

Rethinking Mayan Resistance

Changing Relations between Federal Teachers and Mayan Communities in Eastern Yucatan, 1929–1935

By

Ben Fallaw

COLBY COLLEGE

RESUMEN

En las escuelas federales abiertas en el oriente de Valladolid entre 1928 y 1935, se suponía que las comunidades Mayas rechazaron a los maestros en defensa de su cultura e identidad. De hecho, la resistencia contra las escuelas fue por otras causas: el apoyo económico exigido por las escuelas a las comunidades, el rechazo de la coeducación, y la envidia de los políticos. Vista desde esta perspectiva, es necesario modificar substancialmente la idea de resistencia étnica de los Maya.

PALABRAS CLAVES: Yucatán, Secretary de Educacion Publica, Robert Redfield, Kanxoc, Chan Kom, formacion del estado. KEYWORDS: Yucatan, Chan Kom, Kanxoc, SEP, Redfield..

THE ETHNOHISTORY OF YUCATAN has been told principally in terms of racial conflict and resistance: European/*dzul/blanco* pitted against *macehual*/Maya in a struggle that began with the Conquest and continues to the present day. (Bartolomé and Barabas 1977; Bartolomé 1988; Bricker 1981; Farriss 1984; Pintado 1982; Reed 2001) Given this resistance-driven and essentialist view, the opening of federal schools in eastern Yucatan in the early 1930s would seem to be the mother of all battles between the recalcitrant Maya and an encroaching mestizo/Mexican state. For Alfonso Villa, teacher, anthropologist and key collaborator of North American researcher Robert Redfield, the expansion of federal schools into the neighboring federal territory of Quintana Roo was nothing less than the final clash of the Caste War of Yucatan, the great uprising of some of the Mayan peoples of Yucatan against Mexican rule in 1847. (Hostettler 1996:102) For Yucatecan intellectuals of the day, the spread of Span-

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ish through schooling eradicated the Maya, an opinion summed up by Oswaldo Baqueiro Anduze (1937:93) thusly: “The Maya disappears two ways: when he dies, or when he learns Spanish.”

Contributors to this volume (Castañeda 1996, Restall 1998) as well as the work of other scholars (Rugeley 1996, 2001) challenge the notion of Yucatecan history as an ethno-linguistic *kulturkampf*. This essay reexamines the history of the extension of federal schooling into Mayan communities in eastern Yucatan to consider whether it in fact provoked an ethnic conflict in which Mayan people opposed federal schools to defend their cultural identity. Following Barth’s (1969) critique of essentialism, recent questioning of the use of resistance (Ortner 1995), and drawing on new archival investigations, I argue that while relations between the state and Mayan communities were often conflictive, resistance to schooling was not a struggle to preserve a homogenous Mayan identity centered on the Yucatec Maya language. Rather, local perceptions of political and economic justice and strong opposition to coeducation motivated opposition to federal schools. Surprisingly, most of the Mayan communities in question did not see accepting Mexicanness—speaking Spanish, practicing the patriotic civic rituals of the postrevolutionary Mexican state, and an acceptance of the authority of the Mexican national government—as a potential conquest to be resisted. In fact, most (though by no means all) Mayan peoples in eastern Yucatan did accept Mexicanization when state agents delivered meaningful political and economic assistance and accommodated demands for separate-sex schooling. Such a harmonization of state and popular interests did not come without conflict, and Mayan peoples did at times resist the penetration of state influence. But at times they also welcomed it. The fact that we still speak of Mayan peoples and Mayan culture in Yucatan almost half a millennium after the Conquest is due less to resistance than to Mayan peoples’ ability to come to terms with powerful external forces and embrace change. And the motives for resistance must be carefully examined.

In the first part of the paper, I provide an overview of the attempts by the SEP (*Secretaría de Educación Pública, or Ministry of Public Education*) to transform eastern Yucatan in order to gauge how its project impacted and in turn was shaped by eastern Yucatecan Mayan communities. I then turn to two communities that scholarly literature depicts quite differently: Chan Kom, a modernizing Mayan community, and Kanxoc, seen as a redoubt of indigenous identity. Rather than representing diametrically opposed positions regarding Mexicanization and schooling, they in fact shared a common, generally receptive orientation to the postrevolutionary state’s educational overtures. Finally, I conclude by suggesting a few ways this survey of interaction between the Mexican state and Mayan communities in eastern Yucatan opens new perspectives on ethnic relations in Yucatan.

Several caveats are in order. First, as a historian I analyze change over time, and

I am interested in relations between Mayan communities in eastern Yucatan and the federal educational system, not in communities as allegedly autonomous societies per se. I hope, however, that examining the former adds to our understanding of the latter (and vice versa). Secondly, my data comes principally from the archive of the national Mexican SEP. Clearly, the reports by teachers and inspectors—many of whom could not speak Yucatec Maya—contain the mix of paternalistic concern and disdain typically displayed by state agents towards peasants regardless of ethnic differences. Still, they represent the most complete archival record of state-communal relations for the 1930s, the crucial decade of postrevolutionary state formation in Mexico. I have tried to balance the SEP archives by drawing on state archival sources, as well as ethnographic works, from the venerable (Redfield 1941, Redfield 1950, Redfield and Villa Rojas 1962, Unidad Regional de Valladolid 1983) to recent research more sensitive to politics and ethnic nuances (Alonzo 1982, Kintz 1990, Brown 1993, Kray 1997, Flores Torres 1997, Berkely 1998). Given the density of scholarship on communities in eastern Yucatan, my focus is on how teachers and communities interacted. What changed and what did not change as a result of these interactions? I argue that federal teachers had a profound and largely unappreciated (see Greene 2000) affect on Mayan communities in eastern Yucatan, just as the Yucatecan peasants forced major alterations in the SEP's project.

The Federal Schools and the Postrevolutionary State in Yucatan

States make nations. Over the past two decades, a wave of historical and historically-minded social science research has demonstrated how modern states instill nationalist identity rather than embody or reflect nationalism. (Weber 1976, Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983, Corrigan and Sayer 1985) The postrevolutionary Mexican state forged by Presidents Venustiano Carranza, Alvaro Obregón, Plutarco Elías Calles, and Lázaro Cárdenas and their numerous collaborators between 1917 and 1940 was no exception. Mary Kay Vaughan (1997) amply demonstrated the important role that federal teachers and educational inspectors played in forging a lasting Mexican polity by crafting an inclusive national culture firmly linked to the postrevolutionary Mexican state. In southern and central Mexico, where significant numbers of people still spoke indigenous languages, the SEP's missions of *Castellanización* (teaching Spanish) and Mexicanization took on added significance.

