Ecology, Power, and Religion: Cognitive Landscapes on the Yucatán Peninsula

The research project was initiated by a multidisciplinary research group consisting of historian of religions Docent Bodil Liljefors Persson (BLP) and archaeologist Dr Christian Isendahl (CI). The aim of the project is to offer a nuanced understanding of the dynamic relations and processes that shaped people-society-landscape on the Yucatán Peninsula in a long-term perspective. This overarching, broad research aim has been maintained throughout the course of the project. The research group has employed many different perspectives that brought together and have offered a multifaceted insight concerning the complex relations between Maya religious beliefs and practices, environments, economic systems, and power structures.

An important research result—that also has significant potential for application in investigations of cultures and time periods other than those of immediate interest in the current project—is the conceptual framework that has been continuously reworked and refined as the project has progressed. The integrative, relational, and multidimensional landscape perspective to understand the spatial disposition of religious beliefs and practices has been applied in several studies of the project. This broad perspective attempts to integrate constructivist with geophysical outlooks on landscape ontology, etic with emic aspects of landscape epistemology, and behavioral with cognitive approaches to human ecological relations. The landscape perspective is relational in the sense that the different constituent parts of a landscape are meaningful primarily in relation to other relevant parts. The emphasis on the multidimensionality of landscape is in response to the different ways that religious beliefs and practices interact with other aspects of landscape (e.g., economy, politics, and natural processes) in ways that certainly are intimately interlinked, but that can be identified as individual levels and analyzed separately.

The theoretical approach formulated by application in various contexts within the project demonstrates considerable potential to explain complex relationships and open doors to supplementary and holistic perspectives on the relationships between religion and environment, economy, and politics. A specific example is CI’s investigation of a large-scale water reservoir at Xuch, an agro-urban settlement on the northern Yucatán Peninsula dated to the Late Classic to Early Postclassic Periods (c. AD 600-1250). The results from archaeological investigations carried out during 2007 within the framework of the project and that are discussed in several articles suggests that the water reservoir was a key resource in a seasonal dry climate with an inaccessible aquifer. The reservoir was regarded an axis mundi. It was a key place for politico-religious ceremonies with community integrative purposes and a central symbol of fertility in a drought-sensitive environment. The natural processes in the karst environment that had contributed to the formation of
the reservoir supported an animistic perception of landscape and were also associated with sexual metaphors.

The conceptual framework is similarly useful in the analysis of religious practice in more recent time periods, as BLP's studies of both Early Colonial and contemporary rituals lucidly demonstrate. BLP has conducted two seasons of fieldwork as part of the project (in 2005 and 2007), including observations of rituals and archive research. The interaction between factors of political power and rituals and how these are strongly linked in the physical landscape is emphasized in several of her articles. Both particular places in the landscape and rituals are significant carriers of meaning and identity, which can be seen throughout the historical period and until the present. This is particularly evident in places with strong continuity of cult place, such as Maní, Chichén Itzá, and XCacal Guardia where both socio-economic and religious and political dimensions can be distinguished and that collectively offers a holistic viewpoint.

The results from the research project answers to our expectations not least in the sense that the research questions the results give rise to extend by far the number of questions we have been able to provide answers for. The issues dealt with, the conceptual framework, and research results to some extent sets the agenda for continued explorations of the borderlands between humanistic, social, and natural sciences perspectives on people-society-landscape on the Yucatán Peninsula in a long-term perspective.

The most important publications generated from the project include the volume the project members currently edit. During the latter phase of the project, the research group organized an international conference within the framework of The Association of European Mayanists annual meetings (www.wayeb.org). Nearly 200 scholars and students participated when over 20 specialists in Maya archaeology, history, and religion from Europe, the United States, and Mexico discussed “Ecology, Power, and Religion in Maya Landscapes”. With financial support from the Research Council, Malmö University hosted the first international research conference on the Maya culture ever organized in Sweden. The European Maya Conferences and proceedings are highly regarded within the field of scientific Maya investigation. The volume emanating from the Malmö conference collects reworked and peer-reviewed versions of the major conference contributions, and includes chapters by several leading Maya scholars outlining supplementary perspectives on the relationships between religious beliefs and practices and landscape in a wide sense. The editors contribute with a joint introduction discussing the main research themes and suggest some guidelines for continued investigation within the field. CI’s individual chapter discusses exhaustively the integrative, relational, and multidimensional landscape perspective to understand the spatial disposition of religious beliefs and practices with illustrative applications primarily on the basis of the material made available from his archaeological
investigations at Xuch. BLP’s individual chapter deals with cosmology, rituals, and sacred places in the Yucatec landscape, similarly discussing the multidimensional landscape perspective in relation to different discourses of power based on historical, iconographic, and ethnographic data.

In addition to the conference proceedings we need to stress two additional publications. CI is currently finalizing a scientific article focusing on the interrelated economic, political, and symbolic importance of water reservoirs during the Late Classic to Early Postclassic that has been briefly outlined above. BLP has authored a scientific article accepted for publication in a refereed volume of conference proceedings that discusses evidence of negotiations of ethnicity and power relations in Early Colonial historical sources from the Yucatán.

In addition to the publications in the attached list of publications and to presentations at the Malmö conference, BLP has disseminated research results at several international conferences, including Congreso Internacional de Mayistas in Mérida (2005), the Americanist congress in Seville (2006), and at the European Social Science History Conference in Lisbon (2008). BLP has also presented research results at a number of public lectures, for instance at the Historical Museum in Stockholm (2006), at Malmö University (2005 and 2006), and at the research seminar of the Department of Social Anthropology, Lund University (2007).