

Not Always Oriented: Honduran Plaza-Church Locational Relations

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My first conversation with Bill Davidson occurred at the beginning of the 1994 fall semester. I was a new doctoral graduate student in geography at Louisiana State University and had gone to Bill's office to discuss potential dissertation topics. The topic that interested me (and him) the most was the growth and influence of the Moravian Church on Miskito settlements. Bill described the "impressive church compounds" located in the Miskito settlements of Brus Lagoon and Kaurkira, and he stated that "something interesting is going on down there." After a short period of consideration, I decided to study that topic for my dissertation (completed in 1999).

Bill was interested in the geography of religion as it related to historical geography, the cultural landscape, and indigenous or otherwise minority populations. I think his academic curiosity about the geography of religion was more evident in his classroom lectures than in his publications. Still, this interest was on occasion manifested in the research produced by his students. For example, two of his fourteen doctoral students, and a few of his master's students, wrote dissertations and theses with themes related to the geography of religion. His own research included religion-related themes on only a few occasions including Padre Subirana's role in granting land to Honduran Indians (Davidson 1984a), the Black Christ of Esquipulas (Davidson and Richardson 1993; Richardson and Davidson 1993), and plaza-church relationships in Honduras (Davidson 1994).

I first became aware of his interest in Honduran church location when we were both traveling in La Ceiba, Honduras, in May 1996. As I recall, we were on our way to a nearby Garífuna settlement to photograph a Black Christ shrine when we passed by the Catho-

lic church adjacent to La Ceiba's principal plaza. We discussed why, atypical of most Catholic churches in Honduras, the structure was located on the southeast corner of the plaza, and why it faced the plaza diagonally. Bill explained to me that the street grid was oriented about 30 degrees west of north, and that Catholic leaders had probably placed the church on the southeast corner of the plaza so that the building would still be oriented along an east-west axis.

Bill's knowledge of Honduran plaza-church locational relations was not limited to La Ceiba. In fact, Bill compiled such data during his innumerable fieldwork excursions to Honduras, and had earlier presented his findings at the 1994 Annual Meeting of the Association of American Geographers in San Francisco. The purpose of Bill's research was to compare the Honduran reality with common textbook models of plaza-church locational relations, and through the use of maps, see if differences in plaza-church locational relations resulted from variations in Honduran cultural geography.

After I completed my dissertation research (which included data on plaza-church locational relations in the Honduran Mosquitia), we discussed the possibility of writing a joint article on Honduran church location, but Bill's retirement intervened. Now, with his permission and encouragement, I have updated the information he compiled earlier and have added my own data on church location and orientation from Mosquitia.

The Spanish American Plaza

The relatively large open public spaces normally found near the center of settlements in Spanish America have attracted considerable scholarly attention, particularly among geographers. Studies by Stanislawski (1947) and Gade (1976) are major pieces that place the plaza within the context of its normal form and its numerous functions. Elbow (1975) has contrasted the plaza characteristics of Ladino and Indian towns in Guatemala. Still other studies have examined the role of the plaza in Columbian and Costa Rican society and its relationship to various human behaviors (Richardson 1974, 1982, 2003; Low 2000). Two studies have focused on the borderlands. Arreola (1992) found that the plaza was a symbol of Hispanic identity in south Texas, and Arreola and Curtis (1993) noted the persistence of the plaza and grid pattern despite the growth and change occurring in Mexico's border cities. More recently, Scarpaci (2004) has analyzed the effect of heritage tourism on plazas and their accompanying historic districts. Bass (2005) found that during the past 40 years, inhabitants of southwestern Honduras transformed the open, treeless plazas adjacent to churches into tree-filled parks, with messages promoting the virtues of forests.

Over the years, a general image of the plaza and its surrounding grid street pattern has emerged, and professors pass it on to students through models illustrated in geography textbooks. Examples of such texts include (but are not limited to) Blouet and Blouet's (2002) 4th edition text

on Latin America that uses Sargent's (2002) colonial town plan model; de Blij and Mueller's (2004) 11th edition regional geography text that uses a modified version of Sargent's model; and Jordan-Bychkov and Domosh's (2003) 9th edition cultural geography text that uses a model designed by Jordan-Bychkov. In each of these texts, the illustrations depict a plaza surrounded by north-south, east-west running streets that intersect at right angles, forming a gridiron pattern. The Blouet and Blouet illustration places the church on the south side of the plaza while illustrations in the Jordan-Bychkov and Domosh, and the de Blij and Mueller texts place the church on the east side of the plaza (de Blij and Mueller's earlier 7th edition placed the church on the south side of the plaza).

This study reports the plaza-church locational relations in an entire country for two reasons: (1) to test the stereotype frequently illustrated in geography textbooks; and (2) to see if reflected in this single relationship between church and plaza there are other manifestations of Honduran cultural geography, and by analogy similar manifestations elsewhere in Latin America.

