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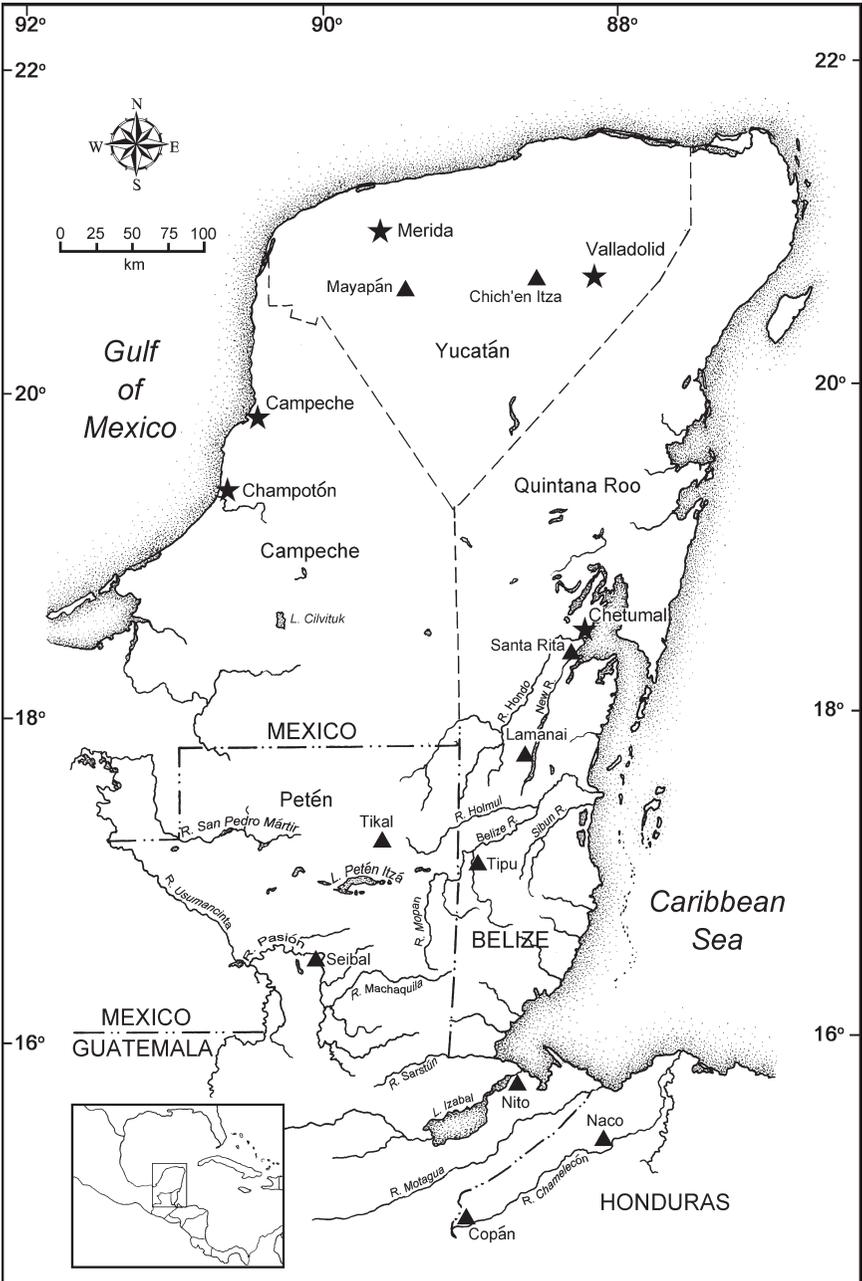
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INTRODUCTION TO THE KOWOJ AND THEIR PETÉN NEIGHBORS

— Prudence M. Rice and Don S. Rice —

The Postclassic period (ca. A.D. 950/1000–1525) in the Maya lowlands of eastern Mesoamerica was long disparaged as one of “decline, decadence, and depopulation” (Chase and Rice 1985a: 1), disdained by archaeologists except for the sites of Chich’*en* Itza and Mayapán in Mexico’s northern Yucatán peninsula (Map 1.1). To the south, in the dense tropical forests of the modern political unit known as the Department of El Petén, in northern Guatemala, the Postclassic was reconstructed almost solely with reference to a group identified as the “Itza.” Both of these viewpoints were discarded by the end of the twentieth century with recognition of significant complexity and variability in the Postclassic historical and archaeological records. The chapters that follow were compiled with the goal of illuminating one heretofore relatively unknown component of late Maya history: that of the Kowoj in the eastern lakes region of Petén.

