

Constructing the Maya

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The boys stand barefoot, clad in fraying garments. They do not face the photographer, but rather gaze smiling, perhaps laughing, to their right. A caption dates the photograph (see the cover image) to 1955, places it at San Juan Chamula, a Tzotzil town in the Chiapas highlands, and specifies that it was taken in the course of an anti-whooping cough campaign organized by Mexico's Instituto Nacional Indigenista (INI, National Indigenist Institute). The boys' laughter, however, was not in response to the prospect of their imminent vaccination, but rather to a spectacle provided by the INI for the occasion: Teatro Petul, a puppet show, staged off camera to the boys' right. Teatro Petul's comical performances, in native languages such as Tzotzil, were intended to convince as they entertained, conveying to audiences young and old the importance of collaborating with the INI's modernization and public health programs. More than simply documenting an immunization campaign, the photograph seems to document a novel relationship between the Mexican state and its indigenous subjects. That relationship, the photograph seems to suggest, could be one built on affect, trust, and even friendship, thus securing the promises of modernity with the power of laughter.

The articles presented in this collection under the title "Constructing the Maya" are case studies of ethnicity and state formation in indigenous areas of Yucatán (Eiss and Fallaw), highland Chiapas (Lewis), and highland Guatemala (Carey and Little). Both individually and as a collective, the authors are well aware of the difficulties of adopting "the Maya" as a rubric. While the term "Maya" has gained in currency in recent years in the wake of pan-Maya movements in Guatemala and Mexico (Fischer and

Brown 1996; Warren 1998), many contemporary members of the groups in question still do not use that term to refer to themselves. In earlier periods the term is even more problematic, exceedingly rare in usage even among those who refer to the language they speak as “Maya” (Restall 2004; Sullivan 2000). Moreover, there is a great amount of diversity in the usage of ethnic descriptors even within particular regions, with many contemporary Yucatec Maya speakers, for instance, rejecting even the label “indigenous” (Castañeda 2004). Despite such qualifications, the contributors to this collection, along with others who recently have attempted cross-regional historical and anthropological comparison of Maya-speaking populations (see, for instance, Watanabe and Fischer 2004), recognize “cumulative effects of comparable heritage and history” (ibid.: 1) that make the historical and contemporary experience of Maya speakers in Guatemala and Mexico mutually intelligible despite inter- and intraregional variation. Some of those “cumulative effects” might consist precisely in how the Maya have been “constructed”: by themselves or by others; as Mayas, mestizos, Yucatecans, Mexicans, or Guatemalans; and in ways both materially concrete and symbolically charged.

All of the essays in this collection are, however, as much about the construction of the state—of state formation, or formations of state—as they are about the construction of the Maya. As such, as Watanabe points out in his commentary, they represent contributions to a well-developed body of scholarship on the historical anthropology of state and nation in Mesoamerica, most notably the work of John Chance and Eric Wolf in Guatemala and Mexico beginning in the 1950s. The contributors also build upon subsequent developments in the historical and ethnographic literature of both Mexico and Guatemala, from Carol Smith’s explorations of the “continuously interactive relation between Indian communities and the state” (Smith 1990: 1), to Joseph and Nugent’s discussion of “everyday forms of state formation” in Mexico (Joseph and Nugent 1994), to more recent, Foucault-inspired explorations of “governmentality” (Castañeda 2004). Against the backdrop of the rise of indigenous indebted servitude in rural western Yucatán in the late nineteenth century, for instance, Eiss explores how local mestizo gentry positioned themselves as political and cultural brokers, ably appealing to both “tradition” and “modernity” as they mediated between largely indigenous pueblos and a modernizing state. Fallaw takes such issues forward through the Mexican Revolution and into the 1930s, in a study of the career of a Maya-speaking, mestizo politician whose rise and fall illuminate the potency and perils of ethnic claims and categorizations in an era of *indigenismo* and popular mobilization. Lewis analyzes an attempt by applied anthropologists working for one federal agency, the INI, in

1950s Chiapas, to train and employ bilingual indigenous cultural brokers, or *promotores culturales*, to assist in carrying out a far-reaching program of economic, social, and cultural modernization. Crossing the border to Guatemala, Carey discusses how early- to mid-twentieth-century highland marketplaces became theaters of struggle between indigenous vendors—principally female—and state officials who sought to control, restructure and normalize markets as part of a wider nation-making project. Little’s study of images of the Maya in 1930s and 1940s Guatemala moves from a discussion of the *Pueblo Indígena*—a state-sponsored facsimile of “Indian” Guatemala, put on display for visitors to annual summer fairs—to a discussion of how photographic images of indigenous participants in the *Pueblo Indígena* were published and circulated, in conjunction with broader policies of national economic modernization. In his commentary, Watanabe is right to note that these essays reflect an important distinction between the workings of state power in Mexico and the more racially polarized Guatemala, with a preoccupation with “political representation” in the former and “sign-making, especially [of] ethnic images” in the latter. These, however, should be seen as relative tendencies rather than absolute differences, with all of the essays providing examples, to use Watanabe’s terms, of both “brokerage” and “brokered images,” albeit in configurations that reflect the specificities of race relations and state power in different local, regional, and national contexts.

