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CAN TREES BE HERITAGE? INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE AND THE PLACEMAKING OF FUGITIVES AND REFUGEES

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INTRODUCTION

This paper emerges out of what for me had been a mystery. As part of a project about the Yucatecan Social War (1847-1901, more commonly known as the Caste War), I had been doing interviews with elderly Maya people whose ancestors had migrated southward to the village of San Jose, in what is now the independent nation of Belize. In these interviews, many of them recited to me the place names (toponyms) of locations through which their ancestors had passed along the way: Icaiché, Xmabax, Yaloch, Ch'o'och' Kitam, K'axilwinik, Chorro, San Pedro, and others. Most Maya place names refer to trees and other elements of the tropical rainforest environment. The careful attention given to enumerating the several places through which their ancestors had passed (and in order) gave me pause. I wondered what was so significant about these place names that was worth remembering, recounting, and passing down through the generations. With a couple of exceptions, none of the locations listed in the Belizean elders' accounts are inhabited today and none can be found on modern Belizean maps. Why, then, do those place names resound and echo in the present?

While the United Nations has recognized place names and knowledge of the environment as elements of intangible cultural heritage and worthy of safeguarding as such, this paper argues instead that both place names and their associated practices of transmission may be forms of knowledge and worthy of safeguarding as knowledge. The distinction (whether place names should be framed as knowledge or as heritage) is not insignificant, but an essential element of the urgent work of decolonizing research.

Maya place names serve a multiplicity of functions, and in this paper, I argue that attention should be paid not just to the names themselves, but the discursive modes in which they are employed. The significance of a name derives not solely from its denotative meaning, but also its pragmatic use. In the Belizean context, place-naming practices are a critical component of heritage, one worth preserving and celebrating, as invoking place names is a means by which people transmit practical knowledge (especially regarding a forested landscape), imbed a moral code into the landscape, stake claims, and render moral judgments about past and present.

KNOWLEDGE

The UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of 2003 concluded that the intangible cultural heritage of the world's peoples should be safeguarded as it is "a mainspring of cultural diversity and a guarantee of sustainable development." Moreover, "knowledge and practices concerning nature and the universe" were identified as one type of intangible cultural

heritage.¹ Subsequently, the Ninth United Nations Conference on the Standardization of Geographical Names celebrated place names as heritage as they provide "a sense of identity and of continuity."² In other words, geographical knowledge is framed as part of heritage, which is important for maintaining group identity. This framing, however, fails to capture the urgency of naming as it may be felt in certain situations. Readers may consider "identity" and "heritage" as optional—like a comfortable and cozy blanket—rather than essential. "Knowledge," however, is not optional, but the means by which people are oriented, navigate, and survive within natural and social environments.

PRAGMATICS

Since the UNESCO declaration, many scholars have shown interest in discerning the etymological origins of place names, standardizing place names, and ensuring the representation of minority place names within modern, multicultural nation-states.³ Such studies tend to prioritize the denotative aspect of place names. A handful of anthropological studies, however, have illustrated what can be gained by focusing upon the usage, deployment, or pragmatic elements of place names within speech. As it turns out, practices of naming places can achieve far more than simply assigning names for common reference. For example, the careful recounting of the various places (often marked by specific trees) where Ilongot people of the Philippines gardened, erected house posts, ate, and slept is the means by which they organize events in time—and reflects their view that individuals create their own history through improvisation.⁴ For the Saramaka of Suriname, who are descendants of runaway enslaved people, lists of place names are a key genre of their sacred, secretive historical lore, strictly guarded and cautiously disclosed piecemeal to the next generation; these lists of place names are "verbal maps," which encode the "knowledge of the movements, deeds, and personalities" of their ancestors and justify their land claims.⁵ The Western Apache, similarly, maintain secrecy around the names of places; Apache place names are descriptive, recall specific events which occurred at those locations, and are disclosed through storytelling narration of those events in order to remind people of the moral lessons thereby derived.⁶

DISPLACEMENT

Do any Maya place names appear on modern Belizean maps? The Maya place names that do appear on modern maps (whether official ones or in tourism materials) tend to be those of the ruins of ancient Maya cities—of a very grand and magnificent tangible heritage, now aggressively marketed as tourist attractions as part of the Belizean plan for national development. Within these maps, therefore, the Maya people are encoded only as a deceased culture, with little relevance for the present.