As prelude to the Kowoj story, we note that Classic lowland Maya civilization—renowned today for its towering pyramids, carved texts on limestone monuments, exquisite polychrome-painted pottery, and sumptuous



Map 1.1. The Maya lowlands, showing modern political boundaries and cities (stars), major archaeological sites (triangles), and geographic features mentioned in this volume.

royal burials—flowered in the Yucatán peninsula between about A.D. 200 and 820. During the Terminal Classic period (ca. A.D. 820 to 950/1000), the southern lowlands experienced a series of transformations simplistically (mis)characterized as the civilization's "collapse," marked by the demise of divine kingship and royal dynasties, the abandonment of large elite ceremonial centers, and the depopulation of Petén (Aimers 2007; Culbert 1973, 1983; Demarest, Rice, and Rice 2004; Webster 2001). Centuries later, however, when the Spanish conquistador Hernán Cortés and his army traversed Petén in 1525, en route from the Gulf coast to what is now Honduras, he reported numerous settlements. According to Cortés (1976), much of the territory was controlled by a people known as Itza. Obviously, Petén had been neither permanently nor completely depopulated, but what actually transpired in this isolated area between 820 and 1525?

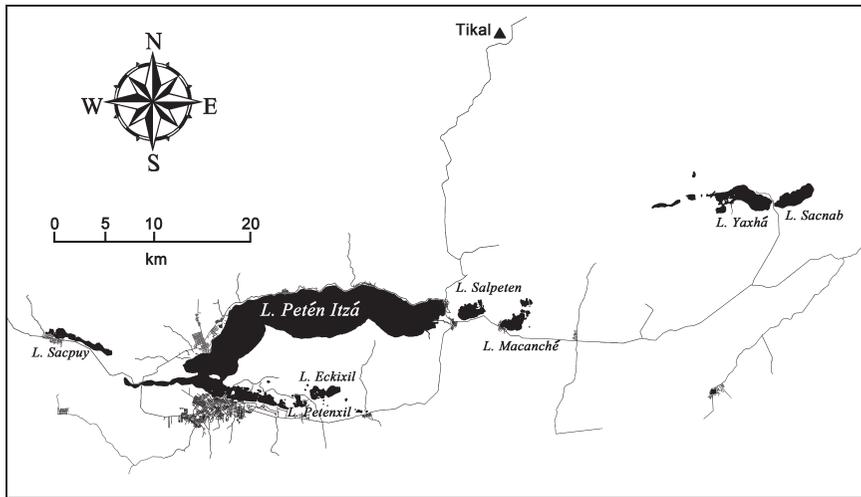
Archaeological and historical study of the "post-Classic" period following the "collapse" began as a rather obscure endeavor undertaken only sporadically through the 1960s (Guthe 1921–1922; Cowgill 1963). The Postclassic and Contact periods in Petén (950/1000–1525 and 1525–1700, respectively)¹ were denigrated as of little intrinsic archaeological or ethnohistoric interest in comparison to both the Classic period in Petén (cf. Hellmuth 1972, 1977) and the Postclassic and later periods in Yucatán, which boasted the great cities of Chich'en Itza (Morris, Charlot, and Morris 1931) and Mayapán (Pollock et al. 1962).

By the 1980s, however, the archaeology of the Postclassic period throughout the Maya lowlands was conceded new respectability (Chase and Rice 1985b; Graham, Jones, and Kautz 1985; Pendergast 1986; Sabloff and Andrews V 1986), and much has been illuminated about the late Maya through the last decades of archaeological investigations. Our own most recent project, carried out in the 1990s, was prompted by ethnohistorian Grant D. Jones's (1998) explication of the 1697 Spanish conquest of the Itza in Petén, the last indigenous kingdom in the Americas to fall to European dominion. The role of a people known as Kowoj, the subject of this volume, is a major new ingredient to add to the mix of recent Maya history in Petén.

The Petén Lakes Region

We and our students and colleagues have conducted archaeological, ecological, and historical investigations into Maya occupation of the lake basins of northeastern Petén since 1973. Although these lakes lie within what is usually described as the heartland of Classic-period southern lowland Maya civilization, they are actually on the southern margins of the distribution of the spectacular cities such as Tikal and Calakmul that are that civilization's hallmark.

Geologically, the area occupied by the lowland Maya is the low, karstic limestone plateau that forms the Yucatán peninsula. This peninsula increases in elevation from sea level on the northern (Gulf of Mexico) coast to ca. 500 meters in southern Petén, where it meets the deformed Paleozoic metamorphic rocks at the northern edge of the highlands of southern Guatemala.

