

Article

Mul Meyaj Tía U Betá Jump'el Kaj: Working Together to Build a Community in Puuc Archaeology

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Abstract: This paper explores specific challenges that archaeologists face when attempting to involve a broader community of local stakeholders in cultural heritage research. We combine our perspectives as a US-based archaeologist and a local community member in a discussion of practical approaches for promoting more equitable research collaborations in the Puuc region of the northern Maya lowlands. The format of the paper includes a blend of dialogue, narrative, and analysis. First, we evaluate the importance of engaging in social interactions outside of the fieldwork setting and examine the limitations to full-coverage community participation. Next, we discuss the structural barriers discouraging greater local interest in cultural heritage research. We assess the potential of linguistic education and digital conservation programs for encouraging broader-scale engagement with knowledge production. Finally, we highlight the importance of employment by archaeological research projects as the critical factor influencing local participation in heritage-related activities. Barring immediate structural changes to the socio-economy of the Yucatán, the most significant way to promote local involvement in cultural heritage projects is for archaeologists and community members to work together to try to secure funding for more sustainable employment opportunities.

Keywords: archaeology; Maya; conservation; experimental archaeology; identity; education; Puuc; collaboration

1. Introduction

The Bolonchén Regional Archaeological Project (BRAP) completed its first field season in the eastern Puuc region of the northern Yucatán in the summer of 2000 and has overseen research in the region ever since. Founded and co-directed by Drs. George J. Bey III (Millsaps College), Tomás Gallareta Negrón (INAH), and William M. Ringle (Davidson College), BRAP's mission has included emphases on local community engagement, preservation of cultural heritage, and ecological conservation. The project's educational efforts have gone beyond fostering numerous PhD and Masters dissertations at US and Mexican institutions, to promoting local K-12 continuing studies opportunities in the towns of Yaxhachén, Kancab, and Oxkutzcab, and field research opportunities for Mexican and Yucatecan *Licenciatura* (Bachelor's Degree) and Masters-level students. BRAP and Millsaps College created the Kaxil Kiuic Helen Moyers Biocultural Reserve centered on the archaeological site of Kiuic and the non-profit organization Kaxil Kiuic, A.C. that oversees it. Based out of the Millsaps Puuc Archaeological Research Compound (MPARC) in the town of Oxkutzcab, the Bolonchén Regional Archaeological Project now enters its third decade of archaeological research while overseeing a multi-faceted, community-oriented operation. The upcoming research phase includes plans to engage with a broader spectrum of local stakeholders in cultural heritage knowledge production.

Although the main project headquarters are in the town of Oxkutzcab (pop. 23,096 according to the 2010 census), which is located along the northeastern edge of the elevated Puuc region, most of the local crewmembers hail from three smaller Puuc villages (Figure 1). Yaxhachén (pop. 1633) and Emiliano Zapata (pop. 1350) are located within the municipality of Oxkutzcab, 30 km and 8 km southwest of the principal town, respectively, and Kancab (pop. 2819) is located 12 km southeast of the town of Oxkutzcab in the neighboring municipality of Tekax [1,2]. The majority of village households, including those with members who work as collaborators on the archaeological project, rely primarily on subsistence farming for their livelihood. *Milpas* (agricultural fields) radiate outward from the villages with broad stretches of secondary growth forest separating cultivated areas. Many of the archaeological sites investigated by BRAP sub-projects, such as Kiuic, Huntichmul, and Labná, lie within these forested tracts.

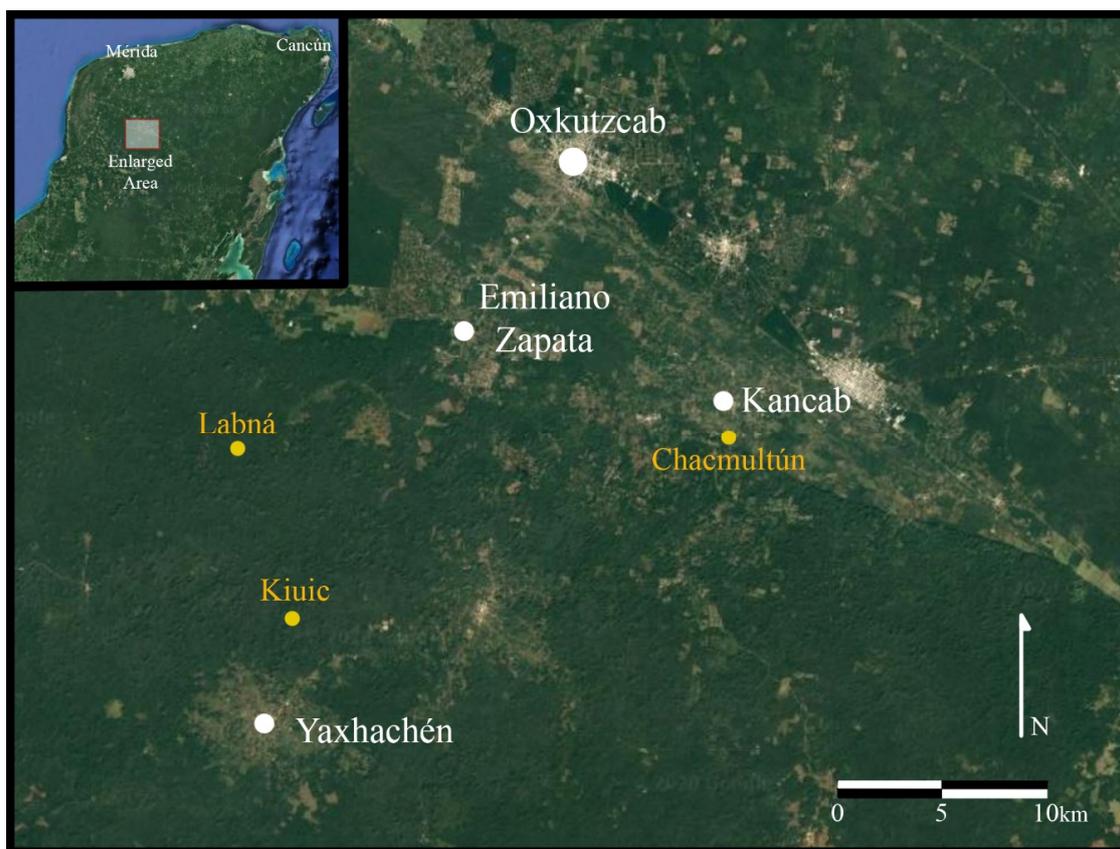


Figure 1. Satellite map of southwestern Yucatán State, Mexico highlighting modern towns (in white) and archaeological sites (in yellow) mentioned in the text.