Historical Background

Scholars generally agree that the Spanish American plaza and urban grid pattern have a Mediterranean heritage, but scholars have debated its exact origin (Stanislowski 1946, 1947; Smith 1955; Foster 1960; Nelson 1963). Stanislowski (1947) argued that Spain adopted the grid from early Greek and Roman notions of town planning, particularly those described in the writings of Vitruvius. Vance (1990) traced the grid back to Miletus, a Greek city in Asia Minor. The Persians destroyed Miletus in 494 B.C., but the Greeks rebuilt it in 479 B.C. with a grid pattern designed by Hippodamus. Smith (1955), and later Gade (1992), suggested that the gridiron street pattern of Santa Fé, founded by Queen Isabella in 1491 as a base of operations to drive the last Moors from Spain, may have served as the model for Spanish towns in the New World. Spain's reliance on the grid allowed the Crown to control territory and resources, and to rapidly prepare the land for new settlement (Grant 2001). Regardless of its precise origin, the plaza and its accompanying gridiron street pattern passed into the Americas, via royal order, through several legal statements of how Spaniards would situate and construct their colonial settlements (Stanislowski 1947). These statements were later included in the Spanish New Town Ordinances written in 1573 (Nutall 1922). Nevertheless, while most colonial town plans exhibited similar morphologies, variations still occurred because of local circumstances (Hardoy 1975).

For Honduras, the first instructions were probably those of Bartolomé de Celada to his men near Trujillo in 1526. De Celada wrote, "The new town was to be laid out in the following order: The church, the plaza, the hospital, the governor's house, the jail, the cabildo, and then other houses" (Figure 1) (Celada 1526:60-64). Other regulations, perhaps slightly contradictory, applied to specific geographical situations.

The Modern Honduran Survey

The settlements selected for this analysis are the total number, 100 percent, of the *municipio* (municipal or county-level) capitals, known in Honduras as *cabeceras municipales*. There are 298 in the country. Maps of the street plans of each these places were acquired from the national census bureau. These maps made it possible to detect if a settlement's street layout was in the form of a grid, if the settlement contained a plaza, and the location of churches. Also, fieldwork over the past decade and a half has resulted in observations being made and photographs being taken in over 260 of these towns. The places range in population from the capital, Tegucigalpa, with a population over 500,000 to towns of less than 500 people.

To explore plaza-church locational relations, one may pose the following questions:

1. Is there a relatively large, open public area; normally known locally as a plaza or parque (excluding soccer fields)?
2. Is its general location near the center of the settlement?
3. Are the streets in a grid pattern?
4. What is the orientation of the grid?
5. Is the major church located on the plaza? (In the rare event that a Catholic church was not present, another denomination was substituted.)
6. On which side of the plaza is the Catholic church?
7. What is the orientation of the Catholic church?

The findings reveal that the single model of a grid-pattern town and its associated plaza-church spatial relationship normally presented by Latin Americanist scholars does not always exist in Honduras (Table 1). For example, a grid pattern existed in only 52 percent, barely half, of the 298 municipal capitals. This percentage is perhaps lower than expected. Factors typically associated with non-grid towns included: (1) towns that were recently founded or that were small (large settlements usually contained a grid); (2) towns where uneven topography made constructing a grid problematic; (3) towns that originated as a result of mining activities; and (4) towns located in areas with a strong indigenous or otherwise non-Hispanic presence. Furthermore, north-south street orientations are not the rule as 54 percent of the towns with grids had streets oriented between 5 and 10 degrees off of a north-south compass heading.

Although most street orientations were within 10 degrees of north, many were highly variable, and some even reached the diagonal—45 degrees off of north.

The model corresponded with the Honduran reality more closely with regard to plaza-church locational relationships, but there were still significant exceptions. For example, 93 percent of the municipal capitals had plazas and almost 90 percent of the plazas were adjacent to the major church (Figure 2). The churches on these plazas were located on the east side 84 percent of the time, and 91 percent of the major

Table 1. Honduran Settlement Feature.

	%
A. Grid Pattern	
Yes	52
No	48
B. Grid Orientation	
Within 5 degrees N/S	40
Within 10 degrees N/S	54
C. Settlement has plaza	
Yes	93
No	07
D. Major church on plaza	
Yes	89
No	11
E. Church on east side of plaza	
Yes	85
No	15
F. Church orientation	
Generally W-E	91
Other	09

Source: Honduran National Census Bureau town plans; field observations.

churches were generally oriented east-west with the altar to the east and the entrance to the west. With respect to church location, the modern Honduran survey more closely follows the illustrations found in the de Blij and Mueller (2004) and the Jordan-Bychkov and Domosh (2003) texts, which depict the church on the east side of the plaza, rather than the Blouet and Blouet illustration, which places the church on the south side of the plaza.

Mapping the Relationships

Maps of the distribution of many of these features revealed no significant patterns. For example, maps of the grid pattern and its orientations displayed little geographical variation and were inconclusive. Nonetheless, maps of places without plazas and maps of church orientation showed distinctive patterns and one can draw conclusions from them. A map plotting the 21 places without plazas reveals their locations in the non-Hispanic areas of the north coast, the Bay Islands, Mosquitia, and a southwestern zone perhaps consisting of more-isolated, less-aculturated indigenous Lenca settlements (Figure 3). Likewise, a map of the 21 places with non-east-west oriented churches indicated the same non-Hispanic regions (Figure 4). Curiously and without overt explanation, six settlements had churches on the west side of the plaza with the church facing away from the plaza (Figure 5). Many of these west-oriented plazas and churches overlooked



Figure 2. Tegucigalpa's central plaza and church, 1998 (photo by author).

