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Seeds of Maya Development: The “Fiestas y Ferias de Semillas” Movement in Yucatan²

The 13th annual consecutive round of native seeds’ exchange meetings has taken place once more in the Yucatan region, Mexico. Celebrated in different sub-regions of this culturally distinctive area, these events bring together Maya-speaking peasants, anti-GMO activists, and organic produce aficionados from the federal states of Campeche, Quintana Roo and Yucatan. These gatherings are variedly called “*fiestas del maíz*” (festivals or celebrations of maize), or “*ferias de semillas*” (seeds’ trade fairs), and they are an important element of what anthropologist Elizabeth Fitting (2011) has dubbed “the struggle for maize” in this Latin American region. Said struggle consists, among other elements, in protecting Indigenous grains and territories from appropriation by the “neoliberal corn regime” for they are conceived as fundamental components, not merely of cultural heritage, but of a distinctive Maya future. The defence of Maya kernels of development involves strategic explorations of both traditional knowledge and new forms of artistic expression. In this article I describe the *fiestas y ferias de semillas* movement and offer an interpretation that stresses its importance not just as a site of Indigenous resistance, but as a strategic opportunity for the construction of alternatives to development. Here, Maya understandings of welfare and prosperity are historically and politically reconfigured within a Pan-Yucatec Maya cultural perspective, at the

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² Article originally published in <http://www.alternautas.net/blog/2015/7/20/seeds-of-maya-development-the-fiestas-y-ferias-de-semillas-movement-in-yucatan> on July 20th, 2015.

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same time leaning on and leading to what I call *Cosmayapolitan* ways of locating communities and social actors in the global situation.

Growing roots: Thirteen years of exchanges and innovations

The *fiestas y ferias de semillas* are conceived as “alternatives for autonomy and food sovereignty” (Acosta et. al., 2010: 14). They were initially designed to re-stock the seeds supply of peasant communities that were severely affected by hurricane Isidore in 2002. Seed exchanges in the Yucatan region used to take place informally through reciprocal support networks between extended families in different sub-regions. However, since the forced adoption of “improved”, hybrid cultivars in the 1980s, circulation and diversity of native biomaterial among Maya peasant communities decreased (Torres, 1997). Just as the name indicates, the *fiestas y ferias de semillas*’ main component has always been the bartering, selling and swapping of seeds of endogenous edible plants, which have been traditionally planted within the multi-crop *milpa* system, i.e. diverse varieties of maize, pulses, tubes, pumpkins, chillies, tomatoes and fruits. The first seed exchange was financed almost entirely by the UNDP (United Nations Development Programme). Later, the meetings have received economic assistance from local communities, NGOs, and research centres.

After four years, *fiestas y ferias* started to become rallying points for people developing diverse forms of activism, for example, the revival of Maya culture and language; the promotion of ecological and/or organic agriculture projects; the defence of human rights; the awareness of gender inequality issues; and the creation of autonomous, rural political and economic organizations. Many if not all these activist agendas were articulated as responses to the impact of neoliberal policies implemented by the Mexican state since the 1980s. In particular, the articulation of Maya agriculture knowledge with *eco-friendly*, new techniques sought to gain autonomy from agri-business corporations’ power.

Fiestas y ferias also became an opportunity to re-enact, redefine and, even, create cultural traditions. Thus, ritual offerings were introduced in which Maya religious specialists ask for the blessing of seeds brought for the exchange. Although it is

argued that this has always been common practice among Maya peasants, the ceremonies performed during *fiestas y ferias* have significantly modified some of the protocols and meanings of these practices (see, Llanes-Ortiz, forthcoming). In 2005, exchange promoters introduced a ceremonial “passing of responsibility” (*entrega del compromiso*) in which community representatives deliver a basket with seed supplies to members of the next event's organizing committee. And, since 2007, the meetings became itinerant, travelling through several towns inside different sub-regions (Acosta et.al., 2010: 19).

Fiestas y ferias also started to feature community theatre plays where young people stage stories retrieved from the rich Maya oral literature. Some performances have dealt with mythical stories about the origins of maize and other important crops. In one such play, actors remembered the role played by animals like the possum or the red-eyed cowbird in the discovery and rescue of seeds from the primordial *milpa*. These shows have been a stimulating platform to celebrate Maya heritage as well as to problematize some of the challenges faced by Maya communities, such as increasing poverty and migration, growing costs of agriculture brought by neoliberal policies and the introduction of GMO farming.

