THE SECOND EPILOGUE TO MAYA HISTORY[1]

Maya history is a drama, the story of the rise and fall of a civilization. The beginning of the drama lies in the archaeological evidence as to the primitive mode of life out of which grew the books, calendars, and dynastic states of the later Maya. The climax lies in the conquest and downfall of that civilization at the hands of the Spaniards.

It is also perceived that Maya history has its epilogue, a final piece spoken after the play is really ended, in the events involving the Itza of Tayasal. That a remnant of a Maya tribe escaped the Conquest until 1702, and on a remote lake maintained Maya culture for more than a century after European power and civilization had occupied the rest of the peninsula of Yucatan, furnishes an afterpiece to the Maya drama quite within the established conventions of literary composition. There, with the conquest of this last remnant, from the point of view of art, Maya history should come to an end.

But, of course, events do not end where a curtain should come down. The history of Maya civilization, like that of other civilizations, continues, in a sense, indefinitely. It continued in Yucatan after the Conquest. Maya culture was radically altered by conqueror and missionary, but it was not obliterated. It continued to affect the mode of living in the peninsula, and to be affected by subsequent events. Thousands of people in Yucatan continue today to speak, farm, build houses, and hold various beliefs in ways learned, through their parents and grandparents, from Indians who were there before the Conquest. On the other hand, the development of the McCormick reaper and binder, with the resulting demand for Yucatecan sisal fiber, and the discovery by an American confectioner and business man that people

[1] Paper read at the Hispanic-American session of the meeting of the American Historical Association at Providence in 1936.

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would buy a chewing gum made of Yucatecan chicle, are, in this extended sense, events in Maya history. Both had great effect upon the Maya of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Those of us who are engaged in the study of the present-day people of Yucatan, are studying, it would seem, a sort of second epilogue to Maya history. We are learning something about Maya culture after its history had become a part of the history of Hispanic American culture. The curtain is long since down, and the show over, but a new show, based on the first, with a cast of characters in part the same, has been going on ever since.

I will say something here on the methods used by this group of ethnologists in this study, and something about the conclusions to which the study is leading.

Strictly speaking, these methods are not historical at all. Ethnologists study and report what takes place in the outward behavior, and, inferentially, in the minds, of people living today. We have no direct source of information as to what their predecessors were doing, except insofar as, occasionally, we may induce some old person to reminisce. And in the Maya villages we have been studying there are no documents except those we make ourselves by filling our notebooks. Without either a past, or a body of documents, how may one claim to be a historian?

I will take refuge in the commonplace that all knowledge as to the past is an inference from something known in the present. We have in our ethnological work in Yucatan, an arrangement of present phenomena from which inferences may be drawn as to the past. Think of Yucatan as a sort of stairway from modern civilization down into a primitive mode of living characteristic of the past. The stairway runs southeastward. On the topmost step, in the northwestern corner of the peninsula, is Mérida, the one city, eight times as large as the community next in size. Here the Spaniards established the center of the new civilization and authority they brought

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to Yucatan, and from here ever since have emanated practically all influences for further culture change. We have made a study of the mode of living of the people of this city. The roads and railroads of Yucatan spread fanwise out from Mérida, serving the area of dense population in the northwest, where the sisal fiber is cultivated. We have made a study of a town on the railroad in this area, the second step on the stairway. The people of this town, mixed-bloods and Indians like those of the capital city, have been in contact with the city, especially in the last thirty years, since when the railroad has connected them with Mérida. But compared with the city dweller, these townsmen are isolated provincials. Beyond the railroad, still further southeastward, there is a higher, denser bush where no sisal is commercially produced. The settlements here are occupied by Indians who are truly rustic peasants. They pay taxes, have simple schools, and even vote. But to the village on this third stair which we chose for study, it is four hours' walk through the forest from the nearest road. The villagers here, much more than do the townsmen, cling to the ancient ways. Beyond this group of villages there is a zone of uninhabited forest. It has been a sort of no-man's-land ever since the war between Indians and whites which broke out in the 1850's and never really came to an end. Beyond this zone one reaches the bottom step on the stairway of Yucatan: a group of villages of Indians that never capitulated to the government after the War of the Castes. Athough the natives here were christianized by missionaries in the colonial period, and although at one time a Spanish road, lined by Spanish estates, ran through this territory, European occupation was later forced to withdraw. And today the natives live secluded in a forest penetrated only by chicle-gatherers, traveling-merchants, and an occasional archaeologist. They are the last Maya Indians to preserve tribal independence.

