

Recent Research on Amerindian and Peasant Cultures in Yucatan and Central America

Kent Mathewson and Michael Yoder

*Department of Geography
Louisiana State University
Baton Rouge, LA 70803*

ABSTRACT

At the two previous decadal meetings of CLAG, the Benchmark sessions on indigenous peoples and peasants in Latin America were organized topically. Various aspects of these marginalized groups' settlement and subsistence practices, past and present, were explored. This paper examines similar themes, but following the session's regional orientation, focuses specifically on the Yucatán and Central America. In addition, the literature is reviewed within a historical-development framework. Advance in our knowledge of prehispanic agriculture and settlement is considered first, followed by historical demographic work on colonial period Indians and peasants. The relative lack of work on nineteenth and early twentieth century populations is contrasted with that on earlier periods. Research on the contemporary period since the 1940s demonstrates that traditional topics such as: subsistence ecology and economy; location, settlement and migration; material culture and cultural landscape formation, continue to be vital concerns. In addition, new directions are being explored: the impact of regional war; the promise of sustainable farming practices; local conservation initiatives

INTRODUCTION

At the two Muncie meetings, the Benchmark sessions on aboriginal and peasant cultures were organized along topical lines. Papers on Indian communities, prehistoric ecology, peasants on the road to agro-modernity, subsistence's substance, food production, ancient agro-landforms, ethnogeography and a pair of overviews covered the field (see Lentnek et al. 1971; Martinson and Elbow 1981). Current organization puts the pieces in chorologic units. Given regionalism's resurgence in the past decade, this is only fitting. For Central America it is doubly appropriate. If any region of the world was thrust from the margins into the maelstrom, from obscurity to scrutiny during the 1980s, it was Central America. If in Central America and the Yucatán before the 1980s, geographers and the Amerinds and peasants they studied could still occasionally claim or feign immunity from modern times, those spaces and places today have been drastically reduced. It should not be surprising that many geographers responded with concern and creativity to the new and often disturbing realities. Perhaps equally encouraging, traditional elements of both local livelihood patterns *and* geographic methodologies persist and demonstrate continued relevance.

This paper is a review of the literature of the 1980s on Amerinds and peasants in Central America and the Yucatán, past and present. Disciplinary boundaries have become increasingly porous, somewhat like the region's political borders. Geographers' work on the region is now routinely recognized by researchers in cognate fields and non-geographers have made important contributions to geographic topics. Ideally, the causes and implications of these convergences should be one of the themes of this paper. Other than brief mention of several cases of interdisciplinary work, however, we will limit discussion to the research of individual North American geographers. Rather than strictly replicating and updating the thematic structures presented at the Muncie meetings we consider the literature in regional and historical divisions.

In reviewing the Central American literature as a whole it is clear that certain topics within several historical periods and places have received particular attention. For example, over the past two decades geographers have played pioneering roles in the study of prehispanic Maya intensive agriculture. The same can be said for aspects of prehispanic and colonial historical demography. Geographers have also played key roles in mapping current Amerind populations and in studying their subsistence systems. In sum, geographers' contributions in cultural ecology, historical demography and ethnogeography have had considerable impact

beyond the discipline. With perhaps lesser impact geographers have been involved in a wide range of studies of contemporary Amerinds and peasants while work on these themes for the nineteenth century has been negligible to nonexistent. In the [end p. 177] following discussion, we highlight those "nodes" of activity that are particularly conspicuous while presenting examples of work expressive of the current diversity of interests.

PREHISPANIC AGRICULTURE AND SETTLEMENT

During the decade of the 1980s the greater Yucatán area, and Belize in particular, was the scene of major projects on ancient Maya subsistence and settlement. Most of the work by geographers on these topics had antecedents in the previous decade but continued into the early 1980s (see Flannery 1982; Turner and Harrison 1983; Darch 1983; Baudez 1984; Pohl 1985, 1990; Mathewson 1990; Siemens 1990). At the outset of the decade Turner (1980) summarized the background of geographers' interests and involvement in prehistoric studies of southern Mesoamerica. He discussed substantial contributions on environmental and subsistence topics, while noting little work on settlement patterns and systems, somewhat surprising given geography's "spatial" tradition.

