

The Role of the Mexican State in the Development of *Chicle* Extraction in Yucatán, and the Continuing Importance of *Coyotaje**

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Abstract. Most commentaries on the development of *chicle* (natural chewing gum) in the Yucatán Peninsula have emphasised the connections that were maintained between the *chicle* entrepreneurs and the companies, like William Wrigley's, which bought the raw gum for processing. The Mexican state is usually depicted as seeking to protect vulnerable forest workers from exploitation by foreign entrepreneurs and the vicissitudes of the free market. Our research, which uses archive material from Mexico City and Chetumal, interviews with former *chicleros* and entrepreneurs, as well as field research in Quintana Roo, suggests a slightly different interpretation. The Mexican state, far from contributing to the demise of personalistic relations (*coyotaje*) actually used these forms of mediation to manage and control the producers. The vulnerability of the *chicleros* to the full effect of market forces, their lack of physical and financial security, as well as corruption among some of the leaders of the cooperative movement, have all contributed to the continuance of *coyotaje*, often tacitly supported by state institutions. The article goes on to show that the need to meet demanding product and environmental standards, to achieve 'certification' as producers of a natural forest product, have compounded the problems of *chicle* producers today.

Introduction

There has been little assessment of the role of the Mexican state in mediating between *chicle* producers and foreign chewing gum companies, many of them based in the United States. It has been tacitly assumed that state intervention, particularly after Cárdenas' presidency (1934–1940) ended the period dominated by *coyotaje*, the illegal and exploitative activities of intermediaries. The agrarian reform introduced by Cárdenas created cooperatives attached to

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ejidos, communal property regimes represented by *comisarios ejidales*, which were directly linked to the state and party apparatuses. The conventional account of these events pays little attention to the links between the development of the *chicle* industry and the rebel Maya, and draws a line under the Mayan resistance after Cárdenas' presidency, when the industry began to be managed by an increasingly interventionist Mexican state:

To a great extent, the creation of cooperatives limited the degree to which the [American] companies exploited the *chicleros* [chewing gum tappers]. The importance [of cooperatives] is that they were created at the same time, [during the Governance of Cárdenas], as the process of endowment of *ejidos* in the Territory of Quintana Roo. This meant that the control of the land and of natural resources [went] to the hands of the existing labour force.¹

We argue that *chicle* played a very important and insufficiently recognised role in helping to arm rebellious Maya during the first decades of the twentieth century.² We also argue that it is in many respects as important today as it was at the beginning of the last century, when the *chicle* 'boom' was in full flood. Our research explores the contrast between the situation today, and that of the early 1900s, by examining the archival record of the chewing gum companies, and that of the cooperatives, as well as the oral testimony of surviving *chicleros* and *permisionarios* (contractors).

Our observations begin with Joseph's critique of Cárdenas' agrarian reform in Yucatán, which focused mainly on the failure of the policy for enlarging the production capacity of *henequen*, the fibre from the leaves of the agave cactus, on which the economy of the peninsula had been highly dependent during the nineteenth century.³ Although Joseph paid no attention to the importance of the *chicle* industry, he indicated that the agrarian reform in general was thought of merely as a process of land redistribution. Cárdenas had the idea that peasant organisations would prosper if both the new *ejidos* and cooperatives were managed collectively. This new *ejidal* model was first conceived of in Mexico DF and then subsequently imposed on Yucatán: 'When the agrarian revolution did come to Yucatán, it came from without.'⁴

Before Cárdenas, Felipe Carrillo Puerto, governor of Yucatán in 1922–1923, had attempted redistribution of land by expropriating henequen haciendas and constituting *ejidos*. The ideas behind the agrarian reform of Carrillo Puerto were first conceived in Yucatán, and in this sense were not as alien as Cárdenas' reform. Carrillo Puerto failed because he lacked

¹ V. Chenaut, *Migrantes y aventureros de la frontera sur* (Mexico, 1989) p. 38.

² M. Ramos Díaz, 'La bonanza del *chicle* en la frontera Caribe de México,' *Revista Mexicana del Caribe*, no. 4 (1999), pp. 172–93.

³ See G. M. Joseph, *Revolution from Without: Yucatán, Mexico and the United States, 1880–1924* (Cambridge, 1982), pp. 289–197.

⁴ Joseph, *Revolution from Without*, p. 291.

sufficient political power and military support. Nevertheless, both Carrillo and Cárdenas gave emphasis to the redistribution of land through expropriation of haciendas and the constitution of *ejidos*. Recently, it has been suggested that such policy of redistribution has in fact favoured indigenous peoples and had proven efficacy in conserving the forest:

As a little noticed result of the Mexican Revolution in the second decade of the twentieth century, well over half of the forest of Mexico was placed in community held hands. In historical struggles that passed through several phases, most of these communities have now gained substantial control over the use of their forests ... New studies are beginning to suggest that important gains in both social and economic justice, good forest management, and biodiversity protection are resulting from the actions of these CFEs [Community Forest Enterprisers].⁵

Research by the authors in the Yucatán Peninsula leads us to question this view of the success of agrarian reforms in incorporating indigenous peoples within the revolutionary project, or protecting natural resources in Yucatán. We argue that although the Cárdenas revolutionary project was highly popular in some quarters, the organisation of cooperatives failed at both sustaining the chewing gum industry and ending the segregation of the indigenous peoples in the Yucatán Peninsula.

Finally we argue that the fate of the *chicleros* could not have been determined by the effectiveness of agrarian reforms alone, but also by the powerful external conditions that shaped the production and commercialisation of chewing gum. The establishment of the cooperative movement in rural Yucatán did not change the fate of the indigenous Mayan population fundamentally. There was some achievement in developing a popular base among the mestizo *chicleros* that had recently moved to the peninsula, but this minor achievement was undermined by the growing corruption in the State and party apparatuses that followed Cárdenas' agrarian reform.

Chicle and the Mayan rebels

The Caste War in Yucatán was one of the most important movements of indigenous peasant resistance in the Americas. It began in 1847, and for most of the subsequent half century much of the Mayan population of the Yucatán Peninsula was locked in conflict with the white population, in a protracted struggle to defend their rights. The Caste War was an attempt by the Maya to recover control over their territories, and to re-establish the rights they had failed to regain after Mexico's independence in 1823.⁶

⁵ D. Bray et al., 'Mexico's Community Forest as a Global Model for Sustainable Landscapes', *Conservation Biology*, Vol. 17, no. 3 (2003), p. 672.

⁶ N. A. Reed, *The Caste War of Yucatán* (California, 2001), p. 56; D. E. Dumond, *The Machete and the Cross: Campesino Rebellion in Yucatán* (Lincoln, NE, and London, 1997), pp. 407–408.

The Maya rebels known as *Indios bravos* or *Cruzob* (followers of the Cross) were members of a syncretic cult of the ‘talking cross’, initially a fusion of Christian Yucatecan and pre-Columbian Maya religions. The ‘talking cross’ ideologically sustained the Mayan resistance movement from the mid-nineteenth century onwards. It has been estimated that the population of *Cruzob* Maya was between one hundred thousand and one hundred and fifty thousand in 1848. When the war officially finished in 1901 the *Cruzob* population was less than five thousand.⁷

One of the most remarkable features of the Mayan rebellion, particularly in the later period between 1901 and the 1930s, was the role played by *chicle* in helping to finance the *Cruzob* armies. During this period revenues from selling *chicle* helped to finance and support the rebels. Ironically, many years later, the *chicle* industry was to achieve what the Mexican government was unable to do by force: the surrender of the *Cruzob* generals.

During the nineteenth century the prosperity of the peninsula of Yucatán had depended on the production of henequen (or *sisal*). In the days before artificial fibres, *sisal* had a number of essential uses, for rope making, carpets and rugs. The development of the Yucatán Peninsula continued into the twentieth century following the development of the new *chicle* industry. However, the chewing gum industry operated under very different conditions from those of henequen. The henequen industry operated entirely under the hacienda regime, a form of production with pre-capitalist roots, in which indigenous people paid taxes to the hacendados by supplying the labour they required. If the Maya objected they were heavily punished and if found on the run they could be punished until death. To a large extent, the labour conditions of henequen haciendas serve to explain the continued rebellion of the Maya, who were not engaged in the industry and who sought autonomy in the South and East of the Yucatán Peninsula.⁸

The sapodilla trees (*Manilkara Zapota*), called *chico-zapotes* in Mexico, from which *chicle* was extracted, did not grow in plantations, as henequen did. As the *chicle* industry could not be developed under an hacienda regime, control over the labour force was exercised through an *enganche*-like system (based on indebtedness), familiar in many other parts of Latin America. A contractor gave an advance to the *chiclero* (tapper) to enable him to begin his work in the forest. The advance was not generally given in cash but through supplying the tapper with the tools needed to work, and the groceries he required to survive in the forest during the tapping season. At least in theory, then, the tapper would be obligated to work for the contractor until the value of extracted *chicle* covered the value of the credit initially given. The system

⁷ Dumond, *The Machete and the Cross*, p. 411.