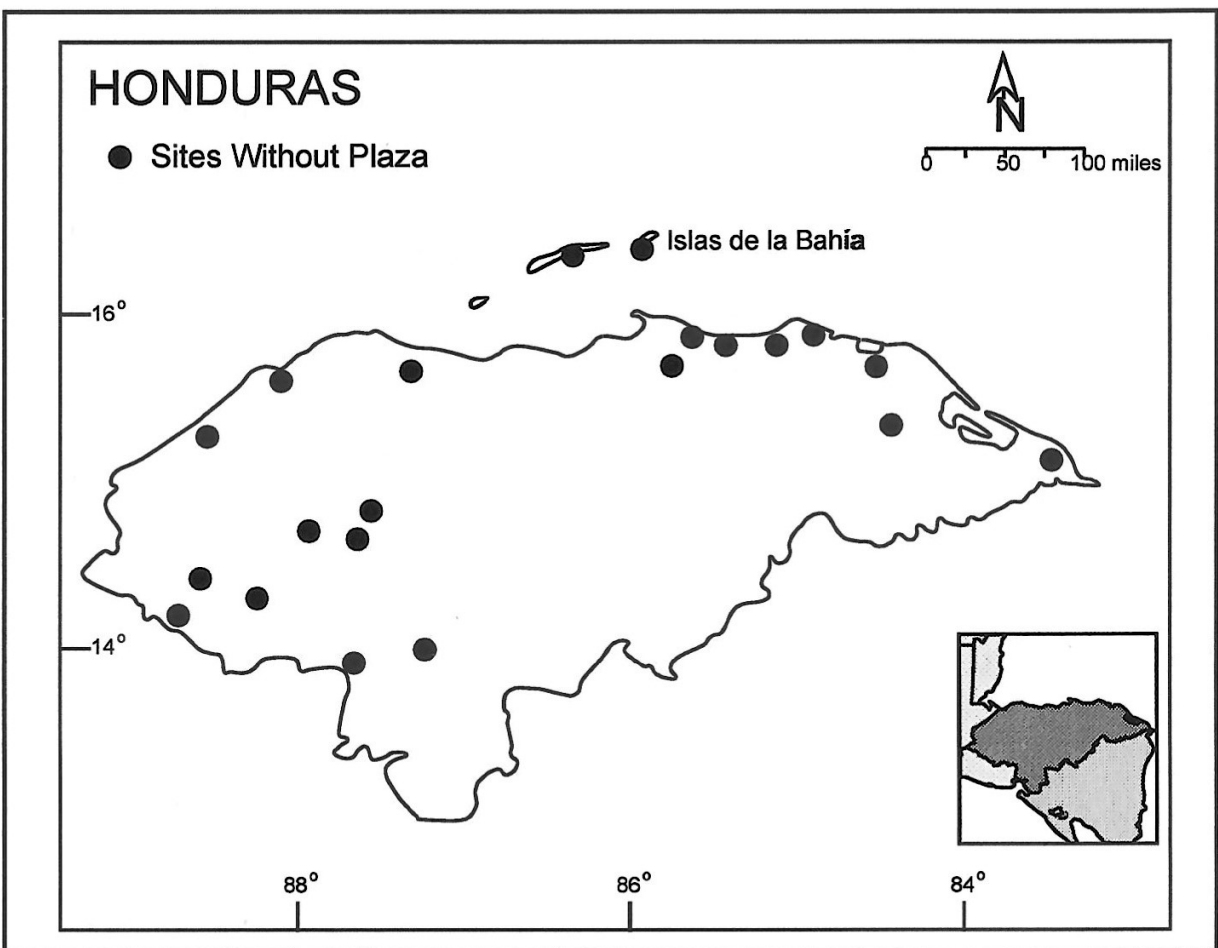


Figure 3. Honduran municipal capitals without plazas.

