

BIRTH OF A DEITY

THE TALKING CROSS OF TULUM

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Twenty years ago when two friends and I visited Tulum, a Postclassic Maya city on the east coast of Quintana Roo, we did not realize that we were among the few outsiders to have an opportunity to study local customs and beliefs—though briefly—since the Maya here had fled to this area after the War of the Castes (1847-1853).

It was not until 1935-36 that Alfonso Villa Rojas made an ethnological study of the Maya of East Central Quintana Roo,¹ although other individuals or groups had penetrated the area in recent times: Stephens and Catherwood, who made a survey at Tulum in 1840;² Teobert Maler in 1891;³ Morley and Lothrop;⁴ Thomas W. F. Gann;⁵ Salvador Toscano and Pedro Sánchez;⁶ Herbert Spinden and Gregory Mason;⁷ Frans Blom;⁸ Helga Larson,⁹ and others.¹⁰ The first news the European world received of Tulum was from Juan de Grijalva who, sailing along the coast of Quintana Roo in September, 1518, saw "far away a town or a village so

1 Villa Rojas, 1945, vii.

2 Stephens, 1843.

3 Maler, 1932.

4 Lothrop, 1932.

5 Gann, 1935, 2: 155-66.

6 Sánchez and Toscano, 1919, 199-247.

7 Spinden, 1930. (Reprinted from *Geog. Rev.*, 18: 641-60).

8 Blom, 1929.

9 Larson, 1966.

¹⁰Mrs. Larson was given the small cross dressed with huipil which is illustrated here. The expedition in which she accompanied Dr. Sylvanus Morley and Alfonso Villa Rojas was a number of years prior to my own visit to Quintana Roo.

large that the city of Sevilla could not appear larger or smaller."¹¹

Until about two decades ago, most visits to this east coast of the Yucatan peninsula had been brief and their object archeological reconnaissance. But Villa Rojas published, in 1945, a study of the activities and the beliefs of the Maya of Quintana Roo.¹² Prior to this, the same author had collaborated with Robert Redfield in a study of Chan Kom, a village in Yucatan near the border of Quintana Roo.¹³ Chan Kom, however, was a new settlement, while the more eastern villages in the low jungle had been occupied since the Caste War without interference from outsiders. At Tulum one stela carries the date 564 A.D., although the buildings are from the Postclassic horizon and the site was abandoned after the Spanish conquest. Sylvanus G. Morley visited Tulum for the first time in 1913 and wrote about the people:

The east coast of Yucatan is occupied by small groups of sublevado Indians who have maintained their independence by guerrilla warfare for the last sixty-five years. These independent Mayas regard every intrusion into their midst with suspicion and act accordingly. In a thick, impenetrable bush, with every trail and corner of which they are perfectly familiar, they have held the Mexican soldiery at bay time and time again, exacting a heavy toll in human life every time they have been attacked. In this general hatred for outsiders, Americans have not been excluded.¹⁴

By the time I met a very small (but probably representative) group of Quintana Roo Maya, their fe-

¹¹ Villa Rojas, 1945.

¹² Redfield and Villa Rojas, 1962. (First pub. by the Carnegie Inst. of Wash., 1934.)

¹³ Morley, 1936, 161.

¹⁴ Villa Rojas, vi.

rocity had been softened somewhat by money brought by "red men" (North American) who penetrated their territory in the search for chicle and for ruins, and by rare itinerant vendors.¹⁵

A small dock jutted into the Caribbean where boats could tie up and there was a one-room *campamento* for visiting archeologists (who visited very rarely). A few hours through the jungle by foot, north of Tulum, was Tancah, site of another ancient Maya center as well as a modern coconut plantation. The plantation manager and Marcelino, guardian of Tulum, were the only Spanish-speaking persons in the area. All the rest spoke only Maya.

Although today roads cut through some of the Quintana Roo jungles, it is still necessary to go to Tulum by plane, or by boat from the popular resort of Cozumel. One generation ago Cozumel was a quiet place (there were no hotels and we saw neither school nor church); it had lost its importance as a great center for preconquest pilgrimages and had not yet been discovered by vacationists.

We had chosen to visit Tulum precisely because it is so far off the beaten track, so rarely visited by outsiders. There are few settlements on this lonely coast.

The very day we arrived in Tulum Marcelino advised us that we would have visitors the next day, the people of Tulum village, three leagues west of the archeological zone. How had they known we were coming? Had they seen our boat cutting over the turquoise waters, coming from Cozumel? We never knew.

"People like you don't come here, maybe for years,"

¹⁵ Ibid, vi.

Marcelino explained. "The Tulum men want to see what you look like."

Our visitors were the men of Tulum village; the women did not accompany them. They were led by their "general." No one spoke Spanish but Marcelino, who acted as interpreter.

"We have come to *pasear* with you," the general stated. *Pasear* means to take a walk, to amuse oneself, but in Tulum it was interpreted as sitting in the shade and talking.

