



Ruth Shady Solís

Peru

“ Build a house, which is my family; plant a tree, which is my children’s development and write a book, which is my occupation, to feel that it was worth having lived ”

Interview by Claudia Cisneros Méndez*



Ruth Shady Solís

Dr. Shady holds a Doctorate in Archaeology and Anthropology and a Bachelors' degree in Pedagogy and has been the Senior Archaeology Professor at UNMSM (National University of San Marcos), director of the multidisciplinary research work on Caral, the oldest civilization in America and director of the "Caral Archaeological Zone" Executive Unit 003 of the Department of Culture. She holds Honorary Doctorates from four universities, and received the Medal of Honor from the Congress of Peru.

Shattering assumptions

They did not believe her. When Ruth Shady announced to her archaeologist colleagues the results of her research in the Valle de Supe, Peru, they thought that she was exaggerating. It was a new interpretation and therefore shattered the prevailing paradigms. Until that moment, the Chavín de Huántar culture was known as the oldest civilization of Peru, and Dr Shady's findings invalidated that assumption in one fell swoop. Not only had she found the

oldest Peruvian civilization, but also the first civilization of the entire American continent. Dating back 5,000 years, Caral was revealed as preceding the 1,800 year-old Olmec culture, and even the 3,000 year-old Maya cultures. “We took the results to the National Cultural Institute (INC) but they did not even consider them. They thought that I was exaggerating.” But Ruth was not daunted and continued to seek funds to develop what she sensed would be the most significant research of her life. “I was immensely motivated because I knew that I was dealing with a historic event that would revolutionize knowledge about the first American civilizations.”

Persevering in the face of obstacles

The first months of research were very difficult. There was virtually no road. The team camped on the uncultivated terraces close to the mountain range, with no water, drainage system or electricity. Dr. Shady and four of her former students and colleagues took turns to cook food on a gas cooker. “The work between 1994 and 2001 was very tough. One night I was chatting to a local farmer when I heard a loud noise. An enormous bull had just sat down on my tent, in which I had just been resting. Moments earlier I would have been crushed.” However, she refused to turn back. “We realized that Caral was a very special site, extremely ancient. It was pre-ceramic but had an extensive, complex series of buildings with monumental architecture. We did not expect this in such ancient settlements.”

She transmitted her motivation and professionalism to the others. The mayor of the district provided some logistical support, INC occasionally lent her a vehicle and she obtained a grant from National Geographic for the first excavations.

Empathy for the underprivileged

But she did not focus merely on research and the conservation of monumental architecture. “I decided that this was not sufficient, and that I also must improve the living conditions of the local populations.” Ruth wanted them to feel proud of their heritage, benefit from it and have a better quality of life. “We wanted these people to identify with the heritage and accept it as theirs, as a source of identity and cohesion.” If Caral could improve their lives, this would bring responsibility as well as pride, to transmit to future generations. To this end, she organized “participative workshops” with a group of academics, and involved the local politicians and population in the creation of a Master Plan to promote integral, sustainable development. This program was approved by the Peruvian Congress in 2006. However, six years later and due to constant changes in State policies and bureaucracy, the authorities have not implemented it. “I am persistent, and continue to work on this issue. There must be a way to implement the integral development plan for the population.” Dr. Shady thus demonstrated her concern for people as well as science. From an early age she was determined to study for two degrees

simultaneously: Archaeology - Anthropology and Pedagogy. (She laughs at the recollection). “It was a challenge: I would study Archaeology and Anthropology in the morning, English in the afternoon and Pedagogy in the evening. But I was very happy, as I loved to learn. I am fascinated by science but I also wanted to help society.”

“I dreamt of discovering ancient cities...”

Dr. Shady was only eight or nine when her vocation became clear to her. Her father was her first source of inspiration. An immigrant from Prague, he admired the ancient Peruvian culture. “He would take us to archaeological sites, but also show us the contrasts between rural and urban areas. For each of our birthdays my father would give us a collection of history books. We eventually had the whole set. I would dream of discovering ancient cities, and write about them... I would fantasize about being a great explorer...” She also had excellent teachers at university: the expert on Andean geography Javier Pulgar Vidal, philosopher Augusto Salazar Bondy, the famously studious Ella Dumbareu Temple (“she would teach us about 16th to 18th century chronicles and I would imagine those societies”), archaeologist and art historian Jorge Muelle and social archaeologist Luis Lumbreras. Many relatives and friends told her that in that profession she would die of hunger and it would be even harder because she was a woman. “Following my vocation was of the utmost importance for me, not listening

to other people. We archaeologists have to be disciplined and persistent, not be daunted by problems, find a solution and always seek to achieve our objectives, while never losing respect for others.”

It is our task to preserve culture, not that of the officials, yet when we achieve something they come and change it. We cannot be constantly starting afresh.

Against gender and knowledge based prejudice

Throughout her life, Dr. Shady has faced many obstacles, both as a professional and a woman. “Certain male colleagues tried to undermine my scientific work, saying that I was not physically strong enough. But I did not feel diminished. I have made them admit that they were wrong, and they now respect my work.” She has also come across bureaucratic obstacles, often caused by a lack of interest in culture. “My country needs to implement short-, medium- and long-term State policies that regard archaeological heritage as a resource. In that way the change in government and officials would not disrupt the continuity of the programs. We spent years lobbying for a budget to be allocated to specific projects, but when we obtained it the leadership changed and we had to start again from scratch.” Nonetheless, she persists with her work and multidisciplinary team. “As regards research, we excavated contextualized materials in 11 Caral settlements then

At one of the 11 research sites, Caral (Valle de Supe, Peru), which measures 67 hectares





Ruth Shady Solís

processed them with professionals from various disciplines (biologists, ichthyologists, physicians, chemists, geologists, among others) from our university or through agreements with other Peruvian or foreign institutions. We thus deduced the necessary information and made sound interpretations of the social system of the Caral civilization,

the changes over its thousand years of existence and the reason why its remarkable urban centers were abandoned.”