Siemens (1982, 1983) summarized his own work on raised fields along the Rio Hondo in Belize and work on wetland agriculture in general in lowland Mesoamerica. With others (Lambert, Siemens and Arnason 1984) he explored the potential of the ancient system for current production. At the end of the decade Siemens (1990) published a volume taking stock of work on relic agricultural features in the inundated coastal zones between Veracruz and Belize. This was particularly fitting in that Siemens discovered the first raised fields in the Maya lowlands two decades earlier (Siemens and Puleston 1972). Darch (1983) edited a volume on "drained" field agriculture that included work from the Maya area. She (1988) also commented on the parallels between past and present systems of "drained" field farming. Denevan (1982) put the entire subject of ancient hydraulic agriculture in the American tropics in analytic perspective with a comparative review of morphologies and measurements.

Turner published singly or in concert with archaeologist Peter Harrison and others a series of articles, books and commentaries on Maya subsistence and settlement. In summarizing this work the following publications stand out. Turner (1983a) finalized work begun a decade earlier on Maya agricultural terracing in the Rio Bec area of Campeche. Turner (Gliessman et al. 1983) also participated in the studies of raised fields in Campeche and Quintana Roo that he had earlier discovered. Turner and Harrison (1981) published a major article in *Science* on Maya raised field farming. They followed this with an edited book on their multidisciplinary research on raised fields at Pulltrouser Swamp, Belize (1983a). Turner (1983d) wrote one chapter in this volume and co-authored two additional chapters with Harrison (1983b, 1983c). Elsewhere, Turner (1983b, 1983c) analyzed problems of estimating ancient labor investments in Maya agrosystems and compared the Formative period technologies of the Basin of Mexico and the Maya lowlands. Turner and Johnson (1980) noted discovery of a dam at the Copán archaeological site in Honduras and they along with others (Johnson, Mahood, Weisman, Turner and Poole 1984) reconstructed the habitat and agricultural contexts for Copán. Turner and Miksicek (1984) reported on economic plant species associated with prehispanic Maya agriculture. At mid-decade Turner (1985) assessed progress in the subfield of Maya studies that he helped to establish. At decade's end Turner (1990a; 1990b) updated our understanding of the dynamics of ancient Maya demographic history.

While the work of Siemens, Turner and others on ancient Maya intensive agriculture commanded the center of attention, geographers wrote on related topics as well. The importance of Wilhelmy's (1981) major book on Maya civilization was appraised by Wagner (1982) for the anglophone audience. Driever and Hoy (1984) explored the relationships between vegetative productivity and the potential population of the Classic Maya. Turner and Denevan (1985) contributed to ongoing debates over ancient Maya demography. Archaeologist

R.E.W. Adams joined R.C. Jones (1981) in analyzing the spatial patterns and regional growth among Classic Maya cities. D.C. Jones (1985) did an archaeogeographic study of the crossroads area of the Classic site of El Mirador. Forshaw (1984) analyzed Maya cosmography at Chichén Itzá. Dunning (1988, 1989, 1990) singly and in concert with others (Killion, Sabloff, Tourtellot and Dunning 1989) has done important work on ancient Maya settlement geography and associated soils in the Puuc Hills, Yucatán.

From the above recitation it should be clear that geographers made major contributions to prehistoric Maya studies in the 1970s and 1980s. The discovery (or in some cases, the "rediscovery") of major forms of landscape alterations (terraces, raised and channelized fields and lesser hydraulic features) associated with intensive agriculture in the Maya lowlands was a scholarly event of considerable magnitude. It is not clear, however, that the intensity or importance given to subsequent work on this general topic can or will be sustained. Nevertheless, for the present[**end p. 178**] it would seem that the doors are open for continued geographic participation in the study of ancient Maya society, settlement and subsistence.

COLONIAL POPULATION AND SETTLEMENT

If questions of population and demographic reconstructions were predictable but secondary components of the past decade's work on prehispanic aboriginal geography of Central America, they assumed primacy in colonial period studies. While not overturning orthodox theory on the seismic scales registered by the raised field workers, the geographical-historical demographers have published extensive and ground-breaking studies. Perhaps not surprisingly most of this work has been done by second and third generation Sauerites. See West (1981:12-13) for a genealogical chart of these connections. The older Berkeley enterprise centered on Mexico has been relocated and updated in Central America. Veblen (1977, 1982) began the move with his work on Totonicapán, Guatemala, but has since moved on to other interests in other regions. Lovell (1980a, 1980b, 1981a, 1981b, 1981c, 1981d, 1982a, 1982b, 1983a, 1983b, 1983c, 1985b, 1985c, 1986b, 1988b, 1989a) first established his own *foco* in Guatemala's Cuchumatán region. More recently he has joined forces with historians and anthropologists in a collective effort to (re)write Guatemala's colonial population history (Lovell and Swezey 1981, 1982, 1990; Lovell, Lutz and Swezey 1984; Kramer, Lovell and Lutz 1990). Lovell (1983, 1985, 1988a, 1988c, 1990a, 1990c) has also put the past in contemporary perspective with articles on the plight of Guatemala's indigenous peoples as they confront the latter day Conquest.

