

Elizabeth Graham

✚ MAYA CHRISTIANS ✚
✚ AND THEIR CHURCHES ✚
IN SIXTEENTH-CENTURY BELIZE



UNIVERSITY PRESS OF FLORIDA

Gainesville · Tallahassee · Tampa · Boca Raton

Pensacola · Orlando · Miami · Jacksonville

Ft. Myers · Sarasota

✚ SEVEN ✚

How to Tell a Church

In this chapter I remain within the remit of setting the Mendicant stage. As part of a discussion of the material culture of the mission experience, however, I consider the idea of a church. Because the excavated churches at Tipu and Lamanai served as the linchpins of our archaeological activity, it was important that I familiarized myself with church architectural terminology, with Spanish practice, and with what others before me had written about early churches in Yucatan and Mexico. I expected this process to be straightforward and to involve little more than a learning curve. The outcome, however, entailed a reevaluation of the implications of architectural typology. This chapter lays out my critical reassessment of the context and use of terms used to describe early colonial mission architecture.¹

No term is more closely associated with the architecture of the mission experience in Mexico and Yucatan than the so-called open chapel, a term introduced by Toussaint for what was known in the sixteenth century as a *capilla de indios* (Indian chapel),² and no term has been more misused. Although *capilla de indios* makes sense from the perspective of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century liturgical practices, the term “open chapel” makes no sense at all.

The Existing Framework: Terms and Typologies

No doubt we all think we know what a church is. Nevertheless, sorting through evidence of Maya and Spanish religious interaction at the time of early contact reveals a somewhat confusing picture of what have come to be called churches (*iglesias*) and chapels (*capillas*). Confusion arises in the terminology of both colonial Spaniards and modern architectural historians and

archaeologists. The colonial Spaniards seem to be inconsistent when they call large edifices in towns *capillas* and small rural edifices *iglesias*.³ However, if one considers function rather than form to be of primary importance, then this apparent inconsistency actually makes more sense than an architectural typology based on form.

The confusing picture of churches and chapels has multiple causes: existing typologies emphasize form rather than function; aspects of the history of use and the attendant implications for terminology have been overlooked; differences in environmental conditions (e.g., between central Mexico and Belize, or between central Mexico and Yucatan) have been minimized; the rationale behind researchers' approaches⁴ is implicit rather than explicit; and analyses either have not detected or have chosen to gloss over Spanish colonial prejudices.

Why are church architectural typologies important? In large part because the focus of archaeologists on material remains includes the remains of churches. Andrews reflects this archaeological perspective in his description of the chapels and churches of early colonial Yucatan and Belize:

Designed and administered by Spanish friars, and built and used by the Maya, [chapels and churches] lie at the core of the initial process of acculturation that resulted in . . . Spanish domination. . . . These structures, often built with stone from Maya pyramids, became the new focus of the cultural and social life of native communities. . . . The chapels and churches were also the social hub of the communities, the locale for baptisms, weddings, fiestas, civic gatherings, and funerals. And, to complete the life cycle, the members of the community were often buried underneath these structures.⁵

It is therefore not unexpected that archaeologists would have interest in the details of church architecture and in church plans and their variations, because these details reflect aspects of community history or identity that are not always recorded in the documents.⁶ In places peripheral to the main economic thrust of Spanish colonialism, such as Yucatan and Belize, architectural detail may be all that is left to reflect the colonial experience. If I draw from typologies to describe the most important excavated building at Tipu as a ramada (thatched) church (fig. 7.1),⁷ or refer to the central room of the masonry-walled portion of one of the Lamanai churches as a presbytery (fig. 7.2),⁸ the terms help to provide the reader with an image of the building. They also have the potential to be adopted as standards in describing particular architectural elements.

On the other hand, the same typologies can be problematic when an



Figure 7.1. Tipu, reconstruction of church, looking east-northeast. (Drawing by Claude Belanger and Louise Belanger)



Figure 7.2. Lamanai, stone chapel of YDL II. Photo looks southeast.

attempt is made to compare structures on a broader geographic basis in order to gain insight into how the buildings were used, or to achieve insight into Maya and Spanish religious experiences. The problem is that sixteenth-century names or terms for buildings, spaces, or rooms derived from their function. They arose as a response to how people knew the buildings or spaces or rooms were used. They were not always formal categories, but they have come to be taken as such. The result is that the literature on churches and chapels in Mexico, Belize, and Yucatan takes terms for granted that warrant careful attention.

Problematic Definitions and Elusive Evidence

Andrews has taken steps to standardize the typology of known church structures for archaeology, and García and Gussinyer have added a historical developmental dimension.⁹ Earlier typologies upon which these later classifications have drawn are informative as regards gaining a perspective on the spectrum of early churches in Mexico and Yucatan.¹⁰ Difficulties and inconsistencies nonetheless persist, owing to the fact that some of the terms basic to typologies, such as the “open chapel” (*capilla abierta*), or even “chapel” vs. “church,” are not clearly defined and, as Andrews observes, remain problematic.¹¹ For example, the church at Xcaret in Quintano Roo, Mexico, is mistakenly described as a “chapel,” as are the churches at Lamanai and Tipu, and the mission churches in Yucatan in general.¹²

Other terms are applied selectively. For example, “ramada” is defined as “thatched,”¹³ and yet the term is applied to structures such as those at Talmalcab, Ecab (fig. 7.3), Xlakah, and the second church to be built at Lamanai (YDL II) (figs. 7.2, 8.4),¹⁴ all of which had massive altar ends built of stone and either flat beam and mortar or barrel vault roofs.¹⁵ Surely, if a category of “ramada” is to be used, it should refer to the early churches at Tipu and Lamanai, both of which were entirely thatch-roofed (figs. 7.1, 8.3, 8.24). Even the term “open-air,” or “open,” used so widely to describe early churches, is never explicitly defined by McAndrew,¹⁶ who was responsible for the foundational, if not the original, use of the term. One has to read his entire history of the early church in Mexico to be able to infer what he means, and even then one is left wondering whether what he describes as “open” was a church or a chapel by his own definition. What, exactly, is it that is open? Lara describes open chapels as “external chapels,”¹⁷ which introduces yet another question: external to what?

