But Is It a Basin? Science, Controversy, and Conspiracy in the Fight for Mirador, Guatemala

Micha Rahder

To cite this article: Micha Rahder (2015) But Is It a Basin? Science, Controversy, and Conspiracy in the Fight for Mirador, Guatemala, Science as Culture, 24:3, 299-324, DOI: 10.1080/09505431.2015.1007034

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/09505431.2015.1007034

Published online: 09 Mar 2015.

Submit your article to this journal

Article views: 224

View related articles

View Crossmark data

Citing articles: 1 View citing articles
But Is It a Basin? Science, Controversy, and Conspiracy in the Fight for Mirador, Guatemala

MICHA RAHDER

Department of Geography & Anthropology, Louisiana State University, Baton Rouge, LA, USA

The ancient Maya city of Mirador, located in the northeastern corner of Guatemala’s Maya Biosphere Reserve, is at the heart of a raging scientific and political controversy. On the surface, the conflict centers around the geological definition of a ‘basin’ surrounding the magnificent site. One side uses the existence of a basin—backed up by satellite images and analyses—to push for redrawing the boundaries of the reserve, arguing that the feature naturally delineates key archaeological and ecological sites and that current reserve management is failing the forests. The other side insists that there is no geological basin—a contention also backed by satellite images and analyses—and that redrawing the lines would undermine more than 20 years of conservation efforts. On both sides of the fight, rumors abound about secret agendas, manipulated data, backroom political deals, and other shady business. These conspiracy stories reveal how paranoid thought is simultaneously a powerful epistemology and a practical political strategy, both of which shape the production and interpretation of scientific facts. Rather than contrasting irrational political rumor with logical scientific fact, or considering the former as simply context for the latter, the case of Mirador demonstrates how the two are deeply entangled ways of acting on and making sense of a complex landscape.

KEYWORDS: conspiracy theory, paranoia, Guatemala, conservation, development

Introduction

Sitting atop an ancient temple in the pre-classical Maya city of Mirador, deep in the jungled Guatemalan lowlands, a friend and I swapped stories with our local
Our guide, outdoing each other with increasingly strange details of the fight over the ancient city’s future. Our stories turned to a well-known and respected American archaeologist who has studied Mirador for over 30 years, Richard Hansen, who is locally notorious—not for his archaeological findings, but for his scientific claims about a geological basin surrounding the site, and his support for a redrawing of the boundaries of the Maya Biosphere Reserve (MBR) within which Mirador lies. Our guide, a resident of the nearby village of Carmelita, told us entertaining tales of the rumored hidden motivations behind Hansen’s scientific and political beliefs—stories ranging from wanting to construct luxury hotels in the jungle to desires to build an enormous, illegal personal collection of Maya artifacts. I traded back rumors that I had heard in other contexts, while my friend—always up for a good conspiracy story—joined in with wild speculations about worldwide Mormon networks and Hansen’s religious drive for domination. Conspiracy theories like these swirl around conflicting scientific claims about the forested landscape that stretched out as far as we could see in every direction. At Mirador, rumors and paranoia are as deeply entangled with scientific controversy as the vines and roots of the forest are with the abandoned Maya cities that lie beneath them.

The ancient city of Mirador lies at the heart of the last untouched tract of forest in the MBR, in the Petén, Guatemala (Figure 1). Mirador is also the center of a raging scientific and political controversy over the existence of a geological

Figure 1. (Color online) The MBR. The numbers indicate the locations of the Mirador site (1) within Mirador-Río Azul National Park, and the village of Carmelita (2) within its community forest concession. The green spaces on the map are human-exclusive ‘nuclear zones’ of the reserve, while the blue and brown spaces show the ‘multiple use zone’ that allows certain proscribed uses, including sustainable timber harvesting. Source: CEMEC (2011). Reprinted with permission.
basin (cuenca), and people ranging from poor local villagers to members of the Guatemalan congress to Mel Gibson, Arab Sheiks, and representatives of the UNESCO World Heritage program line up on one side or the other. The existence of a basin is used to argue for a redrawing of boundaries inside the MBR, creating more strict park-like protected areas while removing large tracts of land from current sustainable forestry concessions. Those who deny the existence of a basin support the concession model, particularly community concessions like that managed by Carmelita, which stands to lose the most land if the basin lines get drawn. In 2011, a national election, spectacular drug violence, and the daily realities of extreme inequality and non-transparent politics heightened rumors of hidden agendas and secret dealings that circulated on both sides of the fight.

Conspiracy Versus Science?

What is the relationship between scientific arguments over a basin and conspiracy stories? How do rumors, gossip, and paranoid logics influence the creation of actor-networks, or the interpretation of contradictory evidence? Usually, when conspiracy theory and science appear in the same sentence, it is in reference to some kind of anti-science ‘wackos’ trying to deny climate change (Lewandowsky et al., 2013), or to the ways that science can help you prove or disprove conspiracy theories once and for all. But in this remote Northeastern corner of Guatemala, the intertwining of scientific controversy, political conflict, and paranoid rumor-whispering challenges this framework of rational science vs. irrational paranoia. Science studies have long shown that the technical is political, and the Mirador basin controversy reveals that in Guatemala—as in many parts of the world—speculative storytelling and conspiracy theories are a primary mode of doing politics. In this controversy, rumors, gossip, and conspiracy narratives create and reinforce social, political, and scientific alliances, and also enact coherent and powerful epistemologies through which scientific data and evidence are filtered.

For people living and working in the MBR, conspiracy stories and science both promise access to ‘truth’—a way to see clearly through the instability of a landscape characterized by violence, contradictory evidence, and uncertain futures. Elite and military domination, corruption, and uncertain responsibility for current and historical violence all contribute to a political landscape in which conspiracies do take place, and paranoia is both a particularly reasonable epistemology and a practical political strategy. Epistemologically, conspiracy stories offer a profoundly powerful explanation for clashing data: the ‘other side’ of a controversy is engaged in deliberate, hidden, and politically motivated manipulation of evidence. At the same time, the act of telling conspiracy stories is a key strategy for enrolling new allies to one’s own scientific-political networks, signaling trust and building ties through the pleasures of shared secrets and access to a hidden truth.
I use the terms paranoia and conspiracy theory not to denote individual pathology but rather a general style of political thought, one that is broadly shared and undermines straightforward relationships between evidence and truth, relying on leaps of logic to bring contradictory evidence into a single coherent explanatory framework. When political paranoia, rumors, and fears of a hidden reality run high, these are inseparable from scientific knowledge claims, not an opposing social field for science to battle. In the case of Mirador, and throughout the MBR, paranoia is not a pathological ‘context’ in and against which scientific reasoning must work. Instead, Mirador unsettles the normative assumption that paranoid conspiracy theory and science are antipathetic, instead showing how the two are deeply entangled ways of determining ‘truth’ on a politically fraught landscape. Increasingly present in politics across the globe, this case provides an example of conspiracy–science entanglements that may illuminate the dynamics of knowledge and paranoid politics around the world.

