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Review / Reseña

Brent E. Metz, Cameron L. McNeill, and Kerry M. Hull. *The Ch'orti' Maya Area: Past and Present*. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2009.

Enriching the Tapestry of Guatemalan Indigeneity

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As one of the least known and understood Mayan groups, the Ch'orti' Maya have long been peripheral to the expansive literature on Maya and have been largely ignored, if not erased, by their national governments and populations. Few Guatemalans or Hondurans realized Chorti' inhabited their countries. While this anonymity has at times served them well—the Guatemalan civil war (1960-1996) during which the military and government perpetrated acts of genocide against Maya, for example, immediately comes to mind—it also has hindered efforts to escape poverty or recover from catastrophes. Plagued by drought, famine, fires, epidemics, hurricanes, and other disasters, the department of Chiquimula where most Guatemalan Ch'orti' reside is one of the nation's poorest, yet its residents are seldom the beneficiaries of government initiatives. This is particularly true in the Ch'orti' region of the state. With little scholarly, government, or

private attention, the Ch'orti' have shaped their pasts, formed their identities, and built their futures.

Firmly grounded in an interdisciplinary approach, *The Ch'orti' Maya Area: Past and Present*, edited by Brent E. Metz, Cameron L. McNeil, and Kerry M. Hull, addresses these (and other) processes by pulling together studies of Ch'orti' archaeology, demographics, linguistics, history, ethnicity, culture, environment, public health, and activism. The contributors also speak to the way such influences as the Catholic church, foreign scholars and tourists, environmental degradation, and governments have shaped Ch'orti' realities. Even though the essays are of varying quality and accessibility, *The Ch'orti' Maya Area* is a model of collaborative scholarship that enriches our understanding of the complex tapestry of Guatemalan indigeneity (indigenously). The multiple vantage points from which the contributors study the Ch'orti' is one of the volume's strengths.

Ethnicity is the most pervasive theme throughout the volume. As contributors grapple with questions of ethnic identity, they understand that these are not merely academic queries. Although Maya in Guatemala continue to be the object of racism, for example, Ch'orti' Maya (in Honduras and Guatemala) have increasingly asserted their Mayan identity and ancient connection to the archeological site of Copan as a way to benefit from what is one of Honduras' most important tourist attractions.

One of the most fascinating aspects of this collection is how archaeologists and linguists establish the primary role of Ch'orti' progenitors among ancient Maya. The Ch'orti' language for example, derives from Ch'olti'an, which as Danny Law et al. convincingly argue in chapter three, is the basis for Classic period Maya inscriptions throughout Mesoamerica. Although less methodologically sound, David Mora-Marín et al.'s assertion in chapter two that Pre-Ch'olan speakers standardized Mayan writing in the Classic period offers an alternative theory. Because identifying ethnicity in the archaeological record is a perilous exercise, attempts to date and document Maya dominance at Copan and in the Zapotitán Valley in El Salvador are less definitive. A number of contributors—Payson Sheets (chapter five), Allan Maca (chapter seven),

and Matthew Looper (chapter eight)—offer tantalizing hypotheses of how contemporary studies of Ch’orti’ rituals, material culture, and built environment, among other markers of ethnic identity, correlate with archaeological data, but they also wisely point to the pitfalls of using ethnographic analogy for archaeology. Nonetheless, the archaeologists who contributed to this volume trace such characteristics as migration patterns and environmental changes, including Mayan plant preferences, to offer evidence of Mayan presence if not provenance. The first peoples to inhabit the Copan Valley, for example, were non-Maya, most likely Lenca. As Robert Sharer (chapter nine) points out, the most convincing hypothesis suggests that a proto-Ch’orti’ population established their capital in the Copan Valley around 100 AD.

Compared to archaeologists, linguists, and anthropologists, historians will find less of interest in this volume. The paucity of historical contributions points to the need for such research in the region. That said, the essays by Stewart Brewer and Lawrence H. Feldman paint a picture of the colonial period that resonates with the broader historiography of colonial Guatemala. Maya throughout the highlands were subject to the *encomienda* system (which Feldman incorrectly identifies as a grant of indigenous labor and land instead of just labor), the demands of which were increasingly excessive as epidemics depleted native populations.¹ By characterizing the colonial period as one of cultural, linguistic, political, and economic loss for the Ch’orti’, Brewer and Feldman affirm Christopher Lutz and George Lovell’s thesis that Maya in the lowland core areas enjoyed less success staving off Spanish encroachments on their land, culture, and labor than their counterparts who lived in highland peripheries.² Spaniards were far from omnipotent, however. As Brewer points out, clergymen had far less success converting indigenous peoples to Catholicism in

¹ Wendy Kramer, *Encomienda Politics in Early Colonial Guatemala, 1524-1544: Dividing the Spoils* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1994); William L. Sherman, *Forced Native Labor in Sixteenth-Century Central America* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1979).

