

## **Voices of the Puuc angels: Rural life among the archaeological ruins in the Yucatán Peninsula**

Interviewee: Evan Parker

Interviewer: Alec Clothier, Sam Pack

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**Evan Parker (EP):** My name is Evan Parker and I am a Ph.D candidate at Tulane university anthropology department, I am an archaeologist doing my last field season of archaeological research, based out of here in Oxkutzcab. Got like 6 weeks of excavations pan, followed by a couple of months of lab work.

### **Alec Clothier (AC) How did you get into archaeology?**

EP: It was accidental, I think that it's kind of how it goes with people, how to go in this profession. I always wanted to be a historian since I was a little kid. I wanted to study history, it was because I could go into this civil war battlefield, I grew up in Mississippi, and this battlefields would give this tangible sense right? That you can go and experience it and see this landscapes, and I did not think about it at the time but it's basically like a proto form of doing archaeology. So I go to college and I take history classes and I was like well, I might as well figure out when history happens, so I took an archaeology class with Dr. George Bey, one of the directors of this project. And I think its pretty cool so I take another class and I come down to Yucatan for a few weeks for a quick trip then I am coming down here to do excavations then I am ok, well I guess I will go to graduate school for this. And then seven years later here we are. So yeah, it was kind of an intersection of being able to discover history in a way or rediscover history I should say in a way that historians simple could not.

### **AC: So, at MPARC are you trying to rediscover history?**

EP: It's a tricky term saying rediscover history, right? Because these items that we end up finding have been left behind, and people have known that they've been there basically since there were left behind. So I'm coming here, so saying rediscovery is a misnomer. It's really just having the money, resources and scientific knowledge to pull it out of the ground and adequately document the process of unearthing these things.

### **AC: At MPARC, is your job mainly excavation or do you do more research?**

EP: Archaeologists tent do focus on certain things and I think that I tent do specially more in excavation or some archaeologist might for example due survey go out and map sites other prefer to work on the lab to specialize in stone tools, ceramics that sort of thing. I always have liked to dig. Hacking my way to the jungle has never been really my cup of tea.

**AC: Given that you are someone more interested in this, how did you come to MPARC?**

EP: I had a few options in terms of where I could do my dissertation research. So my adviser at Tulane University invited me to a site that he conducts research in Guatemala. And I went there, and it was an amazing site. They find all these really beautiful stone hieroglyphic texts. They find these extravagant tombs, and it's very interesting archeology. That said, I've been doing work here for a while, and I feel like we were just scratching the surface as to reconstructing the prehistoric record here. Whereas down in Guatemala, I think they've got a little better handle on it. So even the areas that we knew the most about here, I feel like there was still so much more to explore, let alone the periods of time that we didn't know much about, which is what I tend to focus on. So given that, and given how nice the facilities are here, how great the infrastructure is, the relationship that we enjoy with the government, all of these factors crystallized and you just say, well okay, this is a great opportunity for a dissertation. So that's how I ended up here. Obviously I never left. It's really more of what it was like.

**AC: You made an interesting point about the interaction with the government. Can you explore that a little bit more?**

EP: Well, this is one of the things that I think Mexico does really well, and that is that the government has a strong role in protecting a prehistoric and historic sites. And that they have to receive license or permits to excavate or do any type of archaeological research. And it's good! Because I mean you can apply, do the forms, the laws, regulations and that the professionals could over see that. And that leads to good outcomes for the archaeological record. In the United States we can end up having more patchwork of laws and regulations. And this in many cases can lead to the destruction of the prehistoric records. So yeah, it is different from country to country, each country tends to have its own relationship with the archaeology within its borders, and I think that there are not that many other countries that strong relationships to their history and prehistory as a country of Mexico does.