Since the 1980s, archaeologists have reflected more explicitly on the social processes of knowledge production and the broad spectrum of living people who are involved with, and impacted by, the study of the past [3–7]. Projects across Latin America have demonstrated the potential benefits of multivocal approaches to knowledge production by engaging with a diverse array of communities in cultural heritage research. These collaborative frameworks have led to a productive elaboration of the many roles that the past can play in the present [8–11]. Several projects in the Maya area have also taken significant steps to promote broader local community involvement with archaeology and cultural heritage research [5,12–15]. However, the overall number of archaeological projects in the Maya area that explicitly outline what is actually at stake for local community members remains relatively low [5,16]. We fully acknowledge that the collaborative nature of our own archaeological project as it currently exists is very different from community or public archaeology [6,15,17–20]. As we look

ahead to the next phase of the project, it is important that we incorporate a range of perspectives as broad as the stakeholder pool in the planning and execution of the research.

The authors each joined BRAP several years after its inauguration. Seligson joined after his first year of graduate school at the University of Wisconsin–Madison for the 2010 summer field season. Chi Nah, a life-long resident of Kancab (Figure 2), joined as a crewmember on the Labná-Kiuic Inter-Site Survey sub-project in 2007. We have had the pleasure of working together both directly and indirectly for many BRAP field seasons. This paper is the result of our ongoing conversations about prominent issues that affect engagement between local community members, archaeologists, and cultural resources. Our main objective is to identify the ways in which project goals and practices can best serve the interests of local community members while facilitating broader engagement with cultural heritage. Recognizing that community identity is a fluid and context-dependent construct [21], it is important to clarify that we will be using the term to apply to residents of Kancab, Emiliano Zapata, and Yaxhachén, unless otherwise specified.



Figure 2. A street corner in Chi Nah's hometown of Kancab, Yucatán.

We present two personal perspectives on the ways that archaeological projects like BRAP have already influenced the lives of local community members and discuss how cultural heritage-oriented projects can best incorporate aspects of community archaeology in the Puuc region moving forward. In the following sections, we interweave our dialogue with narrative vignettes and analysis. The paper highlights three principal areas concerning collaborative efforts: (1) the importance of social interactions outside of the fieldwork setting; (2) potential avenues for community members to engage more directly with cultural heritage management and archaeology; and (3) the significance of employment opportunities. We explain how each of these issues relate to the underlying socioeconomic circumstances of the local communities and explore the limits of local participation in archaeological research. We argue that the most significant way to promote local involvement in cultural heritage projects is for

archaeologists and community members to work together to try to secure funding for more sustainable employment opportunities.

2. Engaging Beyond Archaeology

On Sunday August 3 2014, I took the mound for the *Reales de Kancab* baseball team against their cross-town rivals, the *Gigantes* (Figure 3). Wearing a borrowed uniform and standing an intimidating five feet, seven inches tall, I was both giddy and nervous at the opportunity to relive my glory days, however briefly. Lasting only three and one-third innings, I was pretty rusty after seven years away from the sport and only managed to strike out three while walking six batters. The *Reales* ended up rallying to victory behind a fifty-six-year-old relief pitcher nicknamed *Pich'* (Yucatec Mayan for “singing black thrush”) while I cheered my team on from the dugout. All of the members of the Kancab community who turned out for the Sunday baseball game got a kick out of watching the red-bearded gringo not quite live up to the hype.



Figure 3. Seligson pitching for the *Reales de Kancab* baseball team on August 3 2014 and greeting the relief pitcher at the end of his outing.

After the game, I joined my BRAP collaborator hosts for some *venado pibil* (venison cooked in an earth oven) back at one of their family compounds. We sat in a circle of plastic chairs inside a semi-covered auxiliary structure that included a food preparation area (Figure 4), passing around a few *caguamas* (32-ounce beers) and talking about almost anything but archaeology. Like the field site, the circle remained a male-dominated space, and although other family members stopped in briefly to say hello, I did not get much of a chance to talk with them. A backdrop that included the smell of fresh-made tortillas and the sounds of reggaeton and norteño-inspired music reinforced the fact that we were far removed from the field site. I was grateful for how much the power dynamics shifted now that we were not only away from the field site but also literally on their “home turf.”

An early afternoon thunderstorm brought a brief respite from the summer heat as we chatted about daily life in Kancab, local politics, recipes brought back from restaurant kitchens in San Francisco, and the upcoming planting season. We all felt more comfortable asking each other personal questions and, for the most part, answering them. Back at the archaeological site the next morning, I was very happy to find that the opening up of our relationships was not temporary. Field operations took on a new dimension for the rest of the season.



Figure 4. A cinder block house with pole and thatch auxiliary structures in Kancab.

Far from the quiet jungle path [15]—and the immediate production of archaeological knowledge of any kind—was this extra-curricular activity still a productive engagement between a foreign archaeologist and local community members? Seligson genuinely wanted to connect with local project members and found the visits to local communities to be successful in this regard, but to what degree was the satisfaction rooted in phenomenological novelty? Were the interactions tainted or even invalidated if they overlapped with self-serving goals [22]? Were there any tangible results from this instance of engaging beyond archaeology that would benefit local community members as well as the archaeologist? What follows is part of a dialogue between the authors that took place in the spring of 2020 over the phone and through a text-based digital communication platform. We discuss interactions that we have had over the course of the last decade and how they relate to broader issues of engagement with archaeological research and cultural heritage.

Seligson: From my perspective, being invited to participate in local community sporting events, attend family birthday celebrations, and just hang out in an informal setting on the weekend represented a recognition that our relationships went beyond archaeological fieldwork. I knew that we were not necessarily going to achieve the “deep hang” level of cultural anthropology, but I also did not want our interactions to be limited to the workplace environment of the project field sites. Fully recognizing that my participation in non-work-related activities on the weekends had nothing to do with the project’s research goals or knowledge production per se, I wanted our relationship to be more than just an employer–employee dynamic.

