

# PRACTICING ANTHROPOLOGY

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# TOURISM PARTNERSHIP, COLLABORATION, AND ADVOCACY: MEETING LOCAL NEEDS FROM THE INSIDE OUT

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# COMMUNITY COLLABORATION AND ETHNOGRAPHIC INTERVENTION: DIALOGUES IN THE PISTÉ MAYA ART WORLD OF CHICHÉN ITZÁ

By *Quetzil E. Castañeda*

It would be great if Pisté were to be recognized the world over for its artisanry. To recognize and acknowledge the person—that makes it is the greatest achievement that you would have. It would be magnificent (Juan Gutierrez, Pisté artist, July 8, 1999).

The Ah Dzib Pízté' Project in Maya Art and Anthropology was a three-year, collaborative, team-based study (1997-1999) of the artwork that been invented for sale to tourists at the famous archaeological site of Chichén Itzá, Yucatán, México. In the summer of 1999, the third year of the project, anthropologists and collaborators from Pisté, which is the service center for tourism at Chichén, named this artwork *arte pisteño*, or "Pisté Maya art." The project was one of three within an ethnography field school program that used the nearby Yucatec Maya community of Pisté as the base of operations. Fieldwork training included interviewing, participant observation, staging, installation, and ethnographic exhibitions. This article reports on an event in the 1999 field season through dialogue from the initial organizational meeting held between community representatives and the ethnographers on July 8, 1999. The goal is to inspect specific assumptions about community collaboration and applied anthropology.

## Dialogues on Collaboration and Ethnographic Intervention

This meeting was organized to create greater community support for the project than had existed in the previous two years. We wanted a broader base of support for the exhibitions amongst

other sectors than the artists and artisans themselves. The meeting began with my presentation of the agenda and contexts of the Ah Dzib Pízté' project (see Castañeda 2004, 2005a). Our goal was to contribute to the opening of the conditions of production and commercialization, including increasing the valorization, of Pisté Maya artwork through applied intervention of experimental ethnography. Our methodological principle was to conceive and operationalize fieldwork practices based on everyday processes and dynamics of cultural invention, intercultural exchange, and transcultural interaction. Our strategies included the use of art exhibition, installation of ethnography, multi-media documentation, and publications. A specific objective in 1999 was to collect pieces for a December exhibition in the Art Galleries of a liberal arts college north of Chicago as well as to select five Pisté artists who would participate for the duration of the three-week exhibit.

At this meeting were representatives of the collective landholding body (*ejido*) and civil government, of a cultural center located in Pisté, of the Pisté tour guides, as well as the local news reporter for the *Diario de Yucatán*, and a number of artisans. Juan Gutierrez, an artist, was the first to speak followed by Tomas Burgos a tour guide and newspaper reporter who flowered the ethnography projects with praise and expressed the urgency for the community to continue to collaborate with us. Hilberto Yam, an artisan with whom I have been friends since 1985, eschewed flowery speech and instead spoke in practical terms about the importance of the *concurso* (handicraft competition) format instead of the art gallery style of previous years.

I believe that this new art competition, and thus exhibition, is going



Photo by Jennifer Telesca

*Quetzil E. Castañeda*

to be a success. Previously, 1997 and 1998 the exhibitions did not result in much. When the people [artisans] hear that there is going to be a small competition (*concurso*) with small prize-money, I think that this will capture more interest than in the past. I believe that the artists that have not participated will bring their pieces. It is very important to recognize all the artists that are here in Pisté.

Hilberto, who did not participate in previous exhibitions, sought to influence the group as to the nature of the pieces that would be exhibited. He discussed his own experience as a leader of the artisans and as participant in government-sponsored *concursos* in 1988 and

1994. The format impressed him and he had sought to convince me of its merits for the third Pisté summer exhibition in which he envisioned not only wood sculptures, but additional handicrafts such as weaving and embroidery.

