

Chapter Title: Living on the Edge: The San Pedro Maya in British Honduras

Chapter Author(s): Brett A. Houk, Brooke Bonorden, Gertrude B. Kilgore, Tiffany C. Fryer and Kasey Diserens Morgan

Book Title: Coloniality in the Maya Lowlands

Book Subtitle: Archaeological Perspectives

Book Editor(s): Kasey Diserens Morgan, Tiffany C. Fryer

Published by: University Press of Colorado. (2022)

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctv33b9wwk.12>

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Brett A. Houk, Brooke Bonorden, and Gertrude B. Kilgore

Beginning in the 1850s, displaced Maya factions fled the violence of the Caste War (1847–1901) in Mexico and established several villages in the lightly populated forests of western British Honduras (now Belize) and the eastern Petén in what is today northern Guatemala (figure 7.1). Initially this group, collectively known as San Pedro Maya, retained their autonomy in northwestern British Honduras by remaining self-sufficient through milpa, or slash-and-burn, farmers (Ng 2007). However, British logging firms, who depleted mahogany resources along the Belize coast, began to operate farther into the interior of the colony around this same time. Conflicting uses of the landscape eventually led to clashes between San Pedro Maya and the loggers (Bonorden 2016). These clashes culminated in the 1867 Battle of San Pedro and Lieutenant Governor John Gardiner Austin’s delegitimization of San Pedro Maya claims to land in the area, which compelled Maya villagers to pay rent to farm the lands they occupied (Church, Yaeger, and Dornan 2011).

For that reason and others related to recognized “ownership” of lands inhabited by Maya, much of San Pedro Maya history in British Honduras is closely

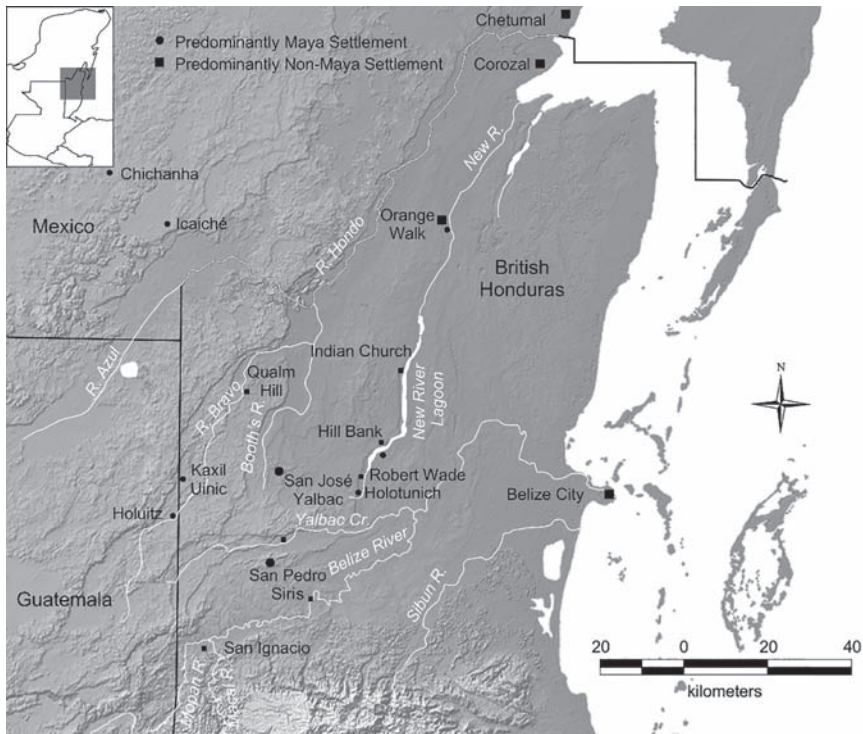


FIGURE 7.1. Map of selected late-nineteenth-century San Pedro Maya sites and non-Maya camps and towns in northern British Honduras. Base map courtesy NASA/JPL-Caltech, SRTM Mission. Site locations after Church, Yaeger, and Dornan (2011, fig. 9.1) and Jones (1977, map 5-1). Map by Brett A. Houk.

linked to that of the British Honduras Company (BHC)—a logging firm that owned most of the forested land in British Honduras north of the Belize River and west of Hill Bank Lagoon (figure 7.2). The BHC, which changed its name to the Belize Estate and Produce Company (BEC) in 1875, was a major landowner, employer, and political force in British Honduras for over a century, and its stranglehold on the rich mahogany forests—as well as the economy and labor force of the colony—still reverberates in Belize today.

As Diserens Morgan and Fryer (chapter 1 in this volume) assert, Maya groups across Central America were not passive recipients of colonialism. Recent archaeological research (Dornan 2004; Ng 2007; Church, Yaeger, and Dornan 2011; Bonorden 2016) further indicates the British did not wholly “incorporate” San Pedro Maya into the colonial economic and social structure of British Honduras following the Battle of San Pedro (cf. Bolland 2003). Rather, Maya communities selectively participated in the colonial cash economy as it suited

