Bullfights in Mayaland

How Rural Yucatecans Reinvented “Death in the Afternoon”

BY ALLAN MEYERS
The "lover of the bullfight," Ernest Hemingway once observed, is "one who has this sense of the tragedy and ritual of the fight." The colorful, if controversial, past-time with all its ritual and tragedy has been a cornerstone of Spanish culture for centuries. And like so many other customs, Spaniards exported it to Mexico in colonial times. In those Mexican cities with a strong European presence, the event stayed true to the mainstream institution. Even today, bullfighters from Madrid, Seville, and Salamanca regularly tour the major cities of Mexico. I have seen several of Spain’s best-known matadors, including the teenage sensation El Juli, perform during my visits to Merida, the state capital of Yucatan.

In Mexico’s countryside, however, the bullfighting tradition was altered, some might even say “reinvented,” to suit the views of the local inhabitants. This is particularly evident in the Maya-language region of the Yucatan Peninsula. Despite the growth of tourism there, few outsiders attend these extremely popular local events, which are a highlight of annual village fiestas. Even on rare occasions when the uninitiated find themselves in attendance at one, they likely will be unaware of the deep cultural symbolism which flows through it.

For seven years I witnessed bullfights in Yucatan’s Puuc region, where I direct an archaeological project, before some of the hidden dimensions became known to me. Since that time in the summer of 2003 I have made a more concerted study of them, taking notes at the contests, following newspaper reports, and questioning the locals who accompany me to fiestas on weekends. According to my records over the last decade, I have attended more than 20 bullfights in six communities; places with distinctive Maya names like Tekit, Akil, and Yaxhom. What I have discovered is that, in spite of its origin, the institution in rural Yucatan is hardly Spanish at all. Ancient Maya ideology and a non-Western worldview permeate the custom, reflecting a remarkable cultural tenacity in the face of modern globalizing forces.

The Spanish Institution

The spectacle of men facing off with bulls in the Mediterranean world goes back at least to the ancient Minoans. While many forms of the practice historically existed across Spain, Portugal, and southern France, the essential style accepted today originated in the early 18th century. In his classic, Death in the Afternoon, Hemingway referred to it as a tragedy in three acts, saying “the first act is the trial, the second act is the sentencing, and the third is the execution.” Three specially trained bullfighters, each dressed in the form-fitting traje de luces, the “suit of lights,” star in the drama. Under ordinary circumstances, each will confront two bulls in the circular plaza. These specially bred and selected black bulls, known to scientists as Bos taurus ibericus, are always four years old and weigh between 1,000 and 1,300 pounds. Several assistants to the bullfighter, some on horseback and others on foot, fill supporting roles on stage. A distinguished spectator serving as judge evaluates the performance based on the bullfighter’s artistic merit, the bull’s behavior, and the crowd’s reaction.

In the first act, the animal makes a series of passes by cape-carrying assistants on foot. A horseman, known as the picador, then enters bearing a long lance. He uses the lance to break the flesh on the bull’s nape. The wound weakens the neck muscle, forcing the bull to slowly lower its horns which diminishes the danger to those in the ring. During the second act, three assistants on foot each plant two barbed batons, roughly a yard long, in the vicinity of the wound. This increases the loss of blood, which in turn, further weakens the animal.

In the final act, the bullfighter enters with a small red cape and works the bull through another series of passes. Once the bull has fatigued to the point of being aplomado, or weighted down like lead, the bullfighter brings the act to a close. Standing between the horns, he plunges a sword into the neck, and if executed properly, pierces the heart. As the animal collapses, several more assistants, guiding a pair of horses, enter swiftly to remove it. The horses drag the dead bull from the arena and deliver it to butchers just outside where the beef is offered for sale to the public.
Enthusiasts point out that as a performance art, these three acts should be taken seriously by spectators. One would no more burst out laughing at a bullfight than one would at a piano recital or a showing of Phantom of the Opera. The audience is fixated on the drama that unfolds, and conversation, while certainly present, is kept to a minimum. Thunderous applause has its appointed time, just as it does at the end of each act in a Broadway play. If the judge deems the performance satisfactory, he may award one or two ears of the bull, or even its tail, as a trophy to the bullfighter.

