

# Examining Blind Spots and Assumptions Impeding Community Archaeology in the Maya World

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*Although I have been conducting community-based archaeological investigations in Guatemala for two decades, much of it has been hindered by underlying biases and blind spots that I only gradually became aware of. In this article, I directly confront three of these in the hope that they can inform others who might be laboring with a similar mindset. Specifically, I wish to address (1) the prevalent notion that contemporary Maya can be severed from their archaeological past and half-millennium of historic trauma; (2) the political origins of the national parks and nature preserves where most archaeologists work, and; (3) the fear that descendant communities will serve as significant impediments to conducting research if they are allowed to exert power over access to archaeological remains.*

*I draw primarily from my experiences along the Northern Transversal Strip in central Guatemala to examine each of these assumptions by: (1) stitching together the Maya past and present to highlight commonalities in their experience during the Postclassic and colonial period, the Guatemalan civil war, and the present day; (2) discussing the founding of major parks including their roles as part of a larger military strategy with U.S. support, and; (3) contrasting my experiences negotiating access to archaeological remains with descendant communities who are confronting a variety of environmental and economic crises. I also suggest several ways that archaeologists can use their knowledge and skillsets to collaborate with communities in order to address major concerns they might face. Fundamentally, when archaeologists side with corporations and politicians over local communities or refer to the Maya as outlaws, looters, and narcos who need to be removed from sensitive areas, we facilitate the weaponization of our discipline against the descendants of the very people we study.*

*Keywords: Community archaeology, Q'eqchi', corporations, parks, contemporary Maya production, positionality, care*



## My Mayanist Upbringing

Like many of my peers, my path to Maya archaeology had very little to do with an interest in the social, political, environmental, or economic issues faced by the contemporary Indigenous populations of Mesoamerica. After falling in love with Pompeii as a child, I dabbled in local archaeology in the Upper Midwest and dreamed of the Mediterranean. The anthropology department at my undergraduate institution was exclusively ethnographic, and I intentionally eschewed any methods classes there to avoid having to interact with living subjects, instead taking many of my major classes at a neighboring college with an archaeological component. It was in one of these classes, a month-long study abroad to the Yucatán, where I became enamored with the monumental ruins of the Maya world and decided to spend my life studying the Maya past.

My dissertation research focused on the ritual use of caves in Guatemala's Northern Transversal Strip (Figures 1 and 2), many of which were actively used by the contemporary Q'eqchi' Maya, whom



I employed as guides, excavators, assistants, cooks, and handymen while in the field. Just like Maler, Morley, de Charnay, and all of the trailblazing white men whose paths I followed, I understood these Maya communities only in terms of my research goals—as either facilitators or roadblocks on my way to what “really mattered”. I believed that I was engaging in scientific investigations of the human past, an endeavor that was, by its very nature, ethically neutral. Any obligations I did have were to the field and the Guatemalan government, and I worked hard to tick off those boxes (e.g., grant money, fieldwork applications, site reports, professional publications, and presentations). When Q'eqchi' villagers questioned my presence and motives, I simply pulled out the official contract with the federal

government I carried in my field bag—a thick, stapled stack of legal pages with words printed in a bold font bordered by an impressive number of stamps and signatures on each page. I could assure them that unlike other *gringos* who were stationed in this part of the country, I was not trying to save souls or extract resources, but simply wanted to study the past as a scholar and student.

The nagging worry that someone would confuse me for an oil man or a miner eventually turned into a realization that, from the Q'eqchi' perspective, **I really was no different**. My team came into the region; paid locals to dig up objects that were bagged, boxed, and shipped off; and then left after promising to return within a year. Archaeology is, in fact, an extractive industry, and while we monetize the resources we extract in more abstract ways than transnational corporations, the publications that result from our investigations are still the primary way we advance our careers.

My interest in community archaeology and finding ways to benefit neighboring and descendant communities came out of this realization. It became a central part of my research at Salinas de los Nueve Cerros, which was founded by invitation from community leaders in 2009. But even with the best of intentions, much of my community work was hobbled by a series of problematic assumptions and blind spots that I continue to work hard to identify and unpack. In this short article, I would like to shed some light on some of these handicaps with the hope that they can be of use to potential readers and, perhaps, move the conversation and models forward.