⁸ Ramos Díaz, ‘La bonanza del *chicle*,’ pp. 177–93.

of indebtedness operated where non-monetary societies met with those of the market, particularly those managed by European and American entrepreneurs. The system was used during the late nineteenth century to obtain rubber in Northwest Amazonia; where it soon degenerated into a semi-slavery system.⁹

Since the early 1900s, numerous non-indigenous people coming from the Mexican state of Veracruz had been recruited into the labour force. Soon many itinerant workers coming from other parts of the republic came to the Yucatán Peninsula as well. Labourers worked in groups at *campamentos* or *hatos* (camp sites) felling wood during the dry season (February to July) and extracting *chicle* during the rainy season (August to January). Both activities required them to move around the forest, yet keep close to collection points called *centrales*. Chenaut followed a model developed earlier by Palerm and Wolf that concluded that each *campamento* could only sustain a population of fifteen to twenty men.¹⁰ The *enganche* system prevented settlement of mestizo *chicleros* in Yucatán, as the unfavourable terms of trade under which the *enganche* system operated added to the environmental limits described by Chenaut.¹¹

The situation for the *Cruzob* Maya in Yucatán differed from that of the mestizos and also from that of indigenous peoples in Mexico and elsewhere in Latin America. As a result of the Caste War, the *Cruzob* already had a military structure and enough arms to defend themselves if necessary. That gave them ample margin of negotiation with the Mexican authorities. At the beginning of the war the Maya had exchanged precious hardwoods with the British in order to get arms and ammunitions. When *chicle* started to pay more than timber they were already in control of the smuggling channels and began to smuggle *chicle* to British Honduras (Belize) in exchange for the supplies they needed. Even after the British authorities prohibited the selling of arms to the Maya in 1897, legal and illegal trade continued.

Initially the *Cruzob* only participated in the smuggling of *chicle*, as they had sufficient power to refuse working for the mestizos. Even after the war had officially ended (1901) the *Cruzob* controlled access to the forest of the South East of the peninsula. The Mayan chiefs decided who was allowed to work there and under what conditions. Thus, international entrepreneurs were forced to hire the services of local contractors, called *permisionarios*, who negotiated with Mayan chiefs.

⁹ See M. E. Stanfield, *Red Rubber, Bleeding Trees: Violence, Slavery and Empire in Northwest Amazonia, 1850–1933* (Albuquerque, 1998).

¹⁰ Chenaut, *Migrantes y aventureros en la frontera sur*, pp. 15–16; A. Palerm and E. Wolf, *Agricultura y civilización en Mesoamérica* (Mexico, 1972).

¹¹ G. A. Macías Zapata, *La península fracturada: conformación marítima, social y forestal del Territorio de Quintana Roo, 1884–1902* (Mexico, 2002), pp. 153–154.

The scale of the early *chicle* trade can be inferred from the annual Bluebooks, which summarised the economic activities of British Honduras in this period. They show a gradual increase in the importance of *chicle* and other forest products, from slightly over 60 per cent of export value in 1886, to about 80 per cent by 1900. A little less than half of these exports were probably sourced from the Mexican Yucatán. Within ten years the official value of *chicle* exports rose by 72 per cent.¹² As the forest resources of British Honduras became gradually depleted, further incursions were made into Quintana Roo (Mexico) and the territory controlled by the *Cruzob*.

These figures also give us some idea of the importance of foreign capital for the region at the turn of the nineteenth century. In the absence of Mexican capital every effort was made to develop the region with whatever foreign capital was available. In 1892 London companies established the Mexican Exploration Company to extract forest products in coastal areas near the Bay of Chetumal. This company was later declared bankrupt but its forest concessions were taken over by another, based in Belize, in 1896. In the same year yet another enterprise, the East Coast of Yucatán Colonization Company, was formed in Mexico City, but financed by the Bank of London and Mexico. This company took over an earlier forest concession, which gave it access to 673,850 hectares of forestland.¹³

These huge concessions positioned British capital to exploit almost the entire eastern seaboard of the Yucatán Peninsula. In 1893 the Mexican and British Governments had entered into a settlement known as the Mariscal-St John Treaty, which made the Rio Hondo the southern border of Mexican territory with British Honduras. Via this strategic river system the British now had greater access to Quintana Roo, and consolidated their position with the *Cruzob*.

Queen Victoria, the British monarch at the time, was aware of the Mexican need to end the ethnic conflict and, wanting to recuperate the money they owed to the Empire, acceded to the Mexican government's demand to stop the supply of arms to the rebel Maya. President Porfirio Díaz approved the treaty in 1889 but before signing it he had to negotiate with the Yucatecan elite, and ratification did not occur until 1897. The British authorities for their part had to deal with the local interests in Belize. Belizeans were dubious about an agreement that was to injure what they saw as the friendly Maya. The British government offered significant financial

¹² H. W. Konrad, 'Capitalism on the Tropical Forest Frontier,' in J. T. Brannon and G. M. Joseph (eds.), *Land, Labor and Capital in the Modern Yucatán* (Tuscaloosa and London, 1991), pp. 156–158.

¹³ J. M. Lapointe, *Los mayas rebeldes de Yucatán* (Mérida, 1997), pp. 148–240; Konrad, 'Capitalism on the Tropical Forest Frontier', p. 149.

inducements to them, to build a new navigation channel that they hoped would settle things down.¹⁴

In the short period between December 1899 and May 1901 the Federal Army gradually opened up the territory of Quintana Roo controlled by the *Cruzob*. However, the Mayas' response following military defeat did not put an end to their cultural resistance.¹⁵

The 'defeat' of the Cruzob

During the last few decades of the nineteenth century, the rebel Maya were forced back into the jungle, but they were able to obtain arms by selling the *chicle* resin which was produced from their forests. This is shown in some of the documents collected in the state archives in Chetumal:

In the report of the 'Standford Manufacturing Company' received by this Ministry, which refers to the verified forest products exploited by the company in the zone during 1906, the following is written:

The company which I represent has done everything in its power to stop the selling of liquors, shotguns and ammunition. The company has been unsuccessful due to the presence of an Alvarado, who has settled in Yo Creek, few miles away from Agua Blanca. [He] has an aguardiente distillery, [the product of which] he trades with *chicle*, which is illegally and furtively extracted from terrains the company I represent and other persons have rented from you. This Alvarado also supplies the Indians with arms and ammunition, avoiding the vigilance that the manager of the company exercises and without this company having means to prevent such operations (...).¹⁶

Strategically, the large gum manufacturers in the United States, notably William Wrigley's, were dependent on *coyotes* (intermediaries and smugglers) for the transport of their supplies. One of the most important motives for seeking this solution was to avoid paying excise duty to the Mexican authorities. These political and economic ambitions, at the margin of legality, which were deeply resented by the Mexican state, served to cement links between some of the British banks – particularly the Bank of London and Mexico – US manufacturers and the Mayan insurgents.¹⁷

After General Bravo took control of the Mayan city of Chan Santa Cruz in 1901, the Mexican forces of occupation then began to construct means of communication between Chan Santa Cruz (renamed Santa Cruz de Bravo) and the coast. President Díaz decreed from Mexico City that the new

¹⁴ Reed, *The Caste War of Yucatán*, p. 287.

¹⁵ A. Villa Rojas, *Los elegidos de Dios: etnografía de los mayas de Quintana Roo* (Mexico, 1978) p. 120.

¹⁶ AGN Section 3a 906. Exp 33 No. foja 3. Ref. Contrabando y Explotación del *Chicle*, Sealed 8 April 1907, Ministry of Government. Signed by Delegate of the Sub Secretary of Government. Chetumal, Quintana Roo.

