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A Tale of Two Ek'Balams

Indigenous populations throughout Mexico have been the focus of state-led development for many years. With the development of tourism on the coast of the Mexican state of Quintana Roo in the 1970s, tourism became a vital tool for economic development projects. At the same time, the country was preparing for massive changes to the *ejidal* system—a communally based land tenure system dating back to the post-Revolutionary period of the 1920s and 1930s. By the mid-1990s, sweeping neo-liberal reforms to land policy throughout the country had fundamentally altered the land tenure system. The federal government was intent on modernizing the country's rural, peasant, and largely indigenous population. Trends in international development that favored a community-based approach to combat the numerous failings the top-down approach had yielded in previous decades were primary influences on this development process. These contemporaneous shifts in economic development, land tenure, and indigenous farming played out in a variety of ways in different parts of the country.

In the midst of these changes, the history of one village in the state of Yucatán took a unique turn when an important archaeological zone opened to the public

just 300 meters from the town center. This book is about these two Ek'Balams: one is a notable archaeological site and the other is a community living in the shadow of this ancient urban center. In 1994, the archaeological zone of Ek'Balam became a destination, bringing tourists to the municipality for the first time. In 1996, the *ejido* entered into the land privatization process through a new government initiative. In 2001, the village became the site of a community-based tourism (CBT) development project funded by the Mexican government.

The site of Ek'Balam, or Black Jaguar in Yucatec Maya (Barrera Vázquez 1980), is one of forty-six archaeological zones in the region open for exploration by the 10 million tourists who travel in Yucatán and Quintana Roo each year (SEDETUR 2013; SEFOTUR 2014). The Mexican state of Quintana Roo, home of Cancún and the Maya Riviera, receives about one-third of all foreign tourist expenditures in Mexico, and since 1970, this state has had a higher rate of growth than any other part of Mexico (SECTUR 2014; Clancy 2001b). Cancún is the tourist emporium located on the northeast tip of the Yucatán Peninsula. Since its creation in the 1970s, it has become a destination famed for its white beaches, turquoise sea, and 280-kilometer coral reef. For guests it offers “good and predictable hotels, an exotic ambiance of margaritas and mariachis, lush tropical forests, and Maya ruins” (Pi-Sunyer, Thomas, and Daltabuit 2001, 122). More than 3 million visitors enter the Yucatán Peninsula region through the Cancún International Airport annually, 60 percent of whom are North Americans (SECTUR 2015). The final destination of the majority is the Maya Riviera, which refers to the Cancún-Tulum corridor stretching approximately 130 km from the northern tip of the peninsula south to the community of Tulum.

While the success of this destination is undeniable, there are costs associated with large-scale tourism development as well. Quintana Roo is home to some of the country's poorest and most malnourished citizens. In comparison to Mexico's national averages, this state has higher rates of infant mortality and divorce and a lower life expectancy (Juárez 2002; Arroyo et al. 2013). Development of Cancun and the Maya Riviera began as a government economic policy favoring international and national economic investment in the hotel industry. During this process, the Mexican state took on the new role of initiating and planning tourism development (Clancy 2001b). From the conception of the idea to the receipt of \$21.5 million in funding from the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) in 1971, the “Cancun Project” was orchestrated by the government through newly formed and empowered agencies such as FONATUR—the Fondo Nacional de Fomento al Turismo (National Tourism Development Fund) (Clancy 2001b, 133). To complete the Hotel Zone efficiently and quickly, cheap labor was necessary. The developers targeted the Maya population in the Yucatán Peninsula to satisfy this need. For the Maya, Cancún was an alternative to traditional milpa, or corn, production, which is uncertain and labor-intensive.

The development of Cancún added migration and wage labor to their economic possibilities. Peasants could now migrate to Cancún when the fields were resting and return to the community when they were needed for agricultural work. Mainly unskilled peasant Maya were recruited for the construction work. This also became an alternative for the young Maya, looking for an alternative to the periodic hardships of milpa production (Re Cruz 2003). This government-planned and internationally funded destination marked a shift in the way Mexico conducted and managed tourism.

