

Cultural Appreciation and Economic Depreciation of the Mayas of Northern Yucatán, Mexico

by

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Translated by Mary Richardson

In March 2001, as part of its Puebla-Panama Plan,¹ the Mexican government proposed the creation of some 92 maquiladoras that would generate about 37,000 “well-paid” jobs in southeastern Mexico. Although this proposal was presented as a great novelty, in the state of Yucatán alone there were already 131 maquiladoras generating over 31,000 jobs, many of which paid no more than a daily minimum wage—a less enticing picture of the job opportunities than had been suggested. Most likely it was assumed that few people, even specialists on Mexico and activists who might oppose the plan, had any real knowledge of the situation in the region. The reality of Yucatán’s maquiladoras and their employees could, however, be indicative of what may be expected in the regions targeted by the program.

The multiplication of maquiladoras in Yucatán has been even more stunning than elsewhere in the country. Between 1994, when the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) took effect, and 2001, a huge number of maquiladoras set up shop in the state, particularly in the countryside. The number of maquiladoras climbed from 31 to 131 and the number of people working in them from 5,170 to 31,540 (Table 1).

In comparison with the situation elsewhere in the country, these increases can legitimately be considered dazzling. In the same period the total number of maquiladoras in Mexico went from 2,064 to 3,735 and the number of workers from 600,585 to 1,210,825.

Contrary to what one might think, given that most of the maquiladoras are U.S. capital, the decline did not begin with the events of September 2001. On the national level, the number of people working in maquiladoras started to

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TABLE 1
Maquiladoras in Yucatán and Mexico 1994–2003

	1994	2001	Increase since 1994 (%)	2003	Decrease in Relation to Peak (%)
Yucatán					
Number of maquiladoras	31	131	322	89	32
Number of workers	5,170	31,540	510	28,747	8
Mexico					
Number of maquiladoras	2,064	3,735	80	2,838	24
Number of workers	600,585	1,210,825	102	1,055,383	13

Source: INEGI (2003).

decrease in November 2000 and the number of establishments in July 2001, while in Yucatán the decreases began in December 2000 and October 2001 respectively. Since then the number of employees and establishments on both national and state levels has been in free fall. The decrease in the number of workers between the peak and December 2003, the date of the most recent official statistics, was about 13 percent nationally and 8 percent in Yucatán. At the same time, the number of maquiladoras in the nation as a whole decreased by 24 percent and in Yucatán by 32 percent, suggesting that in that state it was the smaller maquiladoras (with the fewest workers) that closed their doors during those years. The proportion of women workers in the maquiladoras went from 51 percent in 2000 to 49 percent in 2003 for the country as a whole and from 55 percent in 2000 to 52 percent in 2003 in Yucatán.

Of course, the events of September 2001 and the war in Afghanistan only accentuated the decline. Hurricane Isidoro certainly did not help, nor did the war on Iraq, whose impact on the world economy in general and the Mexican economy in particular remains to be analyzed. However, another important event had a more direct impact on the behavior of maquiladoras, and that was China's entrance into the World Trade Organization (WTO) in November 2001. This made it easier for the United States to access that market, and the Chinese workforce is much cheaper than Mexico's (US\$.40 an hour compared with US\$1.20 in Tijuana)² (Ross 2002). Even being part of NAFTA is not enough (Black, 2002). Maquiladoras are moving out of the country, and in China the low pay combines with the lower cost of ocean transportation, making it "more profitable to move plants across the globe rather than a mile across the US border" (Mackler, 2002).

Given this situation, it is understandable that President Vicente Fox is stepping up efforts to continue attracting maquiladoras to Mexico, particularly to the south of the country, where wages are among the lowest in the republic. Whereas the weekly wage at the border is 600 pesos, it is 300 pesos in Yucatán, which works out to about US\$.42 an hour for a 72-hour work week. The comparative advantage is therefore still a reality, and it is clearly located in the south of Mexico. The Puebla-Panama Plan is part of these efforts (Ross, 2002). It is interesting that when Hurricane Isidoro struck in September 2002, it was money from one of the many programs of the Puebla-Panama Plan that was used to compensate disaster-stricken businesses, including maquiladoras (*Diario de Yucatán*, 2003a). Moreover, the *Marcha hacia el Sur* program was designed to provide businesses, old or new, with between 2,000 and 4,000 pesos for each new employee (Mexico Connect, 2002), a prime example of the use of public funds to finance private and/or transnational enterprise.

