

Ecological Degradation, Global Tourism, and Inequality: Maya Interpretations of the Changing Environment in Quintana Roo, Mexico

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This essay, focusing on the perspective of indigenous Mayas, documents and describes the process of ecological degradation and the rise of the tourist industry in Tulum, Quintana Roo, Mexico. Using a combination of ethnographic, secondary, and archival sources, the author challenges widespread assumptions regarding global tourism and explains how local and global forces shaped Tulum's culture and political economy. Although Mayas ambiguously interpret recent social and environmental changes, she shows that they do not critique the process of globalization in and of itself, but rather critique inequality, their loss of cultural autonomy, and their subordinate position within contemporary global cultures and economies. Scholars and planners must begin to consider Maya interpretations of their changing environment to alleviate the area's severe social and ethnic stratification.

Key words: tourism, globalization, social relations, environment, Mayas, Mexico

This essay examines the shift from a mixed subsistence-based economy to a commercialized tourist-oriented economy from the perspective of indigenous Mayas in Tulum, Quintana Roo, Mexico. I document and describe the process of ecological degradation and the rise of the tourist industry, showing that tourism, consumerism, and proletarianization are powerful institutions and processes over which Mayas have limited control. Furthermore, Mayas negotiate and interpret recent social and environmental changes in contradictory and ambiguous ways. Today—as in the past—they do not critique the process of globalization in and of itself, but rather critique inequality, their loss of cultural autonomy, and their subordinate position within contemporary global cultures and economies.

Despite decades of evidence to the contrary, the dominant discourse on globalization still assumes that almost any kind of economic development—especially tourism—alleviates poverty and increases the well-being of both individuals and nations (cf. Crick 1989; Chambers 1997). Although academics, activists, policy makers, planners, corporate

developers, and the popular media hotly debate the impacts of globalization and global tourism, we cannot fully refute dichotomized conclusions in the debates because tourism has both positive and negative impacts. In fact, most social scientist—like most Mayas themselves—present more complex analyses that recognize both benefits and costs of globalization and tourism, as evidenced in recent scholarship.¹ In the 1990s, scholars and activists suggested ethnic or ecologically oriented tourism as alternatives to mass tourism because they were friendlier to both local people and the natural environment, but some are beginning to rethink even these alternatives because their effects are similar to mass tourism (McLaren 1998; Primack et al. 1998).

In Mexico, globalization has been complicated by the “economic restructuring” of the 1990s, which further subordinated many citizens (Pi-Sunyer and Brooke Thomas 1999:4). Looking strictly at the economic data in Quintana Roo usually leads one to conclude that the benefits of global tourism far outweigh its costs. Since the tourist era, which began in 1970, the state has had the highest rate of growth in Mexico (García Villa 1992; SEDESOL n.d.). Numerous scholars, however, have concluded that most local citizens—especially Mayas—remain marginalized despite rosy economic growth (Brown 1999; Pi-Sunyer and Brooke Thomas 1997; Pi-Sunyer, Brooke Thomas, and Daltabuít 1999; Clancy 1998; Hostettler 1996). Although it is one of Mexico's wealthiest states, Quintana Roo has some of the country's poorest and most malnourished residents (Roldán et al. 1999). In addition, compared to Mexico's national level, Quintana Roo has higher rates of infant and maternal mortality, a

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higher rate of divorce, and a lower average age of death (SEDESOL n.d.¹).

Background

During the mid-19th century "Caste War" of Yucatan (1847-1901), Tulum became one of the Maya centers of power that developed in opposition to the Yucatec and Mexican governments. This race-mediated conflict involved mestizo and indigenous Maya struggles for autonomy and independence from the Mexican state of Yucatan and resulted in one of the longest and most successful indigenous resistance movements in the Americas.² As are most historical events, the Caste War was multiply determined by factors including political struggles between centralists and federalists, the impact of the Bourbon Reforms, changes in land use and the economy, political relations with neighboring countries, and the history of church and racial exploitation.³

Shortly after the conflicts began, miraculous crosses and saints began appearing to various rebel factions throughout the area, and the crosses (managed by human patrons) ultimately became responsible for guiding and leading Maya forces. More importantly, Mayas elaborated new forms of social organization and military, political, religious, and cultural practices centered on the crosses, which ultimately became the heart of culturally distinct customs and identities. Followers of the miraculous crosses believed themselves to be "true Christians," in contrast to their enemies, and identified themselves as *Cruzoob* (Spanish for cross with the Maya plural suffix). With a hierarchical social organization that included military-political leaders, and religious leaders such as the patrons of the crosses, the *Cruzoob* eventually controlled the easternmost portion of the Yucatan peninsula. In 1901 President Porfirio Díaz sent the Mexican army to make the final conquest and erected the federal territory of Quintana Roo. Still, Mexico maintained only nominal control over Maya territory until the second half of the 20th century. Today the descendants of the *Cruzoob* are most likely to identify themselves as people of the Santa Cruz/Cruces (Holy Cross/Crosses), or members of the Iglesia Maya, churches located in political-ceremonial centers where the miraculous crosses and saints are housed. Maya social organization and cultural-religious practices are centered around the churches, including religious practitioners who say Mass and preside over baptisms, weddings, funerals, periodic festivals, and other sacred occasions. Men are still expected to provide religious service by periodically guarding the church and its miraculous crosses and saints, even though the Iglesia Maya is no longer focused on war and military activities.

