

Chapter 5

Re-Centering the Narrative: British Colonial Memory and the San Pedro Maya

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5.1 Introduction

In the 1763 Treaty of Paris, Spain granted a concession to cut logwood in New Spain to British companies along the western shore of the Bay of Honduras. In the 1783 Treaty of Versailles, the area of allowed cutting was confirmed, and the boundaries were extended by the Convention of London in 1786. A map of that year, commissioned by William Faden, Geographer to the King, shows the woodcutting boundaries for logwood and mahogany. It also names British settlements, illegal under the terms of this treaty, extending up the Belize River 120 miles (193 km) above the confluence of that river and Labouring Creek (Fig. 5.1). Nevertheless, the western boundary between British Bay Settlements and logging activities and New Spain was set along Río Hondo to the north (the exact location of which was later contested), then straight down to the New River and “Crab Cather” Lagoons, then angling southeast along Black Creek (east of Labouring Creek) to its confluence with the Belize River. From there east, the boundary was the north bank of the Belize River to the coast and what would become Belize Town. In these far-away treaty negotiations, the stage was set for tensions between British woodcutting

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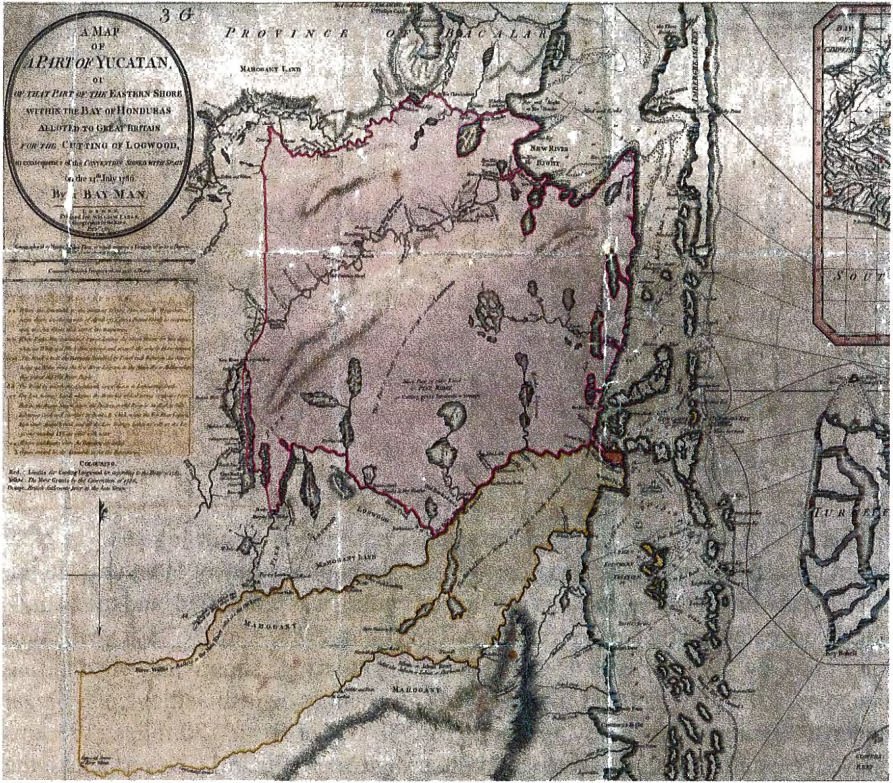


Fig. 5.1 1786 Map of territory allotted for British logging by Spain according to the Convention of London of that year. Originally printed for William Faden, Geographer to the King, South America. The map shows houses and names of British banks and settlements, noting some “English were Settled and Cut Wood 120 Miles above this [Belize River at Labouring Creek]” (CO 700 — BH 12/1).

banks and, we argue, long-term Maya occupants of the Yalbac Hills region who are—tellingly—not noted on this map. They do appear on others (Fig. 5.2).

After 1786, maps of the area show that New Spain lay on one side of the lagoons and Black Creek, with British loggers on the other. Perhaps unsurprisingly, this arrangement made on paper in France did not reflect geopolitical reality in this portion of southern Yucatán. Despite more than two centuries of efforts combining coercion and persuasion, New Spain had never gained full administrative control over the Maya of the southern Yucatan and Petén (Farriss 1984), settling instead for relocating subject populations to a small area of colonial control around Lake Petén-Itzá after 1697 (Jones 1998). In practice then, the western boundary of the British logging lands was de facto a boundary with independent Maya groups. In fact, a Spanish map produced at the Treaty of Versailles in 1783 marks the land west of Black Creek and New River Lagoon as “Provincia de Peten Itza,” an area described for the seventeenth century by historical anthropologist Grant Jones as

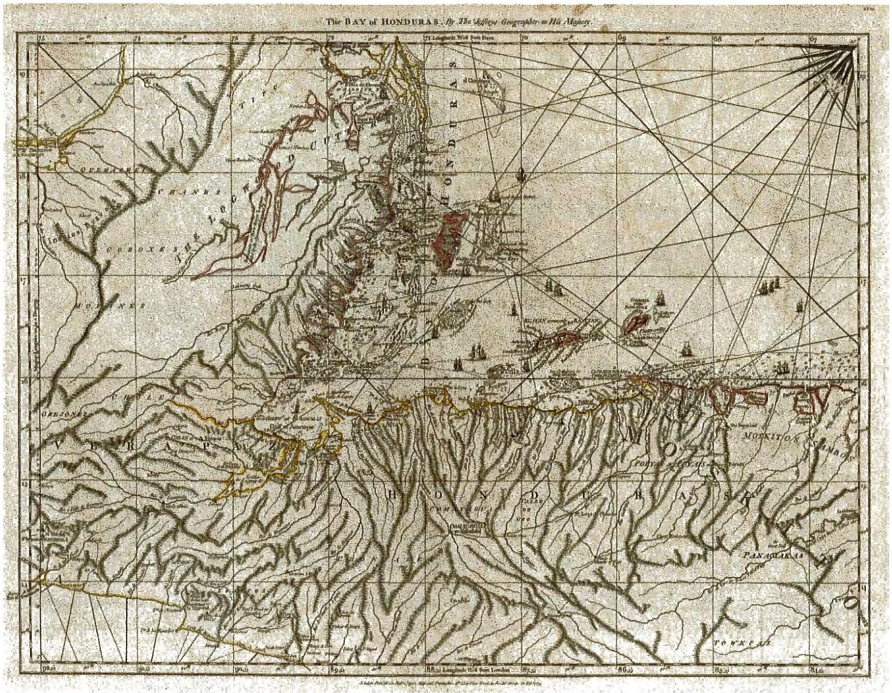


Fig. 5.2 The Bay of Honduras by Thos. Jeffreys Geographer to his majesty. London. Printed for Robt. Sayer, 20 Feb., 1775. (CO 700/BritishHonduras 7)

the “Last Maya Kingdom,” ruled by Maya based in Tayasal on Lake Petén-Itzá, in the Petén (Jones 1998; Fig. 5.3).

In this paper we argue that various configurations of Maya polities in this region, from the late eighteenth through the late nineteenth centuries, consistently understood Black Creek and the New River lagoons to be their border with the British loggers and settlers, and later the colony of British Honduras. This understanding provides the context for a nuanced and decolonized interpretation of the archaeology of the Caste War era Maya town of San Pedro Siris in the Yalbac Hills and its surrounding villages.

