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## Examining the Evolution of Interaction between Researchers and Indigenous Populations: An Investigation of Archaeologists and the Maya

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# EXAMINING THE EVOLUTION OF INTERACTIONS BETWEEN RESEARCHERS AND INDIGENOUS POPULATIONS:

## AN INVESTIGATION OF ARCHAEOLOGISTS AND THE MAYA

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# INTRODUCTION

- This research examines:
  - Past interactions with the Guatemalan Maya throughout history
  - The development of Archaeology
  - Ethical research methodologies
- The goal of looking at the past and more ethical research methodologies is to find ways to change how archaeologists conduct their fieldwork to create a more beneficial experience for all parties involved.



# A HISTORY OF INTERACTIONS WITH THE MAYA AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF ARCHAEOLOGY

THE SPANISH CONQUEST – LIFE AFTER INDEPENDENCE – THE GUATEMALAN CIVIL WAR – NAGPRA  
– TRANSNATIONAL CORPORATIONS AND NARCOS –

# THE SPANISH CONQUEST

- Spanish *conquistadors* began arriving in the Maya World at the beginning of the sixteenth century.
  - They were typically seen as an invading force by the Maya.
  - Some, however, chose to side with the Spanish and aid in the conquest of neighboring Maya groups.
- After their arrival, Spanish colonizers fought to gain control of the Indigenous populations, convert them to Christianity, and exploit their labor.
  - To ease this process, Maya were forcibly relocated to *reducciones*, or centrally located plots of land.
  - They were forbidden from ritual practices and the erasure of these practices would continue for the next five centuries.
- Starting in the nineteenth century, Spanish-controlled colonies began to gain their independence and move towards self-governing.

# LIFE AFTER INDEPENDENCE AND THE EMERGENCE OF ARCHAEOLOGY

## The Maya

- Though the colonies were liberated from their conquerors, this did not promote the liberation of the Maya.
- They continued to be exploited for labor in the time after the Spanish conquest ended.
- In 1847, 70,000 Maya rebelled in the Yucatán Peninsula because they were being overtaxed, sparking the Caste War, which ended in 1901.

## Archaeology

- Archaeology was just starting to form as a discipline, so researchers were following inconsistent methodologies, which were heavily influenced by colonialist and imperialist ideals.
- Interest in the ruins and artifacts of the region attracted many to the area, who exploited local Indigenous labor to dig up troves of relics and leave with them.
  - This creates a permanent loss of context for the artifacts and strips them of any cultural meaning.

# LIFE AFTER INDEPENDENCE AND THE EMERGENCE OF ARCHAEOLOGY CONT.

## The Maya

- At the end of the nineteenth century, the Q'eqchi' Maya living in Guatemala were forced to flee to the southern lowlands after Germans began to arrive in Guatemala to take up the coffee trade.
  - The Germans bought up the Guatemalan highlands and had the government create laws allowing them to use the Maya and other Indigenous peoples as “serfs and sharecroppers.” (Woodfill 2019: 62).
- In the twentieth century, those Maya who were not already working for the Germans, were forced onto land to help the Germans grow coffee.
  - Some were able to escape this by running to the lowlands or crossing the border into Belize.

## Archaeology

- At the end of the nineteenth century, there was a shift towards more formal archaeological training and systematic fieldwork.
- The new governments laid claim on any and all tangible cultural heritage, stripping it away from the Indigenous peoples.
  - For example, the Mexican government adopted an imperialistic mindset regarding artifacts, claiming all artifacts found on their soil.
  - This focus on collecting to grow national cultural heritage shut the contemporary Indigenous people out of their own history

# INDIGENOUS RIGHTS MOVEMENTS AND THE GUATEMALAN CIVIL WAR

## The Maya

- In the 1950s, the Guatemalan government bought and redistributed all unused land to the landless poor.
  - The Maya received provisional land titles and provisional receipts from the *Instituto Nacional de Transformación Agraria* (INTA), making it nearly impossible to prove ownership of land.
- The Guatemalan Civil War began in 1954.
  - With the introduction of Operation Sophia in 1980, the Guatemalan army specifically targeted the Maya, who were believed to be sympathizers to the different guerilla movements in the country.
  - They destroyed 626 villages, killed over 200,000 people, and displaced 1.5 million people.