Mayas' lives began to change dramatically when, in 1971, a consortium of government and private entities began building the megaresort of Cancun, creating a tourist boom and leading to Quintana Roo's statehood in 1974. Since then, global tourism has become a major force in many local Maya economies. In Tulum, Mayas adopted ritualized speech to

dub the historical period beginning with the construction of roads and the advent of Cancun as the "tourist era." Prior to the tourist era, the Iglesia Maya dominated much social activity in Tulum.

Methodology

In 1983, well before the southern half of the Cancun-Tulum tourist corridor—now called the Riviera Maya—received much attention, I first visited Quintana Roo as a tourist. Beginning in 1990, I also conducted periodic ethnographic fieldwork in Tulum Pueblo—the Maya village located just a few kilometers from Tulum ruins, now one of Mexico's most visited archeological sites. Most tourists—myself included—once failed to visit the town even as we explored the archeological site, but Tulum is now the southern anchor of the Riviera Maya and one of Mexico's fastest-growing cities (Carrera 2000).

When I first went to Tulum in 1990, it had a population of about 2,000. About 10 percent were Santa Cruz Mayas (hereafter called Mayas) clustered among five to ten extended families of up to four generations; the rest were immigrants from surrounding Mexican states who had come to work or establish businesses in the booming tourist economy after 1970. Tulum's second-largest ethnic group was Yucatec Mayas who emigrated from other parts of the peninsula, often sharing the language and many cultural practices with Santa Cruz Mayas. The next-largest group was Mexicans, including persons from the Yucatan Peninsula who did not identify as Maya. The final group consisted of foreigners, comprised primarily of tourists and an increasing number of entrepreneurs, the majority of whom are North American and European. Mayas lived primarily in the oldest section of Tulum, and these ethnic groups were increasingly segregated by *barrio* or neighborhood.

Although the most significant differences in socioeconomic status and household wealth contrasted immigrant artisans and owners of small businesses with Mayas and other immigrant workers, some "class" differences also existed among Mayas in Tulum. Like other Maya villages in central Quintana Roo, the turn toward commercialization in the 1970s increased social stratification (Hostettler 1994).

I spent the majority of my time with these Maya families, including a summer in 1990, 10 months in 1991-1992, and about one or two weeks per year until 1994, after which I have visited three or four times for working vacations with my family. Although I developed some conversational fluency in Maya during fieldwork, the majority of Mayas in Tulum were bilingual in Yucatec Maya and Spanish, and since it was easier, I tended to speak Spanish unless people were monolingual. Most of my fieldwork involved observing and participating in the daily lives of women and their families. This included washing clothes, gathering water, making tortillas and other foods, caring for children, running errands, going to local and regional doctors and healers,

attending the Iglesia Maya and its local and regional activities and festivals, attending family celebrations, and visiting with both local Mayas and other immigrants. Once I had a good sense of daily patterns and community organization, I began recording more formal life histories and interviews about work, marriage, gender, and changes in life, some of which will be used to illustrate points of this paper.

Because of Tulum's severe housing shortage, I could not find a Maya family to live with during my first summer of fieldwork, so I lived for a few weeks with a Mexican immigrant family before I rented my own home. During my extended fieldwork (1991-92), my husband and I lived half the time in a pole and thatch duplex in a large *solar* (house lot or compound) in the Maya part of town, surrounded primarily by related families who were active members of the Iglesia Maya. Later the family's matriarch allowed us to build a small concrete block home on their property. Unofficially ours, they use it as a rental property since we rarely occupy it. Initially called a *gringa* (ambiguously referring to economically well-off North Americans), my husband and I were eventually given the more respectable titles of Don and Doña and widely accepted even by the most reluctant members of the Iglesia, who tend to shun foreigners. I tried to understand diverse and conflicting points of view both among Mayas and within Tulum's larger community and reciprocated help primarily by giving food and labor, contributing to community festivals and private gatherings, and providing rides to neighboring areas such as Cancun, Felipe Carrillo Puerto, and Valladolid.

Because of my experience as both tourist and scholar, I appreciate the difficulty of assessing the tourist industry. Since my husband and I became parents in November 1994, most follow-up visits have become "working family vacations" based in a beautiful beachfront condominium in the neighboring resort of Akumal. Our recent one-week stay at a discounted price during the off season was equivalent to 10 weeks wages (\$10 per day for a six-day work week) for most of my Maya friends and acquaintances. We also ate a few meals at restaurants where the per-person cost was the equivalent of a local worker's daily wages and otherwise engaged in tourist activities that, while a bit of a stretch for our middle-class American budget, were exorbitant for local Mayas or immigrant workers.