¹⁷ Ramos Díaz, 'La bonanza del *chicle*,' pp. 177–193.

territory should be called the Federal Territory of Quintana Roo (QR), named after a hero of the independence struggle. Yucatecans did not like this move, since they considered the territory their back yard, but a small number of them benefited from the new status, having been given both vast concessions to exploit the forests and a 'free hand' with the natives.¹⁸

Access to the forests was the first priority of the new regime. It was decided that, since Santa Cruz was only thirty-six miles from the sea, across mangrove swamps, compared with the ninety miles to the railhead at Peto, it would be better to build the railroad to the sea. A new site was chosen as a port, called Vigia Chico. Colonel Arelio Blanquete was in charge of building the fifty-six kilometre railroad from Santa Cruz Bravo to Vigia Chico port. Political prisoners were forced to work as labourers. If they were not affected by sickness, they were shot dead by *Cruzob* Mayan snipers or by the Mexican army while attempting to escape. The railroad was to serve loggers and the new entrepreneurs of *chicle*. It was called *callejón de la muerte* (the passage of death) as it was claimed that each rail post was worth five lives.¹⁹

In 1910 the Mexican Revolution began, although it was two years before it effectively arrived in Quintana Roo. The revolutionary forces tried to make contact with the *Cruzob* by hanging messages in bottles on trees, but to no avail. The mistrust between the Maya and the 'whites', even revolutionary whites, was too great to be assuaged overnight. Within two years, however, Salvador Alvarado, the new socialist governor of Yucatán ordered that the capital of Quintana Roo would be moved south to Chetumal, and the Indians were given definitive control of their own sacred place, No Cah Balaam Nah Santa Cruz in 1917.

The town was almost completely abandoned after General Bravo's army of occupation had desecrated the temple. Juan Bautista Vega took control of the territories on the northern side of Santa Cruz and beyond, while Francisco May took control of the territories to the south and east of Santa Cruz. Both areas now had 'Talking Crosses', enabling the cult to survive and facilitating the operation of theological rule.²⁰ In addition, both groups possessed a military structure for guarding their crosses. Sergeant Francisco May, specially gifted in military affairs, was promoted to General in the *Cruzob* army.

General May had observed the commercial success of *chicle* and had acknowledged its importance, and thus he directed his military operations against the transportation of the product. May knew that their ammunition supply depended on the smuggling of *chicle* to British Honduras to the South,

¹⁸ A. Acereto, *Evolución histórica de de las relaciones políticas entre México y Yucatán* (México, 1904).

¹⁹ J. K. Turner, *México Bárbaro* (Mexico, 1965), pp. 126–8.

²⁰ Villa Rojas, *Los elegidos de Dios*, p. 124.

but within the *Cruzob* territories he continued to attack the railroad transport and showed hostility towards foreigners, whether they were tappers or contractors. The representatives of foreign companies had no option but to negotiate access to the forest with May and the other *Cruzob* chiefs.

In 1917 Julio Martín, a chewing gum entrepreneur achieved what no Mexican politician had achieved before. He obtained an agreement with General May, in which the latter agreed to allow the *chicle* operations of the Martín & Martínez firm on the land he controlled, in exchange for participation in the business.²¹ At last, Octavio Solís, the governor of QR, admitted that political negotiations might be a better strategy than the brute force employed by the Mexican army. He invited the General to Chetumal and then advised President Carranza to follow this path. Subsequently May was invited to Mexico City, where the president made him a general of the Mexican Army and put him in charge of pacifying the Maya. In return May received the railroad rights from Santa Cruz to Vigía Chico (which the Maya would rebuild), a concession of over twenty thousand hectares of land and, the monopoly of *aguardiente* (sugar cane liquor) sales in the region.

The chicle concessionaries and the decline of General May

By the beginning of the twentieth century the taste for chewing gum, nurtured by consumers in the United States, and funded partly by British capital in Mexico, had led an army of adventurers deep into the forests of Yucatán. Many of the *chicleros* who arrived in the first decade of the twentieth century were mestizos from other Mexican states such as Veracruz, and Tabasco, as well as Belize. Up to this point the Maya involvement in the *chicle* trade was largely confined to their role in the supply chain, and as guardians of the forest.

The *pacíficos del sur*, the Maya from the border region between Yucatán and Campeche, had been marginally involved with *chicle*, but the Maya from Quintana Roo did not become *chicleros* themselves until General May's agreement with the Federal Government in 1919. Although they had effective control of their forests from 1914, harvesting *chicle* was not their primary economic activity and it never would be. It has been assumed that *chicleros*, of whatever ethnic affiliation, assumed a lifestyle that was completely dependent on the sale of forest products to foreigners, particularly hardwoods and *chicle*. But historical accounts, testimonies of contractors and of *chicleros* themselves suggest that the main livelihood activities of the Mayan

²¹ Reed, *The Caste War of Yucatán*, p. 309.

people, even after their involvement as *chicleros*, were related to the cultivation of their *milpas* (maize plots).

The Mayan *milpas* are part of a complex agroecosystem indispensable for social reproduction. Maize is the main staple grown in the *milpas*, and it is also the centre of Maya cosmology. 'Making *milpa* demands propitiation of both natural and supernatural force, requiring an intimate knowledge of nature and a detailed reading of the far-from-favourable environment.'²² The reference to the hostile environment in the previous quotation is not a rhetorical subterfuge. The Yucatán Peninsula has no surface rivers; agriculture depends on proximity to natural wells that give access to the water table, the selection of soils, the maintenance of seed depositories, accurate knowledge of microclimates and of the crop diversity combinations that adapt to such microclimates. During the Caste War, after taking Valladolid on 15 May 1848, the *Cruzob* could have taken Mérida as well. The explanation given by the Maya for stopping the military campaign was that the rains had come and they feared the gods more than they feared the chiefs who were commanding them to continue the military campaign: 'The time has come to make our planting, for if we do not we shall have no grace of God.'²³

Nevertheless, by the 1920s *chicle* was becoming more important for the household economics of the Maya. After Martín concluded the agreement with General May, other concessionaries arrived, La Compañía Mexicana from Mexico and Wrigley's from the United States, who operated through an influential intermediary Mr Turton, based in Belize. Martín & Martínez established camps and collection points near Chan Santa Cruz, while in the north an important collection centre was established inland from Puerto Morelos, the Central Vallarta. The rebel Maya were poised to take advantage of the new commercial opportunities offered by *chicle*, and to do so without any significant concessions to the Mexican government.

The regime instituted by General May had all the hallmarks of Latin American *caciquismo*. Although virtually illiterate, May proved an effective businessman, an astuteness that he concealed behind an apparently 'simple' exterior. May exercised his authority through his command of a private military force. He had twenty-five personal guards, and took overall command of the local population. Nevertheless, even this degree of personal authority only existed within very defined geographical limits: outside his fiefdom General May's authority was subject to other more powerful institutions.

²² M. Gates, *In Default: Peasants, the Debt Crisis and the Agricultural Challenge in Mexico* (Oxford, 1993), p. 110.

²³ Leandro Poot quoted by E. H. Thompson, *People of the Serpent: Life and Adventure among the Mayas* (Boston, 1932), pp. 70–1.

Very few Mexican leaders had attempted the desegregation of the indigenous peoples. Governor Felipe Carrillo Puerto was one of those rare leaders to have attempted to include the Maya as partners, rather than as political subjects of the whites. In 1922, as governor of Yucatán Carrillo Puerto helped General May to form a cooperative of *chicle* producers. He also set up instructors in civil rights for the Indian population, in the hope of making the Maya full participants in the revolutionary project. But the *gente de bien* could not accept the Indians as equals. The *gente de bien* were wealthy *hacendados*, members of the liberal party who opposed the socialist party of Carrillo Puerto. They had tolerated the formation of some cooperatives during Alvarado's governorship (1915–1918) only because they were made members of the management boards of such cooperatives. Carrillo Puerto had been a leader of the cooperative initiative of Alvarado and was aware of the hacendados' manoeuvres.²⁴ Previous to the initiative with the cooperatives, Carrillo had tried to organise Mayan peasants through *ligas de resistencia* (leagues of resistance). In 1918 Carranza removed Alvarado from the government and sent the Federal Army to destroy the *ligas*. Carrillo went to live in exile in the United States. When he returned he managed to gain enough support by making agreements with peasant chiefs who were given positions in the government, but Carrillo's position was rather precarious because he was a threat to the hacendados, who were waiting for an opportunity to get rid of him.

The right moment came when de la Huerta rebelled against President Obregón. Carrillo decided to support Obregon, who would later recover his position. However during a brief lapse of time a coalition of *hacendados* and *de la Huertistas* took control of Yucatán and seized the opportunity they were waiting for. Carrillo was captured along with two of his brothers and nine loyal men. They were taken to the Juarez penitentiary in Mérida and then shot without trial.

