

## Chapter 2

# People and Forests in Historical Perspective

*The forests of today show how people have been and still are dependent on them, and how they make use of and interpret their environment in terms of survival and social advancement. The transformation of forest vegetation that we observe indicates specific social needs, cultural values, and changing economic and technological processes. Forests represent a legacy and they are a testimony of the evolution of societies and their respective perceptions of nature.*

(Schmithüsen 1997, p. vii)

*History matters. It matters not just because we can learn from the past, but because the present and the future are connected to the past by the continuity of a society's institutions. Today's and tomorrow's choices are shaped by the past.*

(North 1990, p. vii)

Human impacts on the forests of western Honduras trace back nearly 10,000 years. By the time the Spaniards arrived, the forests had already experienced profound transformations at the hands of indigenous peoples and civilizations. Prehistoric evidence comes from archaeological studies of the Mesoamerican region, while historical documentation dates to 1536 for the part of western Honduras that includes La Campa. Specific references to La Campa are sparse, but it was located near an important Spanish settlement, Gracias a Dios (hereafter Gracias), for which better records exist. La Campa's people would have been affected by many of the events that occurred in and around Gracias. The changes that occurred through conquest and colonialism impacted the people, their cultural traditions, and the institutions they used to manage land and forest resources. Moreover, the imposition of Spanish policies and exploitative arrangements shaped community governance, use of natural resources, and the development of religious syncretic traditions. In this chapter, I consider prehistoric and historical processes of change and cultural contexts that provide the foundation for understanding forest conditions, collective action, and property rights in the present.

## People and Forests in Prehistoric Mesoamerica

The first people to roam into Honduras more than 10,000 years ago saw forests unlike anything seen today. Instead of sparse forests dominated by pines, it may be that they found dense forests of semideciduous hardwoods. Throughout the Mesoamerican region, people hunted wildlife and gathered a variety of plants to eat. They used fire to clear undergrowth. By 10,000 years ago, people in lowland Panama had begun a progressive pattern of forest transformation with the use of fire (Pohl et al. 1996). Similar processes of forest disturbance probably occurred in other lowland areas, but the archaeological record is slim. Around 5,000 years ago, people began to adopt agriculture. The first domesticated crops were varieties of squash (cucurbits), followed by maize and beans (Smith 2005). As people began to settle in villages, they felled and burned trees to create clearings for crops. The burning enriched the soils for several years of planting, after which people abandoned old fields to clear new ones. By 2500–2000 BC, the people of western Honduras were growing maize, avocado, and palms (Pohl et al. 1996). Across the centuries, human use of fire and agriculture reshaped the forests. Pines, among the first trees to regrow in sunny, open areas, took over abandoned slash-and-burn fields. The balance among tree species changed as pines became more common than hardwoods, and by the time complex societies developed in the region, pine dominated the lowland forests and hillsides.

In western Honduras, the Maya civilization emerged around AD 400 as the Maya people conquered or assimilated neighboring peoples. The area around the Mayan center of Copán experienced increasing deforestation as people developed an intensive agricultural system with irrigation, terracing, and cultivated fields. Carbon analysis from ancient Mayan hearths shows that fruit trees, pine, and other species typical of young forests represented the most common types of firewood (Lentz 1991), suggesting mature forests had been eliminated near the city. At its height in the 700s, the population in the Copán River valley reached densities that have not been equaled since. Around AD 860 Copán's population began to fall for reasons that remain undetermined. Sediment core analysis shows that the time interval of the collapse coincides with the driest period in the past 7,000 years; a series of droughts, resulting food shortages, and associated social unrest may have destabilized the society and contributed to the decline of the Maya civilization (Peterson and Haug 2005). The survivors abandoned the city to disperse throughout the countryside. Forests began to regrow. Pines reached maturity and senescence, while hardwoods grew in the shade and regained prominence in spots where pines died off. Descendant Maya groups probably visited Copán's remains for ritual purposes (Newson 1986), but when the Spaniards arrived some 600 years later, the ruins were obscured by trees, brush, and layers of decaying leaves.

Following the collapse of the Mayan centralized state, the Lenca emerged as a major cultural group throughout central and western Honduras and eastern El Salvador. In contrast to the postclassic Maya, who lived in the lowland areas surrounding Copán, the Lenca tended to live in the highlands. The Lencas' preference for higher elevations may reflect ancient resistance to the Mayan state, defensive

purposes, and subsequent efforts to evade Spanish domination (Newson 1986). Lenca society had a marked social hierarchy composed of nobles, priests, warriors, and commoners. Women produced pottery and textiles. They lived in fortified settlements and fought wars periodically against neighboring peoples who spoke different languages. In times of peace, “they exchanged birds, cloth, feathers, salt, cacao, achite [achiote], which is like vermilion with which to paint themselves, and other things” (Herrera y Tordesillas [1601] 1728, p. 283). Although some of these exchanges probably took place to mark the cessation of hostilities, people had to trade to obtain goods such as salt and cacao, which were only available in certain areas. As with other Mesoamerican peoples, the Lenca cultivated maize, beans, and squash. Like the Maya, the Lenca believed that individuals had animal companions (naguas) to whom they were tied spiritually and physically. The belief in naguas has endured to this day among many Lenca communities (Chapman 1992).

Identifying Lenca populations in colonial history poses a challenge because the term “Lenca” was not in common usage at the time of the Spanish conquest. The peoples of central and western Honduras reported by the Spanish included the Potón, Guaquí, Cares, Colo, Chatos, Dules, Paracas, and Yaras. Unfortunately, archival documents present contradictory or vague references to these peoples, their characteristics and their languages. Newson (1986) suggests that the groups most likely to be Lenca include the Cares, Colo, Guaquí, and Potón.<sup>1</sup> Each of these groups presents Lenca attributes given their geographic location and cultural characteristics, insofar as they can be determined from colonial sources.

The first document that referred to the Lenca appeared in 1543.<sup>2</sup> It names three villages assigned as an *encomienda*, a group of villages under the authority of a Spaniard. Two of the villages are described as Lenca; however, the location of these villages is not known. In 1553, Mercederian missionaries received charge of the “partido de los Rencas” [*sic*] and reported in 1591 that they had taught the people of several villages in their native tongue of Lenca, in compliance with a Spanish mandate (Newson 1986). Throughout the colonial period, Spanish documents referred to the Lenca, Cares, and Potón as distinct peoples who spoke different dialects. The Cares lived around Gracias; therefore, La Campa’s population would most likely be included in this group. In the nineteenth century, the Potón identified their language as Lenca. By the late 1800s, scholars identified “Lenca” as a major Honduran culture group, and recognized that place names throughout western and central Honduras had shared roots in the Lenca language (Herranz 1994). Linguists consider Lenca as a separate language family with up to six different dialects (Thomas 1902; Witkowski and Brown 1978); it does not appear to be affiliated with other Mesoamerican languages.<sup>3</sup> The last Lenca speakers found by linguists were interviewed in 1965 and 1970; Lenca languages ceased to be living languages in the early twentieth century, before they could be described adequately (Campbell 1976; Campbell et al. 1978). Similar to the many peoples who became classified as Maya under Spanish domination, it appears that the Lenca were also composed of different peoples whose cultural and geographic characteristics were grouped together as Lenca. This historical cultural diversity appears to continue today; researchers have noted a range of customs, practices, and sociocultural characteristics (Stone 1948).

## The Spanish Conquest

La Campa appears intermittently in archival records that document the Spanish conquest and the colonial period. Although documents rarely mention forests or changes in human-environment relationships, insights can be drawn from early censuses, land titles, and records left by Spanish chroniclers and missionaries. The processes of change that began with the conquest continue to resonate in the present because the current social, political, and economic relationships among the people of La Campa and dominant political powers began to emerge at this time. Moreover, many of the dramatic events that marked the early years of Honduras' colonial period occurred in the vicinity of La Campa, and would have impacted the people's lives and their interactions with natural resources.

In 1536, the Spaniards made their first attempt to found a settlement in western Honduras. The area was named Higuera for gourd-producing trees that grew throughout the region, which Spaniards called *higuera*s or *hibuera*s (Aguilar Paz [1972] 1989). Earlier settlements along the northern coast and central valley, which comprised the area called "Honduras," were struggling to survive, and the Spaniards sought to exploit Higuera's human and mineral resources. The initial effort failed in the face of determined resistance by the indigenous population, which had anticipated the Spaniards' advances and retreated to the mountains. The Spanish expeditionary force had hoped to settle in an agreeable location where they could live off the indigenous people's labor, but they discovered bare fields and abandoned villages. Lacking food and resources, this first expeditionary force retreated to Guatemala. Another contingent of Spaniards and indigenous allies followed within months, and founded Gracias near the end of 1536. The location turned out to be unfavorable because there was no indigenous labor force in the vicinity (Chamberlain 1946), and in 1537 the Spaniards relocated Gracias to a valley nearer inhabited indigenous settlements. Immediately, the Spaniards began to divide the land and indigenous peoples among themselves (Carranza 2004). By that time, the indigenous population had suffered high mortality from epidemic diseases introduced by the Spaniards, but even so, they mounted fierce opposition to Spanish domination. An estimated 30,000 indigenous troops from many different peoples united under a Lenca leader, Lempira, to fight the Spanish invasion. According to Spanish chroniclers, the indigenous people believed Lempira was invincible, and he proved to be a clever strategist. The war spread from western Honduras to the central valley, the northern coast, and into El Salvador (Chamberlain 1966; Herrera y Tordesillas [1601] 1728). For nearly 6 months, the Spaniards fought with flagging courage against indigenous attacks, while a newly assigned Spanish governor, Francisco de Montejo, attempted to maintain discipline. In late 1537, one of Montejo's foot soldiers succeeded in killing Lempira. Accounts vary as to whether the Spaniards ambushed Lempira en route to an illusory peace conference, or whether he was killed in battle. The war ended as indigenous forces disbanded after the loss of their leader (Chamberlain 1966).