Intellectually I was attracted to work in this area because of my interest in social and ethnic stratification. During my first visit to Akumal I was amazed that a literal wall of jungle segregated the luxurious, landscaped, and ordered spaces of white tourists from the slumlike living conditions of Maya workers. Still, like most of the area's tourists, I was equally enamored of the spectacular beaches and exotic Mayas who still spoke their indigenous language. Consequently, my scholarship in this area increasingly emerged out of my own attempts to incorporate and reconcile my personal experience of tourist pleasures with committed scholarship and social activism.

Ecological Degradation and the Subsistence Economy

During most of the 20th century Tulum was a small pueblo with a handful of families bordered by *chicle* (gum) camps, cattle ranches, and coconut plantations. Relying primarily on forest resources, especially hunting and swidden production of maize and other foods, they supplemented their subsistence economy with commercial enterprises such as trade, logging leases, chicle gathering, and occasional migrant labor. By the 1970s, however, it was increasingly difficult to sustain a subsistence-based economy due to political and economic processes that produced ecological degradation and limited access to land and other natural resources. Consequently, throughout the Maya area of central Quintana Roo, the balance between subsistence-based production and large-scale commercial production has shifted dramatically, usually resulting in increased inequality within local communities (see Hostettler 1996, 2001; Re Cruz 1996; Pi-Sunyer and Brooke Thomas 1997; Daltabuit and Pi-Sunyer 1990). As the northern-most Maya community, as well as the southern anchor of the Maya Riviera, Tulum has experienced the most radical changes and differs significantly from other Santa Cruz Maya and Yucatec communities.

Ironically, the process of ecological degradation and the loss of land in Quintana Roo began with programs in the 1930s and 1940s that were intended to equalize opportunities for Mexico's oppressed Indian population, promote modernization and economic development, and reform land ownership. Unlike other regions of Mexico, such as Chiapas, where state-sponsored projects and reforms helped local indigenous populations (Collier 1989), in Quintana Roo state intervention hurt the previously autonomous Maya population.

Mexico's land reform policy granted village-based communal lands, or *ejidos*, to landless peasants, but in Quintana Roo this policy was detrimental because Mayas already had de facto ownership and control of communal lands. Moreover, population density was much lower in Quintana Roo than in other Mexican states, and *ejidos* actually replaced Mayas' autonomous access to large amounts of land with bounded tracts of state-controlled land. Mexican and Yucatec immigrants and developers also flocked to the territory of Quintana Roo in the early and mid 20th century to take advantage of federal policies that subsidized and promoted economic development programs (Villa Rojas 1977; Bassols Batalla 1976).

Although *ejidos* were initially sufficient, dramatic population growth and immigration gradually stressed the ability of the land to sustain Mayas' mixed subsistence and commercial economy, as documented by Mexican anthropologist Alfonso Villa Rojas (1962, 1977:887). Compared to the neighboring state of Yucatan, Quintana Roo was much better off because of lower population density; for example, in 1950 Quintana Roo had .5 persons per square kilometer while Yucatan had 13.4 (Villa Rojas 1962:209). Nonetheless, by the 1970s it was increasingly difficult for Mayas to continue

their mixed subsistence economy, living off the land through horticulture, hunting, and selling of natural resources such as honey and chicle. By 1995, population density in Quintana Roo had increased 34-fold to 17 persons per square kilometer, while Yucatan's tripled to 40 (SEDESOL n.d.¹, n.d.²).

Anthropologists such as Paul Sullivan and Ueli Hostettler provide detailed documentation of ecological degradation and declining crop yields in the Maya zone just south of Tulum before and during the tourist era. According to Hostettler (1996:176-179), national land grants led to a decline in the yield per hectare. By the early 1980s, according to Sullivan (1983:195), Mayas were transformed from "effectively autonomous farmers on virgin and unregulated lands," who only worked half a year to produce good yields, to being overworked farmers who were dependent on wage labor and other commercial enterprises order to survive. Households had to work more land while reaping lower yields even as they supported more people (ibid.:188-215). As early as the 1930s, some other Maya areas became so much less fertile that families were no longer able to provide the labor needed to produce their basic subsistence needs (see Steggarda 1984: Chapter 5; Paré 1995; Steinberg 1998; Wilson 1995; Re Cruz 1996:106, 110; Daltabuit, Rios Torres, and Perez Plaja 1988). During an interview about how life had changed in Tulum, Doña Francisca,⁴ a middle-aged Maya woman, described this process of declining fertility:

Life now is very hard. Even if you are making your *milpa* (cornfield), it just gives a little. Just a few little things it grows like that. Sometimes it doesn't give anything; a lot of people see life as very difficult because it is not like before, when you had everything here. [Interview, June 5, 1992:2]

This indigenous perception is confirmed by Hostettler (1996:286), who shows that Mayas in neighboring areas in the 1930s produced over 1,000 kilograms of maize per hectare, but only produced an average of 280 kilograms per hectare between 1988 and 1992. Since yields have been so drastically reduced, Mayas must either hire *milpa* workers or buy corn to meet their family's basic subsistence needs.

