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Reflections on Ethnicity and Nation in Belize

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Reflections on Ethnicity and Nation in Belize

My identity and my history are defined only by myself—beyond politics, beyond nationality, beyond religion and beyond skin.

NITIN SAWHNEY, 1999

Introduction

Belize, a Central American state with “Caribbean” connections, has been known for its small but ethnically diverse population. I put that word in quotes because for Belize it has carried a special meaning, the Caribbean that includes the territories that were colonies of Britain, and that feature populations predominantly of African descent. And indeed, even for people in the other Central American states, to say that Belize is Caribbean has meant that it is peopled predominantly by Afro-descendants. The territory that is now Belize was once, before the period of European invasion, an undifferentiated part of a large area inhabited by indigenous peoples collectively called Maya but including peoples of different languages and traditions, encompassing parts of what are now Mexico, Guatemala and Honduras, as well as Belize.

The Spanish were the first Europeans to enter Belize; they were resisted by the indigenous peoples, but succeeded in establishing several villages and attempted to impose their Catholic religion. The Maya resistance to Spanish rule continued from the first contacts in 1508 until the end of the seventeenth century, but by then Spain began to lose control of the territory to British pirates, and eventually British settlers controlled the territory and imported Africans as slaves to cut and export wood from the settlement; in 1779 slaves accounted for 86% of the population within British jurisdiction. The reduced Maya population was not counted.

Early in the 19th century, the Garifuna¹ (known to the British as Black Caribs, they were a people of African and indigenous Caribbean origin who had been forcibly removed from their island home of St. Vincent by the British and transported to an island off Honduras in 1797) began to settle in the south of Belize. After slavery was abolished in 1838, the British cutters were deprived of some of their labour, but the population was doubled by refugees from the Caste War in Yucatan in the years after 1847, as Mayas and Mestizos peopled northern Belize. In the 1860s, the labour-hungry British imported indentured servants from India and China. People were also brought by the British from their other colonies in the Caribbean. This mix of peoples was enriched in the twentieth century by immigrants from several parts of the world, including peoples from the Middle and Far East, the Caribbean, Europe and Central America. For

¹ While some maintain that “Garinagu” is the noun referring to the people and “Garifuna” is the adjective, and others that Garifuna is the singular and Garinagu the plural, I follow Joseph Palacio in using “Garifuna” in all cases.

a country with such a small population (in 1945 less than 60, 000; in 1981 146,000; in 2009 about 330,000), the great ethnic diversity in Belize is striking. Equally striking is the impression carried by many, including locals as well as visitors, that Belize is a haven of ethnic harmony.

But Belize was made by slavery and imperialism, both institutions that thrive on racism, and it would be foolish to believe that Belizean society has not been marked by its racist foundations.

In this essay I want to share some reflections, as a person born and bred in Belize, that is to say as a witness and participant from the inside, about ethnic relations, racism, and nation-ness in Belize. I believe that to do this it is important to address the colonial experience of Belize, for people's thoughts and feelings about 'race', ethnicity, colour, difference, and identity were forged in the crucible of their lived experience of slavery and colonialism. I also want to explore the question of nationalism, of what it meant and means to be Belizeans "building a nation", as we have been called upon to do by leaders for more than a half-century, and to reflect on the relation between nation and ethnicity.

Part 1 presents essential background and addresses the issue of British colonialism and its racist essence, describes the emergence of a "Creole culture" in the colony, explains the effect of nationalist politics on ethnic relations, relates the reactions of different sectors and groups in the society to the pattern of ethnic relations, and introduces the phenomenon of Central American immigration in the 1980s and its effects on the concerns about preserving an "ethnic balance". In Part 2 I will present different views about ethnicity and ethnic relations in Belize, analyse the concepts of "race", ethnicity and nation by reference to the current academic literature, look critically at some conceptualizations about the meaning of ethnicity and the state of ethnic relations in Belize, present the special case of the Toledo Maya, and provide some reflections about how the issue might be better understood and addressed.

PART 1

British Imperialism and the creation of "Creole" culture

The colonial society of Belize needs to be understood as a part of the British Empire that extended over several continents and dominated millions of peoples all over the world. For a people to dominate other peoples, often through the use or threat of force and always against the will of those peoples, they need to develop an ideology that justifies such domination and exploitation, and they found it in racism, in the idea that other peoples are naturally inferior to them. As Anderson notes, "Where racism developed outside Europe in the nineteenth century, it was always associated with

European domination . . . Colonial racism was a major element in that conception of ‘Empire’ which attempted to weld dynastic legitimacy and national community”.²

In Conrad’s novel set in Africa, *Heart of Darkness*, it is said that “The conquest of the earth, which mostly means the taking it away from those who have a different complexion or slightly flatter noses than ourselves, is not a pretty thing when you look into it too much. What redeems it is the idea only... and an unselfish belief in the idea—something you can set up, and bow down before, and offer a sacrifice to.” The British justified their Empire with the idea that it was a great humanitarian project, one designed to civilize and make human other peoples that would otherwise remain savages and heathens; the British novelist Rudyard Kipling called this “the white man’s burden”, and a host of novelists, playwrights, poets, painters and other artists expounded the glory of the British Empire and its civilizing mission. There could have been few people living in Britain who were not touched and convinced by this great cultural campaign, few who would not have believed in the glory of Empire and the ideology of racism that underpinned it. Thus the British sought to camouflage the naked power behind their conquest of territories and peoples, and their domination and exploitation, by “developing a justificatory regime of self-aggrandizing, self-originating authority interposed between the victim of imperialism and its perpetrator”.³ This justificatory regime was aimed firstly at their own citizens, since it was imperative that they be as committed to the goals of Empire as the rulers were, that they believe in its goodness and glory, so that they be willing and proud to serve and die for that Empire; and secondly at the victims of imperialism, that they too regard it as good and above all as natural, enduring and invincible. Hence the spectacle from Africa to the Caribbean of black children waving the Union jack and fervently singing *Rule Britannia*, declaiming that *Britons* never, never, shall be slaves.

The colonial administrators and businessmen in the colonies were imbued with this culture, and naturally acted in accordance with its premises and dictates. They looked down on the “natives” and used religion and education to seek to domesticate them; thus did Thomas Macaulay write in his “Minute on Education,” which became the guideline for British education throughout its colonies, that its purpose must be to create “a class of persons, Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinion, in morals and intellect”.⁴ The culture of empire, however, could not thrive unchanged within the colonies; it interacted with the cultures of other peoples and was modified by them and by the practice of everyday living within each culturally shared space. Edward Said speaks of “the interdependence of cultural terrains in which the colonizer and colonized co-existed and battled each other through projections as well as rival geographies, narratives and histories”⁵. How this plays out differs in each colonial society; in Belize, although the imperial culture had (and continues to have) significant force, and was often imposed by force, it was affected by interaction with the cultures of other peoples and by the economic and social development of the colony.

² Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, London, Verso, 1991, pp. 149-150.

³ Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, London, Chatto & Windus, 1993, p.82.

⁴ Cited in Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, p. 91.

⁵ Said, pp. xxii-xxiii.

The British who settled Belize in the 18th and 19th centuries were almost exclusively male and many of them made children with African women, during slavery and after. This process created a group of people called “free coloured” whom the masters used as buffers between themselves and the slaves, but who also struggled to win rights for members of their group in relation to the whites. Some of them became slave masters, and after emancipation would, by virtue of wealth and education as well as colour, become a class that aspired to replace the Europeans as the colony’s elite. It is this group of people who formed what is called the “Creole elite”, and who attempted to impose a dominant culture on the colony based on the British values and norms that they sought to emulate.

The dominant colonial culture that persisted in Belize into modern times was developed by the Creole elite, despite the fact that for a period in the middle of the nineteenth century the majority of people in Belize were Mestizos and Maya—47% of the population as against 29% Creoles.⁶ As used in Belize and in this paper, the term “creole”, when referring to people, means, primarily, those of mixed African and European descent, although it also includes people of mixed African and other ethnic groups, but excluding the Garifuna. Creole society or creole culture, on the other hand, refers to that culture created in Belize primarily from European and African elements and their interaction, but including other influences incorporated into that culture. There is also the need to differentiate between the dominant creole culture espoused by the elite and variously accepted or contested by the creole masses, and the cultures of the masses of creoles, which also differ as between the urban and rural peoples.

It was the British who imposed the labelling of “ethnic groups” on Belizean society,⁷ at the very time that Belize was declared a colony. As elsewhere, the prime instrument for categorizing the population was the census. Census data reflect a process of official classification by the state:

In order to gather meaningful data, population categories must first be defined. Among these are ethnic (or ‘racial’) categories. Thus they become established in official discourses, discourses which are powerfully constitutive of social reality through public rhetoric, the formulation of policy, the targeting of resources and social control measures . . . These official categorizations are not *necessarily* directly reappropriated as self- or group identifications. History, context, and, not least, the *content* and the *consequences* of the categorization, all matter.⁸

Bolland warns further that censuses “define ‘ethnic groups’ in such a way as to reinforce an orthodoxy that they are largely hereditary categories”,⁹ which is far from being the case.

The 1861 census presents the first opportunity to comprehend how the official mind of the time visualized the ethnic composition of the society at that crucial juncture in Belize’s demographic history, shortly after the large influx of refugees from Yucatan.

⁶ Carla Barnett, *The Political Economy of land in Belize: “Machete Must Fly”*, unpublished PhD thesis, University of the West Indies, 1991, p. 72.

⁷ Joseph Palacio states that “the nation state metamorphosed from a colonial origin, and that colonial origin was where ethnicity was born”, interview with Palacio.

⁸ Richard Jenkins, *Rethinking Ethnicity*, London, Sage, 2008, p. 72. Emphasis in original.

⁹ Nigel Bolland, “Pluralism and the Politicization of Ethnicity in Belize and Guyana”, *Struggles for Freedom*, Belize City, Angelus Press, 1997, p. 272.

But the ethnic data contained therein, with no less than 42 “race” categories, is so bewildering as to be totally incomprehensible even to the most informed Belizean. Carla Barnett has done an excellent job of making sense of the census by combining the racial categories and defining five major groups; using her scheme, the census of 1861 showed the following: Whites 3,421 (14%); Creoles 7,401 (29%); Maya 4675 (18%); Mestizo 7458 (29%); Garifuna 2,385 (9%); Other 55 (1%\$), for a total of 25,635. The northern district had 53% of the population, while Belize district accounted for only 35%.¹⁰

A very important indicator of that census, and one that would last to a large extent into modern times, is the extreme geographic concentration of ethnic groups. Thus 73% of the Creole population lived in the Belize district; 86% of the Mestizos were in the Northern district; 84% of the Maya were in the Northern district; and 69% of the Garifuna were in the southern districts of Stann Creek and Toledo.

The large number of “race” categories gives an idea of the degree of intermixing that had taken place even at that time; since then there has been much more, which alerts us to the fact that what may appear as static categories conceals the large degree of mixing between the various groups.

The first census to refer to “race” categories after 1861 was that of 1946, whose data Barnett had to adjust and reclassify¹¹ in order to fit the categories she had created for the 1861 census. The adjusted figures for 1946 show the Creoles as accounting for 54% of the population, the Maya 17%, the Mestizo 13%, the Garifuna 8% and Whites 4%. The census again demonstrated that ethnic groups still tended to concentrate in particular districts, responding to their original insertion in the colony: Garifuna in the south, Mestizos in the north, Creoles in the central Belize and Cayo districts.¹²

Nationalism and its Effects

Until the 1930s and 1940s, when a road system began to be constructed,¹³ there had been little intercourse between the major ethnic groups, and Belize town remained the political and economic centre. The beginnings of economic diversification and the rise of the workers movements marked a change in the isolation of the different ethnic groups from one another. The workers’ movement of the 1930s was led by Antonio Soberanis, who articulated the idea that “we are a new People”, and spoke of the country as “our own Native Land”.¹⁴ The workers’ movement made it clear that it was referencing the “new people” to include the regions and peoples beyond the capital.

¹⁰ Carla Barnett, 1991, pp. 72-74

¹¹ For example, she divided the “mixed” category, which in Belize would break down into “Creole” and “Mestizo”, by reference to preferred or spoken language. Also, Garifuna were reclassified on the basis of language.

¹² Barnett, p. 160.

¹³ Until then, the country’s export economy having depended almost exclusively on timber, colonial authorities had felt no need to build roads, since logs were floated down rivers to Belize City, from whence they were exported.

¹⁴ Cedric Grant, *The Making of Modern Belize*, Cambridge University press, pp.169-170.

Soberanis spread his campaign to other towns, in the north, central and southern districts. In 1943, after trade union activity became legal, the General Workers Union (GWU) was formed; beginning with a membership of some 350, it grew to three thousand before the end of the decade, and carried out successful union activities in all districts of the country and among all ethnic groups.

Until then, all political activity had been concentrated in the capital and had been for the most part advocating greater political involvement for the Creole elite. In the aftermath of World War II, in which many Creoles had “volunteered” to fight alongside the British army, the emerging nationalists, inspired too by the world-wide anti-colonial movement, began to imagine a nation for the majorities living in the colony. They began to question the identity of the colonial society as had been laid down by the Creole elite in 1898 and sustained thereafter.¹⁵

In 1950, the nationalist movement took off in earnest with the formation of the People’s United Party (PUP), whose goal was to achieve “national unity and political and economic independence”. The organizers and leaders all came from Belize City and were all Creoles, although some were of a whiter shade of pale¹⁶ than others. On the eve of the party’s formation, Leigh Richardson, a journalist who was to become the second leader of the party, directly challenged the Creole elite when he wrote that

Physical slaves are often a distinct liability to their masters. Mental slaves are slaves in the most profitable way, doing their master’s bidding without hope of reward and without desire for flight and insurrection. This is the form of slavery that Britain maintains in her colonies, subjecting them to patient waiting for constitutional progress at her leisure and encouraging the inevitable bootlickers among their inhabitants to foster among their fellow citizens a distinct feeling of inferiority and utter dependence on Britain, both of which feelings are then combined and presented in a compound called loyalty to Britain.¹⁷

Until the late 1950s, British officials and politicians alike believed that “it was dangerous for smaller territories to nurse illusions of independent grandeur”.¹⁸ In the early 1950s, although self-government was certainly not regarded as appropriate for most of its territories, Britain, impelled to some show support for the principles enshrined in the UN Charter, was open to modest constitutional reforms such as universal adult suffrage. But this attitude in London did not readily permeate out to the distant colonies, and one can speak of a “lag” between Westminster and the local Government House. This is not surprising, for as we have seen there was a deeply entrenched racist and supremacist culture of Empire embedded in the British people, and particularly in its servants of empire such as governors and other high officials. In the crucial period of the nationalist movement, from 1949 until 1955, the Governor in Belize was Patrick Renison, whose view of how a colony should be governed was

¹⁵ See the Appendix for a discussion of the “creation myth”, based on a version of the meaning of the so-called “Battle of St. George’s Caye” in 1798, the last Spanish attempt to take the territory.

¹⁶ A phrase popularized in the 1970s by Black Power leader Evan X Hyde, referring to the “brown middle class”; after the Procol Harum song of the same name. Of the major leaders, two were what would be considered “black”: Leigh Richardson, the second party leader and Phillip Goldson, the assistant secretary; and two were much lighter-skinned: John Smith, the first party leader and George Price, the third party leader.

¹⁷ Article in the *Belize Billboard*, 17 August, 1950.

¹⁸ Heinlein, p. 59.

hardly touched by the new attitudes in London. He put up a last-ditch battle against the nationalists, and his paranoiac fear of the PUP led him to openly seek to influence the elections against its candidates, accusing them of being communists and of betraying the country to Guatemala.

In his campaign against the PUP, Renison was generally supported by the upper ranks of the civil service, almost all middle class Creoles and “West Indians” from Jamaica or Barbados brought to the colony as British civil servants.¹⁹ Important allies of the colonial administration too were the middle class professionals, especially the lawyers, who were all of the Creole elite, and who had close ties with their counterparts in the other British colonies of the “West Indies”. A group of these, supported by the colonial administration and bankrolled by the Belize Estate and Produce Company (BEC), a British corporation that owned one-fifth of the country’s land and dominated the logging industry, formed the National Party (NP) in 1951 to counter the PUP.

The NP accused the PUP leaders of racial prejudice, a charge emanating from the fact that one of the most effective planks of the party was its firm stand against Belize becoming part of the proposed British West Indies Federation. The party also promoted the country’s links with Central America, partly as a counter to British influence but also because Belize was in fact embedded in Central America, and was not about to break off and drift, Saramago-like, nearer to the other British colonial possessions in the Caribbean. At the same time, the Guatemalan claim to Belize, which had been brought to the fore by an invasion threat in 1948, was a major issue, and the PUP had been accused of selling out the country to Guatemala. These several concerns came together in an incident known as the “Frankson affair”. When the *Billboard*, the newspaper of the PUP, published an article attacking the appointment of a Jamaican to a high post in the civil service over the heads of locals, the Civil Service Association derided the article as irresponsible, and the NP alleged that the PUP hoped “to stir up dissension among people of Negro extraction here so that people of non-Negro extraction may someday control our affairs; in order to build up a feeling against West Indians to prevent Federation and West Indian immigration; and to build a non-Negro majority to lead the country into Guatemala as a department of that republic”.²⁰

The *Billboard* laughed off the charges, noting that the GWU (which the PUP leaders had taken over) was the only organization that could show a registered membership from “every racial stock”, that many West Indians were GWU members and that the Party had nothing against West Indians but was against Federation on economic grounds and against any immigration that displaced local labour or that tended to reduce wages. The *Billboard* no doubt thought it too undignified to point out that most of the PUP leaders, including the Party Leader, the editor and publisher of the *Billboard* and the majority of its members, were “of negro extraction”, but this was clearly not missed by the people, and the charge of racism did not stick.

That charge could have been made with much greater coherence against the Creole elite itself. In 1951, a Commission appointed in 1948 by the Governor to

¹⁹ See Grant, pp. 90, 107, 111.

