Life on the Edge – Identity and Interaction in the Land of Ulúa and the Maya World

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Life on the Edge – Identity and Interaction in the Land of Ulúa and the Maya World

Kathryn Marie Hudson & John S. Henderson

ABSTRACT Much of northern and western Central America was part of a zone of cultural transition in which features of Maya communities to the west blended with and eventually gave way to non-Mesoamerican patterns in the east and south. Orthodox perspectives portray the southeast as a periphery influenced by, but inferior to, a more complex Maya core. The lower Ulúa valley in present-day Honduras provides an interesting vantage on these issues. The development of Ulúa societies followed the same trajectory as in the Maya world, and shared features range from the ball game to particular iconographic elements. The absence of a few traits – above all, hieroglyphic texts and monumental political sculpture – created the notion of "Mayoid" Ulúans imitating the grander Maya. Archaeology reveals prosperous societies deeply entangled with their western neighbours but offers no indication of subordination. Understanding relationships in eastern Mesoamerica thus requires the recognition of multiple Maya, Ulúa, and other identities.

Introduction

Much of northern and western Central America – including north-western and central Honduras, Pacific Nicaragua, and the Nicoya area of north-western Costa Rica (**Fig. 1**) – is routinely conceptualised as a frontier, fringe, or periphery of Mesoamerica (e.g. Urban & Schortman 1986). The perceived marginality of the region is most often framed in relation to the Maya world, which is the closest part of Mesoamerica. Many precolumbian Maya cities – most notably Tikal, Calakmul, Yaxchilan, Palenque, Chichén Itzá, and Copán – have more and larger public buildings, with more extensive use of finely dressed stone, than their Central American counterparts. Monumental sculpture, in styles that appeal to the sensibilities of Euro-American archaeologists, and hieroglyphic texts adorn the civic precincts of these and many other ancient Maya cities. These features have created a widely shared percep-

tion that the ancient Maya were more complex than their eastern and southern neighbours (e.g. Henderson 1997; Sharer & Traxler 2006). Similarities between Maya sites and those in the rest of Central America are therefore assumed to have been the result of Maya influence on simpler and less creative societies (e.g. Longyear 1947; Glass 1966). This peripheral characterisation not only structures syntheses and popular overviews of regional prehistories, but also informs analytical and interpretive projects.

The cultural composition of the alleged periphery (hereafter "the Southeast") and the relationships of its societies with their western neighbours have occupied interpretive attention for more than half a century (Lothrop 1939; Longyear 1947; Glass 1966; Sharer 1974; Henderson 1977; 1978; 1992b; Healy 1984; Urban & Schortman 1986; 1988; 1999; Schortman *et al.*

1986; Schortman & Urban 1991; 1994; 2004; Henderson & Hudson 2012). Despite some recent attempts to re-phrase the discourse to accommodate newer theoretical perspectives on interaction and identity (e.g. Schortman & Urban 2011; Schortman *et al.* 2001; Stockett 2007), there continues to be little clarity on the issues.

The lower Ulúa region of north-western Honduras – geographically close to the supposed Maya core, but conceptually always situated outside it – presents an instructive lens through which to inspect notions of marginality. We suggest that recognising multiple – and perhaps simultaneous – Maya and Ulúa identities and their material correlates offers the best prospect for understanding relationships in the region. This entails a careful reconsideration of traditional analytical categories, including that of "Maya", as discussed below. Assessing the implications of analytical categories – as Jones (1997) has done for European ethnic labels – is an essential enterprise that has too often been overlooked.
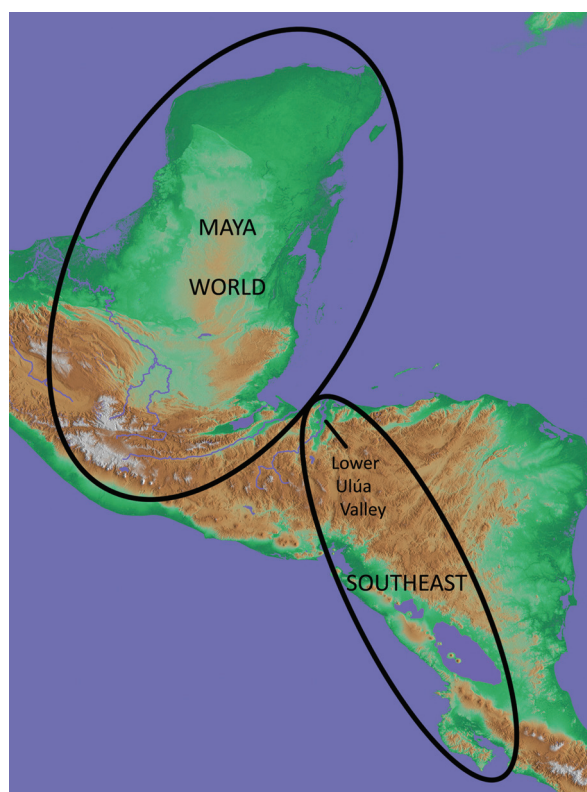

Figure 1. The Maya world and the Southeast.

