Trowels and Tribulations: Lessons Learned During Five Years of Fieldwork in Guatemala

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Archaeologists sometimes joke about preferring the dead to the living, but in reality we are highly social creatures. We do our fieldwork in teams, hire employees, train students, navigate intricate bureaucracies, and interact with myriad "stakeholders," who may include local communities, descendant groups, and landowners. Working in a foreign country presents some distinct challenges and learning opportunities for a young archaeologist. Here, I relate some of my experiences conducting dissertation fieldwork in Guatemala, in the hope that they may be helpful to new graduate students.

As an undergraduate, I received a thorough education in archaeological methods. I spent two semesters at field schools in Central America. I took "Archaeological Ethics and the Law," and read all about stakeholders. One of my advisors ran a foundation dedicated to sharing archaeology with Maya people. My part-time job involved communicating archaeology to the public. This was great, but I was still, in hindsight, pretty dumb. I've come to believe that one of the most important things you can bring to the field is the knowledge that you know almost nothing.

Maybe it was the year or two I spent frantically catching up on social theory at the beginning of grad school, but by the time I was back in the field I felt lost. Learning how to work independently in Guatemala was like learning to speak Spanish – slow, frustrating, and sometimes embarrassing. Sure, I had studied Spanish in school, but actually conversing with people was very different. Understanding the different cultures, government systems, and project logistics was just as hard. But that's how fieldwork is: you learn by doing. Luckily I had excellent advisors and a handful of new Guatemalan friends who were patient and generous enough to help me. As with Spanish, I'm still learning more every year.

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After my first two field seasons at our site in the lowland Peten region of Guatemala, my Spanish and my self-confidence were vastly improved. I could understand jokes and gossip. I had started my dissertation research and given a conference presentation in Spanish. I gained experience with lab work, especially ceramic analysis, in Guatemala City. I knew more about the government's regulations for research projects. I had been invited into the homes of both my archaeologist friends in the city and the rural farmers employed as excavators by our project. I felt like I understood the world of Guatemalan archaeology. However, I abruptly found out that I still had plenty to learn.

At that point, my advisors handed off the management of their large, complex research project to a few of us students. This was a rough transition, and it took learning-by-doing to a new level. It was an amazing opportunity, of course, to have access to the existing project infrastructure and the chance to play directors. But it came with a lot of responsibility and pressure to do well. Filing the annual paperwork to get permits from the government was a daunting task. The rules seemed to change arbitrarily depending on who was sitting in the office that day and how he or she felt about you. I learned to always expect long delays. Despite double-checking lists of supplies to bring to the field, some crucial item was always forgotten. One year, we arrived at the field site only to find the local branch of our bank had closed and we therefore had no money. Another year, none of us could drive a standard transmission, so the Guatemalan co-director and I had to teach ourselves, frequently getting our truck stuck in the mud pits that made up the road to the site. Each season was complicated by unique challenges.

Additionally, all the social relationships in and around the project changed. The division of responsibilities became a source of conflict among the archaeologists. The local laborers who had worked for our advisors for over two decades did not immediately respect the authority of a few 20-somethings, the majority of whom were women. Neither did some of the Guatemalan undergraduate students we were training. I also realized that our Q'eqchi' Maya workers and our *ladino* (Hispanic, not Maya) workers did not get along. Nevertheless, we were succeeding – getting the work done! As usual, as soon as I started to feel comfortable,

terrifying new learning opportunities presented themselves.

During the final field season of my dissertation work, various events brought the communities around our field site into sharp focus. My advisors had long had a positive relationship with the Q'eqchi' village where most of our excavators live. Among other efforts to help the community financially, they worked with cultural anthropologists and local women to start a micro-savings project there. Perhaps that made me complacent about the relationship between our research project and the surrounding populations. In 2015, I was shocked when villagers from a different nearby Q'eqchi' town invaded the national park where our archaeological site is located, clearing 28 hectares of the last protected patch of jungle in a landscape of cattle ranches, cornfields, and palm oil plantations. As descendents of the ancient Maya, the villagers argued, they had the right to use the land for farming. The incident led to a confrontation in which police were attacked with machetes but, thankfully, declined to fire their weapons. Half a dozen farmers were arrested.

In the following days, we heard disturbing rumors. Members of the invaders' town had gone to the neighboring town, where our employees live, to ask for help in a plot to kidnap the unarmed guards working at the park and hold them hostage until the arrested men were released. There was also talk of burning the few modern structures at the site. A concerned local official called in the Guatemalan army for protection. I spent a surreal day explaining archaeology to teenage boys carrying assault rifles and ended up in many of their Facebook photos. After that, the military abandoned us, satisfied that nothing bad was going to happen. We were near the end of our season, but drawings had to be completed and excavations had to be backfilled before we could leave. We received conflicting emails from Guatemalan officials telling us, first, that we had to stay and finish our work no matter what, and then, a day or two later, that we had to evacuate immediately. Tensions among archaeologists, students, and workers rose under the pressure, while we joked about how we would escape if kidnapped by an angry mob. In the end, that mob never materialized, although the same villagers did eventually steal an ancient stone sculpture from the site. Rather than feeling nos-

talgic on my last day of fieldwork, I was simply relieved.

