Archaeology and Ethnohistory in the Pueblos of Ebtún, Cuncunul, Kaua, Tekom, and Tixcacalcupul, Yucatán, México

La Arqueología y Etnohistoria de los Pueblos de Ebtún, Cuncunul, Kaua, Tekom, y Tixcacalcupul, Yucatán, México

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Ebtun, Kaua, Cuncunul, Tekom, and Tixcacalcupul comprise one of the few groups of related communities on the Yucatán peninsula for which we have a long-running (1600-1833) corpus of Maya-language documents, originally published by Ralph Roys in 1939 as The Titles of Ebtun. Although the towns were created after the conquest by forcibly moving native inhabitants to these locations, the Maya retained private and municipal ownership of their lands, which largely corresponded to the boundaries of the prehispanic native province of Cupul, into the 20th century. Roys located many of Ebtun’s dependent settlements and agricultural parcels on maps, but contemporary works have placed little emphasis on the material underpinnings, places, and spatio-temporal contexts of the events and discourses represented in historical sources. My goal in this project is to explore variation in the life histories of different places on the landscape by bringing to bear historical and archaeological evidence on settlement system change of the last 500 years. Ultimately, I want to evaluate how loss of land ownership and local municipal control of land spurs different responses among different communities, how these responses are manifest in the archaeological patterning among settlements, and whether they explain the retention or loss of cultural autonomy in colonial Yucatan.

San Bartólome, Patron Saint of Ebtun

Cenote Cotut. The sign says Prohibido Tocar Este Cenote, Cualquiera duda en la Comisaría Municipal de Ebtun.
Project Description

Descripción del Proyecto

Historical and anthropological investigations in Yucatan have sought to explain the persistence of Maya culture in the face of colonial upheavals. Several ideas have been advanced, including 1). differential acculturation and distance from colonial authority (Redfield 1941; Steggerda 1941; cf. Castañeda 1996, Strickon 1965), 2). incomplete conquest and Spanish neglect of the province (Clendinnen 1987); 3). the delayed transition to a market-based economy (Patch 1993); 4). the coherence of corporate communities (Farriss 1984; Restall 1997; Thompson 2000); and 5). forms of active resistance that range from tenacious litigation and localized revolts to large scale uprisings and religious revitalization movements such as the Caste War of Yucatan (e.g. Bricker 1981; Dumond 1997; Patch 2002; Reed 2001; Roys 1939). To evaluate these options for Ebtun and related communities, I contend that a long-term, microregional analysis that integrates the archaeology of the daily practices in Maya communities with ethnohistorical perspectives of native resistance is vital to comprehend how indigenous communities retain local autonomy and cultural identity when faced with colonization and globalization.

The *Titles of Ebtun* contains a meticulous written record of management of a hydrogeologic landscape, with attendant micromanagement of land ownership and disputes over the inheritance, regulation of use, and transfer of land parcels, especially those containing cenotes (natural water sources), caves, and rejollas (sinkholes). Some cases ownership was disputed between towns over long time periods. For example, disagreements between Ebtun and Cuncunul over the ownership of the Tontzimin tract lasted over 180 years. Native communities frequently recovered ownership of tracts that...
were sold to outsiders. Land parcels such as Cotut, Uxal, and Xcunsuc were sold to residents of Valladolid or Uayma, but individuals and political authorities in Ebtun repurchased the tracts or blocked inheritance, as opportunities arose (Roys 1939).

One of the easiest ways to resolve a land dispute between towns was to sell the land to a Spaniard, as was the case with Hacienda Chebalam and Muchucux (Roys 1939:18). The land for three of the earliest and largest haciendas in Yaxcabá parish was sold in the eighteenth century by people from Kaua and Yaxcabá. These management strategies affected the sequence of occupations and built environment of the sites.
Archival Work  
_Trabajo del Archivo_

The project juxtaposes archaeological and documentary evidence to answer the following questions:

1. What exactly constituted political-economic pressure on Maya communities in the Ebtun region in the colonial and post-Independence periods?

2. Did these pressures affect all Maya communities to the same degree?

3. How did Maya inhabitants cope with these pressures?

4. How did the colonial regime and the post-colonial political economy shape the “traditional” Maya community as we know it today?