The “Open Chapel”

What McAndrew broadly refers to as an open-air church subsumes the area that would functionally be classified as the nave (fig. 7.4). When he uses the term “open chapel,”¹⁸ the picture is less clear. The chroniclers do not seem to have used the adjective “open” to apply to a chapel; the term “open” originated, as I noted above, with Toussaint.¹⁹ But the term *capilla* (chapel), which appears frequently in chroniclers’ accounts, seems at first to be no less straightforward, although I hope to show that, within the context of Christian liturgical practices, it makes eminent sense. The case would seem to be that *in certain historical circumstances*, when the sanctuary or presbytery and other

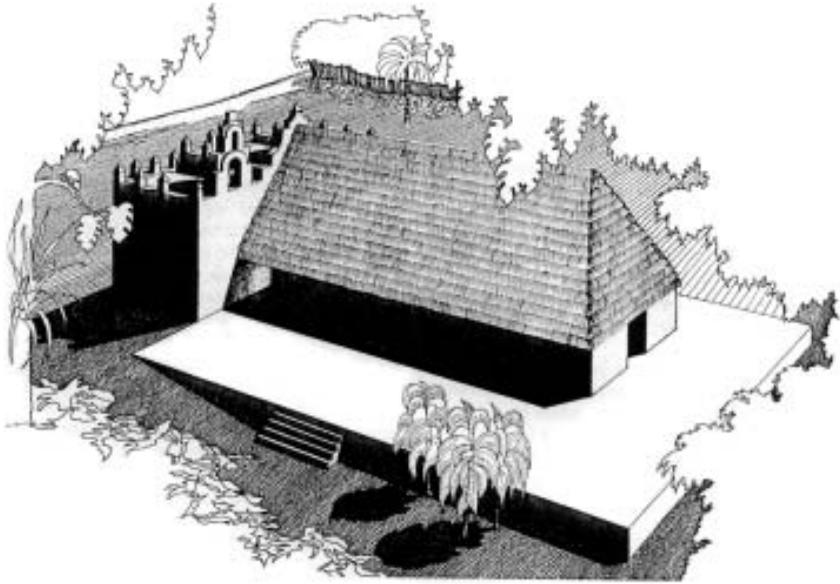


Figure 7.3. Ecab, perspective reconstruction of the church (Andrews 2006, 25, fig. 2.17).
(Reproduced courtesy of Anthony Andrews)

restricted-access space or spaces were enclosed fully or partly by masonry walls as an architectural entity distinct from the nave, the resulting structure was called a *capilla*, or chapel. In modern scholarship this has sometimes been referred to as a *presbiterio*, or presbytery,²⁰ although strictly speaking, the presbytery was (is) only the sanctuary area around the altar (I will elaborate on the historical circumstances below).²¹ Such a *capilla* was usually built in a patio or plaza (as in fig. 7.4) to accommodate large numbers of people. The *capilla* was *not* termed “open” by its users, although an example in Mexico has been described as being “outside,”²² which implies free-standing.

It is not unusual for such sacred spaces as a sanctuary (presbytery) and the area around it, which could even include a choir²³ and chancel, to *function* as a *capilla*, or chapel, but it is unusual for what is effectively the major functioning element for worship in a community to be called a chapel. The sixteenth-century Spaniards understood this, and when they used the term *capilla*, it referred only to the stone-built eastern end of churches in Yucatan and Belize, with their sanctuaries and adjacent rooms, whereas a number of modern scholars have used *capilla* to apply to the entire church. This rather unorthodox, and hence problematic, usage by scholars of the word “chapel” has been a source of confusion to those wishing to describe Maya religious structures in Yucatan and Belize, particularly with respect to the very ear-

liest constructions—sometimes called Paleochristian architecture²⁴—of the sixteenth century.

What is “Open?”

The adjective “open,” rather than clarifying a phenomenon, weaves a web of confusion. When it was first used by architectural historians,²⁵ it seems to have been meant to reflect a practice, early in the history of the Christianization of central Mexico, in which native peoples stood to hear Mass in the open air in what was called an *atrio* (fig. 7.4).²⁶ The atrio was functionally equivalent to, and in some cases probably was in actuality, the pre-Columbian plaza or patio; only the Christian sanctuary/presbytery, with its altar and related ritual space(s), were enclosed by masonry walls. Even if one felt comfortable with the use of “open” as an adjective to describe architecture related to the phenomenon I have just described, the term has stuck like a limpet to such a wide variety of phenomena that it has become meaningless.²⁷

“Open” is applied to the mosque-like “chapel” at San José de Naturales in Tenochtitlan, which in its finished, roofed form is estimated to have been 17,000 square feet and to have held 2,000–3,000 people.²⁸ McAndrew provides the following rationale for the “open,” but not the “chapel,” part:

Since over 2,000 could attend Mass inside, as in a normal church, it might be claimed that the finished seven-aisled version of San José ought not to be called an *open* chapel, even though it was open all across its 200-foot front. . . . To those inside the chapel—whether 2,000, 3,000 or 300—its function would have been no different from that of an ordinary roofed church but, since its long front was open, and since the chapel could serve other thousands out in the atrio and usually did, most of the time its function was concurrently that of an open chapel.”²⁹

In the first place, if one is going to apply the term “open” in this case at all, it is the church that is open, not the chapel. Second, as reconstructed, three sides of the chapel were full-height walled and the fourth side was columned. If the columns make the edifice “open” then many mosques should be called “open mosques” instead of just mosques. There is also the fact that many chapels are walled on three sides, with the fourth side unwalled; in most cases, these form part of a larger architectural entity such as a cathedral or church, and yet they are not called “open chapels,” but simply “chapels.”

