

THEORETICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE ASPECTS OF FRONTIER STUDIES

FRONTIER ADAPTATIONS IN LOWER CENTRAL AMERICA. Edited by MARY W. HELMS and FRANKLIN O. LOVELAND. (Philadelphia, Penn.: Institute for the Study of Human Issues, 1976. Pp. 178. \$14.95.)

Mary Helms has demonstrated her page 1 assertion that "the anthropological horizons of 'Middle America' are slowly being extended again to include material . . . from Lower Central America" as well as from the northern frontiers. Her book, *Middle America: A Cultural History of Heartland and Frontiers* (New York: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1975) is the most current synthesis of the area; here she has coedited a collection of Lower Central American frontier papers presented at the Ninth Annual meeting of the Southern Anthropological Society (1974).

As collected symposium papers, they are typically variable in length, topic, quality, and relevance to the principal theme (Lower Central American frontiers). Nine essays are divided among three sections: "Pre-Columbian Themes," "Black Populations and the Anglo Frontier," and "Native Adaptations to an Economic Hinterland." The geographical focus of individual papers reflects the research interests of people active in the area and attending the symposium: Belize (1), Atlantic Nicaragua (3), Atlantic Costa Rica (1), western Panama (2), and eastern Panama (1). Pacific Costa Rica, Pacific Nicaragua, and eastern Honduras are conspicuously absent in the stricter sense of Central America; in the broader context, data from Venezuela and northwestern Ecuador may be expected to make substantial contributions. These lacunae suggest unfilled niches in current research opportunities.

The complexity of the Lower Central American area allows the book to include a diversity of cultural themes and time periods (although treatment of the area's prehistory is completely lacking except in Helms's introduction), and I do not pretend to have full knowledge of all relevant data. I do want to comment briefly on particular essays where I am more familiar with specifics, or where certain methodological points need to be made. My comments focus on two principal areas: (1) authors' treatment of their topics; and (2) contributions of each to the frontier theme, factually and as manifestations of a developing corpus of conceptual and potentially theoretical approaches to these types of cultural-geographical-ecological areas.

Helms's introduction briefly reviews regional developments encapsulated as pre-Columbian, colonial, and republican eras, and points out the relevance of some chapters to various traditional issues. She also illustrates one benefit of examining modern frontiers and their comparative relationship to prehistoric frontiers, noting (p. 7) that lack of wealth and difficulties of distance and communication served to keep Lower Central America isolated from the principal developments affecting such centers as Mexico and Peru. As I noted elsewhere

(Lange n. d.), many of these same factors operated to keep pre-Columbian indigenous groups free from direct domination by either of the adjacent "high civilizations."

Helms also defines "frontiers" for the purpose of the volume, emphasizing the concept of *place, of process, and of situation* (italics in the original) as first defined by Wyman and Kroeber (p. xiii). While this correctly, and briefly, conveys some of the complexity of frontier area studies, a more detailed discussion of frontiers and establishment of a conceptual framework could have been expected given the work by the interdisciplinary group at the University of Oklahoma in the past few years (well summarized in Miller and Steffen). The interdisciplinary range of frontier studies is exciting, but complex; their many facets require explicit statements of underlying assumptions.

Helms's own contribution, "Competition, Power, and Succession to Office in Pre-Columbian Panama," is found in the first of the three groups. Her discussion, based on a statement by Oviedo, is a proto-historic rather than pre-Columbian analysis; no comparisons are made with available archaeological data to suggest time depth for which the practices may have been in force prior to European contact. Details for some aspects of succession are inferred through interpolation of Oviedo's statement with Polynesian practices described by Sahlins and Goldman. I am uncomfortable with such globe-trotting use of analogies given: (1) the great detail of Polynesian data relative to the quite skimpy Panamanian data, and (2) that most models of human social patterns and behavior have come from nonfrontier areas; we have no data evaluating the extent to which frontier patterns are more or less flexible, and nonfrontier analogs should be applied delicately in interpreting data from Lower Central America or any frontier area.