Stable government did not return until the governorship of Siurob (1927–1931) began. Siurob was a strategic organiser and was not willing to assume a paternalistic approach towards the Indians. Instead he joined the 'progressive' forces of Yucatán that wanted to end the power of General May and the control exercised by any Maya Indian over the forests and railroads.

The engine of 'progress' was *chicle*. Although they were not always aware of it, the *chicleros* received few of the benefits from *chicle* production. Before them, and profiting from their work, were the foremen, the campsite chiefs, the *permisionarios* (national contractors), the international contractors, and the chewing gum brokers working for transnational companies. The system

²⁴ Joseph, *Revolution from Without*, pp. 193–4.

of *enganche* operated from the top-down. The brokers advanced money to contractors, who in turn lent money to their Mexican partners. The *permisionarios* gave the money to the central chiefs for them to hire the foremen, *chicleros*, cooks and muleteers.

May was wise enough to know that taxing his own people would bring an end to his power. Besides, he did not need to impose taxes. He received money from the contractors, the renting of mules, the railroad fees and the sales of *aguardiente*. Siurob however knew better. In his view the government and the *gente de bien* should be getting what the 'Indian chief' was receiving. Representatives of the *gente de bien*, like the Ramoneda brothers, embarked on a campaign to dismantle the rule of the *Cruzob*, and give themselves a free hand in the *chicle* industry. Although governmental officials knew of the illegality of the Ramoneda manoeuvres, they turned a blind eye to the affairs:

[T]his is the *modus vivendi* of the Ramoneda brothers, as one of them was Chief of the Forest Section and approved three concessions of the National Forests of the territory under the false names of Miguel Carrillo, Manuel Carrillo and Miguel Gonzalez. These concessions were then rented or transferred to third parties for a considerable sum of money. Those are [the operations] referred by younger Ramoneda to the Wrigley co. in the letter on the 19th of February (...).

The damage inflicted on the Nation by speculations of this nature, will not be hidden from your excellence, the President of the Republic (...)

... [B]esides that, the Indian chiefs General May and Juan B. Vega, worked with their men funded by the money of an American company [Wrigley], which operated from Cozumel and which used to pay all the corresponding taxes to the Nation. This financed May's operations with a budget of twenty-five thousand dollars. Once the company knew that the terrains of the concessions were to be affected, and therefore the Indians would not be allowed to work, they decided not to lend the money to May and called their agent back to New York ...²⁵

Much to May's disapproval, since his men had rebuilt the line and provided maintenance to the railroad, in 1924 Ramoneda had received the concession to run the railway from the Mexican Ministry of War and Sea Defences. By the 'boom' years of the late 1920s there were over 1,500 *chicleros* working at just one forest location in the north, 'Central Vallarta', during the harvest season, from September to January. In what was to be known as the Mayan zone (southern Yucatán and northern Quintana Roo), the *chicle* was transported from Chan Santa Cruz on the railway line to the port of Vigia Chico. The tractors used for transporting the gum carried 4,600 kilos of *chicle* a day, 27,000 kilos a week.

²⁵ Archivo General Amado Aguirre. Instituto de Investigaciones Historicas de UNAM. Folio 579. Ref. Concesión Ramoneda. Signed Juan de D. Rodriguez May 20th 1927, Payo Obispo, Addressed to the President. Chetumal, Quintana Roo.

Siurob was not satisfied with the take over of the railroad concession; he wanted to finish any Indian political participation. In a historic pact in 1929 the Federal authorities dictated new terms of compliance to May. He was deprived of the power to punish offenders within his 'own' jurisdiction, and civil registration and tax collection was handed over to the Federal Government. On 2 June 1929 General Governor Siurob entered Chan Santa Cruz and, after a great fiesta, he and May publicly embraced. This represented the effective transfer of power from the fiefdom of a traditional cacique to the Mexican State.

Even though labourers had no influence in the management of *chicle* industry, their conditions were improving. This was a direct result of increasing international demand of chewing gum. During the 1920s more than 6,000 *chicleros* arrived from other parts of Mexico and Central America. *Chicleros* earned about 300 pesos a month, but by 1929 this had risen to 1,800 pesos. This was the period of relative affluence, when *chicleros* came down from the forests, and spent their surpluses on jewellery in the shops of Valladolid.

In 1929 production reached its peak for the decade: 2,400,000 kilos. The 1930s proved to be a decade of relative prosperity for most *chicleros*, partly because state apparatuses initially compensated for the fall in price on the world market. But more importantly, a great deal of illegal trade was undertaken via Belize. The production smuggled was not accounted for in official Mexican statistics, but Mexican *chicleros* continued earning. In 1933 production had dropped dramatically to under 700,000 kilos. This drop was going to affect livelihoods adversely but not immediately, since *coyotaje* continued operating while adjusting to the market dynamics.

The second agrarian reform: Cárdenas, collective ejidos and cooperatives

In Quintana Roo, the Federal [Government] presence settled the basis for the pacification of the rebel Maya. Once this [pacification] was achieved, the Territory of Quintana Roo was created. In the forthcoming conflicts between the newly created territory and Yucatán and Campeche, about the access and control over forest resources, the Federal Government kept its supreme power and continued with the incorporation of those regions to the national political system. On the other hand foreign investors were less interested in national politics than in exploiting the forest at minimum cost ... [They] initiated a period of large-scale deforestation. [Hernan W. Konrad]²⁶

Konrad noticed that the pacification of the Maya was linked to the development of a national ideology, and the erosion of the forest frontier,

²⁶ H. W. Konrad, 'Capitalismo y trabajo en los bosques de las tierras bajas tropicales mexicanas: El caso de la industria del *chicle*', *Historia Mexicana*, vol. 36, no. 3 (1987). pp. 501–2.

and highlighted the importance of federal intervention in the forest management of Yucatán Peninsula. Konrad undertook research into the effect of cooperatives in the *chicle* industry and argued that the Mexican state had failed in protecting the natural resources or the interests of *chicleros*: ‘the *chicleros*’ opportunities to work increased with the rise in chewing gum demand internationally, but really few of them benefit from that situation’.²⁷ In the following section we explore the historical context of the agrarian reforms, and by doing so, we expect to reveal the rationality under which such policies operated and the reasons for their failure.

The Mexican Revolution occurred in an agrarian country with little industrialisation. According to ‘theory’, the constitution of *ejidos* would give the means of production back to the labourers. But the revolutionaries never estimated the cost of the operation. During the period between 1920 and 1935 the Mexican state had to face up to the costs of the Revolution: the increasing external debt, the claims for compensation from United States investors for the damages suffered to their properties during the Revolution, and an increasingly hostile group of hacendados who were also claiming compensation.

Even though the idea of *ejidos* has colonial roots, the *ejidal* policy of the agrarian revolution in Mexico has its own dynamics and variants, depending on the ideology and political inclinations of each successive president in turn, as we shall see. The *ejido* is given by the state to a stable (settled) group of peasant families. It is a communal property composed of a communal forest and lands for agricultural labour that could be cultivated individually or collectively.

Carranza (1915–1920) saw the *ejido* as the instrument for improving peasant labour conditions. Carranza did not want to eradicate *hacendados* and replace them with labour committees or unions. He saw the *ejido* as a parallel regime to that of the hacienda. The peasants would secure agricultural lands to sustain their families and work for the hacienda in order to improve their condition.²⁸

Following him, Obregón (1920–1924) accelerated the constitution of *ejidos* and rejected the idea of compensation, which further complicated the relations between the United States and Mexico. Washington refused to recognise Obregón’s presidency for three years. In complete contrast, Calles (1924–1928) his successor, considered the *ejidal* policy as the driving force of modernization. He considered that each peasant should fend for himself and the *ejido* should be instrumental in developing the agricultural industry. Calles managed to pass a law allowing the division and fragmentation

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 502.

²⁸ J. Meyer, *El sinarquismo, el cardenismo y la Iglesia, 1937–1947* (Mexico, 2003), pp. 206–7.

(*parcelación*) of the *ejidos*. However, in 1929 Calles returned from Europe convinced of the success of fascism, and put the brakes on the ‘socialist agenda’ which the Mexican Revolution was thought to represent, and suspended the agrarian reform altogether.

Even though Calles continued influencing the state’s policies after his presidency, his successors needed to revive the *ejidal* policy in an attempt to thwart counterrevolutionary initiatives that could easily prosper among dissatisfied peasants. Portes Gil (1928–1930) revived the *ejidal* policy and in only two years assigned collective property rights to 1,700,242 hectares of land. The following two presidents were much more cautious about creating new *ejidos*, but like Portes Gil they lacked the political capital necessary to attempt the complete re-shaping of agrarian policies.