## Archaeology

- Starting in the 1950s, Processual Archaeology became popular.
  - Shift from focusing on descriptions of artifacts to investigating cultural processes associated with them.
  - Goal was to find anthropological meanings within the archaeological record.
- Processualism maintained a politically neutral standpoint allowed for archaeological research to continue throughout the civil war.
  - This neutral approach ended up perpetuating the exclusionist and racist ideals of the Guatemalan government at that time.

# THE INTERNATIONAL IMPLICATIONS OF NAPGRA

## The Maya

- The Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA) was introduced in the United States in 1990.
  - NAGPRA addresses “the rights of lineal descendants, Indian tribes, and Native Hawaiian organizations (parties with standing) to Native American human remains, funerary objects, sacred objects, and objects of cultural patrimony (cultural items)” (Bureau of Reclamation 2019).
- No similar legislation exists in Latin America, but it has started the process of giving Indigenous populations a voice and a sense of empowerment when it comes to their cultural heritage.

## Archaeology

- The introduction of NAGPRA, and similar legislations around the world, has sparked a shift in Archaeology.
  - Methodological changes were being made and more collaboration with Indigenous populations began to appear.
- Push for Indigenous Archaeology:
  - Archaeology conducted “by, for, and with Indigenous populations” (McAnany 2016: 57).
- American Archaeologists receive NAGPRA reliant training regardless of where in the world they work, meaning they are already more focused on collaboration and working with communities as they enter into the field.

# INDIGENOUS RIGHTS MOVEMENTS VS. TRANSNATIONAL CORPORATIONS AND NARCOS

## The Maya

- After the Guatemalan Civil War, the INTA continued to shrink land parcel sizes in an effort to accommodate the high demand for land.
  - This makes it nearly impossible for Maya to maintain their livelihoods because they do not have enough land to farm food for their families, let alone extra to sell to pay off their land.
- They have become more dependent on fertilizers and chemicals, and often will sell their land parcels to transnational corporations.
  - An African palm company completely bought out the entire village of Poptun for just over \$500,000.

## Archaeology

- After the end of the Civil War, the processual paradigm was beginning to be rejected and archaeologists began to favor postprocessualism.
  - They rejected the ideas of universal laws, systemic views of culture, and the need to remain politically neutral while conducting research.
- The focus began to shift towards finding the symbolic meanings of objects, rather than just their practical use.

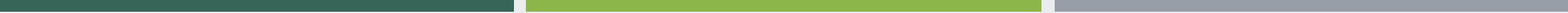
# INDIGENOUS RIGHTS MOVEMENTS VS. TRANSNATIONAL CORPORATIONS AND NARCOS CONT.

## The Maya

- In 2002, the *Departamento de Operaciones Antinarcóticas* (DOAN) was shut down due to corruption.
  - This led to an increase in drug trafficking.
  - The Zetas of Mexico spread their operations into Mexico.
  - The paving of the Transversal Highway is believed to be related to the cartels in Guatemala.
- The Maya in Guatemala are faced with the presence of these Narcos in their everyday lives.

## Archaeology

- Began to recognize that bias is unavoidable and began to embrace the opportunity to work with Indigenous populations.
- Archaeologists now often act as political advocates for the people they are working with.
- It also has become more common to see community development components included in archaeological research projects.



