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Changing Mortuary Rites: An Ethnohistory of 19th Century and Contemporary Religion in Northern Belize

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Abstract: This paper explores the transition of funerary practices from Classic Maya mortuary complexes to the modern Catholic burial practices in northern Belize. Through historical research and ethnographic fieldwork, the causes and effects of mortuary change on Maya culture are explored through a materialist and functionalist analysis of past and present practices. The underlying cause of the most significant changes to mortuary practices in recent history was the rampant spread of cholera in the 1850s, during which the disease transmission and mortality rate prevented the population from conducting traditional Maya funerals. Prior to this event, the Catholic Church had been in the process of converting the Maya population to Catholicism. To enhance their cultural power base, the Catholics exploited this temporary shift in burial practices, which were needed to isolate the contagion, to enact a permanent cultural change in tradition. Today, even though most Belizeans conduct some form of Christian burial, there is evidence of religious syncretism of Maya and Christian religious beliefs in contemporary graves, which results in Belizean mortuary rituals being unique in Latin America.

Keywords: Mortuary rites, Ethnohistory, Belize, Religion, Syncretism

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INTRODUCTION

This paper is an analysis of the cultural transition of mortuary rituals in Belize, exploring the differences between Maya burials in Classic (200 CE–1000 CE), and the Postclassic (1000 CE–1697 CE) Maya mortuary complexes as well as present day Catholic cemeteries ritual behavior. The analysis takes materialist and functionalist approaches in investigating how historical events effected the changes in ancient Maya mortuary rituals to those practiced today in northern Belize. One mechanism of subjugating a society lies in control of the rituals that surround each rite of passage, including birth, marriage, and death. The role of Catholic mortuary rites exemplifies the complex process of cultural subjugation, which began during the Spanish missionization of the Maya during the 16th and 17th centuries, continued after the British takeover of the Belizean territory in the 18th century, and remains the dominant religious power in Belize.

Background

Since agriculture is the top revenue-producing industry in Belize and has a strong influence on Belizeans' lives, the majority of the research on present day Belizean culture is devoted to agriculture, and its influences on the lives and livelihoods of Belizeans (Amiguet et al., 2005; Atran et al., 2002; Beach, Luzzadder-Beach, Dunning, Hageman, & Lohse, 2002; Bourbonnais-Spear et al., 2005; Bourbonnais-Spear, Poissant, Cal, & Arnason, 2006). Recently, there has been an increase in studies on tourism, and the effects of tourism, immigration, and international influences in Belizean culture (Key, 2002; Moberg, 1996; Sutherland, 1996). Of the literature dedicated to contemporary Belize, most research has been on traditional cultures, specifically

those of the Maya and the Garifuna (Bonner, 2001; Bourbonnais-Spear et al., 2005; Garber, 1999; Steinberg & Espejo-Saavedra, 1996). Belizean cultural studies tend to be set in Southern Belize, whereas this research took place in northern Belize, which has a much lower concentration of Mayan speakers and larger concentrations of individuals that identify themselves as Mestizo. The research on the Maya generally focuses on ethnobotany, again with the Q'eqchi' and Mopan in the South (Bruck, 2002; Emch, 2003; Ross-Ibarra & Molina-Cruz, 2002). Literature on the Garifuna is focused on the Garifuna's rituals and cultural identity (Bonner, 1999, 2001; Greene, 1998, 2002; Jenkins, 1983). In regards to research on northern Belize, most studies of traditional culture in the North focus on the few Maya and the Creole populations (DeChicchis, 1989) or contemporary agricultural development and farming (Higgins, 1998; Jones, 1969; Kunen, 2001; Moberg, 1996; Trapasso, 1994). This study aims to fill the gap in the literature on the influences on contemporary religious practices in northern Belize.

