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The Racialization of Food: “Indian Corn”, Disgust, and the Development of Underdevelopment in Depression-Era British Honduras

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Abstract: This paper explores the co-constitution of systems of social distinction, culinary habits, and political economies. During the Depression in British Honduras (Belize), unemployment, hunger, and malnutrition ignited panic, unrest, and uprising. At the same time, agents of a mahogany company and the colonial government displaced an entire Maya farming community. Why was Maya farming not considered a pillar of the colony’s economy? For more than a century, colonial administrators had made scarce attempts to stimulate domestic food production and distribution, and stimulating corn production was not even considered. Corn had become racialized, called “Indian corn”, and was considered disgusting, unhealthy, and the cause of high Indian mortality rates. A visceral disgust for corn was hard to disentangle from British disgust for Indians more generally. The racialization of corn emerged alongside and reinforced colonial economic policies of structural underdevelopment, all of which ensured that when Belize City residents were standing in food lines, the abundant harvests of Indian corn were nowhere within reach.

Keywords: economic development; food; agriculture; colonialism; Central America; Belize; Maya



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1. Introduction

In 1934, when global demand for mahogany had crashed, thousands of men in British Honduras (Belize) found themselves unemployed, and many in the colony faced starvation. Hundreds stood in line for government handouts of rice gruel mixed with sugar, until those distributions stopped in favor of “unemployment relief” in the form of breaking up rocks for five cents a day (Kittermaster, 1934b, March 7). Antonio Soberanis delivered speeches calling for the formation of a union, and a crowd of 500, calling themselves the Labourers and Unemployed Association, marched on the sawmill of the Belize Estate and Produce Company, shutting it down, along with a lumber yard and a dredger (Matthews, 1934b, November 24). This marked the beginning of the labor movement in the British colony.

This paper will show that while Belize City residents were starving, corn production in the colony continued unabated. About 8000 tons of corn were produced every year, only about 10% of which was sold, and the rest consumed by the Maya farming families themselves (Burns, 1938). Why starvation amid plenty? A ready assumption might be that the Maya were “subsistence farmers”, but that is not true. They sold other crops and animal products to British Honduran colonialists and Creoles, but usually not corn. Corn had been racialized—called “Indian corn” and considered repugnant and unhealthy by colonialists, who relied on wheat flour, rice, and other food imports. The British “dietetic snobbery” (Orde Browne, 1939, p. 19) had been adopted by the Creoles, as well. Across centuries, the

racialization of corn developed alongside multiple government policies that suppressed its production and distribution. Food, consequently, was as segregated as development in the colony was uneven.

A robust body of anthropological and historical research shows how food is commonly a salient marker of identity (Ayora-Díaz, 2021; Bourdieu, 1979/1984; Brulotte & Giovine, 2014; Dursteler, 2014; Mintz, 1986, 1996; Simpson, 2022; Tošaj, 2019; Vester, 2015). Food is a marker of belonging, i.e., “We are x people and so we eat y food”. It also denotes distinction, i.e., “Those people eat z food, which is loathsome, and the fact that we do not eat it bespeaks our superiority”. This is an important line of inquiry, as it reveals how patterns of prejudice may play out euphemistically through food habits serving as proxies for social identities.

However, as Sidney Mintz observed, foods “also have histories” (Mintz, 1996, p. 7). That is, foods are embedded within political and economic structures that shape their patterns of production, consumption, and meanings over time. The availability of certain foods is, in every instance, shaped by local, regional, and even global patterns of production, distribution, land tenure, pricing, and taxation. These economic factors determine the availability of foods, as well as their status as budget and prosaic, or else out of reach and dear. In his classic book *Sweetness and power*, Mintz (1986) charted how European colonialism in the Caribbean, transatlantic slavery, the plantation as an organized form of labor, the growth of working-class urban populations, and a reduction in trade preferences for the West Indian colonies all contributed to transforming sugar in Britain from an item that was rare, expensive, and associated with royalty, to one that was abundant and featured centrally in the new habit of taking afternoon sweetened tea with bread and jam. Conversely, it was also the case that increasing demand for sugar in Britain provided an economic incentive for the perpetuation of slave-based, colonial Caribbean sugar production. In other words, the production and consumption patterns of sugar were mutually constitutive—each side influencing the other across centuries and across continents.

While Mintz (1986) focused on how changing politico-economic arrangements enable the creation of new food preferences and habits, my interest is in the converse. I aim to show how food preferences—shaped by their ethnic associations—can, in turn, transform regional economies. If social prejudices are channeled through food, the corresponding patterns of food production and consumption may have serious long-term political and economic consequences over time. We can envisage the mutual interplay between food preferences, social distinctions, and political economies. In other words, systems of social distinction and systems of food production, distribution, and consumption shape one another dialectically across time, as people fashion themselves through their culinary habits and food preferences and aversions. More specifically, within the context of colonialism, if patterns of production, distribution, and consumption have been fashioned to the benefit of the metropole, culinary habits that reflect notions of racial supremacy can entrench that structural inequality. Food habits can, in other words, feed the development of underdevelopment.

This paper explores how British economic policies in what is now Belize emerged with and through racial characterizations of colonial subjects and foods. In British writings in the late nineteenth and into the early twentieth centuries, each racial type in the colony consisted of a bundle of physical features, a certain constitution, a moral character, and customary food habits, which held it all together. The Maya were associated with corn, which was called “Indian corn”, as it became a potent symbol of Indianness. In British writings, corn dishes were regarded as disgusting and a cause of Indian weakness and mortality. The close textual association of Indians and corn is such that visceral expressions

of disgust for corn read as disgust for Indians. Corn thus became racialized, and British settlers and Creole woodcutters opted for imported foods. These preferences shaped British policies regarding agriculture and food for over a century. The racialization of food shaped food policy over time within a social field of difference—with catastrophic consequences. Preferences for expensive food imports over Maya produce ensured both the colony’s food insecurity and its subordinate position of dependency vis à vis the United Kingdom.