[A visit from the president](#)

One morning in 2001, while Dr. Shady was in the Sacred City of Caral, she was informed that

A woman, a message, an objective

Peruvian President, Dr. Valentín Paniagua and his ministers, who had recently heard about Caral, were planning a visit. “I considered it a significant event. He was the only president in 18 years to express interest in our archaeological heritage. They arrived in a helicopter at 9 am, and I took them on a tour around the city until 4 pm, showing them the impressive architecture (which was not immediately evident to a non-archaeologist at that moment) and sharing the knowledge we were acquiring. He congratulated us and asked each of his ministers how their respective sector or ministry could assist the research in such an important Peruvian historical site.”

A few days later she was called to the Government Palace to explain the details of the project’s austere budget. “As I was leaving, the president looked at me and said: “Doctor, we have a van here. Please take it, you need it more than I do.” I also asked him to implement a museum exhibition on Caral at the Palace, to begin sharing its cultural value. One of our most important achievements was the Supreme Decree declaring Caral a site of national interest, with a budget allocation to accelerate and value the research. “That was the first recognition that we received. However we subsequently had to fight for a second decree to make the amount allocated from the budget of the National University of San Marcos independent, so that we could use it.

Dr. Shady is convinced that the Peruvian archaeological heritage is a resource that can promote development and, unlike petrol or mining, does not harm the environment and is one of the most profitable industries. “Not only does it have a touristic and economic value, but it is also important to obtain historical knowledge, and to know how the territory was managed, how society was organized and why it was so successful for thousands of years.” Ruth is keen for Peruvians to know that Caral was not only the first civilization on the continent (before Egypt built the first pyramid at Saqqara and later ones at Giza), but moreover, unlike other civilizations it was not a warlike society (there are indeed no traces of either weapons or defensive walls), in which the State worked in cooperation with civil society representatives and employed knowledge, science and technology to improve living conditions. One example is its seismic constructions, recognized by contemporary Japanese scientists. Caral also has a significance as regards women’s role. “Those first American civilizations maintained gender equality. Women had access to power.” She also believes that in any era “women must have the same options, to take part in whichever activity benefits them and society.” She is aware that, though there has been considerable progress in various fields of knowledge, we are still a long way from sharing these benefits indiscriminately between human beings, and from

preserving living conditions throughout the world. “Maybe the obstacles stem from the culture of individualism and of exclusive use of economic production. Those who study the message of ancestral societies such as Caral know that common wellbeing should guide our work. We should aim to generate benefits that extend to the rest of society.”

The woman, the mother and the dedicated scientist

Archaeologist, anthropologist, teacher, a woman to be reckoned with and alongside all of this, a mother. It has not been easy, as archaeological work is always on-site. “I have always tried to combine my career with the upbringing and education of my two children. Thankfully, my mother helped me. But undoubtedly my work would often take me away from them.” She mentions that she tried to foster an interest in archaeology in them. “But to no avail. I think that they were over-exposed (she laughs) They are both economists, specializing in development and social service. I have instilled values in them and am pleased to have created the conditions for them to develop successfully.” This is her greatest source of personal satisfaction. As a professional she feels very satisfied with the multidisciplinary team, which has contributed to knowledge of the social system of the Caral civilization. “The worldwide response to the values of the Caral civilization has

encouraged us. So has our ability to convey to current and future society the importance of peaceful social interaction between people with different cultures and languages, who exchanged resources, products, experiences and knowledge produced in the Andean territory, which is itself immensely varied. This intercultural relationship favored by Caral’s social system enabled it to develop very early in the north-central area of Peru. This is a valuable message for modern society, as nowadays military action and behavior are still ubiquitous, which is entirely counterproductive to the millions of years of human evolution and the six thousand years of establishing complex civilizations. We have failed to strengthen our human identity and preserve living conditions on Earth. We need to reflect on this, to avoid exterminating ourselves. And of course, I am also thrilled to be able to improve the quality of life of the populations around Caral and train archaeologists with a different vision, who can appreciate the diverse social reality of Peru.”

We take our leave from Dr. Shady, the undaunted archaeologist, devoted mother and tireless defender and researcher of the civilization that changed the history of the continent. She continues to energetically emphasize its social and cultural values, social and political complexity, organized collective, monumental architecture and interest in



Ruth Shady with President Valentín Paniagua (to her right) and former United Nations Secretary General, Javier Pérez de Cuéllar (at the front) in Caral, 2001. Source: Caral Archaeological Zone.

knowledge and its inhabitant's quality of life. Two of her eleven dogs also bid us farewell. "I love animals. All of our dogs have been rescued strays." This is how she spends her

free time, in addition to reading, seeing her family, Yoga and walking.

She knows that blazing a trail for archaeology will be a hard task, but as her father once told her, "Build a house, that is your family; plant a tree, that is your children's development; write a book, that is your profession, to feel that it was worth having lived."

Undoubtedly, this will not be the last time we come across Ruth. Her story is now part of ours, and of yours. We are all part of this great history that Ruth Shady revealed to us. ■

Claudia Cisneros Méndez is an independent TV, radio and Internet journalist and the director of the scientific and humanistic portal www.sophimania.pe. She is a producer in Lima of Fuji TV-Japan, a CNni-USA collaborator in Peru and an opinion columnist in the *La República* newspaper in Peru.