Surviving in the Rainforest:
The Realities of Looting in the Rural Villages of El Petén, Guatemala

Research Year: 1996
Culture: Maya
Chronology: Contemporary
Location: Petén, Guatemala
Site: Tikal

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Note to the Reader

The present article is intended to be used as an informational source relating to the role of local villagers involved in the process of looting. For reasons of privacy, I have used the letters of the Greek alphabet to give certain individuals fictitious names. Words that refer to local mannerisms and places related to the topic, which are in the Spanish or Maya languages, are written in italics. The names of institutions are in Spanish as well, and abbreviations are listed at the end of the article. The map is shown below.

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Introduction

This study was supported in part by funds from the Foundation for the Advancement of Mesoamerican Studies, Inc. (FAMSI, Crystal River, FL). It is an introductory research that focuses on the extraction and commercialization of Precolumbian artifacts by the rural villagers of El Petén, and the role of the community and site museums in Guatemala. Looting is one of the most common illegal activities among the inhabitants of the Maya Area. Prior studies relating to this topic have been done in the Maya lowlands region (David Matsuda in Belize, 1996; Pendergast and Graham, 1990) but both the economic activities and the art classification categories used by local people differ from one country to another, due to different languages and socio-economic backgrounds.

The following article is a synopsis of the information obtained to date. More in-depth information would take months and perhaps years of research. After submitting an interim report (summarizing the work done, time spent, advantages and difficulties, as well as preliminary results), new data has been collected. Subsequently, this information will also be shared with those institutions related to the protection and dissemination of our cultural and natural patrimonies.

This research deals mainly with the first stages of looting, which are known to affect the record and the conservation of the sites. Although this activity involves several levels of participation, our main purpose is to understand how the *campesinos* (in this case mostly *chicle* [gum] gatherers or *chicleros*) are involved in this process, why they do it, and how they classify objects in order to set a price for the buyer. This study includes a "looting glossary" that illustrates the local terms used to describe Precolumbian artifacts and those features that are considered important; all of which reflects the local knowledge about their cultural heritage. Other aspects that are briefly discussed in this study are:

1. Magic and Folklore related to looting.

2. Obtaining Precolumbian objects by the local population during construction and/or agricultural activities.

3. Law and legal registration of privately owned collections.

4. The importance of Cultural Education, aided by site museums, information centers and traveling exhibits.

The scarcity of information available to the public about Maya art and culture causes confusion about what cultural patrimony is, why it is important, and how to it can be protected. There is a lack of knowledge about the legal registration of privately owned objects, as well as a lack of understanding of the Guatemalan laws related to cultural heritage. This information should be provided by the authorities to all the levels of society and to government officials as well. However, talking about looting and art dealing is still taboo; very few efforts are made to propose new methods that could help

rescue, at least in part, the information that has been lost by looting. Knowing the local population's opinion about the Precolumbian Maya and their material culture can be useful in the creation of educational programs and exhibitions in both rural villages and towns of El Petén as part of a wider information program.

Purpose, Methodology, and Logistics

This research doesn't intend to investigate who the looters are as individuals, but why and how people are moved to participate in this illegal activity to obtain additional socio-economic benefits, which are not possible through other "legal" channels. Who is involved, and where or to whom they deliver, is usually known by most of the local population, even if they are not in the business themselves. However, meeting active looters and getting information about the role of intermediaries was still the result of months of investigation.

I based this study on direct behavioral observations, informal discussions and interviews with people from different backgrounds in El Petén.[1] Most of them are men and women who work long seasons in the rainforest on the extraction of non-timber products. Others live in larger towns and have been, or have relatives who are involved in the art dealing business. The smallest number of participants, but not any less important, are actual and former workers of government institutions who have revealed information that, although widely known, was not admitted before this study. Therefore, personal verification can't be presented as yet, since it would imply documented research not available to the public. However, personal testimonies have been double-checked, in some cases, to verify the stories or see how well they match the long-known activities of looters and government officials (including the police and Guardia de Hacienda).[2] Scholars in other fields, who have been concerned with the issue, have also shared important information.

The project included visits to some seasonal camps settled during the *chicle* gathering season in the depths of the rainforest. Visits to the camps required trips inside the Maya Biosphere Reserve using varied modes of transportation: 4-wheel-drive, canoe, walking, or riding mule-back. Muddy trails, mosquitoes, beds made of sticks (*tapescos*), hammocks, and bathing with one bucket of water, if available, are some of the adventures of doing research in this environment. Friendly people, though, made things a lot more comfortable.

[1] Observation was possible through direct contact with local people during my consulting activities in El Petén. Data was also obtained through informal discussions with confidantes. Even though I was able to use a notebook to record field-notes, people were not comfortable with formal surveys or tape recorders. Informants asked for the use of fictitious names for publication purposes.

[2] Both the Policía Nacional and the Guardia de Hacienda belong to the Ministerio de Gobernación, the Ministry in charge of the social order and law enforcement. The latter is the force in charge of confiscating illegal merchandise such as drugs, endangered animal species, archaeological objects, and plants and timber from protected areas, among their other functions.

I have had the advantage of making earlier contacts and friends, thanks to whom I have been able to have support and some facilities. Although I planned to spend three weeks in chiclero camps and another three weeks in the villages, gathering the information had proceeded slowly but successfully. This made it necessary to return several times, a few days at a time, until people could have the confidence necessary to share their experiences with me. Also, I had the opportunity to travel to Belize, where I saw looted sites and talked with local farmers (not *chicleros*) who engage in looting to support their homes. However, Brian Fagan's opinion that "if there is a solution to the looting problem, it is changing public attitudes toward the collecting of antiquities," is, in my opinion, totally true. He is also right when he states that it should be the archaeologist's responsibility to do so through public education and not leaving that enterprise only on the hands of teachers or bureaucrats (Fagan, 1993:15). Another viewpoint is to consider the private collector, who should be able to be part of that responsible community as well.

Figure 1. Author in front of a looted structure at Naactún, locally called El Infierno or Infiernón ("Hell"), located in dense jungle on the Guatemala-México border, just 3 km north.

Geographical Setting

Guatemala (see map) is located in Central America and is part of the geographical and cultural region called Mesoamerica,[3] a territory that has been inhabited since around 12,000 B.C. by several cultural groups. The Maya, one of the most important civilizations during Precolumbian times, developed into a highly complex society with interdependent city-states, ruling dynasties, long-distance trade, monumental art, architecture, writing, and an exact calendar.

Today in Guatemala, contemporary Maya make up more than 70% of the total population and are divided linguistically and geographically into more that twenty ethnic groups with more than twenty-four languages. Also, most of the country's population is living on or next to important archaeological sites and remains that are still related to ancient religion and custom. In the highlands for example, native tradition, education, social roles, and daily life activities still follow patterns that can be traced back to Precolumbian times.

This study was conducted in the Maya Biosphere Reserve rainforest (*Reserva de Biósfera Maya, RBM*), located in the northern part of El Petén (at Parallel 17° 10'), the largest department of Guatemala, comprising 35% of the country's territory and having more than half of the national forest cover. The RBM, which includes several National Parks and biotopes where flora, fauna, and hundreds of archaeological sites and remains, are supposed to be protected areas. South of the RBM's boundaries is the "Zone of Multiple Use" where the population is involved primarily in non-timber activities such as the extraction of chicle (the base of chewing gum), xate (*Chamaedorea oblongata & elegans*, types of palm trees),[4] and allspice or *pimienta gorda (Pimienta dioica)*.

NGO's and government institutions are assisting several villages related to the RBM with environmental education and projects of sustainable use of the forest. Unfortunately, logging continues in certain areas as well as other illegal activities such as hunting and trading endangered animal species and the cultivation of marihuana.

This research focused mainly on the Uaxactún-Dos Lagunas Area (north of Tikal) and the northern area of Carmelita (El Tintal-El Mirador-Nakbé), with informants from San Miguel La Palotada, San Andrés and San Miguel; the last two located on the shoreline of Lake Petén Itzá. Valuable information has also been obtained in Flores, Santa Elena, and San Benito. Flores is the capital town of El Petén and is located on an island in Lake Petén Itzá. Most of the hotels and restaurants are located here as well as the richest petenero families. It is commonly known that there are several collections of Precolumbian objects, which are not yet legally registered by IDAEH.

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[3] In the Social Sciences, Mesoamérica is the geographic and cultural region that ranges from northern México (from the Pánuco and Lerma Rivers) and the Yucatán Peninsula, to the lowlands of Honduras and El Salvador. The indigenous groups within these limits share several cultural traits.

[4] Chicle is the latex or sap of the *chicozapote* tree (*Manilkara zapota*), while *Xate* is a palm leaf (*Arecaceae family*) used in flower arrangements in Europe, Japan, and the United States.

Santa Elena and San Benito, on the other hand, are located next to the island of Flores and have residential areas, businesses, markets, churches and brothels, the latter located in the "red light district" of San Benito and important as places for the illegal dealing (and contacts) of drugs, Precolumbian art, and fauna. El Petén (Guatemala), Belize, Campeche and Quintana Roo (México) are the regions from whence most of the looted Precolumbian objects come. It is widely known that the networks of illicit exchange cross the borders constantly to supply the demands of each other and the foreign market.[5]

Figure 2. El Zacatal camp. *Chicleros* and a toucan as a pet.

In 1996-1997, Mexican and Guatemalan crews were working in both countries and also trading in both. Currently the trend is to loot in Campeche (México) around the Calakmul region. According to some Guatemalan informants who have made several trips to the Mexican side, there was a looting boom in Méxican-Maya sites, but looters of both nationalities preferred to sell in Guatemala because the prices were higher. To this date, major sites in the Petén are suffering severe sacking and armed robberies, followed by smuggling through the Belize border or across the Usumacinta River.

[5] Dugelby (1995:154) in her research about the *chicle* latex extraction, became aware of the presence of Mexicans and Belizeans who cross the borders to exploit Guatemalan forests. In the area of El Mirador, Dos Lagunas and Ixcán Río, she estimated an average of 50 to 200 illegal people working during the 1992-1993 season.

Drugs are also smuggled across the Petén-México-Belize borders, as well as illegal immigrants (from all of Central America) who want to go to the United States and México. They are usually taken through the Petén rainforest in very harsh conditions (personal observation) and several of them have suffered attacks by robbers and other criminals near the Ixcán Río area.[6]

Rainforest Products and Seasonal Campsites

El Petén has an area of 35,850 square kms. and is the northernmost department of Guatemala. Its topography is formed by savannas, chert formations, low hills and two major mountain ranges: the Montañas Mayas to the east (1000 meters above sea level), and the Sierra del Lacandón to the west (600 meters above sea level). Lakes and lagoons are distributed over all of the territory and have been of major importance for human and wildlife populations since Precolumbian times. Rivers also have been an important source of food and transportation, mainly in the lowlands, where most of them are navigable.

The northern and western parts of El Petén are classified as Humid Subtropical Rainforest. The topography is hilly and its vegetation includes nance trees (*Byrsonima crassifolia*), allspice (*Pimenta dioica*), botán (*Sabal morrisiana*) and *chicozapote* (*Manilkara zapota*). On the southern and southeastern parts, the vegetation is classified as Very Humid Subtropical Rainforest and includes the area from Poptún –adjacent to the Belize border– to Sayaxché and La Pasión river, to the west. Common trees and palms in this zone include the *ramón* tree (*Brosynum alicastrum*), the *corozo* (*Orbignya cohune*), and the *ceiba* or silk-cotton tree (*Ceiba penthandra*). Temperatures in all the Petén vary between 19° C to 35° C (67° to 91° F).

My base for this study was centered north of Carmelita and Uaxactún, the northernmost settlements in El Petén, just before entering the Maya Biosphere Reserve. These two communities started as *chicle* gathering camps or *campamentos chicleros* in the 1890's and gradually developed into villages with a permanent population, a school, churches, and government authorities under the jurisdiction of the local governments or *Municipalidades* of San Andrés and Flores, respectively. Their settlement pattern followed the orientation of the airstrips that were constructed around the 1930's, to facilitate the transportation of *chicle* and other products, due to the lack of roads in those times. Both Carmelita and Uaxactún are located in the Multiple Use Zone and their population is dedicated mostly to the extraction of non-timber products. However, only Uaxactún's inhabitants are actually settled in the middle of an archaeological site.

