

EARLY COLONIAL COXOH MAYA SYNCRETISM
IN
CHIAPAS, MEXICO¹

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That acculturation or culture change is a basic tenet of all archaeological study, I think is an undisputable fact. However, archaeological culture change is usually treated in one of two ways. Sometimes the concept of change, or the apparent lack of it, is treated rather off-handedly as an absolute: culture changed, or did not change, period. Here there is concern with only those items that changed or did not change; a part, in other words, but not the whole culture. This is a short-cut which does not tell the whole story. More often, where an archaeological sequence is described with considerable continuity, material culture change is detailed at great length in terms of contrasting percentages, with little or no conceptual recognition of the new combinations of cultural traits at different points of the continuum as new cultural entities. The view here is that continuity of old or very slowly changing items is almighty and little concern is given to the change represented by new items in the culture. Again, this is a partial view of culture. A more productive viewpoint is one which presents a balanced perspective of culture, which takes into account not only changing cultural attributes, but the non-changing ones and also the new cultural features. It is not enough, however, to just recognize that cultural attributes change, or do not change and/or are augmented by new cultural attributes; but one must recognize that these three

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factors are always found together, albeit differing proportions and therefore differing importance.

New whole culture patterns differ from previously defined ones by percentile change and usually it is the combination of the three factors which are responsible for the new and different systemic patterns that characterize the culture. If the new cultural attributes are introduced by a second culture, particularly in a conquest situation, the result will be an amalgamation of the three change factors in a process that constitutes syncretism, a type of acculturation. Syncretism has rarely been used in studies of societies except in reference to religion (Corona 1972, Edmonson 1960, Jiménez Moreno 1972, Madsen 1967, Nutini 1972). Syncretism traditionally refers specifically to the amalgamation of two different religious beliefs into a new religion. The new religion is a recognizable blend of both precursors. We have argued recently that syncretism should be extended conceptually to all cultural systems (Lee and Markman 1976a). It can be shown that syncretism has taken place in the social and the material as well as the ideological cultural system.

In the cultural contact situation the acculturation process can often be shown to be of the syncretic type. Even when cultural contact established on the basis of such overwhelming odds of conquest as in Mesoamerica, for example, the indigenous cultural systems were not eliminated immediately, but instead were changed by the introduction of some new elements, the suppression of other old attributes and the development of some new features which were not present in either the indigenous or conquest cultural systems.

This may be framed as a testable hypothesis which states that where a sustained culture contact situation between two different societies is maintained, even under the duress of severe conquest and domination, the resultant society will be characterized by a syncretic process of acculturation.

To test this hypothesis I will use data collected by the Coxoh Colonial Project (Lee and Markman 1976a, 1976b, Lee 1978) which was developed as part of the New World Archaeological Foundation's interdisciplinary regional study of the culture, history and processes of the human ecology in the upper basin of the Grijalva River and nearby portions of the Chiapas Highlands, Mexico (Fig. 1; Lee 1975).

Through the methodology of archaeology, ethno-history, linguistics, ethnoarchaeology and physical anthropology, the Coxoh Project is attempting to establish the parameters of several Coxoh cultural and biological systems and test the utility of the "genetic model" through the direct historical approach method.

