

# **Decolonizing Belize: Culture, Racism, and the Societal Legacy of Colonialism <sup>1</sup>**

Assad Shoman, April 2025

Prepared for the UB/CBU International Social Work Research Conference 2025, May 7-8, 2025.

**B**elize was a British colony until 21 September 1981, having been controlled by the United Kingdom for almost two centuries. It has hardly begun the process of decolonization, principally because its people still have not come to terms with the fact that the nation state of Belize was created by colonialism, slavery and other forms of exploitation of labour, and by racism. Why is it taking so long to face these issues?

Belize is special in many beautiful ways, as visitors might have a chance to enjoy, but it also claims distinction for its persistent culture of colonialism, being

- the only country that still has a massive popular and official annual celebration of a battle that permitted the slave masters to perpetuate slavery in its cruellest form for another forty years.
- the only former colony whose flag glorifies the days of colonialism, including slavery and the exploitation of its natural resources for the gain of the colonialists.
- the only country whose anthem does not extol those who fought against oppression but those who fought to preserve slavery.
- a country that did not officially recognize and celebrate emancipation as a milestone in the struggle against slavery, nor the indigenous resistance to genocide, until the third decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.
- A country whose flag and anthem, and other public space manifestations, elevate and celebrate colonialism.

---

<sup>1</sup> This is a rich subject that one can only begin to skim in a short essay. I will concentrate here on the history that ensured the persistence of colonialism long after the independence of Belize.

The legacy of colonialism in Belizean culture and society is indeed strong and healthy and attempts to rectify this persistent aberration often meet with intense opposition.

In 1985, four years after independence, the Minister of Education introduced into the schools a new history book that for the first time exposed the historical facts about slavery and capitalist exploitation. There was significant elite denunciation of it, and the newspaper editor of the Minister's party wrote asking him to ban the book, explaining that "Slavery was bad, yes, but not bad as all that. It can be painted up to look better. (Where would all the Creoles and Garifuna be if it wasn't for slavery? Not here, certainly. Not even alive.)".<sup>2</sup>

And in February 2025, yes, just three months ago, the House of Representatives passed a law<sup>3</sup> sanctifying the flag and the anthem, taking it through all stages in one sitting, thus avoiding any discussion by the people, and even the *Amandala* newspaper, which grew out of the Black Power movement in Belize and is the only media that consistently champions anti-colonialism, only commented on the concern expressed by the Leader of the Opposition about government's regulation of the commercial use of the national symbols<sup>4</sup>.

The lyrics of what was much later to be chosen as the national anthem were written in 1925 at the height of colonialism, and yet they depict the country as "a tranquil haven of democracy". A decade later the labour revolts that occurred throughout the British Caribbean started in Belize, where workers' rights were virtually non-existent and where poverty was extreme.<sup>5</sup> So no, it was not a haven of democracy. That is not the only blatant lie in the lyrics. "The blood of our sires which hallows the sod, brought freedom from slavery oppression's rod" refers to the incident in 1798 (see below) which in fact allowed the slavemasters to continue enslaving the people for forty years more; it did not bring freedom. Moreover, no "sires" were reported killed or wounded, and the

---

<sup>2</sup> The full text of the letter appears as an Appendix. The truth is, let's face it, that a lot of what is said there would be endorsed by many leaders, including teachers, even today. Unfortunately, it did not "blow away the Belize we all know and love," i.e. British colonial Belize. Much of *that* Belize is still with us.

<sup>3</sup> National Symbols Act, 2025.

<sup>4</sup> *Amandala*, "National Symbols Bill among 6 new legislations passed by the House," 12 April 2025. <https://amandala.com.bz/news/national-symbols-bill-among-6-new-legislations-passed-by-the-house/>

<sup>5</sup> O. Nigel Bolland, *Colonialism and Resistance in Belize*, Cubola Productions, 1988, pp. 172 – 195.

only blood that hallowed the sod in those days was that of enslaved persons being mercilessly whipped.

And the chorus, which calls out “Arise! ye sons of the Baymen's clan” could only be referring to the depiction of enslaved peoples as “more like the clansmen of a Scottish chief” than slaves, as stated by a prominent elite Creole male in 1898<sup>6</sup>. Then comes the clincher: “Our fathers, the Baymen, valiant and bold drove back the invader; this heritage hold”. First off, the Baymen were the white slavemasters, not our fathers, and while they indeed repulsed an “invader” (that Britain at that time recognized as the legitimate sovereign, incidentally) the fact is that the British themselves were twice invaders: of the Belizean land, where they dispossessed the remaining indigenous people that had resisted Spanish invasion, and invaders of lands in Africa to dominate and enslave people and bring them to work in Belize. And “this heritage” in 1798 was slavery and pillage. So why should I sing those lying words, especially if I am a woman and my gender does not even exist in the song?

