

---

## Contemporary Journal of Anthropology and Sociology

---

### **Changing Mortuary Rites: An Ethnohistory of 19<sup>th</sup> Century and Contemporary Religion in Northern Belize**

Stephanie R. Zach  
Department of Sociology, Anthropology, and Philosophy,<sup>1</sup>  
Northern Kentucky University

&

Douglas William Hume  
Department of Sociology, Anthropology, and Philosophy,  
Northern Kentucky University

---

**Abstract:** This paper explores the transition of funerary practices from Classic Maya mortuary complexes to the modern Catholic burial practices in northern Belize. Through historical research and ethnographic fieldwork, the causes and effects of mortuary change on Maya culture are explored through a materialist and functionalist analysis of past and present practices. The underlying cause of the most significant changes to mortuary practices in recent history was the rampant spread of cholera in the 1850s, during which the disease transmission and mortality rate prevented the population from conducting traditional Maya funerals. Prior to this event, the Catholic Church had been in the process of converting the Maya population to Catholicism. To enhance their cultural power base, the Catholics exploited this temporary shift in burial practices, which were needed to isolate the contagion, to enact a permanent cultural change in tradition. Today, even though most Belizeans conduct

## INTRODUCTION

This paper is an analysis of the cultural transition of mortuary rituals in Belize, exploring the differences between Maya burials in Classic (200 CE–1000 CE), and the Postclassic (1000 CE–1697 CE) Maya mortuary complexes as well as present day Catholic cemeteries ritual behavior. The analysis takes materialist and functionalist approaches in investigating how historical events effected the changes in ancient Maya mortuary rituals to those practiced today in northern Belize. One mechanism of subjugating a society lies in control of the rituals that surround each rite of passage, including birth, marriage, and death. The role of Catholic mortuary rites exemplifies the complex process of cultural subjugation, which began during the Spanish missionization of the Maya during the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, continued after the British takeover of the Belizean territory in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, and remains the dominant religious power in Belize.

Back -0 cgr4(om)-4(r)-4(d)-TJ 05.280 Td ( )Tj 0MC /P <</MCID 45>>BDC TTT321 Tf (-5.2801.1

mythological symbols were included in altars that were erected for certain rituals, specifically in the *Los Dias de los Muertos* celebrations. According to one informant, people would close their doors during these rituals, as the altars were considered by the Catholic Church to be irreverent to God. In  
apelrect

belief systems to be decided by the bourgeoisie.

The functionalist perspective, on the other hand, views cultural practices in the context of their usefulness. Bronislaw Malinowski's biological functionalism (as exemplified in Malinowski, 2010) assumes that any practice begins as a basic survival response and that social institutions evolve to meet the most primal needs (Goldschmidt, 1996, p. 511). Alfred Reginald Radcliffe-Brown's structural functionalism (as exemplified in Radcliffe-Brown, 2013) assumes that culture, being based on social structuring and intricate relationships between individuals in the same society, evolves to accommodate the maintenance of order and established hierarchies (Goldschmidt, 1996, p. 511). Most cultural practices are developed out of necessity and continue to evolve and change, becoming rituals, after which it is difficult to discern their previous function. In this paper, the change from Maya to Catholic mortuary practices in northern Belize is explored as the result of both religious oppression (in a Marxist sense) and response to disease (in a structural functionalism sense).

## **HISTORY OF MORTUARY PRACTICES IN BELIZE**

### ***Mortuary Rituals of the Ancient Maya***

The ancient Maya did not have a unified sense of mortuary

9n4gc -0.003 Tw -7.62(f)173 0 Td [(T)-5(a1m9(or)3(t)-2(ua)4(r)-7(a1m9(or)3l)-2(



a broader range of areas that were considered sacred spaces and so could incorporate church grounds into their concept of sacred spaces.

During a severe cholera epidemic in the 1850s, the death rate far exceeded the amount of space near the churches. This caused an ideological crisis between the Maya and their Spanish magistrates, centered on the rites of death. During the cholera outbreaks in the Yucatán, people would leave bodies around or outside the church. It was general knowledge by that time that corpses of cholera victims were contagious through “harmful miasma”, and the bodies needed to be isolated to prevent further infection. With limited space, many local government officials enacted situational burial laws including the construction of cemeteries, and new time limits between death and burial of the dead to be done within 24 hours. In theory, these are sound and efficient measures to be taken during a time of plague. In practice, they did much to strain the tenuous relations between indigenous peoples and their Spanish local government (McCrea, 2007, p. 32).