An important part of the project was conducting archival research of Spanish-language sources housed in archives in Mérida, Yucatán. Important variables needed to characterize political-economic differences among different communities include population, civil and ecclesiastical tax structure, municipal administration, amounts of agricultural, sugar, and cattle production, craft specialization (textiles), and prevalence of wage labor. Actions recorded as crimes by the state may also signal arenas of resistance. Consequently, my efforts were focused in the Archivo General del Estado de Yucatán (Ramos Padrones, Gobernación, and Justicia Penal), the Archivo de la Mitra Emeritense (Ramos Visitas Pastorales, Cofradías, Asuntos Terminados), and the Centro de Apoyo para Investigaciones Históricas de Yucatán (Municipal records, Registro de Terrenos Baldíos, and Diezmos).
Censuses or *padrones* for the years 1811, 1841, 1883, and 1890 in the Archivo General del Estado de Yucatán list names, ages, sex, and occupations of each inhabitant for each community in the study region. Further analysis of these data will provide detailed information on demographic trends before and after the Caste War of Yucatán. Between 1828 and 1883, the greater Ebtun region lost 76% of its population. Documents from Ebtun in Spanish and Maya suggest that resistant acts were directed against Yucatán’s civil and religious tax policy and its tax collection agents in the mid-nineteenth century. Disputes over land ownership and inheritance were handled through litigation.
Archaeological Survey and Test Excavations

El Reconocimiento Arqueológico y las Excavaciones de Sondeo

With the authorization of the Consejo de Arqueología, INAH, we carried out eight weeks of regional archaeological survey, between June 1-August 1, 2006. The research team identified the range of variation in settlement forms and described their ecological settings, political-economic functions, histories of occupation, population densities, and production infrastructure. These data allow us to address two specific objectives:

1. Describe the archaeological differences between sites (municipal seats, auxiliary towns, haciendas, ranchos, sitios and agricultural parcels) and their distribution in space and time.
2. Evaluate the similarities and differences between archaeological settlements and their characterization in documentary sources.

To collect the necessary data, we used a non-destructive protocol commonly used on regional archaeological survey projects in Mesoamerica. With the authorization and support of local municipal authorities and the assistance of undergraduate and graduate students, and prepared with a comprehensive list of settlement names and places gleaned from documentary sources, we carried out systematic archaeological survey of the region circumscribed by the dependent settlements of Ebtún, Kaua, Cuncunul, Tekom, Tixcacalcupul, Chichimila, and Uayma, which appear on Roys’s (1939) maps. We used an intensive reconnaissance strategy, as close to full coverage pedestrian survey as the dense tropical vegetation cover would allow, known as village-to-village survey (Sinopoli 2005). Using GIS technology, we prepared a base map of the region using orthostatic maps and vector data provided by the Instituto Nacional de Estadística, Geografía e Informática (INEGI). We compared the INEGI data to the locational information previously recorded by Roys, to the Atlas Arqueológica del Estado de Yucatán (Garza T. de González y Kurjack 1980), and to information available in the Centro INAH-Yucatán. Because the settlements listed in documentary sources are all still well known to local farmers, we recorded most of the sites on our lists, as well as sites that do not appear in the historical record.
Using GPS, we located and described the archaeological sites in the study area, focusing on sites inhabited during the last 500 years. Many colonial period sites also show evidence of prehispanic occupation. Places listed in *The Titles of Ebtun* include the ‘labcah’ or old towns of the protohistoric period from which the Maya population was subjected to the policy of congregación in the sixteenth century. To collect data on site size and the internal organization of architecture and features, we recorded ecological and geomorphological characteristics, mapped the central parts of each site using a total station, and surveyed transects radiating from the center of the site to delimit site size. We also collected surface material consisting of ceramics, lithics, glass and metal to determine dates of occupation. Preliminary analysis of all materials was conducted in Yucatan, and all artifacts were delivered to the Centro-INAH Yucatán for curation.
In the currently occupied towns of Ebtún, Kaua, Cuncunul, Tekom, Tixcacalcupul, and Chichimilá, deposits of earth and midden accumulated along the exterior walls of the church and municipal office buildings in the town centers offer an opportunity to collect archaeological material from stratified contexts. For this reason, INAH granted permission to excavate a one-by-one meter test pit in each town in order to characterize the colonial ceramic sequence of this rural region. Each test pit was excavated by carefully separating proveniences in natural and cultural levels, and in general the surface was recorded separately from subsequent levels. In situations where natural or cultural features did not cover the horizontal extent of the excavation, different proveniences were separated as zones. All soil was screened through 6mm mesh. Each provenience and material type was designated with a unique field specimen (FS) number. The matrix, 3-dimensional location, and associations for each context were described in detail on standardized forms. Plans and sections were drawn to scale and photographed. All artifacts were taken to the Centro INAH Yucatán for analysis and curation.
Project Personnel

Archaeological research projects are not solitary endeavors, and many people have contributed to the success of the Ebtun Project.

Los proyectos arqueológicos no son empresas solitarias, sino que mucha gente contribuye al éxito del Proyecto de la Arqueología y Etnohistoria de Ebtun.

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Excavating at Tixcacalcupul

Publications

Results from the archaeological investigations are disseminated as published works, BA theses and masters theses, unpublished field reports and manuscripts, and papers presented at archaeological conferences.


Field Reports


Papers Presented


Acknowledgments

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