

*Wandering Peoples: Colonialism, Ethnic Spaces, and Ecological Frontiers in Northwestern Mexico, 1700-1850.* By Cynthia Radding. Durham: Duke University Press, 1997. Pp. xx + 404. \$59.95 (cloth) 19.95 (paper). ISBN 0-8223-1907-1 (cloth) 0-8223-899-7 (paper).

This book looks at the late Colonial to early National period in central and northern Sonora through southern Arizona, a physically difficult area caught between the better known Spanish colonies in the American Southwest and Mesoamerica. The indigenous inhabitants of the region were mostly Uto-Aztecan speakers, and Radding focuses on the Opata, Pima, and Eudeve, although the Yaqui, Seri, Tarahumara, and the Athabaskan Apache all play a role. The author is a member of the Department of History at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, and she follows her earlier volume *Entre el Desierto y la Sierra* in presenting an ethnohistorical and anthropological perspective, eschewing the traditional approach of the historian. Anthropologists and ethnohistorians will be the primary audience for this book, and there is much to recommend it to researchers from beyond Mesoamerica and the American Southwest for its coverage of the relationship between peasants and a colonial empire.

Radding's goal, she states in the Introduction, is to give voice to the sub-altern peoples of the region and to show how their acts of resistance affected and altered the Spanish colonial project. I have doubts about whether these goals were convincingly fulfilled, but Radding's book is undoubtedly a success as a data-rich anthropological analysis of important socioeconomic transformations in an understudied region. This author knows her stuff, and has an intimate knowledge of the region and its historical record. Her appreciation of the variation in interests among Spanish and Indian groups cannot be done justice in this brief review.

The initial chapter, Introduction: The Social Ecology of the Sonoran Frontier, lays the groundwork. Radding summarizes much of the material from later chapters, but most prominently focuses on a discussion of the Social Ecology theoretical orientation which she follows throughout the book. She defines Social Ecology as an approach based in the ecological relations that guide the "political implications of resource allocation", and determines how people "ascribe cultural values to their claims to land and labor". Obviously these relationships are not *determined* by environment, since the Spaniards did not adopt a Sonoran lifestyle after their arrival. Nevertheless, native peoples had very different concepts of land use and mobility that would

directly clash with the Spanish agenda, and this is really the core of the book. Another concept Radding discusses is that of “ethnic space”, arguing that the Indian-Land relationship provided a sense of identity that transcended any kind of political or economic unit. Since the book is heavily concerned with peasant class formation, she gives a working definition of this term that takes into account the variability within the category, composed primarily of Indians (on the bottom) and non-Indian *vecinos* on the top. Finally, Radding notes that she is following a model of “ethnogenesis” - i.e., rather than evaluating native strategies by how many Precolumbian traits survive over time, she instead examines how Indians defended a shifting and dynamic ethnicity.

The remainder of the book is divided into three parts. The first section, Los Sonoras and the Iberian Invasion of Northwestern Mexico, is devoted to a discussion of native history both before and after the Conquest, in particular describing land use patterns and how these would collide with Spanish concepts of the same. Chapters in this book are not neatly compartmentalized, and readers must expect to find detailed discussions of a topic long before the chapter devoted strictly to that issue.

Chapter 1, Ethnic Frontiers in the Sonoran Desert, gives a good introduction to the region, sketching the basic geographic, ethnic, and linguistic landscape. Radding pays particular attention to the difficulties imposed by the climate and the unstable nature of agricultural production, and how these forced a dispersed settlement pattern. Her discussion of the Precolumbian archaeology is quite good and manages to relate material culture to lifeways more effectively than many archaeologists do. She focuses especially on the Trincheras and Rio Sonora traditions, ranked societies fueled by extensive long-distance trade contacts, but without rigid social stratification.

This is followed by a more traditional historical narrative of the Spanish conquest of this region, and of the failed attempts at imposing an *encomienda* system like that which had worked so well in central Mexico. Spanish colonial exploitation of Sonora differed primarily because of the lack of large-scale polities that could be easily tapped into, and due to the degree of nomadism practiced by northern groups. The lack of incentive for colonists to move into this area, at least until the discovery of silver mines, meant that Spanish control was also much slower to develop. The Crown was accordingly forced to rely on religious missionization for a Spanish presence, primarily embodied in the Jesuit order. The establishment of missions and the *reducción* of scattered Indian settlements into larger villages was a hardship, but still an improvement over the

earlier, violent encounters between Spaniard and Indian in the 16th and 17th centuries. The main focus of Radding's book begins at this point, circa 1700, when mining and stockraising were bringing in increasing numbers of Spaniards, and the Bourbon reforms leading to an increased colonial presence were about to begin.