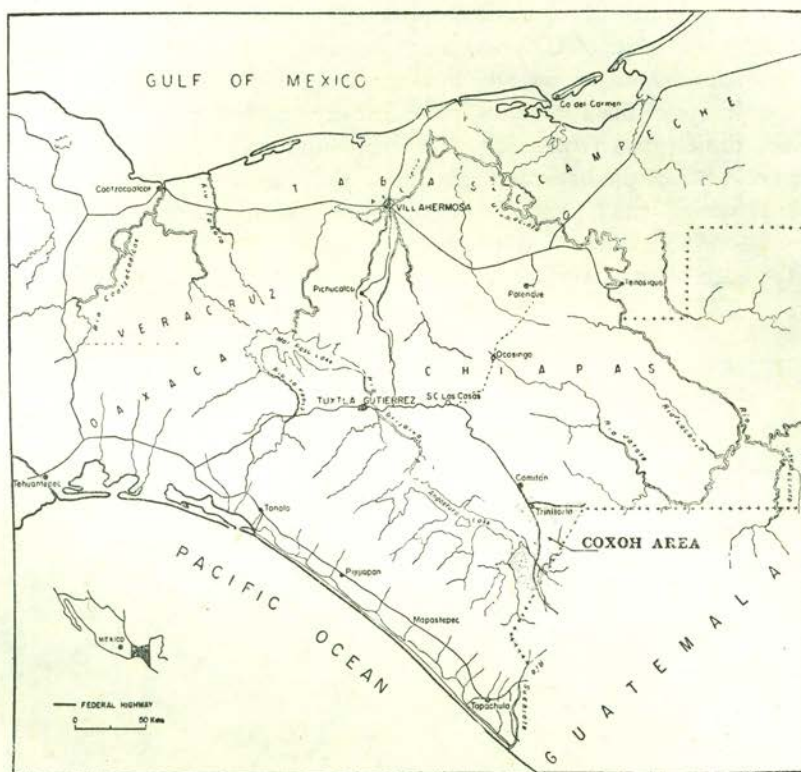


FIGURE 1. Distribution of the Coxoh at the time of the Spanish Conquest.

Briefly, by way of background, the Coxoh are an extinct Maya-speaking group which are known to have been reduced by the Spanish into seven towns in eastern central Chiapas (Fig. 2). These people spoke the southeast dialect of Tzeltal (Campbell 1978) and maintained themselves as agriculturalists by growing principally corn and cotton. The former for local consumption, the latter for export.

Four of the Coxoh towns were linked by the *Camino Real* which connected the Capital of the Province of Chiapa to the Audiencia of Guatemala of which it was part. Three other Coxoh towns were to one side of the *Camino Real*.

The Coxoh were confined, according to documentary sources, to the upper Grijalva River basin along its tributary the San Gregorio, the adjacent flanks of the Chiapas Highlands to the north, and a tip of the Highland Plateau including a small area around the towns of Comitán and Trinitaria and on to the Montebello Lakes area.

gan with the demise of Coapa and will continue on until the last Coxoh speaker is dead. This moment is not far off in the future as only a handful of Coxoh speakers are still alive, all of whom are elderly individuals. Today we will be concerned with only the first or Syncretic phase of Coxoh culture history and process.

Syncretic Evidence in Material Systems

Settlement Pattern

The indigenous Coxoh settlement pattern as known at the present is very sketchy, although data from our excavations terminated in December, 1977 are helping considerably to fill in the blanks. Six large Coxoh communities of the Late Postclassic are located on the banks of the largest rivers in the region and are either in the center or near the lower end of largest and best arable land in the region. Only four sites: Tenam Rosario (Tr-9), El Limón (Tr-14), Puente Moro (Tr-101) and Cancum (Tr-69) are in defensive location and all have fortification walls. Interestingly enough these sites, except Tenam Rosario, are along the border between the Coxoh and the Chuj-Jacalteco territory (Fig. 3). All other sites are in non-defensive locations in smaller river or on gently sloping hillsides, except one which is a cave well upon a cliff face Cueva de los Negros (Tr-12).

As yet we know nothing about non-nucleated community Late Postclassic Coxoh settlements. There probably were small outlying *parajes* and isolated farmsteads but these have not been recognized so far. The trend toward population nucleation throughout the Postclassic in Chiapas and elsewhere generally, however, would suggest that the characteristic form of settlement was larger communities rather than smaller.

Soon after conquest the Spanish affected dramatic change in the Coxoh settlement pattern through their policy of reduction and congregation. The location of four Colonial Coxoh villages: Aquespala, Escuintenango, Coapa and Comitán, can be explained in the overall strategy of the Spanish administrative communication network as vital, if not indispensable service facilities. Another village (Trinitaria) developed later near to the *Camino Real*. Two other villages (Coneta, Cuxu) appear to have been developed from high concentrations of population which existed in rich agricultural areas surrounding each town, well to either side of the *Camino Real*.

