

# Folk House-types as Indicators of Tradition: The Case of the Mopan Maya in Southern Belize

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## ABSTRACT

It is often assumed that indigenous folk house-types are indicators of traditional cultural patterns. Indigenous villages that are dominated by folk structures are generally thought to maintain many traditional culture traits in contrast to villages that are dominated by modern, national-culture house-types. These modern looking villages appear to have exchanged their indigenous heritage for the culture of the developed world. However, in southern Belize, field work in three Mopan Maya villages contradicts these assumptions. My research found little correlation between house-types and various other aspects of indigenous culture. This paper discusses cultural circumstances that argue against the assumption that traditional housing can be correlated with traditional cultures.

## INTRODUCTION

The pole-and-thatch folk house-type of the lowland Maya has historically played an important role in traditional, closed communities. The pole-thatch house expresses community and cultural solidarity (Wilk 1983; 1991, 166; Wolf 1957). In closed corporate communities, when an individual conforms to a house style, he or she is also participating in other traditional social institutions (Wilk 1983; 1991, 166). Examples of these institutions include the *fagina* or community labor assignment, planting certain crops, and the village *alcalde* legal system. If house style deviation occurs, other social traditions should also be eroded (Wilk 1983; 1991, 166).

Research I conducted in Belize in the summer of 1994, January 1995, and June 1995 among the Mopan Maya questions these assumptions. The story that was supposed to be told by the existence of folk housing was misleading. In fact, my research in three Mopan villages found little correlation between folk housing and traditional culture. This claim is based on a study of six indigenous traits in three villages. One village contained all traditional architecture, one contained mainly traditional dwellings with some modern houses, and the last contained mainly modern structures. These cultural traits include planting traditional varieties of maize (*Zea mays*), involvement in stingless beekeeping (*Melipona spp.*), the existence and support of village *faginas* (community participation in traditional dances and saint feast day celebrations), the presence of traditional healers, and the use of the Mopan language.

My research found that the influence of Protestant missionaries helps limit the correlation between traditional house-types and cultural heritage. The missionaries have weakened or severed the ties between many traditional cultural traits and the Maya Catholic faith. A new Maya identity is evolving in southern Belize. This identity rejects the cultural institutions (e.g. saint day celebrations and dances) that connect modern Mopan culture with contact and possibly pre-contact Maya culture.

I chose these six traits as elements of traditional Mopan culture because the Mopan themselves claim[**end p. 87**]