Knowledge, Politics, and Paranoia

Mundane Conspiracy

The words ‘paranoia’ and ‘conspiracy theory’ call to mind pathological extremes, the fearful fantasies of the lunatic fringe. These tendencies are typically placed in opposition to science or rationality, but recent scholarship has marked the move of conspiracy thinking from the extremes of society to a more mundane place at the center of political thought (Marcus, 1999a; Stewart and Harding, 1999). As Marcus argues, paranoid thinking can, in certain contexts, be ‘within reason, a “reasonable” component of rational and commonsensical thought and experience’ (1999b, p. 2). This is not merely a redrawing of the boundaries between rational/irrational thought, but rather a rejection of priori assumptions about which types of thinking belong in which category. Following Marcus and others, I use paranoia to refer not to individual pathologies, but rather to a mode of political thought borne of social contexts in which suspicion of hidden dealings is a perfectly reasonable response. The term denotes a particular style of politics characterized by ‘heated exaggeration, suspiciousness, and conspiratorial fantasy’ (Hofstadter, 2008, p. 3), and indicates a lack of clear limits around what is too extreme to be true, undermining straightforward relations between evidence and belief. Describing paranoid thought as ‘reasonable’ is therefore not an effort to re-entrench the line between rationality and irrationality, but rather to show that these categories are themselves unfixed, and may contain very different forms of thought in different contexts.

Conspiracy narratives, a particular form of paranoid storytelling that posits deliberate, coordinated, hidden action, can be considered in two overlapping ways: first, in its epistemological and hermeneutic logics, seen through the content of the rumors and stories; and second, through its political action and
effect, related to the contexts and ways in which these stories circulate. While always linked in practice, analytically teasing these subtle differences apart illuminates different effects of conspiracy stories: the contents provide powerful frameworks to explain the hidden workings of power, drawing attention to non-transparent political forces, practices, and exclusions (Stewart, 1999; Butt, 2005; Nelson, 2009); while the circulation of the stories draws tellers and (receptive) listeners together in the pleasures of mutual trust around a shared secret, forming or reinforcing alliances through stories that provide clear markers of us/them, right/wrong, and truth/lies (Wynne, 1992; Soares, 1999; de Vries, 2007). Current literature tends to focus on either one or the other of these aspects, but as the case of Mirador demonstrates, epistemological and social–political effects should be read as the warp and weft of paranoid thought.

In terms of their content, conspiracy theories are flexible, powerful explanatory tools, ‘born of a world that cries out for interpretation’ (Stewart, 1999, p. 16). Contrary to common assumptions, conspiracy theories provide a more clear explanatory framework, not less, and are able to coherently contain contradictory statements or events by using paranoid leaps of logic (Marcus, 1999b). Writing about apocalyptic thought in the USA, Stewart and Harding argue that conspiracy theories explain the contradictions, catastrophes, and excesses of (post-) modern life, while offering a return to an (imagined) simpler, stable truth: ‘Reason fails to explain events or to provide means for minimal predictability, which leads to a distrust of “the reasonable” and a search for an alternative epistemology’ (1999, p. 294). At Mirador, clashing scientific data are one such contradiction, and the turn to conspiratorial reasoning provides a clear route through the inconsistencies.

In their content, conspiracy stories point to the hidden workings of power, exacerbated in contexts of extreme inequality, violence, or non-transparency—problems for which Guatemala is notorious. Nelson writes that post-civil war Guatemala is characterized by fears of duplicity, ‘that there is someone behind the scenes, pulling the strings’ (2009, p. xvi). These fears are driven in part by the ‘two-facedness’ of the 36-year war in which the state killed or disappeared over 200,000 people, and in which people were forced into complicity with military action via mandatory civilian patrols, turning neighbor against friend and family against loved ones (Nelson, 2009). This complicity and continued denials of genocide (including on the part of current President Otto Perez Molina) undermine any possible clarity surrounding individual or collective responsibility, contributing to widespread fears, rumors, and paranoia that still inflect daily life in Guatemala. In addition, opaque and highly unequal regimes of governance are ripe for the development of conspiracy stories that illuminate those aspects of power (West and Sanders, 2003; Butt, 2005). Guatemala’s enormous land, economic, and ethnic inequalities and non-transparent national politics dominated by an elite and military-backed oligarchy further heighten these paranoid conditions. Thus, while paranoid politics and conspiracy theories occur the
world over, in Guatemala these forms of thinking move from the margins to center stage, becoming a dominant mode of understanding power and politics.

In addition to exposing the hidden workings of power, the circulation of conspiracy stories works to establish and reinforce social, political, and institutional identities and alliances. Beyond their explanatory power, Brazilian anthropologist Soares argues that paranoia has major political utility in situations characterized by violence, particularly state violence:

When trust in institutions, in the action of others, in the effectiveness of the morality in force, is undermined, when expectations are shaky, conditions are favorable to the exploitation of conspiratorial theories, to active or preventive conspiracies—even, I insist, if only to stabilize [institutions] again. Or, conspiratorial paranoia is part and parcel of the process of stabilization of expectations, creation of legitimacy, consolidation of identities. (Soares, 1999, p. 226)

In a similar vein, Kirsch (2002) notes that rumors about state violence in West Papua not only reflect but also reproduce conditions of terror and repression. Importantly, his analysis relies not only on a reading of the content of the rumors, but also of where and when they travel—it is the appropriation and manipulation of rumors by the Indonesian state that amplifies their violent effect (Kirsch, 2002). Finally, there is an important aspect of pleasure and performance involved in the telling of political rumor, one which consolidates authority and political identity in the teller (de Vries, 2002, 2007). These and other works collectively point to the importance of attending to not just the contents of conspiracy theories, but also their contexts, and in the case of Mirador the effects of paranoid rumors’ circulation extend beyond the social and political into the realm of scientific evidence and authority.

