Archaeology, Tourism, and the Cobá “Supernatural”

Robey Callahan, Dept. of Anthropology, California State University, Fullerton, CA. (robey.callahan@spinbox.org.uk)

Abstract

Over the past forty years, archaeology and tourism have transformed life in the small village of Cobá, Quintana Roo, Mexico. In this brief history I seek to trace locals’ shifting relationships with the archaeological ruins nearby and the archaeologists and tourists who have been and continue to be drawn to them. My overview is organized and expanded around four key linked sets of changes to village life: economic expansion, religious diversification, educational opportunity, and language shift. The questions that will guide my analysis of these sets of changes are: who are the “Maya”? What do Cobá people think makes people tick? And what are local views of what outsiders often call “the supernatural”? Beyond the comparative value this paper will have for those interested generally in the local ramifications of academic archaeology and global tourism, it will provide a firm grounding from which to interpret future changes in the beliefs and practices of Cobá locals with regard to their relationships to and understandings of the ancient relics that form one part of their heritage.

Keywords
Maya, Cobá, tourism, archaeology, ethnicity, ethnopsychology

Biographical Sketch
Robey Callahan received his PhD in Linguistic and Cultural Anthropology from the University of Pennsylvania in December of 2005. His main regional focus is the Lowland Maya. His theoretical interests include creativity, emotions and cognition, dreams and their interpretations, tourism, and ethnicity.
Introduction

During early expeditions to the ruins of the ancient Maya city of Cobá (in what is now the Mexican state of Quintana Roo), J. Eric Thompson and his associates encountered modern Maya chicle-tappers who had long been making camp nearby (chicle is the rubbery resin obtained from the sapodilla tree used to make chewing gum). All of these Maya hunted game as well, and many also grew corn in the area, though none was settled in the vicinity permanently at that time. The remains of that once great city did not, however, fail to inspire awe among these seasonal migrants. As Thompson, et al. (1932 pp. 3-4), write:

…it is their custom to burn candles, copal, or puk ak (a resin obtained from a liana of the same name) before Stelae 9 and 10 at [the] Cobá [Group of ruins] and Stela 1 at [the] Macanxoc [Group], though the latter less frequently. This practice is based on a belief that the Stelae are the guardians of the forest…. If offered food, copal, or a candle, they will protect one’s milpa [cornfield], aid in hunting, and keep one in good health, but if not placated they are likely to punish the slight by sending sickness.

Of course, the integration of ancient artifacts into Maya experience has not been limited to Cobá, or even to those Maya who have found themselves in the presence of other such grandiose ruins (Hamman 2002).

Indeed it is clear that, despite the Spiritual Conquest, the peoples usually called “Maya” by anthropologists have continued to draw the relics of their ancestors into their perspectives on things anthropologists have traditionally labelled “supernatural”. However, the rise of archaeological and tourist interest in the ancient Maya has had and continues to have profound effects upon the cultural practices and beliefs of modern local people. Just how these interactions have played out in any given area, of course, varies.

Of particular interest here is the modern village of Cobá—a village whose present state has largely been shaped by its proximity to some of the most impressive ancient structures in Mesoamerica. This paper provides an historical case-study of this remarkable place: from its early coalescence more than seventy years ago as a scattered hamlet, through its establishment as an ejido (corporate land-owning body recognized by the state) and its adjustments to a tourist economy focused mainly on its archaeological relics, and up to the present day.

Throughout the paper, the focus is on locals’ changing relationships with the archaeological relics and their varied meanings. For some, these meanings focus on traditional practices associated with all manner of spiritual forces; for others, scientific knowledge of the ruins is bound up with local versions of cultural and economic capital, an emerging class structure, and the more diffuse possibilities afforded by embracing a reinvigorated sense of ethnic pride.