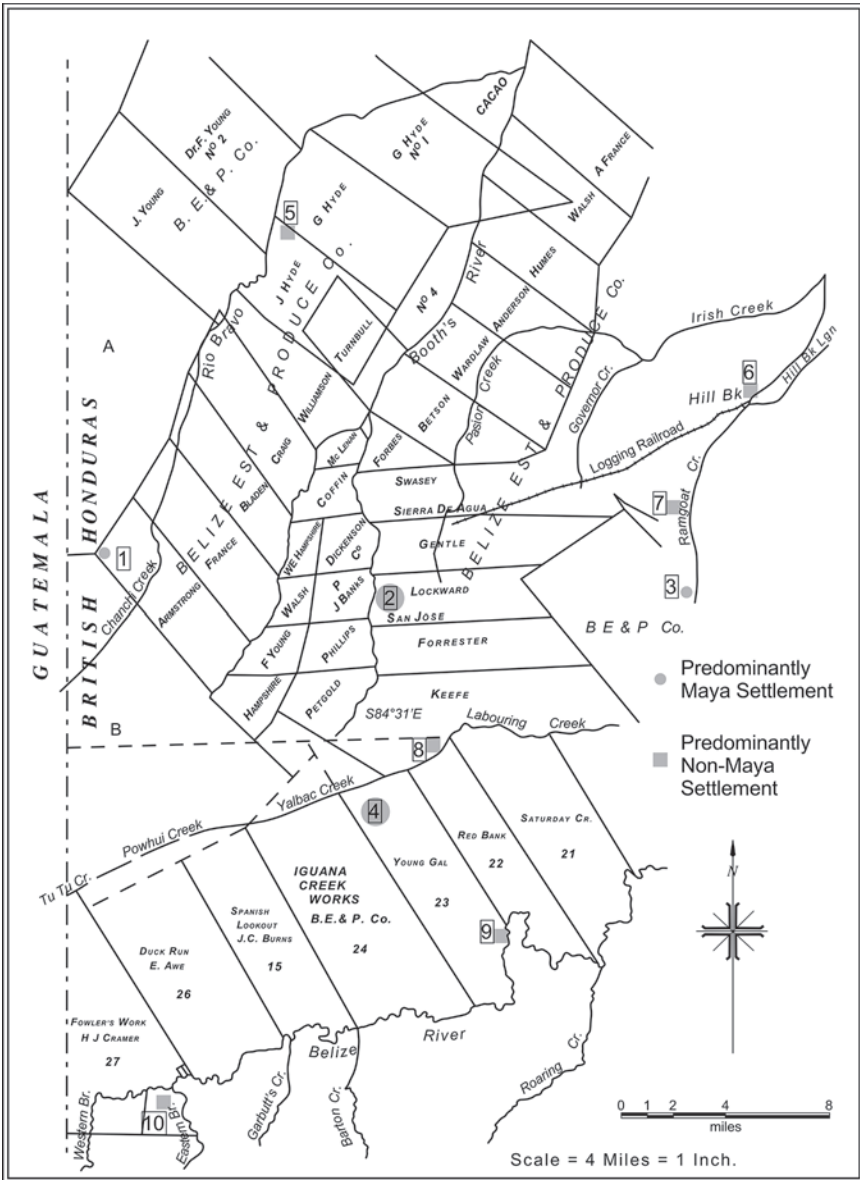


FIGURE 7.2. Map of Belize Estate and Produce Company Parcels in 1936 (Cook and Lee 1936) with approximate site locations added by authors. (1) Kaxil Uinic, (2) San José Yalbac, (3) Holotunich, (4) San Pedro Siris, (5) Qualm Hill, (6) Hill Bank, (7) Robert Wade, (8) Yalbac, (9) Young Gal, (10) San Ignacio. Redrawn by Brett A. Houk from photograph of original map. The typography has been changed, and a graphical scale has been added; both the spellings and map design are original.

their needs. Diserens Morgan and Fryer (chapter 1 in this volume) suggest that scholars must examine postcolonialism as a set of long-term, dynamic processes of social, economic, and political control in everyday relationships. This chapter, therefore, presents an examination of everyday life as it can be gleaned from the archaeological record at three San Pedro Maya villages: San Pedro Siris, Holotunich, and Kaxil Uinic. Considerations of the patterns of consumption and materiality observed within each village and the potential motivations for the acquisition of these commodities demonstrate the ways in which these individuals “lived their ethnicity” within and in spite of imposed colonialist systems (Church, Yaeger, and Dornan 2011).

San Pedro Maya occupied about twenty settlements dispersed throughout northwestern British Honduras and Guatemala (Jones 1977). They established San Pedro Siris first, and it grew to be the largest settlement. Although still on land controlled by the BHC, San Pedro Siris was fairly close to colonial settlements in the middle Belize River valley. Holotunich, meanwhile, is the easternmost San Pedro Maya settlement located south of Hill Bank Lagoon near several BHC/BEC facilities. Kaxil Uinic is similarly located on the periphery of the San Pedro Maya settlement cluster, situated near the border between British Honduras and Guatemala. Maya at San Pedro Siris interacted more frequently with colonial agents and colonists, while the residents of Holotunich and Kaxil Uinic had more limited interactions with loggers and BHC/BEC officials. A comparison of archival and archaeological data from these three sites emphasize the similarities and differences in the nature of San Pedro Maya interactions with colonial economic, political, and social structures at the settlement level. The quantity and variety of imported goods and arms, the presence and context of Catholic religious icons, and incorporation of Spanish or British institutions into San Pedro Maya society each reflect how the nature and degree of Maya interactions with their colonial counterparts varied from village to village. These glimpses of late colonial Maya life at the edge of the British Empire illustrate how each village served as a microcosm of the larger San Pedro Maya society.

Agency and Practice

As previously mentioned, recent research (Dornan 2004; Ng 2007; Church, Yaeger, and Dornan 2011; Bonorden 2016) indicates that San Pedro Maya acted strategically and intentionally to further their own agenda while navigating the political landscape of British Honduras during the Late Colonial period (1872–1900),¹ particularly with regard to the manufacture, adoption, and use of local or imported goods (Skibo and Schiffer 2008). The application of agency theory within these studies highlights the dialogic process through which individuals actively used material culture to negotiate cultural identity and status (Diserens Morgan and Fryer, chapter 1 in this volume; Stein 2005). Agency theory frames individuals as

“rational actors, maximizing some aspect of economic, political, or symbolic capital” (Silliman 2001, 192). Stephen Silliman (2001), however, suggests that we are not entirely the masters of our fate, as our decisions are only partly of our own making. When contextualized within the historical and social circumstances of a given time and place, social rules and limited access to resources can constrain or give rise to different opportunities (see Dedrick, McAnany, and Batún Alpuche, chapter 2 in this volume). Disjunction in practices is archaeologically visible and can be interpreted as contestations of “correct” representations of knowledge that inevitably arise in colonial contexts when groups are confronted with alternative versions of what they have long considered natural (Joyce and Lopiparo 2005).

