# Book Reviews

## Survival Strategies of the Maya

**Anthropology and History in Yucatán.** GRANT D. JONES, Ed. University of Texas Press, Austin, 1977. xxiv, 344 pp. + plates. $16.95.

E. E. Evans-Pritchard wrote some years ago that the most important intellectual affinities of anthropology are not with the natural sciences, but rather with history (*1*, pp. 172–191). He meant, among other things, that a major part of the task of anthropology is to interpret and translate the quality of life of societies that are marginal, nonliterate, defunct, or otherwise unable to add their voices to the consultable record of what man has said. The ten authors (eight anthropologists, a sociologist, and a historian) whose essays appear in this collection are sensitive to this mandate. What is special about *Anthropology and History in Yucatán* is the critical and imaginative use the authors make of ethnohistoric documents. Using such data as native texts and census and baptismal records, they write and rewrite diverse aspects of post-Conquest Yucatec Maya history with an eye to what the Maya themselves and other firsthand observers have had to say about their historical development.

The Yucatán peninsula of Mexico has had special importance in the cultural history of the New World for at least 2000 years. This continues today, for the Yucatec Maya Indian population is part of what is probably the largest surviving, contiguous population of American Indians of common heritage in the New World. This modern Maya culture area extends from Yucatán into the neighboring Mexican state of Chiapas and into Guatemala, Belize, and Honduras. There are indications that some of the very earliest distinctive cultural expressions of the great Ancient Maya civilization developed on the western coast of Yucatán somewhat before the Christian era. Yucatán was also the center of the later phases of the florescence of the Ancient Maya culture, known as the Post-Classic Period (A.D. 900 to the Spanish Conquest, around 1540). Although most of the Maya city-states of Yucatán fell to the Spaniards soon after the fall of the Aztec Empire (1521), the peninsula remained a marginal area throughout much of the colonial period, for it did not have great mineral wealth, stable concentrations of Indian labor, or easy, established routes of land communication. In fact, one isolated Maya center, Tayasal, did not fall to the Spaniards until 1697. Yucatán was, therefore, an area of considerable aboriginal cultural vitality during the colonial period. The late 18th and 19th centuries "opened" Yucatán as commercial agriculture in the north and lumbering in the south brought increasing waves of mestizos and Europeans into the Maya homeland. These exploitative commercial activities, which required Indian labor to a great extent, caused significant population movements within the peninsula, particularly toward the south and into Belize (then British Honduras). In the 1840's, in the midst of these encroachments on Maya communities, lands, and resources, there occurred, in the northern part of the peninsula, one of the most dramatic and self-conscious Indian rebellions on the Latin-American historical record, known generally as the Caste War of Yucatán (*2*). This antiwhite uprising, though ultimately unsuccessful, spread powerful Indian separatist sentiments, many of which have lasted well into the present century, throughout southern Mexico.

*Anthropology and History in Yucatán* consists of ten essays that consider diverse aspects of the post-Conquest ethnohistory and ethnology of this fascinating region. Part 1, Continuity and Change in Maya Ethnic Boundaries, contains three essays by Eric Thompson, France V. Scholes and Eric Thompson, and O. Nigel Bolland. The problems addressed have to do with demographic change and internal migration as Maya responses to the Spanish presence in Yucatán and the British presence in Belize. The essays use different strategies related to different materials, ranging from ethnographic trait distributions (Thompson), to an obscure and valuable village census document from 1654–56 (Scholes and Thompson), to excellent primary sources—letters, journals, archival data, and vital statistics (Bolland). Two general points stand out in all three papers. First, the authors demonstrate what has long been vaguely apparent to Mayanists and Latin Americanists: that for this niche of the New World the historical and ethnographic materials available for reconstruction of the Indian reaction to European presence are altogether excellent. Whether owing to the partial survival of Ancient Maya preoccupation with time-reckoning and record-keeping (there was a tradition of Indian literacy throughout the colonial period), to the relatively good quality of colonial Spanish administrative and church records, or to the romantic lure of things Mayan for competent Western observers and scholars, the result is a treasure trove of possibilities for historical reconstruction of high quality. All three of these papers realize these possibilities. From the reconstruction they provide it is clear that in the post-Conquest period the Maya used an adaptive strategy that had already served them well in the pre-Columbian period. When political and military pressure was exerted, they tended to abandon their ceremonial centers and move "underground" into the remote forests, bush, and cornfields, to reconstitute themselves later in other areas. This strategy was, of course, complemented by the Maya's preferred dispersed settlement pattern and their practice of shifting slash-and-burn agriculture. The long-range result of this "guerrilla" evasion tactic during the colonial period was a slow southerly migration of Yucatec Mayans into more remote sections of the peninsula; many of them in fact reached Belize. Here they encountered the British colonial style, which they coped with in similar pragmatic guerrilla fashion. Scholes and Thompson liken Maya adaptive strategies against European colonial presence to that of the Vietnamese in our time—using distance, forest, swamp, malaria, and dysentery as allies. Certainly these essays contribute some understanding of why the Maya are still around by the hundreds of thousands when hundreds of other American Indian groups have become extinct or have been assimilated.