This is the background against which I wish to examine the processes of cultural appreciation—a process by which culture is valued—and economic depreciation affecting the Maya population of northern Yucatán working in the region's maquiladoras. My hypothesis is that, in spite of the current decline, the spread of maquiladoras in the region is and will continue to be grounded in these apparently contradictory processes.

A HIGH-QUALITY LABOR FORCE

The maquiladoras in Yucatán are mostly garment manufacturers, many of which produce jeans. Some 9,000 workers in three companies—Monty Industries Ltd., Jordache Enterprises, and Manufacturas Lees—produce 62.4 million pairs of jeans a year. These jeans end up in the markets of the U.S.A., Canada, Japan, Germany, and elsewhere. The brand names include Levi Strauss, Lee, Wrangler, Ruster, Jordache, Gap, Polo Ralph Lauren, Eddie Bauer, JC Penney, Banana Republic, Ann Taylor, and L.A. Blues (*Diario de Yucatán*, November 25, 2002). Maquiladora owners praise the quality of the workforce: “The women come with excellent manual skills that we need in clothing manufacture, learned in their homes from sewing beautiful huipiles” (*Latin Trade*, 2001).³ However, they are somewhat more reticent on the subject of the real comparative advantage of being in the south of the country rather than on the northern border.

The region's workers have a distinct history linked with their ethnic definition as Yucatecan Mayas. That definition has been one of the factors in an

economic condition characterized by generalized poverty that is a component of the low wages that plague the region today. For maquiladoras to continue moving to the region and, especially, for them to stay there, the comparative advantage must be maintained. Several factors play a role in the continued depreciation of the workforce. One factor is related to the discourse used by the state to attract capital to the region. The challenge is not to be underestimated. The state must praise the quality of the workforce while emphasizing its low cost. Since Yucatán is one of the sites of Mayan culture, I have wondered whether an ethnic argument is being used in the discourse of the state and whether the stereotypes that stigmatize relatively powerless local populations contribute to a depreciation of their workforce.

To answer these questions, I have examined the advertising designed by the state government for potential entrepreneurs in the form of brochures and maps either on paper or in electronic form. Of course, these represent only a small portion of the state's discourse on its workers, but it is interesting in that it constitutes a local expression of a broader discourse that takes in the northern border of Mexico. However, in order to accommodate the unique character of Yucatán, the local discourse has to be different. As we will see, it uses the regional contrasts between the northern border and the "other" border to its advantage.

The main document to which I will refer is a brochure entitled "Yucatán—The New Frontier for Business" (Gobierno del Estado de Yucatán, n.d.). On one side of the piece of paper folded in two and then six there is a detailed map of Yucatán showing the main roads and some side roads, the highways (including a toll expressway to Cancún in the neighboring state of Quintana Roo), the railroads, the boundaries between municipalities, and the archaeological sites. There are also two tables, one showing the distances between the main towns and another showing the towns' populations. (The towns with maquiladoras are not identified.) On the other side are the following headings: "Ample Infrastructure," "Easy Access," "Essential Network," "Paradise Found," "Quality of Life," and "Productive People." Under the latter we read:

Productive people. Distinct cultural characteristics give Yucatecan workers specific advantages over those from other industrialized areas. The initiative and inventiveness of our workers is valued . . . as is their patience and dedication. Their desire for stability, to live and work in their community, and their strong work ethic account for our low turn over, low absenteeism, and excellent employer/employee relations. The native Yucatecan excels in traditional craft. Manual dexterity. An eye for detail. Patience to concentrate on parts of the whole. These are qualities that allow them to excel at intricate production processes.

Although the true meaning of “native” in the expression “native Yucatecan” would be worth questioning, those reading the brochure will no doubt have deduced that these “native Yucatecans” are indigenous people, since the term is closely related to that of “traditional craft” and Canadians and Americans tend to associate crafts with indigenous people.⁴ What the words do not say the images do. On the first side of the brochure, which serves as the cover, there is a photo of the Pyramid of the Magician from the “recent classic” site of Uxmal. The Mayan people and therefore their ethnic definition in general are presented in this advertisement in much the same way that Hervik has described in his analysis of photos and texts concerning the Mayas in *National Geographic*, where modern and ancient Mayas are uncritically placed side by side (Hervik, 1999a: 174). I will discuss the connections between this ethnic argument and the cultural appreciation and economic depreciation of the workforce in northern Yucatán, joining others who have focused attention on the many ways in which “culture” is used to mask the dynamics of social relations (see Abu-Lughod, 1991).

