

Caste War of the Yucatan Peninsula of Mexico (1847-1915)

Part One: Background

What caused the fierceness of this Maya uprising which lasted over half a century, and killed 250,000 people? No single element alone instigated the rebellion, but as in most revolutions, a long dominated underclass was finally pushed to its limit by overbearing elites that had performed intolerable deeds. These included changing the status of public lands which the Maya used for farming, breaking contracts, and enforcing cruel and unfair work conditions on the local peasants. Added to this was the timing of Mexico's successful break with Spain, which led to numerous changes in the Yucatecan government, including arming the Maya to help fight the Mexican war against the United States in Texas. For the first time ever, the Maya were allowed to own guns.

As a bit of background, Spanish invaders battled 19 years to conquer the Maya in the Yucatan Peninsula. Unlike the Aztecs in central Mexico who succumbed to Cortez in less than two years, the Mayans were not easily overtaken. But by 1700, a once robust Maya population had fallen to 150,000 due to disease, displacement and famine. As peace reclaimed the area, however, the Yucatan Peninsula's combined population of Maya, Mestizo and Spanish ballooned to a whopping 580,000 by 1845. More people on Yucatan soil meant more food was needed, and thus began the battle for land.

The history of the caste war, not unlike Mexico's dramatic history, is complicated to say the least. After Mexico gained its independence from Spain in 1821, the Yucatan, a former territory, joined the Mexican Union. But by 1839, the Yucatecan elites chafed under federal authority and revolted against the new government, severing ties to Mexico, and enlisting the services of the Maya, offering promises of land, along with freedom from taxes. The Yucatan generals armed the Maya, and with their help, the revolution was a success. But a few years later, the new Yucatan government made sweeping changes, including the suppression of monasteries separating church and state, and adopting new land and property rights, which included a clause allowing former public lands to be cultivated and sold. Over the next seven years, several hundred thousand acres of land once used by Mayan peasants was taken from them and transferred into the ownership of the colonial and church elite, who felt the uncultivated lands were barely used by the Maya. To the Maya, however, forest land was sacred and far from vacant, as it housed the deities of the wild places and the guardians of the corn, and to the Maya, corn was the divine food. So not only were ancient lands stolen from the Maya but the promise of deeded land for combat duty was reneged on and never awarded them. The elimination of church taxes, another pledge, was also ignored, leaving the Mayans embittered. By 1843, Yucatan had waffled again and rejoined the Mexican Union, but retained these newer land laws as well as division of church and

state that had been set up during the interim government. With the church on its own and receiving no state funding, the clergy imposed hefty fees, on the indigenous Maya when performing marriages or baptisms. The Maya became easy targets for recouping the church's lost income. At the same time, water rights protection was removed and cenotes (limestone sinkholes that served as reservoirs to the dry, often bleak landscape) which had supplied an area's water for centuries suddenly became private property. On a parched peninsula, things were changing rapidly.

With independence from Spain just two decades earlier, the Yucatan was reeling from loss of trade with Europe. As one-time key exporter for goods like cattle, timber, salt and cotton, it had been replaced as a trade partner by Argentina and Belize. With the failure of old money-making exports, the Yucatan needed a new cash crop. Enter henequen, an agave plant, raised for fiber that could be manufactured into rope. An overseas market soon developed and in 1833, the first commercial henequen plantation was founded. Local landowners slowly converted their rural farms to suit this new crop, named green gold, and as the adaptation took time, cattle and corn crops were not immediately affected, leaving the land issue status quo, and imposing no drastic changes to the Mayan lifestyle. But by 1845, henequen became the major export crop of the Yucatan, and a port city named Sisal was developed near Merida to handle all overseas shipments of the fiber. Sugar cane, too, began its reign when other traditional crops and exports were phased out after Mexico's split with Spain. And with cane's lofty payback, a 700 percent annual profit guaranteed by the second year's production, this high maintenance crop became popular with the hacendados, or landowners. Two things were needed to expedite this new moneymaker: Land and labor. Due to this, forest land became a coveted item and although it had been deemed "land owned by all" under Spanish rule, with a new Mexican government, this land could be cultivated and sold. The Mayans would be allowed to lease it back from the government, but then they would be subject to taxation on the land they used. Few Mayans had the resources to do this. Regarding labor, at the time of Mexico's independence, the Maya were declared free, but hacendados decided that the custom of the land would continue, meaning the Mayan would remain in servitude to his master. The ancient hacendados had grown accustomed to a class of native serfs; they came with the property and could not leave nor marry without the master's consent. And by creating a 'company store' debt system, the Maya could never repay the hacendado, meaning he would stay on indefinitely in serfdom. This well-suited the need for intensive labor in the sugar cane and henequen fields.