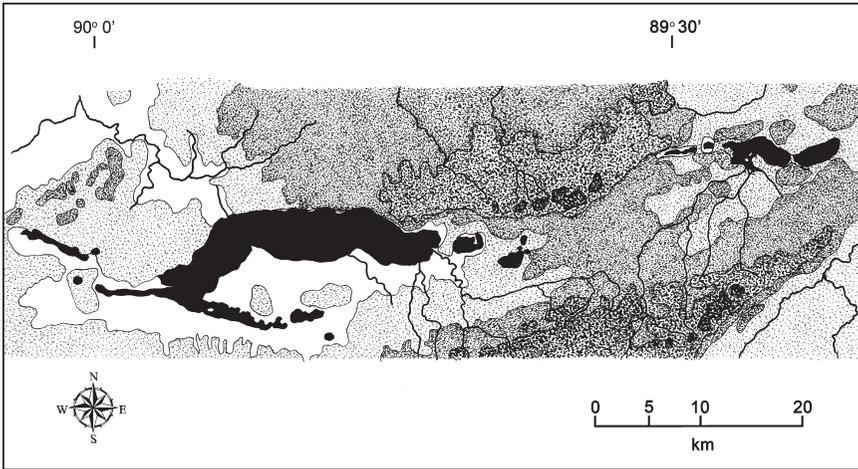


Map 1.2 The central Petén lakes region showing modern towns and roads.

Geographically, the focus of interest here is the “central Petén lakes region” (Map 1.2), defined by an east-west chain of lakes known (from west to east) as Lake Perdida, Lake Sacpuy, Lake Petén Itzá (with tiny Lakes Petenzil and Quexil south of its large main arm), Lake Salpetén, Lake Macanché, Lake Yaxhá, and Lake Sacnab. These bodies of water lie along a fault line at roughly 17° North latitude, the approximate boundary between Paleocene limestones to the north and Late Cretaceous deposits to the south (Hodell et al. 2004: figure 1). They were formed in part by karstic drainage and sinkhole formation. As a consequence of these processes, the levels of the lakes fluctuate dramatically, the most recent perturbation being a rise of 4 meters of Lake Petén Itzá beginning in 1978; by 2008 it had returned to its former level. During these later years, the level of Lake Yaxhá to the east dropped several meters such that the Topoxté Islands are no longer islands but part of a greatly expanded southern shore.

The topography of the central Petén lake basins differs markedly on their northern versus their southern shores (Map 1.3). The north sides of the basins are extremely steep, climbing abruptly 90–200 meters above the lakes’ water levels (which lie approximately 100–110 meters above mean sea level). The southern shores are low wetlands with a very gradual rise over a distance of a kilometer or so until they meet the low karst hills characteristic of the southern Department of Petén.

The lake basins have only internal drainage, with a few small and often seasonal streams feeding into their southern shores. They are commonly characterized by small islands and peninsulas jutting out from their margins, which are particular foci of Postclassic-period settlement. The sixteenth-century Franciscan bishop of Yucatán, Diego de Landa, characterized the Itza region of the southern Yucatán peninsula by its rivers—“the rivers of Taiza”



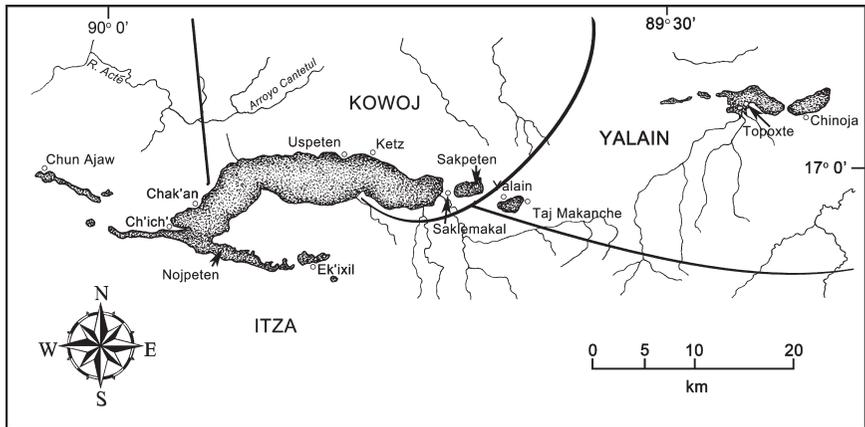
Map 1.3. Topography of the central Petén lakes region. Note low-lying terrain to the south and northwest of Lake Petén Itzá and the higher elevations to its northeast and southeast.

(in Tozzer 1941: 5) — rather than its lakes, which were the locations of its towns and cities. One wonders if this is because of the lack of rivers in the north or because the movement of Spaniards (and trade?) primarily followed riverine routes.

Archaeological Investigations in the Petén Lakes Region

Our interest in the occupational history of the lake basins, particularly their Postclassic settlement, arose out of the Central Petén Historical Ecology Project (CPHEP; 1973–1974), an archaeological and ecological investigation of Maya settlement and land use in the basins of the easternmost lakes, Yaxhá and Sacnab. Under the direction of the late Edward S. Deevey Jr., who addressed the impact of human settlement on a tropical lacustrine environment, the archaeological portion of the project involved test excavations of structures mapped in ten survey transects around the lakes, as well as on the Topoxté Islands in Lake Yaxhá (Deevey et al. 1979; D. Rice 1976; Rice and Rice 1980).