THE CONSTRUCTION OF INDIAN ETHNIC IDENTITY IN NORTHERN YUCATÁN

For anthropologists generally and increasingly for tourists, Yucatán evokes images of ancestral and contemporary Mayan culture. The villages in the henequen region in the north of the state, where I have carried out most of my research since the 1970s, are considered by anthropologists to be Mayan villages. According to the 1995 census, the indigenous population of Yucatán was estimated to be 825,394. This places it fourth, after the states of Oaxaca, Chiapas, and Veracruz, in number of indigenous people and second, after Oaxaca, in the proportion of indigenous people in the total population (56.89% for Oaxaca and 53.01% for the Yucatán in 1995) (INI, n.d.).⁵ In the 1990s, half of the population considered Maya in the state was concentrated in the henequen region; these Mayas are also referred to as *Mayas henequeneros* (CDI, n.d.).⁶ However, in northern Yucatán “Maya” is a term used only rarely by indigenous people themselves. At most, it has been used to refer to the language spoken by a portion of the population. In the context of indigenous claims and cultural affirmations on the international, national, and local levels, this situation needs some explaining.

The history of the identity of the population of northern Yucatán is connected to social categories that go back to the colonial period. From the beginnings of the colony, certain types of work were associated with particu-

lar ethnic categories. It was during that period that the racial criteria used to distinguish between whites, mestizos, and Indians were consolidated. To distinguish between different social categories, Yucatecan society, with the Catholic Church at its head, established social and cultural criteria such as dress codes, family names, local government positions, occupations, and strict rules for social conduct. From that time on, the markers of identity were not skin color or blood but language, dress, and family names. The distinction between whites, mestizos, and Indians continued, and at the end of the colonial period their respective numbers were estimated at 70,000, 55,000, and 375,000 (Hervik, 1999b: 39–42).

The Caste War, which raged in Yucatán from 1847 to 1848 and whose effects were felt into the early twentieth century, had a crucial impact on the social structure and social categorization of Mayas (Hervik, 1999b: 43). Following the 1853 peace agreement, the “pacified” Indians and the hacienda Indians began to call themselves “mestizos,” as opposed to *masewales*, that is, Indians who worshipped the “talking cross” and who were in favor of continuing the war. Hervik considers the adoption of the term “mestizo” by the Indians “a linguistic act that served to consolidate their dissociation from those rebels who kept up resistance” (1999b: 44). The term “mestizo” was eventually consolidated, and today in northern Yucatán it is what is used to refer to people who speak Maya, work the milpa,⁷ know how to produce and process corn, and carry out traditional ceremonies. Mestiza women wear the huipil, *justán* (a petticoat worn under the huipil), and shawl; mestizo men wear sandals. As Castañeda (2004: 41) points out, “the terms ‘Indian,’ ‘ladino,’ ‘mestizo,’ ‘indigenous’ are not equivalent across the Maya world. . . . Even in the Maya region of Yucatán . . . these terms do not have any stable meaning.” In contrast to the situation in other parts of Mexico and Guatemala, the term “mestizo” as used in Yucatán in no way refers to a blend between indigenous and Spanish. In Yucatán it conveys an ethnic division within Mayan identity. While it is not useful for the purposes of this article to go into the complexities of the terms used for self-identification by the Yucatecan Mayas, suffice it to say that terms such as *masewal*, *otzil*, *humilde*, *mayero*, and *catrín* are also expressions of such divisions (Castañeda, 2004: 53).

The ways in which identity is defined have changed and continue to change under the impact, most notably, of economic transformations. In spite of the fact that 25–50 percent of the inhabitants of the villages in northern Yucatán still speak Maya at home, the term “mestizo” is now being replaced by the term “Yucateco” or “Mexicano” (as Hervik [1999b: 53] observed at Oxtutzcab, farther south). As I have pointed out, one of the elements of mestizo identity from the time of the colony, at least for men, was occupation, and

since the 1970s many young men who were socialized to work the land have no longer had access to agricultural labor. As a result, more and more mestizos have gradually become cut off from one of the elements of their identity, that is, the campesino, or peasant, element and, more specifically, their identity as poor peasants, for often Yucatecan peasants say of themselves, “*Somos pobres*—We are poor” (Greene, 1996: 14). But it is always possible that they might return to the land, and some of them maintain that connection by helping their fathers work the land from time to time or by giving a portion of their wages as migrant workers to support farm work.

