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# Conversations about the production of archaeological knowledge and community museums at Chunchucmil and Kochol, Yucatán, México

Traci Ardren

## Abstract

The Pakbeh Regional Economy Program centered at the ancient Maya trading center of Chunchucmil in Yucatán, México, shifted research priorities from a processual program aimed at recovering indicators of ancient ethnic identification to a more community-based program that combines processual methodologies with a local desire for community-based tourism. Initial research goals concerned the elucidation of how a trading economy affected other aspects of the social life of ancient Chunchucmil. As members of the two Yucatec Maya communities on either side of the ruins became more interested in the archaeological research, and as archaeologists grappled with the rise of tourism in Yucatán, a dialogue about who controls and benefits from the production of archaeological knowledge ensued. Currently the project is involved in collaborative development of a 'living museum' where members of local communities and archaeologists will mutually recreate an ancient Maya household on the archaeological site. Some programmatic suggestions for further collaboration between academic archaeologists and local descendant communities in the Maya area are offered.

## Keywords

Descendant communities; museums; tourism; Yucatec Maya; México.

In the mid-1980s, the noted Mexican anthropologist Guillermo Bonfil Batalla wrote that, while every Mexican schoolchild knew something about pre-colonial periods, and was aware of the great archaeological monuments that serve as modern national symbols, the glorious prehistoric past was experienced as something dead, something apart from themselves, something connected by territory but little else (Bonfil Batalla 1996: 3). Bonfil was writing *México Profundo*, a complex analysis of modern Mexican culture, where, in Bonfil's own words, the imaginary dominant Western culture continues to

confront and suppress the *profundo*, or large, resources of indigenous Mesoamerican culture, which continue to reside and survive in most Mexicans. Part of this struggle has been the appropriation of the past, where ancient monuments and archaeological sites have been made into the history of Mexicans instead of the history of the indigenous population of México. This is particularly striking to Bonfil in the National Museum of Anthropology in México City, where the spatial design of the museum emphasizes the prehistory of México on the ground floor and all references and exhibits having to do with indigenous culture are segregated to the second floor. Bonfil lays the responsibility in the lap of his 'imaginary México', the Western-trained intellectuals more likely to speak French than an indigenous language, as well as the school of *indigenismo* led by Manuel Gamio, a colleague of Franz Boas, who simultaneously exalted the 'positive values' of Indian cultures yet acknowledged the necessity of a homogeneous society to forge a new nation (Bonfil Batalla 1996: 116). Gamio advocated Indianizing the dominant culture to a certain degree while Westernizing the Indians. One outgrowth of this philosophy was the education of all children in México in its 'national' history, one that merged the accomplishments of native states like the Maya and Olmec with the Spanish colonial period. Unique Indian cultures were gradually replaced with the 'superior' national culture. It is not surprising, then, that schoolchildren who visit the national museum feel disconnected from the accomplishments of their ancestors, even to the point of seeing no connection between the dead past and the living present. Bonfil's prescient observations foreshadow a current debate within the field of archaeology, a debate framed by issues diverse from those with which Bonfil was concerned, but a debate which is illuminated by Bonfil's honest explanation of the uses to which archaeological data were put by those involved in modern nation building in México. One question Bonfil did not ask, but which is relevant here, is: what responsibility do archaeologists have when children, especially indigenous children, feel separated from their past?

This paper chronicles a shift in research priorities as a result of sustained interaction with members of the local communities in which a Maya archaeological site is located. Over the last five years the Pakbeh Regional Economy Program, an archaeological project directed by academic archaeologists Dr Bruce Dahlin of Howard University and myself with a staff of several graduate students from universities in the United States, Europe and México, has shifted the research focus from a clearly outlined processual program concerning the ethnic nature of an ancient trading enclave, to a collaborative plan of research and development that uses academic archaeological inquiry as a foundation from which to generate tourism within the local communities. Open dialogue with interested community members about the archaeological knowledge generated by academic research, as well as local priorities for development, has been the key component in the evolution of a community-based methodology. Our priorities as directors have shifted, our research has been adjusted accordingly, and we find ourselves engaged in on-going discussions with community members and other academics about how archaeology is to be done in the twenty-first century (Stone and MacKenzie 1990; Patterson 1995; Ferguson 1996; Swidler et al. 1997; Kehoe 1998; Watkins et al. 2000; Gosden 2001).

### **Initial research goals at Chunchucmil**

The original research strategy at Chunchucmil addressed a current concern with evidence for ethnicity in the archaeological record (e.g. Dahlin and Ardren in press; Bawden 1993; Blanton and Feinman 1984; Spence 1996). Chunchucmil is a major, Classic Maya urban center near the Gulf of Mexico coast in north-western Yucatán (Fig. 1) (Ardren 1999). Although demographically large, with 16 square kilometers of settlement, Chunchucmil is located in one of the poorest regions in Mesoamerica for agriculture (Vlcek et al. 1978). The north-western peninsula has an unpredictable seasonal rain cycle with an annual deficit. Soil is another limiting factor, with up to 80 per cent of the landscape having thin to no soil – 50 per cent of the landscape is bare bedrock – and, where soils do exist today, they have largely developed over the last 1000 years since urban abandonment (Farrell et al. 1996). Palaeo-ecological analyses demonstrate that conditions were no better in the past, and research has proceeded from the hypothesis that an urban population of 20–30,000 must have been fed with imported maize (Beach 1998).

