

An Ethnohistorical Perspective on Hunter-Gatherer Complexity in South Florida

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Abstract

Although South Florida was neither fully explored or assimilated during the Spanish colonial era (1513-1760), ethnohistorical records from this era provide tantalizing clues as to the nature of hunter-gatherer complexity in this broad region. Detailed examination of Spanish sources reveal both similarities and differences between South Florida groups and the more well-documented agricultural chiefdoms to the north. Though variations in both space and time are apparent, South Florida as a whole displays an internal coherence that distinguishes it as a regional subset of the broader pattern of sociopolitical complexity across the Southeastern United States, and as a unique nonagricultural region sandwiched between the agricultural peoples of northern Florida and Cuba.

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Since as early as the 16th century, South Florida has been recognized as a distinctive cultural area within the broader scope of Southeastern North America. Just seven years after his first direct contacts with the South Florida Indians, in 1573 Florida Governor Pedro Menéndez de Avilés finally despaired of numerous Spanish attempts to assimilate the inhabitants of a very precisely-defined region of the Florida peninsula, which he described as extending from Mosquito River (at present-day New Smyrna Beach) all the way around the southern tip of Florida and up the Gulf coast to Tocobaga Bay (modern Tampa Bay). Menéndez noted that in contrast to other groups to the north, the South Florida Indians had been consistently intractable and hostile to Spanish contact (Menéndez de Avilés 1573). While his proposal—to wage war against the entire region and enslave the survivors for transport to the Caribbean islands—was summarily rejected by the Spanish Crown, the inability then or afterward of Spanish colonial authorities to establish or maintain effective administrative control over South Florida highlights a fundamental distinctiveness that characterized the indigenous societies of this region, one that was recognized very early on during the European colonial era.

Then and now, outside observers recognized that the indigenous peoples of South Florida were characterized by a predominantly nonagricultural lifestyle that differed substantively from that of other groups living across much of the rest of Southeastern North America, most notably in the absence of maize agriculture (e.g. Goggin and Sturtevant 1964; Widmer 1988; Marquardt 1986, 1987, 1988; Hann 2003). Moreover, this fundamental difference in subsistence economy has long been understood to mirror parallel differences in the lifestyles of South Florida groups, ranging from settlement systems and political organization to religious beliefs. Jesuit missionary Juan Rogel, who spent more than a year living in Spanish garrisons established among the Calusa and Tocobaga between 1567 and 1569, unfavorably compared the South Florida Indians

to the Guale Indians of the Atlantic coastline to the north, noting that “In the end, I found as much difference between [the Guale] and the people with whom I have dealt in these provinces of Carlos [the Calusa] as between very civilized people and barbarous people...if I had been there instead of the time I have been in Carlos, much more fruit would have been borne” (Zubillaga 1946: 332-333). While Rogel’s later experiences among the Orista and Guale considerably soured his initially glowing reports, what seems clear is that his personal experience among the inhabitants of the two regions led him to characterize them as widely divergent cultures, a fact which is supported by considerable other data, both ethnohistorical and archaeological. For example, religious differences noted in person by Rogel are indeed paralleled by what is generally recognized as a distinctive South Florida iconographic tradition, variously known as the Glades Complex or Cult, or the South Florida Ceremonial Complex (Goggin 1947; Wheeler 2000:107-108,125-154; Widmer 1989), which differs collectively from the more widespread Southeastern Ceremonial Complex or Southern Cult (e.g. Galloway 1989).

While the distinctive character of South Florida’s indigenous cultures was and is abundantly evident from many different perspectives, on the surface did share at least one fundamental feature that also characterized most other native societies across Southeastern North America, namely a chiefly form of sociopolitical organization, with multicomunity polities governed by hereditary leadership (e.g. Goggin and Sturtevant 1964; Widmer 1988; Marquardt 1986, 1987, 1988; Hann 2003). Ethnohistorical accounts from South Florida are replete with references to chiefs and a ranked form of social organization, and indeed the powerful and well-documented Calusa have been asserted to represent one of the largest and most powerful chiefdoms known in the Southeast, possibly even straddling the boundary with state-level organization (e.g. Marquardt 1987). This recognized level of sociopolitical complexity,

however, when combined with the apparent absence of maize agriculture within this same region, represents something of an anthropological paradox when contrasted with traditional interpretations regarding the correlation between complexity and food production. The fact that nonagricultural South Florida had chiefdoms like the rest of the agricultural Southeast deserves explaining.

