

LEGACIES OF
SPACE AND
INTANGIBLE
HERITAGE

ARCHAEOLOGY,
ETHNOHISTORY, AND
THE POLITICS OF
CULTURAL CONTINUITY
IN THE AMERICAS

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Designs on /of the Land

Competing Visions, Displacement, and Landscape Memory in British Colonial Honduras

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INTRODUCTION

Colonialism is neither fixed in space nor total in its effects, but is perceptible in myriad clashes and acts of force, obedience, subterfuge, and flight. This chapter traces colonial effects in British Honduras from 1847 to 1942 through the lens of *designs on* and *designs of* the land. In the mid-nineteenth century, Yucatec Maya people fleeing from the Caste War in Mexico's Yucatán Peninsula met up with British mahogany crews in the northwestern forests of what would become British Honduras, now Belize. These groups brought with them competing designs on the land in terms of both resource use and land tenure. Some groups settled in and around the Yalbac Hills (figure 4.1).

Although these contests over the land began more than a century ago, they still reverberate strongly in present-day memories of the land, modern designs of the land. Over the span of nearly a century, multiple and competing designs on the land shaped action, reaction, strikes, advances, capitulations, claims, and longings. Present-day designs of the land in the form of landscape memories are tinged with nostalgia for a lost, salubrious land that allowed a community to thrive. While the tangible heritage of the Yalbac Hills towns in large part have been destroyed, the intangible heritage of the Yalbac Hills Maya persists in the knowledge of subsistence milpa techniques and the association of forest living with a healthy life. In this respect, landscape memory itself is part of the intangible heritage of the Yalbac Hills Maya, integral to a moral vision of a good life. This chapter thus reveals the

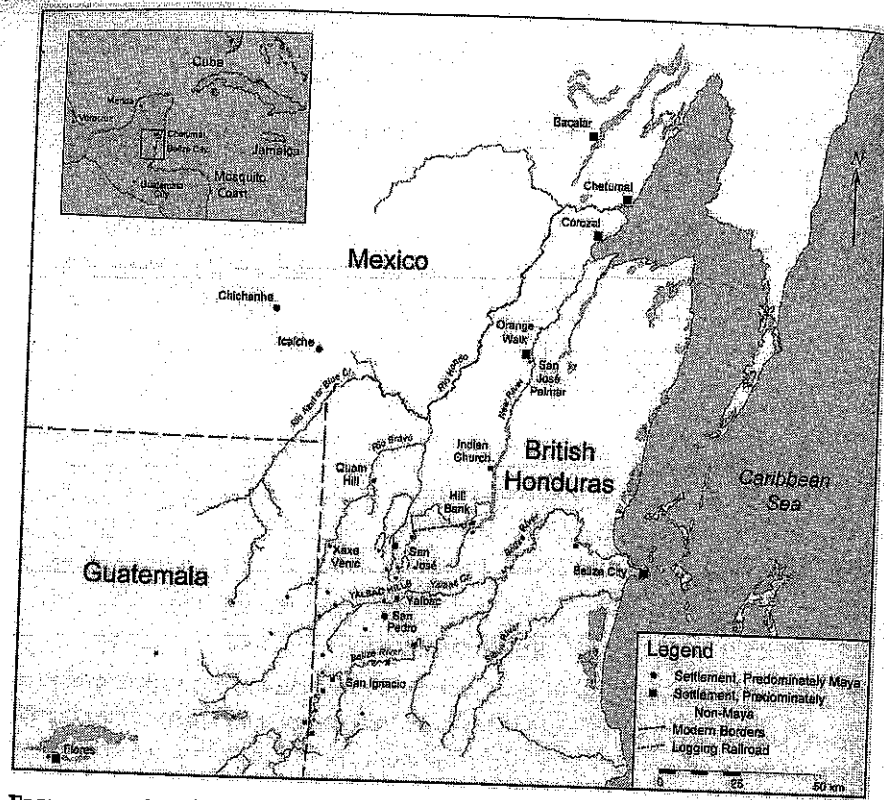


FIGURE 4.1. Northern British Honduras of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

mutual entailment of land use and imaginings and of landscape memory as a form of resistance.

Throughout the period under examination, at each moment, several competing designs on the land motivated action, and yet at different times and in different places, one gained ascendancy, whether through military might, legal strategy, economic force, or simple human occupation. Each design on the land might therefore be envisioned as a tectonic plate, with all in motion, bumping up against one another, sometimes smashing violently, one thrusting upward and submerging another, whose pent-up force reemerges elsewhere. This tectonic metaphor allows us to see the contestation, partialness, and indeterminacy of action, strategy, and policy under the appellation of colonialism. During this time span, several landscape visions emerged, jostled, and subsided. Over the span of a century, land appears as geopolitical territory and a theater of action, a haven and source of

subsistence, a source of extractive commodities and rents, private property, hostage, pollutant, homeland, wellspring, commercial farm, and alienable house plot. This chapter explores how these various designs on the land jostled at different times and in different places, with traces of nostalgia and alienation left on Maya historical memory. The story of land in colonial British Honduras is not a stark contrast of British versus Maya or capitalist versus subsistence. Rather, at each stage, multiple visions of land both propelled and constrained action, as "British" and "Maya" groups often obstructed one another. Land was always an object of desire, a utilitarian tool, and a symbol of what might be.

In 1936, the London-based Belize Estate and Produce Company (BEPCO) evicted the Yucatec Maya inhabitants of San José Yalbac (see below for name variants) from lands their ancestors had settled from at least 1862, according to documentary evidence. Archaeological data indicates settlement well before that date, but we know that many came around 1862 seeking a southern refuge away from the fighting and extortionist rents of the Caste War regions to the north. This group was therefore triply displaced, first by the start of the Caste War in the late 1840s, then again roughly a decade later, and a final time in 1936. It is hard not to read this history and imagine deterministic forces, as if the Maya were predestined to be cast off thrice, because of the imperturbable forces of colonialism and capitalism. Yet, that conclusion would be too simplistic. In the end, San José villagers were in the wrong place at the wrong time. In the final dislocation, economic strategies and the momentum of investments converged to focus British Honduran attention on San José in 1935–36. A series of factors—including misinterpretations of survey maps, desperation during the Great Depression, and interpersonal squabbles on the Legislative Council—created a situation in which BEPCO focused all of its attention on mahogany extraction in the Yalbac Hills. Thwarted in various initiatives and feeling fenced in, the company manager doubled down and made the socially unpopular move of evicting the villagers of San José (also called San José Yalbac and San José Viejo). The company manager could not have predicted the irony that American consumers would soon forsake mahogany for walnut, that the secretary of state for the colonies would just a few years later allow BEPCO owners to sell controlling shares to an American buyer, and that the new governor would prioritize commercial agriculture over forestry. In 1936 in the Yalbac Hills, however, there were several hundred square feet of mahogany logs that seemed of tantamount importance to BEPCO's manager, and San José villagers stood in the way.