### Assumption 1: The Conquest of the Maya World Is Long Over

My fascination with the Maya stemmed in no small part from the mystique of abandoned cities in the jungle, a romantic image that has fed public interest since at least the days of Stephens and Catherwood’s best-selling *Incidents of Travel* series (Stephens 1841, 1843). Much of the Guatemalan, Belizean, Honduran, and Mexican economy today is built upon carefully curated zones of dual archaeological and nature preserves that solidify that mystique. Documentaries and school curricula, similarly, still promote the “mystery of the Maya” (i.e., why they disappeared and where they went).

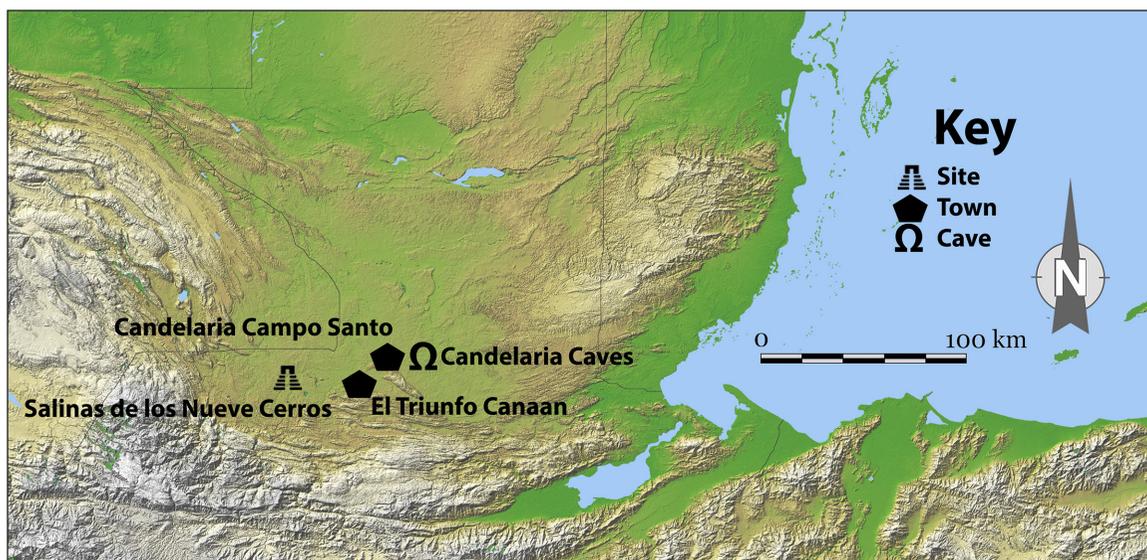
Going backwards in time to the conquest and colonial periods, the Maya lowlands were far from empty. Changing economic systems transformed the central and southern Maya lowlands from the

drivers of Classic market forces to the producers of in-demand commodities for export throughout Mesoamerica. Extant populations also moved around—the Ch’ol speakers who likely represented most of the central and southern lowlands population were displaced by Yukatek speakers from the north after the fall of the great cities, moving to the edges of the lowlands in eastern Chiapas and central Guatemala. But the Maya kingdoms that inherited that landscape, both Ch’ol (Lakandon, Akalaha, and Manche) and Yukatek (Itza, Kowoj, Kejach, and Mopan) were still formidable and populous states who were successful at resisting colonization over nearly two centuries of Spanish efforts (De Vos 1980, Feldman 2000, Jones 1998, Woodfill 2019, Lentz Under Review).

As each kingdom fell, the Spaniards and their Indigenous allies rounded up as many of their citizens as they could and moved them into areas where they could be more easily monitored and controlled. By the early 18<sup>th</sup> century, the Spanish mission to remove the Maya from the region was nearly complete, leaving the southern lowlands largely devoid of human settlements. When Stephens and Catherwood visited the area about 130 years later, the jungle had reclaimed many



**Figure 1.** Map of the Maya world with the primary towns, sites, and other constructed features discussed in this article. Map by the author based on a NASA terrain model.



**Figure 2.** Map of the Northern Transversal Strip and adjacent regions showing the sites, caves, and communities discussed in this article. Map by the author based on a NASA terrain model.

of the cities and towns, allowing the myth of the Maya disappearance to trickle into the public consciousness (e.g., Eggert et al. 2012, Habel 1878, Le Plongeon 1902).