The Southeast as Periphery

The travel accounts of John Lloyd Stephens (1841; 1843), elegantly illustrated by the watercolours of Frederick Catherwood, first brought remains of the ancient Maya to the attention of European and American readers. Stephens was not concerned with defining archaeological categories or regions, and in fact did not use the label "Maya", but his itineraries were limited to the area that would be defined as the Maya world by the end of the nineteenth century (e.g. Gordon 1898). He did not visit adjacent regions to the south and east, which remained, by implication, less interesting; this set the stage for the framing of the Southeast as peripheral.

George Byron Gordon (1898; see Hudson 2011) undertook the first archaeological research in the region in 1896 and 1897, when his work at Copán, the easternmost major Maya city, was interrupted by political conditions. Gordon's approach to the ancient societies of the lower Ulúa valley was entirely framed in relation to the impressive remains at Copán, which he was certain had been produced by a superior people:

> [T]he people, with whose remains on the Uloa River we are brought in contact, were in close relations with some portion of that race [the Maya], whose customs they adopted and by whose culture they were enriched. They were, in fact, subject to the Maya civilization, and the surviving products of their art and industry pertain largely to that civilization. (Gordon 1898:39)

Spinden, like Gordon, recognised relationships between the Southeast and the Maya world, including the lower Ulúa valley and adjacent regions in his *Study of Maya Art* (1913), but he did not think the region's art and archaeology worthy of significant commentary. The view of the Southeast as peripheral to the Maya world had become orthodoxy, and it was not considered in syntheses of Maya archaeology (e.g. Morley & Brainerd 1956; Ruz Lhuillier 1963; Thompson 1966; Coe 1966).

The Southeast was initially recognised as a culturally distinct region in terms of the culture area framework that permeated archaeological synthesis in the mid-20th century (see, for example, Lothrop 1939; Longyear 1947; Glass 1966; Sharer 1974). In this context, it appeared to be a zone of transition in which cultural elements common in Maya and other Mesoamerican communities to the west – monumental public buildings, ball courts, dressed stone architecture, particular iconographic elements in relief carving and ceramic painted design – blended with and eventually gave way to patterns more typical of areas to the east and south. Added to this was the notion of Mesoamerican superiority implicit in these syntheses. Material remains in Mesoamerica were larger, more elaborate, and more aesthetically pleasing, at least to the tastes of archaeologists working there. Mesoamerican societies seemed more complex and appeared to possess the features expected of "advanced' societies; similar features in other areas were therefore attributed to their influence. It is worth noting that there is a distinct recursive dimension here: Mesoamericanists, by virtue of studying the more elegant and impressive remains of "superior" peoples, have acquired enhanced academic status, and the societies they study are consequently deemed more complex and influential than those of neighbouring areas (e.g. Sharer & Traxler 2006; Coe 2011). If the notion of Mesoamerican and Maya superiority remains unexamined, it will continue to shape archaeological understandings of the Southeast in ways that potentially misrepresent the archaeological record.

Efforts to frame the region in terms of inter-regional interaction, reflecting a growing interest in social process and explicit theory in the late 20th century, most often involved the vocabulary of cores and peripheries (e.g. Urban & Schortman 1986; 1999; Schortman & Urban 1994).

World Systems Theory, the most widely used framework for analysing inter-regional interaction, has enjoyed great popularity among Mesoamericanists (e.g. Pailes & Whitecotton 1979; Blanton & Feinman 1984; Whitecotton 1992; Smith & Berdan 2003; Carmack & Salgado 2006). Application of the world systems model has become less exuberant in the face of

recent vigorous critiques (McGuire 1996; Stein 1999; 2002; Kardulias & Hall 2008; Hall *et al.* 2011; Harding 2013). The classic versions of the model, developed in the context of European invasion and colonisation of Asia, Africa, and the Americas, are of dubious relevance in pre-capitalist contexts. Even in colonial contexts, World Systems Theory is problematic in that its insistence on dominant cores tends to reproduce and naturalise power relations of the modern world, especially European hegemony (Dietler 2010:50–53). Key tenets of World Systems Theory – that cores dominate peripheries, especially through thoroughly asymmetrical, exploitive exchange networks; that inter-regional interaction re-structures the political economies of peripheries; that peripheries are simpler than cores in all ways and dependent on them for inspiration and innovation – can only rarely be definitively demonstrated in the archaeological record. All too often world systems interpretations

identify trade networks, … but ignore the need to demonstrate that there was a system of any sort in operation, let alone a 'world system' [---]
There is no reason why we should consider [---] dependence to have existed as the default position; [---] (Harding 2013:7, 12)

Moreover, insistence that the economic and political systems of cores are the determinants of structure and change in peripheries – an essential concept of classic World Systems Theory – locates agency, innovation, and all other dynamic factors outside areas defined as peripheries (Dietler 1998:295–299). This deflects attention firmly away from the specifics of local contexts; local structures and processes, to the extent they are seen as relevant at all, are viewed as secondary and derivative. As Harding (2013:17) remarks with reference to Bronze Age societies, "to understand the nature of interactions … one needs first to contextualise them, which means understanding the nature of the local societies in which they operated."