**Sam Pack (SP): As Tomás (Gallareta Cervera) has probably told you, our project has to do with the Puuc Angels if the government ...why did they took this task among themselves, a task that should have been done by the government.**

EP: Part of it might be due to the rural nature of Yucatan. That it's more difficult to protect sites that are located in rural areas. And that often times the people who know the most about the sites, who are most familiar with them, are the people who've been living there all their lives. People who like the farmers. Now does that mean, could the government have been more involved? I think that's beyond the kind of my expertise. Or my knowledge to say. But I think it's a good thing to say that, well these people have an interest in their own history and they're interested in protecting it. And that to some degree they can create a relationship with the government to help

protect this. Yeah.

**AC: So, given that these people have been living here all their lives and they take it on themselves to protect this area, when we look at MPARC as an institution that is representative of México and the US, its kind of an interesting dynamic or mix of you know, how does attitudes become reflected in MPARC research?**

EP: Well, basically all of the research that we end up conducting ends up being submitted to the government in the form of a really lengthy report with a huge amount of text, huge numbers of photos, full of technical jargon in very dry language. That is one facet of how you can project this information to authorities, to the public, however you want. But there are other methods as well. So on the one hand, we have the heavily involved government side. On the other end of it, you have the daily interactions, or the not so daily interactions with local peoples. And how we present that information, how we present these results of excavations, of mapping to them, is another critical component of what we might do here. So for example, our project has had a long relationship with a small pueblo outside of Oxtutz called Yaxachén where a lot of the workers for the site of Kiuic, where they come from. And for a long time, we have tried to integrate educational aspects of our project to them. So basically say we know this is your heritage, this is your cultural patrimony. This is what we've been finding this field season. And often times, it wouldn't even be the American archeologist or the Mexican archeologist who would be leading these tours or informational sessions. It would be the excavators themselves, who are in some ways more knowledgeable than us about how some of these things ... about the archeological record. So, yeah, I'd say that there are different facets or different ways that we can interact with the public, either very dry bureaucratic channels, or these very informal methods.

**AC: From an outside perspective it sounds like the strength in MPARC is through this collaborative research with this outside pueblo. Can you comment more about the relationship the people have here with the indigenous populations of México?**

EP: I think it's a very good relationship. I count the people who I work with as friends. They ask us to go to parties, to graduations. They invite us over for dinner and for lunch. So I think that only viewing it as a cut and dried business relationship isn't correct at all. And this does happen on some projects where there isn't any type of integration between an archeological project and local communities. One of my favorite examples of this was, we had this one undergraduate student who was working on my excavation team, and it was her first season doing archeology, but she made friends with all these Mayan men very quickly. And they heard that it was going to be her birthday on a given day, in this week. And so they end up making her a cake, and then they hike it all the way up this hundred-foot hill with candles, and we have a little birthday party there. And I think it was something that I had never seen before in doing archeology. And I think it really symbolized that deeper relationship.

And I think that's the way it should be, too, especially if you're gonna have a project that ends up being multi decade long, at this point. We're only a couple years out from being here for almost 20 years. So if you don't make those kinds of relationships, first of all I think it's just, you're probably not gonna have a very good archeological project. But second of all, I think you're forsaking some of your responsibilities to the local community in terms of making sure that they're playing one of the more important roles in the unearthing of this data.

**AC: Can you talk a little bit more about the responsibilities as a researchers you have to local communities?**

EP: Yeah, and this is a very difficult question that I tend to have trouble grappling with. Because I'm someone from the United States, basically pure European descent. I don't really have any tangible ties to my heritage. You know, I've never gone to Germany or England and dug up anything related to my ancestors. I've only done archeology in the new world. Which is a land that my ancestors colonized. And spread disease, tortured, enslaved. N still to a great degree kind of enact this asymmetrical power relationship. In some ways, archeology can be viewed as kind of modern day colonizers, I think. The fact that I'm coming here, I'm bringing a bunch of money from this country, and yes I'm investing it in the local community. But I'm also taking this data, and I'll take it back to the United States and to some degree, I'll profit from it. All right? I'm gonna get publications, it might get me a job. All this sort of thing. Now this is nothing new for anthropologists. We've been dealing with this for a few decades now. And it's not just archeologists who've come to recognize this. So bringing that knowledge to mind, or bringing it to bear in this particular case, say where all right, how can I not kind of be a filthy imperialist when I come down here to Mexico? How can I make sure that I'm not pushing out local stakeholders? That I am listening more than I'm talking? And that these communities are adequately connected to their heritage. Not adequately, but to the greatest extent possible. And that I'm just a facilitator of that. That I'm not trying to be a great white savior or something of that nature, right? So it's a difficult kind of exercise. And it requires a lot of reflexivity. As well as hopefully good friends and colleagues who will call you out if you're not being a good archeologist in that regard. Yeah.