Science and Paranoia

Examining the most well-known case of controversy and conspiracy theories within science—global climate change—Lahsen (1999) finds two opposing political-scientific camps, with accusations of conspiracy and deliberate scientific mishandling flung in both directions at the ‘other side’. In this case, the coherence of conspiracy theory offers a consistent account that cuts through the often undecipherable reality of scientific and political processes: ‘Charges and suggestions of conspiracy spread with little resistance among sympathetic audiences in a social and scientific context characterized by uncertainty, fragmentation, complexity, and competing interests’ (Lahsen, 1999, p. 133). Lahsen’s work analyzes conspiracy beliefs as ‘one tactic among many’ (1999, p. 133), highlighting their efficacy as a tool in a context of controversy and political disagreement. Her analysis centers primarily on conspiracy theories as an evocative ‘style of
argument’ (Lahsen, 1999, p. 113, echoing Hofstatder’s classic essay), reflective of and reinforcing networks of trust, shared interests or worldview, and oppositions based on mutual dislike. The parallels with Mirador in these aspects are striking. But to push this analysis further requires taking paranoid thinking seriously—not just as an argumentative or political style—by looking to the ways that conspiratorial and scientific thought are deeply entangled in practice. When people are embroiled in a politically heated controversy founded on contradictory scientific claims, conspiracy stories become not just ‘tactics’ but also epistemological frameworks through which any new data will be filtered. Brian Wynne’s analysis of Cumbrian sheep farmers’ receptions of scientific claims about Chernobyl fallout reflects this. He notes that ‘many farmers bitterly accused[ed] the scientists of being involved in a conspiracy with a government which they saw as bent on undermining hill farming’ (Wynne, 1992, p. 287). These conspiracy stories then shaped the farmers’ interpretations of science: ‘the farmers thus embedded their reading of the present scientific claim ... firmly within the context of the unpersuasive and untrustworthy nuclear institutional body language which had denigrated them for thirty years or more’ (Wynne, 1992, p. 291). In the case of Mirador, this epistemological effect is present not just in post-facto interpretation of claims, but also in gathering and creating data, asking questions, and framing the debate. While Wynne’s argument centers on social identity and power-laden difference as key to determinations of fact or fiction—a focus which does not align as neatly in the Mirador case—his emphasis on conspiracy stories as interpretive, not just political, tools, is an important addition to Lahsen’s analysis.

In my analysis of the basin controversy, I aim to bring these two aspects of conspiracy theories together, showing how conspiracy stories circulating around Mirador establish strong political-scientific networks that divide neatly into two sides, while simultaneously structuring the lenses through which data and scientific arguments are read. In Latour’s (1987) classic framing of actor–network theory, both human and non-human allies are enrolled in ever-evolving networks, which when large enough stabilize and take on the appearance of fact, nature, or truth. At Mirador, the telling of paranoid rumors and conspiracy theories—the political style—is a key tactic in recruiting human and institutional allies; but in addition, the pre-figured clarity of truth and deliberate falsehood indicated by these stories shapes the reading of non-humans such as maps, satellite images, or biodiversity surveys, determining their enrollment or exclusion from pro- or anti-basin networks as well.

**But Is It a Basin? The Makings of a Strange Controversy**

The MBR is the largest protected area in Central America, stretching over 8,300 square miles of thick, tangled tropical lowland forests, boggy wetlands, and—increasingly—cleared agricultural or ranching landscapes. Home to the spectacular ruins of several ancient Maya cities including Mirador, the reserve is also a
major tourist destination for both Guatemalan and international visitors. Instituted in 1990, the reserve is a patchwork of National Parks and a large Multiple Use Zone divided into concessions, intended to balance biodiversity conservation with local livelihoods. Unfortunately, chronic mistrust, institutional instability, violence, and inequality have thrown up barriers to this lofty goal. While some regions of the reserve have been successfully protected, many core areas are now overrun by agricultural migrants and cattle ranchers, fueled by rapid population growth and deep poverty (Schwartz, 1990; Meyerson, 1998; Primack et al., 1998; Sundberg, 1998; Nations, 2006). On top of these challenges, memories of Guatemala’s brutal 36-year long civil war, ingressions of the current drug war, and severe economic and ethnic inequalities further shape the troubled context of conservation in the Petén, contributing to daily lived fear and suspicion.

Mirador lies deep in the jungled heart of the reserve, protected by a National Park. There is good reason for people to fight over Mirador—it is, without question, an exceptional place. The site is accessible only by a five-day guided hike, or, for those with the means, by helicopter. Making the trek to see it for myself was one of the last things I did after 14 months of research in Guatemala, a capstone to a year of hearing public arguments, secret stories, scientific explanations and political pleas circling around the ancient city. I finally saw for myself the impressiveness of this last stretch of Guatemala’s jungle not permanently inhabited or harvested by humans, the astounding ubiquity of ancient Maya traces dating back further than 1000 BCE, and the enormous temples and pyramids jutting up above the flat forested landscape. But even from atop La Danta, the Western Hemisphere’s largest temple towering above the canopy at over 230 feet tall, I still could not see for myself the ‘obvious’ geological shape of the landscape that I had been promised would be clearly visible by people on both sides of the controversy—I could not see either the presence or absence of a ‘basin’.

A geological basin seems a strange thing to fight about. One side of this controversy, led by American archaeologist Richard Hansen and his NGO FARES (Foundation for Anthropological Research and Environmental Studies), claims that the area around Mirador is a geological basin, and they use satellite data to prove it. An image published in National Geographic in 1992 circulates as a key figure on this side of the argument, showing the different infrared signatures of vegetation types based on photosynthetic activity (Figure 2). Basin-ists claim that red areas show relatively ‘high & dry’ forest, while blue–black areas show low, swampy bajo forests. A neatly delineated dark blue area, they argue, shows that water is clearly pooling in this region, indicating a basin. This evidence is met with flat out denial by anti-basin-ists, who include the majority of conservation and development NGOs and community organizations working in the MBR. Those on this side of the argument claim that vegetation is not true topographical data, and that the National Geographic image shows forest types, not elevation. Instead, they provide elevation maps based on data from NASA’s Shuttle Radar Topography Mission program, which show steep rises on the southern and eastern edges of
the same region, but then a gentle slope off toward the western wetlands of the reserve, without a secondary ridge to form a basin (Figure 3).