The Institution in Rural Yucatan

Bullfights in the Yucatecan countryside, held each afternoon during a three- or four-day fiesta, share only superficial ties to the Spanish tragedy. While the same protagonists are present, there are not three acts, and the animal does not always die. Because of their value, many bulls are saved for future contests. As in Spain, only one bull at a time enters the ring, which in Yucatan is a palm-thatched, circular scaffolding engineered like a traditional Maya house but dismantled shortly after the fiesta. No restrictions apply, however, to the type or total number of animals which may enter. Many bulls are immature or aged, and not the least bit aggressive.

Six or eight local bullfighters wear the “suit of lights,” but most have no formal training. They remain in the arena together throughout, working as a team to challenge the bulls. Should a bull get a momentary advantage, these fighters do not hesitate to run with reckless abandon for safety, casting aside not only their capes, but any pretense of bravado. If need be, they scale the rustic latticework and land in the audience. The crowd roars, some with laughter and others with frightful screams, as the young men scramble. On the infrequent occasion when a bullfighter musters the courage to approach a bull with a sword he may bungle the try, leaving the sword to fall to the ground.

A “judge” on horseback remains in the ring from start to finish. Rather than evaluate the performance, he determines when the bull, due to lack of enthusiasm, warrants removal. Usually after no more than a few minutes, he cues a small band of musicians perched high atop the scaffolding, and they oblige with a melody. On the trumpeter’s note, some 25 saddled cowboys race into the ring and vie to lasso the animal. They often miss their intended target and rope competing horses. Whistles and good-natured jeers from the crowd...
accompany nearly every miscue. Once the bull is apprehended, male vendors of all ages descend from the scaffolding and circulate with their concessions until the next bull arrives.

In larger communities, an intermission occurs about two hours into the action. There is a procession featuring the village’s patron saint, perhaps Anthony of Padua or the virgin martyr Inés, and spectators are invited to petition the saint as they toss coins onto a blanket carried alongside. Several women wearing huipiles, traditional long white blouses embroidered at the neck, often accompany the procession. This is the only time females are present in the arena. The intermission closes with a deafening display of surface fireworks, and the bullfighting routine resumes for up to several hours.

To the casual observer, the rural bullfight appears to lampoon the Spanish tradition’s pomp and haughtiness. It is a raucous comedy of errors. One can easily form the impression that the Mayas took a tradition that was imposed on them by their conquerors and re-cast it as satire. I suspect most aficionados of the Spanish bullfight would abhor the spectacle in Yucatan. Many would reject it being called a bullfight at all, for it reflects none of the values that their tradition embodies.

Among the upper class citizens of Merida, many of whom trace their genealogy to the Iberian Peninsula, there is a general disdain for the rural bullfight. So for those of Maya descent in the population today, perhaps it has achieved its desired effect. But my experience suggests that the institution is much more than simple mockery.

**Elements of Ancient Maya Ideology**

At the center of every rural bullring is a tree, upwards of 20 feet tall and stripped bare to make a slender pole, except perhaps for its crowning foliage. The tree is cut from the forest and planted at the center of the bullring, even before the scaffolding itself is constructed. Once the seating area is completed, colorful banner flags are stretched in all directions from the top of the pole. Historically, this tree is a sacred ceiba, known in the local Yucatec-Maya language as yax che, or “first tree.” In the insightful work *Maya Cosmos*, archaeologist David Friedel
and the late epigrapher Linda Schele discuss how the ancient Maya saw the ceiba as the real life manifestation of the World Tree of Creation, the “pivot and pillar of their cosmos.” Indeed, stone inscriptions from the famous site of Palenque tell us that the World Tree was raised at creation in order to separate the sky from the earth. The ceiba is increasingly scarce in Yucatan today, so locals employ palms and cedars to center the bullring. But no matter the species, the center pole is universally understood to be the yax che.

