serial humanocentric perspective, buildings are the locus for repeating acts, which partly is caused by the houses’ immobility. However, a building is always in the “state” of becoming, even if it is immobile. It forms avenues for people to interact. Buildings are therefore not homogenous, but tend towards differing “biographies” (Kopytoff 1986; Holtorf 1998; Gosden & Marshall 1999; Hamann 2002; Normark 2004c; Stanton & Freidel 2005) or, better phrased, genealogies of actualisation. Buildings may be raised for one purpose and be re-used for another, but these purposes are often out of our reach.

Most buildings are involved in serial patterns through people’s daily or yearly routines. Hypothetically, once, or if, people from another origin settled at Nohcacab, they formed series with other people in their daily encounters with the resident population. The buildings may therefore have formed series where people’s social identities were unimportant, or at least not known from our present perspective.

So were the open-fronted structures at Nohcacab and at other sites the result of conquest, ‘cult’, or trade? We will never know. We do not know if they had “domestic”, “administrative” or “religious” functions. New data will put proposed models in doubt or strengthen them, but no consensus shall ever be reached. Instead of trying to understand the open-fronted structures’ textualities and their involvement in discourses as is done in Derrideanism, Deleuze opens up a way to investigate “virtualities latent in building, the capacity of buildings to link with and make other series deflect and transform while being transformed in the process” (Grosz 2001:73).

From a polyagentive perspective, we can at least say that people must have reproduced material forms they knew. Once a building or any other object had been constructed or manufactured, its actualised form continued to be reproduced at the site and perhaps at other sites, and it became a distributed object (Gell 1998). In other words, the building’s polyagency affected its vicinity in various ways, actualised matter into different polyagents that themselves affected each other in actualised networks. For example, a building became the prototype for later structures and was the index of earlier buildings. As a totality, they could be seen as an œuvre of houses, with different parts distributed at various places and in spatialized time (Gell 1998; Normark 2004a). As such, they could work as nodes for interpretations from various ontological orders (Aijmer 2000, 2001), but all derived as actualisations of the virtual. Such nodes are like “frozen” actualisations that virtuality incorporates and slightly changes when it actualises into a new building. There is no need to know cosmological or economical reasons behind the reproduction of buildings; once they existed, they would affect their milieu and become reproduced. Thus, a “building tradition” is not to be found as an externality, but in the latent virtualities of materiality.

Series of people could also have been formed around Nohcacab’s depressions. Such depressions were good for agriculture since they maintained soil and moisture (Kepecs & Boucher 1996). Nohcacab may therefore have been a specialized agricultural locale. Everyday farming in the depressions may have had little to do with ethnic groups, kinship groups and so on. People rather formed series while farming. These serial collectives may have consisted of people that were at the material nodes for various reasons. Some farmed, others visited friends working there, someone may have overseen the activity, children played, etc. What we do have left are these material nodes as actualised multiplicities, and not these various people’s identities or their ‘practices’.

Other possible physical nodes for serial action in the wider Ichmul area may have been the cenotes, or caves with water. The importance of water in settlement layout has been noted by several researchers (Scarborough 1993, 1998; Lucero 2002; Davis-Salazar 2003). There is a possible funnel-shaped cenote in the centre of Ichmul, today buried under a church. This place is the center from which the site’s larger causeways may have been laid out (Flores & Normark 2004a, 2004b, 2005a, 2005b). The causeways generated serial action and with time they may
have become critical nodes for generating group identity as well (Normark 2004c, in prep 4).

Polyagency also relates to immateriality. The reflective white surfaces of plazas and causeways increased their visibility during darkness, which means that people potentially could have travelled when visibility was less good (Normark 2004c:156).

By using Hägerstrand’s (1970) time-geography, we can see how the network of polyagents, and their distributed polyagency, came to affect the ways in which people interacted, both on a daily basis, and in a long-term perspective. A person living in, or administrating from, one of the open-fronted structures may have farmed in one of the depressions in the morning, later walked to the San Andres terminus, continued on the causeway, visited the centre of Ichmul and its cenote, returning to Nohcacab in the evening, guided in the darkness by the reflective surface of the causeway. At all these places, he or she formed brief series around various actualisations.

This is one possible explanation, but it is pure speculation since we do not know anything about accessibility to plazas, causeways, and cenotes in terms of gender, class, age or other possible restrictions. The only genealogy we have for sure is the one the polyagents themselves can give us, and not the past human agent.

Further, the “genealogies” of other polyagents than humans have a temporal ‘extension’ beyond the human life span. The buildings may have been reproduced in the way described above. Later they may have been reused for albarradas (stone walls without mortar), as Caste War fortifications, or by modern constructions. These later modifications have been done by people with different worldviews, by people whose intentions and ‘ethnic identity’ may have been substantially different and, in my view, unimportant. What remains, however, is the materiality’s virtuality that still forces becomings to erupt into actualised networks that affect people through their polyagency.

To conclude, rather than using the material remains at Nohcacab and Ichmul to study cultural identities such as ethnicity, lineage, class or gender, a polyagentive perspective has been proposed where the focus is set on the becomings of materialities. An advantage with this approach is that there is no need to rely on culture-historical ideas of fairly homogenous culture groups, nor the functionalism of processualism, nor postprocessual notions of subjectivity. We do not need an archaeology that fills out the past with a full society from the outside. It is always doubtful when an archaeologist tells us about social organisation, political economy, cosmology and ethnic identity in the past based upon sherds, obsidian flakes and architectural elements. We do not need a homogeneous meta-narrative like that of historicism (Benjamin 2003). The data is heterogeneous, and so should our account of it be, otherwise we make archaeology into a field of more or less qualified guesses. What we have are actualised “points” in a “void”, only the virtual is full, but that is beyond us. However, in polyagency, we can see the tendencies of how the virtual becomes actual.

In an open-ended ontology of ontologies; the past, present, and future are not something deterministic or finalistic. The humanocentric archaeologist assumes that the past is fixed and can be understood by filling out the gaps there is supposed to be. A polyagentive perspective suggests that what has happened in the past is not static; the past is never the same. The growing past gnaws into future (Bergson 1998:4). Only in such a perspective will there be a way to see a creative evolution that transcends our static concepts, such as ethnicity and culture, and forces us to think in terms of becomings. In short: Time is invention or it is nothing at all (Bergson 1998: 341).

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