The Stakes of a Simple Scientific Divide

Why does the precise shape of what is overall a very flat landscape matter so much to so many people? The basin boundary does not line up with the borders of the parks and concessions of the MBR that were designated in 1990—and basinists want to redraw the map. This revision of territorial limits is based on the argument that the basin forms an important geophysical barrier, one that shaped a regionally unique biodiversity and the cultural formations of pre-Classical Maya civilization. Efforts have therefore been made to either change current boundaries inside the reserve, or to lay down a new, additional protected area on top of them. While it seems odd to layer protected areas over each other, one law was passed in 2002 to do just this (later struck down as unconstitutional by the Supreme Court), and another was proposed to the Guatemalan Congress in 2010 (Escalón, 2012).
Redrawing the lines would take away land use and forestry rights from several concessions in the reserve’s Multiple Use Zone, notably two community concessions that have deep histories living and working in the forest. Of these, Carmelita is not only the concession that will lose the most territory if the basin lines are drawn, but is also the village closest to Mirador, serving as the launch point for most tourist ventures into the ruins. As such, this end-of-the-road forest community with less than 500 residents has found itself at the heart of the controversy, caught up in shifting scales of conspiracy theory in which it is alternately a pawn and a key actor.

Hansen and his allies—who include notable people such as Mel Gibson and former Guatemalan President Oscar Berger—have no problem with the redistribution of land rights and access inherent in their model. This side favors a more strict, park-like protection that severely restricts human use of the forest, and argues that the tourism brought in by properly developed archaeological sites would provide an economic alternative for local communities. Opposed to this vision, a wide variety of NGO and community actors line up against the basin, supporting the current mixed-use model of the MBR and arguing that local economic benefit through sustainable forestry is the best way to protect the forest in the long term. Both sides produce satellite imagery and GIS maps to demonstrate not only the presence or absence of the basin, but also the success or failure of community-based conservation in protecting the forest—a question now inextricably

Figure 3. (Color online) Elevation of the Petén, based on NASA Shuttle Radar Topography Mission data. Source: Modified from NASA SRTM.
(if illogically) linked to the question of topography. The fact that these contradictory visions of the landscape and conservation philosophy can both be demonstrated with empirical data works against the expectation that technoscientific objectivity can cut through the epistemic murk of post-war politics. These contradictions, then, are read as a clear indicator of political contamination of science, leading to accusations of purposeful mishandling.

On the Hunt for Hidden Truths

The tenor of this scientific and political controversy has grown so intense that the mere mention of Mirador sends people into a frenzy of activity, trying to figure out what hidden connections or interests each new actor brings to the arena, and how to counter the ‘threat’ from the other side without knowing what that threat might consist of, nor whether the ‘other side’ is even involved. In this controversy, a single word or name can set off cycles of rumor, gossip, and conspiracy stories that circulate through casual conversations in the hallways of NGO offices, in the cabs of pickup trucks, in Skype chats between GIS technicians, and between tourists and guides at the tops of temples in the ancient city itself.

Among his opponents, the purported goals of Hansen’s secret plans are never quite settled. Rumors I heard ran the gamut from mundane profit-motives, to desire for social and territorial control over the area, to dark spiritual motivations. Many think his push for a basin has to do with the money he could make by developing the site for luxury tourism, while others suggest that this imagined payoff is just a way of enrolling other powerful interests to support his deeper goals—most often linked to religious motivation based on his Mormon faith. Although both he and the candidate deny it, it is widely believed among his opponents that Hansen has personal ties to the 2011 presidential candidate and runner-up, Manuel Baldizón, around whom even darker stories of conspiracy swirl (Plaza Publica, 2011). Through Baldizón, Hansen is linked to rumors of organized crime, drug trafficking, deep corruption, and ruthless power accumulation.

On the other side, pro-basin-ists accuse NGOs and their allies of promoting a fundamentally flawed model of conservation—community forest concessions in particular—for their own financial and political interests. Again, territorial domination is a common theme: ‘there is a small group of power here . . . that wants absolute control over the [reserve]’, one basin supporter, Julio, told me. He continued by telling me that someone from an anti-basin NGO had told him that he continued to work in the Petén because this group ‘allowed it’, insinuating total control over the region. Accusations against these NGOs include corruption (paying off state actors) and unlawful accumulation of profit and power. Another of Hansen’s supporters counseled me conspiratorially to keep a careful eye on these NGOs, with whom I primarily conducted my research: ‘Just look at what they do, ignore what they say, and you’ll see the truth.’
This search for hidden truth is at the heart of conspiracy theories. In the Mirador debate, not only does fear and rumor dominate, neither side takes the other’s scientific or political position as honest ‘truth’. Discussing Manuel Baldizón’s campaign proposal for development of the Mirador, one NGO worker asked: ‘What do they get out of supporting this law? Well, part of it is the community development, development of Petén and tourism, conservation stuff, so they look good and get their name in there . . . But what are the hidden motivations?’ Readily apparent explanations of conservation, development, or political motivations are simply not good enough when Mirador is at stake. Instead, differences in scientific data and conservation philosophy are interpreted as hiding the true nature of the other side’s nefarious interests.

Why Lie? Social, Historical, and Political Conditions of Paranoia

Swirling around the Mirador controversy are twisted tales of corruption and secret plans. In these stories, discursive links are easily forged between deep history and present politics, between local decisions and global influences, or between events inside a small forest community and a presidential election campaign. Of course, there are actual conspiracies as well—politics in Guatemala do happen behind closed doors, in unofficial, informal, and often illegal channels, and through cliques of allied actors working to further their own interests. A deeper understanding of the broad historical, social, and political landscape is therefore necessary to understand how and why conspiracy theories are a primary way of doing politics in the Petén, as well as how these theories shape local interpretation of science.

From Forest to Frontier and Back Again: Petén in the National Imagination

The place of the Petén in the Guatemalan imagination has shifted wildly over the past fifty years, from a backwards and uninhabitable jungle, to a colonization frontier promising a bit of earth for masses of landless Guatemalans, to the site of an environmental crisis that necessitated the intervention of multiple international agencies (Schwartz, 1990; Meyerson, 1998; Primack et al., 1998; Nations, 2006). The current estimated population of the MBR is 118,000 (WCS, 2011), counting both legal settlements—like Carmelita, with its forest concession and longstanding history in the Petén—and illegal migrant settlements neither legally allowed to remain nor (thus far) forcibly evicted. This reserve population is nearly four times the size of the entire population of the Petén only four decades ago, pointing to the extreme rapidity of change in the region.

