History and Archaeological Heritage among the Ch'ol: Ethnographic Dialogues in Northern Chiapas

By

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Committee in charge:

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Professor William F. Hanks

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Abstract

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This dissertation is about Maya Ch'ol understandings of archaeological heritage and their own past, how their current social situation is pulled from and represented in that history. I explore how the Ch´ol experience life from their particular position within the economic, political, touristic, and archaeological landscape today. To understand this situation, I inquire with Maya Ch'ol consultants about their own conceptions of history and heritage, about their relationship with archaeology and archaeologists, and how scholars as mayanists can make our disciplines more open to participation and useful for the interests of Maya peoples of today.

A wide variety of relationships between Maya individuals and history was observed, with a few common threads. These include a generalized perception of archaeological practices as opaque, a need for sharing with the Maya peoples and Mexican society the knowledge that archaeology produces. Participants described widespread discrimination against indigenous practices in the life of Ch'oles. A number of layers of cultural erasure and hegemonic policies have made embracing the ancient past of the Maya peoples something to avoid in order to blend into an ideal Mexican subject. Although there are a great number of Ch'ol academics, artists, and activists pushing for embracing the identity with pride, including the archaeological past, most of the Ch'oles do not. The challenges of decolonizing mayanist archaeology were made evident throughout the dialogues, as well as reiterating its necessity.

In Loving Memory of Pelosita

Table of Contents

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Introduction

In March 2021, Mexico's president Andrés Manuel López Obrador formally requested King Felipe VI of Spain and Pope Francis to ask for forgiveness from the indigenous people of Mexico for the abuses committed during the conquest of the Americas, five hundred years ago. Mexicans tend to think of coloniality as a force that worked in the past, something that external agents carried out and completed before the creation of the Mexican state, expunged with independence, and later obliterated with the revolution. Our government through all its history has been very efficient in reproducing the false idea of Mexico being the redemption from coloniality, and not its continuity. The denial of the colonial hierarchies that are still present in Mexican life and archaeology made me center on this dissertation. The settler inertia with which archaeologists work in Mesoamerica urged me to address its problems and speak about what we can do to purge it from our academic narratives, state politics and social beliefs.

I am a Mexican mayanist archaeologist doing ethnographic research on Maya-Ch'ol people, about their perceptions of archaeological heritage, its practices, and discourses. I am interested on how they narrate their own history and on how their current social condition is pulled from and represented in that history. I want to address the terms of engagement between mayanist archaeology and the contemporary Maya, and I initially aimed to establish a framework on which it could be possible to start the long-term process of incorporating the voices and agency of the living Maya in archaeological research about the ancient Maya. After grasping how complex the many networks of communities present in Classic archaeological heritage are, I started to understand the difficulty of making structural changes, but at the same time the urgency to get rid of power structures that have been irreflexively reproduced by archaeologists and anthropologists for more than a century.

The concept of a Maya ethnicity encapsulates a complexity of peoples that live today in five different countries. "Maya" is an exonym originally conceived by anthropology that can obscure the diversity of the dozens of ethnicities that have existed and still exist today in the region's geophysical diversity. There are more than nine million people in Mexico, Guatemala, Belize, Honduras, El Salvador, and abroad who speak one if the languages in the Maya family. Within Mexico alone there are almosttwo million and a half people that speak one of the Mayense languages (INEGI, 2020). Based on speaking one of these languages, these people have been collectively represented by archaeologists, epigraphers, linguists, and socio-cultural anthropologists as part of a Maya people with a continuous history of more than three millennia, grouped together by a linguistic common ancestor (Bricker, 2004; Grofe, 2005). In this use, calling people Maya can result in de-emphasizing specific histories.

People speaking Maya languages have dwelled surrounded by the materiality of ancient ruins for millennia (Stanton & Magnoni, 2008), and many of them now live in land with a

myriad of ancient archaeological sites of many sizes, with a few of those immersed in national and world heritage dynamics, defining features of what archaeologists call Maya culture. Differences among these archaeological sites were not originally related to diverse histories, producing a homogeneous Maya past. Some Mayense speakers, specifically those of the Cholan subfamily, have languages closely related to the ones written in hieroglyphs in the Classical buildings, monuments, and objects (Josserand et al., 1985; Lacadena& Wichmann, 2002) yet they are positioned in the margins of both monolithic Mexican history and the Mexican institutional practice of archaeology.This dissertation is focused entirely on Ch'ol subjects, as they are the people with whom I have spent the most time during fieldwork in the Palenque region. In Mexico, there are about 250,000 people in the state of Chiapas, Mexico whose native language is Ch'ol (INEGI, 2020), a population continuously growing since the middle twentieth century. In the municipality of Palenque, there are also many communities of Tseltales, and a few Lacandones and Tzotziles living together, who represent a little bit more than a third of its population.

Archaeological sites identified as part of the Classic Maya culture, dating to 250-800 AD, exist across a wide area in the lowlands of the five countries Classic Maya culture encompasses. In northern Chiapas, the archaeological site of Palenque is a major destination for international tourism, a focus of constant archaeological research, as well as of significant work on ancient hieroglyphic inscriptions by epigraphers. Indigenous people in the area near these sites are part of the tourist economy of the region, without any power to administer the resources received from tourists. Many participate in archaeological fieldwork in a range of roles not yet engaged in decision making, or the questioning and interpretation of archaeological data.

The original scope of this investigation was limited to having dialogues with people who have been hired in archaeological work at the archaeological site of Palenque, in the same projects where I have participated over the last twenty-one years. The presence of a World Heritage site like Palenque generates an extensive network of communities where coloniality is expressed quite explicitly, thus where the need to change our philosophies and terms of engagement is more visible. After talking to consultants in the region and the city of Palenque itself, I met people in many places in a wider Chiapas and Tabasco area, belonging to different settings. Many, but far from most contemporary Maya individuals and communities have embraced the Maya exonym. Some have unified and empowered their voices in a way to challenge the racial categories, to study themselves, and to create art. For these reasons, a major part of my research was reoriented towards these academic, artistic, and activist voices. These groups of people are vocally calling for autonomy through territorial and political rights, or they are practicing their culture through the aesthetics and epistemologies they reproduce, study, and write about.

Because of the conceptions of culture in the history of Mexican, Mesoamerican, and Mayanist anthropology, it has been quite easy to assume or impose historical narratives entirely from western epistemologies, to characterize ethnic memberships that may only be

observed from the outside, from the traditions of cultural history. Apart from the speakers of Maya t'aan, or Yucatec Maya, who in some contexts use the term "Maya" to identify themselves, most people claiming a Maya identity belong to a relatively new social network of Mayense-speaking peoples using the category to dispute racial hierarchies.

This research

This is not an ethnographic monograph on the Ch'ol of northern Chiapas. It is a focused investigation about how Ch'ol participate in the contexts in which mayanist archaeology and Maya heritage are practiced. For the last six years I have been conversing with, interviewing, chatting with, messaging, and Facebooking with Ch'ol individuals and groups about how they narrate their own history, how they perceive mayanist archaeology and heritage, what it means to work with the materiality of the ancient Palencanos, and how they would want to be heard and participate in the research agendas of mayanist archaeology. We talked about the colonial problems I see, what they think about them, and the different conditions needed to make possible actual changes to our archaeological terms of engagement with them. It has been a tremendous personal challenge to be open to the subjectivity of ethnographic research within the complexity of the many layers of racist and colonial forces at work in the relation between indigenous people, the state, archaeology, my own academic and professional practice, a world heritage site, and tourism.

From the Ch'ol people around Palenque I knew at the beginning of this research, through a snowball of connections I gradually met a lot of individuals belonging to different social networks, some of them from places far away from Palenque and its phenomena. These acquaintances grew exponentially when I was introduced to several online groups interacting in social networks such as Facebook and Whatsapp. During these six years I have been involved in many conversations, and I was able to do six semi-structured interviews providing significant testimonies that raised very relevant ideas. Nonetheless, the majority of data I acquired was through years of engagement in interconnected conversations, as well as from the online interactions I established.

It was late during this research that I realized that I was not going to be able to prescribe any definitive solutions to archaeology's colonial problems. I was hoping I could propose concrete ideas and directions to start the process of removing the layers of colonial structures in the practice of archaeology, but I ended up simply recognizing a starting point from which I can make my knowledge available, while being as reflexive as I can get. I have become acquainted with many Ch'ol groups of people where lots of individuals are interested to talk about different aspects of the problems of this dissertation. I got to know many communities of a wide range of stakeholders in the narratives we produce, the work we do, and the heritage materiality we exhume. At a very general level, I understood the importance of the sharing of archaeological information, and that it needs to be combined with an effort to critically examine our disciplines' philosophy. These actions will open the

possibility for interventions and changes coming from any of the Mayense-speaking stakeholders.

Beside the networks the subjects of this investigation belong to, there are many other social networks that are relevant for the discussions presented in this dissertation, particularly the groups that I have belonged to in my professional practice, including during the development of this research. Archaeology and its institutions are important subjects to acknowledge and describe in the context of this investigation. It is from these practices that I have engaged and been able to talk about what I wanted to do. Besides, as much as I wanted to get rid of my cultural and epistemological biases, I found out that I always ended up communicating in terms of chronotopes and narratives of my discipline. Although I did not do any ethnographic work among my colleagues, site administrators and government officials, I had many conversations and experiences with them during this research, which have exposed numerous challenges and limitations of proposing a structural transformation in the way we do archaeology. It is also pertinent to describe the engagements with which I have participated in the last 21 years, which have structured the positionality of many interactions, no matter the efforts I have taken to level the hierarchies implicit in interrelating as an archaeologist or a researcher.

At the conclusion of this research, I ended up with more open questions than understandings of the requirements for effective change. In fact, we are in a time of national policies aggressively returning to a mestizo assimilating Mexican State. On the contrary to the mestizo identity promoted in the twentieth century, in the voracious hyper-capitalist world of today the state and capital drive the forces of extraction and commodification of what is seen as monumental, folkloric, or beautiful, and then sanctions it as heritage worthy of preservation as touristic attractions available as experiences for sale (Brown, 1999; R. A. Joyce, 2013; Magnoni et al., 2007; Medina, 2003; Mortensen, 2009). The cultural practices and epistemologies of the different Maya peoples have been changing throughout all their history and are in constant transformation today, but there are current pressures that are going to increase the pace of changes for those peoples close to the "*Tren Maya*" (Martínez Romero et al., 2023). This touristic mega-project is being built to connect five Mexican states of the Maya area by train: it starts from Palenque and is planned to go all around the Yucatán Peninsula. In this context, it has become a major challenge to convey the scientific value of archaeological research as opposed to the official monumentality and touristification of sites. The challenges of conveying my questions to the communities without imposing our epistemologies have amplified, as there are a lot of people seeing heritage through the lens of monumentality and market-derived policies. Today we are very far away from excavating data and proposing narratives that are susceptible to evaluation from a Maya perspective, sensible enough to be attuned to the periods of Ch'ol and other Maya peoples' history, and to their different relationships with the materiality of the past.

My approach builds on a vast corpus of academic work that has been carried out in the fields of decolonial theory, critical heritage studies, and community-based collaborative archaeology. In the last decades there has been a wide interest in different parts of the world to encourage and inform change the terms of engagement between science and scientific subjects and stakeholders. This includes the transformation of many relations between archaeologists and those who can be considered descendant communities of the past we study. These transformations have tended to be difficult. The threads of narratives and positionalities get messy in histories of coloniality. Changes have never been accomplished in the short term, or better put, they have never been fully accomplished, they are always contingent of structures that surpass our capability of understanding and transforming, and must be continuously reimagined and discussed. In the many different contexts in which Mayanist archaeology is practiced, including the many types and actors of research and administration of Palenque, this is not going to be easy or quick. Nonetheless, after the conversations I have had for this project with many different Ch'ol individuals, it has become clear that it is crucial to start to make our work available to wider audiences, and to re-imagine our academic practices and discourses.

As I have seen happening in other community-based, decolonial archaeology projects, it will be very challenging but nonetheless possible in a long term projection, to listen and understand different voices without speaking on behalf of others. This would avoid extracting information while claiming to accommodate the philosophy of the colonized, while perpetuating some of the same old hierarchies in the dynamics of our research, even while conceiving and labeling our practices as ethical and opened to participation. I have gone through different stages of awareness of the complexity of the subject of this study, of my own position, and of the forces that I have worked for. if I can continue the dialogues that I have started and fulfill the commitments I have acquired while conducting this research, I am sure there will be more breaking points on which I will realize the limitations of my knowledge.

Anthropology in Mexico

My basic education made a strong imprint on the concept I have had of Mexico and what it means to be a Mexican. In my youth, part of my desire to be an archaeologist was fed to some extent by the nationalist sentiment of mystery and grandeur of the past. I was awed by the few selected monumental features that the state and society have chosen as a teleological historical origin, presenting them as a testament to the glorious past of all the Mexicans equally. I was trained as an archaeologist in Mexico's oldest school of anthropology, a diverse institution with a history of informing and working for government policies and at the same time opposing them with the theoretical tools developed around the world in the last 50 years. Critiques to *indigenista* policies coming from the *Escuela*

Nacional de Antropología e Historia (National School of Anthropology and History, ENAH), have been heard in different moments of late Mexican history (Bonfil Batalla, 1987, 1997; Gándara, 1992; Litvak King, 1975), and unfortunately they have never stopped being relevant although they have never been transformed into policies. Even with the succession of different economic and political models carried out by liberal and neoliberal governments in the last century and a half, there has been a prevalence of old colonial creole concepts of the state, racial hierarchies, and the push to enclose indigenous complexities and diversities into the imagined community of Mexico.

The creoles that originally invented Mexico as a nation at the end of the eighteenth century imagined a Western Christian monarchical state. Although this first conception has changed a lot, political and economic power continues to be supported by oligarchies sharing a common practice of distancing themselves from indigenous ontologies and phenotypes. While creating a narrative of continuity, they were appropriating aspects and aesthetics of folklore that have been deemed acceptable. Since its conception, the Mexican state has narrated itself as paradoxically inheriting great empires, and simultaneously being the redemption from living in the stone age. Apart from the non-indigenous elites that have overwhelmingly dominated the positions of power, only a few people that are perceived to have transcended their condition as indigenous have reached positions of power in our history. It is those old creole ideas that have shaped the conditions of who gets to be Mexican, further expanded with the concept of Vasconcelos' (1925) *Raza Cósmica* (Cosmic Race), which assimilates a wide range of identities into the national one, and excludes not only native groups but also people of African and Asian descent.

The terms of the relation between the state and indigenous populations as stated by our laws today were produced around the time of the Mexican Revolution, when the *indigenismo* (indigenism) ideology was created. This conceived a racialized Mexican subject, redeemed of the negative aspects of not being white through the concept of the *mestizo* cosmic race. This category claims to combine the best of the two worlds of Mesoamerica (excluding the non-urban or nomadic northern territories) and Europe. Actually, instead of combining them, it has erased the cultural diversity of the many ways of living of indigenous communities. The push for assimilation into a single Mexican identity led to taking bits and pieces of indigenous practices as folklore, making it easy to extract indigenous labor, resources and territories.

The Boasian origin of anthropology in Mexico with its culture-historical ideas has deeply influenced later theoretical thinking and periodization in Mesoamerica. These have also picked up aspects of evolutionist essentialism prevalent in the beginning of anthropology. In the last hundred years, this combination of views has affected deeply the public perception of national history. The teleological idea of Mexican origins traced itself back to the Olmecs as one of the cradles of "high culture" in the Americas, with an imagined continued escalation of civilization until the *mestizo* Mexican nation we pretend to be today. Mexican archaeological theories have developed in aggregation of this classification of cultures,

creating an odd mixture of the *particularista histórica* (historical particularism) version of culture-history, the later positivist processual archaeologies, and Latin American cultural materialism, with their *Arqueología Social Latinamericana* (Latin American Social Archaeology; Gándara, 1992; Litvak King, 1975), among others. Nonetheless, all theoretical stances and the chronologies resulting from them have left unchallenged the system and realities of a homogenizing model of race and nation, which generates and feeds on inequalities established early by western colonization.

In the late 1980s, most Latin American countries reviewed their relationship with the indigenous populations in their territories. In Mexico, the *Instituto Nacional Indigenista* (National Indigenist Institute) created a National Commission for the Justice of the Indigenous Peoples in 1989, which resulted in a constitutional reform in 1992 (Rodríguez Herrera, 1998). Ultimately, this reform was far short of the standards Mexico had endorsed a few years before in Convention 169 of the International Labor Organization. Another reform was carried out in 2001, during the first administration of the federal government led by PAN (*Partido Acción Nacional*), which during the twentieth century represented the political opposition to the hegemonic PRI (*Partido Revolucionario Institucional*) party. This reform included no recognition of indigenous territories, nor their jurisdictions. It was not just contrary to international agreements like ILO 169; it was also far short from the *Acuerdos de San Andrés Larrainzar*, signed in 1996 by the EZLN (Zapatista Army of National Liberation), the Congreso Nacional Indigena (CNI- National Native Congress) -the biggest indigenous collective ever assembled in Mexico-, and the Mexican government. In the last couple of decades, international agreements have pushed Mexico to a judicial "human rights turn", and there are reflexive discussions rethinking Mexican federalism as a process of judicial decolonization (Mendiola Galván, 2005; Rodríguez Herrera, 2005As I discuss below, legal changes are happening, and in the increasing involvement of the Interamerican Court of Human Rights with Mexican indigenous cases. Nonetheless, we are still very far away from thinking about and granting the rights of the pluralities of indigenous communities, as I have seen in the practice of archaeology.

Twenty-two years ago, during the first year of my bachelor's degree, ENAH hosted the Zapatista leaders for six weeks. I was assembled with all the students at the school, and I remember the excitement of collectively assuming that a period of transformation and justice was coming. We all talked about the San Andrés Accords, the way they were transformational for the future political life of our country, and how to convert them into law. Nonetheless, almost all of us continued with our archaeological professional lives as usual, as if nothing had happened. We have not really heard the contestation and denial discourses that surround us. Not even the supposedly sympathetic communities around ENAH have changed our legal and institutional model towards those conversations for three decades.

I consider that I had a good bachelors education at ENAH, with the possibility of choosing the time period, the archaeological material, or the region where I wanted to specialize,

with great professors and different opportunities to get involved with archaeological projects in many parts of the Mexican territory. I was driven towards the Maya region after a chance to work in the Palenque hinterland in 2002, and since then I have been closely involved with archaeological research in that region. During the last eighteen years I have specialized in ceramic materials from the Late Classic. Perhaps this was doing what Gnecco and Ayala (2010) describe as avoiding to acknowledge the social transformations in our "evading game" from the hegemonic contexts that make archaeology relevant. I have participated in lots of fieldwork thinking we had fair terms of engagement with the Ch'ol and Tseltal *ejidos* (shared land) that we surveyed and excavated. I thought it was ethical enough to respect their permission or denial to work in their lands, giving sporadic public talks in the *Casas Ejidales* (ejido meeting-houses) and in local schools, and temporarily employing local labor, with fair wages, from Palenque and from the different communities we passed. I remember lamenting the lack of access to some areas, thinking only about the missing data and not discerning how we had conveyed our prerogatives and the scientific importance we wanted to communicate.

Mexican archaeologists in general are not used to read about the critical thinking on coloniality that has circulated in the last decades in different parts of the world. Instead, we tend to project outwards the menace of dispossession with an irreflexive attitude that claims to protect the national patrimony and its public property against private and foreign interests. While we argue to defend public ownership of the archaeological heritage (Rodríguez García, 2016), we ignore the extractivism and racial hierarchies implied in our discourses and structures of power.

I only got to study decolonial ideas when I started the PhD program at UC Berkeley. I thus decided to switch my focus on ceramics towards these problems, after the awkward realization of the colonial blind spots and bias in almost all my knowledge about the Mesoamerican past. It has been difficult to fit into the role of an ethnographer, to fight against the awkwardness of feeling invasive in the context of my newly acquired and evolving sensibilities. It has been hard to get rid of the little positivist deep inside me, who considers subjectivity unreachable and only feels comfortable talking about the human past with the illusion given by statistical representation and confidence intervals, who is confident of the numbers given by objective measurements and analysis. Since the beginning of this choice, I was aware of the huge amount of work to be done in Mexico in order to decolonize archaeological philosophies and practices, but I found a few inspiring examples of engagement with indigenous communities, and new ways of practicing archaeology in Mesoamerica, the Americas, and the world. All the examples are the results of a process of long-term engagements and dialogues.

Field Context In Chiapas

All archaeological field research carried out in Palenque needs to hire Ch'ol and Tseltal workers as guides and language translators in ground surveys. They also play an important role in the excavation and restoration of Classic buildings. There are Ch'ol families in the *ejidos* neighboring the site of Palenque with two generations of expert excavators and master masons who are and have been employed in the restoration of Classic architecture, becoming fundamental for the development of projects and for the correct intervention in buildings. They have developed a transgenerational pride in the involvement of their families with the archaeological work, as well as a pride in the mastery of excavation and restoration techniques. In the countless days that I have been working next to them and learning from them how to work in Palenque, we have talked about a wide range of topics. Many of these dialogues are related to the archaeological past and the work understanding that entails, the way many tasks we do today in the field, like clearing vegetation from the terrain, would have been intensely harder without the technology and materials to which we have access today. We also have had conversations about our respective ideas on history and the politics of the relationship between indigenous peoples and the state. After all we have been through together, I have befriended a few of them for decades. Only in the last seven or eight years, after the internet arrived at the ejidos and digital communications became possible, have we been able to communicate most often. In fact, prior to the internet we were in Palenque for a few months a year, and then practically disappeared until the next fieldwork season.

I still can't have a significant conversation in Ch'ol language. I have taken lessons from different professors, but I only have a decent vocabulary and grasp a very basic understanding of the grammar. Regrettably, this has prevented me from reaching some elder figures of authority that have been brought up in dialogues. However, the majority of Ch'oles are fully bilingual, and many are trilingual as they also speak Tseltal. All the conversations I had with the people I consulted for this research have been in Spanish, although they have contextualized and detailed many concepts that are not easy to translate from Ch'ol. My original plans to live with a couple of families of Ejido Lopez Mateos, Palenque, for extended periods, thus improving my capability to communicate effectively in their language, were cancelled after the arrival of the Covid pandemic. I considered living with them necessary to understand their life and opinions better, although from the beginning I kind of disliked the idea, given my poor preparation in ethnographic methods and the feeling of being unnecessarily invasive. In the end, I managed to have meaningful interactions sufficient to fulfill the objectives of this research, avoiding imposing my presence in their intimate surroundings. Even though I had more virtual than in-person interactions and fieldwork, I spent many days with them interacting in very different settings, which sometimes involved spending the night in their houses. I am way more comfortable considering myself a guest and not a resident researcher in their home. Some

day, I hope in the next few years, I expect to have the ability to speak and understand their language enough to have proper conversations. While I have considered myself a guest, I have not been opaque about my research interest and my need to consult with them. All the conversations documented have been with an informed consent to participate and to be quoted. I am omitting exchanges that I was told to exclude from this research, and all the people who have not stated their permission to be identified will remain anonymous in this dissertation. Some of the people that originally gave their consent have changed their work conditions and I have decided to omit their names and information that can identify them.

There are six ejidos and their respective towns immediately adjacent to the Palenque archaeological zone and *Parque Nacional Palenque* (Palenque National Park). Local people started to work and to have more responsibilities in masonry and restoration around the seventies, and since then a lot of people of the *ejidos* López Mateos and El Naranjo, the latter a predominantly Tseltal speaking community bordering on the west of the first, have provided skilled and hard labor for the excavation of all kinds of contexts in the region. These include the restoration and public display of monumental buildings in the World Heritage site of Palenque. The six ejidos that surround the National Park were themselves a product of the federal state allocating land to highland communities pushed from their homelands and towns by the lack of land or religious conflicts in the 1960s. Very rarely did those migrations provided them with a familiar landscape, similar to those from which they came. Most of the time they had to learn to dwell in very different geophysical and cultural landscapes, as happened to the majority of the Ch'oles now in Palenque. They originally come from the cloudy and cold Tumbalá, from *K'uk' Wits*, the Quetzal Mountain, in their language.

The first large scale excavations carried out at Palenque by Alberto Ruz in the fifties and sixties employed experienced archaeological workers from the Yucatán peninsula. Ch'ol workers were probably mostly relegated to non-skilled labor. Those expert masons from the Puuc region in Yucatán were employed in many excavations all over the Maya lowlands and in some other parts of Mesoamerica until the eighties, and the expertise of their families is still highly valued in the archaeology of the Puuc region. In a 1970 Palenque excavation report, archaeologist Jorge Acosta lamented that "more than half of the Yucatec workers felt nostalgia and went back to their town" (Acosta, 1975, 350, my translation). This led to starting to train local workers to not have to depend on outsiders. Since then, in Palenque the decades of experience have also produced families with highly valued workers who are employed during the seasons of excavation of monumental buildings. The history of many Ch'ol lives has been affected by work with archaeologists, while they move forward along the positions of *ayudante* (assistant), *albañil* (mason), *restaurador* (restorer), and *maestro* (master) that INAH's projects observe and pay accordingly.

For a long time before I even imagined this investigation, I have spent a lot of time with different groups of Ch'ol people. Living for many seasons inside the archaeological site and in other places in the region has meant seeing them around frequently, participating in

every day interactions, attending parties and special occasions in their ejidos, or even having great conversations in the night shifts I spent with one of the guards of the site. But the most significant way I have known Ch'ol individuals has been working next to them in regional surveys and excavations. We have walked together around 600 square kilometers surrounding the ancient city of Palenque. During those field seasons, I got to work in the lands of many Ch'ol, Tseltal, and a few nahuatl-speaking and non-indigenous ejidos. On those occasions, we had to introduce ourselves in all the *asambleas ejidales* (ejido meetings) and ask for permission to work on their land. Sometimes, the presence of archaeologists in a property or a *parcela* unintentionally generated tensions and conflicts. In other occasions there was more than one *asamblea* to attend, and even having consent to work from an individual meant trouble with other factions. Properties and communal properties have layers of histories attached, and we often got inadvertently caught in the middle of them. In the region there are also a few self-declared Zapatista towns, and before this ethnographic research the only contact I had with those *comunidades autonomas* (autonomous communities) was to be denied permission to survey in their lands. The Ch'oles we worked with were essential to translate many of our interactions from and to Spanish, including the explanation of many of the social and political dynamics that we were not noticing. As the years passed, we have disappeared from most of the *ejidos* that have granted us access, and only when we needed to go back to excavate have we continued the limited public archaeology we used to do. Until recently, I irreflexively did not see any ethical responsibility in returning to share our investigation results, nor how their land is part of the narrative about Classic times we have been building as archaeologists. We haven't even respected that minimal standard that could represent a step to dismantle the power structures that normalize the vertical relations in our work conditions, and the lack of access to participation in archaeology.

Settings and people

Most of the people in the teams of local workers employed by the National Autonomous University of Mexico (Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México-UNAM) projects in which I have participated come from two families of Ejido López Mateos. Some of them have known me since I was nineteen years old. It was my familiarity with them that inclined me to start by consulting them about the questions of my research. Between 2017 and March 2020, I started to explain my investigation and the reasons I am doing it to those families. I invited some of their members to discuss their views on what we *Kaxlanes* (non-indigenous) and specialists conceive as archaeological data and heritage, as well as their experience excavating and working with the materiality of the ancient Palencanos.

The networks of some members of those two families extends to places in other ejidos, in the city of Palenque, at Tumbalá, and as far as Playa del Carmen in the Caribbean, and to

California. For this reason, I was eventually introduced to many people, and I started to get acquainted with other Ch'ol interlocutors. I wanted to take things very slowly to avoid any rush and misunderstandings, not knowing the fieldwork limitations that would come in 2020 with the COVID-19 pandemic. In 2017, I opened a Facebook account to reach consultants easily, since it is their most common mean of messaging. Through Facebook and WhatsApp I was quickly exposed to numerous groups that frequently discuss the identity, language, history, art, literature, and traditions of the Ch'oles. I recognized the voices of many individuals and the effort they make to share the parts of their culture they are interested in. At that time, I also started to read Ch'ol historical chronicles of the Towns of Tila and Tumbalá, while also learning about contemporary Ch'ol literature, particularly poetry.

One of the virtual groups I heard about thanks to Facebook was a collective of Ch'ol and *Kaxlan* linguists that not only study the language but are also involved in sharing information and public education projects of different scales and in different media. The texts and videos they published expanded my knowledge about Ch'ol language and traditional narratives, as well as the way they have organized academically and politically for the study and preservation of their language. To this end, they work with state authorities, the Intercultural Universities of Tabasco and Chiapas, and other actors of the northern part of the state of Chiapas. After contacting them and sharing my research and interests, I was included in a public talk to junior high school students in the Ejido of San Miguel, Palenque. On that occasion, the linguists were teaching Ch'ol orthography to all the predominantly bilingual senior students, while I talked about the archaeological past of the region of Palenque, what we understand about the ancient Maya and how archaeology gets to know it. Moreover, through the Ch'ol Documentation Project linguists blog[1] (*Ch'ol | Documentation Project*, 2018) I have been introduced to several other Ch'ol social networks, and I was invited to their academic meetings and events.

Thanks to the blog, I was introduced to the work of Nicolás Arcos López, a Ch'ol linguist professor in the Universidad Intercultural del Estado de Tabasco (UIET). Because of its relevance, I decided to ask to consult him on the questions of my research, and I have now engaged in dialogue with him for years about them. After our first exchanges, Nicolás introduced me to the professors and students of UIET, and from that moment on I accepted every opportunity I had to collaborate with their predominantly Ch'ol university. In 2018, I was invited to give a presentation to the professors, and a three-day seminar for the students in 2019. Both occasions were a great opportunity to share what we know about the past, and represented a very fertile ground for different dialogues and good questions.

Thanks to the linguists' network, I was also introduced to a group of state-government Ch'ol officials employed in the *Centro Estatal de Lenguas, Arte y Literatura Indígenas* (State

[1] https://chol.lingspace.org/en/about/

Center for the Indigenous Languages, Art and Literature, CELALI) and the *Secretaría para el Desarrollo Sustentable de los Pueblos Indígenas* (Secretary for the Sustainable Development of the Indigenous Peoples, SEDESPI). they are working for the current state administration to deliver a new federal law where the Indigenous peoples of Mexico will be considered public law subjects, although they have not been successful in moving away from exclusively granting them individual rights to collective rights, this could represent a step closer to what was discussed in the San Andrés Larrainzar Agreements, almost thirty years ago. In early August 2019, I had the opportunity to participate with them in a big event celebrating international indigenous peoples' day. Chiapas' state governor, the director of INAH, and many other bureaucrats gathered in Aldama, a town north of San Cristobal de las Casas, that had very recently been the scene of violent land conflicts. The ostentatious event ended with the highest-ranking officials suddenly running away after being confronted by the audience. Later in the same day they held another event in San Andrés, the same place where the accords had been signed. The Aldama event was a setting where federal and regional politicians were displaying their rituals of power. Hierarchies were very explicitly performed and, ultimately, failed at conveying any sense of authority, as the bureaucrats disappeared a few minutes after being yelled at and questioned by the local Aldama audience.

In the last days of December 2017, the EZLN organized the second edition of a scientific congress called "*L@s Zapatistas y las ConCIENCIAS por la Humanidad*" (The Zapatistas and the ConSCIENCES for the Humanity). I was able to attend as an "*escucha*" or listener, and to learn about valuable insights on the way Zapatistas question science. The complex web of political resistance to global and national structures of power that the Zapatistas have constructed in the last three decades influences their questioning. During that event, besides the opportunity to have a few conversations, I was able to hear about what they consider decolonizing science, and what they want to know thanks to its methods. It was also relevant for some subjects of my research, as among the many questions asked of different disciplines, there were several related to archaeology and the ancient Maya. The actors in the Zapatista community do not intersect at all with the government officials mentioned earlier, nor with any other Ch'ol consulted for this research. Even if there are thousands of Zapatista Ch'oles, they are far from being the majority.

In the different forums I have been getting acquainted with, since my first interactions I heard a lot of mentions of the work of a small group of Ch'ol writers and poets. When I got familiar with their work, I found very significant reflections about Ch'ol identity and history. The most prolific Ch'ol author, and the winner of the 2021 award of Indigenous Literature of the Americas, is Juana Karen Peñate Montejo. She is the director of the Casa de Cultura in the Municipality and town of Tumbalá, and it has been a privilege to be able to engage in dialogue and collaborate with her to develop projects for sharing knowledge. In her poetry, there are frequent mentions of the old pyramids, her ancestors, and what it means to be a Ch'ol woman and a Maya. Juana Karen is a respected voice that many Ch'oles listen to. She

has invited me to give public talks to the community of the Casa de Cultura, and to participate in other state promoted activities, where I had the opportunity to share what I do and what I know about the ancient Maya.

As these descriptions of my contacts show, I never really got rid of my positioning as an archaeologist. In fact, while explaining the reasons for my investigation, I often had to describe archaeology and its methods, what we know about the Classic Maya, and the inscriptions they left. In many conversations, the idea of organizing public talks was recurrent, so I decided to look for audiences, and reached several groups in different contexts. The talks I organized and gave allowed me to meet a lot of Ch'oles who are interested in mayanist archaeology and epigraphy, and want to talk about -and sometimes contest- these topics with history as they conceive it. The response to these public talks was positive, but nonetheless I think that regarding my research objectives it was a mistake to put myself in the position of a lecturing figure, instead of someone with whom to contest narratives and question practices. The damage was done, and for the kind of ethnography that I have been improving slowly over these last years, those public lectures turned out to be kind of a good setting to get involved in further conversations with interested individuals. Among the archaeologists working in Mexico, we generally lack a commitment to share the knowledge we produce with a broader public, even less so with the indigenous peoples that dwell and have dwelled for millennia in and around the archaeological sites we investigate today. Making our knowledge about the ancient Maya available is only the very first condition to discuss our terms of engagement with modern Maya, it does not change in any way the footing of our relationship with them, but it helps to start discussions.

In March 2020 COVID-19 pandemic restrictions arrived in Mexico and from that moment I had to rely mainly on long distance communication through social networks. These social media interactions turned out to be essential with the stay-at-home directives. There is still a great divide in the access to technology and telecommunications from urban settings to rural indigenous towns, but in the last five or seven years this divide has been getting smaller. Almost all towns have internet signal carried from cities through long chains of microwave antennas crossing the mountains, and most people under 50 years old have acquired a smartphone. With COVID-19 the Ch'ol social networks exploded with more activity, forums, and members.

Juan Carlos López, one of the most active Facebook users that I met from the beginning of my virtual interactions, created a WhatsApp group with his extensive contact network that includes Ch'ol intellectuals, academics, activists, creators of Ch'ol content, and many other people, including myself, another couple of archaeologists and other *Kaxlan* academics. The forum is used for sharing invitations to events they organize, for asking questions related to language and translating, to compare oral traditions, and for sharing local news and memes in Ch'ol about current events. I had a lot of fruitful and sometimes difficult exchanges in Juan Carlos' and other similar forums. It was by posting a short bilingual (Spanish-Ch'ol) text about my research questions in this forum that I started to get acquainted with many

people. In this same WhatsApp group there was organized a group of Ch'oles postulating their positions about the Tren Maya. They arranged several online meetings in which I was invited to participate and to give my archaeological opinion.

In several of these forums I frequently read the voice of Miriam Hernandez Vázquez, A UIET graduate, the creator of a dictionary app for Android smartphones, and the administrator of "Lakty'añ Ch'ol Tila", a Facebook page with tens of thousands of followers. Miriam is also a prolific translator, and a specialist in her language and culture. She was my Ch'ol language teacher in two online courses I followed. After many years of exchanging ideas about our views, in June 2023 we presented together at the UNAM *Congreso Internacional de Mayistas* in Mexico City. Our talk was about the concept of the Maya and the contemporary Ch'ol people.

Through these same groups and online meetings, I have also met the people that work for Café Tumbalá, a small cooperative that grows, roasts, and distributes coffee in Palenque and Mexico City. The space of the Café in Palenque has become a cultural hub, a place where writers, academics, artists, activists and many other Ch'ol gather. They play dominoes, organize book and poetry readings, and stream talks and discussions on several subjects, from permaculture, to history and political activism.

Working in Chiapas, I have met three Ch'ol archaeologists, two of them from Frontera Corozal, a big Ch'ol settlement on the shores of the Usumacinta river, close to the ruins of Yaxchilán. They both studied archaeology in *Universidad de Ciencias y Artes de Chiapas* (Chiapas University of Sciences and Arts- UNICACH), and they have worked for years for INAH's projects in Palenque. We have discussed the issues of my research while working together in Palenque before the pandemic, and while working for different projects and sharing the base camp in the site. Another Ch'ol archaeologist I have met is an ENAH graduate. Since before he started at ENAH, he has lived in Mexico City and as an archaeologist he has worked for INAH's version of contract archaeology. Excavating in the heart of the Mexica triple alliance, he has become an expert on the Late Postclassic and early colonial basin of Mexico. Nonetheless, he has done a lot of research on historical archaeology of the Ch'ol region, including archival documentary work, and has documented traditional narratives associated with several sixteenth century churches spread across the Ch'ol region. He administers a widely known and shared Facebook page called "Tila: Historia y arqueología de la región Ch'ol"[2] (Tila: History and archaeology of the Ch'ol region) that has been successful circulating the results of his historic and archaeological research in his family's region. His videos have received a lot of attention and questions. We have met on several occasions in Mexico City, and we ended up collaborating on the project "Orilla de las Islas" (Islands' Shore), a citizen's action and an artistic project directed by Julio López Fernandez (López Fernández, 2021). This project celebrated the double city that used to be

[2] https://www.facebook.com/lakmaam

contained in the isle of Tenochtitlan and Tlatelolco. It was carried out in August 2021 for the commemoration of the 500th anniversary of the fall of these cities in the Castilian invasion. The project consisted of painting a 22-kilometer line where we think the shores of the island were likely located (Mirón Marván, 2021).

As part of the safe-distance virtual activities organized by the Chiapas State Government and along with Juana Karen Peñate Montejo, we planned one public talk about archaeology and the ancient maya to be hosted and streamed through CELALI and Facebook State networks. The event was successful, the video quickly accumulated a couple of thousands of views, and some viewers suggested the idea of creating more videos. This is the reason I decided to continue with a digital knowledge sharing project. I created a YouTube channel called *Arqueología yik'oty Xkokisjol*[3], which means "archaeology with Xkokisjol" my Ch'ol nickname, "coconut head". I also opened a Facebook page named *la'ñojtye'elob*, which means "your ancestors", a name that was suggested by a Ch'ol speaker. On those platforms I posted texts, infographics and seven videos. With the video content I created, I try to disseminate what archaeologists and epigraphists know about the Ancient Maya. The videos are translated and voiced by different hired Ch'ol native speakers, with Spanish subtitles. The seven videos that I have published have accumulated more than fifteen thousand views on Facebook, and a lot of people have contacted me with questions and feedback, although predominantly in private chats, almost never in the public forums of the online platforms.

