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9. The Lure of the Kekchi: A German Entrepreneur Becomes a Mayanist
Guillermo Náñez Falcón

Introduction
This paper is based on the Erwin P. Dieseldorff Collection in Tulane’s Latin American Library. This is a massive archive of personal and business correspondence; account books; labor contracts; and research notes, manuscripts and drawings relating to Mayan studies and Guatemalan medicinal plants.

E. P. Dieseldorff (referred to as Dieseldorff in the remainder of this paper) was born in Hamburg in 1868 into a family of wealthy merchants. His father owned several ships that sailed the Baltic. One uncle, Charles William (referred to as “C.W.” in the remainder of this paper), owned an import-export house in Belize from 1843-1862, and then moved to London to continue in the Central American trade. In 1865, H.R. Dieseldorff (referred to as “H.R.” in the remainder of this paper), another uncle, was the first German to settle in the Alta Verapaz in northern Guatemala, where he established a general store in Cobán, the department capital, selling imported goods from England and Germany. Two of Erwin Dieseldorff’s first cousins joined their uncle H.R. in 1880.

Thus, it was natural for Dieseldorff to have a driving entrepreneurial spirit. He envisioned a future in Central America in business and trade. After completing secondary studies in Hamburg in 1885, Dieseldorff worked for his uncle C.W. in London to gain experience in the Central American trade. His father’s death in 1887 left Dieseldorff with a sizeable inheritance, which he was eager to use to build his own business and make a name for himself.

Although he was uncertain what exactly he wanted to do, in October 1888 at the age of 20, he sailed for Guatemala to join family members. The first few months he traveled about Guatemala testing investment opportunities, but finally settled in the Alta Verapaz, where he began to buy and sell properties and develop coffee plantations. By the time of his death in 1940, he was one of the largest private landowners in the country with a vertically integrated enterprise that included properties for coffee production, for seasonal labor, and for milpas for his agricultural workers.

Dieseldorff was primarily a businessman, yet from his earliest days in Guatemala he was attracted to the archaeology, language, religion and customs, and the medicinal knowledge of the Kekchi people of the Alta Verapaz. He made
the study of these indigenous people a lifelong endeavor. His Mayan studies spanned the more than fifty years that he lived in Guatemala, and he made numerous contributions through excavations, publications, museum donations, and personal associations. This paper gives an overview of Dieseldorff’s work, and concludes with some thoughts about his motivations and contributions.

A Budding Mayanist

When Dieseldorff arrived in the Verapaz in 1888, the exoticism of the highland tropics and its Kekchí inhabitants instantly captivated him. He was familiar with the travel accounts by Otto Stoll and William Brigham, but could not have anticipated how the country would affect him. In letters to his mother in Hamburg, young Dieseldorff described in detail the topography, the climate, and the flora of the region and the customs and dress of the Kekchí Maya, who made up more than 95% of the population. He recognized the importance of knowing their language and began to learn it immediately. With a certain pride, in his second letter from Cobán he phonetically wrote the Kekchí numbers from 1 to 10. He lamented the lack of textbooks with which to study.

The archaeological past of the area immediately captured his imagination. A few days after his arrival, he wrote to his mother that on a coffee farm he had visited, “I found many stone knives and arrowheads on a rock, where Indians of another age had thrown them… I also found some pretty clay shards, which look like Roman pottery, with Egyptian-style perspective of the figures.” Knowing little of the Maya at the time, he made comparisons with objects familiar to him.

Dieseldorff’s arrival in the Alta Verapaz coincided with that of Dr. Karl Sapper, aged 22, and two years his senior. Sapper was a recent graduate of the University of Munich in Natural Sciences and brother of the Verapaz finquero (coffee planter), Richard Sapper. Together the two young men traveled to remote areas of the department to carry out a number of excavations. On one of their expeditions, Dieseldorff found “two idol heads, though not intact, and some pretty postsherds and stone knives.”