This tremendous population growth was caused by a confluence of factors that continue to shape encounters on the landscape today. The Petén represents about a third of Guatemala’s land, yet was home to fewer than 30,000 people until 1970 (Schwartz, 1990). In the late 1960s, in order to relieve political pressure caused by
the country’s vast land inequality (without addressing the structural roots of that inequality), the government began a program of colonization into the Petén, encouraging poor, landless peasants to clear the forests. This pull of available land soon merged with the push of civil war violence. In the 1970s and early 1980s, the Petén’s vast jungles also provided a path of flight for hundreds of thousands of displaced people—including many indigenous Maya—whose villages were violently razed in the state’s scorched earth campaigns. Migration and colonization have waxed and waned over the years, but as a result of this growth more than half of the Petén’s lowland forests were lost by 1990, leading to the establishment of the MBR.

There are now a boggling number of state agencies and NGOs working in the reserve, with competing projects, alliances, and governing bodies layered on top of one another. Officially in charge is the state’s National Protected Area Council, CONAP (Consejo Nacional de Areas Protegidas), though they share legal co-administration of several pieces of the reserve with NGOs, the Universidad de San Carlos de Guatemala, and the state archaeological institute, IDAEH (Instituto de Antropología e Historia), which has supported Hansen’s work at Mirador for many years. Key NGOs in the region working against the Mirador basin include the US-based Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS), the Guatemalan Asociación Balam, and ACOFOP (Asociación de Comunidades Forestales de Petén), a collective NGO built out of membership from 22 community forest management organizations, including Carmelita’s cooperative.

Choosing Sides: Violence, Duplicity, and the 2011 Elections

While the civil war officially ended with the 1996 peace accords, the drug war has now moved in, with major international cartels staking out territory across Guatemala, including wide swaths of the MBR. In May 2011, Guatemala witnessed its most extreme violence since the state-sponsored genocide of the early 1980s, when 27 farm workers were brutally murdered and beheaded by the Mexican drug gang the Zetas, just outside the boundaries of the reserve (BBC News, 2011; Prensa Libre, 2011). At the same time, national news reports were following the trial of four former Kaibiles, members of the Guatemalan special forces, for their participation in the 1982 scorched earth massacre of over 200 people in the village of Dos Erres—located very nearby to the site of the Zetas slaughter. The mirroring of mass murder tactics in these two cases, separated by thirty years, is no coincidence: ex-Kaibiles are heavily recruited by the Zetas, who originated from a similar elite forces branch of the Mexican military. This haunting echo of state brutality undermined trust in the government’s response to the drug violence—a military-dominated ‘state of siege’ across the Petén—even as people professed desires for a strong, tough-on-crime strategy.

Indeed, this strategy was the key platform position of the winner of the 2011 presidential election, former general Otto Perez Molina, who edged out Petenero
[local to the Petén] Manuel Baldizón with his *Mano Dura* (iron fist) platform. But the haunting of state violence, legitimacy, and responsibility follow even here into the presidential office, as Perez denies that genocide took place even as the International Commission Against Impunity in Guatemala (CICIG) continues to prosecute generals who served alongside him for war crimes. The 2011 election campaign was a high point for paranoia and conspiratorial thinking, with the choice between the two leading candidates interpreted widely as a choice between bad and worse—Perez, tied to the brutality and duplicity of the civil war, or Baldizón, a charismatic business mogul whose quick rise to fortune and power lay at the heart of dark rumors in Petén.

Called ‘the Berlusconi of Petén’ (Sas, 2011), Baldizón has been accused of abuse of power through his vast media empire during the election, financial corruption, and links to both old crime families and newer Mexican narco gangs that influence much of the politics, land, and social world of the Petén (InSight Crime, 2011). As one Petenero NGO worker told me, ‘it pains me to vote for a military man, for somebody who committed genocide. But Baldizón . . . I despise him with all my soul’. I heard many stories about Baldizón’s secret plans to change presidential term limits; people familiar with his meteoric rise to power in Petén were sure that he had dreams of dictatorship. The inclusion of a development proposal for the Mirador ‘basin’ in his Lider party’s populist right wing platform heightened these fears of conspiracy, manipulation, and deception among anti-basinists. Among Peteneros working in conservation and development around the MBR, a genocide-denying general was thus considered preferable to Baldizón’s darkly rumored plans—a choice between a duplicity of the past over one that lay in the future (Nelson, 2009).³

*From the Village to UNESCO, Mirador Matters*

The division between those for and against the basin reverberates up and down social and political scales, from Congress to small communities. In addition to laws proposed to Guatemalan Congress, attempts have been made to declare Mirador a UNESCO World Heritage site, although clear delineation of the site’s boundaries has stood as a major barrier to this goal. Pacunam (2012), an organization composed of elite representatives from Guatemala’s wealthiest corporations to ‘promote sustainable development through the preservation of Guatemala’s natural and cultural heritage’, long threw its heavyweight support behind the basin model, but in 2011 started to shift its alliances toward the NGO coalition who work against the basin, in particular to support the highly controversial capture of Mirador tourism by Carmelita’s forest concession.⁴

In 2010, this informal coalition—including ACOFOP, WCS, Asociación Balam, and others—helped Carmelita negotiate a legal agreement with CONAP, giving the village a semi-monopoly over hike-in tourism to Mirador. The 2010 Public Use Plan for Mirador-Rio Azul National Park (within which
Mirador’s ruins lie) established that while any agency can arrange tours to Mirador, they must hire members of Carmelita’s tourism board—managed and licensed by the concession’s management cooperative—to serve as guides, mule-drivers, and cooks. This arrangement has been incredibly contentious. Many conservationists and community development workers celebrate this capture of the market as a small victory over Carmelita’s geographic and economic marginality, while tourism operators and developers decry the loss of ‘free market competition’.

As the closest village to the ancient city, the now legally determined center for tourism to the site, and the forest concession with the most to lose from proposed basin-shaped rezoning, Carmelita, though comprised of fewer than 500 people, has become a major player in debates about the future of Mirador. But even inside the village, where it would seem that people should easily align with the anti-basin camp that maintains the current concession extension, use rights, and this small pocket of pro-community tourist regulation, there is a small—but extremely vocal—dissenting group. The division between competing visions for the landscape has become entangled with old family conflicts, with a small group of Carmelita residents opposing the community benefit-sharing model of the cooperative, especially now that their ability to run independent tourism ventures to Mirador in competition with the cooperative’s tourism council has been declared illegal. These families, as opponents rather than members of the cooperative, are more likely to work with and support the anti-concession basin, providing both sides of the controversy the ability to claim the support of local people.

