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Rethinking Maya Identity in Yucatan, 1500–1940

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MARCUS BANKS CONCLUDES in a recent review that ethnicity is best described as a collection of simplistic and obvious statements about boundaries, otherness, goals and achievements, being and identity, descent and classification “that [have] been constructed as much by the anthropologist as by the subject” (1996: 190). Like other key terms in the social sciences, ethnicity is both a category of social and political practice and of social and political analysis. Recent writing on ethnicity reflects the difficulties that arise from the complex interplay of actors and interests (e.g., Wilmsen and McAllister 1996).

Humans seem to have an innate propensity to distinguish between “self” and “other” and to associate with each other and form an inclusive “we” always existing in relation to “others.” In this perpetuated act of distinguishing between insiders and outsiders, social boundaries are delineated, maintained, and legitimized. A systematic distinction between “we” and “others” lies at the core of ethnicity. But of course, other social identities which are not necessarily ethnic, are also built on such dis-

tinctions (class, gender, age group, etc.). The main focus of an inquiry of ethnicity must therefore be the context within which particular ethnic identities emerge. Of special interest is the relationship between social groups made up by people who embody identities in different forms, and whose actions in a variety of social situations are guided by them.

At the same time, as Banks states, ethnicity may also be constructed by an analyst without sufficient empirical evidence. In addition, it might well be the case that what researchers observe in a particular social context as constructions of social difference expressed in the idiom of ethnicity is the result of diffusion. In other words, the emergence of ethnic identities may be highly influenced by sources external to the local context and may include the scholarly discourse on ethnicity (see, for example, Hale 1999). An examination of the analysts contribution to his or her object of study must be an additional focus of critical reading. In sum, ethnogenesis must be scrutinized carefully in space and in time and this is without a doubt the main goal of the four articles discussed here.

Social categories in general and the issue of ethnicity in particular provide a formidable instance for the study of internal and external cultural constructions. Social categories have not yet been studied as thoroughly as other aspects of culture and history in the Yucatan peninsula. This is in fact surprising as the area is characterized by a degree of complexity in past and present ethnic categorization and labeling nowhere else to be found in Mexico. The four articles by Restall, Gabbert, Eiss, and Fallaw demonstrate this clearly. Distilling generalizations in this context is a risky business as everything depends on who is speaking, in what language they speak, and in what local and historical contexts social assignments are performed (see Sullivan 2000). The articles by Restall and Gabbert taken together focus on five centuries of ethnogenesis of Yucatec Maya speaking people who we commonly address today as "Maya." The articles by Eiss and Fallaw review the status of "Maya" identity for relatively short periods of time during the first decades of the 20th century.

Maya Identity and the *Longue Durée*

Restall shows that during colonial times the indigenous inhabitants of the Yucatan peninsula did not see "themselves as members of a common ethnic group." Nevertheless, such a commonly-shared ethnic identity has been assumed by others to be a colonial category. First, the Spaniards called all natives "indios." Under this blanket term, the Spaniards did recognize regional identities, which were mainly derived from how fiercely particular groups of "indios" resisted Spanish expansion. Second, as a result of late-20th century ethnopolitics, "a modern Maya ethnic identity was

forged by Mayas and their non-Maya allies, complete with constructed historical roots, for the purpose of mobilizing the mostly-Maya underprivileged” (Restall, this issue). Effects of this process are much more visible in the case of post-civil war Guatemala (see Fischer and Brown 1996; Warren 1998) than they are for the Yucatan peninsula (e.g., Alonso Caamal 1993). In other words, a heterogeneous population was assigned a single identity from the outside and social analysts have contributed to perpetuate this supposed all-encompassing Maya identity by taking it for granted.

