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A rebel territory behind the tourist scene: Negotiating national belonging and indigeneity in Quintana Roo

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Abstract: When we think of tourism or migration, we think of international mobility. However, the history of Quintana Roo teaches us that tourism and migration can be forces of nationalization. This article invites us to revisit the history of the southeast Yucatan peninsula, in order to understand the mechanisms that presided over its inclusion into the Mexican nation and the logic of the resistance movement that was opposed to it. Furthermore, this article delves into the ritual practices, social organization and territoriality inherited from the Cast War, that are kept alive by the rebels' descendants (Cruzoob), unbeknownst to the gaze of the tourists and migrants who currently inhabit the region. How did the Cruzoob negotiate an identity as Indigenous to the nation, without losing sight of their sense of territorial sovereignty? At the time of the development of the Mayan Train, what are the challenges of the potential touristification of the Cast War? These are some questions that this article proposes to shed light on, in conversation with historical and anthropological readings, and drawing on ethnographic material collected in Tulum.

Keywords: Maya, Tourism, Nationalization, Migration, Indigenous, speaking cross, Cast war

Introduction

When we think of tourism, we think of international mobility. The first images that come to mind are linked to globalization, as when we talk about migration. However, tourism and migration can act as forces of nationalization. This is what the history of Quintana Roo teaches us, since it is the history of the nationalization process of a rebellious area that resisted Mexican domination for almost a century. This article invites us to revisit the history of the southeast Yucatan peninsula to understand the mechanisms presiding over its inclusion into the Mexican nation and the logic of the resistance movement that was opposed to it. Furthermore, this article delves into the ritual practices, social organization, and territoriality¹ inherited from the Cast War, that are kept alive by the rebels' descendants (Cruzoob), unbeknownst to the gaze of the national and international tourists and migrants who currently inhabit the region. How did the Cruzoob

¹ I conceive territoriality as the subjective and dialectical relationship that social beings maintain with space through their practices, their social interactions and their mental representations (Elbez 2021).

negotiate an identity as Indigenous to the nation², without losing sight of their sense of territorial sovereignty? At the time of the development of the Mayan Train³, what are the challenges of the potential touristification⁴ of the Cast War? Here are some questions that this article proposes to shed light on, in conversation with historical and anthropological readings, and drawing on ethnographic material collected in Tulum between 2009 and 2016⁵.

Tourism as a Tool for Territory Appropriation: The Case of Quintana Roo

The Cast War and the Cult of the Speaking Cross: 19-20th Centuries

In the 19th century, the Yucatan Peninsula was rocked by a bloody clash known as the Cast War. To understand its emergence, we must go back to the colonial era. As the Spanish Conquest was approaching (16th century), a large part of the natives of the southeast of the peninsula (current territory of the State of Quintana Roo) hid in the jungle. To survive, they developed subsistence practices as well as a smuggling trade with Englishmen from British Honduras (present-day Belize), to whom they rented timber concessions in exchange for goods. Thus, in the 17th century, the southeast of the peninsula was perceived as a large area of Indian emancipation, which was joined by an increasing number of fugitives from areas dominated by the Spanish.

In the 18th century, colonial authorities spread the idea that this area was depopulated for the purpose of distributing land to develop agriculture and breed livestock. This strategy of “imaginary void” (Macias Zapata 2004)⁶ was then taken up by the Mexican State after Independence in order to distribute lands to hacienda holders. In parallel with this policy of territorial appropriation – which led many natives of the region to become landless peasants – the Yucatec elites took discriminatory measures: placing the “Indian” population in the front line in their separatist wars, reimplementing the “republics of Indians”, and introducing certain taxes (Dumond 1997). These factors contributed to triggering the Cast War.

² By “Indigenous”, I refer to a socially and politically constructed legal category, defined by the State and that only exists in relationship to the nation-State way to represent itself.

³ The Mayan Train is a project of the Mexican government aiming at boosting the economy of the Yucatan peninsula, essentially through the development of tourism, through the construction of a 1500km railway that should be ready by 2024. See <https://www.trenmaya.gob.mx>

⁴ By touristification, I refer to the multifaceted process through which a place becomes touristic. This involves a diversity of actors (investors, entrepreneurs, visitors, inhabitants, migrants attracted by the economic activity, tourism professionals) as well as a large range of social dynamics that have to do with land transfers (agrarian conflicts, rising prices, gentrification), local identity-building process (debates on the aesthetics of the place, on its cultural identity, on the category of the population that is considered to be the most legit and representative of the place), practices of tradition staging and reinvention (according to the tourists’ expectations but also to what the inhabitants imagine that tourists expect), etc.

⁵ For more information about my fieldwork, see the “Fieldwork” section at the end of the paper.

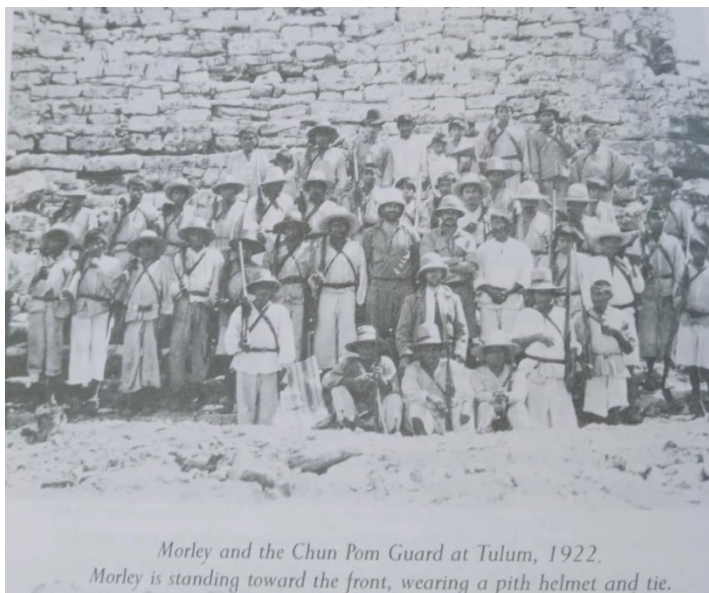
⁶ He defined it as: “a historical succession of images which, from colonial times to the present, have been made to characterize certain portions of the territory [...] in order to justify a particular way of occupation and exploitation of the natural resources contained in this empty land, while disregarding the society that was previously established there.” (Macias Zapata 2004: 11)

During the first year of the war, the rebels had the upper hand over the Yucatec army and managed to advance towards the northwest of the peninsula. But after they had just occupied Izamal, at 60km from Mérida, they deserted the battlefield to sow their fields. The rebels' withdrawal gave the authorities time to organize a response. As a result, the rebels were never able to regain the territorial advancement achieved in 1848.