During the nineteenth century, the boundaries negotiated between the newly constituted republics of Guatemala, Mexico, and the Settlements and (after 1862) colony of British Honduras were negotiated exclusive of Maya input. During that time, the San Pedro Maya used long-established strategies to continue to claim and occupy their land as they understood it. When faced with an intractable problem, rather than confronting colonial authorities or military, they would do what Maya people had been doing throughout the Spanish period, and arguably in pre-Columbian times as well: they vacated villages, scattered into hamlets well hidden in jungle areas, and returned to reoccupy the villages when colonial attention was directed elsewhere. Such strategies of occupation, strategic abandonment, and reoccupation are

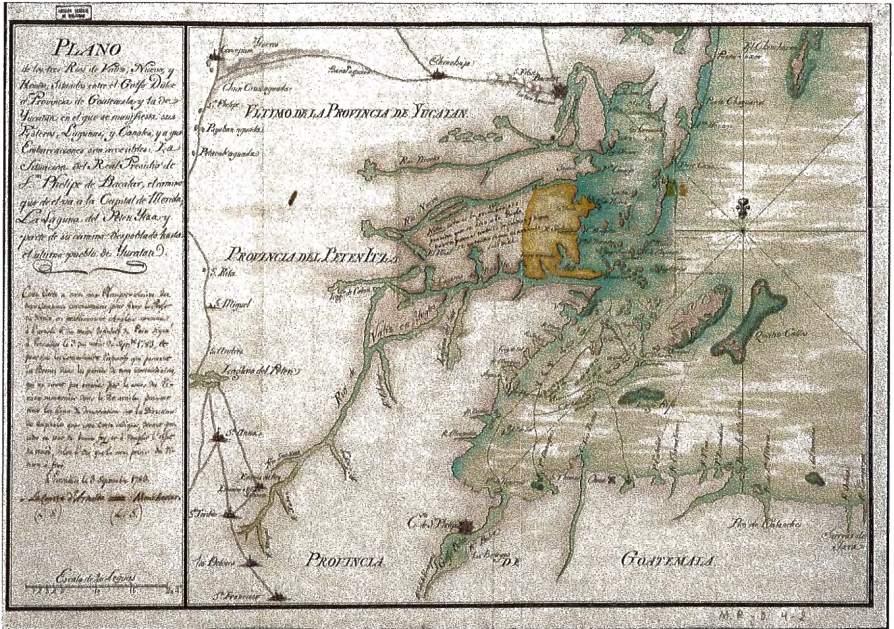


Fig. 5.3 1783 'Plano de los tres Rios de Valiz, Nuevo y Hondo, Situados entre el Golfo Dulce o Provincia de Goatemala y la de Yucatan 2 (FO 93/99/2)

documented over and over in history, ethnography, and archaeology (Farriss 1978; Palka 2001; Redfield and Villa Rojas 1934; Scholes and Thompson 1977) and make sense of the archaeology and history of San Pedro Siris (Dornan 2004; Yaeger et al. 2004).

5.2 Perspective and Language

When archaeologists travel to the archives in England, or Mexico City, or Spain, or Belize, we are usually seeking to reconstruct historical context for the colonial era sites we are investigating. We access primary sources extraordinarily rich in daily detail, although limited in perspective, and frustratingly lacking in interpretive nuance. As researchers we bring our own perspective, which is strongly shaped by the ways in which we accept the past unthinkingly and perhaps unconsciously as given. It takes a great deal of effort to avoid anachronistic assumptions, and to imagine a historical moment when a history could have played out differently than it did. Instead, the ways in which events unfolded are often accepted uncritically. Furthermore, the narrative is reified and reinforced by the fact that the victors generally write histories that are then codified through decades of truth-through-repetition and significant omissions (Augé 2004; de Certeau 1986; Shoman 1994; Trouillot

1995). This is particularly challenging in the Maya world, where the vast majority of the documents available to us were written by people in positions of colonial privilege. It is difficult for scholars, situated squarely within the twenty-first century, to write about the past in terms that do not make the present seem inevitable; we always write a form of Whig history. We tend to privilege the colonial perspectives in which we are steeped—those of the literate and victorious—over those suggested by archaeology and referenced only indirectly between the lines of the textual record. We need to re-center Maya histories. As Maxine Oland (2012, p. 180) notes about the sixteenth-century Maya of Progreso Lagoon, British Honduras: “Instead of imagining the Maya as thrust into the world of the colonial Spaniards (and forced to react), we might instead imagine the Spaniards as lost among the colonial Maya, interjected into a deep Maya timeline that they did not understand and could not control.” What she implies about Spanish–Maya relations in the sixteenth century, we argue is the case for British–Maya relations in the nineteenth century.

Historians and historical anthropologists, because we immerse ourselves in the documents, often fall into a terminological trap, uncritically adopting the language of those who wrote the preponderance of documents in the languages with which we are most familiar (English and Spanish, in this case). If we want to further the cause of decolonizing interpretations of indigenous pasts, it is critical that we are careful and clear about what we say in our authorial voice as marked and distinct from words and characterizations quoted from our mostly colonial and European primary sources. A brief example from the archaeology and history of the African American Burial Ground in New York City will illustrate the pitfalls. People of African descent in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century New York, when freely naming their own institutions, chose “African” and not “negro,” the latter term used primarily by whites (Epperson 1999). As Terrence Epperson has noted, *The New York Times* and the New-York Historical Society, modern institutions considered by many (not least themselves) to be principal keepers of New York tradition and heritage, have decided to use “negro” rather than “African,” the word many in the cemetery itself would have used in their lifetimes. Words matter. Such language in popular usage by such established institutions and in scholarship affects perspectives of research.

In a small effort to address such bias here, we are altering some place name usage for our discussion of the early nineteenth century in southern Yucatán. Too often scholars have used terms that would not have been recognizable to those in nineteenth-century southern Yucatán of any heritage. Thus, we reserve the term “Belize” exclusively to “Belize Town” (what is now Belize City). The larger territory we call Bay Settlements or British Honduras depending on the period. It did not become the colony of British Honduras until 1862, then became a Crown Colony in 1871. Finally, reference to the country as “Belize” is anachronistic for any period before its independence from Britain in the late twentieth century.

In the early nineteenth century, as New Spain dissolved and new republics emerged, the boundaries of those republics were at best fluid and often downright confounding. These early states, including the Federal Republic of Central America

(est. 1823) and the Republic of Mexico (est. 1823), were emerging, unstable, and aspirational. The short-lived República Federal de Centroamérica broke down further into the Republics of Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua, and Costa Rica (1838). From the Republic of Texas (est. 1836) south to Panama (est. 1821 from the República de Colombia), postcolonial boundaries were shifting and contested over the course of decades; state boundaries were more statements of ideal and ambition than they were real. In the Texas borderlands, Juliana Barr (2011) has termed such aspirational borders as “anticipatory geography,” citing Michael Harley (1992):

Likewise, with the Colonial boundaries that were drawn on maps: these provide perhaps the most spectacular illustrations of how an anticipatory geography served to frame colonial territories in the minds of statesmen and territorial speculators back in Europe. Maps were the first step in the appropriation of territory. Such visualizations from a distance became critical in choreographing the Colonial expansion of early modern Europe (Harley 1992, p. 532).