Anthropologists have similarly documented the decline of game animals in Quintana Roo, and Jeffrey Jorgenson (1998:184) even suggests that local animals are so endangered that Maya hunting may no longer be a sustainable practice. Until recently, game meat was an essential and highly valued source of protein and other nutrients in Maya diets, but now both women and men mourn the disappearance of game animals. Doña Francisca again describes this recent change:

Before there was no highway, and as soon as you went out, if you wanted to eat meat, you just grabbed your rifle and you went to hunt, and right away you would kill a *jabalí* [wild peccary] or a deer. In just a short while you would have meat! That is the difference with the *antiguos* [elders], because now there is no game. [Interview, June 5, 1992:2]

Occasionally, I took bus trips or gave Mayas rides to surrounding areas of Quintana Roo. When we went to Felipe Carrillo Puerto, a market town in the central Maya zone, members of the Iglesia Maya almost always knew most of the people who dotted the sides of the relatively remote highway. The conversations and silences of the drives were interspersed with comments about folks we saw on the road, usually waiting for buses, or walking and biking in and out of their ranchos and milpas.⁵ Less frequently, we saw a person or two standing on the side of the Felipe Carrillo Puerto road, sometimes on the Coba road, another very rural road, but never on the Cancun road, holding out a turkey or some other wild game for passersby to purchase.⁶ When we passed these wild game vendors, Mayas wistfully recalled the plenitude of animals, the ease of hunting, and the pleasure of eating game. Doña Demetria, Doña Francisca's recently deceased mother, nostalgically remembered that game was so abundant you could practically walk outside your home and shoot it. Today, she lamented, animals have disappeared and it is extremely rare to see, much less eat them.

Coastal and forest resources are also scarce and even endangered today. Occasionally I offered to take some of my Maya friends to spend time having fun at the beach, but until recently they imagined these excursions quite differently. For me (in addition to being fieldwork) going to the beach meant swimming, picnicking, relaxing with friends, and the sound of the waves. For most adult Mayas, until recently beach visits meant a practical opportunity for beachcombing, fishing, and collecting coastal resources. Inevitably our trips to the beach spurred talk about the depletion of—or their lack of access to—various fish, shellfish, turtles, and turtle eggs. Moreover, they feared the possibility of fines or arrest for the harvest of what had once been trade items or customary foodstuffs—today the harvesting of turtles, turtle eggs, conch, and lobster is either illegal or restricted. Significantly, all are either items in demand globally, such as tortoise shell and other products, or seafood that is particularly appealing to tourist tastes, not to mention being highly profitable.

Trips to the *milpa* and forest similarly provoked talk about the scarcity of poles and thatch for building and the disappearance of tall forests, along with the animals that reside there—monkeys, birds, and particularly game animals, such as the preferred wild turkey and deer. These are precisely the things that are either needed for, or desired by, tourists and the tourist industry. Even the bordering Sian Ka'an biosphere reserve, established in 1986, and "ecologically correct" environmental regulations, such as restrictions on turtle and lobster harvesting, have not benefited Mayas. In the short term, these state environmental policies have simultaneously hindered Mayas' reliance on subsistence economies as well as their ability to profit commercially from tourist development. States and policy makers are still debating how to accommodate indigenous use of natural resources with state-sponsored conservation efforts, but indigenous communities are usually left out of planning (see Arizpe, Paz, and Velázquez 1996; Galletti 1998; and Norris, Wilber, and Morales Marín 1998).

Tourism Development

Tourism is one of Mexico's most important industries, recently ranking as its second or third largest source of income (Weiner 2001). Ninety percent of Mexico's tourism is to coastal resorts (New York Times 2001), and Quintana Roo now captures about one-third of all foreign tourist expenditures (SEDETUR 2001). In fact, Quintana Roo had the highest rate of growth in Mexico since 1970 (SEDESOL n.d.¹), and as the world's 12th highest tourism earner, Mexico is the only third world earner in the top 15 countries (World Tourism Organization 2000b). Unfortunately, Mexico's high ranking does not correspond to high benefits. According to the World Tourism Organization (2000a), Mexico received 15.5 percent of all tourist arrivals to the Americas in 1999, but because of cheap labor and prices, it only received 6.4 percent of all tourism receipts. In contrast, the U.S. received 39.5 percent of arrivals, but made 60.6 percent of receipts. Moreover, despite being one of Mexico's most prosperous states, Quintana Roo has Mexico's fourth highest rate of malnutrition (out of 32 states). Only Oaxaca, Yucatan, and Chiapas—all with large indigenous populations—rank higher than Quintana Roo in terms of malnutrition (Roldán et al. 1999).

