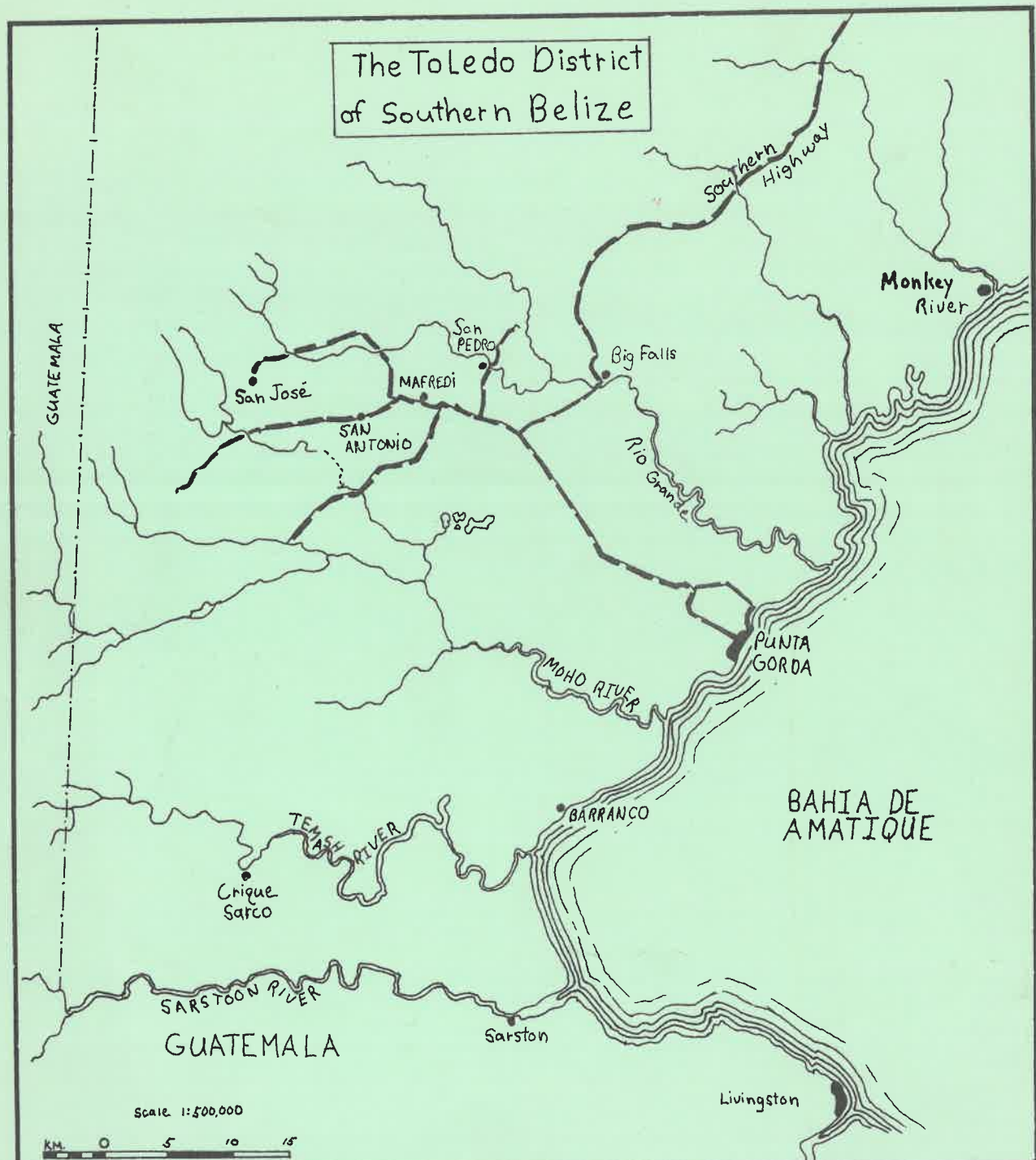


Museum Brief, no. 21

Ethnicity In Southern Belize

MICHAEL C. HOWARD



ETHNICITY IN SOUTHERN BELIZE

THE KEKCHI

AND

THE MOPAN

BY

MICHAEL C. HOWARD

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1975

MUSEUM BRIEF # 21

ISBN #0-913134-21-X

*Printed with non-appropriated funds by
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Columbia, Missouri 65201*

Preface

Two distinct indian groups may be found in the southern portion of Belize, formerly British Honduras, the Mopan and the Kekchi Maya. Colonial origins for the former may be sought among the Mopanga people who inhabited much of this area at the end of the 17th century (cf. Museum Brief No. 15, Riverine Maya). Another people of the same period, the Yaxcabeh (perhaps only a division of the Manche Chol), have since been replaced by Kekchi Maya immigrants. These indians, as well as other inhabitants of Belize, have in recent years been subject to new anthropological investigations. The following paper, by Michael C. Howard of the Western Australian Institute of Technology, is based upon this new fieldwork. The cover illustration has been redrawn for publication by Mr. Joseph M. Gucich.

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Table of Contents

Historical Background	1
Ethnic Categorization	5
The Economic Sphere	7
The Political Sphere	10
Compadrazgo Across Ethnic Boundaries	13
Conclusions	15
References Cited	18

List of Figures

Frontpiece. The Toledo District of Southern Belize

Historical Background*

Kekchi and Mopan-speaking Mayan Indians occupy the inland portion of the Toledo District, the southern-most district of Belize. Until recently they have been quite isolated from the rest of the country and have maintained a considerable degree of autonomy from the national government. Over the past twenty years, however, as the national administration has become more involved in the process of nation-building, the Kekchi and Mopan have been brought at an ever increasing rate into the "mainstream" of the national society and economy. Their contact and integration into the colonial and national administrative structure has also been quite limited, but this too is changing. Despite such changes, the Kekchi and Mopan retain much of their culture, autonomy and isolation.

