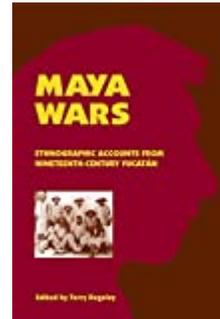




Terry Rugeley, ed. *Maya Wars: Ethnographic Accounts from Nineteenth-Century Yucatan*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2001. xiv + 224 pp. \$39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8061-3355-3.



Reviewed by Michael T. Ducey (History Department, University of Colorado at Denver)

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An Invitation to the World of the Nineteenth-Century Maya

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While mexicanists will find this volume a useful addition to the growing field of Yucatan studies and to Rugeley's excellent histories of village politics, religion, and society in the nineteenth century, the audience that will benefit most from *Maya Wars* will be undergraduates and the non-specialists who rarely have the opportunity to read translated nineteenth-century primary documents on Mexico's indigenous societies. This collection introduces undergraduates to the joys and frustrations of interpreting primary sources while it offers graduate students a taste of what they will find in their archival research and perhaps provides the spark for future dissertations. These kinds of collections are exciting for young historians to read because they suggest ways of knowing a past that they cannot obtain from reading secondary sources alone. The book is unique in providing a wide array of materials on a single region for the nineteenth century, a focus that allows readers to develop a more profound sense of the diversity of Mayan life and an understanding of change over the century. Professors who

want to introduce their students to an indigenous society using documentary evidence will find what they need here.

Although the title implies an emphasis on the events surrounding the Caste War, the book is not dedicated to the study of the rebellion alone. Although it includes plenty of material touching on the rebellion and its aftermath, Rugeley's selections illustrate Maya daily life, economic activities, gender identities, festivals, and marriage, as well as interactions with non-Maya. The multifarious crowd of outside commentators that the editor presents (priests, Protestant missionaries, merchants, refugees, military officers, geographers, and archeologists) offer a window not only on the Maya but on the many connections between the Maya and the world at large.

The diversity of the documents also alerts the reader that, although historians often organize the history of the peninsula around the events of the Caste War, the Maya did not. He is careful to include sources that describe the affairs of not only the rebel Maya who took refuge in Eastern Yucatan (today Quintana Roo) but also those

who did not revolt in the North, as well as the *Pacificos* or the rebels who accepted government peace offers and settled in the South, where they established communities virtually autonomous from the state. Accounts from the Caste War refugees in Belize add another element often forgotten in the literature. The resulting effect of the many voices included in the book will help students understand that the Maya were not a homogeneous mass that behaved as “Indians.” There was no one Maya way of confronting the republican era’s challenges and the documents provided here demonstrate how indigenous actors adopted a remarkable array of resistance and accommodation.

The illustrations, many reproduced from nineteenth-century travelers’ accounts, complement the texts nicely and one can well imagine how students will use them to explore how artists and outside observers created portraits of the Mayas. The images demonstrate the themes that the visitors often sought to exalt in their narratives, romanticizing the native, condemning Hispanic society, or demonstrating the stoicism of the downtrodden Maya. The map, the chronology, and an informative glossary of terms make the collection easier to use and locate the documents in geographical space and historical context for the readers unfamiliar with the region.

The editor’s introduction gives a brief review of Maya history from its origins through the nineteenth century and suggests ways to place the material into a comparative and international framework. In both the introduction and the bibliographic essay at the end of the text, Rugeley discusses the secondary sources and the archives available to researchers that students should find inviting. The editor also suggests some of the problems inherent in reading primary sources. To mention just a few: the authors of the documents were men writing from positions of power, the voice of women is underrepresented, and inherently coercive judicial procedures produced many of the documents. Rugeley does his best to counter some of these problems by providing a wide array of views that call attention to the agenda of each author. Rugeley provides a short introduction to each document where he gives the readers the tools to navigate through some of these hazards. When he can, he describes the author and locates the document in the necessary institutional and political backgrounds, pointing out the author’s biases without spelling everything out to the reader. Far from being a drawback, wrestling with the problem of interpreting sources is part of the historian’s craft and it is one of the appeals of using collections such as this one.

Maya Wars brings together material from three different groups of authors: the Maya themselves, outside visitors, and non-Indian Yucateco administrators such as priests, military officers, and government representatives. To give the Maya a voice in this collection, Rugeley has selected a group of intriguing documents including letters from the Maya leaders explaining their objectives and searching for external support for their movement. The *pacfico* leaders manipulated the government fears of the rebels, contrasting their behavior as “civilized Indians” versus those of the “barbarians,” to gain exemptions from church payments (Document 27). While these letters offer a tantalizing taste of Maya thinking and political strategy, many of the most interesting materials included here describe daily life. For example, Rugeley includes six wills that outline economic activities and provide a glimpse of family relationships. Testimony of a drinking binge given by a *lunero* suggests the attitudes of rural Maya laborers towards both their employers and the city. It is also a fine example of how a *lunero* found excuses to escape hacienda life to spend a few days malingering in the city. The documents show how the Maya found spaces to assert their own identities and interests even under the most trying circumstances.

