Introduction to the Special Section: Borders, Frontiers, and Boundaries in the Maya World: Concepts and Theory

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INTRODUCTION TO THE SPECIAL SECTION:
BORDERS, FRONTIERS, AND BOUNDARIES IN THE
MAYA WORLD: CONCEPTS AND THEORY

Christina Halperin, Carolyn Freiwald, and Gyles Iannone

Abstract

The Maya area has long been characterized as a mosaic of polities large and small, with cultural connections, linguistic dialects, ethnicities, and economic networks that shifted, expanded, and contracted over time. In this paper, we examine different ways of constructing boundaries. From physical demarcations in the landscape to habitual practices of interaction and affiliation, the lines that tied and divided were both unstable and multiple. We draw on definitions and theories from anthropology, history, and geography to review the concepts of borders, frontiers, and boundaries and their implications for the Maya area over the long term.

INTRODUCTION

The making of boundaries entails a continual reworking and unmaking of places and ties among people. The Maya area was a mosaic of polities large and small, cultural connections, linguistic dialects, ethnicities, and economic networks that expanded, fragmented, re-formed, and contracted over time. Rather than focusing on the heart of these interaction spheres and landscapes, however, these dynamics are also fruitfully explored at their fringes. As border and frontier studies from multiple disciplines have underscored, cultural creativity, political movements, and social transformations emerge in between polities and communities as much as they emerge within them. This introduction to the Special Section, Borders, Frontiers, and Boundaries in the Maya World: Concepts and Theory, outlines basic definitions and theories of borders, frontiers, and boundaries and details how such concepts have been employed in the Maya area.

The Special Section centers on the eastern Maya lowlands, bringing together papers and collaborations across the Belize-Guatemala border, which held no significance for pre-Columbian and early Colonial-period social ties, political alliances, trade networks, and migrations. Nonetheless, contemporary borders can impede our understanding of past borderlands because archaeological projects tend to work in only one country (Ford 2011; Golden et al. 2008; Golden and Scherer 2013) and etic nomenclature of ceramics often evokes contemporary geopolitical landscapes. For example, the name of Belize Red type ceramics (named for the original location of discovery at Barton Ramie, Belize) implicitly suggests that it is a type specific to Belizean sites, and the name Peten Gloss ware or vajilla de Petén Lustroso by similar reasoning, implies a ceramic ware specific to Peten sites. Yet archaeological distributions of such types and wares do not conform to modern geopolitical boundaries (Chase and Chase 2012; Halperin et al. 2020; LeCount et al. 2002), and thus create confusion for understandings of pre-Columbian belonging and interaction. Both countries also have their own intellectual interaction spheres fostered through national conferences and the use of different languages for communication. As such, these collective papers strive to dissolve these contemporary boundaries by focusing on the ways that political, social, demographic, and economic interactions were forged, marked, and unraveled within and across this region from the Classic period onward. In doing so, they help enrich our understanding of the history of this contemporary border zone.

LAND, PEOPLE, AND PRACTICE

The meanings of the terms borders, frontiers, and boundaries are sometimes confusing since they are often used interchangeably and because different disciplines, from anthropology to geography, may use them in contradictory ways. Geographers, historians, and Classical archaeologists, in particular, have focused on the territorial dimensions of frontiers, such as political divisions between two states or as physical zones between settled agrarian societies and mobile peoples (Anderson 1996; Feuer 2016; Prescott 1987). Anthropologists, sociologists, and anthropological archaeologists have often incorporated a territorial aspect into their meaning, but focus more on boundaries and frontiers as social and political
identities, as “us” vs. “them,” and as social, political, and economic practices of affiliation and belonging that create divisions that may or may not relate to the physical landscape (Alvarez 1995; Barth 1969; Fassin 2011; Lamont and Molnár 2002; Schlegel 1992). Political and social identities have the potential to be determinantized. At the heart of such ambiguities, however, is an inherent tension in how divisions, limits, and points of convergence manifest since human practices and interactions not only transpire as part of a physical landscape but also as part of ongoing material practices, imagined communities, and situated understandings of self. They are relational, dynamic, mutually constituting, and entangled (Ashmore 2002; Hodder 2011; Hutson 2009; Smith 2003).