Mortuary Rites in Belize

While the Spanish dominated most of Latin America, Belize became the English territory, British Honduras. Although a British territory, British Protestantism did not replace Spanish Catholicism (Burkholder & Johnson, 2010; Burns, 1993). During the Spanish and later British colonial period, the Catholic Church effectively suppressed expression of indigenous religion, and imposed itself in the position of highest power (Cleary & Steigenga, 2004, p. 45). This resulted in seeming disappearance of indigenous practices, reduced to either secret rituals within homes, or becoming incorporated into Catholicism through religious syncretism. For example, Mayan

mythological symbols were included in altars that were erected for certain rituals, specifically in the *Los Dias de los Muertos* celebrations. According to one informant, people would close their doors during these rituals, as the altars were considered by the Catholic Church to be irreverent to God. In another example of the Catholic Church going against Maya practice, the Maya practice of particularly lavish funerals for infants, who are called *Angelitos* (Headrick, 2007, p. 47), were seen as impractical by the Catholic Church because the offerings cannot accompany the deceased, and the family spends much of their income on what amounts to emotional closure. In spite of the influence of the Catholic Church, the proper burial of a loved one in a sacred space, ideally one close to family, has continued to be important to Belizeans (McAnany, 2014; McCrea, 2007; Pendergast, 1988; Prufer & Dunham, 2009; Zorich, 2013).

Problem

Nineteenth century Belize is an example of the changes that come with the collision of different cultures in the struggle for power. The transition of power (i.e., economic, religious, and political) from the indigenous population to the colonizer initiates drastic cultural changes in indigenous peoples' way of life, including changes in rites of passage (Gennep, 1961). Prior to first contact, the people living in the southernmost portion of the Yucatán Peninsula had their own rites of passage for coping with loss. The arrival of the Catholics brought new traditions that conflicted with Maya tradition. Far from simply bringing a different belief system, the subsequent influx of colonists also brought unfamiliar diseases. While the Maya resisted religious changes brought about by colonization, the mortality rate of the introduced diseases on the local

population exceeded the Maya's ability to manage the disposal of bodies through Maya mortuary practices. This stressor facilitated the change and upheaval in many aspects of society, particularly mortuary culture. This research traces this transition from Classic Maya mortuary complexes to the modern Catholic burial practices in Northern Belize.

METHODS AND THEORY

The ethnohistorical methods used in this research included a review of the historical literature on religious practices in Belize as well as ethnographic interviews in northern Belize. The review of historical literature was completed before conducting fieldwork in Belize. In June 2013, 54 individuals were interviewed in three village communities in northern Belize (San Antonio, San Lazaro, and Yo Creek) and observations were made of contemporary burial grounds (cemeteries) in Orange Walk Town. The ethnographic interviews (Spradley, 1979) consisted of questions about peasant farming life (e.g., subsistence, socio-political organization, and kinship), beliefs about death and the afterlife, and funerary practices.

The theoretical lenses by which the ethnohistorical data is interpreted in this paper are both materialism (Marxism) and functionalist (biological and structural functionalism). Marxism usually addresses issues of property ownership and labor relationships (Marx & Engels, 1998), but can also refer to other power disparities. In Marx and Engels version of materialism (Marx & Engels, 2012), most aspects of life, including worldview and ideology, are determined by class relations, which themselves are determined by the oppressing bourgeoisie class. The proletariat, then, lacks agency over both their material resources and non-material beliefs. In Marxism, labor division influences culture, keeping the proletariat mentally enslaved for the sake of their livelihood while allowing

belief systems to be decided by the bourgeoisie.

The functionalist perspective, on the other hand, views cultural practices in the context of their usefulness. Bronislaw Malinowski's biological functionalism (as exemplified in Malinowski, 2010) assumes that any practice begins as a basic survival response and that social institutions evolve to meet the most primal needs (Goldschmidt, 1996, p. 511). Alfred Reginald Radcliffe-Brown's structural functionalism (as exemplified in Radcliffe-Brown, 2013) assumes that culture, being based on social structuring and intricate relationships between individuals in the same society, evolves to accommodate the maintenance of order and established hierarchies (Goldschmidt, 1996, p. 511). Most cultural practices are developed out of necessity and continue to evolve and change, becoming rituals, after which it is difficult to discern their previous function. In this paper, the change from Maya to Catholic mortuary practices in northern Belize is explored as the result of both religious oppression (in a Marxist sense) and response to disease (in a structural functionalism sense).