SEP archives document construction of new schools and federalization of existing ones in over two hundred villages (*pueblos*) and even smaller settlements (*ranchos* and *rancherías*) in the eastern and southern reaches of the state of Yucatan. Federal educators saw both special challenges and important opportunities in these areas. The remote location and initially hostile or indifferent attitude of the popu-

lation made it difficult to establish schools. At the same time, federal teachers believed that their isolation and supposedly unaltered indigenous culture made them a crucial target for incorporation.

During its operations in eastern Yucatan, from its inception in 1929 until the diversion of most federal education resources elsewhere in 1935, the SEP's relationship with communities evolved through three phases. In each, federal educators developed distinctive educational, social, and political strategies, and constructed indigenous identity in different ways. Mayan peoples' reactions, however, determined the outcome of these projects. The first stage was marked by naive overconfidence on the part of the SEP, due in no small part to its belief that the Mayan peoples of Yucatan would readily embrace federal schooling. In the second stage, widespread resistance and apathy by Mayan peasants disillusioned federal educators, who blamed outsiders for hindering federal education. In the third, final stage, federal teachers made significant headway through pragmatic accommodation of popular demands—an outcome remarkably similar to teachers' experiences in other regions of Mexico documented by Vaughan (1997) and Rockwell (1994).

“Waking Up the Jungle”: The SEP's Early Efforts

The leadership of the SEP in Yucatan in the early 1930s, the DEF (Director of Federal Education) and the zone inspectors, were foreigners to Yucatan. They knew little of the fluid ethnic structure of Yucatan, and generally saw Mayan peasants as soft wax, easily molded. Once teachers offered them the opportunity to learn Spanish and demonstrated modern agricultural techniques, the advantages of schooling would be self-evident to Mayan peasants, or so it was thought. Perhaps because of this tremendous faith in the power of education to transform, the first federal teachers sent to Yucatan compared themselves to the early Church missionaries. Fernando Ximello, Yucatan's DEF (Director of Federal Education) in 1933, encouraged his teachers to:

take on a mission similar to that undertaken by the Franciscans . . . which consists of settling in the middle of the families of a hamlet to attract the Indians who are found scattered across a great extension of land with the aim of forming a community. (Ximello 1933)

Another inspector called the teacher a present-day apostle (Brambilla 1932).

The SEP project for rural transformation was crystallized at an Assembly of Teachers held August 1–3, 1932. Staged in the DEF's headquarters, an elementary school in the northern Mérida (state capital) suburb of Itzimmá, it drew hundreds

of teachers as well as numerous state and federal dignitaries. Dr. Efraín Gutiérrez, the president of the University of the Southeast summed up the positivistic sentiment of the exhibition when he praised the federal teachers, saying that “only you have succeeded in waking up the jungle.” (Ximello 1932a; *Diario del Sureste* 4 Aug. 1932).

The original plans of the SEP called for the peasants living in hamlets and small villages scattered across eastern Yucatan to be subjects of an ambitious plan of social engineering. First, they were to be congregated into larger, fixed settlements, each with their own collective land grant or *ejido*, to prevent them from relocating frequently. Only fixed populations could be counted on to supply the considerable amounts of free communal labor required to build and maintain federal rural schools and carry out public works projects. Secondly, they were to be governed by elected authorities who could be held responsible to the federal government for the enforcement of truancy laws and their collective obligation to support the schools.

Federal teachers mapped out an idealized spatial arrangement of permanent communities governed along the lines the SEP set out. At its heart lay the school complex. A series of *anexas* (facilities built for outreach) such as a chicken coop, a rabbit hutch, outhouse, bath-house, and open-air theater surrounded the schoolhouse. The house of the teacher, part of the nucleus of the school compound, was to be built along modern lines, kept clean, adorned with flowers, and filled with rustic furniture “to attract the neighbors with its culture, sensible design, and comfort [and to] serve as an example” (Ximello 1932a). The teacher’s house was to be located in the middle of rural villages to maximize its exemplary value (Flores 1933). His or her influence would radiate outwards, convincing Mayan peasants to dig ditches to drain streets, weed town squares, and drill deeper wells with walls to keep out human and animal waste—all part of what was called the urbanization of the population (Brambilla 1932a).

Teachers sought to transform the temporal as well spatial organization of rural communities. Mayan peasants, the SEP believed, needed to adopt new notions of recreation “for physical, mental and spiritual expansion,” in order to both work more productively and to “enjoy and take advantage of spare time” (Brambilla 1932). Free time was to be spent in ways that the teachers considered appropriate, ways that tended to encourage the formation of a national culture such as *veladas* (concerts and public speeches), social occasions, and sporting competitions. Several teachers commented on the seeming monotony of the lives of Mayan men, women and children peasants that cried out for a well-defined leisure sphere. Not surprisingly, traditional religious practices did not figure in their plans for Mayan communities, as they were generally dismissed as superstition and as promoting alcoholism among men (Brambilla 1932).

While adult behavior was also a subject of much concern, teachers were preoccupied with imposing their sense of time on the children in schools. Respect for

punctuality ranked as highly as neatness in the educators' hierarchy of values. Almost all reports filed by teachers and inspectors emphasized how well (or how poorly) their students had adopted the crucial habit of *aseo*. This could be translated as alertness or "wide awake-ness," apparently involving erect posture, direct eye-contact, and a clear manner of speaking.

In order to realize such an ambitious project, teachers had to gain the confidence of the community. Some federal teachers coaxed adults into visiting their schoolhouses in the evening to talk. DEF Ximello proudly (and with more than a little exaggeration) wrote to his superiors in Mexico City that "all the residents upon finishing their daily labors have taken up the custom of coming into the schoolhouse to chat with the teachers and these meetings often last until nine or ten at night" (Ximello 1932). Ximello emphasized that these talks were not just social occasions:

Taking advantage of the meetings with the residents, the teachers follow to the letter the instructions given to them by the DEF to use the Mexico City daily newspaper *Excelsior*; as a result they have increased [the Mayan peasants'] concept of nationalism and their desire to learn to read and write. (Ximello 1933)

Ximello's emphasis on teaching nationalism underscores the fact that schooling was not only an end in itself; education was also part and parcel of a larger campaign of Mexicanization to spread nationalist consciousness. For teachers, the spread of Spanish went hand in hand with nationalism. The federal sub-secretary of rural education wrote to a zone inspector in Yucatan that the SEP was quite pleased that rates of Spanish comprehension were increasing in the Yucatecan countryside because "it is one of the most efficient means of contributing to the formation of a new national sentiment, up until now still incipient" (Brambilla 1932b). Another inspector put it more succinctly. For him, Spanish was not just the key to educating children and adults but the very "soul of the nation" (Flores 1933).

