Mapping Indigenous Self-Determination in Highland Guatemala

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ABSTRACT

The challenges of building research partnerships around community mapping are critically reviewed in reference to the politics of heritage and identity among Indigenous Maya communities in highland Guatemala. This paper discusses how the goals and interests of archaeologists meshed with those of indigenous mappers in five communities that chose to participate in the mapping program. Based on responses to a survey about the mapping project, participants report joining in order to enhance self-determination, gain cartographic literacy, and improve life opportunities. Community authority over the project and a broad base of participation (including young and old, male and female) proved essential to the program, which combined traditional practices of governance with new technologies. This paper describes the community organizational model and protocols for selecting features and topics for thematic maps as well as for gaining community consensus on map content. Finally, it reflects on this transmodern approach to indigenous mapping and the future of research partnerships.

Keywords: Community-Participatory Mapping, Cultural Heritage, Highland Guatemala, Indigenous Maya

INDIGENOUS CARTOGRAPHY OF THE POPOL VUH

Great is its performance and its account of the completion and germination of all the sky and earth—its four corners and its four sides.

All then was measured and staked out into four divisions, doubling over and stretching the measuring cords of the womb of sky and the womb of earth. Thus were established the four corners, the four sides, as it is said, by the Framer and the Shaper, the Mother and

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the Father of life and all creation, the giver of breath and the giver of heart…. (Popol Vuh, pp. 65-66, Christanson translation, 2003)

With deep taproots in the Central American Maya region, the Popol Vuh—a preeminent text among creation narratives of First Americans—begins with a preamble that metaphorically relates the genesis of the earth and sky to the measuring and staking of a cornfield. Thought to be an ancient document due to the fact that stories and protagonists of the Popol Vuh appear in Maya iconography as early as 300 BCE, the Popol Vuh today is known to us as a text written in the Highland Mayan language of K’iche using a Spanish orthography. The Newberry Library asserts ownership of this treasured cultural heritage, which is housed in Chicago, III. Certainly the current location of the Popol Vuh typifies the loss of tangible cultural heritage that has accompanied European colonization. Shortly, we return to the loss of deep heritage endured by Maya peoples since the sixteenth century; but first we consider the preamble to the Popol Vuh cited above and suggest that this text provides insight to Maya cosmologies—ways of viewing the world and valuing certain kinds of activities—that provides a path to a transcultural space in which a collaborative mapping project could flourish.

Generative activities described in the creation narrative of the Popol Vuh—measuring, doubling and stretching the measuring cords—intimate that ordered and measured space is of cosmic importance and that delineated spaces, such as the separation of the earth from the sky, are a natural outcome of the work of creator deities—the Framer and the Shaper. Call them boundaries if you like but the Popol Vuh makes it quite clear that measuring, quadrilateral partitioning, and centering are Indigenous Maya concepts. Meeting in this transcultural space of an ordered landscape, the authors (two North American archaeologists and three Indigenous Maya mappers) sought to build a new community of practice (Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002) based upon collaborative community mapping. Here we discuss the epistemic challenges and successes of building a transcultural community of practice and situate this cartographic program within larger debates about Indigenous cartographies, community mapping, and the politics of heritage and identity. With the cultural epistemology suggested by the Popol Vuh in mind, we conclude that the mapping program is working for several reasons, which include the following: 1) mapping was not part of a cartographic-legal strategy to establish or recoup land from a State (Wainwright & Bryan, 2009); 2) from the start gender and age parity were pursued as a goal of the project so that the resulting maps reflect a diversity of community perspectives and are not specific to adult males (Wainwright, 2008, p. 257-259); 3) the power differential between the archaeologists and Indigenous Maya mappers was dampened by the fact that the archaeologists ceded control of the decision-making process to local Maya communities even though this meant “back-burnering” archaeologists’ immediate mapping goals; and 4) participating communities enjoyed a pre-existing organizational structure, specifically community libraries, that included a valuable internet connection.

POLITICS OF HERITAGE AND IDENTITY IN THE MAYA REGION

Historically, the corrosion of Indigenous Maya autonomy accelerated through the 19th-20th century period of nation-building during which Maya ethno-linguistic groups (French, 2010) were divided politically among southern México, Belize, Guatemala, El Salvador, and western Honduras. Containing an internally diverse family of Mayan languages crosscut by marked cultural affinities, today the Maya region is thought to include at least six million speakers of twenty-nine nationally recognized Mayan languages. Throughout the southern Guatemalan highlands of the Sierra Madres—which is the locale of this study—twenty-one ethno-linguistic groups reside in variably sized communities, and many settlements can be traced back to pre-colonial times. Five commu-
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