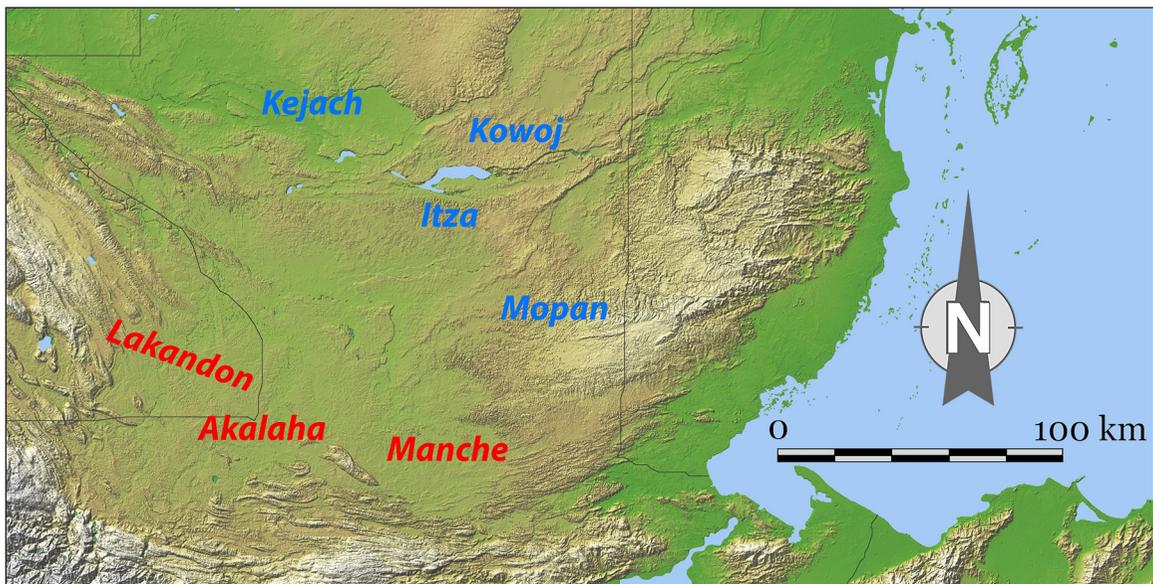
Colonization began anew in the 20<sup>th</sup> century with several driving forces. The spillover from German coffee plantations, the drive for chicle, the founding of archaeological projects, and the discovery of oil in the southern lowlands led to the establishment of corporate and scientific camps, often attracting low-wage employees, sex workers, cooks, and others to found adjacent settlements to provide in-demand services not officially sanctioned within the camp. Population pressures and awful working conditions in other parts of Mexico and Guatemala drew others to the region, who came alone or through organized settlement programs organized by national governments, the Catholic church, and other public and private organizations.

During the Guatemalan civil war, land was gifted to influential military officers and the national elite. Army bases, guerrilla encampments, and small communities composed of families escaping the violence proliferated in the “wild” spaces where the forest was still unbroken (Devine 2014, Falla 1992, Grandia 2012, King 1974, Manz 2005, Permanto 2015, Woodfill 2019, Ybarra 2017). Many of these same families are now struggling to fend off new incursions into their land by wealthy investors, governments, and national and transnational corporations who seek to exploit their land for mineral extraction, hydroelectricity, tourism, or valuable agricultural commodities. The conquest of the Maya world was not some singular event in the distant past but an ongoing process that is still happening today even if the *conquistadores* have abandoned both the sword and the cross as their primary tools.