In Tulum, tourist-related developments alleviated Mayas' increased inability to sustain themselves from their land and natural resources by opening up new economic opportunities and producing a large-scale exodus to commercial economies. Although both the process of ecological degradation and the shift to a globalized commercial economy were experienced throughout Quintana Roo and the Yucatan peninsula, they were more distinct and dramatic in Tulum. Unlike most of its neighbors, Tulum was simultaneously a subsistence-oriented "Maya village," a beachfront-oriented "tourist destination," and a major archeological site of "Maya ruins." Thus, its development differs significantly from recently studied places like Pisté (Castañeda 1996), Chan Kom (Re Cruz 1996), and Yaxley (Hostettler 1996). Unlike Tulum, places that had ethnic and archeologically oriented tourism did not include beachfront resorts, and villages that experienced globalization and ecological degradation did not have intimate, extensive contact with diverse groups of immigrant workers, entrepreneurs, and tourists.

During the tourist era, foreigners intensified their expropriation of Maya lands and natural resources; began to dominate local political, economic, and cultural practices; and quickly outnumbered local Mayas (Daltabuñt and Pi-Sunyer 1990; Juárez 2002.). Tulum grew from a handful of extended families (population 92) in 1960 to over 2,000 people in 1990—the population quadrupled between 1980 and 1990 (Mexico 1960, 1970, 1980, 1990). As of 2000, Tulum is estimated to have at least 12,000 residents. It is expected to grow 15 percent annually to about 33,000 by 2005 and 97,000 by 2010 (Carrera 2000).

As immigrants flooded Tulum, members of its ejido doubled from about 60 in the early 1970s to about 120 in

1992. Many Yucatec and Mexican immigrants transferred their Mexican ejido rights to Tulum, and Mexico granted additional ejido lands to subsidize and encourage settlement in the pueblo.⁷ As tourism increasingly dominated the local economy, more and more families abandoned milpa production and relied entirely on commercial enterprises and wage labor as their economic strategies. Tulum began to serve as a bedroom community for surrounding resorts' immigrant workers. According to one estimate, five homes for workers are needed for every hotel room (Weiner 2001). To encourage immigration and provide housing for workers, the government even redistributed land previously controlled by Mayas to married Mexican citizens on the condition they build within two years. Local property values have since appreciated so much that most Mayas are priced out of the market. Thus, the typical solar in Tulum is much more densely populated than in other Maya communities. Lots that previously housed one or two households now house nine or ten households. Because their solares are so crowded, they are unable to raise pigs, which normally eat all waste products. Solares now require expensive and ecologically harmful septic tanks for sewage.

During the early tourist era, planners and economists were not concerned with local Mayas and the production of subsistence-oriented milpas, but rather wanted to create a large-scale agricultural and ranching industry to sustain the nascent tourist centers of Cancun and its environs (Bassols Batalla 1976:42-43,55; Villa Rojas 1977). In fact, their concern was not directed at feeding local Mayas at all; instead, they were trying to address tourist complaints about the high cost of food (Ortiz Wadgymar 1976:261-262). Although the relationship between national and international government agents and transnational capitalist developers had always been cozy (García Villa 1992; Clancy 1998), this connection intensified and became more corrupt in the 1990s, when Mario Villanueva was governor (1993-1999). A fugitive for two years, Villanueva was recently arrested on charges related to drugs and corruption. His administration arranged a major transfer of lands from the federal government to the state, then promptly sold them to private developers who could easily recoup their investments in as little as four years (Friedland 1999).

Now, public coastal lands are almost nonexistent, and although Mexico's constitution guarantees public access to all beaches, the large hotels are increasingly denying such access, especially to people who don't appear to be white or tourists (Stevenson 1998). In the summer of 2001, I walked the beach with my family hoping to see turtles laying eggs, but when we got to the edge of the large Hacienda Doña Isabel beach in Akumal, a security guard told us we needed permission from the biologist to walk after dark. Too tired to argue, we returned two nights later—this time the security guard told us that we could not pass. Since we could see a group of people watching a turtle lay eggs down the beach, we asked the security guard to get the biologist for our permissions, but he refused. After a heated discussion and obvious

delay tactics, we crossed anyway, and when we reached the group with the biologists, they were very obliging. Later we found out that the hotel did not want us to see the turtles on their beach because they were charging their own guests \$15 each for the privilege. Earlier that week we went to Tancha (a few kilometers north of Tulum ruins), where land is privately owned but not yet developed. The developers had stationed a guard at the beach road and were charging about \$1 per person to get in. About 20 of my Maya friends, who had already paid about \$10 for a truck ride, got by without paying by saying they were just looking for someone. While tourism clearly dominates the local economy, it has had mixed consequences for the local residents, who are losing access to local beaches and lands.

Ambiguous Interpretations of the Past and the Present

Mayas of diverse generations, experiences, and statuses had complex and sometimes contradictory understandings about whether life was better in the past or the present, and I often heard rich and poor, youth and elders alike contrast the comforts of modernization and the tourist era with the difficulties and hardships of the past. Those who were middle-aged and older had personally experienced radical changes in lifestyle and often chatted about the adversities of the old days. They recalled simple lives and struggles with health problems, droughts, shortages of food, and the elders' having to rely on last choice foods that were eaten during years of drought, including a type of snail known as *ciguas*,⁸ and stinky but nutritious turtle eggs, many of which are now forbidden or endangered. Elders passed on their knowledge about how much harder it was to live in the past, recalling that Tulum only had a handful of extended families to support each other. Even young people knew that, in addition to occasional food shortages, there had been no lights, no doctors, no television, and no radio. When the sun went down, people went to bed. Women particularly related to stories about women or children dying in childbirth due to lack of access to modern health care and transportation.