Coapa, on the *Camino Real*, is an excellent example of the Spanish putting their needs before that of the local Coxoh. This town, the

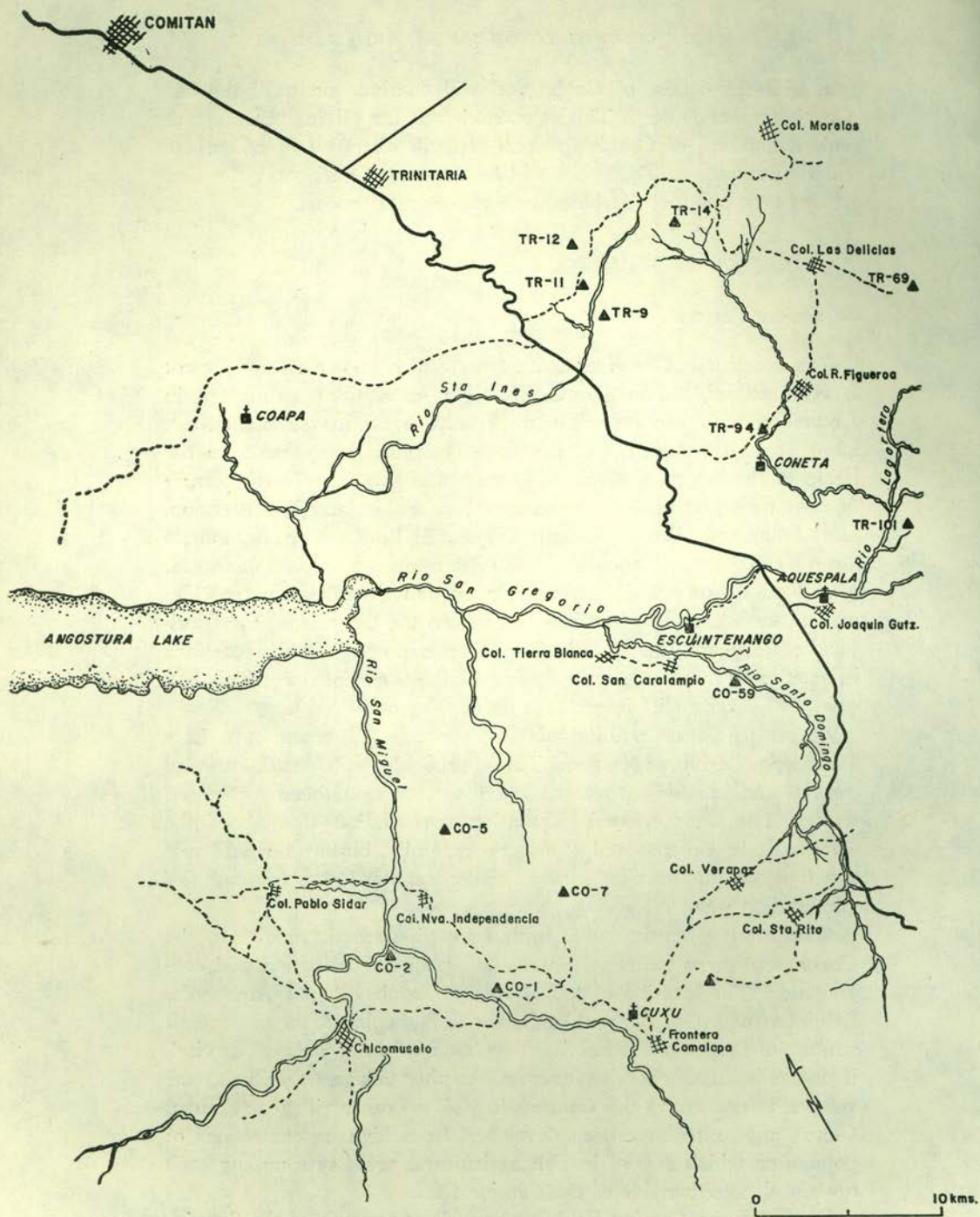


FIGURE 3. Probable Coxoh sites of the Terminal Postclassic Period.

first to become extinct, was founded in a very poor agricultural area at the edge of an unhealthy swamp which has only sulfur-contaminated water to offer. Today the area is still basically dedicated to cattle-raising, although corn is also grown for local consumption.