In mid-December, 1888, the two traveled to a site near Santa Cruz Verapaz, which was about seven hours’ distance on horseback from Cobán, to excavate a burial mound. Dieseldorff reported, “We uncovered a few objects, but produced singular scientific results. We found pretty beads, some nice spear tips, vases in the form of human figures with heads as stoppers, a deep bowl painted red, and the tiny bones of a severed finger.” Of Dieseldorff’s share, eight pottery pieces formed a complete pot with painted hieroglyphs, which he assembled. He made a drawing of this vessel and sent it to the British Museum, “for them to translate for me.”

In 1891, when he returned to Germany on a family visit and to tend to business, Dieseldorff carried with him some of the pieces that he and Sapper had uncovered, and donated them to the Royal Museum in Berlin.
There, Dieseldorff met the Director of the American Section of the Museum, the pioneer Mayanist scholar, Dr. Eduard Seler, who was to have a profound influence on Dieseldorff. They developed a close friendship, which lasted until Seler’s death in 1922. After the visit, Seler published a report on Dieseldorff’s donation in the Zeitschrift für Ethnologie. He called one of them a “particularly rare piece…a small vessel in the form of a human figure.”

Through Seler, Dieseldorff met the other two giants of Mayan studies in Germany: Dr. Ernst Förstemann and Dr. Paul Schellhas. The three men encouraged Dieseldorff to continue excavations and probably instructed him on surveying and recording techniques. It was on this trip that Dieseldorff began to form his personal research library in Cobán of the major works published at the time, including Förstemann’s Dresden Codex facsimile and commentary, Brasseur de Bourbourg’s studies of the Popul Vuh and the Rabinal Achi, works of Diego de Landa, Pío Pérez, John Lloyd Stephens, and others.

Upon returning from Germany, he undertook a solo excavation at Chamá, a property remotely situated in the far western Verapaz at the confluence of the Chixoy and Salbá Rivers. At the invitation of Ebenezer Cary, the North American owner of the land, Dieseldorff began work in March of 1892, assisted by Carlos López, who had previous field experience under Alfred Maudslay. They surveyed, measured, and mapped the site, which consisted of two plazas. The men started excavation of a tumulus on the lower plaza and found five painted vessels, several unpainted pots, a skull, pieces of jadeite and beads. In a tomb on the banks of the Salbá, Dieseldorff made an extraordinary find: the famous Chamá vase on which is painted a vampire-headed deity, and a second vase depicting a procession of seven figures.

The dig proved Dieseldorff a neophyte archaeologist. The first day’s notes are thorough. The second day, heavy rain and a North American lady visitor interrupted work. Excavation notes became fragmentary after the third day, and Dieseldorff later reported that “no notes were taken at the time of the discovery of the grave” in which were found the two vases.

Cary, convinced that the artifacts had great monetary value, forbade further exploration on his property. He kept a share of the findings, including the procession vase, which he sold. Dieseldorff made a colored drawing of the vase for publication, but he remarked with bitterness, “The original [vase] is now in the United States, where it most likely is the show piece in some drawing room.” Dieseldorff’s interest in the artifacts was scientific. He eventually donated his Chamá vase to the Royal Museum in Germany. Ironically, the Chamá vase disappeared in the bombing of Berlin during World War II; the Procession Vase now resides in the University Museum of Philadelphia. In making the drawings, Dieseldorff was the first person, according to Mary Ellen Miller, “to make ‘roll-out’ drawings of Maya pots, in which images from a cylinder vessel [are] extended onto a sheet of paper,” a technique perfected with photographs by Justin Kerr.
Dieseldorff quickly prepared reports on the excavation and submitted them, with his drawings, to the Proceedings of the Berlin Anthropological Society.\textsuperscript{12} His footnotes cite extensively from the works in his library. Dieseldorff speculates on the ethnic origins of the makers of the pottery, as he saw similarities with carvings and glyphs from Copán and Quiriguá. Förstemann and Seler both commented on Dieseldorff’s report, not entirely in agreement with his conclusions but generally favorably. Seler ended with encouraging words, “May Mr. Dieseldorff be enabled to continue his investigations and may equally active and equally successful workers come forward to other places to increase our knowledge.”\textsuperscript{13}