The Toledo District contains a number of distinct geographical zones. (cf. Romney 1960; Laws 1928). Along the coast the land is flat and at times swampy. Inland a few miles in the northern portion the land begins to rise slightly along a soil belt known as "cohune ridge" (for the cohune palm which thrives in the particular soil). Further inland there is another soil belt of "pine ridge". Beyond this is another "cohune ridge" and some low-lying land, which includes the Mafredi Swamp. About twenty miles from the coast the land begins to rise sharply. This inland area is quite hilly, reaching altitudes of 1,500 to 2,000 feet near the Guatemalan border. It is within this zone that many of the Indian villages are located. Most of the southern portion of the district is low-lying. Much of the Toledo District is traversed by creek and rivers which become quite swollen during the rainy season. The rainy season usually begins in June or July and tapers off by November or December. The average rainfall for the district is quite variable, but it is generally between 160 and 170 inches per year.

At the time of the arrival of the Spaniards in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries the area encompassing the present Toledo District was apparently occupied by Chol-speaking Maya (the "Manche Chol"). To their north were the Mopan and the Itza and to the south, in the highlands, were the Kekchi. During much of the seventeenth century Spanish priests tried with little success to convert the Chol to Catholicism and to gather them into larger settlements. Finally, in 1689 a military expedition entered the area from Guatemala and began forcefully removing the Chol to more accessible areas. In this way some were resettled around Cajabon, where they were largely assimilated into the Kekchi. By 1695 most of the Indian population of the area had apparently been removed, leaving the area virtually unoccupied. For further detail concerning the early history of the region see Morley (1938), Remesal (1966), Stone (1932), Thompson (1938, 1970), and Ximenez (1929-31), F. Viana *et. al.* (1955), Tovilla (1960).

Throughout most of the period of Spanish colonial administration the area encompassing the present Toledo District and the southern portion of the Department of El Peten remained isolated and sparsely populated. The Guatemalan census of 1778 states that the entire El Peten had a population of only 2,555, the majority living in or around the largest town of Flores in the north (Juarros 1823:498). It was not until the nineteenth century that the reoccupation of the Toledo District and adjacent region began. By 1802 Black Caribs had begun to settle along the southern coast of Belize.

* The research upon which this paper is based was conducted in 1972.

During the first and second decades of the nineteenth century loggers from the English settlement along the Belize River moved progressively south, until by the early 1820s they had apparently reached the Sarstoon River (Humphreys 1961:15-18). Penetration inland was slight and most cutting took place near the banks of the area's larger rivers. The south was not particularly attractive to those persons, however, since conditions for logging were far better in the north. Toward the end of the century Mestizo and Creole chicle bleeders were entering the region as chicle became a prime economic resource for much of lowland Mesoamerica. The gum found in the south was of inferior quality, however, and operations were never as extensive in the Toledo District as in the north (cf. Evans 1948:248). In 1867 a small number of Americans from Mississippi settled near Punta Gorda. They were joined by others in 1870, but few remained after 1910 (cf. Rosenberger 1958). For the most part the relatively unfavourable conditions for logging and extracting chicle in the south did much to discourage the area's economic 'development' for many years and to limit population growth.

By the latter part of the century Mopan and Kekchi Indians were also moving into the area from Guatemala. Mayan migration into the region was due largely to political and economic changes in Guatemala resulting in part from the ascendancy of Liberal positivists during the last half of the nineteenth century. Mopan settled at San Antonio in the 1880s, migrating from San Luis partly in response to repressive legislation and practices in Guatemala (cf. Clegern 1962:92-3; Thompson 1930; Sapper 1897). Many of the Kekchi came into the area as labourers, some working on plantations which expanded into the lowlands during the last decades of the nineteenth century. One of these, the Kramer Estate, occupied the south-western portion of the district and employed primarily Kekchi workers. After this plantation was abandoned around 1914 many of the Kekchi remained, reverting to subsistence agriculture. With the increasingly widespread and systematic application of peonage, particularly the use of forced labour in Guatemala, more Indians crossed over into the Toledo District during the early part of the twentieth century, although never in great numbers. Migration across the border continues at present; but since the Second World War the rate has been much reduced. Recent quarrels with Guatemala have further discouraged migration.

The Indians who moved into the Toledo District before World War II appear rarely to have settled in stable villages. Most lived in isolation in small hamlets consisting of only a few close relatives, people sometimes shifting after a few years. River valleys were settled and abandoned many times, and membership of a hamlet might vary considerably over a very few years. Prior to World War II, British influence in the district was quite limited, and there was little contact between Indians and non-Indians. Generally the only non-Indians in the interior were Creole and Mestizo mahogany cutters and chicle bleeders (chicleros).

The border between Belize and Guatemala in the Toledo District was not well defined until the 1930s, at which time it was re-surveyed as the result of a resurgence of interest in the conflicting claims over the area (cf. Mendoza 1959:247; Caiger 1951:205-6). Guatemalan influence in its own portion of the area at this time was not much greater than that of the English. As a result, movement back and forth over the border was

relatively common. Kekchi traders from Coban (Cobaneros) traversed much of the area, supplying some of the items which the inhabitants of the district did not produce themselves. Occasionally the Indians would go to Punta Gorda on the coast or to San Luis in Guatemala to trade for salt, machetes and other dry goods. Most Indian settlements were virtually self-sufficient, however, growing a wide variety of crops and making their own cloth, utensils and furniture.

There was some outside interest in the Toledo District during the late 1930s because of the renewal of the boundary question and the introduction of banana raising by the Indians for market. The interest was short-lived, however, as the bananas fell victim to disease. During the summer of 1944 strong winds devastated much of the district. Many houses were destroyed, crops were extensively damaged, and much of the high bush was downed. This resulted in some Indians returning to Guatemala. Also, communication and transportation between many of the villages was seriously disrupted, and several trails have never been reopened.