In the hours preceding a contest, a bull is tied to the yax che. It may be released once the bullfight begins, but it is always lassoed and returned to the tree to have its blood spill on the ground. A live bull, bleeding perhaps from a barbed baton, is minimally sufficient, though normally a rancher known as the “knife man” slays the animal. Sometimes only one, and sometimes several bulls succumb to the practice. Although outside observers, including the celebrated 19th-century adventurer John Lloyd Stephens, described this curious ritual, they attributed no special significance to it. Then, in the early 1980s, archaeologist Mary Pohl made a fascinating connection that seems to unravel the tree-tying custom. Based on a survey of Maya art from ancient pottery and manuscripts, she proposed...
that modern Yucatecans were continuing an ancient deer sacrifice associated with fertility and the transfer of social obligations between community members. Certain frames of the Postclassic Madrid Codex, for instance, depict a live deer tied to the sacred yax che, while other frames show the sacrifice of a bound deer. The Maya-descent population, she argued, quietly perpetuated a long-standing pagan ritual by substituting a bull for the deer in a festive context that had been approved by colonial Spanish clergy.

The links to ancient cosmology do not end at the yax che. Once a bull is killed, cowboys carry it to a butchering station in the concession area outside the bullring. The best cuts of meat are sold to spectators, and the remaining cuts are cooked in a large iron kettle resting on three hearth stones. Like the domestic hearth used in rural homes across the Maya world for at least 3,000 years, the public hearths found at bullfights emulate the three stones of creation that the ancient Maya believed were set down just before the World Tree was raised. In fact, hieroglyphic texts from the Guatemala lowlands refer to the location of creation as yax-ox-tun-nal, the “first three stone place.”

Thus each time a Yucatecan bullfight takes place, the two fundamental acts of Maya creation, the setting down of the cosmic hearth and the raising of the World Tree, are repeated. Likewise, an important ancient ritual of social responsibility and prosperity is reenacted.

Western and Non-Western Worldviews

The most intriguing hidden dimension of the bullfight has taken the longest for me to decipher. Perhaps it would not have come to mind had I not helped to teach a college course a few years back called the “Cultural Environment of International Business.” The course textbook introduced me to a concept called “uncertainty avoidance” that is used to understand the range of business behaviors in nations around the world. Geert Hofstede, a Dutch anthropologist who reviews the notion in Culture’s Consequences, explains that cultures differ in the degree to which they can tolerate uncertainty in the future. According to Hofstede, people in cultures that aim to avoid an uncertain future, “look for structure in their organizations, institutions, and relationships, which make events clearly... predictable.” In Hofstede’s summary, “the stronger a culture’s tendency to avoid uncertainty, the greater its need for rules.”

Almost every aspect of the modern Spanish bullfight is governed by rules, and these rules are designed to emphasize predictability. The event is carefully choreographed in three acts to produce the same result each and every time. If the bull is bred and reared in a specific way, and it is treated a certain way in the ring, then the bullfighter can predict with precision how it will respond. It is the precision which is ultimately judged. “A bad bull,” Hemingway noted, “is one with no reaction to color or movement or with defective courage... so that the bullfighter cannot tell when, whether or how he will charge.” In other words, a bad bull to the Spaniard is one that is not predictable.