The fact that there were times when individuals in the Indian community had to stand in the open air, because only the sanctuary of their church was walled, is interesting in more ways than simply as a basis for architectural

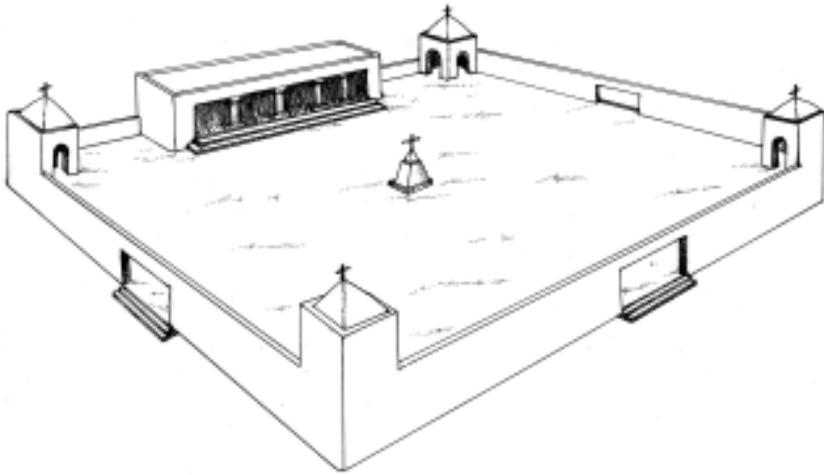


Figure 7.4. Schematic drawing of an open-air church showing stone-enclosed altar area (*capilla*, or chapel), the walls delimiting the *atrio*, and the corner *posas*. Based on information from McAndrew (1965, 279–339 on *posas*, and 374–86 on San José de Naturales) and Artigas (1983, 239, fig. 202). (Drawing by Louise Belanger)

terminology. When people stand in the open air to worship, is this phenomenon a function of colonial priorities, or does it represent practices and spatial organization that go back to pre-Columbian times, as suggested by both Lara and McAndrew?³⁰

The term “open” also inexplicably continues to be applied to churches in Yucatan with substantial naves that were roofed with thatch and had altar ends that were masonry-walled and roofed with timber and mortar or vaulted. The “open chapel” at Dzibilchaltun,³¹ classified as an “open ramada church,”³² is shown in the perspective drawing (fig. 7.5) as having post supports for the roof frame, but no walls.³³ This is based on the presence of rectangular holes high in the masonry walls enclosing the sanctuary, which probably served as sockets for beams that supported the rafters. Excavations, however, did not reveal postholes for vertical supports. The presumed absence of walls, masonry or otherwise, seems to be the source of the adjective “open.”³⁴ This presumption, in turn, may have been influenced by Father Ponce’s description of a church complex at Tizimin in which a “big chapel” stood at the head of a ramada (nave) that was open-sided and served the Indian community.³⁵

In a further complication, Andrews³⁶ cautions that the category of “open ramada church” does not preclude the possibility of a perishable wall around

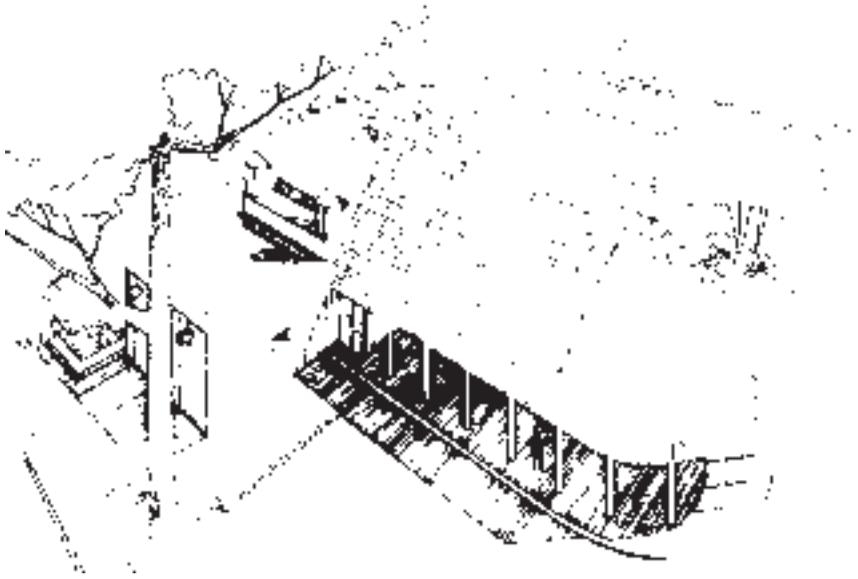


Figure 7.5. Dzibilchaltun, perspective reconstruction of the “open chapel.”
 (Drawing by Gordon and Ann Ketterer, from Folan 1970, 182, fig. 1).
 (Reproduced courtesy of William Folan)

the nave, although this would seem to remove the last vestige of openness. Even in the event that postholes for the large uprights shown in the reconstruction drawing were preserved, setting down a series of light, vertical wooden sticks or poles to rest on the floor between the posts to form a wall would be quite likely to leave no evidence. This is partly because the sticks or poles do not penetrate the floor plaster, but also because the drip water from the eaves can erode the floor edges considerably so that any marks made by the line of the poles are highly likely to be obliterated. Andrews acknowledges the problem of evidence for a perishable wall when he states: “However, the existence of these perishable walls may never be ascertained, even with the aid of archaeological excavation.”³⁷

The fact that evidence of perishable walls is elusive is no more proof that walls did not exist than that they did. Therefore, one major disadvantage of existing “open” classifications is that they seem to opt for the former—perishable walls did not exist. Any church with no walls that stood along the east coast of Yucatan, where winds drive the wet-season rains rather powerfully, could not have encouraged regular attendance.³⁸ Farther south in Belize, where the rainy season can last for nine months of the year, it is hard to imagine the utility of a thatched structure with upright posts and no walls.