At the least, I thought my visits to Kancab or Yaxhachén would demonstrate my sincerity in wanting us all to be collaborators on the project. However, I also worried that as a foreign archaeologist coming down to work locally for only a couple of months every year, a suspicion of neocolonialist intentions might be unavoidable. I hoped that hanging out with the project team on the weekends would help prove to everyone how much I valued and respected their partnership beyond the help that they were providing me for my dissertation research. I also hoped that changing the setting of our interactions would provide me with a better understanding of the role that the project played in my local collaborators’ lives.

Chi Nah: [Translated from Spanish] [From my perspective, most of us enjoyed and appreciated that you would come to visit us in Kancab, because at the field site it is another form of interaction. At the

field site, we need to focus more on the project, on the work (Figures 5 and 6). Yes, there is some time to chat at the field site as well, but it is different. Outside of work hours, there is time to relax and talk more informally. It is not the same environment as it is at the work site. I think it was important that you came to visit it us.



Figure 5. The Kancab archaeological crew excavating a burnt lime pit kiln at the site of Kiuc.



Figure 6. Chi Nah making a sketch map of an archaeological compound near Kiuc.

However, not everyone was excited or cared much. Most of the people who worked on the archaeological project liked your visits, but not everyone cared. Some were too busy working their other jobs to visit. In general, people in Kancab are suspicious of the motives that foreigners might have when they visit the town, but are interested in interacting with them to gain more confidence. Not many foreigners visit Kancab and when they do, they usually just pass through. So when you visited, some people affiliated with the project and also not affiliated with the project may be curious

about your motives. Sometimes, if people do not know who you are, they think it is a little strange that you are there. But when they get to know you, who you are, from where you are coming, it is ok. There was value in your visits, but I would say not necessarily for everyone because they would need to take even more time to get to know you, and you them.]

Seligson: It is very important to respect the diversity of experiences and opinions held by local community members in general, and especially when it comes to potential benefits and drawbacks of having archaeological projects like BRAP in the area. Over time, I learned of the potential for uneven participation in the archaeological fieldwork by representatives of only a few households to exacerbate intra-community divisions. An ongoing challenge faced by BRAP and other projects is the unfortunate reality that it is rare to achieve full-scale coverage of community engagement in archaeological research. Not all factions within even the smallest villages are going to benefit equally (or at all) from the supplemental income provided by archaeological project salaries. Based on what I have learned from experiences in Yaxhachén and discussions with local collaborators, I have come to accept the fact that not everyone in the local communities will welcome our presence, but it has also led to me to wonder whether unanimous support should be a prerequisite for continued fieldwork. It also appears that these circumstances vary from town to town and the situation may be different between Yaxhachén and Kancab.

Chi Nah: [When there is archaeological work, there are some people who would want to participate but do not have the opportunity. However, there are not many people like this. Some guys would like to work, but do not want to do this type of work for the wage that is being paid. There is usually a call put out by the foreman to assemble a team for the sub-project. The number of people needed is determined by the project director. Some people do not want to work for the project because they do not know you. If they do not know the person who is going to pay the wages, they do not want to take the work. People who do not have previous experience working for the project do not know what is involved in the work and do not want to participate.

Only sometimes do people want to work with us but do not get the chance. One issue is that because it has generally been the same guys working on the project for a long time, there are not many others who have experience doing the archaeology work like cutting paths through the forest or excavating. There are fewer people who have the experience, and therefore a smaller group that is likely to want to join the archaeological work.]

Summary: Our conversations confirmed that although Seligson's visits to Kancab were appreciated by some local project members, the overall impact was not as far-reaching as he had hoped or expected. Such discrepancies in the perceptions of intentions and results are unfortunately quite common when non-local actors attempt to "make a difference" in local communities. The skepticism is often justified given the consequences of foreign involvement in the Yucatán over the past several centuries as well as the frequent entanglement of archaeological research with the potentially destructive forces of "economic development" since the second half of the 20th century [23–27]. Despite their limits, however, Seligson's visits were valuable for deepening relationships and bridging power gaps between project members, at least to a certain degree. This helped to strengthen ties that would serve all sides well in our ongoing partnerships. In terms of intra-project solidarity and the creation of more enjoyable work environments that could potentially benefit the production of archaeological knowledge, the social engagements beyond archaeology were indeed impactful.

The visits also had a significant impact with regard to Seligson's deeper recognition of the diversity of local opinions vis-à-vis the archaeological project and non-locals in general [4,5]. This seems like an obvious point to make, but it highlights a range of challenges faced by archaeological projects seeking to engage with local communities and cultural heritage on a profounder level. One of these challenges is a desire to benefit as many local community members as possible while only being able to employ a limited number of individuals directly in project work. Although Chi Nah believes that most individuals from Kancab who would like to work for the project do in fact receive the opportunity to do so, it is difficult to confirm this due to a lack of outreach beyond the social circles of the project foremen.

In Yaxhachén, it is clear that preexisting political and familial rivalries have influenced distinct project field crews that work on separate sub-projects. Archaeologists across Mesoamerica have experienced the effects that internal community rivalries can have on the local involvement in field research. In some cases, these rivalries have been passed down from generation to generation from long ago [28–30]. Tradition dictates that local crew foremen choose the members of their respective work teams. Unfortunately, this system perpetuates intra-community tensions as each foreman invariably selects from a pool of individuals already allied with him and his family. In the past, archaeologists could work with community-wide governing organizations like the *ejidos* (local management councils) to recruit project members from a broad cross-section of the community. Over the past few decades, however, internal community divisions have worsened due to rapid population growth, emigration to urban centers, and the mounting difficulties of subsistence farming, among other factors. As a result, there no longer exists a local governing body that Chi Nah believes can serve as an effective intermediary between the project and the majority of the community. Thus, we will try alternative outreach methods to promote broader participation in the next phase of our research. These will include working with local K-12 schools, using social media to organize community events, and expanding communication networks little by little through project members who participate in multiple local social circles.

