

The Maya are, in many ways, "the Kurds" of Central America. Like the Kurds of the Middle East who have had their homeland partitioned among four states – Turkey, Iraq, Iran, and Syria, the Maya of Central America have had their homeland partitioned among five states – Mexico, Guatemala, Belize, Honduras, and El Salvador. Both peoples have preserved their traditional cultures in the face of religious, ethnic, linguistic, and political persecution; and both peoples have repeatedly engaged in armed rebellions to regain their political independence, writes Joseph E Fallon.

What is generally not known is in 1847 the Maya of the Yucatan succeeded in regaining their freedom. As a result of the "Caste War", the Maya established several independent states. The largest of these, Chan Santa Cruz, which ruled most of the present-day Mexican State of Quintana Roo and portions of the adjacent States of Yucatan and Campeche, was recognized in the 1850s as a de facto independent country by the British Government.

It was not until 1915 that Mexico officially declared "victory" and the end of the "Caste War". But the war erupted again in the 1920s and 1930s. The last official battle in the "Caste War" is said to have occurred in April 1933 when the Mexican Army attacked the Maya village of Dzula.

Mexican control over Maya territory, however, remained nominal at best until the 1950s when railroads and highways were extended into the Yucatan Peninsula. The first jet airline did not land in the Yucatan until the 1960s. This creation of land and air transportation networks was to project the presence of the Mexican State and military into the lands of the Maya.

The historic alliance that existed between Chan Santa Cruz and the United Kingdom included trade, diplomatic recognition, and military assistance. In 1884, London sponsored negotiations between Yucatan government and Chan Santa Cruz that resulted in a signed, but not ratified, international treaty. So close was the political relationship between British and Maya, in 1887, Chan Santa Cruz officially petitioned London to be made a protectorate of the British Empire. But, in 1893, London signed the Spenser Mariscal Treaty with Mexico which, while defining the border between British Honduras and Mexico, effectively abandoned Chan Santa Cruz to the Mexicans. Despite loss of a sponsor, Chan Santa Cruz continued to maintain its independence for more than a decade. Over the years, the colony of British Honduras (Belize) offered sanctuary to Mayan refugees fleeing the war(s). This history accords London, as signatory of International Human Rights Treaties, a precedent for today being an advocate of the Maya.

The Maya resistance to the Spanish, then and now, has been formidable. The last independent Maya Kingdom, Tah Itza in northern Guatemala, did not fall to the Spanish until 1697, more than 150 years after Cortes had conquered the Aztec Empire in 1521. Even then resistance continued until 1761. To put that in historic context, it is a year after Montreal fell to the British ending the Seven Years War with the expulsion of France from North America. Despite defeat and conquest, the Maya held on to the dream of regaining their independence. And in 1847, the Maya of the Yucatan revolted in the "Caste War".

Exploited and oppressed, the Maya lost what little protection they had under the Spanish Crown when local Spanish elites declared independence in 1821. The political turmoil and in-fighting that ensued among the Spanish over the next two decades, between "Mexican" and "Yucatecan", between "federalist" and "centralist", enabled the Maya, who had been preparing for insurrection for years, to revolt.

Causes for the uprising included expropriation of Maya communal lands and increased taxation on the Maya. The immediate trigger, however, was the June 1847 execution of the Maya leader of Chichimilá, Manuel Antonio Ay, on accusations of plotting a revolt. In an attempt to prevent a rebellion through intimidation, Mexicans also massacred a number of Maya torching several Maya towns in the process.

That objective failed. In July 1847, days after the execution of Ay, the "Caste War" erupted. It resulted in the political independence of the Yucatecan Maya. One that was maintained for over 85 years and is considered, in duration and resilience, one of the most successful indigenous, insurrections in the history of European colonization of the Western Hemisphere. In the Spring of 1848, the zenith of their revolution, the Maya had expelled the Mexicans from all of the Yucatan Peninsula except for the walled cities of Merida and Campeche. Even when defeated in the west, the Maya maintained their independence in the south, center and east of the Yucatan Peninsula for nearly a century.

Nancy Marguerite Farriss writes in *Maya Society Under Colonial Rule: The Collective Enterprise of Survival*: "The Caste War reveals not only the profound resentment against the dzuls (foreigners) long harbored by the Maya, but also the social and cultural vitality that had enabled them to maintain through the centuries of colonial rule such a strong sense of their own identity, with an independent even if not fully remembered past and a vision of an independent future."

This vitality of the Maya identity was expressed in the history, culture, rites, rituals, and

prophecies found in the Books of Chilam Balam (one translation of the title being "Secrets of the Soothsayers"). Nine books are extant; more are believed to have existed. Written in the 17th and 18th Centuries in the Yucatec Maya language, but using a Latin alphabet instead of hieroglyphs, its histories and prophecies were an important means to stimulate this anti-colonial resistance.

As of 1994, Cultural Survival magazine noted, "...there have been five major Maya rebellions - two in Chiapas, two in Yucatan, and one in Guatemala - as well as many minor ones during the tumultuous centuries since Spanish Conquest." It can be argued that in preserving their identity and culture, the Maya remain in open rebellion to this day.

One of the greatest catastrophes to befall the Maya in recent times occurred in Guatemala where to this day the Maya remain an effectively disenfranchised, dispossessed majority population much like Africans in former Rhodesia. In the 36 year old Guatemalan civil war, 1960-1996, Minority Rights Group reports the Maya suffered "almost 200,000 deaths...over 200,000 refugees in Mexico and a million internally displaced within the country. These actions were subsequently defined as genocidal by the United Nations-sponsored truth commission."