**Doing Paranoid Politics**

It is in this historical, territorial, and political context that paranoia becomes, as Marcus (1999b) writes, entirely reasonable. It is fed by horrific news reports, and by the daily eruptions of violence that never appear in those reports—domestic violence, muggings, public beatings, and other incidents heavily underreported due to widespread distrust in the police and justice system—not to mention the more subtle, systematic violence of extreme poverty and inequality. It is also fed by the regularity of death threats made against those working in state or NGO conservation institutions, in which those speaking politically dangerous opinions, or just accidentally patrolling the wrong park area at the wrong time, might have to sweep their families into hiding at a moment’s notice. These are key conditions that shape ubiquitous paranoia and suspicion in the Petén, but analysis of the political and epistemological effects of this paranoia cannot be limited to the simple explanation that paranoia is reasonable because sometimes stories turn out to be true. Moving beyond this simple justification, I turn first to an analysis of how the circulation of conspiracy stories and rumors create and solidify social, political, and scientific alliances, and in the next section to the effects of these stories on epistemology and the reading of evidence.
Conspiracy theories always include the belief that people are being fooled into participation in something that is against their own interests (Cubitt, 1989), a logic deeply mirrored by the prevalence of engaño (deception, duplicity) narratives in post-war Guatemala (Nelson, 2009). Both sides of the Mirador controversy explain the enrollment of local and international allies to the other side through this kind of logic, while this explanation simultaneously enacts alliances on their own side: the sharing of a conspiracy story creates a bond between teller and listener, marking both as on the right side of a moral and political divide and indexing unimpeded access to truth (Cubitt, 1989). This comingling of political morality and ‘truth’ is a powerful mixture in the Mirador controversy, where scientific and political arguments have become inextricable. As a result, paranoid rumors here are not ‘one tactic among many’ (Lahsen, 1999, p. 133), but a dominant form of political action.

Conspiratorial Politics from National to Local

The 2011 election year brought a flurry of activity and insecurity to the Petén, and as stories about Baldizón and his dirty dealings ran wild, their occasional intersections with Mirador rumors provided rich fodder for conspiracy theories. Baldizón’s right wing platform included a plan for tourist development of the Mirador area that included the word ‘basin’, and which stood in opposition to the current Carmelita-favoring Public Use Plan and protected area administration. While Richard Hansen publicly denied any connection to Baldizón and his Lider party, rumors of their alliance (ranging from financial contributions to secret phone conversations) were only fanned by these denials, with both men seen by their opponents as manipulative, dangerous, and powerfully well-connected would-be destroyers of the MBR. Baldizón’s proposal was eventually defeated in congress, but even with this victory, members of the anti-basin coalition worried about retribution from the politician. It would not come immediately, they decided, but Baldizón is a ‘smart, patient man’, one who remembers who has crossed him and bides his time before taking retribution.

These rumors were passed back and forth between two staff members of anti-basin NGOs in a car ride shared with a tourism development consultant and myself as we headed out to a community event inside the reserve. The consultant, who had worked extensively with Pacunam and Hansen’s NGO FARES, was skeptical of the connections being posited between Baldizón and Hansen. The staff members piled on more evidence in response, such as a detailed analysis of language in the candidate’s proposal that appeared to be translated word-by-word from English descriptions of the ruins. This conflation of poor translation with hidden conspiracy reveals the logic of these rumors: ‘what distinguishes the paranoid style is not, then, the absence of verifiable facts . . . but rather the curious leap in imagination that is always made at some critical point in the recital of events’ (Hofstadter, 2008, p. 37). Beyond the rumors’ logics, the
sharing of these stories in the private, convivial space of a shared pickup cab was clearly intended to enroll a new ally in anti-basin politics.

Within Carmelita, a similar atmosphere of suspicion and rumor animates village-level politics. Fights between the concession’s management cooperative and the COCODE (Consejo Comunitario de Desarrollo, or community development council; a village-level structure introduced through the peace accords to increase community political participation) were shrouded in conspiratorial rumors, with regulation of tourism and access to Mirador among the hottest issues. In the run up to a COCODE election in late 2011, the cooperative’s board of directors and an anti-basin NGO representative strategized in a closed-door meeting about how many days in advance to announce the election assembly, in order to prevent ‘the other side’ from having too much time for counter-campaigning, organizing, and ‘manipulating’ other community members.

This planning meeting was not perceived by those taking part as manipulation or conspiracy, despite being purposefully designed to swing the election toward their own interests. The political alignment of the opposing faction with Hansen and against the cooperative, as well as against broader community-based conservation discourses and NGO interventions, marked the opposition’s actions as based on lies and manipulation for personal gain. In contrast, the meeting was seen as strategizing not for the individual interests in the room, but in defense of the broader community and forest. This kind of preemptive activity simultaneously drives and is driven by the paranoid gossip that builds into full-fledged conspiracy theories, as this meeting designed to cut off the opposition’s secret plans will only inspire more rumors from the other side, deepening divisions between them.

How I Came to Conspire Against the Basin

I too am entangled in the dynamics of paranoia and rumor at Mirador, conditions for my own knowledge production. Each side of this controversy allowed me access to their knowledge and stories out of the desire to have me see the clear ‘truth’ of their side, while also limiting my access out of fear that I might be hiding a secret alliance to the enemy. I was told at one point that there had been careful discussion about whether or not I should be allowed into a particular meeting, a discussion that ended with the conclusion that I was ‘probably not evil’. But rather than uncover a clear and final truth (though I am more convinced by non-basin data), I too was enrolled into an anti-basin position. While partially due to my preference for community-based conservation—which while far from perfect, I find more realistic and equitable than strict park-like protectionism—by the time I encountered the basin-ist position and evidence directly I had already been turned against them by months of social ties with anti-basin NGOs solidified by stories, gossip, and rumor—stories which I myself later turned to political effect.
Less than a month after returning from Guatemala to academic life as a PhD student at the University of California, Santa Cruz (UCSC), I received an email from an anti-basin conservationist: ‘Hi Micha, Can you please read this email and give us your take on this?’ What followed was a forwarded string of messages from a ‘governance consultant’ who was asking about Mirador, and would be meeting with the UCSC Environmental Studies Department to discuss research funding on behalf of some unnamed ‘friends’. My NGO contacts were afraid that Hansen’s ‘hidden hand’ was ‘yet again attempting to plant a seed with a reputable institution to raise their personal profile and line wealthy institutions up behind their cause’ (personal communication, April 11, 2012), and asked me to investigate. I managed to get myself invited two days later into a meeting between an academic department I did not belong to and the consultant, who turned out to be the representative of a sheik from the United Arab Emirates.

