

Commentaries

Lost in Mayaland

By

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A GENERALLY ACCEPTED ARGUMENT that operates as a self-fulfilling prophecy holds that the people who inhabited the territory, which today we refer to as the Yucatan Peninsula, shared a common “Maya” sense of ethnic identity, both prior to the Spanish Conquest and throughout the colonial period. This myth, discussed by the four authors in this special issue in nuanced and provocative ways, might distress more than one Mayanist whether or not she or he is “Maya.” While dealing with this question, other issues and themes are visited, including the topics of Indigenous education and attitudes toward the State.

These modest commentaries begin with a rhetorical question: how does one get lost in a territory possessing a map and a tour? On the one hand, according to Liisa Malkki (2001) territories are constructed into quotidian languages and frequently into academic tours that become obvious as they become expressed in scholarly and non-academic languages. She further points out that “. . . their obviousness makes them elusive as objects of study” (Malkki 2001:55). Paradoxically, in my opinion, the irony of the term “obvious” resides in its own obviousness: it is accepted without any discussion precisely because the obviousness is unquestionable. Territories are subtle traps.

On the other hand, maps and tours are two forms of narrative that contribute to the theoretical/philosophical recreation of the interrelations and interconnectivity between practice, event, and structure (de Certeau 1984). Maps define space and spatial descriptions as if they were frames of reference of daily life, a critical and an “objective” representation of the known (i.e. places and ethnographies). Tours function as both subjective and intersubjective knowledge based on experience, action and interaction (i.e. temporal utilization of space within a period of time). As Quetzil Castañeda (1996) expresses the idea: tours are based on maps, but maps are built

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on the synthesis of chosen tours.

I explicitly combine these two forms of narratives—“map” and “tour”—in my brief analytical survey of the essays. From these tours a background map emerges showing how the notion of Maya people or ethnic group was constructed and simultaneously how they were created as Mexican “subjects” and “citizens.” My purpose is to establish some points of interconnection in these authors’ works between the temporary “Maya” points of encounter and the power relations that are revealed by each author. My goal is not to summarize and synthesize the arguments of these essays—that is, I do not intend to make an overall and masterful map that presents a new synthesis. The introduction by Castañeda and the commentaries by Ueli Hostettler provide such *précis*. Instead, I raise some provocative questions, doubts, problems, and concerns.

Matthew Restall

Were the Mayas of colonial Yucatan actually Mayas? Were the pre-colonial Mayas in reality Mayas? Restall, in asking the above questions, replies with a resounding “NO.” His contention de-reifies the infamous self-fulfilling prophecy that the people who dwelt in the area, today as known as the Yucatan Peninsula, shared a common sense of “Maya” ethnic identity. It also demystifies the idea that this “collective sense” preceded the Spanish Conquest and persisted during the colonial epoch. For Restall, those people did not consistently call themselves “Maya” or use any other name that might indicate that they self-identified as members of a “Maya” ethnic group. Furthermore, the Spaniards did not refer to the Mayas as “Mayas” but as *indios* or *naturales*. The strength of Restall’s work resides in its demystification of the essentialist notion of “Maya” as a rooted, ethnic identity. To accomplish this, Restall created a tour based on a historical map that dismantles the paradigmatic discourse about Mayaness. I appreciate his critique of anthropological discourse. However, since I too am an iconoclast, I must point out that there are some very troubling weaknesses to his argument.

Restall’s argument originates with an inversion of Landa’s explanation. While Landa claims that the name of the city of Mayapan came from the name of the people called Maya, Restall argues that a group of people were called “Maya” because they lived in the city of Mayapan. The name Maya then became generalized across the peninsula when the city was destroyed and the people fled to other parts. This argument, however, takes for granted the existence of a territory that was to become inhabited by “Maya” diasporic refugees who escaped the destruction of Mayapan. Furthermore, there is the common legend based on chronicles that there was only one survivor of this war on Mayapan conducted by the Xiu lineage. This one sur-

vivor was Cocom Cat. Was he the only Maya or were there others?