This erasure of the modern Maya has been consistent over time. For decades, British Honduran colonial reports characterized the land as essentially depopulated when the British defeated the Spanish at the Battle of St. George's Caye (in 1798). These reports further characterized the Yucatec Maya people in the colony as latter-day immigrants, having arrived as refugees during the Yucatecan Social War. This fallacy of *terra nullius* (a no-man's land) was central to British claims of sovereignty and land rights in the region.⁷

However, the land that the British claimed as their own *was* populated with Yucatec Maya people prior to 1798, and what is now Belize was a zone of refuge for Maya people fleeing more intensive colonial depredations in the northern half of the peninsula at least since the sixteenth century. If there is one thing that is consistent about Yucatec Maya history in the Belize region, it is displacement. Spanish colonialism was characterized by military conquest and the forced relocation of people from dispersed settlements into more compact villages in which they could be surveilled and subjected to labor regimes and heavy tax and tribute burdens. Flight into the Belize region from Spanish colonial impositions stretched across the three centuries of Spanish rule. When British loggers and slavers

arrived on the scene, they raided Indigenous villages, causing survivors to move their villages away from the coasts and major waterways and farther into the interior. In the nineteenth century, Mexican independence meant relief from colonial-era tribute and tax obligations, but those were replaced by new taxes, which by design created a tax-debt-labor system, in which tax burdens resulted in the accumulation of debts, which could only be paid by working within the expanding export-oriented plantation system. Accumulated debts resulted in countless peasants becoming attached to estates as indebted peons. Fleeing the estate was the only way to escape that debt, and again, flight to the Belize region was common.⁸ These exploitative conditions in Yucatán additionally triggered the Maya Social War rebellion of 1847-1901, and thousands of Yucatecs (of both Spanish and Maya descent) fled to relative safety in what the British were then calling the colony of British Honduras.⁹ Even after the war had ended, exploitation of plantation workers was a major cause of the Mexican Revolution (1910-1921), and the resulting food insecurity led even more Yucatec Maya peasants to flee southward into the Belizean forests.¹⁰ Colonialism, rebellion, revolution, and capitalist exploitation—wave after wave triggered flight southward. By the mid-nineteenth century, the northwestern quadrant of what is now Belize was populated with several Maya villages, including San Jose.

THE HERITAGE OF FUGITIVES AND REFUGEES

What, however, is the heritage of fugitives and refugees? When on the run, Maya peasants would have needed to travel light—just what they could carry in a bag balanced on their head with a tumpline. Heavy items of material culture would have weighed them down. What they most needed when on the run was knowledge of the thickly forested landscape—where could they find water, fruit, game animals, and other people who might grant them safe haven.

Maya place names encode information about the location of critical natural resources within the tropical rainforest environment. The northern half of the Yucatecan peninsula is essentially a limestone shelf that emerges from the Caribbean Sea. Limestone is highly porous, and rainwater quickly seeps through it, forming a system of underground rivers only accessible through natural wells and sinkholes. Prior to the introduction of mechanical drilling, being able to access water wholly depended upon being able to locate those natural wells. Settlements grew up around those natural wells. The name of the town of Hunucma, for example, means “many waters,” reflecting its importance within that limestone topography. In fact, most commonly, Maya settlements are named according to the specific type of tree found at the entrance to a natural well or sinkhole. This is the case for the towns of Mopila’ (water by the wine palm tree), K’ankabch’en (well in the red soil), Chaltunch’en (well in the flat rock), Sacnietelchen (well by the *Plumeria alba* L. tree), and Dzitnup (by the single wine palm). Other place names mark the location of fruit-bearing trees and plants, such as X-Mabax (hog plum tree), Becal (*Ehretia tinifolia* tree), and Tepakan (at the nopal plant). Additionally, hunting grounds are encoded in place names such as Ch’o’och’ Kitam (salted peccary) and Yaloch (opossum’s offspring).¹¹