With the sudden increase in the numbers of people dying, a problem for the grave workers was that the labor pool was also shrinking. As so many people died of cholera, more laborers were forced to work at the cemeteries. Building graveyards was time-consuming work due to the hard layer of limestone in the Yucatán, which makes digging strenuous labor. Once the bodies were buried, the varying water table would sometimes bring them to the surface, so graves were anchored to the ground in piles of stones. Due of the amount of time needed to construct burials, people lost time to farm or work for wages, which reduced the resources they needed to pay for the funerals for the dead and to sustain their families (McCrea, 2007, pp. 43–44). One of the

most significant problems was how to prevent the bodies of the dead infecting the gravediggers, perpetuating the cycle of death that was ravaging the villages.

In addition to the changes in the treatment of the dead had an impact on how the living grieved; there were also economic impacts of the cholera outbreak. The sick were isolated, and priests were discouraged from performing last rights (McCrea, 2007, p. 49). Within hours of death, the bodies were taken away, and many of their belongings burned. The quick burial mandated by local government precluded the practice of the wake, which had previously replaced the Maya practice of ritual mourning. The bereaved had little to no time to prepare funerary processions that gave final testament to the lives of the deceased. Furthermore, the isolation of the bodies and the distance of the burials was an affront to a culture that valued closeness to its ancestors and its honored dead (McCrea, 2007, p. 49). was

for the bereaved to grieve together, and a chance to finalize funerary preparations, especially in the cases of children, whose processions are more elaborate. In Latin America, many parents make extra expenditures on floral arrangements for the child's funeral, an expense often not afforded to adult burials.

### **Current Mortuary Practices in Northern Belize**

By the time cholera struck in the 1850s, relationships of oppression were already deeply ingrained in Latin America's social fiber. Still, the abrupt cultural shifts contributed to the Caste War, as the boiling point of conflict between the indigenous Maya and the Spanish, had been brewing for centuries (Reed, 2001, p. 5). The first Spaniards to arrive to the New World were missionaries, who came with the intent of proselytization, which initiates an oppressive relationship. The European settlers that followed came to exploit labor and natural resources. Even the immigrants with more secular intent brought the Church with them, as the Church and the Spanish Crown were entwined. The peoples of Belize were resistant to change, as the Maya continued to practice most of their ways until the end of the 1800s.

The presence of the Catholic Church in Latin American served as a powerful institution of an oppressing class. Currently, the majority of people in Belize profess to be Christian. People who practice any remaining forms of indigenous Maya beliefs do so covertly. Most individuals willing to admit to adhering to Maya beliefs are in the older and remember the struggles of their parents. One of the contributing factors to the loss of Maya beliefs was that, for many years, the Mayan language was banned. Most informants in the villages where interviews were conducted reported that they were Maya by heritage, but few spoke

the language. The older people knew Maya, but had not taught their children. Many had even been scolded for using their native tongue as a child, if not at home, then at their schools. In fact, there seems to be a discernible gap of a generation between a fluent speaker of the Maya language and the children today. There are revival efforts, but most people acknowledge that it may be too late to reverse the loss of speaking Mayan in their communities. The loss of the ability for people to speak Mayan affects mortuary rites, as there are Mayan songs and words to be uttered for the deceased at their wake (McCrea, 2007, p. 52).

The Maya are avid storytellers, and the

los 0.77 0 Td [(i)-2(n )]4h3.736 aoTc 0.05 T4(c

supernatural for the purpose of personal safety. In a broader sense, perhaps these stories were told in this manner for a reason. The moral is that the supernatural is not meant to be common knowledge. Personal experience with the supernatural should be kept to oneself for as long as possible.

There are two ways of interpreting what the Maya could have feared in repercussion for reporting their interaction with Maya supernatural entities. The Maya could be wary of the Christian believers and Church, who made a point to undermine and suppress most Maya practices. To have people at the individual level unable to trust each other is to jeopardize the ever-important social bonds of the small community. This makes the Maya even more vulnerable to exploitation by the Church, which made itself the institution to which all answer, and essentially took away their ability to unite against it.

