

## Indigenous Threatened Heritage in Guatemala

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Victor Montejo

The history of abuse and destruction of ancient Maya heritage in Guatemala started more than five centuries ago. This long and dark night has persisted as modern Maya continue to struggle for their basic human rights and cultural identity. Between 1960 and 1996 many Guatemalan people, especially its Indigenous population, suffered extreme violence at the hands of the government. They were accused of being subversives and supporters of the guerrilla movement. As a result, the Guatemalan military government unleashed a scorched earth policy that destroyed entire villages and massacred thousands of Indigenous people. According to the 1999 report of the Commission for Historical Clarification, otherwise known as the Truth Commission, more than two hundred thousand people died, one million were displaced internally, and a further thirty thousand were refugees in Mexico and other countries. In 1996, with the signing of the Peace Accords, most refugees returned to Guatemala and rebuilt their abandoned communities or were relocated in new settlements. Unfortunately, the most important of those signed, the Accord on the Identity and Rights of Indigenous Peoples (AIDPI), was not implemented. In other words, the roots of the conflict remained unsolved. It was a peace without justice for the Indigenous population, who continue to endure racist treatment and discrimination.

The Maya have been seen as a backward people reluctant to abandon their traditional way of life and thus opposed to progress. For the Guatemalan ruling class and non-Maya population, they are seen as *indios*—backward, dirty, and savage people. Their cultural identity and link to the ancient past has not been fully recognized, since most Guatemalans argue that Maya civilization is already dead and is seen only as a source of archaeological objects that can be looted or used as sites to attract tourists.

This long and intentional process of destruction has been an attempt to eradicate Maya culture and civilization, a process of long-term killing that I have termed *Mayacide*.

In this context, Maya heritage has been threatened, including their traditional dress and their religious practice and ceremonies. Four of the twenty-two Mayan languages are also in danger of extinction.<sup>1</sup> These are prominent examples of the urgent need to protect Maya cultural heritage and to respect the human rights of Indigenous people, as declared in the Guatemalan Constitution. The time has come to treat the country's Indigenous people with respect and to fully recognize them as living inheritors of the ancient Maya culture and civilization. Additionally, the ethics of archaeology must be kept front and center when excavating and handling Maya sites and artifacts in order to finally end the connection between archaeology and colonialism. Considering a living culture as an "archaeological culture" has led to the complicity of museums and colonialism in sustaining the backward position of Indigenous people.<sup>2</sup>

For this purpose, the Maya people should be trained and supported to enable participation in ongoing debates concerning archaeological research and the excavation and handling of Maya remains. To achieve this goal, the international community must apply pressure on nations to comply with existing laws aimed at the protection of cultural heritage.

### **Historical Background**

Maya civilization—the Maya calendar, art, literature, religion, and spirituality—were nearly destroyed during the Spanish conquest and colonization from 1524 to 1821. This destruction occurred not only through the atrocities of war but also through the violent imposition of Christianity on the natives by early missionaries—this genocidal war of conquest, disease, and forced labor dismantled Indigenous Maya populations as they were forcibly separated from their ancient traditions. This is how the Maya hieroglyphic writing system stopped being used and disappeared from memory. Obviously, the native Maya suffered as they watched the destruction of knowledge documented in hieroglyphic books or codices burned by the missionaries. As stated by Bishop Diego de Landa, one of the friars responsible for burning a great number of hieroglyphic books in the Yucatán Peninsula region in 1565: "We found a great number of books in these letters, and since they contained nothing but superstitions and falsehoods of the devil, we burned them all, which they took most grievously, and which gave them great pain."<sup>3</sup>

Those who wanted to maintain the traditional knowledge system were persecuted and tortured to death. By killing the elders who were the last repositories of ancient Maya hieroglyphic writing, the missionaries ensured the extinction of an ancient writing system. In response to these ethnocidal actions, Bishop Bartolomé de las Casas came out in defense of the Indigenous people in the court of Seville, Spain, in 1561, arguing that the war of conquest was inhumane and genocidal.<sup>4</sup> It was during the early colonization of Maya territory that some of the most important hieroglyphic texts to

survive destruction were taken to Europe, where they are now housed in museums and archives. Among these are the three major texts known as the Madrid Codex in Spain, the Paris Codex in France, and the Dresden Codex in Germany.

