Lafitte: A History in Dzilam de Bravo
Lillian Paz Ávila

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Translated by Jeffrey P. Modzelewski in June, 2002

[Translator’s note: I thank Dr. Reginald Wilson for providing me a photocopy of this article for translation. I believe the piece will be of interest to our readership, as it presents a present-day view of the presence of the Lafittes in the Yucatan Peninsula from a Yucatan perspective.

I cannot, however, vouch for the overall accuracy of the article’s contents. It contains at least one glaring error: the inaccurate citation of Rubio Mañé in footnote 3. The author here quotes Rubio Mañé as stating (I paraphrase) that the Lafittes flourished in the second half of the nineteenth century, which rings false immediately to those with a decent grasp of the privateer’s chronology. Rubio Mañé in fact says that they flourished in the second decade of the nineteenth century. This sloppiness in a matter so basic, as is the citation of a short excerpt from another’s work, cannot but diminish a reader’s confidence in the accuracy of the rest of the article. At best we can say that the author did not proofread well her article prior to publication; at worst, that her knowledge of her topic was insufficient to enable her to recognize an error of roughly one-half century in situating her subjects in their historical epoch.

Nonetheless, to the extent that the article’s data is accurate, I hope that the translation will hold significant value for those who do not read and speak Spanish, because of the information provided that is not readily accessible via other tongues—for example, the interviews conducted within the Dzilam de Bravo community, the brief history of the three cemeteries which have existed in the latter, and the reference to the term of office of a local municipal official to help pinpoint chronologically the creation of the historical markers commemorating Lafitte.

With regard to the spelling of the surname Lafitte, which has appeared in multiple variations throughout history, although The Laffite Society uses two “f”s and one “t,” the author of the following article uses one “f” and two “t”s. I have left this spelling unchanged in the translation. Likewise, in her references in the “Bibliography” and “Footnotes” sections at the end of the article, I left the surname spellings as she cited them.

Some areas of the text posed difficulty for the translator due to the use of incomplete sentences, demonstrative pronouns such as “these” and “those” whose antecedents were not clear, and so forth. The discussion of the various monuments and plaques commemorating Lafitte in the section The Monument of the Three Crosses; The Death of the Pirate is a case in point. A personal visit to the site would doubtless have helped to resolve ambiguities in the Spanish text and thus eased the translation, but this was not possible.]

This work attempts to present information about the presence of the pirate Lafitte in Dzilam. Its central objective is to frame and analyze the place which the presence of Lafitte in Dzilam de Bravo occupies within the community, both from the perspective of the alleged descendants and from that of the rest of the community.

Dzilam de Bravo finds itself situated almost at the midpoint of the Yucatan coast, in the north of the state. It is a fishing village where we can still hear “tales” of pirates and many others in relation to the main figure of the port, Jean Lafitte. One of the families of this area, the Estradas, affirms its descent from Lafitte. Other persons of the community, and even some of the Estradas, although they do not deny the foregoing, do not give much importance to this part of the “tale.” But the pirate presence in this port cannot be doubted, as is demonstrated by the awareness of the story of the pirate ghost that guards a treasure on Bird Island.
During my field work, I obtained accounts of the lives of the alleged descendants of Lafitte; this is a sub-genre of the story of life, although less full and complete. With other persons of the community I conducted free-form interviews.

**Piracy in Colonial America**

Piracy in America began and grew because Spain controlled the commercial and maritime system of the Indies, which rested on the principle of monopoly established in favor of the port of Cádiz, and subsequently that of Seville. It was the contract house in Seville only that was authorized to regulate trade with the colonies, such that no ship could depart without its permission. Add to this reason, among other restrictions, the need for products in the colonies, the prohibition against inter-colony commerce, and the high prices of the products that the Spaniards brought to American territory in contrast to those of the regional products which could have been purchased at very low prices.

This monopoly, with all its prohibitions, was what caused piracy and contraband to appear in the Spanish colonies in the Americas, carried on by the English, French and Dutch, and later to increase because of the religious wars of Spain at the onset of the Counterreformation.

Contraband with respect to other nations began with the interception of Spanish ships in European waters, but as a consequence of the wars sustained by Spain and the high cost entailed in same, it could no longer supply its colonies, nor maintain in them a strong system of defense, and the pirates thus gained a privateering foothold in the waters of the Americas.

**The Brothers Lafitte. The Years in New Orleans.**

Jean and Pierre Lafitte are known for the piratical activity that they carried on from New Orleans to the Gulf of Mexico.