Chicle is the most important product, followed by *xate* palm which is used as ornamental dried plants, and allspice. Hunting is limited and is mostly for local consumption, since there are several prohibitions related to endangered species.

[6] Dugelby (1995:152-153) also noticed that because of the presence of marihuana dealers and tomb looters, some camps were abandoned in certain areas, due to the increase in violence caused by illegal activities.

Precious woods, like *caoba* (mahogany - *Swietenia macrophylla*) and *cedro* (cedar - *Cedrela mexicana*) have been overexploited and illegally traded, causing the reinforcement of protection laws. However, gum or *chicle* gathering is the legendary activity closely related to the modern history of El Petén by which the locals identify their socio-cultural background. Effectively, even though Yucatán, México had already been in the business since 1866, El Petén started to export *chicle* around 1890, so it is not strange to hear all sorts of anecdotes about most of the grandfathers and fathers of the present generation being intrepid *chicleros*. Dugelby (1995:34) noticed that because of its importance, *chicle* not only "dominated the political economy of Petén" but also "the imagination of the *peteneros* from 1890-1970".

Chicle collection is limited to the rainy season, usually from August to February, although weather conditions determine the actual periods of work. Camping depends on the time needed to be spent in the forest. Seasonal campsites are mostly needed by the *chicle* gatherers, and they can vary from simple shelters of wood and palm to more formal thatched structures. Each campsite includes one or more compounds on a cleared spot next to an *aguada* (seasonal water source) or a *sibal* (lagoon surrounded by reed-like vegetation or *sibales*). Ramón trees (breadnut) also have to be near, since the leaves are used to feed the mules.

Figure 3. La Toronja, *chicle* gathering camp.

In brief, the *chiclería* (the gathering method) consists in cutting the cortex of the *chicozapote* trees, from top to bottom, in a herringbone design, which enables the sap or chicle latex to flow down into a special bag tied to the base. The action is called *picar* and is done with a machete or long, curved steel blade. Each tree is worked once, and left to recover from three to eight years, or until the scars disappear. Each *chiclero* has to hike through the forest to locate the trees he wants to tap. The *picado* (making the cuts in the tree) is done with the help of a pair of spikes or *espolones* tied to the ankles, and with a thick rope or *ropo*, used for climbing. After cutting and collecting the bags' contents in a bigger rubber bag or *ahulado*, the *chiclero* walks back to the camp carrying up to fifty pounds of sap. Traditionally, Sunday is the day when the *chicleros* cook the latex in big aluminum or iron *pailas* (tubs), where the gum is heated until all its liquid is evaporated and it can be easily manipulated and placed in wooden molds while it's still hot. However, cooking days can vary depending on the quantity each person extracts.

Molds are washed with soapy water to prevent gum from sticking. When cool, the blocks or *marquetas* are unmolded and stamped with the *chiclero's* initials, those of the camp foreman, and the contractor (Figure 4, shown below). Each block has to weigh approximately twenty-five pounds. For every *quintal* (100 pounds) each *chiclero* is paid a fixed price; but if they exceed the required weight, the extra ounces are not counted in the payment. Rain helps the latex flow, so the entire industry depends on the season's rainfall. If the *chiclero* cannot produce enough gum to pay his expenses, he sustains great losses.

Xate (palm-leaf) cutting, on the other hand, is done year-round, with a peak harvest in April, and less demand from June to September (Dugelby, 1995:30; local *xateros* pers. com.). Men, women and children who participate equally in the *xate* business, can engage in other occupations at the same time, and still maintain their own schedule to walk into the jungle. While *chicle* gathering implies living in the rainforest for several months, *xate* cutters or *xateros* can live in a permanent village and make short trips to the forest, camping there if needed. The campsites they use can be shared with *chicleros*, or they can occupy them when it's not gum season. The process consists of cutting the upper palms of the plant (stem and associated leaves), not the plant itself. Recovery time is only a few weeks, so the same plant can be used several times. Another advantage is that *xate* can be grown in gardens. However, due to the large quantities demanded, domestic production would require large plantations.

Figure 4. Blocks or *marquetas* of cooked and molded gum.

The rainforest then, continues to be the source of salable materials. An evident difference between the two activities is the availability of the source. Due to deforestation, *chicozapote* trees are not as abundant as they were 80, 30, or even 10 years ago, according to several eyewitness accounts.[7] Old men even remember that one could work all day without moving too far from one tree to another. Today, just locating trees can demand a lot of walking. *Xate* palms, on the other hand, are easier to find because they regenerate easily and grow close to each other, occupying the lower level of the forest. *Xate* does not depend on a particular season, although storage has to be done in warehouses with refrigerated rooms.

Common characteristics of both activities are the numerous levels of participation, which include the gatherer or tapper, the buyer or *contratista* (contractor), and finally the

[7] By the 1970's, 70-80% of El Petén was still covered with tropical rainforest. The population was also low (25,000 in 1964) even though colonization increased it severely since the 1800's (when there were around 9,000 people). Today, forest cover has decreased dramatically while the population is over 400,000 (Dugelby, 1995:35; Schwartz, 1990:26).

export companies. There are also several levels of contractors, who according to their ability to pay workers vary from simple intermediaries to major business people. In both cases women can also be contractors. Today two of them are renowned contractors in the *chicle* business, although no women are climbing trees any longer. North of Carmelita, on the way to the archaeological site of El Mirador, some of the main *chiclero* camps are El Tintal and El Arroyón, the former next to the site of the same name, and the latter next to a stream which makes it a suitable camp to return to each year. Other camps like El Sibalito, Los Pichos, La Florida, La Muerta, and others are not always occupied, but dependent on the seasonal mobility of the groups who depend on the availability of water sources and trees. North of Uaxactún, on the way to Río Azul, are El Corozal, El Manantial, Ixcán Río and others; on the way to Naactún are El Suspiro, El Zacatal, El Cartucho, and La Toronja which were occupied during the season of August 1996. Other major camps that belong to the Uaxactún-Dos Lagunas area are La Vitrola, Ponte Chango, El Centinela, Los Loros, Pitoreal, Los Monifatos, El Hule and others. It is known that there are around 800 or more *chiclero* camps in all the Petén territory.[8]

The main areas for chicle gathering in El Petén are in the north, the southeast (in the Chiquibul river area), and the west (called the Lacandón).[9] White 1st. class gum (*chicle de primera*) is produced in the north and is in higher demand, while the other two are 2nd. and 3rd. class gums. Although there is some demand, the quality is not very good as it has a pink coloration. The *chicleros* call going to the southeastern region, *chiquibulear*, and implies making extra money in the rainy season in order to complete their production of gum. Due to the presence of explosives and mines, *chicleros* no longer extract in the Lacandón area, which historically had been suitable for hiding guerrilla groups because of the pristine jungle and difficult access. Earning extra money by the people who work in the rainforest can be complemented by hunting and looting.

Who are the Looters?

Looters are locally called *huecheros* or *hueches*, names derived from the Maya word huech or armadillo, an animal who opens holes in the ground, according to popular knowledge. The name emphasizes the act of excavating, although it also encompasses the entire process –from looting to dealing– under the name of *huechería*. Looters, intermediaries,[10] and major dealers are people from several socio-economic backgrounds; the excavators, the ones who perform the rough work, are usually the individuals who know their way around in the jungle. Although each person has a

[8] Dugelby (1995:201) estimated that around 120 camps were occupied at the beginning of the 1992-1993 season, and that 200 camps were used by groups moving around for different reasons.

[9] The places recognized by the *chicle* industry are Carmelita, Uaxactún, Dos Lagunas, Melchor de Mencos, Yaxhá, and La Libertad.

[10] Meyer (1990:152) describes them as follows: "The intermediaries are the links in the long antiquities trade chain. Looters have access to the objects, but rarely to the final client. He needs the intermediary, who can have a store, a small business or use his own house to deal. The intermediary knows the connections to export the object illegally, knows who can be bribed, and which international dealers are interested in what kind of art".

specific role inside his or her community, looting is part of the additional economic activities that provide food and an extra amount of cash. If they are lucky enough, this can be a large amount. In several specific cases, however, there are individuals who are dedicated exclusively to carrying out illegal excavations.

The massive looting activities that take place by large crews hired by powerful people are not part of this study. Instead, special attention is paid to the local activities done by individuals who work in other legal activities in their community or in the rainforest. These people, as their ancestors did, exploit the natural environment. According to their world-view, the rainforest and its surroundings include not only water sources, plants, and animals, but also the ground. Archaeological mounds are, by and large, considered part of the forest's soil. For that reason, when the looter has a main occupation, looting can take place incidentally during his or her work.

Because of its geographical location and history, most of the Petén population live and work on and next to places with Precolumbian occupation. That explains why, aside from the professional sacker, people who work in the forest are the ones who have a higher probability of looting. Used to hiking into the jungle in a specific direction (*rumbear*) during their reconnaissance walks, *xateros*, farmers, *chicleros*, hunters, and others have discovered sites and mounds. Taking into consideration that forest workers have to sell their product to a contractor and work very hard to earn enough money to support their families, being near a group of ruins (and knowing how to look for things) can be a strong temptation. The situation gets worse after a season that wasn't good enough, when the worker already owes the contractor[11] money he has borrowed for his expenses and/or he is the head of a large family.

[11] The contractor in the *chicle* and *xate* business is the person who can invest capital and is able to pay workers, transportation, and storage facilities.

Figure 5. Children of a chiclero in a central distribution camp north of Uaxactún. In several cases, chicleros take their entire families to live in the seasonal camps.

The *xateros* are usually more independent; therefore, the contractor commonly *buys* the product of *his* labors. The gum contractor,[12] on the other hand, "hires" the chicleros, giving them a certain amount of money on account, called *enganche* ("hook", literally), *before they start to work. Usually there is an agreement between the contractor and the chicleros* on the amount each one has to produce, according to the quantity of money given for the *enganche*. This money is used to provide for his family as compensation for the time he will be away from home, as well as to pay for the expenses of equipment, clothes, transportation, and other things that might be needed at the workplace. This money is now owed to the contractor, as will be all the food, cigarettes, liquor, batteries, and other supplies the *chicleros* ask for from the warehouse keeper of the main camp. The contractors pay the *enganche* by a verbal agreement, so there have also been times when the *chiclero*, having the money in hand, never shows up at the camp, causing an economic loss to the contractor.

Workers in the gum business come from different parts of El Petén, Alta and Baja Verapaz (mainly Cobán and Salamá), Belize and México.[13] Depending on the category

[12] Most of the *chicle* contractors are affiliated with Cooperativa Itzalandia (the consortium of *chicle* business people of El Petén). In each season, there are around 60-90 contractors and subcontractors. During the 1992-1993 season, Dugelby (1995:44) registered 62 contractors who were active in extraction and were members of the cooperative. Of these, ten to twenty were only *chicle* buyers (they had no people in camps). Only three contractors were independent but with legal licenses from CONAP. Numbers for today can be similar.

[13] According to their places of origin, *chicleros* identify themselves as *peteneros*, *cobaneros*, *salamatecos*, *beliceños*, and *mexicanos*. Although those from the lowlands are better tappers, contractors believe that *cobaneros* and *salamatecos* are the least probable to leave the camp in the middle of the

under which a *chiclero* works, and the distance from where the gum is delivered, would fix the actual price of each *quintal* or 100 pounds. The *chicleros* work habits can fall into any of the following categories:

1. Independent worker: they work by themselves, usually camping alone or with a few others. Since they deliver directly to a contractor-buyer or to CONAP,[14] they do not receive any enganche, but invest their own money for supplies. They work on their own schedule. Actually, they are paid around Q.500 or more ($83.00) per *quintal*.

