

Legacies of Colonialism: The Education of Maya in Belize

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Prologue

We sat together in the dark, returning from a street art fair in Belize City. She began her narrative about her life and her educational journey.

“When I was fourteen, I was told that I was married. I didn’t know anything about it. I was just told that I was married.”

Her husband, age twenty-one, was a drinker who rarely worked, so life was difficult. He was abusive, but she tolerated the abuse until he began to abuse his daughters. She took her three daughters and left him. Her parents and her village counseled her to return and work things out with her husband.

“I tried to work things out, but it wasn’t working.”

She returned to finish high school in Punta Gorda in the Toledo District. She was twenty-eight with three children. “When I applied to go to school, the minister asked, ‘Do you still know your numbers, your letters?’”

I answered, “Yes, do you want me to recite them?”

Most of the teachers at the high school were Garifuna. There were no Maya teachers in her school.

“I was called names and told to quit. They said, ‘You are Maya. You should be washing clothes, making baskets. You shouldn’t be in school. You don’t belong here.’”

Yeah, I noticed that the teachers gave preferential treatment to other students. They were allowed to turn assignments in late, but not me. The other Maya students all quit. They didn’t finish. But I didn’t quit, and I graduated valedictorian.” (Mopan Mayan woman)

Introduction

Belize has one of the lowest educational achievements in the region. The educational system, inherited from the British (Classbase.com, 2012), has as a “key feature” a “partnership between different religious organizations and the government in the delivery of primary and secondary education through grant-aided schools” (UNESCO, 2007, p. 1). Compulsory education is required for ages 5 to 14, the eight years of primary school. Only two-fifths of primary children, however, complete the course of study within the prescribed time. No more than 45% of students, compared to the regional statistics of 80%, go on to secondary school, and most of these come from the wealthiest families. “Fewer than half (44 percent) of standard six (eighth grade) students who took the national primary examination (PSE) in 2011 obtained an overall grade of satisfactory or above. The results were even worse for students living in rural areas, where only 37 percent scored satisfactory compared to urban students who scored 52 percent” (Näslund-Hadley, Alonzo & Martin, 2013, p. 11).

The Maya, who live primarily in rural areas, have the lowest achievement of any group in Belize with 88% attending primary school and 40% attending

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secondary school. In Toledo District, which includes reserve lands (Toledo Maya, 1997), only 10% scored satisfactory (Näslund-Hadley, Alonzo & Martin, 2013, p. 12). While education is compulsory, it is not free: "... many children do drop out because their parents are unable to pay the costs of uniforms, books, and annual school fees, or need child labor to assist them at home" (Classbase.com, n.d.). In Toledo District, which has a large concentration of Maya, indigence in rural areas is 60% and 42% of the children have stunted growth due to malnutrition (Teachers for a Better Belize, 2015). Consequently, Maya generally are represented by the low statistics in Belize associated with poverty and rural populations.

The roots of the current educational problems lie in the unique history of the nation, the perpetuation of policies against the Maya enacted by the British, the subsequent and on-going colonization efforts via schools, and the lack of education via the Maya languages. The history of Belize begins with disinterest by the British in developing this area as a colony and its lack of acknowledgement of the Maya as Indigenous people. The disinterest allowed the colonization via Christian controlled schools that have disenfranchised women and the Maya, disenfranchisement of women is a possible factor in the on-going poverty of the Maya. The antagonistic British policies include built-in economic disadvantages for the Maya: Under the British, the Maya were forced to become landless laborers. Finally, Maya children have few opportunities to receive education via their own mother tongues. The input of Maya women is critical to increasing educational opportunities of Maya children.

Unique History and Development of Belize

The history of Belize is unique in the Caribbean region and Central America from the standpoint of the tenuous involvement of the British from its inception to the British denial of the Indigenous identity of the Maya, a denial that began with the first British citizens to settle in that region. In her dissertation, Relehan (2008) mentioned "the five stories central to Belizean identity" beginning with the 'discovery' of uninhabited land" (p. 105)—terra nullius (nobody's land)—even though present-day Belize is in the center of the once vast Maya Empire and the earliest known Maya settlement is located close to present day Orange Walk (Relehan, 2008). The British, however, contended that the Maya had completely deserted this area before European arrival. It should be noted that Christian groups have recently condemned this policy (General Synod, 2001; Concacan, Inc., 2015).