Three topics for videos were previously suggested by Ch'ol audience members, and for these and other themes I reached out to mayanist colleagues who generously drafted 500 to 600-word scripts where they explained a Classic Maya archaeology subject of their specialization. The first video published for my channel is about epigraphy, a useful subject to introduce wider conceptions of supposedly shared Maya culture described from the anthropological disciplines. In fact, it involves hearing the phonetic, syntactic, and semantic similarities between the Classic Maya languages inscribed in hieroglyphs and the Mayense languages of today, particularly the Cholan subfamily, including Ch'ol. When I have talked about this with Ch'ol friends and during my talks, it has been a surprise for people to recognize their language in the transliterations of the ancient texts.The Tila dialect speakers remain astounded by the same use of the particle ti or tyi to state the perfective aspect of verbs. Talking about things that have happened is a recurrent practice in ancient epigraphic texts, and in Classic Maya hieroglyphic inscriptions they wrote that aspect in the same way as the Ch'oles from Tila. It is through these reactions that I have grasped the effectiveness of the homogenizing effort perpetrated by the ruling classes of Latin American countries. I understood how it has pushed for the disenfranchisement of many Maya speaking peoples' histories, trying to actively bury them under many layers of displacement and dispossession. The Maya speaking peoples have denied many impositions and have

[3] https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCPTIVm7J2_7-W0itwCveaZw

negotiated their own destiny with the political tools they have had. But in many aspects, the national discourse has effectively rendered an ancient Maya culture to the public as belonging to an amorphous remote past. This same past is largely unrecognizable for most of the contemporary Maya speaking people I have talked to for this investigation, and they don't associate it with their own history.

Other videos covered topics that I needed to share, like one about what we can learn from the analysis of ancient pottery. I chose this subject because is my area of specialization. I have spent most of my career studying this archaeological material, and this part of research is one of the stages that remain hidden from the people that work in the field. This is why I describe how this material constituted helpful tools in the past, and how it is useful for archaeologists today, explaining how these artifacts and their fragments tell us a lot of information about the people of the past. Another video is about the nixtamal, the quintessential maize cooking method for Maya peoples and many other American peoples. Food is one of the most suggested subjects among the audience members, and the nixtamal has been a central theme for p cuisine of Maya peoples for the last three millennia. In fact, this video has been the one that generated most responses, along with the epigraphy episode. Another video is about Classic Maya cities, the people´s lives and networks in the ancient city-states of the Maya lowlands, as well as different adaptations to the landscapes they occupied. The sixth one describes the relation between the ancient Maya and their surrounding fauna, and details what we can know about the lives of the people through the faunal remains we excavate today. The last one published so far is about Yaxchilán and its epigraphic history. In the Classic Period, Yaxchilán was a major settlement in the Usumacinta River and it is located very close to modern Frontera Corozal. This Ch'ol community, one of the main Ch'ol towns outside their central region in Tila, Tumbalá and Palenque, has many members interested in knowing more about archaeology and its findings about the ancient Maya culture.

The process of making these videos has also been a very fertile for fostering interesting dialogues, especially during the translation of the texts by the different Ch'ol collaborators. The discussions with them about how to express archaeological ideas have resulted in rich dialogues, providing valuable insights on Ch'ol views about ancient history and its heritage processes. For example, they translate the term Maya, if they use the term at all, differently or replace it with the more common "*lakñojtye'elob*" which means "our ancestors". Another example concerns how they have chosen to express in their language terms taken from epigraphy, like "underworld" or "*k'ujul ajaw"* (sacred lord).

Along with these hints and discussions, as I mentioned earlier the feedback that I have received from the audience has been positive so far. Even if the responses from the public have been mostly from individuals reaching privately, thanks to some of those individuals I have been introduced to other forums with different topics of discussions. In this way, I have learned about the temporalities that some Ch'ol groups are most interested in. Moreover, I learned about some of the debates and points in common that they have

regarding the scientific practices of inquiring about archaeological materiality, about the national and international discourses and markets of the heritage that surrounds them.

After the end of Covid restrictions I have returned to Palenque on several occasions, and I have finally met in person a lot of people that I had only interacted with through chats and virtual groups. During these last trips, I have been able to follow up in person previous conversations with several people in Palenque and with the consultant members of the extended López family in López Mateos, who I began to talk with at the beginning of my research. During the two 2022 and 2023 field seasons, I talked with Ch'oles and Tseltales about the excavation, the work that this entails, the ancient ways of life we get to know excavating together, and their relation with tourism. We also spoke about their views on the challenges and opportunities brought by the *Tren Maya* project, and on the recent labor conflicts that have followed the employment of thousands of workers. They were hired for the excavation and display of more restored buildings, for the construction of a visitor's center for the archaeological site and national park, for a 160 room hotel right outside the limits of the reserve, a train station, and a new projected downtown around it, all built and administered by Mexico's armed forces.

During these stays at Palenque, I have been interviewed by two Ch'ol media. The first interview in May 2022 was for a *radio comunitaria Ixim* (community station Ixim) in San Manuel, another of the *ejidos* that share boundaries with the national park of Palenque. We discussed what archaeologists do and what we were excavating in Palenque at the time, and they gave meaningful insights on their views about those subjects. A few days later, another interview was conducted for the Facebook site "Lakty'añ CH'ol - Lengua CH'ol – Tila". Miriam Hernandez and Isabela Mayo questioned me about *la'ñojtye'elob* (their ancestors) and my work. Both interviews are available online in the creators' Facebook page and Youtube channel.

In May 2023 I was invited by the Palenque site administration to give a workshop at their Museum, as a part of a series of talks about different archaeological and historical subjects. Most of the people that showed up were part of a group of Ch'oles and their families that sell their handicrafts and other products next to the site paths from where the tourists experience Palenque. I presented what I think of archaeology and my current questions, and we discussed their perceptions of archaeological work and how opaque they feel the research process is. This is particularly relevant as many of them are closely involved in the fieldwork, but are completely omitted from the analysis, interpretation, and publication of data.

Significance and contributions: overview of the dissertation structure

This dissertation begins with recent decades theoretical and methodological discussions on decolonial theory, critical heritage studies, and community-engaged, collaborative

archaeology. In this chapter, I emphasize how indigenous and non-indigenous scholars have tried to listen to indigenous stakeholders' demands, perceptions, and practices around archaeological heritage in different parts of the world. I detail their approaches and efforts in transforming, or not, the terms of engagement and the hierarchical structures implicit in their interaction.

In the next chapter, I historicize the subject of archaeological heritage in Mexico, in Mesoamerica as well as with respect to Mayanist archaeology, and in the Palenque region. I explain the current situation through the lens of archaeological research and heritage practices in Mexico, in the site of Palenque, the city, and the surrounding Ch'ol region. I contextualize the national narratives, the political conditions, and market economies with which archaeology has operated in Mexico for more than a century, and their current state with the landslide of transformations brought by the Tren Maya project, as well as its contestation. I also talk about the effort that some indigenous communities have taken to be listened to and to claim autonomy, and how some have moved into serious change of views and policies.

In chapter 3, I expose what I have learned from the Ch'oles while doing this research, while consulting literature, other published media, and through the ethnography I carried out in the last six years. I describe how the Ch'oles, including some scholars, have written about themselves, how historians, anthropologists, and linguists have studied their culture and language. I also describe the thread of connections of people and ideas I made through the conversations I had with the consultants of this research, the snowball of acquaintances and testimonies made by asking questions to different audiences. I detail all the different settings of my field and online work, describing the testimonies given by consultants.

I end in chapter 4 with what I can conclude after this research. I describe the questions that were left unanswered, the new questions raised, the conclusions I drew, as well as the limitations and most pressing challenges to this investigation. I will detail the commitments I have taken for my future research, while explaining the results of trying to strip away the philosophy and knowledge of archaeology, while trying to be as reflexive as I can, and while recognizing the colonial inertias that I have reproduced in all my professional life. I will finally state what would be desirable to do and to continue asking the Ch'oles with respect to Maya archaeological materiality and heritage.

Chapter 1: Theoretical background on critical heritage studies, decolonial thought and collaborative approaches in archaeology

Some of the consultants of this study are friends with whom I have worked for more than 15 years, surveying their landscape in the search for archaeological sites, excavating them, and doing together many other activities. Nonetheless I have barely engaged with them in the philosophical fields of my discipline, and I have never involved them in the decision making of my research interests, methodology, interpretation, or in the public circulation of the results of the investigations. Although I have been aware of the colonialism of some of the practices carried out during fieldwork, and actively try to avoid them, I was unaware of the colonialism in our epistemology. I have been, thus, part of the construction of modern historical discourses that Mignolo (1995) observes as performative acts of colonialism. Coloniality has been defined as a structuring process in the modern capitalist world-system that articulates peripheral identities into economic, political, and cultural domination (Grosfogel, 2003).

This is why, for this research, I considered myself to be experiencing archaeological data from a point zero perspective (Castro-Gómez, 2007), that is thinking that I did not have a point of view. Several fields of knowledge converge in this research. I will build upon a large corpus of academic work on critical heritage studies, community-based participatory archaeological research, and Maya ethnography. In this chapter I will describe the anthropological background which I am referring to when I talk about decoloniality, heritage, its relationship with identity, membership, and politics, and the current trends of collaborative approaches in indigenous archaeology.

Heritage

In this research, I have contrasted the definitions I have acquired through my archaeological education and practice with those of Ch'ol individuals', and with that of Mexican state official and legal materiality of memory. The materiality of the contexts, objects, and settlements we excavate creates forces that seem to be beyond the interest of scientific research. For Mexican laws, the stuff we record in our fieldwork is transformed into heritage in the moment it is registered, although most archaeological materials are far from being considered and used as heritage. It is important to be clear about my definition of heritage and from whose work I have selected the concepts discussed in this dissertation. Heritage is a social, economic, and political phenomenon (Harrison, 2013).

This concept has been summarized by Hodder (1983) as the present's past, or in another concise figure of description, the “presented pasts” (Stone & Molyneaux, 1994). It is a present-centered phenomenon and discourse with material consequences (L. Smith, 2006).

For Harrison (2013), heritage emerges from the relationship between people, objects, places, and practices, and it implies a selection of these elements to hold up as a mirror to the present. Linked by chains of connectivity networks such elements keep the past alive, along with a set of values to be encouraged to bring into the future. Heritage is a social frame for dialogue on which human and non-human agents work together to recreate the past through everyday networks and associations.

Heritage has also been explained as a set of attitudes to, and relationships with the past (Lowenthal, 1998). It is informed in the present and reflects inherited and current concerns about history (Turnbridge & Ashworth, 1996). Heritage is a conveniently abstract notion, it can be used to unite one group of people with a shared narrative, but at the same time it can be used to alienate other groups from the cultural remnants of their past (Field et al., 2016). These potential uses are a product of what Mol (1999) has recognized as heritage's inherent ontological politics, as it supports human groups' quest for self-knowledge, communication and learning, and guides them. The ownership of peoples' own past can also be a tool for oppression from hegemonic or colonial ontologies (Silverman & Ruggles, 2007). The complicity between academic disciplines and heritage management agencies has created what Di Giovine (2009) defines as the heritage-scape.

Heritage has functioned as a crucial mediation of the contradiction between general memberships versus the recognition of particular identities (Weiss 2007). It operates at different scales of social identities, from the family to the community, the regional, and the national : it is one of their creating forces (Carman, 2002). It inevitably generates a wide spectrum of contesting and ever-changing definitions and memberships, where multivocality and dissonant discourses are part of the nature of heritage (Waterton & Smith, 2009). This situation can be attributed to the diversity of the many scientific disciplines that have put together this concept (Uzzer, 2009): archaeology, anthropology, geography, linguistics, history, economy, law, art history, sociology, psychology, architecture, urbanism, development, conservation, ecology, among others. These disciplines have all converged in the subject of heritage. It is evident that there is the need to have a good grasp of what heritage means and to be inclusive in that definition, not only across the academic disciplines involved (Tunbridge et al., 2013), but also among all peoples creating and being affected by heritage.

A satisfactory inclusive definition would be less concerned about what is heritage, and more about describing the situated inquiries of how, from what, and by whom it is constructed (Gonzalez, 2014). Heritage involves a "kaleidoscope of interests shaped by the different experiences of the past for different communities" and lived histories (Hodder, 1998, 125). It is projected in a social arena on which the material traces selectively prompt memory from a perceived objectivity of physical things, conceived as a site for the creation and contestation of memory and identity politics (Harrison et al., 2008). For Potter and Modlin Jr. (2015) heritage involves representations, experiences, thoughts, emotions and the

identities of the various actors implicated in the reproduction of a social memory. It is not what we remember, but how collectives selectively remember and link together people into groups. It is a social memory that explicitly draws identification through concepts of ownership, but not always through the commodification of the past. It instructs members of a heritage group that a specific set of things and practices from the past should be preserved for the future.

These ideas are raised and discussed in the field of Critical Heritage studies, articulated by diverse disciplines, including archaeology. For the last thirty years archaeologists, anthropologists, historians, geographers, and sociologists have moved away from discussions that conceive heritage as mere objects and places. They have moved towards a conception of heritage as a cultural process, with an interest to inquire about its social context, and to consider it as a form of cultural practice (Waterton & Watson, 2014). In recent decades, Critical Heritage studies have started an engagement with reflexive discussions of the conditions and historicity of how heritage takes place. They have examined the entanglement of heritage with politics and identity, and focused on the lives of people and their relationship with their material past, instead of conceiving heritage as things and places to be celebrated and protected. International and national institutions in charge of regulating and sanctioning policies concerned with cultural heritage have operated according with hegemonic emphasis, without focusing on the lives of the people. A fast-growing body of literature has emerged talking about this critical approach (for example Ashworth et al., 2007; Bender, 1998; Castañeda & Mathews, 2008; Cojtí Ren, 2006; Eriksen, 2014; Field et al., 2016; Harrison, 2010, 2013; Meskell, 1998, 2001a, 2001b; Silverman & Ruggles, 2007; L. Smith, 2006; Waterton & Watson, 2014).

Frequently, ethnographic work informs research on Critical Heritage studies, as it works in collaboration with the peoples who historically have been the objects of ethnographic studies, people often represented by indigenous, marginalized, colonized, impoverished, or disempowered communities. Ethnographies with these subjects may lead to understanding and engaging with conceptions of materiality, relatedness, life, and temporality coming from the ontological peripheries. In this way, it will be possible to understand how heritage displays active meanings that transform the social, political, and economic arenas (Field et al., 2016). There are multiple examples in the world and in the Maya region of ethnographic research developing around heritage practices (for example Abu El-Haj, 1998; Bartu, 2000; Breglia, 2003; Castañeda, 1996; Edensor, 1998; F. Gil, 2007; F. M. Gil, 2005; Green et al., 2003; Herzfeld, 1991; Rodriguez, 2006; Shankland, 1996, 1999). Such ethnographic testimonies have a unique capacity of giving light to the complex connections between dwelling, the material world, and conceptions of time and history. Archaeology has constructed different ways to frame and think about all these concepts. For this research project, I believe that the conceptions generated by the embodied histories of the Ch'ol people are required knowledge to start a meaningful participative research agenda.

Heritage is used as a coming-to-terms with our historically particular and shared routes as human groups. It functions as the means of reproduction and presentation of culture, of its materiality, and represents what human groups choose as their sites of special historic interest (Hall, 1996, 4, 1999, 3). I conceive materiality in the way current studies approach it, that is materiality concerned with the recursive relations among agency, structure, objects and action (Hodder, 2012; Ingold, 2007, 2012; Knappett, 2011; Latour, 2005). Even though heritage has the specific purpose of creating a sense of timelessness, human communities and their identities are never eternal, they are constantly producing change, as well as adapting and reacting to the multi-scalar situations in which they are embedded.

Time is a concomitant condition of heritage. Time is a modern concept with a long background history. Ideas from Western enlightenment have induced the modern illusion of navigating on an irreversible arrow of time (Latour, 1993) that we are surfing on the edge of history. The peoples that choose to stay away, and the ones actively kept out from the crest of that imagined wave, are considered stagnant in a departed time. The past always has political implications. Our own renderings of history are defined by the hermeneutics of historical productions (Foucault, 1991). Habermas and Ben-Habib (1981) conceive modernity as a project to achieve the development of objective science, universal morality, and law, for the rational organization of social life. Modernity's historical sciences have traditionally organized the past into linear sequences. These sequences still enable today's teleological conceptions of history of otherness, from the Western perspective. Once again, they are part of the long-term colonial processes structuring much of social relations in the world. Heritage itself is in part a product of Western ontological dualisms: past-present, body-mind, nature-culture, civilized-savage (Harrison, 2013).

The global practices of heritage belong to a postmodern search for an origin that references material culture to a self-conscious creed, "whose shrines and icons daily multiply and whose praise suffuses public discourses" (Lowenthal, 1996, 5). These discourses are composed by transnational, national, regional, local, household, and kin networks of coexisting contemporary relations. Heritage reflects, derives from, and graphically exemplifies unequal global relations and the legacy of the unfinished colonialism still prevailing in many modern states (Field et al., 2016). These global practices are regulated by a set of international and nation-state institutions that record, list, and categorize them. The United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization, has listed 1073 sites in 167 countries (UNESCO World Heritage Centre, 2022), and 429 intangible cultural heritage practices in 113 countries (UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage, 2022). The word heritage in international and state legal language is frequently preceded by the dichotomous adjectives material-intangible, and natural-cultural, which are categories that work well for the making of state policies and tourism development. But for an anthropological point of view, to distinguish between those qualifiers is to ignore that all heritage is culturally constructed, and that the intangible is never entirely immaterial as it is framed in places

(Harrison, 2013), either physical or represented, and reproduced through corporeality, objects and signs.

The conceptions and dynamics of identity are also central for the production and reproduction of heritage. Identity is created and recreated using the resources of history, language, and culture in a process of ever-becoming, instead of being (Hall, 1996, 4). Identity is defined by Jenkins (1996, 4) as the way in which individuals and collectivities are distinguished in their social relations with other individuals and collectivities. This way of conceiving it is crucial to the discourses about heritage and about its politics. In the words of Meskell "self-definition today coalesces around genealogy, heritage, citizenship, and sameness" (2002, 280). Identities are thus enunciated on the premise of exclusion and otherness. Identity and meaning must be understood as always ongoing projects. Identity has also been addressed on archaeological subjects. For this reason, it has brought attention to contemporary issues regarding the relation between people´s contemporary identity and our object of study (Meskell, 2001a), which in turn is part of heritage resources. These resources are intertwined in a network of subtle, negotiated, personal and shared, contingent practices, with identity expressions and claims constantly changing through the meaning and the subjects of heritage itself.

Archaeology, one of the many things considered heritage, is a common form of resource for creating and sustaining a sense of cultural identity in the present. It goes through a cycle of stages from record (belonging to the archaeological past), resource (in the archaeological present), and heritage (in the public present). All these phenomena gravitate around the same body of material constituted by objects, monuments and landscapes (Carman, 2002). In the case of the broader heritage concept, there are two registers of the definition of archaeological heritage. The first, emphasizes the material culture of past societies that has survived to the present. The other, concentrates on the process through which the material culture of past societies is re-evaluated and re-used in the present (Skeates, 2000, 9–10). In my personal career, until my PhD education, I have taken for granted the theoretical implications of the former, conceiving the value of the archaeological remains unreflexively scientific. This is something that Castro Gómez (2007) defines as "point zero" perspective, or a god's-eye view, representing itself as being without a point of view, ignoring the structuring structures that make possible institutions and hermeneutics, for example, the inquiries and research of a specialist mayanist archaeologist such as myself. In this project, archaeology is about to get explicitly personal, I will render transparent my object of study in its situated context, to myself and to the people around it. Likewise, I will also render transparent my own motivations for pursuing a different archaeology (Meskell, 2002, 293) in the Maya area and Mexico.

Heritage discourses entail narratives, polyphonic and often contested, but always constructed and imagined narratives. Joyce (2002) has studied archaeological languages and their media. She has framed them using Russian linguist Mikhail Bakhtin's literary

theory, examining the practices and communication media through which archaeology represents the past, simultaneously reproducing itself by those means. Joyce describes archaeology as a science that is actively engaged in the construction of stories about imagined pasts, with its own chronotopes. According to Bakhtin, a chronotope is the way a narrative portrays and implies space-time, is what gives coherence to particular genres (in R. Joyce, 2002). Our narrative genres and their implied or explicit chronotopes resonate outside the discipline, they have repercussions in the politics and economics of heritage practices and management. Often they are coordinated from state institutions and their means of memory reproduction. In the work of the Russian linguist, memory is defined as an unsystematic accumulation of experience that exists not only for the sake of preservation, but also for creative transformation (Bakhtin, 1981). In the remembered past and in its reassessment, there are the conditions for creativity and freedom (Morson & Emerson, 1990, 229–230). Bakhtin and his dialogic perspective offer a great potential for engaging in critical thinking about heritage discourses, to move from self-reproduced monologues about the past to a dialogue with different communities. It allows to acknowledge the polyphonic nature of the different narratives operating locally and globally in the places of heritage. Building on these ideas, the purpose of this research is to start a multivocal dialogue, aiming to transcend the abstract theoretical engagement to an entailment of sociopolitical and intellectual hybridity (R. Joyce, 2008, 60). It intends to move "beyond dialogue" (Hodder, 2004), or to engage with the social realities behind the multivalent stories (Kojan & Angelo, 2005).

Decolonial discussions

Although heritage is grounded in discourses of kinship, residence and property, these discourses have been dominated by a global hegemonic power recognizing the nation-state as collectively similar sub-units (Herzfeld, 2010, 259). Global archaeological representations have created a new temporality of the past of pre-European Americas, cast in Western terms. As in many other colonial loci around the world, the ancestors of the dominated indigenous peoples were turned into others (Gnecco & Ayala, 2011; Schmidt & Mrozowski, 2013).

The unequal forces of cultural representation in the contest for power (Bhabha, 1994) are the subjects of postcolonial discussions. Recent decades have witnessed an increasing scientific reflexiveness about these unequal relations. In an influential work, the Maori scholar Tuhiwai Smith (1999) has called for a transformation of the colonized views of scientific methodologies. She talks about six different circumstances through which research can be stripped away from its colonialism: the formulation of the research questions, charting the inquiry, gathering the data, interpreting the data, taking action, and reflecting on the consequences of the actions taken. These six stages of investigation can be

reflexively revisited in archaeological practice, and all of them could be potentially sharpened by alternative indigenous views.

The postcolonial discussions have been globally guided by ongoing debates in the anglophone colonial world- particularly in the U.S.A., Canada, Australia, and New Zealand- between indigenous people, the anthropological academy, and the industry of heritage (see Biolsi, 2005; Gosden, 1999; McNiven & Russel, 2005; C. Smith & Wobst, 2005; Swidler et al., 1997; Zimmerman, 1998). The diversities in colonial policies and philosophies between the English-speaking colonial world and the Latin one tell a lot about the differences and conflicts between European monarchies, who headed colonization and its subsequent political-economical regimes. I understand coloniality building upon Grosfoguel's (2003) definition: a structuring process in the modern capitalist world-system, which articulates peripheral identities into economic, political and cultural domination.

Colonial histories are what create the political condition of indigeneity. The indigenous condition is defined by Harrison and colleagues (2008) as a category developed to describe different populations in modern colonial contexts all over the world. These populations have and are being dispossessed of their territory and culture by settler societies (many of which are now nation-states), and now re-imagine the places and communities in their own terms by mechanisms such as the social sciences. Indigeneity increases exponentially the possibilities for people dwelling in a landscape to be descendants of the archaeological communities who have dwelt before in the same places. But of course, the realities are almost always more complicated than that. To be an indigenous is never a passive condition, it is a constant struggle (explicit or implicit) for sovereignty. This presents a challenge to the hegemony of nation-states and to the heritage narratives of states (Lonetree, 2012).

Because of our traditional epistemology, even anthropological sciences have naturalized discourses of domination, what Fricker (2007) calls epistemic violence. Archaeology and anthropology are no exception to this hostile epistemology, and perhaps they reflect even more explicitly colonial relations as they have defined otherness and used the indigenous to build their representations. What anthropologists define as culture is used to make a menu of descriptions of peoples lives in an orderly fashion, rather than identities that existed before the anthropologists' discovery and cataloging (Wagner, 1975). Schortman states: “power plays a large part in determining in what ways and by whom cultural variation is compartmentalized” (2017, 273).

The practices of heritage have carved a privileged place for archaeologists, who operate within the supporting structure of legal and academic practices. These practices imply cultural claims that are ostensibly exclusionary (Meskell, 2002, 2010). Silverman and Ruggles (2007) have pointed out that heritage is also a human rights topic: the right to participate in cultural life. For instance, indigenous rights to manage and control their

archaeological heritage are stipulated in the Declaration of Human Rights (United Nations, 1948, Article 27), the Declaration of Indigenous Rights (United Nations, 2008, Articles 11-13) and Convention 169 of the International Labor Organization (International Labour Organization, 1989). Nevertheless, there is an inherent conflict between world or national heritage and individual local rights (Silverman & Ruggles, 2007). The practices of the heritage industry have been guided by international institutions, whose histories are biased in favor of the discourses of the dominant classes (Hewison, 1987), in a mutual complicity (Castañeda, 1996). As Mignolo (1995) states, modern historical discourses are performative acts of colonialism.

In order to transform the way scientific theories interact with historical-political realities, and to be open to other paradigms, while paying attention to how communities speak for themselves (Mignolo, 1995), many scholars have been involved in de-epistemologizing and re-ontologizing knowledge activities (Latour, 2007, 87). In fact, decolonization is not just the right thing to do from an ethical perspective, it can also enrich academic discourses with different ontologies and ways of perceiving and conceptualizing. It is a requirement for coherency between our scientific practices and the global-national discourse and laws that call for multiculturalism. This is necessary to translate into practice what is communicated in legislation and literature. It would imply to seek relations with other visions, histories, and worlds, to move towards an engaged militancy for social equality. One of the first things we can do to expunge colonialism from our practices is to expose its philosophical base to other ontologies (Gnecco & Ayala, 2011). To be inclusive, we need to de-privilege expert knowledge, to understand what we have to offer in a discussion among equals, to re-imagine the legal and institutional hierarchies and to ensure that archaeology is concerned with peoples' heritage (Waterton & Smith, 2009), and not with our own entropic epistemological universe. As Meskell notes: “national modernities are constructed through dialogic relationships between archaeological materiality and heterogeneous narratives of the past that recursively offer horizons of hybridization” (Meskell, 2002, 288).

An archaeological decolonization would imply changing our practices and contexts so that disadvantaged groups can be heard and be responded to. It will allow moving away from methods and principles in line with the Western voices (Hodder, 2008). For Atalay (2008) a decolonizing impetus is pushing to seek real change in the practices of archaeologists and their institutions, by combining Western and Indigenous forms of knowledge. With this project I am at trying to change all my further terms of engagement with the different Maya indigenous peoples, or any other local stakeholders of archaeological heritage.

Heritage and Tourism

Different ideological foundations of heritage based on intimate local relations have existed before the creation of the concepts of modern heritage. They stand in opposition to, and as

a consequence of, the official modern nation-states' patrimony (Mortensen, 2016). The nation-states are also a product of essentially modern epistemologies, constituted by imagined- rather than practiced- communities, as Anderson (1983) describes them. For this author, the use of heritage is part of the forces that generate those imagined communities. The sense of unity in nation-states is produced by the institutions of power through practices and discourses such as maps, museums, catalogs, and censuses, or whatever is needed to represent and imagine "its dominion, the nature of the human beings it rules, the geography of its domain, and the legitimacy of its ancestry" (Anderson, 1983, 164).

Official heritages are built into a national historic rootlessness under official state sponsorship (Patterson & Schmidt, 1995). To achieve a homogeneous national narrative (Benavides, 2007), national archaeologies present smoothed versions of history, generally conceiving continuous subjects and ignoring their discontinuities. Looking for unification (at the cost of plurality), national myths are based on the remote past, typically through archaeology (Kohl & Fawcett, 1996). Nationalisms frequently own a past that does not belong to the same nations, and they continue to oppress the descendants of that past (Mamani, 1989).

The discipline of archaeology was created at the same time of the formation of modern nation-states in Europe and elsewhere, arising from a type of identity whose construction is very specific and reductionist (Meskell, 2002, 282). Heritage serves as a symbolic currency for nation-states to participate in a global political economy of prestige (Isar, 2011). This economy of prestige is materialized in the places and things to be showcased to the world, which are not just worthy of preservation, but also meritorious to be displayed to a touristic audience. Heritage tourism is an industry that consumes the places, experiences, and things recognized as heritage. It does not only involve the presentation and re-imagination of the past, but also a profitable source of economic relief to otherwise marginalized places.

Describing heritage tourism, Nuryanti defines it as a "Highly complex series of production related activities, rapid movements of outsider people through areas that are segmented into national and regional cultures and traditions" (1996, 250). The same author considers that heritage is for tourism what tradition is for modernity, a scenario where the local unique and the universal are put together (Nuryanti, 1996). It involves more than labor demand and income increase, it includes struggles of land ownership, the competition between the old and new, the transformation of lifestyles, or community relocations (ibid). Three types of impact of heritage tourism have been recognized by Mathieson and Wall (1987): physical or environmental, sociocultural, and economic.

In touristic practices, heritage is affected by a transformation of its relationships. Once uninfluenced by commerce, heritage places have been suffering a kind of colonization of goods that were previously out of the market (Holtorf 2005). Thus, it is important to introduce the term of commodification: a dynamic condition in the social life of things,

defined as the situation that makes them exchangeable for some other thing (Appadurai, 1994; Kopytoff, 1986). Tymothy and Nyaupane describe heritage commodification as when a “culture becomes a product that is packaged and sold to tourists” (2009, 62). This process stimulates the drive of the illicit trade in antiquities, and at the same time can positively affect communities' awareness about the importance of conservation. The market of heritage tourism is largely motivated by a “quest for authenticity” attributed to people and places with less contamination by modern capitalism, a condition that it is staged in many destinations (MacCannell, 1973, 1976). This demand converts the local into a form of currency (Weiss, 2007), stimulates a cultural freezing of those viewed as related to a heritage site (Garland & Gordon, 1999), mainly in the cases where it is profitable to display a selection of traditions. Nonetheless, for Cohen (1988) these emergent authenticities can also help raise awareness of cultural practices vulnerable to extinction.

International organizations, nations and touristic capitals pick and choose the features of the hosting cultures for the travelers to experience, with a process defined by Baille, Chatzoglou and Taha (2010) as heritagization. Heritagization corresponds to the designation, management, and interpretation policies where the past blends into the present and flattens an omnipresent now. It is where history loses its weight through increasing its familiarity. In the last half century, tourism and its heritage niche market have been particularly attractive in developing countries, in particular in those places with a perceived richer cultural diversity. There, national governments frequently and substantially participate in the heritage industry, with less participation by private capital (Nuryanti, 1996). This is also the case for many Latin American countries, where archaeological research is slowly turning attention to the social realities of the multiple voices surrounding heritage (see, for example Mamani, 1996; McGuire & Navarrete, 1999; Patterson, 1995; Vargas Arenas, 1995).

The current political, economic, legal, touristic, and academic discourses of Maya archaeological heritage operate in a complex network of institutions and communities, local, regional, national, and international, each of them with their own history. In several ethnographies of touristic contexts in the Maya area, particularly in the north and east of the Yucatán Peninsula (Breglia, 2003, 2006; Castañeda, 1996; Córdoba Azcárate, 2020; Taylor & Little, 2018), it is evident how tourism has impacted the lives of Maya speaking people through exploitation of labor, transformation of lifestyles, displacement, commodification of their land and culture. Their cultural traditions become a form of currency in a capitalist system. Sometimes, this happens in the same places where they used to be servants of the Haciendas and Fincas. Córdoba Arzate (2020) who has studied tourism phenomena and their spaces in the area of Cancún, in the State of Quintana Roo, as well as in Celestún, Hacienda Temozón Sur and Tekit, in Yucatan, recognizes tourism categorizations as a form of entrapment. These categorizations are able to alter the daily and seasonal cycles of the Maya speaking people entangled in their networks of exploitation. The Tren Maya has catalyzed the transformation brought by the

commodification of landscape, heritage, and culture. This *megaproyecto* (mega-project) has implied the biggest salvage archaeology project ever carried out in Mexico. Concurrently, its construction has mobilized multiple Ch'ol, Tseltal, and Yucatec Maya with legal tools to stop or limit the touristic development project related to the Tren Maya. Several anthropologists from INAH itself have criticized the implementation of this *megaproyecto* and have advised some of the collectives that have presented legal cases against the institutions in charge of its construction.

Outside the official heritage, outside the professional practices around heritage authorized by the states and motivated by some form of legislation or economic interest (Harrison, 2013, 14), there is a world of contestation. Here, the definitions and the institutionally prescribed uses of heritage are debated. This creates constant tensions between regional, local, indigenous and all sorts of heritage stakeholder and the communities of academics, state institutions, capital interests, and even raises environmental concerns.

The intention of this dissertation is to step out of the academic, Western hermeneutics of heritage. It is to try to learn about and participate with an indigenous ontology, with other choices concerning the ways the strings of history are woven together to remember, to celebrate or to proscribe history, its places, practices, and materiality.

Collaborative-oriented approaches to archaeology.

As previously mentioned, recent decades have witnessed a force driving towards less hierarchical relations between archaeologists and archaeological heritage stakeholders. More and more projects have attempted to engage in collaboration with local, public, and indigenous communities in the world, in Latin America, in Mesoamerica and in the Maya region. The experiences of indigenous and local engagement with archaeological projects guide the ways in which I started a dialogue and a scientific collaboration with the Ch'ol people of Chiapas.

Many scholars from different disciplines have discussed the colonialism of scientific discourses. From pedagogy, Freire (1970) invited his discipline to avoid mechanistic conceptions of history, in order to problematize the future and the social value of its professional practice. Atalay (2012, 11) takes this advice to think about archaeology's sustainability. I have described how recent decades have witnessed an effort to re-ontologize knowledge activities (Latour, 2007). There has been the will to move the academic locus of enunciation towards other worldviews and to be open to other paradigms, to change the way our philosophies interact with different social realities, and to pay attention to how communities speak for themselves (Mignolo, 1995).

Archaeology can contribute to social sustainability by transforming itself into a tool to look together – as the plurality of humans – into the future (Wright, 2005, 56). According to

Vallance, Perkis, and Dixon (2011), social sustainability is generated by "the presence of inter-generational equity of distribution of power and resources, of employment, education and the provision of basic infrastructure and services, of freedom and the participation in the social forums where decisions are taken" (Vallance et al., 2011, 343). Democratization of archaeology must be driven not just for the ethics that help to contribute to social justice and sustainability. It also represents an opportunity to enrich our knowledge about different pasts, to listen to embodied historic narratives produced by different populations. Our science provides in-depth readings rooted in the sediments of ancient time. For this reason, today we can significantly contribute to the understanding and managing of bio-physical and sociocultural systems across chronological and spatial dimensions (Welch & Ferris, 2014, 107–107). Decolonization should be one of the main mechanisms to make anthropology socially relevant and necessary.

In archaeology, decolonization has taken many forms. Atalay (2012) describes the history of the community-based archaeologies of the last two decades. In the Anglo-Saxon postcolonial world there have been substantive discussions about the relationship between archaeology and indigeneity. This discussion has been a product of an academic reaction to many social movements originated with and voiced by indigenous communities. There are many heritage research examples in English-speaking countries that have reflexively and critically contextualized academic production, oriented to participatory research (Atalay, 2006, 2008; Lightfoot, 2008; Lydon & Rivzi, 2010; McNiven & Russel, 2005; C. Smith & Wobst, 2005; Swidler et al., 1997; Watkins, 2005; Welch & Ferguson, 2007; Zimmerman, 2007). North American Native activism has laid the foundations of many further postcolonial debates, and for academic and legal adaptations to how archaeological heritage is perceived and appropriated by different communities. The outcomes have resulted in pieces of legislation that lessen archaeology´s monopoly over archaeological heritage. The governments of the United States, Canada, Australia and New Zealand have negotiated with each indigenous community – at least at a discursive level, and only with formally recognized ones- as from nation to nation (Biolsi, 2005). The agreements reached have set the footing for any further dialogue in terms that are very different from other parts of the colonial world. The ideas of indigenous author Deloria (1969) and the Native American Movement in the 1970s are still making their way through modern heritage hegemonies all over the planet, even if in some places those voices have been considered only very recently, or not yet at all.

The contrast between postcolonial efforts in the English-speaking world and the regions colonized by Latin monarchies is very interesting. The social and political conditions in which archaeology is practiced in Latin America are generated from the imagined communities projected by nationalist discourses about the past (Anderson, 1983). *Mestizaje* (race mixing) ideology predominates in the construction of identities, under the fallacy of a cultural and racial mixture during the clash of the West with the "civilizations" of the Americas (Navarrete Linares, 2016). Nationalist histories have homogenized cultural

diversity by the permanent removal of generations of embodied local histories, separating them from the very landscapes that produce them. National narratives have created and fostered rootlessness, intrinsically promoted by official heritage practices and institutions (Patterson & Schmidt, 1995). In Mexico, heritage conceptions and legislation are a product of these social homogenizing ideologies, where the original multiculturalism within the colonized territory was reduced to the patrimony of everyone, making it no one´s (Rozental, 2011). Moreover, several contrasts in the monarchical land management and ownership have produced different practices in the legal rights of governments and their subjects over land (Lorenzo, 1998).

To overcome colonial and postcolonial narratives, where indigenous communities are presented in the margins of history, as "distant subjects, owners of a stagnated dead temporality" (Gnecco & Ayala, 2011, 28), other ontologies have been included in archaeological and anthropological interpretations and chronologies, thanks to internal influences. The postmodern crisis of anthropological representation called archaeology to move towards post-processualist ideas of self-reflexivity, multivocality, and awareness of our subjective practices (Hodder, 1999, 2008). Three decades ago, for the first time in the anthropological sciences, there was serious thinking about the social ethics of our practices. With the external landslide of contestation, and the internal post-processual tendencies, a paradigm shift was created in ways of carrying out archaeology. Wyllie (2008, cited in Overholtzer, 2017) considers this as the "new archaeology" of the twenty first century, one that is co-produced with formerly ignored or used indigenous descendant communities.

By grouping together a category of community based participatory archaeology, the emphasis is on the terms of engagement between the academic community and all possible local stakeholder counterparts. In principle, there should not be a universal method to relate with pluralities. Rather than representing a uniform concept or theoretical position, this paradigm shift is best described as an assemblage of strategies. It ranges from circulating the products of investigations to the public, to a genuine synergy in which academics and local communities make all significant contributions to knowledge (Colwell-Chanthaphonh & Ferguson, 2008).

For Colwell (2016), the terms of engagement between archaeologists and indigenous stakeholders go through a continuum of five historical modes of interaction. These start with a colonial control in which the scientific and heritage goals are set solely by archaeologist. Secondly, they pass to resistance, with the development of opposition to coloniality. Thirdly, they move to participation, in which there is limited stakeholder involvement and the goals of research are developed independently of stakeholders. This is followed by collaboration, when there is free flow of information, full stakeholder involvement and the goals are set jointly. The terms of engagement would finish in indigenous control, in which the goals would be set by tribes, their own needs would be privileged, and archaeologists and institutions would be employed by the tribes as

consultants (Colwell is speaking about the 574 federally recognized Tribal Nations in the United States).