Proyecto Lacustre (1979–1981) continued this work, investigating occupation of the basins of Lakes Macanché and Salpetén, roughly twenty-five kilometers west of Lakes Yaxhá and Sacnab and east of the large northern arm of Lake Petén Itzá, and Lakes Quexil and Petenxil east of its small southern arm. This provided our first encounter with the peninsular site we named Zacpetén in Lake Salpetén, which we mapped and tested — quickly discovering that it, like the Topoxté Islands, had a substantial Postclassic component. We began to question the “demographic collapse” model of the southern lowlands, and, building on the earlier work of George L. Cowgill (1963) and William R.

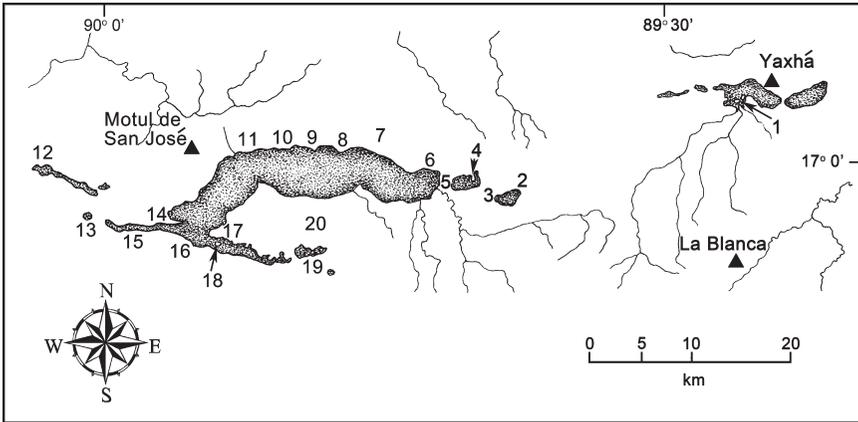


Map 1.4. Late-seventeenth-century indigenous political territories and towns in the central Petén lakes region. Modified from Jones 1998: map 3.

Bullard Jr. (1970, 1973), we regularly deviated from our randomized sampling protocols thereafter to map and test-excavate the lakes' islands and peninsulas so as to investigate Postclassic occupation.

In the 1980s our interest in the Postclassic period gained new impetus through Grant Jones's ethnohistorical studies of sixteenth- through eighteenth-century archived accounts of Spaniards' contacts with Maya inhabitants of Petén (Rice, Rice, and Jones 1993). These documents included names of rulers, titles, towns, regional settlements, and lineage territories. Jones's magisterial synthesis, *The Conquest of the Last Maya Kingdom* (1998), exposed enormous complexity in Petén's demographic situation: in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries the area was occupied by several Maya groups embroiled in civil war. These conflicts were the consequence of many generations of political intrigue and factionalism, ethnic rivalries, calendrical disagreements, territorial disputes, stresses brought on by Spanish contact, conquest, diseases, taxation, labor demands, demographic flux, and myriad other causes. Jones's analyses revealed that—unlike earlier interpretations of Contact-period Petén history, which suggested occupation and control of a broad region by a large, relatively undifferentiated sociopolitical unit known as “Itza”—numerous groups distinguished by social (lineage), ethnic, and linguistic differences occupied Petén during the period of Spanish contact.

Jones's findings led to Proyecto Maya Colonial (1994–1999), an archaeological and historical project initiated to investigate his model of indigenous Maya lineage distributions and political geography. The goal was to locate sites that could be correlated with named Postclassic- and early Colonial-period settlements and territories identified in the Spanish accounts, particularly three political provinces or territories (Map 1.4): Kowoj, Yalain, and Kan Ek'. It was the Kan Ek' and their allied lineages in the Lake Petén Itzá region who were known to the Spaniards as the “Itza.”



Map 1.5. Mapped Postclassic- and Contact-period sites in the central Petén lakes region: (1) Topoxté Islands; (2) Muralla de León; (3) Yalain; (4) Zacpetén; (5) Ixlú; (6) Piedra Blanca; (7) Jobompiche I; (8) El Astillero; (9) Uxpetén; (10) San Pedro; (11) Chachaclún; (12) Sacpuy; (13) Picú; (14) Nixtun-Ch'ich'; (15) Pasajá; (16) Colonia Itzá; (17) Tayasal; (18) Flores; (19) Quexil Islands (Ek'exil); (20) Cenote.