In 2012, there were six events in equal number of towns. On this year, I conducted a collaborative study of the cultural performances at play during *fiestas y ferias*, and produced two ethnographic short documentaries about them. In these videos (and an accompanying article; Llanes-Ortiz, forthcoming) I examine the ways in which Maya performances embody cultural transformations and communicate political resistance.³ Cultural and artistic performances in *fiestas y ferias de semillas* include: rituals, theatre, dances, songs, storytelling and poetry recitation. In 2013 and 2014 they also featured presentations by young Maya performer Jesús Pat Chablé aka “Pat Boy”. His songs combine cultural pride and romantic lyrics in Yucatec Maya with hip hop, reggae and reggaetón.⁴

³ See <http://vimeo.com/65300894>, and <https://vimeo.com/66728193>

⁴ Visit Soundcloud <http://soundcloud.com/pat-boy-rapmaya>.

This year, members of one organizing committee issued a declaration to mark the 13th anniversary of the movement in Yucatan. Thirteen is a highly symbolic number in Maya cosmology. Ancient Maya calendars counted time based on different combinations of 13, and even today rituals count offerings and groups of supernatural entities based on this number. The balance that *Káa Nán Inájóob* (“Keepers of the Seeds”), Missionaries and *K-Et Xiimbal* (“Walking Together”) make of the *fiestas y ferias* stresses their importance as “spaces [...] to share experiences and knowledge, and to celebrate the life of the sacred maize” (KNI et. al., 2015). Their assessment points out that the number of maize varieties on offer increased from eleven to twenty, and that other fifty-five types of seeds have also become part of the exchanges. In this way, they declare, *fiestas y ferias* have contributed to “advance the knowledge, recording, and recuperation of production abilities that were getting lost” (Ibid). In this declaration, they strongly demand government institutions, research centres and agri-businesses to recognize that native seeds of the *milpa* system belong to the Maya people and constitute “our legitimate collective property”. And they also stress (and ask recognition for) the movement's significant contribution in preserving this legacy and in preventing its commercial appropriation.

The Pan-Yucatec Maya dynamics of *fiestas y ferias* movement

The *fiestas y ferias de semillas* movement involves a heterogeneous network of organizations which act in several sub-regions of the Yucatan peninsula. Apart from the three aforementioned groups (which are based in the southern region of the Yucatan state), others in the network are: *Much' Kanan I'inaj* (“Looking Together After the Seeds”; community network based in Bacalar, Quintana Roo); EDUCE A.C. (“Education, Culture and Ecology”; working in Yucatan and Quintana Roo); *Ka' Kuxtal Much Meyaj* A.C. and *Toojil Xiimbal* (“Renaissance in Collective Work”, and “Walking the Right Path”; both community groups in Hopelchén, Campeche); the School of Ecological Agriculture *U Yits Ka'an* (which seats in Maní, Yucatán); and the Collective against Genetically Modified Organisms (Colectivo Ma' OGM; a peninsula-wide alliance). A few research institutions have

been steady allies, too, notably the Yucatan Center of the National Institute of Anthropology and History (INAH Yucatan); the University Regional Center in the Yucatan Peninsula of the Chapingo University (CRUPY), and the Biological and Farming Sciences Campus of the Autonomous University of Yucatan (CCBA-UADY). Given the diversity of participants, *fiestas y ferias* attract different size audiences, from modest crowds of 50 to large gatherings of up to 500 people, mostly in rural locations but increasingly also in some urban settings.

Fiestas y ferias de semillas have emerged as creative and innovative responses to situations of chronic (predominantly indigenous) poverty and marginalization, rapid cultural change, environmental degradation, abandonment of agriculture production, increased migration of the younger generation, among many others. Above all, these gatherings constitute an articulate response to neoliberal government policies, which have greatly affected the capacity of Maya communities to cope with severe cuts in agriculture subsidies and the liberalization of food markets. However, the movement in Yucatan does not represent a unique phenomenon in Mexico or even Latin America. Seed exchange *ferias* have also been held in many other regions and countries for almost a decade (in Tlaxcala, Oaxaca and Puebla in Mexico, or El Salvador, Bolivia and Uruguay, to give a few examples). The movement's longevity, however, represents a continuous and successful adaptation of a global strategy that has been re-configured in response to Pan-Maya Yucatec agendas.