Thus, a dialogue occurs between material culture and identity and between structure and agency as well (Giddens 1984). Social agents, Silliman (2001, 192) asserts, “are both constrained and enabled by structure.” In Silliman’s (2001) nuanced approach to agency theory, social negotiations transform the *doxa* (mundane activities of everyday life) within fluctuating contexts, as individuals attempt to forge residence within their social worlds—oftentimes in the face of oppression and domination (Dobres and Robb 2000; Silliman 2001). Individuals do not blindly follow customs but confront situations that call for conscious choices, like those created by the blurred lines of *doxa* in shifting colonial contexts (Cowgill 2000). As noted by Rosemary A. Joyce and Jeanne Lopiparo (2005, 371), “*doxa* is an abstraction always made visible either in the form of *heterodoxy* (a knowing break with that which is now viewed as obsolete tradition) or *orthodoxy* (a conscious rearticulation of what is viewed as valued tradition).”

An examination of the varying levels of interaction with the colonial economic, political, and social structures at San Pedro Siris, Holotunich, and Kaxil Uinic illustrates how each group adapted to the breakdown of the *doxa* of milpa—slash-and-burn—farming (and the autonomy that came with it), forging different alternatives and actively instituting societal change with varying political and economic sovereignty. As noted by Maxine Oland and Joel W. Palka (2016), different zones of colonial contact experience varying structural constraints, resulting in contrasting processes of subjugation, autonomy, and culture change. These varied processes and their effects are evident in the contrasting archaeological assemblages present at San Pedro Siris, Holotunich, and Kaxil Uinic, where requirements to pay land rent in colonial currency catalyzed a shift in Maya labor away from subsistence activities and into commercial production, similar to the Colonial period (ca. 1540 to 1821) *visita* (subject town) of Tahcabo in the Yucatán, where the burden of church and state-imposed taxes precipitated Maya involvement in wage labor to acquire currency (Dedrick, McAnany, and Batún Alpuche, chapter 2 in this volume). Viewing each San Pedro Maya site mentioned at the beginning of this chapter as a microcosm of the larger,

shared San Pedro Maya experience and, simultaneously, unique archaeological manifestations of agency and practice, offers an opportunity to reconsider the traditionally monolithic meaning of “the colonial Maya” and the assumption that the dynamics of their relationships with colonists were uniform or their motivations consistent across villages (Oland and Palka 2016). Each village strategically confronted the changing doxa within the parameters of their unique relationship with the colonial system.

A Brief History of Economic, Political, and Social Interactions in Northwestern British Honduras

The scope of this chapter precludes a detailed account of the Caste War (see Reed 1964; Bricker 1981; Rugeley 1996; Sullivan 1989; Alexander 2004, 15; also, Fryer [chapter 5]; Badillo Sánchez [chapter 6]; and Meierhoff [chapter 8], this volume) but warrants a brief summary as it relates to the formation of San Pedro Maya communities. As political turmoil engulfed the Yucatán with the outbreak of the Caste War in 1847, a group of approximately 1,000 Maya splintered from a larger group of “Pacíficos del Sur”—Southern Pacifists who had come to oppose the direction in which the war was going—and moved into territory claimed by Guatemala and British Honduras between 1857 and 1862 (Dumond 1977, 113). Of these initial migrants, 350 resided in the principal village of San Pedro Siris, the largest of the San Pedro Maya settlements (Dumond 1977; Bolland 2003). O. Nigel Bolland (2003) asserts that British authorities and logging firms initially encouraged San Pedro settlement in the remote region, as these entities viewed Maya settlers as a potential source of cheap labor for agricultural development in the face of lagging mahogany exports. Through time, though, conflicts emerged between San Pedro Maya and their colonialist logging counterparts over the two groups’ incompatible uses of resources in the forests of northwestern British Honduras. Compounding the situation was widespread disagreement and confusion over the northern and western boundaries of the colony, which led to claims by Maya refugees that the loggers were cutting trees on Mexican territory and subsequent demands for rent by Icaiché Maya, a more belligerent Yucatec Maya faction living in Mexico (see Kray, Church, and Yaeger 2017; for earlier accounts of the logging competition between British settlers, Spanish settlers, and Maya see García Lara and Olán, chapter 4 in this volume). In April 1866, Icaiché factions raided a BHC logging camp called Qualm Hill, taking a number of hostages (Camara 1866).

The raid on Qualm Hill ultimately served as a catalyst for a brief confrontation between British troops and San Pedro Maya on December 21, 1866, which began with the arrival of forty-two men from the Fourth West Indian Regiment, under the command of Major MacKay, at San Pedro Siris. According to Lieutenant Colonel Robert William Harley (1867), the regiment was quietly

José Yalbac, Chunbalche, and other small villages in what became known as the Battle of San Pedro (Jones 1977). Harley's troops burned all the buildings and milpas in these villages, but John Gardiner Austin (1867b) reveals that most Maya living in the settlements had retreated prior to the arrival of British troops and no actual combat occurred. Captain John Carmichael led a final mission to destroy additional San Pedro Maya settlements, ultimately pushing Maya back across the border into the Yucatán in February of 1867 (Carmichael 1867; Jones 1977). It is at this juncture in the narrative of San Pedro Maya–British colonialist relations that we turn our focus specifically to the village of San Pedro Siris and how the Battle of San Pedro transformed the interactions between the residents and the colonial economic, political, and social structures in British Honduras.

San Pedro Siris

Under the direction of Richard Leventhal, Jason Yaeger, and Minette Church, archaeologists working with the San Pedro Maya Project (SPMP) conducted excavations at San Pedro Siris over four field seasons from 2000 to 2003 (Dornan 2004, 13; Yaeger et al. 2004a, 2004b; Church, Yaeger, and Dornan 2011; Kray, Church, and Yaeger 2017;). The village of San Pedro Siris occupied an agriculturally productive and reasonably defensible area with smaller hamlets clustered around its periphery (Dornan 2004). The village center had a church, fiesta house, jail, and other government buildings, and probably contained about fifty residential structures to support a population of 300 to 400 individuals (Dornan 2004; Yaeger et al. 2004a). Archaeological investigations at the village site identified a cobble walkway, a yard, several rock piles, a trash toss zone, and a possible animal pen (Dornan 2004; Yaeger et al. 2005). The archaeological remains at the site, as evidenced by the recovery of incendiary rockets used in the battle (Kray, Church, and Yaeger 2017), most clearly represent the period following the Battle of San Pedro and the reoccupation of San Pedro Siris (Church, Yaeger, and Dornan 2011).