Capilla de Indios

Sometimes *capilla de indios*, or “Indian chapel,” is used as an architectural term, usually to apply to a form of “open chapel” if a large structure is involved,³⁹ but this label is also problematic. According to Kubler,⁴⁰ a non-architectural meaning of *capilla de indios* is suggested by a sixteenth-century document from Guatemala:

The capilla was sometimes an administrative and fiscal institution for the maintenance of the cult assigned to the Indians, related in kind, very possibly, to the later *cofradías* of the seventeenth century. But the *cofradías* existed within individual communities, whereas the *capilla de indios* was maintained for a cluster of communities. With the increasing particularization of Indian communities the *capilla de indios* became obsolete, yielding to the *cofradías* in the individual communities. It would appear that the *capilla de indios* survived as long as there existed a shortage of personnel. When ministers became numerous enough to serve the many Indian parishes individually, there was no further need for the regional association implied in the *capilla de indios*.⁴¹

It is of course possible that the term *capilla de indios*, as applied to an institution, grew out of the fact that the Indians congregated on Sundays and feast days in groups,⁴² in an area in which they once heard Mass before a more formal church was built. Bretos observes that in the sixteenth century, *capillas de indios* was not a reference to form but to the identity of the congregation.⁴³

Chancel, Sanctuary, Presbytery, Choir?

There is also confusion in the use of terms employed to describe what might be called the business end of the church, which is generally restricted to celebrants such as the friars or secular priests, although those assisting, such as sacristans or *maestros cantores*,⁴⁴ were also admitted. As far as I can ascertain, this confusion arises partly from the fact that liturgical usage has changed through time, partly from the fact that sources vary, and partly from the fact that the positioning of the altar has also changed.

The earliest Christian altars in the Old World were free-standing tables in private houses,⁴⁵ which gave rise in early Roman churches to the celebrant standing on the far side of the altar facing westward toward the people. The custom of positioning altars near the east wall seems to have been established by the end of the fourth century.⁴⁶ The celebrant's position gradually changed to eastward-facing, with his back to the people in the nave.⁴⁷ This was the practice during the period of the Spanish conquest and is reflected in

the churches in Belize and Yucatan; it was also the practice until recently, but since the late 1960s or early 1970s the westward-facing position of the altar has been restored in many Roman Catholic and some Anglican churches.

Most sources on church terminology agree that the sanctuary is the part of the church that contains the altar, and today it refers to the area around the altar, although the term “presbytery” is also used.⁴⁸ The history of “chancel” is more complicated, and not all sources are in agreement. One source states that “chancel” originally had the meaning that “sanctuary” has now, but came to refer more specifically to the area between the altar and the nave, which is restricted to the clergy and choir (figs. 7.6, 7.7).⁴⁹ Another defines the chancel as part of the choir near the altar of a church, where individuals stand to assist the priest.⁵⁰

One thinks of “choir” as referring to a group of parishioners singing in chorus, but in the sixteenth century it referred to a place with restricted access where the friars recited the holy offices. In Belize and Yucatan, the choir was the area in which Maya with religious training helped to officiate Mass, or in which the liturgy was chanted. In this context, “choir” can refer to people who chant the liturgy or to the space designated for this purpose. “Chancel” is solely a spatial term, and came to be used to designate the space between the altar and nave, access to which was restricted to the clergy and/or the choir. In some churches, a screen separated the nave from this space, and the word “chancel” is said to derive from the Latin word for lattice, or screen.⁵¹

“Chancel” is now often used to designate the entire area east of the nave (and east of the transepts, where they exist).⁵² This is a looser definition than the original meaning, and at one point I thought it could serve in the case of Yucatecan and Belize examples to designate the stone-built part of the church east of the nave, because it refers to the space designated for activities associated with the altar (sanctuary), as well as space devoted to other liturgical activities performed either by priests or, in the Maya case, by individuals from the community who were officiating at Mass. “Chancel” does not, however, encompass the rooms that in Yucatan were traditionally adjacent to the sanctuary, such as the baptistery and sacristy (fig. 7.8), although in the sixteenth century the baptistery, where the baptismal font was kept, could also serve as the choir (fig. 7.8).⁵³

McAndrew, in translating a sixteenth-century source, uses the term “chancel” to refer to the body of the church east of the nave: “All the other churches of the parishes for Indians in these parts are of thatch except for the chancels where Mass is said, and those are of stone.”⁵⁴ Unfortunately, he does not identify the source in this instance, so we have no way of knowing the original Spanish term. García y Granados uses *presbiterio*,⁵⁵ and “chancel” is a term used by others.⁵⁶ With reference to Tipu and Lamanai, we have used



Figure 7.6. Plan of St. Martin's Church in Exeter, Devon, showing the chancel and its relationship to the nave and sanctuary. (Adapted from Scott 2004, 4)

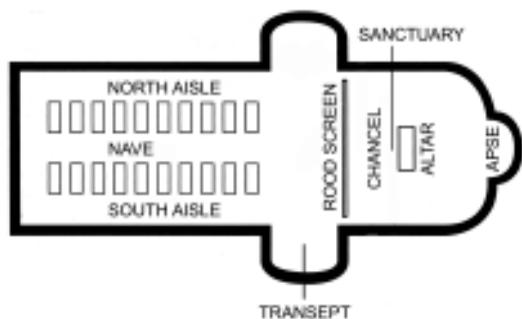


Figure 7.7. Traditional layout of the Western church shows the relationship of the chancel to other parts of the church. (Adapted from Taylor 2004, 28)

“sanctuary” in earlier publications.⁵⁷ “Chancel” seems at first to be a reasonable choice to designate the area east of the nave, but the term does not, as noted above, account for the rooms on either side of the sanctuary.

Where the sanctuary is supplemented by other spaces or rooms and is differentiated architecturally (type and design of construction) from the nave, no commonly accepted term exists. McAndrew refers to a “chancel-chapel,”⁵⁸ but this is awkward. Examples would be the “business ends” of the churches at Tamalcab,⁵⁹ Lamanai (fig. 8.4), Ecab (fig. 7.3), and Dzibilchaltun (fig. 7.5), all of which would fit Cárdenas Valencia’s description:

Tienen iglesias muy grandes y muy capaces, que aunque de paja y de palmas silvestres, son de gran defensa y dura. . . . Las capillas son edificadas de cal y canto, cubiertas algunas de azotea y las más de bóvedas y en ésta están los altares y colaterales hechos todos los más de muy lindo pincel y molduras sobredoradas.⁶⁰

(They have very large and spacious churches which, although of straw and wild palms [thatch], offer good protection and are lasting. . . . The chapels are built of masonry, some covered with a flat roof and the rest vaulted and in this are the altars and associated parts all painted artistically and with gilded mouldings.)