MARKERS OF IDENTITY, SOCIAL CHANGE, AND STEREOTYPES

Today, at a time when the henequen plantations have almost completely disappeared, communal lands are being privatized,⁸ the new government is encouraging small businesses, and maquiladoras have spread across the state, what defines people’s identity is still changing. Globalization and the compression of space and time will likely steer those definitions in new and unexpected directions and affect them in unforeseeable ways. Even at a time when the Mayas of Chiapas are claiming the right to the recognition of their unique cultural identity,⁹ Yucatecans still do not make a radical distinction between Mayas and non-Mayas. Yet they do not hesitate to use the markers of identity for special occasions or during religious, economic, or political ceremonies. Thus, when a dignitary visits a village, there is always entertainment featuring women dressed as mestizas (see Gauthier, 2002).

It appears that the markers of ethnic Indian identity have been transformed into political instruments used by the dominant class (and no doubt the state) to rally a certain segment of the population, some of whom still hold dear the values that those markers evoke while others have distanced themselves from the plight of poor peasants. Indeed, these days, because of the shifts in economic patterns, employment diversification, and a certain social mobility, it is clear that the markers of ethnic Indian identity do not mean the same thing to everyone. For some they are still a daily reality; for others they are a symbol that reminds them of a past condition and that may sometimes be disdained and sometimes valued. This translates into very different motives for wearing the huipil; the huipil worn for political ends is not the same huipil that is worn in everyday life. The “political” huipil is elegant; the fabric is high-quality and the embroidery complex. The women wearing it are well educated and can afford it. These days, female university professors systematically wear huipiles, as do women mayors, members of Congress, and

businesswomen, and they do not all wear them for the same reasons: in the case of mayors and members of Congress, wearing a huipil is a political statement, whereas other women wear it simply because its roominess and lack of tailoring are well suited to the climate and hide any excess weight. Whatever the case, it certainly does not accentuate women's curves; indeed, the monks imposed it on Indian women during the colonial period specifically to hide women's bare breasts. Nowadays it allows upper-class women to appear elegant without having to worry about Western standards of decency and ideal body type.

While dressing like a mestiza may have the effect of honoring mestiza women, dressing better than they may instead depreciate those mestizas who are simply wearing their everyday clothes rather than using them to show their political stripes. Such practices gradually trap Yucatecan mestiza women in a contradiction that simultaneously plays in their favor and works against them. This contradiction is extended to the whole poor peasant population because Yucatecans do not distinguish between who is Maya and who is not. By wearing the huipil, middle- and upper-class women are appropriating the right to speak on behalf of and to represent the "Other." As Riggins (1997: 9) says, "The rhetoric of Othering dehumanizes and diminishes groups, making it easier for victimizers to seize land, exploit labor, and exert control while minimizing the complicating emotions of guilt and shame."

The markers of Indian identity, such as clothing, serve many, often contradictory, social functions. They are a fertile breeding ground for stereotypes. One of the stereotypes that stigmatizes the people of northern Yucatán is that of the lazy Maya. A young businessman in Cancún voiced it clearly to me in the spring of 2001: "I know that you are an anthropologist and you will hate me for saying so, but the people from inland—the villages of Yucatán—who come here where there is plenty of work do not want to work. They are lazy. They spend their days doing nothing while we need employees!" At the same time, this young man continually praised the qualities of one of his main employees, who came from one of those inland villages.

According to Michael Herzfeld (1992: 67), all stereotypes are by definition simplistic. They always point to the *absence* of a supposedly desirable property. In the case at hand, the stereotype of the Maya who does not want to work corresponds to that definition. Given that the state wants to prevent the closing of maquiladoras in the region and to encourage the establishment of new ones, this stereotype could of course be detrimental. Civil servants are well aware of this and therefore insist on the high quality of the workforce. What I wish to demonstrate is that although this rhetoric, which insists on the *presence* of something, may contribute to a cultural appreciation of the workers, it does not prevent their economic depreciation.

STEREOTYPES, CONTRADICTIONS, AND EXPLOITATION

A demonstration of how this rhetoric works, how it is rooted in power, and what contradictions it leads to in terms of labor exploitation is particularly timely because, in spite of the fact that existing maquiladoras are fleeing to Central America and China, the Puebla-Panama Plan continues to propose maquiladoras as an economic model for “developing” the south of the country. Indeed, there is much to suggest that Yucatán has been a veritable laboratory for the Puebla-Panama Plan. As pointed out above, between 1994 and 2001, that is, in barely seven years, over 100 maquiladoras, particularly in the ready-to-wear clothing sector, arrived in the state, half of them in rural areas on the outskirts of as many small towns and large villages.