As always, the unfolding events of history are not predetermined but result from convergences and divergences of interests and actions at certain times and places. The knowledge of actors is forever partial and incomplete. Acting from a standpoint, focus becomes narrowed, heels dig in, and winners and losers emerge, both

dirtied in the process. With growing social resentment about the power of BEPCO, the company manager lost in his bid for an elected seat on the Legislative Council, and he headed back to England, tail between legs, and replaced in his post.

This chapter moves backward and forward in time. At its core are neighboring towns of San Pedro Siris (also called San Pedro) and San José Yalbac in the Yalbac Hills; Grant Jones (1977) called the residents of these and smaller satellite villages the San Pedro Maya, after their main settlement. We move backward to trace the routes of their ancestors and then forward to their descendants. Our team brings together archaeological, oral, and documentary data. Minette Church and Jason Yaeger, along with Richard M. Leventhal and Jennifer Dornan, conducted archaeological research at the site of San Pedro Siris, which was abandoned at the turn of the twentieth century; Yaeger and Christine Kray conducted interviews in Spanish and Yucatec Maya with people who had lived in nearby San José Yalbac prior to the eviction in 1936 (figure 4.2);¹ and Dornan and Kray conducted archival research in the Belize Archives (Belmopan) and the National Archives (United Kingdom). This multimethod collaboration has enabled us to trace the movements of generations of people across sites and has also revealed that despite this turbulent history of forced displacement, the intangible heritage persists in the form of subsistence knowledge, moral critique, and landscape memory. This chapter first examines tangible evidence of the competing designs on the land that propelled Maya movements across the region and then examines how narrated memories of the landscape communicate the intangible heritage of subsistence production and a moral vision of the good life.

LAND AS GEOPOLITICAL TERRITORY AND A THEATER OF ACTION

Taking the Yalbac Hills of western Belize as our center, we first tack backward in time to trace the designs on the land that propelled Maya movements across the land. From 1847 through the 1870s, southern Yucatán and northwestern British Honduras were destabilized by visions of land as geopolitical territory and by the theater of military action that resulted. Those who eventually settled in the Yalbac Hills region by 1862 did not settle there straightaway but made stops along the way, including through Chichanha, in search of a safe place to land.

In 1847, Maya and some Mestizo fighters had initiated a large-scale rebellion against descendants of the Spaniards in the Caste War of Yucatán. Although most of the rebels were Maya, over time the factions grew more complicated and shifted, with different Maya groups fighting one another, as well (see Dornan 2004; also Reed 2001). The Caste War rebels were resentful of tax burdens, debt peonage, and liberal land reforms that ushered in widespread disenfranchisement, leaving landless

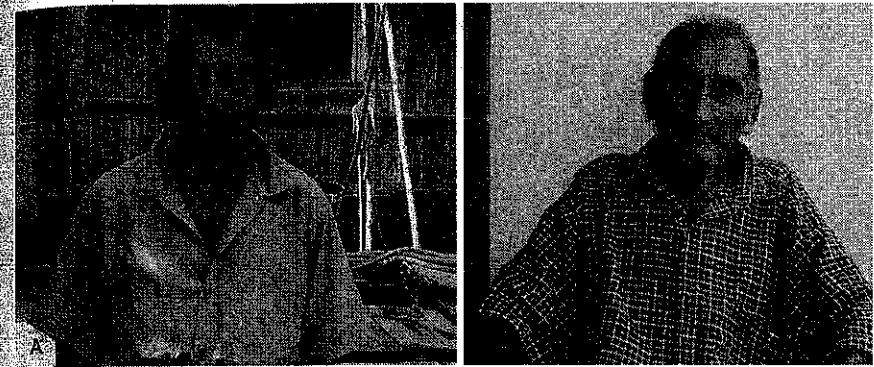


FIGURE 4.2. Valentín Tosh (a) and Emeterio Cantún (b) of San José (Nuevo) Palmar. Both were residents of San José Yalbac at the time of the 1936 eviction.

peasants open to easy exploitation in an expanding plantation system. Ultimately, Mexican federal forces entered the fray and pushed the rebels back to southern and eastern parts of the Yucatán Peninsula (Reed 2001; Rugeley 1996).

LAND AS SOURCE OF EXTRACTIVE COMMODITIES AND RENTS

To the south, in what is now Belize, thousands of Maya refugees entered a no-man's land simultaneously claimed by Mexico, Guatemala, and Britain. They entered a region that itself was destabilized by competing designs on the land. British buccaneers had been illicitly extracting logwood near the coasts, and in the 1770s, as British demands for mahogany for luxury furniture rose, woodcutters advanced deeper into the forests, where they confronted Maya groups (Bolland 1977b:72).² Around the same time that the Caste War fighting spread and factions splintered off, land in the western forests became intensely profitable and desired, as both a source of extractive commodities (primarily, mahogany) and as the leverage by which different Mayan factions extracted rent from British Honduran woodcutters.

Seeking a truce with the Mexican forces, in 1851 and 1853 the rebel Maya group in Chichanha signed peace treaties with Mexico. In so doing, they committed to fight the fiercest of the rebels, the Santa Cruz Maya, or Cruzob, to the east (Bolland 1977b:75–76). They became known in Mexico as *los pacíficos del sur*, “the peaceful ones of the south.”

The rebel war with Mexico took on international dimensions as the British were hauled in. Perhaps emboldened by their alliance with Mexico, Maya from Chichanha in 1856 and 1857 attacked the British mahogany camp on Blue Creek, claiming that the woodcutters should pay rent for taking lumber from Mexican

territory (Bolland 1977b:76). This set up a four-player game in which the Santa Cruz Maya were fighting the Mexican forces, who were allied with the Chichanha, who then found themselves at odds with the British. Some British Honduran merchants even traded guns and powder to the Santa Cruz Maya, ultimately ensuring that the Caste War stretched over half a century, until 1901.

In 1857, the Santa Cruz Maya attacked Chichanha once again, and half of the village fled south. Ominously foreshadowing future conflicts, British accounts even at this early date noted that Maya swidden farming destroyed valuable mahogany in the forest (Bolland 1977b:76–77).