Four communities, one on each step of the stair, have been

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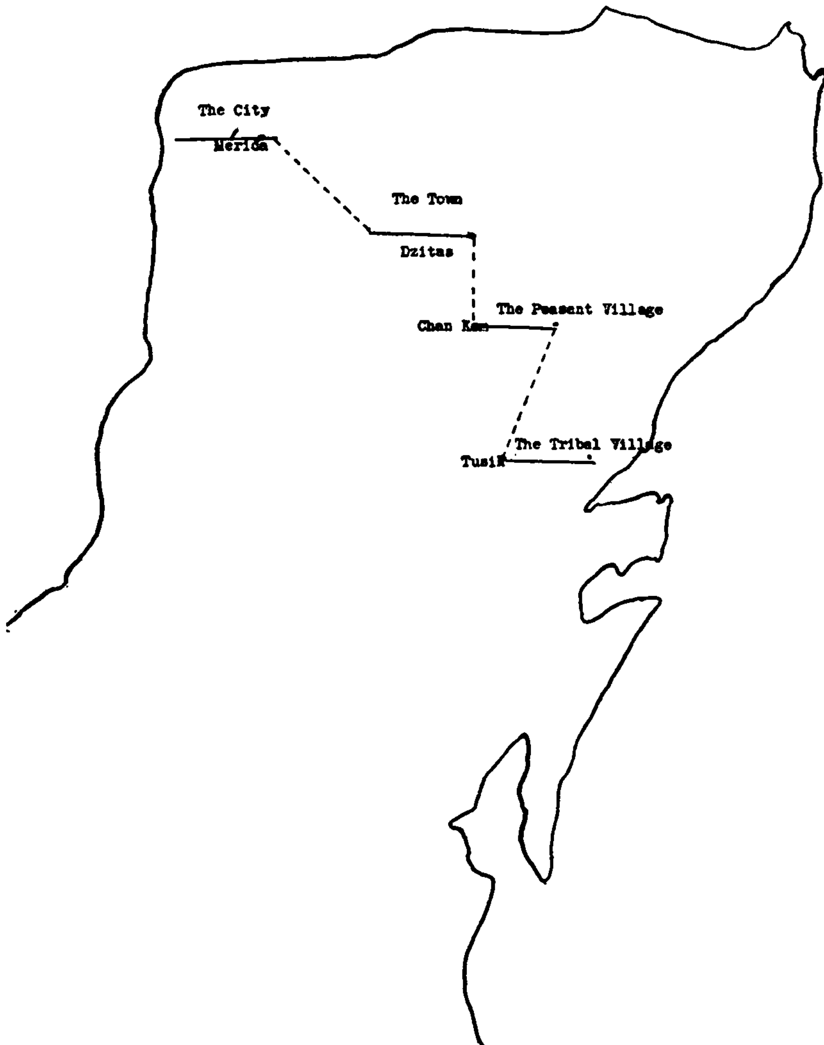
studied.[2] To avoid the use of the unfamiliar place names, I will refer to them as the city, the town, the peasant village, and the tribal village. Two general observations should be made about them.



[2] Dr. A. T. Hansen studied Mérida, Mrs. Redfield and I, Dzitas, Mr. Alfonso Villa and I, Chan Kom, and Mr. Villa, Tusik, in Quintana Roo.