The Belizean flag, meanwhile, tests the honesty of anyone, including servicewomen and men, required to salute it. The flag features a coat of arms in the centre, with several images relating to the slave economy of the original British settlement. The very fact that it depicts two men is already problematic; where are the women? That those figures are then racialised poses enormous problems in a country that consciously seeks to promote itself as multi-ethnic and multi-cultural.

The origins of the design go back to a decision by a Public Meeting<sup>7</sup> on 2 November 1819 which has most of the features in the present one, with the two men obviously depicting men of African descent and bearing tools of the woodcutting trade. There is one very similar design said to be granted by royal warrant of 28 January 1907, which describes the two men as “Negro”. Both have the motto “*Sub Umbra Floreo*”.

---

<sup>6</sup> Anne Macpherson, “Imagining the Colonial Nation: Race, Gender, and Middle-Class Politics in Belize, 1888-1898,” in Nancy P. Appelbaum, Anne S. Macpherson, and Karin Alejandra Rosemblatt, editors, *Race & Nation in Modern Latin America*, University of North Carolina Press 2003.p. 115.

<sup>7</sup> This was an early form of government whereby the propertied white men (in 1814 expanded to include “free coloured” who owned one slave and possessed the value of 200 pounds) passed basic laws for the settlement.

The Coat of Arms made law in February is basically the same design, with all the symbols of the exploitation of the forests and of a grand ship taking the produce to Britain, and the men are now described as one “Afro-Belizean” and the other, painted a whiter shade of black, as “Mestizo-Belizean”. The motto continues the call to “flourish” in the shade of the mahogany tree.<sup>8</sup> Whether people thus pigmented are the only “Belizeans” recognised as legitimately inhabiting the territory is an open question. It recalls an incident a few years ago when an order of flags from Taiwan had both men painted yellow, causing them to be denounced as “fake”, because “the men on it should look brown and black”.<sup>9</sup>

The flag itself, which was a historical compromise (adding the colour red) rapidly reached in the highly un-tranquil days of 1981<sup>10</sup>, suggests that those two parties are locked in as the only or the preferential parties recognized by the nation. Is that democratic?

And if one were inclined to wax satirical over something so precious as the National Symbols Act, look no further than Section 11:

11. Notwithstanding the provisions of any Act to the contrary, the copyright in the words and music of the National Anthem and in the design of the National Flag and the National Coat of Arms are vested in the Crown in perpetuity.<sup>11</sup>

Really? The Crown? What Crown?

---

<sup>8</sup> Whether during or after slavery, only a handful of men flourished from the labour of workers in the logging industry.

<sup>9</sup> See for example <https://www.7newsbelize.com/sstory.php?nid=30099>; <https://www.7newsbelize.com/sstory.php?nid=50356>; [Made in 1981, The Belize Flag is Standardized in 2019 - Ambergris Caye Belize Message Board](#)

<sup>10</sup> That independence year saw weeks of protest, including the imposition of a state of emergency, and the Opposition boycotted the ritual independence conference in London where the Constitution was agreed, and generally anything to do with independence. It relented on the issue of the national symbols, and the much-hated “PUP flag” was subjected to a compromise by putting strips of red (the Opposition’s party colour) at the top and bottom of the flag. Curiously, that strip tended to expand when the UDP was in power. The new law has now confined the two horizontal red borders to “one-fifth of the total width of the flag”: National Symbols Act, 2025, Schedule 1.

<sup>11</sup> National Symbols Act, 2025, section 11.

Am I making too much of a song and dance about a simple anthem and flag? Maybe not, when you consider that the children learn to sing it in school and are taught that it reflects the essence of their homeland. And now that pack of lies has been made law! The irony is that a very conservative Peoples Constitution Commission appointed by the government, which was referenced for other reasons by the sponsor of the Bill, was a month later circulating its draft report in which it recommends<sup>12</sup> “that the flag be changed (since it is not gender neutral and promotes colonialism) to a more universal symbolic flag [and] that the national anthem, formerly Land of the Free be one subject to a national competition which does not associate itself with colonialism ‘ye sons of the Baymen clan’.”

### **Perpetuating Colonialism**

What is it about Belize that colonialism was so successful, particularly among the people who articulate the dominant culture, in implanting itself so firmly in the popular imagination? Every colony has its own peculiar history of colonial implantation; what made Belize especially susceptible to colonial mental domination until well after independence?

Like many countries of the Americas, Belize was part of an area that was first invaded by Spanish forces and then colonized by other European countries, in this case Britain. Originally densely populated by indigenous people, most of the ethnic cleansing was carried out by the Spaniards, with the British doing some mopping up. The British settlers then brought from Jamaica people who had been captured in Africa by Europeans, transported to the Americas and enslaved by the British, and they established a slave “settlement in the Bay of Honduras” ruled from Britain by the British government. The political economy was based on slavery until 1834 and then on an extractive capitalism for which the enslaved people were trained to toil in a four-year period of apprenticeship.

