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REPORTS ON THE MAYA INDIANS OF YUCATAN

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**Reports on the Maya
Indians of Yucatan**

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Santiago Mendez, Antonio García y Cubas, Pedro Sanchez de Aguilar, Francisco Hernandez Reports on the Maya Indians of Yucatan

PREFACE

So little has been written in regard to the ethnology of the Maya Indians of Yucatan, and especially concerning their beliefs, which persist to the present time, that we publish here a translation of an important and practically unknown account of this subject. This report was printed in Mexico in 1870, but it is buried in a study by Antonio García y Cubas entitled "Materiales para formar la Estadística General de la República Mexicana," in *Boletín de la Sociedad Mexicana de Geografía y Estadística*, segunda época, tomo II, pp. 352-388. It is on pages 374-387, bears the date Mérida, October 24, 1861, and was written by Santiago Mendez, who states that he was governor of Yucatan during the years 1841-42. In connection with a study of this report, so far as it relates to the beliefs of the Maya, it will be profitable to consult the paper by Dr Daniel G. Brinton on The Folk-lore of Yucatan, printed in the *Folk-Lore Journal*, London, vol. I, part viii, 13 pp., August, 1883.

We have also had translated the notes on the superstitions of the Indians of Yucatan contained in the work of Pedro Sanchez de Aguilar, 1639, published by the Museo Nacional of Mexico in 1892 (pp. 83-84), and the report of Francisco Hernandez on the religious beliefs of the Yucatan Indians, which was sent to Bartolomé de las Casas, evidently while Bishop of Yucatan in 1545, and is given by him in chapter cxxiii (pp. 328-330) of his *Apologetica Historia de las Indias*, a work which did not appear in print until 1875-76, the first complete edition of which was edited by M. Serrano y Sanz, and printed at Madrid in 1909.

The information contained in the Mendez report is strikingly similar to that given by Bartolomé José Granado Baeza on Los Indios de Yucatan, an account written in 1813 but not published until 1845, when it appeared in the *Registro Yucateco*, tomo I, pp. 165-178. This report of Baeza is one of the principal sources used by Brinton in his study.

The editor has incorporated a few brief notes, and has prepared a glossary of the Indian words and a short bibliography of the subject.

Marshall H. Saville.

THE MAYA INDIANS OF YUCATAN IN 1861

By Santiago Mendez

Report on the Customs, Labor, Language, Industry, Physiognomy, etc., of the Indians of Yucatan, made by the Agent of the Department of Public Works, who signs this report, in obedience to orders of February 6, 1861.

CUSTOMS

The character of the Indians of Yucatan is such that, were they to be judged only by their customs and their habits, we would have to qualify them as stupid and devoid of reason. It seems indifferent to them to be in the shade or exposed to rain or to the scorching rays of the sun, even though they could avoid it. It does not matter to them whether they go dressed or naked. They never try to obtain commodities they see other races enjoy, even though the trouble or sacrifice it would cost to get them might be but small. In order to rest or to chat with their companions they hardly ever sit down: they squat, it being quite indifferent to them that they do it in a sun that scorches them when they might perhaps have shade two steps from where they are. Reward does not encourage them, nor does punishment admonish them; in the first place, they think they deserve more, – perhaps because they were always accustomed to be made use of, – and in the second case they consider punishment as a kind of fatality from which it is quite useless to try to deliver themselves: hence they do not reform. So long as their hunger is stilled, it is quite indifferent to them whether their meal is exquisite and varied, or whether it consists only of tortillas and chile, devouring their food in either case with astounding voracity. When they find themselves driven by utter necessity, they will work in order to remedy it, but they never do so with zeal or with the desire to improve their fortunes. They are so improvident that they may squander in one day the earnings of a week, in an exaggerated amount of dainties or in superstitious practices, and above all by intoxicating themselves, leaving their families without bread and clothing. Or, they remain idle until whatever they earned by the sweat of their brow is gone. They cultivate a cornfield and gather a good harvest from it, and even though they do not need to do so, they will sell the corn with considerable loss in order to squander the money in splendid repasts and superstitions, both of which always go together. This harvest might insure the subsistence of their family for a whole year, but their improvidence will reduce them within a few days to having to sell themselves for work (peonage).