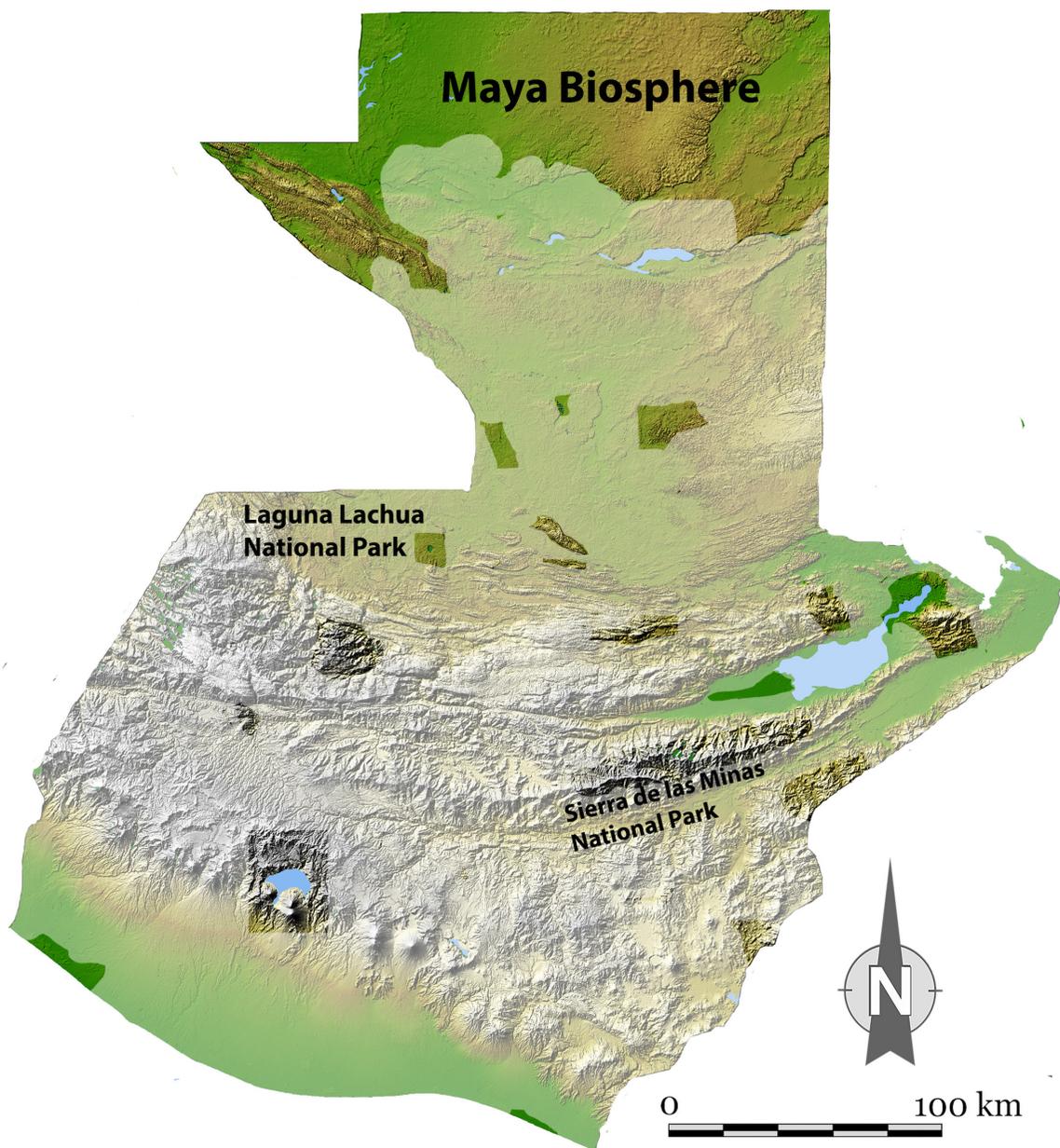
### Assumption 2: Parks and Nature Preserves Are Apolitical

It is in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century that most of Guatemala's national parks and biosphere reserves were established (Figure 4). While a few small parks were created around specific cultural or geographic features like Lake Lachua and Sierra de las Minas, most were large, sparsely occupied swaths of borderlands where guerrillas could camp and easily escape into Mexico if the army was close. The creation of the Maya Biosphere and many of its composite national parks in 1990 created a permanent justification for military presence in the region and prohibited the establishment of new settlements, both of which allowed the border to be tightly controlled. After the signing of the Guatemalan Peace Accords six years later, the rhetoric around forced relocation changed, although it continues to this day. Now, the military targets “invaders” and “*narcos*” in parks and preserves, as opposed to Cold War-era “Communists” and “guerrillas” and conquest period “barbarians”, “pagans”, or “rebels” (Falla 1992, Grandia 2012, Morán 2000 [1636], Ybarra 2017). Military patrols continue to burn fields and homes, round up everyone they can find, and forcibly remove them (Devine 2014, Peace Brigades International 2013, Woodfill 2019).

