INFORMATION TO USERS

This manuscript has been reproduced from the microfilm master. UMI films the text directly from the original or copy submitted. Thus, some thesis and dissertation copies are in typewriter face, while others may be from any type of computer printer.

The quality of this reproduction is dependent upon the quality of the copy submitted. Broken or indistinct print, colored or poor quality illustrations and photographs, print bleedthrough, substandard margins, and improper alignment can adversely affect reproduction.

In the unlikely event that the author did not send UMI a complete manuscript and there are missing pages, these will be noted. Also, if unauthorized copyright material had to be removed, a note will indicate the deletion.

Oversize materials (e.g., maps, drawings, charts) are reproduced by sectioning the original, beginning at the upper left-hand corner and continuing from left to right in equal sections with small overlaps. Each original is also photographed in one exposure and is included in reduced form at the back of the book.

Photographs included in the original manuscript have been reproduced xerographically in this copy. Higher quality 6" x 9" black and white photographic prints are available for any photographs or illustrations appearing in this copy for an additional charge. Contact UMI directly to order.

UMI
A Bell & Howell Information Company
300 North Zeeb Road, Ann Arbor MI 48106-1346 USA
313/761-4700 800/521-0600
NOTE TO USERS

The original document received by UMI contains pages with slanted print. Pages were microfilmed as received.

This reproduction is the best copy available

UMI
THE POLITICAL ECOLOGY OF PEASANT SUGARCANE FARMING IN NORTHERN BELIZE

by

John Erwin Higgins

A Dissertation Submitted to the Faculty of the DEPARTMENT OF ANTHROPOLOGY In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements For the Degree of DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY In the Graduate College THE UNIVERSITY OF ARIZONA

1998
As members of the Final Examination Committee, we certify that we have read the dissertation prepared by John E. Higgins entitled The Political Ecology of Peasant Sugar Cane Farming in Northern Belize and recommend that it be accepted as fulfilling the dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

Richard A. Thompson  
Thomas K. Park  
Jane H. Hill

Final approval and acceptance of this dissertation is contingent upon the candidate's submission of the final copy of the dissertation to the Graduate College.

I hereby certify that I have read this dissertation prepared under my direction and recommend that it be accepted as fulfilling the dissertation requirement.

Dissertation Director Thomas E. Sheridan
STATEMENT BY AUTHOR

This dissertation has been submitted in partial fulfillment of requirements for an advanced degree at The University of Arizona and is deposited in the University Library to be made available to borrowers under rules of the Library.

Brief quotations from this dissertation are allowable without special permission, provided that accurate acknowledgement of source is made. Requests for permission for extended quotation from or reproduction of this manuscript in whole or in part may be granted by the head of the major department or the Dean of the Graduate College when in his or her judgement the proposed use of the material is in the interests of scholarship. In all other instances, however, permission must be obtained from the author.

SIGNED: [Signature]
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This research was funded by grants from the Wenner Gren Foundation and the Comins Fund of the Department of Anthropology of the University of Arizona, for which I am eternally grateful. I would like to thank Dr. Angel Cal of the University College of Belize and Dr. Santos Mahung of the Ministry of Education for their endorsements which opened many doors that otherwise would have been closed to me. Many people assisted me with my research, however. I would particularly like to thank Mr. Eduardo Zetina of Belize Sugar Industries, Mr. Elsner Cruz of the Belize Sugar Board, Mr. Felipe Blanco of the Orange Walk Cane Farmers' Association, Mr. David Grajales of the Ministry of Lands and Survey in Orange Walk, Fr. Kurt Kassebeer, S.J of La Immaculada Parish, and the staffs of the Central Statistical Office and the Archives of Belize for their assistance. I owe a far greater debt of gratitude, however, to the villagers of San Pablo, and in particular Silvino Bacab and his family, for putting up with me for as long and as patiently as they did.
DEDICATION

To my father who inspired my interest, to Bob Netting who nurtured that interest, to Tom Sheridan who saw this through until the end, and finally to Steffi whose incredible patience has not always been a virtue.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>LIST OF FIGURES</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LIST OF TABLES</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ABSTRACT</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>An Anomalous Industry</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Economic Characteristics of Peasant Cane Farming</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Control of the Means of Production in the Export Sugar Industry</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Further Anomalies</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Ideological Orientation of Sugar Industry and Land Reforms</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prior Sociological Analyses of the Belizean Sugar Industry</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fieldwork Methodology</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>THE HISTORICAL ORIGINS OF THE BELIZEAN PEASANTRY</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Beginnings of the Caste Wars</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Historical Analysis in Existing Studies of the Belizean Sugar Industry</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conquest and Colonization</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Early British Presence in Belize</td>
<td>81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Impact of Mexican Independence on the Maya</td>
<td>84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Yucatecan Sugar Industry</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political Antecedents of the Caste War</td>
<td>94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Rebels’ Demands</td>
<td>98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anglo-Maya Relations during the Early Years of the Caste War</td>
<td>102</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1: Map of the study area .................................................................181
Figure 2: Farmers' average cane price: 1951-1989 ........................................270
Figure 3: The number of sugarcane farmers in San Pablo Village 1971-1993 ....289
Figure 4: Frequency of quota transfers: 1970-1992 .......................................296
Figure 5: San Pablo, San Jose, Douglas, and San Luis land transfers 1958-1992 ...299
Figure 6: Commercial bank loans to cane farmers ........................................302
Figure 7: San Pablo villagers' total quotas in thousands of tons .......................305
LIST OF TABLES

Table 1: Comparison of 1990 sugarcane prices in US dollar per ton paid to farmers ......15
Table 2: San Pablo households’ primary sources of income in 1993 ...............................44
Table 3: Distribution of size of private landholdings and number of owners for 1922, 1926, and 1934 .................................................................................................146
Table 4: Population density and distribution in the Corozal and Orange Walk Districts in 1921 .....................................................................................................................178
Table 5: Comparison of the seasonal labor requirements of milpa, plant cane, and ratoon cane ..................................................................................................................234
Table 6: Wages paid to agricultural labor 1932-1938 ..........................................................239
Table 7: Number of cane farmers according to farm size 1950-56 .......................................250
Table 8: Comparison of estate and independent farmers’ cane production 1964-70 .............266
Table 9: Sugarcane production costs ....................................................................................285
Table 10: Ratoon cane production costs .............................................................................287
Table 11: Frequency of quota transfer types 1971-1992 ......................................................294
Table 12: Frequency of land transfer types: 1958-1992 .....................................................297
ABSTRACT

The Belizean export sugar industry is dominated by small family farmers who produce the nation’s most important cash crop in terms of area under cultivation, employment, and export earnings. These peasant farmers control both cane cultivation and the harvest transport system and receive the lion's share of the proceeds from the sale of Belizean sugar. The origins of this anomalous industry can be traced to the regions' long history of peasant resistance to exploitation.

Sugarcane was brought to Belize by refugees of the Mayan Caste Wars in the mid-nineteenth century who began producing sugar for the local market using swidden technology. Sugar production was briefly taken over by British plantations; however, the peasants were never fully proletarianized despite attempts to turn them into a plantation labor force.

The peasantry's historical resistance to proletarianization is the result of several factors. Colonial officials and capitalists found it difficult to control either the movements or the labor of these independent cultivators. Low rural population density, peasants' refusal to give up subsistence farming, sugarcane's compatibility with swidden farming practices, and the peasantry's politicization all contributed to the dominance of small-farmer cane production during this century.

During the 1950s plantation production was resurrected in order to meet the colony's recently acquired Commonwealth Sugar Agreement export quota. Colonial
planners assumed that plantations were more efficient and competitive than peasant farmers. Nevertheless, in 1972 the state sponsored plantations were forced to shut down due to competition from independent small cane farmers.

Peasant sugarcane farming has proven to be remarkably resilient in the face of crises spawned by chronic fluctuations in the price and demand for cane sugar. Most farmers depend heavily on family labor to minimize their production costs. Because they have minimal capital inputs to production, they can sustain negative profits from cane and still survive by deploying family labor into other income and/or subsistence producing activities. The viability of peasant farming families that allows them to compete successfully with large-scale capitalist sugarcane farmers contradicts the Marxian notion of the inevitability of polarization into capitalist farmers and proletarian workers.
INTRODUCTION

An Anomalous Industry

Considered from the standpoint of the dismal history of sugarcane cultivation in the Caribbean, Belize's export sugar industry stands out as a social and economic anomaly. As one Belizean authority on the sugar industry puts it, "...what we have is a wonderful social exercise, but not much of a business enterprise" (anonymous per com 1993). He was referring to the fact that Belize's industry is dominated not by efficient corporate plantations or capitalist farmers, but by thousands of "inefficient" peasant farmers who control both the cultivation and the harvest transportation system of the nation's largest and most important cash crop in terms of area planted, employment, and export earnings (Belize Abstract of Statistics 1992).

Belize's unusual situation is all the more surprising, and interesting, when you consider that tropical export sugar industries and the plantation system have long been regarded as anathema to indigenous cultures and non-capitalist modes of production (e.g. Geertz 1963; Beckford 1969, 1972; Gudeman 1978; Yengoyan 1974). Few other crops have achieved the "the terrible green monster's" notoriety (Taussig 1980). To most social scientists familiar with the history of sugarcane in the western hemisphere, the mere

¹ In the first sentence, and indeed in the title of this dissertation, I have already violated the integrity of the English language by creating a new word: "sugarcane." No doubt the trend will continue.
mention of cane conjures images of immense plantations worked either by slaves, or by landless laborers who slave to earn the bare minimum necessary to sustain them.

Be that as it may, in 1994 less than nine percent of the cane grown in Belize was produced on plantations.\(^2\) forty percent less than in 1969 when plantation production was at its peak and both of the nation’s refineries were owned by Tate and Lyle Limited: a London-based multinational corporation that controlled much of the Commonwealth Caribbean sugar trade during the 1960s. In 1972 Tate and Lyle sold all of its cane lands to local farmers and Belize became the first nation in the Caribbean in which nationals had complete control over sugarcane cultivation (Ayuso 1972:6).

Today approximately six thousand small farmers with landholdings of fifty acres or less, and cane production quotas of two hundred tons or less, produce sixty-four percent of Belize’s cane crop (King et al 1992:109). Ninety-four percent of farmers have quotas of less than four hundred tons which seems to be the practical limit for non-mechanized, household-based production (Hulse 1970, Brockmann 1978). Peasant farmers nevertheless receive the lion’s share, 65 percent, of the value of sales of Belizean sugarcane.

\(^2\) Today the only sugarcane plantation in Belize is owned by Petrojam Ltd., a Jamaican concern that produces inedible syrup which is shipped to Jamaica to be refined into ethanol. Petrojam purchased the Libertad refinery in 1991. It had been closed since the disastrous 1985 crop when world sugar prices hit bottom and Tate and Lyle could no longer afford to operate it. Much of the cane that Petrojam processes is produced by Belizian farmers; however, they prefer not to sell their cane to Petrojam because the company pays far less than BSI. From the farmers’ perspective Petrojam does serve a useful purpose because they will accept stale cane which is unacceptable to BSI. In the event of a wildfire, or if a farmer has difficulty delivering his cane before it begins to rot, he can always sell it to Petrojam and recoup his production costs. Although I could find no statistics supporting this contention, Belizian cane farmers and the analysts at Belize Sugar Industries maintain most of the labor employed by Petrojam during the harvest season is made up of foreign laborers who come to Belize specifically for the harvest.
sugar while the refiner receives only 35. In the Mexican sugar industry which produces only for the relatively high priced domestic market, the division of revenue is 54 percent to the farmer and 46 percent to the manufacturer. In comparison to other sugar producers in the region, the price per ton of cane which Belizean farmers receive is also quite high.

Table 1: Comparison of 1990 sugarcane prices in US dollar per ton paid to farmers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Price (US dollar)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Belize</td>
<td>27.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jamaica</td>
<td>22.60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>St. Kitts</td>
<td>25.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trinidad</td>
<td>24.15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>El Salvador</td>
<td>14.38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Honduras</td>
<td>12.62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guatemala</td>
<td>6.42</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Belize Sugar Industries Limited Submission to Arbitration Committee 1993:15

The economic benefits of sugar production are therefore spread widely, albeit thinly, throughout the rural population of northern Belize. In order to understand sugarcane as a crop, we must understand the environment, technology, and social order in which it is embedded. Agrarian systems are highly disparate: not only are different crops adapted to a different environmental conditions, they also have technical requirements which influence the social organization of production in various ways.

The Economic Characteristics of Peasant Cane Farming

From the perspective of neoclassical economic theory, the presumed inefficiency of Belize’s peasant-based sugar industry stems from the fact that maximization of total income from various sources (e.g. sugarcane cultivation, wage labor, and subsistence
farming), rather than maximization of profit or of marginal product guides both peasants' sugarcane production and their overall labor deployment strategies. Most farmers depend heavily and preferably exclusively, on family labor (the labor of resident and non-resident male offspring) and/or reciprocal wage labor exchange\(^1\) in order to minimize their reliance on hired labor and reduce their production costs. Because peasant farmers rely on low-cost family labor and minimal capital inputs to production, when sugar prices are low they can sustain negative profits from cane farming and still survive by deploying family labor into other income and/or subsistence producing activities\(^4\). The same cannot be said of capitalist farmers who must meet payrolls in order to survive\(^5\).

The viability of peasant sugarcane farming families that allows them to compete successfully with large-scale capitalist sugarcane farmers contradicts the Marxian notion of the inevitability of polarization into capitalist farmers and proletarian workers foreseen

---

\(^1\) By "reciprocal wage labor exchange" I mean arrangements made between farmers whereby each agrees to help the other harvest his cane for the same fixed cost per ton. The benefit of such an agreement is that there is a balanced exchange of wages: what the farmer loses in the wages he pays to harvest his cane he recoups working for the farmers who helped him harvest his cane. He is also assured that the labor necessary to harvest his cane will be available when needed. It is extremely rare for farmers who are not close kin to enter into unpaid reciprocal labor exchange agreements because the future is too uncertain. Illness can strike at any time making it impossible for a farmer to repay his labor debt.

\(^4\) This strategy is based on the willingness of the cane farmer's sons to work for subsistence alone when cane prices are low and this is not always the case. If the farmer is not able to hold out sufficient inducements (e.g., the promise of a cane quota or land) to preserve the loyalty of his labor supply, then the familial enterprise breaks down as the sons strive to establish economic autonomy.

\(^5\) When world market sugar prices crashed in 1985, cane farmers in the Yo Creek Branch of the Orange Walk Cane Farmers Association actually ended up owing the refiners money due to overpayments they had received early in the harvest before the bottom dropped out of the market. Those farmers who were most severely effected were those who had intensified production and had loans outstanding.
by Lenin (Shanin 1986:4). In fact, small cane farmers, who are the majority in the
Belizean sugar industry, behave more like Chayanovian peasants than capitalist farmers
despite producing an export crop for one of the world’s most capricious markets. Strange
as it may seem, they treat their income from sugarcane almost as though it were a
subsistence crop which fulfills specific needs, and adjust their sugarcane production
levels accordingly.

The central idea underlying Chayanov’s theory of the peasant family farm and
demographic differentiation among peasant households—the idea that economic inequality
is demographically rather than socially based—is that the socio-demographic processes of
birth, maturation, and so on give rise to a typical sequence of changes in peasant family
composition (Greenhalgh 1985:571, Chayanov 1966:56-58). As families move through
their developmental cycles there is a rise and then a fall in the number of consumers and,
because consumption need determines production, cyclical trends in family income
(Chayanov 1966:60). Similarly, over time the transition into larger and smaller farm size
classes is due primarily, though not exclusively, to growth and contraction of the family
cycle (Chayanov 1966:249, 254-256).

The critical difference between Chayanov’s peasants and Belizean peasant cane
farmers is that the expansion of sugarcane production beyond the minimum necessary to
sustain the family is linked to an increase in the number of producers rather than
consumers. Large families with favorable consumer/producer ratios (in Belizean cane
farming families: an abundance of healthy adult male offspring or, less frequently, female
offspring who bring healthy male sons-in-law into the familial enterprise) are able to profitably expand sugarcane production as long as they can maintain the loyalty of their labor force. In other words: the whole of the family production group is far greater than the sum of its parts. This is perhaps best illustrated by Olga Stavrakis in her analysis of the social and economic consequences of the expansion of the Belizean sugar industry. She notes:

In fact, various traditional families who have tried to break into capitalist relations but have lacked the initial capital have organized strong hierarchical male work groups based on reciprocal labor. Using their rights to land, one such successful work group at first expanded its milpa and produced surplus which they invested in increasing production, in sugarcane cuttings, and in land purchase. As a group they compete favorably with high income mestizos, but when the holdings are divided by the number of households involved, they are no better off than most other villagers (1978:187).

By virtue of sheer numbers, large families have greater access to the labor, land, and sugarcane quotas—not to mention the political clout necessary to translate these resources into a successful enterprise. Nevertheless, when large familial production groups break up, as they invariably do, the cycle begins again as each of the constituent households begin building work groups based on the labor of their offspring.

---

1 I otherwise disagree with most of Stavrakis conclusions. In her analysis she claims that the overall effects of sugar industry expansion have been highly detrimental to the peasant population.

2 This is something which is counted on by other villagers whose families are not so demographically well endowed. An interesting case in point is the Morado family of San Blas Village. Roberto Morado moved to San Blas, Orange Walk District, from a village in the Corozal District where he was a poor milpero and estate laborer. Roberto had the good fortune to have seven sons whose births were timed so that they came of age during the sugarcane boom of the 1960s. Eventually his seven sons, their wives, and offspring jointly acquired over 3000 tons of sugarcane quotas, at least 200 acres of cane land, a bulldozer, a cane loader, a tractor, four trailers for hauling cane, a harrow, tiller, and disc, a cane truck and a pickup and truck. Much of this equipment was
The price farmers receive for their cane is determined primarily by the price Belizean sugar brings in preferential markets, the European Economic Community and the United States, where Belize sometimes holds export quota agreements. The sugar that Belize produces in excess of these quotas is sold on the world market where it brings a lower price, in effect, driving down the average price farmers receive for their cane.

The refiner, Belize Sugar Industries (BSI), wants farmers to exceed their individual quotas in order to insure that the factory is continuously supplied with fresh cane so that it can operate at peak efficiency. In attempting to convince peasants to maximize their profits from sugarcane farming by producing cane in excess of their production quotas, BSI has argued that

The ultimate question the farmer needs to ask himself is: If I produce an additional ton of cane will it cost me more or less than the additional revenue I shall receive? So long as the additional revenue exceeds the additional cost it will be profitable for the farmer to produce additional cane (Belize Sugar 1990:2).

Farmers do not think in neoclassical terms of the costs and benefits of maximizing their profit from cane. Instead, they weigh the relative value of their cane income against the

---

acquired from a cane cooperative that broke up due to familism. During the mid-1970s the second oldest son accused the oldest son—who had taught himself to read and write and had taken over the administration of the Morado family business—of cheating his brothers. In 1993 the Morados were still fighting over who owed what to whom. Most of the seven brothers still have sizable sugarcane quotas but almost all of their machinery has been sold-off and none has a quota over 500 tons.

The example that Belize Sugar provides is that of two farmers who produce respectively 100 and 115 tons of cane. The farmer who produces 100 tons of cane at BZ$55.00 per ton earns $2500 profit ($25 per ton) after deducting $30.00 per ton production costs. The farmer who produces 115 tons of cane at BZ$33.00 per ton earns $2645 ($23 per ton) in profit. According to this logic it is still better to produce more cane at a lower price because you will still earn more and the average cost per ton of increased production is reduced because fixed production costs are spread over a greater tonnage (1990:2).
value of subsistence farming, wage labor, and other potentially productive activities which they can engage in rather producing an extra ton of sugar cane for a lower market price. The amount of sugarcane a farmer can sell to the factory is limited by his quota, but the amount of cane a farmer can afford to produce is, in the larger scheme of the totality of his economic activities, determined by his access to inexpensive labor: his own and that of his offspring.

The profits from small-scale sugar farming cannot economically sustain capital intensive production and neither the incentives nor the prerequisites for intensive food crop production for domestic markets (either market demand or land scarcity and population pressure which would force intensification) exist in Belize. Most cane farmers can and do earn income independently of cane farming; however, reliable sources of cash income are few and a cane production quota is a guaranteed, albeit often minimal, source of income. At the same time, an economic strategy that combines cane farming with subsistence production and other income earning activities minimizes the risks associated with being dependent on the sugar market while allowing peasant farmers to retain control over the means of production.

The advantage enjoyed by those farmers who practice both cane and subsistence farming is the ability to protect their households' standard of living from fluctuations in the prices of cane and staples by producing enough food to meet basic household needs.

*It is virtually impossible to determine the opportunity costs involved in such calculations due to drastic seasonal fluctuations in the market value of subsistence crops and the relative scarcity of opportunities to engage in wage labor (Moberg 1991, Chibnik 1978).*
A cane income is subject to the vagaries of the world market and returns far less per man-hour of labor than subsistence production if the farmer is forced spend his cash income on food. Because most of Belize's domestic food crop production is carried out by swidden farmers, domestic markets are either glutted with produce or empty (Moberg 1991). Chronic world sugar market price instability and seasonal fluctuations in domestic availability and market prices of food staples in Belize preclude small-farmers' households from becoming entirely dependent upon sugar cane production as their sole means of support. As a result, peasants treat sugar income as though it were a subsistence crop which fulfills specific needs, allocating household labor to other activities with the express intention of balancing the pursuit of cash income from cane against other potentially remunerative activities. In order for a household to maintain this precarious balance, the male and female heads of the household must achieve and maintain control over a labor force of productive dependents.

The *zafra* (harvest season) which lasts from December through May (depending upon when the rains begin and end) is the critical labor bottleneck in the cane production cycle. Roughly two-thirds of the total labor input required to produce a crop is expended during the harvest. During the rest of the year, which farmers refer to as the *temporada muerto* (dead season), the labor demands of cane cultivation are far less urgent. Two factors contribute to the sense of urgency that one perceives during the *zafra*: the intrinsic perishability of sugarcane and the threat of rain. Sugarcane must be ground within seventy-two hours of being burned and cut or its sucrose content disappears. When the
weather dry and the roads are in good condition, accidental and intentionally set cane fires are a constant threat. At the same time, however, farmers must harvest all their fields before the rains begin in late May and the roads into the fields become impassable. The za\textit{f}ra is the time when labor is most in demand and when cooperation and conflict among kinsmen are most evident. A farmer who has entered into a cooperative harvest arrangement with his kin before the za\textit{f}ra, or a farmer who has abundant labor from his immediate family at his disposal, stands a much better chance of delivering his entire crop than a farmer who has to hire cutters.

Small sugarcane farmers' cultivation practices have much more in common with those of swidden subsistence farmers than with those of capitalist farmers. This is reflected in the peasants' cane yields: the yield per unit of land is low, while yield per unit of labor is high. Swidden farming is still the basis of most of Belize's food crop production and in 1993, thirty-three San Pablo households (twenty-eight cane farming households and five seasonal laborers households) had made swiddens larger than two acres. Before sugar plantations were established during the 1950s, most of Belize's sugarcane was produced using a swidden technology. In short, cane farmers made the transition directly from mil\textit{p}a (swidden) subsistence farming to sugarcane farming without ever having any experience of intensive agriculture. No farmer that I interviewed had ever used draft animals and plows to till the soil. The extensive nature of peasant cane farming practices can also be attributed to the physical characteristics of cane.
Sugarcane is a perennial grass which sprouts from the roots or ratoons after it is harvested. Cane does not require annual replanting—the single most expensive aspect of cane cultivation due to the need for mechanized land preparation (see Table 8)—however its productivity decreases with each successive ratoon. Unlike other cultigens, cane can withstand considerable neglect and still produce a crop worth harvesting. For example: If the labor needed for weeding is not available, or this labor can be more profitably employed elsewhere, a cane field can be neglected to the point of being overrun by weeds. Certainly there is a limit to the extent to which a farmer can neglect his fields. Nevertheless, although competition from weeds reduces both yield in tonnage and in sucrose content, it does not necessarily destroy the crop nor does it complicate the harvesting process. The weeds are simply burned-off—as farmers say "El fuego lo compone" (The fire fixes it).10

When farmers replant their fields or put new land under cultivation in cane they frequently choose low-yield/low-maintenance varieties over high-yield varieties which require greater capital and labor inputs (e.g. mechanized soil preparation, fertilization, and frequent weeding and pest control). By far the most popular variety on the basis of its ability to withstand neglect, and the most widely planted variety in my study area, is B52298, known locally as blanco or cana del pobre (white or poor man’s cane).11 Blanco

---

10 If a farmer neglects his fields too much then it may be difficult for him to find anyone to help him harvest his cane. As the quality of the cane declines it requires more labor to harvest the same tonnage of cane because a greater number of thinner stalks must be cut. From the cane cutters perspective the best cane to cut is newly planted and second year cane which has a high weight to volume ratio.

11 In 1990 it was estimated that sixty percent of the acreage under cultivation in cane was planted in three varieties: forty percent in B52298, ten percent in POJ2878, and ten
was developed at Tate and Lyle’s research station in Jamaica and was first planted in Belize in 1956. *Blanco* is relatively low yield variety and is susceptible to the virus smut, *Ustilago scitaminea*, which entered Belize in 1978. Despite the Belize Sugar Industry’s efforts to get farmers to give up planting *blanco* in favor of high-yield, smut-resistant varieties, farmers still prefer *blanco* because it matures in ten months, requires fewer capital inputs than other varieties, withstands neglect when labor and capital are in short supply, and can be harvested annually without replanting for up to twenty years. As one cane farmer so eloquently put it, “*Ajuanta su buena chinga y siempre da algo*” (It takes a good fucking beating and always yields something).

Most farmers do not maximize sugarcane production per unit of land through either labor- or capital-intensive production except when market conditions are extremely favorable. Even when high prices are anticipated, they prefer to increase production by extending the area under cultivation rather than by intensifying production—something which is still possible in the sparsely populated areas south of Orange Walk Town. When crises occur, as in 1985 when the world market price of sugar crashed and one of Belize’s two refineries was closed, farmers reduce labor and capital inputs to production and allowed the cane to fend for itself while they pursued other economic activities. Using satellite imagery, the Research Department of Belize Sugar Industries estimated that in 1987, two years after the market crash, approximately 66,000 acres were under cultivation in cane. Of these 66,000 acres 24,000 acres were in healthy cane, 10,000 acres were percent in PR1048. All these varieties have been in Belize for at least twenty years and are noted for their long ratooning (Rao 1991:5).
harvested fields, and 32,000 acres were poor and/or abandoned fields (E. Zetina per. comm. 1994).

Under the current system by which cane quality of is assessed (as determined by the TC/TS ratio: the number of tons of cane required to produce a ton of sugar) there is little incentive for farmers to intensify production to increase the quality of their product. Bonuses for high sucrose content are determined not on the basis of the quality of the individual farmers' cane, but on the basis of the quality of the cane produced by the branch: a localized division or aggregation of cane farmers who have land in the same area. A farmer who invests heavily in improving the quality of his cane will see no financial reward for his effort if other farmers in the branch are producing inferior cane.

It is really no surprise that small cane farmers behave like swidden subsistence farmers since arable land is still relatively plentiful in Belize. Most first generation cane farmers were swidden farmers before the Sugar Ordinances allowed them to deliver their cane directly to the factory. Prior to the resurrection of the export sugar industry in the 1950s, the majority of the rural population of Belize survived on swidden subsistence farming and seasonal labor in the forest industries. These part-peasants/part-proletariat had no security of land tenure and their only access to credit was through the exploitative wage-advance system which the forestry interests used to capture their labor. The transfer of sugar production from the plantations to rural small holders did increase their dependency on export agriculture; however, it also gave them access to land and credit and dramatically increased their political power.
Although complete control of sugarcane cultivation by Belizean farmers did not occur until 1972, the Sugar Ordinances signaled the beginning of the end of the Belizean sugar plantations. As Sidney Mintz notes, "The history of newly discovered and newly occupied areas has demonstrated again and again that free men will not work as employed agricultural laborers if they have access to land which they can cultivate for themselves" (1964:xiv-xv). By permitting small farmers to obtain guaranteed delivery quotas the ordinances forced the plantations to compete for labor with peasant subsistence farmers who were themselves in the process of becoming cane farmers.

Throughout the colonial era the absence of a suitable labor force was cited as the primary cause of Belize's lack of commercial agricultural development (e.g., Bristowe and Wright 1888. Handbook of British Honduras 1925:183). On one hand, this agricultural labor shortage was attributable to the fact Belize simply had a very small population: laborers were scarce (and highly mobile when this was necessary to avoid exploitation), and domestic demand for food crops was limited. On the other hand it was also the result of peasants' refusal to permanently give up swidden subsistence farming for agricultural wage labor (Jones 1970:12). However, once peasants were permitted to own land and were guaranteed the right to sell their sugarcane crop to the refiner, there was little reason why any would choose to be wage laborers on plantations when they could be independent farmers

The Sugar Ordinances of 1959 were soon followed by a land reform program intended to encourage farmers to give up swidden farming for intensive agriculture (the
lonstanding theme of agricultural development planning in Belize by providing farmers with incentives to plant permanent crops, specifically sugarcane (Belize Times 11/4/73). It is estimated that between 1971 and 1982 the government acquired some 525,000 acres of land from big landowners for redistribution to small farmers (Shoman 1987: 37).

Together the Sugar Ordinances of 1959 and the government's land reform program created from among the rural population of northern Belize a powerful new hybrid class in Belizean society, what Donald Attwood refers to in his study of Indian peasant sugarcane farmers as a "commercial peasantry" (1992:14). A peasantry made up of Yucatec Maya and mestizo refugees of the Mayan Caste Wars had existed in northern Belize since the 1850s; however, until the 1950s their market activities were largely confined to selling surplus production from their milpa (swidden plots).

During the early 1950s it was believed by colonial planners that in order for Belize to meet its newly acquired Commonwealth Sugar Agreement (CSA) export quota, the sugar industry would be taken over by foreign-owned plantations. In the words of the British Governor Thornley in a speech delivered to cane farmers in Louisville village in 1957

To ensure that the factory obtains a continuous supply of the required amount of cane to keep it operating economically without loss of time...there must be a hard core of efficient cane production associated directly with the factory to supplement the production of other growers and to act virtually as a balance wheel in the organization of the daily delivery of cane to the factory. To this end the new company, Plantations Limited has been formed (Belize Times February 13, 1957).
Despite the colonial government’s desire to enhance the efficiency of the sugar industry by increasing plantation production, the politicization of the rural population that followed on the heels of self-rule and adult suffrage in the early 1950s made it impossible for either the colonial government or the nascent urban-based, anti-colonial, nationalist labor movement to ignore the peasants’ demands for land and a share in the sugar industry. Concern over growing civil unrest in rural northern Belize during the 1950s, coupled with the colonial government’s fear that Belize would lose its CSA export quota if production did not increase, resulted in promulgation of the Sugar Ordinances of 1959. These ordinances stipulated that any farmer who could grow five tons or more of sugarcane was entitled to a cane quota, or sugarcane delivery license, which guaranteed the farmer the right to sell the amount of cane specified by his quota to the refiners. The Sugar Ordinances also called for the formation of the Belize Sugar Board (BSB) to oversee the development of the industry and the Cane Farmers’ Association (CFA) to represent the interests of the farmers in their dealings with the government and the refiners.

By the end of the 1960s the cane farming commercial peasantry had become a self-conscious class, "la masa canera" (the cane farming masses), and the CFA was well on its way to becoming the largest organization in the country aside from the government bureaucracy. However, as these peasants made the transition from swidden-based, subsistence and domestic-market production to cash crop production for the export market, and even as they continue to adopt new technology and production strategies.
they nevertheless remain embedded in a social and cultural context which has deep historical roots. As I shall argue throughout this dissertation, a central feature of this cultural context is the tradition of *milpa* agriculture and its associated social institutions.

Throughout the colonial era and well into the twentieth century Yucatecan peasants, both in Mexico and Belize have relied upon swidden agriculture, together with flight and armed resistance, as a means of resisting external exploitation. This claim is neither original nor controversial (see for example Farriss 1984; Reed 1964; Jones 1969, 1989; Cal 1991a; Patch 1993); however, to date no one has explicitly examined the role which *milpa* agriculture has played in the development of Belize’s peasant-based sugar industry.

Control of the Means of Production in the Export Sugar Industry

The Belizean sugar industry continues to be dominated by peasant farmers for another very important reason: small farmers control not only the cultivation of sugarcane, but also the critical link between field and factory, the transportation of the harvest to the refineries. In northern Belize some 1400 privately owned vehicles, primarily trucks, are licensed each year to deliver sugarcane to the refineries. Many of these trucks are licensed only during the harvest and are idle for the remainder of the year. Many truck owners are barely able to recoup their operating and replacement costs incurred during the harvest season. The Research Department of Belize Sugar Industries, the nation’s principal refiner, estimates that there are twice as many vehicles as would be needed for
the harvest if an efficient, centrally-managed transportation system was implemented and
the number of vehicles licensed to deliver cane was limited (Belize Sugar Industry 1993).

From the standpoint of the maximization of productivity, both the cultivation and
transportation components of the sugar industry are economically irrational. Why are
these peasants so irrational?

To a Western-trained neoclassical economist, a truck which sits idle for six
months out of the year when it could be used for other purposes, or when its ownership
cannot be justified on the grounds of economic necessity—nor to mention the chaos the
transportation surplus creates during the cane harvest—is not a sound use of economic
resources. Be that as it may: no foreign consultant, no functionary of the Belize Sugar
Board, no Belizean politician, no elected official of the Belize Cane Farmers’
Association, and certainly no representative of BSI, has ever been successful in
persuading farmers to support rationalization of the cane harvest transportation system

12 The question of the “inefficiency” of the harvest system is a very sore point among cane
farmers and the elected officers of the Cane Farmers’ Association (CFA) who are
responsible for organizing the harvest delivery schedules. Debate between BSI and the
farmers over who is responsible for the harvest delivery problems has been going on for
years (Belize Times May 16, 1977). Successive studies during the early 1970s
identified the transportation surplus as the major problem associated with the
inefficiency of the harvest delivery system (Hulse 1970, Ayuso 1972, Persaud 1974). In
1974 Prime Minister George was at the height of his political popularity in the north
due to his land reforms. He addressed the question of the inefficiency of the cane
transportation system at the 13th Annual Conference of the Caribbean Cane Farmers
Association in Orange Walk Town (wondering why cane farmers couldn’t buy one
truck for ten farmers instead of ten farmers buying ten trucks) and called for greater
farmer cooperation in improving the harvest transportation system without result
(Belize Times 8/2/74:2). Shortly thereafter Joe Briceno (then both a government
minister and Chairman of the Orange Walk Division of the Cane Farmers Association)
went into very serious political trouble when he promoted legislation which would limit
Cane farmers obviously do not perceive the transportation situation in quite the same light as those who seek to rationalize the delivery system. Although they may not readily admit it, and prefer to place the blame for harvest delays with the inefficiency of the refinery, most farmers are aware that long lines at the factory are the result of too many trucks. However, no one wants to see the system changed. To somewhat oversimplify a complex question: in industrial sugar production control of the means of production is not just ownership of the land on which sugarcane is grown, it is also control of harvest transport and refining processes.

The cane farmer and the refinery are mutually dependent: sugarcane has virtually no value unless it is refined; and, the BSI refinery has no fields of its own and no purpose other than to produce sugar. A sugarcane refinery is absolutely useless without sugarcane; however, the land on which farmers produce cane can always be used to cultivate other crops. While Belizean farmers retain control over both cultivation and transportation of the harvest they in effect control two-thirds of the means of production. I have never actually heard any cane farmer explain this situation in terms of the number of vehicles licensed to deliver to the refineries (Monthly Report of the Sugar Industry 8/27/75).

13 The importance of marketing and the overseas shipment of Belize sugar are conspicuously absent from this thumbnail analysis. Clearly, without a marketing component there would be no Belizean export sugar industry. Nevertheless, the fact remains that in order for sugar to be produced, sugarcane must be delivered to the refinery and it is the farmers who control this aspect of the sugar production process. On December 10, 1993 500 cane farmers rioted in Corozal Town attacking the CFA offices and vehicles of the directors after they refused to meet with them. The farmers had met earlier with CFA directors to discuss a BSI proposal to raise their handling charges per ton of sugar. The handling charges would change from $51.00 per ton, a price which had been in effect since 1981, to $57.60 per ton. In the meeting prior to the riot the farmers demanded that the CFA forward their demands that the proposed increase be revoked. In considering the farmers' demands the executive committee...
of "control of the means of production." But this does not mean that they are unaware of the importance of maintaining control over the harvest transportation system. While farmers control both the cultivation of cane and the harvest transport system, the balance of producer/refiner dependency relationship swings heavily in their favor. This would seem the obvious explanation for why they can demand and do receive sixty-five percent of the value of Belizean sugar sold on the world market while the refiner receives only thirty-five percent.14

The system that farmers themselves have developed to cope with both cane delivery problems and the harvest labor bottleneck is one in which cane farmers join together during the harvest to form grupos (harvesting groups) which collaborate in the cutting, loading, and transportation of their cane to the refiner. The core members of these grupos are usually related males: a man and his adult sons or brothers and their adult sons. Any grupo whose members' aggregate quotas exceeds 1000 tons is entitled to its own daily delivery quota (the larger the grupo's combined quotas the larger the grupo's daily quota) for the duration of the harvest. By participating in a large grupo the individual has the security of knowing that when the time comes to harvest his cane both the labor and the transportation needed will be available. Granted, unrelated farmers who

---

14 The Monthly Report of the Sugar Industry date March 27, 1992 it reported that BSI and the CFA were negotiating to increase the farmers' share of the profits from cane to sixty-six percent if only the farmers would implement an effective delivery control system.
join familial grupos for a harvest season often see find needs being subordinated to those of the core grupo. Nevertheless, the farmer who chooses to hire a truck or, if he owns a truck, go it alone, faces greater uncertainty and risk of delays in delivering his cane than if he were part of a grupo. In the absence any other effective form of harvest cooperative. Belize Sugar Industries and the Belize Sugar Board have both been forced to recognize and incorporate the grupo system into the scheduling of cane deliveries to the refinery (Monthly Report of the Sugar Industry 1/27/76).

Further Anomalies

Belize Sugar Industries, Ltd. refines ninety percent of the cane produced in Belize and is itself something of an anomaly. Prior to 1963 Plantations Limited was the single largest producer of sugarcane in the colony and owned several thousand acres of cane land in addition to Belize’s sole refinery at Libertad in the Corozal District. BSI was formed in 1963 as a subsidiary of Tate and Lyle, Ltd. when it acquired Plantations Limited. In anticipation of continued high world market prices, an export quota into the lucrative United States market, and government sanctioned expansion of its plantation holdings. Tate and Lyle constructed a second state-of-the-art refinery at Tower Hill in the Orange Walk District in 1967. However, the company’s assumptions concerning the stability of world market prices proved ill-advised. The price of sugar on the world market dropped and BSI’s financial problems were compounded by increasing losses in the cultivation component of its operations due to unionization of field workers.
Two of the main reasons Tate and Lyle decided to invest in the Belizean sugar industry during the 1960s were the abundance of inexpensive, unoccupied, arable land and a small, seemingly docile laboring population. By the early 1960s production on the company's plantations in Jamaica and Trinidad had peaked and its ability to expand elsewhere in the Caribbean was limited by rising land costs and increasing political unrest and hostility toward plantation owners--particularly in those island nations with rapidly expanding populations (Beckford 1969, BSI 1989). Their attempt to take over the Belizean sugar industry was thwarted not only by the expansion of small farmer sugarcane cultivation, but also by the formation of Belize's first agricultural laborers' union, the Northern Cane Workers' Union (NCWU).

Prior to 1939 labor unions were illegal in Belize (Annual Report of the Labor Department 1947:2). After the laws were changed unions were formed in urban areas, primarily Belize City, but were slow to attract a constituency in the underdeveloped agricultural sector of the economy. However, once plantation-based sugarcane production began to expand in northern Belize, field laborers and cane cutters--many of whom were also milperos (swidden farmers)--quickly recognized the need for an organization which could represent their interests to the government and the plantations.

Between 1961, when the Northern Cane Workers Union (NCWU) was formed, and 1972 when Tate and Lyle sold all of its sugarcane fields to Belizean farmers, field laborers and cane cutters struck BSI twelve times and the piece rate for cutting a ton of
cane rose from BZ$1.00 in 1960 to $2.96 per ton in 1972. In 1967, the same year BSI completed the new Tower Hill refinery, the NCWU negotiated a forty percent increase in the piece rate for cutting cane (Annual Report of the Labor Department 1960-1973). In part the NCWU’s success was based on their ability to legally block BSI from importing foreign labor for the harvest.

The Union’s first fight was to secure better wages for the workers... Several inter-related problems stood in the way. There was need to get recognition by employers and the union had to deal with saboteurs in its midst. The chief saboteurs were the large number of foreign workers engaged in the cane plantations. The union therefore realized that unless immigrant workers who had entered illegally into the country left, their bargaining position would remain undermined. The first step to resolve this problem therefore was to bring to the attention of the Immigration Authorities these illegal entries. The workers acted on the principle of self-preservation. The strike went on for nine days --February 3-12, 1962. It was successful. This resulted in the unions’ recognition by employers who signed an agreement on wages meeting the demands of the workers (Ken 1967 cf. Jones 1969:202).

Even after the NCWU had negotiated substantial increases in the wages paid to cane laborers, BSI still found it necessary to import foreign labor during the harvest as the number of small farmers delivering cane to the factory increased: in 1965, 295 alien cane

\[15\] The value of the Belizean dollar has long been pegged at two-to-one to the US dollar. In 1993, US$1.00 was worth BZ$1.9825.

\[19\] It is interesting to compare Jesus Ken’s version of how this strike began with that of one San Pablo villager who was at the time employed by BSI as a field laborer and cane cutter. According to this man, who was a local union activist, villagers from San Pablo, Buena Vista, San Jose, and Douglas decided, on their own initiative, to strike the plantations against the wishes of Ken who did not feel the time was right. These villagers went to the other villages which provided the bulk of BSI’s plantation labor and told them that if they agreed to strike, then the above-mentioned villages would provide them with food for the duration of the strike. When Ken learned of this plan it was a fait accompli and he had no other choice but to go along with the workers’ plan or lose credibility.
cutters received temporary work permits; and in 1966, 553 temporary work permits were issued to foreign cane cutters (Annual Report of the Labor Department 1966-1967).

The labor shortage that BSI experienced during the cane harvest was the result of both competition for labor with small cane farmers and conflict between the plantations' labor needs and the seasonal labor demands of *milpa* subsistence farming. In his study of the "traditionalist" Yucatec Mayan village Xaibe, Ira Abrams notes that by 1971, sixty-eight percent of the heads-of-household in this village held sugarcane quotas (1973:51). While small cane farmers and subsistence agriculturalists might be willing to work on the plantations periodically when they needed cash, the labor demands of their own farming operations were logically of greater importance to them than the plantations' labor needs.

Paradoxically, although there was unemployment in the country there was a shortage of manual labor in the cane fields...owing to *milpa* farmers having to attend to their crops...and to the reluctance of many unemployed in the urban areas to work in agriculture (Annual Report of the Labor Department 1965:7).

By 1970 BSI's accumulated financial losses were such that Tate and Lyle considered closing one or both of its refineries. As an alternative to factory closure, in 1972 BSI sold the bulk of its lands under cultivation in sugarcane to Belizean cane farmers. Then something even stranger happened: world market prices then began to rise and produced record returns in 1974 and 1975. The price farmers received for their cane

---

17 The *milperos* reluctance to engage in wage labor which took them away from their *milpa* is an enduring theme in the history of wage labor in both forestry and commercial agriculture in northern Belize. As I shall discuss in far greater detail below, the wages paid to agricultural labor were never sufficient to keep the *milpero* and his family supplied in the type and quantity of foodstuffs to which they were accustomed.
soared from US$6.50 per ton in 1973 to US$28.00 per ton in 1975. Belizean cane farmers benefited the most from this price boom, but the profits BSI realized from processing alone were sufficient to justify increasing the refining capacity of the Tower Hill Factory.

In 1982 the boom ended and world sugar market prices dropped until they reached an all-time low of 2.56 US cents per pound in 1985. By 1984 it had become apparent to Tate and Lyle Ltd. that the combined effects of a reduced US quota, low world prices, and unfavorable currency exchange rates would soon bankrupt BSI. In mid-1985 the financial crisis forced the closure of the Corozal District refinery. Belize could ill afford the loss if its greatest source of export income. In order to save the sugar industry the government and Tate and Lyle reached an agreement whereby BSI’s factory employees would buy out Tate and Lyle’s interest in BSI with payment spread out over a number of years as and when profits were made. The agreement also called for the complete transfer of shares to BSI employees by 1994 even if the full purchase price had not been paid to Tate and Lyle. The resulting make-up of BSI’s shareholders in 1985 was as follows: BSI employees 81.29%, Tate and Lyle 10%, Government of Belize 5.68%, and the Development Finance Corporation of Belize 3.03% (BSI 1989:10). Despite continued low world market prices and further cuts in the US quota during the late 1980s, BSI’s profit margin has actually improved steadily since 1986.

---

18 Even though the refinery is now employee-owned and Tate and Lyle has very limited interest in the company, farmers still see BSI as the root of all evil (El Canero November 1992).
The Ideological Orientation of Sugar Industry and Land Reforms

If we assume for the moment that my introductory analysis of the current state of the Belizean sugar industry is even remotely accurate then the question arises. Is the Belizean sugar industry the result of a hitherto unacknowledged Central American socialist reform movement?

George Price who led the nationalist labor movement and governed the colony from the first days of self-rule until 1984 was a populist rather than a socialist and his People’s United Party’s electoral platform declared that W. W. Rostow’s (1960) “stages of growth” model was the key to national development. Nigel Bolland describes the PUP’s ideology as “antisocialist as well as anti-colonial and pro free-enterprise as well as pro-American” (1986:113). When Tate & Lyle acquired the Corozal sugar factory in 1963 and began building the new factory in Orange Walk in 1967, the PUP hailed these developments as victories for its policies which were based on the so-called Puerto Rican model of development: industrialization by invitation, import substitution, and export expansion (Shoman 1987:31).

Some of the architects of Price’s sugar industry and land reform policies, most notably Jesus Ken and Assad Shoman, did have definite socialist agendas. However, both became disillusioned with the PUP and with the peasants because once the peasants acquired land and sugarcane quotas, their interest in more far reaching socialist reforms evaporated and the peasant movement ended. Shoman maintains that the PUP’s
paternalism succeeded in preventing the formation of any enduring peasant movement. "since the PUP government's land distribution program at once secured peasant support for the party and for a time sufficiently satisfied that sector as to make its self-organization appear unnecessary" (1987:88).

Even though small farmers came to control the sugar industry through industrial and land reform, the Belizean sugar industry is clearly not a good example of socialism for a number of other reasons. First, a peasant or family-based farming regime is in many ways antithetical to socialism: every sugarcane production and/or transportation cooperative that was established in my study area eventually succumbed to internal conflict borne of familism. Second, there are a number of large capitalist farmers who are trying to control more land and quotas and exploit their laborers through patron-client relationships. They are constrained from doing this not by government regulation, but by the fact that they can very easily be put in their place by an disgruntled laborer or small farmer who can afford a box of matches. Due to the perishability of burned sugarcane, a large farmer who finds himself the victim of an "accidental" fire has little choice but to pay his cane cutters the wage they demand and "employment fires" are not uncommon. Third, the banks are making a fortune on low risk crop loans to farmers and it is with good reason that farmers say "somos la vaca lechera del gobierno" (we are the government's milk-cow). In sum, Belize is no workers' paradise and exhibits a wide

\[\text{\textsuperscript{19}}\] The largest cane farmer in Belize (who resides in San Pablo where I lived during my fieldwork) lives under a constant threat that, should he go too far, his cane fields will be burned. In 1981, following a land dispute with two small farmers, someone burned 200 acres (approximately 4000 tons) of his cane and he was able to salvage only 1000 tons.
range of social, economic, and political imperfections which we do not customarily associate with socialist regimes.

Prior Sociological Analyses of the Belizean Sugar Industry

My contention that Belize’s sugar industry is a peasant-based export sugar industry violates most of the conventional wisdom concerning the historical relationship between sugarcane, peasants, and tropical export sugar industries. Throughout the New World, and particularly the British Caribbean, sugarcane is known as the quintessential plantation crop, a crop whose intrinsic cultivation and processing requirements spawned the African slave trade and the sugar plantation: itself a precocious form of capitalistic agro-industry which preceded the development of capitalism in Europe (Mintz 1985:50-61). After slavery was abolished sugar production was taken over by huge industrial plantations cultivated by gangs of hired laborers, reputedly the most marginalized and exploited agricultural laborers in the world. In sum, sugarcane is emblematic of the disparities of wealth, ownership, and power that characterize the agrarian regimes of developing nations in the Western Hemisphere. I contend that Belize’s export sugar industry simply does not fit either this stereotype or this regional historical pattern.

The Caribbean colonial experience has long provided the theoretical, historical, moral, and emotional justification for the belief that proletarianization and poverty are the natural outcome of export sugar industries. However, as no less an authority than Sidney Mintz notes:
The association of sugar cane, the slavery of transported Africans and the large agricultural estates commonly called plantations is both intimate and ancient—so much so that we need to be reminded how much that association is an artifact of particular historical circumstances...nothing says it must be grown only on plantations, or only by slaves. Moreover, since sugar cane can be grown on farms of widely varying sizes, and by arrangements varying from small-scale freehold to contract and tenancy, to dub it a plantation crop does not automatically bring enlightenment (Mintz 1974:ix-x).

Following publication of The Peoples of Puerto Rico (Steward et.al. 1957) the analysis of the plantation as an institution became a cottage industry within the social sciences, most particularly among those concerned with the history of the European presence in the Caribbean. Despite the fact that the Caribbean is ethnically, culturally, and politically an extremely heterogeneous region, many researchers attempted to generalize about the region based upon the prevalence of the plantation (Hagelberg 1974:2).

The common plantation influence gives the set of countries a certain homogeneity: each is fundamentally similar to the other, in terms of not only economic structure and economic problems but also social structure, political organization, and other aspects of human life (Beckford 1975:15).

Some scholars soon rejected the notion of ever arriving at a single definition of the plantation (e.g. Binns 1955; Pan American Union 1959:190; Courtenay 1965:1) and Eric Wolf and Sidney Mintz subjected the concept to a more refined topological classification (Wolf and Mintz 1957, Mintz 1957). As Hagelberg so clearly points out, such progress toward precision should have rendered the concept a "less suitable base for global socioeconomic generalizations"; however, this has not been the case (1974:3). The "plantation society" concept or model has been applied to both the analysis of the

My analysis of the social and economic consequences of export sugar production contradicts most of the existing studies of cane farming in Belize (Beckford 1969. Jones 1969; Henderson 1972, 1990; Stavrakis 1978; Brockmann 1979). These studies predicted that the rapid growth of Belize’s export sugar industry would inevitably proletarianize the rural population: either the sugar industry would eventually be completely dominated by foreign-owned plantations, or it would gradually enrich big farmers, impoverish small ones, and inexorably create a massive landless, underemployed rural labor force.

Having been blessed with hindsight—and unprecedented access to every farmer’s landholding and sugarcane production records for the five villages in my study area—I feel confident in saying that the rural population in my study area has genuinely prospered as a result of sugarcane farming. True, many of the older villagers do lament the passing of the good-old-days of the milpa subsistence economy when everybody raised their own corn and pigs and chickens; but all are quick to point out that before sugarcane they had no security of land tenure. Large land owners could dispose of their property without regard for the people who resided or farmed on their land. Now sixty-five percent of

---

20 It should be noted that these studies were conducted during the 1960s and 1970s when dependency theory was rightfully demolishing modernization theory and faith in the universality of the proletarianization process was de rigueur for analysis of capitalist economic penetration of peasant societies.

21 As Dona Jacinta, a woman who has lived in San Pablo all her life described the Plantations Limited acquisition of the land around San Pablo: “Nos vendieron, nos vendieron como cochinos en el chiquero” (They sold us, they sold us like pigs in a pen).
households in San Pablo village, the focal point of my research, own land outright or have land under long-term leases with the government. In addition to villagers' registered landholdings. I estimate that at least thirty percent of village households have holdings on government land which are unregistered, or squatted, for which they pay neither taxes nor rent. In my analysis of San Pablo villagers' land records on file with the Department of Lands and Survey in Orange Walk Town I found that villagers did not even bother to register their landholdings (75 parcels totaling approximately 1660 acres) under cultivation in cane and subsistence crops in marginal areas east of the village until 1981 (Lands and Survey Department Records 1958-1993). Even today, many holdings in this area are still unregistered and villagers pay no rents for them. In a broader analysis of the history of 573 parcels of agricultural land (totaling 16,031 acres) including land belonging to the villagers of San Jose, San Luis, Douglas, and Nuevo San Juan I found that 208 parcels (8126 acres or roughly half of the acreage involved) had no registration number. Many farmers reported that this meant these parcels were unsurveyed and the government has never actually verified the acreage being farmed—as opposed to the acreage villagers claimed as the basis for their rental payments to the government.

Although the majority of farmers in the Corozal and Orange Walk districts have land holdings between 5 and 50 acres, the largest area of land was held by those with more than 50 acres. In Corozal, 63% of the farmers held 40% of the land in holdings of 5-50 acres. 16% with holdings over 50 acres had 59% of the land. In Orange Walk, 59% of the holdings were 5-50 acres occupying 23% of the total land area; whereas 20% of the holdings were over 50 acres and accounted for 77% of the listed area. Fragmentation of land holdings is not a serious factor in farm management. Nevertheless in Corozal, 7% of landholders have four or more parcels; and 54% have two or three. In Orange Walk the census recorded 46% of landholders with 2 or 3 parcels and 1.8% with four or more (King et al 1992:110).
In 1993 only 19, or 15 percent, of the 126 households in San Pablo were truly landless. Many of these were newly established households which had only recently begun to assert their residential autonomy, though not necessarily their economic autonomy, by setting up residence apart the husband’s father’s household. The fact that four male Salvadoran immigrants who had recently married into the community were able to acquire land, albeit land without good road access and therefore suitable only for subsistence farming, speaks to the fact that arable land is still plentiful in the Orange Walk District. The distribution of occupations among San Pablo households based on their primary source of income also suggests a fair degree of prosperity.

Table 2: San Pablo households’ primary sources of income in 1993

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source of Income</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>dependent on relatives</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sugarcane farming</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>seasonal agricultural labor</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>commercial enterprises</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>non-agricultural jobs</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>permanent agricultural labor</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: 1993 Household census data

Of those households claiming seasonal agricultural labor as their primary source of income (generally the poorest households aside from those dependent on their relatives), eight also held small sugarcane production quotas which they considered secondary sources of income. It is important to note that, of those 76 households claiming that their primary source of income is sugarcane cultivation, probably only 20 percent can actually depend entirely on cane to supply them with the income they need to get through the year.
Unlike other Central American nations, Belize simply does not have a large landless poor population. "Over most of the country, small-scale farmers find ready access to arable land, in striking contrast to the land scarcity facing their Central American neighbors" (Moberg 1991:16). Although prime cane land with good road access is scarce in densely populated areas of the Corozal and Orange Walk Districts, extensive tracts of land in Belize remain unalienated national lands, notably in the vicinity of the New River Lagoon in Orange Walk District and along the New Northern Highway in Belize District (King et al 1992:110).

