



Rodolfo Uribe

In the *Swamps* There's Nowhere to Stand

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When you visit the houses in the towns along the Usumacinta River bank, people always talk about space. They ask you, “Where did you leave your car?” because the only raised ground is the narrow highway. And a peasant will explain to you, “You can leave your truck instead of just pulling it off to the side of the road thanks to the sweat of my brow.” And he is right. All the high ground on the Tabasco coasts, starting with the pre-Hispanic Olmec cities like La Venta, or the Mayan cities like Jonuta and Comalcalco, built directly on the swamp thanks to enormous brick and soil terraces, is artificial. As late as the 1960s and 1970s, to build highways to indigenous towns like Tuca and Tamulté de las Sabanas, the materials were taken completely from the pyramids still standing on site. In the 1980s, when the Usumacinta highway was built, it was first laid out on the raised land found

there. But, local inhabitants were violently opposed because these were the handmade embankments fashioned from houses, patios and cattle corrals. Thus, the history of impressive efforts was made known: since this region was settled 60 years ago, the Usumacinta has moved further and further north, forcing the first colonists to move their houses at least three times. They had to take on the immense job of building new terraces with their own shovels and bare hands, to be able to live above the water. And even then, they are accustomed to living with the water up to their ankles or higher for one month of the year, when the November “rise” comes.

These towns are the last remnant of what life was like in most of Tabasco. The state is actually a big swamp, a big plain crisscrossed by 30 percent of Mexico’s fresh water supply, covered every autumn by a huge sheet of water. Today, it is fashionable to see swamps as merely a matter of “ecology” and “sustainable development.” But the truth is that the vast swamp area of the Tabasco coast

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has to be understood as a “landscape,” that is, a cultural product that involves above all an enormous effort, as the first Spanish colonists also discovered. What the inhabitants of Santa María de la Victoria, the first Spanish capital in the Grijalva delta, suffered in order to move inland, as they described it to the Spanish crown, was impressive.

But, as Graham Greene discovered in his visit to the port of Frontera in 1938, the swamp is also a particular mood. It is even more a special form of downheartedness, a moment suspended in time. Water is rhythm, but in the swamp, it is above all a dense calm, a great silence vis-à-vis the unlimited horizon and the almost always intensely blue sky. But it is a silence felt rather than heard because, in reality, the further into the reed-mace or *popal* groves you are,¹ the more the voices of thousands of birds dominate, birds that in spring find their favorite nesting places here thanks to the exceptional abundance of fish. There is no experience to equal going in through a quagmire on horseback or by water in a *cayuco*² to feel the incomparable sensation of getting to the heart of the swamp. Here, local traditions say that at mid-day, when shadows disappear, you can get lost if you hear a rooster crow, followed by the far-off

sound of indigenous music, the echo of life in the enormous pre-Hispanic cities that are supposed to be buried beneath the mud.

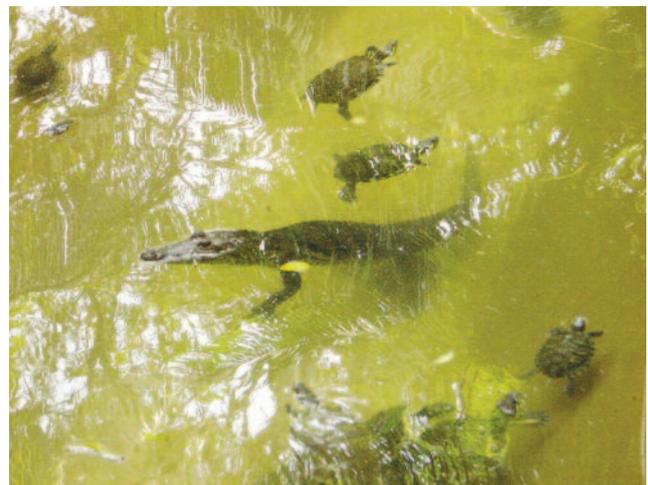
Sixty percent of Tabasco’s surface is floodplain and 30 percent is covered with permanent bodies of water like coastal lagoons, interior lagoons, *cibales*,³ watering holes, *popales*, reed-mace groves, *tulares*⁴ and, of course, its great rivers with their many canals and streams. Thus, it is no surprise that 80 percent of indigenous *ejido* collective farm land is flooded. It is merely a vestige of the Spanish occupation that took over all the high ground that later became plantations and pastures. In fact, from the heights of the city of Villahermosa at the 18th parallel to the Gulf beaches 60 kilometers away, almost everything is more or less swamp.

