



# Wartime Impacts on Maya Culture Heritage

Alyssa Henss

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## OBJECTIVES

- Analyze the ancient roots of the spirituality surrounding the Talking Cross
- Dispute common misconceptions of colonial domination during the Contact Period
- Identify Maya resistance and cultural retention strategies during the Caste War
- Explore how the Caste War was successful in strengthening modern day Maya culture heritage in the Yucatán Peninsula.

## INTRODUCTION

During the summer and winter of 2022, I traveled to the Yucatán Peninsula to explore how the Maya Caste War (1847-1901) impacted Maya culture heritage. The Caste War, also known as the Maya Social War, was a battle between the Maya and those of predominantly Spanish ancestry in the Yucatán. While there were many complex issues intrinsic to the war, it was most simply an economic and political dispute over the retention of Native Maya agricultural land by Maya people (See figure 1).

The Cult of the Talking Cross was at the center of this resistance (Reed 1964). It was a fusion of Christianity and traditional Maya beliefs and practices that revitalized Maya culture heritage and brought numerous people together in their effort to seek reform and access to agricultural land. In the century since the time of the conflict, between 1901 and 2023, despite the best efforts of the Yucatec Maya people today, the larger tourism industry has simplified symbols of Maya culture heritage for the palatability of tourists in the historically colonial western region of the Yucatán Peninsula, most visible in Colonial stronghold cities like Mérida and Valladolid.

## METHODS

Physical evidence of the Caste War is abundant throughout the Yucatán Peninsula. The methods table below outlines my data collection process using first-hand primary and secondary textual sources. This data was improved through investigation of the region via two separate trips to continue my research at museums and visit archaeological sites and towns of central importance during the Caste War. The original presentation of this data was comprised of a traditional written thesis section that focuses on a scholarly review and theoretical understanding, and a public-facing visual StoryMaps element that utilizes the Arcgis mapping and storytelling program. I decided to complete my project in this way because the archaeological history of the Yucatán Peninsula is rooted in change over a significant amount of time. In an effort to represent this change in a way that is accessible to all readers, I utilize StoryMaps to visually bridge the gap between the past and the present through interactive textual elements, maps, and personal photos of the major topics explored within the project (See figure 2).

Method	Examples	Application
Secondary Textual	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Accounts of Spanish conquest of Aztec/Maya territory from books</li> <li>Summaries of the Caste War</li> <li>Maya culture and language dispersion into the Yucatán Peninsula of México</li> </ul>	Background information Maya spirituality, Caste War, Spanish conquest of Yucatán Peninsula of México
Primary Data (travel/physical)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Museum tours, artifacts, and Maya churches in Quintana Roo</li> <li>Descriptions of the Caste War and Maya heritage from locals and tour guides</li> <li>Murals and public art in Quintana Roo</li> <li>Trips to Tulum and Tikal</li> <li>Caste War sites and cenotes in Quintana Roo</li> <li>Mayan language course</li> <li>Dresden codex</li> <li>Church ceremony</li> </ul>	Background information on Maya worldview/history/antiquity/archaeology/experience/folklore (past and present), impacts on tourism in the Maya Riviera, and modern comparative understanding of Christianity and the Cult of the Talking Cross
Digital media	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Video with caste war summary</li> <li>Image of basic Yucatec Mayan words</li> <li>Diagrams of Maya cosmovision</li> <li>Arcgis StoryMap</li> </ul>	Descriptions of Yucatec Maya language, cosmovision and Caste War to better communicate with an online general audience

Figure 1: Map of the Yucatán Peninsula. Map by <https://geo-mexico.com/?p=844>



Figure 2: StoryMaps “slide” feature comparing Talking Cross church, Felipe Carrillo Puerto, Quintana Roo (left) and San Servacio church Valladolid, Yucatan (right). Photo by author



## ANALYSIS

My hypothesis refutes the narrative that the Spanish successfully pacified the region. I further argue that the Cult of the Talking Cross had a significant impact on modern culture heritage and is most visible in towns like Felipe Carrillo Puerto, in the eastern peninsular state of Quintana Roo. My analysis of the data supports this. My findings also demonstrate that the tourism industry has had an increasing impact on the expression of culture heritage in recent decades. I identify a differentiation of how culture heritage is represented outwardly between the colonial western Yucatán state, dominated by Mérida and Valladolid, yielding a simplified version of Maya culture while downplaying evidence the Caste War ever occurred. This contrasts with the eastern state of Quintana Roo, in the town of Felipe Carrillo Puerto, which acknowledges this history.