What has made it possible for maquiladoras to move into Yucatán in such numbers is of course the interests of multinationals, but the state has also led an extremely aggressive campaign and put very attractive measures in place. Not only have industrial parks been built all around the capital, but Mérida has been systematically linked to the villages in the region by a series of highways that go around the many small villages and haciendas that would otherwise slow down traffic. The map on the brochure described earlier clearly illustrates this. The Mérida airport and the port town of Progreso have been radically improved to make it easier for business people to get around and to import materials and export finished products. Other projects for improving infrastructure, particularly electricity, have been completed, and subsidized work training programs have been developed. In short, no effort has been spared in order to attract international enterprise to the region.

At first glance, Yucatán is not a logical destination for multinational enterprise. First, it is far from the U.S. border. Although the government may point out that it is a 2-hour flight or a 32-hour boat ride from the United States, the state’s maquiladoras can hardly compete with those on the northern border. There is only one area in which they still have a comparative advantage, and that is labor costs. Although training programs have been set up, the workforce is far from being specialized and well trained. This does not seem to be an obstacle for the maquiladoras in the ready-to-wear clothing sector, which must settle for less-educated employees than the electronics sector if they want to maintain a good profit margin. The fact that wages for workers in Yucatán are 50 percent lower than wages on the northern border is undoubtedly the comparative advantage that they need. And it is that bottom line that must constantly be protected, now more than ever. This is where the stereotypes with ethnic or essentialist connotations come into play, whether they are being conveyed by the people themselves or by foreign entrepreneurs.

Returning to the excerpt from the brochure quoted above, I want to comment on it in terms of ethnographic information to shed light on its essentialist aspects and contradictions: “The native Yucatecan excels in traditional craft. Manual dexterity. An eye for detail. Patience to concentrate on parts of the whole. These are qualities that allow them to excel at intricate production processes.” The promoters are not the only ones to refer to the fact that in Yucatán the rural population is familiar with sewing, embroidery, and weaving (especially hammocks). This statement has a concrete historical basis. For many decades, alongside the production of henequen, peasants made clothing and hammocks, usually subcontracting for small business people in Mérida or in small towns nearby. Almost all rural households have sewing machines, looms for weaving hammocks, and embroidery canvases. As the president of the Consejo de la Cadena Industrial, Textil y del Vestido said recently: “We are the heirs of the textile culture because sewing machines are used in even the smallest villages where there is no electricity” (*Diario de Yucatán*, 2003b). The assertion that the population is accustomed to work that requires dexterity and attention to detail is a familiar one. The economic effect of this essentialist notion (“It is natural for them to sew”) is that there is no need to pay them for their familiarity with such work. In reality, industrial sewing machines and the operations they require bear little resemblance to home sewing, weaving, or embroidery. Many people have never touched a sewing machine in their lives and find it difficult to work in maquiladoras because, as some of them have confided to me, they are afraid of the machine. Moreover, the operations are extremely fragmented. They represent only a fraction of the production process and do not require any of the creativity needed to sew for one’s family.

Elsewhere the brochure points to Yucatecan workers’ “desire for stability, to live and work in their community.” This idea, which is often reiterated in writings on the Mayas, is based on a belief in the homogeneity of the community and an imaginary connection among the individuals that make it up. In reality, there is a hierarchy between the towns and villages of northern Yucatán; they are not all the same size, and they are far from having a common history. Each community has its own structure and is distinct in various aspects, including language. If “community” means “place of residence,” the notion that Yucatecans work or wish to work in their communities is open to question. Although the current situation is not comparable to that on the northern border, Yucatecan workers do usually have to travel to work. They generally spend between a half hour and three hours a day commuting either on foot, by bicycle, on a delivery tricycle, in a collective taxi, or by bus. Workers do not always come from the place where the maquiladora is located, and there are often major differences between towns.

