

## Negotiating Heritage

### Education and Archaeology in Belize

In May 2013, a more than two-thousand-year-old Ancient Maya pyramid at the archaeological site of Nohmul was bulldozed almost to the ground by developers seeking limestone to build roads. Nohmul is located near the predominantly Mestizo and Yucatec Maya village of San Pablo, in the Central American and Caribbean country of Belize. Historically, Belize (formerly British Honduras)<sup>1</sup> was considered the “periphery of the periphery” of the British Empire—an inaccessible territory of limited social and economic interest.<sup>2</sup> Despite Belize’s small profile (8,867 square miles with a population of fewer than three hundred ninety thousand people), the destruction at Nohmul quickly made international news and was the subject of a range of responses and concerns. International news sites and historical and scientific organizations like *National Geographic* decried the damage and emphasized the development threats to such a significant example of humanity’s shared cultural heritage. Foreign archaeologists referenced Nohmul in discussions of endemic archaeological site destruction and the corresponding need for better national oversight and management of heritage, as well as an example of how Belizeans are “distanced from heritage.” Belizean news media quoted politicians and state heritage actors who stressed the criminality of the act, called for harsh penalties, and noted a perceived “insensitivity” of citizens who failed to do their duty of protecting the nation’s heritage. Belizean citizens used the damage at Nohmul to lament social and economic inequalities, bemoan the ineffectiveness of politicians and government institutions, discuss ethnic and racial tensions, and make claims for resources for archaeological and tourism development.<sup>3</sup>

The Nohmul story represents fundamental questions about history, culture, and public memory that resonate on a global scale. What are appropriate and inappropriate ways of connecting with, managing, and using the past? Consider the multiple stakeholders and complex stories surrounding debates about Confederate monuments in the United States, the benefits and negative

impacts of tourism development at Machu Picchu, the histories of museum collecting practices and efforts to repatriate Indigenous objects throughout the world, or the Taliban's dynamited destruction of the Bamiyan Buddhas in Afghanistan. Efforts to define, preserve, research, and teach about culture and history connect the past to the present; these efforts and connections are what many scholars call *heritage*.

People previously conceived of heritage exclusively as those aspects of the past that are valued and passed down (that is, inherited), and/or the tangible objects and places associated with the past. By asking difficult questions about how and why the past is valued, scholars have revealed that heritage is constructed, and it is not universal, natural, static, or objective, nor does it consist simply of things and places. Rather, as noted by Laurajane Smith, "heritage [is] a process of engagement, an act of communication and *an act of making meaning in and for the present*."<sup>4</sup> Understood in this way, heritage is deeply connected to identity and includes the myriad ways individuals, groups, institutions, and states understand, value, and engage with manifestations of culture and history.<sup>5</sup> These manifestations include tangible and intangible forms of the past, such as cultural and historical sites, objects, landscapes, memories, and narratives. People engage with heritage manifestations through a range of practices including visits to culturally significant sites, education programs, scholarly research, management and preservation, tourism, daily practices, and cultural traditions. Heritage engagements are dynamic as cultural identities and the meanings and uses of the past change over time.

Heritage scholarship has shown that heritage constructs and practices occur in multiple intersecting and often contested forms. One form is what Smith refers to as "authorized heritage discourse"<sup>6</sup> and Rodney Harrison refers to as "official heritage"<sup>7</sup>—the latter is the term I employ. These heritage forms are typically thought of as authorized because they are crafted and employed by people with recognized power, like government agents, scholars (for example, archaeologists, historians, anthropologists), and dominant cultural groups. They are structural and ideological in nature because they include institutionalized and legislated forms of control over the past, such as state-sponsored or regulated research, management practices (for example, site development, preservation, and cultural property laws), museum displays, tourism promotion and programming, and education related to culture and history, as well as heritage forms and places (for example, historic sites and objects, historical narratives, and traditions) those in power deem significant. Official heritage discourses are also typically dominant, in that they seek to control and limit how people think about and use culture and history "to make meaning in and

for the present” and often emphasize certain cultural identities and historical narratives over others.<sup>8</sup>

Another form of heritage constructs and practices are those that are more localized, personal, and shared by cultural groups, including storytelling, foodways, traditions, and daily practices, as well as the cultural forms, places, and narratives tied to these (for example, cultural landscapes, sacred spaces, objects of cultural patrimony, and family and group histories). Harrison defines “unofficial heritage” as “a broad range of practices that are represented using the language of heritage, but are not recognized by official forms of legislation,” such as “buildings or objects that have significance to individuals or communities, but are not recognized by the state as heritage” or social practices surrounding these tangible and intangible heritage forms. I refer to the ways individuals and communities identify, value, and engage with historic and cultural places and objects on their own terms and negotiate official heritage discourses as “vernacular heritage practices.” I also refer to shared cultural components that are embodied aspects of group identity as “vernacular heritage.”

*Negotiating Heritage* employs a combination of ethnographic and historical approaches to demonstrate the processes through which cultural actors have crafted and navigated official and vernacular heritage meanings, practices, and narratives in Belize, including the ways different Belizeans employ the concept of heritage to define culture, history, and identity in multiscalar, intersecting, and often conflicting contexts. We cannot truly understand the Nohmul destruction and similar examples of heritage engagements except within a complicated set of dynamics that influence how the past is constructed, preserved, and used by governments, academics, and local people. In Belize, these factors include colonial history and British imperial policies, constructs of governmentality and citizenship, racial and ethnic politics, social and economic development, the interests and agency of descendant and local communities, and the power of international heritage movements.