**SP: How is that manifested specifically in your own work?**

EP: Some ways this has proven a little bit more difficult for me. Just by virtue of the time period that I'm excavating in. So it's basically a time period from 800 BC to 350 BC. And we consider that to be a period that culturally Maya and we can certainly link it to the classic period. Which is by far the vast majority of the ruins that you see around you, the vast majority of the ruins that the angels, the [inaudible 00:47:04] protect. That's all classic period, right? So creating a relationship between that deep of a past, and the local community I think is more difficult. Especially considering the fact that we only started finding this stuff a few years ago. As far as this particular site that I'm working at goes, it hasn't really lent itself to bringing visitors out

there. So tangibly, I can't say like I've been giving tours to local school children. But it also is three miles down a terrible dirt road as well.

EP: I think a lot of it's going to have to come around in terms of the way that it's presented to the public. All of the excavation data that we've gotten. So we've found some really amazing things at this site. And to say well, all right, how can I responsibly disseminate this knowledge? Well first of all, not just going to run back up to the United States and start shouting from the rooftops that hey, look, we've found this stuff. Instead, I'm going to, well, going to consult with Mexicans first. And hopefully release any type of information through those channels first. To where at least this information is presented as it should be, first of all to a Mexican audience. Now is that a huge amount, or a huge step in terms of acknowledging the torrid past of archeology? Not the best. Are there other ways that I can present this information or disseminate it? Or ensure that it's controlled by Maya people. Well I am all ears. I'll say that. I'll say that. Yeah. It's kind of hard too, whenever you're, I think doing a dissertation and you're a graduate student to kind of juggle all these things as well. Hopefully this'll be kind of more clarified after the analysis is done, and after I can take a step back and say, "Oh, man. All right."

**SP: The greatest travesty, I personally believe, is that that guilt would prevent us from doing anything. And so another way to look at this, and I hope this is my long winded way of asking your thoughts on this position, is that if anthropologists, archeologists, if we, let's go ahead and use the first person plural, if we didn't do this kind of work. The simple fact of the matter is, it wouldn't get done. If anthropologists/archaeologists if we did not do this kind of work, the simple fact is that it would not get done.**

EP: That's true. There is, I think, you kind of have to toe a certain line. Right? The fact that if we're too busy being self-reflective or being afraid to do anything simply because of our past, the fact that we're carrying our past around with us. Well if no archeology gets done, then that's not gonna help anybody either, right? If you want to in some ways reconnect Maya people to their past. Not doing archeology is gonna be an impediment to that. So I don't know. I don't think I've gotten to the point where it's become paralyzing yet. But I am kind of self conscious every day. And it might ... And it can manifest itself in little ways too. The fact of me always getting shotgun in the truck. It's a little tiny thing, right? But the fact that I'm always the one riding shotgun, why should I be the one who gets shotgun? It's a stupid example, right? That it is these little tiny things. And that they might indeed build up to a huge amount of anxiety. And that, yeah, I stress out over do the excavations look good, and this, that, and the other. But whenever you're also stressing out to the degree to which you're treating people with respect, decency, courtesy. It can add up. It can be a burden. But by the same token, I'm here. And I'm doing this archeology. And if I'm not willing to accept that burden, then it's not gonna kind of make me one of those terrible archeologists of the past who did end up just going and stealing people's cultural patrimony? Maybe it's finding that middle ground. As it goes for many things. Just finding that little middle ground there. Yeah.