The built environment of Chunchucmil exhibits a number of unique features that set it apart from most other Classic Maya centers of its size: streets, stone fences, a central barricade, a relative lack of sculptural monuments and, most fundamentally, a de-centralized monumental core (Magnoni 1995; Dahlin 2000; Hutson et al. in press). Chunchucmil's uniqueness is also reflected in its strategic location with respect to maritime trade routes and salt flats, regional subsistence patterns and artifacts (Dahlin et al. 1998). The original research program was designed to test the hypothesis that the deviations Chunchucmil demonstrated were due to its economic organization as an ancient trade center. Excavations and testing were designed to establish the degree to which economic factors organized Chunchucmil's economic, political, social and religious life.

Following Michael Spence and others, we have identified a list of traits by which to identify ethnic enclaves, realizing that how ethnic groups choose to display ethnic traits can appear arbitrary until large-scale patterns are distinguished (Spence 1996). Spence suggests that ethnic markers will appear in certain central institutions, such as the arrangement of ritual space, artifacts – especially the style of serving or domestic vessels, as well as their source of origin, and skeletal traits and/or mortuary practices that can be distinctive. We agree with Garth Bawden and others that ethnic markers are primarily communication mechanisms, used by a community of members to manifest an identity to others (Bawden 1993: 43). As such, the material record can carry the physical expression of certain structural components of a society.

There is some architectural evidence for ethnic enclaves at Chunchucmil. A cluster of modest platforms east of the central area has the only known Puuc style masonry represented at the site, and may be an architectural signature of ethnic identity. Approximately 12 kilometers to the north and 20 kilometers to the east, the Puuc established large cities dominated by their distinctive architectural style. One working hypothesis is that this cluster at Chunchucmil represents an attempt by the Puuc to establish a presence and perhaps a central role in the trade economy of Late Classic Chunchucmil during a time when hostile forces were in control of the northern and eastern coasts of Yucatán.

Another indication of non-local influence on the architectural record emerged in recent excavations. In a residential group within the central urban zone, a 3-meter high platform



Figure 1 Location of Chunchucmil on the Yucatán peninsula. Map by Michael C. Owens.

was built in a typically central Mexican architectural style known as the talud-tablero. The presence of this architectural form in the Maya area has usually been interpreted as an indication of extensive influence, especially economic and military, emanating from the early urban capital of Teotihuacan upon all of Mesoamerica during the Early Classic period (Marquina 1964; Heyden and Gendrop 1980; Giddens 1995; Blackmore and Ardren 2002). Other examples of talud-tablero-style architecture are found at Chunchucmil's nearest urban neighbor, the ancient capital of Oxkintok, where the style has been interpreted as an indication that the political and economic life of this city was directly tied to non-local, central Mexican, power (Ricardo Velasquez personal communication 2000).

Midden testing at modest platform groups has already demonstrated a relatively high level of material wealth at all levels of Chunchucmil society (Hutson 2000). Consistent with excavations at the port site of Punta Canbalam on the coast, Chunchucmil middens have yielded a high percentage of foreign ceramics from the central Gulf coast region, jade and obsidian from the highlands, chert from the coast of Belize and significant amounts of marine shell ornaments (Stanton et al. 2000).

The stone walls which surround the majority of house lots at Chunchucmil suggest either a need to enforce local cultural norms regarding the use of public versus private space or a heightened concern for the use value of land. Though Maya house lots are not the same as enclosed fields, soil testing has determined that kitchen gardens were certainly grown in the enclosed households at the site (Beach 1998). Given the poor nature of the soils for subsistence plants such as corn, the house lots may have been dedicated to market-oriented crops such as cotton or achiote, a native dye and condiment (Watanabe 2000). Artifactual patterning from excavations in non-mounded areas of the house lots indicates an intensive use of house-lot areas for processing raw materials such as shell and obsidian. Over a thousand obsidian fragments were recovered from less than 2 square meters of fill off a small platform in a residential area (Hutson 2000). A heightened commercialism of the residential realm would be consistent with certain trade-center models.

Given an environment that is severely limited in agricultural potential, the modern inhabitants of the land around the ruins have diversified their economic strategies just as the ancients did. Although the current population of the area is much smaller than what has been projected for ancient times, the ruins of Chunchucmil are split between five separate *ejidos*, or modern land grant communities, that date from the dissolution of large hacienda landholdings after the Mexican revolution (Fig. 2). Each of these communities is quite distinct; their economic bases are very different and thus the lifestyles and values of their citizens are different. The modern village of Chunchucmil is largely supported by wage labor in the nearby state capital of Mérida. The village of Kochol is primarily agricultural, with farmers shifting from traditional crops such as maize to cash crops like *habanero* peppers and papayas. Coahuila and San Mateo are small agricultural communities with less active use of their *ejido* lands within the site boundaries, while Halacho is a county seat some distance from the ruins, which uses land for pasturage of range cattle. In each *ejido*, the majority of the population is ethnically Yucatec, but there are long-standing historical and cultural conflicts between the communities, which often lead to mutual mistrust. The Pakbeh Project has dealt primarily with the members of

