

# The *Museo del Niwan Nha* in Yalambojoch, Guatemala

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**Abstract:** A community museum is currently being established at the Niwan Nha Cultural Centre in the Guatemalan village of Yalambojoch. Through a collaboration with the Ethnologisches Museum Berlin, copies of stone sculptures collected for the museum by Eduard Seler in the 19th century at neighbouring archaeological sites are helping residents to connect with a local past that has been locally lost to collecting and looting activities.

[*Yalambojoch, Huehuetenango, Guatemala, archaeology, Chuj Maya culture, community museum, stone sculptures, plaster casts*]

## Introduction

In the late 19th century, archaeological sites in the Chaculá region, located in the northwestern corner of the Guatemalan highlands, were the focus of two very different German collectors: Gustavo Kanter and Eduard Seler. Kanter had owned the Chaculá *finca* or farm since the early 1890s. The presence of several archaeological sites on his land seems to have fuelled his desire to collect antiquities on his *finca*, turning him into an amateur archaeologist. Seler, pioneering scholar of Mesoamerican Indigenous cultures and employee at the Königliches Museum für Völkerkunde in Berlin (today:

Ethnologisches Museum Berlin), Germany, visited the region with his wife Caecilie in 1896 for the purpose of researching and collecting antiquities (Seler 1901). The couple's stay lasted less than three months, enough time to assemble an extensive collection that was subsequently sent to the museum in Berlin, where it is preserved to the present day. Later, and likely inspired by the illustrious visitors, Kanter went on to establish his own archaeological museum in Chaculá. At the time, it came to be considered one of the most important in the country (Recinos 1913:205). However, political problems forced Kanter to leave his *finca* in 1915 (Navarrete 1979:14–15) and flee to the nearby Mexican state of Chiapas, where he died around 1920. The museum and its archaeological collection were vandalized, looted and forgotten for decades, until 1975, when the Guatemalan archaeologist Carlos Navarrete documented its pitiful remains (Navarrete 1979).

In 2013 the Proyecto Arqueológico de la Región de Chaculá (PARCHA) was established to locate and document the archaeological sites originally reported by Eduard Seler (1901), as well as conduct new investigations in the region. A total of six field seasons have been conducted between 2013 and 2022. Together with a study of the materials in the Seler collection of the Ethnologisches Museum Berlin, Seler's studies in the region were successfully contextualized (Wölfel 2022). During the discussion following a presentation of the fifth season's (2018) research results in the village of Yalambojoch, the idea of establishing a community museum emerged. Although originally the interest was specifically in housing and exhibiting archaeological objects found during excavations at the sites around Yalambojoch, in later meetings with interested community leaders additional themes were identified, such as traditional life and the civil war, which was particularly brutal in this area during the 1980s (Falla 2011). Especially with regard to the latter, the museum has the potential to preserve the historical memory of these events, which is very present among village elders, for future generations, considering that there is no formal place of memory for the victims of violence, neither in Yalambojoch, nor in nearby San Francisco, the site of a horrific massacre. Additionally, the donation in 2022 of a collection of Maya textiles from different parts of the department of Huehuetenango complements the themes proposed by the community.

Concerning the subject of archaeology, it seemed logical to establish a connection between the museum in Berlin and the new community museum, given first that the study of material and immaterial cultural heritage is of fundamental importance for anthropological museums and that the Berlin museum possesses an extensive collection from the Chaculá region. A first visit by conservator Kai Patricia Engelhardt, representing the museum, took place in February and March 2020 (Figure 1) at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, which prevented the project from continuing immediately.

As a site for the museum, the Centro Cultural Niwan Nha ('Big House' in Chuj) was chosen, a complex of several buildings that from the 1990s onwards were built atop a hill on which the Guatemalan army had established a military post during the 1980s. In fact, the army had bulldozed and removed a few metres from the top of the



Fig. 1 Meeting at the main hall of the Niwan Nha, 1 March 2020, photograph by Julián Pérez Camposeco

hill, where a small archaeological site was located. Several objects from the remains of this site, found during the construction of the Niwan Nha, have been preserved and will be exhibited in the museum.