As the head village of the larger San Pedro Maya community, San Pedro Siris was the epicenter of the San Pedro political-military hierarchy and in certain circumstances possessed the authority to dictate the affairs of all twenty villages within the settlement area (Jones 1977; Dornan 2004). As noted by Minette Church et al. (2011), both pre-Columbian political entities and nineteenth-century Mexican militias inspired San Pedro Maya village political organization. Prior to the Battle of San Pedro, the colonial administration in British Honduras officially recognized Asunción Ek, *comandante* (commander) of San Pedro Maya communities, as the *alcalde* (mayor) of San Pedro Siris (Dumond 1997). The *alcalde* system benefited Maya, who applied the political institution by modifying the traditional Maya position of the *batab*, or town leader. The system also benefited the colonial government, as it made British rule cheaper and more

effective in rural areas because these leaders were essentially unpaid officers serving as an extension of the colonial government. The compliance of *alcaldes* within the administrative hierarchy of British Honduras, therefore, is a point of negotiation within the fractured *doxa* of Maya political organization during the Late Colonial period. Although San Pedro Maya likely contested any notion of “incorporation” into the social structure of British Honduras due to the implied loss of autonomy and identity associated with the term, the concept of a hierarchical political system was acceptable as a modification of older Maya political structures. Additionally, the *alcalde* system served as a buffer between Maya and more direct forms of colonial control, allowing the group to maintain a greater sense of autonomy at the village level (Bonorden 2016).

Upon receiving his commission from the colonial administration, *Alcalde Ek* promptly requested munitions to defend the British territory and the establishment of a school at San Pedro Siris (Dumond 1997). Minette Church, Yaeger, and Dornan (2011) assert that British authorities, though initially reluctant to arm San Pedro Maya, did so with the intention that the group would serve as a buffer between the rest of the colony and other, less amiable Maya factions who were still fighting their war to the north. The SPMP recovered a variety of arms from the site, including flint-lock rifles predating 1850 and British Enfield rifles, which Lieutenant Governor Austin likely supplied to San Pedro Maya in 1866 (Austin 1866; Church, Yaeger, and Dornan 2011, 182). Differential access to such highly coveted imported goods, to which the villages established after the Battle of San Pedro (such as *Kaxil Uinic*) did not have access, may explain why the residents of San Pedro Siris more readily accepted colonial institutions (like the school) in the village as a leverage point of negotiation.

According to Christine Kray, Church, and Yaeger (2017), the colonial government funded schools in major San Pedro Maya villages, but the Catholic Church actually administered them. While the archives are silent on whether or not the colony ever built *Ek*'s requested school, archaeological evidence suggests that one may have been present. The SPMP discovered toys, including tea sets and dolls, inkwells, and other items possibly associated with a school at San Pedro Siris (Dornan 2004, 215; Church, Yaeger, and Dornan 2011, 190).

The Catholic Church was “fundamental to the extension and establishment of colonial power” in British Honduras (Wainwright 2016, 7). Both the church and the colony sought power over Maya, though their methods of and motivations for achieving this goal greatly varied. The “hidden curriculum” of religious-based education sought to reinforce and justify British control of British Honduras, reifying the social order within the colony (Lewis 2000; Relehan 2008). Even though British Honduras was a Protestant settlement, the Catholic Church had a strong presence in the colony, which was essentially surrounded by countries and colonies rooted in Spanish Catholicism. Jennifer Dornan (2004, 152) reports, “There is

archaeological and archival data to support the idea that the inhabitants of San Pedro were catholic [*sic*]." Archaeologically, this evidence is the form of "numerous Catholic religious pendants" and "imported religious icons, specifically crucifixes, in domestic contexts" (Church, Yaeger, and Dornan 2011, 189). Dornan (2004, 152) also notes that San Pedro Maya allowed a Catholic priest to enter the village during the period of armed conflict between Ek's militia and the colonial regiment, indicating "some level of trust in the church." Church, Yaeger, and Dornan (2011, 189) caution that "the exact nature of San Pedro villagers' faith, given their tumultuous Caste War history, is unclear," and Dornan (2004, 153) warns against assumptions that the adoption of certain Catholic symbols equates with "a failure of indigenous agency." As Elizabeth Graham, Scott Simmons, and Christine White (2013) note with regard to Maya religiosity during the Spanish conquest (ca. 1500), changes manifested in the archaeological record reflect the active involvement of Maya in refashioning the cosmos and their place in it. We conversely assert that, though religious innovations (such as adopting aspects of Catholicism after the Spanish conquest) do demonstrate the exercise of agency, the continuation of such practices (i.e., maintaining a Catholic faith within Protestant Belize), when a changing social structure (i.e., the Anglican Church) challenged the religious doxa, also serves as evidence of agency through action.

Dornan (2004) notes that the Late Colonial period following the Battle of San Pedro was a time of increasing ethnic confusion as distinctions between the social categories of "Indian," "Mestizo," and "Ladino" broke down because various groups frequently divided and coalesced in strategic alliances, morphing to adapt to the changing political landscape. Harrison-Buck and colleagues (2019) have recently explored the interactions of colonialists, San Pedro Maya, Creole loggers, and ex-Confederates, whom Lieutenant Governor Austin actively recruited to settle in Belize to spur agriculture and act as an additional buffer against San Pedro Maya following the 1867 battle. Eleanor Harrison-Buck and colleagues' (2019) study concludes that these groups had extremely fluid political and economic agendas, seizing on economic opportunity despite blatantly subverting established protocol, especially with regard to the sale of restricted arms and ammunition. In addition, with British and American technologies widespread, a comingling of "traditional" and colonial goods, beliefs, and practices occurred in the colony.

