

The Social Geography of South Florida during the Spanish Colonial Era

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Abstract

Between the 1513 and 1760, the indigenous societies of South Florida were subjected to increasingly forceful external pressures which eventually led to cultural extinction. Nevertheless, perhaps more effectively than any other region of greater Spanish Florida, the Calusa and their neighbors mounted a conscious and proactive resistance to these colonial forces, preserving many elements of their traditional culture while simultaneously dooming themselves to eventual destruction and exile. Synthetic review of available ethnohistorical and archaeological data throughout this period provides important insights regarding the social geography of this unique nonagricultural region sandwiched between the agricultural peoples of northern Florida and Cuba.

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No less than fifteen years after Columbus' 1492 landfall in the Bahamas, the indigenous inhabitants of South Florida began to experience the indirect impact of Spanish colonization in the broader Caribbean basin, marking their reluctant entry into a European-centered world that would ultimately result in their cultural extinction within 250 years. By 1509, the Spanish conquest had already pushed across most of the major islands of the Caribbean, including Hispaniola, Puerto Rico, and Jamaica, leaving only Cuba as a safe haven along the northwestern margin of the Taino culture area. In 1511, Spanish forces finally penetrated the Cuban interior in search of fugitive Indians from Hispaniola, beginning the conquest that would ultimately absorb Cuba's indigenous peoples into the Spanish colonial empire (e.g. Wright 1970). It was this chain of events—the flight of Taino Indians into Cuba and their subjugation under Spanish rule after 1511—which ultimately set the stage for the migration of native refugees from Cuba into South Florida, forewarning the South Florida Indians about the approaching juggernaut of Spanish colonization. Perhaps for this reason more than any other, when the Calusa of the Southwest Florida coastline were first contacted by Juan Ponce de Leon in the summer of 1513, their first strategy was to send a Caribbean Indian who spoke some Spanish as a stalling tactic before an organized frontal assault against the invaders (Herrera 1601; Worth n.d.). Not only had the Calusa been forewarned, but they appear to have previously made a conscious decision to adopt a policy of resistance and isolationism, which would persist for more than a century and a half with only brief interruptions.

After first contact in 1513, Spanish interaction with South Florida was minimal for two generations. Illicit Spanish slaving into the newfound territory was launched from Cuba prior to 1517, when 300 Florida Indians were said to have been captured illegally in territory granted to Ponce de Leon (Spanish Crown 1517; Worth n.d.). Ponce's 1521 colonization attempt was a

failure, and it was only the repeated shipwrecks of Spanish vessels along Florida's eastern coastline that ultimately brought Spanish captives and precious metals into the domain of the Calusa, whose political dominance of South Florida seems unquestionable throughout the era (Herrera 1601; Oviedo y Valdés 1851; True 1944). It was no accident that Pedro Menéndez de Avilés sailed directly to the Calusa capitol at Mound Key on the Southwest Florida coast in 1566 in search of the largest concentration of captive Christians throughout South Florida, any more than it was a coincidence that Menéndez garrisoned a fort for nearly three years there, longer than any other Florida outpost outside the colonial towns of St. Augustine and Santa Elena (Hann 1991: 217-321; Worth n.d.). The Calusa were the most populous, powerful, and fiercely independent society in all of South Florida, and necessarily take precedence in any discussion of the social geography of the region.

The broad parameters of Calusa sociopolitical organization can be reconstructed using sparse though informative ethnohistorical data dating in large part from the 1560s. Most of this derives from the memoirs of shipwrecked Spaniard Hernando de Escalante Fontaneda, who was shipwrecked as a 13-year-old boy in 1549 along Florida's southeast coast, and who spent 17 years as a Calusa captive (True 1944; Worth 1995). As an interpreter for the principal Calusa chief on Mound Key, and subsequently for the Spanish who lived there from 1566 to 1569, Fontaneda was privy to the type and quality of information that makes his later memoirs both reliable and profoundly instructive.

Fontaneda enumerated a total of 50 pueblos pertaining to the "land of Carlos," and he named as many as 37 of them in two comprehensive lists, one naming pueblos and the other naming their chiefs (Escalante Fontaneda n.d.a, n.d.b). Based on the known or suspected locations of the coastal pueblos he listed, the Calusa coastal heartland minimally seems to have

stretched from Charlotte Harbor on the north to Cape Sable on the south (see Worth n.d.). He furthermore described the Calusa domain as extending all the way to a pueblo called Guacata, which he otherwise listed within the domain of the Ais chiefdom along the Atlantic coast of South Florida, and also including some 25 pueblos situated in the interior lake district around Lake Okeechobee, called Mayaimi by the Calusa. Fontaneda even included the westernmost pueblos on the Florida Keys, including Guarugunbe and its subordinate Cuchiaga. In sum, Fontaneda described a domain that included well over half the area of the southern Florida peninsula, including the sparsely-populated interior district of Lake Okeechobee and most of the western Everglades, and a far more densely-populated estuarine coastline. The linear extent of the Calusa domain reached some 200 miles, and encompassed perhaps over 10,000 square miles.