The Federal Government and Yucatán

In December 1931 President Pascual Ortiz Rubio ended the status of Quintana Roo as a Federal Territory, dividing the administrative jurisdiction between Campeche and Yucatán. From then until 1935 the Mayan zone was once again, to the dismay of the Maya, in the hands of Yucatecans.²⁹ *Chicle* production diminished greatly as the Yucatecan *permissionarios* had to agree with the conditions imposed by the two companies that dominated the market, the Chicle Development and Wrigley’s,³⁰ which fixed the price of a 46-kilo sac to US\$ 9.20, half of previous price.³¹

In the Mexican Presidential campaign of 1934 the Partido Nacional Revolucionario (PNR) candidate, General Lázaro Cárdenas visited Payo Obispo (Chetumal) and Cozumel. He promised to restore Quintana Roo’s status as a Federal Territory if he was elected. He kept his promise; as early as January of 1935 he had modified articles 43 and 45 of the Constitution reconstituting Quintana Roo as a Federal Territory. As the state became more involved in the territory from which *chicle* was harvested, so the unrest that had fuelled the Maya resistance became channelled into the progressive post-revolutionary project. The state strategy was to gain control of the production process through the formation of labour cooperatives, which were established through the peninsular from the mid 1930s.

There had been cooperative initiatives before Cárdenas. We mentioned Alavarado’s initiative and Carrillo Puerto’s and General May’s initiative

²⁹ J. González Durán, *La rebelión de los mayas y el Quintana Roo chiclero* (Mérida, Mexico, 1974), pp. 40–1.

³⁰ M. F. Jaramillo Botero, *La historia oral de los mayas de Quintana Roo* (Mexico, 1988), pp. 76–7.

³¹ González Durán, *La rebelión de los mayas*, pp. 40–1.

of 1922. Siurob launched an initiative to replace May's in 1927. Beteta gave an account of a cooperative being established in Xhoaxhoben in 1929: '[This] is not a real cooperative ... it functions as a sales agency that charges no commissions'.³² But Cárdenas cooperativism project was different in a number of ways. Cooperatives were attached to 'collective *ejidos*', which in theory guaranteed that peasants were involved in the political project.³³ Cardenas specifically chose Yucatán to make it a showcase for the collective *ejido* programme.³⁴ Yucatán has been the scenario of the Caste War; if the agrarian revolution managed to transform the social order there it would be an example for the rest of the country.

Yucatán was also an ideal location for another objective of Cárdenas agrarian reform: the integration of the Indians into the National project, the 'Mexicanisation of the Indians'.³⁵ In 1936 Cárdenas created the Departamento de Asuntos Indígenas – DAI (Department of Indigenous Affairs). After expropriation of henequen haciendas began in Yucatán, Cárdenas travelled to Mérida. On 3 August 1937 he delivered a fervent speech justifying the measure as the minimum compensation the Mexicans could give to the Mayan people for their fight against oppression, which was in essence the fight of the Mexican revolution.³⁶

In Quintana Roo, in addition to the *ejidos*, National Forests were given to the Indians of the Mayan zone. As the Indians had not shown 'sufficient enthusiasm' in *chicle*, the state considered that by giving them rights of exploitation and guaranteeing that cooperatives will buy *chicle*, the Indians would join the industry and it would prosper. In 1935 seven Forest Reserves were legally formed in the Maya zone. They were distributed to individuals each given the right to exploit 420 hectares of *bosque Zapotal* (forest in which *sapodillas* were predominant). Each terrain was divided in five sections to be exploited one per year, as a way to guarantee conservation of the trees. Later that year Melgar, the Governor of Quintana Roo during the Cárdenas presidency, decided to make the same type of distribution in the North by dismantling the huge states of Santa María and Cuyo, two of the biggest in the nation. Santa María alone was more than one million hectares.³⁷

On 20 August 1935 one of the first chewing gum cooperatives of Quinta Roo, Pucte, was founded with twenty-nine members. The cooperative sold six tons of *chicle* directly to the Wrigley's company, increasing the income

³² R. Beteta, *Tierra del chicle* (Chetumal, 1999 (1929)), p. 49.

³³ Meyer, *El sinarquismo, el cardenismo y la Iglesia*, pp. 207–213.

³⁴ Joseph, *Revolution from Without*, p. 292.

³⁵ L. Cárdenas, *Ideario político* (Mexico, 1972), p. 172.

³⁶ W. Gabbert, *Becoming Maya: Ethnicity and Social Inequality in Yucatán since 1500* (Tucson, 2004), pp. 99–101.

³⁷ L. Rosado Vega, *Un hombre y un pueblo* (Chetumal, 1998 (1940)), pp. 248–9.

received by the *chicleros* three-fold. The establishment of cooperatives had brought collective strength to the organisation of workers in the industry. In the same year cooperatives were established in Carrillo Puerto, Xhazil, Yaactun, Dzula, Xpichil, Señor and Chumpon, all lucrative areas for the *chicle* trade. The apparent economic and political success of the cooperatives and the dismantling of large states were making inroads on the established class of *hacendados*.

In theory, *chicleros* formed cooperatives because it enabled them to get both a better share and a better price for the resin through dealing directly with the buyers. In practice, however, the process was more complex: tappers had to rely on representatives from the cooperatives and the same institutional structure of foremen, subcontractors, *permisionarios* and brokers continued to operate. Wrigley continued to rely on *coyotes* (smugglers) and started to hire Mexican nationals in order to maintain the supply chain.

Under the governorship of Melgar an umbrella organisation was established which took control of the sale and export of all of the *chicle* produced within the cooperatives. 48 *chicle* cooperatives had been formed and this second-level organization had offices in both Felipe Carrillo Puerto and Cozumel. Some Mexican historians were quick to prise Cárdenas project:

Cooperativism is a nutshell. Inside the nutshell there are the high values of social spirit; they are protected from external distortions ... [Within cooperativism] all revenues go to the labourers; there are no upward or downward deviations. That is why within the Territory [of Quintana Roo] there is no dissidence ...³⁸

This view that there was no dissent among labourers from the Cardenista project is not really accurate. The friendly Maya that worked in the henequen haciendas in the north of Yucatán, were in no position to assume management of the industry and many protested against the agrarian reform based upon collective *ejido*.³⁹ Our research in the former Cruzob territories in Quintana Roo, the testimonies of the *Cruzob* descendents and other Maya living today in the region, as well as archival records, all show that the new relationship towards indigenous peoples was resisted and resented by the Maya, as paternalistic and dependent. Rosado Vega wrote the first comprehensive account of the *chicleros* of Quintana Roo during the *Cardenista* period (1934–1940). The historian noticed the apparent apathy of the Mayan population with respect to the *Cardenista* project:

At [Felipe] Carrillo Puerto nobody asked any favour [from the President] (...). The General invited them [The Maya] to express their will, and it was [only] under

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 349.

³⁹ Joseph, *Revolution from Without*, pp. 289–91.

the initiative of the President [Cárdenas] himself that such initiatives were determined to the benefit of that community.⁴⁰

Alfonso Villa Rojas has shown that it was not apathy but unwillingness that the Maya were reflecting in their attitude. The constitution of *ejidos*, often to replace indigenous territories, was highly resented: ‘... indigenous peoples were very upset, as they considered it an interference with their internal affairs, and also, they resented the divisions of the lands, as if it were something to be treated as private property’.⁴¹ The Maya agreed with the land division subject to the condition that Xcacal, one of the key *Cruzob* territories, should be considered a unique *ejido* without further urban fragmentation. However, soon after the agreement was reached new fragmentation of land was undertaken by constituting town *ejidos* in Yaxley, Chanchen, X-cacal Guardia and Tuzic.

When Governor Melgar arrived at Santa Cruz, now renamed Felipe Carrillo Puerto, he took May’s *Cruzob* temple and made it the ‘Lázaro Cárdenas Primary School’.⁴² Melgar started implementing Cárdenas’ policy of Mexicanisation of the Indians. He built schools in the *Cruzob* territories, although they were initially rejected and looked upon with suspicion. On some occasions the mestizo teachers were bullied and had to leave or seek refuge with the army.⁴³

The chicle industry after Cárdenas

At the beginning of the 1940s *chicle* production was given an additional boost by the entry of the United States into World War Two. Within the space of a couple of years *chicle* resin had assumed strategic importance. It was part of the US forces’ rations, and demand for it from the United States remained insatiable. In 1942 Mexico exported more chewing gum to the United States than at any other time in its history: nearly four million kilos.