Following Lempira's death, Montejo decided to move Gracias again, this time to a temperate valley with abundant water and closer to the surviving indig-

enous population. With its third founding in 1539, Gracias became the administrative center for the province (Lunardi 1946; Pedraza [1539] 1946). It was only 16 km from today's Centro of La Campa, or a few hours on foot or horseback. Given their proximity to Gracias, the original inhabitants of La Campa would have been early targets of Spanish domination. The Spaniards consolidated their power through forced resettlement of the population into *pueblos de indios* (indigenous towns) and *reducciones* (consolidated settlements of the dispersed Indian population). With the creation of nucleated settlements, the Spaniards sought to pacify the population, as well as collect tribute, exploit labor, and impose Christianity and European cultural standards upon the indigenous people (Vasquez 1714; Weeks and Black 1991). Through the encomienda system, *pueblos de indios* were assigned to Spanish encomenderos (holders of encomiendas), who had the responsibility to Christianize and protect the people along with the right to demand tribute and labor. Although the indigenous people could retain land, they lost autonomy. Encomenderos used their power to demand forced labor and tribute while generally ignoring their obligations to care for the people. Although the Spanish Crown ordered that the indigenous people be treated well, the stipulation was never enforced. Indigenous people fled into the mountains. Famine eventually drove many back into villages, while others died of starvation (Newson 1986).

Epidemic diseases brought by the Spaniards combined with war, slavery, forced labor, malnutrition, and displacement to decimate the indigenous population. In 1539, Cristóbal de Pedraza reported from Gracias that "more than 6000 people, men and women, young and old, were killed or taken away, and 3000 of them were made slaves ..." (quoted in Chapman 1978, p. 5). Montejo ([1539] 1983), who based his government in Gracias, reported drastic population declines between 1536 and 1539 for five settlements in the region: Taloa shrank from 400 to 40 houses; Cárcamo's 500 houses were reduced to 20; Araxagua declined from 250 to 40 houses; Opoa's 200 houses fell to 30; and Lepaera dwindled from 400 households to 70–80. He concluded, "... there is not one pueblo destroyed, but all have been destroyed" (p. 282). The indigenous population of western and central Honduras declined from an estimated 600,000 people in 1500 to approximately 32,000 by 1550; the decline continued into the eighteenth century (Newson 1986). Nevertheless, all of the settlements mentioned by Montejo, except Araxagua, survived; today they have become municipios in the departments of Lempira and Copán.

Gracias became the most important Spanish city in the region during the early years of the colonial period. In 1544, the Crown chose it to establish the Audiencia de los Confines. The Audiencia was the seat of Spanish power in the Central American region and governed Higueras (western Honduras), Honduras, El Salvador, and Guatemala. The first president of the Audiencia, Alonso Lopez de Cerrato, reported in 1548 that the population could not pay even half the tribute owed, so he moderated the tribute demands and amount of service required (as cited in Newson 1986). Encomenderos resisted these changes. Meanwhile, the Spanish authorities in Gracias failed to support priests' efforts to convert the

indigenous population to Christianity. Priests sent reports to Spain complaining that the indigenous population suffered grave abuses at the hands of the *encomenderos*, who often refused to release people from forced labor to receive Christian indoctrination. Similar abuses occurred throughout Latin America. The Spanish Crown attempted to reduce abuses of the indigenous population with the passage of the New Laws of the Indies in 1542 (Chapman 1978), but no apparent improvement occurred. In 1548, evidently irritated by the shortcomings of its officials in Gracias, the Crown ordered the Audiencia de los Confines to move to Guatemala. The transfer of power took place in 1549. Gracias lost influence but continued as an important regional administrative center during the colonial period.

### *The Origins of La Campa in History and Legend*

People lived in the area that is now La Campa long before the arrival of the Spaniards, but the turmoil of the conquest has shrouded their prehistory. Lempira's war against the Spaniards was launched from strongholds not far from present-day La Campa, and the war evidently caused dislocation as people left their villages for mountain strongholds. Colonial documents and indigenous oral history agree that the earliest settlement in what is now La Campa was located in the mountains and called Tecauxina (also Tecauxinas and Tecaucina, now known as Cruz Alta; Fiallos 1991). It may be that the Spaniards founded Tecauxina (Chapman 1992) on the site of a prehispanic indigenous settlement; archaeological evidence suggests that both indigenous people and Spaniards lived there (Ardón Mejía 1989). In 1536, Pedro de Alvarado, a Spanish chronicler in western Honduras, mentioned a pueblo called Tiquixima, which may have been a reference to Tecauxina (Castegnaro de Foletti 1989).

The origin of the name "La Campa" presents a puzzle. It seems to have Spanish derivation, but the closest word is "el campo" ("the field" or "the countryside"). Nor is "La Campa" or "Lacampa" (as it appeared in early documents) overtly indigenous. Some people in La Campa say that the name derived from the Spanish "vamos a campar" ("let's camp here"), because of the site's agreeable location by a river. Membreño ([1901] 1994) asserts that the root of the name comes from the Mexican (Nahuatl) "acapan," which means "in cane water" (or "in the water of the cane," from *acatl* = cane or reed, *atl* = water, and *pan* = in). Western Honduras has many locations named with Nahuatl terms because the Spaniards brought a large contingent of indigenous troops from Mexico to help conquer the region. However, the derivation of La Campa from "acapan" seems a stretch given that other place names derived from the same roots retain greater similarity to their original form, such as Acapa. Another possibility is that the village was named after a Spaniard with the last name of "Campa" who had directed the construction of the colonial church (Castegnaro de Foletti 1989). The Spanish surname "Lacampa" also exists, and suggests another possible origin of La Campa's name. A former *alcalde* of La Campa,



Don Alcides, reported that a historian in Gracias had found a document written by an architect named Campa, who wrote that he had designed and directed the construction of a church, which appeared to be the one in La Campa. The author lauded the people of the village for their dedication and organization. Don Alcides thought the document had been lost upon the historian's death.

There are two versions of the founding of the village of La Campa. One version emerges from Spanish archives, and the other through oral history. Following the death of Lempira, Montejo tried to attract indigenous people back into settlements and relocated villages to places that were convenient for the Spaniards (Chamberlain 1966), and the process of relocating indigenous people continued under the Audiencia de los Confines. La Campa came into existence sometime between the end of Lempira's war and 1582, when the village is first mentioned. It was probably created through the forced relocation and resettlement of indigenous people living in the mountains in and around Tecauxina. A Honduran sociologist, Mario Ardón Mejía, told me of a colonial document stating that the priest assigned to Tecauxina objected to the village's inconvenient location in the mountains and ordered the people to move to the valley.<sup>4</sup>

The people of La Campa have a different version and explain the founding of their community through the legend of the "Discovery of San Matías." One elder told it with particular flare:

*Long ago, the people lived in the village of Tecauxina up in the mountains. The people were very religious, and they had a little chapel where they prayed. One day, a hunter came down from the mountains to see what he could find to hunt in the valley. His dog caught the scent of an animal and chased it along a river. The hunter followed as fast as he could and passed a place where two rivers came together. The whole place was thick forest, with big pines and all kinds of trees, so he couldn't see what the dog was after. Then the dog treed the animal in an amate tree by the river. The hunter saw that it was a big lizard, a garrobo. As he went to shoot it, he saw a statue at the foot of the tree. He didn't know what to do with the statue, and so he went back up to Tecauxina. It was a long walk up the side of the cliff to tell the people what he had found. Many people went to see the statue, and they carried it back to the chapel and put it on the altar. Everyone was sure it was a saint, but they didn't know which one. The next morning, the statue was gone. The hunter and other villagers went to look for it, and found it under the same tree. They carried it back to the chapel again. That night they took turns watching it, but the next morning it was gone again. They wondered who could have taken it! They found it again under the tree, and carried it back. More people guarded it that night. But it disappeared again! Now the people realized that it must be some kind of living thing, and it must be leaving because it didn't like its new home. The village had a leader, and he was very wise. He said that the saint must want them to move to the valley, because it had plenty of water. Tecauxina didn't have a permanent source of water. So the people took their things and moved to the valley where the two rivers came together. They made a camp, built shelters, and constructed a church for the saint. They used great pines; some were a meter across! Then a priest came, and the people asked him to identify the saint. The priest said that it was San Matías [Saint Matthias], and the people rejoiced because now they knew the name of their patron saint. They made chicha [fermented maize beverage] and roasted maize; they prayed, sang, and celebrated. They danced with a garrobo, stuffed of course, and played the reed flute. We still do that today, but now the Church forbids chicha. I remember when I was a little boy everyone made a big jug of chicha to celebrate the saint's day and everybody drank it, even the priest.*

Other villages have similar legends of how their patron saints convinced people to move to a new home. In Tambla, south of La Campa, the patron saint left the church repeatedly to go to an attractive plain, and eventually people abandoned their homes to build a new village there. Other patron saints of Lenca villages, similar to San Matías, moved at night to the spot where they wished to live, or became so heavy that they could not be moved out of a place where they wished to stay (Aguilar Paz [1972] 1989).

These stories may have been a way for a dominated people to justify their compliance with forced relocations; they could also have been promoted by priests as part of the effort to encourage the Catholic faith. In La Campa's case, the "Discovery of San Matías" reinterprets history to transform the people's experience of subjugation to one of autonomous decision making and spiritual insight. Instead of being forced to move to the valley, the people moved of their own choice, thus the story empowers the people and credits them with the ability to discern the saint's will. The legend fixes La Campa's Catholic faith firmly within a syncretic tradition. The Lenca valued the garrobo for its tasty meat, and the amate tree was revered for its affinity to water. The conjunction of the garrobo, the amate, and the image of San Matías merge Lenca and Christian symbols; the legend reinforces the validity of Lenca traditions with the drinking of chicha and incorporating the garrobo into a celebratory dance for the saint. The story displaces Spaniards from their historical centrality. The priest appears, but only to identify San Matías. The legend reveals major elements of the people's relationships with their natural environment: forests provide sustenance, trees produce timber for construction, and water availability underlies many decisions about land use. It also implies the fundamental dynamic between humans and forests: humans transform forests as part of their lives and livelihoods.