Teachers, however, faced numerous imposing challenges, including their own quite limited preparation and adaptability. In theory, the teachers were to be held to lofty, if not impossibly high, standards. The teacher, DEF Ximello warned, must be careful to dress neither ridiculously better nor embarrassingly worse than the residents, and avoid the temptation to take too many trips out of their isolated posts. He or she was responsible for providing helpful knowledge to peasants on just about every subject, taking correspondence courses at night and maintaining a private library on subjects ranging from pedagogy and psychology to agriculture, but he should at the same time avoid—especially in the case of normal school graduates—"the vanity of the know-it-all and of the bourgeoisie" (Ximello 1932a). Almost all of the inspectors and many teachers, however, were not from Yucatan, and thus did not speak Yucatec Maya, meaning they were forced to learn it before they could com-

municate with their host communities. DEF Ximello complained in mid-1933 of the problems that he had because “with only a few exceptions all the world speaks Maya even in the capital and in the main cities” (Ximello 1933). Moreover, the inadequate training of many federal teachers—many of whom had only fourth or fifth grade educations—forced the DEF to devote considerable time and resources to improve their training (Ximello 1932a). Unfortunately for the SEP, these were but a few of a host of problems they faced in trying to set up functioning schools in eastern Yucatan.

“They Have Roundly Failed”: The Agony of Federal Education

Even after constant assemblies were held in small communities by teachers and inspectors to persuade their residents to support schools, Inspector Brambilla of the fourth zone (embracing most of the Department of Valladolid that sprawled across the southeastern part of Yucatan) admitted in late 1932 that federal teachers had only minority support in most communities (Brambilla 1932c). When adults failed to build and maintain schools, when parents refused to send their children to school, and when a few teachers faced violence or even in one case death at the hands of Mayan peasants, disillusionment set in among educators. Several embarrassing incidents underscored the problems facing many schools in the eastern reaches of Yucatan. When the national Secretary of Education Narciso Bassols visited the village of Pixoy in March 1933, residents of the “very rebellious” pueblo physically threatened him and almost threw him out (Rivera 1933). The early optimism and faith that SEP teachers first had in their ability to transform eastern Yucatan soon gave way to widespread pessimism and attempts to blame problems on anyone besides themselves or the peasants.

There was plenty of culpability to go around because the ambitious initial plans drafted by the SEP for eastern Yucatan failed on almost every point. The so-called urbanization campaign fell flat. Teachers believed that once new land was turned over to communities in the form of ejido (collective land grants), Mayan farmers would abandon the age-old practice of traveling long distances every few years to bring new *milpas*, or corn plots, into production. Apparently teachers seriously underestimated the amount and quality of land required by farming communities (or simply misunderstood how milpa was made), because even after land grants were made, their generally poor soil forced members of communities to periodically migrate in search of new, fertile lands with bush high enough to be cleared and burned to fertilize cornfields. In mid-1934, the new inspector of the Valladolid district noted with dismay “the ranchería inhabitants’ surprising ability to change residences, they go to cut down new bush and prepare their milpas, lashing together

their houses in new locations to form new rancherías” (Lozano 1934). Of course, Mayan peasants had been “hiving off” from their home communities for centuries, and no matter how successful federal teachers were, corn cultivation on Yucatán’s thin and rocky soil demanded such periodic moves (Farriss 1984:209-214). Consequently, maintaining regular enrollments, and keeping track of adults’ labor obligations to schools turned into a source of disruptive conflict between teachers and many peasants.

Some educators blamed the schools’ problems not on the characteristic mobility of the Mayan peasants but on their lack of Spanish and dispersed pattern of settlement. Inspector Flores summed up the problem as follows:

Our pueblos or rancherías live immersed in complete ignorance of all progress in the various branches of civilized life, whether it is because of lack of the national language [Spanish] or of other sources of information, and as a result, [they] have a total absence of ambitions or ideals to better their social condition, a complete apathy in the question of the education of their children . . . while at the same time systematically opposing all changes in the norms of their habitual lives. (Flores 1932A)

Most federal teachers, however, blamed resistance on *caciques* (local bosses), alcohol, and the political status-quo represented by the ruling regional political party, the *Partido Socialista del Sureste* (Socialist Party of the Southeast) or PSS.

Conflict with *políticos* was probably inevitable, given that federal policy charged teachers with being much more than just instructors of the young: they were to be the sole conduits between rural communities and the national state, a role previously monopolized by PSS *políticos* (Brambilla 1932a). Federal educators blithely assumed that local political officials would second their efforts, rather than seeing them as a threat. In reality, however, the *comisarios* (“commissioners” appointed from the county seat or elected by residents) who governed pueblos and rancherías subordinated to a municipal county seat, or *municipio*, and the directorates of the Socialist Leagues of Resistance (the local chapters of PSS) proved to be either apathetic or openly hostile towards schools. In May 1933, Inspector Víctor M. Flores found the *comisarios* uniformly “ignorant, without talent or energy,” and that both they and the Socialist League presidents “constantly clashed” with teachers and opposed the work of schools for purely political ends. To make matters worse, town councils generally failed to remove *comisarios* when teachers complained about them. The end result was that truancy laws and directives encouraging communities to support the federal schools by donating their time and materials were not enforced by local authorities (Víctor Flores 1933a). The state government proved equally uncooperative. Without the governor pressuring local officials to support the schools, teachers charged that petty *políticos* acted like the petty bosses

(*caciquillos*), thwarting the efforts of federal teachers. “If some [teachers] overcome them,” complained one SEP official, “more frequently they faced hopeless schools, even though [the teachers] have used their will, their intelligence and their hearts, they have roundly failed” (Lozano 1933a).

Federal teachers came to universally loath the PSS, blaming it not only for sabotaging schools but also for actively participating in the sale of alcohol. Teachers considered male recreational drinking a cardinal sin, and the link between it and regional politicking was a sore point in teacher-communal relations. The distribution of alcohol and sporadic violence associated with local and regional electioneering dismayed the federal teachers, who claimed that this “agitation” set back their efforts and distracted the governor from his rightful duty to back them. According to one inspector, various local authorities and *lideres* tried to win votes not by encouraging support for schools, but by perversely telling “the Indians” not to do anything to help the school and promising exemptions from communal labor obligations to the school in return for votes (Lozano 1934a).

Teachers soon ran up against opposition from established petty elites with a stake in the political and economic status-quo. The small hamlets where most federal schools operated had been indirectly linked to the regional economy through itinerant merchants who bartered alcohol for products like hens for sale in Valladolid or on the henequen plantations to the west. These merchants were usually politically connected. In Xcoptel, a small community in the municipality of Cuncunul, teacher Manuel Vargas Ayuso convinced the majority of the inhabitants to join him in running out “clandestine sellers and exploiters” who reportedly charged a whole hen or rooster for one measly cup of alcohol, and in a few notorious cases swapped a small cask of rum for a bull or many baskets of eggs. When Vargas’ temperance campaign threatened to dry up their profits, the merchants filed false charges against the teacher with sympathetic Socialist officials, and almost succeeded in having him removed in July and August of 1935. Only energetic intervention by SEP Inspector Manuel Rivera kept Vargas in his school (Rivera 1935a).