The rebels were in touch with Englishmen from the British Honduras. Following a failed attempt of English intermediation with the Yucatecs, the rebels asked the Queen of England to annex their territory – a failed attempt which they nonetheless repeated several times, aware that they would not be allowed to self-govern⁷. In the 1930s, the wish for English annexation mutated into a wish for American annexation, as evidenced by this 1940 statement by the rebel captain Concepcion Cituk:

“It was only a short time ago that we learned that our old friend, Queen Victoria, who let arms slip over the border when our grandparents were alive, had died. We believe, and the Cross had told us this, that only the American doctor can guide us in our independence. [...] Tell him that we want nothing of Mexico, but want to become part of his country, under American protection. We want him as chief”. (Sullivan 1989: 153)

The American doctor mentioned in this letter is none other than Sylvanus Morley, the archaeologist in charge of the restoration of Chichen-Itza (and a spy for the CIA), whose help the rebels desperately tried to obtain during the 1930s.



Rebel guard of Chum Pom with the US archeologist Sylvanus Morley in 1922 in Tulum
(Goni 1999 : 123)

The rebels called themselves “Macehualob.” In colonial Yucatan, this term referred to the peasant

⁷ Several sources attest to a form of deification of Queen Victoria and her lineage by the rebels, who declared that they “did not want any flag unless they could have the English one” (Dumond 1997: 355).

classes of the native population, who were subject to forced labor, tribute and prohibitions, as opposed to the “almehenob”, who were exempt from it because they had a noble status before the conquest or mastered certain skills (Gabbert 2001). After Independence, the natives of the peninsula continued to call members of the lower social classes Macehualob (Dumond 1997). Today, the rebels’ descendants are also called Cruzoob, in reference to the cult of the Speaking Cross.

This cult emerged in 1850: as the rebellion was running out of steam, crosses endowed with the gift of speech miraculously appeared, declaring that the fight must be continued. The scholars who have written about this phenomenon agree that the speaking crosses were part of a strategy utilized by rebel leader José Maria Barrera to reinvigorate the struggle. The village closest to their miraculous appearance was renamed Chan Santa Cruz and attracted many rebels. In 1851, the ventriloquist and patron of the crosses, Manuel Nahuat, was murdered by the Yucatec army and two sacred crosses were confiscated. In order for the cult to continue, Barrera placed in a church three smaller crosses dressed in “hipiles”⁸, announced as the “daughters” of the previous ones (Villa Rojas 1978). The crosses were placed in an enclosure only accessible to the priest, who used a barrel as a loudspeaker to give them a supernatural voice. The crosses also began to express themselves in writing, via letters that their interpreter sent to the various localities of the rebel network to transmit their orders. At the same time, other “daughter” crosses appeared in different rebel localities. Churches resembling the layout of the Chan Santa Cruz ceremonial center were built to host them, and a guard system was put in place to protect their entrance (Balam 2010). These localities became hotbeds of the rebellion, which reorganized into a network of local chiefdoms linked together by hierarchical relations.

According to the official data, the caste war ended in 1901, with the capture of Chan Santa Cruz by the federal army. However, when the army arrived in Chan Stanta Cruz⁹, the town had been deserted by its inhabitants (Goni 1999). Because the most important centers of the rebellion had been deserted when the federal army arrived, and because the Macehualob (who took refuge in the jungle like in colonial times) continued to carry out attacks until the 1930s, many scholars consider that the Cast War continued long after 1901 (Sullivan 1989, Balam 2010, among others).

Opening the Quintana Roo: making the Macehualob a minority in the region

In the 19th and 20th centuries, the federal government took steps to nationalize the rebel territory: it granted land to politicians and to agricultural and logging companies (Reed 1964), constructed a railroad connecting the rebel country with the west of the peninsula (Lapointe 1983), and got the Southeastern Railroad Company to committ to settling working families on the 723,250 hectares that were given to it. Gustavo Marin Guardado wrote: “there was a strong political will to carry out the colonization of the region, especially by social groups very distinct from those of the

⁸ Traditional women's clothing typical of the region.

⁹ After its progress having been delayed for three years by the rebels, who cut the telegraph and telephone cables to make lead balls from it (Dumond 1997).

natives” (2008:112). Thus, the federal authorities indiscriminately sent Yaqui prisoners deported from the north of the country¹⁰, landless peasants left out of the Agrarian Reform (Macias 2004) and Asian workers (Lapointe 2006). There were also Cuban, Honduran and Mexican seasonal workers who came to work in the logging industry.

After having tried in vain to dissuade the loggers from appropriating lands they considered to be theirs, the rebels stole goods, attacked several logging camps and burned hectares of forest. In response, federal soldiers were sent into the area to regularly set fire to the rebels' fields and steal their food supplies (Sullivan 1989).

These measures weakened the rebel network, which was already depleted by internal divisions including: desertion of Macehualob who joined enemy ranks, disagreements between rebel leaders on how to lead the fight and negotiate peace agreements, opportunistic enrichment of certain leaders who collected taxes from loggers without redistributing them to Macehualob living in poverty (Villa Rojas 1945, Konrad 1991, Villalobos 2006).

Gradually, the Macehualob were integrated into military service and national education projects, as part of a federal policy of integration of “Indian” populations (Lapointe 2006). But integration didn't occur without resistance: most of the rebel leaders refused to allow the government to establish primary schools in their villages, to the point of threatening or even attacking the schoolteachers, who were perceived as government spies (Sullivan 1989: 88). In the same movement, the Agrarian Reform was not well received by some of the Macehualob, aware that accepting land from the federal state was tantamount to recognizing its sovereignty. Thus, in 1935, the rebels of Xcacal Guardia told the anthropologist Alfonso Villa Rojas:

“We do not need anyone to grant land to us since all these forests are ours. [...] We do not want to negotiate anything with the President of Mexico or with the Mexicans. Let them stay in their towns, leaving us in ours, and thus we will live in peace.” (Sullivan 1989: 140). This declaration of sovereignty shows that, more than thirty years after the official end of the war, the Cruzoob continued to perceive Mexicans as foreigners to whom they refused to be assimilated. Villa Rojas (1978) confirmed this idea by noting that in the 1930s, they still referred to the territory of Quintana Roo by the expression “U luum mazehualob”. An official from the Ministry of Public Treasury wrote in a 1934 report: “They get to such degree of ignorance of their nationality that a great persuasive effort was necessary to make them understand that the Federation soldiers were their compatriots.” (Goni 1999: 159).