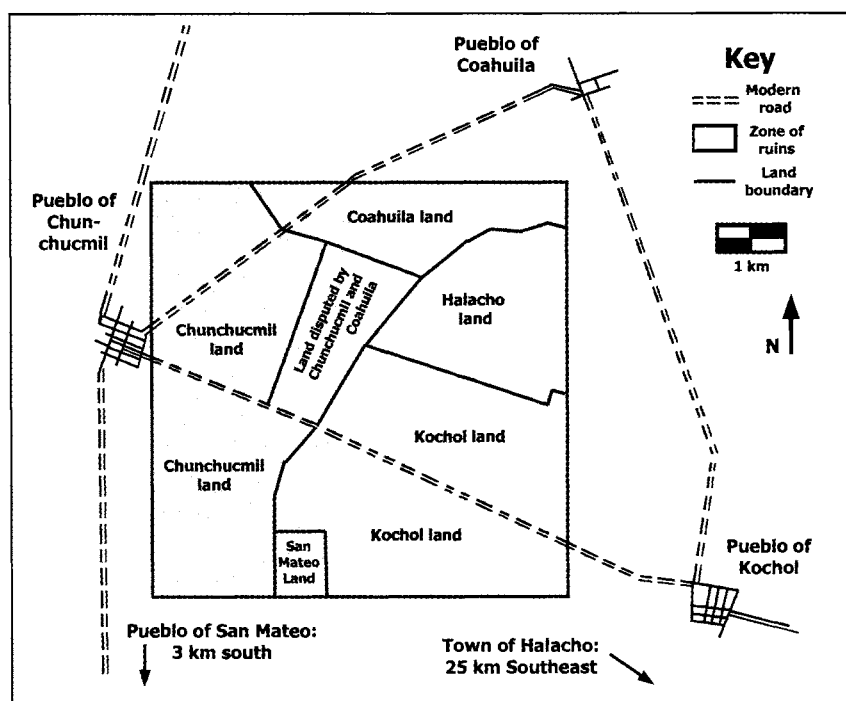


Figure 2 Division of archaeological ruins into five modern community boundaries. Illustration by Scott Hutson.

Chunchucmil and Kochol, as these two communities control the land on which the majority of archaeological research has taken place.

### Tourism and archaeology in the Maya world

The overarching power and influence of tourism in México is evident to anyone conducting archaeological research in Yucatán. Over the last twenty years, Pakbeh staff members, Mexican archaeologists and Yucatec Maya communities have all witnessed the dramatic expansion of tourism on the peninsula. Many studies have documented the growing role of tourism in the Mexican economy: it is currently the third largest national industry, the main arena of overseas investment and the second largest employer after agriculture (Austin 1994; Clancy 1999). Because México has assumed a 'statist' approach to its tourism economy, where the federal government has a direct hand in planning, funding and promoting tourism as a means to fund regional development, tremendous changes have occurred in Yucatán as a result of the boom in tourism since the 1960s when FONATUR, the state tourism ministry was created (Van Den Berghe 1994; Clancy 1999). The Mexican government has relied so heavily upon foreign tourism that they have demonstrated a willingness to pursue tourism plans despite opposition from local groups,



or at the very least with minimal local involvement (Long 1991). Members of small Yucatec communities have experienced tourism as something imposed by the state, not something initiated on a local level. Paradoxically this is an industry based in large part on Maya cultural heritage, albeit in a heavily commercialized form (Brown 1999). Despite its intrusion into people's lives, tourism on the peninsula is generally desired because it is seen as one of the primary ways in which to receive infrastructural support from the government. Roads are paved when tour buses demand it, new electrical lines are run when eco-tourism resorts are built in rural areas.

Despite the improvements in infrastructure, the economic benefits of this \$6.4 billion/year industry are small for most Maya communities. Hotel industry ownership and control is confined to large-scale Mexican chains and foreign investors (Clancy 1999), while electrical and telecommunications service is consistently targeted to places where large numbers of tourists are expected, like the Maya Riviera/Cancún-Tulum corridor (Brown 1999). Objective evaluation of the tourism industry in México leaves no doubt that it benefits primarily multinational corporations (Clancy 1999). A small but growing nature or sustainable tourism industry holds the promise of greater local control (Savage 1993).

An awareness of the economic potential of tourism existed in Chunchucmil and Kochol prior to the commencement of archaeological research at the site. These villages are literally in the shadow of Uxmal, the third most commonly visited site on the peninsula, and, although most villagers have not been to Uxmal, it holds a place of meaning or significance in their lives as a major tourism center. Tourism is so pervasive in Yucatán, that few communities would deny the attraction of an archaeological project because the potential economic benefits are so obvious to *campesinos* trying to support themselves in a changing world where cash is needed for children who want Nikes, but also for fertilizers to make a semi-agricultural lifestyle viable (Re Cruz 1996). Señora Gomez, a staff member at one of the few locally operated archaeological museums in nearby Hecelchakan, emphatically stated that as archaeologists we should start a local museum in Chunchucmil, 'para avanzar con turismo el pueblo [so the village could move forward through tourism]'

### **The evolution of a dialogue about archaeological research**

The initial receptivity on the part of Chunchucmil and Kochol village leaders to a foreign-run archaeological project at their ruins was due in large part to the wages we would pay to excavation assistants. A small number of local leaders, especially the schoolteachers from both villages, Gualberto Tzuc Mena and Fernando Rodriguez, believed in the potential for excavations to draw tourists to the site. At the outset of archaeological research, there was little interest expressed in excavation as a way to reveal the ancient history of the villagers or their ancestors. Unlike certain areas of the Yucatán peninsula, here there are no remaining traditional *h'men* (shaman) in any of the villages near the ruins of Chunchucmil. These specialized keepers of traditional knowledge are key individuals within Yucatec villages for the dissemination of stories about the ruins as powerful places where spirits must be appeased and ancestors honored (Ardren 1991; Brown 1999; Freidel et al. 1993). Thus, as a generalization, it might be fair to say that members of the local

communities near the ancient site of Chunchucmil saw the ruins as agricultural land, where contested boundaries have caused conflict between the communities, much more than they saw the area as a historical or cultural resource. Cultural anthropologist Lisa Breglia is currently conducting research on the changing attitudes of locals toward the archaeological ruins.

