

Documenting the Brigades: Oral History of Local Archaeology Experts in the Puuc Region, Yucatán, México

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*Places are always in transit, in the process of becoming. People consistently create, erase, and change the meanings of their landscapes. In her now-classic 1995 book *Living with the Ancestors*, Patricia McAnany argues that ancient Maya ancestors are markers of places for both elite and non-elite populations and acted as a text-free genealogy of place. However, a long and violent colonization process effectively distanced indigenous peoples' cultural links to ancestral archaeological sites. Furthermore, McAnany warned us that only a few indigenous Americans are included in the process of archaeological research, making the practice potentially an unwelcome guise and "an instrument of domination." She proposed community engagement as a way forward out of the colonial past. Indeed, contemporary Maya populations connect with their ancestral land and rural lifeways regardless of archaeological narratives. Oral history is a method that bridges archaeological and local understandings of rural landscapes. Since 2018, faculty and students from Kenyon College have collected oral histories from local workers who engage with archaeological sites. The brigadores (i.e., brigades), constituted of indigenous farmers turned professional excavators, masons, and custodians, have interacted with Yucatan's Puuc landscape for generations, building a deep well of knowledge about the archaeoscape. In this article, I discuss the preliminary results of our project, *Voices of the Puuc Angels: Rural Life among the Archaeological Ruins of the Yucatan Peninsula*, which documents the brigadores' narratives about rural lifeways in Yucatán and their relationship to the ancestral archaeological past.*

Key Words: Oral History, Maya Archaeology, Puuc, Placemaking, Community Archaeology



Introduction

This article is about and for the men who reconstruct and care for the buildings that shape our archaeological imagination and draw experts and tourists alike to southeastern México. Here we explore how the *Brigadas de Restauración*, a group of indigenous farmers highly skilled in archaeological survey and ancient masonry restoration, engage with the archaeological landscape through their labor. By capturing local narratives among the ruins, using oral history, we shed new light on understanding the archaeological landscape of the Puuc Hills, in Yucatán, México. These narratives are different from archaeological interpretations of the landscape since abstract academic concepts, such as cultural heritage and identity, have no salient meaning for the local Puuc people. These narratives about how local laborers encounter the archaeological landscape constitute a previously unacknowledged view of local ruins. Oral history amplifies these men's voices as contributors to archaeological knowledge; moreover, making the interviews digitally available opens access to information for the community. These narratives expand our understanding of how the archaeology of a region impacts local communities and highlights their active and frequently unmentioned contribution to the archaeological imaginary.



To balance and share the authority of archaeological interpretation, Patricia McAnany (2020) proposes a shift away from a research that focuses on the final product (i.e., journal articles, conference papers, archaeological reports, etc.) to one that privileges the process of collaborative research. This shift requires the establishment of long-standing relationships with communities close to places of archaeological research. How does this look in practice? How do we, as scientists of the past, focus on the process and not on the products that our careers privilege and require? In this paper, I explore the use of oral history as a method to help bring to light the different ideas that local communities have about the archaeological landscape. Incorporating these narratives of place and the people behind them into the archaeological process is a first step to creating a more democratic discipline.

In 1995, Patricia A. McAnany published the book *Living with the ancestors: Kinship and kingship in ancient Maya society*, an obligatory text in Mesoamerican archaeology. In it, she describes her research at the site of K'axob, Belize, under the argument that mortuary rituals and dedicatory cache deposits from this small Formative-period village indicated a comprehensive understanding and incorporation of Maya cosmology before the emergence of the institution of divine kingship (McAnany 2014:160). She further theorizes that agricultural practices in Preclassic sites (circa 1000 B.C. – A.D. 300) like K'axob eventually were appropriated by Classic period (A.D. 300 – A.D. 900) Maya elites. Most importantly, she suggests that ancestors are the markers of continuity and transition from generation to generation. Their active role in the landscape establishes a sacred geography linking territorial places to ancestral time.

In the following paragraphs, I very briefly summarize the history of the rural lifeways in the Puuc region of the Yucatán Peninsula, emphasizing the historical processes that changed the ways local people interacted with their landscape. Then, I describe the history of the *Brigadas de Restauración*, discuss some of the main themes brought up in their digital narratives and share some preliminary interpretations about their stories of labor and the landscape.