The *concurso* was an ideal form to follow since it provided an everyday model of exhibition that was part of the cultural world of the community. The *concurso* would exemplify our principle of transforming everyday practices of intercultural exchange into experimental fieldwork methodologies. The art gallery style—in which objects are exhibited as art for “the sake of art” to create a primarily aesthetic experience—was too out of the ordinary. On the other hand, the point of the art gallery style was precisely to begin “lifting” the artwork out of the established frameworks, i.e., the institutionalized category and market venue of handicrafts, including a full *concurso*. We wanted to promote artisans to develop their artistic creativity, inventiveness, ingenuity and skills to become, or to approximate, what is culturally constructed in the western tradition as art—as art “per se.” Thus, the exhibition of wood sculptures with other tourist handicrafts with which they are usually displayed and sold in tourism venues of Yucatán peninsula would defeat our long-term goals of increasing the commercial values and aesthetic appreciation of the artwork.

### Judging Maya Art: What is the Role of Anthropology?

The meeting focused on the importance of figuring out the criteria of soliciting pieces for the *concurso*. Underlying this discussion was a tacit understanding of the politics of language and terminology. The Spanish word *piezas* was used to refer to the objects, not *artisanía* (artisanry or handicrafts) or *arte* (art). The term *típica* (typical or traditional) is not used anywhere in the Yucatán Peninsula to refer to handicrafts, in contrast to other parts of Latin America. Word choice and syntax assert pre-given value judgments that are forged by institutional fields of power.

The discussion about the kinds of pieces to be solicited for the *concurso* explicitly entailed the question of how to and who would define the criteria of evaluation and judging the pieces for the competition. Significantly, Hilberto insisted that we, the ethnographers—really, I as director—must determine the criteria of types of pieces and which artists would travel to the US.

The deal is that you need to tell us what should be done. You are in control; it is you who do the exhibition and make the call for pieces, [thus] you need to specify everything. It is you who control this not the artists. The artists are very clear on this, that you give the orders.

This insistence points out two issues.

First, the project was not a “traditional” applied research much less a kind of action research despite *close affinities*. In other words, there are very specific conceptions about the very conditions that make research “count” as applied research that do not undergird the Ah Dzib Pízté’ Project. We, the anthropologists doing the research, conceived, designed and conducted a project in which we asked the subject community to collaborate. We defined a social problem in which to intervene. It was not the case that the community defined the problem and asked us to work on it. This does not, however, mean that the problem does not exist; rather, it points out that this problem is so fundamentally a part of the very structure of the tourism handicraft markets of the Yucatán-Cancun tourism region that it cannot be envisioned, much less addressed, by the Pisté artisans as a problem to be, or that can be, resolved. Further, the artisan community—much less Pisté tourism service providers (guides, taxi drivers, workers, etc.) or the Pisté community—does not form a cohesive, corporate, unified collectivity that could assume the role of controlling the research agenda, process, or results. There is neither client nor cohesive community with which, nor for whom,

the ethnographers are working. Yet, the project is expressly conceived as an applied intervention in which all aspects of the ethnographic research process and products make a difference, a real sociological and cultural difference in the lives of people with whom the research engages.

In view of this social and political fragmentation, Francisco Perez, an archaeologist representing the National Institute of Anthropology and History (INAH), underscored our desire to create a civil association of community support that would take on the task of creating an annual exhibition. He directed himself to other community leaders present:

The proposal is that a type of organization based on all the groups in Pisté can be created to continue the work...[Castañeda] is asking that the groups unite so that an *asociación civil* (self-help organization) for Pisté Maya art can become a reality. This would be the point of creating these criteria. They are laying the foundation, but what they want is that we determine our own criteria in order to standardize these *concursons* so that this event will not just happen this year. Is not this the proposal, that it be continued through local channels?

A few vocalized their support for collaboration. Significantly, those who voiced agreement, such as Tomas Burgos and the representatives of the Agrarian Civil Government (*ejido*), were neither producers nor sellers. Nonetheless, the silence of the invited artisans was less rejection than a realistic understanding of the political culture of México and of Yucatán that would ultimately swallow the efforts that this proposal requires.