## Land Rights, Population, and Implications for the Forests

During the early years of the colonial period, La Campa was a small settlement. Epidemic disease, war, and relocation must have taken their toll on the population. In 1582, a Spanish census listed La Campa as a *pueblo de indios* with 20 tribute payers (*tributarios*) under an *encomendero*, Marcos Cana (Leyva 1991). If each tribute payer had a wife and two or three children, La Campa's population included approximately 80–100 people (Newson 1986). The same census reported that 30 Spanish *vecinos* (married adult males counted as permanent residents with full legal rights) lived in Gracias. Twenty-two of these men held *encomiendas* within the region governed by Gracias, which covered most of western Honduras, including what are now the departments of Ocotepeque, Lempira, Intibucá, and Copán. The small indigenous population, combined with the low Spanish population during the first few centuries of the colonial period, would have been favorable for forest expansion. With a sharply reduced indigenous population and few Spaniards to work the land, the area in agriculture



declined as compared to the period prior to the Spaniards' arrival. Spanish demands for indigenous labor interfered with villagers' planting and tending of crops, and the region struggled to produce enough food to feed its inhabitants. With fewer people and less activity on the landscape, pine forests must have expanded into former fields and clearings around depopulated and abandoned villages. Only around Spanish settlements, mines, and ports did the intensity of land use increase, and trees were felled to build mines, construct buildings, and create pastures for imported cattle and horses. Around La Campa, large swaths of pine-oak forest remained as *realenga* (open Crown lands) into the 1800s.

Every indigenous community was to be granted land for common use by the population. According to a 1573 royal decree, indigenous communities had rights to one *legua cuadrada* of land as ejido (government-granted common land) to be shared among all residents (Carlos IV de España 1805). A *legua cuadrada* encompassed approximately 1,600 ha, although the exact measure varied through Central America. Land granted to indigenous communities as ejidos usually included communal forests, pastures, and fields. The actual expanse of land differed from community to community. Some communities claimed more than a *legua cuadrada*, but others, particularly those adjacent to Spanish settlements, could not claim or maintain the ejidos they deserved by law (Newson 1986).

La Campa did not receive a formal recognition for its ejidal land until 1732<sup>5</sup>; but in 1724, the people sought title to a section of unclaimed land located to the north of the Centro. La Campa sent representatives to the judge in Gracias responsible for surveying land in the province (*juez subdelegado de medidas*) to present a petition:

*I, Pascual Peres, current Alcalde of the pueblo of La Campa in the jurisdiction of the city, Gracias a Dios, my principal regidores [council members] and the rest of the común [residents] of this pueblo ... come before your honor, Juez Subdelegado de Medidas in this jurisdiction, and declare that there is an area to the north of our pueblo that is called Quesuncelca; it is realenga and baldía [open for communal use],<sup>6</sup> without an owner; and because the children of the pueblo need it for their work with sugar cane and to raise some cattle and horses, we request and beseech your assistance to send a surveyor to mark the indicated plot of land, for the residents request it and we are prepared to cover the cost for the value of the caballerías<sup>7</sup> it contains, and obtain title....<sup>8</sup>*

In 1725 the title was approved and recorded in the capital, Santiago de Guatemala. La Campa purchased the four *caballerías* and 24 *cuerdas* (approximately 190 ha) that comprised Quesuncelca (also called Suncelca) for slightly more than 26 oz of silver.<sup>9</sup> It indicates that La Campa could muster a surplus income in excess of the heavy tribute obligations that indigenous communities owed to the Crown. Moreover, the people had sufficient knowledge of the legal system and land titling process to present a successful request to the regional government. The surveyor's report noted that the people of La Campa had already planted many plots of sugarcane in the area, and the rest of the land was covered with pine trees, but appropriate for grazing. Quesuncelca had a lower elevation and milder climate more suitable for sugarcane than the Centro, and even today Quesuncelca (now called Cañadas after its largest village) is known for its sugarcane production. Quesuncelca had the additional advantage of being several kilometers closer to Gracias, which was the

nearest local market. The context suggests that Campeños were raising sugarcane to sell,<sup>10</sup> and the income may have provided the cash to pay for the land. Campeños, however, credit San Matías with providing historical economic benefits to the community. Given the image's miraculous discovery, San Matías is widely believed to have the power to grant miracles and heal disease. To honor San Matías and share his miraculous power, a select group of faithful Campeños carried the image of San Matías to other communities in the vicinity for people to venerate (cf. Chapman 1986). Offerings of animals, food, and other useful goods were collected and taken to La Campa. An additional source of income may have come from La Campa's production of artisanal pottery, which appears to have prehispanic origins. Archaeological remains show that early colonial pottery was thick and crude, but during the colonial period, La Campa began to produce a thin, fine pottery that shows Spanish influence (Castegnaro de Foletti 1989). It was traded throughout the region (Ardón Mejía 1989).

Unlike many pueblos de indios throughout Honduras that lost land during the colonial period (Newson 1986), La Campa residents had use of *realengas* and *baldíos* (Crown lands considered vacant "wastelands") surrounding their community and did not face competition for this land from neighboring communities until the 1800s. Population growth occurred gradually. Confession records from 1796 to 1797 provide a list of everyone who confessed and took communion (*gente de confesión*) aged 10 years and up. In 1796, the lists noted 342 people attending confession in La Campa. The priest listed confessors by family in the order of husband, wife, sons, daughters, and *agregados* (additional members; their relationship to the rest of the household is unexplained), with widows, widowers, and their children indicated at the end. Although the report does not include children under the age of 10, the information provides valuable insights. La Campa's population included 83 households headed by a married couple (the priest included the names of four husbands with the annotation "absent from the pueblo"). Eight bachelors were noted separately.<sup>11,12</sup> For 1797, the list has 389 confessors (Table 2.1). The priest grouped people into family units separated by lines, and indicated parents and children

**Table 2.1** Population of La Campa, 1582–1801

Year	Tribute payers/confessors	Total population
1582 <sup>a</sup>	20 tributarios	~100 <sup>b</sup>
1797 <sup>c</sup>	389 confessors (10 years or older)	—
1801 <sup>d</sup>	143 tributarios	671

<sup>a</sup>*Relación hecha a su Majestad por el gobernador de Honduras, de todos los pueblos de dicha gobernación. Año 1582.* Cited in Leyva (1991)

<sup>b</sup>This estimate of total population follows Newson's (1986) calculations that each tribute payer had a wife and an average of three children

<sup>c</sup>*Curato de Gualcha y pueblos anexos: Colusuca, Coloete, La Campa, Caiquín, y Valle de Sunsulaca, 1797. Archivo Eclesiástico de Comayagua, Caja 1: 1758–1799, Padrones.* University of Texas at Arlington Special Collections, Roll 1. Maritza Arrigunaga Coello, compiler

<sup>d</sup>*Población de las Provincias de Honduras, matrícula de 1801* (Leyva 1991)

by marriage and family status. Adult females outnumbered adult males (148–98); 68 women were listed as widows, and only 2 men were widowers. Forty-three of the widows were grouped in pairs or as groups of three or four with their children, implying that they formed separate households.<sup>13</sup>

The disparity in the gender balance indicates a high mortality rate for adult men, which could have resulted from forced labor and tribute demands. The Spaniards required men to work as burden carriers (*tamenés*) and serve in mines at great distances from their homes; many died (cf. Newson 1986). A glimpse of the situation comes from a petition submitted by the indigenous community of Piraera, which was located south of Gracias, near the current border with El Salvador. The people pled to be exempted from supplying 40 men each month to work in the port of Omoa on the Caribbean coast. The port was a 16-day march to the north, and many men died in the unaccustomed tropical climate. The people noted that this obligation was in addition to the tribute they already owed each year: 530 tostones<sup>14</sup> and 25 maravedis for the Caja Real (royal treasury), 200 tostones to the governor of Honduras, 10 tostones for various religious collections, 15 fanegas<sup>15</sup> of maize, and 19 chickens, as well as several smaller payments.<sup>16</sup> In a similar petition from 1795, Lepaera's indigenous community complained that forced labor in tobacco fields caused them great suffering; they received only 1 peso per week for their work and two small tortillas to eat each day. The demands on their labor prevented them from planting their own crops, but regardless they had to pay 100 fanegas of maize every year as tribute. To meet this obligation, they had to purchase maize at 2 reals per almud (unit of measure for dry goods) and haul it to Gracias, where officials counted each almud as only 1.5 reals worth of maize.<sup>17</sup> The documents reported that residents were abandoning the pueblos to avoid the misery they faced with the excessive tribute and labor demands. La Campa most likely confronted similar demands, or perhaps worse given that it was located much closer to Gracias than Piraera or Lepaera.

Based on the confessional records, La Campa had approximately 120 households by the late 1700s, and about 30 of those households were headed by widows or bachelors. Shortly thereafter, a census conducted in 1801 reported 671 residents and 143 tribute payers in La Campa.<sup>18</sup> Assuming that each household planted 1.5 manzanas (1.05 ha) of maize to meet its annual needs (based on Campeño farmers' recollections of the total maize area planted with slash-and-burn agriculture prior to the advent of fertilizer), each household had about 16.5 ha available for their use. The calculation is rough, because it is not known whether Campeño men, like men of Lepaera and Piraera, had difficulty planting their own crops due to forced labor obligations, or whether they might have tried to plant more than needed in order to meet tribute obligations. At any rate, the proportion of the population to the land area suggests that each household had about 15 times as much land as needed to produce an annual crop of maize. This estimate includes only the legally titled ejidos and Quesuncelca, and La Campa's population also used unclaimed *realenga* on its borders. With such low population density, long forest fallows would have been easy to maintain. Slash-and-burn fields had several decades or more to grow back to forest before being cleared again.

### **Community Governance and Communal Land: The Roots of a Communitarian Tradition**

La Campa's current municipal government and communal land rights have their origins in Spanish models transplanted to the Americas. Little is known of prehistoric Lenca community organization and concepts of property. According to chroniclers, the Lenca lived in central settlements surrounded by agricultural fields (Weeks et al. 1987). It is not clear whether land was held communally, privately, or in some combination. During conquest, the forced relocations of indigenous peoples into *pueblos de indios* disrupted preexisting forms of governance and facilitated the imposition of Spanish governance models upon indigenous communities. The Spaniards imposed a model derived from rural Castile, where agricultural communities governed themselves and their communal land areas through village councils. Under the Castilian model, each community had *ejidos* for people to use for agriculture and other needs. Every community had a governing body formed by an *alcalde* and *regidores*. These community authorities were charged with enforcing Spanish laws, punishing minor offenses, and overseeing community land. They received a salary paid out of the community's tribute (Newson 1986).