Funded by private donations from Sweden, and represented in Yalambojoch by Per Bylund Andersen, the NGO Colchaj Nac Luum ('Land and Freedom' in Chuj, the Mayan language spoken in the region) has inaugurated several projects over the years: a kindergarten (1997), a library (2000), a textile workshop (2003), a main hall for events (2008) and above all, since 2006, a secondary school (*Instituto Básico*). Due to the increasing importance of migration to the United States in the past fifteen to twenty years (see also Falla and Yojcom 2012), the interest of young people in secondary education has constantly decreased, leading ultimately to the closure of the secondary school in 2018. The former school rooms were subsequently repurposed for the museum. At the same time, the library was relocated to one of the rooms in the same building. With these changes, the Niwan Nha is positioning itself more towards becoming a cultural centre.

Today, the civil association Awum Te' ('tree planters' in Chuj), founded in 2003, which works in the fields of culture, education, the environment and community devel-

opment, owns the centre and the museum. Members constitute the majority of Yalambojoch's residents. All maintenance and future development of the museum project will be organized and carried out by the association. Revenues generated by timber production from 103 hectares of forest, owned and managed by Awum Te', ensure the long-term financing of the Centro Cultural Niwan Nha, including the museum.

At the end of 2021, Ulrich Wölfel's parents, the late Dr. Horst Wölfel and Karin Wölfel, made a generous donation in support of the museum, covering the costs of renovating the rooms and purchasing furniture and basic equipment for the new museum. Additionally, a project was initiated to compile the history of Yalambojoch, as told by the villagers, to provide a counterbalance to what is written by anthropologists and historians. The results will be published in the form of a book.

With this support, work began on renovating the secondary school rooms in 2022. Two rooms house the permanent exhibition, one room serves as a library, and a large room at the entrance to the building is being used for temporary exhibitions and the projection of videos and movies. In the latter room, at the end of August 2023, a temporary exhibition, 'Agua, Territorio y Conflictos: Mapas históricos de las cuencas de los ríos Nentón–Lagartero, Pojom–Santo Domingo e Ixcán', prepared by the Cofradía Cartográfica Cuchumateca, was installed and inaugurated.

The present article has two main goals: first, to present the case study of the Yalambojoch community museum as a collaborative process; and second, to foreground the possibilities of using replicas of sculptures in working together with local communities on key questions of decolonial museum practice. We show how in the present case replicas with a complex provenance history can interact with oral tradition and memory, thus creating a dialogue that ultimately has the potential to help a local community in its efforts to re-discover the richness and diversity of its archaeological heritage.

## The Collaborative Project

Within the framework of a cooperation project between the Ethnologisches Museum Berlin and the Museo Comunitario de Yalambojoch in Guatemala, a small archaeological exhibition was designed for which three replica sculptures were sent. This project is an example of the importance not only of replicas in museum practice, but also of the decolonization and diversification of museum practice pursued in the 'Collaborative Museum' (CoMuse) initiative. In addition to the exhibition, the project also includes the integration of the conservation knowledge and experience of Kai Patricia Engelhardt, the conservator from the Ethnologisches Museum Berlin.

The installation of the exhibition, together with the inhabitants of Yalambojoch, took place during August 2025 (Figure 2). Two of the replicas were mounted on wooden pedestals, while a third, due to its flat shape, was hung on a wall. The exhibition graphics, produced in Berlin, include three large banners documenting the journey of



Fig. 2 The inaugurated exposition with plaster casts and banners, 27 September 2025, photograph by Ulrich Wölfel

Eduard Seler and his wife Caecilie Seler-Sachs to Yalambojoch and the archaeological significance of the replicas. These copies are complemented by a table supporting a glass case with original objects recovered during construction of the school houses in the 1990s, with additional pieces coming from different parts of the community. Placed on a separate wall is a collection of photographs from the 1980s, made by Swedish photographer Anette Palm Wigart, showing the inhabitants of Yalambojoch in exile during the civil war.

