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**Title:** Interacción colonial en un pueblo de indios encomendados : El Chorro de Maita, Cuba  
**Date:** 2012-11-22
Abstract

Colonial interaction in an *encomendados* Indian town. El Chorro de Maíta, Cuba.

The relationships between indigenous peoples and Europeans do not take up much space in thoughts on or around the Caribbean. This is deemed a minor topic among a relevant subject: the discovery and conquest, and the construction of a colonial world. Indigenous communities are supporting actors of Columbus’s success and quick victims of either genocide or the fatality of the clash between civilisations; they rarely, if ever, appear in the colonial universe. This dissertation redresses the colonial invisibility of the ‘indian’ through the study of an exceptional archaeological context in northeast Cuba: the site of El Chorro de Maíta. Excavated between 1986 and 1988, it reports the only cemetery found in Cuba at sites of agricultural-ceramist communities, known in traditional Caribbean practice as Taínos. In this case we are dealing with a settlement space in use since precolonial times, in an investigation that addresses the following questions and objectives.

**Questions:**
- How is indigenous presence expressed in colonial times, in terms of interaction with other sociocultural groups, sustainability and transformation of ways of life and identity?
- In which ways is interaction between indigenous and Spanish peoples expressed at the archaeological site of El Chorro de Maíta?
- What is the meaning of this evidence of interaction?

**Objectives:**
- To identify, at the site of El Chorro de Maíta, elements or individuals associated to the European action, as well as processes of change or continuity in indigenous patterns that may have developed as a result of this action.
- To explore the significance of this presence and processes, so as to understand the situation in which interaction takes place and its characters, together the indigenous responses and processes of transformation and construction of new identities and individuals.

**Theoretical Framework**

The definition of the type of situation that frames the interaction is vital in order to interpret it. Terms such as ‘interaction’ or ‘contact’ may become aseptic references, indicators of a link but disconnected from its objectives, nature and consequences – they need to be contextualised and embodied. Interaction situations in colonial environments at the contact period are rather different from those documented here (Hill 1998; Silliman 2005). Domination is the main element setting them apart. The loss of autonomy, the control over both daily and spiritual life, transform the indigenous universe and project interaction on a plane that is very different from the link existing among autonomous communities that negotiate positions from their respective interests. In the Antillean case, such situations are associated to a particular chronology, specific to each island, and to the pace of Spanish penetration in the area with the subsequent occupation and management of the territories. Based on these elements, this dissertation takes as a starting theoretical assumption the key role of domination in the structuration of relationships among individuals and societies (Miller y Tilley 1984; Miller et al. 2005). The idea of domination helps understand the nature of the colonial situation (Dusell 1994) but it is not its only component. It will therefore be important to understand how life is managed in these types of situations, and which processes may take place when a diversity of population and cultural entities are intertwined in a
colonial world. In this sense, approaches to agency (Hodder and Hutson 2003; Wobst 2000) and transculturation (Ortiz 1983) will be used as orientation tools to assess these phenomena. These terms will help understand how an indigenous person and an ‘indian’ that resists, is aligned to, interacts with or mixes up with white and African people, turning into a new individual or setting for the foundations of a new mestizo world.

**Methodological perspective**

This dissertation maintains that indigenous sites with Hispanic material cannot be analysed from the perspectives traditionally used for the study of Precolumbian contexts. On this basis, a methodological protocol is presented, which considers:

- **Combination of approaches from both prehistoric and historic archaeology.** This strategy integrates resources and skills from both specialities, assessing their specific regional developments. It combines a wide radiocarbon dating campaign with estimates based on the dates of European materials and historical processes. It furthermore makes extensive use of documentary information, both published an unpublished, as well as ethnohistorical sources, thoroughly seeking temporal and spatial adjustment.

- **Multidisciplinary perspective and integrative vision.** El Chorro de Maíta includes remains of human habitation spaces and a cemetery, hence yielding a great diversity of materials. In order to assess these contexts holistically, studies were carried out on the whole collection of human remains (osteometric and dental analyses, characterisation of artificial modifications, taphonomic studies, provenance studies through strontium isotope analyses, etc); zooarchaeological studies; a diversity of archaeological works (survey, excavations, etc) with a strong archaeometric profile, especially on the archaeometallurgical investigations; and historical studies.