The enthusiasm expressed by Pakbeh staff members about the site as the remains of an ancient trading city with royalty and historical-political interconnections to other ancient Maya cities was soon communicated to locals employed by the project to work on excavations at the site. The archaeological messages of cultural inheritance and empowerment at first stood in stark contrast to the messages from local workmen of fear and anxiety that we would take away the site or facilitate the Mexican government taking away the site. At a formal meeting between the project and the men of Kochol in 1999, the second year of excavations, many local individuals challenged project members with the accusation, 'Ustedes son los gringos que siempre ganan de la tierra de nosotros [you are the outsiders who always profit from our land]'. While certain immediate fears were ameliorated by providing specific information about our inability to take away the land, indeed our dependence upon them for permission to work, as well as our requirement as foreigners to abide by Mexican federal and state laws which mandate removing archaeological materials to state facilities, it also became clear that facilitating access to the processes of archaeological research, and especially to the results, would be essential to building a relationship of trust and mutual collaboration.

Through dialogues with village elders and regular evening meetings of project members and interested community members, we have continued this dialogue about what happens on an archaeological project and who ultimately benefits (Plate 1). In these conversations a crucial element is the willingness of some community members to speak up about the value they see in archaeological research; thus the conversations abandon the traditional power dynamic of academic authority in favor of a more balanced dialogue in which everyone present is entitled to express an opinion. Speaking to other villagers in a video about the archaeological project, Gualberto Tzuc Mena, the Chunchucmil village school-teacher and an historian of local history, said:

Para mí, este proyecto que está realizado por mis compañeros que vinieron de los Estados Unidos, ha sido de muy suma importancia para. . . Kochol y Chunchucmil ya que ha beneficiado a los campesinos dándoles remedios para tener un poco de recursos económicos para sustentar sus familias . . . y realmente conocer la historia de Chunchucmil, de los antiguos mayas, para mí, es de suma importancia. [To me, this project organized by my co-workers from the United States is very important. It has already given the people of the villages a chance to earn some extra wages to help support their families, and to really know the history of the archaeological site of Chunchucmil and the ancient Maya. To me, this is really important.]

The project, including Gualberto in his capacity as laboratory manager (Plate 2), encourages locals to handle and explore certain archaeological materials, such as whole ceramic vessels, before they are removed to the state museum of archaeology. While artifacts are compelling, the sharing of archaeological knowledge produced by excavation is more fundamental to this exchange, and, when artifacts are mutually examined by staff



*Plate 1* An evening conversation about the meaning and significance of ancient ceramic vessels. Photo by Takeshi Watanabe.

members and community members, a profound sense of mutual trust and respect is fostered. Many members of the Pakbeh Project have given presentations to the communities on their research and encouraged questions, reactions or alternative interpretations from the audience. Permanent poster exhibits with photographs, maps and text have regularly been produced and donated to local community centers to encourage access to the information for those who are unable to attend our presentations.

In 1999, the project produced a short video expressly for the local communities in which basic concepts of excavation were explained and demonstrated by local leaders who work with the project. Narrated in Spanish and Yucatec Maya, the video was very popular and prompted new questions about archaeological research from individuals who had not had any significant previous associations with the project, such as teenagers and women. After Gualberto Tzuc Mena showed the video to his elementary students, he suggested we provide tours of the excavations for kids from both villages. Each season, first to fifth graders are given a morning to crawl up the pyramids and ask questions about ceramics, obsidian and the other materials recovered that day. These are fine opportunities for the local community members who work with the project as excavation assistants to explain to children from Kochol and Chunchucmil, often using their first language, Yucatec Maya, what they have found in excavations as well as why kids should be interested in archaeology. After one visit, the Secretariat of the *ejido* of Kochol, Marcelino Cahuich, told me:



*Plate 2* Gualberto Tzec Mena at work in the ceramic laboratory. Photo by Traci Ardren.

La arqueología es bonita y más gente debe aprender sobre la arqueología . . . hay mucha gente en Kochol, y no todos tienen interés en este trabajo, pero algunos sí. Este programa de visitas de alumnos es buena porque los alumnos van a sus casas y hablan con sus familias sobre las cosas que han visto, hablan mucho, y ahora más gente está preguntando sobre la arqueología y las cosas que estamos buscando. [Archaeology is a good thing and more people from the village should know about it . . . there are many people in Kochol and not all of them are interested in archaeology, but many are. This program of visits by schoolchildren is good, because the kids go home and talk about what they have seen, they talk a lot, and now more people are interested in archaeology and what we are finding.]

In addition to the maintenance of exchanges about what happens on site and what it means to all interested parties, our research and excavation strategies have been shaped by on-going dialogue between village elders and members of the archaeological project about what would attract paying visitors to the site. With many monumental centers already open to the public in the immediate region, and a relative lack of carved monuments or visible monumental architecture at Chunchucmil, we have agreed that excavation and consolidation of household groups might pose the best chance of attracting the interested public. To date there are no Maya tourist sites that demonstrate the experience of the majority of ancient Maya, those who lived in modest residential platform groups in

and around the monumental pyramids, palaces and ball courts of the royalty. Members of Kochol first commented on the similarity they saw between the ancient house mounds dug up on site and the dimensions and orientations of their own homes. They joked about moving into the newly reconstructed platform groups, where it would be quieter and cooler than in their own homes.