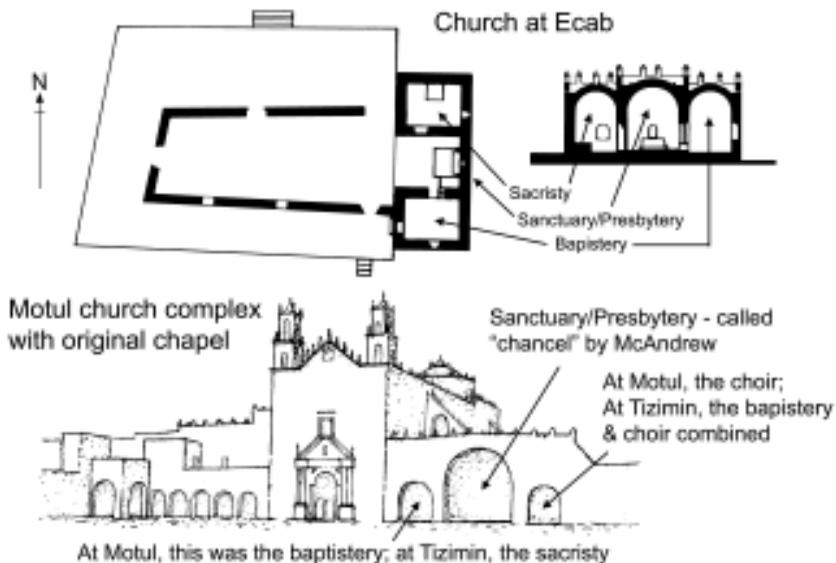


Figure 7.8. Chapel components of Yucatecan churches. (Ecab example adapted from Andrews 2006, 18, fig. 2.6; Motul example adapted from McAndrew 1965, 520, fig. 264)

Perhaps *capilla*, or “chapel,” is in fact the most appropriate term for the stone portion east of the nave, because it was the term used in the sixteenth century. Although there is theoretically no difference between *capilla* in Spanish and “chapel” in English, the complexity implied in the sixteenth-century use of *capilla* can become lost in translation, as I shall explain below. An alternative might be a term that was also sometimes used in colonial times, *capilla mayor*, or large chapel, as long as one remembers that the *capilla* or *capilla mayor* was functionally part of a larger whole—a church.

The situation is somewhat more complicated in the cases of the first church at Lamanai (fig. 8.3) and the lone church at Tipu (fig. 8.24). Each church comprises a long, narrow space enclosed by part-stone, part-perishable walls with apsidal or half-hexagonal⁶¹ or polygonal ends, and a roof of thatch. The altar area is separated from the nave in elevation by two lines of stones that served as the risers of steps. Both churches also had a room east of the sanctuary and separated from the sanctuary by a wall.

My inclination was at first to call the entire area east of the nave, and separated from the nave by steps, simply a sanctuary, because the space is relatively small. However, the sanctuary in both cases is clearly separated from the nave, creating in effect a “screen”; the areas around the altars (or around where the portable altars were placed) have features which suggest the

existence of hierarchical or differentiated space for the priest and for Mayas who officiated at Mass; and a separate room was constructed behind (east of) the sanctuary and probably served as a sacristy. Hence, despite the small size of these early churches, the east ends are more than simply sanctuaries.

Church or Chapel?

The use of the term “church” versus “chapel” seems often to reflect the belief that size matters. A church is, however, the consecrated building where Mass is said and which serves the community; it can be any size. Taylor⁶² displays a photograph of a lovely stone church in North Yorkshire that measures only 5 meters by 4 meters (fig. 7.9). As long as the structure or structural element serves the Christian community—which is also called the “church”⁶³—by providing sacred space where Mass can be said, it is a church. A chapel, on the other hand, is sacred space that serves a smaller-scale function and serves a limited audience. It is described as being “less than a church”⁶⁴ in terms of its functions. If chapels are smaller than churches in size, it is because the smaller size serves the purpose.



Figure 7.9. St. Andrew's Old Church, Upleatham, near Cleveland, North Yorkshire. Measures 5 meters (17 feet, 3 inches) by 4 meters (13 feet), with space for about thirty (Taylor 2003, 29). (Reproduced with permission of the E&E Image Library)

Chapels can be parts of churches, as in the cases of chapels along the aisles of cathedrals, usually separated from the nave by a series of columns. Such chapels are places of private or family worship where prayers can be said and candles lit.⁶⁵ Chapels can be set in schools or hospitals or airports to serve people in these settings. Chapels can be separate buildings, as in the case of *posas*, which stood in the corners of the atrio (fig. 7.4), although Masses were not said in *posas*. A chapel can be a sacred building in a sacred place where people stop to pray or to chant during a religious procession. None of the identified sacred buildings at Tipu or Lamanai was a chapel, because all were constructed to serve the entire community; they were churches. In the case of the “open chapels” as described by McAndrew, these, too, were constructed to serve the community, and were therefore, properly speaking, parts of churches.

All of the examples of open-air sacred buildings described by McAndrew are churches according to standard ecclesiastical criteria—if, that is, one considers that native peoples formed the Christian community. McAndrew uses the term “chapel” in describing all his examples of the masonry portions of his open-air churches,⁶⁶ perhaps because he was focusing on the non-perishable architectural elements of the Indians’ churches. As described by McAndrew, these “open chapels” were part of larger complexes, or monasteries,⁶⁷ that normally included: (1) a residence, or *convento*, for the clergy; (2) one or more walled open areas, or atrios, where the Indians, but not the Spaniards, stood to hear Mass⁶⁸ and onto which faced a stone building—the chapel, or *capilla*—in which the altar was sheltered and where the priest or celebrant stood (fig. 7.4); (3) *posas*, or “corner chapels,” in the atrios,⁶⁹ which were tiny and distinct from the “open” chapel (fig. 7.4); and (4) what was called by the Spaniards an *iglesia*, or monastery church.⁷⁰

One factor that explains the use of atrios was the sheer size of the indigenous communities, whose congregational demands, according to McAndrew, “could not be met with the ordinary repertory of church-building forms” because “Europe had had no need for anything like atrios.”⁷¹ He also argues that there were not enough friars to say Masses if the Indians were subdivided into groups to hear Mass in the monastery church.⁷² This makes sense, at least as an early measure. In Mexico by the end of the century, and in many places by 1576, the use of atrios and open chapels was obsolete;⁷³ this does not, however, explain why Spanish residents were not expected to stand in the atrios.

