

Lenca Geography of the 16th and 17th Centuries

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Introduction

This study seeks to delimit the region occupied by the Lenca Indians during the two centuries after Spanish Contact. Information used for such a reconstruction comes primarily from missionary reports, past and present toponyms, and some geographical interpolations. A map has been constructed to locate the sites mentioned in the text.

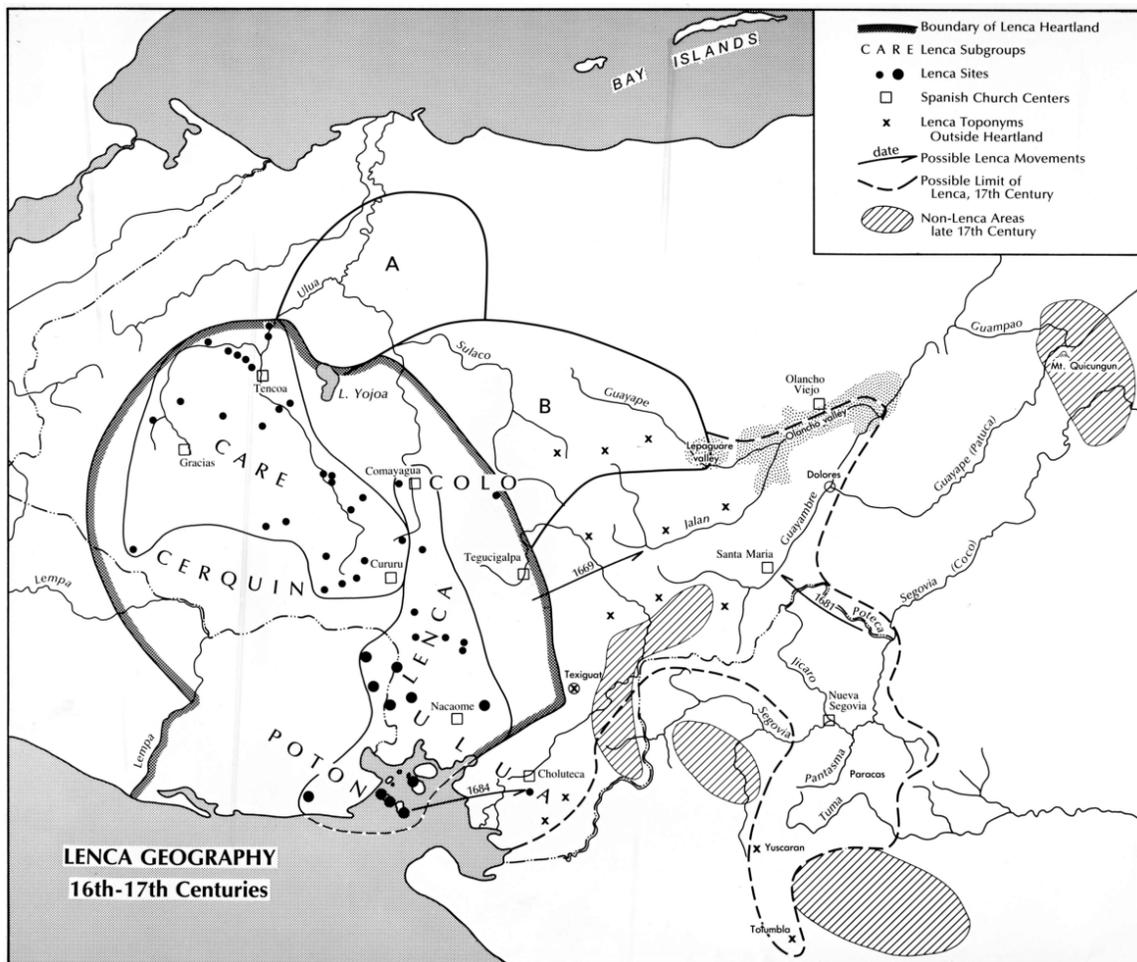
Early Reports of the Lenca

I know of no specific identification of the Lenca before 1591. In that instance, the Honduran bishop noted the Merced fathers had organized a "beneficio de los Lencas" (AGI 1591). Apparently, that territory was the same as shown as LENCA on the accompanying map —an ecclesiastical district of Lenca-speakers that stretched south of Comayagua in 1632 (AGCA 1632). The Spanish historian Bernal Diaz, on the Honduran scene in 1525, was probably the first to record places occupied by the Lenca—*Maniani*, *Malalaca*, and *Agalteca* (1525: 554), but the term Lenca probably first appeared as "Lenga," one of the places listed in Pedro Alvarado's repartimiento from San Pedro in 1536 (Alvarado 1536). In that document Lenga is identified only as a site "towards Maniani," which we know was the most important pre-Hispanic settlement of the valley just north of Comayagua. Other sites grouped with Maniani and Lenga include Aramani, Comayagua, and Agalteca, all of which occupy a zone later identified as Lenca land. Years later, listed among the Indian settlements of 1574 and 1592 are Yutilenca, from the Gracias area (Zuniga C. 1971) and Yutipelencia, in Olancho, and Lengaquira, in Gracias a Dios (AGI 1592).