In light of my research findings I believe that the critical flaws of prior analyses of Belize's sugar industry do not so much lie with the idea that increasing rural participation in the world sugar market would change peasants' lives. Instead the problem lies with the dependency theorists' unquestioning faith in the superior efficiency and competitiveness of capitalist plantation-based production in comparison to small farmer production, their disregard of the possible independent effects of the historical interaction of population and environment, and their consequently inflexible ideas of the conditions made necessary by capitalist economic penetration. All of which is bolstered by the persistent misconception that capitalism is some sort of monolithic entity characterized by historical uniformity of interest.

I contend that demographic conditions favorable to the emergence of the capitalist mode of production under one set of historical circumstances (that is, capitalist exploitation of timber that dominated Belize's export economy until 1950) were not at all
conducive to the emergence of the capitalist mode of production under an economy dominated by agricultural export production. Laws and practices enacted by Belize’s colonial forestocracy to control labor, discourage the formation of an independent peasantry, and protect timber resources from depredations by swidden agriculturalists were neither successful nor were they conducive to the creation of the surplus labor force that was necessary when timber resources were depleted, the chicle market collapsed, and the export economy shifted to agriculture.

The rural population in the sugarcane districts was never fully proletarianized because colonial capitalists were never able to wholly capture the Yucatec mestizo-Maya peasantry’s labor, either when timber production dominated the colonial economy or when sugar production became the colony’s main source of export income. Among those researchers most familiar with peasant-state relations in Belize during the 19th century, (Cal 1991a, Jones 1977, Bolland 1988) there is a strong consensus that peasants resisted the expropriation of their labor by refusing to give up swidden subsistence farming for wage labor. I would go further and say that the peasants’ ability to fall back on the milpa—and the government and the capitalist’s inability to stop them from doing this—ultimately resulted in their being able to dictate the terms of their participation in the export sugar industry during this century.

Dependency and world-systems theories argue that capitalist production erodes the underlying values and structures of traditional, pre-capitalist socioeconomic behavior (Frank 1969:131, Wallerstein 1974:349). This belief is closely related to the assumption
that peasants are everywhere marginalized, powerless victims of the larger societies they inhabit (Redfield 1953:31; Wolf 1966:11; Shanin 1971:78; Goodman and Redclift 1981).

Nevertheless, it is now recognized that indigenous economic pragmatism often defies the predictions of evolutionary theories which assume the incompatibility of so-called traditional economic behavior and commercial production (Barlett 1980:157; Guillet 1980:167; Guyer 1981; Folbre 1983:13; Wilk 1984:239; Plattner 1989:394; Stone et al 1990). Similarly, many researchers have pointed out that the impact of external forces (expanding markets, new technologies, foreign domination) on peasants is always mediated by the structure of internal forces (environmental, historical, and social factors) rooted in indigenous political economies. Furthermore, the outcome of the interaction between internal and external forces is not predictable by any general theory (e.g. Warman 1981; Rheinhardt 1988; Sheridan 1988; Shanin 1990, Attwood 1992).

Nevertheless, researchers continue to overlook indigenous societies' capacity to interpret and adapt to change within the framework of their own cultural logic, resulting in theories suffused analyses that simply don’t fit on-the-ground reality.

In my opinion prior studies of the social consequences of Belizean sugarcane farming adhered to a very narrow reading of dependency theory in their analyses, thereby masking the anomalous nature of the Belizean situation and inhibiting productive comparative analysis. Their fundamental underlying assumption is that the world capitalist system exploits and impoverishes all ordinary people--poor peasants and laborers--who come into contact with it: the greater the contact the greater the
immigration of the peasantry (Attwood 1991:6). It follows that an export sugar industry can only serve the interests of wealthy peasants and a thriving sugar industry ought to be driving small farmers into debt, dispossessing them of their land, and exploiting the labor of an ever-growing landless proletariat. Dependency theorists prefer to dismiss the anomalies—situations in which the circumstances of ordinary folk have improved through contact with the world system—rather than understand the means by which peasants participate in the world system without being becoming the victims of it. These studies therefore emphasized explanation of the similarities, rather than the differences, that exist between Belize and other British Caribbean sugar exporters on the basis of the presumed commonalities of the British colonial experience and export sugar production. This is understandable given that the existing studies of the sugar industry's impact on peasant farming in northern Belize were undertaken when dependency theory (Baran 1957; Frank 1967) dominated discussions of capitalist development in non-Western societies; export sugar industries were universally regarded as anathema to peasant agriculture (e.g., Mintz 1964, Beckford 1972 Yengoyan 1974); and Tate and Lyle, Ltd., the British sugar giant, had not yet fully retreated from Belize. Be that as it may, northern Belize simply has a great deal more in common with the Yucatan and Mexico than it does with any of the islands of the British Caribbean, including a successful history of peasant resistance to external exploitation.

Most prior studies of the Belizean sugar industry predicted that sugar industry expansion would result in the extinction of peasant farming in northern Belize.
According to these studies: land suitable for cane farming was becoming scarce; subsistence production was declining; wage-labor dependency was increasing; a rural class structure was developing; and traditional extended family households were disappearing (Jones 1969; Henderson 1972; Stavrakis 1978; Brockmann 1979).

A fundamental assumption implicit to these studies (particularly Henderson 1972) is that sugarcane is somehow naturally predisposed to centrally organized, industrial production and processing—the proverbial factory-in-the field—by virtue of its intrinsic characteristics, notably its perishability and the capital intensive processing required to extract sugar from cane (Mintz 1985). For this reason sugarcane has long been seen as the quintessential "plantation crop" with its own unique capacity to create the rural equivalent of an urban industrial proletariat, setting in motion the law of population peculiar to the capitalist mode of production.

Most of the researchers who studied the sugar industry in northern Belize maintain that it proletarianized the rural population, however two studies (Abrams 1973; Nimis 1981) do not support this contention. Abrams is the only researcher who attempted to analyze the relationship between changes in Belizean cane-farming households' socioeconomic behavior and changes in their developmental cycles over an extended period of time. His research in Xaibe Village showed that, during the period 1950 through 1971, more people resided in extended family households after sugarcane cultivation began than had done so before it began. His findings contradict those of Jones (1969), Stavrakis (1978), and Brockmann (1979). He concluded that independent, small-scale sugarcane production spawned a resurgence of the extended family household as the primary unit of residence, production and consumption in this village (1973:27). Nimis studied women's role in livestock production in the same village in which Stavrakis studied cane farming's affect on village social relations and diet. Stavrakis (1978) claimed that declining staple production during the 1970s was the result of the permanent abandonment of subsistence farming for sugarcane production. Nimis contends that this subsistence production decline was the result of a pragmatic peasant response to a sugar price-boom in which the price of cane soared from US$6.50 per ton in 1973 to US$28.00 per ton in 1975. Subsistence production returned to pre-boom levels once cane prices stabilized and staple prices rose (1981:324).
The laboring population therefore produces, along with the accumulation of capital produced by it, the means by which itself is made superfluous, is turned into a relative surplus-population; and it does this to an always increasing extent. This is a law of population peculiar to the capitalist mode of production; and in fact every special historic mode of production has its own special laws of population, historically valid within its limits alone. An abstract law of population exists for plants and animals only, and only in so far as man has not interfered with them. But if a surplus laboring population is a necessary product of accumulation or of the development of wealth on a capitalist basis, this surplus-population becomes, conversely, the lever of capitalistic accumulation, nay, a condition of existence of the capitalist mode of production. It forms a disposable industrial reserve army, that belongs to capital quite as absolutely as if the latter had bred it at its own cost. Independently of the limits of the actual increase of population, it creates, for the changing needs of self-expansion of capital, a mass of human material always ready for exploitation (Marx 1978:422).

The creation of a surplus laboring population through the alienation of peasants from their land is a necessary condition for capitalist sugar industry expansion because free men will not work as agricultural laborers if they have access to land they can cultivate for themselves (Mintz and Wolf 1957, Mintz 1974).

The Belizean studies uncritically accepted the idea that the essential agro-industrial nature of commercial cane cultivation determines the social relations of the rural population. There is, however, no natural law which states that sugarcane can only be grown on capitalist plantations; nor are there many people who would prefer to work on someone else's plantation for wages when the opportunity exists to own land and be a small farmer. Nevertheless, the association of sugarcane cultivation with plantations and the global expansion of European agro-industry and has become so entrenched in the collective conscience of the social sciences that many researchers have forgotten that this
association is. as Mintz (1974.ix) is careful to point out. an artifact of particular historical circumstances. The association of sugarcane, plantations, landless labor, and grinding poverty provides emotional justification for mechanistic, top-down political-economic analysis (e.g.; Beckford 1969,1975), and linear proletarianization models are often uncritically applied to the analysis of any situation in which sugarcane is cultivated for export.

To briefly summarize my criticisms of the existing studies: First, their analyses seem based on the assumption that rural social changes brought about by the sugar industry are unilineal. Although Belizean peasants dominate export sugar production and domestic staple production, the persistence of the peasant production must therefore be explained away as a transitory epiphenomena of uneven capitalist development. Second, their analyses of rural social change reify processual generalizations and typologies (e.g.. Beckford's notion of the "typical plantation economy") borrowed from studies of plantation-dominated sugar industries and societies that have little or nothing in common with either Belize or its sugar industry. The Belizean sugar industry was not founded on slavery, nor did it force a peasantry onto enclave plantations and degrade it into a fully proletarianized labor force (Jones 1969; Abrams 1973; Brockmann 1979). Sugarcane was brought to Belize by refugees of the Mayan Caste War and was produced for local consumption by swidden subsistence farmers. Plantation-based sugar production began, expanded briefly, and failed twice in Belize under markedly different circumstances: once when the export market collapsed in the 1880s, and again during the 1970s when
production was expanding and sugar was colony's leading export (Jones 1969; Cal 1991a). Third, the Belizean studies do not address the Yucatec Mayan cultural history of violent resistance to Spanish, Mexican, and British hegemony (Farriss 1984; Reed 1964; Jones 1989; Cal 1991a). With the exception of Jones (1969), none addresses the Belizean peasants' history of successful resistance to plantation expansion—and the fact that Tate and Lyle's plantations folded in the face of unionization and competition for labor with small farmers—nor do they address peasants' ongoing resistance to coercive state measures instituted to promote intensive staple production for urban markets (MacInnes 1983; Moberg 1991). Fourth, they ignore the social implications of the labor and capital requirements of sugar cane cultivation that limit the scale of household-based sugarcane production (e.g., Hagelberg 1974), and yet ironically allow peasants to compete with wage-paying capitalist farmers when markets are favorable, or outlast capitalists during periods of market decline (Shanin 1990). Fifth, their analyses of changes in household-level land tenure and labor practices are based on small samples of synchronic data that cannot reveal the long-term effects of either peasant household developmental cycles or market trends on household-level socioeconomic behavior (Fortes 1958; Birdwell 1979; Carter 1984). Finally, none of these studies addresses the fact that Belize is the least densely populated nation in Central America and arable land is still easily obtainable. Nor has anyone questioned how low population density might influence either the spread of, or resistance to capitalism at the village and household levels. In sum, none has attempted to explain how peasants came to dominate sugarcane production in Belize.
what specific circumstances made it possible for small farmers to take over production, and what effect this has had on the sugar industry or the welfare of the rural population.

This dissertation is about the emergence of a special class in Belizean society, a commercial peasantry. These peasants began cultivating sugarcane when they arrived in Belize during the mid-nineteenth century; however, they did not attain real political power until the 1960s when they gained control of sugar cultivation. In this dissertation I attempt to clarify, and at times modify, the reigning interpretation of the history of sugar cultivation in Belize. I argue that regional and local relations of production and power are at least as important as external influences. The specific character of a region's political economy is shaped by its history, its natural environment, and the technologies used for production, distribution, and political control. Consequently, the impact of new capital, crops, and markets is determined not by universal laws of history but by the specific interactions of technology, environment, and social organization. If we have to give this explanatory approach a label, let's call it political ecology (Sheridan 1988).

Political ecology has been defined as the politicized study of the history of human environmental relations and resource use (Herschkovitz 1994, Stonich 1993, Greenberg and Park: 1994). It brings together approaches to the analysis of human behavior that have been regarded as separate if not antithetical. It combines central concerns of cultural ecology, the cultural and ecological consequences of the way a people live in and interact with their environment, with those of political economy, the relationship between the control of resources and the distribution of power in society.
Political ecology integrates a political perspective into cultural ecology based on an understanding of the status of communities within the broader political economy of global capitalism.

Under the mantle of political ecology I propose to provide an alternative to the narrow political-economic analysis characteristic of existing studies of the social and economic consequences of the expansion of Belize's export sugar industry. In my analysis I shall examine the historical background of sugarcane cultivation in Belize in its political-ecological context, drawing on the history of peasant resistance to external exploitation in the region, its environment and cropping systems, the dynamics of village society, and the impact of national and international markets.

Fieldwork Methodology

Most of the existing sociological studies of northern Belize employ political economic analysis to explain rural social and economic conditions. None of these studies addresses the fact that Belize is the least densely populated nation in Central America, nor has anyone questioned how low population density might influence either the spread of or resistance to capitalism at the village and household levels. The question I addressed throughout the course of my fieldwork was, How do Belize’s low rural population density, the absence of a large free rural labor force, and the existence of large tracts of unclaimed, arable land influence the impact of capitalism on sugarcane farming populations? Assuming that these circumstances do exist, I set out to determine if the cash-poor, labor-scarce economy of smallholder cane farming and the seasonal
bottlenecks of cane cultivation favor households with abundant labor resources. Pursuing this line of reasoning, a further objective of my research was to determine if and how household demography influences the nature of economic differentiation within cane farming communities. Is there any demonstrable relationship between households' economic behavior (e.g., accumulation, debt, participation in wage labor, dependence on subsistence farming) and changes in household size, composition, and structure over time? Do the economic behavior and social status of cane farming households change in response to the domestic group developmental cycles, or is social stratification primarily a function of individualistic capitalist accumulation? Are sugarcane quotas and land becoming concentrated in the hands of individuals, or are these assets cycling through families?

To answer these questions I collected a variety of ethnographic and statistical data. One of my primary sources of household demographic and economic information was a census of households in San Pablo, San Luis, and Nuevo San Juan. This census elicited information concerning households' demographic histories, economic activities, land tenure, and agricultural labor practices. I conducted the San Pablo census by myself during the summer of 1993. The Nuevo San Juan and San Luis censuses were conducted during the winter of 1994 with the help of two paid assistants, local school teachers who are experienced government censuses takers. To gain an understanding of sugarcane labor practices I worked the 1993 and 1994 harvests intermittently as a cane cutter and loader for three different San Pablo harvesting groups. I also conducted multiple
interviews with twenty villagers concerning their sugarcane and subsistence farming practices, contributing my labor to several of these farmers at different times during the subsistence agriculture cycle. During October and November of 1993, ten San Pablo households provided me with a daily accounting of their income, expenses, and their exchanges of goods and labor with other households.

I also conducted research in Orange Walk Town, Corozal, and Belmopan. Research in these locations ranged from interviewing bureaucrats and bank managers to collecting maps of the agricultural holdings in my study area. Through the endorsement of my research by the Ministry of Education of Belize, I was able to collect information from several sources: the Department of Lands and Survey, the Ministry of Social Development, the Belize Sugar Industries, the Belize Sugar Board, the Belize Cane Farmers' Association, La Immaculada Parish, and the records of the San Pablo Justice of the Peace. These data include: the land rent, tax, lease application and transfer records for my study area from 1960 to 1993, individual's sugarcane production and quotas from 1971 through 1993, farmers' debt payments to the Development Finance Corporation and the Cane Farmers Association from 1989 through 1993, registered transfers of sugarcane production quotas from 1974 through 1993, changes in the prices of agricultural inputs from 1974 through 1993, the branch officers of the Cane Farmers' Association from 1972 through 1993, the baptismal records of La Immaculada Parish from 1900 to 1973, and registered births and deaths in San Pablo from 1965 to 1985. These data were collected throughout the course of fieldwork as access to records was granted. I also spent three
weeks in April of 1994 working in the national archives in Belmopan gathering information concerning land and labor legislation, the development and politics of the sugar industry, and the history of the villages in my study area.
The Historical Origins of the Belizean Peasantry

The Beginnings of the Caste Wars

The Guerra de las Castas (War of the Castes) began in the sugar districts of Yucatan in late July of 1847. Fighting broke out when Yucatecan government troops attempted to capture four men, three Maya batabs (hereditary leaders) and one mestizo, accused of plotting to overthrow the government. The most often cited cause of the revolt is, however, the invasion and seizure of Indian communities' lands by ladino sugarcane farmers which began in the 1840s (Cline 1990, Farriss 1984, Patch 1993).24

During the colonial era the Mayan ejidos, or village communal landholdings, had enjoyed a modicum of security under laws enacted by the Crown to sustain and protect

24 During the colonial period in Yucatan the Spanish used numerous biological and cultural criteria to distinguish themselves from the so-called inferior races, for example: skin color, language, surname, dress, occupation, and place of residence. European-born Spaniards and lesser status criollos (Yucatecans born of Spanish parents) were the proprietors of large estates, high public officials, and professionals. The indios (Maya) were Maya-speaking farmers and laborers who lived either in their own communities, on the peripheries of towns, or on the estates of the Spaniards and criollos for whom the worked. The term castas referred to mestizos: people of Spanish-Maya parentage. Owing to the ambiguous nature of the criteria used to differentiate one “caste” from another, some mestizos were considered Maya while a very small minority could pass for white. Some castas held minor administrative posts in the towns or worked as administrators for the Spanish in the countryside while others were virtually indistinguishable from the Maya in terms of appearance, dress, language, occupation, and social standing. Shortly after independence from Spain, only two categories were legally recognized: whites and Indians. The whites were a minority who dressed in European clothing, spoke Spanish, and dominated the Yucatecan political system and the economy. The Indians spoke Maya, dressed as campesinos (peasants), and worked in agriculture. This represented an abrupt downward change in status for many mestizos and may help account for the high number of Spanish surnames among the rebel leadership of the Caste War (Cline 1947:110-180; Reed 1964:20-22). In this chapter I use three terms for simplicity sake: ladino, mestizo, and indio. “Ladino” refers to persons with Spanish surnames who enjoy high socioeconomic status; “mestizo” refers to an ambiguous category of persons with Spanish surnames who range in status from merchant entrepreneurs to peasants; and, “indio” or Maya refers to persons who are Yucatec Maya swidden subsistence farmers and laborers.
the tribute-based economy: without Indian labor, land was of little value. The commodification of land, the privatization and alienation of *terrenos baldios* (unoccupied lands) and Mayan *ejido* lands, and the forced integration of Maya peasants into the market economy as a free labor force, were explicit objectives of the liberal agrarian reforms enacted by Yucatan’s *ladino* elite to hasten the transition to a capitalist economy. This process accelerated dramatically in Yucatan following Mexican independence from Spain in 1821 (Cline 1990, Patch 1991).

Prior to Mexican independence central Yucatan—which was to become the sugarcane region—had been the southern frontier of Spanish settlement and control. The social, economic, and political structures of Yucatec Maya society in these districts had not undergone the disruption seen in northwestern Yucatan where Spanish population density was higher and Iberian economic exploitation and rule were more direct (Farriss 1984:386; Rugeley 1996:163). To the *mazehualob*, the Maya peasants, the loss of their land to the *ladino* sugar planters was tantamount to loss of their ability to make *milpa* (swidden): the cultural-ecological basis of peasant society. The *milpa*, the forest from which it was made, and the corn it produced were not merely commodities, but central, sacred elements of pre-conquest Mayan religion and cosmology. Christian forms of public worship prevailed in the towns and provided the Mayan peasants’ syncretic religious beliefs with a veneer of Iberian Catholicism; but the forest was still the domain of the old gods who continued to provide the peasants with the necessities of life (Farriss 1984:292, Clendinnen 1987:159). To the nominally Catholic *mazehual* the *milpa* had
retained profound spiritual importance despite the economic and religious onslaught of colonialism and Catholicism (Redfield 1941:115; Reed 1964:47). The ladinos' expropriation of Indian communities' traditional lands and forest reserves was not just an assault on the economic basis of peasant society, it was an assault on the last bastion of the Maya gods.

The Caste War differed from earlier Maya uprisings in one very important respect: during the ongoing Centralist-Federalist conflict with Mexico, and in the internal struggles between Merida and Campeche for political and economic control of the peninsula, the various rival ladino factions had enlisted and armed the indios. Six months prior to the beginning of the Caste War Cecilio Chi, a batab and one of the four original conspirators in the revolt, had commanded Maya troops for the Campeche faction. In January of 1847 Chi and his soldiers--without the leadership of white officers--routed the Merida forces at Peto, took Valladolid by storm, and massacred much of the city's ladino population (Reed 1964:46). Emboldened by service in the white's factional struggles (in which Maya troops had killed ladinos with impunity and without repercussion), Chi and otherbatabs initially drew upon the traditional structure of local authority to mobilize men and material for the Caste War (Farriss 1984:386). Soon after they prevailed upon British timber merchants in Belize for arms and powder, thereby establishing a trading relationship which would endure for the next seventy years (Humphries 1961:66, Hubbe 1940, Lapointe 1983).
During the early stages of the revolt the rebel leadership and most of the rebel fighting forces came from the sugar districts. The fiercest battles of the war were also fought in the region and within just two years the war had completely destroyed the Yucatecan sugar industry (Reed 1964, Dumond 1977, Farriss 1984). The viciousness of the warfare and the atrocities committed against non-combatants by both government and rebel soldiers sent thousands of *indios*, *mestizos*, and *ladinos* fleeing into northern Belize.\textsuperscript{25} Ironically it was these *indio* and *mestizo* refugees, fleeing a war begun by sugarcane, who founded the Belizean sugar industry.

After their initial successes of 1847 and 1848, many of the rebel Maya withdrew to Chan Santa Cruz in Quintana Roo where they founded the Empire of the Talking Cross and resisted the Yucatecan government well into the twentieth century. Refugees from both sides of the conflict immigrated to Belize for the next eighty years as factionalism divided the rebels and the fortunes of war shifted back and forth between the rebel Santa Cruz Maya and the Yucatecan government forces. Viewed from a regional-historical perspective, Mayan flight from northern Yucatan into the sparsely populated southern reaches of the peninsula and the Peten was no new development. Since the first days of the Spanish presence in Yucatan, throughout the colonial era, and after Mexican independence the southern lowlands were a zone of refuge for Maya who chose to live as *milperos* (swidden farmers) in dispersed forest settlements rather than endure Iberian

\textsuperscript{25} From 1862 until 1981 Belize was "British Honduras" and a colony of Great Britain. From the eighteenth century until 1862 Belize, though not technically a colony in terms of international law and local government etc., was a colony in all but name. For simplicity sake, and out of deference to Belizeans, I will refer to British Honduras as Belize.
exploitation and oppression (Farriss 1984, Jones 1989). Only the fact that ladinos and mestizos were part of the exodus during the mid-nineteenth century was new.

In this chapter I examine the cultural-ecological and demographic bases of Mayan peasant resistance to European hegemony in Yucatan in order to begin to explain how and why the peasant descendants of Maya and mestizo Caste War refugees were able to take control of sugarcane cultivation in Belize during the 1970s. The thesis of my argument is that the demographic and environmental characteristics of Yucatan and the southern lowlands frontier, coupled with the persistence of swidden subsistence agriculture among the Maya, were critical aspects of non-military peasant resistance to political and economic domination by the Spanish, the Mexicans, and the British.²⁶

The consensus among those researchers most familiar with peasant-state and peasant-capital relations in nineteenth century Belize is that indio and mestizo peasants successfully resisted expropriation of their labor and proletarianization by refusing to abandon swidden subsistence farming for full-time wage labor (Cal 1991a; Jones 1970, 1977; Bolland 1988). This form of peasant resistance has its roots in the particular type of human-environmental relationship characteristic of milpa agriculture. I suggest that its cultural-ecological and demographic bases have been neglected in political-economic analyses of the Belizean sugar industry.

²⁶ In this historical background chapter I draw heavily from the work of a number of researchers, among them: Nancy Farris, Grant Jones, Robert Patch, Inga Clenndinen, Victoria Bricker, and Robert Cline to name just a few. In so doing I have taken liberty with their individual interpretations of the history of the Yucatan for the sake of my own argument. I therefore apologize for any oversimplification which may have resulted.
Unlike the Spanish, the English in Belize never resorted to slavery or conscription to obtain Mayan labor. Instead they relied on the lure of the cash economy bolstered by land laws that marginalized Maya and mestizo alike, and labor practices and laws that promoted debt-peonage (Cal 1991a:83). Laws supporting debt peonage were in force in Belize until 1943. Peasants often participated willingly in the colonial economy as wage laborers during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. However, neither the attraction of wages nor the combined coercive powers of the state and the timber elite who controlled the colonial economy were sufficient to compel them to abandon swidden farming. I argue that during the twentieth century, their refusal to give up swidden subsistence farming was critical to their ability to control the terms of their participation in Belize’s capitalist export sugar industry.

The Belizean colonial elite’s traditional animosity toward peasant farming was rooted in several long-standing beliefs: swidden farming destroyed valuable trees, deprived the timber interests of labor, and weakened control over the labor force by minimizing dependence on elite-controlled food imports. During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries the conditions of treaties between Britain and Spain limited British activity in Belize to logging and prohibited commercial agricultural development. Furthermore, as long as logging was profitable the timber elite saw nothing to be gained from the long-term capital investment that commercial agriculture would require. Their antipathy toward peasant swidden farming and their apathy toward commercial agricultural development resulted in land and labor laws designed to discourage the
growth of a sedentary agricultural peasantry. Paradoxically, these laws directly contributed to an agricultural labor shortage when timber exports declined and export sugar production boomed for a short period during the late nineteenth century, and again in the mid-twentieth century. The second export sugar boom began in the 1950s and was the final stage in the transformation of the Belizean national economy from forest to agricultural export dependency.

During the early 1950s swidden subsistence farmers—who seemingly unbeknownst to the government were producing most of the sugarcane grown in Belize—began to have power incommensurate with their marginal political status by virtue of the fact that they had retained control over their own labor through subsistence farming. *Mayero* peasants had never seen wage labor as an end unto itself simply because the wages and rations paid to agricultural labor were insufficient to keep the laborer and his family supplied with the quantity and quality of foods to which they were accustomed (Jones 1969:138). Belize's historic economic dependence on elite-controlled timber exports and food imports meant that declines in the timber market often produced food shortages. When food was scarce, money could not buy what was not there.

Under the terms of the 1951 Commonwealth Sugar Agreement (CSA) Belize received a 5,000 ton provisional export quota that could become a 25,000 ton guaranteed export quota if warranted by increased production. By 1959 plantation-based production had increased dramatically; however, Belize had still not met its target, having exported only 16,712 tons in that year, and the status of its CSA quota was up for review. In order
to increase production and at the same quell growing rural discontent over plantation expansion, the colonial government enacted the Sugar Ordinances in 1959. These ordinances gave any *milpero* who could produce at least five tons of sugarcane (roughly equivalent to the production of one quarter of an acre of land) the legal right to obtain a sugarcane quota and deliver the amount of cane specified by that quota to the factory.

The colonial government, and I will argue later the dependency theorists, mistakenly assumed that “inefficient” peasant sugarcane farming would inevitably succumb to competition from the efficient, capitalist, plantation-based production which was taken over in 1963 by Tate and Lyle, Ltd., a multinational corporation that controlled much of the Commonwealth Caribbean sugar trade. The government also failed to foresee the political mobilization of the sugar districts’ peasant population by the People’s United Party and the General Workers Union which together formed the nucleus of Belize’s emergent anti-colonial, nationalist, labor movement. The idea that every *milpero* could be a *cañero* (sugarcane farmer) became first a slogan and later a reality. By 1972 the state sponsored plantation economy had collapsed in competition for agricultural labor with emergent, vigorous smallholder production.

I begin here with a brief discussion of some of the assumptions underlying the historical analyses found in existing sociological studies of the Belizean sugar industry. I then examine the historical bases of early Mayan resistance to European hegemony through flight, and the impact that the existence of an uncharted, unpacified region (the southern lowlands) had on the ability of the Spanish to control the Maya. My discussion
then turns to the liberal agrarians reforms and the sugar industry of nineteenth century
Yucatan and their effect on the Maya; Anglo-Maya relations before and during the Caste
Wars; and, peasant-capital and peasant-state relations in Belize during the nineteenth
century. The preceding will provide a basis for the interpretation of ethnohistorical data
concerning the status of refugee Maya and mestizos in Belize during the early twentieth
century. Information obtained from the Belize Archives concerning peasant-state and
peasant-capital relations during this period is useful in explaining the political-ecological
processes underlying the founding of the villages in my study area by swidden subsistence
farmers. It also sheds light on the interactions of the mayero (indo and mestizo swidden
farmers) population, the colonial government, Belizean timber and chicle interests, and
the large landowners.27

Internal colonial correspondence and court records from the Orange Walk District
from the first three decades of the twentieth century suggest that mayeros successfully
resisted exploitation despite land and labor laws that were designed to proletarianize
them. Peasant resistance focused on the points of weakness and division within colonial
capitalist society itself by exploiting the conflict that existed between the British colonial
administration, the British-based firms that monopolized landownership and mahogany

27 The term mayero, as it is used in Belize, refers to those indios and mestizos who follow
a particular way of life which we associate with Yucatecan swidden subsistence
farmers. Objective traits such as the ability to speak Maya, participation in Maya
agricultural rituals, descent, and surname are not necessarily criteria of the mayero
identity. In his study of Pustunich in Yucatan Press notes that these villagers consider
themselves neither “Indians” (an identity associated with the rebel Maya of the Caste
War) or “Spanish”, but mayeros. Mayero, like the Spanish terms molinero (miller),
carpintero (carpenter), and milpero (swidden farmer) indicates professional status or
expertise—in this case expertise in the Maya way of life (1977:285). It further attributes
cultural descendancy from a specific life-style rather than an ethnic or racial group.
exports, and the emergent Belizean chicle entrepreneurs who deeply resented their second-class political status (relative to the British expatriate elite) and increasingly aligned themselves with North American commercial interests. The mayeros exploited the competition for labor and resources that existed within the forestry economy; they conspired with chicle entrepreneurs to subvert the colonial government's efforts to control the price and movement of the agricultural commodities they produced; and they withheld goods from the domestic market to exploit seasonal price fluctuations. If market prices were unfavorable they banked their surplus corn in pigs and chickens. During the 1920s the largest landowner in the colony, the Belize Estate and Produce Company (BEPC), tried to restrict pig-raising in villages on company lands to force the mayeros out of subsistence agriculture and into wage labor. The peasants withheld their surplus corn production from the domestic market—causing shortages and price increases in corn and pork—and successfully petitioned the government to have these restrictions lifted. They squatted government and private lands to make milpa and defied efforts by the BEPC to make them confine their milpa to areas where it could be monitored. If we are able, for the moment, to entertain the notion that the mayero subsistence farmers were often able to successfully resist capitalist exploitation despite the political and economic forces aligned against them, then it is much easier to understand how and why they were able to take control of the Belizean sugar production.
Historical Analysis in Existing Studies of the Belizean Sugar Industry

The social scientists who have studied the social and economic consequences of the growth of the Belizean export sugar industry during the twentieth century have traditionally taken the Mayan Caste War and the introduction of sugarcane into northern Belize by Caste War refugees as their historical starting point (e.g., Jones 1969, Henderson 1972, Abrams 1973, Stavrakis 1978, Brockmann 1979). In April of 1848 rebel Maya forces captured the town and fortress at Bacalar—twenty miles north of the Belizean border at the Rio Hondo—and permitted the garrison and the town’s inhabitants to withdraw to Belize (Dumond 1977:107). The expulsion of the entire Bacalar population of 7,601 transferred to British territory, virtually intact, the southernmost enclave of the Yucatecan sugar industry (Molina Solis 1921:295).

The influx of refugees during just the first fifteen years of the Caste War (1847-1861) increased Belize’s known population from 2,534 in 1835 to 25,635 in 1861 (Cal 1991:216)\textsuperscript{24}. From the moment of their arrival in northern Belize, the indio and mestizo swidden farmers, who were the majority of the refugees, found themselves subject to the same land and labor laws that the colonial elite had designed to control and proletarianize the recently emancipated African slave population. The situation in Belize was in some ways not unlike that which many of the refugees had left behind in northern and central Yucatan.

\textsuperscript{24} Population figures for time inaccurate
By the mid-nineteenth century the five English companies that dominated the colonial economy had created a *latifundio* pattern of land tenure in which they owned virtually all the land along navigable waterways, the colony’s primary means of transportation and communication. These companies harvested and marketed logwood and mahogany and imported and distributed manufactured goods locally and throughout southeastern Yucatan and Central America. With the backing of the territorial government they had extended the political boundaries of Belize to the northwest and the south into the frontier shared with Mexico and Guatemala. After the state formally recognized their land claims in the mid-nineteenth century these firms regarded the resources of Belize as their private property (Cal 1991:328).

Belize’s total known population in 1832 was 4,537; of which approximately forty percent were slaves, eighteen percent free blacks; twenty-one percent colored; and, twenty-one percent (including troops and military pensioners) were white (Cal 1991:202). After the abolition of slavery (1834) and the expiration of the apprenticeship system which bound freed slaves to their former masters (1838), the timber interests had to develop new means of controlling the labor force. Precisely coinciding with the end of apprenticeship the elite sponsored legislation limiting former slaves’ access to land by replacing the existing system of Crown land grants with the sale of such lands at the cost of 1 Sterling per acre, a price well beyond the means of most freedmen. They also established a contractual labor system (labor contracts stipulating length of service, wage
rate, and rations) and a system of wage advances that was identical to the system that Yucatecan *ladinos* used to control Mayan labor through debt peonage (Bolland 1988:71).

Most of the researchers who studied the growth of Belize's export sugar industry during the twentieth century based their analyses in dependency theory (e.g. Frank 1967, Baran 1964, Wallerstein 1974): what William Roseberry refers to as the "catastrophist view" (1989:126) and Donald Attwood calls the "standard theory of commercialization" (1991:9).

In light of the elite-sponsored the land and labor laws enacted to marginalize and control peasant laborers during the nineteenth century, and tropical export sugar industries' notorious reputation for proletarianizing peasants; these studies saw export sugar industry expansion during the 1960s and 1970s as the inevitable, final chapter in the short history of peasant agriculture in northern Belize—yet another example of the proletarianization that invariably accompanies capitalist economic penetration of peasant societies (Beckford 1969; Jones 1969; Henderson 1972, 1990; Stavrakis 1978; Brockmann 1979).29

Their predictions notwithstanding, the Belizean sugar industry is now dominated by a commercial peasantry whose persistence and prosperity seem to defy both the will of the state—which over the years has struggled to create a more efficient (capitalistic) sugar industry—and the vagaries of the global sugar market.

---

29 Grant Jones' 1969 analysis is not based on dependency theory but on Geertz (1963) model of agricultural involution. Nevertheless, Jones concluded that sugarcane cultivation would bring about the destruction of peasant subsistence agriculture in northern Belize. In a later publication (1972) he moderated this view somewhat.
The sugar industry continues to grow despite setbacks that occurred during the mid-1980s (low world-market prices, increased competition with corn sweeteners, and Belize's loss of its preferential export quota to the lucrative US market) which resulted in the closing of one of the country's two refineries. Market conditions began to improve after 1986 and, following an expansion of processing capacity at the Belize Sugar Industry's (BSI) one remaining refinery, one thousand small sugarcane quotas (ranging from twenty-five to one hundred tons) were issued to new farmers in 1993. While its political opponents argue that the United Democratic Party (UDP) bought the 1993 national election with the promise of these new quotas (this seems an accurate analysis), the fact remains that these one thousand new farmers were not coerced into growing sugarcane. Unless they are suffering from a peculiar form of mass delusion, they must know whether other small farmers have benefited from sugarcane. Perhaps the most interesting question is why did the UDP feel that it was politically expedient/necessary to create one thousand new farmers when this was opposed by both the Orange Walk and Corozal Divisions of the Belize Cane Farmers' Association and BSI.

The reasons that the dire consequences researchers predicted for northern Belize's rural populace have not occurred do not lie with the idea that increasing rural participation in the world sugar market would change peasant life. I suggest that the errors of dependency-based analyses stem from: 1) their disregard of the possible independent effects of the historical interaction of population and environment, and their consequently too-rigid ideas of the conditions made necessary by capitalist economic
penetration (Sorenson 1988, Turner and Brush 1987:37). 2) the belief that capitalism is a monolithic entity characterized by historical uniformity of interest (Roseberry 1989); 3) their faith in the superior efficiency and competitiveness of capitalist plantation-based sugar production in comparison to peasant production (e.g., Beckford 1969); and. 4) their failure to acknowledge a long regional history of peasant resistance to external exploitation.

These analyses have overlooked two conditions which Marx deemed critical to the emergence and reproduction of the capitalist mode of production: 1) the existence and persistence of a surplus laboring population or what Marx refers to as “the law of population peculiar to the capitalist mode of production” (1978:422-423, Dobb 1973:153); and, 2) the necessary transformation of the essential human-nature relationship and the non-capitalist social forms (the forces and relations of production) intrinsic to milpa subsistence farming (see Roseberry 1989:155-157).

I argue that demographic and environmental conditions that were presumably favorable to the capitalist mode of production under one set of historical circumstances—the exploitation of forest resources that dominated Belize’s economy from the seventeenth century until the mid twentieth century—were not conducive to reproduction of the capitalist mode of production when the colonial economy finally shifted to agricultural export production in the twentieth century. The colonial elite sponsored land laws limited rural population growth by attempting to exclude agriculture from the forest environment in order to protect the basis of their wealth: timber. They were successful to
the extent that they discouraged the development of a sedentary agricultural peasantry; however, they were unable to block peasant swidden farming. The labor shortage which plagued the first attempt to establish plantation agriculture in northern Belize during the nineteenth century was the first indication of the demographic-ecological paradox that was to hamper the development of capitalist agriculture during the twentieth century: the rural immigrant population was unwilling to engage, nor could they be forced to engage in plantation labor that would require their abandonment of swidden subsistence production.

The history of agriculture in northern Belize since the beginning of the Caste War in 1847 is the history of its Yucatec Maya and mestizo immigrant population; however, the history of their resistance to external exploitation did not suddenly begin in the mid-nineteenth century with their immigration to Belize. In the opinion of several researchers the liberal land reforms of post-independence Yucatan and expansion of the state’s sugar industry pushed the Maya from flight and other more passive forms of resistance into the armed conflict of the War of the Castes (e.g., Cline 1990; Patch 1991, 1993; Farriss 1984; Bricker 1981). Neither the methods by which the Belizean colonial elite attempted to exploit them nor the ways in which the immigrant peasant population resisted exploitation were new. The indios and mestizos who immigrated to Belize during and after the Caste Wars brought with them not only an understanding of the power of political violence, but also a three hundred year old tradition of resistance to foreign domination fundamentally based on flight, life in the bush in dispersed settlements, and
swidden subsistence farming. This form of peasant resistance did not end with their immigration to Belize and is, I suggest, largely responsible for the fact that today the descendants of these immigrants control sugarcane production in Belize. The history of the Belizean sugar industry must be examined within this broader regional-historical context of peasant resistance to external domination if we are to understand the political-ecological bases of peasant resistance in twentieth century Belize that led to the emergence of the peasant-dominated sugar industry.

Conquest and Colonization

It would be difficult to understand why the Spanish bothered to conquer and colonize Yucatan were it not for the concentrated Yucatec Maya settlements found in the northern portion of the peninsula. The region had no mineral wealth of any kind and few commercially exploitable resources of value on European markets. The Maya were quite poor in comparison to the Aztec and the Inca, not to mention that they were also warlike, difficult to defeat, and rebellious (Clenndinen 1987). Yucatan had the dubious distinction of achieving its reputation as a colonial backwater before it became a colony: news of the riches found by Francisco Pizarro in Peru caused mass desertions among the forces Francisco de Montejo had recruited for his conquest of the peninsula (Farriss 1984: 32). In northern Yucatan, where most Spaniards settled after the conquest, the soils were of poor quality and too shallow to plow, groundwater was scarce, and the climate was

---

30 As one bemused Maya put the question to the conquistador Francisco de Montejo, "What will you do here, stranger, when you are set upon by as many Indians as there are hairs on the skin of a deer" (cf. Rugeley 1996:xi).
hot, humid, and generally inhospitable to Europeans and their accustomed crops and livestock. The environment alone was one reason why so many colonists wanted to leave and why the early Spanish government forbade emigration (Patch 1993:16). Yucatan's peculiar combination of environmental constraints on European cultigens and intensive agriculture, the presence of a large Indian labor force, the absence of commercially exploitable resources, and the small size of the Spanish population relative to the indigenous population explain why tribute in various forms became the basis of the colonial economy and remained so long after other colonies had shifted to more complex commercial economies (Patch 1991:54).

The Mayan agricultural economy was based almost entirely on shifting cultivation of maize and beans: ostensibly the only agricultural regime the poor soils could support and the only staple crops the region could produce given the existing technology (De Landa 1959:118). The only resources of any commercial value to the Spanish were those which the pre-conquest Maya elite extracted in tribute from the commoners: cacao, salt, beeswax, honey, and cotton. Cattle ranching began soon after the conquest and was the only agrarian enterprise the colonists ever pursued on a commercial scale and even this was very limited. Internal demand was small--colonists were not flocking to the Yucatan--and ranching was concentrated in the northern and western reaches of the peninsula close to Spanish population centers and the few export outlets that existed. The trade in livestock did not become significant until the early nineteenth century.
The ecological realities of the northern Yucatan proved as frustrating to the spiritual goals of the conquest as they were to its economic objectives and for similar reasons. Shortly after their arrival in 1544, the Franciscans were granted royal approval to begin *reducción* (resettlement and congregation) of the Maya to facilitate their conversion to Catholicism. The prosperity of the colonial-tribute based economy was, however, directly dependent on the survival of the tributaries. Secular colonial economic interests opposed resettlement on the grounds that it was economically disruptive and hastened the demise of the Indian population by exacerbating the effects of drought and famine and accelerating the spread of disease. In reality this was not entirely correct since the congregated towns were no larger than most of the proto-historic settlements that depended on swidden agriculture (Farriss 1978). Nevertheless, by the 1580s the Maya had—with the tacit approval of the *encomenderos* (settlers who received grants in native labor and tribute from the crown)—begun to reverse the process of congregation. They accomplished this by absconding from official villages and reverting to a dispersed settlement pattern characterized by a large number of unauthorized *ranchos* (hamlets) that were administratively dependent on, but physically separate, from the original congregated town. State control gradually diminished as the government began to recognize the imprudence (from an ecological and economic standpoint), if not the futility, of trying to control the Indians’ settlement pattern. Ultimately the Crown sanctioned a modified version of the Indian system of land tenure (*republica de indios*). Communal ownership was legally recognized, and the *Leyes de Indias* contained measures
designed to protect and maintain the preconquest landholding system (Patch 1991:53). It is estimated that by the early eighteenth century unauthorized satellite settlements established by the Maya contained approximately one-third of the Indian population. In 1763 the public granary at Campeche obtained seventy-seven percent of its maize from independent swidden farmers (Farriss 1984:206, 35).

The long and stable history of the *encomienda* in Yucatan is also symptomatic of the region's feeble commercial growth. In most Spanish colonies the *encomienda* served as a transitional means of extracting wealth from indigenous populations (often under the guise of indemnifying early settlers for tutelage and supervision of the Indians' conversion to Catholicism) until more commercial economies developed. In Yucatan the private *encomienda* was allowed to continue until 1786 (Farriss 1984:39). The market economy made inroads into the local tribute-based economy but it was not until after the end of the *encomienda* system that demand for Mayan labor for commercial production increased in size and changed in organization. Tribute was the Spaniard's main source of wealth and basic sustenance long after the core colonies had shifted to more complex commercial economies. Robert Patch maintains that the Yucatan's economic system more closely resembled feudalism than capitalism until the 19th century (1993: 54).\(^1\)

In the absence of precious metals the basis of the Yucatecan colonial elite's wealth was Maya society itself. Both clerical and secular colonial interests were constrained in their exploitation of the Maya by several factors, not the least of which were the

\(^1\) Patch would not, however, characterize the colonial economy as feudal.
geographical limits of colonial control and the relative ease with which the Maya could and did escape if Spanish demands became too onerous. The dearth of commercially exploitable resources also meant that funds for military campaigns to bring the frontier under control were scarce. Spanish control was also limited by the colonists' marked preference for urban residence in the relatively drier climate of northern Yucatan over rural life in the sweltering forests of the southern lowlands.

The eastern and southwestern coastal provinces of Yucatan were depopulated by European diseases shortly after the Spanish arrived. Much of the remaining indigenous population of the southern-most provinces (Uaymil and Chetumal) was then slaughtered during the semi-independent campaign led by the Pacheco family (Jones 1989:43). In the mid-seventeenth century more than two-thirds of the peninsula (the eastern coastal region and everything south of Peto excluding an narrow strip of western coast) was officially designated as despoblado or uninhabited—more a reflection of the extent of Spanish control than demographic reality. The despoblado was in fact home to large numbers of refugees who fled colonial rule to form independent settlements of their own or join their unconquered cousins, who controlled small pockets in the east and all the territory to the south (Farriss 1984, Jones 1989).

If the northern Yucatan had few resources of interest to the Spanish colonists, then the sparsely populated forests of the southern lowlands were even less attractive. The soils were better and groundwater more plentiful; but the climate was also more humid and the Indians were even more belligerent and less abundant (ostensibly as a result of the
Pacheco campaigns) than those in the north. The Mayan provinces of Chetumal, Uaymil, and Dzuluinicob (roughly the southeastern portions of Quintana Roo, the northeastern quarter of the Peten, and modern-day Belize) were conquered and pacified in 1544. Judging from the carnage that ensued in Uaymil and Chetumal, this seemed more an effort to stabilize the southern colonial frontier than to establish tribute-paying *encomiendas*; the exception being the cacao-producing area around Laguna de Bacalar. No sooner had the first *encomiendas* of central and northern Belize been granted than rebellion broke out in Chetumal province in 1546 (apparently begun in concert with a massive rebellion, the Great Revolt, that broke out far to the north in Valladolid), and the Maya killed their *encomendero*. Between 1544 and 1707 Dzuluinicob slipped back and forth between Maya and Spanish control several times (Jones 1989:5).

The southern lowlands Maya soon learned that open rebellion invited brutal repression and frequently chose to accommodate clerical and secular demands until the Spaniards departed, which they invariably did. It required two months for a priest carry out a *visita* to the villages scattered along the river systems of Belize. In his absence Christian doctrine remained in the hands of the Maya *maestros* whose loyalty to the faith was hardly unwavering. Grant Jones notes that this frontier was a place of dynamic cultural syncretism. Catholicism provided the Maya with Christian ideology, rituals, and symbols which they readily incorporated into their own beliefs and practices, adding another dimension to, and further justification for, their opposition to Spanish rule.

We are told...of a hotbed of apostates at Ixpimienta who were ruled by opportunistic Maya priests who mocked the Church in dress and ritual... Yet when Spanish troops arrived on Good Friday they found the
population waving palm fronds in a collective expression of Christian ritual unity. These same Maya later murdered their Spanish visitors...humiliating the bodies in ways that were derived from both Spanish and Maya traditional practice (1989:107).

Absent any compelling economic incentive beyond the recapture of runaway Maya from the northern *encomiendas*, from the sixteenth century onward the Spaniards exhibited neither the motivation nor the ability to bring the southern lowlands under permanent control. The perceived benefits of carrying out major expeditions in the area simply could not justify the costs involved. The Spanish made periodic *entradas* (forays) into the region to punish apostates, reduce runaways, and reestablish *encomiendas*; however, the net effect was to drive the indigenous and refugee Maya deeper into the forests and further from colonial authority. In 1697 the Spanish finally succeeded in conquering Tah Itza, the southern-most stronghold of independent Itza Maya. Most of the local Mayan population then fled into the forest and famine set in at the Spanish headquarters. The Peten was subsequently turned into a penal colony for Spanish criminals which suggests how highly the Spaniards valued this conquest prize.

The Spaniards' ability to control subjugated Maya was contingent on their maintaining a physical presence in the region. Few wished to reside in Salamanca de Bacalar, the isolated Spanish *villa* that governed Chetumal, Uaymil, and Dzuluinicob, let alone the yet more remote Maya settlements of the interior. Bacalar was a colonial backwaters' backwater: "...a tiny, often corrupt, and virtually disenfranchised Spanish population in the midst of a green sea of widely scattered, rebellious, and nativistic Maya" (Jones 1989:53). During the seventeenth century increased by British pirates based in
Belize further compounded the Spaniards’ inability to control the southern lowlands Maya. Bacalar was attacked and its church sacked and desecrated in 1642 by Diego Lucifer el Mulatto and the villa lost all control as a frontier outpost until its reinforcement in the eighteenth century (Villa Rojas 1945:17).

The overall effect of the survival of the southern frontier was to maintain the viability of Maya political resistance both in the southern forests and in the villages of the northern Yucatan itself. The idea and the reality of this process of cross-frontier resistance survived for nearly four centuries. Its final expression was the nineteenth century Caste War of the Yucatan, whose rebel leaders, the generals and priests of the Santa Cruz Maya, founded a Maya chiefdom in the forests of Quintana Roo (Bricker 1981:19, Jones 1989:11).

The Early British Presence in Belize

Until the decline of timber exports in the mid-nineteenth century, British colonists were not interested in either agriculture or landownership per se. The first British settlers who arrived in Belize in the 1650s and were buccaneers-cum-loggers. Britain’s title to Jamaica and other de facto possessions in the West Indies and America was first acknowledged by Spain in the Treaty of Madrid in 1667 and a further treaty signed in 1670. Thereafter it was agreed that the subjects of the two crowns should abstain from all acts of violence and Great Britain made a serious effort to suppress buccaneering. By 1682 the buccaneers, “the frontiersmen of the Caribbean,” had either turned pirate or settled down to the business of logwood cutting (Humphries 1961:1)
Little is known about these first settlers' contacts with the Belize Maya since they seem to have kept few written records. These early settlers valued neither land nor Indian labor and were interested only in one natural resource: logwood. Furthermore, Indian labor was virtually unobtainable due to the hostility and the dispersal of the indigenous population (Bolland 1977:70). Land was not a valuable commodity because timber exploitation was not conducive to permanent ownership of land and the threat of Spanish invasion precluded the development of an agricultural economy. It is assumed that during most of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries logwood cutting in the coastal swamps had relatively little effect on the Maya. The earliest documented clashes between the Maya and the British loggers began in the 1770s and coincide with the shift from logwood to mahogany extraction. As the loggers moved out of the coastal swamps and inland along the rivers in search of mahogany they began encroaching on the forests where the resident Maya practiced *milpa* agriculture (Cal 1991b:88). The loggers viewed Mayan swidden agriculture as damaging to the forest resources they were exploiting. The Maya no doubt felt threatened by British expansion into their territory and began attacking timber camps. The cultural identity of these Maya is unknown though it seems likely they may have included the Tipu Maya of Dzulunicob and refugees from Spanish oppression in northern Yucatan. Maps of the late eighteenth century show that the frontier of the British timber extraction was south and east of the Rio Hondo which would coincide with the area occupied by the Tipu (Jones 1989). Based on the relatively small size of the Mayan forces that attacked the timber operations it does not appear that they
were part of a large polity that could mount major attacks—which also meant that they could not be decisively beaten. Nevertheless, by the 1820s and 1830s it seems that the Maya had withdrawn from the territory and were seldom seen by British settlers and loggers (Bolland 1977:73). These Maya apparently resettled north of the Rio Hondo and in the Peten where they remained outside British control.

The threat of being ousted by the Spanish, who retained sovereignty over the settlement precluded the development of plantation agriculture in Belize until the nineteenth century. It was not until the Treaty of Paris in 1763 that Great Britain actually obtained from Spain "plain and public" recognition of their right to cut logwood in the Bay of Honduras (Humphries 1961:2). The Convention of London in 1786 granted British subjects in Belize the right to cut mahogany as well as logwood, but expressly forbade the establishment of coffee, sugar or similar plantations. Until 1796 Spanish inspectors came and, with British cooperation, uprooted any large plantations they found (Shoman 1994:93). The loggers advanced the frontier of known stands of timber but the only permanent settlements they established were at sites on the river banks that served as timber collection points or barkadeers. As forest resources in one area were exhausted it was a simple matter to move to another location where they were plentiful (Humphries 1961:17).

The only criterion affecting land use was accessibility to rivers and streams, the principal means of transport and communication. Without an inexpensive means of getting logs to the coast, the costs of timber extraction would be prohibitive. In order for
logging to be profitable it also required a source of cheap labor. Since the Belize Maya were not easily exploited the British resorted to slavery; and in 1807 African slaves made up seventy-five percent of Belize's known population (Cal 1991b:89).

The timber interests' hostility toward the development of an agricultural peasantry was based on two beliefs: the idea that allowing a peasantry to form would draw scarce labor away from timber extraction; and, putting land into agricultural production would destroy forest resources. In Belize land only became a commodity in anticipation of the emancipation of the slave population. In 1817 the colonial government abolished the location system of free land acquisition and replaced it, in 1838, with sales of Crown lands to stifle the development of a landowning peasantry and force former slaves to continue working for the timber interests (Cal 1991b:91). The ex-slaves' labor was also controlled through a contractual wage advance system, supported by penal sanctions, which kept the laborer perpetually indebted to his employer.

The Impact of Mexican Independence on the Maya

When Mexico became independent from Spain Yucatecan commerce collapsed as its exports were displaced from their accustomed markets in the Gulf of Mexico, Havana, and Europe. Gradually new trade items (sugar) began to replace the old (cattle) as the Yucatan strove for political independence via economic self-sufficiency. This economic transformation was aided and abetted by legislation designed to bring down the old colonial economic order and replace it with a more capitalist economic system in which the exploitation of privately owned land using wage labor, rather than the exploitation of
Indian labor in the form of tribute, was the primary source of wealth. Even before Mexican independence was won, Spanish liberals had begun to institute new laws designed to eliminate antiquated economic principles and modernize property-holding system. The liberals of the Spanish Enlightenment, the sanjuanistas, called for "genuine agrarian change" to modernize and improve the rural economy (O'Reilly). The Maya were generally seen as an impediment to such change.

The liberals' hostile attitude toward Mayan landholding patterns and agriculture practices was based on long-standing ladino conceptions of the Maya as intellectually and technologically backward. Justo Sierra O'Reilly, Yucatan's most widely known liberal thinker, maintained that the contemporary Yucatec Mayan agrarian longfallow system and the concept of communal ownership of property were environmentally and socially "damaging." According to O'Reilly these indios did not belong to the ancient civilized race of Moctezuma, but were instead an "intractable and degenerate mixture" (Navarro 1988:109). Among the "nine true causes" of Yucatan's poverty, an editorial in the newspaper El Yucateco listed: Indian laziness and alcoholism, bad faith on the part of laborers (mostly Indians), populations isolated in forest hamlets, and praedial larceny (Molina 1955:169):

Most if not all of the liberal reforms of the early nineteenth century were injurious to the interests of Maya. Yucatecan liberals saw the republica de indios as an anachronistic vestige of Spanish colonialism that prevented full integration of the Maya labor force into the market economy. Their reforms sought to restrict communal
ownership, extend private property rights, and remove restrictions on the alienation of Indian community lands, thereby encouraging colonization of so-called despoblado regions of the peninsula which they believed to be only sparsely inhabited by the Maya. The liberals saw the Constitution of Cadiz (1812) which contained provisions to stimulate the privatization of communal holdings and colonization of unused lands as a significant transitional step in the destruction of the colonial regime (Patch 1993:54). The next major step in this process was the Law of Colonization (1825) which facilitated the private acquisition of terrenos baldios (unoccupied lands) in order to attract immigrants and promote colonization of the hinterlands. There was no formal recognition of the fallow forest lands which Maya communities held in reserve for swidden agriculture.

