

## Chapter 1

### The Mayans of Central Quintana Roo

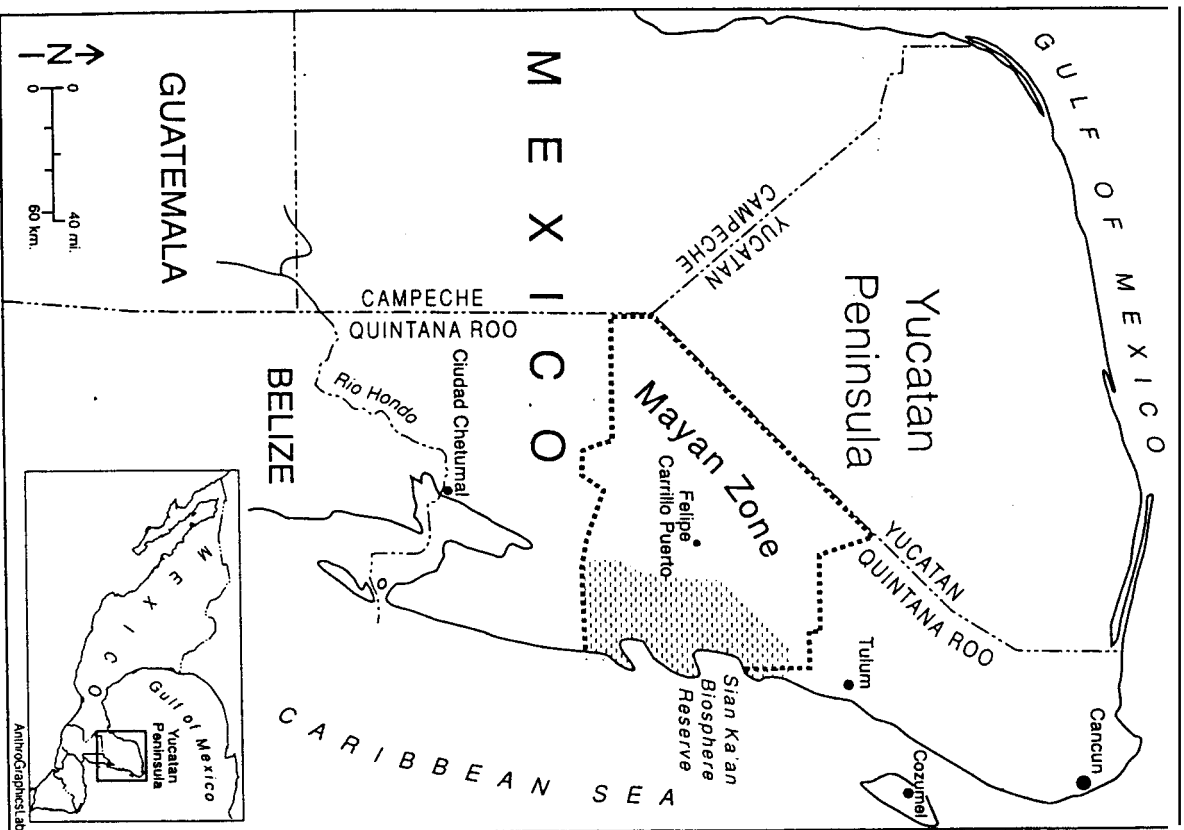
David Barton Bray

#### CULTURAL OVERVIEW

##### The People

From 1850 to 1901, a group of Yucatec Maya known as the *Cuzob* or “people of the Cross” refused to be displaced by or incorporated into expanding sugar plantations, defied the Mexican nation, and established a rebel state in the forests in the interior of Quintana Roo, at the time a remote region in the eastern Yucatán Peninsula of Mexico. These rebel Maya were descendants of one of the greatest civilizations of the Western Hemisphere. Before the Spanish conquest, the ancient Maya erected great stone buildings and pyramids, practiced intensive forms of agriculture, used a form of hieroglyphic writing, and conducted astronomical reckonings in the vast rain forests of what is today southern Mexico and northern Central America. The descendants of these Maya occupy a nearly continuous territory in southern Mexico, Guatemala, and Belize.

The contemporary Mayan people can be defined as a language family, a cultural group, and the occupants of a geographic space. In Mexico, they include the Yucatec Maya who gave birth to the rebel group discussed in this chapter, a small group of Lacandon Maya of the lowland rain forest of Chiapas, and the far more populous Tzotzil and Tzeltal Maya of the Chiapas highlands, many of whom have migrated into the lowlands, as well as scattered groups elsewhere. In Guatemala, they include the Quichean peoples of the eastern and central highlands and the Mammean peoples of the western highlands. Other groups live in Belize. The millions of contemporary Maya have generally similar sorts of subsistence patterns, textiles, and other cultural patterns but proudly differentiate themselves from each other by distinctive textile designs and other practices.