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First, the intensity of early Spanish influence upon Maya culture decreases as one goes down the stairway. But the two most remote communities, peasant village and tribal village, have a similar heritage of almost pure Indian blood and of mixed Indian-Spanish culture. It was the War of the Castes that separated these two Indian village groups, and made two cultures out of what, a hundred years ago, was probably one culture. Second, the degree of isolation of the communities since the expansive period of early Spanish occupation and missionizing, increases as one goes down the stairway. As I have said, the tribal village has remained out of touch with civilization for generations. But new ideas, from baseball and Paris fashions to communism and theosophy, keep the way of life agitated in the city. In this respect, the town and peasant village occupy two intermediate points.

When the four communities are compared, first, to see the extent to which there is a common culture throughout the peninsula, one is struck by the great degree to which modes of living are the same, even in tribal village and in modern city. If a lower or middle class city dweller were to go to the remotest village, he would find a rude settlement of half-hostile primitive people, and would probably dislike it very much and wish to be back home. As they would speak Maya, and he, perhaps, only Spanish, he could not talk with them. Nevertheless, he would find much of their mode of living familiar. Indian ways have penetrated into the city, and Spanish ways into the Indian villages to such an extent that there is a great deal of customary life which the native of either city or remote village would find perfectly commonplace and understandable in the culture of the other. I cannot here take the time to depict for you in detail that world of conventional meanings which the Spanish-Indian contact has made general and more or less uniform throughout Yucatan. City-born laborer and distant tribesman have much the same knowledge of how to measure and prepare a cornfield, how to sow, harvest, and store the maize, and how to prepare it in the most usual edible

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forms. So also are general many elements of clothing—sandals, which are Indian, and hats and short trousers, which are European. General throughout are the methods of animal husbandry, of raising sugarcane, and the use of many metal tools, rice, coffee, chocolate beaters and pots, certain herbal medicine, the making of and sleeping in hammocks, the raising of turkeys and the feeling that they are appropriate for festal eating. But less tangible elements of living are as widely and generally understood. Everywhere the same names and something of the personal and religious qualities are given to God, the Virgin, Christ, and the principal saints; the chief Catholic prayers are known; the sign of the cross has religious or magical power, there is understanding of vespers, octave, and novena. Everywhere oaths may be taken by kissing the cross, and kneeling is a sign of respect. The Christian calendar, including the week, and alphabetic writing, are known and to some degree used everywhere. In all the communities the danger of the evil eye is recognized. So also it is believed that sickness and other misfortune may come with intangible "winds" that invest persons on certain occasions. All babies are carried on the hip after they are about three months old, and it is thought appropriate, or at least traditional, to make a certain little ceremony the first time this is done. So, too, it is correct to rinse out one's mouth before and after eating, and it is known how to whistle a certain whistle when you want wind to come. It is everywhere understood that foods and medicines fall into one of two curious and non-rational categories: "cold" or "hot".

The essentials of kinship organization are basically the same throughout the area. Tribal Indian and city workman of Spanish blood can equally understand the notions of the proper subordination of women to men, the propriety of respect of elders by young people, and especially the institution of godparenthood with its concomitant relationship between parents and godparents of a baptized child. Whether Maya or Spanish be spoken, the terms used for kinsmen, with a few

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small exceptions, denote the same categories of relatives everywhere.

This may be summarized by saying that the Indian techniques of raising and cooking corn, of building thatched houses, of making sandals or hammocks, and a number of other things, have survived and become a part of the present culture of Yucatan. With these elements have also persisted, even in the city, bits of belief, little domestic rituals, and fragments of lore. These latter have no doubt been carried on by Indian women, as wives, mistresses, household servants, and nurses of Spanish children. On the other hand, while much European material culture has been completely assimilated, the striking fact is that the general basis of European social organization and the chief forms of the Catholic religion have also been assimilated, even by the most remote Indians of Quintana Roo.