2. Suchilma[15] worker: Each chiclero is paid Q.475 ($79.00) for each *quintal* (100 lbs.).

3. *Chiclero* working for a contractor: They live in camps for several months in order to supply the gum directly to the contractor. Transportation, food, and other supplies are provided by the contractor but have to be paid back. The price of the *quintal* varies from Q.350 to Q.400 ($58.00 to $67.00). The price depends on the contractor and how far the camps are, since the gum has to be brought to the central camp through narrow trails in the jungle, thus increasing the costs of muleteers (*arrieros*) and mules. In few cases, 4-wheel-drive vehicles are able to get to some camps.

The prices of *chicle* are included in this paper because *chiclería* has been the traditional and major activity of El Petén. Also, it is useful to estimate the average profit a *chiclero* can make to help us understand why the local forest worker can be easily tempted to loot. In one season a regular worker can produce between 8 to 10 *quintales* which, multiplied by an average of Q.350 ($58.00), can give him around Q.2800 to Q.3500 ($466.00 to $583.00). But he can also consume around Q.2000 ($333.00) or more if he is camping with his family. So, at the end of the season, he takes home around Q.1500 ($250.00). Extraordinarily good *chicleros* are able to produce from 14 to 22 *quintales* in one season, thus increasing their income. In 1996 a bonus for the *chiclero* of Q.72 ($12) per *quintal* produced, was approved by CONAP, thus increasing their final payment (Roan Balas McNab, pers. com.)[16] According to estimates made by several informants, more than 7,000 people earn an income from the extraction of non-timber

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season, as they are considered hard-working and loyal men. According to Dugelby (1995:262) they can make up 40%-50% of the *chicleros* working at the RBM per season.

[14] This is the Institution in charge of resource management and sustainable use policies. It's also in charge of the protection of natural reserves and the legislation and control of the gum extraction activities and exportation of forest products.

[15] Created in 1949 to provide legal advice and benefits to the affiliated workers engaged in *chicle* and timber activities. Can also act as a buyer for the *chicleros* who are members of the union, providing extra benefits.

[16] In 1995, the daily wages for the forest workers were the following: *chicleros*, US$ 7.00; allspice extractors, US$ 6.00; *xateros*, US$ 5.00; timber and farming, US$ 1.00. The exchange rate was fluctuating around US$ 1 = Q. 5.63 *quetzales* (Soza, 1995).

products, and *chicle* alone can provide sustenance to an average of 2,000 people and their families.[17]

However, production depends on several factors. Besides the availability of the source material and the personal ability of the *chiclero*, some of the major factors that affect the success of the season are the number of tappers and productive trees, the presence of other camps in the vicinity, the existence of timber activities, the group's social organization and interrelationships, and the fluctuations in the prices of *chicle* (Dugelby, 1995:194).

Most of the provisional camps are also the warehouses for looted Precolumbian objects. Learning how the objects get there was a priority for this study. First of all, *huecheros* use these camps during the summer or when they are abandoned. Because of that, frequently the *chicleros* find several Precolumbian objects (usually ceramics) in their camps at the beginning of the season. *Huaxca* is the term used by the locals to define the discarded Precolumbian objects, or fragments, that do not have artistic attributes, fine manufacturing techniques, or the condition demanded by the market of Precolumbian art. Thus they are not suitable for the market and are left behind, usually next to the trenches opened in the mounds. In several cases, the looters themselves broke the objects, probably as an angry response to their unsuccessful efforts. On the other hand, objects can be transported to the camps by the *chicleros* when they find the discarded objects next to looted structures.

Figure 6. Abandoned ceramic objects at a *chiclero* camp. Some are reused or kept as ornaments.

Since they usually walk 1.5 to 2 hours (3-5 km) from the camp in different directions, the objects that have been transported by them are more likely to belong to archaeological sites that are circumscribed in each camp's action area. Also, it is frequent that while

[17] Each year there is an average of 1,600-1,900 *chicleros* working per season.

exploring, in the search for new *chicozapote* trees, water sources or *ramón* trees, on average 2 1/2 *leguas* (8 km to 10 km at the most), new sites are discovered and material can be brought from a farther distance. The best hours for tapping the trees are from 4:30 a.m. to 7:00 a.m. leaving plenty of free time for exploration.

Not all the *chicleros* or *xateros* loot, but it is a fact that the ones who do have to know their environment extremely well, know how to walk about safely and orient themselves in the tropical rainforest. Not everyone who comes to work in El Petén has the ability to search and loot. According to personal verification and local comments, looted material is almost non-existent in the camps that contain large numbers of people from Cobán and Salamá. These workers come from other environments (mountains, caves, different vegetation, and temperature) and do not venture into the Petén jungle very much. This is not a rule, but a marked difference can be seen in the number of Precolumbian objects in the camps made up by *peteneros* and the ones by outsiders.

Although the gathering activities are supposed to be permitted only in the Multiple Use Zone, several *chiclero* camps are settled inside the Maya Biosphere Reserve, mostly in the north and north-eastern Petén, exploiting the areas of National Parks and Biotopes, where *chicle* extraction and land use is forbidden.[18] Among the affected reserves are the Biotopo Dos Lagunas, Parque Nacional Mirador, and Parque Nacional Río Azul. Even some *chicozapote* trees have been tapped inside Tikal National Park, an action difficult to control by the sixty rangers that patrol an area of 576 square kms. In Guatemala, mainly in El Petén, national parks also include archaeological sites due to the high density of Precolumbian occupation. *Chiclero* camps can't avoid being next to archaeological sites, and some of them even take their names from them, like El Tintal and Las Ruinitas ("the little ruins").

Today, one of the main problems since the signing of the Peace Agreements between the Guatemalan government and the guerrilla groups (Dec. 1996), is the relocation of refugees returning from México. Some groups have been re-settled inside the RBM. Three communities of non-*petenero* people, for example, are located inside Parque Nacional Laguna del Tigre.[19] Another major problem is the intrusion into specific archaeological sites, which are presently invaded by around twenty families, each with an average of ten people per family. Among these sites are Seibal, Dos Pilas, Aguateca, Tamarindito, and Ucanal (Martínez, 1997:8). On the other hand, the villages located in Parque Nacional Montañas Mayas-Chiquibul are not refugee camps, but

[18] The Multiple Use Zone of the RBM has approximately only 800,000 hectares, to be used for gum extraction activities (Dugelby, 1995:199). Because of the protection the reserves have against timber activities and massive colonization, the national parks still provide a large number of productive *chicozapote* trees.

[19] There are plans to give training to the population in sustainable activities related to the tropical rainforest (mainly gum extraction and *xate*), since they do not belong to the *chicle* tradition, and still practice slash-and-burn agriculture. Resource management programs and training will be directed by CONAP-TNC to help their adaptation in a new environment.

immigrants use the resources and interact with each other through the Belizean border.[20]

Besides the major sites of Piedras Negras, La Pasadita, and some tombs and offerings located on the Lacandón steep ranges and the Usumacinta River, archaeological sites in that area (on Guatemalan territory) are scarce. It is known that looting has been prevented in this region thanks to the "protection" given by the guerrilla groups who live there. Ironically, the CPR's or Comités de Población en Resistencia (Committees of Population in Resistance) have been the only ones that have had active participation in the protection of the cultural patrimony, mostly because of the presence of patrolling troops.[21] Mr. "Alpha's" testimony (about his looting attempts, while he was on a *chicle* expedition in the Lacandón area) is often repeated by several *chicleros*:

> "A buddy and I were walking in the forest in the Lacandón, locating good trees [*chicozapote*], when we saw a nice mound and we decided to try some luck. We were making the *saque* (looting trench) when three *guerrilleros* stepped behind us and forced us to leave the area immediately. Since we already had a vessel out, they let us take it, but only that one. They told us not to loot mounds because they are *patrimonio cultural*, and if they see us again they would kill us." (Translation by the author).

In order to obtain a profit, looters have to face several ordeals. First of all, they risk their lives excavating mounds where eroded limestone blocks can collapse and bury them, as has happened more than once. Second, they may or may not find objects that can be offered for sale, thus losing the money invested on the expedition. In their opinion, differences in mound shape (architecture types) can give an approximate idea of their contents. Experience, like in all human activities, increases the chances of success. In most cases "hitting a *canasta*"[22] is the dream of every looter "since it's almost sure that one can obtain, at once, thousands of *quetzales* in profit" ("Mr. Alpha", pers. com.).

[20] The population of the Chiquibul is being trained in sustainable land use by CECON, an institution under the Universidad de San Carlos de Guatemala. Also, there are plans to give formal training for ecotourism as an activity that can be developed and provide extra income. The latter will probably be part of a project supported by private funds and other environmental NGO's (Bradford Peirce, pers. com.).

[21] This fact is confirmed by CONAP officials and NGO's who work with the communities in the area. The CPR's work with development and sustainable projects and keep close relationship with the institutions involved. Trips and visits from the project's staff are still announced in advance for safety purposes.

[22] Literally "basket": structure or mound that contains more than two burials. See glossary.

Figure 7. Mr. "Alpha" at a looted mound, explaining how *saques* are made and checking for possible remains.

Looting involves expeditions into the jungle (*entradas a la montaña*) and camping for several days. The locating of structures is done by walking in alternate directions. A looter can work alone or in a group of two to five individuals, unless he is part of a larger crew hired to loot specific areas. When a mound is located, the looter checks its orientation and its relation to the rest of the structures. Since these are usually located around plazas which in turn are oriented to the cardinal points, the first mound to be looted will be the one built on the East side of the compound. For the ancient Maya, the buildings on the East-West axis, associated with the sun's daily journey, were the most important, along with the buildings on the North side. Unfortunately, experience has taught looters that, more often than not, this is true.

Local individuals that are dedicated exclusively to this business usually have more control over their schedule and money. Mr. "Beta"[23] for example, loots systematically with two other men, sponsoring his own expeditions. With the first profits some years ago, one of his fellows opened a store where the villagers can buy food and other supplies. For Mr. "Beta" two weeks are enough time to find "good objects". Informants from his neighborhood have noticed his looting sprees and he is constantly seen around the Flores-Santa Elena area. It seems that experience has made him a successful *entrepreneur*, although his knowledge about Maya culture is limited only to the appreciation of shapes, material, and visible manufacturing techniques in order to supply the demand of his clients.[24]

1. An interesting fact about rainforest looting is that, as in the gum business, there are also *hueche* contractors. These are the people who can sponsor an expedition, giving money, mules, and supplies to a small crew, which in turn will bring back the booty. Gum and *xate* contractors have the economic means to do this, and many of them usually do. This can work in two ways:

2. The contractor buys the merchandise from the looters, discounting off the price the expenses he has incurred to support their expedition. Then he offers the objects for sale, earning all the profit for himself.

The contractor serves as an intermediary, taking the objects to a buyer and making the deal for the objects. The money he receives is divided among those who participated, reserving the highest percentage for himself. Generally, the contractor is able to cheat the others since there are no receipts or payment notes.

Most of the independent looters, professional and occasional, take the risk of delivering the objects themselves, traveling from their village or site to Flores, Santa Elena and Guatemala city, as well as to Melchor de Mencos and other border settlements next to Belize. Different kinds of transportation are used, from mules returning from the camps to a *xatero's* pick-up truck (disguised with *xate* leaves), 4-wheel-drives with darkened windows or, if he is brave enough, a public transportation bus.

[23] He is dedicated only to looting and deals directly with his clients. His reputation is well known among the buyers and he still delivers to an important collector in Guatemala City, whose name is also well-known by the local population.

[24] Once, I had an opportunity to ask him about the different types of objects. While he was trying to figure out their possible function in ancient times, he got mixed-up with folk beliefs, superstitions, and his own knowledge, which is based on the poor information obtained from some friends who work in an archaeological project.

Figure 8. Mules carrying blocks of gum back to the central camp. Archaeological objects are transported out of the forest the same way.

Intermediaries can also be contacted in the "red light district" of San Benito, where the women who work there serve as "mail" and informants in case the Guardia de Hacienda is around the area or working undercover. Drinking a beer and having a business meeting inside a bar or in the many motels in the San Benito-Santa Elena area is part of the *modus operandi* at the lower levels of the art dealing system, in which some police officers and other bureaucrats are or have been involved. One must realize that all of these individuals have families and friends in their hometowns, so it is common for children and women to talk about the objects they have seen passing through their homes. Children, naively, often talk about the things they have seen and where they have seen them, without realizing the implications of their declarations.