The conquest of the Maya and their severing from their lands and histories has continued unabated since the Spanish conquest, and the latest front is the environmental movement. Variations of the same history continue to play out for the Maya surrounding Salinas de los Nueve Cerros. After several horrible confrontations in the territory a few days to their north, the Akalaha ambushed a small group of Spanish priests and soldiers in 1555, so the military burned their lands, hanged their leaders, and forcibly removed the survivors from their homes. Echoes of this trauma reverberated



**Figure 3.** Primary languages in the southern lowlands on the eve of the Spanish conquest. Languages in red are in the Ch'ol family, languages in blue are Yucatek. Map by the author based on a NASA terrain model.



**Figure 4.** Primary national parks and nature preserves in Guatemala. Map by the author based on a NASA terrain model.

throughout the Spanish Empire, where reports of the martyrdom of one of the friars, Domingo de Vico, spread far and wide (e.g., Margil de Jesús 1976 [1695], Remesal 1932 [1619], Salazar 2000 [1620], Tovilla 1960 [1635]). During the civil war, many of my older Q'eqchi' collaborators were conscripted into deputized *Patrullas Auto-Civiles* (civil auto patrols) and forced to participate in

burning “rebel” villages and rounding up survivors.

Today, the Q’eqchi’ are regularly cast as environmental villains who wreak havoc upon their landscapes, both in conversations by development specialists in the region and in academic publications (e.g., Atran and Medin 2008). The military took advantage of that reputation in 2012 when they burned the fields of three villages in the southern part of Lake Lachua National Park in an attempt to forcibly evict them, even though one was established before the park’s founding. At the same time that much of the environmentalist narrative is focused on the Indigenous threat, however, these villagers and their neighbors have to suffer through the headaches and nose bleeds caused by the sulfur dioxide that is leaking from the nearby oil wells and the massive fish die-offs caused by agricultural runoff from the African palm plantations that are spreading, largely unchecked, throughout the region.



While parks are protected from corporate takeover, they also typically become off-limits to the communities who are already living there and managing the environment. The creation of a park, then, does not involve finding and preserving pristine areas, but is in fact a “spatial colonization and spatial commodification” (Kurnick 2019) that severs people from their landscape. Local control cedes to new stakeholders representing national and at times even global governing bodies and concerns who often impose strict rules about what can be done and by whom within the park boundaries. Even when locals are still allowed to live or work within these newly minted parklands, there are often major restrictions and significant added costs (Kinnard 2014).

Nowhere was the political nature of park creation more obvious to me than while working to help found the Candelaria Caves National Park, which began at the behest of a foreign hotelier in the area whose ultimate goal was removing the Q’eqchi’ villages who lived and farmed atop and around the caves he exploited for tourism. Although the villages predated the hotel, his connections to the military and high-ranking members of the Guatemalan government kept their residents in check during the period of the Guatemalan civil war. After the threat of disappearance and death diminished after the signing of the Peace Accords, however, community leaders began to demand a share in the planning and profits. As a result, the hotelier used extant connections to begin the process of creating a national park that he hoped would forcibly remove them from within the park boundaries and, thus, remove any potential competition or obligations. Ironically, when the Guatemalan government officials moved forward, their primary collaborators (USAID, the Cancuen Project, and Idaho State University) successfully convinced them to side instead with the local communities, who now co-manage the national park with the Ministry of Culture and Sports, sharing in the responsibilities, planning, protection, and profits (Woodfill 2013, 2019). This model has proved viable and successful, as the villagers have preserved and expanded the forested areas while protecting the fragile cave ecosystem and the archaeological remains within, all without the assistance of the military patrols used in other national parks. At the time, though, the political battle for the future of the system raged in public as much as it did behind closed doors in the capital, with articles, interviews, and editorials in national newspapers and television programs.



**Figure 5.** Palm plantation abutting the Northern Transversal Highway, with the foothills of the Guatemalan highlands in the background. Photo by the author.

### **Assumption 3: Descendant Communities Are an Obstacle to Access**

I began working in archaeology in August 1990 as a 13-year-old volunteer for a non-profit in Minneapolis. I internalized the Processualist ideals of archaeology as a science that was devoted to codifying universal laws of human behavior in the past (e.g., Flannery 1973). I was sure that the Oneota and Woodland remains I helped to investigate provided datasets that allowed us to find these laws, and that, as scientists, we could expect unfettered access to the past.

