
A Review of *The Indigenous Peoples of Mesoamerica and Central America: Their Societies, Cultures, and Histories*

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The Indigenous Peoples of Mesoamerica and Central America: Their Societies, Cultures, and Histories. By Carmack, Robert M. 2017. Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books. 124 pp. Hardcover \$85.00. ISBN 978-1498558969

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No other Mesoamerican scholar has contributed more to the study of Mayan society, culture, language, and history than Robert M. Carmack. With a prolific contribution of seminal works - including *Quichean Civilization: The Ethnohistoric, Ethnographic, and Archaeological Sources* (1973), *The Quiché Mayas of Uatatlán: The Evolution of a Highland Guatemala Kingdom* (1981), *El Título de Totonicapán: texto, traducción y comentario* (1983), *Harvest of Violence: The Maya Indians and the Guatemalan Crisis* (1992), and *The Legacy of Mesoamerica: History and Culture of Native American Civilization* (1996), among others—Robert Carmack has left his own legacy on Mesoamerican studies through continuous ethnographic, historical, linguistic, archeological, and archival research since 1933 to present. His work could best be described as meticulous and groundbreaking with a clear commitment to disseminate the greatness of Mesoamerica-Central America indigenous peoples from precolonial to modern times. His book, *The Indigenous Peoples of Mesoamerica and Central America: Their Societies, Cultures, and Histories*, is no exception.

The premise of the book is to present a comprehensive analysis of the native peoples populations that inhabit the territories known as Mesoamerica and Central America, conclusively demonstrating the close interconnections between these geographic areas often seen as unrelated and outside the influence of the Mexican world to the north. Selectively using features of Immanuel Wallerstein's (1976) "world-system" theory, Carmack focuses on histories, societies, and cultures of these regions from pre-colonial to colonial and modern times. The first chapter opens with the 1502 Columbus encounter with a variety of highly sophisticated and advanced native groups in the Central American Atlantic coast, including a canoe of native merchants that demonstrated the existence of a complex commercial system with the Mexican region to the north. The chapter includes a description of the shared geographical and ecological characteristics of the region that simultaneously accounts for its diverse social history.

Chapter two subdivides the zone into the northern region (present-day Highland Guatemala and the northern lowlands of Yucatán), the middle region (roughly present-day El Salvador, Honduras, and Nicaragua), and the southern region (present day Costa Rica and Panamá). Each region's degree of

political development (states, chiefdoms, tribes), and cultural development (writing, architecture) depended on its geographic proximity to the powerful Aztec empire to the north. It is argued that, despite close interrelationships through complex exchange systems, the Central American region did not achieve economic, political, or cultural unity during its pre-colonial period.

Chapter three is a discussion of the type of native societies the Spanish conqueror encountered in the sixteenth century, and that ultimately determined their colonization and colonial experience. It invites readers to see such an encounter in terms of two different world-systems, where a large part of Central America was never fully integrated to the Mesoamerican advanced social economic system, although each zone participated, to some degree, in an active exchange system dependent on its level of socio-political development. The chapter concludes that at the time of the Spanish invasion, Central America was fractured and undergoing a “Mexicanization” due to the presence of Aztec and Maya merchant-soldiers.

Chapter four describes the complexities and diversity of the Mexican-dominated Mesoamerican imperial states, like the Mexican Aztec and Maya-K’iche’ in the northern region of Central America who both engaged in military conquests of less powerful states and chiefdoms. Furthermore, this chapter demonstrates that, at the time of the Spanish conquest, Mesoamerica and Central America were a vigorous “world-system,” or “intersocietal network,” stratified into core, semi-peripheral, and peripheral zones whose natural evolution-transformation was interrupted by the Spanish invasion.

Chapters five, six, and seven present ethnohistorical case studies of the Mesoamerican influenced Maya-K’iche’ of Guatemala, the Masaya and other native peoples of Nicaragua, and the native peoples of Buenos Aires and Costa Rica, respectively, from pre-colonial to modern times. Chapter six describes the K’iche’ social, cultural, and religious structures in order to identify change and continuities as K’iche’ communities faced Ladinization by the modern state. The case of the Masaya and other native people of present-day Nicaragua in chapter seven demonstrates the manner in which native peoples have actively participated in the historical process, first resisting European subjugation, as in the case of pre-colonial Chorotegas. Likewise, native peoples, such as the Masaya and the Monimbó natives, participated in the Sandinista Revolution of the 1970s. The chapter suggests that their success was due in part to their ability to maintain ancient ties. Chapter seven discusses how the native peoples of Buenos Aires and Costa Rica took a different path and resisted early European colonization through strong community relationships and by appealing to legal venues (National Indian Law) to defuse the threats posed by modernization to the environment, and thus to their ancient cultures and overall existence.

Finally, chapter eight summarizes the overarching arguments of the book, including the seldom recognized native legacy left on the historical development of Mesoamerica and Central America. It serves as a reminder that native groups were not pawns, but rather active participants in the historical process, with a legacy of survival that allowed them to resist and shape every historical development that has threatened their existence.

In a total of 124 pages, Carmack offers a coherent and persuasive argument demonstrating the importance of analyzing Mesoamerica and Central America as an integrated region. The book is clearly written, following a logical sequence of chapters, and the argument is equally accessible to a range of audiences, from non-experts to scholars of this topic. However, given that geography is central to the argument, additional maps would have better allowed the reader to conceptualize the different regions analyzed. Finally, a claim in chapter two that Friar Francisco Ximénez, transcriber and Spanish translator of the Popol Wuj, a sixteenth-century Maya-K'iche' creation narrative, was a creole historian is inaccurate given that he was born in the town of Ecija in the province of Seville, Spain, in 1666. Overall, this book is another important contribution to the field of indigenous studies, and a remarkable endeavor to place the native peoples of Mesoamerica and Central America as equals on the stage of world history. Carmack's research presented in this text will continue to influence future generations of students and scholars alike regarding the complex histories, societies, and cultures that developed in Mesoamerica and Central America, and that have undeniably outlived the test of historical time.

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