There are at least two other problems with this argument. First, Restall bases his whole claim on a single paragraph written by Fray Diego de Landa. Second, Restall does not take into account that a territory, as any other space, is always unstable. The concept of a “territory” can be a subtle trap. Moreover, these two traps are interrelated. Based on Fray Diego de Landa’s assertion that the name of the place known as Mayapan was derived from the name “Maya,” Restall clarifies that the usage of the toponym “Maya” by a group of people was restricted to those who were living in Mayapan, a city that exerted control over much of northern Yucatan (Pollock 1962:1). It did not refer to all people who inhabited the entire peninsula. Fray Antonio de Ciudad Real, “ . . . who visited the crumbling remains of the city nearly 400 years ago” (Pollock 1962:1) wrote,

In the *guardianía* [of Maní], near a mission-town called Telchac, a very populous city once existed called Mayapan in which (as if it were a court) all the ciciques [sic] and lords of the province of Maya resided and they came with their tribute (Ciudad Real 1873:2:470–71; original spelling).

Here this version of Ciudad Real does not name the people of the province Maya, but names the province with the name “Maya.” What then is the name of the rulers of this province that is called “Maya?” Further, what is the territory of the Maya? Is it Mayapan? Is it Maní? Telchac? Or is the Maya territory one or both of the regions (Puuc and northwest coast) where these towns are located? Despite the confusion of possibilities, it seems at least clear that not all of Yucatan is Maya territory.

The rulers of Mayapan (during the post-classic period) were the Cocom family. The legendary Ralph Roys wrote, “I surmise that the Cocom, who claimed descent from Quetzalcoatl, were descended of those who had once called themselves Itzá. In the *Chilam Balam of Chumayel* we read: ‘Furthermore they [the Itzá] left their descendants here at Tancah [Mayapan]’” (Roys 1933:84, 194). In combining these quotes we find that Telchac and Tancah were called Mayapan, and Pollock states that Telchaquillo also went by this name. But Tancah is also known to refer to a place that today is called Tulum. And the people were called Cocom. Someone is lost in the map, maybe it is just me or maybe it is Restall, perhaps it is Cocom Cat, the “one” survivor of Mayapan—wherever this legendary place may have existed on Earth.

The contention that the Cocom and the Itzá were—or were not—Maya brings along two fundamental questions for archeologists, anthropologists, historians, and other interested parties. First, if the Cocom and the Itzá were Maya because they inhabited the “province of Maya,” is it possible to claim that the Caamal, Canul, Canché, Chan, Ché, Chel, Cochuah, Cupul, Iuit, Pech and Xiu were Maya as well? In terms of identity claimed or assigned to them, they were not, or so claims Restall in

his detailed study of the use of the term “Maya.” Second, if there is no Maya ethnic group, is there a reason to keep writing about them? After all, *¿Por qué vender cerillos en el infierno?* (“Why sell matches in Hell?”)

The contribution of Restall’s work to the literature on the so-called “Mayas” is that it illustrates that the use of the term “Maya” was and is a political strategy. Expanding on his idea, these people were historically relentless in politically negotiating and renegotiating their identities in relation to those with whom they interacted. By doing so they unveiled their multiple identities. In other words, although Restall himself does not extend his analysis of words beyond their presence or absence in the archives, his essay shows that the historic interaction of “Maya” allowed them to “have” multiple identities—in much the same way as the “Maya” do today—and not a single and homogeneous identity. Their multifaceted identities prevented them from being categorized absolutely in terms of binary oppositions. To borrow Bhabha’s analytical concept, this allowed these “Maya” to escape the mimicry that operates in colonialist discourse (Bhabha 1994).

I believe that some Maya and non-Maya Mayanists will be disturbed by Restall’s work. But not me, since I prefer to self-identify as “post-Mayan” rather than as “Maya.” I suspect that the beliefs that shape identities are part of the relationships of power and control that pervades this world. Here, I am adopting a political strategy to create for myself a socio-political identity, indeed, a polyglot identity, just like the Mayas that Restall studied. It is as if those multiple identities, spoken as they are in heteronomous languages, were a symphony and bricolage of the uncertainty of who I am. It is as if those multi-lingual identities somehow “encounter themselves” in a “point of suture” (Gupta and Ferguson 2001:13) that nonetheless remain in play, in chorus, that gives me a stable/temporal ground that allows me to sometimes act and speak as a fully endowed agent and sometimes to speak and act as a multiply fragmented subject.