At San Pedro Siris, challenges to the accepted doxa of foodways precipitated more negotiations of identity. San Pedro Maya found their subsistence practices altered by the prescriptions of colonial institutions, resulting in a reliance on foreign goods that San Pedro Maya could not manufacture. Archaeological evidence from San Pedro Siris indicates the residents served and ate food with bowls and plates imported from England but cooked those same foods in ceramic vessels that were either locally produced or imported from the Yucatán (Dornan 2004; Church, Yaeger, and Dornan 2011). This concurrent use of locally produced and

imported vessels is either a reflection of the San Pedro desire to utilize more efficient and effective technologies while maintaining traditional foodways or an effort to consciously manipulate status and identity markers within their local community (Dornan 2004). The inhabitants of San Pedro Siris chose which types of imported vessels to use, selecting types they could incorporate into traditional food preparation and serving techniques (Leventhal, Yaeger, and Church 2001; Church, Yaeger, and Dornan 2011). The lack of flatware found at the site, for example, indicates that San Pedro Maya chose to use tortillas as scoops rather than adopting metal utensils (Yaeger et al. 2004b). It is possible that the inhabitants of San Pedro Siris consciously negotiated food preparation methods while still striving to maintain a distinct Maya identity with regard to what food they actually consumed. Such choices around food consumption and preparation represent active materializations of Native identity in this context, rather than “passive vestiges” of ancient traditions (Silliman 2001, 203). Foodways, as an inherently social phenomenon, solidify group membership and provide distinguishing characteristics between groups (Jaffe, Wei, and Zhao 2018), and the maintenance of group identity via foodways offered a reprieve from the multitude of changing doxa that confronted San Pedro Maya.

While blending traditional foods with imported food-processing techniques and serving goods caused minor changes to San Pedro Maya lifeways and created a new *heterodoxy* of foodways, the necessity of paying rent to BEC more profoundly affected San Pedro doxa for subsistence. Ethnographic accounts collected by the SPMP reveal that, at least in the early twentieth century, villagers worked as loggers or as *chicleros* to earn money to pay their rent (Kray et al. 2017, 65). The process of chicle extraction, preparation, and transport is described in detail by Mathews, Gust, and Fedick (chapter 10 in this volume). Several of the “cooking cauldrons” from San Pedro Siris shown in Kray and colleagues (2017, fig. 4.5c) are actually chicle-boiling pots, identical to those we recovered at Kaxil Uinic (discussed in the subsection “Kaxil Uinic”). Villagers also interfaced with the loggers by trading agricultural products for salt pork and wheat flour (Kray et al. 2017, 65). At San Pedro Siris, then, it appears that residents were still able to negotiate their place within the developing colonial system rather successfully, adapting aspects of their social organization and daily practices to “maintain lifeways associated with their lived ethnicity” in the face of constant change (Church et al. 2011, 191), albeit within the somewhat limited realm of possibilities created by the colonial structure.

Holotunich

San Pedro Maya settled the hamlet of Holotunich in the tumultuous political landscape that precipitated the Battle of San Pedro and occupied the site until about 1893. Olivia Ng (2007, 2010; Thornton and Ng Cackler 2013) located and

investigated the site in 2006 as part of her dissertation research. With influence from Icaiché, Holotunich initially served as a base camp for Maya to collect rent money from British loggers, helping to maintain the spatial extent of San Pedro Maya control by acting as a boundary marker for their landholdings (Ng 2007, 26). Described by Lieutenant M. B. Salmon in his 1876 reconnaissance report of the village (quoted in Jones 1977; Ng 2007; and Ng 2010), Holotunich consisted of 12 houses that could not contain more than 8 families, or approximately 30 to 50 people. Located on a small and defensible hill near Ramgoat Creek, the settlement occupied a position closer to the British logging works at Hill Bank, Robert Wade Camp, and David O'Brien's Bank, relatively far from the other San Pedro Maya villages in its settlement cluster. Established on the periphery of both San Pedro Maya and British spheres of influence, Holotunich was central to struggles and negotiations of power between these two groups (Ng 2007).

Reoccupation of Holotunich by BEC after San Pedro Maya had abandoned the village complicated Ng's (2007) attempts to isolate the Maya component of the site. However, she did document five features that she interpreted to be Maya architectural remains (Ng 2007, 127), including one that closely resembles a cobble platform and walkway documented at San Pedro Siris (Dornan 2004; Yaeger et al. 2005, 260–261). In general, Ng (2007) identified the structures based on lines of cobbles, which she interpreted as the bases of walls. Artifactual remains clearly associated with San Pedro Maya occupation and these structures, however, could not be isolated. The continuation of traditional construction techniques at Holotunich despite proximity and exposure to alternative methods via the loggers at David O'Brien's Bank indicates the *orthodoxy* of the practice. Constrained by their limited ability to acquire cash, Alyssa Brooke Bonorden (2016) asserts, San Pedro Maya often chose not to purchase items for which they could freely acquire substitutes. The continuation of traditional building practices, therefore, represents an exercise of agency within this context.

The potential for mixing between the two occupational components of Holotunich also hindered Erin Kennedy Thornton and Ng Cackler's (2013, 373) faunal analysis, but their study did conclude that "jute, fish, armadillo, paca, and peccary" occurred more frequently in deposits likely associated with San Pedro Maya occupation. Bird, domestic pig, and deer bones occurred in both the San Pedro Maya and later BEC components (373). While bones from domesticated animals occurred in the San Pedro Maya component of the assemblage, in general the preference appeared to be for wild species and the maintenance of traditional subsistence practices, with the opposite trend characterizing the later BEC occupation (374–375).

The artifactual data from Holotunich is of limited value because of the potential for the mixing of stratigraphic contexts; the long manufacture ranges of most glass, metal, and ceramic objects; and the lag between artifact manufacture

and deposition. Ng (2007, 296) proposed that the following materials were likely associated with San Pedro Maya occupation of the site because similar objects were found at San Pedro Siris: “accordion parts, [a] rosary, [a] crucifix, black glass bottles, ceramic doll parts, tobacco pipes, and cast-iron pots.”

Ng (2007, 316) suggests that daily life for residents of Holotunich “at the defining edge of San Pedro Maya power appeared to be fraught with tension and negotiation.” As she observes, Maya at Holotunich were geographically farther from the closest Maya village than they were from the nearest non-Maya settlement, a logging camp at David O’Brien’s mahogany bank, which was less than a mile away. Facing pressures from other San Pedro Maya as well as the Icaiché, the villagers at Holotunich balanced the need to represent Maya interests—including those of the Icaiché who repeatedly claimed that Mexico owned all the territory west of the New River Lagoon (Church et al. 2019)—while coexisting with the nearby logging camps (Ng 2007, 317).

