

NEW MIGRATIONS FROM YUCATÁN: TERRITORIES AND REMITTANCES

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Abstract

This article seeks to call attention to a region that, in the past decade, has become a major remittance recipient. Remittance-sending migrants hail from a variety of rural areas in the state of Yucatan, but the data available for analysis is still incipient. A brief amount of historically-based fieldwork and an up to date assessment of these new emigration territories contribute to this area of study.

Keywords: migration, remittances territory, growth, Yucatan

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SOCIO-ECONOMIC TRANSFORMATIONS IN THE STATE OF YUCATÁN.

The State of Yucatán, located in southeast Mexico, covers an area of 39,612 km., 342 km of which are coastline. It contributes 1.42% of the national GDP (INEGI, 2010: 34) and, according to the National Institute of Statistics, Geography and Informatics (INEGI), it had 1,818,948 inhabitants in 2005; 49.30% were male and the remaining 50.70% were women (INEGI, 2005: 1). It currently has a total of 1,955,577 people, 992,244 of them women and 963,333 men (INEGI, 2010). The largest population concentration is found in the state capital, Mérida, which is inhabited by 830,732 people (i.e., 42.48% of the state total). Like the rest of the state, the city has a very balanced ratio between the sexes, although women are slightly higher at 51.68%: this is probably due to the recent immigration wave of female laborers who work in the domestic, manufacture and hospitality sectors.

Yucatan covers 2% of the total surface area of Mexico and has a very high percentage of indigenous or mestizo population (65.5% in 2000). In comparison with the rest of the national territory, it is also one of the entities that has retained its indigenous tongue (Mayan) even though Spanish plays a considerable role.

Although cross-border migration processes in the Yucatan Peninsula go back a few decades, transnational migration from this state comprises the most recent wave in Mexico; national and transnational migration comprised almost 9% of the total state population in 2004 (157,339 people; INDEMAYA, 2004¹; see Table 1). Out of this total, 24% (i.e., 37,601 people) is transnational. Yucatecan migration to different states of United States has increased notably over time (see Charts 1 and 2).

During the 1930s and, specifically, in 1937, social production relations in the state changed. The cardenista agrarian reform was carried

1. INDEMAYA points that, in 2006, 39 U.S. cities awarded 4,341 registrations to Yucatecan migrants: 34% in San Francisco, 19% in Los Angeles, 9% in Oxnard, 7% in Portland. Although the number of applications decreased by 2007, the Yucatecan migrant U.S. destinations remain the same (INDEMAYA, 2010: 1-2). I acknowledge the support provided by the head of this institution, Abigail NO HAY APELLIDO, along with that of some of her close collaborators as well as the data and logistical support they provided, which has twice enabled us to carry out some of our fieldwork.

out and 150,000 peasants sought to gain collective land rights (ejido). Notwithstanding the reform's importance, we must also remember that it prevented these production units from being managed independently; the system established a paternalist relationship between the ejido owner and the state that echoed the previous one between landowner and laborer. Women remained on the margins of the productive sphere, and only male children were entitled to join the ranks of the ejidatarios. Consequently, women reproduced these sexist parameters and were always more interested in educating their sons rather than their daughters.

Rural Yucatecan women became a coveted political clientele in the late 1960s. During the early 1970s, social unrest erupted in the sisal-production region—the most important in the state—which began to experience isolated social protests. The wives of the sisal ejidatarios resented, in their role as purchasers of goods, the effect the reduction in working days during which ejidatarios were hired had on the domestic economy. It was precisely during this juncture that, in the 1970s, the sisal-production region determined the future of the vast majority of rural families and, in our opinion, marked the beginning of a change of conduct in the matriarchal structure: the sisal women, interested in safeguarding communal traditions, significantly altered their behavior.