Three months later, George H.W. Bush signed the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act into law. While the primary motivation for its existence was to right some of the historic wrongs inflicted upon America's Indigenous population and give them some control over their ancestors and their ancestors' possessions, it also presented a real challenge to the notion that we had that unfettered access. This notion has been litigated and relitigated in the courts of law and public opinion, like the famous Kennewick Man controversy (Preston 2014) and the more recent outcry over Princeton University faculty using bones from child victims of the 1985 police bombing in West Philadelphia for online, undergraduate instruction (Flaherty 2021).

My first visit to the Smithsonian Institution was in the lead-up to the passing of NAGPRA, and while I do not remember any of the archaeological exhibits I was so excited to see, I do vividly remember the protesters and the conversations about human remains in the museum's basement that followed. While in college, I interned with Faith Bad Bear, the NAGPRA project manager at the Science Museum of Minnesota, and heard the horrifying stories behind the objects in the museum collection and saw the messy process of repatriation first-hand. Instead of being simply frustrated,

Faith thought of NAGPRA as a sort of Pandora’s Box—“you open it and a bunch of bodies fly out, but at the very bottom is a little bit of hope.” Hope in the possibility of moving through the centuries of exploitation and trauma to create collaborative partnerships and practices that bring together archaeologists and the people whose ancestors they study.

Most of the work to build that trust must be done by the scientists who want the information Indigenous peoples and their ancestors provide, though—in addition to our problematic history of acquiring Indigenous bodies and objects without permission (*e.g.*, Urry 1989), we are the ones whose livelihoods are based on researching them and their ancestors. Because we as archaeologists need to access the lands and history of people around the world in order to assure the survival of our discipline, we rightly fear losing that access through forces out of our control. Many of these fears have focused on descendant communities, a bogeyman who reemerged in Elizabeth Weiss and James Springer’s (2020, 2021) recent problematic book and paper at the Society for American



**Figure 6.** Sign posted in the village of El Triunfo Canaan, reading: “-STOP- WE PROHIBIT THE ENTRANCE OF PALM COMPANIES. IN THE COMMUNITY OF EL TRIUNFO CANAAN, WE RESPECT ARTICLE 44-67 AND CONTRACT 169, ARTICLE 1-7-13 AND 20,” referring to legal standing for the prohibition. Photo by the author.

Archaeology meetings (Wade 2021).

However, such works are blind to much more catastrophic concerns. During the Guatemalan civil war and Peru's Shining Path revolution, the violence left much of the countryside off-limits to scientific investigation, just as much of Mesopotamia is still off-limits to American archaeologists after our two Gulf Wars. Urbanization, resource extraction, and infrastructure projects have partially or totally destroyed significant archaeological sites— e.g., Kaminaljuyu and Naranjo to the growth of Guatemala City, Los Encuentros to the Quixal hydroelectric dam, and La Venta to petroleum exploitation. In my own research experience, some Maya subsistence farmers have asked us not to pass through or dig in their agricultural fields, but enough of their neighbors are willing to work with us that we can conduct our proposed investigations with only slight modifications to our plans.

Corporate, private, and municipal entities have proven to be much more disruptive. Their landholdings are often much larger and can encompass entire sites and regions, and their land use practices are often much more extreme, involving mechanized modification of the landscape and crops that are far more damaging than corn. In my experience, they are as suspicious—if not more so—about our intentions and the long-term effects of our investigations than local landowners, and they are much harder to meet with to actually discuss plans and answer questions. Unlike villages, where residents are accustomed to calling impromptu meetings with only a few hours' notice when needed, the entities that hold large landholdings are complex bureaucracies that can hide behind lawyers, administrative assistants, and ambiguous legal wordings to indefinitely delay a meeting or the announcement of a decision.

Even when corporations and political entities have a desire to collaborate with archaeologists, the sheer scale of their landholdings tends to render them unaware of what is found within, whereas smallholders tend to know their terrains intimately. In fact, it is really a disservice to local Maya landowners and organizations who have allowed me to enter their property by saying that they gave my team permission to work there. Most of the archaeological contexts where I have conducted research were shown to me by local individuals who then invited me to investigate there; without their guidance, I would have been unaware of most of my research sites. These same families provided knowledge, labor, and companionship on top of their permission, all of which resulted in the data I string together in my publications, presentations, and classes. Truthfully, most of my career has only been made possible because locals who live, work, and intimately know their landscape became invested in it. I cannot say the same about corporations and municipalities.

