



Portrait of Southerners amidst Jungles: A shared cultural space in Ocosingo, Tenosique, and Sacluc (La Libertad) on the Mexico-Guatemala border

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Various moments draw a shared history between Ocosingo in Chiapas, Tenosique in Tabasco and La Libertad in Petén. This work seeks to portray some of these moments over time, and the actors who imprint the cultural dynamic that begins with a common pre-Columbian past that rest in that thick jungle, an important natural heritage of humanity. A cultural unity that continues to this day represented in various peoples descended from that common past. Relations between peoples despite international border divisions (Mexico-Guatemala), thanks to an important inter-river zone shared between

both nations, key for communications and intervention in the environment and for delineating part of this border of clearly artificial vertices and geodesic lines.

Background

Despite Hernán Cortés early contact with the area in 1524, it would take many years to make the conquest process effective, unlike other parts of the rest of Mesoamerica. The fronts of conquest will advance. Huehuetenango, Verapaces, and Yucatán where they will finally be successful.

The dispersed nature of the settlements and the insurmountable nature of the ecological barrier delayed the real conquest of the area, for the conquerors a reminder of an unfinished task. Despite this, once completed, the territory continued to be abandoned, having the character of an area of refuge for indigenous peoples. It is the inhabitants of this jungle who present the main objective of conversion and it is towards them that the onslaught is directed that ends for the *Itza* the latest of all, in 1697.

Long after the conquest at the end of the 17th century, there were still various Chole groups -which due to their appearance were associated with the *Lacandones*- located in various places in the jungle. In 1832, Captain Segura promoted the *Bool Manche* treaty aimed at the pacification of this group -*Manche*-, seen as synonyms of primitive, often received the nickname of

Caribs and many fled to Mexican territory. Despite this, various centers remain in Guatemala, on the banks of the Pasión and Usumacinta rivers, which extend their stay until the middle of the 20th century, when a new wave leaves to join its neighbors in Lake Miramar.

By the beginning of the 18th century, the inhabitants of the original settlement of the town of Los Remedios and San Pablo Itza, mostly of Yucatecan origin, the most widespread tradition when it comes to identifying origins and cultural traditions in Petén although Belizeans, Campechanos, Chiapanecos and Tabasqueños began their dispersion towards the savanna located on the south and southwest of the island, on the way to the riverbeds of the Machaquila, Pasión and Usumacinta rivers. These towns based on a long history of natural corridors, pre-Columbian paths, and conquest, during the expansion will give rise to important livestock ranches.

There are two stories that attribute different origins to the founders of town of *Sacluc* (white mud), the easternmost town of the island of Remedios. First refers to settlers of Yucatecan origin. Which is due to two determining factors, the Itza tradition of Yucatecan affiliation and the success of the conquest entries from Yucatán as well as their ecclesiastical affiliation to this province. Second refers to Tabasqueña families who settled in the area with their main vocation being to promote the logging companies that throughout the 19th century were located in Chiapas and Guatemala. All mobilizations that start from the same continuum, the expansion of landowners supported by

existing indigenous settlements, and the consolidation of the same from the Tabasco and Campechana migrations throughout the 19th century with the aim of promoting the transnational Guatemalan and Mexico Mahogany Company.

In his process of settlement expansion, it was supported by the mobility allowed by the confluences of the Pasión, Usumacinta and San Pedro Rivers that brought Tenosique and Balancán closer, to Paso Real (later called Sayaxché) and then towards the Freedom. The other route to access the island of Flores was following the route of the old Camino Real, which went up the San Pedro Mártir and the continued towards the town of San Andrés Petén on the northern margins of the lake by Petén Itza.

Parallel to the development of the hunts is the arrival of a series of travelers, naturalists and people with a notable interest in archaeology. Various routes will follow the expeditions that enter the jungle and will result in the first reports that will be the basis of future archaeological and ethnological interpretation. It will be thanks to them that what until then were sites reserved for Lacandon pilgrimages, which some report to Tikal, will become part of an important inventory of the cultural past. Ocosingo is the most important gateway for these accesses, although not exclusive.

Until then, the border between Mexico and Guatemala was not precisely defined. The logging activities were led by foreign

consortia that precipitate the need to define it. The jungle becomes a series of plots that distribute the timber wealth to a few. A similar situation was on the Guatemala-Honduran border, and even later -1932- when the interests of the banana companies led to the establishment of the territorial award.