The key players in this brief history are long-time residents of Cobá (a small minority of whom are part of the local ejido, an entity which in most places normally organizes the distribution of farmlands but which in Cobá is now focused mainly on generating for its members revenues from tourism). Bit parts are awarded to American and Mexican archaeologists, tourists from around the world, and other outsiders with various religious and pecuniary interests. The wider Mexican society, with its ambivalent attitudes toward indigenous languages also joins the cast. Even Mel Gibson’s film, Apocalypto, much praised in Cobá and throughout the Yucatec Mayan-speaking world (Callahan 2007), makes a cameo appearance.

The background for this short history is more than ten years’ work collecting the testimonies of local people, visiting tourists, and archaeologists; doing ethnographic research;
and examining archival, academic, and other written materials. I shall begin with a sketch of life in Cobá before the coming of the roads, back in the days in which it would take, by many people’s reckoning, a day’s travelling (on foot, donkey, or horse) to get to the nearest proper town, Chemax. As with the remaining parts of this paper, my sketch will always be seeking to bring forward the relations Cobá people have had and may or may not continue to have with those elements of the place that draw in the majority of tourists—the archaeological ruins.

The coming of the roads is seen by most of the older locals as a transforming event for the village. With the roads came electricity, running water, schools, a health clinic, a public library, a full-time police force, and Evangelical temples—the sorts of things formerly isolated, rural communities all over the peninsula never had before. My overview of this period will be organized around four key sets of changes to village life: economic expansion, religious diversification, educational opportunity, and language shift.

Finally, I shall survey the current state of affairs in Cobá surrounding these issues and speculate upon what the future may hold. However, before we launch into this history, it is probably wise to begin with a simple question (“Who are the Maya?”) and a couple of further clarifications (“What do Cobá people think people are like?” and “What are their general views on the ‘supernatural?’”).

Who Are the Maya?

This is by no means a simple question. Hervik (1999) and Loewe (2010) provide two important recent attempts to disentangle the subtleties involved here.

According to various people in Cobá, the Maya were the people who built the grand pyramids, ball courts, elevated roads, and other ancient structures nearby and farther afield, and they all died long ago. The modern-day residents of Cobá, who, for the sake of clarity, I shall call “Cobá people” most of the time in this paper, do indeed often count themselves as descendants of those ancient Maya, and yet they do not commonly use “Maya” as a collective noun to refer to themselves. However, they do frequently use it as an adjective to describe things, and sometimes behaviours and even people, they view as “traditional” and “poor” Maya-speakers, whose “women wear the ‘iipil’, the traditional form of dress originally introduced to the region centuries ago by the Spanish to promote their version of female modesty. Likewise, they refer to “Maya” as the language the vast majority of them grew up speaking. Many Cobá people refer to themselves as “mestizos”, a term which in this context connotes “modern” or at least “modernizing” people. Sometimes this term is explicitly glossed as “halfway between traditional and modern”, although it is common for regional government officials and some locals to use the Spanish word for “civilized” here instead of “modern”.

From an academic point of view, Cobá people are, for the most part, heirs to the great Maya civilization familiar to archaeologists—a civilization whose heyday ran from about 250 to 900 A.D., and through whose somewhat turbulent history, ranged across wide swathes of territory, from the northern tip of the Yucatán Peninsula to as far South as modern-day Honduras and El Salvador, from the Caribbean Sea westward to what is now the Mexican state of Chiapas. It was responsible for the creation of most of the pyramids and other monumental structures which even today can be seen throughout the region. While its kingly rulers oversaw matters of regional trade, diplomacy, and war, its priestly caste managed with the aid of their elaborate calendars the maintenance of the cosmos (Sharer & Morley 1994).

Long before the time of the Spanish, the era of the great Maya kingdoms had given way to one of lesser, regional entities. Many years after other parts of the New World fell under the subjection of Spain, the Yucatán itself finally succumbed. Its polities were
reorganized along lines more amenable to Spanish sensibilities, and its peoples were converted, often in the early days under some duress, to an at least nominal form of Catholicism (Farriss 1984).