After having tried to obtain the annexation of the southeast of the peninsula by the United States – in the continuity of the requests for annexation addressed to the United Kingdom since the 19th century (cf. above) –, the most recalcitrant rebels ended up agreeing to integrate the Agrarian Reform, which completed the dismantling of their socio-territorial organization. Indeed, the “ejidos” system forced them to formulate their territorial requests entity by entity, whereas they were organized into a network of localities of unequal power. Furthermore, the administrators of the “ejidos” had to be elected, which destabilized the old appointment practices (Sullivan 1989).

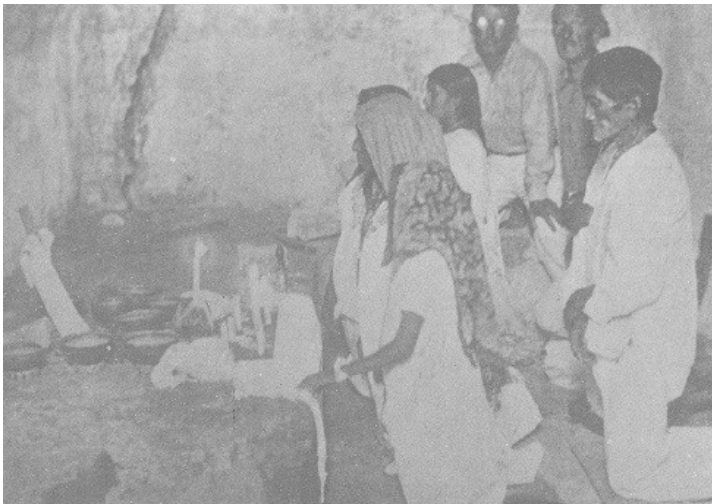
¹⁰ At the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th centuries, different groups rose up against the Mexican government's policy of territorial appropriation. The Yaquis were one of them.

Finally, this change in the territorial organization created conflicts over the limits of the “ejidos”, further dividing the rebels (Marin 2008: 111).

Heritage and tourism as a means of territorial appropriation: the example of Tulum

At the end of the 19th century, the Tulum means were known as “the most savage and belligerent of all the rebellious Indians” (Goni 1999: 59). Indeed, anyone venturing into the area had to be interrogated by the Speaking Cross of Tulum, that could order his execution (Goni 1999). As a result, archaeologists could not find a crew willing to accompany them to Tulum, and local workers avoided approaching them. Yet, during the 20th century, Tulum went from being “a great place not to visit” (Sullivan 1989) to an international tourist destination. Here's how this change happened.

From the 1930s, the demographic decline and pacification of the rebel society facilitated the arrival of visitors. In 1937, the archaeological site of Tulum was integrated into a restoration project that supported broader aims of national integration¹¹. The Cruzoob, who had gotten used to worshipping a cross the altar of which was erected within the “Castillo” (main monument of the site), saw their access denied by the archaeologists of the National Institute of Archeology and History (INAH), some of whom were sleeping in the “Castillo”. This created conflicts between the worshipers of the cross – who wanted to pray there, place their offerings there, and claimed to be its owners – and the officials who told them that the site was state property.



Religious ceremony inside the « Castillo » (main monument of Tulum archeological site) in 1927 (Goni 1999 : 150).

The archaeologists in charge of the project developed such a distrust of the Tulum means that they brought in workers from Cozumel rather than hiring locals for the restoration work. At the

¹¹ In 1937, archaeologists from the Southeast Mexican Scientific Expedition noted the presence of Toltec and Aztec elements in the peninsula, and concluded that the unity of the Mexican nation was not only legal, but also ethno-cultural.

same time, the governor of the Quintana Roo Territory attracted tourists, by building an airstrip and a hotel in Tulum (Goni 1999, Villa Rojas 1945). In 1939, the President Lazaro Cardenas made an official visit during which he declared Tulum heritage of the nation.

Thus, thirty years before the Cancun tourist center came to fruition hotels opened in Tulum, the activity of which diversified with the development of diving tourism from the 1950s. At the end of the 1970s, tourist attendance in Tulum was boosted by the development of the Cancun project, which gave it greater visibility and accessibility for international tourism (especially since the construction of the 307 national road in the 1980s).

While in Cancun, the federal state imposed itself as the administrator of tourism development (Oehmichen Bazán 2010), in Tulum, it imposed itself through the heritage designation of large plots of land. Thus, while a family of natives had appropriated the entrance to the ruins and charged the entrance, the INAH prevented it in 1966¹². In 1981, the site became part of Tulum National Park, together with 664 hectares of beach and jungle. Since then, the federal state not only collects revenue from visits to the site, but it also validates which activities are prohibited or authorized within it. For example, the INAH banned climbing on the “Castillo” in 1993¹³. To hold a ceremony within the site, it is now necessary to obtain an authorization from the INAH. At the same time, the creation of Tulum National Park has endowed the Federal State with prerogatives, such as validating or rejecting construction projects, fixing and collecting taxes from the establishments located there, applying them financial penalties or closing them if they do not comply with the requirements of the Park.

In 1982, the Sian Ka'an Natural Reserve was created as part of a project by the Quintana Roo Research Center (CIQRO): a civil association the majority share of which belonged to the Federal State, and which benefited the support of the National Science and Technology Council (CONACYT) – an institution that depends on the federal state. In 1986, the Sian Ka'an Natural Reserve was declared a Biosphere Reserve by a presidential decree and recognized as a World Heritage Site by UNESCO. Although it is now a world heritage site, 99% of its territory is owned by the nation. This initiative enabled the federal state to appropriate 528,148 hectares. As in the case of Tulum National Park, it is up to the federal authorities to enforce the environmental preservation measures of the Reserve. It is therefore apparent that the UNESCO method, which consists in delegating the management of protected areas to national authorities, can be exploited by public authorities for the purposes of territorial appropriation. In fact, the presentation of the Sian Ka'an Biosphere Reserve on the UNESCO website reproduces the myth of the “imaginary void”, presenting the Mexican State as the noble savior of an abandoned area:

“After the historic abandonment of the area, inaccessibility, frequent flooding and poor soils allowed for centuries of natural regeneration, until governmental schemes encouraged timber extraction and land clearing for cattle pastures in the 20th Century. The undesired effects of uncontrolled development led to the creation of a nature reserve in 1982,

¹² According to an elderly guide from the area, it was the Caamal family (name of a former Cruzoob leader).

¹³ This ban was extended to all structures on the site in 1996.

consolidated in 1986 when the area was categorized a national biosphere reserve by Presidential Decree and also internationally recognized”¹⁴.

