Journal of Anthropological Archaeology 34 (2014) 78–99

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Journal of Anthropological Archaeology

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/jaa

Cross-valley communities: Identity and interaction in Early Postclassic period highland Chiapas

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Received 2 June 2013
Revision received 18 February 2014
Available online 29 March 2014

Keywords:
Maya
Mesoamerica
Chiapas
Community
Ceramics
Style
Interaction
Consumption

ABSTRACT

Over the last half-century, anthropologists have employed the concept of "communities" as an interpretive framework. While many scholars have conceptualized the community as a territorial unit, it may be more usefully viewed as a type of social network. As social networks, communities create patterned relationships and interactions between their members, which can be reflected in various aspects of material culture from landscape markers to similarities in the stylistic attributes of domestic artifact assemblages. This article examines the nature and degree of interaction between the Early Postclassic period archaeological sites of Moxviquil, Huitepec, and Yerba Buena in highland Chiapas, and the degree to which the relationships between them constitute communities as social networks. Statistical measures of homogeneity and boundedness are used to compare ceramic vessel attributes at these three sites, and to identify patterns of exchange, emulation and distinction in ceramic assemblages. The results of the analysis suggest high degrees of homogeneity in ceramic attributes between Jovel Valley sites, in contrast with low degrees of homogeneity between the Jovel Valley sites and Yerba Buena. However, the results also indicate a low degree of boundedness between these three sites, suggest low-intensity inter-valley interaction between separate communities.

Introduction

Archaeological approaches to the study of ancient communities have been burdened in recent years by the variation in the meaning of "the community." Like many other social scientists, anthropological archaeologists often seek to identify social units that transcend smaller social entities such as individuals and households (Marcus, 2000:232). Contrasting notions of communities as spatial units versus social units have been observed in anthropological, sociological and colloquial usages of this term since the mid-20th century (Hollingshead, 1948). Territorial approaches to ancient communities commonly view the community as the social equivalent of archaeologically defined spatial units within ancient settlement systems, while social network approaches emphasize the community as a form of identity and/or interaction. Archaeologists are only just beginning to take full advantage of the potential of the concept of communities as social networks in order to empirically examine the patterned social relationships and interactions between community members from a bottom-up perspective. As dynamic and flexible social entities, communities provide a useful concept for the archaeological investigation of social units that span territorial boundaries as reflected in various aspects of material culture, from landscape markers to the stylistic attributes of utilitarian objects.

This paper uses a bottom-up perspective on communities as social networks to examine the degree of community-scale interaction between Early Postclassic period archaeological sites in highland Chiapas. I compare ceramic assemblages from Moxviquil and Huitepec, two Postclassic period sites located on opposite sides of the Jovel Valley, to Yerba Buena, a more distant highland site located 60 km to the southeast, near the Amantenango Valley. I discuss style in material culture as a way of observing interaction in the archaeological record, and suggest that statistical comparisons of homogeneity and boundedness between the stylistic attributes of utilitarian ceramic vessels can be used to examine the scale and nature of interactions between different sites. Furthermore, social networks can vary in the degree to which spatial borders (whether features of the built or natural landscape) serve as social boundaries. As such, variation in homogeneity and boundedness can be used to identify community boundaries, as well as identify other types of relationships between different communities. An analysis of ceramic attributes at Moxviquil and Huitepec suggest that the Jovel Valley served as a locus for social interaction between separate settlements within a broader community, rather than as a geographic barrier that represented a social boundary

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http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.jaa.2014.03.002
0278-4165/

between rival groups. In contrast, the distance between the Jovel Valley and Amatenango Valley hindered, but did not preclude low-intensity interaction between the two areas.

Communities in theory, communities in practice

While there is a long history of studying communities in social science research, the use of the term itself has often proved problematic, due to conflicting meanings of "the community" in both academic prose and popular usage. Academic works on communities inevitably contend with the tension between communities as social networks, and communities as spatial units. In 1948, Hollingshead acknowledged this tension by remarking that:

> "sociologists [and social anthropologists] are neither sure of what they mean by such basic terms as 'city,' 'community,' 'neighborhood' and 'ecology,' nor are they consistent with one another in their usage. . .The term 'community' is defined in at least three different ways in current literature: 1. as a form of group solidarity, cohesion, and action around common and diverse interests; 2. as a geographic area with spatial limits; or 3. a socio-geographic structure which combines the ideas embodied in 1 and 2 (Hollingshead, 1948:145).