All Coxoh Colonial communities are founded on new townsites. No earlier Late Postclassic settlements underlie them. The Spanish did not found the Colonial Coxoh settlements on top of their pre-Conquest predecessors even when there was no ethnocentric or personal need to fulfill. There are probably several good reasons for this. Moving the Coxoh to a new site took them physically away from the pyramids, platforms and temples which were the structural focus of their native religion. Remaining in the old Coxoh ceremonial-civic center would have continually exposed them to the memories and the very ruins of the destroyed religion, making their conversion to the new religion more difficult and time consuming. Also in order to develop a Colonial community in the ancient Coxoh center, the Spanish would have had to deal, either forcefully or through persuasion, with already developed property interests of the Coxoh themselves, especially the religious and political elite who were grouped around the center of the community. It was much simpler for the Spanish to move the Coxoh to a new site where there were fewer vested interests than to remain in the old center.

Community Pattern

Three aspects of Coxoh villages characterize its community pattern: layout, orientation and structural content of the public and private domain. The Coxoh towns, like most other Spanish-founded towns in the New World, are laid out in a square grid pattern with the center block or two given up to the central plaza and main church and convent, and other civic buildings which are located on adjacent blocks facing on to the plaza (Fig. 4). Colonial Coxoh villages have a rigid and highly unified layout.

The complete lack of an overall town plan in Late Postclassic Coxoh sites contrasts dramatically with the later pattern. However, before the arrival of the Spanish, as well as after, the ceremonial structures, both secular and sacred, occupy the center of the community. A large open space or plaza around these structures has always been available for the congregation of large crowds for their participation in religious, commercial, political, or purely social activities. Prior to the Conquest, this space was relatively unstructured and irregular in shape. After-