The sheik and his daughter had been given a helicopter tour of Mirador by Hansen and had fallen in love with the area, but this consultant had gotten a ‘bad smell’ off of Hansen’s request for millions of the sheik’s dollars. Instead, he had turned to UCSC looking for alternative ways to invest in the region. In the meeting, after tentatively feeling out the consultant’s connections, I suggested that he direct research funding through both UCSC and the NGOs and community coalitions that line up against the basin. I was pleased to be able to support the organizations that had supported my research (at least potentially—the funding has not materialized), but also felt uneasy at how I had been drawn into the same preemptive, backroom strategizing that I was writing about. Without the fear of Richard Hansen’s secret dealings, and my own circulation of gossip in the meeting, this potential alliance between a sheik, an American university, and the anti-basin camp of conservationists would never have been possible. Paranoid politics are thus highly generative—both of political connections and alliances, and of new knowledge: any knowledge about Mirador produced by this funding will be inherently inflected by the paranoia that shaped the possibility of that research.

Paranoid Evidence

The previous section revealed how rumors and conspiracy stories are powerful tools for creating and solidifying political alliances. Through the lens of actor–network theory, these two scientific camps are enrolling human and institutional actors to their competing networks through paranoia and rumor-sharing, though neither has yet grown large enough to overshadow the other and stabilize into ‘fact’. But what of the non-humans enrolled in the scientific arguments—the GIS maps, satellite images, and biological surveys? When two scientific positions come into conflict, the contradictions between them amplify the mundane paranoia that dominates political life in the Petén, each side convinced that the other is intentionally manipulating or distorting the data. In fact, the more
convincing the other side’s evidence, the more convinced people become of hidden wrongdoings.

*Basin, Plateau, Landscape*

Richard Hansen and other supporters of the basin make strong claims to scientific support and evidence, including from scientists working in the U.S. Geological Survey, the University of Arizona, and Stanford University. But the infrared satellite image that serves as a central pillar in the basin-ist scientific camp (Figure 2) is summarily dismissed by opponents: ‘a ring of healthy photosynthetically active vegetation appearing seasonally around the Mirador region does not sufficiently determine the nature of the topography involved in producing such a pattern’ (personal communication, August 4, 2011). In response, one basin-ist complained about ignorance of bajos, the forests that grow in swampy depressions and that appear blue–black in infrared images:

> They always say, ‘it’s not a basin! It’s not a basin!’ ... You know infrared photographs ... it’s bajo vegetation. Now, water doesn’t stand on a hill, it doesn’t stand on a plateau, which is what [they’re] trying to call it ... Let the vegetation tell you what’s going on.

Nonetheless, when faced with data based on vegetation vs. radar topographical satellites (Figure 3), anti-basin-ists stick resolutely to the latter.

Of course, basin-ists claim not only that this basin exists, but also that it delineates an important natural and cultural barrier—one significant enough to justify the redrawing of political boundaries. Specifically, they argue that many species are endemic to the basin, and that the most important sites of pre-classic Maya civilization are within its geological boundaries. One Guatemalan who had worked with FARES showed me on a map why current lines ought to be redrawn:

> Scientifically, technically, biologically, there is no reason to have made a park like this. However, here there is a mountain range ... which is what Richard Hansen calls ‘the basin’. Actually, the majority of Maya construction is inside this. On this side [pointing west of the region] there are some [sites], but not like here. Those same Maya used logic: they saw that there was a natural protection here, the mountains, the water runs generally in this direction [indicating the basin’s center] ... It makes a lot of sense. Biologically, scientifically, the park should have been here.

On the other hand, the anti-basin-ists not only claim that there is no special geological feature here, but that the natural and cultural landscapes of interest are much larger and more complex. As one CONAP employee wrote:

> The insistence on differentiating this from the rest as extraordinary has no foundation ... There are two archaeological sites there, more or less out of
the ordinary only because of the size of the structures, but there is much more sophisticated and advanced Maya art in other sites, so in reality it’s just one of the many important things in the MBR.

Competing Conservation Philosophies

The two sides of this debate hold very different interests and beliefs in terms of the conservation, with community-led sustainable forestry facing off against tourist-oriented parks. The gathering of technoscientific evidence to bolster each side’s position extends into this realm, with each side presenting data demonstrating the success or failure of the current management regime of the reserve. The basin side explicitly argues that there is no such thing as ‘sustainable’ timber harvesting, and that community management in particular constitutes a threat to the future of the landscape. To this effect, they present a map of the area showing the accumulation of eight years of MODIS (Moderate Resolution Imaging Spectroradiometer) satellite ‘hot-spot’ data to indicate the presence of fires in the MBR, creating a clear and terrifying image of an anthropogenic fire sweeping in from the unruly west (Figure 4). Against this image, anti-basinists argue that the overlaying of many years of fire data creates an exaggerated sense of threat, erases the reduction of fires in recent years, and conflates the activity of illegal land invaders in the Western national parks with the permitted, controlled agricultural fires of community concessions.

The anti-basin-ists, too, provide GIS maps and satellite data to back up their claims of the concessions as good conservation model, showing how most deforestation in the reserve has occurred in exclusive National Parks, with the concessions providing much stronger protection for forest cover and offering a buffer against further human migration toward the Mirador area (Figure 5). Speaking back to this model, basin-ists point out that tree cover is not a good indicator of ecosystem health, and that the real impacts of concessions are invisible from the sky. In particular, they point to habitat fragmentation caused by logging roads, ecological depredation due to hunting and harvesting of non-timber forest products, and the prevalence of trash being left on paths and in campsites by unconcerned locals.

Reading Across the Lines

What might be as simple as competing methodologies or types of evidence does not play out in these terms. Instead, the differences in scientific argument are attributed, on both sides, to deliberate deceit or manipulation: as a basin-ist told me, ‘most Peteneros will ignore or chose to ignore geographical truths in favor of political or economic expediency’ (personal communication, October 4, 2011, emphasis added). On the other side, an anti-basin NGO worker simply stated, ‘Richard still goes on about his false “basin”, no matter what the science
shows.’ These lines between truth and falsehood are declared as obvious and easy, the value of evidence being read through political and social alignment, in a clear parallel to the conflict over global climate change as described by (Lahsen, 1999).