The bullfights of rural Yucatan, on the other hand, introduce a set of elements which actually encourage unpredictability. It starts with the bulls themselves. Multiple breeds and ages, some not mature enough to have horns, appear in any given bullfight. Those from the most expensive breed of cattle, termed media casta, are frequently recycled. Reused in contest after contest, these bulls become aware of the routine and thus less predictable. Humans agitate the bulls by setting off fireworks in the ring; they smolder afterwards adding a hazard to bull and bullfighter alike. The arena surface may be unevenly prepared, especially after heavy tropical rains, making it easy for both bulls and humans to lose their footing during the match.
Top, a *cuchillero*, or “knife man,” approaches as cowboys bind a young, hornless bull to the center pole in Tekit in July 2007. The origin of the center pole in Yucatan is unclear. It may have been imported from Spain, where in some provincial towns, young men historically climbed tall greased poles as part of rural fiestas. On the other hand, it may have been added by colonial Mayas who, according to 16th-century bishop Diego de Landa, possessed their own pole-raising custom associated with fertility rituals.

Unpredictability increases with crowd participation, which is expected and encouraged. Spectators throw empty cups, plastic bottles, and food at bulls to distract them. Children, whose feet dangle from the upper section, often kick the bulls as they pass. Vendors parade around the perimeter of the ring hawking their goods, sometimes lingering and interfering with the bullfighting action. Young men, occasionally intoxicated, enter the arena unannounced to fulfill their *promesas*, or petitions to the saint, by testing their courage. The unrestricted charges of amateur cowboys also startle the bulls and create some of the most unpredictable, and memorable, moments of the fight.

This distinction in uncertainty avoidance influences attitudes toward time. The Spanish bullfight, with a well-defined starting point and rigidly organized set of activities, has a carefully calculated duration. The spectator knows with certainty both when it begins and when it ends. The Yucatecan version, in contrast, is open-ended. Although there is an acknowledged start time, it is frequently delayed. More importantly, no one ever knows exactly when it will end. Spectators do not

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*Animal Figures in the Maya Codices.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, Papers of the Peabody Museum of American Archaeology and Ethnology 4, 1910. The modern bullfighting practice of tying bulls to a center pole, which locals associate with the cosmic tree of creation, may have perpetuated an ancient deer sacrifice ritual. In both cases, the animal’s blood nourishes the sacred tree that connects the human realm to the heavens and the Underworld.
know how many bulls will enter the ring, and the match often goes on for hours and hours at a petty pace. I have recorded bullfights lasting from two and a half to nine hours long. Incredible as it may seem, the rural bullfight frequently ends by attrition. People simply start leaving when they have had enough, and after the majority departs the ranchers stop introducing more bulls.

In the bullfighting traditions, therefore, one sees competing worldviews in microcosm. Western, uncertainty-avoidance societies like Spain believe that we can prepare sufficiently to offset the uncertainties of the future. In our own society, for example, an auto insurance agent cannot tell you if you will have an accident this year, but she can predict your chances of being in one based on your age, occupation, and driving history (and she will charge you accordingly). The middle and upper class populations in Merida and other industrialized Mexican cities generally follow this uncertainty avoidance pattern; their bullfights tell us so.

Rural Yucatecan society, conversely, places great value on an institution that does not shun uncertainty, but arguably revels in it. In some ways, this should come as no surprise. Just as they inherited the World Tree, cosmic hearth, and animal sacrifice, the denizens of the countryside inherited from their ancestors a cyclical, sometimes fatalistic worldview that relegated the future to a largely uncontrollable force. These legacies are powerful markers of modern cultural identity, even if the meanings associated with them today are not the same as those from long ago. At the same time, the capacity to cope with uncertainty stems from the essentially non-industrial conditions that many in the region still experience. As the social and economic forces of globalization gather steam in the 21st century, it will be interesting to gauge which transformations await this particular form of folk entertainment.

In the meantime, some outsiders may decry the rural celebration as little more than a “decadent form of the Spanish sport,” just as two British writers did in 1909. But they would be missing a rich and powerful subtext, even if it is not consistent with the tradition’s origins. On encountering such reactions, I often return to Hemingway and his penchant for understatement. “Decadence,” he said, is a term “applied by critics to anything they do not yet understand or which seems to differ from their moral concepts.” International travelers, particularly those interested in the more remote corners of the globe, may well heed this astute observation.

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