Across the Yucatán Peninsula, state governments as well as agents of the federal government have embraced the ancient Maya heritage as their most important—and profitable—characteristic. More important, the state has identified the indigenous past as the tangible remnants of it as national patrimony. The country had long been the object of the touristic imagination, particularly for North Americans (Berger and Wood 2010); however, with the creation of FONATUR, the Mexican government established its first foray into the governance of tourism (Castañeda and Burtner 2010; Cheong and Miller 2000; Bramwell and Lane 2011; Dinica 2009). In some ways, this was an obvious extension of the existing role of the federal government in the promotion and management of heritage (Berger 2006; Muñoz-Fernández 2015). Since 1939, the Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia (National Institute of Anthropology and History, INAH) has governed the nation's patrimony in the form of archaeological zones.

The tourism industry effectively reinforces ethnic difference by using it as a primary marker of destinations throughout Latin America (Anderson 2013; Babb 2010; Baud and Ypeij 2009); however, Mexico's focus on the presentation of ancient indigenous peoples through archaeological exploration is a marked difference (Bueno 2010; Velasco 2016; Clark and Anderson 2015). New emphases on multiculturalism and neo-liberal development models in state and federal promotions of tourism in Mexico and the Yucatán Peninsula in particular complicate the view of Maya identity (Loewe 2009), with some viewing it as a colonialist construct (Castañeda 2004; Hervik 1998; Restall 1999) and others as a continuation of cultural traits from the pre-Columbian period. The promotion of tourism at archaeological sites brings into question issues such as politics of patrimony and the management of ruins, as well as the present-day negotiations surrounding land rights in archaeological zones and the internal and external forces involved (Breglia 2006). It is at this intersection of heritage, tourism, and identity that the archaeological zones for which the Mexican state of Yucatán is so well-known are positioned (Castañeda 1996, 2003; Walker 2009).

Tourism has left its mark on the region in both cultural and physical ways. A major tourist corridor cuts across the peninsula, connecting Mérida, the state capital of Yucatán, with the resorts of Cancún and the Maya Riviera (figure 0.1). These two cities represent different types of tourism experiences and provide



FIGURE 0.1. *Main tourist corridor through Yucatán*

vastly different offerings. On one side is a culturally vibrant colonial city and on the other are the white sand beaches of the Maya Riviera. These types of tourist destinations are the two ends of a typology of tourism, including mass or charter tourism, cultural tourism, and alternative tourism (Smith 1989). We can think of the typology of tourism as a spectrum. If alternative “off the beaten path” tourism is at one end, I propose that mass, or charter, tourism is on the other end. By identifying these two types of tourism and positioning them as opposites, we have just created a spectrum, or a continuum, of tourism. In addition, we have created tourism border zones to be traversed by hosts and guests alike (Bruner 2005).

Small villages, cities, archaeological zones, haciendas, forests, and the million Yucatec Maya who live on the peninsula (INEGI 2010) dot the length of this tourism continuum. In the 1930s, anthropologists descended on Yucatán and Mesoamerica more broadly, turning the region into a veritable ethnographic laboratory. Throughout Mesoamerica, anthropologists were concerned



FIGURE 0.2. *Castillo at Chichén Itzá (left) and Acropolis at Ek'Balam (right)*

with understanding the way indigenous people organized themselves socially into communities and how these “little communities” were key to gaining an understanding of indigenous, peasant culture. One of the lasting concepts that emerged from this period was the folk-urban continuum, as proposed by Robert Redfield (1941). Ethnographers subsequently adopted this model as a framework for understanding peasant communities throughout Latin America and even elsewhere in the world. They presumed that anyone who fit the description of “peasant” was at some stage of their journey from folk to urban. Anthropologists discarded this conceptual framework long ago, but the concept of the continuum serving as a gauge for a place and a person’s rurality is alive and well in promotions of cultural, archaeological, and eco-tourism. Located in the literal and figurative middle of this continuum are the two Ek'Balams.