I turn now to a comparison of the four communities with respect not as to how their cultures are alike, but as to how they differ in the presence or absence of Indian or of European elements. It is to be expected that pagan culture will be found best represented in the peripheral villages. This is true. In both the peasant and tribal villages, the pagan gods of the bush, of the cornfield, and of the village itself, are felt to be very real and close. In both communities, there is a series of agricultural ceremonies, the most important of which are carried on by special shaman-priests. These ceremonies include features which are beyond doubt Indian in origin. A special bark-beer is made and offered to the deities, as are certain ritual breadstuffs, made of maize and squash seeds. These are grouped on altars in an order symbolic of a quadrilaterally conceived cosmos, and of a hierarchy of rain- and forest-gods especially associated with the natural wells, and with the east. Women are excluded from ceremonies; sacred water is brought from a hidden cenote, or well; turkeys are strangled with bark-beer in their throats, as they are held by four men who bear the same names as those borne by the ancient priests

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who held down the arms and legs of a sacrificed human victim. There is a special group of bee-gods, and special ceremonies to these.

These remarks only begin to mention the Indian elements that are still present in the peripheral villages. Furthermore, there are pagan elements present in the remotest of the four communities, that are not to be found in the others: a dance of women, with gourd rattles, around a table-altar; lustrative retreat for the shaman-priest; the use of what are apparently men's houses, one for each tribal band.

This is to be expected. What is more surprising, at first, is that some elements of Catholic ritual are more vigorously and completely present in the most peripheral community than in any of the other three. If we except from our comparison the relatively few strictly pious and conforming Catholics in the city, and confine our comparison to the lower and middle class mixed-blood people who constitute most of the population of the city and all of that of the town, it may be declared that, in matters of religious form, the tribal village is both more pagan and more Catholic than is any of the other communities. Only in the remote village is there a daily recitation of Catholic prayers (some in Maya, some in Spanish, and some in Latin), and only there are Masses frequently celebrated. These Indians have been without direct contact with priests of the church for several generations. Their supreme religious officer is a native, with an admixture of white blood, who received from his father and his grandfather the authority and the oral lore to carry on the ritual. The laymen of this community are familiar with all the principal prayers of Roman liturgy. Special communion maize bread is used, and a communion liquor made of honey and water. These people observe the principal, and even lesser saints' days, and all the essential elements of Lent and Holy Week, including Ash Wednesday and Palm Sunday. Only these people practice penance by approaching a shrine on their knees.

We recall the progressive decline of the Catholic church in

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Mexico, the spread of secularization and rational philosophy in recent years, and the curb upon the clergy. Meanwhile, out in the forest, a Maya people preserve both the Christian lore and practice that the priests taught them long ago, and so much of their own more ancient native belief and ritual as survived the destruction of the temple-cities and of the upper levels of their priestly hierarchy.

But now another general fact must be brought forward. The fusion of such Spanish and Indian elements as are present is more nearly complete in the communities farthest from the city. The town is a heterogeneous sort of place, containing half-hearted Catholics who, upon occasion bring in from some village queer but powerful medicine men to perform rites that will assure a successful crop. In the peasant village, there are two cults, one carried on by the shaman-priest and directed to the pagan gods, and the other by a reciter of Catholic prayer and addressed to the saints. The two cults are parallel, complementary, and non-competing; they are separate aspects of what the natives feel to be a single body of pietistic practices. Finally, in the tribal village, Catholic and pagan ritual are intimately blended into a single cult. There, in a native hut that serves as a church, two altars are erected. One bears a cross, and represents the Most Beautiful Lord in that heaven called "Glory"; the other represents the gods of the rain and the cornfield. A single ritual involving both pagan and Christian prayers is carried on at these altars. The ancient pagan ritual maize breads are placed on both. There is one body of celebrants, who are participants in a Mass, and also votaries of the agricultural spirits. On Holy Friday, new fire is kindled at the door of this rustic temple, as is the practice in the Roman ritual. And it is said by the Indians that the kindled flame represents the re-birth of that ancient heroic personage, one Jesus, who was betrayed and destroyed long ago. But the fire is not kindled with flint and steel, but with the Indian fire drill, as was new fire kindled by the ancient Aztecs, and probably the ancient Maya. A special group of men, known as

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men with "hot hands", kindle the fire. And the new fire, it is thought, must be brought to all the domestic hearths and there kept alive till the evening of Good Friday on the following year. This periodic renewing of the domestic fires from a new fire ceremonially kindled is a well attested aboriginal Indian rite.

