

ARCHAEOLOGY AND SOCIAL CONFLICT: ILLEGAL APPROPRIATION OF LAND AND PROTECTION OF ARCHAEOLOGICAL HERITAGE IN PERU

1. Introduction

Social conflicts can be considered very similar to conventional armed conflicts. In both cases archaeological heritage is endangered due to a lack of authority in the area and the different interests that arise for the heritage itself or for the land where it is located. On the other side, they differ in the aspect that social conflicts are a constant in their societies. They can even coexist with armed conflicts, and will stay after the latter finish.

In any case, archaeologists involved in areas of any kind of conflict need to understand the local situation in the areas where they expect to protect archaeological heritage. I consider that the examples related to social conflicts may give us hints on how to deal with the protection of this heritage of an area involved in an armed conflict. In the present paper I wish to present the case of a social conflict from the north coast of Peru, in South America.

2. The Social Conflict in the Poma Forest

In January 2009, the eviction of peasants from the Poma Forest Historical Sanctuary, who were occupying these lands illegally, was the first of its kind in Peru. The Poma Forest is located in the Pitipo district, Lambayeque province. It is consisted of nearly 5 837has is a "dry forest" that holds a very diverse ecosystem, with at least 26 types of birds and 8 types of mammals. It also contains the ancient capital of the Sican Culture (750-150 A.D.) consisted of 36 mud-brick pyramids, small temples and domestic areas.

The eviction allowed the recovery of 1200has of land where archaeological remains could be found, and it was promoted by local archaeologists, the central government and local communities close to the archaeologists. Tragically, it ended with the dead of two policemen and several others injured, and local archaeologists still face constant threat to their lives. Nevertheless, the important aspect of this eviction is that

it became the first time that a protected area was recovered with the intervention of the local authorities, archaeologists, local communities and the police.

The illegal appropriation of land is a common phenomenon in the coast of Peru and a very difficult one to eradicate. Although invaders usually tell the media that they are poor people looking for a land to live, reality is that they are part of a well organized mafia that illegally sells public and private property. In order to achieve the appropriation, they convince groups of families to take by force some land, using legal holes to take it from the government or private owners. In this process, many archaeological sites have been lost.

To promote the protection of archaeological heritage, archaeologists appealed to the identity issues in this area. On one hand, there are several local communities that have been settled for long time in here, and use the forest as part of their everyday life. Although the connection with ancient monuments is very weak, recent discoveries helped local communities to see that the land where they belong had a long history of advanced civilizations. On the other hand, those communities that illegally occupied the forest have just recently entered in this area. They also have typical customs of the mountain region, and do not feel close to the ancient past of this area.

3. Archaeologists and local communities working together

By observing the situation mentioned above, archaeologists approached first to the communities that had a strong ties to this area, organizing different initiatives to take advantage of the forest and the archaeological sites in a less destructive way, especially by the development of tourism.

The relationship with local communities helped the success of the eviction. Logistics were organized by archaeologists, local authorities and local communities together. To achieve this, archaeologists have been working with the main representatives of local communities for a long time in different levels. It was extremely important to have the support of local society, acknowledging its own organization. All the actors involved had to understand that the real defense of the heritage was only possible if they were involved and convinced of the importance of defending it. Now, local communities and authorities are active in proposing ideas to make a good use of the forest and the archaeological heritage. Archaeologists helped to connect the local population with its own past, and integrate them into the protection of it. The next

step will be to approach to the new communities in this area, and involve them in activities for defending the forest and the archaeological heritage.

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