²⁰ The *Belize Billboard*, March 1953.

consider constitutional reform presented its report; it was then led by W. H. Courtenay²¹ and its views were those of the Creole elite. The Commissioners praised the justice and fair play exhibited by colonialism and maintained that in order to preserve this democratic record, there must not be any “premature extension of political responsibility”, especially in a multi-ethnic country like Belize:

It is our view that there is far less risk in giving more power to and placing greater responsibility in the hands of the people in a homogeneous society than in a society of a cosmopolitan character, where the process of integration is still in a state of flux, and where there is the subtle ferment of racial cleavage arising from differences of language, culture and outlook, and inequality in educational progress.²²

They saw no hint of contradiction between this inequality and what they characterised as “those high principles of fair play, freedom and justice which are characteristic of the Anglo-Saxon”.²³ Indeed, they argued that “the advance in general and political education has not been uniform among all the races which comprise the Colony’s population, and the lack of balance arising from the long lead which the largest group [Creoles] enjoys over the minorities calls for the establishment of a system which, while meeting the legitimate aspirations of the one does no violence to the interests of the other”. Noting that 42% of the “aboriginal indian” (the Maya) were illiterate, as were 26% of “Asiatic” and 22% of the “Carib” (the Garifuna), the Commissioners nonetheless recommended a literacy test for voting, cynically remarking that “the proportion of illiterates for the whole colony is in any case so small that little harm will be done by their exclusion”. This, despite the fact that they recognized that in every district except Belize, English was the usual language for less than half of the population.²⁴ Not content with discriminating against the “minorities” by an English literacy test, the report also proposed, for the districts outside Belize, a system of indirect voting by part-nominated town boards and village councils, on the assumption that those people were too backward to exercise the direct vote. The PUP campaigned against the report, and in the end its racist recommendations were not implemented. Had they been, the subsequent history of ethnic relations in Belize would surely have been very different.

Still, there is no doubt that Belize was a deeply divided society in the 1950s—every colonial society is. Most significantly, and affecting all the other sources of division, was the class division which separated the large mass of poor people from a small minority of the wealthy and powerful. There were religious differences reinforced by the educational system structured on religious lines. There was the great divide between Belize City and the rest of the country. And there was “race.”

²¹ Courtenay was a prominent member of the Creole elite, a lawyer and member of the Legislative and Executive Councils; he was the first leader of the National Party, and supported the West Indies Federation. He later became an adviser to George Price and was Speaker of the Legislative Assembly in 1961. He was knighted by the British in 1973 and ended his public life as Speaker of the House of Representatives in 1974.

²² Report of the Constitutional Commission, Belize, Government Printer, 1951, para. 40.

²³ *Ibid.*, para. 17.

²⁴ “English” speakers would include speakers of the Creole language, or creolized English.

The ethnic dividing lines were evident in the usual stereotyping of each group by the others, but in many respects the animosities were latent, because of the rigidity of colonial society: the white man was boss, and everyone else knew and kept his or her place. The geographical and occupational separation of the ethnic groups provided little opportunity for ethnic animosities encouraged by colonialism to make themselves felt. The fragility of ethnic relations was not put to the test in the stagnant colonial society. The success of the PUP's aim of destroying colonialism and uniting the country was bound to lay bare the underlying tensions between the ethnic groups.

What was not clear was that these tensions would soon manifest themselves within the very small group of leaders of the party itself. In the first elections under universal adult suffrage in 1954, the PUP won 66% of the votes and eight of the nine contested seats. The colonial government was forced to concede that the will of the people was clearly with the PUP, and offered to cooperate if they wanted to. This invitation received mixed reactions from the leaders of the PUP. Most of them, led by Richardson and Phillip Goldson²⁵, decided that the country's interest lay in accepting the invitation, while George Price²⁶ remained adamant in his determination not to compromise with colonialism. It soon became clear that Price's rejection of British tutelage went deeper than that of Richardson and Goldson, who had accepted semi-ministerial responsibilities in the Executive Council and began to exhibit a greater affinity with the colonial administration than their earlier anti-colonial sentiments would have merited; Richardson even began to favour Belize joining the West Indies Federation.²⁷ Price continued to promote Belize's Central American destiny, whereas Richardson had to find reasons for rejecting it, and he hinted at cultural differences as a factor.²⁸

A few months later, in July 1956, Richardson took the further step of denouncing "race" prejudices within the Party, alleging that when the nationalist movement began in 1950 "there were certain persons who felt that the leaders ought to be the Latins among us and so they led until one thing or another swept Creole leaders into the forefront. Certain Latins have never forgotten that and have been scheming ever since to uproot the Creole leaders."²⁹

It is not clear what "Latin" leaders Richardson alleges led the PUP, nor which "one thing or another" swept Creole leaders into the forefront nor who those supposedly

²⁵ One of the major leaders of the PUP until 1956, when he broke with the party and formed, with Richardson, the Honduran Independence Party (HIP). He later became the leader of the National Independence Party, formed by the merger of the NP and the HIP, and was the Opposition leader for many years.

²⁶ George Price was born on January 15, 1919 in Belize City; as a young man he studied for the priesthood but later entered politics, and after 1949 he dedicated himself completely to building the nation of Belize and to gaining independence. He claimed to have in his heritage the main ethnic groups of the country: African, European, and indigenous. He was decorated with the highest honors of Mexico, Venezuela, Honduras, and Cuba, received the Order of the Caribbean Community and was named the National Hero of Belize in 2000.

²⁷ Grant, p. 172

²⁸ Richardson's report to the PUP membership meeting of 5 March, in the *Belize Billboard*, 7 March 1956.

²⁹ The *Belize Billboard*, 29 July 1956.

new leaders were. The first leaders of the PUP were all embedded in what Grant calls “the Creole complex,” although some were lighter-skinned than others. When Richardson became the leader, he did not displace any “Latins” to do so. What may be the case is that Richardson was losing the argument for his new-found position of promoting federation with the “West Indies”, and that he sought refuge in “race matters” to buttress his new position. Thus, in making his case against association with Central America, he argued that the Central Americans themselves were seeking to develop economic and cultural relations “with these same West Indians whom some people would have us despise.”³⁰ The fact is that the most vocal opposition to such federation came from working class blacks in Belize City, who feared job competition from the islands. Richardson also used the Guatemalan claim as part of his argument, stating that the only Central American country that showed any interest in Belize was Guatemala, and that because of its claim to Belizean territory.³¹

As far as the “Latins” are concerned, at that time, as Grant explains, they were underrepresented in national politics:

The Latin elite had not been encouraged to become actively involved in politics because they were considered by the colonial administration to be untutored in the norms and administration of central colonial government. This had a debilitating effect on this group and functioned as a sort of self-fulfilling prophecy for the colonial government and the Creole elite: the latter, as the Courtenay Commission stressed, was cognizant of the strategic function that it performed in the Crown colony period and continued to assert its eligibility for this role in the decolonizing process . . . Few of [the Latin elite] had penetrated the inner core of the PUP national leadership at the time of the PUP split.”³²

In any case, Richardson himself, as leader of the PUP, had railed against attempts to use “race” to divide the people: “a vicious attempt [is] being made to divide the country into racial groups, into religious groups, and into incompatible classes . . . no colonial country which has allowed itself to be divided by racial cliques, by religious enmity and by class hatred has liberated itself . . . this country must therefore close ranks in race, in creed and in society for its own liberation”.³³ In addition, Richardson himself had often made the strongest case in the past against federation with the West Indies, stating, for example, that “We also believe that the destiny of this country is more wrapped up with the destiny of Latin America than of the British Caribbean, not alone because of geography but because of history and trade and tradition”.³⁴

Had Richardson persisted with his charges of “racial prejudice” against Price, and attempted to lead a political movement based on “Creoles” versus “Latins”, it is likely that politics in Belize would have pursued a path of ethnic conflict similar to that of Guyana, with political parties reflecting the interests of different ethnic groups. In the event, this did not happen, and none of the parties that have emerged in Belize thereafter have even courted the possibility of aligning themselves exclusively or predominantly with one ethnic group. The long-standing dominance of Belize City in national politics

³⁰ *The Belize Billboard*, 7 March 1956. Here he seemed to be echoing the arguments of the NP over the Frankson affair that he had so forcefully rejected.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² Grant, pp. 175-176.

³³ *Belize Billboard*, 11 September 1953.

³⁴ Editorial, *Belize Billboard*, 7 February 1951.

and the marginalization of the “outdistricts” would naturally have predisposed the emerging political system to develop along ethnic lines, given the ethnic geographic concentrations noted above, but the nationalist ideology which imbued the major actors in the developing two-party system prevented this from occurring. Crucial to this development was the fact that Richardson and Goldson, who had formed the Honduran Independence Party when they left the PUP, merged with the National Party in 1958 to form the National Independence Party (NIP); Goldson eventually became the leader of the Party, and stamped it with the inclusive national flavour which he had promoted as a leader of the PUP. That is to say that neither of the two major political parties that predominated in the pre-independence period, the PUP and the NIP (later UDP), sought to win support from any one ethnic group as against any other. If it is true, as Grant states, that it was the PUP that first used the opportunity, in 1957, “to take account of the cultural factor in party politics” by ensuring that the party’s candidates for the Corozal, Orange Walk and Cayo districts were resident Mestizos and that in Stann Creek and Toledo they were Garifuna, whereas none of the candidates of the opposition parties was a Mestizo,³⁵ nonetheless by the next following general elections in 1961 both major parties put forward candidates whose ethnicity reflected the majority ethnic group in the area in all divisions except Toledo. Neither of the two parties presented a Maya candidate in Toledo (where, by then, the majority of persons defining themselves as Maya were resident) until 1974, when both did, and they have generally maintained that pattern since.³⁶ There have been exceptions, but the pattern was set and it has prevailed. Both parties have ample representation of the major ethnic groups in the society.

It can be confidently asserted that by 1965 the prospect of Belizean party politics becoming tainted with “ethnic politics” had been largely surmounted.³⁷ The Guatemalan claim continued to provide some fodder to those few who may have been inclined to introduce the “race” question into politics, but it was always the case that the Mestizos and other ethnic groups rejected the claim as much as did the Creoles, in like manner that it was the majority working class Creoles in the 1950s that were most vehemently opposed to the West Indies federation; in other words, their positions were not based on ethnicity but on nationalism and self-interest.

Such was the situation when, in 1969, the “race” question became a major issue with the emergence of the United Black Association for Development (UBAD), which drew its inspiration from the Black Power movement in the U.S. Its leader was Evan X Hyde, a recently returned graduate from the U.S., who defined it as “strictly a cultural association aimed at making black people over the world realize that they have a history, culture, heritage and beauty of which they should be justly proud”.³⁸ The organization challenged the latent racism in the society and addressed, in a more profound and sustained manner than any other before or since, questions of racism and of ethnic relations in Belize.

³⁵ Grant, p. 182.

³⁶ Myrtle Palacio, *Who and What in Belizean Elections, 1954 to 1993*, Belize City, 1993.

³⁷ See Part 2 for a discussion of ethnicity, etc.

³⁸ Evan X Hyde in an interview in the *Belize Billboard*, 15 June, 1969.

By that time, the nationalist movement's goal of including all the people of the country in the society had generally prospered, except for the case of the Maya in the south. The Maya in the north had largely assimilated to Mestizo culture, and the Mestizos had to a greater extent broken out of their isolation in the north and become more visible in Belize City, not only in the business sector but also, increasingly, in the civil service. The Garifuna had also become more visible throughout the country, especially in the public service and in the teaching profession. But it was still the case that certain "prestige" jobs, such as bank clerks, were more open to lighter skinned Creoles or Mestizos, and that certain social clubs continued to exclude blacks from their number. Most importantly, the class differences had been maintained and even accentuated, so that the poor in Belize City, which continued to be the main centre of political, economic and social action, were visibly black people.

Despite its emphasis on "black" and its penchant for calling the country "Afro Honduras", UBAD preached unity for all non-white peoples of Belize, defining "black" as being in "four parts: the black, the brown, the red and the yellow." It acknowledged the white man as the historical and current oppressor, and declared that "every white person until proven otherwise must be considered an enemy to freedom, justice and equality."³⁹

But Hyde was especially critical of what he termed "the Creole bourgeoisie," or people with black skins and white masks,⁴⁰ and excoriated them for perpetuating the British-inspired origin myth:

No one can deny that the most effective historical source of division between the tribes in our society has been the so-called Battle of St. George's Caye . . . The myth was created that white master and black slave fought hand in hand against a dastardly aggressive tyrant—the Spaniard . . . For the sycophantic Creole bourgeoisie class, the 10th represented a legitimization of their supremacy in the civil service administrative circles of government . . . For the English, the 10th has been an opportunity to divide the native society by allying themselves with the Creole bourgeoisie class against the "niggers" and the "Pania" and the "Kerobi".⁴¹

He concludes that the Creole bourgeoisie saw the "Battle" as "the legal historical foundation of their right to be an exploiting class".

On the question of animosity between the "Latin" and "Creole" elements in the society, UBAD posited that

Many of the so-called Creoles in the capital are bemoaning the Latinization of this and the Latinization of that but they should first question their own conscience. For many years the Creole bourgeoisie were the slavemaster's pet and discriminated openly against the "yellow belly panya" and the "Kerobi". . .

Hyde criticized the prejudice created against the "Spanish":

They are most not real Spanish at all. They are our Indian [Maya] brothers and sisters who have likewise been oppressed, brainwashed and enslaved by the white capitalist system . . . Granted,

³⁹ Evan X Hyde, *The Crowd Called UBAD: The Story of a People's Movement*, Belize City, 1970.

⁴⁰ After Franz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952), Grove Press, New York, 2008.

⁴¹ Evan X Hyde, *Knocking Our Own Ting*, Belize City, 1969. The celebration of the Battle is held on September 10 each year, and is popularly known as "the 10th".

many of those “Spanish” think they are white, but many “Creoles” think they are white. Man, we are all victims of the same English shit...⁴²

On the other hand, Hyde often accused Price of being a “Maya racist” and of having “schemed, connived and bullied to force a Mayan identity on the people. This perverted program of Mayanization cannot continue indefinitely for pressure is building up.”⁴³ Part of the pressure Hyde refers to was related to Price’s project of building a new capital city inland, which was then nearing completion. Apart from its greater safety from the ravages of hurricanes, Price’s major motivation for moving the capital to the centre of the country was to make it more inclusive of the entire population, a way of integrating Belize’s diverse population and seeking to build a greater concept of nation-ness. The choice of a Maya motif for the central plaza and government buildings was made part of the “Mayanization” charge. The Creole-dominated civil service was particularly averse to uprooting from Belize City and moving to what they considered a remote hinterland.

Referring specifically to the effect of the Guatemalan claim, the *Amandala* stated that in the country’s quest for a national identity, “a primary problem has been one of race,” indicated that “the basic racial dichotomy is of course between the Afro Belizean and the Latin Belizean,” and opined that “although most Latin Belizeans reject the Guatemalan claim, some Afro Belizeans believe that they in fact encourage this claim, and that the People’s United Party represents the institutional vehicle for passage of this country to Guatemala.” It concluded that both political parties had failed to come to grips with the problem of race and nationalism in Belize, and that only UBAD had opened a dialogue on the issue.⁴⁴

For much of the 1970s the country’s political scene was dominated by the issue of independence and Guatemala’s threats to prevent this by force if necessary, and there was little public discourse, outside of that context, on the question of ethnic relations. In the period immediately preceding and following independence in 1981, however, a major phenomenon, relatively massive immigration from war-torn Central America, began to have a major impact on that question.

“Aliens” Lay Bare Underlying Tensions

Belize has an extensive land border with Guatemala and a sea border with Honduras; these borders are extremely porous, and the land border, consisting of jungle and unaffected by natural divides such as rivers or mountain ranges, was arbitrarily drawn by linking straight lines between three points. It is impossible to prevent people crossing, and people have flowed across the artificial border for centuries. Throughout slavery, slaves regularly escaped in large numbers to Guatemala and Honduras as well

⁴² “Creole, Carib and Spanish – Counter-revolutionary Terminology”, in *Amandala*, 1969, pp. 2-3. In Kriol parlance, “panya” refers to “Spanish” or Mestizo people, and “yellow belly” relates to their propensity to eat corn. “Kerobi” was a disparaging term for “Caribs” or Garifuna.

⁴³ The *Amandala*, 21 May 1971.

⁴⁴ The *Amandala*, 16 November 1973.

as to Mexico. The Garifuna came across in the early nineteenth century and have been criss-crossing the border ever since. And Central Americans, people known in Belize as Mestizos or simply as “Spanish”, have been traversing the border in search of work ever since the days of slavery.

None of these serial immigrations, however, anymore than the massive immigration from Mexico in the mid-nineteenth century which resulted in the “Creole” population becoming a minority overnight, had any serious effects on “ethnic relations” in Belize, simply because by and large there were no such relations. Everything was controlled by, and referenced to, the white colonizer, and each ethnic group kept its place, generally continuing to reside in the area in which it had been inserted on entry to meet the needs of the economy.

The waves of Central American immigrants that began to come in earnest in the 1980s were a very different matter. By then colonialism (though not the colonial mentality) was history, and the new nation state of Belize was struggling to define its “identity”. The best candidate for this prize was of course the identity⁴⁵ created by the Creole elite, for although other ethnic groups had entered the socio-cultural reality almost as completely (with the exception of the Maya in the south), and although the political field was wide open, the weight of the dominant culture had scarcely lightened; rather the other groups had, to varying extents, bought into that culture. Belize City and what it had come to represent culturally remained dominant, the centre of decision-making despite the physical move of government offices to Belmopan. And so the new nation was imagined as Creole: people that spoke English, were anglicized in other cultural ways, and practiced a unique “Belizean way of life”, which could be interpreted best by members of the Creole elite.⁴⁶ True, other cultural groups were tolerated and even celebrated as folkloric manifestations that made Belize interesting and quaint, but the bedrock of the nation was its British inheritance, those “institutions, laws and high principles characteristic of the Anglo-Saxons” that the 1951 Creole constitutional commissioners had spoken of.