The seemingly simple task of hiring local crewmembers highlights one of the main challenges facing archaeological projects that seek to develop broader and deeper levels of engagement with local communities—the inability to provide economic benefits to enough individuals directly to make archaeological fieldwork appealing. The restricted pool of stakeholders who are directly involved with the research retain the limited annual employment positions and pass down opportunities within closely-knit social circles. However, as other contributors to this Special Issue have pointed out [5], there are many ways to involve local community members in the production of knowledge related to cultural heritage beyond day-to-day field operations. Engaging with cultural heritage can take many forms including educational outreach, the development of local cultural centers or museums [5,31], and participation in the planning, analysis, and dissemination stages of the project [14,15]. Participating in local sporting events and chatting over *caguamas* certainly do have their merits for improving intra-project relationships and may even hold potential for improving local/non-local relationships on a broader community scale. However, to invite more local stakeholders to participate directly and indirectly in the next phase of the project, we will need to work through social media and other non-governmental means to reach out to as many different social groups within the community as possible.

3. The Cultural Heritage Factor

The ten-person team from Yaxhachén worked for two weeks, switching out pairs of excavators every ten minutes. The tools they used were not trowels and buckets, but heavy iron poles and large pickaxes. They slowly picked away at the side of the low limestone outcrop, forming a semi-circular indent in the gentle slope. The irregularly-shaped boulders that they prized from the bedrock matrix were used to complete the other half of the circle, forming a miniature silo. After two weeks, the team completed the model pit kiln. Now ready to assemble the raw materials to conduct a burnt lime production experiment, they invited Don Gabriel, the father of one of the team members, to preside over the kiln firing.

As a child, Don Gabriel had seen older men in the village construct large aboveground pyres out of greenwood. They had broken down large pieces of limestone into fist-sized pieces and stacked them on top of the wood. They then lit the pyre from the center, causing it to slowly burn outward and eventually cave in on itself to form an aboveground oven. Don Gabriel was kind enough to adapt this technique, and oversaw the assembly of a pyre within the semi-subterranean pit kiln. At each stage of the greenwood layering, he included an offering—first, dried corncobs, then dried chile peppers, and finally salt. Although an unseasonal downpour ruined the first experimental burn, the second

one was a success. The freshly cut greenwood burned red through the night in a ring of fire, leaving behind a pile of quicklime in the morning (Figure 7).



Figure 7. The burnt lime production experiment: (A) the team arranging the fuel for the burn; (B) the kiln heating up soon after being ignited; (C) the fuel burns for a total of 20 h, through the night; (D) by morning, the limestone has been converted to burnt lime [image D adapted from [32]].

The construction and firing of the crew’s experimental pit kiln in February and June 2015 were a direct outcome of the extra-curricular interactions described in the previous section. The larger issue at stake with the experiment, and with most of the archaeological research conducted by BRAP and its members, is knowledge production concerning Maya cultural heritage. One of the specific purposes of the lime experiment was to counteract charges made in popular publications that the Classic Maya destroyed their environment and committed “ecocide,” at least to a certain degree. The firing of our experimental kiln demonstrated that the ancient pit kilns scattered across the landscape of the eastern Puuc were more fuel-efficient than the “traditional” aboveground pyres used during the Colonial Period and more recent eras. This in turn indicated that pre-colonial communities in the Puuc were in fact carefully managing their natural resources, taking proactive steps to stave off environmental degradation [32].

Seligson: Although the choice to visit Kancab and Yaxhachén outside of work hours had nothing to do with my archaeological research objectives, the extra time that I spent immersing myself in local community activities did end up benefitting the production of knowledge in the end. I broadened my social networks through the weekend socializing, and the success of our pit kiln experiment was largely due to the level of familiarity that we developed hanging out in the Yaxhachén central plaza, at the soccer field, and in family homes (Figure 8). On one of my visits, I was introduced to Don Gabriel, whose insights were invaluable to the construction and firing of the pit kiln. Getting to know extended families and getting to the point where we were all comfortable talking about anything but archaeology actually brought us back around to talking about cultural heritage in more meaningful contexts.



Figure 8. The soccer field on the outskirts of Yaxhachén.

I acknowledge that I did not consult with everyone who ended up being involved in the project when I first planned it. However, when I arrived in the field to begin the experimental work, I made sure to discuss the background, objectives, and possible broader implications of the project with the whole team. Although the input and guidance of my local collaborators ended up being instrumental to the success of the experiment, I wondered afterward whether we could have developed an even more nuanced understanding of lime production by incorporating the perspectives of an even broader pool of collaborators. Additionally, although I was very proud of the data that we generated and the implications of our results, it concerned me that many of my local collaborators were not as invested in the knowledge we were producing about their ancestors as I was.

Chi Nah: [Some of us take pride in the work that we do to find out more about the ancestors. To see how they built their buildings and temples and created the carved stones. They did not have the building materials that we have today, so it is interesting to see how they built their homes with different materials. All of the ancient architecture is very beautiful. Some of us are very proud to do this work at these sites and it is very cool to see how well preserved they are because they represent a great heritage that has passed.

For me, it is important to know that the ancient Maya knew how to take care of the natural environment and how to exploit the resources of their lands responsibly. I think that many people in the rest of the world still do not recognize that the ancient Maya were good guardians and took care of the planet. In the present, we do not know how to take care of the environment, because there is a lot of chemical contamination. The ancient Maya did not have any of the agricultural chemicals that we

have now and they did not need them to grow even more crops than we do today. In the present day, if you do not use chemical products, the agricultural plants do not bear fruit and no one can harvest their crops.

Not everyone is interested in the culture of the ancestors or learning more about them. They do not have the background information that would make the sites interesting to them or to make the ancient buildings meaningful. Some people understand and recognize that the ancient buildings are important because they are managed by INAH (the National Institute of Anthropology and History of Mexico), but not everyone. Some people do not believe in the importance of the ancient sites. To them, these are just stones. When they find remains of ancient structures on their lands, they just see stones, not forms.

Seligson: One weekend, a few of my friends from Kancab took me to visit the ancient site of Chacmultún, just about 2 km south of town (Figure 9). It is a beautiful site and the name, roughly translating to “mounds of red stone,” references the pinkish hue of most of the stones used in the central buildings at the site. An unforgettable aspect of this visit, my first to the site, was experiencing the pride that my friends radiated in showing me around the ruins. To me, it seemed that they were demonstrating a level of interest in the ancient Maya far beyond anything that they had demonstrated at any of our field sites. I asked them about this apparent discrepancy, but they shrugged it off, saying that it was just such a beautiful site.



Figure 9. A two-story structure in the central precinct of Chacmultún, displaying the characteristic pink-hued stones from which the site derives its name.