- **Comparative vision.** Where possible, a diachronic perspective is attempted, following the evolution of a diversity of elements before and during the interaction, with the aim of identifying and assessing situations of change or continuity in indigenous patterns. This approach is correlated spatially. In addition, there is a focus on identifying the emergence of new elements of material expression, practices or ethnic components, as well as on aspects of the biological impact of the interaction. Variability in mortuary practices is analysed as well.

The assessment of the domination was based on the identification of changes or situations in the realms of indigenous daily life, religious behaviour, identity expression or the conformation of life and funerary environments, all of which are historically to Hispanic control schemes, particularly with the construction of colonial subjects (Bonfill 1977). Indigenous performance was considered based on variables such as the ways in which Hispanic materiality and practices are handled; the study of transculturation focused on situations of syncretism and ethnogenesis events, connected with the emergence and identity construction of new ethnic components, particularly the mestizo.

**Results**

This study generates a new vision of El Chorro de Maíta because it is based on a new perspective and new interests. The starting point is the discovery of the cemetery and initial study of the site over twenty years ago (Guarch Delmonte 1988, 1994, 1996; Rodríguez Arce 1992a). This is the only record of the contexts now gone, and therefore a key document to reconstruct a picture of the place. The work involved the search for, and organisation of,
much information, most of it unpublished and often incomplete, employed to assess the structure and nature of the excavated areas, as a foundation to develop a renewed site interpretation. Also the results of previous studies were compiled (Guarch Delmonte 1996; Guarch Delmonte, Rodríguez Arce y Pedroso 1987; Rivero de la Calle et al. 1989; Rodríguez Arce 2003; Rodríguez Arce et al. 1995; Taylor 1990). Some of these served as a basis for the present study, as is the case of the data on mortuary practices (Rodríguez Arce 1992b); others could not be integrated in depth owing to issues with the methods employed to gather or process the data; and others had to be rectified, especially in aspects such as the determination of the minimum number of individuals, the ancestral origin, or the identification of materials associated to the burials.

Fieldwork involved a new topographic mapping of the site, a full surface and excavation survey, as well as excavations in three different areas. Up to 7421 cultural records were recorded, as well as abundant faunal remains and samples for archaeobotanical study. An archaeological area of 34,448 m² was characterised 12,448 m² larger than initially estimated. As many as 15,437 items were studied, most from the cultural collection obtained in the works of 1986-1988 but not previously analysed, in addition to a further 519 coming from the burials, and not including the objects on the skeletons. All the colonial material initially identified was reassessed; from the collection of 56 ceramic sherds recognised in the first studies (Pedroso 1992), the count now reaches 600 items. 17 new radiocarbon dates, created a total of 18 dates of non-funerary areas, allowed us to refine the dates of an occupation that started towards the 13th century AD, continued until the moment of the Hispanic arrival, and was extended during the first half of the 16th century, perhaps a little longer.

Pre-contact occupation is characterised by a domestic orientation, even though residential areas have not been identified. It is structured over the length of the site, without impacting the area of the burials. On its eastern side, the latter area appears related to sectors without residual concentrations; this information, together with the relatively central location of this space, suggest the presence of a square that would have been defined before the European interaction. Most of the archaeological horizons related to the interaction are disturbed, which, together with the small scale of the excavations, made it impossible to characterise their functions. It was equally impossible to obtain a suitable comparison of patterns of the indigenous materials with those related to pre-contact moments. In this evidence or in the indigenous patterns, a particular modification deriving from the interaction could not be observed.