The archaeological zone of Ek'Balam is home to some of the most impressive pre-Columbian stuccoes found in the Maya World, and their excavation and subsequent opening of the site to visitors was a welcome addition to INAH’s holdings. This is a Terminal Classic site that reached its height between AD 700 and 1100 (Bey et al. 1998; Sharer and Traxler 2006). One of the most important attractions at Ek'Balam today is the Acropolis. This structure is one of the largest monuments in the Northern Maya Lowland region (Vargas de la Peña, Borges, and García-Gallo 1998). More important, it is open for climbing and exploration. When the famous Castillo at Chichén Itzá closed in 2005, Ek'Balam’s Acropolis became one of the two remaining pyramids for visitors to climb within day-trip range of both Mérida and Cancún (figure 0.2).

The Castillo at Chichén Itzá—a four-sided flattop pyramid—is perhaps the most widely recognizable icon of the Yucatán Peninsula. An average of 5,000 tourists visit this site daily, with the majority coming around the spring and fall equinoxes to bear witness to the shadow serpent descending the Castillo (UNESCO 2015). I visited Chichén Itzá as an exchange student and, similar to many of my fellow travelers, lesser-known destinations deemed to be off the beaten path piqued my interest. The growing popularity of Ek'Balam and its

reputation among travelers as the alternative to Chichén Itzá are what attracted me to the area in 2003.

Travel to Ek'Balam is safe and easy, a characteristic of the region that adds to its allure for tourists. A comfortable two-hour bus ride takes visitors from their hotel in Mérida or Cancún to the colonial city of Valladolid. There they exit the bus station and are greeted immediately by taxi drivers who will chauffeur them to Ek'Balam and bring them back about two hours later for around US\$30 (560 Mexican pesos). This leaves them plenty of time to explore the archaeological site, climb the monuments, and purchase a few souvenirs. The drive to and from the archaeological site is pleasant and comfortable. A main highway heads north from Valladolid and passes through the town of Temozón, providing a glimpse of daily life. Ten kilometers north of Temozón a highway turns east and leads directly to the archaeological zone.

Adjacent to this ancient site is the modern-day village of Ek'Balam. This village of around 350 residents has experienced numerous changes since the initial excavation of the archaeological zone. Visitors arrive daily at the intersection of the main road into the archaeological zone and the smaller road that, according to barely visible hand-painted signs, leads to the Maya village of Ek'Balam. Not surprisingly, most choose to continue into the archaeological site on the road more traveled. For most, the narrow road full of potholes that reveal the white earth beneath the pavement does not look like the correct choice. Before its completion in 2003, the road to the ruins took a much different route (figure 0.3). The old road to the archaeological zone leads through the small village of Ek'Balam, past thatch houses, playing children, and roaming poultry before arriving at the ruins. Until the completion of the new road, the entrance to the archaeological zone was located just outside the village of Ek'Balam, approximately 300 meters from the zone's ceremonial center. The village of Ek'Balam has experienced numerous changes since the initial excavation of the archaeological zone. With the completion of the new road, travelers can easily bypass this scenery and get straight to the archaeological zone they came to see.

In 2003, I arrived at this intersection and opted to turn off the brand-new highway and into the village of Ek'Balam. After this initial visit to the archaeological zone and village of Ek'Balam, I became very interested in how this small community was engaging with such a major change to its daily life. While residents have always had ties to the regional economy, the opening of the archaeological zone represented their first extended local engagement with the tourism industry. A major agent of change in Ek'Balam is a community-based tourism (CBT) project that, until the completion of the new road in 2003, was located just outside the entrance to the site (figure 0.4). The CBT project is a hotel and cultural center called U Najil Ek'Balam, which means House of the Black Jaguar in Yucatec Maya.