But it was not until the nineteenth century, when the American explorer John L. Stephens visited the ruins of Quiriguá and published his report in *Incidents of Travel in Central America, Chiapas, and Yucatan* in 1841, that broader interest in the ancient Maya and their cultural heritage caught on. Stephens's account opened the door to and attracted a variety of antiquarians and collectors to Guatemala in the early twentieth century. This army of hungry collectors, as well as Mayanists and other scholars, took away great numbers of artifacts, manuscripts, and other relics of the past. Maya civilization captured the attention of the world as news of the discovery of ancient cities buried in the rain forests of Guatemala, Mexico, Belize, and Honduras spread far and wide, thus exposing Maya cultural heritage to looters and collectors who wanted a piece of this great civilization. Stephens even added to his traveler's account an anecdote describing an arrangement he had made to buy the ruins of Quiriguá for \$10,000. His plan was to have them cut into blocks and shipped to New York, where he would rebuild the acquired ruins. Fortunately for the Maya, the owner of the plantation where the ruins were located, hearing that French collectors were paying more, decided not to sell at that time.<sup>5</sup>

Another classic example of the removal of Maya patrimony by collectors and antiquarians was the extraction of the Popol Vuh, the sacred book of the Maya. It was discovered in the attic of the Santo Tomás church in the Guatemalan town of Chichicastenango and transcribed by the parish priest, Francisco Ximénez between 1700 and 1715. By 1860, the manuscript was housed in the national archive in Guatemala City. There, the French collector Abbé Charles-Étienne Brasseur de Bourbourg gained access to it during his research and collecting adventure. The manuscript was smuggled out of the country, surfacing as part of Brasseur de Bourbourg's collection in Europe and translated into French in 1861. The manuscript was later sold at auction to French scholar Alphonse Pinart, who owned it until his death in 1911, after which his widow again placed it up for auction. This time it was purchased by Edward Ayer, an American collector, who brought it back to the United States and placed it at the Newberry Library in Chicago.<sup>6</sup> Other significant Maya manuscripts and codices may have been similarly removed from Guatemala and the Yucatán.

As for Maya artifacts, these are the types of objects that have most commonly been removed from the country. Today one can find them on display in major museums around the world—not to mention a great number of objects kept in private collections or the back rooms of museums. Historically, the Maya have suffered throughout the centuries the destruction of their cultural heritage, both tangible and intangible. This is no accident. For the *ladinos* (non-Maya) of Guatemala, the Maya are considered backward, inferior people who need to be eliminated or assimilated into Western culture. Yet burning books, decimating ancient sites, and killing the adherents of Maya

culture are acts of ethnocide and genocide. Starting with the invasion of Guatemala by the Spaniards in 1524, this slow extermination of a whole civilization amounts to nothing less than Mayacide.

### **Unprotected Maya Heritage**

The false representation of Indigenous people as “savages” has precipitated programs of assimilation that ignore the status of the Maya as inheritors of an ancient civilization. The Maya people are not taken into consideration when it comes to the protection of their cultural rights and heritage. This grotesque violation was evident during the recent armed conflict in Guatemala, which destroyed the social, cultural, and spiritual fabric and context of modern Maya culture; uses of the Mayan languages, traditional dress, and the practice of the Maya calendar by their spiritual leaders were prohibited.<sup>7</sup> According to the report of the Truth Commission in Guatemala, there were more than two hundred thousand Maya killed and millions displaced, some becoming refugees in Mexico and other countries. In other words, the weight of violence and massacre was placed upon Indigenous peoples because they have been considered second-class citizens.<sup>8</sup>