The love of the parents for their children, of the children for their parents, and between husband and wife, is barely lukewarm, and not at all passionate, if we are to judge from their absolute lack of signs of sympathy, pity, or condolence. They contemplate dry-eyed and rather indifferently the suffering of their nearest, and even their demise, without allowing this to change their demeanor or letting it interfere in the least with their general customs of life.

Although some of them can read and write, they use it very little, either because they are very slow and clumsy in the exercise of both, on account, no doubt, of the lack of practice, and also because there is but little written in their own language.

Their children have usually no other education than that which they receive from the curates, priests, choirmasters, and teachers of the catechism, which education was formerly given to them at the church doors or in the mansions of the large ranches and farms, and they were compelled to assemble every morning from seven to eight to learn the catechism. At the present day, as it is not possible to force the parents to send their children to learn even this, there are but few who learn at all, especially among the boys. When the writer of this was governor of this state in the years 1841 and 1842, he succeeded in establishing primary schools in almost all the villages, and although averse to anything that looks or sounds like despotism, he authorized, nevertheless, the mayors, justices of the peace, and chieftains (*caçiques*¹) to use it in order to force parents to send their children to the said schools. Unfortunately, in 1842 came the invasion by the forces of general Santa Anna, and in the effort to resist them, all the resources of the state were spent for many years in advance. Then followed our own senseless revolutions and the almost general uprising of these same Indians against the other native races, consequently these schools passed out of existence without it having

¹ For the meaning of this and of other Indian words, consult the [glossary](#).

been possible until this day to reestablish them. Hence this remains an unsolved problem and it is difficult to calculate the profit they might have brought (once the tenacious and persistent opposition of the Indians overcome), leaving them convinced of the advantages it might mean to further their knowledge even in the manual labor they perform.

Generally they train their children from a very early age to help in their agricultural labor such as their forefathers did before the conquest, or else they teach them light manual labor, such as weaving little mats or matting in general, making small bags, baskets of all kinds and sizes, leather bands such as are used by the native porters, sacks, hammocks, ropes, to prepare henequen from agave fiber, to make straw hats, and so forth. In some villages they are taught to make common pottery, and in places near the coast they are shown how to extract salt, to fish, and seamanship in general. It is very rare that they are taught other arts and crafts or trades, with the exception perhaps in cities or principal towns, where, especially when they have been reared and educated in the households of white people, they may become efficient in the art of quarrying stone, though quite primitively, or they qualify as masons, shoemakers, tailors, muleteers, drivers, and cowboys. They also provide the town with firewood, charcoal, and fodder.

With regard to their marriage customs, there is little else to say except that the daughter-in-law goes to live in the house of her father-in-law, and the son-in-law goes to live with his wife's parents, which is at present the most usual way, because an episcopal edict had to be issued prohibiting the first-mentioned to avoid the very frequent abuses committed on the bride by her father-in-law and brothers-in-law. At a very early age young men marry, without repugnance, women who are much older, widows, and even girls who have children born out of wedlock. To remonstrances made by those who wish to dissuade them in view of such conditions, they will reply, "Why should I care? This happened before my time!" It is to be supposed that conjugal fidelity is not regarded very scrupulously by such couples. Their most common diseases depend largely on the seasons, and recur regularly. During summer and fall, when fresh food is abundant, the Indians are very immoderate in its use, consequently they suffer from diarrhea and vomiting. In spring and summer they have *tabardillo*, which is a burning fever, and dysentery, both of which are caused by too much exposure to the hot sun; and in winter obstinate constipation, colds, and affections of the throat and lungs. Their curative methods consist merely of abstinence and of bleeding, which they perform with a thorn or a fish-bone, and they cool their blood by drinking sour *pozole* or boiled lemonade, or else a decoction of a plant called *xhantumbú*. They never use emetics nor cathartics.

Ordinarily they eat two meals a day, one on rising and another in the evening. If they go to work in the field, after having breakfasted on tortillas and *atole*, they take with them a large lump of *pozole* which they use as a refreshment at noon by diluting it in water. At sunset they leave work, and, returning home, eat the second meal, generally after having taken their bath. Their usual food consists of boiled vegetables seasoned with salt, chile, and sometimes with the juice of oranges (the sour orange is used for this) or of lemons. On Sundays, if they are able to do so, they buy beef or pork; these are the only days when they eat meat, except when they kill a wild bird or a creature of the woods while hunting. Such meat they cook by baking it in a special way in the earth, or else in *pib*. The very poor among them live all the year round on tortillas and chile, and a bowlful of *pozole* or *atole*. Even the wealthiest content themselves with only one dish. This does not interfere with their being big eaters, nor devouring all they can get when it does not cost them anything.