A suggestion from the Pakbeh staff to form a community museum around the conception of a living museum, where members of Kochol would, on a rotational basis, spend time 'living' in one or more of the reconstructed residential groups has been met with preliminary endorsement from Marcelino Cahuich, the Secretariat of the *ejido* of Kochol, and other community members interested in developing tourism at the site (Plate 3). When I suggested a garden of native plants could be nurtured, Galdino Canul, the Mayor of the *ejido* of Kochol, suggested papaya trees, since they are the economic backbone of modern Kochol. Everyone was in agreement that pre-contact turkeys, chillies and corn could easily be raised and various types of leather worked; however, Marcelino and other leaders were less sure that anyone in the area still had the skills to spin and weave native cotton or knap obsidian. Marcelino suggested nearby potters who still mine clay and create coil-based pots be brought to teach interested members of Kochol. Other excavation assistants from Kochol have offered to demonstrate native beekeeping, roof thatching and medicinal plant tending. A woman's group, 'Promotores de Salud' (Health Advocates), led by Señora Irma, the nurse from Kochol, was very enthusiastic about the



*Plate 3* Marcelino Cahuich and Traci Ardren in conversation on the archaeological site. Photo by Raphael Zak Wood.

proposed living museum, and offered their skills as experts in household maintenance. Clearly the concept will evolve given the interests of Kochol citizens to enliven the archaeological knowledge that provides a base, but only the barest of backbones, for a thoroughly modern exploration of an ancient Maya household. The Kochol community museum will become another on-going and evolving experience through which members of the local community and staff archaeologists can share in the production of archaeological knowledge.

One of the most common themes to emerge in the conversations between Pakbeh archaeologists and locals is the explanation and translation of the concept of tourism. While most members of Kochol and Chunchucmil are aware of the broadest outlines of the tourism economy, and its importance in bringing cash into small communities, they have a limited concept of who tourists are or what they might pay money to see. Some conversations leave little doubt that workers on the site see tourists as a group of people who are always traveling, for whom traveling is a way of life. Descriptions of tourists by locals often utilize an ethnic metaphor: there are Yucatecans, Mexicans, Cubans, gringos and *turistas*. Thus, while the Pakbeh staff has provided information about the modern process of tourism, as we understand and experience it, we have also learned a great deal about the distance that exists between modern Yucatec Maya and even the best-intentioned tourists who pass through the area. Conversations about the living museum have thus included comments by all parties that this attraction would be different from many others, because tourists and locals would interact, learn about each other; perhaps even get to know one another a bit. The scale of the living museum appeals to all parties as a departure from the highly compartmentalized and formalized interactions that take place in most tourist locales on the peninsula.

During the next field seasons, Pakbeh project staff and community leaders will finish consolidation of the archaeological remains at the first platform group, as well as reconstructing perishable structures and creating access to the group from the road (Fig. 3). Additional collaboration will focus upon the elaboration of textual material to guide visitors, although the goal is to allow much of this instruction to happen face to face, between members of Kochol and tourists. Interested volunteers from Kochol will be identified by community leaders and begin training in the basic mechanics of maintaining the living museum and interacting with the public. Proposals to the highest levels of México's administration of archaeological sites have received enthusiastic support, in part because the innovative concept of a living museum has a strong educational component and does not violate any federal laws about how actual archaeological structures or artifacts must be curated. We are optimistic that the living museum will move forward the goals, shared by the Pakbeh Project and both local communities, of increased revenue generated for local families, increased access to and production of knowledge about the ancient Maya past for members of the local communities and innovative tourist opportunities for the public that foster a real interaction between tourist and local.

### **Future directions for community archaeology in Yucatán**

There is a growing awareness in the field of archaeology that one of its greatest challenges is to be both responsive and relevant to what have been called 'descendant communities'

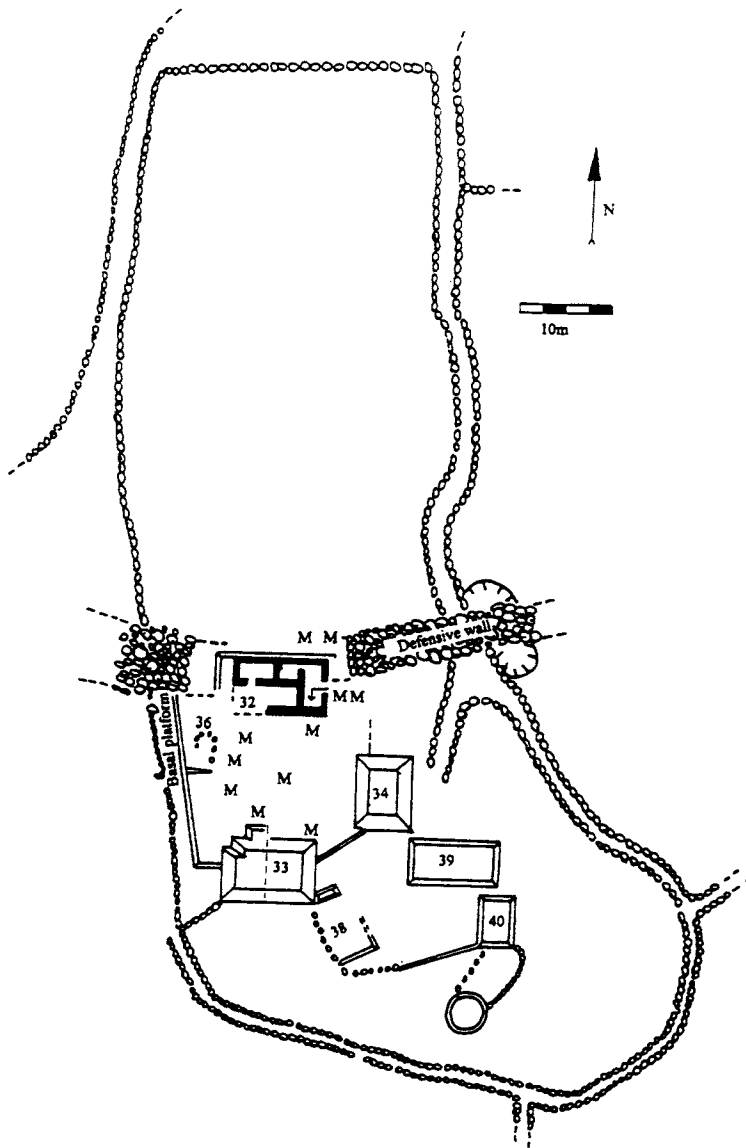


Figure 3 The Ka'ab residential group, a model for the living museum. Illustration by Aline Magnoni.