I might note parenthetically that a more extensive treatment of the 16th and 17th centuries would have greatly altered the tone of the book. This period of nearly 200 years after the arrival of Spaniards on mainland America is bound to have had pronounced effects on the Native American populations of Sonora. Disease swept through western Mexico ahead of the Spanish advance (see the *Relación de Michoacán* for a description of the effects of disease on the Tarascan political and social system) and Sonora probably suffered similar devastation long before Europeans ever showed up in the area. Radding notes that when the peoples of Sonora attempted to defend and hold onto their culture against the Spanish encroachment, it was already as much colonial as Precolumbian. But she might have noted that the probable passage of disease through the region before the Spaniards ever got there would have helped to tear down much of the Precolumbian political and economic order. This by no means wiped out native culture, but a more extensive discussion of this disastrous period would probably have made Radding's examples of native resistance look rather late and ineffectual.

Chapter 2, Amerindian Economy in Sonora, is a detailed and interesting exegesis on native subsistence methods, and Radding gives a nice discussion that virtually puts the reader into the shoes of a Native Sonoran. The critical feature of agriculture in Sonora was its instability thanks to the variable rainfall. Too little rain resulted in a minimal crop, but too much washed away valuable soil. The resulting native pattern of feast or famine depending on the current food supply would seriously interfere with the goals of the Spanish colonial system.

Chapter 3, Native Livelihood and Colonial Economy, describes this collision with a nice blend of quantitative data and individual portraits. The mission system was oriented towards production of a limited number of staple crops to supply the nearby presidios and mining camps, and struggled to impose this system on the Indian populations, who had adapted to the Sonoran environment by adopting a dispersed settlement pattern and a reliance on a wide array of resources. Sonorans were increasingly reluctant to plant the communal mission lands, and many protested by breaking off from the mission to reestablish the small hamlets of the past. The

expulsion of the Jesuits in 1767 left other Spanish colonists free to ensnare the Indians in debt servitude, even as Bourbon reforms continued to break up communal lands into private holdings.

Part II, *The Intimate Sphere of Ethnicity: Household and Community*, is divided into two chapters. Chapter 4, *Sexuality, Marriage, and Family Formation in Sonora*, delves into vital statistics for the region. Radding examines the series of birth and death rates, and she documents the fragmentation of Indian households due to labor migration and disease. Indian households responded by becoming considerably more flexible; they accepted new members who had lost their own families, and temporary sexual unions formed while males were away at mining camps. These impermanent family structures clashed with Spanish, particularly missionary, ideals, and were yet another source of ethnic conflict. As in the previous chapter, Radding uses historical data on individuals or families to liven up the quantitative statistics and give the reader a much better feel for the era.

Chapter 5, “Gypseys” and Villagers: *Shifting Communities and Changing Ethnic Identities in Highland Sonora*, concentrates on the fragmentation of community that supplied the term “Wandering Peoples” to the title. The migration of Indians away from the missions undermined the communal land system, the invasion of the region by cattle herds led to increased erosion and destruction of agricultural land, and men joining the military for long campaigns against the Apaches left many of their towns starved for labor.

Part III, *Rival Proprietors and Changing Forms of Land Tenure*, has two chapters. Chapter 6, *Land and the Indian Común*, follows the causes and effects of increasing privatization of land. Radding makes good use of her knowledge of legal procedures of the time, and of individual case studies, to show exactly how the invading *vecinos* were slowly gaining control of land and water rights. The advance of Bourbon reforms brought increasingly formal procedures of land ownership for which the Indians were unprepared. The land grabs that followed continued to chip away at communal land holdings until little was left, and the incentive even to retain Indian identity disappeared.

Chapter 7, *Peasants, Hacendados, and Merchants: The Cultural Differentiation of Sonoran Society*, discusses many of the themes of previous chapters (primarily land ownership) as illustrated by individual cases from the community of Pitic and the valley of Horcasitas. The chapter concludes with the final dismantling of communal and mission lands under the nascent

Mexican government, provoked by the needs of a growing non-Indian population in the far northwest.

Part IV is titled *Ethnogenesis and Resistant Adaptation*, and pulls together many of the earlier threads. Chapter 8, *Cultural Endurance and Accommodation to Spanish Rule*, and Chapter 9, *Patterns of Mobilization*, are both devoted to discussions of resistance among the Sonoran Indians and how it was manifested. Resistance, Radding argues, was mainly acted out through migration (voting with your feet) and actual armed rebellion, which appears to have occurred rather frequently in retaliation for ill treatment and in frustration over the inability to defend their holdings in other ways. Other forms of resistance that Radding discusses appear rather less effective - e.g. Indians joined the Spanish military in order to gain some personal advantages, but their absence cost their communities dearly in terms of labor and defense.