Figure 1. The Yucatán Peninsula, México. Gray area indicates the location of the Puuc region.

A Brief History of the Rural Lifeways in the Puuc Region

The Puuc zone is located in the southeast of the Yucatán Peninsula and has the densest concentration of Maya speakers in southeast México (Quintal Aviles 2005:292). Its landscape is characterized by hilly fertile land and abandoned ancient Maya masonry buildings (Figure 1). As late as the beginning of the 21st century, it was not uncommon to think that Maya Puuc communities disappeared after the Classic Period. This popular idea of a collapsed and vanished civilization heavily masks multiple processes – historical, cultural, political, economic – that shaped contemporary local communities and the rural landscape.

Current archaeological research by Ringle, Gallareta Negrón, and Bey (2020) demonstrates that throughout its pre-Hispanic occupation, the Puuc Region's economy thrived through stone quarrying, lime production, and to a certain degree agriculture. Here populations settled around 750 B.C., with an increase in population and site density at about A.D. 600 to 950, when the area was periodically depopulated, leaving the remains of ancient settlements throughout the landscape. During the conquest period, evidence suggests that the Yucatán peninsula was politically divided between multiple chiefdoms, out of which the Tutul Xiu—who traced their royal family lineage to

the Classic Period capital Uxmal—ruled over the Puuc area. During the 18th and 19th centuries, most communities living in the region were integrated into a peonage system on henequen haciendas implemented by wealthy Yucatecans of Spanish descent. The system exploited indigenous communities for labor in the processing of henequen fiber, of which wealthy Yucatec families kept all the profits (Meyers 2012).

At the beginning of the 20th century, after the Mexican Revolution, there was an active effort by the State to consolidate its diverse and dispersed inhabitants into a singular national identity and create national citizens. Communities in the Puuc region were “liberated” from the hacienda peonage system by General Salvador Alvarado. Maya communities left the haciendas, were given lands to farm by the government, and changed their status from peons to Mestizos (Quintal Aviles 2005:326). By 1930, the increase of state-sponsored *Campesino* education promoted Spanish as the official national language, resulting in a decrease of Maya speakers and the adoption of prominently western values. In 1939 Mexican archaeology was institutionalized by the founding of the Instituto Nacional de Arqueología e Historia (INAH), which helped create a traditional sense of Mexican national identity by emphasizing an official national narrative, the exploration and restoration of ancient archaeological sites and its regulation of local and foreign investigations. These processes demarcated the break in continuity between local communities and their deep past, creating: (1) the “ancient Maya” – i.e., mysterious constructors of ancient temples considered the cultural patrimony of the world, and who have since disappeared from the region, and (2) Mestizos, the local rural dwellers without a past (Quintal Aviles 2005:306). In the latter part of the 20th century through the present, globalization, rapid urbanization and the disconnection between local communities and their prehistoric past are a strong factor in the devaluation of the rural lifestyle, causing younger segments of the population to migrate to larger urban centers in Mexico and the US.

Hence, from the ancient Maya stone buildings located in the Puuc landscape stem two different interpretations of the past: one that is top-down at the state’s service, and another developed by local people engaging with the landscape in their daily lives. These narratives, of course, are permeable – they interact, challenge, and reinforce each other (Jones and Russell 2012:271-72). Using oral history we can explore, record, and incorporate personal experiences of how local people engage with their landscape, ideas which are frequently subsumed or marginalized by grand, nation-building narratives.

Collecting Oral Histories

The previously summarized historical processes and power dynamics left much material evidence associated with the past throughout the landscape, from large masonry buildings to small ceramic sherds. Our project explores three questions: (1) How do local communities create meaningful narratives about this complex landscape? (2) How does it affect their perception of the rural environment (following Connerton, 2012; Stanton and Magnoni, 2002)? And how are landscapes socially constructed through identity, memory, and individual experience (following Van Dyke and Alcock 2003; Yoffee 2007)?



Figure 2. The two original members of the Brigada Volante. Photos by Mauricio Marat (left) and the author.