"About 1803 the brothers Lafitte opened a blacksmith shop in the City of New Orleans. The shop came to be simply a front, which served as a depot where the Lafittes took orders for merchandise recently confiscated from vessels at sea... Jean managed the commercialization in New Orleans and the contacts for transporting merchandise to other places, while Pierre, a more experienced sailor, served as his first lieutenant, ensuring departures opportune for a healthy product trade with their clients."

The illicit activity of the latter brought them problems with the North American government, and despite assisting in the defense of North American territory against the English in 1814 [sic], they were expelled, and set out in search of another place in which to engage in their activities.

**Lafitte in the Yucatan**

The contraband won by Lafitte and his buccaneers in the Caribbean was very important: "These pirates, terror of the shores of New Spain, were in the second half [sic] of the nineteenth century the masters and lords of the Gulf of Mexico."

In the Yucatan, the expansion of inter-colony commerce was no longer sufficient, and along the coast of the Peninsula there had therefore grown up a large piratical trade with Belize, Jamaica and New Orleans. This commerce grew to be so great that it equaled in importance which legally entered through the ports of Campeche and Sisal.

Some documents point out that it was Pierre Lafitte who frequented the Yucatan coast. As Rubio Mañé tells us, upon abandoning Galveston, Pierre founded his corsair seat at Islas Mujeres. It is not the object of this work to clarify if it was Pierre or Jean who died at Dzilam, but rather the socio-cultural importance which the presence of the pirate, and all that relates to him, holds for the community.

**The Monument of the Three Crosses. The Death of the Pirate.**

In Dzilam there exists a monument to the memory of Jean Laffite called that of the "Three Crosses." Of course, there have existed others besides those here mentioned.

To begin, I wish to clarify that which, on first impression, the plaque of 1960 may seem to indicate to us - that the creation of the monument was carried out by the associations mentioned at the beginning of this work [sic]. The other of the plaques, that which says "Ancient Cemetery," was created during the term (1991 - 1993) of Manuel Sierra as municipal president. We know as a result of all those interviewed in Dzilam that this monument was built in 1993, at the same
time that the aforementioned plaque was created.

To this relatively new monument were attached the plaque of 1960 and that which carries the name of the pirate with the years of his birth and death. Farther along we will see from where these two last plaques came.

Meanwhile let us become familiar with the history of the cemeteries of Dzilam in accord with the data of those interviewed.

The current cemetery of Dzilam is found on the outskirts of the populated area; this is the third that has existed. The second cemetery was located where the monument of the Three Crosses is now, but before the latter there was another at almost the same site, except more toward the sea. At present the site that this cemetery occupied is now completely covered by water. It is so old that persons less than sixty years of age do not remember it. It is said that when the sea began to erode the earth and the cemetery deteriorated, the second was ordered built, and it is this second cemetery which the majority know as “The Old Cemetery.”

When this one began to deteriorate for the same reason as the first, the breakwater was constructed to re-claim terrain from the sea, and later that cemetery which currently exists was built.

In Dzilam it is told that Jean Lafitte came fleeing from one of his enemies, that he was wounded in the battle and took refuge in that place, but due to the severity of his injuries he did not survive; the place where the bucanero was buried is unknown, but a man of the Estrada family tells that at the age of 8 – he is currently 82 – he went to the edge of the beach to see what the sea was bringing in, because on some occasions objects that were thrown from ships washed up, and on his return he found a large “bone,” but at the time he did not know what it was, picked it up, and went along, playing with it. He came upon Doña Genoveva Pacheco de Estrada who startled, asked him where he had found that object and made clear to him that it was the bone of a dead person. Immediately Doña Genoveva bought cloth in which to gather up the bones, which were turned over to the municipal president.

Later they were told that they belonged to Lafitte, so the mayor ordered a place set aside in the first cemetery in Dzilam to commemorate him.

People about 10 and 15 years younger than the man previously mentioned tell that the remains of Lafitte were discovered beginning with the exhumation of the bodies produced by the erosion that the sea had caused in the first cemetery.

The cemetery was relocated, and it was to this location that Bush Romero and other North American investigators were taken to view the remains, or only the femur, of Lafitte, by Don José M. Estrada, who at the arrival of the investigators introduced himself as a descendant of the pirate.