The parallel with the closing speech of President Cardenas’ visit in 1939¹⁵ is interesting, since on this occasion, the poet Rosado Vega associated the incorporation of Tulum into national heritage with its discovery, although it was a powerful rebel center well-known by the authorities for a long time: “thanks to this visit by General Cardenas, the ruins of Tulum have finally come out of the doldrums, abandonment and oblivion in which they have always been maintained”.

A reproduction of this effort to erase the subversive history of the region can be spotted in contemporary Quintana Roo, because of the demographic composition of the state and the existing touristic discourse about it.

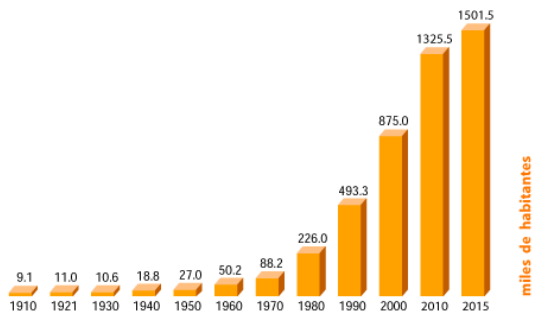
Using migration and tourism to erase a subversive past: when the Maya hides the Macehual

Although the Federal State redoubled efforts to attract migrants to the region in the second half of the 20th century – with the creation of the Colonizing Commission of Quintana Roo in 1938 and the implementation of considerable immigration campaigns in the 1960s¹⁶ –, it is only with the development of tourist activity along the Caribbean coast that it reached its goal of replacing the Macehual population.

¹⁴ <https://whc.unesco.org/fr/list/410>

¹⁵ During which Tulum was declared heritage of the nation (see above).

¹⁶ The workers attracted to Quintana Roo by the projects mentioned above were not able to put down roots in the region in the long term (Mendoza Ramirez 2009) . Indeed, the logging companies that had undertaken to develop colonies, preferred to replace them with temporary settlements in order to maximize the economically exploitable territory. Moreover, when in 1931, the federal authorities gave this territory to the States of Yucatan and Campeche, they did not maintain its infrastructures. Thus, in 1938, the Colonizing Commission of Quintana Roo was created to organize the movement of national migrants to Quintana Roo. This policy took on considerable dimensions in the 1960s, with the establishment of a large media campaign and benefits for migrants (donation of building materials and food, a daily income, an automatic access to a loan, etc.). However, once again, the families attracted in the region fled in the face of problems: lack of fresh water, land unsuitable for agriculture, conflicts related to the granting of pieces of land that were presented as “empty” but that were actually inhabited or exploited by natives, corrupt practices (Mendoza 2004).



Increase of the population of the Quintana Roo State in thousands of inhabitants between 1910 and 2015 (INEGI 2015).

Simultaneously, the Macehualob have disappeared from the collective imagination of the region's history. Indeed, the ethnographic surveys that I conducted in Tulum between 2009 and 2016, revealed that the vast majority of the inhabitants had never heard of the Cast war, and that those who had heard of its name imagined that it was an event of the colonial era. Similarly, most inhabitants believed that Tulum was uninhabited before tourism, and that the tourism development of Tulum was posterior to the one of Cancun (Elbez 2021). For example, residents from the capital living in Tulum for about ten years said: “- There was nothing here until the 1970s. It was only with tourism that Tulum existed. - It’s almost a pueblo built by foreigners.” (October 2012)¹⁷. Thus, the migrants who constitute the vast majority of the town’s population today, unconsciously contribute to the nationalization of this former rebel area, both through their presence and through their representation of Tulum’s past.

Another force that contributes today to the myth of the “imaginary void” and to the nationalization of Quintana Roo, is the touristic imagination (Elbez 2017a, Elbez 2017b). Ecotourism discourse in particular tends to present the region as depopulated before the arrival of tourism, playing on images of deserted beaches and a lost paradise. At the same time, the discourse of cultural tourism obscures the Macehual under the generic figure of the “Mayan”¹⁸, creating an illusion of unity between “Mayans” across the whole peninsula. In reality, during the Cast War, the natives of northwest Yucatan actually fought against the Macehualob alongside the Yucatec army. The tendency to refer to Cruzoob ceremonial centers by the generic term “Mayan church” creates the same illusion of unity, since it is applied interchangeably to the places of worship of different syncretic Catholicisms. Furthermore, tourist guides generally do not mention the colonial and post-Independence periods, nor do the Mayan townspeople. Rural “Mayan communities” are described as self-sufficient and peaceful survivals from pre-Hispanic times. In effect, the figure of

¹⁷ Daily conversation with three Tulummeans in their thirties in the “taqueria” they had just opened together. Th three of them know each other from Mexico City and moved to Tulum in their twenties. For more information about my fieldwork, see the “Fieldwork” section at the end of the paper.

¹⁸ I write “Mayan” in quotes in order to emphasize that it is a constructed category put into play by the Mexican State as a way of incorporating a diversity of people and groups who do not necessarily identify as such. On the historical construction of Mayaness, see Restall Matthew, 2004, “Maya Ethnogenesis”, *Journal of Latin American Anthropology*, vol. 9, n°1, p. 64-89.

the pre-Hispanic, spiritual and peaceful Maya, masks that of the Macehual warrior whose cult is tinged with Catholicism. This is apparent in the following excerpt from the website of the Tulum municipality, an excerpt that reproduces the myth of the “imaginary void” and equates Cruzoob pilgrimages to the Cross of Tulum with Mayan pilgrimages to pre-Hispanic deities:

“With the abandonment of Tulum as a living and dynamic city, deterioration has come and nature has taken care of concealing it. It took many centuries to pass before it was rediscovered by the western world, but the natives never forgot it and annually they made and continue to make ritual pilgrimages to bring offerings to the gods of the antiquity.”¹⁹

However, until today, several localities of Quintana Roo are home to Cruzoob communities that date back to the Cast War, preserving its memory as well as the sense of Macehual territory. This is what we are going to see now.

The Cruzoob Today: Powerful and Relatively Autonomous Indigenous Communities

The Crosses and their guardians: a hierarchical social organization dating from the war

Today, Quintana Roo has five Cruzoob centres: Chan Santa Cruz, Tulum, Xcacal Guardia, Chumpon and Chancah Veracruz. Each of these localities has a ceremonial center, to which is associated a hierarchical system that dates from the war. At its head stands a “tatich”, who is both the patron of the cross and the head of the community. In addition to orchestrating masses, weddings and baptisms, he plays the role of judge in more serious cases that involve members of the community (crimes, witchcraft, treason according to Dumond 1970: 269). He is assisted by a secretary, who plays the role of scribe and interpreter of the cross. Below these leaders in the religious hierarchy are the cantors, “h-men” (healers) and priors.

