

**Chol past ontologies: Social
indigenous Archaeology in the region
of Palenque, Chiapas, Mexico**

Tinker Grant Summary Report
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During the first two weeks of July of the present year, thanks to the funding provided by The Tinker grant, I was able to start the fieldwork for my dissertation. My main objective for this season was to explore the possibilities and limitations for the ethnographical investigation that I want to develop among the Maya Chol people of the Palenque region, northern Chiapas, Mexico. This ethnic group lives surrounded by its archaeological past: the main questions of this investigation are related to the way the Chol people recount their own historical narratives and how these are incorporated into their current situation. I am also interested in their condition within the political, economic, touristic and archaeological landscape of today. I consider that it is very important to establish a dialogue between the archaeological academic community that investigates their ancestors and the modern Maya.

According to the last census by the Mexican Federal Government, there are more than 200,000 people that identify themselves as *wiñiko´b* (meaning men, as the speakers of Ch´ol call themselves). They live in the northern portion of the state of Chiapas, and some isolated regions of Tabasco and Campeche, southern Mexico. The work that I started this summer is located on the *ejido* (communal land) of Adolfo Lopez Mateos, a small town of a little more than 300 people in the municipality of Palenque, very close to the World Heritage site with the same name. Despite the fact that they are likely descendants of the ancient builders and dwellers of today´s touristic landmarks, after a century of nationalist and colonialist politics they have been marginalized from the academic understanding and interpretation of their own past, also from the economic profits that a site like Palenque generates.

My activities consisted of getting familiar with the people of the community, request the authorities for the permission to work there, find a place to live in future ethnographic field seasons, and start to ask to different people what they think about their ancient past. Although the work was very fruitful, I faced some challenges, some related to my skills as an ethnographer, some other with my Ch´ol speaking, as there are many

monolingual people, principally the elders who are the carriers of the oral tradition, so important for this investigation, and some others related to the frictions generated after many decades of a colonial relationship between institutional Mexican archaeology and them.

I was lucky to start my short field season with a friend's wedding, a young Chol married a Tseltal woman from the neighboring community of El Naranjo. It was a great opportunity to introduce myself to all the people from Lopez Mateos, as I did. The event was very important for my ethnographic interests, as both communities have remarkable contrasts: they speak different Maya languages, all the population in Lopez Mateos is Evangelical Christian and El Naranjo is predominantly Roman Catholic, which makes the latter tolerant to many practices that the former is not. There were parties celebrating the marriage in both communities, and the identities of both groups became explicitly contrasted and even contested between them and the rest of the country. For me it was a great time to speak with them about history and ancient traditions, since I can see some similarities in the way they celebrate their marriages and the stories told in Classic period (250-900 CE) monuments with epigraphic inscriptions. Patrilocal patterns have persisted since the ancient times, as it was very explicit in the ceremony and the preparation for it. I also talk with them about ancient feasts, how they share many of the ingredients, and even the terms used to describe them, I had a very positive response in those conversations sharing food and drinks with them.

After the wedding I had to ask the authorities from the *ejido* for the permission to stay in town and to carry my investigation. I had a positive response, although they advised me to explain to the whole community in a meeting what exactly is that I want to enquire and the purposes of my study. In my next travel there I will have to be prepared with a presentation translated to Ch'ol to explain everybody my investigation's methods and objectives. The main purposes of my trip were accomplished, I did prospect my opportunities and make my official presentation as an ethnographer, since some of the inhabitants already knew me, but as an archaeologist. I now know who the best candidates are to be my principal consultants, they are all characters with some kind of connection with archaeology, either its academic activities, maintenance of the sites, or touristic endeavors.