

A Tale of Two Ek'Balam: Opportunities and Challenges of Community-based Tourism Development Among the Yucatán Maya

Review by Jason Edward Miller

Taylor, Sarah R. 2018. *On Being Maya and Getting By: Heritage Politics and Community Development in Yucatán*. Boulder: University Press of Colorado.

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Most of the residents who live in the rural village of Ek'Balam (next to the Ek'Balam archaeological site and the local community-based tourism (CBT) project in the Yucantán region of Mexico) are Maya. But what makes someone *Maya* and how do you market that Maya-ness to others? These questions underpin Sarah R. Taylor's 2018 ethnography *On Being Maya and Getting By: Heritage Politics and Community Development in Yucatán*. Based on eight years of longitudinal participant observation and ethnographic fieldwork among local residents, Taylor explores how political, historical, and economic processes have created and continue to impact Maya tourism in this region in Mexico.

Taylor argues that previous models of understanding Maya identity or peasant populations more broadly (such as folk-urban continuum or notions of the Maya as a homogenous community) are too limited because they look only at certain factors. Instead, Taylor advocates for an approach that “contributes to our understanding of how a group of people negotiates and maneuvers through a web of social programs, tourists, volunteers, and external expectations to live their daily lives” (18). Taylor employs a model she calls “ecosystem of authenticity” (21) to understand how various actors, pieces of policy, economics, and natural systems intersect in the village and contribute to identity. This model begins with understanding the legacy of the *ejidal* system (a communally based land tenure system in Mexico dating to the 1920s) and culminates with understanding global political economy as it relates to tourism. Taylor describes a diverse community in terms of both people and perspectives that are: “actively involved in daily negotiations with tourists, volunteers, state and federal funders, and each other. It is through these negotiations and their perceptive, intentional maneuvering that residents are able “to be Maya and get by” (25).

The book is organized into seven numbered chapters plus two unnumbered chapters. The unnumbered introduction introduces the reader to the archaeological site of Ek'Balam as well as the modern town of the same name. Each of the subsequent numbered chapters incorporate an ethnographic vignette featuring members of the ethno-fictional *Ay Mena* family who are

participants in the Ek'Balam CBT project. Members of the Ay Mena family are a composite of various local residents encountered by Taylor during fieldwork. The first chapter introduces the reader to the various members of this family as well as lays out the approach the book will take and summarizes the organization of the rest of the book. The second chapter is largely concerned with methods and includes sections noting the kin relationships of local community members as well as maps of local communities. Chapters three, four, and five contain a significant amount of contextualizing literature concerning tourism, development, and indigeneity; the policy history of Mexico's land tenure system; and community and tourism development, respectively. Taylor weaves a review of the literature in with ethnographic examples from her own work in Ek'Balam in each of these chapters. Chapter six finds Taylor describing substantive ethnographic examples of the creation of Maya-ness via the analysis of several rituals and the tension that exists between local residents and other state actors who have a stake in the region's "development." Chapter seven returns to a nuanced discussion of the role of kin groups as a lens to explore "making it" or the success of the CBT project. The text ends with a short unnumbered conclusion chapter with the author's final thoughts and opportunities for future research.

Taylor writes in the style of a more traditional ethnography with reflexive elements. The prose is clear, accessible, and easy to understand (if not a bit repetitive in places). The text would find itself at home in an undergraduate classroom or by a casual reader interested in the topic as well as those who have more experience with the subject matter. In chapter two, Taylor discusses her use of classic anthropological methods, such as kinship charts and map making, as part of her participant observation as well as a humorous discussion of Taylor's arrival into the community and early rapport building with residents. These sections of the text provide both practical and engaging links to larger discussions of methods and kinship in an introductory course. The ethnographic vignettes of the Ay Mena family are engaging—especially as the book goes on and the children grow into adults. Vignettes featuring the family's matriarch, Doña Gomercinda (or Doña Goma for short) are also particularly engaging. Readers will likely enjoy how she prepares for and then "performs" her Maya-ness for tourists from the local *Hotel Eden* in her home's kitchen using a traditional stone *metate* to grind corn into masa flour which is brought out and used only when tourists are around. Chapter six's discussion of the Cha'a Chaak ceremony was arguably the richest ethnographic example in the text. This rain-calling ceremony was traditionally held annually but has only been held sporadically more recently. On request of development funders, the ceremony was performed again, albeit mostly for the tourists, volunteers, development agents, and government officials while actual Maya women worked in the kitchen. While Ek'Balam residents feel the ceremony went very well, others feel it "wasn't Maya enough." Here, Taylor's ethnographic analysis shines as she uses the notion of tourist's gaze (a variant of Foucault's *medical gaze*) to understand how Maya and others viewed the ceremony differently.

These ethnographic sections also provide something of a missed opportunity. Readers may find themselves wanting more—more of the vignettes and more deep analysis of them. Early in the text, Taylor passingly mentions using thick description (13, 20). However, most of the vignettes are too short and pass much too quickly to qualify as *thick*. While Taylor's rhetorical focus is clearly on the fictional composite Ay Mena family, we do not hear at all from the tourists or volunteers themselves, other residents who belong to one of the other five lineages in the community rendering her conclusions somewhat one-sided. Taylor makes reference to this fact

in Chapter two where she utilizes transect walks as a way of learning more about other points of view in the community (36-38). However, after a relatively brief discussion this is not mentioned again. Taylor also does not include any of the transect walk maps which is frustrating given the book includes so many maps (which often lack detail and are hard to interpret) and that the approach sounds so interesting! The largest critique of the text is that it lacks focus. Readers may be left wondering what exactly this book is about. Local economics? Maya identity and indigeneity? Community-based Tourism? Taylor attempts to weave many threads together here in a short amount of time-- only 132 pages including many charts, maps, and graphs. This is not much space for an ethnography, especially one with so much to say. Disappointingly, relatively scant attention is given to the community-based tourism project even though it is continually mentioned throughout the text and is in the book's title. Likewise, while there are recurring mentions of resident's fretting over out-migration to larger cities, this feels very underdeveloped and a missed opportunity. Conversely, much space is given to the history of Mexico's *ejidal* system. While this historical context is useful and necessary, it takes up too much space arguably better spent on deeper ethnographic accounts and analysis.

On Being Maya and Getting By is sure to be a useful text in introductory anthropology classrooms while also appealing to general audiences looking to learn more about the Maya world. Taylor's "ecosystem of authenticity" provides a compelling analytical lens through which to more closely examine community-based tourism and community development work in the context of indigenous authenticity. These conversations are critical for not just the Maya, but for us all as we consider notions of identity, economics, and getting by today.

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