Part Two: the War itself

Great social changes were taking place on the Yucatan Peninsula. Prior to Mexico's secession from Spain, the Maya had been forbidden to serve in the army or to own military weapons. But with changing times and governments, Mayan numbers were needed to assure victory in whatever present battle was being fought, both on the peninsula and elsewhere. Three times the Maya were recruited and armed with rifles and machetes, and the third time it backfired. In 1847, after hearing of the death by firing squad to one of their leaders, Maya troops marched on Valladolid, the most elitist and separatist city in Yucatan, and macheted 85 people, avenging old wrongs. Mutilated bodies were carried triumphantly through the streets. With this news, a wave of dread hit Merida, the economic axis of the peninsula, as it was sure to be the next staging ground for what was now becoming a race war. There was a debt to be paid and it was paid with the machete -- for the robbery of their land, for imposed slavery, for whippings, for impiety to God and the forest, and for the severed ears of their grandfathers. In retaliation for the Valladolid massacre, the Yucatecans descended on the ranch of one of the Maya leaders, sexually assaulting a 12-year old Mayan girl. With this affront, eight Maya tribes joined forces and drove the entire elite population of the Yucatan to Merida, burning towns and pillaging as they went. So fierce was the threat of slaughter, all non-Maya prepared to evacuate Merida and the peninsula, leaving both entirely in Maya hands. But just as the Maya approached Merida, sure of victory, fate intervened when great clouds of winged ants appeared in the sky. With this first sign of coming rain, the Maya knew it was time to begin planting. They laid down their machetes and headed for home and their corn fields, in spite of pressure from their chiefs. Now it was time to plant corn. A thing as simple and ancient as that. In 1848, the Yucatecans staged a comeback, killed Mayan leaders and reunited. But as the Mayans harvested corn they had planted in hidden fields, they kept fighting. Hunkering down, they attacked Yucatecan villages, burned huts, murdered any white man they encountered, with no thought of giving up. They relied on guerrilla war tactics and fought to preserve the only life they knew. Through all this, they were pushed to the eastern and southern regions of Yucatan and Quintana Roo, as far south as Bacalar.

The Maya attacked cities and towns spreading terror and death. Early in the war, the Yucatecos fled to Merida, and were just one battle away from defeat when the rains came. The Maya were forced to lay down their weapons and returned to their fields to plant corn. This allowed the Yucatecan army to regroup and attack the Maya. In early 1850 the Maya insurgents found themselves on the brink of defeat but with no intention of giving up. Weakened and demoralized, the Maya sought refuge in the dense jungles of central Quintana Roo where they founded small communities. An act, which falls into the realm of disbelief, brought them together and motivated them to continue the struggle. This was the apparition of the Talking Cross in mid-1850. The cross was the medium by which God talked to the Maya, his chosen people. The cross ordered them to continue the war against their enemies, the whites, and promised them that they would be safe from their bullets. The location where the cross appeared was transformed into a place of