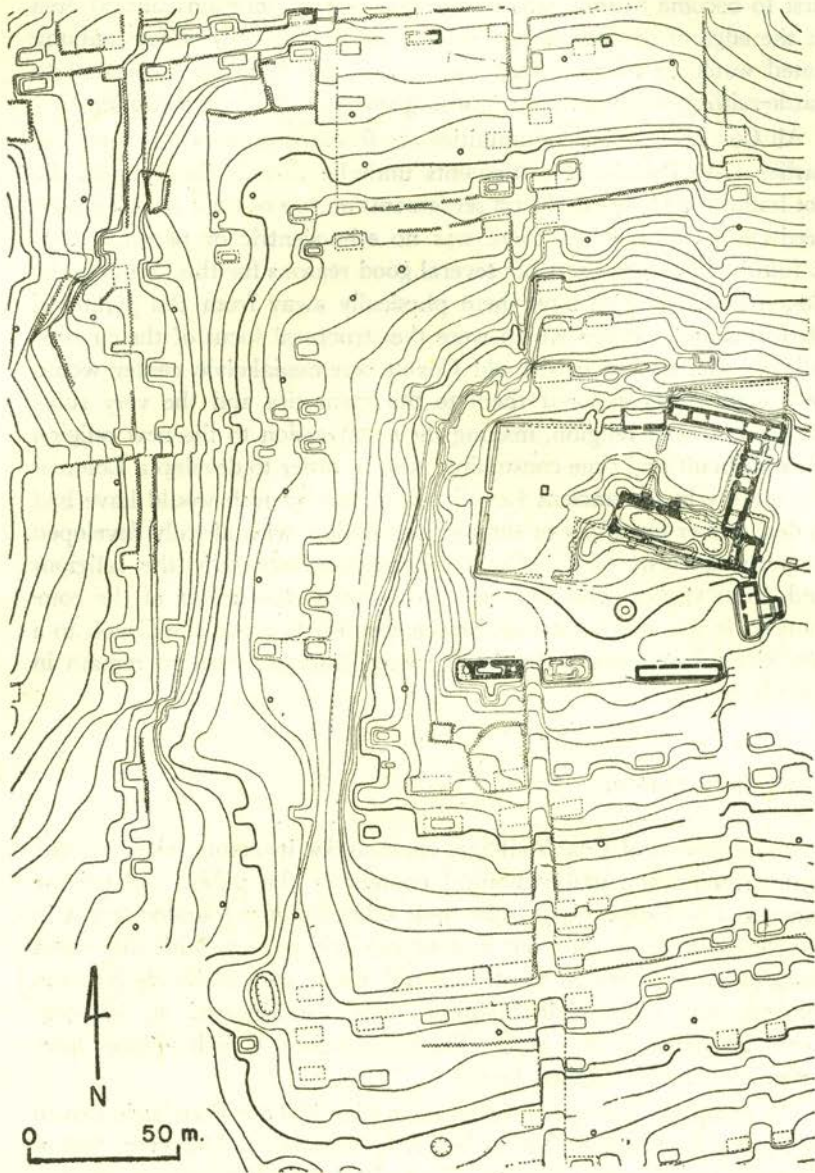


FIGURE 4. A central portion of the plan of the Coxoh Maya town of Coapa. Church-convent complex dominates the central area. Small circles are sweatbaths. Rectangles are domestic houses. Broken lines are rock walls.

wards, the plaza was always uniformly defined by the buildings which surrounded it, and access to the plaza was limited to the streets which issued into it. Pre-Conquest Coxoh towns do not have this overall unified layout. Considerable centrally located open space was left for congregation of the population around the religious and civil buildings during this period just as it was later under the Spanish domination.

The orientation of the Colonial Coxoh town street grid plan, as well as the orientation of the earliest chapels built in these towns of about 43° east of north much more nearly equates with the general pre-Spanish site orientation of civic-ceremonial centers than it does to that of the Mesoamerican Spanish orientation which was north-south, east-west.

The content of the public building domain was altered decisively by the Conquest. The single imposing religious structure of the Colonial community contrasts sharply with the earlier native pattern characterized by several civil-religious structures, almost all competing in importance and size with one another.

Many building techniques are direct carryovers from the pre-Conquest times into the early Colonial period, especially the use of lime with a high content of charcoal for mortar and plaster and clean rockfill platforms for bases of civil and religious public building, as well as others. The use of *xoc*, a soft, easily worked travertine limestone for coins of doors and windows of elite early Colonial buildings is a new technique.

Structurally the private domain in Colonial times has a wider latitude in terms of building patterns. Elite residences follow very closely the construction methods of the public buildings. In the residences of the commoners no discernible Spanish traits can be seen. All domestic as well as some sacred architecture had grass or palm-thatch roofs, wattle-and-daub walls with coursed stone footings and porches, and continued to be made in the tradition of the pre-Conquest Coxoh. A second better made wall type common in Colonial Coxoh domestic structures called *corazón de piedra* or heart of stone, can now definitely be said to be a pre-Spanish Coxoh building technique based on our excavations at Los Encuentros (Lee and Bryant, n.d.).

Other specialized structures such as sweat baths and lime kilns can be also traced to Late Postclassic Coxoh origins based on construction techniques.

Syncretic Evidence in Portable Material Culture

In comparison with Late Postclassic communities, the portable material culture inventory of Coxoh Colonial towns appears to be most impoverished. Even with the added abundance of metal, the range of types and variation within types of artefacts is extremely restricted. This may be due partly to a combination of poor preservation in the shallow colonial sites and their short length of occupation. However, Christianity certainly eliminated many items normally found in connection with the worship and maintenance of native pre-Hispanic religion of the region. Nor was there any longer a need for elite burial and cult offering items. The only ceramic indigenous ceremonial holder found in the Colonial Coxoh religious system is the spike-decorated, and lime-painted incense burner (Fig. 5).

Except for the incense burner form, only indigenous ceramic forms of domestic function seem to continue on into the Colonial period. These include the triple loophandled water jar, simple silhouette bowls, jars, colanders, and spindle whorls, all of which are made in the polished red and scraped brown native traditions. This is by far the most common pottery in all domestic situations including the convent. The candleholder is a new, Spanish introduced form made locally in the indigenous tradition (Fig. 5).

Imported glazed pottery of the Spanish tradition is also found in all domestic situations. It is always rare, but even the most humble indigenous house has some examples.