Thinking about it now, I question my arrogance and unwillingness to believe, but I admit that I still thought that there must be some deeper meaning behind the discrepancy in their feelings toward Chacmultún and our field sites. I felt that perhaps it had something to do with the proximity of Chacmultún to their hometown—this was *their* ancient site. This was the site that they would bike to growing up, that they would take visiting family members from other towns to come visit, where they would spend the occasional Sunday touring. There must be some perceived connection between the modern town and the ancient site.

Chi Nah: [I do not know if there is a connection between Kancab and Chacmultún. I do not think there is. There is a small village right next to the ancient site, the modern village of Chacmultún. They probably have a closer connection. There are some people from Kancab that visit the site and

like it because it is the only site they have visited. It is a nice place to visit and spend the day outside. I personally like Chacmultún because it is a very beautiful site, but there are also other sites that are more beautiful. Not everyone gets the opportunity to see other ancient sites. If you see the other sites, you see that Chacmultún is very nice, but there are also many other nice sites.

In general, it would be very helpful if local people were able to visit more archaeological sites. It might increase their interest in studying all parts of the ancient civilization. The ancient sites are part of our Maya culture, so we must study them thoroughly to learn more about them. It is important that people today not forget the heritage of our ancestors. We must not forget that we are linked by the tradition of being speakers of the Mayan language.

I also think that it is important for local collaborators to be involved in the planning of the archaeological projects to let them know more about the goals and methods that each project has. The project objectives should investigate the relationships between ancient communities, the exchange of materials, and their daily activities. It is important to know how all of the planning of each project develops, how all of the planning of each project is carried out. It is also important for local collaborators to know what the objectives are of each investigation so that they can make sure to take advantage of every job that arises.]

Summary: Increasing participation by local community members in every stage of the archaeological research process continues to hold much promise for developing a balanced voice for the past. Unfortunately, as Fisher and Chase point out in the introduction to this Special Issue, archaeologists have not yet fully embraced this more equitable model of collaboration. One of the many factors contributing to the delay may be a seeming discrepancy in interest in the production of knowledge related to cultural heritage between the non-local archaeologists and the local community members. Chi Nah notes that not everyone in Kancab is interested in learning more about the ancient Maya. This apparent lack of interest can often be traced back to exclusion from the knowledge production and education process in the first place, and so the cycle has continued [6,15,16,27]. The other principal factor preventing local engagement with cultural heritage is a structural economic inequality that requires a focus on such practical concerns as economic stability ahead of heritage obligations or privileges [33]. We will discuss the importance of economic benefits more explicitly in the following section.

A theme that we kept returning to in our discussions of local perspectives on cultural heritage was the disconnect that many local residents feel between their own culture and that of the people who left stones in the fields. Recognizing that at least for some local community members, this disconnect may result from a lack of opportunity to productively engage with cultural heritage, archaeological projects like BRAP can work to broaden the scope of our outreach programs. One area that may encourage local exploration of connections between past and present is linguistics. Although few residents of Kancab identify with the architectural remnants scattered across their community agricultural fields, many do appreciate that the language they speak is an intangible heritage passed down from the people who lived there before. Even though many community members may not refer to themselves primarily as “Maya” [34], they do recognize and even take pride in speaking a Mayan language.

Yucatec remains one of the Mayan dialects with the highest number of speakers, but urbanizing and globalizing trends have led to a generational divide in Yucatec Mayan fluency, with younger generations more likely to embrace Spanish as a primary language. Even if language revitalization programs similar to those that have been successful in other sub-regions of the Maya area are not yet a necessity in northern Yucatán, educational programs that focus on the connections between language and cultural heritage may serve as a gateway for expanding interest to other forms of cultural heritage [15,31,35–37]. We explore other potential options for local educational programs that could promote wider interest in the study of the past, such as digital conservation and experimental archaeology in our Discussion section. With more community members interested in learning about the ancient Maya, archaeological projects may find a broader community eager to contribute perspectives and engage in knowledge production about the past. However, even if such programs are successful at

promoting broader and more meaningful interest, funding and employment remain critical underlying issues deterring widespread engagement.

4. The Importance of Employment

The final Friday of the field season is always a mixed bag of feelings. Relief, sadness, excitement, anxiety. Everyone meets back in the village one final time for salaries to be doled out and to enjoy the sandwiches and cold soft drinks that often represent the final shared meal until the following summer. We all sit on the concrete benches in the shade of the ciricote trees in the central plaza. Most community members are indoors or sitting on shaded patios during what happens to be the hottest part of the day. Some local guys who did not work on the project this summer whistle and slowly raise an extended palm skyward to say “what’s up?” as they cruise by on their mopeds on the way to prepare their fields. A few students take advantage of the downtime and relaxed atmosphere to try out the old seesaw they had been eyeing all season. The local crewmembers ask what the students will be doing when they return to the United States in the coming weeks and whether they will be returning next summer.

Group photos are taken, handshakes and hugs are exchanged (Figure 10). Exclamations of “Thank you,” “*Gracias*,” and “*Dios bo’otik*” are spread around. Some project members are looking forward to returning to the United States, maybe to air conditioning and a favorite food item. Some are relieved that after seven grueling weeks, the coming Monday will not bring with it more forest-clearing or earth-extracting or bucket-carrying. Anyone who has participated in summer fieldwork in the Yucatán knows that it is tough work—both physically and mentally—and that the level of difficulty is significantly higher for the local crewmembers than it is for the archaeologists who oversee the project. And yet, the final interaction of the final day is almost invariably a request (part hopeful, part desperate) for confirmation that there will indeed be another season of arduous labor the following summer.



Figure 10. Group photo of the 2018 field crew in the town center of Emiliano Zapata.

Although the final day of the field season is indeed a bittersweet experience for all, it is that much bitterer for the local project members who count on the weekly salaries provided by the project every summer. Employment is the most visible and direct way that the archaeological project benefits portions of the local community at the moment, but it can only go so far. Archaeological projects pool together

funding from multiple sources and still rarely include specific allotments for community engagement beyond employment in fieldwork, despite the inclusion of broader impact considerations in grant applications [5,17,29,38]. Employment is the reason why most, if not all, local crewmembers participate in the project in the first place. Any interests that they might have in cultural heritage are secondary to the importance of supplementing livelihoods based on subsistence farming. Thus, archaeologists must grapple with several issues surrounding the sources and quantities of funding, as well as where responsibilities should lie with regard to ensuring local economic stability.