The study shows an important presence of European ceramic sherds. These ceramics appear in various areas of the site, which suggests an integrated functioning of almost all the space during post-contact times. Including the material collected from tombs but not on the skeletons, a total of 605 European objects are reported (including only glass and metal items), of which 99.1% (600) are ceramic sherds. There is a clear orientation towards storage and transport, involving even non-European ceramics that would however have been imported through colonial action. Given their frequency, they do not appear to have reached the site by means of gift or exchange channels, whereby the indigenous people would obtain exotic objects. Although the lack of preserved contexts makes an estimate of this use more difficult, their dispersal across the site indicate that their transformation into just one more item of refuse. The massive incorporation of ceramics and its use as a disposable, daily item must have been implemented and sustained by Europeans, or by individuals who where in direct relation with them and who were used to Hispanic material culture. Sherds of Mexico Pintado de Rojo and Azteca IV have been identified; judging by their chronology and origins, these objects probably reached Cuba as elements of the economic and colonial expansion links existing between the Antilles – especially Cuba –, and Mexico.
In the light of the new studies, the European material universe is shown to be scarce in domestic environments, especially as far as tools and weapons are concerned. If there was direct Spanish presence, or of individuals who followed a European way of life, this must have been limited and complemented with indigenous elements. There was indigenous access to Hispanic materiality but this was limited, with a minimum development in terms of morphological copy or object manipulations. Colonial materiality, including remains of pigs (*Sus scrofa*), are concentrated in the spaces nearer the cemetery. The chronology of European ceramics yield a long range, completed with a maravedi struck at the Santo Domingo mint between 1542 and 1558 which is consistent with the temporal definition provided by the radiocarbon dates.

The study of human remains and associated materials constituted the other main research strand in this thesis, and it was undertaken with an emphasis on data integration. The whole dataset was reanalysed, establishing new identifications of sex, age and number of individuals. This was the basis of subsequent dental examination, an assessment of cranial modifications and identification of origins through strontium isotopes. A taphonomic study, combining these data with information about the recovery of remains during the excavations, allowed the construction of a different view on the formation of the cemetery and mortuary practices. The identification of the objects found on the skeletons, largely supported by archaeometric data, offers more precision on the materiality of European origin or associated to colonial management – which is of great importance for the reinterpretation of the chronology of these burials as well as the management of life and death in the individuals.

The cemetery is revealed with a biological and cultural diversity hitherto unrecognised. Its formation is shown as the product of historical circumstances marked by the interaction with Europeans. The number of individuals interred (133 in a total of 108 burials) is much higher than initially thought. Even though the space is dominated by the presence of local indigenous peoples, the lack of ethnic and territorial homogeneity of the mortuary population is established. The strontium isotope analyses, supported by carbon and oxygen isotopes, identifies indigenous peoples from a range of regions in Cuba and the broader Caribbean and, in one case, Mesoamerica, as well as an individual from western Africa. The Mesoamerican individual shows cranial and dental modifications that are consistent with those in the Maya area of Yucatan, while the African origin of the other individual is also consistent with the osteometric data. In addition, a mestizo with white and indigenous ancestors is identified, in addition to another one with white and African ancestors – both are local.

Object identification was rectified, demarcating those connected to the Europeans such as coral, jet, guanines, linen fabric, and brass *lacetags*. In addition, mortuary practices are identified, such as the extended burial, that indicate a Christian origin. Identity changes such as the abandonment of cranial modification and indigenous mortuary practices originate in the colonial interaction – itself the likely reason determining the presence of individuals who were buried wearing clothes. The Christianisation focuses on elite people and children.

A total of 22 radiocarbon dates obtained on samples from 17 individuals establish the probability of a large chronological spectrum for the use of the cemetery, especially after the contact. The chronology of the materials associated to the burials help demarcate this in a moment that appears to postdate 1510, spanning through the first half of the 16th century and perhaps the first years of the second half of this century. Over a third of the individuals studied (49 out of 133) were interred after the European arrival, but the actual number is likely higher. It was impossible to offer a diachronic perspective because no definite precontact burials or utilisations of the space could be identified, even though there might be
a trend – though not confirmed – for the non-local, extended burials to be later. Practices related to the interaction clearly co-existed at the cemetery with indigenous practices, although the latter are predominant and provide the main picture.

The variability of demographic and mortuary practices in terms of the local or non-local origin of the individuals is a key aspect. Non-local individuals are mostly men, slightly younger than non-local ones. Certain indigenous mortuary practices are more weakly represented in the non-local individuals and some, such as the use of ornaments, are not present at all. Practices of Hispanic origin are, on the contrary, more marked. From this perspective, it is possible that most of the local individuals belonged to the same social unit, whereas the non-local show a diversity of origins which are difficult to reconcile with Precolumbian circumstances and appear, instead, typical of a conglomerate of immigrants, managed from the perspectives of mobility and colonial life.