Their usual beverage is called *pitarrilla*, consisting of the bark of a plant called *balché* which they put in soak in fresh water and honey and let it ferment. After fermentation it becomes strong enough to be intoxicating. They are also very fond of liquor, and there are very few among them who do not become intoxicated occasionally, at least on Sundays.

Experience, and to a certain extent tradition, are their only guides for telling the different seasons of the year; they have not the slightest remembrance of their ancient calendar system. They are accustomed to hear clocks strike where such exist, but otherwise, simply from the course of the

sun, moon, and stars, they are able to regulate the hours of the day and night, more or less. They also know when an eclipse of the moon is approaching, attributing this phenomenon to an intention of the sun to destroy his satellite, and they therefore are prepared to make a fearful racket with sticks, *mitotes*, whistles or horns (*fotutos*²), shotguns, and other instruments during the eclipse, believing that by so doing they can avoid the catastrophe.

They sleep from early evening until four o'clock in the morning. Their working hours, if it is at all necessary for them to go to work, last from sunrise to sunset. If they are paid, they walk or travel at all hours, even with a load.

There are a few among them who are trustworthy and faithful in their contracts, and know how to keep their word and promises; but there is a greater number who absolutely lack all of these virtues, with the exception, perhaps, of the solemn promises they make to their saints, in the fulfilment of which they are scrupulously punctual.

They lie easily and very frequently, although they are aware that lies are prohibited. Generally they evade, whenever possible, a truthful answer which is to the point and fully satisfies the question.

Their principal vices are lasciviousness among both sexes, and drunkenness among the men. To do them justice though, we might as well acknowledge that it is more than probable that if other races and tribes had to live as they do, almost naked, in the complete liberty and isolation of country places, all members of one family, males and females, grownups and minors, the married and the single ones sleeping together in those little huts without any, or at best, very scant, knowledge of religion, of modesty and honor, without any fear of the consequences of unchastity to the women, without any intellectual enjoyment, reduced to the merest essentials – to satisfy hunger, thirst, sleep, and the intercourse of the two sexes, might they not be guilty of worse crimes?

They are generally accused of being inclined to theft, but as a rule they steal small things of little value, and they are not known to recur to violence or murder to satisfy this tendency.

The wealthy are free money-lenders to members of their own tribe and even to those of a different stock, so long as they are satisfied they are not going to be cheated.

As in almost all of the most populated part of the Yucatecan peninsula, it is impossible to use the plow for tilling the fields; labor is reduced to clearing the tropical growth by burning it in the height of summer and sowing corn or vegetables when the rains commence, to fencing in the fields and weeding them, etc. In order to be able to cultivate at one time as much as possible of their extensive lands, the wealthy Indians pay their day-laborers and volunteers exceedingly well, either in money or in its equivalent in provisions at a price below its actual market value, especially in times of scarcity. They are guided in this by the rule, "This is sweat of my brethren and it is not right that they should pay it too dearly." If those workers are servants of some large ranch and live on the place, they are called *Luneros*,³ because they give their master their day's work on Mondays in exchange for the land he gives them to cultivate for themselves and for the water he allows them for irrigation of their fields. If they do not, for one reason or another, go to work on that day, he receives one real in silver instead. The customary amount of work they really are compelled to do for their master per year is twenty *mecates* of clearing of untilled land and another twenty of already previously tilled fields. Had the owner to pay for hired labor, this would amount to 12 pesos, 4 reals. In addition to this they have to give him two hours on Saturdays for what they call *fagina*,⁴ which means work around the house of any kind their patron should order them to do. On some of the ranches the obligatory field-work is reduced to half, but in this case they have to pay their real for Mondays, and always have to do the Saturday's *fagina*. Any other service or work they may be called on to do is paid or put to their

² *Fotuto* is a musical instrument used by the Carib Indians and also by the negroes of the Antilles.

