

THE MODERN MAYA AND RECENT HISTORY

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Top, Maya from the community of Indian Creek in Belize gather to hear news of a judgment on land rights. Bottom, the Cortez dancers—young girls and boys—take a break while performing an indigenous dance from the southern Belize region.

THE MAYA ARE GENERALLY thought of in relation to their distant past—a past of great cities with towering stone pyramids rising up out of dense jungle. Exploring further, one encounters a complicated writing system, beautiful pottery, carved stelae, and elaborate ceremonies and rituals. Indeed, the history of the Maya began in ancient times *ca.* 2000 BCE and has continued with many important cultural developments into the modern world today.

The Maya still live in their ancestral homelands in southern Mexico, Belize, Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras. In addition, local and world politics, along with current economic systems have resulted in the movement of some Maya people to southern California (San Diego and Los Angeles), San Francisco, Houston, Miami, Chicago, and many other parts of the world.

Several historical narratives have been commonly associated with the Maya, including the notion that the Maya no longer exist. One narrative explains that as the great cities of Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, and Belize collapsed and were abandoned (*ca.* 850–900 CE), the Maya people and culture disappeared. This abandonment, often thought of as one of the great mysteries of the ancient world, is frequently taught in schools, when students learn about the Americas prior to the arrival of the Europeans. In this narrative, the Maya are mixed together with the Aztecs, Incas, and other cultures of the ancient Americas. As the anthropologist Eric Wolf might say, they become a people without history.

The second narrative suggests that the collapse of the Maya cities of the southern lowlands was not the end of the Maya people or culture. Rather, the Maya of the Guatemala highlands



and of the northern lowlands, in the area of the Yucatan Peninsula, maintained their cultural traditions. During the Postclassic Period (*ca.* 900–1520 CE), important Maya centers—Chichen Itza and Mayapan in the north and Utatlan and Zaculeu in the Guatemala Highlands—continued to develop. These cities extended their influence beyond Central Mexico and were connected to the entire Mesoamerican world. However, by the time the Spanish arrived at the beginning of the 16th century, the Maya civilization had fragmented into many small city-states. With the appearance of the Spanish, disease rapidly depopulated the region and ultimately destroyed the Maya people.

A third account comes closest to what actually transpired. Even after the initial collapse in 850/900 CE, the subsequent fragmentation of their culture during the Postclassic period, and the destruction caused by the Spanish and by disease, the Maya continued to exist in Central America. But they were forced to convert to Catholicism, were seen as a faceless labor force, and were persecuted and made to live as a permanent underclass—first under Spanish control and later within the political systems of independent Central American nations. This narrative—of devastation by disease and persecution by Spanish conquistadors and modern governments—provides a framework for the lives of Maya people today. During the last 500 years, the Maya have been an underclass: oppressed by the Spanish, other Europeans, Ladinos (non-indigenous peoples of the region), and even by their own people.

Fortunately, this situation has begun to change. The Maya make up a majority of the population in Guatemala and have become important members of the political power structure. In addition, Maya men and women have been elected to the Belize National Assembly, and to governorships and other official political positions within the Mexican states in the Yucatan Peninsula. However, today in Chiapas, the Zapatista rebellion—focused on Maya self-determination throughout the region—continues in opposition to the political power in Mexico.

To illustrate the current situation within some Maya communities, we present two stories that illuminate the Maya struggle for self-identity as well as the fight for political, social, and economic power and self-determination. Both of these stories have roots that go back several hundred years.



Above, the Cortez dancers are named after Hernán Cortés, one of the Spanish conquistadors who colonized the Americas. Below left, the Tihosuco Church was partially destroyed during the Caste War, but its remains serve as a reminder of this period. Below right, a statue of Jacinto Pat, one of the first leaders of the rebellion, is located in the central plaza in Tihosuco.



REBELLION AND HERITAGE

As one travels around the Mexican states of Quintana Roo, Campeche, and Yucatan, almost every town and village show scars from the Caste War: the armed conflict and rebellion that began in the region around 1847 CE. One of the largest and most successful indigenous rebellions in the world, the Caste War extended into the 20th century and, in many respects, continues today. Within the main square of the small town of Tihosuco in Quintana Roo, the inner sanctuary of the church is open to the outside elements with a missing end wall and roof, destroyed during the rebellion. It remains unrepaired to serve as a reminder of the war. Nearby in this same square stands a



The “Talking Cross,” which energized those who fought in the Caste War, is now lost. However, the Shrine of the Talking Cross still stands in Felipe Carillo Puerto, formerly called Chan Santa Cruz.

statue of Jacinto Pat, one of the early leaders of the rebellion who was from Tihosuco. Pat is shown holding a sharpened machete ready for battle. Down the road in the neighboring town of Tepich, there is a statue of one of that town’s favorite sons, Cecelio Chi. And behind the town’s church is a walled cemetery with a plaque on the outside indicating the location of Chi’s grave.

