

TCD Field Research Grant – 2019
Patrick Hunt

Comparing Afro-Mexican and Yucatec Maya Agro-biodiversity Knowledge and Practice.

Location: Dzoncauich, Yucatan, Mexico

Dates of funded research: June 20, 2019 to August 8, 2019

Summary of activities

Upon arriving in Dzoncauich, I met with the mayor who was excited by my proposed activities. The mayor introduced me to Pablo, who committed to be my guide while I was there. Pablo introduced me to people and helped translate any Yucatec Mayan. Pablo and I started going around and doing freelists with people, asking them “Please mention every edible plant that you know”. With some informants, we conducted interviews and I asked questions about changes to diet and medicine, where people learned about plants, and important uses of the plants.

The enthusiasm of informants varied. Quite a few people were very excited to tell me about plants and wanted to go out and collect examples. Others gave me long lists with hundreds of plants names, meticulously moving through each category- herb, fruit, vegetable, etc. Others would list off what they had growing in their milpa at the moment and some fruit trees they had around their house but didn’t want to go into much more detail. People prepared medicines for me to try. I got to tour some gardens and was invited to eat and chat a handful of times.

I spent a lot of time with Pablo’s family and ate almost every meal with them. This gave me the opportunity to participate in some daily tasks- gathering firewood, cooking, selling *tsolitos* (squash) door to door. It was interesting to see the family dynamic, especially among generations. Many younger people in Dzoncauich (people in their 30s and 20s) work outside of the village or have studied or lived in other places. The youngest, children and teenagers, all seem to want to study in Merida at some point and maybe move somewhere else.

I also was able to participate in some important activities: I visited a few milpas and talked to their owners, I did some beekeeping with Pablo and his son, and, in my last week there, I was able to attend some of the gremios- a Catholic religious festival that has a focus on sharing food. I had quite a few interesting conversations with Pablo about his transition from a *milpero* to an *apicultor*.

One major hurdle I had to come was reposing my research questions. My original intent was to compare plant use and knowledge between self-identified Afro-Mexican and Mayan residents of Dzoncauich. This was based on census data that stated that Dzoncauich had a 17% population of Afro-Mexican identifying individuals, which is very high for Yucatan. However, upon arrival, I encountered no one who identified as Afro-Mexican, at least on the survey I conducted. It is still a mystery to me why the survey data is incongruent with my findings.

Future recommendations for Tinker:

I don’t have any recommendations in particular. The only strong feeling I had is that I wish this were just my initial visit. I made some strong connections and was feeling well integrated into the community when it was time to go. But that is just the nature of the Master’s program I am in. If this were PhD research, it would be very different.

I will first use my research to write my thesis. My thesis will be a descriptive thesis, examining life in a Yucatec Mayan village in 2019 with all the external market influences, shifts in traditional practices, and change in knowledge. I will engage with political ecology and agroecology literature to contextualize some of these changes. I will plan on presenting my research at any relevant conferences. I will also definitely go back and visit Dzoncauch. I have already been invited and value the connections I made there.







