



Wolfgang Gabbert. *Becoming Maya: Ethnicity and Social Inequality in Yucatan since 1500.* Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2004. 252 S. \$49.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8165-2316-0.

Reviewed by Matthias Gorissen

Published on H-Soz-u-Kult (August, 2006)

W. Gabbert: *Becoming Maya*

Becoming Maya? Well, I have tried that, too – more than a decade ago, as a proto-typical anthropology student far off in a small village on the Yucatán peninsula in southeastern Mexico. With my head full of fuzzy ideas on the nature of ethnographic research, cross-cultural understanding, and the importance of “going native”. A part of the problem was that appropriate role models – the native Maya – proved hard to find. The people I had to deal with were all “mayeros” (speakers of the Yucatec Maya language), but referred to themselves as “masewalilo’bá” – a term of Nahuatl origin roughly equivalent to “peasants” or “campesinos”. Elsewhere in Yucatán, members of the (Maya) Indian population classify themselves as “mestizos”, and even though the academic literature on this region frequently refers to the “ladino” (non-Indian) part of the population, this term is hardly ever used by Yucatecans. In recent years, the term “Maya” – which originally referred only to speakers of Yucatec Maya – has been increasingly appropriated as a self-designation by speakers of 30 related languages in southern Mexico, Belize and Guatemala. Being Maya – being associated with the splendid artwork, hidden ruins and mysterious hieroglyphs of an ancient civilization – became a positive value in political and economic struggles. This has already led to different forms of ethnic revival, shifting identities, and new alliances across national borders. For an introduction to these processes, see Fischer, Edward F.; Brown, Robert McKenna (eds.), *Maya Cultural Activism in Guatemala*, Austin 1996; Warren, Kay B., *Indigenous Movements and their Critics*. Pan-

Maya Activism in Guatemala, Princeton 1998. In Yucatán, on the other hand, some parts of the so-called Indian population reject being labelled “Maya” or “indigenous”. And with regard to the roles I played myself in these contexts: I may have been accepted reluctantly as a “mayero”, but I completely failed to become Maya. Instead, I found myself repeatedly classified under various terms for “foreigner” – “ts’ulá”, “wachá”, “gringo”, or (even worse) “turista”. It does not really help to learn that the secondary meaning of at least one of these words is “asshole”.

Wolfgang Gabbert’s book provides the best map for this confusing situation published to date. It asks how social and ethnic categories in Yucatán have changed and developed over a period of 500 years. Thus, it presents us with a long-term perspective on identity formation in a single, relatively peripheral region of Latin America under changing political, demographic, and economic conditions.

The book’s title is already a slight provocation. Previous research on this region – a rich blend of archaeology, epigraphy, history, linguistics and cultural anthropology, which is characterized by a severe disdain of established disciplinary boundaries – has usually taken for granted that something like a distinct ethnic group called the Maya actually exists or at least existed. In this perspective, the Maya as a group sharing a common language, culture, and descent were present in Yucatán since at least 1000 B.C.E.. Maya culture has been described as

being in decline ever since the Spanish conquest (1527-1547). The idea was that more and more culturally specific traits were lost and replaced by European customs. The recent history of Yucatán, then, is a story of increasing acculturation, which radiates from the cities out into the countryside. According to this still-prevailing essentialist notion of ethnicity, one does not become Maya; one either is it or is it not. The classic formulation of this view is and the common foe of current revisionist studies is: Redfield, Robert, *The Folk Culture of Yucatan*, Chicago 1941. Mexican anthropologists subscribed to the same paradigm for decades, although their political jargon was somewhat different. Cf. Villa Rojas, Alfonso, *El proceso de integración nacional entre los Mayas de Quintana Roo*; in: *América Indígena* 37 (1977), pp. 883-906. For a more recent study which sees migration to the peninsula's booming *zona turística* as the encroachment of urban-industrial forms of tourism upon traditional Maya society, see: Re Cruz, Alicia, *Milpa as an Ideological Weapon. Tourism and Maya Migration to Cancún*, in: *Ethnohistory* 50 (2003), pp. 489-502 (here p. 500).

Gabbert carefully avoids to fall in these traps. For him becoming Maya is essentially a post-conquest phenomenon. Thus, the carefully chosen title of his book already points to the author's conclusions that Yucatec Mayan ethnicity today is still ethnic consciousness in the making (p. 161), and that the notion of an ethnic boundary between two bounded separate groups is a Maya-speaking lower class and a Spanish speaking upper class is open to question (p.154). As ethnic and social categories are highly flexible and relative to each other, the current situation in this region is best described as a case of ethnic differentiation rather than ethnic separation (p. 155).

Gabbert's book joins a number of other studies, which have recently challenged traditional notions of ethnicity in Yucatán. Hervik, Peter, *Mayan People within and beyond Boundaries. Social Categories and Lived Identity in Yucatan*, Leiden 1999; Hostettler, Ueli; Restall, Matthew (eds.), *Maya Survivalism*, Markt Schwaben 2001; Moßbrucker, Harald, *Cultura y Etnicidad en Yucatán*. *Conceptos generales y situaciones específicas*, Hannover 2001; Castañeda, Quetzil E.; Fallaw, Ben (eds.), *The Maya Identity of the Yucatan, 1500-1935. Re-thinking Ethnicity, History, and Anthropology*, special issue of the *Journal of Latin American Anthropology* 9(2004)1. It is unique, however, in its structure, its thoroughly historical perspective, and its high level of abstraction. Rather than presenting another

ethnographic monograph with a historical introduction, Gabbert has condensed his own research into a total of 19 months of ethnographic fieldwork in a rural part of the peninsula into a single chapter at the end of the book. While this chapter lends further support to his larger argument, it is hardly a crucial part of it. Moreover, despite the fact that this book is surely another skilful combination of anthropology and history, it lacks all the meticulous detail that anthropologists and historians usually display to inscribe their own authority. Vivid (and often romanticising) descriptions of Maya village life have been published elsewhere. E.g., Kintz, Ellen R., *Life under the Tropical Canopy. Tradition and Change among the Yucatec Maya*, Fort Worth 1990. Here, we are confronted with an almost clinically detached autopsy of the historical development of Yucatán's status system. Rather than going native, Gabbert is now a professor of sociology at the University of Hannover does (thankfully) not pretend to have become Maya himself.