It is possible and necessary to practice an engaged archaeology, socially relevant, ethical, intrinsically linked to the collaboration of local communities, and as a result: sustainable. This sustainable archaeology is done "with, for and by indigenous groups" (Nicholas, 1997, 85). Research practices and discourses are accessible, relevant and co-participated for the benefit of local communities, who incorporate their own experiences and epistemologies into archaeological discourses (Atalay, 2008, 2012). In this way, it is feasible to look for mutually acceptable research agendas between archaeologists and the indigenous communities with which they coexist (McNiven & Russel, 2005).

For Green, Green and Goes Neves (2003), community archaeology is defined by involvement in public education, by collaboration in the conservation of heritage, by the management of archaeological resources to reduce poverty, and by the discussion of the epistemological frames and philosophies in the practice of the discipline. It is a transformation that begins with acknowledging the historic construction of relations and the distribution of political and economic power (Hemming & Rigney, 2010, 94). This awareness process is frequently helped by ethnographic work. Such knowledge is needed to design and carry out participatory programs with an association of indigenous communities and universities, heritage managers, industries, and governments at different scales. Gnecco (2012) proposes a halt in making the past a place to escape from today´s social changes, and suggests opening the circulation of our products and the inclusion of other horizons and chronologies in the interpretations we make.

The social equity aspect of these engagements can broaden our epistemological possibilities and make our practices more ethical. But it can also make archaeologists feel comfortable with the reproduction of extractive and colonial practices (La Salle, 2010). It is important to ensure a future with archaeology, valuing the tools and the knowledge we can provide to study the histories of people, without losing sight of the ethical implications of representing the past of others. We need to avoid falling in the trap of self-congratulatory meaningless inclusions, as has been the case of many Latin American law reforms regarding multiculturalism. As Dawdy (2009) notes, a lot of public collaborative archaeology projects can be described as doing self-centered public relations for archaeology. Dawdy argues that "Archaeology has been very useful lately, but primarily to itself" (138). To a certain extent this statement is true, we have not been able to reform the power imbalances of archeology, and collaboration is not enough to bring those changes (Montgomery & Fryer, 2023). Nonetheless, this is not a good justification to remain untouched and inactive from decolonial discourses in Mexico. Often the scapegoat is that descendancy is too complex and, because of this complexity, any collaboration is futile for motivating a decolonial transformation. It is very likely that, even with a descendant-oriented paradigm shift, we will still inadvertently reproduce systemic hierarchies and injustices. To avoid this, we need

to be continuously self-reflexive about collective indigenous engagements and their potential to perpetuate colonial structures (Westmont & Clay, 2022).

In the next chapter, I will describe the history and current conditions of the archaeological heritage in Mexico, in the Maya area, and in the Palenque regions.

Chapter 2: Historical context and current situation of archaeological heritage in Mexico, Mesoamerica, the Maya region, and Palenque.

The settler history of Mexico imagines a chronology where all indigenous history and agency ended in August of 1521, when an alliance of Castilian and local armies defeated Tenochtitlan, the city that was the seat of power of the Aztec triple alliance. This history conceives a sudden transformation of the ontology of all the peoples living within the territory that New Spain later claimed to control. From that point, the Mexican State and society have thought that the fate of all the native identities has been in the hands of someone other than themselves. The systematic ethnocide has and continues to be an irreparable, enduring loss. But the fact that there are still almost 70 indigenous languages spoken in a country with five hundred years of organized cultural assimilation and erasure, tells a lot about the resilience of identities, and the agency of many groups with a persistent refusal to be exterminated. Along with the effort to colonize, there has been a reality of different strategies with which different indigenous groups have adapted to new political circumstances, negotiated their position, and refused colonial impositions.

The materiality of archaeology has rarely been central in the indigenous strategies for survival and negotiation of their autonomy. After centuries of active persecution followed by social stigma, they have had to detach themselves from their culture and history in many ways, as they are perceived under Western paradigms as primitive and pagan. In Mexico, the scarcity or absence of archaeological heritage in the indigenous strategies for autonomy and survival does not exempt archaeologists from being reflexive about the colonial role we have played in the national and capitalist structures. The contexts and situations described in this chapter call for an unpostponable re-evaluation of archaeological legal, economic, political, and academic heritage practices. This re-evaluation needs to be carried through the old promises of plurality and multiculturalism stated in the Latin American legislation. Since the end of the last century, there has been a political push to move the Spanish speaking countries into models of multiculturalism. These agendas have merely been symbolic, and they have not changed the vertical relations in which the state and society are linked with the plurality of the native indigenous populations. In 2020, Mexico was inhabited by 7.3 million people, grouped in many ethnicities and speaking 69 languages (INEGI, 2020).

The history of my country is conceived through a sequence of chronological discontinuities that are projected to audiences advancing a monolithic conception of Mexican culture and history. This has been imagined by picking and choosing a few monumental elements from the pre-Hispanic past, a past that Mexico has considered useful in order to imagine a grand narrative of long-standing nations, compatible with the imperial forces that dominated the territory during the sixteenth century conquest (Breglia, 2006; Bueno, 2016; Navarrete Linares, 2011).

Historical overview

The ongoing colonial history of Latin America has shaped the nation states and their respective relationships with their own plurality, with indigeneity and otherness shaped by an imagined, racialized, national subject. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, in the time of the creation of national states, Latin America was a region that awoke the interest of travelers (Schlüter, 2009). This interest was partially due to the narrative constructed during the colony by Spanish descendants. These same descendants were the authors of later nations' ontologies appropriating the indigenous past, and that paralleled it with the historical discourses of European dynastic monarchies. The later nations believe in a remote point of origin, with the right to claim independence from European colonial powers, because they have "existed since long before the conquest and that they were entitled to recover their freedom" (Bueno, 2016, 150). The conquest of the Aztec empire in the sixteenth century, which in the mind of the Castilian *conquistadores* included *de facto* all their political subjects, facilitated the government of large portions of Mesoamerica, even though the colonial powers met with a lot of resistance. Up to today, there are long traditions of indigenous power contestation in many places and communities of the country. During the Castilian invasion, the early attempts for de-signifying the indigenous discourses, places and objects were effective. Less than two centuries passed before Aztec narratives were merely an adornment to the *criollo's* own imagination of a history of kings. Nonetheless, some of the ancient narratives retained their meanings among indigenous populations through religious practices and worldviews. The Spanish monarchy left a long-lasting imprint in our conceptions of land ownership, and the relations between the people and their government. Lorenzo (1998) argues that Latin American legal traditions have inherited the Spanish monarchical state's sovereignty practices over the land and all the resources it contained, in contrast to anglophone traditions of rights to property, this is reflected in Mexican assertion of ownership of archaeological sites, which is absolute.

Mexico is my country of citizenship, and the main source of the sponsorship for my education at Berkeley. It is a two-century old nation, invented by intellectual *criollos* from late eighteenth century New Spain, people with romantic and opportunistic ideas about what they imagined as the Mexican past. A good description of what Mexico and being a Mexican means is given by Roger Bartra (2014). He describes it as an artificial entelechy that exists only in books and speeches exalting it, where it is possible to find its origin in the constitution of the modern capitalist state. Bartra conceives the idea of an existing unique subject of the national history, *el mexicano*, as a cohesive illusion, more a texture than an identity. Nonetheless, in heritage discourse Mexicans are conceived as carrying deeply, unconsciously inside them "an alter ego whose roots can be traced to the "night of times, that nourishes from the ancient indigenous vitality" (Bartra, 2014, 1197). The author sees the popular figure of Malintzin (not the actual historical one), a Mexican archetype for the

treasonous desire to be part of the colonizing forces, as the indigenous Eve. Malintzin's resistance to the Mexica imperial despotism is converted into treason.

Malinche, or Malintzin was also one of the first subjects representing a Latin American myth, the *mestizo*, the human product of the mixture of two races. The outcome of this blend has the potential of civilizatory redemption, by acknowledging being part of the history of the "cosmic race" in a celebrated past. This racial category was created by the Mexican intellectuals of the beginning of the 20th century, in a desperate attempt to be part of what was named at the time "the concert of the nations", the modern capitalist industrial global enterprise (Vasconcelos, 1925).

Navarrete Linares (2016), talking about racism in Mexico, mentions that the origin of the mestizos was not really a product of a racial nor a cultural mixture, it was rather a social and political change that generated a new identity. This was still unequally contrasted and related with the indigenous plurality, and it also served as a base of elites' privilege. For these reasons, the author complains about the lack of interest in Mexico in Anglo-American postcolonial academic thought. Usually, as a nation we still hold to the universal validity of the European culture. Although there are multiple places of indigenous contestation, they are lost in the fragmentation of the ethnic plurality. This limits the agents and their audiences to the very local, without a national force entangling those struggles together, as I will explain further.

Mexico, by its name and discourses, has been traditionally celebrated as an Aztec nation. It is interesting the way Mesoamerican archaeology inherited a fossilized imperial Aztec bias regarding the others, the savages, the *Chichimeca*. This is the term applied to all the northern communities of people that in the Late Postclassic period (900-1521 CE) did not fit into the Aztec structures of civility and order. The official history and heritage practices of the *Mexica* count several explicit episodes of state historians destroying and re-writing narratives to ground the history of the *Mexica* empire in a mythical time, anchored to a deified Toltec history. The creation of the academic Mesoamerican concept itself reflects much of this old ideology. It is not strange that the first expeditions to describe the ruins of Palenque in the Maya region in the end of the 18th century, considered by Navarrete Cáceres (2000) as the beginning of archaeological practice in in the country, were sponsored by the *Capitanía de Guatemala* (the colonial Captaincy General). Explorers were following orders by the king himself, conveyed through the *Audiencia (*appellate court) , and not from the government of the New Spain, in Mexico City.

The first law regarding antiquities in New Spain was dictated as early as 1575, when the *Consejo de Indias* (Council of the Indies) stated that all pre-Hispanic ruins were part of the *Real Propiedad* (Royal Property). From that moment on, all government regimes since Mexico's colonization and invention have dictated laws about what we now call archaeological heritage, with different approaches and intensities of involvement. In 1808, still under Spanish colonial government, an official *Junta de Antigüedades* (Antiquity

Committee) (Bernal, 1980) was established. When the first president of independent Mexico, Guadalupe Victoria created the National Museum in 1825, the new nation conceived the territory and government in a similar fashion to the way Spanish Habsburgs practiced their colonialism. That is, the monarch was the owner of all the land and its contained resources. Judiciary emphasis on private property in Mexico did not arrive until the *Reforma* laws and the 1857 constitution, influenced by French liberalism. A few years later, the ancient Mexican national myth fooled another Habsburg, this time from the Austrian branch: the Mexican Emperor Maximiliano. Maximiliano was very concerned with the archaeological past, and even installed the National Museum in the location that held its collections until they were moved to its current location in Chapultepec in 1964.

Since the development of positivism, many extractive colonial enterprises, including archaeology, have been disguised or have convinced themselves they are neutral positive agents with no other interest but knowledge and truth. This has provided an opportunity for capitalists to invade and extract materials from the colonial and postcolonial territories. In the nineteenth century, during the time of traveling explorers and the first scientific attempts to register archaeological sites in Mexico, foreign individuals and institutions provided most of the effort, the science, the technology, and the archaeology (Bueno, 2016). The great number of travel chronicles, and other published descriptions of the exotic ruins of Mexico and Central America, fed the nationalism that was being constructed at the end of that century (Pani, 2011). The first explicit Mexican official relation with its archaeological past was created during the years of the Porfirio Díaz regime, under the direction of Leopoldo Batres. The dictatorial authority of Batres was similar to that of Porfirio Díaz, but over his own dominion: Mexican archaeological heritage. Batres' individual agency was the engine moving the state's official history and image (Bueno, 2016). During this time, Mexican archaeology developed its symbiosis with the national state (Navarrete Linares, 2011),which endured the creation of the current post-revolutionary institutions. The *porfiriato* celebrated the centennial anniversary of independence with the restoration and opening to visitors of Teotihuacan in 1910. It was the first archaeological site in the continent converted into an open museum, for the praise of the monumental civilizations that founded the Mexican nation.

The Mexican revolution that soon followed was a nation-wide shocking event that directly or indirectly killed more than a million people, and produced profound changes in the configuration of society. It was the ultimate blow that reduced the indigenous population to less than the non-indigenous. Fighting together under the label of campesinos or peasants, many native identities remained buried under the vindicatory message of the revolutionary war. Erased partially by deaths in direct combat, because of war, hunger, and the Spanish influenza, many others were displaced to cities and assimilated into the hegemonic cultures. The Mexican revolution that deposed Diaz' regime did not bring any ontological change in the way the archaeological and indigenous past was perceived and administered. Nonetheless, it brought new institutions. These kept consolidating the dominance of the

mestizo ideology, and recapitulating the same positivist ideas from the *Porfiriato* (Bonfil Batalla, 1997; Bueno, 2016; García Cancliní, 1997; Hyland, 1992; López Caballero, 2011; Matos Moctezuma, 1998; Mendiola Galván, 2005; Navarrete Linares, 2011; Vázquez de León, 2003). Archaeology has since then been used to provide a "stratigraphy of nationalism" (Hyland, 1992, 92).

Mestizaje was made an active policy with Latin American *indigenismo*, the state-sponsored projects that promised to "mexicanize the Indians, to homogenize their ethnicities by diluting them in a single national identity" (Lomnitz, 2005, 20). It was a "scientistic, governmentalistic effort" (Breglia, 2006, 39). *Indigenismo* and its continuities have represented another non-indigenous solution for what the settler ideology conceives as the "Indian Problem". The ultimate goal of this Latin American policy and ideology was the total assimilation and modernization of Mexico´s Indian people into a mainstream of *mestizos* (Knight, 1990). From then until now, the Mexican state narrative and its ontological politics have appropriated bits and pieces of indigenous culture and history, focusing on the monumental and on what it fits into Western definitions of art. This practice leads to making altars for the things worthy to be celebrated while ignoring everything else. At the same time, it has historically marginalized contemporary indigeneity from the voices that produce the narrative itself. The severance of the contemporary indigenous from the glorious pre-Conquest is as strong as before the Mexican Revolution (Hyland, 1992, 109).

Indigenismo program sought "to select and conserve the most useful values to the indian in his role as a national citizen and to exterminate those prejudicial to his full incorporation in the larger society" (Heath 1972:86). National ideologies and imagined historical chronologies have denied the coevalness of the contemporary indigenous groups (Fabian, 1983). The dominant groups have picked and chosen a few aspects of the indigenous practices to mythically root the nationalists' structures. This is a way of reaffirming the power structures, the forces that help to marginalize and exploit indigenous peoples (Watanabe & Fischer, 2004). *Indigenismo* was defined by Knight (1990) as the glorification of the indigenous past, combined with the assimilation of the living original peoples into a suitably *mestizo* Mexico.

Manuel Gamio, one of the post-revolutionary intellectuals who shaped the idea of a modern Mexico, replicated the moral paternalistic figure that Batres represented. He was the first archaeologist with a concern and a plan about how to help local communities, although he was conceiving them through the lens of the "indigenous problem". In his *La Población del Valle de Teotihuacán* (Gamio, 1923), Gamio describes the subsistence, traditions, bioanthropology, and crafts of the indigenous populations in the vicinity of the ruins, contrasting them with the magnificence of the archaeological remains. These data were used to ascribe them as the descendants of the builders of the ancient city. He trained people from San Juan, one of the towns close to Teotihuacan, to produce obsidian *artesanias* (handicrafts). In his mind, this could represent potential income because of the growing number of visitors to the pyramids. Despite his epistemological blindness and

active imposition of other ontology, this represents the first effort by an archaeologist to improve the poor conditions of many indigenous communities that live surrounded by ruined past opulence. In *Forjando Patria* (1916), Gamio explicitly calls readers to imagine, from ignorance, what should be considered as the indigenous Mexican. In the absence of precise knowledge about the indigenous reality, he deemed it necessary to create an indigenous soul, even if it was just temporary. Hence, the entrance of the indigenous to national history was accomplished by the door of the past. They were converted into national patrimony, into a resource, as they embodied the origins of the nation (López Caballero, 2011).

Although the revolution was won by people sharing the kind of power ambitions of the defeated dictatorship, peoples' participation in the struggle brought significant changes in some legal and political practices regarding labor and land exploitation. An example is the legal figure of the *ejido,* created by the government of Lazaro Cárdenas as a reaction to the Porfirian latifundia. *Ejido* is a form of communal land ownership that places emphasis on the rights to work and usufruct land, instead of on individual property. In contrast, latifundia were huge ranches exploiting the work and lives of rural populations who dwelt in conditions equal or close to slavery. Those *haciendas* and *fincas* left a profound mark on the conception of identity and history among many indigenous peoples. The *ejido* form of land tenure was the main setting of the rural political and productive organization until the neoliberal constitutional reforms of 1992.

The 1992 reforms by the Carlos Salinas government opened the way for private capitalists to own what used to be communal. Today, a patten of a small number of owners of large portions of land is returning all over the country, vigorously led by international mining companies, real estate, and tourism. On that occasion, the constitution adapted to the contemporary multicultural rhetoric going on in Latin America during that time. In fact, this was when a lot of laws were changed or re-written to adjust to the diverse communities that had made themselves visible, and the advances in international law through the International Labor Organization. Yet the results of many of those legal reforms were merely a rhetorical inclusion, a neoliberal auto-congratulation, a symbolic offering in exchange for facilitating the opening to capital interests for the dispossession of land, labor, and resources. Unfortunately, in most Latin American countries, the global legal structures established in those times didn’t bring real change to the national institutional epistemologies and practices of state-sponsored science and policy making. As Gnecco (2012) points out, there is no real practiced multiculturalism in Latin America.

Archaeological Administration, Training, and Perspectives

With more than 80 years of existence, the *Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia* (INAH, National Institute of Anthropology and History) was a creation of the post-

revolutionary president Lazaro Cárdenas. INAH was instituted at the same time as the *Instituto Nacional Indigenista* (INI, National Indigenist Institute), which oversaw *Indigenismo* policies. INI has now been reduced and fragmented into smaller institutions, no longer with the (explicit) purpose of social homogenization. In contrast, INAH is still functioning, and it is now a large bureaucratic apparatus employing thousands of people. Among INAH's duties is taking care of the more than 43,000 archaeological sites, maintaining the 189 of them that are open to public visitation, and managing over a hundred museums (CONACULTA, 2010). At the same time, INAH has the task of educating professionals in the fields of anthropology, archaeology and history, to implement research and disseminate the acquired knowledge. It is a titanic endeavor that the institution has merely imagined to control.

For these reasons, in recent decades conservative administrations and lawmakers have pushed legislative agendas to open the cultural and archaeological heritage to private capital investment and profit (Breglia, 2006; Rodríguez G. 2016). They have been confronted with resistance from INAH's labor unions and researchers' associations, who are very active and vocal. Still, only the signature of the president has the power to declare the status of an archaeological zone. It is remarkable that even the voices within the INAH who offered a critical view of the nationalistic nature of the discipline have not been able to change the structures in which our paradigms and hierarchies are practiced. In Mexican archaeology there have been discussions about its social role, and debates about the context of our production of knowledge that arose from different institutional frames and disciplines. Recognizing the nationalist discourses, Panameño and Nalda (1979) asked 38 years ago, "Archaeology, for whom?". Even these authors failed to reflexively acknowledge to other archaeologists and to society in general the patrimonial practices and academic ownership among Mexican archaeologists. Archaeologists have had the potential of a *de facto* ownership of their site or materials,. Other critical voices have made themselves heard, with warnings about the bad influence of *mestizo* ideology in institutional practice, the unproductive theoretical work, and the bad influence of political agendas in archaeological research (Hyland, 1992; Jones, 1997; Olivé Negrete & Castro-Pozo, 1988). Such discussions have not produced critical museography or reflexiveness on the side of institutional archaeology, although a few researchers are beginning to engage in this type of dialogue and action. Gándara (1992) described official Mexican archaeology and its theoretical stagnation, and Vázquez de León (2003) projected the heritage mechanisms in Mexico as a leviathan, a monopoly with harmful political power constructions, a machine of historical representation and heritage management, too concerned with its internal politics to be meaningful. In many cases, the critical voices have been ostracized from the academy and from the practical monopoly of INAH.

There is no theoretical commonality among Mexican national institutional researchers. Researchers with a broad range of perspectives from INAH and the universities are asking different questions, and each one directs attention onto specific social aspects and

archaeological materials in their own categories. Even with this diversity, Mexican archaeologists, including myself, share difficulty getting rid of cultural history categories inherited from the beginning of the discipline in Mexico. Our work and narratives are still compartmentalized between the institutions and their discourses, and the public. A clear example of this is the arrangement of some of the ethnographic exhibition halls in the *Museo Nacional de Antropología* (National Museum of Anthropology), where the museum planner decided to locate the living populations above their archaeological ancestry, to complete the cultural-historical sequences (Hyland, 1992 citing Ramírez Vázquez 1968). As Meskell (2002, 291) notes:

> "with cultural affiliation archaeologists have created a tenuous and spurious connection between positivist assertion and political outcome … out of sync with everything archaeologists have learned about identity from the work of Gordon Childe onward".

Despite the predominant lack of multivocality and interest to collaborate with indigenous communities, one voice has raised critical issues and has contested a lot of INAH's political practices since the sixties: Navarrete Cáceres. Today a nonagenarian Guatemalan anthropologist and archaeologist, in 1992 he was already making a call that has not yet been registered by the archaeological establishment. In a formal situation, trying to mock and re-purpose the paternalistic exhortation made by Alfonso Caso (1968) to the *joven arqueólogo mexicano* (Young Mexican archaeologist, Spanish to highlight the gender – he-), Navarrete (1993, 3) addressed the students of the ENAH (*my translation*):

> "Stop excavating for a while, don't play dumb and go to see the lashes and the dispossession, pay attention to Simojovel, where the army and the ranch owners burned villages. Remember, at least a little, the tortured of Guatemala and the smashed skulls of the 30,000 Salvadoreños, try to take notice of that. You don't have to go so far and excavate tridimensionally to find dead Indians... Don't forget that with all the misery we witness, archaeologists have the privilege to write for dead voices, that we can be chroniclers and witnesses of all the indigenous that made a history without writing. That the ones that today resist, and haven't been crushed, resonate in our histories, that at least there is an archaeologist nearby to write about it".

Archaeology and Indigenous Peoples in Mexico Today

The declared archaeological zones in Mexico are juridically sanctioned as national property. For this reason, there are potential and actual coexisting claims of ownership, custodianship, and cultural inheritance. Mexico has created a hierarchy of monumental patrimony, where some sites and features are exploited more than others "in the coalescence of built heritage and the overlapping discourses of nationalism, historical and scientific merit, and value as economic resources and aesthetic spaces" (Breglia, 2006, 61). The indigenous past in Mexico now is the national one, it was not created from a multivocal

collective of native ethnicities. Claims of ownership thus can be made “by anyone and no one” at the same time (Rozental, 2011, 349).

The monumental character of Mexican archaeology and its judicial language identifies with a few selected features of the pre-Hispanic past (Breglia, 2006), the great pyramids, the spectacular sculptures, Aztec imperialism, to give a few examples. This monumentality seeks to build international prestige and to erase ambivalence (Breglia, 2006; Hyland, 1992; Knapp & Ashmore, 1999). By praising what the political-economic powers have selected as worthy of preservation, they have excluded an entire plurality of different parallel and crossing histories. The monuments have become symbols of the Mexican identity, powered by a monolithic vision that situates those monuments within the values of the exotic and the touristic (Navarrete Linares, 2011). Heritage monuments in Mexico lie at a powerful nexus between ethnoscapes and finanscapes (Meskell, 2002, 289). As in the case of India, the fixity of monumentalized space is shot through with contingent histories and multivalent narratives (Meskell, 2002, 293). As happens in Peru, Mexico has formed a plasticity and multivalency of monumentality that has resulted in a diversity of icons (Higueras, 1995).

There are three main Mexican laws sanctioning archaeological heritage. The first is the *Constitución Política de los Estados Unidos Mexicanos* (1917) (Political Constitution of the United States of Mexico), in which the 73th article describes the faculties of the State to exercise power and make laws about any archaeological monuments of national interest. This neglects the conflict between this faculty and the pluri-culturalism stated by the same document in its 2nd article. The 2nd article grants the right for indigenous communities to participate in their own, self-determined cultural lives. Although in the first line of the same article, it states that the Mexican nation is unique and indivisible.

There are other two pieces of relevant legislation. The first is INAH *Ley Orgánica* (Organic Law) (1938), which describes the duties and organization of the National Institute of Anthropology and History. The second is the *Ley Federal de Monumentos y Zonas Arqueológicas, Artísticas e Históricas* (Federal Law on Monuments, Archaeological, Artistic and Historic Areas) (1972), which sanctions the management of all archaeological heritage that has surpassed the condition of record and made it into public discourse. It also covers all declared archaeological zones and whatever has been labeled as a monument, that is things that the Mexican state would consider to display in a museum. In these two laws, there is no mention of the possibility to engage (not even acknowledge) any kind of indigenous plurality with national heritage practices. They tacitly forbid communities to substantively participate in the heritage decision making (Mendiola Galván, 2005; Rodríguez Herrera, 2005).

Nonetheless, multiple indigenous voices in Mexico have questioned archaeology and exercised sovereignty over their territory and heritage. For example, the Tohono O’odham people, who live in the Mexican state of Coahuila and the American state of Texas, have

successfully protested and achieved the repatriation of human remains excavated by archaeologists a few decades earlier (Mendiola Galván, 2005; Vázquez de León, 2003, 98–99). This example is a rare exception on the rule of repercussions to archaeological epistemic violence. The Tohono O'odham also actively resisted the construction of a wall dividing their territory along the Mexican American border. Their border situation may have made them more prepared to contest national policies.

Although not all indigenous groups share a common way to relate to their heritage, Mexican archaeologists have failed to make available our heuristic tools and philosophical bases to society. For these reasons, archaeologists need to design not just more inclusive academic strategies, but we also have to press for a change in Mexican laws to legally recognize indigenous prerogatives in the use and management of heritage. Mexican laws still privilege institutional archaeologists over any other community having a stake to hold regarding archaeological heritage. The Mexican archaeological heritage legal frame is not only in conflict with itself, but it also goes against some of the international agreements and declarations that Mexico has agreed to sign. These agreements guarantee indigenous communities to determine their own heritage values and practices, among other rights.

In the late 1980s, with Latin American revisions of the relation between the state and the indigenous populations, INI created a National Commission for the Justice of the Indigenous Peoples (1989) (Instituto Nacional Indigenista -INI-, 2012). This resulted in the 1992 constitutional reform. It was far short of the Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention, better known as the Convention 169 of the International Labor Organization that Mexico just had signed a few years before (Medina 1995). And again, with the reform of 2001, there was no recognition of indigenous territories, nor jurisdictions. Ultimately, this reform fell far short of the *Acuerdos de San Andrés*, signed by the Zapatista Army (EZLN) and the Mexican government in 1996. Although this was one of the political platforms on which the current ruling party campaigned, this promise has not yet been fulfilled. Some of the people in positions of power in the indigenous' affairs institutions were present discussing and drafting the accords, but they are now either hesitant of their earlier positions, or blocked by the state vision that predominates in all branches of government.

It was 27 years ago that the San Andrés Sacamch'en Agreements were signed and a pact was made through dialogue between the federal government and biggest collective of indigenous peoples ever to be gathered in the history of Mexico, that later formed the *Congreso Nacional Indígena*, and the EZLN. The people participating in the *mesas de trabajo* (working groups) were already thinking about the ILO's Convention 169. Only the *mesa* of *Sociedad y Cultura* (Society and Culture) was successful in producing a consensus and produced the only formal agreements document (EZLN & Gobierno Federal de México, 1996). Among the commitments in it, the federal government made five recommendations to INAH:

a) "Allow Indigenous people entrance free of charge to the archaeological sites.

b) Give to Indigenous people a proper training for the management and administration of the sites.

c) Share the utilities generated by tourism on those sites.

d) Allow the use of sites as ceremonial centers.

e) Protect the sites when they are endangered by touristic development or looting" (1996, 23, translation by the author).

In Mexico, the international agreements have motivated a judicial "human rights turn" in the last couple of decades. There are reflexive discussions rethinking Mexican federalism in a process of judicial decolonization (González Galván 1994), voices calling for a profound reform to achieve a truly pluricultural nation (Sierra 1996), where indigenous communities are recognized as collective historic entities and not just by their individual rights as citizens. These voices have made an impact in the practice of the law in Mexico, as seen in the recent tendency of the Supreme Court to issue rulings in favor of indigenous interests and the increasing involvement of the Interamerican Court of Human Rights with Mexican indigenous cases.

More than eight million people identify with an indigenous ethnicity or speak one of the 69 native languages in Mexico (INEGI, 2020). They are (as a colonial collective) the most direct descendants of the plurality of populations that during pre-Hispanic times dwelt in what is circumstantially today the Mexican territory. Despite the relations imagined by anthropologists, archaeologists, and historians, a connection between indigenous communities and their ancient archaeological past is rarely seen, but clearly existent. The fact that it is barely perceived in the public national discussions is because of the effectiveness of the state-sponsored ontological politics of heritage. In this, indigenous communities are lost in the national noise of everything else, easily confused with nothing. Bartra (2014) defines the Mexican chronotope as an archaeotopy, the practice of imagining today an ancient positive place. But now, this is a withered positiveness that lays covered in a deep mythic layer, buried by the Mexican revolution's landslide, for which we can only feel a melancholic emotion. Bartra says: "We have dreamt of a thousand heroes but only the ruins are left of their history" (Bartra, 2014, 2666). Similarly, in his widely known book "*Los indios de México*", Benitez defines the Mexican relation with the indigenous as follow:

> "We titillate ourselves with their jewelry, we excavate the dirt to uncover ancient artifacts and we keep ignoring their rags, protecting the people who steal their lands, and failing to punish who exploits them… We have one attitude towards the dead Indians, and a very different one towards the living. Dead Indians inspire admiration, flows of tourists, a solid national pride. The living ones make Mexicans blush of shame, they leave without meaning the words of civilization, progress, and democracy on which the same national pride relies." (2002, 47, translation by the author)

In their work in Latin America, multiple archaeologists and anthropologists have addressed the critical discussions of heritage described in chapter one (Benavides, 2010; Funari, 2001; Green et al., 2003; Herrera, 2010; Mamani, 1996; McGuire & Navarrete, 1999; Patterson, 1995; Ramos, 1994; Vargas Arenas, 1995). Moreover, an increasing number of investigations in Mexico are opening to participation of local and indigenous communities. For example, Rozental (2011) explored the phenomena around the displacement of the Teotihuacan-style monolith Coatlinchan from its original location to the entrance of the National Museum of Anthropology. The author inquired into the multiple *habitus* that were attached to the sculpture and the place where it was located, near the town of San Miguel Coatlinchan, on the Northeast slopes of the basin of Mexico. Rozental recorded a vigorous contestation of the application of the official concept of patrimony, a state-wide category that was lived very differently at the local level. Another example is represented by Overholtzer's (2017) engagement with the population of Xaltocan, in the basin of Mexico. The author involved Xaltocan inhabitants in her projects' archaeological interpretation and in local museum display, organizing symposiums and talks about the work with all the people helping in the excavations and surveys. Community-engaged archaeology has also been carried out in the Mixteca Alta (Geurds, 2007). An increasing number of projects under this model have been carried out in the Maya region, which I will address further below.

Heritage tourism in Mexico

The state of Mexico has also participated in the global commodification of its heritage through tourism industries. In fact, after oil, tourism is Mexico´s most important source of foreign exchange (Hyland, 1992, 106). Cultural tourism represents only 10% of this total, as most travelers prefer to visit beach locations (van den Berghe, 1995). Nonetheless, displayed since Porfirian times, monumentality has attracted hundreds of millions of travelers in the last century, while feeding a large market of tourism, education, and leisure. These economic strategies have been a “kind of life-saving resource within a frame of improvisation” (Getino, 1990). One of the products Mexico has to offer to local and international tourism is an overworked trope: archaeological sites as open-air museums, spaces devoted to contemplating the rich and powerful of the past. The display of ancient urban cultures has skewed the public perception of history towards Mesoamerica while ignoring the immense number of cultures in northern Mexico. The market value and the implied amount of capital moved by the experiences sold by tourism are evident in the millions of yearly visitors to archaeological sites (Table 2.1). In the last 27 years, Teotihuacán, near Mexico City, and Chichén Itzá, in northern Yucatán, have been the most visited sites in different years. Palenque has been consistently among the highest four in that period, along with Tulum, with a big influx of tourism attracted to the sun, sea, and sand tourism of the Caribbean.

The archaeological sites open to the public are frequently located in places where cultural plurality and the exoticism of cultures and territories have been turned into a commodity. Visitors are expected to walk the *Zonas Arqueológicas* with an almost religious attitude. Very little information about the monuments and buildings is displayed, as monumentality is the central message and speaks for itself. The emphasis on rich and large buildings creates a narrative in which the most powerful ancient communities are celebrated, while the workers and builders of those monuments are omitted, as are the local people that frequently work in the restoration of the buildings. This is what Johnson, Mirón and Campiani (In press) call a hierarchical landscape, an ancient urban environment that was created to utter power through constructed spaces and public discourse, and a modern one that appropriates those spaces for teleological national narratives and tourism capital. The names of a few archaeologists are celebrated in the history of the excavation of sites, but the local actors are omitted (Holley-Kline, 2020).

Year	National	Palenque	Chichén	Teotihuacan
1996	9,924,950	234,829	1,030,657	3,680,712
1997	8,938,995	342,541	1,018,658	2,871,538
1998	9,522,358	366,979	1,075,460	3,227,826
1999	9,661,585	335,074	1,232,040	3,493,958
2000	9,609,075	360,876	1,140,988	3,097,201
2001	9,288,339	322,465	1,180,818	2,594,159
2002	9,898,152	319,647	1,152,644	2,756,281
2003	10,307,750	450,349	1,333,533	2,122,872
2004	10,448,193	426,433	1,296,859	1,752,428
2005	9,667,146	485,6118	1,041,206	1,822,032
2006	9,109,459	556,474	938,941	1,410,887
2007	9,213,767	651,850	1,329,226	983,227
2008	11,144,114	706,569	1,454,661	2,160,300
2009	9,214,958	555,138	869,525	1,688,301
2010	10,418,161	399,618	1,404,324	1,925,100
2011	10,724,831	521,053	1,440,003	2,234,439
2012	10,857,835	579,658	1,497,973	2,182,069
2013	11,880,716	584,391	2,203,417	2,323,658
2014	12,661,695	760,310	2,111,875	2,487,040
2015	13,632,403	930,867	2,047,922	2,906,200
2016	14,978,290	655,417	2,107,410	3,852,129
2017	16,579,343	920,470	2,677,858	4,185,017
2018	16,663,408	747,605	2,743,554	4,067,198

2019	16,005,589	824,311	2,365,554	3,459,528
2020	4,455,517	286,089	823,795	702,013
2021	5,683,782	286,920	1,743,388	919,514
2022	10,311,755	351,019	2,630,496	1,949,521

Table 2.1 Statistics of the national total visitors to INAH's sites, with Palenque, Chichén Itzá, and Teotihuacán for reference (Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia -INAH-, n.d.).

The state sponsored management plans of heritage sites and touristic heritage development projects emphasize capital investments and fostering employment in the investigation, restoration, presentation, and maintenance of archaeological sites open to the public. Providing jobs to the local population does relieve segments of poverty, but in many cases causes the contrary effect. Still, providing employment is not enough to claim any kind of collaboration with local communities. On the contrary, the peonage relation of indigenous people with archaeology has reinforced the prevention of indigenous communities occupying substantive roles in research projects (Yellowhorn, 2000). Mexico has been able to display its archaeological heritage due to the hard work of thousands of indigenous individuals, who nonetheless are considered a degraded reflection of their magnificent past (Bueno, 2016, 353).

There are 189 archaeological sites open to public visitation managed by INAH, including ten World Heritage sites, three of them in the Maya region. These sites used to receive more than 16 million visitors a year in pre-pandemic times (Table 2.1). Health restrictions collapsed the tourism industry, with a quarter of the previously normal visitors according to the 2020-2021 statistics (Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia -INAH-, n.d.). In the last year, after pandemic policies were lifted, there has been a slow increase in the numbers. Most site visitors are Mexican nationals. About a quarter of the total are normally represented by foreign travelers (Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia -INAH-, 2023).

The Maya peoples and Maya ethnography

When I use the term Maya, I am referring to a group of ethnicities that has been constructed from the outside. This lumps together many identities by their phylogenetically related, but distinct, Mayense languages, which are separated into five subfamilies (Bricker, 2004; Grofe, 2005). According to Restall (2004), there are not enough sources to know if the term Maya was used in pre-colonial times. As Watanabe states, "despite their similarities, the Maya hold no exclusive cultural tradition, insular history, shared class status, or conscious collective identity" (2004, 39). An aspect that has helped the aggregation of cultures into the concept of the Maya is the fact that during the Classic period (300-900 CE), the ruling classes of hundreds of political units participated in a pan-regional political

network. This chronological frame could not be more Western-projected, as the period name indicates. The political network related the elite governing classes in the same political hierarchy through dynastic prestige, alliances and open hostility. These relationships were recorded in inscriptions preserved at many of these sites, interpreted today by epigraphers. In the epigraphic record, it is not mentioned how those regional networks and the respective *K´ujul Ajawob* (lords) and the other members of the governing classes related to the specific ethnicities they ruled in their homelands (Blanton et al., 1996; Clark & Blake, 1994; Marken et al., 2017; Schortman, 1989). The epigraphic record attests the ways these elites actively created and adapted to shared notions of history, values, and place, similar to the case of the ruling classes of Postclassic central Mexico (Berdan, 2008).

Yet the plurality of different cultures within the Maya area is likely to be ancient (Watanabe, 2004), displayed in a great deal of variation of styles, technologies and practices registered in the archaeological record across the region. The same is true of linguistic variations in hieroglyphic texts from the Classic period and after. As Wylie (2008, 203) warns archaeologists in general, there has been a selective representation and suppression of ancient Maya multivocalities through time. Conceived in this broad way, the History of the Maya has lasted more than three thousand years, spreading over a region of about 300,000 km^2. The people dwelling in those landscapes have produced a large number of ruins and vestiges that bespeak people living in ancient times. Without the help of any archaeologist, the people and their communities have constructed their own sense and chronologies of the omnipresent archaeological remains through their own histories, categories, and explanations (Hamann, 2002; Stanton & Magnoni, 2008). They have reacted to and actively changed the social realities with which they are and have been historically participating.

Mayense	Population of
Mayat’aan	774,755
Tseltal	589,144
Tsotsil	550,274
Ch'ol	254,715
Huasteco	168,729
Tojolabal	66,953
Yokot’an	60,563
Mam	11,369
Q'anjob'al	10,851
Chuj	3,516
Akateko	2,894
Q'eqchi'	1599
Lacandón	771
K'iche'	589

Jakalteko	481
Kaqchikel	169
Ixil	117
Awakateko	20

Table 2.2. Population of Mayense speakers in Mexico after the 2020 census.