In first years of independence there was no rush to acquire terrenos baldios and the interests of the old colonial elite, and by extension those of the Maya, were protected by cautious interpretations of the old law. The old elite had no reason to dispossess Indians of their lands, and both church and state benefited from the survival of a tribute-paying, dependent peasantry. This situation began to change dramatically as liberal economic reforms eroded the old order and the old elite found it more difficult to control emergent economic interests favoring less a less conservative economic agrarian policy. Furthermore, the expansion of the sugar and logwood industries in the southern part of the state and near the Belizean frontier could not be contained. Powerful landowners within the old colonial elite also wanted to join the colonization process to benefit from the profits generated by sugar and logwood in the frontier areas and to extend their
control over the rural populations around their maize and cattle-producing haciendas in the northern part of the peninsula. At the same time the political situation shifted dramatically as increased conflict between Centralists and Federalists at both the regional and national levels threatened to bankrupt the state treasury. Political leaders had to find new sources of public revenue and the most obvious source was the commoditization of terrenos baldios and Indian ejido lands.

In 1841 the Federalist state government passed a new colonization law limiting Mayan villages' communal lands to one league in each direction from center of the village (four square leagues). Lands adjacent to villages which were outside these limits, though in active milpa or in fallow, were declared terrenos baldios and subject to colonization. Further economies were achieved by giving soldiers who fought against Centralists premios de campana (campaign prizes in the form of terreno baldio land grants) of one quarter league in lieu of cash payment for their service. The state government also implemented the contribucion patriótica (a forced loan to the government) in 1843 and paid creditors with no-interest bonds that were valueless until they were later be used to purchase terrenos baldios, thereby creating a land rush. In 1844 a new law created a tax of one real on every ten mecates (one mecate is roughly one-eighth of an acre) of milpa whether within a Maya village's ejido or on terrenos baldios; and villagers were required to pay to have lands surveyed to distinguish ejido lands from terrenos baldios. Villagers couldn't afford the cost of surveys to protect their lands and communities often had to sell communal property just to pay for the survey. Indians also submitted claims for terrenos
baldios (including Jacinto Pat, one of the leaders of the rebel forces during the first years of the Caste Wars), and the Maya fought adjudication of claims in court and sometimes won but the tide was against them.

The areas most affected by the agrarian policies were those that were believed by the government to be thinly populated. In reality these areas contained significant numbers of Maya, both in areas ostensibly under government control and in the despoblado. The process of Mayan population dispersal and the formation of new settlements which began after suspension of the Franciscan’s efforts to create reducciones had continued unabated throughout the colonial era and after independence from Spain. Population dispersion was stimulated by three factors: the desire to escape the demands of political and religious authorities, bad harvests and food shortages, and the intrinsic land requirements of extensive agriculture (Farriss 1978). As the Maya population rebounded from the devastation of the military conquest and the introduction of Europeans diseases, the number of unauthorized settlements increased as people sought new land for swidden. These settlements usually formed in two stages. As communities grew, people had to walk farther to make swidden and milperos established temporary residences in order to be the near their fields. Then the women and children arrived, temporary shelters became permanent, and new villages were established. These villages formed either as satellites of the parent village or, as was often the case when crop failures caused food shortages and emigration, colonists occupying land far removed from the parent settlement. In the despoblado unauthorized settlements could proliferate easily because it was an open
frontier stretching all the way from the central Yucatan to Belize and the Peten. During the 1830s areas the government believed to be unpopulated were found to be inhabited by large numbers of independent farmers. Some were colonists who had emigrated from areas under government control and others, in the borderlands, were Maya who had never been as thoroughly colonized by the Spaniards as those of the more northern districts (Patch 1993: ).

In 1838 the juez de paz (justice of the peace) of Tepich in the Valladolid District reported that two-thirds of the Maya under his jurisdiction had abandoned their authorized villages and were living in the bush to avoid paying taxes and to practice their religion. In response to this and similar reports the government offered the inhabitants of unauthorized hamlets several years of tax relief if they would return to their parent villages but they refused. In 1837 the subprefect of Temax wrote that the laws ordering the elimination of these ranchos were unenforceable because lawmakers did not understand that it was almost impossible for all the peasants to live in a village and work lands a great distance from their homes. He further noted that no lands were available in his partido: those lands thought to be abandoned only appeared that way due to the fallow cycle of milpa farming (Patch 1993:63).

As the liberals anticipated, the reforms they designed to promote progress through colonization were increasingly displacing the Maya from their lands. Indian communities found themselves with less land to work at the very moment their population was growing rapidly. Pressure on Indian villages and settlements increased as their
landholdings were chewed away at by ranchers and sugarcane farmers who had purchased or been awarded terrenos baldios. In 1841 there was a minor uprising in Acanceh by villagers protesting the sale of terrenos baldios and minor milpa tax rebellions occurred in Yalkuk, Huhi, and Teabo.

The Yucatecan Sugar Industry

If the liberal reforms of the early nineteenth century provided the legal means for alienating Mayan community lands, then the expansion of the sugar industry created the economic incentive needed to set the process in motion. Sugar was not an important agricultural commodity in colonial Yucatan and the beginning of serious development of commercial sugarcane cultivation dates to 1823. In that year the state legislature sought to stimulate sugar production because the Yucatan had been cut off from Cuba, its traditional source, by independence from Spain. The sugar industry in many ways embodied the liberals' agrarian reform agenda. It was a new agricultural commodity with internal markets and export potential that exploited two previously underutilized resources: Indian labor and Indian land. To the sugar impresarios, the adventitious new land laws and simple logic dictated that they extend production into areas which had formerly been Indian community lands. The rapid expansion of sugar plantations in the borderlands region (particularly Sotuta, Tekax and Valladolid) resulted in the sudden invasion of traditional Indian lands by whites.

In order to keep costs of production low planters increased production by expanding their holdings and the total area under cultivation rather than by perfecting
either the techniques of production or of processing. By Caribbean standards, neither the machinery used in Yucatecan sugar processing nor the methods of production were sophisticated or efficient. However, what was lost to inefficiency could be made up for by increasing the area under cultivation since land had become cheap.

Expansion of the sugar industry also demanded that the Maya submit to a system of stable, disciplined labor. The scarcity of willing labor in the Yucatan was a factor that initially limited the expansion of the sugar industry. The harvest is a major cost of production and absorbs a major part of the available labor, thereby putting the proprietors at the mercy of an "irresponsible population." Planters risked losing all or part of their crop if it wasn't cut in time. In 1813 the state's entire harvest was lost because the Indians refused to work voluntarily and legislation enacted by the Spanish courts had diminished the existing system of forced labor (Cline 1990). Peonage and some form of forced labor seemed essential and inevitable in order to achieve good sugar production on the plantations. Although the cañeros weren't responsible for passage of the rigid laws of peonage established for the benefit of the palo de tinta (logwood or dyewood) interests, they nevertheless used these laws to entrap Mayan laborers.

The sugar business was extremely lucrative and in 1844, when cane production reached its apogee, Tekax and Peto had more land under cultivation in sugarcane than all the other areas combined. Cline estimated that 800,000 hectares of "vacant" land was converted to private property and one-third of the terrenos baldios converted to private property were found in Peto (1990:59). Not surprisingly the areas where the Indian
rebellion of 1847 was most determined (Peto, Hopelchen, Sotuta, Tekax, Valladolid) contained about forty-five percent of all the *terrenos baldios* converted to private property (Dumond 1977).

Initially protective tariffs, high prices, cheap land and labor, and adequate though by no means advanced technology were factors that contributed to the growth of the sugar industry. Everything seemed to favor the expansion of the sugar industry: advantageous land laws, exemption from export duties, new roads reducing transport costs, and duty free entry to the ports of the Gulf. When the dictatorship of Santa Anna began to tax sugar and rum exports heavily the producers sought to transfer this cost of production to the consumers and were largely successful until 1847 when the War of the Castes broke out.

In the mid-nineteenth century the distribution of the Yucatecan *ladino* and the known Maya populations reflected the economic exploitation of the land. At the outbreak of the Caste War the Maya of the Yucatan varied from long-time hacienda and plantation laborers in the north and west to newly recruited sugar workers and the free Maya of varying degrees of "wildness" in the east and south. In 1845 nearly seventy percent of the Spanish population lived in the zone around Merida extending east to Valladolid and west to Campeche, this area had the highest *ladino* population density since the colonial era which contained long established plantations, ranchos and haciendas. The geographical center of the peninsula and the southern frontier of *ladino* control (the districts of Valladolid, Tihosuco and Sotuta) contained thirty percent of the *ladino* population. Prior
to the liberal reforms of the nineteenth this area was only inhabited by swidden-farming Maya communities. Land in this area was increasingly being brought under cultivation in sugarcane and cattle ranches were expanding. It is no accident that the impetus for the revolt, its leaders, and most of its fighting forces came from this region. These were the same Maya provinces (Cupul, Cochuah, and Sotuta) that were the locus of the Great Revolt in the sixteenth century and the more circumscribed Canek revolt of 1761 (Farriss 1984:386). These were also the districts where the social, economic, and political structure of the Maya community has best survived the pressures of colonial rule. More accurately, it was where those pressures were weakest: where Spanish population was least heavily concentrated and commercial agriculture was least developed. To the east and south, an area extending from roughly Tulum to the Rio Hondo was sparsely populated and said to be inhabited by Maya descendants of refugees from the Canek revolt. In areas with less dense population, the southern and eastern extremes of the state, there was little conflict over land between the Maya and ladinos who held land grant timber concessions in this area. Logwood harvesting went on independently of the land rush because the loggers saw no use in holding long-term title to land.

The transition from old commodities (cattle) to new commodities (sugar) destroyed the tenuous equilibrium of ladino-Maya relations that existed during the colonial era as the expanding Maya population was subject to increasingly oppressive demands for their land and labor. Sugar competed with the Indians for the best lands and, given the political power of the cañeros, the Indians had no other recourse but to submit.
flee, or fight. Fighting broke out in Tepich on July 30, 1847 and quickly spread through the Maya heartland of Yucatan: the districts of Valladolid, Tihosuco, and Sotuta. As the rebellion spread only the most servile workers in the old colonial areas remained loyal to their *ladino* masters. Although one might assume that a large part of the rebel army was composed of free Maya of the southeast, a numerically more significant portion was almost certainly made up of former agricultural workers from haciendas and plantations. By 1849 the major battles of the war, which were fought mostly in the sugar region, had completely destroyed the industry (Dumond 1977:105-107).

Political Antecedents of the Caste War

The Caste War differed from earlier Maya uprisings in one other very important respect: during political strife of the 1840s between the Centralists and the Federalists, both the rival factions had armed the Indians. All the problems the Mexican Republic had experienced since independence from Spain, the power struggles and class rivalries, were reflected on a smaller scale in Yucatan. At the time of Mexican independence, Yucatan chose the federalist as opposed to the centralist philosophy of government based on a tradition of a separate administration under the Spanish Crown. Federalism became synonymous with liberalism and opposed to centralist-conservatism. Mexican President Lopez de Santa Anna, a liberal hero and federalist favoring state’s rights, became a centralist conservative after one term as president. Under his centralist regime, states were made administrative departments, state governors were appointed rather than elected, and elective offices were limited to the very rich. National troops garrisoned in
Yucatan to preserve order (suppress federalists) were paid out of the state’s own funds. The subordination of local interests to Santa Anna’s desire to create a uniform nation was an affront to the principles of the ruling class in Yucatan who were accustomed to exercising rule (Reed 1964:25-26).

In May of 1838 Santiago Iman, a captain in the state militia, began a revolt against centralism in Tizimin in northeastern Yucatan. Iman’s revolt was unsuccessful until he promised the indios that if they joined him he would suppress the Church obventions they were forced to pay. The Maya, long forbidden to bear arms, had recently been forced to serve in the army: many owned shotguns, all carried machetes, and their numbers were unlimited. After Iman took Valladolid the whole state rose to his assistance and drove the Mexican troops from the peninsula 1840.

The Yucatecans vowed to remain independent until Mexico returned to the federal system. Centralist authorities in Mexico were unable to act until 1843 when an expeditionary force was sent to Yucatan; only to be defeated by an army of indios who were promised land and, for the second time, a reduction in their church taxes. Although Yucatecan federalists had defeated the Mexican army they soon realized that independence was impractical and signed a treaty of reincorporation in which they accepted a centralist regime in exchange for control of state affairs, special import-export duties, and free passage for Yucatecan products to all the ports of Mexico. Santa Anna then reneged on this treaty and Yucatan again renounced its national ties in December of 1845. In 1846 war with the United Sates broke out and Santa Anna needed whatever
assistance he could get so he promised Yucatan full rights as listed in the treaty of 1843. Reunification occasioned another round of Centralist-Federalist fighting and the *indios* were once again enlisted using the same promises as before (Reed 1964:28-33).

Late in July, 1847 Yucatecan authorities heard rumors, emanating from the sugarcane region, that Maya *caciques* (leaders responsible to the Yucatecan government) were conspiring to overthrow the government. The authorities’ brutal, inept attempts to capture the conspirators started the Caste Wars. Three of the four original leaders of the revolt had Maya surnames: Jacinto Pat and Antonio Ay were landholders and *caciques* of Indian settlements; and, Cecilio Chi and Bonifacio Novelo had seen military service as a commanders of Maya troops in the Federalist-Centralist conflict (Careaga 1990:106). The original intentions of the conspirators are not known though it is suggested that Pat wanted to replace the *ladino* government, Ay wanted to drive the *dzul* (whites) from the Yucatan. and Chi was simply for killing every *dzul* down to the last woman and child (Reed 1964:55). Pat and Chi were from the towns of Tihosuco and Tepich on the eastern edge of the commercial sugar zone, Ay was from a village near Valladolid, and Bonifacio Novelo, a *mestizo*, was from Valladolid itself.

As the rebellion gained momentum the Maya armed their new recruits with weapons and munitions provided by English merchants. One by one the important population centers of Tekax, Ticul, Izamal, and Bacalar fell to the rebel forces (Careaga 1990:58). In March of 1848 the Governor of Yucatan, Santiago Mendez dispatched letters to Spain, Britain, and the United States asking each for help and offering complete
domination and sovereignty over Yucatan to the first power willing to oblige (Reed 1964:85). In April of 1848 Jacinto Pat accepted a government request for meeting in the town of Tzucacab to negotiate an end to the fighting.³²

It is impossible to reduce a phenomenon as complex as the Caste War to any single cause or event. The years between Mexico’s independence in 1821 and the rise of the dictator Porfirio Diaz in 1876 were likely the most turbulent period in Mexico’s history. In the case of Yucatan, historians tend to see the years 1821-1847 as a coda to the eighteenth century, an extension of the economic restructuring begun by the Bourbon reforms of late colonial Spain (Cline 1990, Patch 1996). A second school of thought sees the Caste War as primarily a consequence of an enduring racial split that continues to characterize Yucatecan society (Villa Rojas 1945, Reed 1964, Thompson 1974). Another closely related view emphasizes the ways in which pre-Columbian Maya culture secretly circulated beneath the facade of the ladino state (Bricker 1981, Jones 1989). All these elements (political-economic, ethnic, and cultural-religious) undoubtedly contributed to the outbreak of war. The Caste War began as a peasant revolt (led by elements of the Maya elite) against land and church taxes and economic exploitation by the Merida-based ladino elite. The Maya essentially perceived the racist ladino government as a foreign power that demanded they pay civil and religious contributions, forced them to provide their labor free to cañeros and hacendados, and required they surrender their milpa land, the basis of their survival, to latifundistas. After 1850, when the syncretic cult of the

³² The American newspapers mistakenly referred to Pat as “San Jacinto Pat” and reported that he was “a native leader of Irish ancestry” (Reed 1964:87).
Talking Cross became the central rallying point of the rebels and the Empire of the Cross was established in Quintana Roo, the conflict's religious-millenarian dimensions became more apparent.

The Rebels’ Demands

The conditions Jacinto Pat and Cecilio Chi presented to then Governor Miguel Barbancho (Governor Mendez had since stepped down), at Tzucacab demanded an end to economic exploitation of Indians by the church and state, security of Indian land rights, and Mayan self-government. Articles one and two specifically demanded racial equality between whites and Indians in matters of civil taxation and religious obventions.

Article 1. From this day forward and in perpetuity the *contribucion personal* is abolished for whites as well as for Indians, that is, the tax which all Yucatecans must pay from the ages of sixteen to sixty.

Article 2. For Indian and white alike the payment for baptism is fixed at 3 *reales* and for marriage at 10 *reales*.

Article 3. The right to fell the forests to make *milpa* or establish *ranchos* on *ejido* lands as well as on *terrenos baldios* without payment of any tax or rent whatsoever is established. Once established, the right to these lands cannot be alienated. Furthermore no unclaimed lands—though surveyed and registered—which have not already been deeded by the government can be removed from the public domain.
Article 4. The government must return all 2,500 weapons seized from Indians. Any shortfall in this number will be purchased by the governor who will turn them over to Jacinto Pat so that they may be given to their rightful owners. All weapons and livestock seized in war and presently in the hands of Mayan troops will remain their property.

Article 5. Miguel Barbancho is to be made governor for life and is thereby personally charged with the fulfillment of these articles.

Article 6. Caudillo Jacinto Pat is named the governor of all the captains of the Indians of the Yucatan and will work with Barbancho to determine how they will be governed for the well-being of all.

Article 7. All indebted servants, whether combatants in this campaign or not, are absolved of their debts. Anyone who wishes to enter into new debt arrangements is free to do so, but will have to repay newly acquired debts.

Article 8. The tax on the distillation of rum is abolished throughout the Yucatan.

Article 9. When this treaty is ratified by the governor then all rebel forces will withdraw to their homes except those required to maintain order in their respective villages (Careaga 1990:127).

Pat and Barbancho signed the treaty but Chi refused: only a definitive Maya victory in which the dzul were driven from the Yucatan would suffice. The split

---

Chi's refusal to sign the treaty was based on more than just his hatred of the dzul. In the latest round of ladino factional fighting he had sided with Barbancho's political rival Mendez who had ignored the excesses of Chi and his Maya troops in the plunder of Valladolid. Pat was a Barbanchista and judging from the terms of the treaty, which made Barbancho Governor of Yucatan for life and gave Pat political and military
between Jacinto Pat and Cecilio Chi over their differences concerning whether they should continue fighting and what it was they were fighting for was symptomatic of the factionalism that plagued the rebel Maya for the next seventy years. In December of 1848 Chi was murdered by his wife’s mestizo lover, Chi’s secretary. The rivalry between Pat and Chi then passed into the hands of Chi’s two officers, Florencio Chan and Venancio Pec, who murdered Pat in September of 1849 (Reed 1964:121).

Pec, Chan, and other rebel leaders simply did not trust the dzul and were completely unwilling to submit to the authority of Merida. As long as the government troops continued their attacks on the rebels peace was impossible. Chan and Pec wrote the following to the governor in 1848 after reviewing the terms of the treaty he had signed with Jacinto Pat at Tzucacab:

...our subordinates request that you hear their allegations of the excessive and frightening cruelties they receive from your troops, they do not consent that we should once again submit to the government of Merida. This is also because the government of the Englishmen has begun to support us and provide us with many favors and for this reason my men voluntarily obey their directives (my translation, Betancourt and Menendez 1990:130)

It is certainly possible that Chan and Pec were taunting the governor by bringing up their amiable relations with the British; however, on two later occasions, in 1867 and 1887.

---

control over the Maya, Chi’s decision not to sign may have been motivated by self-preservation.

14 "...mas supuesto que mis subordinados piden les oiga el alegato que hacen de ser excesivas y espantosas las cruealdades que reciben de vuestras tropas, no consisten que volvamos a sujetarnos de nuevo al gobierno de merida. Esto es tambien proque ya empezo a ampararnos y hacernos muchos beneficios el gobierno de los senores ingleses: por lo cual les ha nacido de voluntad obedecer sus mandatos."
other rebel leaders suggested to colonial officials that British annexation of rebel-held territory was a possibility. Apparently the Maya felt that if the ladinos could cede Yucatan to a foreign power in times of military crisis, as Mendez had attempted in 1848, then they could do the same.

By the end of May 1848 the Maya were within eight kilometers of Campeche and twenty-four kilometers of Merida and Governor Barbancho had written out a proclamation declaring the evacuation of Merida. The definitive victory that Chi demanded was within grasp but inexplicably the Maya armies withdrew literally in the middle of the night. The two most widely held explanations for why the Maya chose to break-off the attack when they were on the threshold of victory are: the rebel army did not have sufficient supplies of food and weapons to continue the fight; and, the time of year had come when the Maya had to either plant their milpa or see their families face starvation. Whatever the cause, the Maya withdrawal to the south and east into Quintana Roo allowed government forces to regroup and seize the initiative (Reed 1964:99).

From its onset the Yucatecan government portrayed the War of the Castes as a race war in which the Maya’s sole objective was the extermination of all whites, rather than a peasant rebellion against exploitation and oppression. In so doing the government unified the two rival factions of merchants in Campeche and Merida, lead respectively by the political rivals Santiago Mendez and Miguel Barbancho, who had previously been in contention for the economic and political control of the peninsula. After the Maya failed to take Merida, local authorities began to accumulate resources for the war by, among
other things, allowing the sale of Maya prisoners of war into slavery in Cuba. In November of 1848 Governor Barbancho published a decree stating that any indio found with weapons was to be arrested and could be expelled from the state for ten years. This decree allowed slave traders to make fortunes through not only the sale of captured rebels; but also of non-combatant Maya and mestizos who were dragged out of their homes at night or way-laid on the roads. The Maya slave trade did not end until 1861 when the Mexican President Juarez outlawed it under the penalty of death (Careaga 1990:60).\textsuperscript{35}

Anglo-Maya Relations during the Early Years of the Caste War

The ostensible objective of the Caste War revolt was to purge Yucatan of the dzul and win autonomy for the Maya; but their animosity did not extent to the British (Villa Rojas 1945:20). After the outbreak of war the British pursued a pragmatic, albeit “amoral” (see Hübbe 1940 and Lapointe 1983) policy of official neutrality in their dealings with both the rebel Maya and the Mexican government.\textsuperscript{36} In order to maintain the flow of Mexican mahogany into Belize, colonial officials had to ignore the arms trade between Belize-based merchants and the Santa Cruz Maya. If this trade were interrupted the rebels might invade Belizean territory to acquire the arms they needed and the cost of defending Belize’s precarious territorial integrity would increase through the necessity of having to

\footnotesize{
\textsuperscript{35} It is interesting to note that the refugee population of northern Belize declined from 13,547 in 1861, the year the slave trade was abolished, to 10,522 in 1871.

\textsuperscript{36} These researchers suggest that the British greed was almost entirely responsible for the prolongation of the Caste War.
}
station troops along the Rio Hondo. Powerful colonial economic interests would be
doubly offended by both the loss of trade and the taxation which increased military
protection of the settlement would require. At the same time it was necessary to find the
means of controlling the refugee peasant population whose activities also posed a threat
to both Belize's territorial integrity and the interests of the landed elite.

Prior to the outbreak of the Caste Wars Belize-based British timber interests had
been operating on the Mexican side of the Rio Hondo for many years. The most
accessible stands of logwood and mahogany in northern Belize had been depleted long
before the war began. British loggers had made arrangements with Yucatecan landlords
to cut timber in Mexican territory which was then floated out the Rio Hondo to Belize. In
these sparsely populated areas, the southern and eastern extremes of the state of Quintana
Roo, there was little conflict between the Maya and the ladino and British loggers who
held Mexican timber concessions the area: Esteves and Vasquez of Bacalar and the
Vaughan and Cristi Company of Belize (Patch 1991:61). Despite regulations to the
contrary, Mexican laborers were encouraged to cross the river to work in British timber
camps (Cal 1991a:198). Maya said to be living on the Mexican side of the Rio Hondo
were employed by the loggers to work both in Mexico and in British territory and it is
presumed that an increasing number of Maya were employed by British loggers even
during the Caste wars (Jones 1990:192).

The colony also maintained commercial relations with mestizos and ladinos living
in the frontier city of Bacalar some twenty miles north of the Rio Hondo, the de facto
border with Mexico. Belize relied on Bacalar for agricultural products to feed both timber crews operating in the area and the population of Belize City. In the absence of any significant domestic agricultural production, Belize depended almost completely on imported food. Following the first Maya attack on Bacalar in 1848, the colony's superintendent wrote to the governor in Jamaica that the disruption of trade with Bacalar was a serious inconvenience to the colony. Bacalar had been providing virtually all the corn, sugar, and poultry consumed in Belize and the suspension of trade had already caused severe food shortages (Jones 1990: 193-195). The attack on Bacalar was also a serious threat to Belizean timber operations north of the Rio Hondo. Timber resources in the settlement had been heavily depleted and the Corozal region was almost completely cut over. Timber operations in Quintana Roo, on the other hand, had never been more active: but, the settlement did not possess sufficient military strength to protect the mahogany camps working along the Rio Hondo. Superintendent Fancourt further noted that he was anxious to reestablish relations with the existing government—which was the rebel Maya (Jones 1970:71).

No sooner had the Maya taken control of Bacalar than the British timber interests began negotiating independently with the new landlords to continue logging in rebel-held territory. Within a month of the capture of Bacalar the rebel commander, Juan Pablo Cocom, had named a Belizean citizen, Richard Hill, to act as his agent in the colony and keep track of mahogany and other products brought into the colony from rebel-held territory (Jones 1977:195). Although the Mexicans retook Bacalar in 1849, the Maya
controlled the forests of Quintana Roo and British timber interests continued to do business with the Maya at the expense of diplomatic and military problems with the Mexicans (Hübbe 1940).

The Maya could have easily defeated the British forces garrisoned in Belize; however, they were in need of a source of arms and munitions which the British merchants and loggers provided. In 1849 the Mexican government formally accused British merchants of opening a warehouse in Bacalar to sell arms to the Maya, further suggesting that such activities were the basis for the continuation of hostilities with the Maya. They specifically accused British merchants of selling weapons valued at $1,945 to Jacinto Pat. The Mexicans maintained that they had the right to ask for the suppression of the arms traffic under the terms of the Anglo-Mexican Treaty of 1826. The British replied that instructions had been given to prevent by all possible means the traffic in arms and to preserve a strict neutrality in the conflict, but that these orders had been given in accordance with the general principles of international law. However Great Britain "distinctly" denied Mexico the right "to require by virtue of any treaty whatever" that the Superintendent of Belize enforce such prohibitions (Humphreys 1961:66). Had the government refused to permit British merchants to engage in arms traffic they would have risked opposition from the powerful commercial interests in the colony who would have lost not only the arms trade, but also all rights to cut wood in rebel-held territory. Suspension of trade also posed the threat the rebel Maya might invade British territory to get the weapons they needed.
The activities of *ladinos* and *mestizos* who had taken refuge in Belize also posed problems for the British. On February 13, 1849 the British Magistrate at Punta Consejos wrote to the Superintendent of the colony that hostilities on the Mexican side of the Rio Hondo were spilling over into Belize. Refugee "Spaniards" were using the colony as a base of operations for launching attacks against the Maya which had drawn the rebel Maya and the conflict into the colony. One of the instigators of these raids was Father Juan Trujillo who, "in the beginning of the revolution," had sided with the Indians. In December of 1848 Trujillo ran way from Bacalar (then under rebel control) to Narrows Bank on the New River in northern Belize where he turned against the Indians. During the first week in February 1849 Trujillo sent some Spaniards from the New River to attack the Indians near Cacao on the Mexican side of the Rio Hondo across from the British settlement at Douglas. The Spaniards killed seven Indians and afterward fled back into the colony. In his dispatch Magistrate Faber notes that the Indians are "very excited" and say they would invade English territory if they could catch certain persons. In order to avoid future threats to local peace and tranquillity he suggests that troops be stationed at Douglas and other locations along the Hondo. Faber also suggests turning Father Trujillo over to the Commander of Spanish forces, Lieutenant Colonel Victor Pacheco: "...Victor Pacheco would take good care of him and make him generally useful, because he does not appear to be very partial to *padres* in general and this one in particular" (29R227, Punta Consejos, February 13, 1849, J. W. Faber to Colonel Charles
St. John Fancourt, HM Superintendent.\footnote{Pacheco was executed in July of 1849 on the orders of Colonel Jose Dolores Cetina who was sent by Governor Barbancho to recapture Bacalar and stop the arms trade between Belize and the Maya. Pacheco was a political ally of Mendez who had fled to the Bacalar area when Barbancho returned to power in 1848. When Cetina and the Seventh Division arrived Pacheco volunteered his services and the use of his schooner which was turned into a coastal patrol. Reed suggests that Lieutenant Colonel Pacheco was actively smuggling weapons to the Maya while under Cetina’s command (Reed 1964:119).} Apparently on the advice of the magistrate, the rebel commandant at Bacalar, Don Jose Maria Zuc, swore out a complaint against Trujillo stating that he had sent armed men to the Mexican side to attack and kill the Indians. In November of 1850 Trujillo was denied a ticket of residence in Belize and was subsequently ordered to leave the settlement after Mexican forces had retaken Bacalar. (R33 486 November 4, 1850; R33 532, Summons to Fr. Juan Trujillo, Narrows Bank, New River). The raids carried out by Trujillo and his followers were not isolated incidents. Grant Jones notes that during December 1848 mestizos residing in Consejo also raided Maya settlements across the Rio Hondo. In January of 1849 Superintendent Fancourt informed them that if they continued their hostile actions against the Maya “...I should consider it my duty to deliver any one up to the Indian authorities who enjoying the British protection should hereafter abuse that privilege...”\footnote{cf. Jones 1970:69}.

Not all the ladinos and mestizos who fled to Belize were “refugees” in the strictest sense of the term, nor were they all hostile toward the Maya. Antonio Betancourt Perez notes that when Merida was threatened by the rebel armies in 1848 some of the wealthier citizens fled to New Orleans, Vera Cruz, Isla del Carmen, and Tabasco. Others decamped to Belize where they soon began selling weapons to the rebels, not out of
solidarity with the Cruzob, but out of their desire to profit from the conflict (1988:58).
Although he cites no specific documentary evidence, Joaquin Hübbe suggests that
Belizean citizens operating under the auspices of the timber companies were directly
involved in Caste War battles fought in the Bacalar area (1940:123).

After Bacalar was retaken by Mexican forces in 1849 the rebel Maya used
Belizean territory to conduct the arms trade and to escape pursuit by Mexican forces. In a
circular to be disseminated by the Magistrate of the Northern District dated March 17,
1856, Superintendent W. Stevenson cautions refugees from the Yucatan who had
previously held leadership roles in the Caste Wars to abstain from “any activity which
might be construed as inflammatory or provocative where the Mexican government is
concerned”. He further suggests they might consider moving away from the border area.
While the tone is not threatening, and the circular states that the government does not
wish to limit the freedom of movement of these men, at the same time failure to heed this
directive will result in forfeiture of the protection they enjoy while residing in Belize.
The letter to the magistrate accompanying the circular specifically mentions: Sebastian
Mola, Manuel Cepeda Baeza, Vicente Perez, Santiago Perez, Crescencio Cortez,
Francisco Virgilio, N. Virgilio, Manuel Salado—all of which are, oddly enough, Spanish
names (R44 p300-301). The Orange Walk District villages of San Roman, San Antonio,
and Douglas are all located on the banks of the Rio Hondo and were inhabited, during the
Caste War, by mestizos such as Manuel Castillo and Basilio Grajales who made their
money from gun-running and timber concessions in rebel-held territory (Hübbe 1940. Cal 1991a).

Several autonomous Mayan political units arose in the southern and eastern portions of the Yucatan Peninsula as outgrowths of the rebel army (Dumond 1977:102). In 1853 a group of Maya residing west of the Rio Hondo (the Xkanha, Lonchha, and Chichanha Maya) broke away from the rebel Santa Cruz Maya and submitted to Mexican authority in an agreement negotiated in Belize. These Maya, los pacíficos del sur, (the peaceful southern Maya) were apparently those who had been displaced from Belizean territory during the nineteenth century and found it in their best interest to side with the Mexicans who provided them weapons and commissioned them to disrupt the arms traffic between Belize and the Santa Cruz rebels. In exchange they received essentially the same peace terms which Pat and Chi had demanded (and subsequently refused) from the ladino government of Yucatan in 1848 (Hübbe 1940:135-137).

Fighting soon broke out between the pacíficos del sur and the Santa Cruz and in 1857 the Santa Cruz attacked the village of Chichanha. This attack caused a split among the Chichanha and half the population, who became known as the San Pedro Maya. withdrew to the south and settled on the fringes of Belizean territory bordering the Peten in an area refereed to as the Yalbac Hills (Bolland 1977:75).

The Santa Cruz recaptured Bacalar from Mexican forces in 1858 and in 1860 again attacked Chichanha, this time burning the village to the ground. The survivors of this raid abandoned the village and resettled at Icaiche to the south of Chichanha and west
of the Rio Hondo near the Belizean border (Bolland 1977:76). The Icaiche refused to recognize British territorial claims in the northwest of the colony. Demanding rent for lands occupied by British settlers and loggers, they began attacking Belizean logging operations and demanding ransom for prisoners taken during these raids (Humphrey 1961:135). The Icaiche raids created a panic in the northern districts, disrupting both logging operations and the nascent export sugar industry. In December of 1866 a detachment of British troops sent to discipline the Icaiche was routed by a combined San Pedro-Icaiche force. British casualties were five dead and sixteen wounded and in their retreat they left behind the civil commissioner who was never heard from again. Under the threat of an apparent San Pedro-Icaiche alliance in the making, the British attacked and burned several villages San Pedro in 1867 and their inhabitants were temporarily driven out of the colony (Bolland 1988:98). After fighting broke out between the Icaiche and the British, representatives of the colonial government were more straight-forward concerning their feelings toward the Santa Cruz Maya. The magistrate at Corozal Town wrote to the Maya leaders at Santa Cruz that “The proclamation, prohibiting the exportation of arms ammunition and gun powder, which has been issued by the government...is not intended...to apply to the Santa Cruz...the Lieut. Governor entertains towards them the most friendly feelings” (AB 93, Adolphus to Novelo, Ken and Pot. 2 August 1866 cf. Jones 1970:79).

Icaiche attacks on British logging operations continued and in 1870 the Icaiche briefly occupied Corozal Town (in northern Belize on the border with Quintana Roo, where the rebel Santa Cruz came to do their shopping) until they received word that a
Santa Cruz force was coming to attack them. The last major battle in the colony occurred in 1872 when the Icaiche attacked the British garrison at Orange Walk. The attack was repulsed and the Icaiche leader, Marcos Canul, was mortally wounded. For the rest of the 1870s relations between the British and the Icaiche were uneventful albeit uneasy and in 1882 the Icaiche formally recognized the territorial boundaries claimed by the British (Bolland 1977:76).

Colonial Perceptions of the Immigrant Population

Changes in British perceptions of the indigenous Maya during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries coincided with changes in the nature of the colonization process. During the early colonial period, when the Belize Maya were fighting British loggers' encroachments on their territory, the Maya were seen as a savage, warlike people. After they withdrew from areas where the loggers were operating during the early nineteenth century they were still seen as savages, albeit noble savages. Though timid, inoffensive, and “free from vindictive or malicious propensities”, the colonial government and the timber interests nevertheless saw Mayan swidden farmers as a nuisance and a threat to the timber resource base (Bolland 1988:101). The immigration of thousands of Maya and mestizo peasants into northern Belize during the Caste Wars began a new era in the colonial economy and occasioned another shift in attitude. The milperos were initially seen as a source of rental income and foodstuffs for the timber crews and, when mahogany exports declined and the sugar industry expanded, a potential source of cheap
agricultural labor. They were also seen, however, as a threat to the elite-dominated economic order: the peasants could not be allowed to own the land on which they made their villages and milpas because this would make them too independent. Furthermore, their propensity to squat and make unauthorized milpa on the timber interests' private property--large tracts of land in northern Belize that had been logged-out but which were nevertheless still the property of the timber interests--was also cause for concern. Since the end of slavery in 1817 the British forestocracy had successfully perpetuated the freedmen's dependence on wage labor by discouraging the emergence of an independent peasantry while at the same time exercising monopoly control over food imports (Ashcraft 1973, Bolland and Shoman 1977, Cal 1991). Colonial land and labor laws, the wage advance system, and manipulation of the food supply were not as effective in controlling the labor of the independent, semi-nomadic swidden farmers who came to Belize in the mid-nineteenth century. New laws were soon created specifically for this purpose.

Throughout the colony's history the absence of a "suitable" labor force was frequently cited as the reason Belize had failed to develop an economic base beyond forestry (Morris 1883). There had been several proposals, some as early as the first decade of the nineteenth century pointing out that "the real value of this country was agriculture" (Henderson 1809:37-40). By the 1850s there was a growing consensus within the colonial administration--though not within the timber elite--that once the timber resource was depleted the colony would per force become dependent upon
agricultural production. Belize had long been dependent on Bacalar for food and
disruptions in trade created by the Caste War caused food shortages in the colony. The
Maya and mestizo refugees who came to Belize in the decade or so after 1848 were for
the most part milperos; and colonial authorities soon noted that they were producing
considerable quantities of corn, rice, and sugarcane. According to an 1859 report, the
Maya were said to be employed by mahogany gangs or in cutting logwood on their own
account, and in milpa farming and pig raising. The mestizos and a few of the Indians
were engaged in sugar growing. By 1850 the mestizos who settled at Consejo (refugees
who had fled Bacalar in 1849) were already producing corn for the local market and in
1857 they produced enough sugar and rum to fill local demand and export one hundred
barrels to England. The superintendent of the colony reported that nearly eight hundred
acres was under cultivation in the northern district by Yucatecan refugees who rented
their land (Burdon 1931:3:128).

But within the last few years the cultivation of cane has been attempted by
the recent Spanish and Indian settler in the northern district, who, by their
own rough means have succeeded very fairly in establishing small but
rather profitable plantations near Corozal and on the margins of the
principal rivers in that district...the legislature have been reluctant to
attempt the imposition of any duty on these manufactured articles [rum
and sugar]...as it is important to encourage that description of immigration
and cultivation and it has hitherto proved as beneficial to the mahogany
cutters as to the immigrants and cultivators themselves...it is hoped the
increasing prosperity of these new people...will induce others to follow
their example of immigration and scatter themselves throughout the
settlement (AB 55, Blue Book 1855)
The economic and social status of the refugee population ranged from Maya and *mestizo* peasants to wealthy *ladinos* who had fled Mexico with some of their capital intact. Prior to the arrival of the Yucatecan refugees the land and labor laws which the elite enacted had, roughly speaking, created a two class society: the former slaves who were the timber labor force and the British colonial elite who were the loggers and merchants and their functionaries. The more affluent *ladino* and *mestizo* refugees represented a new element in colonial society that was forced to accept second-class status below the Anglo-Saxon elite. Many of these refugees, particularly those who had been forced to flee to the colony when the Maya captured Bacalar, deeply resented their loss of status—not to mention the fact that the British, by virtue of their ongoing commercial and diplomatic relations with the rebels, had granted the Maya *de facto* recognition of their sovereignty over Quintana Roo. Other more commercially inclined *mestizo* refugees viewed their situation more pragmatically: in 1857 Corozal mestizos, as well as the Maya residents of Corozal Town were reportedly exchanging large amounts of gunpowder with the rebel Maya in exchange for liquor from Tekax (Burdon 1931:3:199)

In their relations with the *indio* and *mestizo* peasants, the higher status Spanish-speaking immigrants sought to preserve the same stratified social system and labor control mechanisms that prevailed in Yucatan.

It is well known that a system has prevailed in the colony unchecked, more particularly as between the Spanish-speaking portion of the inhabitants and the Indians, of laborers being kept in debt by their employers for the purpose of securing a continuance of their labor... Advantage has been taken of the ignorance and submissiveness of such laborers to keep them in debt either by supplying them with goods or with drink for the purpose.
and they thus become virtually enslaved for life (Bristowe and Wright 1888:199).

Unlike the Yucatecan ladinos, British timber contractors generally limited the maximum credit advanced to workers to the equivalent of one season's wages, thereby avoiding tying up too many assets in promised labor. This allowed them the flexibility to determine the size of the timber gangs at the beginning of the cutting season contingent upon the price of mahogany. The ladinos, on the other hand, were trying establish a more permanent form of debt peonage (Cal 1991b:91).

Nevertheless, immigration had a leveling effect in that all the refugees, by virtue of their alien status and their ethnicity, enjoyed fewer rights and privileges than did the Anglo-Saxon colonial elite and this rankled the wealthier ladinos and mestizos. Although some of the Spanish-speaking-refugees established themselves as shopkeepers, artisans, sugarcane growers, and timber contractors for British companies, a far greater number were forced to eke out an existence as milperos and wage laborers on the sugar ranchos and estates (Jones 1969:96). The refugee Maya and mestizo milperos together constituted a fourth class in that the poorer mestizos were in the same boat (economically and socially) as the indio refugees and both were represented equally in the ranks of the peasants and wage laborers. The Maya-mestizo ethnic boundary began to break down during the early settlement period as ethnic distinctions were increasingly replaced by economic status or class-based distinctions. In the case of refugee Maya, the move from Mexico to Belize may have been an opportunity to get out from under the oppression of
the Yucatecan caste system, while those *mestizos* who came to Belize may have experienced a reduction in their status (Jones 1969:92).

By the outbreak of the Caste War much of northern Belize had been logged over and landowners found themselves with lands that were not producing any revenue. With the encouragement of the government, these landowners welcomed the first Maya and *mestizo* refugees from Bacalar whom they saw as both as a source of rents from their idle lands and suppliers of foodstuffs for the timber crews (Jones 1969:6). James Blake offered much of the land around Corozal to the refugees and provided some with the capital needed to establish small sugar plantations (Reed 1964:170).

The timber interests do not appear to have needed the refugees' labor during the decade immediately following the outbreak of the Caste War. During the 1840s there was heavy demand for mahogany in England for railroad coaches which lead to the cutting of small trees and depletion of the resource in Belizean territory. The mahogany trade then went into a severe decline in the 1850s (Bolland and Shoman 1977:69). The Yucatecan refugees arrived when the mahogany trade was just beginning to decline and the existing labor supply was probably adequate since the African freedmen had remained almost entirely dependent on wage labor in timber. The landowners didn't develop an interest in commercial agriculture until the mid-1860s so initially there was no need for plantation labor. Whereas the ex-slaves were still prevented from obtaining land to insure that their labor was available for the forestry work, some landowners in the northern districts encouraged the settlement of Maya and *mestizo* renters (Jones 1969:20). It was
not in the timber industry’s interest to alienate the peasant villages that sprung up near the timber works since these villages subsidized the cost of food and served as a labor reserve. As long as the milperos didn’t destroy valuable trees the timber interests initially welcomed their presence on company lands because their surplus production reduced the cost of food for the logging crews. From the government’s perspective their participation in the market economy as consumers of imported goods was a significant contribution to state receipts because custom duties and excise taxes made up the bulk of government revenue (Cal 1991a:244-249).

The Maya refused to enter into sharecropping arrangements initially proposed by British landowners; however, they were not averse to making their own milpa on land which they rented on an annual basis as did the mestizo rancheros (small cane farmers using swidden technology and animal-driven sugar mills) who planted sugarcane (Jones 1969:7). The only area of the colony in which a system of land rental developed during the nineteenth century was in northern Belize where the refugees resided. Virtually all the arable land in Corozal had already been allocated through Crown grants well before the Caste War. Annual leases to immigrants soon proved to be so lucrative that British landowners preferred them over long-term arrangements. When the large landholders did sell their lands they sold tracts too large for the peasants to afford and refugee peasants were legally barred from landownership until 1870. In 1855 the colony had enacted a law that prohibited aliens who had resided in the colony for less than twenty-one years from owning property and an 1862 law made trespassing on private property and the
unauthorized destruction of timber a felony (Cal 1991b:95). The restriction on alien land
ownership did not apply to the small number of ladino immigrants who were sufficiently
wealthy to be able to afford naturalization; however, the vast majority of first generation
refugees leased house lots and milpa plots from the mercantile firms (Bolland and

Settlement Patterns of the Mid-nineteenth Century

The immigrant population of northern Belize grew rapidly during the first few
years of the Caste War and by the 1860s Corozal Town, which is adjacent to the Mexican
border, nearly equaled the population of Belize City. According to Cal’s analysis of
census data in 1861, 57 percent of Belize’s total population were born outside Belize and
57.5 percent of the total population resided in northern Belize. Of the Yucatecan
immigrants 33.3 percent were classified as Maya, 9.6 percent as ladino and 57.1 percent
as mestizo (1991a:216).

Maya refugees first appeared in scattered settlements west of Corozal Town in
1848 and by 1857 the Jesuits reported twenty-eight villages of Yucatecan refugees in
northern Belize. The Maya communities of San Narciso, Xaibe, Patchakan, Chan Chen.
and San Victor were settled in the western half of the Corozal district during the first
years of the Caste Wars and were often composed of rebel sympathizers (Jones 1969:70.
50). Local oral history maintains that Xaibe and Patchakan, both near Corozal Town.
were the first villages established by Maya refugees. Patchakan is said to have been
settled by people from the Chan Santa Cruz region who refused to fight in the war and
Xaibe was settled by the very old and the very young, sent by their rebel relatives to escape the ravages of war.

The first mestizo immigrants who arrived in Belize settled at Consejo near the mouth of the Rio Hondo. Hostility between the Consejo mestizos and the Santa Cruz Maya caused some of the mestizos to move down the New River where they founded Orange Walk Town, San Esteban, and a number of smaller settlements. If modern settlement patterns are any indication, it is probable that the bulk of the peasant mestizo population did not work on ranchos and estates near Maya settlements in western Corozal, but instead on those in eastern part of the district near the New River (Saltillo, Pueblo Nuevo, Progresso, Santa Cruz). The latter have remained mestizo settlements to this day, whereas those in the western part of the district have maintained a certain degree of Maya culture. (Jones 1969:91)

Some of the Maya population remained relatively independent from the wage labor economy while others became closely attached to the mestizo sugarcane farming population. However, those Maya who chose to live near mestizo communities initially found themselves subject to the same social stratified social system that prevailed in the Yucatan. It seems likely that most of the Maya crossed into Belize unnoticed, choosing to live independently without ever having obtained legal entry tickets for which authorities charged $2 per alien household. Very few stable Maya communities existed in Belize prior to 1870 when the expanding mestizo sugar ranchos and British estates began to attract laborers. This unstable settlement pattern was the result of several factors: the
monopolization of land by British timber companies, swidden farming land requirements, the nature of the wage labor market, low population density, the absence of markets and consistent demand for foodstuffs, and the availability of land for swidden farming across the Rio Hondo in rebel-held territory.

Since practically all of northern Belize was owned by four London-based companies, and since the peasant refugees were legally and economically barred from landownership, there was little incentive to settle in one place and even less incentive to make the transition from long-fallow swidden farming to sedentary intensive agriculture. Colonial landownership patterns had begun to change during the second quarter of the nineteenth century as a result of the changing relationship between Belizean landowners and their London-based creditors. Previously the big landowners were loggers who had connections with and were often indebted to London merchants. Most private land was, however, owned by individuals. In 1856 passage of the Joint Stock Companies Act led to the direct participation of the London merchants in land ownership in the colony through partnerships established with old settlers. When the mahogany trade went into depression in the 1850s many of the old landowners were unable to meet their debts to the merchants and had to sell their holdings. Those settlers who had acquired merchant partners were able to survive the depression and became more powerful buying out the holdings of the smaller settlers. Through this process the Belize Estate and Produce Company (with well over a million acres), Young, Toldeo and Company (with approximately a million acres), Sheldon Byass and Company (with 50,000 acres), John Carmichael (with 25,000 acres)
that included Corozal Town) and a handful of others soon accounted for almost all the privately owned land. Apart from these great landowners, little land was held as private property in the colony (Bolland and Shoman 1977:79).

With the mahogany trade entering a depression some of the landowners began to look for alternative sources of income. The refugees had shown that sugar cultivation could be profitable and, for the first time in the colony’s history, the British landowners became interested in commercial agriculture. This interest spawned concern over the validity of their land titles since most of the privately owned lands had been acquired through the old location system in effect prior to 1817. In 1855 the Laws in Force Act gave retroactive ownership of land which had been acquired under old location system thereby legitimizing and consolidating the elite’s control over land in the colony. Further legislation, the Honduras Land Titles Act of 1861, resulted in the four above-mentioned companies owning ninety percent of the private land in the colony. These companies sought to protect their monopoly by sponsoring legislation limiting alien property rights, thereby discouraging the growth of a landowning refugee class which might have competed with them in mahogany extraction and sugarcane farming.

The land requirements of swidden farming is another factor that contributed to the instability of early refugee settlements. In Yucatecan *milpa* farming, land use was based on a cycle in which a plot of land was cultivated for two years and then fallowed for a period generally ranging from eight to twelve years. Northern Yucatan’s thin soils typically lead to a low ratio of cultivated to fallow land, usually on the order of one acre
under cultivation for every five acres under fallow in order to maintain the soil nutrient cycle (Patch 1993:54). The soils in northern Belize are generally deeper and more fertile than those of northern Yucatan; however, unless a milpero could afford to buy enough land to maintain a twelve-year fallow cycle there was no point in becoming a landowner.

Based on 1870s land prices and the average wages paid to estate workers ($8 per month plus rations) Angel Cal calculated that a five-person swidden farming household (two adults and three children) cultivating the minimum three acres necessary for subsistence each year would need $180 to buy the thirty-six acres needed to subsist more or less permanently in one place. A one hundred mecate milpa (approximately twelve acres), on the other hand, rented for about $7-11 per year (Cal 1991a:59).

The ecology of swidden agriculture is not averse to a rental from of tenure and the annual lease system actually reinforced the persistence of milpa farming. Even if it had been economically feasible and legally possible for the refugees to buy land, it seems unlikely that this would have happened as long as forest fallow swidden was the dominant form of production and rural population density remained low. The transition from annual lease tenure to landownership would, by its very nature, imply the intensification of production (Boserup 1965:70-71). Permanent settlement and cultivation of fixed holdings would deprive farmers of the flexibility and mobility needed to offset the risks inherent in swidden farming (for example, localized crop failure due to weather or insects), and it is unlikely that soil fertility would remain constant in the long-term (Lambert and Arnason 1982:32, Humphries 1993). Nor would such a strategy allow
the farmer to increase the area under cultivation as the household's size and needs increased without purchasing additional land. Under the annual lease system *milpa* size could expand with changes in household size without requiring any substantial long-term investment.

The extensive nature *milpa* farming also worked against the emergence of a landowning peasantry. Under conditions where land is plentiful, shifting cultivation is more consistent with temporary tenure than with permanent land ownership. Until the 1960s the population density of rural northern Belize was both remarkably stable and low and the ecology of shifting cultivation was not threatened. Between 1921 and 1946 the rural populations of the Orange Walk and Corozal Districts actually decreased (Central Statistical Office 1993:8). People only felt the need to own land when the export sugar industry was revived in the 1950s.

There was also little economic incentive for *milperos* to acquire fixed holdings and intensify production. Beyond the food requirements of the timber labor force, which varied according to the price and demand for mahogany and logwood, Belize's minuscule population generated little internal demand for foodstuffs and the lack of roads--the loggers relied on the rivers for transportation--made getting crops to market difficult. Even after the laws were changed to encourage swidden farmers to buy land and settle down--under the condition that the land be used for intensive agriculture--the peasants of northern Belize did not choose to become landowners until they obtained sugarcane
production quotas and the state initiated a land reform program during the 1950s to increase export sugar production.

The impermanence of early refugee settlements also resulted from the fact that there was nothing to prevent those Maya who worked in timber from bringing their families to whatever location their work demanded, a pattern of labor migration which persisted well into the twentieth century (Dunk 1922, Annual Report of the Labor Department 1949). Peasants often entered into labor-tenancy arrangements with their British landlords which required that they relocate. In return for being available to work for the landlord at certain times of the years (the sugarcane harvest for example) the peasant and his family could live at the landowner’s rancho or timber works where they had access to milpa lands. They could probably acquire some cash from the patron of the rancho in exchange for surplus corn in times of emergency (Cal 1991a:267).

If no other option was available, or if they did not want to pay any rent at all, then peasants squatted privately owned land. “It is generally admitted that the Indian is not a desirable or useful settler: he hates interference and molestation...It is said to be the Indian habit--to prevent their fowls making a noise, so that the whereabouts of their milpas or settlements not be known--to cut out the tongues of their roosters.” For landowners squatting was more than just a nuisance: “...in their opinion, the milpas and plantations are ruination to the forests and wood trade in which they are interested” (Bristowe and Wright 1888:208).
Squatters' milpa not only destroyed timber but also represented a loss of rental income and potential laborers at a time when commercial agriculture was beginning to seem like a viable alternative or complement to the timber industry. In 1872 *The New Era* identified two "classes" of residents that contributed to the economic welfare of the colony: "exporters of the produce of the country and importers of goods for sale in the country; and the population engaged in manual labor." The "squatters" were not seen as economically productive segment of the population: "...they are entitled to all the happiness they can get out of their mode of life. But they are not members of the Colonial Society. They are beyond the pale of civilization, they contribute nothing to the common fund, and are not entitled to consideration at our hands" (Bristowe and Wright 1888:31). In response to landowner pressure to prohibit squatting the state enacted the Act to Prevent Trespasses upon Property in 1862 (Cal 1991a:270).

It was common for refugees to settle in Belizean territory near the Rio Hondo and farm in Mexican rebel-held territory to avoid paying rent to British landlords. The Icaiche and Santa Cruz Maya charged nominal rent which tenants often paid in gunpowder. With the Rio Hondo nearby, peasants also knew that if things did not work out in British territory they could easily cross the river, leaving their debts and British jurisdiction behind (Jones 1970:78, Bolland 1988:107, Cal 1991a:269). This contributed to the instability of both rural settlements and British political relations with the rebel Maya. Problems developed when the Santa Cruz and the Icaiche Maya (who had sided with Mexico in 1853 against the Santa Cruz) came into Belize to demand money from
rent-dodgers. In order to eliminate this threat to Belizean territorial integrity the government legislated the Act for Better Securing the Peace of the Frontier in 1868 which prohibited non-British residents of the colony from renting land in Mayan-held territory (Cal 1991b:64).

By the 1870s the successful establishment of the sugarcane industry in the Corozal District by Yucatecan smallholders had convinced colonial administrators that the economic future of the territory was based in agriculture and the policy restricting the sale of Crown lands to smallholders was reversed. This change had little effect on the peasants of northern Belize since the timber interests already owned all the accessible land along the rivers. Unclaimed state lands were remote, cost five dollars per acre, and had to be surveyed at the buyers expense. In an effort to siphon-off refugee labor and promote agricultural development in southern Belize the government reduced the price of Crown lands to one dollar per acre and set the survey and registration fee at six dollars. Reduced land prices and a short-lived export banana boom did attract immigrants from outside Belize: however, very few mayeros chose to resettle in southern Belize.