Laying the blame on outsiders only went so far with the SEP, as inspectors and teachers gained more experience. Writing in May 1933, inspector Víctor M. Flores of the second district (which included only part of the Department of Valladolid), blamed Socialist politicians and local authorities for many of the schools’ woes. But he also pointed out that the “social festivals” organized by many teachers failed to stir the Mayalingual population because they were given only in Spanish, and complained that the school teachers ignored their mission to visit households. More to the point, he continued, teachers failed to convince communities of the benefits of schooling, above all instruction of Spanish. Lacking any belief in the advantages of education, he argued, parents felt that the time of their children would be better spent doing chores or helping with farming. Flores was careful to point out, how-

ever, that the “fanaticism, mistrust and apathy” he saw among Mayan folks were not innate traits, but the result of experience, environment and poor (read: PSS) leadership. Better community leaders like the teacher and local allies inside communities, he felt, could win over a community and unify it behind the school (V́ctor Flores 1933a).

While alcohol, Socialist politicians, and shrewd merchants proved to be daunting foes of the SEP project, resistance to attempts to change gender roles posed another formidable problem. Federal plans for Yucatan’s indigenous peoples called for changing the role of women in several ways. First, young girls as well as young boys were to go to school. Secondly, teachers were to conduct visits to houses and hold literacy and other classes for adult women with the aim of making them, in the words of two educational bureaucrats, “better housewives and active agents of improving the community” and, “introduce women to an active life [resolving] the problems of their community” (Brambilla 1932a, Ximello 1932b).

To that end, the traveling Federal Cultural Mission that visited communities in Quintana Roo and Yucatan in 1930 had a female teacher, Julia Ruisanchez, who taught peasant women to sew the “simple and elegant styles of the young women of the middle class,” instructed them in home hygiene, as well as explaining how to decorate their sparse homes in the bourgeois style of central Mexico (Ximello 1930a). Her role was not restricted to women—she taught the men “the love of *la patria grande* (the great mother country) trying to erase the antiquated provincialism of Yucatan” (Ximello 1930a). She was so beloved that when the traveling mission moved on, women and children wept.

In spite of Ruisanchez’s popularity, the planned transformation of women’s role ran into numerous roadblocks as well. First and foremost, Yucatecan peasants in most communities bitterly resisted coeducation and steadfastly refused to send girls to schools to be educated with the boys. Communities felt that it was immoral to have young girls under the care of a male teacher. This was not an abstract precept or irrational fear: there were several cases of male teachers sexually assaulting or abducting female students, the perpetrators remained unpunished. In the case of adult women, there was apparently some resistance to taking literacy classes, although this was by no means as universal as the resistance to having girls schooled by male teachers.

The planned economic mobilization of women was probably the weakest element of the SEP’s project to “modernize” women’s place in rural Yucatan. The teachers apparently had no idea that women already were economically active, tending gardens, in some cases peddling produce. And the notions of increasing housewife productivity drafted back in Mexico City were wildly impractical in rural Yucatan. In 1934, the DEF in Yucatan published its *Home Economics Program* which gave detailed, elaborate instructions on how to organize a kitchen. The ideal

kitchen, however, was modeled on that of an upper middle class home in Mexico City, and would have been both out of place and incredibly expensive in a Yucatecan peasant hut.

In spite of all of these setbacks, federal educators persisted in their attempts to implant schools in eastern Yucatan. In some ways, initial failure proved to be key to eventual success. As Elsie Rockwell noted in her perceptive study of federal schools in Tlaxcala, the very dependence of federal schools on their host communities forced the teachers to negotiate, compromise, and take popular demands into account—allowing many schools to gain acceptance by their host communities (Rockwell 1994:197–198; Vaughan 1997:90–93). As we shall see, federal teachers and inspectors learned to take into consideration the demands of Mayan peasants, and as a result were able to make substantial progress in setting up schools.

However, the conflictive issues that teachers faced were rarely related to resistance to Hispanic/Western/mestizo culture long attributed to the Maya, and the qualified successes that teachers enjoyed came in no small part because they themselves abandoned a stereotypical notion of monolithic indigenous identity in favor of a more subtle understanding of the Mayan peasants in the third phase of the SEP's Yucatecan operations in the mid 1930s.

Pragmatic Accommodation: Negotiating Support for Education

In response to the considerable problems that federal teachers faced in trying to set up schools, educators attempted to cultivate popular support in communities where there was some sentiment in favor of schooling, and closed schools in communities where resistance by the population was too strong. By cutting their losses and adjusting their project in light of popular responses, federal teachers made considerable if modest strides towards their goals of transforming Mayan communities. This fundamental adjustment of the SEP's project was in no small part due to a more realistic understanding of Mayan peasants. Rather than envisioning indigenous peasants as either *tabula rasa* or dupes of corrupt politicians and merchants, educators increasingly came to see them as rational beings who needed to be convinced of the benefits of change before supporting federal schools and the larger program of rural development.

At the end of 1932, for instance, an inspector recommended that peasants be won over to the school by making the benefits of federal school more evident, and by taking more efforts to improve communities materially. He recommended that village improvement funds be established using the proceeds of communal milpas, in order to buy books on improving agriculture and start light industries and craft production as well as on the standard complex of school *anexos* (annexes used to

spread new economic activities) (Brambilla 1932c). Some progress was made in 1934 when local communal councils were reorganized to try to increase popular support for the schools as well as undertaking other rural development projects ranging from temperance to reforestation (Regulación 1933). Communal appreciation of federal schools probably increased when teachers handed out over 1,000 quinine tablets to combat a malaria outbreak (Ramírez 1934).

Teachers' tacit recognition that they would have to take peasants' demands and needs into account was much more important in the eventual success of some schools than any bureaucratic modifications. For instance, one important breakthrough came when federal teachers gave into communal demands for female teachers to be assigned along with male teachers to teach girls. According to DEF Ximello, the parents were so "jealous" that they usually prevailed upon male teachers to bring their wives to teach the girls. Communities who balked at volunteering labor were eager to build the residence to house the wife or female teacher's separate school for girls, and honored her with the title *maestra* (teacher) whether she was the official teacher or just his (uncompensated) wife or sister (Ximello 1933). Even as federal teachers adjusted their plans to respect communal notions of gender divisions, they hoped that the presence of the teachers' wives would aid the modernization of rural communities. DEF Ximello claimed that the spouse of the teacher "is a powerful aid in his work, through her the confidence of the community is gained and their children are the true teachers of their playmates" (Ximello 1932a).