The second section, Process of Adaptation in Maya Society, contains four essays that document other internal strategies the Yucatec Maya have used over the past four centuries to cope with Western presence without becoming engulfed. D. E. Dumond discusses political and social organization aspects of this adaptation in his paper, "Independent Maya of the late nineteenth century." He documents with precision the emergence of several autonomous Indian po-

litical units in the wake of the outbreak, in 1847, of the Caste War of Yucatán. Autonomous political units of this type have a long history among Yucatec Maya, apparently since before the time of the Conquest. Thus the deeper historical framework might have been more fully developed. Grant D. Jones documents, in his paper "Levels of settlement alliance among the San Pedro Maya of western Belize and eastern Petén, 1857–1936," that intervillage alliances also served as an adaptive strategy to the threat of being engulfed. It appears to me from evidence given that Dumond's "autonomous villages" and Jones's "allied villages"—although they apparently represent contradictory views of Maya political behavior of the time—are reconcilable and complementary parts of a general Maya style of political and social integration. The autonomous model appears to be the more useful for defensive behavior (the guerrilla route); the alliance model seems to be efficient for offensive action against mestizo encroachment. These papers were originally part of a symposium, and it is unfortunate that such an interesting, flexible social structural model seems not to have been explicitly discussed by either author in relation to the other. Dynamic equilibrium models have proved useful as analytical tools in several now-classic case studies (*3*). It is possible that they would also help to explicate and generalize the findings in these two papers.

James W. Ryder offers in the same section a materialist interpretation of internal migration of Indian populations within the peninsula ("Internal migration in Yucatán: Interpretation of historical demography and current patterns"). This is a carefully argued and well-documented paper that demonstrates that internal migration responded not only to regional and local economic events but also to distant factors in the world economic system. It offers compelling data to challenge Robert Redfield's well-known model for social change, the "folk-urban continuum" (*4*). While Redfield held that isolated villages behave as closed social and economic systems, Ryder shows that even the most remote villages in Yucatán were linked to the national and global scene, even in the 19th century.

The final essay in this section, "The *maestros cantores* in Yucatán," by Anne C. Collins, is a superb small piece. Collins demonstrates how the role of native religious assistants (*maestros*) in the colonial period evolved into principal ritual positions in the "free" Maya communities that emerged in Yucatán in the turbulent decades surrounding the Caste War. She explains neatly how a menial native assistant's role during the colonial period became, ironically, a powerful adaptive tool for conservative Indian revitalization and separatism in the 19th century. Her paper offers fascinating and useful insights that go beyond the Yucatec Maya area and into the present. For example, she helps me to understand why, to this day, in Chiapas Maya communities with which I am familiar musicians (called *maestros*) have such influence and power as ritual advisers.

The final section, Maya Views of History, consists of three essays that incorporate modern Maya concepts of the past. This is of particular interest because the modern Maya are of course heirs to the well-known Ancient Maya preoccupation with time-reckoning and history. Victoria Reifler Bricker shows in her essay, "The Caste War of Yucatán: The history of a myth and the myth of history," that Maya historical accounts of the great Caste War of 1847—classed by Western historians as legends or myths—are in fact closer to what actually happened than are Spanish accounts of the same events. She makes the very important point that "the history of the Caste War needs to be rewritten with more attention paid to the Maya version of the conflict" (p. 257). Her essay provides a solid model for ways in which such rewriting might proceed, for her interpretation comes from an awareness of what key linguistic and iconographic symbols probably meant to the culture bearers themselves.

Allan F. Burns also considers Indian historical accounts in his essay, "The Caste War in the 1970's." He demonstrates how oral histories of the Caste War function in the cognitive and social lives of contemporary Mayans of the Quintana Roo zone of Yucatán. In particular, these oral historical accounts operate as charters for Indian ethnic separatism and superiority in the larger mestizo-controlled social universe. The essay contains complete texts of the accounts and information about their cultural context and constitutes a useful ethnographic example of the uses of the past in time present. Again, as in Bricker's paper, the most interesting issue is not proximity of the texts to the Western historical record but how oral history helps to draw maps of a people's own world view. The paper is thus an important contribution to sociolinguistics and social anthropology.

The final essay, by Irwin Press, entitled "Historical dimensions of orientation to change in a Yucatec peasant community," presents still another case of oral history in ethnographic context. The community in question is not an isolated one but one that has been, since before the Conquest, in the mainstream of the current of social change in Yucatán. Press also writes of "two histories," the documentable, externally constructed version and the internally generated oral accounts. He finds that they complement one another to a striking extent and that no important contradictions emerge. But he does make a strong case for consideration of local particulars in both historical traditions before generalizing about Yucatec peasants or any peasant societies as they encounter the modern world.

In general, the essays in this collection are of high quality, responsibly grounded in ethnographic minutiae and based upon primary sources that historians and anthropologists have reason to respect. The bibliography also constitutes a significant contribution to Maya studies. However, there is a sense in which the editor, Grant Jones, did not finish his job. There are case studies here that should add substantively to the historiography of peasant societies, to the interpretation of oral history, and to materialistic historical interpretation, as well as to the development of theory of culture change and to the field of sociolinguistics. The editor of such a set of papers might provide a statement pointing to their broader implications. Jones lay the groundwork for such a statement in the introduction, noting the importance of bringing ethnohistoric methodology to bear on the cultural history of Yucatán. However, I think that the real importance of this collection lies in the authors' acknowledgment that historical data, like anthropological data, are, in their original state, embedded in the meaning systems and experiences of their respective societies. Perhaps this was what Evans-Pritchard was getting at when he said that "history must choose between being social anthropology or being nothing" (*1*, p. 190).

GARY H. GOSSEN
*Board of Studies in Anthropology, University of California, Santa Cruz 95064*

**References**

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3. E. E. Evans-Pritchard, *The Nuer* (Oxford Univ. Press, Oxford, 1940); E. Leach, *Political Systems of Highland Burma* (Beacon, Boston, 1954).
4. R. Redfield, *The Folk Culture of Yucatán* (Univ. of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1941).