As strongly as McAndrew argues for sheer numbers as the stimulus to open-air worship, he recognizes that Indians were still segregated outdoors in some places as late as the 1690s, while the Spaniards were inside the church, as in Cuautitlan.⁷⁴ Therefore, another factor must have been the prejudicial attitudes of the Spaniards, both clergy and lay people, toward the *indios*. A

third factor was the history of use of religious structures, but this matter will be clearer once I have described the major components of church complexes in Mexico, which McAndrew says were in effect by 1540 and standardized by 1550,⁷⁵ and from which Yucatecan and Belizean types derived.

With regard to order of construction, it seems from McAndrew's comments that the first priority was a place in which the friars could celebrate Mass:

What is most significant here is that when the friars were beginning a friary . . . they made some sort of chapel as soon as they could because it was the single most important integer in the monastery scheme. They could live in old Indian buildings, recite their offices in them, and even say their own conventual Masses in them; they could teach the Indians their Catechism in old buildings or old courtyards, and preach to them there: but in no building could they suitably celebrate Holy Mass for their Indian converts until they built it themselves. During both the Conquest and Conversion, many Masses must have been said entirely outdoors, or under a temporary shield of cloth, thatch, or wood, because there was no place else to say them, but Masses without a chapel must always have been recognized as a makeshift once the Conversion was well under way.⁷⁶

The second priority was a residence for the friars, with the monastery church the last component to be built. The monastery church was a place of worship for clergy and Spanish or mestizo townspeople, but not Indians.⁷⁷

Once the monastery church was completed, or well along, the first temporary open chapel would often be replaced by an architecturally more respectable structure of masonry; or sometimes, if it had not been too flimsily improvised, the first chapel might be kept on as the regular Indian chapel after the monastery church was done.⁷⁸

Here lie the roots of prejudice. In Europe, the church community was the community, although segregation almost certainly manifested itself with regard to where people sat in the nave. In the New World, the community was formally and functionally divided into Indians (*naturales*) and Spaniards. If anything, given that the Indians outnumbered the Spaniards, it was the Indians who formed the true church community. At the very least, *both* activity areas—the atrio, or nave, with its stone-sheltered altar (*capilla*, or chapel), which the Indians used, and the roofed nave and sanctuary that the Spaniards used—were churches. In fact, even McAndrew observes that sixteenth-century chroniclers sometimes referred, correctly in my opinion, to the atrio as an *iglesia*.⁷⁹

The questions to be asked are: Why were Indians and Spaniards expected to worship separately? Why is *capilla* often used to describe the Indians' place of worship? Why is "open" (an adjective that seems relevant only in the earliest stages of church development in central Mexico⁸⁰) so tenacious in architectural typologies? And how could "open" be expected to have any utility at all as a descriptive term when it covers so many different structural variations?

The situation in Yucatan was somewhat different from that in central Mexico. In many places in Yucatan, no church for exclusive use of Spaniards was built; the friars used rooms in the *convento* for their rites, and the chapel, or *capilla*, was the walled structure where the friars stood when Mass was recited for the Maya community, who gathered in a ramada in the atrio.⁸¹ The implication is that because in Yucatan there were many Mayas and few to no Spaniards, depending on the community, it was not worthwhile to build a substantial stone structure within the monastery. Where churches were finally constructed, in places such as Mérida (and this is how the building is described in the literature, where "church" refers to roofed structures like the ones built in Europe, in which roofs are not made of thatch), they were built by the secular clergy, and the Maya were served by the monasteries.⁸²

Although the open chapel and the atrio/patio with which it is associated have been described and praised as an architectural type distinctive to the New World, what is distinctive instead seems to be the origin of the practice of using the term "church," or "*iglesia*," to designate a place where Mass was said for Spaniards and from which *indios* were largely excluded.⁸³ What is also distinctive is the use of "chapel" to refer to the main place of worship of the Christian community.

In the case of the Spanish friars, use of the term *capilla* may have another explanation, which I am convinced has contributed to subsequent confusion. McAndrew noted that the friars' first priority in a new area was to establish a place to say Mass,⁸⁴ and given the importance of ministering to the Indians, they said Mass for the Indians as well as for themselves under whatever shelter for the altar they could devise. In Mexico, this sheltered altar area fronted the atrio and became the stone-built *capilla*. McAndrew claims that sixteenth-century writers commonly called this a *capilla de indios* because it had been created for the Indian congregation,⁸⁵ but reference simply to a *capilla* also occurs in the sources.

In monasteries, the place where friars say their own daily masses is called by them a "chapel" because it is not for the general use of parishioners and is a private place for the friars' use only. Hence, it is "less than a church,"⁸⁶ because it is part of the whole. It is possible that the early combined use of a roofed and walled sanctuary and altar area by friars for their private services

and by Native parishioners as part of their church is responsible for the persistence of the term *capilla* (chapel), or *capilla mayor* in Yucatan, to describe what came to function as the “business end” of the local church. McAndrew defines the *capilla mayor* as “liturgically the principal part of the church, the space for officiating clergy and altar, usually the same as the chancel or presbytery.”⁸⁷ It is conceivable that the circumstances of early church history in Mexico and Yucatan are partly responsible for the error made, not by those in the sixteenth century, who knew the function of a chapel, but by modern scholars in referring to indigenous places of worship as “chapels.”

I say “partly” because, as the chapel and the space for the nave became incorporated into larger construction efforts, and as the Spanish or non-Indian population increased, the idea that the space established for worship by the Indians was “less than a church” may have been reinforced. If archaeologists’ attention, however, is properly to be focused on the effects of contact and conquest, it is critical to recognize and acknowledge such prejudices—not perpetuate them.