Undoubtedly one of the most important developments that smoothed relations between federal teachers and peasant communities came in the summer of 1935. Manuel C. Rivera, the new inspector of the zone that embraced most of the Department of Valladolid at the time, convinced municipal authorities to end the *guardia*—unpaid labor/messenger service and police watches customarily done in larger towns or villages by male inhabitants of small subordinated settlements. This, in turn, made peasants more willing to donate labor time to federal schools, since they no longer faced double demands from teachers and local officials. The school in "rebellious" Pixoy received much more communal support after Rivera ended the *guardia* demands historically leveled on them by Valladolid. Rivera also pioneered other important changes that improved communal cooperation, like organizing a consumer/producer cooperative in Xcocail in an attempt to stop outmigration in search of milpa land. Finally, Rivera helped several rancherías and pueblos receive ejidal donations, a measure which presumably would increase the amount of land available for peasants close to home, so that they would not have to move in search of new land (Rivera 1935b).

Rivera also proved more disposed and adept than his bureaucratic predecessors to try to work with municipal officials. Perhaps because he was a newcomer to the

state, he did not have any of the ingrained hostility to Yucatecan politicians that most veteran inspectors had. For whatever reason, the local politicians elected in the fall of 1934 for the 1935–1936 term in many towns around Valladolid were much more supportive of federal schools than their predecessors. Fortunately for federal teachers, the mayor of Valladolid who took office in 1935 was a former state teacher, Menalio Villanueva. Villanueva helped rebuild the troubled federal school and banned some alcohol sales in Valladolid's largely Mayan suburb of Sisal, thus ending perennial conflicts with federal educators there (Rivera 1935b).

At about the same time, Federal inspectors downplayed anticlerical instructions from Mexico City to eradicate popular Catholic celebrations. Inspector Peniche López “counseled his teachers to use much tact, given the inveterate customs of the residents and their religious fanaticism” (Peniche 1935a). Teachers backed off from attempts to limit drinking as well in 1934 and 1935, perhaps as part of a general retreat from conflictive cultural reform.

Some teachers finally made much progress through impromptu meetings at night which featured readings of the Mexico City newspaper *Excelsior*; adult peasants of Dzonotchel (who apparently learned to read at night by poring over the paper with the help of their teacher) took advantage of the visit of North American academic Frank Tannenbaum to send a message to Mérida inquiring about the fate of their newspaper subscription, which had not arrived in weeks. Further investigation found the missing copies, piled up in the post office of Mérida for almost two months, and the grateful residents gave thanks when the cherished papers finally arrived (Ximello 1930b).

Federal educators also began to build a communal sense of unity around the federal schools through celebrations of civic culture. New schools were opened with as much fanfare as the SEP could muster. DEF Ximello reported that entire communities turned out for the inauguration of new or remodeled schoolhouses that featured *bailes regionales* (folk dances), a simple concert or phonograph music, and baseball games. Ximello boasted that these dances “were splendid, a religious festival never had more pomp,” adding that by hiring semi-professional musicians (“they wanted the best music”) and shooting off rockets, such festivals drew many from nearby settlements, too (Ximello 1932c). Federal educators undoubtedly hoped that such happenings would both reward residents in the villages who built new schools, and convince visitors of the benefits of supporting federal schooling. And they believed they seeded a new, school-centered notion of communal unity.

As federal educators worked out the practical problems of operating schools in eastern Yucatan, they began to see results. Although the sweeping transformations once hoped for never materialized, teachers did make progress on several fronts.

Federal schools began to win the battle against truancy in some communities, although one inspector noted in 1933 that raising attendance to close to 90% in his

southern and eastern district was achieved only “at great cost and more than a few ugly confrontations” (V́ctor Flores 1933a). Unfortunately for federal teachers, authorities usually enforced truancy laws only when threatened by their superiors, only rarely out of a concern for their communities.

In spite of other adjustments on the part of the SEP, rural Yucatan’s “completely indigenous” character and its geographic distance from the center of Mexico meant Mexicanization still figured prominently in the federal curriculum. Because of the sheer volume of patriotic instruction, probably some sort of rudimentary national identity began to take root. Not only were over 1,000 copies of *Historia de Ḿxico* distributed in mid-1934 (enough for no more than 2 or 3 for each school), many schools by that time had adopted a weekly ceremony honoring the Mexican flag and singing the national anthem, and all observed a series of national holidays aimed at creating a Mexican—as opposed to Yucatecan—civic pride. At the same time in 1934, all schools were ordered to display either a store-bought or homemade map of the nation of Mexico, so that even the most isolated community would learn to envision itself as part of the nation as a whole, no matter how remote or abstract it might seem in eastern Yucatan (Ramírez 1934).

Still, the most important part of Mexicanization remained the spread of Spanish. There is reason to believe that some federal teachers gained the confidence of their communities and taught Spanish better through more effective instruction techniques. By mid-1934, the DEF in Yucatan could honestly report that Spanish comprehension had improved, as teachers adopted the “natural method” of instruction and used informal conversation to teach Spanish instead of rote lecturing, a process speeded by teachers’ growing knowledge of Yucatec Maya. Many also regularly met with parents of students every two weeks to convey the importance of education and to offer to help communities with their problems, including petitioning for land grants. Although many problems in Spanish instruction (and less vital parts of the curriculum) remained, the SEP could end the pre-school preparatory classes in many rural primary schools because their students no longer required intensive basic Spanish (Ramírez 1934). But even as federal teachers began to lower the language barrier, new obstacles emerged. Many of the books adopted for the national curriculum could not be used with Mayan children. Inspector Jesús Brambilla complained that *The Three Bears* was useless because “the bears . . . in the world of the Maya children, are pretty much unknown and uninteresting” (Brambilla 1933a).

In spite of the limited success in some areas like the cultivation of some nationalist sentiment and the spread of Spanish, other key elements of the SEP’s project of Mexicanization failed miserably. The key transforming institutions was to have been an indigenous boarding school to serve all of Yucatan and Quintana Roo by training a new generation of teachers that would return home to their old villages as agents of change—a project remarkably similar to the one Paul Eiss describes

during the administration of Salvador Alvarado over two decades earlier (this volume). Located first in Chan Santa Cruz and later Chichimila, the boarding school was a dismal failure. Although lack of funding and staffing problems posed serious problems, the refusal of indigenous families to send their children proved to be its ultimately undoing. Only seven or eight boys and no girls were recruited during 1933 in spite of repeated attempts to persuade parents to send their children (Brambilla 1933b).

Having surveyed the failures and hard-won success of federal schools in eastern Yucatan, and the varied responses of Mayan communities to them, we now examine the implementation of federal schooling in two specific communities in eastern Yucatan. The story of Chan Kom's federal school is a case study of the SEP's project's success, an example of how federal schooling did transform communities, although the process never went according to SEP plans. At the same time, the story of the federal school in Chan Kom puts the early history of this, the most-studied Mayan community in Yucatan, and one of the most popular subjects of ethnographic study in all of Latin America, in a new light. We then turn to Kanxoc, long considered one of the most Mayan villages in all of Yucatan and a place where federal educators faced serious obstacles, to examine what motivated resistance to schooling, and to consider to what extent these struggles were to preserve Mayan culture.