The broad definition of the Maya actually extends beyond the frontiers of Mexico, as only 11 out of the 30 related languages are spoken within its territory. Today more than seven million people speaks a Mayense language (Table 2.2). They are distributed in five countries - seven if we include the United States of America and Canada, where there is a large number of immigrants-, and they all have their own respective histories of colonialism, anthropological research, and construction of heritage. More than being united by any kind of Maya cultural essence, they are instead entangled together by a history of oppression and contestation, *indigenista* national policies, migration, commerce, and a touristic heritage market and its mechanisms.

For more than two million people in Mexico, their first language belongs to the Mayense linguistic family. Mexican Mayas represent about a third of the global Maya population. The three biggest populations in Mexico are the Yucatec Maya, with three quarters of a million people, followed by Tseltales and Tsotsiles from the Chiapas highlands, while Ch'ol represents the fourth most spoken Mayense language in Mexico, with a quarter million people. There are some languages that arrived in Mexico after the Guatemala conflicts, which ended in the mid-nineties of the last century.

The invention of the Maya concept as we know it today could be attributed to the anthropologists and archaeologists that created the label to encapsulate cultural horizons and their boundaries. They ascribed to it a cultural essence that transcends history. The first use of the ethnonym Maya in association with the archaeological sites of Yucatán was in the nineteenth century, and it was only later used to refer to all related languages and modern ethnicities (Schackt, 2001). Much of its global resonance can be attributed to the wide-spread -and still in use in Mexico- cultural history ideas of spatially bounded entities sharing a collection of traits (Kircchhoff 2000). Mayaness is something continually produced, reproduced, and consumed by the practices of archaeology, tourism, the Maya communities themselves, and the state institutions related to them (Castañeda, 1996). The generalization of a Maya culture imposes a unified history on people who have not thought of themselves as Maya, either in the archaeological past or the present (Hostettler, 2004). The only people that historically have named themselves with that ethnonym are the Yucatec Maya, the speakers of Maayat'aan. In recent decades with the surge of the Pan-maya movement in Guatemala and with the discourse of Mexican Maya academics, artists, activists, and other indigenous actors, the term is being used to bring together their voices of contestation of colonial structures.

Academic and legal epistemologies have framed human dwelling into categories of occupation and abandonment. Archaeology works in abandoned places, a Western category of empty land and settlement previously called *terra nula* (no one's land, *terra nullius*). This is the ground where colonialism is performed, the territories perceived as susceptible of invasion (Brown, 2008; Ingold, 1993; Ucko & Layton, 1999). Abandoned places are where other dwelling discourses and ontologies are nullified by ignorance or active domination. With the discontinuities observed in the occupation and abandonment of archaeological settlements in the Maya region, archaeologists have talked about collapses and disappearances. López has challenged those terms by pointing out the potential of this discourse for the exclusion of contemporary Maya peoples from the grand narrative (in Zimmerman, 2007, 147). In fact, such ideas have strongly reverberated with the general public, who think that the ancient Maya is a culture that disappeared. The resonance of these discontinuities can be seen in increasingly popular narratives that globalize the archaeological Maya using hyper-diffusionist ideas. These imagine intercontinental ancient connections between the Americas and the rest of the world, denying the credit for monumentality, precision, or aesthetics to the original builders and planners of remarkable monuments. In these postmodern times, many people choose to see an alien causality of the archaeological rather than acknowledge indigenous ingenuities. Hence, I believe that archaeology can and must do more than it does to prevent these racist conceptions and narratives. Yucatec scholar Castillo Cocom has pointed to the way ethnogenesis has proscribed Maya people from a way to exist outside the nation-state's reductive and politically constructed identities. Castillo Cocom and colleagues challenge the field of Maya anthropology to think beyond Western imagery (Castillo Cocom et al., 2017). There is an increasing number of indigenous professionals in the fields of anthropology, archaeology, and linguistics. Some of them are re-defining the sanctioned ethnicities and starting a dialogue seeking to engage their embodied academic and indigenous condition.

In the past century, anthropologists have conducted an immense amount of ethnographic research on Maya populations. They have produced and documented an ongoing dialogue between Western epistemologies and different Maya peoples in the multiple landscapes, ethnicities, and communities in the broad Maya region. Together, they are one of the most ethnographically investigated peoples in the world. Especially relevant to my research due to its location, the Chiapas Project, directed by Evon Z. Vogt from 1957 to 1976, thoroughly influenced this focus on Maya populations (Gosen & Bricker, 1989; Vogt, 1994), and "represented one of the most sustained, intensive, and productive ethnographic studies conducted anywhere" (Watanabe & Fischer, 2004, 16). Many other projects in Yucatan, Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador, and Belize also contributed to Maya ethnographic knowledge.

Inspired by global decolonization, in the sixties American anthropologists reformed the practices and interests of their investigations. They shifted their interests towards the legacies of racism, colonialism and imperialism (Hymes, 1969; Asad 1973). By the seventies,

anglophone anthropologists “recognized that they could no longer write about contemporary Maya communities without explicitly acknowledging the wider neocolonial legacies that enveloped them” (Watanabe, 2004, 35). At the same time, the Mexican counterpart of the anthropological disciplines have remained state-centered, reflecting national interests and policies. The only critical voices have come from socio-cultural anthropologists. The most stubborn of the disciplines seems to be archaeology, empowered with a federal monopoly and unwilling to share control of the material heritage under our custodianship.

The last thirty years of research have witnessed an increase in solidarity with the oppressed Maya (Carmack, 1988; Falla, 1994; C. A. Smith, 1990; Wilson, 1995). Postmodern conceptions with a constructivist and dynamic lens have revealed “the internal plurality of cultures, the agency of social actors, and the subjective dimensions of community affiliation and pertinence; they have made necessary to question the validity of the recognized cultural identities” (Elbez, 2017, 55). Hence, our anthropological disciplines need to address a “historical consciousness” of past, present, and future (Watanabe & Fischer, 2004, 21) to study systematically the problems of exploitation and politics (ibid: 13). This academic activism vigorously rejects the *Indigenismo* ideology and the program of policies in Latin America implemented in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Yet the repercussions of this national philosophy and policies still have a strong echo in current national public conceptions of the indigenous other in Mexico.

It has been proposed that the transformations undertaken with colonial processes can be viewed as a Maya translation of the Christian and Western epistemologies and *habitus,* rather than as an entire ontological change (Hanks, 2010). In related work, a considerable amount of research has been done on religion, particularly Roman Catholicism, and its relationship with Maya peoples’ epistemologies, linking ritual practices with the places and memories of their ancestors (Molesky-Poz, 2006), and observing the continuities of religious practices and their spatiality (Josserand & Hopkins, 2007; Navarrete, 2013). Maya ontologies were not erased with the religious conversion during the colonial period, Evangelical Christianity has been more insistent to end traditional practices and conceptions among its practicians. Ethnographic and linguistic work has advanced research on Christian Evangelicals, an increasing presence in Maya communities (Kray, 2004). The Mexican Summer Linguistics Institute (Instituto Linguistico de Verano) has produced extensive documentation on Mayense languages, including many dictionaries and grammars. Thanks to this institution, the Christian scriptures have been made accessible to many Mayense languages and their dialects. Evangelical Christians have converted large portions of communities and whole communities that were traditionally Roman Catholic to Protestant religions. This practice fostered the loss of much rituality and local political structures intertwined with the yearly cycle of Catholic festivities.

Maya heritage, tourism, and identity

Epistemic violence in the Maya area has been produced by global histories of discovery, conquest, evangelization, academic investigation, and the production of the states' national prestige for the international stage. The processes that have shaped the notion of "the ancient maya" have transformed the plurality of cultures into an identity for display as a valuable commodity: both an archaeological subject (Bartra's archaeotopy), and a tourism object (Castañeda, 1996; Mortensen, 2006, 2016). It was the Maya ruins that introduced Mexico into the international circuit of tourism. The spatial proximity to the Maya touristic heritage affects the intensity with which indigenous communities relate to the discourses of archaeology and tourist capital. Some of these communities have a long-term relationship with archaeology or tourism, but they belong on the margins of the market network. They are the side attractions to see after the splendorous ruins.

Maya sites in all countries are displayed with an emphasis on abandonment. They blend with the nature surrounding them, attesting the exotic forces of the tropics (Mortensen, 2016; Ball 2006). The decay of ruins is partially "manufactured by archaeologists, with the right amount of collapse and consolidation to appear as if the visitor had just discovered the ancient city themselves" (Johnson et al., In press). This type of display indexes the monuments with authenticity, it "endures its legacy in the midst of its decay" (Lofgren 1999:20). The open museums that the ruins constitute reproduce the romantic experience of the early explorers (Mortensen, 2006). The blending of the natural and the indigenous materiality reaffirms the denial of coevalness, and puts the indigenous in a primitive state, closer to nature and further from civilization. The tropical experience is often prioritized before the cultural meanings in the *Zonas arqueológicas*, as in the National Parks of South Africa (Meskell, 2013).

In Mexico, the sites in the Maya region collectively attract the national majority of archaeological tourism. Among the 10 most popular ruins in the country, more than 6.5 million people a year visit 5 Maya sites (Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia -INAH-, 2023). The touristic network in the Mexican states that the Maya region includes is connected to other countries through a network of roads and infrastructure promoted by transnational initiatives such as the "Maya World Organization", which has promoted heritage tourism since 1992 (Brown, 1999; Devine, 2013; Magnoni et al., 2007), the same year as the *ejido* reform. A lot of different Maya communities and individuals have been exposed for several generations to the phenomena around tourism and archaeological investigation, the professionals involved, and their epistemologies. It seems that the conversations archaeologists are having with local people in the Maya area have not been fully understood by either side, as Sullivan (1989) illustrates. This author studied the early twentieth century communication between Sylvanus Morley and the Yucatec communities living in the eastern side of the Yucatan peninsula. This area was historically occupied by Yucatec Maya who fled domination to the eastern coast since the early Spanish invasion,

conducted military campaigns of resistance to Mexico that started in the nineteenth century and lasted into the twentieth century. The letters between the British archaeologist and the leadership of this resistance, the *insurgent Maya from Santa Cruz,* constitute an excellent testimony of how archaeology has not been historically interested in communicating its ideas with people other than archaeologists and their sponsors.

Outside the world of anthropology, some indigenous communities have embraced the imagined Maya concept. The Pan-Mayan Movement of Guatemala (Cojtí Cuxil, 2008; Fischer & Brown, 1996; Montejo, 2005; Warren, 1998) is a collective of Maya ethnicities and communities led by Mayan scholars. For self-representation, it has appropriated the same categories used to diminish and exploit them, and has been actively building a response to their social realities. For example, a group of Indigenous and Western scholars embraced the political category of "indio maya" that has been used for oppression. By acknowledging a shared history of domination under colonial and neo-colonial regimes, they engaged in political resistance and in a push for self-representation. The Pan-Maya movement has questioned the frameworks in which indigenousness is lived and rejected, they have organized networks of resistance and have successfully changed the legislation of Guatemala. This movement has been shaped by the country's war and post-war political changes of the nineties, a time of harsh conditions for many ethnicities targeted for genocide (Bastos & Camus, 1995; Cojtí Cuxil, 1991, 1995; Coordinadora Cakchiquel de Desarrollo Integral., 1992; Fischer & Brown, 1996; Sam Colop, 1990; Warren, 1998; Watanabe, 1995). The long-awaited Guatemalan peace in the middle of the 90's brought the Agreement for the Identity and Indigenous peoples' rights (*Acuerdo sobre Identidad y Derechos de los Pueblos Indigenas*) (UNESCO, 1995). In this document, archaeological remains are stipulated as part of a Maya heritage. This also includes languages, cosmology, spirituality, dress, laws, and sacred places. In Guatemala, indigenous participation and specific targeting in the war against the genocidal dictatorships of the late twentieth century produced the presence of a multi-cultural rhetoric in the after-war agreements and new laws. Here, some ethnicities are even privileged over others.

Currently, there are plenty of Maya scholars contesting anthropological representations of the past and present of the Maya, including voices from Yucatan (Castillo Cocom, 2007; Castillo Cocom et al., 2017), and the highlands of Guatemala and Chiapas (Cojtí Ren, 2006; Molesky-Poz, 2006; Montejo, 2004). Some of these writers have outlined the unethical practices carried out by anthropologists and other researchers (Sam Colop, 1990). Unaccountability and opacity are common themes in the complaints of the subjects of anthropological studies. Other Maya scholars are contributing novel interpretations of Classic and pre-colonial architecture and materials from a Yucatec epistemology (see for example May Castillo, 2018; May Castillo & Kan Chí, 2017).

On the Mexican side of the border, the processes of contestation to colonial politics and economies also have a long history. Many episodes and processes of resistance took place in different places in the highlands and lowlands throughout colonial history (Womack Jr.,

2009). In the last two decades the Zapatista National Liberation Army (EZLN) has contested representations that draw from the shared history of oppression and exploitation. EZLN is an insurrection army that started in the eighties and was made public in 1994. It is not an explicitly Maya organization, but is mostly composed of Maya people. They have articulated an explicit distancing from ethnic categories. Zapatistas have been able to influence federal legislation, although insufficiently for their goals. The Pan-Maya movement and the Zapatistas represent a watershed in the prevailing conditions of anthropological work in Mesoamerica (Watanabe & Fischer, 2004, 20). EZLN is still a political force in the highlands of Chiapas and in national debates about indigeneity and resistance. They are labeled the first postmodern guerrillas in the world. Zapatistas have grouped together people from Tseltal, Tsotsil, Ch'ol, Tojolabal and Chuj identities and languages, all of them united by a shared history of oppression, dispossession, and displacement, and anchoring a lot of memories in the *finca* times, the *mosojäntyel*, a word from the C'hol language translated as "the time of slavery" (Alejos García, 1994). Zapatistas' historical chronology also sees the period of forced labor and land dispossession as the genesis of current economic and political structures. They consider Mexico as a big *finca*, which has changed its foremen with different administrations but has retained the same hierarchy of power (Subcomandante Insurgente Moisés & Subcomandante Insurgente Galeano, 2018). The Zapatistas themselves have needed to go through a process of decolonization, withdrawing Maoist ideas of the seventies and eighties brought by the founders of the movement. These ideas clashed with Maya ontologies, mainly with their religious practices. They had to adapt to be more inclusive in forms of organization and spirituality. This army claims to be compatible with the Mexican nation, and they invite all other Mexican otherness and oppressed communities to join.

A common denominator that Zapatistas observe is the rebellious character of the indigenous and Maya peoples of Mexico. This attribute is attested by the many moments and places of their histories when they have organized against hegemonic powers, from the long and tenacious opposition to the Spanish conquest in the Peten and Selva Lacandona regions, the Yucatec Guerra de Castas (literally Caste War, translated by Tiffany Fryer, 2020, as "Maya Social War"), or the Tseltal, Chol, and Tsotsil highland rebellions of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (De Vos, 1980, 1988; Reed, 1971; Womack, 2009).

To bring sciences to their own interests, in the last seven years Zapatistas have organized two editions of a congress called "*L@s Zapatistas y las ConCIENCIAS por la Humanidad*". These events aim at fostering dialogue between their base and the scientific community to which they decide to listen. It is a unique opportunity for science to be socially relevant, as it tackles the needs and demands the indigenous people are specifically asking to address. The subjects and debates are dominated by agro-ecology and sustainability discussions, although in the first encounter several questions directly related to archaeology were posted. Specifically, questions were asked about the Classic Maya, their ways to deal with sustainability issues, their astronomical knowledge, and even about evolutionary

bioanthropology. Interestingly, in some of those questions, *Zapatista* students addressed the builders of the Maya ruins as “our ancestors”. Sadly, in some of the responses from the *Kaxlan* academics involved, they also addressed the archaeological Maya as “our ancestors”, embracing a national homogenizing discourse (*Kaxlan* is a Ch'ol and Tseltal term to describe people outside indigenous identities, for instance all the *mestizos* and foreigners). Interestingly, according to the questions they formulated and to the few conversations with Zapatista people I had the opportunity to engage with, Zapatista students pay a lot of attention to the same monumental features the national archaeology has chosen to glorify.

Even though thousands of Mayas have entered the networks of the Zapatismo, they are far from being most of the Maya peoples. Outside of it, many academics, artists, and cultural activists in Mexico have turned to their own culture and to the ethnonym Maya as a living proof of the enduring power of their ancestors. The five hundred years of colonial oppression and resilience have creatively informed the present as a collective historical experience. An example of denial of colonial impositions outside Zapatismo is the case of beekeepers in Campeche, represented by Leydy Pech and the *Múuch Xíinbal* organization. They managed to win a case against Bayer in the Interamerican Court of Human Rights, achieving a nation-wide ban on GMO soybeans, since their pollen contaminates organic labeled honey the apiarists of Campeche produce.

Maya archaeological heritage archaeology

The way Maya peoples have contrasted national narratives and used archaeological heritage has mostly escaped the attention of archaeologists. The scholars that have paid attention are limited by the geographically small regions where archaeological heritage sites play a significant role in the social dynamics of any of the Maya ethnicities. The first to recognized how intertwined archaeologists are with respect to our contemporary political dynamics was Wilk (1985). He observed a relationship between war in what was then the present, and the desire to talk about ancient Maya war, or to talk about an idealization of ancient Mayas as peaceful. Not long after, Pendergast (1994) noted the disconnection between mayanist archaeologists and the Maya peoples we have employed. They had been limited to participation in fieldwork, as landscape guides, or to provide the physical workforce for excavation. Pendergast noted a failure to include those peoples in the process of knowledge creation.

The first heritage-oriented ethnographies among Maya peoples were carried out in the nineties. An example is about the Q'eqchi' people, and the way they relate with archaeological sites in a Belize landscape that was relatively new for them (Matsuda, 1998). This work described how they explain and interpret buried artifacts as seeds planted by ancestors, and use antiquities as an occasional addition to their families’ income, by putting them on sale. Castañeda (1996) worked for many years in the town of Pisté, next to the site

of Chichen Itza, in the Yucatán peninsula. He observed and documented the reaction of Yucatec Maya people to archaeological investigation and touristic interests. Also in Yucatán, Breglia (2003, 2006) focused on the people around the sites of Chunchucmil and Chichén Itzá. She observed conflicts between the institutions with power over research and display of heritage, and local communities dwelling in the surroundings or inside the archaeological sites. Rodriguez (2006) documented how an archaeological project in Chunchucmil generated problems with one community, Kochol, because of short-term engagements. McAnany (2016) has engaged with indigenous communities in Yucatán, Belice, and Guatemala, involving Tz'utujil, K'iche' and Mam communities in participatory survey and inventory of archaeological sites.

Watson (2010) has questioned the privilege of the discipline of Maya epigraphy in the construction of narratives, and has tried to open its spaces through community research programs. Straffi (2017) investigated three Maya communities and the way they use and get involved with the archaeological materiality that surrounds them. He paid attention to how Zapatistas use the site of Toniná as a space for political struggle, how Tenam Puente is used as a sacred place by the Tseltales of the Comitán area, and how the Chuj of San Mateo Ixtatán related salt production with the yearly *Romería* festivities and archaeological places.

The *Tren Maya* project

The confluences of archaeological heritage, colonialism, tourism, *indigenismo*, and capital exploitation of territories and cultures are very well illustrated in the national scale Tren Maya project. The train is currently being built in the Yucatán Peninsula and it is a decades old project. In the five states involved in the project, the biggest owners of land and capital have pushed for different versions of a tourist-centered rail network. I have heard rumors about different kind of train projects in Palenque since I started to work there in the early 2000s. During the presidential campaign of Andrés Manuel López Obrador, a touristic train in the Maya region was announced, and its construction started in 2019. It is a heavily polarized subject among Mexicans, as it is tightly attached to party politics. Nonetheless, very soon it will be a reality that is going to change dramatically the 1500 kilometer territories that it will cross in the next decades. Some stations are expected to be ready in 2024.

The objective of this rail network is to connect the Caribbean cities that attract most tourism with the entire Yucatan peninsula, making a circuit that goes from Palenque all the way to Cancún, passing through the states of Chiapas, Tabasco, Campeche, Yucatán, and Quintana Roo. It includes most of these states' major cities and tourist attractions, many of which are archaeological sites. The train represents a way of transporting the tens of millions of tourists that annually arrive to the "Mayan riviera". The project has many parallels with the way Cancún was planned and built in the 70s of the last century. This

project was a force that transformed the town of a hundred fishermen to one of the fastest growing cities in Mexico. The Maya Train project has an evident emphasis on the monumentality and wonders of the most popular Maya archaeological sites. It promotes the same old celebration of the powerful ruling classes of the past, presented as experiential products in landscapes marketed as primitive and wild.

The Tren Maya will have 16 stations and 14 additional minor stops, and will involve the urban transformation of at least 11 cities included in its itinerary. Among them are the cities of Palenque, Campeche, Mérida, Valladolid, Cancún, Playa del Carmen, and Tulum, all already under a lot of urban pressure. The project was originally being built by FONATUR, a federal tourism fund that develops and builds touristic initiatives. But since 2023, it was handed over to the military and passed under the administration of SEDENA (Secretaría de la Defensa Nacional-*National Defense Secretary*). SEDENA is overseeing the construction of the railroad network, visitor centers in nine archaeological sites, and even six large hotels in the most visited sites. It also supervises the new urban developments around the stations, and all the complementary projects, like the highway from Palenque to San Cristobal (Gasparello, 2020). These new developments were originally called "polos de Desarrollo" (development centers), but after negative reviews their name was switched to "comunidades sustentables" (sustainable communities).

On December 16, 2018, the president led an event named "*Ritual de los Pueblos Originarios a la Madre Tierra para Anuencia del Tren Maya*" (Indigenous Ritual to Mother Earth for the Consent for the Maya Train). In this event, the state-sanctioned indigenous authorities, the federal and state institutions overseeing indigenous affairs, FONATUR, and INAH participated in a ritual to ask permission from mother earth for the Tren maya, and to set the first stone of the construction. The political event had the intention of legitimizing the project through the ritual dimension. Indigenous organizations denounced the political use of Maya rituality and symbology by state representatives (Gasparello, 2020, 33). I did personally hear a couple of complaints about the head of SEDESPI (Secretaría de Desarrollo Sustentable de los Pueblos Indígenas of Chiapas) performing rituals that are within the competence only of a *xwujty*, a person with a ritual capacity. Many vocal indigenous individuals protested the mockery of Ch'ol rituality displayed in the event through different social networks. This situation frames the *neo-indigenista* economical philosophy with which the government operates well, with its assimilation and cultural appropriation policies. Moreover, it features the voracious local and international capital that are extracting the landscapes, the cultures, the labor, and the histories of Maya communities and peoples.

The consultation process for the Tren Maya project was incomplete. It wasn't carried out long beforehand, and it was not presented with clear and complete information. FONATUR only recognized assembly members of *ejidos* as interlocutors. The *ejidatarios* are the people with a vote and the ones who decide about land issues. They usually constitute a minority in the population of the towns formed by each *ejido*. They are the only ones holding and

inheriting a piece of land, although they don't own it. A couple of generations after the foundation of *ejidos*, the land usually started to be scarce in relation to the growth of settlements, and the remaining population was forced to search for opportunities outside their communities, or start the legal quest of founding new *ejidos* in land made available by federal and state governments. According to FONATUR, 15 regional assemblies were organized in two phases, with the participation of 10,305 people from 1,078 indigenous communities (Presidencia de la República, 2019). However, the document was released almost a year after construction works had started in many sections.

The full executive project has never been made public. In January 2020, the Environmental Impact Statement (MIA) of half of the project was released (FONATUR 2020). This is a document that includes only measurements of impact mitigation required in the construction of the railroad and stations, omitting any long-term effects on urban growth, real estate speculation, infrastructure and land needed for more tourism, the possible increase in drug trafficking and organized crime, or the transformation of indigenous lives. In the MIA document the neoliberal twist of the old ideas of assimilation is quite explicit. It is not clear to me if it is a typo when the document states: "*El etnocidio puede tener un giro positivo, el etnodesarrollo*" (Translated as: Ethnocide can have a positive twist, ethno-development. Ibid:404). The outdated ideas of *indigenismo* are rephrased as the same kind of multicultural development that has been promised since the beginning of neoliberal administrations in Latin America.

The rhetoric of the Tren Maya makes a lot of reference to a historically forgotten southeast, incorporating a lot of the same nineteenth century public discourse about the south of Mexico; that is, the idea of an abandoned southeast living at the limits of wilderness, and the necessity to attract foreign investment in whatever asset the developed nations require from colonized territories. The same tropes of historical neglect in the Maya region were used when German, American, and Mexican investors were encouraged to create coffee plantation industries in the Ch'ol region (Fenner, 2020). In a collection of anthropological work about the Tren Maya, published outside any government institution, Ceceña and Prieto assert:

> "The advance of the megaprojects of this development over the territories implies also the advance of an unfinished colonization process, as perhaps the last step in destroying the structures of the worlds called indigenous: Maya, Zoque, Olmec and all who have interacted and interact today in these lands" (Ceceña & Prieto, 2023, 38) (*my translation*).

The actual systemic problems that are widely known to afflict the communities in the five states involved in the project, have been reduced to a need to attract as many tourists as possible, and to offer whatever can be commoditized as goods and experiences. These include the land and folklore of different Maya peoples entangled in this initiative. The necessity of more tourism has never been stated by any Ch'ol, Tseltal, or Yucatec Maya that I have ever met. Although they participate in the opportunities given by the flux of touristic

capital, they react and negotiate in the limitations imposed by over-exploitation and lack of choices. The source of previous failed initiatives and the current connectivity initiative has always come from government programs or private investors. For years, I have heard common stories and complaints about the education provided in the *ejidos*, the obstacles to access to healthcare and the difficulty of moving ill family members to major cities such as Villahermosa or Mexico City, or even the corrupt networks of crop distribution that make profitable agriculture impossible. It is a bit insulting that the federal government thinks that the solution to those problems is through providing an industry of service employment. The possibility of the mitigation of real problems was used to coerce consent to the project in many ways. The granting of rights of indigenous communities was conditioned on opening their territories to the tourism industry, without the slavery and semi-slavery conditions of a century ago, but in the same social hierarchy.

The Tren Maya is an entirely top-down development that will impose the transformation of countless lives through the cultural assimilation of Maya peoples. In the end, it is not so different from what the Dominican Fray Matías de Córdova wrote in his work entitled "*Utilidades de que todos los indios y ladinos se vistan y calcen a la española, y medios para conseguirlo sin violencia, coacción ni mandato*" (Benefits of all the indigenous to dress and use shoes at the Spanish-way, and how to obtain it without violence, coercion or obligation) (1798). He exalted the benefits of assimilating the "shoeless" indigenous into what was considered modernity by the imposition of integration to capital markets, starting by buying their shoes. Instead of the rich Chiapanecan and Guatemalan classes that Córdova wrote about, the current patrons are the owners of the tourist providers and of the travelers to come from all Mexico and the world.

There have been many Maya voices that have called attention to many problems in the planning and implementation of the Tren Maya. They see the commodification of their territories and the folklorization of their cultures and materiality. They have made public what non-governmental organizations have done to stop or limit the construction of the train. Specifically, legal cases have been implemented with the help of Maya and *Kaxlan* anthropologists, environmentalists, and lawyers that have represented seven affected communities. Angel Sulub Santos has documented how legal cases have been delayed by the pandemic and by the indifference of Quintana Roo authorities. From Buczotz, Yucatan, Pedro Uc Be, a well-known poet and activist, has made a call to stop the devastation and coloniality of the project. Historian José Ángel Koyok Ku has denounced the capitalist imposition to surrender their landscapes to tourism.

Since the beginning of construction, ethnographic research has been inquiring about the position of Ch'ol, Tseltal, and Yucatec communities on the project. Anthropologists from INAH and other institutions have documented consultations, and the diverse positions favored by different individuals and communities. There is a lot of economic diversity within the ejidos, towns and cities affected by this project. Researchers have studied the denial of permission in communities where consent was not easy or is still contingent (Gasparello,

2020; Martínez Romero et al., 2023). For example, Gasparello (2020) has documented the way two ancillary projects -with a longer history than the Tren Maya- have been pushed by state and federal government. The first is a new highway from Palenque to San Cristobal, while the second is a luxury complex in the waterfalls of Agua Azul. These two places are characterized by a lot of social tensions around land tenure and the debate on indigenous sovereignty. Things are complicated by the presence of several actors like old towns, ejidos -produced after disarticulation of coffee fincas in the 50-70's-, autonomous Zapatista communities, paramilitary groups, narcotraffic, global migration, local and national institutions.

The starting point of the construction and trajectory of the Train Maya project is the town of Palenque; future travelers will reach from there to Cancún and vice versa. Towns and cities in its track will be very different after the ensuing urban expansion, the exponential growth of tourism, and all the phenomena that it will carry. The environment is going to suffer pressures asserted in the landscapes, not just by the construction of the train and its stations, but by all the intended and unintended changes that are going to come in the following decades.

Palenque

Palenque is the name of the world heritage archaeological site, its closest city, and the municipality in which they all are located. These locations were called Palenque after the Spanish translation of *Otulum*, or fortified house, as the Ch'oles have known the place where we visit the ruins of Palenque today (De Vos, 2010, 61, nota 1 a pié de página; Hardy González, 1991, 5). In good measure, the presence of the archaeological site has played a role in attracting people and transforming the town into the biggest city in northern Chiapas. The town was founded in 1567 by the rebel Dominic friar Pedro Lorenzo De la nada (see Chapter 3). The last title in his name, meaning "from nothing", was included by himself. In fact, "nothingness" is the place he proposed to rule, and in this way he created the three *reducciones de indios* that were going to be the heart of the Ch'ol region in the subsequent centuries: Tila, Tumbalá, and Palenque, among other Tseltal towns in the highlands of Chiapas (De Vos, 2010, 57–61), as I will explain below.

After the Classic period occupation of Palenque, when the now ruins were alive and populated by its builders, the place was never completely abandoned. There were continuous visits of people who used the crumbling city, people that dwelled around or knew about the decaying city, practiced their rituality through the meanings that the place represented. This is attested, for example, in Postclassic caches found in the debris of some houses and temples in the archaeological site. The ancient city of Palenque was never lost from the grasp or the landscape of Maya Ch'ol people living in the region. They have dwelt in this territory and used the same resources the ancient people did. In one way or the

other, they have probably remembered the subtle echoes from the many lives and histories entangled through centuries of occupation of a big urban settlement. This is the case of the ancient *Lakamha'*, or the city of the great waters, as the epigraphic texts name the place today called Palenque. The monumental features that indexed power and framed the materiality of the practices in the past in Palenque, now generate another place of inequality through archaeological research and tourism (Johnson et al., In press).

The western world did not have any notice of the ruins until the late 18th century. The early news about the site lured many foreign explorers. They introduced Palenque to the world through their Western narratives of discovery, and introduced the Palencanos to antiquarian labor and its paradigms. The history of antiquarianism and later archaeological investigation using the labor of local Ch'ol people is lengthy, and violence and forced labor has not been uncommon. In 1787, in the first archaeological study in Mexican territory (Navarrete, 2000), Captain Antonio del Río used the imposed work of 69 local Ch'oles -provided by a local authority- to clear the thick jungle and excavate the site for the first time.

In the middle nineteenth century, John Lloyd Stephens, along with Frederick Catherwood, he created the first images and information that circulated around the world illustrating the ruins of Palenque. They were the first Westerners to recognize the ancestry of the Maya people in the ancient builders of the wonders they were visiting. Stephens and Catherwood were literarily carried on the backs of Ch'oles of Tumbalá, Tulijá, and Palenque, as is illustrated in one of Catherwoods' drawings. It is well known how the team of explorers tried and failed to buy the site for fifty dollars after they had done so at Copan.

A decade later, in his memoirs Charnay (1885) wrote about his own difficult journey from Palenque to San Cristobal. As he had to transport the heavy early photographic equipment, his workers exhausted their patience and abandoned him in the road. He describes how, in desperation, he made people feed him by gunpoint, in a town in the Tulijá valley. In his work, he frequently complains about the moral character of the Indians and describes what he saw as "their vicious lives".

In the early twentieth century, the two Porfirian celebrities and officials, Justo Sierra, the Education Secretary, and archaeologist Leopoldo Batres, personally witnessed the death of two Ch'oles. The men were carrying one of the pieces of the stone panels of the Temple of the Cross to be transported to Mexico City, during the process of extraction of antiquities to fill the National Museum (Lombardo de Ruiz, 1994).

A few decades later, while Frans Blom was attempting to map the site of Palenque, in his letters he wrote about the refusal of local workers to enter vaulted buildings and caves. Eighty years apart, both Stephens and Blom described what they called superstitions around the ruins. These were the Maya perceptions of the differential dangers associated with domesticated places and undomesticated wild spaces, the later linked to darkness and

the underworld. The undomesticated space can be inhabited by dangerous spirits, while the managed built environment is considered less dangerous (Hanks, 1984). In a recent article with Johnson and Campiani, we observe that:

> "While the archaeologist and the indigenous excavators worked side-by-side in what was now becoming an archaeological site rather than a city, the experience and value of place were vastly different" (Johnson et al., In press).

Modern archaeological investigation of Palenque started in the nineteen fifties and sixties with the works of Alberto Ruz. Ruz excavated many buildings, financed by the Rockefeller foundation and INAH (Schele, 2012). The archaeologist facilitated public visits to Palenque with the restoration of many structures, and the construction of a road from Palenque city. This road arrives downhill from the main excavated buildings around the biggest plaza of the site. Ruz excavated one of the most publicly known archaeological features in Mexico, the tomb of a prolific ruler, the ancient *ajawlel*, K'inich Hanab Pakal. The discovery of the tomb made Palenque popular, and it gradually became relevant in many global discussions about the past, inside and outside academy. Ruz used the specialized work of Yucatec Maya masons from Oxkutzcab for the restoration of buildings. As previously noted, it was not until Acosta's investigations in the 70s that Ch'oles and Tseltales of the then newly formed ejidos in Palenque started to be instructed in the techniques of excavation and restoration of ancient buildings (1975). From then on, generation of Ch'oles and Tseltales from López Mateos, El Naranjo, San Manuel, and Nueva Babilonia have worked producing the display of ruins forming the touristic place of Palenque.

During the administration of president Carlos Salinas de Gortari, the "*Proyectos especiales* INAH" were implemented (Matadamas 2011). Between 1992 and 1994, 14 archaeological sites received a great deal of resources for the addition of new excavation and display of buildings. With the exception of Paquimé and the cave paintings of Baja California Sur, all the other sites were in Mesoamerica. This initiative of hundreds of millions of pesos was heavily biased towards the Maya region, with half of the sites in this area. It was the same period of the creation of the Mundo Maya initiative that created a substantial increase of tourism in the region (Brown, 2008; Magnoni et al., 2007). Palenque was one of the selected sites, and a lot of areas previously closed were made ready for public visits. The discovery of the royal tomb of the "Red Queen", right next to the famous tomb of Pakal, made Palenque an even more popular touristic destination. During this time, the administration of the site extended to Yaxchilán and Bonampak, creating an administrative structure that is still in place.

Anthropologist James Clifford visited the site in 1993, and categorized Palenque as a "forest of interpretations" (Clifford, 1997, 224). He described the atmosphere a few months after the opening of the brand-new site museum. He recalls:

> "In the new, improved Zona Arqueologica Mayans are admissible as authenticated folklore. Street sellers, however "traditional" their clothes, are matter out of place, generally scorned by

> the local ladinos. I hear it said that they are "prostituted" by the tourist trade. They belong in their villages. I'm not surprised to learn, too, that a plan was proposed to re-route the forest trail emerging at the Palace of the Inscriptions so that descending Chol villagers would pass behind the Pyramid, out of sight and outside the ruin proper. So far, objections have blocked the plan. And it's unlikely the Chols would go along, especially now that the word is out (thanks to the New Epigraphy) that "Pacal spoke Chol"" (1997, 236).

It is interesting the way Clifford was convinced that the spread of knowledge about epigraphy would make abuse and erasure of the Ch'ol more difficult. This has not been the case. Most of the Ch'oles that I have talked about Cholean languages used in ancient epigraphy are still surprised by the linguistic connection. This tells a lot about the limited scope of outreach programs among archaeologists working at Palenque.

In the 2000s, the association of economic development and tourism continued as a political paradigm. The administration of the first alternate government after the long *priísta* hegemony did not represent a substantial change in the management of archaeological heritage, with only a few failed attempts to open culture segments of the economy to the private sector (Breglia, 2006; Rodríguez Herrera, 1998). In the last twenty years, Palenque has been the arena of contestation of multiple meanings. The arrival of communities of new-age practitioners and ancient aliens tourism, has added to the complexity of locals and foreigners entangled by the threads of archaeological heritage. There is an industry of alternative tourism that has made a circuit between Palenque, San Cristobal de las Casas, and Tulum, in Mexico, and Antigua and Panajachel in Guatemala. They are known for appropriating and folklorizing a few aspects of Maya rituality, and mixing them with other indigenous practices of the Americas and the world.

Massive tourism carries many social problems, one of the most acute ones the rise in criminality, drug trafficking and the influence of organized crime in all economic activities. Palenque has become a pivotal node in the greater region of the southern Gulf of Mexico coast. A few families of cattle ranchers own most of the licit capital generated in the region. In the meantime, the old railroad network still carries thousands of migrants coming through Guatemala from all over the world, along with all the human trafficking crimes associated with their passage. Palenque is the first city in the ground route of drugs crossing Mexico from Central and South America.

There are 300 electoral districts in Mexico. Palenque belongs to one of 28 indigenous districts. The main feature for the definition of this electoral sectorization is the presence of a population with more than 30% indigenous people. The District 01 of Chiapas includes the municipalities of Palenque, Tila, Sabanilla, Tumbalá, Yajalón, Catazajá, La Libertad, and Salto de Agua, that grouped together have 75% indigenous of their total population. This means that the representative in the legislature must belong to an indigenous community. Self-adscription policies have been abused by the current legislator of this district, a cousin of

the current president, Manuela Obrador Narváez. She has obtained her recognition as part of a Ch'ol ejido in Salto de Agua, making way for her place in the *Camara de Diputados*. Crescencia Díaz Vázquez, a Ch'ol politician filed a lawsuit against the congresswoman for the supplantation of identity, but it was decided by the Federal Electoral Tribunal in favor of Obrador (Vela, 2021) as she accredited her affiliation with a Ch'ol ejido, even though she is from Tabasco and has never been part of the realities of the Ch'ol and Tseltal populations she represents.

Palenque has been a UNESCO World Heritage site since 1987 (UNESCO World Heritage Centre, 1987). Before the pandemic started in Mexico, Palenque used to receive around a million visitors per year, reaching 930,000 in 2015. From 2014 to 2019 the yearly visits to the archaeological zone averaged more than 800,000 tourists (See Table 2.1). The municipality of Palenque has a population of 132,265 people, most of which live in the urban settlements of Palenque and in the contiguous town of Pakalná. The first language of the 38% of people older than 5 years is a Mayense one. Specifically, 25,043 speak Tseltal, 23,842 Ch'ol, 1,377 Zoque, 774 Tsotsil, and a few hundred more speak other languages, including Maayat'aan, Nahuatl, and Totonac.