This road to a transition where matriarchy became crucial in the safekeeping of Yucatecan rural identity and the fall of the sisal industry also ran parallel to the rise of the so-called coastal development poles we refer to as the “Cancun mirage.” While, at the beginning, Cancun mostly attracted male migrants working in construction, it subsequently began to receive waves of temporary migrants hailing from most of rural Yucatan, this time with a greater contingent of female labor involved in domestic work and, at later stages and already with better qualifications, the management and hospitality sectors. The first migratory flux from the main municipalities of the former sisal region reached Cancun, the main center of development of the Riviera Maya, in this disarticulated economic space. Most workers were men employed in construction, and either they or their children later moved into the service sector (Re

Cruz, 1996: 167-181).² Subsequent migration waves incorporated an increasingly large amount of female workers. These women might have foregone their traditional clothes but, in many cases, maintained certain rituals, legends, and concepts of the Yucatecan Maya cultural memory (Mendoza Rosales, 2009: 117-118).

Migration eventually widened to encompass other rural areas that were not experiencing enough local economic development to guarantee survival and an improved quality of life. It is from the above considerations that we intend to raise some questions regarding Mexico's most recent wave of international migration.

THE LESSENING OF STATE PRESENCE AND THE DISMANTLING OF RURAL YUCATÁN.

The erosion of the ejido institution in Mexico had been under way internally and accelerated as the national government, the receiving and intermediary party as far as credit was concerned, pulled away.

The case of the *tesis* ejido in Yucatán is a very relevant example. During the 1980s, Mexico underwent its most important national economic transformation and started on the path toward state deregulation and lessened state presence, also a turning point for the countryside. Yucatán, which at the end of the 1990s only contributed 1.30% of the national GDP (INEGI, 2003: 40), was among the states chosen to activate this economic policy and, according to us, was specifically selected in order to measure the docility and acceptance of very low

2. Alicia Re Cruz shows how the different migration waves of a single community (Cham Kom) manifest great socio-economic diversity depending on the different stages and sociopolitical relations of Cancun immigrants since the end of the 1970s. The first ones attained their dream and became small business owners and important political figures in their community. Subsequent generations became "the Cancun ones"—those who, among the people of rural Cham Kom, were regarded as having attained "the Mecca of economic success." The analytical sketch of Cham Kom during the 1990s shows two different, juxtaposed worlds that do not result in synthesis or social uniformity. These peasant and emigrant worlds express different migration-related experiences via cultural representation. Images, symbols and representations such as the *milpa* (growing agricultural field) are recreated as a response to the socio-economic and political contexts of the moment (Re Cruz, 1996: 167-181).

cost employment by international capital (i.e., manufacturing). The dismantling of the rural system was carried out via institutional decrepitude and its economic inability to compete with the production rate and prices available in the free market. In the last years of the 20th century, most of the former sisal region had already been overrun by wild vegetation and only some crops belonging to the so-called parcelarios remained. Towns such as Teya, Chapab, Sacalum, Abala, Tetiz, Kinchil, Ucú, Timucuy, Bokobá, to mention only a few, are vacated in the early morning by a population that only returns home to sleep (Iglesias Lesaga, 2000:10).

Yucatan needed this rural workforce in order to provide international capital with plentiful, cheap, and docile laborers (manufacturing workers in Mexico's northern border receive twice the wages paid in Yucatan). This allowed for high rotation rates among employees (Castilla Ramos and Torres Góngora, 1998: 106-112; Gravel, 2006: 51-66).

Companies planned this absorption of labor during a time of transition in the behavior of rural communities: they approached them and based manufacturing factories in most of the former sisal towns (Ramírez Carrillo, 2006: 7-10).³ Since 1995, the industrial policies of Yucatan continue to favor the Neo-Keynesian approach as the only possible way of generating economic growth.

CHARACTERISTICS OF THE MIGRATORY PHENOMENON IN YUCATN.

The migration problem in Yucatán comprises two different flows: internal migration within the state and to neighboring Quintana Roo, and international emigration, mostly to the United States and, in particular, the state of California.

According to recent INDEMAYA information, internal migration mostly targets the city of Mérida and the state of Quintana Roo (INDEMAYA, 2010: 2-14). This migration is mostly, though not exclusively, male; according to this study, women do not exceed 20% of the

3. The author goes through and analyzes the different stages in the establishment of manufacturing in Yucatan during the past few decades.

total. The average age is between 25 and 29 years of age, and over 60% of them are Maya speakers. They are mostly employed in construction, cooking, cleaning, and, in most cases, return periodically to their communities of origin—especially those who work in Mérida, their major labor market hub.⁴

The migration phenomenon has many faces and can be approached in many ways. Migration and, specifically, immigration, entail starting and arrival points. This study examines migration in a region with marginal economic growth rates, vast social inequality, and low economic development.