Every nation has a myth of origin, some event that is understood to have given birth to the nation or that solidified and guaranteed its existence. Whichever group of people take upon themselves the right to decide what that event was will exercise significant control over the imagining of the

---

<sup>12</sup> Compilation of the PCC Recommendations, 26 March 2025.

nation. In Belize, this occurred in the late 19th century, when the elite was formed by British residents and a group of people who were mostly a product of the intermixing of slaveowners and enslaved, here called “elite Creoles” to differentiate them from the working-class Creoles.<sup>13</sup>

They decided that the event that would become the origin myth for the country of British Honduras (as it then was) was an incident that occurred in 1798 when the British settlers, aided by warships and men sent from Jamaica by the British government, repulsed yet another Spanish attempt to expel them from what the British agreed was Spanish territory. In 1898, the centenary year of the event, that elite consecrated “The Battle of Saint George’s Caye” as the birth of the nation within the British Empire, and they succeeded in carrying this origin myth forward until today.<sup>14</sup>

The elite Creole supported the British settlers in the colony in stifling the attempt of working class people in 1888 to commemorate emancipation, the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the end of slavery, denouncing the attempt as racially divisive.<sup>15</sup> The working people’s uprising in 1894 finally pushed the elite Creole to join the British residents in consolidating the 1798 event as the origin myth. The message to the rebel workers was that just as master and slave fought together as brothers to repel the Spaniards, so too must workers and masters work together in harmony. And the fact that the enslaved remained so even after the victorious battle? Well, the workers could figure that out, and they did.

In 1898 too there was an attempt to change the symbolism in the design of the Coat of Arms, from that of two “Negroes” labouring for their white masters, to one of black and white together in the same trench. The Creole elite proposed a special stamp issue to commemorate the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the battle, depicting a black soldier and a white one clasping hands over a banner

---

<sup>13</sup> Evan X Hyde (*Knocking our own ting*, 1969) insisted that African descendants should not be called “Creoles” but African Belizeans, but his attempts to establish this new nomenclature were not successful.

<sup>14</sup> A good summary of how the “Creole middle class” succeeded in having that narrative established, overriding the attempts of black working class people to have Emancipation celebrated, is in Anne Macpherson’s “Imagining the Colonial Nation” op cit., pp. 112 – 127.

<sup>15</sup> It is instructive that a hundred years later, when SPEAR launched a campaign to commemorate the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of emancipation, a Black Minister of government ridiculed the initiative, saying it was old history that need not be revived.

proclaiming "Shoulder to Shoulder". The Queen was not amused, and rejected the plea<sup>16</sup>. But the idea of having men of two colours represented in the coat of arms perdured, as we have seen, and they went back to being woodcutters.

And the "10th" (after the day in September when the British victory is celebrated) will be honoured again this year. The fact that it celebrates an event that enabled the slave-owners to continue their evil system for 40 more years does not seem to faze many people. It's an occasion for bacchanal and carnival. It's cool.

The process of making slavery in Belize cool began even during slavery. In 1790 the British agent there explained that slaves were such "by choice only".<sup>17</sup> In 1823, three years after a major slave revolt, and faced with denunciations from abolitionists in England, the Baymen referred to the 1798 battle and declared, unfazed by the irony, that "there appeared a sacred tie between the Slave and the Master, which *bound* the one to the other".<sup>18</sup> They explained that this evinced "the marked preference of these faithful Slaves to their state of bondage than to the freedom offered by the Spaniards".<sup>19</sup> Yet it was during these years after the independence of Central America, that almost 10% of male enslaved persons evinced their preference for freedom by escaping to Peten or beyond.<sup>20</sup>

Yet the myth of slave/master brotherhood persisted, and a hundred years later Monrad Metzgen, a public officer in Belize who founded the Loyal and Patriotic Order of the Baymen (L&POB) that organized the annual "10th" celebrations, wrote a book "Shoulder to Shoulder" that celebrated the

---

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., p. 121.

<sup>17</sup> O. Nigel Bolland, *The Formation of a Colonial Society, Belize, From Conquest to Crown Colony*, Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore, 1977, p. 77.

<sup>18</sup> The "sacred tie" was the whip and the laws, and the preachings of some Christians justifying slavery.

<sup>19</sup> Shoman, *13*, p. 118.

<sup>20</sup> This prompted the Superintendent in 1825 to report that "the Negroes ... make no secret of their thoughts on desertion", that the number of desertions had reached around 120, and that those who escaped often visited the settlement from Peten. He feared that members of the Militia, "composed almost wholly of Black Pensioners, have ever shewn great repugnance to interfere between Master and Slave in the apprehension of deserters." O. Nigel Bolland, *Formation*, pp. 78 – 79. Before 1834, hundreds had succeeded in escaping.

fantasy of enslaved peoples and their masters fighting together like brothers. He “had an abiding faith in the country’s British colonial connection.”<sup>21</sup> Little wonder he was made an Officer of the Most Excellent Order of the British Empire in 1946. And perhaps not surprising that he was posthumously granted the Order of Distinction by the government of Belize in 2009, nor that the motto of the Belize Defence Force is “Shoulder to Shoulder”.