As for the purported desire for stability, it is true that the turnover rate in the maquiladoras in Yucatán is only about 3 percent, perhaps only 2 percent,¹⁰ whereas turnover is one of the main problems on the northern border. Although I would not go so far as to cast doubt on this statistic, the recent history of maquiladoras in Yucatán suggests that achieving this low turnover rate took some effort. According to Castilla and Torres (1994: 100),

The arrival of Taylorism in Yucatecan factories led to symptoms of rejection because the rationality required by the work discipline was in contradiction with local culture. The resistance of Yucatecan workers to production demands was expressed in 1985 [the year the first maquiladora was set up in Mérida] in one of the businesses by a general strike and increased rates of turnover, absenteeism, and desertion in almost all factories. These events were very meaningful for foreign businesspeople, who had to rethink how they managed the workforce in terms of the pursuit of new social pacts.¹¹

The pursuit of new social pacts must be supported by prior conditioning of the target population. In my 1986–1988 study of women’s agricultural and industrial cooperatives, time management was the main challenge for the civil servants supervising the production projects. Peasants were used to managing their time themselves, and the transition from agricultural work in the milpa or domestic work to productive projects benefiting from credit or factory work required a redefinition of the workforce through the discipline of work schedules. Indeed, I saw civil servants attempting to persuade women who did gardening or crafts as part of the projects to follow a regular work schedule even when it was absurd to do so (Labrecque, 1991).

Another indication that the turnover rate in maquiladoras may be more than 3 percent or at least that people are not necessarily going in droves to be hired is that the maquiladoras seem constantly to be in hiring mode. This is evidenced by the banners spanning the entrance to villages inviting workers to apply. The interviews I conducted in the summers of 2000 and 2002 show that workers quickly grow weary not necessarily of working in maquiladoras but of working in *certain* maquiladoras. Sometimes they look for work at other maquiladoras because they want to be with their friends, but more often they do so because they have heard that working conditions are better there. And it is true that human resources are managed differently depending on whether the investment capital is American, Canadian, Chinese, or Korean. It is clear that the government wants to use the low turnover rate as a comparative advantage to attract other maquiladoras. How is the turnover rate reached? By better wages, better working conditions, better fringe benefits? On the contrary. It is reached through the intrinsic qualities of the workers. And what is responsible for those qualities? Their culture, which in the case

of a population that is considered to be indigenous (although that is never stated) is in effect their nature. Does the advertisement not say “Distinct cultural characteristics give Yucatecan workers specific advantages over those from other industrialized areas”?

ESSENTIALISM, EXPLOITATION, AND RESISTANCE

There is nothing new about discourses that refer to the essential nature of the workforce. In fact, they have been the constant companion of maquiladoras since the 1960s. Women, first and foremost, have been the object of such discourses, which have emphasized their dexterity and docility, attributing these characteristics to their nature rather than to the way in which they have been socialized. In northern Yucatán there is no need to emphasize the distinct nature of women, because the entire population is by definition essentialized as indigenous.

In reality, the population is no more docile here than elsewhere. Docility could be associated with the fact that women still represent 52 percent of the workforce and until recently represented a much higher proportion. Docility could also be associated with the relative youth of the workforce, since employers prefer workers between 16 and 30 years of age. However, in clothing factories they accept slightly older employees than in electronics factories. In the maquiladoras that I studied, there were workers over age 30. It is not age that matters but productivity. At the same time, in contrast to the situation on the northern border, where there have been maquiladoras for over 30 years, a systematic culture of worker resistance has not developed. Workers practice an individual form of resistance that Peña has called “tortuguismo” (Peña, 1997). Thus, a supervisor told me with a laugh that she often found pieces of clothing that had been deliberately sabotaged in the sewing phase and that she is often offered small bribes to turn a blind eye to a late arrival, absence, or decrease in productivity.

It is therefore a matter not of docility but of repression. The people in northern Yucatán are probably more repressed than those on the northern border not only in the factory, where unions are completely nonexistent, but also in family and community structures themselves. Young people who work on the northern border often come from villages farther south. They leave their parents and gain an independence that they have probably never before known.¹² Yucatecan girls and boys, in contrast, continue to live with their parents while working at maquiladoras in their villages or in neighboring villages. They continue to be subject to parental authority as long as they live under the family roof. Although their wages may give them some

independence, they do not earn enough to be able to move away from home, often even after they are married.

When a population is reduced to some supposedly essential nature, the qualities that are considered innate can rapidly turn into faults. I have wondered, on reading the hiring brochure for the Monty maquiladora in Motul, why it targets young people “who really want to work.” Does this insinuate that there are some people “who do not really want to work”? In everyday life in Yucatán, if one mixes at all with people from the middle and upper classes (and not just young businessmen from Cancún like the one quoted above), one often hears assertions to the effect that peasants are lazy and do not want to work, even if they are well paid to do so. Of course, one also hears some nuances regarding women’s self-sacrifice in dealing with their husband’s alcoholism, but in general everyone is lumped together. Women are recognized as hardworking, but I have often heard middle-class women who hire them as servants complaining of their lack of consistency and motivation. This is strangely reminiscent of what we hear when political correctness is put aside and people freely express their opinions about Indians.