² Chris Lutz and George Lovell, “Core and Periphery in Colonial Guatemala,” in *Guatemalan Indians and the State: 1540-1988*, ed. Carol A. Smith, 35-51 (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1990). See also Murdo MacLeod, *Spanish Central America: A Socioeconomic History, 1520-1720* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973).

Chiquimula than in other areas of Central America. With his close documentation of demographics, tribute, and productivity, Feldman shows that Ch'orti' struggled to produce enough cacao to meet their tribute obligations through most of the colonial period, but by the mid eighteenth century their prosperity began to increase. Even as he suggests that this and other aggregate data point to improving conditions, Feldman notes that individual communities were again showing "signs of stress" (153) during the last few decades of colonial rule.

These two essays left this reader wanting to know more about colonial Ch'orti' and how "the early years of Spanish control continued into the nineteenth and twentieth centuries" (147). Unfortunately, *The Ch'orti' Maya Area* jumps from this short section on colonial history (which incongruently opens with a photograph from the 1930s) to studies of contemporary Ch'orti'. This lacuna speaks to the need for future historical research in the area. The main published source from which to cull information about Ch'orti' during the national period is *The Chorti Indians of Guatemala*, an ethnography by Charles Wisdom, which provides insight into life in 1930s.³ Charles Lincoln Vaughan closes out *The Ch'orti' Maya Area* with a fascinating essay about Wisdom and his manuscript.

Comprised of essays collectively concerned with the manifestations and significance of Ch'orti' ethnicity, the penultimate section on contemporary Ch'orti' represents the heart of the volume. The authors look at the way poverty, botany, oral tradition, political movements, social organizations, tourism and even disasters shape and convey indigeneity. Two Ch'orti' contributors emerge in chapter thirteen as John Fought and Isidro González (a Ch'orti' translator and interpreter) transcribe, translate and analyze the Ch'orti' tale of the coyote and rabbit as told by Lorenza Martínez, a Ch'orti' storyteller. In an observation that correlates with other contributors' descriptions of dynamic and hybrid Ch'orti' identities, parts of the story can be traced to the African diaspora.

Since much is at stake in identity politics, Ch'orti' are increasingly laying claim to their indigeneity in empowering ways. Picking up on a

³ Charles Wisdom, *The Chorti Indians of Guatemala* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1940).

theme introduced earlier in the volume, Lena Mortensen examines how Ch'orti' have established their rights regarding the Copan Archaeological Park in Honduras. As Maca points out, Honduran elites and the government have a vested interest in the "Mayanization" (91) of Copan and Honduras. Aware that the government and non-Ch'orti' entrepreneurs were profiting from these associations, about 2000 Ch'orti' from Guatemala and Honduras blocked the entrance to the park for twelve days in 1998 to insist they be recognized as decision makers and beneficiaries of the park and its corresponding tourism industry. True to their understanding of contemporary power, at one 2001 Mayan ceremony in the park, the Kaqchikel Maya daykeeper led the assembled crowd, which included Ch'orti' and non-Ch'orti', in a series of prayers, one of which was for more efficacious political organizing!

Complex and fluid, Ch'orti' ethnicity contributed to their oppression as often as it offered opportunities for their empowerment and enrichment. As Julián López García points out in an incisive essay, a history of maladies ranging from earthquakes and hurricanes to fires and famines has plagued the area since at least the seventeenth century. When a famine struck in 2001, the media portrayed Ch'orti' as a cursed people whose fate could be attributed to their own backwardness and fatalism. Dehumanizing the victims facilitated foreign interlopers' ability to approach the crisis as an opportunity to serve their own needs and goals: U.S.-based religious delegations arrived to proselytize and the U.S. government donated "corn deemed unfit for human consumption" (268). By Metz's own admission, the very existence of this volume can also be traced (at least in part) to tragedies in the Ch'orti' area:

[T]he emergence of the Ch'orti' movements in Guatemala and Honduras, and international press accounts of cholera and famine, have attracted greater attention to this area. Such attention has invigorated our work and made us feel that we are no longer working at the margins. With such a convergence of issues and fieldworkers, and with the heightened relevance of our research to the Ch'orti' movements, this is an opportune time to share information and lay the groundwork for continued multidisciplinary and multiethnic collaboration on the Ch'orti' area. (9)

For all the attention to ethnicity, the role of gender and class among Ch'orti and in their relations with others receives short shrift in this volume. For example, Sophie de Broe tracks how ethnicity influences reproductive decisions and health but leaves the reader to wonder how gender impacts these realities. Kerry Hull's discussion of fluid gender notions in Ch'orti' rituals fits squarely within the broader literature on gender dualism and Mayan rituals but does little to suggest new ways to think about these concepts. In short, this reader was left wanting to know more about the diverse social relations in the Ch'orti' area.

Although one suspects the broad ranging topics, themes, and theses discouraged the editors from writing a conclusion to highlight the most salient findings and their significance beyond the confines of the Ch'orti' area, some effort to synthesize the essays and suggest future research would have been helpful. Nonetheless, *The Ch'orti' Maya Area* will be of particular interest to scholars of the Maya and could serve as a model for interdisciplinary studies of other indigenous groups.