Kaxil Uinic

Of the three sites we are examining, Kaxil Uinic, was situated the farthest from colonial settlements, and as such the residents there likely had the least direct contact with non-Maya actors under normal circumstances. The village was settled in the 1880s and occupied for nearly fifty years until the BEC closed it and forcibly relocated the residents to San José Yalbac in 1931 (Jones 1977, 161–162). Brett A. Houk (2012) first identified the village location based on reports from employees of the nearby Chan Chich Lodge, and Bonorden subsequently conducted survey, mapping, and excavations over the course of two seasons, in 2015 and 2016 (Bonorden and Kilgore 2015, 2016; Bonorden 2016; Bonorden and Houk 2019). Situated 1.85 km east of the border between Belize and Guatemala, the surviving archaeological footprint of the village includes glass bottles, metal objects, and rock clusters scattered around a small *aguada*, or waterhole (figure 7.4, “bottle scatter” and “surface finds”). Contrary to reports by Jones (1977, 161), we found that the site is located approximately two kilometers west of Chan Chich Creek—its *aguada* is key to confirming the site’s location since J. Eric S. Thompson (1963, 233) sketched the village and its “waterhole” in 1931, shortly after it was abandoned.

Based on a handful of archival accounts, we know that Kaxil Uinic had an *alcalde*, a physical council house (Colonial Secretary [1931] 1991), and approximately twenty “huts” (Thompson 1963, 233), suggesting a population of approximately 120 people (Bonorden 2016, 359). Although distance isolated Kaxil Uinic from the colonial government, footpaths through the forest connected Kaxil Uinic to the outside world: paths ran to Icaiché in the north, San José Yalbac in the southeast (Jones 1977), Yaloch in Guatemala to the southwest, and the Petén region to the west (Miller 1887). The archival record suggests that the village had strong Icaiché

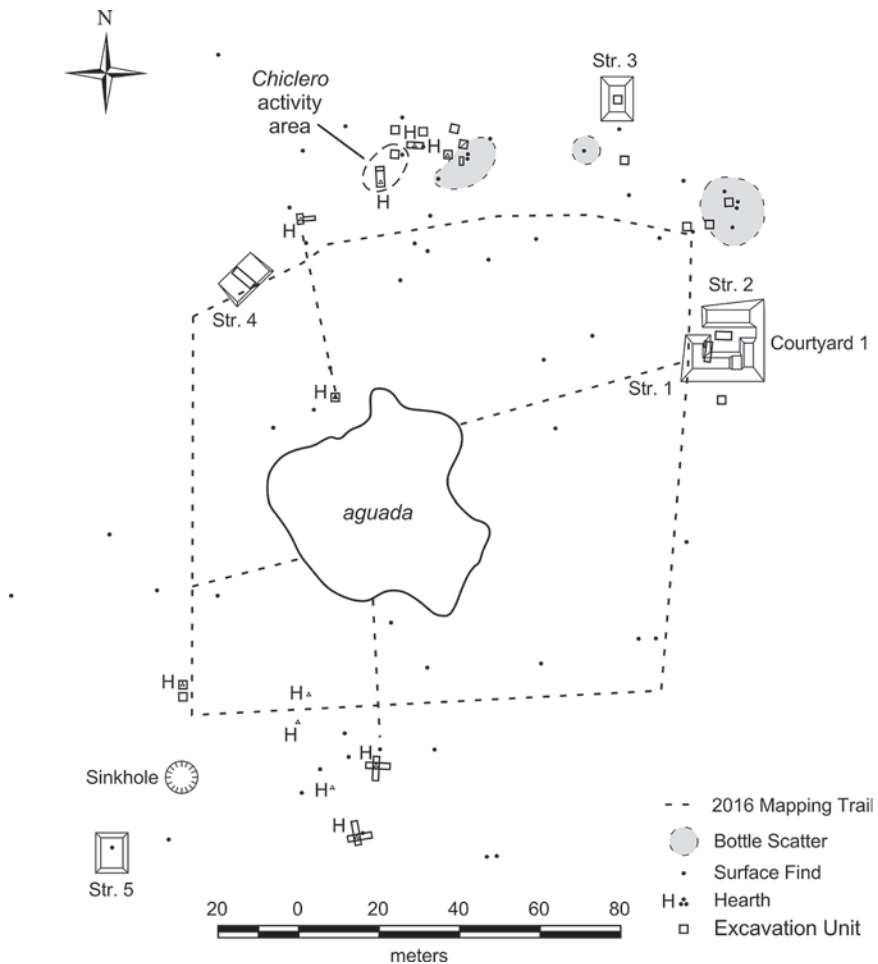


FIGURE 7.4. *Kaxil Uinic site map showing hearths, surface collections, artifact clusters, and structures. Map drawn by Brett A. Houk.*

leanings in the 1880s. J.P.H. Gastrell (1886) wrote to the Earl of Rosebery that the “Ycaiché Indians” “[kept] their power or jurisdiction to nearly as far south as Garbutt’s Falls and control . . . Xaxa Venic [Kaxil Uinic] which [was then] supposed to be within [the] Belize frontier.” The *alcalde* of the village, Antonio Baños, reportedly considered his village to be in Mexican territory (Bolland 2003) and displayed strong Icaiché sympathies the same year (Jones 1977).

During the 2015 and 2016 field seasons, we identified 10 three-stone hearths similar to those identified by Meierhoff (chapter 8 in this volume) at Tikal, and 66 isolated surface artifacts or artifact scatters at Kaxil Uinic. During this time,

we opened thirty excavation units. Over the course of this two-year project, Bonorden and Gertrude Kilgore (2015, 2016) analyzed 5,320 artifacts from the site. We interpret each three-stone hearth to represent the location of a residential structure based on work done at the Caste War Maya village at Tikal by Hattula Moholy-Nagy (2012) and James Meierhoff (2015, 2017, chapter 8, this volume). Several excavated hearths sat on prepared marl floors, and excavations encountered similar marl surfaces associated with dense artifact scatters, but not hearths. We encountered no postholes, which is not surprising given the environmental conditions, but the prepared marl surfaces are likely architectural (Bonorden 2016). Based on the distribution of known hearths (see figure 7.4), Bonorden and Kilgore (2016, 92) proposed that the village may have been divided into two distinct clusters of families, one on the northern side of the aguada and the other on the southern side. The lack of window glass and nails suggests pole and thatch house construction, like the “huts” depicted in Thompson’s (1963) sketch.