worship. This is how Chan Santa Cruz (Small Holy Cross) originated as the principal sanctuary of the rebel Maya, who named themselves the Cruzoob (followers of the cross). Thus, the rebellion took on a sense of sanctity. In 1858, the Maya rebels massacred the inhabitants of Bacalar and captured Fort San Felipe. They held it for years before destroying and ransacking it. The conflict heated up once more. The booty obtained from the sacking of the towns which fell to the Cruzoob, was exchanged for arms, gunpowder and other supplies provided by the Belizeans along the Hondo River. The relationship between the Cruzoob and Belize became closer to such a degree that in 1887 the Maya expressed their desire to be placed under the protection of the Queen of England and that the territory they occupied be annexed to this British colony. The proposal was declined. However, this incident opened the door to talks between the Mexican and British governments and they agreed to cooperate in the campaign to pacify the Maya and to determine the territorial limits of both nations. This, in addition, provided the impetus for the Mexican government to start another military push in Quintana Roo. In order to stop the Belizeans from supplying arms to the Maya, a customs post was built at the mouth of the Hondo River in 1898, in front of a point popularly called Cayo Obispo. The city of Cayo Obispo (today Chetumal) was founded by Lt. Othon P. Blanco. Contrary to what happened in the Zona Maya, where General Bravo ruled the Cruzoob rebels with an iron fist, colonization and pacification under the supervision of Lt Major Othon P. Blanco at Payo Obispo were more effectively executed. Nevertheless, the pacification of the Maya was still a few years away. Chetumal Harbor and Caste War Period Canon Although the end of the Caste War is associated with General Igancio A. Bravo's entrance into Chan Santa Cruz in 1901, it took three years for the end of the war to be officially declared. However, the Maya were in no way pacified. But even when the war was officially over, the Maya continued their struggle against the white Yucatecan authorities; the different tribes fought each other and also threatened the security of the British mahogany cutters and the northern part of the colony. Those days were far from peaceful. On various occasions the settlers were terrorized by attempts to attack Corozal.

Mexico slowly gained control over the Yucatan, but the rebels held firmly onto Quintana Roo, using the pueblo of Chan Santa Cruz (present day Felipe Carrillo Puerto) as their base. Eventually a peace treaty was signed, but the Chan Santa Cruz Indians still remained hostile. Although the caste war officially ended in 1855, more or less from lack of interest by those in power in Merida, the struggle which had killed 247,000 would continue well into the 20th century, and involve a bizarre cult named The Speaking Cross, organized by the Chan Santa Cruz Indians who were to remain hostile for decades.

Part Three: Winding the Conflict Down

The independent Maya, known as the Cruzo'ob because of their adherence to the indigenous Speaking Cross religion, were sustained by trade with British Honduras (now Belize). They bought arms and other goods, paying with captured loot and with "taxes" charged to British woodcutters allowed to work in areas they controlled. Great Britain recognized the Maya free state as a de facto independent nation. The war might have ended in 1884. Mexico re-established diplomatic relations with Great Britain, broken seventeen years earlier in retaliation for Britain's recognition of the French-imposed Maximilian regime. Britain responded by acting as a peacemaker, sponsoring negotiations between the Spanish Yucateco state and the Maya Cruzo'ob state - while continuing the lucrative arms trade. A delegation of Maya leaders met with a Yucatecan representative, General Teodosio Canto, in Belize. They reached a peace agreement that afforded the Maya a measure of autonomy, selection of their own leaders, and an exchange of prisoners. The day after the signing, a drunken General Canto insulted one of the Maya leaders, Antonio Dzul. The Maya denounced the treaty and left in anger. In 1887 the Maya formally requested that Britain annex their territory and place them under the protection of Queen Victoria. The British declined the offer. But this incident inspired talks between the Mexican and British governments aimed at pacifying things along their mutual border. Mexican President Porfirio Diaz, working to put down several long-running Indian revolts, recognized that cutting off the arms supply was key to winning in Yucatan. A first step was to settle the long-disputed boundary between Mexico and British Honduras. The Spencer-Mariscal Treaty, signed in 1893, did that by establishing the Rio Hondo as the boundary. Howls of protest arose from Yucatan over the loss of territory they believed to be theirs. Mexico resolved some outstanding debt problems, and the British agreed in principle to suppress the arms trade. In fact, little changed on the last point.