Chi Nah: [I first got involved with the archaeological project when I was in Secondary School. I found out that they were looking for people to work at Maya sites, such as at Labná and at other smaller groups of structures. I decided to participate for two reasons—first off, due to the lack of other jobs available, I saw that it was an opportunity to work. The other reason was to know more about the Maya ancestors, and how they built and lived in their homes.

One of the benefits of having that job was that it provided me with a way to help contribute to my household, to bring food to serve at home. Sometimes I would ask if there was a way to raise wages, because with that salary we only had enough to buy some things. Today and every year food products are increasing in price, and a low salary is sometimes not enough for us to be able to buy everything necessary. For the community, it is a good job because it helps some to be able to support their families and is a benefit for them.

One of the main challenges that villages like Kancab face is poverty. The economy is poor due to the lack of work and due to the minimum wages offered locally. It is one of those problems that we face and many cannot pay for an education to then go into a career that would earn more money. In truth, both the cultural heritage aspect and the monetary aspect are important, but the ability to help provide money for the family is the top priority.]

Seligson: It is unsurprising that the economic support provided by employment on archaeological projects is the most important factor influencing participation by local collaborators. Beyond the fun and benefits of weekend socializing, and even the importance of protecting and promoting cultural heritage, it makes sense that supplementing income to help support a family is a top priority. Archaeologists are obviously very happy that we can provide employment opportunities for our local collaborators, but recognize that our contributions to the local economies can only go so far.

To address some of the broader challenges faced by local communities, Millsaps College and BRAP created a *becario* (scholarship) program to help children from Yaxhachén continue their education. Until a new schoolhouse was built in Yaxhachén in 2016, local education ended after the eighth grade. Only a handful of students were able to afford the time, transportation costs, and tuition to attend the high school in Oxkutzcab, 30 km away. The Millsaps *becario* program sponsored between two and four students per grade from Yaxhachén to attend high school in Oxkutzcab. Since the new schoolhouse was built in 2016, Millsaps and BRAP have supported students from Kancab and Oxkutzcab in pursuing other continued educational opportunities. These education opportunities, like the salaries paid for archaeological fieldwork, are limited by available funding. Perhaps more emphasis should be placed on integrating education opportunities into the archaeological research components of the project?

Chi Nah: [More scholarships for local students would help some, but not everyone. Not everyone wants to study more. Jobs are more important to help support families. If possible, the archaeological project should look for other strategies or ways to offer more work, so that the communities can get involved, as well as maybe tourism to generate more jobs. Maybe the archaeologists could reach out to people in villages near other ancient sites that need to be explored and conserved to get more people involved. There are many sites in the region that can be studied more closely.

Maybe there are more jobs that could relate to cleaning and protecting sites, but these would have to be administered through the government, through INAH. This would maybe provide year-round work for some people. Maybe workers would be needed to clean paths so that people can reach the sites and have a good view of them. This would help employ more people. Also, I honestly think that if I had a job that was unrelated to archaeology, I would be a little less interested in Maya heritage.

I would not learn as much about the importance of how the {ancient} Maya culture evolved, because my work would not be related to it. It would still sound interesting, even if my work was not focused on it, because it is part of our culture and our language comes from our ancestors, but overall I would not be as interested in learning more.

It is important to continue to study the ancients to learn about their ways of living together, and to learn more about their languages that are similar to some that are spoken now. But at the same time, another important benefit is that while the project is running, it helps people from small communities to have temporary employment. The opportunity to work for the project provides work that people would otherwise not have.]

Summary: The Bolonchén Regional Archaeological Project oversees several sub-projects, many of which have field seasons of fewer than eight weeks each summer. Fortunately, two of the project's directors, Dr. Tomás Gallareta Negrón and Mtra. Rossana May Ciau can employ local collaborators on National Institute-related projects for periods throughout the rest of the year. However, even these work opportunities are often short-term and depend on such factors as the frequency of modern construction projects. Funding for summer fieldwork salaries is limited by the amount of research funds available to BRAP sub-projects, which can vary widely from year to year. The National Institute of Anthropology and History (INAH) sets the salary levels for crewmembers on archaeological projects, so local project directors do not have the authority to raise wages. The fact that archaeological employment is sporadic even in the best years leaves local collaborators in a precarious situation and constantly seeking other, more permanent sources of income. The lack of alternative local employment opportunities leads many individuals to move to larger urban centers like Mérida or Cancun [30], or even to risk the dangerous journey to the United States [39].

In our discussion of potential ways to improve the local archaeological employment situation, we regularly raised the possibility of finding more opportunities to engage in cultural resource management. As Chi Nah notes, this could involve protecting and maintaining archaeological sites for both cultural preservation and tourism purposes. Local or state governments could employ community members to cut back vegetation that threatens standing architecture at consolidated and unconsolidated sites, as well as regularly visit the thousands of architectural compounds scattered around the eastern Puuc to monitor for natural or anthropogenic destruction. Unfortunately, there is only limited government funding available for heritage management and it is mainly directed at the more prominent sites in the region. Only a handful of individuals currently work or volunteer as local site guardians [40]. It is possible (though unlikely) that INAH would be able to employ more individuals in the site-monitoring program in the future, as this would require an increase in funding for INAH. The federal government recently slashed the INAH budget due to the COVID-19 pandemic and though it is too soon to evaluate the full scope of the budget cuts, it is unclear when funding might return to previous levels, let alone rise above them.

With few other viable options at present, individual research projects like BRAP will continue to serve as the most pragmatic avenue for archaeology-related employment. Thus, in addition to taking the next crucial steps toward adopting aspects of a legitimate community archaeology level of local participation, it is important to continue to focus on local employment in the broader impact sections of grant applications [5]. In the eastern Puuc, at least, the best way to invite more local community members to become active stakeholders in cultural heritage protection and knowledge production may be to ensure that involvement is an economically worthwhile endeavor. There are still many changes that need to be made to funding structures to provide the economic foundation for achieving broader employment coverage [7,38]. In the meantime, archaeological projects can continue to promote this transformation by collaborating directly with local community members on project planning and including explicit statements about community well-being in their research proposals.