Similarly, Michael Witgen (2007, p. 640) notes that French Jesuit documentation of the northern Great Lakes region in New France “served as an alternative spatial history,” framing European perception of the area as part of New France rather than as “native space.” Still, often scholars project recently codified state boundaries back into time periods when they did not yet exist in any real, pragmatic way, or they accept aspirational boundaries on maps and treaties as reflecting some on-the-ground political and social reality that impacted the lived experiences of people in the region.

When we discuss the Yalbac Hills here, there is no Guatemala before 1823, and no border, even aspirational, before 1859. Even then, we argue, that border was not recognized as legitimate by local San Pedro Maya on either side of it. (Indeed, the border was only briefly recognized by Guatemala then, and only intermittently since.) The border between British Honduras and Mexico was unresolved through much of the nineteenth century and negotiations were complicated by a major Maya rebellion in Yucatán beginning in 1847—the Caste War or Maya Social War—and the secession of Yucatán from Mexico, when it became the República de Yucatan (1841–1848).

In the second half of the nineteenth century, the Maya rebellion was transformed as two antagonistic Maya groups, the so-called *Pacificos* (“peaceful” or “pacified”) Maya (centered first in Chichanha, then Icaiche), and the Santa Cruz Maya (centered at Chan Santa Cruz), alternately clashed and negotiated peaceful relations with Yucatecan and British Honduran officials across a period of decades (Fig. 5.4). The border was not set by treaty between Britain and Mexico until 1893. Throughout the second half of the nineteenth century, we argue that Maya groups, including village clusters around San Pedro Siris, effectively exercised self-rule and recognized borders established with Spain in the eighteenth century quite different than those being deliberated by Mexico, Guatemala, and the British in the nineteenth century.

Decisions about terms and usage are not mere semantics. If one’s thinking is structured by modern national boundaries, then how are we to situate strategies and



Fig. 5.4 Carl Hermann Berendt map of Yucatan and Campeche 1878, showing San Pedro Siris, Icaiche, and Chichanhá. (CO 700/BritishHonduras 23)

actions decided by different nineteenth-century Maya, British, or Mexican groups who conceptualized territories differently, or interpret the archaeology we find? We must first—as best we can—identify places in their world as nineteenth-century inhabitants would have done. Of course, we cannot know with any certainty what nineteenth-century Maya leaders were thinking, but to the degree possible we want to make space for indigenous or *campesino* (peasant) senses of place, politics, and economies in chronologically appropriate terms. We also want to make sure the better documented do not drown out those who are more materially represented in our sources.

In truth, in the context of the neighboring Mexican state led by indigenous president Benito Juárez (1857–1872) and Guatemala headed by a mestizo president, Rafael Carrera (1847–1848, 1851–1865), there is no legitimate reason for archaeologists or historians to talk of the Indian “presence” in southeastern Yucatán as any less formally established in geopolitical terms than the British Bay Settlements themselves. In this sense our case again parallels that explored by Juliana Barr (2011, p. 8) in the southwestern USA, for which she states, “We have framed [Indian] power in spatial concepts of borderlands, middle grounds, divided grounds,

and native grounds. Yet, though we have recognized the existence of Indian borders, we have primarily focused our attention on exploring the relations that developed along and across the borders created between Indian societies and European colonies” rather than trying to explore or understand the homeland geography of Indians themselves.

Dumond (1977, p. 103) outlines the historical moment of the mid-nineteenth-century Caste War in terms that center Pacífico or Chichanha/Icaiche and Santa Cruz Maya political groupings:

After the outbreak in 1847 of the massive rebellion known commonly as the *Guerra de las Castas*—the Caste War or better, the Race War—several autonomous Indian political units arose in the southern and eastern portions of the Yucatán Peninsula as outgrowths of the rebel army. Organized in quasi-military fashion, fluctuating in number to some extent and varying in their affiliations both with one another and with the governments of Yucatán and Campeche, these units persisted throughout the second half of the nineteenth.

Of the Caste War era Maya groups in southern Yucatán, two have drawn the most historical attention: the Pacíficos, based at Chichanha in what is now southern Campeche, who brokered an uneasy peace with Mexico (by way of a declaration of peace in 1851 and a treaty in 1853), and the Santa Cruz, to the northeast in what is now Quintana Roo, who were in conflict with Mexico and to whom, at different times, certain British Honduran merchants sold guns and ammunition. Less explored by scholars, south of these two Maya polities, was a third Maya political group, village clusters centered on San Pedro Siris in and around the Yalbac Hills and eastern Petén, identified by Grant Jones (1977; see Fig. 5.4). This southern group is distinct from the two northern groups in terms of demographics and identity, origin, history, and political strategy. This group is our focus here.

Sometime between 1857 and 1861, the San Pedro Maya, seeking to avoid continuing conflict with the Santa Cruz and to achieve some autonomy from the leadership of the Pacíficos centered at Chichanha, moved southward (Jones 1977, p. 144; Belize Archives and Records Service, Belmopan [hereafter BARS] 52, Frederick Seymour to Major General Bell, May 15, 1857, Confidential no. 1; BARS 81, Seymour to Gov. Eyre, February 13, 1863, no. 15; BARS 81, Seymour to Eyre, November 12, 1862, no. 187). For several years, the San Pedro leadership in the person of General Asunción Ek was engaged in trying to insert and translate its sense of territorial authority, separate and distinct from both Pacíficos and Santa Cruz, into colonial and nationalist geopolitical discussions framed in terms that British settlers and Mexican politicians would understand. Then, in 1866, British Honduran leadership broke trust with San Pedro by sending a West India regiment to put down a perceived threat in the village (discussed in depth by Jennifer Dornan [2004]), which drove San Pedro’s leadership back into alliance with Marcos Canul and the Pacíficos now centered in Icaiche (BARS 92, Austin to Grant, December 28, 1866, no. 133; BARS 92, Austin to Grant, January 12, 1867, no. 8).

Through much of rest of the nineteenth century, the Maya villages around the village of San Pedro Siris behaved strategically in a political landscape where they seemed to have a claim as strong—or stronger, by dint of actual occupation—to the lands they inhabited as any British, Mexicans, or Guatemalans. These claims are not

surprising given the context. The Santa Cruz Maya at this time wrote letters delineated “Estado Independiente de Yucatán,” an assertion which would not have escaped the attention of the two other Maya groups. British internal documents from 1853 and 1867 characterize logging activities in areas contested with Mexico as both “unjustifiable” (Colonial Office, British National Archives, Kew [hereafter CO] 123/94: Secretary of Foreign Affairs Clarendon to Superintendent Wodehouse, November 1856) and probably accompanied by “maltreatment” of the natives (CO 123/131: Secretary of Foreign Affairs Stanley to Vice-Admiral Mundy, January 1867). At around the same time (December 18, 1865), British officials were grudgingly acknowledging the Santa Cruz Maya as an “Indian Nation”:

I cannot refrain from observing that, until the boundary between British Honduras and Yucatan is properly defined, and as long as Mexico refuses to acknowledge the rights of the Queen’s Sovereignty over a British Colony, it is hardly possible for Britain to join with Mexico in any military operation against an Indian Nation, whose object appears to be to obtain both from Britain and Mexico, the recognition of her independence (Public Records Office, British National Archives [hereafter PRO], Foreign Office, 254, 557—Peter Campbell Scarlett (British Minister to Mexico)— don Martín de Castillo (Mexican Foreign Minister).