Pan-Yucatec Maya activism is a heterogeneous cultural and political field that has laboriously and gradually taken shape in the Yucatan region. It involves intellectuals, community groups and networks, with strong ties to the Pan-Maya movement in Guatemala, and the Indian Theology and the Zapatista movements in Chiapas. This constellation of actors acts, however, in the midst of a particular Yucatecan cultural politics where social and ethnic identities are negotiated in different ways. Therefore I deem necessary to stress the Yucatec character of their Pan-Maya approach, to differentiate it from the Chiapanecan and Guatemalan contexts. The last quarter of the 20th century gave way to new forms of imagining linguistic, class and ethnic differences in the Yucatan peninsula. Since then, several

attempts have been (and are still) made to re-configure supra-local and inter-class relationships within the Maya-speaking population. These Pan-Yucatec Maya identity projects aspire to re-infuse a sense of common ancestry, political convergence, and economic solidarity among the descendants of the Maya in Yucatan, who were for most of the 20th century seen as just marginal, illiterate peasants.

Promoters of *fiestas y ferias* represent different strands within Pan-Yucatec Maya activism, which is a greatly diversified field. Some of them have a long history of involvement in intercultural education projects, influenced by Liberation Theology and cognitive constructivism (Llanes-Ortiz, 2010), while others come from agro-ecological research and development initiatives. Therefore, *fiestas y ferias* are in no way homogenous, but they rather compose a dynamic terrain in constant redefinition and self-analysis. Their dissimilar trajectories and perspectives become apparent, for example, in the way promoters name their events. Some organizers foreground the cultural and spiritual relevance of these meetings and, accordingly, insist in their *fiesta* status, that is, as a spiritual and cultural celebration. They are prone to conceive *fiestas* as a reframing of Catholic festivities, where the figure of the saint is replaced by “sacred maize”. From a more pragmatic perspective, other organizers are more keen to stress the technical, economic and political prominence of the agriculture genetic exchange, and favour the *feria* (trade fair) or even *tianguis* (street market) monikers. Although the *fiesta/feria* argument has affected the way seed exchanges are devised and presented to the wider public, this difference is not considered fundamental. This attitude has allowed the *fiestas y ferias* movement to continue expanding and influencing other actors who are not necessarily aligned to the cultural politics these activists uphold. For them, the most essential principle is resistance against the neoliberal commodification of maize and land.

Protecting Maya development and territories

Whether represented as a divine figure or as an economic asset, the importance of native maize is undeniably stressed as the main weapon against the “neoliberal corn regime” in Mexico. This expression – coined first by Elizabeth Fitting (2011) –

describes the cultural economic reality in which Mexican Indigenous and mestizo peasants and consumers find themselves, after the implementation of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) in 1994. Fitting defines this new *food regime* as one characterized by the increased presence and influence of corporate agriculture interests in world institutions (like WTO, FAO, WIPO, etc); the unequal relation between the value of global north and global south agriculture exports; the significant dietary changes produced by the expansion of agro-food businesses (what French activist José Bové has dubbed “food from nowhere”); and the growing significance that genetic manipulation has for the development of capitalist agriculture (Fitting, 2011: 18-19).

All these aspects of “corn neoliberalism” are addressed and challenged within the Pan-Yucatec Maya *fiestas y ferias de semillas* movement, either in discourse or (more importantly) in practice. As a rallying point for different forms of social justice activism, these festivals stress the importance of local ethnic solidarity against the designs of international corporations and agencies. Organizers have worked very consciously to maintain their independence from national government institutions and privilege the support of local communities, NGOs and research centers. This is an attempt to remain outside the sphere of influence of corporate interest which they see closely embedded in national government agencies. Pan-Yucatec Maya activists also insist in the importance of producing mainly for family consumption and community exchange, as opposed to an emphasis on commercial agriculture for export. This is a move towards food sovereignty that challenges the excessive commodification of rural livelihoods, which is seen as increasing the vulnerability of Indigenous communities.

Dietary shifts are also called into question mainly through the socialization and use of traditional recipes based almost exclusively in local produce from the multi-crop *milpa* system. Meals are prepared collectively with contributions from different communities, combining almost exclusively assorted *milpa* agriculture products, which are later offered to all the *feria* attendants for tasting. These dishes are also displayed during the seeds ritual offering, thus stressing their symbolic as well as nutritional importance for Maya *campesino* self-sufficiency. Maize, squash, beans,

roots and forest produce are thus presented in terms of food identity, thus countering the “food from nowhere” move of corn neoliberalism.