Does Size Matter?

If size mattered, one could argue that the “open chapels” were correctly labeled, because they were smaller than the monastery churches, although they could on occasion, according to McAndrew, be more elaborate or even more spacious than the neighboring monastery churches.⁸⁸ But small size is a qualifier only if one considers the stone-built *capilla* or *capilla mayor* to stand for the whole, when in fact it is only a part. The Maya congregation stood in the atrio which the *capilla* bordered. A thatch-roofed structure almost certainly served to shelter the congregation in the atrio in tropical zones, and even in Mexico people were not expected to stand in the open under “endless local drizzle.”⁸⁹ Where they stood, however, was nevertheless part of what should have been considered, but for the absence of stone, to be a church. Indeed, sixteenth-century chroniclers, as practicing Christians, applied the term *iglesia* (sometimes spelled *yglesia*) not only to atrios in Mexico, as noted above, but to open-air chapels in Yucatan.⁹⁰

McAndrew realizes this predicament and attempts to explain it.⁹¹ Part of the rationale seems to be cultural bias against considering the atrio space, even when it was covered by thatch, as an element of the actual structure of worship. Masses were traditionally celebrated indoors in Christian practice, at first in houses, later in structures built as community or meeting houses, and ultimately in formal churches;⁹² there came to be agreement that the church should be a permanent or durable structure. Owing to the Christian

bias toward structural durability, McAndrew surmises that Masses said in atrios could never be considered to have taken place in churches, in the traditional sense.

It [the atrio] cannot have been formally consecrated or dedicated, instead it probably was merely blessed, as chapels or private oratories were, though possibly it was not formally sanctified at all, any more than would be the space where an outdoor Mass for an army or hunting party might be said. Even today Canon Law makes no provision for temporary churches, and when the first atrio began to serve for Masses it may well have been viewed as a temporary makeshift. Its unconsecrated status could have persisted after the atrio had become virtually a permanent church.⁹³

McAndrew appears here to be building a case on the basis of no evidence. Given the dedication the religious had toward indigenous Christians, and the general liturgical rules of the church, it is highly unlikely that where Nahuas or Maya or Otomi worshipped would not have been at least blessed, and certainly consecrated, if worship utilizing atrios, with their “open chapels,” or *capillas*, continued for any length of time. If in their early years of use, however, the stone-built altar ends of churches were blessed rather than consecrated, in the manner of private oratories or chapels,⁹⁴ this might have encouraged the later use of the terms *capilla* or *capilla mayor* to refer to them.

Given the definition of *capilla mayor* as “the space for officiating clergy and altar, usually the same as the chancel or presbytery,”⁹⁵ incorporation of the term “chapel” in the terminology makes sense, especially if one takes into account that in churches that were to serve a community of friars as well as Indians, there were days when Mass was said with no congregation. Therefore, the stone-built altar ends of churches in these cases—and perhaps wherever *capilla* was the term used by the friars—indeed served as a chapel for a small audience, in addition to being part of a church. The audience in this case would have comprised friars or other clergy, and they would have sat in the space between the nave and the altar.

McAndrew claims that beyond the earliest days when some sorts of temporary structures were needed to get started, neither in Mexico nor in Yucatan (he does not mention Belize) did the friars use the chapels associated with atrios (his “open chapels”) for their conventual Masses or for the reciting and chanting of their prescribed offices.⁹⁶ In Mesoamerica, however, where Christianity was brand new, the earliest days may have structured all that followed, and a good argument can be made, I believe, that the terminology employed in the initial stages of Christianization remained in use.

If I have offered a reasonable hypothesis for the continued use of *capilla*, or

chapel. in a situation where it refers to a structural element that is clearly part of a church, the problem remains that the term “open” covers a lot of territory. The larger open-air chapels in Mexico almost look like mosques in plan,⁹⁷ with three walled sides, leaving one columned side partly open.⁹⁸ No examples of this particular form are known in Yucatan or Belize. What McAndrew illustrates as the typical Yucatecan “open” chapel is the stone-built east end of a space that functioned as a church. (The elements of such an open chapel are similar to the stone-built chapel with sacristy and baptistery at Lamanai, and similar to a number of rural structures in northern Yucatán and Quintana Roo illustrated by Andrews.⁹⁹) McAndrew’s “typical open chapels” were parts of monasteries, and the stone chapels bordered atrios (see fig. 7.8). In rural Yucatan, what Andrews called “open and closed ramada churches” are free-standing and are not part of monasteries.¹⁰⁰

Artigas has devised a five-part typology of a subgroup of open chapels (*capillas abiertas*) that includes the kinds of structures found in Yucatan and Belize (the stone-built *capillas* with their adjacent rooms), which he calls *capillas abiertas aisladas*, or open chapels that are isolated or free-standing.¹⁰¹ He makes the point that *aisladas* is an appropriate term because the structures antedated *iglesias techadas*, or roofed churches.¹⁰² However, the *capillas abiertas* are only *aisladas* if one focuses on form rather than function, or on material rather than purpose. Whether people stood or sat or knelt in a space that was covered or uncovered makes no difference in terms of the function of the overall structure, which served without any doubt as a church, or iglesia. That only one end of the church was built of stone does not make the chapel functionally isolated. Although the stone end could have been used by the friars for their own private use as a chapel, a church is a church is a church.

No Unifying Criterion

According to Andrews,¹⁰³ McAndrew’s unifying criterion for the open chapel designation is the presence of a thatched roof over a nave. But this would be a criterion for an open *church*, not a chapel, and even then, usage is inconsistent. Based on my reading of McAndrew, if one tried to find a common thread among open churches, it would involve a situation in which a Mass was being said in, or at one side of, an atrio, or forecourt, where people could spill out into the atrio if the covered or protected sanctuary space (the chapel) was not large enough for the congregation. McAndrew also conceived of ramadas as being temporary or impromptu, hastily constructed to provide some protection from the sun; this does not, however, apply in the Maya area, where thatched structures were carefully constructed and were intended to last. Thus, although McAndrew’s concept of an open-air church holds up for

central Mexico in the early years of the Conquest period, his and others' use of the term "open chapel" has given rise to confusion because identifiers that originated in the past to reflect functions, such as "chapel" and "church," have been tethered to size and construction material.