**AC: Do you think that a lot of archaeologists, especially grad students and new archaeologists, how do you think that most of them have to deal in one way or the other with this anxiety? Do you think that this is a generalized thing for archaeologists and Maya archaeologists in this case?**

EP: I think some folks are a bit more aware of it than others. I think that's one thing that our project does do a better job of than some others. Is kind of promoting an awareness of who we are, who the community is, and what that relationship is between the community and the archeologists. Now there are other projects that don't do this at all. Where the relationship is minuscule, basically. Or it's just not a thing at all. Now as far as Mexicans, or you know, I think that's a more complicated question. I think it depends on the background of the archeologist. Are they indigenous? Were they raised in an urban area? Have they interacted extensively with indigenous people? Do they ... Are there any divides, say, between a Mexican archeologist and indigenous people? And in many cases you'll say that there will be. Say that there will be. I can't speak to how to bridge those divides 'cause, boy, it's hard enough just doing it, being an American, you know? But then you think of like what's going on in the United States, and you say, all right, well you have archeologists who work in say, where I'm from. Mississippi. And there is absolutely no relationship in many cases between indigenous peoples in Mississippi or Louisiana and the archeology that's being done there. And the archeologists aren't necessarily thinking about those sorts of things. And that's partially due to the fact that many of the Native Americans have been removed from those areas. But I think that that ... That there's such a disconnect between archeologists who don't have ties to that heritage. And that just ends up creating this larger and larger gap. Whereas at least, I think you can say, Mexicans have a really strong tie to their own heritage. And at least are going to be a little bit more aware of that relationship between the archeology they're doing, their own heritage. And the background of indigenous peoples.

**SP:: Why would the indigenous peoples care about their past if they have an unprecedented future? How would you respond to that?**

EP: Yeah, I think that's something that I think you see banded about a lot when people talk about archeology. The fact that's it irrelevant in a world where you have huge amounts of poverty. You know, refugee problems, war, diseases. The fact that we shouldn't be wasting our time doing these sorts of things. And I'll admit, these thoughts cross my mind as I spend 60 hours a week staring at ceramic shards, counting the tempering agents in the ceramic shards. And I say, "What is my connection to this? This is totally out of bounds for me." Well, that's just kind of the scientific minutiae, what you're looking at there. And as you begin to assemble those 60 hour work weeks on top of one another, and the data becomes a more clear picture, that's whenever we begin to be able to say something significant about the past. And you say, "Well okay, well now that we can say something significant about the past, where does that lead us?" There's a

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few different directions that we can go with this. Number one, we can utilize that information about the past to enhance the wellbeing of people in the present or future. So one of the things that I like, that I focus on for my dissertation is on the origins of inequality. But we live in a world full of inequality, right? And you maybe ask yourself, you say, "Well, is inequality a natural state of humanity? Are we meant to live with some people wielding power over others?" And the archeologists are in the unique position of being able to say, "Well, this is how inequality develops through time." And seeing how that develops through time, and how people create inequality in pre-history, I think has some implications for how we construct inequality in the present. And the degree to which inequality for example, might lead to the collapse of civilizations. To widespread human suffering, to malnutrition. We can create these links, right? All right, so that's the first way. The second way is the fact that I think to some degree being connected to your history is empowering in and of itself. And that being able to not be rudderless or adrift in an open ocean, being able to tie yourself to the past, I think is good for your family. It's good for your individual wellbeing, and it's good for your community. And I think that archeologists coming in and to some degree helping bridge this gap ... I think that that's one of the things that we can contribute most. And that's not irrelevant. And that's something tangible that archeology can do for the world. And hence, keep doing it. Keep doing it. If we can get those kinds of good, tangible outcomes out of it. Yeah.