Each of the essays presented here also takes up the issue of ethnicity—that is, of indigeneity and mestizaje, in ways that build on the extant scholarship on that topic in Guatemala, Mexico, and beyond (for instance, Smith 1990; Grandin 2000; Hervik 1999; Gabbert 2004; de la Cadena 2000; and Weismantel 2001). These essays offer a notable contribution to that literature in moving beyond a conceptual separation between indigenous communities on the one hand and the state on the other, or between concrete social (i.e., ethnic, gender, or class) entities or identities on the one hand and abstract political entities (i.e., the state) on the other, to an exploration of the ethnic aspects of political rhetoric and practice and the political dimensions of ethnicity. Carey may go the farthest here, characterizing incursions of Guatemalan authorities into indigenous marketplaces as expressions of the state’s “own [i.e., ladino] ethnicity,” and of its “polysemic ethnic, gender, and class identities.” Similar points, however, are made by Lewis in a discussion of indigenous perceptions of INI leaders and policies—most notably the building of “penetration roads” into highland communities—as “ladino.” Little also proceeds in this direction, in his analysis of the efforts of Guatemalan authorities to produce images of Indianness that confirmed a nationalistic and modernizing ladino identity (and of images

subsequently produced in the course of “ethnic tourism” by North American anthropologists and others). Eiss and Fallaw, for their part, explore the latter theme—the political dimensions of ethnicity—by discussing how indigeneity and especially mestizaje, more than facets of social relations in rural Yucatán, became a grammar of political subjectivity from the Porfiriato forward, and a political strategy for populist leaders as well as their detractors in the revolutionary and postrevolutionary periods. While none of the contributors would argue that ethnicity is only, or primarily, a political phenomenon, all share an interest in studying the juncture of ethnicity and politics, to illuminate how political rhetoric and practice either subject social identities to rapid change and reconfiguration, or—as seems more typical—reproduce and confirm socially embedded hierarchies and identities. In keeping with such an emphasis, the essays delve somewhat less into the analysis of ideology and consciousness, and more into an exploration of the public and performative manifestations of such ethnic and political “repertoires.” “Indian” beauty pageants, carnival parades, model indigenous villages and markets, “traditional” mestizo dances, Maya-language campaign speeches, the wearing of *traje*, theater plays, and the “puppets of modernity” of Teatro Petul thus figure in these essays not merely as illustrations of underlying ideologies but also as embodied performances that actualize hierarchies, intervene in public memory, and produce substantial effects—even changes—in the ordering of political and social (ethnic, gender, and class) relationships (cf. Roach 1996; Taylor 2003).

One last characteristic of the essays in this collection is a movement beyond the domain of ideology or consciousness, rhetoric or representation, to consider formations of state and ethnicity in terms of material culture—or perhaps more broadly, “materiality” (Miller 2005). That materiality takes various forms, ranging from such physical structures as roads, railroads, bell towers, schoolhouses, monuments, and markets, to sewing machines, pottery, weavings, and telegraphs, to photographs and books, to the physical bodies subjected to hygiene and health measures. Such constructed objects are not merely the by-products or targets of state policies, but rather materializations of complicated productive and political relationships among indigenous, mestizo, ladino, and state actors. As such, these things have not only “social lives” (Appadurai 1986) but also political lives, with meanings and implications that are subject to change and open to contestation. As material objects, they are thus never completely under the control of their makers, and are exposed to unforeseen hazards and juxtapositions: a neo-Mayan pyramidal monument, left half-constructed, eventually demolished; fruit, chicken, or chorizos, confiscated in a highland market; a telegraph line or railroad line, sabotaged by communalist

insurgents; a new schoolhouse, with a sheep's head buried in its foundations; photographs circulating, consumed, and republished, their captions and meanings changing as they travel through space and time.

In a similar vein, we may return to the photograph from San Juan Chamula, which merits more than a single viewing. Standing behind the others, on the left side of the image, a single, unsmiling boy gazes not to his right but directly ahead, toward the photographer. What might he be thinking? And then there are the other boys. While looking to the right, their bodies point straight forward, as if they had been posing directly before the photographer, and then, just a moment before the photograph was taken, were directed to turn to the right, toward the puppet show. As much as the photograph might be a representation of a certain kind of state power over indigenous populations, its subjects—especially that one boy—offer other readings, exposing the photographer to scrutiny and revealing the artifices of power involved in the photograph's construction. The photograph, like these essays, thus offers not only a depiction of power's reach but a reminder of its limits.

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