Official heritage discourses and practices examined in this book include government-supported and sponsored education policies and school curricula related to culture and history, institutionally sanctioned festivals and events, archaeological exploration and research, and the institutions and policies developed to professionalize archaeology and to manage historic and cultural sites, objects, and practices. Vernacular heritage practices examined include the ways local communities react to, reinforce, and complicate official heritage discourses, for example, by manipulating state agendas to advocate for community recognition and resisting curricula and school practices. I also provide examples of vernacular heritage practices in the ways Belizean citizens value,

preserve, and connect with historic places and maintain cultural traditions, by protecting cultural knowledge, continuing marginalized practices like language and foodways, and identifying connections between themselves and past peoples. Thus, in this book, I use the term heritage to mean both the processual definition given by Smith above and the more traditional sense of what people define as historic sites, material culture, and cultural practices.<sup>9</sup> Drawing from archival sources, interviews, and observations I explore etic and emic perspectives on heritage in Belize from the late nineteenth to the early twenty-first century, revealing the complex intersections between official heritage and vernacular heritage engagements.

The communities at the core of this work are two rural Kriol<sup>10</sup> African-descendant villages in north-central Belize, Crooked Tree and Biscayne. Crooked Tree Village is an inland island surrounded by seasonal lagoons. With connecting tributaries in the Belize River valley, the lagoons form a wetlands environment designated the Crooked Tree Wildlife Sanctuary (CTWS) by the Government of Belize in 1984, which is a protected area and tourist attraction comanaged by the Belizean Forestry Department and the Belize Audubon Society. Indigenous Maya people lived in this region from as early as 1100 BCE until Spanish contact in the sixteenth century. In the early eighteenth century, British loggers forcibly brought enslaved African people to the region to increase productivity in timber extraction. Small logwood cutting outposts inhabited originally by loggers and enslaved people grew into larger formal settlements in the Crooked Tree area, with the establishment of a Baptist church and school in 1843.<sup>11</sup> Anthropologist Melissa Johnson suggests that seminal development of Kriol culture and language occurred in Crooked Tree and similar riverine villages as freed and enslaved African peoples and their descendants mixed biologically and culturally with European colonists (through force and agency), adapted to wetland conditions, and developed ways to communicate.<sup>12</sup> Biscayne Village, located one mile south of Crooked Tree on Belize's Northern Highway, was founded in the late 1970s primarily by residents from Crooked Tree interested in living in an area that was more connected to vehicular transportation channels and more accessible to Belize City.

Ancient Maya sites surround Crooked Tree and Biscayne, and community residents have mixed feelings about the meanings and uses of archaeology. This book's research began with a focus on the relationships between Crooked Tree and a community-based archaeology project (the Chau Hiix Archaeological Project [CHAP], which was directed by K. Anne Pyburn [Indiana University] from 1989 to 2007). Although most Crooked Tree residents do not ethnically identify with the nearby Ancient Maya Chau Hiix site, they have long consid-

ered the site a community resource and part of the community's local history and culture—their engagements with the site and archaeological project reveal Kriol cultural practices of adaptation, negotiation, and resistance.

I participated in archaeological research with the CHAP and directed outreach efforts, much of which took place in local schools. I sought to understand how archaeological sites are connected with living people, who both alter the meanings of sites with their cultural practices and are themselves affected by the ideologies and temporalities such sites represent.<sup>13</sup> I observed practices and discourses that left me with questions. How was it that the Kriol children I worked with seemed to know so much about the Ancient Maya but did not easily articulate the same information about their own histories? Why did teachers on the one hand lament the loss of Kriol culture while on the other perpetuate stereotypes about ethnic groups? How did Crooked Tree and Biscayne residents learn about national and local culture and history, and what roles did these constructs play in their lives?

*Negotiating Heritage* argues that archaeology and formal education are particularly significant, interconnected social institutions through which official and vernacular heritage forms and practices are constructed, controlled, and contested. The fields of history, public history, archaeology, and historic preservation share goals to understand the past through scholarly investigation, to protect and preserve remains and records of the past, and to share knowledge with people about the significance of the past through education. While scholars often discuss best practices for accomplishing these goals,<sup>14</sup> there are fewer discussions about the intersections between historic scholarship and primary education. This book fills this intersectional lacuna by combining analysis of schooling and curricula with analysis of archaeological research and site management, enabling me to examine heritage in practice as well as in discourse and theory.

Education and archaeology function as official heritage practices defining culture and history for individuals, local communities, and states. Formal education (for example, curricula, school programs and practices, and education policies), affect how people construct a sense of their place in society, for example by reinforcing and legitimizing official cultural categories and historical narratives. Similarly, archaeology is a formal mechanism by which people become temporally and spatially oriented. Archaeologists add social, political, and economic value to the places and groups they investigate by determining the “significance” of sites and cultural histories and making choices about appropriate ways to engage with past material culture (for example, scientific research and preservation).