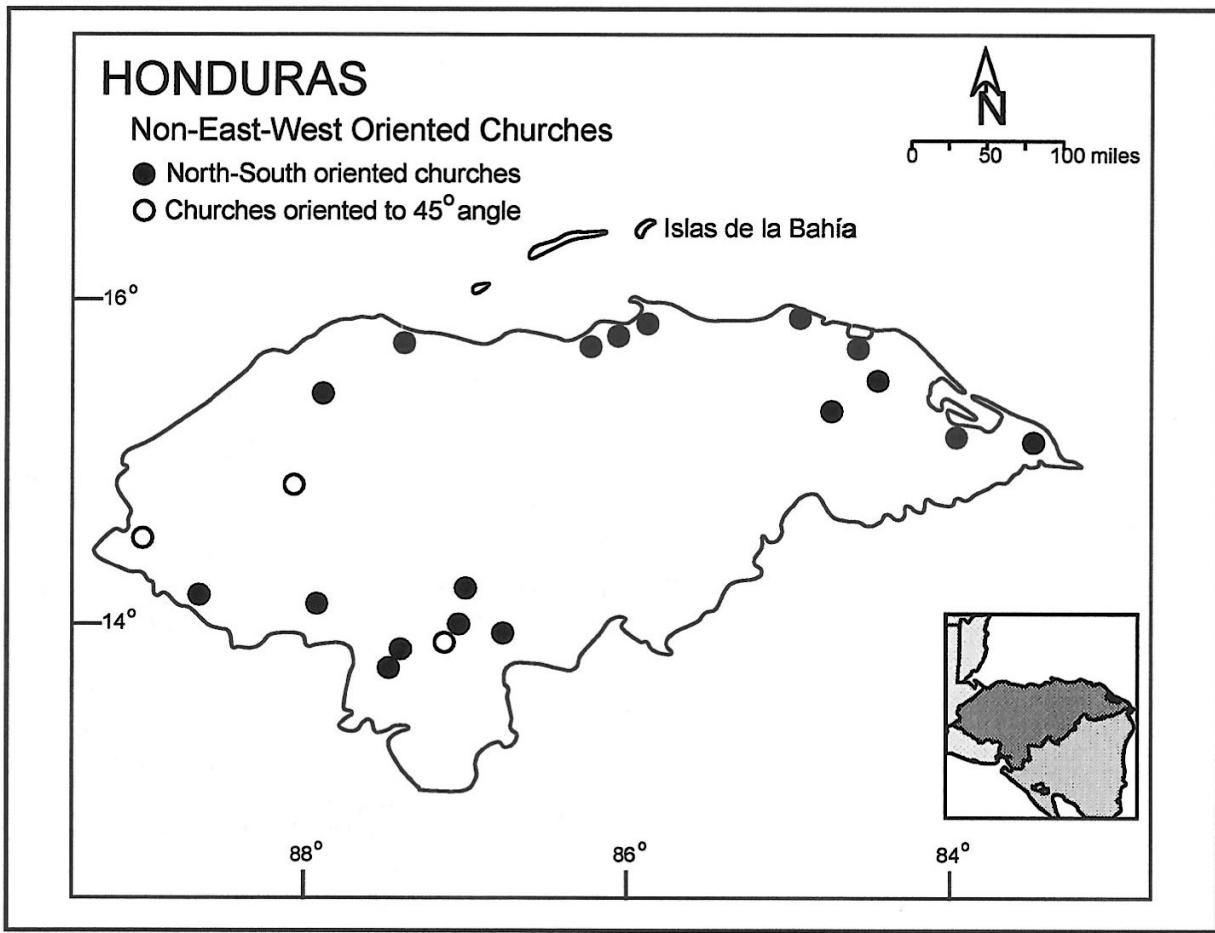


Figure 4. Non-east-west-oriented churches in Honduras.