In this chapter we ask what happens to colonial narratives of the past in this region if we are careful not to take sides prematurely, implicitly and using anachronistic terms, in the fluctuating early nineteenth-century geopolitical contest over southern Yucatán territory. This requires not talking about past landscapes in terms defined by after-the-fact colonial diplomacy. We argue from this perspective that the archaeological data from the site of San Pedro Siris, from ascertaining dates of occupation to its interesting history of strategic abandonment and reoccupation, make sense only if we broaden our geopolitical landscape to be more inclusive and more in sync with the nineteenth century’s unstable diplomatic contexts, inclusive of claims by shifting Maya polities. In the words of Barr (2011, p. 8): “All too often when we imagine the early American landscape, the only borders we picture there are the imaginary lines drawn to demarcate vying European claims to the North American Continent.”

5.3 A San Pedro Maya–Centered Past

The analytical shift in language and perspective described above, making room for alternative and indigenous geographies, led us to re-examine documents and provide new context for our archaeological findings at San Pedro, including dates of occupation. The received history, based largely on Spanish and Mexican documents, is that the San Pedro Maya area was only lightly occupied in the late eighteenth century, and virtually abandoned due to disease in the early nineteenth (Jones 1977). In this narrative, the Maya immigrants from the north who came to the area after 1857 would have found the Yalbac Hills and surrounding jungles empty. However, a key piece of contradictory evidence is found in the archives, when in 1862, Edward

Rhys noted that the former name of San Pedro was “ceris” (BARS 78, Rhys to Seymour, November 3, 1862, Belize), and the full name, San Pedro Siris, is given in other documents from that decade. This shows that there was a pre-1850s occupation. Moreover, the fact that the letter “r” is not found in the Yucatec Maya language suggests that the earlier occupation consisted, at least in part, of speakers of a Maya language other than Yucatec.

In Grant Jones’s (1977) edited volume, J. Eric Thompson (1977) is the lone voice arguing for a pre-1857 presence of what he calls the “Chan Maya,” a group in the Yalbac Hills and eastern Petén that was somewhat culturally and linguistically distinct from the people of Yucatán. Although Thompson suggests he is coining the phrase “Chan Maya” in this work, there is in fact a 1775 map (see Fig. 5.2) by Thomas Jeffreys, Geographer to His Majesty King George III, that shows several Maya groups to the west of the British logcutters and north of the “Mopanes” (Mopan Maya), including a group labelled “Chanes.” Tipu, an earlier Maya settlement south of the San Pedro villages, is shown on this map, as are a group labelled simply “*Indios bravos*” (wild Indians) in the Yalbac region who, being “wild,” were presumably very difficult to document and count. In his 1998 book, Jones (1998, pp. 433, n. 48, 439, n. 54) notes that “the composition of Tipuj’s early sixteenth-century population is uncertain, but I suspect that it may have been predominantly Mopan [Maya]” and that the “Mopans who were known as Chinamitas or Tulumkis were said in 1698 to be located...well into Belize, east or southeast of Tipuj” and “many more were hiding in the forests.” Thompson (1977) notes Petén-style *incensarios* (incense burners) in the area around what is now San Ignacio (Cayo), Belize.

Such “Indios bravos” shown in eighteenth-century maps may have occupied the area well into the nineteenth century and even approaching the turn of the twentieth century. Archaeologist James Meierhoff (pers. comm. 2018), while working on the Chan archaeological site in northern Belize, heard stories from the elderly landowner about Maya living in the forests around Negroman (near the ruins of Tipu) and San José Succotz; Mr. Chan would hear conch shell horns sounding from “the bush” as a boy. There were several groups fleeing into this area in the late eighteenth and nineteenth century from north, west, and east, including Yucatec from the north and enslaved Africans from logging camps. Joel Palka has worked on nineteenth-century Lacandon sites in the Petén and acknowledges the possibility, based on *incensario* finds, of a few Lacandon Maya in areas of the Petén near the current Guatemalan border or even just east of it who probably either “died or assimilated into Yucateco, Mopan, and Itzá groups” (pers. comm. 2018).

5.3.1 *Census Data*

The discussion among the archaeologists cited above highlights the problems with historical narratives of regional occupation based on documents alone. Any census tells us at least as much about the state that organizes it as it does about the people being counted, and so a census should never be read as unfiltered, objective data

(Schuyler 1974, 1978). The numbers always have a context. Here, we take a more critical view of very fraught and methodologically flawed attempts by New Spain and British Honduras at taking population censuses in remote areas controlled by independent Maya potentially unwilling to be counted, starting in seventeenth-century New Spain. From these narratives it seems clear that Maya groups both recognized the census as attempts by New Spain or the British to control them and their territory, and found ways to thwart those efforts.

Between 1654 and 1655, Francisco Pérez of Bacalar made three different journeys into the upper Belize River valley (Mopan and Macal Rivers), where San Pedro Maya villages would eventually be established, in order to try to enumerate Maya there who had been part of the Rebellion of 1641 and bring them back to New Spain and the Church. He also sought occupants of several villages near Bacalar who had chosen to burn and abandon their villages and flee to the south. Pérez had equivocal success; he recorded the “chiefs and other Indians of Tipu settlements, save those absent, sick, or for other reasons unable to make the trip [to Chunukum]” (Scholes and Thompson 1977, p. 55).

Chunukum, according to Scholes and Thompson, was “probably” somewhere near Never Delay, which is about 43 km (27 miles) away from Tipu as the crow flies, and much further by foot or waterway. Despite Pérez’ claim that all were present and none hiding, the census numbers he finally recorded are sketchy, as Scholes and Thompson (1977, p. 55) note:

There were 110 men and numbers of women and children. In addition, 23 Indians were already at Chunukum. This figure fails to agree with the *matricula*, which gives 141 male residents of Tipu, unless we make the highly doubtful assumption that those of Tipu found at Holzuuz [south end of New River Lagoon] are included. In fact, unless disease had swept off many youngsters, many children must have been left at home; they are outnumbered by adults by three to one.

Furthermore, the Tipu leaders went on to promise to build a church at Chunukum, more than 64 or 80 km (40 or 50 miles) away from Tipu on foot or by river, and to convene there whenever summoned. “One suspects that the reason behind the offer to build there was to keep priest and government official from poking around Tipu” (Scholes and Thompson 1977, pp. 55–56), and this arrangement enabled Tipu to interpret their renewed submission to the authority of New Spain rather loosely as time went on. Some 40 years later, in 1696, Maya occupants of Tipu were still allied with independent Maya rulers of Tayasal to the west in Petén, by marriage; they “kept the Spanish at arm’s length while giving verbal assurances of their loyalty as subjects” (Scholes and Thompson 1977, p. xvi). Soon after, Tipu “fades from sight” as Spanish military officials attempted to forcibly relocate them after the defeat of Tayasal in 1697, but the environs may have remained occupied (Jones 1977, p. xvii, 1998). Eventually, the village of San Pedro Siris is established in the Yalbac Hills north of Tipu. The answer to the question of when exactly that happens has traditionally been understood as 1857, during the Caste War, but that answer assumes the area was vacant before then, an assumption that is unwarranted.