The final chapter, *Conclusions: Contested Space*, provides a much needed summary, drawing together the many threads of this volume. The pre-Contact Sonoran Indians had adopted a dispersed settlement pattern and broad-based subsistence strategy in order to deal with a low productivity and risky agricultural regime. The Spaniards forced them in the 17th century into a concentrated mission-centered pattern and insisted that they cultivate a few staple products (maize, wheat) to feed the wider colonial market. Ironically, the slow decline and breakup of the mission system was opposed by the Indians, thanks to the identification of the mission with communal land ownership. Radding concludes with an argument for the continued use of the Social Ecology approach, and notes that the time is ripe for more comparative analyses incorporating more densely peopled areas with more sedentary populations.

Primary data in this book are not overwhelming, but there are plenty of maps, charts listing the holdings of various missions, data on agricultural production and sales, etc. The author is clearly in command of the literature for this area, and has a very realistic sense of how the flexibility of stated ethnicity, the incompleteness of records, and the biases of one chronicler or another can affect interpretation of seemingly clear-cut quantitative data. I came away from this book impressed with Radding's scholarship and her identification of important factors and relationships.

My reservations and doubts relate to larger questions. Two of the primary objectives of this book were to give voice to the peasants, presumably Indian peasants, of Sonoran society, and

to examine their strategies of resistance to the Colonial agenda. In regards to the first goal, I'm not sure that it was fulfilled. The Opata, Pima, and Eudeve peoples are hard to tease out from the statistics and Spanish historical records. Although I applaud the use of individual and family histories to flesh out the broader historical patterns found in the documents, there is little Indian presence in these portraits, which better illustrate Spanish and *vecino* motives. Indians are usually being talked about by others, rather than speaking for themselves. When they do speak out, it is their community leaders who are doing the talking, and it is hard to know how representative these views were of the village as a whole.

Radding's second goal is of very broad relevance to ethnographic and ethnohistoric research, and is the source of my primary reservations. What constitutes resistance, as opposed to accomodation? Although Radding begins to address this thorny theoretical question, she veers off into a discussion of armed rebellion and migrations as manifestations of this behavior. These may be plausible examples, but what about the statement that the blending of native and Catholic religious beliefs constitutes resistance? Indian beliefs appear to have been so thoroughly expunged that there is no discussion of them in this book beyond a vague reference to shamanism. Of course, Catholicism is a good example of shamanism too (a holy man who goes to the land of the dead to heal others and returns with messages from the other side), and I'm not sure how much of those "native" contributions really are that. I'm not saying that only those acts that are ultimately successful need to be considered resistance - they are all ultimately transitory - but surely we need to spend more time on this question. Resistance sounds great, and it is a means of empowering the dead and making it appear that they were not run over without a fight, but it's not always a very accurate characterization of past events.

More questions abound. What are people resisting against? Who is resisting? Indians? Not exactly, since there was only occasional cooperation between different groups. And shouldn't we describe the recalcitrant behavior of the *vecinos* towards the missionaries, or local Spanish officials against each other, as resistance? Or does one have to be "ethnic" (Spaniards have no ethnicity, of course, since they are the establishment) for acts to be considered resistance? Is resistance occurring at the level of the village community? Sometimes, when attempting to defend the integrity of their communal land, but these protests were mostly voiced by native leaders whose motives were often not so altruistic towards their own constituents. Besides, choices of

resistance vs. cooperation more often led to intravillage conflict, not solidarity. Rather, Radding describes a social environment in which individuals resisted, and attempted to improve their lot even at the expense of their own communities. Victories are typically small and personal. Radding eventually concludes that native Sonorans followed a path that wound between accommodation and resistance. But isn't this what every one of us does every day? What individual or group doesn't toe that line between retaining our independence or giving it up to gain something else? Is this a meaningful observation?

I am more optimistic about the approach of Social Ecology as an integrated analysis of humans and the significance they ascribe to their subsistence relationships. Rather than just focusing on how these ideologies are formed, however, we must also study why they are retained in the face of overwhelming changes. The subsistence pattern to which the native Sonorans kept returning was quite logical for the environment in which they lived. But what about the Spaniards? Why did they continue to try to impose production for a colonial market on a population so incapable of maintaining it, and in the face of declining populations and continuing rebellions?

I can recommend this volume as a detailed and savvy analysis of the Late Colonial - Early National period of this corner of Mexico, and I believe I learned quite a bit about the interaction between Spanish colonialism and peasants. My disagreements revolve around Radding's optimistic portrayal of native Sonorans as perhaps more organized and effective at interfering with the Spanish agenda than I can see.

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