Restall indicates that during the colonial era group belonging and individual’s identities were based on two fundamental social units: the *cah* or municipal community, and the *chibal* or patronym-group. Besides these relatively localized social categories, other groupings like *macehual* (Indian commoner) and *dzul / vecino* (resident foreigner) mark the basic divide between conquerors and subjugated. In his view, this situation may give rise to two forms of ethnic awareness: an overt ethnicity with explicit identification and an implied ethnicity with membership only loosely defined. Thus, Restall concludes that “the colonial experience gave rise to and fostered a sense of *implied* ethnicity among the Mayas . . . but that *overt* ethnic awareness among Mayas did not exist in either the late post-classic or colonial periods” (Restall, this issue). Thus, the Conquest—an ethnic conflict par excellence according to contemporary post-1992 sensibilities—failed to trigger a strong Maya ethnogenesis. The fact that “the bifurcation of implied and overt ethnic awareness persisted through the mid-19TH century” suggests, in Restall’s view, that the Caste War cannot causally be related to the prior fomentation of an ethnic consciousness among the Maya based on “the colonial-era development of multiple implied-ethnic terms” (Gabbert, this issue).

This point, to which I will return, is also central to Gabbert’s argument. For Restall, scholars who interpret the Caste War as a result of a strong mobilization along ethnic lines, constitute the third reason why an assumed deep-rooted ethnic Maya identity has been perpetuated in scholarly writings. Restall concludes that paradoxically, “the Maya struggled in the face of steady opposition for over three centuries *against* their own ethnogenesis” (Restall, this issue).

Maya Identity in Times of War

For Gabbert the catalyst for the development of ethnic relations in the peninsula is the Caste War. It enabled the emergence of an ethnic consciousness among the rebels whereas before there was no such identification by those we call Maya today. His main argument is that on both sides of the conflict bands were not composed in an ethnically exclusive fashion; rather they were heterogeneous. Nevertheless, the

respective majorities of the antagonists clearly represented the basic social divide imposed by the Spanish Conquest. Gabbert shows that prior to the war, clear-cut social categories did not simply result in clear-cut divisions of social spaces in everyday practice (see, for further elaboration, Gabbert 2001). But again, the major divide between “the mainly urban Spanish-speaking elite [and] the Maya-speaking lower classes which dressed in the folk costume” was clearly recognizable (Gabbert, this issue). His analysis of the social composition of the rebel movement casts doubts on a monocausal racial motivation of the rebels. By using such explanations contemporary commentators “divert attention from the social origins and objectives of the rebels who, at least during the first years of the war, merely aimed at political and economic reforms” (Gabbert, this issue). While Restall’s analysis focuses mainly on the role of the scholarly discourse on the imagining of Maya ethnogenesis, Gabbert brings to the fore aspects of political practice and the political instrumentalization of ethnicity by the Yucatec elite of the early-19th century.

The Caste War began as a civil war, not as a war of liberation. Gabbert attributes the development of a Maya ethnic consciousness only to those who engaged in the rebellion and clung to it until the end. This is due, first, to the prolonged repression at the hands of their Yucatec enemies and, second, to the empowering effect of the cult of the Speaking Cross (see Dumond 1985). Yet it is only on the basis of these sources of common ideological identification, that a lasting sense of cohesiveness was built, fused by a particular historical experience. This is reflected, for example, in the self-identification as *kruso’b* or, more recently, as *masehualo’b* (see, Sullivan 1983, for a discussion of the latter term). Gabbert analyzed the ethnic composition of National Guard contingents that were drafted from seven localities between 1869 and 1884 to fight the rebels. Of the 888 individuals mentioned in the lists, Gabbert identified 58 percent as Indians. From other sources (e.g., Dumond 1997; Reed 1964; Reed 1997; Villa Rojas 1945) we know that on the rebel side many non-Indians fought as well. Moreover, in his sample of reports of rebel raids between 1858 and 1879, Gabbert identifies 97 out of 286 reported Yucatec casualties as Indians (many of them women), which clearly shows that fellow “Mayans” were not spared by the rebels. Because on both sides Indians and non-Indians were victims and perpetrators in the large-scale killings, “possibilities for developing an encompassing ethnic consciousness were nil” (Gabbert, this issue).