Though Guatemala has attracted the largest cohort working on historical demography, other areas have received attention. Robinson (1981) questioned the notion of closed corporate community in his study of eighteenth century Indian migration in Yucatán. Watson (1990) investigated fugitive migration in colonial Chiapas. Davidson (1980, 1984b, 1985) has surveyed population and settlement history of both Amerind and Afro-Amerind peoples for extensive portions of Central America's Caribbean coast. Newson (1981, 1982, 1986, 1987) has produced important studies including two books on demographic collapse and the Spanish impact on native populations in Honduras and Nicaragua. This follows her work in the 1970s on contact period Trinidad. Newson (1982, 1984, 1985) has also written on the colonial mining industry and its labor demands and a major review article on Indian population patterns in colonial Spanish America. As with the work on ancient intensive agriculture, geographers' reconstructions of population history are receiving attention beyond the discipline, most notably among historians.

Not all of the decade's work on colonial historical geography was published by Sauer's recent successors. Sauer's (1981) thoughts on Indian food production in the Caribbean and its littorals were edited from a taped talk and published posthumously by Denevan. Similarly, Sauer's (1987) observations on trade and gold on the early Spanish Main were edited and published by Denevan. Sapper's (1985) historical geography and ethnology of Alta Verapaz, Guatemala, was translated into English and republished. Stanislawski (1983) produced a major study of Nicaragua's first three decades under Spanish rule. Three notable studies were published on aspects of the region bridging the colonial and post-colonial periods, with significant but not

exclusive coverage of Indigenes and peasants. Dozier (1985) explored the history of Anglo involvement in Nicaragua's Mosquito Coast. Sandner (1985) wrote an historico-political geographic study of Central America as a whole from 1504 to 1984. Finally, Hall (1984a, 1985) published Spanish and English editions of a general historical geography of Costa Rica. Its success points to the need for geographies of other Central American nations giving similar attention to the role of Indians and peasants in their histories.

EARLY NINETEENTH TO MID-TWENTIETH CENTURY

Yucatán's nineteenth and early twentieth century Indians and peasants have been studied by historians, anthropologists and others for decades with many notable results. If one were to make a global map of regions that have yielded enduring "classics" along with many durable studies in the social sciences the Yucatán would fare rather well. For example, the reception given Farriss's (1984) much acclaimed history of Maya cultural persistence in the colonial era can be explained in part by a rich scholarly terrain created through the previous work of several generations of Mayanists. For the same period, by comparison, Central American Indians and peasantry remain under studied. The past decade was no exception, though work on Guatemala by anthropologists such as Smith (1984, 1990) or historians such as McCreary (1986, 1990) is narrowing the gap and should have heuristic impact on topics and approaches taken up by geographers studying the historical relations between the State and indigenous [end p. 179] populations in Central America. Historically inclined geographers have virtually ignored both regions during the post-colonial period. Camille's (1986) thesis on the historical geography of the Toledo District in Belize is a partial exception though his emphasis on the Confederate colony precludes focus on the peasantry and Indians *per se*. Geographers such as Sapper (1936a), McBryde (1945), Platt (1942) and a few others were in the field during parts of this period recording facts of Indian and peasant life. On the whole, however, this period remains an open frontier for geographers wishing to study a wide variety of historical topics dealing with indigenous and peasant cultures, ecologies and economies.

CONTEMPORARY PERIOD: CURRENT STUDIES

Viewed since the end of World War II the number of geographers working in Central America and the Yucatán on topics involving Indians and peasants has increased dramatically. Even though figures suggest that overall recruitment and field research in Latin Americanist geography may be on the decline after a peak in the 1960s (Robinson and Long 1989) the following review of current work on contemporary topics gives evidence of both continuity and diversity of interests along with some innovations.