2. Materials and Methods

In the vein of historical anthropology, this paper is based on archival and oral historical research methods. The research for this paper was motivated by a dramatic incident in 1936, in which agents of the Belize Estate and Produce Company and the colonial government forcibly removed all residents of the western Maya village of San Jose, and placed them on a reserve at the current location of San Jose Palmar (Orange Walk District). I aimed to understand what happened in the eviction, and the social, political, and economic circumstances that surrounded it. In 2005, I conducted historical interviews with fourteen Maya elders who had lived in San Jose at the time of the eviction, when they were children or teens. Most of the survivors had passed away, and I interviewed everyone who I could locate who had lived in San Jose in 1936. In 2005, these fourteen elders were in their late 60s to early 90s, and they variously lived in San Jose Palmar and in Santa Familia and Branch Mouth in the Cayo District. The interviews were conducted in the Yucatec Maya language and related to the period of the 1930s, including questions regarding food production, labor, land tenure, food and cuisine, other material culture, village life, historical memory, relations with the Belize Estate and Produce Company, the eviction, and its aftermath. I then conducted research in the Belize Archives and Records Service (in Belmopan) and with the Colonial Office records in the National Archives (UK) in Kew. Additional primary sources were available in published form. Altogether, the records consulted for this paper span the period of 1900–1945, and include reports of colonial officers (including governors, district commissioners, medical officers, forestry officers, agricultural officers, and police chiefs), British Honduran newspapers, and records related to land disputes, the Belize Estate and Produce Company, and the West India Royal Commission of 1938–1939.

3. Results

3.1. *Timber Exports and Imported Food*

Food preferences are not simply a matter of familiarity, because a food may be quite familiar and, nevertheless, despised. Food preferences are established within a social field of relations and over time. British antipathy to maize (termed “Indian corn”) dates back to the earliest English settlements in the New World. According to [Vester \(2015, p. 23\)](#), “The first inhabitants of Jamestown would not eat corn even when faced with the prospect of starving, since they associated it with savagery and feared for their humanity. . . . Cornmeal was dismissed by many British authors as. . . fit only for feeding animals”.

In the case of the early British settlement in the Bay of Honduras, British disinterest in corn and, instead, reliance upon imported European foods was a matter of both familiarity and geopolitical competition. Prior to the arrival of European colonizers, Indigenous people throughout southern Mexico and Central America cultivated a variety of food crops, with corn as the dietary staple, consumed in the form of tortillas, tamales, thickeners in stew, and beverages (*atole*), among others. Richard [Wilk \(2006\)](#) laid important groundwork for this paper, as he described how dietary habits of early British arrivals on the eastern shores of Central America in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries became established, with strong preferences for meat and imported wheat, and aversions to local crops. Wilk’s work on the earlier period helps us to understand how different culinary habits could become

signifiers for colonial and Indigenous identities in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, which is the focus of this paper. According to Wilk (2006), the preferences of the early British arrivals were cemented during their months at sea, as European sailing vessels fed their crews rations of hard (wheat) biscuits and salt pork, beef, or herring. The early buccaneers—as they came to be known because of their habit of cooking meat on an open spit (barbecuing)—were former sailors and pirates, opportunistic “adventurers” in search of luxury items that they could sell back in European markets. They raided Indigenous settlements, plundering goods and carrying people off into slavery. They showed no interest in establishing permanent settlements, extensive farming, or formal rule, and while they preferred European foods, their diet was opportunistic, consisting of whatever they could gather, hunt, and fish. Some also maintained small “provision grounds”, consisting mainly of cultivars that needed little tending, such as fruit trees and root crops, which suited their need for mobility. Although the Baymen (as they called themselves) became familiar with Indigenous foods through their slaves who cooked for them and probably tended the gardens, the Baymen maintained a preference for European foods. Food had already been established in England as a symbol of status wielded in lavish, conspicuous consumption. The idea that the food makes the man (or that certain foods were of high status and others of low status) was already in place. Consequently, as Wilk noted, the Baymen “may have eaten corn tortillas prepared by a Mayan slave. . .but they would not serve this food to guests, and would rarely speak of it in public. Proper food was made with imported wheat flour and salted meat” (2006, quote on p. 47).

Wilk (2006) added that British reliance upon imported foods was cemented by the Convention of London treaty of 1786 (*Convention between His Britannick Majesty, 1786*), in which Spain permitted British presence in the region of Belize, provided that their activities be confined to timber extraction, not agriculture. European demands for Belizean logwood and mahogany had taken off, and at the time, Britain had little interest in establishing commercial agriculture in the region. As Wilk (2006) discussed, the British woodcutters and their enslaved African workers could eat, so long as their timber harvests were sufficient to purchase imported food. A sizable group of wealthy merchants coalesced around the port in Belize City, where they imported European foods in exchange for timber and other products of the forests and seas that would be sold back in Europe. The Belize City merchants were so dependent upon market demand for their imported foods that they actively discouraged food cultivation in the British settlement for more than a century. Thusly, according to Wilk (2006), eighteenth-century British Honduran culinary habits of eating wheat products and other imports had been reinforced by international treaty and by the outsize power of the Belize City merchants, both of which suppressed farming for the regional market.

3.2. *Racialization and Repulsion*

As I have discussed elsewhere (Kray, 2023), British–Maya relations took a turn for the worse in the mid-nineteenth century, setting the stage for racial and racist characterizations. As mahogany trees closer to the major waterways had been cut down, woodcutting crews pushed deeper into the forests, where they came into more frequent contact with Maya villagers. Competition over land ensued, as woodcutters feared that clearing of land for crop production would destroy the valuable timber they coveted; meanwhile, the timber crews’ cattle roamed into, ate, and trampled the Maya forest gardens. “Indian attacks” on woodcutters’ camps grew in number. Then, after the Social War of Yucatán (Caste War, 1847–1901) broke out, its disruptions spilled over into the forests to which British mahogany companies laid claim. The war set British nerves on edge as different factions intermittently demanded rent from logging companies, threatened logging works in cases

of failure to pay, led raids into territories that the British considered theirs in pursuit of deserters, debtors, and runaway servants, and even attacked targets in the town of Orange Walk in 1872 (Kray, 2023).