Belize’s independence coincided with the new wave of immigrants from Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador, as a result of war, instability and economic hardships in those countries. The population of Belize was 145,000 in 1980; by mid decade it was estimated that up to 30,000 new Central American immigrants had entered Belize. Many Belizeans reacted with horror; the new immigrants were called “aliens”, and all the centuries-old negative stereotyping of these people surfaced in public forums and the media.⁴⁷ Above all, the fear was repeatedly expressed that the immigrants would alter the delicate “ethnic balance” of Belize, suggesting that steps

⁴⁵ See below for a discussion of this term in the context of the Belizean nation.

⁴⁶ I would argue that this imagining was not limited to the Creole elite, but rather was accepted by most articulate members of other ethnic groups that had been “educated” and socialised to accept the dominant values and norms of the society. Of course, this does not mean that there was unanimity; there were persons from all ethnic groups who contested this interpretation.

⁴⁷ At the same time, in everyday life, migrant integration, especially in rural areas where the greatest number of immigrants went, was fairly tolerant, as compared with similar situations in other countries of the region.

should be taken to maintain the relative percentages of the several ethnic groups, with the clear implication that the Creoles should be numerically superior. By 1984, public pressure on the government became intolerable, and Attorney General V. H. Courtenay⁴⁸ issued a statement, entitled “The Alien Situation in Belize”, which only served to reinforce popular prejudices:

Public concern has manifested . . . disquiet at the influence which the new wave of aliens has on our institutions, on our social values, and on the quality of life in Belize . . . and anxiety that debilitating, contagious and communicable diseases are spread throughout.⁴⁹

That was bad enough, but the statement fanned the waves of panic further, declaiming that the aliens demonstrated

a clear tendency to subvert the way of life to which we are accustomed . . . We hear of Belizean citizens being shot and knifed in the streets of Belize City by aliens. We learn of citizens disappearing into thin air, never to be heard from again . . . [after giving other frightening examples] All these are strange and new to this little country of ours. They represent a way of life to which we are unaccustomed. Human life, for us, is valued and sacred. Fear and terror are commodities with no place in Belizean life. . . lawlessness and general criminal behaviour is abhorrent to the very nature of the Belizean man and woman.

The statement also referred to the “fear that the job market in the country is being distorted by work practices alien to our labour market,” suggesting that this was the first time that immigrants were used in Belize to enlarge the market and depress wages. In fact this was far from true, and indeed the government itself was guilty of this practice, as is clear from what was occurring in government-administered banana farms at the time. The government had established state-managed banana farms in 1971 in order to combat unemployment in the south and provide people with agricultural opportunities. The small farms administered by the Banana Control Board (BCB) were for the most part leased or owned by Creole and Garifuna farmers. BCB records of 1975 put the total banana work force at 325, of whom 289 were Belizeans and 36 Central Americans. The workers were, especially after 1979, unionized in a very militant union, and the state managers took steps to neutralize its power, principally by replacing Belizeans with migrant workers from Honduras in particular. By the eve of privatization in 1985, the banana workforce was mostly made up of recent immigrants, and all union contracts were voided upon privatization. By 1993, 92% of the banana workforce was composed of Central American immigrants.⁵⁰

What is also remarkable about the government statement on “aliens” is that it claims that by then, three years after independence, Belize had become a “homogeneous nation”. Recalling that the Belizean population was made up of immigrants who had come from several continents over time, and who had been welcomed to participate in nation-building, the author concludes that “our uniqueness has been our ability to weld these varying cultures and experiences into one homogeneous nation”.

⁴⁸ Son of the Courtenay mentioned above, he was a distinguished lawyer who had played a prominent role in the diplomatic struggle for independence.

⁴⁹ Belize government statement, “The Alien Situation in Belize”, 1984.

⁵⁰ Mark Moberg, “Myths that divide: Immigrant Labor and Class Segmentation in the Belizean banana industry”, *American Anthropologist*, Vol. 23, No. 2 (May, 1996), pp. 311-330.

The statement was made in the context of a general amnesty being offered to undocumented immigrants, allowing them to register and regularize their status; thereafter, the borders would be all but sealed. Still, many Belizeans felt that the government was soft on aliens, and this became a major issue in the general elections in 1984, which the PUP lost to the UDP, that party having pledged to get tough on the aliens and to deport as many of them as possible. In 1986 the government appointed an immigration advisory committee which included seven Creoles and two Garifuna; no representatives of the Mestizos or of the indigenous Maya was included, although the Mestizos were the largest ethnic group and were already feeling the effects of being in many cases physically indistinguishable from the dreaded aliens. One of the major concerns expressed by the committee was the fear that “the current influx of aliens could numerically transform the entire Belizean population within the next generation . . . the incomers could acquire increasing proportions of the nation’s economic and political power”⁵¹ The Committee adopted the idea of the export capitalists that there was a need for “cheap labour in the agro-industries of Belize,” and that this required immigrants, but insisted that these should have “an ethnic identity that could assimilate into the national fabric”. Presumably this should have been able to include persons from any one of the ethnic groups of Belize, but this is not what they meant; their recommendation was equivalent to saying “let’s get ourselves some black workers”: they said it was of immediate importance for government “to investigate the possibility of using West Indian contract labour”.

This was, of course, totally unrealistic, as no “West Indian” would tolerate the treatment meted out to the “aliens” by the agro-capitalists of southern Belize, and the Central Americans kept coming across the porous border and finding employment in those industries, as well as settling in rural areas and farming lands by squatting or otherwise. At the same time, there was a steady and growing emigration of Belizeans since the 1960s, first primarily of Creoles, later of Garifuna and Mestizos, mostly to the U.S. The fact that many, perhaps most, of these emigrants to the U.S. were illegal, and because data have not been rigorously kept, it is impossible to arrive at accurate figures, but Jerome Straughan, who did an exhaustive study⁵² of material from both Belize and the U.S., estimates that there are “between 110,000 and 120,000 Belizeans in the United States, including U.S. raised children (about 30 percent of the Belizean-American population is native born). In terms of their ethnicity, Straughan concluded that

Until the late 1980s, Creoles and Garifuna, both with African roots, were an estimated 75% of the Belizean population in the United States. Today, with increased U.S. emigration, Mestizos are a greater percentage of the Belizean population. Correspondingly, Mestizos are perhaps now the second largest ethnic group of Belizeans in the U.S., surpassing Garifunas. (Few Mayans have emigrated to the United States.)

Straughan does not agree, however, that the “ethnic shift” was caused by emigration, as others have opined; he believes that “was perhaps inevitable because of factors such as the greater integration of Belize into Central America, government’s

⁵¹ Immigration Advisory Committee report, Belize, 1987.

⁵² Jerome Straughan, “Emigration from Belize since 1981”, Barbara Balboni and Joseph Palacio, eds., *Taking Stock: Belize at 25 years of independence*, Benque Viejo del Carmen (Belize), Cubola, 2007.

immigration policy (or lack thereof), wage differentials, and employers' appetite for cheap labor". Still, the emigration of thousands of Creoles obviously contributed to the ethnic shift, although not as much as immigration, which was the primary factor.

The census of 1991 provided the first iconic official figures that revealed the effect of the migrations of the 1980s on the "ethnic balance" in Belize: Creoles comprised 30% of the population, compared to 40% in 1980, and Mestizos added up to 44%, compared to 33% in 1980. The 2000 census showed further changes: 25% Creole and 48% Mestizo.⁵³

One major problem with these classifications, in addition to the major one alluded to earlier concerning the great degree of intermixing of the population which make all estimates of numbers in ethnic groups suspect and unreliable, is the one relating to "Mestizos", given the fact that, first of all, the category "Mestizo" was applied in Belize for decades in relation to at least two quite distinct groups: those immigrating from Mexico and those immigrating from Guatemala who were perceived as having, or who claimed to have, mixed Spanish and indigenous heritage. The matter is much more complicated for the more recent Central American immigrants, emanating as they do from Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador, this latter country providing for the first time a source of major immigration to Belize. All these people are not the same; they may all speak some version of the Spanish language, but their histories, traditions, customs and experiences are all different, and indeed there is traditionally a great deal of animosity between them; they would hardly likely agree that they all belong to one "ethnic group". Moberg, for example, has documented how "national divisions have been reproduced and exacerbated by the organization of work on the banana farms" in southern Belize.⁵⁴ Some farm owners have felt the need to resort to dividing their farms into three distinct blocs for Guatemalan, Honduran and Salvadoran workers, following incidents of animosities, fights and even murder between these nationalities. Still, for the Belizean generally, and especially in Belize City, these people, lumped together with the local Mestizo population, are "all the same". And the perception is that the country is being "Latinized", which is seen as a very bad thing, since, as one Belizean creole intellectual is reported to have said, "the history of the black man on this continent when he has been reduced to minority status is a sad, sad story".⁵⁵

Concerns about an "ethnic balance" have been a recurrent part of the discourse on ethnicity in Belize for decades, and these have been exacerbated by the immigration from Central America, but this phenomenon has only highlighted a problem that has been around for a long time, and that is that there is a significant amount of confusion about what ethnicity means, what the effects of ethnic differences are, and how the society should deal with the question. In the next section I will discuss the concepts of

⁵³ The 1991 and 2000 figures are from *Abstract of Statistics, 2007*, Chart 1.3, Statistical Institute of Belize, 2007; the 1980 figures are from Central Statistical Office, 1980.

⁵⁴ Moberg, p. 322.

⁵⁵ O. Nigel Bolland and Mark Moberg, "Development and National Identity: Creolization, Immigration, and Ethnic Conflict in Belize", *IJCRES*, Vol. 2 No. 2. Many references to this sentiment are also to be found in the Belize newspapers.

ethnicity and nation and examine how this has been addressed in Belize since independence, in light of how the issues have evolved.

PART 2

'Race', Ethnicity, Nation

These three concepts are different but interrelated, and they are often used interchangeably, so that race is sometimes seen as an integral part of ethnicity, which in turn is sought to be imposed on the concept of nation. The terms have meant different things at different times, or to different people at the same time, and their meanings are all socially constructed.

'Race' is often used to portray a set of people that differ phenotypically from others in hereditary physical characteristics, generally identified by skin colour, hair type, skull shape, and lip size. This may be seen as the biological or primordial definition. But there is obviously a social/cultural aspect to this, since it depends on a human decision to determine which physical characteristics are important in differentiating people from one another and which are not. Phenotype and 'race', therefore, are not the same thing: "phenotype is the natural product of the interaction of genetic endowment (genotype) and environment; 'race' is a cultural fiction."⁵⁶ Or, to put it another way, 'race' is an imposed description of a person, a categorization of one by another, the latter having the power to determine what is significant and what not in terms of social relations. It is a category imposed within a structure of power and has no scientific validity whatsoever.

The need for such a categorization is felt, and the determination taken, in order to provide a consequence, which has usually been to dominate or to have some advantage over the person categorized. Hence 'racism', can be seen as a set of organized beliefs about 'racial' categories based on purported biological differences and their inferiority or superiority, which people consciously hold and use to treat the people thus categorized differently.⁵⁷ Racial categorization and racism are thus associated with situations of domination, of which imperialism and colonialism are prime examples.

'Ethnicity' is a term that began to be used by social scientists after World War II, the Nazi experiment having made 'race' a highly compromised concept. It has thus often been used as a pseudonym for 'race', or applied to refer to minorities or immigrants in particular countries. It remains a highly contested term, extremely

⁵⁶ Richard Jenkins, *Rethinking Ethnicity*, 2nd ed., London, Sage, 2008, p. 81.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 85.

ambiguous, and in many ways it has a strong tendency to misrepresent reality, since it seeks to categorize a social reality as if it were “pure”, when it is anything but.

For our purposes, however, we will use the concept of ethnicity as including a group’s belief that they are of common descent and that they share a common culture (including any or all of language, religion, ideology, morality, symbolism, customs and laws, tradition, material culture, cuisine, etc) that is different from that of others; and that this is to whatever extent recognized by the wider society. But it is important to emphasize that this belief is a subjective factor, involving a choice about what differences are important, a belief adopted by the group and changed over time to account for social interactions with other groups. Thus Frederick Barth posited that ethnicity involves the “social organization of cultural difference”: he shifted the emphasis from the content of ethnicity, which he called the ‘cultural stuff’, to the social processes that produce and reproduce boundaries of identification and differentiation between ethnic collectivities. He noted that “some cultural features are used by the actors as signals and emblems of difference, others are ignored, and in some relationships radical differences are played down and denied”.⁵⁸ Ethnicity, then, is affected by interaction and transaction between groups, and is “a matter of political manoeuvring and individual decision-making and goal orientations . . . Shared culture is, in this model, best understood as generated in and by processes of ethnic boundary maintenance: the production and reproduction of difference vis a vis external others is what creates the image of similarity internally, vis a vis each other.”⁵⁹

What is important in terms of social relations between and within groups, therefore, is what goes on at the boundary, how groups interact with one another and influence each other, which has an effect not only on how one group sees the other, but also on how each group sees itself. There is an important difference, however, between the two; how a group sees itself may be termed self-identification, whereas how one group sees another is a matter of categorization, which entails an element of power, the ability to define others. The two processes, however, inter-react in dialectical fashion: how a group is categorized can, over time, become part of how that group identifies itself. And, as Jenkins has pointed out, “entering into ethnic identification during childhood is definitely a matter of categorization: we learn who we are because, in the first instance, other people—whether they be co-members or Others—tell us. Socialization is categorization . . . To recognize that categorization is a vital element in our models of the social construction of ethnicity is to place issues of power and compulsion—and resistance—at the heart of what we do”.⁶⁰ Thus, in labour markets where several ethnic groups vie for jobs, ethnic categorization is a powerful tool in the hands of employers which they will use to maximize their profits or better exploit the workers, and this often has the effect of exacerbating ethnic tensions between workers and inhibiting class solidarity.

⁵⁸ Frederick Barth, “Introduction”, in Frederick Barth (ed.), *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries. The Social Organization of Culture Difference*, Oslo, Universitetsforlaget, 1969.

⁵⁹ Jenkins, p. 13.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 170

Ethnic group differences, then, are often used as an instrument in the contest for power in particular situations: “ethnicity in modern society is the outcome of intensive *interaction* between different culture groups, and not the result of a tendency to separatism. It is the result of intensive struggle between groups over new strategic positions of power within the structure of the new state: places of employment, taxation, funds for development, education, political positions and so on.”⁶¹ Ethnic diversity, however, is nothing new, nor is it unique to colonial situations where peoples of different ethnicities are brought together by an imperial power. As Jenkins points out, “inhabited social arenas are routinely multi-ethnic. This is what ethnicity—collective identification that is socially constructed in the articulation of purported cultural similarity and difference—is all about. Thus we should neither problematize difference *in itself*, nor celebrate it as a departure—and a liberation—from the past. It simply *is*.”⁶²

Ethnic diversity within a shared space, then, is not an unusual occurrence, nor is it a problem; the problem is how this is used to create conflicts, to dominate, to share resources, etc. Perhaps we can begin to understand why this occurs by considering the difference between ethnicity and racism:

Racism may be understood as a historically specific facet of the more general social phenomenon of ethnicity. As such, it characterizes situations in which an ethnic group (1) dominates, or attempts to dominate, another set of people, and (2) seeks to impose upon those people a categorical identity that is primarily defined by reference to their purported inherent and immutable differences from, and/or inferiority to, the dominating group.⁶³

Part of the difficulty with understanding the problematic of social relations in Belize is no doubt the confusion we all seem to have about race and ethnicity. Bolland has argued that “in the Caribbean, a historical preoccupation with the idea of race has left its powerful mark in the prevailing conceptions of ethnicity, not only in the sense that racial or somatic traits are generally considered an aspect of ethnic identity, but also in the widespread assumption that ethnic identity is an ascribed characteristic, a matter of common descent linked with race . . . However, if ethnicity is perceived more accurately as a socially constructed *process*, rather than as a heritable characteristic or a bundle of traits, we can understand better its dialectical relationship to class.”⁶⁴

The “ethnic groups” in Belize were, as we have argued, constructed under colonialism, but perceptions about ethnicity, and ethnic relations, were affected by the process of “nationalism” leading to independence. But what does it mean that Belize became a “nation” or “nation-state”?

The first meaning of the word ‘nation’ indicates origin or descent; later, a nation was considered a space occupied by a culturally and ethnically homogeneous group. But hardly any modern state (in the European sense that dates states from the 17th century) could satisfy that definition, and the word came to be used to mean simply a political sovereign unit. Since the mid-nineteenth century, “the people” and the state were equated, giving birth to the phrase “nation-state”, the body of citizens whose collective

⁶¹ A. Cohen, *Two-Dimensional Man: An Essay on the anthropology of power and symbolism in complex society*, London, Routledge and Paul, 1974, p. 96.

⁶² Jenkins, p. 52.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 23

⁶⁴ Bolland, *Struggles*, pp. 263 and 307.

sovereignty constituted them a state which was their political expression within a particular territory.⁶⁵ Hobsbawm adds that what characterized the nation-people as seen from below was not ethnicity nor language but “precisely that it represented the common interest against particular interests, the common good against privilege”.⁶⁶

Bringing the discussion closer to home, in terms of what ‘nation’ meant for post-colonial countries, we can say that the primary motivation was to get rid of the foreign rulers who were seen as different from everyone else in the country colonized, and who were regarded as conquerors and exploiters that discriminated against the people. In that context, “insofar as there were proto-national identifications, ethnic, religious or otherwise, among the common people, they were, as yet, obstacles rather than contributions to national consciousness, and readily mobilized against nationalists by imperial masters; hence the constant attacks on the imperialist policies of ‘divide and rule’, against the imperial encouragement of tribalism, communalism, or whatever else divided people who should be, but were not, united as a single nation”.⁶⁷

Hobsbawm, however, seems to cling to the old concept of ‘nation’ as congruent with a shared ethnicity, and he declares that “the unity imposed by conquest and administration might sometimes, in the long run, produce a people that saw itself as a ‘nation’, just as the existence of independent states has sometimes created a sense of citizen patriotism . . . However, this is not sufficient to call the states which have emerged from decolonization, mainly after 1945, ‘nations’ or the movements that led to their decolonization . . . ‘nationalist’ movements”.⁶⁸ He contends, therefore, that “the appeal of most such ‘nations’ and ‘national movements’ was the opposite of the nationalism which seeks to bond together those deemed to have common ethnicity, language, culture, historical past, and the rest. In effect it was *internationalist*.”⁶⁹ Jenkins, for whom “*all* nationalisms are, in some sense, ‘ethnic’”, would agree to distinguish between nationalisms that claim territory on the basis of putative common ethnicity and those that attempt to construct ethnic commonality within an already-occupied territory.⁷⁰ The problem with this construction is that it equates “national identity” with ethnicity, and requires the nationalism that does not have a common ethnicity at hand to “construct ethnic commonality”, an idea that seems to be behind the thinking of some Belizeans when they describe their ‘nation’ or how their nation ought to be (see below), but surely this poses a serious danger of a forced “national identity” which can only be achieved by exclusivist and oppressive tactics?

