



Aluxes

Sprites of the Land and the *Cenotes*

Elsie Montiel*

For the Mayas living in jungle communities, *aluxes* are a daily, unquestionable reality. They definitely do not think it wise to ignore them. Of course, if you're only a visitor to these lands, you would have the right to doubt their existence, but it would be best not to take any risks and accept protection against their trickery when offered. Pac Chen ("leaning well" in Maya), a Mayan village offering sustainable tourism, includes this in its services. Don Crisanto, the village *Ah men* ("doer" or wise man), is in charge of it.

Don Crisanto explains: "The *aluxes* are tiny, short little sprites, about 40 centimeters high, with hairy bodies. They appear on the roads, but not everyone can see them. Sometimes we think, 'I don't believe it,' or 'they're tricking me,' and we do things that bother them. So then, you'll be walking along, and they'll surprise you. 'What's that kid doing standing there?' And when you look back, it's not there anymore. It's a spirit; it's the wind. But the image stays in your eye, so you remember."¹

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Photos by Elsie Montiel.



The *aluxes* wander the roads. The Mayas ask them to bring rain and to protect the harvest from all danger. There can be more than one. They also protect the crop from thieves, frightening them out of committing their crimes. "They keep watch because there's always somebody who thinks, 'In that little plot, there are a lot of watermelons,' and they think it would be easy to steal them, but they [the *aluxes*] take soil and throw it on them, or they throw a little stone [at the thieves] or they whistle, and since the thieves don't see anybody, they get scared and decide not to take anything." When the harvest comes, those who invoke their protection will have to make an offering of thanks; if they don't, of course, the *aluxes* will take their revenge.

Aluxes don't only walk on the ground; they're also in the *cenotes*. For the ancient Maya, these were sacred places representing the underworld, or Xibalba, the home of the gods of death. So, their ceremonies included a ritual at the *cenote* entrance.

In the villages that are part of the eco-tourism circuit, these rituals are not carried out, but outsiders are protected anyway.² Don Crisanto says: "Before entering, I have to protect our visitors because, since they are innocents, they



don't know and we have to ask the *aluxes* not to do anything to them, to protect them." Like almost all current indigenous rituals, they mix Catholic mysticism with pre-Hispanic beliefs. "We use copal for protection; I wave the copal in front of them and make a sign of the cross on each one. When they breathe in the smoke, it stays inside them, so they don't go in with fear; they have the courage to do it. Sometimes, when they go in and look up, they see little figures: that's them [the *aluxes*], but since they've already swallowed the copal smoke, they're protected."

SUSTAINABLE TOURISM

Visits to Mayan villages are part of the sustainable tourism projects operated by a private company involving the inhabitants themselves. The indigenous people are hired to build the installations (docks for the kayaks, the zip-wire and rappelling facilities, palm-covered open-aired restaurants, saunas); they are given the materials and trained to operate them for a wage. Visitors come in small groups and spend about three hours on site and are given a meal prepared by the village women.

For Pac Chen resident Sebastián, the business is good for his community since it helps out, particularly when the harvest is bad. It also prevents local residents from going in

search of jobs in the state's high-tourism areas. The village has fewer than 130 inhabitants: 27 families. Agriculture is subsistence farming; they plant corn, beans and squash and raise chickens; they purchase only a few industrialized products like salt and washing soap. They consume no soft drinks. Health care is based on herbal cures since they are very familiar with medicinal plants, used even to cure snake and other animal bites and stings. They only have a primary school; anyone who wants to continue his or her education has to go to nearby towns. Most young people are bilingual Mayan-Spanish speakers. Spanish is for talking to visitors. But the older residents and many of the women are monolingual. The village is located on a tourist corridor that includes the Cobá archaeological site and the spider monkey reserve at Punta Laguna. However, in hurricane season, it can be isolated for more than a month at a time.

Eco-tourism has been in place for eight years now, and although it does not seem to affect community life or deplete their natural resources, the rate of development of tourism in the area is such that it is reasonable to fear that low-impact activities will succumb to the sale of land for big tourist resorts, with the resulting effects on the social and economic organization of Mayan communities. ■■■



NOTES

¹ The quotes and information used in this article are all from personal interviews done in Pac Chen, June 6, 2008.

² In the opinion of the guide Aranzazu Chávez, "these ceremonies are not very authentic because they're designed for tourists. The traditional ceremonies were only held on certain dates. But that doesn't mean the whole thing is fake. Many parts of it are genuine, like the language (Yucatecan Mayan), the table they use called *kaanche* and the use of copal resin. The complete ceremony consists of a welcome and asking for protection for activities, and particularly for the *cenote*. The *Ah men* are free to pray as they wish; there is no predetermined prayer. But, above all, they are the reflection of the current situation of the Mayas in general and these communities in particular, immersed in sustainable tourism projects. I think it's commendable that they include these ceremonies in the tours because it gives tourists an idea of Mayan traditions."