Although the popularity of World Systems Theory may have contributed to the persistence of orthodox perspectives that envision a one-way flow of ideas

and institutions from more complex Mesoamerican and Maya societies to simpler societies deemed incapable of cultural achievement and innovation, the earliest explicit applications of World Systems Theory in the Southeast (Schortman & Urban 1994; Urban & Schortman 1999) invoke a modified version, purged of some of the more problematic tenets of the classic formulation and incorporated into broader core-periphery perspectives. This analysis recognises that evidence for exchange is more suggestive of a balanced flow of goods than economic exploitation and that there is no evidence of political control. Other world-system perspectives on the Southeast (e.g. Carmack & Salgado 2006:225–226) retain more of the customary emphasis on economic and political dominance.

Reducing the insistence on core domination and recognising greater variability in the structure of inter-regional interaction certainly reduces incongruity with the archaeological record, but the analytical advantage of simplified world system models is not apparent. In all formulations, innovation is situated outside the region: influence is assumed to flow from Maya centres.

Some recent approaches to the Southeast (e.g. Schortman *et al.* 2001; Schortman & Urban 2011) reflect an analytical strategy that directs much greater attention toward the specifics of local contexts. These approaches move toward an understanding of interaction defined more in terms of local practices and identities and including a broader array of social actors capable of exercising agency (e.g. Stockett 2007). An emphasis on local contexts, however, does not by itself resolve questions involving the location of innovation or the directionality of the flow of ideas. Schortman & Urban's (2011:10–12) argument that Late Classic period leaders at the site of La Sierra in the Naco Valley (**Fig. 2**) adopted practices and symbols employed by the lords of Copán in order to enhance their own status and power provides an example of this kind of broad generalisation and lack of resolution. Aspects of La Sierra's monumental core, including specific architectural features of the ball court, support their case. How-
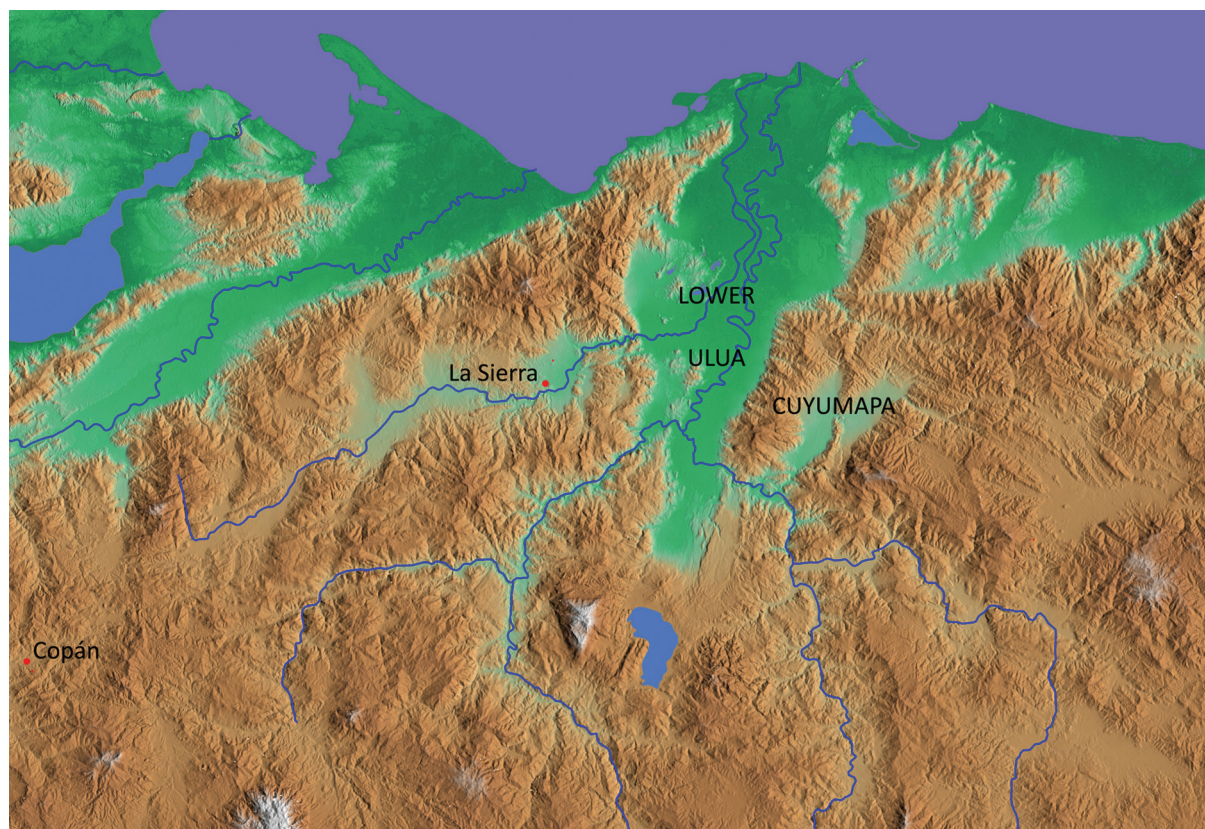