Consequently, chewing gum production reached its apogee in June 1943 when a party of representatives of *chicle* cooperatives travelled to the United States, to meet government officials. Their object was ‘to discuss and defend the price of Mexican *chicle*, one of the most highly prized wartime materials in the United States’. The US manufacturers who, in the view of

⁴⁰ Rosado Vega, *Un pueblo y un hombre*, pp. 377–8.

⁴¹ A. Villa Rojas, *Los elegidos de Dios*, p. 202.

⁴² G. A. Menéndez, Quintana Roo, Albúm monográfico (Chetumal, 1936); L. Careaga Villesid, ‘La etapa cardenista’, in Loreana Careaga Villasis (ed.), *Quintana Roo: textos de su historia*, Vol. 2 (Mexico, 1990), p. 215.

⁴³ Villa Rojas, *Los elegidos de Dios*, pp. 128–35.

the Mexican cooperatives, merely 'added the flavour' to the gum, had refused to increase the price they paid for it.⁴⁴

While chewing gum exports were at their highest so was corruption, which had not disappeared with the formation of cooperatives. General Melgar had taken the cooperativist project under his wing. By 1938 there were 39 cooperatives, which represented 78 per cent of all rural workers of Quintana Roo. Melgar obtained a budget from the Federal Government for the formation of the umbrella organisation mentioned above. He made himself president of the committee to oversee the cooperatives.⁴⁵

However, the paternalistic style of Melgar, which initially favoured the interest of rural workers, was to become a damaging factor for economic development during the years that followed. In 1940 General Gabriel R. Guevara, one of the revolutionary moderates affiliated to the new president, General Avila Camacho, replaced Melgar. Guevara cared little about the *chicleros* and the revolutionary project but was very interested in getting control over the attractive *chicle* business. He made himself President of the Management Board of the Federation of Cooperatives and started to control the use of the Federation's funds.⁴⁶

After Guevara, Margarito Ramírez (1944–1958) took office and enthusiastically dedicated himself to the more damaging practices of nepotism and corruption. He co-opted all the members of the Management Board of the Federation, transferred money from the Federation Funds to the government and personal accounts, received money for large concessions given to the Freighberg Mahogany Co., and sold properties of the cooperatives at very low cost yet receiving large commissions.⁴⁷

Mexican historians tend to ignore the relevant role of the Maya in political mobilisations after Cárdenas. Although both Careaga Villesid and González Durán provided ample information on the social mobilisation against Ramírez in 1956, they both – and the historians before them – ignored the participation of the Maya in such revolt. A mestizo *chiclero*, who witnessed the social rebellion at the time and who now works as assistant librarian in the State Archives of Chetumal, described the part taken by the Maya and their leader General May at the time:

[R]ight after the massive protest movement against the Governor Margarito Ramirez he proclaimed loudly: 'The day will come when I will see all of the Indians from Quintana Roo dressed in rags'. And the fires that came after the hurricane [Janet] could not be produced by slash and burn agriculture. At the time, the

⁴⁴ Goberino del Estado de Quintana Roo, *Encyclopaedia of Quintana Roo*, Vol. III (Mexico, 1998), p. 101.

⁴⁵ Rosado Vega, *Un pueblo y un hombre*, pp. 351–352.

⁴⁶ J. González Durán, *La rebelión de los mayas y el Quintana Roo chiclero* (Mérida, 1974), p. 53.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 54–6; L. Careaga Villesid, 'Los años de Margarito Ramírez,' in Loreana Careaga Villesid (ed.), *Quintana Roo: textos de su historia*, Vol. 2, pp. 223–229.

[Indian] General May still had power and he was really the brain behind the revolt. After his gesture, the people of Chetumal decided to follow. All the Maya came to Chetumal. The artillery company aligned by the side of the [governmental] palace pointed their machine guns at the marching people. I was just a child, but got among them; and the general said: 'with those machine guns they cannot kill us all' and the people took courage and remained protesting (...)

May was really organised. I witnessed how he directed the different groups of people at the revolt, assigning different tasks to each team. (...) As I was still a boy I managed to get very close to him. He talked to all the team chiefs and it surprised me how well he spoke although he was just an Indian of the Mayan zone.⁴⁸

Cárdenas and Melgar had tried to put a stop to the smuggling of *chicle* through Belize. Melgar built boundary stones across the frontier and cleared the forest of the border. Passports and cargo permits were issued and border controls were implemented in coordination with Belizean authorities. Melgar was at the head of all operations concerning the agrarian reform. He was directing all operations in forestry management, was President of the Federation of Cooperatives, and he was personally involved with the foreign secretary in adjusting trade relations and assuring control of the border with Belize. He had complete support from Cárdenas and the best intentions no doubt, but such a paternalistic style facilitated the corruption and nepotism that followed during the rest of the twentieth century.

On 27 September 1955 hurricane Janet devastated Quintana Roo. The port of Vigía Chico, where *chicle* was stored and ready to be shipped, was completely destroyed. Only three of fourteen workers in the port survived. The Chetumal bay was flooded and three hundred thousand cubic meters of wood were lost.⁴⁹ After the hurricane Margarito Ramírez arranged with timber companies to pick up the 'fallen' woods so as to prevent everything from being lost in the eventuality of fires. But he was capable of initiating fires when necessary in order to secure the contracts.⁵⁰ The mismanagement of the forest by the government since Margarito has been denounced time and again:

What really changed *chicle* was the hurricane [Janet]. The south zone was completely devastated and the central zone or Maya zone, which did not suffer as much, was overexploited. It became *repeladero* (overexploited) and *chicleros* went there to *poquitiar* (to take a few remains).⁵¹

⁴⁸ Interview with Isidro Quiterio Escalante, November 2003, State Archives, Chetumal, Quintana Roo. Isidro is the curator of the archive of the Federation of *Chicle* Cooperatives.

⁴⁹ Careaga Villesid, 'Los años de Margarito Ramírez,' pp. 227–8.

⁵⁰ González Durán, *La rebelión de los mayas*, p. 56.

⁵¹ Interview with Isidro Quiterio Escalante, November 2003, State Archives, Chetumal, Quintana Roo.

A former Maya *chiclero* and member of the Cruzob from Tulum was more critical:

[I]f the forest is burning, that is when they [the civil servants] say: go ahead and take care of your forest! The only thing [that] they say I agree with is the making of thick forest bells around the *milpas* to prevent the fires from getting out of control during burning of the fields. We do have ample patches here in Tulum. But this was not originally a government initiative. Here in Tulum the forest did not get burned after the hurricane [Janet] as we had ample patches between *milpas* ...

After I quit *chicle* I dedicated [myself] entirely to my *milpa*. I got very upset with all this *chicle* business. We, the *chicleros*, used to give a contribution to a provision fund held in Chetumal. When we suspected something was going wrong, the seventy-six thousand pesos that we had accumulated in the fund were already gone. The governor elected the manager of the funds (...)⁵²

From the forty *chicle* cooperatives left by Melgar in 1940 only twenty survived until 1955. Margarito Ramírez sold many properties of the federation of *chicle* cooperatives, lent money from the fund (to which Pablo Canché referred in the previous quotation) to individuals that would never be returned, and transferred the remaining capital of the Federation to his personal accounts. In August 1956, after the protest, the secretary of government was forced to resign but the party protected Ramírez who continued governing from Mexico City.⁵³

After Margarito Ramírez issued a law authorising export of all woods 'fallen by the hurricane Janet', the forests of Quintana Roo were devastated. The Federation of *chicle* cooperatives was in a desperate situation. But it was going to get worse; the new president, López Mateos, selected Aarón Merino Fernández (1958–1964) to replace Ramírez. Merino convinced the president to issue a decree creating a new 'forest unit' that would deal with forest management and that would depend upon the Federations of Cooperatives' *chicle* and timber. The governor took complete control of the Federation Funds, as well as forest permits management and of *chicle* and timber exports. *Chicleros* were nominally owners of their cooperatives, the same as when they were constituted by Cárdenas; but effectively they did not have any

⁵² Interview with Pablo Canché Balám, Tulum, 16 December 2003. Pablo was born in Tulum into a Cruzob family. He is the grandson of a legendary Mayan shaman and his father-in-law was the *Cruzob* chief of Tulum during the 1970s. Pablo is now in his late seventies; in his twenties he was selected for the main role of the cult film 'Chac: The Rain God'. After the film he continued working with several foreign researchers interested in the magico-religious life of the Maya. For interviews with Pablo Canché see M. Peissel, *El mundo perdido de los mayas: exploraciones y aventuras en Quintana Roo* (Barcelona, 1976); M. Everton, *Modern Maya: A Culture in Transition* (Albuquerque, 1991).