Wolfgang Gabbert

Gabbert’s essay is a historical study that works to de-reify the category “Maya.” He critiques the idea that the “Maya” are rooted in the past, which is often idealized in terms of continuity. He points out that the notion of “Mayaness” was created in the seemingly not so far away nineteenth century. His argument is constructed in “horizontal” and “vertical” terms of regional space and diachronic history of the system of social classification of all Yucatan. This makes a remarkable contrast with Peter Hervik’s analysis (1999), in which a classification of one town, Oxkutzcab, which was studied over a three year period, is generalized across the entire peninsula and across numerous historical periods. From this perspective, Gabbert overcomes the

limitations of Hervik's study in two ways: it is historical and a regional study.

Nevertheless, *nunca falta un pelo en la sopa* ("there is always a hair in the soup"). I refer to his use of the term "ladino." Why *ladino* instead of *dzul*? This mishap contradicts the precision of his argument. It contradicts both his conceptual points about the need to analyze the specific categories of individuals and groups in social interaction. He states:

... the starting point for the analysis of ethnicity should not be ethnic collectivities but individuals using ethnic categories in social interaction. In doing this, it has to be remembered that the use and meaning of categories may not only change historically but also in accordance to whom is using them and to whom they refer.

His use of *ladino* and not *dzul* is the hair, which spoils the substance of his soup. No one in the Yucatan uses "ladino." As Gabbert himself states in footnote number three, "The term *ladino*, which originally meant Spanish-speaking, is used in other parts of Middle America but not in Yucatan." Why, then, use it? As far as I know, this term is not used among scholars in their writings about Yucatan, with the exception of Nelson Reed (1976:17). "Nevertheless," Gabbert continues in his note, "it seems more apt to describe the culturally and linguistically hispanicized section of the population than other terms (e.g., white) since it has less phenotypical or genetical connotations inappropriate to Yucatan."

Unfortunately, this does not convince me as a reason to use the term: Why is it "more apt" if there are no "... individuals using [this] ethnic categories in social interaction"? Indeed, the question then becomes, what is the significance of this "hair"? It seems that despite Gabbert's intent to make a tour of experiential categories he imposed a map, a very foreign scholarly map, in his analysis. Maybe I, too, am lost in the map when I use the term *dzul* ...

The value of Gabbert's work is not only that he makes a horizontal or vertical historical study of the idea of "Maya," but that he makes an open invitation by asking us to reflect upon our beliefs about how social categorizations were—and still are—created. It is an incitement to study contemporary categorizations that are directly interconnected to the notion of "Maya" such as the terms: *huiro* (indio); *malix*, a term derived from the Yucatec-Maya (*Ah Malix Pek'*, which is translated in the *Diccionario Maya Cordemex* (1980) as *perro corriente o sin casta* (dog without pedigree, mutt); *naco*, (a derogatory term for indigenous person) popularized by television—especially the national television companies such as Televisa and Azteca—and which is derived from the Totonaco, an "Indian group"; and, *hija*, a term popularized by a clown named "Pepillín" in the Yucatec television Channel 13 that is owned by the Yucatec State Government, which also means *huiro*. These four terms are used in contemporary Yucatan as synonyms of "indio" and they possess

the same pejorative connotation. Gabbert's essay provides the historical ground on which to conduct ethnographic study of these contemporary terms of social classification.

Paul K. Eiss

Eiss's study of the late Porfirian *Liga de Acción Social* and Alvarado's projects for Indigenous education from 1909 to 1918 is a provocative contribution to this collection of essays. The interesting element of Eiss's approach is that there is a double decentering of the study of the Maya. While the local—the Maya—is the center of his analysis, it is decentered not only by a shift to the regional level, but also by a shift to the national level, that is to *la Mexicanización del Maya*. This analytic redirection is extremely important in order to deconstruct the discursive practices that had the goal of constructing the Mexican *Patria* and the roles that the “Maya” of that time period were to play in the nation of the future. Eiss's deconstructive work opens up the possibility for other tours by which to understand how the construction of the “self” (Mexican), individuality (Mexican), and homogeneous collectivity (Mexican *mestizaje*) are the product and process of power relations and the changing sociopolitical conditions during the transition from the Porfirian to the revolutionary periods.