It has been urged that persons wishing to lease lands should go where Crown lands are plentiful, if private landowners will not sell or lease: but besides the scarcity of Crown land in the Northern District, there is another difficulty there in respect to the Indians and so-called Spaniards from the neighboring republics, who are averse to going elsewhere or leaving places they once settle in. The Indians or Mayas...are a truly peculiar people, though a stiff-necked and perverse one. They seem averse to going further south, as in the Northern District...Their houses are only makeshifts, and perish with themselves. As the soil becomes exhausted, they constantly change their places of cultivation...They do not in general live on their milpas, but elsewhere, perhaps in a sort of township, and are also meanwhile engaged in a lazy, desultory way, probably helping logwood-cutters...should the government ever make reserves and rules for their
guidance, the Indians are so obstinate...they would probably take up their all—which is nothing but a gun, hammock, and shot-bag--pack up, and be off (Bristowe and Wright 1888:208).

Angel Cal suggests that one reason they did not move to southern Belize was that a commercial crop like bananas required the medium of the cash economy to provide the producer a livelihood whereas subsistence farming did not (1991a:268). I would add that the *mayeros* chose to stay in northern Belize because that is where they had access to both land to make *milpa* and wage labor in timber and sugarcane, and they could still remain in contact with relatives still in Mexico. Refugees, rebel Maya, and Belizean loggers and merchants moved freely back and forth across the border between Mexico and Belize throughout the duration of the war (Dumont 1977:123-124; Lapointe 1983).

Another of the reasons may have been environmental. Annual rainfall in northern Belize is extremely variable locally and it is hard to arrive at an average since precipitation ranges, on average, from 1300 to 2000 millimeters per year. Nevertheless, below Orange Walk Town rainfall increases dramatically and southern Belize generally receives at least 1000 millimeters more rainfall each year than the northern districts (King et al 1992:20). While increased rainfall may not be an impediment to swidden agriculture, it does mean that the biota of southern Belize is somewhat different from that of northern Belize and much different from that of still drier northern and central Yucatan.

The expansion of Belize’s sugar industry and the wage labor opportunities it provided gave the peasants an economic reason to establish more permanent villages.
Many of the present-day villages in the Corozal District were originally settled adjacent to a sugarcane rancho or estate. It was not until 1870 that any details of the operation of the ranchos appear in the colonial record and by this time several British estates had begun to take over sugar production. The original mestizo planters continued to grow and process cane but the expansion of the industry was taken up by the British. From the few documents which do exist it appears that the labor force for the first ranchos was both Maya and mestizos who either lived on the premises or in neighboring villages.

Small-scale sugarcane farming was technologically identical to swidden corn farming. Clearing land and planting sugarcane were done in the same way—and usually in the same field—as milpa corn farming. Today this is still how small farmers without money to pay for mechanized land clearing establish new fields. A new field is begun by cutting and burning the bush; sections of cane and seed corn are then planted in alternating rows using a pointed stick. Within six months the sugarcane takes over the field and intercropping with corn is no longer possible. Sugarcane continues to grow from the original planting for several years. Cane is a grass and new stalks, called ratoons, sprout from the roots of the harvested cane. Under ideal soil conditions ratoon cane can continue producing for up to twenty years. During the nineteenth century when ratoon production declined to unacceptable levels the field was fallowed. Today farmers often ratoon their cane for ten years before replanting.

On the early ranchos a close association developed between milpa farming and small scale sugarcane cultivation; however, commercial sugarcane farming was beyond
the means of most peasants. In the annual sugarcane cycle the harvest season is the
critical labor bottleneck and requires a great deal of labor over a very short period of time.

During the nineteenth century it was virtually impossible to engage wage labor without
providing advances in cash and goods. Laborers often accepted advances and then
absconded, leaving the ranchero with an unharvested crop.

The “advance system,” by which laborers receive two or three months’
wages in advance, at once puts the employer in the power of his men—as
however incompetent, idle, or insubordinate a man may prove, the master
cannot dismiss him, as he would thereby lose the amount advance...it is a
common occurrence for a man to receive advances from two different
employers, and then run away (Bristowe and Wright 1888:179).

If the farmer had borrowed money to pay advances this would further indebt him to the
mercantile firms that leased land. Most peasants could not afford to go into commercial
farming and, since they had no collateral to secure loans, the mercantile firms
refused to advance them credit (Cal 1991a:257).

Although swidden farming continued to be important to the Maya and mestizo
refugees, some were proletarianized through the operation of the wage advance system of
the sugar ranchos and estates (Jones 1969:8). The degree of proletarianization was
determined by the availability of wage labor tempered by peasant’s preference for control
of their subsistence (Cal 1991a:213).

Truly their love of independence and ease far surpassed anything I have
ever witnessed in any other people. Those that seek for employment, or
are prevailed upon to undertake it, are perhaps barely equal, numerically to
those that remain at home and squat in their houses...apparently indifferent
to all employment...
There are very few Indians, who will engage with others than Yucatecans, and this is owning to their reluctance to enter into written contracts of service, and the enormous advances they demand and expect to receive before they enter upon their work. (Carnet to Longden, 27 January 1870 cf. Jones 1969:85)

Ironically, Carnet blamed the laborers for the advance wage system, thereby rationalizing the high profits made by those employers who sold goods to their laborers at inflated prices.

...this is to a great extent forced upon the employer, through the general improvidence of the Indian laborer, and the great demands he makes by way of advances...There are doubtless instances where some slight advantage is taken of the Indian laborer; but upon the whole I am inclined to think that the greater advantage is on the other side (ibid.)

Plantation Society 1879-1890

In the 1860s the British landowners followed in the footsteps of the immigrant cane farmers and soon took over export production. This forced many of the mestizo rancheros out of business and into wage labor where they joined the Maya who, though they continued to rent small milpa plots, were the bulk of the labor force for the big estates. By 1867 3,000 acres were under cultivation in cane and ten British estates had steam machinery for refining cane. The British Honduras Company (which later became the Belize Estate and Produce Company) was by far the biggest sugar and rum producer in the colony with 746 acres under cultivation in cane out of a total of 1,683 acres held by those estates with steam machinery. Besides these ten large estates there were thirty-two small estates planted in sugar and corn by refugees. Their cane fields varied in size from
five to one hundred and ten acres and the average milpa was thirty-two acres in size (Bolland and Shoman 1977:85).

As export production increased it soon became apparent that the labor supply was inadequate to meet the needs of sugar industry expansion despite the decline of mahogany exports and entry of the Creole timber labor force into the agricultural labor market. In 1862 the government repealed the $2 alien household registration fee to discourage emigration. Nevertheless, between 1861 and 1871 the population of the northern districts declined from 13,547 in 1861 to 10,522 in 1871 due to the return of Caste War refugees to Mexico (Bolland 1988:135). In 1863 the Corozal District magistrate reported that some planters could not harvest two-thirds of their crop for want of labor (Cal 1991a:252).

The Maya refugees also proved to be a far less tractable labor force than the estate owners had hoped and it was difficult to force the refugees into wage labor. Marie Lapointe suggests that much of the labor employed during the initial stages of the sugar industry’s expansion was actually supplied by rebel Maya who were paid in ammunition (1983:86). Grant Jones and Nigel Bolland both note that the Maya who were hired by the sugar plantations through the wage advance system could only be pushed so far despite the penal sanctions supporting debt servitude. The advance system could easily backfire on an employer: a Maya burdened by debt and threatened with legal action had only to cross the border into Yucatan, where he would be welcomed by the Santa Cruz (Jones 1969:86).
The system of advances to which they have become so accustomed, and without which the Indians cannot be got to hire, is the main drawback to their regular attendance to work...The employer, though able to cause the idle to be arrested...is frequently deterred from doing so by reason that...the recently punished Indians will take the earliest opportunity to crossing the border into Yucatan...where Indian Commandants gladly receive them. There are at present scores of runaway mozos living on the opposite [Mexican] bank of the Rio Hondo, who are largely indebted to their former masters, some of whom have actually been ruined by this practice (Adolphus to Longden, 15 January 1870 cf. Bolland 1988:107).

As the sugar industry continued to expand there was increased competition for labor both within the sugar industry and between the loggers and the sugar planters and it appears that some refugees were able to exploit this situation.

The provision regarding the punishment of an employer for compounding or being party to arranging cases of fraudulent advances has been enacted for the purpose of putting an end to an evil practice arising from the competition between employers for the services of a laborer. Such a practice holds out an inducement to...secure extra advances by means of fraud, for he knows if the offense is detected he is not likely to be prosecuted, and the matter will be arranged between the employers concerned. By this means he is tempted to secure double advances, and now that the employer is liable to punishment as well as the laborer, it is hoped such a demoralizing practice will be stopped (Colonial Report 1888:199)

Of those peasant tenants in arrears on their rent on John Carmichael’s estate in 1869, 34.8 percent were noted as “abandoned”, “ran away”, or “unable to locate” and their back rents were seen as losses to the estate (Cal 1991a:308). Nigel Bolland notes that in this same year the Corozal magistrate decided 286 cases under the colony’s labor laws: 245 were punished for leaving their work, 30 for insolence and disobedience, 6 for assault on bookkeepers, and 5 for entering into contracts and accepting advances before the expiration of prior contracts (1988:160). Convictions of laborers for violations of the
Masters and Servants Law seem to have kept pace with both the expansion and the decline of export sugar production (see tables below). Cal notes British did not condone arbitrary justice however legal action taken by employers against laborers increased dramatically during 1855-1869 when investments also peaked.

Table 3: Legal actions against laborers initiated by employers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>LEGAL ACTIONS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1855...</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1857...</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1860...</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1863...</td>
<td>375</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1869...</td>
<td>281</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1883...</td>
<td>336</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1884...</td>
<td>460</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1885...</td>
<td>354</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1886...</td>
<td>263</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1887...</td>
<td>174</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Finding local Maya labor insufficient for their expanding sugar operations the landowners attempted to acquire additional labor through immigration. After Belize became a colony in 1862 various measures were undertaken to bring in laborers from China and the West Indies and freedmen from the southern United States but these met with little success. The British Honduras Company, which operated three estates near Orange Walk and one on the New River at Santa Cruz, imported 474 Chinese laborers from Amoy in 1865. By 1868 only two hundred and eleven remained on the estates: over one hundred had died and one hundred more had fled to the Santa Cruz Maya due to their
mistreatment (Reed 1964, Bolland and Shoman 1977: 86). The labor shortage and competition for labor between the timber interests and the sugar estates persisted until the cane sugar market crashed and the estates closed down.

It is a well-known fact that, and now realized by all, that there is not sufficient labor in the colony to enable the limited capital to be employed... As all the available labor is employed to its fullest capacity, it is clear no further development of the colony can take place beyond its present state unless arrangements are made for introducing laborers.

The only satisfactory solution to cure the inefficiency of labor, the frequent offenses committed under the Labor Ordinances, and the evils of the advance system, is the importation of laborers into the colony. The waste and deficiency of labor used to be made up from Jamaica but that source...is cut off by the demand there for the Panama Canal...

Wood-cutters cannot be conveniently imported, for they are a race sui generis, and are only to be obtained from the colony, hence the employers do not see why they should contribute towards the importation of laborers for the planters, although it should be clear that if not directly they would be indirectly benefited by being freed from competition with planters for laborers (Blue Book 1886:5).

Efforts were also undertaken to attract Confederate planters from the southern United States who it was hoped would become independent cultivators and would establish estates. These efforts also were largely unsuccessful due to the high costs of land. Some did settle in the southern part of the country but after the sugar market collapse in the 1890s most eventually either went on to Honduras and Guatemala or returned to the United States.

Despite their attempts to establish a dependable, permanent labor force the plantation owners were unable to solve the problem of labor shortage. Except for a small number of East Indians and Creoles who worked on the plantations, a full-time rural proletariat did not exist. The Creoles were more susceptible to proletarianization than
immigrant Maya and mestizos because they did not have an established tradition of subsistence farming, whereas the refugees who worked on the sugar estates never fully abandoned subsistence agriculture. The labor shortage which plagued this first attempt to establish plantation agriculture was the first indication of the demographic-ecological paradox that was to hamper the development of capitalist agriculture for years to come: the rural immigrant population was unwilling to engage in plantation labor that would require abandonment of subsistence production (Jones 1969:12).

The sugar industry's collapse was as dramatic as its expansion. Exports fell from a record of two and one half million pounds in 1882 to approximately 200,000 pounds in the early 1890s (see Figure 1 below). Throughout the Caribbean sugar industries were in a state of depression due to competition from European beet sugar. Every British estate eventually closed down operations and most of the southern planters who had settled in the Toledo District left the country. Morris reported that during the early 1880s the number of estates in the northern districts dwindled from twelve to six or seven and the amount of land under cultivation in cane declined markedly (1883:27).
Many laborers found themselves unemployed following the collapse of the sugar industry and most of those who were proletarianized during the peak of the sugar industry in the 1870s and 1880s were re-peasantized after the industry collapsed in the 1890s. The 1881 census reported that there were 1328 agricultural laborers in the Northern District (Bristowe and Wright 1888:204). In 1921 the Colonial Office reported only 152 agricultural laborers in Corozal and 29 in Orange Walk (Colonial Report for 1921:6).

The decline of the wage labor market was offset by two factors. First, most of the rural population had remained self-sufficient because they were allowed to continue to practice swidden agriculture; after the sugar industry collapsed there was a complete reversion to subsistence agriculture. A majority of the sugar estates failed before the end of the nineteenth century and much of the land planted in sugarcane reverted to the original absentee British owners. After the decline of the sugar industry few British investors stayed on in Corozal, and the absentee owners once again began to derive most of their income from the land from annual leases of land to milperos, thereby encouraging the continuation of shifting cultivation based on a rental from of land tenure (Jones
The mestizo commerciantes (businessmen) were constrained from owning land by the British timber interest’s land monopoly. Once the sugar market failed and their capital to make advances dried up they no longer had any real hold over their peons. Second, there was room for additional labor in Quintana Roo in the forest industries, particularly after the beginning of chicle exploitation in the 1880s. Chicle bleeding was a particularly popular occupation among the Maya because it does not necessarily preclude the ability of a man to plant and harvest his milpa. Chicle was, for the rural population of northern Belize, almost the sole means of preserving the cash income to which they had become accustomed during the export sugar boom.

The Course of the Caste War

After the Maya failed to take Merida the ladino forces staged a recovery and during 1848 and 1849 managed to retake much of the territory that had been lost to the Maya. However, the territory which had never been under government control, the forests of the south and the east, remained in the hands of the Maya. The campaign against the rebels continued and, despite ongoing internal political strife, the government somehow managed to establish tenuous control over the area that had been the sugarcane region. The Yucatecan forces never achieved a definitive victory over the Maya—who had largely withdrawn to the southern and eastern forests—but the government could no longer afford the war nor would it ever be able to hunt down all the rebel bands. In 1855 the government declared that war was officially over though the fighting would continue for the next fifty years.
In 1850 the rebel leader Jesus Maria Barrera and his harried Maya troops found a miraculous cross with the power of speech at a place thereafter referred to as Chan Santa Cruz or “Little Holy Cross” in Quintana Roo. Through a ventriloquist named Manuel Nahuat the Talking Cross directed its followers to drive the dzul from the Yucatan. Led by a priest-warrior hierarchy and a religious system that gave divine guidance to military actions through the words of the Talking Cross, the Cruzob (Santa Cruz Maya) established their capital at Chan Santa Cruz. Despite being driven deep into the forest, by 1858 the Cult of the Talking Cross had become a full-blown revitalization movement of serious proportions. From their headquarters at Santa Cruz the rebels fended off sporadic Yucatecan military incursions into Mayan territory—which sometimes reached Chan Santa Cruz—and launched raids against the ladino-held towns in central Yucatan. Booty and prisoners captured during these raids were taken back to Santa Cruz where the prisoners were made slaves and the spoils of war were traded to Belizean merchants for guns and ammunition. Then on February 20, 1858—five days after rebel Maya had bought arms in Belize City and Corozal, some 1,500 Maya led by Venancio Puc attacked Bacalar. The Maya captured the town and fortress and several days later, under orders issued by the Talking Cross, massacred all the inhabitants despite British offers to ransom them. After the Bacalar massacre there ensued a period of coolness between the Belizean government and the Santa Cruz despite other rebel leaders’ assurances that they intended no harm to the English (Dumond 1977:120). Puc’s contemptuous treatment of British emissaries and his complete lack of respect for the Crown were a source of friction
between the British and the Cruzob. In 1863 Puc was killed during a coup orchestrated by Leandro Santos and Dionisio Zapata who immediately wrote to the superintendent at Belize City assuring him of their peaceful intent. A Yucatecan government commission was sent to Belize to try to arrange a peace but Santos and Zapata were soon killed in a coup led by Bonfacio Novelo, Bernabe Ken, and Jose Crescencio Poot, a militant faction who subsequently rejected the peace overtures. There followed a period of factional instability with the Cruzob; however, the newest leaders survived and hostilities against the Yucatecans continued under the leadership of Bonifacio Novelo. Relations between the rebels and the British became more stable despite some minor border incidents involving Cruzob incursions into Belize. The rebel Maya clearly had no desire to alienate the British since the arms they needed for their struggle against the Mexican government came from Belize, and colonial officials were willing to ignore the "illicit" arms traffic as long as timber continued to flow out of Quintana Roo into Belize. Both the British and the Santa Cruz Maya shared a mutual interest in keeping the Rio Hondo a peaceful channel of communications and commerce (Bolland 1977:75). Throughout the Caste War Belizean merchants traded with the rebel Maya both on Belizean soil and in rebel-held territory in Mexico; and, British loggers were allowed to operate in Mayan-held territory in exchange for money, arms, and ammunition. Belizean merchants visited Chan Santa Cruz on a routine basis where they traded merchandise for the loot which the Maya acquired through raiding (Dumond 1977:122). In 1867 diplomatic relations between Mexico and Britain were severed following the defeat and execution of the Emperor
Maximillian: the Juarez government refused to recognize the agents of any government which had maintained relations with Maximillian (Humphries 1961:138). That same year the rebel leader Bonifacio Novelo suggested that rebel-held territory should be annexed by the colony (Villa Rojas 1945:28; Humphreys 1961:147, Lapointe 1983:89). Although the British never seriously considered annexing Quintana Roo, the colonial administration's attitude toward the Santa Cruz and other Mayan immigrants became more positive with the realization that the colony needed laborers if the agricultural economy was to develop (Bolland 1977:93). In 1887 the Santa Cruz Maya again communicated to the authorities of Belize that they wished to place themselves under the protection of the Queen of England and have the territory which they occupied annexed to the colony. By this time the war had taken its toll on the Maya and the Empire of the Cross was in decline. Britain and Mexico had reestablished diplomatic relations in 1884. This last Cruzob request to be annexed, which was refused by Queen Victoria's government, precipitated a dialogue between the Mexican and British governments resulting in the Spenser-Mariscal Treaty in 1893. The treaty prohibited Belizean merchants from selling arms to the rebel Maya in exchange for which they were granted concessions to cut timber in Yucatan and Quintana Roo by the Mexican government. Deprived of their primary source of weapons and munitions and greatly reduced in numbers through warfare and disease, the Maya were less able to resist Mexican incursions into their territory. Government troops under the command of General Ignacio A. Bravo began a campaign to pacify the region in 1899 setting off another wave of
immigration to Belize. In 1901 Bravo captured the then deserted rebel strongholds at Chan Santa Cruz, Tulum, and Bacalar; the Cruzob having once again retreated into the forest.

Social and Economic consequences of the Sugar Industry

The collapse of the export sugar market in the late 1880s drove-off the British investors who had taken over the industry. Sugarcane cultivation reverted to small-scale production of sugar and rum for domestic consumption based on the rancho system. National investors were involved in more lucrative enterprises, chicle tapping and mahogany, and colonial officials abandoned the notion of agricultural development as the colonial economy reverted to almost complete dependence on timber exports. In 1904 the only crops which were being exported from Belize in any quantity were coconuts and bananas.

Through their participation as wage laborers in the export sugar industry immigrant Maya and mestizo peasants were incorporated into the colonial economy and, by extension, the global capitalist economy. Nevertheless, they remained peasants because their fundamental economic orientation was that of swidden subsistence farmers. Their primary economic objective was subsistence, not the accumulation of profit for reinvestment, and they had refused to give up the milpa for full-time wage labor.

The temporary development of a part-time rural proletariat from among Yucatecan immigrant population accelerated the breakdown of the ethnically-based
stratified social system among the peasantry. The breakdown of the Maya-mestizo ethnic boundary, or rather the convergence of these identities, resulted in part from their mutual experience of economic exploitation on the British sugar estates and the discrimination both suffered at the hands of the British and wealthy ladinos. As ethnic distinctions between Maya and mestizo gave way to the economic or class-based distinctions imposed upon them by colonial society, the shared identity which emerged from this process, the mayero identity, had as its focal point the peasants' shared occupation as milperos.

The term mayero, as it is used today in Belize and some parts of Yucatan refers to those indios and mestizos who follow a particular way of life which we associate with Yucatec Mayan swidden subsistence farmers. Objective traits such as the ability to speak Maya, participation in Maya agricultural rituals, descent, and surname are not necessarily criteria of the mayero identity. In his study of Pustimich in Yucatan Press notes that these villagers consider themselves neither “Indians” (an identity associated with the rebel Maya of the Caste War) nor “Spanish”, but mayeros. Mayero, like the Spanish terms molinero (miller), carpintero (carpenter), and milpero (swidden farmer) indicates professional status or expertise—in this case expertise in the Maya way of life (1977:285). It further attributes cultural descendancy from a specific life-style rather than an ethnic or racial group. In use among mayeros the term implies friendship and solidarity and refers to those who follow and respect the mayero way of life. The term mayero seems to be used much more frequently in Belize than in Yucatan (Koenig 1978:220; Birdwell-Pheasant 1979).
In his study of Ticul in Yucatan Thompson notes that the term “Mestizo” refers to those persons who speak Yucatec Maya and continue to observe what remains of the ancient rituals of bush, field, and home (1974:13). In Redfield's study of Chan Kom he does not use the term mayero but notes that it is the mode of life, making one's living as a milpero, that determines whether an individual is Maya or dzul. Skin coloration and surname are of little consequence: “One can be very light in color and still be a Maya. They are Maya because they live just as we do. They can go into the bush, and work hard there” (1950:72-73). The mayero identity was therefore not “created” by British racism and economic exploitation, but these factors did contribute to the proliferation of this identity among Maya and mestizo peasants in northern Belize.

The wealthier Spanish-speaking immigrants also suffered British racial discrimination; however, this had not kept them from accumulating land and capital while working as contractors for the British timber companies and/or trading guns with the Maya. Some developed enterprises which, in addition to their trade with the Maya, revolved around supplying the timber and later the chicle tapping crews with provisions and livestock. After the sugar industry collapsed and British investors withdrew from northern Belize these entrepreneurs began to gain control of the local economy.

The Integration of the Refugee Maya into Colonial Society

The two non-economic institutions through which the refugee Maya were integrated into the colonial society were the alcalde system and the Roman Catholic Church and its
schools. In 1858 the *alcalde* or mayoral system was imported from the Yucatan where it had been established by the Spanish during the colonial period. The primary difference between the Yucatecan and the Belizean *alcalde* systems was that the Belizean alcaldes were elected by their villages rather than appointed by the government.

"An Act to provide for the more speedy and economical administration of justice in the rural districts of this settlement, and for that purpose to invest certain fit and proper persons resident therein with a limited civil and criminal jurisdiction. The jurisdiction of the alcaldes will extend over the village for which he is elected, and be of summary paternal character, in accordance with native customs, subject to supervision of, and appeal to, the district magistrate (Blue Book 1888:112).

Although the alcaldes' responsibilities and legal authority were only vaguely defined; however, the *alcalde* system was the first step taken toward establishing some governmental control over Maya communities and policing remote rural areas.

The colonial government was only moderately successful in extending its control to the Maya communities through the alcalde system and, until the village councils were formed in 1955, the Roman Catholic Church exercised far greater political control than the government through its schools and the *patron* system. The *patron*, whose relationship to his villagers was often a paternal one, was appointed by the priest and represented the authority of the church in the village. Often the village *patron* was someone who exercised some degree of economic control in the community, for instance an influential *mestizo* shop owner. As the local agent of the church and the principal aid of the priest in the village, the patron kept an eye on the congregation between the priest's visits and saw to it that the church and the school were maintained. Virtually all the
children in the region who attended school attended Catholic schools. In addition to religious instruction, which further eroded indigenous religious beliefs, the children were taught Spanish thereby lessening the ethnic distinction between mestizo and Maya.

Summary

By the end of the nineteenth century Belize exhibited all of the characteristics of a mono-export dependent colonial economy. Land, politics, and economic activity in general were largely under the control of a few large merchant houses associated with both the export of forest products and the import of foodstuffs and other supplies. The timber market fluctuations of the mid-nineteenth century resulted in the consolidation of the British colonial elite’s control over trade and the development of a *latifundia* pattern of landownership. A land survey of the northern districts in 1886 showed that five proprietors owned nearly all the land: the Belize Estate and Produce Company alone owned almost a million and a half acres which included most of the Orange Walk District. In 1884 the sixteen largest villages in the district were located on land belonging to four landowners and the BEPC collected rent for both houselots and milpa land from the residents of twelve of these villages. Based on 1881 census data Angel Cal has estimated that approximately 81.2 percent of those working in agriculture in northern Belize were landless tenant farmers (1991a:273-274).

The *latifundio* pattern of land tenure carried over into the twentieth century and a 1929 report showed that six percent of all freeholders owned ninety-seven percent of the
private land, while smallholders (eighty-five percent of the land owners) owned only one percent of the private land in the colony (Sampson 1929:64).

Table 3: Distribution of size of private landholdings and number of owners for 1922, 1926, and 1934

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Average size of Alientated Holdings</th>
<th>1922</th>
<th>1926</th>
<th>1934</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>&lt;10 acres</td>
<td>1400</td>
<td>1565</td>
<td>1486</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11-50 acres</td>
<td>538</td>
<td>571</td>
<td>571</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>51-100 acres</td>
<td>135</td>
<td>139</td>
<td>141</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>101-1000 acres</td>
<td>153</td>
<td>155</td>
<td>157</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>over 1000 acres</td>
<td>267</td>
<td>267</td>
<td>264</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Ashcraft 1973:59

As the above table indicates, the distribution of private landholding remained remarkably stable during the 1920s and 1930s and the annual lease system continued to be predominant form of land tenure among peasants in northern Belize.

Through their control of the local government the British expatriate elite had successfully blocked all efforts to tax their landholdings until 1868 when Icaiche raiding necessitated increased defense spending. In 1907 the legislature fixed the tax rate at 0.5 cents per acre which was not increased until 1931 to 2.5 cents per acre. Land taxes were a minor source of government revenue until a new law was passed in 1967. The government did not begin to pressure landowners to pay their taxes until the 1930s when the Belizean elite took control of the Legislative Assembly away from the British landowners. In 1932, the sixty-four landowners with holdings of one thousand acres or more owned 2,283,930 acres and owed the government $175,507 in back taxes. In 1933 the Belize Estate and Produce Company alone owed the government $114,994 for four
years of back taxes. The company owned 1,149.939 acres land for which it paid only $28.748 in land tax annually and still owned most of the Orange Walk District and the land on which twelve of the district’s sixteen villages were located (MP 1141:1935).

During the nineteenth century the government’s primary sources of revenue were duties on imports and exports. This situation favored the latifundistas because, rather than being taxed on the basis of their capital assets (their land) they were taxed according to the volume of trade. Public works and public spending were kept to a minimum and virtually no communications, transportation, or market infrastructure existed that was not directly associated with forest resource exploitation: there was one poorly equipped commercial port and virtually no roads. As late as 1891 the Colonial Report noted, “Neither roads nor a road system exists. Land communications, so far as it can be affected...has to depend on mahogany truck and wing paths...and on the primitive forest tracks utilized to connect such truck paths (1891:7).

Colonial administrators had recognized the necessity of diversifying the economy in the early 1800s; however, after the export sugar industry collapsed and chicle boomed the government abandoned all efforts to promote commercial agricultural development in northern Belize--the colony’s Agriculture Department was not formed until 1928. Until the 1920s the local legislature remained firmly under the control of the forestry-merchant group who discouraged any agricultural development which they did not directly control in order to maintain the dependency of the timber labor force on elite-controlled food imports.
The government encouraged the Yucatecan immigrants to purchase land Crown lands in southern Belize during the 1870s, however, very few mayeros chose to relocate there. The peasants of northern Belize remained tenant farmers with no political power and virtually no rights or guarantees with regard to their tenant status: "the tenancies are from year to year, without written lease; but an obnoxious tenant can be gotten rid of at any time, also a tenant in arrears of rent" (Bristowe and Wright 1888:208).

The swidden system continued to serve as the principal mode of agricultural production in northern Belize. From the colonial administrators' point of view the persistence of milpa agriculture and all that it implied: low population density, scattered settlements, and "wasteful land practices" (shifting cultivation) contributed to the stagnation of the agricultural economy.

The supply of labor in the Colony is totally inadequate, both in quantity and quality, for any large development schemes. It is clear the labor question...must be tackled concurrently with other agricultural problems. Immigrants to be introduced should be people of agricultural traditions, and whose social customs and habits in general are acceptable (Handbook of British Honduras 1925:184-188).

They did not consider milperos to be farmers, nor were they capable of comprehending either the economic rationale or the demographic-ecological realities underlying the persistence of swidden subsistence farming. Nevertheless, they could not help but occasionally notice the mayeros productivity.

Indian corn is a very important food crop in the Colony both for people and animals. The corn is grown in the milpa system especially in the Orange Walk, Cayo, and Toledo Districts. The yields obtained are very satisfactory, the size of the ears is remarkably large, considering the primitive methods of production. Throughout the Colony, corn is planted
too far apart, and too many seeds are place in each hole--partly the result of task work. The Indians select their corn for planting, but they do not select it in the field. Proper selection of corn would increase yields considerably.

Pigs are very plentiful in Orange Walk District, especially in the villages between the Rio Hondo and New River. The breed is mostly of the poor razor-back type. A rather remarkable feature of British Honduras is the large number of turkeys one sees in villages and settlements. The birds thrive well and are very fine in appearance (Handbook of British Honduras 1925:178-183).

The British administrators apparently considered the peasants' "very satisfactory" corn yields and their success in pig and poultry raising as flukes of nature. The Maya had no place in the agricultural development schemes of colonial agents. They were considered primitive, backward and they refused to submit to becoming a full time wage labor force. In an important report that spurred the formation of the Agriculture Department, W. R. Dunlop reported that the Maya were "a dying race" who should be put on reservations to "place some check upon the destructive activities of the Indians in the forests" and be left to wither away (1921:6). Ironically, this colonial perspective on the productivity and value of swidden agriculture is echoed in dependency theory-based analyses of colonialism and underdevelopment in Belize (Ashcraft 1973).

The Changing Colonial Economy

After the collapse of the sugar industry in the 1890s the export sector of the colonial economy reverted to complete forest products dependency and most of the rural population of northern Belize returned to full-time swidden subsistence farming (Jones
1970, Cal 1991a). The period 1890 to 1935, between the decline of the plantation-based sugar production in the late nineteenth century and the resurrection of the export sugar industry, is often described as a time of unremitting stagnation of the agricultural economy (e.g. Ashcraft 1973, Bolland and Shoman 1977:110). Historical sociological analyses of this period have generally focused on the persistence of forest-export/food-import dependency in order to explain the continuing underdevelopment of the agricultural sector of the domestic economy without distinguishing between the impact that timber export dependency had on the proletarianized Creole timber labor force, and that which it had on the mestizo-Mayan peasantry of northern Belize (Ashcraft 1973, Bolland and Shoman 1977).

It is widely held that the reversion to timber export dependency effected all segments of Belizean society equally, establishing a pattern of underdevelopment which would subsequently endure, essentially unaltered, the transition from timber export dependency to agricultural export dependency that occurred following the resurrection of the sugar industry in the 1950s. The laboring population of the colony—all being subject to ostensibly the same external political-economic pressures—are either seen as an undifferentiated whole, or the mayero peasantry of northern Belize is treated as an economically and numerically insignificant anomaly. As Cedric Grant noted of the Yucatecan refugees of the Caste War, “the predominantly Latin peasantry was in the
colonial society but not of it" (cf. Shoman 1994:131). I will argue that this was certainly not the case.

Citing Andre Gunder Frank (1969:312), Ashcraft maintains that Belize was subject to the same homogenizing political-economic processes as was Latin America.

...the process whereby expanding corporate empires absorb or tie indigenous enterprises into the global network compromises existing interests and creates new ones. This monopolizing effect penetrates the entire economy, weeds out "uneconomic" competition, and implicitly manages or guides the entire indigenous economy. The political economy of underdevelopment in each country is the political economy of international underdevelopment (emphasis mine Ashcraft 1973:169, 171).

Ashcraft's analysis closely follows the basic tenets of dependency theory. The world capitalist system is composed of two opposing parts: the wealthy core (the metropolis) and the impoverished, exploited periphery (the satellites). The world capitalist system exploits and impoverishes all ordinary people—poor peasants and laborers—who come into contact with it; and, the inhabitants of the periphery all march to the tune of the core. The core and the periphery are inseparably linked and can only be understood in terms of their relationship to each other. Capitalist expansion simultaneously creates development

---

19 I believe Grant's dubious assertion arises from a somewhat "Creole-centric" tendency to see the history of Belize's Creole population as "Belizean history" rather than from any objective demographic or economic reality. Culturally, northern Belize has more in common with Quintana Roo than it does with the rest of Belize, particularly Belize City—a fact which has certainly not been lost on the Creole population. Due largely to the economic importance of the sugar industry, northern Belize has been able to demand political representation commensurate with its contribution to the national economy despite the fact that the urbanites of Belize City consider the inhabitants of the districts to be country bumpkins: "the tendency, which had begun in the 1957 elections, to recruit parliamentary candidates from their constituencies had its political advantages, but it also limited the number of candidates who could have been selected from the intellectual repository of Belize City" (Grant 1976:243). I guess I would call this representative democracy.
in the core and underdevelopment in the periphery and is therefore inherently contradictory (Pierce 1984:4-5).

Societies which share a history of European colonial rule often exhibit socioeconomic and political similarities which appear to be functionally related to the nature and extent of their participation in the world economy. However, as Donald Attwood notes in his study of the peasant sugar industry in India, the most fundamental problem shared by dependency, world systems, and other theories of the "development of underdevelopment" is that they are assumed, by their proponents, to be universally relevant.

This mindset inhibits the study of anomalies and variations—inhibits comparative analysis in other words....Comparisons are instructive only if we explore the differences as well as the similarities between cases. However, fundamental differences among Third World societies are assumed not to exist by those who believe the have a universal theory of development" (1991:7).

The dependency model is also silent about the independent historical trajectories or "self-modeling processes" that characterize the peripheries (Gudeman and Rivera 1990:159). As I shall attempt to demonstrate below this mindset inhabits both national studies of Belize (e.g. Ashcraft 1973, Bolland and Shoman 1977) as well as studies that have examined the impact of sugar industry expansion on specific communities in northern Belize during the 1960s and 1970s (Henderson 1969, 1990; Stavrakis 1978; Brockmann 1979). The result has been that the above-mentioned studies assumed that the decline of peasant farming and rural proletarianization were a foregone conclusion of export sugar industry expansion: this, however, has not been the case. Today there is abundant
research contradicting dependency and world systems theories' assumption that commercial agriculture is antithetical to peasant or household-based production (e.g. Barlett 1980; Guillet 1980:157; Wilk 1984:239; Plattner 1989:394).

The Development of Underdevelopment as a National Phenomena

In a 1973 study, Colonialism and Underdevelopment: Processes of Political Economic Change in British Honduras, Norman Ashcraft examines the relationship between Belize's colonial history and its lack of internal economic development. The crux of Ashcraft's argument is that forest products export dependency severely retarded the growth of the domestic economy, particularly food crop production for domestic consumption. Ashcraft bases his analysis largely on southern Belize and the Creole population and generally ignores the northern Belizean peasants' role in the domestic economy. He sees peasant subsistence agriculture as an economic activity of last resort: something which the rural labor force reverts to during the periodic collapses of the timber economy. The peasants' return to full-time swidden subsistence farming is therefore the result of external economic forces (i.e., foreign markets for Belizean timber) acting upon the local economy.

For most people, small-scale farming has always acted as a supplemental income to that earned through employment in large-scale commercial enterprises. Historical circumstances...have had the peculiar effect of repeatedly forcing the 'peasant' to rely on this apparently secondary means of making a living. Primitive farming methods, an inadequate and cumbersome transportation system, poorly developed marketing arrangements, and the lack of consumer demand combine to discourage expansion of domestic production (Ashcraft 1973:94)
Ashcraft’s statements concerning the inadequacies of Belize’s transportation and marketing infrastructure and the lack of consumer demand due to the small size of the population are beyond dispute; however, his causal analysis of peasant agriculture seems to put the cart before the horse. Although mayeros did engage in wage labor as opportunities arose they nevertheless remained, through thick and thin, swidden subsistence farmers—which is what most were before they immigrated to Belize. Like the colonial administrators of the nineteenth and early twentieth century (see Handbook of British Honduras 1925:178, Pim 1934:129), Ashcraft assumes that the persistence of “primitive” milpa agriculture and the absence of western, capital-intensive agriculture is evidence of stagnation of the agricultural sector of the domestic economy.

Whereas Ashcraft sees persistence of the milpa as economic stagnation, I see it as successful peasant resistance to economic exploitation: aside from flight or armed rebellion, the milpa was the only thing that stood between the peasants and proletarianization. Furthermore, as long as swidden agriculture continued to be the basis of most staple crop production in Belize—and the state and the timber interests were unable to stop the mayeros from making milpa—the mayeros had a lock on not only corn production for domestic consumption, but on poultry and pigs as well (Handbook of British Honduras 1925:182-183). 39 Neither British nor Belizean capitalists were interested making the investments and assuming the risks involved in intensive corn

---

39 Today swidden farmers still produce most of Belize’s staples though swidden is no longer exclusively the domain of the mayeros as it had been in the past (Moberg 1991:17).
production for the domestic market as long as the big money was to be made in chicle and mahogany.

As I have previously argued, milpa subsistence farming persisted in Belize—and in colonial and post-colonial Mexico—despite colonial administrators’ and capitalists’ efforts to transform the peasantry into a free labor force during the nineteenth century sugar boom. Even when the colonial government offered landless Caste War refugees the opportunity, in 1870, to buy land in southern Belize and become small-scale banana producers few chose this option. They refused to leave northern Belize despite the fact that British interests owned virtually all the land in the Corozal and Orange Walk Districts and for most there was little hope that they could ever be anything other than landless tenant milperos. Most did not choose to become landowners until after 1956 when the government initiated a land redistribution program designed to resuscitate the sugar industry after it was devastated by Hurricane Janet in 1955. Even then, the government had to lure the mayeros away from the milpa with guaranteed sugarcane delivery quotas, crop establishment loans, and thirty acre parcels of land under five year lease-purchase agreements (Abrams 1973:28-29).

In his discussion of the period 1900 to 1935 Ashcraft writes:
...the continued focus on a mono-economy...the export of forestry products, at the expense of other potential trade items, left the country dependent on the whims of foreign buyers and fluctuations in the international forestry market. With all efforts concentrated on exports, it was impossible to develop even a small-scale system of domestic production that could adequately supply the local market...with metropolitan powers directly or indirectly controlling the market activity. The rate and value of imports gradually surpassed and even doubled that of exports. The trade picture...tells the story of the growth of underdevelopment in British Honduras" (1973:47).

By making external trade relations the deus ex machina of the colony's domestic agricultural economy, Ashcraft not only underestimates the peasants' role in shaping the colonial economy, but also assumes that the peasants of the northern districts were as dependent upon food imports as the proletarianized Creole timber labor force. There is no denying that the export-import sector of the colonial economy (the colonial capitalists and the timber proletariat) was dependent on forest products exports; nor can anyone deny Belize's unfavorable balance of trade during the early twentieth century. However, Ashcraft seems unaware of both the extent and the importance of peasant food-crop production for the domestic market in northern Belize during this period (see Handbook of British Honduras 1925:178-183, MP2065-1918, MP1955-1919)\textsuperscript{40}. As I shall discuss in greater detail below, peasant corn production was critical to the chicle industry and colonial administrators kept a watchful eye on the seasonal price and availability of corn.

A further difficulty with Ashcraft's dependency-based analysis arises from his tendency to ignore conflict between capitalists: he treats capitalism as though it were a

\textsuperscript{40} The 1946 Colonial Report notes primarily that the producers of sugarcane and maize are "individual agriculturalists, Maya Indians in northern and southern districts."
monolithic entity characterized by historical uniformity of interest. He fails to
differentiate between the “types” capitalists present in Belize who had markedly different
cultural origins and political agendas, specifically: the native, anti-colonial capitalists and
British expatriate latifundistas.\footnote{In a 1968 article “Seven Fallacies about Latin America” Rudolfo Stavehagen attacks the
thesis that there is any inherent conflict between the new Latin American elite
(commercial and industrial entrepreneurs) and the old elite which derives its
prominence from the ownership of land. Stavenhagen maintains that these two groups
have shared interests in maintaining internal colonialism whereby both groups profit at
the expense of the laboring population (1968:22-23). This does not, however, seem to
have been the case in northern Belize where the political activities of the new elite--
though in no sense altruistic--were clearly directed at breaking the old elite’s political
and economic control over the colony.}

He also ignores competition among capitalists of all
stripes for peasant labor and resources, competition which I will argue often worked to
the peasants’ advantage. Throughout Belize’s history the absence of a “suitable” labor
force had always been blamed for the colony’s lack of agricultural development (Bristowe
and Wright 1888. Handbook of British Honduras 1925:183). And yet this labor shortage
was in no small measure directly attributable to colonial policies designed by and for the
timber elite to stifle the development of an agricultural peasantry.

In his discussion of the train of causality linking external economic forces and
local response Ashcraft notes that rural folk do not exist in isolation “but rather have had
to adapt their activities, lifestyles, and economic habits to the requirement of the
dominant and therefore more pervasive ruling interests” (1973:93). Truer words were
never spoken; however, I feel that he overestimates or exaggerates the determinacy of this
relationship.
Thus, the critical features of domestic farm production evolved as an immediate response to a framework constricted by the economic, political, and social focus on external trade, i.e., exports and imports (ibid.)

It is certainly true that the *mayeros* of northern Belize were forced to adapt to circumstances imposed upon them by dominant Anglo-Saxon colonial elite. My difficulty with this particular aspect of Ashcraft’s analysis stems from his assertion that the “critical features of domestic farm production evolved as an immediate response” to what were essentially external forces. For *mayeros* the *milpa* was not just something they did when the export economy failed and wage labor was unavailable; it was a central aspect of their cultural identity (see Press 1973, Birdwell-Pheasant 1978, Koenig 1979). The export economy of the colony was clearly based on timber, but the domestic economy of the northern districts was firmly rooted in the *milpa*, and remained so despite the boom and bust cycles of the export economy.

I believe the most serious flaw in Ashcraft’s analysis is his failure to recognize the internal contradictions inherent in colonial policies designed by British capitalists to maintain their monopoly over the exploitation of Belize’s forest resources, and the demographic-ecological paradox which these contradictions engendered. Colonial laws that prohibited peasants from owning land—or denied them any security of tenure as renters—precluded the formation of a sedentary agricultural peasantry. This resulted in low rural population density which, in and of itself, was conducive to the persistence of *milpa* agriculture. The colonial capitalists and the state lacked both the desire and the means to stop the *mayeros* from making *milpa* and furthermore, as will be discussed
below, the peasant's labor and their corn production were too valuable to risk driving them out of the colony. Paradoxically, the laws which prohibited peasants from owning land made it more difficult for capitalists to control the peasant labor force.

The Control of Land as a Prerequisite for the Control of Labor

Most of what has been written concerning the history of the relationship between the control of land and the control of labor in Belize has focused on the purported efficacy with which the timber capitalists were able to control the labor of the Creole population (see Bolland and Shoman 1977; Bolland 1982, 1988). In a 1982 article entitled "Systems of Domination after Slavery: The Control of Land and Labor in the British West Indies after 1838", Nigel Bolland examined and compared the relationship between the control of land and the control of labor in post-emancipation British Caribbean sugar colonies— all of which were islands with the exception of Guyana—and in Belize. In his analysis Bolland refutes the demographic argument advanced by Hill (1976) and Scarano (1977): that the availability of land (explained in terms of favorable or unfavorable man/land ratios or degrees of population density) was a critical factor which determined whether or not ex-slaves would emerge as a "reconstituted peasantry," or would remain dependent upon estate labor (1982:592).

The demographic argument holds that the supply as well as the quality of labor available to the plantations was mainly determined by two factors: population density and the availability of arable land. On small islands with high population density (Antigua, St. Kitts, and Barbados) the monopolization of arable land by the planters restricted the
growth of a peasantry and limited the independent cultivation of provisions to the 
function of supplementing wages earned from estate labor. At the other end of the scale 
were the less densely populated colonies of Jamaica, Trinidad, and Guyana where the 
plantations' loss of labor through the growth of the peasantries was far greater. 

According to Bolland, Belize—which had abundant arable land and extremely low 
population density—does not fit the population density model employed to explain the 
growth of independent peasantries in the less densely populated colonies noted above. 
Despite the fact that Belize was largely unoccupied, the ex-masters were able to control 
both land and labor of the freedmen to a degree comparable to that in small densely 
populated islands. The coercive powers of the timber capitalists, supported by the state, 
were sufficient to keep the Creole timber laborers proletarianized despite the fact that 
Belize had (and still has) extremely low population density. In Belize both land and labor 
were controlled to a degree comparable to that seen in small densely populated islands 
through laws and institutions (e.g. the advance wage and truck systems) which did not 
exist elsewhere in the British Caribbean: "...variations in the ability of ex-masters to 
control their ex-slaves...the availability of land, though important, is not the only factor. 
nor is it determined by population density...The availability of land is primarily 
determined by the power structure" (1982:614). 

I agree with Bolland's assertion that population density does not, in an of itself. 
determine the availability of land which essentially arises from the dialectic of the power 
structure and demography. However, in this context we must look at more than just the
"power structure" of Belizean colonial society. The neighboring Mexican and Guatemalan frontiers, Quintana Roo and the Peten were far from stable and noone (the states, the forestry capitalists, or the various political entities that existed among the indigenous and \textit{mestizoized} populations of the region) had a monopoly on violence. Both the Creoles and the British were culturally and linguistically isolated from the indigenous and Hispanic Central Americans which surrounded them. The same can not be said, however, of the rest of the colony's population, most of whom were of Yucatecan descent. In other words: the Belizean capitalists' and the state's control over the Yucatecan population of northern Belize was not as powerful as their control over the Creole population. The ability of the Belizean state to control the activities of people residing either permanently, or temporarily, within its borders was strongly influenced by population density for the simple reason that controlling the sparsely populated, politically unstable frontier was an expensive proposition for which neither the state nor the timber capitalists were willing to foot the bill. Furthermore, it can certainly be argued that the continuing instability of the frontier region benefited nineteenth century Belizean capitalists who traded arms for timber with the rebel Maya.

The Plantation Concept in Analyses of Belizean Land and Labor Relations

I have argued at length that the peasant population of northern Belize was more resistant to proletarianization than the Creole timber labor force due to the persistence of swidden subsistence agriculture and the resultant inability of the colonial government and colonial capitalists to control the peasants' labor. Researchers' neglect of the analysis of
the *mayero* population’s anomalous historical resistance to proletarianization seems to arise in part from the desire to fit Belize into the category, for comparative purposes, of a “typical Caribbean plantation economy” (see Beckford 1969, 1972) within an analytical framework based on dependency theory (Frank 1969, Myrdal 1957).

The great estates and the extreme monopolization of land ownership in Belize are similar to the latifundias of Latin America, and they also have their parallels with the plantations of the West Indian islands. All these plantation-latifundia economies have certain common fundamental characteristics which affect every aspect of their societies... The historical experience of Belize quite clearly identifies the country as a plantation-latifundia society. The organization of the predominant production unit in Belize differed in many ways from, for example, a sugar plantation, and the experience of slaves and laborers in mahogany gangs was undoubtedly different from that of slaves on sugar plantations. Nevertheless, the macro-features of the society are very similar to those of the West Indian Islands where sugar has predominated (Bolland and Shoman 1977:119).

In the context of the discussion of Caribbean history few terms evoke as much emotion as “sugar cane” and “plantation”. Sugarcane is known throughout the world, and in particular among the developing nations of the Caribbean, as a crop which exploited slave labor to grow fortunes for colonial plantation owners and has since been taken over by huge industrial plantations cultivated by gangs of hired laborers.

Sugarcane’s seemingly “natural” propensity to create and perpetuate a rural industrial proletariat arises from the special capital and labor requirements characteristic of large-scale sugar production. Neither a sugarcane field nor a sugar refinery can be independently productive: the only thing you can make with a refinery is sugar, and refineries require heavy ongoing capital inputs. In most of the Caribbean the sugarcane harvest lasts six to nine months which means that a refinery is idle for at least three
months of the year. Cane cultivation and harvesting must therefore be coordinated to maintain a steady flow of cane into the factory so that it operates at peak efficiency and profitability during the grinding season.

As Sidney Mintz notes, the need to closely coordinate the cultivation of cane with its mechanical/chemical transformation into sugar arises from the inherent perishability of the crop thereby producing "careful scheduling at the top and iron discipline at the base" (Mintz 1985:32). Simply stated, once a cane field has been burned-over prior to cutting, it must be processed within seventy-two hours or the cane begins to rot and its sucrose content quickly deteriorates. The links between the cutting, grinding, boiling, and crystallization processes must be synchronized under one authority if a refinery is to operate efficiently, and efficiency and time-consciousness are the hallmarks of industrial capitalism. The capital required to establish and maintain a refinery, and the timeliness and scheduling required to insure that it operates at peak efficiency to maximize profit, are conducive to the exploitation of labor. Mintz argues persuasively that although seventeenth century Caribbean sugar plantations may not have been capitalist in origin, they were the world's first agro-industries and an important step toward capitalism. The plantations of the post-slavery Caribbean, on the other hand, epitomize capitalist agro-industry because they are predicated on the exploitation of a surplus laboring population dispossessed of the means of production. The "industrial" nature of export-oriented sugarcane cultivation and processing (the demand that the activities of the field and the factory be closely coordinated), the seasonal labor bottlenecks characteristic of large-scale
commercial cane cultivation (particularly the harvest season), and the land requirements of a crop which yields a final product, after processing, one tenth its original volume are all factors which would seem to militate against smallholder sugarcane farming.

Historically plantation agriculture has been seen as efficient, "modern," and particularly suited to certain tropical crops because "large-scale plantation units make possible economies of operation by the use of labor-saving machinery" (Beckford 1969:321). As Mintz notes, plantations epitomize agro-industry due to their heavy substitution of machinery for human labor, their intensive use of scientific methods and products, and characteristic mass production on large holdings (1985:51).

The special factor combination that distinguishes plantation production from other kinds of farms is the bringing together of as many unskilled farm laborers as possible under the authority of a few highly skilled managers: "...the plantation substitutes supervision--supervisory and administrative skills--for skilled, adaptive labor, combining the supervision with labor whose principal skill is to follow orders" (Beckford 1969:323). By its very nature, large-scale sugarcane farming demands that a large seasonal labor force be available during the harvest. However, this labor force is not needed during the remainder of the year since sugarcane's cultivation requirements account for only one third of the labor needed to produce a ton of sugar.

All economies require different inputs of labor; consequently in the long run population processes such as birth rates and indices of fertility are viewed as responses to differential levels of labor inputs and agricultural requirements. Thus where certain agricultural crops are highly labor intensive such as sugar, rice, and cotton as plantation or non-plantation crops, the resulting rural populations associated with these cropping patterns will be larger (Yengoyan 1974:59).
Plantation enterprises are often characterized by a high degree of vertical integration, often to the extent of being entirely self-sufficient. For example: the plantation enterprise may supply inputs for its agricultural operations and processing and marketing facilities for its agricultural output. Vertical integration may be carried to the extreme that the plantation's agricultural operations no longer represent the bulk of the company's investments and the maximization of total profit for the firm is therefore not dependent on profit maximization of its agricultural activities. For this reason the firm is able to hedge possible losses on its farming operations against consequent gains further up the scale. Profit maximization is the primary objective of plantation enterprises; however, because it is part of a wider, vertically integrated complex, profit maximization may not be the guiding principle at the level of its agricultural operations. The relative importance of the firm's agricultural component depends on the share of agriculture in the firm's total investments: the smaller this share the less the need for profit maximization in agricultural operations (Beckford 1969:334-335).

Plantations enterprises must have sufficient land to meet the refinery's processing capacity. The minimum amount of land required is determined by the level of output

---

42 During the 1960s Tate and Lyle was operating in three West Indian sugar-producing countries through almost wholly-owned subsidiaries (Jamaica, Trinidad, Belize). The company was also engaged in sugar refining in the United Kingdom, Canada, Zambia, Zimbabwe (then Rhodesia), sugar storage and distribution, molasses production and trading in the West Indies, Africa, Europe, Asia, and North America, manufacture of syrup and liquid sugar, distillation of alcohol, manufacture of machinery, and world-wide shipping including insurance. The company owned a fleet of eleven tankers for bulk shipping of sugar. As a sugar refining enterprise Tate and Lyle accounted for a substantial share of refining activity in two metropolitan markets: the United Kingdom and Canada.
needed to cover fixed costs in processing. However, in order to allow for a degree of flexibility of output adjustment over time in response to changing market opportunities plantations generally try to acquire land well in excess of the minimum needed to sustain the refinery. Sufficient land must be acquired to produce the desired flow of cane into the refinery: even when the cane can be supplied by independent farmers the firm would be in too vulnerable a position to rely exclusively on such supplies (Beckford 1969:339).

This is an extremely important point: if the refinery does not have sufficient sugarcane production capacity to cover its minimum processing requirements then it will be dependent upon the production of independent farmers. As Mintz notes, from a political-economic perspective the defining characteristics of the capitalist sugarcane plantation are: the separation of production from consumption and the separation of the worker from the means of production (1985:52). It would therefore seem to follow that if the worker is not separated from the means of production you can't have a capitalist plantation system. In advancing the argument that Belize exhibits a typical plantation economy Beckford claims that “Tate and Lyle has a complete monopoly of raw sugar production in British Honduras. The company’s estates represent some 80 percent of total sugar-cane production in the country” (Beckford 1969:332). This is simply not true. According to everyone's' statistics--those of BSI, the Belize Cane Farmers' Association, and the Belize Sugar Board--Belizean cane farmers have never produced less than fifty percent of the sugarcane grown in the country.
Bolland and Shoman's argument that Belize exhibits all the characteristics of plantation economy rests on their contention that the "macro-features of society" (i.e., "the extreme monopolization of land ownership") had the same impact on the mayero peasantry that they did on the Creole timber proletariat. In order to accept the applicability/relevance of the plantation model to Belizean circumstances it is also necessary to accept that the state and capitalists were able to control the labor force through control of the land and state sanctioned debt-peonage.

The freedmen in Belize, unable to acquire land and indebted to their masters...continued to be tied to labour in the mahogany forests. The Caribs and the Maya, too, were denied freehold titles to land in order to make them available as a source of labour for the plantation which were being developed in the second half of the nineteenth century (Bolland and Shoman 1977:121).

If the plantation system of production is a major theme of the history of sugarcane cultivation in the New World, then its antithesis is peasant agriculture. These two modes of production have always been in competition for land and labor and wherever there is a favorable man-land ratio, peasants will always opt to work on their own account.