Courtyard burial, which has its root in the Maya practice of keeping their loved ones close by as a form of ancestor worship, was banned early in the nineteenth century. People continued to practice courtyard burial largely unnoticed until the death rate began to increase in the 1850s. During the high mortality and infection rates during plague conditions, keeping bodies so close to home led to infecting entire households. While the Maya did not subscribe to germ theory at this time, they theor0 Tw aibe to to be te Tc -0ari.34.7 0 Td [(ev)-4(et)-15(y)17(a)-



Zach & Hume / CJAS 4(2), 149-161, (2014)

at the edge of the villages, just as in the ihe(n t)2(he2(hen(n t)- c(he2(hen(n t)ur(us7(y)20(. 4(s)]T.

These are reminiscent of Maya offerings, but also indicative of continued visit and maintenance of the graves.

The cemeteries in Orange Walk Town (the third largest city in Belize and regional center of Northern Belize) were not as well maintained as those in surrounding villages. In Orange Walk Town the grass was long, some of the graves were dilapidated, and others had graffiti on them. It was difficult to reconcile informant reports that suggest graves are diligently cared for on, at least, an annual basis and the conditions of the graves in Orange Walk Town. Informants suggested that people move more frequently from the city or have children elsewhere, which may contribute to the deterioration of the graves. There were also teenagers passing time in the cemeteries, smoking and socializing in small groups. Several graves had hand-decorated gang symbols from rivaling gangs.

Of the informants that were interviewed, only a handful had home altars. In the homes with altars, the owners identified themselves as Catholics who attend Mass and carry out Christian traditions. The altars were in either an insular room or a back yard, both places not readily seen by the public, though whether this is because they were hiding them or because they were used in private worship was unclear. Individuals with syncretic tendencies drew basic connections between Catholicism and Maya religion, because the older members of the community still recall memories that would date back to the transition from Maya to Catholic beliefs.

On a comparative note, it is possible that the similarities between the Mayan and Catholic afterlife made the transition from Mayan traditionalism to Catholicism easier. The Maya believed that those who died with honor ascended to a paradise in the domain of the rain god, though not much is known about its physical structure. Informants

reported that paradise was arranged in nine levels, which the older pyramids were

culture with nostalgia. People continue to recount Maya myths, though in Spanish and English rather than in Mayan. There are attempts to revive the Mayan language by several revivalist organizations, which are also occurring

- Pennsylvania.
- Edmonson, M. S. (2008). *Heaven Born Merida and Its Destiny: The Book of Chilam Balam of Chumayel*. Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Emch, M. (2003). The Human Ecology of Mayan Cacao Farming in Belize. *Human Ecology*, 31(1), 111–131.
- Garber, M. E. (1999). *Na'chiin: Reproduction, Illness, and Ambivalence in a Mopan Community in Southern Belize* (Ph.D.). State University of New York at Buffalo, United States -- New York.
- Genep, A. van. (1961). *The Rites of Passage*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Goldschmidt, W. (1996). Functionalism. In D. M. Levinson & M. Ember (Eds.), *Encyclopedia of Cultural Anthropology* (Vol. 2, pp. 510–512). New York: Henry Holt and Company.
- Greene, O. N., Jr. (1998). The “Dügü” Ritual of the Garinagu of Belize: Reinforcing Values of Society Through Music and Spirit Possession. *Black Music Research Journal*, 18(1/2), 167–181. doi:10.2307/779397
- Greene, O. N., Jr. (2002). Ethnicity, Modernity, and Retention in the Garifuna Punta. *Black Music Research Journal*, 22(2), 189–216. doi:10.2307/1519956
- Headrick, A. (2007). *The Teotihuacan Trinity: The Sociopolitical Structure of an Ancient Mesoamerican City*. Austin: University of Texas Press.

Moberg, M. (1996). Myths That Divide: Immigrant Labor and Class Segmentation in the Belizean Banana Industry. *American Ethnologist*, 23(2), 311–330.

Paxton, M. (2001). *The Cosmos of the Yucatec Maya: Cycles and Steps from the Madrid Codex*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press.

Pendergast, D. M. (1988). The Historical Content of Oral Tradition: A Case from Belize. *The Journal of American Folklore*, 101(401), 321–324. doi:10.2307/540472

Prufer, K. M., & Dunham, P. S. (2009). A Shaman's Burial from an Early Classic Cave in the Maya Mountains of Belize, Central America. *World Archaeology*, 41(2), 295–320. doi:10.1080/00438240902844236

Radcliffe-Brown, A. R. (2013). *The Andaman Islanders: A Study in Social Anthropology*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.