To more clearly describe these entanglements and tensions, however, we draw from the terminology of Parker (2006:79), in which “borders” are linear dividing lines in the landscape and “frontiers” are interstitial zones of interaction between political, administrative, and cultural entities (also see Iannone 2010:353). While both concepts may entail spatial relationships, borders have a more clearly marked manifestation, and frontiers are zones or regions, and as such, are more porous. For example, while precise borders may be a product of “18th-Century absolutism” (Wendel and Rösler 1999:7) and the rise of the contemporary nation-state (Parker 2002:327; Prescott 1897:1; Ratzel 1897), there are examples of incipient borders as early as 1290 B.C. when a formal treaty between Hittites and Egyptians legally recognized the territorial jurisdictions of the two states (Pritchard 1969:199).

In contrast, the term “boundary” is more general and signifies the bounds or limits of anything. As such, it encompasses both borders and frontiers. The term boundary has limitations in that it is more ambiguous and can apply to different types of interactions and different ways to conceptualize and divide people and places. Nonetheless, flexible terms are heuristically useful, as seen with recent discussions of “communities,” which are dynamic social formations that operate on multiple, overlapping levels and that include ideological, material, spatial, and practice-based manifestations (Canuto and Yaeger 2000; Varen and Potter 2008).

In the Maya area, scholars have debated whether polities were defined through the physical landscape or through relationships of debt, obligation, alliance, and hierarchy between people. Hammond (1991:275–281), for example, argued that Classic Maya polities were not forged by high degrees of boundary maintenance or through clear territorial divisions. Likewise, Graham (2011:29–39) has asserted that pre-Columbian polities were defined primarily through relationships among people, particularly patron-client relationships that dictated the tribute and labor obligations peoples had to rulers, and in return, the responsibilities of rulers to their communities. During the Colonial period, the Spanish often designated political units based on señoríos, the domain of a lord, and the encomienda system, in which primarily Spanish and Creole men were given tribute rights over particular peoples and their labor (Farriss 1984:38). Among Colonial Quiche Maya speakers, for example, vinak literally meant “people,” but was also used to refer to Quiche and Cakchiquel polities with territorial extents (Hill 1996:63–64), further underscoring the dialectics between land and people.

Research on pre-Columbian Maya market systems suggest that the distribution of goods was characterized more as overlapping market spheres than isolated “solar” markets centered at polity capitals (Eppich and Freidel 2015; Masson and Freidel 2013). Markets and gift exchanges helped create economic and cultural interaction spheres that were reinforced and cross-cut by community, lineage, linguistic, polity, and regional affiliations (Fox et al. 1996; Smith and Berdan 2003). For example, network analyses have the potential to show how economic interactions cross-cut or reinforced polities and how such economic interactions had their own boundaries or limits (Golitko and Feinman 2015; Meissner 2017, 2020). The circulation of both quotidian and precious objects, however, was part of the place-making of communities, regions, and polities as people moved and brought precious objects with them, journeyed to and from market centers, and traveled afar with gifts to cement diplomatic and social ties between families and polities (Halperin 2014).

Migration is also a critical factor in the making and unmaking of borders and boundaries. Recent isotopic analyses have underscored that Maya peoples were highly mobile, but with the large majority of movements within an individual’s lifetime as occurring between regions rather than long distances (Freidel 2011; Freidel et al. 2020; Price et al. 2008, 2010, 2014; Somerville et al. 2016). Unlike the hyper-policing and surveillance of twenty-first-century borders (Fassin 2011), pre-Columbian polities, as in Colonial times, likely had relatively little control over the migration of their constituents (Inomata 2004). The isotopic identification of who is considered “foreign” and “local” based on geological and environmental variation over a given area, however, often differs from boundaries identified by ceramic production and distribution spheres, architectural styles, or even biological affinity. Despite these discrepancies, it is clear that demographic shifts constantly altered polity sizes and power structures and, in turn, helped forge new social and cultural affiliations and senses of place.