Chan Kom: The Hidden Role of the SEP in Negotiating Progress

After the publication of Robert Redfield and former teacher Alfonso Villa Rojas' now-classic studies of Chan Kom in the 1930s and 1940s, a series of anthropologists have returned to Chan Kom to revise and critique their research and the notion of a folk-urban continuum that underlay it. In Redfield's narrative, the people of Chan Kom benefited from the sagacious and generally altruistic leadership of forward-thinking local leader Don Eustaquio Ceme, who eagerly sought out the benefits of progress such as learning Spanish, building a road to Chichén Itzá, and rebuilding their villages along the lines of larger towns. While Redfield generally ignored regional politics, he argued that the PSS offered Chan Kom support for its modernization project (Redfield 1941, 1950). In a revisionist reinterpretation, Victor Goldkin (1965) emphasizes the internal stratification and tyrannical behavior of the Ceme, Pat and Tamay families, whom he believes imported notions of "progress" from their home village of Ebtún. For him, these "principal people" were an incipient class-in-the-making, even calling them Mayan kulaks, who imposed their notion of progress including the Spanish language on the rest and hounded out resisters. Rhoda Halperin (1975) followed up on Goldkin's notions of a hidden class

conflict, arguing that Don Eus Ceme exploited the expanding state power in the form of municipal government (a coveted status achieved in 1935 with the help of federal teachers) out of self-interest, manipulating the communal labor obligation to build roads which in turn were used by him to export cattle and corn while siphoning off resources from the communal ejido. Most recently, Alicia Re Cruz (1996) has used extensive oral history to reconstruct the history of Chan Kom from a postmodern perspective, emphasizing the mutability of the community's cultural tradition.

While later accounts of Redfield and Villa Rojas' study challenged their interpretation of data, none has taken on the basic founding narrative of Chan Kom, which, I argue, omits and distorts the role of the federal school in the transformation of Chan Kom from a small settlement to a town. Before turning to the federal school's role in Chan Kom's past, let us recount Redfield and Villa Rojas's summary of federal schooling in Chan Kom: Villa Rojas is the first teacher who managed to influence the community, after four previous teachers failed to make much of an impact. Villa Rojas was interested and sympathetic enough to remain for several years, helping the people attain their now-famous political and social objectives (Redfield 1950:169). Redfield mentions that the teacher—assumed to be Villa Rojas—convinced the community to rebuild a masonry school building that collapsed in 1931, which set back schooling efforts (Redfield 1950:13). The other major event involving teachers in the Redfield-Villa Rojas account was “around 1940” when the wife of Villa Rojas' (unnamed) successor as teacher got the girls to bob their hair and wear dresses instead of the traditional Mayan dresses or *huipiles* (Redfield 1950:39).

Redfield depicts the school's place in Chan Kom ambiguously—the people wanted their children to learn some Spanish and math, but did not like the “romping” of girls with boys, which was seen as breaking a deeply held (but uninvestigated) taboo (Redfield 1950:134,160). Similarly, the other schoolteacher(s) in Redfield's Chan Kom remain(s) in the shadow of Villa Rojas, marginalized and unimportant. The teacher (and his family) in 1948, Redfield recounts, were seen by the people of Chan Kom as “necessary anomalies; they bring troublesome problems, as when a marriage is suggested between a girl of such a family and a boy of the village.” Attempts to instill holidays like Mothers' Day—wildly popular elsewhere—were rebuffed (Redfield 1950:157). Redfield generally goes to great lengths to point out how little the federal school succeeded in changing Chan Kom. In his account, the community was *already* known for its “sobriety and honesty” before the first (state) school began operating shortly after the Mexican Revolution (Redfield 1950:169).

SEP and state archival accounts put the crucial early years of Chan Kom and its relationship with schools in a new, remarkably different perspective. Although Redfield refers obliquely to the failures of the first teachers that preceeded Alfonso Villa,

and mentions that the women of Chan Kom shut the doors of their huts to Villa Rojas when he arrived, he makes no mention of the fact that one of the (state, not federal) teachers that preceded Villa Rojas had been legally accused in 1926 of “disgracing” one girl of 17 and molesting another after trapping her in the schoolhouse—facts which cast the community’s attitudes towards schooling in quite a different light (Cuncunul mayor 1926; Redfield 1950:12–13).

In spite of this setback, Chan Kom did not give up on the school. In October of 1931, residents complained to the governor that the county seat of Cuncunul was trying to prevent them from building a new schoolhouse by maneuvering to “remove our dear and progressive commissioner” (Huh 1931). By the time the SEP’s archival record of Chan Kom begins, Alfonso Villa had already left, but his replacement, Gualberto Zapata was overseeing a remarkably successfully federal school. The inspector of Chan Kom at the time, Santiago Pacheco Cruz (the only native Yucatecan inspector in federal service in the state, and the author of several books on Mayan culture and language), took full credit for the school’s outreach program in his first extant report on Chan Kom:

[T]he majority of the residents have changed their customs and way of life, to the extent that they use pants instead of the *delantal* (apron). The community has progressed considerably due to the progressive spirit that predominates among the inhabitants, who have begun a plan for civilization, improving their houses, streets, plaza, curbs, [and] building their school. (Pacheco 1932a)

In case his supervisors doubted his role in Chan Kom’s transformation, Pacheco Cruz added that he had been visiting Chan Kom for over fifteen years, probably since his days as a state educational inspector during the Salvador Alvarado administration (1915–1918). It was at this time, Pacheco Cruz claimed, that he began his “work of improvement” in Chan Kom, aided by the “young and enthusiastic teacher” Alfonso Villa (whom he did not refer to by name). Thanks to their efforts, Pacheco Cruz (1932a), claimed that at the time of writing, 1932, Chan Kom already looked more like a *pueblo* (village community) than a *ranchería* (hamlet). He was even more proud of the fact that Chan Kom refused to allow the sale of alcohol, that it always supported the school and the teacher, and that “almost no resident wants to speak Maya in order to improve their Spanish” (Pacheco 1932a).

In April 1932, Pacheco Cruz returned to Chan Kom where he filed another glowing report, noting the unusually high degree of Spanish speaking, to the point that the residents of Chan Kom refused to speak Maya to him—although he did address them in Yucatec Maya, suggesting that the shift to Spanish had yet to take completely. The teacher at the time, Gualberto Zapata, did mention some opposition by residents who refused to staff an education committee to coordinate communal

support for the federal school. Although the source of the conflict was not revealed, there was an important new addition to the school whose presence might well have ended tension between the teacher and Chan Kom—the teacher’s little sister, Geneveva was serving unofficially (meaning putting in long hours without pay) to teach Spanish to the women. What really surprised the inspector, however, was the fact that older women—some even sick—packed the classroom to learn to read in the afternoon when the adults took Spanish literacy classes. And Pacheco Cruz again noted the exceptionally well-maintained school with its full complement of anexos (it only lacked a basketball court) as well as a baseball diamond in the town square (Pacheco 1932b). Just two months later, the director of federal schools in Yucatan, DEF Fernando Ximello, visited Chan Kom for a memorial service honoring the Chan Kom resident who died in 1931 when the masonry school under construction collapsed. To memorialize his sacrifice, the open air theater under construction at the time bore his name (Ximello 1932c). Such ritual helped to culturally cement the SEP’s presence in Chan Kom.