Tabasco is nothing more than an enormous alluvial sponge produced by the Grijalva, Usumacinta and Tonalá Rivers that for millennia have deposited their silt there, moving the coastline from the Chiapas mountains to where it is today. It is an enormous plain dominated by the rhythm of the water. In the most far-flung parts of the swamps of the Usumacinta, you have to watch out for the tide so as to avoid having to drag the *cayuco* over dry sand. In addition, there is a year-

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ly tide: in spring the sea's salt water penetrates the Usumacinta up to 60 kilometers up-river, and in fall, the tide is a sea of fresh rain water that comes down from Chiapas and Guatemala covering everything.

These conditions have spurred the creation of important civilizations such as those that made it possible for the Olmecs, the creators of the Meso-American number system and calendar, to build their metropolis. Or, more recently, the Yokot'anob, a people dedicated to long-distance commerce starting in the ninth century, developed an entire culture synchronized with the swamp that was finally cornered by the Spaniards.

Based on the Mayan civilization model that saw life as produced together with time through exchanges regulated between the different dimensions of the universe, between humans and the different supernatural beings, and among human beings themselves, the Yokot'anob produced a system of life centered on "the offering." Priests and anthropologists always complained that the Yokot'anob did not separate religion from the economy and did not want to listen to them: it was a way of "making life," which is why it is at one and the same time a social way of organizing religious life and a way of organizing production.

When asked what it means to be Yokot'an, they always mention this way of life: "A Yokot'an is a peasant who plants and fishes in the swamps." The system established a delicate balance between environmental and social processes. The key to the system is the same as for the *pajarales*, where migratory birds nest: the abundance of fish. Socially, this is manifested in the participation in offering tribute to supernatural beings and the "companions" for the production of food, curing and every other end. Offerings can be individual, requesting a special favor; or they can be "promises" in which an entire family or group of families participate. They also have to be made before every collective productive undertaking: planting, harvest, fishing, building a house. When the town fair is held, other towns come visiting and the first pick of the harvest is offered up to the patron saint in what is called the *enrama*. This ceremony symbolizes exchange and at the same time permits the organization of social networks for work, cooperation and kinship. The patron saint, or *chuj' o uyum*, is offered food with a request made in Yokot'an made by a "recommender" (a wise man who knows the prayers for making requests of the saints). He spreads smoke over the offerings or persons to protect them and give them



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over to the saints, who are also presented with drum and flute music. The gods can only be reached through smoke and music, and they only understand the language of the earth.

Participation in the different kinds of offerings is divided up into different kinds of activities performed at different times according to natural rhythms and techniques. The women from one nuclear family may raise animals and produce food in their backyards. They gather together in the kitchen, the most important and largest room in the house, which, in contrast to the rest of the building, never has a cement roof, to cook for several families and make decisions involving the community that the men then take to the meetings. The men gather together to go fishing for a week at a time, to build houses, to clean an *acahual* (land left to lie fallow and be covered by low vegetation), or plant or harvest collectively (called “*manovuelta*,” a system of cooperation among the peasants whereby they rotate working in their neighbors’, relatives’ and friends’ fields). Planting times depend on flood levels, which means that lands of different altitude can yield up to three crops a year. In the town fairs, entire communities come together to trade; also, from time immemorial, some people have made their living by trading, practicing what they call “changed life,” a system of commerce based on the circulation of merchants who barter products from different

communities. This means that they have understood perfectly that through these products, what was being exchanged was effort or life itself.

The growth of cattle ranching and the environmental impact of large hydraulic works and the oil industry changed the rhythm of the waters and contaminated them along with the soil and the air. This has made productivity and farming decline. The water circulates less and less and is not fed with new nutrients because now there are areas that are permanently flooded and others that are usually dry but suffer catastrophic flooding. The urban development that followed the advent of oil drilling has meant that most people now work in the city. The offering is increasingly a mere symbolic ritual system, but its norms for equitable exchange are now being used as the ethical and cultural basis for obtaining government services and negotiating compensation payments for damage done by oil drilling. **MM**

NOTES

- ¹ Parts of the swamp are covered with these plants, the reed mace (*typha latifolia* L.) and the *popales* (*thalia geniculata* L.).
- ² *Cayucos* were originally dug-outs made by hollowing out a tree trunk. Today, they are made of fiberglass.
- ³ *Cibales* are lagoons formed by the residue left from flooding.
- ⁴ A *tular* is a swamp area dominated by *tular* plants (*typha dominguensis* Pers.)