### **Corporations vs. Communities in the Northern Transversal Strip**

African palm production is one of the most disruptive of the new industries threatening the communities where I and many of my Mayanist colleagues work. African palm trees were introduced to the Pacific Coast of Guatemala in 1988, with the first palm plantations established in the Petén a few years later (Castañeda 2011, Grandia 2012, Escalón 2014). In 2010, there were over 76 km<sup>2</sup> of African palm in Guatemala alone—2% of the republic's arable land—which doubled in four

years (Alonso-Frajedas et al. 2010, CMI 2015). By 2019, Guatemala had become the second-highest producer of palm oil in Latin America with trees covering 165 km<sup>2</sup> and producing 900,000 tons of oil (Prensa Latina 2019; Figure 5). As they require wet tropical climates to propagate, their cultivation is limited to the hot lowlands and coastal regions of eastern Mesoamerica—the same areas with the densest Precolumbian populations. There, they present a very real threat to archaeological remains in addition to the livelihoods of subsistence farmers—the trees, which live an average of 25 years, have dense root systems that descend over half a meter into the earth and splay out in a 3-5 m radius (Plants for a Future, n.d.).

The explosion of palm plantations in Guatemala over the past 30 years is supported by international investments from Goldman-Sachs, the Carlyle Group, and others (Rubio Castañeda 2017:226), and fed by multiple practices of questionable ethics. Liza Grandia (2012:165) reported a forced acquisition of the entirety of the landholdings of a village in the municipality of Poptún, Petén. Landowners were offered a fifth of the price of their land and the holdouts (and their families) were threatened with violence. In the Northern Transversal Region, the village of Candelaria Campo Santo, one of the co-managers of the aforementioned Candelaria Caves National Park, initiated a series of roadblocks and protests in 2012 after an upriver palm plantation owned by Chiquibul, S.A., illegally seized 3 ha of community land and built an unauthorized road through it (Sam Chum 2012, Escalón 2014). The protests were ultimately unsuccessful, and as a result, the Candelaria Caves National Park is experiencing an environmental crisis caused by pesticides, fertilizers, and other untreated agricultural runoffs that drain into the river at the heart of the park's caves (Woodfill, pers. obs. 2017, 2019).

Increasingly, economic and climactic insecurity have driven more Maya to sell their land to foreign industries, even without the aggressive tactics described above. Along the Northern Transversal Strip, most of the communities were established during the Cold War with the assistance of the US government, who encouraged the use of individually parceled land in lieu of cooperative community holdings. This single decision, based on the desire to minimize potential Communist sympathies, has resulted in an ecological and economic crisis ripped from the pages of Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (1962). The extant parcels are in practice too small for the individual families who farm them to let sections rest after a few years of intensive corn cultivation, so they continue to farm increasingly exhausted soil with the aid of heavy fertilizer use. The ubiquity of corn throughout the Indigenous patches of the regional quilt has required the increased use of pesticides to combat the blossoming populations of fungi and insects that feed on maize. Both fertilizer and pesticides cut into already slim profit margins, and as pests and pathogens become more resistant to the agrochemicals the Maya spray on their crops, more and more powerful poisons must be used. Eventually, these chemicals damage the corn itself, so more and more farmers turn to "*maíz mejorado*" (i.e., genetically modified corn with a "suicide switch" that prevents them from replanting in future years). The lack of seed reserves combined with increasingly erratic weather patterns caused by global warming results in a precarious economic situation. This is worsened still by the general practice, as reported by my collaborators, of buying GMO corn seeds with a down payment backed

up by a land title that is held until they can pay off the remaining debt after harvest time.

Even if Maya farmers working and living atop Salinas de los Nueve Cerros are able to stay afloat through all of these problems, lending houses have become common ways for many to address short-term economic woes or to finance education or improvement projects. Villagers can get an instant loan by putting up their land title as collateral, but just one published rate sheet from a house in the nearby town of Playa Grande Ixcán has annual interest rates that in several plans top 80% (Fundación Genesis 2019). When farmers are unable to pay their debts, the landholdings are bundled and sold, often to corporations, leaving the former owners to fend for themselves and feeding the waves of migration into nature preserves and the few remaining available lands.