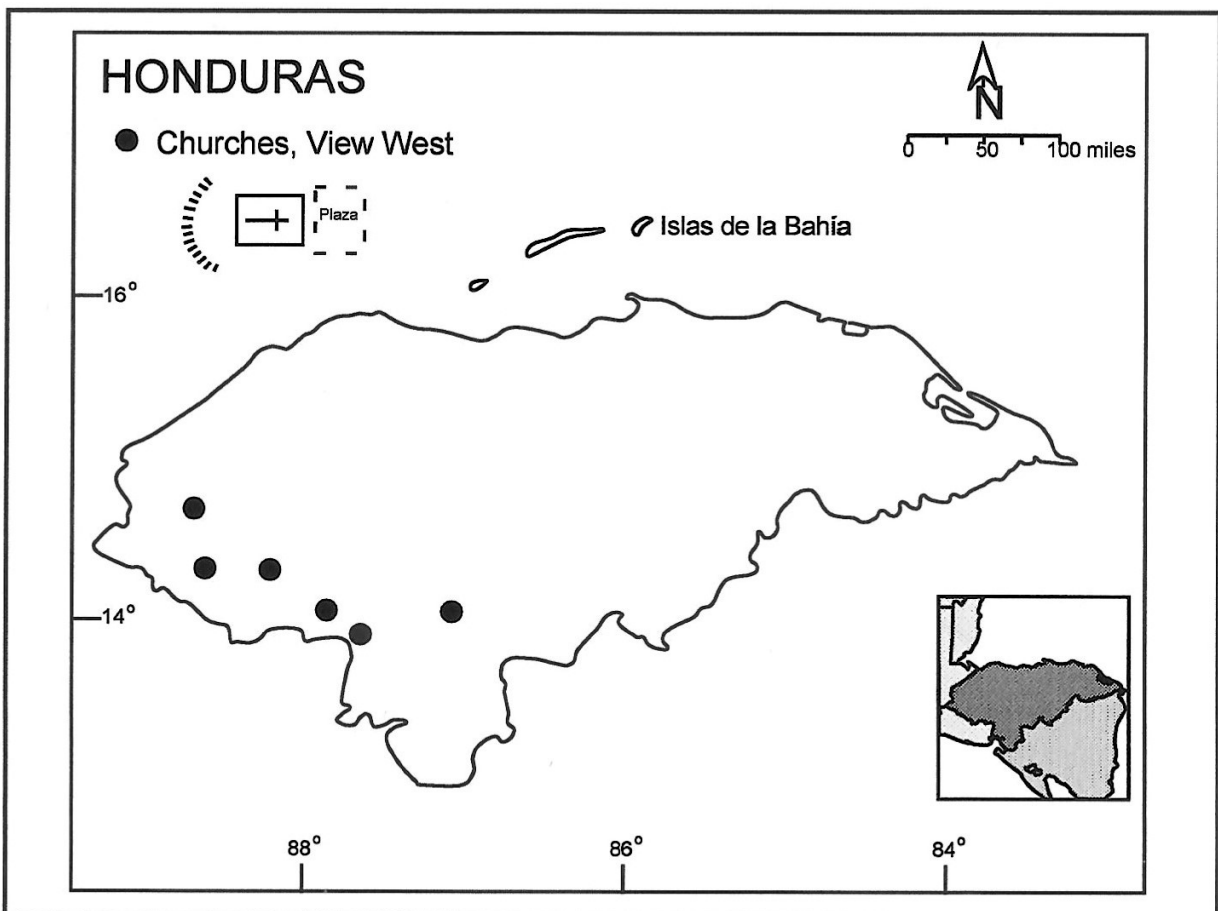


Figure 5. Honduran churches, view west.

a depression that sometimes contained a settlement. At other times the plaza and church were located on the west side of a settlement.

Additional observations occur at the department level (Figure 6). The Department of Valle, in southern Honduras, was the only absolutely consistent region in all categories. In all nine Valle *municipios*, the *cabeceras* have grid patterns and east-west oriented churches on the east side of plazas. Early colonial settlement of the area organized by Franciscans, which followed the Pacific coastal plain into Nicaragua, might explain the Valle consistency.

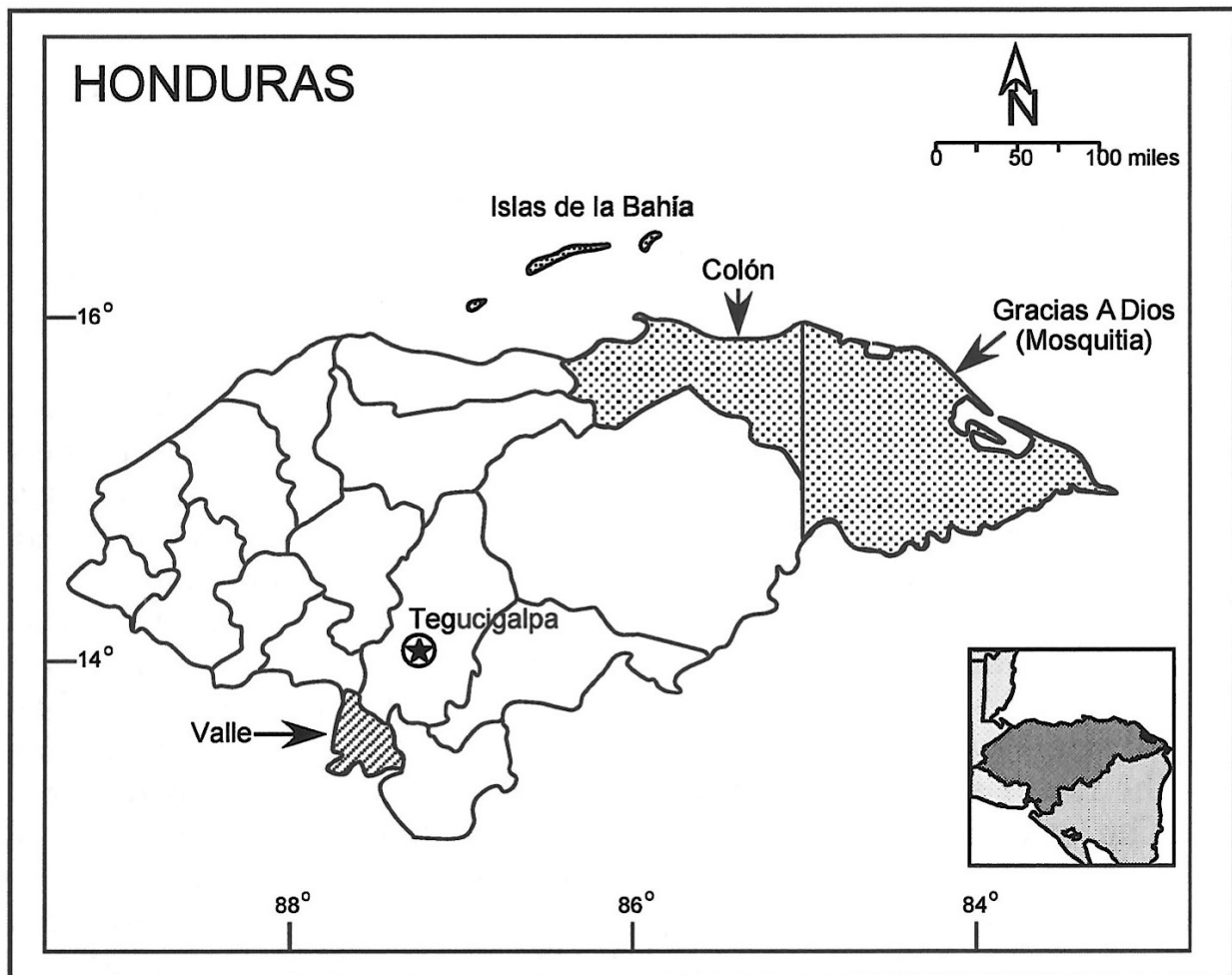


Figure 6. Distinctive departments.