From this encounter, Bush Romero developed his book Beneath the Waters of Mexico. In this work, I decided to not list as support this Bush Romero book, because he did not adhere to an investigative method, because it is based solely on the narrative of a single person, and because, without further corroboration from the rest of the community, it is presented as fact. Currently the alleged descendants tell us that they are not very knowledgeable about the topic since the only one who knew the story well was Don José M. Estrada – now deceased –, and they made the book available to us to give us details of the history of their family.

A group of men said that in Dzilam stories of Lafitte and other pirates have always been told, that they are transmitted via oral tradition, but that only with the arrival of North American investigators in 1960 did they become aware that the Estrada family traced its ancestry back to Lafitte, and they even mentioned that the investigators gave notice of an inheritance for the descendant family.

With respect to the foregoing, one of those interviewed mentioned: “When the gringos came they said that there was a fortune in the United States, then for this reason the Estradas made their descent legitimate; of course, when there is talk of an inheritance, relatives come out of the woodwork.”

According to these people, the pirate we are discussing sustained relations with a black slave who came with him. This woman established herself in Dzilam; nevertheless, it was never known that they made a family. These persons consider the knowledge that they have of the topic as “comments, tales, nothing with certainty.”
Although some people merely doubt the descent from Lafitte, some others exist who totally deny it, among the latter some of the Estrada family. They are not ignorant of the existence of Lafitte in the environs, but they told us what they learned through the old people, that the families of the port sheltered their daughters from the stalking of the pirates, although the latter were respectful with the community which gave them refuge; and with respect to the black woman with whom Lafitte allegedly sired progeny, they told us that she was only the pirate's slave and they never came to learn of a relationship between them.

On the preceding, a man of the Estrada family said: "...that Chencho Estrada, who died a short time ago, says that they are relatives of them; of that Lafitte, but it is not true, I knew the father of that Chencho, he is my grandfather's brother, they say that they are relatives - of Lafitte - but they are not, I saw them, years I have lived here, almost 80, and I only hear tales."

The part of the Estrada family that considers itself descendants says that all the remains that were found were in a wooden box that the sea brought up, carved with the name of Jean Lafitte. For them, their descent from Lafitte arose from a woman of the name of Lucia, native of Dzilam; from the relations between Lucia and Lafitte was born a little girl called Alicia or Felipa Cedil, who did not come to know her father because the pirate died before her birth, and due to this she received the surname Cedil (which belonged to a companion of Lafitte).

Further on, Alicia or Felipa entered into matrimony with Simeón Estrada; from this matrimony was born José Inés Estrada Cedil.

José M. Estrada received these investigators who arrived in Dzilam in 1960 in search of the trail of the remains of Jean Lafitte, and he led them to the tomb of the pirate in the second cemetery.

The visit of the foreign investigators to the second cemetery yielded as a result the creation of a small monument in recognition of the presence of Jean Lafitte in Dzilam. It had two plaques, one with the name Jean Lafitte with the years already mentioned several times [sic], and the plaque which names the associations that carried out the investigation. The latter is the same plaque which is currently on the monument of Three Crosses, and therefore the monument to which said plaque refers is that of 1960 and not the present one.

With the passage of time, the plaque was carried to the library by a municipal president, and it was in 1993 when, in his term in that office, Mr. Manuel Sierra ordered the present monument erected, since according to him it was fitting that Lafitte be remembered in the ancient cemetery where his remains were found, and more so because this place is located near the sea, whence the pirate had come.

With respect to this, it is said that this mayor proposed the construction of several monuments at a high cost (those of Three Crosses, the Dead Man's Highway, the Navy, etc.), and the opinion of the people is that he kept for himself a good part of the money destined for these activities.

The people of the community informed us that the creation of so many monuments that have been erected is due to each municipal president considering a different place more appropriate to commemorate Lafitte.

The descendants do not see themselves as identified with this monument, because they do not know where the remains of Lafitte wound up and because they were not consulted for the creation of the monument.

Pirate Presence in Dzilam

The presence of stories about pirates in the region is undeniable, and not only stories involving Jean Lafitte. The story possibly most known by the people of the community is that of the black man of the island.

It is said that a pirate ship was passing along the coast of Dzilam, and faced with the danger of being sunk by the weight of its chests or attacked by other pirates, it was decided to hide the booty on Bird Island. Meanwhile, the crew argued about who would remain to watch the chests of gold. A young black volunteered and his petition was approved by the captain. Upon disembarking to guard the chests, the captain asked the young man if he were sure of the decision that he had made; thinking avariciously, he said yes. Immediately the captain ordered the black to dig the hole where the treasure would be buried. Upon finishing the task ordered, the captain cut off his head and buried it together with the treasure, to keep watch
until the ship returned, marking the place with a sword.