*Ejidal* land could not be sold or partitioned, and individuals could not own specific parcels or pass them on to inheritors. Similar to rural Spain, the person who planted a field in the commons controlled it until the harvest passed, then the land returned to commons (Vassberg 1984). In colonial years, low population density in La Campa meant that people probably had few limits on choosing locations for their fields. The main constraint was the labor required to clear land and tend crops. Over time, rules and local customs developed regarding land use and *de facto* private claims to communal land. By the twentieth century, municipal documents report *de facto* owners of sugarcane fields, orchards, and *houselots*, and these properties could be sold, exchanged, or inherited among community members. *Slash-and-burn* fields were temporary, but fields and lots with perennial plants or permanent structures were treated as private property.

Honduras gained independence in 1821. At this time, La Campa was incorporated as an indigenous community within the *municipio* of Gracias, as were the neighboring indigenous communities of Caiquín, San Manuel de Colohete, San Sebastián (formerly Colusuca), and Santa Cruz (formerly Erandique). The system of community governance imposed by the Spaniards endured in the postindependence period. La Campa continued to elect *regidores* to handle local issues, but as a community under the *municipio* of Gracias, it also had to provide service to the municipal government in Gracias. La Campa's elected leader, called an auxiliary *alcalde* because he was subordinate to the *alcalde* in Gracias, had to attend municipal meetings and relay information. The population also had to provide labor and pay fees to Gracias.

Due to poor transportation infrastructure and the power of local elites, Honduras did not develop a centralized national government during the period following independence. Civil wars and political instability characterized Honduras throughout

the nineteenth century. Eighty-five different presidents governed Honduras between 1821 and 1876 (Lapper and Painter 1985). The political uncertainties and wars may have disrupted small rural communities affected by the struggles or forced conscription of men into the fighting forces; however, this period has sparse documentation for La Campa. The cities of Comayagua, Tegucigalpa, and San Pedro Sula developed as regional powers vying for dominance. Gracias faded in importance, and western Honduras became a hinterland where local elites and rural communities exercised considerable autonomy.

During the 1800s, the population grew and demand for agricultural land for milpas (maize fields) and pasture expanded accordingly. La Campa and Caiquín residents began to compete for land that lay between their communities; both claimed prior use rights established in antiquity. They had legal recourse to add to their ejidos under an 1836 law that expanded indigenous communities' land rights from one to two *leguas cuadradas*. The communities turned to the authorities in Gracias to resolve the dispute and claim the two *leguas cuadradas* permitted. La Campa's auxiliary alcalde's petition argued,

*Whereas security of property is an essential requirement to avoid damaging disputes ... currently the pueblo that I represent believes itself harmed by that of Caiquín which disputes part of the land that we recognize as our own ... since we lack the corresponding title, we find it difficult to defend the part that the community of Caiquín intends to take away. The pueblo of La Campa legally and legitimately recognizes ownership of the land that it possesses, but it does not have the document that would serve to prove the dominion that has been transmitted for many years into the present.*

*I ask and beseech Your Excellency, in the first place, for protection of our land, and secondly, may it please Your Excellency to order that our land be surveyed according to the same borders recognized by the pueblo, hence resulting that we be given title.<sup>19</sup>*

An official in Gracias responded on the same day:

*In sight of the preceding petition, the government agrees to grant as ejidos to the pueblo of La Campa the land that its residents say they have possessed for many centuries, as long as the area does not exceed the two leguas cuadradas indicated in Article 15 of the June 23, 1836, Law. The interested parties may request survey and auction of any excess land there might be, according to the regulations in force.<sup>20</sup>*

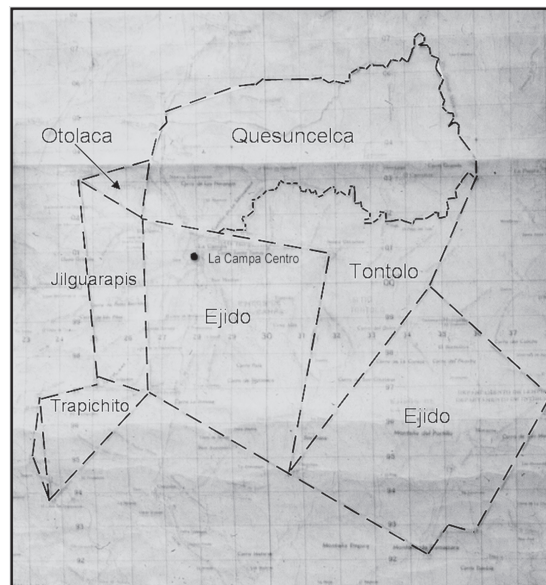
The surveyor required 3 arduous days to mark the borders. Residents of La Campa and Caiquín accompanied the surveyor to draw the boundary through the disputed area, and reached a compromise acceptable to both sides. At the end of the process, the surveyor noted that much of the land claimed by both communities remained outside their legal allotment, because both claimed more than two *leguas cuadradas*. The surveyor reported "pine-covered hills with sparse undergrowth, adequate to graze livestock but little else," and described the challenges of traversing the steep hills and forests. The description implies denser, more extensive, and less accessible forest than exists now.

The border conflict with Caiquín provided an incentive to formalize use rights with a land title. Scribes in Gracias made at least two copies of the title. La Campa retained one for its community archives, and the other went to the capital, Tegucigalpa, for official records and eventual archiving. Although the official

demarcation left out much of La Campa's territory, the official recording of the land title in 1865 expanded La Campa's legally recognized land rights.

Subsequent to the legal titling of two *leguas cuadradas*, La Campa pursued legal titles to some of the *realengas* that they used beyond the borders of their ejidos. La Campa acquired Tontolo in 1882 from Manuel Trejo, a citizen of Gracias. He had purchased Tontolo as *realenga* from the nation in 1870 and paid 177.62 pesos for 13.3 caballerías<sup>21</sup>; he sold it to La Campa for 600 pesos.<sup>22</sup> In 1925, the national government granted La Campa 2,500 lempiras to purchase Otolaca,<sup>23</sup> but it was delayed due to political upheavals. In 1973, La Campa purchased Trapichito with funds from a timber sale (discussed in more detail in Chapter 4) (see Fig. 2.1). In contrast to ejidos, which were granted by the state to indigenous communities and nominally remained within the state's purview, land purchased by municipal authorities on behalf of La Campa belonged to the community. In practice, there was no distinction between ejidal and communal lands until the national government implemented a land titling program directed at indigenous ejidos (Chapter 5).

The history of La Campa's landholdings presents a number of gaps and uncertainties. At one point in time, Otoloca evidently included Jilguarapis; the land passed through several owners before returning definitively to La Campa.<sup>24</sup> Moreover, La Campa's borders have varied over time, and the boundary markers I located in the field did not always fall where the titles' survey maps indicated.



**Fig. 2.1** La Campa ejidos and common lands, borders approximate (enhanced version of a copy of a hand-drawn map kept in La Campa's municipal office)



Although land purchases added to La Campa's landholdings, La Campa may have lost some land along its edges through purchases by private individuals. The legal establishment of the municipio of La Campa and subsequent border disputes also shaped its present boundary lines. In trying to ascertain details that land titles excluded, I had several extended conversations with Don Alcides, a former alcalde with a broad grasp of La Campa's history. He confessed to a number of uncertainties as well, because La Campa has few documents from the period prior to gaining municipal status. Supposedly, an alcalde during the mid twentieth century decided to clean out a cabinet in the municipal offices to make more space, and burned piles of historical records. Don Alcides noted: "We don't even know what was lost; the papers probably went back to the colonial period. Thank goodness he didn't burn the land titles."<sup>25</sup>

The history of La Campa's land titles shows that La Campa's authorities were proactive in seeking official land rights, but it is not clear whether they were more proactive than others. La Campa's success in maintaining and gaining land contrasts with the common perception that indigenous communities lost land through the colonial and postindependence periods. La Campa was located near an important colonial city and on the edge of a large hacienda (Hacienda Catulaca), yet it appears that Spaniards and Ladinos had no interest in the area surrounding La Campa, and it experienced few incursions or competition for land until the nineteenth century. The Quesuncelca title mentions that Catulaca respected the Crown mandate that prohibited Spanish-owned cattle from grazing within 1.5 *leguas* of a pueblo de indios (Carlos IV de España 1805). The topography and the absence of valuable mineral resources probably protected La Campa more than any other factors. To La Campa's west lay the impassable peaks of Celaque; to the east, a mountain plateau scarred by gorges inhibited passage. To the south, footpaths (widened to roads only in the past 30 years) led through pine forests to the nearest neighbors, the pueblos de indios of Caiquín, San Manuel de Colohete, and Colusuca (which became San Sebastián). No other important settlements appeared in La Campa's vicinity until Ladinos moved into Guanajulque in the postindependence period.

La Campa's success in expanding its legally titled land also reflected Honduran policies that permitted common-property ownership. In other parts of Central America during the latter part of the nineteenth century, liberal reforms promoted centralized governments and export-led growth. El Salvador and Guatemala enacted policies that expropriated indigenous lands and transformed communal properties to private holdings in order to convert "unused" land to productive uses. As peasants and indigenous peoples lost land, they formed a labor force at the disposition of large landholders, coffee growers, and emerging industries. By contrast, the Honduran state attempted to expand production through mandates and incentives; indigenous and peasant populations retained land rights (Lapper and Painter 1985). Elites expanded control over the poor, rural population through legal and financial leverage, but Honduras did not acquire a landless labor force until the twentieth century. Honduras lagged behind its neighbors in urbanization, industrialization, and income from exports, a situation that has been attributed in part to the low productivity of peasant agriculture (Euraque 1996; Williams 1994).