In 2018, the author and colleague Sam Pack, funded by the Ohio Five Digital Scholarship Initiative, designed a project to explore contemporary ideas about local indigenous identity, cultural heritage, and its connection with a past that has been aggressively shaped by multiple layers of history, colonialism, and nation-building. Our approach was digital storytelling, an emergent new form of digital narrative in which an individual relays their own history, which is then presented and archived in a digital format. I choose to use oral history as our main method due to its ability to show how people experience their past and landscape from an individual perspective. Our focus was to transform the anthropologist's traditional relationship as an expert into a collaborative endeavor focused on local community narratives about how contemporary Maya people view and engage with ancestral material heritage in rural areas. Moreover, our project aimed to document the different ideas local people have about rural lifeways in Yucatán and their relationship to the archaeological past through digital storytelling.

The video interviews were then transcribed in Spanish, translated to English and uploaded to Digital Kenyon, a digital repository for scholarship conducted by Kenyon College faculty, students, and staff. We currently have 20 interviews corresponding to six groups of local experts: academics,



Figure 3. Three of the original members of the Brigada de Restauración. Photos by the author.

La Brigada Volante, *La Brigada de Restauración*, site custodians, excavators, and artisans. All interviews can be found here: <https://digital.kenyon.edu/puucangels/>. In this article, I focus on interviews with members of the two brigades.

Rural Life Among Archaeological Ruins in the Yucatán Peninsula

In 1981, as part of an effort to protect Puuc archaeological sites from looting and natural deterioration, Norberto Gonzales Crespo (INAH) created the project *Brigadas de Restauración de las Zonas Arqueológicas de Yucatán*. The project brought together and formalized two groups of local Oxcutzcab agriculturalists who, since the 1960s, have recorded, protected, and consolidated the ancient structures located in rural landscapes. The first brigade, called *Brigada Volante*, consisted of two individuals, Mario Magaña and Pedro Gongora; both men have recorded Puuc sites and monitor their conservation for close to 50 years (Figure 2). The second, called *Brigada de Restauración* consists of a group of Oxcutzcab masons-turned-restoration experts who have

reconstructed virtually every site available to the public in the Yucatán, as well as those in other states of southeast México (Figure 3).

Narratives from The Brigada Motorizada: Pedro Gongora

Don Pedro Góngora was born in Oxcutzcab, Yucatán in 1947. His maternal grandfather was born and raised in Hacienda Tabí, working long hours, with little pay and confined to the hacienda as a *peón*, which Don Pedro refers to as slavery. After Salvador Alvaro liberated local communities from the hacienda system, his family eventually settled in Oxcutzcab, where they owned a small *ranchito* and a *milpa*. Don Pedro mentions that his parents had no connection with the ancient buildings, nor knew to whom they belonged. Even though he was raised in the Puuc region, his first interaction with ancient archaeological sites was when he was hired by the *Secretaria de Recursos Hidraulicos* to survey the landscape at the age of 26. A large number of mounds and standing masonry architecture piqued his interest in these ancient buildings and their presence on the rural landscape.



Figure 4. Don Pedro patrolling in his motorcycle at Oxcutzcab, Yucatán. Photo by the author.

