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Pre-Columbian Society in Non-Mesoamerican Costa Rica

Exceptuando la península de Nicoya, que se encontraba bajo la influencia mesoamericana, prevaleció en la Costa Rica precolombina una forma sudamericana de organización política: Dos tipos de cacicazgo, el uno encabezado por un gran cacique hereditario, rodeado por los miembros de su familia, el otro por un cacique menor. A pesar de que los cacicazgos se terminaron con la conquista española, su tradición prevalece todavía en la sociedad urbana moderna de Costa Rica.

Documents from the time of the Spanish Conquest reveal a pattern of living common among the non-Mexican pre-Columbian Costa Ricans. Except for most of the Nicoya Peninsula where Mesoamerican peoples had taken over, the language and customs of the early inhabitants were rooted in the South American continent, particularly in the east and the north.

Pre-Columbian society in non-Mesoamerican Costa Rica was organized according to hereditary chiefdoms, whose boundaries were marked by rivers or prominent geographical features. There were two categories of rulers: one called by the Spaniards "cacique", a term learned in the West Indies signifying chief, whose power was limited to his immediate frontiers; the other called "cacique mayor" or "cacique principal", a mixture



of West Indian and Spanish words, whose authority extended beyond his assigned territory to other chieftains, their lands and subjects (Fernández 7: 354, 356, 382).

The cacique, be he "mayor" or not, usually had more than one wife and inhabited a large communal house, rectangular among the Votos in the north along the San Juan River and circular among the rest, where he presided over a group of kinsfolk which included at least part of a clan. Thus parents, children, and grandchildren lived under one roof (Peralta 1883: 408, Fernández 7: 390, 392). These clan houses might have as many as one hundred inhabitants (Fernández 3: 37) or as few as ten to forty at times without a chief (Fernández 5: 381). They were usually separated from one another by forest (Fernández 5: 370, 392). Pile houses on an island in the Diquis River were also known (Peralta 1883: 6). The dwellings containing fewer people were designated a province (Peralta 1883: 408). In many parts of the country the house, either singly or in groups, were surrounded by a fence of strong timber and were known in Spanish as "pueblos palenques" or "poblazones palenques", a "palenque" being a palisade (Fernández Guardia 1908: 37, 49, 51). The inhabitants of each house or settlement within the chiefdom paid tribute to the "cacique mayor". This Supreme Chief, if he were important enough, could occupy various houses according to the season and here he took his immediate group along with whomever else he wished (Fernández 7: 405).

The sons of the Guetar chiefs, the largest aboriginal group in highland Costa Rica, held the title *taquetaque*. The eldest son inherited the chieftainship, a tradition that seems to have been true of all non-Mesoamerican Costa Rica (Fernández 7: 384, 405). Along the San Juan River, however, in the land of the Votos, there is at least one mention of a woman ruler whose husband did not share her sovereignty (Fernández Guardia 1908: 18). The brothers of a chief were also allowed multiple wives. A brother was sometimes accorded the title "cacique" (Fernández 6: 453) but more often was addressed as "principal" in Spanish and *ybux* in Guetar (Fernández 7: 384).

The children of the chief and the "principales" or his brothers served as his direct vassals, whose primary tasks were to clear land, plant crops, build him a dwelling when needed, and supply *chicha* (a fermented drink) and some chocolate (Fernández 7: 384, 386). Although these were their main duties, the servitors were expected to do anything asked of them and to provide from the various settlements sufficient men as warriors, carriers, or porters — in short, whatever the moment required.

The priest, who also served as medicine man, seems to have held a rank as high as the "principales" and to have been considered in the light of

a divinity. He did not inherit his position but was named to it. It was his duty to consult oracles, to practice divination and sorcery, to give notice of happenings in distant places, to tend the idols, and to carry out religious rites (Fernández 5: 156, 157).

Below these ranks were the commoners, who did hand labor of all kinds and helped to supply the tribute for the Supreme Chief (Peralta 1883: 699). Slaves formed a distinct category that primarily served religious purposes. They were men, women, and children captured in war or obtained in trade for sacrifice every moon or for burial with a dead chief or "principal" as servitors in the next world (Peralta 1883: 701 - 702).

The daily life of all ranks was heavily governed by restrictions and by religious beliefs. Objects, including houses, could be tabu; mana was associated with inanimate things as well as with people.

The rigidity of the social system and the absolute power of the chief became immediately clear to the Spaniards. They noticed that once a "cacique" gave an order, his people carried it out even at the risk of death (Peralta 1883: 699). Nor was this system of strict vassalage confined to the men. Socially, women of rank treated as chattels all those beneath them regardless of sex. Such adherence to rank made the act of conquest easier. Once a rebellious ruler was captured, his subjects quieted down and were pacified (Fernández 7: 460). In some cases, the Spaniards resorted to taking prisoner the immediate family of a chief as a means of bringing him and his people to heel (Fernández 7: 454). One incident relates that the stubborn and refractory wife of a conquered chief was relegated to the kitchen among the negro slaves and mulemen to make her humiliation more poignant (Fernández 6: 264, 267).

The rank system spelled the eventual conquest of non-Mesoamerican Costa Rica. Supreme Chiefs asked Spanish help against lesser chiefs, who in turn begged the intruders' aid against those who refused to follow the ancient laws and conform to the customary vassalage (Fernández Guardia 1908: 44, 48). The continuous wars of one dominion against another took their toll (Fernández 5: 156). Chieftainships and chiefdoms have disappeared, but the "cacique" concept has persisted even into the modern life of Costa Rica. The citizen whose political influence covers a substantial number of local people in a given community is known as a "cacique", while the individual whose authority has a wider or regional scope is considered a "caudillo", a Spanish word signifying Supreme Chief or "cacique mayor".

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