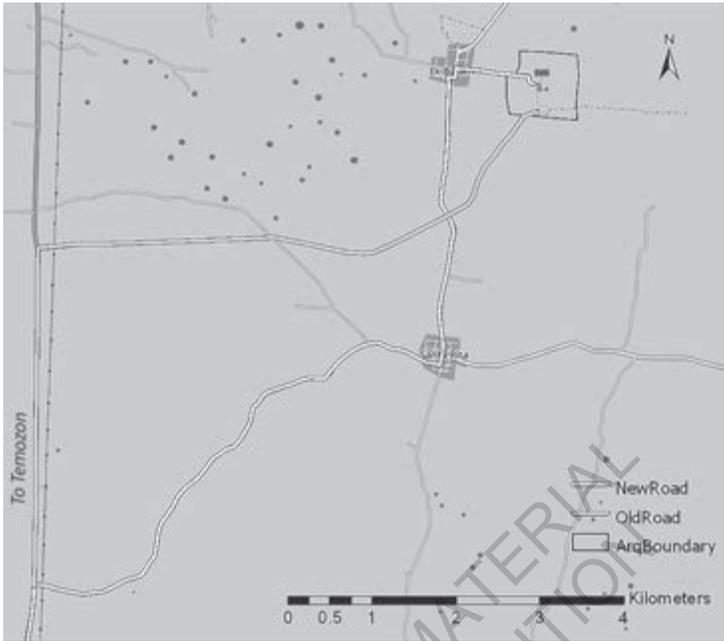


FIGURE 0.3. Location of initial entrance to archaeological zone

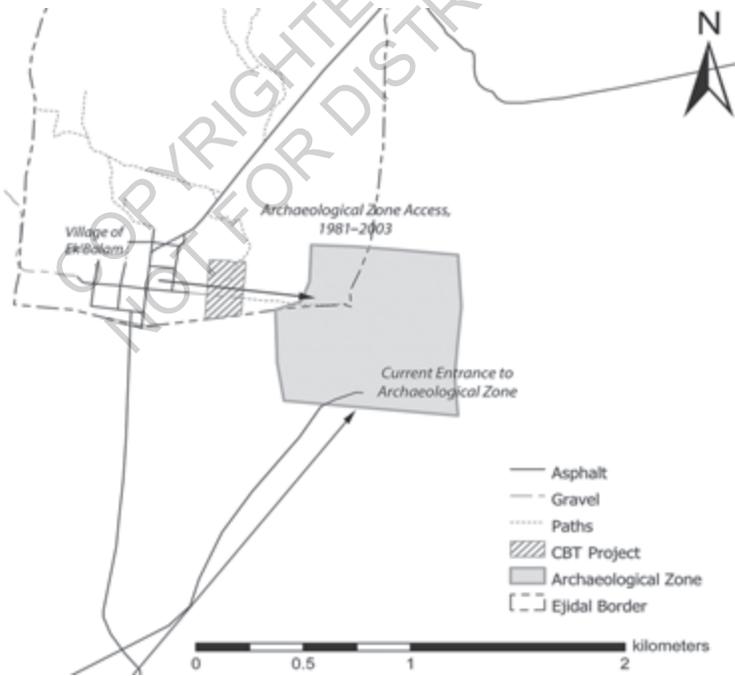


FIGURE 0.4. Access to archaeological zone

Residents were never isolated from tourism and tourists; however, managing a hotel down the street from one's house is categorically different from working on a construction crew building a hotel in Cancún, which was one of residents' main engagements with the region's tourism industry. This was the main topic of conversation with the individuals I met on that trip, and I decided that I wanted to know more about exactly how people were handling this change. Six months later I returned to embark on the research that would eventually answer these questions. Ek'Balam provides a context for understanding the many factors at work in development initiatives, kinship and land use, and the tourism encounter. The results of this analysis are a rich description of how one group of people is actively negotiating with tourism and development.

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