While general statements regarding the underlying hunter-gatherer subsistence economy of South Florida's original inhabitants are of course foundational to any argument regarding the emergence and persistence of sociopolitical complexity in the region, my intent in this brief paper is to highlight the Spanish ethnohistorical evidence for the nature of that complexity, and particularly as it compares to contemporaneous ethnohistorical evidence for sociopolitical complexity in other parts of Southeastern North America, focusing on the adjacent regions of greater Spanish Florida during the European colonial era, which I have explored elsewhere in ethnohistorical context (Worth 1998a, 2003b). Given that South Florida clearly differed in several fundamental respects from the rest of the Southeast, a broad-scale comparison of the two regions from a documentary standpoint seems not only appropriate but necessary, if only to highlight any observed commonalities or distinctions which might shed light on the nature of sociopolitical complexity in general, and on its emergence among hunter-gatherers in South Florida in particular. What is really in question here, therefore, is the extent to which South Florida's chiefdoms were, or were not, like the chiefdoms of the rest of the Southeast.

From the start it should be noted that the documentary record relative to South Florida's indigenous societies is different in type, quantity, and quality from that which is available for much of the rest of the lower Southeast, particularly within that broader zone that I refer to as greater Spanish Florida, including not just the northern half of the modern state of Florida, but

also portions of all surrounding states, and extending to a limited degree even farther into the interior. With only a handful of very short-lived exceptions, Spanish contact with the indigenous peoples of South Florida was extremely limited, and most commonly manifested itself as neutral or hostile interactions between independent and autonomous polities. South Florida's peoples were never effectively assimilated into the colonial system of Spanish Florida, and thus long-term, multi-generational documentary data of the sort that characterizes much of the northern Florida mission provinces is simply absent for South Florida. Moreover, Spanish contact occurred most frequently with coastal groups accessible by ship, and focused most heavily on the larger and most powerful polities, such as the Calusa of the rich coastal estuaries of Southwest Florida. While the totality of the social geography of South Florida is unquestionably dominated by the spatially-extensive Calusa polity, the example of the Calusa is only the most extreme example of what is a far more diverse assortment of smaller polities distributed across the landscape. For this reason, the comments below will draw upon documentary data from a number of South Florida groups, and from an broad range of time, extending from the 16th through the 18th centuries (c.f. Hann 2003).

First, it is instructive to draw attention to some basic similarities between sociopolitical complexity in South Florida and the greater Southeast. At its most fundamental level, South Florida displays organizational characteristics common to the vast majority of Southeastern societies, namely the fact that aboriginal populations were organized into named communities with hereditary chiefs or headmen, and that these communities were organized into larger multi-community polities with centralized leadership under the name of the chief of the preeminent community. Over the course of nearly the first two full centuries of intermittent Spanish contact with these South Florida groups (from 1513 through roughly 1704-1706), these named polities

displayed considerable long-term geographic and political stability, and even after the devastation of subsequent Indian slave raids from the north (see Worth 2003a), their political and ethnic identity seems to have persisted at least for a time in the context of considerable population mobility. In general terms, if chiefdoms were the predominant form of sociopolitical organization for the rest of Southeastern North America, South Florida was seemingly no exception.

As a parenthetical note, it is important to note here that general system of inheritance and kinship in South Florida seems to have been markedly different from that of the agricultural chiefdoms to the north, particularly as regards the patrilineal mode of chiefly inheritance, in which chiefs passed their office to elder sons, and in which the chief's brother acted as shaman or spiritual leader (c.f. Hann 2003: 168-169). In addition to these two offices, there was a third which appears consistently in Spanish documentation regarding South Florida, but which never appears in reference to agricultural groups to the north: the "great captain" or "captain general" (Hann 2003: 165-168). This office, perhaps best characterized as a sort of "war chief," was occupied by the husband of the chief's sister in the case of the Calusa, and thus may be characterized as achieved rather than ascribed or inherited. While leadership roles were always tied to chiefly lineages in South Florida, they were patrilineages instead of matrilineages.

