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Gay Life in Yucatan

The story of what took me to Yucatan begins with some 17th-Century Spanish colonial documents describing the Mayas. Unlike the antisexual European Christian tradition, Mayan religion did not see eroticism as sinful. Instead, sex was considered to be a gift from the gods and a fitting topic for religious artistic expression. Sexual customs, including homosexual behavior, were commonly depicted in temple art.

The Spanish were shocked at this open display of sexuality. The chronicler Lopez de Gomara reported that the Indians were "sodomitic like no other generation of men." His contemporaries noted that same-sex behavior was especially common among the Mayas. Bernal Diaz del Castillo, an associate of Hernando Cortez's, described an exploration in 1517 of the coast of Yucatan, where he had seen many clay idols in which "the Indians seemed to be engaged in sodomy one with the other." He commented frequently on the Indians' acceptance of same-sex relations.

A few years later, Fernandez de Oviedo, the official chronicler for the Spanish king, wrote about another expedition to a Yucatan coastal island. The

leader of the expedition, Diego Velazquez, had reported entering a Mayan temple and being horrified to see a large wooden statue of two males engaged in anal intercourse. Oviedo compared this experience to his own encounter with homoerotic art by the Indians of Panama: "In some parts of these Indies," Oviedo announced, "they carry as a jewel a man mounted upon another in that diabolic and nefarious act of Sodom, made in gold relief. I saw one of these jewels of the devil 20 pesos gold in weight I broke it down with a hammer and smashed it under my own hand." The Spanish destroyed untold millions of dollars worth of Native American art, but they took special delight in melting down these "jewels of the devil."

The Spanish were amazed to note that far from seeing sexual acts as sinful, the Indians often had religious justification for same-sex eroticism. Many oral traditions referred to the "Age of the Flowers," in which homosexuality became quite common, and to the "Age of Xochiquetzal," which was dedicated to the goddess of sex.

The Franciscan friar Juan de Torquemada, in Guatemala before 1615, wrote that the Mayas told him a story of a god who had come down to earth and taught the males how to have sex with each other: "Convinced, therefore, that it was not a sin, the custom started among parents of giving a boy to their young son, to have him for a woman and to use him as a woman. From that also began the law that if anyone approached the boy, they were ordered to pay for it,

punishing them with the same penalties as those breaking the condition of a marriage."

Since homosexuality was the norm and was reinforced by Mayan religion, European concepts of "sinfulness" made no sense from the Mayan viewpoint. The usual pattern for males was for a boy to be a "boy-wife" in his youth, then to graduate in his teenage years to being the "husband" of younger boy, and then finally (after his mid 20s) to marry a woman. This cultural form violates our cherished notion that a set "homosexual orientation" is imprinted on only 10% of a population from birth. What it shows instead is that in the absence of social taboos, the inclination of most males is to interact sexually with both sexes.

The Spanish did not use this new knowledge to gain a wider understanding of the naturalness of homosexual behavior nor to question their notion that the only purpose of sexual desire is for procreation. Upon no authority other than the Bible, they had determined that any other sexual act than that designed to reproduce was "against nature."

The Spanish of that time were one of the most homophobic societies in world history. Having recently pushed their deadly enemies, the Islamic Moors, from the Iberian Peninsula, they were fanatical about keeping their "Christian civilization" free from the taint of Moorish influence. Since boylove was common among the Moors, the Spanish asserted their differentness with a strict prohibition against all homosexuality. Before 1492 the Spanish had had so little

contact with other cultures (except for their detested enemy) that they could not know homosexual behavior was commonly accepted elsewhere in the world. But no sooner had they finished the colossal effort to expel the Moors than the discovery of the New World brought them face-to-face with yet another repellent culture. To their horror, the Spanish soon realized that the Native Americans accepted homosexual behavior even more readily than the Moors did. The Spanish responded by citing their homosexuality as evidence of the Indians' inferiority.

Probably the major reason why the whites were able to prevail over the aboriginal Americans was because the Europeans brought with them many germs to which the Indians had no immunity, smallpox in particular. Europeans at this time carried incredibly high levels of pathogens left over from the plagues that had devastated Europe a century before. Diseases that only sickened the disease-hardened European survivors caused Indians to die in huge numbers. Old World diseases killed between 70% and 90% of the pre-Columbian American populations.

The Spanish, who did not recognize why the Indians were wasting away from disease, took it as an indication that God meant to wipe out the infidels. Oviedo wrote to the king condemning the Mayas for accepting homosexual behavior: "I wish to mention it in order to declare more strongly the guilt for which God punishes the Indians and the reasons why they have not been

granted His mercy. It is not without cause that God permits them to be destroyed. And I have no doubts that for their sins God is going to do away with them very soon."