The period of logging exploitation meant a new dynamic for the towns in the area. La Libertad, known as Sacluc in its origins, was the closest place to this activity given its proximity to the area's rivers. By then the towns of Tenosique, Balancan and the city of Carmen itself were not only listened to by the Petén residents but were also the reason for visits for various types of transactions. This meant the continuity of many family traditions that had previously broken off on one route or another between the towns, the Manzanero and Aldecoa family left the city of Carmen, while Castellanos Berges and Vadillo left Flores.

Several Petén residents passed through the classrooms of the Carmelita High School in this Gulf city receiving instruction or were visited by teachers from these latitudes. Later another important site in the education of the Petén residents will be Saint John College in Belize city.

Throughout the first decades of the 20th century with the border already defined. The impassibility of the area did not allow greater control, and outside of the continuity of community relations -beyond the borders- those who had the greatest advantage were those who dedicated

themselves to the plundering of resources. Thousands of *trocopaces* (roads made by tractors) were made with the hunt that allowed the continuity of this transit and in the future will facilitate activities such as seismic testing carried out by oil companies, another of the heritage of this territory.

The Petén has always been a refuge for persecuted politicians, a place of expatriation for seditionists, a space of opportunities for businesses which ranged from dyewood to precious woods and with the 20th century to chicle, pepper and xate. The presence of Mexicans was common throughout the 19th and 20th centuries, being determining factors for the dynamics of certain places. Vicente Narciso, who brought the first double marimba to the Petén, from Verapaz, narrates during his time in Sayaxché, how the Mexican currency was the one used for commercial transactions.

Beyond the Tabasco and Campechana families in La Libertad, San Francisco, Santa Ana and Sayaxché, some reached the city of Flores, and left their mark among the society of the island, which by the way was the leader of the department in its entirety. Without a doubt, the most prominent role of these emigrants belongs to Juan Nicolau Acal, who arrived in Petén in 1924, staying until the end of his life in 1965, when he died in Guatemala City¹. There he played various roles in various fields, remembering in a special way his work in the arts, specially

¹The Nicolau were a prominent family dedicated to hiring laborers for the hunts and later for the chicle.

in the music. On the other hand, it is remembered how the marimba of Don Félix Burgos, also known as Los Lishes, migrated for a long time to Tenosique and Balancán.

More unnoticed but no less important are the relationships established from the presence of Tomas Garrido Canabal, during his short period as a fugitive from the “Huerista” revolution. After this residence, he ordered a gift of a machine that produces electrical energy as a sign of gratitude. If the Caste War had impacted the Petén, some time ago, during the Mexican revolution, internal struggles impacted the department again. In 1911, José María Pino Suárez, whose mother was originally from Balancán, visited Flores, a city with which they had long had commercial, festive, and finally family relations.

Cultural expressions and common populations

Throughout the 20th century, outside of the increasingly scarce indigenous settlements, the oldest populations dated back three hundred years since their founding. The 18th and 19th centuries were characterized by constant population movements, although the corpus of surnames changed little. These were circular movements, family relationships, commercial exchanges of strategic alliances to intervene in the environment with the founding of companies. The mestizos developed in an enclave, with the important characteristics of the Spanish

culture on the one hand, while the other hand with a strong ascendancy with the indigenous culture with which it had coexisted over the last centuries. A little studied mestizaje, where the term *Ladino* was not used, and whose vitality is expressed to this day at a distance from other configurations.

In the field of music and dance, the *zapateados* derived from the fandango were the most successful popular forms, and this included orchestral ensembles and later double marimbas that by the first decades of the 20th century were already developed by the mestizo or ladino groups of Mesoamerica, at the end of the 19th century, shorties, mazurkas, polkas and *zapateados* would be added to this repertoire of rhythms and would acquire their own air. The festive cycles from the spread of the cult of the Christ of Esquipulas passed through Dolores, the Island of Flores, La Libertad from its journey in eastern Guatemala, the Guadalupe cult arrived from Mexico along the rivers.