I believe that what best fits the situation of Belize and similar post-colonial societies, particularly those in the western hemisphere that were constructed by importing peoples from other continents, is to describe nationalism as a mobilizing idea that enabled the colonized people to resist and gain liberation from an alien and occupying empire and the freedom to create a new entity of governance in the space

⁶⁵ E. J. Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism Since 1780*, Cambridge University Press, 2nd ed., 1992, pp. 18-19

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 20.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 137.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 138

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 178-179.

⁷⁰ Jenkins, p 151.

(necessarily that earlier defined by the colonizing power) shared by groups who might have different histories, cultures and ethnicities. That new entity, then, which has been created along the lines of the sovereign state, is what we might call the new nation or nation-state. It is not a 'nation' in the sense of the kind of community with which people have identified throughout most of the history of humankind; it is more in line with Anderson's definition of nation: "an imagined political community—and imagined as both inherently limited [territorially] and sovereign".⁷¹ It is imagined as a *community*, he adds,

because, regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship. Ultimately it is this fraternity that makes it possible, over the past two centuries, for so many millions of people, not so much to kill, as willingly to die for such limited imaginings.⁷²

The imagining is indeed limited; it does not, in my opinion, necessarily include, as Jenkins insists, "the ethnic character of nationalisms, and the importance of experience and the 'cultural stuff' in their everyday social construction".⁷³ As Hobsbawm convincingly demonstrates,

The populations of large territorial nation-states [or, as in the case of Belize, even mini-states] are almost invariably too heterogeneous to claim a common ethnicity, even if we leave aside modern immigration, and in any case the demographic history of large parts of Europe has been such that we *know* how multifarious the origin of ethnic groups can be, especially when areas have been depopulated and resettled in the course of time, as in vast areas of central, eastern and south-eastern Europe, or even in parts of France [or, I would add, Britain].⁷⁴

This does not mean, however, that the idea of nation, although it does not coincide with ethnicity, necessarily negates the presence, and indeed the value, of ethnic consciousness: just as there is an imagined political community that defines the nation-state, there are imagined ethnic communities that can exist within a nation-state without contradiction.⁷⁵

Having said that, what can we say about national consciousness and national identity? I would say, referring to the case of Belize, that national consciousness refers to the adoption of the idea that the colonial power must be removed and a new nation-state put in its stead, one that would be governed by the formerly colonized peoples for their own benefit. Clearly this is not an idea that "infects" all the people at once; different social sectors and regions of the country will adopt it at different times, and it is the mission of the nationalist pioneers, those who first adopted the idea and led the struggle against colonialism, to convince the masses that this is a desirable goal for which they should make sacrifices and be prepared to struggle. It may well be the case, and it certainly was in the case of Belize, that even upon attainment of the nationalist goal, not every person or group has adopted that "national consciousness". There may be persons who would prefer for varying reasons that the colonial state remain in place,

⁷¹ Anderson, p. 6.

⁷² *Ibid.*, p. 7.

⁷³ Jenkins, p. 165.

⁷⁴ Hobsbawm, p. 63.

⁷⁵ See below, page 46.

or groups (and perhaps here some of the indigenous people in the south would fit) who are, through isolation or neglect or lack of understanding or conviction about how this would affect their lives, indifferent to the motivation of “creating a nation”.

I agree with Jenkins that “national identity and nationalism involve, almost by definition, group identification and social categorization, inclusion and exclusion”, and that nationalism is an ideology that defines “criteria of group membership and principles of exclusion”, but do not share his assertion that nationalism, like racism, is “a historically specific manifestation of ethnicity”.⁷⁶ That would imply a definition of ethnicity which would deprive it of any useful content. Nations normally exclude membership on the basis of not having been born in the territory or not having parents who were, and they usually provide for such persons to acquire citizenship by other means such as long residence and acceptance of the constitutional norms of the state. Rare are the examples of nation-states that rely on ethnicity—or even ‘race’—to qualify for full membership; the most obvious existing example is Israel.

There are, of course, instances throughout the world where a majority or dominant ethnicity attempts to attach its ethnicity to the state as the only or the privileged manifestation of nation-ness, and as we have seen Belize provides an example of this, but this represents a perversion of what is generally accepted as ‘nation’ or nationalism, at least in the post-colonial states that include peoples of multiple ethnicities. Nationalism in that sense is very different from ethnicity, and indeed the concepts are not comparable. That is not to say, as Jenkins disparagingly comments, that “nationalism is the modern new broom that sweeps ethnicity clean out the door of the nation-state”,⁷⁷ since ethnic groups *do* continue to exist after the new nation is formed—indeed, as in the case of Belize, they more often than not become more pronounced and acquire greater relevance—but they are not, in the prevalent nationalist ideology, constitutive of the state or nation.

What then of “national identity”? This is indeed a hot potato, as the question immediately arises: who has the power to define, and what happens to those who do not fit the definition or who disagree with it? And what, in any case, is meant by “identity”? Stuart Hall suggests that identity is not a state but a dynamic process, that individual and group attachments are always partial and incomplete, and often shaped by distinctive discursive practices and contingent events. His emphasis is more on the process of identification than on identities as such. Since all identities have a narrative structure no identity is coherent, stable or permanent. Identities are ‘points of temporary attachment to the subject positions which discursive practices construct for us’.⁷⁸ Malešević warns, however, that ‘identity’ is often used as an umbrella term to cover different events and forms of social action. Not only is the concept either too fuzzy and ambiguous or too inflexible for sociological research, but its pseudo-scientific acceptance has led to its popularity on political and activist discourse, where it

⁷⁶ Jenkins, p. 86-87.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 149.

⁷⁸ Cited in Siniša Malešević, *The Sociology of Ethnicity*, Sage, London, 2004, p. 148-149.

continues to have devastating consequences when individuals and groups are incited to kill or die in the name of ‘preserving one’s identity’.⁷⁹

What is usually meant by people demanding a “national identity”, however, is usually some vague notion about the “way of life” of the nation—but is there, or should there be, only one way of life? And again, who will say what that way is? True, the cohesiveness of a nation seems to require some sense of belonging, of sharing in a community, but any attempt to impose cultural characteristics (such as a common or privileged language) as a condition of belonging may lead to dissension and conflict. When any group seeks to define itself as the nation, or as the best, most genuine or “true” expression of the nation, this provokes others to define themselves militantly as ethnic groups and demand privileges for that group: “minority ethnicity is often a defensive reaction to majority nationalism”.⁸⁰

Still, people seem to require some sense of “national identity”, and perhaps one should seek to arrive at a kind of national identity that is inclusive and productive of that sense of community required by a “nation”, but that does not involve impositions or repressions; I will suggest below how this might be developed.

Ethnicity in the Belizean State: Weapon, Shield or Camouflage?

The standard wisdom on ethnic relations in Belize has generally been that its several peoples and cultures co-exist in harmony and tranquillity, following a long line of tradition beginning with the claims of the Baymen that masters and slaves loved and respected each other, through the colonial period, where the ruling elite maintained that “there was no distinction whatever” between the ‘races’ in political or social life,⁸¹ to the nationalist period, where the myth of ethnic harmony was made an integral part of the identity of the Belizean nation. The first academic conference in post-independence Belize to address this issue produced varying opinions. Harriot Topsey, the chief government archaeologist, argued that although the colonial masters had used the tendency of peoples to belittle other cultures as a “divide and rule” tactic, “we as Belizeans are as much to blame for the perpetuation of ethnic prejudice”. Noting the establishment of ethnic councils for the Maya, the Garifuna and the Creole in the 1980s, he commented that “for several decades the tendency among our ethnic groups has been toward integration into the Belizean economic, political and cultural mainstream. Today, the pendulum is swinging back . . . the resurgence of ethnic consciousness is leading Belize into an escalating ethnic war”.⁸² And Sylvan Roberts, chief government statistician, who noted that “most of the migrants coming into Belize are of Latin ethnic origin”, declared that “one obvious concern of the Belizean host population is the

⁷⁹ Ibid., p. 157.

⁸⁰ Bhikhu Parekh, *Rethinking Multiculturalism. Cultural Diversity and Political Theory*, London, Macmillan, 2000, p. 235.

⁸¹ A judge in Belize to U.S. visitor John Stephens, in John Stephens, *Incidents of Travel in Central America, Chiapas and Yucatan*, Vol. 1, New York, Dover, 1969, p. 17.

⁸² Harriot Topsey, “The Ethnic War in Belize”, in *Belize: Ethnicity and Development*, Belize City, SPEAR, 1987, p. 1.

potential upset of the traditional ethnic balance. Traditionally, the two largest racial groups in Belize have been Creoles (55% approximately) and Mestizos (40% approximately). The recent heavy influx of Mestizos (Latinos) can easily reverse these percentages, causing much concern”.⁸³

A very different view was taken by noted Belizean archaeologist and anthropologist Dr. Joseph Palacio, himself a Garifuna, who stated that “far from suggesting that there is a ‘war’ among the ethnic groups I would say that there is taking place a process of cultural revitalization, which encapsulates some creative tension that could ultimately be beneficial to the evolving Belizean identity. Indeed, in the face of so great a penetration from the outside world it would be cultural suicide if the ethnic groups did not search within themselves for their primordial bearings, even if at times their demands of revindication would seem to be conflicting”.⁸⁴ Palacio took a radical departure by arguing that “ethnicity is no longer paramount as a marker among Belizeans. Rather there has been overwhelming cross ethnic blending within a wide ranging creolization process. The end product is a new Creole, the modern day Belizean society which is stratified more by class than by ethnicity”. He argued that “the Garifuna and Maya are using ethnicity as a method of inserting themselves into the new Belizean nation, thereby being able to exact socio-economic benefits for themselves and their progeny. Implicit in their revivalism is the realization that they are Belizeans but that they are minority groups within the socio-economic class structure of the nation state.”

At the same conference where an ethnic war was deemed imminent, Nigel Bolland presented a more balanced and optimistic view. He argued that the common conceptions of ‘race’ and ‘ethnicity’ are too static, and that “the social meaning of racial and ethnic identities varies according to the historical social context in which they occur”. While under colonialism ethnic prejudices are fostered, “ethnic consciousness is often a powerful mode of solidarity and resistance among colonized peoples”. Referring to what had been called the “Creole and Mestizo complexes”⁸⁵, he stated that “the definition of these so-called ‘complexes’ in terms of static racial/cultural syndromes hinders our understanding of the dynamics of Belizean culture, where processes of cultural synthesis had given rise to new cultural phenomena and social identities. He argued further that “people have different identities and alliances when engaging in different activities in different social contexts”. With regard to the rise of ethnic associations, he opined that they would only become divisive if they were not treated reasonably by the political and intellectual leaders, and concluded that

The basic problems facing Belize as a nation are not caused by racial and ethnic relations, or by the continuing patterns of emigration and immigration . . . [but] by the nature of the country’s economy, which is open, dependent, and largely foreign controlled, by the continuing threat of

⁸³ Sylvan Roberts, “Recent Demographic Trends in Belize”, in *Belize: Ethnicity and Development*, Belize City, SPEAR, 1987. In 1980, the census figures showed Creoles 40% and Mestizos and Maya 42%. It is not clear what period the chief statistician was referring to in 1987 as “traditional”.

⁸⁴ Joseph Palacio, “May the New Belize Creole please rise”, in *National Cross-Cultural Awareness Conference*, Belize, SPEAR, 1988.

⁸⁵ So delineated by Cedric Grant, who included in the first whites, Creoles and Garifuna, and in the second Spanish, Mestizo and Maya, in Cedric Grant, *The Making of Modern Belize*.

the Guatemalan claim, and by the increasingly pervasive influence of the United States. These problems may give rise to social tensions that could all too easily be translated into inter-ethnic rivalry and competition.⁸⁶

The nature of the country's economy certainly has a lot to do with the continued immigration from Central America even after it had ceased to be a war zone, as agro-industrialists demanded and received government support to import or employ immigrant labour, and it is in this area where the greatest antagonism between Belizeans and immigrants has most openly manifested itself. This is especially evident in the banana farms of southern Belize, which after privatization are owned by a handful of Belizeans and foreigners who have implemented a concerted policy of employing cheap and pliant immigrant labour. And while over 90% of the workforce is made up of Central American immigrants, supervisors tend to be Belizean, as "many growers frankly consider Belizean antipathy toward immigrants to be an asset".⁸⁷ Despite the clear historical evidence of Afro-Belizean involvement in agriculture, and specifically in banana production, the owners justify the overwhelming immigrant composition of their work force by insisting that "you will hardly find a Creole or Carib willing to work in the field", and by asserting that they are culturally ill-disposed to agriculture, since "their fathers and grandfathers were woodcutters, not farmers".⁸⁸

In the citrus industry, where a large part of the field workforce is also immigrant labour, Kroshus has shown not only how "Spanishness" and being "alien" are conflated, along with the identification of field labour, as "Spanish", so that Mestizo Belizeans are lumped together with the immigrant labourers, but also how the workers' union was weakened because of a split between "Spanish" grove workers and waterfront Garifuna, who controlled the union. In a convention held in May 1986, "citrus workers identified and aligned themselves along a number of axes of difference: as rank-and-file workers opposing union leaders, as valley workers challenging the waterfront, as Spanish confronting Garifuna, and as Belizeans defending their jobs and union against 'aliens'".⁸⁹

Basing themselves on Bolland's historical work and Moberg's field work in the banana farms, both men wrote an article where they concluded that

Identities acquire their force in the workplace because they are otherwise significant in the lives of workers, be they Afro-Belizeans faced with the prospect of minority status in their country, or Central Americans nurturing long-held racial prejudices. Were it not for a colonial and regional history steeped in ethnic distrust, low wage development strategies could promote a degree of solidarity among all workers, Belizeans and immigrants alike. Instead, ethnic hatreds are fanned by immigration and its real or imagined consequences.⁹⁰

Apart from the workplace, animosities between Belizeans and the new immigrants are noted in villages where they co-exist, as for example in San Felipe in

⁸⁶ O. Nigel Bolland, "Race, Ethnicity and National Integration in Belize", in *Belize: Ethnicity and Development*, Belize City, SPEAR, 1987.

⁸⁷ Moberg, op.cit. p. 317.

⁸⁸ Ibid., p. 319.

⁸⁹ Laurie Kroshus Medina, "A Class 'Politics of Difference': Ethnic Mobilization Among Workers in Belize", *Transforming Anthropology*, Vol. 7 No. 2, 1998, pp. 20-34.

⁹⁰ Nigel Bolland and Mark Moberg, "Development and national identity: creolization, immigration, and ethnic conflict in Belize". *International Journal of Comparative Race and Ethnic Studies*, 1995, 2, 1-18.

northern Belize, where a Maya-Mestizo community played unwilling hosts to new immigrants, principally Salvadorans, whose “adoption of de facto squatting rights” divided the village, with the earlier inhabitants at the southern end and the Salvadorans in the northern section, and created “racialised social tension between these Spanish-speaking residents, who have also maintained clear patterns of residential segregation within the village itself”, and interviewees placed emphasis on “cultural and racialised differences (‘el problema de la raza’) as causes of the tension.”⁹¹ This, however, may be an exception to the rule in rural areas, as Palacio maintains that “Belize City is the seat of antipathy” toward the new immigrants, purposely fanned by media owners there, whereas “such a perspective is not upheld among dwellers of rural Belize who interact on a daily basis with them”.⁹² He notes, however, that the immigrants came into Belize “at a moment when a rigid socio-economic class structure is being put in place in Belize and they are being inserted into the lower socio-economic strata”. Having described how they are subject to unfair and repressive labour practices, particularly in the citrus and banana fields in the Stann Creek district, he predicts that unless corrective measures are taken, “I see a district like Stann Creek particularly vulnerable to clashes between two sets of peoples displaced—albeit in different ways—black Belizeans, both Creole and Garifuna on the one hand and Central Americans on the other. There is an almost classical feudal system in that district where no more than three families control the urban and rural economy, including most of the land ownership, leaving hardly any space for the smaller man”.

Palacio’s insistence on the class aspects of ethnic relations are shared by Bolland, who writes that “the intimate relations between class and ethnicity are tied, in particular, to the state of the economy . . . the variations in the conceptualization and politicization of ethnicity in Belize must be understood in relation to the dynamics of economic development and changing social structure, among other factors, in the specific history of the society”.⁹³

In Belizean history, open, organized social mobilization manifesting itself as “race riots” or overtly targeting any ethnic group has historically been directed only at one such group, the whites, although there has always been a great deal of prejudice manifested between the other ethnic groups at the private and personal level, which has no doubt sometimes reached violent proportions. Palacio’s remark that large numbers of assaults against Central Americans go unreported⁹⁴ can no doubt be applied, albeit on a lesser scale, to ethnically-inspired assaults against other ethnic groups. At the same time, the phenomenon of ethnic intermixing through sexual unions across ethnic groups has been increasing over the past decades, so that there are thousands of people who are

⁹¹ David Howard, “Reconsidering the politics of race, migration and participation in Belize”, in Elisabeth Cunin & Odile Hoffman, eds., *Etnicidad y nación: debate alrededor de Belice*, Mexico City, Agencia Nacional de Investigación (France), July 2009.

⁹² Joseph Palacio, “Social and Cultural Implications of Recent Demographic Changes in Belize”, *Belizean Studies*, Vol. 21 No. 1, 1993, pp. 3-12.

⁹³ O. Nigel Bolland, “Ethnicity, Pluralism and Politics in Belize”, in Bolland, *Colonialism and Resistance in Belize: Essays in Historical Sociology*, Benque Viejo del Carmen (Belize), Cubola, 2004.