Some villages have taken more aggressive stances to resist displacement. After seeing the failure of Candelaria Campo Santo to remove the palm plantation from their land, the residents of El Triunfo Canaan, Chisec, Alta Verapaz, posted signs that explicitly barred palm plantation owners and workers from entering their land in 2016 (Figure 6). Others, like my colleague Ramiro Tox who recently succumbed to COVID-19, have resisted genetically modified corn in order to reduce their dependence on the global supply chain for their survival, although they note that every year their yields decline as the pollen from their neighbors' fields fertilizes their plants.

The displaced Indigenous populations, typically dismissed as “park invaders” or “*narcos*” by some journalists, politicians, and academics, are inextricably linked to the expansion of palm plantations into their lands through these and other mechanisms. And while the Maya—especially the Q'eqchi'—are painted as the bringers of environmental catastrophes, most of my work has supported grassroots environmental movements founded and led by rural Q'eqchi' villagers to create community-run parks and ecotourism facilities, preserving and regenerating the local biodiversity while protecting local livelihoods, often in the face of powerful external threats. Archaeology can be and at times has been a part of their toolkit, bringing attention to the area through publications, press, and the promise of visiting picturesque ruins and caves in a jungle setting. It can just as easily be a tool to continue to colonize, disrupt, marginalize, and displace, however, if the resulting tourism infrastructure is owned, managed, and staffed by external players who are more interested in extracting profits than investing in local initiatives.

### **Where Do We Go From Here?**

Some villagers have looted, some villagers work with *narcos*, but the narcotics and antiquities trades are systemic problems that need to be addressed through significant legislation focused on their primary beneficiaries and markets instead of attacking their poorest and most marginalized participants. Especially in the wake of the public realization over the past few years that privileged individuals can and have weaponized the police against minorities, be they grilling or bird-watching, I believe we should involve armed forces in our scientific fieldwork as little as possible.

As discussed above, the driving forces behind looting, drug trafficking, and the establishment of new communities in protected areas are, at least in the corner of Guatemala where I work, poverty and powerlessness. I believe that, to address some of these problems at a local level, we should

endeavor to create sustainable income and increased freedom for community members instead of supporting the half-millennium of militarization in Maya lands.

Some of the ways we can work towards that end are well within our wheelhouse. We can work with federal agencies and funding sources to create new parks where we work, like what we were able to do in the Candelaria Caves, or we can modify existing ones that empower and bolster, rather than vilify, local communities. Simpler still, we can use the tools and skillsets at our disposal (e.g., Geographic Information Systems, fundraising, education) to support local initiatives and goals. For example, these are a few actions my team has taken or is currently planning: (1) Surveying property lines for communities in the process of acquiring their land, (2) Rebuilding ancient Maya *aguadas* for use by contemporary communities, (3) Using digital elevation models and hydrological modeling to determine the best places for establishing rice patties and other agricultural field types, and, (4) Helping establish legal foundations for the existence of a community by connecting the Precolumbian and contemporary populations in specific places.

From the local perspective, the most important thing Proyecto Salinas de los Nueve Cerros has done is simply provide a space for an applied anthropologist to work with community leaders towards goals they themselves identified. Between 2011 and the present, they have supported myriad successful initiatives, beginning with the creation of two local, Maya-led NGOs focused on accomplishing distinct goals. The resulting collaborations have rebuilt roads and bridges, brought clean water to multiple communities, resettled nearly 100 families, provided new sources of sustainable income, and improved local health and wellbeing in various ways (Woodfill 2013, Woodfill and Odum 2018, Woodfill and Rivas 2020).

Just as archaeology can be a tool for the continued onslaught against the Maya, it can be a tool for combatting poverty and powerlessness. Archaeologists have a choice. If we prioritize parks over people and paint the Maya as “invaders” in a pristine landscape, we become active members of the ongoing colonization of the Maya world. If we, with our institutional prestige and public platforms, continue to refer to the Maya as outlaws, looters, and *narcos* needing to be removed from sensitive areas to preserve their past because of their importance for “world heritage” without regards to local concerns, we are facilitating the weaponization of our discipline against the descendants of the people we study, just as the environmental movement has already been weaponized against them.

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