The history of newly discovered and newly occupied areas has demonstrated again and again that free men will not work as employed agricultural laborers if they have access to land which they can cultivate for themselves. Basic to the relationship between men and land, then, is the relative availability of land for settlement and of labor for employment. In areas of sparse settlement, free men will settle unoccupied land and avoid working for others...It is precisely the ease with which land may be acquired in such situations that makes employable labor scarce...The plantation needed a coerced labor force because it could not amass or retain a free labor force (Mintz 1964:xiv-xv).
Bolland and Shoman employ Beckford's definition of a "plantation economy" which does not necessarily preclude the existence of a large peasant population, however, this peasant population is nevertheless, by Beckford's definition, a product of the plantation system and the plantations' influence is all pervasive: "the land area covered by the plantations enterprise is so vast that it is usually the only source of employment within a fairly wide area" (1969:341).

...the term plantation economy can be used cautiously to describe situations where the dominant pattern of agricultural resource organization is the plantation system. Dominant is used in the sense that the bulk of the country's agricultural resources are owned by plantations, and/or plantation production provides the main dynamic for development...there are situations...where peasant producers are more numerous than plantation enterprises but where, because the peasantry is a creation of the plantations their behavior reflects the plantation influence (emphasis mine Beckford 1969:325).

In sum I contend that the argument for the plantation society as sociohistorical determinant of contemporary subcultures is not relevant to the case of the peasantry of northern Belize. The peasants of northern Belize do not fit into the same category as those found in Caribbean islands where emancipation permitted the formation of a peasantry from among the ranks of the former slaves of plantations, nor can we say that they were created or "reconstituted" as a result of uneven capitalist development (Bolland 1982:592).

Most of the research examining the social and economic consequences of the expansion of the Belizean export sugar industry during the twentieth century also either explicitly identifies Belize as a plantation society (Beckford 1969, Henderson 1969)
and/or assumes that the transition from forest products export dependency to sugar export dependency produced the uniform results predicted by dependency theory (see Henderson 1969, 1990; Stavrakis 1978; Brockmann 1979). Another premise underlying these studies is the idea that before the export sugar industry expanded in the 1950s rural society consisted of a relatively homogeneous mass of peasants. Peasant communities were self-sufficient and minimally engaged with the outside world: they grew crops with their own labor and had more or less equal access to the community's land, which was not the exclusive, private property of a few. Landless laborers were scarce or non-existent, and so were rich peasants or landlords who might have prospered by exploiting them.

Since the Maya defined access to land by use rights, accumulation and private ownership were not only unnecessary but also counterproductive. Their use right system gave them tremendous flexibility and mobility. However, under present conditions, without private ownership of land, without possessions of material value and without surplus-producing profit agriculture, there is nothing substantive the Indian can sell to acquire capital. Within the traditional context capital was not necessary for survival. But as cashcropping developed and those few who could acquire capital purchased land, the traditional farmer began to lose control over his means of production (Stavrakis 1978:97).

In attempting to fit northern Belize into a model of the "development of underdevelopment" Stavrakis seems to suggest that prior to the 1950s the peasant population of northern Belize was a pristine, pre-capitalist social formation (1979:ix-xiii).

---

43 The most notable exceptions to this generalization, which will be examined later in greater detail, are Jones' (1969) study which uses Geertz's (1963) model of agricultural involution to demonstrate what he sees as the ecological incompatibility of peasant subsistence agriculture and small farmer sugarcane cultivation. Abrams study (1973) sees small-scale sugarcane cultivation as perfectly compatible with peasant agriculture.
These community studies consequently suffer from the same misconceptions concerning the social and economic impact of export sugar production on the *mayeros* of northern Belize. In *Change in Northern Belize: Economic Development and Socio-Cultural Change in Orange Walk* Brockmann writes:

The establishment of modern large scale sugar manufacturing, in which a large number of local farmers produce all of the sugar cane, has brought real economic gains to most of Orange Walk's population. The farmers' response to economically meaningful participation in a profitable industry has been widespread and strong...Factory work, cash cropping, field labor, merchandising, and the production of other goods and services have all increased due to this new industry and the capital it produces. This development, however, perpetuates the pre-industrial class and center-satellite wealth and power differentials. While the old upper class has maintained, and in some cases augmented itself, there has been increased differentiation within what, traditionally, was the other, or lower class (1979:1).

Brockmann's analysis follows what Attwood has referred to as "the standard theory of commercialization" (1991:10). He maintains that the transition to sugarcane farming provides a classic example of the emergence of rural proletarianization via participation in the world sugar market. Expansion of the export sugar industry would enrich big farmers, impoverish small ones, and eventually create massive unemployment among agricultural laborers. All this would engender a greater class polarization. The essence of the theory was that big landowners would find it easy to adapt new inputs, because they had access to easy credit and had enough resources to buffer themselves from the risk of price fluctuations in the market place. Middle and small peasants, on the other hand, could not afford to buy new inputs and would assume great risks in attempting to do so by going into debt. Fluctuations in crop prices would make it difficult to repay these debts.
and drive the smaller peasants deeper into insolvency. Thus the new crop regime would drive middle and small peasants into the landless proletariat.

The Anti-colonial Elite

The first three decades of the twentieth century were marked by the beginning of two closely related trends that would profoundly influence subsequent political and economic developments in northern Belize: the growing power of an anti-colonial Creole and Yucatecan nouveau elite who saw the British latifundistas (most particularly the Belize Estate and Produce Company) as their natural enemies, and the increasing influence of the North American markets and corporations that were rapidly displacing British markets and firms in the colony's import and export trade (Konrad 1991, Shoman 1994).

Before World War I mahogany extraction was dominated by the British expatriate elite who relied primarily on the proletarianized Creole population for labor and, together with absentee landowners, monopolized the private ownership of land in the colony. The expatriate elite's economic and political hegemony seemed unassailable at the end of the nineteenth century, but this would soon change. The first three decades of the twentieth century saw the rise of a native capitalist elite whose wealth was based largely on chicle—which the mayeros called oro blanco (white gold). Unlike the British elite, these Belizean entrepreneurs owned little land and relied primarily upon the mayero peasantry as their principal source of labor.
Chicle began to compete with mahogany as the region’s principal export in the 1890s. Shortly after the twentieth century began the colony’s export income improved dramatically with the expansion of American markets for both chicle and mahogany. The amount of chicle exported from Belize—most of which actually came from Quintana Roo and the Peten—increased from just 3,561 pounds in 1892 to 925,199 pounds in 1896 (Jones 1969:102). By 1901 chicle exports exceeded two million pounds per year. After chewing gum was included in United States military rations during World War I exports averaged over three million pounds per year and this high rate of export continued until the Great Depression began in 1930.

The Belize Estate and Produce Company started to lose the chicle market and some of its mahogany markets to US firms after the First World War began and both the mahogany and chicle industries became increasingly dependent on American buyers. US-based companies—particularly Wrigley, Adams, and Mengel—acquired considerable political influence in Belize because they “created for local entrepreneurs business opportunities which the dominance of the BEPC and its influence in London and Belize City had so long denied them.” These American companies financed the chicle entrepreneurs’ operations and were their most profitable customers (Grant 1976:80-81).

During the 1920s colonial administrators began to worry, and not without cause, that the BEPC would itself fall into the hands of US interests. This almost occurred when, from 1928 through 1930, the BEPC was negotiating to sell its estates to the Mengel Company, an American timber concern with logging operations in Quintana Roo.
The deal eventually fell through because the BEPC was unable to show clear title for a large area of land it claimed to own on the western frontier. A confidential dispatch to the acting governor dated March 28, 1929, from the conservator of forests summarizes the colonial administration’s concerns regarding the possible effects of the sale of BEPC lands to an American company.

It is most unlikely that the Mengel Company would limit themselves to an output consistent with the maintenance of a permanent yield of the forests concerned. It is anticipated that all the mahogany would go to the US thus killing the British trade and resulting in the end of shipping to Belize. The Harrison line would discontinue its service to the colony with damaging effects on the import trade from Great Britain. I mention in this connection that, from what I hear, the slaughter of immature mahogany which is now going on in the north is on a scale such as to shock even the local inhabitants, familiar as they are with wasteful practices; something will have to be done about it sooner or later (MP2-1929).

More generally, the governor warned the Colonial Office in 1935 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”—the 1936 Colonial Report notes that “the standard of currency is the gold dollar of the United States of America”.

The most prominent member of the anti-colonial elite was Robert Sydney Turton, a white, Belize-born chicle and timber millionaire and the Wrigley Company’s agent in Belize. Turton’s account was the mainstay of the colony’s one bank and he was the first employer and mentor of George Price, Belize’s perennial social-democrat prime minister.44 During the 1920s Turton and the new merchant-professional elite challenged

---

44 With Turton’s financial support Price went on to found the anti-colonial People’s United Party (PUP) during the 1950s. The PUP won every general election, seven in total, from 1954 till 1984.
the landed British interests’ economic and political control over the colony and began the
transition from expatriate British control to creole control. Their primary political
opponent was the Belize Estate and Produce Company whom they blamed (somewhat
sanctimoniously) for retarding the colony’s economic development by holding massive
amounts of undeveloped land and refusing to allow appropriate land taxation. (The
company’s response to these charges will be discussed below). By 1921 the landowners
who held seats on the all-nominated Legislative Council, the most powerful branch local
government, began to be replaced by the new native elite of chicle contractors, merchants.
and professionals. While in 1916 four of the seven members of the council were
representatives of landowners, by 1921 they were reduced to a minority of three, and in
1927 only the BEPC’s representative remained. In 1936 Turton, who was constantly
being accused of financing individuals and groups who attacked British interests in the
colony, defeated the BEPC’s local manager in the Legislative Council elections: the sole
remaining member of the old landowning elite on the council (Shoman 1994:101).

In 1928 the BEPC still wielded tremendous influence in London--one of its major
shareholders was a minister in the British government--but the governor of the colony
agreed with the new elite’s criticisms of the company, noting that it was “the large
landowners and their forbears who must be held responsible...for the lamentably
backward state of the colony” (MP-1141-32:12, Shoman 1994:83). In the same year the

In a 1968 article “Seven Fallacies about Latin America” Rudolfo Stavenhagen attacks the
thesis that there is any inherent conflict between the new Latin American elite
(commercial and industrial entrepreneurs) and the old elite which derives its prominence
from the ownership of land. Stavenhagen maintains that these two groups have shared
interests in maintaining internal colonialism whereby both groups profit at the expense
Taxation Committee, which had also come under the control of the native elite, sought to impose a tax of five cents per acre on the big landowners in order to penalize them for non-development of their lands, however, the tax stayed at 1.5 cents per acre (MP 1141:1932).

In the 1930s the global economic depression and the resulting decline of mahogany exports put many of the large landowners in arrears on their taxes and the government began to pressure them to either sell their land or surrender it to the government for back taxes. This prompted lengthy negotiations between the government and the BEPC in which the company claimed it was being unfairly taxed in comparison to the town property owners who were then competing with the company for political control of the colony.

At best is it not absurd to put forest swamp land on the same basis of taxation as valuable town property such as the Belize Stores, John Harley & Co., James Brodie & Co. Ltd....Moreover the town property owner is of little or no value to the colony. He is a middleman, rarely if ever a producer except of government revenue derived through money put in circulation by the operator. And that money is almost entirely spent on the towns. These are in fact parasitic upon the districts and the work of the districts is the work of such operators as this company (MP1141-1932:2).

The BEPC claimed that it was largely responsible for all the development which had occurred in rural areas, particularly the Orange Walk District, and therefore should not be treated in the same way as "persons residing in England and elsewhere who have..."
no interest in British Honduras except to sell out their holdings” (MP1141-1932:7). After an extended, tedious dialogue between the government and the company concerning the land tax, the increase of land tax, the non-development of lands, and land valuations the government acquired approximately 160,000 acres in lieu of back taxes from landowners, including the BEPC, in the Orange Walk and Corozal Districts. Much of this acreage was eventually set aside during the 1950s as reserves for milpa agriculture and for planned farm settlements (Report of the Committee of Lands Administration 1961:4).

Settlements of the Orange Walk District during the Early 20th Century

The settlement pattern of northern Belize at the beginning of the twentieth century still reflected a colonial economy based on the exploitation of forest resources. With the exception of those villages that were established during the nineteenth century sugar boom, existing settlements had developed largely in response to the distribution and extraction requirements of logwood and mahogany (Ashcraft 1973:29). The oldest continuously occupied villages were those located on rivers which were still the colony’s primary means of transportation and communication.

Like the Corozal District, the Orange Walk District was settled by large numbers of Maya and mestizo immigrants after the outbreak of the Caste Wars. However, during the second half of the nineteenth century much of the peasant population of both districts gravitated toward the wage labor opportunities provided by the Yucatecan sugar ranchos and British estates in Corozal. With the exception of two estates operated by the BEPC on the New River in the Orange Walk District, large-scale sugar production had never
extended below the southern boundary of the Corozal District. Aside from a few small rum and sugar producing estates and livestock operations, the Orange Walk District economy was based entirely on forest resource exploitation and swidden agriculture: periodic declines in timber production were always followed by complete reversion to full-time subsistence farming on the part of the rural population.

The Report on the Census 1921 notes that, for the colony as a whole, "Apart from the urban areas the somewhat sparse population is confined generally to the sea coast and river banks in plantations, farms, or settlements or camps where mahogany, rosewood, and logwood are cut or where the sapodilla gum is bled for chicle" (Dunk 1922:3). The report describes the houses and the population in the Corozal District as "scanty" and "scattered," although several new settlements had been established by Mexican immigrants since the 1911 census. The Orange Walk District was said to contain a "scattered population of migratory habits...Fully ninety percent of the houses are of the 'bush' house type, composed of various classes of sticks with thatched roofs." Each year hundreds of men from the Orange Walk District, often accompanied by their families, would take up temporary residence in the Peten and Quintana Roo while cutting mahogany or tapping chicle.46

46 I am not certain that Dunk is correct in saying that chicleros' wives and children followed them into the bush though this was true of mahogany crews (see Abrams 1973, Schwartz 1991). "Womenfolk usually accompany their male partners to the place of work, even if forest operations for the extraction of timber. Owing...to the shifting nature...of chicle...females are rarely found in the camps" (British Honduras Annual Report of the Labor Department 1947:10).
The population density of the entire colony was 5.27 persons per square mile; however, most of the population was confined to the urban areas (Belize City and the district towns) and villages along the coast and the rivers. “Beyond the higher reaches of the rivers, small and isolated settlements may be found while there are large areas in the hinterland without any population whatsoever. Indeed it might be said that those parts of the colony which are still unexplored are probably entirely unpopulated” (Dunk 1922:14).

The following table shows the population density and distribution in the Corozal and Orange Walk Districts in 1921.

Table 4: Population density and distribution in the Corozal and Orange Walk Districts in 1921

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>District</th>
<th>area in square miles</th>
<th>total population</th>
<th>persons per square mile</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Corozal</td>
<td>urban 0.22</td>
<td>2079</td>
<td>6.51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>rural 717.78</td>
<td>4677</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OW</td>
<td>urban 0.23</td>
<td>1175</td>
<td>3.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>rural 1461.77</td>
<td>4432</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Dunk 1922:46

The 1921 census report noted that a 10.88 percent increase in the population of the Corozal District since the 1911 census was attributable to new settlements formed by immigrants from Quintana Roo and the return of chicleros who were working in Mexico47. The population decrease that occurred in the Orange Walk District between...

---

47 Dunk notes that the 1911 census was taken on the second of April and that date is close to the end of the chicle season. He suggests that at that time, many of the citizens of the colony were working in Mexico and were not counted. The 1921 census was taken some three weeks later “...and no doubt this shifting population had, to a large extent, returned to the country to which it naturally belonged” (1922:17).
1911 and 1921 (4.91 percent) was said to reflect "the migratory habits of the people, the
transfer of mahogany gangs to the Mexican side of the Rio Hondo, and to losses
sustained...from the influenza epidemic of 1918" (Dunk 1922:57).

Give the migratory habits of the population and the dispersed rural settlement
pattern it would be unwise to put too much faith in colonial census data. The author of
the census report notes that the dramatic increases in population, particularly the increase
of 19.09 percent between 1891 and 1901 make it impossible to determine what
constitutes a normal rate of population increase. Nevertheless, one trend does seem
readily apparent: the census data show that the population of the colony increased by
twenty percent between 1901 and 1921. One factor that contributed to the increase in
population which is not mentioned in the report is the immigration of large number of
Santa Cruz Maya into Belize during the period in which the Empire of the Talking Cross
was in decline and the Mexican government was beginning to reestablish military control
over Quintana Roo. The causes of the immigration of Santa Cruz Maya to Belize during
the 1920s will be examined more closely in my discussion of the impact of the chicle
industry on the mayero populations of Orange Walk and Corozal.

The period 1901 to 1921 is also when the Orange Walk villages where I
conducted most of my ethnographic fieldwork (San Pablo, San Luis, and Nuevo San

---

48 "It will be observed that the percentage increase which occurred during the last
intercensal period is twelve percent while the natural increase (or excess of births over
deaths) from the beginning of 1911 to the end of 1920 was in the neighborhood of two
percent only."
Juan) were first permanently settled (see Figure 2)\textsuperscript{49}. The earliest references to two of these villages, San Pablo and San Jose, are found in the baptismal records of the La Immaculada Parish in Orange Walk Town and date to the 1880s.\textsuperscript{50} Douglas is the oldest village in the area and appears on a map dated 1814. At that time it was the northeastern-most logging camp on the Rio Hondo and the frontier of British territorial control (Bolland 1987:117).

\textsuperscript{49}Nuevo San Juan was established in June of 1978 by villagers from Douglas who were flooded out by the Rio Hondo. The name Nuevo San Juan comes from \textit{Dia de San Juan} (the day of San Juan), June twenty-fourth, which marks the beginning of the rainy season. My study area also included San Jose and Douglas villages however I did not conduct a census in these villages.

\textsuperscript{50}The baptismal records at La Immaculada Roman Catholic Church in Orange Walk Town only extend back to 1880, earlier records having been lost to termites (Fr. Kurt Kassebeer per com. 1994). The earliest baptismal references which list San Pablo and San Jose as the children’s place of birth occur in 1887 and 1886 respectively. Descendants of both these families, Juchim and Navarette, still reside in these villages.
Figure 1: Map of the study area

Adapted from an untitled map found in the Department of Lands and Survey. Orange Walk Town
Throughout its history Douglas served as a barkadeer (a collection point for timber which was floated out the Rio Hondo) and an embarkation point for Belizean loggers. and later chicleros, working in the forests of Peten and Quintana Roo. Douglas also appears in colonial correspondence from the early years of the Caste War in connection rebel Maya incursions into British territory and the arms-for-timber trade between British loggers and the Santa Cruz (see Hubbe 1940). The Rio Hondo’s importance to the timber industry and its influence on settlement in northern Belize is reflected in the size of river-bank village populations relative to the ranchos of the interior which formed around them (see Table 5 below).

Table 5: Population of ranchos and villages in study area in 1921

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Village</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Santa Rosa*</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Douglas</td>
<td>130</td>
<td>116</td>
<td>246</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>San Pablo</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>San Jose</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>San Luis</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>San Pedro*</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>San Roman</td>
<td>187</td>
<td>176</td>
<td>363</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*denotes ranchos which no longer exist

Source: 1921 Census Table 3: Houses and Population of each Inhabited Town, Village, and, Settlement

One of the oldest inhabitants of San Pablo and a descendant of Andres Navarette, the earliest recorded settler, noted that four other ranchos which are not mentioned in the 1921 census once existed in this area at approximately the same time: San Felipe, San Francisco, San Juan, and Paraiso. With the exception of San Roman Village, which is
also located on the Rio Hondo and settled shortly after the beginning of the Caste War. all of the settlements listed in Table 5 and those mentioned above formed as satellite communities of Douglas during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.  
Before discussing the history of these villages it is necessary to briefly examine some of the factors that influenced settlement patterns in northern Belize during this period.

Beginning in the late nineteenth century the peasant population of northern Belize became heavily involved in the chicle economy as both tappers and suppliers of foodstuffs for the chicle crews. Access to good milpa land and transportation became much more important considerations in determining where people settled than proximity to wage labor opportunities. Most chicle tapping was carried out in Quintana Roo and Peten and, unlike the mahogany workers, chicleros' families seldom accompanied them into the bush. Chicle crews were necessarily highly mobile and camps moved quite frequently as the zapote trees in an area were tapped out (Annual Report of the Labor Department 1947:10).

Other factors that influenced where mayeros chose to settle were the tenancy arrangements, residential and land-use restrictions, and the rents that landlords demanded. The old-timers in San Pablo uniformly agreed that the Belize Estate and Produce Company was the most obnoxious landlord in northern Belize in terms of the restrictions it placed on its tenants. The company generally demanded that its tenants occupy

---

51 Based on a comparison of baptismal records and court records it appears that many of the inhabitants of San Roman and Douglas were full-time chicleros while those people living in the outlying ranchos were full-time milperos.
established villages on company lands where they were required to pay rent on houselots ranging from $3.50 to $5.00 per year. The company also tried to impose tight controls on where and how much milpa their tenants made and tenants were fined heavily for destroying timber or exceeding the area agreed upon.\textsuperscript{52}

In 1925 milpa rental rates ranged from $0.30 per acre on Crown Lands to $5.00 for a basic one acre milpa permit on BEPC land though larger areas could be rented from the company at a much lower rates. Landowners other than the BEPC usually charged $0.50 per acre; the landowner’s annual tax at that time was $0.015 per acre.\textsuperscript{52} (Handbook of British Honduras 1925:183, Orange Walk Court Records 11-11-25 San Miguel).

Those estates that produced rum and sugar for the local market offered wage advances to their tenant milperos under the condition that their tenants provide the estate with labor during the peak periods of labor demand in the cane agricultural cycle (see discussion of the J. W. Price Estate below). Landlords whose primary source of income was rent on milpa land, which included most of the absentee landlords, often demanded little of their tenants other than the payment of rent for the area cultivated. “Most of the large landowners are willing and even desirous, of renting their lands on reasonable terms for this purpose” (Report of the Agricultural Commission 1917:2). Rents were assessed and collected by the landlord’s local encargado (manager). Tenants were sometimes allowed to establish settlements wherever they wanted provided they did not destroy

\[52\text{ In 1922 Gregorio Garcia of Corozalito was charged by Philip Ernest Ely for the BEPC with "destruction of several sapodilla and breadnut trees in particular and others in general, through neglecting to take reasonable precautions when burning the land. Also, for exceeding the area agreed upon." Damages were assessed at thirty dollars by the BEPC’s land agent.}\]
valuable timber: this type of tenancy arrangement often drew settlers away from estates with more restrictive occupancy conditions.\textsuperscript{53} Throughout the history of the region we seen peasant resistance manifest as a tendency to settle in dispersed hamlets beyond the reach of colonial authority and this pattern continued into the twentieth century. Older villagers said that under favorable tenancy conditions the things they looked for when deciding where to settle were soil fertility, the availability of permanent water, access to transportation (either by water or by road), and proximity to an economic and social center. Before discussing the history of the villages in my research are it will be useful to examine the environmental characteristics which drew settlers to this area.

Physical Characteristics of the Study Area

All of Corozal and most of the Orange Walk districts lie on the Northern Coastal Plain which is bounded in the west by an escarpment that rises up to the Bravo Hills of western Orange Walk District. Those areas of northern Belize which are not flooded for most of the year are characterized by flat to undulating plains shaped by subaerial erosion of limestone (peneplanation) with generally less than ten meters of local relief and shallow soils (Wright et. al 1958, King et al 1992:19). Today these plains--particularly those located between the Hondo and New Rivers--contain the main areas of sugarcane cultivation in northern Belize.

\textsuperscript{53} Several of Petronila Price's tenants who were charged in Orange Walk Court records with failing to repay advances to labor eventually settled in the San Pablo-San Jose area during the 1920 and 1930s: Josito Bacab, Estevan Teck, Valerio Cabrera, Felipe Mendez, Juan Blanco, Francisco Navarette, and Toribio Mai.
The villages in my study area are located on the eastern edge of the Lazaro Plain land system: a broad, very slight ridge that runs between the Hondo and the New rivers. The area referred to in Figure 2. as the Southern Portion of the Douglas Estate (SPDE) is entirely within the Lazaro Plain. When these villages were first settled this was considered prime *milpa* land due not only to its physical characteristics (elevation, soil, and vegetation), but also due to its proximity to Douglas and the Rio Hondo and the fact that it no longer contained marketable timber. The Lazaro Plain contains the Guinea Grass soil suite with Lazaro and Pixoy soils predominant in the higher portions of the plain, and Lazaro, Pixoy, Pucte soils in lower slopes.\(^4\) The Guinea Grass soils generally contain moderate amounts of plant nutrients, are fairly well watered and drained, and today are used primarily for sugarcane and *milpa*. This is where villagers first planted sugarcane during the 1950s. The Lazaro subsuite, which makes up most of the soils in the SPDE, is said to be suitable for a wider range of crops than are currently planted in the area (King et al 1992: map 1a).

Where the natural forest cover remains, it is primarily semi-deciduous broadleaf forest. Wright et al. (1959) classified the semi-deciduous broadleaf forest as rich in lime-loving species: mostly deciduous seasonal forest with smaller areas of deciduous, semi-evergreen forest associated with alluvial soils. Canopy height varies from 15-30 m in height and in composition and structure depending on soil. drainage, and degree of

---

\(^4\) The soils of the Guinea Grass Suite developed either from sandy limestone or in shallow siliceous alluvium overlying limestone and occur primarily in the northern Orange Walk District.
disturbance from agriculture, logging, and hurricanes. Common species forming the forest canopy include sapote or sapodilla (Manikara zapota (L.); mamey ciruela (Pouteria campechiana (HBK.) Baehni); breadnut (Brosium alicastrum Swartz); mapola (Pseudo bombax ellipticum); hogplum (Spondias mombin L.); and the prime timber species mahogany (Swietenia macrophylla King) and cedar (Cedrela mexicana Roem.). In addition to mahogany and cedar other important timber species include santa maria (Calophyllum brasiliense Camb.); naragusta (Terminalia amazonia (R. and P.) Steud.); mylady (Aspidosperma Cruenta); billy webb (Sweetia panamensis Benth.) and ironwood (Dialium guianese (Aubl.) Steud.).

The corozo or cohune palm (Orbignya cohune) occurs extensively in the broadleaf forest and in some areas forms dense stands or corozales (Lambert and Arnason 1982:3-4).

Milperos past and present use both monte alto (high bush made up of diverse tropical hardwoods) and corozales for swidden but they generally prefer the to make milpa in corozales. Both monte alto and corozales are high in soil nutrients (especially phosphorous which is often the limiting nutrient in tropical farming); however, monte alto takes more time and effort to cut, does not burn as completely, and therefore releases fewer nutrients into the soil. Very little ground cover grows under a closed corozo

\footnote{On limestone such species as black poison wood (chechem) (Metopium brownei (Jacq. Urban) and glassywood (Guettarda combsii Urban) are found, whereas in those areas with more acid soils, santa maria and naragusta are particularly evident. Riparian forest forms a specific subclass, characterized by very tall individuals of such species as cotton tree (Ceiba pentandra (L.) Gaertn.); booknut (Cassia grandis L.) fringed by the cohune palm (Orbignya cohune (Mart.) Dahlgren) and bamboo thicket (Guadua spinosa (Swallen) McClure).}
canopy so there is less initial clearing to be done and *corozo* is highly combustible

(Lambert and Arnason 1982:2; King et. al. 1992: 49).

The land to the east of the San Pablo-San Jose (referred to in Figure 2 as Narrows and Naranjal) slopes gradually toward the New River and is subject to seasonal flooding. The higher, arable portions of the Narrows and Naranjal areas are part of the Louisville Plain land system: a undulating plain made up of the Pembroke soil suite which contains the Louisville, Concepcion, Remate soil subsuites (King et. al 1992: Map 1a). Villagers generally consider the soils in these areas to be good for agriculture, however, much of this area is low-lying and too wet for corn and other *milpa* crops. Those villagers who have sugarcane planted in the Narrows and Naranjal areas often have difficulty getting their crop out if the rains come early.  

The History of Study Area Villages

Local oral history places the founding of San Pablo and San Jose by *milperos* from Mexico in the late nineteenth century. The first recorded inhabitants of San Pablo were Andres Navarette and Manuel Cuy whose names appear in the baptismal records of La

---

56 Some of Naranjal and Narrows areas is part of the Xaibe Plain land system (undulating plain with Puluacax, Remate, and Xaibe soils) which can be used to grow sugarcane however much of this area is cut-off from San Pablo and San Jose by Sibal swamps which are impassible for most of the year.

57 Some of the historical information contained in this section comes from an essay contest that I sponsored at the San Pablo Roman Catholic School. Out of about sixty students in the fifth and sixth forms (seventh and eighth grade) only nine entries were received. I later learned that many students had not submitted essays since they felt that the school principle's nieces and nephews would win since she was judging the essays. Whether or not this was a self-fulfilling prophecy I don't know; however, the students were correct in so far picking the winners was concerned.
Immaculada Parish in Orange walk Town in 1886 and 1887. According to Navarette’s granddaughter, he was sublevado (rebel) who was born near Merida and fled to Belize to escape government persecution. He first lived in San Estevan, where he met his wife, and then moved to San Pablo and later to Douglas.

Based on other villagers’ family histories, those people who eventually settled permanently in San Pablo during the 1920s were all milperos who had previously lived a semi-nomadic life, moving from place to place as the need for new milpa land and/or money dictated. New settlements were established following a pattern seen throughout the Yucatan: first the men would make milpa and build a hato (hut) where they lived while they tended their crops and eventually their families would follow. This process often took several years as people moved back and forth between the parent village and the new settlement. Today the old mayeros romanticize la vida bajo el monte (life in the bush) but readily acknowledge that the life of a pioneer was dangerous, difficult, lonely, and boring. As one old San Pableno put it: “todo el dia—machete, machete, machete” (all day long—machete, machete, machete).

According to both the Orange Walk baptismal records and local oral history, San Pablo’s first permanent settlers arrived in 1915 and made their living exclusively from milpa: Anacleto Mai; Fulgencio Sabido and his three grown sons Prudencio, Liberato.

---

Many of the settlers of San Jose originally came from San Estevan and moved back and forth between the two. In 1888 Victoriano Chuc baptized a daughter who was born in San Jose. Court records show that in 1918 he was living in San Estevan where he filed charges against Jose Maria Chuc, presumably a kinsman, for “using insulting words.” In 1925 Jose Maria Chuc was contracted by Luis Mayo in Orange Walk Town as a chiclero. In 1933 Chuc lived in Santa Rosa and in 1939 he lived in San Roman.
and Eleuterio; and Pedro Marin. The Mais came from Douglas and the Sabido family came from Corozal by way of Douglas. Pedro Marin is said to have fled to Belize from Chan Santa Cruz, Quintana Roo with his wife Paula Acosta shortly after the turn of the century. Before coming to San Pablo he lived in Corozal Town and Louisville where he worked as a laborer on sugar ranchos.

Many of the *mayeros* who settled in the Douglas-San Pablo area during the 1920s came from sugar *ranchos* in the Corozal and Orange Walk Districts (San Juan Saltillo, Louisville, and Caledonia; and Louisiana Farm, and San Lorenzo) while others had moved away from BEPC-owned villages (San Estevan, San Felipe, Libertad, and San Joaquin) get out form under company control.

During the 1920s and 1930s the Mengel Company held a timber concession along the Rio Hondo in Quintana Roo. The company's main timber camp at "Mengel" which is now Alvaro Obregon, was connected to Botes Village on the Mexican side of the Rio Hondo opposite Douglas by a railway which was dismantled when the company stopped working in the area. The chicle concessions on the Mexican side of the river were held by Robert Turton (MP1958-1930).

Aside from subsistence farming, the primary economic activity of the *ranchos* surrounding Douglas Village was supplying corn, pigs, and poultry to the mahogany and chicle camps operating in Mexican territory. A vegetation map of the Orange Walk and Corozal districts dated January 24, 1933 notes that this area (roughly including all the land between the Rio Hondo and the New River north of Orange Walk Town to Corozal
Town) was unsurveyed but known to contain "much Indian cultivation" and was forested in "intermediate mahogany and sapodilla bush"—presumably an area which had been logged-out during the nineteenth century.\(^5^9\)

Prior to completion of the road between Orange Walk and Corozal in 1937 the Rio Hondo was the primary means of transportation and communication for that portion of northern Belize that lies west of the New River. Timber and chicle contractors with crews in Quintana Roo and the Peten came to Douglas by boat and sent messengers to notify the outlying ranchos that they were buying produce (MP242-1934). Money could be made selling surplus corn to the contractors, however, pigs, chickens, and turkeys brought a much higher rate of return. These days are remembered as a time when food, and occasionally American gold dollars, were plentiful.

Before 1939 the only road between Douglas and San Pablo was a picado or horse trail cut through the forest (Annual Report of the Labor Department 1939). A seasonal truck path that skirted Pulltrowser Swamp connected San Pablo to San Estevan where milperos also occasionally sold their produce.

The land surrounding Douglas and the land on which San Pablo, San Jose, and San Luis are located belonged to an Englishman, Arthur Williamson, who derived most of his income from stock-raising at the Narrows Rancho on the New River and the rents

\(^5^9\) Until recently there was very little clear-cut logging in Belize so "logged-out" means that all the trees of legal size had been cut.

\(^6^0\) There are a number of treasure stories associated with this period which have as their central theme the hoarding and loss of gold—usually through the indiscretions of a woman. It is said that Pedro Marin left his wife Paula Acosta when she divulged to some "Mexicans" the location of Pedro's gold. Marin left his wife and only returned to San Pablo to raise his children after she died.
paid by his *milpero* tenants. In 1932 Williamson owned 13,599 acres in this area.

Another large tract of land in the area, 17,500 acres, was owned by an absentee landlord named William Bowen whose sole source of income from this property was land rental to *milperos.* When Williamson owned the Douglas Estate villagers acquired land for *milpa* through his local *encargado* who assessed rent based on the area under cultivation. Although *milperos* had no legal right to long-term tenure, villagers maintain that there was a tacit agreement among themselves concerning usufruct rights: you could not take possession of the land where another farmer had made *milpa* until twelve to fifteen years had elapsed since the last planting. After that time if the land was not put back into production then anyone who resided within the community could claim it. This principle still applies in those more remote areas of the Orange Walk District where bush-fallow swidden is still the predominant form of farming.

According to an untitled Lands Department map dated 1920, the Belize Estate and Produce Company also owned 3,200 acres of land in this area, the Narrows Estate, where villagers also made *milpa.* San Pablo and San Jose were settled just outside the company’s property line. During the 1930s the BEPC surrendered the Narrows Estate to the government in lieu of taxes and this land subsequently became an agricultural reserve set aside for subsistence farming (MP418-1954). The adjacent Naranjal-Burgos area (4,138 acres) was acquired by the government from the Burgos

---

61 Today there is considerable disagreement among villagers who were living in the area during this period concerning which landlord owned what land. It appears that Williamson’s *encargado* lived in Douglas Village and Bowen’s *encargado* operated out of Caledonia though this is uncertain.
family of San Estevan in 1967 and was to be set aside for a “planned farm settlement” (MP-1141-1932, Annual Report of the Lands and Survey Department 1967). Some villagers still believe the Narrows land belongs to the BEPC; however, this has not stopped them from establishing sugarcane fields there and most of the high ground has been claimed.62

Government regulations governing agricultural reserves set aside for milpa subsistence farming required that milperos to obtain annual licenses to grow subsistence crops and they were prohibited from making any “permanent improvements” to the land: planting permanent crops (i.e., sugarcane or fruit trees) or erecting buildings. Rent was assessed on the basis of the farmer’s oral declaration of the amount of land he had under cultivation (Report of the Committee of Lands Administration 1961:4).

In practice few milperos bothered to obtain annual licenses and laid claim to holdings by simply cutting a brecha (breach or cleared path) around the piece of monte they wished to use. This land was theirs until they abandoned the holding, abandonment being defined according to local custom as discussed above. To this day these lands are still unsurveyed and many villagers pay no rent at all for their holdings in the Naranjal and Narrows areas. The government did not intend for swidden holdings in these areas to become permanent; however, once these villages became involved in sugarcane

---

62 One San Pableno proudly told me: Cuando esos cabrones quieren reclamar, van a tener que pagar which translates roughly as: when the company decides that it wants its land back it will have to indemnify all those people who have made improvements to the land.
cultivation in the 1960s there was little the government could do to stop farmers from planting cane.

The 1918 Orange Walk court records mention Williamson, along with Petronila Price, as the largest employers of agricultural labor in the district, though it does not appear that Williamson ever employed more than twenty laborers. In 1919 the Principal Medical Officer of the colony, Thomas Gann, suggested Williamson’s land as a possible resettlement site for Santa Cruz Maya who were seeking refuge in Belize after the Mexican government had regained control of Quintana Roo (MP 2090-1918). In 1923 Williamson did surrender a large tract of land along the Rio Hondo to the government in lieu of taxes and this land subsequently became part of the Ramonal and Sapote Agricultural Reserve. It is uncertain whether this land acquisition had anything to do with any effort by the government to resettle Santa Cruz Maya refugees (MP3102-1923). In 1931 Williamson still owned approximately 13,600 acres in the vicinity of Douglas Village, an area referred to as the Douglas Estate (MP1141-1932). The Corozal District Commissioner’s quarterly report in October 1932 notes that tenant farmers on Williamson’s land near Douglas and San Narciso had planted approximately five hundred and fifty acres of corn (MP2275-1932).

As arable land close to the villages has become scarce due to the twin pressures of population increase and the expansion of sugarcane cultivation into the margin, conflicts over land ownership are increasing. The larger cane farmers in the area have found it necessary to pay to have their land surveyed in order to retain ownership; these land conflicts will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter xx.

The Ten Pound Cay and Ramonal-Sapote agricultural reserves are adjacent to the villages of Patchakan, Yok Chen, San Pedro, and Christo Rey which are today considered the heartland of the traditionalist Yucatec Maya in the Corozal District.
Orange Walk Town grew with the chicle boom and as the number of settlements between the Rio Hondo and the New River increased the need for a road from Corozal to Orange Walk Town became apparent. A 1916 report on the roads of the northern districts noted that a road existed from Corozal to Douglas, but you could not get to Orange Walk from Corozal except by way of San Roman, Rio Hondo. The engineer who filed the report also noted "...that where attention is being given to the roads there is a tendency to establish milpas and develop lands" (MP2512-1916).55

The Northern Highway was eventually routed through San Pablo and San Jose and once it was completed these villages grew rapidly as people living in interior ranchos (e.g. San Pedro and San Francisco), gravitated toward the highway while the population of Douglas remained more or less stable. There are no census data for these villages during this period66; however, the La Immaculada Parish baptismal records do provide some means of comparing the growth rates of these settlements. In the twenty years before the road was built, from 1915 through 1936, parish records show that only twenty-nine children from San Pablo and San Jose were baptized while one hundred and ninety-four children from Douglas were baptized during the same period. When the Northern Highway was finished the ranchos around Douglas were no longer as dependent on the

55 The Burgos family of San Estevan Village, who were merchants and chicle contractors, lobbied the government to have the highway routed from Orange Walk Town through San Estevan to Corozal (MP2797-1924). Nevertheless, the government eventually decided to by-pass San Estevan in favor of the higher ground west of the New River. The road was routed through San Pablo and San Jose and the Burgos family moved their center of operations to Orange Walk.

66 With the rare exception of the 1921 census which gave the populations of some very small ranchos, Belizean censuses do not usually include separate counts for villages of less than two hundred persons.
Rio Hondo for transportation and river traffic declined. By 1945 San Pablo and San Jose’s combined baptismal rate exceeded that of Douglas and this pattern of population growth has continued into the present. In 1991 the population of Douglas was 453 while San Jose had grown to 1,740 persons and San Pablo to 804 (Abstract of Statistics 1993:14).

Economic Activities of the Mayero Population during the Early 20th Century

During the early twentieth century the mayero population of the Orange Walk District and Corozal Districts moved in and out of various occupations as economic need dictated and access to wage labor permitted. The principal sources of cash income were chicle tapping, sales of surplus corn, pigs, and poultry to chicle and timber contractors, and agricultural labor on small estates which manufactured rum and sugar and/or raised mules and oxen used by chicle and mahogany operations.

During 1918 the biggest employers in the Orange Walk District were the Belize Estate and Produce Company’s logging operations headquartered at Hill Bank on the New River, the Heron and Parsons Company which operated a factory that extracted oil from palm nuts near Orange Walk Town, Arthur Williamson who raised livestock at Narrows Rancho on the New River, and the J. W. Price Estates (San Lorenzo and Louisiana Farm) which were primarily engaged in stock rearing (zebu cattle used for hauling mahogany) and rum production (MP-857-1921).

In 1921 the District Magistrate reported that the manufacture of rum in the district was solely in the hands of Mrs. Price and was carried out at Louisiana Farm and San
The Price Estates operated on the basis of the wage advance system and also had a store in Orange Walk Town that extended credit to the estate's laborers. Price had two agents who handled accounts on the estate and at the store. In 1918 and 1919 Miguel Dominguez, Price's Louisiana Farm foreman, filed charges against twelve laborers for failure to fulfill their labor contracts (Orange Walk Court Records). Laborers who did not fulfill their contracts were subject to arrest and/or having their property seized. In 1922 she instructed her agent in San Lorenzo, Mr. Alpuche, as follows concerning a the debt ($31.50 advanced to account of labor) of one of her tenants at San Lorenzo:

"I will accept Sebastian Ku's offer of his milpa and fencing as security until he obtains the money to pay us in the very near future...please advise him I will not wait much longer after the chicle season begins when he assures me that he will get the money to pay up. You may let him have the horse seized yesterday..." (Orange Walk Court Records, 4-6-1922).

Ku's case is interesting because it does not appear to have been that unusual. Mayeros moved back and forth between estate labor, la chicleria, and the milpa, sometimes using the proceeds of one activity to pay-off the debts incurred through another activity.

The Northern Belizean Noveau Elite

Most of the northern Belizean nouveau elite were Yucatecans of Spanish descent who primarily involved in la chicleria (the chicle business). A far smaller number were engaged in stock-raising and sugar production on land which was often leased from

---

67 The combined production of rum at both ranchos in 1921 was 5,691 gallons. The amount of excise duty that Mrs. Price paid during 1920 was a record $13506.35, $3677.35 in excess of the amount received for 1919 (MP-857-21).
British landowners (MP857-1921). The chicle contractors’ labor force was drawn almost entirely from the *mayero* peasant population which, by its very nature, was more difficult to control than the more fully proletarianized Creole timber labor force. The chicle contractors did not own the means of production—neither chicle trees in Peten and Quintana Roo nor the land where the *mayeros* made their *milpa*—and it was impossible to directly supervise the necessarily widely dispersed mobile labor force. Furthermore, there was often intense competition among chicle contractors for labor and resources which prevented them from acting as a unified group. The contractors were obliged to pay large advances and, if possible, try to establish more permanent debt peonage relations with their *chicleros*. This was not without risk, however, since most of the *chicleros* hired in Belize worked outside British jurisdiction in the Peten and Quintana Roo. A majority of court cases from the Orange Walk District during the early twentieth

---

68 The most interesting exception to this rule is the case of General Francisco Mai, leader of the Santa Cruz Maya, who in effect owned all of the trees in the area which he controlled.

69 Most of the historians, anthropologists, and colonial administrators who have written about the use of the wage advance system in Belize to control labor (e.g. Morriss 1888, Jones 1969, Bolland and Shoman 1977, Bolland 1988) are unanimous in their belief that the system favored the employer. It seems, however, that the advance wage system could cut both ways and employers who became overextended through advances could be bankrupted (Cal 1991a, Birdwell-Pheasant 1979). As late as the 1950s it was difficult to hire laborers for chicle and manogany work without making wage advances. In 1952 the Annual Report of the Labor Department noted: “There are no penal provisions in any of the labor laws of British Honduras…save in instances where a workers neglects to proceed to work after having received and advance of unearned wages, or receives the advance through fraud or misrepresentation. These two penal sanctions must be retained until it is possible to abolish the long established but harmful system of wage advances.” In 1954 the Annual Report of the Labor Department noted that the government was experiencing great difficulty overcoming the advance system: “The practice is deep-rooted in the minds of workers and it is difficult to convince them of the disadvantages which they suffer in obtaining wage advances…Although the conditions under which advances may be given are restricted by the Employers and Workers ordinance…illegal advances are not recoverable in court…through collusion between employers and workers evasions are common.”
century involve chicleros being sued by their employers for failure to fulfill their chicle contracts or pay their accounts at their employer's store. As Norman Schwartz notes in his study of chicleros in the Peten "...contractors and chicleros maintained a mix of mutually suspicious, labile patron-client and impersonal economic relations with each other" (1990:7).

Historically the British timber interests did not attempt to establish long-term debt peonage relationships with the Creole timber laborers because this would require that they support the labor force during the off-season. Instead they preferred to hire timber crews from season to season based on anticipated market conditions and then force them to fend for themselves once the season was over. This was also true of the tenants on their northern estates: there was no advantage to be gained from making cash advances to the mayero subsistence farmers.

The chicle boom created a general demand for labor not unlike that which had occurred during the nineteenth century export sugar boom and the landowners' relationship with their peasant tenants changed as the British landlords began to look for ways to capture their tenant's labor. Belize Estate and Produce Company saw its tenants as their own private labor reserve and the policies which the company implemented to

---

70 Schwartz's assertion concerning the impersonal nature of economic relations between chicleros and contractors is born out by the fact that few contractors is served as baptismal compadres for their chicleros. In examining the baptismal records of the villages in my study area during the early twentieth century I found few cases where contractors were named as baptismal compadres.

71 House lots in company villages rented for between three and five dollars per year and milpa rentals varied according to the area planted though the basic one acre milpa permit was five dollars (MP1141/1932:5).
increase the *mayeros'* dependence on wage labor and imported foods focused on limiting their access to land and their ability to make *milpa*. This was essentially the same approach to labor control that had successfully proletarianized the Creole timber labor force. From the peasants' point of view, the critical difference between the British and Belizean capitalists became the expatriates' landownership monopoly. There was certainly never any alliance between the northern Belizean elite and the *mayero* peasants; however, when it came to the question of landownership in northern Belize they did share a common enemy: the Belize Estate and Produce Company.

Most of the chicle tappers worked, either directly or indirectly through subcontractors, for Robert S. Turton. Through his relationship with the Wrigley Company Turton obtained seven out of eight of the chicle concessions granted by the Mexican government during the 1920s (Konrad 1991:166). He also had chicle crews working in the Peten and mahogany crews working in the Peten and Quintana Roo. In 1923 there were fourteen licensed contractors in the Orange Walk District who ran chicle crews.\(^2\) Nine of these contractors had Spanish surnames and four were also listed as owners of general merchandise stores in Orange Walk Town, and Guinea Grass and San Estevan villages (Handbook of British Honduras 1925:445-446). The listings in the commercial directory of the 1925 Handbook of British Honduras clearly show that person's with Spanish surnames controlled most of the business in Orange Walk Town. Of the occupations listed: general merchant, grocer, baker, tailor, barber, carpenter.

---

\(^2\) One of these contractors, Santiago Castillo, became the local agent of the American timber company mentioned above, the Mengel Company, and went on to become one of the wealthiest merchants in the colony.
moccasin maker planters, stock farmers, mechanic, and chicle contractors; the only category in which persons with English surnames predominate is that of carpenters.

Like mahogany workers, chicleros were recruited through the wage advance system. However, unlike the mahogany workers who received a monthly salary, the chicleros worked on a task or piece work basis. Chicleros were paid on the basis of pounds of chicle tapped and the amount they received per pound was based on market demand or what the contractors thought they could get away with paying. The Labor Department Report of 1939 notes that chicleros who signed on in Orange Walk were paid from thirteen to twenty cents per pound, the majority falling in the range of sixteen to eighteen centers per pound, with average monthly earnings of twenty-four to thirty dollars per month. At this time mahogany workers were earning fourteen dollars per month with rations and agricultural laborers were earning eight dollars per month with rations (Report of the Labor Department 1939:14).

At the beginning of the temporada, or season, chicleros were required to sign an agreement stipulating the length and location of employment, the amount of chicle each agreed to tap, weekly delivery rates, the price per pound, how the chiclero's rations were to be paid for, and the amount of advance wages received. Orange Walk court records from 1925 show that chicle contractor Luis Mayo sued eight chicleros for failure to fulfill their chicle contracts: each had received a cash advance of fifty to sixty dollars under the condition that he would tap fifteen hundred pounds of chicle at fifteen cents per pound, in weekly deliveries of one hundred pounds. Another contract signed in 1941 notes that
chicleros employed to work in the Peten for ten months were signed on to tap from 2,000 to 2,500 pounds at the same rate of fifteen cents per pound with advances (usually twenty to twenty-five dollars) and rations of twenty-five cents per day to be deducted from the chiclero’s pay. This is consistent with the 1938 Colonial Report which states that chicleros earn an average of two hundred and forty to three hundred dollars per season for ten months work, the price ranging from fifteen to twenty cents per pound depending on the quality of the gum.

The laws governing labor contracts clearly favored the employer who had the power to arrest a contract laborer and bring him before the District Commissioner for any number of reasons: neglecting or refusing, without reasonable cause to embark for, or to join his work, or to perform his work; injuring or causing injury by negligence or other improper conduct to the stores or property of his employer; being guilty of drunkenness, willful disobedience of orders, insolence, or other misconduct; and, obtaining a second advance of wages in fraud of a previous advance (Chapter 123 of the Labor Laws). Most of the charges filed in the Orange Walk court--those for which records still exist--during the period 1909 through 1930 were filed by chicle contractors/merchants against chicleros who failed to fill their chicle contracts, report to work, or pay their store accounts. Chicleros were also frequently taken to court by milperos who provided them with corn on credit. It was not uncommon for chicleros who were indebted to, and

73 I was given access to the Orange Walk District Courts records days after they were received by the National Archives in Belmopan and before they had been cataloged. The records contain some large gaps and it therefore be impossible to say precisely how many men were employed in chicle extraction or had signed agricultural labor contracts at any given time.
working for one contractor to illegally sell any surplus chicle they produced to other contractors. Orange Walk court records for the year 1940 showed that a number of people were charged with bleeding chicle without licenses and many chicleros and chicle contractors were charged with failing to put their marks on their chicle blocks (to aid smuggling or illicit sales) or failing to maintain records of who their chicle came from.

Those contractors who worked in Peten and Mexico had to acquire permits to take laborers out of the colony and pay duty on food exported to feed their crews (MP2170-1918, MP3279-1919, MP3377-1919). Government attempts to control and tax the flow of rations to chicle and mahogany crews in order to avoid food shortages in Belize resulted in widespread smuggling.

Mayeros and Capitalists in the Chicle Economy

Chicle extraction in Mexico, Guatemala, and Belize was dominated by American corporations (the Adams and Wrigley companies) that hired local contractors: largely native Belizeans of Hispanic and Creole descent. The chicleros (chicle tappers) who worked in Yucatan and Peten came from all over Mexico, however, most of those hired by Belizean contractors were mayeros. The following is an excerpt from a 1921 report sent to the Colonial Secretary by the Orange Walk District Commissioner.

The chicle temporada is from the end of June till February or March. The work is performed by all sorts and conditions of men and of various nationalities...The bulk of the chicle operations are carried out in Mexican and Guatemalan territory and the men engaged as bleeders are out of the colony from seven to eight months of the year.
It has to my mind been the ruin of the milpero...who are of Yuctecan Indian origin. Formerly he was quite content to attend to his milpa which supplied himself and family with practically all their wants. His milpa was on a fairly large scale and there was always a fair surplus of corn for sale and both himself and his family were contented. Now it is quite the reverse, and in numerous cases, owing to the large advances made to them by contractors, which they squander away, and neglect their little holdings, they together with their families are sometimes in a state of comparative want. (MP-857-1921)

Doubtless many chicleros squandered their advances and neglected their milpa; however, chicleros earned more money than milperos, and if the chiclero had a son or father who made milpa for the family then the chiclero was that much better off than the full-time milpero. The chicle boom also provided the peasants with a market for their corn and pigs. The mayeros were not only integrated into the chicle economy as chicleros, but also as producers of food stuffs--and sometimes both simultaneously.

The “official ration” of a mahogany worker was four pounds of pork per week and seven quarts of wheat flour: flour imported by Belize City merchants and taxed by the government (MP2170-1918). The central staple in the chicleros’ diet was corn: grown locally by milperos and untaxed. As chicle exports increased, the demand for corn increased and factors which effected the seasonal availability and price of corn (not the least of which was smuggling) became of great concern; not only to the chicle contractors, but to colonial administrators as well. In his 1921 Annual Report the Orange

---

74 MP2170-18 8-8-18 R.S. Turton requesting permission to export provisions from Belize to Payo Obispo to Botes and Esperanza for the use of his mahogany gangs: 20 barrels flour, 20 tins (50lb) lard, 5 barrels mess pork, 5 barrels brown sugar, 5 bags beans
Walk District Commissioner notes “There was a great scarcity of maize throughout the year and prices were high. It was not until the months of September and October, when crops were harvested, that prices went down from $8 per cargo (approximately sixty quarts or one hundred pounds) to $3 at which it remained till the close of the year” (MP-857-1921).

Food shortages in Belize were exacerbated by the outbreak of World War I when food exports from Britain to Belize were curtailed to aid the war effort (MP4070-1917). In 1918 the Chairman of the Food Control Committee also noted that the high price and scarcity of com in Belize City ($1.75 per cargo or sixty quarts) was brought on by Belize Estate and Produce Company’s newly instituted policy of prohibiting pigs from running loose in villages on company lands.

The fact of the matter is that owing to the high price of lard, pork, and poultry, the corn is required for feeding purposes. This is especially so with regards to San Estevan and Guinea Grass where swine have recently been prohibited from being at large. I do not think that Belize should rely on this district for corn in any quantity except between from the middle of November to the middle of March. The milperos are not anxious to sell. I presume they are holding back for usual higher prices of August and September. I understand there is still plenty of corn in the Corozal district especially at Douglas, San Narciso, and Santa Elena. (MP2065-1918, 6-26-18).

The milperos’ ostensible reluctance to sell their corn could have been motivated either by their desire to play the corn market or by the additional livestock feeding burden the BEPC’s new pig policy had imposed on them. The average subsistence requirements of a family of five (two adults and three small children) in Yucatan is about 2,500 pounds
of corn per year (Redfield 1950, Villa 1945, Steggerda 1941). A study conducted in 1953 estimated that it takes 1,000 pounds of corn to feed a pig for nine months achieving a final weight of seventy-five to one hundred pounds (MP47-1953). Clearly it was much more economical for the milpero to allow his pigs to forage for food in and around the village and make his milpa farther away than it was to pen his pigs and feed them corn.

The Orange Walk court records do contain a fair number of lawsuits initiated by milperos against livestock owners, both other milperos and rancheros, for damages to their milpa and there are several cases of milperos accused wounding or killing livestock. I would venture to say, however, that these cases arose primarily from the landlords’ attempts to restrict milpa farming areas close to the villages.

In the above-mentioned Food Control Committee document the Chairman also noted that some small quantities of corn were probably being smuggled across the Rio Hondo and higher prices were being paid to farmers than those that had been set by the government. I believe he seriously understated both the extent of smuggling of foodstuffs across the Rio Hondo and the price gouging that was occurring. In 1919 the government issued an order that no sugar could be exported from the colony without the permission of the Governor or the Collector of Customs and "vigorous steps must be taken by customs and excise officers to prevent illicit export of corn and sugar" (MP1955-1919 Gazette Notice 427 4).