Besides recognizing that both looters and buyers benefit directly, one of the main tasks of this research is to evaluate how the local looter (or incidental digger) states the "value" of an object, depending on its morphologic and/or decorative characteristics. "Value" is stated in two ways: the importance or meaning the object itself has for the locals and of course, the monetary value.

Although archaeologists and social scientists do not recognize the monetary value of an archaeological object because of its historical and cultural importance, there is no way of avoiding the fact that there is a demand for Precolumbian art. For that reason, it is useful to know the population's various perspectives, to help us find better and new ways of making archaeology and history available to the public. New tools can be created to provide more information about the importance of cultural objects and what is lost by looting. On the other hand, the use given to an archaeological object by contemporary local people is also an interesting issue that reflects the local and national ideas about material culture.

When making a delivery to an intermediary or buyer, the looter faces another challenge: fair payment for the quality of the piece and adequate compensation for his effort. The dealing process involves contacting the buyers and offering the objects, which may be ceramics or jade, bone, and shell ornaments. Stelae, stucco sculptures, and architectural parts follow a slightly different path since they can't be carried around freely. The latter, because of their size, are often broken or cut with chainsaws and transported in pieces, which are put together again after they reach their destination. In several cases, only some fragments of the sculpture are cut and sold separately. The most common example are the carved glyphs on stelae or stairways, which are used as decoration or as book and paper holders by local collectors.

Looters seem to be knowledgeable in regard to the demands of both dealers and collectors. Also, there is the risk of price devaluation. This means that when a looter or minor intermediary is seeking buyers, the more frequently he shows the object to numerous potential buyers, the more the value of the object decreases. Usually the exchange follows this pattern:

1. The seller shows the object to the potential buyer and asks for a certain amount of money (in national currency).

2. The buyer makes his own evaluation according to his knowledge or to the characteristics he or his potential clients demand.

3. Bargaining is permitted in order to agree on a suitable price for both seller and buyer. Obviously, the buyer tries to lower the price.

4. If the seller decides he cannot sell at the price offered, he can seek another buyer.

5. Often, the last potential buyer will call other potential buyers and let them know the characteristics of the piece and the price he offered, so the others will offer less than he did. In many cases, the seller (usually the occasional rural looter) has to sell the object at a very low price because the chances of getting a fair payment diminish with each showing.

In other cases, less frequently today, the collector gets to the looting area by his own means, using 4-wheel-drives, private planes, or helicopters to pick up the objects. In the airstrip at Uaxactún, for example, planes landed once or twice a week from the last

years of the 1960's to the first years of the 1980's. In Carmelita, helicopter landings were also frequent in the 1980's. In San Miguel La Palotada, crews and helicopters of FYDEP[25] landed next to the pyramidal structures locally called Las Ruinas or El Tikalito and looted them. Several people claim that the looting was done by direct orders of a former President of Guatemala in the 1970's. According to local knowledge, the same happened in several sites of El Petén.

Figure 9. Don Santiago, a farmer from San Miguel La Palotada, shows the main structure looted by FYDEP. The building has more than one trench. The size indicates the work of a large crew.

[25] FYDEP (1958-1988), a government institution created to manage the forest reserves north of El Petén, and was in charge of providing infrastructure for the development of agriculture, industry, and tourism; the exploitation of natural resources; colonization; and cattle-ranching (Dugelby, 1995:26). Until then, El Petén had been a territory with large areas of land owned by high government officials that had been given to them as gifts for their services to the State. Between 1986 and 1989, FYDEP was dissolved because of institutionalized corruption. In 1989, CONAP was created and became the institution in charge of the 44 protected areas of Guatemala (PROPETEN/CI, 1993:3).

Unfortunately, government officials are still involved in the entire *huechería* web, knowing the dealers and facilitating their modes of transportation, their contacts at the frontier customs offices, re-selling confiscated objects for their own benefit, or buying objects for their own collections.[26] It is common knowledge that several guards who participate in confiscating Precolumbian artifacts, will put in their place others less important or fakes. Also, objects in custody often disappear without anyone knowing their whereabouts.

Mr. "Gamma",[27] for example, worked at the local IDAEH office and was able to see how some officers from the Guardia de Hacienda "chose" the objects they liked, packed them in different boxes, and finally exchanged them for a fee with others less important (if they didn't just disappear).[28] Also, people who are or were working in Santa Elena's Airport claim that some years ago, in the 1980's, customs police had access to a storeroom where archaeological objects were kept, that could be exchanged for "better" ones.

The names of major looters and dealers are often known not only by local inhabitants, but also by the police, judges, and major authorities. Actions against them are rarely executed. Instead, small-time looters or people with objects kept in their homes are prosecuted as a way of diverting the prosecution of the real traffickers. One reason for this might be the influence of powerful people in the business, as well as the presence of individuals involved in other kinds of illegal trade, like endangered fauna and drugs. The lack of formal training of bureaucratic officials about national and international cultural heritage laws and agreements is also the cause of disorder and corruption.

Magic and Folklore Related to Looting

Since the European Conquest and Colonial times, the population of Mesoamerica has gone through a process of change in its oral tradition, beliefs and native cosmo-vision. Today, beliefs and cultural values change according to *socio-economic*, political, and

[26] A recent case involves a truck stopped a few months ago by CONAP guards at around 2:00 a.m., while transporting Precolumbian objects to Guatemala City. Surprisingly, only one guard (from Guardia de Hacienda) was escorting the truck and had a spider monkey (a protected species) tied with a rope. The documents for the Precolumbian artifacts were indeed correct and signed by a high official of IDAEH. However, the objects inventory was hand-written on a separate sheet of paper, with no signature or stamp. Because of the time and the lack of knowledge of what to do, CONAP only confiscated the monkey (informant from CONAP).

[27] Mr. "Gamma" admitted he has always been a *chiclero* and a *xatero*. Formerly, between seasons, he dedicated himself to looting. Thanks to a friend and to his basic knowledge on Precolumbian objects, he was able to get a job at IDAEH's local office. To this date, but after he was dismissed from his job, he returned to the *chicle* business and, as he said with a broad smile, to looting.

[28] Mr. "Alpha" was captured once with "a vase painted with nine Indians, arranged in two levels". When he was brought in front of the judge he realized that the vase on the desk was not the one he found, but a fake. To prove it to the judge, he described the details of the real vase and asked for a cotton ball soaked in alcohol, which he rubbed on the vase's surface. The paint stains on the cotton ball were enough proof. He was not convicted because the vase was indeed a fake. Days after, he heard "his" vase was already in the illegal market.

religious backgrounds. Many of the characters and stories that are part of the local folklore are products of the syncretism of European and Native American traditions and it is common to find traces of them in the Old World and other countries of Latin America.

While the Spanish conquerors were trying to destroy all traces of what they considered pagan practices (books, shrines, local traditional dances, and festivals), they were also introducing a new religion and new cultural manifestations that replaced the native ones. Spanish oral tradition took shape in a new context, giving birth to a series of characters that are part of the folktales of most of the rural areas and towns of Guatemala. Ghosts in the form of monks, women, dogs, dwarfs, and even the devil himself, are the main characters that haunt the old streets and villages, and in several cases are related to important historical events. The *Duende*, for example, is a Pan-Mesoamerican character in the shape of a short man, who haunts not only in towns, but also in forests and other isolated areas. In the Guatemalan highlands it is known as *Alux*, and likes to play tricks on people and court beautiful girls. In the Petén lowlands, however, it is very popular in the *chiclero* camps' folktales and is regarded as an evil spirit.[29]

Worldwide, antiquities are thought to attract spirits of past times. Beliefs of hidden treasures are widespread in Guatemala, México and other Central American countries. In towns and in the old parts of the cities, the appearance of floating lights over specific spots is a signal of a treasure that should be excavated, so that the deceased can sleep in peace. Some requirements have to be followed though, and the person who does the excavation should not tell anyone in order to prevent the spell from breaking. The rural population of El Petén has not escaped this cultural phenomenon. Although believing or not is a personal decision, some supernatural experiences are familiar to looters, whether they occur to them or to others. These could be listed under what I call "Looting Folklore". It is interesting to see how oral tradition, as part of local culture also plays a role in an activity that destroys other aspects of culture, such as archaeological remains.

Voices in the Forest

For those individuals in direct contact with nature and the Petén rainforest, archaeological sites can be considered *sitios encantados* (haunted or enchanted sites). The jungle has claimed entire cities which were abandoned hundreds of years ago by causes that are still misunderstood by most of the rural population. Wars, droughts, social unrest and environmental overexploitation, are some of the reasons the Mayas "disappeared". Unfortunately, non-local tales that are heard from unprofessional tour

[29] Ambrosio Sierra, camp foreman of La Toronja in the 1996-1997 season, lost his little daughter in a *chiclero* camp four years ago. Crews from other camps were sent into the forest to look for her, but only her small footprints were seen, disappearing in the jungle five *leguas* (ten km.) away from the camp (an unusual distance for a 3 year-old child to walk in few hours). News spread to all the *chiclero* camps and the official version is that the *duende* enchanted her and took her away.

guides (like the stories about abductions by extraterrestrial beings)[30] has now become part of the oral tradition. The presence of evil spirits and ghosts in the area prevent many people from walking about, but unfortunately, as time brings the modern world to them, not all individuals feel intimidated any longer. Some even see the ghosts as an adventurous challenge.

One of the most widespread beliefs, repeated by people of different ages and backgrounds, is the occurrence of supernatural phenomena at the archaeological sites, manifested by animal sounds, singing human voices, music, and pounding, among many others. Hunters and forest workers are usually the ones who tell the most stories about them, which are transmitted orally to their families and friends. Superstition among local people was noticed by the first explorers of the Maya region at the turn of the 20th Century. Although Theobert Maler did not have *chicleros* as guides,[31] he had his own opinions about the Indians he employed, considering them "lazy, incompetent, and superstitious"[32] (Brunhouse, 1975:10). He even claimed that part of the vandalism he found, such as at the murals of the Temple of the Jaguar in Chichén Itzá, was caused by "ignorant and superstitious natives [who] had hacked at portions of the pictures with machetes" (Brunhouse, 1975:14).

When Maler arrived in Tikal in 1895, he had to carry a cast-iron corn grinder to provide tortillas for his fearful employees because they refused to dig carved stones from the ground to make the traditional *metates* or grinding stones. In the report of this expedition in 1911, Maler wrote down the legend the natives had told him about the site. Their stories tell of Tikal as "the place to which the ancestors returned to the earth at midnight, dressed as in antiquity, to roam inside temples and palaces." This was supposed to happen mainly during certain festivals, when voices could be heard in the air. Tikal had been discovered years before, in 1848, by Modesto Mendez and Ambrosio Tut, who named it Tikal, a Maya Itzá toponym which stands for "*Lugar de las Voces*" or "Place where the Voices can be Heard". The name could have been given after this phenomenon was noticed, which locals believe occurs in other archaeological sites and caves as well.

The effects of such stories proved to be strong indeed, when Maler noticed that "the half-breeds in the party became demoralized with fear as night approached; [while the] full-blooded Indians retained their composure day and night" (Maler, 1911:6, cited in Brunhouse, 1975:15). During the first days at the site, camping was indeed a problem. His local guides avoided sleeping inside the site's buildings, and preferred to sleep in a nearby campsite. In fact, they left Maler alone in one of the palaces of the Central

[30] This non-local belief could have had some kind of support through the analogy with local sightings of "flying lights", common in Guatemalan and *petenero* folklore.

[31] *Chicleros* were introduced in El Petén around the 1890's, when the Wrigley Company started to operate and to sponsor the *chicle* sap extraction from El Petén, México, and Belize.

[32] According to his memories (Maler, 1911) the guides were always complaining about the hard work and the harsh conditions under which the expeditions were made. Liquor seemed to be an added problem to the lack of good working performance. The words "lazy" and "incompetent" were not stereotyping adjectives used against indigenous people in general, but only reflect his workers' behavior during his explorations.

