

Chapter 12

Afterword: El Pilar and Maya Cultural Heritage: Reflections of a Cheerful Pessimist

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As we consider the contested landscape of cultural heritage, the facets elaborated in this volume are touch points for profitable discussion: social identity, political claims, national propaganda, ownership, respect, and interpretation. Yet, cultural heritage is fluid and constantly changing depending on the context of space and time. At the regional and global scale, the forces of homogeneity and unity reign, while at the national and local scales, heterogeneity and diversity prevail. With the growing world of tourism, cultural heritage has become a novelty realized through travel to the locale or its virtual substitute through print and moving media. Travel can be a positive opportunity that brings societies together to share common values of culture. But it also can generate tension when cultural values come into conflict. The case of the ancient Maya is significant on this point (Fig. 12.1).

When, in 1983, I first encountered El Pilar, a major Maya center straddling the border of Belize and Guatemala, it was unmapped and unknown to the academic community (the name itself, El Pilar, harks back to Spanish explorations). Of course, it was a recognized place in the local area, one known to have an abundance of water, unusual in a region of absorbent limestone bedrock. There were lumber and chiclero camps at the site, again because of the water. Local villagers who traversed the area were familiar with its geography—hills of covered ancient temples and corozo palms that were exploited for fronds and nuts. The illegal antiquities market had impacted the site: when we mapped it, we enumerated some 65 looters' trenches. But none of the local community or foreign explorers and archaeologists who traversed the terrain aiming for the interior sites—Tikal, Uaxactun, Yaxhá, and Naranjo, all within a radius of 50 km—had discerned the archaeological qualities of El Pilar. At its most vibrant—the period from A.D. 600 to 900—El Pilar had a population of more than 20,000 people, who lived in a mosaic landscape of city homes and gardens. Through archaeology, a cultural heritage that was lost was found. What would be its future? And for which stakeholders? At the threshold of the twenty-first century, do we need yet another Maya temple as a travel destination?

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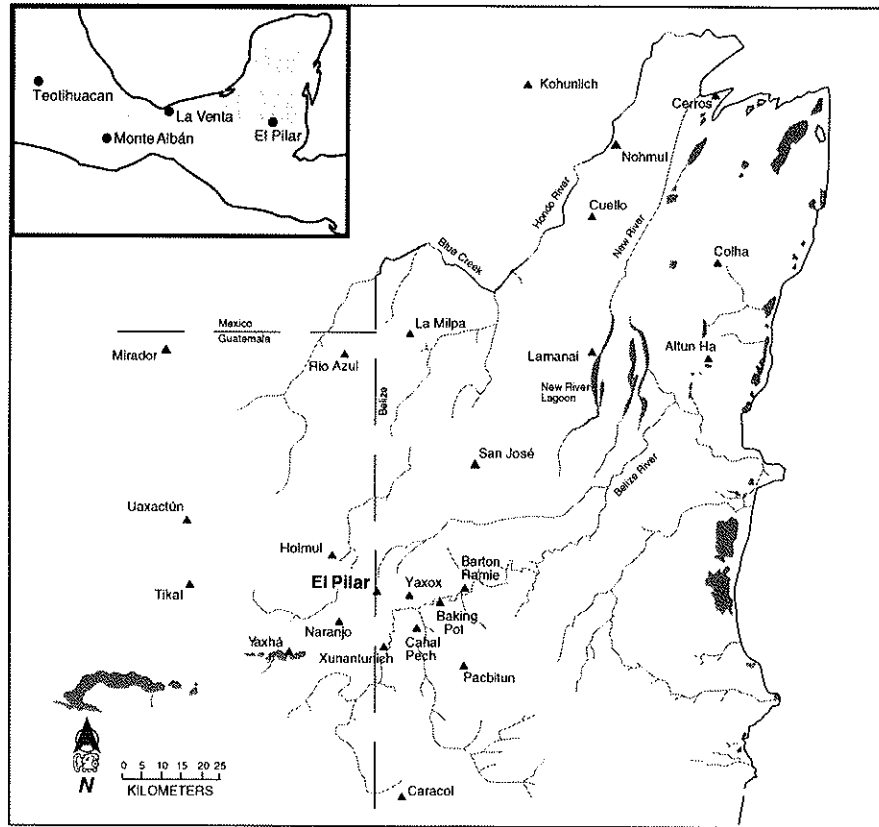


Fig. 12.1 The central lowland Maya area with El Pilar and other major centers located. (Anabel Ford)

A century ago, a romantic interpretation of the ancient Maya was constructed by scholars for Chichen Itzá. This was a time when, worldwide, water was abundant, natural resources seemed endless, and tropical forests appeared as the last terrestrial frontier. The Carnegie Institute of Washington was explicit that Chichen Itzá needed to be promoted as a mecca of travel to arouse public interest and support archaeology (Sullivan 1991:82–84). Across time and space, the promotion of the Maya has become homogenized with the iconic Chichen style, even as archaeologists working in the Maya region find more diversity (Webster 2002). And just as more responsible tourism venues are emerging and the desire for unique destinations is expanding, the Maya tourism fashion has taken the iconic Castillo at Chichen Itzá and made it *the* narrative. So successful is this icon that, in March 2006, a meeting of NAFTA leaders (Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper, United States President George W. Bush, and Mexican President Vicente Fox) used the Castillo at Chichen as the backdrop.