When comparing mortality data at this site with other cemeteries and Precolumbian contexts in the Antilles, the atypically high mortality among children 5-9 years of age stands out, possibly related with a catastrophic death situation. The existence of evidence of numerous deaths and continuous burials in short periods, with displacement of recently buried bodies, support this idea. Burials of individuals faced down may also be interpreted within this picture, in that they include mostly children in the same 5-9 age group. The post-contact dates associated to one of the individuals moved shortly after being buried (No. 81) as well as to three children of the 5-9 age group, links such event or events with the interaction with Europeans, and with both local and non-local individuals. A catastrophic event or a situation of high mortality is consistent with the pace of formation of the context, while not being the only cause: details of the alteration of defleshed burials, the quantity of burials and the diversity in the management of human remains, as well as chronological aspects, indicate that the cemetery did not emerge in a single, brief process.

A range of factors indicate that the cemetery of El Chorro de Maíta derives from the interaction with Europeans. These include: the lack of cemeteries in Cuban agricultural-ceramist sites in particular, and in Antillean contexts with Meillacan ceramics; the abundance of post-contact burials in the cemetery – probably more numerous –, the lack of clear chronological evidence for pre-contact burials, the incidence of mortuary practices of a Christian origin; and the presence of ethnic elements generated by, or associated to, the colonial action. However, we cannot rule out the possible initial presence of a small number of burials linked to the precolonial settlement. The concentration of burials, the continuity in the use of space, and the number of inhumations – based on a variety of data, there are at least 156 individuals –, altogether highlight the singularity of a cemetery arranged at a precolonial square and functioning in parallel to the life at the site. The integration of data from both the cemetery and non-funerary areas reveals a strong temporal coherence in post-contact times. Similar materials, both indigenous and European, are found in both spaces. From this perspective, and bearing in mind the local character of most of the buried individuals, it can be proposed that the inhabitants of the site, or at least many of them, would be buried at the cemetery.

In order to understand and interpret interaction as a process with impact across the whole site, all the available historical and archaeological data were employed, structuring the discussion around what may be deemed as key aspects of the colonial situation: domination, the indigenous individual as a social actor, and the transculturation process in its various facets. The basic aspect of domination is the identification of the site as a village of indios encomendados. This is undoubtedly valuable as one of the very few cases where relevant archaeological information has been obtained – according to Deagan (2004), a similar historical circumstance would have taken place at En Bas Saline. The history is clear about
the traumatic nature of this situation and its terrible human and cultural toll, as well as about its significance in terms of its power to control people’s fate and the construction of a colonial daily existence (Marrero 1993a:158-200; Mira Caballos 1997; Pérez de la Riva 1972).

This perception is based on the analysis of demographic data and mortuary practices among local and non-local individuals, seen within an overall context of interaction. The predominance of male individuals among the non-locals and their age differs from the patterns seen in groups of immigrants pre-contact (Laffoon and Voss 2011), but is compatible with slave populations (Deive 1995), as is the presence of individuals not previously documented in Antillean pre-contact contexts – namely, a Mesoamerican indigenous female and an African male. The presence of both slaves and local indigenous peoples in the same mortuary space and temporal context hints at the character of the latter as encomendados, especially as this was the status most commonly given to the population of the island. The encomienda meant the obligation to work for the Spaniards in exchange for religious and “civilizing” instruction in addition to a symbolic cash payment (Mira Caballos 1997). At the same time, the predominance of women – an unusual feature in pre-contact mortuary spaces –, together with the relatively low frequency of men of working age, suggest that male population could have left the village at the request of the Spanish. Local people, many of them post-contact, make substantial use of traditional mortuary practices and status symbols – a right that appears to have been denied or restricted among the non-locals. This situation is coherent with the supposed alternative situation of the indigenous person, as an individual encomendado but legally free.

