ON BECOMING A DEVELOPING COUNTRY ARCHAEOLOGIST

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It was the first day of summer vacation in the small, hilly, town of San Ignacio in the Cayo District of western Belize. The night before, one of my older brothers (I was ninth of 11 children) had suggested that the two of us go and collect potsherds from some Maya house mounds that were located just behind our yard. Like most other 10-year-old Belizean kids in the late 1960s, I knew little of the ancient Maya. Historical instruction on Belize, then known as British Honduras, was limited and mostly addressed the country’s position within the context of the British Commonwealth. What lay beneath all those jungle-covered mounds scattered across the Belizean countryside was, therefore, as clear to me as the dark side of the moon.

Shortly after breakfast, my brother and I grabbed two old machetes that would serve us as excavation tools and headed for the mounds. Once at the site, my brother suggested we begin digging on the side of the smallest structure. Two hours later, we had a bag of potsherds, two obsidian blade fragments, and a broken mano. Once we were back home, my brother took out two small knives, gave one to me, and began to modify the potsherds into small rectangular pieces. These, he informed me, we would glue together with lime plaster and make a small fort. We would then place plastic toy soldiers in the fort and try to blow it up with firecrackers.

Every time I reflect on this first day of my archaeological pilgrimage, I can’t help but think that my career began as an “innocent looter” or a potential “terrorist.” The effects of this first “archaeological” experience, nevertheless, had a lasting and profound impact on me. That night, it was hard to fall asleep. Like the firecrackers going off on our little makeshift fort, my mind was being bombarded by many questions about the people who had built the mounds. How did they make those pots and tools? What did their children do for fun? Where were they now, and why did they leave their home on the little hill behind my parent’s house? Today, as a professional archaeologist, I am still asking these questions, but my journey to attain the academic credential was as circuitous as Santiago’s quest in Paulo Coelho’s “The Alchemist.” In that wonderful fable, Santiago leaves home in search of his “personal legend.” He eventually returns, after a long and adventurous foreign trip, and realizes that his legend was at home all the time.

After completing high school, I had to leave San Ignacio and move to Belize City (70 miles away) to attend one of the only two junior colleges in the country. The selection of available majors at St. John’s College was very limited in the 1970s, so I decided to major in Economics and Politics and to select my electives after meeting with my academic advisor. I did not realize it then, but the stars had begun to align themselves in my favor. My advisor, Father Richard Buhler S.J., had a Ph.D. in Anthropology and he had just convinced the president of the school to offer Introduction to Anthropology as an elective. I signed up and achieved far better grades in this class, and his subsequent course in cultural anthropology, than in any of the required courses in my major. I still recall graduation day when Father Richard came to say goodbye to my parents and me. His final words were, “Jaime, your passion for archaeology far exceeds any passion you may think you have for Economics. You need to seriously consider a career in Anthropology.” I quietly agreed, but Belize had no university at that time and, with 11 kids to support, Mom and Dad certainly could not afford to send me abroad to pursue a college degree. So I returned to San Ignacio and began teaching history at my old high school.

Exactly a year and a half later, I received a letter from Joseph Palacio, head of the Belize Department of Archaeology, inviting me to apply for the post of archaeological assistant. Joe noted in his letter that Father Buhler had suggested he contact me. I was elated. A month later, in April of 1976, I joined Joe and became the junior officer of a two-person Department of Archaeology. Almost a year later, Joe resigned his post and left to pursue a career in cultural anthropology. So there I was, on my own, with little to no formal training in Anthropology, expected to manage the archaeological
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That year, I also “did time” in San Antonio, Orange Walk, and then at Xnaheb, Toledo, with the indomitable and legendary Dennis Puleston. Denny had come to Belize that summer to dive the Sayabmái Cenote. He was looking to see if it contained any ritual deposits. In typical Denny fashion, he had rented several scuba tanks in Belize City and was trying to transport them on a bus to Orange Walk. When the bus driver refused to take the oxygen tanks, Denny called me in Belmopan, imploring that I assist him with transportation. I did, and upon completing his three-day dive he, in turn, accompanied me to Xnaheb to help survey this newly discovered site. It is on this trip that Denny convinced me to apply to the BA program at the University of Minnesota.

