

FAMSI © 2001: Lorraine A. Williams-Beck

Rethinking Maya Political Geography

Research Year: 1999

Culture: Maya

Chronology: Late Post Classic and Early Colonial

Location: Yucatán, México

Site: Chontalpa

In 1957, Ethnohistorian Ralph Roys published his highly influential historical reconstruction of Maya political organization on the eve of Spanish invasion. Recently, Tsubasa Okoshi Harada and Sergio Quezada have provided an innovative modification to the classic "Roysian" scheme. In this most recent model pre-Hispanic Maya political geography reflects human relationships rather than the territorial manifestation of those affiliative or political group constructs. Weaving direct historic and/or economic theoretical perspectives together with archaeological evidence yield a distinct fabric from which to assess political and community organization among fifteenth- and sixteenth-century indigenous populations settled within the Yucatán Peninsula and adjacent periphery. Recent archaeological and historic research in these areas provide new dimensions to pre-Hispanic political geography that differ considerably from Roys' documentary interpretations.

The book manuscript, divided into two parts, commences with a review and discussion of the new paradigm for assessing archaeological evidence and historical documents for the Late Postclassic and Early Colonial Period Mayas. The initial section emphasizes theoretical underpinnings of the model, combining a direct historical approach with social, political, and economic evidence for developing new avenues of interpreting social, political, and community organization in complex societies. The second part assesses the model through specific historical and archaeological case studies, as reflected by the following contributions.

Matthew Restall offers ethnohistorical evidence regarding the mythological origins of some Late Postclassic and Colonial Period Yucatán's ruling dynasties' patronymic groups. Restall argues that such mythology, and particularly the idea that these Maya elite were central Mexican in origin, has no historical basis. In addition documents appear to reflect metahistorical constructs perpetuated by the élite in certain cases to lend ideological support to their position within existing Maya social structure.

In a specific case study Tsubasa Okoshi Harada further discusses the significance of Canul origin myths through a detailed analysis of the Calkiní Codex. He concludes that historical discourse and original document alteration provide backdrops for legitimizing both Canché and Canul power bases. First Okoshi Harada mentions Canul differentiation from Canché local factions through tracing their ancestral right to rule to

Mayapán, and then develops a convincing scenario for Canché alliance control of the Calkiní area prior to Canul arrival in the early sixteenth century.

Jürgen Kremer's philological analysis of historic documents referring to Mayapán identifies certain errors in early translations that have provoked serious misinterpretations regarding architectural description, geographic location, and pre-Hispanic sociopolitical makeup. Discussion centers on Tozzier's translation and interpretation of Landa's *Relación de las cosas de Yucatán*, one principle source most scholars address for understanding not only the history of Mayapán city and its surrounding political jurisdiction, but also the relationship between this political entity and others in the Yucatán Peninsula.

Ana Luisa Izquierdo's essay on Chontalpa political geography discusses evidence for power struggles among sites within this region, using Ralph Roys initial study combined with certain concepts from political anthropological and archaeological theory. Seven political entities, or payolel from Chontal Maya, are identified in historic documents, and clues are offered for interpreting some boundaries between and population estimates within the following independent autonomous jurisdictions: Acalan, Ixtapa-Usumacinta, Xicalango, Potonchán, Zahuatan, Chilapan, and Copilco. The essay concludes that the area's character immediately prior to Spanish arrival is more rural than urban, that political boundaries were extremely amorphous, and that political makeup in five of the seven jurisdictions was more similar to that described for traditional incipient states.

Ernesto Vargas Pacheco's case study of Acanlan Province, located within the heart of the Chontalpa area, provides archaeological evidence from which to discuss pre-Hispanic Maya settlement and political organization to assess its goodness of fit with the Okoshi-Quezada model's three basic building blocks: neighborhood (*cuchteel*), local urban center (*batabil*), and regional political jurisdiction (*cuchcaba*). Vargas Pacheco argues that through time Acalan's riverine ecosystem fostered the formation of alliances and shared control of the region among equally ranked peers. At the time of Spanish contact three specific urban centers or batabilob appear to have been involved: Itzamkanak, Potonchán, and Xicalango.

Settlement evidence for Isla Cilvituk, located in the Cehach region's southern frontier of the Yucatán Peninsula, sets the stage for both an archaeological and an historical assessment of political organization, through an economic model of political expansion complementary to the Okoshi-Quezada paradigm. Rani T. Alexander argues that Kopytoff's (1987) internal frontier model clarifies how such communities formed and grew, providing testable archaeological models that incorporate the processes of segmentation, migration, and competition of interest to ethnohistorians.

Juan Manuel Chávez Gómez reviews historic documents for the northwestern section of the Cehache region, known as the "montaña" in Scholes and Roys treatise of Acalan Tixchel, to discuss political organization for a seventeenth century version of independent aggregated communities under a local lord's direct, and at times indirect, control.

Lorraine A. Williams-Beck assesses settlement and community organization data for the immediate Calkiní political jurisdiction within the Ah Canul Province following the Okoshi-Quezada model of political integration. Specific archaeological evidence through neighborhood or *cuchteel* and local urban center or *batabil* aggregations suggests a series of pre-existing independent local lords settled within this political jurisdiction, as well as long-standing cultural barriers against certain groups adjacent to the region centuries before Canul rule. Williams-Beck concludes that the relatively high degree of political fragmentation and control of specific critical resources would ultimately aid Canul incorporation of their immediate political jurisdiction during the early sixteenth century.

In the diachronic political geography of Chikinchel, Susan Kepecs discusses an integral methodological approach for interpreting pre-Hispanic and Early Colonial periods political systems. Combining the archaeological record's complexity with historical documents and cross-cultural attributes as a single interpretative base contributes additional information that significantly increases understanding native political and community organization frameworks through time.

The peninsula's eastern Caribbean coast provides another point of view regarding Late Postclassic period political organization through sites, their architectural components, and associated imported archaeological remains. Manuel E. Pérez Rivas and María Flores Hernández conclude that centralized monumental architectural compounds not only served as elite lineage or family residence groups but also as long distance commerce control foci for such imported products as honey, cotton, cacao, and ritual paraphernalia.

And finally, Janine Gasgo's case study adjacent to the Yucatán Peninsula discusses on the political geography of the Soconusco province in the late postclassic and early colonial periods. In spite of the many differences between the Soconusco region and the Yucatán peninsula, it is useful for all of us to consider the variability and similarities that existed within these different regions of southeastern Mesoamerica in the Late Postclassic and Early Colonial periods. Common problems inherent in research of this temporal framework include developing methodologies to assess ethnohistoric documents in order to untangle myth from the reality they contain, and others to integrate historical and archaeological data into a single coherent picture.

Submitted 11/06/2001 by:
Lorraine A. Williams-Beck
lwright@tamu.edu