### The Politics of Cultural Heritage

Significantly, however, it was the specific sociopolitical conditions of 1999 that propelled the alliances and collaborations that were being formed

that summer. In 1999, PAN sought to privatize national cultural heritage and, in response, INAH heritage workers at Chichén sought me out to help them in their politics, which was both local and national. This collaboration led to interactive history exhibitions of the INAH workers and the reconstruction of Chichén in 1998 and 1999, as well as a dissertation on the privatization of archaeological heritage (Lisa C. Breglia, *Docile Descendants and Illegitimate Heirs*, Anthropology, Rice 2003). In turn, the Chichén INAH gave material support to the exhibition. This collaboration was fueled by divergent motivations and interests that nonetheless converged in exhibition.

The 1999 exhibition also benefited from events the previous year. On the third and final day of an ethnographic exhibition in 1998, we discovered our interactive history exhibit had been displaced from Town Hall by the live history of mayoral elections. The researchers, therefore, dedicated themselves to documenting the election during which the winning candidate—an artisan and old friend—orchestrated an attempt to expel “foreign” anthropologists who were interfering with México’s political process. A year later, Alfonso May, the PRI mayor of Pisté, *dio vuelta a la tortilla*—“he turned the tortilla over” (slang for “being two-faced”)—and actively supported our exhibition project. The new mayor needed peace, cohesion, and productive good will among the community factions that had fought so bitterly the year before. During our 1999 collaboration, Alfonso and I had opportunity to reminisce about our friendship and the old days of the artisan invasion of Chichén Itzá in 1985 (Castañeda 2005b). As if he had not threatened to have the students and me jailed and thrown out of the country the year before, we recalled how he taught me Maya and explained the conflict between artisans and the INAH workers at Chichén when I would go “hang” with him (i.e., do participant observation).

These contextual elements illustrate the absolute contingency of ethnography.

Applied anthropology and action research takes place in the presupposed condition that the communities or clients have attained a high degree of corporate-ness or solidarity such that they can explicitly define and express a socio-cultural problem as issues that require intervention by outsider ethnographers and professional ethnography. But such solidarity and corporate-ness does not always exist or only fleetingly exists in momentary conjunctures. The experimental ethnography developed in this project actualized “applied/action” research objectives without the solidity of these fundamental conditions of possibility (Castañeda 2005a). Experimental ethnography—in which the “experimental” is based and defined in terms of fieldwork, not representation—therefore disturbs the boundaries of our pre-given, reified separation of “applied” and “pure” research in ways noted by Paul Doughty (2005 Malinowski Award acceptance speech).

The second issue raised for debate by Hilberto’s insistence on the ethnographer’s control of judging was the specific norms for the inclusion of artwork. Hilberto at first expressed the desire that the exhibition should only exhibit *originales* (originals) from peninsular Yucatán, in particular from Chichén, and not include “invented pieces.”

It is very important that the judges base their evaluations on the *originalidad* (originality) of each artist. This competition here is not going to allow just whatever piece. For example, if just any person that is selling in the streets is allowed to enter the competition then many artists are going to participate with figures or pieces that are *inventadas* (invented). Thus, it is necessary to define the *explicación* (explanation, norms) by which the works are going to be judged. If you are thinking of selecting a few *artistas* (artists) from Pisté—[well,] we are many. But to organize a gallery showing in the United States I think that it would be much better if you solicited artists that do *piezas originales*

(original objects or works) that are [from] Chichén. This would be a magnificent idea.

Despite his advocacy of artistic originality *and* originals, he was also very clear that this would therefore include pieces that were, as he expressed it, “ugly,” such as the jaguar and Chac Mool. Why are these ugly? Because they do not sell!

In terms of the most pretty pieces, we have figures from Palenque that are very unique and with a lot of decoration. But, to represent our community, [the pieces] would have to be from our archaeological zone of Chichén, because we represent what is Chichén Itzá. We do not represent Chiapas, Uxmal, Coba. Someone could make a Chacmool and you might think it is very pretty, but we [artisans] are fed up with the Chacmool. There is a meaning to the Chacmool which is that it is original to Pisté. The jaguar is not pretty. Nobody buys it. Nobody makes it because it does not have any decoration.