The complexities in the management of a World Heritage site attracting mass tourism were tripled in the nineties, with the addition of Yaxchilán and Bonampak within Palenque's administrative structure. Bonampak is a unique case in Mexican archaeology. INAH had to negotiate the access and excavation of the site with the Lacandones. In order to arrive to the frescoed temples, tourists must use the transport provided by Lacandones, which goes from the entrance of the national reserve of the Selva Lacandona to the site. Yaxchilán is another complicated case. During the last decade, the site has been controlled by two Ch'ol cooperatives in Frontera Corozal. Like the Lacandones, they control transportation from their border town to the archaeological zone, in this case by river. INAH is present in both sites within a marginal context of local decisions. It only clears vegetation, maintains and restores the buildings. Another example of the difficult relation between INAH and local indigenous populations is represented by the site of Chinkultik, in the Chiapas Montebello lakes, near the border with the Guatemalan Cuchumatanes mountains. Because of land problems, in 2008 a confrontation between Tseltal *ejidatarios*, who had occupied the archaeological site, and the state police resulted in six deaths (Proceso, 2008; Red TDT, 2017). After appealing to their indigenous rights to appropriate the sacred space, state forces made a raid and the site was declared an archaeological monuments zone.

In the last five years, the presence of the Tren Maya project has already made a substantial impact on the archaeological site, on the city, and on the population of Palenque. The Palenque route was announced as the first segment that is going to be inaugurated in 2023. The site has been one of 27 in the Maya area to be given enormous amounts of resources through the Tren Maya's PROMEZA program (Archaeological Zones Improvement Program). The objectives are entirely touristic-centered, that is restoration of more buildings and the extension of the visitors' experience. It also includes the building of a new campsite and

laboratories for the archaeologists, new bathrooms, storage places, offices, a visitors' center, and a 160-room hotel (de la Rosa, 2023). PROMEZA is perhaps the project with the most resources ever to be granted to the site in all its history, adding to the massive archaeological salvage project that is currently ending in the 1500 kilometers of the train's route.

The federal authorities and Palenque's site administration have been pushed to make a new management plan for the site. It has to be noted that the versions of that document have never been published on the UNESCO website. I was included in some of the meetings organized to prepare the new document, updating it with the current number of tourists and the presence of the Tren Maya infrastructure.

INAH administrators are required to find ways of collaborating with the indigenous communities. Even with the genuine interest of a few of its actors for changing power structures, INAH has a complete lack of intention to meaningfully collaborate with the locals. They are working with an entirely top-down approach, offering opportunities to sell handcrafts in the new visitor's center and promoting the production of pyrography reproductions of the iconography of ancient Palenque. This is a product that the locals have been making for less than 30 years. It is not a Ch'ol tradition but it is the only cultural practice INAH is cataloguing as traditional. Moreover, in their list of *ejidos* affected by the initiatives and plans linked to the new train, they exclude the closest to the site, which form the majority of the workforce in the archaeological zone.

Even though the selling of a set of standardized souvenirs inside the archaeological zone is a relatively new economic activity for the people of López Mateos and El Naranjo, it has become a point of tension in relation to the site. For archaeologists it is an aesthetic problem, it looks ugly, we don't like the feeling of being in a market while observing the solemn messages uttered by the ruins. The addition of a prohibition of any economic transaction inside a federal property has made administrators and archaeologists try to evict the vendors from the site trails on multiple occasions.

The ejidos around Palenque could have strong legal grounds to completely transform the administrative and academic structures, if they constitute a collective to sue the federal government. A site with an even larger number of vendors of the same inventory of souvenirs is Chichén Itzá, and it has already been involved in an equivalent process. The surrounding communities of Pisté and Xcalakoop have started a legal case against INAH, and the results have the potential to establish a precedent for a national transformation of heritage legislation and practices.

Archaeology in Palenque and its region has affected the lives of several generations of indigenous communities. From our academic perspective, these people belong to an ethnicity considered descendant of the ruins´ builders and inhabitants. Yet, we have not done anything to show any kind of interest in the ways they tell their own story and

produce meanings about heritage. The situation in Palenque is immersed in highly unequal dynamics, and there is an inertia of academics and state officials to act towards justice and re-evaluation of the power structures that have prevailed starting hundreds of years ago.

Chapter 3: The Ch’oles and the ethnographic dialogues

In this chapter, I will present the information I gathered through the ethnographic dialogues carried out for this project,. The focus in this investigation on this ethnic group is the result of my archaeological experience in the Palenque region in northern Chiapas, Mexico. In the last sixteen years I have worked along with many Ch'ol people in their homeland, as I have previously explained. First, I will provide contextual information about the Ch’ol people and their history, before moving on to the dialogues themselves.

Ch'ol Demography and Locations

The Ch'oles are a group of people with a population of about a quarter million (INEGI, 2020). They call themselves *Wiñikob*, translated as persons, and their heartland is in northern Chiapas, in the municipalities of Tila, Tumbalá, Palenque, Salto de Agua, and Sabanilla, with communities in southern Tabasco around Tacotalpa, Teapa, and Oxolotán. They have established Ch’ol ejidos in southern Chiapas and southern Campeche (Fig. 3.1), and frequently emigrate to the Mexican Caribbean coast and the United States. Historically, they have been neighbors with Chontales to the North, Zoques to the west, Itzá-Yucatecan to the East, and Tseltales and Tsotsiles to the South.

The land of the Ch’oles sits on a karstic rock formation that has folded forming the mountain range of the Sierra Madre of Chiapas. In altitude, it extends from the lowland tropical forests of the alluvial plains of Tabasco, to the foggy pine and oak forests in the northern Sierra Madre of Chiapas, which reach to 2,500 meters above sea level. The large forests that half a century ago used to cover the whole region have been decimated by cattle ranching and large-scale monoculture. All altitudes have large amounts of precipitation and humidity arriving from the Gulf of Mexico. The land is furrowed by many rivers that flow north in the Grijalva and Usumacinta river basins. Before the roads and rural airstrips were built in the twentieth century, these waterways constituted a major means of transportation in the region. Flat patches of good soil are precious in the highlands, with dependency on the cultivation of the valleys near the lowlands for all the large populations the area has hosted.

The Ch’ol language can also be spelled Chol, and it is generally named by its speakers as *Lakty’añ*, translated as “our word”. It belongs to the greater Tseltalan Mayense subfamily and within it, together with Chontal, Ch’orti’ and the now extinct Choltí, constitutes the Cholan language group (Vázquez Álvarez, 2011). This branch is also divided into Eastern Cholan (including the latter two) and Western Cholan, with Chontal and Ch’ol. *Lakty’añ* is divided into two dialectal variants, Tila and Tumbalá. They are mutually intelligible with some lexical variations. It is a difficult language to learn for a Chilango-Spanish native speaker such as myself. The precision of inclusive and exclusive first-person plural pronouns

has been useful in the ethnographic dialogues. It is interesting to observe how they use them when they talk to *Kaxlanes,* the non-indigenous, and when they talk among themselves.

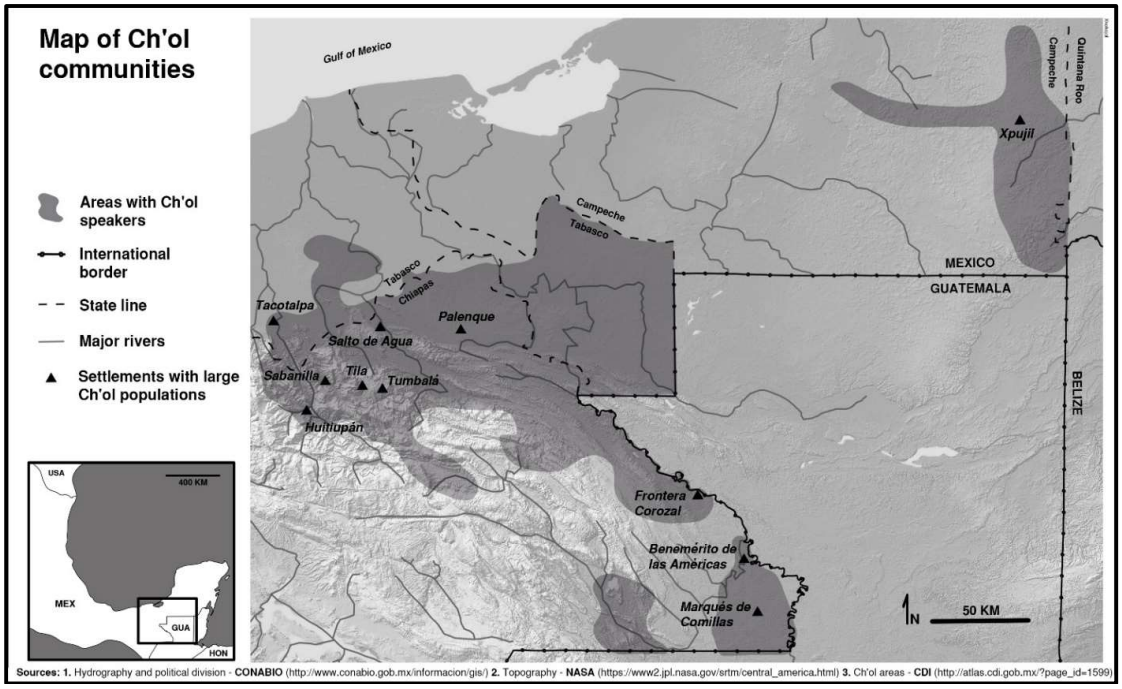

Fig. 3.1 Ch'ol speaking region and its main towns (Map of the author).

The current socioeconomic conditions of the Ch'ol region are a product of their own historical ways of creating and appropriating their landscape, and of producing power dynamics, as well as reacting to and negotiating five hundred years of colonial history. Modern day Ch'oles are not the same people as the Ch'ol speaking inhabitants of the *reducciones* in northern Chiapas of the sixteenth century. And much less are they the rulers and builders of Classic period Palenque and all the capital cities of other *ajawlelob*, or kingdoms, in the region. Just as with any other group of people and their millenary ancestors, it would be problematic to assign direct descent from outside their own historical experience. Identity involves memory although it is always unfinished, under construction, and it is not practiced exclusively through genotypes, languages, or any other monothetic categorizations of culture. Nonetheless, anthropology and its disciplines have talked about a collectivity of cultures, which includes the Classic Maya and Mayense languages. These weave together a narrative of three thousand years for a modern group of different peoples with a common linguistic ancestor.

Pre-Colonial History

The two best known bilingual Ch'ol chronicles, published respectively by historians from Tila (Pérez Chacón, 1988b) and Tumbalá (Meneses López, 1986), recognize ancient history in the central landscape where they dwell, without tracing any specific connections to Classic Maya and the abundant materiality produced before Hispanic contact. These chronicles present the creators of so many archaeological features around them as part of their universe, related to a different time, rather than specific lineage from millenary-scale memory.

According to phylogenetic and glottochronology studies, the Cholan linguistic group started to separate from the Tseltalan branch around 100 CE (Vázquez Álvarez, 2011, 3). This is the same period as the founding of the first Classic *ajawlelob*, which produced a lot of monuments and artifacts with hieroglyphic texts. Classic Maya, or Classic Cholan, is the base-language for most of those inscriptions, with variations that were developed at the same time. Sites in the Northwestern lowlands, like Palenque and Tortuguero, wrote their hieroglyphic texts in Western Cholan, with elements of Chontalan, while sites like Toniná and Chinkultik, in the southeast of the Highlands, left a written record with elements of a differentiated Tseltalan language (Becquey, 2012; Lacadena & Wichmann, 2002).

Thousands of sites have been identified in what today constitutes the Ch'ol region, and Palenque has been subject to archaeological research and restoration for more than a hundred years. Nonetheless, outside the Classic contexts of Palenque and its surrounding region, there has been very little archaeological research in the Ch'ol area. We know about a few sites because of their condition as reference points in the Ch'ol ritual landscape, as they currently use those places for their religious practices. One of them is the Joloniel cave, near Emiliano Zapata (Tumbalá), a cavern with a spring that constitutes the headwaters of the Ixteljá river. In the walls of two chambers there are seven groups of paintings from the Early Classic period. Among other events, they commemorate a period-ending ceremony during the early fifth century CE, carried out by a lady ruler from a political entity called Sibikte' (Bassie-Sweet et al., 2015, 2147). It constitutes a landmark for all the Ch'oles around Tumbalá today. They believe that the spirit of a being named Don Juan inhabits that cave and others in the region (Bassie-Sweet et al., 2015, 1504). The Ejido Emiliano Zapata has closed the entrance to the cave and manages its access and use. They practice yearly ceremonies inside, as happens in many other important caves used today by different Maya groups in the region. The other site that is known thanks to Ch'ol use is Ujaltón, near Tila. It is a Classic period site where the Tilecos go every January to deposit ritual offerings (Bassie-Sweet et al., 2015, 1375; Sheseña Hernández & Tovalín Ahumada, 2014, 2021). At Ujaltón, three stone stelae with hieroglyphic texts have been registered. They are currently held in the Jesuit Mission in Bachajón.

There is a huge gap of archaeological and historical information between these known sites for the Postclassic period that followed. After the ninth and tenth centuries, dispersed settlement patterns of less centralized political organizations produced smaller archaeological sites. These are more difficult to detect, and most of all, they are less prone to attract tourists and archaeologists with monumentality. For these reasons, very few investigations are concerned with this period in the region and there are just some scattered data from a few sites. For example San Román (2008, 46–47) talks about the only Postclassic cache vessel recorded in Palenque. We know very little about the political conditions of Ch'ol land in the sixteenth century before the Castilian invasion. From the description of the first raids, it is safe to assume that there were settlements near modern day Tila and Petalcingo, with most people dispersed in small hamlets and family sized settlements in the valleys formed by the Sierra Madre in the region.

Colonial History

Most of the Ch'ol people had their land distributed into *encomiendas* before they even met any European. They were aware of the violent circumstances around them and probably decided to pay tribute without military intervention as a strategy to remain low-profile and free of any violent raids (Bassie-Sweet et al., 2015, 481). The same happened with the Cholan Lacandones and the Pochutlas, who fought and fled from colonial domination nearby the lands of the Ch'oles (De Vos, 1980). But not even peaceful tribute payment to Spanish invaders was enough to protect them against other Spaniards, who were profiting from the market of slaves, even though it was forbidden by the Laws of Burgos from 1512, and later by the *Leyes Nuevas* in 1542. After the establishment of encomiendas, several soldiers that participated in the first stages of invasion conducted raids on multiple occasions in the Ch'ol region to capture people and sell them. The first one was in 1528, when Tila was assigned for *encomienda* to a soldier living in Espiritu Santo (today's Coatzacoalcos) and was ransacked by another one. Seven years later, Tila was raided again by a Captain sent from Espiritu Santo by Pedro de Alvarado to dominate the rebel town of Pochutla. On his way to Pochutla he attacked Tila, Petalcingo and other towns, capturing slaves (Bassie-Sweet et al., 2015; De Vos, 1980; Fenner, 2020). Other events like this happened in 1541. Before the arrival of these military expeditions, most of the people in the raided settlements fled to the mountains, where they could easily hide as they were used to a dispersed settlement pattern. The same strategy was repeatedly used later by some of their descendants, who successfully escaped enslavement, domination, and tribute.

Four decades after the first invasion and after several failed attempts to pacify rebellious communities using armed force, the Dominican Fray Pedro Lorenzo ventured into the forests of the unconquered Maya with a pacifist approach. This stance put him against his

Dominican superiors who saw his evangelical work as too dangerous. De Vos (2010) sketches a biography of this character in an almost hagiographical way. There is very little information about his life, but he was responsible for the *reducción* (a Spanish colonial term meaning the concentration of a dispersed population) of the Pochutlas, and their resettlement in Ocosingo. In 1567, he founded the town of Palenque with the Ch'oles living around the Chacamax river valley. Fray Pedro was also responsible for the re-structuration of the towns of Tila, Tumbalá, Ocosingo, and Yajalón (Bassie-Sweet et al., 2015; De Vos, 1988).

Since the late sixteenth century, the main church of Tila has displayed in its main altar a blackened Christ that has attracted the devotion of many Maya Catholics in the Ch'ol region, Tabasco, and across Central America. Until the political instability of recent years, the sanctuary historically hosted a massive pilgrimage on Corpus Christi day using a route from Villahermosa and Salto de Agua. The cult and its importance have been interpreted by essentialist-oriented researchers as a continuity of prehispanic deities and ritual practices (Josserand & Hopkins, 2007). Constructivist approaches see it as a deeply transformed network of communication and central places, but not a continuity of cults (Navarrete, 2013).

During the colonial period, each of these towns had local religious organizations maintained by the indigenous people, called *cofradías* (loosely, brotherhoods) in Spanish. The *cofradías* of Tila and those of other towns have constituted influential decision makers in their communities, including in the ones in which they still survive, like Tumbalá. There are several traditional narratives that talk about the foundation of the town of Tila and the construction of the church, which had to be relocated several times until Tilecos found the definitive location where the Cristo Negro was happy. Archaeological evidence confirms the presence of several abandoned churches from the sixteenth century in the region, as documented in historical archaeology research (Méndez Torres & Oltehua Garatachea, 2019; Oltehua Garatachea & Méndez Torres, 2019).

Through the testimonies of different elders of the town, in his chronicle of Tumbalá written in Ch'ol and Spanish, Meneses López (1986) notes how the traditional religious authorities were deeply embedded with the municipal government. He describes the system of *cargos*, which starts with being one of the *Capitanes* of the church, who has to maintain order in the church and give food and liquor for some festivities. After *Capitán* there is the rank of an *Ajkal*, who collects money and food for the holidays and ensures that the children attend school normally. Subsequently, there is the rank of *Policía Rural*, who maintain order and security in town, followed by the *Motiomas*, who are intermediaries between the people and the divinity. In exchange for some form of tribute, people ask *Motiomas* for their prayers to solve problems. Finally, after fulfilling that rank, a *Motiomá* can be one of the town's *Tatuches*, the elders and top authorities of town.

Economically and culturally, since early colonial times the Ch'ol region has been more integrated into Tabasco and Yucatán networks than those of Chiapas. The land of the Ch'oles was at the limits of the administration of Tabasco, governed from today's Villahermosa and Coatzacoalcos, and Chiapas, administered from Ciudad Real, now called San Cristobal de las Casas. This marginal position between two political regions made intervention and military incursions particularly difficult for the Spanish, and in some measure let the Ch'oles go their own ways and have their own political authorities. Most of the region's parishes were scarcely visited by priests on the occasions of yearly Catholic celebrations. The difficult terrain, far away from political centers, has served Ch'oles as a refuge from colonial domination, and many times in history they simply walked away from the *encomiendas*, *reducciones* and tribute impositions. As Watanabe (2004, 44) observes: "scarcity of resident priests enabled both highland and lowland Maya to carry on locally variable religious traditions centered publicly on fiestas and religious brotherhoods (*cofradías*) dedicated to Catholic saints, while domestically they continued to consult shaman-diviners for curing and agricultural rites" (see also Farris, 1984; Rugeley, 2001; Wasserstrom, 1983).

As this quotation indicates, during colonial times, a set of religious-political systems called *cofradías* were established in the main towns and outside of them. These brotherhoods were external to the Church secular administration control from Ciudad Real. Within the structures of cargo systems and cofradias, there was a space where the Ch'oles negotiated their cosmogonies into something tolerated by the scarcely-present Catholic authorities. These systems of hierarchy associated with the cycles of Catholic festivities, managed by the Ch'oles and their own means of cultural capital, remained as the core of the identities and traditions of the Ch'ol communities in the highlands. Nonetheless, since late 20th century, these have been fading away from many towns. The presence of Protestant Christians, land conflicts, and migration have made it difficult for many of those organizations to survive.

The most common form of colonial imposition was the conversion of some communities into cotton processing industries. Ch'oles paid tribute in cotton fabrics and corn, which created a set of productive practices around textiles, with women exploited in the weaving of *mantas*, and men transporting the cotton and products through the mountains to pay tribute or engage in market exchange (Fenner, 2020, 115). The present-day embroidering tradition of Ch'ol women dates perhaps back to colonial time, although it has changed a lot since then.

The Ch'oles actively participated in religious and political insurrections started by the Tseltales of Cancuc in 1712 (Becquey, 2012; Breton, 1988; Womack, 2009). It was not the first nor the last time they associated with their neighbors to stand against oppression, as can be seen today with the Zapatistas. A couple of decades after the Cancúc uprisings, a *Justicia Mayor* (a colonial authority) from Ciudad Real produced a report to assess the situation along the Tzendales route, including the regions of Tila and Tumbala. The authority described a scattered population that used to live shifting between the highlands around

the main towns and the lowlands in the Tulijá valley. Each community had a counterpart in the lowlands, for example Bulujib for Tila and Sichabunte for Tumbalá, with many families living in a circulating residence pattern. In this way, they took advantage of both landscapes, where they grew cacao and tropical crops in the lowlands, and also managed to evade census, baptisms, tribute, and religious impositions (Breton, 1988; Fenner, 2020).

Ch'ol History after Independence from Spain

The first Mexican independent governments did not bring any significant change in the administration of the Ch'ol region by centralized institutions. If anything, it was detrimental, with the disappearance of the model of *republicas de indios* (the colonial concept of indigenous towns as self-administering autonomous units) and the limited legal routes for autonomy the new republican era provided. In fact, Chiapas was for a long time a land where very few Ladinos and Spanish lived. It was not until the land reforms during the Juarez government beginning in the 1850s and lasting through the 1870s that Chiapas started to attract capitalists from Villahermosa and San Cristobal, and after that from foreign industries. Palenque and Tila saw the incursion of gradually more *Kaxlanes* in their government, but not in significant numbers until the 20th century.

The mid 19th century was a time when a lot of travelers published memoirs of visiting the ruins of Palenque that showed the contemptuous relationship between them and the local people who helped in their Western discovery enterprise. In those memoirs, there are a few hints of what the Ch'oles thought of the archaeological sites, and it is very evident that the perception and values of place were entirely different from the Westerner explorers and the locals (Johnson et al., In press). Stephens describes how he and Catherwood were left alone in the site of Palenque because "the Indians had superstitious fears about remaining at night among the ruins, and left us alone, the sole tenants of the palace of unknown kings" (Stephens, 1854, 292). Seven decades later, Danish archaeologist Frans Blom described another of those different perceptions. When he was attempting to map the site and record the architecture, he wrote home describing how "The Indians are so superstitious and afraid of the dark and of ghosts that they do not venture on entering any cave" (Blom's February 1, 1923 letter, in Nielsen & Leifer, 2004, 9).

A few years after the visit of Stephens and Catherwood, which introduced the world to the images of the ancient Maya ruins, and more intensively late in the same century, international agricultural markets started to be interested in the windward slopes of the Sierra Madre of Chiapas. The attention was focused both towards the Pacific ocean and the Gulf of Mexico, the later being the heartland of the Ch'oles and Tseltales. After a few attempts from Mexican capitalists, the Ch'oles were effectively robbed of large portions of land when the government labeled territories as uninhabited, or *baldíos*. Wanting to increase taxation and investment in a region seen as underdeveloped, the government sold

lumber concessions and land titles. The deforestation that came exploiting mahogany and precious woods opened the way for the establishment of coffee and rubber plantations (Bassie-Sweet et al., 2015, 1061; De Vos, 1988), the *fincas*, that were the equivalent of the *hacienda* system in the Porfiriato. The German-American Coffee Company was the largest of all foreign corporations that owned plantations. From the 1870s to the 1920s, it used the forced labor of many Ch'ol communities for the production of coffee for European and North American markets. In less quantity, Ch'ol were exploited for the production of rubber.

After being robbed of their land, there were four forms of Ch'oles exploitation in the finca economies: *baldíos, meseros, mozos* and *acasillados*. Ch'ol were coerced to work under debt peonage just to have the right to usufruct of their own ancestral lands. The first form of exploitation was the *baldíos*, where Ch'ol were required to work in the most active seasons in exchange for being able to cultivate crops. The *meseros* worked alternating one month for their own land plots, and another for the fincas. The *mozos* or *acasillados* lived inside the plantation facilities (Fenner, 2020, 450), and remained almost entirely trapped in the finca economies through the plantation stores, which monopolized basic goods. Ch'oles were paid in currencies emitted by the fincas, because it was good business keeping families in constant debt (Bassie-Sweet et al., 2015, 1079). At the stores, there was always a large amount of liquor available, made and promoted by the fincas themselves, which reduced the energy and agency of individuals to fight for their rights.

International investment on plantations in the region was the strongest force of colonization the Ch'oles have ever seen. It altered dramatically their practices about land and labor. The economic system of the fincas was designed to keep the Ch'oles and all indigenous people in constant poverty. This is a time Ch'ol call today *mosojäñtyel*, the time of servitude. They translate this in Spanish as *esclavitud*, enslavement. It is the oldest collective memory fixed in the historical narrative of the Ch'oles. Ethnographic and historical research by Alejos (1994) in the nineteen-eighties recorded this term as the name used for this period that inflicted, and still imposes, collective pain. This form of labor imposition has been called de-facto slavery (Washbrook, 2018), and it is near slave labor (Bassie-Sweet et al., 2015). Although it was different from the practices of human trafficking in other parts of the world, we are not in any position to relativize the memory of a time of dispossession of land and lives that the Ch'oles themselves translate as slavery (Alejos García, 1994, 232), as Fenner tries to do in his work on the Ch'ol region (Fenner, 2020, 469–493). This was a time that established structures that in good measure still affect the position of Ch'ols in the geopolitical and economic reality of Chiapas and Mexico.

Other experiences in the late 19th and early 20th centuries are documented to be remembered by Ch'ol people, a tradition of prophetic talking objects was recorded by authorities of Chiapas as a menace posed by rebellious indigenous organizations near Sabanilla, in the Ch'ol region (Cruz Pérez, 2014). The use of rituals using *cajas parlantes* (talking boxes) was brought from the Tseltal region. The use of talking saints, objects and images has constituted a form of action against colonial oppression in many different

moments in the history of Maya peoples, such as during the Yucatec Social War and the Tseltal rebellions of 1712 and the 1800s (Womack, 2009).

The Mexican Revolution and Modern Ch'ol History

Episodes of the Mexican Revolution that began in 1910 are recurrently remembered by different elder community members, grandsons and great-grandsons of the people who participated in the battles between Pinedistas, Carrancistas, and federal forces in Northern Chiapas (Meneses López, 1986). It was a period that left a mark on their history. A couple of times, in ejidos near Classic sites, I have personally heard that different factions in the revolution used the ruins we were at as campsites, including suggestions they hid wealth and weapons in the vaults of the ancient buildings. The limited justice brought by the winners of the revolution was very slow to arrive to Northern Chiapas. The call for the creation of communal lands that emerged from the Revolution was resisted by the remaining finca owners. Instead, following the fincas period, privately owned latifundia have been normalized all the way to modern times, as the Zapatistas argued in the 1990s.

In fact, the first ejidos in the Ch'ol region were formed in the 1930s, during the presidency of Lázaro Cárdenas. For the first time Ch'ol who had been in a peonage position under the fincas were changed into smallholders of coffee cooperatives. Nonetheless, these have been largely controlled by foreign capital, international markets, and the government. A substantial expansion of ejido communal land regimes did not start until the mid-twentieth century. The extent of land held as ejidos went from Tila and Tumbalá to the Tulijá Valley, and eastward, to the left shore of the Usumacinta river. To a certain extent, the Ch'ol ejidos that started in the sixties have reoccupied the territory from which they were displaced in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries (Bassie-Sweet et al., 2015, 1079).

After the declaration of the Biosphere reserve of the Montes Azules in the Lacandón jungle in 1978, many of the Ch'oles that had previously been established within its limits were displaced to form new communities, such as Frontera Corozal (named at the beginning as Frontera Echeverría, the name of the president that sought the creation of the reserve and town relocations, it was later changed to its current name) in the Usumacinta river, near the archaeological site of Yaxchilán. The community of Nueva Palestina was created in the southern edge of the reserve, while other Ch'oles had to settle in dry and far-away lands in southern Campeche, around the national Calakmul Biosphere Reserve (De Vos, 1988).

After the nineteen seventies, contestation of the indigenous conditions started to increase. The land reforms of the post revolution were long forgotten with large latifundia owning most of the land, exploiting the labor of indigenous communities, keeping them poor and without choices. This situation, along with the presence of Liberation Theology catechists helping the organization of the 1974 Indigenous Congress of San Cristobal de las Casas

(Morales Bermúdez, 2018), and Maoist ideologues organizing communities politically and militarily, created what has been called the first postmodern guerilla. This was revealed to the world on January 1st 1994 as the Ejercito Zapatista de Revolución Nacional (EZLN).

Communities and portions of them in the Ch'ol region have been involved with Zapatismo since its beginning. An example is Roberto Barrios, one of the original five Caracoles (autonomous EZLN towns founded in 2003), located 22 km southeast of Palenque. Half of the town participates in autonomous networks, while the other half does not. This political divide is shared in many places where Zapatismo is present, and it adds complexity and tension to the already complicated social relations and land conflicts. Besides those five centers (Nolasco Armas, 2007) there were many other smaller communities that decided to embrace Zapatismo, articulated with their respective regional organizations. Although not all Ch'oles participate in autonomous politics, almost all have been affected by the displacement of people, violence and political turmoil caused by the state's response and by the Zapatista communities themselves.

Since 2019, the Caracoles defined by the EZ changed their categorization into what is now called *Centros de Resistencia Autónoma y Rebeldía Zapatista* (CRAREZ, Centers of Autonomous Resistance and Zapatista Rebellion). This change involved adding eleven more autonomous centers, among them Tila. Tila is an old town with a history of political division since the beginning of Zapatismo and even before. Tila's long unresolved problems have resulted in violence many times, and continue to be a menace for many people. After years of tension, in 2017 the municipality had to move government offices and administration to El Limar, an ejido in the Tulijá valley, where the finca El Triunfo used to be.

Since the nineties, landowners and state-party politics have organized together against Zapatismo, creating paramilitary groups. They have violently repressed autonomous political organizations. They have transformed along with the political movements over the last three decades. In recent years some of the networks of drug cartels have participated, adding even more violence. As a consequence of the instability, in the last four years the celebration of the Cristo Negro of Tila has been canceled, erasing a crucial point of contact for the communities within the Ch'ol region and outside of it, as well as a lot of economic income for Tila.

Against this background of developments in recent decades, Alejos (2003) relates a visit to the town of Palenque in 1997. He tells how the *Kaxlan* population described Palenque as "invaded" by indigenous communities, after an influx of migration provoked by the violence during the conflicts between the Paramilitary and Zapatistas. Alejos (2003, 88) observes that the non-indigenous population of the city described the way "even the ruins have been taken over" by the indigenous people. In fact, vendors started to be present inside the site in the middle-late nineties. These people, who sell handcrafts within the ruins, come from the neighboring two ejidos. Alejos notes how the histories of many young Ch'oles drastically

changed when they had to flee the violence of their original communities, putting themselves at the expense of the precarious labor market the city offered.

Ch'ol Ethnography

The Ch'ol have not attracted the attention of anthropologists as much as the Tsotsil and Tseltal peoples in the highlands. Nonetheless, there is a considerable amount of ethnographic literature about several communities, along with linguistic research and traditional narrative compilations. There is a lot of information written in the eighties in the style of the *testimonio* genre by Morales Bermudez (1999; 1987), a philosopher and theologian who was involved in the organization of the Chiapas Indigenous Congress of 1974. He spent a lot of time in the Ch'ol region, living with them and sharing their problems.

Alejos García has done ethnographic and archival work since the 1980s, investigating the agrarian discourses and history of Tumbalá, its old and modern conflicts. The Centro de Investigaciones y Estudios Superiores de Antropología Social (CIESAS, Center for Investigation and Superior Studies of Social Anthropology) has given graduate degrees to many indigenous students in Chiapas, including some Ch'oles. Along with a few non-indigenous graduate anthropologists, after doing research in their respective communities, they have built a significant corpus of ethnographic data. For example, Díaz Peñate (2009) describes the cosmovision and ritual practices of Ejido Nueva Esperanza. Rodríguez Balam (2013) talks about the integration of Ch'oles, Yucatec Maya and mestizos in southern Campeche. López (2013) describes the ritual practices of witchcraft associated with social conflicts and the presence of paramilitary groups in Tila. Another work that describes the situation in more recent years is by Pérez and Villafuerte (2022), and concerns the transformation and association of political parties and violent groups. Becquey (2017) investigated ritual practices in the construction of houses and the spatiality of the Ch'oles of La Cascada, Palenque, while Panqueba (2012) writes about the negotiation of identities between rural teachers and *indigenista* institutions. Rodríguez Ceja (2017) describes the embodiment of social and interpersonal conflicts through witchcraft in the Ch'ol ejidos of Campeche. Josserrand and Hopkins (Josserand & Hopkins, 1996) detail the use of ritual language and the contexts on which it is used. Moreno (2013) talked to Ch'oles of Sabanilla about nahualism beliefs and about how they have been transformed through time. Cruz Demesa (2014) catalogues and searches for meanings in the colorful Ch'ol women´s clothing, and Gutierrez (2017) does ethnographic research among the Ch'oles of northern Chiapas about being young. As these examples show, in different universities, there are many young Ch'ol students that are investigating their own culture.

Included in many of the cited works, and adding to the several published collections by diverse institutions, there is a large corpus of traditional narratives (Alejos García, 1988,

1994; Cruz Demesa, 2014; Dirección General de Educación Indígena, 2018; Hopkins et al., 2016; Meneses López, 1986; Morales Bermudez, 1999; Paredes Salas, 2018; Pérez Chacón, 1988a; Rodríguez Ceja, 2017; Rodríguez García, 2016; Whittaker & Warkentin, 1965). Some authors have done structural analysis of myths and stories. Other investigations resulted in published compilations of creation myths, fables, and tales, agrarian discourses and the foundation of towns and ejidos, and the description of supernatural beings that dwell in and own the forests, caves, and resources. All these authors compile different versions of the same narratives and beliefs, along with a considerable corpus of other oral genres such as aphorisms, riddles, and accounts of situations that can represent lessons in life. These sources inform my understanding of the dialogues I engaged in with Ch'ol people about their views of their identity, the past, and their relationships to archaeology.

The dialogues

As I have mentioned in previous chapters, I have interacted with Ch'oles in the context of archaeological research for many years, in the process of surveying and excavating sites in the region of Palenque. On those occasions, I have had to explain our investigations to local communities and ask for permission to access their land and excavate some of the sites. In retrospect, I can recognize that we were not successful in conveying the purpose of our research and the significance of knowing what we were inquiring about. I remember well being asked many times what use people had allowing me to survey and excavate the sites in their land, and awkwardly arriving at the conclusion that what we could tell them was pretty worthless. I remember well a morning I arrived at my excavation inside the Junior Highschool of a big ejido, to discover it completely destroyed. The previous day I had given a talk to the senior cohort in the school, and I remember lamenting about the destruction of what I considered arbitrarily to be their heritage, due to the lack of understanding of the importance of our work. Unreflexively I thought I was being empathetic and clear. I didn't acknowledge that our scientific message was not being communicated and that the power structures of institutions and epistemologies really don't care about the local social dimensions of archaeological work. I am not trying to say that with the dialogues in this ethnography I was successful in conveying the meanings I intended to share. But I was actively seeking to be as reflexive as I could, and to listen to the directions in which the interlocutors wanted to take the discussions.

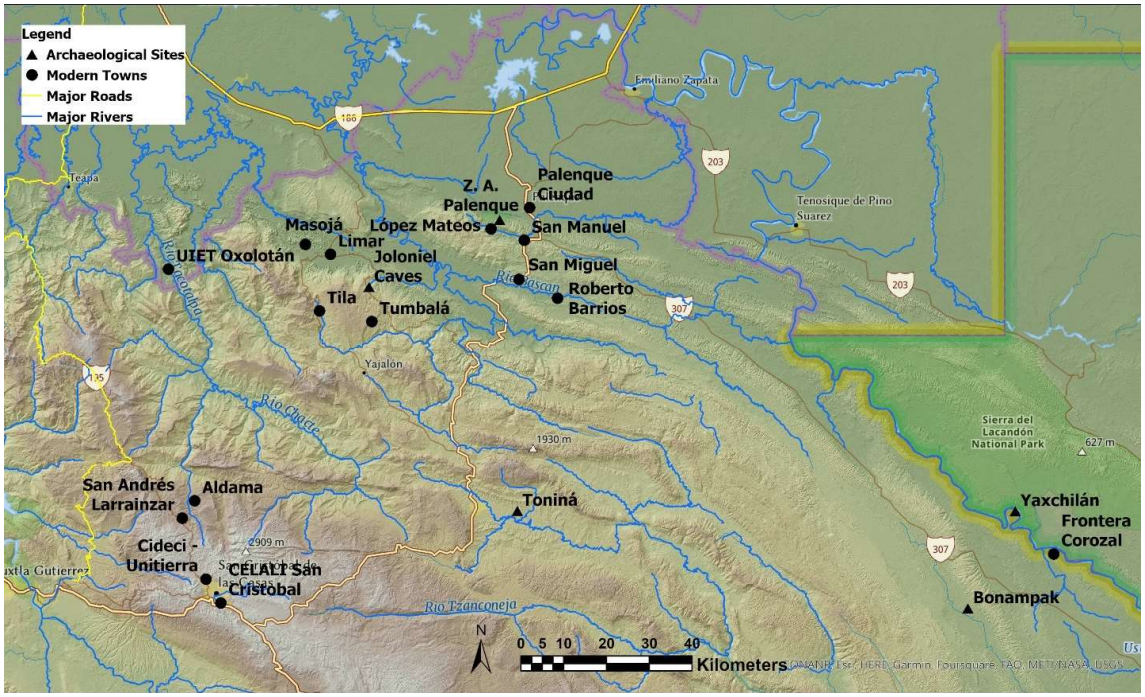

Fig. 3.2 Map of the communities mentioned in the dialogues (Map by Arianna Campiani, datasets from ArcGIS NatGeo BaseMap; NASA JPL 2021; Geodata Lib UTexas 2015).

Once I decided on the subject of this investigation and started to engage ethnographically with Ch'oles, I began with the people I knew the most, my friends of the ejido López Mateos, in Palenque. Since the beginning I was pointed towards many other people that could have thoughts and opinions about heritage and archaeology subjects on which I started to have conversations. I could not reach all the people that I have been directed to, and in most conversations, we did not arrive to any conclusion. The conversations, to put it in Sullivan's words, are still unfinished (1989). All the places that I went to in person have conversations about archaeology are shown in figure 3.2. But most of the interactions I had for this dissertation were made through digital media and social networks. These include people of a wider geography than depicted in the map.

In the following pages, I will present the different people and the settings in which I engaged in dialogue for this dissertation.