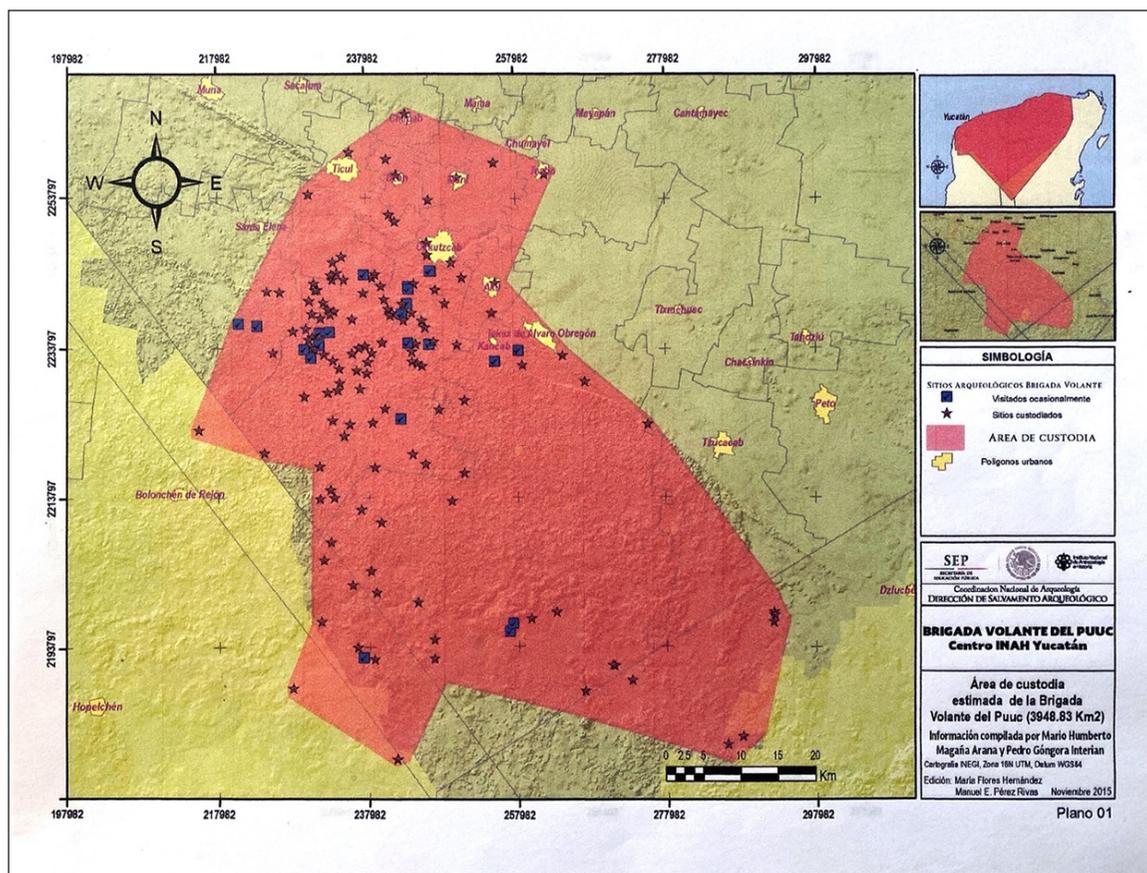


Figure 5. Approximate patrolled area of the Brigada Volante. Map by María Flores Hernández and Mario E. Pérez Rivas.

Mario Magaña, an INAH custodian from Oxcutzcab and Pedro’s brother-in-law, suggested that Pedro work with him and apply his surveying skills as a custodian of ancient Maya sites. From the start Don Pedro showed passion for his job, as he mentions that, even when the institute did not require it, he worked beyond his regular eight-hour day and travelled long distances by horse, bicycle, or on foot. Both he and Mario relied on a series of informal road networks, or *brechas*, and the hospitality of local agriculturalists that gave them a roof to sleep under when night fell and they were unable to get home. After being hired by INAH, and with the help of Don Mario, Don Pedro learned and incorporated archaeological technical vocabulary to refer to ancient sites and their features. In 1973 both Pedro and Mario were hired as custodians of small peripheral sites in all of the Puuc region and in 1981, Mario and Pedro’s custodial work was formalized when they acquired Yamaha motorcycles and created the *Brigada Volante* (Figure 4). The two men patrolled an area of 3,948 km² on their motorcycles, acquiring the nickname “Puuc Angeles” by local archaeologists (Figure 5).

From interviews and talks with Don Pedro, it is clear that even though he was born and raised

in the Puuc region, he did not feel any cultural connection to the archaeological landscape. This complete disconnection can be traced back to the beginning of the 20th century, when his ancestors were still living as *peons* in Hacienda Tabí. This view changed when he began to work as a surveyor and later as a custodian and part of the *Brigada Volante*. When asked if his parents knew of and told him about archaeological ruins, Don Pedro said:

“No. I learned it from my own, because I was orphaned by my father at 6 years, he was a peasant, just as my grandparents had no idea what the ruins were, but I knew from the moment I started in this, to distinguish buildings and vestiges... Well for me it was not difficult because I already had a notion of what archaeological remains are and I learned to distinguish between what are foundations and the masonry buildings. It was not difficult for me to adapt because I already liked it and I still do.”
(Digital Kenyon 2018a)

Maya language played a critical factor for the Puuc Angels to contact populations located in remote places where roads were not available until recently. Moreover, Pedro’s excellent memory, which can remember precise details from individual sites, is a testimony of his deep expertise in the landscape and its history. For example, the phallus that is now located at the entrance to the



Figure 6. Don Pedro and Kenyon staff at Cooperativa, Yucatán. Photo by the author.