In the assemblage, Bonorden and Kilgore (2016) found a few shotgun shells, one bullet casing, and one shotgun stock. Because San Pedro Maya first settled Kaxil Uinic in the 1880s, after Lieutenant Governor Austin had restricted the sale of weapons and ammunitions to them, a lack of easy access to firearms explains the relative dearth of such artifacts. This finding stands in stark contrast to the early component at San Pedro Siris (Church, Yaeger, and Dornan 2011) but aligns with the findings at Holotunich, where Ng (2007) found ammunition that post-dated San Pedro Maya occupation of the site.

Several artifacts provide glimpses into both daily life at the village and access to European goods: seven clay pipe fragments, a small metal brooch, a metal religious pendant apparently depicting a Catholic saint, a shell comb, shell and bone buttons, and a Guatemalan one-half real coin dated to 1900. Many of the imported items, however, relate to food preparation and/or serving: metal corn grinders, ceramic and metal serving dishes, metal cooking pots, metal cans, and glass bottles. Bonorden and Kilgore (2016, 129) note that the villagers used most of the European items in the perpetuation of local practices, often alongside traditional food preparation methods (such as stone metates). The significance of heirloom “technologies of self,” including *metates*, is described in greater detail by Fryer (chapter 5 in this volume). This intentional decision to adopt certain colonial technologies, such as metal corn grinders and pots, to prepare and cook food more efficiently but eschew other things, such as metal forks and spoons, in favor of traditional methods of consuming food, mirrors the pattern seen at San Pedro Siris. In addition, this practice reinforces the notion that as social agents, the villagers chose to perpetuate their traditional foodways despite pressure from and access to colonial technologies (Church, Yaeger, and Dornan 2011, 188).

The faunal assemblage from excavations at the village includes peccary, domesticated pig, deer, turkey, and river turtle bone (Bonorden 2016, 368). These

remains align with William Miller's (1887, 422) observations, made while cutting a transect along the border with Guatemala, that Maya villagers here "raise[d] pigs and fowls" in addition to growing "maize, rice, and beans." The lack of cow bones at Kaxil Uinic may reflect either a disdain for cattle among San Pedro Maya—Asunción Ek, alcalde of San Pedro Siris, had once formally complained to the colonial government that the logger's cattle wreaked havoc on their milpas (Cal 1991, 249–250; Dumond 1997, 276; see also Kray, Church, and Yaeger 2017, 59)—or a lack of access to cattle given the village's distance from colonial settlements.

As with San Pedro Siris, the archaeological and archival records suggest that the villagers at Kaxil Uinic engaged in commercial activities to earn cash to pay their rents. Gust (chapter 9 in this volume) asserts that by capturing the means of production (i.e., milpa farmland in this instance), elites, such as the colonial administration in British Honduras, created a workforce "that had no option other than selling their own labor power by working the lands and equipment of others." In the case of Kaxil Uinic, this meant that San Pedro Maya engaged in the colonial economy as *chicleros* to obtain cash and thus access to the means of production (the land). Bonorden and Kilgore (2016) documented an apparent *chiclero* activity area at Kaxil Uinic, marked by machetes, *chiclero* spurs, a shotgun stock, and *chicle* boiling pots (figure 7.5; see figure 7.4). Harrison-Buck and colleagues (2019) suggest that *chicle* tapping may have been adopted rather easily into the villagers' normal routine of hunting and gathering in the forests of northwestern Belize and eastern Petén. As Thompson (1963) remarked, however, by the 1930s this shift had a profound effect on San Pedro Maya. Speaking specifically about the village of San José Yalbac, Thompson (1963, 155) noted, "Practically all the beans and much of the maize were brought in from the outside, because so many of the men were away *chicle* bleeding that they could not make milpa." While the initial move to *chicle* tapping was a response to the need for cash, it ultimately marked a break in the accepted *doxa* of milpa farming as the primary means of subsistence. Turning to *chicle*, as Thompson (1963, 155) described, left Maya communities "uprooted." Like the colonial frontier settlement of Tihosuco in the Yucatán (see García Lara and Olán, chapter 4 in this volume), Kaxil Uinic was located on the edge of the colonial empire, which led to the creation of (sometimes illicit) subsystems between peoples from different nations (e.g., *chicle* smuggling from Guatemala to British Honduras) who maintained facets of their group identities but also adopted new characteristics.

It also appears that perhaps the villagers became overly zealous in their *chicle* harvesting; Thompson (1963, 6) noted that BEC closed the village in 1931 "because it was believed to be a center of *chicle* smuggling." Combined, the archaeological data and limited archival information depict Kaxil Uinic's residents as largely maintaining traditional Maya lifeways, particularly in terms of



FIGURE 7.5. Artifacts related to chicle harvesting and processing from Kaxil Uinic. (A) fragment of a chicle pot (Spec. #KUV1497-01), (B) chiclero spur (Spec. #KUV1634-01). Photographs by Brooke Bonorden.

house construction, subsistence, political organization, and food preparation. They did so despite the pressures of demands for rent payments, which necessitated participation in the chicle industry. Thus, the residents of Kaxil Uinic demonstrated their agency by perpetuating their lived ethnicity in many facets, and when confronted by a *heterodoxy*, they pursued the subsistence strategy most similar to the previously prescribed *doxa*.