Beyond the general observation of chiefdom-level sociopolitical organization, there seems to have been a general parallel between South Florida and the greater Southeast regarding the population size ranges for individual communities, though admittedly this observation is based on very limited population data. Documentary sources regarding community sizes are few in number, and generally based only on estimates, but what data exist support an interpretation that the most typical population range for individual communities was perhaps 300-400

inhabitants, though smaller communities of only a few dozen residents were also commonplace (see Worth 2006). The largest communities, particularly chiefly administrative centers, may have held up to 1,000 residents, but this was probably an exception rather than the norm. I would also note here that while Spanish accounts tended to emphasize the perceived degree of residential mobility of South Florida hunter-gatherers, in long-term perspective, both ethnohistorical and archaeological data imply considerable residential stability in primary community locations, while simultaneously acknowledging the internal complexities of hunter-gatherer settlement systems and periodic resource exploitation patterns.

Yet another interesting parallel with other Southeastern chiefdoms is the apparent maximal population size of the largest-scale political entity. Elsewhere I have suggested in very broad terms that agricultural chiefdoms in the Southeast were commonly characterized by three administrative tiers, including community headmen, first-order chiefs, and second-order chiefs, with a maximal administrative scope comprising some 5 to 10 subordinate headmen or chiefs at each of the two higher levels (Worth 2003b). Two alternative strategies seem to have been employed to achieve this third level of sociopolitical integration, distinguished from one another by the spatial distribution of people and resources on the landscape. Complex chiefdoms represented spatially discrete and internally continuous polities with a total of roughly 50 to 100 communities organized into local-level administrative units comprising only 5 to 10 communities each. What I have referred to as compound chiefdoms, in contrast, represented spatially discontinuous polities comprised of an array of 5 to 10 discrete simple chiefdoms, each of which administered only 5 to 10 subordinate communities. In both cases, however, first-order administrative units (or simple chiefdoms) were subordinated to second-order administration, forming maximal polities of considerably larger size than the simple chiefdom at a local level.

The populations of such maximal polities seems to have ranged from a low of 5,000 to 10,000 people to a high of perhaps 20,000 to 40,000 people, distributed in something on the order of 50 to 100 communities, variously configured on the landscape. And this, precisely, forms a reasonable parallel to ethnohistorically-documented figures for the Calusa polity in South Florida, which in the 1560s was claimed to administer a total of more than 20,000 people distributed in 50 communities.

The 50 communities comprising the Calusa domain were extended minimally over a range of some 150 to 200 kilometers, making the spatial extent of the broader Calusa polity more comparable in scale to the compound chiefdoms noted above, which, at between 50 and 450 kilometers in diameter, were substantially more extensive than the 50 to 80 kilometers of documented complex chiefdoms. Nevertheless, despite this similarity, there is precious little indication within the documentary record for intermediate administrative subdivisions of the sort that might be characterized as local-level simple chiefdoms within a broader compound chiefdom, although ethnohistorical accounts do seem to reflect slightly greater visibility for a handful of named communities located in different sub-regions within the Calusa territory, including Tampa, Muspa, and Mayaimi, some or all of which might have had some regional administrative role under the chiefly capitol at Calos (though this is not explicitly indicated in the documents). Moreover, at present, there does not seem to be the kind of spatial clustering of historic-era Calusa archaeological sites that would mirror the compound chiefdom model described above, although this observation is based on admittedly limited survey data.

There is little comparable ethnohistorical data regarding the internal demographic and political structure of any other South Florida chiefdom. Nevertheless, in 1567 the chief of the Tocobaga province to the north of the Calusa domain was said to have negotiated peace with

Pedro Menéndez in the company of 29 subordinate chiefs, and while a contemporary (and independent) Tocobaga population estimate of 6,000 would suggest an average population of only 200 people per chief, both figures confirm the fact that Tocobaga was somewhat smaller in scale than the Calusa polity to the south (Solís de Merás n.d.; Worth 1995). Many named subordinate communities are documented within other regional South Florida polities, including Tequesta, Jeaga, Ais, and Surruque, but none of these lists appear to be comprehensive enough for similar analysis.

In my opinion, the overall cast of ethnohistorical accounts regarding the political structure of South Florida chiefdoms is one of geographically extensive but demographically dispersed hunter-gatherer societies that might best be characterized as something akin to very large simple chiefdoms, with functional characteristics somewhat resembling strongly centralized tribal confederacies among a comparatively large number of semi-autonomous communities with local-level hereditary leadership. This is not to say that South Florida polities should be classified as tribes instead of chiefdoms, because they clearly possessed institutionalized hereditary leadership and centralized decision-making with long-term locational stability (e.g. Creamer and Haas 1985). But South Florida chiefdoms seem to have differed in several important ways from the more common Southeastern model outlined above, including an apparent lack of second-order administration, a larger-than-normal number of subordinate communities under first-order administration, and a considerably larger territorial area within which constituent populations were dispersed.