Figure 2. Lower Ulúa region.

ever, they carry the argument further, and present the ball court itself as a direct reflection of this emulation. Although the La Sierra ball court seems to be a novel feature without clear antecedents in the Naco Valley, ball courts were constructed in the lower Ulúa valley at least as early as the Late Classic. In the adjacent Cuyumapa drainage, located farther to the east, ball courts were in use by the Late Formative (Fox 1994). The disinclination to entertain the possible role of interaction with communities in these regions – much closer to La Sierra than Copán – or even to consider the ball game part of a shared regional tradition and thus a part of local traditions, is striking. Emulation of practices in Maya states is an appealing interpretive model in some cases, and it is nothing if not orthodox, but the frequency with which it is deployed as the initial, and sometimes the only, working hypothesis reflects the persistence of the orthodoxy of marginality.

Re-framing the Issues

The orthodox labelling of the Southeast as a periphery of the Maya world – which carries with it assumptions of greater complexity, cultural superiority, and asymmetrical flows of ideas (cf. Stein 2002:904) – is partly an effect of the persistence of conceptual and analytical categories that need to be re-examined. Traditional concepts of what complexity ought to look like archaeologically persist, and these have been strengthened by a desire on the part of many local governments to create for themselves the kind of Maya history that validates their historical importance and attracts tourists. An insistence that the precolumbian past in Honduras was Maya has been a prominent aspect of state efforts to create a national identity (Euraque 2004a; 2004b). All of these factors are derived from the core-periphery framework that has dominated academic discourse and from the casting of various ancient cultures into particular roles that satisfy that interpretive model.

Simplistic notions of identity persist, and even the more nuanced approaches that have emerged in recent years (e.g. Schortman *et al*. 2001; Stockett 2007; Schortman & Urban 2011) have barely begun to envision the array of simultaneous, overlapping categories that remain to be defined in terms of local practice.

Ancient societies and individuals were not bound to a singular identity in the tidy way some would like them to be; they operated in contexts with a wide range of diverse and concurrent social and cultural categories. Simplistic, singular conceptualisations persist, however. Late Classic pottery from the Naco valley undoubtedly embodied a local identity as Schortman *et al*. (2001) argue. At La Sierra, chiefly emulation of the tools of political legitimation employed by the lords of Copán probably helped construct another local identity. As they note, though, there must have been many additional Naco valley identities that are left undefined.

If we are to move definitively away from reliance on Maya donors and non-Maya receptors as the dominant mode for interpreting inter-regional similarities, interactions, and identities, we must explore local contexts and analyse local practices in ways that do justice to the many facets of identity. We should be open to the diversity that is attested archaeologically, and interaction needs to be disentangled from the idea that less cultured regions were eager to adopt the superior characteristics of their dominant neighbours (Brumfiel 1993; Harding 2013). Such factors as the centrality of the Southeast in the production of cacao, which may have had a significant impact on the directionality of influence, also need to be considered. Language, place of origin, polity membership, class, status, genealogy, occupation, and gender are a few of the additional dimensions of identity that need to be taken into account (e.g. Restall 2001; Hostettler 2004; Guzmán Medina 2013).

A Maya Identity

The most pernicious of the conceptual categories that inform understandings of the Southeast seems at first glance to be the most straightforward: "Maya." It is problematic precisely because it is rarely acknowledged as an analytical category. Coe's (2011) approach is typical: he delineates a Maya territory in terms of language and cultural features, but does not consider the analytical implications of this construct. Usually considered an artefact of outmoded culture historical perspectives, and deemed useful only in the context of synthesis and popularisation, the category "Maya"

has eluded recent critical scrutiny. In fact, it is implicit in most, if not all, analyses and interpretations of the Southeast (e.g. Lothrop 1939; Longyear 1947; Glass 1966; Sharer 1974; Healy 1984), which are structured by an insistence on a binary Maya/non-Maya characterisation of sites and regions. This discrimination usually takes the form of deciding whether or not they are part of the Maya world, itself the product of the archaeological imagination, and it contributes both to the illusion of an absolute core-periphery dichotomy and to the perpetuation of belief in a homogeneous state of Maya-ness.

"Maya" originally referred to a language spoken in 16th-century Yucatan. In the 19th century, the term was appropriated as a label for the newly recognised family of languages to which it belonged (Gabbert 2001; Restall 2001; Schackt 2001). Spinden, writing in 1913, used "Maya" in much the way archaeologists would use it throughout the 20th century and into the 21st: to refer to a language family, to the main territory occupied by its speakers, and to a cultural tradition whose main features were thought to have been shared by its speakers. The 8th edition of Coe's (2011:11) influential text characterises the Maya world this way:

> There are few parts of the world where there is such a good 'fit' between language and culture: a line drawn around the Mayan-speaking peoples would contain all those remains, and hieroglyphic texts, assigned to the ancient Maya civilization.