Within the Cruzo'ob nation, disputes over peacemaking and allocation of timbering proceeds were causing rapid changes in leadership. Central authority deteriorated, people were emigrating, and the number of effective troops was falling. A rare visitor in 1888 reported Chan Santa Cruz depopulated, although still used as a ceremonial and meeting place, with the Speaking Cross shrine heavily guarded. The Cross itself had been taken to Tulum and then, amid further political squabbles, moved to Chunpom, about midway between the two rival sanctuaries. In 1892, a British merchant opened a store in ruined Bacalar, undermining the isolationist leaders. In 1896, actions got underway that led to the official end-of-the-war date five years later. Independent-minded Yucatan finally accepted that all-out Federal assistance was the only way to end the war. Mexican and Yucatecan troops established a headquarters for invasion at the abandoned town of Saban, on the frontier east of Peto, about fifty miles northwest of Chan Santa Cruz. President Diaz selected General Francisco Canton to be governor of Yucatan, a military man to support a joint military effort. In a move to stop the flow of arms and timber proceeds to the Maya, Federal authorities ordered a young naval officer, Sublieutenant Othon Pompeyo Blanco, to establish a military station and customs post at the mouth of the Rio Hondo. Finally, with

gunships and artillery aimed at the Maya, their capital was occupied in 1901, and the fighting ended.

Maya soldiers first opposed Bravo's advance on December 27, 1899. Although they outnumbered the Mexican-Yucatecan army, the Maya found their dry stone walls were no match for artillery fire. Their shotguns, ancient muzzle loaders, and machetes were ineffective against modern weapons, and they were short on ammunition for the single shot Martini-Enfield rifles they bought from the British. As shot for their muzzle-loaders, they resorted to using bits of telegraph wires they had taken down and cut up. Bravo's fortifications, clearings, and good communication precluded the ambushes they had used effectively for so many years. In four months, Bravo's army advanced thirty miles toward Chan Santa Cruz, building good wagon road and forts along the way. When the rainy season began in May 1900, the supply routes became impassable, a severe measles epidemic struck the Maya forces, and military action paused. Things resumed in early 1901, with the Maya attacking in force but unable to stop the relentless advance. A simultaneous naval operation from Chetumal Bay advanced against light resistance and occupied the ruined and abandoned town of Bacalar on March 31, 1901. In that year, forces under General José Maria de la Vega began advancing toward Chan Santa Cruz from the south. Vega also sent forces to land at a sand spit on Ascension Bay called Vigia Chico; at Tulum; and at Xcalak, a deserted peninsula seaward of Chetumal Bay. The Maya nation was surrounded.

But it was only when the chicle boom hit Quintana Roo in 1915 did their hostility weaken. The Wrigley Company sent in chicleros, chicle collectors, to gather the resin from the sapodilla tree which was used for chewing gum. At first the chicleros were killed by the Chan Santa Cruz, or robbed of their equipment. But in time, a new Mayan leader took over, General May, who recognized deals could be made with the chicle companies, and slowly an end came to the old system of killing any white man who walked into the territory. Progress was on the way, and in the depths of the forests of Quintana Roo, even the Chan Santa Cruz Indians heard the call. When 1915 ushered in the Mexican Revolution, General Salvador Alvarado was sent from Mexico City to restore order to the Yucatan, Mexico's most prosperous state, due to the henequen boom. That September, the final decree ending the caste war came, riding in on the coat tails of the Mexican Revolution. Topping his list of reforms, General Alvarado canceled all 'debt labor' which freed 60,000 Maya and their families, after 350 years of slavery. The Revolution had arrived, and with it, the caste war of the Yucatan ended after 60 years of revolt by a people who fought fiercely to preserve their way of life.