Yet, even while the British were growing ever more suspicious and fearful of the Maya, British–Maya interactions were becoming a matter of daily life. Maya people had been directly incorporated into the British Honduran economy, as auxiliary laborers at woodcutting camps, domestic servants, plantation workers, and tenant farmers (Kray, 2023). The Maya were underfoot, as a subordinated and servile, but potentially rebellious, group. British fears of Maya treachery simmered at a low boil.

A certain category of British writing in the second half of the nineteenth and the first part of the twentieth centuries reveals quite a lot about British views of race and culture at the time: these were pieces by British writers for British readers. They included missionary reports, travel accounts, and reports from colonial administrators to their superiors. As a group, these writings both reflected and contributed to an emerging conception of race that undergirded the expanding empire. This concept of race fused physical characteristics, cultural customs, and moral character, and races were positioned within a hierarchy of value, from primitive to civilized. As time went on, the notion developed that those races with the most refined cultures and strongest constitutions would survive and thrive; conversely, the more “primitive” races were viewed as naturally weaker and doomed to extinction.

The continuity of British racial (and racist) depictions of the Indians (and other groups) in the Belize region across a period of seventy years is remarkable. Each of the “races” were described in terms of their physical features, robustness, diet, and moral character, as well as other standard elements of material culture. The fact that these features came as a bundle—physical characteristics, robustness, diet, and moral character—reveals the extent to which many British people of the era saw physical vitality, diet, and morality as core, intrinsic, and inter-related features of race.

Over time, this narrative of core racial features communicated the idea that the Indians were, by virtue of race, Janus-faced: superficially servile, but treacherous, and prone to violence, especially when inebriated. Moreover—went the narrative—they subsisted mainly on corn, which was unappetizing (even repulsive) and non-nutritive, and which contributed to their lack of vitality and poor health. Descriptions of corn cultivation, corn dishes, and the Maya as a people were laid out in tandem. It was as if the essence of being Maya was corn farming, and corn was an inherently Maya food. Antipathy for one blended into antipathy for the other. The association was so tight that, at times, it seems as if disparaging corn or its cultivation was all one needed to do to disparage Maya people themselves. The Maya had become racialized—that is, cast as a physically distinctive type with an innate character—and corn, as the bulk of their diet, was cast as mirroring and contributing to Maya spoliation. In essence, Indians and corn were both racialized, and the implied repulsiveness of one bled into that of the other.

The racialization of Indians and corn took discursive shape by 1850. In a book published in London in that year and directed to “British Christians” (Crowe, 1850, p. iii), Baptist missionary Frederick Crowe described the “Indians of Central America” while stationed in Belize City. For this work, he relied on the writings of other colonialists and clerics, as well as his limited interaction with the Maya people in the Belize region. In a long chapter, he described the various “races” of Central America, including Indians, mixed races (Ladinos, Mulattos, Sambos), Caribs, Mosquitos, and Europeans. Details of physique, healthfulness, diet, and moral character followed one after the other in a way that implied co-constitution. For the Indians nearest to Belize City, he detailed their skin tone, stature, muscularity, hair, “handsome feet”, and facial features. Eager, as were many

British colonialists, to cast aspersions on the Spanish, he noted that the “gait [of the Indians] denotes somewhat of the degradation to which they have long been subjected” (p. 41). Their constitution is “delicate and susceptible” (p. 41), and “their leading characteristics are docility and timidity. When aroused, however, they are fierce, cruel, and implacable”. “Long subjection has taught them a cringing servility and low cunning”, he added (pp. 42–43).

Directly after describing their constitution as “delicate and susceptible”, Crowe detailed their diet. The missionary apparently had come to know Maya people who were hired laborers, and he described the Maya diet as “exceedingly simple” and consisting solely of laborers’ daily rations, which were “seven ears of Indian corn, a tea-cupful of [beans], and a few chilies. . . and they seldom taste animal food” (Crowe, 1850, p. 41). This characterization of the Maya diet belies the four pages (pp. 7–11) that the missionary had previously dedicated to the myriad foods cultivated, gathered, hunted, and fished in the Belize region.

In contrast to Crowe’s account, the Maya people I interviewed who had lived as children in western British Honduras in the 1930s described their diet as substantially more varied. At that time, their families cultivated thirteen kinds of vegetables: corn (Maya: *ixi’m*), black beans (*bu’ul*), lima beans (*iib*), black-eyed peas or cowpeas (Maya: *x-pelon*, from Spanish: *espelón*), ñame (*makal*), elephant ear plant root (*kukul makal*), sweet potatoes (*iis*), cassava (*ts’iin*), tomatoes (*p’áak*), West Indian pumpkin (*k’úum*), cushaw (*x-ka’*), onions, and rice. They enjoyed the fruit of fourteen types of trees (some cultivated and some wild): avocado (*on*), mango, nance (*sakpaj*), sweet oranges (*chujuk pak’aal*), Seville oranges (*suuts pak’aal*), hog plums (*abal*), honeyberry (*wayam*), sapodilla (*ya’*), bananas (*ja’as*), macaw palm (*tuk’*), coconut, tamarind, mamey, pineapple, and cacao. They raised pigs (*k’EEK’en*), chickens (*káax*), turkeys (*úulum*), and ducks (Spanish: *pavo*), and a few families raised cattle (*wakax*). They hunted sixteen types of animals: ocellated turkey (*kuts*), collared peccary (*kitam*, also called *k’EEK’en k’áax*), tapir (*tsiimin k’áax*), deer (*kej*), great curassow (*k’anbul*), agouti (*tsub*), paca or gibbon (*jaleb*), armadillo (*wech*), pheasant (Spanish: *faisán*), dove (*mukuy*), coati (*chi’ik*), parrot (*t’úut*), crested guan (*kox*), kinkajou (Spanish: *mico*), and two more unidentified animals (*t’ambul* and *pito*). They fished in nearby streams, and to season their food, they grew several varieties of chilies (*íik*), onions, chives, garlic, cilantro, *kiwi’* (Spanish: *achiote*), and another unidentified herb (*xuruk*). From the forest, they gathered honey (*kab*), shelf mushrooms (*xikinche’*), and cohune nuts (Spanish: *corozo*). Some families also cultivated sugarcane, although that would have been primarily for sale, rather than household consumption. The Baptist missionary’s insistence on characterizing the Indian diet as meager seems related to his conclusion that their constitution was “delicate and susceptible”. This is not to say that the rations of hired laborers were more varied, but rather that taking laborers’ rations as typical of all the “Indians of Central America” suggests a willful kind of ignorance—an ignorance that did not care to know more.