During the 1950s there were efforts to lessen the isolation of the Indian communities in the Toledo District. A liaison officer was appointed to live among the Kekchi. Attempts were also made at assisting in the economic development of the area. The Land Use Survey Team (cf. Romney 1960) sent some of its members to study the district and to make suggestions (some of which were implemented), and the Catholic Church encouraged the development of an agricultural co-operative in San Antonio. In addition, through the Inferior Court Ordinance of 1952, the colonial administration sought to reform the local village governments by democratizing and integrating them more closely into the national administrative structure.

From the post-World War II period until the present there has been a steady increase in the frequency of interaction between the Indians and the rest of the country. Such interaction has developed slowly, however, and outside knowledge by the Indians and of others regarding them is still limited. The physical, cultural and social isolation of the Indians at present varies individually and from village to village. The Kekchi-speaking Indians in the southern part of the district are somewhat more isolated and conservative than those in the north, and in the northern villages the degree of conservatism varies greatly. This isolation and conservatism is due in part to a lack of adequate roads in many portions of the district. Roads have been extended and improved in the northern Toledo District over the past few years, although flooding still makes transportation difficult during the rainy season. The Southern Highway which connects the district with the rest of the country was completed in the mid-1960s. The expanding road network at present plays a vital role in the economic development of the district by allowing an increasing number of villages to market such cash crops as rice and beans on a larger scale.

The 1960 census states that the Toledo District had a population of 7,686. This figure includes members of several ethnic units. Following Smith (1974:335-6), the term ethnic "category" rather than "group" will be used in those cases where internal organization is generally lacking. The two principal ones being the Mayan Indians and Black Caribs. In general, these ethnic units occupy distinct communities. The coastal communities of Punta Gorda (cf. Cosminsky 1966), Barranco, and Monkey River are primarily inhabited by Caribs, along with some Mestizos, Creoles, East Indians, Europeans and Chinese (and more recently a few Mayan Indians). A small number of Mestizos also live at Big Falls and San Pedro Columbia. There are several East Indian and Creole families along or near the Punta Gorda-San Antonio Highway, and the village of Mafredi is composed principally of East Indians and Mayans. San Antonio is the largest Indian community in the district (over 1,000 people). Virtually all of its inhabitants are Mopan-speaking, though some are 'Mopanized' Kekchi. At present the composition of most of the other northern villages is a mixture of Mopan and Kekchi, with one of them often predominating. The interior of the southern part of the district is occupied almost entirely by Kekchi-speakers. Recently Indians have begun expanding north along the Southern Highway (and a few have moved to Cayo District), as groups or individuals migrate from established villages for a variety of social and economic reasons.

Ethnic Categorization

The terms Indian or Mayan are often used for convenience to denote both the Kekchi or Mopan-speaking people of the Toledo District. "Indian" or "Mayan Indian" will be used throughout to denote the Mopan and Kekchi rather than Amerindian, as used by Caribbeanists. In the case of descendants of immigrants from India, the term "East Indian" is employed. However, the reference implies a degree of homogeneity that is not entirely warranted. Although the Kekchi and Mopan recognize their membership in a category of Indian as distinct from other ethnic categories, there are important internal distinctions of which they are conscious. Cultural differences between Kekchi and Mopan were certainly much greater in the past than at present in terms of religious beliefs, lore, dress, and various customs. Until recently village composition was generally much more linguistically and culturally homogeneous than at present. Over the past two decades there has been an increasing admixture of the Kekchi and Mopan, much as the Kekchi and Chol intermixed in the seventeenth century. Despite this mixing (both in a cultural and social sense), however, a distinction remains between Kekchi and Mopan, and these continue to be significant ethnic categories.

In the case of mixed Kekchi-Mopan marriages, which are becoming more frequent, the Mopan language and much of their culture seems to predominate. Thus, the children of such unions often speak Mopan as their first language rather than Kekchi. An ability to speak both Kekchi and Mopan, with differing levels of proficiency, is becoming commonplace in some of the northern villages. It is possible that the dominance of Mopan in such instances is related to the prestige which Mopan-speakers attribute to themselves as opposed to the Kekchi whom they consider to be more 'primitive' and superstitious. Although, in cases where the wife is the Mopan-speaker, socialization factors regarding her role in raising the children may also play an important part. The attributed prestige of Mopan-speakers is partially due to the fact that San Antonio, the principal Mopan village,

has long been the recipient of non-Indian influence and has been at the forefront of economic and social change within the area. San Antonio had a serviceable road to Punta Gorda long before there were such roads elsewhere in the district, since 1948 it has been the residence of the area's only Jesuit priest, and it has one of the largest and oldest schools in the district.

The Kekchi, on the other hand, following the decline of plantation labour around 1914 became much more self-sufficient and isolated, and have only recently begun to develop economically. However, such external factors cannot entirely explain these differences. There are also cultural factors which seem to effect receptivity to change. For example, Kekchi make up the majority, if not all, of the shaman class. Even shamans in Mopan villages (a belief in the efficacy of sorcery appears to be almost universal among both Kekchi and Mopan) tend to be Mopanized Kekchi. In the Kekchi-speaking villages the presence and importance of shamans has to some degree stifled entrepreneurial activities. For example, when a man opened a store on a full-time basis in one village the local shamans began demanding credit. When he refused on one occasion a shaman threatened him. The store-owner died shortly thereafter and his death was attributed to sorcery. This death has since proven a strong deterrent to similar entrepreneurial activities.

