

Travels With the Daykeeper

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"I never quit being a linguist while I am 'anthropologizing'," says Judith Maxwell, head of the Tulane Interdisciplinary Linguistics Program who has spent this summer on a Fulbright Scholarship that has her scrambling across Guatemala's diverse and rugged landscape documenting Mayan sacred sites.



Anthropologist Judith Maxwell, right, and co-investigator Ajpub' Garcia Ixmata' look over Guatemala's Lake Atitlan while researching Mayan sacred sites. (Photo by Javier Escobar Paniagua)

Though [Maxwell's scholarship](#) at Tulane has largely focused on the indigenous languages of Central America, particularly the Maya, she has spent a good portion of the last six years hiking the country's highlands, photographing the sacred sites and documenting their locations. When she can, she'll talk to locals to gain a sense of a site's history.

The Indiana Jonesâ?like expeditions resulted from Maxwell's work on the *Kaqchikel Chronicles*, a project on which she collaborated with Tulane anthropology professor Robert Hill to produce a translation and analysis of a rare and diverse collection of Mayan texts.

A large portion of the narrative in the chronicles follows the Kaqchikel migration into the highland areas that they currently occupy. The stories are rife with accounts of the groups they met, battles they fought and settlements they founded, says Maxwell.

“The problem is that most of the sites that are known to be linked to major historical events are sacred sites,” says [Maxwell](#). “You can't just walk in, take a picture and walk out.”

Maxwell's companion and co-investigator on these outings is Ajpub' Garcia Ixmata', a researcher at Universidad Rafael Landívar who also happens to be a daykeeper, a Mayan ritual specialist. Before entering a site, the two ask permission from the immanent spirits to enter.

Ask Maxwell if she accepts the Mayan cosmology, and she'll tell you that her experiences at the sacred sites are spiritual and mystical ? except for the last five minutes when she's taking pictures and GPS readings.

“If I were not able to make the spiritual connections,” says Maxwell, “I would not be allowed in these places, either by the local daykeepers or the local practitioners. In a way, the reason why I'm trusted with this sacred knowledge is because I can make the spiritual connection.”