Acropolis (Structure 5D-65, known as Palacio Maler) which he used as house and laboratory from 1895 to 1904.

The most common superstition is derived from the sounds of crowing roosters and chickens in places where these birds are not supposed to be. Clapping hands and music made with whistles, drums, and trumpets, also scare people away from the sites. These tales are part of the popular knowledge and are mostly associated with sites that are still deep into the jungle and whose location is barely known.[33]

For the forest workers that are involved in looting, there are two phenomena that they experience. The first one is a voice behind the ear that tells where the exact location is to look for a tomb. Ironically, the same phenomenon that prevents unwanted visitors around the buried cities is the same one that can eventually help the looter. In superstition and myth, there are always two sides to an event, which provides some kind of equilibrium and helps to justify the outcome, whatever it may be.[34]

The second involves drinking liquor. For Mr. "Beta" (well known for his expertise and good taste in the material he loots and deals with) being drunk guarantees a good discovery. He strongly believes there is a "close relationship between *hueche* and *guaro*".[35] At the time of this interview, for example, he was drinking a full bottle before "hitting the trail" (*agarrar rumbo*) promising he was coming back in two weeks with good objects. I have to note that at that moment he was still sober. The owner of the place where he eats, confirmed that he buys a lot of liquor before leaving, and is always drunk when he leaves the village. For him, being absolutely sober is only required for dealing. Answering to the question of how the "power" of liquor is manifested during looting, his answer was simple:

> "It's like a feeling or premonition; I just walk attracted by the place where I have to dig and I get it. Sometimes, I hear a voice but is like a murmur, so I just follow the direction where the voice comes from."

An interesting point about this particular issue is that the people who believe or have heard the murmurs, classify the voices in two categories. The first conveys all the voices that give a specific message; easy to understand by the listener. These are

[33] Roosters were reported being heard in Yaxhá, Uolantun, and Naachtún (or Naactún), by three different informants. On the other hand, voices and cries have been reported mostly for Tikal, Uaxactún, and the Lacandón area. Singing has been mentioned only for Copán (Honduras) and some caves in Guatemala. [This information has been obtained through informal conversation during 4 years of contact with the people of Petén].

[34] For Mr. "Epsilon", his good fortune vanished when after hearing a voice revealing the location of a mound with a tomb, he went to one of his best friends and told him about it. "I thought I could trust a close friend to help me excavate", he recalls, "but it seems that the *encantamiento* disappeared because I opened my mouth; if I haven't said anything, maybe the spirit wouldn't have gotten so angry and punish me with this misfortune. Since then, I never heard that voice again". (Translation by the author).

[35] *Guaro*: A generic term for corn based liquor, similar to "moonshine". It can be bottled as a patented brand or be a clandestine (home made) drink. In the Uaxactún area, the clandestine is called "*chumpiate*".

supposed to be in the Spanish language. The second category includes all the voices that are heard in murmurs, cries, or are loud enough but in haunted places. People who have listened to them believe they must be from the ancient Maya because they are not in Spanish, but in an unintelligible dialect that sounds like the Indian languages.

Self-suggestion seems to play tricks on those who claim they can hear those voices. However, the voices play an important role in keeping the sacredness of the ancient space in the locals' minds, although, unfortunately, it can't prevent the sites from being looted. Whether it is the wind, the sound of the leaves, or a real experience, oral tradition seems to confirm that one should not believe, nor avoid believing.

Tombs with Riches, Tombs with Magic

Since the early exploration years of the Maya Area, problems between the archaeologists and their crews are not uncommon. Sometimes, however, they become difficult to handle when they are the result of the discovery and the following "violation" of a tomb. Many locals still believe that some kind of damnation will punish the first ones to enter a sacred place; that extends even to the persons involved in an excavation. A known case involved some workers of the Proyecto Arqueológico Regional Petexbatún (1994), in south-eastern Petén, where the crews were afraid that the king, buried in the magnificent tomb that was being discovered, would get very angry and eventually punish everyone with a "disgrace". Dr. Juan Antonio Valdés (pers. com.) remembers that he and other archaeologists had to enter the tomb alone because the excavators didn't want to continue with their job. "After the tomb was opened", he continued, "dark clouds and sudden strong winds reminded me of their beliefs, but I considered that event as a coincidence. However, the experience was so real that it made me think that maybe something unusual was really going on".

Although looters obviously try not to pay attention to these stories, the belief is always present among the local population. One of the most common phenomenon often repeated by both forest workers and looters is an apparition of brilliant lights over sites or mounds. "They can be bright white lights suspended over the mounds that have treasures inside" says Mr. "Delta", "so we know where we have to excavate without the fear of missing the luck". Stories with the same pattern are told by *chicleros* from their own experiences or those of their friends. Doña Julia, the wife of a forest worker, vividly remembers a beam of fire while sitting one night in a small plaza, near the archaeological site of El Naranjo. According to her descriptions, "it looked like a tall, dancing figure, which emerged from the base of one of the mounds, turned in the air several times, and disappeared in the mound located just a few meters in front of it". After that, she admitted being so afraid that she was unable to go out at night by herself. After her experience, ceramics and other objects were discovered inside the second mound, which only confirmed the witnesses' beliefs.

Miguel Marín, a former guide of Tikal, and Julián Tot[36] are two of the many people that have seen a "brilliant light that floats over Lake Petén Itzá". This light is well known in all the villages around the lake, and the oldest men often share stories about it. Some of today's fishermen still notice this "flying object" moving at great speed over the water's surface, without making any noise. Occasionally, other characteristics are the row of colored lights around the object and the high frequency of sightings from September to November, usually flying down from the top of the hills over the village of San José. Local old men are sure that the reason for these appearances is because the ancient Mayas lived, and therefore were buried, under the villages along the shore.[37]

Lights are not the only signals for the looter. Human-like shadows moving next to the mounds are also part of the folktales. One belief in particular, however, is the mixture of a legend and the dream pursued by all the looters: the *Muñeco de Jade* or jade figure. The stories that characterize the figure tend to have the same structure, although witnesses and details change, often with a personal flavor. For most of the people interviewed,[38] this jade figure talks to the looter in his dreams, revealing where the "treasure" is hidden. In a setting that is supposed to be recognized by the potential looter, it usually appears sitting next to a mound or on top of it.

This character, however, doesn't seem to help all the time. Mr. "Alpha", for example, is one of the *chicleros* that claims he saw the jade figure in person on one occasion. His version, as follows, matches the stories of the others that witnessed his excitement:

> "I was walking en *la montaña* (in the rainforest) looking for chicozapote trees when I followed a trail that took me to another place with a lot of structures. A *Muñeco de Jade* was sitting next to one of the mounds, so I grabbed it and went back to the camp. I walked and walked, and always came back to the same mound. Then a voice inside me ordered me to leave the *muñeco* alone or I would never find my way back. That was it! I left it with all the sadness of my heart and while I walked, I went cutting branches with my machete to mark the trail. I called the others [who were at the camp at the moment], and we all went following the marked trail. We never got to the point. I saw all my marks

[36] Don Julián was one of the first workers in the Tikal Project of the University of Pennsylvania and discoverer of Tomb 116 in Temple I. He is now working at the Sylvanus G. Morley Museum of Tikal.

[37] This is obvious to the villagers that live around the lake because of the large quantities of Precolumbian ceramics and stone objects that can be found on the ground next to the shore or on their properties. Miguel's house, like many others, is built over a mound, which was partially destroyed when he built a new bathroom and kitchen.

[38] Twenty-five persons were interviewed in regard to this character in particular (*chicleros*, villagers, contractors, and cooks). Sixteen placed the *Muñeco de Jade* in dreams, whether they had the experience or not. Of the sixteen, five have dreamed of him and eleven haven't had any such experience, but have heard the stories from others. Two claim they have seen him at least once in broad daylight during their walks. For the remaining seven, four have heard these stories but don't believe in them, and three never heard this legend before.

but there was nothing! Some men were really frightened, so we all ran back to the camp!" (Translation by the Author).

Several stories like these are part of the local folklore which, through the oral tradition, reflect the cultural context in which they are created, transmitted, and modified. Although I consider the supernatural experiences in archaeological sites as part of the looters' folklore, it is important to emphasize that the legends, beliefs, and folktales that characterize ancient ruins and objects are not only the patrimony of the ones who loot, but of all the people who are in contact with the sites, the natural environment, and the socio-economic activities where the events take place (in this case the Petén rainforest). Looters and forest workers are the most susceptible to these beliefs, mainly because of their temporary isolation during the seasonal activities.

Chiclero camps can have *petenero* people as well as tappers from México, Belize, and other parts of Guatemala. Some take their families along, and the camps that need cooks usually hire women. Life in the camps, though temporary, involves social relations that can evolve into something similar to an extended family. Story-telling at the end of the day, jokes, gossip, and casual conversation about the news they were able to get with their short wave radios, are common experiences after a day's work. Isolation is only interrupted when the muleteers arrive with supplies and to pick up the *chicle*. If we consider Bascom's functions of folklore,[39] the tales of amusement and the validation of culture and beliefs could be the main factor that keeps local superstitions alive and continues to maintain the oral tradition of story-telling among a population that still considers their environment the source of food, raw materials, and economic benefits.

Glossary of local words

The following glossary of the most common terms highlights a small part of the vocabulary used by the forest workers and looters in El Petén, They reflect and illustrate the ideas people have about Precolumbian remains and how archaeological objects are classified. Local and Spanish expressions are written in italics.

Caballo: literally "horse". Term used to describe the small mounds (small structures) with elongated shapes. Name given because of the slightly curved edges of the mound, resembling the horse's back.

Canasta: literally "basket". Architectonic compound or building where several burials can be found. According to the looters' opinion, "canastas are not so frequent, but excavating one can assure a profit of thousands of quetzales." Because of their size

[39] For folklorist William Bascom (1954) the four functions of folklore are to provide amusement; validation of culture by justifying institutions, beliefs and attitudes; education; and a way of applying social pressure and exercising social control.

and shape, it can be suggested that these *canastas* could be acropolis buildings or multiburial platforms.

Caritas: literally "little faces". Face or head fragments of ceramic figurines, usually whistle figurines or solid anthropomorphic or zoomorphic figures.

Compuesto: vault or chamber, room. A structure can have one, two, or three *compuestos*.

Dioses: literally "gods". Synonym for "figures" or "characters".

Duende: spirit or ghost in the form of a little man, sometimes with the body covered with long hair or wearing a big black hat. It is said that he haunts during the evening or at night, and likes to bother girls with long hair and big eyes, or ride the horses and mules inside the corrals.

Gobernante: Lord, a character portrayed on polychrome ceramic vases, standing or sitting, but in fully decorated attire and headdress. Usually, he appears sitting on a throne or carried on a palanquin. The main characteristic is that he appears with attendants or visitors paying homage to him. Synonym: *Rey*; see *Reyes*.

Hebra de pelo: literally "hair shaft". Refers to the Codex-Style ceramics[40] or Chinos black-over-white ceramics,[41] both of which are painted with fine black and brown line over cream or white background. Term commonly used in the area of Carmelita. Synonyms: *línea negra* and *maíz blanco*.

Huaxca: ceramic vessels that are not suitable for sale, due to the lack of artistic attributes that define high quality, in manufacturing techniques and decoration. Also referred to with a diminutive (not necessarily disrespective) term: *huaxquerita*. In other documents it can be spelled *Waxca*.

Huaxquero: looter. Term derives from Huaxca. In Petén this term is not used as much as *huechero*. Other spelling: *Waxquero*.

Hueche: armadillo (*Dasypus novemcinctus*); looted object; short for *huechero* or looter.

[40] Codex-Style is the distinctive tradition of North-Central Petén during the Late classic (c.a. 700-830 A.D.). Besides the black-brown line, artists of this style used diluted red paint to decorate hieroglyphs, selected images, and rims. The available pictorial space was filled with glyphs, gods images, and animals. Workshops for these ceramics have been located around Nakbé, Pacaya, and El Mirador (Reents-Budet *et al*., 1993:1-11).