Andrews recognizes that applying what has been taken to be McAndrew's definition of an "open chapel" to the religious structures at Mani, Calkini, and Ecab is problematic, owing partly to these structures' large size.¹⁰⁴ At Ecab there existed a thatch-roofed, walled, and enclosed space (fig. 7.3);¹⁰⁵ therefore the structure cannot be called "open." Clearly, the builders had some idea of the size of the community, and in the Ecab case people could not spill out of the nave without missing direct participation in the Mass. There is a large platform that could have served as an atrio in the structure's earliest manifestation, and in this sense it could have been "open" at one phase in its history, with the stone chapel and its sacristy and baptistery rooms being the first architectural element, where the friars would have carried out their own rites. This is another case in which the source of the structure's "chapel" (*capilla*) designation in the eyes of the Spaniards might reflect its history rather than an attempt to conform to an architectural type. Finally, if the religious structure served the community of Ecab, then it was, as Andrews clearly implies, a church and not a chapel.

The Spanish Sources Were Right

Andrews goes on to say that the Spaniards were inconsistent in labeling religious structures: "The massive ramada structures that abutted the sixteenth-century convents of Maní and Calkiní were known as *capillas de indios*, while many rural structures (such as those of Ecab, Polé [Xcaret], and Lamanai) were often referred to as '*yglesias*.'"¹⁰⁶ This labeling is perfectly in keeping with the Spanish world. The structures in which the Maya worshipped at Mani and Calkini were parts of monasteries of which convents were the residential portions. Therefore, the criteria would be much as I have described above for central Mexico, in which the native focus of worship is designated a *capilla* partly because it incorporates an element which could have served as a chapel for the friars in the early stages of the planned community, and partly because this element of stone is the (Indian) church's outstanding feature, but also because a real (stone) church was envisaged for the use of non-Maya as part of the ideal plan. Referring to the spaces in which the Maya worshipped at Mani and Calkini as "chapels" or *capillas de indios* is consistent with the practice established earlier in Mexico, despite the fact that a monastery or other church might never have been built. (There is also Kubler's option, which is

that *capilla de indios* reflects a reference to an Indian organization rather than to something material.)

The Ecab, Xcaret, and Lamanai structures are indeed iglesias, or churches, from the Spanish point of view, because they were built to serve the entire community of Maya with no expectation of a Spanish population of any size. It therefore follows that Bretos's two formal categories¹⁰⁷ of *capillas de indios* and *capillas de visita* are inappropriate. The first has some validity because it was in use in colonial times,¹⁰⁸ but it was nonetheless rooted in prejudice; if *capilla* is to be used at all as a type, perhaps *capilla de atrio* is better. As for the second, the *visita* structures are by definition churches, because they were intended as places of worship for the entire community.

Putting Typologies Aside

This brings me to the remaining categories suggested by Andrews.¹⁰⁹ It is not in keeping with past or present church practice to label small structures "chapels" and larger ones "churches." Whether a building is a chapel or a church depends on its function rather than its size, even though size can sometimes reflect function.

The term "ramada" seems best applied to the type of structure described by Andrews¹¹⁰ as one in which the sanctuary, chancel, and nave form a continuous space under a single thatched roof; if the space between the chancel and the nave is divided in some way by a wall or a rail, and the space is therefore not continuous, the fact that a single thatched roof covers everything seems in keeping with the definition. However, whether the structure is defined as a ramada church or a ramada chapel should reflect its known function. Ramada chapels were ephemeral, and likely built only in the very earliest days of contact for use of the friars during evangelization. In Belize, the first religious structures (of which we have evidence) built for community worship at both Tipu and Lamanai were ramada churches.

Churches such as the second church at Lamanai, the one Jones describes at Bacalar,¹¹¹ and the church at Ecab seem to be alike. They all have a stone-built element or *capilla*/chapel that comprises the sanctuary, with space for officiating clergy, a sacristy, and a baptistery, but unless they fit McAndrew's criterion of allowing the congregation to spill out into a walled atrio or forecourt with no thatched nave, they are not "open." There is also the problem I noted earlier of detecting archaeologically whether the nave had walls or not, which means that the standardized reconstruction of an open ramada church in Roys¹¹² cannot be confirmed archaeologically unless one takes negative evidence as unequivocally indicating absence. Also, only the nave is

thatched in these cases; the *capillas*/chapels (sanctuary, sacristy, baptistery, chancel, choir) are either roofed with beams and mortar or vaulted. Calling these churches “ramada” implies that the entire interior space was roofed with thatch, which is misleading.

In the case of churches in Belize, and probably elsewhere where there is a long rainy season, it is highly unlikely that buildings would have been completely open-sided. If the second church at Lamanai had a thatched nave with open sides, as has been shown in the reconstruction of the Dzibilchaltun structure (fig. 7.5),¹¹³ people could have attended Mass only in the dry season, or only when the daily winds off the lagoon abated. During the rainy season from May through January, the winds off the lagoon would have driven the rain right through the nave.

Given the problems outlined, I have not attempted in the chapters that follow to fit the excavated churches into an existing typology, although I describe their features. The original impetus behind my reassessment of terms and categories stemmed from an attempt to sort out what to call the Lamanai and Tipu churches, based on prior typologies. My conclusion is that the typologies as they stand are problematic; they do not aid in our understanding of building function or even form. The term “open” can perhaps be retained informally as an adjective in describing space, but it should not be used to designate a type. It is not even clear that Toussaint¹¹⁴ intended “open” to constitute a type. Form is important to archaeologists because, as I have noted, it is often all that we have to go on, and we therefore operate on the assumption that form is an indicator of function. In the case of the “open chapel,” however, we have allowed use of a formal typological designation to cloud critical issues, not least of which is how to tell a church. For those interested in the dynamics of the sixteenth-century colonial encounter, particularly in Yucatan and Belize, how to tell a church is a primary concern.