Past Attempts at Delimiting Indian Territory

Several attempts to map the distribution of Central American Indians have been made, such as those by Thomas and Swanton (1911), Lehmann (1920), and Johnson (1940). These maps are based primarily on linguistics, and are generally lacking in detail. Often group names are simply written in an area without any attempt to establish firm ethnic boundaries. Johnson, whose map in *The Maya and their neighbors* (1940) has received much citation, perhaps best expressed the frustration in attempting to delimit the Lenca region, when he simply capitulated with his declaration that while the western Lenca boundary is fairly well fixed by the eastern extension of the Maya, other boundaries of Lenca territory are "determined by the limits of their neighbors" (p. 110).

Since Johnson's map, Anne Chapman (1978), who has conducted the most research on the Lenca, has delimited a Lenca heartland, based on her ethnographical and ethnohistorical research. Her Lenca region is the most recognized and acceptable to date, but Doris Stone (1941:14) and Robert West (1998) have indicated that the Lenca territory might have extended farther to the north and northeast. Stone based her notion on a pottery she linked with Lenca and believed that Lenca "influence" reached into "western Yoro and the upper Sula-Ulua region," a notion also supported by Longyear (1947:163) and shown on the attached map as zone A. Professor West constructed his map from the locations of modern Lenca toponyms using four geographic suffixes, *tique* (cerro, montaña), *laca* (lugar poblado), *quin* (camino), and *guala* (río). By that method he showed that Lenca lands probably extended to the northeast into the zone labeled B on the attached map.



All of these attempts at regionalization must be a bit suspect. For example, Lehmann is clearly mistaken. He thought "Lenca" was a general term, employed like the generic "Jicaque," and believed that the "Chatos" and "Dules," who we now know were Mosquitian groups, "should be considered Lencas, or if not," he said, "were the Matagalpa" (1920, II: 635). Someday, perhaps the archeologists will have enough

information to tell us whether there is a pottery diagnostic of the Lenca. No one but E. G. Squier (1855:385) has written incorrectly that the Lenca occupied the Bay Islands off the north coast of Honduras.

Evidence for Expanding the SE Frontier of the Lenca

The 16th Century. Materials of the 16th century contain very little information that can be used to alter the previously suggested boundaries. For the century the primary problem seems to be how to settle the confusion arising from the use of the names of languages and culture groups within the larger Lenca zone. The names Ulúa, Potón, Care, Cerquin, and Colo, can be explained as cultural divisions within the Lenca area.

Care and Cerquin, peoples and languages associated with the western Lenca territory, were introduced in Montejo's report of 1539, the Ulua of SE Salvador and Choluteca, the Potón, and Colo were known by Ponce in 1586 (Cibdad-Real 1586:339-347). On the Colo: Fray Alonso Ponce, who passed through Honduras on a visita in 1586, remarked that just east of Comayagua at Agalteca the folk spoke the language *colo*, and that the people of Comayagua spoke the same. It is at least worth a note that the *colo* prefix is attached to several early place names of western Honduras, including *Colohete*, *Colосуca*, *Colopele*, *Colomoncagua*, and *Cololaca*. Further, words like Macholoa, which appears early as *Macoloa* (without the h), might be related to that "language" of Agalteca and Comayagua in the late 16th century. Just when the names/languages of Care, Cerquin, Colo, Ulua, and Potón became lumped under the Lenca rubric is not yet clear, but today Lenca is the term used throughout those former locations. It seems clear that they were all sub-groups of the Lenca. Others such as Larry Feldman (1986: 10) are not so convinced.

The 17th Century. On the other hand, from the 17th century three missionary episodes make possible the proposal here offered—that Lenca might have been farther to the south and east than previously suggested. The first episode encompasses the three entries of the Franciscan Verdalete into the upper Río Guayape between 1604 and 1612. Whether he entered "heathen" lands via Nueva Segovia in northern Nicaragua, or by the upper Olancho Valley from the convent in Comayagua, he was in contact with Lenca who were perhaps settled on the land. The missionary also took Lenca from Comayagua with him on his trips. Lencas apparently were numerous along the upper Guayape in 1610 (Valle Lepaguare, a Lenca term) and some of them had been exposed to Christianity. The missionary camp, also among Lenca, was probably at the confluence of the Guayape and Guayambre. All of this points to Lenca living dispersed and in missions along the Guayape until the Patuca confluence.