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The rebel Yucatec Maya came to terms slowly and grudgingly with the reality of their participation in the Mexican nation; as late as the 1930s they were attempting to negotiate foreign diplomatic alliances through visiting U.S. archaeologists. "The Mayan Zone" of Quintana Roo still maintains a distinct cultural identity as the mostly heavily indigenous region of the modern Mexican state of Quintana Roo. The Maya today live in a precarious equilibrium between a declining traditional agricultural lifestyle and the economic opportunities offered by the booming tourist centers of Quintana Roo. Standing in between those two options is a third way, that of intensifying their management of the dry tropical forest habitat which has sheltered and supported them for 150 years. In the last fifteen years they have made significant strides in the sustainable management of their forest resources, particularly in the management of mahogany (*Swietenia macrophylla*). In order for the forest to become a genuine economic alternative, however, there are new demands to manage it more intensively without permanently degrading the resource for their children.

#### The Setting

Today Quintana Roo, formed out of a federal territory in 1973, is best known as the home of Cancún, a resort destination favored by U.S. college students. Long before the beaches of Cancún became world famous, other features of Quintana Roo's geology determined the course of its development. Quintana Roo, like the rest of the Yucatán, is mostly a flat limestone shelf, much like southern Florida in the United States. The limestone is heavily pitted with myriad sinkholes, some of them quite large, called cenotes. Quintana Roo's only river, the Río Hondo, forms the southern boundary with Belize; the rest of the water in the state moves through underground channels, accessible only through the cenotes. In most places, only a thin layer of soil has formed over the limestone which, combined with a five-month dry season, has limited the density and height of the forest. Because the forests receive about 1,200 millimeters (47 inches) of rain a year, ecologists call them "dry" or, at best, "semihumid" tropical forests. The canopy may only reach as high as 30 to 35 meters (98 to 115 feet) as opposed to 45 to 50 meters (148 to 164 feet) for wetter forests on better soils. Nonetheless, these forests have a rich biodiversity with as many as 100 tree species, 1,257 different kinds of plants, and 151 vertebrate species. One survey of late secondary forest (an advanced state of succession from an original clearing) in central Quintana Roo yielded a total of ninety-eight tree species from thirty-three families. Predominant trees include the sapodilla tree (*Manilkara zapota*); whose sap (called chicle), which was traditionally used to make chewing gum; the ramon (*Brosimum alicastrum*), used for forage; and mahogany (*Swietenia macrophylla*), valued for centuries as one of the finest woods available for use in furniture and inlays.<sup>1</sup>

#### Traditional Subsistence Strategies

The Mayan milpa or cornfield is more than just a place to plant corn; traditionally such crops as beans, squash, chiles, and yucca are interplanted. Corn was developed as a food crop for humans in Mexico and, as one would expect for such an ancient practice, it has developed a complex system of practices and beliefs around its cultivation. Traditionally, and to a significant degree still today, clearing land, planting, tending, and harvesting mark the principal stages of the agricultural cycle and occupy much of the Mayas' time, energy, and concern. The type of agriculture practiced is known as slash and burn because it is based on clearing and burning forestlands, planting for a few years until soil fertility is exhausted, and then clearing a new patch of forest. The technique depends on having substantial areas of forest so that whole villages can continue finding new forest soils in which to plant. When anthropologist Alfonso Villa Rojas visited the region in the 1930s, he found each farmer cultivating nearly 6 hectares (15 acres) to support his family for a year.<sup>2</sup> The Maya also traditionally planted vegetables and herbs in large wooden boxes next to the house and raised chickens, turkeys, and pigs. The forest was a source of game, particularly deer and white-collared peccary, wild fruits, medicinal herbs, and building materials.

#### Social and Political Organization

The power of the Cruzob, or Talking Cross cult, also marked Maya social organization. Until well into the twentieth century, and to some extent today, the Maya organized themselves around the model of the Yucatec militias, out of which they sprang as a military force in 1848. Since the 1930s, they have also organized their communities according to the regulations of Mexico's agrarian reform laws. These laws call for the communities to select their leadership democratically, usually for three-year periods.

Although some Maya have always lived throughout the eastern Yucatán, it is central Quintana Roo that is known as the Mayan Zone because of its density of population and the historical presence of the Cruzob as a major demographic infusion in a mostly unpopulated area. However, the rest of the state has passed from having a Maya majority to a shrinking minority, overwhelmed by the explosive growth of tourism and immigration into the state. By 1995 only 26% of the population of Quintana Roo spoke an indigenous language. Even today, however, the two *municipios* (counties) that make up central Quintana Roo, Felipe Carillo Puerto and José María Morelos, are an average of 75% Mayan; the two *municipios* to the north, Lázaro Cárdenas and Solidaridad, also have substantial Mayan populations. The largest absolute number of Maya are found in the *mun-*

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