One additional distinction should be made here, which relates to those noted above: a high degree of internal factionalization and political fragility, with a correspondingly frequent use of warfare and assassination as political strategies. While inter-provincial warfare was of

course endemic to Southeastern chiefdoms, my strong impression from the ethnohistorical sources is that South Florida chiefdoms were not only characterized by higher-than-average levels of warfare, but also by considerable internecine strife, including the relatively common use of murder as a strategy for political enforcement. The Calusa chief, for example, was documented to have ordered the assassination and beheading of subordinate chiefs on several occasions in the 1560s (Solís de Merás n.d.), and more than a century later the threat of murder remained strong among chiefs living along the Calusa frontier (c.f. Hann 1991: 23-28). Possibly also reinforcing the prominent role of warfare in internal chiefly politics, existing documentation for South Florida suggests that chiefs were always or almost always male, in stark contrast to the agricultural chiefdoms of northern Spanish Florida, which were commonly governed by hereditary female chiefs during the historic era, despite the fact that male heirs had preferential (though not exclusive) position within a matrilineal inheritance system (e.g. Worth 1998a). Chiefly polygyny also appears to have represented an ongoing strategy for internal political integration among distant communities, and its importance is underscored by the fact that marriages between newly-installed chiefs and the sisters of subordinate community headmen were sometimes denied or blocked as a form of resistance (c.f. Hann 2003: 170). Moreover, based on the lack of any clear documentary evidence for the existence of true “council houses” in South Florida (Hann 2003: 36), which among agricultural chiefdoms in the rest of greater Spanish Florida served as the seat of an institutionalized chiefly council with decision-making authority (c.f. Shapiro and Hann 1990; Worth 1998a, 1998b), there definitely seems to have been a greater individualization of political power in South Florida. My overall reading of the ethnohistorical sources suggests that political power in South Florida chiefdoms was less a stable

institutional norm than an active and ongoing construction which required constant feedback and reinforcement on the part of individual chiefs.

This distinction is not at all dissimilar from what has been characterized as “network” and “corporate” strategies (Blanton et al. 1996), with South Florida groups employing more of a network strategy as individualizing chiefdoms, and other northern Florida agricultural chiefdoms employing a more corporate strategy as group-oriented chiefdoms. Though the distinction between network and corporate strategies is by no means mutually exclusive, it has been noted that “there is a loose association of the corporate strategy with environmental situations providing the potential for substantial agricultural development and of the network strategy with more marginal environments” (Blanton et al. 1996: 7). Such a pattern would indeed be consistent with the combined subsistence and settlement systems of South Florida hunter-gatherers, with a widely dispersed population tied to naturally-available resources with strong geographic and seasonal variability, and a concurrent absence of surplus production of agricultural staple foods. Indeed, a strong degree of local economic autonomy likely provided a counteracting force to regional political centralization, while the strong degree of regional and seasonal variability in the availability of specific resources (particularly focusing on differentiation between coastal vs. interior habitats) likely encouraged just the opposite, encouraging broad-scale social integration based principally on inter-regional exchange of nonagricultural resources. In this sense, the characterization of network strategies as emphasizing “individual-centered exchange relations established primarily outside one’s local group” (Blanton et al. 1996: 4) seems suitably applicable to South Florida’s far-flung hunter-gatherer chiefdoms.

Ultimately, the very same environmental and economic features that distinguished South Florida from regions to the north may well have laid the groundwork for the observed pattern of sociopolitical complexity among South Florida hunter-gatherers, particularly to the extent that it differed from complexity among agriculturalists to the north. South Florida's chiefdoms seem to have been simultaneously larger in terms of spatial extent, and yet less complex and less stable in terms of political centralization, apparently emphasizing a laterally-extensive and individualized network strategy of sociopolitical integration over one in which political power was institutionally structured within a more group-oriented corporate framework. From the Spanish point of view, South Florida's indigenous provinces rightfully earned a reputation as warlike groups who were both feared and respected, and yet their chiefdoms, while geographically extensive and demographically comparable to other Southeastern polities, displayed a lesser degree of stable institutional complexity than that of their neighbors to the north. Perhaps this, in part, explains the Spanish inability to assimilate these groups into the Florida colonial system, not to mention the extreme frustrations of Pedro Menéndez.

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