LAND AS PRIVATE PROPERTY

At the same time as the Chichanha refugees entered the mahogany forests, the British colonial and private sector interests converged, designing a legal strategy to control land as private property. In 1858–61, the Honduras Land Titles Acts drafted in London allowed would-be buyers to purchase lands in the British Honduran settlement even if there were no existing title. Consequently, within a very short period of time, very little land was left for purchase (Bolland 1977a:187). One of the London lawyers who drafted the law also worked for the British Honduras Company (BHC), established precisely in 1858 in London. The attorney general affirmed that the legislation by design was to secure titles for the BHC (Bolland 1977a:185), which subsequently purchased 1 million acres, comprising one-fifth of the area of modern Belize and one-half of the settlement's privately owned land (Luke 1931). Its holdings included the entire Yalbac Hills region (Surveyor General 1929).

Meanwhile, some Maya people fled further to the south. In 1860, the Santa Cruz Maya again attacked and burned Chichanha. The survivors relocated at Icaiche. The group from Chichanha that had left in 1857 moved further south, to evade domination by the Icaiche and conflicts with the Santa Cruz Maya. By 1862, they had settled in the Yalbac Hills area, including in San Pedro and San José (Bolland 1977b:76–77). British woodcutters had only recently entered this region, so it would have seemed relatively safe (Jones 1977). The San Pedro Maya found a land far from the conflicts between the *pacíficos* and the Santa Cruz Maya with mature forests well suited to milpa farming. While it may have appeared to them unclaimed, as it was sparsely inhabited and unused from the perspective of Maya farming, from the British Honduran perspective, the land was private property owned by BHC under the new British laws.

Then, the scheme of land as geopolitical territory resurged with greater force in 1862. British settlers sought to establish political dominion over the region, and the settlement of Belize in the Bay of Honduras reconfigured itself as the colony of

British Honduras. Native *alcaldes* (mayors) were appointed in the western towns and selected from within the communities, but to serve as an extension of the colonial government. Yet even in those early conversations with colonial officials, there were already signs of the British woodcutters and Maya jostling one another, as villagers at San José reported that sometimes woodcutters would chase them out so that they could rob the village and fields (Jones 1977:158). In the following year, 1863, the leader of San Pedro turned to the colonial government for support against Icaiche, which was aligned with Mexico. He also complained that the cattle of the BHC mahogany crews were trampling their fields (Dumond 1997:276).³ He received ammunition from the lieutenant governor, in return for which he made various promises, including, tellingly, “to respect the mahogany trees” (Dumond 1997:486).

The British were not the only imperial power with an interest in this part of Central America. In 1864, during the short-lived Second Empire of Mexico, the Imperial Commissary of Yucatán claimed all of British Honduras and the Petén for the Mexican Empire (Dumond 1997:274), a fact that apparently emboldened Mexico's *pacífico* allies at Icaiche in their demands for rents from British woodcutters. In 1866, the Icaiche attacked the BHC mahogany camp at Quam Hill, demanding rent for resources taken from Mexican property. British Honduran officials suspected that the Icaiche and San Pedro Maya were jointly planning more attacks on logging camps.

The relationship between Icaiche and San Pedro was apparently a complicated one. Asunción Ek, *alcalde* (mayor) of San Pedro, appealed to British Honduran officials for protection from Icaiche, yet in December 1866 the Icaiche leader sent a letter to the lieutenant governor, datelined San Pedro, asserting that that area belonged to Yucatán. Although Ek's original intentions are ultimately unknowable, when British Honduran troops marched on San Pedro, San Pedro fighters repelled them, with support from Icaiche (Dornan 2004:114–31).⁴

Seeking retribution, in February 1867 the British sent more troops and burned San Pedro to the ground (Bolland 1977b:78). Accounts of the raid describe the use of early incendiary rockets, fragments of which were recovered during investigations at the site (Church et al. 2011; see figure 4.3). The troops also destroyed San José and other neighboring villages, burning houses, fields, and granaries (Bolland 1977b:78–79).⁵

In the same year that the Yalbac Hills villages were destroyed (1867), the British Honduran government again crafted legal strategies to advance British designs on the land. The lieutenant governor proclaimed that Indians should not occupy or cultivate land without payment of rent to landowner or crown (Bolland 1977b:91); in other words, they were forbidden to own land of their own. In 1868, the lieutenant governor affirmed that many Maya villages in the western area were on land



FIGURE 4.3. Fragment of an incendiary rocket uncovered at San Pedro Siris.

owned by either the BHC or Messrs. Young Toledo and Company. Those living on crown lands should be given space reserved by the crown, though they were not to be issued titles (Bolland 1977b:91). According to Bolland (1987:49), "Apart from a few instances, however, this policy of 'native reservations' was not really implemented, and in the last years of the nineteenth century it was virtually abandoned." The fact that Indians were prevented by law from owning land assured that those in the Yalbac Hills would continue to be unsettled by actors with competing designs on the land.

In 1871, the British colonial government once again used legal maneuvers to advance what were in fact convergent goals of commodity extraction and political dominion. Seeking greater protection against the northern rebels, the Legislative Assembly in the colony ceded governance directly to Britain. British Honduras consequently became a crown colony (Bolland 1977b:92), ultimately enhancing the power of the colonists to pacify the northwestern region.

By 1872, San Pedro and San José had been reoccupied (Jones 1977:153). They remained under the shadow of Icaiche, whose leader appointed the *alcaldes*, and Icaiche continued to collect rents from British woodcutters (Dumond 1997:342). Until 1898, both Mexico and British Honduras continued to claim dominion over what is now northwestern Belize, emboldening the Icaiche to continue to demand rent payments from woodcutters. Consequently, Maya in the Yalbac Hills region continued to be pulled between Icaiche "protection" and the notion of peace. However, by 1884 the Icaiche were only charging the Belize Estate and Produce Company (the new name for the British Honduras Company, as of 1878) for rents to the north of the Yalbac Hills region (Dumond 1997:383), which probably allowed those in the Yalbac Hills to finally exercise autonomy and feel settled. Their position must have remained somewhat tenuous, however, as the Lacandon Maya to their west in Guatemala continued to charge rents to loggers there throughout this period (Palka 2005).

LAND AS HAVEN AND SOURCE OF SUBSISTENCE

We have seen that groups of Yucatec Maya continually moved further south and deeper into the forest. Their vision (design on the land) appears to have been of land as a safe haven and as a source of subsistence. Joel Palka notes that the dynamics of these "zones of refuge"—where populations disperse into areas not under firm colonial control as a mechanism for survival—are understudied (Palka 2005:30–31). The overall picture painted by the artifact assemblage at San Pedro is an interesting and seemingly paradoxical one, as Maya efforts to find refuge farther south occurred in parallel with their increased access to and participation in the global economy, particularly in terms of their use of manufactured goods. Increasing participation in the cash economy in the nineteenth century seems to have been, perhaps counter-intuitively, a way to augment autonomy and local subsistence. A market in non-essential goods tied the villagers of San Pedro to other Maya westward in the Petén as well as to logging camps locally and to San Ignacio and Belize City. Throughout the occupation, however, evidence of the cash economy remains supplemental to evidence of continuing reliance on local resources for the necessities at San Pedro.