⁵³ Careaga Villesid, 'Los años de Margarito Ramírez,' p. 224; González Durán, *La rebelión de los mayas*, pp. 58–60.

say in their administration, neither did they have any power to audit the funds of the federation.

Apart from the problems of the Federation, *chicle* sales plummeted as the US companies switched to synthetic chewing gum. After the supply problems experienced during the Second World War, US companies were eager to develop resins based on hydrocarbons. After the Korean War of 1950–1951 manufacturers had found optimal synthetic resins and thus ended their dependence on Mexican *chicle*.

The integration of the Maya

The testimonies of Mayan *chicleros* also reflect the fact that they resented racial discrimination and the state takeover of their forest. The mestizo *chicleros* sometimes harassed their fellow tappers, but to a large extent they tolerated each other. However, the Maya understood that after giving up military and political control to the government, and being disarmed, they had effectively lost control of their territories:

[T]here was a group of *uaches* (Mexicans) that were always looking for trouble. If we were only Maya, there would have been no problem. Sometimes we got tired of being insulted. We resisted fighting insofar as we could, but sometimes we were forced to defend ourselves.

[I] was twenty-one [years old] and the price was \$10 when I left *chicle* [in 1954]. You see, the trees were already *repicados* (over-tapped). Some trees had been tapped three and four times. Some *chicleros* went to tap the same tree each year. Poor dear *zapotes* (sapodilla trees) were finished. Now, after all land is divided into *ejidos*, where can a man look for *zapotes*. Where can we go to exploit anything in fact?⁵⁴

This reference to discrimination was echoed in other interviews made with surviving Mayan *chicleros*:

During my youth I worked [as *chiclero*] forty-five years. From that I got nothing. On the contrary the government took our land and now is even taxing us. The government is the biggest swindler of all. After taking our land they gave us patches of it as in an act of charity, only to dominate us. The government made the money with forest concessions (...)

[T]he governors took my grandparents out of Tulúm.⁵⁵ Then they kicked my family and me out of our *ejido*. Now we have to pay everything, even the transport to our own lands. They are tricky, after they facilitate division of *ejidos*; they

⁵⁴ Interview with a former *chiclero*, José Domingo Castillo Pool, Tihosuco, Quintana Roo, December 2003.

⁵⁵ The *Cruzob* maintained a talking cross in the archaeological site of Tulúm until 1935, when the Federal Army took the site and expelled them. See P. Sullivan, 'Tulúm: A Portal Between Two Worlds', *Arqueología Mexicana*, vol. 9, no. 54 (2002), pp. 98–100.

come to your land offering money to alleviate your needs. ‘And what happen after you sell?’ (...)

[T]he *chicozapote* forest was in *ejidal* lands but the government made the tricks to take possession of it all. The government says you are responsible for taking care of the forest but you cannot exploit it. But if they get a good deal commercially they go and give concessions to fell the forest.⁵⁶

Cooperatives after Cárdenas

The socialist government of President Cárdenas had considered it indispensable that the Federal Government supervised the exploitation of the forest resources. At the time, the chewing gum industry and timber were the most important sources of state revenue. Given the importance of chewing gum exports for the economy of the peninsula of Yucatán and for the country in general, the federal government often intervened in the negotiations of chewing gum price made between the Federation and importers from the USA.

As we have explained the commercialisation of Mexican chewing gum became a function of the federations of *chicle* cooperatives since their foundation in the late 1930s. These federations had a very hierarchical structure. No negotiation or sales of chewing gum could be made without the authorisation of the federation’s president. And since the first federation of chewing gum cooperatives was established in 1937 and Governor Melgar appointed himself president, federations were in the hands of corrupt governors.

It was only after 1978 that democratic election of the presidents of *chicle* cooperatives was introduced. However, this did not bring an end to the State intervention in the processes of production and commercialisation. The entire production of *chicle* was sold through one export company, Impulsadora y Exportadora Nacional (IMPEXNAL), and a branch of the Banco Nacional de Comercio Exterior (National Foreign Trade Bank). This monopoly was created through a government tax law, which exempted IMPEXNAL from paying export taxes. For the producers it was impossible to influence the prices they were paid, and most revenues were accumulated at IMPEXNAL.⁵⁷

The management problems of the federation, its politicisation and lack of financial accountability, led to the establishment of the Plan Piloto Chiclero (PPC) in 1994. The need to reorganise *chicle* production had been under discussion since the 1983 Plan Piloto Forestal, a master plan of Forest Management funded under an agreement between Mexico and Germany.

⁵⁶ Interview with Pablo Canché Balám, Tulúm, 16 December 2003.

⁵⁷ T. de Vries, ‘*Chicle* Commercialization: Institutions, Sustainability and Green Markets,’ unpubl. MA thesis, Florida International University, 2002, pp. 23–24.

Chewing gum extraction was identified as an axis of a diversification process which aimed to improve conservation of the forests of Quintana Roo.

The PPC initiative then led to the founding, four years later of the Unión de Productores de Chicle Natural (Union of Natural Chicle Producers). This organisation is based upon the participation of *chicleros* through a General Assembly, which is convened from participating cooperatives. The union initially represented 24 cooperatives from Quintana Roo and 22 from Campeche. Currently (2005) it represents 17 cooperatives from QR and 34 from Campeche. The total number of registered producers up to date is 2,164.

The union now deals directly with the marketing of chewing gum. But this task has been very difficult to perform. Following the loss of importance of chewing gum for the national economy the Federal Government stopped intervening directly through IMPEXNAL. However the former managers of IMPEXNAL introduced foreign buyers to a new company: Mexitrade. International buyers were initially reluctant to buy from the union as former IMPEXNAL managers had advised them to buy from Mexitrade.

Initially, the union had no choice but to sell to Mexitrade and accept their prices. Although production of *chicle* varied widely below 395 tones per annum, throughout the mid 1990s, until now the price has varied very little, fluctuating from US\$ 3.98 a kilo to a maximum of US\$ 5.31 during the 1999–2000 season. From 1999 to 2002 the price was the same, US\$ 4.46 a kilo. The union started to erode the control of sales of Mexitrade in 1998 by negotiating directly with Wild Things, an organic chewing gum manufacturer from the USA, and with Mitsuba, an intermediary that sells to Japanese gum producers. A small rise in the price of *chicle* during 1999–2000 seasons reflected the entrance of Wild Things into the market. During 2001–2002 season Wild Things paid US\$ 5.25 per kg, whereas Mexitrade paid US\$ 3.50 and Mitsuba US\$ 4.70.⁵⁸

The union management team identified two main obstacles for the development of chewing gum market: the bureaucratic burden and *coyotaje*.

Bureaucracy

There is a series of regulations (and duty stamps) that have to precede the shipping of *chicle*:

- An announcement to the ‘Forest Archive’
- An authorisation of forest exploitation

⁵⁸ Interview with Manuel Aldrete, Manager of PPC, Chetumal, Quintana Roo, 13 November 2003.

- A shipment authorisation issued by the Federal government
- The state authorisation (Official requirement to the state government)
- Authorisation of transport of dried resin to storage houses
- Requirement to the federal government of ‘re-shipment’ of merchandise previously stored.
- Shipment authorisation
- A report and a certificate of requirement each time a part of the authorised quantity of chewing gum would be shipped (as all the *chicle* is not transported at once).

To complicate things further, these procedures cannot be directly made by the PPC, the union or the cooperatives. They have to be undertaken by the each cooperative indirectly through the *comisario ejidal*, since the *Cárdenista* policy that attached cooperatives to *ejidos* has not been reformed. All of the *chicleros* operating in the cooperatives must be members of an *ejido*. The *ejidal* forests are theoretically managed collectively, and officially represented by the *comisario ejidal*. Following these regulations, the forest inspectors must go to the *ejido* and verify the information each time a report is handed in by the *comisario*.