Since the most concrete reference of "Maya" is to the Mayan family of languages, one might expect the archaeological category to be defined by the direct historical approach: working backward from a systematic assessment of material remains from regions with documented Mayan speech in the 16th century. Instead, selective characterisations of archaeological remains within the area so defined emphasise Classic period Maya city-state capitals in the lowlands of northern Guatemala and Yucatán and features that served to legitimise their kings (see, for example, Hammond 1982; Sharer 1994; Coe 2011; Fash 2012). Longyear (1952:9) is the most explicit:

> Maya 'culture' [---] is really a rather heterogeneous collection of elements, identifiable as 'Maya' only when they occur in association with certain key manifestations of the 'stela cult.' This applies most evidently to Maya pottery, which differs so markedly from region to region that it never could have all been brought under the same classificatory roof, save for the veneer of stelae, corbelled vaults, [---] Our plight is much worse in peripheral regions where sure diagnostics of cultural affinity are almost entirely lacking.

The material remains of these city-states – above all their monumental architecture, sculpture, and hieroglyphic texts – have come to stand for an essentialised Maya identity that, we argue, masquerades as an archaeological category. The absence of these in the Southeast defines its ancient societies as not Maya; the elements that are shared are taken to reflect the dependence of the periphery on Maya innovation. The issue is not simply skewed labelling. Elevating these features – monumental architecture, sculpture, and hieroglyphic texts – to be the markers of a homogeneous Maya category ignores what we actually know about them: that they were part of the apparatus of lowland states, functioning in the expression and maintenance of kingly power. Monumental buildings and the stela complex are best understood as material reflections of the image of themselves that dominant groups chose to emphasise in public domains; they are projections of local-scale identities of powerful kin groups into public arenas (Earle 1991; Demarest 1992). They functioned in strategies of "state nationalism," helping to construct identities that privileged dominant groups and maintained their power, while marginalising others (see Alonso 1994; Shackel et al. 1998; Kohl 1998; Patterson 1999). To treat these features as criteria for a broad and unitary Maya category, despite the variability in the archaeological record, makes archaeology complicit in the homogenising political agendas of ancient power-seekers and their contemporary academic counterparts. Of all the identities that might be recognised in the eastern regions of Mesoamerica, generic "Maya" is the least likely to

correspond to a social identity that was ever salient for precolumbian people.

The generic "Maya" construct has real analytical implications. In interpretive practice, Maya archaeologists rely on it, implicitly, as a warrant for drawing on societies of highland Guatemala and Chiapas for analogies to elucidate various aspects of ancient lowland states. The unstated rationale is that even though the core features of Classic lowland Maya state infrastructure are not attested in these areas, they were occupied by speakers of Mayan languages at the time of the Spanish invasion and had been for centuries. This "Mayanist paradigm", as we may call the deployment of an undemonstrated generic Maya identity, is central to maintaining the characterisation of non-state societies in the Southeast as non-Maya. Moving beyond implicit belief in the marginality of the region requires re-conceptualising "Maya" as an archaeological label. We need to abandon our fixation on infrastructures of royal legitimation and acknowledge substantial variability within a more broadly construed Maya world, or we need to discard the concept. We argue that it is useless to assign a homogenising label to a heterogeneous data set.

The literature on the impact of imperial Rome on the rest of Europe offers interesting parallels. Jones characterises the situation very clearly:

> *variation in material culture, which was traditionally perceived in terms of cultural and ethnic relationships, is now interpreted in terms of socioeconomic and political relationships. Yet, at the same time, the assumed existence of bounded monolithic ethnic groups [---] remains a part of the interpretative framework [---] and the boundaries of these groups are still identified on the basis of stylistic variation [---].* (Jones 1997:35–36)

> *Such categories provide a basic framework for the classification and description of the evidence, and their assumed existence continues to underlie the analysis of other aspects of socio-cultural organization.* (Jones 1997:38)

Figure 3. Lower Ulúa valley.

Though the "cultures" of culture history are, in the abstract, uniformly rejected as normative constructs that are very difficult to relate to ancient social reality (Trigger 2006:211–313; Johnson 2010:17–23), cultural identities closely related to them, including "Maya", continue to structure interpretation (e.g. Jones 1997). These categories and their lingering effects should be addressed explicitly.

Ulúa and Maya Worlds

The prehistory of the lower Ulúa valley in north-western Honduras provides an interesting perspective on the ways the "Maya" label has been used as an archaeological category. The archaeological record documents an array of features ranging from artefact form and decoration to organisational patterns that ancient societies of the valley shared with their contemporaries in the Maya world to the west and north. The respective fundamental developmental trajectories are also the same. Yet the absence of elements associated with Classic period city states (most explicit in Longyear 1952:9) is often taken to be a decisive indication that the region must be considered non-Maya.

The lower course of the Río Ulúa (**Fig. 2**) winds through a very large and fertile alluvial valley (**Fig. 3**), a premier cacao-producing region at the time of the Spanish invasion. Shell and other marine resources are available in the north; nearby mountains are still home to the quetzal; there is a local obsidian source on the south-western flank of the valley and jade from the

Figure 4. Early Formative Olmec related pottery, Puerto Escondido.