Dieseldorff, in March 1894, joined Alfred Maudslay and his wife on their expedition to Copán. Mrs. Maudslay remarked on his enthusiasm despite his near fatal accident with a poisonous snake.\textsuperscript{14} In the process of digging under Stela 4, a broken monument of which only the feet remained, he discovered a stone block that had been used for structural support. It had hieroglyphs that dated it as being much older than the monument above. Maudslay thought the glyphs significant and included drawings of them in his Biologia Centrali-Americana.\textsuperscript{15} Dieseldorff made other excavations on his own property Chajcar and, upon invitation of the President of Guatemala, General José María Reyna Barrios, at Acasaguastlán, always sent reports of his findings to the Berlin Anthropological Society in Germany.\textsuperscript{16}

Concomitantly with his archaeological interests, Dieseldorff embarked on the study of Kekchí religious practices and their use of medicinal plants.\textsuperscript{17} From 1890 to 1894 he mostly resided at Seacté, a property that he was developing as a coffee farm, situated a difficult eight- to ten-hour ride on horseback from Cobán.\textsuperscript{18} Isolated from all Westerners in this remote spot, he lived with the Kekchí laborers and their families in a rude hut and shared their simple food of corn tortillas and black beans. By necessity, he learned to speak their language, and he began to record information about their rituals, customs, and beliefs.\textsuperscript{19}

At Seacté, Dieseldorff developed a close relationship with the curandero on the property, Félix Cucul. Gradually he gained Cucul’s confidence, and the two men often went on long walks around the property. Cucul spoke about the different plants that he used medicinally. Seacté in the lowlands of the Verapaz had a hot climate with particular flora. Later, when Dieseldorff owned estates in the cold regions of the department, he came to know the curanderos of these places, such as Tomás Caal of Chajcar and Martín Chub and Sebastián Maquín of Secac. Dieseldorff also worked with a fellow-German coffee planter, the Baron von Türkheim, who had compiled a herbarium of the plants of the department.\textsuperscript{20} Dieseldorff noted that the curanderos lacked diagnostic skills, for they did not have medical knowledge or instruments. Dieseldorff acquired medical textbooks to educate himself and began to instruct the men. Dieseldorff found them willing to learn and experiment with different plants and new treatments.\textsuperscript{21}
Dieseldorff was in the process of preparing for publication his compilation of medicinal uses of plants of the Verapaz when he made a discovery that interrupted his life for a number of years. He believed that *escobilla* had almost miraculous curative properties and became determined to introduce it to the medical world. Called *mesbé* by the Kekchí, it is a plant of the *Malvaceae* family, whose botanical name is *Sida rhombifolia*. In experiments on himself and his farm workers, he learned that an unguent of the leaves cured cases of chronic dermatitis, and that the inhalation of vapor from boiling the leaves alleviated bronchial congestion and, he came to believe, cured tuberculosis.

In 1912, he went to Berlin, where with his own funds he established a clinic, the “Mesbé Institute,” for the treatment of tuberculosis and other maladies. He contracted doctors and other medical personnel. The clinic seemed on the verge of success when World War I began, and all physicians were inducted into military service. Dieseldorff was forced to close the clinic, and was unable to return to Guatemala until the end of the war. In later years, Dieseldorff did not lose his faith in *mesbé* and approached doctors in the U.S. to make clinical tests, but with no success. He continued work on his pharmacopoeia of Kekchí medicinal plants and published it in the *Anales de la Sociedad de Geografía e Historia*. The article gave the Kekchí, Spanish, and botanical names of 48 plants with medicinal uses made of them by the Kekchí, and included botanical drawings made by don Pablo Wirsing.