The first stage of Proyecto Maya Colonial, “The Seventeenth-Century Political Geography of Central Petén, Guatemala,” consisted of archaeological reconnaissance in 1994 and 1995 in six lake basins (Macanché, Salpetén, Petén Itzá, Quexil, Petenxil, and Sacpuy) and included survey, mapping, and small-scale excavations. Jones’s data on specific toponyms and socio-ethnic (or ethno-political) groups, along with distinctive Postclassic architecture known from our earlier projects in the eastern lakes region, focused project surveys on eighteen Postclassic- and/or Contact-period settlements: thirteen newly mapped and five remapped (Map 1.5). The density and location of these sites readily conform to Spanish descriptions of specific seventeenth-century Maya towns, and we believe at least ten are mentioned in the documentary records. This correspondence, plus the nonrandom distribution of architectural complexes and ceramics, established the context for the next stage of field research from 1996 through 1999: comparative investigation of sites immediately east of Lake Petén Itzá, specifically Zacpetén, Ixlú, and Yalain. This volume presents our findings on the Postclassic and later occupation at the site we studied most intensively: Zacpetén.

Although our questions in these projects were directed primarily to the Postclassic and Contact periods, our investigations uncovered continuous Maya settlement in the lakes area from the Middle Preclassic period (beginning ca. 800–700 B.C.) through the seventeenth century of this era and revealed important insights into the region’s late occupational history. For example, contrary to early assumptions underlying reconstructions of a catastrophic demographic collapse in the southern lowlands, the region was never completely abandoned. Instead, during the Terminal Classic period, reduced

populations began reorganizing themselves in and around the basins of the central Petén lakes (Chase 1990; Rice and Rice 1990).

Second, a heretofore virtually unknown “post-Classic” archaeological period in central Petén was revealed as a culturally vibrant episode, with residential occupation and ceremonial construction concentrated on the easily defended islands and peninsulas in the region’s lakes.

Finally, the well-watered and underpopulated lakes district seems to have attracted immigrants from adjacent regions beginning in the Late and Terminal Classic and continuing through the Postclassic and into the Contact period. Terminal Classic in-migration is evidenced by the introduction of ceramic types and architectural forms, better and earlier known in the Petexbatun region to the southwest (Demarest 2004; O’Mansky and Dunning 2004), found particularly at sites around Lake Petén Itzá but also in the Salpetén and Macanché basins. Postclassic Maya migrations, especially the arrival of the Itza in Petén, are long known through the indigenous “prophetic histories” of northern Yucatán but have not been well attested archaeologically. For a millennium, from the ninth through the eighteenth centuries—archaeologically differentiated into the Terminal Classic, Postclassic, and Contact periods—the Petén lakes region served as a refuge for groups of Maya forced into exile by the waning sociopolitical fortunes of towns and regional hegemonies to the north, south, east, and west (Caso Barrera 2002; Farriss 1984; Jones 1998; P. Rice and D. Rice 2005).

Socio-Ethno-Político-Linguistic Groups in Postclassic Petén

Postclassic- and Contact-period Petén was inhabited by numerous groups that varied to greater or lesser degrees in terms of social formations, ethnicity, political organization, and language (see Hofling, Chapter 4, this volume, Map 4.1; Thompson 1977). Of these, the more centrally located spoke related and mutually intelligible dialects of the Yukatekan branch of the Maya language family. The Classic lowland Maya are believed to have spoken Yukatekan in the north and Ch’olan Maya in the south; occupants of the lakes area might have been bilingual. Postclassic linguistic reconstructions (Hofling 2006b) indicate that the later languages began to differentiate sometime around 1000, likely as a consequence of the population shifts attendant to the Terminal Classic transition. In nearly all cases, the history and archaeology of these groups are relatively little known, although the late centuries of the central Petén Postclassic and Contact periods have been framed solely in terms of the Itza.

Our attention here is on the Postclassic- and Contact-period Maya in the basins of the eastern lakes, that is, those east of the main arm of Lake Petén Itzá: Lakes Salpetén, Macanché, Yaxhá, and Sacnab. At the time of European conquest, this region was occupied by a little-known group: the Kowoj. As Jones explains (Chapter 3, this volume; also Rice, Chapter 2, this volume), scholars generally did not know of or understand the Kowoj as significant “players” in Contact-period Petén until his analysis of previously unstudied documents illuminated their role. The Kowoj claimed to have migrated

to Petén from Mayapán, but the Kowoj in Yucatán are also poorly known archaeologically and historically, and their role in events can only have been confused by the idiosyncrasies of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Spanish orthography. For various reasons, discussed in subsequent chapters, we believe the Kowoj in Yucatán were a Xiw-affiliated elite lineage group. And as detailed in numerous contributions to this volume, project excavations at the peninsular site of Zacpetén in Lake Salpetén confirmed strong cultural and historical connections with Mayapán, consistent with the Kowoj claim of descent from that city.