Bolland (2003) and Shoman (2011) exposed the fallacy of the myth of terra nullius by citing evidence from the reports of Spanish entradas into that area, indicating a large Maya population in what is now Belize. In his popular history of Belize, Shoman (2011) identified three distinct "Maya areas of control: the Chetumal province, the Dzuluinicob province and an area in the south from the Monkey to the Sarstoon Rivers, occupied by the Manche Chol Maya" (p. 4). Present day Chetumal lies in the state of Quintana Roo along the coast of the Caribbean Ocean and on the border with Belize. This area of Maya control may have extended as far south as present day Orange Walk. The Dzuluinicob area,

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controlled by Yucatec Maya speakers, began outside of Orange Walk and ran south of San Ignacio. After the collapse of the Classic Maya period in the 9th and 10th Centuries A.D., the Maya continued to live in organized groups, practiced their traditional beliefs based upon their own cosmology and engaged in trade with other communities (Shoman, 2011). Relehan (2008) provided an additional rationale for denying the existence of the Maya in Belize: It allowed the British to become the “original” inhabitants. Upon independence, the Belizean government adopted the British policy, which continues to be an impediment to the advancement of the Maya people in Belize.

While the Spanish claimed the area, the first settlers were British pirates of the 1600’s. The coastline of Belize with its river mouths and lagoons made it a perfect base for them. The first recorded British settlement was in 1638, but it was not until European countries agreed to outlaw piracy in 1667 that the former marauders realized the value of trade in logwood (used for dyes) that grew in abundance along the coast of Belize. Since these early settlements were close to the coast, there was little interaction with the Indigenous Maya. These early settlements represented the first colonization of the area although there was no official support by any governments. As a result of the Godolphin Treaty of 1670, the Spanish ceded its territories in the West Indies to the British. Consequently, the Belizean settlements became part of the West Indies by virtue of the settlers being British.

However, the British government remained indecisive about claiming this region as a colony, and the Spanish reasserted control over the area from time-to-time, forcing the British settlers to retreat to Trinidad. In the early part of the 1700’s, logwood trade was discontinued, but the trade in mahogany began to gain ground. Logging for mahogany took the British entrepreneurs further away from the coast and into the central and northwest areas and in the proximity of Maya settlements, resulting in armed raids by the Maya. These skirmishes finally made the previously “invisible” Maya very evident. In fact, the literature of the time refers to them as “vast hordes” (Bolland, 2003, p. 103). Bolland (2003) identified four phases in the contact between the British and the Maya. The first phase during the early eighteenth century included encroachment by loggers on Mayan settlements. Phase two from 1817 to 1847 was characterized by a series of small yet persistent raids upon logging camps, followed by three decades of the Maya retreating into the forests. “The reemergence of the Maya of western Belize in 1847 occurred simultaneously with the resurgence of the Maya of Yucatan” (Bolland, 2003, p. 111). Phase three was marked by violent military activity in the northern and western parts of Belize that resulted in defeats of the San Pedro and Icaiché Maya, coinciding with the establishment of the crown colony of British Honduras. After that, the Maya were incorporated in the “colonial social structure” (Bolland, 2003, p. 111).

In 1717, Britain made its first official acknowledgement of the logging settlements at the Council of Trade. The shift to mahogany required the introduction of slavery, with most of the slaves purchased from Jamaica. Within a short amount of time, slaves became the largest population in the settlements.

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The early British settlers of Belize were all male. “The fact that there were few European women, especially in the early years, encouraged the European men to view Indigenous women as objects to be used not only for their own gratification but also as vital objects for carrying out their project of domination” (Shoman, 2011, p. 7). Shoman’s (2011) accounts of the treatment of African slave women further illustrate this patriarchal domination of women. Slave women were treated much worse than male slaves: Slave women were staked naked to the ground and flogged, chained and flogged, and starved (pp. 32-34) without impunity or legal recourse given that all the courts consisted of white males. It is Relehan’s (2008) contention that the patriarchy of the British colonial system is the primary source of racism and marginalization of Maya in Belize. The behaviors learned under colonialism, particularly as it applies to women and Maya, have been resistant to change.