The domination action affects the very appearance of people, since many of them were buried clothed, and among the children there are some who do not show cranial modifications. This was not a uniform link, in that a woman acquired valuable textiles coming from the Europeans and had access to ornaments perhaps also brought by them. Given their connection to indigenous sumptuary and symbolic traditions, metal ornaments (guanín, gold) undoubtedly marked her high status and also a particular and direct relationship with the Europeans. This scenario is indicative of interaction phenomena and of the control of the local elites as a strategy to facilitate the administration of the labour force. It also suggests that some privileges – surely very few – were preserved for this small social sector.

Spirituality was subjected to domination too. The extended position, with a clear Christian origin, is shown in several individuals, both local and non-local, and replaces indigenous mortuary practices. Elements associated to Hispanic religious behaviour, such as jet and perhaps coral, enter the cemetery. These are mainly found associated to children and to the high-status woman – key groups to ensure the sustainability of the evangelisation and religious conversion. The Christian action among children possibly includes the lack of cranial modification as well: this feature is absent in a child associated to jet and coral, indicating a manipulation that aims at modifying the essence of identity. The very mortuary space, a powerful cultural symbol constructed over the centuries in the landscape, is no longer a cave where the ancestors’ bones and offerings are accumulated for another dimension of life, or the woods where bodies are left unburied. Instead, it is a place where these had to be buried and concentrated, as dictated by the Christian faith. Even though the cemetery does not have a formal character, it represents the imposition of a different, Christian-based way of dealing with death. It is a colonial cemetery and it emerges out of the circumstances of mortality and of the control over indigenous spirituality and existence. Nevertheless, there does not seem to be a sustained control by priests. If there is, this must
have been occasional and limited, with a higher incidence in the Christianisation of certain individuals rather than in the functioning of the cemetery as a whole.

The daily existence in this environment is thus revealed as one that is marked by harsh living conditions, high mortality, the loss of community members and an interruption of reproductive cycles. An environment where different identity and religiosity were imposed, where indigenous peoples were manipulated to remove their ethnic and cultural symbols, to erase their traditional life and death practices, being forced to interact and proceed to a different existence with people who were often strangers. The creation and presence of colonial subjects, “indians”, “mestizos”, “blacks”, is evidenced; they are different in their backgrounds but they share their positions as dominated people. Considering these circumstances, as well as the chronological information, it is very difficult to be precise as to the exact duration of the cemetery, since it may have included burials from endemic episodes as well as ordinary death cycles. Given the presence of non-local individuals, it is also possible that the cemetery included people from other locations with their own rhythms of mortality.

Even though it has been impossible to securely identify the site in written records, the information available supports the picture of the site as a village of *encomendados*, in that similar communities of this kind are documented in nearby areas. This would constitute an indigenous village whose population, in large part, either move to comply with Spanish-led labour assignments (the *demora*), or perhaps fulfils these obligations at home. The village seems to be contextualised in the broader colonial management of the northeastern region, in the lands adjacent or related to the former Indian province of Bani. Potentially, indigenous villages such as this one were integrated with Spanish sites (mines, *estancias*) where both slaves and *encomendados* were employed – as documented in various areas of Cuba. These villages could have had other functions in addition to serving as the residence for the local labour force. In particular, we cannot rule out the possibility that they could have been used to concentrate slave populations, or to develop specific economic activities, particularly those related to the production of foodstuffs. In the case of El Chorro de Maíta, its control and functionalization may have acknowledged its regional importance, perhaps taking advantage of the precolonial structures of integration in the area. Indigenous experience related to the environment, resources, cultural constructions and landscape organisation would have been used within a broader process. The proximity of the coast may have led to the connection between these types of enclaves and larger schemes of colonial order and management, perhaps within panregional spheres of interaction where individuals and goods from different areas would circulate. The presence of Mexican and other non-local ceramics, as well as the remains of a Mesoamerican woman at the cemetery, seem to illustrate this process as well as the enormous scale of the colonial activity and the important role played by Antillean spaces in this process.

Contrary to the traditional discourse, the indigenous person was a not passive victim: they demonstrate the ability to project their actions and to act according to individual or communal interests. They were protagonists and active agents in the search for solutions, and in a repositioning that could give some options for survival and continuity. The act of burial appears to have been to some extent controlled by indigenous peoples who kept the predominance of traditional mortuary practices and who handled Christian rituals in a rather informal way, perhaps syncretically connecting them with indigenous traditions, in an ambivalent and strategic position, thus constructing a cemetery that was neither indigenous nor really Christian. The interaction shows this ability, since the link where the elite is inserted does not necessarily respond to European interests alone. It is also an option for some individuals, especially for those close to Christianity or already Christian. They are
peoples and groups in a different position, but they do not totally abandon important indigenous elements: they are ‘indian’ perhaps, but they are still indigenous individuals too.