In contrast, the Departments of Gracias a Dios, Colón, and Islas de la Bahía, located along the eastern and northern coasts, were the least consistent regions in all categories, with Gracias a Dios being the least consistent of the three. Of the six municipal capitals in Gracias a Dios, only two had grid patterns and plazas, and none had churches located on the east side of plazas. Furthermore, none of the six had east-west oriented churches. In fact, all six municipal capital churches had generally north or south orientations (Table 2).

Table 2. Gracias a Dios Municipal Capital Church Orientation.

Municipal Capital	Catholic Church		Moravian Church	
	Cardinal Direction Orientation	Feature Orientation	Cardinal Direction Orientation	Feature Orientation
Ahuas	...	...	north	path
Batalla	south	lagoon	...	...
Brus Laguna	north	side street	east	main street
Raya	south	airstrip	south	airstrip
Puerto Lempira	north	main street	northeast	lagoon
Wampusirpe	north	river	...	...

Source: field observations 1996, 1998; Tillman 2004; Honduras census bureau town plans.

The Mosquitia, a Distinctive Honduran Region

The Mosquitia's distinctive historical and cultural geography explains the dissimilarity of municipal capitals in Gracias a Dios (Davidson 1974, 1980, 1984b, 2002; Tillman 2004, 2005). Augelli (1962) classified this distinctive Protestant region, home to the Miskito Indians and the Moravian church, as part of Middle America's Rimland. A closer look at plaza-church locational relations in other Mosquitia settlements reinforces the region's distinctive cultural geography documented in previous studies.

Fieldwork conducted in 33 additional Mosquitian settlements indicates trends similar to those found in the municipal capitals. Notably, the same trends that distinguish this region from the Honduran interior revealed themselves regardless of whether the church was Catholic or Moravian. Only one of the 33 additional settlements had a grid street pattern and only two had plazas. Churches were located on the north and east sides of these two plazas but not on the east.

The orientation of these churches provided the most significant data. Both Catholic and Moravian churches in the Mosquitia can be oriented with the front door opening to any cardinal direction. For example, one of the 15 Catholic churches observed in the additional settlements was oriented to the north, three to the northeast, three to the east, one to the southeast, one to the south, one to the southwest, three to the west, and two to the northwest (Table 3). Similarly, six of the 26 Moravian churches were oriented to the north, two to the northeast, six to the east, one to the southeast, none to the south, three to the southwest, two to the west, and six to the northwest.

The question is: "What were churches in the Mosquitia oriented to if anything at all?" The answer is that rather than being oriented along a generally east-west axis, as 91 percent of the major municipal capital churches in Honduras are, churches in the Mosquitia, including major municipal capital churches, were usually not oriented to specific cardinal directions, but instead were oriented to natural or manmade features in the landscape. For example, two of the municipal capital churches were oriented to bodies of water, including one to a lagoon and one to

Table 3. Gracias a Dios Church Orientation.

Settlement	Catholic Church		Moravian Church	
	Cardinal Direction Orientation	Feature Orientation	Cardinal Direction Orientation	Feature Orientation
Auka	...	...	west	ridge pole
Belén	...	...	east	ridge pole
Benk	...	...	northwest	ridge pole
Cayo Sirpe	northeast	main path	...	...
Cocal	...	...	northwest	plaza
Cocobila	...	...	southwest	lagoon
Dakratara	...	...	east	creek
Dapat	northwest	main path	southwest	lagoon
Ibans	...	...	northwest	ridgepole
Katski	northeast	sea	southeast	main path
Kaurkira	...	...	east	ridgepole
Krata	northeast	main path	...	...
Kruta	west	main path	north	path
Kusua apaika	...	...	north	road
Laka Tabila	east	path	...	...
Lisangnipura	west	road	...	...
Mistruk	...	...	north	path
Mocorón	east	road	northeast	plaza
Nueva Jerusalén	...	...	east	ridge pole
Palkaka	north	path	east	lagoon
Paptalaya	...	...	north	road
Prumnitara	...	...	northeast	main path
Río Plátano	south	soccer field	...	...
Sirsirtara	west	river	northwest	river
Suhi	southeast	river	...	...
Tasbapauni	...	...	north	sea
Tasbaraya	northwest	path	southwest	main path
Tikiuraya	east	river	...	...
Tumtumtara	...	...	east	airstrip
Twitanta	...	...	north	lagoon
Uhi	...	...	northwest	main path
Wauplaya	...	...	west	none
Yahurabila	southwest	path	northwest	lagoon

Source: field observations 1996, 1998; Tillman 2004.

a river, and four were oriented to manmade features, including two to streets (Figure 7), one to a settlement path, and one to a grass airstrip.

My field survey found that Catholic churches located in the non-municipal capital settlements followed the same feature-orientation trend, with four of the Catholic churches oriented to bodies of water (one to the Caribbean Sea, three to rivers) and 11 oriented to manmade features, including eight to settlement paths, two to roads, and one to a soccer field.