A key component of the project is the integration of the local community in the exhibition process. The inauguration of the exhibition took place on 24 August 2025 (Figure 3). A local band invited participants to enjoy the music and dancing. After a short welcome address by the institutions involved in the museum, the *rezador* (traditional “prayer maker”) of Yalambojoch, Pedro Lucas Jorge, performed a ceremony praying for the well-being of the community and especially the success of the museum project. During the short guided tours that followed, visitors were excited to see the fruits of all the work. Younger visitors in particular showed great interest in the pre-Columbian objects. In the future, workshops are planned to elaborate didactic materials, train visitor guides and help expand the exhibition with local collections.

In addition, based on footage recorded around and during the inauguration, project documentation will be created, which will be exhibited in both Berlin and Yalambo-



Fig. 3 Inauguration of the exhibition, 24 August 2025, photograph by Erasmo Josué De León Velásquez

joch to show the development of the project and the views of the local community. The presentation of the project at the Humboldt Forum in Berlin will be an integral part of the cooperation. At the media station ‘Communication’, the project will be presented in the form of photographs, short films and interviews with the participating community members in order to make the intercultural exchange and the creation of the exhibition accessible to a broader public.

## The Sculpture Replicas

The selection of three sculptures to be sent to Yalambojoch as replicas was made by Ulrich Wölfel, based on his provenance research on the Seler collection. During his stay at Chaculá in 1896, Seler had made paper moulds (for the technique, see e.g. Borchardt 1911) of thirteen sculptures, seven of which represent pieces that he could not take to Berlin (these either remained *in situ* or entered the Kanter collection) and six corresponding to objects considered particularly valuable, which, in addition to being sent to Berlin, received ‘backup copies’ due to the long and dangerous journey

(Wölfel 2022:256–258). Once in Berlin, the Königliche Gipsformerei (Royal Plaster Workshop) made moulds to produce the casts. These were made available for sale to the interested public (Generalverwaltung der Königlichen Museen zu Berlin 1902:98), as well as being sent to other museums (e.g. the American Museum of Natural History in New York).

The selection made for the Yalambojoch museum reflects (a) different types of sculptures (ancestral figures, relief discs, stelae with hieroglyphic inscriptions) and (b) different biographies of the original objects (loss in Guatemala as part of the Kanter museum; loss in Germany during World War II; original preserved and on display at the Humboldt Forum in Berlin). The two objects whose originals have been lost are of particular importance, as the preserved copies take the place of the originals, at least from the point of view of archaeology and museology. It is important to note that none of the sculptures come from Yalambojoch or its immediate vicinity (stone sculptures from sites near this village are unknown), but from the nearby (~14–18 km in a direct line) archaeological sites of Tres Lagunas, Casa del Sol (north of Quen Santo) and possibly Quen Santo (the Sacchaná stela was found by Seler in a secondary, modern context). Thus, the museum, being the only one in the area, fulfils a regional function in its efforts to preserve and promote the history of the Chaculá region.

In collaboration with the Gipsformerei der Staatlichen Museen zu Berlin, two plaster copies were prepared, painted in colours similar to the original objects. The third replica, the Sacchaná stela, is an excellent example of the use of digital reproduction techniques. As for technical reasons it was not possible to use the moulds in the Plaster Workshop, a different process had to be employed for this object. Fortunately, the University of Bonn's 'Text Database and Dictionary of Classical Mayan' project had previously scanned the stela at the Humboldt Forum in Berlin. Using the resulting model, a 3D sand print was made. This technology permits the reproduction of complex structures in great detail, giving them a realistic texture. The print was subsequently hand-painted.

It is essential to stress that the collaboration with the Ethnologisches Museum Berlin, although physical objects have been sent from Berlin to Yalambojoch, is not a restitution, but rather part of an effort to recover, preserve and strengthen the historical memory of the Chuj people. The replicas complement the original objects on display at the museum, thus showcasing the great variety of archaeological objects at the regional level. In addition, the context of the extraction from their places of origin tells the story of the 'Liberal Reform' of dictator Justo Rufino Barrios (President of Guatemala, 1873–1885), which caused the largest expropriation of Indigenous communal lands in the country's history, opening the way for the establishment of *fincas* in places where Indigenous villages had previously existed.