The archaeological materials from San Pedro Yalbac reveal a wide variety of subsistence techniques and subsistence resources, only somewhat parallel to Palka's findings among the Lacandon, and for the most part confirmed by interviews with people who lived in San José Yalbac in the 1930s. The Yalbac Hills Maya farmed corn, beans, squash, sweet potato, and jicama. Pollen data from portions of the site of San Pedro, collected by John Gust (2006), indicate slash-and-burn swidden farming, made possible by the steel tools that were common in the assemblage. The pollen data also suggest fruit, spice, and nut (cashew) trees in the vicinity, likely cultivated. There is tentative pollen data for cultivation of tobacco as well, which Joel Palka (2005) cites as an important trade item in the Petén. Excavation yielded smoking pipe fragments embossed "E Roach/London" (manufactured between 1830 and 1860) at San Pedro, at least one of which had residue, indicating local use as well.

The pollen data indicates an area rich and diverse in useful plant resources, generally. Artifacts for exploiting agricultural and wild resources include a high frequency of machete blade fragments, axes and hoes, and perforated cans likely used for holding corn seeds when sowing. Patent medicine and cosmetics bottles (hair tonic and pomades) indicate the villagers at least supplemented local medicinal remedies and cosmetics with commercially available ones.

Oral narratives recount that the Maya in the Yalbac Hills region hunted deer, paca, peccary, squirrel, and a variety of birds, including the wild turkey, dove, pigeon, and quail, and they collected honey. Some of the many small Jamaica Ginger extract (figure 4.4), pepper sauce, and other condiment bottles may have been reused to

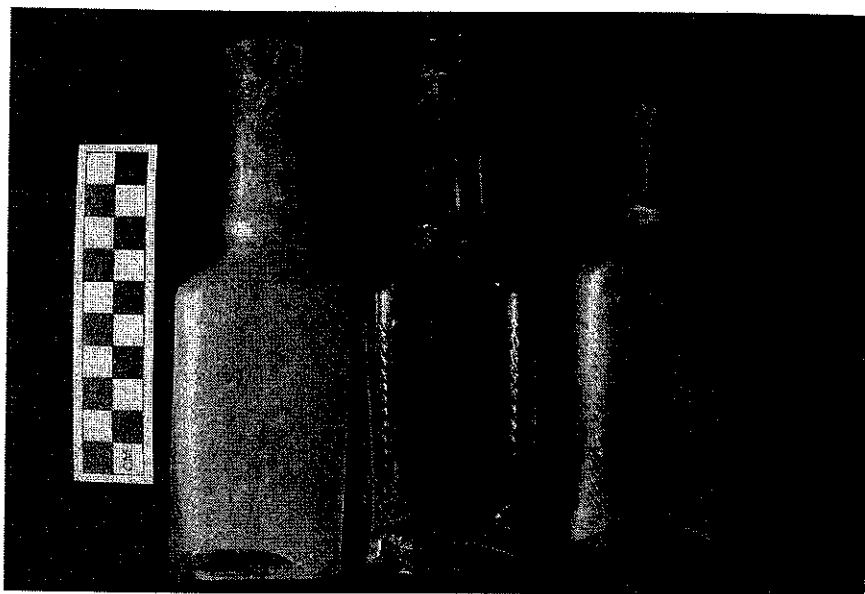


FIGURE 4.4. Jamaica Ginger bottles from San Pedro Siris.

store honey from honeybees, as such bottles were in the Petén (Palka 2005). They collected edible freshwater snails called *jute* from the creek that ran through the village, but the shell was also likely burned to make lime, which was essential for softening up corn kernels prior to grinding (Palka 2005). Many of the locally produced earthenware basins at San Pedro had coats of lime on the interiors, presumably from the process of soaking corn (figure 4.5a).

They also used forest materials to fashion a wide variety of items, including their houses, furniture, hammocks, and sandals. This account of a heavy reliance on the forest is confirmed by the faunal assemblage, which includes game animals that remain popular today such as whitetail and brocket deer, *tepescuintle* (paca), agouti, collared and white-lipped peccary, and armadillo (Freiwald n.d.). Cow and pig were present, but these domesticated animals only accounted for approximately one quarter of the remains of commonly consumed mammals found at the site, and peccary remains were roughly twice as common as pig remains (Freiwald n.d.). A relatively common find on the site were roasting pits. Taken together with a remarkable number of cast-iron Dutch oven kettles, they suggest the inhabitants of San Pedro enjoyed traditional Yucatec Maya *pibil* dishes, in which meat is roasted or stews cooked overnight in an earth oven. Fungal spores collected with the pollen data suggest large animal dung, perhaps used as fertilizer (Cummings 2005).

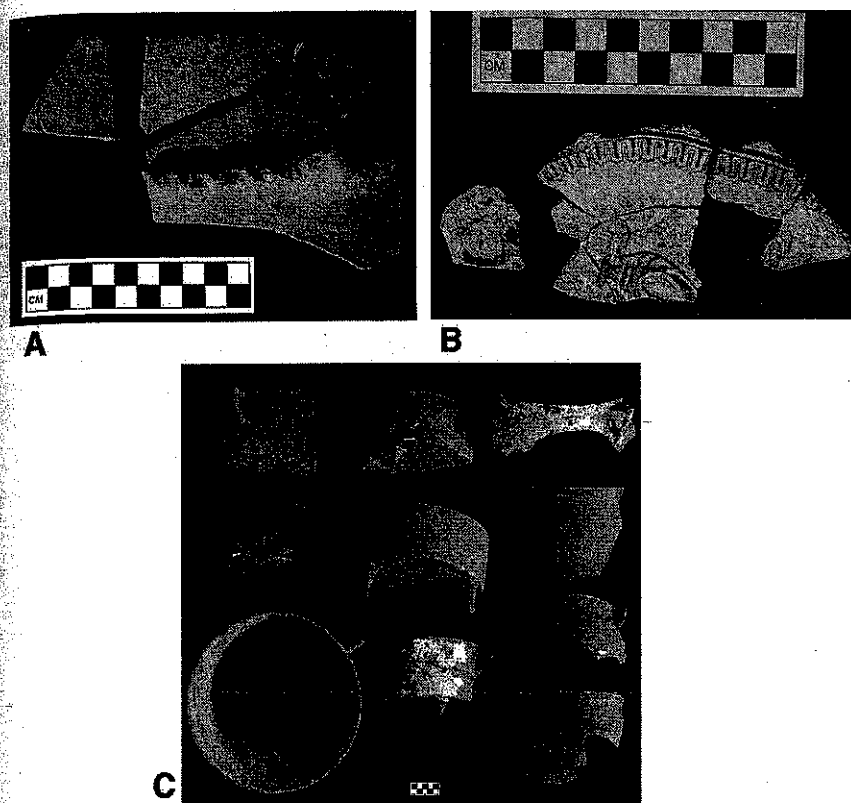


FIGURE 4.5. Locally produced ceramics (a), mulberry transfer ware (1830s to 1850s) (b), and cooking cauldrons (c) from San Pedro Siris.