During the twentieth century, the Honduran government continued to acknowledge indigenous communities' land titles, and made small but symbolically important concessions to laborers and the rural poor through recognition of unions and land-reform programs. The government recognized labor unions in 1954 (the last nation in Latin America to do so) as the result of a massive strike by banana workers and intervention by representatives of the United States' American Federation of Labor. The government and the owners of the banana companies (Standard Fruit and United Fruit) accepted unions overtly, but tried to undermine their autonomy by co-opting the leadership. The government also legislated a social security system for the labor unions (Peckenham and Street 1985). Unions expanded rapidly, especially in the banana industry. During the reformist military government of Oswaldo López Arellano (1972–1975), union membership exceeded that of all other Central American nations (Euraque 1996). Land-reform programs of 1963 and 1972 were enacted in response to determined demonstrations, well-organized land occupations, and legal pressure from rural peasants and their allies. Over the course of 2 decades (1963–1982), nearly 55,000 land-poor or landless rural households obtained approximately 245,000 ha from large landholdings (Kincaid 1985). The beneficiaries had to follow a complicated procedure to gain the land. Landholders resisted redistribution of even the least desirable, idle segments of their land, which were usually all that the law permitted peasants to request on the justification that the land was not being put to productive use. The reforms benefited barely 14% of the rural population, and not all managed to hold on to their land. While the reform programs and unionization process did not challenge the fundamental inequities in Honduran society, they may have diffused social tensions. In comparison to neighboring nations, the Honduran government responded with a degree of openness to social unrest instead of relying primarily on violent repression. The combination of symbolic reforms and the appearance of a somewhat responsive government may have contributed to Honduras' relative stability through the 1970s and 1980s (Kincaid 1985; Thorpe et al. 1995). Although the Honduran military and national government also employed repression to eliminate opposition and people "disappeared" (Comisionado Nacional de Protección de los Derechos Humanos 1994; Valladares Lanza and Peacock 1999), Honduras nevertheless avoided the civil wars that shook Guatemala, El Salvador, and Nicaragua.

### **La Campa Becomes a Municipio**

By the early twentieth century, the residents of La Campa and Caiquín became frustrated with their obligations to provide labor and fees to Gracias, because they received little in return. The neighboring communities of San Sebastián and San Manuel de Colohete had gained municipal status in 1896 and 1901, respectively (Fiallos 1991), but La Campa and Caiquín had fewer residents and lacked the prerequisite infrastructure. In 1916, La Campa hired a lawyer to argue its case and attend to bureaucratic procedures in Tegucigalpa. By 1920, La Campa's case had

advanced favorably. When it became obvious that La Campa would succeed in its bid, the people of Caiquín sent their auxiliary alcalde to La Campa with an offer: they wanted to be part of the new municipio as long as La Campa recognized Caiquín's separate land titles and autonomy in land-use decisions. Despite their history of discord, both communities recognized that they had something to gain by unification. La Campa would become one of the department's larger municipios and obtain proportionally more financial support from the national government. It would also have a larger population base to carry out municipal projects (see Fig. 2.2). Caiquín would be free of servitude to Gracias; as part of La Campa it could participate more directly in municipal government and place its own residents on the council. La Campa accepted Caiquín's proposal. When municipal



**Fig. 2.2** Municipal borders of La Campa, 1921–1995

status became official on January 19, 1921, Caiquín's council made land-use decisions within its territory, served in Caiquín's town hall, disciplined Caiquín's residents on minor transgressions, and defended its land against Campeño interlopers. La Campa's residents (who controlled the municipal council due to their larger population) tolerated Caiquín's autonomy, but expected Caiquín's residents to send representatives to municipal council meetings, respect municipal ordinances, pay municipal taxes, and stay off La Campa's land. Caiquines resented Campeños' dominance of the municipal council. Several Caiquines became delinquent paying municipal taxes; they were fined by the council. Within 20 years of joining La Campa, Caiquín's people renewed their struggle to form an independent municipio.<sup>26</sup> La Campa, unwilling to lose even a recalcitrant portion of the municipal population, quietly resisted the process. Meanwhile, farmers along the La Campa-Caiquín border renewed their conflicts over land rights. In the years following the survey of 1864, the communities had failed to maintain the boundary line and had not erected permanent border markers. The surveyor had designated agricultural clearings as markers along the border, but with time the clearings had reverted to forest or changed their dimensions. Rumors on both sides alleged that the stone border markers had been moved; the discord has resonated into the present day.

As a municipio, La Campa gained local autonomy over labor obligations and tax decisions, and it could represent its own interests directly before the departmental and national governments. The first elected *municipalidad* (municipal council) included the *alcalde*, *síndico fiscal* (second in line to the *alcalde*, responsible for overseeing land allocations), and three *regidores* (council members) who served as advisors. Interestingly, the *síndico fiscal* was customarily the person who came in second in *alcalde* elections. This meant that *alcaldes* had to work closely with a political rival; the mechanism helped to limit corruption and ensure transparency in decision making. Council members could be elected from any village in the municipio, so power did not become concentrated in the Centro. Moreover, each village in the municipio selected several auxiliary *alcaldes* (village representatives) to attend council meetings, organize labor and communal activities in the village, and help enforce the law within their villages. In addition to attending council meetings, communicating council decisions, and enforcing the law in their villages, auxiliary *alcaldes* were charged with the sensitive tasks of collecting taxes from their neighbors and arresting anyone who violated municipal ordinances. A *suplente* (substitute) was elected to cover an auxiliary *alcalde*'s duties in case of illness or disability. In addition, every village named *alguaciles* (assistants to the municipal *alcalde*) in proportion to their population for rotating service in the offices in the Centro.<sup>27</sup> Through the first half century of the municipio, almost every man served periodically as an *alguacil*. Each village sent one auxiliary *alcalde* or *alguacil* every week; the on-duty representatives arrived in the Centro on Sunday afternoon to relieve their predecessors. For the full week, the on-duty auxiliary *alcaldes* and *alguaciles* were responsible for running errands, supervising ongoing community projects, detaining lawbreakers, guarding prisoners in the municipal jail (usually drunks who had disturbed the peace), and assisting the *alcalde* and council as necessary. They slept in the town hall at night, until their relief came the following Sunday. The

national government abolished the position of alguacil in 1941 and instated a paid position of concierge instead.<sup>28</sup> La Campa appealed the decision by explaining that the municipal government could not afford to pay a concierge, and needed to have alguaciles. La Campa continued the custom until the 1970s, when it adopted the position of concierge. Today the concierge's duties involve guarding the municipal offices and its keys, capturing delinquent livestock grazing in the Centro, and carrying messages for the council.

The auxiliary alcaldes and alguaciles comprised the *consejo* (advisory board) to the council, and they offered their opinions and presented requests during council meetings. Other municipal offices included *jueces* or *justicias* (judges for minor offenses) and the *juez de policia* (municipal police officer), which rotated among the regidores. The police had to investigate cases of civil transgressions and mete out punishment. In recent years, the police position has become a separate post in the municipal government. The position of *juez de paz* (justice of the peace) is responsible for addressing serious transgressions; he also mediates civil disputes and adjudicates conflicts over land. Criminal cases generally transfer to the department capital for adjudication.

Since Caiquín had separate land titles as a pueblo de indios, it elected in addition a local council composed of an auxiliary alcalde and regidores to help manage affairs within its territory. The size, composition, and responsibilities of the municipal council have evolved through time with demographic change and revisions of national municipal laws, but the basic structure has endured.

### ***Traditional Subsistence Crops***

Maize, beans, and squash, the triumvirate of Mesoamerican agriculture, have been important staple crops throughout La Campa's history. As in other Mesoamerican cultures, the Lenca planted these crops together in the milpa, and the practice continues today. The multicropping methods imitate naturally occurring plant associations, which indicate indigenous people's intimate knowledge of their environment. Spaniards' accounts from the 1500s to 1600s mentioned that indigenous groups planted crops in a variety of combinations, such as maize-chile-melon-sweet potato-beans, cotton-beans-chile-tomato-chia (or *chan*, a flowering plant whose seeds make a tasty beverage), trees-medicinal plants-flowers, and maize-beans-chia (Ardón Mejía 1993; Chapman 1978). Through crop associations, Mesoamerican agriculturalists were able to "reduce their risk of total loss in the agricultural cycle, manipulate the microclimate, and guarantee the sustainability and improvement of the resource base" (Ardón Mejía 1993, p. 96).<sup>29</sup> In addition, Lenca people evidently raised other native crops, such as yuca (cassava), tobacco, cacao, achiote, and chayote or *pataste* (Chapman 1992). All of these plants can be found today in La Campa, except for cacao, which requires a moist, tropical environment.

During the colonial period, the Spaniards introduced wheat, sorghum, sugarcane, and new types of fruit (Ardón Mejía 1993; Chapman 1992; Newson 1986).

Although indigenous groups were encouraged to produce wheat, Spanish colonists produced most of it themselves in response to scarcity and high market prices (Newson 1986). The Lenca of western Honduras, similar to other Honduran Indians, did not adopt wheat cultivation to any notable extent (Chapman 1992). Since maize produces significantly higher yields per unit of land compared to wheat (Netting 1993), indigenous groups had little incentive to switch to wheat even though bread became a popular treat (Chapman 1992).

Colonial sugarcane production in Honduras could not compete with Caribbean production, and establishing large sugarcane plantations required exorbitant investments. Haciendas grew limited amounts of sugarcane to produce minimally processed sugar for consumption, but production never met local demand (Newson 1986). Over the centuries, sugarcane disseminated throughout Honduras, and most La Campa households raise some sugarcane for subsistence or simply a sweet snack.

Fruit trees have been a persistent part of Lenca agriculture, and were probably cultivated around dwellings. Fruits native to the region included mamey (*Mammea americana* L.), zapotillo (*Manilkara bidentata* [Mill.] Fosberg), papaya (*Carica papaya* L.), and jocote (*Spondias purpurea* L. and *S. mombin* L.). Spanish documents from the 1500s report avocado (*Persea americana* Mill.), guava (*Psidium guajava* L.), pineapple (*Ananus comosus* [L.] Merr.), zapote (*Calocarpum sapota* [Jacq.] Merr.), and granadilla (*Punica granatum* L.) (Chapman 1992; Newson 1986). A number of these fruits, along with those known as *paterna*, *guanijiquil*, *consonrico*, *chimís*, and *nance* (*Byrsonima crassifolia* [L.] HBK) grow wild in La Campa. Residents distinguish these naturally occurring fruit trees from those that must be cultivated from seeds and nursed to maturity, such as citrus fruits, varieties of banana, and avocado. Varieties of mango (*Mangifera indica* L.) appear well suited to the area; residents raise them in gardens but they also grow along paths. A 1920 La Campa document, written to substantiate eligibility for municipal status, reports that “the majority of residents possess an orchard of banana and coffee, orange and *lima*<sup>30</sup> trees.”<sup>31</sup> The list only includes crops introduced by the Spaniards, which had market value. It is almost certain that people’s orchards in 1920 contained the wide variety of native plants and trees that are found today.