SUBSISTENCE ECOLOGY AND ECONOMY

The role of human agency in landscape change as mediated by traditional subsistence practices remains the general theme in various studies. Wilken's (1987) book on traditional resource management was something of a milestone. While focused primarily on the "good farmers" of Mexico, his examples from Guatemala were evidence enough that both his research methods and the farmers' practices could and should be emulated elsewhere in the region. In this regard, Mathewson (1984) described the highland Maya *tablón* system of irrigated, raised-bed gardening practiced at Panajachel, Guatemala. Studies of lowland Maya shifting cultivation included Gelbert's (1983) and Nations and Nigh's (1980) work on the Lacandón. At the other end of the region, Gordon's (1982) study of Amerind culture in Bocas del Toro, Panama, drew on long associations with that area while Hasbrouck's (1985) master's thesis looked at subsistence fishing among the San Blas Kunas. O'Donnell (1981) wrote a dissertation on the relations between manatees and humans in Central America. Two students, Ginsberg (1986) and Fey (1988) studied kitchen gardens in the Petén and Quintana Roo respectively.

Specific aspects of Amerind and/or peasant subsistence ecology were identified and studied in detail.

Johannessen (1982) examined the ongoing process of maize cultivation in Guatemala. He (1986) also updated his work on the distribution and use of melanized boned and fleshed chickens in Mexico and Guatemala. Following in the tradition of Nordenskiöld (1930) and Sapper (1936b), Kent (1984) updated our knowledge of stingless beekeeping and Dixon (1989) placed the practice in agroecosystemic contexts. Hunter and Dekleine (1984) wrote on an equally emblematic cultural geographic topic, geophagy, in Central America. Hunter, Horst and Thomas (1989) examined the nexus of geophagy and religion in Guatemala, and Horst (1990) examined the material in geophagic tablets used in these religious practices. Richardson and Davidson (n.d.) consider the cultural context(s) of geophagy in Esquipulas, Guatemala (see also Vermeer, Katz and Richardson n.d.). Horst (1987, 1989) examined both the commercialization of traditional farming and the persistence of milpa agriculture in highland Guatemala. Bliss (1988) explored newer terrain in studying the role of Garifuna women in farming in Belize.

LOCATION, SETTLEMENT AND MIGRATION

In the past decade, geographers have done important work on the present location and distribution of Central American Indian groups. Davidson and Counce's (1989) recent map and review of the subject sets new standards and promises wide impact. Previously Davidson (1984a, 1987) reviewed the geography of minority populations in Central America and the status of Amerinds in Belize. Herlihy (1985a) reviewed the settlement and subsistence geography of the Chocó. He (1986a) has also studied the process of recent village formation and economic diversification among the Embera and Chocó in eastern Panama. More recently Herlihy (1989a) has considered the semi-autonomous nature of Panama's indigenous homelands in relation to indigenous rights. Herlihy and Andrews (1990) have surveyed the status of the Tawahka Sumu in Honduras.

Some work has been done on forced migration and relocation of Indian groups and displaced peasants. Herlihy (1985b) wrote on Chocó relocation in Panama's Darien Province. Dupuis (1982) analyzed the problem of peasant refugees in the Guatemala-Mexico border zone. McElroy (1986) studied Salvadoran refugee migration into [end p. 180] Belize, and Parvenu (1986) studied Belize's "Valley of Peace" refugee camp in the larger context of refugee movements in Central America. McVey-Dow (1986) investigated the effects of migration on Maya women's textile production in Chiapas.

IMPACT OF WAR ON INDIANS AND PEASANTS

As suggested earlier, the insurgencies and civil wars that enveloped portions of Central America in the 1980s had profound and in many cases disastrous impacts in Indian and peasant populations. In several countries the geographic, ecologic and economic basis and integrity of Indian and peasant cultures were disrupted or reordered as a result of these conflicts. Geographers have recorded some of these changes. Nietschmann (1987) has placed these events and processes in a global historical context, arguing that the "Third World War" has already begun. Third World states, often directly supported by the first and second world superpowers, are waging dozens of local wars against indigenous nations within "their" borders. A participant-observer and partisan of the indigenous insurgency in eastern Nicaragua for much of the decade, Nietschmann (1985, 1989) has become a well known authority on the conflict. His (1972, 1980) earlier work on Miskito subsistence ecology and culture provided the foundations for his current work. Others working as geographers in the western part of Nicaragua offered alternative views of the conflict (Ballard 1984). Driever (1985) and Elbow (Dennis, Elbow and Heller 1988) have written somewhat less engaged accounts of the Guatemalan Indian and peasant insurgency.

OTHER DIRECTIONS

If all sources on aspects of Indian and peasant life in Central America from geographic perspectives were exhaustively considered, scores of references could be added to the bibliography. The work of non-

geographers and those geographers publishing outside North America have received lesser attention. A comprehensive review would include these citations. Beyond the themes already outlined, there has been disparate work on many additional topics. We will give a brief summary and citations of some of these.

