The Caste War Museum

Elsie Montiel*

Mauricio Degollado

Tu waka tuukultik, tu láakal wíiniko'ob k'a'béet u ya'ako'ob ba'ax ku tuukultiko'obe, máanen te joonaja' u ti'ai ka cha'ant tu láakal ba'ax k'a'abetchaji ti' le ba'axo'obe u cha'an way te lu'umo'oba

Fragment of the Mayan inscription at the entrance to the Caste War Museum[1]

If anything is characteristic of Mayas today, it is the awareness of being part of a powerful, dynamic ethnic group and the conviction that their history as a people is not limited to the study of their great pre-Hispanic past. The Maya of today strive to know and study all stages of their own evolution as a social group, a history loaded with resistance and change that has allowed them to preserve their identity until now.

This is the raison d'être for the Museo de la Guerra de Castas (Caste War Museum), located in the town of Tihosuco, one of the sites where this armed struggle played out. Inaugurated in 1993 in a restored eighteenth-century building, here contemporary Mayas offer their version of the violent social struggle against oppression and injustice led by their ancestors in the mid-nineteenth century.

The small museum has four rooms. The first summarizes colonial history and that of the resistance movements of the Mayan people during the entire colonial period, as well

* Editor of *Voices of Mexico*.

Mauricio Degollado

Mauricio Degollado

We learn that the resistance of the Mayan people started from the moment the Spaniards began their occupation of the area and their attempts at evangelization.

as the pirate invasions that laid waste to the city and its environs. As a preamble, the museum pays homage to the achievements of the pre-Hispanic Mayan civilizations, with one showcase exhibiting axe-heads and instruments from the period.

In this room, we learn that the resistance of the Mayan people started from the moment the Spaniards began their occupation of the area and their attempts at evangelization, around 1511. The first missionaries were Franciscans; the best known of them, Friar Diego de Landa, would go down in history as the person responsible for the burning and destruction of innumerable registers of Mayan history as part of his strategy to "facilitate" the conversion of the indigenous people to the new faith. The Mayas ceded but did not forget. Two mainstays keep them united: their language and their religious beliefs. The first rebellion broke out in 1546. Between then and 1761 there were more than 11 movements. The cruel punishments imposed on anyone who fostered and took part in the rebellions were not enough to definitively suppress the spark of resistance (many Mayan priests and leaders of the rebellions were publicly hung, decapitated or burned alive as a warning and to spread fear). The time that passed between one resistance movement and the next depended on how long it took them to regroup and face the Spanish again.

In this room, a very eloquent painting by Marcelo Jiménez illustrates these clashes, portraying a Christian cross opposite the Mayan god of war. A model reproduces different moments of the resistance, the burning of the annals and the punishment of 12,000 indigenous. Among the most important movements is the one in Valladolid, outstanding for its destruction and burning of the ceremonial center in order to build the Spanish town.

The last rebellion of that period, and perhaps the best known, was the one headed by Jacinto Can 'Ek ("Can" means "serpent"; "Ek" means "king") in 1761. A Maya from Campeche, educated in the Catholic faith by the Franciscans, knowledgeable not only in the Christian liturgy but also in the prophesies of his people, after delving deeply into its past, he decided to help his Maya brothers. Expelled from the monastery, he took the title of Jacinto Uc de los Santos Can Ek Chin Chan Moctezuma and began a rebellion with the support of local strongmen and towns, demanding the Spanish recognize him as king of the Mayas. The clash in Cesteil, one of the towns where the fighting was the most ferocious, ended with the elimination of almost all the townspeople. Jacinto himself escaped, but soon after was captured and taken to Mérida, where he was brutally punished: he was beaten to death and his body cut up and burned.

This closed one chapter and marked the beginning of another, the subject of Room 2: "Yucatán in the Nineteenth Century," depicting the lives of the Mayas in the early period of Mexican independence. The wheel symbolizes the beginning of the stage of large-scale agricultural production —specifically sisal fiber— with the resulting need for

transport and cheap —practically slave— labor. Photographs document the new symbol of exploitation of the Mayan people: the haciendas. The rich hacienda owners were well aware of the ancestral Mayan resistance, so they adopted the strategy of giving some local strongmen the title of *hidalgo*, or noble. In exchange for certain privileges, they assumed the central task of maintaining political control over the *macehuales* (common Mayas) who worked the haciendas. Many were forced to remain there until their deaths because they became hugely indebted and were not only unable to pay, but they also left these debts to their children. The *hidalgos* also had to trap any peons who dared to escape and bring them back to the hacienda.

The third room, entitled "Causes of the Caste War," displays objects that belonged to the rich hacienda owners, which contrast sharply with the simple Mayan utensils. Coins and paper money reveal the immense wealth generated on the peninsula during this time, so much so that the owners printed their own money. It was during this period that the owners toyed with the idea of becoming independent from Mexico, and they actually declared independence three times. Poverty and the barbaric conditions of exploitation once again united the Mayas: suffice it to say that from the age of 14 until the age of 60, they were forced to pay tribute in kind. Failure to do so meant they risked execution or losing their land; they even had to pay to baptize their children. The hacienda owners also used them to fight their battles: when the peninsula government with its seat in Campeche decided to increase taxes, they armed the Mayas and made them fight in their name, with the promise of canceling their debts. Their reneging on this promise and the continuing abuse culminated in the bloody armed movement known as the Caste War. Three figures (Jacinto Pat, the local leader of Tihosuco; Cecilio Chi, the leader of Tepich; and Manuel Antonio Ay, the leader of Chichimilá) planned the rebellion. Their objective: freeing the Mayas from the domination of the creoles and the mestizos, giving them self-sufficiency and autonomy. The plot was discovered and Manuel Antonio Ay was shot. Chi and Pat continued with their plans and on July 30, 1847, the rebellion broke out in Tepich. In a short time, more than 40,000 Mayans throughout the peninsula had risen up in arms. Hatred fueled the hostilities and both sides fought mercilessly. The Mayas aimed for the total extermination of

Elsie Montiel

Hatred fueled the hostilities and both sides fought mercilessly. The Mayas aimed for the total extermination of the white population. Tihosuco itself was almost destroyed.