_Dzilam: An Advantageous Bay_

The presence of Lafitte in Dzilam is explained by the natural shelters - called _bocas_ - which the bay provided him and which he accessed via three channels well-marked by him.

The level of the sea in Dzilam is low, so that only through channels of deep water in the shallows can one gain access to the _bocas_. Through those channels only light vessels can pass; those of greater draft run aground.

The condition of this place was apparently the principal advantage that Lafitte had over the Spaniards, since the large vessels of the latter did not approach the bay for fear of being left grounded in the shallows off the Dzilam coast. We suppose that this could have been possible not only for Lafitte, but for any pirate ship that was not Spanish, since the technology of some European countries was much more advanced than that of Spain. An example of the latter are the vessels known in that era as "flyboats." Even now the fishermen know and utilize the entrances to put in with their small crafts.

Also mentioned is the arrival of some boats to commercialize the Palo de Tinte [a regional flora?] that occurs on the coast at 10 kilometers from Dzilam.

_Physical Characteristics_

In the majority of the interviews with the alleged descendants, not much was spoken about the physical traits of the latter, because they mentioned that there are now few who retain physical characteristics as well defined as those who have died.

With respect to the preceding, one person of the family related: "This that I tell you is ancient, my grandfather and his brother J. Inés were tall and white, they did not look like they were from here, and I believe that that gentleman - Lafitte - came and crossed himself with a woman from here and they came out in that way, my dad came out dark but I think because of my grandmother. That gentleman - J. Inés -, and my grandfather, and my aunt Carmen who died a short time ago, they had a face different in this manner, with blue and green eyes, and so did the family of Manuel, of Chencho [sic]."

In some other interviews, it was affirmed that even now the family retains white skin, very blue eyes, tall stature and lean body. "He who is a half-breed like that over there has green or olive-colored eyes, and there are also some spoken of who have black or coffee-colored eyes."

In addition, some people of the community - or descendants - say that the people who originate in Dzilam have a multi-European origin, because the contact that was had was from Dzilam to Izamal or toward Progreso, and because these were places of European settlement, they did not "mix" with the population of Mayan traits and surnames until after they had contact with the villages of the interior, like Temax, Cansacab, Tekal de Venegas, etc. Therefore, in Dzilam one finds surnames such as Sierra, Estrada, Nadal, Marrufo, Alcocer and Betancourt.

Owing to the foregoing, one sector of the inhabitants do make a distinction between their multi-European “origin” - some families native to Dzilam - and the other families that have arrived from the interior of the state, Campeche and Tabasco and towns with which there was previously no communication.

_Final Considerations_

For the sector of the community that does not have much knowledge of the topic and therefore does not give it importance, the monument only means for them the point of reference for where the ancient cemetery was.

The factors that confirm the pirate presence in this port, such as the geographic situation, the physical characteristics of the alleged descendants, and the story of the pirate ghost, together with the data taken from Rubio Mané, serve to reinforce for us the presence of persons of European origin who came on the pirate vessels, and so, although Lafitte supposedly left descendants, it would be very conservative to think that, of all the crew, he was the only one who had relations with some woman of Dzilam.

As regards the Estradas, I think that they affirm themselves descendants of Lafitte because of the possession of swords, foreign-language books, and some dishes with gold coins which people now deceased said they had found, which was later confirmed by Bush Romero in his investigation.
Because of this, a torrent of doubts assailed me. I concluded that the North American organizations, together with the expedition leader, took the narrative of José M. Estrada and presented it in their book just as the man gave it, in exchange for obtaining the objects that the family possessed and, from the municipal government, the alleged femur of Lafitte.

Notes
“Tales” is the form by which the inhabitants of Dzilam refer to histories, narratives, legends, memoirs, etc.
1. Ibid. P. 15. (Sic)
4. In the narratives, one side maintains that only a femur was found, the other that it was the entire body, but it merits attention that all mention the great size of the supposed “bone” and they do not mention another part that caused such astonishment in the community. (Interview carried out with a group of men with ages between 67 and 75 years.) (The death of the pirate and the acknowledgment of the daughter on the part of a companion of the pirate explain the loss of the surname Lafitte in this family.)
5. We refer to multi-European in the sense that not only French and Spaniards found themselves in Dzilam, since on the pirate vessels were found Dutch, English, etc., men, and it is probable that they also left descendants in Dzilam de Bravo.

Bibliography