Other Maya place names provide key information about the social landscape. For example, paths and roads are named after the inhabitants of the locale to which they head, providing an indication of whether they be friendly or foe; for example, u beel Tekom means “the road to Tekom.” In the southern part of the peninsula, where the limestone topography gives way to a swampier landscape, above-ground streams and rivers were the most common pathway of long-distance travel. Rivers, similarly, were named after the inhabitants of the locale to which they headed, e.g., the Belize River (the way to the Itzá)¹² and Ts’ulwininiko’ob River (the foreigners). Collectively, therefore, Maya place names encode information necessary for survival of people on the move. When ancestors would recount to their descendants their accounts of migration, and carefully list the place names through which they passed, they were also transmitting to their descendants that valuable knowledge about

how to safely navigate through the landscape. This knowledge would have been critical for survival and resilience of Maya communities across the centuries.

Maya place names have, however, more than just a denotative function. They are poetic and evocative. The careful recitation of names is a testament to the dogged tactics of survival as people fled taxation, forced relocation, forced labor, debt peonage, war, and military draft. It documents their struggles and their determination to find safety.

This raises the critical issue that the Yucatec Maya in Belize have been (at least) twice displaced: first, from the northern half of the Yucatán peninsula to the Belize region and again within Belize itself. Within the fledgling colony of British Honduras, the Honduras Land Titles Act of 1861 allowed British capitalists to purchase large tracts of land, even if no prior title existed. Subsequently, one company, the British Honduras Company, emerged as the largest landowner in the colony, owning 1/5 of all the land, and nearly the entire northwestern quadrant of the colony, where those many Maya villages were situated.¹³ The BHC was involved in several commercial ventures, including the extraction of logwood and mahogany timber, and subsequently, sugarcane and chicle. Deemed as tenants, the Maya villagers had to pay rent for their house and garden plots to the company, which in many cases obliged them to work for the company in some capacity. Ultimately, the company won out. Maya gardening was deemed a threat to the valuable mahogany trees, and one by one, entire villages were evicted. In 1936, the residents of San Jose were made to pack up their belongings, they were loaded onto railway carts (the same ones that moved out the mahogany logs), put on a barge upriver, and resettled on a reservation. Their houses and fields were burned to prevent them from moving back.¹⁴ Looking at a modern map of northwestern Belize, therefore, one would see no indication that there once were sizable, interconnected Maya communities in which people grew their own food, raised their children, governed themselves, and attended church and school.

PLACE-NAMING PRACTICES

When you use a place name from the past, especially for a settlement that no longer exists, you draw attention to the past—that there was a past that is different from the present. In Keith Basso's *Wisdom Sits in Places*—an achingly beautiful ethnography about Western Apache place names and what they reveal about Apache understandings of the past, morality, and wisdom—he notes that when something draws attention to “the passage of time—and a place presents itself as bearing on prior events...ordinary perceptions begin to loosen their holds...and the country starts to change. Awareness has shifted its footing, and the character of the place, now transfigured by thoughts of an earlier day, swiftly takes on a new and foreign look.” Accordingly, simply uttering an older, displaced, and suppressed place name forces the listener to ask the question: “What happened here?” Invocations of the past in meaningful places thereby transform the listener’s perception of the place—in Basso’s words: “Thus...does the country of the past transform and supplant the country of the present.”¹⁵