Marginal notes on several of Fontaneda's original manuscripts have been attributed to royal cosmographer Juan Lopez de Velasco, who seems likely to have derived his information from Fontaneda himself (Worth 1995). One of these notes includes population estimates for various South Florida groups, including 20,000 for Carlos and 1,000 for Guarugunbe. Estimates for other groups within the list seem reasonably accurate, and so the Calusa numbers are probably sound, especially if they were generated by Fontaneda, who knew more about the Calusa than any other group. Therefore, a total population of 21,000 for the Calusa domain does not seem out of line.

Using the Fontaneda texts, accurate reconstruction of the sixteenth-century social geography of the Calusa domain and greater South Florida hinges on Fontaneda's conception of the Spanish term "pueblo," which literally means "town" or "village," but which might incorporate considerable variability both in terms of overall size and spatial arrangement. The overall number of pueblos is remarkably consistent through the early European colonial era.

Based on a 1612 expedition, the Florida governor related a figure of 60 subordinate pueblos claimed by the Calusa chief on Mound Key, and Fontaneda's breakdown of 25 coastal and 25 interior pueblos also matches a contemporary Jesuit relation of 30 subordinate chiefs within 40 leagues of the Calusa capitol (Fernández de Olivera 1612; Hann 1991: 9-12; Zubillaga 1946: 429-30).

Using Fontaneda's global figures of 20,000 people distributed in 50 named pueblos, it is possible to infer an average "pueblo" size of 400 inhabitants. Fontaneda's own text indicates, however, that most or all of the pueblos located in the interior district around Lake Okeechobee were considerably smaller, on the range of between 20 and 40 inhabitants each, and López de Velasco's notes suggest populations of 40 and 80 for Cuchiaga and Tatesta in the western Keys, respectively. The Calusa capitol on Mound Key, in contrast, seems to have had a much larger population, and as late as 1697 was estimated to have a population of roughly 1,000 by Franciscan missionaries (Hann 1991: 159). This broad range of community populations is also comparable to that encountered by a 1680 Spanish-Timucuan overland expedition to the northern margins of Calusa territory, during which five villages with from as few as 20 to as many as 300 inhabitants each were encountered along the way (Hann 1991: 23-27).

If Fontaneda's breakdown of smaller interior communities and larger coastal communities can therefore be used as a basis, the Calusa population may well have been heavily weighted toward coastal populations, with perhaps 90 to 95 percent of the Calusa population living along the rich estuaries along the coast. If this were the case, average coastal pueblo sizes might have been as much as 700 people, contrasted with well under 100 inhabitants for interior pueblos.

Regardless of whether Fontaneda's 50 named Calusa pueblos ranged widely in population size from 20 to 1,000 inhabitants, or were instead more evenly distributed near an average of just 400, the question remains as to what exactly a pueblo represented, and in turn what the chief of such a pueblo may have represented in terms of a local or regional political structure within the broader Calusa domain. More specifically, did Fontaneda's named pueblos represent spatially-discrete individual towns, villages, and hamlets distributed more-or-less evenly across the landscape, each governed by a single hereditary headman or chief, or did they instead represent localized clusters of smaller communities which were each governed as small chiefdoms by a named cacique? Both are theoretically possible, given that archaeological data from the interior Southeastern U.S. reveal many agricultural chiefdoms comprised of a handful of walled towns averaging more than 700 inhabitants, just as ethnohistorical records suggest that the smallest Timucuan chiefdoms in northern Florida were comprised of perhaps 750 inhabitants distributed in half a dozen small villages (e.g. Worth 1998: 2-8; 2003a; Hally et al. 1990). Nevertheless, the absence of corn agriculture from the southern Florida peninsula, combined with the archaeological record of fewer but substantially larger estuarine communities specifically during late prehistory in Southwest Florida (e.g. Widmer 1989: 255-260), as well as the wide range of population sizes cited by Fontaneda and others for individual communities across South Florida, suggests to me that Fontaneda's pueblos were more likely discrete communities than tiny chiefdoms.

Based on this interpretation, the areally-extensive Calusa polity would therefore have been comprised of a broadly-distributed constellation of no more than 50 individual communities varying in size from less than 50 to as many as 1,000 inhabitants, the largest and most populous of which were situated alongside the rich coastal estuaries, and the smallest of which were inland

among the lakes, swamps, and streams of the interior. Though half the Calusa communities were evidently located in the interior, no more than 10 percent of the total population lived in this region, demonstrating a substantial economic focus on estuarine resources along the coastal margin.