⁹⁴ Joseph Palacio, “Social and Cultural Implications of recent demographic changes in Belize”, p. 10.

members of more than one ethnic group, in terms not only of the phenotypical markers, but also culturally.

A considerable number of Belizeans, therefore, participate in more than one ethnicity, but that does not mean, as Myrtle Palacio seems to suggest, that ethnic boundaries are no longer relevant. In a study of Garifuna residing in Belize City, she found that many had mixed with Creoles, both through sexual unions producing offspring and culturally, and she posits a new category of “GariKriols” for whom, she maintains, “the choice of ethnic identity by the offsprings and their parents are skewed toward Creole”.⁹⁵ She argues that a redefinition of ethnicity is timely for post-independent Belize “because the present ethnic definitions do not respond to the new dynamic, ethnic circumstance in Belize”. But that situation is hardly new, and has been occurring long before independence. The fact is that the meaning of ethnicity is fluid, depending on history and changing reality. But she goes further and suggests that “the concept of ethnicity in Belize is becoming outdated, and what may be emerging is a Belizean identity”.⁹⁶ The problem I have with that is, firstly, that it does not seem that generally speaking people are identifying less with an ethnic group, and perhaps the opposite is the case; secondly, and more importantly, what does a “Belizean identity” mean or suggest in this case? It would seem to mean more than a “national identity” in the sense of sharing political loyalty to a nation-state; it almost suggests that “Belizean” would be a new ethnic group. But if so, what are its characteristics, and how will everyone fit into that group and comply with its requirements?

Joseph Palacio has some penetrating thoughts on this issue: he maintains that “an ethnic group is a part of a nation state”, but that “we the Garifuna became ourselves long before we were absorbed into this nation state,” and that they (i.e. the Garifuna) are a “nation”, and not an ethnic group.⁹⁷ For other groups, he argues, “you are in Belize and different from other Belizeans and so you are given a label”, but what makes the Garifuna unique “is not so much the differences between us and the others, but . . . a history that goes back to South America, Africa, St. Vincent, Central America, etc, which came long before Belize, and that makes us not an ethnic group but a nation, like any other nation.” The Garifuna nation, he maintains, was adversely affected by the birth of the Belizean nation, because the concept of the nation state

came as a zero sum game, meaning that you were either a part of this nation state or nothing at all. It was said: we are now Belizeans of Garifuna origin. But that was tokenism. Because it didn’t say, you can be both. It didn’t answer the question of plural identity, that, yes I can be a Garifuna and also be a Belizean, and to go even further, being Belizean makes me a stronger Garifuna, because then I would learn the language in school, I would be schooled in the history and my identity would be strengthened by virtue of being part of the Belizean nation. The question was not asked then... We are seeing the results now of a group of people who are not even strong Belizeans, much less strong whoever they are, who are confused, still suffering from the discrimination of the past, and cannot face it because they lack the depth of identity.⁹⁸

⁹⁵ Myrtle Palacio, “Redefining Ethnicity: The Experience of the Garifuna and Creole in Post-Independent Belize”, unpublished Masters thesis, University of New Orleans, 1995, p. 114.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 115.

⁹⁷ Interview with Palacio in 2009.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

I would not do justice to Palacio's views if I did not mention the fact that he sees a group's "primordial bearings" as important for its sense of identity.⁹⁹ He insists that "ethnicity involves biological as well as cultural factors, and acceptance by the larger society, i.e. the political, which is the determining factor, not the biological; the political value that is given to the biology as well as to the culture".¹⁰⁰ He explains this further: "if people who are of black origin feel that the African identity is one which also has historical roots that starts off not from slavery but from the peoplehood, meaning from Africa, having a base which does not come from being defined in Belize but that comes from being defined long before . . . the point of reference is a certain amount of what your ancestors were and have maintained notwithstanding slavery".¹⁰¹ This is clearly related to his views about what makes the Garifuna in Belize unique, and different from the Creoles, based on a self-consciousness about their ancestry, and he believes that the fluidity of culture can and should be reconciled with people's need to seek for the primordial bearings of their culture: "The latter is what has most been articulated by indigenous peoples all over the world and remains sacrosanct to us. Furthermore, we don't see any conflict at all with both positions. As I have always said, it is in doing one that you better appreciate the other".¹⁰²

What is more striking about the Garifuna claim to nationhood is that it posits this as encompassing a nation that exists within the territorial confines of three distinct nation states, one of which is considered by Belizeans as their historical enemy, Guatemala (the other is Honduras). No-one would question the Belizean-ness of the Garifuna people in Belize, yet the Garifuna people consider and proclaim themselves as "a nation across borders".¹⁰³ There are substantial Garifuna communities in Honduras and Guatemala, as well as in several U.S. cities. Palacio writes of "a nation spread across three countries . . . a people divided by borders, by colonialism as well as by personal choices"¹⁰⁴, and urges greater study on "their role as transboundary people with an unusual historical capacity to move freely across boundaries and maintain multiple nationalities, especially within a region where border areas have been known more as military flashpoints than as areas for peaceful coexistence".¹⁰⁵

Multiple ethnicities, multiple nationalities, multiple identities: what a hotpot we have here! The question is does it matter, and if so when and how and to whom does it matter? It seems clear, for example, that people sometimes change their "identity" to fit changing circumstances. In the 1946 census, where people were asked to place themselves in an ethnic group, 56% of the population of Corozal claimed to be Maya and 14% chose to classify themselves as Mestizos, whereas in 1980 these figures are virtually inverted, with Maya representing 14% and the Mestizo 58%. A similar pattern emerges for the other northern district, Orange Walk. While some of this difference may

⁹⁹ See his quote at page 30 above.

¹⁰⁰ Interview with Palacio, July 2009.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² Personal correspondence with the author, December 2009.

¹⁰³ A recent book edited by Joseph Palacio is so titled: *The Garifuna, A Nation across borders*, Benque Viejo del Carmen, Cubola, 2005.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., p. 16

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., p. 18.

be accounted for by increased miscegenation between the Maya and Mestizo, a more likely explanation is that persons in the northern districts who classified themselves as “Maya” in 1946 reclassified themselves as “Mestizo” in 1980, reflecting their own conception of where they fit in, and no doubt influenced by the belief that their self-interest was better served by the “Mestizo” identity. This phenomenon is not new or unique; it is known in the literature as “ethnic identity switching”, and is used by rational choice theorists of ethnicity to show that, “since ethnicity has been identified as a social and cultural resource that actors can occasionally rely on in the pursuit of their own individual benefit . . . individuals use the strategy of so-called ‘ethnic identity switching’ in a rational and self-interested manner”.¹⁰⁶ This relies on the view that ethnicity is neither primordial nor static, but rather a dynamic changing process.

It is also noteworthy that while in 1861 the vast majority of Maya were enumerated in the northern district, by 1980 most are to be found in the Toledo district; this is explained not only by the change in self-classification in the north, but principally by the fact that many Maya entered southern Belize from Guatemala beginning at the end of the nineteenth century. The sharp increase in the category “Maya” in the Toledo district from 36% in 1946 to 57% in 1980 may be partly due to improved birth rates and continued immigration from Guatemala, but may also be related to the fact that beginning in the 1970s an ethnic consciousness movement had been developed by the Maya in the south, one which demanded special rights for the indigenous people. This may have made some people more willing to describe themselves as Maya.

Similar considerations apply to the Garifuna. In the 1946 census, less than 5% of the population of Toledo said they were Garifuna, although 17% of the district’s population said they generally spoke Garifuna; since that language is only spoken by Garifuna people, there were large numbers of people who for one reason or another did not claim Garifuna heritage. By 1980, however, as a result of the elevated status that Garifuna people enjoyed in the country, there was no reluctance in being so classified.¹⁰⁷

What is clear from the above is that there is a great deal of subjectivity and variability with respect to the concept of ethnicity, and that ‘ethnic groups’ are not clearly bounded, fixed, or agreed upon by the society as a whole or by individuals within it. Different Belizeans have diverse ideas about ‘ethnicity’ and ‘ethnic groups,’ so there is no common understanding, nor is there consistency, since even the same Belizean’s views of these may well change over time.

My reading on how Belizeans themselves perceive their ethnicity is based on my view that, to begin with, the Garifuna and the Maya have a very different self-awareness than the rest of the population. Only those two groups would think of defining themselves as a “nation”, defying the traditional identification of “nation” with nation-state or nationality. For a Maya or Garifuna, their nationality may be Belizean, but they belong to the Maya or Garifuna nation respectively. The so-called “Creoles” have the

¹⁰⁶ Siniša Malešević, *The Sociology of Ethnicity*, London, Sage, 2004, p. 100

¹⁰⁷ These statements rely on the research and insights of Carla Barnett in “The Political Economy of Land in Belize”.

greatest difficulty in defining themselves, as hinted at by Palacio. Evan Hyde and *Amandala* have always reacted against the use of this term: “we at this newspaper have a basic problem with the use of the word “Creole” to refer to Belizeans of African descent who are not Garifuna. But the “Creole” designation has its uses, and one of them is to specify the ethnicity of the people who were the highest ranking natives in the public service in 1956”.¹⁰⁸ The use of the term is, from its genesis, deeply marked by class differences, with the “high ranking natives” identifying with their Englishness and the working class projecting their African or “black” roots and fighting for social and economic justice. While the articulate proponents of Maya or Garifuna culture fight to preserve their ancestral traditions (including matters related to land, governance and religion/world views), the other groups primarily use the concept of ethnicity to fight to preserve or gain concrete benefits or perceived priority status in the society. The “East Indian” ethnic council, for example, does not even seek to promote the use of any Indian language, and while the “Kriol Council” does seek to elevate the status, and encourage the use, of the Kriol language, it makes no claim similar to the Maya or Garifuna to “nation-ness”. In short, and with the exceptions specified, I believe that virtually all the concerns of Belizeans that are sometimes expressed in “ethnic” terms would be resolved by constructing a society that is truly democratic, just and tolerant, and where there is no exploitation or oppression.

In general, I would say that most Belizeans have very different views about their ethnicity that are particular to their own history, lived experience and world view; my own example is a case in point. In terms of my ancestry, my father was an immigrant from Palestine and my mother a descendant of refugees from the Caste war, a mix of Maya and Spanish. We lived in Belize City, and so, as far back as I can remember, my language was English, although a certain amount of Spanish was spoken at home, that being my mother’s first language¹⁰⁹ and my father being conversant in both, although his first language was Arabic. I would hear him speak it when friends of Palestinian or Lebanese origin visited, but I never learnt the language. At my Catholic school I was taught that Muslims were infidels and that Arabs were basically baad people, but that didn’t affect my love and admiration for my father, who would spend hours each night listening to a Cairo radio station, following the plight of the Palestinian people in the racist Israeli state. Outside the home, at school or with friends, I did not speak Spanish and would not own up to knowing the language; in the social and political context of the time, this was something to be ashamed about. I did not identify myself as a “Mestizo”, whatever others may have thought of me, although I suspect that with my Arab origins people weren’t quite sure where to place me. I guess if I would have thought about it I would most readily identify as a “Creole”; that was certainly the language and culture I shared. I was of course aware of prevailing prejudices between “Spanish” and Creoles, and those against Garifuna and “coolies”, but did not share any of these. In this I was perhaps benefitting from the fact that my father was an outsider, untainted by the prejudices generated in the specific context of Belize’s colonial history. He taught me

¹⁰⁸ *Amandala*, 26 March 2010.

¹⁰⁹ Which makes me suspect that my first language was Spanish.

that I was better than no-one, and that no-one was better than me. I recall that one of the very few times he hit me, a sharp slap to the face, was when, talking with a few friends at home, we made fun of the name of an African leader whose country was at war with colonialism. Generally, I would say that I didn't give any thought to the question of belonging to any ethnic group, or to that of ethnic relations in my society, which is not to say that I was not aware of underlying prejudices and acts of discrimination. In terms of social class, I would say that as I was growing up society placed my family in the lower middle class, considering my father's occupation (a small grocery store) and his immigrant status.

Upon my return from studies in England, where I witnessed a much more blatant form of racism than was evident in Belize, I was more sensitive to the real prejudices and discrimination in Belizean society. Soon after my return in 1968, Evan X Hyde and others formed the United Black Association for Development, to denounce the racism endemic in the society and promote pride in one's blackness, and I associated with the movement. Still, I felt that the real issue that caused separation, intolerance and prejudice was class, not 'race'. Yes, colonialism was racist and it sought to create divisions between peoples of different cultures as part of its strategy to dominate them, but the solution for the colonized people was to refuse to be so divided, and to unite across such divides to struggle for freedom and justice, in particular social and economic justice. I felt, and still do, that the real division was between the rich and powerful and those they kept poor and powerless, and that the "wretched of the earth"¹¹⁰ should unite along class lines against the oppressors. I became active in the struggle for the independence of Belize, and shortly after we won independence in 1981 I wrote that Belize had become a State before it became a nation. By that I meant that there were still so many differences among its people based on ethnic and other particularities, and that we as a people needed to do more to come together as one people, and to create what we were then calling a "national identity". Since then I have become wary of such terms, and have come to believe that it is wrong to attempt to impose such an identity. And while I still believe that dividing the population into distinct "ethnic groups" is counter-productive, I have come to appreciate the importance that ethnic identification and ethnic consciousness can have for people, particularly when they feel that resources, and respect, are denied them because of their belonging to a particular ethnic group. Still, for me personally, ethnicity is irrelevant, and I certainly do not identify myself as belonging to any ethnic group.

The fact is that for many people ethnicity is something that may exist as background music, with little or no attention paid to it, while for others it is an important part of their conscious self-hood, a vital part of what it means to live in the here-and-now. For some, the national identification is paramount, for others not. Are we to assign first and second class citizenship to people on the basis of such different appreciations? I recall that just a few years after independence, an independence with which I was publicly associated through my participation in the diplomatic effort, at a time when it was popular to wear T-shirts proclaiming "I am 100% Belizean", I

¹¹⁰ The phrase is Franz Fanon's: *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961), Grove Press, 2004.

appeared at a public conference to make a presentation, wearing a T-shirt that said “I am 50% Belizean”. I might have said 10 or 90, what shocked people was that it wasn’t 100%, and when asked what about the rest, I replied “that’s for myself and my friends”. Two points I would like to make here: firstly, that people have multiple identities, apart from their (possibly multiple) ethnic identity, and we cannot assume that for most people national identification necessarily trumps the other identifications which they subscribe to as social actors. And secondly, many people experience nationalism, as well as ethnicism, “as a constant social pressure, a collective impetus towards a degree of belonging or conformity with which they do not feel comfortable”.¹¹¹

Stuart Hall suggests that “identities are never unified and, in late modern times, increasingly fragmented and fractured; never singular but multiply constructed across different, often intersecting and antagonistic, discourses, practices and positions. They are subject to radical historicization, and are constantly in the process of change and transformation.” He adds that although a person might invoke a real or imagined past to ground his or her identity, “actually identities are about questions of using the resources of history, language and culture in the process of becoming rather than being: not ‘who we are’ or ‘where we came from’, so much as what we might become, how we have been represented and how that bears on how we might represent ourselves”. The question for him is “not the so-called return to roots but a coming to terms with our ‘routes’”.¹¹²

If identities are to serve us as tools for shaping our current and future environment, it follows that we will choose to accentuate this or that aspect of our multiple identities depending on circumstance and need. Affirming an ethnic or a national identity, for example, may be more salient when faced with a situation where persons of another ethnicity or nationality compete with us for jobs or other resources. When Belizeans were engaged in the struggle against colonialism, it may have been propitious to downplay ethnic differences in order to avoid these being used by the colonizer to weaken their resolve and focus, but once independence was won ethnic identifications might have become useful to demand a fair share of the nation’s resources. Conversely, women faced with discrimination or domestic violence will choose to make their gender identity more significant than their ethnicity. When engaged in the often bitter struggle against Guatemala and Britain for Belize’s full sovereignty and territorial integrity, my T-shirt might well have proclaimed that I was 100% Belizean, but after the victory I could choose to downplay my “national” identity and give room to other aspects of my being.

And there are situations where we may make our ethnicity the prominent or even determining factor, only to find that for our own good we should have been focusing on other matters. Such, in my view, is the case with the recurrent obsession on preserving an “ethnic balance”.¹¹³ For some, this gave expression to the fear that black or Creole people would become a minority and therefore lose political and cultural power. Well,

¹¹¹ Jenkins, p. 88.

¹¹² Stuart Hall, “Introduction: Who needs identity?”, in *Questions of Cultural Identity*, edited by Stuart Hall and Paul de Guy, Sage, London, 1996, pp. 3-4.

¹¹³ Although it is open to question how much this is the case for the younger generation of Creoles.

the fact now is that they *are* in a minority, the dreaded occurrence has come to pass, and it is almost certainly irrevocable. But does this necessarily mean that as a consequence Creoles will be worse off or lose political power? Do numbers guarantee power? There was a time when blacks made up 90% of the country, and that was when they had least power; most of them were slaves. Throughout much of the colonial period, when they were the largest ethnic group, the vast majority of that group likewise had little or no power. The exercise of their right to self-determination changed that, and as we have seen the political and cultural power of the Creole group has been greater than its numbers would suggest. And political parties have not divided along ethnic lines; in particular, the party that some have tried to portray as the Creole party (the NIP and later the UDP) has had as much support in the several ethnic groups as the PUP. Indeed, the results of the last election in 2008 should put to rest the idea that in Belize's current ethnic climate the census numbers game is significant. Despite the large influx of Central Americans, whose Mestizo nature was supposed to threaten the black population with discrimination and repression, and the perception that politically this would adversely affect the UDP in particular, this is what occurred: the UDP won its greatest election victory ever; it won significantly not only in Mestizo-dominated areas, but in areas where the Central American immigrant population is greatest; it's least good relative showing was in Belize City, where the PUP secured four of the six seats it won overall; and for the first time a person who in Belizean terms would be considered "black" became Prime Minister.