The book's authority, then, largely stems from the concise character and the breath-taking pace of Gabbert's narrative. After a brief introduction on basic concepts and terms, we are taken through an excellent synthesis of the history of Yucatán since 1500 C.E. Starting in the late-prehispanic period, eleven chapters grouped in three different parts outline the basic political, economic and demographic developments and their influence on the peninsula's status system. Part one covers the time from 1500 to 1821 (Mexico's independence from Spain), part two the years from 1821 to 1915 (thus including Yucatán's bloody *caste war* of the mid-nineteenth century), and part three the time since 1915 (when the Mexican Revolution reached the peninsula). For each of the three epochs, Gabbert reconstructs the Yucatecan status system from a wide variety of sources. He examines a broad array of status markers ascriptions and self-designations, language, dress, phenotype, surnames, architecture, and marriage patterns. He argues that there was little group consciousness among the Yucatec Maya before the Spanish conquest, when people's loyalties were basically linked to their local community (*kah*), their patronymic group (*ch'ibal*), or to one of several regional overlords (*halach winiko'b*). After the conquest, the colonizers quickly established a crucial legal distinction between *indios* or *naturales* and Spanish citizens, with different rights and duties for both groups, and dire consequences for social life on the peninsula. Throughout the colonial period, however, terms like *indio* and *españoles* referred to status categories rather than ethnic communities (p. 36).

The special legal and administrative status of 'Indians' was only slightly altered after independence, and not formally abolished until 1868. The distinction between Indian and White 'races', however, remained at the core of Yucatán's ideological system, and served as a guiding principle for contemporary interpretations of the caste war. Gabbert argues that the composition of opposing forces does not support this view, as people classified as 'indios', 'castas' (of mixed descent) or 'whites' fought on both sides. The last decades of the nineteenth century were characterized by a further expansion of hacienda economy and an increasing proletarianization of the peasantry. Landless farmers were forced into debt peonage, and throughout the peninsula this epoch is recalled as 'the time of slavery'. Thus, 'Indians' continued to be associated with poverty and backwardness.

Between 1915 and 1940, revolution and agrarian reform laid the foundation for Yucatán's contemporary status system. Even though explicit discrimination is very rare in this region, the Maya-speaking lower class is still subject to 'structural violence', such as disadvantages in education and employment. Despite an impressive degree of social mobility, cultural markers still play an important role in power relations, and those associated with 'Indianness' like language, dress, or Maya surnames are increasingly dropped. This should not be considered, however, as a simple process of acculturation. Descent and origin are still important to determine a person's social status. In other situations proof of Indian descent has become a way to climb up the social hierarchy. It is, for example, a prerequisite for participation in special government programs. But even though the existence of a Maya ethnic group remains a basic point of reference in every discourse on social relations, there is still little group consciousness, and many people avoid to be classified as Maya. As an 'imagined community', the Maya basically exist as a community imagined by outsiders.

Throughout this book, Gabbert argues that class and

ethnicity were interdependent categories in the formation of Yucatán's status system, that this system was much more complicated than a simple dichotomy would suggest, and that identity cannot be reduced to a single criterion like language. In terms of a regional research tradition, his study is the logical culmination of a process which already began in the 1960s. Since then, anthropologists and historians alike have challenged earlier representations of 'the Maya' as an un-differentiated, quasi-egalitarian peasant society. For another milestone in this process, see: Farriss, Nancy M., *Maya Society under Colonial Rule. The Collective Enterprise of Survival*, Princeton 1984. With considerable hindsight, however, Farriss may be criticized for providing a relatively static view of Maya culture, which she described as being organized around a limited set of unchanging 'core elements'. Upcoming work by Matthew Restall on the Colonial period African minority promises to paint an even richer picture of ethnicity in Yucatán. The later fate of another minority 'Spain's Central Mexican allies in the drama of conquest, who settled down in separate wards within the peninsula's three major towns' remains an unresolved and poorly documented problem. And yet, to argue that becoming Maya is a continuous and unfinished process is still a novel approach, which future research may apply to other areas in the neighbourhood and related linguistic groups. As indicated above, this process is currently not restricted to Yucatán. Indigenous actors play an increasingly crucial role in defining the content of 'Maya culture'. And so do national governments, the prospering tourism industry, popular media, NGOs and 'last, but not least' western anthropologists. The structural violence which Gabbert identifies for Yucatán was, of course, of a much more physical nature in Chiapas and Guatemala, where social mobility may be more restricted and open discrimination is more frequent. It may take some time, however, before a complementary study on other regions may work out the arguments found in Gabbert's excellent study with the same force and precision.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<http://hsozkult.geschichte.hu-berlin.de/>

Citation: Matthias Gorissen. Review of Gabbert, Wolfgang, *Becoming Maya: Ethnicity and Social Inequality in Yucatan since 1500*. H-Soz-u-Kult, H-Net Reviews. August, 2006.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=19511>

Copyright © 2006 by H-Net, Clio-online, and the author, all rights reserved. This work may be copied and redis-

tributed for non-commercial, educational purposes, if permission is granted by the author and usage right holders. For permission please contact H-SOZ-U-KULT@H-NET.MSU.EDU.