Nonetheless, ethnohistoric, ethnographic, and archaeological evidence also suggest that the Maya were known to have created physical borders in the landscape and, in some cases, engaged in heavy boundary maintenance practices (Iannone 2010:353; McAnany 1995:87). Boundaries and frontiers were most often demarcated using prominent features on the landscape, such as caves or springs, or by erecting shrines or artificial mounds (Marcus 1993:126; Pohl et al. 1997:208–214; Roys 1943:181, 192). There are rare cases of cities with defensive features and walls that delimit the capital, such as the Classic-period Tikal earthworks, the wall encircling the Postclassic city of Mayapán, the defensive moat around Classic-period Becan, and the agave palisade and moat around the Chinamita town of Tulúm (Puleston and Callender 1967; Marcus 1993:124; Masson et al. 2006; Webster et al. 2007). Large investments were made to create defensive features in the valley zone between El Zotz and Tikal, underscoring regional geopolitical border maintenance practices (Garrison et al. 2019). Classic-period defensive features between Yaxchilan and Piedras Negras also reveal that the two competing political centers vied for control over riverine and land routes of exchange and were also heavily concerned with marking territories within and between the two regions (Davenport and Golden 2016; Golden et al. 2008; Golden and Scherer 2013).

Contemporary nation-state border issues provide some reflection for these archaeologial border maintenance practices. The desire among some U.S. political officials to create larger and longer physical barriers between the U.S. and Mexico serves as much as a symbolic divide between types of people on racial, criminal, and economic grounds as a concerted effort to block the northward movement of people (Dick 2019), and it points to potentially multilayered meanings and purposes of ancient border practices.
Immigrants embody the articulation of territorial borders and social boundaries since they cross borders to settle within a new community, but also often encounter new social boundaries in the different ways they are treated in their new homelands (Fassin 2011:215). Likewise, the recent vote in Belize in May of 2019 to ask the United Nations to settle the border territory dispute in which Guatemala claims 11,000 km² of Belizean territory (Sanchez 2019) underscores the ways in which borders are never fixed, but in a constantly shifting state of negotiation and contestation. Houk and Bonorden’s (2020) article in this Special Section on the San Pedro Maya from the Kaxil Uinic village document that this territorial dispute has existed longer than the establishment of the country of Belize and even the colony of British Honduras. They argue that borders are manifestations more of political aspirations than lived experiences of belonging.

One way that pre-Columbian Mesoamerican borders were reaffirmed was through ritual circuits, in which groups of people encircled settlements, communities, or regions in their pathways to and from shrines and key landmarks, such as caves, mountain tops, and springs (Garcia-Zambrano 1994; Halperin and Hruby 2019; Hill 1996; Reese-Taylor 2002; Tozzer 1941:139). Community leaders also regularly surveyed territorial limits using these processes to (re)confirm both natural and artificial features as legitimate territorial markers (Iannone 2010:355; McNaney 1995:87; Roys 1943:181, 192). Contemporary and historic data indicate that ritual circuits undertaken as part of annual New Year ceremonies or to establish settlements often began at the center of the community and followed a counter-clockwise direction around it. The shrines and landscape features visited along the way served not only as zones between earthly and otherworldly realms, but as ways to create and reinforce divisions between people and places.

MULTIPLE, OVERLAPPING, AND DYNAMIC BOUNDARIES

In the same way that social identities are situated, multiple, and dynamic, boundaries should also be viewed as multiple, overlapping, and constantly shifting. While one spot may mark the heartland for some, that same spot may encompass a hinterland for others. For example, today’s Hong Kong is both a modern world metropolis and a peripheral Chinese city (Tenzin 2017:551) whose political status and incorporation into mainland China has been increasingly contentious with the protest over the Fugitive Offenders bill in 2019–2020. In turn, political, economic, ideological, military, social, demographic, and geographic boundaries may correspond closely with, and dialectically create one another, while other boundaries may vary substantially from one another as contradictory to, nested within, or cross-cutting one another (Alvarez 1995; Campbell 2009; Hegmon 1998; Parker 2006; Rodseth and Parker 2005). Likewise, Smith (2005) argues that ancient states should not be conceived as homogenous and uncontested territories. Instead, she contends, a focus on multiple, shifting networks, as seen through the development of interconnected roads or the distribution of state-sponsored inscriptions, allow us to rethink how boundaries transpired from the perspective of overlapping and uneven connections rather than a homogenous territorial division (see also Martin and Grube 2000:21; Munson and Macri 2009).

