

Felipe Carrillo Puerto

Capital of the Contemporary Mayan World



▲ The Mayan Region is not an ethnographical museum –it is a people on the move.

▶ Peoples on the move are a hindrance to neo-liberal plans. This war will not be lost here in this land, because this land will be reborn.

Mural at the entrance of the Cultural Center.

Elsie Montiel

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The Sanctuary of the Talking Cross, still a ceremonial center, holds one of the sacred crosses.



Remains of a train hark back to Carrillo Puerto's time of economic splendor in the early twentieth century.

The cultural legacy of the pre-Hispanic Mayas is so clear and has had such a dynamic momentum in the entire Yucatán Peninsula that the continual allusion to “the Mayas” and the almost abusively common use of the term “Mayan” to describe almost any cultural or tourist activity here seems justified.

Tourist resorts and cities using the name “Mayan” or trying to co-opt its culture have grown all along the Caribbean coast of the state of Quintana Roo. This means that the confrontation between what is Mayan for tourists and what is authentically Mayan is a day-to-day occurrence. Visitors do not usually notice it because very few actually venture far enough afield to encounter what we could call the real contemporary Mayan world. That world has its capital in the city and municipality of Felipe Carrillo Puerto.

In this city, Mayan culture not only refers to immortalizing the feats of their pre-Hispanic ancestors, but to knowing about later history. That history includes the Mayas' participation and development as a social group throughout the colonial period, after independence and in the last two centuries, pinpointing its significance and tracing a route for their future. In Felipe Carrillo Puerto and the communities that survive around it, being Maya implies recognizing yourself as such in order to keep your language and customs alive and defending your rights as indigenous people. The very birth of the city is related to the quest for autonomy and the resistance to oppression and the annihilation of Mayan identity.



Elsie Montiel

BRIEF HISTORY

When the colonial system was imposed on the Yucatán Peninsula —Quintana Roo was not made a separate territory until 1902— the indigenous people suffered both economic exploitation and the imposition of new religious beliefs. In that period there were at least seven Mayan uprisings. Domination and oppression did not disappear when the country won its independence from Spain, but simply changed form. Resistance movements fighting for liberation did not disappear either.

Felipe Carrillo Puerto was founded during the first part of what became known as the Caste War, which broke out in 1847 in Tepich, with the movement fighting for autonomy and better living conditions.¹ It was 1850; the indigenous had risen up three years before and become so strong that they controlled a large part of the peninsula. Different events turned those conditions around and the indigenous forces, tired and demoralized, were on the brink of defeat. It was then that something happened that gave them back their confidence and cohesion: a talking cross appeared.

The “miracle” was the work of General José María Barrera, who carved some crosses in a tree and proclaimed that they transmitted divine messages that talked about



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The Spring of Blows, a fountain where Mayan rebels were publicly whipped.



reuniting and continuing the struggle. A ventriloquist served as Barrera's "interpreter of the cross." So, Barrera led the rebel military operations. Around the site where the talking cross appeared, the town of Noh Ca Chan Santa Cruz Balam Nah, today Felipe Carrillo Puerto, was founded. The rebels not only resumed armed actions, but also became devotees of the cross. The local people called themselves *cruzoob*, or "the followers of the cross."

Soon, a theocratic-military structure was established under the leadership of a Chief of the Cross or *tatich*, who was the superior of the Chief Spy (Tata Nohoch Zul). These two, in turn, gave orders to the military command and the oracle of the divine word or Interpreter of the Cross, and under them were the soldiers and priests, followed by the common people (*macehualoob*). Whites, prisoners and non-*cruzoob* Mayas were slaves. Chan Santa Cruz developed an economy that allowed it to resist; it bought weapons from English residents of Belize, a form of support they would lose later on. Armed actions took the form of guerrilla warfare, which would last until 1901 when government troops took the city. This was the official end to the Caste War, and the talking cross would be silent forever after. One reminder of the violence against the rebels in that period is the so-called Spring of Blows, a fountain that exists today

next to the church. Bound rebel indigenous warriors were forced to kneel and be publicly whipped at the foot of this fountain.