These are object of veneration and they are celebrated by the different communities, fostering important levels of transnational inter-community friction. Dawns accompanied by marimbas that perform precious *zapateados* that dance the *Chatona* (also known as the *Mojiganga* or *Gigantona*), *El Caballito*, the burning of cows (fireworks structures), the representation of dances such as *Pocho*, *Moros* and *Huastecos*, are traditions shared beyond borders, the Ixtabay coexists with them, wandering through the

jungle and making Chileans fall prey to its narrative charms that merges with vocabulary with an important lexicon in Mayan, but above all, knowledge for living in a difficult environment.

One more trace is possible, found as a link to this process of miscegenation, the African, a charge spread from the settlement of San Benito on the margins of Lake Peten Itza. Today the dance of the Negroes, from Tenosique, shows the revolt carried out by the black Petén residents against their white masters.

Naranjo- El Ceibo

With an important grid of *trocopaces* that allowed the extraction of wood and the transfer of their logs to the rivers of Pasión, San Pedro, and Usumacinta, the roads of the Jungle are a large network where peasants such as chicleros, xateros, pepper growers and poachers, we are referring to the local population, since the bridge we are referring to today constitutes one of the most important passageways for undocumented and other illegal immigrants, The toponymy of outposts in the middle of the jungle tells us about ancient stories of occupation, With logging exploitation, many of the trails became something more than this and little less than a road.

Although the Usumacinta route was the privileged one as it allowed access further south thanks to its navigable tributaries, the route north of San Andrés that

connected with the San Pedro River also continued to be a transit area. Other less expeditious routes went to the south of Usumacinta, on the known route as Negro or Salinas, due to navigation difficulties, although not completely ruled out. To the east of these confluences continues a rich river geography, which during the last three decades of the second half of the 20th century served as a backyard for Guatemalan insurgent groups, which made Ixcán and the Lacandón mountain range their theater of operation.

It will be at the vertex of the San Pedro River, where an important traffic dynamic will be noted from the last decades of the 20th century. Oil exploitation will be the gateway for “southern” emigrants who, pressured by lack of land, will go to the larger state land reserve in search of consolidating their dream: land for life. To the south of Over the years, an important border post was consolidated. Since the end of the last century, the department of Petén and the neighboring states of southeastern Mexico have become an important transit route for undocumented South Americans, and Central Americans seeking to achieve the American dream.

This mobilization, which is becoming increasingly intense, will become an important marker of binational relations, mutually characterized as places of passage, furthermore, in both Guatemala and Mexico, they became sites of national emigration, often from central Mexico or the north, who advanced on these reserves, as well as in Guatemala, seeking food security. A few years ago, groups that had

remained in Mexico as refugees for more than two decades returned to various sites in the bordering banks of the Usumacinta, bringing with them a marked Mexican culture, certainly shared in their indigenous heritage with themselves- and above all, many children and young people of Mexican nationality who demanded a return sooner rather than later that they ended up carrying out, today these families are binational group.

Shared future or divergent cultural projections

Like other border areas, people and cultural traditions tend to be confusing and overlap from one place to another; this is a reality that intensifies when the historical substratum of these peoples is shared, or derived from close relationships based on common enterprises.

This quick tour has at least warned us of that pre-Columbian past that undoubtedly presents a more intense platform for relationships. The ecological unity that also kept the area isolated, the late conquest and the uniform presentation of migrations with their own cultural traditions helped to consolidate that common substrate. The establishment of family circles identifiable in time and space, in relationships of reciprocity in various areas that kinship, they go to the commercial to the exchange, to the identification of stories, to the use of resources such as education (the case of the *Liceo Carmelitas* in Ciudad del Carmen) strengthens in the more

immediate past the outline that we have attempted of expressions such as music and dance.

However, isolation has ended and abruptly, both natural resources and population change rapidly. The traditional populations have migrated in the vast majority and the area, as a passage, serves as a recipient of national and Central American settlers, and the passage of a varied list of nationalities. What were previously true cultural identifiers or markers increasingly becoming more intense markers of a folkloric nature, in the sense that this term now has in globalized spheres. Although for now the scenarios continue to have a strong substratum of belonging for their inhabitants, the same shared and common beyond the borders, it is time more than to raise question but to instrumentalize scene in favor of paths or at least paths that do not distance the jungle and allow the mirror of border brothers, shared families beyond imaginary lines.