In contrast, the dominant discourse about the contemporary tourist era is that Tulum now has "everything." Discussions about the present often centered on the things—mostly industrialized services and commercial commodities—that were not available in the past. Stores were usually mentioned first, along with a list of commodities that are now considered essential: sugar and coffee (which ironically drove colonial plantation economies), clothes, soaps and detergents, and other packaged and processed foods and drinks. Also enumerated were doctors and health services; electricity and lights; running water; people; entertainment, including music, radios, television and dances; and the omnipresent roads, cars, and buses for speedy transportation.

During most evenings I visited with Maya women and their families at the Iglesia Maya or outside their homes. We watched the hustle and bustle as people (mostly women and

children) shopped in the stores surrounding the Maya *cancha* (combination town square and basketball court), walked on their visits and errands, played in the basketball court, rode their bikes, watched television, or listened to music. Even when elderly Mayas complained about sociocultural changes in the world (e.g., increased drinking and high rates of divorce), they appreciated the pleasurable conveniences and commodities of the contemporary tourist era and recognized Tulum's place as a privileged supplier of jobs and higher wages.

Despite the dichotomized discourse about the physical adversities of the past and modern improvements of the present, locals fondly remembered the prolific resources and fertility of their environment. The oral traditions of middle-aged and older women mirror those of neighboring Maya men reported by Hostettler (1996:346-349). Often, themes centered on the fertility of the land and the abundance and availability of food, as evidenced in this interview with Doña Francisca:

Before you had everything, like to eat.... If you planted beans, if you planted squash, if you planted watermelon, or corn, just like that—you planted a few fields and you would have it all to harvest. [Interview, June 5 1992:2]

In the past, food, including game meat, was normally diverse and abundant for everyone, but during occasional droughts, almost unobtainable for anyone. Now they marvel that they are surrounded by all kinds of exotic foods, but complain that it is difficult to buy or obtain a diverse and abundant diet.

Similarly, Maya oral traditions include nostalgic remembrances of community reciprocity, egalitarian social relations, communal sharing of food and resources, religious devotion, and generosity of assistance from the small community. To account for retrospective bias about the "old days," I asked people to characterize as many members of the founding families as possible. Although a few individuals were described as jealous, selfish, or violent, most members of Tulum's founding families were characterized as caring, respectful, and generous.⁹ For example, Doña Thelma, a middle-aged woman, was mindful of the charity and fraternity—what social scientists would call reciprocity and interdependence—that characterized the elders. When I interviewed her, she reported that:

The people here were very, very good people.... They had everything! When you went to ask for something, they just gave it to you.... That epoch was very good.... It was like living between siblings! You went to ask for a little of something, and they gave it to you. And then they would go ask somewhere else, and it was the same. [Interview, April 17, 1993:25-26]

People's generosity and the ideology of reciprocity palliated the experiences of poverty, hard times, and corn shortages. There was always a milpa nearby, and folks relied on hunting and gathering of now depleted sea and forest

resources to supplement corn and milpa products during times of scarcity. Although you could not buy corn or other foods—even if you had money—most people shared resources and behaved as siblings in an “extended family.” Doña Thelma’s correlation of social relations with siblinghood is significant because, while my research showed that family relations were often filled with conflict and competition, sibling relations were the least antagonistic. Moreover, Mayas do not represent the differences in generous and reciprocal social relations today as qualitatively distinct from those of the past. They still characterize the majority of social relations as marked by generosity and reciprocity, even among most immigrants and new acquaintances. But proportionately things are different. In the past they developed intimate, reciprocal relations with almost everyone in Tulum—today Tulum includes thousands of persons but they will only develop intimate, reciprocal relations with a few, and impersonal commercial relations with many (cf. Collier and Quaratiello 1994: Chapter 5). Accordingly, Pi-Sunyer and Brooke Thomas (1997:198), were surprised by how little people in the tourist industry knew about Mayas.

Many Mayas use metaphorical language or narrative forms to discuss “scientific” knowledge of their environment. Today they recognize that contemporary developments have hurt the region’s ecology, and this knowledge, often expressed metaphorically, forms an important part of their everyday conversations. Roads are a key metaphor in Maya cultural logic and prophetic and oral traditions (Burns 1992). Like scholars (see McLaren 1998; Chias Becerril 1990), Mayas also acknowledge that roads marked and enabled the shift to commercialization, as heard in this common refrain.

Since there was no highway, there was nothing. There were no jobs, no construction workers, nothing. People just worked in the milpa, or gathered a little bit of chicle.
[Doña Francisca, June 5, 1992:2-3]

Mayas explained that roads and the noise of the buses and other vehicles drove game to retreat into the deep forest (cf. Hostettler 1996:346). The buses do in fact drive game farther away; highways and their traffic tangibly contributed to the overall depletion or extinction of fauna. Moreover, roads and buses have been the means by which outsiders have exploited, extracted, and controlled the land and natural resources.