Political power, then, does not in Belize, at least up to now, correlate with ethnic group numbers; that is to say, political parties do not depend on exclusive or overwhelming support from any one ethnic group. But that really says nothing about how poor people, whatever ethnic group they belong to, will fare in the society, whether or not their lot will improve. Whether people are discriminated against or made to feel the consequences of prejudice, whether they are repressed and exploited, is not dependent on their ethnic group numbers in a political society, but rather on the policies of that society. And so unless the social and economic policies of the state are changed, poverty will continue to have a black face in Belize City and a Maya face in Toledo. If the neo-liberal policies of the state continue to be implemented, there will be an increase in poverty, greater inequalities, and greater likelihood of social conflict. But if that conflict is contested along ethnic rather than class lines, there will not be a resolution in favour of the poor and marginalized.

Colonialism was based on racism, but it imposed a capitalist system of production and of social relations which inevitably created classes that contested the way wealth was created and distributed, and this became the real bone of contention after emancipation, when the crude 'race' markers under slavery were legally removed. That is why "a class analysis is required . . . to see how or why the system of domination in the colonies changed from status inequalities during slavery to class

inequalities after legal emancipation, as a consequence of both the social dynamics within the colonies and the colonies' relationship with the metropolises".¹¹⁴

Many are the attempts to understand the relationship between 'race' and class. Robert Miles¹¹⁵ suggests that capitalism reifies ethnic group membership to hide real economic relationships and that the focus should not be on "ethnic relations", but on the capitalist state and its responsibility for the process of 'racialisation'¹¹⁶ and the 'racialised fraction of the working class'. So, the 'black masses' are not a 'race' which has to be related to class, but rather are persons whose forms of political struggle can be understood in terms of racialisation within a particular set of production (class) relations. Thus, for Miles, "race" and "ethnicity" are not concepts that can be explained in their own right; they are deeply tied to the relations of production and the nature of the capitalist state. Cultural and physical group difference has meaning only as it relates to the different class positions which people occupy in production relations.

Stuart Hall, on the other hand, maintains that although ethnicity cannot be reduced to class, it still is not possible to explain ethnic relations in abstraction from class relations. Race and ethnicity have a decisive impact on class consciousness; they are reciprocal relationships that affect each other. He says that 'race' is "the modality in which class is 'lived', the medium through which class relations are experienced, the form in which it is appropriated and 'fought through'".¹¹⁷

I propose that we examine one crucial example of resource allocation in Belize during the nation-building stage, that relating to land distribution, in order to determine to what extent distribution was ethnic-based and whether ethnic solidarity has been useful as a rallying point to address unequal distribution.

Carla Barnett has suggested that "unevenness in land distribution and inequities in socio-economic development are . . . the result of inequitable policies which were determined on the basis of ethnic discrimination by successive governments going back to the colonial days".¹¹⁸ This is, however, questionable in relation to the early nationalist governments. What the PUP called "land reform" in the 1960s and 1970s was no such thing, but rather a modest exercise in some limited land distribution, typically by purchasing land from large landlords and redistributing to small farmers in farm plots and village lots.¹¹⁹ Barnett has correctly argued that "the land reform programme totally ignored the issue of ethnicity as a variable determining land

¹¹⁴ Bolland, "Creolization and Creole Societies: A Cultural Nationalist View of Caribbean Social History", in *Struggles for Freedom. Essays on Slavery, Colonialism and Culture in the Caribbean and Central America*, Angelus Press, Belize, 1997, p. 25.

¹¹⁵ Robert Miles, *Racism*, London, Routledge, 1989. The summary of his views presented here is from Malešević, pp. 34-35.

¹¹⁶ Malešević claims that the origins of the concept of "racialization" can be traced back to Franz Fanon's *Black Skin White Masks*.

¹¹⁷ Stuart Hall, "Race, articulation and societies structured in dominance", in *Sociological Theories: Race and Colonialism*, Paris, Unesco, 1980, p. 341.

¹¹⁸ Carla Barnett, "Defining Ethnicity in Belize. Understanding our History", University of the West Indies School of Continuing Studies' Belize Country Conference: *Beyond Walls: Multi-disciplinary Perspectives*, University Centre, Belize City, Belize November 21-24, 2001, p. 26.

¹¹⁹ And the basic pattern of land ownership, with a very few owning much of the private lands, and the vast majority of those lands being owned by foreigners, was not affected.

distribution in the colonial period”, but this was not a factor that the nationalist movement was likely to take into account, having embarked on a policy of ignoring or wishing away ethnic differences in favour of an all-embracing Belizean identity. But I do not think that the facts support her contention that the redistribution favoured the Mestizo and Maya population of the north and discriminated against the Maya of the south and the Creole and Garifuna population, “who tended to live outside of the geographical areas where the land reform was implemented”.¹²⁰ Large areas of land were acquired by government and redistributed in the centre of the country as well as the north, and this benefitted members of different ethnic groups, particularly Creoles in the Belize and Cayo districts.

What happened in the north, and why the Mestizos and Maya living there eventually were able to prosper more than others in the country, had to do not with land reform nor ethnic preference but with the government’s decision in the 1960s to throw its weight behind commercial sugar production for export that was controlled by a British company, thus effectively maintaining the pattern of dependent development, but shifting from mahogany to sugar. And this policy was by no means strife-free in the north. Indeed, the new sugar industry turned the Mestizo and Maya subsistence farmers into a rural proletariat, and they had to carry out a fierce and continuing struggle both as farmers and as workers in order to benefit from the industry.¹²¹ The rest of the country experienced a later and much different development. Attempts to attract industries that would employ a large labour force never materialized, and the commercial agriculture that developed in the south, involving citrus and bananas, thrives for some time now on immigrant labour, as we have seen.¹²²

It was the effect of the government’s macro-economic policies, therefore, and not a land distribution program based on ethnic discrimination, that resulted in the peoples of the north benefitting more than those of the centre and south. In other words, it is the structure and working of the capitalist economy, imposed by imperialism and never effectively challenged by the nationalists, that has created injustices in Belize where so many are poor and powerless and so few benefit from the wealth of the nation. And when these inequalities appear to correlate with ethnic divisions, then it becomes possible to suggest that the cause is ethnic discrimination, and that their resolution will be sought by reference to ethnic loyalties, but the history of struggle in Belize does not often bear out that interpretation.

Barnett has further suggested that “ethnic-based organizations have originated in those groups which are more economically depressed and politically deprived, and which have the least access to land ownership,” and that they are mobilizing “to reverse the effects of centuries of unequal treatment”.¹²³ There is little evidence, however, to support the contention that the ethnic organizations are focused on a struggle to right the wrongs of the past that have resulted in the gross economic disparities in the population;

¹²⁰ Barnett, “Defining Ethnicity”, p. 22.

¹²¹ Shoman, *Thirteen*, pp. 207-218.

¹²² Indeed, so did the sugar industry in the 1960s, the immigrants then being from Mexico, and the local cane workers took decisive action to change that; see *ibid.* Pp. 212-213.

¹²³ Barnett, “Defining Ethnicity”, pp. 24-25.

rather they concentrate on preserving what they regard as the cultural content of the group and on promoting self-respect. In the case of land in particular, people seek to gain access to leaseholds or freehold property from government on a purely individual basis, by lobbying the minister responsible. This has led to a situation where bits of land are provided to people as political favours, while large areas of land are accorded to those who have the means to entice the minister or officials. I know of no case where any ethnic council has campaigned to affect land distribution or to make land available to any member of the group. The case of the Toledo Maya is, as I argue below, not the typical one of an ethnic group seeking to address economic inequalities to which it is subject, but a special case of claiming communal rights within a constitutional and legal system not designed to accommodate them. Where groups have struggled against the economic inequalities, they have done so as workers or interest groups that are multi-ethnic. The UBAD, the organization most openly dealing with ‘race’ issues, always puts these in the context of class divisions rather than examples of pure racism.

In my view, then, the extreme economic inequalities that are very much a part of Belize’s political economy today are not the result of present-day ethnic discrimination or prejudice, but rather of the economic system put in place by colonialism and perpetuated by all governments after independence, and the way to struggle to change it is not through the use of ethnicity but by changing the system to one more responsive to the needs of the majorities, regardless of ethnicity.

Indigenous Rights and “One Nation”: Irreconcilable Differences?

The claim of the Toledo Maya to special rights as indigenous people and their recent vindication in the courts has created a great deal of animosity among many Belizeans, who still cling to what they have been taught involves being a nation, where what is emphasized is *individual* rather than communal rights, and where no distinction should be made as between ethnic groups: all are equal, all have equal rights: one people, one nation. This policy has been adopted as part of a political consensus of the state, and the Maya claims seem to directly violate it.

The extreme isolation of the Maya of Toledo that was evident even at the middle of the twentieth century was progressively reduced in the ensuing decades, but they continued to be relatively isolated and to a certain extent outside of the economic and social developments of the country; poverty studies since 1994 have consistently shown the Toledo Maya to be the poorest of the poor, with significantly less access to social services than the rest of the nation.¹²⁴ Although the colonial government had promoted

¹²⁴ A poverty study in 2002 showed that 30% of the Belizean population was poor, and 10% indigent. An IDB report noted that “poverty and indigence are concentrated in Toledo district. While Toledo hosts around 10% of the total population, it contributes with 25% of the poor individuals of the country. Poverty and indigent rates reach 79% and 56% respectively in this district, well above the values of the other districts”, and added that extreme poverty is directly related to ethnicity; 57 percent of Toledo’s population is Mayan, compared to an average of 4 percent for other districts: Florencia Devoto, *Belize, Poverty and Economic Sector Performance*, Inter-American Development Bank, 2006.

the idea of land reservations for the Toledo Maya as far back as 1868, the creation of reserves did not take root until the 1930s; between 1935 and 1954, 217,000 acres of land were declared “Indian” reserves, including 146,000 acres reserved in 1954 as the Toledo Development area.¹²⁵ But the government was never too clear about the management of these reserves nor even about their real extent; a government report in 1965 stated that “twelve areas in the Toledo District comprising 77,457 acres have been set aside for the use of Indians only and have been declared Indian reserves”.¹²⁶ In any case, the Maya themselves had no legal authority over the lands in the reserves, which were deemed to be government lands held at their disposal. Richard Wilk has testified¹²⁷ that various reservations were established between 1918 and 1933, but that some villages received no reservations while some reservations were declared for non-existent villages, and that “the reservations were never in practice defined clearly, because of the prohibitive costs of monitoring or surveying land use and boundaries. The result is that today the reservation boundaries bear little relationship to long-established customary territories around villages”.

In the 1980s the Toledo Maya Cultural Council (TMCC) put forward a claim for some 500,000 acres of land in Toledo to be granted to the Maya as a people, for their own use and under their exclusive control, as well as significant autonomy in the areas under their jurisdiction. The general public reaction was one of incredulity; commentators in Belize City and Belmopan questioned the whole concept of special rights for indigenous people, asking whether the other ethnic groups would have special rights to land as well, and declaring that most of the Maya in the south were recent immigrants from Guatemala; some denounced it as a Guatemalan plot to take Belizean land. The political parties ignored the Mayan plea, since it did not fit into the concept of the new Belizean nation, one where there were no identities based on ethnic groups or any other template, but one identity only, the Belizean identity. There were denunciations that the Maya project threatened “balkanization”, the break-up of the Belizean nation-state at its very inception, and calls for government to resist it. Indeed, no less than the Director of Archaeology of Belize denounced the Maya land claim:

First of all the Kekchi and Mopan presently residing in the Toledo district migrated from Guatemala about a hundred years ago. Some of them are recent arrivals—as little as one year ago. Does this mean that since they are immigrants like the Garifuna or the Mestizo, and are claiming aboriginal rights that the National Garifuna Council and the Mestizo equivalent can also call on this same aboriginal right to land in Belize? Since the Creoles have been the earliest immigrants, can they also claim rights to land? Are we going to divide Belize up into homelands? Are we going to use the South African example of homelands as our guideline?¹²⁸

Ignored and ridiculed, the Maya continued organizing among themselves and preparing their case, with help from indigenous organizations abroad. The TMCC

¹²⁵ Barnett, pp. 106-107.

¹²⁶ Survey and Lands Department Report, 1965, cited in Barnett, p. 108.

¹²⁷ In a paper entitled “Mayan People of Toledo: Recent and Historical Land Use”, February 1997, submitted as an affidavit in Supreme Court Action No. 510, between the Toledo Maya Cultural Council and others as Applicants and the Attorney General and the Minister of Natural Resources as Respondents.

¹²⁸ Harriot Topsey, “The Ethnic War in Belize”, in *Belize: Ethnicity and Development*, Belize City, SPEAR, 1987.

claimed to speak for all Maya of the district, and the Toledo Alcaldes Association represented all the Maya villages there. A document prepared in 1994 for the TMCC stated:

The precarious nature of Maya land tenure threatens the long-term survival of the Maya people. Land has value to the Maya people in an economic sense of course, but land also has deeper cultural and religious meanings in the Maya communities. The Toledo District is under growing pressure to be opened for agricultural and logging exploitation by outsiders. A secure, legally protected land base of sufficient size to meet the needs of the Maya communities is needed in order to ensure their survival.¹²⁹

Government's 1994 economic strategy paper made no reference to the TMCC proposal, and in fact put forward, as part of the solution to Maya poverty, "voluntary relocation of certain Maya communities" and the "elimination of institutional conditions that tend to decrease investment among small farmers", which was interpreted by the Maya as a threat to abolish the reservations. When in the 1995 their lands were threatened by huge concessions of land—the largest for 160,000 acres—to Malaysian timber companies, the Maya carried out an international campaign that got support from environmentalists as well as indigenous rights groups, and it started a court action against the government, seeking a declaration that the Toledo Maya "hold rights to occupy, hunt, fish and otherwise use the areas within the Toledo District . . . and that such rights of use and occupancy (hereinafter referred to as "Maya aboriginal rights"), in accordance with the common law and relevant international law, arise from and are commensurate with the customary land tenure patterns of the Toledo Maya". They further sought a declaration that the failure of the government to respect those aboriginal rights denied the Toledo Maya equal protection of the law and contravened the Constitution of Belize, and asked the court to order the government to cancel the logging licenses.¹³⁰ As a result of manipulations by government of the justice system, that case was never fully heard or concluded, and in 1998 the Maya presented a petition to the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR).

That same year there was an election and the PUP regained the government, with Said Musa as Prime Minister. His government suspended the logging concessions, and in October 2000 he signed a "Ten Point Agreement" with the Toledo Maya which recognized their claims to land as indigenous people. In 2004 the IACHR issued a report supporting those claims, while the government, in response to charges by the Maya that the Ten Point Agreement was being violated, engaged in a series of negotiations with the Maya, but it was clear that the political and executive arms of government in crucial ministries did not believe in the concept of special rights for the Maya, and did nothing to implement them. Finally, in 2007 the Maya took the government to court in a new case, this time specifically claiming customary land rights for two villages in Toledo, Santa Cruz and Conejo. In a landmark judgment delivered on 18 October 2007 by Chief Justice Abdulai Conteh, he ruled that the claimants held collective and individual rights to the lands, that the two villages held collective title to those lands, and that "this collective title includes the derivative individual rights and interests of Village members which are in accordance with and subject to Santa Cruz

¹²⁹ Cited in Shoman, *Thirteen*, p. 270.

¹³⁰ Supreme Court Action No. 510 of 1996, Belize Supreme Court.

and Conejo and Maya customary law”. He ordered the government to “determine, demarcate and provide official documentation of Santa Cruz’s and Conejo’s title and rights in accordance with Maya customary law and practices” and to refrain from any acts that would “affect the existence, value, use or enjoyment of the property,” except with the informed consent of the villagers. This prohibition extended to granting any rights over the properties, making any regulations affecting the lands or the use of resources, or granting any concessions whatsoever affecting those lands under any existing law.¹³¹

It is too early to say whether and how the new government will comply with this order, or what the general repercussions in the society will be. Although the order relates to only two villages, the Toledo Maya intend to extend it to all their villages, and have initiated another case before the courts to so declare. The reaction to this dramatic development from other Belizeans has been generally negative, viewing it as a challenge to the identity of the nation and threatening its survival as a supposedly “homogeneous nation”. Certainly George Price¹³², and those who believed in his vision of a “Belizean nation”, did not support the Maya claims to preferential and special rights. Support for the Maya, however, has come from the most unlikely place: Evan X Hyde, the Black Power leader of the 1970s, who, principally through his newspaper *Amandala*, has continued the campaign for the validation of Belize’s African identity and for the rights of black people in Belize, the same Hyde who had called Price a “Maya racist”. In an editorial of June 2008 entitled “Friends of the Maya”,¹³³ he admitted that “powerful Belizeans are opposed to the Chief Justice’s ruling, and that opposition cuts across party lines”. He accepted that “it is not politically sensible for us at this newspaper to support the Maya against the majority, oligarchical position, but *Amandala* does so support the Maya”, and concluded:

We have the same enemies that the Maya do—modern, rapacious, murderous capitalism introduced by the Europeans and sustained by the neo-Europeans . . . [who] will say that ours is a racist position. So what do you think was the position of the Europeans where the Africans and the Maya were concerned? We were murdered and raped because we were Africans and Maya. If we Africans side instinctively with the Maya because we have been victims of the same imperialist process, and you then call that “racist”, then you can call it anything you wish. We stand with the Maya, come hell or high water.¹³⁴

This question of special rights for the Maya, in the context of Belize’s multi-ethnic history and reality, poses as direct a challenge to the vision of a “Belizean identity” as that posed by the influx of Central American immigrants, and perhaps more so. For one thing, Belizeans have had to come to terms with the fact that they do not seem to have the sole power to decide issues they consider as constitutive of “national identity”, that international law and international institutions have a say on these issues that is recognized by the local court system. It has also become evident that the British

¹³¹ Judgment of Chief Justice Conteh on Claims 171 and 172 of 2007, Supreme Court of Belize, October 18, 2007.

¹³² Personal conversations with the subject.

¹³³ *Amandala*, June 25, 2008, p. 5.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*

law inherited from colonialism and developed by the new state is not the only law of the land; the Conteh judgment explicitly recognized the existence of “Maya customary law”, and ruled that the state must take it into account.