There are a number of cultural features that are generally associated with either Mopan or Kekchi identity, although these are not always valid indicators in fact. These include dress, house-style, certain beliefs, as well as language and surname. Despite these differences, however, articulation in terms of a common Indian ethnic identity is beginning to develop. Many Kekchi and Mopan see themselves as belonging to the ethnic category of Mayan Indian which sets them off from members of other ethnic categories with whom they are coming into more frequent contact. However, so far they tend not to group themselves with northern, Yucatec Mayans. As their identity has developed certain characteristics have become overt symbols of their Indianess. Speech is one of these, although many also speak English or Spanish, and it is frequently used as a means of exclusion in multi-ethnic settings (cf. Eidheim 1969). The Mayans being virtually endogamous, physical characteristics have also become significant. To some Indians, their type of dwelling (a thatched hut), economic pursuit (growing maize in particular), and diet (black beans, tortillas, tamales, etc. as contrasted to the different Creole and Carib dishes) have come to symbolize their ethnic identity. Other customs and beliefs are also becoming important in this regard, but have not yet reached the stage of being clearly articulated symbols. Also becoming important is the alcaldeship as a symbol of their relative autonomy.

These symbols are interrelated with an overall idealized picture of what it means to be an Indian-- what Barth (1969:14) terms "basic value orientations". It is in relation to this that the above symbols are often chosen. Such idealized pictures include the Indians' stereotype of themselves as being hard-working (which they highly value), while the Creoles and Caribs are said to be lazy and the East Indians and Chinese are crafty and try to cheat the Indians. It is recognized that not all Indians share in these characteristics. Those who do not are viewed as being somewhat deviant rather than outside the category of Indian.

The thatched hut has clearly emerged to many as a symbol of Indian identity, and those who attempt to build zinc-roofed board and brick houses are subjected to considerable adverse social pressure. Only in the larger villages are there entrepreneurs with sufficient personal capital (in a broad sense) been able to 'afford' to construct such houses. Zinc-roofed houses are seen as a means of flaunting one's wealth and social superiority, while it is felt that Indians should at least show outward sign of sameness. Furthermore, the construction of thatched dwellings involves the reciprocal labour exchange of a large number of men and utilizes local forest products, but zinc-coated ones are built by a few paid labourers and require the purchase of building materials. Thus, while the former requires a large personal network, social integration into the village, and one's own labour, the latter does not, requiring only that one have sufficient cash to pay for the needed goods and labour.

The significance of such symbols seems primarily due to two inter-related factors: increased social interaction with non-Indians (cf. Mercier 1965; Cohen 1969) and a greater scope for wealth differences and entrepreneurial activities among Indians. Both points relate to the overall economic development of the area. These factors seem to have given rise to tensions and an increased tendency to demarcate social identity. Such demarcation, or boundary creation and maintenance, also appear to be a response by Indians to government efforts to undermine cultural differences under its policy of national homogenization, to the fact that many Indians continue to feel that certain aspects of the old ways should be maintained, and that Indian identity is not considered a liability. Most have not accepted 'modernization' in the same way nor to the same degree that many of the government bureaucrats have. Most prefer to accept only those things which seem to be of direct benefit to them after careful consideration (based upon their own limited perception) and such changes are not necessarily seen as altering one's ethnic identity. That is, most Indians have opted to maintain their ethnic identity (although in fact there has probably been little choice in the matter) and because of increasing social interaction with others as well as external pressures and constraints, it has become necessary to consciously define boundaries.

The Economic Sphere

The type of agriculture practised by the Indians of the Toledo District is principally the much maligned slash-and-burn or milpa system common to many tropical and semi-tropical areas of the world. Most of the Mayan men engage primarily in agriculture for their livelihood, and crops are grown both for subsistence (principally maize and black beans) as well as for market (principally rice and red kidney beans). In addition many people supplement their income from non-agricultural sources, but in most cases these are secondary pursuits. Different personal strategies regarding marketing and occupation have led to an increasingly wide range of personal wealth. As indicated above, until after World War II most people were virtually self-sufficient and needed little cash. People at that time grew a wide range of crops, mostly for home use; and major agricultural activities employed reciprocal labour assistance rather than wages (cf. Howard 1974).

During the 1940s a Government Marketing Board was established in Punta Gorda. When the Board began buying red kidney beans a few Indians decided to grow them for market. The difficulty and high cost of transportation, however, dissuaded many. In 1948 the resident Jesuit priest in San Antonio started an agricultural co-operative (cf. Gregory 1972). This had an important effect throughout much of the district as it was to a large degree responsible for the market price of red kidney beans rising substantially. Transportation between San Antonio and Punta Gorda was also improved at this time, and the co-operative in San Antonio began operating a truck. The greater ease in marketing and the higher price caused many more people to begin growing beans for sale. Hogs also became an increasingly popular means of gaining additional income.

Rice production has had an important effect on the economic growth of the region in recent years. It was grown in a few of the villages, such as San Antonio, as early as the 1940s. Road improvements have since allowed other villages to begin marketing rice as well. The development of Madredi Swamp for wet-rice cultivation, which is presently underway, has greatly increased the output for the district as a whole. Transporting and drying rice is still difficult in many villages, however, since harvest time is during the rainy season. Presently, although the sale of red kidney beans is also important, the vast majority of agriculturalists in the northern villages derive most of their cash income from the sale of rice. In San Antonio the proportion of rice planted for sale in comparison to other crops has led to some shortages of items for home-consumption such as maize, and the latter are frequently purchased from other villages. In this respect, San Antonio continues to change more rapidly than other villages, as a larger proportion of its agriculturalists move toward complete cash-cropping.

Cash-cropping has become an increasingly important part of the Indians' livelihoods in many villages and has to a degree more fully integrated them into the national economy. An awareness of their economic role vis-à-vis the rest of the nation and the greater frequency of economic transactions with non-Indians has led some Indians to become disturbed about what they perceive to be an unfair arrangement. They see the hard-working Indians feeding others (especially Caribs and Creoles), but not receiving their just rewards. Such feelings become especially clear during rice harvest, which falls in the rainy season. In some of the more remote rice-producing villages, the roads become difficult and often impassable. People frequently express dissatisfaction with the government for not providing adequate roads and bridges and for generally not caring about the problems faced by the Indians. The problem is partly due to the fact that the expansion of rice production has in some instances outstripped road construction, which is a difficult and costly endeavour in such an environment. Also, the crews responsible for the road maintenance are non-Indians and their laziness is frequently blamed for the inadequate condition of the roads.