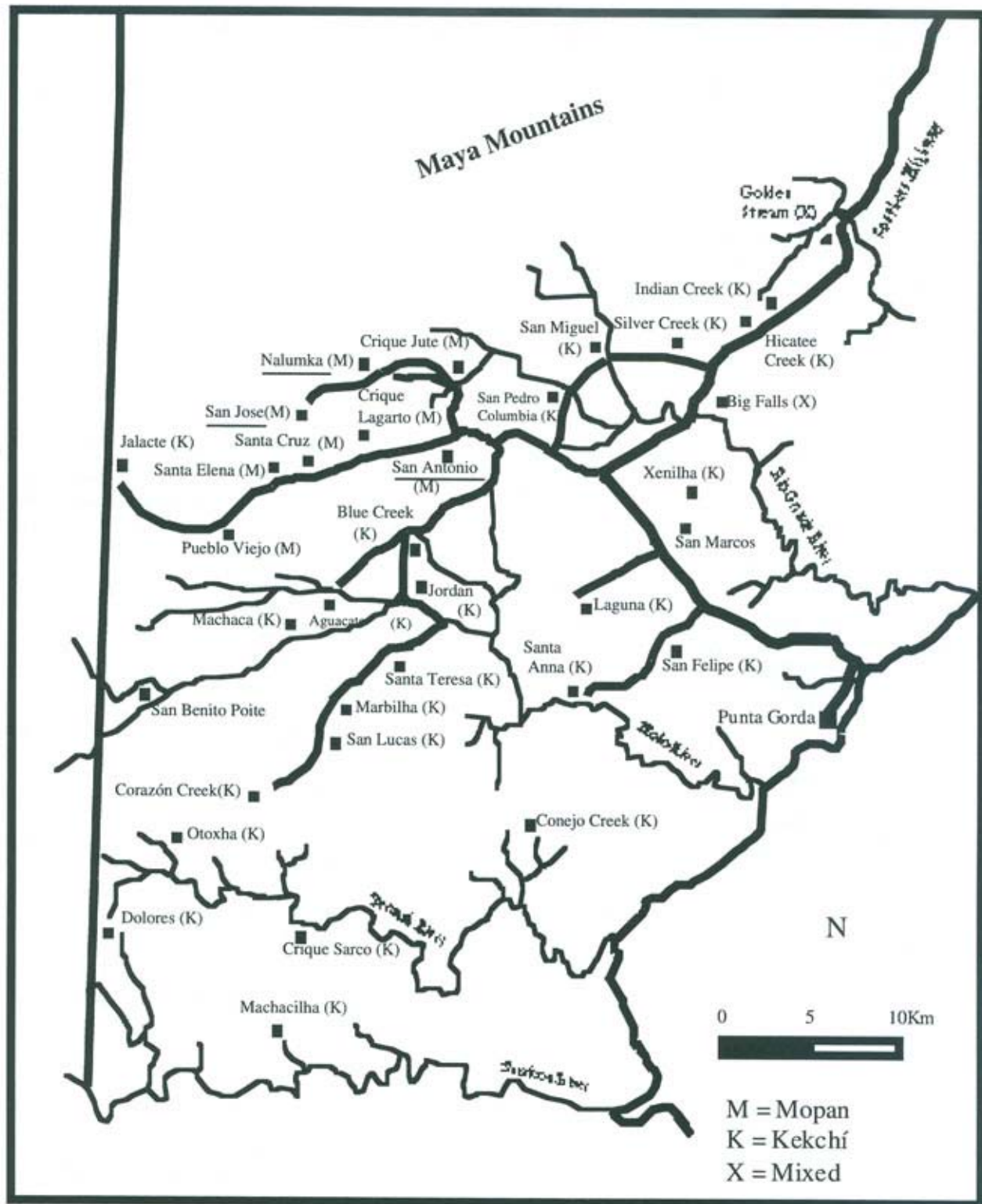


Figure 1. Maya Villages of Southern Belize

[end p. 88] them as being representative of the "old ways." Planting black maize was described by many young people as participating in a superstitious act because of its religious significance, something done by only the

older generation, or "old heads" as they call themselves. Older residents described the black variety as having qualities that were religiously significant; it is eaten on certain religious holidays.

Festivals were also described by villagers as being part of the old ways. In many villager's minds, when dances were no longer performed, they lost a part of Mopan life that served to unite the community. Celebrating the feast day of a town's patron saint helps define that village. They are not only Mopan, they are also Mopan of San José or San Antonio. When these celebrations are discontinued, there is less communal cultural identity.

Generally, Mopan adults of age 30 to 40 are the first generation that no longer participates in these cultural activities. They remember their parents and grandparents performing these traditions, but they now view them as part of a Maya spiritual world they don't believe applies to them. This spirit world has been aggressively challenged by the Protestant missionaries.

The six traits chosen are not weighted equally. Nor are they the only traditional traits in a Mopan community. Certainly, for instance, the village fagina and the Mopan language are more important to Mopan identity and community solidarity than stingless beekeeping. However, these six were included because they all existed a generation ago, and all were described as being important traits in the Mopan landscape by the Mopan themselves. As will be shown later, even a seemingly trivial trait such as bee-keeping plays an important role in Maya religious life.

The Mopan cultural region in southern Belize is a dynamic, complex landscape that can be misinterpreted based on house-types. A Mopan town devoid of folk housing is not the acculturated town that it might first appear to be. Instead, it indicates a culture that has incorporated objects from the outside world, often reworking them into a new indigenous identity. Similarly, a town dominated by traditional dwellings is not a closed community. Instead it is a town where homes are constructed with the most readily available and affordable material.

This paper focuses on three Mopan villages in southern Belize: Nalumka, San José, and San Antonio (Figure 1). Nalumka is the smallest village, with around 400 people. It is also the youngest village, having been settled in the late 1970s. San José is second in size with around 800 individuals. It is an old village by Mopan standards, having been settled some 80 years ago. San Antonio is the largest and oldest village. It has about 1,200 people and was settled in the late 1800s. Nalumka is located about 30 kilometers from Punta Gorda, the regional capital. Its residents practice shifting cultivation and grow cash crops such as tomatoes and cabbage, which are sold in Punta Gorda. Nalumka resembles a traditional village the most; all houses, with the exception of the school principal's residence, are pole-and-thatch.

The second village discussed is San José. Like Nalumka, most of its inhabitants participate in an economy based on shifting agriculture and cash crops. Cash crops such as cacao are sold in Punta Gorda and abroad. San José also resembles a traditional village, but modern housing is beginning to be more common.

The third village is San Antonio. San Antonio has had a great deal of interaction with the larger Belizean culture and economy. This interaction accelerated after a road was constructed to the village from Punta Gorda in the 1940s, the first road to a Maya village in the Toledo District (Gregory 1987, 8-9). Although shifting agriculture is still important, villagers also own shops, make crafts to sell to tourists, and look for wage labor in Punta Gorda and elsewhere to supplement income. San Antonio appears to be the most prosperous of the three villages discussed, with some individuals having electricity, running water, and television sets. Unlike Nalumka and San José, modern, concrete and zinc-roofed houses are very common.