Within the community, a reorganisation of existence is sought in order to face the crisis. This involves an increase of female protagonism, which is very clear in higher social strata. As far as it can be inferred from domestic data, indigenous materiality is maintained, with a low incorporation of Hispanic material and some continuity. As a part of the new scheme, it is possible that new individuals from other villages were incorporated as _allegados_, as well as mestizos with an indigenous identity. It is clear that the sustainability of social cohesion and community functioning are attempted and, to some extent, achieved. Potentially, the variability of interaction patterns with the Europeans, together with a hitherto unrecognised ability to resist and adjust, tend to attenuate the disintegrating effects of the encomienda and the harshness of life under Hispanic domination. This may have allowed El Chorro de Maíta to remain as an indigenous space in spite of being turned into a colonial setting. The temporal duration of the colonial use of the site and cemetery rule out an immediate collapse and point to some indigenous success in achieving permanence, even though a final disaggregation would appear to be forthcoming.

This situation may also respond to a domination scheme where influence on the indigenous population may have been punctuated and based only on very specific interests. The site is a source of labour force and serves some systems of colonial ordering in the region, but Christianisation efforts appear not to have been massive, and perhaps the action of constructing colonial subjects is attenuated by several factors. This picture is consistent with life in rural environments, where Hispanic practice may have been very flexible (Guitar 2003) and more interested in economic profit and effective functioning of its enclaves than in the Christianisation and civilisation of ‘indians’.

The site shows a transformative nature. There is a diversity of identities, some constructed through an adjustment to colonial life (‘indians’) and others through the ethnic and cultural mix (mestizos, mulattoes). These are the results of a process of ethnogenesis leading to the emergence of new human and cultural products whose identities tend to be multiple given their intermediate position as ethnic and culturally differentiated individuals. Some identities, such as those of mestizos and mulattoes, are marked by the flexibility that is inherent to their plural base, and suited to a human, territorial and cultural reality that is different from those of their distant ancestors and, as such, creole. The ethnogenesis situation, the syncretic peculiarities of some burials, and the very intermediate nature of the cemetery itself as a colonial product where indigenous and Christian traditions are preserved and combined, all of them correspond to a transculturation setting. We can see how cultural practices, identities and even new individuals are acquired, lost and created. The moments, processes and products of the Ortician concept can be found here. The temporality of this location and its nature demonstrate the early date of the process and the active participation of the ‘indian’. The African presence also distinguishes this context and the strength of its human and cultural diversity.

Similar spaces must have existed in other areas of the island, conforming a complex picture that needs to be recognised if we are to complete an objective vision of early colonial Cuba. These are important contexts in the formulation of a multiple culture and in the ethnic mix that would mark the future configuration of “the Cuban”. In them, both the indigenous and the ‘indian’ appear with great strength, the ability to adjust and to maintain their identity – important aspects that are generally overlooked by History and which are retrieved here thanks to archaeology.

**Implications of the study and future directions**
This research has revealed the need for broad, multidisciplinary and creative approaches to study interaction at sites like El Chorro de Maíta. The ‘indian’ does exist in the colonial context beyond the very early stages, much closer to us in time than we tend to believe. Our difficulties in recognising them stems from the lack of such approaches and the weight of historical prejudice – progressively losing importance but still present until archaeology can be more precise as to its own contribution. In order to understand the colonial times, the study of encomienda, an important and extended system in indigenous environments must be increased. Its archaeological manifestation contains the evidence of the destruction of the indigenous society but also the solutions for continuity, as shown at El Chorro de Maíta. What one might call “the archaeological invisibility of the encomienda” is nothing but the result of an inadequate perspective, but also of a tendency to consider interaction in indigenous contexts as an invariably early and brief phenomenon. These problems may also stem from an incomplete understanding of historical documents and of relevant aspects of colonial life. This is typically seen as a large compartment with fixed characteristics, just as the discovery and conquest, rather than as a complex phenomenon that requires a constant spatial and temporal contextualization. There are other overlooked spaces: estancias, corrales, the asientos de los hatos… a non-urban indigenous universe where the ‘indian’ is the lead actor. Beyond the invisibility of the encomienda – as there were free indians in these contexts – there is a whole colonial invisibility of the ‘indian’ and of the other colonial subjects who lived and died in the hinterland of villages and, by extension, in the periphery of traditional history. Their archaeological expression will often be similar to a Precolumbian space, since some of them were indigenous settlements transformed in colonial foundations: El Chorro de Maíta raises a warning in this regard.