The problems with census taking in the early nineteenth century were much the same as the problems faced in the seventeenth century. Pérez reports “*Indios del monte*” or “forest” or “wild” Indians in the upper Belize River Valley in 1655. At that time, he notes 26 women, four men, and no children at all, which suggests to Jones (1989, p. 237) that the group “had been rounded up by a detachment of Pérez’s force while the men were out hunting or elsewhere engaged and the children had been left behind with the infirm and aged.” It is also possible that the village was intentionally vacated when troops arrived, as this was a common strategy when dealing with unwelcome visitors. Scholes and Thompson (1977) note that earlier reports of population in this region, from informal censuses varied depending on those reporting. Priests and missionaries enumerated every four or five house hamlet (a common settlement pattern) because they counted “souls to be harvested,” whereas Army reports might skip tiny hamlets of a few houses: “small settlements do not feed an army or give lodgment, so may be ignored” (Scholes and Thompson 1977, p. 19).

Clearly, taking an accurate census of hamlets of “wild” Indians or those recently in rebellion was difficult in the seventeenth century, and there is little reason to believe that it was easier by the mid-nineteenth century before and during the Caste War. Howard F. Cline (1950) discusses Indians largely removed from dependence on colonial economies and otherwise autonomous Maya in the southern part of the state of Yucatán and as far south as Bacalar and Chichanha. Using Cline’s work as well as colonial census data, Dumond (1977, p. 105) goes on to make this surprising assertion:

The distribution of population reflected the exploitation of the land. In 1845 nearly 70 percent of the population lived in the colonial areas of the north and west [Yucatán], more than 30 percent in the developing commercial sector of the sugar-producing borderlands. Available figures reflect little more than 1 percent (fewer than 8000 people) in the south-eastern zone (Cline 1950c: tables 18, 28; Regil and Peón 1853), although some estimates have been said to place the total number of the southern *huites* [sic] at twenty thousand or more (Cline 1950c:364).

He is assessing the highest numbers in areas where the Maya and mestizo labor force was most concentrated and dependent, and counts were easy and reliable, and then assessing the lowest numbers where he has already described Maya groups as dispersed, mobile, and elusive. We are to take these hinterland numbers to heart, despite the fact that Dumond also cites John L. Stevens (1854) “this was a region found by Stephens and Catherwood in 1842 to be without roads, never visited by whites” (Dumond 1977, p. 105).

The preceding discussion leads us to believe that there was surely some population in the Yalbac region—maybe a mix of Mopan, Yucatec, and Itza Maya—prior to the large migration of Yucatec speakers after 1857 described in historical documents. Evidence of such occupation at San Pedro is suggested by archaeological data as well.

5.3.2 *Archaeological Data*

The archaeological data from San Pedro are more in line with J. Eric Thompson's demographic picture of the region than Jones' or Dumond's. There is no dispute that a large number of Maya immigrants from Chichanha moved south into the Yalbac Hills and surrounds between 1857 and 1861. However, we argue there is reasonable documentary evidence that there was at least a small, scattered population already in the area. The archaeological record at San Pedro Siris suggests the possibility of occupation dating to the 1820s or 1830s if not earlier. We have evidence of one or more flint lock muzzle-loading weapons of a type known as "Brown Bess," including hardware and three flints (Fig. 5.5). The British military replaced flintlock muskets with percussion cap smooth bore weapons in 1838 and we have more evidence of the percussion smooth bore muskets than flintlocks, as well as many ramrods which can be used for either. However, the presence of three flints (one locally made) and flintlock hardware in our sample, when combined with a ceramic profile including pearlware, transfer-printed ware, and sponge motifs, all more prevalent than plain wares, suggests some Maya occupied the locale prior to the well-documented Caste War-era migration from Chichanha.

Perhaps some of the locations in the Yalbac Hills and eastern Petén chosen by immigrants after 1857 were attractive because they already knew people living there. Thompson (1977; also see Farriss 1978) and others observe historically and ethnographically a pattern whereby a faction leaves a parent village and goes to

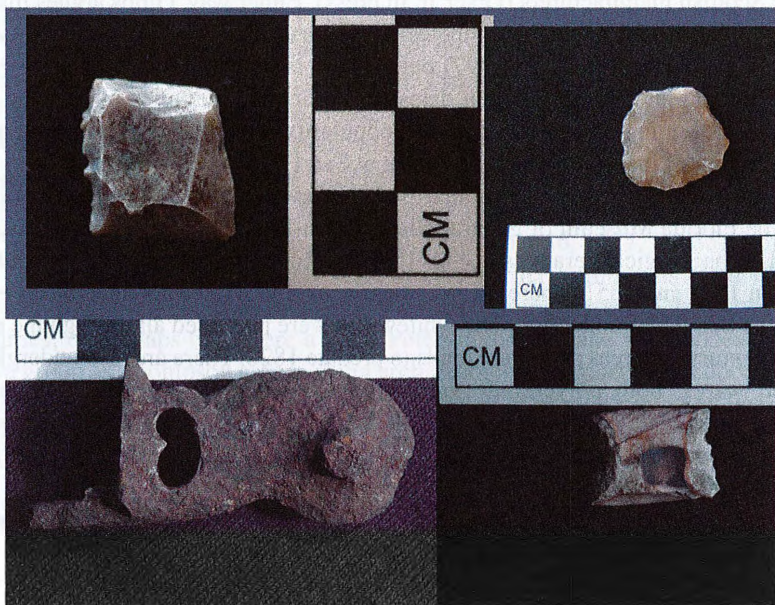


Fig. 5.5 Flints and cock from flintlock firearm, from San Pedro Siris

settle in a place with kin or fictive kin, people with whom they have traded and perhaps intermarried. Generally, groups feeling pressured to move out of one place do not strike out into entirely unknown territory.

Of course, there is an alternative hypothesis that would account for the presence of early artifacts on a site not occupied until mid-nineteenth century. People may curate old guns, or English manufacturers might have dumped increasingly outdated and unpopular patterns onto colonial markets like British Honduras. We know that manufacturers in Scotland were producing brightly colored sponge stamped wares between about 1840 and 1880, which were explicitly marketed to “peasants” in the UK and Ireland, as well as “out-markets” (Orser Jr. in press). Imported wares were excavated from terrestrial and underwater contexts by Lauren Alston Bridges and Roberto Gallardo (2018) at the port of Acajutla, on the coast of El Salvador, confirming that imported ceramics were sold in such “out-markets” piecemeal, rather than as sets as would have been the norm for more affluent buyers in the English colonial markets.

No doubt many of the wares we find are consistent with rural colonial markets such as British Honduras during the mid-nineteenth century. However, manufacture and popularity of some transfer patterns at San Pedro seem to skew earlier. Archaeologists working in parts of the maritime British colonial world as disparate as Australia and the east coast of the USA have concluded that access to fashionable ceramics patterns was generally timely, without much, if any, lag. Gibbs (2010, p. 113), reporting on a whaling community in Australia, acknowledges that people may curate these decorated pieces longer, or buy “cheaper, out of date ceramic styles or patterns,” or perhaps those inexpensive decorated wares marketed to them by the Scottish manufacturers (Orser Jr. in press). Either way, Gibbs argues that lag time is minimal, and by the later nineteenth century Gibbs sees no lag time at all in Australian contexts. Samford (1997) published a table with mean as well as absolute beginning and end production dates for particular categories of transfer print motifs, representing peak production and popularity as well as total period of availability. Many of the transfer motifs we see at San Pedro, such as “exotic” and “floral,” have peak production and popularity dates between ca. 1820 and ca. 1840 (see also The Florida Museum of Natural History’s on-line type collections of historic-period archaeological ceramics [1492–1850]). “Romantic” motifs skew a bit later, between 1831 and 1851. There are both pearlware and whiteware decorated ceramics in the San Pedro collection. The whitewares were produced all through the nineteenth century, whereas pearlware tends to predate 1820. There are also underglazed painted wares, both polychrome varieties (post-1840s) and cobalt blue monochrome, which date between 1815 and 1830 (Samford 1997; Fig. 5.6). It seems that artifacts from subsurface contexts skew slightly earlier than dates for surface finds, as one might expect.