Loltún cave, he comments, was initially found at the site of Cooperativa and then moved to this more touristy location (Digital Kenyon 2018a). The use of the local Maya language, an excellent memory, and the detailed knowledge of the landscape give Don Pedro and Don Mario a unique and unreplaceable perspective of ancient Puuc sites.

Some other themes from his stories included the reconstruction of a recent past landscape that no longer exists, in which communities from the south of Yucatán were isolated from the state and its influence. In an excerpt from one of the stories Don Pedro told me about getting lost in the jungle he describes:

“I was so excited that day that I did not realize that a storm was coming, and it was too late for me to go back. I had no lamp, I had nothing, I was not prepared for it. At night I left the site. I went through a trial, I knew. I got to where there was a milpa, and there was a lady cutting grass, and I asked her if there was a trail that goes by Tabí and she told me ‘the truth is no, I only have companions that go in search of water by the well, and they go in that direction; but I do not know.’ ‘Well, it’s okay,’ I said goodbye and followed a narrow trail. At first, it was okay because it’s a high jungle so I could see (the path), but suddenly I got where the bush was short, and the



Figure 7. Restoration Brigade restoring Kiuic's central Temple-Pyramid. Photo by the author.

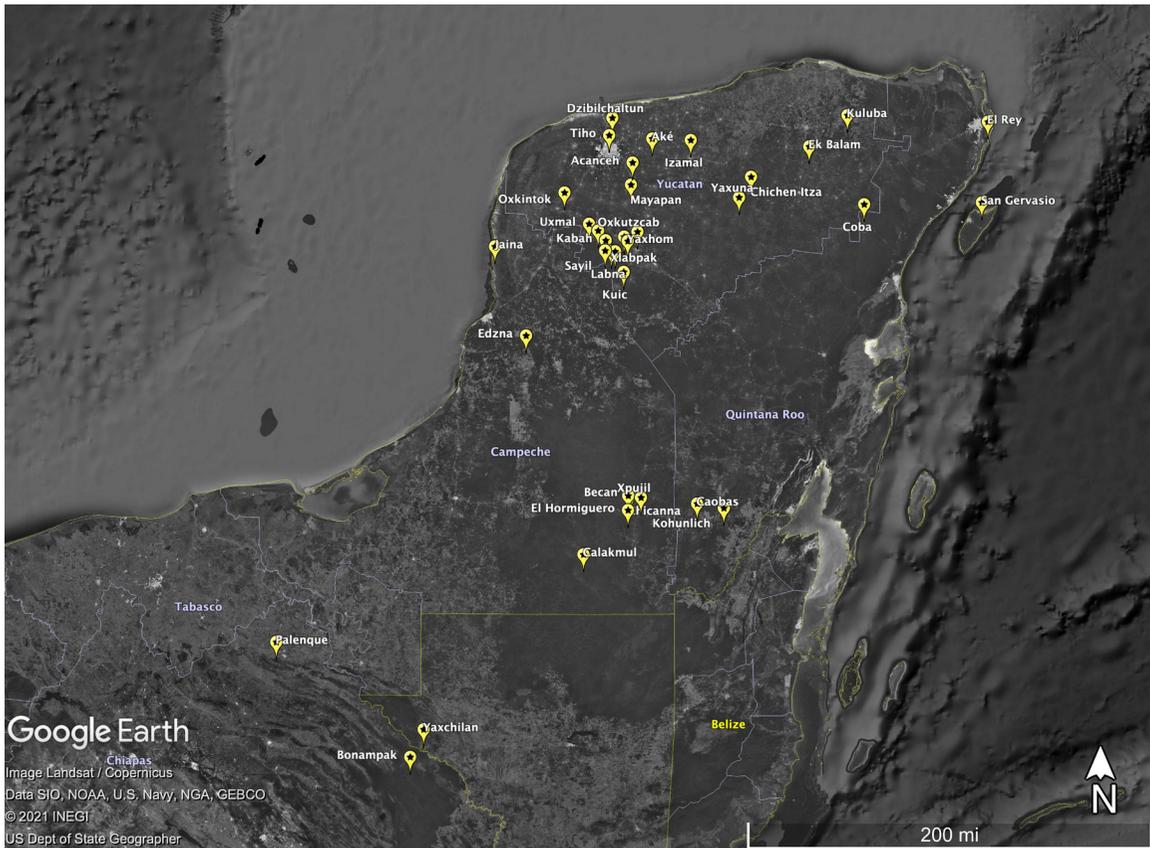


Figure 8. Some of the sites restored by the Brigada de Restauración.

trail got lost. And then, it started to rain, I took out my raincoat and I sat on some stones, the rain started, the thunderbolts. ‘What am I going to do now? I do not know where I am anymore.’ Suddenly it was dark, I remembered that I had a compass in my bag and when the lightning flashed, I was able to see the direction. I thought if I go to the south, over there, I must find the way back, but how do I do it if I can’t see, it’s very dark. I made the decision to go in the dark and I was able to make it out on the road. But it looked like I had fought with a jaguar, I was full of thorns. The good thing is that I did not get bitten by a snake or something, but when I left the road, I was disoriented because I did not know whether to go to the right or to the left.” (Digital Kenyon 2018a)

This excerpt, includes ideas about the use of ancient roads or trails, landmarks, knowledge about the jungle landscape, his technical knowledge, and the perils of his work. The knowledge accumulated through decades of viewing and reviewing archaeological sites molds the particular lens by which Don Pedro views the Puuc’s landscape (Figure 6). It is this personal and continual interaction with the land that give it meaning to people.