## Rituals, Beliefs, and Natural Resources Among the Lenca

Due to population collapse, profound disruptions of society, culture, and loss of their language, no aspect of the Lenca beliefs and practices can be considered a pure survival from the prehispanic era. Nonetheless, the people managed to develop uniquely syncretic Lenca traditions forged in the violent clash between Spanish and indigenous cultures, Catholic doctrine, and native faith. Similar to communities throughout the Catholic world, Lenca communities celebrate their patron saint’s day. Although this tradition appears to be entirely Catholic in origin,



Lenca communities integrated aspects of their culture into the celebrations. Two special expressions of Lenca syncretism are found in traditions of *guancascos* (villagers taking their patron saint to visit another village) and *pagos a la tierra* (payments to the earth; hereafter pagos). Both of these traditions affirmed Lenca cosmology and reinforced social relationships. Pagos had the additional role of expressing and confirming Lenca beliefs regarding human-environment interrelationships, and therefore will be explored in depth.

For believers, the Lenca belief system constitutes an integrated whole. God, Christ, and the Virgin Mary reside in heaven, attended by a host of saints who intercede on behalf of suffering humanity, while earthly spirits do God's will by caring for the resources upon which humans depend for sustenance and livelihood. People owe devotion and respect for all parts of spiritual hierarchy and demonstrate their faith by attending mass, performing sacraments and rituals to please God, and conducting rituals to appease earthly spirits.

### ***Festival of San Matías***

La Campa celebrates the Day of San Matías during a 9-day period, usually starting around February 15 and continuing through February 24.<sup>32</sup> It represents the annual high point of religious and social celebration for La Campa. While any patron saint's day draws people from surrounding villages to join in the revelry, the Festival of San Matías draws pilgrims from throughout western Honduras. The celebration appears to date to the colonial period. It begins with a Mass or the praying of the Rosary (depending on the availability of a priest). The Consejo de Fábrica (a group of men charged with overseeing and organizing church rituals and special events) lower the large image of San Matías from his niche and place him on a wheeled stand on the floor of the sanctuary. The Guardia de la Santísima (a group of devout women charged with caring for and decorating the church and the images of the saints for religious events) decorate the sanctuary with ribbons, flowers, pine boughs, and ornaments, and clean all of the saints with special attention to San Matías. After San Matías has been prepared, a man dances the Baile del Garrobo in the church yard, accompanied by music from a bamboo pipe and drum. The dancer, who covers his head with a traditional mask, dresses in black. He holds a stuffed garrobo in one hand, and brandishes a whip in the other. As he dances, mischievous children dart in front of him, and he snaps the whip in their direction but takes care not to hit anyone. The Baile del Garrobo recalls the miraculous discovery of the image of San Matías, and the tunes of the dance are performed only during the festival. On following days, representatives of La Campa's villages bring one of their saints to celebrate the festival with San Matías. Some statues reside in the sanctuary with San Matías, while other images are given shelter in the municipal building or a house.

Alguaciles and assistants set up frames for kiosks around the municipal building, which are rented to vendors who come to the festival. The number of kiosks grows

over subsequent days as the Centro fills with vendors who sell all manner of goods, religious souvenirs, and knick-knacks. By February 22, the Centro becomes nearly impassable as vendors, temporary kitchens, and crowds of pilgrims fill nearly every available space. Centro households rent rooms, porch space, and backyards for visitors to sleep, and charge for the use of latrines and showers. Many Centro women sell tortillas and coffee or complete meals to visitors from their homes. San Matías is carried in procession around the village, and long lines form to make offerings or request miracles from the saint. Inside the sanctuary, the walls and pillars become covered with petitions and notes of gratitude, written by devotees, and a large wooden box serves to collect people's offerings.

In 1994, I was able to participate in the entire festival. At the peak of the festival, I counted 176 kiosks, 13 pickup trucks selling goods, and at least 169 vendors selling from open spots on the ground. Mobile vendors, who carried wares on their backs through the crowd proved too difficult to count accurately; they sold candies, drinks, herbs and natural remedies, chewing gum, sunglasses, bead jewelry, watches, and other small items. Campeño potters set up seven stands to sell their wares. At least ten busloads arrived, and more buses made trips back and forth from Gracias to drop off pilgrims. Uncounted trucks and minibuses competed for parking space in the fields and along the road leading to the Centro. Visitors from nearby villages walked or rode on horseback. Authorities estimated the crowds at 3,000–5,000 people.

The festival represents a peak in harvesting from the forests around the Centro. Large quantities of firewood are cut to cook the food consumed by pilgrims and vendors; the population consuming firewood swells to several thousand people instead of the several hundred that usually reside in the Centro. A large number of small pines are cut to serve as poles for kiosks; each kiosk requires a minimum of 11 poles that are 2–4m long, and 150–200 kiosks are set up. I estimated that approximately 1,000 pine saplings were cut in 1994; given that neighboring kiosks may share corner posts, thicker poles may be used for more than 1 year (Centro households rent out poles during the festival), and some vendors bring their own poles or tents.

### *Guancascos*

The tradition of guancascos is a celebration that involves reciprocal visits of patron saints between two neighboring indigenous communities. It appears to have its origins in prehispanic traditions in which two communities confirmed their commitment to peaceful relationships and promised to serve as allies in case of war. Villages paired in these traditions are called *guancos*; the tradition appears to be Lenca, although some villages that do not appear to have Lenca origins also practice guancascos. During the colonial period, the original traditions evolved into an expression of friendship between two villages' patron saints, but the underlying purpose of affirming peaceful relationships between the

villages endures. If guancos enter into a dispute, the celebration of their guancascos is suspended (Chapman 1986). Until recently, La Campa participated in guancascos with Belén, Santa Cruz, and San Manuel de Colohete. Most Lenca communities celebrated one guancasco; therefore, La Campa's large number of guanco ties was unusual, and perhaps reflects the regional importance of San Matías (Castegnaro de Foletti 1989).

Each guancasco celebration occurred at a specific time each year, and required advance planning between the two villages to confirm the details. The host village might hire a band or musicians to welcome the visiting saint and its congregation, prepare food for a series of feasts to entertain their guests, and plan customary dances and greetings. Historically, guancasco celebrations involved copious consumption of chicha and boisterous activities that the Spaniards perceived critically:

*Just as grave are the damages that arise from the gatherings that some pueblos have with others for their festivities that some call Guancos. The entire populations of the villages carry the images of their patron saints as far as 34 leguas and on the way commit innumerable acts of disorder ....* (quoted in Chapman 1986, p. 133)<sup>33</sup>

In recent times, the guancascos that endure have become more serious religious events while retaining their social dimension. The most important guancasco for La Campa is with Belén, and is celebrated in conjunction with the festival of San Matías. When I was there in 1994, the guancasco with Belén began on February 23 so that its patron saint, the Virgen del Rosario, could be present on February 24 with San Matías. Historically, the people of Belén carried the image over the mountains to the Centro, but with improved roads and transportation, they traveled most of the distance by vehicle. Arriving in La Campa, the people carried the Virgen in a procession down the road into the Centro, where they were met by a procession of Campeños and pilgrims bringing the image of San Matías to greet them. The procession with San Matías included musicians playing a bamboo pipe and drums. The alcaldes and regidores of each town led the processions; each alcalde carried the Vara Alta, an ornate staff that serves as the customary badge of office. The alcalde of La Campa welcomed his counterpart, the Virgen, and the people of Belén on behalf of San Matías. The alcalde of Belén responded with flowery phrases of thanks and appreciation; both men mentioned the history of goodwill and friendship between their peoples. Then the people carrying the Virgen and San Matías came together, and each image "bowed" to the other in a greeting ritual that the people colloquially described as "kissing each other." The two crowds merged and surrounded the two saints' images, which were carried side by side back to the church as musicians played celebratory tunes, and fireworks were set off. The saints were set together with other images of saints before the congregation. The festivities continued with a Mass, followed by fireworks. The Virgen remained with San Matías until February 27, when she was removed and carried in procession out of the Centro, then gently placed in a box and carried by vehicle back to Belén. By custom, the people of La Campa entertained their visitors with food, drink, dances, and religious observances and offerings during this period.

Guancascos between other villages followed a similar pattern, and when the patron saints were of different sexes, the people referred to them as “fiancés” (Chapman 1986). Just as marriage creates a common bond between two families, the guancascos symbolically created a bond between two communities through the spiritual pairing of their patron saints. When the two villages had patron saints of the same sex, the saints were seen as joined by bonds of friendship. After the end of the Festival of San Matías, the men given the honor of carrying and caring for the image of San Matías historically started the annual round of visits to surrounding communities that venerated San Matías and gave offerings. The caretakers benefited from the hospitality of the host communities, and carried most of the offerings back to La Campa, while taking a portion as compensation for their time and service. Similar practices, known as “visits of the saints,” also occurred among other Lenca villages, but La Campa presented an extreme case due to the distance that San Matías traveled (Chapman 1986). This custom ended in 1993, when the caretakers got drunk and allegedly dropped the image of San Matías. Since the caretakers had an overriding responsibility to care for the image with respect, especially due to its miraculous and sacred nature, Campeños felt betrayed and outraged. The priest took advantage of the people’s anger to definitively prohibit the custom of San Matías’ visits to neighboring villages. The priest, however, had already expressed dislike for the practice because it emphasized the image in a form that official Church doctrine perceived as too close to idolatry.<sup>34</sup>

### *Pagos a La Tierra*

In Lenca beliefs, every place has a spirit that owns it, and the spirit expects to be respected and compensated for the resources appropriated by humans. To do this, the Lenca perform a pago. In other Lenca communities, it is called a *compostura* (literally an “act to put things into balance”). In La Campa, the *compostura* represents one stage in a multistage ritual. One woman explained her rationale for performing pagos in these terms:

*We should pay the earth, because if someone gives you a gift, shouldn't you repay that gift? Wouldn't you return it? Of course. It's the same with the earth; it gives us food. And it seems to me, we should pay back the gift. The earth has owners, each place has spirits that live there, and the water has owners, too. (March 21, 1994, personal communication)*

If a spirit feels that humans are ungrateful or wasteful of its resources, the aggrieved spirit will cause a family member to fall ill. One Campeño explained to me that when he was a young father, his firstborn son fell gravely ill with a high fever. At the recommendation of a neighbor, the man invited a *sabio* (wise person) to examine his son. The *sabio* explained that the man’s son’s illness was caused by the spirit of his milpa, who was angry because he had not received any offering for the man’s use of the land. The man had to perform a pago and promise the spirit to make regular payments in the future. His son soon recovered.