The racialization of the Maya was elaborated further in a very long letter written twenty-seven years later, in 1867. Penned by Richard Fletcher, a Methodist missionary who had been working in the Corozal region in British Honduras, ministering to both Maya and Hispanic people, he described the Maya to his superiors at the Wesleyan home office in London. He began with a moral characterization, calling them “diminished, degraded, and miserable inhabitants” (Fletcher, 1867/2001, p. 105). His description moved quickly from house form and furnishings to cooking techniques, and then to the following: “The food in common use among the Indians is very soon told. They chiefly subsist on cornbread, which they dip into a kind of soup made of ground pumpkin seeds & chile or bean soup and chile. . . . They seldom buy meat or kill a chicken or even make use of eggs, so that their food is not very nutritive” (p. 106). Moving on to crop cultivation techniques, he

then proceeded to list common sins, and in the same paragraph, he added that “With few exceptions, they grow up with large hard bowels, the consequence of the indigestible food they eat” (pp. 108–109). The juxtaposition of sin and repulsive food is telling.

The Methodist missionary then detailed their healing practices and, as he was interested in phrenology, he described their physical appearance in great detail (including such minutiae as the roundness of the head, the slope of the chin, the thickness of the hair, and the angle of the toes) (Fletcher, 1867/2001, pp. 109–110). Sketches were included with the letter. He offered this interpretation: “The aspect is somber and reserved, his melancholy features seem immovable. . . . According to phrenology, they possess much firmness and veneration: benevolence and the intellectual faculties are not very largely developed, but destructiveness & secrecy are” (p. 110). From this condemnation of their intrinsic moral character, he explained that “They are not long lived. . . . From their disregard to health, hard drinking, night exposure at wakes, & other causes, their constitution is early broken up, & they pass away before they have lived out half their days” (p. 110). His outlook was not optimistic: “Unless God in his providence interpose[s] on their behalf, Spaniards & Indians within the next 50 years will nearly all have passed away” (p. 114). Again, physical appearance, diet, vitality, and morality were fused into one racial type.

The most elaborate description of the diverse races of British Honduras was penned by Archibald Robertson Gibbs, the editor of the *Honduras Observer*, in 1883. A. R. Gibbs (1883, pp. 158–174) sketched a sixteen-page “ethnological description” of the various groups. “Representatives of every nation under the sun are to be found in this peculiar little colony”, he wrote. The following groups he merely listed: “The phlegmatic German, the volatile Frenchman, the Belgian cross between these two, the morose but imperturbable European Spanish, contrasting with his colonial counterpart, the hot-blooded Italian. . . and the three varieties of the insular-minded British. . . . The East sends its bespangled, turbaned, delicate-featured Hindoo, and ‘heathen Chinees’, cute and ugly-featured, both indescribably dirty” (pp. 158–159). Subsequently, he described at length the various “aborigines”, including the Waikas, “Indians of Guatemala and Yucatan”, and the “Unreclaimed (*Los Candones*, unbaptized)”, and also the “Caribs”, “Ladinos”, “Sambos”, and “Mulattos”. Each group was described in terms of their physical characteristics, facial features, moral character, customary diet, clothing, the types of illnesses to which they were susceptible, and the types of jobs for which they were most fitted. Physical constitution, moral character, custom, and diet were fused in each type—all went together in a neat little racial package.

Of the “Indians of Guatemala and Yucatan”, Gibbs wrote that they “are a small-sized, swarthy-complexioned, wiry race, not capable of sustained physical exertions; Asiatic in feature” (A. R. Gibbs, 1883, pp. 159–160). Those just to the north were the “semi-civilized yet unsubdued tribes such as the Icaichés and Santa Cruz” (pp. 159–160). Of the moral character of the Indians near Belize, he said that they “are docile and timid and inoffensive, except, as in the case of Chichenhas and Santa Cruz, when roused to take part in a war of races, when they become cruel and fierce” (p. 162). Gibbs moved immediately from moral character to food, writing the following: “They live industriously and inoffensively in villages scattered over the district, cultivating their patches of maize and pulse, their pigs and poultry—those near the coast engaging in fishing, and cutting braziletto or tinta (logwood), and trading with Belize. . . . Their diet is simple and frugal, and rather monotonous, consisting of corn cakes (tortillas), frijoles (fried beans), eggs, and occasionally poultry, game, wild hog dried, or domestic pork” (p. 162). Once again, what is most significant about Gibbs’ chapter is the standardization of the characterization of the races, with each group assigned its signature body type, robustness, moral flaws, and the food that glued it all together.