We consider the Kowoj in Petén to have maintained a distinct ethnopolitical identity (*vis-à-vis* the Itza) and to have spoken a Yukatekan Mayan dialect. As with the Itza in Petén, a major issue concerning the Kowoj is the date when they arrived in the lakes region. Jones (1998: 11, 16, 430n24) indicates that the Kowoj migrated from Mayapán at the time of the initial wave of Spanish conquest, roughly between 1520 and 1543. For various reasons (see Rice, Chapter 2, this volume; Pugh and Rice, Chapter 5, this volume), we believe the migration occurred earlier and that there were likely multiple episodes of migration of Xiw-related groups into Petén, of which the Kowoj proper were (one of) the last.

Of the several groups occupying Petén during the Contact period, the Spaniards most frequently mentioned the Itza. Through repeated contacts, the Spaniards apparently mistakenly believed that much of Petén was dominated by a unitary, centralized monarchy – much like that in their own post-medieval homeland and in the large civilizations they encountered in highland Mexico and Peru, headed by a ruler known since Cortés’s visit as *Kan Ek’*. However, it is now clear that by the time of final Spanish conquest in 1697, the Itza controlled a more restricted area limited to the west and south of what is now called Lake Petén Itzá from their island capital *Nojpeten* (“great island”).

Fray Bartolomé de Fuensalida, who visited *Nojpeten* in 1618 and 1619, reported that the Itza in Petén had fled from *Chich’en Itza* a century before the Spaniards arrived in Yucatán (cited in López de Cogolludo 1971 [vol. 2, bk. 9, ch. 14]: 256–257). The ruler of *Nojpeten* at the time of the 1697 conquest, *Ajaw Kan Ek’*, claimed descent from that city through his mother (Jones 1998: 11). Clearly, during the Postclassic period the Itza were among many groups translocating between the settled north and the more sparsely occupied territory of central Petén. Once there, they pursued an expansionist strategy, carrying out raids, wars, and resettlements and fomenting rebellion in all four quarters of their territory (D. Rice and P. Rice 2005; P. Rice and D. Rice 2005).

Jones tentatively postulated the existence of a third late territory and ethnic group in the lakes region, the *Yalain*. A town called *Yalain* was described by Franciscan Fray Andrés de Avendaño y Loyola in 1696 (in Jones 1998: 216, 443n11) as “a town of very few houses clustered together, but of many well-populated *milperías* [food cultivations]” occupied by people from *Nojpeten* who had agricultural plots there. *Yalain* was said to lie east of Lake Petén Itzá, and Jones (1998: 19, map 6; Jones, Chapter 3, this volume) proposed that the

town lay in the Lake Macanché basin; the territory extended east to the basins of Lakes Yaxhá and Sacnab, over former Kowoj lands, and was controlled by the Itza after their aggressive expansion in the 1630s. We are somewhat less persuaded of this possibility, which supposes a remarkable distance for Nojpeten farmers to cultivate their fields. Instead, we are inclined to place Yalain east of the small southern arm of Lake Petén Itzá where, within sight of Nojpeten, a system of canals and raised fields joins (or joined, before modern road building) Lakes Quexil and Petenxil with Lake Petén Itzá (Rice 1996).

We believe the site of Ixlú corresponds to Saklemakal, known in archival accounts as a port town on the eastern end of Lake Petén Itzá and later named Puerto Nuevo de San Antonio del Itzá (Jones 1998: 371). The Spaniards noted that Saklemakal was a contested site in the late seventeenth century, with the Yalain/Itza and Kowoj vying over its control and the latter seizing the port in the turmoil that followed the Spanish conquest of Nojpeten. Mapping and excavation confirm in part that the site was contested: a late pre-conquest Itza presence at Ixlú/Saklemakal may be detected in the construction of a small central shrine in the site's main plaza and in a pattern of caching skulls in pairs around the shrine (paired skulls were also found at Flores; Cowgill 1963: 20–22), one pair of which overlay earlier cached skull lines (Duncan 2005a: 202), also known from our excavations on the eastern Lake Macanché mainland.