However, starting in 1847, decades after Mexican Independence, the Maya of Yucatán rose up in an insurgency which came to be known as the “Caste War”, and they nearly succeeded early on in driving out of the entire peninsula the descendants of the Conquistadores and the broader ruling Hispanic elite. But by 1850, the tide had turned against the Maya rebels, and many retreated into the jungles of what is today the state of Quintana Roo. There, inspired by their holy relic the Talking Cross, they lived as a de facto Maya republic until well after the Mexican Revolution of 1910 (Reed 1964).

Although travellers and missionaries had produced some of the first modern writings of an anthropological cast on the Maya of Yucatán (Brinton 1890; Gann 1918; Stephens 1843), the peninsula was opened up in grand fashion through the seminal works of some key early ethnographers (Redfield 1941, 1950; Redfield & Villa Rojas 1934; Roys 1972; Villa Rojas 1945; Steggerda 1941). And today the study of the living Maya is the focus of a great many researchers from within Mexico and from farther afield. Quite a few recent works, whether targeted at general or academic audiences, deal to one extent or another with the local effects of tourism on the region’s inhabitants (Bevington 1995; Brown 1999; Callahan 2005; Castañeda 1996; Juárez 2002, 2003; Kintz 1990; Kray 1997; Loewe 2010; Love 1994; Pi-Sunyer, Brook Thomas, & Daltabuit 2001; Re Cruz 1996, 2003; Walker 2009).

There is a long-standing set of ideal types in psychological anthropology—one which distinguishes between the “sociocentric” (a term denoting a psychosocial orientation that elevates group interests above those of the individual) and the “individualistic” (an orientation that sees the individual as the master of his or her own destiny, so to speak). It is common in the literature for the former term to be mapped onto so-called “non-Western” societies and the latter, onto so-called “Western” ones. There are those who argue quite compellingly that the modern Maya are in one way or another “sociocentric”, or at least that they were before they began entering full-scale into capitalist relations of production and converting to non-Catholic churches in which various versions of the “prosperity gospel” are preached (Kray 1997; Pi-Sunyer, Thomas, Daltabuit 2001).

Another reading is, however, possible, and it is a reading I will pursue in this article. Here, people in Cobá and elsewhere in the region are seen as potentially having long been rather “individualistic” (Callahan 2005). Such a reading arises from a focus on the issues of shame and trust and on how they are integrated into a local model of what makes people tick.

The people I know in Cobá and elsewhere in the region view human beings (and other entities, spiritual or otherwise) as fundamentally fallible and all too prone to disregarding bonds of trust. Intra-familial conflicts emerging from divergent interests are common; group efforts of any sort must be assiduously monitored to ensure at least the appearance of fairness.

Morality on a more diffuse scale is maintained to a great extent by what Kray (1997, p.99) has called “mutual vigilance”. The phrase “mutual vigilance” is a rather kind way of characterizing a perceived reliance on the fear of the potential of others’ ever-watchful eyes and shaming gossip to keep one on the straight and narrow, so to speak. And, just as one depends on others’ harsh and critical monitoring to do what is right, others depend on one’s equally harsh and critical gaze to do likewise. If there is anything that could be taken as “sociocentric” about village life in this part of the world, then this is it. However, at the base of “mutual vigilance” is a view of the person as fundamentally selfish and anti-social.

This local view of what makes people tick is rather less charitable than actual practice reveals; however, it does lead people to emphasise the importance of what may more diplomatically be termed “self-reliance”. Far from being “sociocentrists”, Cobá people are
what are probably best called “pragmatic individualists”—and rather hard-core ones at that.

The common academic distinction between the “natural” and the “supernatural” is potentially misleading here as well. Cobá people tend to view the two in rather the same light. God and forest spirits and bad winds and dangerous “were-animals”—the kinds of things outside writers may habitually be inclined to label as “supernatural” and rhetorically endow with one or another species of transcendent, mystical, and perhaps even romantic awe—are all simply facts of life here (as real for many villagers as rain and sexual desire).

