

Mexico—The Essentials



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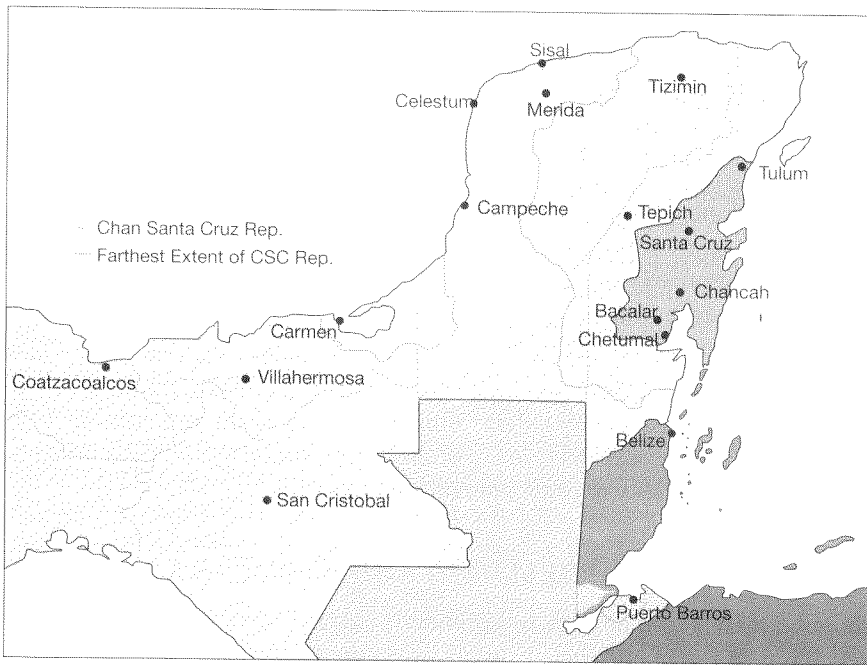
New York Oxford
OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS

MESSIANIC REBELLIONS AND POPULAR SAINTS

Religion mixed with politics and economic outrage contributed to messianic rebellions at times mislabeled simply as ethnic or agrarian uprisings in the nineteenth century. Often the rebels were inspired and sustained by local saints.

The Caste wars in the Yucatan Peninsula (1847–1901) resulted from a complex of land, taxation, political, and ethnic issues, but the rebels also had major religious motivations that can be summarized as the emergence of a local, syncretic Mayan-Catholic faith. It ultimately became focused on the Speaking Cross, located at their capital city of Chan Santa Cruz (today renamed Ciudad Felipe Carrillo Puerto, Quintana Roo). The Speaking Cross guided the wartime strategies and daily behavior of the rebels. At their high point, the rebel Maya held all of the southern part of Yucatán into the north sections of British Honduras (modern-day Belize) (see Map 3.1). The federal army eventually crushed the rebels with harshness inspired by religious zeal.

Another well-known nineteenth-century example came in the rebellion in Tomochic, a mountainous village in Chihuahua, in 1891 and 1892. The village rebels organized their resistance around the popular saint and healer in nearby Sonora, Santa Teresa. The Porfirian army, after an initial defeat, eventually overwhelmed the rebels, killing over 300 villagers and razing the town. Santa Teresa, known for her miracles of healing, a power she attributed to the Virgin of Guadalupe, was exiled to the United States. She and her father located to Nogales, Arizona, where she continued to practice folk medicine, spiritual healing, and support for Mexican workers throughout the border area. The villagers' rebels received national attention through the serialized fictional memoirs of an army officer (*Battle of Tomochic: Memoirs of a Second Lieutenant*) written by Heribero Frias.



Map 3.1 Territory held by Maya Rebels.

The famous artist José Guadalupe Posada drew a cover for a children's book about the events and the saint.

Other saints have appeared and been venerated, often with no greater following than the local community. Often the emergence of individuals as popular saints defies explanation and understanding. In Tijuana, bordering on the United States with greater San Diego, in 1938, a soldier was executed by the law of flight, in which he was released in a cemetery to run for his life as soldiers shot at him for the rape of a local child. Known as Juan Soldado (the equivalent of GI Joe), Juan Castillo Morales quickly became a folk saint. His grave in Tijuana became a pilgrimage site for those who believed he was innocent of the crime and that he could perform miracles of healing and assistance with family, court, and employment needs. His acclaim spread across northern Mexico and the southwestern United States and the prayer, "*Juan Soldado, ayudame a cruzar*" (Juan Soldado, help me cross [the border]) became a widely used invocation.

Perhaps no more infamous saint has appeared than San Jesus Malverde, the patron saint of drug traffickers. Called at the times the *rey* or king of Sinaloa, in popular legends, he represents the victims of poverty and injustice. The tale of his life and martyrdom occurred during the rule of President Porfirio Díaz (1877–1911), when Malverde, after his parents died of hunger, became a Robin Hood, a social bandit who only robbed the dishonest and disreputable and shared the profits with the deserving poor. Government troops finally captured him; he was hanged in 1909 and his body left to rot. Every year on May 3, believers gather at his shrine in Culiacán, Sinaloa, to thank him for favors granted and illnesses cured, and to request help with love, marriage, and debts. Recently, he became known as the narco-saint and appeared in many cultural forms. Devotees can purchase spiritual supplies that include candles, incense, bath crystals, soap, and lithographs featuring his image. Three films have focused on him and drug trafficking in California ("*Jesus Malverde*," "*Jesus Malverde II: La Mafia de Sinaloa*," and "*Jesus Malverde III: Infierno en Los Angeles*") with soundtrack music about him and the narco-cartel kings. A Mexican-American stage play, "*Always & Forever*," is a drama that examines cultural events such as *quinceañeras* and *banda* music with Malverde as a prominent character. A Guadalajara brewery produces a beer named Malverde, distributed throughout the north. His association with drugs was made evident in the US television series "*Breaking Bad*" when one episode showed the bust of Malverde. The popular telenovela "*La Reina del Sur*" incorporated scenes from Malverde's chapel in Culiacán.