Other groups in Postclassic- and Contact-period Petén were the Kejach, Mopan, and Lacandon. These groups probably all had a long ancestry in central Petén but were pushed out into the peripheries by Itza expansionism (Jones 1998: 19–28; P. Rice and D. Rice 2005). The Kejach (or Cehache 'place of deer') occupied the area north and northwest of the Itza (Thompson 1977: 11–12), and the two groups were apparently separated by an empty no-man's land. Unlike the Itza, the Kejach lacked centralized political authority and hierarchical sociopolitical organization (Alexander 2000: 387). Reportedly, the Itza and Kejach were frequently at war, and when Cortés passed through this area in 1525 on his way to Honduras he found that the towns were often fortified and situated in easily defendable locations. The sharing of surnames between the Kejach and the Itza suggests that they may have had a common origin (Jones 1998: 23), although by the time of European contact they were clearly not on good terms. The Spanish-constructed road leading south into Petén from the western Yucatán port of Campeche passed through Kejach territory, and several small Spanish missions (Ichbalché, Tzuktok) were briefly occupied there. Unfortunately, to our knowledge, no archaeological fieldwork has been undertaken in the Kejach area of Petén (but cf. Alexander 2000 for Lake Cilvituk in Campeche).

The Mopan-speaking Maya occupied the valley of the Río Mopán in southeastern Petén and Belize, east and southeast of the Kowoj region; the Belize River may have been their northern boundary (see Thompson 1977: 5). In 1618 Mopan territory extended northward to just south of Kowoj-occupied Lake Yaxhá, between Itza territory and the site of Tipu (or Negroman-Tipu), on the western bank of the Macal River—a tributary of the Belize River—in

western Belize. During Colonial times Tipu served as the staging point for Spanish efforts to evangelize the “heathen” Itza in Petén.² Included among the Mopan are groups known as the Chinamitas in eastern Petén and Belize, with a fortified town named Tulumki (‘agave-walled fortress’), and the Musules (Jones 1998: 20–21). Reportedly, the Mopan were constantly at war with the Itza, who had pushed them to the margins of Petén by pursuing their own strategies against the Spaniards; such Itza aggression likely predated Spanish documentation. The town of Mopan (now San Luis) in southeastern Petén was briefly a mission town, but it was attacked by the Itza and “incorporated into the Itza political system as an outlying colony whose duty was to monitor the frontier with Verapaz” (ibid.: 58), which was dominated by Dominican missionaries. By the end of the seventeenth century the Spaniards considered the Mopan political “dependents” of the Itza (ibid.: 19–22). Research by Guatemalan archaeologists in the southern part of Mopan territory, while focusing on the Classic rather than the Postclassic period, has identified at least two sites with Postclassic occupation (Laporte 1996, 2004).

The Lacandon Maya, numbering only about 500 people in eastern Chiapas, Mexico (southwest of the Petén lakes), represent the remnants of a larger group(s) that remained isolated from Christianity and Western influences until relatively recently (Boremanse 1998; Doby and Blom 1969; McGee 1990; Palka 1998, 2005a, 2005b; Thompson 1977: 14–19). They consist of two separate populations with different geographical origins (Boremanse 1998: 4). The southern group fled Yucatán, while the Northern Lacandon—perhaps descendants of the Kowoj (Pugh, Chapter 16, this volume)—may have been pushed out of Petén by the Itzá.

To judge from the historical documentation, then, in the seventeenth century a number of Maya socio-ethno-politico-linguistic groups in Petén were in some state of hostilities, if not active warfare, with each other. Central Petén, a distant and isolated refuge zone for Maya clinging to traditional ritual practices, was receiving scores of immigrants fleeing the oppressive conditions of the Spanish *encomiendas* (grants of labor and, by extension, land) to the north. Once a vast but relatively sparsely occupied forested terrain, Petén not only was increasingly populated by a motley assortment of refugees and fugitives, but this “safe zone” was simultaneously shrinking as Spanish missionaries and military forces steadily encroached on all sides. By the late seventeenth century, Itza expansionism had pushed ethno-linguistic groups of long standing in Petén into the peripheries (P. Rice and D. Rice 2005). The Postclassic archaeology of the Kejach, Mopan, Manche Ch’ol, and other distant neighbors of the Itza is poorly known, such that it is not possible to specify to what extent their nonperishable material culture might have displayed resistance to their Itza oppressors.

Within this broader environment, the Petén lakes region was wracked by powerful factions in the Late Postclassic and Contact periods, and by the seventeenth century the lines were drawn over issues of capitulation to the Spaniards and acceptance of Christianity. The Itza under Ajaw Kan Ek’ were on one side of this conflict; the Kowoj, with their late “capital” at Zacpetén,

along with an allied faction of Itza on the northwest shore of Lake Petén Itzá, were on the other.

Organization of this Volume

In this book we focus on the ethno-political group known as “Kowoj” in seventeenth-century Spanish documents, and we ask two questions about them: (1) Who were the Kowoj, in the sense of both their archaeological visibility and their cultural or socio-ethno-political identity, and (2) what was their history in Petén? That is, we seek to characterize the Kowoj as they identified themselves and as they can be identified through their recoverable material remains, primarily those from the site of Zacpetén but supplemented by data from other sites such as Topoxté. We also try to determine when and how they came to be distinguishable from the better-known (at least in documentary sources) Itza in Petén. Given our focus on what can be studied through archaeological investigations, the primary data sets explored in detail to date are architecture, pottery, and mortuary patterns. These data sets constitute the bulk of this volume.