The Spanish worked feverishly to wipe out all traces of "the crime not to be named among Christians." They killed, burned, plundered and bullied their way across much of Meso-America, making "sodomy" a prime justification for their genocidal policies. By the 18th Century, Spanish priests were reporting that they had successfully wiped out homosexuality.

Being distrustful of any claim that "the nefarious sin against nature" no longer exists, I recently resolved to discover if any trace of the aboriginal practices still remain. By luck I ran into a gay man in Key West who had lived in Yucatan as the lover of a Mayan young man. The man in Florida had no knowledge of Mayan history, but what he told me set my ears spinning. He said, "Homosexuality is very open and common with boys between the mid teens and the mid 20s. But after that men have much social pressure exerted on them to get married to a woman and to stop dressing in drag." His statement reflected a remarkable continuity from precolonial Mayan culture. It was then I decided that to further my research on homosexuality among American Indians I had to go to Yucatan. What I had not counted on was how much I would enjoy my stay among the descendants of the Mayas.

The time to go to Yucatan is between November and April, since the summer is hot and wet. In wintertime there is not much rain, and the weather is pleasant—warm in the daytime and a bit cool on some nights. Carnival time, for the week preceding Ash Wednesday in February, is an especially festive and colorful time.

No traveler to Yucatan should miss the ancient Mayan ruins that are scattered through the forests. On the east coast are Tulum and Coba (with tours originating from Cancun) and in the interior are several sites (with tours from Merida). The most impressive interior sites are Chichen Itza, Uxmal, Kabah and Mayapan, which over 1,000 years ago were the urban centers for an advanced civilization.

The pyramids in Yucatan are some of the most interesting in the world. To see them best, make Merida your base. Though a bustling metropolis, Merida retains the charm of the old colonial era. Marks of the Mayan heritage remain even in the heart of the city, with 16th-Century cathedrals built by the Spanish from stones of Mayan temples. There are museums, tours to nearby ruins and evening serenades at downtown parks.

Gay travelers who want to meet the locals should get a hotel within a few blocks of the Plaza Grande, the main square in the middle of downtown. An automobile is unnecessary, unless you wish to rent an inexpensive car to drive to the beaches and pleasant port cities of Progreso and Sisal. Be sure to ask if

your hotel allows a visitor to come into your room, because some do not. Nice hotels that are not too expensive are the Merida Mision, Presidente Panamericana, El Castellano and Caribe.

Because homoeroticism is so diffuse in Yucatan society, there are no separate subcultural institutions, such as gay bars in the United States. It takes a little while to adjust, but cruising in Yucatan is easier than in any American city. It seems that many Mayan males are continually on the lookout for a good time. And they will take their good time with either male or female. It is in this aspect that Yucatan sexuality is so different from contemporary urban America, divided into "gay" and "straight" populations. Bisexuality, or at least a fluid approach to sex, is the norm. My informants suggested that probably 90% of the male population is at some time sexually active with other males.

Female sexuality is poorly understood by Mayan males, so I was not able to get reliable information on lesbianism. But at least for males, the culture provides a de facto acceptance of same-sex relations. On the other hand, there is no gay community in our sense of the word because the culture has a strong inclination to define males as either active ("hombre") or passive ("homosexual"). "Homosexuals" are usually effeminate or at least "ambiente," having an androgynous ambiance. They take the passive role in anal or oral sex and are considered the "true" homosexuals. Though they do not have sex with each other, they often share a sense of community with other effeminate males,

based around drag names, language and humor. They have an accepted position in society, and my questions about homophobic violence were greeted with puzzlement. They could not understand why anyone would want to harm them because they were homosexual.

Their masculine sexual partners, the hombres, have no sense of being homosexual. As long as they keep their macho demeanor and at least express some interest in females as well, they are free to follow their sexual desires with males. They have no burden of being labeled "abnormal," because in fact their behavior is normal for their society. It is interesting that a person might take *either* role, hombre or homosexual, depending on the relationship established with the other partner.

By adapting to the local customs, American tourists can have a wonderful time. Mayan sex life is remarkably disease-free, so it is the responsibility of gay travelers from the United States to avoid sexual practices that might introduce diseases into the local population. With the international publicity over AIDS, in fact, more Yucatanis are avoiding involvements with Americans. Just as we are changing our own behaviors, we must exercise even more responsibility abroad. With this in mind, a trip to Yucatan can be a delight for the gay traveler.

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