Consequently, when Maya elders in the present recount to their descendants the names of the several places through which their ancestors passed—including San Jose, from which they were evicted—they communicate several things. They transmit practical knowledge that is helpful for navigating the terrain, including the location of fruit trees, hunting grounds, and the trees that mark openings to natural wells. Their collective memory of places that were once alive and busy, but are now abandoned, serves as testimony to their past occupancy and implies the people's right to recognition within the polity and sovereignty over the land. Finally, these naming practices evoke a history of resilience, in which people relied on ancestral knowledge to find their way to safety and freedom. Even after they were displaced one final time and moved to a reservation, they committed those place names to memory and recited them, like a sacred litany, to preserve those memories of both

desperation and dignity. Reciting those names in the present recognizes and honors ancestral knowledge and the courage of those who risked beatings, whippings, and the return to peonage in order give their children the chance at a better life. Reciting those names across generations bears witness to their struggles, their tenacity, and their right to recognition in the present as legitimate Belizeans.

Ultimately, whether intentional or not, Maya place-naming practices align with three central decolonizing projects identified by Linda Tuhiwai Smith in her *Decolonizing Methodologies*. "Remembering," according to Smith, entails more than just recollection, but it is re-membering: "connecting bodies with place and experience." "Naming" of places involves re-envisioning the world; it is the process by which "people name their realities." Finally, use of Maya place names that encode ancestral knowledge of critical natural resources within the tropical rainforest works toward the goal of "discovering the beauty of our knowledge" and placing trust in "its continued relevance to the way we lead our lives."¹⁶

CONCLUSION

Maya place names are a form of intangible cultural heritage—it's true. Yet they are so much more than heritage. Deployed within place-naming practices and embedded within stories of survival, they stake claims, re-envision the world, and transmit and celebrate ancestral Indigenous knowledge of the forested landscape. Ultimately, they are critical projects within a global movement of decolonization.

NOTES

- ¹ UNESCO, "Text of the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage," November 3, 2003, <https://ich.unesco.org/en/convention>.
- ² United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, "Ninth United Nations Conference on the Standardization of Geographical Names," August 21-30, 2007, <https://unstats.un.org/unsd/geoinfo/uneggn/docs/9th-uncsgn-docs/report%20of%209th%20uncsgn%20n0750902%20en.pdf>, Resolution 4.
- ³ Andrea Cantile and Helen Kerfoot, eds., *Place Names as Intangible Cultural Heritage* (Florence: Italian Geographic Military Institute, 2016), https://www.igmi.org/++theme++igm/toponomastica/proceedings_2016.pdf.
- ⁴ Renato Rosaldo, *Ilongot Headhunting, 1883–1974: A Study in Society and History* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1980), 16, 23, 48.
- ⁵ Richard Price, *First-Time: The Historical Vision of an African American People*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 7.
- ⁶ Keith H. Basso, *Wisdom Sits in Places: Language and Language among the Western Apache* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1996).
- ⁷ Christine A. Kray, *Maya-British Conflict at the Edge of the Yucatecan Caste War* (Denver: University Press of Colorado, 2023), 38.
- ⁸ Nancy M. Farriss, "Nucleation versus Dispersal: The Dynamics of Population Movement in Colonial Yucatan," *Hispanic American Historical Review* 58, no. 2 (1978): 187–216, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2513085>; Grant D. Maya Resistance to Spanish Rule: *Time and History on a Colonial Frontier* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1989).
- ⁹ Kray, *Maya-British Conflict*.
- ¹⁰ Christine A. Kray, Author interviews with former residents of San Jose, Orange Walk District, Belize, 2005.
- ¹¹ Ralph L. Roys, *The Political Geography of the Yucatan Maya*, Publication 613 (Washington, DC: Carnegie Institution of Washington, 1957); Kray author interviews.
- ¹² Matthew Restall, "Creating 'Belize': The Mapping and Naming History of a Liminal Locale," *Terra Incognitae* 51, no. 1 (2019): 5–35, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00822884.2019.1573962>.
- ¹³ Kray, *Maya-British Conflict*, 92–3.
- ¹⁴ Kray author interviews.
- ¹⁵ Basso, *Wisdom Sits*, 4, 5.
- ¹⁶ Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*, 3rd ed. (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2021), 167, 179, 182.

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