[41] Belonging to the Palmar Ceramic Group, the artists of this style never diluted the black paint, so all the imagery was created with the same density of slip paint (a clay + water mix). Also, large portions of the vessels' surfaces were left blank, using horizontal glyphic texts around the rims or diagonal texts covering the pictorial space. Blank spaces were filled by a few simple iconographic motifs like an element similar to a fleur-de-lis. The workshops of this ceramic style have been located in Eastern Petén and Belize, mostly around Holmul, Naranjo, La Sufricaya, and Buenavista (Reents-Budet *et al*., 1993:1-11). Recorded as BW or "Black and White" in The Maya Vase Book by Justin Kerr (Vol. 2, preface).

Huechero: looter. Name derived from the Maya word *huech* or armadillo, an animal who opens holes in the ground, according to popular knowledge. The name, however, emphasizes the act of excavating. The rest of the process is known as *huechería*.

Huechería: term derived from the word *hueche*. Name for the looting business, which encompasses the entire art dealing process, from looting to dealing.

Indios: human characters portrayed in painted ceramic objects. Usually it's referred to as *indios pintados* or "painted indians". See *personaje*.

Jade: gem quality silicate mineral in the pyroxene family. It has two forms, jadeite and nephrite.; Generic term used by the local population to refer to all kinds of greenstones. Jadeite is the form of jade that has been found frequently in the tombs of the elite in the Petén Lowlands, usually in the form of necklaces (beads), carved pendants, celts, pectorals, earflares, bracelets, and all kinds of carved ornaments. Greenstones, and jadeite, were some of the fine goods transported throughout Mesoamerica by long distance trade networks. (See *Jadeite* and *Muñeco*).

Jadeita: sodium aluminum silicate ($NaA1Si_2O_6$), one of the forms of jade. It was highly valuable by the Precolumbian Maya because of its green color symbolizing water, life (vegetation), and the center of the earth. Deep green to greenish-black varieties are called chloromelanite and are colored by iron. Jadeite sources are rare and occur only in metamorphic rocks. Of the seven sources of jadeite around the world, only three are located in America; the main source for Maya jade is in the Motagua River Valley in Guatemala, exploited for trade and manufacture in Precolumbian times. (See *Jade* and *Muñeco*).

Leyenda: literally "legend". It refers to the glyphic text on ceramics, sculpture, or architecture. It's mainly used for ceramics, in which the objects (vase, bowl, plate, or others) can have different categories of "legends".

1. Horizontal: Around the rims of bowls and vases, or around the central figure in plates. This type of text is often the Primary Standard Sequence or PSS.[42]

2. Vertical: The secondary texts that are usually written in front of or next to figures, and are the ones that identify the settings and the participants.

3. *En forma* de 7: "in the shape of a 7". Refers to the secondary texts arranged in cruciform or T-shapes, and in any other way permitted by the space available. It has the same function as the vertical text.

[42] PSS: Primary Standard Sequence, originally discovered and named by Michael D. Coe. Recent research on these texts (see Reents-Budet, 1994:109-121) has deciphered many of the glyphs, making it possible to identify the five sections that make up the PSS: 1. Presentation (dedication and presentation of the vessel); 2. Surface Treatment (glyphs tell if the vessel was painted, carved or blessed with writing); 3. Vessel Type (the use of the vessel is identified as "his/her drinking vessel", "his plate", "his tripod plate" or "his vase"); 4. Contents (glyphs record the intended contents of the vessel, like cacao or corn gruel); and 5. Closure (names and titles of the owner or the patron of the vessel).

Línea negra: fine black line characteristic of polychrome, Codex-style and black-over-cream ceramics. Contour line. Synonym for *Hebra de pelo* and *maíz blanco*.

Maíz Blanco: literally "white corn". Code word used commonly in the Uaxactún area and among dealers in Guatemala City. It refers to the ceramic vessels that have white slip paints as backgrounds, mostly Codex-Style and Chinos ceramics.

Mancha: literally "spot" or "stain". Used for polychrome ceramics and refers to the paintbrush strokes that color both the figure and background, without respecting the contours. figure with no black line for contour. An object with this characteristic is considered of poor quality.

Muñeco: literally "doll" or "figure"; figurine. It refers to solid figurines made of clay or different kinds of stone. The dream of all looters is finding a *muñeco* de jade or "jade figure". They are described as standing or seated lords with a height of around 5 to12 inches. Folklore characterizes them as lucky charms associated with rich tombs (see *Jade* and *Jadeite*).[43]

Penacho: headdress. Refers to the headdresses made with bird feathers (quetzal, macaw, parrot) and other materials such as palm.

Personaje: figure or character. It refers mainly to human or god characters, not to animals. Other synonyms are *indios* (indians) or *reyes* (kings).

Personaje con arte: literally "character with art". These are characters that show full action, like a standing figure with arm movement; seated lord receiving offerings or homage; kneeling figure in front or behind a lord; dancers, and others.

Pito: whistle. This category also includes whistles with anthropomorphic or animal figures and ocarinas. Synonym: *Silbato*.

Plantel: flat open area. Plaza surrounded by buildings.

Plato: plate. Usually has a ring base.

Plato ceremonial: literally ceramic "ceremonial plate". It is the local term used to identify the finely manufactured and decorated tripod plates. Polychrome[44] or Chinos black-on-cream plates (with or without kill-hole) are the main objects that belong to this category.

Reinado: literally "kingdom". This term implies a subtle idea of European medieval kingdoms (popular because of fairy tales) with kings, princes, and palaces. It refers to the archaeological site in which the mounds or structures are over 20 feet tall and has

[43] The dream of the "Jade figure " is probably influenced by the discovery of the lidded jade mosaic vases found in Tikal and exhibited at the National Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, in Guatemala City. The lid handles of these vases are anthropomorphic heads with hairdos and ornaments.

[44] Ceramic vessels that are painted in several colors; the colors can be painted either before firing or paint can be applied over a thin layer of stucco (plaster) after firing.

several architectonic groups. If a site or compound has smaller mounds, it is commonly considered as a subject of a bigger "kingdom".

Reyes: literally "kings". Characters portrayed in polychrome ceramic objects, standing or sitting, but in fully decorated attire and headdresses. The same idea can also be referred as *indios pintados* or "painted indians". See *Personaje*. Synonym: *Gobernante*.

Ruina (s): literally "ruin (s)". Archaeological site or mound. In El Petén, most of these are covered by the jungle.

Saque: looter's excavation or hole in a structure or mound. Trenches cut into the structures are also classified in this category.

Tiempos: tiers or registers of characters or scenes. Some vases or bowls have their surfaces divided horizontally or depict figures distributed on upper and lower levels. Vases with this characteristic usually display two rows.

Tocado: headdress that is made of white or decorated cloth, such as turbans. Can also refer to feathered headdresses.

Vasija: literally "vessel". It usually refers to ceramic bowls or lidded-bowls, or ceramic containers with three dimensional shapes.

Vaso: vase. Can be cylindrical, barrel-shaped, or squared.

Vaso Ceremonial: literally "ceremonial vase". Identifies the ceramic vase that is painted with deities or anthropomorphic characters (in action) and glyphic texts. Usually polychrome or black-over-white vases with high quality decoration and manufacture.

Vaso Mudo: literally "mute vase". It is the vase that doesn't have glyphic texts that can "talk" about the vase or about the characters displayed.

Waxca: See *Huaxca*.

Local Knowledge about Maya Art and History

Local knowledge about Precolumbian remains is not limited only to architecture, but also includes the objects that are part of the material culture. It is an important fact that most of the population in Guatemala is living on, or next to, archaeological sites and centers. If people are aware of those remains, they do not understand them to be part of the nation's history and Precolumbian culture. In the highlands, for example, people engaged in agriculture are the ones who find Precolumbian objects more easily. Ceramics, are identified as objects that the "ancestors" (*los antiguos*) left behind. Other

elements, like jade beads and obsidian blades, are placed on altars and used for divination by the local healers.[45]

Other interesting phenomena occur on the Pacific coast of Guatemala, where large areas of land are cotton or sugar cane plantations or cattle ranches. Some of the *fincas* have large Precolumbian monuments, which are still visited by local and foreign pilgrims, who burn copal and present offerings to the figures.[46] These basalt stone sculptures are usually carved in human and animal shapes. In many cases, black soot cover the surfaces due to the heavy smoke of the ritual burning, and neither the owners of these lands or IDAEH have been able to remove some of them to safer places because of their importance to local rituals.[47]

Unfortunately, in the highlands and on the Pacific coast, most of the sites are located under major human settlements and agricultural areas. Looting is a problem because of the presence of laborers (many of them are immigrants from other departments) dedicated to the seasonal harvesting and extensive agriculture. Also, there is a high demand for objects from this region by private collectors, often the owners of these *fincas*. (Bové, 1996).

In El Petén, on the contrary, people are more aware of archaeological sites and mounds which are easier to notice because the structures were built with limestone blocks, and not with mud bricks. Also, large extensions of the Petén territory (mostly the northern areas) are not occupied with permanent settlements or criss-crossed by highways, thus being more protected from devastating destruction.

Today's population categorizes objects according to their own cultural context and beliefs. Local people in the rural areas classify the archaeological remains according to their nature, shape, material, and decoration. For example, it is common to hear that all round-based ceramic vessels are defined as *ollas* (cooking pots), and beads or shells that are found together are defined as *collares* (necklaces). Archaeological sites, with tall structures and pyramidal buildings, are commonly known as *reinados* or kingdoms. Mostly among the forest workers, minor sites with smaller architectural groups are often considered to be part of, or subordinate to, a nearby kingdom. This size relation among sites is empirically deduced by their experience in the field.

Long-term research and recent discoveries in archaeology and epigraphy have revealed that Maya cities had strong socio-political interrelationships through commercial exchange, marriage, alliances, warfare, and social events. Thanks to the study of Maya

[45] This was observed in the house of a healer from San Antonio Palopó (Lake Atitlán), Sololá. According to him, the obsidian objects (clearly Precolumbian), were left for him in the fields by the Lord of Thunder, after a day of rain. Effectively, the common name for obsidian is *piedra de rayo* (stone of thunderbolt) and, just as a coincidence, it can be easily found after the rain washes down mounds and slopes.

[46] Copal is incense made with the resin of the *copal* tree (*Protium copal*), in use since Precolumbian times. Other modern offerings include candles that equate with the colors of the cardinal points (red, black, white, and yellow), liquor and chocolate bars that resemble the sacred cacao (*Theobroma cacao*) consumed as a sacred food in antiquity.

[47] The most well known sculpted stones are located on *fincas* in Santa Lucía Cotzumalhuapa, and La Democracia (department of Escuintla).

art and glyphic writing, (most often from looted objects) it has been possible to determine the importance of ritual events at certain sites, and the attendance of rulers from other sites during those occasions.

Moreover, it is interesting to hear chicleros suggest, by direct observation and reconnaissance in the forest, how sites could have been subordinated to another powerful site based on their sizes and the distances that separate them. Don Matías Velásquez (an *arriero* who rides back and forth from the camps to the central warehouse with supplies and *chicle*) was explaining to me his theory about how El Infiernón (now Naactún), Río Azul, and even Tikal were kingdoms that, despite their greatness, must have been subjects of a greater kingdom "on the other side" called Calakmul (Campeche, México). Interestingly, until that day he never had the opportunity to read or hear of the latest discoveries about the Maya states and their relationships. Specific studies about Calakmul as a superpower had already been made by epigraphers and archaeologists. Calakmul's dominance of the Maya lowlands has been deduced from the inscriptions carved on stelae and buildings, which record the diplomatic and economic exchange of the sites of the area (Martin and Grube, 1995:44-45).[48]

Local Classification of Precolumbian Remains

Precolumbian remains are given a "value" by the local population, depending on whether they belong to the "portable objects" category, or to the "sculpture and architecture" category. First it is important to state the concept of the word "value", which in this case has three meanings:

1. Degree of utility that objects have in order to satisfy needs or provide welfare.

2. Quality of the objects which, in order to possess them, certain amounts of money or something of similar value has to be given in exchange.