After gaining some distance and some rest, I was able to reflect on this crisis and my own reaction to it. In the moment, I had been angry and scared. Although I was familiar with the extreme poverty in the area, I thought it was stupid of the local people to destroy precious natural and cultural resources, especially when it was illegal to do so. Some of my anthropologist and historian friends helped me adjust my way of thinking. I read an ethnography (*Enclosed* by Liza Grandia) and articles about the Q'eqchi' people's short history in Peten, the loss of much of their farmland to cattle farmers and the palm oil industry, the rapidly expanding population, and the failure to account for human needs when creating protected areas like the giant Maya Biosphere. I had previously come to understand why the young men who worked for us wanted to travel undocumented to the United States, despite the dangers – this is their only means to earn a decent chunk of money to support their families. I had also realized why people had no compassion for stray dogs when I held an elaborate funeral for a puppy and overheard one of the excavators who was humoring me note, casually, "When we buried my daughter we only used one rock." Now I started to see why all of the archaeological sites outside our little park had already been deforested and occupied. Cultural and natural resources were not an immediate priority. Looking back on my undergraduate training, you'd think I would have figured this out sooner, but my vision may have narrowed under the stress of surviving each field season.

2015 brought further crises in the communities around our field site. For example, we were very concerned about some of the people trying to migrate to the U.S. Two young men were captured by a Mexican drug cartel *en route*, and their family members, many of whom worked for our project, had to come up with $7,000 USD to get them back. Shortly after we returned to the city to start the lab season, a palm oil plantation spilled illegal pesticides into the river near our site, killing the fish the locals eat and poisoning the water they drink and bathe in. Eventually, the palm oil company was sanctioned, and the teacher who had first reported the disaster was assassinated in broad

daylight. One of our students had begun an ethnoarchaeological project about fishing, but that could not continue. The distrust engendered by the pollution of the river had other consequences for our research project. When Japanese scientists conducting paleoenvironmental studies in cooperation with our archaeological team tried to take sediment cores from a nearby lake, an angry mob materialized, threatening to burn people alive. Some of the local Q'eqchi' people thought that the researchers were stealing mythical gold out of the lake or polluting the water. This misunderstanding could have been prevented by better communication beforehand. Instead, a few of us archaeologists had to do damage control after the fact, traveling to Peten to meet with the town's authorities.

Back in the capital, I tried to decide whether or not I would keep working in the same research area in the future. People were already asking what my next project would be, before I had even begun writing my dissertation. Based on the dramatic events of 2015, some advised me to move far away, but abruptly ending the relationships I'd formed over five field seasons didn't feel right.

With other grad students, I had previously discussed the possibility of starting a public outreach program in the communities around our site. Despite living near multiple Maya ruins, most local people know little about what archaeologists do or about the ancient Maya. Now I thought that an outreach project might be the first step to figuring out how people might benefit financially from their cultural resources while preserving archaeological sites. I read about many modern site preservation projects that emphasize the economic needs of local people. I knew I had to start small and learn more about the communities, especially after witnessing the crises miscommunications can cause. I reached out to the undergraduate professor who oversaw educational programs about Maya heritage and archaeology, and she shared some great Spanish-Q'eqchi' bilingual teaching materials with me. A former employee of our research project, now a teacher in the largest Q'eqchi' town near our site, helped me design an educational program for two private secondary schools.

In early 2016, I returned to the field not to dig, but to talk to kids about archaeology and the ancient Maya. This was

a lot of fun. I used the experience I gained at my undergraduate job to present the Maya in a colorful and relatable fashion, while emphasizing the importance of the archaeological record for scientific studies of the past. I gave the schools copies of the bilingual archaeology coloring books my former professor provided. I also left boxes of school supplies, generously provided by my advisors' larger archaeological project, in the hopes of being invited back.

Unexpectedly, I was recruited to teach a full day of English classes at one of the schools. Although English is considered a valuable skill and is part of the curriculum at every school, the local teachers don't actually speak it. One frustrated teacher showed me his English textbook, which was written entirely in English, with no translations provided. I am definitely not a qualified ESL instructor, but the fact that I spoke the language was good enough for them. In the end, taking over the English classes throughout the day was a great experience. The students, already bilingual in Q'eqchi' and Spanish, were smart, funny, and eager to learn as much of the language as possible. I focused on the conversational phrases each class was most interested in. This included ways to flirt with their classmates and how to inquire about a job. While language instruction is not directly related to archaeology, it was a way to respond to the community's needs in exchange for the chance to promote my own agenda. Also, English will be a necessary skill if members of the younger generation become involved in tourism, a common way for local people to profit while protecting archaeological sites.

Falling in line with my long-term plan, the leaders of the community, a small group of elected men who oversee civic issues in an egalitarian fashion, heard about my classroom visits and complained that I really ought to visit the public schools. Among this year's group were two long-time employees of our project. I soon found myself sitting in a tiny concrete room with them, the teacher friend who was helping me, and several mosquitoes. I was a veteran of this kind of meeting, after hashing out the lake-coring fiasco with the previous year's committee. I knew that each man would talk for a very long time. However, I

was not expecting them to speak only in Q'eqchi'. After explaining my educational project and passing around examples of the coloring books, all I could do was sit quietly and try to make out each person's tone, especially when I was being pointed at. In the end, after what felt like hours, I learned that they were all in favor of expanding the project, including more English lessons. I hope to return to the community this year to visit the public schools. I will bring more educational materials, so that teachers can continue to provide information about archaeology and the ancient Maya, their distant ancestors, especially when I am not around. The outreach project is still in its early stages, but I'm cautiously optimistic that it will have a positive impact on the area around our research site.

I learned so many things during my doctoral fieldwork. I grew up into a real archaeologist in the field. Thanks to my advisors, I know I am capable of running a research project on my own someday, and the management skills I acquired would serve me well in any career. Thanks to many frustrating experiences, I no longer expect anything to work perfectly on the first try – I have learned to roll with the punches. And thanks to the people I met in rural Guatemala, some of whom I consider true friends, I no longer see local and descendant communities as faceless, two-dimensional "stakeholders." In a way, I have come full circle, returning to some of the idealism of my undergraduate years, but in a pragmatic way. As I near the end of my graduate education, I am more aware than ever that I still have a lot to learn.