Epigraphic research in the Maya area, for example, reveals that some places, as identified by place names, may overlap with emblem glyphs (royal titles), as in the examples of Yaxha, K’awitznal (Ucanal), and Lakam-ha (Palenque) (Stuart and Houston 1994:3–10). Not all emblem glyphs, however, evoke toponyms, and as dynasties splintered or migrated, such royal titles were associated with new peoples, deities, and places, such as the Mutul dynasty at Tikal that fragmented in the early seventh century with the foundation of a splinter polity in the Petexbatun region. Likewise, new epigraphic readings suggest that multiple polities may have forged together to form regional group identities. While such formulations sometimes evoked the quadripartite directions (Marcus 1976:16–17; Rice 2004), royal titles also included the Huk Tzuk (Seven Divisions) and Huxlajuun Tzuk (Thirteen Divisions) titles that may reference a geopolitical model of multiple royal families or an ethnic identity that cross-cut polities (Tokovinine 2013:98).

Likewise, ethnohistoric data indicate that ethnicity sometimes overlapped with political boundaries, such as the Kowoj and Itza Maya who occupied the Peten Lakes region during the Postclassic period. These two ethnic groups spoke the same Maya language, but possessed different origin stories, had different architectural styles and ceramic production communities, and ultimately considered themselves enemies (Cecil 2009; Cecil and Neff 2006; Jones 1998; Pugh 2003; Rice and Rice 2018). Yet when the Kowoj were annexed into the larger Itza kingdom, the Itza kingdom encompassed multiple ethnic groups, including not just the Kowoj, but also the Tuluncies (enemies who were referred to as na unicolob or “not men”; Marcus 1993:127), and the Mopan Maya, who spoke a different Yucatecan Maya dialect (Jones 1998:19–22).

As Marcus (1993, 1998; Iannone 2002) stressed in her dynamic model of ancient Maya polities, provinces expanded and contracted over time, a process of centralization and decentralization that constantly shifted political frontiers. While some provincial regions may have been highly controlled or tightly allied with dominant centers, such as Xaxchilan and its subordinate centers (Golden et al. 2008:2), others may have been “semi-autonomous buffer states” (Braswell et al. 2004:200; Iannone 2010) with only weak connections to more powerful centers. Alternatively, some provincial polities may have always been autonomous and never incorporated into larger political formations (Scarborough et al. 2003). Michelet (2012), for example, argues that, unlike most polities in the Maya area, the Rio Bec region during the Late and Terminal Classic lacked both a clear political frontier and a political center. Its “great houses” were numerous, but without the typical signs of centrality and hierarchy (no open central spaces, no ballcourts, and/or dispersed rather than nucleated monumental architecture).

In his study of African political formations, Kopytoff (1987) distinguished between external and internal frontiers. External frontiers were frontiers between complex political entities, such as expanding empires, and more sparsely populated areas with less complex societies. Internal frontiers, on the other hand, were interstitial zones between metropolises. Internal frontiers were often home to ethnically ambiguous, politically fragmented, and marginal societies that fell in between more powerful political entities (the “institutional vacuum”). They were also dynamic places where new political centers emerged as a result of people moving from the metropolis. The idea of the external frontier is difficult to apply to the Maya area, since Maya polities were not necessarily more populous or more politically complex than their neighbors (Goldstein 1994; Schortman 1989; Schortman and Urban 1994; Stoner
CULTURAL CREATIVITY, DIVERSITY, AND POLITICAL INNOVATIONS

One of the critiques of many previous core-periphery studies is the emphasis on the metropolis as the source of influences and migrants. In fact, many agency and postcolonial approaches have emphasized frontier zones as places of ethnogenesis, cosmopolitanism, cultural creativity, political innovations, and hybridity (Bhabha 1994, 1996; Cobb 2019; Lightfoot and Martinez 1995; Ogundiran 2014; Schortman and Urban 1994; Silliman 2015; Stein 2002; Voss 2005, 2008). Despite their more peripheral status, frontiers are often places of contact for different cultural, social, and linguistic groups. Bhabha (1994), for example, argues that hybridity is a process in which different cultural forms and ways of being are mixed to create new subjectivities. It is from a marginalized position, in particular, that the mixing of and creative reworking of traits and dispositions take on new meanings and stimulate change.