# THEORY AND METHODOLOGY IN INDIGENOUS RESEARCH

PAST RESEARCH WITH INDIGENOUS PEOPLES – ATTEMPTS TO CHANGE  
– PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH – COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT –

# PAST RESEARCH WITH INDIGENOUS POPULATIONS

- In the past, research methodologies focused mainly on the goals and needs of the researcher without much, if any, focus on the local Indigenous community's needs.
  - This reflects the remnants of colonialist and imperialist ideals in Western research.
- Researchers tended to view themselves as the ethical authority, but were not taking into account the cultural differences of the Indigenous populations.
  - This often leads to the exclusion of Indigenous populations and erases the opportunity to gain access to different perspectives and insights from them.

# ATTEMPTS TO CHANGE

- More recently, Indigenous groups have been pushing for more ethical and respectful research methodologies.
  - This is forcing researchers to consider the struggles and vulnerabilities of the local Indigenous populations as they prepare to conduct their research.
- Researchers are working to change their methods to reflect this through the use of:
  - Participatory Action Research methodologies
  - Community Development

# PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH (PAR)

- PAR creates a collaborative research environment, where the people being studied are invited into the formation of the research process and allows for them to influence it through working with the researcher.
  - Researchers work to establish themselves in the community and create trusting and meaningful relationships with the population they are studying.
  - After establishing these relationships, researchers begin to involve these individuals in the research process, emphasizing the importance and significance of their involvement with the project.
  - Researchers take on the additional role of an advocate for the community and help them in any way they can.
- This moves away from traditional Western research methods, which also moves it away from the imperialistic ideals associated with Western research.
- PAR methodologies are mutually beneficial by improving the results of the research for the researcher and the everyday lives of the Indigenous communities that were involved.

# COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

- Some researchers have begun to include community development components in their research projects, which creates a way for researchers to include the needs of the community in their research.
  - This allows the researcher to give back to the community and can potentially make the Indigenous communities more willing to work with the researchers.
  - This is especially important for archaeological research, given the extended periods of time that archaeologists will be working with a community.
- Brent Woodfill and William Odum, who worked with the Maya at *Proyecto Salinas de los Nueve Cerros*, worked to help bring access to clean water to the Maya community they were working with in Guatemala.
- Patricia McAnany has worked to benefit Maya communities through the region through the Maya Area Cultural Heritage Initiative (MACHI) and InHerit: Indigenous Heritage Passed to Present to bring Maya communities school curriculum and performances (plays, radio shows, puppet shows, etc.) to help contemporary Maya gain a better understanding of their Maya heritage.



# DISCUSSIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

– LESSONS TO BE LEARNED – WHAT TO DO MOVING FORWARD –

# WHAT LESSONS CAN BE LEARNED?

- We need to start the shift towards research methodologies that are beneficial to Indigenous communities and the researcher and minimize the use of methodologies that reflect colonialist ideals.
  - This would help to involve the communities in research about their own heritage and improve the quality of the research overall.
- We need to include more self-directed development projects within research projects involving indigenous communities.
  - Bringing in development projects based on the needs of the Indigenous community will help to improve their lives and encourage them to be more trusting of researchers and to involve themselves in the project.
- We need to introduce more legislation similar to NAGPRA throughout the world.
  - The positive impacts of NAGPRA and other similar legislations impacted communities outside of their jurisdiction, but the introduction of this type of legislation around the world has the potential to regulate fieldwork and prevent future violations of human rights.

# WHAT SHOULD BE DONE AS WE MOVE FORWARD?

- Making these changes is not something that can be done overnight.
  - We should, however, start transitioning to better research methodologies and legislations now.
  - These changes will help in the development of more ethical and respectful research, which will be beneficial to both the researchers and the Indigenous communities.
- If these changes are not made, then we will see the continued negative effects of colonialism on Indigenous communities and research.
  - Without change, Indigenous communities will continue to be exploited and struggle to survive while being faced with discrimination, racism, and displacement at the hands of their governments and international corporations.
- We have already seen the start of these changes, but the world is far from perfect when it comes to dealing with Indigenous peoples and change is necessary for the sake of their lives.