Some traditional topics were revisited or extended. Augelli (1987) reevaluated Costa Rica's frontier legacy and West and Augelli (1989) revised and republished their authoritative text on Middle America. Thomas and Minkel (1984) considered questions of population, land tenure and development in Guatemala. E. E. Miller (1982) surveyed small scale farming in Central America. J. P. Jones (1982) looked at Guatemala's highly articulated Indian periodic market system. Everitt (1983) studied Mennonites in Belize, raising implicit questions about who should be included in that nation's peasantry. Dufresne (1984, 1988) did demographic work on Yucatecan peasants. Vargas Ulate (1986) analyzed ecological impacts of agrarian colonization along the San Lorenzo River in Costa Rica. Herlihy (1987, 1989b) explored changes in the cultural landscapes of indigenous groups in Panama and the processes involved in the opening of the Darien Gap.

Murray (1987) compared the folk housing of two Maya groups in Belize. Xander (1987) looked at the geographic aspects of artisanal charcoal production on Isla del Carmen, Quintana Roo, while Price (1987) considered the artisanal lobster fishery in Belize. D. L. Miller (1982) surveyed Mexico's Caribbean fishery. Incer (1985) published on Nicaragua's indigenous toponyms. Koechart (1984) surveyed cultural change among Guatemalan indigenous groups. Palmer (1982) studied the religious pilgrimage site of Esquipulas, Guatemala. Richards (1983) used LANDSAT imagery to survey farmsteads along Belize's Sibun River, while Frost (1981) looked at the human impact on Belizean wildlife and landscapes.

New directions were undertaken in other studies. Annis (1987) explored the interaction of religious ideologies and production systems at the town level in highland Guatemala. Carvajal and Driori (1987) initiated work on the question of ethnic diversity in Costa Rica's Atlantic coastal region. Hall (1984b) focused on regional inequalities in well-being and Swisher (1982) looked at the use of organic farming methods in Costa Rica. Patten (1984) reviewed problems involving coffee production in Nicaragua and Johns (1985) linked processes of uneven development and peasant proletarianization there while Pena and Klein (1984) sought connections between population patterns and social change. Thielen (1988) considered the impact of agrarian reform on both the economy and ecology on Nicaragua's small producers. Vasile (1986) looked at similar questions in El Salvador. Place (1981, 1985) and Parsons (1983) explored the local and ecological impacts of Costa Rica's cattle industry. Herlihy (1986b) looked at questions of biotic and cultural preservation in Panama. Granados (1983) and Naughton (1987) wrote theses on small scale gold mining in Costa Rica and its impact on town development and on land use conflicts and biotic conservation.

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CONCLUSIONS

In summarizing the geographic work done on Indians and peasants in Central America and the Yucatan during the 1980s several things are apparent. Work on prehistoric subsistence systems begun in the 1970s and brought to full fruition in the 1980s stands out as perhaps the most impressive achievement. The work of Turner and others made headlines in the international press, was documented and aired on television in various countries and was presented in prestigious non-geographic journals. This work constitutes one of geography's several recent success stories increasing the standing of the entire discipline in the eyes of scholars in cognate disciplines. For example, an international board of prehistorians has recently designated the work of Turner and others on ancient Maya agricultural landforms as among the premier prehistoric discoveries of the twentieth century (Malina n.d.). Similarly, the half dozen or so geographers working on Central American historical demography have produced important results. While their work may not register as wide or immediate recognition as landscape archaeological discoveries, with time these contributions are

likely to be viewed as integral to future reconceptualizations of the region's aboriginal past.

Turning to the more recent past, the geography of Central America's nineteenth century indigenous and peasant worlds is largely inchoate if not blank space. New pan-disciplinary interest in processes such as ethnogenesis and nation formation may put this period more solidly on geographers' research agendas. Work on Indians and peasants and their present conditions and prospects is proceeding apace. New concerns here include the impact of regional war and conflict, global forces impinging on local resources, the transformation of Indians into *ladino* peasants and peasants into proletarians. Older concerns include plant and animal domestications, material culture forms, travel for both economic necessity and religious quest and, as always, (or at least one hopes!) Indian and peasant modes of subsistence and reproduction. With the intensity of conflict abating in some areas and compelling questions and problems to be addressed throughout Central America, the coming decade promises geographers of all commitments a place for contributions.

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