

Chichen-Itza in Mexico: battlefield or seed of the future?

Finding a balance between collective spirits

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With the contribution of the Mayan voice of Pedro Hernández Luna from Chiapas, Mexico.

Abstract: Looking at the archaeological site of Chichen-Itza in Mexico, the paper brings out the official spirit of the place, born from archaeology and the subaltern spirit born from the indigenous Mayan culture. The identification of a plurality of spirits reveals however an unbalanced power relation between these spirits. The paper tries to historically identify the origins of the current imbalance and suggests strategies to overcome this imbalance, some that can be applied to other similar cases.

Before introducing the case of Chichen-Itza, we would like to share some thoughts on the nature of the spirit of the place. To begin with, it seems important to stress the fact that considering the spirit of a place as a unified spirituality and as a universal consciousness is equivocal. We argue that the spirit of the place centers on two levels: the individual and the collective. The spirit of the place could be the result of a constructed synergy between an individual innate experience recalling a disposition of the affect and the individual's cultural conditioning. The cultural conditioning emanates from the collective experience and includes the educational, cultural and spiritual backgrounds and references to the group's system of beliefs to which the individual belongs. This consideration demonstrates pluralities of the spirit of a place not only between individuals of a same group - individualization of the spirit of the place - but also between groups - collective spirits of the place -. Looking at the collective spirits, the

word “historicity” is significant, for it reveals that the spirit of the place is in fact a collective heritage transmitted first by those who have constructed the spirit, the significance and the materiality of the place.

We also assume that the spirit of the place, without discussing whether it refers to the divine or not, defines the significance of a place and is not only passive but is also a basis on which an individual or a group will act towards the place. Site managers are generally asked in the management process to identify the way stakeholders use the cultural place. The understanding of the uses of a place (action) can be explored through the identification and understanding of the inner experience (the affect) that an individual or a group has constructed or inherited from its ancestors. We propose to bear in mind the intrinsic partnership between the spirit and the use of a place.

Imbalance Between the Official Spirit and the Subaltern Spirit

The archaeological site of Chichen-Itza in the Yucatan Peninsula in Mexico is one of the ancient cities built during the pre-Hispanic Mayan time and is today one of the most studied and visited sites. Over the past few years, especially since 2005, Chichen-Itza has been the heart of conflicts between different stakeholders that directly maintain a relation with the site. The main stakeholders identified are: the INAH (National Institute of Anthropology and History) as the main custodian of the site, the landowners within and adjacent to the site, the visitors, the hotels owners, local Mayan craftsmen, villages adjacent to the site, archaeologists and even representatives of the EZLN (Zapatista Army of National Liberation). All have vested interest in this heritage and associate different uses: scientific, historic, religious, economic, symbolic etc. The main conflicts are land tenures, tourism’s pressure and the presence - considered as an invasion by the INAH - of the craftsmen selling their products inside the site (Vargas 2007; Rodriguez Galaz 2007; Rodriguez 2007). There is no doubt that Chichen-Itza is strongly bound to symbolic issues. It is, at the same time, a symbol of national pride; a symbol of cultural identity for Maya people; a symbol of prestigious place to study archaeology; a symbol of “a place to see” for the majority of tourists; a symbol of a universal expression of humankind according to UNESCO.

Concerning the intrinsic relationship between the use and the spirit of a place, the plurality of uses of the site obviously reflects the plurality of the collective spirits of the site. Chichen-Itza is a stage where different collective spirits have come together and where, because of the current conjuncture, the coexisting spirits and uses are in confrontation and conflict. As a result, inconformity, especially among the craftsmen and Mayan people who claim their cultural right to the site, is a reality that must be faced.

Inconformity by a group of stakeholders is the indication of an imbalance. In the case of Chichen-Itza, this imbalance can be identified within the modalities of the use of the site. The Declaration of Chichen- Itza drawn up by the Mayan people in July 2005, denounces the dominant use of the site for tourism with up to 5 000 visitors per day and the non-distribution of the benefits among the Maya communities adjacent to the site. The inhabitants from the communities who are predominantly craftsmen consider themselves as the main descendants of the site and the living expression of the Maya culture. Behind the unbalanced use of Chichen-Itza lies an unbalanced power relationship between two main spirits of the site. The dominated spirit is the one held by the Maya communities as they are the ones who raise their demands because they feel jeopardized, mistreated and misled. The dominant spirit is the one nourished by archaeology. Indeed, we argue that two main systems of beliefs in relation with the past, one born from archaeology and another born from Maya culture have constructed the two main spirits of the site as they both provide elements and a cultural conditioning on the basis of which outsiders will experience the spirit at Chichen-Itza. However, archaeology has become the dominant provider: its sphere of influence among many stakeholders is greater whereas current Mayan culture has been put aside, which has created an unbalanced representativeness among the spirits.