The voice of authority belonged to the general. When we said something, Marcelino carefully translated it, while the rest of the Tulum visitors sat stony-faced and unhearing. When Marcelino stopped talking, the general repeated, his voice heavy with power, what he had just heard. Then the others came to life, made animated comments. Their questions revealed that the people of Tulum really had little contact with people outside this area. For example, the people at this time (toward the end of the Second World War) spoke vaguely of a "revolution" to the north, in some country. We explained the war in as simple terms as possible, to people who did not know there were other continents and other seas.

We, too, took our turn interrogating: "Do you have any figures to which you make offerings?" we asked. "Do you have any saints?"

When this question had been translated there was a cold silence, then an entirely different subject was broached. After a while we repeated the question but received no answer.

While the general and his men were obviously avoiding our theme, I tried to remember what I had heard

about cult in East Central Quintana Roo. All-important was the talking cross, believed by most Maya of the region to be Jesus Christ Himself. In 1850, while the Caste War was at its height, a small cross appeared carved on a mahogany tree at a place known as Chan Santa Cruz. It was a talking cross, at that time given voice by a Indian ventriloquist named Manuel Nahuat, who had been instructed by Jose Maria Barrera, a mestizo and supposedly the inventor of the device. This cross claimed to have been sent to earth expressly to help the Indians in their struggle against the Whites. It was the element that spurred the Maya to more intense resistance and made Chan Santa Cruz the rebel center, both religious and political. Nahuat, discovered by government troops, was killed and the cross destroyed, but other crosses appeared, this time without voice (written messages were often found attached to the cross instead, or the "voice" was heard and interpreted by the *patrons* or priests). Three "daughter" crosses took the place of the original one at Chan Santa Cruz and others appeared at Tulum, Chanchah, Chumpom, and Muyil.

The cross became the result of true syncretism in Quintana Roo. Not only is it the Christian symbol but it is found in Palenque as the Tree of Life in the Cross of Palenque and the Foliated Cross, and its form is seen in the ceiba, the sacred tree of the Yucatan peninsula, which holds heaven and earth together, its branches reaching into the cosmos and permitting the spirits of the deceased to ascend from one heaven to the next. "[Cortes] . . . suggested adorning the Christian cross with branches and flowers, therefore presenting to the Indians the precise image of the mythical

foliated cross, symbol of life and center of the universe . . . So we see how the syncretism of the Christian Holy Cross with the mythical tree of native theogony came into being."¹⁶ Regarding the "voice of the cross, speaking idols were popular among the preconquest Maya, at Cozumel and other sites (the voice having been provided by a priest).

Villa Rojas wrote about this: "It is not surprising, therefore, that the Cult of the Cross, reviving as it did practices and ideas already deeply rooted in religious tradition, was so readily accepted by the Maya of Quintana Roo. Throughout the region the renewed faith was quickly diffused and fervently embraced, the settlement established around the marvelous mahogany tree at Chan Santa Cruz developing as a center of its influence."¹⁷

Distracted by my thoughts on the talking cross, I suddenly realized that the general of Tulum was describing their found—and lost—deity.

One day, on walking through the woods in quest of deer, these people discovered a miraculous image. This was a miracle such as they had never seen. It was a cross but in the figure of a child, with golden hair, pink skin, and eyes the color of the sky.¹⁸ But the greatest miracle of all was that, as the child-form cross was moved back and forth, he spoke to the people, although his voice sounded like mere crying. Surely, this was a god sent to help them.

The new deity was set up in the village, next to

¹⁶ Salmerón (ined.).

¹⁷ Villa Rojas, 1945, 21.

¹⁸ ". . . and when a man extends his arms it is clear that God has created him in the shape of a cross." (p. 45, Villa Rojas, 1945) and ". . . the three daughter crosses [were] dressed in huipils and skirts . . ." Ibid, p. 21.



Holy cross of the Maya of X-Cacal, Quintana Roo, presented to Mrs. Helga Larson when she visited this village inland from Tulum in 1938. Height 28 cms. Photograph courtesy Bodil Christensen.

another cross. Offerings were brought to him: flowers, food, strings of beads. In return he brought prosperity to the town. Corn crops flourished, there was plenty of deer. Fame of the deity spread, and this was fatal for Tulum.

At the height of their well-being the blond, blue-eyed protector was taken from them. The people of a larger village, deeper in the jungle, heard of this golden age, and one day appeared in plan of war. The jealous and belligerent men took away the diety of Tulum by force.

From the day their protector left them, the people of Tulum were visited by bad luck. A drought came, and hung over the peninsula of Yucatan for two years. A locust plague stripped the corn stalks; something happened to their drinking water, something which brought sickness and even death.

There was a grim silence when our visitors finished telling us about their god who now reigned in a rival jungle village. "Why don't you boil you water so it won't make you ill?" I suggested.

Marcelino translated my question but no one answered. What the people of that isolated village wanted was not advice about water, but another human-form talking cross, like the doll that some chicle-gathering family or an itinerant merchant lost in the jungle of Quintana Roo.

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