To study Yucatecan transnational migration, one of Mexico's most recent, entails thinking of a specific background: the experience of working in the Cancun and Riviera Maya tourist labor market. We should emphasize that, unlike the flows issuing from traditional emigration areas (Aguascalientes, Colima, Durango, Guanajuato, Jalisco, Michoacán, Nayarit, San Luis Potosí and Zacatecas) and according to the scant extant research on the subject, the first Yucatecan migrant group can be traced back to the mid-1970s (Ojeda Cerón, 1988). By the 1980s, the presence of Yucatecan migrants in United States was already substantial, but it had been decades since the first contingents of Mexican guest workers started migrating.

Yucatecan migration has very specific characteristics which we believe are inherent to its marginal rural status and the relatively late rural dismantling in the state. As mentioned in the preceding paragraph, the former sisal zone, the state's main production and population hub, was in severe decline by the early 1960s. This was followed by two decades of population loss and the beginning of the Cancun tourist industry. Work in the Cancun and, later, in the Riviera Maya tourist industries (which first attracted males, then females, then entire nuclear families and, finally, women cut loose from the family nucleus) entailed a modus

4. INDEMAYA has only provided us with some general percentage data, since this is a survey built around a certain number of cases and only covers some migration trends. We cannot identify the specific type of work in these two areas, which comprise from highly qualified staff in the hospitality sector to those who work in a variety of tourism-related tasks. We did not include other indicators involving place of origin and destination given the survey's characteristics.

vivendiand kind of qualification until then unknown by the state's rural and urban (i.e., Mérida) populations.

A study of Cancun immigration must consider natural phenomena such as the Gilbert (1988) and Isidore (2002) hurricanes and their effect on transnational emigration during the past decade. Both hurricanes wrecked rural areas. Gilbert damaged the already eroded sisal region and affected the beekeeping industry, a traditional Maya activity, as well as the incipient fishing industry.⁵ Isidore subsequently devastated a much stronger fishing industry along the shores of Sisal, among others. While natural phenomena such as these ravaged crops, businesses and the hotel infrastructure, the latter was widely restructured on both occasions—so the hurricanes ironically provided a solution for those seeking laborers in the construction and services sectors.

TRANSNATIONAL MIGRATION

*"I see migration as a way to arm oneself
and procure benefits to prevent migration."
"Life stories,"*

NAOMI ADELSON,

The early history of Yucatecan transnational migration, mainly to the United States, goes back to the late 1970s. The major destinations at that point seem to have been the city of Los Angeles and surrounding counties. Currently and according to the only extant survey on this phenomenon, the migration flow has spread throughout U.S. territory (INDEMAYA,

5. In regard to Gilbert's impact, Iglesias says: "The meteor destroyed 55,000 acres of crops in Yucatán with a approximate value of \$16,000,000,000.00*. The vegetable, maize, sorghum, beans, Aloe Vera, peanut, rice, fruit and other harvests disappeared almost in their entirety (80%). ... The Government of the State of Yucatán rushed to launch a replanting program at a time when disappointment is already widespread among the peasants. The damage to the fishing sector has been considerable: Dzilam Bravo and Telchac Puerto are just two examples among many others. During the week after the hurricane, Celestún alone sustained fishing losses estimated around \$14,000,000.00. [This also includes?] the stagnation of the fishmeal and freezing industries, and the loss of frozen product in the premises at the time of the hurricane (Iglesias, 1988)." (*in 1988 pesos)

2004).⁶ In 2004, 77% of Yucatecan migrants were in California; 9% in Oregon; 6% in Colorado; Texas, Nevada, Washington, Springfield (¿por qué se da aquí una ciudad y en lo demás un estado?) Missouri, Utah and Florida each had 1%. It was not possible to identify the place of destination for the remaining 2% (see Graphs 1 and 2). By 2004, the total number of Yucatecan migrants was 37,601. Of these, 36,803 (98%) were in the United States. Currently and according to recent studies, there are already 45,000 emigrants from 101 municipalities.⁷