Ambiguous Status

The primary purpose of the British, like the Spanish, in the Americas was the exploitation of resources. Originally, the Maya did not figure into this exploitation as the logwood was along the coast while the Maya lived inland. As interactions between Maya and British settlers and finally the colonial government grew, the policies that were enacted reflected the lack of financial resources exercised by the Britain in its administration of this poorly defined colony. From the original denial of their existence, British policy changed as the colonial economy changed.

The first British settlers provided no records of encounters with Maya, but, as Bolland (2003, p. 102) pointed out, they were illiterate. Their primary enemy was the Spanish who constantly attacked them and tried to remove them. The Spanish records provided evidence of a Maya presence in the region even along the coasts, noting that “the Indians who live near the English are so inconsiderable that it is unnecessary to take any notice of them” (Bolland, 2003, p. 102). The Maya soon went from non-existence into an enemy for the British, however. Encounters increased as soon as the British moved inland to harvest mahogany, and the Maya fought back.

The Maya used a American Indian approach to warfare, using surprise and short-lived skirmishes, generally disrupting the logging activities and then fading into the forests. In 1788 and 1802, requests were sent for troops and guns and ammunition because of “attacks of Wild Indians” (Bolland, 2003, p. 103). “Though they ultimately failed to check the expansion of the British, these Maya were certainly seen by the British as a serious threat to their settlement...there can be no doubt that the number of Maya encountered by the British was no longer ‘inconsiderable’ as it had been in 1779. Neither can it be doubted that the relations between the Maya and British, far from being as cordial as had been suggested, were extremely hostile and antagonistic” (Bolland, 2002, p. 103). The size of the attacks indicates the decentralization of the Maya of the time.

Despite these early attacks and the resurgence of the Maya from 1847 to 1872, representing an uprising of Maya from the Yucatan Peninsula to the west of Belize, the British finally defeated the Maya and “incorporated them into the

social structure of the colony as a dominated and dispossessed people” (Bolland, 2003, p. 104). Because of the Maya practice of swidden agriculture, they were perceived as a threat to the logging industry. To best meet the needs of the colony, they had to be incorporated as cheap labor. To this end, Maya were forbidden to own land. As a result, whole villages had to pay rent on the land they already inhabited. In the north, the Maya and mestizos began to produce sugar cane on their rented lands in sufficient amounts to generate trade in sugar. “Between 1862 and 1868 the export of sugar from Belize was more than quadrupled” (Bolland, 2003, p. 115).

This success spawned the birth of plantations, which gradually took over the little ranchos and milpas, forcing Maya to become part of the debt peonage system that forced laborers to purchase supplies in advance of their wages. Generally, they found themselves owing more at the end of their contract than they had earned. Additionally, the Maya were paid less than other workers. Unlike Creole workers, the Maya were more likely to stay to pay their debts. As the Maya in the interior were developing Belize agriculturally, the British were courting Confederates so that the colony would have more white immigrants than those of color (Bolland, 2003).

In 1872, the Crown Lands Ordinance provided that Maya could not own land and were to be confined to reserves although this ordinance was never actually carried out fully. Two settlements in the west, Benque Viejo and Sukkotz, were identified as Maya villages. These were lands where the British were not to settle. Some land in the south in what is now Toledo District was designated reserve land. As far as the Maya were concerned, all the land was theirs as they had occupied it for hundreds of years. As a consequence, most Maya villages do not fall in the reserve lands (Toledo Maya, 1997). The British borrowed the Spanish alcalde system to administer these Maya villages. The original alcaldes were probably traditional leaders. Later they were elected and at one point they were appointed. The Belizean government originally took the stance of the British in denying the Indigenous rights of the Maya, but the preamble of the new constitution of 2001 includes a specific reference to Belize’s Indigenous people, “requiring that policies of state protect them” (Shoman, 2011, p.314). Despite this clause, protection of Maya lands has to be re-negotiated with each newly elected government (M. Garcia, personal communication, Dec. 6, 2014). A recent incident illustrates this when thirteen Maya were arrested for protecting their land (Culturalsurvival.org, 2015).