To illustrate the unbalanced representativeness of the spirits at Chichen-Itza and the dominance of archaeology as a provider of elements to construct and experience the spirit of the site, we shall highlight three examples. The first one lies within the definition of Chichen-Itza as a World Heritage site. According to the description of the three criteria¹ justifying the Outstanding Universal Value of the

¹ UNESCO has established a list of 6 criteria on the basis of which each country should justify the Outstanding Universal Value of the site to be declared as a World Heritage site. One site can combine different criteria.

site, prepared by the Mexican government and approved by UNESCO and ICOMOS (International Council on Monuments and Sites), only archaeological data were used to justify the criteria, giving full credit to archaeology to comprehend the significance and the spirit of the place. The criteria for nomination do not recognize the importance and continuity of the Maya oral historic memory and Maya spirituality at Chichen-Itza, although it exists. As part of a personal investigation, it has been possible through the recovery of the oral historic memory from Maya villages around the site, to discover a spirit assigned to the site. The Maya concept *chumuk lu'um*, meaning the 'centre of the world', which refers to a sacred place, assigned in the past to Chichen-Itza, has survived among Maya villages. According to contemporary beliefs, the Maya people of this area now consider the present village of Xocen to be the centre of the world and especially associate the concept to a *cenote* (a natural water-filled limestone sinkhole) located in the village (Xocen is a Mayan village situated next to Chichen-Itza). Even though the concept *chumuk lu'um* is assigned to the *cenote* of Xocen, the one at Chichen-Itza is still considered as a sacred place. However, these data are excluded from UNESCO's data in the description of the criteria.

In addition, Pedro Hernández Luna clearly explains that, according to the Maya cosmology, life is composed of elements intrinsically connected to each other. The *xch'ulel kuxletik*, 'the spirit of life' has a sacred connotation. Not only human beings but all elements such as trees, animals or rivers that express life have their own spirituality. Interestingly, some spirits gather in a sacred place (*lugares sagrados*) where the human being is capable of entering in communication with them. These sacred places can be a mountain, a river or any other geographic space such as a *cenote*. Nevertheless, these sacred places, where the spirit of the place is reproduced and transmitted by Maya people, are not protected by any national law. Article 24 of the Mexican Constitution even prohibits any form of worship outside the temples (Rajsbaum Gorodesky and Escalante Betancourt 1996), which prevents indigenous people from legally perpetuating their spirituality at sacred places. Furthermore, the Mexican 1972 law on Monuments, Archaeological, Artistic and Historic zones which governs the way tangible cultural heritage should be managed omits the symbiosis between the archaeological heritage and intangible heritage such as indigenous spirituality. Saying that, it is legitimate to consider that the continuity of the

original spirits of the place held by indigenous groups is partly threatened by the exclusionary disposition of the Mexican law.

Finally, site interpretation at Chichen-Itza is a field where archaeology is once again the dominant vector by which visitors are helped to construct the experience of the spirit of the place. At Chichen-Itza and generally at other sites in Yucatan, most of the explanatory signs found that describe the monuments are multi-lingual with explanations in three languages, Spanish, English and Maya. This initiative is truly a first step towards the integration of multiculturalism to site management. However, a short-coming should be underlined. The explanations in all three languages are based on archaeological data, which gives to archaeology the absolute privilege to broaden its sphere of influence on outsiders while they absorb the significance and spirit of the site. This situation excludes the Mayas' right to express, on an equal basis, their spirit of the place.

Acknowledging the Past to Better Construct the Future

It is necessary to recognize, in the sense of identifying and assuming, the historical processes that have led to understand the current unbalanced representativeness in order to renovate the national historic memory and set up a new basis on which future actions could be undertaken to overcome the imbalance.