Later that same year I met Paul Healy, who was travelling back to Trent University in Canada at the end of his project in Honduras. Paul decided to make a stop in Belize to express interest in starting a project focusing on ancient Maya terrace agro-systems. Neither Paul nor I had the faintest idea that this chance meeting would develop into a very long professional and personal relationship. To this day, Paul continues to be my senior mentor and has contributed more than anybody else to the eventual success of my career. But none of us knew this at that time. Like Denny, Paul encouraged me to pursue an undergraduate degree, and so I applied to both Trent and Minnesota.

Denny’s incredible death by lightning atop the Castillo at Chichén Itzá left me with only the Trent option, and thus in 1978, I began making plans for college in Peterborough, Ontario. Several obstacles, however, had to be overcome to make this possible. First, I had to convince the minister responsible for archaeology to hire a foreigner (Elizabeth Graham) to take over as department head. Secondly, I had secure funds to pay for school. The first was less difficult to achieve; the second proved much more challenging. In the end, I was only able to get a loan to pay for my first year at Trent. Regardless, I decided to make a go for it and hope that, with Paul’s help, we could find additional funding.

On the day of my scheduled departure, Hurricane Greta hit Belize. All flights were cancelled. I had to postpone my departure until flights resumed and I had to help Liz address the destruction at our sites. I arrived in Canada several weeks after classes had started, but was able to catch up. With Paul’s and Liz’s help, I also was able to secure funding for the rest of my undergraduate studies from the Canadian International Development Agency. After completing my Bachelor’s degree, I returned to Belize for two years and continued to work with the Department of...
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During the next eight years, I taught as an Assistant Professor at Trent, and then at the University of New Hampshire (UNH). In the spring of 2000, I left UNH on a two-year leave of absence and headed back to Belize. The government had asked me to direct the development of several large Maya sites as tourist destinations.

That project was as humbling as it was exhilarating, and it continues to be the most incredible experience of my life. It made me realize how poorly our graduate programs prepare us in the fields of conservation and cultural heritage management. I had no idea about lime mortar recipes or the conventions for preserving prehistoric architecture, and I had even less knowledge about how to conserve large stucco masks. The most adequate training I had received to tackle the likes of the 140 to 150-foot tall structures at Caracol and Xunantunich were the summers spent excavating monumental architecture with Paul Healy at Pacbitun and with Dave Pendergast at Lamanai.

Other shortcomings in my academic training also became apparent when I was appointed Director of the Belize Institute of Archaeology in 2003, a post I still hold to this day. Now I have to find ways to establish international bilateral agreements for the protection of our cultural heritage, to liaise with the likes of Interpol in matters concerning the illegal trade in antiquities, to assist Ministry of Education personnel with the introduction of Maya studies in the Belizean curriculum and to establish responsible methods for integrating archaeology and tourism development. In an effort to adequately address these new challenges, I have attended various UNESCO workshops on the management of world heritage sites; seminars that focus on the development of cultural industries; and Organization of American States programs addressing the management of cultural resources in Latin America. In my not-too-spare time, I continue to devote some energy to my own research interests.

The road to becoming Director of Belize's Institute of Archaeology has certainly been long and winding, and while I no longer struggle with comprehending the meaning of words like “diagnostic,” or the significance of ceramic complexes, my greatest daily challenge is to adequately manage the cultural heritage of Belize with very limited human and financial resources. This is the bane of our existence in the developing world. For this very reason, I encourage colleagues in less developed countries to make every effort to continue their education, both formally and informally. I further advise them to seek novel ways to foment collaborative projects with our foreign colleagues. We are, after all, just custodians of an archaeological heritage that truly belongs to all the people in our culturally diverse world.

Jaime At the entrance to Actun Tunichil Muknal (photo by Richard Holter).