Furthermore, changes in practices do not necessarily indicate changes in belief. For instance, those who have abandoned the cornfields to work in tourism or elsewhere do not necessarily give up the ch’á’ah cháak (the propitiatory rain-summoning ceremony that is an integral part of the agricultural round—as necessary, for example, as preparing a field for burning) because they cease to believe in the various saints and deities invoked in that ritual; rather, they give up the ch’á’ah cháak because they do not need the rain. For local tour guides awaiting clients at the gates to the ruins, a bout of rain may actually be the last thing they need. Things are, of course, a bit more complicated than that, but, as I hope to demonstrate, they are not that much more complicated.

In sum, the present-day people of Cobá, although for the most part descendants of the ancient Maya of the region, do not view such ties in an unproblematic manner, as many outsiders tend almost automatically to do. They view human beings (and, by extension, spiritual entities and forces) as fundamentally motivated by pragmatic self-interest. And almost no one in the village makes the distinction between the “natural” and the “supernatural” that is so common in anthropological thinking. These three facts are essential to understanding the various ways Cobá people relate to the ancient structures that have drawn and keep drawing archaeologists and tourists to the area, and I shall return to them often as we move forward with this history.

**Cobá before the Roads**

It is difficult to pin down exactly when in the first part of the twentieth century the seasonal chiclero camps gave way to more permanent settlements. It seems to have been after the archaeologist Thompson’s visit in the mid-1920s. In that decade, the chicleros were quite active.

At least by the 1930s families had begun to come to the area to settle permanently. Initially the southern side of the main Cobá lagoon was the choice site for most early colonists—an area that was some distance from the camps. A cenote near the edge of the lagoon served the few early families, most of whom originally came from villages in eastern Yucatán state.

The early migrants, the way it is most often told today, were attracted by the lagoon and the archaeological ruins nearby, and at least a couple wanted to make a clean start, away from troubled relations in their villages of origin. These new families, in keeping with traditional Maya modes of subsistence, cleared homesteads and built thatched houses, and slashed and burned areas of the jungle to farm corn and other staples. Some collected chicle, and some began to tend cattle.

Soon there were families setting up their homesteads on the northern side of the lagoon. Certain Stelae (stone pillars carved with glyphs) within what is today the archaeological zone continued to be venerated as santos (“saints”—in this case, in the “icon” sense), in particular by those wishing for luck in hunting or seeking good fortune in other matters. Just as with more common Catholic icons of Mary, Jesus, and saints, Cobá people treated and continue to treat these Stelae as if they contain some animating force within—some aspect of God or holy power.
As the years passed, more families moved in, and the *ch'á'ah cháak* became of greater importance. Throughout this period, the ceremony was held at the base of one of the pyramids, as I shall discuss later in more detail. Throughout this period as well, the area was also visited, often on the back of a donkey or horse, by the odd stranger—perhaps an academic, adventurous tourist, or wayward romantic—drawn by the promise of ancient, time-worn ruins.

**The Roads Come to Cobá**

The coming of the roads to Cobá brought many changes—changes that continue today. For the sake of conciseness, I shall discuss in turn changes in the local economy, in religion, in education, and in attitudes toward language. I begin with the economy.

1. **Economy**

It would be fair to characterize the Cobá of the early period as being economically fairly undifferentiated. The key divisions of labour were within the household, with particular rights and duties doled out on the basis of sex and age. Most men were *milperos* (“corn-farmers”), some kept cattle as well, and some would add *chicle*-tapping to their list of endeavours. Over time, things became more complicated, and Cobá grew into a proper village with its own schools, police force, local government, and *ejido* (Kintz 1990:104-108). The Cobá *ejido* itself was originally set up in the early 1970s to provide its members with more secure access to land they could use to farm to feed their families. Up to that point, *milperos* in Cobá simply staked their various claims and tried to make sure that their own and others’ cattle were not able to enter their fields. Areas within what was later to become the archaeological zone itself had often been used by certain locals to keep cattle, but this became an issue after the arrival of the archaeologists.

