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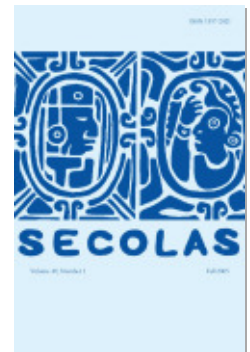
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*Yaxcabá and the Caste War of Yucatán, An Archaeological  
Perspective* by Rani T. Alexander (review)

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# BOOK REVIEWS

***Yaxcabá and the Caste War of Yucatán, An Archaeological Perspective.* By Rani T. Alexander. Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico Press, 2004, p.207, \$49.95.**

The Caste War of Yucatán (1847-55) was one of the most notable and successful indigenous rebellions ever to occur in Latin America. Its impact has been long lasting, regarded by scholars and Yucatecans alike as the epoch changing event of the mid-19<sup>th</sup> to early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries in Mexico's Yucatán peninsula. At the Caste War's end, oppressive tax codes were rewritten and the caste-like social structure (from which the War took its name) became more fluid. Agrarian reforms were established and traditional Maya land use patterns emerged once again. The rebel Maya in the eastern region of the peninsula gained some political and territorial autonomy, spawning an indigenous revitalization movement that continued into the 20<sup>th</sup> century—traces of which still mark the region today. But the Caste War also left 30% of the peninsula's population dead, brought widespread property destruction and social dislocation.

The Caste War has often been conceptualized as an ethnic conflict pitting the newly independent (1821) Spanish-speaking colonials against a long besieged and exploited Maya populace. New scholarship as well as some recently published revisions of classic Caste War studies (Reed 2001), however, have begun to re-examine the complicated history of the Caste War in light of new theoretical advances particularly in the scholarship of resistance and rebellion. Alexander's book is an important contribution to the recent scholarship re-examining the Caste War, especially significant because he bases his work on historical archaeology, informed by archival material. As the author points out, the worthiness of such an approach is that while the Spanish-speaking colonials dominate the historical record, the Maya agriculturalists appear more clearly in the archaeological one. Thus the lives of those who have often been lost to history can now be better documented.

Alexander chose Yaxcabá as his area of study, a long settled town in the heart of Yucatan state and the site of much conflict during the Caste War—the town was sacked nine times during the War as the various factions rampaged through the region. In

his book Alexander seeks to address two issues: to understand how the process of agrarian change related to Maya resistance and to determine if Maya resistance successfully restored a more balanced agrarian pattern and traditional forms of land use. The author addresses these issues by examining the 500 year cultural process of how the rural communities surrounding Yaxcabá created modes of defense and accommodation to the intrusions of the colonial state. Specifically Alexander developed a long-range comparison of distant and present archaeological settlement and residential patterns in Yaxcabá parish. While not seeking to explain the origins of the Caste War *per se*, Alexander focuses instead on tracing the strategies of coping and survival among the households and communities of the area over the long range including the Caste War period.

Alexander writes clearly making the data presentation of archaeological material accessible to non-specialists, although non-specialists may struggle with the link between archaeological data and theory. The author's discussion of the current literature concerning resistance in the opening chapters is an especially useful and thoughtful summary of resistance theories. He selects Stern's (1987) work on peasant rebellions in the Andes as the most relevant model for analyzing his household archaeological data from the parish of Yaxcabá. Yet Alexander raises more questions in these chapters than he is able to address with specific historic archaeological and archival data about Yaxcabá.

Alexander concludes that avoidance protest (i.e. settlement dispersal, lagging tax collection by local Maya authorities and relocating Maya religious practice from town to forest or *milpa*) was the principal means of resistance utilized by Maya agriculturalists. He also notes that the Yaxcabá region evidenced shifting settlement patterns of nucleation and dispersal in keeping with demographic changes and that the movement of Spanish-speaking colonials into the era after independence limited land available to some but not all Maya communities. An especially convincing conclusion by the author, however, is the variation he found among the Maya householders of the different settlements responding to population growth, land ownership, tax status and distance from authorities. Such internal variation underscores the author's argument that the pressures of an encroaching colonial state were experienced differently among the communities of Yaxcabá parish and that the communities' responses to these pressures were varied and changed over time.

More questionable is the idea that agrarian change became

fused with a Maya social identity during the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Recent scholarship in the identity formation of Yucatan's peoples debates the creation and longevity of a Maya identity (*Journal of Latin American Anthropology*, spring 2004). While the author uses archaeological data to note evidence of a Maya identity primarily through materials items linked to religious practice, he does not acknowledge the diversity among the indigenous population nor its complex social formation over the centuries since the Spanish arrival. The Maya are not now, nor were they in ancient times, a homogenous group. Other scholars (Farriss 1984, Restall 1998 among others) have long argued that the formation of indigenous Maya identity changed over time to incorporate and modify colonial practices so that what may be regarded as authentically Maya is in fact infused with Spanish colonial elements that the Maya had successfully incorporated into their evolving culture.

This innovative study represents an advance in our understanding of the complexities of the Caste War and perhaps, more importantly, the shifting strategies of survival, resistance and accommodation employed by small scale indigenous agriculturalists to persist economically and preserve their way of life over centuries against extra-community forces. It is doubtful, however, if these findings can explain how and why present-day small-scale agriculturalists succeed in the face of globalization, as the author maintains. Nonetheless, Yaxcabá and the Caste War of Yucatán is a notable contribution to the literature on the Caste War and especially valuable for its application of archaeological methodology to studies of survival, rebellion and resistance.

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***Mexico OtherWise, Modern Mexico in the Eyes of Foreign Observers.*** By Jurgen Buchenau (ed. and trans.). Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2005, p. 285, \$22.95 paper.

Any scholar teaching in the field of Latin America likely has made use of the University of New Mexico's *Diálogos* series, and all of us owe a debt to long time editor David Holtby, who has contributed greatly to the breadth of reasonable quality texts available to Latin Americanist educators. The newest addition to