

Book Review:

Decolonizing Indigenous Histories

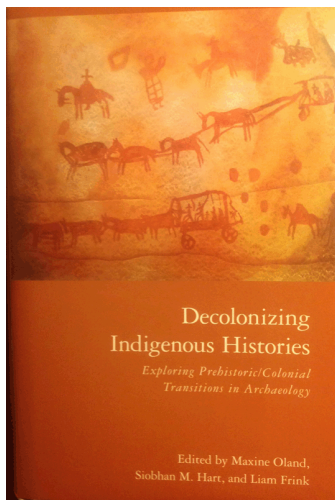
Exploring Prehistoric/Colonial Transitions in Archaeology

Edited by Maxine Oland, Siobhan M. Hart, and Liam Frink

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Book Review by Bertha Miller

Fourth World peoples experienced invasions into their territories, occupations, and colonization long before the arrival of the Portuguese, Arabs, Han Chinese, and eventually the more recent British, Spanish, German, Portuguese, and French joined in the process of invading various populated lands on six continents. The movement of peoples over the last 50,000 years forced already-settled peoples to adjust their social, economic, political, and cultural lives to small waves of invading forces every bit as strange and threatening as the more recent invasions. Most contemporary analyses of colonization and decolonization pay attention to colonization by “Europeans” beginning 1492 as if the Genoans, Castilians, and Basque who sailed their ships to the Caribbean, the Russians who sailed to what is now Alaska and the northern Pacific Coast of North America, and the English and French later entered the North Eastern coast of North America were specific events of colonization that demand our sole attention. Invasions occurred incrementally, and they occurred in a relative flash of time, but it is clear that human patterns of invasion and colonization indicate a process of transition instead of an “event” that has had very specific effects on small societies extending back in time well before the “modern era of colonization.”



The Oland, Hart, and Frink anthology of ten authors takes a different tack from the “decolonizing” literature. First of all, the pieces are arranged in groups permitting the reader to compare similar types of approaches to the question of “how have peoples transitioned?” in the face of colonial intrusions. The book covers a wide cultural and geographic expanse including colonial experiences in North America, Africa, Australia, and Central and South America. While

by no means comprehensive, the range does give the reader a powerful sense of the many variations of Fourth World nation response to “modern colonization” since the 15th century of the Common Era. Importantly, the editors have chosen contributors who avoided examining colonization as an event experienced over an expanse of time. They favored reducing their emphasis to scale of social memory, practice, tradition, and community in the various colonial and postcolonial contexts as one essay author, Steven Stillman insightfully suggests (p. 214). This approach avoids the consequences of conventional social research (anthropological, archaeological, historical) that lead to emphasizing the perceptions, ideas, and assessments of French, Spanish, English, Dutch, and other colonizers while shrouding pre-European colonization in structured epochs that bear no relationship to the lived experience of the

indigenous peoples—tending to dismiss these earlier periods as unrelated. Reducing the scale to particular communities and their records tends to reveal early social, economic, political, and cultural dynamics that may directly explain responses of the recently colonized to the colonizers.

Many archaeologists still cast their eyes exclusively “on Europeans and their descendants or on the effects of European colonization on indigenous peoples,” write the editors (p. 3). Their expectation is that the authors of this volume emphasize the concept of “transitions” as “a heuristic device for understanding broad cultural processes” (p. 3). Prominent among the views presented is Enrique Rodriquez-Alegria at the University of Texas who challenges the idea that indigenous peoples are homogenous in their response to colonization. He argues that various peoples organize public and private strategies that define and extend their power to act in diverse and effective ways in the face of colonization. It could be argued that these strategies inherently reconstruct unequal power relationships.

One can readily notice this outcome by considering the century-long México (Aztec) colonization of the Xaltocan before Spanish colonization. Rodriquez explains that the economic life of Xaltocan changed radically resulting in significant wealth decline, as the people of this nation became vassals paying tribute to México. As with the pattern of colonization experienced by many other peoples, México tribute demands essentially impoverished Xaltocan. Xaltocan was forced to produce larger quantities of cotton while maize production continued. Still, hunting, salt production, and essential supports for the Xaltocan population declined.