When the first Spanish vessels landed in Yucatan Peninsula around 1508 and Ponce de Leon first set foot on the coast around 1514, the Mayan people still lived on what is called today archaeological sites. They maintained beliefs, uses, knowledge and values linked to these sites. During the conquest, there was a physical confrontation between the Spanish conquerors and the local population who resisted the Spaniards. The Spaniards used brutal methods in order to evangelize the Maya. Diego de Landa mentions such episodes which included burning Mayas alive, stringing up indigenous women, cutting parts of the bodies and drowning people (Diego de Landa 1864: 87-89). We can consider this physical confrontation to be a real, historic genocide. The only testimonies that we have to quantify this genocide are the writings and colonial documents or present studies. The number of deaths occurred as a result of the massacres and diseases differ depending on the author but the estimated loss varies between 65 and 90% of the population (cf. Mazin 2005: 62; Gerhard 1992: 33-34; De las Casas 1991). The Maya that escaped from the Spanish colonialists lived inland in the jungle

and could continue their lives without further threat. These demographic losses and migratory movements undoubtedly distorted the transmission of Maya culture. Indeed, immigration is identified by Pedro Hernández Luna as a continuous major cause of the deterioration or disappearance of traditions, sacred places and of the spirit of places.

Furthermore, the destruction of the Maya culture is identifiable by the destruction of the tangible heritage as colonial documents commented on it. The place itself was destroyed. Several Indian towns were destroyed and replaced by Spanish colonial towns, which imposed a new urban and social organization for example, the enforced labour system - the *Encomienda*-. This is the case with the ancient Maya town T-Hoo which is now Mérida. Also, at Izamal, the monastery of San Antonio was built on the Mayan town in 1549 (Diego de Landa 1864: 3). During the spiritual conquest, before leaving the island of Cozumel, Cortés destroyed indigenous idols (among them the oracle of Ix Chel, goddess of medicine that pilgrims would come to worship). In its place he left an image of the Virgin Mary and a cross (Gerhard 1992: 32) in order to uproot what was considered to be the masterpieces from Hell. Father Martin de Valencia also stated in a letter that he and others invaded the most populated provinces, tearing down numerous religious buildings and temples where indigenous worshiped their idols and made numerous human sacrifices. In their place, the conquerors erected large crosses and started to build churches and monasteries to convert indigenous people to the Christian faith and to baptism (Matos Moctezuma 1992: 91). The spirituality conquest was a deep cause of the denigration of Mayan spirituality.

In spite of the human and cultural loss, one cannot deny that the Mayan people survived, adapted themselves to violent intrusions and in fact, continued to transmit their millennial knowledge. Language became, particularly after the conquest, the main mnemonic vehicle to transmit, orally, part of the spirituality assigned to places. The Kimberley Declaration (2002) is clear on that point: Indigenous people state that “Language is the voice of our ancestors from the beginning of time.” The Mayan population transmitted its cultural heritage and knowledge through its spoken language and today, since the majority of the population still speaks Mayan in the Yucatan Peninsula, still defines its cultural heritage within the “logic of memory”. This logic frames itself within an organizational system where the human memory is the main tool to transmit history and

heritage. It is a system where tangible objects and nature are endowed with a memory rather than scientific data. The modalities of the system are found today through myths, legends, songs and poetry but also ceremonies, ritual etc (cf. Michel Boccara 1997). Even though some may argue that a syncretism in Mayan cosmology has occurred since the conquest, it is wiser to respect the Mayan people for whom their language has undeniably perpetuated their oral historical memory and the essence of the spirit of places such as Chichen-Itza.