Not long after the people of Cobá were granted their *ejido*, work began in the archaeological zone. Labourers, many of whom hailed from Oxkutzcab in Yucatán state, were drafted in to clear off the jungle that covered many of the ancient buildings. On a number of occasions, free-roaming cattle would climb up the sides of the newly cleared pyramids in search of things to eat, and some of them would become trapped and eventually fall, bounding head-over-hoof down to the ground below, a near-total write-off for their owners.

These incidents annoyed the archaeologists and led them to ban cattle from the zone, an act which effectively killed off much of the cattle industry in Cobá. However, it was at about this time that construction had begun on a resort hotel (what was then a Club Med) to cater to the tourists whose arrival *en masse* was anticipated once the ruins were made presentable. Although the archaeological zone is run by the federal government, the area around the zone—in particular, the area established as the parking lot and entrance for tourists—came under the control of the Cobá *ejido*, and what had been an *ejido* focused on corn-farming became an *ejido* focused on extracting money from tourists.

In the normal course of things, *ejidos* are ideally open to new members, but Cobá’s *ejido* has over the past few decades become so valuable an instrument for benefiting its members economically from tourism that they are loath to let anyone else in. Of course, there are local people making money off of tourism (artisans, shopkeepers, restaurateurs and waiters, hotel-owners and -workers, etc.), but the real money flows to the *ejidatarios*, who, along with their families, nowadays make up roughly only one quarter of the village’s population.

As one might expect, what began life as a small, remote, and economically relatively undifferentiated lagoon-side community has, largely through the development of the archaeological zone and the growth of tourism, become a bustling, highly stratified village in...
which people work hard, often unsuccessfully, to downplay the tensions. Understanding more of the extended significance of these hierarchies—and especially how they relate to locals’ ideas and attitudes about the contents of the archaeological zone—entails looking more closely at other changes. One key area of change is that of religion, to which we now turn.

**Religion**

Before the coming of the archaeologists, the *ch’á’ah cháak* was routinely held at the base of a structure called “La Iglesia” (“The Church”), one of the immense structures that now is part of the archaeological zone. That pyramid got its name because the early migrants to the area thought that it was an ancient Maya church. The name has stayed, even though most people will say today that “the ancient Maya were not Christians”.

In the early days, most men and boys took part in the ceremony. Today, however, there are only about a dozen families who participate (and the archaeologists now insist that they perform the ceremony no closer than 300 meters away from La Iglesia—an irksome injunction in the eyes of many). And, of course, there remain several Stelae in the archaeological zone that are treated as *santos*.

The coming of the roads also brought significant changes to religion in Cobá. Although the people were “all Catholic” before the roads, many complain that they were neglected in those days by their priest, a man who would arrive on horseback “once every six weeks” or so to perform mass and special ceremonies. With the roads came different, non-Catholic churches. In the early days, it was the Assemblies of God (now there are two of these in Cobá). Then came the Church of God of Prophecy, the Seventh Day Adventists, and the Jehovah’s Witnesses. As of 2012, there was even a small non-denominational congregation forming in a disused building on the main road.

For our purposes, there are two key points to be made here. First, the pastors in the non-Catholic churches are, again, all outsiders. Their view of their mission is rather impassioned. It is as if they feel they had been duped by the religion into which they had been born (Catholicism) but from which they have managed to free themselves, and from which they are now helping to free others. The *ch’á’ah cháak*, the *hets’ méek* (a gender-marking ritual for small babies), the propitiation of gods of the *milpa* (“cornfield”), the warding off of bad winds, and the various curing duties of the *hmeen* (“shaman”)—all of these traditional Maya rituals and beliefs, and many others, are looked upon with disdain (and, occasionally, unrestrained vitriol) by these pastors, one of whom even asserts that they are in fact “rituals of the Catholic Church”, to be as assiduously avoided as the errant teachings of “Carlos Marx [i.e., Carlos Darwin]”, sometimes unfortunately promulgated in the public schools, that “we come from monkeys”.

