

WHO ARE THE MAYA?



“There is no doubt there were many Maya communities in Belize when the Europeans landed.”

– Assad Shoman

13 Chapters of a History of Belize

- Today, there are over 10,000 Mopan and Ke'kchi Maya in 37 Maya villages still living in the Toledo District. Most continue to practice their traditional way of life and culture.
- Their survival depends upon the forests and rivers where they hunt, farm and fish as their ancestors did.
- The Maya, as most indigenous people, are intimately connected to the land. They believe that all humans and nature are one. The vitality and survival of their culture depends on their lands.



WHAT DO THE MAYA WANT?



“ In Africa land was always recognized as belonging to the community. Each individual within society has a right to the use of the land ...”

– Julius K. Nyerere

first President of Tanzania (1964 – 1985)

- According to the written laws of Belize, the Maya have no secure rights to the land they have been living on for hundreds of years.
- Maya, Creole and Garifuna communities alike have all survived Colonial land policies and attitudes meant to keep the best land under the control of a special few.
- With little regard for local communities, government grants land concessions to companies that exploit precious forests and destroy Belize's natural heritage.
- For the Maya - and many other Belizean communities - these development and land “management” policies threaten their way of life.

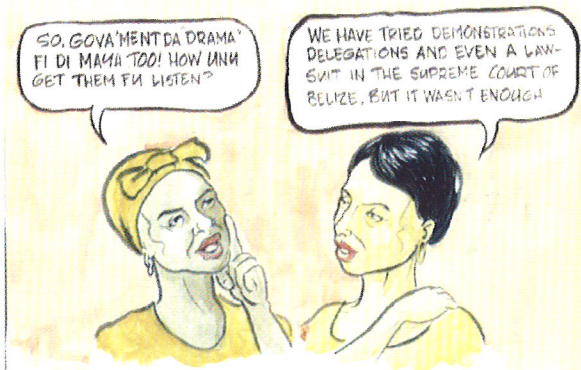


“The Mayas are not proposing to be an autonomous body, but rather the right to be consulted about and control our future.”

Maya Atlas: The Struggle to Preserve Maya land in Southern Belize

- With secure rights to their traditional lands, Maya communities can help prevent land grants and sales to companies and foreigners that do not benefit them or other Belizeans.
- Maya communities would instead be able to promote forestry and other development projects that do not damage the environment and that are beneficial to all Belizeans.
- The World Resource Institute reports that Belize has already lost 65% of its forests. 66% of what remains - almost all of it in Toledo in areas where the Maya live - is threatened.
- A third of Toledo's 10,000 Maya are threatened by unplanned land sales and poorly controlled logging concessions, resulting in pollution and other environmental damage.

WHAT ARE THE MAYA DOING TO CAMPAIGN FOR THEIR RIGHTS?



“The architecture of the dead was used to fashion the National Assembly, but the living Maya have not been allowed to be architects in the fashioning of the nation. The Maya as a people have been effectively excluded from having a deciding voice in constructing Belizean society.”

– Assad Shoman

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- The Maya have filed a petition at the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) to get government to recognize their rights to their lands and culture, and to stop the logging.
- The IACHR is part of the Organization of American States, which is comprised of all the countries in North, Central and South America except Cuba. Belize has been a member since 1991.
- As a member of the OAS, Belize is bound to uphold the human rights of all Belizeans - rights that are set forth in the American Declaration on the Rights and Duties of Man, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, and other human rights treaties.



“ People want to know what the Maya want ... I will tell you. We are seeking the adequate and necessary means to develop our full human potential and dignity as human beings in Belize.”

– Julian Cho (1962 - 1998)

Chairman, Toledo Maya Culture Council

The Toledo Maya Cultural Council (TMCC) was founded in 1978 to:

- pursue and strengthen the principles of human equality;
- safeguard and promote economic, social and educational interests of the Maya;
- secure rights to lands the Maya have been living on and using for hundreds of years; and
- ensure the recognition and representation of Maya people in government policy decisions.

TMCC, the Toledo Alcaldes Association, and other groups are working for goals that will benefit the Maya and all Belizeans:

- **Conservation.** The Maya have always protected the forests in southern Belize. Like other Belizeans, the Maya want development - but not the destruction of their villages and the precious plant and wildlife species that are unique to Belize.
- **Cultural Diversity.** Belize is unique not only for its bio-diversity, but its many different cultures and ethnic peoples - living together in peace. This is our strength as Belizeans. The Maya are seeking only to protect their way of life and their survival as a distinct culture.
- **Eco-tourism.** Belize's tourism industry depends on the legacy of the ancient Maya. But what about the 10,000 Maya who are living in Toledo today? The continued growth of this industry depends on the preservation of Maya lands, culture and traditions.



The Maya:
A Belizean Struggle for
Survival