The cult of the cross did not disappear altogether. The Sanctuary of the Talking Cross is still a ceremonial center. Although today it is common knowledge that the cross never really spoke, its role in uniting and organizing the Mayan people is considered important.²

The geography of the peninsula changed. In 1902, the territory of Quintana Roo was founded, and in 1904, Santa Cruz (whose name had been changed to Santa Cruz de Bravo) became the capital. Natural resources, particularly exotic wood and *palo de tinte*, began to be exploited and exported via the port of Vigía Chico, connected to Santa Cruz by railway. From that splendid time, Felipe Carrillo Puerto preserves a tiny fragment: in a park near the center of the city is part of a railcar.

In 1915, the capital moved to Payo Obispo, and Santa Cruz was practically deserted. Later, it would be repopulated by Mayas. At that time, the main economic activity was the production of rubber for export. Francisco May, considered the last *cacique* or Mayan ruler, held the monopoly on rubber production. He was repudiated by many because it was said he amassed a great fortune from agreements with the fed-



▲ The Regional Music Museum has a copy of the national anthem in Mayan.

Photos this page by Mauricio Degolladao



According to Mayan myth, the sorceress Xtabay bewitched ► and killed drunkards on the roads. Felipe Carrillo Puerto Cultural Center.



Publications and CDs in Mayan on sale at the Regional Music Museum.



Exhibit about the development of music in the Mayan region.
Regional Music Museum.

eral government granting him the monopoly in exchange for maintaining political and economic control of the Mayan population. In 1932, Santa Cruz de Bravo was renamed Felipe Carrillo Puerto after the Yucatán leader and governor known for his interest in the welfare of the Mayan population. Today, this city is the seat of the municipality of the same name and is considered the center of the Mayan region. In 1974, Quintana Roo became a state.

A CULTURE IN MOVEMENT

The Mayas of today continue to resist the cultural onslaught that aims to turn their customs and traditions into consumer products. The main form of resistance is preserving the language in day-to-day use and in public schools and municipal government offices. Civic organizations like the Academy of the Mayan Language include visual artists, writers and musicians interested in preserving their traditions and language. With other organizations, they do surveys on the use of the language, publish books in Mayan and organize activities to recover and study natural resources. Children are the main target of these efforts, particularly in municipal seats or towns where their location means they are more influenced by Spanish.



Photos: this page by Mauricio Degolladao

Children are the main target of the efforts to preserve traditions and language.

Radio XEN KAH on AM broadcasts all its programming and music in Mayan. The tiny Regional Music Museum and Library is another example of the efforts to ensure that their identity is not lost. It delves into regional history using paintings, photographs, clothing, musical instruments, radios and even LPs. Here you can find a copy of the national anthem in Maya, as it is sung in local schools; a copy of the Quintana Roo state song; and a Mayan calendar given as a gift by their Guatemalan brothers and sisters. Children from the city and surrounding communities come here to do research. For more than five years now, Expo-Maya has been held, bringing together artisans, musicians and visual artists from the region with the aim of recovering the expressions of current Mayan culture and exhibiting them without any commercial influence.

All these efforts are sanctioned by the Law on Cultural Rights and Indigenous Organization of the State of Quintana Roo, which came into effect in July 1998. The law covers the use and preservation of customs, traditions, language, authorities, religion and clothing, but its implementation has not been easy and always faces difficulties.

In any case, clearly the descendants of the ancient Mayas have not lost their ability to resist invasion and to defend their rights, though their weapons have changed. **MM**



Hand-painted Mayan calendar.

NOTES

¹ See the article about the Museum of the Caste War in this issue of *Voices of Mexico*.
² The crosses carved in the tree became three wooden crosses. One is in the Sanctuary of Carrillo Puerto, a second is in another sanctuary in a nearby town, and the third is said to be lost.