But Mayas are not surprised by the region’s radical changes. Prophecies and divination have been essential in Maya cultural logic (see Freidel, Schele, and Parker 1993; Farriss 1987; and Sullivan 1983), and continue to be used in Tulum and elsewhere to understand and make sense of the changing world. Their experience of radical change is being incorporated into their cyclic understanding of time and history, and specifically their prophecies about the *wutz* of the world, expected to happen shortly after the year 2000. Although the *wutz* is commonly interpreted as referring to the

end of the world, it is more of an inversion, or turning, and the beginning of a new era (Sullivan 1983). While contemporary Mayas often interpret the *wutz* in terms of Christian millenarianism and the coming of “The Lord,” this will not be a time of final judgment, but rather a time when Mayas will regain control of their land and their lives.¹⁰ The elders foretold that fields would no longer be productive, food would be scarce, humans would lose both the desire and the ability to procreate, young children would die, people would wear gold shoes and clothes, they would be surrounded by people speaking many languages, and they would have to buy water, among many other points. According to many Mayas, these things are all coming to pass. While Mayas critique some contemporary changes, many understand the tremendous changes of the tourist era in the context of their prophetic tradition.

Globalization and Inequality

Although Mayas have never been strangers to global economies, proletarianization, and consumption of commodities (Juárez 1996, 2002), it was not until the building of roads and the tourist era that these processes dominated their lives. Since the tourist era, the level of commodity consumption has increased dramatically, and some scholars suggest that even the nature of consumption has shifted with increased globalization (cf. Miles 1998:3-5). Tulum’s move away from subsistence and milpa making is due not solely to ecological degradation and lower agricultural yields, but also to broader changes in culture and political economy. As George Collier (1990) has suggested, societies once oriented to “seeking food” can shift their primary orientation to “seeking money,” resulting in fundamental social and political changes. In Tulum, the intensified desire to purchase and consume modern commodities has been incorporated into oral traditions as “the need for money,” as suggested in this interview with Doña Francisca:

What you also lack now—for someone who makes milpa—is money. Because money, since you are working in the milpa, well, where are you going to get some money? That’s what’s hard for milpa makers also. Of course you have things to eat, they have all of that. But to just buy something like that, they don’t have any money.
[June 5, 1992:2-3]

Commercialized patterns of consumption are essential for the shift to globalization. As Gabriel and Lang (1995, cited in Miles 1998:148-149) have noted in their analyses of the nature of consumerism, people must first “choose” to get money in order to actively “choose” consumer goods. Mayas clearly understand that nowadays not only are *milperos* (corn farmers) forced to work harder to eat, they need money to buy things. If they do not work for wages, they are not able to live like the people who now surround them. Regrettably, even when they “choose” wage labor or commercial enterprises, they are rarely able to “choose” the same commodities and

services as those chosen by their wealthier and usually “whiter” neighbors and tourists because of their social and racially based subordinate status (Wolf 1982; Gregory and Sanjek 1994). The lack of cash for commodity consumption, then, is what truly makes life hard for wage workers, and especially milperos, in the tourist era.

Although a few Mayas settle for steady work in better-paid industries such as construction or fishing, allowing them to support families and maybe even improve their lot, more commonly they flit from job to job in search of better work. Pedro, a 23-year-old who started working when he was 14 initially helped his uncle make milpa or build *palapas* (indigenous-style buildings constructed of wood poles lashed together and covered with a palm-thatched roof), and then worked for several years in a hotel earning about \$65 a week, less \$20 for transportation. He recently quit in search of higher earnings and decided to try fishing (like his father and brother) because he has more flexibility and can earn up to \$25 per day. Unfortunately, fishing is very seasonal, and earnings are normally much lower, so his mother does not want him to fish. Penni, a 16-year-old who is just entering the work force, debated taking an easy but lower-paying job as a clothing store clerk. Instead, she started working as a chamber maid in an Akumal resort—also earning about \$65 per week, including tips—for long hours of hard work. Almost all work histories are marked by frequent changes in the search for stable and decent jobs, but employers interpret job changes as the mark of an undisciplined work force.

While modernization and changes in Tulum have certainly brought many benefits, these changes also positioned Mayas as a structurally and ideologically inferior class of humans. A major theme that ran throughout all the discourses concerning the tourist era was the ever-present stratification and inequality, and the ever-looming need for money and its concomitant, power. Positioned in a commercial economy that values consumption yet devalues their labor and assets, Mayas realize they have little access to either the means of production or even their own resources. Their relative poverty and omnipresent cash deficits are expressed in the frequently heard refrain, “What is lacking today is money.” Money is all that keeps people from buying fantastical, luxurious commodities such as the “gold” shoes and clothing prophesied by the elders. Moreover, the kind of money they want most is dollars—sarcastically referred to in Spanish as *dolores*, or pains—because they are the most stable and powerful kind of cash.