(Stone and MacKenzie 1990; Patterson 1995; Ferguson 1996; Swidler et al. 1997; Kehoe 1998; Gosden 2001). A recent iteration of this theme utilizes the framework of post-colonialist studies in order to argue for an archaeological practice that responds to the calls of indigenous people that academic archaeology is the ultimate usurpation of their past, by reformulating the relationships between native peoples and archaeologists especially in regard to construction of 'the past' (Gosden 2001). What follow are some programmatic thoughts about how a post-colonial archaeology, in which Native people

are full partners in key decisions about how cultural materials are managed, should be conducted in the Maya area. These observations are most relevant for south-eastern México, because great variation exists in native perceptions of archaeological research within the Maya area alone.

In Latin America, the direction of archaeological research toward the interests and goals of local communities does not yet seem to be self-evident to many researchers, but this may be due in part to the multiple descendant communities that exist and contest each other's claims to the archaeological past. México presents a complex situation, for, though archaeologists are not required by law to consult with local native populations about archaeological research, they are required to abide by the demands of the nation-state and of the tourist economy. In Yucatán, multiple descendant communities can be identified, and each has distinct demands. Local Yucatec Maya communities, who share control of the ruins, are a clearly distinguished group, although, as seen at Chunchucmil, the members of Maya communities are diverse in their perceptions of the ancient ruins. Descendants of the hacienda owners or historic landowners, today often wealthy Ladino businessmen, are also a distinct and powerful group. Archaeologists and anthropologists who work for the state of Yucatán and the nation of México claim the ruins as their national patrimony and use images, artifacts, maps and archaeological knowledge for a variety of purposes, including economic development and ethnic identification. Even the interested public, who visit México in very large numbers to visit the ruins and whose dollars drive the state economy, have specific considerations and needs. Each of these populations can claim the ruins where archaeological research is conducted as part of their heritage, as a space in which they find meaning and experience cultural perpetuation. Archaeologists are only doorkeepers of the past, we open the door and anyone can step through.

This is not to say there are no differences in the relative levels of privilege and connection these multiple descendant groups may claim. Historic and modern power imbalances in México and the broader Maya zone have shown that Maya communities are largely excluded from the process of interpreting archaeological data (Warren 1998; Montejo 1999). Descendant groups that are comprised of people with culturally continuous or territorially historic claims to an archaeological resource must be given priority of control over the management of cultural materials. But archaeologists must also become more aware of, and responsive to, the other members of descendant communities with which we work. Clearly, as public funding of archaeology increases, and public interest increases, only by acknowledging our responsibility to the interested public as a unique descendant community will we ensure the continuation of the discipline. Chris Gosden suggests archaeologists develop the notion of layered knowledge, an idea he borrows from Aboriginal Australian culture where both public and secret interpretations of art and ritual exist simultaneously (Gosden 2001: 258). Each distinct descendant group in Yucatán is both interested in, and looking for, a different contextualized meaning from archaeological data. Archaeologists must begin to negotiate these intersecting layers of knowledge as we move between descendant groups.

There are other aspects of the social context of archaeological research in Yucatán that demand attention and dovetail with the needs of descendant communities. Briefly, these include the modern economic setting, the historical landscape and the local patterns of



consumption of archaeological knowledge. As outlined above, one economic setting of the Pakbeh archaeological research is the tourist economy of Yucatán. Further considerations relevant to local community members include the role a project plays in employing local people, and specifically the rate of pay relative to other employment options and the distribution of work opportunities. Mayanists are all too often unaware of how profound an impact their 'scientific' project may have on the local economy and community. Archaeological field schools, in particular, where large numbers of transient students bring highly disposable cash into a rural or isolated setting, can have a profound effect on the values of a local community and upon how archaeology is perceived by the host community. In comments to participants in a session on the social context of Maya archaeology, anthropologist Richard Wilk likened an archaeological field school in Honduras to setting loose untrained, largely unsupervised anthropologists to conduct research on an unwilling population. An archaeological project that will employ local people must have an understanding of the local wage system and rates, what alternative employment opportunities locals may or may not have, and consider the impact the appearance as well as the disappearance of their wages will have on the local economy.

Consideration of the historical landscape must encompass much more than the traditional survey of environmental change that may have occurred at a site. A real consideration of landscape must include people, and the actors who experienced the site over time, especially those who have cultural or experiential claims to the land. If an archaeologist is going to be responsible to the needs of descendant communities, it is imperative to know the nature of relationships between the land and various communities. Has the site been continuously utilized or have the archaeological ruins been co-opted from traditional use by another interest? What constitutes traditional use in a given region? Within the Maya area some prehistoric sites have been abandoned for hundreds of years, some are under cultivation, some have been held in private hands, some are the site of continuous religious experience and some provide political refuge. For any given archaeological zone, tracing the history of how the site came to be available to excavate will inform the relationship of various communities to the land, and thus improve the interpretative power of the archaeologist. In Yucatán, it is significant to many Yucatec Maya that numerous ruins were returned to them for agricultural purposes after the Mexican revolution and land reforms of the 1930s. This moment stands as a benchmark in their on-going experience of these landscapes and their past. It is also extremely significant to them that these sites can be taken away at any time when the nation-state determines they are of archaeological importance to the national patrimony. An understanding of this particular local history helps us understand the protective but fragile connection Yucatec Maya have with their archaeological heritage.