Aspects of Lenca practices imply an underlying conservationist ethic. Current theoretical perspectives on common-pool resource management hold that people do not independently develop rules for resource management unless an important resource becomes scarce (Gibson 2001). Yet many rural, small-scale societies act conservatively toward natural resources within a set of practices and beliefs that constrain resource destruction. The question is whether such beliefs should be understood as a conservation ethic. Baland and Platteau (1996) argue that unless practices are intentionally designed for ecological purposes, they should not be thought of as conservationist:

*A society may be said to be conservationist if resource conservation has been (purposely) achieved through the operation of ecologically oriented motives. When this is not the case, because such an outcome has resulted either from motives unrelated to the ecological concern or from exogenous, uncontrollable events, the society is not conservationist although resources have actually been maintained ....*

*The above distinction between intentional and non-intentional conservation practices is not a purely academic matter. Indeed, the potential for village- or group-level resource management in today's circumstances partly depends upon the people being sufficiently aware of the impact of their own actions on the state of the surrounding resources. (p. 187)*

By contrast, scholars working with indigenous communities argue that beliefs and practices can encode information that serves ecological purposes, even if believers are not conscious of the ramifications. The important thing is the outcome. Rappaport (1984) discusses ritual dimensions of ecology among a New Guinea people, and argues that the *kaiko* ritual of pig slaughter and feasting keeps the pig population in check, and serves as a way to solidify intergroup alliances, facilitate trade, and build community solidarity. Lansing (1991) shows that the traditional system of water temples in Bali served to manage irrigation to control pests and water flow efficiently. Although the Balinese believed that faith in water temples helped agricultural production, few understood the logistical dimensions and practical benefits of the system that was couched in religious symbolism and ritual.

The contexts in which indigenous cultures and beliefs conserve natural resources contrast with the criteria that Western scientists and conservationists use to assess resource management and ecological sustainability, creating a gap between indigenous knowledge and Western science. Recent studies of traditional ecological knowledge and ethnoecological approaches attempt to bridge the gap between indigenous knowledge and Western science by recognizing the elements of traditional beliefs and practices that contribute to conservation. These studies recognize that beliefs can provide a powerful incentive to act in certain ways, which can foster resource conservation or degradation. Toledo (2001) provides a generalized description of the beliefs held by many traditional, subsistence-based indigenous groups:

*Nature is, therefore, not only a productive source but the center of the universe, the core of culture and the origin of ethnic identity. At the heart of this deep bond is the perception that all living and non-living things and natural and social worlds are intrinsically linked (reciprocity principle). (p. 457)*

For the traditional Lenca belief system, this link between nature and social life was palpable, and became explicit through the practice of pagos.

### Types of Pagos

People in La Campa used to conduct many types of pagos (Table 2.2). The historical depth of these practices cannot be accurately reconstructed, but may have their roots in prehispanic rituals, while other dimensions echo the structure of a Catholic Mass (Chapman 1986). Four agricultural pagos took place in milpas, an additional pago occurred if the family planted field beans (*frijoles*).

**Table 2.2** Types of *Pagos a la Tierra*

Type of pago	Preferred months	Special characteristics
<i>Milpa</i> <sup>a</sup> (maize field)	January–May	A major pago with a tom turkey
<i>Siembra</i> (maize planting)	April–June	n.d.
<i>Saumo</i> : (ripening of the maize when the first ears may be eaten)	August–September	<i>Mantucas</i> (tamales made from newly ripened maize) are served
<i>Tiempo de tapiscar</i> : (harvest time)	October–January	A major pago with a tom turkey
<i>Alza de obra</i> (after the harvest has been entirely consumed)	Variable	Careful cleaning of the bin or storage room where maize was stored. No sacrifice is done
<i>Cañal</i> (sugarcane field)	Variable	n.d.
<i>Frijolar</i> (bean field)	Variable	n.d.
<i>Huerta</i> (orchard) or finca (coffee field, historically with the huerta)	January–May	Tom turkey
<i>Barral</i> (clay bed)	January–May	Rooster or hen turkey
<i>Arenal</i> (sand bed)	January–May	Chicken (usually)
Area used to fire pottery	January–May	Chicken
<i>Pozo</i> or <i>manantial</i> (water source)	January–May	Rooster (usually)
<i>Monte</i> or <i>Montaña</i> (forest)	Variable	Tom turkey
<i>Hogar y solar</i> (house and patio)	January–May	Chicken (usually)
<i>San Antonio</i> (Saint Anthony, patron saint of domestic animals)	Variable (historically on June 13, the saint's day)	Tom turkey (formerly a calf or cow might be sacrificed for a public celebration)
To heal spirit-induced illness	As needed	Bread is served instead of <i>buñuelos</i>
<i>Punto</i> (a symbolic gesture to promise a pago at a later date, offered when a family cannot afford the full ritual, but wishes to appease a spirit)	As needed	A single candle lit in the appropriate location, instead of the full ritual

<sup>a</sup> A single pago for the milpa has now replaced the four pagos (*siembra*, *saumo*, *tiempo de tapiscar* and *alza de obra*) previously offered for maize production



Families also performed pagos for the spirits of sugarcane fields (*cañal*), orchards (*huertas*), and coffee plantations (*fincas*, typically shaded by fruit trees). Hunters used to owe thanks to spirits of the forest where they found success, but hunting has declined with loss of deer, wild pig, and other fauna. Women who produced pottery performed pagos to honor the spirits of the clay bed, sand bed, water source, and forest that provided firewood to temper the pottery. Households also needed to repay the siren who provided their water. When a new house was constructed, a pago was conducted to reassure the resident spirit, and periodically thereafter a pago took place in gratitude for the use of the houseplot. Owners of cattle, horses, and mules performed a pago to San Antonio, the patron saint of domesticated animals.

People who remember the full cycle of pagos indicate that some were simpler than others, and required different investments in resources. In many cases, people could not afford to fulfill all of the pagos, but the pagos to the milpa and the clay bed were most important because of their centrality to household subsistence. Some pagos were small, private affairs (such as the *alza de obra* to give thanks after the maize harvest was consumed) while others involved large celebrations with family and friends, such as the pago during the harvest. The pago to San Antonio involved the largest public festival, because everyone's cattle, mules, and horses shared communal pastures. The ceremony was held on a large, open pasture owned by the Catholic Church until the mid-1900s, when it was sold. The entire community gathered to witness multiple sacrifices of tom turkeys. They consumed large quantities of chicha, feasted communally on the sacrificed animals, and followed the ceremony with dancing. Today the public pagos have ended, and the frequency of pagos has been declining due to a number of social factors (Chapter 7).

### Organization and Elements of Pagos

Pagos vary in their details across the Lenca regions of Honduras. In Guajiquiro, Department of La Paz, Stone (1948) reported that the Lenca perform agricultural rites that involved cacao, copal, chicha, dancing, and a bonfire; she does not mention a sacrifice of a domestic animal. In the Department of Intibucá, people build an altar in the field, decorate it with special flowers (*zomos*) and set off fireworks (Chapman 1992). Differences in the practices of pagos may have roots in varying prehispanic cultural traditions as well as experiences with the Catholic Church. In La Campa, pagos also differ with respect to the resources of the household and the nature of the spirit to be paid. Spirits of land are believed to be male and typically desire a tom turkey in payment. Spirits of water, clay beds, and sand beds are understood as female, and generally prefer a hen turkey or a rooster. The importance of clay beds and sand beds for pottery making, primarily a female occupation, correlates with the feminine nature of the spirits.

Most types of pagos require the same set of elements: a fowl (a turkey, rooster, or chicken), copal (aromatic resin used for incense), cacao, and chicha (Table 2.3). Turkeys, copal, cacao, and chicha are clearly Mesoamerican elements, and imply

**Table 2.3** Elements required for a *Pago a la Tierra*

Element	Explanation
<i>Vino dulce</i> (chicha)	Beverage made of fermented maize and sugarcane extract (dulce de panela). Consumed at key points in the pago and sprinkled on the ground during the <i>compostura</i> (second stage of the pago) to please the spirit
<i>Cera negra</i> (black wax)	Collected from hives of native black bees in pine-oak forests. Used to make the nine candles that are burned in front of the cross during the <i>compostura</i>
String	Used for the wick for the handmade black wax candles
White wax candles	Burned in front of the cross during the <i>compostura</i> (depending on the spirit to be honored)
<i>Copal</i> or <i>incenso de duquidambar</i> (incense)	Resin from pine trees ( <i>Pinus pseudostrobus</i> ) burned as incense before and during the <i>compostura</i> . The scent pleases the spirit
Cacao pods	Roasted and ground with maize into a ball ( <i>chibolito de cacao</i> ) about 1.5 in. in diameter. It is dissolved into chicha and mixed with blood to sprinkle on the ground. The scent pleases the spirit
<i>Nixtamal</i> (maize boiled with lime)	Ground with the cacao to form the <i>chibolito de cacao</i> (see above)
Banana leaves	Used to wrap the <i>chibolitos de cacao</i> and the black wax candles to carry them to the site of the pago
Turkey, rooster, or chicken	Sacrificed to honor and repay the spirit of the earth
Sharp knife	Used to slit the throat of the sacrificial bird
Wooden cross large enough to stand on the ground	Set on the ground where the pago is performed to show respect for Christ (an adaptation to negate priests' claims that the pago is a heathen ritual), except in pagos for water, clay, or sand
<i>Buñuelos</i> or bread	<i>Buñuelos</i> are bananas cooked with <i>panela</i> , eaten with <i>chilate</i> after the <i>compostura</i> . Bread is served if the pago takes place to cure an illness
<i>Maíz blanco</i> (white corn)	Roasted, ground, and boiled in water to make <i>chilate</i> . It is served with the <i>buñuelos</i> or bread
An image of Jesus, the Virgin Mary, or a saint	Used as a decoration on the table where the celebratory meal is served following the <i>compostura</i>
Flowers	Placed in front of the image of the saint and on a chair that welcomes the spirit for the celebratory feast

prehispanic dimensions in the ritual. In La Campa, pagos require candles made by hand with black bees' wax (produced by native, wild bees who build hives in hollow trees), candles of white wax, a cross, and sometimes a painting of a saint, preferably San Matías or the Virgin Mary. The Lenca of Intibucá use fireworks and a certain decorative flower, but usually forego the cross and the painting of a saint. Pagos center on the sacrifice and ritual consumption of a fowl. The ritual involves three stages (*puntos*) (Table 2.4), and each stage requires a series of steps performed in the correct order and with due respect for the spirit. The first stage