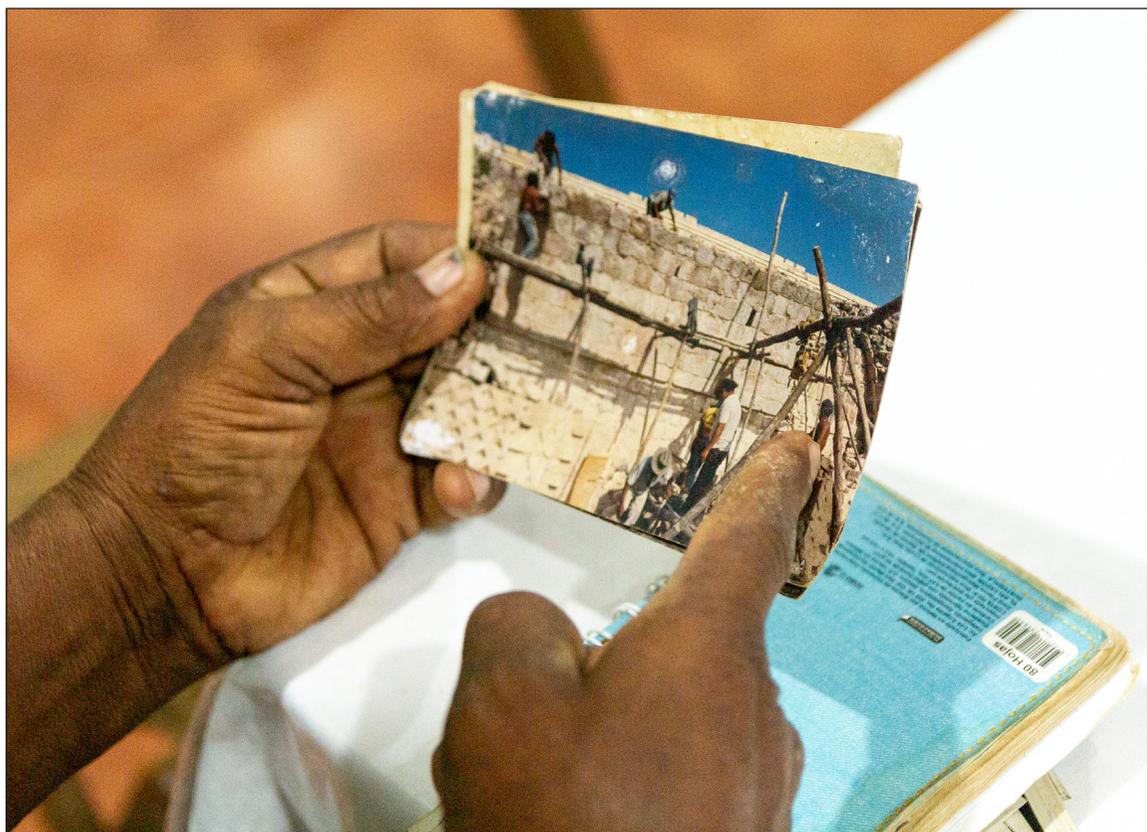


Figure 9. Santos Cruz recalling the restoration of a Palace Structure in Kabah, Yucatán. Photo by the author.

Narratives from La Brigada de Restauración: Santos Cruz Sierra, Willbert Castillo Cantú, Samuel Antonio Perez Chi

Anthropologist Medina Un (2018) remarks on the rich history and complexity of the specialized restoration labor of the Oxcutzcab masons since their first training by INAH archaeologists and restoration experts at the site of Chichén Itza in the 1960s. Santos Cruz Sierra and Wilbert (Will) are two of the most prominent masons who have worked restoring archaeological sites in multiple Mexican states for over 45 years. Each archaeological project has one *Cabo* – the main mason who oversees the completion of all restoration at a particular archaeological site (Figure 7). In this article, I will be focusing on Santos and Wilbert’s interviews.

Don Santos Cruz, born in Oxcutzcab, Yucatán, was invited in 1972 by Aurelio Monroy and Angel Novelo, both *Cabos*, to work in Yaxchilán to consolidate and raise the site’s stelae. Two other masons, Don Will and Samuel Antonio Perez Chí, were also among those hired. The journey included a flight on a small propeller plane – “*como los chicleros*” (i.e., like the gum collectors) – and a boat ride across the Usumacinta River. The season lasted six months. Samuel was just 12 years old, and

before that trip he had no knowledge about archaeological sites or the ancient Maya. These masons have worked or been in charge of the restoration of Maya sites that shape the archaeological imagination which has drawn a global audience to southeastern Mexico. In Yucatán, some of these sites include Chichén Itza, Uxmal, Ek Balam, Oxkintok, Labna, Yaxuna´, Kabah, Sayil, Xlapak, Acanceh, Dzibichaltún, Aké, Culuba, Mayapán, Xkitché´, and Multunchic. Beyond Yucatán, other such sites include Edzna´, Jaina, Xpujil, Becan, El Hormiguero, Cakalmul, and Chicana (Campeche); El Rey, Coba´, Kohunlich, Caobas, and Cozumel (Quintana Roo); and Palenque, Bonampak, and