In the 1920s, at the culmination of decades of study of Mayan glyphs, calendar systems, religion and culture, Dieseldorff published at his expense in Germany what he considered his magnum opus, the 3 volume *Kunst und Religion der Mayavölker*. The work was never for sale. He distributed copies to libraries and museums in Germany and the U.S. A translation of the work later appeared in Guatemala in the *Anales*.

**Reflections on Dieseldorff**

Dieseldorff is not well known in the U.S., at least in part because most of his writings were published in Germany and Guatemala. Except for the two articles on the Chamá vase that appeared in Bowditch’s *Mexican and Central American Antiquities*, his major works are not available in English. Moreover, Dieseldorff was a self-taught scholar who worked outside the academic community. He regularly presented papers at the Congresses of Americanists and corresponded with the leading U.S. scholars of the day, yet did not find entry into the North American anthropology community, perhaps because he lacked an academic degree and a university or museum affiliation. His writings, however, were on a scholarly level and demonstrate knowledge of Mayan glyphs, iconography, cosmology, deities, and calendar systems, as well as a thorough understanding of the publications of German and North American Mayanists.
Dieseldorff’s studies on Mayan religion, culture, and calendar systems were fundamental for his understanding of the psychology of the Kekchí. He had a strong affinity for the Kekchí, but consciously or unconsciously used this knowledge to benefit his enterprise. He understood that the life of the Kekchí was based on cycles of the planting and harvesting of their *milpa*, and that corn and *milpa* had a sacred significance for them. There were religious rituals for each time of the year that had been established by Kekchí traditions and beliefs. Recently, historian Wade Kit argued in his doctoral dissertation that Dieseldorff came to have an unwritten agreement with his farm workers that he would respect their customs, giving them days off for their rituals and religious festivals, in exchange for completion of their labor obligations during other times. Dieseldorff admonished his administrators to respect the traditions of the workers, “Porque sin mozos no hay finca.”

In Guatemala, Dieseldorff was a corresponding member of the Academia de Geografía e Historia and published numerous articles in the *Anales* of the organization. In the Spanish translation of *Kunst*, he singled out the contributions of Guatemalan Mayanists of his day, including J. Antonio Villacorta C., Virgilio Rodríguez Beteta, and Flavio Rodas. He donated to the library of the institution the five-volume set of Seler’s collected works.

The final installment of *Religión* in the *Anales* ends with an admonition that Guatemala establish an anthropological museum in the capital to collect and preserve monuments and artifacts of the Mayan past. “Thus,” he wrote, “Guatemala would fulfill its scientific mission as guardian of the remains of Maya science, an honor-bound obligation and a proud legacy to posterity.”

The museum would be a tourist attraction and moneymaker as well, he argued. In time, the anthropology museum became a reality. In the early 1940s, after Dieseldorff’s death, his son Willi donated his father’s collection to the museum, which created a separate sala for its display.

**Conclusions**

Dieseldorff was primarily a businessman, a coffee planter and exporter, a merchant. Yet, he had a passionate interest in the Maya throughout his life in Guatemala. His avocation afforded him psychological satisfaction and social prestige that he might not have otherwise had. When in Germany, or at international meetings of scholars, he was no mere man of business or a rich finquero, but a scholar, whom people addressed with respect as “Herr Doktor.” Similarly, to his colleagues in the Academia, he was “un Viejo Maya.” The complexities of his personality are also reflected in the sobriquet that the cobanero made of his initials EPD. They referred to him as “El Puro Diablo.”

**NOTES**

The Lure of the Kekchi

Ibid., Senahú, 4 May 1889. Dieseldorff Collection, Latin American Library, Tulane University. Hereinafter the abbreviation “DC” will appear for materials from this collection.