Gabbert concludes that ethnicity is strongly related to processes of social classification or categorization. We cannot conclude from “the existence of a category denoting a certain aggregate of individuals that social cohesion, solidarity, and group consciousness automatically exist within that population.” This implies that the starting point to understand ethnicity “should not be ethnic collectivities but individuals using ethnic categories in social interaction.” Much like Restall, Gabbert concludes that, in the case of the Yucatan peninsula, colonialism did create a soci-

ety dominated by the dichotomy of colonizer and colonized, but he cautions us that “it would be highly misleading to think of these categories as homogeneous and solidary communities” (Gabbert, this issue, see also Hervik 2003; Warren 2001).

Fixing the “Indian Problem” Yucatecan Style: Early Initiatives in Rural Education

Eiss reviews projects of indigenous education promoted in Yucatan by different social actors between 1909 and 1918. He shows that while indigenous education projects developed shortly before the revolution by the right-wing, *hacendado*-based *Liga de acción social* formally differed from those of the later constitutionalist revolutionary government of Salvador Alvarado between 1915–18, they nevertheless shared “a broad set of assumptions—as utopian as they were racist—about education as a process of racial improvement and nation-making” (on the continuity of 19th-century social thinking, see Dawson 1998; Doremus 2001; Knight 1990). Alvarado’s mission of liberating Yucatan from its feudalistic past of ethnic and class difference entailed high levels of state intervention. Liberation was meant to be redemption of all social classes. “Backward Indians” would thereby become modern Mexicans and reward the government with their obedience and labor in exchange for liberation.

A key element of the redemptive project was public education both in the sense of schooling and as a metaphor for the revolutionary project as a whole. Through teaching of the Spanish language and the spreading of mestizo culture, indigenous populations living outside the sphere of direct governmental influence should become members of the Mexican *patria*.

Eiss documents that most projects of rural education aimed at redeeming indigenous children were pursued with an almost religious fervor. They failed however because of political opposition, lack of knowledge and practice in educational matters, and local, that is “Indian,” resistance.

In this process of failure, “when ‘Indians’ did not de-Indianize, when a ‘new race’ did not emerge, when the ‘pernicious seed’ of socialism sprouted, when workers did not labor complacently for the *patria*, or dared to question its meaning,” (Eiss, this issue). educational reformers turned to 19th-century ideas about “the biological and inveterate nature of Indian racial inferiority, and even the advocacy of a kind of eugenics as the only regeneration possible” (Eiss, this issue). In such theories “Indians” are seen as incurably blind to the light of the *patria*, and to the redemption that the revolution promised. Such blindness was seen to be the result of centuries of slavery that produced deep cultural and “racial” degeneration. Only a complete deculturalization of their children and their subsequent resocialization in modern

civilization would allow the regeneration of “racial imperfection” and make them fit to become “Mexicans.” These are the ideas and policies the Yucatec elite wanted to apply as a solution of the “Indian problem.” Eiss does a good job in extracting this elite discourse from the documents. Those, however, who are the object of these discursive and political practices—the “Indian”—remain mostly silent because the available sources, “are almost entirely framed within the rhetoric of government officials and reformers, providing scant basis for inquiry into indigenous perceptions of—or contestation of—indigenous education and its racial politics” (Eiss, this issue). Yet Eiss has found evidence of indigenous resistance. He cites a document from the village of Cuzamá where in 1916 a teacher was harshly criticized for her ineptness and for her view, which was at the time widely shared received wisdom, that Yucatec Maya “was a primitive and irrational dialect, and that the purpose of education was to remedy racial deficits through hard labor” (Eiss, this issue).

The Consolidation of Rural Education in Yucatan: Maya Resistance or Accommodation?

Fallow examines the Mexican state’s role in enhancing and politicizing ethnic consciousness through an analysis of the expansion of federal schooling in eastern Yucatan, from 1929 to 1935. Included in this timespan are the periods of the *Maximato* (ruled by the *Jefe Máximo* Plutarco Elías Calles, 1929–34) and the early *Cardenista* (President Lázaro Cárdenas, 1934–40). The latter provides a formidable example of how states make nations by actively dissolving and absorbing sub-national social groups. One of the important instruments used by the state to achieve this goal is public education. A famous phrase by President Cárdenas nicely encapsulates it all: “Our problem with indigenous people does not consist in keeping the Indian ‘Indian’ nor in making Mexico indigenous, but in Mexicanizing the Indian” (translation mine, cited in Warman, Bonfil, Nolasco Armas, Olivera de Vázquez, and Valenica 1970:32).