3.3. Disease

Heading into the twentieth century, a characterization of corn as unhealthy gained ground. In a 1902 report, an assistant colonial surgeon expressed concern about the high child mortality rate in the Cayo District, which had the highest concentration of Maya inhabitants. He blamed the child mortality rate (37% of children aged five and under) on the fact that “Corn and Pork (fresh) form the two principal articles of Diet” (Davis, 1902). In 1903, the district commissioner of Cayo characterized the local diet as consisting of corn and little else, and he blamed the high infant mortality rate (25.3% of children aged one and under) on “neglect or improper feeding or both” (Franklin, 1903, p. 6). A few years later, in response to a petition for a medical officer for the colony, the district commissioner insisted that such an expense was not warranted, because only education, rather than medicine, could “rouse [the Indians] from their lethargy to improve themselves and their position”. Noting that the mortality and child mortality rates were highest among the “Indians”, he attributed this “to their food and the dirty state in which they allow them to be in before the child is weaned from the breast they are given the enevitable [sic] ‘tortilla’ to munch, and other indigestible stuffs”. “The consequence”, he added, “is, that children from 12 months to 2 and 3 years can be seen with a rotundity of stomach that any adult might envy, they are allowed to grovel in the dirt with pigs and fowls and seldom bathed, the elders are almost as bad, it is a case of the survival of the fittest” (Franklin, 1906, p. 3).

The simultaneous racialization of the Maya and Indian corn crystallized in several pieces of writing by Thomas Gann, whose roles as a medical doctor, colonial medical officer, and amateur archeologist lent him credibility. His racial characterizations of the Maya in the early twentieth century appear in his colonial medical officer reports and in several travel and archeological books for an international readership. In *The Maya Indians of Southern Yucatan and Northern British Honduras*, a bulletin published by the Bureau of American Ethnology at the Smithsonian Institution in 1918, Gann began with a section on “personal characteristics”, including a detailed physical description of the Maya as a type, with a variety of centimeter measurements of the head and facial features. “The eyes are large and dark brown”, he wrote in clinical language, “the ears small and closely applied to the head, the nose rather broad, and the jaw prognathous” (Gann, 1918, p. 15). Following the physical description, he moved on to daily work tasks, and then their virtuousness, stating, “They are civil, obliging, and good-tempered, and make excellent servants, when they can be got to work” (p. 17).

Gann dedicated several pages to describing the Maya diet as diverse, consisting of a corn base, supplemented by beans, root crops, fruits, game, and some fish. Even with this diversity, he concluded that “The Indians are a short-lived race, a fact due partly to their indigestible and badly cooked food” (Gann, 1918, p. 34). Because of their diet, he added, they nearly all suffered from flatulence, and for that reason, almost all the children wore a charm in the shape of a cross carved from *tancasche* (“seizure tree”) bark (p. 19). On one of his archeological expeditions, Maya and Creole workers formed his crew. He continually pitied his Maya workers who had “nothing but corn cake and beans to eat” (Gann, 1925, p. 81). He described a snack of corn *lob* as “a glutinous, milky fluid made from boiled maize thickened with black beans”. When his Creole worker, Muddy, took a drink of it, he “was soon disillusioned, for the stuff is about as palatable as castor oil”, reported Gann (p. 187). Obsessed and amazed, as he was, by the ingenuity, industriousness, and beauty of the ancient Maya cities, Gann dismayed of the humility, poverty, and high mortality rates of the modern Maya people. He could fathom the contrast only through a racial (and racist) explanation. The Maya of western British Honduras, he said, “are a poor, feeble, anaemic, degenerate race, representing the last step of the once great Maya people along the road to extinction” (p. 156).

The method by which the Maya grew their corn and other produce was also disdained by the British (see also [Wainwright, 2008](#)). This may, in part, have been related to the British observation that swidden farming (commonly called *milpa* farming throughout Mexico and Central America) threatened the mahogany trees that had become the primary source of export revenue for the colony by the late nineteenth century. British officials called swidden farming “lazy, desultory” ([Parker, 1886/1888](#), p. 208), “ek[ing] out an existence” with one’s “so called labours” ([Franklin, 1903](#)), and “primitive” ([Gann, 1918](#), p. 27). The Agricultural Adviser remarked that “the milpa system is opposed in every way to sound agricultural principles” ([Dunlop, 1920](#), p. 70), and even the governor referred to it as a “wasteful system of cultivation” and a “fugitive form of cultivation” ([Burns, 1935](#)). A distaste for corn was hardened by antipathy for corn farmers and for corn farming.

In other words, the fact that corn did not become part of the British diet in British Honduras was over-determined. In a 1923 report compiled for the governor regarding the cost of living for civil servants, the President of the British Honduras Chamber of Commerce made a long list of thirty items that would likely be part of the pantry purchases of civil servants and their families in a given week (including tea, bread, butter, cheese, fish, fruit, oatmeal, milk, sugar, coffee, cocoa, potatoes, rice, plantains, beans, beef, pork, turtle, conchs, crayfish, marmalade, jam, onions, flour, green vegetables, fowl, condiments, eggs, lard, and coconuts). Corn simply did not make the list ([Grabham, 1923](#), p. 2).

3.4. Segregation of Work and Food

British food preferences were imposed upon their Creole timber crews. In the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the British continued to see the Belize region as an open forest for the extraction of valuable timber to sell in international markets. At this time, the woodcutting crews consisted mainly of enslaved Africans and people of African descent, who, over time, became known as Creoles ([Bolland, 1977](#)). When the timber crews set out from Belize City, they took with them the food they would need for the several months of the season. Wagons were loaded up with imported foods, all aligned with British tastes. The Creole woodcutters received a standard weekly ration, which was consistent across two centuries. Called “seven and four”, it consisted of seven quarts of wheat flour and four pounds of salt pork ([C. A. Gibbs, 1938](#), p. 4). The woodcutters also received a small wage, with which they could purchase items at the company store. Within the twenty-six items stocked in a mahogany company’s commissary, neither corn meal nor locally grown corn were included—although the workers could purchase canned, imported sweet corn, if they so desired ([C. A. Gibbs, 1937](#)).