The situation is further aggravated by the Indians' disposal of their income from the harvest. This added wealth has led to a greater demand for consumer goods, although much of it is still hoarded. Where such goods are provided by itinerant Kekchi merchants from Coban (Cobaneros) or local part-time store-owners there are social constraints which keep these individuals from unfair practices, or at least keep them from carrying these to excess. Part-time store-owners must depend upon fellow villagers for assistance in such things as reciprocal labour

in agriculture and also tend to be related to many of the other villagers. The Cobaneros are dependent upon the people's hospitality while travelling through the district. Such constraints are lacking in the case of full-time store-owners in Punta Gorda, who are mostly non-Indians. They are also less effective for full-time Indian merchants in villages such as San Antonio who tend to be much more isolated socially than their fellow villagers; although in these cases there are other, more direct, sanctions such as sorcery. Especially in Punta Gorda, such merchants sometimes cheat the Indians and most raise their prices during harvest. There are price controls on some items, but enforcement of these is often lax. Such activities by store-owners have encouraged the stereotype that non-Indians always try to cheat Indians; and, like most stereotypes, only a few examples are needed to keep it alive once established.

Among the most popular consumer goods purchased with the Indians' new income are radios, the prices of which rise markedly during harvest. Such items in the tropical environment are frequently in need of repair -- a task which the Indians themselves are generally incapable of. Thus they are forced to leave their radios in Punta Gorda with a non-Indian specialist who can repair them. In such a case the Indians must interact with a non-Indian because of economic dependence (although not perceived as such, it can be argued that it is a case of interdependence since the repairman is largely dependent upon Indian produced food). However, such interaction has led to ill-feelings and latent ethnic hostility. Such transactions are entered into by the Indians with great suspicion and when, as has happened, individuals are put off when trying to reclaim their radios, sometimes for years, with the claim that the repairman is still waiting for the necessary parts, they feel that their initial suspicions have been confirmed. In such cases the Indians will rarely protest (unless quite drunk), being content to gripe about it among themselves. This seems to be in part due to a feeling of powerlessness as well as to general Indian norms of public conduct, both of which have contributed to the creation of inter-ethnic "rules" of behaviour which militate against protests across ethnic boundaries. The failure to make a formal complaint is related to Indian ideas regarding the autonomy of judicial systems (Indian and non-Indian), unfamiliarity with the non-Indian system (which is changing), and a feeling that as an Indian one would not get a fair hearing anyway. While such behaviour may have been adequate in the past when inter-ethnic interaction was minimal, under present conditions it undoubtedly encourages some individuals to take advantage of the Indians and adds to ethnic hostility.

There are a number of other temporary, short-term ways in which Indians have made money. Up to the 1960s many men worked during the summer (the slack agricultural season) bleeding chicle or cutting mahogany. Hardwood logging has now virtually disappeared in the district and, although some men continued to work as chicleros until 1966, when the buyers from Belize City ceased coming into the area in that year all work in this field stopped. A few handicrafts are made when men or women are in need of cash, but most prefer to buy such items from the Cobaneros. It has become common in recent years for young men to go away from the area for short periods to earn money as unskilled labourers. In this way young men have travelled throughout most of the Country. Some money is usually saved from such work, and it is used primarily for wedding expenses when the men return home.

As pointed out above, during the 1940s conditions in the Toledo District began rapidly changing. Particularly, conditions improved for more varied kinds of economic activities by entrepreneurially-oriented persons. Until recently the interior of the Toledo District has not been of interest to members of other ethnic groups. It has been very undeveloped economically and mostly inhabited by Indians. Therefore, few non-Indians have been interested in providing services for such people, who had few consumer wants and little to offer for sale. The increasing marketability of produce and the resulting increased demand for consumer goods has altered this situation. Opportunities developed for entrepreneurs interested in satisfying these desires by operating stores and driving trucks. Some East Indians and other non-Indians have settled along the road between Big Falls and San Antonio to offer these services. There have also been a number of Indians willing to try and take advantage of the new niches available (particularly in San Antonio).

As Barth (1963) and others have pointed out, an entrepreneur must count both his profits and losses not just in monetary terms, but also in "vital intangibles like power, rank, and goodwill". In this way entrepreneurial activities may have "social costs" in other spheres which, should they prove to be functionally interrelated to a significant degree with the entrepreneurial activities in the economic sphere, may force the person to abandon his enterprise. Where Indian entrepreneurs have made a profound break with traditional Indian pursuits (e.g., milpa agriculture) they may prove to be much less effected by such social costs. In the smaller villages, however, where entrepreneurs are still heavily dependent upon the goodwill of other villages, such costs may be of considerable importance. In addition, goals in other spheres such as politics, may outweigh economic goals; and, should the economic activities imperil these other goals, a decision may be forced regarding one's priorities.

From the above it is clear that the Indians in the Toledo District are becoming increasingly integrated into the national economy. Such changes have led to the emergence of increased wealth differences within the villages as well as to different means of acquiring an income-- to incipient classes. Despite these differences, however, even the wealthiest Indians remain simply wealthy Indians to members of other ethnic units. This occurs even though such individuals cease to bear many of the symbols of Indian identity. Other Indians tend to view some of the entrepreneurs with scorn, some with jealousy, but they too consider them to be Indians. Thus, although Indian identity is connoted by a number of symbols, failure to be identified with many of these symbols does not necessarily allow one to change identities. All people in the district are defined as belonging to some ethnic category, and even certain deviants must be identified in this manner--as being more Indian than anything else. In the case of those deviating from normative Indian behaviour, since they were born as Indians (and the main ethnic categories tend to be highly endogamous and physically distinct); and, to some extent, they continue to speak Kekchi or Mopan and to interact with other Indians more than with non-Indians, they continue to be identified as Indians. Therefore, ethnic identity is largely ascribed at birth, and it is virtually impossible to change identity without leaving the district.