**Table 2.4** Stages of a typical *Pago a la Tierra*

Stage	Activities
First ( <i>Primer Punto</i> )	<p>Assemble the ingredients needed for the ritual</p> <p>Lay the table for the feast with flowers, image of a saint or Christ, and each ingredient as it is ready</p> <p>Decorate a chair with flowers and colorful cloth to seat the honored spirit(s)</p> <p>Grind cacao pods and <i>nixtamal</i> to form the <i>nueve de cacao</i> ball</p> <p>Make nine black wax candles from melted wax and string</p> <p><i>Encarnadura</i> (formal opening of the ritual): The <i>encargado</i> (leader) prays for God's blessing and the blessing of the spirit(s). Then he blesses each participant with a <i>retoque</i> (passing over) of black wax candles and copal incense<sup>a</sup></p> <p>All present drink chicha in solemn silence</p>
Second ( <i>Segundo Punto</i> , or <i>Compostura</i> ) <sup>b</sup>	<p>Participants carry all required elements to the location where the spirit dwells. Wrap the black wax candles in banana leaves</p> <p>Light copal incense</p> <p>Set the cross in the ground (except for pagos for water, clay, or sand)</p> <p>Arrange and light the nine black wax candles (in front of the cross if it is used)</p> <p>Spread copal smoke around the area, pray to the spirit to accept the offering and forgive any wastefulness of the spirit's resources</p> <p>Mix the <i>nueve de cacao</i> with chicha in a small clay bowl; spread most of the liquid on the ground in front of the burning candles</p> <p>Pray for the spirit to forgive any waste and disrespect, and request the spirit's blessing</p> <p>Summon the spirit and present the bird to be sacrificed. The <i>encargado</i> speaks to the spirit with great respect and asks that the sacrifice be accepted</p> <p>Sacrifice the bird by slitting its throat. Some blood is captured in a clay bowl with chicha, and the rest soaks into the ground</p> <p>Pluck several of the longest feathers from the bird and spread them over the bloody ground</p> <p>Prayer asking for the spirit's favor while splashing the chicha and blood mixture around the area using one feather</p> <p>All present drink chicha in solemn silence</p>
Third ( <i>Tercer Punto</i> )	<p>Return to the house, praying and repeating the invitation for the spirit(s) to accompany everyone back to the house</p> <p>Everyone sits down at the prepared table</p> <p>Prayer and an invitation to the spirit(s) to come and sit with the family</p> <p><i>Buñuelos</i> or bread is served with <i>chilate</i> (unsweetened maize flour drink) for each person and the spirit(s), who invisibly occupy the decorated chair</p> <p>Prayer to honor the spirits and ask that the food be received</p> <p>Everyone sits and eats the <i>buñuelos</i> or bread and drinks chilate, followed by another prayer</p> <p>Preparation of the sacrificed fowl(s) and a savory <i>atol</i> for the feast</p> <p>When the food is ready, the participants gather around the table. The <i>encargado</i> prays for the blessing of the food and the acceptance of the offering by the spirit</p> <p>Everyone sits and eats quietly. At the end of the meal, the <i>encargado</i> says another prayer and embarks the spirits back to their home</p>

<sup>a</sup> A young *encargado* told me that the *encarnadura* (embodiment) begins with making the black wax candles. A more experienced *encargado* said that it begins with the blessing

<sup>b</sup> If multiple spirits need to be repaid at the same time, this second stage, or *compostura*, must be repeated for every spirit at his/her location

involves preparations of the items required for the pago, which vary depending on the nature of the spirit to be paid. The second stage entails the sacrifice of the bird to appease the spirit, and the last stage is a feast to consume the sacrificed bird in honor of the spirits. A spirit partakes in the feast by sitting at the table and absorbing the essence of the bird and the other foods through their aromas. If all goes well, the spirit departs contented.

A leader (*encargado*) carries out the pago. An encargado must have the talent to talk with spirits and thorough knowledge of the steps of a pago. A sabio has the additional talent of divining or discerning the spiritual causes of ailments; this talent is needed to identify the type of pago required when someone has a spiritual illness. A sabio may also serve as an encargado, but recently most of the sabios in La Campa have been women. I learned of no case in which a woman served as an encargado. Today, La Campa has only a few people with the requisite experience and talent to serve as encargados. In the Centro, three men offered their services until recently when one moved to find work outside the municipio, and another retired due to age. Two of the men explained that spirits are like people, and it is important to talk to them with respect, and behave as if they are standing right beside you. Sabios and encargados do not charge for their services because it is considered a gift to be able to talk to spirits, and spirits might take offense if someone tried to profit from the gift. Nevertheless, they expect to be given a gift in appreciation for their efforts. Some sabios become exhausted at the effort of talking to spirits, while encargados expend their time and energy to conduct the 8–18 hour rituals. By custom, sabios are left a gift of food or money, while encargados receive the breast of the sacrificed fowl and some additional gift of money or service.

From a conservation perspective, the most interesting aspect of the pago is the explicit intention to make amends to the spirit for any waste or disrespectful use of the resource in question. Encargados pray repeatedly for the spirit to forgive any transgression or wastefulness committed by human acts. The prayers speak to the spirit as the owner of the place, and request that it accept the sacrifice of the bird that is being offered. The prayers also thank the spirit specifically for the resource that has been consumed or used, especially water, clay, sand, vegetation, or a crop. I have been fortunate to witness two pagos, and I am struck by the humility of the prayers and the request for forgiveness of waste. Why were the people so sensitive to waste, or afraid of spiritual retribution for consuming resources basic to survival? It is possible that conservative or wise resource practices can emerge from an environmental awareness born of intimate knowledge of a place and its climatic vagaries (Turner and Berkes 2006). Alternatively, it could be that the Lenca experienced prehistoric degradation that prompted concern for waste of timber, water, clay, and sand as well as for soil exhaustion. If so, then the force of the Lenca belief system preserved this concern even when the environmental contexts changed. Another possibility is that pagos emerged as part of religious beliefs designed to ease human insecurities and create a sense of control in the face of the unknown. In contrast to rituals found in some cultures to bring good weather, large harvests, or luck in war, the pago aims to maintain the balance between humans and nature, and offer com-

pensation for consumption. Similar rituals exist in other agrarian cultures, including parts of southeast Asia and Latin America (Barrera-Bassols and Toledo 2005; Samaddar 2006).

## Synthesis

The available prehistoric and historical data for western Honduras, including La Campa, reveal that the forests and people have experienced major transitions in the past 10,000 years. During this time frame, the forests have been cleared patch by patch, many times over. If we attempt to conceptualize the patterns of change, the region has experienced several major disjunctures that have led to radical transformations in the natural and social environments. The first major disjuncture occurred with the arrival of humans, who transformed the landscape by clearing forests. The forest cover renewed itself through long fallows and abandonment as people moved over the land, but the original composition of plants and animals no longer exists.

The emergence of domesticated plants, followed by the rise of agriculture and permanent settlements, led to the next major disjuncture. Social transformations and new forms of social organization created mosaics of forest clearings, fields, fallows, secondary successions, and mature forest patches. The eventual rise and fall of complex Mesoamerican societies, including the Maya civilization, involved periods of localized deforestation and environmental transformation followed by the dispersal of the human population. Prehistory suggests that indigenous civilizations failed to constrain their impacts on the resource base, and environmental deterioration along with climatic variations contributed to their disintegration. Social transformations took place in conjunction with forest transformation, as people in certain areas created permanent settlements and developed trade networks and hierarchical social relationships. Trade allowed people to exchange seeds, foods, tools, and ornamental items, and developed the agricultural characteristics of Mesoamerican culture, especially the maize-beans-squash complex and dependence on the tortilla as a dietary staple.

The arrival of the Spaniards and the period of conquest and colonialism represented a catastrophic disjuncture for the people and societies of the region but resulted in a reprieve for forests. In a period of less than 100 years, an estimated 90% of the native population was wiped out; it is not likely that any community or family survived unscathed. The collapse of the population reduced the pressures on the forests, and they expanded. At the same time, the foundations of the traditional social order crumbled, and the Spaniards imposed their cultural and social order on the survivors. La Campa's form of community governance, property rights, land titles, and relationship with the nation-state were initially established during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Even so, the people fought against Spanish domination; they adapted and resisted by developing novel integrations of traditional beliefs and practices with European and Catholic elements. In a millennial perspective, the period of forest regrowth lasted only a few centuries, but the

syncretic practices and unequal relationships of power with higher-level authorities continue to evolve and influence the lives of the Lenca people.

European culture brought new technologies and priorities along with a profoundly different conceptualization of humanity's place in the natural order. Whereas traditional indigenous societies evidently perceived people as part of nature and subject to it, European cultures and the Catholic faith saw humans as separate from nature and dominant over it. Even though the prehistoric evidence and historical records show that indigenous peoples steadily transformed and periodically overexploited their environment, the European world view fostered rapid exploitation of natural resources, the building of mines, and further transformation of forests. The Spaniards also revolutionized society and livelihoods by introducing sugarcane, coffee, bananas, cattle, horses, mules, pigs, and chickens. Today, the Lenca consider these introduced species as an integral part of their household economies. Of course, the Spaniards also carried off New World plants and introduced them to Europe, thus the events of the colonial period represent a precursor to later processes of globalization for Central America.

It could be argued that independence from Spain constituted another disjuncture, but it was less dramatic than previous ones, especially at the local level. The social, cultural, and economic foundations established under Spanish rule survived independence despite the extended period of political uncertainty and conflicts that ensued in Honduras. For La Campa, independence resulted in few dramatic changes. They no longer had to pay tribute or provide labor to Spanish authorities, but as part of the municipio of Gracias, they still owed contributions of their human and productive resources. In terms of their natural resources, forests remained the dominant land cover, although cycles of forest clearing and regrowth occurred with slash-and-burn agriculture. La Campa participated in regional trade networks through which they traded pottery, basketry, and sugar for salt, cacao, copal, and other goods, but the community had become a backwater in an economically unimportant region of Honduras. The nineteenth century did bring the first schools to the area, and Campeños began their enduring competition for land with Caiquín. All of these disjunctures set the stage for the twentieth century, and the transformations for the people and forests discussed in subsequent chapters.



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