Built in Exploitation

The British and later the Belizean government consider the Maya primarily in economic terms. Originally, they were seen as an impediment to the logging industry and later as a source of cheap labor for logging camps and plantations. The Belizean government continues to pressure Maya to cut down their forests and open up more land for development, land that is intended be sold to white settlers primarily from Canada and the United States. In fact, in everyday life, such as shopping, deference is always given to white patrons over Belizean. This

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is another legacy of colonialism as is the custom of addressing everyone with a title. Another form of exploitation of Maya comes through tourism, an important source of income for Belize. “Maya exploitation of the past and the present is in many ways only marginally different. Both exist under the overarching theme of economic gains at the expense of Maya people” (Burns, 2016, p. 3). Belize is home to a large number of Mayan ruins, and visiting these ruins has become part of the ecotourism of Belize, a multi-million dollar industry. However, Mayan groups rarely oversee visitations to these sites. In fact, there may be no Maya present at all as is the case in Atun Ha in the north.

On-going Colonization

Allowing various Christian mission groups to provide schools was a natural outcome of the general disinterest of Britain in responsibility for its colony in Central America. Like the policies toward the Maya, the Belizean government has continued the educational policies of its predecessor. Under British rule, Christianity was a primary colonizing force as it taught correct behaviors as defined by the mores of Great Britain. Moreover, “Christian morals were used to justify British/white rule while simultaneously presenting the Indigenous people and African slaves as incapable of ruling themselves” (Relehan, 2008, p. 1). Relehan (2008) called these values the hidden curriculum of Belizean schools. Imperialistic curriculums have doomed many Indigenous people to fail in school as witnessed in more economically advanced countries, such as the United States, Canada, and New Zealand.

According to Relehan (2008), another important aspect of the hidden curriculum of these Christian schools is the reinforcement of traditional gender roles and keeping women only in “feminine” jobs, such as secretaries, nurses, and teachers. She noted that part of the function of the hidden curriculum is to control women’s sexuality. This control is carried out in the uniforms that girls in high school are required to wear: The uniforms are designed to de-emphasize any sexuality and some schools require teenage girls to wear shapeless white dresses. Additionally, any high school girl who might become pregnant is forced to drop out of school; no comparable pejorative action is taken against expectant fathers. Female instructors are not allowed to wear trousers. These policies follow the overall patriarchal role of British colonialism. One of the outcomes of these policies lies in one interesting statistic—while more girls than boys go to high school, women are not excelling in the work force (UNICEF, 2011).

This hidden curriculum has worked against the achievement of the Maya, particularly Maya women. In the creation story recorded in the *Popol Vuh*, a retelling of traditional Mayan texts that were destroyed by Spanish priests, creation occurs through the efforts of a female and male—Xpiyacoc and Xmucane, sometimes translated as “She who has borne children” and “He who has begotten sons” respectively (*Popol Vuh*, 2003, pp. 50-51). There is also archaeological evidence of female leaders (Emery, 2011). In Mesoamerican cosmology, men and women represent the duality of life in all its aspects: Christianity upset this balance in the daily lives of Maya (M. Garcia, personal communication, 23 May

2016). Current school curriculums, although revised during the past 15 years, do little to affirm this traditional viewpoint. Part of the problem lies in the persistent shortage of well-educated teachers (UNESCO, 2007), itself a possible result of a colonizing curriculum.