After documenting in detail different responses by local people to the expansion of rural education, Fallow concludes that resistance “was not always the exclusive or even the predominant stance adopted by Mayan peoples towards an Hispanicizing state” (Fallow, this issue). The resistance to these education projects was not the expression of a struggle over the defense of Maya culture, but rather denoted political, economic and non-ethnic cultural negotiations. Accepting the Mexican state by way of accepting its schools and education was not perceived as a negation of identity or of what is conventionally defined as Maya culture.

The Federal schools in villages of eastern Yucatan, such as Chan Kom and Kanxoc, which Fallow discusses, were often accepted in principle, but conflicts arose

over who would have to support the schools, the gender of teachers, and the controlling power of brokers such as teachers and local political bosses. As teachers and inspectors pragmatically adapted the school to local conditions and more adequately addressed the expressed needs of Mayan communities, the success of schools improved.

In Yucatan, as in other places of Mexico, the cultural nationalism of the state was materialized in the expansion of schooling and related ambitious projects of social engineering, such as the Agrarian Reform and *Indigenismo*. Although these strategies threatened local historical and cultural continuity, resistance by Mayan people did not build upon cultural ground of unified identity, much less ethnic identity. Fallaw does not, however, categorically discard the notion of Mayan identity, “yet the motives for individual and collective resistance must be carefully contextualized and historicized” (Fallaw, this issue). Implied in this analysis is the anti-essentialist notion that the boundary between Mayan people and others in the peninsula is not a sign of historical continuity but principally the result of the expansion of the Mexican state. Fallaw concludes that, like all social collectivities, Mayan people “have a history” (Fallaw, this issue).

Concluding Remarks: Questions and Counterpoints

In my view, much of the rethinking of ethnicity in the context of the Yucatan peninsula has to do with documenting the complexity of social categorization. All the articles in this issue illustrate that it is important to move beyond the use of the encompassing and distorting label of “Maya,” which imposes a unified ethnic history on people who have not necessarily thought of themselves as “Maya” neither in the past nor present. This is particularly well demonstrated in the articles by Restall and Gabbert.

By problematizing the “Maya” label, these articles reject an essentialist approach to ethnicity in the peninsula, which is evident for example in the work of Bartolomé (1988). On the other hand, while they concur in problematizing the history of Maya identity (e.g., Restall’s and Fallaw’s remarks on ethnopolitics and essentialism), the authors only indirectly address the fact that in the larger Maya area, especially in Guatemala, the term “Maya” and related issues of “Mayanness” have gone “public” and left the academic setting to become one of the mainstays of the Pan-Maya Movement. All political implications of anti-essentialism aside (Warren 1998), it seems that over the last decades a new Maya identity was born in Guatemala which makes deliberate use of the symbolic capital related to the complex and controversial image of the “Maya.”

Restall suggests that while overt forms of ethnicity did not exist for colonial

Yucatan, a sense of implied ethnicity of Mayas is recognizable from the sources he studied. It would be interesting to learn more about the ways this implied ethnicity allowed for resistance against the Spanish conquest and subsequent colonial rule. This may entail questions such as whether an implied ethnicity only emerges in response to Spanish encroachment or whether it is a reflection of what has been called primordial attachments—that is, the influence of being born into a particular cultural and social context. The recent work by John F. Chuchiak (2001) on the persistence of older forms of Maya religion into the late colonial period may well provide a lead in answering these questions.

I am not completely convinced by Gabbert's conclusion that only the rebels in Quintana Roo became an ethnic community while the rest of the Maya-speaking population remained a cultural category without group consciousness. It seems, for example, that quite a few Mayan people moved east to join the rebels throughout the whole duration of the war and that the rebels had many allies among those who remained supposedly without encompassing group consciousness.¹ I admire his detailed discussion of social categories and I agree with his methodological generalizations regarding the study of ethnicity. It is important to keep classification systems separated from their operation in daily interaction.