The recognition of the ethnic diversity is another key area related to these new approaches. Mestizos, Africans, indigenous peoples from different areas… are all to be revealed in some osteological collections typically seen as just indigenous and Caribbean. There is a great diversity in a world that is readjusted through the link with Europeans, combining their own schemes of mobility and integration with those imposed by the Spanish. The impact of bioarchaeological analyses is likely to bring about a revolution in this sense, and it will reach maturity when funerary contexts at interaction sites begin to be understood differently. These studies will be key to access the human and cultural plurality concealed by the marginality of some environments or by the homogenising strategies of the colonial power. They will allow us to better perceive other forms of sociocultural relations, those which were articulated within the world of those dominated, and not always determined by their compatibility with, or a single position in face of the Hispanic power.

The understanding of the specific nature of interaction situations, rather than a mere documentation of their existence, should guide methodological strategies. Rather than just European objects, change and continuity, there are whole historical circumstances to be perceived and explained. From societies in contact to societies, groups or individuals who are dominated but who live and respond to this domination, transforming themselves and creating new peoples and new cultures, subverting with their very existence the act of colonial power. In order to reach this level of understanding, the study of indigenous contexts in interaction circumstances should become a specific area of archaeological thought in this region, just as it happens in other areas. This will be the only way to turn archaeology into an instrument that can give a voice to the marginal sectors of the world onto which ours was built.

The research carried out at El Chorro de Maíta demonstrates the power of archaeology to not only document interaction at isolated sites, but also to approach colonial management structures that reach a regional level, or perhaps several islands or even non-Antillean
spaces. New interaction networks are thus revealed where the Caribbean is engaged as an open, multi-related space since pre-Columbian times (Hofman et al. 2007; Rodríguez Ramos 2007).

Ongoing studies at El Chorro de Maña, stemming from this dissertation, will be key in this effort. Non-funerary spaces remain to be studied in detail, as is an assessment of the impact of interaction in residential areas and the broader environment – which is nowadays more accessible thanks to the survey work carried out. Archaeobotanical analyses are oriented along these lines and will inform of the vegetable consumed and grown, as well as about the environment and flora. The dates of human remains, hard to manage because of the long calibration curves and susceptible of adjustments based on diet aspects, will be further refined through an individual calibration project led by Alex Bayliss that will incorporate results of sulphur, carbon and nitrogen isotopes. The possibility of technological changes in ceramic manufacture and information on the provenance of ceramics – given the potential presence of indigenous non-Antillean materials – is to be assessed through manufacture and provenance studies at the University of Leiden. Residue analyses of ceramics, co-ordinated by Vernon James Knight and carried out by Eleonora A. Reber of University of North Carolina at Wilmington will take us closer to the area of food.

Our understanding of the ethnic diversity will be developed through DNA analyses by Dr Hannes Schroeder, Centre for GeoGenetics, The Natural History Museum, University of Copenhagen. This study will allow us to better understand the conformation and development of identities in the colonial population, particularly the mestizos – a little-known group but one playing an important role in sustaining the indigenous legacy. A further strand of work to be completed is the transcription of the wide range of documents identified at the Archivo General de Indias, which contain key information about repartos of Indians and the location of the encomiendas. Without a doubt, there is much yet to be done, and El Chorro de Maña offers an exceptional opportunity in the complex yet necessary task of using archaeology to recover, at a more inclusive and less colonial way, a bottom-up history that includes those “below”, the less important ones, and the majority that made us the way we are.