

Introduction

When piety meets politics it can be a volatile mix.

—Christiane Amanpour, *The Observer Television*,

August 2007

The Christianity of sixteenth-century Europe came to the Maya of Belize in two major ways. The first, and better known, comprises the efforts of Spanish friars and clergy to convert the Maya to Christianity as part of a larger plan of imperial domination by Spain. The second is rarely considered significant, but must surely have figured in Maya deliberations about what it meant to be Christian. As Belize communities became more and more “frontier” relative to developing centers of power in Yucatan, Guatemala, and lower Central America, the Maya of these communities became more and more vulnerable to non-Spanish Christians: the British, French, Dutch, and other European seafarers, legal or otherwise, who plied the Caribbean, preyed on Spanish shipping, and carried on slaving well into the early eighteenth century. Historical sources tell us that British activity in Belize dates from the seventeenth century, but evidence suggests overwhelmingly (see chapter 5) that knowledge of Belize’s fluctuating coastline—its shallow coastal shelf, barrier reef, and cayes—was built on many decades of sailing experience and ships pilots’ detailed records. Thus, it is entirely reasonable to consider that non-Spanish activities, or at least activities unrelated to official Spanish imperial expansion, had repercussions for Belize as early as the sixteenth century (see fig. o.1).

It is the Spanish encounter with which this book is concerned, owing to the fact that the ruined churches which we excavated at Lamanai and Tipu are the historical product of this encounter. Nonetheless, the nature of the challenges faced by the Maya of Belize extended beyond what the Spanish Christians alone would generate. Even if my proposal about sixteenth-century raids on the Belize coast is regarded with scepticism, there is no doubt that the kinds of Christianity that characterized Europe in the sixteenth century

BELIZE MAYA CHRONOLOGY

Period	Approximate calendar dates
Independence	1981 to present
Self-governing British Crown Colony	1964 to 1981
British Crown Colony	1862-1964
British colonial settlement	1660s to 1862
Spanish colonial	1544 to 1648/1708 (Spanish sovereignty claimed to 1798)
Terminal Postclassic/Contact	1450/1492 to 1544
Late Postclassic	1350 to 1450/1492
Middle Postclassic	1200/1250 to 1350
Early Postclassic	1000 to 1200/1250
Terminal Classic (Maya collapse)	800 to 1000
Late Classic	600 to 800
Middle Classic	450 to 600
Early Classic	250 to 450
Terminal Preclassic	100 B.C. to A.D. 250
Late Preclassic	400 B.C. to 100 B.C.
Middle Preclassic	900 B.C. to 400 B.C.
Early Preclassic	1500 B.C. to 900 B.C.
Archaic	pre-1500 B.C.

Figure 0.1. Belize Maya chronology.

deeply affected events in the Maya lowlands of Belize. This includes the late medieval Christianity of the mendicant friars, with its attendant energy, engagement, and optimism; the authoritarian Christianity that developed in response to the concerns of the Council of Trent; and the radical reform that led to what has come to be called Protestantism. All of these Christianities reached Belize, and to the extent that this book deals with them, it can be called a study of religion.

On the other hand, I devote considerable effort to describing the problems that arise in assuming that “religion” is a viable concept (see chapter 3). Perhaps it is safer to say that the book is about people in Maya communities in Belize who came to call themselves Christians in the sixteenth century, in particular the inhabitants of the towns of Tipu and Lamanai (see map 1.1).

These communities remained active in the seventeenth century, but it was during the pivotal years of the sixteenth century that the Maya encountered, learned about, weighed, wrestled with, and appropriated Christian thought and ideas. Even though historical conditions would change, in terms of diminishing Spanish activity, the encounter with Christianity was pervasive and its impact long-term. In fact, the impetus behind the writing of this book was the recovery of archaeological evidence which suggested that the Maya inhabitants of Tipu and Lamanai considered themselves Christians and remained Christian even in the absence of church or civil authority.