During the heyday of mahogany harvesting in British Honduras (from the mid-nineteenth century through the 1930s), British, Creole, and Maya people worked in close proximity in and around the logging camps ([Kray, 2023](#)). There, they had the opportunity to become familiar with their respective cuisines. Around the logging camps, however, work was segregated by design. The tasks that required the most strength were assigned to the Creoles: felling the trees, bucking the logs, hitching the logs to an oxen team (and later, to a tractor), and lashing the logs into rafts to float downstream. These assignments aligned with the British notion that the Creoles were racially fitted for such work. Just as Archibald Robertson Gibbs had described the Indians as a race, with their characteristic physical features, constitution, customary work, morality, and food, he did the same for the Creoles. Gibbs described them as “capable of severe physical toil, [and] less disinclined to undertake it”. Morally, they were “as excitable as the race elsewhere, as frivolous and unreliable. ... The labouring classes are much given to rum, music, dancing, and sexual pleasures”. Their food he described as “coarse and ill-prepared. ... They raise poultry and pigs, but buy nearly every other article of food”. Of their robustness, he described them as

“healthy...and active, but an epidemic of cholera or smallpox makes wholesale ravages among them” (A. R. Gibbs, 1883, pp. 170–171).

In the early 1930s, the largest mahogany company in the colony was the British-owned Belize Estate and Produce Company, and at the time, its most valuable extraction efforts were centered around the Maya village of San Jose. The Maya elders who had lived at San Jose at the time recounted that the Maya people who worked for the company were assigned different tasks. Recall that Gibbs said that the Indians were “a small-sized, . . . wiry race, not capable of sustained physical exertions” (A. R. Gibbs, 1883, p. 160). The tasks they were assigned might not have required quick bursts of energy, but they certainly required stamina. They removed the bark from the logs and squared them, gathered fodder for the oxen and horses, cleared paths through the forest, and hauled the water for the workers and livestock.

To a certain extent, food at the camp reflected the segregation of the work. Whether the laborers were Creole or Maya, they received the same “seven and four” rations of wheat flour and salt pork. According to those interviewed, Maya families carried on a brisk trade in food with the Creole woodcutters—but corn was not part of that trade. The Creoles would sometimes trade a bit of their flour and salt pork rations to Maya villagers in exchange for wild game meat and a wide variety of produce from their gardens and fruit trees. Additionally, the Maya families would also take some of these same foods, plus sugarcane and dried fish, to local towns to sell. Only one interviewee mentioned that their family sold any corn. We can see, therefore, that the Maya were not wholly “subsistence farmers”, because they regularly sold and traded their food products. Corn, however, typically was not purchased—and the apparent reasons for this were complex, rooted in both Creole and British food preferences and local prices, as will be discussed below.

Creole identity was tightly tied to forestry work. Since the British settlement had centered on forestry, and agriculture had been prohibited under Spanish treaties, the Creoles in British Honduras had never developed the tradition of farming. According to the Labour Adviser to the Secretary of State for the Colonies, they prided themselves as forest workers, and saw farming as “alien and distasteful” (Orde Browne, 1939, p. 190). Gibbs had similarly perceived “the invincible distaste of the mass of native coloured labourers to the avocations connected with the cultivation of the soil, and their inherent preference for the life of the mahogany or logwood works” (A. R. Gibbs, 1883, p. 175). The higher wages the Creoles earned in the forestry sector reinforced their sense of superiority over peasant farmers, according to the Labour Adviser (Orde Browne, 1939). Additionally, they had become so used to eating imported food that their sense of superiority extended to their food choices. “A kind of dietetic snobbery has thus been evolved”, he wrote, “which despises local produce of all kinds and favours exclusively imported foodstuffs. Polished rice of inferior quality and low food value is preferred to the excellent local product; salt pork from North America is liked much better than fresh meat; white wheaten flour is demanded in place of maize meal; while even the limited quantity of fresh vegetables eaten comes mostly from overseas” (p. 191). Belizean Creoles, in other words, inherited the British distaste for corn. A mahogany company manager labeled it an issue of identity: “The Mahogany-cutter’s ‘Johnnie Cake’ made from flour and pork lard. . . [is] as necessary and desirable as the old-time Scotsman’s porridge or the Irishman’s potatoes” (quoted in C. A. Gibbs, 1938, p. 4).

A committee appointed by the governor in 1942 to investigate local food production reached a similar conclusion. “The urban population, particularly of Belize, the wage earners and the chicle and mahogany camps”, they wrote, “are largely dependent on imported foodstuffs. There appears to be a prejudice in the towns against locally produced food which may be due to the factors of quality, price and availability but is also partly

tradition as the inhabitants of the Colony since the earliest days have depended largely on imported foodstuffs” (Stevenson et al., 1942, p. 2).

3.5. Hunger and Domestic Food Production

On the one hand, what does it matter? Why should it matter if the British and Creoles preferred imported wheat flour to corn? It matters for one reason: because these food preferences fed into a pattern of underdevelopment that had dire consequences for the urban poor.

First—and not surprisingly—food prices remained high throughout the colonial period, as British Hondurans imported food, rather than developing sufficient domestic food production. Even in the early nineteenth century, colonial officers and other British observers were calling for the development of agriculture. Consistently, however, these writers aimed to stimulate export-oriented agriculture, as opposed to cultivation of crops for local markets. In these reports, moreover, corn—if it was mentioned at all—was quickly dropped for lack of interest (Henderson, 1809/1811, pp. 40–41; A. R. Gibbs, 1883, p. 183; Morris, 1883, pp. 101, 114; Dunlop, 1920; Burns, 1935).