The fact I have last cited—that Spanish and Indian elements are intimately fused in the peripheral communities—leads to a reformulation of our problem. What strikes one, as one goes from the city to the town, to the peasant village, to the tribal village, is not that life becomes more Indian and less European, but that life becomes more like that which is characteristic of isolated, non-literate, long-established peoples. One might say that the peripheral peoples are more primitive than the others, except that "primitive" might connote only simplicity of technology, and might suggest a rude or disorganized life. Much more than simplicity of technology is involved here. As one goes from the city to the tribal village, as one goes from a literate, mobile people to a non-literate, immobile people, one finds not less organization, but more. In the remoter villages, customs, beliefs, and institutions are organized into a self-consistent whole. Rite expresses belief, and is carried on as the collective utterance of a people whose fears and aspirations find an expression that is for them proper and inevitable. And as one goes from city to tribal village the homogeneity of behavior within the group increases; what is right for one man, is right for all the others. In the city there is so much variety, change, and superficiality that people are bewildered; the town is less confusing, but it is a house divided; the village life, however, has so much inner consistency that I think of its mode of life as a sort of structure, and feel that it could be diagrammed, or expressed in a three-dimensional model.

We might call the simple, isolated, established people with well organized cultures the "folk", and say that the "folkness" of life in Yucatan increases as one goes southeastward

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down the stairway I have imagined. The "folkness" of a culture is not dependent upon the historical source of its component elements. I have spoken of the institution of godparenthood as a feature of culture generally present in the peninsula. Although it may in part rest historically on some Indian custom of selecting sponsors for children, so far as inspection will reveal that institution is Spanish in form. This institution is more fully developed, more complexly and completely involved in other aspects of culture, in the villages than in the town. In the villages, the godparental institution is expressed in solemn ritual, and endorsed by mythology and belief. In town and city, it is a weaker, a more secular, thing. A Spanish custom, inculcated by the early priests, helps to give the primitive culture its essential character and organization.

There is an antithesis between the building-up of a cultural organization in isolation, and the breaking-down of that organization in the course of invasion and contact or of internal invention. When the Spaniards came to Yucatan, they performed a major operation on the native culture, removing, let us say, half the organism. Upon it they transplanted new organs, new customs, and new beliefs. Where isolation allowed it to happen—and the isolation was enough everywhere in the peninsula to allow it to happen to some degree everywhere—the graft took, and the re-made organism grew, flourished, developed, and elaborated its parts; and the parts became intimately interdependent upon one another. Some of the parts were Spanish grafts; they, like the Indian elements, developed and merged into a single new structure. The remade ways of life, with little or no distinction as to Spanish or Indian origin recognized by the people, came to take on a feeling of rightness, to rest under moral and religious authority. This was the phase of culture growth. But meanwhile the opposite phase, that of civilization, was also present. New changes occurred; the colonial period came to an end; technological improvements and economic expansion penetrated

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the peninsula; schools, revolution, political and economic events stirred even the distant forest dwellers. In the city, as in all cities, the stir has always been so great as to restrict the culture process. In the remote villages, the re-made culture was, until recently, little disturbed by civilization. Now the disorganizing influences are increasing, both in city and in village. In studying this second epilogue of Maya history, it seems that we are studying two complementary aspects, one, so to speak, anabolic, the other katabolic, of social change everywhere.

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