Every day Maya women and men see and experience tremendous differences and inequalities between human beings, either as neighbors or tourists, right in their midst, or as newsmakers or characters on television. Some folks have luxuries and money to spend in their leisure; others struggle to achieve new standards; many struggle to survive with limited resources. Mayas of all generations lament their poverty and subordination as they notice others consuming both luxuries and necessities. Thus, while most Mayas in Tulum appreciate touristic transformations, including industrial and

electronic technologies and commodities, the building of beautiful homes and gardens, urban boulevards and landscapes, and cultural and economic alternatives and opportunities, they simultaneously critique their oppressed and subordinate status within the new economy.

Ambiguities and contradictions in Maya stories about the present and past represent an astute recognition of their life experiences and histories, but they are also more than that. They are critiques, not of globalization per se, but rather of their position within globalizing national and world systems. Unfortunately for Mayas, they realize their attempts to achieve autonomy through their resistance-based social organization have been obstructed. However, in 1986, Tulum’s Iglesia Maya was revitalized when its miraculous cross—which had been residing in a rival Maya ceremonial center—refused to leave. On one of its occasional pilgrimages, the men responsible for returning the cross reported they were no longer able to lift it, and it was determined that the cross wanted to stay home in Tulum. The cross subsequently demanded devotion from Tulum residents and led to a revitalization of the Iglesia Maya. Since Mayas have proven to be experts at transforming cultural practices and cultural logic in changing environments (cf. Collier, Mountjoy, and Nigh 1994), there is no reason to believe the tourist era will be different. I would not be surprised if new interpretations of the coming wutz go beyond the customary prophecies to include expectations of good jobs, decent wages, decreased disparities of wealth, and the personalization of commercial exchanges. If academics, policy analysts, and corporate developers want to alleviate the severe social and ethnic stratification found in one of Mexico’s wealthiest states, they would do well to listen to Maya interpretations of their changing environment.

Notes

¹For general books and essays on tourism see Crick 1989; Kinnaird 1994; Smith 1989; Sinclair 1997; Chambers 1997; Grabum and Moore 1994; Cheong and Miller 2000; Faulkenberry et al. 2000; and Enloe 1989. For works on Maya globalization and tourism see Nash 1993; van den Berghe 1994; Hernández Castillo and Nigh 1998; Collier and Quaratiello 1994; Collier, Mountjoy, and Nigh 1994; Arizpe, Paz, and Velázquez 1996; Primack et al. 1998; and Wilk 1991. Scholarship specific to the Yucatec or Santa Cruz Maya area includes Hostettler 1996, 2001; Gubler and Hostettler 1995; Arzápalo Marín and Gubler 1997; Weinbaum 1997; Re Cruz 1996, 1998; Castañeda 1996; Sullivan 1983, 1989; and Brown 1999.

²Mexicans and Yucatecs popularly attributed these uprisings to Mayas’ racial hostility against whites in order to delegitimize Maya demands, hence the name Caste War. Scholars continue to debate the primacy of racial stratification as opposed to other criteria in causing the war. Both Rugeley (1996) and Dumond (1997) recently minimized the importance of race, in part because mestizos were also involved in the movement. Despite the fact that Indians did not simply hate whites, or that both Mayas and mestizos were involved, the movement was racial in the sense that the “rebels” were fighting against social injustice and exploitation that were clearly mediated by race, and they used race-based categories to develop their ideology and agenda (cf. Reed 1997).

³Although historians of the Caste War differ significantly in the primacy of these factors, most would agree that a combination of historical policies and events contributed to its development. The extensive literature related to the Caste War includes Reed 1964, 1997; Montalvo-Ortega 1988; Bricker 1981; Patch 1993; Jones 1989; Farriss 1984; Rugeley 1996; Sullivan 1989; Gann 1918; Dumond 1977, 1985, 1997; Villa Rojas 1945; Bartolomé 1988; Barabas 1987; Bartolomé and Barabas 1977; and Lapointe 1983.

⁴All names of persons are pseudonyms.

⁵Significantly, when we travelled to Cancun, my passengers rarely saw anyone they recognized on the road; their "community" lay to the south and west, toward their ejidos and the other Iglesia Maya villages. The unaccustomed eye does not recognize these openings or trails into the forest, although many are "formally" marked with arranged branches or other "signs."

⁶People on the Coba road were more likely to be hawking parrots or pizotes [badger or coat] to tourists visting the Coba ruins.

⁷After several decades of relative stability, Tulum's ejidatarios petitioned the state to grant them more lands in the 1970s (Secretaría de la Reforma Agraria 1974).

⁸This may be a regional term applied to a black and white ocean snail that has no commercial value. It may be derived from the Mexican Spanish term *ciguatera* which refers to poisoning due to the consumption of rotting fish and shellfish.

⁹See Juárez 2001 regarding marital conflict and generational change in Maya marriages.

¹⁰Commonly, the coming "lord" or "god" is referred to as *Dios* (God), *Mundo* (World), *Las Tres Cruces* (The Three Crosses), *Santo Cristo Las Tres Cruces* (Holy Christ the Three Crosses), or *La Santísima Cruz* (The Most Holy Cross).

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