Discussion

The archival and archaeological data from San Pedro Siris, Holotunich, and Kaxil Uinic provide three glimpses into the lived experiences of the communities collectively known as San Pedro Maya following the Battle of San Pedro. The three sites' locations afforded different opportunities for interaction with other Maya groups, English/European colonists, and other subaltern groups including Creole loggers and ex-Confederate immigrants at different chronological intervals (see Harrison-Buck et al. 2019). The archaeological records at the three sites show some compelling similarities while concurrently reflecting different levels of interaction with colonial structures. While Maya at San Pedro Siris and Kaxil Uinic clearly acquired items of personal adornment and religious affiliation—such as European clothing, jewelry, crucifixes and pendants, and modern food preparation tools and techniques—these items do not reflect incorporation of Maya communities into the colonial social structure,

but rather denote the adoption of certain technologies and symbols into traditional Maya lifeways. As Church, Yaeger, and Dornan (2011, 194) observe, San Pedro Maya were “free to use the income they obtained . . . to buy goods they desired to enhance life in their chosen place: musical instruments, sewing machines, perfume, toys, decorated ceramics, jewelry, and more.” Despite having access to European construction technologies, Maya at Kaxil Uinic, and presumably San Pedro Siris and Holotunich as well, continued to build their houses as they had done for millennia, using marl floors and pole and thatch superstructures centered on three-stone hearths. Domestic pigs may have largely replaced peccaries as a protein source, but Maya residents prepared and consumed them in traditional ways (i.e., *pibil* style), alongside corn, beans, and squash grown in milpas. Machetes eventually replaced stone tools for clearing those milpas, and at San Pedro Siris perforated metal cans replaced baskets or cloth pouches for sowing seeds, but the villagers continued to grow traditional crops of maize, beans, and squash, alongside sweet potato, jicama, spices, fruit trees, and possibly tobacco (Kray, Church, and Yaeger 2017, 61). What is missing from the archaeological record at the three sites—cow bones, large quantities of canned foods, and flatware—also reveals a preference for traditional foods and foodways. In other words, the material record at the three sites reflects the choices made by individuals toward maintaining a common and persistent group identity.

Barnet Pavao-Zuckerman and Diana DiPaolo Loren (2012, 200) note in their study of foodways at a Spanish Colonial presidio on the isolated east Texas frontier that “the power of individuals to express social identity via material means was sometimes limited by the economic parameters of frontier life,” and thus “multiethnic communities on colonial frontiers provide an important opportunity to examine the construction and expression of social identities and social difference in a setting in which individuals were both influenced by social hierarchies and limited in their ability to access the material trappings of preferred styles.” The same can be said for the three San Pedro Maya villages included in this study, which were located on the frontier of two colonial spheres of influence. Their power (and often lack thereof) to control food production, the extraction of natural resources, and access to preferred goods through exchange moderated their ability to distinguish themselves as a social group through foodways.

The *alcalde* system, which the British tolerated for reasons mentioned in the subsection “San Pedro Siris,” must have had a familiar feel to it for San Pedro Maya, since it had been in use in Mexico since shortly after Spanish conquest as part of the *cabildo*, or town council, system emplaced by Spanish colonial administrators but adapted by Maya to more closely align with their traditional form of government (Restall 1997, 51). Furthermore, while Asunción Ek served as the *alcalde* of San Pedro Siris, he was also the acknowledged ruler over the

rest of the San Pedro settlements. While this arrangement did not have a formal status in the British colonial system, it may have resonated with Maya who, shortly before Spanish invasion, had a political office called Halach Uinic, a headman who ruled a province from a *hol cahob*, or head town (see Roys 1957; Marcus 1993). While only an alcalde, Ek behaved more like a preinvasion Halach Uinic must have, directing the affairs of smaller settlements from his head town of San Pedro Siris (see Restall 1997, 64).

The quantity and variety of imported goods and arms, Catholic religious icons, domestic animals, and acceptance of colonial political institutions into San Pedro Maya society each reflect how the nature and degree of Maya interactions with their colonial counterparts varied from village to village. These glimpses of late colonial Maya life at the edge of the British Empire illustrate how each village served as a microcosm of the larger San Pedro Maya society. At San Pedro Siris, the residents tolerated a greater colonial presence within the village, including the construction of a school, as a strategic negotiation to acquire firearms. We must consider this break in doxa within the context of the extant structures at the time. Pressured to defend themselves against the Icaiché, the villagers negotiated and forged a new identity through interactions with their colonial counterparts. At Holotunich, however, a greater sense of orthodoxy (in terms of foodways and construction techniques) on the margins of San Pedro society may reflect a desire to maintain group identity in opposition to relative isolation. Finally, Kaxil Uinic presents a microcosm of change at a later juncture in San Pedro Maya history, when the availability of arms decreased, the spread of disease increased, and the colony stripped Maya of their land rights. In more ways than one, we can conclude that the residents of Kaxil Uinic adapted to the requirements of the British colonial system—the need to participate in a cash-generating activity to pay for rents stands out—while at the same time ignoring many elements of colonial control. The villagers adapted to the breakdown of the doxa of milpa farming by forging an alternative economic strategy to retain some sense of autonomy. They added chicle to the list of products they already collected from the forest, they ignored international borders and communicated freely with Maya groups in Petén and Yucatán, and they embraced modern technologies to perpetuate traditional lifeways. In fact, one could argue that the success of San Pedro Maya at adapting to the colonial impositions without embracing European colonial worldviews—despite eighty years of contact with and influence from the colony’s political, economic, and social structures—is what ultimately compelled BEC to forcibly move them from their villages and irrevocably alter their lifeways, beginning in 1931 with the closure of Kaxil Uinic. Although the decisions made by San Pedro Maya are evidence of their agency, one is left to consider why they made certain choices over others within the constraints of the colonial system.

Acknowledgments. The authors thank Dr. John Morris and the staff of the Institute of Archaeology, National Institute of Culture and History, in Belize, for issuing a permit to work at Kaxil Uinic village. Mr. Jeff Roberson and Mr. Alex Finkral kindly granted us permission to excavate on Yalbac Ranch. The staff and students on the Belize Estates Archaeological Survey Team were responsible for much of the hard work that made this chapter possible. We also would like to thank James Meierhoff for his helpful collaborations on this shared academic journey. Finally, we extend our deepest gratitude to the Alphawood Foundation for supporting the 2016 fieldwork at Kaxil Uinic village and our archival research in Jamaica and England.

Note

1. The Late Colonial period described here is based on Bolland's (2003) fourth phase of British-Maya interactions during the British occupation of Belize, which begins with the Battle of Orange Walk in 1872 and continues to the twentieth century.

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