5. Discussion

Cynicism toward archaeologists and their intentions is unfortunately often justified in the era of globalization as the rise of contract (alternatively referred to as cultural resource management or commercial) archaeology has entangled the objectives of knowledge production with “economic development” [23–27]. Despite originating with the noble goal of cultural heritage preservation, many contract archaeology projects have been linked, fairly and unfairly, to predatory economic forces [7]. Disconnects between local and non-local perceptions of archaeological research intentions are rooted in neo-colonial structural problems that are unfortunately often beyond the power of individual research projects to fully address. Despite the obstacles, we agree that it is still worthwhile to try to manifest the changes that we can, even if it means advancing with small steps. In this regard, social engagements that seek to transcend the employer–employment dynamics of the field site are a valuable early step away from the quiet jungle path. They help to establish deeper personal relationships and more open channels for communication about project objectives. However, to enact real collaboration in the generation of understandings of the past, it will be necessary to work with multiple local social groups to reach as broad a cross-section of the community as possible.

Communities are heterogeneous entities with compositions and identities that are constantly in flux. Individuals within the overlapping social groups that compose the populations of villages like Kancab, Yaxhachén, and Emiliano Zapata possess a diversity of perspectives that could inform project agendas moving forward [4,10,20,30]. A great way to introduce more local community members to the ways that the project has thus far generated understandings of the past is to follow the example set by Overholtzer [13] and emulated by Hutson and colleagues [5], and encourage local project collaborators to give public talks about the archaeological fieldwork in which they have already participated. Through these broader community engagements, the project can invite more village residents to be a part of the planning process for upcoming field seasons. This would help to build new communities of practice [35] in which the benefits and responsibilities of being a stakeholder can be made explicit from the start [18]. It would also force archaeologists to confront the prospect of relinquishing total authority over the production of archaeological knowledge, which may end up being one of the biggest obstacles to fully embracing aspects of a community archaeology framework.

Archaeologists who work in the Maya area, many of whom are not from the Maya area and do not claim ancestral ties to the region, tend to get defensive about the accomplishments of the ancient Maya. It is unsurprising that researchers would be proud of the cultures to which they have devoted their life’s work and about which they have helped shape popular understandings. However, taking pride in a culture that is not one’s own often carries with it the potential for paternalistic claims to authority over knowledge production and the overstepping of boundaries [4,6,18,21]. For several decades, researchers have been raising these issues about who should be able to “speak for” ancient communities [17,41–45]. Even as archaeological projects increasingly promote the incorporation of subaltern perspectives, we continue to do so largely within the framework of authorized heritage discourse [42] that still privileges Western, scientific theoretical foundations [7,21,27].

On several occasions over the past decade, the two of us have disagreed over interpretations of archaeological features that we mapped together in the field. Sometimes, one of us would end up changing our opinion, but more often, we would include both of our perspectives in the write-up of our findings. Collaboration does not mean replacing the unilateral authority of Western-based theoretical frameworks with authoritarian subaltern frameworks—it means recognizing the potential contributions of multiple ontologies to generate a comprehensive understanding of the past [10,27]. Thus, moving forward, it will be important to recognize that disagreement is going to be an integral part of the knowledge production process [6]. Instead of trying to avoid it, we will work to embrace it as an indicator that we are engaging in more worthwhile, equitable collaboration. We expect this to be a challenging proposition, and even if we successfully implement an equitable program of knowledge production, we will still need to regularly assess to what degree our collaboration is merely a diversion from deeper underlying structural issues [7].

Beyond collaboration in planning, execution, and analysis, however, it may be impossible to completely overcome the power differential created by the employer–employee relationship. This dynamic is maintained in part by research guidelines that require a certain level of training to document archaeological fieldwork—an essential measure of protection when the subject matter involves cultural patrimony. Non-field site socializing can only go so far to address these dynamics when project members return to the field site. However, a potential approach to remedying the colonialist overtones of current research practices would be for archaeologists to make a more concerted effort to train local collaborators in archaeological documentation. This can take place within the project setting, through broader outreach programs, or even through K-12 educational programs. The fact that archaeologists usually retain the responsibility of record-making for themselves not only restricts control over knowledge production, but leads to a situation in which the archaeologist often literally stands over their local collaborators as they labor manually. Sharing access to archaeological documentation skills would not only empower local collaborators, but also allow archaeologists to more directly engage in the “muddy labor,” breaking down some of the more overt displays of inequality [46].

In addition to education in archaeological documentation methods, workshops focused on ancient Maya texts have been demonstrated to be a productive way to involve school-age community members more closely in the study of cultural heritage [47]. We have already touched on the significance of linguistics as a bridge between past and present and its potential importance as a gateway for promoting wider interest in both intangible and tangible heritage. The dialect of the hieroglyphic texts is different from Yucatec, which has continued to evolve since the end of the first millennium C.E., and yet there remain enough parallels to allow students to appreciate that their linguistic heritage can be traced back over one thousand years. Frequent engagements with Classic Maya hieroglyphs, whether within class settings or at workshops after normal class hours, could thus potentially be a productive way to encourage broader participation in knowledge production about the past.

Two other potentially productive avenues for greater local collaboration and engagement with cultural heritage are to focus on digital conservation [48] and experimental archaeology. The near ubiquity of internet access and smartphones, even in the smallest villages [5], coupled with the widespread adoption of such communication platforms as Facebook and Whatsapp, facilitates greater communication between archaeologists and local collaborators during the archaeological “off-season.” Easier communication methods and access to the internet’s trove of information and software downloads open the door to a wide range of potential heritage-related activities that go beyond excavation and survey, especially for younger generations. Advances in photogrammetric modeling that include the development of relatively intuitive software [49,50] raise the possibility that local community members can digitally conserve local artifacts and features. K-12 students could use their smartphone cameras to photograph objects and landscapes, and then upload them to central consoles at the BRAP headquarters or local schoolhouses where they can work with the photogrammetric software to create 3D models.

Experimenting with ancient technologies is another way to promote engagement with cultural heritage, especially at the K-12 level. Our construction and firing of a lime pit kiln modeled on the archaeological features that we had identified all over the field site brought this artifact of the past to life. Beyond their value for education, hands-on activities like ceramic or stone tool production or preparing meals using only pre-colonial tools and ingredients are fun. They also have the potential to instill a deeper connection and appreciation for the visible remnants of ancestral communities that did not have access to metal nor electricity. These applied lessons in digital and experimental archaeology can thus serve as productive starting points to encourage widespread community engagement from a younger age. The aim of all of these engagement initiatives is not to set the stage for the cooption of erasure of private heritage [33], but rather to promote broader interest toward the ultimate objective of developing a more balanced, multivocal interpretation of the past.