Although common in the tourist centers of Cancun or Chichen Itza, statues of ancient Maya people are absent from Tihosuco and Tepich. In some towns there may be wall murals that celebrate the ancient Maya, but these are generally overshadowed by murals in public buildings showing the Maya during the time of rebellion and conflict. The Maya people of Yucatan are focused more on their recent history and attempts to regain power and self-determination than on their distant past. One might say that the ancient Maya are celebrated more for the tourism and economic clout they bring to the region, than for the role they play in providing cultural and social continuity to the modern Maya world.

The Caste War began on the dry limestone flats of the Yucatan Peninsula in the mid-19th century. The causes of the rebellion are numerous: internal Mexican politics, economic hardships of the Maya, repression exerted by Yucatecos (local population of European descent) over the Maya, and increased and constant taxation.

In 1847, as the Yucatecos debated aligning Yucatan with Mexico rather than creating an independent state, concern grew over the potential for an indigenous rebellion. Based upon this fear, a Yucateco army set fire to the town of Tepich, suspected to be one of the centers of the rebellion,



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MUSEO DE LA GUERRA DE CASTAS (CASTE WAR MUSEUM)

The Caste War Museum, created in 1993 by the government of the state of Quintana Roo, Mexico, is located in the town of Tihosuco about 70 kilometers south of Valladolid. It is focused on the presentation and preservation of the cultural heritage of the region. The museum exhibits Caste War artifacts, drawings, photographs, dioramas, and text panels. It presents the complex background and causes of the rebellion, leading directly to a discussion of the battles and the people of this time period. The Caste War Museum has become a focal point for cultural activities in the local community and it is part of the curriculum for local school groups.

and an indigenous leader, Manuel Antonio Ay, was captured and killed. Jacinto Pat and Cecelio Chi gathered men and resources at Culumpich, Pat’s hacienda, and on July 30, 1847, they attacked the Yucateco forces in Tepich.

In a letter from 1848, Jacinto Pat wrote:

It would be well if the lands of Yucatan were divided as you suggest to me because we are already tired of seeing so much death. For that reason we want peace, without being at war. It is because the whites began it, because



This is the original entrance arch to Culumpich, the hacienda of Jacinto Pat. Culumpich holds great significance to the modern Maya of this region.

what we want is liberty and not oppression, because before we were subjugated with the many contributions and taxes (pagos) that they imposed upon us. —*February 18, 1848 letter to John Kingdom and Edward Rhys of Belize, from Maya Wars, p. 51.*

And later, Pat described the situation that eventually led to war:

With great respect I wish to inform you that here in Yucatan we suffer the evils and harms of the Spanish. They kill the poor Indians as they kill animals, but not all the Spanish; they who did so were well known, whether great or small. For this cause the eastern Indians and all their companions in Yucatan rose up, but they did no harm to all the Spanish, only to those who were cruel to the Indians. Furthermore, for some time they have paid contributions but received poor treatment. —*July 11, 1848 letter to Modesto Mendez, from Maya Wars, pp. 55–56.*

Although multiple Maya factions worked in concert during the war, their forces were never truly united. By mid-1848, the Yucatan elite had been driven to Merida where preparations were being made to flee the peninsula, leaving it entirely in Maya hands. But soon thereafter the Maya withdrew and the Mexican/Yucateco forces regained control of much of the region. The reasons for the Maya retreat or defeat are unclear; scholars have argued that the Maya did not have the resources for a prolonged war or that their supply lines were stretched to the breaking point. And some have suggested that the Maya simply left the battlefield when it was time to plant their fields. Both Jacinto Pat and Cecilio Chi were killed, not in battle but

by internal, competing Maya factions as the Maya were pushed back.

In 1850, the Maya were nearly defeated and had been driven to the very edges of the region. However, in the forests of eastern Yucatan a new town at Chan Santa Cruz developed around the cult of the Talking Cross. This cross became the spiritual and military symbol for the Maya as they rebounded in battle. A small independent state was declared around Chan

Santa Cruz, and this entity and others remained outside the control of the Mexican government into the 20th century. Some would argue that the rebellion continues even today within the Yucatan. The Zapatista rebels of nearby Chiapas have indicated their strong connection to the rebellious past of the Yucatan. Also, many of the underlying causes for the Caste War still exist in the region.



No known photographs of Jacinto Pat exist. This drawing is commonly used to represent him.

PENN MUSEUM PROJECT IN TIHOSUCO

A cooperative project has been started in Tihosuco to focus on the identification and preservation of some of the important remaining artifacts and symbols of the Caste War. The project falls under the auspices of the Museo de la Guerra de Castas and the Penn Cultural Heritage Center of the Penn Museum and is initially focused upon the sites of Culumpich, Jacinto Pat's hacienda and the starting point for the rebellion, and the nearby town of La'al Kaj, abandoned during the rebellion. This project will identify and preserve these sites and associated artifacts. At the same time, it will evaluate the economic future of the region, creating a development model that will allow for both the economic sustainability of Tihosuco and the region, as well as Maya control of their heritage and their future.