Lithic materials, lithic working techniques and specific lithic artifact types continue directly on from the Late Postclassic into the early Colonial period. Both ground stone and chipped stone artifacts continue to be made. Tripod basalt *metates* with round two-handed *manos* are common to both the pre-Conquest period and later times, as are chipped obsidian blades, "Guerrero", we call them "Coxoh" points and cutting flakes.

Metal is found in both Late Postclassic and early Colonial Coxoh occupations. During the pre-Hispanic period it is limited principally to copper and occurs most frequently in the form of jewelry and small cutting tools such as lancets and axes. Copper is also common in the Colonial period, but iron is even more important. This copper is made into tubes, a few vials and vessels. Iron is most frequently found in the form of square handwrought nails, cutting implements, rings, horseshoes and rarely keys. Silver is sometimes found in the form of Christian religious adornments for saints and religious paraphernalia. Metal objects are never common as those made in lithic

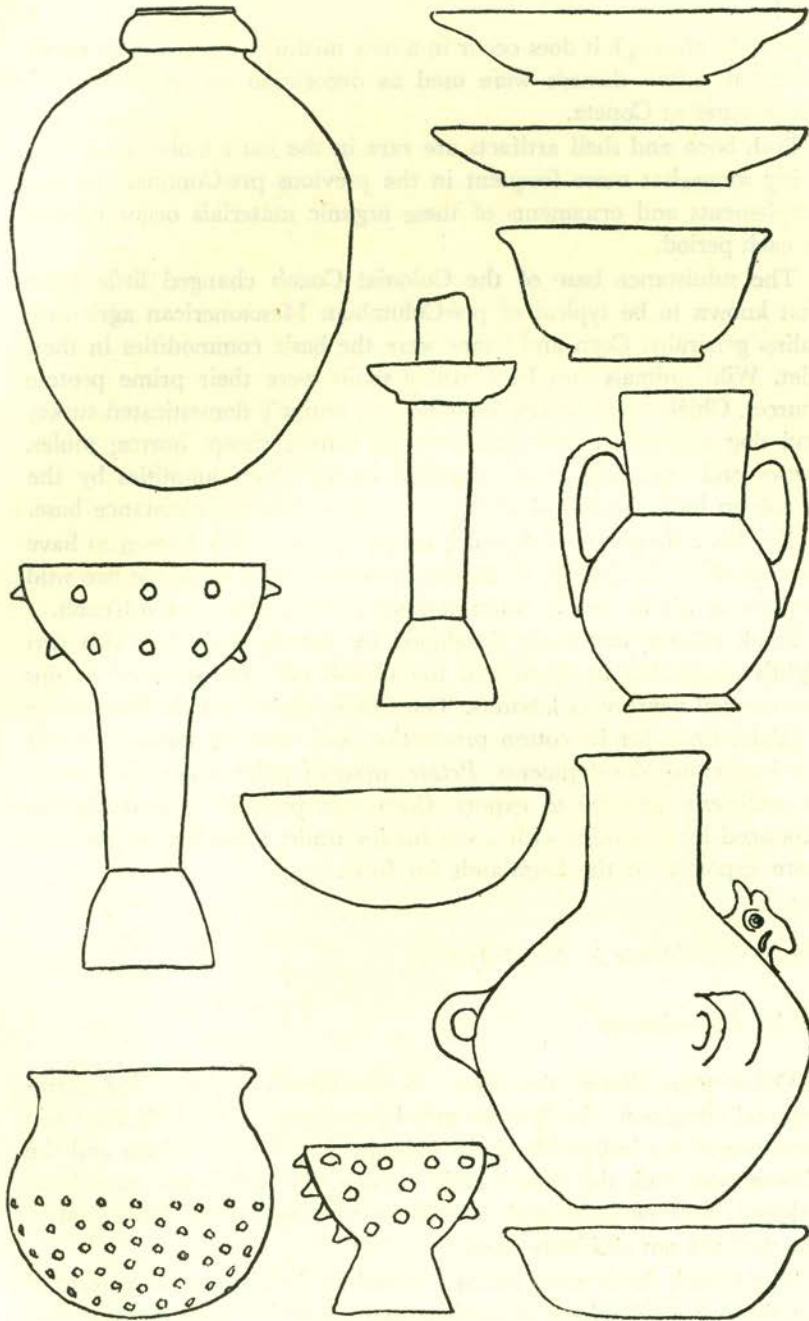


FIGURE 5. Colonial ceramic complex of both indigineous Coxoh and introduced Spanish technology.

materials, although it does occur in a new medium, cloth. Finely silver-wrapped cotton threads were used as decoration on women's skirts and blouses at Coneta.