HISTORY OF MORTUARY PRACTICES IN BELIZE

Mortuary Rituals of the Ancient Maya

The ancient Maya did not have a unified sense of mortuary ritual. The Maya functioned as warring city-states for the majority of the Pre-classic and Classic periods, and had many religious cults, each with power over a different geographic area. Maya burials vary due to time period and social hierarchy. Ornate mortuary complexes were reserved for nobles and their servants. Temple complexes were reserved for kings and priests. Their burials were typically large-scale affairs, involving

lavish grave goods and human sacrifice. Many royal tombs consisted of pyramids, having nine steps, to mirror the nine levels of the underworld (Edmonson, 2008, p. 31). Other tombs were underground vaults, which usually consisted of thirteen rooms arrayed to reflect the belief in thirteen heavens, and interred not only the deceased but also the sacrificed servants (Edmonson, 2008, p. 31). In some burials, such as the case of a Maya shaman, the deceased was covered in a cotton mantle (McAnany, 2014, p. 26). Though the significance of the orientation of the burial site is yet to be determined, graves typically faced north or west. It is suggested that these may have been the directions associated with the Maya conception of the sides of heaven (Paxton, 2001, p. 23). Although the amount and type vary, royal funerals throughout the Yucatán included cinnabar, food items, jade artifacts, offerings of ceramics and a sarcophagus. For example, in the majority of Yucatán royal burials, either corn or jade items were placed in the mouth of the deceased to accompany the person into the afterlife (Miller & Samayoa, 1998, p. 58). Though there was variation, depending on the social and economic class of the deceased, in what was included in the burial, and where the deceased was buried, both the Maya nobles and commoners were buried in places that were considered sacred.

Commoners often did not have access to burials at large temples. Personal worship of the gods and ancestor veneration were important in Maya religion, and every home had an altar (McAnany, 2014, p. 1). For the majority of the Maya, a home altar was a way of accessing sacred space privately since it was not available for them publically. People were often buried under their home altar or courtyard. Both areas were considered sacred spaces, and the closeness of burials to the family home was important.

Post-Classic burial practices survived into the colonial period. The most intriguing example of Post-Classic burial was found at Lamanai (Pendergast, 1988). Lamanai is unique as the community and culture survived after Spanish contact. The downfall of Lamanai community was ultimately not due to direct Spanish aggression, but a rampant malarial outbreak that killed the occupants of the mission as well as those of the surrounding area. The Spanish, prior to the outbreak, had built a church and had attempted missionary work (Pendergast, 1988, p. 321). Discovered in the remains of the altar of the church was a Maya burial, which suggests that the deceased was a high status individual (Pendergast, 1988, pp. 321–2). The individual was in a seated position and propped up, which is rare in Maya archaeology, and almost unheard of in a Catholic context. The location was important, as it showed how the Maya had repurposed a Catholic altar for a Maya burial. This shows resistance to the new beliefs, but also syncretism, in the fact that the altar was preserved and reused, and acknowledged by the Maya as a sacred area. After the malarial outbreak Lamanai was abandoned for some time.

Among the ancient Maya, there existed similar, but not unified, cosmological structures, named supernatural beings, and views of the afterlife. It was commonly believed that there existed a supernatural paradise, which was the home of *Chaac*, the god of rain, water, and lightning. This paradise was open to anyone who died in sacrifice, war, or complications in childbirth (Steele, 1977, p. 1063). The alternative is a place of punishment referred to as either *Mitnal* (the cold, dark realm of the dead in the bottom of the world) or, more commonly, *Xibalba* (the place of fear) (Edmonson, 2008, p. 31). *Xibalba* is home to the 12 lords of *Xibalba*, who inflict

human suffering in its many forms. The belief in an afterlife in either paradise or a place of fear and punishment closely resembles the Catholic belief in heaven and hell.