But the Maya are resilient. A most unexpected event occurred in Mexico in 1994. Under the name of "Zapatistas", the Maya of the Mexican State of Chiapas engaged in an armed uprising, which in many ways, in grievances and aspirations, echoed the "Caste War" by the Maya of the Yucatan.

With the insurrection in Chiapas, a Pan-Maya sense of solidarity was emerging, enhanced by the social media, which leaped over political borders uniting in common concern Maya of Quintana Roo, Yucatan, Campeche, Chiapas, Guatemala, Honduras, and Belize. Even in the U.S. State of Florida, there was an assertion of group identity and solidarity. They were not "Mexicans" or "Guatemalans" or "Hispanics" or "Latinos" – they were Maya.

Little noticed by much of the world after their initial uprising in 1994, for over the past twenty years the Maya in Chiapas have maintained their own schools, hospitals, communal lands, and political and economic administrations. They are teaching and writing in the Maya languages. According to Mexican newspaper, El Universal, it is believed that approximately 250,000 people in Chiapas support the Zapatistas, while author, Neil Harvey, "estimates that 120,000 to 150,000 people live within Zapatista communities". But tensions exist and major hostilities can erupt at any time as the Mexican government has refused to abide by the San Andreas Accord

on Maya autonomy and land rights and maintains an active military presence in the locality.

Richard M. Leventhal, Carlos Chan Espinosa, and Cristina Coc observe in *The Modern Maya and Recent History*, "Some would argue that the rebellion continues even today within the Yucatan. The Zapatista rebels of nearby Chiapas have indicated their strong connection to the rebellious past of the Yucatan. Also, many of the underlying causes for the Caste War still exist in the region."

Another underlying cause for Maya rebellion has now emerged and the focal point is once again the former Chan Santa Cruz. It is the tourism industry. Promoted by the Mexican government, it poses a growing threat to the lands, culture, and identity of the Maya. In the 1980s international airports were constructed in the former Chan Santa Cruz at the cities of Cozumel and Cancún to transport tourists to the resorts built along the eastern coast of the Yucatan. Dubbed the "Maya Riviera", it is an impressive series of hotels, theme parks, and entertainment centers stretching 75 miles from Playa del Carmen in the north to Tulum in the south.

According to "The environmental effects of Tourism in Cancun, Mexico" (2015), "Cancun ...contributes one fourth of all tourism revenue in the country. Few decades ago, the area was an underdeveloped, snake-infested jungle in one of the poorest region of the nation. However, for last ten years over two million visitors arrived to Cancun each year justifying the place as a world-class tourism destination. The fascinating development of tourism in Cancun is the crown jewel of the state-planned tourism centers in Mexico..."

While tourism is an important source of revenue, it is also a successful component of the strategy of the Mexican government to absorb Maya lands into the state's political and economic structure and to deconstruct Maya identity so as to eliminate the possibility of any future Maya uprising.

In "Cancun Bliss" (*The Tourist City*, 1999), Daniel Hiernaux-Nicola revealed "...the selection of Cancun also reflected geostrategic considerations...Fear of indigenous uprisings therefore contributed to the desire to find development alternatives for the southeast [the Yucatan Peninsula]."

By encouraging millions of tourists a year and importing hundreds of thousands of labourers

from other countries and other regions of Mexico to work the hotels, restaurants, and entertainment industries, the Mexican government seeks to alter the demographics – to reduce the Maya to a dispersed minority in their own land. Reducing Maya to "myths of the past, ruins in the jungle, or zoos". Mexico's use of "tourism" is a unique form of colonialism. But the goal is no different than Saddam Hussein's "Arabization" policy in Iraqi Kurdistan.

In the Nineteenth Century, the British government had extensive relations with the independent state of Chan Santa Cruz. These included negotiations on behalf Chan Santa Cruz with the governments of Yucatan and Mexico. It is time for London to exercise that influence again.

For the same reason the United Kingdom opposed Hussein's "Arabization" policy in Kurdistan, it was a violation of international law, it should oppose Mexico's use of tourism to promote the "de-Mayanization" of the Yucatan. London should use its good offices to influence Mexico to end its attack on Maya identity and autonomy in Chan Santa Cruz/Maya Riviera and Chiapas. The autonomous political status given Kurdistan in post-Saddam Iraq is a potential political solution for the plight of the Maya in Mexico. This possibility should be explored.

On February 2, 2016, The Yucatan Times noted: "Ethnographers and other visitors continued to report occasional observations from macehual [pro-Chan Santa Cruz Mayan] villages: A proclamation from the Speaking Cross signed by "Juan de la Cruz" in 1957. Requests for rifles to drive out the Mexicans in 1959. A British flag flying in Xcocal Guardia in the 1970s. Remote Cruzo'ob villages that believed the Caste War was still going on. The guarded and worshipped Cross in Xcocal Guardia, where residents were expecting "help" from the Americans and British as late as 1997...Maya prophecy regards history as cyclic. In that tradition, the present may be a time of relative peace and freedom, but subjugation will come again, and the Cross will deliver a signal to resume the war and drive out the foreigners. Events in history do not so much end as come around again in the next cycle."

Perhaps with British influence, this could change. Perhaps this endless cycle of oppression and revolt can end with Mexican and international recognition of Maya autonomy. Perhaps after 500 years of exploitation and dispossession, the Maya can, at last, be assured peace, freedom, and respect.

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