## **The Staying Power of Propaganda**

What has made it possible for myths like “slavery in Belize existed in name only” and “masters and slaves fought together shoulder to shoulder” to continue to thrive? We have to recognize that the British were good at sweetening their oppression:

We’ve known for long that ‘there ain’t no black in the Union Jack’. But it was not in vain that Lord Cromer boasted that the British ‘possess in a very high degree the power of acquiring the sympathy and confidence of any primitive races with which they are brought into contact’. Yes, colonizers love to be loved, and in Belize, as in their other colonies, the British created enough Anglophiles to make them believe, perhaps, that their Empire was in truth a benign civilizing force”.<sup>22</sup>

What was the message of the colonizers? It was first developed in relation to their colonies in Africa and Asia, where there were millions of people whose lives and livelihoods were destroyed by European conquest, resulting in the Euro-American slave trade, the despoilation of their resources and the destruction of their economies and modes of living, including their religions. The subjected peoples were then told that the Europeans brought civilization to them, including superior languages and religions, along with goods from the developed world and trade, and baubles bangles and beads. In carrying out this attempt at indoctrination, the colonizers had to use a lot of force, and arrest and kill millions of people, because the people had millennial cultures to

---

<sup>21</sup> Lawrence Vernon, *The Monrad Metzgen Story*, Belize City, 2019.

<sup>22</sup> Assad Shoman, *A History of Belize in 13 Chapters*, 1<sup>st</sup> edition, Angelus Press 1994, Introduction. The first quote is the name of a book by Paul Gilroy.



sustain their resistance to the imposition of foreign ideologies that impoverished and enslaved them.

In the Caribbean, including Belize, the situation was much different. Here the colonizers had substantially reduced, but never conquered or obliterated, the indigenous populations, and they had brought people captured thousands of miles away and done everything possible to strip them of their beliefs and cultures and languages and imposed, as if on a new slate, the languages, beliefs and cultures of the conquerors. It became much more difficult, then, to rebel against that imposed culture, and it was only the human desire and need for freedom that enabled the people to rebel against their oppressors. But they were forced to do so using the instruments of the oppressors, including, to a large extent, their language and religion.

The British largely succeeded, therefore, in Belize as in their other Caribbean colonies, in making some of their oppressed subjects feel pride at being part of the British Empire, and even to feel loyalty to it. This, in part, explains Belizeans going off to fight for Britain under the Union Jack in two world wars, although in both cases they learnt that they were not valued as human beings by those they risked their lives for.

Even up to the 1960s children in school learned to sing “Rule Britannia” and their biggest treat every year was on 10 September, when they would march in the parade led by the “L&POB”, the Baymen no longer the white slave masters but the black and brown men descendants of slaves, who would deliver to the white Governor for transmission to the white Queen 5000 miles away an Address of Loyalty.

The nationalist movement began by denouncing colonialism and sending messages to the Queen condemning her reign as “the most despicable form of government ever inflicted on a helpless people”.<sup>23</sup> Movement leaders were very clear about the imperial purpose of controlling the minds of the oppressed:

---

<sup>23</sup> PUP telegram to the Queen, September 1952, cited in Assad Shoman, “Birth of the Nationalist Movement”, *Journal of Belizean Affairs*, Vol. 2, 1973, Benex Print, Belize, pp. 3 – 40.

Physical slaves are often a distinct liability to the owner. Mental slaves are slaves in the most profitable way, doing their master's bidding without hope of reward and without desire for fight and insurrection. This is the form of slavery that Britain maintains in her colonies, ... 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.<sup>24</sup>

Nor were the *independistas* originally shy about proclaiming the need for more than just reform: "Revolution is right - if there is oppression, if there is a reasonable chance of success and if there is no possible alternative,"<sup>25</sup> asserted George Price.

The fact that there was no revolution—not even the peaceful, constructive kind later proclaimed by Price—can be explained, apart from the power of the Empire over the bodies and minds of the people, by something unique to Belize: the manipulation by the British and then by Belizeans themselves of the territorial claim of neighbouring Guatemala to Belize,<sup>26</sup> which became one reason for the enduring division in the independence movement.

The split in the movement occurred in 1956, largely because of ideological differences about how to interact with Empire. One wing, which included most of the officers of the independence party, the People's United Party, wanted to start cooperating with the imperial government, even to the point of agreeing to consider being part of the "British West Indies Federation", while the other

---

<sup>24</sup> Leigh Richardson, soon to be PUP Chairman, in *The Belize Billboard*, 17 August 1950.