A stark contrast between the eastern and western regions of the peninsula is demonstrated through the communication of Maya culture through public art. In the small town of Felipe Carrillo Puerto, large, colorful public murals can be seen throughout the streets. While conducting research within the city, one mural stood out to me due to its impressive size and details (See figure 3). Towering over the middle of the city’s central park, the image depicts the rich history of the Maya people from ancient times to the Caste War, with important symbolism and divine cosmology piecing each section together. Even as an outsider who is still learning about the complex culture, I was able to immediately grasp the power of essential elements such as maize, spiritual resistance, and the balance of the universe. Reflecting on all of the data that I have collected throughout my study; public art has stood out as the most clear and accessible manner of communicating culture heritage.

Conversely, Valladolid and Mérida, the two cities most closely associated with the Spanish-dominant side of this conflict, are almost completely devoid of art in the city center relating to the Caste War. Despite the wealth of artists and intellectuals at the disposal of each city, visitors must utilize and seek out museum galleries or tours to find art relating to this topic. While this is an unfortunate circumstance, it is important to note that the streets of downtown Mérida are also filled with powerful graffiti that speaks to modern conflicts with the national government. Painted over the bodies of Spanish colonial figures and buildings are the sentiments of citizens who no longer wish to participate in the oppressive colonial system that has been the backbone of their society for far too long. As the national government continues to force profit-driven ideals upon the masses, citizens will keep finding new ways to revolt against it. Although this project speaks towards the cultural discrepancies within the Yucatán Peninsula, unity amongst its people should not be overshadowed.



Figure 3: Maya culture mural in Felipe Carrillo Puerto. Photo by author

## CONCLUSIONS

The Caste War was one of the largest influences on the Maya culture heritage movement in the Yucatán Peninsula. While the Talking Cross had a widespread positive impact originally, colonial boundaries between the Spanish Yucatecos in the west and Indigenous Maya in the east were reaffirmed later through the boom of the tourism industry near the end of the 20th century. Furthermore, Maya heritage advertised through tourism in the colonial western region is comprised of important symbolism that is divorced from all authentic relevant history of the deep or recent past.

Currently, the Yucatán Peninsula is undergoing a large infrastructural change as the state has begun building the Tren Maya, or Maya Train (See figure 4). The train will connect previously semi-isolated villages on the eastern coast to popular tourist destinations further west. While this move will likely have a positive impact on México’s economy, directly benefiting the government and major business owners, it has already begun to have a negative impact on its everyday people. The expansion of the tourism industry in this manner will effectively destroy many villages, small towns, and untold archaeological sites along its route. On top of this, the train will give the government greater power over the modern memory of the Caste War. In the past, the semi-isolated conditions of the eastern peninsula have provided the locals with agency over the communication of their own history. As the government has continued to encroach over this territory in recent years, they have come with the intention to paint the Caste War as a unified win for the Mexican people despite the war taking place as a primarily Indigenous-based resistance against the Mexican government (Morgan and Leventhal 2020). Following the concerns raised by Indigenous scholars (Todd 2016; Watkins 2005), this issue would benefit from increased communication with indigenous communities and local leaders. Archeologists everywhere should conduct research in consultation with local communities and their needs wherever possible in order to bridge our pasts with the necessities of the present day.



FIGURE 4: Construction of Tren Maya. Photo by Cancun Sun. <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/latino/mexico-invokes-powers-build-tourist-train-threat-pre-historic-sites-rcna39102>

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