The members of the cruzoob military hierarchy are also subordinate to the authority of the religious leaders. The companies, which have been organized on the model of Yucatec militias since the war (Dumond 1985), aim to protect each ceremonial center and to ensure its worship life. They are made up of ten to forty men, subject to the authority of a general (Balam 2010), who take turns day and night to guard the entrance of the church in shifts of two and a half months. Performing one’s “religious service” in a company is mandatory for married men and optional for single men (Balam 2010). Some join after having been called to serve in a dream, others because they have promised the holy cross to watch over it, in exchange for the fulfilment of a wish (Balam 2010: 142). Companies are made up of several hierarchically ordered roles, to which specific tasks are associated: commanders, captains, sergeants, corporals, soldiers²⁰. Although the various positions that exist are distributed on a voluntary basis, they are usually transmitted from father to eldest son, according to a segmental²¹ and patrilineal system.

¹⁹ Text that appeared when I consulted the site tulum.gob.mx in February 2016.

²⁰ For more details on their respective responsibilities of each, see Elbez 2021 (appendix 2).

²¹ Segmental society: “society, the structure of which is based on kinship and lineage, and that does not have centralized institutions. It is divided into many components of similar nature, opposed to each other at each level but connected at a higher level. The segmental organization dominates in many nomadic societies. (Ciavolella & Wittersheim 2016: 43).

Like the members of the companies, the holy crosses obey a hierarchical organization, and they are valued according to the number of believers that they can affect. At the lowest level of the hierarchy are the domestic crosses, which are usually given to married men when they establish their own household (Villa Rojas 1945). In order to be protected from the impurity of domestic life, they are kept in a family chapel. When a miracle is attributed to one of these crosses, an altar is made especially for it in the family chapel, and its owners organize a feast in its honor every two to three years.

Unlike the other domestic crosses, the miraculous ones cannot be carried for ceremonies: a “fiadora” cross is carried in their place. The use of “fiadoras” can be traced back to the Cast War, during which the cruzoob feared the theft and destruction of their crosses by the army²². The threat to the crosses also explains the implementation of the guard systems, as well as the Cruzoob’s tendency to move crosses from one ceremonial center to another²³.

The village cross is the miraculous domestic cross that has acquired the most prestige. It sometimes belongs to a family of village founders but what makes it famous are the miracles it performed. Village crosses are kept in the ceremonial center, where worshippers go to ask for things that concern the community. Believers whose domestic cross doesn’t work can also ask the village cross personal requests. The village crosses are utilized ritually in festivals financed by the patrilineal lineage to which the village crosses belong (but other villagers also participate in their organization).

In localities that host an important ceremonial center, on which other local communities depend (the five listed at the beginning of this part), the village cross is located behind the altar, in a recess that is not accessible to the faithful. During the cross celebrations, Cruzoob from all over the region come in procession to bring it offerings. The classification of ceremonial centers by degree of power is variable: Chan Santa Cruz had its heyday, then Tulum, then Xcocal Guardia (Elbez 2021).

How the rebel territory is kept alive behind the tourist scene: the Cruzoob territoriality as a support for a living memory

The participation of the different Cruzoob centers in the same network is visible in the similarity of their spatial organization: the ceremonial centers follow the same spatial structure (vestibule, room accessible to the faithful, background only accessible to the priests, where the holy crosses are arranged). The ceremonial centers are surrounded by four small crosses, and it is also the case of the localities that house them (Balam 2010).

²² Indeed, the Cruzoob considered that the absence of a cross in a locality, and therefore of its protection, meant bad luck, leading to famines, epidemics, deadly battles, etc.

²³ This has happened many times since the war until today. The details are exposed in my PhD thesis (Elbez 2021).



“Mayan church” of Tulum (straw roof) on the “Cancha maya” square (Elbez 2016). One of the four crosses that surround the ceremonial center appears at the bottom right of the picture.

An interview that I conducted with Elena²⁴ (a foreigner who married a Cruzoob and whose sons were integrated into the company of Chumpon) demonstrates that the Cruzoob remember the places of their former ceremonial centers, now covered by the jungle, and that they go there in secret to perform ceremonies:

“What happens is that sometimes in Chumpon, they gather the whole village in the church, and they discuss. They do... They have... How do you say... They foresee the future, like oracles, and they talk about it. But they also speak of the past. It's very much alive in them. So: when the village was formed, it was not formed where it is now. There is a secret place that they all know. And if something happens there, all the people gather there. And over there, there is everything: it is in the middle of the jungle, there are caves, there is water, and everything. This is the place, and we keep it alive. But in specific moments. They don't tell you about it so easily. And they don't pass it on from one another just like that either...” (February 2016)

In addition, holy crosses are moved from one Cruzoob locality to another, as part of secret pilgrimages during which they are carried through the jungle along “the old paths taken during the war” (Herrera 2013, Elena’s interview from February 2016). Indeed, the rebels were accustomed to carrying their holy crosses during their incursions, and they sometimes placed them in huts built in encampments where they lodged halfway (Dumond 1985: 300). Also, as mentioned above, holy crosses have been repeatedly moved when they were deemed to be in danger. Thus, through their processions, the contemporary Cruzoob keep open the secret paths that their ancestors took during the Cast War. It is also likely that some of the Cruzoob’s secret paths and places date back to the colonial era, when many natives of the southeast of the peninsula took refuge in the jungle to escape Spanish domination (cf. above). Thus, through their pilgrimages, the Macehualob reclaim the rebel territory, and update their mastery of its hidden confines. Besides, since they keep the knowledge of the “ancient paths” and their pilgrimages secret, they prove their ability to conceal

²⁴ For more information about my fieldwork, see the “Fieldwork” section at the end of the paper.

collective actions in a Quintana Roo that is now inhabited by a majority of non-natives and visited each year by more than 12 million tourists²⁵.

In today's Quintana Roo – that is caught up in tourism planning territorialities largely orchestrated and financed by the federal authorities (Riviera Maya, Ruta Maya, Pueblos Mágicos de México, and more recently the Mayan Train) – it is not random that inhabitants keep alive a territoriality that their ancestors used to refuse the status of Indigenous of the Mexican nation. Whether the memory of the Cast War is spoken or kept quiet, explicit or implicit, the spatial practices of protection and displacement of the crosses reaffirm the sovereignty of the contemporary Cruzoob over the “secret paths” borrowed by their ancestors. Through their ritual practices, the contemporary Cruzoob show that, if they decided to, they would be able to mobilize these paths, that have served as a guarantee for their ancestors' autonomy in the past centuries.