Yaxchilán (Chiapas) (Figure 8). Santos, for example, was the *Cabo* at Labna when the restoration of the arch and *sacbé* took place (now considered architectural icons of Maya archaeology); copious technical notes and photograph files that he personally took during the restoration process, most of which are not public, are still in his possession (Figure 9).

During his interview, Santos talked about his technical knowledge in Maya architecture, including architectural terms, measurements, and the difference between modern and ancient masonry. “*Es un rompecabezas debajo del escombros*” (i.e., it’s a jigsaw puzzle underneath the rubbish) Samuel said in an interview. Santos thinks that local people are disconnected from the past because they tell him that the current ruins were “*inventadas*” (i.e., made up) by the archaeologists. This idea must be particularly offensive for Santos, who has reconstructed countless ancient buildings with his own hands following the architectural patterns seen in the rubble. Both Santos and Will express pride in their work, technical expertise, and the ability to keep everybody safe during their tenures.

Santos also knows first-hand the dangers of his profession. Santos narrates an incident at Kabah in 1993 in which the carelessness of another *Cabo* caused an accident that took the life of one of his peers and original member of the *Brigadas de Restauración*, Don Juan Dzib. Don Will says:

“We keep everybody safe, that’s our job. We check the scaffolds and see that no one gets hurt. [...] that’s why I tell you that there are moments where we are doing well but we must take care of ourselves. Like when the pit was made there (at the site of Kiuc). We already were 8 meters deep like that, the guys who were down there. I told people to not leave stones, do not leave this, do not leave anything, because a stone at 8 meters hurts when it falls. And if it falls it’s on your head. That’s why we ordered helmets then, to protect ourselves. It was a blessing that nothing happened.” (Digital Kenyon 2018b).