In our view, the most outstanding facts about transnational Yucatecan migration can be listed as follows:

1. This is a late migration flow in relation to those in the rest of the country and is generally comprised of a high number of unemployed laborers who have been unable to find work in the manufacturing sector and hail from the former sisal region, other rural areas and the Riviera Maya.
2. It is a very young migration that dates back to the late 1970s and early 1980s.
3. It is still not very representative regarding the number of migrants but has very strong bonds to families and communities of origin, as shown by remittance frequency.⁸ These are usually monthly or fortnightly. Municipalities with a higher emigration rate also receive them weekly. (See Graph)
4. This migration must be seen in the context of increased regional diversification in national migration flows.

6. I thank the invaluable support of Estela Guzmán, who provided me with the sources that have allowed us to obtain some of the data mentioned in this paper.

7. Five of the most populated municipalities of the state have yet to be examined: Mérida, Tizimin, Uman, Kanasin and Valladolid. See Exponen diagnóstico por fenómeno de desplazamiento demográfico, (SIPSE, Grupo Milenio, Mérida, Yucatán, 2010, <http://www.sipse.com/noticias/40779-bajan-23-remesas-yucatecos--.html>.)

8. Although the amount of remittances decreased during 2010 due to the U.S. crisis, remittance frequency has increased and remains an important source of income for families in places of origin. The case study carried out by INDEMAYA-COBAY-UTM (“Estudio regional de la migración en Yucatán”) determined that remittances usually reach an average of 2,000 Mexican pesos per month and only certain villages receive up to 60% more in family remittances.

5. It is an increasingly young and mostly male migration; some leave their communities aged 16 or 17. There is currently no extensive statistical data involving gender in the case of Yucatan and the information provided here is based on several field studies (the most recent a case study carried out in specific villages). Given that these men are mostly lowly qualified workforce who are unemployed, lack prospects in rural areas and are also very young, “contagion” or “taking a shot at it” should be included among the reasons to migrate.
6. It is a migration where communities of origin share common or inherent features: something has “ignited” transnational migration.⁹
7. At the same time, Yucatecan migration has some things in common with the rest of Mexican transnational migration: just like in other areas of the country, the “more successful” transnational migrants are those who migrated internally first had contact with other cultures. The most significant example for the Yucatecans is Cancún/Riviera Maya, which functions as a sort of “school” or “migration springboard” to the United States (Cornelius, Fitzgerald and Lewin, 2007).¹⁰
8. Although this is currently difficult to assess due to lack of data, the change of religious beliefs among an important fraction of the migrant population would appear to have a directly proportional relation to behavioral change, especially in regards to controlled alcohol consumption which would otherwise be regulated by the presence of the family.

9. Several fieldwork studies include the testimony of migrant pioneers, whom we call “catalysts.” They, in turn, acted as receptors in the country of destination. “When I first arrived in San Francisco in 1988 there was no one from Yucatán here... at most there were twenty of us... but some years ago, all the boys began to leave the village to come here,” says Santos Nic, a 51-year-old elementary school teacher who arrived in 1978 and unofficially became the community leader. “We came to California in search of gold,” says Jorge, “but without the teacher we would not have made it. He tells us stories about our Mayan land... we speak [Maya] among us, and if anyone needs an interpreter, then we help out.” Another significant case is that of owner of the Tommy’s restaurant on Geary Avenue, who left Oxnard to arrive in San Francisco with a guest worker program and, in the 1960s, moved his entire nuclear family there, following later with his extended family. “For many of the new Mayan immigrants, Tomás is like family” (Garance Burke “Indígenas mexicanos migrantes en Estados Unidos”).

10. See “The Interface between Internal and International Migration,” in Cornelius, Fitzgerald and Lewin (2007), *Mayan Journeys: The new migration from Yucatan to the United States*. In this article, Rodríguez, Wittlinger and Manzanero ??? Esto está incompleto en el original.