The archaeological data also show that in addition to subsistence techniques, the San Pedro Maya traded with the British for mostly commercial items, including items for procuring, cooking, and serving food such as machetes, axes, metal cooking vessels, and serving dishes; household items including scissors and buttons; and items for personal leisure, such as porcelain dolls and tobacco pipes. At the same time, though, there is remarkable continuity in subsistence and cooking techniques, reinforcing the conclusion that the period of the late nineteenth century was one in which the Yalbac Maya valued tradition and achieved a degree of cultural autonomy and subsistence through choice and selectivity in acquiring manufactured goods and subsistence self-sufficiency.

For example, the ceramic assemblage at the site included a wide variety of imported decorated serving wares, all of British manufacture (figure 4.5b). Unlike

those used by British nationals—which would include many plates, tea cups, and saucers—most of the vessels at San Pedro were deeper forms, such as bowls or tureens. These apparently were more useful for local and preferred cuisine. Cookware largely comprised either iron cauldrons (figure 4.5c) or locally manufactured, large cooking vessels, some with evidence of soaking corn in lime (figure 4.5).

In addition to the possibility that they grew, smoked, and perhaps traded tobacco at San Pedro, a large number of pepper sauce bottles probably indicates rebottling locally produced honey rather than using store-bought products; this they could potentially have traded or sold for cash, as did the Lacandon to the west (Palka 2005). There were also a large number of alcohol bottles including wine, case (whiskey), rum, and various demijohns. Villagers may have consumed alcoholic beverages, or they may have reused these bottles after the contents were gone. One former San José resident indicated in strong terms that San Pedro and San José were dry villages; however, it seems unlikely that so many bottles discarded and broken and swept to the edge of the yard area would have derived only from recycling uses. Sewing machine parts, a bottle of sewing machine oil, and any number of pairs of scissors suggest a cottage industry of some sort, perhaps making *huipiles* (traditional blouses) of Yucatec design. There clearly was access to some luxury items, such as French perfume and costume jewelry, indicating a small cash economy, which may have involved trade with local logging crews, merchants in Cayo, or itinerant traders who were also in the Petén to the west (Palka 2005).

LAND AS HOSTAGE

However, despite an apparent dogged determination for autonomy and self-reliance among the Yalbac Hills Maya, their occupation of those lands was precarious, as the legal framework for their destabilization was already in place. In fact, the combination of British Honduran land tenure laws allowed land to be used as a hostage—to compel desired action on the part of the Maya through blocking their access to it. Because the Honduras Land Titles Act had allowed British forestry companies to purchase almost all of northern and western British Honduras and because the Maya were prohibited from owning land, as the logging crews penetrated the area, the Maya of the Yalbac Hills region were eventually obliged to pay rent on company lands for both house plots and agricultural fields. The burden of rents pushed the Maya to participate more fully in the colonial cash economy perhaps with less choice and to relinquish some self-sufficiency.

The Yalbac Hills Maya must have continued to sell agricultural produce, honey, tobacco, and other handmade items to woodcutting crews working in the area in order to pay rents. By the 1930s, the Creole mahogany crews generally did not have

cash on hand at the camps,⁶ but this may not have been the case earlier in British Honduras and was not the case in logging camps in the Petén in earlier periods where Lacandon either worked for cash or traded (Palka 2005). The oral narratives of Maya who lived in San José in the 1930s indicate that sometimes the mahogany workers traded their food rations of salt pork and wheat flour to Maya villagers for their agricultural products. Some of this information indicated that men from San José on occasion would travel to Cayo to trade or would trade with itinerant merchants.

People who were children in San José in the 1930s told us that to pay their rents, their fathers worked on support crews for the mahogany companies or in *chicle* (natural gum) bleeding. The *chicleros* often set out for months at a time, sometimes deep into the Petén forest to the west in Guatemala, harvesting the chicle tree's sap to satisfy the growing taste for chewing gum in the United States.⁷

Around 1900, San Pedro was abandoned, for reasons that may have included a drought, a slump in the demand for mahogany (Church et al. 2011:191), and epidemic disease (Jones 1977:151).⁸ At this point, San José became the largest town in the Yalbac Hills region.

LAND AS POLLUTANT

Designs on the lands of San José reached a violent climax in the 1930s, symbolized by the transformation of “soil” (Maya: *lu'um*) into “dust” (Spanish: *polvo*), as described below. How the Maya used the land was ever-more circumscribed by the Belize Estate and Produce Company (BEPCO), which was often simply referred to as “The Company.”

The centrality of BEPCO in the colony can hardly be overstated. In December 1935, when the company manager, C. S. Brown, was running for a seat on the Legislative Council, he reiterated a line of argument that the company frequently used in bargaining for preferential treatment from the colonial government:

The Company's interests are the Orange Walk District's interests. I can go further than that and state that the Company's Interests are the Colony's interests. The Company owns about one-fifth of the Colony. The Company has been the stand-by of the Colony for the past 50–65 years. The Company is the largest taxpayer in the Colony. The Company is the largest and most considerate employer in the Colony. At the present time the Company's lands and works give employment to over 1,000 men. The Company is the largest and most considerate landowner and landlord in the Colony. The Company stands for progress. (Fair Play 1936)

Mahogany for several decades had been the colony's largest export. In fact, from 1926 to 1935 forest produce (primarily mahogany, and secondarily, chicle) accounted

for 83 percent of total exports (Burns 1936a). Repeatedly, the company had been able to leverage its economic importance into favorable government policies.⁹ It argued that if it were not for the company, hundreds of people would have been unemployed, there would be no income with which to purchase the imports upon which British Hondurans depended, and the colony's tax base would collapse. As a consequence of the company's importance, one of the appointed ("unofficial") seats on the Legislative Council was generally reserved for the manager of the company (Bolland 2003:162). The company also generally held a seat on the Forest Trust. In fact, in July 1935 the governor reappointed C. S. Brown as a member of the Forest Trust (Government Gazettes 1935).