When the Spaniards took over from the México, Xaltocan patterns of behavior seeking to acquire the external appearances of elite

Spaniards, Rodriquez explains, repeated what had been practiced with the México overlords. The Spaniards relocated the Xaltocan population into a central location from small villages to exact more efficient control over the population. Land ownership struggles developed between the Xaltocan people now concentrated in a single location, and to resolve these disputes (between elites and commoners) the Spanish administrators issued land deeds. While reducing conflict between the Xaltocan people, conflicts arose with the Spaniards themselves. The patterns of conflict tended to reflect differences over status and the distribution of shortage (bureaucracy) that favored either commoners or elite.

Alistar Paterson of the University of Western Australia undertakes to compare rock art as a communications device in East Timor (2000 BP, CE 1977), Arnhem Land, Australia (CE 1600s-1900s) and Matadi on the Congo estuary (CEW1488) and North America. As Paterson notes, these sites and peoples are quite different; however, they have rock art that was produced in territories threatened by occupation by outsiders. As sources of information Paterson readily explains that he doesn’t “read” the markings, he merely attempts to interpret them. What he discovers is that (like his contributing colleagues) evidence emerges demonstrating that the makers of the rock art describe the Dutch and English, or other more recent arrivals, but extending back in time depictions illustrate the arrival of foreign invaders before the Europeans. Pastoralists appear in San depictions as herders of animals.

Northern Central plains in North America receive Patterson’s attention as he points to rock depictions of Spaniards, French, British, and American settlers. Paterson points to the transitions occurring with the introduction of the horse and the appearance of guns, wagons, and metal objects. The seventeenth and

eighteenth century introduction of horses from Europe receive prominent attention and illustrate a major change for societies in that time. Transition as a result of invasion and occupation are clearly illustrated.

Paterson engages in cross-cultural analysis by comparing what he perceives as significant concentrations by rock art makers on the introduction of animals in Australia, North America, and in Africa. He stretches to suggest that the importance of these animals “may relate to aspects of society related to belief and power” (p. 67). I must say this is not a surprising interpretation since social researchers reliably turn to such an observation when they have no direct or even indirect evidence for a phenomenon.

To my eye Stacie King, an anthropologist at the University of California-Berkeley, captures the essence of the book and the manuscript collection of the ten authors. She flatly asserts that while the arrival of the Spanish marked an historical shift for peoples in Europe and in the Americas, they had already experienced dramatic invasion and occupation before the Spanish arrived. She points to previous experiences with the “Aztec” and the “Inca” (and I would add the Heron and Illinois with the Five Nations Confederacy, the Snohomish with the Chimicum, and the Yamasi attacks and occupations in southeastern North America) affecting trade, migrations, militaristic expansions, and occupations long preceding the Russians, Spanish, English, Portuguese, Dutch, French, and Swedes. I would extend Dr. King’s observation of short-term incursions in the Nejapa region of Mexico having less significant effects than the many earlier incursions. It seems reasonable to suggest that the widely practiced intrusions and occupations of many societies throughout the ages long before the incursions and occupations by European kingdoms significantly

changed economic, social, and cultural life of Fourth World nations as an extended process.

Pre-European, Arabic, or Han Chinese encroachments may be better considered part of the chain of incursions and colonization reaching well back before the current era. This observation does not excuse the adverse effects of invasions and occupations by European kingdoms and states into Fourth World nations’ territories and societies. Nor is there a rejection of the transitions made by Fourth World societies that define their present condition or character. The particular circumstance of each nation as we now understand them may well be understood more accurately by considering the public and private strategies creatively developed as a response to internally evolving changes as well as the processes that reflect the colonizing impulse.

I genuinely enjoyed reading this collaboration of participants who attended the American Anthropological Association annual meeting in 2008. While the techniques of these social scientists still cause them to struggle to understand that which stands beyond their reach, they are clearly making earnest efforts and some progress to open a dialogue that Fourth World peoples must now join.

About the Author

Bertha Miller is a Wenatchee with a degree in Anthropology.

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