For the living Maya, most aspects of their ancient and modern culture remain unprotected. That is why we must put pressure on states to comply with existing laws protecting cultural heritage. The Guatemalan government likes to glorify the past, promoting Maya heritage for tourism while rejecting and discriminating against the modern Maya population. Similarly, Maya archaeological sites have been in the hands of individuals who show little concern for the protection of the national patrimony. The smuggling of Maya artifacts continues today, but in a more sophisticated way than in the past, sometimes under the control of drug traffickers and organized crime figures. A recent article in the *Los Angeles Times* sounded the alert about a Maya artifact placed on auction in Paris:

A major, long-lost stone carving of a bird headdress dating from AD 736, made during the classical heyday of the powerful city-state of Piedras Negras in what is today Guatemala, was scheduled to go on the auction block in Paris next week. Long sequestered in a private collection, the magnificent bas-relief carries an estimate of \$27,000 to \$39,000. The sculpture was almost certainly stolen in the early 1960s from the ancient Maya site. It passed through the inventory of a prominent Los Angeles gallery on its way to Paris. Its illicit history is no secret, yet the sale in France is scheduled to proceed in broad daylight.<sup>9</sup>

The looting and desecration of Maya tombs and archaeological sites have caused much damage to the patrimony and history of Guatemala. Every day, Maya artifacts are illegally smuggled out of Maya sites, with no concerted action by the government to stop the activity. Those objects considered Maya have become desirable for collectors searching for more valuable stone or jade items.<sup>10</sup> During the writing of this chapter, on



**Figure 15.1** Polychrome Maya vase sold at Christie's, Live Auction 17456, Lot 129, closed 8 April 2019, <https://www.christies.com/en/lot/lot-6196575>. Image: Private Collection Photo © Christie's Images / Bridgeman Images

9 February 2021, I discovered that another auction was taking place in Paris, with five Maya polychrome vases being auctioned (see fig. 15.1).<sup>11</sup> Mexico and Guatemala have initiated legal claims on these objects.

Despite more than a century of research on the Maya, this cultural patrimony is still vulnerable and exposed to destruction, not only by desecrators of Maya tombs but also by development projects carried out without consultation with the culture's inheritors. Maya archaeological sites are exposed and unprotected in the rain forest of northern Guatemala. Once they are uncovered and shown to the public, the sites are invaded not only by archaeologists, but also by new colonists or immigrants to the region who live near these areas and join in the looting. Even the Guatemalan government, through its Ministry of Culture and Sport, has acknowledged its failure to protect Maya sites, stating that "looters and grave diggers operate in archaeological sites in the country, taking

advantage of the lack of vigilance at these sites. They carry out illegal excavations without the required technology, thus causing great destruction to these sites.”<sup>12</sup>

Each state has its own laws to protect its cultural heritage, particularly First World countries. But in states such as Guatemala, there is little oversight, and the few programs protecting heritage are underfunded. There is little compliance with the relevant law, since those who deal with archaeological sites know how to manipulate it. That is why the smuggling of pre-Columbian objects has continued, and indeed, during the past twenty years, the theft of colonial art and religious objects has also become more common.

The archaeological patrimony of Guatemala also continues to be smuggled across borders by underground criminal organizations. To prevent the illegal trafficking of archaeological objects, in 1997 the United States and Guatemala created a memorandum concerning “Restrictions on the Import of Archaeological Objects from Pre-Columbian Cultures.”<sup>13</sup> The United States has enforced the agreement, but the same should be demanded of each country with which Guatemala has diplomatic relations and agreements.

To this end, the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA), which protects the rights of Native Americans in the United States, should be extended internationally. All states need to give their Indigenous populations the power and opportunity to control and protect their cultural heritage. Guatemala must have a law for grave protection and repatriation of stolen cultural material and heritage. Most museums, including the National Museum of the American Indian in Washington, DC, are engaged in the repatriation of cultural and sacred objects to Native American communities in the United States that can demonstrate ownership.