## Memories of the Sculptures

The looting and subsequent dispersal of objects from the Kanter collection resulted in the loss of a large part of the formerly extensive corpus of stone sculptures in the region. Today, only nine sculpture fragments from the Kanter museum remain at Chaculá (Wölfel 2022:1, Fig. 1.11), in addition to a few more fragments at the site of Quen Santo. While the inhabitants of Yalambojoch frequently find archaeological objects such as pottery vessels, obsidian blades and stone tools in their fields, during the construction of houses or during occasional explorations of local caves (the same applies to human remains), stone sculptures are a rarity that evoke feelings of surprise, curiosity and in some cases memories of times past.

Although the Kanter museum in Chaculá had disappeared many decades ago, some of the inhabitants of Yalambojoch still remember the house that contained the stone figures, located near the old road to Nentón that passed by the main house of Finca Chaculá. As a young man, Pedro Lucas Jorge saw the sculptures:

I think I was twelve, fifteen years old when I was there at Chaculá with my late father. We always looked at stones like this one [points to the copy of the ancestor figure], but they are no more than just stones, but they have figures of people. And there are quite a few, maybe eight or ten, just like this one. But who knows if they are still there or if they have been taken away, who knows how that is? Like this Gustavo Kanter, he said that previously the land was his, with the land of the Laguna Brava, it was his, he said. Well, since they are German people, who knows where they come to another country to invade our place. But those from El Aguacate [neighbouring village] fought him, so they say, [and] evicted him, and he went somewhere else, to the state of Chiapas, Mexico; who knows where he went. (Interview with Pedro Lucas Jorge, Yalambojoch, 26 February 2025)

The ancestor figure was already at Finca Chaculá when Seler visited the place (Seler 1901:Plate VIII) and was later found in Kanter's museum, as evidenced by a photograph taken by his son-in-law, Gustavo Kaehler, before 1915 (reproduced by Burkitt 1924:138). Furthermore, we know that it remained in the museum building after the looting that took place that year, thanks to a photograph taken by Franz Termer in February 1926 (Photographic Archive of the Museum am Rothenbaum – Kulturen und Künste der Welt, Hamburg, Germany), whereas in 1975, when Carlos Navarrete documented the remains of the collection, it was no longer there (Navarrete 1979). It is not clear whether Don Pedro could have seen it when he passed by the house with the figures.



Fig. 4 Inspection of the crates with plaster casts, 26 February 2025, photograph by Ulrich Wölfel

## Discussion

During a meeting at the museum on 26 February 2025, in which several members of Awum Te' involved in cultural issues participated, an intense discussion developed about the importance and significance of the sculptures sent as copies from Berlin (Figure 4). In addition to the feeling of happiness of having received objects that have no parallel in the archaeological remains with which the people of Yalambojoch are familiar, a sense of loss and of a lack of knowledge was noted. The loss of the objects was attributed to the little interest in these kinds of objects shown by previous generations of people from Yalambojoch. It was further noted that archaeological materials, due to centuries of Christianization efforts, no longer play a significant role in traditional religion, as their significance is largely unknown today. The lack of interest in history was also attributed to the focus on the daily chores of peasants and farmers. However, the arrival of the copies from Berlin immediately sparked fresh interest in the pre-Columbian culture of the region and pride in being part of Mayan culture. Comparisons were made with the sculptures on display at the nearby archaeological site of Chinkultic (Chiapas, Mexico), which is open to the public and is well-known among Yalambojoch's neighbours. While in Mexico ruins are seen as something foreign, the new exhi-

bition in Yalambojoch has the potential to change this feeling. As Pascual Gómez Pérez puts it, 'this speaks of us [...] it is something that also allows us to know our history'.

In a country where Indigenous people have been historically exploited, plundered and discriminated against, and where racism still prevails, it is vitally important to recognize that Indigenous people have a history of their own. This history is still hidden, yet it is very powerful in the memories of the people, being preserved in their language.

In contexts where discrimination has penetrated to the bone, it is preferable to deny or hide one's own history. It is our responsibility to give back a little of what has been taken from the Indigenous people. The exhibitions in the museum contribute to the vindication of Yalambojoch as a people and to recognize its past, what their grandparents lived through. Above all, it shows the importance of the Chuj culture and language, as well as emphasizing that the Chuj are a people who have been present in this territory, who have been invaded, massacred, expelled and turned into refugees, but who are nonetheless still present here.