Eiss's historical analysis is rigorous when it refers to the way intellectuals of that period visualized “the” Patria by singing the national anthem, venerating national symbols, making gardens, and reading poetry. He reveals that these were the essential elements in the minds and debates of the intellectuals who sought to create the Mexican Patria. He cites a powerfully clear statement by Alvarado:

We are all part of the great Mexican family and we should harbor noble ideas and sentiments of greatness and prosperity for our patria [which] exists only through the union of its members in the pursuit of a shared set of ideals and ends.

In revealing the ephemeral and intangible nature of the project of Patria, Eiss, however, leaves something unsaid. While it is clear that Patria, for Alvarado, is literally a social construction of reality, Eiss does not reveal his own idea and understanding of what Patria is. In my opinion, Eiss at this point gets lost on the tour with his own map, which he keeps hidden from the reader. By this, I mean the re-narration of the discourse sticks too close to the details. These are “details” that we know and have known precisely because they have been so repetitive in that discourse of Patria in Yucatan, in México, and in Latin America. I wonder, like those of Cuzamá, how my Patria would be imagined without map and tours. This possibility might

allow me to understand the processes of many Mexicanizations. Thus, Eiss ends his essay saying that “... the questions of how they [the “Maya” he implies as exemplified by the people of Cuzamá] might have imagined the Patria ... are questions that must be left, for the moment, unanswered.” Yet, my question is how does Eiss imagine “Patria?” And who else besides those of Cuzamá are referred to when he uses the pronoun “they”?

Ben Fallaw

In turning to the work of Ben Fallaw it can be noted that in contrast to the prior three essays, which are more straightforward historical analyses, Fallaw’s is more explicitly ethnographic. It is not just that there is a highlighting of Maya villages. His piece is concerned with the definitive subjects of ethnographic study such as human interaction and exchanges. What makes his essay “more” ethnographic is that his historical analysis aims to contribute to the ongoing debate in anthropology on hegemony, conflict, and “resistance.” Thus, the focus, as he states, is not actually on Maya communities per se, but on their relation to the federal educational system and, more concretely, on the federal teachers sent to the villages. This, in other words, is an explicitly anthropological approach to historical questions.

The value of his work, then, is that he does not see conflict as erecting an impenetrable barrier between sociopolitical agents. On the contrary, for Fallaw, conflict provides a space that allows for negotiation and renegotiation. Although this negotiation has not always been “successful,” Fallaw shows that at least the people interacting were always trying to circumvent and bypass conflict through negotiation. Significantly Fallaw states,

I would argue that the teachers’ tacit recognition that they would have to take peasants’ demands and needs into account was much more important in the eventual success of some of the schools than any bureaucratic modifications.

Of course, the Maya made some concessions as well. Consequently, although there is a myth or pervasive understanding that these educational projects failed, Fallaw’s analysis indicates the contrary. There was no such failure because they, the Maya and the federal teachers, were talking among themselves—negotiating and compromising. Hence, to become a Mexican was not a problem for these “Maya”—and perhaps this is one of the reasons why no one, or very few people, call themselves Maya in Yucatan today. Ironically, they would rather be called Mexican than Maya.

In other words, in contrast to the myth of failure, these educational projects

must be seen as having been successful. One wonders now, thanks to Fallaw's study, why this myth has been promoted? Why do we believe that the projects failed when we stare in the face of the reality of self-identified Mexicans and continue to call them Maya? Now that I know for sure, thanks to Restall, Gabbert, Eiss, and Fallaw, that there is no monolithic, ahistorical Maya ethnicity, I can see that we are lost when we face Maya essentialism on one side and the reality of Mexican nationality on the other. Lost in the map without a tour. Fallaw too is lost but finding a path, a tour. I am following him—even though as a Post-Maya I may already be the tour guide.

Before I leave this tour, I must say that these papers fill me with many doubts—in a good sense—that can only push me to extend my thoughts about these topics and, *ya sabes* [you know], become even more lost. I hope I am not the only one.

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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., Wilmesen 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-