The next inspector to visit Chan Kom, Juan I. Flores, noted in the report of his visit, the unusually high attendance (almost every student enrolled was in school, 40 boys and 20 girls), and that Chan Kom was quite unusual in having a third grade (comparably-sized communities were fortunate to have a second grade). Gualberto Zapata’s replacement as teacher, Manuel Arévalo, had some problems with the community and soon resigned, probably due to the fact that he did not bring a wife nor sister to teach the girls. This might explain why Chan Kom’s educational committee, responsible for the school before the SEP, was again refusing requests to convene. Flores was surprised how the community undertook construction projects and communal improvement “spontaneously”—with no evidence of the kind of forced labor Eustaquio Ceme has been accused of exploiting. The “building fever” that he found in Chan Kom resulted in the rapid construction of masonry homes and the clearing of the plaza, a change that signaled the kind of urbanization the SEP long hoped to encourage. Such changes evoked mixed emotions from the inspector, because he traced them to the North Americans of Chichén Itzá “who have made Chan Kom a center of their operations” and claimed—with a great deal of exaggeration—that the Yankees “converted almost all of them, to Protestantism, and because of this they listen to the (Protestant) pastor more than the teacher.” The American influence also resulted into another change: “The inhabitants are mentally transformed by the Americans and do not want to undertake any work without being paid well” (Juan Flores 1933a). While the SEP generally encouraged the spread of market values, the obvious threat to communal labor pool and the foreign presence disturbed him deeply.

The new schoolteacher proved to be a good fit in the end, although the next inspection in September 1933 found that its students were only average in their atten-

dance and learning of Spanish. Enrollment remained high, although the student population slipped somewhat because the local educational committee failed to enforce truancy laws (Flores 1933c). In January of 1934, Inspector Juan I. Flores donated a new national flag (a sure sign that the school was seen as a model for others), and noted with pleasure that inhabitants had built a chicken coop and dove house for the school in the afternoons after working long hours in their cornfields. Such cooperation, it should be noted, was comparably rare in eastern Yucatan. He also witnessed the construction of two important public health projects: curbs to prevent the *cenote* (sinkhole used as a natural well) from being contaminated by runoff with animal and human waste during rains, and corrals to prevent cattle from defecating in the streets (Juan Flores). These public works were not the result of either American influence or Chan Kom's "building fever"—instead they had long been key elements of the SEP's urbanization project which Chan Kom accepted after negotiation.

The last existing reports in the SEP archives on Chan Kom from May 1935 provides information on an in-service training session of teachers held in Chan Kom. The fact that Chan Kom was chosen to host it indicates that the school was a flagship in the district. It featured sports and an anti-fanatical (anti-Catholic) play at night, ending with a well-attended dance in the halls of Chan Kom's newly-built town hall, another monument to afternoons of collective labor for the good of the town and the spirit of progress the SEP helped encourage. The next month, Inspector Rivera had to mediate an unspecified dispute between the teacher and inhabitants. Once resolved, Chan Kom's inhabitants agreed to resume road-building and helped to build or to maintain anexos (Rivera 1935b). Again, the terms of progress had been negotiated—not between Eustaquio Ceme and Chan Kom's people as Redfield and Villa Rojas would have it—but between federal educators and the community as a whole, as the archives are clear on the SEP's mandate to convene the entire community to make decisions after conversing with federal teachers and the inspector.

Clearly, rather than simply imitating North Americans or spontaneously choosing progress, Chan Kom undertook much of the SEP's modernizing project after hashing out the terms of cooperation with federal teachers and inspectors. Some of the "building fever" was due undoubtedly to Eustaquio Ceme's role and to North American influence. But several of the key changes were clearly the result of the SEP's project—including "urbanization," the enclosure of animals, and the sanitation of wells. Moreover, rather than simply having a progressive homegrown leader (Eustaquio Ceme) personally mediate between Chan Kom and overarching political and cultural systems, as Redfield and Villa Rojas suggest, a series of energetic (and forgotten) teachers besides Villa Rojas hammered out the terms of transformation with Chan Kom's residents. If Chan Kom was in the end more willing than most communities to embrace the SEP's project, teacher-community relations were

not devoid of conflict, nor did the means teachers used to achieve acceptance differ markedly from those used with other communities.

Kanxoc: Rebellion or Negotiation?

Among all the communities in Yucatan, few can match Kanxoc for its reputation as aggressive defenders of their Mayan identity. In the December 1923 coup supporting Adolfo de la Huerta's presidential aspirations launched by rebellious federal troops against the Socialist regime of Felipe Carrillo Puerto, Kanxoc alone openly defended the governor who long championed indigenist policies designed to aid Mayan peoples. The president of Kanxoc's Socialist League of Resistance, Antonio May, threatened to kill any whites who came there during the de la Huerta coup (Carey 1984:174). Like nearby (and just as famously Maya) Xocen, whose people fought to avenge *el caudillo de los pobres* Felipe Carrillo Puerto, Kanxoc seemed to be a community set on rigorously defending its Mayan identity (Dzib 1999:27). When the hard-line leaders of the most recalcitrant descendants of the Caste War rebels who took refuge in Quintana Roo, Concepción Cituk and Evaristo Zuluub, rejected the accommodationist policies of General Francisco May in 1928–1929, they sent a request for aid to what Paul Sullivan calls the “notoriously bellicose town of Kanxoc” (Sullivan 1989: 31). And in December of 1932, the “indios de Kanxoc” threatened violence when their candidate for mayor of Valladolid lost a disputed municipal election (*El Yucatanista*, 10 Dec. 1932).

Another memorable incident seemingly confirms that Kanxoc indeed was an epicenter of Maya resistance against federal schooling. On Mexican Independence Day (September 15) 1933, the *Kanxoquenses*, apparently living up to their reputation for ethnic defiance, insulted and then chased off the schoolteacher when he tried to raise the national flag, the supreme patriotic Mexicanizing ritual (Ramírez 1933). Moreover, attendance at its school was low, even for eastern Yucatan, having reached its nadir at the start of the academic year when only 14% of eligible children enrolled. Schooled students could speak only short phrases in Spanish (Brambilla 1933b). Given its famed Mayan-ness, Kanxoc seemed to be shutting its door to federal teachers by engaging in acts of symbolically-laden resistance.

Yet a closer look at the context of such events suggests that the federal school of Kanxoc was not the target of collective ethnic resistance to federal schools. Parents, in fact, kept children home for two reasons, neither of them a rejection of Mexicanization or federal schools.