Second, the competition for souls among the various churches in the village has created a number of distinctions that map in intriguing ways onto social relations more generally. It is true that many who leave the Catholic church also leave behind much of the
social-bond-building structure of *compadrazgo* (“ritual co-parenthood” associated with life events of children), though certainly not all of it. However, less formal mechanisms are in place within the non-Catholic churches. The language of family present in *compadrazgo* may often be missing, but people routinely refer to co-believers as *hermanos* (“brothers”) and *hermanas* (“sisters”).

Further, it is true that a spirit of individualism is more strongly fostered in the non-Catholic churches, and that this spirit of individualism could be argued to lead to greater competition and less cooperation among locals. To a certain extent, this is probably the case. However, matters are more complicated than that. As noted, Cobá people are culturally highly individualistic in the first place, and yet they have traditionally depended on others’ monitoring scrutiny to keep them doing the right thing. One thing that the non-Catholic churches in particular do is to impose a much more rigorous kind of “mutual vigilance” upon their members—something of which most people seem to be aware, at least implicitly. One effect of this intensified “cooperative mindfulness” is that members of such churches are on the whole viewed as more morally upright and, more importantly, as more trustworthy.

This sense of being a bit more trustworthy extends beyond these non-Catholic churches and into the world of local business—a world to a great extent bound up with the tourist industry that rides mainly on the back of the nearby archaeological ruins. And so bonds formed within these churches find their correlates in economic ties of trust in and beyond the wider village. Further, the image of being seen by others as a committed member of one of these churches serves as a sign for many that one is not only economically, but also socially, ambitious. None of this is to say that there are no social climbers in the Catholic Church; rather, those engaged in such moves tend to rely on more traditional, and perhaps at some level less reliable, mechanisms of trust.

At the risk of summing the situation up too bluntly, being a member of a non-Catholic church in Cobá is good for business. The business of Cobá, however, involves the exploitation for tourist consumption of archaeological ruins, some of which are deeply associated in the local mind with beliefs and practices explicitly condemned by all non-Catholic churches (and for the most part only tolerated by the Catholic Church). The locals, more or less regardless of religious affiliation, are strongly disinclined to “either/or” scenarios when it comes to such matters, preferring to take a context-dependent view of the utility of any given ritual or belief.

This last fact cannot be overemphasized. Becoming a member of one of these non-Catholic churches in Cobá does not, regardless of what the pastors say, mean abandoning one’s former views on human beings and the universe (although it may mean *adding* to them). A long-time Seventh Day Adventist prays for certain things in church; visits the *hmeen*, whose manner of healing explicitly relies on more traditional Maya-Catholic understandings of reality, when the need strikes; and will have no qualms about a trip to the doctor. I do not mean to claim that everyone is this flexible, but this view of the “right tool for the job”—a highly pragmatic view of the role of beliefs in action—is very common. Again, a local shopkeeper who does not make *milpa* would be very unlikely to take part in the *ch’á’ah cháak* (because the rain would not be a top priority for him—not because of something his pastor said); however, he may well have the *hets’ méek* performed for his infant children, though he may not invite his pastor to attend. There are even non-Catholics in Cobá who have their children baptised by the Catholic priest because it is something they simply feel must be done—and because it is the most important life event of a child that generates *compadrazgo* bonds. And the last thing that would occur to a local tour guide, even an upstanding member of one of the Assemblies of God churches, when interacting with tourists, would be to condemn more traditional beliefs and practices, especially those associated with the stunning ruins the visitors had come to admire.
In sum, it is not part of the local character to draw strong, universally applicable criteria of truth and error by which to measure all aspects of existence. From a pragmatic point of view, doing so simply does not make much sense: life is hard enough, and whatever might help one avoid the bad and attract the good is welcome (and why on earth would one discount out of hand something that may prove useful in the future?). Furthermore, while it may be fine for pastors, it is simply not good business for locals to express overly earnest or partisan views with each other or with tourists. Cobá society is fraught with enough tension. Most locals do agree, however, on the value of a good education.