Ejido López Mateos, Palenque

Ejido López Mateos was founded in 1967 by people from Tumbalá. There were 55 original petitioners, but only 19 of them received a parcel of land and became assembly members. The land given by the federal government came from 410 hectares of the Finca Santiago, previously property of The Chiapas Rubber Plantation and Investment Company (Gobierno

Federal de México, 1967). The ejido now has a total population of about three hundred people. It is a quiet conservative town with a Protestant-Christian majority distributed in three churches. To reach López Mateos there are trucks that make the 45-minute trip for twenty pesos on the unpaved road from the Palenque ruins. Actually, it is much closer to the ruins by a foot path that directly crosses the ridge separating the ejido from the National Park. That trail, which arrives directly behind the Temple of the Inscriptions, is used exclusively by people of López Mateos and El Naranjo.

The public infrastructure of the ejido consists of a water tank connected to a spring that feeds all extended family domestic compounds in town, the electrical network carried from the ruins, and a *casa ejidal*, the place where they held the assembly meetings. There is also a bilingual elementary school that is perceived by most as lacking teachers and enough time in the classrooms. But it is a valued place because it has been a wi-fi hotspot used by many in the last four years. Besides this spot, people use "*fichas de internet*" (internet tickets), pre-paid wi-fi time sold by the families getting the satellite signal or the network of antennas from Palenque. The last infrastructure feature in town is a public soccer field next to the river, a common meeting point for youth.

I have worked for more than twenty years with several Ch'ol members of two families of this town. For many years we have had conversations about what it means for them to work with the materiality of the ancient Palencanos, and about their perceptions of the narratives archaeologists and epigraphers create. I have been invited to their houses to eat on many occasions, and stayed several nights as a guest. Every day around dusk, all the town, separated by gender, goes to the river Chacamax to have a bath. After the people arrive from their work, milpas, or their handcraft stands in the archaeological zone, after teenagers have played soccer in the public field, and before they have dinner and go to bed, they wash themselves. Some of them stay a while seated on the fresh rocks of the river talking with friends. I remember great conversations there about many topics, accompanied by the stars and the sounds of the forest. As alcohol is prohibited in the ejido, we often spent nights on the archaeologists' campsite having drinks together with a few of the younger generation of Ch'oles. We have shared a substantial part of our lives around archaeological work in Palenque and we know about our respective achievements and difficulties over a long period. I know how the livelihood of the people of López Mateos and all the ejidos around Palenque has been closely attached to the World Heritage site, about the pride they take in the expertise some of them have in restoration and excavation, and how they have become an essential part of research. I have become familiar with how they build family labor networks around the ruins, entangling their lives with Palenque's flows of tourism, research, vigilance, and site maintenance, offering different products and handcrafts on its trails, guiding tour groups as certified jungle tour guides, or offering traditional sweat bath experiences. Before my research I understood the meaning of heritage to them as exclusively related to sustenance and work.

My first visit to López Mateos with the current research in mind was in June 2016, when I was invited to the wedding of Moctezuma López, a friend and field collaborator that I have known since he was three years old. I was assigned the work of a *reportero* (reporter) and took pictures during all the wedding ceremony and party, from the moment Moctezuma's family started the parade from the bride's house in the neighboring ejido of El Naranjo, until the *recalentado* (leftovers) on the next day. The wedding ceremony was good to meet a lot of people in town, and to observe how close of a relationship the neighboring Ch'ol and Tseltal ejidos of López Mateos and El Naranjo have. It is frequent to see patrilocal marriages between the two communities, and there are some trilingual children, but unfortunately this has also led many children not to speak either Ch'ol or Tseltal.

On that visit, I started to explain to different members of the extended family of Moctezuma my intentions of investigating what they think about archaeological work and heritage. All of them have close -but different- relationships with the archaeological work and site. In 2016, I still did not have IRB approval and I wanted to take things slowly, without rushing questions or forcing conversations. So I only detailed what I wanted to inquire about in the days before the marriage, and asked them if they were willing to be represented in my investigation, and under what conditions.

In 2017 there was a field season of excavation in the Group IV compound, one of the architectural groups of the city of Palenque. I spent several weeks working on the photogrammetry of the general excavations and of the many human burials in the small plaza of the ancient neighborhood. During fieldwork, we talked a lot about what it meant for them to excavate the physical remains of the ancient Palencanos. A few of them are familiar with the efforts Native Americans in the United States have taken to repatriate human remains from archaeological collections and museums, and were very curious about the results and discussions around that subject. A general consensus among all the Ch'ol workers was an interest of the contents of ancient burials. Even though they refer to the archaeological Palencanos as *lak'ñojtye'elob* (our ancestors) they don´t have problems excavating them. They take pride identifying tomb signs before archaeologists do, and are happy to see and hold burial goods and to recognize the way graves are constructed. Almost all of them complained about the way the valuable objects are taken away from Palenque, or opaquely disappear from the public to be stored in the site museum. This is a critique about archaeologists that kept showing up through all the conversations I had in this research.

Fig. 3.3. The Puy soup.

One of the Sundays of the field season, I was invited to the house of Samuel, Moctezuma's father, to eat *puy* (*xutes* in Spanish), a river snail soup that Ch'oles appreciate as a tasty and nutritious meal (Fig. 3.3). Xutes (genus Pachychilus) are one of the archaeological materials that show up in almost every context we excavate. According to Samuel López, it is natural that people have eaten so much of this snail through the years, because they are easy to grow by planting a few of them in water streams, and they give a lot of sexual energy letting people have a lot of children. Sexual jokes are a frequent theme when excavating the remains of this food. Samuel talks about how, when he was a child, his mother produced lime with the shells from snails that were eaten, and how the nixtamal and the whitening/disinfesting of their houses were made with lime produced by burning the carbonate-based shells. Since industrial lime has been available, it is cheaper and easier to buy it.

After I completed the IRB process, I made more visits to López Mateos, generally avoiding spending the night in their house to be as little invasive as possible. But sometimes conversations carried on, and I lost the last *transporte* to get back to the city. In those cases, I used to go in the afternoon to the soccer field to play and watch the games, to cooperate in the acquisition of a *big* (a three liter off-brand Coca-Cola) for the end of the game, and to have a chat with the young guys of the town. Seated next to the field during those occasions, I remembered very vividly my childhood experiences in the school playground, being terrible at soccer, but wanting to be included in the games and the conversations, ultimately failing at it. The challenges of ethnography were made very explicit in that

situation, not just for the social awkwardness that I experienced, but also for the difficulties in creating a real exchange of ideas in a dialogue, given the structures I have been placed into through the years of archaeological research.

During the pandemic I remained in contact with my López family friends. The couple of grandparents that originally settled in López Mateos in 1967 died in that period. Many people did not have the luxury of staying home. In phone calls with Samuel and Moctezuma, the remedy to all kinds of flus based on garlic, citrus fruits, and ginger was mentioned as highly effective against covid. Samuel affirmed that the *lak'ñojtye'elob* knew well how to cure all kinds of sickness. The pandemic and its economic consequences hit Palenque and the communities around it hard. Although tourism halted, the construction of the Tren Maya did not stop. Most of the young adults in the ejidos surrounding the city have been employed in different developments within the Tren project, for example, the construction of a Hotel next to the park, the expansion of the trails and restoration of buildings in the site, and the renewal of all the facilities of the site (a sub-project called PROMEZA, Programa de Mejoramiento de Zonas Arqueológicas).

After realizing that the contingency of their positions about archaeology depends on the complex web of contexts in which they and all the actors move around the archaeological site, I gave up on further consultation among my friends of López Mateos. I had failed to understand the complex relationship they have with the ruins and the labor they provide. In many aspects I felt they were telling me what they supposed I wanted to hear, while in other contexts they were expressing very different opinions. For example, I had conversations with several people of the *ejido* about what it means to work with the archaeologists, with few objections and depicting harmonic terms of engagement. I was aware of a history of not so harmonic relations, but I understood their points and the family histories associated positively with archaeological labor. Then I watched several of them participate in a protest and strike in 2022 asking for better pay, and asking all archaeologists to leave the site. It is a shame that the place where the most heritage complexity is, and where change is more urgent, is the one that I understood the least, but it is in the nature of a World Heritage site, and it will need further engagement and investigation.

ConCiencias Zapatistas por la humanidad

In the final days of 2016 and the first of 2017, the EZLN organized the first edition of the *ConCiencias Zapatistas por la Humanidad*. This was a scientific conference in which they called *Kaxlan* researchers from different universities of the world to talk about problems and questions the Zapatistas have. It was held in the installations of the Zapatista *CIDECI – Universidad de la Tierra Chiapas*. Located northwest of San Cristobal de las Casas, it was very close to the poor neighborhoods of the Tsotsiles that have been displaced after religious and land conflicts in recent decades, and that are now victims of organized crime

and its violence. In 2019, the campus of CIDECI educational center was granted the status of a *Municipio Autónomo Rebelde Zapatista* (MAREZ) (Rebel Autonomous Zapatista Municipality). In the last decade, it has become an important place for the autonomous system of education, and the most common forum from where the EZLN communicates to the outside world.

Fig. 3.4. The inauguration speech at the 2017 ConCiencias congress.

I was aware of this congress after it was transmitted online, and as soon as I saw the convocation to the second edition I asked to attend as an *escucha*, or listener. The conference explicitly excluded social sciences in both of its editions. It involves a very interesting format of convocation to dialogue: in the first edition they posted a series of questions formulated by different Zapatista students, most of them related to biology, agronomy, astronomy, and physics. Among the long list of questions there were some related to hominid history, archaeology, and the ancient Maya. The fact that the questions place emphasis on the same monumentality that the state and tourism celebrates is very interesting, even if it is for different reasons.

I went to CIDECI between December 26 and 30, 2017. It was really interesting to see the network of scientists coming from universities from all over the world, working together with different indigenous communities towards equality and exchange of knowledges. Even though archaeologists in Mexico have not listened to the demands of many indigenous groups about decolonization, other disciplines have years of experience working with epistemologies outside of Western paradigms, building dialogue and collaboration, and avoiding extractive practices.

It was great to hear the inauguration speech in the words of five female Zapatista students of each main Caracol, or autonomous settlement (Fig. 3.4). They talked about the Maya

calendar and its relation with the cultivation cycles, they welcomed “rebel scientists” that are willing to build a science with the liberty to promote common good, controlled by the people in the fight for their rights. They asked to make science a true collective of their problems and interest into the real world, a science able to transcend what they called the “scientific science”.

However, I had little chance to talk to the Zapatista students. The masked men and women did not mingle among the e*scuchas*, they were physically separated in the big auditorium of CIDECI. I did have the chance to speak with many attendees about the possibilities of the questions and knowledges presented in the conference. For example, there was a group of Tseltal apiculture cooperative members from Ocosingo, who attended because they are very interested in climate change and the influence of GMOs on their honey production. They told me how they are all surrounded by archaeological sites and materials in their houses and fields and were very interested in the history of beekeeping that archaeology can recognize.

Assisting at ConCiencias, I noted that the Zapatistas imply a sense of Panmayanism without explicitly embracing it. They avoid ethnic categories, putting more emphasis on class structures of oppression, dispossession, and exploitation, a recent history shared by all the highland Mayas in the time of the plantations of foreign capitalists. Even though the Zapatistas and autonomous communities don’t represent the majority of Ch’oles (most them have nothing to do with the Zapatista networks) from people that I have talked with in this research, most are sympathetic to their causes. Ch'ol have a complicated relation of understanding the causes of the rebellion and later political movement, and at the same time suffering the consequences of their presence and activity, with all the violence and displacements associated with them. People in the Ch’ol regions most affected by Zapatismo and counterinsurgency lament the loss of important traditions, like the festivities of the Cristo Negro of Tila, after the political instability. Most have decided to remain as neutral as possible to escape paramilitary violence.

With all the complexities of the political polarization brought by Zapatismo, I found the congress and their discourse very advanced on questions related to my research and the effort of decolonization of which I want to be part. Since that event I have been listening closely to what they say, and I have learned a good deal about the positive achievements they have made in some of their communities, that otherwise would be at the outmost margins of Chiapanec society. The Zapatistas warned long ago about the current situation with paramilitary groups and their association with organized crime cartels around their communities. This situation has become dire during the last few months in towns on the border with Guatemala. It now impedes visits to the Yaxchilan ruins, for example.

Facebook

In the last ten years, internet service has arrived to many ejidos in Chiapas where previously there wasn't any coverage. Since then, and increasingly, the social networks of Facebook and WhatsApp have been the most popular means of communication among Ch'oles. In September 2016, very soon after I decided on the subject of this dissertation, I opened a Facebook account with the nickname I was given by my friends from López Mateos, *Xkokisjol*, or Coconut-head, and I added all of them. During the first couple of years, it was a primary way to maintain contact with them from California. In that period, I was aware of only a couple of Facebook groups specialized in Ch'ol content, but there were many people that casually posted and interacted in their language. I am still not great at facebooking, but then I really did not know how to use the network. I posted a text in Ch'ol and Spanish about my research several times, opening questions to anyone who wanted to respond, and I did not receive any answer.

Nonetheless, it was through Facebook that I knew about many ways in which the history of the Ch'oles is narrated by themselves, and how they are very interested in their recent history. The towns of the region have changed a lot in the last hundred years, and people frequently post old images that show how the landscape has transformed. For example, there is much interest in the history of aviation in the region as before most roads were built there was a lot of movement of people and goods through the air. The airstrips were a focal point of the communities both in the highlands and the lowlands. Nowadays, most of the infrastructure and networks of pilots have disappeared, but tales of heroic pilots and difficult journeys remain. There is also a lot of posting about the cycles of religious holidays and the way they have changed or disappeared. For example, they describe how many communities have lost the organization of *cofradías* that managed the festivities, along with many other secular aspects of community life.

Shortly after digging for Ch'ol content in social networks, it became evident to me that there is a profound political polarization. Old and new conflicts in northern Chiapas foster sharper political affiliations, making a high contrast between the *autonomos* and the Ch'oles that chose to be outside of those groups. While the first remain marginal or outside state control through Zapatista networks, the second either participate in state institutions or try to remain neutral, even if is difficult, as stated by many consultants in this research. In recent years, blocking roads and cutting the fiber- optic cable that goes from San Cristobal to Palenque have been adopted as an impactful way of protest. The reasons for protests, and the way to circumnavigate blockades, are often discussed in online forums. There are dedicated groups to update news of such events, and everybody that moves in that landscape checks them before commuting.

In those groups, I started to get acquainted with many prominent voices that are heard by many Ch'ols. The words of Ch'ol poets, artists, historians, linguists, and activists are widely shared in the virtual networks. They post their academic and artistic production, participate

in discussions about language and orthography, and answer questions from many people. Even though those voices are not organized in a collective, they are much more effective than the official media provided by the state and federal government. I reached some of them and I got responses from a few. That is how I met Juana Karen Peñate, Juan Carlos López, and Miriam Hernandez. I will detail further about the dialogues and opportunities I had with them below.

My plans were to use Facebook to meet people and base my dialogues on personal visits to their places, and I proceeded with that plan from 2018, when I had my IRB application approved. I visited new and old consultants in the towns of Palenque, Tumbalá, and San Cristobal, until March 2020 with the arrival of the Covid-19 pandemic.

It was when the pandemic and its restrictions to travel began that I started to turn to Facebook seriously, and it seems that many Ch'oles did the same. There was then an explosion of online groups, posts, discussions, and online events, presenting and chatting about different cultural practices. In the first months of the safe distance restrictions, I created a Facebook page to share archaeological and mayanist information. After asking around for a good name, I got several suggestions. People said that I should name it with the most common term used to translate "ancient Maya" to Ch'ol language: *Lak'ñojtye'elob,* "our ancestors". Since I am a *Kaxlan*, I decided not to include myself in that collective (*Lak'*- our), to avoid imposing a history that it is not perceived the same way as we narrate it from archaeology. But taking into account the suggestions, I named it *La'ñojtye'elob*, which means "your ancestors" (*La'*- yours).

The page has been an efficient way of posing questions. Although its original purpose was to discuss the questions of my research, it later became part of a dissemination project. Almost everywhere I went, but particularly in the areas where there is not an archaeological site open to tourism, people generally had very little notion of what archaeologists do. So, to explain where my questions come from, I often had to describe my discipline and what we know about the ancient Maya. Putting myself in the position of a lecturer is definitely an obstacle to establishing dialogues among equals. But I could not magically get rid of my positionality, because my formation influences all my social relations, as well as my questions. Instead of pretending to go outside my paradigms, I gave up, and that resulted in more frank dialogues. At the beginning *La'ñojtye'elob* was slow, with just a few followers and very few comments. But with the later addition of the video capsules of "*Arqueología yik'oty Xkokisjol*", it thrived in chats, likes, and shares. It now has more than 1700 followers, and I receive questions and comments from everywhere in the Ch'ol region and beyond, particularly from the migrant community that lives on the Caribbean coast or the United States.

WhatsApp groups

After I opened my Facebook account, I made many acquaintances. Through them, I have been added to four WhatsApp chat groups. Two of them are mainly used for local news and to ask the routes to arrive to different towns, while promoting business of different kinds. Another group is mainly concerned with linguistic questions, and the fourth one is particularly fertile for discussions. It was made by Juan Carlos López, a Ch'ol cultural activist from Ejido 20 de Noviembre, Palenque. He manages a Facebook group with more than four thousand followers, where he posts and reports news, as well as videos about language and cultural practices. After a month of the Covid restrictions, Juan Carlos created a WhatsApp group called "Nuestra Cultura Chol-Maya", where from his contacts he added more than a hundred phone numbers. According to him, he selected the most vocal people that could engage in discussions about identity and culture, including activists, linguists, indigenous state workers, professors, writers, poets. This group has been very fruitful for engaging in dialogues with different people. It was used for two years very intensively to show local traditions, ask questions about them, compare them between different regions and dialects, talk about the towns' histories, and to complain about current conditions of many aspects of life in northern Chiapas.

Right after I was added to the group, I posted a bilingual text in which I explained what archaeologists do in Palenque and presented questions directed to the Ch'ol readers about what they think of our methods and narratives. The text was translated and adapted to both dialects by the paid collaboration of Morelia Vazquez, and it is included in the first appendix of this dissertation. After the posting of the text, the chat exploded with feedback, including many critiques. It was the first time different opinions were dialoguing with each other about my research questions. The majority of reactions were asking for more information and involvement in the process of knowing archaeological history. The first suggestions of creating videos were made one afternoon in that chat. Many people told me how they are surrounded by archaeological contexts in their houses and fields, what they think of the figurines and stone tools they find, how sometimes they are called by a rooster crowing to a treasure underneath archaeological mounds. Many pointed towards the Joloniel cave, and how the Classic period paintings are important to mark the sacrality of the space in the current use of it for ritual practices.

The posting of the text and the reactions to it spanned over one afternoon. Besides the welcoming feedback, several people manifested their skepticism, or were even disgusted with my proposals and included angry and vomiting emojis. One person left the chat after the first interactions. A group of three voices launched some valid criticisms about the paradox of my positionality as a researcher and the intention to equalize relations.

The skeptical group in the chat agreed on the idea that what archaeologists do is profanation, that the ancient materiality is to be left alone, and that not even contemporary Ch'ol can consider themselves as its owners. One of them remarked:

> “los abuelos y las abuelas cerámicas piden no ser reconstruidas. Tampoco quieren los huesos ser escarbados para ser explicados porque en los centros ceremoniales (no ruinas) tienen una intención sagrada.”
>
> “the ceramic grandparents ask to not to be reconstructed, neither the bones want to be dug to be explained, because in the ceremonial centers (not ruins) they have a sacred intention”. (WhatsApp conversation, May 20, 2020, my translation).

This was not the first time I was confronted with criticism towards archaeology and Western appropriation of history. In the two years that the chat was active, there was plenty of questioning about who is the beneficiary of doing archaeological science.

Some of the skeptics were willing to dialogue and some others not. They frequently make reference to the Popol-Vuj and other K’iche’ ideas, and are in contact with Panmaya activists from Guatemala, although none of them use the term Maya. An epigrapher was included in the group, and for some days there was a discussion between him and the most questioning voices about the accessibility of knowledge written in hieroglyphic texts. According to the Ch'ol critics, the truths in the ancient texts are hidden to *Kaxlanes*. I was fortunate to witness their reactions to an effort of dissemination without any reflexivity by the epigrapher. In fact, the epigrapher was speaking from the scientific truth, and the responses were very interesting. Despite the critiques, there were many reactions to the recognition of familiar semantics and sounds written in hieroglyphs.

Eight people posted pictures of archaeological objects they found or had in their house at different times. Some of them were interested in selling them and assessing their monetary value. The reactions of the rest of the chat were almost always negative. Other people reprimanded them both for the excavation and the will to profit. They were not criticizing the looting from a legal or scientific point of view, but from a call to avoid profanation of what is sacred. Some figurines, particularly anthropomorphic ones, were perceived by some as powerful objects with a connection to the supernatural world they call *wits* (hill). The objects lure the pure souls of children, attracting them to where the owners of the world and the *chujtyaty* (sacred father) live.

There were frequent posts and discussions about food, from people asking about availability of certain products and their cooking techniques, to questions about the history of Ch’ol cuisine and its ingredients. This is a subject that is intertwined with landscapes and the history of migration. There is a nostalgia for highland products among all the ejidos of the lowlands that originally come from Tumbalá and Tila. The *käkätye´* seed, *chipilin*, *yerbamora* and other herbs are often talked about. There are people taking those ingredients long distances, to the Caribbean coast and even to California. In the peak of the pandemic many recipes to boost the immune system were shared, with the same amount of misinformation that was present in all social networks about Covid at that time. Four Covid related deaths were reported in the chat.

The activity on the chat ended abruptly after the dogmatism of two anthropologists who were added later to the group. A discussion about bullfighting and animal rights sparked a condemnation of Christianity from them, attacking everything they see as colonial impositions. For these reasons, many people left the chat. Others stayed to contest these claims. I was partially relieved to be outside those fights and partially terrorized by all the possible blind-spots they suggested might exist in my research interactions. The anthropologists involved also started from a decolonial perspective and had positive intentions. They did not want to attack the people personally, but it became personal for many. The administrator ended by closing the group. It was a very rich forum with participation of a wide variety of voices. I met a lot of individuals there that wanted to discuss different ideas outside the group.

The group of linguists

Early on my Facebook activity, I met a group of Ch'ol and *Kaxlan* linguists that are very active in the promotion of the Ch'ol language, and in the regularization of its orthography. They have been involved in different ways in activism and academic events inside and outside government institutions. Carol-Rose Little, Jessica Coon, Jesus Vázquez, Silvestre Gómez, Nicolas Arcos, and Morelia Vázquez, have organized academic conferences and events. I met them personally in January 2019, when they organized the workshop "*Dispositivos técnicos para la sostenibilidad de las lenguas indígenas*" in the *Centro Estatal de Lenguas, Arte y Literatura Indígenas* (State Center of Indigenous Languages, Art, and Literature. CELALI) in San Cristobal de las Casas, where many of them live. Since then, we have been collaborating in different projects, and I have met a lot of Ch'ol people through them. The linguists created a blog[4] in which there is a lot of content about the language, the products of children's workshops they organized, and narratives from different communities. It was a fundamental source of information and contacts for this dissertation.

In June 2019, we organized together a series of talks about the language and history of the Ch'oles in Tumbalá, that I will detail further. A month later, we organized a series of workshops for the Ch'ol *Escuela Secundaria* (Junior Highschool) of San Miguel, Palenque, where Nicolas Arcos, one of the linguists, is from. Bilingual education is only available in the elementary level of education, and it is generally very poor, with few students able to write in their native language. This is why they considered it important to give a series of talks about Ch'ol orthography and writing. I spent a school day talking to all the seniors in the three groups of the third grade, teenagers of 14-16 years old, about what archaeology is and what we know of the history of the region of Palenque. I did not have any digital means of projection, so I circulated a lot of hieroglyphic monument drawings with their

[4] https://chol.lingspace.org/en/about/

transliteration and translation. It was one of the many times in which I have seen Ch'oles surprised by the recognition of their language in the ancient epigraphic texts.

Most of those teenagers know about the ruins of Palenque, but only a few of the circa eighty students had visited the site that is 25 kilometers from their town. A lot them had found archaeological pottery sherds and architectural mounds in the fields of their family or around the ejido of San Miguel. They talked about the different supernatural beings you can find around the ancient sites, how their parents have told them about the danger of an *espanto* (scare) that you can suffer in places like those or like the caves. They frequently stumble on archaeological contexts, and have seen many burials and buildings while clearing their fields from vegetation. They keep some of the objects they find in their houses, more for the intrinsic value than a monetary one, although some spoke of selling the *muñecos* (literally dolls; ceramic figurines) to *Kaxlanes*. All the kids and professors wanted to organize a visit to the ruins, but the pandemic came and we were not able to do it. It is something that I would like to organize in the future.

Nicolás Arcos López

In the meetings with the linguists, I was introduced to Nicolás Arcos López, a specialist in Ch'ol culture and language from Ejido San Miguel, Palenque. He is a linguistics professor at the Universidad Intercultural del Estado de Tabasco (Intercultural University of the State of Tabasco, UIET) in Oxolotán, where he has taught since 2011. He was born in San Miguel, but spent a part of his childhood in Valladolid, Yucatán, getting familiar with Mayat'aan and observing the aspects that are similar to those of his native language. Nicolás started to be conscious of his culture through the contrast with the Yucatecs. He first got interested in the culture and history of the Ch'oles more than the language, but his path led him to the master's degree at CIESAS for indigenous scholars.

The story of his family is that of many other Ch'oles in the ejidos created during the last century, that is migration from and nostalgia for a homeland, and adaptation to new landscapes. The foundation of the towns is recounted with heroic, religious, and supernatural elements. His family has also been involved in frequent land conflicts among community and family members, with the involvement of and intimidation by ill-intentioned ritual specialists called *Xwujty,* and the supernatural consequences and social dynamics generated by them.

He sees the potential of archaeology as a tool to make the Ch'oles understand their landscape and culture better, and actively participates in different kinds of activism and academic activities oriented towards the preservation of Ch'ol ways of life, their practices, and knowledge. He wrote the history of the foundation of San Miguel in the blog created by the group of linguists, and I think it is very relevant, as it is an example of the history of the Ch'oles conceived and narrated by themselves. Nicolás knows the story because his father

transmitted it to him, as he was one of the founders of San Miguel that came from Chunchucruz, an ejido near Tumbalá. I am reproducing his chronicle in its entirety:

The Water Lord (*Jiñi Yum Ja'*).

In San Miguel, Salto de Agua, Chiapas, there is a waterfall called Misolha (from *misol* 'sweep', and *ja'* 'water') 'fall of water'. Today this place is one of the major tourist centers of the municipality, and is frequently visited by people from different parts of the country and from abroad. But the first settlers who encountered the waterfall tell of the dangers of the *yum ja'* (water lord). One evening, when the Ch'ol people were searching for land for planting, they heard the sound of water in the distance. They were tired and quite thirsty, so they went in search of the water, but they never imagined that they would run into the yum ja' there. At that time, he did not show himself in person, but he used the *ik'* (air), the *ja'al* (rain) and the *mam* (lightning) to send messages. The first thing that impressed people was the height of the falls and the rainbow that formed above the water. Then suddenly, a voice was heard saying… "I know that you were expelled from your community and have nowhere else to stay. That's the only way I let people enter my house. But as for the people who do not respect my house I will not respect them either, and that's how it will be with your wives, brothers, and children." After having listened to the *yum ja'*, the group felt sad and unsure about his welcome, because they did not know what to expect, or what would happen to them if they did not fulfill his wishes. The next day, the small group of Ch'oles left again for their places of origin to go in search of their relatives and other people who had wanted to found a new community. Once the Ch'ol people managed to settle near the waterfall, they started hunting animals for their food, they started logging and burning many swaths of rainforests for their crops, and then they even began to steal treasures that were hidden in the mountains and caves. When the yum ja' became aware of this situation he began to communicate his anger through dreams with *laktyaty* ('our father'): "I saw how the *Kaxlans* (Ladino people) came to burn houses. The tenants of the place cried and it was impossible to show resistance, because the group that had come to harm them were mounted and carried machetes." *Laktyaty*, surprised by the revelation, called a meeting to gather the inhabitants of the community and communicate the message he had heard. However, his words were not taken into account and many men and women continued with the same practices as before. The yum ja' realized that his words had been disobeyed, so he again reached out to the *laktyaty* and his community: ''You saw how the *ja'al* flooded the houses and the crops near the rivers and streams. The roofs of houses, trees and crops fell by the forces of *ik'*. *Mam* flashed and shouted at sunset and nightfall." *Laktyaty* understood that the dreamed message had come from the yum ja' and after reaching consensus with his family, they decided to bring him an offering and prayers. But suddenly a current of air extinguished the candles and they heard a voice that said: "So this is how they repay me for the favors I gave them? I inhabit this house and I will not allow it to be destroyed!" *Laktyaty* again tells his family and friends about the event, and manages to convince some of their children so that each year they bring a token of gratitude to the yum ja'. Still not satisfied with this situation, the *yum ja'* meets *Ik'*, *Ja'al* and *Mam*, and each one asks for support to defend the inhabitants of the jungle. The *Ja'al* constantly floods the well of Misolha, it makes it deeper and more turbid, and that prevents people from enjoying the natural color and beauty of the water. This in turn generates economic losses for the owners of established businesses there. The *Ik'*, is in charge of sweeping the clouds to other places and with its blowing it also often generates large fires in the mountains and in the crops in the burning season. It also

> creates a whirlpool to trap and submerge people in the depths of the waterfall. The *Mam*, for his part, flashes and shouts the passage of the *ik'* and *ja'al*; he burns the looters physically and spiritually and when he can, he goes back to hiding the treasures in inaccessible places.
>
> The yum ja' is still alive and constantly visits the community of San Miguel. (Arcos López, 2018) (Blog entry, available in English in the Ch'ol Lingspace blog[5])

The narration of the excesses committed in the exploitation of natural resources by the early inhabitants of San Miguel is very interesting. The archaeological treasures (called *mukbilbä* in his Ch'ol version, without a good translation into Spanish or English) are part of the *matyelum*, or forests, which means they are owned by the same beings that possess the animals, vegetation and water. They need to be exploited with their permission and in a sustainable way, otherwise this makes the *Yumja'*, or the owner of water, angry and brings them to suffer the consequences of weather calamities and bad times.

UIET

Thanks to Nicolás Arcos I visited Oxolotán, Tabasco, to meet the professors at the Intercultural University of the State (UIET). The majority of students and faculty are Ch'ol, with the others coming from Yokot'an and Zoque communities, as well as a minority of *Kaxlan* professors. Although it is an institution that survives with very little resources and official acknowledgment, it has been a very productive setting for the formation of indigenous academics and intellectuals. It offers education that combines traditional knowledge with Western academic knowledge. Oxolotán is its biggest campus with seven bachelor's degrees: Intercultural Communication, Intercultural Law, Sustainable Rural Development, Tourist development, Intercultural Nursing, Language and Culture, and Intercultural Medicine (Fig. 3.5). The most popular careers chosen by the students are nursing, tourism, and language and culture. They all receive intensive courses on their native language, along with introduction to history and anthropology. A lot of valuable theses have been written by UIET students, with perspectives on the culture of Ch'oles of different parts of Chiapas and Tabasco.

[5] https://chol.lingspace.org/en/the-water-lord-jini-yum-ja/

Fig. 3.5. The UIET campus in Oxolotán

In January 2019, I was invited to give a one-day seminar for the professors about mayanist archaeology and the history of the Maya peoples. I found a group of faculty members and administrators eager to get involved with the making of narratives about the ancient Maya and the histories they belong to. Since then, I have recognized the intercultural universities (including the Chiapas one in San Cristobal de las Casas, which unfortunately I have not been able to visit) as a very fertile ground for consulting about ethical and methodological aspects of archaeology with respect to indigenous rights. All the professors had anecdotes, tales, and beliefs associated with archaeological sites and materials. They had questions about the ways the ancient Maya practiced their foodways, medicine, and social hierarchies, as well as questions about archaeological methods and the uses we have for archaeological materials. Even among them, I saw a few surprised by the recognition of their language in hieroglyphic inscriptions, but most of them knew about the relation of Classic inscriptions and the Cholan languages.

In October of the same year of the professors' seminar, I gave a two-day workshop[6] for the students of five of the careers. This was also about archaeological methods and the history of the Maya peoples through archaeology and epigraphy. I received more input on where and when the Ch'oles focus when they talk about their history, and what their expectations of collaboration would be in case they could be included in archaeological research. I saw a great emphasis on colonial history among the students in general. They are very interested

[6] https://www.facebook.com/groups/403182670380710

in the histories of the foundation of the old and not so old towns, the construction of their churches and the cult to the Black Christ of Tila. At the end of the workshop, we had an activity for them to create a Wikipedia entry about Ch'ol heritage. Given the large number of Ch'ol speakers, we never achieved a consensus about what should be included in the content, and we ended up never creating the page. Nonetheless, the exercise was great for them to talk about the different perspectives they have about history and heritage, and for me to hear the aspects on which they have more emphasis.

There were a few common denominators in the responses discussed and delivered on small text cards they wrote, including the importance of historical churches and buildings, foodways, the cycle of Ch'ol festivities and oral traditions. They all share a sense of Ch'ol culture being lost or under menace of disappearing, and welcomed the idea of collaboration between archaeologists and indigenous peoples. Out of the seventy students that attended the workshop, I received 23 written responses from this activity that are included in the Appendix 2 of this dissertation. They talked about the fact that many communities are not intensively attached to their current land because they migrated relatively recently, and they have lost many landmarks that used to be important in their world, including some archaeological materiality. They discussed among themselves about what was important to remember and what they want to change.

The International Indigenous Day of 2019 in Aldama and San Andrés Larrainzar, Chiapas.

On August 9, 2019, a few weeks after the workshops in Tumbalá and San Miguel, I was invited with the linguists to Aldama, Chiapas, by state bureaucrats to be part of the public and participate in state celebrations of the International Indigenous Day. It was a moment of high tension in the land conflicts between the towns of Aldama and Chalchihuitán, with recent events of shootings and assassinations. The governor of Chiapas wanted to be present to calm the situation. A strong discourse of party politics was implicit in the celebration, to show the supposedly novel paradigms of the new state and federal administration. They wanted to project an image of a governor facing difficulties in person, without intermediaries.

Early in the morning of the day of the event, we were transported from downtown San Cristobal in government vans on the roads that lead to the north, and to the Zapatista territory. We passed San Juan Chamula, Zinacantán, and San Andrés Larrainzar. In each town the contingent of government vehicles grew bigger. When we arrived to Aldama around noon, we had to wait for a couple of hours in the town square for the high-ranking officials to arrive (Fig. 3.6). There was a lot of expectation about the conflict and the presence of people of both towns. When the Governor arrived, accompanied by INAH's director and the secretary of SEDESPI, they were invited to a house to receive blessings and attire from the town's traditional authorities. After an hour, they came out to start the

public event. Indigenous authorities from all over Chiapas recognized by the state were present in the tight venue built in the roofed basketball court of the town.

A couple of my Ch'ol companions had instructions to give a speech at the event, and they prepared for weeks to do a good job talking about the most dire necessities of their communities, and about what was urgent to do to alleviate them. When we arrived, they were given traditional costumes that they had never wore in their lives, and were put standing in the back of the podium where the officials were going to sit. They remained silent in the back for the totality of the event.

The first speech was given by Diego Prieto, the director of INAH, who started by praising the governor and the administration of MORENA´s (*Movimiento Regeneración Nacional*) political party, claiming that authorities were not hiding from the problems. He continued to highlight the advances in economic policies that were aimed at improving the lives of indigenous communities, with lots of gestures to the Tren Maya, without explicitly mentioning it. He also reprimanded neighboring communities for the lack of peace between them. After him, the SEDESPI secretary gave brief comments. He is the same person that officiated the ceremonies of inauguration of the works of the Tren Maya, a role that many consultants complained about, because he does not have any ritual office (see pag. 72). The governor's speech was in the same tone, and started by saying that he arrived by land and not by helicopter because he was not afraid of the people, that he was not going to leave until everything was worked out between Aldama and Chalchihuitán. After a few minutes of his speech, many members of the public in the margins of the basketball court started displaying protest signs, and yelling at the visitors and government officials. The tension quickly built up and the yelling became generalized, and people started to move from their seats. In less than two minutes, the governor and his company were already in their bulletproof trucks on their way to San Andrés Larrainzar, to the second part of the visit planned for the event.

After half hour of confusion in Aldama, we were advised to leave, and we took the SEDESPI vehicles to San Andrés Larrainzar, the town that the Zapatistas named Sakamch'en de los Pobres. It is where the only agreed upon document produced from several forums in the same negotiations was signed between the Zapatistas and the federal Government in 1996. The fulfillment of the San Andrés Accords was part of the political campaign of the current administration, but it wasn't visible in this event. The event was marked by a lot of *Guardia Nacional* (National Guard) security and was in the same tone as the previous one intended. The INAH director was trying to convince attendees that the situation was different, right in the place where 23 years earlier the biggest indigenous collective ever to have negotiated with the government asked for more inclusion in archaeological investigation and management. These earlier participants also asked for their recognition as subjects of public law, and had many other demands for cultural policies, about which he said absolutely nothing.

Apart from the fiasco of that event, it was sad and very interesting to witness how state rituals and rhetoric have changed very little since the middle twentieth century. The explicit folklorization of my friends was combined with a completely empty discourse about justice that has been promised since the peak days of the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI). In that period, the relationship between the federal state and indigenous communities was created through networks of patronage authorities aligned with electoral processes. These were generally very far away from the real needs of the populations they represented. Despite their marginalization during this event, my friends have used many different means of activism to preserve their language and culture, and to demand the changes needed to make conditions more equal to the rest of non-indigenous Mexicans. It was a shame that the authorities missed the opportunity to hear their demands.

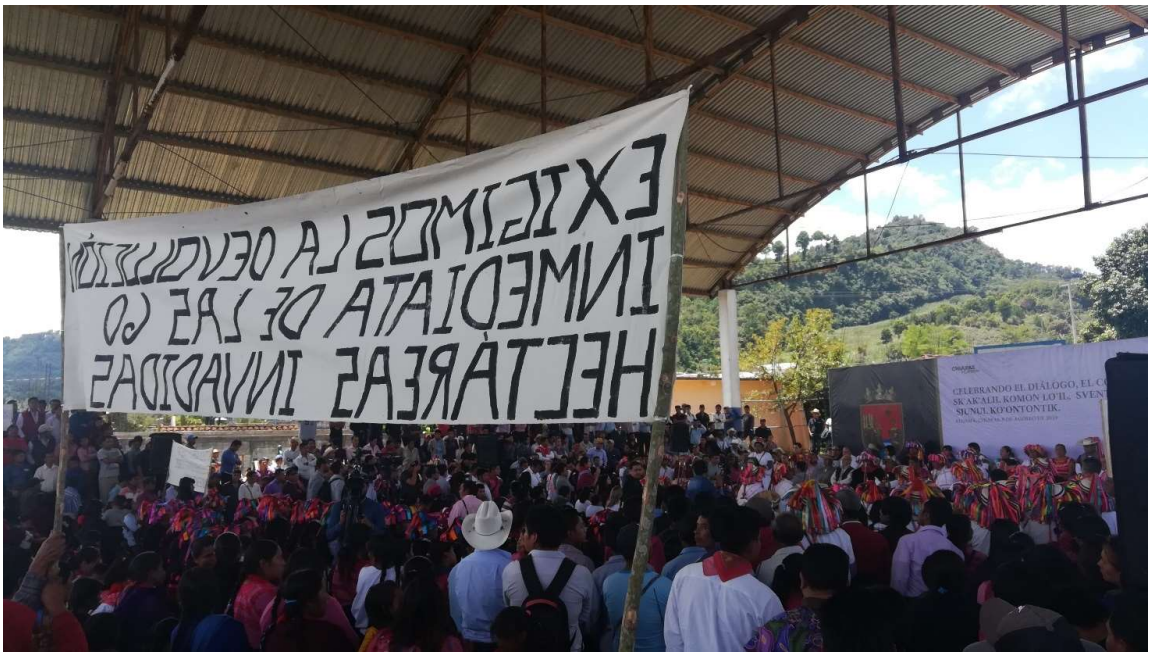

Fig. 3.6. The 2019 Aldama International Indigenous day event.