Moravian churches exhibited similar feature orientation but with a slightly larger percentage of churches oriented to bodies of water. Eight of the Moravian churches were oriented to bodies of water, including one to the Caribbean Sea, five to lagoons, one to a river, and one to a creek (Figure 8). Eleven were oriented to manmade features, including six to settlement paths, two to roads, two to plazas, one to a grass airstrip,

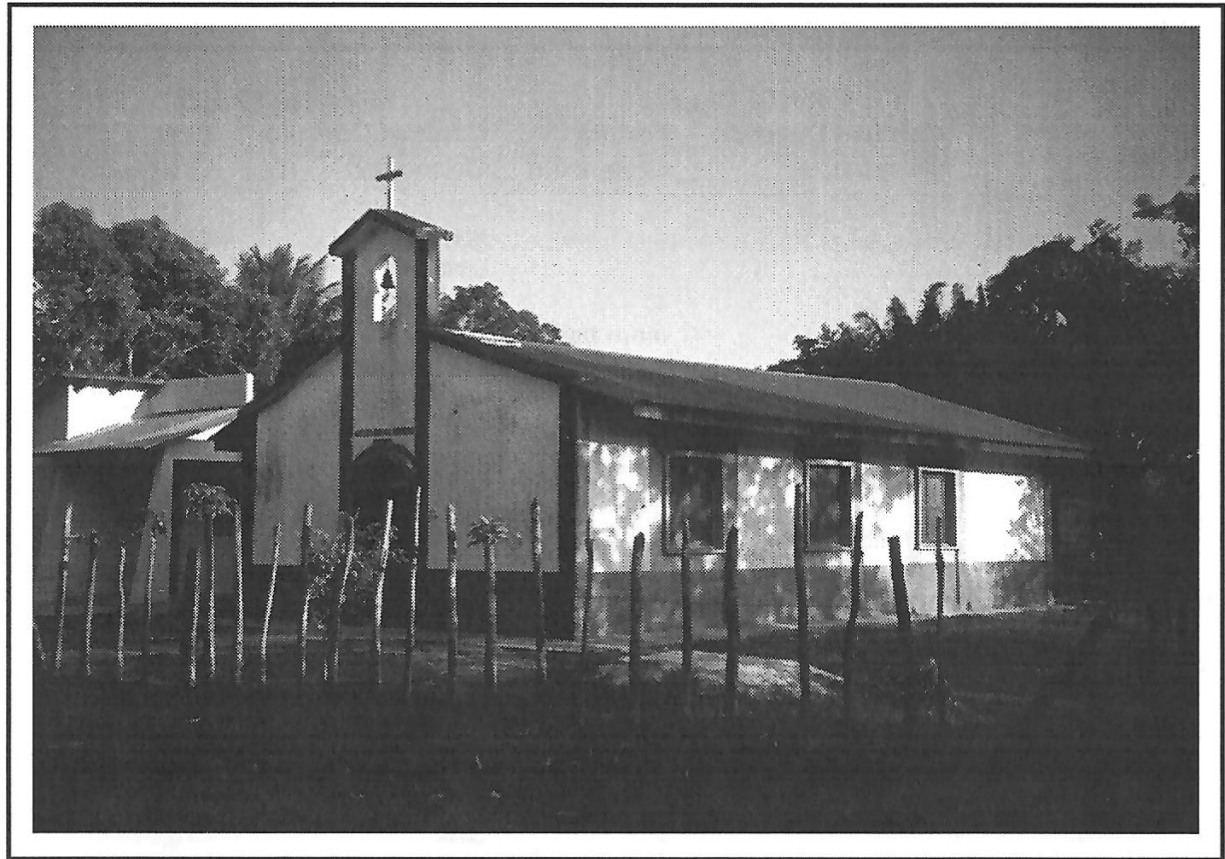


Figure 7. The Brus Lagoon Catholic church is not adjacent to a plaza. It faces north and is oriented to the adjacent street, 1998 (photo by author).