Little has changed since Hollingshead's day; in many ways, research on communities in anthropology, and particularly in archaeology, is still plagued by conflicting definitions. However, as Hollingshead (1948) observes, his second definition of community, as a "geographic area with spatial limits" renders the term "community" synonymous with other territorial units such as cities, villages, towns and neighborhoods, and therefore is of limited anthropological (and sociological) utility. In contrast, "community" becomes an anthropologically useful term in discussing a social group with "solidarity, cohesion, and action" (Hollingshead, 1948) while acknowledging that physical (or virtual) spaces are often important for the creation and maintenance of community membership through frequent interaction.

Historically, many scholars have embraced Hollingshead's second definition of communities, emphasizing the "community-as-territory" approach. Many mid-century sociological community studies utilized this approach, in tandem with a more general structural–functionalist approach to the study of society. For example Murdock (1949:80) defines a community as "the maximal group of persons who normally reside together in face-to-face association" and argues that it may "assume the form of a *village*, occupying a concentrated cluster of dwellings near the center of the exploited territory, or of a *neighborhood*, with its families scattered in semi-isolated households." As such, he argues that communities function to facilitate social interaction, allow for cooperative food production activities, permit reciprocal aid and sharing among members, and facilitate economic specialization within the community. The community-as-territory approach has been widely adopted in archaeological studies in conjunction with regional settlement pattern studies (Marcus, 2000:232), such that communities become synonymous with sites, villages, towns, wards, neighborhoods, or districts (e.g. Lipe, 1970:86; Kolb and Snead, 1997:615; Mehrer, 2000:45; Preucel, 2000:60). In Mesoamerican archaeology, this approach has been reinforced by the colloquial use of the term *comunidad* ("community") to refer to rural villages and towns in modern Mesoamerican countries. A community-as-territory approach also has some obvious benefits for archaeologists, as it allows for the creation of a methodological equivalency between settlement pattern studies and studies of communities in the archaeological record (Kolb and Snead, 1997). "The creation and maintenance of local identity is essentially rooted in economic practice and social reproduction, but is manifest in the manipulation of boundaries both physical and symbolic" (Kolb and Snead, 1997:611). As such, communities may erect and maintain formal spatial boundaries as a way to signify membership to both members and non-members (Kolb and Snead, 1997:613).

However, territorial boundaries may be symbolic rather than physically marked, and may instead be established and maintained through the use of informal landmarks or aspects of material culture. This creates methodological problems for community-as-territory approaches that rely on the identification of physical boundary objects. Furthermore, the reduction of communities to spatial entities negates the usefulness of "the community" as an analytical concept. Most archaeologically-defined settlement units often glossed as "communities" are archaeological sites interpreted as (and perhaps best described in terms of) various types of sociopolitical units at the middle level of settlement between households and regions such as urban barrios, districts, neighborhoods or suburbs; rural hamlets; villages or towns; fortresses; provinces; or city-states (Flannery, 1976:8; Hare, 2000:79). The conflation of "the community" with these other types of territorial units results in the following: (1) it creates confusion between scholars with different ideas on the size and nature of ancient communities; (2) it privileges scholarly definitions of ancient communities over communities as created and conceptualized by ancient peoples; and (3) it deemphasizes the potential use of non-territorial aspects of material culture to mark community membership. In particular, community-as-territory approaches do not allow for a consideration of social groups that transcend territorial boundaries, whether political boundaries imposed by a past or present political authority, or site boundaries as imposed on the material record by archaeologists. As such, the community-as-territory approach has significant limitations in archaeological contexts where sites are spatially proximate, but where the sociopolitical relationships between them are uncertain and cannot be assumed.

An alternative approach to the study of communities is to study communities as social networks. This approach favors Hollingshead's first definition of community as "a form of group solidarity, cohesion, and action around common and diverse interests" (1948:145). All individuals exist within multifaceted social networks, and many different aspects of one's identity can potentially form the basis of community membership. Through the use of this approach, community membership is defined on the basis of actual or perceived commonalities, but by defining commonalities, community members often consist of individuals who exhibit a diverse array of social identities in other ways (Barnes, 2011).

The community-as-social network approach allows for variation in the forms that a community may take, and acknowledges the potential complexity of spatial and non-spatial networks of social, political, and economic relations (Hare, 2000:79). It is true that communities can be defined through co-residence and can be synonymous with small-scale residential, territorial, and/or political units. However, communities may also include part-time residents, emigrants who maintain contact and interaction with other community members, and communities that include spatially disparate members who maintain contact through meetings, written or technological communication. Community membership may be defined or assigned on the basis of political membership, or in order to solidify the boundaries of a particular group for a political purpose (Preucel, 2000:58); however, community membership may also cross political boundaries. Similarly, community membership may be defined on the basis of other types of social identity: ethnicity, language, customs, age, gender, religion, profession, or class (Barnes, 2011; Díaz-Andreu and Lucy, 2005:10; Mancini et al., 2005:571). Notably, by emphasizing a particular commonality in order to create community