The Political Sphere

In 1858 the British colonial government, in keeping with its policy of indirect rule, adopted the alcalde system of local administration for Indian, Mestizo, and Carib settlements in British Honduras. Since these

people came from a region that had been administered through Spanish colonial institutions, the British considered this form of government to be more expedient than an attempt to impose foreign forms of administration (cf. Grant 1967).

Because of the isolation of the Indian villages in the Toledo District before the Second World War, the colonial government had very little influence on the internal development or workings of village administration. The Indians consequently retained a form of administration that was familiar to them and developed it in their own way. As a result, the position of the *alcalde* in many of the district's Indian communities came to be held by members of a single family (or group of families) who wielded considerable power. Generally, a number of older men in each village and senior members of the most influential families decided upon who would hold the various offices. In this manner there was usually only one candidate for each office in annual 'elections'. In many villages the family which was recognized as first settling the village was afforded the right to represent the village, to hold the most important political offices, and to wield the most authority. The senior male member of this family ordinarily served as First *Alcalde*. Anyone who disapproved of rule by this family generally chose to move away, sometimes founding a new village.

In 1952 the Inferior Court Ordinance was instituted, which was intended to regularize the disparate systems of local administration throughout the country and to encourage regular "democratic" elections of village officers. Through this ordinance the government apparently hoped to gain more effective control over the local *alcaldes* and to integrate them more closely into the national administrative structure. In some of the villages the family heads who had held the *alcaldeship* for many years handed the office over to other members of the locally dominant group, while retaining actual political power and authority. Due in part to the continued isolation and autonomy of the villages, such attempts at reform had little effect beyond lessening the prestige of the office of *alcalde* and shifting real power and authority away from recognised offices.

Since the mid-1960s the government of Belize has been encouraging the introduction of village councils among the Indians of the Toledo District (cf. Manifesto for the New Belize in the Surging Seventies: 13). This action has been closely tied to the government's desire to more fully integrate and equalize the nation's judicial and administrative system. Also, included in this plan is the eventual replacement of the *alcalde* and associated offices. In the administrative sphere it is intended to replace them with the village councils and in the judicial sphere by a police force and court system more closely integrated into the national structure. After an initial period of resistance, the councils have, especially after 1969, gradually been accepted in some of the Indian villages, though the form they take often differs from that envisioned by external planners. The government's view of the role and functioning of the village councils appears to be different from that of the Indians (compare with Richards 1971:8-10). The former's perception of local councils is based largely upon an English model, modified somewhat by Creole and Carib political precepts. As such, councils are seen ideally as operating through principles of participatory democracy. Because of cultural, social, and political considerations, however, councils have tended not to operate in this

manner in the Indian communities. Instead, where the new ones have gained some acceptance, the old form of politics, which is to a large degree 'un-democratic', and notions regarding leadership and authority tend to remain, becoming incorporated into the council's operation.

From the early 1950s factionalism has been increasing within the Indian villages. This appears to be related to the rapid political and economic changes which have effected village growth and increasing heterogeneity. The increase in the intensity and incidence of factional disputes has had an important effect upon the authority of the alcaldes and the acceptance of councils. In some instances the alcalde's authority was weakened not only because of the lack of personal power and authority possessed by the incumbents following the 1952 reform, but also because his decisions became more frequently associated with factional considerations. In terms of the village councils (or the acceptance of almost any innovation for that matter) the new councils have come within the field of factional quarrels and the council's acceptance and functioning has been closely related with factional considerations. Thus, in one village the initial village council was formed and dominated by a few innovative young men with relatively weak social networks in the community. They ran the council largely in opposition to and without the support of members of the dominant village faction and those holding what were considered by other villagers to be legitimate positions of leadership, and with only meagre support from other villagers. This council failed and it was not until council membership became more closely aligned with the political realities and normative precepts of the villagers that it began to function more successfully. Although it became dominated by members of the major village faction, there were influential persons not aligned with this faction on it as well. The council's acceptability and success, from the local perspective, was enhanced through the personal power and authority of its members.

The increasing acceptability of the village councils after 1969 was in part due to political changes which resulted in there being more for the village councils to do, more 'spoils' to try and obtain, and more for the council members to try and take credit for. These changes resulted in part from the defeat of the incumbent Representative to the National Legislative Assembly, an independent, for the Toledo District North by a member of the nationally dominant People's United Party (P.U.P.) Previously, with an independent in office, the national government had been little inclined to spend money in the northern Toledo District. Since the election of the new P.U.P. representative, however, the government has proven much more willing to allocate money for the district's development in terms of wells, roads, civic buildings and other amenities. Also, with national independence imminent the P.U.P. government began to take a greater interest in bolstering its support throughout the nation. What has evolved now that these 'spoils' are available, is a patronage-and-brokerage structure. This involves men on the councils acting as brokers, seeking 'spoils' from the national government. The result is that Indian politics are now much more involved in national politics, although many Indians themselves remain quite uninvolved and choose to leave the actual politicking in this respect to council members.

The result of the above changes maybe seen as a form of political syncretism. For reasons of political expediency the Indians have in some ways accepted the culturally alien forms of administration that

the government has promoted. However, although the structural features of local government are in keeping with the national government's design, political activities within the Toledo District's Indian villages remain highly imbued with the latter's values and culture and subject to local considerations regarding political power, competition and authority. Thus, although the political "arena" has expanded to include aspects beyond the Indian villages to a larger extent, the primary political "field" (Swartz 1968) has remained at the local level and closely tied to many local considerations. Such results are not infrequent where planners attempt to bring about profound political change through alterations in the administrative sector. If local politics are closely integrated into the local administrative structure desired changes may occur. However, where political power and authority rests largely outside of these offices, as is the case with several of the Indian villages in the Toledo District, such changes may prove elusive.