The second group of documents distributed throughout the volume consists of foreign commentators. As is often the case, outside observers provided details about daily life that the locals took for granted. They described agriculture, dress, and housing because the intended audience was completely ignorant about the region. At the same time, the problems inherent in outsider accounts are in evidence in this collection. It should be abundantly clear to any reader that these men from abroad viewed the Maya as a mystery and projected their own fantasies and prejudices at will onto the natives. For example, the harsh characterizations of Barn de Waldeck (an enlightened visitor from Prague) that Mayas were stingy, superstitious clods, shackled by Catholicism and who bury their money, reflect his own frustrations with European Catholic peasants as much as those of the Yucatan. The authors all have their own axes to grind: Methodist missionaries see the weight of popish oppression all around them, British commentators spy opportunities to plant the flag, while “scientific” visitors (archeologists, geologists, etc.) observe impediments to progress. Outsiders’ comments reveal as much about the visitors as the objects of their gaze, providing the careful reader with plenty of material to reconstruct the worldview of nineteenth-century visitors. A useful companion volume to this collection would be Alfred Siemens’s volume on nineteenth-

century Veracruz foreign visitors. Siemens describes the mechanisms foreigners used to project their obsessions onto both the people they encountered and the landscape they traversed as they went from the port to the *altiplano*. In the end, Rugeley portrays the complicated dance between how Mayas sought to influence outsiders as compared to how the outsiders described what they saw and what they wanted to see in the peninsula.

Because this collection covers an entire century, readers can get a sense of how the events of the war changed the views of the Maya. Before 1847, outsiders characterized the Maya as “listless,” “docile,” and ideal laborers who had been beaten down by centuries of Spanish Catholic oppression, but once the war erupted they became objects of fear, an irrational force of nature capable of exploding onto the scene like a hurricane. The dualistic views of Native Americans appear here in a chronological pattern; depending on the commentator they appeared first as sluggish sub-humans and then as noble savages or first as “civilized” and later as “barbarous.” The change also may reflect the intellectual transitions that visitors experienced as romanticism transformed European sensibilities towards native peoples.

The “Hispanic” *yucatecos*, usually serving in official roles and who often made sophisticated observations on politics in indigenous society, wrote the final category of documents. Jos Bartolom del Granado Baeza, a priest writing in 1813, provided some revealing clues about the impact of constitutionalism in Maya communities (pp. 20-21). Jos Demetrio Molina, an imperial official in 1865, found that Mayas sought to interpret the promises of the Imperial government to their maximum advantage (p. 149). Military men offered vivid descriptions of Maya military tactics and, in spite of their revulsion towards the rebels, it is obvious that their tenacity and skill won them grudging respect. These documents often display the frustrations of local officials when they found that the Maya were not simply ready to bend to their image of what the nation should be.

The organization of the documents is largely chronological, beginning with the period from 1800 to 1847. In this section, before the rebellion, Rugeley provides a jarring contrast between the scornful observations of outsiders (a priest and two foreign visitors) and documents from Maya *republica de indios* that, in the words of the editor, “reveal that rural villagers were methodical, orderly and concerned about the operation of public affairs” (p. 31). In the section dedicated to the Caste War, the doc-

ument trail begins with the Maya relating their objectives, intentions, and preferred solutions rather than the usual Mrida perspective. Only after the Maya give their point of view does he include the usual crowd of military men and British visitors. In addition, he presents fascinating accounts from captives held by the rebels that offer details about the political and social organization of Chan Santa Cruz. These materials are especially appealing because they include accounts that flesh out the Maya rebels, providing clues about the intimate lives of the Eastern rebel communities. The documents do not lend themselves to romanticizing life in Chan Santa Cruz and they often portray the costs of the war.

The third section demonstrates the editor’s skill in bringing together sources from little-used archives, such as the Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society Archives, to describe a group of individuals often left out of the narratives of the Caste war, i.e. the Pacficos and the Maya refugees in Belize and Guatemala. The segment on “Pacified Yucatan” recovers scenes from daily life in the North including some revealing accounts of passive resistance that the drama of the Caste War often overshadows. The final selection of materials touches on the last years of the independent Maya societies that emerged from the Caste War and a preview of the changes that came with the twentieth century. In this section “professional ethnographers” appear on the scene, providing some revealing contrasts to the “non-scientific” accounts in the earlier sections. The nostalgia that pervades Pacheco Cruz’s descriptions of festivals (Document 38) is a fitting conclusion for the volume.

This book encourages comparisons to two path-breaking volumes in nineteenth-century history, Nelson Reed’s dramatic history of *The Caste War of the Yucatan* and Leticia Reina’s encyclopedic collection of essays and primary documents, *Las rebeliones campesinas en Mexico, 1819-1906*. When I was a young history undergraduate these two books convinced me that the study of rural indigenous communities was not only exciting but also “doable.” Reina in particular offered the possibility to read primary sources and demystify the historian’s work. Future generations will find Rugeley’s material an even broader portal into the study of nineteenth-century Mexico and indigenous societies. It is evidently the editor’s hope that the book will serve as an invitation to future scholars to take up the challenge of rural social history (p. 220). It is an honorable objective and I cannot think of a better collection of sources to pique the interest of a new generation of historians than this one.

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