Judging from the artifact assemblage at San Pedro, occupation there or in the surrounding area may have begun in the second or third decade of the nineteenth century, perhaps even before. The influx of people from Chichanha 20 or 30 years



Fig. 5.6 Hand-painted flow blue ware from San Pedro Siris

later may have augmented or even overwhelmed an existing but smaller settlement only a few families in size, like those hamlets observed by Spaniards in the eighteenth century, just as the later artifacts swamp the earlier ones in terms of numbers at San Pedro.

In sum, population estimates drawn entirely from documents are unreliable, particularly for areas of only aspirational colonial control, and it looks as though there could have been people living at or near San Pedro two decades or more before the Caste War began. The ravages of disease in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries no doubt decimated the Maya population of the Yalbac Hills and Belize River valley (Thompson 1977), but there is evidence in documents as well as in the archaeological data that the area was never entirely empty of people. As early as 1822, a group of slaves working as woodcutters fled from the British settlements through the Petén into Yucatán, “having been conducted thither by Indians through bye paths” (BARS, Misc. Inwards and Outwards Rec. 2, A. H. Pye to Capt. Genl. & Pres. of Yucatán, Don Melchor Alvarez, August 6, 1822, Belize). In a November 1857 letter to the Governor, Superintendent Seymour wrote about how there were “also in North Honduras many Indians of the Chichenja & *other wild Maya tribes* [emphasis added] who shirk observations, & do not apply for licence to roam through the forests” (BARS 55, Seymour to Gov. Darling, November 16, 1857, no. 35). It may be that the pre-Caste War occupants were simply earlier immigrants from northern Yucatán, migrating south to escape Spanish rule in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, or perhaps they were a more Petén-influenced and independent “Chan” Maya group as Thompson argues using archaeological, linguistic, and documentary evidence. However, it is unlikely that larger number of migrants into San Pedro Siris and surrounding villages after 1857 were establishing those settlements entirely *de novo*. The settlements were around existing permanent water sources like lagoons and springs, often adjacent to ancient mounds. It seems more likely that the Caste War-era migrants joined “Indios Bravos”—perhaps kin or trade partners—who were already long-term residents in the area of the Yalbac Hills.

5.3.3 *Maps, States, Boundaries*

By the late 1850s, Britain was grudgingly acknowledging autonomous Maya residents around San Pedro in the Yalbac region, just as Mexico was in the Chichanha Maya region. The Foreign Office [hereafter FO] of Great Britain acknowledged to the FO of Mexico, again grudgingly, a Santa Cruz Maya “Indian nation” claiming independence on what they consider to be their borders. To be sure, the British were engaging in a sort of brinkmanship here. They were using the threat that an independent Indian state would pose to the territorial aspirations of both Mexico and Britain in order to pressure Mexico into settling their southern boundary along the Río Hondo in terms favorable to British Honduras. We have only a little direct, written evidence of how Maya villagers in and around the Yalbac Hills and Petén in southeastern Yucatán were communicating with these states about their territory (or working to translate their territorial aspirations into the language of western state diplomacy). However, the fact remains that we do have two adjacent nation-states—three if we include Guatemala under the short-lived leadership of its mestizo president Rafael Carrera—acknowledging a distinctive Maya political identity in diplomatic missives to one another in the 1850s.

Say, for the sake of argument, we take the Maya at their word, just as we take Great Britain, Guatemala, and Mexico at theirs. Say we begin (as has Dumond 1977) from the analytical standpoint that the nineteenth-century Maya villages of southeastern Yucatán, west of British Honduras, east of Guatemala, and south of Mexico, collectively constituted longstanding Maya provinces cum Maya political groups, and effectively remained such even after Mexico, British Honduras, and Guatemala had more or less settled on what they considered to be their borders in the late nineteenth century.

We take as a given the fact that until very late in the nineteenth century, the Maya in and around San Pedro Siris, in the Yalbac Hills and eastern Petén had at least as much claim to political authority and autonomy as did Yucatán, Mexico, Guatemala, or British Honduras. The latter was not a colony (versus settlements) until 1862 and was not a Crown Colony until 1871. The borders ultimately agreed upon by the British, Mexicans, and Guatemalans were in fact conjectural or aspirational state borders that cut through the middle of a populated, actively independent Maya political entity which contemporary nineteenth-century British diplomats called a nation. The *Pacíficos* negotiated a degree of autonomy and self-rule in an 1853 treaty with Yucatecan officials, witnessed by British diplomat Superintendent Phillip Wodehouse (Dumond 1997, pp. 193–198). The San Pedro Maya in the 1860s, at times allied with the *Pacíficos*, but on land claimed by the British, did not get this recognition.

Still, on the ground, the purely aspirational northwestern borders of what became British Honduras, as well as its aspirational western boundary with Guatemala, traversed a land occupied by a preponderance of Maya people and a bare smattering of profoundly insecure (judging by their repeated complaints to the Lt. Governor) British logging camps (Dumond 1997; Gann 1997 [1925]; Jones 1989). In fact, the

Chichanha/Icaiche asserted considerable influence and acted freely here, attacking logging camps and taking hostages in cases where British companies were not paying rents that the Icaiche believed they were due (Dumond 1997).

5.4 Black Creek and New River Lagoon: San Pedro Maya Borders

In policy letters aimed at establishing the geopolitical status of British Honduras as a colony rather than logwood and mahogany concessions granted by Spain, officials of the British CO openly acknowledged “actual” occupation as the best way to establish colonial and state territory. In an internal communication, as late as November 15, 1856, the British CO argued that it would be good to write to the government of Guatemala to establish a western border, saying the border should be created:

on a basis comprised of actual occupation and of the Treaties with Spain in 1783 [17]86 that is where either Country shall be found to be in actual occupation that Country shall be declared to have the territorial right, and where the tract is unoccupied or occupied by Indians only, the line shall be drawn according to what shall be considered to have been the boundaries intended by the treaties with Spain. (CO 123/94, Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs Malmesbury to Superintendent Stevenson, November 15, 1856)

While the referenced treaty with Spain ceded usufruct, not territorial, rights to Great Britain, Britain had long argued for territorial rights since they were no longer negotiating with New Spain, but with independent Mexico and Guatemala. However, the British did reference the treaty here in terms of setting borders, and importantly for the San Pedro Maya, the western boundaries for woodcutting in that treaty were set at the smaller lagoons east of the New River Lagoon extending down along Black Creek to the north bank of the Belize River. Everything west of the New River Lagoon system and drainage, the Yalbac Hills and into the Petén, was territory occupied by Maya who considered this their domain, including villages for whom they chose local mayors, *alcaldes*, well into the 1870s, villages whose political center was San Pedro Siris. The more westerly border at roughly the 89th meridian (the current border) established by the Anglo-Guatemalan treaty of 1859 was in every sense an aspirational one, since there was no real control in that area by British Honduras, Mexico, or Guatemala. It cut through San Pedro Maya territory.