All these bureaucratic procedures diminish the capacity of the union to make contracts and export *chicle*. During 2002–2003 the union was unable to attend the import orders issued from a recently opened Korean market. When the managers of the union explained the procedures to their Korean counterparts, the Koreans thought it impossible for a government to act against the interests of exporters and accused the union of misconduct in commercial practices. Although this matter has now been resolved this experience forced the union to change its marketing strategies. Given the actual conditions and administrative measures to fulfil, the union managers have calculated that they cannot take orders over 900 tonnes a year, even when the total production capacity is 2,000 tonnes per year.⁵⁹

Coyotaje after Cárdenas

Despite the increased intervention of the Mexican federal authorities in most aspects of *chicle* production and marketing, and the setting up of cooperatives among *chicleros*, the web of clientelism and *coyotaje* that underpinned their work, persisted into the period after the formation of the cooperatives. The archives in Chetumal provide examples of occasions on

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

which the cooperatives' officials claimed interference by outside *coyotes*, praying on the vulnerability of their members:

Dear Sir,

As president of the Cooperative LENIN I am informing you that up until now we have no administrator sent to us [from the Federation], the majority of our associates have started extracting and selling *chicle* to several buyers that have arrived here and who I believe have not been authorised to buy *chicle*. These persons are Maurilio Sanchez, whom I understand buys *chicle* for Mr Humberto Rodríguez; Manuel Hernandez [who buys] for the contractor Erales; Eduardo Rodriguez and many others [who buy for themselves]. Thus the cooperative is all a mess and when the chewing gum collector [of the Federation] will come it will be a huge problem, as these people are paying \$7.60 and \$8.00 [per kilogram] for *chicle*, thus when they [the associates] start working for the cooperative nobody will want to hand his *chicle* to the collector (...)

It is a shame that all this *chicle* is being smuggled and this damages my interests as I will not receive the commission of three tons [of *chicle*] that had already being taken, and if some measure is not taken to stop these [illegal] buyers they will continue to damage the [works of the] cooperative.⁶⁰

As was seen after the rebellion against Margarito Ramírez, the state's policy was that of further alienating cooperatives members from the management boards. *Chicleros* had seen the disappearance of the Federation Funds in front of their eyes and witnessed how the Federal Government and the party (Partido Revolucionario Institucional – PRI) let those responsible get away with it. There were some initiatives to restore confidence in the cooperative movement, but the main challenge of 'democratising' rural society was never accomplished. The hegemonic party of the Mexican state and of the 'Revolution', the PRI, which held power in Mexico until the arrival of President Fox, effectively prevented any such reforms.

The agrarian reform of Cárdenas (collective *ejidos* and cooperatives) did not change the way *chicleros* operated. In fact, just like the *permisionarios* in the 1930s and the Cooperative Federation after the 1940s, the PPC works to this day within the same *enganche* system. There are however some improvements to the organisation. The *Chicle* cooperatives make payments for technical studies and as taxation on the level of forest exploitation. The cooperatives also manage contributions for a retirement fund, which covers the costs of hospitalisation and the sickness fund, through which *chicleros* have access to health services. The *chicleros* have also witnessed fluctuations in the price of *chicle*, around \$42 a kilo during the last four seasons. Discounting the taxes and the fund contributions, a *chiclero* is paid

⁶⁰ Federación de Cooperativas de Q. Roo, File documents 1959. Document: Annex to doc No. 261. From Presidente de la Coop José B. Uc, to: Javier Arjona Palma, Gerente General, Federación de Cooperativas de Q.Roo. State Archives, Chetumal, Quintana Roo.

\$32 per kilogram (year 2004). *Chicleros* recognise this as fair, taking into account the services provided.

The major change in the organisational structure made by the PPC is that the cooperative representatives are required to be former *chicleros*, members of the cooperative and elected by them. These representatives frequently attend meetings and workshops in Carrillo Puerto and Chetumal where they are informed of the union marketing operations and also discuss the management strategies of the cooperatives. In the meetings during the 2003–2004 seasons the cooperative representatives identified *coyotaje* as the biggest threat to the union.

Coyotaje does not operate differently today from the way it worked in the 1920s, 1940s or 1960s. The continuance of *coyotaje* is a consequence of limited market opportunities, and an entangled relationship between government offices and departments and foreign investors.

Coyotes approach *chicleros* and offer them a superior price to that offered by the cooperatives. *Coyotes* can offer higher prices, as they do not pay for any of the costs that cooperatives have already incurred, and because they smuggle *chicle* to Chetumal. In Chetumal, Mexitrade (which was the main buyer of *chicle* until 2004) used to buy the *chicle* from *coyotes* through intermediary companies, like PFSCA (Forest Products of Southeast Mexico and Central America). PFSCA is mainly dedicated to the commercialisation of valuable hardwoods, but is currently experimenting with the commercialisation of Non Traditional Forest Products as well.

The conflicts of Mexitrade with the union increased after the 1998–1999 season. Following the Asian financial crisis the markets for natural chewing gum in Asia declined dramatically. Mexitrade had already bought the *chicle* production from the union but was unable to sell it in the Asian market and thus refused to make any further payments. The union sought an agreement with Mexitrade but the company refused to take any responsibility. At the end, the union went to court.⁶¹ In response Mexitrade started refusing to buy directly from the union and made the commercial agreements with PFSCA. ‘I understand Mexitrade presented some objections to working directly with PPC union and thus we filled the commercial space available,’ explained PFSCA secretary.⁶²

During the 2002–2003 seasons PFSCA supplied Mexitrade with 150 tones of *chicle*. PFSCA offered \$43 per kilo of *chicle* to anyone who offered it to them. Thus, *coyotes* were in a position to offer a higher price than that offered

⁶¹ After a lengthy process the court has decided in favour of the union and ordered Mexitrade to pay the fees plus interests. Despite the order, no payment has taken place yet. Interview with Manuel Aldrete, Manager of PPC, Chetumal, Quintana Roo, 13 May 2005.

⁶² Interview with Norma Azuara Salas, Secretary of PFSCA, Chetumal, Quintana Roo, 13 November 2003.

by the cooperatives to *chicleros*, and still managed to make a very good profit (10 per cent investment return in a three months period).

PFSCA is a family company; José Luis Azuara is the manager, while his sister, Norma, is the Secretary. Their brother Aldo Azuara works for Semarnat (Secretariat of Environment and Natural Resources) the institution that has at its discretion the provision of permits for the transport of *chicle*. Aldo Azuara offered an explanation for the PFSCA encouragement of *coyotes*, 'intermediaries are necessary because the foreigners do not understand local uses and cultural practices (...) In the case of *chicle*, the intermediaries know the history of exploitation, the divergences and polarisation between different zones of the State'.⁶³

Conclusion

Cárdenas' unequalled charisma and his commitment towards improving the labour conditions of the Mexican peasantry has made it difficult for Mexican historians to develop a critical assessment of his government's policies and their full implications. The Cárdenas land reforms were decisively aimed at helping the Mexican peasants. Previous critical assessments have focused on the effectiveness of his agrarian reform in transforming labour relations and assuring economic stability. Before Cárdenas no one had managed to consolidate sufficient political power to confront the Yucatán *hacendados*. The dismantling of the biggest political units in the Yucatán Peninsula, the handing of the land to peasants in the form of collective *ejidos*, and the formation of cooperatives, have all been seen as major revolutionary advances. However, these analyses were incomplete, as they did not attach weight to the external factors that have also influenced economic prosperity in the region.

The effect of Mexican state intervention in sustaining the *chicle* industry and politically incorporating the Maya needs more detailed analysis as well. The cooperative movement failed to bring an end to the segregation of indigenous peoples; in some respects it can even be seen as institutionalising Mayan separation. Paternalistic intervention in the forest economies of the region facilitated corruption, which prevented the creation of sustainable management of forest resources in the Yucatán Peninsula. The agrarian reform of Cárdenas left an ambivalent legacy in the Yucatán Peninsula, and one that needs to be understood if more sustainable forms of forest exploitation are to be developed in future.

⁶³ Interview with Aldo Azuara Salas, SEMARNAT, Chetumal, Quintana Roo, 13 November 2003.

The implications of the history of *chicle* for patterns of production and consumption are also interesting. While the Mexican government of Cárdenas was looking for economic stability through the control of the factors of production, in the United States they had already understood that capitalist power derived from the management of consumption as well. Cárdenas' agrarian reform was conceived and planned from Mexico City, and did not take into consideration the particularities of Yucatán. It completely ignored the Mayan people's process of adaptation and cultural particularities. While in Mexico rural cooperativism was seen as a way of Mexicanising the Indians and tying peasant movement to the revolutionary project, in the United States consumerism was already being used to deliver market-based economic policies. The Mexican state aimed at the opposite; it sought ways to address social policy that were at once 'progressive' and 'modern', but which often served to reduce the autonomy of the individual, and succeeded in tying the producer more closely to the increasingly ubiquitous state.