Tenzin (2017) argues that borders and frontiers can be convergence zones, places of cultural hybridity, linguistic diversity, and fluid identities. It is not just the interstitial character of the frontier itself—and the institutional vacuum that it provides—that leads to the hybrid qualities that are often ascribed to frontier communities. The intermingling of local and immigrant cultures within frontier settings is equally important (Koptyoff 1987:28–29). Despite their peripheral status, frontier settlements can be self-sufficient power centers. For example, in the Sino-Tibetan borderlands, Tenzin (2017) finds that Qiangzu peoples take advantage of Tibetan unrest to advance their own political interests as they sit in the shadow of the Han and Tibetan states. In turn, both Gyalrongwa and Qiangzu communities in this borderland region position themselves as dynamic centers through historical narratives and origin stories, and both groups pick and choose different cultural traits from each other and from their more dominant neighbors to define their identities and assert their political and economic interests.

Likewise, Ogundiran (2014) considers Early Osogbo, Nigeria, as a dynamic internal African frontier during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Rather than passively emulating ceramic styles from Yorubaland, the metropolis from the northwest, Early Osogbo was a convergence of three different ceramic complexes: the local Osun complex, the Oyo complex from northwest Yorubaland, and the Ife ceramic complex from central Yorubaland, where different cultural expressions were displayed and negotiated in the context of food service and hospitality. In fact, the Early Osogbo ceramic assemblage was more diverse than those from the metropolis. Similarly, Halperin and colleagues (2020) have found that the Maya site of Ucanal did not blindly replicate the ritual practices and material culture of the larger polities of Naranjo and Caracol that dominated it during the Late Classic period. Rather, Ucanal took advantage of its frontier status between these political superpowers to eclectically incorporate influences and social practices of multiple regions and eventually to establish itself as a vanguard of Terminal Classic-period political changes. These and other archaeological examples point to the possibility that frontiers not only accommodated difference whereby diverse influences and ways of being co-existed, but could also be places of innovation and agency (see also Stein 2002).

One way in which diversity and difference is mediated is through “boundary objects” that link different practices, values, and viewpoints. In applying Star and Griesemer’s (1989) concept of boundary objects, some archaeologists (Mills 2018; Roddick and Stahl 2016) have emphasized the bridging role of particular people, places, and things in translating and making connections between different communities and their practices. Boundary objects inhabit multiple social worlds and as such, destabilize the boundedness of social boundaries. Harrison-Buck and Pugh (2020) consider fine paste ceramic vessels as boundary objects that facilitated the interactions between diverse ethnolinguistic, regional, and social groups in the Maya lowlands during the Terminal Classic period. Such interactions were also fostered through elite women who intermarried into distant polities and communities during all time periods and who were integral in serving as intermediaries between regional differences.

Accommodations and negotiations of difference may also be highly situational. Schortman and colleagues (1994, 2001), for example, find that elites in the Naco Valley, a zone often considered to be the southeastern frontier between Maya and non-Maya peoples, drew on multiple political identities and practices of affiliation. They linked themselves to Maya elites to the northwest in their adoption of urban headaddresses, use of Spondylus sp. shell in ceremonial contexts, and in their construction of monumental architecture as a means to legitimize their higher status while they simultaneously promoted a local regional identity in the construction and display of ceramic vessels and figurines that strategically cross-cut status divides to forge social solidarity among community members.