Juana Karen Peñate Montejo and the Casa de Cultura of Tumbalá

It has been a privilege to meet Juana Karen Peñate through social networks, and to have been able to work with her in person. She is a respected voice among thousands of Ch'oles on Facebook and other media. After reading her work and witnessing her prominent presence in online networks, I introduced myself to her through Facebook, and she was very kind to answer. She has been very receptive of the research questions of this project, and we have been accomplices in mutual projects.

Juana Karen is the director of the *Casa de Cultura* of Tumbalá, and she is many more things than that. She has a degree in law and has studied communication, has been a radio producer, a law translator, cultural promoter, and is a poet. She has published three books with her work, and in 2020 she received the *Premio Literaturas Indígenas de América* (Indigenous Literatures of the Americas Award) for one of these, her work *Isoñil ja'al*, "The song of the Rain". She is a driving force in the cultural life of Tumbalá. Her *Casa de Cultura*, a municipal cultural center, is a cultural hub where children and young Ch'oles have the chance to learn both traditional and international music, plastic arts, and participate in many other knowledge sharing and cultural events.

I first got to know her through her poetry, where the history of the Ch'ol people is often represented. In her poem "The Maya are words and forest", she uses the term Maya appropriating it with an exclusive form of the plural first-person pronoun. When she says "Xmayajoñbalojoñ" she is saying "we, the Maya", and she is talking to people outside of that collective, the *Kaxlanes*. She describes the collective Ch'ol spirit as living in the heavens of history, and uses the Temple of Inscriptions in Palenque as a metaphor of the painful places of their past. The following poem, published in a cultural supplement of the newspaper *La Jornada*, beautifully reflects her positions about Ch'ol history:

Xmayajoñbalojoñ matye´el yik´oty xty´añonlojoñ	**[We] The Maya are words and forest**
Cha´añ mi kña´tyañlojoñ tsijk´uxtäl, mi kchoklojoñ *mi ktsätsel cha´leñlojoñ ty´añ* *ila tyi ch´ujulbä melbaläl* *ts´itya kñusa k´iñlojoñ*	Because we know about pain, we reject it. We fight from the temple of inscriptions an essential part of our days.
Ili xmayaty´año´b xty´añ kälojoñ *tyi tyamlel ñäch´tyälel:* *kch´ujlelojoñ añ tyi* *panchanlel ty´an*	[We] the Maya *xty'añob* say with profound silence: our spirit lives in the heavens of history.
Mi kbuty´lojoñ jocholbä ti ibäl *cha´añ tsijk´uxtäl yik´oty mich´ajel:* *mi it´säñsañoñlojoñ itsajakñäyel k´iñ.* *ili ñoxi´ tyuch´libäl mi iletsañ ik´uxel,* *mi ityajbeñ iwäyi´ yujkel* *iyäch´ añoñlojoñ tyi tsatsabä*	We fill the letters emptied by the hate and anger: we bathe on the sun's perfume. These old pyramids climb to the pain, they reach the room of the storms and they make the presence of wars.
Joñoñlojoñ mi k´elojoñ letyoj, mi kälojoñ ñäch´tyäyel, *mi kñatyañlojoñ pañämil* *chä´äcchi, komolojoñ uts´atybä ty´äñ:*	[We] The Ch'ol look at the conflict, we talk about peace, we understand the world Yes, we demand respect.

joñoñlojoñ che´ bajche´ matye´el yik´oty ty´an.	We are the presence of the forest and the word.

(Peñate Montejo, 2003)(my translation from her Spanish version)

In others of her works, she talks about how the ancient buildings in her landscape witness the passage of time that weaves Ch'ol history. She describes the builders of the ancient houses as *Tatuchob*, or grandparents, and acknowledges how their message and prayers still live in those ancient walls, even just as a reminder of them.

Tatuch	**Tatuch**
Tatuch, ipaty ili ñoxi´ otyoty,	*Tatuch*, the walls on the ancient building
tsa´ ik´eleyety,	witness the passage of your years,
jiñäch tyamlel woli ts´ix awe´tyel,	it is time that threads your history,
ñumenixbä, wolibä iyujtyel mi kälel,	past and future eternize,
iyutslel aty´añ ilaj tyi lum.	they harmonize your voices in the cosmic
Ilayi, añ ip´ätyälel ak´ay	space.
ak´aba, aty´añ, awejtyal,	Here, your chant persists,
ilayi, tyi paty ili otyoty, ktatuch	your name, your word, your sign,
wa´chumul asubоñel yik´oty	here, on these walls, *tatuch*
ach´ujulty´añ.	your message and your prayers live.

(Peñate Montejo, 2013, 42–43) (my translation from her Spanish version)

Juana Karen is very interested in the history of the Maya and of Ch'ol peoples. We have had many conversations about how archaeology can be opened up to the participation of indigenous communities in the region she lives in, and we also have seen how much knowledge sharing efforts are needed. Outside the zones neighboring Palenque or Yaxchilan, very few people (not just indigenous, but anyone) know what archaeology does, and we agreed that archaeologists need to share the knowledge we produce. With that in mind, I visited Tumbalá on several occasions in 2019 and at the beginning of 2020. Tumbalá has been a relatively small town for its five-century history. Spanish is spoken by the majority, but it is rarely heard in the normal everyday life in town.

Together with Juana Karen and a group of linguists, we organized a series of talks about archaeology and Ch'ol language. Before the pandemic, we only had the chance to do one of them, and it was successful. In June 16 of 2019, more than 40 people, including children, young people and a few of their parents attended the talks. The one I gave was entitled: "*Iñusak'iñ yik'oty ity'añ mayajob*", "The history of the maya peoples and its languages" (Fig. 3.7). The public asked a lot of questions about what we excavate and what we use excavated materials for. I talked about archaeological methods and what we know about the ancient Maya. I gave as many epigraphic examples as I could. As in many other places, I saw the surprise of recognizing many of their own words in the phonetics of the hieroglyphs. I intentionally focused on the history of the lady ruler of Sibikte´ after the

animated faces made by a group of girls when I was talking about the inscriptions of the Joloniel cave, and on how a woman was the most powerful person in the region in the sixth century.

Fig. 3.7 The talk at Casa de Cultura in June 2019.

Juana Karen has a personal sense of Ch'ol history. She talks of it lamenting the colonial dispossessions, the time of the *finca* plantations, and the frequent violence. But she acknowledges that much of her culture still survives against the constant pressure of *Kaxlan* and Western assimilation. Juana Karen addresses the way the *Kaxlanes* have appropriated the ancient spaces for leisure and money, while the uses of those spaces are getting lost for the few people that still practice their rituality in places with the presence of ancient Maya. She states:

> *Las y los choles abuelas y abuelos nos cuentan que venimos de Yutybal Ña'äl de la raíz de una gran madre, una madre antigua, ellas y ellos no saben si se denominan mayas, solo saben que nuestro Yutybal eran sabios, miraban el mundo con sus propios ojos, con su tacto, con su palabra, nos cuentan que construyeron casas grandes allá donde habitaban, nosotros sabemos y conocemos esa parte, las cuevas de Joloniel, es trabajo de nuestras ancestras y ancestros, pero los habitantes de ahora ya no le dan importancia, porque los Kaxlanes cambiaron nuestra forma de pensar, nos quitaron todo lo que éramos nuestra ropa, nuestras ceremonias, invadieron nuestros territorios, tuvimos que huir a otras lados y empezar de nuevo, fuimos mozos de los finqueros que igual nos impusieron sus culturas y por eso ahora casi no nos acordamos de nuestra historia, no estamos olvidando, la religión que nos impusieron nos obliga a olvidar de los que somos, que venimos de grandes constructores de casas, construyeron pensamientos e ideas,*

inventaron el tsik (calendario) y muchas otras cosas que desconocemos, ahora cada uno pertenece a una iglesia nuestras celebraciones lo ven como brujerías, ya somos pocos los que vamos a las cuevas, en los ojos de agua, en las Ruinas de Palenque solo los Kaxlanes llegan a pasear ya no se hacen las ceremonias, ahora el gobierno lo hacen por dinero, en las Cuevas de Joloniel y en el ox, no son muy conocidos solo van los tatuches a sembrar su promesa de vez en cuando. (Entrevista escrita, Peñate Montejo, April 26, 2020)

Our grandfathers and grandmothers tell us that we come from *Yutybal Ña'äl*, from the root of a great mother, an ancient one. The Ch'ol women and men do not know or care if they are called Mayas, they only know that our *Yutybal* were sages, they looked the world with their own eyes, with their skin, with their word. The grandparents tell us that big houses were built where the ancient people lived, we know and acknowledge that part of history, for example, the Joloniel Caves is the product of the work of our ancestors, but the population of these days do not give it much importance, because the *Kaxlanes* changed our way of thinking, they took everything we were, our clothes, our ceremonies, they invaded our territories, we had to flee to other lands and start over again. We were servers to the plantation owners that also imposed their culture, and that is why we barely remember our history. The religion that they imposed makes us forget what we are, that we come from great builders of architecture and ideas, they invented the *Tsik* (calendar) and many other things that we now ignore, now when we become members of a Christian church they make us think of our celebrations as witchcraft. Very few people still go to the caves and to the water springs to make our ceremonies. In the ruins of Palenque only the *Kaxlanes* arrive to sightsee and the rituals are not made there anymore, the government does that for the money. In the caves of Joloniel and Ox only the *tatuchob* go to plant their promises every now and then. (Written interview, my translation)

When asked about what the relation is of the Ch'ol people with the archaeological materiality in their region, she states:

La idea que se tiene de la arqueología es muy vaga, los choles saben de su existencia pero nadie se ha puesto a reflexionar que formamos parte de esa historia, lo vemos muy ajeno a nosotros, porque hemos dejado de escuchar a nuestros abuelos y abuelas, desconocemos nuestra historia, los jóvenes de ahora la mayoría no tienen sed ni hambre por conocer, pesa más "niega que eres indígena" solo habla el español, porque es una vergüenza hablar tu idioma, te van discriminar, esas expresiones nos ha permitido negar de nosotros porque nadie nos habla de esta historia; como poeta me llevo un proceso largo para reconocerme y asumirme como integrante de un pueblo con riqueza en cuanto a historia, que provengo de una raíz milenaria, pero eso me di cuenta cuando salí de la comunidad, del municipio y sobre todo porque yo misma me interesé en la escritura de mi idioma y haber recorrido las ruinas de palenque, Toniná y algunas otras ruinas, mi curiosidad por descifrar los jeroglíficos mayas, comprender que soy parte de la comunidad y que mis raíces proviene de una gran cultura como la maya. (Entrevista escrita, Peñate Montejo, April 26, 2020).

The knowledge about archaeology (among Ch'oles) is very vague, the choles know of its existence but nobody has reflected on the fact that we are part of that history, we see it not belonging to us, because we have stopped listening to our grandfathers and grandmothers, we ignore our history, most of the current youth are not thirsty nor hungry to know. It is more

> important to “deny that you are an indigenous”, “only talk in Spanish”, because it is a shame to speak in your language, you're going to get discriminated against. Those expressions have allowed us to deny ourselves, because nobody talks to us about history. As a poet I took a long process of recognizing and assuming myself as part of a people with historical richness, that I come from a millenary root, but I realized that when I left my community, my municipality, most of all because I was interested in the writing of my language, and having visited the ruins of Palenque, Toniná and some others. My curiosity to decipher the Maya hieroglyphs, understanding that I am part of a community and that our roots come from a great culture as the Maya. (Written interview, my translation)

Juana Karen has a very clear idea about what archaeology should do to get rid of its colonial structures. She has direct knowledge of how state institutions work and how we archaeologists offensively portray ourselves as the only ones with a voice about the Maya past. Juana Karen proposes:

> *Me gustaría en un primer momento que la arqueología debe asumir la responsabilidad el reconocimiento y la defensa de derecho al patrimonio de los pueblos indígenas. Que los pueblos indígenas sean coparticipe en el rescate, manejo e interpretación de su propio pasado mediante la arqueología. Que la arqueología reconozca a los pueblos indígenas como parte de su identidad y territorio y que reivindique la justa recuperación de sus territorios y de su misma historia a través de las excavaciones arqueológicas. Que existan los vínculos arqueológico-históricos, que se reconozca que existe la necesidad de construir una interculturalidad con los pueblos originarios. Que la arqueología les devuelva a los pueblos originarios la herencia de sus ancestros, conscientes de que el pueblo ch’ol fueron violentados por la conquista y colonización y es momento en que los pueblos deben ser considerados como parte de este patrimonio que les ha sido negado. Me gustaría también que tome en cuenta de las prácticas y cosmovisiones, identidades, mitologías, tradiciones orales, prácticas laborales, ceremoniales, curativas, creencias y tradiciones en general de los pueblos y comunidades indígenas, ya que actualmente los arqueólogos contemporáneos se asumen como los únicos que pueden manejar la materialidad de su pasado de los pueblos, que ofenden con su actitud al ignorar a los verdaderos herederos de los sitios arqueológicos. Propongo para que la arqueología mexicana comience a trabajar a partir de la información cultural, económica, política, social e ideológica de la cultura chol al mismo tiempo que empiecen a comprender la riqueza etnográfica que de ellas mismas emana.*
> (Entrevista escrita, Peñate Montejo, April 26, 2020)

> I would like in a first instance that archaeology assume the responsibility, the recognition, and the defense of the right to the indigenous peoples’ heritage. That the indigenous peoples be participants in the rescue, management, and interpretation of their own past through archaeology. That archaeology recognizes indigenous peoples as part of their identity and territory, revindicating the just recovery of their territories and their history through archaeological excavation, to establish links between our history and archaeology, that archaeology recognize that there is the need to build interculturality with the native populations. That archaeology returns to the indigenous peoples the legacy of their ancestors, conscious that the Ch’ol people have been hurt by the conquest and colonization, and it is time that the indigenous people have to be considered as part of that heritage that they have been denied. I would like also that archaeologists consider the practices, cosmovision, identities, mythologies,

> oral traditions, labor practices, curation ceremonies, beliefs, and traditions in general of the indigenous communities, because now the archaeologists assume themselves as the only ones capable of managing the materiality of the indigenous past, that offend with their attitude when they ignore the true heirs of the archaeological sites. I propose that Mexican archaeology needs to start to work from the cultural, economic, political, social, and ideological information of the Ch'ol culture, and at the same time to start to understand the ethnographic diversity emanating from it. (Written interview, my translation)

After winning the Indigenous Literature award, Juana Karen was invited in 2021 to the *Camara de Diputados* . Along with another 48 members of indigenous communities in Mexico, she took the podium[7] and expressed their arguments of vindication, memory, and value of the pluricultural diversity of the country. She invited our hearts (of the *Kaxlanes*) to beat at the rhythm of the Ch'oles, and demanded the serious inclusion of languages in official life. She urges for her culture to be visible, not just the folklore and the beautiful, but also the parts that still hurt them, which should be the responsibility of the Mexican institutions (Peñate Montejo, 2021).

Miriam Hernández Vázquez

As with Juana Karen Peñate, it has been a privilege to get to know Miriam Hernández Vázquez, and to collaborate with her on different projects. She is a specialist of Ch'ol language and culture, alumna of the Intercultural University of Tabasco (UIET), a pioneer in the digital activism of her language, a Ch'ol professor, a translator, a web developer, and a video content creator. Miriam manages the page "*Lakty'añ Ch'ol - Tila*" in Facebook, and I introduced myself to her through that medium. Since that moment we have had a constant dialogue about many aspects of her work and my research.

Miriam tells a story that is common among her generation. She was very young when the Zapatista conflicts exploded in the Tila region in 1996, when her grandfather, a *Xjuwty* with ritual capacity, was killed by paramilitary forces while attending his corn field, taking forever with him the knowledge he had. Those were difficult times for the ejidos around Tila and the Tulijá Valley. The *Paz y Justicia* paramilitary organization perpetrated a lot of killings around those years. The region became even more marginalized from the rest of the state, and the lack of medical services eventually took the life of her little brother, a few years after her grandfather's demise.

She started to become interested in studying her career after the insistence of her father and his passion about Ch'ol culture and history. Miriam started to write in her language when she attended the university, as she had a very poor Ch'ol education before that. It was

[7] https://www.facebook.com/camaradediputados/videos/discurso-de-juana-pe%C3%B1ate-montejo-en-lengua-chol/465905587327988/

then that she started to became very interested in the history and culture of different Maya peoples, including those of the Classic times. While she was studying at the UIET, she got inspiration from Tseltal and Tsotsil Facebook groups to make a forum about her language that currently has more than 13,000 followers. She collaborated with a programmer to create a Ch'ol dictionary application for Android phones, which is the most handy dictionary that I have. She included the sound of her voice in the pronunciation of every word included in the app.

Miriam has frequently discussed with her father about how they come from a "different mother from the one stated in the bible" (Interview, Miriam Hernandez, February 15, 2021). She has studied the history of the Maya and wants her community to embrace their ancestral culture, but she sees many problems in her community that are much more urgent to address. She is from Masoja-Shucjá, in the municipality of Tila, where the *ejido* has established a prohibition of any religion outside the Roman Catholic church of the town. They have had problems with religious proselytism and protestant events that they feel were invasive to their life and traditions. The strict policy has helped in the preservation of the traditional authority system of *tatuches* and *principales* in charge of the festivities and some of the secular aspects of life. The town used to have a ritual specialist that communicated and consulted with the spirit of San Miguel Arcangel in a cave near the ejido, in times of necessity. Those ceremonies, called "*esperas del santo*" (saint waiting), are no longer carried out, and no one visits the cave anymore.

During the Covid-19 pandemic, she struggled to find job opportunities. For this reason, she started to teach online Ch'ol language courses for beginners. I attended all the courses she offered, along with other people who included *Kaxlan* linguists and Ch'oles who felt they were losing their language and wanted to improve it and be able to write it. These have been the best lessons I have taken in Ch'ol, but I have still a lot to learn to have a fluent conversation.

On May 28, 2022, in her Facebook page Miriam transmitted a live video[8] where she and Isabela Mayo, a Ch'ol embroidery entrepreneur, interviewed me about mayanist archaeology and epigraphy. They opened the questions to the audience, and the interest of the majority was directed towards historical linguistics questions. For example, they wanted to know when the two main dialects started to separate and why it happened. They also have many other questions regarding life in Palenque, and even they asked for my opinion on ideas about ancient aliens that circulate around the internet.

On June 28, 2023, we presented a coauthored paper[9] in the *Congreso Internacional de Mayistas* entitled "*La construcción de las identidades: Lo maya para el pueblo Ch'ol*" (The construction of identities: the Maya for the Ch'ol people). There, we talk about the lack of

[8] https://www.facebook.com/watch/live/?ref=watch_permalink&v=312800987694974
[9] https://www.facebook.com/LenguaChol/videos/962130375106751/

participation of Ch'ol and indigenous communities in archaeological research, the ethical problems of Mexican national practice of the discipline, and how she and her community relate to the ancient people that dwelt in their region. The people of her community are not aware of big archaeological sites nearby and many of them, including her mother, have not been in any site opened by INAH. They seem to not to make any link between their history and the one of the Classic Maya peoples that inhabited their region. Nonetheless, they often think about the materiality they found from small archaeological sites in their fields. The figurines encountered are said by Miriam's father to have the power to attract children to the other side of the world, where the supernatural entities live. When she was a little child, she fantasized to get to know that other world and discover its secrets, encouraged by the incomplete knowledge and enthusiasm left by her grandfather to her father. He also told her a common story among the Ch'oles, how greenstone axes are a product of the nails of *Ch'ajk*, the thunder, who likes to eat the maggots that grow beneath tree bark, and with the power of thunder smashes the trunks in search of his treats, leaving his broken nails in the form of the greenstone artifacts. For millennia, Ch'ol and other Maya people have discovered polished stone objects left by ancient people in the forests, and have explained their presence through their own cosmogony and paradigms.

Juan Carlos López

Juan Carlos López is the creator of the WhatsApp chat group that I described previously. He has built an extensive network of Ch'ol individuals from the arts, political activism, the academy, and other points of view who have constructed many dialogues about what it means to be Ch'ol. I presented myself to Juan Carlos by Facebook, in the beginning of my interactions on that platform, and since then we have had constant conversations, both virtually and in person. His Ch'ol group is one of the most active and populated that I have come across. Juan Carlos is very active himself with video reporting of local news and the publication of traditional narratives and practices. He enrolled in the bachelor's degree of *Patrimonio Histórico, Cultural y Natural* (Historical, Cultural, and Natural Heritage), the only one offered by the new *Universidad del Bienestar Benito Juarez de Palenque*. He has worked in tourism and cuisine, as well as a translator of official documents and audio shorts published by state and federal governments.

Juan Carlos was born in ejido 20 de Noviembre in 1992. He is an enthusiastic disseminator of both traditional and anthropological knowledge about the Ch'oles. He uses the name *Xcholel Wiñik*, (Man of the Milpa) in his virtual groups and has decided to dress as the Ch'ol farmers of one hundred years ago. He states "to dress like a Ch'ol man makes me more part of the history" (Interview, Juan Carlos López, May 22, 2021). Juan Carlos used to be bullied for his indigenous identity and appearance, and states with pride that he is no longer ashamed. This is one of the reasons he decided to become an activist and to embrace the traditions of his grandparents of Tumbalá.

Juan Carlos has strong ideas about the lack of involvement of the Maya peoples in mayanist archaeology. He sees the materiality of the Classic Maya as a "tangible testimony of our cultural inheritance" (Interview, Juan Carlos López, May 22, 2021), an important part of his heritage. He laments the lack of attachment to the land and the history of the Ch'oles, and what he sees as the fact that they are collectively abandoning their culture with the pressure of protestant religions and migration from ancient landscapes. He talks about a memory of pain, about how the Ch'oles are submerged in the consequences of historical rejection. He connects his personal history of being stigmatized for his appearance and for his way of speaking Spanish to how the Ch'oles have been historically exploited, hurt, and killed by state actors and capitalists. He conceives a need of a cultural renaissance, at the same time embracing their Maya descendancy and acknowledging historical changes. Juan Carlos has been an important part of this dissertation, through him I have met a network of Ch'ol individuals with opinions about archaeology. His capacity to put together diverse voices has worked several times in different projects of dissemination of his culture.

Josué Arcos López

I met Josué Arcos in the WhatsApp group "Nuestra Cultura Ch'ol". He has been enthusiastic about the possibility of involving Ch'ol communities in the archaeology of Palenque and in the questions I have posted in that chat and Facebook groups. He is from Ejido San Manuel, Palenque, a Tseltal and Ch'ol town that is very close to the archaeological site. He belongs to the communication NGO "Tseltal Bachajón Comunicación", an organization working for indigenous presence in the different media. They produce documentaries, podcasts, and they have a radio presence in the neighboring ejidos through the station "Radio Ixim", from which they transmit cultural dialogues, music, and local news. The organization is articulated with broader Latin American indigenous organizations, like the "Coordinadora Latinoamericana de Cine y Comunicación de los Pueblos Indígenas" (CLACPI, Latin American Coordination of Indigenous Peoples' Cinema and Communication) and has a presence in some of the dialogues and forums organized by the state and federal governments.

In the final months of 2020, Josué Arcos and Juan Carlos López met with a representative of the Secretaría de Desarrollo Sustentable de los Pueblos Indígenas (SEDESPI) of the Chiapas state government. They were told about the possibility of getting resources to produce content in Ch'ol language for pandemic online events and activities that were organized. I was invited to the group to think about possible projects to present, and we met several times to discuss what was needed and what we could do. The meetings were very fertile dialogue to understand what the Ch'ol intellectuals who were participating considered important to disseminate and to preserve. But it was all for nothing. The state bureaucrat disappeared after the first meeting and the resources never came, in what they say is a governmental tradition of promising and not showing up to follow through.

In May of 2022, I was invited by Josué Arcos to San Manuel to be interviewed on Radio Ixim about the work we were doing in the archaeological site of Palenque at that moment, and to talk about what the Ch'oles and Tseltales think about mayanist archaeological research. The interviewers were very interested to know about the normal people of ancient Palenque, the people that built the temples and palaces we can visit today. They reflected about the social hierarchies of the past, and on how it is different now with the stigmatization and discrimination against indigenous peoples, on how through globalization they are aware of the world, but they are still kept in its margins. They called attention to the necessity of including the voice of the communities that provide the workforce in the site, not just in a labor sense, but also by finding forms of collaboration and cultural exchange between archaeologists and Maya peoples.

In the radio transmission we launched an invitation to any Tseltal or Ch'ol who were listening to visit our Palenque excavations the week after the interview. Thirteen people of four families responded. It was very interesting to walk the site with people that were very familiar with the spaces and history of exploration, but at the same time ignored much of the academic production and the produced narratives. They perceive archaeological work as an opaque enterprise, where we dig and take treasures away from them. It is really hard to argue about any scientific interest when what they see is an emphasis on treasures and their display for tourism.

Arqueología Yik'oty Xkokisjol

The Covid-19 quarantine in Mexico began to be enforced in March 2020. Many activities were required to be done from home. Although the national program of pandemic confinement only lasted a few months, for two years the state of Chiapas promoted in Ch'ol language "*käleñ tyi awotyoty*" (Stay at your house), to promote social distancing. In that context there were organized a series of online cultural events hosted by the state's council of cultural affairs network (CONECULTA). I was invited by Juana Karen Peñate to reproduce the talk we had organized the previous year in the Casa de Cultura for the audience of CONECULTA. The regular events hosted one-hour videos, which I thought was too long to keep the attention of a diverse audience, and because the networks in Chiapas tend to be unstable for the large amount of data, but it was a chance to talk about many aspects of Maya history that sparked curiosity and interest from the audience in Tumbalá.

On June 5, 2020, I presented a video entitled "*Arqueología tyi petyelum maya*" (Archaeology of the Maya region) in which I talked for forty-five minutes in Spanish about what archaeologists know about the ancient Maya. At the end I presented in Ch'ol a few questions about what they think of us excavating the history of the Maya peoples. The live video was very successful, there were hundreds of live-viewers, and it accumulated several thousand views, wildly exceeding any of my expectations to reach people. Unfortunately,

for reasons I do not know, the video is no longer available in CONECULTA's Facebook site. There were not a lot of comments during the stream, but many people reached out personally or through WhatsApp groups to comment and suggest the idea of making more videos, entirely in Ch'ol, about the subjects suggested by some viewers.

Putting the language archaeology uses to communicate with itself in very simple terms was and still is very challenging. I decided to create a YouTube channel to post the video streamed by CONECULTA[10], and after the suggestions to keep creating content I started to ask mayanist colleagues for scripts about their special subjects. That is how I created the channel "*Arqueología yik'oty Xkokisjol*" ("Archaeology with Xkokisjol", my Ch'ol nickname) which has been a great platform for sharing knowledge entirely in their language, trying to represent both main dialectal variants. The videos range between four and eight minutes in length, a friendlier format for data consumption and engaging the attention of diverse viewers. Through this medium I have heard many questions the Ch'ol people have about the history of the ancient Maya and their own past.

YouTube proved to not be very effective to reach the Ch'ol audience, but the same videos posted on the La'ñojtye'elob Facebook page were viewed by more than ten thousand people, and have attracted more than 1300 followers, which is a huge number thinking about the people I could reach doing only in-person talks. All the scripts were the product of paid collaboration with the native speaker translators, who also recorded the audios for the videos. The process of translation was a very good setting to observe many ideas and chronological contrasts the Ch'ol establish about archaeology, to have conversations about what they can relate with in the past that we were talking about in the videos. As in all my previous online interactions, the reactions, questions, and comments were expressed in private messages through Facebook or WhatsApp.

After the reactions I had observed among Ch'ol speakers after I described how Classic Maya hieroglyphs sounded, I decided to make the first video entitled "Its'ijb xmayajob tyi wajali"[11] (The Maya writing system) about epigraphy, with a script provided by Felix Kupprat translated and voiced by Morelia Vázquez in the Tila variety of Ch'ol. I wanted to present significant words in hieroglyphs that likely sounded similar to modern Ch'ol ones, so I presented the words for cacao, tamal, atole, and writing. The first three are very important foods present in past and modern life of the Maya peoples. Diet and cuisine were always subjects that sparked the attention of Ch'ol people getting to know archaeological narratives. The Ch'oles today enjoy a lot of beverages made with cacao, when they are abroad it is one of the things they miss the most, and it was a very appreciated ingredient in the dishes of the ancient Maya mentioned on the archaeological objects destined to serve them. Tamales are one of the most important foodstuffs in the modern Ch'ol diet and they

[10] https://youtu.be/qlt9MrTowmE?si=S7sjCUO1BXsTjKC-
[11] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PI7rYZnz2F8

were a frequent reference painted and engraved on plates dedicated to the service of that dish. The same is true with *atole*, a beverage with a name that was written in vases for the same effect. Morelia and I exchanged views of many details of the translation, and we thought a lot about the fact that today, to say the word for people in Ch'ol, the Tila variant uses Kixtyañob, or Christians, and how paradoxical it was to talk about ancient people with that modern concept of what person and people mean.

The next video I produced was with a script of my own. I wanted to talk about ceramics because it is my area of specialization and I have worked for almost two decades analyzing pottery fragments from the Palenque region. But I also chose the subject because I wanted to talk about non-monumental materiality. After many conversations I realized that many people only conceive as archaeology and archaeological those sites that are open to the public, and not the myriad of ancient materials spread in small sites all over the Ch'ol landscape, where ceramic sherds are omnipresent. I expose[12] how through the humble remains of the jars, plates, and vases we get to know a great deal about lives in the past, what we can learn about the chronology of sites, the foodways they practiced, and the many possibilities the tons of ceramic fragments bring when we study them. The translation to Tumbalá Ch'ol and voice-over was made by Moctezuma López Sánchez who knows about ceramic sherds very well after having worked in many excavations in Palenque. He talked with the elders of his family to ask how he could translate the figures of thousands of years that were mentioned in the video, reaching the conclusion that they did not remember how to count in big numbers anymore. This sparked conversations among them about how the Ch'oles have largely lost the vigesimal (base 20) numbering system and count of the Classic Maya, and instead do math in Spanish.

The next video was entitled "*Ch'äxä-ixim (k'usa') yik'oty ajmayaxumtyälob*"[13] (Nixtamal and the Maya peoples), again following the suggestions of many Ch'ol audience members to talk about the way the ancient Maya ate and practiced food preparation. The culinary technique of nixtamal is the process of cooking corn with heat combined with the alkalinity of lime, rendering the cereal much more nutritious and digestible. I wanted to talk about how peoples from all over Mesoamerica, including the Maya region, have based their diet on nixtamalized cuisine since the Early Preclassic, around three thousand years ago, and that it is still the base of most Mexican food. The video talks about how the objects used to grind and cook maize were an essential part of life in ancient houses and the archaeological record today. It also speaks about how the Classic Maya did not eat tortillas, that there is nowhere in the lowlands any sites with the presence of *comales*, the griddles needed to cook tortillas. I discussed how the Classic word for tamal, *waj,* has been re-signified into *tortilla*, the most important food in the modern Ch'ol diet, which must have begun to be eaten in the region after the sixteenth century. The script was coauthored by me and

[12] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h0zHBqu0R_A
[13] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-mjV4v2ctyw

Morelia Vázquez, a food engineer from Campanario, Tila, who also made the translation and voice over in Ch'ol from Tila. She talked to her family about how they cook with corn and documented the process. This sparked conversations in her house about how the eldest women remember the use of grinding stones called *ña'tyuñ* (mother stones), before the spread of metal mills, and the many beliefs they have around maize and how to handle it.

After many people asked about the ruins of the better known Classic settlements, like Palenque, Toniná, or Yaxchilán, I invited Arianna Campiani to write a script about ancient Maya urbanism. This fourth video was entitled "Tyejklumtyak Tyi Wajali"[14] (The cities of antiquity), in which she explains how the ancient Maya planned and organized their cities through the different pre-Hispanic periods, what were the urban differences between the regions of the lowlands, what elements constituted the heart of the religious and administrative life of the ancient cities, and how they were divided in sectors and neighborhoods. The script was translated by Moctezuma López from Spanish to the Tumbalá dialect of Ch'ol. He is familiar with Palenque's architecture of houses, temples, and the central buildings of Palenque.

The fifth short video was written by archaeologist Carlos Varela, who specialized in faunal remains of Palenque. The video is entitled "*La'ñojtye'elob mayajob yik'oty Bälmatye'el*"[15] and it talks about all that we can learn from the animal bones we excavate from the trash pits of the Classic houses, how those materials give us a lot of information about ancient landscapes and how the people managed and used them. Animal bones represented a frequently used material to make different kinds of artifacts, that also tell us a lot about the social practices of the Classic Maya of Palenque. The script was translated to Ch'ol of Tumbalá and narrated by Lucía López López, an elementary and junior-high school professor. She had to consult with other Ch'ol speakers about how to translate the word manatee, since she is not familiar with those big aquatic mammals. They have almost disappeared from the Tabasco plains and the rivers of the region, but probably abounded during Classic times.

The last video published on Arqueología Yik'oty Xkokisjol was about Yaxchilán. Many audience members from Frontera Corozal, a Ch'ol town in the Usumacinta River upstream from the ruins of that ancient city, asked me to make a video about the kingdom capital that now is the archaeological site of Yaxchilán. The script for "*Yaxchilán tyi wajali*"[16] was written by Pilar Regueiro Suárez and talks about the epigraphic history and archaeological knowledge about the city, how the K'ujul Ajawob, or lords of that ajawlel made war against other polities and erected monuments with the dynastic history of the rulers of the sixth to seventh centuries. It was translated and voiced in the Tila variant of Ch'ol by Miriam

[14] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=55K_gUuk_G8
[15] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7YYSw75rl7I
[16] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aAQ_YtxJf0I

Hernandez. We had long talks about how normally she would translate the word underworld into *xibä*, or hell, a Christian concept translating the word for "devil", more than directly coming from the K'iche' word Xibalba that represents something very different from what the Classic Maya thought in their cosmogony. She ended up translating the concept into *iye'bal lum*, which means the under the earth. Miriam, being a specialist of her language, clearly noted the use of the marker of the perfective aspect in epigraphic verbs, a form that she uses in her dialect of Ch'ol language.

Café Tumbalá

Café Tumbalá is a coffee producing cooperative from the town with the same name. It has three shops in Mexico City since a couple of decades ago, and one in Palenque opened in 2020. This last location has become a cultural hub where Ch'oles from the area and beyond spend time together drinking a product that is intimately entangled with Ch'ol history, while they talk about what it means to be Ch'oles. They regularly organize outreach events, book presentations and discussions. Colonial history research in Palenque is a frequent subject in these events. I got to know them during the pandemic, when they organized online discussions with Ch'ol and Kaxlan specialists of different disciplines and presented two different books with the product of poetry workshops. I was very glad when in 2022 I was able to meet Alfonso Cruz in person, a Ch'ol agronomist from Palenque who manages the Tumbalá coffee shop in Palenque. He is familiar with decolonial theory applied to agriculture sciences and he has very valid critiques about the range of ideas I am using for this dissertation. He has seen how concepts such as those have been used to legitimize further exploitation and extraction of knowledge and resources, with little benefit for the communities investigations and projects claim to include as equals. In the last year he has built and opened a forum space at the back of the café to organize more events.

In June 2022 from Café Tumbalá, the *La'añojtye'elob* Facebook page, the Ixim radio station, and the WhatsApp groups we invited all the Ch'oles nearby who had the chance and wanted to visit the site of Palenque on a Sunday morning, with the possibility of seeing the excavations that the team of several universities were digging in Group IV, one of the archaeological neighborhoods outside the ancient city center. A group of 12 people showed up, with members of three families and several individuals, some of whom had not visited the site before. We decided to walk only the areas of the site that are open for public visitation, because there were people carrying children and others who would have had difficulties trekking in the forest to arrive at and return from the excavations. It was a great opportunity to pay attention to what in the materiality of the ruins calls the interest and curiosity of the men, women, and children, who live close to the site but have not worked in it, experiencing the spectacular spaces and structures built by the hard work of a Cholean speaking population 1300 years ago, and cleared of vegetation and restored by hardworking Ch'oles and Tseltales of Palenque in the last seventy years. Ch'ol children and teenagers are

passionate soccer and basketball team fans and players, and when we passed through the structures of the ballcourt in Palenque there was a lot of excitement among the teenagers in the group. The same as every time that I have talked about the ballgame traditions of ancient Mesoamerica to young people, they are always interested and have great questions about the ballgame, a set of ancient social practices related to a game played in courts present in almost all central parts of the Maya cities, that we imagine could have had some similarities with today's sport traditions and spectacles.

During the Palenque excavations of 2023 I had the chance to attend an event organized by the indigenous film community mentioned previously. They use the café for the projection of movies made by Maya filmmakers and that evening there were a dozen Ch'oles gathered to watch *Vaychiletik* (Pérez, 2021), a movie made by a Tsotsil filmmaker about the life of his father, a traditional musician who has to perform in the entire cycle of religious festivities. The film shows how alcohol consumption and exchange for services of such a ritual specialist is a central issue of his role, and all the problems it creates while having a day-job and a family. The film sparked a discussion by the audience in the café. They talked about how important those roles are for the preservation of traditional structures of authority in the Ch'ol towns, and at the same time how alcoholism is a huge problem in many communities.

In the days after the film projection, we launched another open invitation for June 16, 2023 to visit the site and excavations our team had opened at the time. Since it was a Friday only four people showed up, and it was again a great setting to talk about what they think about Ch'ol history and what they would want and expect archaeologists to do to open participation to Ch'ol and Maya voices. On that occasion we only visited the areas where we had excavations because everyone was already familiar with the open parts of the site. We saw how the houses of regular inhabitants of the city of Palenque would have looked like. There was a burial being exposed and two in the group manifested their mixed feelings of witnessing the excavation of human remains, how interesting it was to see the ancient funeral traditions, but at the same time thinking that they would not want their tombs and the graves of their family to be dug out of the ground no matter how interesting they could be in the future.