9. Changes in nuclear family relationships have allowed women to play proactive roles, especially among recent migration flows. Nowadays, a young daughter or wife has the option of participating in the international labor market.
10. Even though the migration started in some rural areas of the former sisal zone, it has now spread to the old citrus- and maize-growing regions, as well the livestock areas and others across most of the state.¹¹
11. It is a mostly rural migration that, according to the latest studies, follows the same trend of other transnational migration flows from across Mexico.¹²
12. The origin of migrants, who mostly hail from bilingual Maya-Spanish communities, does not directly relate to a decrease in transnational migration.¹³ On the contrary, we believe that the “marginalization” many of these indigenous migrants suffer in the United States is neutralized by vernacular exchanges, which creates closer ties between the various Maya communities and fosters new migratory flows.

11. This is the case of the Tunkás municipality, where the impact of migration is such that emigration has become a tradition. Originally a timber, furniture and handicrafts producer, it has become one of Yucatan’s major migrant-sending localities given the scant local employment opportunities. At the same time, most of the population has converted to Evangelical Christianity and this helps them in their place of destination (Travis Silva et al, 2007: 29-48; García and Romero, 2007: 115-139).

12. The changes in the urban/rural composition of Mexican migration to the United States in the past decades have been characterized by high urban participation during the 1980s and its decrease during the 1990s, which reflects the complexity and dynamism of these flows. The recent “ruralization” of the migration flows cannot be seen as a final transformation. The fact that certain trends such as this one appear to reverse in such a short time demands the need for new and less rigid interpretive frameworks that can understand and accommodate these apparently unexpected situations (Lozano, 2001: 11).

13. The greater the amount of indigenous inhabitants, the lower the number of declared international migrants. This leads us to assume a lower incidence of international migration in municipalities with a mostly indigenous population. The author of this study clarifies that in some states such as Yucatan and according to the 2000 Census (INEGI), there are no international migrants in municipalities where 60% of the population speaks an indigenous language. We believe this is a mistake, a byproduct of the census’ very structure and is due to, among other things, communal fear of providing accurate data: the reasons are diverse and beyond the scope of this paper. For more, see Darío Antonio López Villar’s “La migración de la población hablante de lengua indígena en el sureste mexicano,” in *Población y salud en Mesoamérica*.

13. The so-called labor niches for Mexican immigrants are even more reduced for Yucatecan migrants than for those hailing from traditional migration areas and the north of Mexico: the docility of the Yucatecan workforce directs these low-skilled laborers toward the worst paid jobs.¹⁴
14. Yucatecan migrants are beginning to show signs of vulnerability regarding mental health: depression, drug addiction and, more recently, criminality threaten an important contingent of recent migrants.

WHY MIGRATE? SURVIVAL WITHOUT DEVELOPMENT

The main reason for Yucatecan migration to the United States appears to be the fact that the emigrants have relatives or community acquaintances who have gone there previously and “attained” the American dream—so that, nowadays, they can get work in restaurants as dishwashers or waiters, or have joined with other members of the Latino community in the agricultural sector. There are other very important reasons, including the chance to earn more and attain a better quality of life (either for the nuclear or extended family). A clear example are the construction of materials that are replacing the Mayan house without doing away entirely with the traditional *modus vivendi*. Toward the end of the 1990s, the gradual transformation of the rural Yucatecan space was most evident in the former sisal area¹⁵ and is now manifesting in the former citrus-growing zone. This is largely a byproduct of the high international migration rate in these areas and an increase in remittances. In a brief and recent field study in the town of Oxkutzcab and nearby villages in the same municipality (e.g., Xohuayan), we found that the number of two-level, masonry homes are very numerous and stand out among the old Mayan housing in the area.

14. Elaine Levine has studied this problem among Mexican and Central American migrants in Los Angeles, California (Levine, 2005: 108-136).

15. This type of social and cultural change in the Yucatan peninsula has been studied by Othón Baños Ramírez in *Modernidad, imaginario e identidad rurales, el caso de Yucatán* (2003) and “El hábitat maya rural de Yucatán: entre la tradición y la modernidad.”

All of the above leads us to the clearest manifestation of emigration: family remittances, the amounts of which have been growing significantly: over 100% in the 2003-2007 period (see Remittances graph). This is an important and unprecedented migratory change for the State of Yucatán but, when compared to international migrant remittances across Mexico, the amount is quite low (Gongora Gómez, 2007: 56). During the mid-1990s, family remittances sent to Yucatán amounted to a mere 11 billion U.S. dollars which, by 2006, had increased almost 900% (Góngora Gómez, 2007: 59).