<sup>25</sup> Speech by George Price, Historic Leader of the PUP, cited in a speech cited by Richardson, *The Belize Billboard*, 17 June 1950.

<sup>26</sup> When the Central American nations became independent in 1821, the Spaniards had already abandoned their active claim to the territory, and Guatemala later claimed it as an inheritance from Spain. It abandoned this claim by a treaty with the British in 1859, but because the British refused to honour an arrangement to pay Guatemala £50,000, Guatemala revived the claim in the 1940s, and the British later tried to get Belize to agree to pay for Britain's omission first by supporting Belize's subordination to Guatemala and then by pressuring Belize to cede land to it. Belizeans took their case to the UN, as much against Britain as Guatemala, and succeeded in achieving independence with British troops stationed in Belize to prevent a possible invasion by Guatemala. The troops were to stay for no longer than nine months, but at the insistence of the USA (which had traditionally supported Guatemala's claim and was fearful of Belize turning to Cuba for support) they stayed for 13 years.

wing, which retained the support of the members and the control of the party, maintained the party's traditional opposition to that federation and its demand for independence<sup>27</sup>.

The political movement for ridding Belize of colonialism, then, was ripped in two, and it remained so until Belize achieved independence in 1981. That this was the declared intention of the colonial power is not in doubt. The colonial rulers insisted on a strong two-party system in Belize as in their other colonies, seeing the division of peoples' loyalties into two parties along non-class lines as a safeguard against radical change.<sup>28</sup>

In the meantime, and from as early as 1961, after the devastation of a hurricane made Belize more dependent than ever on British finance, Price began to abandon his sweeping anti-British stance, along with the party's support for radical trade union positions. The unfolding of the Anglo-Guatemalan dispute in the 1970s, with the Guatemalan military government thrice credibly threatening to invade the territory and the British reinforcing their garrison to defend that remnant of empire, only served to intensify the feeling of utter dependence on the British.<sup>29</sup> Many Belizeans then felt *gratitude*<sup>30</sup> toward the colonizer that only thirty years before had been accurately described as "the most despicable form of government ever inflicted on a helpless people".

How do Belizeans break the mental chains that imprisoned them through 180 years of British rule and of an education system designed to make them dependent and uncritical defenders of the very system that oppressed them? How to redirect the success the British had in making people from north to south of Belize feel they were part of a British nation that had its rulers 5000 miles away

---

<sup>27</sup> Whatever may be said about the pros and cons of Federation, and some of the finest Caribbean anti-colonial minds favoured it, in Belize it became the difference between those who supported and those who opposed the British.

<sup>28</sup> Assad Shoman, *I3*, p. 168. In 1959, for example, a Commissioner appointed by the British Government to make recommendations with regard to constitutional advance in Belize stated that the essence of the British parliamentary system of government (which they assumed the colonized must accept as their own) is the existence of two parties that can credibly form a government at any time, and he found the dominance of the PUP in the 1954 and 1957 elections so disturbing that he mentioned this as a major reason for advising against self-government.

<sup>29</sup> Elsewhere I have called this the harrier mentality, after the Harrier jets that the UK brought into Belize, creating a feeling of dependence and gratitude to the British for "saving Belize", when it was the duplicity of the British that got Belize in that position in the first place.

<sup>30</sup> Malcolm X asks, "How can you thank a man for giving you what's already yours? How then can you thank him for giving you only part of what is yours?"

and instead make them feel part of their own nation where all have equal worth and are afforded equal opportunities?

*No es facil.*

The tragedy of Belize, and this it has in common with other states in the Americas, is that it segued smoothly, and largely by its own volition, at least that of its leaders, from being subjects of a dying imperialism to being dependent on an all too vibrant one, from the bosom of the UK to the clutches of the USA.

The independence leaders themselves wished it so. In the early days of the independence movement its leaders taught their followers to sing *God Bless America* rather than *God Save the Queen*.<sup>31</sup> One might argue that George Price at least meant the continent and not the racist country that insisted on appropriating the name for itself, and it was done to bait the British governor, but still. You end up thinking it's the US of A. And when your leaders start travelling to "the States" even before independence and soliciting the help of their capitalists to develop your country, well, you're asking for it.

Price himself was deeply convinced that the only way for Belize to develop was to entice US capital to invest in Belize and "modernize" the economy, and he accordingly played the cold war tune to attract US investment. In an address to the Economic Club of Detroit in 1970, reiterating themes he had advanced to the Michigan Legislature in 1967, Price spoke about "the ideological struggle in the Americas ... between the armed and violent revolution emanating from Havana and the peaceful constructive revolution ... in democratic countries like Belize and the United States of America." He suggested that US investment in Belize could help win this struggle for the west, and outlined the "impressive incentive attractions" which Belize offered to US investors.<sup>32</sup>

---

<sup>31</sup> Even when the leaders chose their own anthem (Land of the Gods) the words were extremely patriarchal, and glorified colonialism and slavery.