The Mayan Train is a tourism development project launched by the Mexican government in 2019 that should be in operation in 2024. This 1,500-kilometer-long railway across the Yucatan peninsula will go through part of the rebel territory, since it takes back part of a railway built by the federal government during the Cast War in order to breach and nationalize the rebel region (cf. above). Therefore, one can wonder whether the Cruzoob's “ancient paths” and their associated worship practices will be maintained secret in the face of the visitors and of the intensified federal presence.

When Indigenous legislation is put at the service of Macehual sovereignty

The implementation of multiculturalist policies in different Latin American countries tends to polarize the debate between theories of emancipation which present “constitutional reforms as a response to the mobilization of Indigenous peoples”, and theories of manipulation which conceive multiculturalism as “a new technique of power allowing the State to extend its radius of action and control previously autonomous social spheres” (Lopez Caballero, 2011). The work of the Argentinian anthropologist Claudia Briones (2005) falls into this second category. Briones considers political multiculturalism as a hegemonic instrument which aims to homogenize the national body via the pseudo-recognition of its ethnic and cultural heterogeneity. According to Briones, Indigenous laws should not be seen as responses to demands made by citizens. Rather, Indigenous laws reify the very categories that were created by the State before becoming “the places of enunciation from which Indigenous activism builds its requests” (2005: 19). This description fits quite well the history of the Macehualob, who were forced to accept the status of Indigenous Mexicans after a conflict that lasted more than half a century. However, the fact that they finally lent themselves to the game of Indigenous legislations does not necessarily imply that their claims, their methods of self-identification and collective organization, are conditioned by the State. This is evidenced by the information presented in this section, which invites us to adopt

²⁵ Figures of 2021: <https://centrourbano.com/inmobiliario/quintana-roo-recupero-un-80-de-la-afluencia-de-turistas-en-la-zona/>

In 2019, the Quintana Roo was visited by 22,000 tourists: <https://www.economista.com.mx/estados/Quintana-Roo-cerraria-el-ano-2021-con-12-millones-de-visitantes-20210916-0053.html>

an intermediate point of view between the theories of emancipation and manipulation, by considering that Indigenous legislations are strategies deployed by the State to control peripheral populations, but do not invalidate the possibility for the latter to mobilize these same legislations in order to increase their power and their sovereignty on a local scale.

Although the federal State had attempted to use Macehualob leaders as intermediaries since the 1970s (Bartolomé, 2001), these attempts failed until the Quintana Roo Law of Indigenous Rights, Culture and Organization formalized the remuneration and recognition of Cruzoob leaders by the State in 1997. Since then, marriages and baptisms orchestrated by the “tatic” have legal value, as well as the documents produced by the traditional judges. In 1998, a second Indigenous Law was approved, expressing the will to improve the “social welfare [of Indigenous people] through specific programs and budgets”²⁶. It is important to note that the terms “Cruzoob” and “Macehualob” do not appear in the Indigenous legislation of Quintana Roo, which uses the generic terms “Indigenous” and “Maya” to designate them. Furthermore, Cruzoob practices are mired in the temporal confusion that usually comes with the process of turning local identities into nationalized Indigenous heritage. For example, in the 2017 decree through which “the system of hierarchical responsibilities²⁷ of the Mayan sanctuaries of central Quintana Roo” was declared “intangible heritage of Quintana Roo”²⁸, the Cruzoob system of hierarchical responsibilities is listed side by side with cultural contributions that are representative of pre-Hispanic Mayaness, such as astronomy or mathematics: “Nevertheless, the State of Quintana Roo has a composition originally based in the Mayan ethnic group, that contains a richness recognized worldwide for the advances it brought in matters of architecture, astronomy, mathematics, its folklore, its gastronomy and its system of hierarchical responsibilities in the ceremonial centers, runs the risk of undergoing a great deterioration at the hands of globalization, through tourism and temporary migrations”. This excerpt is also revealing of the Mexican authorities’ tendency to hold globalization and tourism responsible for the Cruzoob’s risk of cultural loss, whereas historically, it was the Mexican State that actively worked on dismantling it. Thus, during the inauguration of Tulum “Mayan Church” festivities in October 2012, a representative of the State of Quintana Roo declared “The State is hand in hand with you” as a response to the traditional judge, who began his speech with “We, as Indigenous...”²⁹. Thus, by agreeing to take advantage of the Indigenous legislation, the Macehualob agreed to become Indigenous to the Mexican nation, more than a century after the start of the war.

That being said, it is clear that the Indigenous legislation of Quintana Roo aligns with the interests of the Cruzoob, who have been able to seize it in order to protect their worship from intrusions. Indeed, beyond the recognition of their religious, military hierarchy and places of worship, Quintana Roo Indigenous legislation recognizes it as an offense to self-proclaim oneself

²⁶[https://adsdatabase.ohchr.org/IssueLibrary/ESTADO%20DE%20QUINTANA%20ROO%20\(Mexico\)_Ley%20de%20derechos%20organizacion%20y%20cultura%20indigena.pdf](https://adsdatabase.ohchr.org/IssueLibrary/ESTADO%20DE%20QUINTANA%20ROO%20(Mexico)_Ley%20de%20derechos%20organizacion%20y%20cultura%20indigena.pdf)

²⁷ In Spanish, “Sistema de cargos”

²⁸ http://documentos.congresoqroo.gob.mx/transparencia/proceso_legislativo/iniciativas/I152017070411.pdf

²⁹ For more information about my fieldwork, see the “Fieldwork” section at the end of the paper.

as a “Mayan dignitary”, as well as the acts of photographing or filming the “Mayan Churches” and their activities without the Indigenous authorities’ authorization. In addition, the leaders of the Cruzoob ceremonial centers have used the Indigenous legislation to boost the economic power of their community. While those of Xcacal Guardia directly requested resources from the State government³⁰, those of Chumpon obtained a greenhouse where they grow tomatoes with the economic aid of the State, that also sent trainers to transmit them techniques of production improvement (Balam, 2010). Regarding the Cruzoob of Tulum, in addition to the salary that is allocated to members of the military and religious hierarchy, the negotiator of the ceremonial center before the authorities obtained from the State government a piece of land on the beach, on which the Cruzoob built about thirty bungalows that they rent out to tourists. They take turns doing it and the incomes are divided among the community members (Balam, 2010: 191). It is interesting to note that, besides the economic interest of this initiative, it also allowed the Tulumean Cruzoob to expand the territory over which they extend their sovereignty.