In the chapters that follow, I examine the evidence for how and why the Maya converted to Christianity in the region of Mesoamerica now known as Belize. The “when” we already know, at least in broad outline: the time of Spanish colonization of the New World in the sixteenth century. The “how” and “why” questions—about precisely what constituted conversion or what Spanish colonizers thought conversion would lead to—necessitate turning to the experience of the missionary encounter elsewhere in Mesoamerica, and even elsewhere in the world. This broadened spatial dimension is complemented by extension of the dimension of time, because the Christianization of Europe in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages, from about the fourth to the tenth century A.D., turns out to be highly relevant to an understanding of how people “became Christian.” The contemporary Western world and the history of its expansion are rooted in the process by which indigenous Europeans came to claim themselves as Christian. Although what constituted being Christian differed through time and in space, between interest groups, and especially among individuals, “claiming” Christianity in Mesoamerica and Late Antique Europe was a key process that affected reconfigurations of identity, kin, and tributary (economic) allegiances as well as landscape.

With regard to the towns in the land that became Belize, my thesis is that the Maya remained Christian in the absence of Spanish authority because they saw themselves as Christian. It has been argued that conversion was a matter of survival, or was incomplete (see chapter 11), but these arguments entail two faulty assumptions. The first is that Maya individuals were not interested or intelligent enough to separate the message from the medium; and the second is that the Christian belief of the time was readily apparent to an observer—to someone from Tipu, let’s say—as qualitatively different from extant beliefs prior to the arrival of the Spaniards. In particular, I challenge the idea that Christianity was never properly assimilated by the Maya, mainly because what has been considered to be “proper” is problematic.

I first laid out some of these ideas on Maya encounters with the Christian world view in a paper presented to the Society for Historical Archaeology in 1992, when I was engaged in analyzing the results of the excavations at Tipu.

Since then, I have been able to add information derived from investigations at Lamanai, both my own and those of David Pendergast. For my arguments concerning the intensity and depth of Maya coastal interaction I have been able to draw on my excavations of coastal sites in Belize in the 1970s, and including work carried out in 1986 and between 1990 and 1993. The ideas and insights which are presented in this book are, however, not new to anthropology or in history; they have simply arisen in a new context in which archaeology adds another dimension. I like to think that, in the words of Clifford Geertz, I simply “plunge more deeply into the same things.”¹ In doing so, I do not claim that archaeology is any better or more direct a tool than anthropology or history. My hope, rather, is to be seen to bring archaeological evidence to bear fruitfully not only on the topic of Maya-Spanish interaction in the colonial encounter but also on the processes of conversion in particular, and on what is often called “religious change.”

Whatever the reception to my ideas, the descriptions of the archaeological remains of the churches and their associated finds at Tipu and Lamanai form a useful addition to our knowledge of Maya activities during the early years of Christianization. I am presently at work on a second volume, which presents architectural plans and sections as well as descriptions of the church zone excavations. In this first volume I have allowed my interest to stray beyond the bounds of description, to consider what the discoveries can tell us about changes in Maya beliefs in the early colonial period. At the same time, I have tried to present the material remains in a manner that will allow others to interpret the data independently.

The volume is divided into four parts. Part I consists of the chapters that cover the context of analysis: my approach to the data (chapter 1); the period before Contact (chapter 2); the terminology we use in describing religious behavior and its implications (chapter 3); and what it means to be Christian (chapter 4). Chapter 2, which discusses Yucatan and Belize on the eve of Conquest, draws heavily on the literature of archaeology and ethnohistory and will not always make sense to those outside the field of Maya studies. The chapter does not bear on discussions of the meaning of Christianity but is important in understanding the political and economic organization that provided the context for the colonial encounter and its aftermath, including the Christianization process. The colonial and modern Maya are commonly seen as divided by a deep chasm from the Maya widely known through towering ruins in tropical forests; chapter 2 attempts to bridge this gap, but also to lay to rest a number of myths about the pre-Columbian Maya which the Spaniards believed and called upon in order to legitimize their actions.