The company's power extended beyond the tiny Caribbean colony. It was owned by the Hoare brothers in London (Sir Samuel John Gurney Hoare and Sir Oliver Vaughn Gurney Hoare). Sir Samuel Hoare, the First Viscount Templewood, had been elected to the House of Commons in 1910; he was made secretary of state for air in 1922. In 1931, he became secretary of state for India and, finally, in 1935 achieved the position of foreign secretary. The archival documents reveal that when Sir Oliver Hoare wrote to someone in the Colonial Office on Downing Street, he quickly received a personal meeting, and recommendations favorable to the company were sent to the governor in British Honduras (e.g., "Belize Estate and Produce Company" n.d.).

As mahogany stands closer to the coast had become depleted, BEPCO moved its operations westward into the San José area. Its headquarters had been centered at Orange Walk in the colony's northeast. Mahogany logs from the interior were cut, hauled by cattle to the rivers, and floated downstream for export to England and the United States from the mouth of the New River. The company typically had three camps in operation at any one time, the camps being temporary, typically having a life of from one to three years (Whiting 1939). As hardwoods became exhausted in the north, however, BEPCO moved its headquarters from Orange Walk to Hill Bank, on the western edge of the New River Lagoon. In the 1920s, it constructed a logging railway westward from Hill Bank, its endpoint some five miles to the northeast of San José (Surveyor General 1936).¹⁰

Relations between BEPCO and its Maya tenants came to a head in 1935, for several reasons. First was the matter of the mahogany trees. Although BEPCO tenants were not allowed to burn forest to make milpa in the traditional swidden agricultural practice, so long as the mahogany camps were at a distance, Maya farmers had been able to do so surreptitiously. By the early 1930s, though, BEPCO had established a logging camp next to San José, and the Maya could no longer engage in swidden. The oral narratives reveal that some families tried to farm continuously on the same plot, with diminishing yields; others persisted in burning forest to create new

fields, angering the company manager, C. S. Brown. In an apparent effort to defend the company against criticism regarding events in the western forests, in a campaign speech in December 1935, Brown estimated that milpa burning around the Yalbac Hills towns of San José, Yalbac, and Xaxe Venic (also Kaxil Uinic) resulted in mahogany losses to the company estimated at \$300,000 (Contributed 1935).¹¹

Second was the issue of rent. Maya tenants on BEPCO lands had to pay rents to the company, yet according to the oral interviews, the company regularly rejected cash payments and demanded labor in lieu of payment, typically clearing brush and gathering fodder for the cattle. Some claimed that the amount of labor required was excessive and, further, that the tenants had been denied a deserved refund. Land taxes had been increased in 1928, and the company in turn raised rents. Tensions mounted when it was revealed that the company had paid only a portion of the additional taxes and was several thousands of dollars in arrears. Then in 1935, when the new land tax was repealed, tenants were angered that none of the additional rent they had paid was going to be refunded (Editorial 1935).

The greatest affront was the penetration and pollution of the village sacred and social space, symbolized by the transformation of soil into "dust." Company workers had been using a tractor to haul logs over the road that ran through the center of San José, right in front of the church. They would pile the logs in the space used for cricket and dancing, to which the villagers objected repeatedly. Besides the noise and the danger to children, the hauling of the logs sent up a cloud of dust that wafted into the church. *Lu'um* is a Yucatec Maya word that means both "soil" and "dirt," but in several of the interviews, villagers engaged in code switching and substituted the Spanish word *polvo* (dust) to refer to the dirt kicked up by the tractor and logs. As Mary Douglas (1966:35) notes, dirt is "matter out of place." What, as *lu'um* is the source of sustenance and abundance, once transformed by the tractor and logs into *polvo*, becomes a pollutant of the village's central sacred and social spaces.

In April 1935, the brother of the alcalde hit a BEPCO tractor driver with a stick as he hauled logs in front of the church, resulting in a criminal case. The tractor driver asserted that he was hit several times, while the alcalde's brother said that he hit him once to gain his attention because the villagers had told Brown (the manager) that the tractors should not pass in front of the church (Orange Walk Soliloquies 1935).

Several months passed, during which time company and colonial officials deliberated how to resolve the dispute. During this time, C. S. Brown conducted his campaign for an elected seat on the Legislative Council. He lost the race to Robert Turton, the largest chicle supplier to Wrigley's in the colony, but a few weeks later, the governor announced that Brown would be one of the appointed members to the Legislative Council, nonetheless. A letter to the editor stated, "Mr. Brown perhaps is a good man but he is the Manager of the Belize Estate & Produce Company;

and if the people of this Colony fear nothing else they seem to have a tremendous fear for the Belize Estate & Produce Company" (Laing 1936). This letter hints at BEPCO's ability to act with near impunity. In that vein, company management decided to evict the San José villagers. With approval of the governor and the king, BEPCO arranged to transfer some of its lands to the crown as an inalienable "trust" for the villagers, in an area just south of the former BEPCO headquarters in Orange Walk. The new settlement was called San José Palmar (San José of the Palms, but more commonly called San José Nuevo.¹²

In April 1936, San José villagers were loaded into logging railway carts and, following the same route as the mahogany logs that were the source of their conflict with BEPCO, they were taken to Hill Bank on the lagoon.¹³ They were put on a barge and sent down river, on a trip lasting three days. They were given temporary residence in a space in Orange Walk known as the "barracks," the site of the former army barracks, then used as communal pasture and playground.¹⁴ The barracks in Orange Walk was the site of the last big Indian attack in the colony in 1872, when a band of Icaiche Maya led by Marcos Canul was repelled and their leader mortally wounded. Placing the San José Maya at the barracks location may have been read by some contemporaries as symbolic of defeat. Employees of BEPCO burned the village of San José, including houses, church, school (which, while administered by the Catholic Church, had been funded by the colonial government), and agricultural fields. In our interviews, many elders were especially distressed that their animals were left behind to fend for themselves or starve. Villagers lived in tents in the barracks for a few months, where they were fed rations of rice while they cleared forest and built new thatch houses at San José Palmar. The eviction did not slow company production that year. In fact, while mahogany exports had experienced a dip early in the 1930s, owing to slumping demand during the Great Depression, between 1935 and 1936 the number of square feet of mahogany logs exported more than doubled (from 1,913 to 4,843 square feet), owing to increased American demand, especially for the large logs of the western limestone region (Burns 1936a).