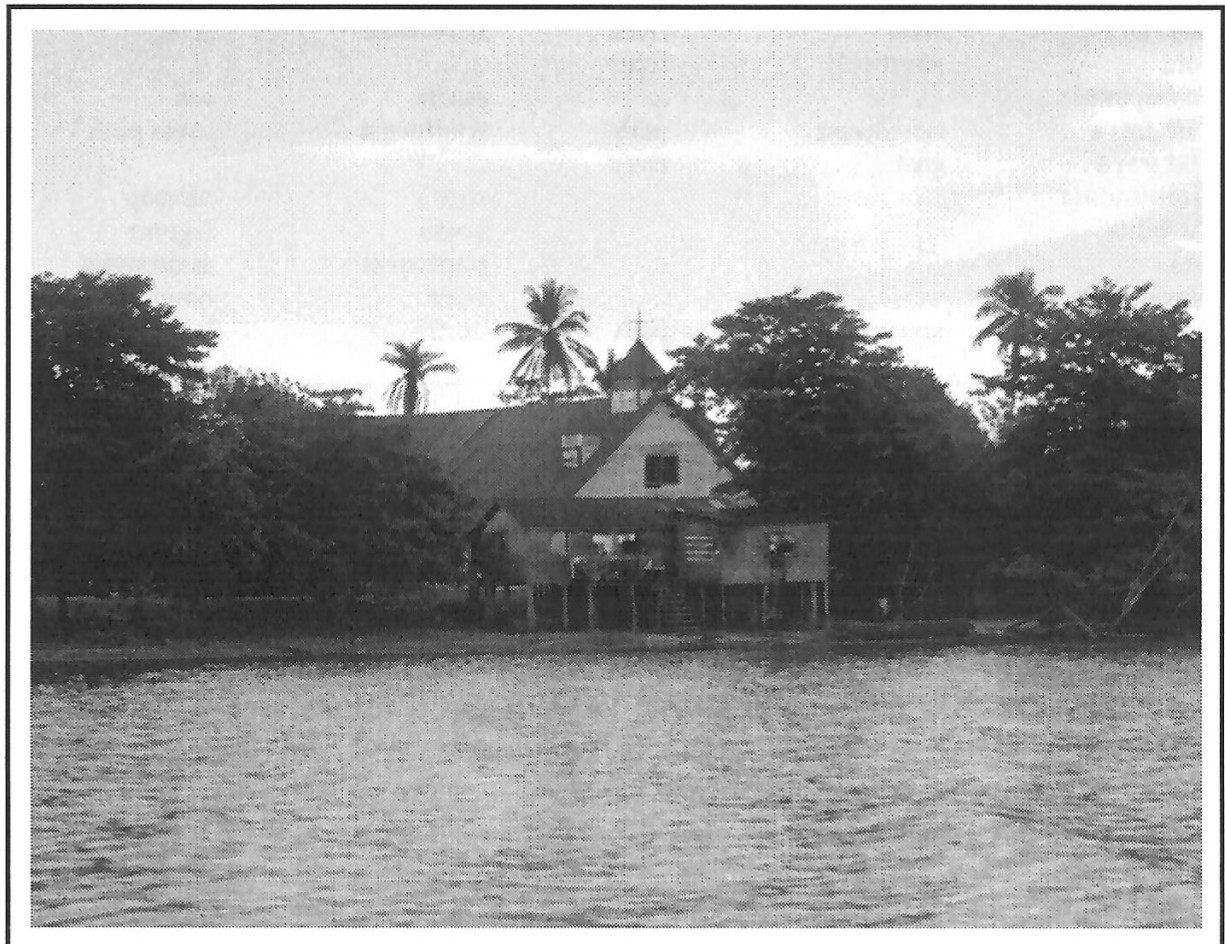


Figure 8. The Cocobila Moravian church opens to the southwest and is oriented to Ibans Lagoon, 1996 (photo by author).

and one had no apparent feature orientation. Six additional churches, often located in coastal settlements, were oriented such that the ridgelines of the churches were parallel to the ridgepoles of existing houses. This type of orientation might be an adaptation to the local environment because it generally places the structure perpendicular to the prevailing winds and allows more breezes to enter through the windows.

Conclusions

The single model of plaza-church relationships normally presented by Latin Americanist scholars does not always exist in Honduras. Unlike the textbook illustrations, a grid pattern existed in only 52 percent of municipal capitals and 54 percent of these grids varied more than five degrees off of north. Other settlement features followed the model more closely. The most consistent feature was that 93 percent of the municipal capitals had plazas. The plazas were adjacent to the major church 89 percent of the time, with 85 percent of churches located on the east side of those plazas, and 91 percent of the churches were generally oriented east-west, with the entrance typically on the west. Variations relate to several factors including culture group, physical geography, and settlement size.

Municipal capitals located in the Department of Gracias a Dios exhibited the most variation from the Honduran norm—a fact best illustrated by the stark contrast in church orientation. While 91 percent of Honduran municipal capital churches are oriented along an east-west axis, none of the major municipal capital churches in the Department of Gracias a Dios had such orientation because they were oriented to natural or manmade features rather than cardinal directions. The adjacent Department of Colón and to a lesser extent *Islas de la Bahía* also show a high variation of plaza-church relationships and maps of places without plazas and non-east-west oriented churches located several settlements in these departments.

The variation in plaza-church locational relations in these three peripheral departments is a reflection of their distinct historical and cultural geography that includes, but is not limited to, diverse culture groups, strong influence from Protestant denominations, and such landscape features as settlement morphology, house types, and even the material culture found in cemeteries. Therefore, scholars studying Honduran cultural or regional geography should add the variation in plaza-church locational relations, most particularly church orientation, to the list of items mentioned above that distinguish the departments of Colón, *Islas de la Bahía*, and especially Gracias a Dios, from the Honduran interior.

The future may bring persistent change resulting from the ongoing Hispanicization of these areas. The percentage of the total Honduran population residing in Gracias a Dios has changed little over the last century and is still less than 1 percent (Davidson 2002). The 2001 census indicates that the percentage of Ladinos living in Gracias a Dios is on the rise, however, and this growth corresponds with a greater government presence and increasing Hispanicization of the region. This ongoing His-

panicization of settlements located in peripheral parts of the country will likely result in the construction of more plazas and adjacent churches.

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