Mauricio Degollado

Mauricio Degollado

Elsie Montiel

The continuing abuse culminated in the bloody armed movement to free the Mayas from the domination of creoles and mestizos, giving them self-sufficiency and autonomy.

the white population. Tihosuco itself was almost destroyed: signs of the battle can still be seen on the church. By 1848, the indigenous forces had managed to dominate part of the peninsula and the local government found the situation uncontrollable and even asked for support from the U.S. army. Mexico's central government also went to its aid.

Jacinto Pat was convinced that they should establish a dialogue, but Cecilio Chi rejected any pact. The arrival of the rainy season interrupted the hostilities when only the cities of Mérida and Campeche were still unvanquished, and the rebels decided to return to their homes to till their fields. The army's counteroffensive was not long in the making, and it began to take back positions from the Mayas. Cecilio Chi and Pat were both assassinated, one for personal reasons and the other by a dissident Mayan faction. The museum offers visitors maps of the rebel routes, portraits of movement leaders and examples of arms and munitions to illustrate the events. Around 1850, the conflict became a low-intensity war with the rebels seeking refuge in the jungle. In that year, they founded Chan Santa Cruz (today known as Felipe Carrillo Puerto), a town that became headquarters for the movement because that is where the so-called "Talking Cross" appeared, that would keep the Maya fighting.[2] It is said that when the cross ordered them to take a particular town, the Mayas would always be victorious, thus restoring their confidence. This cross ended up leading the armed movement, and is still the object of religious worship to this day. The struggle lasted into the early twentieth century despite the hardships and shortages the Mayas suffered, without powder or weapons and punished by epidemics and the constant lack of food.

Some historians put the end of the Caste War at 1901 when the central government of Porfirio Díaz launched the last offensive and signed a series of treaties, among them, the one that divided the peninsula and created the territory of Quintana Roo. But the museum maintains that after that

date there were still bastions in the jungle under Mayan domination and a well-defined guerrilla war was waged under the religious-military structure dictated by the Talking Cross. A chart hangs in Room 4 illustrating the internal hierarchy, as well as photographs taken in 1935 of the movement's last leaders: Concepción and Evaristo Tulum. It also exhibits weapons and bullets used by both sides in the war —here, we also learn that the Mayas used English weapons brought into the country through Belize.

Lastly, there is a room dedicated to the donors: when the museum opened its doors, many local inhabitants decided to contribute pieces they had at home. Among these pieces are the skull of Bernardino Kin, a Mayan leader who achieved certain prominence and died from a machete blow to the head in 1875 during an encounter with the army. There are also clay replicas of *aluxes*, sprites common to Mayan mythology throughout the ages.

The visit ends in the small botanical garden boasting medicinal plants commonly used by local inhabitants. The garden was established with the help and work of 15 elders from the community wise in the use of the plants. More than 5,000 children have visited the garden, where they are told of the importance of the plants, they learn to identify them with drawings they color and can compare to the live plant itself, and after that, woman elders or traditional healers teach them how to make a shampoo or salve. This space is also used as a meeting place for the elders.

Here, you can purchase shampoo, soap, syrups and salves. But, above all, you become convinced that you are in the presence of a people determined to interpret its history and perpetuate its knowledge and traditions on its own terms, to sow confidence in a future with dignity among its descendents. VM

Notes

[1] "If you think everyone has the freedom to say what they think, pass through this door to see everything that was used and what happened in this place."

[2] The indigenous forces were tired and demoralized, but the appearance of a miraculous cross that spoke and told them what to do restored their confidence in their struggle. This "miraculous" cross was born when José María Barrera, a mestizo from Peto, carved three crosses in a large tree, which brought forth their first message on October 15, 1850. But he used a ventriloquist, Manuel Nahuat, as the "interpreter of the cross" to reveal its messages. The so-called Talking Cross became the true ruler of society and even exercised military command. The town founded at the site of these three crosses was called Chan Santa Cruz ("Little Sacred Cross"), and its inhabitants called themselves *cruzoob* ("followers of the cross").

EDUCATION
BEYOND BORDERS
UNAM
UNAM SAN ANTONIO
Spanish Courses
- Over 60 years of experience in San Antonio
- Top quality instruction in Spanish and ESL
- Highly trained faculty
- Special Mexican art, history and literature courses
- Unique Certificate in Spanish Language proficiency
- Year round lectures, exhibits and workshops
- State-of-the-art language lab "Gilberto Borja Navarrete" Computer lab
- International videoconferencing

Registration Fall 2008
Session I: August 21-22
Semi Intensive: September 22
Session II: October 23-24
Registration Spring 2009
Session I: January 12 -13
Semi Intensive: February 9
Session II: March 16 - 17
600 Hemisfair Park, P.O. Box 830426
San Antonio, Texas 78283-0426 • 210.222.8626
ligia@servidor.unam.mx • www.usa.unam.edu
UNIVERSIDAD NACIONAL AUTONOMA DE MEXICO / SAN ANTONIO CAMPUS