Motagua valley is only a bit more distant. The Ulúa and its tributaries form natural routes of communication; the Río Chamelecón is a corridor to Copán and the Maya highlands and the Comayagua leads to central and southern Honduras and to lower Central America beyond. The Gulf of Honduras provides easy access to Yucatan. It is not surprising that a region so favoured by nature was the home of prosperous societies actively engaged with their neighbours (Henderson & Hudson 2012). Their developmental trajectory, as presented below, follows the same course and timing as that in Mesoamerica, especially the lowland Maya world, and involves many of the same specific features. A review of the history of connections among lower Ulúa valley societies and their neighbours indicates many kinds of interactions, but nothing that suggests subordination to any other society.

By the beginning of the Early Formative, in the early centuries of the 2nd millennium BC, the valley was home to pottery-making villages (Henderson & Joyce 1998; 2004; Joyce & Henderson 2001). A stratigraphically earlier occupation at Puerto Escondido with wattle and daub construction material and stone tools may represent a preceramic village of the late Archaic period, but the absence of pottery might

Figure 5. Terraces, Structure 4, Los Naranjos.

be a reflection of the very limited exposures of deep levels. The earliest pottery at Puerto Escondido was made in the same forms, mainly small bowls and jars, and often decorated in the same ways as pottery from Pacific coast communities. Shared design elements include simple red rim bands as well as more complex designs such as punctations in zones delimited by incision. Unusual features of manufacture, notably a band of slip applied to the rim and left unsmoothed, reflect especially intense interaction with potters as far west as Soconusco.

In the late Early Formative (roughly 1100–900 BC), Ulúa valley potters were decorating serving vessels with "stars," crosses, and other motifs that were very widely distributed in Mesoamerica (**Fig. 4**). These, along with jewellery and costume elements made from jade and other materials, reflect the region's active involvement in the Olmec world; local manufacture indicates that the relationship involved something more than direct exchange (Joyce & Henderson 2010a). Some of the common ceramic symbols – cleft heads and hand-paw-wing designs – suggest the possibility of shared elements of belief. The differential distribution of these items in association with large and elaborate domestic complexes indicate that the relationships they reflect were part of a process of emerging social distinctions. Chemical analysis demonstrates that these small decorated serving vessels (along with some of those used in the earlier Early Formative) were employed for cacao presentation and consumption, an integral part of status distinction in later Mesoamerica (Henderson & Joyce 2006; Henderson *et al.* 2007; Joyce & Henderson 2007; 2010b).

Middle Formative (roughly 900–300 BC) Playa de los Muertos style pottery in the valley incorporates stylistic features that define a later Olmec interaction sphere, reflecting a continuing engagement with a wider Mesoamerican world. This pottery is associated at Puerto Escondido with a broad stucco-faced platform, indicating a continuing process of social differentiation. At Los Naranjos, tall platform mound construction, monumental Olmec style sculpture, and a burial with costly jade jewellery (Baudez & Becquelin 1973; Joyce 2004; Joyce & Henderson 2002; 2010a) point to an intensification of the process, extending into a

public, political sphere (**Fig. 5; 6**). In comparison with the Maya lowlands to the west and north, Late Early Formative and Middle Formative lower Ulúa valley communities were quite precocious in their engagement with wider (Olmec) spheres of interaction and in their use of material markers of status and power differentiation.

In the Late Formative, beginning about 300 BC, chiefly centres with monumental architecture and political art appeared throughout eastern Mesoamerica. Public construction activity continued at Los Naranjos, and in the lower Ulúa valley proper the appearance of monumental platform mounds in several communities where they were not previously constructed

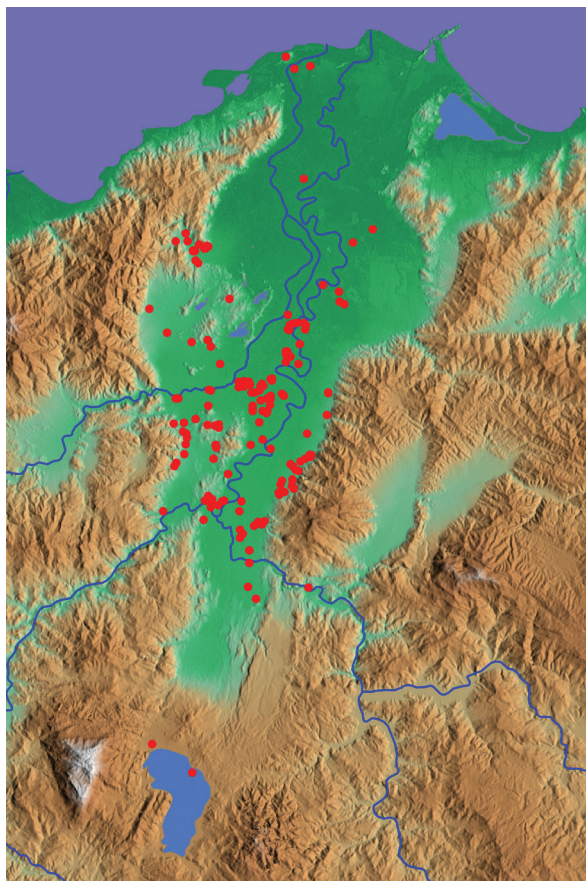**Figure 6.** Monument 4, Los Naranjos.