In 1918 Francisco Bautista was accused of over-charging the police department for corn. In his defense he claimed that he had been sustaining losses and was merely charging the price fixed by the Food Control Board (MP676-1918).
contractors had to apply for permission to export food from Belize for use by their workers and pay export duty on locally grown corn thereby increasing the costs of their operations.

In February of 1920 the Orange Walk District Commissioner requested that a customs boat be sent at once to patrol Hondo for three weeks because large quantities of corn were being smuggled out of Belize through Water Bank and several other locations (MP600-1920, 21 February 1920 From Acting District Commissioner Orange Walk translation of coded telegram received from OW District Commissioner). According to the Orange Walk courts records, government patrols netted one chicle contractor, Maximiliano Rosado of San Roman, Rio Hondo attempting to illegally export twenty-five cargos (roughly 2500 pounds) of corn valued at fifty dollars.

In 1920 the colonial government installed Belize's first personal income tax. Prior to this time the expatriate dominated legislature derived most of its revenue from duties on imports and exports--preferring that to being taxed on the basis of their immense landholdings. The new income tax hit hardest at the Belize-born timber and chicle contractors who owned very little land (compared to the British interests) and who bitterly resented seeing their taxes increase while the land tax remained the same. Perhaps none resented it more than Robert Turton. The following correspondence between the Internal Revenue Officer and the Colonial Treasurer in May of 1922 concerns a confrontation between revenue officer Metzgen and Turton over his income

\footnote{Turton filed a number of appeals concerning the tax assessments levied against him (MP612-22, MP751-22, MP2237-23, MP2580-23.)}
tax assessment. This document is also interesting in that it demonstrates the gulf which existed between the British civil servants and the Belizean-born population. He also talks at length about smuggling on the Rio Hondo and Turton’s alleged involvement.

1. I beg to report for the confidential information of his excellency the governor a most unpleasant experience I had yesterday at 5:15 PM on my way back to my office.

2. I met Mr. Turton with one of his clerks...at the foot of the bridge. He came up to me and asked if I knew that the people of the northern districts had it in for me. I told him “No,” and asked why should they. He said because I assessed them to income tax when they should not have been assessed; and that, moreover, by my having lived among them I was able to dig up all sorts of information regarding their business. He then said that income tax was high-handed robbery by the government, that the income tax assessment committee consisted of rogues and thieves; that men like he were sweating to pay such little piss ants and shits like me $150 a month (excuse me for repeating these filthy words); that he would see me lose my job within twelve months, because I went around and dug up all sorts of information about people for the government, and then compel them to pay income tax; that I went a bit too far in the execution of my duties, and like others, I would get my ass kicked out. I told him that he was getting personal. He then said “I don’t mean you, I mean the Assessment Committee—the Government”. He was speaking very loudly and using filthy language, evidently to attract a crowd and put me at public ridicule Mr. Perdomo then came out on his veranda and said “That’s right; the same thing will happen to him that happened to Tom Anderson.” This man Perdomo...made a deliberate attempt to defraud the income tax, and in consequence a supplementary assessment was levied on him. Mr. Perdomo recently told me...that he hated me because I made him pay $16 too much income tax. Mr. Turton then started to accuse me and the assessment committee of robbing one Amado Madera [licensed chicle contractor in Orange Walk]. He wanted me to tell him how Madera’s assessment was arrived at (Madera owes him several thousand dollars). I told him I would discuss no man’s assessment with him. I finally told him that I knew he hated income tax...but that...the best minds in the world recognized it as one of the most equitable forms of taxation—according to ability to pay. He said “equitable me ass; damned robbery; damned thieves.” I then said “Look here, Mr. Turton, please understand that you can’t intimidate me”. He got furious, and as a crowd began to gather I walked off.
3. I would like to point out that this is the second time in my official career, that I have been accosted by Mr. Turton. Some years ago at Orange Walk he told me that I ran too much risks and if I were not careful one of these days I would be shot while on the Hondo; that the government was not going to thank me for what I was doing; and that I was getting people against me. I then told him I was not looking for any thanks from the government; I was working for my salary and that was all the thanks I desired; that if I threw my whole heart into my work I could not help it—it was part of my nature. He said I was a damned fool. This incident happened on board the “Star” at the wharf at Orange Walk. At that time it was reported to me that Mr. Turton and certain of his contractors were engaged in the running of contraband on the Hondo and I was constantly on their trail. One of his contractors, the late Santiago Perdomo, had men employed, I was told, to watch and report whenever I left Orange Walk. The result was that I had to steal out of town at the dead of night. Whenever I disappeared from Orange Walk and my destination could be guessed couriers were dispatch and people informed of my presence on the river.

4. Shortly after Mr. Turton lodged his appeal against his assessment to income tax for the year 1920 he met me near Folgarait and Loria’s store and abused to me Mr. Grey-Wilson, a member of the income tax assessment committee, most disgracefully. He then said it was Mr. Grey-Wilson who was causing all the trouble in his assessment. He then said that it was Mr. Grey-Wilson who was causing all the trouble with his assessment. This was only a foretaste of what was in store for me. This attempt of Mr. Turton to frighten income tax officials will be repeated, I am afraid, unless something is done in the law to protect officers in the department (MP240-1922).”

If the revenue officer’s allegations concerning Turton and Perdomo’s involvement in smuggling are true, then they were well equipped for the job. Aside from the Belize Estate and Produce Company and the Melhado family (who dominated rum-running from Belize to the United States during prohibition) Turton had the largest number of vessels registered in the colony. His personal navy included four ships over four tons: a 21 ton

---

77 Metzgen went on to lead the National Party, a pro-colonial political party of the 1950s.
motor schooner, a 25 ton motor-yawl, an 11 ton aux-yawl, a 13 ton sloop, and a 23 ton steamer (Colonial Report 1923:241-245). Santiago Perdomo was also in a uniquely favorable position to engage in smuggling. Prior to his death in July of 1920 he was the Commanding Officer of J Company, the Orange Walk Militia.

I wish to place on record...the splendid and loyal services rendered...from the outbreak of war, and particularly from the inception of Company “J”, by Mr. Perdomo...He did not spare himself financially and otherwise to make the company a success and bring it up to a high state of efficiency. In spite of being a very busy man (he carried on chicle operations on the Mexican territory on a large scale and had two large shops at Orange walk to supervise) he threw his whole heart into the life of the force and went through the ordeal of drilling for over two hours every day for the first three months after the birth of the company...thereby setting a good example to the men of the town generally. With very few exceptions nearly everyone in his employ at Orange Walk, through his influence, was a member of the force. (my emphasis MP 2291-1920)

Perdomo appears elsewhere in the colonial record as a licensed chicle contractor, a labor contractor for R. S. Turton, and as a tenant on BEPC lands at San Lazaro where he had planted forty acres of sugarcane (MP857-1921). His name also appears frequently in the Orange Walk court records as the plaintiff in a large number of cases involving chicleros charged with non-fulfillment of labor contracts and/or unpaid store accounts---in 1917 and in 1919 he appears as the defendant in two assault cases.

At some point Perdomo’s business relationship with Turton appears to have soured. In May of 1920 corn was selling in Orange Walk Town for a record high of $3.50 to $4.00 dollars per cargo. At the District Council Meeting Perdomo accused Turton of provoking a corn shortage by buying up all the local stocks for his chicle crews.
"Mr. Perdomo reported that there existed a scarcity of corn in the town of Orange Walk; that he had been informed that the agents of Mr. R.S. Turton were now buying hundreds of cargoes of corn...with a view to their being exported over to the Mexican side...at Orange Walk it was most difficult to buy corn as the Indians say they prefer to take it to San Antonio [a village on Albion Island, Rio Hondo] where they realize a better price. He [Perdomo] begged that his excellency the governor be requested to take such steps as he might see fit to prevent the export of such corn" (MP147-1920).

Perdomo died two months later—presumably of natural causes—and his wife inherited an estate valued at $20,000.

It seems clear from the preceding discussion that mayeros were at times able to exploit the competition between the chicle entrepreneurs in order to get higher prices for their corn. Shortages of corn, pork, and lard and increases in the prices of these commodities also resulted from the BEPC’s attempts to concentrate milpa production in particular areas so that they could keep tract of rents due from their tenants and restrict pig-raising in company owned villages in order to divert the labor of its tenants into activities that would benefit the company. (The company initially claimed that their motives behind the pig restrictions were purely humanitarian: they were merely trying to stem the spread of hookworm among their tenants.) In May of 1917 the inhabitants of Guinea Grass Village petitioned the Acting Governor of Belize to intervene in their behalf in a dispute with the local agent of the BEPC who demanded that they pen their pigs and confine their milpa to an area close to the village where their activities could be monitored more easily. In their petition to the Governor the villagers maintained that if pigs were not allowed to forage freely in and around the village then they would be
unable to raise pigs because their *milpa* corn yields were unreliable. They refer to the lands which the company's agent has designated for their *milpa* as "pasture lands" which, if these really were pasture, would be unsuitable for *milpa* farming. They also note that they are willing to comply with the Governor's memorandum urging increased agricultural production for domestic consumption and that they do not wish to be a burden on the Colony.

Sir...as you will see we are given to agriculture and the raising of pigs etc. on lands belonging to the Belize Est. & Pro. Co. Ltd., and which we have to pay rents both for lots in the Village and any lands so cultivated in the forest. We cannot always depend on our corn crop as a means of support for ourselves and family as that often fails when our pigs assist us greatly in procuring food and clothing and also to pay our rents to the Estate and we are now notified to put up our pigs from going at large in the village in a time when our corn and other feed for the animals is exhausted. We beg to mention that American pork cannot be had in our village owing to the raise in prices and we are quite willing to adhere to the Governors Memorandum of the food production for Local Consumption if we are permitted to raise our animals and work our *milpa* as the shutting of the pigs will only tend to starve them...

We further beg to mention the fact that lands around the border of the village has been promised to us to cultivate. We have been told so by the Agent but we presume Mr. Grabham has not seen the lands so appointed as there are valuable trees grown on the same and by clearing the land the trees must either be damage or entirely destroyed, the working of these pasture lands around the village would utterly debar us from letting our pigs and other animals in the village at large...we can easily keep on with our milpas and what land promised us for cultivation could easily be adjoined thereby giving distance from the village so as not to cause annoyance to any one with our animals...we are willing to comply with request for planting and not be a burden to the Colony and in so doing we shall be able to assist others meanwhile trusting our grievance to be considered and further help arrived at, we anxiously await His Excellency's help and answer we therefore remain your obedient Servants and etc. (MP1684-1917).
The Guinea Grass villagers’ complaint against the BEPC was not an isolated incident: similar protests were lodged during the same period by BEPC tenants in San Roman, Yo Creek, San Felipe, and San Estevan. In 1936 the BEPC took all the villagers in San Roman to court for failure to pay their rent. I could find no record of the outcome of that case; however, in 1951 a similar case developed in Yo Creek. At first the manager refused to issue residents milpa permits unless their back rents, $3.50 per year, were paid and even considered evicting those tenants who had no recoverable property. Ultimately the company decided to issue milpa permits for the usual five dollars and take no immediate action concerning arrears (MP532-1951)

The BEPC local manager’s response to Guinea Grass petition reveals some of the company’s real motives underlying the restrictions against loose pigs in company-owned villages.

As regards the Petition of the Inhabitants of Guinea Grass, I would inform His Excellency that I recently visited Guinea Grass and carefully went into the very matter referred to in the Petition and found
(1) That the Pigs are an intolerable nuisance in the village and are bitterly complained of by a large number of the inhabitants, and it is comparatively few of them, who through idleness, wish to have the pigs roaming loose in the village.
(2) That they make it impossible for the Inhabitants to cultivate small gardens round their houses.
(3) That, in wet weather especially, they make the village filthy and unsanitary...
(4) That I explained to the Inhabitants they would get far more value from their pigs by keeping them penned, and the only possible reason they have for objecting to penning is that they are far too idle to collect food for them.
(5) The cultivation of Milpas in the vicinity of the village has been seriously interfered with owning to the destructions done by the pigs, and consequently milpas have to be made miles away. This results in serious damage to the Company’s property, as valuable trees are destroyed and our
Agent is unable to keep the check that is necessary, if the milpas were cultivated as they should be in the vicinity of the village.

(6) When arranging for the penning of the pigs, I granted free of rent a most suitable site of land, and any inhabitant was allowed to enclose a portion of it for the growing of plantains, etc. In addition I gave them free of all cost wire to fence in the whole plot. All that had to do was to put it up themselves.

(7) I have further offered them 200 acres of cleared land free of rent for two years and to assist them in the purchase of agricultural tools to the extent of $500.

Every man woman and child in the village can, if they choose, earn good wages collecting Cohune Nuts for the Factory now being erected there by Messrs. Parsons & Heron, but the majority are unfortunately too idle to undertake any kind of work (MP1684-1917, May 26, 1917).

It is not necessary to read between the lines of the manager’s reply to see that there are several motives underlying the pig restrictions. Mr. Grabham maintains that the sole reason the villagers don’t want to pen their pigs is because they are “far too idle to collect food for them” and for the same reason they are unwilling to seek wage labor collecting cohune nuts for the BEPC’s concessionaire, Parsons and Heron. He also states that the villagers are making milpa at some distance from the village to avoid pig depredations and his agent is unable “to keep the check that is necessary.” I interpret this to mean that it is difficult to assess the amount of milpa rent his tenants should be paying, nor is it possible to fine villagers for the destruction of timber. The concessions that he states that he is willing to make to his tenants: rent-free land for pig-raising, free fencing, and five hundred dollars worth of agricultural tools; imply that he is trying to get them to give up milpa for more settled, intensive farming.

The colonial administration’s response to this situation is also interesting. The Guinea Grass villagers’ petition was reviewed in a District Board meeting held on May
20. 1920 and after lengthy discussion the board decided that due to the high price ($3.50 per cargo) and scarcity of corn the prohibition on loose pigs should be lifted. (MP147-1920). In November of 1920 in a letter to the Colonial Secretary the General Manager of the BEPC actually reversed company policy concerning pig-raising and questioned the value of any ordinance prohibiting loose pigs. Such an ordinance would cause a loss of rent and taxes, an increase in the price of pork and corn, and force the Indians to leave the colony.

With the Indian race all over the colony—and like the Irish peasantry, the pig is part of the family, and the Indians look upon the raising of pigs as a sort of revenue for the payment of their rents and taxes, quite apart from the matter of food on feast days.

It seems to me, that if the Company wish to place restrictions on their tenants, it is in their power to do so, without the assistance of the Government, and I do not recommend that this law be applied, but if it is, then let it be throughout the whole colony...there would then be I am afraid, a great exodus amongst the Indians, this would then effect the Revenue in the matter of rents and taxes, and the public generally, in the matter of pork supplies, and the cost of living (MP3417-1920, 20 November 1920, From Manager the Belize Estate and Produce Co., Ltd. to the Colonial Secretary).

In a related document the Corozal District Commissioner and the Principal Medical Officer note that any ordinance restricting pigs would be difficult to enforce and would alienate the villagers who do understand the economic motives underlying such an ordinance. Banning loose pigs will result in higher corn prices and more corn shortages and had already caused some mayeros to leave the colony.
As far as the villagers themselves are concerned it may be well to point out that, however wrongly so, they regard the restriction order [in Yo Creek and San Roman] as but a smokescreen for the purpose of accommodating their landlords and to compel them to divert their activities into other channels in the interests of their landlords and their concessionaires.

...not allowing these pigs loose is not going to stimulate the people in extending their milpas, rather the reverse. When I passed in May corn was selling at San Estevan, on New River, at $4 per cargo [loose pigs were prohibited in San Estevan]. As a matter of fact the restriction as to pigs far from stimulating milpa planting has caused the exodus of many men and their families, created an unsettled and resentful feeling in those remaining, and produced scarceness and a heavy rise in the price of pork and lard. I have had frequent complaints, from those best situated to feel and ascertain the effect of any changes in the villages, that the restrictions in question and those relating to the sale of corn had disheartened the people, reduced their means, and driven many of them away, some out of the colony (MP 992-1920).

The Santa Cruz Maya Enter the Chicle Economy

At the same time that the Belize Estate and Produce Company's restrictions on their tenants were threatening to drive the *mayeros* out of the colony, the Mexican government's attempts to reclaim the state of Quintana Roo from the Santa Cruz were increasing Maya immigration to Belize. The major rebel strongholds of Quintana Roo at Chan Santa Cruz, Bacalar, and Tulum were occupied by Mexican forces under the command of General Ignacio Bravo in 1901. Nonetheless, systematic, organized resistance to Mexican incursions into rebel-held territory continued until 1919 when Francisco Mai, the most powerful *Cruzob* military and political leader, was coopted by the Mexican government.

In March of 1919 General Mai departed for Mexico City with General Solis, the Commandant of the Mexican forces at Payo Obispo, to meet with President Carranza.
When Mai did not return for several weeks the *Cruzob* became concerned that he was being held captive by the Mexicans. In April of 1919 the Acting District Commissioner of Corozal wrote that the District Commissioner at Consejo received word that

...the Indians had sent in notice to the Mexican government that unless their general was sent back to them in fifteen days they would kill everyone in sight. Understand also from another source that on Friday or Saturday the Indians had seized Vigia and that a Mexican boat had put in there and not been allowed to land (J. Maccall, Ag. D.C. MP 2090-1918, 4-8-19).

The Santa Cruz' fear for the safety and well-being of their commander proved to be unfounded. The following is an excerpt from a communiqué sent from the Principle Medical Officer, Thomas Gann, to the Colonial Secretary in February of 1919.

1) Chief Mai...has been made an officer [general] in the Mexican army and wears the Mexican uniform; he has also married a Mexican wife, and received a present of $10,000 from the government.

2) The other Indians declare that he is a traitor to his country and express their intention of finishing him as soon as an opportunity arises.

3) Chief Balaam has returned to Quintana Roo, but a good many of his Indians still remain in Corozal, and some of them have hired out to rancheros and coconut planters to do cleaning at fifty cents per mecate.

4) The Indians have made every effort to procure ammunition in Corozal and I understand, in one case at least, not without success though it should be remembered that they need powder and shot more urgently in procuring game than for use against other branches of their tribe or against the Mexicans (MP 1122-1919).

In additions to the numerous other emoluments he received from President Carranza, General Mai was also granted a chicle concession making him the Santa Cruz region’s largest chicle contractor and producer, taking on, as Herman Konrad puts it, “some of the
less-savory aspects of the previous entrepreneurial occupant of Santa Cruz, General Ignacio Bravo” (1991:165).

Mai’s conversion/co-optation accomplished what two decades of Mexican federal efforts hadn’t: reintegration of Cruzob into national economic and political sphere. Knowing better than to tax his own people, Mai contented himself with the rent paid by various concessionaires. Robert Turton, the Wrigley Company’s agent in Belize, controlled seven of the eight chicle concessions granted by the Mexican government and during the 1920s and he was Mai’s biggest customer (Konrad 1991:166). In 1925 Mai earned 40,000 pesos, all his personal property, plus income generated from his rum monopoly and other sidelines. Mai’s example stimulated imitation and factionalism once again divided the Cruzob as Mai’s own nominal subordinates, Cituk of X-Maben and Sulub of Dzula, followed suit “causing friction, double taxation, and raids” (Villa Rojas 1945:33. Reed 1964:253).

The Spenser-Mariscal Treaty had banned the sale of weapons to the Maya but this did not stop them from obtaining arms from Belizean merchants. In 1919 the Mexico City newspaper Excelsior carried an article based on statements furnished by two Mexican engineers working in Quintana Roo who stated that the Maya were obtaining arms and ammunition from merchants in Belize in exchange for cabinet woods and hides and an official inquiry was mounted in response to these allegations. In December of

---

78 In 1928 General Mai bought a forty-eight ton boat, the San Jose, to carry out legal and illegal commerce in chicle. That same year Mexican authorities seized his boat in route to Belize with twenty-six tons of illegal chicle. Mai’s boat was decommissioned by authorities not returned to owner until 1930 after Mai had been stripped of his chicle concession (Chenaut 1989:18).
1919 the Assistant Superintendent of Police in Corozal, J. Maccall, stated that in April the Maya leader General Balam had come to Corozal with eighty of his men seeking thirty caliber ammunition (30-30, an American caliber) but was told that none existed in the colony (MP3302-1919). The ban on the sale firearms and ammunition to the Maya did not, however, extend to the sale of shotguns to General Mai. In 1923 Vicente Rendon Quijano, the Mexican Consul in Belize wrote to the Colonial Secretary complaining that “on or about the 15th of January last, a chief of the Maya Indians by name of Mai, purchased from the merchants in Corozal, eleven shotguns and about five hundred cartridges.” These weapons were found in his baggage in a customs search at Payo Obispo and the consul wanted to know if these sales to Indians are not restricted. (Apparently the consul was unaware that Mai was now a General in the Mexican Army.) The colonial secretary responded that there were no restrictions concerning the sale of shotguns to the Maya (MP506-1923).

No one had a monopoly on force in the frontier regions of Belize, Guatemala and Mexico and chicle raiding was not exclusively a Santa Cruz Maya activity. In 1916 it was reported chicle stolen from colony merchants by raiders was possibly being used by Mexican revolutionaries to purchase arms and Guatemalan government officials were implicated in the raiding.

...the Weir concession worked by persons from this colony is nearly coextensive with area occupied by the raiders...the Guatemalan officials deliberately leave that territory open to the raiders and the future concessionaires of the Guatemalan government...Mr. Carlos Perez and the Compania Chiclera and Maderera act as agents for the raiders in the disposal of their stolen chicle. Perez approached W. C. Melhado of this colony and proposed that he pay twenty cents per pound to Trinidad Flores.
for chicle stolen from one of his contractors, W. Encalada near Ycaiche on the northeastern frontier of the Peten district (MP2487-1916).

Chicle raiding was not solely confined to the forest nor was anyone immune. In October of 1919 Robert Turton sent British colonial officials an urgent telegram reporting that "Honduran revolutionaries" had absconded with the Mexican sloop Aire Libre which was transporting five tons of his chicle and he requested that the boat be seized (MP3531-1910-20-19). Large-scale chicle raiding, smuggling, and chicle thefts continued well into the 1930s.79

General Mai's co-optation by the Mexican government in 1919 caused yet another split within the Santa Cruz and occasioned another round of emigration to Belize by those Maya who either wished to continue the war with Mexico or those who simply wanted to be left alone and feared unprovoked attacks by Mexican troops (Villa Rojas 1945:33).80

"I was under the impression that Mai, before his departure for Mexico, enjoyed a sort of loose suzerainty over the whole tribe, but his defection to the Mexican cause has no doubt

---

79 MP719-30, April 8, 1930, From the OW District Commissioner to the Colonial Secretary. "Mr. Enriquez of Blue Creek has 100,000 lbs of chicle in the bush waiting to be concentrated. Must be done in one place due to raiders. MP2247-32, 10-4-32 British Minister, Mexico: Mexicans requesting permission to enter BH territory near Blue Creek stop smuggling of chicle in that area the acting colonial secretary is unwilling to assist because Mexicans refuse to extradite 3 'bandits who robbed and attacked a shopkeeper named Rowlands.

80 MP 1997-19 August 21, 1919 From the acting Colonial Secretary Re: Deputation of Indians from Tulum, Quintana Roo to HE the Governor, I received a deputation consisting of Don Pablo Camal, an Indian General from Tulum in Quintana Roo, and his captain Ceveriano Put this morning. ...they are visiting the colony and want to be able to come to the colony if attacked by the Mexicans... ...they have twenty-five followers ..."the Mexican government has said it will assist them but apparently they do not trust them" ...these men have nothing to do with General Mai or Balam who are eight days journey from them over land.
abolished this, and probably his mantle has fallen on Baalam” (MP2090-1918, Gann 4-4-19). In 1918 and 1919 at least three different rebel leaders representing separate factions (Balam, Patt, and Camal) came to Belize seeking weapons and/or asylum.

Mr. Cornelio Lizarraga came to this office and said he had received a message from Santa Cruz that a deputation of about fifty were to come this month or next as they want an English flag and either want the British to protect them over there or else to allow them to settle on the British side if given land...number about three thousand (J. Maccall to the Colonial Secretary, March 10, 1919 MP2090-1918)

In June of 1919 a deputation of thirty-four Indians under the leadership of General Jose Maria Patt met with the District commissioner of Corozal.

They told me that their chief Apolinario Lima had died, that they were without a leader and wished to know if the British government would have them under the British Flag as they were tired of their treatment at the hands of the Mexicans. They also asked for arms to protect themselves and said if arms were supplied then they would be ready to help the British when...required. They said other generals also wished to come under British Flag. I told them arms could not be allowed out of the colony at the present time and that the British treaty with Mexico prohibited the British from taking them under the flag. In spite of what I told them they still said they would like their application brought to H.E.’s notice. These people come from, Xate, Piche Kah, Tzula Kah, Chen Tzul and Ginyaxche. The general is badly crippled with rheumatism and I sent him into hospital. The rest are going back in a few days. They have brought hammocks, hides, etc. for sale. You may remember that they made a similar application last year (MP 2090-1918, From DC Corozal NO.175-18 Undated)

In response to Patt’s inquiry the Colonial Secretary noted that the District Commissioner had acted “correctly and diplomatically”.

The actions of these Indians proves their friendliness to this government. I should like the Principal Medical Officer to review their papers. These Indians are under the suzerainty of a friendly power, Mexico, and we should avoid any appearance of trying to sway their allegiance to Mexico
while at the same time observing a friendly and amiable attitude toward them. (MP2090-1918:6-28-18)

The Principal Medical Officer, Thomas Gann, was strongly in favor of encouraging the Santa Cruz to settle in Belize and argued that they would be an economic asset to the colony.

The Sta. Cruz make excellent plantation hands, and though having their own milpas to look after, they would not probably often sign on a labourers, some of them would be available most of the time for work on the plantations when they are not engaged in their own agricultural pursuits. The older men have been used to a somewhat semi-nomadic lifestyle for a number of years, and might not at first settle down to steady work, except on their own milpas, but the rising generation would soon discover that the best way to get extra money for clothes, guns, powder, tools, cooking utensils, and all kinds of luxuries, is to work for it on the plantation. From the first they would in my opinion be a highly acceptable and important asset to whatever part of the colony they settled in, as they produce large quantities of pigs, fowls, eggs, corn, and vegetables, and when let alone and not heedlessly oppressed, they are quiet, well behaved, industrious folk.

Of course it would be impossible to accommodate several thousand of them in any one village, but there are numerous sites along the Hondo and New River where reservations could be made for a few hundred, and it is possible that the Belize Estate and Produce Company, Mr. Williamson, and Mr. Schofield might join the government in accommodating such desirable tenants.

I understand that Chief Balam, if he cannot obtain arms to fight the Mexicans, wishes to leave their territory, and I must say I cannot see that any harm could possibly be done through H. E. granting him an interview, and hearing his views on the Indians settling in this colony, nor do I see how the Mexicans could possibly take exception to such a procedure as the Indians are free agents in leaving and returning to Mexico. (19 2090-18 4-4-19)

Gann was supported in his sympathetic view of the Maya by the Commanding Officer of the British Honduras Territorial Force who wrote to the Colonial Secretary in August of
1918: "Those people by my knowledge have been trying for the last twenty years to get under the flag and small blame to them" (MP2090-1918).

Given the possible diplomatic repercussions of any British attempt to lure the Maya out of Quintana Roo and into Belize it is not surprising that the colonial record is mute concerning any plans to effect a large scale resettlement of Santa Cruz Maya in Belize. The only evidence of a dramatic population increase during this time period occurred in the Cayo and Toledo districts where the population increased by 27.9 and 24.3 percent respectively. Dunk noted "The increase in Cayo population is assigned entirely to the influx of persons from Peten who came into the colony during the intercensal period to take up permanent residence in that district" (1922:12). Whether these immigrants were from Quintana Roo or elsewhere is unknown: in reality neither Belize nor Mexico had much control over, or knowledge of, who crossed their borders. As late as 1947 Annual Report of the Labor Department noted that

A voluntary migration of workers from villages...near our Northern and Western borders into...Mexico and Guatemala for...employment in the chicle or mahogany industries has existed for many years but there are no records showing the extent of this movement nor are there any means of obtaining statistics...(1947:10).

81 "The Table shows a large percentage if increase amongst the males during the earlier years of life and amongst females between the ages 5-10 no less an increase than 21.22...The age from 25-30 indicates a decrease not only in the proportion of the sexes but also in the total number of those ages enumerated at the recent Census, compared with the number enumerated at the Census of 1911. It is difficult to account for this increase except on the grounds perhaps that young men have left the colony to try their fortunes abroad. There is no apparent explanation to offer for the extraordinary increases of the ages between 75 and 80 for males and 80-85 for females or of the ages exceeding 90 years amongst the females (Dunk 1922:21)."
The Decline of Timber Exports and the Resurrection of the Sugar Industry

If the world had any ends British Honduras would certainly be one of them. It is not on the way from anywhere to anywhere else. It has no strategic value. It is all but uninhabited, and when Prohibition is abolished, the last of its profitable enterprises—the re-export of alcohol by rumrunners, who use Belize as their base of operation—will have gone the way of its commerce in logwood, mahogany, and chicle. Why then do we bother to keep this strange little fragment of the Empire (Auldous Huxley 1934:21).

During the 1920s forest products accounted for about eighty-five percent of Belize’s exports by value and the Great Depression hit the timber industries hard: chicle exports declined from over four million pounds in 1930 to just over one million pounds in 1932 and mahogany exports declined from ten million board feet in 1930 to only six hundred thousand in 1932 (Ashcroft 1973, Bolland 1988:169). Most effected were the Creole mahogany workers and the residents of Belize City whose problems were compounded by a hurricane in 1931 that killed one thousand people and destroyed three-quarters of the buildings in the city. The economic hardships created by the depression spawned Belize’s first organized labor movement which, though originating in Belize City, would eventually spread to the northern districts in the 1950s with the expansion of Belize export sugar industry.82

The hardships suffered by the rural population of the northern district’s seem to have been less acute than those of the urban poor because the mayeros were able, once

---

82 In 1934 the nascent labor movement was taken over by Antonio Soberanis, a barber who had traveled in Central America and the U.S.A. Soberanis was born in the Orange Walk District, San Antonio, Rio Hondo in 1897 and was the son of a Yucatecan immigrant who came to Belize in 1894 (Bolland 1988:186).
again, to revert to subsistence farming. In his annual report for 1932 the Acting District Commissioner of Orange Walk reported that the price of corn had dropped from $2.50 per cargo during the early part of the year to $0.75 at year's end. By the end of 1933 both of Orange Walk’s sugar ranchos had shut-down, chicle and mahogany extraction were at a standstill, and cash was in short supply.

...due principally to a lack of work for some, and scarcity of money in circulation...a good deal of bartering is now done in the matter of business, also for payment of rents due to the various landlords for milpas, and lots in town. Much the same goes on the various out-stations and villages... although the Worldwide economic depression still prevails, and effects the inhabitants of this district, they do not seem to worry much about it, in fact, it is doubtful whether many grasp the general situation, all they are aware of is they cannot get work, and cannot understand why. In the past, the majority have relied too much upon the chicle industry and work in their line at the various mahogany banks, neglecting their plantations (MP305-1932, January 31, 1932).

In reality it did not take long for the mayeros of northern Belize to grasp the economic implications of their situation. In his Quarterly Report of April 1933 the Orange Walk District Commissioner noted that the Belize Estate and Produce Company was beginning to employ people at Hill Bank and Sierra de Agua; however, the chicle industry was still doing nothing and all the chicleros had gone to work on their milpas (MP817-1933. 7 April, 1933). The Corozal District Commissioner reported in October of 1932 that no chicle contracts had been signed in the district since November of 1931, no mahogany gangs were working, sugar and copra (dried coconut) were the only active industries, and corn was selling at $0.60-0.55 per cargo. "Around San Narciso alone on Mr. Williamson's lands 2,225 mecales have been planted out and in the Douglas area about
twice that amount has been planted out...almost everyone has been planting corn to provide food for themselves" (MP2275-1932, October 14, 1932).

The depression also had severe political and economic consequences on the Mexican side of the Rio Hondo and brought to an end General Mai’s control over chicle extraction in Quintana Roo. In 1929 chicle production peaked and a quintal (bale) of cured chicle sold for fifty pesos. Then came the crash and in 1930 a bale sold for 30 pesos and in 1932 for 17.5 pesos. The Santa Cruz Maya were outraged. Not understanding economic theory but remembering the whites’ history of betrayal, they stopped collecting and production was cut in half and then in half again. In August of 1929 the Mexican Secretary of War feared a Cruzob uprising and ordered the Thirty-Sixth Federal Battalion to Quintana Roo. It was broken up into small detachments and sent to Payo Obispo, Santa Cruz, Puerto Morelos, and Vigia Chico. In 1933 “The concessions to General Mai were ended, his taxing was stopped, and law order, and graft were to be administered by white politicians and enforced by white soldiers” (Reed 1964:253).

The depression’s effects on Belize’s forest exports markets once again spawned government concern over the need to develop the colony’s agricultural potential. In

---

83 In 1930 the District Commissioner in Corozal reported to the Colonial Secretary that there was some trouble over the chicle bled on the Mexican side of the Rio Hondo. A Company named CIA Mexicana Productores de Chicle has been formed with the representative for Quintana Roo Mr. Celso Perez Sandi, former Vice Consul at Corozal, and backed by Lorenzo Cue, a Mexican Financier of Merida...the plan being to compete against the American combine and raise prices. Mr. R.S.Turton has a concession extending along the Hondo, and his chicle has been seized and is detained by the local government in Payo Obispo, the company offering to sell him his own chicle, and there is rumor that the governor offered to help him get his chicle if he paid him $10,000 (MP1958-30).
reviewing the Belize Estate and Produce Company's request to exchange land for back taxes the Colonial Secretary noted

The slump in the chicle and mahogany markets has made obvious the fact that those industries alone, except possibly in boom periods, are insufficient to support the increased population of the colony. The population has grown considerably in the last 20 years. Even if the timber industry were in a flourishing condition...there would be employment only for a limited number of persons and a parasitic existence for a further limited few. After that unless land were available for agriculture the surplus population would be forced to drift away to the neighboring republic as it has always done in the past, or starve (MP1141-1932:13)

During the first two decades of the twentieth century bananas, copra, and a small amount of cacao were the only crops exported from Belize in any significant quantities. Much of the banana crop was produced by swidden farmers in the Stann Creek District until 1913 when commercial banana production was wiped out by Panama disease (Romney 1959:119). The Agriculture Department was established in 1928 but very little attention was given to promoting the cultivation of export crops and even less to production for domestic consumption until the depression set in.

Beginning in 1917 four reports concerning the state of Belizean agriculture were submitted to the government with recommendations for possible avenues of development (Brindley 1917, Dunlop 1921, Sampson 1929, Pim 1934). The first three studies proposed little that was new in terms of altering existing colonial agricultural policy: all called for plantation-based export crop production. Pim's 1934 study was a departure from the norm, he identified several specific causes of the general lack of agricultural development in northern Belize--aside from the usual "absence of a suitable labor force"-
-and proposed some original solutions to these problems. The first problem Pim identified was insecurity of land tenure and the lack of unalienated land for smallholder agricultural development in the northern districts: a situation which the government had long recognized and was already taking steps to remedy (Pim 1936:26, MP1141-1932:12). The second major problem was the poor living conditions of the Maya population which Pim attributed to their primitive agricultural techniques, the lack of any organized plan to raise agricultural standards, and their participation in chicle extraction which had drawn them away from agriculture (ibid. 86, 129). Finally he attributed the failure of the sugar industry during the 1890s to “excessive overhead expenses and the high cost of production, lack of transportation facilities, and lack of scientific assistance and control” (ibid. 25).

Unlike his predecessors who considered smallholder production to be inefficient, Pim’s solutions to agricultural underdevelopment were predicated on the creation of a “genuine agricultural population” of Maya and mestizo smallholders living in scattered villages and producing crops for domestic consumption through intensive cultivation. Pim considered the re-establishment of plantation-based sugarcane cultivation and a central sugar refinery to increase export production to be of secondary importance to staple production for domestic consumption. In Pim’s scheme northern Belize, and particularly the Corozal District, was to be the focal point of agricultural extension efforts. To open up the northern districts to Belize City markets Pim urged the completion of the road between Corozal and Orange Walk.
In the economic context of the depression it seems that the government considered agricultural export production to offset the loss of timber exports to be more important than production for domestic consumption. Some of the hard economic lessons of the export sugar market collapse of the 1890s were apparently forgotten. In connection with the state of the sugar industry, the 1925 Handbook of British Honduras noted

The existence of a local market not yet fully met by local production...and also the new Canadian and British preferential tariffs are encouraging factors in a consideration of extending the British Honduras sugar industry. The shortage of labor is the great limiting factor...An important feature is the existence of large areas of suitable land, fertile and relatively cheap. The cane itself grows vigorously...the soil has body and ratooning capacity and rainfall is excellent (1925:177).

The 1917 Brindley report had proposed a central sugar refinery as a means of raising the productivity and efficiency of the sugar industry and in 1931 a commission was appointed by the government to study the feasibility of reviving the sugar industry. In 1933 a proposal was made to establish a central sugar factory, the Corozal Sugar Factory Ltd., to be financed by local investors (Henry Melhado, the Bishop of Belize, several Belize City merchants, and some of the wealthier Corozal sugar growers) with a government loan of BZ$58,000. The plan called for a factory to be built on the Pembroke Hall Estate which was owned by William Schofield. Approximately 9,000 acres of the estate’s lands would be rented or sold to persons interested in growing cane. The factory would produce some 2,500 tons of sugar annually, half of which would be exported and half consumed locally. Until the estate’s lands came into production the factory would be supplied with cane by the six Corozal ranchos and the Gonzalez and Price estates outside
Orange Walk Town. It was also stipulated that up to three thousand tons could be purchased annually, directly from small growers, but this provision did not go into effect until 1944. A second-hand sugar refinery was purchased from the Bacardi Company in Cuba and erected at Libertad in the Corozal District in 1937 at a total cost of BZ$133,000. That same year the International Sugar Agreement went into effect giving Belize an export quota of 1,000 tons.

Small farmers were not allowed to deliver cane directly to the factory in their own names until 1944 when World War II boosted the demand for sugar in Britain and it had become apparent that the rancho-based sugar contractors were incapable of keeping the factory supplied with cane. A 1948 report issued by the Evans Commission suggested that the inability of the *rancho* contractors to keep the Corozal Sugar Factory supplied with cane was the result of a labor shortage.

The local shortage of labor has led to excessive ratooning, which accounts for the low average yield of about 12 tons of cane per acre compared with nearly 40 tons from plant cane. No fertilizers are used and the burning of trash robs the soil of its humus return (Colonial Report 1948:286).

I would suggest that the problem of low yields on the sugar ranchos was due to the fact that contractors were employing sudden techniques for cultivation. The rancheros were indeed plagued by a labor shortage because milperos who could raise cane themselves had no reason to go to work on the ranchos as what were essentially plantation laborers. By 1938 only three of the original ranchos which were to supply the factory with cane still held contracts. Between 1937 and 1944 it appears that most of the cane delivered by
the official contractors was actually grown by small farmers who had chosen to sell their cane to the rancheros at low prices rather than work for them as field laborers (Jones 1969:1932-134).

The decision that the Libertad refinery would initially be supplied by the sugar ranchos (six in Corozal and two in the Orange Walk District) that were providing rum and sugar for the domestic market appears to have been based on past experience: the sugar plantations of the nineteenth century had encountered tremendous difficulties in recruiting a full-time labor force because the plantations’ labor demands were in conflict with the swidden agricultural cycle. Jones has noted that colonial planners inexplicably saw the rancho system as an intermediate evolutionary step between “inefficient” smallholder swidden-based production and efficient, capital-intensive plantation production (1970:125-126). They seem to have been ignorant of the fact that the ranchos also used swidden technology—typically, production was increased by putting more land under cultivation rather than increasing labor or capital inputs to production—and between them the ranchos had only produced 416 tons of sugar in 1935 (King et al. 1992:118).

The most serious flaw in the government’s plans, however, was the absence of any means of insuring that the labor force the ranchos needed would be available during the cane harvest season. It was assumed that the mayeros would seek employment on the sugar ranchos rather than continue to rely primarily on swidden subsistence production despite the absence of any coercive mechanisms—for example, a taxes on food crop production—which might force them to seek wage labor. Furthermore, by allowing them to deliver
cane to the factory either directly or through the contractors, milperos had the opportunity to earn cash income from the sugar industry without having to commit to full-time wage labor on the ranchos: they could still be subsistence farmers while earning a cash income.

Milpa Agriculture and its Impact on the Plantations

In Belize the sugarcane harvest/processing season lasts from December until June, the dry season, and during the rest of the year the factory sits idle. The harvest season is when the demand for labor is at its peak: roughly two-thirds of the total labor input required to produce a crop of sugarcane is expended during the harvest. During the rest of the year the labor requirements of planting and weeding, which are spread out over a longer period of time, are roughly half the labor required for the harvest. In 1970 the Hulse Commission estimated that non-mechanized farmers expended 6.4 hours of labor to produce one ton of cane: 2.3 in cultivation and 4.1 hours harvesting. Whereas the 2.3 hours of cultivation labor (clearing, planting, and weeding) required to produce a ton of cane is spread out over an eight month period, the 4.1 hours of labor required to harvest a ton of cane is expended in one day (Hulse et. al. 1970:76). The population of northern Belize refers to the time between sugar harvests, July through November, as the *temporada muerta* or "dead season."

The sugarcane harvest in Belize also coincides with the most critical period in the *milpa* agricultural cycle: the felling and burning of bush. During the 1930s the *mayeros* of northern Belize once again proved unwilling to abandon the *milpa* for agricultural
wage labor. *Milperos* could not engage in full-time agricultural wage labor during the harvest season without risking the loss of their *milpa*.

Traditionally the long-fallow\textsuperscript{84} *milpa* cycle in Yucatan begins in December or January when farmers select a piece of land for clearing. The following table provides a comparison between the seasonal labor requirements of the *milpa*, plant cane, and ratoon cane.

\textsuperscript{84} Based on a twelve to fifteen year fallow period.
Table 5: Comparison of the seasonal labor requirements of milpa, plant cane, and ratoon cane

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Season</th>
<th>Month</th>
<th>Milpa</th>
<th>New Cane</th>
<th>Ratoon Cane</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>tumba</strong> (fell bush)</td>
<td></td>
<td>harvest</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dry</td>
<td>January</td>
<td>burn bush (corn and climbing beans planted together)</td>
<td></td>
<td>dead season</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>February</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(weeding)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>March</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>April</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wet</td>
<td>May</td>
<td>plant first <strong>cosecha</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td>dead season</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>June</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>July</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>August</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>September</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>October</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>November</td>
<td>plant first <strong>yashkin</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wet</td>
<td>December</td>
<td>(corn and/or bush beans planted separately)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dry</td>
<td>January</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>harvest</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>February</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>March</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>April</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wet</td>
<td>May</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>harvest</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>June</td>
<td>plant second <strong>cosecha</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>July</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>August</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>September</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>October</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>November</td>
<td>plant second <strong>yashkin</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wet</td>
<td>December</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dry</td>
<td>January</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>February</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>March</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>April</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Since Diego de Landa first noted Yucatec Mayan farming practices in the sixteenth century milperos have always preferred, for reasons of safety and sociality, to work the milpa in pairs or larger groups usually made up of patrilineally related males—a practice which today is called working en compania or "in partnership" (Farriss).

---

85 The social and economic implications of working en compania will be discussed later in greater detail as I explain how this practice has been extended to commercial sugarcane cultivation.
Milperos begin the tumba (felling) by clearing vines and small trees with machetes. Large trees are cut with axes and then limbed to compact the brush so that the fire will burn hotter. Farmers whose households are completely economically dependent on swidden for subsistence and cash income have traditionally worked two *milpa* simultaneously: a new *milpa* is cut, burned, and planted every dry season while the past year’s *milpa* is cleared, burned, and replanted thus reducing the workload of clearing by half. Taking an eighty mecate *milpa* as a “typical family farm size”, Lambert and Arnason estimate that a forty mecate (five acres) *milpa* in *monte alto* requires forty man-days to clear using machete and ax based on an eight hour work day. Weeding the previous year’s forty mecate *milpa* for another planting requires approximately fifteen man-hours (1982:13).

The brush is allowed to dry until immediately prior to the beginning of the rainy season in late May or early June. Milperos generally try to wait to burn the *milpa* until the last moment before the rains begin so that the brush is as dry as possible and all the ash will be washed into the soil. The burning begins during the hottest part of the day in order to achieve as hot a fire as possible: the more complete the combustion of the felled trees the more nutrients are released into the soil. A high intensity fire also destroys weed

---

66 The way in which brush is felled and prepared for burning depends on many factors. For instance, a milpero may not want all the brush to burn completely so that some felled trees are left for firewood.

67 The size of *milpa* a household makes depends on many factors: family and livestock consumption needs, markets for surplus production, the labor available, *ad infinitum*. A bare-minimum subsistence *milpa* for two adults, three small children, and little or no livestock is twenty-five mecatés. In 1933 when Villa Rojas conducted his study of the Santa Cruz Maya in X-Cacal his data suggest that, on average, 13.5 mecatés of *milpa* are planted per household member excluding infants (1945:61).
seeds and shallow roots and makes planting much easier by completely burning all the accumulated surface litter and debris left over from clearing. When winds are calm the fire is usually started first in the center of the milpa, and then along the edges so that convection draws the fire toward the center of the plot as it gains intensity. If wind is present then a “backing fire” (a fire set to burn into the wind) is started first on the downwind side of the milpa along the edges of a guarda raya (fire line). The upwind side is then ignited so that the two flaming fronts meet in the middle of the milpa.

If the rains come before the farmer burns then he is in serious trouble; even a short rain can dramatically increase the moisture content of the felled brush, thereby delaying the burn for another week and further increasing the risk of failure. During this critical period all other economic activities are of secondary importance and it is therefore not surprising that during the 1930s swidden farmers were unwilling to engage in wage labor on the sugar ranchos if this might result in the loss of their milpa.

The scheduling conflict between the labor requirements of milpa farming and wage labor on plantations during the sugarcane harvest does not mean, however, that swidden subsistence farming and sugarcane farming are necessarily incompatible. In fact, quite the opposite is true. Farmers using precisely the same swidden technology very easily incorporated sugarcane into their milpa without taking on any risks beyond those which they would normally face if they were planting only a subsistence milpa. Most of the sugarcane fields in existence today started out as milpa and today many farmers still

\*\* The need to construct a fireline is determined largely by wind conditions and the type and dryness of the vegetation of the surrounding forest.\*
practice the *milpa* system when they expand production into forested areas even though land clearing machinery is available. It is far less expensive to establish a cane field using the *milpa* system than it is to pay to for mechanized clearing (E. Zetina per comm. 1993).

After the rains have sufficiently soaked the soil, usually by late June, corn is planted using a heavy stick to make the holes. Sometimes squash and climbing beans are planted together in the same holes with the corn, or they cane be planted a month or more after the corn is established. Jicama, yams, sweet potato, and wide variety of other crops are often intercropped with the corn. The first corn crop is harvested in August or September. After the weeds are cleared in November bush beans and corn are planted to be harvested in February. The *milpa* is weeded in April, burned in May, and the cycle is repeated for another year. After two years of continuous use the *milpa* is fallowed for twelve to fifteen years before it is worked again.

When sugar cane was first brought to northern Belize in the 1850s swidden farmers planted it as part of their *milpa* using the same tools (axe, machete, fire, and planting stick) they used for corn cultivation. In northern Belize all planting is still done by hand. Sugar cane is a grass which propagates asexually and is planted using cuttings from the cane stalk which have at least one *ojó* or bud. A six inch hole is punched into the ground at an angle with a heavy, pointed stick and a section of stalk with an *ojó* is stuck in the hole and chopped off with a machete.
If a farmer plants sugarcane in his milpa it is usually intercropped with corn in alternating rows; however, after the first corn harvest the cane takes over the field and shades-out any food crops growing underneath it. The most important difference between a corn milpa and a sugarcane milpa is, however, that sugarcane ties the farmer to the same piece of land since the ratoon cane can continue to be economically productive for up to twenty years.

In addition to the agricultural scheduling conflicts which kept subsistence farmers from working as full-time wage laborers during the sugarcane harvest there was also the matter of wages. Agricultural laborers received the lowest wages and the least rations of any workers in the colony: in 1938 they received $BZ12 per month with no rations: “At no time had the wages and rations paid to agricultural labor been sufficient to keep a laborer supplied with the quantity and quality of foods to which he and his family were accustomed” (Jones 1969:138). World War II increased demand for Belizean forest products and mahogany workers were making BZ$20 per month with $0.25 per day rations; chicleros were earning on average $240 to $300 per season or roughly $26 to $33 per month (Colonial Report 1938). As can be seen from the following table the wages paid to agricultural labor never approached those paid in forestry.
Table 6: Wages paid to agricultural labor 1932-1938

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Wages</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1932</td>
<td>$6-10 per month with rations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1933</td>
<td>$15 per month with rations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1934</td>
<td>$9 per month with rations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1935</td>
<td>$9 per month with rations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1936</td>
<td>$17 per month no rations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1937</td>
<td>$17 per month no rations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1938</td>
<td>$12 per month no rations</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* $0.65 per day, 6 days per week

Source: Colonial Reports 1932-1938

In order to understand how the rural population became politicized and the direction which the sugar industry of northern Belize has taken as a result it will be useful to briefly examine the political changes which were occurring in the nation as a whole.

The Rise of the Anti-colonial Trade Union Movement

During the 1930s there was growing discontent with British rule and nationalist trade-union movements were gaining strength throughout the Commonwealth Caribbean. Between 1938 and 1939 sixty-five trade unions were formed in the region and legislation was passed setting up departments of labor and providing mechanisms for regulation labor disputes (Shoman 1973: 4). At the same time that the labor movement began in Belize there was the beginning of political activism with an explicitly anti-colonial agenda. Among the Belizean-born elite--most notably Robert Turton--this movement had begun to take shape in the 1920s when native elite began to align themselves with North American commercial interests and contest the British expatriate elite's domination of the Belizean economy. The anti-colonial movement never had an organized, working-class base of support until 1934 when Antonio Soberanis formed the Labour and
Unemployment Association (LUA)—at that time an illegal organization—to protest the condition of the Belize’s working class. As late as the 1948 Legislative Council elections there were no political parties and the majority of the people felt that, given the ineffectual nature of the Legislative Council and the BEPC and other London-based interests’ political power, there was little which could be done to alter the system. Then in 1949 the governor used his “reserve powers” (the power to veto or pass any law he deemed necessary) to devalue the Belizean dollar despite the protests of the Legislative Council and prior assurances from the British government that a devaluation would not occur. The devaluation most affected the colony’s working population and Belize’s emergent anti-colonial movement, the People’s Committee, used devaluation as a springboard to launch its attacks on British rule. By the end of 1950 the People’s Committee has become the People’s United Party (PUP), and the PUP and the General Worker’s Union (see discussion of the BHTWU below) were holding joint public meetings in which they addressed concerns ranging from devaluation and labor legislation to constitutional reform, universal suffrage, and federation. In response to the consolidation of the anti-colonial movement Belize’s second political party, the National Party (NP), was founded by “old empire loyalists” who were supported by the colonial

---

89 The Legislative Council is an outgrowth of the crown colony system of government established in 1871. Historically the council has been made up of nominated, appointed and elected members who, in theory, formulate and enact legislation governing the internal affairs of the colony. In practice legislative and executive power were exercised directly by the British government through its representative, the Governor, who had the power to veto or pass any law he considered necessary. In 1945 the legislative Council consisted of three official or appointed members who were employees of the Crown, four nominated members who held office “at the Crown’s pleasure, and six elected members (Shoman 1987:16-17).
government (Shoman 1987:22). The National Party\(^90\) espoused a gradualist approach toward independence arguing against the "premature extension of political responsibility" on the grounds that much of the population, particularly the Indian racial "minorities", was not sufficiently educated to handle self-government (Shoman 1994:173).

During the year prior to the 1954 general elections the colonial government and the NP attacked the PUP on the grounds that it practiced racial and religious discrimination. Despite the fact that most of the PUP's leadership was Creole, the party's opponents maintained that it was pro-Hispanic and anti-Creole, strongly influenced by anti-British elements of Belize's Roman Catholic clergy, communist, and it was the PUP's intent to turn Belize over to Guatemala. The validity of these criticisms, particularly the PUP's relationship with Guatemala, are still the subject of political controversy and are dredged up for every general election. Certain aspects of these accusations are not entirely without substance though by and large they seem the products of political propagandizing rather than any objective reality. Nevertheless, George Price has always maintained that Belize should align itself economically and politically with its Central American neighbors rather than the British West Indies and this has always irritated the British.\(^91\)

\(^90\) In 1958 the National party became the National Independence Party (NIP) though their position on independence was still much the same.

\(^91\)George Price's father was of English and East Indian descent and his mother was an Escalante from Orange Walk Town: wealthy mestizos engaged in various commercial ventures. Price attended St. John's College, a Jesuit high school in Belize City and studied for the priesthood in Guatemala before becoming R. S. Turton's personal secretary in 1942. The colonial government had long regarded the Jesuits, many of them Irish- and German-Americans, as being hostile toward the British and Price's mentor and
Nigel Bolland succinctly describes the PUP’s ideology as “antisocialist as well as anti-colonial and pro free-enterprise as well as pro-American” (1986:113). After sugar replaced timber as Belize’s primary export earner, and the British transitional Tate and Lyle, Ltd. began investing heavily in the sugar industry during the 1960s, the PUP declared that the road to progress lay in the prescriptions of W.W. Rostow’s *The Stages of Economic Growth—a Non-Communist Manifesto* and the Puerto-Rican Model of development: industrialization by invitation, import substitution, and export expansion.
(Shoman 1987:31). The problem of reconciling the PUP's economic development agenda with its image as a populist, anti-colonial, trade unionist movement and the need to maintain a popular base of support among the rural population of northern Belize will be addressed in greater detail when I discuss the impact of the Sugar Ordinances of 1959 and the PUP land reforms of the 1960s and 1970s.

Despite strong resistance by the government and pro-British elements, in 1954 the increasing pressure for greater self-government resulted in the promulgation of a new constitution which provided for universal adult suffrage and an elected majority in the Legislative Council. In the Legislative Council election that year almost seventy percent of electorate of twenty thousand voted and the PUP won with sixty-six percent of the votes cast and took eight of the nine council seats. The governor was forced to concede that the will of the people was with the PUP and promised his cooperation. The PUP responded that it would cooperate with the government only in so far as that cooperation "will not retard the campaign against the colonial system" (Shoman 1987:23).

The Growth of the Labor Unions

In response to growing labor unrest in Belize during the 1930s legislation was enacted in 1939 which allowed the formation of labor unions. Prior to that time labor unions were prohibited by law and the power of the timber elite was fully supported by the labor legislation which continuously evolved to meet the elite's needs. Belize's first union, the British Honduras Trade Workers Union (BHTWU) was an outgrowth of Soberanis LUA and was first registered in 1943. Shortly thereafter its name was changed to the General
Workers Union (GWU). In that same year the Employers and Workers Ordinance replaced the old labor laws (Labor Ordinances Chapters 104 and 105) which had given employers the legal power to arrest and deliver up for prosecution laborers who had violated the various penal sanctions of the labor laws. The Annual Report of the Labor Department for the year 1944 noted: "Many employers in the mahogany and chicle industries have reported an increase in absenteeism since the repeal of the penal sanctions in the old Labor Laws but no official action has yet been considered necessary." The Employers and Workers Ordinance still retained penal sanctions to prosecute laborers who received advances but failed to show up for work. In 1944 seventy-seven workers in chicle and mahogany were prosecuted for failing to begin work after they received advances or failed to pay the balance of their accounts owed to their employers after their labor contracts expired (Annual Report of the Labor Department 1944).