Compadrazgo across Ethnic Boundaries

Compadrazgo is an important social institution among the Toledo District's Indian population and an examination of compadrazgo networks among the Indians, with particular reference to those links created or existing across ethnic boundaries, is needed to give us a more complete picture of ethnicity in this setting. Compadrazgo involves the creation of a social bond between the parents of a child who is passing through some life-crisis rite and a sponsor(s) for the child, and it may be extended to include a range of kin. This social bond implies the existence of mutual rights and responsibilities. However, role expectations in the case of compadrazgo tend to vary situationally and depending upon the ethnicity of those involved. Compadre relationships tend to strengthen pre-existing social relationships and, as such, do not ordinarily involve the creation of new ones. Basically, they allow people to extend personal relationships on a firmer basis, strengthening ties of kinship or friendship. Mintz and Wolf (1950:342) have made a distinction between "vertical" compadrazgo, which they define as "tying together members of different classes", and "horizontal" compadrazgo, which is defined as "linking together members of the same class". With the vertical type, relationships tend to be of a patron-client nature. Although horizontal compadres are basically social equals, a degree of asymmetry may be said to exist, since it is implied that the parents can never adequately recompense the sponsor, although this may in practice alter over time through successive transactions. Compadre links across ethnic boundaries, which may or may not coincide with class difference, add yet another dimension.

Compadrazgo bonds exist among the Indians of the Toledo District through sponsorship of a child in a variety of rites. Two indigenous rites, one at birth and another performed six to seven months later (*cf.* Thompson 1930:78, 110-11; Howard 1973), involve only Indians. Sponsorship is also involved in three Catholic rites (virtually all of the district's Indians are Catholics): baptism, confirmation and marriage. The extent of personal compadrazgo networks varies considerably, depending upon personal strategies for living in a village and, to a lesser degree, the strategies of one's own kin. In all cases, such links should be seen as representing potential transactions which strategically may or may not be activated. One of the most important functions of compadrazgo among the Indians is recruitment to reciprocal labour groups for various agricultural activities and house construction (*cf.* Howard 1974). Individuals rarely have a wide enough local kinship network to depend upon for recruitment in such cases,

and compadre relations provide an important resource pool to draw upon-- one which is more dependable than non-institutionalized friendship. Compadres also provide assistance and support in numerous other ways.

Using one northern village as an example, most compadre links in this case are between fellow villagers, and 70% of the men (out of a total of 48) have all-Indian compadre networks. However, some individuals have asked non-Indians to sponsor some of their children for the various Catholic rites. Most of these individuals have only one or two non-Indian compadres, but there are a few cases of persons having almost 50% of their networks consisting of non-Indians. The inter-ethnic links that do exist include the following categories of people (the numbers in brackets are the total number of links within the community to such people): teachers (19); non-Indians in Punta Gorda, usually merchants (7); nurses in San Antonio (3); visiting carpenters, usually present to carry out work on the church altar (3); a forestry officer (1); and a farm demonstrator (1). In all cases the links involve those people with whom the Indians come into contact through the performance of some service. From the Indian perspective, all of the links, with the exception of some of those with teachers, were initiated by those who are presently middle-aged (mid-40s and early 50s) or older, all of whom have relatively large local kinship networks. In no case is there an Indian who was asked to sponsor the child of a non-Indian. The first teachers lived in the village around 1952 and, with the exception of an anthropologist and a Peace Corps worker, they have been the only non-Indians to live in the village for a prolonged period.

With the economic changes following the Second World War, Indians began to have more frequent dealings with people in Punta Gorda and some felt the need to have more personal contacts there-- someone to perform small favours, to talk to, to ask advice of, to grant credit, to spend the night with should the need arise, or to add a more personal dimension to economic transactions. Such links are generally with merchants, who perceive themselves as deriving certain economic advantages from the links. For the most part, the younger people have not seen the need to create such links in Punta Gorda. It seems that the younger men feel more at ease, no doubt partly because of their education and greater facility in English, carrying out economic and other transactions in such a setting and see no need for this added dimension. It should be noted, however, that compadrazgo among these younger people is still significant within the village setting.

Teachers (always the one resident in the village at the time) are the most common category of non-Indian compadre chosen. There does not seem to be any change in the frequency of choosing teachers as compadres since the 1950s, although as most of the teachers are Caribs, a recent increase in anti-Black feelings among some Indians has made the teacher's lot a little more precarious, and this may effect the frequency in the future. There appear to be three principal reasons why villagers choose teachers for compadres, the first two of which are closely related: 1) those individuals who are, to a degree, enamoured of non-Indian ways perceive some prestige in having more intimate links with non-Indians, 2) some Indians have become close friends with the teachers and wish to further cement this bond, and 3) sometimes certain individuals can find no one else to baptize their child. The creation of such bonds makes the teacher's residence in the village more secure, especially in terms of acquiring food and avoiding

or mediating hostilities with angry parents; and little is required of them in return.

The content of compadre links across ethnic boundaries tends to be much more restricted than in the case of those formed within ethnic boundaries, and those links created through sponsorship in the indigenous rites tend to be much more intimate and obligatory than those created through the Catholic ones. There are many forms of assistance and support that Indians may ask of their Indian compadres; and the expectation is that, if possible, the compadre will comply with reasonable requests (although factionalism is making this increasingly problematical in the case of older or more distant links). This is not so where links have been created across ethnic boundaries. With teachers, carpenters and most other non-Indian compadres very little is actually expected beyond friendly relations and possibly an occasional small favour. When a person leaves the area such links virtually cease to exist. The situation with non-Indian merchants, which has already been discussed, is different, since it is of a patron-client nature. Briefly, what emerges from the above is that the extent, intensity, content and frequency of social relationships tends to be far greater within ethnic boundaries. In cases where compadre links do cross ethnic boundaries these aspects tend to be much more limited.