Philip Young's essay, "The Expression of Harmony and Discord in Guaymí Ritual: The Symbolic Meaning of Some Aspects of the *Balseria*," and Laura Minelli's on "Mesoamerican Influences among Talamanca and Western Guaymí Indians" are also out of place in a pre-Columbian chapter. Young himself noted that the first account of the ritual dates to more than one hundred years after the Conquest, and Minelli is concerned with post-Conquest remnants of Mesoamerican influence on the eastern coast of Costa Rica. While it is almost certain that most behavior observed within a century of the Europeans' arrival had some root in the prehistoric era, it seems preferable to refer to these studies as "salvage ethnography," as Young does (p. 40), rather than to stress pre-Columbian antecedents.

In the introduction to the Minelli chapter, the editors write: "Stone 1956 . . . has tentatively proposed that the rather limited use of maize by Talamanca peoples indicates a late pre-Columbian introduction of the grain by Mesoamerican colonists." A subsequent study suggests that the earliest corn in firm archaeological context on the Atlantic coast of Costa Rica may be of southern derivation dating to early in the Christian era (Snarskis, p. 348). While Minelli cites Lothrop (1942) as a "recent" source indicating the Aztecs were in the process of subjugating all of Central America at the time of the Spanish Conquest and might ultimately have controlled all of it, it is also plausible to argue that the Aztec

empire was under such internal strain that collapse was immanent—Spanish pressure merely speeded up the process. The Sigua had arrived in the Sixaloo area only very shortly prior to contact, and we may consider that zone to be at the far southern reaches of the communications and distance limitations referred to above.

Franklin Loveland's chapter, "Tapirs and Manatees: Cosmological Categories and Social Process among the Rama Indians of Eastern Nicaragua," is also not really pre-Columbian in its subject matter or emphasis. The introductory notes to this section state: "Few comparisons have been made of the adaptations by Maya lowland societies and peoples of Amazonia to the tropical conditions common to all. When such investigations are performed, the cultural patterns and processes of eastern Central American lowland groups, which are geographically and perhaps culturally intermediate, may be expected to acquire new significance and interests for anthropologists" (p. 68). I have also made this suggestion (Lange 1971; 1976, p. 179) and it continues to warrant detailed investigation.

William Davidson's "Black Carib (Garifuna) Habitats in Central America" is the first chapter in part 2. It is descriptive, brief, and the data on coastal settlement patterns are not really developed. Sheila Cosminsky's paper, "Carib-Creole Relations in a Belizean Community," is problem-oriented, well organized, solidly presented, and is my personal choice as the outstanding item in the book. She is also, as discussed below, the only one who made an effort to contribute to the frontier theme.

Part three begins with a paper by Dorothy Cattle on "Dietary Diversity and Nutritional Security in a Coastal Miskito Indian Village, Eastern Nicaragua." Her detailed dietary discussion arrives at conclusions counter to those of Nietschmann (1973, 1974) regarding abilities of local groups to cope with pressures of dietary change. The second paper in the group is by Regina Holloman and discusses "Cuna Household Types and the Domestic Cycle." This is a solid presentation of patterns and preferences for matrilineal residence among the Cuna, with data and rationale for variations in household organization.

In the final chapter, James Howe writes on "Communal Land Tenure and the Origin of Descent Groups among the San Blas Cuna." His discussion is generally detailed and thorough, and his observations on the relationship of coconut groves to descent groups have implications with potential impact far beyond the specific Cuna area. He also has the best turned line in the book with a vignette from the *Tropical Crime Stoppers Textbook*: "Coconuts are very easy to steal, and once stolen, impossible to identify."

The strong points of this publication, aside from the value of part or all of some individual contributions, are its clear indication of the diversity of field objectives being pursued within Lower Central America and its complementary highlighting of numerous geographical and methodological areas that are currently understudied or ignored. Its weaknesses are the lack of a diachronic perspective incorporating prehistoric data and the focus almost exclusively on the descriptive/locational aspects of the frontier theme rather than on any even

minimal analytical aspects. I have some reservations about whether this collection of essays, as a whole, warranted hard-cover publication. Some of the papers are working documents, or preliminary reports, and it would seem that a more modest mode of dissemination would have served the needs of authors and readers equally well.