The different events that the Chuj have lived through have formed them as a people. Although they continue to inhabit their territory, they have lost some of their customs, and their children are growing up without knowing all their cultural richness.

The presence of these sculptures is evidence that the Chuj have inhabited this territory and that it has historically belonged to them, despite the various laws and decrees that have affected it. This history deserves to be told, to be known. The new generations have the right to know it, and we hope that accordingly they can proudly say that they belong to an ancient people, and that they speak the language that their ancestors once spoke.

## Summary and Conclusions

The participants in the different meetings have shown a great interest in the museum, offering their ideas and opinions. A small group of volunteers has formed a museum committee. However, the number of people actively working on the realization of the project is still very small. Possible reasons for the lack of participants include the absence of people who have migrated to the United States in recent years. Others, who have stayed in Yalambojoch, are occupied in construction work funded with remittance money sent by their friends and relatives in the United States. Furthermore, some people have expressed the opinion that they want to wait until the museum is 'ready' and then see how they might contribute to it. The latter attitude is related to the so-called 'asistencialismo' (welfarism), which entails a certain passivity and expectation. This in turn pushes the non-local participants of the project into more active, dominant roles. In fact, the first exhibition, inaugurated on 24 August 2025, was entirely designed and installed by Kai Patricia Engelhardt and Ulrich Wölfel. To counteract this unintended situation, during the initial exhibition, several of the glass cases will

remain empty, together with calls for community participation. Once having overcome the foreignness of the 'museum' as such, workshops and other activities will eventually lead to a community take-over.

That this is not a vain hope is evident from shifting attitudes towards the project. Whereas during the early planning stage the potential for attracting tourists had often been cited as one of the primary motivations for the museum, the progress in setting up the exhibition and the arrival of the copies has engendered a desire to discover more about local history and identity. It is precisely the replicas that help to create connections between different historical moments: the pre-Hispanic past, the time of the 'Liberal Reform' with the Kanter *finca* and the post-civil-war present with new archaeological research and collaboration with the Berlin museum.

Like all Mayan groups, the Chuj cultivate a rich oral tradition, comprising their history from remote times to the present (see e.g. Piedrasanta 2009; Hopkins 2021). Objects and textual and visual exhibits in the museum, as in the case of Don Pedro cited above, can inspire and strengthen this cultural memory. It will thus be crucial in the planning of future exhibits to document and preserve this immaterial heritage in the Chuj language.

Furthermore, given the continuing importance of archaeological sites in the context of identity and traditional spirituality (see e.g. Frühsorge 2010; Straffi 2014; who both include examples from the Chuj area), it is hoped that future archaeological projects in the Yalambojoch area will also contribute to the museum's exhibits.

The handover ceremony of the replicas to the Yalambojoch Community Museum, celebrated in Berlin on July 18, 2024, in the presence of the Ambassador of the Republic of Guatemala, H.E. Jorge Alfredo Lemcke Arévalo, highlighted the importance of the project for cultural cooperation between Germany and Guatemala. The attendees perceived it as a symbolic act of exchange and respect for the culture of Guatemala's Mayan communities. Thus, the handing over of the replicas was not only an act of remembrance but also a gesture of recognition of the cultural significance of the objects for the Yalambojoch community.

For the future of the collaboration there are many ideas, among them the desire to receive training for the museum's supporters, to create pedagogic materials in Chuj and Spanish, to organize excursions to the museum for students, both from Yalambojoch and from neighbouring villages, to receive further objects, either in the form of copies or (preferably) as originals, and lastly, given the realization of the difficulties in achieving the last point, to consider the possibility of a visit to Berlin to see the exhibition in the Humboldt Forum and the objects in storage in Dahlem. The community museum should be known by people from other villages around Yalambojoch, and if in the future training for those interested in contributing to the museum is implemented, it should be remembered that the exhibitions should be in the language of the villagers. A more enriching exhibition will also provide texts in Chuj.

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