Final Comments

In the past decades, there has been a shift in the power relations between archaeologists and their publics, particularly among indigenous peoples in settler nations (Jones and Russell 2012:273). Interviews with groups of workers that labor closely with archaeologists revealed a different narrative that people create about the ancient past. Narratives from these brigadores are molded by worldview, or in this case profession, from each group, and to a degree by each

individual. Archaeology creates a nexus in which material culture is interpreted and infused with different meanings.

It is premature to pinpoint any specific views the Brigadas have about archaeology. For the brigadas, archaeology is a source of perennial work, pride, and community building (including archaeologists). Their personal histories express a strong sense of passion for their labor, fondness for individual archaeologists they respect, and deep history of unique experiences rooted in the archaeological landscape. The brigada's history of community and knowledge building is not explored the same way that individual histories of archaeologists and sites are. It is the impression



of the author that interviewees were “caught off guard” when asked about their views on archaeology, perhaps because it’s a question that is very infrequently asked to them. The brigades live in the present and look towards the future, not the past; abstract academic concepts, such as cultural heritage, are not common in their talks about the ruins. Instead, there are proud of their specialized work, which can be seen in virtually all major archaeological structures in the Puuc region and is the reason they will restore buildings there for the foreseeable future.

Preliminary results of our project show some interesting implications for future oral history studies in the region. Narratives recovered from local archaeology experts are not static in time; that is, they are diachronic and dynamic. Don Pedro Gongora talks of a long-term process of transformation of the landscape and a lapsed way of life, in which people were transitioning from a post-Colonial hacienda system to the current rural, agricultural landscape. In Santos’s narrative, we hear the importance of a constructed kinship and the use of technical and Maya language applied through the practice of masonry, with his cohort of *compañeros*, which can be traced back about 40 years and has restored some of the most notorious archaeological landmarks in México.

Both narratives implicitly refer to the creation of a community of practice by restoring and preserving ancient Maya buildings; they depict the long trajectory, expertise, and importance that their jobs have in their personal lives. There is a reconnection with ancient Maya sites through labor. Most of those interviewed did not have a connection with the sites until they worked on archaeological projects. While this may seem obvious, they are individuals that have been around the sites all their life but have never considered these as part of their direct heritage. For example, Don Pedro, who grew up in the Puuc, did not pay serious attention to the sites until he started to work as a surveyor at the *Secretaria de Recursos Hidraulicos*.

Don Pedro and Don Will express concerns regarding the legacy of their work, a topic that was exacerbated with the passing of Don Mario Magaña in 2017. Don Pedro mentions that:

“Unfortunately for me the brigade no longer has a future. Once I die everything will be over. That’s my point of view. I’m seeing it right now. I’m not sure what’s going to happen, I see it difficult, I see it very difficult. Now most young people, for example, the least time they work and how much more they can be paid without working the better. That is the mentality of young people and that is disappointing. That is why

I feel bad when I say it, but I am seeing that reality. But what can we do? We cannot change his mentality. He does not work five minutes more than the hour, but to the contrary he works less.” (Digital Kenyon 2018a)

On the other hand, Don Santos’s son, Will, became an archaeologist:

“I feel very proud. Because I remember very well at that time my son did not reach the age that he was allowed to work, but because he liked it, good he should work. He told me if there was a chance that he will come to work. But his mother said, “look for a soft chamba [work], well not very soft.” (Digital Kenyon 2018b)

These labor narratives are different from our interpretations of the archaeological landscape since abstract academic concepts, such as cultural heritage and identity, have no salient meaning for local Puuc people. They are about how local laborers encounter the archaeological landscape and constitute a previously unacknowledged view of local archaeological ruins. Oral history amplifies these people’s voices as contributors to archaeological knowledge; moreover, making the interviews digitally available opens possibilities for information to make it back to the community. These narratives expand our understanding of how the archaeology of a region impacts local communities and highlights their active and frequently unmentioned contribution to the archaeological imaginary.

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