A parallel process that occurred among European historians could explain the current distance between archaeology and the indigenous voices concerning their respective approach to the spirit of the place. Historians and the clergy during the 16th century had a greater sensitivity to listen to the non-European voices and actively gathered data that could better help understand their cosmology and culture (Cañizares-Esguerra 2001). However, since the 18th century, historians have followed the main stream of Enlightenment and consequently, no longer rely on historical records writing in non-alphabetical scripts and other indigenous sources especially the language (Cañizares-Esguerra 2001). When archaeology first appeared during the 19th century in Mexico, this science followed scientific epistemologies inherited from the European Enlightenment. This process has eliminated the possibility for indigenous living memories and spirituality to become part of the official understanding and significance of archaeological sites. The way the non-indigenous relate the history of Chichen-Itza rightly illustrates this evolution: Chichen-Itza was mentioned in different colonial documents but the Spanish were never able to establish a city there because of the hostility of the local Mayas. Consequently, no further known alphabetical documents refer to the site and it is not until 1840, that the foreign explorers Frederick Catherwood and John Lloyd Stephens became the European discoverers of the site, which they described through drawings and maps (Pérez de Lara 2008). The site then became a new centre of interests in Mexico and in the world. From that moment, mainly foreigners came to explore Chichen-Itza (Pérez de Lara 2008) and archaeological projects were undertaken to discover more about the site. The site, like many other major sites in Mexico, was also culturally and symbolically reinvested to become the witness of a great past civilization and was used by the Mexican government, especially after the Mexican Revolution in 1910, as a tool to unify the nation under a cultural symbol. Since the 1950's the archaeological site has become a major centre for archaeological

research and a main attraction for tourism. The site is today among the most visited sites in Mexico and was nominated as a World Heritage Site in 1988 by Mexico in accordance with UNESCO's (United Nations Organization for Education, Science and Culture) guidelines because it is considered as a masterpiece and a manifestation of the great Mayan civilization. In the official history, it is settled that archaeology helped discover and understand the ancient Mayan site. However, as we have seen, a subaltern history and a subaltern spirit of the place held by the Maya people have survived.

Daring New Insights

There is no doubt that today the Maya's spirit of the place held by the surrounding communities is identified as the most scorned spirit at Chichen-Itza. Yet, it maintains resistance and the current situation is an opportunity for site managers to ponder strategies to unfold a new approach that embraces the plurality of spirits. To reach a fair representativeness of the spirits of the place, which would help prevent disproportionate cultural conflicts at Chichen-Itza, some viable suggestions are provided in the following paragraph, some that can be applied in other similar cases.

Concerning site interpretation:

- In collaboration with other human sciences and with the Maya communities, indigenous memory should be rescued from the jaws of disappearance, reactivated and included within the information concerning Chichen-Itza in order to provide the visitor with several options while experiencing the spirit of the place. A major challenge would be to rewrite the history of Chichen-Itza, in books, guide and other informative documents.
- Not only should panels at the site or at the site museum be multi-lingual but they should also reflect multi-culturalism.
- Update Chichen-Itza's criteria or other World Heritage sites in Mexico. Archaeology is not the only way to approach the past. It is evident that indigenous interpretations of cultural spaces should be included within the official history of Mexico in order to overcome the current historical amnesia.

Concerning law in site management

- According to Pedro Hernández Luna, the first step to protect the spirit of places held by the unheard voices is to assert indigenous

rights. Maya people need stable places where they can perpetuate their living culture. Site managers should in that sense draw inspiration from the international documents on indigenous rights ratified by Mexico, such as the 169 Convention (International Labour Organization, 1990) while planning a holistic management of archaeological sites.

- Legally recognize the notion of sacred places assigned to archaeological sites or natural places by indigenous people as suggested in the 169 Convention. By ratifying the 169 Convention the Mexican Senate recognized the requirement of the constitution's Article 133 that states that the Convention should be considered as a "*Ley Suprema*" (The law of the land) (Rajsbaum Gorodesky and Escalante Betancourt 1996). Consequently, the Mexican government committed itself to modify national legislation in order to be coherent with the Convention.

- It is worth mentioning the newly agreed United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (2007). Even though the legal impact is different from the 169 Convention, the principles are the same. This Declaration is a step and a sign towards the development of other indigenous rights.

These suggestions are more conceivable if they are framed as ethical considerations: in the face of unfairness that jeopardizes the world's cultural diversity, it seems that there is no other option for site managers than to dare an innovative commitment instead of conformity. This might imply adopting the ethics of assuming a policy that allows another discursive trajectory bringing out pluralist and inclusive attitudes and actions in order to insert multiculturalism within cultural heritage management.

We want to close by explaining the title of the paper, which may have some relevance to understand the situation at Chichen-Itza. The site lies at a threshold of further conflicts, but has the potential to be used as a resource to work towards dialogue and coexistence between spirits and in fact, human beings. For most people an archaeological site is about the past, but the Maya representatives, as our Mexican friend related to us, simply declared while visiting Chichen-Itza, "This place is the *semilla del futuro*", the seed of the future. This statement provides us with part of the answer.

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