Second, reliance on food imports rendered the British Hondurans vulnerable to the vagaries of the global markets. At the end of the 1920s, the colony was heavily dependent upon exports of forest products, overwhelmingly, mahogany (and secondarily, chicle). The Depression upset this precarious balance, as declining worldwide demand for mahogany led to massive unemployment in the colony. On the international stage, steel was replacing mahogany in railway construction, and furniture makers were shifting to walnut to meet changing consumer desires (Belize Estate and Produce Company, 1938, p. 4). Even as early as 1930, the largest mahogany company in the colony—the Belize Estate and Produce Company—indicated that “the market for Mahogany Logs was characterized by unrelieved gloom. Throughout the whole period there was an entire lack of anything approaching activity in demand” (Belize Estate and Produce Company, 1931). From 1926 to 1935, the average annual value of exports of forest products (mainly mahogany and chicle) was \$1,064,289, while in 1936, it was \$856,613 (Burns, 1937, p. 15). A colossal hurricane struck the capital in 1931, further crippling the mahogany output and exacerbating the unemployment problem. In 1932, the governor called the unemployment situation “serious” (Burdon, 1932), and by 1934, it was “acute” (Kittermaster, 1934a, February 15).

Unemployment led to widespread hunger. In that year (1934), the government began providing assistance to feed hungry schoolchildren. Unemployed people lined up to receive dishes of rice gruel mixed with sugar. Those handouts were replaced by a government scheme to hire unemployed men on road work (Kittermaster, 1934b, March 7), and 1488 men signed up (Matthews, 1934a, August 14). By the end of the year, the incoming governor concluded that “a large number of persons in the Colony are living barely above the starvation line” (Burns, 1934, October 1).

With hunger came unrest. The unemployed had taken to marching in the city streets in protest (Kittermaster, 1934b, March 7). Empire relief funds had been funneled to the Belize Estate and Produce Company to rebuild the sawmill that had been destroyed by the hurricane, which stirred up popular resentment (Burns, 1934, October 1). As mentioned above, in October, Antonio Soberanis, a labor leader, encouraged the sawmill workers to strike for more pay. In what the police called a “riot”, a crowd of about five hundred members of the Labourers and Unemployed Association marched on the sawmill, some armed with sticks. When the police broke up the group, one group broke down the gate at the Public Works yard. Others dispersed and shut down production at the dredger and at a lumber yard (Matthews, 1934b, November 24).

Determined to reduce hunger and unrest, the new governor, Alan Burns, aimed to increase domestic food production. In a way in which prior colonial administrators had not, he perceived the Maya farmers as potentially valuable economic contributors. They produced an estimated 8000 tons of corn per year, although the Maya farming families (and their livestock) consumed 90% of that, and only sold 10% (Burns, 1938, December 7, p. 1). Burns wondered how this production might be increased, and in 1935, he launched a series of initiatives to stimulate domestic food production. A new Board of Agriculture began to purchase basic crops (rice, corn, and beans) at guaranteed prices to support the farmers (Government Gazette, 1935, October 26). Additionally, a government marketing board opened, and Crown Land grants were made available, with the hope that Creoles would take up farming. The governor also urged that immigration restrictions be lifted so that Jamaicans—well regarded for farming—could settle and produce food for the domestic market (Burns, 1936, March 6).

A good deal of ambivalence toward Maya food production peeked through the governor's plans, however. First, the Board of Agriculture purchasing stations were situated in Belize City and Punta Gorda, in the south (Government Gazette, 1935, October 26), but not in the west or the north, where the Maya people were concentrated. Additionally, the Board of Agriculture scheme to purchase crops at guaranteed prices was fatally flawed. The purchasing prices the Board offered for both corn and beans were lower than the costs of production and transport. The Board prices were low, apparently, because they had only been intended to provide a kind of insurance for the farmer—a guaranteed market—rather than a source of profits (Stevenson et al., 1942, p. 4). The low price offered for the Maya families' biggest crops surely reflects the British antipathy to corn (not to mention beans). With such low prices offered, Maya farmers would have lost money by producing corn and beans for sale, and Maya reticence to cultivate corn surpluses over the years is understandable in this context.

In the worst of ironies, while the governor was writing hundreds of pages about the colonial food prices, he made no mention of the impact on the food supply that would have resulted from the eviction of the Maya villagers at San Jose in 1936. As had happened routinely over the centuries, timber interests and Maya farmers clashed over priorities of land use. As the Maya elders who lived through the eviction explained to me, the causes of the conflict were multiple. Belize Estate and Produce Company managers prohibited the villagers from cultivating their milpas, because they worried about the destruction of the mahogany trees. The Maya families resented having to pay rent to the company, and the noise and dust of the tractors hauling logs through their village disrupted a peaceful life. Ultimately, some mahogany trees were destroyed by surreptitious milpa farming, and then, with the assistance of the colonial government, company employees evicted the entire Maya village of San Jose and removed the villagers to a reservation. The employees burned the gardens and houses, so that the villagers would not be tempted to return. Housed temporarily in army barracks and given rations of rice, the villagers experienced a severe health crisis, including the deaths of many children and elderly people (see also Kray et al., 2017). Amid a global depression, the colonial government, once again, prioritized forestry, and to the numbers of hungry and unemployed Creoles in Belize City, the Belize Estate and Produce Company added a group of hungry and dispossessed Maya farmers.

Within three years after assuming his post, Governor Burns perceived that British Honduran agricultural underdevelopment was an enigmatic knot of problems. Well over a century of prioritizing forestry (and, secondarily, export-oriented agriculture) had led to meager food production for domestic markets. Forestry wages needed to be high because the workers expected to purchase imported foods, but these high wages, in turn, pushed agricultural wages in the export-oriented agricultural sector higher than was sustainable

(Burns, 1938, December 7, p. 59). Burns wondered if domestic food production might be stimulated by introducing potatoes, dasheens, and onions, and increasing the production of rice, red kidney beans, yams, sweet potatoes, coconuts, and cassava—but he did not discuss increasing corn production (pp. 2–5). Protectionist measures for domestic agriculture might stimulate production, and he urged the Colonial Office to consider sending such aid. Perhaps sensing that such aid would not materialize, he turned once again to local factors. “The Colony cannot be economically healthy until the local inhabitant is made to eat locally grown food” (p. 59), he fretted. Perhaps recognizing the intractability of food preferences, he resigned: “The main hope for this Colony lies in its forest products, as agriculture could not sustain it on its present standard of living” (p. 59). He seemed resigned to the status quo of forest exports and expensive food imports.