Iannone (2010) incorporates many of these dynamic processes associated with internal frontier communities in his analysis of the “petty kingdom” of Minanha, a small capital city situated in what is now Belize’s north Vaca Plateau, an area that was once located equidistant (25 km) between the two larger—and antagonistic—kingdoms of Caracol and Naranjo (see also Schwake and Iannone 2010, 2016). By taking into consideration Minanha’s environmental setting, geopolitical location, and developmental history—alongside its architecture, artifacts, and ritual practices—Iannone (2010: 362–364) highlights several characteristics that are indicative of an internal frontier community. These include evidence for political volatility (the periodic destruction of stelae, buildings, and even the purposeful burial of an entire elite residential courtyard), hybridity (a site plan that reflects multiple, extraregional influences, and a comparatively intensive use of slate unlike that seen at either Caracol or Naranjo), emulation (evidence for caching behavior, mortuary practices, and both architectural and artifactual traits that are similar, albeit not identical, to those of Caracol), and negotiation (shifts in rulership and political affiliations that are suggestive of everchanging relationships with the Caracol and Naranjo polities). The tensions and tumultuous relationships between these two superpowers, as well as with Tikal and Calakmul, over the course of the Classic period are seen to varying degrees at other sites in the eastern lowlands, including Xunantunich (Awe et al. 2020), Ucanal (Halperin et al. 2020), and Nakum (Zřátka et al. 2020), providing, at the polity level, different perspectives of “the outside looking in.” Further explorations, however, are needed to examine how such relationships manifested at different social scales, such as the household level, whereby the potential for internal heterogeneity and unevenness in such tensions can be better understood.
CONCLUSION

Boundary studies in archaeology help focus social, political, and cultural analyses at key pulse points of ancient interactions, conflicts, and ethnogenesis. In order for them to be successful, however, they must consider the situated, historical, and multiscalar ways in which people make or break ties with each other and the ways in which marks on the ground were experienced and constantly reworked. The shifting entanglements of people and place from the pre-Columbian and historic periods in what is now the Belize-Guatemala border point to the rich integration of polities and communities in this contemporary border zone and to ways in which frontiers and borders were fragile formations.

Historic documents and archaeological research indicate, for example, that the borders of Spanish and British colonial powers in this region were fluid, porous, and rarely enforced, a phenomenon that has spilled over into more contemporary national border conflicts (Houk and Bonorden 2020). Likewise, the isotopic evidence from the Colonial mission of San Bernabé on the shores of Lake Peten Itza underscores the possibility of ties between Central Belize and the Peten Lakes region (Freiwald et al. 2020). The movements of people between these regions have a long history, with evidence of migration during the Classic and Postclassic periods (Freiwald 2020; Hoggarth et al. 2020; Wright 2005), and with significant mobility of people today, whether legal or illegal.

During the Colonial period, however, this entire region was considered a political frontier, distant from the colonial capitals in northern Yucatan and highland Guatemala, which continues as the loci of political power today (Schwartz 1990). Its colonial frontier status was partly inherited from the Postclassic period, in which the eastern lowlands were home to many decentralized political entities that were smaller and less powerful than Chichen Itza and later Mayapan in the northern lowlands, as well as the Kaqchikel and K’iche’ polities in the Guatemalan highlands. Despite this, eastern Maya lowland centers were well-connected with peoples in northern Yucatan and other regions of Mesoamerica (Awe et al. 2020; Halperin et al. 2020; Harrison-Buck and Pugh 2020; Meissner 2020; Żrałka et al. 2020). During the Classic period, in contrast, the eastern lowlands contained some of the largest political capitals and urban centers, whose expansion and limitations can be usefully explored through the study of smaller centers at their shifting frontiers (Awe et al. 2020; Halperin et al. 2020; Żrałka et al. 2020).

Although spatial borders are often dualistic in that they often (but not always) create divisions between two political entities, a focus on boundaries, frontiers, and borders in a more encompassing array of social, ethno-linguistic, material, and landscape perspectives underscores a more multi-sited tension of political and social dynamics. Frontiers were often diverse places and the home to multiple different ethnic, linguistic, and cultural groups whose practices and material productions often selectively combined influences from afar to create new sense of people and place. The consideration of multiple, situated, nested, and entangled boundaries highlights the ways in which people and place mutually create one another, as well as the ways in which their divergences stimulate change.

RESUMEN

El área maya ha sido caracterizada por mucho tiempo como un mosaico de políticas mayores y menores, con conexiones culturales, dialectos lingüísticos, etnias y redes económicas que se cambiaron, se expandieron y se contrajeron con el tiempo. En este artículo, examinamos diferentes formas de construir límites y fronteras. Desde las demarcaciones físicas en el paisaje hasta las prácticas habituales de interacción y afiliación, las líneas que unían y dividían fueron inestables y múltiples. Nos basamos en definiciones y teorías de la antropología, la historia y la geografía para revisar los conceptos de fronteras, bordes, límites y sus implicaciones para el Área Maya a largo plazo.

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