Figure 7. Classic period sites, lower Ulúa valley.

marks a broader adoption of complex forms of social and political organisation (Wonderley 1991).

As in the Petén-Yucatan lowlands, valley communities grew and differentiated during the Classic period, and the region enjoyed its greatest prosperity and complexity (Henderson 1992a; 1992b; Henderson & Beaudry-Corbett 1993; Joyce 1993). During the Late Classic period (ca 600–850), there were more communities, more different kinds of communities, and more people in the Valley than at any other time in its history (**Fig. 7**). Ulúa polychrome pottery (**Fig. 8**), elaborate and costly to produce, was widely used within the valley and not consumed by a restricted group. By the end of the period, carved marble vases and architectural elaboration, both with distributions limited to a few parts of a few communities, suggest a renewed process of socio-economic differentiation, though differences were not so sharp as to indicate social stratification.

The design structure and iconographic vocabulary of painted Ulúa pottery, and the exportation of Ulúa polychromes and carved marble vessels to Petén-Yucatan lowland communities, offer the clearest evidence of continuing interaction among Ulúa communities and their western and northern neighbours.

Despite regular interaction and a generally similar developmental trajectory, political institutions in the lower Ulúa region remained distinct from those found in communities in the Petén-Yucatan lowlands. There, community growth and differentiation resulted in the emergence of stratified, politically centralised societies. By the beginning of the Classic period, rulers of these city-states legitimised and sustained their positions of power and privilege through a complex of monumental architecture and political art – large, elaborately decorated palaces, temples, ball courts, and other public structures and above all stelae bearing their portraits and hieroglyphic texts extolling their accomplishments. City-states and their material trappings did not develop in the lower Ulúa valley (Henderson 1992b).

In the Terminal Classic period (AD 850–1000) a process of transformation swept across eastern Mesoamerica. Classic period city-states collapsed across the Petén-Yucatan lowlands, public construction and the carving of monumental political sculpture ceased, and plain or simply decorated fine paste wares replaced local polychrome painted pottery. In the lower Ulúa valley, traditional elaborately painted polychromes gave way to fine paste pottery. Ulúa fine
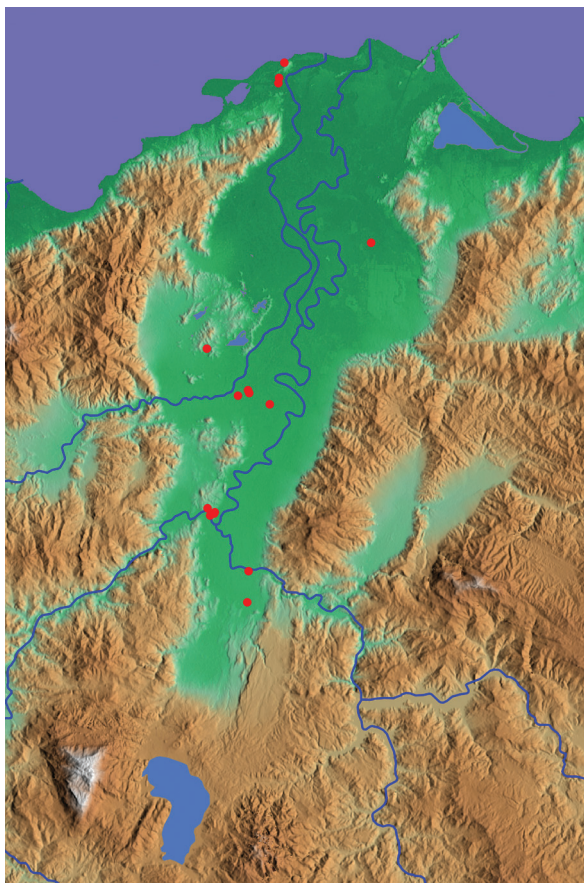

Figure 8. Ulúa polychrome bowl.

Figure 9. Terminal Classic period sites, lower Ulúa valley.

Figure 10. Late Postclassic period sites, lower Ulúa valley.

paste wares were locally produced, but they were made in the same vessel forms as their western counterparts. Valley settlement systems (**Fig. 9**) underwent a radical simplification (Henderson 1992b; Henderson & Beaudry-Corbett 1993). Cerro Palenque (Joyce 1991) emerged as the single prominent centre, the largest city in the region, though overall population in the valley declined.