Part II comprises coverage of the critical dynamics that affected the Maya-European encounter in Belize. Chapter 5 focuses on the currents of change

in Yucatan, Mexico, and Central America in the early sixteenth century and the implications for the Maya communities of Belize; the chapter also draws attention to the Belize Maya as part of a coastal band of interaction in which maritime travel, trade, and exchange had considerable time depth and generated a distinctive socio-cultural sphere. This, and the distinctive environmental setting represented by Belize's coast, cayes, and atolls, deeply affected the course of the Mayas' encounter with Europeans, in ways that have been overshadowed by scholars' concerns with what was happening in Guatemala, Yucatan, and Mexico. Chapter 6 provides background that is meant to help explain the drive and agendas of the Franciscans who were so instrumental in the dynamics of conversion in Belize. The mendicant orders in the New World have been intensively studied by historians, and I add no newly discovered documentary information. My contribution is to integrate the information gleaned from the documents with my knowledge derived from new archaeological discoveries, for the specific purpose of illuminating the history of the land that became Belize.

Part III consists of three chapters and turns from a concern with historical background to consider the material culture of conquest and conversion. Chapter 7 grapples with how churches have been described in colonial Mesoamerica, and with the problems that have arisen in emphasizing typologies. Chapter 8 and chapter 9 describe the discoveries from the perspectives of Tipu and Lamanai. I assume that not all readers are familiar with Grant Jones's seminal *Maya Resistance to Spanish Rule*,² which describes the colonial encounter in Belize on the basis of documentary research. I therefore take time in the two chapters to contextualize the archaeological discoveries by describing what we know from the documents about the arrival of the Spaniards in Belize, the establishment of *visita* churches, and the awarding to the Spaniards of *encomiendas*—grants to particular Spaniards of Maya labor and tribute. I have kept archaeological and ethnohistorical data separate, and I trust that referencing makes the sources of information clear.

Part IV introduces information beyond that presented in earlier chapters and uses the information as the basis for an assessment of the impact of Christianity. Chapter 10 examines aspects of the Christianization of Europe and draws from this to shed light on what happened in Belize. Chapter 11 considers what it means to be “pagan.” Chapter 12 assesses scholarly and other debates about “religion” and archaeology’s role in this process.

Terms which might not be known to all readers are defined in the glossary. These include Spanish terms for offices and people, archaeological terms, and terms used in anthropology which might differ from the dictionary definition or vary from practices in other disciplines. I normally use the term “colonial” to refer to the period following Columbian contact, although based on general

practice I sometimes use the term “historic.” I should note that Mayanists are moving away from using “historic” to distinguish the period after Columbian contact because the Maya have a long tradition of written history, a fact that makes Western, European-based distinctions, such as historic versus prehistoric, irrelevant. Where I refer to pre-Columbian Maya periods, such as the Classic or Postclassic, figure 0.1 provides details of chronology.

I sometimes use the term “Mayas” rather than “Maya” in cases in which I would like the reader to think in terms of individuals rather than of the group itself. This is admittedly an awkward term, but without knowing what the Maya from different towns or cities or areas called themselves, or without knowledge of individuals’ names, it is an attempt to emphasize the individual over the group. In addition to using the term “Maya” (see chapter 3), I refer to other Mesoamerican cultural or language groups. I use “Aztec” to refer to the people who constituted the empire that the Spaniards faced upon their arrival in central Mexico, but I sometimes use “Nahuas” for the same people when I want to refer to Nahuatl-speakers as opposed to Maya speakers. See the glossary for details. None of these terms is adequate to express the diversity of languages and cultures that characterized Mesoamerica; they serve mainly to distinguish indigenous Americans from Europeans. Where I use “Indian,” or “*indio*,” it is normally with reference to the term as it appears in Spanish documents, although chroniclers sometimes also use “*naturales*.”

Where I employ Spanish-language words or names, accents are used, but where I use Maya-language or Nahuatl words written in the Roman alphabet, I do not use the accents common in the Spanish-speaking world, because these words are not Spanish in origin. An exception is the word “Yucatán,” but the accent here is used only when referring to the Mexican state. With regard to Maya names used in modern Belize, the situation is a bit more complicated, as can be seen in the acknowledgments. My use of accents there is based on knowledge of the individuals involved and whether it is their practice to use accents in their names. With regard to other non-English-language words, such as *encomienda*, *encomendero*, *visita*, or *cah*, among others, for those which I use frequently, I italicize the word at first usage but then cease italicizing in the remainder of the text. All translations not otherwise noted are mine. All photographs not otherwise acknowledged were taken by me or David Pendergast.