Thus Hilberto’s aesthetic judgment is not Hilberto’s per se, but is rather reported to be his empirical understanding of the tastes and aesthetics of the consumer-tourist. This knowledge, he implies, is apparent to all artisans.

Hilberto was concerned that the gallery exhibition in the United States had to have originals because it would not be fair, correct, or just to exhibit invented pieces: “I repeat, I believe in the United States we cannot lie that such and such a piece is in the codices.” He felt it wrong to lie to the tourists that invented figures had any connection to the ancient traditions of material culture. Significantly, his argument was for criteria of authenticity in which identity [“we represent Chichén”] is defined and actualized by archaeology via implicit criteria of accurate replication and legitimate referencing of the corpus of the ancient Maya art tradition.

Several protested Hilberto’s perspective. Miguel Güemez, a leader of the

opposition *Partido Acción Nacional* and then a county councilman (*regidor*), proposed a different view, which was also held by other non-artisans present. Miguel asked:

What is being sought? The original Maya replica, or the creation of the artist? I have noticed that the artisans here create a lot of things by combination... They combine two, three, even five replicas [in a single piece]. Of course there is a lot of variation in the amount of details that they use, but the artist always aims to create something, to make something uniquely theirs. They try to be like the Mayas who did not copy anything. It just came to their head. They created pieces. The artist, I believe should also create something uniquely individual.

Despite this and similar comments by other non-artists, Hilberto was adamant that the ethnographers—as curators, collectors, critics, and consumers of *arte pisteño*—should determine the criteria of value, aesthetics, judging, and exhibitionary display. This pragmatism is not an abnegation of their agency or values, but is rather rooted in culturally available notions of collaboration. It demonstrates a sophisticated art-savvy since the Pisté artists/artisans know that the very condition of possibility for handicrafts to become “art” necessarily requires the consumer-patron to intervene, not only in the marketing and consumption of the objects, but in the very production, even aesthetic design and conception, of the artwork.

### Transcultural Exchange: Applied Ethnography and Invention of Culture

Responding to Hilberto, I reiterated that we wanted “to promote both the authentic creation of unique work by the individual and the practice of making replicas.” Francisco Perez of INAH identified the underlying

logic of our intervention as applied ethnography.

I believe this is very interesting because each causes the evolution of the other. If originally the artists, the artisans, began copying to produce pieces, with time these images became monotonous. Here begins true creation, when the artist makes a jaguar, a simple jaguar and does not apply the features of a single form but modifies the elements... I believe this is an evolution. *Here the anthropologists seek that in a given moment the artists will begin to further evolve this aspect.* It is interesting that we say that the artists “copy.” I think that we have to reconsider to what extent they copy, because... we have all seen the sculpture of the Corn God [but] if you try to find this representation in the ancient Maya corpus, it does not exist as such. This means that the first person that carved that sculpture was already creating a unique piece which was later mass reproduced. *Thus, [the artists] combine elements that represents all of Maya civilization.* But we use this [term] particularly [referencing] the Maya today and not the prehispanic Maya. *We are talking about the Maya that are right now living and that are transforming and creating their own proper culture [italics added].*

The Pisté artwork, from this viewpoint, is an ongoing invention of Maya culture or, as Perez expressed, civilization, in which the artists are truly already Maya evolving and inventing the Maya again. In this dynamic, experimental ethnography is an applied project that intervenes in cultural invention with specific, material goals of promoting the art and artists of Pisté and with intangible goals of shifting habits, attitudes, and practices. The dialogues, presented here in illustration of this applied experimental ethnography, were a continuation and renewal of old and emergent transcultural collaborations.

The 1999 Pisté exhibit gathered greater and greater momentum and resulted in something of a festival with local dance and music groups joining the opening and closing days. Later that year, five artists—Hilberto Yam, Jorge Pool Cauich, José-León Tuz Kituc, Wilberth Serrano Mex, Juan Gutierrez—survived Chicago’s climate to install the first exhibition in the USA of contemporary/modern Maya art from Chichén Itzá. Today, these efforts remain unique successes that many artisans and I still seek to repeat and improve.

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