3. Significance or importance of an object or an action portrayed on it.

According to the people interviewed for this study, Precolumbian remains are given two kinds of "value"; the significance an object or site has for them; and the actual monetary value of an object. The importance of an object/site is never understood for the role it played as part of the nation's history and present culture; only if it provides some kind of benefit to the individual or the community.

[48] According to these studies, the sites that were more closely related to Calakmul through royal visits, diplomatic exchange, marital alliances, or warfare are: Piedras Negras, El Perú, Yaxchilán, Dos Pilas, Cancuén, Naranjo, and Caracol. Tikal and Palenque were related to Calakmul only through armed conflict (Martin and Grube, 1995:45).

Figure 10. Different styles of ceramics brought back by the *chicleros* from the jungle. They are now in exhibition to the public. (Dos Lagunas Biotope and Uaxactún Collections.)

Portable objects are recognized by the local villagers as things that were used by people before them. The basic function of ceramics, figurines, and ornaments are easy to determine because of the shapes and hardness of the material. However, details about their use (domestic, ceremonial, funerary) and manufacturing technology are generally unknown or confusing. Also, there are differences among the socio-economic and cultural backgrounds of the viewers. Collectors will emphasize their attention to the artistic decoration (and maybe historical importance); looters will focus on the objects' size, decoration, and general condition; while others will re-use the objects according to their points of view.

For portable objects, unfortunately, the economic value is most important because the direct commercialization can provide money, if they are in demand. Consulted about which objects are the most "valuable" and in which order of importance, from most valuable to least valuable, several informants agreed that the list could be classified as follows (the final decision depends on the object in particular):

1. Jade and Greenstone Pieces: In order to be considered of some value, the objects have to include delicate or outstanding manufacturing techniques. Jade figurines and masks are always at the top of the list of favorites. Other objects of great value are round beads, carved tubular beads, earflares, and mosaics. Apple-green colored jadeite is the most requested, as well as bright dark greenstones. If Jadeite presents brownish or white spots, it is of poor quality.

2. Ceramic Vessels and Containers: Includes Polychrome ceramics, Codex-Style[49] and black-over-cream vessels.[50] Certain shapes are also preferred, but again

[49] The characteristic shapes of the Codex-Style vessels include plates with low and flaring walls; bowls and dishes with flaring walls; and vases and bowls with vertical, divergent or flaring (black, white, pink, blue, green, red) walls (Reents-Budet *et al*., 1993:1-11).

everything depends on their decoration. In order of most important to least important are: vases; bowls, as well as those with three dimensional lids; and lastly, plates. There are several characteristics that are looked for, essentially the following:

a. One or more painted characters: The economic value of the vessel depends on the number of painted figures, the setting (palace and throne, for example), and the movement or action they display. If there is action, the price increases.

b. Standing figures (priced individually). If there are different figures, the vessel's price is the product of multiplying the price of each figure by the number of figures. If the seller or buyer thinks, for example, that three of the figures are the same personage or in the same category, then it is three for the price of one.

c. Movement of figures: The type of motion portrayed on the vessel is highly important, as we can see in the following cases:

    i. Characters riding animals (deer, peccary), serpent monster scenes and ballgame players, with full action movement are the most valuable, depending on whether the object is painted in polychrome or black-over-white.

    ii. Seated Lord moving arms: The movement or action of the arms is very significant and highly valuable. This includes lords sitting on thrones, talking to lesser lords, and also lords or deities emerging from turtle carapaces.

    iii. Dancing figure: The dancer is the least valuable of the "moving" characters, unless he appears associated with another character or has extraordinary artistry. The price of the object depends more on the painting and presence of glyphs.

However, objects with glyphic texts are highly valuable because it means that the vase "is not mute". They include the texts around the rims of vases and bowls, and the glyphs on plates. The secondary texts in cruciform or T-shapes are of the highest value because of their association to the figures.

3. Ceramic figurines (complete): Includes whistle-figurines and solid and hollow figures. Their value depends on the decoration (the presence of incisions, painting, applied ornaments) and the form of the figure, such as:

    a. Active human characters: lords and warriors in full attire (best if polychrome).

[50] These ceramics from Eastern Petén include tall cylindrical vases with vertical walls; bowls and dishes with higher walls than the ones seen in Codex-styles; and tripod plates with high and flaring walls.

b. Human characters: with or without action, men and women dressed in everyday or royal attire; best if painted and dressed in headdresses, necklaces, sandals, capes, loincloths, robes, etc.

c. Animal figures: the most common are turkeys, peccaries, owls, dogs, parrots, and rabbits.

Objects (ornaments) of shell and bone are the least valuable of the salable objects, unless they have extraordinary "art", in which case they can move upward on the list. The objects included in this category are bracelets, bracelet and anklet beads, pectorals, spoons, carved bones, etc.

4. Architecture and Sculpture: unfortunately, sculpture, such as stelae, carved panels, and statues, are considered valuable if they can be traded. Sometimes these are mutilated to obtain specific parts that are most in demand (like carved glyphs or parts of the main character), or cut into pieces in order to transport them to their destination, where they can be reassembled. At present, archaeological sites are considered valuable because they can either attract tourism (and benefit people who can work as guides or offer other services) or they can be looted.

Local Re-Utilization of Archaeological Objects

Although selling for profit is very important, not all the Precolumbian objects have to be sold in order to be valuable for the people who use them again. This is more likely in the case of ceramics, stone grinders or *metates*, and stelae that do not have any visible and outstanding carvings. In the rainforest, anything that can be used is considered valuable. Looting activities destroy the information that could be available about the function of the objects and their cultural context and perhaps provide new insights into Maya history and the development of technology. However, their function is not forgotten, thanks to the importance some of these objects have for the present inhabitants. The objects and their functions are categorized according to the way they are perceived, on the cultural setting of the present-day people and the similarity of shape between Precolumbian artifacts and modern or traditional utensils.

The most common re-utilization of antiquities is the use of ceramics. Vessels that haven’t been sold, start a new life in the *chiclero* camps as containers of all sorts of things, from ballpoint pens to rubber bands. But those who benefit most from the abandoned ceramics are women, who use them frequently in their kitchens to contain flour, eggs, salt, dried soups, spices, chilies, and corn dough for traditional foods.

Figure 11. Felicita Barrera, a cook from La Toronja camp, with the bowl she uses to contain tortillas.

Ceramics are almost always present in the kitchens of all the village houses and *chiclero* camps. Eating from a Precolumbian plate or bowl is not strange because their shapes are a clear demonstration that they were made by the Maya to contain food. Vases are the least used because of their size (around 8 to13 inches tall) and their material, which is heavier than modern glasses and cups. Ceramics are also used as water containers if their shapes are rounded and have narrow necks (widely known as a *tinaja*) or to pour water if they are narrow and easy to handle.

Figure 12. Bowl used to pour water in the camp's "dishwasher". (Los Pichos)

Kitchens are where Precolumbian objects are most needed and therefore used and cared for most effectively. Most of the women who gave their opinion about the quality of these wares, explained that they like them because they come in different styles, are more original because they are not manufactured anymore, and they are free. Household accidents can happen if the vessels are not used properly, since exploding pots can hurt the user and scatter the food, if they are put over the fire without being "cured" first.[51] This process consists of putting warm water in the vessel and gradually bringing it to a boil. In some cases water mixed with *masa* (corn dough or corn meal) is poured inside.

However, not all the objects are safe from destruction. On one occasion a woman from Uaxactún found a small tripod vessel on her way back from the *aguada*, where she went to carry water. She cleaned it and placed it on the kitchen table as a container for her chili peppers. One day, the Guardia de Hacienda came to the village checking some houses that were supposed to have objects for illegal trade. She was so scared that she took the vessel, ran to the back of the house, and broke it. The guards were not looking for her nor was her house being searched, but since then she has been terrified to have something Precolumbian in her home. Meanwhile, her nice chili plate was destroyed forever. In other cases, children use the abandoned ceramics to practice with their sling-shots, hitting them from a distance to prove their shooting ability (which later on will be used for hunting).

Precolumbian remains can also provide important devices to accomplish several chores. Grinders, for example, are still used the traditional way, so using an ancient one

[51] Carlos Catalán, a *chiclero* and tour guide from Carmelita, remembered a lecture in which I said that one of the main functions of ceramics was to contain food. While taking some tourists to El Mirador, he bravely picked an abandoned vessel and decided to show how he cooked his beans in a Precolumbian bowl. To his surprise, the pot exploded making his dinner disappear.

is not very different or unusual. Most of the women said that they like the *metates* because they last forever and can be found in different shapes (tripod and flat, curved and shallow, curved and deep, etc.) which can be used for varied purposes, from grinding coffee to drinking troughs for animals.

However, need is the mother of invention and originality, as can be seen in the following illustrations that show other widely-practiced re-utilization of cultural artifacts. For instance, many stelae that were either not carved or were too eroded to be considered important by the local people, became important as construction material. The flat shape and large size determined function. The slab-shape of the stela makes it a favorite to build ovens, washing surfaces, hearths, and ancient limestone *metates* can be used to wash clothes.

Figure 13. Broken stela cut in pieces to build a hearth to cook *chicle*. Stelae are often re-used to construct other facilities because of their ready-to-use slab shape. (El Suspiro camp, abandoned in August 1996.)

Destruction vs. Conservation. What are the Options?

The protection and conservation of the sites in Guatemala are a major concern for IDAEH[52] and the archaeological world. However, the lack of resources and the need for the government to provide urgent relief in other aspects of social welfare (health, education, roads, etc.), places cultural activities at the end of the list of priorities.

Legally, the administration of the archaeological sites and national parks is shared by IDAEH and CONAP, due to the existence of some National Parks that have both nature reserves and major archaeological remains, such as Tikal National Park, El Mirador National Park, and Río Azul National Park. However, most of sites in the country are protected only by IDAEH. Unfortunately, the cultural heritage has not received the necessary support from the authorities or any other institution. Until a few years ago, only two private entities, Asociación Tikal[53] and Fundación del Banco G & T (a private bank in Guatemala), have provided support for studies and other activities related to the promotion of the cultural past. G & T has recently started to sponsor much of the remodeling of the new exhibits at the National Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, which will be of great use to the school population, visitors, and researchers.

Of all the approximately 1,400 archaeological sites in Guatemala, only Tikal receives attention because its image is promoted as the main attraction for international tourism. Just showing Temple I and its Great Plaza is enough to make people think that Tikal is the Maya World, rather than a part of it. A nearby site, Uaxactún, 25 km north of Tikal, does not receive the most minimal support from INGUAT or IDAEH.[54] El Mirador and El Perú are available only to adventurous travelers who can either contact the communities that provide tourism services (Carmelita and Centro Campesino, respectively) or contact PROPETEN/CI[55] to arrange trips. Fortunately, non-governmental organizations that are promoting ecotourism like PROPETEN/CI, ARCAS, TNC, and others are fulfilling, in part, the lack of cultural education by providing training and basic information about archaeology to the local guides.

[52] IDAEH was created February 23, 1946 to "improve the organization and administration of the museums; coordinate the dependencies that control the archaeological heritage; start and promote the ethnographic and folklore studies, as well as intensify the historical research…" (Siller, 1992:53). Created first under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Education, it now belongs to the Ministry of Culture and Sports.

[53] Asociación Tikal is a private organization that for several years has sponsored part of the Annual Symposium of Archaeology in Guatemala (organized by the National Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology), promotes conferences and tours relating to archaeology, and provides funds to archaeology students for research and publications. Besides Museo Popol Vuh and CIRMA, Asociación Tikal has an extensive library on archaeology and Maya art.

[54] IDAEH's Registration Office provided a minimum of support and orientation in the creation of the first privately owned collection of Precolumbian objects in El Petén. The collection, now open to the public, can become a good complement to the archaeological site that surrounds the village.

[55] PROPETEN/CI is undertaking projects of the sustainable use of resources, community enterprises, and ecotourism, giving special training, merchandising orientation, and funding to the local population. The Ruta Mirador (for El Mirador) and Ruta Guacamaya (or Macaw Trail, which includes El Perú) are two of the main ecotourism projects that involve community administration and the provision of services.