Initially the GWU drew its membership from the forestry and shipping industries (primarily dock-workers) and was largely Belize City-based. The first mention of a union labor action in the sugar industry appears in the 1949 Annual Report of the Labor Department when the GWU struck the Corozal Sugar Factory over wages. The company refused to refer the matter to arbitration, but a Board of Inquiry ultimately found in favor of the one hundred and ten employees and gave them a retroactive increase in pay.92

Until 1953 the union's activities in the timber industry were severely limited by a wartime

---

92 Surprisingly, I found no mention of this labor action in either Shoman's 1973 account of the rise nationalism and labor unions in Belize, or in Jones' 1970 study of the agricultural history of the Corozal District.
law which forbade strikes in the mahogany industry. Furthermore, the Belize Estate and Produce Company, against whom most of the unions' activities were directed, wielded so much political influence in Belize and in London that the company was able to bar union officials from entering their lumber camps. Nevertheless, by the end of the 1940s the General Workers Union had grown to three thousand members and expanded its membership to include occupations other than timber and shipping, most importantly the laborers working for the Corozal Sugar Factory. In October of 1952 the union led a national strike against government departments and the Belize Estate and Produce Company and by November its membership had grown to over eight thousand (Shoman 1987:23).

Since its inception the GWU had been closely associated with the people's Committee and by 1953 the GWU and George Price's People's United Party were virtually synonymous and shared the same officers. In that year the PUP lodged a protest with the Secretary of State concerning the BEPC's restrictions on union activities. The secretary's response was "...in British trade union law no special right is conferred on union officials to enter private property...They could only do so on the invitation of the proprietor" (cf. Shoman 1973 8).

It was against this back-drop of increasing anti-colonial sentiment and labor activism that the sugar industry of northern Belize began its expansion and was soon to become Belize's primary source of export income.
The Emergence of Small Farmer Sugarcane Cultivation

The colonial planners' misconceptions concerning the presumed efficiency of the *rancho*-based sugar production relative to small farmer production (i.e., the assumption that the *ranchos*' cultivation practices were more modern and intensive than those of the *milperos*) and their mistaken assumption that the *ranchos* would be able to increase production in order to keep the factory continuously supplied with cane were compounded by newly instituted government policies designed to provide *milperos* with access to land. The sugar *ranchos* were, in effect, doomed by the colonial government's creation of agricultural reserves for peasant swidden farming in northern Belize during the 1930s. The corporate sugar plantations of the 1960s were undone by land reform which gave *milperos* access to land to grow sugar cane.

In 1915 the colonial government introduced the Location Ticket system in order to facilitate purchases of small parcels of Crown land for agricultural development; however, this system required that buyer make permanent improvements to the land, thereby excluding swidden farmers from land ownership. By the 1930s the government had finally acknowledged that most farmers practiced shifting cultivation and swidden farmers were responsible for virtually all domestic food crop production. Since these farmers required a new parcel of land each year, they did not need the security of a freehold or a long lease, and could not comply with the requirements of the Location Ticket system. In order to accommodate the land needs of *milperos*, during the 1930s the government began to establish agricultural reserves where farmers could obtain annual
licenses to practice swidden subsistence farming (Report of the Committee of Lands Administration 1961:2). In the northern districts most of these reserves were situated on lands (approximately 95,000 acres in total) that were turned over to the government by large landowners in arrears on their taxes: Santa Rosa, Ramonal, Canal Works, Sapote, and Ten Pound Cay, and Consejo in the Corozal District\(^{93}\), and Narrows, San Estevan, and Swasey in Orange Walk. In 1937 at precisely the same time that the government was hoping to divert the *mayeros* into wage labor on the sugar *ranchos*, it also created the 63,000 acre Ramonal Sapote Agricultural Reserve\(^{94}\) adjacent to the traditionalist Mayan villages of Patchakan, Cristo Rey, San Pedro, Concepcion, and Yok Chen thereby lessening those villagers' need to become involved in wage labor (MP418-1954).

In 1937 the Corozal Factory Limited began producing sugar for local consumption and in 1938 produced 1,036 tons. Shortly thereafter the factory and its lands, the Estrella Estate, were acquired by the Colonial Agricultural Development Company (CADCO), an American company. In 1949 the Commonwealth Sugar Agreement (CSA) was signed between Britain and the sugar producers of the British Commonwealth. Under this agreement preferential sugar export quotas were arranged which included a negotiated price clause favorable to the producers.

---

\(^{91}\) By 1966 107,408 acres had been set aside as reserves for shifting cultivation in the Corozal District (Annual Report of the Survey and Lands Department 1966:10).

\(^{94}\) Milperos growing crops on these reserves were charged a flat-rate five dollar per year fee except when permanent crops such as sugarcane were planted. In such cases they were charged $0.50 per acre subject to certain conditions (MP252-1952).
In 1949 Belize’s total sugar production was minuscule but the signatories to the CSA agreed to grant Belize a 5,000 ton quota in the hope that this would stimulate development of the industry. Belize was also granted a provisional 25,000 ton reserve export quota with the understanding that Belize’s sugar industry could continue to expand up to 30,000 tons for export under the CSA.

Despite the incentives of a guaranteed export quota and preferential trade agreements the sugar industry did not expand as rapidly as colonial administrators had hoped. In 1950 Belize’s total production was only 1,462 tons and no sugar was exported; by 1952 only 451 tons had been exported to Britain. In 1953 the capacity of the mill at Libertad was improved and it was possible to produce ten tons of sugar per hour. Production jumped to 2,626 tons of which 815 tons was shipped to Britain. In 1955 a record 2,079 tons of sugar were exported to Britain but this was still a long way from meeting Belize’s 5,000 ton provisional quota.

The other sugar producers party to the Commonwealth Sugar Agreement began to press for cancellation of the 25,000 ton reserve quota allocated to Belize. Not wishing to lose this quota the colonial government began to consider various means by which export production could be increased: the opening up of production to small farmers, the expansion of plantation-based production, and the importation of West Indian laborers who would be placed in government planned and managed agricultural settlements.

During the 1950s a number of studies were undertaken under government auspices for the purpose of charting the future of northern Belize’s agricultural
Collectively these studies called for the development of agricultural settlements under strict government management and planning. The settlers would be given land under the condition that part would be put under production in sugarcane and the balance would be devoted to food crops. The Frampton team maintained that in order to develop the agricultural sector of the economy a larger rural laboring population would be required and this need could be met by importing West Indian agricultural labor to form the nucleus of each settlement. It was believed that indigenous agriculturalists could only develop into progressive small farmers by example. It is worth noting that the Frampton group opposed the expansion of plantation production.

Brown shared similar views and also had little sympathy for the indigenous subsistence farmers. He was not, however, as hostile toward plantation production as the Frampton team and thought it possible to work out a sort of compromise whereby each farmer would be "given" a parcel of company land. The farmer would work his allotment under the direction of company supervisors who would also provide inputs (e.g., fertilizer and pesticides) as they deemed necessary. The farmer would receive a portion of the sugar profits in exchange for his labor. In his second report Brown (1959) envisioned the establishment of agricultural settlements in which each farmer would have five acres of cane, five acres of coconuts, five acres for corn and beans, a garden, a few fruit trees, and a sow. How anyone could manage to survive on such a holding was never made clear. Ultimately both Brown and Frampton's recommendations never came to anything due to
the rapid pace at which both plantation and small farmer sugarcane production expanded. The possibility of any type of settlement plan along the lines suggested by either Brown or Frampton was virtually eliminated by the passage of the Sugar Ordinances of 1959. Among other things, the Sugar Ordinances gave any farmer who could produce five tons of sugarcane (roughly the equivalent of one quarter of an acre of cane) the right to receive a provisional sugar delivery quota and become a voting member of the British Honduras Cane Farmers’ Association.

Until 1951 the total area planted in cane remained at about 2,000 acres. From 1951 to 1955 there was a considerable expansion in acreage due largely to mayero small holders who planted new land in cane using the milpa system.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Size of Farm (acreage in cane)</th>
<th>1950</th>
<th>1951</th>
<th>1952</th>
<th>1953</th>
<th>1954</th>
<th>1955</th>
<th>1956</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0-10</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>102</td>
<td>109</td>
<td>118</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10-25</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>40</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25-50</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>25</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50-100</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>100-200</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>200-300</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>300+</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Annual Report of the Department of Agriculture 1957, Table IV)

Under the impetus provided by the Commonwealth Sugar Agreement guaranteed export quota Belize—not to mention the threat of loss of this quota should Belize not meet its production targets—the factory was opened up to deliveries by independent growers and
small farmers began to take over production. According to Grant Jones’ data, in 1944 six percent of the cane delivered to the factory not produced on the factory’s estate came from small farmers. The remaining ninety-four percent was delivered by contractors who often bought cane from small farmers to fill their contracts with the factory and paid small farmers less than they themselves received from the factory. By 1954 small farmers were producing sixty-four percent of the cane delivered to the factory and in the process were receiving higher prices for their production (Jones 1969:136-137).

During the same period there was also growth of plantation production directly associated with the factory. The expansion of plantation-based production and the simultaneous increase in the number of peasant producers signaled the demise of the rancho/contractor system of production. This period also marked the beginning of the intensification of conflict between the small farmers and the plantations. In 1953 CADCO was bought out by a Jamaican company which formed a local subsidiary, Plantations Limited, and began acquiring private landholdings in the Corozal District which had formerly belonged to the timber interests. As Plantations Limited expanded they not only acquired some of the best cane-growing lands in the district but also areas where the rural population were making milpa.

The Cane Planter’s Cooperative: 1952-1959

With the expansion of small farmer production a movement began to form a cane farmers’ cooperative through which all farmers would be able to sell their cane to the factory at equitable prices. At the time there was no organization which represented the
independent small farmers and the factory bought cane from individual farmers at its discretion as need dictated. Most of the cane which the factory processed which was not produced on its own estates was delivered to the factory through several rancheros who held production contracts with the factory. After Hurricane Janet devastated the sugar industry in September of 1955 the colonial government recognized that unless something was done to revitalize the industry the Corozal District’s economy would lapse into a depression. The British Governor, Sir Colin Thornley, addressed cane farmers at a public meeting in Louisville, Corozal on October 10, 1955 and proposed to examine the feasibility of legislation to assist the independent cane farmers in establishing a cooperative and in 1956 the Cane Planters’ Cooperative Association Limited (CPCAL) was formed.

One of the cooperative’s first actions was the distribution of $90,000 (a $45,000 grant and $45,000 loan) given to it by the British government to aid sugar industry rehabilitation after Hurricane Janet. Roughly half of these funds was spent on fertilizer and by 1957 the $45,000 loan from the government had been paid-off through deductions from farmers’ accounts at the factory. It was hoped that the remaining funds would be used to establish an efficient, centrally organized cane delivery system by investing in transport equipment. This plan failed and to this day almost all of the cane grown by individual farmers is still delivered by privately owned trucks which greatly complicates the scheduling of deliveries to the factory.\footnote{In 1993 there were approximately 1200 privately-owned cane trucks delivering a crop which, according to the calculations of the Belize Sugar Industry Research Department, could be handled by 700 trucks. This oversupply of transportation results in very long
From its inception, the government tried to use the CPCAL as a means of controlling and directing the growth of the sugar industry. The government’s primary objectives were: 1) to create an efficient, centrally-organized cane transportation system, 2) to encourage farmers to use intensive cultivation practices emphasizing increased reliance on capital inputs (mechanized land preparation, pesticides, and fertilizers, 3) to limit the number of new farmers entering the industry until rural settlement and land-use policies could be formulated, and 4) to make the farmer’s cooperative responsible for the management of its own financial affairs. It is somewhat ironic that after forty years the government, the sugar industry, and the Cane Farmers’ Association (CPCAL’s successor) have still not met the first three of these objectives and the fourth objective, the financial management of the Cane Farmers’ Association is a constant theme of the political rivalries and infighting which plagues the association.

Early on the leadership of the first planters’ cooperative was taken over by large farmers who were distrusted by the mayero small farmers: accusations of favoritism in the scheduling of cane deliveries and financial mismanagement were rampant. Ultimately friction within the cooperative made it impossible for the CPCAL to either improve the efficiency of cane delivery to the factory or organize the distribution of agricultural inputs to farmers. Furthermore, both large and small farmers resented the government’s attempt
to manipulate the sugar industry through the cooperative. The farmers' dissatisfaction with the CPCAL together with the expansion of plantation production also gave rise to northern Belize's first home-grown politicians: a Yucatec Maya named Jesus Ken and a mestizo, Mateo Ayuso, who emerged as spokesmen for the small sugarcane farmers. Of the two Ken proved to be a much more influential and enduring presence in the politics of northern Belize than Ayuso.

Jesus Ken was from the predominantly Yucatec Mayan village of Xaibe and his grandfather was a rebel leader during the Caste Wars (see Jones 1969). Although Ken had limited formal education he was widely read in socialist theory and believed that sugar industry expansion would occur at the expense of the rural population if something were not done to insure that small cane farmers, milperos, and agricultural laborers gained access to land and the right to become independent sugarcane farmers. As plantation production expanded to fill Belize's export quota under the Commonwealth Sugar Agreement the rural population became increasingly aware that both the large cane farmers and the plantation interests represented a threat to their livelihood, not just as cane farmers but also as milperos. These growing fears gave rise to the caneros movement, whose slogan "every milpero can be a cañero" would eventually become a reality. The cañeros movement first achieved widespread public recognition in February.

Mateo Ayuso attended St. John's College and St. John's Teachers College and taught secondary school in northern Belize before joining the Department of Cooperatives. Ayuso went on to become the first manager of the CFA where he lobbied for the interests of the small farmers. Eventually he was fired from his position in 1966 under the cloud of allegations that he had used the CFA to further his own interests though the charges were disproven years later.
1957 on the occasion of the Governor’s speech at Louisville outlining the colonial administration’s plans for the development of the sugar industry which called for increased plantation production. Ken led a demonstration against the expansion of the Plantations Limited in which he and his followers carried placards depicting Plantations Limited as an octopus grabbing everything within reach (Shoman 1994:195).

The Expansion of Plantation Production and Growing Rural Unrest

In a speech delivered on February 8, 1957 at Louisville Governor Thornley once again addressed the cane farmers concerning the future of the sugar industry. Thornley opened his speech with the good news that the participants in the Commonwealth Sugar Agreement had agreed to reaffirm Belize’s overall export quota of 25,000 tons under the condition that Belize meet this production goal by the Fall of 1959 when the signatories to the agreement would re-convene to review the state of Belize’s sugar industry and the status of Belize’s quota.

By that time we must have developed our resources of land, man-power, finance, and factory capacity to satisfy the Commonwealth Producers that the 25,000 ton export target is within our capacity to develop over a further short period...I am here to make this announcement and to discuss the arrangements which will be necessary to step up our production.

At this point I want to make it quite clear to all existing cane growers, particularly the small growers who have expressed fears that their future in cane production is in danger, that it is the Government’s intention not only that they should continue to retain their present share of the industry but that they should increase their production of cane (Belize Times, February 13, 1957).
Despite the governor's assurances that small farmers would not be left out of the sugar industry's expansion there were certain aspects of his speech which alarmed the small growers.

Now that we are assured that we can continue to work for a total production of 30,000 tons the Corozal Sugar factory Ltd., has the necessary guarantee to justify in it investing in the expansion of the factory...without an efficient factory with the necessary capacity, there can be no sugar industry.

To ensure that the factory obtains a continuous supply of the required amount of cane to keep it operating economically without loss of time...there must be a hard core of efficient cane production associated directly with the factory to supplement the production of other growers and to act virtually as a balance wheel in the organization of the daily delivery of cane to the factory. To this end the new company, Plantations Limited has been formed.

I find, however, that the formation of this company, and the purchase of lands required by it on which to grow cane, has caused the small growers fear that they may be squeezed out of the industry or, at best, they will suffer depressed cane prices.

I can give an unqualified assurance that this will not be the case.

Historically plantation agriculture has been seen as efficient, "modern," and particularly well suited to certain tropical crops because "large-scale plantation units make possible economies of operation by the use of labor-saving machinery" (Beckford 1969:321). As Mintz notes, plantations epitomize agro-industry due to their heavy substitution of machinery for human labor, their intensive use of scientific methods and products, and characteristic mass production on large holdings (1985:51). The special factor combination that distinguishes plantation production from other kinds of farms is the
bringing together as many unskilled farm laborers as possible under the authority of a few highly skilled managers: "...the plantation substitutes supervision—supervisory and administrative skills—for skilled, adaptive labor, combining the supervision with labor whose principal skill is to follow orders" (Beckford 1969:323).

On sugarcane plantations both the field labor engaged in the cultivation and harvesting of cane and the processing of cane into sugar are controlled under a single authority because neither a field nor factory can be independently productive. A sugar refinery requires substantial capital investment and a refinery cannot easily be converted to any other purpose. Therefore it is imperative that an adequate supply of sugarcane be available so that factory refining capacity can be utilized efficiently. The intrinsic nature of sugar cane and its processing requirements demand that the plantation be efficient and "time conscious": a central feature of capitalist industry (Mintz 1985:53).

Plantation enterprises are frequently characterized by a high degree of vertical integration, often to the extent of being even of self-sufficient. For example: the plantation enterprise may supply inputs for its agricultural operations and processing and marketing facilities for its agricultural output97. At times vertical integration is carried to extreme to point that the plantation's agricultural operations no longer represent the bulk

97 Tate and Lyle operates in three West Indian sugar-producing countries through almost wholly-owned subsidiaries (Jamaica, Trinidad, Belize). In addition the company engages in sugar refining mainly in the United Kingdom, Canada, Zambia, Rhodesia, sugar storage and distribution, molasses production and trading in the West Indies, Africa, Europe, Asia, and North America, manufacture of syrup and liquid sugar, distillation of alcohol, manufacture of machinery, and world-wide shipping including insurance. The company owns a fleet of eleven tankers for bulk shipping of sugar. As a sugar refining enterprise Tate and Lyle accounts for a substantial share of refining activity in two metropolitan markets: the United Kingdom and Canada.
of the company's investments and the maximization of total profit for the firm is not dependent on profit maximization for its agricultural activities. For this reason the firm is able to hedge losses on its farming operations against consequent gains further up the scale. Profit maximization is the primary objective of plantation enterprises; however, because it is part of a wider, vertically integrated complex, profit maximization may not be the guiding principle at the level of its agricultural operations. The importance of its agricultural component depends on the share of agriculture in the firm's total investments; the smaller this share the less the need for profit maximization in agricultural operations (Beckford 1969:334-335).

Plantations enterprises generally attempt to acquire land well in excess of the refinery's processing capacity. The minimum amount of land required would be determined by the level of output needed to cover fixed costs in processing. However in order to allow for a degree of flexibility of output adjustment over time in response to changing market opportunities, plantations generally try to acquire land well in excess of the minimum needed to sustain the refinery. Sufficient land must be acquired to produce the desired flow of cane into the refinery: even when the cane can be supplied by independent farmers the firm would be in too vulnerable a position to rely exclusively on such supplies (Beckford 1969:339).

Small farmers feared Plantations Limited not only as a competing sugarcane producer, but also as a competitor for land for cane and subsistence production. Nowhere were these fears greater than in my study area where the Plantations Limited had already
purchased several thousand acres north of the San Pablo-Douglas Road. The company
was also attempting to acquire the Southern Portion of the Douglas Estate (see Figure 2)
where villagers in my study area made milpa. Governor Thornley attempted to assuage
these villagers' (primarily the inhabitants of Caledonia, Buena Vista, Douglas, San Pablo,
San Jose, and San Luis) concerns in his speech.

I realize that to enable existing farmers to increase their cane
production within the available time more land will be required for them. Here again I am concerned to learn that Plantations Limited, which is vital
to the successful development of the industry, has engendered in the minds
of some of you fears that you will not have access to the land you require. I wish to assure you that this is not so...although the company has acquired
lands (which were already in private ownership—so the position in respect
to them remains unchanged); the amount of land in the hands of the Crown
has increased enormously in the last year by the acquisition of the Corozal
Estate comprising nearly 35,000 acres. Some of this is already being used
by tenants who occupy it on an annual basis. It is the intention of the
Government not only to allow those persons to continue their holdings
undisturbed but to give them greater security of tenure.

Despite the governor's assurances it was clear to some--particularly the aspiring politician
George Price--that the above-mentioned villages were seen as a potential source of cheap
labor by the plantation interests. As the Governor noted: "...it can readily be seen that a
30,000 tons sugar industry will support and require a labor force of 3,000. A force of this
size is probably not available in the District at present for the sugar industry alone and we
will have to ensure that it does become available."

Thornley's statement that the land which the company had acquired was "already
in private ownership" and that its transfer to Plantations Limited was therefore of no
consequence to the peasant population was a distortion of the facts. Though privately
owned, this land had always been available for villagers to lease for milpa and rents from subsistence farmers were the landowners sole source of income from these holdings. Once the plantation’s cane fields were established, subsistence farming would no longer be possible on these lands.

One of the alternatives which had been proposed was that those villagers who did not wish to remain in the area were free to relocate to new government planned settlements. This possibility was also mentioned in Thornley’s speech: “I have in mind that such settlement, which must be carefully planned having full regard to the general needs of the District as well as those of the sugar industry would be based on small family farms...preference will of course be given to farmers from British Honduras.”

In the same issue of the Belize Times in which the governor’s speech was reprinted an anonymous editorial appeared which has generally been attributed to George Price. The editorialist observed,

The most suitable arrangement would be to make fertile lands available under long leases, lands near their villages, or to acquire the necessary lands around existing villages, for the use of the villagers. If some suitable arrangement is not made quickly...These villages may become ghost communities...graveyards of a once happy, helpless and carefree people who lived their simple lives in contentment until “prosperity” came to their land.

The editorialist went on to warn that the rural population, though “happy, helpless, and carefree,” were not above taking matters into their own hands.98 The Governor, his

---

98Although noone can’t remember the exact year when this occurred, the villagers who were serving on the San Pablo Village Council during this time recall sending a letter of protest to the governor concerning Plantations Limited’s bulldozers clearing forest south of the Douglas-San Pablo Road and the damage that had been caused to several villagers’ milpa. In their letter they stated that if this continued they would find it
Executive Council, and his advisors "...will have to keep their foot constantly on the ball. otherwise the oil that calmed troubled waters last week may turn into a raging inferno ignited by the destructive spark of procrastination, indecision, and fear of offending powerful vested interests."

The Northern Cane Workers Union and the Cañeros Movement

In 1961 Jesus Ken’s Northern Cane Workers’ Union (NCWU) was officially registered with the Labor Department as the union representing the interests of the sugarcane cutters (Annual Report of the Labor Department 12/31/61). Workers at the Corozal sugar refinery were represented by the PUP affiliated General Workers Union. The objectives of Ken’s (NCWU) and the “cañeros movement” as it became known was to make all the peasants, whether milperos or sugarcane field workers, landowners and independent cane farmers. Despite the convergence of interests between the NCWU and George Price’s emergent anticolonial, trade-unionist People’s United Party (PUP), Ken and his followers espoused a much more radical reform program than the PUP. The NCWU was fundamentally a peasant movement which pursued its own agenda and remained relatively free of the political influence of the PUP and its affiliated union the General Workers Union (GWU)—which later became the Christian Democratic Union (CDU)—whose members came primarily from urban areas.

necessary to shoot the machine operators. This may sound like nostalgic exaggeration but this did occur in 1988 after Petrojam acquired former BSI lands north of the Douglas-San Pablo Road and began land clearing to establish new cane fields. In the process they bulldozed several milpa planted by villagers from Nuevo San Juan and one of the drivers was shot at. Eventually the company compensated the farmers whose milpa had been destroyed.
Once Price came to power the PUP adopted a program of economic development which welcomed foreign investment in the sugar industry, specifically the expansion of plantation production by Tate and Lyle, Ltd. which had expressed interest in constructing a second sugar refinery in the Orange Walk District. Tate and Lyle Ltd. is a British sugar-refining firm which had extensive holdings throughout the Commonwealth Caribbean (Beckford 1969). By the early 1960s production on its plantations in Jamaica and Trinidad had peaked and its ability to expand elsewhere in the Caribbean was limited by rising land costs and increasing political unrest and hostility toward plantation owners—particularly in those island nations with rapidly expanding populations (BSI 1989). Belize, on the other hand, had both an abundance of cheap, unoccupied, arable land and a small, seemingly docile population.

Although the NCWU remained separate from the power structure of the PUP, Ken did run as the PUP candidate for the Corozal South electoral district and won a seat in the Legislative Assembly in 1963, thereby enhancing his ability to press the issues of greatest concern to the rural population. However, Ken’s increasingly radical rhetoric and behavior would eventually prove to be too extreme for the PUP which was trying to dismiss accusations that it was a communist organization. In December of 1963, while negotiations were still underway for Tate and Lyle Ltd. to buy the Corozal sugar refinery, Ken organized a land seizure to demonstrate the land hunger of the small farmers. About eighty men armed with machetes and shotguns entered company lands and seized control of the company’s machinery. Ken sent a telegram to Price giving the government
seventy-two hours to respond to the farmers demands for land. The Minister of Natural Resources promised that lands would be made available and the land occupation was called off (Shoman 1994:196). Ultimately Ken and the NCWU were able to force the PUP government to guarantee land and sugarcane quotas for all, but by 1964 he had clearly become a liability to Price's government.

The NCWU-organized land takeover was not an isolated incident. As Plantations Limited had begun to expand production, the burning of company cane fields and sabotage of company equipment increased. Fire was undoubtedly the peasants' most popular and effective weapon in the fight against plantation expansion since cane which is burned has to be cut and ground within seventy-two hours or it is worthless. In 1962 the NCWU called a strike against Plantations Limited and several large producers who refused to raise cane cutters' wages and were illegally importing Mexican labor to undermine the NCWU's bargaining position. Through his influence with the PUP Ken managed to have most of the illegal workers deported. Then the night before the strike several of the company's cane fields went up in flames. The strike lasted for nine days and the NCWU gained a substantial wage increase for cane cutters. The NCWU continued to represent the interests of field workers throughout the 1960s and managed to gain considerable concessions from the plantation owners. In 1964 the union entered into collective bargaining agreements with Plantations Limited, the Cane Farmers' Association, and CADCO and in 1967 and 1969 obtained wage increases for both cane cutters and field laborers (Annual Report of the Labor Department 12/31/64, 67, 69).
Once the NCWU had consolidated its bargaining position agricultural laborers from Mexico were once again allowed to enter Belize during the cane harvest. In 1965, 295 Mexican laborers received for the cane harvest and in 1966 permits 553 temporary work permits were issued to foreign cane cutters (Annual Report of the Labor Department 12/31/65, 66).

One of the reasons the NCWU was able to bargain effectively on behalf of field laborers and cane cutters was the persistent labor shortage which plagued the plantations and the large farmers. In part this was the result of the expansion of small farmer cane cultivation which provided the rural population with an alternative to seasonal labor on the plantations as a means of earning cash income. A more significant factor, however, was the fact that most of the field laborers were also milperos who refused to give up subsistence farming for wage labor. The 1965 Annual Report of the Labor Department noted that "Paradoxically, although there was unemployment in the country there was a shortage of manual labor in the cane fields and citrus orchards owing to milpa farmers having to attend to their crops...and to the reluctance of many unemployed in the urban areas to work in agriculture" (1965:7).

Even if the government had been able to coerce swidden farmers into wage labor on the plantations, this was not necessarily seen as a desirable situation. In a 1951 report which addressed the question of whether sufficient labor would be available to meet the

---

It is not altogether surprising that Creole laborers from Belize City would be unwilling to cut sugarcane since this would require reside in northern Belize in what was, to them, an alien culture. Furthermore, throughout Belize's history the timber interests had disparaged and stigmatize agriculture labor and farming as unworthy occupations in order to control the labor force.
expanding needs of agricultural development and the effect of agricultural development on smallholder production it was noted that even if it was possible to divert the milperos' labor from swidden farming into agricultural development there was "the danger that smallholder production of essential foods might tend to decrease as a result of the drift from subsistence farming to employment on estates. If there is in fact a serious risk that peasant farmers will abandon their small holdings the whole agricultural position may require to be reviewed" (MP1118-1951). The same report noted however that "In our interview with Maya Indians we found that the milpa system still existed which showed that they are more seasonal than permanent workers as they returned to their district at planting and harvesting seasons, regardless of the demand for their labor" (ibid.). Based on a survey of agricultural laborers the Labor Department concluded that some swidden farmers had given up subsistence production for wage labor. Their data indicated, however, that only 10 percent of those agricultural laborers surveyed had given up swidden farming for wage labor while 42 percent engaged in both wage labor and subsistence farming (Annual Report of the Labor Department 1952).

In 1967 Tate and Lyle completed construction of the Tower Hill Refinery outside Orange Walk Town and the district experienced a small farmer boom comparable to that which occurred in the Corozal District during the early 1960s. It is estimated that between 1963 and 1969 the sugarcane acreage under cultivation by small farmers increased from 16,000 to 28,000 acres. As the figure below indicates, from 1966 to 1968 small farmer production doubled.
Table 8: Comparison of estate and independent farmers' cane production 1964-70

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Farmers</th>
<th>Estates</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1963/64</td>
<td>130,000</td>
<td>80,362*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1964/65</td>
<td>189,933</td>
<td>82,396</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1965/66</td>
<td>200,000</td>
<td>125,786*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1966/67</td>
<td>282,640</td>
<td>128,712</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1967/68</td>
<td>290,727</td>
<td>227,993</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1968/69</td>
<td>400,000</td>
<td>242,515*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1969/70</td>
<td>394,194</td>
<td>281,981</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Department of Agriculture Annual Report and Summary of Statistics 1969

Ironically the Orange Walk sugar boom signaled the beginning of the end for both the Northern Cane Workers Union and Tate and Lyle's control of sugarcane cultivation in Belize.

When Tate and Lyle bought Plantations Limited and the Corozal Sugar Refinery the colonial government assured the company that its share of cane production would be at least fifty percent (Annual Report of the Labor Department 12/31/63). It is not unreasonable to speculate that both the government and Tate and Lyle assumed that small farmers would be unable to compete with the company's modern, efficient cultivation techniques and would soon driven out of cane farming. This was not an unrealistic expectation given that, in 1966, the management committee of the CFA had signed a constant price agreement—either through ignorance or possibly collusion—stating that farmers would indefinitely accept a fixed price (BZ$10.46 per ton) for the cane they produced. This meant that farmers could not benefit from any increase in the market price of sugar and clearly favored the refiners. In February of 1970 the British Honduras Sugar Industry Commission of Inquiry noted that this arrangement was "grossly
inequitable, unprecedented anywhere in the world, and farcical given the uncertainty of the future” (Minutes of the Commission of Inquiry Feb. 16, 1970). As a result of the Commission of Inquiry’s recommendations, by 1972 the average price farmers received for their cane had risen to BZ$17.62 per ton (BSB).

In anticipation of continued high world market prices and an export quota into the lucrative United States market, Tate and Lyle constructed a state-of-the-art refinery at Tower Hill in the Orange Walk District in 1967. This factory was designed so that its processing capacity could easily be expanded without major structural modifications. However, the company’s assumptions concerning the world market prices and the United States quota proved ill-advised in the short-term. By 1970 the accumulated financial losses of the cultivation component Tate and Lyle’s operations were such that the company decided to sell the bulk of its lands under cultivation in sugarcane to 220 Belizean cane farmers who also received quota increases in proportion to the amount of land they purchased under cultivation in cane. No doubt some of Tate and Lyle’s losses and its decision to get out of cane farming were attributable to the successes of the NCWU and its successor the Northern Christian Union (NCU) in securing wage increases for field laborers and cane cutters in 1970, 1971, and 1972 (Annual Report of the Labor Department 1971-1973). Ironically the end of plantation production in Belize was also

---

100 It is interesting to note that when Grant Jones (1969) studied the historical development of agriculture in the Corozal District and subsequently suggested that peasant sugarcane farming was ecologically inviable he failed to note the existence of this highly prejudicial constant price agreement. In sum he contended that peasants’ income from sugarcane cultivation could not make up for their loss of subsistence production. While this may have been true during 1967 when he conducted his field research, this was certainly not the case after 1972 when the constant price agreement had been abolished.
the end of the field workers’ unions. While the sugar factory workers unions continued to
thrive\textsuperscript{101} there was really no longer any need for field laborers unions since there was no
one left to strike. Production was now dominated by small farmers who relied on the
labor of their own families and/or reciprocal labor exchange agreements between farmers
during the harvest.

Although Tate and Lyle had completely withdrawn from sugarcane cultivation,
the profits the company realized from processing alone were sufficient to justify the
capital investment needed to increase the refining capacity of the Tower Hill factory. In
1972 BSI announced plans to expand the Tower Hill refinery’s sugar production capacity
from 30,000 to 37,000 tons of sugar (Belize Times 12/24/72). In 1973 the US
Department of Agriculture increased Belize’s sugar quota to 37,900 long tons
Subsequently the BSB announced that increased factory demand would be met by
increasing the licenses of those farmers with quotas of less than 400 tons (Belize Times
3/25/73). By this time there were 2,293 registered cane farmers and 93 percent held
licenses of less than 400 tons (BSB).

World market prices then began to rise and moved rapidly upward producing
record returns in 1974 and 1975--due in large part to the US sugar market being

\textsuperscript{101} The Annual report of the Labor Department for 1976 noted that “In most cases the
trade unions were responsible as the major agency influencing wages and all
negotiations, except one, were settled without strike.” In 1976 the General Workers
Development Union which represents 850 factory workers at BSI obtained an increase
of $0.30 per hour plus other fringe benefits. To this day the unions representing the
sugar factory workers have remained strong.
completely open during these years for the first time since the signing of the Jones-Constigan Act in 1934. As can be seen in the figure below, between 1972 and 1975 the price Belizean farmers received for their cane rose from BZ$17.62 to BZ$62.21 per ton.
Figure 2: Farmers' average cane price: 1951-1989
Source: Belize Sugar Board
As Assad Shoman notes "The boom significantly raised the standard of living of the Maya-Mestizos of the north and decisively brought them into the mainstream of national life, making them a force to contend with at the highest levels of decision-making" (1994:200).

Nevertheless, every silver lining has its cloud. In just twenty years the mayeros of northern Belize had gone from being swidden subsistence farmers with no security of land tenure, no right to vote and no political representation, and no access to markets or credit, to a situation in which they now owned land, had become the single largest and politically most powerful interest group in the colony, and controlled two-thirds of the means of production of the nation's most important cash crop. In brief they had become the most affluent and politically most powerful segment of Belizean rural society. The opposite side of the coin is that they had become dependent on the world sugar market.

The cultural-ecological basis of Maya-Mestizo life and identity, the milpa system, that had cushioned the impact of foreign exploitation of forest resources during the colonial era, was under attack. However poor the chiclero or the logwood cutter, he knew he could always return home to a subsistence living as a milpero...Not so today's cane farmer. The greater his reliance on cane, the greater the reduction in his milpa production (Henderson 1990:91).

Jesus Ken had hoped to improve the viability of the peasants as a means for "their educational, technological, and cultural advancement, "but "their desires generally never went beyond the vulgar acquisition of cash" (cf. Shoman 1994:199). As has been the case time and again throughout history, once the peasants got what they wanted they were
satisfied—a propensity which has always irked people with a clear vision of what their lives should be.

Sugar Industry Reform and the Sugar Ordinances of 1959

On December 31, 1959 Governor Thornley signed two ordinances patterned after legislation already in effect elsewhere in the British Caribbean which were designed to control the development of the Belizean sugar industry. These ordinances provided a place for both small farmers and plantations in the development of the industry and gave the government oversight of the industry as a whole while leaving the regulation of individual farmers within the industry. The first ordinance, the Sugar Industry Control Ordinance, laid out the institutional framework within which the development of the industry would take place. Oversight of the industry’s growth was delegated to the Belize Sugar Board. The second ordinance, the Sugar Cane Farmers’ Association Ordinance, called for the creation of an association of registered sugarcane farmers, the British Honduras Cane Farmers’ Association (CFA), to replace the CPCAL and outlined the role the CFA would play in the sugar industry.

Since its inception the role of the Belize Sugar Board (BSB) has been to monitor and regulate the sugar industry by controlling the quantity of sugar—and more recently inedible syrup used in ethanol production—produced by the factory(s); regulating imports, exports, and local sales of sugar; setting the beginning and end dates of the harvest season; controlling the amount of cane grown by matching the growers’ licenses with anticipated market demand; and controlling the issue, transfer, and size of individual
farmers' cane delivery licenses or quotas. In addition to its regulatory functions the BSB acts as a mediator bringing together the interests of the government, the farmers, and the sugar refiners to try to promote smooth operation of the industry—not always an easy task. The BSB also administers the Sugar Labor Welfare Fund which is derived from a BZ$2.00 per ton charge levied on all sugar exported from Belize. The SLWF provides BZ$1200 housing grants to cane farmers and workers and a small number of sixth form scholarships for their children, contributes to the construction of village community centers and health care facilities, and provides funds for school maintenance and the purchase of sports equipment. Half of the BSB’s administrative costs are paid by the two divisions (Orange Walk and Corozal) of the CFA.

The BSB is made up of farmers’ representatives who are usually elected officials of the CFA, the Chief Agricultural Officer, and independent appointees of the Minister of Commerce which include representatives of the refiners. Although the BSB is ostensibly apolitical, the operation of the board is overseen by the Secretary of the Sugar Board who is a political appointee and by no means immune to pressure from above.

From the individual cane farmer's perspective the most important function of the BSB is its control over the issuance, transfer, and regulation of the size of sugarcane delivery quotas. The farmer's cane quota is the amount of cane which the farmer is guaranteed to be able to deliver to the refinery. It is also his collateral for loans made through the commercial banks and the Development Finance Corporation and a fairly accurate measure of his economic status in the community. Occasionally, if the market is
good and the factory is operating efficiently, farmers are allowed to deliver more than
their quota on what amounts to a first-come-first-serve basis. Otherwise, if a farmer
produces cane in excess of his quota he must sell it to farmers who can’t fill their quotas
based on the production of their own fields.

In theory a quota increase should be given only to a farmer who can demonstrate
that he has increased his productive capacity by exceeding his quota through deliveries of
additional cane when existing production under the quota system is not meeting factory
demand, or by demonstrably increasing the area he or she has under cultivation in cane.
In practice many farmers apply for quota increases without having increased the area
under cultivation but by merely claiming that is the case. If they receive a quota increase
but don’t have the cane necessary to meet the new, higher quota then they can always buy
cane and increase their production in the next crop year.

The Sugar Ordinances of 1959 also called for the creation of the Belize Cane
Farmers’ Association (CFA). The CFA is made up of all licensed cane farmers (those
who hold production quotas) and is divided into sixteen branch committees, eight in the
Orange walk District and eight in the Corozal District. Each district also has a divisional
committee which represents the interests of each district’s farmers. The CFA acts as a
cooperative in supplying farmers with agricultural inputs on credit; however, its most
important functions are: representing the growers’ interests in any negotiations over the
price farmers receive for their cane and controlling the delivery of cane to the refinery
during the harvest season.
It is no exaggeration to say that the rural population of northern Belize leapt at the opportunities provided them by the Sugar Ordinances of 1959. In his study of the Corozal District village Xaibe, Ira Abrams notes that by 1971, sixty-eight percent of the heads-of-household in this “traditionalist” Yucatec Mayan village held sugarcane quotas (1973:51). Even those researchers who see the overall consequences of the expansion of the export sugar industry as being detrimental to the welfare of the rural population of northern Belize (e.g. Jones 1969; Henderson 1972, 1990; Brockmann 1978; Stavrakis 1979) note that agricultural wage laborers and milperos flocked to cane farming. This is really not surprising under the circumstances. Before they were given access to sugarcane cultivation in 1959, the peasant population of northern Belize had no security of land tenure\textsuperscript{102} and no access to credit—let alone a guaranteed market for their crops.

The Orange Walk District’s rural population lagged behind the Corozal farmers in taking up cane farming due to the distance between the Corozal refinery and most Orange Walk villages. In 1950 there were only six cane farmers in the Douglas-San Pablo area: the southernmost extent of sugarcane production during the 1950s (Annual Report of the Agriculture Department 1957, Table II). After Tate and Lyle completed construction of the Tower Hill Refinery outside Orange Walk Town in 1967 the sugar boom also reached Orange Walk District villages. By 1971 there were 243 licensed cane farmers with a

\textsuperscript{102} The land laws had changed in that milperos had more security than before and legal recourse against landlords who wished to arbitrarily evict them and/or raise their rents (Ordinance 9 of February 16, 1962). Nevertheless, under Ordinance 6 of 1947, in adjudicating land disputes the courts favored those who sought “to provide for the orderly and progressive development of land” through planting permanent crops or by otherwise making permanent improvements to the land. Milpa agriculture did not qualify as a permanent improvement to the land however the planting of sugarcane did.
combined production 30,989 tons in the villages of Douglas, San Pablo, and San Jose (BSB records). In 1975 BSI, then still under the control of Tate and Lyle, agreed to invest $16 million to increase the Tower Hill refinery’s capacity by 25,000 tons for the 1977/78 harvest and it was decided that the BSB would increase both the number of new farmers and the size of existing farmers’ quotas so that farmers could prepare for increased factory demand (Monthly Report of the Sugar Industry 2/27/75). The number of cane farmers in Douglas, San Pablo, and San Jose then jumped from 276 in 1976, to 407 in 1977 (BSB Records).

The Quota System in Belizean Sugarcane Farming

In order to understand how the Belizean sugar industry operates it must be understood that since the signing of the Sugar Ordinances in 1959 and the imposition of the quota system—which simultaneously guarantees and limits the amount of cane a farmer can deliver to the refiner—sugar refining in Belize has been a monopoly. For all practical purposes, all of the cane grown in the country has only one market: the Belize Sugar

---

103 Today this statement is not entirely accurate since farmers can sell their cane to Petrojam; however, Petrojam pays such low prices that this is a measure of last resort. After record losses forced the closure of the Tate and Lyle refinery at Libertad in 1985, the government of Belize began negotiations with Petrojam Limited of Jamaica in the hope that the Libertad refinery would reopen to produce “inedible syrup” which would then be shipped to Jamaica and refined into ethanol. In 1987 Petrojam bought the refinery and several thousand acres of land in Corozal and the northern Orange Walk District which was previously owned by BSI. Petrojam planned to produce most of the cane it needed on its own lands and initially proposed paying Belizean farmers twenty-five dollar per ton for any cane which the refinery required beyond its own fields’ production. This price was well below farmers’ average estimated production costs of approximately thirty-five dollars per ton and was bitterly opposed by the farmers (Belize Times 8/14/88). In 1990 Petrojam was granted a license to refine 140,000 tons of cane during its first year of operation (Monthly Report of the Sugar Industry 3/27/90). In order to protect BSI’s supply of cane, by law Petrojam can only purchase from farmers the excess of cane available above BSI’s license of 1,000,000 tons. In 1993 the BSB authorized Petrojam to purchase 200,000 tons of cane from farmers and
Industries, Ltd.. From 1963 when Tate and Lyle Ltd. acquired Plantations Limited, until 1985 when the Corozal refinery was shut down and Tate and Lyle sold ninety percent of its interest in the Tower Hill refinery to the government, the refining monopoly was entirely in the hands of Tate and Lyle. From 1963 until 1972 Tate and Lyle produced approximately forty-five percent of the cane grown in Belize; however, in 1972 the company sold off all of its cane lands to local farmers.

The quota system was enacted to insure that the refineries receive sufficient cane to keep them operating efficiently while at the same time guarding against overproduction and thereby protecting farmers from the danger of a glutted market. It is not uncommon for global sugar production to exceed global demand which results in price declines. While Belize still had preferential trade and guaranteed export quota agreements with the United States and Great Britain, Belizean farmers and the sugar refiners enjoyed a degree of security—however short-lived and false this sense of security may have been. The United States’ and other industrialized nations’ quota systems (e.g. the European Economic Community, Japan) and preferential trade agreements have acted as a double-edged sword toward cane sugar producers. On the one hand they offer the producers prices that are above the world market level and provide strong incentives to increase

---

with the agreement that farmers would receive $33.50 per ton (Monthly Report of the Sugar Industry 1/27/93). This price is very low, however, it does provide farmers with the means of disposing of cane which might otherwise be lost. For example: if a farmer’s cane is burned accidentally and he isn’t scheduled to deliver at Tower Hill he can sell his cane to Petrojam. In 1993, ninety-three farmers from the San Jose and San Pablo branches sold a total of 2,739 tons of cane to Petrojam as compared to 104,757 tons delivered to BSI (BSB 1993/94 crop statistics).

104 Today this refinery is eighty-five percent employee owned.
production. On the other hand they expose sugar exporting countries to the caprices US farm subsidy politics which, between 1974 and 1985, fluctuated between a completely open US sugar market in 1975 to and absolute protectionism in 1985—not to mention more general political shifts in the climate of American foreign trade policy.

In 1975-76, the US market was completely open for the first time since the signing of the Jones-Constigan Act in 1934, but government control and guarantees were reimplemented in 1977, followed by blatantly protectionist policies adopted in 1981 and expanded upon in 1985. Congressman Stephen J. Solarz has called the US sugar farm subsidies program “the Great American Rip Off.” In 1984 the program’s subsidy worked out to $250,000 for each American sugar producer compared to subsidies averaging $3,500 per wheat producers and $9,000 per dairy producer. Solarz paraphrased Winston Churchill, saying that in regard to US sugar producers, “never have so few extracted so much from so many” (Congressional Record, April 4, 1985, p. E1408 cf. Hemstead 1991:28). The Republican administration of Ronald Reagan formulated the Caribbean Basin Initiative to offer countries in the region open markets in the US for “dynamic, labor-intensive, non-traditional” exports: apparel, winter fruits and vegetables, ornamental plants, and cut flowers (Fox 1989:10). At the same time however, the Caribbean Basin countries’ sugar exports to the US, formerly thirty-eight percent of all US sugar imports, were drastically curtailed. In 1986 the US sugar quota dropped by one million tons and Belize’s share of that quota was cut by 7,500 tons representing an
approximate loss of three million dollars US in gross revenue (Esquivel 1985 speech to Rotary Club in Orange Walk Town).

Since the Sugar Ordinances were passed in 1959 and the quota system was instituted, speculation has posed a problem in that persons with quotas who have no cane planted are able to profit from either the surplus production of genuine farmers whose production exceeds their quota, or the production of farmers who have planted cane but have no quota. Part of the problem stems from the fact that neither the Belize Sugar Board nor the Cane Farmers' Association have sufficient resources to physically check to see if applicants for quotas actually have land in cane. The other cause of this problem is that quotas are often awarded as political favors. Despite the fact that the Belize Sugar Board is charged with issuing quotas on the basis of merit (i.e., the applicant's having the necessary land and the demonstrated ability to produce sugarcane), the fact remains that the Secretary of the Sugar Board is a political appointee who is ultimately responsible to elected government officials who use quotas to get votes.\(^9\)

Each year prior to the harvest the BSB issues an estimate of the total price farmers will receive per ton of cane based on anticipated market conditions. Farmers do not receive payment for their cane all in one lump sum however. The total they receive is

---

\(^9\) In a 1988 series of correspondence between Elsner Cruz, the Secretary of the Sugar Board, and the UDP Minister of Commerce, Industry and Tourism who had appointed Cruz, the Secretary protested that the Minister's decision to create 80 new sugarcane farmers in Chunox and Copper Bank villages on the grounds that this action was taken without any consultation with the BSB. Despite Cruz's protests, Minister Eduardo Juan informed him that "Further to my earlier letter...this serves to reiterate my approval given for the eighty registered cane farmers in the areas of Chunox and Copper Bank Villages to deliver a quota of up to thirty-eight tons each. The original list should remain intact and be dealt with en toto" (Belize Times 6-15-90:17).
stretched out over the course of the year following the harvest. The first payment is usually eighty-five percent of the estimated total. Farmers usually receive the second payment in July after the harvest has ended, and the third and final payment is received immediately before the beginning of the next harvest season. It is intended that the second payment should arrive in time for farmers to use this money for cane cultivation (replanting fields, weeding, fertilizing, etc.) but many farmers complain that they need these funds a month earlier, before the rains begin in earnest, if the second payment is to be used in cultivation. The third payment arrives just before the beginning of the next harvest so that farmers can repair equipment needed for the harvest. Again, farmers complain that the money they get from the third payment is generally insufficient to cover the harvest start-up costs and so they usually have to sell their first few loads of cane in the line at the factory (usually at $5 more per ton than the estimated first payment) so that they can get the money needed to pay their initial transportation and harvesting costs.

The person who buys their cane delivers it to the factory in his own name, this not only counts toward filling his own quota, but also entitles him to collect the second and third payments: farmers who are forced to sell their cane to “brokers” lose fifteen percent of the estimated total price. Many farmers complain bitterly that for years they had to sell

---

106 The amount of the second and third payments is largely determined by how well sugar sells on the global market after Belize’s has filled its preferential export quotas. In 1985 when the world market price of sugar crashed the farmers in the Yo Creek Branch of the Orange Walk CFA ended up owing money to the refiner ($0.015 per ton) because the price estimates had failed to anticipate a price crash.

107 Speculation on the price of sugarcane is not without its dangers. In 1985 when cane prices did not meet the BSB’s initial price estimates many speculators ended up getting no second or third payments and some went broke.
their cane to other so-called farmers with large quotas that they had received on the basis of political favoritism.

An individual farmer's quota or his household's aggregate quotas (i.e., the quotas of husband, wife, and offspring) can also be increased if the farmer can show that he has consistently exceeded his existing quota. Although it is impossible to tell how accurate this claim is, farmers maintain that the process whereby quotas are increased is a completely political process in which party affiliation is all important. This is certainly true to the extent that the Secretary of the Sugar Board, who controls quota increases is a political appointee who changes with every national election, and both parties staunchly maintain that when they come to power it is necessary to increase the quotas of their "farmers" because they were treated unfairly by the opposition. The size of each farmers license depends on his or her production performance over the previous three years and the anticipated demands of the factory and the market.

Peasant Adaptation to Sugarcane Farming

The Economics of Peasant Cane Farming

Historically plantation agriculture has been seen as efficient, "modern," and particularly suited to tropical crops such as sugarcane because "large-scale plantation units make possible economies of operation by the use of labor-saving machinery" (Beckford 1969:321). As Mintz notes, plantations epitomize agro-industry due to their heavy substitution of machinery for human labor, their intensive use of scientific methods and
products, and characteristic mass production on large holdings (1985:51). The special factor combination that distinguishes plantation production from other kinds of farms is the bringing together of as many unskilled farm laborers as possible under the authority of a few highly skilled managers: "...the plantation substitutes supervision--supervisory and administrative skills--for skilled, adaptive labor, combining the supervision with labor whose principal skill is to follow orders" (Beckford 1969:323).

On sugarcane plantations, both the field labor engaged in the cultivation and harvest of cane and the processing of cane into sugar are controlled under a single authority because neither a field nor factory can be independently productive. A sugar refinery requires substantial capital investment and it cannot easily be converted to any other purpose. It is therefore imperative that an adequate supply of sugarcane be available so that factory refining capacity can be utilized efficiently. The intrinsic nature of sugar cane and its processing requirements demand that the plantation be efficient and "time conscious": a central feature of capitalist industry (Mintz 1985:53).

Although sugarcane has numerous characteristics which seem to predispose it to agro-industrial cultivation and processing--primarily its perishability--it also has a number of characteristics which make it an attractive crop for small farmers with limited capital to invest in cultivation. Foremost among these characteristics is the fact that cane is a grass which propagates asexually. After sugarcane is burned and cut during the harvest season it regenerates from the roots which means that, depending upon the variety, a single planting of sugarcane can be harvested for several years without
replanting. Sugarcane can be planted using swidden technology which further reduces the costs of production and can withstand considerable neglect when labor and capital for field maintenance are in short supply.

Farmers resist the introduction of new high-yield hybrids because these varieties demand more capital inputs in fertilizer and herbicides and must be replanted more often. Given the uncertainties of the price of sugar on the world market it makes good sense not to overcapitalize production. A newly planted cane field produces its best crops during its first and second years of growth but farmers claim that they don’t realize any profit from plant cane until the third year if they must pay for mechanized land preparation. Aside from harvesting costs, planting is the single most expensive aspect of cane cultivation (see Table 10 below).

In northern Belize sugar cane cultivation practices vary along a continuum ranging from the *milpa* system, which employs essentially the same technology as swidden subsistence farming, to fully mechanized cultivation. When sugar cane was first brought to northern Belize in the 1850s swidden farmers planted it as part of their *milpa* using the same tools (ax, machete, and planting stick) they used for corn cultivation. Most of the sugarcane fields in existence in northern Belize were initially planted using the milpa method.

During the 1960s local farmers began planting cane in my study area using this same method. The bush is cleared manually (with machete and ax) and burned and sections of cane are planted using a digging stick and a machete to chop off each section
above the ojo as it shoved into the ground. Cane and corn were planted in alternate rows during the first planting. Once the cane became established, however, it was impossible to intercrop. Today many farmers still practice the *milpa* system when they expand production into forested areas even though land clearing machinery is readily available. If a cane field has to be replanted, paying for mechanized land preparation is inevitable. Although unclaimed forest land close to roads has become scarce, as new roads are constructed through the bush farmers expand cultivation into these areas using the *milpa* system.

When new land is put under cultivation using the *milpa* system the farmer can, by doing the clearing himself or by using the un- or underpaid labor of his family members, significantly reduce his planting costs. This is particularly important when cane prices are depressed. If we take as an example the costs of establishing a cane field using the *milpa* system in the Buena Vista area (column 1) and eliminate all of the labor costs involved in planting (column 2) and half the harvesting labor costs (assuming that the farmer and one son do half the harvest labor) then the return on his investment increases from 36 percent to 151 percent.
Table 9: Sugarcane production costs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Land rent</strong></td>
<td>20</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Interest on operating capital @ 16% per annum</strong></td>
<td>97.31</td>
<td>97.31</td>
<td>119.46</td>
<td>15.87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Supervision/administration</strong></td>
<td>90</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Land preparation</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>plow</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>harrow</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>furrow</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>tilling (molding)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>35</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>manual clearing</td>
<td>160</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>burning</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>cleaning unburnt material</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>bushhog planting area</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>herbicide</td>
<td>33.33</td>
<td>33.33</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>herbicide application</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Planting</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>seed</td>
<td>33.33</td>
<td>33.33</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>cut &amp; load seed</td>
<td>16.67</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>transportation</td>
<td>16.67</td>
<td>16.67</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>aligning rows</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>manual planting</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>covering</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Fertilization</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>fertilizer</td>
<td>52.5</td>
<td>52.5</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>manual application @ $2.00 to $4.00 per sack</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3.75</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Weed control</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>herbicide</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
<td>15.44</td>
<td>15.44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>herbicide application @ $1.50 to $2.50 per tank</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>weeding 4 times manually with machete</td>
<td>160</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>maintenance of intervals</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Harvesting</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>cutting fire lines</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>cutting cane @ $5.00 to $6.00 per ton</td>
<td>225</td>
<td>112.5</td>
<td>132</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>loading cane @ $4.00 to $5.00 per ton</td>
<td>225</td>
<td>112.5</td>
<td>99</td>
<td>49.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>transporting cane to factory @ $10.50 to $17.50 per ton</td>
<td>540</td>
<td>540</td>
<td>231</td>
<td>231</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>burning trash</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1 Milpa system</td>
<td>2 Milpa system</td>
<td>3 Ratoon cane</td>
<td>4 Ratoon cane</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------------------------</td>
<td>-----------------</td>
<td>-----------------</td>
<td>---------------</td>
<td>---------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Plant cane Buena Vista hired labor 1819.48</td>
<td>Plant cane Buena Vista family labor 984.81</td>
<td>Ratoon cane San Pablo hired labor 746.65</td>
<td>Ratoon cane San Pablo family labor 457.81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total cost per acre</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yield tons cane per acre</td>
<td>.45</td>
<td>.45</td>
<td>.22</td>
<td>.22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Production cost per ton</td>
<td>40.43</td>
<td>21.88</td>
<td>29.23</td>
<td>20.80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Returns per ton cane @ 1990 prices</td>
<td>14.57</td>
<td>33.15</td>
<td>25.81</td>
<td>34.23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Return on investment as percentage</td>
<td>0.36</td>
<td>1.51</td>
<td>0.88</td>
<td>1.64</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Although this example is admittedly exaggerated—and I really question this farmer's claim that he was going to get a forty-five ton per acre yield—it is not so far from the truth as one might think. If we compare the costs of cultivating an acre of ratoon cane in San Pablo using estimated hired labor costs, versus the costs of a farmer who used family labor, we have a more realistic picture of the returns to ratoon cane. Of seventy-six cane farmers interviewed in San Pablo, forty-one relied exclusively on family labor for cane cultivation, nineteen used primarily family labor and occasionally hired labor, and fifteen relied exclusively on wage labor. In every case family members supervised the hired labor thus decreasing the administrative costs.