Unfortunately, the Maya have been relegated to the role of observers and never given the right to participate in decision-making in relation to their cultural heritage. Throughout the centuries, only the mestizo population in power in Guatemala has had the authority to decide on Indigenous issues. Control over Indigenous patrimony by the state is enforced by the 1970 UNESCO Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property, which defines “cultural property” in Article 1 as “property, which, on religious or secular grounds, is specifically designated by each State as being of importance for archaeology, prehistory, history, literature, art or science.” Leaving governments to identify the relevant cultural heritage means that Indigenous people have been marginalized and sometimes denied access to their cultural and ceremonial centers, as is the case for the Maya *ajq'ijab*, or spiritual leaders.

The pre-Hispanic and colonial cultural heritage of Guatemala is surely of common interest to the entire nation's population. Expressions of cultural production and heritage must be recognized and given the necessary protection against destruction and abandonment. Yet there is a lack of political will within Guatemala to devote economic resources for the protection of cultural heritage. The government's reliance on external

investment and foreign support constitutes a conflict of interest in its adjudication between archaeologists and the living Maya. It is no accident that the smuggling of Maya archaeological objects increased during the civil war.<sup>14</sup> How can a people protect their cultural heritage if they can hardly protect their own lives?

To address these abuses and promote the cultural rights of Indigenous people, an “Agreement on Identity and Rights of Indigenous Peoples” was signed as part of the post-civil war accords between the Guatemalan government and the Guatemalan National Revolutionary Unity (URNG), a guerrilla movement that became a legal political party through the peace process.<sup>15</sup> The agreement was anticipated as one of the most important of the peace accords signed, but it has remained a dead letter. There is no interest or political will for promoting any legislation that could help Indigenous people fight for their rights. Although the constitution recognizes Guatemala as a multicultural nation-state with an Indigenous population of Maya descent, the few relevant laws for the protection of Indigenous culture are not enforced. In some cases, legislation exists, but loopholes allow it to be manipulated. For example, Article 60 of the constitution reads, “Paleontological, archaeological, historical, and artistic assets and values of the country form the cultural heritage of the Nation and are under the protection of the State. Their transfer, export, or alteration, except in cases determined by the law, is prohibited.”<sup>16</sup> One clause—“except in cases determined by the law”—is critical. Which law? And who applies it?

The law for protecting cultural heritage in Guatemala must be strengthened. It is also crucial to create new laws pertaining to sacred sites and the freedom of religion for Indigenous people: in the twenty-first century, Indigenous knowledge is still considered a form of witchcraft by some factions of Protestantism. As recently as May 2020, a Maya spiritual guide in northern Guatemala was accused of being a witch and was burned to death for the sin of being a traditional medicine man.<sup>17</sup> We have not come all that far from the criminal actions of the missionaries during the colonization of the Americas.

### **New Problems at Unprotected Maya Sites**

As noted above, the Maya people need to be given more involvement by the state in protecting Maya heritage. The ideology of *Indigenismo* is founded on the colonialist belief that the Indigenous are not capable of doing things for themselves and need a patron or a savior. When will they be trained and called to be part of the project of protecting and promoting their own Maya heritage? We must recognize that people have different ways of expressing themselves, so we must respect their ways of life, including their arts, writing, languages, literature, manuscripts, and religious iconography. This is to be human, to be creative and diverse in order to survive in this globalized world.

In the context of globalization, a major problem has emerged concerning the great ancient site of El Mirador. This Maya city is now under scrutiny because its head archaeologist, Richard D. Hansen, who for thirty years had a monopoly on research and



decision-making at the site, is negotiating funding from private investors to appropriate it against the will of the Maya people.<sup>18</sup> In the name of science and research, he is working with investors to create a hotel-resort in the Maya biosphere, appropriating Maya culture and negotiating it for private development projects without consulting the Indigenous and Guatemalan population. It has been noted that the Maya biosphere must be untouched for the protection of this vast Maya territory and its archaeological sites.