<sup>32</sup> Cited in Assad Shoman, *Party Politics in Belize, 1950 – 1986*, Cubola Productions, Benque Viejo del Carmen, 1987, p. 31.

Indeed, the USA had long since penetrated the minds of Belizeans through the education system<sup>33</sup> and through popular culture (comic books, cinema, song, corn flakes packages, chewing gum, etc.). Most of the business transactions were also with the USA. This influence increased dramatically after independence, with hundreds of thousands travelling to the USA, to visit, to study, to live.

Perhaps the most powerful and enduring tool of imperialist penetration and mind control, however, was the introduction of the boob tube, which occurred in Belize just before independence.<sup>34</sup> No-one needs to be told how much that instrument was able to flood people's minds with the images, whether in movies, cartoons, news reports, documentaries, or, importantly, ads, that made "Western" and particularly dominant US culture appear to be the epitome of goodness and greatness to which all who wished to be civilised should aspire.<sup>35</sup>

One other post-independence shock awaited Belizeans. Their leaders had promised "with independence more development," and trumpeted the fact that Belize would then be able to have recourse to the great international financial institutions like the World Bank and the IMF and the several UN agencies that would guarantee development finance. It didn't take them too long to find out that these institutions were created by the same colonial and imperial powers to serve their own interests and to continue to control the resources of their former colonies by other means, including perpetual debt—reminiscent of the debt mechanism used by the former slave masters to control the freed persons after emancipation.

---

<sup>33</sup> In the "Church/State" arrangement that blighted the education system, most of the schools were Catholic and run by Jesuits and other religious outfits out of the USA. In 1935 the British Governor complained to the Colonial Office that "the whole colony is largely influenced by the comparative proximity of the US, and the people as a whole are more American than British in their outlook. This may be due to a limited extent to the cinema, but is more directly attributable to the influence of trade and education. All of the Roman Catholic priests and nuns, who are responsible for the education of more than half the population, are American, and the children of the better classes, who are sent abroad for their education, go more often to the US than to Great Britain". Cited in *13 Chapters*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, pp. 153-154.

<sup>34</sup> For an interesting and amusing report on this phenomenon see "Brukdown" Magazine, number 6, 1981: <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1cbxO5QZ6APqAFgpJARsZer8w5PzJNlh/view>

<sup>35</sup> There are thousands of studies that show the ways television and other media manage to control thinking, but a favourite of mine remains *Para leer al Pato Donald*, a book published in Chile in 1970 by Ediciones Universitarias de Valparaíso, belonging to the Pontifical Catholic University of Valparaíso, during the brief flowering of democratic socialism under the government of Salvador Allende. It was published in the USA by Pluto Press in 2020: Ariel Dorfman and Armand Mattelart, *"How to Read Donald Duck: Imperialist Ideology in the Disney Comic"*.

## The Consequences of Colonialism

By its very nature colonialism is racist: you don't travel thousands of miles to dominate a people unless you think they are inferior to you. Your job is then to convince them that they are, so that your domination need not always be by force, although force will always be the ultimate guarantor of a continuing colonialism: witness the millions killed by the British, the French, the Belgians to maintain their colonies. One of the enduring consequences of colonialism is therefore the internalization by the colonized of the thinking of the colonizer, displayed in feelings of inferiority and dependence.

Franz Fanon speaks about “the inferiority complex so subtly instilled by oppression”<sup>36</sup> and explains:

But the men who are prey to racism, the enslaved, exploited, weakened social group—how do they behave? What are their defence mechanisms? ... Because no other solution is left it, the racialized social group tries to imitate the oppressor and thereby to deracialise itself. The “inferior race” denies itself as a different race. It shares with the “superior race” the convictions, doctrines, and other attitudes concerning it.<sup>37</sup>

Colonialism inflicted a psychology of dependence which is more difficult to shake than the proverbial Sisyphean task and which has crippled our collective imaginations. This is what we have to retake. George Lamming explains that “the political sovereignty of a people is impossible unless it rests upon an authentic cultural base created by its working people”.<sup>38</sup> He posits that the imagination, individual or collective, is the site of resistance to colonial narratives and oppressive systems.

---

<sup>36</sup> Franz Fanon, *Towards the African Revolution – Political Essays*, Grove Press, 1967, New York, p.121.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 38.

<sup>38</sup> George Lamming, *Conversations*, Richard Drayton and Andaiye (Editors), Karia Press 1992, p. 225.

The colonized mind must break free of the limitations imposed by colonial history to "re-envision" one's own reality. This self-expression born of new imaginings is what makes it possible to exercise self-determination and collectively seek a nationhood different from the one designed by the colonizer.