Fallow is certainly right in stating that the expanding state creates tensions that mobilize social responses. He concludes that these were not based on ethnicity but rather on a host of local grievances. Could it be that such conclusions are rather related to particularities of consulted sources—the state addressing the peasants, the peasants petitioning the state in terms that the peasants believe the state will accept—rather than to the reality of how people mobilize along ethnic lines? If we look farther east, the response by Mayan people in central Quintana Roo—precisely among those whom Gabbert postulates to constitute the only occurrence of the ethnogenesis of Maya ethnicity among inhabitants of the Yucatan peninsula—the response seems to be more informed by ethnicity. Nonetheless, the different responses by Mayan peoples of these two neighboring areas share to a great extent the same aspects of negotiation and accommodation so nicely captured in Fallow's contribution (see also Hostettler 1999). From the perspective of central Quintana Roo, I would therefore still argue that Mayan people interact with the state by making use, although maybe not always exclusively, of the resource of ethnicity which was dramatically heightened, as Gabbert has illustrated for the Caste War. Mayan responses are not simply a reaction to the all-powerful Mexican state but are the result of autochthonous politics and strategies, probably developed before modern states came into existence. I imagine that this might correspond to what Restall calls "implied ethnicity."

Eiss' case addresses a particularly powerful external perspective as to exactly who are Mayans. His analysis shows how social and political policy makers thought

of them and how such perspectives were turned into action. This again makes clear how external perspectives—I quote here Peter Hervik—“establish and fix the position of the Maya in the past without allowing ordinary Mayas any active role as caretakers of their own destiny” (2003:89). While such concepts are based on the experience of politicians and policy-makers, they are also influenced by scholarly discourses. This may serve to remind us that our thinking and reasoning about Maya ethnicity may have direct influence on people whose lives and histories we study. Moreover, we scholars remain entangled with the problem that ethnicity is both a category of social and political practice and a category of social and political analysis. Eiss reminds us again of the difficulties that arise from the complex interplay of actors and interests.

While the four articles are anti-essentialist in tone, none of them denies that both in the past and in the present basic cultural features distinguish Mayan people from others (see Restall and Hostettler 2001). We might, thus, fruitfully argue whether they should be called “Maya” or how to best label them and others. It is also obvious that once we detect ethnicity we have not finished our job, but in fact just started our inquiry. We have to document the social processes that draw culturally defined groups into hierarchically structured fields of power, status, and wealth. We need to document how such social processes operate in everyday practice and how identities, once they are established, obtain a habitual quality and under what circumstances ethnic identifications are perpetuated, modified, or discarded. It seems, however, that no single theoretical approach has sufficient explanatory power to explain the complexity of ethnic group formation and ethnic conflict.

Contrary to some scholars who state that the concept of ethnicity is about to expire as an analytical concept (see Banks 1996; Eriksen 1993), I would argue that it remains useful for the study of cultural and social differentiation in the context of the Yucatan peninsula. The four articles show that an interdisciplinary approach is the most promising for this kind of research (see, for an even broader approach, Hostettler and Restall 2001). In addition, Yucatan has generated and continues to produce a corpus of social and cultural data of extraordinary wealth. Let us use this corpus and focus on the *longue durée*, on the recent past, and on the ethnicities of the present in the Yucatan peninsula.

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ments was based on the conference papers. After all four authors have revised their papers in order to transform them into the present articles, my own comments were revised and updated.

Notes

¹Reed (1964) documented that the rebel intelligence depended on spies among their enemies. Conversations in central Quintana Roo revealed to me that a number of people (entire families and individuals) joined the rebel movement only during the late-19th century (Hostettler 1996). One example is the late Juan Bautista Poot, who was born around 1910 and at the time of Villa Rojas' research in 1935 was a minor chief in the Xcocal hierarchy. His father had migrated to central Quintana Roo during the 1890s from the area of Peto in Yucatan (see Morley 1947: Plate 9 d).

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