2. E.P. Dieseldorff, Cobán, to his mother in Hamburg, 22 November 1888, DC.

3. Ibid.

4. Ibid., 6 December 1888, DC.

5. Ibid., 27 December 1888, DC; unpublished typed manuscript with corrections in Dieseldorff’s hand, “Excavación cerca de cueva de Santa Cruz Verapaz,” DC, Box 154, Folder 3.

6. Ibid., 2 January 1889, DC.


8. E[benzer] Cary, Chamá, [to Dieseldorff], Seacté, 4 March 1892, DC, Box 148, Folder 1.

9. Unpublished ms. In Dieseldorff’s hand, [Chamá excavation notes, March 1892], DC, Box 154, Folder 32.


17. Unpublished ms. in Dieseldorff’s hand, “Pharmakologie Kekchi,” DC, Box 161, Folder 8.


19. Ibid.


21. Erwin P. Dieseldorff, Las Plantas Medicinales del Departamento de Alta Verapaz (Guatemala, 1940), 5.

22. ____, Heilung von Lungenleiden durch Inhalation von Mesbé (Belin, 1914); ____, Mesbé bei chirurgischer Tuberkulose (Berlin, 1914); Dr. Adolf Spangenberg, “Mesbé, ein neues

23. Erwin P. Dieseldorff, “Las Plantas medicinales del Departamento de Alta Verapaz,” *Anales de la Sociedad de Geografía e Historia de Guatemala*, XVI, 2 (December 1939), 92-105; XVI, 3 (March 1940), 192-206. In recent years there has been renewed interest among Guatemalan scholars at the USAC in medicinal application of plants of the country, with Armando Cáceres as the leading researcher. See: Armando Cáceres, Blanca Samayoa, and Ligia Fletaes, “Actividad antibacteriana de plantas usadas en Guatemala para el tratamiento de incecciones.” *Cuadernos de Investigación*, No. 4-90 (Guatemala, 1991); Armando Cáceres, *Plantas de uso medicinal en Guatemala* (Guatemala, 1996). Dieseldorff’s interest in botany had practical, as well as medical, applications. He regarded agronomy as a valuable science for a coffee plantation owner. He conducted experiments with the use of natural and chemical fertilizers and pesticides, and he corresponded with agronomists in England and in the United States to seek their professional advice. In 1908, he published in Germany a manual on the cultivation of coffee, which gave practical advice. In 1908, he published in Germany a manual on the cultivation of coffee, which gave practical advice based on his own experiences. Erwin P. Dieseldorff, *Der Kaffeebaum. Praktische Erfahrungen über seine Behandlung im nördlichen Guatemala* (Berlin, [1908]); Erwin P. Dieseldorff, [Cobán], to Dr. L.O. Howard, Washington, D.C., 2 July and 1 September 1989, DC, Letterbook “Varias Cartas,” 37-38, 209-10; ____ , to Walter T. Swingle, London, 8 August and 1 September 1898, DC, Ibid., 144-46, 208.


25. See endnote 23.


29. Erwin P. Dieseldorff, “El Tuzltacá y el Mam, los dioses prominentes de la religión Maya,” *Anales de la Sociedad de Geografía e Historia de Guatemala*, II, 4 (July 1926), 378-86; ____., “El Calendario Maya de Quiriguá,” Ibid., XIII, 2 (December 1936); ____., “La Causa por la cual los Mayas de Quiriguá comenzaron su calendario en 22 de septiembre del año 3373 A.J.C.,” Ibid., XVI, 4 (June 1940), 271-79.

30. ____., “Religión y arte de los Mayas,” Ibid., V, 1 (September 1928), 66-86; V, 2 (December 1928), 184-203; V, 3 (March 1929), 317-35; V, 4 (June 1929), 432-53.


33. Author’s note: the sala disappeared in the remodeling of the museum, and most of the pieces from the Dieseldorff collection are in storage.