First, the people of Kanxoc objected not to the presence of federal teachers, but to a lack of federal teachers. Kanxoc had over three hundred school age children in 1932, and its teacher was left alone after the SEP eliminated two assistant teachers to

save money and to penalize Kanxoc for low enrollment (Ramírez 1932). This cost-saving policy allowed federal schools to be opened in smaller, more isolated communities, but it left relatively larger communities like Kanxoc with unmanageably high student-teacher ratios. Parents resented the federal government's slight, and kept children home rather than having them ignored and standing uncomfortably for hours in an overcrowded classroom that also lacked benches (Pacheco 1932b). To make matters worse the firing of the last assistant teacher created in the district inspector's words "much discontent [. . .] the indigenous people demand two teachers for their school"; they refused to send their children back to school or continue building a masonry schoolhouse until the SEP listened. The inspector took the boycott seriously enough to personally negotiate with Kanxoc's parents, and in the end agreed to return the assistant teacher who had been transferred (Brambilla 1932d).

Secondly, just as in Chan Kom, Kanxoc's parents demanded a female teacher be sent to teach the girls. Even after the male teacher's aid returned, parents demanded that at least one female teacher be assigned to Kanxoc, an assignment which clashed with the SEP's policy of frequent rotation of teachers and highlighted the low percentage of women in the teaching corps. Finally, in September 1935, the inspector of the Valladolid district agreed to send a female teacher in order to get more children back into school (Morel 1935).

Significantly, SEP inspectors never blamed the problems in Kanxoc on the parents' blanket opposition to schooling, and they were always quick to point out when residents were not doing their part in other communities because of anti-education sentiment. In other communities, where many were against federal schools on principle, they frequently complained to civil authorities to try to pressure them to send children to school. Inspectors understood that the Kanxoc school's problems resulted from a combination of the parent's hostility toward coeducation and the SEP's removal of the teachers' assistants from Kanxoc. In this community renowned for its Mayan-ness, peasants clashed with school not in an attempt to keep Mexicanization at bay, but to demand *more* resources from the federal government for schooling, as well as to force teachers to respect their notions of propriety (and quite possibly to guarantee the girls' safety) by educating girls separately.

The conflict with the SEP in Kanxoc points to a larger pattern of eastern Yucatecan Mayan communities' engagement with the postrevolutionary state. Kanxoc's support for Socialism was due in no small part to the clientele José María Iturralde (governor, 1924–25) had built in the eastern pueblos (Iturralde's nickname was "El Gran Kanxoc"). And, as in the case of Chan Kom, the Socialist Party granted material help in reward for support—Kanxoc got a windmill to service public wells. But early as the Alvarado administration (1915–18), Kanxoc was demanding a separate school and a *profesora* for the girls, showing how communities expected concessions and consideration in return for support (Bustillos 1987:43,83; Pacheco 1953: 229;

Concluding Thoughts: Rethinking Mayan-State Relations

This survey of interaction between federal teachers and Mayan communities in eastern Yucatan during 1930s demonstrates that resistance was not always the exclusive or even the predominant stance adopted by Mayan peoples towards an Hispanizing state. And resistance was far from automatically informed by a defense of linguistically-centered ethnicity. Of course some villages did reject teachers, and many peasants were never convinced of the benefits of the Mexican education system. But most resistance to federal teachers was generated by a host of factors unrelated to the defense of what is conventionally defined as Maya culture. As such, it supports the conclusions of other scholars who question the notion of an essential Maya identity in Yucatan sustained by unrelenting, timeless resistance. As Matthew Restall points out in this volume, the colonial indigenous peoples of Yucatan did not use the term “Maya” to refer to themselves as a discrete ethnic group much less a proto-nationality. Terry Rugeley’s pathbreaking studies of the origins of the Caste War of Yucatan of 1847 and 19th century regional culture in Yucatan not only set a new standard for archival research and historicization of the fluid boundaries of Yucatecan Maya identity, they emphasize the impossibility of thinking of Yucatecan ethnohistory in terms of homogenous Hispanic and Mayan worlds locked in perpetual conflict (Rugeley 1996:xiii, 8; Rugeley 2001).

In eastern Yucatan in the early 1930s, then, there is no indication that the opening of federal schools triggered collective action to defend Yucatec Maya language from the spread of Spanish, a crucial element in any notion of ethnically-informed resistance. As we have seen in eastern Yucatan, communities often welcomed federal schools—after negotiation. What resistance there was—and it was by no means insubstantial—came primarily over three factors: economic support for schools (free labor service), the menace of sexual abuse by rogue federal teachers, and the political threat federal schools posed to petty Socialist officials and their local allies in Mayan villages. Mayan peoples of eastern Yucatan in the 1930s had a notion of communal identity that differed substantially from that advanced by essentialist analyses of Mayan culture that privilege resistance, one that was unthreatened by Spanish-language schooling. Consequently it would not be unreasonable to at least remain agnostic on the question of the survival of an unchanging Mayan-ness sustained through resistance.

My point is not to categorically discard the notion of Mayan identity, yet the motives for individual and collective resistance must be carefully contextualized and historicized (Fletcher 2001). Nor am I negating the fact that the Yucatec Maya, like

their highland cousins in Guatemala and Chiapas, continue to exhibit what June Nash (1995: 9) has called the “extraordinary durability of distinctive cultures in Middle America.” But are these ethnic distinctions timeless? Restall and Gabbert’s essays in this volume, as well as this one, demonstrate that being Maya in the 17th, 19th and early 20th centuries meant considerably different things. To be sure, there is an identifiable Mayan way of organizing families, agriculture, and religion (Hanks 1990), which could conceivably have functioned as “a living, but hidden Maya heritage,” preserved, to use James Scott’s terms, in off-stage behavior largely unobservable to outsiders (Faust 1998:27). The extent to which this has served as the cause of collective resistance, I would argue, merits careful reconsideration. In critiquing essentialism, I certainly am not attempting to use what bell hooks (quoted in Darder 1998:83) has called “the new, chic way to silence . . . marginal groups.” Sadly, denial of ethnic difference has been a familiar strategy to politically marginalize and forcibly acculturate indigenous peoples again and again in the history of Latin America (Gould 1998). Yet to avoid critically reexamining the past of indigenous peoples risks intellectual marginalization and romanticization.

This reexamination of the relationship between the SEP and eastern Yucatecan Mayan communities, like all of the essays in this issue, suggests the need to rethink the history of ethnic relations in Yucatan. This particular slice of Yucatecan history, as narrow as it is, speaks to the need to recognize differences not only between but within ethnic groups, to recognize cooperation and adaptation as well as resistance and rebellion, and to carefully analyze and historicize the motives for resistance. The past of Yucatec Mayan people is marked both by periods of dramatic change as well as enduring continuities. In other words, like all people, they have a history.

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