Pushing this analysis further than a politically structured system of belief, it is not simply the denial of evidence that matters here, but the imaginative imputation of nefarious goals that lie behind deliberate falsehoods, rumors which undermine the possibility of taking any future evidence at face value. At one point, an NGO staff member showed me a PowerPoint presentation he had assembled that systematically ran through copied images of the FARES website, highlighting and contesting individual terms, numbers, and claims running across all three aspects of the controversy (the existence of a basin, its significance, and the degree of conservation threat posed by current management). More than a straightforward refutation of scientific claims, this PowerPoint was presented to me as evidence of calculated deceit on the part of the opposing NGO, with each additional disputed claim adding to the weight of the deception—and therefore to the seriousness of what it might be hiding. Through the twists of paranoid logic, people interpret evidence for a basin as key evidence against a basin (and vice versa), as one’s own evidence becomes increasingly solidified in the face of dangerous opposition.

Figure 4. (Color online) A map showing NASA MODIS satellite-detected ‘hot spots’ (fires) from 2001 to 2008. While fires within national parks are illegal, controlled agricultural fires within the MBR’s multiple use zone are permitted with certain restrictions. All fires in all zones from eight years of variable burning are presented here as part of a unified threat. Source: Global Heritage Fund (2009). Reprinted with permission.
This reading of contradictory data as a sign of powerful conspiracy demonstrates an epistemology that reveals more about the workings of power in Guatemala than it does about the shape of the landscape (Stewart, 1999; Nelson, 2009). Importantly, one’s own data and evidence is never held to the same scrutinizing standard as the opposition’s, as there are no hidden deceptions to ‘reveal’, and logical leaps in one’s own reasoning are accepted as unproblematic. For example, one basin-ist cited the discovery of 14 new species of moth in a three-year period as evidence for the biological uniqueness of the basin. While this claim certainly supports high biodiversity in the area, it does not demonstrate that these moths are not found outside the basin, where no similar surveys have been conducted. Similarly, Hansen’s Mormon faith was considered a potentially dangerous and important factor in his marshaling of data, while Mormon Guatemalans working in anti-basin institutions were left free of suspicion. Paranoid epistemologies are not only very clear about the lines between truth and falsehood, they also impute ‘politics’, dirty dealings, and logical fallacy exclusively to the ‘other’.

Conclusion

In the MBR, conspiracy theories and suspicion are entirely reasonable, and are not just contextual to, but also deeply entangled with practices of scientific
interpretation and knowledge making. There is an insistence on both sides of the Mirador debate on a single and knowable truth, something solid and discoverable that is being purposefully manipulated and obscured by the interests of the opposite side. In this controversy, scientific practices designed to present objective images about an external reality cannot be separated from the fearful context in which that science takes place. Dark rumors of dirty secrets like territorial control or plots for Mormon domination create the networks that bolster scientific facts, and are embedded within the frameworks through which people read data proving or disproving a basin at Mirador. Conspiracy theory here is not anti-science, but rather it is inside scientific understanding itself.

Science—with its promises of access to a clear and knowable reality—works hand in hand with conspiracy theories as a way to get a handle on the sheer out-of-controlness of life on an ecologically, historically, and socially complex landscape. Conspiracy stories have previously been considered as either a way to strengthen political-scientific alliances (Lahsen, 1999), or as an epistemic framework through which evidence is filtered (Wynne, 1992). My analysis of the controversy over Mirador brings these two aspects together to show how both the content and context of circulating rumors act in the creation of complex actor-networks. Conspiracy stories draw together unexpected scales and stories, shape political strategy, and also shape the production and interpretation of evidence, drawing clear lines between fact and falsehood. Conservationists, scientists, villagers, and politicians come together with non-human actors such as maps, satellite data, and biodiversity surveys in a world where daily violence and paranoid fantasy bleed into each other, and in which the circulation of conspiratorial stories is political business as usual. Out of the unpredictable shifts of multiple political, scientific, and ecological worlds, paranoid politics and epistemology emerge as a coherent and highly effective way of understanding and acting in the world.

Finally, it is essential to reemphasize that this dynamic of paranoia and scientific controversy is not an exceptional connection found only in this remote corner of Guatemala. All science is political, and conspiracy stories and paranoid gossip are common ways of doing politics around the world—Mexico (de Vries, 2007), Italy (Wagner-Pacifici, 1999), Venezuela (Briggs, 2004), and the ‘global’ sphere of climate change (Lahsen, 1999) provide easy points of comparison. These responses to complex material and political realities are exacerbated by violent, unequal, and non-transparent contexts, and are common in everyday, mundane conversations and understandings of how the world works. Conspiracy theories are powerful tools for making sense of contradictory information, and for providing clear explanations in situations that are anything but; science, too, provides this kind of satisfying clarity and finality of explanation. Rather than contrasting irrational political rumor with logical scientific fact, or considering the former as simply context for the latter, the case of Mirador demonstrates how the two are deeply entangled and are, in practice, inseparable.
Funding

This work was supported by the NSF Division of Social and Economic Sciences [grant number 1027014] and the Wenner Gren Foundation [grant number 8428].

Notes

1 While most names have been omitted or replaced with pseudonyms in this article, well-known figures such as Hansen have been identified by name when referring to their public actions or personae. I interviewed and corresponded with Hansen as well, and comments from these more confidential contexts have been anonymized.

2 There is a long and controversial history of Mormon archaeology in Mesoamerica, although Hansen has never connected his own research to this explicitly religious legacy. For more information, see Sides (1999).

3 Baldizón carried the election in Petén by a wide margin, but I did not encounter a single Petenero working in CONAP, conservation NGOs, or other agencies in the MBR who claimed to vote for him. Instead, these people explained his local victory as a product of either duping the local population with his charismatic promises and exorbitant media campaign, or as a result of vote buying, such as by providing new tin roofs to rural villages in exchange for political support.

4 While this shifting alliance is a fascinating story in itself, it was unclear whether Pacunam’s support would be permanently withdrawn from Hansen’s work and the basin model, or why this shift was taking place. One FARES worker suggested they might be ‘suspicious’ or ‘envious’ because the elites were not given the proper adoration or god-like treatment. Anti-basinists were happy to attribute the change to the elites beginning to ‘see through Hansen’s lies’. I was not able to secure an interview with a Pacunam representative who might directly answer these questions.

5 Actors from these institutions remained in the realm of ‘claims’; I never saw firsthand testimony or evidence from these connections.

References


Prensa Libre (2011) Petén vive horas de terror a causa de explosiones y la matanza, Prensa Libre, May 16.