Environmental education has its widest range in El Petén, Guatemala City, and some smaller communities. Even though that region is sometimes considered the cradle of Maya civilization, there is not a single cultural education project in El Petén.[56] IDAEH's local office is simply a bureaucratic dependency that is not capable of developing its own programs to reach the communities. Archaeologists and their excavation projects are not requested to create a special educational program as part of their work in the area.

The local population has obtained its knowledge about the ancient Maya in different ways. The groups who know most about the physical sites are obviously those that have been in direct and constant contact with Precolumbian objects. They can either be formal and incidental looters, or trained workers of IDAEH in the major archaeological sites. There are also students of Archaeology and tour guides who may obtain and disseminate scarce up-to date information, but most of the knowledge acquired by *petenero* students is limited to their teachers' classes, their fieldwork experience, and a few articles and texts edited in Spanish.

In places like El Petén, a vast number of individuals who are hired to work as diggers in the archaeological projects, have been involved in looting in one way or another. This has been addressed by other authors and admitted by archaeologists who, even though they are aware of this, can't do much about it. Scientific excavations can last from a few weeks to several years, providing economic growth to whole villages, with new jobs and the possibility of tourism. These job opportunities create other economic advantages in which the local population can participate and obtain additional income. But, although archaeological excavation and studies provide these people with a new way of life, they do not last forever. In El Petén, the excavation period is usually during the dry season from February to early May; the rest of the year, the men who are digging with the project, have to go back to *xate*, *chicle*, *pimienta* gathering.

Excavators for the archaeological projects are usually hired from the villages in the vicinity. Contrary to other regions of the country, the *petenero* workers who are hired to work in a project often have more experience in the field than the archeologist in charge. The professional archaeologist is well aware of this. Workers learn the scientific methodology and often discover valuable evidence, as well as providing protection for the site. They also pick up basic conservation techniques for the objects.

Learning how to interpret their findings or at least knowing what are they looking for and why they are so important, is usually not part of the knowledge they acquire as employees of a scientific project. Very few archaeologists acquaint their crews with the latest information. Archaeological research is limited to excavation, data interpretation, restoration, and the publication of technical reports. No one, as far as it is known, gives back to the community the information obtained from the same grounds where local people live and work.

[56] Petencito, the regional zoo of El Petén, is currently developing a plan of paying more attention to the public, which will include the improvement of services like interpretation, environmental education, conservation, and recreation. Culture aspects like the relationship of the Maya with nature will also be included.

Consequently, when an archaeological project finishes the excavation research after some years, it leaves the area without providing a sustainable activity for the local population as a product of their many years of investigation. The communities are legally not allowed to participate in the management, protection, and direct tourism benefits of the archaeological sites that exist next to them. So, as soon as the site is discovered, investigated, and its history almost decoded, they are practically abandoned again without any ongoing program of information.[57]

Notable exceptions have been Norberto Tesucún and Neria Herrera, two local people who have provided basic information about their Precolumbian heritage to the school population in El Petén. Mr. Tesucún is now the Museum Coordinator for the Tikal Precolumbian Collections; while Neria Herrera, a teacher from Uaxactún, is the legal guardian of the first private collection of El Petén that is open to the public.

Mr. Tesucún is an example of utilizing trained local people. As an excavation worker with the Tikal Project of the University of Pennsylvania (ca. 1958), "Don Beto" was involved in several discoveries in the core of the site. As time passed he became part of the permanent staff, working in different departments. As Museum Coordinator, he has lectured and given tours to the school children of El Petén. However, there are no resources to provide him with teaching materials and facilities.

[57] Cases like these are frequent in the Maya area. Uaxactún is still being looted, as well as the areas surrounding Nakbé and the Petexbatún Region, at the north and southwest of Petén. A well-known case is Aguateca, which has been sacked several times by armed men and its stelae cut with chainsaw. The guard from IDAEH was unable to do anything with his only weapon, a machete.

Figure 14. Norberto Tesucún, the museum coordinator for the Tikal Precolumbian Collections in the Sylvanus G. Morley Museum, Tikal, holding a jade statuette representing a sleeping jaguar, after the object was returned from an international exhibition.

Surprisingly, in El Petén there is only one registered collection, located in Uaxactún. Neria Herrera, a school teacher, collected all the objects that were found by the school children and their parents in the jungle (or maybe looted by them). These objects were not quite good enough for sale, so they were given to her as a gift. For several years she hid the objects because of her fear of being caught and sent to prison. In 1995, she finally had the confidence to ask for advice and now her collection is open to the public, to which tourists, *petenero* schools, and locals can go and see the objects freely.

Scholars like Dr. Juan Antonio Valdés and Dr. Nikolai Grube have supported the small exhibition with labels, articles, and conservation. Today it encompasses more than 200 objects of ceramics, bone, shell, flint, and limestone. Her purpose has been to provide cultural education through the interpretation of cultural artifacts that can be easily identified by analogy with modern-day utensils.

Figure 15a. View of the Uaxactún Collection, in Posada Campamento El Chiclero.

Figure 15b. View of the Uaxactún Collection, in Posada Campamento El Chiclero.

Cultural Education in Guatemala

Cultural education should be a priority if past destruction is to be mitigated in the future. This destruction is not manifested only by looting, but also through the destruction of the sites due to agricultural and/or construction activities. El Petén suffers from this problem, mostly around the lakes of the central area, which had a high Precolumbian occupation. Today, several villages surround Lakes Petén Itzá, Yaxhá, Macanché, Quexil, and Petenxil, among others. The villages of San Miguel, San José, San Andrés, Santa Elena, San Benito, and even the capital city of Flores are literally settled on mounds. In San Miguel these can be up to ten feet high. Frequently, the population finds objects while making necessary excavations for construction.

In Flores, for example, the Catholic Church was built over Precolumbian remains in the 1700's, on the highest point of the island. Years later while fixing the drainage system under the church (1980's) two stelae were found buried under its foundations. The island's inhabitants, as well as the rest of the Petén population, are aware of these features but prefer not to notify IDAEH because of the fear that their lands can be confiscated or that they will be forced to leave their homes. At this moment, while land legalization procedures are being made, several properties that have mounds and other archaeological features are being flattened or bulldozed to secure the ownership of the land.[58] On the other hand, a large variety of objects have been recovered by the people and kept in their houses as decoration in small private collections that are visible only to the families' close friends.

Plantations located in the Coastal piedmont have very important sites on their properties, while each day, towns and villages destroy what is left in the highlands by cultivating the land. The highlands, with its fertile volcanic soils and the different altitudes, are rich in archaeological occupation. Part of Guatemala City, too, is located on top of Kaminaljuyú, one of the major Mesoamerican centers in the Late Preclassic (300 B.C.-250 A.D.) and Early Classic (250-600 A.D.) periods. The construction of modern residential areas on the western side of the city has destroyed important archaeological remains.

[58] For many years, ownership of land has been based on *agarradas* (meaning "to grab the land"). Immigrants, attracted by the idea of large tracts of land, arrived at the desired area and claimed their "stakes". From that moment their ownership was official. Today it still happens, but to a lesser degree. For that reason official land legalization is a priority.

Figure 16. One of the several mounds of the site of Kaminaljuyú (Guatemala City, zone 11). Ironically, the Hyatt Hotel built over the site is called "Tikal Futura" and is decorated with Mayan motifs.

The Registration of Archaeological Patrimony

There are mechanisms that can help the "owners" of artifacts protect the cultural patrimony[59] and at the same time learn about what they have. IDAEH has a Registration Office[60] where "private collections" must be legally registered and where interested people can receive advice about the rights and obligations of a "legal guardian of the cultural patrimony". Since "illicit collections" (that is, "non-registered collections") can result in an accusation of aggravated robbery which is penalized with up to fifteen years in prison in the case of archaeological artifacts, it is necessary for all the people in Guatemala, who have collections, to have them registered legally.

However, individuals assume several obligations that complement their rights, the most important being the prohibition to export or sell the objects. Guatemalan law does not differentiate as to the means of acquisition and penalizes the crime without distinction,

[59] Cultural Patrimony is defined by Joel Ajxup (pers. com.) as "the group of archaeological, historical, artistic, and paleonthological objects and things that have an exceptional value from the point of view of science and the culture of a Country".

[60] "The Registration Office for archaeological, historical, and artistic property, is a public institution that will function as a dependent of the Institute of Anthropology and History of Guatemala. Their obligation is to provide free services to individuals in the identification of the archaeological, historical, and artistic objects they may possess" (Decree 425, Chapter II, Article 10).

even though in several cases the authorities themselves are involved in illegal commercialization and exportation. Perhaps one day, a venue can be found by which all sides can benefit, the scholar as well as the collector.

To conclude this first study, I believe that cultural education, as one of the main tools available to scholars and archaeologists, can in the future decrease the high impact of destruction suffered by the historical remains. Looting cannot be stopped completely because of economic necessity. However, information about objects without provenance, can still be rescued and teaching people why the destruction of these objects may also cause the destruction of their history. If environmental conservationists are making us aware that natural resources are important for human life, then archaeological conservationists should also try to explain the importance of mankind's life and development through material culture.

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Others also shared their personal opinions about looting and looters. Among many others, I thank Fernando Paniagua, Registration Officer of IDAEH; Norberto Tesucún, Museum Coordinator of Tikal National Park; Lic. Mario Mancilla and Lic. Joel Ajxup, attorneys at law; and Lic. Leopoldo Colom Molina, former director of both IDAEH and the Ministry of Culture. Nature conservation scientists Roan Balas McNab, Nidia Alvarez, Julio Morales, Mike Lara, and archaeologist-environmental educator Korina Castellanos; all helped me with important data and personal experiences related to local economic activities and the natural and cultural patrimonies of El Petén.

A special acknowledgment also goes to teacher Neria Herrera and her late husband Antonio Aldecoa, for their confidence and their decision to create the first privately-owned Precolumbian collection open to the general public, at Posada Campamento El Chiclero, in Uaxactún. Finally special thanks to all the local men, women and children who shared their world-views and knowledge about nature and the Maya culture.

Some learning opportunities for me were facilitated through the Instituto Guatemalteco de Turismo (INGUAT), PROPETEN and CATIE-Olafo (NGO's) who hired me for two

weeks each to give classes at Carmelita and San Miguel La Palotada, both of which I had visited before. Prior to this, ARCAS invited me to give a course to the Group of Ecotourism in Uaxactún. Being able to teach and share with the local people opened more doors to communication and confidence. This also meant knowing more about related issues and certain aspects of social behavior. The research process for this study has been very important in the evaluation of the role of the authorities in the conservation of the archaeological heritage. Several preconceptions about the rural looters have been strengthened or "dropped" after getting to know and interview the various people involved.

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Abbreviations

ARCAS: Asociación de Rescate y Conservación de Vida Silvestre (Wildlife Rescue and Conservation Association).

IDAEH: Instituto de Antropología e Historia de Guatemala (Guatemalan Institute of Anthropology and History).

CATIE: Centro Agronómico de Investigación Tropical (Agronomic Center for Tropical Research).

CECON: Centro de Estudios Conservacionistas (Center for Conservation Studies).

CI: Conservación Internacional (Conservation International).

CONAMA: Comisión Nacional del Medio Ambiente (National Commission for the Environment).

CONAP: Consejo Nacional de Areas Protegidas (National Council for Protected Areas).

CPR's: Comités de Población en Resistencia (Committees of Population in Resistance).

FYDEP: Empresa de Fomento y Desarrollo Económico del Petén (Company for the Fomentation and Economical Development of Petén).

INGUAT: Instituto Guatemalteco de Turismo (Guatemalan Tourism Commission).

NGO: Non-Government Organization.

PROPETEN: Proyecto Petenero para un Bosque Sostenible (Petén Project for a Sustainable Forest).

RBM: Reserva de Biosfera Maya (Maya Biosphere Reserve).

SUCHILMA: Sindicato Unico de Chicleros y Laborantes de Madera (Union of Gum Extractors and Timber Workers).

TNC: The Nature Conservancy.