Both bone and shell artifacts are rare in the early Colonial period, being somewhat more frequent in the previous pre-Conquest period. Implements and ornaments of these organic materials occur equally in each period.

The subsistence base of the Colonial Coxoh changed little from that known to be typical of pre-Columbian Mesoamerican agriculturalists generally. Corn and beans were the basic commodities in their diet. Wild animals and fresh water snails were their prime protein sources. Chickens early supplemented the natively domesticated turkey and dog as another principal protein. Cattle, sheep, burros, mules, horses and pigs were never acquired in sufficient quantities by the Coxoh to have figured significantly in their diet or subsistence base.

No domestic plants of Spanish origin are definitely known to have been used by the Coxoh. Palm and *guanacaste* tree seeds are two wild indigenous plants locally eaten and used extensively by the Coxoh.

Stock raising was early developed by the Spanish, but this was tightly controlled by them and the Coxoh only participated in this commercial venture as laborers. The Coxoh region was known during Colonial times for its cotton production and weaving industry which are indigenous developments. *Petate*, mats of palm, were also woven in sufficient quantity to export. Corn was probably less frequently produced in quantities with a surplus for trade. Palm hearts probably were exported to the Highlands for food.

Syncretic Evidence in Social Systems

Social Organization

Other than change the object of the Coxoh regional and extra-regional allegiance, the Spanish may have changed very little the basic structure of the indigenous social organization. *Encomenderos* and the Crown now took the tribute paid outside the region and may have reduced local *caciques* and *principales* to a somewhat lower status, but they did not eliminate them.

The Coxoh surely were strongly urged to the monogamous state of marriage. A quick check of modern Mayas nearby today suggests that the Spanish argument was not strong enough, if it had indeed much effect in the beginning at all.



PLATE I. Facade of the Coneta church, an early XVII Century Coxoh building.

Kinship

Well after the Conquest the Coxoh continued to be named with a bipart calendrical last name based on the ancient Tzeltal Maya calendar. By the end of the XVI Century most Coxoh had only Spanish first and last names. Until more ethno-historical work is done little more can be added concerning syncretism in kinship.

Religious System

In spite of all that has been written about Colonial and Modern religious syncretism in Mesoamerica, perhaps there are some who still need to be convinced that the special blend of Catholicism in Indian Mesoamerica today is due to the mixing of indigenous polytheistic views with the monotheistic beliefs of the bearers of the Conquest Culture. Not all aspects of the religious system underwent syncretism, for instance Coxoh burial customs of the Colonial period are completely Christian as far as we know. The dead were buried extended, with their feet toward the altar, both inside and outside of the church and unaccompanied by burial offerings. This was a dramatic change from the internment of the cremated remains of the dead, and its offering interred in a water jar, in the summit of a pyramid of the ceremonial center or in the deep reaches of some isolated cave during the preceding Late Postclassic period.

Quite naturally resistance to religious change is found among the Coxoh of this early Colonial period. This is demonstrated by their hiding images of the ancient deities behind altars and under the skirts of saints in order to continue their devotion to them (Ximénez 1929-31). The use of calendrical last names in baptism records long after the Conquest, proves that Coxoh religious practitioners had gone underground and continued to maintain the calendrical counts and, undoubtedly, the rites and rituals necessary to the well-being and functioning of the calendar and the community as well. The resistance to religious change would seem to have been the main impetus for syncretism.