Reconstructing the internal political economy of the Calusa polity is a daunting task, especially with respect to the degree of political autonomy for each disparate community, and the extent to which there may have been regional settlement clusters or an organizational hierarchy between the principal Calusa chief and local village headmen (see, for example, Goggin and Sturtevant 1964; Marquardt 1987, 1988; Widmer 1988). Moreover, there is considerable ambiguity regarding the precise nature of local and regional chieftaincy, including the mechanisms for inheritance, the exact nature of governance and jurisdiction, and the importance of political marriages and chiefly polygamy. Leaving these matters aside, however, in broad perspective there is sufficient evidence regarding the overall relationship between the Calusa and their neighbors during the Spanish colonial era to provide important insights into the nature of political power across South Florida.

Without question, the Calusa polity represented the largest demographic and military entity in all of South Florida, so much so that neighboring Indians and Spaniards alike were largely unable to penetrate or even significantly influence the hegemony of the Calusa chiefs through the early 18th century. With the sole exception of fort San Antón de Carlos from 1566-1569, and a brief Spanish visit followed by a later retaliatory expedition in 1612-1614, the Calusa kept the Spanish effectively at bay from 1513 through 1688, when Calusa policy shifted resulting in a greater degree of contact between Mound Key and Havana, Cuba (see Worth 2003b, 2004, n.d.). And even though surrounding South Florida chiefdoms to the east and north

were more-or-less autonomous during this era, the Calusa chiefs repeatedly demonstrated their military might by dispatching long-distance military raids against opposing groups with Spanish ties. Early in 1568 the Calusa chief was reported to have had the chief of Tatesta and two other Indians murdered in the eastern Keys for this reason, and in 1614 the Calusa sent a fleet of 300 canoes to the province of Mocoço along modern Tampa Bay where they slaughtered some 500 Spanish-allied Indians in two towns and sent the 12 wounded survivors to St. Augustine to claim credit for the massacre and to threaten the Spanish governor not to interfere (Menéndez Márquez 1568; Treviño Guillamas 1614). And as late as 1680 a Spanish-Timucuan expedition was ultimately unable to penetrate the Calusa perimeter due to standing Calusa threats of chiefly assassination if Spaniards were allowed to approach the Calusa heartland (Hann 1991: 23-27).

A sea-change in Calusa policy was implemented in 1688, beginning with the Calusa chief's request for and eventual receipt of baptism in Havana by early 1690, and followed by a short-lived Franciscan mission to Mound Key in 1697, and subsequent evidence for regular shipboard visitation to Havana over the next decade (Worth 2003b, 2004). Perhaps in response to dwindling population levels due to the combined effects of European diseases and overall political fragmentation, together with the gradual advance of Spanish missionaries and soldiers southward into the lake district of central south Florida during this era, the Calusa must have realized, too late, that their policy of total isolation was no longer tenable. The Calusa chief was reported to be in control of only 2,000 people by 1697, though detailed testimony from early the following year indicates that many or most of the coastal Calusa towns were nonetheless still in their original locations along the Southwest Florida coast (Hann 1991: 161-205). Despite the traumatic and depopulating effect of the colonial era, it was ultimately the massive success with which the Calusa resisted Spanish contact which, ironically, set the stage for their rapid demise

in the early 18th century. With the collapse of the western Florida mission chain between 1704 and 1706, English-allied Yamasee and Creek slave raiders armed with firearms quickly plunged deep into South Florida, and within the span of a seven-year period, as many as ten thousand captives were reported to have been sold into slavery (Worth 2003b, 2004). By early 1711, the few survivors that remained had fled as refugees to one of two safe-havens: St. Augustine or the Florida Keys. Spanish aid finally arrived, but was ultimately too little and too late. In the spring of 1711, two ships brought a total of 270 South Florida Indians to settle as refugees on Havana harbor, including the hereditary chief of the Calusa, his heir, and 50 other Calusa vassals, along with a handful of other chiefs from the west and east coasts of South Florida. Tragically, however, 200 of these immigrants died within three months of their arrival from the effects of smallpox and typhus, including the entire Calusa noble lineage. Ethnohistorical records suggest that the remaining South Florida Indians were subsequently governed by surviving Tequesta nobility, though ultimately these last few hundred survivors were pushed by Creek raiders all the way to Key West, where a final and devastating raid on May 17, 1760 resulted in the final evacuation of South Florida by some 60 to 70 remaining survivors. Ongoing research in Cuba reveals only minimal potential for continuing descendency from the 18th-century migrations, but in any case Calusa political hegemony seems to have ended by 1711 (Worth 2004).

In the end, while the Calusa policy of isolationism may well have preserved their indigenous culture and political dominance in South Florida far longer than any other group in greater Spanish Florida, it was this very policy which ultimately proved fatal in the context of the Indian slave trade emanating out of the English colonies to the north. Cultural conservatism was eventually defeated by adaptation and transformation, and the South Florida Indians were destroyed and replaced by the ancestors of the modern Seminole and Miccosukee, whose active

participation in the evolving commercial slave economy of the European colonial frontier proved to be one key to their survival, even to the present day. The Calusa fell victim to their own unwillingness to change, and to the very fact that their military dominance of South Florida was so impenetrable that they succeeded in preventing Spanish contact until it was far too late.

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