It is an evolving issue, and its outcome is uncertain, but it cannot be ignored, as government and the society has largely sought to do. As one observer pointed out just after the issue emerged, and considering the appearance of ethnic organizations, “to reply to the call [for a Maya homeland] would be to acknowledge the tenuous nature of the ‘Belizean identity’. At the same time, however, to ignore it is to ignore the threat to the continued existence of the ‘nation’ as it is now; because rising ethnic consciousness underscores the fear and belief by many that an ethnic struggle is inevitable—that ‘machete must fly’”.¹³⁵ Some people believe that the issue will not have a major effect on Belizean politics, since the centre of political activity is in Belize City, and people there could care less about pieces of land far away in Toledo, which does not affect them directly. But this may be taking too narrow a view of the situation, since what is involved is a frontal challenge to what ‘nation’ means and where to locate the right to regulate the distribution and control of resources in a formal way.

Interesting parallels can be drawn between how the Maya today have resorted to international fora and norms to demand their rights and the “decolonization by internationalization” carried out by Belize in the 1970s to gain independence. The nationalists relied principally on the evolving norm of self-determination of peoples and on the principle of self determination,¹³⁶ while the Maya have recourse to the growing body of international law and principles related to indigenous rights. And while the nationalists appealed to the UN, the Non-Aligned movement and other international organizations as well as friendly governments, the Maya take their case to regional bodies, international financial institutions (IFIs) and international non-government organizations.

From the early days of their struggle for indigenous rights, in the 1980s, the Maya of Belize have received support from indigenous groups in the Americas, and the IFIs have included in loan projects the requirement that government consult with the communities affected, a stipulation the Maya have utilized to advance their rights. UNDP, UNICEF and UNESCO have identified indigenous peoples as a special target group in their policies and work directly with indigenous organizations. The Inter-American Development Bank (IDB), which is quite active in Belize and has concerned itself with governance issues, presented a paper to government in 2008, entitled “Policy Note on Indigenous Peoples in Belize”, in which they include Maya and Garifuna. The paper refers to the bank’s Operational Policy on Indigenous Peoples, which supports “development with identity” of indigenous peoples, including strengthening their capacities for governance, and seeks to safeguard indigenous peoples against adverse impacts and exclusion in Bank-funded development projects. The concept of development with identity is defined as:

¹³⁵ Barnett, “The Political Economy of Land in Belize”, pp. 251-252.

¹³⁶ For a full treatment of this, see Assad Shoman, *Belize’s Independence and Decolonization in Latin America*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York, 2010.

a process that includes the strengthening of indigenous peoples, harmony with their environment, sound management of territories and natural resources, the generation and exercise of authority, and respect for indigenous rights, including the cultural, economic, social and institutional rights and values of indigenous peoples in accordance with their own world view and governance.¹³⁷

The report urges that the Bank stipulate in its agreements with government the observance of rights of Maya and Garifuna peoples, in particular in the areas of land, participation in decision-making, education and health. It acknowledges how far there still is to go when it states that still, in 2008, “there are strong indications that the Maya and Garifuna of Southern Belize stand out negatively compared to the national average in almost every indicator.”¹³⁸

Missed Opportunities, Bad Turns, Future Shifts

In this paper I have sought to describe and explain my own views about ethnicity in Belize, how this has been seen by others and how the questions of ethnicity and of ethnic relations have been affected by, and affected, the project of nation-building. Belizean society today is a product of colonialism and the struggle against it, and more immediately of the policies adopted by Belizean political leaders and accepted by the people, however much that “acceptance” may be compromised by the prevalent political and economic system. The end result is a society wherein the questions of ethnicity and “identity” have still not been faced or resolved, and where people still harbour deep-seated ethnic prejudices against others.

Most importantly, it is a society where gross inequalities persist and where large numbers live in poverty and hopelessness. In this final section I will express some views about why this came to pass and propose some ideas about how to deal with the potentially explosive question of ethnic relations.

I have argued that ethnic relations did not become a national issue until the workers movements of the 1930s and the later nationalist movement made them relevant, by virtue of including all peoples throughout the country in the project of nation-building. The nationalist movement’s goal of political independence was clear enough; it involved ridding the country of the colonial rulers and gaining self-government and independence. Its other stated goals of national unity and economic independence were more difficult to define: what did they mean? The party ideologues were conscious of the great disparities in wealth and of its structural causes, and so they proclaimed some policies that would have directly addressed those issues. They demanded the nationalization of the BEC operations¹³⁹ and the confiscation of the free holdings and leases of large landowners, to be turned over to the people in cooperative

¹³⁷ Ellen-Rose Kambel, “Policy Note on Indigenous Peoples in Belize”, IDB report, 30 June 2008, p. 7.

¹³⁸ Ibid, p. 4.

¹³⁹ The Belize Billboard, 2 November 1952.

ventures.¹⁴⁰ In 1952, Party Leader Richardson and Goldson defined the party's economic philosophy:

[The PUP] believes that cooperativism (the principles of the cooperatives system expressed through credit unions and cooperatives of producers and consumers on a nationwide scale) is an urgent need and that trade unionism on a nationwide scale is the complementary requirement for a better British Honduras . . . The PUP holds that only these two movements can bring distributive justice and a spreading out of the national wealth over all the people: and to the PUP distributive justice is the most sacred political and industrial principle.¹⁴¹

In its early years, the PUP proclaimed itself a party of the masses: "we of the PUP constitute in the majority the lower order of society . . . we are the labourer deprived of his hire . . . we are the people crying for bread".¹⁴² It declared that it had unified "the common people into a strong organization,"¹⁴³ yet it derided its opponents for saying that the PUP's supporters were mostly "lower class" people, and asserted that "class hatred is never a legitimate, never an intelligent weapon".¹⁴⁴ The party refused to explain the class issue in any comprehensive way, and even declared that "wise capitalism" could also achieve distributive justice.¹⁴⁵

The party's contradictory positions can readily be explained (apart from the detail that its leaders were inspired by John XXIII, not by Marx) by the fact that the Cold War was then at its height and had a direct effect on Britain's evolving policy of decolonization.¹⁴⁶ In 1954, the British minister of defence declared that "our Colonial Empire in its varying stages of development is likely to be a vital 'cold war' battlefield", where the communists might strike directly or "exploit troubles basically of a nationalist character".¹⁴⁷ This was in a context where Britain had introduced troops into its colony of British Guiana in 1953 and suspended the Constitution because a supposedly communist regime "would seriously embarrass the UK in its diplomatic relations with the U.S."¹⁴⁸ and where the U.S. was preparing to overthrow Guatemala's elected government on similar manufactured grounds. In the U.S. press, Price had been compared to Guyana's Cheddi Jagan, and the PUP was being linked to the "communist" government of Guatemala. This was enough to force the PUP leaders to temper their socialist rhetoric, but in any case they were not influenced, as Jagan was, by Marxist or socialist thinking; rather they had been steeped in the social encyclicals of the Catholic Church. They denounced communism as "a world conspiracy against freedom, democracy and religion".

In the event, the party did nothing to introduce the type of radical economic measures it had earlier enunciated. The prime objective of the leaders was to effect constitutional change toward self-government, and they opted for a broad programme of national unity that would win over the middle class elements. They therefore refused to

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., 5 January 1953.

¹⁴¹ The *Daily Gleaner* (Jamaica), 5 September 1952.

¹⁴² The Belize Billboard, 11 September, 1953.

¹⁴³ Ibid., 5 July 1953.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., 11 September 1953.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid.

¹⁴⁶ This is explored in some detail in Assad Shoman, *Belize's Independence & Decolonization in Latin America: Guatemala, Britain and the UN*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York, 2010.

¹⁴⁷ "Internal Security in the Colonies", 29 December 1954, CAB 129/72.

¹⁴⁸ Savage to Lloyd, 13 September 1953, CO 1031/119.

use class as a unifying issue for the vast majorities, but instead embraced a policy of artificial unity across—and ignoring—class divisions. It lumped together religious, ‘racial’, and class divisions as “all the same”. When Richardson called on the people to “close ranks in race, in creed and in society for its own liberation”¹⁴⁹, what he meant by liberation was not related to his other calls for distributive justice and nationalizations, but simply to the end of rule from London. They did not address the question of what kind of society they would construct after this constitutional change was effected, or what would be the basis of a “national unity” where the vast majority remained poor, a few were rich, and ethnic differences corresponded with those differences.

True, by decisively rejecting the criterion for the new Belizean person on his or her ability to adopt things British, the nationalists opened the gates of participation to all ethnic groups, but the fact remains that the real base of the early PUP’s support was the “lower class of people”, the workers and peasants. Once this bond of class was deliberately broken (and that became progressively the case as the party moved inevitably toward self-government) other divisions (especially ‘race’) were bound to assume greater importance. It was no doubt the case in Belize, as in other British colonies in the Caribbean, that “the real divisions of society are the horizontal ones of social class rather than the vertical ones of colour identification”.¹⁵⁰ Unless social class was seriously addressed, “colour identification” was bound to become a dominant issue, but the party never seriously considered the ‘race’ issue, according to Richardson.¹⁵¹

Frantz Fanon, a Caribbean anti-colonial activist and writer, wrote that “in the thick of the fight more than a few militants asked the leaders to formulate a dogma, to set out their objectives and to draw up a programme. But under the pretext of safeguarding national unity the leaders categorically refused to undertake such a task. The only worthwhile dogma, it was repeatedly stated, was the union of the nation against colonialism”.¹⁵² But self-determination is an absolute principle; it does not constitute a programme. Nationalism says nothing about how, or if, the new nation will be restructured—will there be just a change of flag, anthem and constitution with the same social and economic order?

For a nationalist project to operate in the interests of the majorities there must be, in Fanon’s words, a “rapid step...from national consciousness to political and social consciousness”. The PUP did not, could not, take this step. With its leaders divided and confused, it relied instead on the vain hope that a mere changing of the guard, from British to Belizean rulers, would provide the distributive justice it proclaimed as “its most sacred political and industrial principle”. People were made to believe that self-government would bring real social and economic changes benefitting the majorities. It did not. What happened elsewhere happened here: “The national bourgeoisie and their specialized elites of which Fanon speaks so ominously, in effect tended to replace the

¹⁴⁹ See page 39 above and footnote 103.

¹⁵⁰ Gordon Lewis, *The Growth of the Modern West Indies*, Macgibbon & Lee, London, 1968, p. 20

¹⁵¹ Richardson interview with the autor.

¹⁵² Franz Fanon, *The Wretched of the earth* (1961), Grove Press, 2004.

colonial force with a new class-based and ultimately exploitative one, which replicated the old colonial structures in new terms”.¹⁵³

Part of the failure to change colonial structures is related to the failure to change the colonial mentality, the failure to change the colonial version of history. As Fanon has pointed out, the settler makes history; he proclaims that “this land was created by us, and so we have the right to define it”. The Belizean man and woman would be unable to really *move on* and redefine the nation in their terms unless the myths created by the colonials to suit their purposes could be demolished. There were some attempts by the nationalist movement to demystify the “battle myth”, but in the end they were unable to do so, because in a society that colonialism had racially divided this served its purpose in ways that the colonialists themselves had probably not foreseen. The myth declared that slavery existed but in name and that there was no racial discrimination; that their economic and social system was based on justice and fair play, its bedrock being equal opportunity for all. The corollary was that if black people remained poor that was their fault, not that of the masters or their system. When the myth was attacked, those who cynically claimed to be representing those very black people cried foul, actually said that to do so showed that the demystifiers were prejudiced against black people! It worked only because the colonial history was so embedded in the society, which had used all educational and cultural means at its disposal to stamp it on the minds of the Creole elite. And so the nationalist movement backed off from the challenge; in the 1980s it began to speak of two “beginnings” for the nation: the first (and consequently the most important) was the battle, the next was independence. Fanon: “The immobility to which the native is condemned can only be called in question if the native decides to put an end to the history of colonization—the history of pillage—and to bring into existence the history of the nation—the history of decolonization”.¹⁵⁴ The best opportunity to this is at the birth of the nation.

Having missed that opportunity and as a consequences taken quite a few bad turns, the nation today appears to be lost, desperately seeking a “national identity” but mired in futile discussions about ‘race’ and ethnicity, still divided along lines that will not help to address the real issues that keep the people poor and powerless. Nor is it likely that, in the current political climate, any serious attempts will be made to change the economic and political system that has held a stranglehold on Belize for so long. Not to indulge, then, in what would be considered utopian or quixotic fantasies, I will confine myself here to proposing, in the context of the real existing situation, some policies and directions which might be taken to deal with the potentially divisive issues of ethnicity and difference, in particular with respect to varying opinions about what it means to be part of a single nation.

The issue of the rights of the indigenous peoples, like the issues posed by the recent Central American immigrants, goes to the question of what it means to be a multicultural nation and how different views concerning “national identity” and the rights accorded to different members of the nation are to be reconciled. To be sure,

¹⁵³ Edward Said, p. 269.

¹⁵⁴ Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, New York, Grove press, 1968, p. 51.

almost all nations today are multi-cultural, but what we have in Belize is a consciousness of relevant cultural difference within a very small population, and unless policies are adopted to deal with the tensions and conflicts this can generate, the situation might well deteriorate.

To begin with, what policies might be suitable to adopt with respect to national identity in Belize? Following Parekh,¹⁵⁵ I would say, first of all, that the identity should not be constructed in ethnic or cultural terms, but rather as a political and institutional concept related to the state and its constitution. Also, the national identity must provide room for the existence of multiple identities, whether they be ethnic, religious, linguistic, cultural or whatever. Its definition—which should in any case be considered as flexible and subject to change—should be such that it can include all citizens, making it possible for all to identify with it. This would entail accepting all citizens as equally valued, irrespective of their differences from what may be considered the “norm”, and equally legitimate members of the community.

If this appears to water down the concept of a national identity to a point where it becomes meaningless for those who would want to stamp a particular cultural flavour on it, so be it: that is the price to pay for living in harmony in a nation constructed in the way the Belizean nation was. Not that similar thoughts have not been voiced before. A book published just after independence for use in schools stated that “the historical origins of our people and the more recent influences upon our culture have produced diversity. Out of this diversity we must seek unity, while recognizing the value of our different customs and traditions”.¹⁵⁶ It has not been easy, however, and the truth is that no-one has really tried, to determine how to resolve the inherent clash between that “unity” and the diversity or difference. The fact is that the modern nation-state “expects all its citizens to subscribe to an identical way of defining themselves and relating to each other and the state. It can tolerate differences on all other matters except this one, and uses educational, cultural, coercive and other means to ensure that all its citizens share it. It is thus a deeply homogenizing institution”.¹⁵⁷ Here I will suggest a few concepts that may be usefully employed to resolve this dilemma.

First of all, we must recognize that in multi-ethnic and multi-cultural societies people have different histories and views about their needs and aspirations, and they cannot all be treated in an identical manner. Here we can take a leaf out of the book that justifies “affirmative action” to correct injustices caused by racism or other forms of historical marginalization, or of the call for small states to “special and differential treatment” in regional or global economic institutions. Despite the idea that the principle of equal citizenship requires all citizens throughout the country to have exactly the same body of rights and obligations, when different communities have, for cultural or other reasons, different needs, it is unjust to insist on treating all the same. Sure, it is not easy to deal with the subject of communal rights within the legal system adopted from western European systems, but ways must be found to do so, for unless indigenous

¹⁵⁵ Parekh, Bhikhu *Rethinking Multiculturalism. Cultural Diversity and Political Theory*, London, Macmillan, 2000, pp. 231-233.

¹⁵⁶ Ministry of Education, *A History of Belize: Nation in the making*, Cubola, 1983, p. 73.

¹⁵⁷ Parekh, p. 184.

communities are given some autonomy over their lives and resources they have no chance of maintaining their way of life. And if they want to do that, it is unjust to prevent them: cultural rights are also human rights.

And there is nothing wrong with people in different parts of a nation state enjoying different rights; that occurs, for example within the states in the U.S.¹⁵⁸ Equal treatment under the law has to be understood within a cultural and historical context: people who have unwillingly been placed within a political, legal, economic, social and cultural framework that does violence to their own culture and way of perceiving their environment should be given some leeway, within the confines required to preserve the integrity of the state, to practice their way of life. Likewise, people who have suffered discrimination for centuries or decades cannot be said to have “equal opportunity” with others who have not, given their existence within a capitalist society that is highly competitive. State action is in such cases needed to help people overcome historical disadvantages, or else past acts of injustice are reproduced and replicated in the present. Not only do concepts of justice require this, but also the political goal of social harmony and peace.

Some countries in the Americas have designed policies to accommodate the special rights claimed by indigenous peoples. For example, Nicaragua’s Constitution of 1987 (revised in 1995) acknowledges the multi-ethnic nature of Nicaragua, accords indigenous peoples their right to development of their identity and culture, and recognizes the official status of their languages in addition to Spanish on the Atlantic Coast. It also ratifies communities’ right to intercultural education in their own language and recognizes collective forms of land ownership. Two autonomous regions were created, the Northern Atlantic Autonomous Region (RAAN – Spanish abbreviation), and Southern Atlantic Autonomous Region (RAAS); these two areas comprise half of the country’s landmass, although only 10 percent of the population live there. The recognition of a multi-ethnic, multi-cultural and multi-lingual nation thus acknowledges the special political, economic, social and cultural rights of the citizens on the Atlantic Coast.¹⁵⁹ In terms of conceptualizing the treatment of indigenous people within a “nation-state” that came to exist as an imposition over their already existing society, Bolivia has gone further, by declaring that country “The Plurinational State of Bolivia”. Instead of a nation-state, we have a state of many nations. Evo Morales won the elections in Bolivia by a convincing majority in 2005, becoming the first indigenous president elected in a South American country. In 2009 a new constitution was enacted, proclaiming the initiation of a new socialist communitarian and plurinational state in Bolivia and initiating the radical change of a political system that was inherited from the Spanish empire. Today, 36 indigenous communities and groups have the right to territory, language and their own communitarian justice.

¹⁵⁸ I appreciate that the U.S. has a federal system of government, and also that in that country “states rights” have often been opposed to human rights, but I think the reference remains useful, i.e. that within the same country rights may differ depending on local circumstances, peoples’ needs and aspirations.

¹⁵⁹ Sandra Brunnegger, “From Conflict to Autonomy in Nicaragua: Lessons Learnt”, Minority Rights Group International, London, 2007.