A particularly good example of the mixing that has gone on in Colonial Coxoh religion can be seen on the facade of the Coneta church built about the second decade of the XVII Century (Plate I). Obviously the church and its facade conforms more architecturally to Spanish norms than its pre-Hispanic pyramidal forerunners. Although some definitely local building and material preparation techniques

are present in the facade, indigenous elements are most obvious in the decorative motifs which cover it. I will outline some of these briefly from top to bottom:

At the top register below the belltower flanking the central niche, is located a quadrifoil line and circle motif which vaguely reminds one of the Classic Maya twisted reed glyph (Glyph T 615, or the Glyph T 727, Thompson 1962). Directly below this motif is an even more amorphous one which looks very much like the cross-bones glyph (Glyph T 623). It is interesting that all known examples of this glyph appear in the *Madrid* and *Dresden Codexes*, which are Late Potsclassic in date.

In the second register are a series of four niches painted with four-bladed propeller-like motifs with a round spot often painted between the blades. This motif shows considerable resemblance to the *Mol* with propeller infix glyph (Glyph T 583) and the related shield glyph (Glyph T 624).

In the third register, just above the main door, is the round "rose window" which, with the niche and flanking circles above it, appear to form a large face. Large masks and mythical faces are common elements in Classic and Potsclassic Maya temple facades. The sun bursts or multi-pointed stars on the pilasters of the same register are also indigenous elements, as are the double bifurcated tongue motifs which flank all of the niches on this same level.

In the hips of the decorative arches which flank the main doorway are square cartouches which look very similar to the *Kin* glyph (Glyph T 544) with a variety of glyph T 6 attached below.

I do not intend to suggest that glyph or glyph-related decorative motifs on the Coneta church facade carry some integral message. There is only a very remote possibility that this is the case. I only wish to show that they appear to be rather closely related to the general pre-Hispanic Maya cultural milieu of which the Coxoh were part and that these symbols therefore meant something to them.

By far the most dramatic religious syncretism on the facade occurs in the polychrome paintings on the arches over the main doorway (Fig. 6). Painted in red, black, gray, brown and pale yellow are angels, the sun, corn plants, monsters with plants issuing from their mouths, and the *santísimo* or host. The angels are, of course, Catholic and the monsters too; although in the latter we find an interesting coincidence in both Catholic and indigenous icons. The jaguar and an earth monster or *Cipactli* are very important figures in pre-Columbian cosmology. Their representations appear in paintings, stone sculptures, architecture and pottery. They are ubiquitous anciently. The

lion and dragon are common elements in Catholic, especially Dominican, iconography. There are similar mythical monsters from the Tecpatan convent of the same period.

The two plants which issue from the monsters' mouths are thought to be squash represented mainly by its flower, and the prickly pear portrayed principally by its fruit.

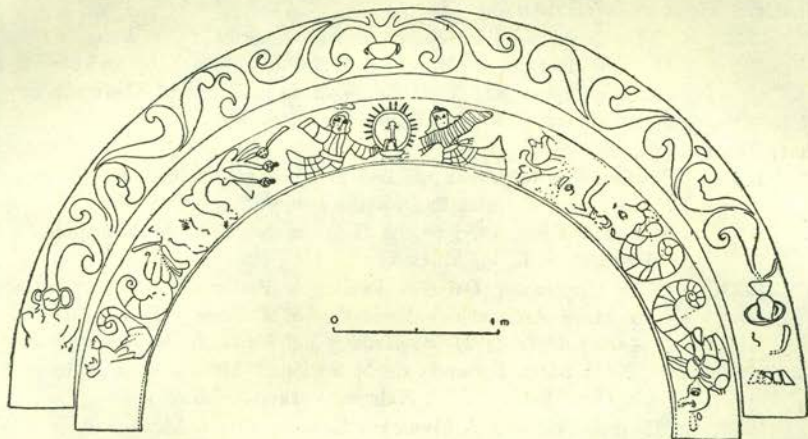


FIGURE 6. Line drawing of the polychrome painted designs on the arch faces of the Coneta church main door.

The *santisimo*, between the two angels, rests in a long-legged tripod bowl. This ceramic form is one of the hallmarks of the Late Postclassic period. Here would seem to be the epitome of Coxoh-Catholic religious syncretism.

While many details remain to be discovered in the realms of artifactual, archival and genetic data on the Coxoh acculturation process, the main outline is clear enough to suggest that the syncretic nature of this process is a first step in the explanation of what happened in the XVI and XVII Century contact between the indigenous Coxoh Maya and the conquering Spaniards.

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