While it is not known what the specific mourning rituals were involved with Prehispanic Maya funerals, contemporary Maya engage in loud and verbal displays of grief for their dead, as a testimony to the life of the deceased (McCrea, 2007, p. 52). One informant in northern Belize reported another mourning ritual that involved maintenance of graves, including visitation to the gravesite one year after the death. In many burials, especially of the vault or tomb style, evidence of offerings suggests continued visitation, and indicates ancestor veneration and, especially in the case of young children, profound grief. Goods such as special food and drink were left by the grave, in hopes that the spirits would enjoy the gifts from the afterlife.

Changes in Belizean Mortuary Practices

There is evidence that introduced diseases may have killed up to 90 percent of the pre-colonial Latin American population (Cook, 1998, p. 5). Through the 1800s, diseases such as malaria and cholera ravaged Latin America. The changes in living space and new divisions of labor of the indigenous population helped spread and sustain the diseases. Indigenous people were moved into estate systems (e.g., *haciendas* and *encomiendas*) and cities where they became a labor pool for the Spanish. Closer quarters and polluted water were a common problem throughout the Americas, especially in the first half of the nineteenth century. By the late 1800s, the general populace had accepted burying their dead around churches as this area was considered sacred ground by the Catholics and so was congruent with the Maya belief in burial in a sacred place. There was no direct conflict as the Maya had

a broader range of areas that were considered sacred spaces and so could incorporate church grounds into their concept of sacred spaces.

During a severe cholera epidemic in the 1850s, the death rate far exceeded the amount of space near the churches. This caused an ideological crisis between the Maya and their Spanish magistrates, centered on the rites of death. During the cholera outbreaks in the Yucatán, people would leave bodies around or outside the church. It was general knowledge by that time that corpses of cholera victims were contagious through “harmful miasma”, and the bodies needed to be isolated to prevent further infection. With limited space, many local government officials enacted situational burial laws including the construction of cemeteries, and new time limits between death and burial of the dead to be done within 24 hours. In theory, these are sound and efficient measures to be taken during a time of plague. In practice, they did much to strain the tenuous relations between indigenous peoples and their Spanish local government (McCrea, 2007, p. 32).

With the sudden increase in the numbers of people dying, a problem for the grave workers was that the labor pool was also shrinking. As so many people died of cholera, more laborers were forced to work at the cemeteries. Building graveyards was time-consuming work due to the hard layer of limestone in the Yucatán, which makes digging strenuous labor. Once the bodies were buried, the varying water table would sometimes bring them to the surface, so graves were anchored to the ground in piles of stones. Due of the amount of time needed to construct burials, people lost time to farm or work for wages, which reduced the resources they needed to pay for the funerals for the dead and to sustain their families (McCrea, 2007, pp. 43–44). One of the

most significant problems was how to prevent the bodies of the dead infecting the gravediggers, perpetuating the cycle of death that was ravaging the villages.

In addition to the changes in the treatment of the dead had an impact on how the living grieved; there were also economic impacts of the cholera outbreak. The sick were isolated, and priests were discouraged from performing last rights (McCrea, 2007, p. 49). Within hours of death, the bodies were taken away, and many of their belongings burned. The quick burial mandated by local government precluded the practice of the wake, which had previously replaced the Maya practice of ritual mourning. The bereaved had little to no time to prepare funerary processions that gave final testament to the lives of the deceased. Furthermore, the isolation of the bodies and the distance of the burials was an affront to a culture that valued closeness to its ancestors and its honored dead (McCrea, 2007, p. 49).

Mortuary Practices of Catholic Belizeans

In Catholicism, mortuary rituals begin before death. While traditions may vary based on cause of death, rituals before death focus on last rights, wherein a priest offers the dying their last opportunity for salvation. After the individual has died, there is a long wake, a customary vigil in which the family stays with the dead. While there are many similar rituals around the world in which people hold vigil with the dead on the way to the grave, it is said that the Catholic practice of this ritual started in Medieval Europe, to avoid live burial. This sometimes occurred in the event of conditions previously unknown, such as forms of catalepsy, when a person appears temporarily dead (McCrea, 2007, p. 55). Others see it as a last farewell, where people can be with the deceased one last time. In Latin America, the wake is an opportunity

for the bereaved to grieve together, and a chance to finalize funerary preparations, especially in the cases of children, whose processions are more elaborate. In Latin America, many parents make extra expenditures on floral arrangements for the child's funeral, an expense often not afforded to adult burials.

