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La Nueva Conquista: Cross-cultural Interaction and Lacandón Maya Culture Change in the 19th-century Guatemalan Lowlands

Research Year: 1996

Culture: Lacandón

Chronology: Colonial

Location: Lowland México and Guatemala

Site: Lacandón Forest

The Lacandón Maya of the lowland rainforests of Guatemala and México, who are recognized by their long white tunics, long hair, and dialect of Yucatec Maya, are often viewed as one of the least-acculturated Maya peoples. What is over-looked, however, is cross-cultural interaction and indigenous culture change after the political and economic expansion of the post-colonial republics in the 19th century. During this period of "second conquest," the extensive encroachment of settlers, refugees, missionaries, loggers, and traders led to the occupation of the "uninhabited" lands of the Lacandón. As intruders entered the remote frontier zone in the lowland jungles, the Lacandón adapted through a variety of ways to foreign rule, disease, evangelization, exploitation, and conflict. The Lacandón, an acephalous society with small scattered family settlements and agricultural fields, attempted to resist and overcome the sporadic efforts of subjugation and intrusion into their territory by limiting contact, submitting to temporary authority, and by repeatedly escaping into the wilderness.

Using new archaeological and archival data, the effects of long-term interaction on native culture and the responses by the Lacandón to this contact have been elucidated. Published sources and Spanish documents have provided valuable information on cross-cultural interaction and Lacandón culture change, plus vivid descriptions of Lacandón culture, since the beginning of the 19th century. This project has discovered several hidden 19th-century Lacandón sites through old maps, local informants, ground reconnaissance, and metal detector surveys in the rainforests of Petén, Guatemala. Some of the materials uncovered which were crucial for understanding Lacandón lifeways and culture change include traditional ceramics and incense burners, chert blades and arrowheads, exotic painted white ceramics, machetes, metal knives, glass bottles, and a multitude of various metal and stone tools.

This project will continue in the future with the investigation of 18th and 20th century Lacandón settlements and culture to examine the full spectrum of culture contact and social transformation. Results of this project are published in "Lacandón Maya Culture

Change and Survival in the Lowland Frontier of the Expanding Guatemalan and Mexican Republics" (Palka) in *Studies in Culture Contact: Interaction, Culture Change, and Archaeology*, edited by James Cusick, Center for Archaeological Investigations, Southern Illinois University Press (1998).

Submitted 09/01/1996 by:
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