**Education**

Today in Cobá, with the exception of the Maya-language kindergarten on the poorer side of the village, all education is in Spanish. When I first arrived in the village in 2001, I was surprised to find that it had for a couple of years had a two-year high school. This project had been instigated and initially underwritten mainly by prominent local families. In addition to the high school, there are two primary schools (one on each side of the lagoon) and a telesecundaria (a secondary school with some of the instruction beamed in by satellite).

Most of what teachers teach comes from a standard national curriculum, and there is normally little focus on the local ruins themselves or on their wider significance. As is more often the case with larger communities in the region, Cobá has its own Casa de la Cultura, a complex of buildings which, in Cobá’s case, includes a dance hall/art gallery, a music hall, and the recently relocated village library. This key new forum is one in which children in particular (but also their parents, of course) are exposed to activities and events which highlight, among other things, the area’s Maya past. Its director is also a teacher at one of the local primary schools and has for a number of years been active in supporting the regional art scene as a widely recognised sculptor. He has been promoting Cobá within the Yucatán Peninsula and as far beyond as Florida and New York. Both his own work and his work with children draw heavily on ideas of the Maya past, sometimes in a more archaeologically informed way and sometimes in a more elaborately imaginative way (by integrating Maya themes into his sculptures and by staging jaguar dances and Maya musical parades with the children, for example).

The village has other individuals who organise projects to spread arts and crafts with a Maya flavour to both children and adults. Sometimes these efforts are of a formal, classroom nature, and at other times they take on the character of one-on-one apprenticeships (say, in the production of wood carvings to sell to tourists).

Such attempts at a more regionally relevant cultural/artistic education are viewed locally as important for two main reasons. The first is the growing significance of aspects of a “Maya” identity among a number of influential villagers. The second reason is that education in general is perceived by Cobá people as the key to economic and social advancement. It is difficult to overstate the respect most local people feel for education and the educated. It is not simply that education is seen as the ticket to work beyond the milpa and construction site and service industry. It is also that the results of education (the ability to write and understand contracts and explain what is going on in the wider world) are respected in and of themselves. Seen in such light, it is no surprise that the rising local elites were instrumental in the creation of the high school.

As concerns the archaeological zone more particularly, the official tour guides in Cobá are able to earn well because their accreditation (by the Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia) arises from specialized courses. Many of these guides are also able to give their tours in various foreign languages, including Italian, French, and English. With Mexican nationals, even those who speak Yucatec Mayan, the language of choice is Spanish.
There are long-standing reasons for this.

**Language**

It has certainly been the Mexican government’s goal over most of the modern period to use public education as a tool to encourage the use of Spanish and to discourage the use of indigenous languages. In the Yucatan Peninsula, as elsewhere, this has entailed in small, rural communities the establishment of primary schools in which literacy in the local indigenous language is used as a “gateway” into Spanish literacy and Spanish language-use more generally. Before the coming of the roads to Cobá, the community was almost entirely Maya-monolingual. Now, many people speak Spanish to one extent or another, with children, as one would expect, tending toward the higher end of Spanish fluency.

Of course there is a wide but thinly spread movement to encourage literacy in the Mayan language, but this movement has been for the most part confined to formally educated people and the version of Maya upon which they have generally insisted is of a purist variety and sounds strange to the ears of the majority of Maya-speakers, eschewing as it does the many Spanish loan-words one finds in everyday Maya speech. As noble as such efforts have been—and they may well prove crucial to keeping the language alive, they have had little or no effect in small villages across the region. Most speakers of Maya do not know how to read it. Even if they know how to read Spanish, there appears to be a psychological block of some sort that prevents them doing the same with Mayan. Or perhaps they simply see little economic value in making the effort.

In fact, most Cobá people grew up speaking a language the larger society deemed “second-class” or worse. And many today still do not speak the more prestigious national language with a comfortable degree of fluency, and so they often revert to silence in the presence of those who do. This situation is compounded by having the educated Maya activists, with their fixation on linguistic purity, effectively telling the majority of people who speak Mayan as their first language that they cannot even do that properly.