LAND AS HOMELAND AND WELLSPRING

In the barracks the evictees experienced an immediate health crisis. Back in San José Yalbac, the elevation is relatively high and it is removed from the coast, so malaria is not a problem. Orange Walk is lower and nearer the coast, and malaria is endemic. The year 1936 saw heavy rains and an increase in the mosquito population. The evictees moved into their new village, impoverished, malnourished, and sick. These factors, all of which followed from their dislocation, made them particularly vulnerable to a whooping cough epidemic that spread through the northern districts

in mid-1936. The medical officer of the Orange Walk District reported: "The course of the epidemic was attended with the highest mortality in the village of San José. In this small community of 30 families 45 deaths occurred chiefly among infants and children of school age. A combination of factors—increasing poverty with its sequel malnutrition, chronic malaria and ankylostomiasis [hookworm] has lowered the vitality of the people and rendered them highly susceptible to the graver complications of the disease" (Degazon 1936). By way of comparison, in 1936 the infant mortality rate for the whole colony was 152.7 per 1,000 live births; in the Orange Walk District it was 281.4 (up from 247.6 from the previous year) (Annual Medical and Sanitary Report 1936). That year, Orange Walk was the only district to experience a net natural loss (of forty people), attributed to disease (Vital Statistics, 1936). In a report to the secretary of state for the colonies, the governor commented on his August 1936 visit to San José Palmar, indicating that he admonished the villagers for not making greater progress in building their new homes, threatening that if they did not do so, he would not give funding toward their school and he would instruct the district commissioner not to give them jobs working on the district's roads; he acknowledged, though, that the lethargy they exhibited was related to malnutrition and hookworm (Burns 1936b).

The way that San José elders talk about their former village (design of the land) reveals that their landscape memories are a moral discourse—a way in which they encode a vision of the good life and a moral critique of those responsible for their removal. These narratives are therefore a key element of the intangible heritage of the Yalbac Hills Maya and intangible residue of colonialism. According to several of the interviewees, the illnesses and deaths experienced in the aftermath of the eviction were directly related to the insalubrious nature of San José Palmar in comparison with what they call San José Viejo (Old San José). Notably, while official documents recorded the new place-name as San José Palmar (San José of the Palms), elders doggedly refer to it as San José Nuevo (New San José). This appellation underscores that the new town exists only in reference and in comparison to Old San José, the homeland. New San José, through its very name, connotes their dislocation. While the medical officer blamed the deaths of 1936 on whooping cough, hookworm, and malaria, the oral narratives emphasize the contrast between the healthy environment of Old San José and the unhealthy one of New San José. The narrators note that, back in Old San José, they had drunk cool water directly from a clean spring; in New San José there were no wells or springs, so they had to drink brackish water from streams and swamps. In Old San José, they say, the soils were deep and rich; in New San José, the soils sandy and harvests meager.

Perhaps most important, in Old San José they were able to cultivate corn. For millennia, corn has been the mainstay of the Maya diet, and an ancient Maya belief held

that the gods fashioned humans from corn dough. As is often remarked by Yucatec Maya speakers in Yucatán, San José elders commented that corn is really the only thing that fills them up. In milpa farming, it is the primary crop and forms the bulk of the diet in the form of tortillas, a variety of corn gruels (*atoles*), thickeners for stews, tamales, corn on the cob, and so on. The archaeological abundance of local ceramics with and without lime residues, as well as the preference for deeper serving and eating vessels of refined British wares at San Pedro—vessels capable of holding stews, beans, corn gruels, and soups—reflects the centrality of corn in the Yalbac Hills diet. Furthermore, the assemblage included virtually no individual settings or pieces of flatware; the only metal spoons were serving spoons. This likely reflects the common Maya practice of using folded pieces of tortilla as a scoop for liquid foods or to pinch off pieces of solid foods such as roasted meat. In Yucatec Maya, the primacy of the tortilla is noted semantically: eating with tortillas is “eating” (*janal*); breakfast, since it does not include tortillas, is just “drinking” (*uk’ul*). Many of the San José elders told us that the rice rations that they were given in the barracks in Orange Walk did not fill them up, contributing to their illnesses. As they were denied food suitable for human beings, they were, by implication, treated inhumanely.

Finally, many noted that sadness itself killed some in the barracks. In Yucatec Maya, *k’oja’anil* (sickness) means both physical sickness and mental or emotional sickness, underlying the connection between body and mind. A body that is *k’oja’an* (sick) from emotional sickness is physically ill, as well. One woman commented that her father died of sadness just eight days after they arrived in the barracks. Overall, the memories of the eviction configure Old San José as homeland and as wellspring, as salubrious land, providing in abundance all of the elements needed to sustain healthy bodies and minds. This particular design of the land (landscape memory) is a biting moral critique of those responsible for their eviction and also honors and celebrates the subsistence lifeways of their ancestors.

LAND AS COMMERCIAL FARM

In the cruelest of ironies, shortly after the eviction, BEPCO’s owners gave up on the Yalbac Hills, and the colonial government turned its attention to commercial agriculture. In the early 1930s, as Creoles gained some political traction within the colony and as the Great Depression dropped a bombshell of hunger on the colony (“Conditions in British Honduras [1935]” n.d.; “Unemployment Situation [1934–1935]” n.d.), an alternative design on the land was gaining traction. This emerging view was the land as a plantation, as a large agricultural field on which to grow commercial crops destined for domestic and foreign markets (“Land Settlement [1936]” n.d.). While BEPCO had been angling for hurricane reconstruction funds and

tax breaks (“Belize Estate and Produce Company: Future Management of Lands, 1931–1932” n.d.), others in the colonial administration, including the governor, were urgently promoting an alternative design on the land—that of government support for commercial farms (“Agricultural Development, 1932–1933” n.d.), and in 1936 the governor created the colony’s first Board of Agriculture (Burns 1936a). By 1938, worldwide demand for mahogany had slumped, due to a preference for steel in railway carriages and furniture and an emerging preference for walnut over mahogany in cabinetry (Whiting 1938).

This new design on the land recast the government’s relationship with BEPCO. In 1929, British Honduran Legislative Council members had argued against the sale of BEPCO lands to a US company, Messrs. Mengel (“Belize Estate and Produce Company: Future Management of Lands, 1931–1932” n.d.). Thirteen years later, when BEPCO sold 90 percent of its stock (the controlling share) to Glicksten, a US-based company, the governor and Legislative Council were quiet (“Belize Estate and Produce Company, Ltd., 1941” n.d.). The people of San José Yalbac had been evicted in 1936 in favor of the design on the land of extractive commodities, yet just a few short years later that design was slipping into the background as businessmen chased profits on plantations. Legislative Council members, the governor, and post-Depression social welfare advisers saw commercial agriculture as the key to economic diversification, strength, and social stability.

The Yalbac Hills area was peripheral in this new design on the land. With its hilly topography and soil that is often thin, the area was poorly suited to early mechanized agriculture. The hills were also located far from large permanent settlements that constituted the year-round labor pool needed for commercial agriculture. Further, they were poorly integrated in the developing transportation networks, far both from the ports where cash crops were exported and from markets in the larger settlements.