In a context in which the comparative advantage is slim, it is obviously better not to refer to any specific ethnic characteristics of Yucatecan workers that might be construed as meaning that they are lazy, since that might scare away investors. It is not, however, taboo to refer to their Mayan roots. This is not always done with the same ambiguity as in the government’s brochure. An organization in the United States called Mexico Connect reports: “The social fabric of the Yucatán is an intriguing mix of Mayan and European cultures that translate into a strong work ethic. Coupling the work ethic with intelligence and a high literacy rate against a backdrop of a pervasive warmth of personality makes for a unique environment that enables pleasantness and productivity to co-exist as it did in this country in the 1950’s.” Farther down they add: “and the DAILY minimum wage is about \$3.00 US” (Mexico Connect, 2000).

CONCLUSION: THE HOMOGENEITY OF “OTHERS”

To what extent does what I have described involve stereotypes and contradictions? In this situation, it is clear that Yucatecan workers are the “Other” that is used in the employment of stereotypes and exclusion. They are constantly defined as “Others” and are never themselves in the position of defining “Others.” We speak of “them”; they do not speak of “us.” At any rate, what they have to say is not found in the same place. There is an official discourse on Others, but the discourse of these Others is ignored and diminished

with half-truths and commercial propaganda. As Riggins (1997: 5) says, outsiders tend to perceive Others as a homogeneous category.

We find ourselves in the contradictory situation in which the only comparative advantage of the workforce in northern Yucatán is its supposed Indian ethnicity but that ethnicity must not be overemphasized. The advertising designers chose not to focus on Indian ethnicity not because they reject ethnic definitions but because they totally accept them. Because of this, they believe that Indians are lazy, and when the goal is increased profits that must absolutely be kept quiet. This is the paradox. The supposed Indian ethnicity, which has a social existence, must be domesticated, made inoffensive, while maintaining the social stigma of the "Other." I believe that the fact that mestizo dress is being adopted by dignitaries is part of this domestication, as is the conjuring up of Mayas and particularly ancient Mayan roots. Contemporary Mayan identity always refers to the past or at least to tradition and cultural continuity (Hervik and Kahn, 2000; Hervik, 1999a). Herzfeld's remark is very fitting here: "A social poetics recognizes that people deploy the debris of the past for all kinds of present purposes" (1997: 24).

Civil servants and businesspeople are not the only ones to "practice stereotypes" (Herzfeld, 1992). Even though recent writings in anthropology refer to economic inequalities, gender relations, and power relations in general while stressing the importance of viewing Mayas as resolutely modern social actors (Nadal, 2001: 54), they are very quick to speak about Mayas in general, the Mayan peasantry, what Mayas do, what Mayas think, and what Mayas say. Very few of us take into account the deep historical and regional disparities characteristic of northern Yucatán not only in relation to Chiapas but in relation to the south of the state (Hervik, 1999b). What for Mayas may be an explicit strategy (strategic essentialism) in an effort to revitalize their culture (Hervik, 1999a: 189) is for anthropologists nothing less than primitivism. As Micaela di Leonardo (1998) has said, primitivism (whether or not it is sincere) is of no help whatsoever in our attempts to understand how the global system is widening the gap between the wealthy and the dispossessed.

As Hervik and Kahn (2000) have pointed out, the Mayas are far from being a homogeneous group: the people we refer to as Mayas speak in 30 different languages, have highly varied political structures, have unique histories, and can be found in different nation-states. Fortunately, anthropologists and historians have recently taken it on themselves to clarify exactly which Mayas are being discussed (see Castañeda and Fallaw, 2004), and it will be increasingly difficult to defend the idea of an imaginary Maya condition that supposedly transcends space and time. Instead, it will become easier to understand how it is that one can do fieldwork in northern Yucatán for decades without hearing a single individual identify himself or herself as

Maya and why it is always Others who do so in their place. In a context in which people never use the term “Maya” to refer to themselves and never identify with a far-off Mayan past (Hervik, 2001), it is worth questioning the motives of those who do so for them.¹³

The supposed cultural continuity among the Mayas is therefore a fiction, as is what is generally assumed to be their stability. Their rootedness in the past is an ideological construction, and what is said about those roots is part of the meta-discourse (Hervik, 2001). It is troubling to realize that the cultural promotion of Maya workers must be based on an argument of cultural continuity that is indiscriminately used by a series of social actors from anthropologists to industrial businesspeople and, eventually, the state. All of these actors do so in their own way and more or less openly. Under these circumstances, even the silences in the discourse are meaningful—for example, when it is never openly stated that the population is indigenous. Whether we like it or not, in Yucatán this discourse feeds stereotypes that are used locally as a basis for the ethnic, gender, and generational division of the labor market and the economic depreciation of the workforce. In summary, it is in the interest of the state, now more than ever, for populations to be static while simultaneously being part of the process of globalization—that is, to remain “Maya” but not too “Maya.”