Finally, perhaps the most crucial aspect of the *fiestas y ferias* movement is its frontal refusal to allow the introduction of GMO crops in Maya territories, promoted by agri-business corporations with the active endorsement of the Mexican agriculture ministry, among other national agencies. Although the reasons for this refusal might appear to be ideologically evident, it is worth noticing that there are at least two additional reasons for this rejection. On the one hand, there are cultural motives that influence Pan-Yucatec Maya responses to GMO foods. These are presented as principles of consubstantiality and diversity. According to a passage of the *Poop Wuj*, fundamental book for the Guatemalan Maya (which Pan-Yucatec Maya activists have adopted, too, as their own), the first human beings were created using ground maize as their essential substance. This mythical account foregrounds the sacredness of maize, and makes the preservation of its integrity, free of genetic manipulation, an important philosophical and spiritual tenet for these activists. On the other hand, Pan-Yucatec Maya activists are also distrustful of the consequences of GMO farming for native varieties, particularly what concerns its productive, aesthetic and biological diversity. Endogenous maize varieties differ in shape, colour, taste, harvesting periods, and cultural function. All these characteristics will most probably be affected with the introduction of homogenized and self-sterilizing GMO crops, if and when they contaminate local harvests (a possibility acknowledged even by NAFTA's Commission for Environmental Cooperation in a report published in 2004).

The threat that GMO farming (specifically, of commercial soy beans) represent for Maya peasants has been rendered clear with the contamination of bee honey harvests in 2012. On this year, Maya beekeepers' honey was found to contain traces of transgenic pollen originated from more than 10,000 hectares of soy beans planted in the state of Campeche. This event seriously threatened regional honey exports that comprise nearly 40% of national exports to, among other places, the European Union (Lakhani, 2014). Bee honey is one of the most important cash crops for Maya peasants. The risk of losing this important income has made Maya

peasants even more reluctant to allow GMO crops in their collectively owned territories and even in neighbouring lands. As Fitting highlights in her book, it is this kind of local resistance, which could derail the expansion of transgenic technology worldwide (2011: 19).

Conclusions

The Pan-Yucatec Maya activism for the protection and control of Maya communities' seeds and territories won an important battle in 2014 when Mexican judicial authorities, first at state and later at federal level, ruled to suspend permissions granted by the Ministry of Agriculture to Monsanto for the farming of transgenic soy beans in the peninsula. Central to the legal case pursued by Maya groups and NGOs – some of which participate (or have participated) in the *fiestas y ferias de semillas* movement – was the argument that Mexican authorities did not recognize the Maya people's right to be consulted on policy decisions affecting their territories (Lakhani, 2014). The Mexican government's committed neoliberal agenda has been rendered even more transparent by its subsequent complicity with the violation of the transgenic moratorium ordered by the Supreme Court, a fact that Maya individuals and organizations have been quick and firm in denouncing (Chim 2014). Although not all the *fiestas y ferias* organizers were directly involved in the legal challenge presented to the State, the space they have been so instrumental in creating has allowed activist and community networks to maintain contact and raise awareness of the conflicting nature of GMO planting in land surrounding their own maize and honey crops.

In their first 13 years of existence, this movement has created a new set of cultural and organizational practices. Its main promoters have opened and maintained a space where different forms of activism see an opportunity to converge and manifest their rejection of the “neoliberal corn regime”. Above all, this is an arena where Maya development alternatives can be discussed and, more importantly, put in practice. As Elizabeth Fitting points out (2011: 4), State development policies have historically emphasized the superiority of technical expertise, a principle that is openly challenged in *fiestas y ferias* celebrations of the sophisticated plant-breeding

knowledge and biodiversity management skills that Maya peasants have maintained and continue producing.

This propitious environment has also allowed different Pan-Yucatec Maya agents to develop their own sense of being in the world, through both artistic and political expression. I call this new understanding of Maya agency a *Cosmayapolitan* perspective. This is one where Maya histories, knowledge and practices are re-constituted in an open dialogue, first of all, with other Pan-Maya movements in Chiapas and Guatemala; and second, with global interests and preoccupations, such as the movement against neoliberalism or the GMO agriculture regime. Cosmayapolitanism addresses at the same time the dynamism and creative rootedness of Pan-Yucatec Maya endeavours, one of the many ways in which Maya agents are trying to rearticulate their relationship with the Mexican state.

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