³ *Luneros* are Monday-workers.

⁴ *Fagina*—*faena*, manual labor.

account. By *milpa roza*,⁵ the first clearing of a field by felling trees, cutting and burning undergrowth, etc., is meant; while the *milpa caña*⁶ is the clearing of fields that have already been tilled the year before, where the cornstalks are to be split and burnt in order to plant again.

Those who are employed as cowboys on stock-farms receive a fixed wage, and are not subject to the Monday service nor to the usual field-work. They have to look after the cattle and horses, and they have charge of the draw-wells, the tanks, and drinking pools. They have to attend to irrigation, weeding, and sowing of the truck gardens and orchards, and in general to do all work performed on such ranches either for their conservation and improvement or else in personal service to the owners or for the advantage of its products. It is also their duty to rasp a certain amount of henequen fiber from the agave each day. Their wage is from eight to twelve reals per month and five *almudes*⁷ of corn per week. Yet neither this latter nor the salary are paid to him as his earnings, but credited to his account against what he draws in provisions or money, so that he actually is always indebted. This, however, is the aim of the owners, in order to hold the man quite secure, even though they know very well that, should the man die in their service, they would lose that amount. They see to it, however, that he never owes too much. This really constitutes a kind of slavery (peonage) which the men try to avenge by serving as poorly as they can, even to such masters as aim to make their lot easy and agreeable by frequent gifts or bonuses.

As a rule the Yucatecan Indians are regarded as being meek, humble, and not easily stirred to ire and cruelty, basing such an opinion on the fact that the most customary punishment among them was a whipping applied with moderation. This kind of punishment did not offend them, if they were informed of the reason why it was meted out to them, nor did they consider it degrading. This characteristic is still noticeable among those who have remained submissive and attached to the white people. It is quite different with those among them who have had to suffer the cruel, atrocious, and protracted martyrdom inflicted by the rebels. They are merciless to those who have fallen and still fall into their power, not only those of other tribes, but even of their own, in case they refuse to follow their tracks. They have no pity on either age or sex.

The chieftains (*caçiques*) of today, as well as those who were in office in the past, and the most prominent or wealthy Indians, live just as simply as the rest, without the slightest variation. They all are respected by their subordinates, whom they do not oppress to their own advantage, nor do they demand any services from them without compensation.

The Indians are generally gay, light-hearted, gossipy, and fond of tricks, in which they can display strength, agility, and adroitness. They are also very fond of music and song, although not very gifted or talented in the execution of the former especially. At their feasts and dances, which usually are rather tumultuous and poorly organized, they still use some of the old songs in their own language, to the accompaniment of a little raucous flute, the carapace of a turtle (*hicotea*), upon which they beat the time with a hart's horn, and of the *mitote* or *taukul*. The *mitote*⁸ is a solid piece of wood of cylindrical shape, one yard long and a third of a yard or a little more in diameter, open at one side almost from one end to the other. This opening is made for the purpose of hollowing out the piece of wood until it is reduced to one inch or a little more in thickness. On the opposite side of the mouth, or opening, they fasten two oblong wings, which, starting at both ends, meet in the center and are separated from one another by a serrated edge. In order to play this instrument, they place it, mouth downward, on the ground, so that the wings remain on the topmost side, and they hit them with two short sticks whose points are covered with an elastic resin that makes them jump, so as

⁵ *Milpa roza* is, literally, field cleared of underbrush and ready for planting.

⁶ *Milpa caña*, literally cane field.

⁷ An *almud* is a dry measure equivalent to twelve English bushels. There seems to be an error in the quantity here.

⁸ The author here seems to have confused the meaning of the word *mitote* (see [glossary](#)). In Yucatan the instrument he describes is called *tunkul*.

not to deaden or confound the sound, which is of such resonance and force that it may be heard at a distance of two leagues.

Notwithstanding the fact that they regard death almost with indifference, they are timid and cowardly. They never attack the enemy unless they are far superior in number. Still, they are very astute or cunning to plan ambushes and to take advantage of every occasion to surprise their foes, and then fight with great advantage, always accompanying the fighting with frightful shouting. They are generally good marksmen, and they handle the machete⁹

⁹ The *machete* is the large knife which the Indian men of Yucatan invariably carry with them.

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