The book is organized into six sections. This first part, Chapter 1, provides a brief and general introduction to the volume, the history of our archaeological investigations in Petén, and an overview of the social, political, and “ethnic” context of Maya groups in Contact-period Petén. The most important components of this context are that (1) multiple groups speaking variant dialects within the Yukatekan branch of the Maya language family occupied Petén in the Postclassic and later periods, and (2) by the late seventeenth century they all existed in a state of mutual hostilities.

Part II introduces the Kowoj of Petén from several largely non-archaeological perspectives, because they need to be understood within the complex historical context of feuding and factional competition between the two major elite lineage alliances of Yucatán—the Itza and Xiw—and the large cities of Chich’én Itza and Mayapán. Chapter 2 seeks to place the Kowoj within this broader spatio-temporal and cultural context, with discussion of indigenous documents (and archaeological data) concerning the Postclassic Maya lowlands and the ties between the Kowoj and the better-known Xiw in the north. This is followed by Grant Jones’s summary of the ethnohistorical research that led to recognition of the Kowoj as a political entity from data in archived documents and Charles Andrew Hofling’s chapter on linguistic differences between Itza and Xiw as evidenced in the *chilam b’alam* books. The most critical issue here is the history and dating of the Kowoj in Petén, an issue that cannot be definitively settled although we believe we have the outline of a satisfactory resolution. In Chapter 3, Jones notes that a Kowoj informant reported to a Spanish military man that the Kowoj had origins in Mayapán and fled northern Yucatán and arrived in Petén in the second quarter of the sixteenth century. While we cannot argue with this testimony, we have a difficult time squaring that late date with the long Postclassic archaeological sequence in eastern Petén. We propose that the Kowoj were one of several elite lineages

affiliated with the Xiw in Yucatán, and, more specifically in Petén, the “Kowoj proper” were probably the last in a series of these lineages to flee Yucatán and migrate to Petén during the several centuries of the Postclassic period.

Parts III, IV, and V address various categories of archaeological data from our excavations at Zacpetén. Part III surveys the architecture and settlement patterns of the Kowoj (or Xiw affiliates) in Petén. Of particular importance are the two largely contemporaneous Mayapán-style architectural complexes known as “temple assemblages” at Zacpetén. Existing only in the eastern part of the Petén lakes district (and not in the Itza-controlled west), the temples and open hall structures of these assemblages yielded large quantities of primarily ritual artifacts in situ, suggesting that they were abandoned in haste. Several domestic structures were also investigated at Zacpetén, the most unusual of which was Structure 719 (Chapter 9), which may have been a very late-occupied council house.

The three chapters in Part IV add ceramic data to the mix. These chapters combine technological analyses of paste and pigment constituents and design elements of the slipped and decorated Postclassic pottery at Zacpetén and the lakes area plus descriptions of the incense burners and other ritual pottery found in the temples and elsewhere at Zacpetén. The Kowoj and their Xiw-related allies in Petén made and used the distinctive Clemencia Cream Paste-ware pottery, which we believe was produced in or near the Topoxté Islands in Lake Yaxhá, although similar stylistic attributes of decoration (and also incensarios) were copied in other clay pastes found at Zacpetén.

Part V’s chapters provide additional information on the history of the Kowoj and their Xiw-related allies at Zacpetén, as well as distinguishing them from other groups in broader spatial and temporal contexts. These contexts include information from a carved Classic altar at Zacpetén, their patterns of access to obsidian, data on mortuary patterns—a mass grave of ~thirty-seven individuals—and possible relations between the Kowoj and the Northern Lacandon in Chiapas, Mexico.

Part VI, the concluding Chapter 17, summarizes the varying interpretations and often contradictory evidence, especially concerning dating, while highlighting what we consider our successes in relating the Kowoj and their Xiw-related antecedents to Mayapán and in distinguishing ethnicity (or some ethno-linguistico-political variant thereof) in the archaeological record of central Petén.

Notes

1. Norman Schwartz (1990: 2) divides the post-conquest history of Petén into these periods: Early Colonial 1697–1720s; Late Colonial, 1720s–1821; Independence, 1821–1890s; Enclave Economy, 1890s–1970s; and Modern Colonization, since the 1970s.

2. Tipu had close relations with the Petén lakes region during the Postclassic period, as evidenced by ceramic exchange—approximately 40 percent of the Postclassic pottery (by sherd count) from early excavations was Snail-Inclusion Paste ware or Clemencia Cream Paste ware in roughly equal amounts (Rice 1984c)—and intermarriage (the presence of Itza surnames; Jones 1998: table 1.1).