The logging activities at Hill Bank, San José, Xaxe Venic, and Yalbac have long since ceased and populations dispersed. In the 1930s, though, the company moved in aggressively, displaced settled villages, and moved on again just as quickly. However, no one was left unsullied. In June 1936, C. S. Brown took a six-month leave of absence, returned to England (Happenings and Comments 1936), and was replaced by another manager (Whiting 1938).

LAND AS ALIENABLE HOUSE PLOT

Many of the evictees in New San José and their descendants became wage workers on the expanding sugarcane plantations in the northern districts that were an integral component of this new design on the land. The land set aside for the evictees was

never formally recognized as a reserve, and many elders in our interviews remained uneasy that a copy of the trust papers issued by the king was given to the Ministry (of Natural Resources?) and not returned to them. The land beneath their feet felt unsteady. Beginning in the 1980s, some villagers wanted to use house plots as collateral for loans. A committee representing the "San José Palmar Indians" and the Trustee Agent (the Minister of Natural Resources) recommended that the land allotted to them, which had previously been managed as a communal resource, be divided into house plots (Minister of Natural Resources 1996), which as alienable property could be sold. This is the state of land tenure in the community as of our writing.

CONCLUSION

As we have seen, chased out of Yucatán by war and its predations, a group of Yucatec Maya eventually settled in the Yalbac Hills, only to have their descendants evicted from their homes at San José several decades later due to a mahogany extraction scheme, which in turn lost steam a few short years after that. Caught in a maelstrom of desperation, hunger, malnutrition, and political infighting in the Great Depression, San José villagers were removed to a reservation that was ill suited to sustain them, and many succumbed to disease. The village fragmented as one group took its chances on a new life in Santa Familia to the south.

Despite these devastating losses and the rupture of the material connection to the Old San José, certain memories and ways of talking about Old San José are a key element of the intangible heritage of the Yalbac Hills Maya. These landscape memories are the *designs of the land* that persist into the present. Physical distance cannot sever the ties forged by memory. Memories of the homeland arouse the emotions of those who experienced the eviction, as the new settlement is always referred to as "new" and is considered a poor substitute for the favorable environment of the old.

The eviction overwhelms historical memory and identity, and identity is colored by absence. The old, lost place is remembered as salubrious—as providing, as a matter of nature, the elements required for bodily health, including rich soils, corn, safe water, and cool air. The deep forest, its abundant resources for gathering, hunting, fishing, farming, and material culture, and the knowledge of their forebears of how to live well in that environment—these memories are treasured by the older generations. The land that was lost is envisioned and lamented not solely as a place where people lived, but as a place where people thrived. While Belize now looks outward to global tourism and new forms of commercial trade, the colonial primacy of mahogany is long forgotten, except by those who refuse to forget. Landscape memory—memories of places and their peoples—in this respect is both heritage from the past and a force of agentive action toward an idealized future.

NOTES

1. One group lives in Santa Familia (Cayo District) and another group lives in San José Palmar, or San José Nuevo (Orange Walk District). In 2003, Yaeger interviewed ten in Spanish. In 2005, Kray interviewed the same ten plus four more using Yucatec Maya, though some had become so Spanish dominant that they switched back and forth between languages.
2. "Indian" attacks on woodcutter camps were reported as early as 1788 (Bolland 1977b:72), and fresh attacks in 1847 reignited British fears of "wild Indians." In that year, Maya groups attacked mahogany camps on the Rio Bravo and Belize Rivers, New River Lagoon, and Hill Bank (Bolland 1977b:74). O. Nigel Bolland (1977b:74) suggests that these attacks might have been led by Maya from the Yalbac Hills because that area was equidistant from those three. This scenario may be accurate. Counter to assertions by colonial administrators, archaeological data leads us to conclude that there were people living in San Pedro prior to 1862.
3. In 1865, Marcos Canul of Icaiche demanded rent from the BHC for mahogany taken along the Río Bravo "plus back rent of \$2000 for the eight years in which the works had been located there" (Dumond 1997:274). The Río Bravo is north of San Pedro but in relatively close proximity.
4. According to Grant Jones (1977:158), in February 1867 a group from San José had attacked the BHC settlement at Indian Church and demanded that rent be paid to San Pedro or Hill Bank. In contrast, Don Dumond (1997:278) says only that men from San Pedro or San José were suspected as the ones placing the demands.
5. Those fleeing San José created a new settlement called Cerro, which was burned by the British the following month (Jones 1977:158).
6. Although testimony given before the West India Royal Commission in the late 1930s is internally contradictory, all of the testimonials imply that the mahogany crews at the camps would not have had cash for purchases outside of the company store. Kemp indicated that workers were paid in scrip redeemable at the company store and with weekly rations consisting of salt pork and flour (Kemp 1938). The Managing Director of BEPCO reported that the Creole mahogany workers generally insisted on receiving the full amount of their cash payment (outside of their food rations) in an advance contract prior to the season, to leave it in Belize City with their families (Whiting 1939). Then, with little income left, they would buy items on credit at the commissary, leading to a state of perpetual indebtedness that would obligate them to return to work for the company the following year (West India Royal Commission 1941).
7. Chicle bleeding appears not to have become a major economic strategy for Yalbac Hills residents until the second decade of the twentieth century. The first time that *chiclero* is listed as the occupation of a parent of a child born in San José is 1917 ("Cayo District Births, 1885–1931." n.d.).

8. The date of the last births recorded for San Pedro was 1896 ("Cayo District Births, 1885-1931" n.d.).

9. For example, after the devastating hurricane of 1931, the company was able to secure a hurricane reconstruction loan from the colonial government of \$200,000, which it used to build a sawmill in Belize City, to export sawn lumber to Europe, which was greatly preferred to whole logs (Whiting 1938).

10. Tellingly, in twenty-six pages of colonial government discussion in 1922 of various proposals to build a railway into the western districts for the purpose of extracting mahogany, no mention was made of people living in the region (Despatches 1922).

11. The document did not specify over what period of time those losses occurred. Colonial Executive Council minutes of January 2, 1935, note that BEPCO had also evicted the people of the Yalbac Hills village of Xaxe Venic in 1929 (Executive Council 1935).

12. The Colonial Office documents regarding the eviction ("Reports the removal . . ." 1936) have been culled ("destroyed under statute") from the National Archives in England. Details are therefore pulled together from oral histories and other archival materials, such as newspaper accounts.

13. A small group of villagers did not want to go to the Orange Walk area and, with family connections, went to Santa Familia (Cayo District) instead.

14. Just prior to this, the Orange Walk District Board wanted to donate the barracks as a government agricultural station because it cost \$200 a year to clean and represented a drain on taxpayer resources (Orange Walk Soliloquies 1935).

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