The Maya tourism narrative—emphasizing great temples and spectacular art—leaves little room for consideration about how the ancient Maya prospered within the tropical forest that so challenged early explorers. Yet careful reflection is needed (Ford and Havrda 2006): what of the contemporary Maya who continue to live in their traditional settlements with forest gardens, at the periphery of their developing nations of Mexico, Guatemala, and Belize? Their gardens contain all the dominant plants of the Maya forest, 90% of which are classified by economic botanists as useful (Campbell et al. 2006).

Research has shown that local Maya communities have a perspective on themselves and tourism (Ford 1998) that can correct the impression of foreign visitors that the Maya failed. They offer a link in the same space from the flamboyant prosperity of the Classic Maya of the ancient past to the sustained activities of the traditional Maya households of today. Indeed, rarely is the connection made that the language of the Maya hieroglyphs (Macri and Ford 1997) is the same language spoken by contemporary Maya farmers—a language embedded in the forest and its resources (Atran 1993). Instead, the contemporary Maya are too often cavalierly blamed for the destruction of the Maya forest. How can this paradox be reconciled?

As cultural heritage has been transformed into global currency with tourism, we see more emphasis on political ends, often privileging the foreigner while ignoring local stakeholders. Recently, particularly in the setting of archaeology, there has been an explicit effort to promote public outreach, local participation, and community inclusion in the development of visitor destinations. The power in shaping the narrative needs to encompass multivocality. Since cultural heritage is always fluid and open to contest, it provides alternative space for social, cultural, and traditional practice that can begin to integrate other equally valid perspectives.

Political and national claims are historically rooted, and often entrenched and resistant to change in the short term, but inevitably change occurs in the long term. My project at El Pilar has emphasized the development of a participatory process involving scholars and the local stakeholders. Claims can be negotiated, as my work at El Pilar has demonstrated (Ford 1998). The claims may be found within the context of national and social space, in museums, or in land tenure. How information is generated and distributed impacts the story of a cultural heritage. This is where collaboration is most critical. There are many dimensions to participation and to the evaluation of stakeholders. The importance of conceptually sharing ownership, respecting diverse views, and engaging varied interpretations plays out most clearly in this arena. Fundamental to my project is the recognition that when social identities change, a provision for the performance of identities can embrace the change. One successful venue of the project has been the promotion of traditional village living arts (Ford et al. 2005; Ford 2006).

Of special promise for the future is the concept of Peace Parks (Ali 2007), which has transformed nationalist interests, creating spaces where contest can be conciliatory. The Peace Park initiative for binational El Pilar highlights the ancient Maya site as a shared cultural and natural heritage of two nations, Belize and Guatemala (Fig. 12.2). Today, El Pilar is the heart of the 5,000-acre El Pilar Archaeological

The El Pilar Archaeological Reserve For Maya Flora and Fauna

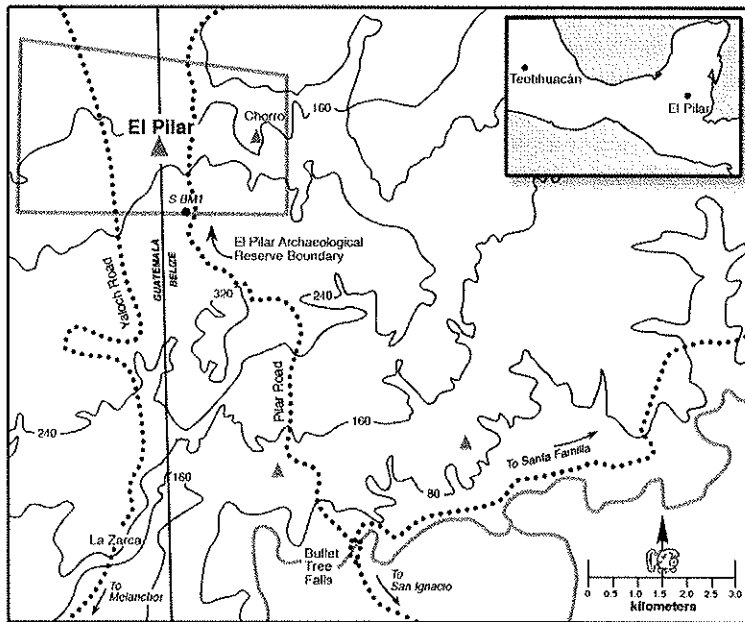


Fig. 12.2 The El Pilar archaeological reserve of Belize and Guatemala. (Anabel Ford)

Reserve for Maya Flora and Fauna, which links Belize and Guatemala and celebrates the culture and nature of the Maya forest. Where the cultural heritage of the ancient Maya is a critical component of tourism in both countries and the natural heritage of the Maya forest is globally recognized as a target for conservation, the El Pilar model can resonate locally, nationally, regionally, and internationally. Simultaneously, the concept of Peace Parks acknowledges the sovereignty of each country while underscoring the regional quality of the cultural and natural heritage of the Maya, both of which transcend national boundaries.

A future without contestation? Difficult but possible. Across the globe there has been recognition of the plight of our natural resources and a push to promote biological diversity. I can envision a similar recognition for the value and qualities of the world's cultural heritage. We are a global society and, as a result, there is a movement toward increasing cultural homogeneity. Awareness of the intangible cultural heritage in language, land use, and other furtive forms provides a platform for celebrating cultural diversity, as validated by UNESCO's 2001 *Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity* and UNESCO's 2003 *Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Heritage*. Humans have occupied the earth for millions of years, and over that course of time we have transformed the natural resources of our space to our needs. Explicit recognition of the value of diversity in our natural heritage is a starting point to promote the values inherent in the diversity of our cultures.

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