On this issue, lawyers for Guatemala's National Council of Protected Areas (CONAP) "ruled out construction of any new roads, thereby assuaging one of the major latent fears that had caused distrust among roundtable members for years. The 'no new roads' decision was made public and incorporated into the master plan."<sup>19</sup> But this was far from sufficient: to stop the development project altogether, in 2020, Maya organizations in Guatemala sent an open letter to Hansen "regarding his imperialist and colonial drive to expropriate our Territories and Sacred Sites."<sup>20</sup> The issue is now in the US Congress, where Senate bill S. 3131, also known as the Mirador-Calakmul Basin Maya Security and Conservation Partnership Act, sponsored by Senator James Inhofe of Oklahoma, was introduced in 2019.<sup>21</sup>

According to the North American Congress on Latin America (NACLA), "Hansen's proposal is the latest green land grab in the name of conservation, which does not take into account current efforts in the region to protect the rainforest."<sup>22</sup> Other international organizations have also come forward against Hansen's abusive intrusion, including the Association for the Protection of Latino Cultural Patrimony (APLCP), which demanded that Hansen be expelled from the Society for American Archaeology (SAA).<sup>23</sup> In response, the SAA president sent a letter to Senator Inhofe stating the organization's position on this controversial issue: "We join our archaeologist colleagues in Mexico and Guatemala in strong opposition to the program Senate bill S. 3131 would create."<sup>24</sup>

If allowed to go forward, this megaproject would affect not only ancient archaeological sites, but also the ecological and protected area of the Petén rain forest. Some Guatemalan government officials have supported Hansen, and, as noted above, *ladino* scholars and government officials are not committed to the care of ancient Maya cultural heritage. This is a dangerous new model of colonial economic domination and control that will spread unless we prioritize Maya heritage at the pinnacle of Guatemala's national cultural agenda and empower the Maya as actors in the construction of Guatemalan identity. This would create the framework for a national education program and curricula promoting cultural reaffirmation.

Without such a shift, the continual invasion of the Maya homeland and territories will continue. The government has granted foreign scholars and fortune seekers the right to invade Maya sites, disrespect the dead, and excavate buried cities and monuments. Today, hundreds more sacred cities, buildings, human graves, and other burial sites are being discovered with the aid of new technologies, but then left unprotected. Light Detection and Ranging (LIDAR) technology, for example, while an important tool for revealing sites in the jungle, has created many of these problems

when the mapping of new sites then leaves them unprotected, facilitating the illegal activity of looters and grave robbers. Some looters are locals who make their living by digging up sacred objects and selling them to intermediaries who take them to international black markets.<sup>25</sup>

Maya communities are not consulted or involved in archaeological digs in Guatemala. There are several reasons for this omission. The most traditional Maya are cautious and advocate for the historical values of Maya heritage over its monetary worth. Knowing this, some archaeologists opt not to hire Indigenous people, who might question unethical practices in the field. This also sheds light on why traditional Maya voices are not fully represented in any government institutions that grant licenses permitting access for excavations at these sites. In addition, archaeologists often have total authority at sites, bringing commercial investments to Maya-protected lands and territories against the will of the millions of Maya now voicing concerns. And yet the twenty-two Maya linguistic communities have no formal right to participation in the excavation and handling of archaeological finds. With Maya heritage in the hands of those scholars and collectors with access to the sites and seeking artifacts, there is a lack of checks and balances that might otherwise help prevent the theft of Maya cultural objects. Not surprisingly, artifacts are smuggled across borders and mysteriously appear in museums in cities in the United States and Europe, enlarging their collections of Maya cultural objects and relics.<sup>26</sup>

### **Maya People and the Protection of Ancient Maya Heritage**

A proper economic plan is necessary to help Indigenous people, and Guatemala as a whole, successfully protect its cultural heritage. Indigenous consultants must be made part of the teams at governmental, academic, and international institutions dedicated to making decisions about Maya cultural heritage. Local, trained Indigenous experts should be hired, as they are the living descendants of that ancient civilization. There is, then, a lack of government support for the protection of Maya heritage, particularly at archaeological sites recently under excavation.<sup>27</sup> There is currently no monitoring of excavations or their finds by independent observers and authorities.