A few years ago I sent a passage of a hundred words about the “10<sup>th</sup>” myth being used to prop up a colonial version of history to a graphic artist, Carlos “Lito” Quiroz, and he promptly sent back this:



Our young teachers and intellectuals are called to become subversive traitors to the tradition that expects them to manage, like the good slavery overseers, the intellectual enslavement of their own people.

Always bear in mind that “the West” was built by genocide, slavery, racism and colonialism. They constructed a system to create and maintain their power and wealth, and you inherited that system. Remember what was the purpose of that system that is now in your hands: what are you going to do with it? Can you take the same system that was designed and refined over centuries to oppress and exploit and use it for liberation, for the achievement of freedom justice and equality? The same constitution, the same laws, the same principles, the same social structures?

The same history?

The British, for example, are famous for congratulating themselves for the abolition of slavery. Apart from the fact that they did not do so out of the goodness of their heart,<sup>39</sup> the British legislators actually paid substantial sums of money to the slavemasters for the loss of property entailed in abolition. Not only did they not compensate the enslaved people for their years of servitude, but they forced them to work four<sup>40</sup> more years for their masters to help pay the compensation to the owners.

Perhaps more importantly, those four years, aptly called “Apprenticeship” were used by the exploiters to acclimatize the people to continue to work for their masters not as chattel slaves but as wage slaves. In Belize two major mechanisms were used to ensure the continuation of slavery. The most important, because the most essential and enduring, was to deny land to the freed people.

Shortly after Apprenticeship ended, supposedly enabling the freed persons to abandon their former masters, the Colonial Secretary issued instructions to the Superintendent to stop giving out grants of land for free as before. This was “calculated to meet the new exigencies of society” after emancipation, this being necessary because access to land would “discourage labour for wages”.<sup>41</sup> Without land to till, and with the only game in town being logging, what could the “emancipated” do but continue to work in the forest for the same boss?

But that was not enough. The pre-colonial state<sup>42</sup> then passed a series of laws embodying oppressive systems of “truck” and “advance” which even British commentators decried as forcing

---

<sup>39</sup> In 1831 in Jamaica, a rebel army of some 60,000 enslaved people used an underground network based around the Baptist church to launch an uprising that shook the foundations of the slave colony. “Henry Bleby, a British Methodist minister, said of the revolt, “The spirit of freedom had been so widely diffused that if the abolition of slavery were not speedily effected by the peaceable method of legislative enactment, the slaves would assuredly take the matter into their own hands, and bring their bondage to a violent and bloody termination.”: <https://caricomreparations.org/the-role-of-the-slave-revolts-in-ending-slavery/>

<sup>40</sup> The law said six, but fear of further revolts shortened the process by two years.

<sup>41</sup> Nigel Bolland and Assad Shoman, *Land in Belize, 1765 – 1871*, Institute of Social and Economic Research, UWI, Kingston, 1975, pp. 60 - 61.

<sup>42</sup> Belize did not officially become a colony until 1862.



them to “become virtually enslaved for life”.<sup>43</sup> The colonial laws that enforced this forced labour remained in force until the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>44</sup>

Still not enough, with land denied and freedom of labour curtailed, to ensure that the supposedly freed workers would not find other means of sustenance, the Public Meeting in July 1838 “Resolved that all Sunday Markets in this Settlement be from henceforth totally abolished,”<sup>45</sup> thereby reducing the ability of small farmers to market their products.

The freedmen were forced in many ways, therefore, to continue working for their former masters in the forests. But such is the nature of British colonialism that they were not satisfied with this victory. On top of that, they created and pedalled the myth that black people were especially physically attuned to forestry work, and not only that, but that they themselves preferred such work to tilling the soil, which they regarded as unmanly and effeminate, more suitable for people like the “Indians” (the indigenous) and the “mestizos”. Our amazement at the lengths the colonialists go to control the minds of the colonized is only exceeded by the realization of discovering that they find willing hawkers of their ideas among the colonized themselves.

How do we fight against this? How do we turn the tide?

The first thing is *not to forget*. Not forget that the country was built on genocide, slavery, colonialism and racism. Not be fooled by the framings of its history by the colonialists. Emancipation, for example, was not a solution or reversal of the racist oppression that it claimed to end, but merely the harbinger of different ways to oppress and exploit black people. That is why they were denied land and markets.

The next thing is not to take for granted the outcomes of that colonialism and regard them as sacred. Take land for example. This land was peopled by indigenous people who were mostly

---

<sup>43</sup> Bristowe, Lindsay W. and Philip B. Wright, *The Handbook of British Honduras, for 1888 – 1889*, Blackwood, London, 1888, p. 199.

<sup>44</sup> Assad Shoman, *Birth*, op. cit.