TRADITIONAL MAYA LANDS IN SOUTHERN BELIZE

The second story of the modern Maya continues to play out today. The Maya people of southern Belize and the government of Belize are locked in a long-standing legal, political, and social fight about rights and the nature of identity in the 21st century. In 2007, the Maya people of southern Belize won a landmark legal case when the Supreme Court of Belize affirmed their rights to control traditional lands and the resources on and below those lands. This decision, based on the Constitution of Belize and relevant international law, provided for permanent control of a large swath of land in southern Belize by indigenous Maya people. This would benefit the Maya, allowing them to control external exploitation of the rainforest and other natural resources including lumber and oil.

A few months after the Supreme Court handed down this decision, the people of Belize went to the polls and elected a new national government. The Maya people, represented by the Maya Leaders Alliance and the Toledo Alcaldes Association, hoped that this new government would affirm the legal decision and would work to implement it. However, it rapidly became clear that the Belize government would appeal the decision.

A second, similar case was presented to the Belize Court in 2010. The government argued that the Maya of southern Belize—both Kekchi and Mopan—were relatively recent immigrants into Belize and therefore did not deserve this land any more than any other group in the country. Belize, according to this argument, was unpopulated in the 17th and 18th centuries and is therefore a country of recent immigrants.

But the Maya disagreed. As stated by Cristina Coc, then head of the Maya Leaders Alliance,

We have known from the outset that the government does not agree with us. We knew that they would fight us to the highest courts...the Prime Minister said that a few times publicly. So we anticipated coming back to the Court of Appeals. We're here to continue to defend our right to life...our right to those lands and resources that we call our home. We're here to continue to express our disappointment with how the government has violated our rights, with how the government has refused to respect and to recognize us as a people. Maya people are not asking for special rights. There is nothing special about Belizeans having a right to property and property of any kind. Maya people are Belizeans...and their rights need to be respected.—*March 17, 2011, Channel 5 Belize.*

The Belize land case goes back many years. Its roots can be found in the first attempt to organize the Maya of southern Belize in the 1970s and 1980s with the creation of the original Toledo Maya Cultural Council (TMCC) headed by Diego Bol and Primitivo Coc. As the Maya population began to grow within southern Belize, questions relating to land, control of resources, and long-term land preservation began to be asked.

In 1996, the TMCC, with Julian Cho at its head, filed a claim against the Belize government. This claim sought to provide title to traditional lands and resources, within the Toledo District, to the Maya people and communities. In addition, the claim challenged the constitutionality of the government's actions in granting concessions for logging or access to other resources on these lands. This was a direct challenge to the actions of the Belize Ministry of Natural Resources that had granted logging concessions for 500,000 acres of rainforest to two Malaysian companies.

This claim languished in the courts as the Attorney General for Belize never brought the case forward. In the meantime, the Maya submitted a petition to the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, requesting that the Commission either mediate a resolution or find that the government of Belize was in violation of human rights. When mediation failed, the Commission issued a final report in 2004 that clearly stated that the government had violated human rights laws and that indigenous peoples have collective property rights over traditional lands and resources. When this report brought no response from the government, the Maya people were forced to re-enter the Belize legal system, filing a grievance in 2007, as noted above. The court's landmark ruling in favor of the Maya, however, did not mark the end of this saga.

The second land case was heard at the beginning of 2010. And on June 28, 2010, the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court in Belize, Dr. Abdulai Conteh, affirmed the traditional land rights of the Maya people of southern Belize. He stated, "that Maya customary land tenure exists in all Maya villages in Toledo and where it exists, gives rise to collective and individual property rights under...the Belize Constitution" (Judgment of the Supreme Court of Belize, 2010). The Maya had won a second legal victory. As the original 1996 claim potentially had a major impact on logging within the proposed homeland in southern Belize, the 2010 decision affects recent petroleum concessions on this land granted by the government of Belize to an energy company from the United States, US Capital Energy.



Top, in 2008, a conference on Indigenous Perspectives on Cultural Heritage was held at the Penn Museum. Cristina Coc is seated in the middle (white blouse). Richard Leventhal is standing, second from left. Middle, Cristina Coc is one of several Maya leaders who are organizing the fight for control of traditional Maya lands in southern Belize. Bottom, Maya demonstrations in favor of land rights take place in Belize.

Louise Krasnewicz (top), Cristina Coc (middle), Richard M. Leventhal (bottom)

Even now, this dispute has not been resolved nor is it moving towards a mediated solution. Rather, the government has appealed the 2010 decision with hearings held in 2011. One last possibility exists to resolve this case—the Appeals Court of the Caribbean Court of Justice that, in 2001, replaced the Privy Council of the United Kingdom as the court of last appeal. The Maya people of southern Belize continue the struggle to gain control over the land and resources that were and are traditionally theirs. For the Maya this is a struggle for self-determination, cultural identity, and economic sustainability.



Millions of Maya people live in Central America and throughout the world. The Maya are not a single entity, a single community, or a single ethnic group. They speak many languages including Mayan languages (Yucatec, Quiche, Kekchi, and Mopan), Spanish, and English. However, the Maya are an indigenous group tied both to their distant past as well as to events of the last several hundred years. During their most recent history, the Maya have become an almost permanent underclass of the region. The future of the Maya is not based solely upon their past, but is organized around their desire for cultural and economic self-determination in the future. 🏠

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For Further Reading

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