NOTES

1. The plan, which includes a series of projects aimed at better integrating the southern and southeastern regions of Mexico into the world economy, is part of the logic of the Free Trade Area of the Americas. Funding comes mainly from the Inter-American Development Bank. The introductory document for the plan can be found on the web site of the Mexican government's Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores (<http://www.sre.gob.mx/>).

2. At the time of my research the daily minimum wage was 32 pesos. According to some estimates, it takes four daily minimum wages to live above the poverty line (*Economía Hoy*, 2000).

3. The *huipil*, a white tunic with embroidery around the neck and the bottom, is the “traditional” dress of indigenous women in Yucatán. The huipil is sometimes confused with the embroidered blouse.

4. The context of the commodification of Maya crafts in North America has been well described in a research note by Carol Hendrickson (1994). Consumers are rather familiar with this idea of the Mayas as crafts producers.

5. We have estimates for 1997 but not for the proportion of the total state's population that is indigenous.

6. Henequen is an agave that has been grown on a large scale in northern Yucatán since the end of the nineteenth century, first by peons (peasant Indians tied to an owner in a relation of personal dependence) and then, after the revolution, on *ejidos* (communal landholdings on which the general assembly of members makes all decisions) and small private landholdings. When the outer envelope of the henequen leaves is removed, a fiber that is used to make rope, among other

things, can be extracted. Henequen was the basis of the agricultural and industrial economy of Yucatán for many decades. Although that is no longer the case, northern Yucatán is still referred to as the *henequenera* region, and the 62 municipalities (out of a total of 106) where henequen used to be grown are still identified as henequeneras. A stylized drawing of the henequen plant is part of the coat of arms of Yucatán (there is also a deer, which has practically disappeared from the region as well). For more information, see Baños Ramírez (1995), Brannon and Baklanoff (1987), and Breton and Labrecque (1981).

7. The milpa is a distinctly Mesoamerican system of agriculture that combines three main plants: corn, beans, and squash. Several other plants are also grown in the milpa. Working the milpa is one of the traits that anthropologists and “Indianists” have associated with Indian identity (see Bonfil Batalla, 1994 [1987]).

8. In 1992, the new national agrarian act introduced amendments to Article 27 of the Mexican Constitution with respect to communal and ejidal land tenure. The amendments concern both associations of producers and the circulation of land. The Programa de Certificación de Derechos Ejidales y Titulación de Solares Urbanos amounts to a privatization of land. According to the Instituto Nacional Indigenista, in Yucatán, peasants from the south who work milpa more have taken advantage of the program more quickly than the henequenero peasants, who practice the milpa less and have fewer alternatives in the field of agriculture (CDI, n.d.).

9. These claims are not, however, limited to ethnic identity (see Castells, 1999: 99).

10. This is the percentage given by Fabio Atti (*Latin Trade*, 2001). These figures are not at all in keeping with the impressions that my informants (maquiladora workers) gave us in the summer of 2000. Although the turnover rate is acceptable, absenteeism seems to be a serious problem.

11. The hypothesis of new social pacts explores the construction of consensus among workers who consider themselves part of a large maquiladora “family.” This is something that I cannot explore in detail here but is extremely relevant. For reflection on family metaphors and the connection between the construction of the state and “cultural intimacy,” see Herzfeld (1997).

12. The dangers of gaining independence have been discussed in the context of the murders of women maquiladora workers in Ciudad Juárez (see Nathan, 1999; Salzinger, 2001).

13. An important qualification here is the pan-Mayan movement’s recourse to strategic essentialism, which is becoming evident in northern Yucatán. Indigenous peoples themselves use discourses on cultural continuity in pursuit of their own objectives (see Warren, 1998). However, the Yucatán example shows how such discourses can be appropriated by others for purposes not originally intended, particularly in the context of a low degree of organization of the indigenist movement and uncritical support for neoliberalism.

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