Setting aside the dismissive tone of the phrase “occupied by Indians only” (in a document advocating territorial occupation as a basis for territorial claim), this was only one of several British colonial documents acknowledging first, that the Maya were the main occupants of land west of New River Lagoon and Black Creek, and north of the Belize River; second, that something like the aforementioned independent Santa Cruz “Indian nation” to the north had a diplomatic relationship with Mexico and England by way of a treaty in 1853 (that is, the Pacificos) and perhaps emboldened by that, Chichanha Maya leaders demanded rents from British

loggers beginning in 1856 (Dumond 1997, p. 265); and third, that British woodcutters operating west of the 1783 treaty borders prior to 1859, anywhere west of New River Lagoons and Black Creek, were operating illegally beyond England's jurisdiction. The fact that Superintendent Wodehouse had also signed onto the 1853 treaty between the *Pacífico Maya* centered at Chichanha and Yucatán defies explanation unless in the 1850s the British colonial establishment itself, unlike the loggers, was still operating with the understanding that their western and northern boundaries were still those set by the 1783/86 arrangements with Spain:

I think that, all things considered, the Superintendent should be requested to warn the British occupants of questionable territory that it will be difficult and may be impossible for the British Government to protect their lives and property if they shall be found to be pursuing their [logging] operations on the Mexican side of the boundary as recognized in the Treaty of 1826 [which reinforced the same boundaries as the 1783/86 treaty with New Spain] and that His Majesty's Government...strongly recommend them to consider the expediency of withdrawing their establishments from any tracts of country which are not within the British limits. (CO 123/94, Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs Malmesbury to Superintendent Stevenson, November 15, 1856)

Lord Malmesbury goes on to suggest that one who might best advise on the vagaries of boundary setting between British subjects and Indians was Robert Scharbargh who explored the boundaries proposed for the Mosquito Indian reserved lands to the south in Honduras (CO 123/94). Notably, the Mosquitos were given usufruct rights within those boundaries, not territorial rights, just as British loggers had been granted by Spain in 1786.

Throughout the first half of the nineteenth century, there is a clear pattern of inter-colonial tension between loggers, gun and powder merchants, and the FO and CO; the loggers, in particular, clearly felt that their government officials had been whittling away their rights in the upper Belize River valley and surrounding area since the eighteenth century. They wanted colonial protection, but the CO saw them as troublemakers undermining diplomatic relations with both Maya and Mexican officials. In fact, from the seventeenth century through at least the 1850s, the international legal status of British Honduran settlements (not yet a colony) was completely fluid. Settlers and loggers were frequently at odds with the CO and FO, and not infrequently with the Lt. Governor in Belize or the Governor in Jamaica. The CO periodically complained that the logging camps beyond Black Creek and New River Lagoon were illegal, making their job harder.

5.5 Discussion: San Pedro Maya Re-Centered

No doubt the Maya understood how precarious their homeland position was within the shifting and unsolidified aspirational borderlands of these various colonial and post-colonial powers. When Asunción Ek, alcalde of San Pedro Siris, applied to the British Honduran Lt. Governor John Austin for firearms to protect both San Pedro and the British from their mutual enemy at the time, the Icaiche, led by Marcos



Fig. 5.7 Ink well fragments and gun barrels from San Pedro

Canul, he may well have been hedging his bets, seeing the writing on the wall (BARS 93, Ek to Austin, May 10, 1866, San Pedro). The same might be said of his request in 1863 for a school teacher and provision of “elementary Spanish books” to village children (BARS 81, Seymour to Gov. Eyre, July 13, 1863, no. 72). Both of these material requests are documented in archaeology as well as archives (Fig. 5.7).

If the British were playing a game of brinksmanship with Mexico, using the threat of an autonomous Maya state to prod the Mexicans to solidify their mutual border, the San Pedro Maya were doing the same with the English, *vis a vis* the Icaiche Maya, who were hostile to the British and allied with Mexico. It is likely that Ek knew about the treaty of 1853 which afforded the Icaiche some level of autonomy within southern Yucatán and also the *de facto* independence of the Santa Cruz Maya. He may have known that the Miskitu had been granted semi-autonomous territory within Honduras in 1856. Within this context, Ek may have been angling for a similar arrangement with the British Honduran lieutenant governors in the early 1860s. Maxine Oland (2012, p. 179) argues that sixteenth-century Maya leaders in Progresso Lagoon “manipulated their relationships with the Spaniards to regain prestige when Mayapán collapsed.” In a nineteenth-century world where several colonial and post-colonial states were being carved, re-carved, and then negotiated anew out of what was once New Spain, affording spaces for novel arrangements with degrees of autonomy for indigenous groups, Ek and his fellow leaders were playing the geopolitical game as they found it. After all, indigenous and mestizo leaders were leading the largest new republics of the time: Benito Juárez in Mexico,



Fig. 5.8 Parts of Congreve Incendiary rockets used by the 4th West India Regiment to burn the village of San Pedro in 1867

and Rafael Carrera in Guatemala. So why should not Maya leaders expect to lead in places where they were a demographic majority?

Sadly, Ek's gamble would not pay off (Fig. 5.8). The second of two encounters with the 4th West India Regiment resulted in the abandonment of San Pedro in 1867, and the subsequent burning of the village using Congreve incendiary rockets by the British who were frustrated by the fact that no one was there to surrender. In fact, hints in the documents, combined with evidence of reoccupation of the site within a couple of years, make clear that the Maya did not actually surrender, despite the somewhat aggrieved note left for Ek by Colonel Robert William Harley: "I have now to destroy your town which you will never again be allowed to occupy, unless you make proper submission at Belize and sue for pardon" (War Office, British National Archives, Kew 32/6202: Col. R.W. Harley to A. Ek, note left in Fiesta house, February 1867). Despite this declaration, there is nothing in the archives to indicate that Ek or anyone else did in fact "make proper submission" at Belize Town. By May of that year, those who had fled San Pedro and other Yalbac Hills villages were living at Santa Rita in Guatemala (BARS 96, 4th WIR Captain Thomas Edmunds to Cockburn, May 31, 1867, Young Girl Bank). San Pedro Siris was rebuilt and reoccupied within three years (Bristowe and Wright 1889), and Ek again was mentioned as regional commander there in 1875 (Dumond 1997, p. 342). The British position was unclear as well; even as the mission to burn San Pedro was underway, the British Secretary of State sent a dispatch to the Commander of the Admiralty noting that "[Indian] troubles seem to have originated from an ill-defined and disputed boundary [with Guatemala and Mexico]; secondly from the unjustifiable conduct of the Logwood Cutters in felling wood within the *Indian Territory*" (CO 123/131: January 24, 1867; emphasis added).

Eight years after the military destruction of San Pedro, in 1875, the Icaiche Maya (now led by Santiago Pech) and a group from San Pedro marched on Holotonich and restated a prior claim "to the whole of the left bank of the Belize River down to Black Creek mouth" (BARS 119, Messrs. Phillips and Co. to Acting Col. Secty., Thomas Graham, March 22, 1875, Belize). Pech made the same claim again in 1882, when he met with Harley (now Acting Lt. Governor) in Belize City. Pech stated that he has, on his own authority, "appointed alcaldes at Holotonich, San José, and San Pedro, and has always understood that his jurisdiction extended to

those places.” Harley pressured Pech to “respect the boundaries” claimed by the British colony, by simultaneously presenting him with evidence of Pech’s having made hostile acts against the colony and also promising to lift trade restrictions and to “renew friendly relations.” Pech declared himself willing, “pending his report of this ultimatum to his Government who would otherwise blame him and begged for a copy of these proceedings so that he could shew his Government what had taken place” (BARS 93, Memorandum of an interview, Col. Harley and Genl. Santiago Pech, October 13, 1882, Belize). This declaration of “willingness” seems reminiscent of seventeenth-century Tipu leaders “submitting” to Spanish rule by building a church and agreeing to be summoned to a spot 64 + km (40 + miles) away from their actual village (Scholes and Thompson 1977). However, Harley took it seriously enough that he used Pech’s concession as grounds to end British Honduras’ unofficial alliance with Santa Cruz Maya to the north (Bolland 1977).