## **THE CULTURAL SETTING**

The Mopan are not the original Maya inhabitants of Belize. The original Maya were of the Chol and Chan language groups. These populations were reduced by warfare and introduced diseases. The surviving Maya were driven into Guatemala by English loggers and settlers in the 17th century (Wilk and Chapin 1990, 14).

The Mopan started migrating to Belize from neighboring Guatemala during the 1880s to escape taxation and forced labor (Wilk and Chapin 1990,14). [end p. 89] Most settled in the southern Toledo District, generally in the hill regions just south of the southern Maya Mountains. As population has increased in recent years, placing pressure on forest resources, small numbers of Mopan have moved northward in search of new agricultural land (Davidson 1987, 15). However, the cultural hearth of the Mopan in Belize remains in the Toledo District. Today, there are around 7,000 Mopan in Belize (Belize Central Statistical Office 1991).

### **CULTURAL CHANGE AND ETHNIC TRAITS**

Since Nalumka and San José resemble traditional villages in their house-types, it is reasonable to expect that other traditional ethnic traits are present. To my surprise, however, the residents of the village whose built environment was most traditional maintained the fewest number of traditional institutions. Nalumka lacks most of the cultural traits described above. First, no one in Nalumka keeps stingless bees. Second, residents claimed the traditional black maize variety (locally known as *bush nieh*) was rarely if ever planted today. There was also no one in the village who claimed to be a practitioner of folk medicine. Traditional festivals are also non-existent.

The only traits that are still preserved in Nalumka are the village fagina and the Mopan language. The faginas are regularly attended by all able-bodied adult male residents. There is a great deal of social pressure for male residents to participate. If someone is absent, he faces a fine and public condemnation. The Mopan language is still widely spoken by both young and old. Although English is the official language taught in the local school, Mopan is used by instructors in the lower levels because it is the children's first language.

The residents of Nalumka, living in a seemingly closed corporate traditional village, have abandoned most of the traditional traits. Villagers no longer participate in a world where life revolves around institutions tied to the Maya Catholic faith.

The house-types of San José also imply a traditional cultural landscape. However, as with Nalumka, when San José is examined more closely, one finds a village that is far from a traditional closed community. Although many of the cultural traits are still present, they are in decline. For instance, I found only two people who still keep stingless bees. This practice was widespread only a generation ago. Planting traditional black maize is also waning. Some of the older residents still plant it, but the younger generation has turned to varieties whose colors have less religious significance. Feast day celebrations are for all practical purposes extinct. The last public feast day dance and celebration took place in 1977. Most of the young people in the village neither remember nor have any interest in reviving such institutions.

Cultural institutions that are still maintained are the Mopan language, the fagina system, and traditional healing. As in Nalumka, the Mopan language is still widely spoken by all age groups. As in Nalumka, social pressure and the threat of fines maintains general support for the fagina system. In contrast to Nalumka, traditional healing is still practiced in San José. One individual in the village serves as healer and government-trained health worker. He successfully moves between the traditional and modern worlds.

Based on outward appearances, San Antonio would seem to be the most acculturated village of the three. Modern homes line the streets. Yet traditional healers are still present and supported, participation in the village fagina is strong, the deer dance was performed three years ago, the feast day of Saint Anthony was celebrated while I was in the village this past June; the Mopan language is spoken by both young and old, and, although the black maize variety is becoming more rare in the village, many residents continue to plant it. The one trait that is absent from San Antonio is stingless bee-keeping. In conversations with numerous residents, no one could identify any individuals involved with this activity.

### **DISCUSSION**

An important factor that has caused the decline of these institutions and that in turn limits the correlation between traditional house-types and cultural heritage is the influence of Protestant evangelical missionaries. Missionizing rural villages in southern Belize began in earnest in the middle and late 1970s. As missionaries

entered villages, traditional Maya Catholic beliefs and practices began to be eroded. Although many of these traits may at first seem unrelated to religion, most have a spiritual significance related to the Maya Catholic faith. For [end p. 90] instance, stingless bee-keeping, which can be traced to pre-Columbian Maya society (Dixon 1987, 66), played an important role among Mopan Catholics on religious holidays. Known in Mopan as the *choccho* and *keunseet*, the stingless bees beeswax was used to make candles to offer prayers on Catholic feast days. The ritualistic significance of the beeswax was transplanted from traditional Maya beliefs into the Catholic faith. The Maya Catholic religion allowed this tradition to continue in post-contact Maya culture. However, as more individuals convert to Protestantism, bee-keeping has become rare because it is associated with the old ways. The beeswax has lost much of its spiritual significance among the Mopan today.