Conclusions

Much of the above discussion has concerned the isolation of Indians in the Toledo District from the rest of the nation. This isolation may be seen as primarily consisting of three aspects: physical, cultural and social. Physical isolation is perhaps the most easily dealt with. As shown earlier, most of the district's Indians live in ethnically homogeneous villages, approximating Wolf's (1957) "closed-corporate" type, and come into only limited contact with a narrow range of non-Indians. Such physical isolation limits the frequency of interaction between people; but, as Mitchell (1969), Boissevain (1974) and others have pointed out, this does not necessarily effect the "content" or "intensity" of the links (Mitchell 1969:20,29). Thus, kin who live many miles apart and see each other only on rare occasions may have more significant links than neighbours who encounter each other daily. The physical isolation of the Indians has been lessened by the construction of roads and improved transportation. However, the effect that these changes have on the nature of inter-ethnic relations must be treated as problematical and as largely dependent upon other variables.

Social isolation implies that interpersonal links across ethnic boundaries, where they occur, tend to be of limited content in comparison with those among members of a single ethnic unit, although this is not necessarily the case where ethnic identity is primarily externally imposed. Thus, although members of two ethnic units may come into contact with each other frequently, members of the different units may fail to develop many social relationships across ethnic boundaries, and those few links which do exist tend to be "single-stranded" or of different content. The Indians in the Toledo District presently encounter non-Indians more frequently than was the case in the past. The nature of social relations with non-Indians, however, tends to remain more limited and of different content than those with fellow Indians. This is true even in the multi-ethnic villages of San Pedro Columbia and Mafredi, where members of different ethnic categories live in close proximity.

The third type of isolation, cultural isolation, implies a lack of comprehension and commonality of certain aspects of each other's cultures and can have an important effect upon inter-ethnic transactions by limiting or structuring the nature of communication between members of different ethnic units, where cultural differences remain significant. Difficulties in comprehension tend, in part, to be generated by culturally-related communication structures and perceptions based upon stereotyping, and transactions which do occur may be perceived quite differently by members of different ethnic units. Transactions which are similar in formal aspects (e.g., economic transactions) may have very different meanings depending upon whether they are between members of the same ethnic unit or different ones.

Clearly, to some degree all three of the above variables affect the nature of social relations across ethnic boundaries. Further, it would appear that these are interrelated, although the nature of this inter-relationship should be treated as problematical. Consideration of these variables alone, however, is certainly not sufficient for understanding the nature of ethnic relations in the Toledo District. Careful attention must also be paid to the factors which generate the relevant aspects of these variables. Thus, although cultural differences between ethnic units have to some degree been lessened through education and economic development, and physical isolation has also been reduced, there has been no substantial breakdown in the social boundaries between ethnic units. In fact, ethnicity has possibly increased in importance.

There seems to be ample evidence from other countries (cf. Mercier 1965; Cohen 1969) that the reduction of physical and cultural isolation between units may not necessarily imply the reduction of social isolation or of the overall significance of ethnicity in general, and that it often increases it. A number of variables seem important in the case of the Indians in the Toledo District. One of these is that, despite numerous changes in their culture in recent years, the people still remain satisfied with many elements of their traditional culture. Significant aspects of their culture are tied to economic activities; and, as long as these (e.g., growing maize) are maintained, an important element of continuity remains. However, even if these activities were to change it is still possible for the Indians to retain their ethnic identity. Basically, most of the people still see themselves as Indians; and, as such, they are different from others. Such a precept allows for considerable leeway in terms of culture change, especially since much of the content of their ethnicity has been transformed into selected symbols which connote an ideal type of the 'good Indian'. The Indian's identity is also to a large degree ascribed by members of other ethnic units, thus limiting one's choice in terms of ethnic identity.

Since their identity is retained, as many Indians come into greater contact with members of other ethnic units the need for deliniating this has become more acute. Furthermore, increasing interaction with non-Indians has produced a feeling that Indians as a whole are discriminated against by members of other ethnic units. Black Power ideas emanating from Belize, though as yet representing no real political threat to the Indians, nonetheless leave many feeling uneasy with independence close at hand. Greater familiarity with some non-Indians has created or strengthened negative stereotypes of certain other ethnic categories by the Indians, who see themselves as hard-working farmers while most others (especially the Creoles) are felt to be lazy and in receipt of an unfair share of the national spoils. Economic development and education have led to increasing

wants and greater awareness. More and more the Indians see their desires being blocked by non-Indians-- by the merchants who cheat them and raise prices during harvest, by the civil servants who seem to do nothing in return for their salaries. Such ill-feelings have been somewhat placated by the increased spoils available in the district since 1969, but these have in turn led to increased demands.

As yet the Mayan Indians of the Toledo District remain part of what Smith(1974:289) has described as "polyglot societies characterized by the stable symbiotic accommodations of their racial ethnic components". As the pace of national integration accelerates, however, this state of affairs is changing. Whether a new symbiosis will be formed or whether Belize will go the way of nations such as Guyana after independence is difficult to predict. Smith(1974) has pointed to the primacy of political considerations for determining the development of ethnic relations. At present the Indians have attained no great degree of internal articulation as an ethnic group, and they remain marginal to national political affairs. Also, there is not yet pronounced overt conflict or competition with other ethnic units. Such developments will probably only emerge should the necessities of political and economic competition so dictate. Also, should national politics move in the direction of mobilization and competition along ethnic lines it could encourage similar political developments within the Toledo District, especially as the Indians become more fully integrated into the national economy and administration. Political leadership and activities remain focused primarily at the village level. The few delegations that have been sent to Belmopan tend to be from residents of a single village protesting about some local concern, rather than leaders purporting to be spokesmen for the Mayan Indians of the Toledo District or distressed about some national development. But this could change and an increasing number of politically minded Indians speak in terms of 'we' as Indians contrasted to 'they' who are non-Indians.

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