The word "frontier" does not even appear in some of the contributions, and evidently there was no strong direction from the editors to treat the concept theoretically rather than, or as well as, locationally. Since this emphasis was apparently not intended, it is best not belabored but left with the simple reiteration that we have reached a point where frontiers should be viewed conceptually as well as descriptively, and any treatment should be explicit rather than implied. Cosminsky does, in fact, point to the frontier theme in discussing ethnic boundaries in the Belizean community she studied, and notes Barth's observation that the maintenance of such boundaries by groups in contact implies "not only criteria and signals for identification, but also a structuring of interaction which allows the persistence of cultural differences" (Barth, p. 16). This theme is also important in the European work of Cole and Wolf and is an area to be expanded in future frontier studies.

The special nature of the Lower Central American area has been recognized at least as far back as Spinden (1917, 1925), Stone (1934, 1939, 1959, 1964), and Lothrop (1939, 1940), and subsequently by Sauer, Willey, Rouse, Coe, and West and Augelli. The usual conception has been to see the area as the southern part of Mesoamerica or the northern part of the Intermediate Area; West and Augelli gave a different perspective by showing it as part of the boundary of the Caribbean basin. These cultural-geographical variables serve to emphasize the probable complexity of any interpretative attempts.

Current frontier studies do not seem to allow for the Lower Central American case in which an area was bounded by two frontiers instead of one. Hudson (p. 27) came close by showing a group conflict model that had a centrally located area contested by two different groups. The model, however, deals with the two groups' extensions, and not the zone in which the two frontiers define an area that pertains to neither. This central area would best be conceived of as a buffer, with two and possibly more frontiers defining its boundaries. This buffer, however, represents a more complex cultural phenomenon that should be considered differently from simple expansion frontiers. Rathje has previously employed the buffer concept in Mesoamerican studies, although the area on which he focused is conceptually different from Lower Central America. He was emphasizing highland/lowland differences; these differences tend to be much less pronounced in Central America because the distances involved are much less and the space/population relationships more compact.

The simplest dynamic model for a buffer zone must have three sectors: two representing the more developed cultures bordering the buffer (although as noted above a buffer with more than two frontiers is possible, and is applicable in the Lower Central American case since we may consider the Caribbean rim to be a third boundary distinct from either Mesoamerica or South America), and the third sector is the buffer society itself. Changes in intensity of activity within

the buffer will be seen to vary dependent upon external forces (collapse of governments, formation of new political alliances, subsistence disasters, etc.) as well as developments in the buffer zone culture (subsistence disasters, discovery of new economic goods more attractive to one external culture than the other, etc.).

One of the most important aspects of buffers/frontiers not treated in the present volume is the aspect of time and changes through time in frontier status or location. The dynamic nature of frontiers has not really been dealt with: How long does an area remain a frontier? How do we know when this condition has passed? Do we apply these temporal inquiries to only broad-based frontiers such as the rimland-heartland, only to more limited frontiers such as ethnic boundaries between community segments, or to both?

In prehistoric Lower Central America we see natural frontiers and cultural frontiers that eventually evolved into the boundaries of a buffer zone; yet boundaries between ethnic groups almost certainly continued to exist within the buffer. Historically, we see a native Amerindian population gradually displaced by European and African populations on a regional and micro-regional basis; we should not overlook the impact and role of the Chinese either. Different populations evolved patterns of frontier social structures that can be identified and studied on national, areal, urban, rural, and neighborhood bases.

The use of frontier/buffer concepts in this and similar areas of the world offers alternatives to understanding processes of cultural development and defining the nature of human social structures. The difficulties in controlling the multitude of variables of time, location, and scale will cause the appearance of interpretative, rather than purely descriptive or descriptive/quasi-interpretative, studies in the prehistoric or historic periods of the Lower Central American buffer zone to be relatively rare in the near future. Such interpretative studies should, however, become more common as the data base expands and the frontier/buffer model matures in its application. Wrestling with such difficulties, on the other hand, offers the only means by which we can potentially ever be able to claim to understand the cultural development of the area.

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