Current Mortuary Practices in Northern Belize

By the time cholera struck in the 1850s, relationships of oppression were already deeply ingrained in Latin America's social fiber. Still, the abrupt cultural shifts contributed to the Caste War, as the boiling point of conflict between the indigenous Maya and the Spanish, had been brewing for centuries (Reed, 2001, p. 5). The first Spaniards to arrive to the New World were missionaries, who came with the intent of proselytization, which initiates an oppressive relationship. The European settlers that followed came to exploit labor and natural resources. Even the immigrants with more secular intent brought the Church with them, as the Church and the Spanish Crown were entwined. The peoples of Belize were resistant to change, as the Maya continued to practice most of their ways until the end of the 1800s.

The presence of the Catholic Church in Latin America served as a powerful institution of an oppressing class. Currently, the majority of people in Belize profess to be Christian. People who practice any remaining forms of indigenous Maya beliefs do so covertly. Most individuals willing to admit to adhering to Maya beliefs are in the older and remember the struggles of their parents. One of the contributing factors to the loss of Maya beliefs was that, for many years, the Mayan language was banned. Most informants in the villages where interviews were conducted reported that they were Maya by heritage, but few spoke

the language. The older people knew Maya, but had not taught their children. Many had even been scolded for using their native tongue as a child, if not at home, then at their schools. In fact, there seems to be a discernible gap of a generation between a fluent speaker of the Maya language and the children today. There are revival efforts, but most people acknowledge that it may be too late to reverse the loss of speaking Mayan in their communities. The loss of the ability for people to speak Mayan affects mortuary rites, as there are Mayan songs and words to be uttered for the deceased at their wake (McCrea, 2007, p. 52).

The Maya are avid storytellers, and the loss of their language is made more profound when one considers that their tales of human struggle against supernatural beings was encoded with metaphors that do not necessarily translate into English or Spanish. The myths or moral behavior that people continue to recount today are still filled with Maya symbolism, as stories told by informants contained the same supernatural characters that tormented the Ancient Maya, such as the *sisimite* (bigfoot) and the *xtabai* (beautiful female spirit). In particular, two stories detailed the themes that continue to resonate among villages in northern Belize. In both stories, a human man strayed from his path of righteousness and was given retribution by some supernatural entity. He is not a hero figure, but a man changed by a hard lesson. In one of the stories, the man meets *xtabai* in the form of his illicit lover. He may not speak of his encounter to anyone for five days or he will face certain death from which not even a shaman could save him. In the other story, a man who wastefully misused the magic gallstone of a deer for personal gain had its magic turned on him. He could not speak of the artifact until long after it was destroyed. In both these stories there is a theme of secrecy concerning the

supernatural for the purpose of personal safety. In a broader sense, perhaps these stories were told in this manner for a reason. The moral is that the supernatural is not meant to be common knowledge. Personal experience with the supernatural should be kept to oneself for as long as possible.

There are two ways of interpreting what the Maya could have feared in repercussion for reporting their interaction with Maya supernatural entities. The Maya could be wary of the Christian believers and Church, who made a point to undermine and suppress most Maya practices. To have people at the individual level unable to trust each other is to jeopardize the ever-important social bonds of the small community. This makes the Maya even more vulnerable to exploitation by the Church, which made itself the institution to which all answer, and essentially took away their ability to unite against it.

Courtyard burial, which has its root in the Maya practice of keeping their loved ones close by as a form of ancestor worship, was banned early in the nineteenth century. People continued to practice courtyard burial largely unnoticed until the death rate began to increase in the 1850s. During the high mortality and infection rates during plague conditions, keeping bodies so close to home led to infecting entire households. While the Maya did not subscribe to germ theory at this time, they theorized that harmful *miasmas* were responsible for infecting the living. The gases emitted by the corpses, which began to rot quickly, carried germs and attracted unwanted scavengers, such as rats and wild dogs, that became vectors to further spread disease. It was necessary to move the bodies as far away as possible, and bury them quickly, to prevent the transmission of disease.