At the time, the excavation of a monumental building was being finished in the center of the same archaeological neighborhood where we were digging, and our group got a tour guided by my friend Samuel López from López Mateos, who had participated in the restoration of the two-floor structure. After the excavation, with the generous invitation of the archaeologists working in the site, we visited the laboratories where there were teams analyzing materials, where the group saw the process of research after the excavation. The physical anthropologists showed how they record all the information from the skeletons, and also displayed to us the burial ceramic offerings of the tombs they were studying. The lithic specialist showed how he studies fragments of blades, knives, and other artifacts made of different types of rock.

Workshop in Palenque's site museum

During the same excavation field season of 2023, when I recorded the last dialogues included in this investigation, I was invited by the director of the *Zona Arqueológica de Palenque* to give a workshop on June 23rd, as part of the regular outreach conferences and events organized by the site's administration and museum in the last year. It was planned to be a dialogue to hear the voices of the Ch'oles and Tseltales that work inside the site trails selling handcrafts. Some of them have been attending the museum's events regularly. The previous week there was a talk about sixteenth century history of Palenque and its church. I was nervous to be there talking about what I think about Maya archaeological heritage, and the need to equalize the colonial footing in our terms of engagement, because I was a little afraid of being confronted about problems completely outside my context and capacity, after the open conflict with the archaeologists with the strike the year before, and all the rumors that were long circulating about removing all vendors from the ruins. I think I was invited partially to test the mood of the community that wants to get involved in activities. Because I was an outsider to the administration I did not risk a job position or the consequences of direct conflict. I accepted the invitation and it ended up being a very interesting forum (Fig. 3.8). There was no mention of any conflict or tension with the site management from them, and I wanted to avoid the subject, since I had no power or knowledge to give them any answers regarding those conflicts.

I started by briefly talking about how archaeology imagines the history of the Maya peoples and how all the modern maya peoples are implied in our narratives, and how the language used in hieroglyphic texts in antiquity is related to the ones spoken now. Even the people around Palenque, who know the pieces and narrative in the site's museum, and reproduce the Classic iconography in pyrographed leather images, get startled by the recognition of the sounds of Classic Maya epigraphic language. We really have not conveyed effectively to the public and stakeholders what we have learned by reading the hieroglyphs and excavating the sites.

Fig. 3.8. The workshop at the Museum in June 2023, taken from its Facebook page.[17]

The group, with a majority of women, were all familiar with what archaeological fieldwork entails. They have friends and family members who have participated in excavations, and they have seen the process themselves. A general perception of archaeologists among the audience was that of opacity, about how they are kept from what happens after the fieldwork. We simply don´t share with the public the results of the many specific investigations done through site surveys, excavations, and materials analysis.

The Ch'oles and Tseltales present that afternoon see the celebration of treasures and monumentality in the local and national museums, in the press, and in the state's discourse. They see how we take and hoard tons of archaeological materials in the storage at the site and universities, but they are not familiar with what takes most time of the archaeological work, which is all the analysis and research done on the data and materials after the excavation. Several members of the audience complained that they have seen how pieces from Palenque ended up in Mexico City and different parts of the world, as well as the museum lending pieces abroad to be celebrated as universal treasures. They perceive a threat of being dispossessed of what makes their lives possible.

17

https://www.facebook.com/MuseoSitioPalenqueMusipa/posts/pfbid02xVTJR7V1qhEHiTZBF6mBYdRjEqacbPbq4tvrGp4RgNmrcceEXKg9CwrdHZ43kJbil

Common threads in the dialogues

While describing the history of their lives, the history of their communities and the histories shared by all Ch'oles, consultants often metaphorically talked about the threads of individual paths that are woven into collective histories. This textile metonym of time is not uniquely Ch'ol, or Maya, but I find it appropriate to describe the shared ideas talked and chatted about with Ch'ol subjects. These threads are some ideas in the conversations and interactions I had during this research that were frequently brought up. This does not mean that there was a uniform perception or set of opinions shared by all Ch'oles. After completing this ethnography, there are very few generalizing statements that I can maintain about the relationship between the Ch'oles and mayanist archaeological heritage. Instead, the common threads that I will describe below were ideas mentioned repeatedly by different consultants.

All of Ch'oles that talked to me in detail about their life history experienced discrimination in their childhood and early education. The way they talked Spanish, the communities that they came from, and other aspects of their indigenous condition have been historically frowned upon by Kaxlan Mexicans. This produced in many consultants what was described by them as shame, a childhood aspiration to transcend indigenousness and associated practices that represented obstacles to their social relations and wellbeing. This contributes to a prevalent (although not total) discursive disconnection of Ch'oles with the archaeological and remote past. Many of them have chosen to avoid embracing a material heritage that represents the remote past of indigenous cultures, the same condition for which they have experienced discrimination. At the same time, perhaps because of the networks in which I interacted in this ethnography, most of the consultants that sketched autobiographical information have transcended that shame in their life through the work and ideas of different Ch'ol communities, and transformed it into pride of their culture.

However, very few of the consultants perceive archaeology as something that contributes to their culture and heritage. Their notions of culture and heritage are closer to the present and involve more recent history. Even when they are involved in archaeological labor, the value of what archaeological heritage provides is generally conceived to be much more concerned with economics than culture. The categories and chronologies that archaeology uses are completely outside the frames the Ch'ol use to account for their historical narratives. I also observed among the Ch'ol the unfortunate prevalence of old racist anthropological concepts related to early evolutionist conceptions in the discipline, internalizing these ideas in the same degree as in Mexican population in general.

Possibly as a result of this, most consultants were unaware of the connection between Ch'ol language today and the one written in hieroglyphic inscriptions from Classic times. The surprise of recognizing a lot of meaning and forms was a frequent reaction to

hearing and reading the transcription of epigraphic texts sculpted or painted on objects. This came with a widespread curiosity about the history of the separation of the two main dialectal varieties of Ch'ol. When the subject of the language was brought up in conversations, almost everyone had questions about how these two Ch'ol variants came to be.

While they do not center their ideas of culture and history in archaeology, almost all of the consultants can recognize archaeological materiality in the surroundings of their landscape. Even Ch'oles that have lived for years in cities or even abroad acknowledge in their land of origin the presence around the houses, milpas, and pastures of countless remnants of ancient settlements. They can identify where there are mounds with the remains of domestic architecture and other scattered archaeological materials. Ch'ol often keep the ceramic objects and figurines they find in their landscape. Very few ascribe an economic value to these. I was contacted two times by different people who wanted me to value figurines and ceramic vessels. After I explained to them that I could not do that they stopped contacting me. Online, some Ch'ol who stated economic values were chastised by others.

Instead of being seen as economic resources, I repeatedly observed a conception among the consultants of exceptionality of these archaeological materials. Most Ch'oles treat the ancient materiality with special consideration. Yet this isn't simply a claim based on the identification of cultural "heritage". More than thinking about their ancestors, they conceive ancient objects they find as sacred or ritual, objects with the power to transport people to the other world, where the owners of the world and other supernatural agents live. Not all Ch'oles think within this cosmogonic frame, of course. But the treatment of objects encountered often shows they hold some degree of special status. Other Ch'ol have reported their family simply placing figurines in their house altars along with the Catholic saints images. Others did not articulate any kind of religious attachment, but still conceive these things as precious objects, and handle them with particular care.

While this disconnection from ideas of heritage is common, the Ch'oles who have achieved a degree of education have made connections with national and international dialogues, which conceive Maya peoples united by a shared history, either from academic discourses, from Zapatista concepts, or Panmayanism. Many of the Ch'oles that went to study outside their regions of origin developed a vocal stance for the preservation of the language and culture, organizing through different means to do so. Intervention in managing archaeological materials and sites, however, has not so far been their focus.

Overall, the aspects of archaeological history that resonated the most with the Ch'oles with whom I spoke were not grand narratives about chronologies, collapses, kings, and wars between kingdoms. Many (most) were keener to listen to histories of everyday life in the past. This includes the foodways, the way people hunted, fished, and used animals, how they built their houses, or how they cultivated their fields. Without ignoring the

monumental narratives that illustrate ancient splendor, the topics that triggered more online interactions were those related to ordinary life in different times in the past observed through archaeology.

Conclusions

After seven years of searching for all possible ethnographical settings where there might be Ch'ol people who want to talk about mayanist archaeology and how they perceive their history, I accumulated a lot of ideas coming very different contexts, from very close stakeholders for archaeological sites to people outside the touristic circuits of Chiapas. I am aware that the network of people I engaged with to do this research does not represent the full diversity of thought and ideas among the Ch'ol speaking population, nor other Maya peoples dwelling in northern Chiapas, like the Lacandones, Tseltales, and Tsotsiles. The ethnic groups and their categories always make more sense from the outside than from the indigenous epistemologies. Neither the Ch'oles, Tseltales, nor any other group have articulated a single voice or organized into a unified political organization.

It is also very challenging to talk about descendance from the constructed narratives of mayanist archaeology and epigraphy, while the maya peoples of today have different chronologies and identity markers. I observed a majority of Ch'ol people not using the term Maya at all. Their identities are more often related to their local community and the linguistic variants they speak. When they speak of the *Choleros*, Choles, or Ch'oles, in Tumbalá they often use the term *Wiñikob*, which means people. In the Tila variant they use *Kixtyañob*, which means Christians. The people that employ the concept of the Maya are generally those who have gone outside their communities of origin to study abroad. They have participated in the discourses of academia, art, tourism, activism, or new-age beliefs, and have embraced the term Maya, to recognize the shared history and aspects of the epistemologies of the Maya peoples. Regardless of whether they use the term Maya, however, the Ch'oles have an unequivocal relation with the materiality of the remote and recent pasts that surrounds them. What archaeology considers its object of study is included in the chronology of the universe as they conceive it. This connection has not been completely erased by religious discourses.

The ancient people that mayanists study exist in different forms within the epistemologies of the Ch'oles. They are either conceived within cosmic chronologies connected with the other worlds and their creation forces, equated with the owners of resources provided by the land, or interpreted using biblical narratives. They may be conceived under panmayanist paradigms, channeled through new-age categories, or understood with academic histories. It is clear for all the Ch'oles that the region in northern Chiapas they dwell in has been their land since time immemorial. Many traditional histories point to Tumbalá as their very origin, the place where *wiñikob* were created. After five hundred years of colonial history that started violently and has kept indigenous identities marginalized, oppressed, and stigmatized, without completely getting rid of the violence, the relation with their ancestors has become complicated. I observed a common history among consultants of having been discriminated against in their childhood for their indigenous condition. They need in many instances to distance themselves from their past and ontologies to survive.

The Ch'ol have not been passive subjects of colonial structures. They have used their landscape, both in the highlands and the lowlands, to take refuge from exploitation. They have moved under their own conditions, been displaced by colonial, national, and capital forces, and have been granted land under agrarian reform in places that required them to move. In particular, the intimate relation with places, landscape, and their chronotopes has been buried under many layers of oppression histories and obscured in the process of returning to the lowlands, with the creation of ejidos in the last sixty years.

The stones, sherds, burials, treasures, and materials from the ancient settlements spread across all the region are conceived by some Ch'oles as belonging to Yum ja', Chujtyaty, and the same owners of the *matyelum*, or forest, from which they obtain resources. They are required to do so responsibly, under the threat of being punished with bad times and climate calamities. At the same time, a lot of Ch'oles don't share those specific ideas, but there is a general agreement that the places of the ancient houses and sites attract particular forces and beings. Even some of the most dogmatic Christians consider the possibility of catching an *espanto* (a fright) in the ruins, or joke about the presence of the *Wäläk-ok* and other supernatural beings that can be threatening and need to be tricked or satisfied with offerings.

In some cases, archaeological work and tourism have created new relations with the ancient materiality, constructing family histories around work in the ruins, where excavation, mason, and restoration skills are a source of pride, as well as an asset negotiated in their position in the archaeological projects. The myriad of interests converging in the World Heritage site of Palenque make relations very complex, contingent on the ever-changing contexts in which research, tourism, and politics operate. I have seen Palenque when the inequalities between *kaxlanes* and indigenous Maya have become ever more explicit. The region is currently being delivered to the touristic capitalists that are going to impact dramatically on social relations in northern Chiapas in the next decades. A change in the way mayanist archaeology relates with the modern Maya is more urgently needed, and at the same time more difficult to change.

It is hard to propose a change in archaeological colonial practices in the Ch'ol region when a lot of people don't even know what archaeologists do. I observed how it is imperative that mayanists take dissemination and sharing our knowledge seriously, to share the scientific value we see in materiality. The efforts at knowledge sharing done within the frame of this project became an effective way of starting discussions on the relation of Maya peoples and their history.

To start the dialogues and participation that could lead to decolonization of archaeology, I believe that it is important to make data and interpretations available to the audiences outside mayanist archaeology, in comprehensible language that allows this information to awaken curiosity and inquiries about the cultural history of each community of stakeholders, for anyone who want to put in practice the methods of archaeological

research for their particular interests. Unfortunately, even among close stakeholders there is little knowledge of the full scope of archaeological work. Despite the intimate and bodily participation in archaeology during fieldwork, most of the Ch'oles around Palenque are kept out of the loop of the processed data, analysis, and interpretations we produce, making very evident the necessity of sharing our work and narratives, and programming regular public archaeology events and workshops directed to modern day Palencanos, site workers and their communities. The opacity of the research processes after fieldwork has produced a perception of archaeologists as treasure hunters or thieves, that is really hard to argue against while what is celebrated in the public discourse is treasures and monumentality, the products intended for tourism.

A process of sharing knowledge is just the first requirement to begin the long process of dialogue towards transformation in the relation of archaeology with indigenous stakeholders. Among Mexican colleagues and institutions there are many that cling to an illusion of a state-controlled heritage and anachronistic ideas about it. It is going to take a lot of work and time to make the need for decolonization evident to all Mexican archaeologists by the several archaeologists and anthropologists that are voicing concern about the current practices of institutional archaeology. The frequent response to the question of indigenous control or participation in archaeology, that "descendancy is too complicated", is no longer a justification for ignoring the indigenous voices that have been calling for a change in colonial structures, including the work of archaeologists in the world and in the Maya region. Yet in this moment of history, for the most part Mexican archaeology does not have the will to think reflexively about our role in the construction of social narratives and categories that have had the power to maintain colonial and postcolonial domination, which still gives a lot of privileges to archaeologists that they are not willing to negotiate.

It is urgent to think about and practice the kind of dialogues addressed in this dissertation in the contexts of professional archaeology in Mexico. We need to stop fooling ourselves and acknowledge ethical considerations about the fact that we appropriate and use other peoples´ pasts, someone else´s history. We have not assumed the responsibility for the representations made from the academy, national rhetoric, and the touristic industry. I think the challenge it is not about empowering indigenous peoples through tracing a sequence of historical continuity from archaeological subjects to the indigenous populations. It is instead a need to point towards "reconciliation in the wake of colonization, rather than attributing salience entirely to the archaeological record" (Meskell, 2002, 291).

At some point in the research for this dissertation I became very skeptical about my own work and the decolonizing discourses I was trying to use for the context of archaeology in Palenque. I became paralyzed about the possibility of doing more harm than good. I have seen too many examples in the world of these ideas being used for social white-washing and disguising extractive projects as justice, that many times not only extract archaeological

materials, but also the traditional narratives around them, without returning in any significant way to the communities claimed to be included. I felt I did not change or influence in any significant way the terms of engagement of the archaeology in which I participate, much less the rest of mayanist heritage practices. Now, I acknowledge the commitments I have acquired that will change the way I work, the subjects that I choose, and the manner in which I will investigate them.

A deep transformation of our ethical parameters and the participation of Maya stakeholders in mayanist archaeology has the potential to augment the interpretative potential of archaeology. By doing what is right, we can do much more than change the methodological and ethical aspects of our discipline. If archaeology opens its interpretations and academic narratives to epistemologies grounded in Maya perspectives, it would be when we build a regular incorporation of *emic* Maya categorizations and chronologies in the construction of histories. We need to perform an archaeology that problematize its own future, produced in co-participation with indigenous communities and other interest groups, to disseminate our understandings and put the resources of archaeology at their service. Thinking in this manner, with a long-term commitment, it will be possible to grant archaeology both the task of the conservation of heritage in the future, as well as a socially relevant role.

I am now inspired by the many Ch'oles I have met that are passionate about their history and very enthusiastic about the possibility of participating in the archaeological investigation processes, of creating their own research questions and inquiries into the materiality of their ancestors and the depths of their identity. In every archaeological project around Palenque in which I will be involved in the future I will be thinking about their perspectives, continuing the dialogue, and looking for more voices interested in challenging the privileges of mayanist science.

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Appendix 1

Arqueología tyi petyelel lum maya / Arqueología en el área maya

By Esteban Mirón, Ch'ol traduction: Morelia Vázquez. Adaptation to the Tumbalteco dialect: Carol-Rose Little

Joñoñlojoñ arqueólogos mi kcha'leñlojoñ säklayaj bajche yila iñusaj k'iñob x-oñob chumtyälob wajali. Mi kmelojoñ jump'ej ñopoyaj cha'añ mi kña'tyañlojoñ chuki añob icha'añob lakñoxtye'elob tyi oñoty'añ che' bajche: otyotyäl, bäñäk'äl, pislel, pejtyel chukibä mi lajk'äñ tyi jujump'ej k'iñ i wolixbä laj käy majlel, wolixbä ipajk'uyemajlel, ñaxañ tyi pimel ya'tye tyi lum.

Los arqueólogos nos dedicamos a investigar la historia de las comunidades humanas. Lo hacemos a través del estudio de las cosas de toda la gente: las casas, la comida, el vestido, todas las cosas que usamos en nuestra vida y vamos dejando atrás, que van quedando enterradas, primero por las plantas, y después por la tierra.

Joñoñlojoñ arqueólogos mi ksäklañlojoñ baki mi kmejlelojoñ ktyaj chukityak imelbalob oñob lakpi'älob yik'oty mi kjok'lojoñ ya' baki tsa' ajñiyob wajali cha'añ mi jkäñlojoñ bajche yilal tsa' chumliyob, mi ksäklañlojoñ chuki iñopbalob wajali mejlbä käñbeñlojoñ majlel che bajche je'al baki tsa' chumliyob i wäle yambäjix bajche chumulob. Ili e'tyel mi kla'melojoñ tyi pejtyel pañämil yik'oty mi kcha'lelojoñ säklaya tyi pejtyelbä yorajlel baki tsa' ichumtyayob pañämil xchumtyilob. Palenque añ tyi jump'ej ty'oxliblum ik'a'ba América baki joñlojoñ xjok' oñobmeltyak kik'otylojoñ ajñop imelbaltyak xchumtyilob tyi k'älä wajali mi käñlojoñ bajche ipetyäl maya, jump'ej iñuklel ty'oxliblum ba mi imäktyañ jop'ej tyejklum, ba' ocheñ México, ya baki ja'el mi yochel alätyejklumtyak bajche Chiapas, Tabasco, Campeche, Quintana Roo yik'oty Yucatán. Jiñi ty'oxliblum mi subeñob Maya kome ya' momoty chumulob xchumtyälob muk'obä tyi yäñäl ty'añ pej ipi'älobäch ibä

Los arqueólogos buscamos en donde podemos encontrar estas cosas de la gente del pasado y excavamos en esos lugares para conocer cómo vivían, buscamos qué lecciones podemos aprender de los que habitaron un lugar en donde ahora se habita de manera diferente. Esto lo hacemos en todo el mundo e investigando sobre todas las épocas en las que los humanos han habitado la tierra. Palenque está en una región de América que los arqueólogos y antropólogos conocemos como el Área Maya, una extensa región que hoy abarca cinco países, incluyendo a México, y los estados de Chiapas, Tabasco, Campeche, Quintana Roo y Yucatán. Esta región es llamada Maya porque en ella habitan grupos de gente que hablan una lengua de la misma familia lingüística (que llamamos Mayense). Estas comunidades han vivido en esta área por más de tres mil

tyi lak ty’añtyak (ik’a'ba maya ty’añ). Ili lumaltyak tax ichumtyayob tyi petyäl k’älä tyi oño’ ty’añ, k’äläl bajche tsa' ityecheyob ityempañobä cha’añ mi chumtyälob tyi alälumaltyak che wi’ilix tsa' iñukesayob tyi kolem tyejklumtyak, tyi kej ipäk’ob ixim yik’oty yambä bäñäk’äl mu'bä ibej ak’eñob ikuxtyälel a jiñi tyejklum maya.

K’älä wajali, yik’oty tyi weltyä ipetyälel maya, jiñi motyol xchumtyälob mach lajalix, yambäjix bajche i baki chumulob yik’oty je’el yäñälo’bix ity’añtyak, añkese tyäk’ä tyi jump’ej tyejchibal, yambäjobix. Che’ tyi ujtyi wajali i wäle mejläch lajk’el, wäle mi pejkañtyel iyoñlel bolomp’ej ichak’al (29) ty’añtyak icha’añäch mayaty’añ. Jiñi Ch’ol jiñäch jump’ej ty’añ ochembä tyi juñmojty ik’aba Cholano, ya’ ba mi yochel Ch’ol, Chontal, Chortí yik’oty Cholti. Ili motyojtya’ñtyak laja chuku yik’oty jump’ej ty’añ mu'bä ik’äñob oñobmayajob wajali mi ts’ijbuñob tyi ñuki xajletyak, kabäl tsa' jaleji tyi klásiko, ojli tyi 2000 yik’oty 1000 jabix iñumel. Wokox iyälä jump’ej ña’tyibal mu'bä ichajpañ its’ijbo xchumtyälob. (jiñäch ik’aba epigrafía), wäle mi lakña’tyañ che kabäl ty’añ añ tyi Ch’ol yik’oty yambätyak mayaty’añ lajal bajche mi ts’ijbuñob aj oñob chumtyälob wajali tyi ruinas tyi Palenke tyi bojtye’elel iyotyotyob yik’oty tyi xajleltyak.

Che' lakujil, wä’añ jump’ej päslib, bajche jiñi ty’añ waj tsa' weñ k’äjñi cha’añ mi k’abilañtye tamaltyak bajche k’älä wajali -

años, desde cuando se empezaron a organizar a vivir en pequeñas comunidades que

después crecieron en ciudades, subsistiendo a base del cultivo del maíz y muchos otros productos que siguen siendo fundamentales en la vida de los pueblos con lenguas mayenses.

Durante esos tres milenios, y a lo ancho de toda el área Maya, los grupos de gente han sido muy diferentes, viviendo en distintos paisajes y hablando lenguas que, aunque estén relacionadas a través de un origen común, son distintas. Así ha sido en el pasado y así podemos ver que es en el presente, se hablan en este momento más de 29 idiomas de esta familia lingüística. El Ch´ol es uno de estos idiomas, pertenece a un grupo dentro de la familia llamado Cholano, que agrupa al Ch´ol, el Chontal, el Chortí, y el Cholti. Este grupo de lenguas está muy relacionado al idioma en el que los antiguos Mayas escribían en sus monumentos, sobre todo en el periodo que llamamos Clásico, entre 2000 y 1000 años atrás. Gracias a la ciencia que estudia la escritura de los antiguos (la epigrafía), sabemos que muchas palabras que hoy se dicen en Ch´ol y en muchas otras lenguas Mayenses son iguales que las que escribían los antiguos habitantes de las

ruinas de Palenque en sus edificios y en sus monumentos.

Así que sabemos, por ejemplo, que la palabra waj ha sido usada para nombrar a los tamales desde hace más

1500 jab. Kuxul kabäl ch’ejewtyak ts’ijbubilbä icha’añob cha’añ chokoch yik’oty majki tsa' ik’äñäyob, , a ili tamali che bajche jiñ mi iweñ mulañob ik’uxob wajali aj oñobchumtyälob, yäñätyak ikolemlej mi melob, yañältyak ibek’etyle mu'bä k’äjñel bajche icha’añ bälmatye’el yik’oty chäñija’tyak, ja’el mi melob tsajbä tamal, mi k’äñob iya’le cha'b. ¿Ichokoch ma’añik mi lajk’ux tamal yik’oty weñbä mele ul? Ili japbibäl kabä mi pästyak ibä tyi paty vaso. Wajali mi weñ mulañob pajbä ul, yik’otybä käkäw, tsajbä, ch’ok iximbä yik’oty ja’el ts’a’añbä. Jiñi ty’añ sa’ ts’ijbubiläch tyi ojli oñoty’añixbi vaso yik’oty ch’ejewtyak, k’älä jiñäch iyuch’elob lakpi’älob wajali che ta' tyejchi imelob iñaxañ cholel, che maxtyo ba’añ jiñi machity, mi k’äñob wajali cha’añ iye’tyel jiñäch jiñi jacha yik’oty cuchillotyak pätybilbä tyi xajlel.

Joñolojoñ arqueólogos tax kwa’chokolojoñ ityejklumob mayajob, mi ktsiktyisalojoñ ili oño’melbaltyak yik’oty mi kpäslojoñ iñuklel lak tyejklum mu'bä ipäyobtye xjula’ob tyi pejtyelel pañämil. Maba ik’ajtyibeñlojoñ a xh’olob chuki woli iña’tyañob cha’añ kña’tyibalojoñ, jiñi arqueología. Tyi ksäklayajlojoñ yik’oty kña’tyayalojoñ mi kch’ämbeñlojoñ isujm oñobmayajob tyi klásico che bajche ja’el x-oñobchumtyälob mu'bä ipejkañob jump’ej ty’añ bajche ch’ol o mayaty’añ, ankese bajche ili, maba jk’ajtyibelojoñ a xch’olob chuki woli iña’tyañob, chuki mi ña’tyañob che mi kjok’lojoñ lum cha’añ mi klosañloñ ibäkel lak oño’tye’elob yik’oty chuki mu'bä ik’äñotyak wajali.

de 1500 años. Existen muchos platos que tienen escrito para qué y por quién eran usados, y los tamales parecen ser el manjar preferido de los antiguos, los hacían de diferentes formas y tamaños, con diferentes animales y pescados, o incluso dulces con miel de

abeja. ¿Y qué mejor para acompañar un tamal que un atole? Esta bebida también es representada frecuentemente en la escritura de algunos vasos, les gustaba el atole agrio, con cacao, dulce, de maíz tierno y hasta picoso. El pozol también está escrito en algunos de los antiguos vasos y cuencos, ha sido el almuerzo de muchísimos campesinos desde que se trabajaban las primeras milpas, desde mucho antes del machete, cuando se desmontaba con puras hachas y cuchillos de piedra.

Los arqueólogos hemos construido una gran parte de la historia antigua de los pueblos Mayas, contamos estas historias y exhibimos los tesoros que atraen a turistas de todo el mundo. Nunca les hemos preguntado a los Ch´oles qué opinan sobre nuestra ciencia, la arqueología. En

nuestras investigaciones e imaginaciones entendemos a los antiguos Mayas del Clásico como los ancestros de las poblaciones que hoy hablan una lengua Cholana o Mayense, y a pesar de esto, no hemos preguntado nunca a los Ch´oles qué es lo que piensan, qué es lo opinan cuando escarbamos la tierra para sacar los huesos de los antiguos y sus cosas.

¿Añ ak’ajtyiyaj cha’añ jiñi arqueología?

¿Bakibä ijalel oñomelbal mi amulañ a weñ käñ?

¿Bajche mi aña’tyañ ikuxtyälelob tyi otyotyäl, tyi lumal yik’oty tyi kolem tyejklumtyak mayajob?

¿Bajche mi amelbeñ yejtyal jump’ej säklaya cha’añ arqueología?

Joñolojoñ arqueólogos mi kmulalojoñ kñich’tyañ chuki woli la'ña’tyañ, mi añki la’ k’ajtyiyaj ts’ijbubeñla aj: estebanmiron@berkeley.edu

Tyi Facebook: Xkokis Jol

¿Qué preguntas tienes sobre la arqueología?

¿Qué periodo de la historia te gustaría conocer mejor?

¿Cómo te imaginas la vida en las casas, los pueblos y las ciudades antiguas de los mayas?

¿Cómo diseñarías una investigación arqueológica?

A los arqueólogos nos gustaría escuchar tu opinión, si tienes alguna pregunta escribe a: estebanmiron@berkeley.edu

Facebook: Xkokis Jol

Appendix 2

Compilation of answers to the questions: What do you consider heritage? What would you like to preserve in your community? And what would you like to change? In the workshop of mayanist archaeology and heritage imparted at the Universidad Intercultural del Estado de Tabasco in October 2019. The names of the students were never included, only the community of origin is mentioned in the delivered answers, most of the students choose not to give their written responses.

Ixtapangajoya Chiapas	Conservar
	• Iglesia
	• Tradiciones de la iglesia
	• Comidas típicas
	  ○ Tamales
	  ○ Esturado de animales criados
	• Celebridad del día de muertos
	  ○ Dulces de diferente fruta
	  ○ Leyendas
	• Fiestas navideñas
	
	Cambiar
	• Tala de árboles
	• Extinción de animales
	• Contaminación aire, suelo, agua

Teapa, Tab	• Grutas Coconas • Gastronomía, longaniza enjamonada • Iglesia de Tecomajiaca • Fauna, mono araña • Flora, plantas • La fuente del Mure • Iglesia de Santiago Apóstol por sus túneles • Malecón por su túnel • Los monumentos y edificios históricos que hay en la zona que no son explorados, que se le diera importancia de la investigue que se lo de a conocer al pueblo
Jalapa, Tab	Conservar Entre las cosas que me gustaría conservar de Jalapa está el estilo de vida de sus habitantes, manteniendo la tranquilidad y la unión de las personas, así como sus creencias compartidas, esos pequeños

	fragmentos culturales que, al día de hoy, forman parte de la identidad de la comunidad. Yendo por el aspecto maternal/físico, me gustaría conservar las antiguas construcciones antiguas del lugar, sus atractivos naturales y sus puntos históricos. Cambiar Realmente son pocas las cosas que me gustaría cambiar de mi comunidad, pero si tuviera que mencionar algunas, me gustaría transformar la percepción que sus habitantes tienen para que comiencen a ver la importancia y belleza que existe en la zona, para que hagan mayores esfuerzos para conservar todo aquello que nos representa como comunidad.
Hacienda de Santa Lucía, Tacotalpa, Tab	• Los animales • Las áreas verdes • Árboles • Los ríos o arroyos • La gastronomía • Tradición • Costumbres • Las leyendas • Las aves como loros, tucanes, águilas, etc
Tacotalpa, Tab	• Museos • Kolem´ja • Las grutas • Danzas tradicionales • Leyendas • La Hacienda de Santa Lucía • Las guacamayas • Ríos • La mimbrería
Teapa, Tab	En el lugar donde vivo, son muchas las cosas que quisiera que se conservaran como son los parques, iglesias, ríos, lugares turísticos como el Cocona, entre otros, pero sería un pensamiento vago y sin importancia, cualquiera puede decir que es lo que quisiera conservar, sin embargo no hacen nada al ver como va desapareciendo después de toda una historia. ¡Quisiera cambiar muchas cosas, pero entre querer y hacer hay una gran brecha, si se quiere cambiar algo no es algo que solo debas decir sino algo que te comprometas a hacer!

	• Iglesias • Ríos • Cerros • Zonas turísticas • Buenas costumbres • Buenas compañías • Los buenos momentos • Todo aquello que nos haga sentir bien con la vida
Frontera Comalapa, Chis	• Una iglesia antigua que se encuentra en mi comunidad: Es muy importante tanto religioso y en mi comunidad porque es las historia de mi comunidad, • Fiestas de mi comunidad: nos ayuda a convivir y poder tener una buena comunicación. • Reuniones de asamblea • Que no se perdieran los lugares naturales para convivir, como arroyos y ríos. • No me gustaría que se perdiera la convivencia de toda la comunidad • La comida que acostumbramos son: Tamales de mole, chipilín, recado de pescado seco, pozol, atol, barbacoa.
Teapa, Tab	Las cosas que me gustaría que se conservaran son las casas de ladrillos. Me gustaría que se conservaran para que las futuras generaciones sepan como vivían las personas y de que material eran las casas de antes. Los ríos es una de las otras cosas que me gustaría que se conservaran Y que nunca se acabe el pozol
Jalapa, Tab	Conservar los tintales que se encuentran en la carretera Jalapa-Villahermosa. Las tradiciones del día de muertos ya que año con año se va modificando y perdiendo las tradiciones y costumbres. Que la iglesia no se siga modificando ya que así se va perdiendo la historia, aunque se irá creando otra, pero ya no sería de mucha antigüedad.
Jalapa, Tab	Me gustaría guardar las costumbre de las personas mayores porque ellos son honesto muy trabajadores, tal vez ellos son así porque la mayor parte de su vida vivieron sin tecnología esa es una razón que influyó mucho. En Jalapa hay una pozolería que tiene más de 25 años

	y su pozol y dulce quiero que nunca se acabe. Venden muchas variedades de dulce. ¡Tienen que probarlo! Lo que quiero que se acabe es la delincuencia, que los jóvenes dejen los vicios, tanto como tecnología y estupefaciente.
Teapa, Tab	Lo que quiero conservar: • Sus tradiciones • El Chedraui, Bodega, Coppel, etc • Sus lugares como, restaurantes y las grutas de Cocona Patrimonio en mi familia: • Familia • Lengua • Costumbres Creo que lo que cambiaría de mi pueblito, sería la forma en que actúan ciertas colonias ya que se viene dando mucho el asalto. Y esto es algo que se viene dando desde hace tiempo.
Macuspana, Tab	Patrimonio: Me gustaría conservar de Macuspana el Cerro Tortuguero, el Parque Lineal ya que está una réplica de un calendario maya, los ríos y lagunas que están en todo Macuspana, los cerros de Apasco (ya que son explotados para arenas y grava), el tramo de inicio en la entrada de Apasco, porque esta muy linda, me gustaría conservar el parque ya que está grande y bonito (aunque quisiera que fuese como antes donde habían hasta pájaros), los restaurantes en Morelos con vista a la laguna, conservar los ríos de las comunidades de Bitzal porque ahí hay manatíes, conservar tradiciones como elecciones de Reynas, y concursos de pesca y carreras.
El Limar, Tila, Chis	• El árbol llamado Ceiba, una de las plantas más importantes de los ch´oles de Tila, por su historia de los Wäläk Ok. • Día de muertos, la celebración y el ritual que se les hace desde las casas de los familiares, y el adorno que lo embellece. • Sus cuentos y mitos que son como una regulación del tiempo de salida o organizador de día y de la noche. • Los ritos de la pedida de lluvia • Los curanderos, que ayudan a estar bien de la salud sin meterle químicos al cuerpo (Que a través del tiempo nos afecta de una u otra forma)

	• La lengua materna que es el ch´ol y el fomento a la escritura y lectura de ello.
Sin lugar	¿Qué considero patrimonio? Mi familia, la religión, las creencias, la comida, costumbres, tradiciones Conservar La lengua, Costumbres porque debemos conservar siempre nuestro origen región porque es algo con lo que nos identificamos como personas desde pequeños.
Tacotalpa, Tab.	• Cuidar a los animales • Que las comidas típicas aún se preparen, ya que es un gran patrimonio, algunas comidas y bebidas nos identifican. • Cuidar y conservar las lenguas indígenas • Seguir practicando el bordado • Cuidar las tradiciones Cosas que quisiera cambiar: • Que dejen de tirar basura tanto en las calles como en los ríos • La caza y venta de animales
Teapa, Tab	Conservar • Medio Ambiente • Iglesias • Gastronomía Tiene que haber un cambio: • Contaminación • Tráfico • Sociedad
Ej. Emiliano Zapata, Tacotalpa, Tab	Conservar: • La lengua ch´ol • Artesanías • La gastronomía • La flora y la fauna • Cuerpos de agua • Tradiciones culturales y religiosas • La agricultura • Organización social

	Cambiar • Contaminación • Alcoholismo • Violencia intrafamiliar • Desempleo • Deserción escolar • Drogadicción • Discriminación • Conflictos entre vecinos
Guayal, Tacotalpa, Tab.	Dese mi punto de vista una de las cosas que quisiera conservar sería mi lengua materna (ch´ol), para las nuevas generaciones de mi comunidad, ya que a través de ella se pueden interpretar la cosmovisión de mis antepasados, las costumbres y tradiciones que aún prevalecen en la actualidad. Una de las prácticas que quiero rescatar son las visitas que hacen las personas mayores a las cuevas, para pedir beneficios a la madre naturaleza, también rescatar el ritual de la siembra del maíz.
Oxolotán Tabasco	Yo soy de Oxolotán y considero que hay que preservar los caminos en los cerros, en los que antes las personas utilizaban como “camino real” ya que estas comunicaban a las comunidades circunvecinas. Hay que conservar la piedra que está en el río, la de mayor tamaño, ya que ahí se puede utilizar como sitio turístico. La elaboración del tamalito o de la gran variedad de los mismos, ya que aquí hay varias maneras de prepararlos. Los arroyos que hay en los alrededores Que no se pierdan las lenguas maternas tales como el ch´ol, zotzil, el zoque y otros, para que a futuro se les enseñe a las siguientes generaciones.
Raya Zaragoza, Tacotalpa, Tabasco	En lo particular lo que me gustaría conservar de mi comunidad es el respeto mutuo, conservar las diferentes creencias y obras laborales como oficios antiguos, como son la panadería, de ladrillo es el horno donde se hornea para luego venderlo, es muy importante te enseña una manera de vida que la generación a traído en la antigüedad. Como también la fábrica de bordado, son manualidades especiales y los recursos naturales como la cascada.

	En parte me gustaría que fuera algo que se tome en cuenta y pueda ser conservado, y si se pudiera ser algo turístico y arqueológico e igual a los ancestros.
Buenos Aires	Yo considero de mi parte que lo más importante que hay que conservar en nuestra comunidad son la cultura y sus costumbre porque cada una de ella son importantes. Para el futuro lo más interesante que a mi me gustaría es que los valores, aquellas costumbres no se desaparezcan porque lo más importante para nosotros como indígenas son la lengua ch´ol, el tipo de vestimenta y la gastronomía, y el respeto que nos hace ser como persona.
Raya Zaragoza	Quiero conservar las cosas antiguas como las que están hechas de barro, como el como el comal etc. Así en el futuro conservarlo y otros podrán estudiar ese objeto. El otro como las construcciones de las casas que fueron y son hechas de pura piedra y en los pueblos hay algunas de esas, llevaron años para hacerlas y es lo que quiero conservar. También los materiales de sus trabajos, ya que también hay algunos que conozco, como instrumento de los campos.
El Limar, Tila	Yo quisiera conservar las culturas que tiene mi comunidad como la tradición, las fiestas, la gastronomía. Los ríos de arrollo las cuevas, el ambiente y las religiones. Quisiera conservar los cultivos como el maíz, frijol y algunas otras cosas que se cultivan
Tila	Me gustaría conservar culturas, tradiciones como en las otras comunidades tienen muchas culturas, eso es lo que yo quiero como en mi comunidad tienen muchas tradiciones y costumbres de como hacen las fiestas, eso es lo que no me gustaría que se pierdan. Me gustaría que se siguen esas costumbres como hablan ch´ol.
Ixtapangajoya Chiapas	Conservar • Iglesia • Montañas • Cuerpos de agua • Dulces • Día de muertos • Modo de producción agrícola

	• Leyendas • Fiestas Cambiar • La pérdida de las costumbres • Tala de árboles • La caza de animales • La contaminación