Looming over the implementation of these broader cultural heritage engagement programs is a concern for their potential to translate into gainful employment. Throughout our conversations,

site consolidation and preparation for tourism were frequently raised as possible avenues for generating more sustainable work opportunities. Despite the potential upsides for employment that such projects would entail, the focus on tourism faces several challenges. As Hutson and colleagues point out [5], the archaeological tourism industry of the Yucatán is saturated. Even if tourists arrive specifically to visit archaeological sites, there are too many sites to visit them all. They mainly stop by the more well-known archaeological zones in the center and northeast of the peninsula, which have the advantage of being closer to the major beach resort areas [30]. It is unlikely that the state or federal government will provide funding for new archaeological infrastructure, excavation, and consolidation projects in the Puuc for tourists that may never come. A concerted social media campaign to promote already consolidated sites like Chacmultún to tourists could potentially draw a few extra visitors to the smaller villages in the eastern Puuc, but it is unlikely to be significant enough to help with local employment.

Additionally, recent research has identified several ways in which cultural tourism has contributed to fraught relationships between modern Maya communities and the Maya cultures that came before. Foreign tourists visit small villages with preconceived notions of “Maya” culture that are biased by pop culture depictions. They then judge residents as inauthentic or “less than” in comparison with the ancient inhabitants of the region [30,34,51–53]. There are several gray areas in the commodification of heritage that are beyond the scope of this paper [7], but it is important to recognize that despite the resulting deficiency in tourism revenue, their locations far from the well-worn tourist paths may be beneficial in certain ways for villages like Kancab and Yaxhachén. One positive result is that local residents have not been pressured to exploit their cultural heritage in similar ways to communities closer to Chichen Itza or Ek’ Balam [29,30]. Such pressures often lead to the reiteration of cultural tropes influenced by and for tourists [52].

Despite the silver linings of limited local tourism revenue, the fact remains that the ability to find employment of any type is becoming increasingly precarious. Intensifying aridity in the northern Yucatán is placing further economic constraints on the local collaborators who rely heavily on subsistence farming. A full-on drought that began in 2018 now reaches the worst levels experienced locally since 1986 [54]. The direness of the situation is exemplified by the fact that many individuals continue to attempt the extremely dangerous US–Mexico border crossing despite the fact that recent US policy has made it at an increasingly life-threatening undertaking. As we finish writing this paper, the COVID-19 pandemic continues to wreak havoc on the global economy. Those individuals who recently risked it all to pursue economic opportunity in the United States have arrived in a locked-down country where jobs that they had been seeking have disappeared. The importance of archaeological employment will become even more apparent in summer 2020 as fields dry up and projects are prevented from conducting fieldwork due to the pandemic.

Ideally, organizations that fund archaeological research will support the creation of broader cultural heritage infrastructure such as local K-12 and continuing education programs, as well as resources to employ more individuals in heritage research during the archaeological “off-season.” Some might argue that the well-being of local Puuc residents is the responsibility of the local, state, or national governments of Mexico. However, considering how US-based institutions and researchers continue to accrue economic and professional capital through engagement with Maya cultural patrimony, it makes sense that local stakeholder communities should be prominent beneficiaries as well. Major funding institutions will thus need to be open to supporting archaeological projects with collaborative organizational structures and significant public well-being goals. Additionally, academic publishers and learning institutions will need to be more receptive to studies of the past that include knowledge generated through a collaborative framework. Although it may be a long while, if ever, before we see the full realization of these structural transformations, archaeologists and local communities can work together in the meantime to pursue goals that are more achievable in the short-term. We can collaborate on more equitable forms of knowledge production and work

together to apply for support from multiple, not necessarily archaeological, sources in an effort to balance archaeological research objectives with economic practicalities.

6. Conclusions: Looking Ahead

The Bolonchén Regional Archaeological Project oversees several ongoing sub-projects around the eastern Puuc that continue to draw upon local community support networks. As we look ahead to the next phase, we plan to adopt as many aspects of a community archaeology framework as the local circumstances permit. We will begin by attempting to broaden the local social circles within which the project currently operates through partnerships with local schools, as well as through social media. This will facilitate the incorporation of broader input in the formulation of research objectives and logistical planning. Prior examples of community-oriented research designs have yielded valuable insights into the possible benefits and complications of taking such an approach [4,5,14,17,24,38,45]. Taking the explicit step from community participation to integration in project planning has the potential to augment local community support for the cultural heritage goals and add new dimensions to knowledge production. Increased access to multiple social media platforms will facilitate the incorporation of a broader spectrum of perspectives into the planning processes that often take place during the winter when non-local archaeologists are not there in person.

In this paper, we have highlighted some of the understandable challenges that continue to impede the widespread implementation of community-focused archaeology projects. Despite these broader structural challenges, and the more immediate setbacks of 2020, we believe that a strong potential still exists to deepen partnerships between archaeologists, local community members, and governmental and non-governmental organizations to benefit all involved. In taking a realistic approach to this next phase, we recognize that there will be limits to the implementation of our community archaeology paradigm. We understand that many members of the local communities will remain suspicious of archaeologists' intentions and uninterested in participating in the research or management process. There will also be certain aspects of the archaeological research process that are unlikely to change, at least for now. These include the methodologies employed during data recovery phases and the field dynamics established by the employer–employee relationship on-site. We know that it will be difficult for archaeologists who have themselves been enculturated into a certain framework for studying the past to engage with diverse ontologies and to relinquish some of their power that to this point has been nearly absolute. Even those of us who feel ready to adopt a new approach may find the process especially challenging when it comes to the interpretation and dissemination phases of our research.

Finally, underlying these many individual hurdles is the essential challenge of continuously securing funding for archaeological and cultural heritage research. Funding will continue to be necessary to clarify and generate new understandings of the past. Funding will also be increasingly important to encourage a broader spectrum of local stakeholders to work with archaeologists to engage with the past. Archaeologists must continue to partner with community members to apply for funding from a wide range of public and private institutions to try to secure more sustainable employment opportunities on research projects. One of the focal points for these projects moving forward should be collaborative engagement with cultural heritage.

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