A final aspect of the historical landscape that can be crucial but is often ignored by archaeologists is documentation of who has experiential knowledge of the site. Communities that are spatially close to ruins may travel over them on a regular basis, or they may not. Groups that claim religious significance in the ruins may have greater experiential knowledge of the ruins, and can thus contribute to the interpretations offered by an archaeologist. A real commitment to understanding the entire landscape of a site includes a willingness to engage in dialogue with groups that may have very different motivations for accessing archaeological space. As Quetzil Castañeda has shown for the ancient Maya

capital of Chichén Itzá, where 40,000 tourists appear on the vernal equinox each year, the demands and interests of these pilgrims have had as profound an effect as any archaeological project on the reinvention of Chichén Itzá (Castaneda 1996).

Finally, one of the most deliberately overlooked aspects of modern archaeological research, and one of profound impact on relations between archaeologists and local communities, is the specific local pattern of consumption of archaeological knowledge. Certainly archaeologists are taught early on that they have an obligation to publish their findings and make these available to the field. But, after this obligation, many archaeologists withdraw from any engagement with the information they have written, and move on to the next research opportunity. These technical reports, journal articles and monographs are then consumed by a variety of interests for a variety of purposes, which vary according to the region, and which have been the study of recent scholars who examine ethnicity and nationalism (Kohl and Fawcett 1995). Michael Dietler has shown how Iron Age archaeological evidence from France has been manipulated in the name of Celtic identity since the time of Napoleon the First and continues to be used by pan-national movements like the European Union (Dietler 1994). A cautionary tale is told by native ethnographer Victor Montejo, who claims the depiction by archaeologists of the ancient Maya as obsessed with blood sacrifice was absorbed by the military dictatorship of Guatemala and used as a justification for the widespread massacres of modern Maya, whom the military identified as sub-human pagans (Montejo 1993: 15). Certainly, the Guatemalan military had motivations for massacre that went far beyond any historical or archaeological justification, but Montejo's statement does illustrate the power of archaeological knowledge to be manipulated for political means, as well as the high level of mistrust between the archaeological community and native ethnographers. Such observations should not act to silence our production of knowledge, but as a call for anthropological archaeologists to share in the responsibility for the images we create about the world. A post-colonial archaeology that acknowledges the verifiable uses to which archaeological data can be put, such as land claims or language revitalization, can contribute productively to the field of post-colonial theory by adopting substantive political engagement with indigenous peoples (Sturm 1996; Begay 1997; Nicholas and Andrews 1997; Warren 1998; Lilley 2000; Gosden 2001).

Collaboration between Native Americans and archaeologists in North America has shown that conflicts over the uses to which archaeological data will be put are often mitigated when indigenous communities are put in control of research issues or are at least fundamentally consulted in the development of research proposals (Ferguson 1996; Begay 1997; Cypress 1997; Ravesloot 1997). What kinds of research might native descendant communities suggest? As noted by Bruce Trigger and others, the emphasis on environmental determinism or empirical quantification that characterizes much of processual archaeology is of little interest to most native groups in North America (Trigger 1997). Kay Warren describes the interest of female Kaqchikel Maya linguists in a native chronicle written down in the sixteenth century that preserves oral histories from much earlier times. *The Annals of the Kaqchikels* contains a passage about women warriors, which was compelling to Kaqchikel Maya scholars because 'it demonstrates that women were held in respect and occupied positions of prestige in the original cultural system' (Warren 1998: 154). To these female scholars, the textual passage that

described women joining with men in the uprisings at the ancient capital of Iximché, supported their own positions as women joining a mostly male movement of cultural revivalism. In addition, Warren notes that the message of ancient women and men working together was meaningful because the female scholars felt increasingly under pressure from non-local development groups to see themselves as exploited by men within their culture. In this instance the native interpretation was not one of female independence but rather co-operation across gender lines. Warren's observations would suggest that research on ancient gender roles, and especially the negotiation of resistance to imposed European gendered expectations, could be of very real interest to modern communities of Maya women and men.

Native ethnographer Victor Montejo has articulated the frustration of Maya intellectuals and activists that they are 'continually placed in the position of being listeners' (Montejo 1999: 14). Montejo addresses the power imbalance present in Western academic control of intellectual knowledge about Maya culture, and argues for a 'decolonization' of the process by allowing 'insider' voices to be heard and respected (Montejo 1999: 13). Montejo's own version of ancient Maya history, briefly summarized as a backdrop to his ethnography of the modern political exile experience, compares the accomplishments of the ancient Maya to coeval accomplishments in Europe with statements such as, 'When democracy was flowering in the Attic world, our ancestors were forming city-states such as Tikal, Uaxactun, and Quirigua' (Montejo 1999: 26) but ultimately emphasizes the independence of Maya communities prior to Spanish arrival. Montejo's writings suggest that a productive avenue of research would be for Western and Maya scholars to collaborate on interpretation of new archaeological materials, and underscore the crucial importance of increased funding targeted for Maya scholars to facilitate educational and occupational training in archaeology.

Demetrio Cojti Cuxil, an influential Guatemalan Maya scholar, has argued forcefully that 'the appropriate role for North American anthropologists should be one of helping to identify continuities in Maya culture, the timeless characteristics that make Mayas Maya' (Warren 1998: 74). While a significant challenge to academics attempting to move far beyond the essentializing history of anthropology and archaeology, Warren and I see Cojti Cuxil's ideas as a call for scholarship on the rejection of Spanish or Western definitions of Maya culture, such as investigation of the material remains of Maya resistance during the Colonial period.