One informant, who gave a personal account of a courtyard burial, hinting that it had been close by, explained the importance

of keeping one's ancestors close by. He explained that there are two reasons why courtyard burials still occur. The first is that it is an adherence to a tradition, the loss of which is lamented by the elderly. The second is that given the socioeconomic position of most people in rural Belize, paying for a plot of land on top of the expense of the funeral can be prohibitively expensive, and devastating to a family's financial well being. It would be less of a financial burden, then, to bury the loved one in the courtyard of their home, which is still something people deem important. That land is already paid for; they own it, and while their rights of its use probably do not extend to burials, it could be seen as a wise alternative to paying for an additional plot of land.

The proximity of burials to the home has been important to people in Belize for a long time, as an extension of the Maya belief in sacred space. Christian and Maya religions both have a notion of consecrated ground. To the Maya, it was proximity to a temple, in the case of royalty, and for the commoner, closeness to a home altar that the family made holy. When the Catholic Church became the spiritual institution in Belize, the Maya were quick to make the connection between Church and temple, and it became custom to bury people around it. They would have agreed that this privilege should be given to those who owned the land the Church was on, and those who devoted their lives to it. The problem, again, became the lack of space for burials. Churches were much smaller than the mortuary complexes to which the Post-Classic Maya became accustomed and did not have enough space for everyone, so people were forced to bury their family members in cemeteries, which were generally at the edge, rather than the center of the community.

Today, communities manage their own cemeteries, and they are almost universally

at the edge of the villages, just as in the nineteenth century. This is probably because there was practical application to the isolation of the dead, and because people agree on an individual basis as to the consecration of that land. When someone writes a will, they indicate the location where their remains should be buried. Informants reported that they would choose to be buried as close to home as possible, which in some cases means the transport of remains to another village.

While the belief in sacred space was never jeopardized, the location of and definition of sacred spaces resulted in conflict between the Maya and their Spanish governors in the Yucatán. During the cholera strikes of the nineteenth century, the Maya were disgruntled about their plight, in which many people lost time and wages from working their fields to digging graves. Not only was it a financial burden, it was also dangerous work. The gravediggers of the 1840s to 50s were exposed to disease for extended periods. In many cases, town officials made efforts to sanitize the work, spraying chemicals (sulfur and bichloride of mercury) into the graveyards (McCrea, 2007, p. 48). These chemical cocktails often ended up making people sicker. People were so outraged by the conditions that they sometimes overthrew the magistrates or began violent riots. Disputes over sacred places contributed to the growing tensions between the Maya and Spanish, culminating in the Caste War of Yucatán (1847–1901).

The change from below ground to above ground burials occurred not as an act of oppression, but as a response to changing population needs and environmental constraints. Northern Belize, being in a tropical climate and predominately limestone, has an unpredictable and often shallow water table. In modern cemeteries, hurricanes and flooding would exhume bodies and send caskets and deposit them

back into villages, causing biological hazards in towns trying to recover from the severe storm. In the epidemics of the 1800s, the number of shallow burials and storms resulted in exhumations often enough that there was a shift to above ground graves. Informants referred to “six feet under” (a phrase they used) as a poor man's burial and not recommended. The change to above ground burials occurred among both the Maya and Catholics. In Belize, of the cemeteries visited, there were only two burials that were underground, one anchored by a pile of rocks and the other under a particularly English-styled tablet tombstone with a cross atop it.

