

Excerpt from Rachel Heim's undergraduate capstone project, "Ancient Maya Gender Roles"

In the ancient Yucatan, every adult Maya had two names – the first from the mother (matrilineage) and the second from the father (patrilineage). Both kinds of lineage were strictly ranked so that one's genealogy could be easily traced; oftentimes the right to rule was affirmed by lineage, especially on the mother's side. It should be noted that there can be no single explanation of gender dynamics in a culture as rich and diverse as the ancient Maya. The development of "gender complementarity" in Maya studies, where gender was viewed as fluid and manipulated by the dominant culture instead of based off biological sex, is further evidenced by costumes worn by men and women that indicated their dynamic roles in society regardless of physical biological attributes. The absence of overt sexual characteristics in the Classic Maya, except in the nude depictions found only on cave walls, leaves archaeologists with the task of identifying other characteristics that clearly portray males and females – often, these are costumes or signs (i.e a typical female costume is a latticework skirt).

As the Maya civilization evolved over time, specialization emerged and created class and gender divisions everywhere from the farm to the house to the government, but more recent analysis has determined blurred lines that implicate a larger role for women in society. Maya women were not always confined to the role of child bearing and rearing, but instead were able to expand into various areas of their society. Without the subjectivity of androcentrism, studies of women, such as those of Lady Sak K'uk, have shown that Maya women were active participants in the creation and modification of culture. Lady Sak Ku'k ruled at the Maya site of Palenque and when her son K'inich Janab' Pacal ascended the throne, he asserted that his right to rule was validated through his mother's side.