After a seven-year period, a committee appointed by the governor concluded that the governor’s agricultural initiatives had essentially failed to increase domestic food production. The Creoles could not be enticed to become farmers. The committee concluded that if domestic food production were to be increased, the Board would need to offer higher prices for staple crops, to provide sufficient incentive for the cultivation of surpluses. Additionally, “if [the local planter] is to succeed in increasing the Colony’s food supply”, they wrote, agricultural education and other types of government assistance would be needed. Ultimately, though, a cultural attitudinal shift was needed, they asserted: “He [the local planter] must be encouraged to develop *[sic]* the communal spirit, which will assist his agricultural efforts and his welfare” (Stevenson et al., 1942, p. 4). Although the financial disincentive for producing surplus corn and beans was clear enough, perhaps out of habit, the committee could not resist blaming local cultures and customs.

Government efforts to increase domestic food production in the late 1930s was a case of too little, too late. Despite the many calls for increased domestic agriculture over the decades, in the 1940s, the colony was no better able to feed itself than at the end of the nineteenth century. In 1942, an annual average of 7,251,000 pounds of wheat flour was imported, and none was produced locally. Meanwhile, twice as much corn (an annual average of 146,000,000 pounds) was produced domestically, which was nearly all consumed by the Maya growers (Stevenson et al., 1942, p. 1). A segregated society, a segregated labor market, and an export-oriented economic vision generated underdevelopment of the food supply, laying the groundwork for chronic urban food insecurity and malnutrition.

4. Discussion

Half a century ago, world-systems and dependency theorists (e.g., Frank, 1969; Wallerstein, 2011) identified an international structure of economic relations that created the “development of underdevelopment”, in the words of Andre Gunder Frank (1969). A basic global division of labor had been established through colonialism, imperialism, and capitalism, resulting in an enormous transfer of wealth from “core” to “periphery”. Core states had established regimes involving extracting raw materials from colonies and other peripheral regions, transforming them into manufactured goods in the metropolises, and then selling them at higher prices back in the periphery. This division of labor resulted in the “underdevelopment of development”, as peripheral countries remained in a weakened position, dependent upon demands for their commodities, and vulnerable to the vagaries of the global market. Dips in demand would predictably result in situations of scarcity, even hunger, as they might need to continue to import foods, but with weakened purchasing power. So long as peripheral regions remained wedded to a primary strategy of exporting raw materials, they would forever remain in relations of dependency on the core states, according to Frank (1969).

World-systems and dependency theories illuminated global patterns of inequality, helping to explain why some regions remained poor, despite robust exports. What these global analyses sometimes lacked, however, was a clear sense of how such decisions were made on the ground. The overarching patterns were clear, but where were agency and meaning? What decisions were people making in their daily lives and in their official tasks—based on their social values and aspirations—that retrenched the pattern of dependency that mortgaged the future of many?

In the case of British Honduras, the racialization of food was the linchpin connecting agency, meaning, and food insecurity. The British had already developed an aversion to “Indian corn” in their settlements in North America. In their logging pursuits in British Honduras, they relied on imported foods (especially wheat flour) and provisioned their enslaved Creole woodcutters with rations of wheat flour and salt pork, thereby transferring their tastes to a new social group. The distaste for corn was incorporated into emerging pseudoscientific theories of race, and corn and its Maya farmers became associated with disease, disgust, and weakness. As long as global demand for mahogany and chicle remained high, the British and Creoles could purchase the imported foods they preferred. Maya farming families produced very little in the way of surpluses of corn, because there was negligible domestic demand for it and prevailing prices provided no incentive. The market value of corn, in other words, reflected the broader cultural aversion.

The Great Depression of the 1930s exposed the colony’s perilous state of dependency. A slump in demand for mahogany led to widespread urban Creole unemployment and near-starvation, and there was no infrastructure connecting Maya farm produce and urban residents. Moreover, when the new governor set about to right the trade imbalance and promote domestic food production, his aversion to corn was, nevertheless, reflected in the strategy of offering prices for corn that were below the costs of production and transportation, in setting up government purchasing stations elsewhere than in the regions where Maya farmers were concentrated, and in assisting the behemoth Belize Estate and Produce Company in forcibly displacing the Maya village of San Jose. Even while implementing various programs to boost domestic food production, he believed that “the main hope for this Colony lies in its forest products” (Burns, 1938, December 7, p. 59). He resigned the colony to the core–periphery dynamic that ensured that British Hondurans would, once again, go hungry.

5. Conclusions

This research underscores the power of food preferences and social systems of distinction in making and breaking economies. So long as enough mahogany and chicle were moving out, the British colonialists and Creoles could buy the imported food they wanted, even at elevated prices. Corn was racialized, associated with Indians, repugnance, and disease, and British Hondurans did not offer prices for corn that would have incentivized the generation of surpluses. Consequently, while Maya families sold and traded other food products, they remained subsistence farmers only of their staple crop, while urban colonialists and Creoles relied on expensive food imports. The continuity—for over a century—of administrative calls for increased domestic agricultural production, in tandem with ongoing depreciation of Maya food and farming, and a paucity of plans for how to link Maya staple food production with domestic consumers, all point to an administration that was ambivalent about the inclusion of the Maya within the polity. Corn could be incorporated into the body no more than the Maya could be incorporated into the body politic.

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