

The *Yaxche-ob* of Cozumel Island, 2008

Sharon and I lived on Cozumel during the summers of 1965 and 1966. The little sleepy village of San Miguel was home base during research for my master's thesis on the settlement patterns of the island. We rented a house from the banker Carlos Namur and I roamed the island, on trails and off, in search of cenotes, aboriginal ruins, and evidence of economic activities that impacted the landscape, such as the low walls that partitioned sections of the abandoned henequen industry (Davidson 1967, 1975). Although I was keenly aware of the ceiba tree (in Maya: *yaxché*, plural: *yaxché-ob*), I remember seeing only one while we lived there – the one behind the Capitanía on the main street (*malecón*) of the town that ran along the waterfront. Now that I look back, over fifty years ago, I think I would have expected to see more ceibas on the island. After all, shouldn't we expect to see the sacred tree of the Maya growing on the sacred island of the Maya?

Over the years we made a few very brief stops at the island to see friends and dive in the clear sea, but had a chance for a more extended stay when our younger son, Chadwick, married in 2008. Parissa decided on a "destination wedding" and we were pleased to think they selected Cozumel because the island was where his parents had enjoyed living during the first years of their marriage. Of course, Parissa admitted she didn't know we had ever lived there. Still, we loved their wedding and gained an opportunity to check out the ceibas of the island.

The Ceiba Survey of December 2008

Except for the single instance of a ruin toponym, evidence that the tree was present some years in the past is difficult to find. The ruin named *Yaxché* is located in the north central portion of the island. Supposedly, the site was named by local guide Manuel Angulo Vivas in the early 1960s because of the presence of a large ceiba. There is also a local, unconfirmed legend that a large ceiba was once beside the original cenote that probably watered early San Miguel -- on the east side of Av. 8 de Octubre, south of calle 29. The historical records I am familiar with do not mention either tree, or other ceibas on the island.

To my knowledge, the modern *yax.che.ob* of Cozumel number 60. Almost all seem to be in cultural context – planted at ruins, hotels, the country club, a tourist shop, two across the street from the urban cemetery, and the one mentioned before at the Capitanía. The one isolate, perhaps 30 years old, can be seen along the southern highway between km markers 20 and 21.

1. Ruinas (13)

Cedral, the small village in the south founded by the grandfather of don Cristino Cardenas Serrano in 1848 has three ceibas along its southern street and three at the

ancient ruin site immediately behind the “campo” house of the late German Garcia Padilla (1941-December 2016), “Flaco” to his friends of older days. When we lived on the island “Flaco” worked in a dive shop. His dream was, he said, “to make five dollars a day and to marry his girlfriend.” He did both, and much more. He was the first Presidente de la Municipalidad de Cozumel (1975) and Jefe de la Policia Nacional del Estado de Quintana Roo. Our first children were born on the same day (April 4, 1968). He was *mi compadre* and I will miss him.



Figure 1. Largest ceiba of Cedral, 2008. Sharon with German Garcia and grandson.

San Gervasio, in the north central sector of the island, is the primary tourist attraction. Three recently planted ceibas are along the roadway entering the ruin and another has been planted in the parking lot. All are less than three years old.

At an unnamed site inland from Playa Palancar, at the 27 km marker on the southern highway, is a large tree, perhaps 80-90 years old. It and two smaller ceibas are located between the old and new paved highways that bisect the ruin. Apparently, the old tree was carefully spared during the construction of the new road.



Figure 2. Three ceibas on Southern Coastal Highway, km marker 27, 2008.

2. Hotels (23)

With the expansion of major hotels along the southern highway, ceibas have been planted at some entrances. Hotel El Cid La Ceiba, which has seven trees visible on entry, incorporates the name of the tree in its formal title.



Figure 3. Ceibas at entrance of Hotel El Cid La Ceiba.

The Occidental Cozumel and Occidental Allegro Cozumel hotels have six more among their royal palms and coconuts.

North of San Miguel, heading to the older hotel area known as San Juan, somewhat hidden among the coconut palms and mimosas along the median of the highway can be seen several ceibas. Two are in front of the Puerto del Sol condos, four are at the Westin Cozumel, and two are near the entrance of El Cozumeleño. Just north of the country club where the paved road ends there are two crossroad ceibas.



Figure 4. Ceiba in the median near the Westin Hotel north of San Miguel.

3. Cozumel Country Club (18)

The largest concentration of ceibas is on the grounds of the country club and golf course north of San Miguel. Eighteen can be seen at the entrance (1) (Figure 5), along the roadway (7) among the royal palms, at the parking lot (4), and on the course (6). On their maturity all of these will project an impressive landscape.



Figure 5. Ceiba at the entrance to Cozumel Country Club, 2008.



Figure 6. Ceiba on golf course of country club, 2008 (photo taken from El Cozumeleño).

4. Governmental (4)

Just behind the Capitanía building along the northern *malecón* (Av. Rafael Melgar norte) in San Miguel is a ceiba that is said to be 120 years old. It was large in 1965 when we lived in San Miguel. Although no one can determine its age with certainty, it seems to be the oldest ceiba on the island. Another very large ceiba, not available for photography, is in the military complex at the airport.



Figures 7, 8. (left) Old ceiba behind La Capitanía, San Miguel, 2008; (right) two ceibas on 5th Avenue, San Miguel, across from the municipal cemetery.

5. Mayaluum tourist shop (2)

At the 11 kilometer marker on the transversal highway (the extension of Avenida Benito Juárez that originates at the San Miguel dock) a migrant from Baca, Yucatán planted three trees in front of *Mayaluum*, his artifact store, on May 3, 2005. Traditional Mayans know that the ceiba represents the Christian cross and it would be appropriate for the trees to be planted on *Día de la Cruz* (Day of the Cross in the Christian calendar). By coincidence, the discovery name of Cozumel, “Isla de la Santa Cruz,” was so placed because of the May 3rd date in 1518 when Grijalva landed.

When I photographed the trees in December 2008 only two remained. The April 2014 street view of Google Earth indicates how much they had grown (photos 9 and 10).



Figure 9. Ceibas at Mayaluum tourist shop, December 2008.



Figure 10. Ceibas at Mayaluum tourist shop, April 2014.

To conclude, given the ages of the 60 ceibas known on the island and their locations in medians, at new hotels, and the new country club, it is obvious that all ceibas on Cozumel, except for two (Capitanía and Playa Palancar ruin) have been planted in support of the recent development of tourism on the island.

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