The protection of ancient Maya sites and the cultural heritage of the Maya can also be promoted by the *ajq'ij*, or Maya priests. They are the community's spiritual leaders, so their presence and activities may enhance protection and vigilance at ancient Maya centers. In recent decades, as more people have moved closer to archaeological sites, some have become *huecheros* (native looters). If efforts are made to prepare and educate people to participate in archaeological excavation projects, recent migrants may become more sensitive to protecting their cultural patrimony.<sup>28</sup>

Another important effort for the protection of Maya cultural heritage is to request that museums stop buying Maya artifacts. In fact, museums must decolonize their exhibits and repatriate sacred objects to the communities of origin. The Maya need a concerted United Nations effort to halt decades of improper and unmonitored digging,

no matter who is doing it, no matter their credentials. Leaders of the Maya linguistic communities should have a voice in any disturbance of their ancient heritage, as well as on any permitted or proposed excavation site. Additionally, cartels are gaining vast incomes from stealing artifacts, as big-dollar buyers from the United States and other prominent countries are allowed to purchase stolen artifacts with few legal consequences. There is no government watchdog group working on behalf of the Maya to guard, or deny access to, cultural heritage sites for the sake of their protection.

The invention of LIDAR is illuminating, but the Maya now know that people with GPS equipment will walk right over to unknown sites, hidden for millennia, and start digging in prime areas, and no one can stop them. How many hundreds of artifacts have been found in the last thirty years? This ongoing tragedy will continue until all diggings require appropriate monitoring and unauthorized diggings are investigated.

I hope this whole project of gathering information can push states to action. In the case of Guatemala and the Maya, there has been a major cloud around archaeological diggings. How can we better address the theft of artifacts, or even improper removal of these objects by licensed archaeologists, without Maya approval? Why is the Guatemalan government so reluctant to address these thefts? What is the extent of the relationship between the government and the *huecheros*, the local grave looters who continue with illegal diggings and have contacts with traffickers and cartels?<sup>29</sup>

### Conclusions

Unfortunately, most Guatemalan *ladinos* do not know the greatness of ancient Maya civilization as their cultural heritage. This lack of knowledge weakens what might otherwise serve as a source of deep pride for the Guatemalan nation. At present, Maya archaeological sites continue to be looted by fortune hunters, including *huecheros* and the drug cartels that have invaded these remote and unprotected lands. Also, the revenues acquired from tourism by the Institute for Guatemalan Tourism (INGUAT) are not distributed to Maya communities, and most tourist businesses are in the hands of the non-Maya, except for those hired as guides at the sites for tourists and visitors. In addition to all this comes the invasion of the rain forest by ranchers and loggers who have threatened the ecosystem and the protected Maya rain forest of El Petén. Great tracts of the rain forest are cut down every year as more people migrate to these areas, invading the territory where the most ancient Maya land and sites are located.

Maya cultural heritage still hidden in the Petén rain forest has benefited from this natural source of protection, remaining undisturbed and secured from illegal excavations. Once a site is “discovered” and digging begins, however, it is exposed to looters, without any oversight of what is being removed—even by archaeologists—due to the absence of a system of proper checks and balances. For example, new LIDAR data showing the immense size of the city of El Mirador have exposed the region to looters, a situation made all the more dangerous by the lack of resources and effective legislation to protect it. There is also a lack of respect for the Indigenous communities living close

to the Maya protected areas, who struggle to maintain their cultural patrimony against newcomers.<sup>30</sup>

As stated at the outset, burning the ancient book of the Maya was akin to incinerating an entire civilization. Burning its knowledge, and thereby erasing a culture or a civilization, is to leave its people naked and devoid of knowledge. In the case of the Maya in 1565, it was not only an ethnic group that was destroyed, but an entire civilization. This was an immense crime, and people have not learned from it as they continue to violate the human and cultural rights of the Indigenous people of Guatemala.