If we adopt a standpoint from the territory of the San Pedro/Icaiché Maya in this period, it seems that in fact Maya governing autonomy—either as a state or perhaps better understood as a Maya “domestic dependent nation”—persisted for decades past the village burnings of 1867, despite hardening border claims by Britain, Guatemala, and Mexico—borders which they were slowly reaching agreement upon, but still could not well enforce.

5.6 Landscape Archaeology and Strategic “Abandonment”

At the landscape as well as the site level, the language of “occupied” and “unoccupied” and, even more problematic, “abandoned,” used in all primary sources describing settlements in this area must be examined in the context of historic Maya patterns of mobility and homeland in southern Yucatán and the Petén. Dr. Thomas Gann (1997 [1925], p. 95) reported “peaceful resistance” at work as late as 1925:

The Indians, especially in the Spanish-American republics, take every possible precaution to hide their villages, concealing them in the depths of the bush, where they are almost impossible to find...Though the Indians of British Honduras have received nothing but encouragement and kind treatment at the hands of the local Government, old instincts die hard, and they are still averse to visits from the white man to their villages. To prevent such the approaches are made as narrow and inconspicuous as possible, and as Indians always walk in single file, and use no mode of conveyance for goods except their own backs, this is easily accomplished. On riding through the bush one will sometimes strike a little narrow, inconspicuous track which looks as if it had been made by game visiting a water-hole, but if followed up will be found to lead to a settlement of considerable size. The villages are literally buried in the bush, the densest parts of which are chosen, and only just so much cleared as will accommodate the houses, the forest growing right up to the back yard. All around the settlement is a labyrinth of paths, amongst which the stranger may wander up and down and in and out for hours, the last place he is likely to arrive at being the village. Meanwhile he has been thoroughly inspected, and should the Indians have reason to think that his mission is undesirable, he will find empty huts and a deserted village.

European colonizers, having a very different sense of place and settlement, were apt to misinterpret an empty village as an abandoned village. More recently, archaeologists and historians did so as well.

Using archaeology, ethnography, and documents, Joel Palka (2001) demonstrates in his work in the Petén that the Lacandon used strategic abandonment of settlements as an overt strategy to avoid confrontation with and subjugation by colonial authorities, military or civil, and maintain a *de facto* sense of homeland. Again, this vacating of villages is read by colonial authorities (and sometimes by scholars) as submission or “abandonment,” but nineteenth-century Maya occupants very often came back, as they did at San Pedro Siris; clearly, they are thinking of this mobility differently.

5.7 Conclusion

Just as we need to take care we do not use anachronistically modern terms to describe geopolitical landscapes in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, we also need to be more precise when we speak of a site—or an entire region—as “abandoned.” It may be difficult to see archaeologically, but it is possible that small- to medium-sized Maya towns engaged in this strategy of dispersing more-or-less temporarily into the bush in pre-Columbian times as well.

In successive field seasons, San Pedro Maya Project personnel engaged in surface collection, testing, and trenching, ultimately basing more extensive horizontal excavations on artifact densities and subsurface features in trench profiles. In her dissertation work at San Pedro Siris, Jennifer Dornan (2004, p. 209), who led excavations in the field, interpreted the horizontal excavation of a house lot and surrounding yard and trash dump areas:

The relationship between the different types of cobble surface remains unclear although they do suggest at least 2 and probably 3 different construction phases. However, the length of and time between these phases remains unclear. The fine grained and subtle variations in these strata do not lend themselves to certainty in understanding their relationships though future research could clarify these nuanced distinctions further (Dornan 2004, p. 209).

Such evidence may represent episodes of resurfacing or reconfiguring of the household between generations. However, it is also at least possible, given the historical context discussed here, that such discrete occupation surfaces represent episodes of strategic abandonment and reoccupation by the people of San Pedro. We know that they left the village at least once, when Colonel Harley found it empty and set fire to it. (We found Congreve incendiary rockets used to burn the village, but given the relatively shallow deposition, many episodes of slash-and-burn agriculture over decades, as well as post-San Pedro *chiclero* (chicle collector) camps on the site, it is not surprising we could not define that exact 1867 burn episode.)

Consideration of the past of southern Yucatan that centers Maya territories and even aspirational states on an equal footing with Mexico, Guatemala, and British Honduras leads to new hypotheses and interpretive options in view of patterns of archaeological artifacts and features. We would go so far as to say that such a historical perspective provides better context for the archaeological observations we make. The evidence at the site of San Pedro led us to question the narrative of an empty early nineteenth-century territory occupied by Yucatec Maya only after 1857.

In fact, it seems clear that this latter narrative has its roots in accounts by early twentieth-century contemporaries who, not coincidentally, were also sometimes British colonial officials (Bolland 2003). Major Sir John Alder Burdon (1931–1935, vol. 1, p. 4), Governor of British Honduras from 1925 to 1932, published a history of the colony in 1931: “There is no record of any indigenous population and no reason to believe that any such existed except far in the interior. There are traces of extensive [ancient] Maya Indian Population...all over the Colony...but this occupation was long before British settlement.” Many from villages in the San Pedro area were increasingly dependent on the British logging banks for work by the early twentieth century (Kray et al. 2017). However, Burdon published his unfounded assertion conveniently at a time when his governorship was experiencing the inconvenience of an investigation into labor practices common on his watch. As Bolland notes:

Meanwhile, the Belize Estate and Produce Company drove Mayan villagers from their homes in San Jose and Yalbac [near the already abandoned village of San Pedro] in the northwest and treated workers in mahogany camps almost like slaves. Investigators of labor conditions in the 1930s were appalled to discover that workers received rations of inferior flour and mess pork and tickets to be exchanged at the commissaries, in lieu of cash wages. As a result, workers and their families suffered from malnutrition and were continually in debt to their employers. The law governing labor contracts, the Masters and Servants Act of 1883, made it a criminal offense for a laborer to breach a contract. The offense was punishable by twenty-eight days of imprisonment with hard labor. In 1931 the governor, Sir John Burdon, rejected proposals to legalize trade unions and to introduce a minimum wage and sickness insurance. The conditions, aggravated by rising unemployment and the disastrous hurricane, were responsible for severe hardship among the poor. The poor responded in 1934 with a series of demonstrations, strikes, petitions, and riots that marked the beginning of modern politics and the independence movement (Bolland 1993, p. 176).

That such convenient histories and archives inscribed by settler colonists provide poor context for interpreting archaeological sites is not surprising. Not many scholars would condone these egregiously self-interested early twentieth-century narratives, yet we argue here that they sometimes continue to color our prose, and we privilege colonial aspirations in subtle and anachronistic ways. Clearly situating the interpretation of nineteenth-century Maya sites in the historical context of Maya geopolitics and territorial claims, to the degree we can re-construct them, makes for better and richer, if complex and multivocal, narratives about the past of southern Yucatan.

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