For the sake of justice as well as of national harmony, Belize must also learn to deal with the demands of its indigenous peoples, while at the same time address the phenomenon of the recent immigrants. The fear has been expressed that they will destroy the “Belizean way of life”, but one must recognize that culture is always in flux, and just as the different waves of immigrants to Belize over centuries affected the culture (first of all by aggressively seeking to destroy the indigenous Maya culture), so too will present and future immigrations change what is considered at any point in time “Belizean” culture. In terms of attempts at “integration” which would force new immigrants to accept and adopt the Belizean way (whatever *that* is), that is to deny people their cultural rights of expression, which is an injustice. Rather, we should recognize the fluidity of cultures and allow the natural interchange between them to produce a new blend that would then become, for a while, the “Belizean” culture . . . or cultures, for the only harmonious way to proceed surely is to recognize that what we are building is a multiculturally constituted culture. And as far as “integration” is concerned, forcing people to adopt a “way of life” is fraught with difficulties, apart from the injustice of it. For who is to decide what that way of life really is in all its details and particularities? Besides, it is in constant flux, always changing in response to stimuli not only from physical persons but, increasingly, from the globalized media. What is “Belizean” today is not what it was yesterday nor will be tomorrow, and new immigrants, be they persons brought across by air or by the currents of the sea or ideas in bytes brought by television or internet, *will* interface with and influence the current culture, whether we like it or not, and the cross-fertilization process will produce a new cultural reality. It is best for social harmony that we recognize and privilege this interaction.

It is ironic to consider that we in Belize don’t really know what “multicultural” means, in terms of the major problems it can pose, compared to present-day Britain, which has become vastly more multicultural than Belize. The groups that share the Belizean space today, including immigrants from Central America, have been sharing that space and creating linkages and relations among themselves for centuries. The one significant exception is the Mennonites (although they have been in Belize for half a century), who for various reasons are not seen as a major problem in terms of ethnic relations in Belize; no-one posits that any “ethnic war” will involve them. Again, apart from the Toledo Maya claim to land and autonomy, and that in relation to what we have come to understand as what is involved in being a supposedly homogeneous nation, there are no major problems of *understanding one another* as between the ethnic groups in Belize. Indeed, as most writers on the subject have acknowledged, there is a significant amount of borrowing in various cultural aspects among the several groups. Consider the situation in Britain, where over the past few decades hundreds of thousands of peoples of several nationalities and differing cultures have gone to reside there and claim rights to express their cultures freely, cultures that in many ways conflict with traditional British values and that the British people don’t understand at all! But the major differences between Moslem and Christian ideologies have to be

accommodated, and laws are adjusted, for example, to take account of the particular cultural requirements of Sikhs and others.¹⁶⁰

The bottom line is that while a multicultural nation must develop a common sense of belonging among its citizens if it is to remain viable, this sentiment cannot, by definition, be based on cultural homogeneity. The sense of belonging must be political in nature and not based on ethnic or cultural characteristics; all that is needed is that the citizen care for the political community and be committed to safeguard its integrity. This is not to say that the process will be easy or free of ambiguities and potential conflict. How, for example, would the nation resolve a situation where one cultural group claims the ancestral right to treat women as inferior to men or the right of parents to beat their children? These and many other examples might be given of difficult confrontations that would present seemingly insurmountable dilemmas, and no doubt the society might decide that the denial of certain rights and duties are irreconcilable with the nature of the nation state, and that certain values are an indispensable part of the political content of the state. But these confrontations, when and if they appear, must be worked out through dialogue and a continuing process of education, not by force. The adoption of such an open and tolerant policy, in my view, is the only way to ensure that Belize remains a viable nation free from violent ethnic and cultural conflicts.

APPENDIX

Constructing the “Creole” identity: the “myth of origin”

Every nation seems to need a myth of origin, some event in the historical past that is considered as giving birth to the entity that the people within its territory must owe allegiance to and that gives meaning and an “identity” to it. The myth must also provide some explanation about the nature of the nation and the people; the moral of the story will serve as a guide to behavior and provide justification for the way the nation is structured. Jenkins affirms that “one distinguishing feature of nationalisms is their appeal to the past—an ethnic-national history embodied in such things as myths of

¹⁶⁰ The 1972 law requiring motor-cyclists to wear crash helmets was amended in 1976 after protests by Sikhs who insisted on their right to wear their traditional turban instead. A similar exemption was made in 1989 for Sikh construction workers in the case of safety helmets. Perhaps more controversially, British Asian girls can have their marriages annulled by the courts on the ground of parental duress, while white girls cannot: see Parekh, pp. 243, 248.

origin, royal genealogies or cultural romanticism—in the construction of a collective project for the future”.¹⁶¹

In Belize, the myth of origin is based on the victory of the British colonizers against the last attempt by Spain, whose sovereignty over the territory was recognized by Britain, to displace the British. At the time of the battle in 1798, the population of British settlers, their slaves and the progeny of both was close to 4,000,¹⁶² and 75% of them were slaves.¹⁶³ The conflict did not end slavery but rather reinforced the colonial slave society. The question begs to be answered: why did a nation whose people struggled long and hard against slavery and colonialism choose as its myth of origin an event that buttressed the position of the slave masters and colonizers, indeed one that professed that the slaves preferred bondage to freedom? Who created the narrative, what exactly is the moral of the story and whose interests does it serve? I will attempt to provide an answer in this brief note, relying on historical facts and on my interpretation of them.

Slavery in Belize was as evil and cruel as anywhere else in the “new world” where Africans were forcibly transported and compelled to work in sub-human conditions. But the British settlers had long been arguing that slavery was benign, and in 1823, when pressures for the abolition of slavery were building up in England, the settlers, in an attempt to refute arguments that they were treating their slaves cruelly, referred to the 1798 confrontation, claiming that the slaves willingly fought for their masters’ lives and property, and that “there appeared a sacred tie between the Slave and the Master, which bound the one to the other, clearly evincing the preference of these faithful Slaves to their state of bondage than to the freedom offered by the Spanish”.¹⁶⁴

The facts testify to a different reality, however: slaves in Belize as elsewhere in the Caribbean often staged armed revolts against their masters and escaped so many times to the interior and to neighbouring lands that the settlers often predicted the ruin of the settlement unless the escapes were stopped. Indeed, in 1825, just two years after the claim that the slaves preferred bondage to freedom, yet another group of slaves escaped to Guatemala and Honduras, prompting the Superintendent to report that throughout the colony “the Negroes in their conversations among themselves make no secret of their thoughts on desertion”, and that should there be a slave uprising he was unsure about whether “the Black portion of the Militia” could be counted on.¹⁶⁵ There were several slave revolts throughout the period of slavery, the last major one occurring in 1820, twenty-two years after the Battle.

After the emancipation mandated from London that occurred in 1838, the freed slaves and workers resisted their continued exploitation and brutal treatment in many ways, including protests, manifestations and riots. But the power of the ruling class,

¹⁶¹ Ricahrd Jenkins, *Rethinking Ethnicity*, Sage, 2008, p. 167.

¹⁶² A count in 1790 enumerated 2,656 and this had grown to 3,959 in 1803: O. Nigel Bolland, *The Formation of a Colonial Society*, Johns Hopkins, 1977, p. 3.

¹⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 51.

¹⁶⁴ Shoman, *Thirteen*, pp. 33-34.

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 50.

which increasingly included members of the “creole” elite, maintained their power in post-emancipation society by denying land to the freedmen and controlling the labour force by laws and practices which kept them in conditions little removed from slavery.

By the end of the 19th century the country of Belize had become much more ethnically diverse than it was at the beginning, as a result of the arrival of the Garifuna, the influx of Mestizos and Maya from Yucatan and Guatemala, the importation of Indians as indentured servants. Still, although they formed a minority, the whites and the Creole elite maintained political, economic and social dominance, although the vast majority of Creoles were poor, dispossessed, debt-tied labourers.

As the 50th anniversary of emancipation (1 August, 1888) approached, a group of black people in Belize Town decided to mark the day and petition the governor for an educational, emancipation institute. They called themselves “the coloured population of this Colony”, and were led by labourer Simon Lamb and included many women and schoolteachers: “the Emancipation Jubilee indicated the capacity for [a] black-identified self-organization involving black and mixed-race women [to develop] . . . but they did not look to middle class Creoles as their spokesmen”.¹⁶⁶ Although they addressed the governor with expressions of empire loyalty, the teachers signed a speech delivered by the schoolchildren describing slavery as cruel, miserable, humiliating and degrading, totally against the grain of the version of slavery adopted by the Creole elite, as evidenced for example in the writings of Frederick Gahne in his *Colonial Guardian* newspaper. He wrote that in Belize there was “slavery but in name”, and likened the relation of the slaves to their masters to that of clansmen to a Scottish chief. He averred that “the hatred of race and of class” which arose in other portions of the British Empire where slavery existed” did not occur in Belize, where the Creole labouring class had no such disposition.

The following year the emancipation committee staged a march to a lot in the centre of Belize Town which the governor had promised for the emancipation institute, and the committee declared it would build a “People’s Hall” there with promised assistance from the governor. In March 1893, however, with the building partially completed, the governor withdrew his support and instead advocated Gahne’s idea of a general museum without “distinctions of class or colour” and that would not “keep alive the memory of those atrocities” and implied that suspicions of racial motives had affected the success of the project. The committee persisted in building the People’s Hall, but in July when the building was almost complete a severe storm destroyed it, and nothing ever came of it again.

The whites and Creole elite had succeeded in defeating this working-class attempt to commemorate the days of slavery and to continue fighting to make real the promise of emancipation. Macpherson concludes that “middle-class Creoles, [lacked] any desire to commemorate slavery and emancipation, or to identify with their black

¹⁶⁶ Anne Macpherson, “Imagining the Colonial Nation: Race, Gender and Middle-Class Politics in Belize, 188-1898”, in *Race and Nation in Modern Latin America*, Nancy Appelbaum, Anne Macpherson and Karin Roseblatt, eds., Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 2003, p. 114. All the material presented here on the emancipation committee is from that source, pp. 108-131.

ancestors”, and that the criticisms of the project as “sectarian and racially divisive heralded middle-class claims to be generally representative and racially neutral”.¹⁶⁷ The sentiments expressed by the whites and the Creole elite persisted and became part of the dominant culture, as evidenced by the fact that in 1988, when a small group of Belizeans led by SPEAR¹⁶⁸ sought to promote the celebration of the 150th anniversary of emancipation, there was very little response from the populace, and a black minister of government scoffed at the proposal, saying slavery was long gone and that we should not seek to remember it. Emancipation, the abolition of slavery that was due in no small part to the struggles of the slaves, is not celebrated in Belize.

In 1888, the year of the 50th anniversary of emancipation, expatriate whites reacted to the efforts of those who commemorated that event with a private celebration of the victory of the British over the Spanish in 1798, and the following year members of the whites-only Colonial Club staged a public entertainment depicting the battle. But the use of that battle as the myth of origin for Belize was not, in the end, a project of the few whites in the colony, but rather one adopted by the Creole elite, who felt the need to stamp an identity on the country that would help to preserve the difference between them and the vast majority of working class blacks and maintain the society’s rigid class divisions. Certainly the workers riots of 1894 made this need more urgent, and the 100th anniversary of the battle four years later provided the opportunity to fulfil it.

In 1894 workers organized a petition which set out their economic grievances and claimed that they were “the *real inhabitants* of the Colony, the men by the sweat of whose brow in the forests all its prosperity has been achieved.”¹⁶⁹ When their modest demands were rejected, they rioted and looted the stores of major merchant houses. It was recognized that apart from economic grievances, the racism prevalent in the society was a major underlying cause of the riot. The Governor himself remarked on the fact that “the distinction between employers and employees . . . embraces the distinction of colour”. The riot was suppressed with the help of an armed detachment from a British warship, but the workers had forced the ruling class to recognize the racist nature of the society and had shown that there were limits to the levels of oppression they would tolerate.¹⁷⁰ Nor was this an isolated incident; working class blacks were showing in many ways their dissatisfaction with the prevailing system.

Something needed to be done to establish the moral authority of the system and to give the black working class an enemy other than the white and “high brown” ruling class. In 1897 a group of middle class Creoles began to agitate for celebration of the 100th anniversary of the “Battle of St. George’s Caye”, but with the emphasis being on the unity of master and slave in confronting the Spanish invader. Under this

¹⁶⁷ Ibid., p. 116.

¹⁶⁸ The Society for the Promotion of Education and Research, a non-government organization that promoted popular education and peoples’ causes.

¹⁶⁹ “Petition of the Labourers”, set out in Assad Shoman, *Thirteen Chapters of a History of Belize*, Belize City, 1994, pp. 159-160. Emphasis added. The reference to the “real inhabitants” may be seen as an attempt to establish the primacy of the working class to claims on the nation, as against both the British and the Creole aristocracy.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid., p. 161.

interpretation, the victory was as much that of the slaves as of the masters. By joining together “shoulder to shoulder”, it was as if a new man was born,¹⁷¹ one that was a composite master-slave, a white-black that gave birth to a nation of people saved from the tyranny of the Spaniards and basking in the protection of a British empire that respected the values of freedom and justice. To make this feasible, the fact that slavery continued for forty years after the battle had to be forgotten, and it made no sense to celebrate an “emancipation” that occurred then. Slavery itself had to be painted as benevolent, as really slavery in name only. The real emancipation or liberation came not in 1838 but in 1798, when brave masters and loyal slaves together defeated the invader and gave us this land. And just as the white slave masters could command the love, respect and obedience of their slaves, so could the Creole elite, a hundred years later, command the same from the working class, if they could only be made to realize that it was in their interest to uphold the existing system of wage slavery. Thus did the *Clarion*, a newspaper of the Creole elite, moralize over the rioters of 1894:

What a lesson in loyalty and confidence it would constantly be to those very people if their minds were turned back vividly to that September day at St. George’s Caye when the sturdy Baymen masters and slaves willingly stood forth shoulder to shoulder to shed their blood to defend the government and protect those they served.

It was very important for the Creole elite that working class blacks accept the origin myth, since this would grant them the legitimacy to become the natural successors to the white colonizers, the accepted leaders of the nation that was evolving. Another useful function of the myth was that it engendered hostility toward the “Spanish”, which was by extension applied to the significant numbers of Mestizo people in the country, making it less likely that working class alliances would form across ethnic lines. The Creole elite succeeded to a remarkable extent, aided by the Christianizing socialization process and the education system, but the myth was repeatedly contested, as working class “Creoles” continued to express significant challenges to this imposed vision of a just and harmonious society. Just one year after the celebration of the anniversary of the Battle, workers demonstrated against their employers, and when they repeated this action the following year the Governor dismissed the organizer as “a worthless negro carpenter”. In 1919 a major workers’ revolt occurred: a riot was started by over 300 men who had suffered racist treatment while serving the British Empire in the Great War and who continued to be exploited on their return. They were joined by over 3,000 residents of Belize City, who became the major protagonists of the uprising. Although much of the resentment that sparked the riot had to do with the economic conditions suffered by the people, the racist treatment to which they were continuously subjected was undoubtedly an important element. The situation was brought under control when a British warship landed 100 marines and the Governor proclaimed martial law. He reported that during the incident the people had shown an “open inclination to be insulting to Europeans in the street.” People were

¹⁷¹ And as Macpherson has noted, referring to the Creole middle class, “the battle myth commemorated their white settler forefathers as patriots and male slaves as loyal dependents, while erasing the presence of black, coloured and sometimes enslaved fore-mothers of the leading Creole families”, Macpherson, p. 108.

heard to make such statements as “these are the brutes we do not want here,” referring to white men; “this is our country and we want to get the white man out”; and “we are going to kill the white sons of bitches tonight . . . This is a black man’s night.”¹⁷²

This is our country.

This is the first instance I have found of black people in Belize, the descendants of Africans brought as slaves, articulating the demand to recognize *this* land as theirs, to proclaim a right to *this* country. They did so as against their former masters, against the white man; they did not in any way reference the indigenous Maya or other ethnic groups in the colony.

Black consciousness had undoubtedly been developed with the coming of the Garveyite movement to the colony earlier in the century. Indeed, it was found that the Governor’s ban of the periodical *Negro World*, the official organ of Garvey’s United Negro Improvement Association (UNIA), was one of the grievances that fed the riot. A local newspaper, the *Belize Independent*, also carried a column called “The Garvey Eye,” and in 1920 a local branch of the UNIA was formed, with prominent middle-class blacks in its executive. Garvey himself visited Belize in 1921, but he was not very critical of the colonial regime; and by 1926 the movement was rendered harmless by factionalism in the parent U.S. body, and the social arm of the movement, the Black Cross Nurses, was soon co-opted by the colonial establishment. Still, the movement enhanced the sense of black consciousness which contributed significantly to the later rise of the nationalist movement.

The whites and the Creole elite continued to maintain cultural dominance over the society through their control of educational and other institutions, and they continued to drive home the myth that the white masters and their slaves loved each other, that workers should love their masters, and that differences of ‘race’ and class as between whites and “Creoles” were of no special significance. The anniversary of the Battle became a yearly fixture every 10th of September to this day, marching songs glorifying the Baymen and their loyal slaves composed and sung, and, as on the occasion of the centenary, bags of sweets were meted out to the schoolchildren at the end of the parade. The origin myth proclaimed that the most important event in Belize’s history was not the defeat by African slaves of the pernicious institution of slavery, nor the resistance to oppression by workers, but the defeat by one European empire of another over possession of a land that belonged to neither of them; that it was necessary to look outwards to the “mother country” to make sense of, and improve, the landscape; that Belizeans should be proud to be part of a great empire, even though they were a dependent and inferior part. When, after 1945, that Empire was clearly destined to crumble, and when Belizeans began to grope toward a concept of themselves as a separate nation, the “Creole identity” myth became an obstacle to struggle, since it glorified the negation of struggle, and had to be debunked. The early nationalist movement sought to do this, but failed. The origin myth remains as a strong contender for defining the identity of the independent nation-state of Belize, a paradox that remains for future generations to resolve.

¹⁷² Shoman, *Thirteen*, pp. 162-164.

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