The construction of a major Maya museum in Guatemala to house artifacts, both repatriated and newly discovered, could be a way to rebuild Maya culture in the form of a reparations program. Such a museum could also house the Popol Vuh, if one day it is repatriated to Guatemala to serve as a symbol of unity for all Guatemalans. Yet the failure of many Guatemalans to recognize the greatness of their ancient heritage contributes to their lack of interest in repatriating the stolen treasures now dispersed in museums around the world.

I agree with Simon Adams's assessment that there is widespread agreement among many heritage-associated professionals that "defending cultural heritage [is] not just about preserving statues but also about protecting people."<sup>31</sup> The case of the Maya is a classic example, a conflict that has persisted for centuries and one from which the Maya have not been able to escape, even after more than five hundred years of nightmares and persecution. For the Maya, there must be a strong questioning of the political and ideological role of the state in the construction of an elitist nationalism. After Adams's remarks, Edward Luck went on to say: "It is about a political project, whoever is carrying it out, that wants to identify certain cultures as inferior to others, as getting in the way in the larger nation-building project."<sup>32</sup> The February 1999 report of the Commission for Historical Clarification, entitled *Guatemala: Memory of Silence*, has documented the violations of the state against the Indigenous population that had been silenced for centuries. The recent armed conflict in Guatemala has shown that its Indigenous people are still struggling for full recognition of their rights as human beings, as well as for the protection of their cultural rights and identity as living members of the ancient Maya civilization.

Who finances such criminal actions? National institutions co-opted by corruption, often by outside forces, will not act upon crimes, or will outright ignore them. For this reason, it is important to include Indigenous scholars and trained experts in decision-making about their own cultural heritage, if we wish to protect Indigenous cultural heritage not only from looters, thieves, and organized groups of smugglers, but also from those archaeologists who have been given total freedom to access and decide on ancient Maya heritage, as in the current case involving Richard Hansen. And for this reason, the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act in the United States must be extended to those countries with rich archaeological sites that are subject to

invasion. A law of this kind in Guatemala would help decrease the continued theft of objects from current and future dig sites. Government and university research institutions must have Indigenous scholars to advocate for their Maya communities in the research and excavation of their sites. In this way, their cultural heritage will be afforded greater protections as well as more accurate appraisals in its promotion to the wider world. But these Native scholars need to be critical and to respond to their communities, not to the colonialist agendas established by traditional archaeologists.

Finally, we recognize that Maya resiliency has been fundamental to their ability to survive in the midst of continuous destruction over five centuries: a negation of their cultural identity as descendants of the ancient Maya civilization from which they have been severed for centuries in the attempt to assimilate them into a homogeneous nation-state. While their resiliency is extraordinary, we must not think of them just as victims of the circumstances around them, but as creators and actors in the protection of their cultural heritage in the twenty-first century. Therefore, there is a need to recognize this connection with their ancestors and accord the Maya the privilege of being the living descendants of a great ancient civilization.

#### SUGGESTED READINGS

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#### NOTES

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1. See Academia de las Lenguas Mayas de Guatemala (ALMG), [www.almg.org.gt](http://www.almg.org.gt).
2. Dan Hicks et al., "The Brutish Museums: The Benin Bronzes, Colonial Violence and Cultural Restitution," talk given at a webinar conference uploaded by the Hearst Museum of Anthropology, University of California, Berkeley, streamed live on 12 February 2021, YouTube video, 123 mins., <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Zc-5BnHD8aM&feature=youtu.be>.
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