In present-day Belize, people encase caskets in cement placed on a plot in the graveyard. Cemeteries resemble miniature towns, built in much the same ways as many of the houses. This use of concrete for both homes and above ground burials is linked with the Catholic Church's brief move into Liberation Theology in Belize in the 1990s when villages were encouraged by the Church to manufacture concrete blocks as an alternative income activity (Chedd, 1991). Most of the graves in Belize are painted with bright pastels, similar to the buildings of the living. While most of the graves are simply the concrete slabs, some are decorated with colorful tiles. Others are built in small enclosures, to deter vandals and indicate higher status of the individual interred within. Sometimes a book, a Heart of Christ, or a Virgin Mary (usually a Pieta scene of the Virgin Mary cradling the dead body of Jesus) will be sculpted and placed on the tombs. Approximately half of the graves are topped with shrines, evidence of religious syncretism, one of the few facets of Maya religion that still echoed in the modern day cemetery. The shrines held mostly flowers and candles, with some other offerings of stuffed animals and pieces of bone, usually the vertebrae of cows or pigs.

These are reminiscent of Maya offerings, but also indicative of continued visit and maintenance of the graves.

The cemeteries in Orange Walk Town (the third largest city in Belize and regional center of Northern Belize) were not as well maintained as those in surrounding villages. In Orange Walk Town the grass was long, some of the graves were dilapidated, and others had graffiti on them. It was difficult to reconcile informant reports that suggest graves are diligently cared for on, at least, an annual basis and the conditions of the graves in Orange Walk Town. Informants suggested that people move more frequently from the city or have children elsewhere, which may contribute to the deterioration of the graves. There were also teenagers passing time in the cemeteries, smoking and socializing in small groups. Several graves had hand-decorated gang symbols from rivaling gangs.

Of the informants that were interviewed, only a handful had home altars. In the homes with altars, the owners identified themselves as Catholics who attend Mass and carry out Christian traditions. The altars were in either an insular room or a back yard, both places not readily seen by the public, though whether this is because they were hiding them or because they were used in private worship was unclear. Individuals with syncretic tendencies drew basic connections between Catholicism and Maya religion, because the older members of the community still recall memories that would date back to the transition from Maya to Catholic beliefs.

On a comparative note, it is possible that the similarities between the Mayan and Catholic afterlife made the transition from Mayan traditionalism to Catholicism easier. The Maya believed that those who died with honor ascended to a paradise in the domain of the rain god, though not much is known about its physical structure. Informants

reported that paradise was arranged in nine levels, which the older pyramids were supposed to have echoed. *Mitnal* (the Cold Place) or *Xibalba* (the place of fear) was a multi-tiered realm, meant to punish eternally the souls of the damned and the dishonored. The similarities of the Mayan and Catholic perceptions of Heaven and Hell may have eased the earlier Maya's conversion to Catholicism. To increase the conversion rate, Catholicism has assimilated other beliefs in an attempt to appeal to subjugated populations. Religious syncretism decreased resistance and eased more converts through their spiritual transitions, resulting in a new exploitable lower class, now able to be dominated religiously as well as economically.

CONCLUSION

Though the Maya resisted the change to their traditions by the Catholic Church, the Maya were powerless to stop the suppression and near extinction of their culture, as evidenced so dramatically by the cholera epidemics of the 1850s. Ever since the Colonial era, the Maya have focused their labor on subsistence, leaving the Church to labor on ideological change. The changes in burial practices were not only a product of subjugation by the Catholic Church, but were established for reasons of function—the biological necessity of infection control. To cope with sudden increase in mortality rate, the Catholic Church instituted measures that eliminated many of the traditional mortuary rituals of the ancient Maya, which further solidified the Catholic Church's control over Maya spiritual life.

There are many in northern Belize who seek to revive Maya culture in hope of bringing agency and meaning to their lives. Informants that claimed Maya heritage regretted the loss of Maya customs and traditions; the elderly spoke about Maya

culture with nostalgia. People continue to recount Maya myths, though in Spanish and English rather than in Mayan. There are attempts to revive the Mayan language by several revivalist organizations, which are also occurring in other Maya communities in Belize, Guatemala, Honduras, and Mexico. Marxist and functionalist mechanisms of cultural change are being replaced by revitalization efforts (Wallace, 1956). The syncretism between Maya and Christian religious beliefs continues to be negotiated, and as a result, mortuary rituals in northern Belize remain unique in Latin America.

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