Curriculums that substitute a mythology for an actual history do considerable damage. In this case, part of the curriculum was that the Maya were not the original inhabitants of Belize. Maya, now adults, who came through Belizean schools using this curriculum are still hesitant to claim an Indigenous identity, pushing them further toward a Mestizo identity. This is particularly true in the western parts like Succotz and Benque Viejo, both villages once identified as Maya villages (Bolland, 2003). The story in the prologue of domestic abuse is all too typical for Maya women in Belize (McCluskey, 2001). As noted in the prologue and introduction, most Maya women fail to complete high school or escape the violence. Patterns of drinking and domestic abuse date back to the wage peonage era (Bolland, 2003; Shoman, 2011; Cal, 2013).

It is difficult not to think of this domestic violence as a microcosm of the violence that the Maya have historically endured in Belize. Much of the violence against Maya has been over land rights. As noted earlier, Maya were often forced to pay rent on land they were already occupying. Primarily because of the overarching patriarchy of the British system, Maya women rarely inherit property (M. Garcia, May 23, 2016). Muriel (2012) argued that the Maya could strengthen their land rights by having more women own land. In fact, this has already started happening. The Garcias, Yucatec Maya and well-known Maya healers, are landowners: Their father, a well-known and respected spokesperson for San Antonio village, Cayo, made sure that his five daughters as well as his sons inherited land. He further provided for the care of his wife for the rest of her life. In a recent confrontation over the desecration of sacred Maya ruins, the main spokesperson was Christina Coc from the village of Santa Cruz and the Maya Leaders Alliance (Culturalsurvival.org, 2015).

Lack of Education in the Maya Languages

Despite the overwhelming data supporting education via mother tongue (Ball, 2011), education in Belize is in English even though only 6% of the population speaks English as a first language. English as the language of instruction is another legacy of colonialism. In reality, most of the teachers are English as a second language speakers. Mr. Richard Peck, a grade school teacher from San Jose confirmed this in an interview when he “mentioned that when he was in high school, there was a certain discrimination against Indigenous students. Because of that, students were afraid of speaking their first language and wanted to fit in to Creole society by speaking Creole. Teachers also encouraged them to speak ‘English’, by which they actually meant Creole” (Tanaka, 2012, p. 10). As might be expected, there are few schools in Belize that provide education via any of the three Mayan languages in Belize: Yucatec Maya, Mopan Maya, and K’ekchi Maya.

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Sponsored by UNICEF, Aguacate Roman Catholic Primary School was founded in 2007. Its primary aim is to have more Maya children complete school by following the UN mandates on educating children in their native tongues. In this school, all teachers speak K'ekchi. One of the learning goals is for students to learn how to navigate two worlds successfully, the traditional Maya world and the contemporary world. One of the first actions at the school was to have the children wear their traditional dress: "The boys would wear embroidered sleeves, collar and button-band and the girls wore po'ot (a traditional Q'eqchi' blouse) and uk' (traditional skirt)" (UNICEF, 2011, p. 15). Teachers also wore culturally relevant clothing. In addition to training in traditional arts and music, children are taught to read and write K'ekchi. Parents and community were involved from its inception. Increasing test scores validate the success of this school. There is also a second such school at San Jose.

Tumul K'in is a non-governmental secondary residential school founded in 2002. It sits on 500 acres in Blue Creek, Toledo District. Tumul K'in is a Mopan Maya word, meaning "new day" (Tumul K'in, 2016). This coed school has equal numbers of boys and girls and offers Forms 1-4 (equivalent to grades 9 to 12). Students attend school for a cycle of ten days and go home for four days. They grow all their own food, which is prepared onsite in a traditional kitchen. The curriculum consists of academic subjects and Maya arts, music, and philosophy. Students attend classes from 10 AM to about 6 PM. Before a student can graduate, s/he takes a course in entrepreneurship. While some students do start their own businesses, just as many go on to tertiary education (V. Cal, personal communication, April 22, 2016). Since the school operates on a small grant from the Ministry of Education, it suffers from a chronic shortage of funds, making it difficult to recruit and keep teachers. Like the school at Aguacate, students wear traditional clothes as a uniform as do the teachers. The school serves both Mopan and K'ekchi students. Given the travel distance and the cost of traveling (the Yucatec Maya live in the north and west of Belize), few Yucatec Maya have attended the school.