<sup>45</sup> Bolland and Shoman, *Land in Belize*, op. cit., p. 64.

cleansed by the Spanish invaders, but they did not have a system of land titles that the British later brought to appropriate the land for themselves and then deny it to their enslaved workers. From the very beginnings of the British settlement land ownership was distinguished by its extreme inequality, with a tiny minority always owning most of the land. Before and after independence, that tiny minority have been mostly foreigners. The result is that most Belizeans cannot get the land they need to cultivate or to live on.

The problem is that Belizeans now, and since they began to demand freedom from colonialism, have not thought it fit or proper to question that situation nor to reverse it. They *take for granted* that the laws they inherited with independence and the constitution that protected those laws are sacred, and somehow even right, and should not therefore be questioned. And so it is not surprising that in both the constitutional reform episodes we have had since the turn of the century, no-one questions the laws of property enshrined in the independence constitution that in effect legalized the pillage of Belizean land by the British colonizer.

One can extend this paradigm to any aspect of today's reality that can be traced to the birth of the nation. The gross inequality in the society that seems to be taken for granted and that has increased since independence. The increase in poverty levels over the years. The persistent racism against indigenous people and poor African descendants. The exploitation of natural resources. The accumulation of wealth by a very few. The acceptance of the property laws and the economic laws that sanction inequality.

What we have here is the *normalisation of injustice*, so that for example only a handful of people take seriously the demand for reparations for slavery. No one questions the class divisions in the society, nor, for example, the class composition of those in prison, even when everybody knows that the biggest criminals and drug dealers are among the rich and propertied class.

That is partly because people have become *afraid of the truth*, afraid to speak the truth, afraid to hear the truth. This fear of questioning is something ingrained in the individual through schooling and in the society through punishment. What we see happening in the USA right now is only a

caricatured reflection of what happens here all the time, except that as good colonial subjects *we have learnt to censure ourselves*, so no-one needs to censure us.

The sad thing about this is not that it's gone on for so long but that its exposure has been made explicit time and time again for a hundred years, from the days of Soberanis and Leigh Richardson and George Price, through the movements of UBAD, PAC, SPEAR and others.

I know that there are some teachers throughout the length and breadth of Belize, more than a handful but less than a score, who are trying valiantly and against the current (I know a particularly active one in Dangriga) to teach the truths about colonialism and try to get their students to imagine what decolonization really means and requires of them, and they should be given all the support and *aliento* possible.

Rather than make us lose hope, then, the persistent presence of colonial thinking makes us look to the Maya, who have hardly been mentioned in this paper, but who endured centuries of two imperialisms that were the greatest of their time, and also the misunderstanding of the national rulers for decades, and still they do not give up, still they fight to preserve their culture, their dignity and their land, and so for hope we look to the Maya, and to Maya, who sang for all the wretched of the earth:

You may write me down in history  
With your bitter, twisted lies,  
You may trod me in the very dirt  
But still, like dust, I'll rise<sup>46</sup>.

---

<sup>46</sup> Maya Angelou, "Still I Rise".

## **APPENDIX King to Musa**

August 11, 1983

Hon. Said Musa  
Minister of Education  
Belmopan

Dear Said,

I have just read "A History of Belize".

It is a disgrace! How could you push this grim, gloomy, biased, one-sided account of our past upon the children of Belize?

This is, as you well know, a typical Marxist view of history, all class struggle and hate.

The sum total of the book is to teach the school children to despise the white people, the rich people, the English and the U.S. Governments, Capitalism, and anyone who admires or even agrees with them.

It is only a small step from there to persuading the children that all things British or American are wicked and evil, such as Parliamentary democracy, an independent Judiciary, British Common Law and private enterprise.

Ten years of learning this in school and we will have a generation ready willing and able to bring about a Communist revolution.

I have no objection to the publication and sale of the book in Belize, (although it should be clearly marked "Poison. Keep Out of the Reach of Children."), but for the Government of Belize to endorse it for use in our schools is alarming and outrageous.

The writing of any history for primary and secondary school students is an exercise in propaganda in every country. No Government puts out a book saying bad things about their past.

A History of Belize should say to the children: Look here kids, we live in a wonderful country. We have done great things in the past together and we are going to do great things together in the future.

The theme of Freedom-loving, independent people starts with the pirates and goes through every phase of our life to date. We are a true melting-pot of six races and eight languages and together we have survived the three centuries surrounded by bullies and enemies (Spaniards, Guatemalans).

We will survive and prevail over all obstacles in our unique, peaceful way of life.

Slavery was bad, yes, but not bad as all that. It can be painted up to look better. (Where would all the Creoles and Garifuna be if it wasn't for slavery? Not here, certainly. Not even alive.)"

Done properly the history for Schools can make good Belizeans better, proud and willing to be a part of the future.

This version your task force has put out is dynamite and it is going to blow away the Belize we all know and love - and you and I along with it.

Do us all a favor and get it out of the schools now.

Sincerely,

Emory.