The second episode is that told by Fray Espino, who was reared in northern Nicaragua where he became familiar with the Lenca language at Nueva Segovia and who worked among the Lenca settled at Santa Maria, on the upper Río Guayambre, in 1667 (Espino 1674, Vásquez 1714, IV: 187). Santa Maria was near the Yara (Sumu) border to the east. The request of "Christian" Indians from the Poteca river in Nicaragua to be settled at Santa Maria (ACGA 1681) might imply that the Poteca too were Lenca. It was

Espino who also noted "a family of Paracas Indians who were of the Lenca nation"(Vasquez 1714, IV: 189).

The third account (AGI 1699) reports a missionary trek of late 1699 that began on the upper Patuca at the new Lenca reducción of Dolores (AGI 1712), continued downriver for six days, and then crossed the mountains to the upper Segovia, before returning to Dolores down the Guayambre. Three nations and three languages were encountered along the circuit: Lenca, Parrasta, and Guaianes. The approximate borders between the groups can be determined by discovering the sites of crucial places named in the manuscript. Leaving Dolores, which apparently was at the confluence of the Ríos Guayape-Guayambre, the expedition reached the first village at the *ULIBAS* river near the mountain called *QUICUNGUN*. Departing this area, the missionary walked south along the *ALALI* stream over the mountains to the *SEGOVIA* river, which now separates Honduras and Nicaragua. The travellers then passed north of the Nicaraguan mountain now called *YALUCA*. All of these names and sites are presently known by the Sumu Indians of the area. Once on the Segovia, the Spaniards turned upstream for nine days, fearing all the time of the Guaianes, who can be identified clearly as the modern Miskito, who then were living in several villages near the mouth of the river. Lenca was the "common" language of the Rio Segovia (upper?) and on the Tuma (upper?) (AGI 1699, f. 49). At the entrance to the Poteca, Christian Indians were again found and tensions eased. No problems were encountered before reaching Dolores by way of Santa Maria down the Guayambre.

Mapping all of this information from the three 17th century accounts suggests that the boundary of the Lenca might have reached beyond the upper Guayape, included all of the Guayambre, and perhaps reached down into northern Nicaragua including the Poteca and the upper Tuma rivers.

The Nicaraguan Jaime Incer, who knows Nicaraguan environments and cultures best, believes the western border of the Parrasta/Sumu coincides with the beginning of the dry forest; the Sumu peoples inhabited the wetter eastern forests. As a geographer, I also seek relationships between the early cultures and habitats. I have suspected that the coastal Miskito, who were canoe Indians, preferred areas below the major waterfalls in the interior rivers where their canoes were less useful. The Sumu seem to have occupied the zone between the major waterfalls and the high ridge lines to the west. And the Lenca seem to have occupied the drier lands west of the continental divide. If this all holds true, we can propose boundaries between the Lenca and Sumu in Nicaragua and Honduras at 1699 just east of the Dolores settlement and near the mouth of the Poteca. We cannot force this ecological-ethnic group relationship, but it is a possibility to be considered.

Concluding Remarks

To conclude, the evidence of the 17th century reports indicates the presence of Lenca Indians in the Olancho Valley of Honduras, on the upper Patuca, in northern Nicaragua at Nueva Segovia, on the upper Tuma river, and in the Paracas uplands.

Modern Lenca toponyms, such as Yuscaran, reach even farther south into Nicaragua and might point to an earlier Lenca presence.

Nothing in the documents certifies absolutely that Lenca settlement was dense or widespread in southern Honduras or northern Nicaragua. All references point to isolated settlement—a family of Lencas or an occasional forced Lenca reducción. This brings to mind three possibilities to account for the presence of Lenca to the south and east. One, that during the mid-16th century when gold placering was at its peak on the Guayape (West 1959) thousands of Indians, including undoubtedly many Lencas, were attracted to the area and remained in the Olancho Valley. Two, Mexicans and Lenca from the Comayagua area accompanied Spanish missionaries and soldiers as mercenaries on expeditions into lands of the "less-civilized" Indians down the Guayape. Some of the Lenca escaped the Spaniards and joined the "wild" Indians of the east. Third, "Christianized" Lenca were used in mission outposts, such as at Santa Maria on the Guayambre, as models of proper frontier settlement in hopes that the reduced heathen Indians would follow their lead.

On the other hand, Lenca settlement might have been more permanent and widespread than I suspect. And we must keep the possibility of an enlarged distribution in mind as we search for other documents in the archives. Avenues of research that are important to clarify the Lenca distribution include 1) determining which Indians occupied the lands around Texíguat, a key intermediate and little known area and 2) uncovering the mysterious linguistic relationship between Lenca and Matagalpa. Toponymic studies are made particularly difficult across the Honduran-Nicaraguan border because at least 34 common place names are found near the border in each country.