The planting of certain local maize varieties has also declined. Maize has historically been central to Maya culture throughout Mesoamerica, resulting in a religious mythology associated with different varieties (Vogt 1990, 67). Once this religious connection is weakened by missionizing, traditional varieties are abandoned for those that are more culturally neutral. According to an "old head" in San José, the black maize has been associated with myths that date from the "old" times (around the time of original migration from Guatemala?). One story that was shared with me concerned the origin of the black color. Apparently, as punishment for sexual promiscuity, God "burned" the maize crop, producing its black color. This was to serve as a reminder to the Mopan of the power of God.

A young farmer in San José, when asked why he did not plant black maize, claimed he did not participate in such traditional activities. He claimed individuals of his father's generation planted it, but he did not believe in the superstition associated with it. Instead, he planted white maize because it was perceived as having less religious significance.

Public feast day celebrations are another casualty of missionizing. Many of the dances that were performed on Maya Catholic holidays have pre-Columbian roots. These were easily incorporated into the Catholic feast day calendar. The Cortez, Deer, and Monkey dances all have a Catholic facade covering a Maya history. Many Catholic officials tolerated and even promoted performances with monetary support. However, when Protestant conversion began, these celebrations were abandoned because of their "heathen" ritualism.

Even among Mopan Catholics today, the old ways are being abandoned because of the volatile nature of the missionary issue. Entire communities and families have split along religious lines (Davidson 1987); thus the cultural solidarity to motivate individuals to continue many traditions is rapidly declining.

Knowing that these activities are connected with the Maya Catholic faith, it was not surprising to discover that in Nalumka the dominant religion is the Nazarene Church. In fact, the Catholic Church has little presence in the village. This is the same village where the majority of the six cultural traits are absent. In San Antonio, where most of the traits are present, the Catholic Church still dominates. The Catholic Church in San Antonio is the oldest church in the Toledo District. It is an impressive structure, constructed with stones taken from a nearby ancient ruin. The Church keeps a permanent missionary in San Antonio, and a priest from Punta Gorda conducts mass every Sunday. Thus, the Church maintains a strong presence. In most villages, a Catholic priest will visit at most once a month, limiting the influence and presence of the Church. The evangelical missions, on the other hand, can overwhelm villages. In San José, for instance, there are currently four Protestant churches vying for converts, some bringing medicines, clothing, and household items down from the United States for their converts. In Santa Cruz, another nearby Mopan village, there have been up to eleven churches competing for converts since the early 1980s.

The strong connection between traditional Maya and Catholic faith in San Antonio was seen at the Christmas nativity scene, where offerings of eggs, beans, and dozens of small crucifixes had been made. It is the Maya Catholic religious culture that maintains the social setting in which these rituals and traditional activities remain acceptable.

## CONCLUSIONS

A Mopan Maya village dominated by pole-thatch house-types does not necessarily indicate a traditional indigenous landscape. One possible explanation for the persistence of folk houses in the face of rapid cultural change is that the pole-thatch house continues to be the most functional structure available to cash-poor villagers, whether they are evangelical converts or Maya Catholics. Be [end p. 91] cause of its functionality, the traditional house often survives the transition from Maya Catholicism to evangelical Protestantism. Other traits that are being abandoned do not have as great a functional role, especially to younger generations, who regard them as old-fashioned and superstitious. When Mopan convert to Protestantism, they must still live in a domestic structure. There is no way to avoid this. However, the same individuals can avoid other activities that are considered Catholic. They can easily stop using stingless beeswax on Maya Catholic holidays, they can easily stop planting black maize, and they can stop visiting traditional healers. Traditional traits that survive among converted individuals (language and the fagina) are more public. Absence from the fagina, for instance, will bring public anger. In the past, such conflicts have been resolved by asking an individual or individuals to leave the village.

The modern Mopan village is neither a closed nor an open cultural landscape. It is a landscape where exceptions to traditional cultural geographical rules abound.

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## RESUMEN

Se supone a menudo que las viviendas indígenas típicas constituyen un indicador de estructuras culturales tradicionales. Se considera normalmente que los poblados indígenas en que predominan las construcciones tradicionales mantienen numerosos rasgos culturales de carácter ancestral en oposición a aquellos en que abundan las viviendas de tipo moderno y nacional. Estos poblados de apariencia moderna parecen haber cambiado su herencia indígena por la cultura del mundo desarrollado. Sin embargo, en el Belize meridional, las investigaciones de campo en tres poblados mayas de Mopan contradicen estas suposiciones. En mis propias investigaciones, apenas encontré correlación entre el tipo de vivienda y otros aspectos de la cultura indígena. En este trabajo se discuten las circunstancias culturales que constituyen factores en contra de una supuesta correlación entre vivienda y cultura.

*Translated by Rafael Espejo-Saavedra [end p. 92]*