A productive dialogue about research priorities arose from an accidental discovery found on another archaeological project on which I worked in Yucatán. In the course of architectural testing at the Classic period Maya site of Yaxuna, a human burial dating to the historic period was recovered from one of the rooms of standing architecture within the site. A juvenile skeleton complete with porcelain button and musket ball was found just beneath the floor surface inside the Classic period building (Suhler and Freidel 1993: 45-6). This individual appears to have sought out shelter in the ruins of the archaeological site, died from a musket ball wound and was buried in the remains of an ancient palace (Bennett 1993: 155-6). Within the local Yaxuna community, this individual stimulated much more interest than any previous burial, and it was immediately interpreted by locals as the remains of a refugee from the Caste Wars, a series of Maya independence movements during the nineteenth century, and a significant event in the history of the local

village. Stories from the Caste War are told in this village, and it is a very real and present part of the historical landscape, much more immediate than the ancient Maya history that attracts so much more research attention. Even some of the older women from the village made the walk over to the research laboratory to see 'los restos del pobrecito [the remains of the poor little guy]'. Lacking a specialist in historic archaeology, and given the strong interpretative certitude of the villagers, burial 10 has remained a Caste War victim in everyone's minds. The experience of intense interest in possible Caste War remains, as well as the ensuing dialogue about the lack of archaeological research on this period of history, illustrates that recent historical events are a good candidate for further community archaeology in Yucatán and echoes the calls for more study of Maya resistance that come from Guatemalan Maya scholars.

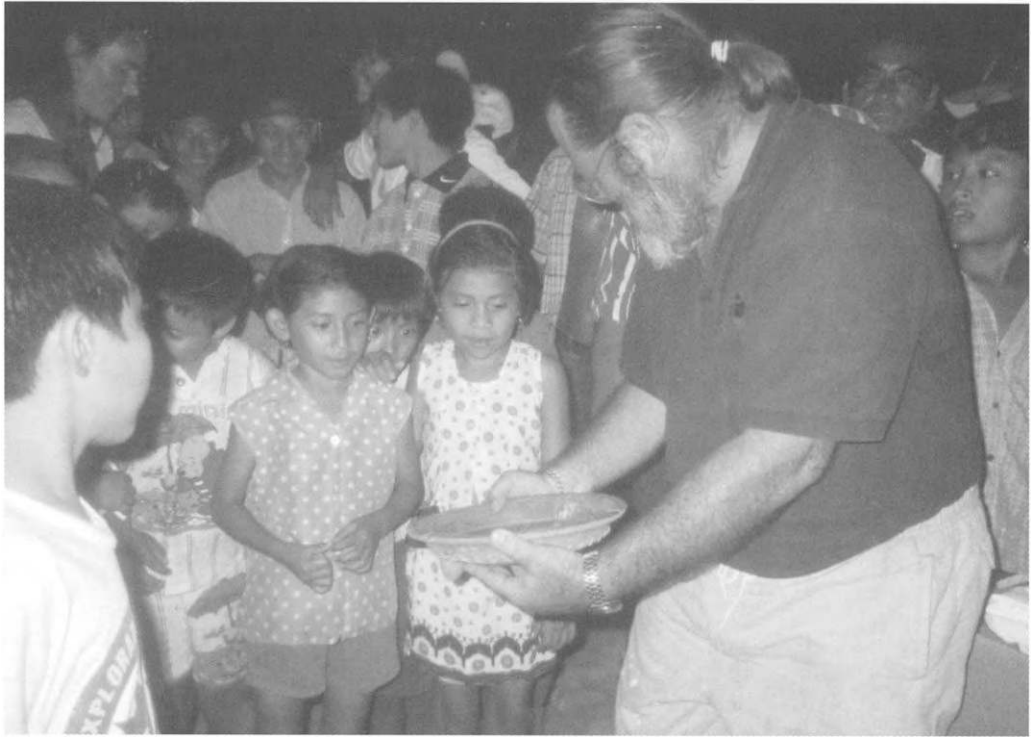
### **Concluding thoughts**

The Pakbeh Regional Economy Program has taken some small but significant steps toward the goal of practicing an archaeology that is both more responsive and more relevant to our host community. In addition to respecting and implementing the goal of bringing tourism to the villages, we have a commitment to education that encompasses many levels of participation. Working in conjunction with the primary school teacher of Chunchucmil, we have given tours to area teachers and encouraged them to bring students on site. High school students are working in the laboratory in the hope that they may continue in the field of archaeology once funding is secured for scholarships to the University of Yucatán. Most fundamentally, we are involved in an on-going dialogue with all interested members of the villages of Chunchucmil and Kochol about what the artifacts and structures mean, to us, to them and to the interested public. Much of our work still lies ahead, but the satisfaction of positive relations with the Yucatec communities on both sides of the site is evidence to us that we are on the right track.

From my viewpoint, there can be no greater failure for archaeology than to accept that children will feel no connection to their archaeological heritage or that native peoples will reject the entire archaeological discipline as exploitative (Plate 4). There are signs of hope that archaeology is moving into a theoretical maturity that accepts some of the critiques of post-colonial analysis. A growing number of native people entering the field, the incorporation of archaeological ethics into graduate and undergraduate curriculums and a greater accountability to descendant communities, however they are constructed and defined, are all signs that we have indeed left behind the days of archaeology as an isolated laboratory endeavor and are moving toward a greater sense of cultural responsibility.

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*Plate 4* Bruce Dahlin and children from Chunchucmil village explore an ancient ceramic vessel. Photo by Traci Ardren.

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