This territory is quite important, since almost all the heads of Cruzoob families are “ejidatarios”, a legal status on which they were able to capitalize not only to exploit the territory, but also to obtain from the authorities the first permits for the sale of alcoholic beverages, as well as the first licenses for taxi and truckload transportation (Marin Guardado, in press).

The “Mayan Church” of Tulum: an underground but essential force of local politics

In parallel with the measures mentioned above, the Cruzoob community of Tulum has implemented another strategy, that allows it to gain political power while improving the economic position of its members: negotiating jobs with municipal and State authorities. (Balam, 2010: 191). Since they are more likely to offer civil servant positions, this strategy has the advantage of guaranteeing a strong Cruzoob presence within decision-making bodies (Marin Guardado, in press): municipal governments, ejidal police stations, trade unions, cooperatives, political parties (mainly the PRI).

In addition, several people involved in local politics explained to me that their candidacies had to be validated by dignitaries from the “Mayan Church” before they could stand for election³¹. It seems that the Cruzoob community votes collectively, and that its leaders have a network capable of making and breaking a career. This is suggested by this excerpt from the interview of Ricardo, a sixty-year-old man from Durango who arrived in Tulum in 1979, and became a municipal delegate for Tulum for three years before becoming President of the city's taxi union³²:

“In 1987, Anapito Cahuich, who had been a municipal delegate here for twelve years, died. And so I am applying as an outsider. Why? Because there were only a hundred families, and everyone knew me: the priests, the sergeants, etc. And then Tulum was very... I mean,

³⁰According to Balam (2010), this is frowned upon by members of other Cruzoob communities, and creates tension with the authorities.

³¹ For more information about my fieldwork, see the “Fieldwork” section at the end of the paper.

³² A very powerful union which is close to the PRI.

Cancun was barely growing and Chetumal was way out there, we were very isolated... So I apply and I tell them: if you want to work with me, support me. I want to rule Tulum. I will help you. [...] And so, I told the Mayan priest: if you help me in the competition against the ejidal commissioner, if you help me to be a delegate³³, I will come with you and you will tell me which young person you want me to teach politics to. So I went to his church, walked into the church and we sat down, with all the elders around. The priest said, 'Ricardo wants to be the leader now. He offers us to teach a young man. We are going to make him win'. Time passed and they made me win. In front of the president, they crossed my paper according to color. They would ask me: 'What color is your paper?' The priest would come and say: 'Red!', and everyone would come and vote red, red, red... [The priest would say]: 'Once again!' And again..." (September 2010)

According to Ricardo, the young man he trained became Mayor a few years later.

During my fieldwork, I also collected several accounts of an event that is indicative of the control exercised by Cruzoob over access to key political positions. In the 1990s, Cruzoobs from Tulum reportedly sequestered a mayor who had just come to power, as well as the officials who counted the vote, in the City hall of Tulum. They allegedly doused the building with gasoline and threatened to set it on fire if the mayor didn't resign. Following this confrontation, he would have been replaced³⁴.

It therefore appears that the Cruzoob community of Tulum has been able to combine its political know-how with Indigenous legislation, to become an essential subject of the local political game.

Turning the Cast war into a tourist attraction: how to make a subversive memory harmless...

During my years of fieldwork, the "Mayan church" of Tulum and its celebrations had not been captured by tourism³⁵ and a large part of the inhabitants were unaware of their existence. In fact, on two occasions, the inhabitants (originally from other Mexican States) that I invited to the "Mayan church" festival – commonly called "feria de la cancha maya"³⁶ – went to the city hall square instead³⁷. Indeed, since 2010, the city hall square has been renamed "Museum Park of the Mayan Culture" and adorned with decorations that evoke pre-Hispanic Mayaness, which leads newcomers to think that this is probably the "cancha maya". It is therefore noticeable that the Cruzoob have been rendered invisible: on the one hand by the policies aiming at attracting migrants (who ignore local history), and on the other hand by the deployment of a tourist discourse that

³³ At the time, Tulum was a delegation (basically a village) that depended on the municipality of Cozumel.

³⁴ I recorded three versions of this episode, the variations of which are analyzed in my PhD thesis (Elbez 2021).

³⁵ The "Mayan church" was occasionally visited by groups of less than ten tourists, so we can't consider that it was properly touristified.

³⁶ The "Mayan church" festival takes place on the "Cancha maya" square: a name inherited from the Canché family (a family of Cruzoob leaders) or to the fact that it served as a large football field in the 1980s.

³⁷ For more information about my fieldwork, see the "Fieldwork" section at the end of the paper.

coalesces all Yucatan natives in the “Mayan” category. The extreme discretion of the Cruzoob, who respect secrets and taboos regarding the disclosure of their cult³⁸, also played its part in their obscurity. Thus, during my fieldwork years (between 2009 and 2016), the “Mayan church” feast was not the subject of any touristic promotion. Although some Tulum means went to its “feria” (market, games) or to its “toreada”, Cruzoob processions and rituals (preparation of sacrificial food, prayer, or dancing times) were carried out discreetly, in hours and places unknown to people outside the community.

The inaugurations of the feast were, however, an opportunity for municipal and State authorities to regularly reaffirm their peaceful relations with the Cruzoob authorities, as part of a political ritual aimed at furthering their process of indigenization. Indeed, on these occasions, the political leaders declared to the Cruzoob dignitaries their commitment to work for the conservation of Mayan culture, and entered the ceremonial center accompanied by their wives, dressed in “hipiles”.



Inauguration of Tulum “Mayan church” festival in March 2013, with representatives of the State, the town, the local Cruzoob community, and their wives (paper of Novedades de Quintana Roo, 8/3/2013).

It is likely that during these years, there were talks on the potential touristification of the “Mayan church” festivities. Indeed, during the October 2012 celebration, an advertising screen promoting the different tourist offers of Tulum had been installed in front of the “Mayan church”;

³⁸ I devoted an article (not published yet) to “Silence as a vector of memory, integration and power among the Cruzoob of Quintana Roo”, in which I expose the method I developed to turn the Cruzoob’s silence into a source of ethnographic knowledge. This question alone deserves many pages, so we won’t dwell on it here.

which seemed strange considering that most of the people present were locals. In the same year, a Cruzoob man asked the leader of a pre-Hispanic dance group to train four boys of the Cruzoob community³⁹. After performing with their trainer's dance troupe during the inauguration of the “Maya church” festival for two years, the boys formed their own troupe and began to perform during the municipal festivities⁴⁰. During my years of fieldwork, the Cruzoob of Tulum generally did not recognize themselves in the figure of the “pre-Hispanic warrior” that is dear to the Mexican nationalist imagination, and often referred to pre-Hispanic dancers performing for tourists as “apaches” (Elbez, 2017a, Elbez, 2017b, Elbez, 2021). However, some of them decided to embody this heritage figure to take advantage of the tourism economy.