After AD 1000, Cerro Palenque declined, almost all Classic period communities were abandoned, and valley populations were greatly reduced. The few identified Early Postclassic communities are all small villages without public architecture. Smaller political and economic centres, with very different public architecture, reappeared in the last century or two before the Spanish invasion, just as they did elsewhere in lowland eastern Mesoamerica (Henderson 1992b; Henderson & Hudson 2012).
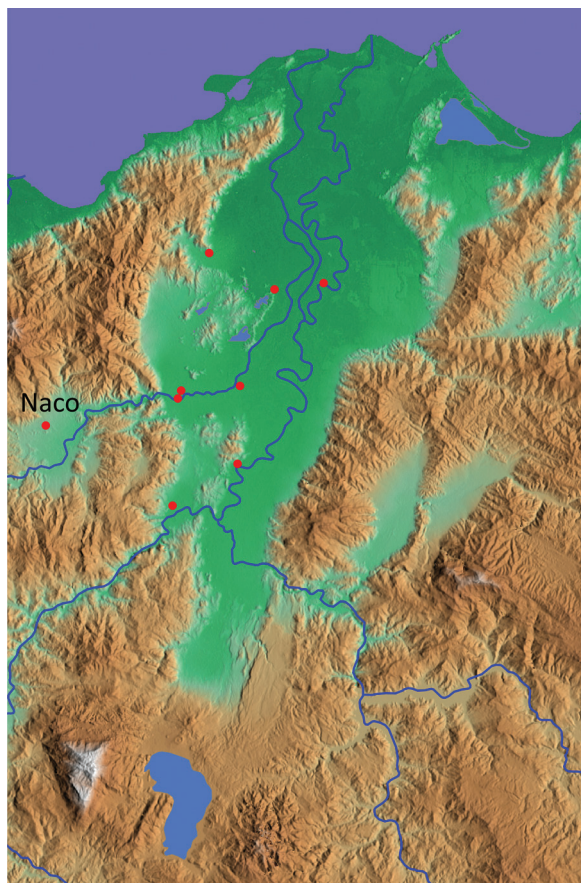
During the later Postclassic period, the valley (**Fig. 10**) experienced a slow economic resurgence, and by the time of the Spanish invasion in the 16th century it was an integral part of the extensive exchange networks that connected communities from Yucatan to Central America (Henderson 1977). Naco, located just up the Río Chamelecón from the valley proper, was the leading commercial centre in the region (Wonderley 1981; 1985). It was a well-known trade destination as far west as the Acalan region on the Gulf coast of Mexico. The lower Ulúa valley was famous for its cacao production. In 1536 the king of Chetumal sent a fleet of war canoes – commanded by the renegade Spaniard Guerrero – to defend his interests in Ulúa cacao from the Spaniards. Although the Spanish were ultimately victorious, the act of sending troops to defend the region from foreign intruders clearly indicates its importance within the regional sphere of interaction.

Features shared by lower Ulúa valley communities and those of the Petén-Yucatan lowlands are diverse: the ball game, settlement organisation, architectural forms, ceramic design, and an array of particular iconographic elements, among many others. One might expect the lower Ulúa valley to be regarded as part of the Maya world on the basis of these common features, a persistent pattern of linkage with lowland Maya communities, and a common basic trajectory of development. However, the absence of such traits as hieroglyphic texts and monumental political sculpture has created the perception that it was not. This classificatory assignment triggers the interpretive mode in which Ulúa societies are characterised as peripheral and subordinated to a Maya core or cores. They are constructed as an impoverished peasantry, receivers of ideas, and marginally successful imitators of their grander western neighbours. The effect is to define Maya in a way that sharply limits the variability, at least in terms of political structures and their material correlates, that can be embraced within the category. This effectively eliminates the possibility of contemplating different ways of being Maya.

Variability, Identities, and Prospects for Clarity

Understanding the relationships among societies in eastern Mesoamerica, including those in the Southeast, requires the recognition of multiple, simultaneous Ulúa and Maya identities. Issues of cultural identity and affiliation are particularly pertinent in regions of cultural junction (e.g. Jones 1997; Restall 2001; Hostettler 2004; Guzmán Medina 2013), and the southeast periphery of Mesoamerica offers a good example of how traditional conceptualisations fail to articulate with existing archaeological evidence. At the most fundamental level, we need to more carefully attend to the geographic distributions of specific features stripped of implications about influence and emulation, and we need to work out how these features fit into local social systems. This plurality of systems is itself crucial, since it allows for the recognition of multiple or simultaneous identities and facilitates an understanding of how local and regional variations pertain to the issues at hand. The archaeological record as it stands at present will not easily sustain this kind of analysis, but a re-evaluation of traditional analytical models can offer a viable starting point.

The appropriate research trajectory for the Ulúa region and other peripheral zones is clear. The documentation of local contexts and analysis of local practices must be done in ways that will lay the foundation for recognition of variable, overlapping, and contingent local social identities. The notion of a singular Maya identity must be replaced with a more nuanced approach to identity construction in the Southeast, and studies of interaction – both at regional and local scale – must move away from interpretation based on dominant/subordinate dichotomies (Gingrich 2004). The failure of most commentaries on Mesoamerican and Central American peripheries to examine fundamental categories has created a mire of vague labels and imprecise conceptual frameworks. Critical engagement with the central issues and analytical constructs should be a regular and self-evident exercise for all those concerned with borders, margins, and fringes. This will allow for increased access to these peripheral areas and help to animate those who inhabited them.

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