A significant decrease began in 2008 and became evident in 2009, when remittances in Yucatán fell by about 23 or 24 million dollars in regards to the previous year (Insert Figure 1, Yucatán remittances and tables). This reflected national remittance trends for the same period. In spite of the U.S. economic crisis, a large number of migrants have maintained more than one job for long periods; this has allowed them to keep sending remittances, even if the amounts are lower. We must keep in mind that migrants currently exceed the 45 thousand mark, and that most of whom are very young and have only recently arrived in the target destination. According to a number of studies, this feature is significant given that those migrants who have spent a short period of time in their target destinations send remittances more frequently and consistently. Fieldwork leads us to confirm that this is also the case in the major emigration areas of Yucatán.

Most U.S. remittances sent to Yucatán come from migrants residing in California. Unfortunately we do not have data regarding receiving municipalities, which would allow us to assess frequency and amount across the different localities of origin. However, comparing the migration density of Oxkutzkab municipality, formerly known as the orchard of Yucatán, we find that areas with the largest number of migrants also receive the highest remittance amounts.¹⁶ We cannot ignore so-called

16. For over a decade, San Francisco, California, has been the main U.S. target destination for Yucatecan migrants. Most come from Oxkutzkab and comprise a tight network of mostly young people who live in dangerously overcrowded places and send remittances to their families so they can build a house in a reasonable amount of time; earning that kind of money would take over twenty years in their place of origin (Adelson, 2002).

“catalysts” in the place of destination, which attract people belonging to certain communities and could shape remittance-sending behavior.¹⁷ We must remember that, in addition to international remittances, families and communities also receive money from temporary or established migrants in the Riviera Maya and the more recent flows to Merida.

Remittances have alleviated poverty in Yucatan and entail a policy of survival, as explained by scholars in the field of international migration (García Zamora, 2008: 435). It is clear that remittances do not bring about a model of development and, in the case of Yucatán, are not even a minor growth factor. They merely ensure survival; only in some noteworthy cases do they increase quality of life through accrued wages that would take over four times as long to earn in the place of origin. Both Rodolfo García Zamora (García Zamora, 2008: 435) and Raúl Delgado Wise (Delgado Wise et al, 2006: 121-137) have stated that remittances are a wage-based income meant to ensure survival:

Remittances are the way in which this fraction of migrant wages is transferred to families and communities of origin to ensure familial and communal social reproduction, just like any other wage-based income in these or other communities. Remittances are, undoubtedly, a wage fund; that is their meaning and function as a macroeconomic variable (García Zamora, 2008: 435).

CONCLUSION

The potential magnitude migration could attain in the near future demands planning on the part of the federal and state governments—in this particular case, the state of Yucatán. There is a need for local development projects that prioritize endogenous development on the basis of local economic potential (e.g., the restoration of the beekeeping, fruit and vegetable industries) and, on the other hand, create a space for new technological developments that attract national or foreign capital investment and go beyond the mere use of unemployed workforce

17. See Naomi Adelson (2002), Juan Rodríguez Gal et al (2007), and Garance Burke (2002), who address specific migrant communities in the state of Yucatán.

in manufacturing activities. "I see migration as a way to arm oneself and procure benefits to prevent migration," said a migrant. The number of returning, temporary Yucatecan migrants is already decreasing given the costs and risks involved crossing the border without papers. The question is: will those who dream of returning, settling and working in their homeland actually be able to do it in the near future?

The national trend of circular Mexican migration is starting to crumble: the U.S. unemployment crisis and extreme U.S. border security measures are making irregular crossing more and more difficult. This is already a growing trend in Yucatan. There have been no returns this past year, but neither have there been departures.

Currently, the state government is concerned about addressing the vulnerability of mostly undocumented Yucatecan migrants living in the United States during one of the steepest recessions in over half a century. Instruments that enable migrants to cope with their immigration status are being created, but there are no significant long-term public policies for growth and sustainable development, new effective education projects, or the future incorporation of skilled labor in major migration areas. Unfortunately, what is portrayed as public policies is but a mere palliative to an economic model that cannot create the jobs that would stop international migration.

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