Since 2017 (year of the decree that made the “system of hierarchical responsibilities of the Mayan sanctuaries” an “intangible heritage of Quintana Roo”), politicians and “Mayan Church” representatives have undertaken to make a tourist attraction out of the “traditional Mayan festival”. Therefore, its 2017 and 2018 editions took the appearance of huge shows, with the presence of several folk-dance groups.



These pictures reveal the huge scale given to the 2017 and 2018 editions of Tulum “Mayan Church” festival’s inaugurations. At the center of the right-side picture, the Mayor Romi Dzul (papers of Noticaribe, 8/3/2018 and 8/3/2017).

During the 2017 inauguration, the representative of the Governor of the State of Quintana Roo (from the Institute for the Development of Indigenous Peoples) explained “the importance of publicizing this type of activity that places the State under the international gaze”⁴¹. In addition,

³⁹ I analyze this ethnographic episode in my article “When employment leads to faith. Journey of a tourism employee who became a leader of the Mexicanity spiritual movement” (Elbez 2022).

⁴⁰ For more information about my fieldwork, see the “Fieldwork” section at the end of the paper.

⁴¹ <https://noticaribe.com.mx/2017/10/08/inaugura-romi-dzul-la-fiesta-tradicional-maya-en-tulum/>

the “Cast war” is now mentioned during the inaugurations of the newly called “Traditional Mayan Festival of Tulum”. For example, in the Noticaribe paper which traces the inauguration of October 2017 (which is nothing else than a press release from Tulum municipality), we can read that “Tulum was originally founded by 13 families who left Felipe Carrillo Puerto during the Cast War”⁴². Nonetheless, the paper mentions this episode without explaining what it refers to, and then associates the “Mayan Festival of Tulum” with a “millenary culture”, which invites us to date it from the pre-Hispanic period, blurring the tracks that link it to the Cast war. It therefore appears that attempts to communicate this historical episode coexist with a desire to hide its subversive dimensions.

This same observation can be made in the localities of Quintana Roo that have already made the Cast War a tourist attraction. This is the case of Tihosuco, where a Cast War Museum opened in 1993. Built in a colonial building which houses a botanical garden, this museum is not entirely dedicated to the Cast war, contrary to what its name suggests: not only does it exhibit objects dating from the pre-Hispanic and colonial eras, but the exhibits dealing with the 19th century focuses on the mistreatment of the “Indians” and the injustices imposed on them rather than on the war itself. On the museum's website, there is no mention of the categories of identification “Macehualob” or “Cruzoob”, and the “Mexicans” are barely mentioned. The main protagonists of the Cast war are referred to as “Mayans”, the “Indigenous” and the “Spaniards”⁴³, which encourages visitors to perceive it as an event of the colonial era. Another locality in Quintana Roo where the Cast war was already a subject of public interest and touristic promotion during my years of investigation, is the village of El Cedral. El Cedral is located on the island of Cozumel, which served as a refuge for the Yucatec elites fleeing from the rebels’ attacks during the war. Thus, the “Santa Cruz” feast celebrated in El Cedral commemorates the survival of a man who was a victim during a Macehualob rebel attack. After surviving a Macehual attack at a church in Saban in 1847, Casimiro Cárdenas supposedly regained consciousness among the corpses as he clutched a small wooden cross, to which he credited his survival. Cárdenas allegedly promised that, when he would arrive in a safe place, he would celebrate each year “las novenas” in honor of the Holy Cross⁴⁴, and that his descendants would do the same. Hence, the Cross celebrated in El Cedral is not a Speaking Cross. It symbolizes a version of history opposed to the Cruzoob’s perspective, a history that does not question the legitimacy of the Mexican presence in the region.

In recent years, the Cast war has entered the packages of some small tourist agencies of Playa del Carmen. This is the case of “Corazon y vida maya”, which offers a visit of Señor, in which the tourists meet an old man who lived through the Cast war among different village characters: the healer, the beekeeper, etc. Today, with the development of tourism along the Mayan Train route – that partly follows the route of the train built at the time of the Cast War to open up the region –, it remains to be seen whether the touristification of Cruzoob culture will be

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ <http://www.museogc.com/Museo/S-inicio.html>

⁴⁴ In Roman Apostolic Catholicism, the Holy Cross (which has nothing to do with the Cruzoob crosses) is celebrated on May 3. Celebrating “las novenas” consists of praying for nine days in a row. The island of Cozumel has been “discovered” by a Spanish conquistador on May 3, and was therefore named “Santa cruz” until the 1960s.

accompanied by a narrative of the Cast War and what form this narrative will take. Indeed, spreading knowledge of this historic episode has a subversive potential, which is visible in the words of Manuel (Tulumean originally from Querétaro) who declared:

“I used to criticize the Mayans of Quintana Roo, I found them pretentious: why do they treat foreigners well and not Mexicans?! And then I read about the history here and the Cast war. [...] So I better understood the attitude of the Mayans here. And that's why I believe in the historical recognition of a people with dignity, like when the Spaniards demonstrated against the celebration of Christopher Columbus, or what the Germans did in relation to the Jews. What happened happened, and I'm not proud of it. But I believe in that.” (October 2015)

Fieldwork

Between 2009 and 2016, I carried out several long fieldworks in Tulum (Quintana Roo, Mexico). Through an immersive participant observation (I lived in Tulum for several months on a row and worked at different jobs), numerous interviews (conducted with natives of the region, Mexican and foreign migrants, touristic guides, tradespeople, politicians, activists, employees, etc.) and the study of tour operators and officials' narratives, I attempted to grasp the local and touristic representations of Tulum identity and history, and to take note of the contemporary practices of Tulum plural collective memories. Throughout these years, I attended several inaugurations of the local “Mayan Church” fest, as well as the festivities themselves and some rituals. I collected testimonies on the Cruzoob leaders' political practices, followed the public debates and controversies on Tulum local identity, and paid attention to the words used by the inhabitants to refer to a different category of the local population. I followed several social actors in their daily lives, including the leader of a pre-Hispanic dance group mentioned above. I followed pilgrimages and guided tours, while paying attention to the participants' narratives, inquiries and representations of space. I went back to Tulum in 2019 and 2022 for a short period of time.

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