Lack of education in Mayan languages threatens the survival of the Maya in Belize and the survival of the Mayan languages themselves. Mopan and Yucatec Maya speak related languages, but K'ekchi is part of the Q'uiiche Maya language family. In Toledo District, Tanaka (2011) found that many Maya language teachers were a mixture of Mopan and K'ekchi and grew up hearing both. Most language materials for all three languages are published either in Guatemala or Mexico with explanations in Spanish, making these materials inaccessible to Maya speakers in Belize although Tumul K'in has published a book on Mopan Maya. Teacher training in Mopan Maya has been delivered via la Academia de Lenguas Mayas de Guatemala in San Luis, Guatemala. In speaking with a Mayan basketmaker, she verified that Creole is the primary language at school and Maya is only used at home (T. Choc, personal communication, April 16, 2016). Most of the interviews in the Tanaka (2011) study professed that they did not feel they were fluent in Mopan.

What Needs to be Done

The future of the Maya in Belize resides in an improved educational system that reinforces Mayan languages and cultures. Unlike the systems in Canada and the United States for identifying Indigenous people, there are no rolls or record keeping by any government entities of who is Maya. There is only a self-identification, and the one aspect that determines that identity seems to be the ability to speak a Mayan language. For that reason, there needs to be more schools that teach Maya language and culture. In order for this to happen, more Maya speakers need to become trained as teachers. Additionally, materials in the three Mayan languages need to be developed. Today education for Maya reflects the on-going British colonial policies that are being perpetuated by the Belizean government.

The international community needs to provide continuing oversight to ensure that Maya rights are respected. Indeed, Belize only exists because of international sanctions as both Mexico and Guatemala still have territorial claims to parts of Belize (Shoman, 2011). Without the protection of Maya rights, Maya education will continue to suffer. The disenfranchisement of the Maya leaves them in poverty as well as without a political voice. The United Nations supports education in a child's mother tongue and cited the educational system of Belize for not supplying this opportunity (UNESCO, 2007). Existing Mayan language schools need additional financial support so that they can continue to be models for other schools.

In order to keep schools grounded in Mayan culture, the traditional role of Mayan women as propagators of culture needs to be acknowledged and reinstated, thereby decolonizing the curriculums. Studies have shown a positive correlation between a woman's educational level and the educational achievement of her children (Sewell & Shah, 1968; Chavallier, Harmon, O'Sullivan & Walker, 2013). This data strengthens the argument for providing a curriculum that affirms the Maya traditions. Currently, there is only one high school in Belize that does this, the Tumul K'in Learning Center, a co-ed boarding school where the role and importance of Maya women is stressed. This particular school currently operates without any additional funding except for the grant from the Ministry of Education. The dedicated staff is often overworked and underpaid. There are only two Maya bilingual/bicultural schools, and they are located in the southern part of the country. The remainder of the Maya children attend schools with teachers who lack sufficient, if any, linguistic training to meet the language needs of Maya students, and additionally have no cross-cultural teaching training. This training needs to be implemented immediately for all existing and future teachers if Maya children are to have a chance to succeed.

In the interim, Maya women are leading the way for change. The Garcia Sisters—five Yucatec Maya women who revitalized slate carving and Maya healing arts—are leading the way by holding public office in their respective villages and advocating for education in Mayan language and culture. When they were teenagers, Maya women did not go alone to Belize City, but their father allowed two of the five sisters to display their art. At that time, there really was

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no road from their village to Belize City. Since then, one sister has served on the council in her village and established a museum of Maya art and another is building a school to teach traditional Maya healing. In the south, Christina Coc, educated in biology and chemistry at University of Minnesota-Duluth, is a well-known spokesperson for the Mayan Leader Alliance. In addition to these women, there are many other less known women making changes: a basket-maker from Armenia who is working to expand her business with the support of her husband, the women's pottery co-op from San Antonio, Cayo District, and I am also reminded of the two women from the village of Santa Cruz who were selling baskets and textiles one Sunday morning in Punta Gorda to raise money for school tuition for their children. Maya women are already changing the educational futures of their children.

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