There are, of course, some radio and television broadcasts done in Mayan these days, but the truly transformative moment for many speakers was the appearance of Mel Gibson’s film, *Apocalypto*. In Cobá, this film was seen by more than half of the population aged eight and up before it was even officially released in Mexico. Far more even than the story, the fact that the film was done in Yucatec Mayan (albeit a purist version) has given people more pride in the language (Callahan, 2007). Although many of the tour guides do note some inaccuracies in its portrayal of the ancient Maya, the film powerfully links an imagined archaeological past to current-day speakers of Yucatec Mayan. In a place like Cobá, this is significant. What it means for the future remains to be seen.

**Conclusion: The Coming of the Airport to Cobá**

Back in 2001, I was talking with an older man about his views on the past and the future. Harking back to the days before the coming of the road, he referred to Cobá people as having been “very Maya”, a manner of speaking, again, that links “Maya” with ideas of “rural” and “poor” and “peaceful”. Cobá in 2001 was not viewed as “very Maya”, but it is still viewed as “peaceful”.

More than a decade later, I was discussing similar themes with a soft-spoken but quite successful local businessman, and he phrased matters in exactly the same way. He also mentioned the possibility of an airport being built nearby and worried that Cobá may start to grow rapidly, like Tulum, and cease to be “peaceful”. Although this man was raised here before the coming of the roads, he now lives in a modern-style house and is quite wealthy by
local standards. A long-time member of the official tour-guide guild, he has taken some of his earnings and transformed one of his pieces of land into a “very Maya” homestead of sorts. Designed to host tourists after their visits to the archaeological zone, this project is part-museum, part-restaurant, and part-theatre.

Still, the word “Maya” for the most part is locally used to refer to “the ancient Maya”. The film Apocalypto, for instance, was a film about “the Maya”. And yet the people in that film spoke the same language most Cobá people speak today. Visiting anthropologists and tourists routinely use the term to refer both to the ancient builders of the pyramids and the people who are taken as their modern-day descendants. This biologically inflected model of culture does not map well onto local or even regional conceptions; however, it seems to be having its effects.

Locals who no longer participate in the ch'á'ah cháak or burn candles at various Stelae in the archaeological zone are just as likely to be annoyed when some archaeologists place limits on or make negative comments about these practices—they do see these things as linked to who they are (and who those archaeologists are not). Cobá’s Casa de la Cultura is a new site in which more of the threads that link present-day villagers and the archaeological past are being woven together to form new connections.

If, however, Cobá people are ever going to say that they themselves are unequivocally “Maya”, a lot more will have to happen. The regional associations of the term with “poor” and “uncivilized” will have to go. And the perceived economic value of embracing a “Maya” identity will have to increase dramatically, given the strong associations of wealth and culture (in an “educated” sense) with the Spanish language and with the wider Mexican (or at least Yucatecan) society.

In terms of the Maya world broadly conceived, speakers of Yucatec Mayan have seemed particularly uninterested, on the whole, in organising politically around an ethnic identity. Perhaps, however, even given the highly individualistic streak that runs through the character of many here, a tipping point will one day be reached that connects/reconnects the majority with what the currently relatively small number of Maya activists (and clearly quite a few locals) see as an important part of their cultural patrimony—namely, the ancient pyramids and other structures spread out across the region.

References

Bevington, G.

Brinton, D.

Brown, D.

Callahan, R.

Callahan, R.
Castañeda, Q.

Farriss, N.

Gann, T.

Hamman, B.

Kintz, E.

Kray, C.

Hervik, P.

Juárez, A.

Juárez, A.

Loewe, R.

Love, B.

Pi-Sunyer, O., Brook Thomas, R., & Daltabuit, M.
Re Cruz, A.

Re Cruz, A.

Redfield, R.

Redfield, R.

Redfield, R. & Villa Rojas, A.

Reed, N.

Roys, R.

Sharer, R. & S. Morley

Steggerda, M.

Stephens, J.

Thompson, J., Pollock, H., & Charlot, J.

Villa Rojas, A.

Walker, C.