The table below provides a comparison of production costs complied by the Research Department at BSI. Both Farmer A (column 1) and the BSI Research Farm (column 2) employ wage labor and machinery to maintain their ratoons. In column 3 we see Farmer B's costs using wage labor and in column 4 his costs using only family labor.
Table 10: Ratoon cane production costs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1 Farmer A</th>
<th>2 BSI Research Farm</th>
<th>3 Farmer B</th>
<th>4 Farmer B</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yield per acre</td>
<td>32 tons</td>
<td>24 tons</td>
<td>12 tons</td>
<td>12 tons</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tillage (Molding)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>$35.00</td>
<td>$35.00</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fertilization</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fertilizer</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Application</td>
<td>$26.67</td>
<td>$26.00</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>$1.33</td>
<td>$2.50</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Weed control</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Herbicide</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Application</td>
<td>$25.00</td>
<td>$41.25</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manual weeding</td>
<td>$20.00</td>
<td>$20.00</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supervision/Management</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overhead</td>
<td>$32.00</td>
<td>$48.00</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Operating expenses</td>
<td>$96.00</td>
<td>$72.00</td>
<td>$36.00</td>
<td>$36.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Harvesting</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opening firepass and burning</td>
<td>$7.50</td>
<td>$7.50</td>
<td>$10.00</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cutting cane</td>
<td>$192.00</td>
<td>$120.00</td>
<td>$66.00</td>
<td>$49.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Loading</td>
<td>$128.00</td>
<td>$120.00</td>
<td>$60.00</td>
<td>$45.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transporting cane</td>
<td>$448.00</td>
<td>$388.88</td>
<td>$156.00</td>
<td>$156.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Burning trash</td>
<td>$4.00</td>
<td>$5.00</td>
<td>$6.00</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total cost/Acre</td>
<td>$1,256.50</td>
<td>$1,130.88</td>
<td>$450.00</td>
<td>$362.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cost/Ton cane</td>
<td>$39.27</td>
<td>$47.12</td>
<td>$37.50</td>
<td>$30.21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Price/Ton cane</td>
<td>$55.56</td>
<td>$55.56</td>
<td>$54.43</td>
<td>$54.43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Profit/Ton cane</td>
<td>$16.29</td>
<td>$8.44</td>
<td>$16.93</td>
<td>$24.22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Profit</td>
<td>$521.42</td>
<td>$202.56</td>
<td>$203.16</td>
<td>$290.66</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Belize Sugar Industries 1991:6

Farmer B's complete lack of capital inputs to production (no fertilizer, herbicide, or tilling) are reflected in his low yield per acre and in the lower price he receives for his cane. Nevertheless, his earnings in terms of his profit per ton of cane are far better than those of either the BSI Research Farm or Farmer A even if we assign opportunity costs to
his labor (column 3). Perhaps more importantly, should the price farmers receive for
their cane drop to BZ$31.50 per ton as it did in 1985, Farmer B’s losses in terms of
capital outlays would be negligible while Farmer A’s losses would probably put him out
of business.

It has long been recognized that 400 tons is the maximum level of production for
farmers who rely primarily on family labor for cane cultivation (Hulse 1970, Brockmann
1978). Production beyond the 400 ton level generally requires increased reliance on
capital inputs (fertilizer, herbicides, and pesticides), mechanized land preparation, and
hired labor for cultivation if the farmer is to maintain this level of production.
Historically most farmers have been reluctant to increase production beyond this level by
purchasing machinery necessary to mechanize cultivation because the economic returns
are not sufficient to pay for the costs of mechanized production until the farmer reaches
the 2000 ton level of production. As I will explain in greater detail in my discussion of
the formation of extended family production grupos, farmers have overcome the dangers
of acquiring too much equipment—and too much debt—by pooling resources.

The Recent History of the Expansion of Peasant Cane Farming in my Study Area

After completion of the Tower Hill refinery in 1967 sugarcane cultivation spread rapidly
through the villages in my study area, particularly after the price boom of the early 1970s
and a subsequent expansion of the refinery’s processing capacity in 1976. The figure
below tracks the expansion of sugarcane production among the villagers of San Pablo.
Figure 3: The number of sugarcane farmers in San Pablo Village 1971-1993

Source: Belize Sugar Board Records
The rapid proliferation of sugarcane farming in San Pablo, San Jose, Douglas, and San Luis is attributable in part to the government having acquired private lands adjacent to these villages for redistribution to farmers under a lease-purchase program designed specifically to encourage cane cultivation. As was discussed previously, this redistribution program began as a result of small farmers protests against Plantations Limited’s acquisition of lands adjacent to these villages for the purpose of establishing a massive sugar plantation. In addition to receiving parcels of land through the government, villagers were also entitled to apply for provisional cane quotas and crop establishment loans issued through the Orange Walk Division of the CFA.

In 1965 the Annual Report of the Lands and Survey Department noted that south of the Douglas-San Pablo Road 3,470 acres of newly acquired land (formerly the Southern Portion of the Douglas Estate) had been surveyed and divided into 150 agricultural parcels for distribution to villagers and construction of a system of feeder roads which provide every parcel with road access had begun. By 1967 the government had also acquired and surveyed 2120 acres (71 parcels) in the Indian Hill Estate for redistribution.

According to the man who was chairman of the San Pablo Village Council in 1967, under the redistribution program each household in the village was allowed to claim one parcel of land which were generally twenty-five to thirty acres in size. At the time there was more than enough land for each household to receive one parcel and households which could demonstrate greater need—those with several resident male
offspring—were entitled to acquire additional parcels. Although the idea of owning land was a foreign concept to most of the milperos in these villages, some grasped the broader implications of the situation and also acquired parcels in their wives’ names.

In 1955 there were only six cane farmers in all of the villages mentioned above. Although incomplete, the Belize Sugar Board records for the 1960s show eighteen farmers as having applied for quotas between 1963 and 1968. By 1971, the first year for which I have reliable data on sugarcane production and quotas, San Pablo Village alone had forty farmers (see figure above). The number of farmers in San Pablo remained fairly stable until the mid-1970s when the price boom of 1975 and the 1977 expansion of the Tower Hill refinery’s grinding capacity precipitated another stampede of new farmers. According to government census data, in 1980 the population of San Pablo was 638 persons residing in 101 households. Based on these population figures and the data in figure above, we can see that by 1981 there were almost as many sugarcane quotas in San Pablo as there were households; however, these statistics are extremely deceptive.

A superficial examination of the statistics concerning the distribution of land and sugarcane quotas gives the impression of a large population of farmers with small landholdings who are producing barely enough cash income from sugarcane to survive. It is estimated that a household requires a minimum annual production of 400 tons of cane in order to support itself entirely from the proceeds of cane farming (BSI 1989). In Belize approximately ninety percent of all registered cane farmers have quotas of less than 400 tons which would suggest that the majority are not earning enough to get by.
Government land records suggest a similar situation and give the impression of a large number of farmers with single small holdings; however, this does not appear to be the case. To a great extent this is attributable to the fact that when farmers take possession of unclaimed land in areas which have not been surveyed, the amount of rent they pay the government is based entirely on their declaration of the amount of land they are using. Many farmers in San Pablo have been growing cane for years in the unsurveyed Naranjal and Narrows areas east of the village without ever paying any rent. The Overseas Development Administration conducted a study of land use in northern Belize in 1991 and concluded that although the majority of farmers in the Corozal and Orange Walk districts have land holdings between 5 and 50 acres, the largest area of land was held by those with more than 50 acres. In Corozal, 63% of the farmers held 40% of the land in holdings of 5-50 acres, 16% with holdings over 50 acres had 59% of the land. In Orange Walk, 59% of the holdings were 5-50 acres occupying 23% of the total land area; whereas 20% of the holdings were over 50 acres and accounted for 77% of the listed area.

Fragmentation of land holdings is not a serious factor in farm management. Nevertheless in Corozal, 7% of landholders have four or more parcels; and 54% have two or three. In Orange Walk the census recorded 46% of landholders with 2 or 3 parcels and 1.8% with four or more (King et al 1992:110). There may in fact be substantial benefits to having a number of small holdings in cane rather than one large parcel. A farmer with a single parcel is more likely to experience complete loss of his crop due to insect infestation or wildfire than is a farmer with dispersed holdings.
Some researchers (e.g. Henderson 1990, Stavrakis 1978) have used the statistics of the distribution of sugarcane quotas to justify dependency theory based analyses of the consequences of cane farming: the existence of a large number of cane farmers with small quotas must be evidence of ongoing proletarianization and the development of underdevelopment. As I shall argue below, any analysis of the economic situation of the cane farming population which is based on the examination individual farmer’s production and landholding statistics cannot hope to comprehend the social and economic strategies which small farmers employ in order to be able to participate in the capitalist economy without becoming its victims.

Since the beginning of cane farming in San Pablo and throughout the northern districts, farmers have sought to increase both their cane production and their landholdings by acquiring multiple quotas and parcels of land which are registered in the names of their spouses and offspring. Upon the recommendation of the Cane Farmers’ Association, farmers apply to the Sugar Board for small provisional licenses (usually twenty-five tons) for their wives and offspring. This strategy is not confined solely to large farmers but is almost universal.

The Economic Rationale of Multiple Quotas

The farmer’s cane quota is the amount of cane which the farmer is guaranteed to be able to deliver to the refinery, his collateral for loans through commercial banks and the

\footnote{In reality quotas are issued based on political and familial affiliation rather than productivity. With respect to the official process of acquiring licenses through the CFA and the BSB, farmers universally maintain “todo es politica” (its all politics).}
Development Finance Corporation, and the basis of his access economic benefits provided by the CFA (low cost agricultural inputs and credit) and the Sugar Labor Welfare Fund (primarily $1200 housing grants).

Among the villagers of San Pablo in 1993, 108 sugarcane quotas were distributed among 28 families which cooperated—some to a greater degree than others—during the cane harvest. The village’s remaining 22 quotas were held by small farmers who worked the harvest on an individual basis. Families hold multiple quotas for a number of reasons: to spread the tax burden and hide assets, to not appear to have “too much,” and to keep their offspring in line.

If you examine the frequency of quota transfers among the villagers of San Pablo, San Jose, San Luis, and Douglas as noted in the table below we see that only 37 percent of these transfers resulted in quotas leaving the family that had originally acquired them. The Belize Sugar Board requires that persons transferring quotas state the reason for the transfer. Among those transfers between parents and offspring the most frequently stated reason was “To give my son, daughter a start in life.” Some were yet more explicit stating that a quota was being transferred to a son under the agreement that “he continue to take care of the family.”

Table 11: Frequency of quota transfer types 1971-1992

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Frequency of transfer types</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>no known relationship or sale</td>
<td>126</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>brother to brother</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>husband to wife</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>father to daughter</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sister to sister</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mother to son</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>father to son</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
If only one person in the family, the male head of household, controls all the quotas and all the land then it is difficult to keep other family members interested. However, if each son receives a fifty or one hundred ton quota then he is still not financially independent but nevertheless has some tangible incentive to continue cooperating in the family productive unit.

Quota transfers decline when the price of sugar drops and pick up again when it increases. The following graph shows the number of transfers for the same villages noted above. High prices in 1980 and 1981 (more than BZ$60 per ton) seem to have spawned an increase in quota transfers—probably through sales of quotas—while the price crash of 1985 had the opposite effect.
Figure 4: Frequency of quota transfers: 1970-1992.

Source Belize Sugar Board Records
In tracing the history of agricultural land transfers in the same villages noted above, (San Pablo, Douglas, San Jose, and San Luis) the same pattern evident in the frequency of types of quota transfers was also in evidence. Only 18 percent of the land transfers of parcels with registration numbers--those which can be reliably tracked--involved land leaving the family.

Table 12: Frequency of land transfer types: 1958-1992

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of transaction</th>
<th>Frequency of transactions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>same owner (no transfer)</td>
<td>346</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mother to daughter</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>no known relationship (sale)</td>
<td>88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>brother to brother</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>husband to wife</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>father to daughter</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sister to sister</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mother to son</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>father to son(s)</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>daughter to mother</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>within family</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>grandfather to grandson</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>step-father to step-son</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>brother/sister-in-law</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>purchased from BSI</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>grandfather to granddaughter</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Belize Sugar Board Statistics
The pie chart on the following page shows the types of land transfers as a percentage of the total acreage involved in transfers of the 365 parcels with registration numbers. This includes the cane land villagers purchased from BSI in 1972 when the company got out of sugarcane production. It is interesting to note that, of these 365 parcels, 69 percent appear in the tax records. This is significant because most of these parcels were originally leased from the government during the late 1960s and early 1970s which means that the owners have since purchased the land from the government.

Although it is impossible to verify this, some farmers claim that there is more family unity now than there was when everyone lived from swidden subsistence farming. Swidden farmers had no private land, no agricultural machinery, and very little savings. Now, with sugarcane there is something to inherit and sons are less willing to strike off on their own.
Figure 5: San Pablo, San Jose, Douglas, and San Luis land transfers 1958-1992

Source: Land Rent and Tax Registers of the Department of Lands and Survey in Orange Walk Town.

Four villages land transfers 1958-1992
as percentage of total acreage

- Transfer within family (25.60%)
- Purchased from BSI (4.85%)
- Sold to non-kin (18.01%)
- No known transfer (51.55%)

365 parcels with registration numbers totaling 7905 acres
A farmer’s quota is also a fairly accurate measure of his economic status and prestige in the community though individual accumulation and the flaunting of wealth is neither particularly desirable nor is it advisable. An individual who is conspicuously wealthy is said to be demasiado orgulloso or “too proud”. Too much orgullo attracts envidia (envy) which starts cane fires; people also have far less compunction about stealing from or cheating los ricachones (the gluttonously rich). One way to minimize the appearance of being too rich is to spread your wealth among your offspring. This attracts less attention—from both the standpoint of taxes and envidia—as well as providing an incentive for your offspring to continue to be part of the familial enterprise.

In order to understand why farmers seek to acquire multiple quotas it is also necessary to bear in mind that farmers’ access to commercial credit is based entirely on the size of their production quota. Any farmer with a quota of one hundred tons or more can take out a loan against his quota. Although the original purpose of these loans was to provide farmers with funds to purchase inputs for cultivation during the dead season (fertilizer, pesticides, etc.) many small farmers use these crop loans primarily for subsistence during the period between harvests. The banks refuse to give small farmers loans in excess of the value of their production quota. The effects of these lending policies are readily apparent if we examine farmers’ monthly outstanding loan balances.

Immediately before the 1993 harvest a son of one of the wealthiest cane farmers in San Pablo was robbed of his tools and a bicycle which were stored behind his house. He told me that he had gone out the back door just in time to see and recognize the thief making off on his bike. When I asked what he did he said that he put out the word that he just wanted his tools back and he didn’t care about the bike but nothing ever came of it. I asked him why he didn’t go to the police and he said that if he did there was absolutely no question that they would burn his cane fields.
from commercial banks. In June following the harvest farmers take out loans for planting, field maintenance, and/or subsistence. In January when the bank starts taking loan payments out of the farmers cane earnings farmer debt drops off dramatically.
Figure 6: Commercial bank loans to cane farmers

Source: Data compiled by the Central Bank of Belize

Cane farmers' monthly outstanding loan balance 1985 - 1992
Farmers are paid for the cane they deliver to the refinery through the banks which automatically deduct their loan payments before the farmer ever sees his money. A farmer who wants to delay the repayment of a loan can sell his cane to another farmer, however, he usually receives approximately 15 percent less total income than he would if he delivered his cane to the refinery in his own name. If, for example, a farmer takes out a loan equivalent to half his credit limit (BZ$2000) against a 400 ton quota he really has no choice but to deliver the cane to the factory in his name and pay-off the debt according to the bank's repayment schedule or he loses money by selling his cane to another farmer. However, if instead of having the entire 400 ton quota in his own name, the farmer distributes his quota among his family members (for instance giving his wife and a son each a 100 ton quota and retaining 200 tons for himself) they are entitled to take out loans in their name--wives always take out loans in their maiden names--based on their quotas. The family can then delay repayment of the loan by delaying delivery of the cane to fill the quotas against which the loans were taken out. In this example if the farmer fills his own 200 ton quota first and later fills his wife and son's quotas (against which loans were taken out) then all of the income from his first payment is immediately is available to the family without the bank taking its share off the top.

Another reason that farmers distribute quotas among family members is that this minimizes the possibility of the farmer having his quota reduced if he fails to fill the quota for three consecutive years or, as was the case in 1985, sugar market declines result in blanket quota reductions. Individual large farmers are more susceptible to downward
revisions when they are unable to meet fill their quota for the simple reason that a
shortfall is more obvious. Using the same 400 ton farmer as an example, if he can only
deliver 300 tons of cane for three consecutive harvests then his quota will be reduced by
100 tons. However, if he distributes his quota among the family then each quota holder
can alternately “take the hit” so to speak. By distributing shortfalls in production among
the family quota holders on an alternating basis none of the family members consistently
experience shortfalls for three consecutive years.

In general small quotas are much less likely to be revised downward even when
shortfalls are frequent because the BSB generally operates according to the principle of
one quota-one family even though everyone knows this is not the case. In 1985 when the
Libertad refinery was closed due to world sugar market price crash and Belize’s loss of its
US market quota, farmers with licenses greater than 100 tons were subjected to a blanket
15 percent quota reduction while farmers with 100 tons or less quotas were unaffected.
As Figure 7 on the following page indicates, this was the first time in San Pablo’s history
that the village’s aggregate quota holdings declined.
Figure 7: San Pablo villagers' total quotas in thousands of tons
Source: Belize Sugar Board Records
In Appendix D, Figures 2 and 3 provide an interesting comparison of the size and
distribution of quotas in the Corozal and Orange Walk Divisions of the Cane Farmers' Association before and after the disastrous 1985 harvest season. It is apparent from these data that the Corozal Division suffered the most from closure of the Libertad refinery. It is interesting to note, in comparing the effects of the downward quota revisions on the Orange Walk Division, that farmers in the 300 to 400 ton range suffered the most. These larger small farmers not only suffered a blanket 15 percent reduction in their quotas, but also a 15 percent reduction in the amount of money they could borrow from the banks to maintain their fields since bank loans are based entirely on the size of the farmer’s quota. This meant that those farmers who were dependent upon loans to maintain their fields, those who could not substitute family labor for wage labor, were forced to neglect the acreage they already had under cultivation.

The final reason why farmers prefer to distribute their quotas within their families rather than keeping everything in their names is income tax. In Belize in 1993 persons with income of less $3000 a year were not required to pay income tax. Given the nature of the records kept by both the refiner and the commercial banks it is virtually impossible for a farmer to hide sugar income from the government. If, again using the example of the 400 ton farmer, a farmer keeps all the quota in his name then he will be liable for income tax. If his quota is distributed among family members then they pay no taxes.
Early ethnographers working in Mesoamerican communities traditionally attempted to describe household composition and residence patterns in the static terms provided by general ethnological theory. Households were seen as being "single," "joint," "extended" or "residual" family households. Occasionally terms such as "patrilocal," "matrilocal," and "neolocal" were used to further stress the nature of the kin ties of household family members and the preferential residential rules that existed in the community. Once the ethnographer had coded the residential units in their community, the number of households in each category were totaled and statistical conclusions were drawn from the data (Abrams 1973).

In the rare instances when anthropologists such as Redfield (1950), actually tried to study the ways in which a community and its residence patterns had changed over a specific period of time, the statistics of household composition for the two endpoints of the period were simply compared to show how the proportion of the various "types" of households in the community had changed over time. This data was then used to formulate specific hypotheses concerning why household patterns had changed in the way they had. In Redfield's case he suggested that the disappearance of the extended family household type in Chan Korn was the result of modernization.

While such approaches attempted to realistically account for the change in domestic organization through time, they ignored a critical aspect of domestic organization, its basic processual-developmental nature. Fortes was one of the first to
stress the importance of the developmental cycle in the domestic group. He made it clear that the types of households ethnographers traditionally defined and counted in the communities they studied were the momentary crystallizations of a domestic developmental cycle at one point in time (1958:3). Looking at the number of standard household types in a community told nothing of the developmental cycle of the domestic group in which one household type followed from another as the biological nature of the family changed.

More recently anthropologists such as Netting (1981) and Wilk (1991) have focused on the economic adaptive functions of the household to the explain changes in the configuration of the domestic group over time. In essence this view holds that “the household social unit responds more flexibly and sensitively to changes in the socioeconomic environment than do larger aggregations such as kin groups and settlements” (Netting 1981:47). Although I agree with this statement as a sort of theoretical bottom-line, it does not seem to adequately explain the forms of domestic group adaptation to sugarcane farming present among mayero communities in northern Belize, particularly if coresidence is used a criterion for defining production and consumption units. I would argue, following Goody (1976), that domestic groups’ adaptations to small-scale sugarcane cultivation—most evident in the organization, allocation, and scheduling of labor—in northern Belize do not so much take place inside individual households as within kinship networks which link the various domestic groups. I maintain that it is impossible to examine household organization as if the house
where a domestic group resides were separate from others. The changes which take place in household organization can only be significantly described by looking at the wider kin networks linking individuals and households. The locus of peasants' adaptation to cane farming is not situated in the individual household per se, and it is impossible to examine household organization as if the house were a single domestic group which isolation.

The approach which I have adopted for my analysis of peasant adaptation to commercial sugarcane farming derives primarily from Polyani’s concept of “householding”°: the various forms of noncapitalist economic organization that persist, grow, and change in the midst of capitalist economies. Though lesser known than his concepts of reciprocity, redistribution, and market exchange, householding is a concept which Polyani designed to “handle complexity, change, and resistance to political and economic elites in cultural systems where there are constant tensions between the demands of the elites and the requirements of people who stand on the lower rungs of state stratification systems” (Halperin 1991:94).

Polyani conceived of householding as a noncapitalist form of economic integration which has very little in common with either the profit motive or the institutions of markets. It is production for one’s own sake, the means of provisioning the “household”--which Polyani defines as the members of a self-sufficient unit, be it a family or the settlement of the manor (1944:53). Householding as a form of economic

---

°Polyani’s choice of term “householding” is unfortunate in that it engenders confusion. Householding has little to do with physical households and may not require actual households. It may involve several individuals, pairs of individuals, or groups of households (Halperin 1991:98).
integration of activity embodies the principle that action is directed by the interest of the group which runs the household for the benefit of its members.¹¹¹

The key feature of Polyani’s model of householding is the coordination, timing, and scheduling of economic activities (production, distribution, and consumption) by people who move in and out of differently organized economic institutions. Householding may operate within a capitalist economic system but it is not of the capitalist system. Rather, it is a form of integration capable of coordinating both capitalist and noncapitalist provisioning processes for the benefit of groups at various levels within stratified state systems, regardless of how the state or local economies are organized (Halperin 1991:98).

In the absence of any reliable quantitative data which I could use to compare pre-sugarcane and post-sugarcane domestic group developmental cycles it is impossible to say that sugarcane cultivation has caused the particular distribution of residential groupings in existence today. Therefore, rather than look at domestic organization in San Pablo from a static and quantitative point of view, I focus instead upon the processes of domestic group development and the ways in which domestic groups articulate with the capitalist sugar economy over the course of their development. Rather than adhering closely to existing ethnological classifications of households and/or domestic groups—what in terms of the developmental cycle would be stages of domestic group

¹¹¹ In this way householding is similar to Trouillot’s conception of the peasant labor process: the institutionalized process whereby the organization of domestic group labor perpetuates the household as the primary unit of production and consumption (Trouillot 1988, Mandala 1990). However, Polyani’s notion of the household is much broader than that of Trouillot.
development—I try to categorize the variations in domestic group organization in the community the way that San Pableños do.

The Concept of the Household in San Pablo

Mayeros make important distinctions between the biological and economic nature of domestic groups in the community. While the kinship relations of coresident individuals are important (non-kin seldom live together), the villagers themselves classify households in the community primarily according to economic organizational criteria. Families who reside together in multiple family domestic groups (which are primarily patrilocal) and maintain themselves as single units of production, consumption, and distribution are seen by San Pableños as a fundamentally different kind of domestic group than those who live together but maintain separate family economies

\[\text{It is a very tricky proposition to make the distinction between families which live together but have separate economies and families which live together and have joint economies. Often brothers and/or fathers and sons reside in adjacent houselots and maintain what appear to be economically separate households: they don’t pool income and each has its own economic resources such as land and cane quotas. Nevertheless, they may eat together often and be engaged in constant exchanges of food and labor (childcare, house maintenance, etc.) and so on. This is one of the reasons it is so difficult to apply any kind of typological framework in trying to define households within the community. In fact, I doubt whether any typology has any relevance.}\]
cooperative agricultural enterprises (each retaining their share of the proceeds), which are seen as still different types of domestic units, referred to locally as grupos (groups). The most successful cane farmers in San Pablo are all members of grupos which are made up of patrilaterally related males whose economic cooperation focuses on the sugarcane harvest, the critical labor bottleneck in the annual cane agricultural cycle. Coresidence in and of itself is not the primary criterion for local classification of domestic units in the community.

All of the households which villagers referred to as trabajando en compania are made up of the families of fathers and sons I refer to these units as “patrilocal extended family households.” The second type of domestic group which involved co-residence, but economic and productive independence on the part of member families (which are also generally made up of the families of fathers and sons) I refer to as multiple family households. Those families in which non-coresident member households form cooperative agricultural enterprises are called grupos (groups) which are also predominantly made up of related males, often brothers and their adult sons. Domestic units composed of one biological family which operate more or less economically independent from their kin (there is no enduring economic collaboration) are called nuclear family households. Finally, those households which consist of an incomplete or partial biological family which is either economically independent (in the case of bachelor households) or dependent (in the case of widows with small children who are dependent on their relatives) I refer to as partial family households. When I use the term
“household” in this study, then, I refer not only to the kinship but also in a primary sense to the economic and productive relationship member families of a single domestic unit have to one another.

Household Types as Stages in the Developmental Cycle of Domestic Groups

Once I had examined the family residential histories of villagers it became clear that the types of households I have described are stages in a general household developmental process.

Families go through developmental cycles as the individuals who compose them go through their life cycles. A census taken at a given point in time takes a cross-section and gives a static picture of households and families that the historian and sociologist can sort into types. But rather than being types these may simply be phases in the developmental cycle of a single family organization (Berkner 1972:495).

My data conflict in an important way with the developmental cycle as conceptualized by Fortes (1958). Rather than there being a single developmental cycle for each society as Fortes contended, there are in San Pablo a number of alternate developmental cycles based upon a common theme: when a son marries he must decide where he wants to live and how to support his new family. He can stay with his parents (though this is not a particularly desirable situation from his wife’s perspective) and either combine his resources with theirs or maintain his own family separately, or he can move off on his own while maintaining some economic ties with the parental household.

The basic strategy for achieving full adulthood in mayero society is constant: obtaining control over one's own labor and the resources it generates (Birdwell 1978).
This takes a different form for males and females since each sex is concerned with a different set of activities and resources. A woman initially achieves this by obtaining her own domestic workspace: house, kitchen, and wash house. Increasingly however, it also means acquiring land and a sugarcane quota in her name. For a man it is attained through acquiring a sugarcane quota and titled land in his own name which he can then eventually use to control the labor of his offspring.

As long as a son continues to occupy a subordinate role in his father's economic enterprise he is subject to the decision-making and authority of the father. Decisions concerning how the son's labor and resources are made with a view toward satisfying the consumption needs of, and perpetuating the parental household. If a son wishes to work toward establishing an economic base that will supply the future needs of his own family, he must either escape his father's authority or become a partner in the decision-making. This is most decisively accomplished by the son's acquiring titled land. The accumulation of capital through wage labor and sometimes marijuana cultivation are also employed by young men as a means of beginning to establish some degree of autonomy.\textsuperscript{113} The acquisition of a sugarcane quota, based on production carried out on the father's land, or \textit{milpa} cultivation on unclaimed land is also an intermediate step toward autonomy.

\textsuperscript{113}Marijuana cultivation is not so popular as it once was. Following the closure of the Libertad sugar refinery the UDP government acquiesced to the demands of the US State Department to get tough on crime and accepted a huge grant for this purpose. The ensuing herbicide-based campaign against marijuana cultivation contributed to the demise of honey production in Belize and stiff new laws made the risk of growing and possessing marijuana much higher.
A man's obligation to his father's household is eventually be superseded by a concern for the development of his own resource base and a secure future for his family of procreation. This may or may not result in total economic separation, that is, the establishment of autonomous control over his own productive enterprise. A man may continue to work in company with others; the critical point lies in his achievement of control over the allocation of the fruits of his labors, and a significant share in decision-making regarding the labor itself. Complete economic autonomy, in the sense of an independent enterprise, does not appear to be an important goal toward which men strive.

The means of establishing full economic autonomy are largely limited to the full-time pursuit of a nonagricultural occupation, which are scarce, or the acquisition of good cane land with road access which is becoming scarce. Sugar cane and subsistence farming are seasonally labor intensive and generate labor bottlenecks which occur simultaneously during peak periods in the annual agricultural cycle. Until a man has mature sons to work under his leadership—meeting the labor demands of both sugarcane and subsistence production to insure that his household's cash and subsistence needs will be met—it is to his advantage to maintain some kind of cooperative arrangement with father and brothers, provided he is on an equal footing with them in the decision-making process.

A son may continue to work with his father's production group for some time after marriage and even after setting up his own separate household. In fact the paternal work groups often seems to persist, until the sons have the labor of their own sons at their
disposal. The time at which, and the extent to which, a mature son decides to assert his economic autonomy is contingent upon the respect with which his father treats him and the father's ability to offer inheritance (land or capital assets such as a cane truck) or more immediate inducements (part of his sugar cane quota or separate living facilities within the family compound) to remain in his production unit. By the same token, the household will support those who support the household. If a son leaves his father's household work group at a time when the loss of his labor threatens its productivity or viability then he is on his own. If the son strikes out on his own at the right time and on good terms, leaving his parental household in a position of strength and security, he remains a member in good standing.

The decision to establish a separate residence is often precipitated by the son's wife's desire to assert her social maturity. Life is generally not easy for the yierna (daughter-in-law) residing in her husband's household under the command of her suergra (mother-in-law) who controls access to the household's domestic resources. In fact, there often is a predictable pattern to the newly married couples' decision to depart.

After the yierna has her first child her workload increases exponentially yet she still under the authority of her suegra who still expects to control her labor. Meanwhile she sees her husband's labor going into the maintenance of her in-laws household. One woman complained to me that when she lived with her husband's family, even though she had to take care of her own child, she was still expected to do whatever her suegra told her to while her unmarried sisters-in-law sat around doing
nothing. Eventually things reach the boiling point and one day the *yierna* packs her bags—which is usually not very much—and takes her baby out to the roadside to wait for the bus so she can return to her parent's home. When her husband catches up with her the demands are usually the same: either complete residential separation or her own kitchen and washing facilities in his father's solar. Relations between the *yierna* and her mother-in-law are not necessarily irreparably damaged by such a split unless the woman also demands that her husband begin working apart from his father's work group. Today young men often try to avoid this situation entirely by building a house before they marry. Fathers try to maintain the loyalty of their sons by building them a separate house on their lot. It is expected that a good father will eventually provide his son with a house after he is married. Similarly, sons who remain in their father's cane production group expect to eventually receive a quota: either one which the father has bought, or a share of his father or mother's existing quota.

The patrikin-based production, distribution, and consumption relationships I have outlined above strongly suggest that *mayero* residence practices are not, in and of themselves, a reliable indicator of the nature of the social changes that have occurred in *mayero* society as a result of commercial sugar cane cultivation. Although the household is the basic *mayero* economic unit, its production and consumption functions may not define identical units. A residential unit with its own independent processing and consumption facilities may be part of a patrilocal extended-family in terms of production. Conversely, an extended-family household with common processing and consumption
facilities may house more than one production unit by virtue of the presence of a son who is in the advanced stages of establishing a productive base with which to support his wife and children. Under these circumstances, any attempt to typologize these different ways of organizing production, distribution, and consumption would seem to be pointless. They are merely different outcomes of the application a common social strategy under different sets of conditions spawned by domestic group developmental cycles. What is clear is that the residential, production, and consumption functions which occur in *mayero* households cannot be understood without reference to the domestic group's developmental cycles.

The Impact of the Domestic Group Developmental Cycle on Cane Farming

One of the basic questions I addressed throughout the course of my fieldwork was, How do Belize’s low rural population density, the absence of a large free rural labor force, and the existence of large tracts of unclaimed, arable land influence the impact of capitalism on sugarcane farming populations? Assuming that these circumstances do exist (my data indicate that they do), a further question arises: Do the cash-poor, labor-scarce economy of smallholder cane farming and the seasonal bottlenecks of cane cultivation favor households with abundant labor resources? Pursuing this line of reasoning, a further objective of my research was to determine if and how household demography influences the nature of economic differentiation within cane farming communities. Simply stated, is there any demonstrable relationship between households' economic behavior and
changes in household size, composition, and structure over time? Do the economic behavior and social status of cane farming households change in response to the domestic group developmental cycles, or is social stratification primarily a function of individualistic capitalist accumulation? Are productive assets (sugarcane quotas and land) becoming concentrated in the hands of individuals, or are these assets cycling through families?

My research suggests that capitalism has not supplanted the peasant labor process in most cane farming households—that is, the organization of domestic group labor that perpetuates the household as the primary unit of production and consumption. However, although the household is the primary unit of production, consumption, and distribution its utility as an analytical concept is eclipsed by the importance of the patrilocal extended family to sugarcane production.

Most farmers cannot depend solely on cane farming to meet their households' cash needs for a number of reasons, primarily the unpredictability of the market and the banks' refusal to provide loans to increase production. Small farmers' basic economic goals are to minimize their labor and capital inputs to cane production—being sure to fill their households' production quota(s)—so that they can take advantage of other economic opportunities as they arise. The strategies farmers use to increase income, avoid risk, hide assets from the government and the banks, and reduce costs of production are based largely on extensive cultivation techniques and kin-based production groups.
Like *milpa* agriculture, sugarcane cultivation in Belize is extensive rather than intensive. According to Chayanov’s theory of peasant economic behavior, in a swidden-based subsistence economy, as size of family increases so does the size of the swidden due to increased household need. In sugarcane farming as the labor force increases so does the area under cultivation. This occurs not only because there is more labor available, but also because sons who are willing to work for subsistence in their youth expect to be compensated further down the road.

The question of the extensive nature of sugarcane production relates back to the availability of land the economies of scale in cane farming. When sugar prices rise farmers prefer to increase their production by increasing the acreage under cultivation rather than increasing their labor or capital inputs to existing fields. Similarly, farmers don’t gamble on the market by producing more cane and hoping that they will receive a quota increase. Instead they apply for an increase and, if they receive it, plant more cane.

Farmers with access to fallow land within a reasonable distance of the refinery invariably increase production by expanding the area under cultivation rather than by increasing inputs to existing fields. A first year *milpa* (swidden) cane crop requires less labor and capital inputs and provides a higher rate of return than does a mechanized first year crop. The rent charged on government land is minimal, and it is easier to cancel a lease than it is to pay-off a bank loan if the crop fails.

The most important means by which farmers reduce their costs of production, minimize risk, and take advantage of occasional opportunities to engage other income
producing activities is by practicing a form of non-capitalist economic integration based on the *grupo* or extended family production group. This type of economic integration is present throughout the Yucatecan population of northern Belize and can reasonably be called a cultural norm. There is arguably some evidence of cultural continuity between labor practices in Quintana Roo documented by Villa Rojas in 1945, and what goes on now in sugarcane farming.

In contrast to the general practice of the pre-Hispanic period, the Maya of the subtribe today seldom help one another in their work. Cooperative labor is limited to groups of close relatives, chiefly parents, brothers, children, and sons-in-law, who often form little parties to work a single *milpa*, which, however, is divided into individual tracts (Villa Rojas 1945: 75).

These extended family *grupos*’ economic behavior closely resemble Polyani’s concept of “householding”: the coordination, timing, and scheduling of economic activities of (production, distribution, consumption) by people who move in and out of differently organized economic institutions. As Polyani conceptualized it the term, householding is a form of non-capitalist (not *pre-capitalist*) economic integration capable of coordinating capitalist and non-capitalist provisioning processes for the benefit of the group.

The extended family-based organization of labor in sugarcane production can be seen variously as a means of resisting being sucked further into the capitalist economy through reliance on wage labor and capital inputs; a means of protecting member households from other farmers who behave like capitalists, and a way to avoid exploitation by the banks and the state. The most basic characteristic of the *grupo* is the coordination and scheduling of activities among family members who move in and out of
different economic spheres on a seasonal basis: cane farming, subsistence farming, and wage labor. Although this type of economic integration operates not only in sugarcane farming but in other spheres of economic activity as well, the way it works is most apparent in cane farming.

In cane farming, the group pools labor and resources for production. A grupo is not a household: its members do not necessarily share the same residence, pool income, or jointly own land, cane quotas, or machinery. Sometimes this does occur; however, the pooling of income and the joint ownership of resources are likely to lead to conflict later on.

The core members of a grupo are usually a man, his wife, and their adult sons. All the grupos in my study area developed out of households, but not all households become grupos. As long as sugarcane cultivation continues to be labor rather than capital intensive some families will never attain the same level of cane production due to purely demographic considerations. However, just having lots of sons is not enough. The cohesiveness, productivity, and longevity of a grupo are determined by many factors, not the least important of which the temperament, competence, and foresight of the head of household.

Cane was planted in my study area during the 1960s when the government distributed land and production quotas to the male heads of household. Many of these

\[11\] Most of the group's cooperation in production focuses on the sugarcane harvest which represents approximately two-thirds of the labor required to produce a ton of cane. Grupo members may also cooperate in cane cultivation but this is less common.
farmers' wives also acquired land and quotas. Today, it is common for the sons of these farmers to initially acquire these resources through the family as a gift from a parent, rather than by purchasing them from another farmer or applying to the government. Control over the flow of labor and resources within the group is directed toward the economic preservation and continuity of the group. While unmarried males remain in their fathers' households they often acquire sugarcane quotas which they fill by working on the father's land. This provides them with a source of personal income yet keeps them dependent on their fathers. The parent's resources: land, cane quotas, machinery are held out as inducements to continue working together. The wealthiest cane farmers are those whose household labor arrangements have survived the breakup of the household.

Married sons often have separate households and these sons and their wives individually own land and sugarcane quotas. The persistence of a grupo, after the sons have established their own households, is contingent upon the father's ability to offer sufficient inducements for his offspring to continue to cooperate in production under his direction.

Decision-making within the grupo is initially vested in the father though in old age this authority is symbolic rather than practical and the oldest son generally becomes the leader. It is at this point that competition emerges within the grupo as the sons begin to develop their own spheres of influence and power via the labor of their offspring.

When the grupo breaks up, the economic productivity and affluence of the member
households generally either remains stable or declines due to the withdrawal of resources, primarily labor, from the productive process.

Generally you see an increase in productivity as extended family groups mature and a decline in production as they breakup. When sugarcane grupos break up there is generally a decline in the member households' overall production unless they are in a stage of the developmental cycle in which they can establish their own grupos.

Summary

Sugarcane farmers resist domination by and capitulation to capitalism through a form of kin-based economic integration that combines market and non-market forms of economic organization and production. Low rural population density, the absence of a large free rural labor force, and the prevalence of extensive cultivation practices contribute directly to the persistence of noncapitalist forms of economic integration among sugarcane farmers. Farmers are not averse to accumulation of wealth and productive resources; however, accumulation is primarily directed toward the economic preservation and continuity of kin groups rather than individual self-enrichment. Analysis of the histories of households' sugarcane production, land tenure, and demographic data suggest that differences in wealth and power among sugarcane farming households are strongly influenced by larger kin group developmental cycles. While it is difficult to prove this statistically due to movements in and out of the grupos by unrelated farmers who join the grupos during the harvest season, this conclusion is supported by what the farmers
themselves say. It is also consistent with Birdwell's findings with regard to the personal power careers of swidden farmers in northern Belize.

In short, households where the male head is in centralization [at the high tide of his personal power career] control more bigger, and better houses...A man in centralization controls sufficient labor and other resources to be able to afford larger more commodious structures. But the configuration is as much a cause as a result of being in the centralization stage of power development (1979:191).

My findings are also consistent with Abrams' analysis of changes in socioeconomic behavior and household types in one sugarcane farming village over a twenty year period. His data show that more people lived in extended family households after sugar cane cultivation began than had done so before it began. He concluded that independent small-scale sugar production had been critical to the extended family household's resurgence as the primary unit of residence, production and consumption in this village (1973:27).

We have seen in this study that modernization in the lowland Maya area need not bring about the destruction of traditional community life and solidarity...Because of the essential compatibility between the focus of change which took place and the values of the people...the change was an eminently successful one. The culture contained specific institutions such as the extended family (a tradition of father and son working cooperatively upon agricultural pursuits) which were well suited to the successful production of agricultural products...the particular delivery cycle of cane, which favored those farmers who had their own delivery trucks, and later restricting on new licenses further made the extended family household an advantageous productive institution (1973:270)

His analysis does not suggest that individual capital accumulation made larger households possible--as neomarxian theorists claim (e.g., de Janvry 1981; Wallerstein 1984)--but that the labor and resource requirements of simultaneous sugarcane and subsistence farming
were conducive to the formation of the extended family households. Sugarcane
cultivation has exacerbated existing rural socioeconomic stratification; however, the
inequality seen in cane farming communities is fundamentally similar to that seen in
communities of subsistence farmers and conforms to Chayanov’s notion of demographic
differentiation (Aass 1980:240). To put it another way, wealth and power accrue to those
households and extended families that, by virtue of their size and influence, have the most
land and labor at their disposal—provided these resources can be effectively controlled
and utilized. Large extended family households and or production groups may be as
much the cause as the result of the prosperity they emanate.
THE POLITICS OF THE PERSISTENCE OF PEASANT CANE FARMING

Somos Mas

In July of 1993 George Price, Belize's perennial Prime Minister and founder of the People's United Party (PUP), was defeated in the national general elections by Manuel Esquivel and the United Democratic Party (UDP). This was Price and the PUP's second loss to Esquivel and the UDP (the first occurred in 1984) and only the second time the PUP had been out of power since universal adult suffrage was instituted in 1954.

The PUP was Belize's first political party and came to power as an anti-colonial labor movement that initially relied heavily on urban working-class support. During the first years of its existence the PUP recruited its membership directly through Belize's first labor union, the General Workers Union. During the 1950s the sugar industry in northern Belize began to expand and the PUP began to cultivate a rural base of support from among the peasant population whose livelihood was threatened by the expanding sugar plantations. After Belize attained internal self-government in 1963, the PUP was able to begin a land distribution program. The party became very strong in rural areas, establishing a strategic base of support which no other party was able to seriously challenge until the 1980s.

The PUP regained power from the UDP in the 1989 elections and received a majority of votes in the 1993 election (36,082 versus 34,306); however, the UDP won more of the twenty-nine district representative races in 1993 and therefore won the election. Although the UDP's victory was constitutionally valid, the PUP politicians in
Orange Walk Town immediately seized upon this anomaly to launch a new political broadsheet, *Samos Mas (We are More): The Voice of the Majority*, in which it savaged the new regime and its policies.  

The primary target of the PUP's attacks was the UDP’s plan to license one thousand new small cane farmers. Following their victory in the 1993 general elections the UDP administration announced that the cane required to meet an increase in the Tower Hill factory’s refining capacity (an increase from 950,000 to 1,000,000 tons) would be provided by one thousand new farmers who would receive quotas ranging in size from twenty-five to one hundred tons and automatically become voting members of the Cane Farmers’ Association. These new farmers were to begin delivering cane to the factory during the 1994/95 harvest.

The PUP accused the UDP of having bought the election with the promise of these new quotas. The UDP countered that it was necessary to increase the number of licensed small farmers because these individuals, whom the UDP claimed were already growing cane, had been denied quotas on purely political grounds by the officers of the PUP-dominated Cane Farmers’ Association.

---

115 In the March 25, 1994 issue of *Samos Mas (We are more)*: UDP Prime Minister Esquivel is referred to as “Cascabel” (rattlesnake), and Orange Walk District representatives Elodio Aragon and Ruben Campos are referred to respectively as “El Odio” (the hate) and “Mafioso Campos.” In December of 1991 Ruben Campos’ brother-in-law was arrested while transporting ten kilos of cocaine in Campos’ van. The irony of this situation is that Joe Briceno, the longtime PUP Orange Walk Central Representative, Minister of Energy and Communications, and chairman of the Orange Walk Division of the Cane Farmers’ Association in Orange Walk was lured to the United States and arrested for drug trafficking by the Drug Enforcement Administration in April of 1985. Slander, libel, personal attacks, innuendo, and name calling are by no means confined to mimeographed scandal sheets. All of Belize’s newspapers, with the occasional exception of Amandala are blatantly partisan: the Belize Times and People’s Pulse represent the views of the PUP and UDP respectively and the Beacon is owned by sometimes UDP politician Dean Lindo. Lindo has been a constant target of the Belize Times which published a photograph of Lindo peeing on a tree in the October 31, 1973 edition and has since referred to him as “the urinator.”
The PUP further contended that the creation of these new farmers was part of a larger, more insidious plot to give the UDP government greater control over the sugar industry. The plan to create new farmers had required special legislation—which was passed by the UDP legislature and ratified by the courts in record time—that increased the Sugar Board's control over the quota system at the expense of the CFA. The PUP further alleged that by stripping the Cane Farmers' Association (whose officers are elected from its membership) of its say in the distribution of new cane quotas, and by giving the Sugar Board (which is made up entirely of political appointees) the final say in how new quotas are distributed, the UDP was consolidating its power over the industry in order to manipulate the sugar industry for its own political ends. Perhaps not surprisingly, all of these allegations, by both the PUP and the UDP, were to some degree true.

Since the export sugar industry was resurrected in the 1950s, the ability to direct the distribution of the economic benefits of the industry—and the votes of the cane farmers and their families—has been a key to political success in national elections. In order to understand how the politics of sugarcane influences national politics it is necessary to bear in mind the old adage, "the smaller the pie, the larger the struggle for the pieces."

The political pie in Belize is very small indeed. Belize's six political districts are made up of twenty-eight voting precincts with 2500-4000 voters in each (Ergood and Hall 1987:2). It is not at all uncommon for precinct elections to be won or lost on the basis of twenty votes. In the past both political parties have used the distribution of sugarcane

---

116 For example: In the 1984 general elections—when the United Democratic Party first defeated the People's United Party—in the Corozal Bay precinct the PUP candidate received eight more votes than the UDP candidate (906-898) and in Orange Walk East
quotas as a means of capturing votes\textsuperscript{117}, but the UDP's plan to add an additional one thousand new farmers and increase the size of the cane farming population by almost twenty percent was a political coup which could profoundly alter the political balance of power in northern Belize. However, the UDP's plan was not without serious risk to the sugar industry and the farmers themselves.

The UDP plan was also opposed by Belize Sugar Industries (BSI) which runs the Tower Hill Factory\textsuperscript{118}. BSI maintained that the creation of one thousand new small farmers was unquestionably contrary to the industry's goal of rationalizing sugarcane cultivation through the intensification of existing farmers' production. Furthermore, the harvest delivery system—which is controlled by the CFA—was already in a state of chaos. A twenty percent increase in the cane farming population would increase the confusion inherent in the system, wreak havoc on scheduling of deliveries to the factory during the harvest, and result in even longer lines of trucks waiting to unload at the factory.

\textsuperscript{117} Florencio Marin the leader of the PUP in northern Belize and arguably the most powerful PUP politician in the country. During the 1970s in order to win a difficult election Marin arranged for swidden farmers in the villages of Chunox and Sarteneja to receive sugarcane quotas and loans to plant cane before there was actually a road linking these villages to the factory. After the election when the road failed to materialize and the farmers defaulted on their loans their debts were passed on to other new farmers who had to pay an additional fee for new quotas acquired through the Sugar Board.

\textsuperscript{118} Prior to 1985 BSI was owned by a London-based corporation, Tate and Lyle Ltd., and operated Belize's two refineries: the Libertad Refinery in the Corozal District and the Tower Hill Refinery in Orange Walk. In 1985 the Libertad refinery was closed due to the decline of the price of sugar on the world market and Tate and Lyle sold all but ten percent of its interest in BSI to the Belizean government. BSI subsequently became 85 percent employee owned. The Libertad refinery was not put back into production until it was acquired by Petrojam Ltd. of Jamaica who manufacture ethanol. The Tower Hill refinery processes approximately 90 percent of the cane grown in Belize. The history of BSI will be examined later in greater detail.
If cane is not ground within seventy-two hours of being burned and cut it begins to rot and its sucrose content quickly disappears. Longer lines at the factory would result in longer waits to unload and could result in tremendous losses of cane which the farmers themselves would have to bear. The addition of one thousand new farmers to the system might also have a disastrous effects on the efficiency of the refining process itself if the ratio of almost stale to fresh cane increased. Processing cane which is almost stale is harder on the grinding machinery than fresh cane and increases the frequency of mechanical breakdowns. It also slows the chemical reactions of the refining process and raises TC/TS ratio: the number of tons of cane required to produce a ton of sugar. All of these costs would inevitably be reflected in the price farmers receive for their cane.

By November of 1993 the list of new farmers had been compiled (and leaked) and the UDP’s plan appeared to be a fait accompli. Although the PUP still hoped to challenge the constitutionality of the law giving the Sugar Board control over the distribution of new quotas, it would be political suicide to try to take back the new quotas. Regardless of the outcome of the legal challenge, it was still essential that the PUP demonstrate that it had retained some support in the north if the party was to survive. A march to demonstrate party solidarity and protest the UDP’s plan to “steal control of the sugar industry from la masa cañera (the cane farming masses)” was organized by the PUP and scheduled to take place on November 17th, a Wednesday afternoon, in Corozal Town. The march was scheduled for mid-week to minimize the possibility of a counter-demonstration and possible confrontation between PUP and UDP supporters. Four
friends from San Jose Village suggested that if I really wanted to understand the la política de la caña (the politics of cane) I should attend this demonstration.

I have known these four farmers since 1982 when I first worked in northern Belize as a mercenary archeologist in the employ of Norman Hammond. I had hired some of their family members to work on the excavations and one owned a bar that I frequented in San Jose. All were PUP loyalists and men of means but none was considered to be a big cane farmer by local standards. Like the bar-owner, most had other negocitos (small businesses) on the side. The most politically influential members of the group were Don Hector, a Justice of the Peace, and Bernaldo, the San Francisco CFA branch representative who controlled the scheduling of local farmers’ cane deliveries during the harvest.

As we drove to Corozal we talked about how villagers decide which candidates to support. Don Hector began his explanation by saying that “en la familia cañera, es el papa quien manda” (in the cane farming family, the father is in charge). Ideally, the children follow the father’s lead in economic and political matters because everything the father does is for the good of the family.119 By the same token, in politics, as in the family, it is only natural that the “father” takes care of his own first120. In other words, elected officials are expected to take care of their own, and in Belize’s minuscule voting

---

119 In reality mothers exercise far greater power over familial decisions than Don Hector’s analysis acknowledges. Nevertheless, in mayero society the father is the figurehead of authority in the family.

120 In her study of a subsistence farming village in the Corozal District Donna Birdwell-Pheasant notes that farmers, in discussing their relationship to the state say “el gobierno es nuestro papa,” tThe government is our father, (1979:80). This is a commonly expressed sentiment.
precincts it is difficult for elected officials to avoid face-to-face interaction with their constituents. It is always very clear who is taking care of their own and who isn’t.

In recent issues of Somos Mas and The Belize Times (the official PUP newspaper) the PUP had been protesting the “victimization” of its supporters by the UDP government. According to Somos Mas people were being fired from government jobs and school teachers were being sent to villages in remote areas far from their families so that UDP supporters could have their positions. When I asked if this did not happen when the PUP was in power everyone in the car acknowledged that it did occur, but it was never as bad under the PUP as it was under a UDP administration.

The staging area for the protest march was the Capri, a dance hall and bar on the Northern Highway, the main road through Corozal Town. Across the street from the Capri was a huge billboard with red lettering (the official UDP color) painted to resemble dripping blood which demanded “STOP THE VICTIMIZATION.” We arrived at the Capri about half an hour before the march was to begin and as we drank our beers cane trucks full of cañeros and buses chartered by the PUP began arriving from Orange Walk Town and the northern districts’ villages. Several high party officials were present, among them Florencio Marin: the leader of the party in northern Belize and arguably the most powerful PUP politician in the country aside from George Price. Marin was slated to address the cañeros in the Capri ballroom after the march.

---

121 I know of several cases in which villagers from San Pablo have shown up, unannounced, at a Orange Walk politicians’ homes in the evening to seek assistance in matters ranging from assisting with the burial expenses of relative to finding jobs to requesting that the government temporarily ban the importation of jalapeño peppers so that they can sell their crop to the local processor, Femagra.
The march was delayed for about fifteen minutes pending the arrival of several buses bringing Creole PUP loyalists from Belize City. The buses finally arrived and quickly unloaded. The occupants, who were all wearing blue and white PUP ball caps and T-shirts, immediately began chanting “Touch one touch all!” as a demonstration of their solidarity with the cane farmers. The Creole demonstrators quickly took position in the front of the march and they continued chanting party slogans (Somos mas, PUP all the way, etc.) throughout the duration of the march. In middle of the column of marchers was a pickup truck with a public address system which in effect separated the Creole demonstrators in the front from the cañeros in the rear.

In contrast to the festive mood of the Creole marchers, most of the cañeros were extremely quiet and, at the beginning of the march, seemed very angry—as though they might be set off by the least provocation. All in all this gave the demonstration the appearance of being two separate marches: as though the people in the front were celebrating a sports victory while the marchers in the rear were on their way to a serious labor action. I was beginning to wonder if my perception of the irony of the situation was lost on everyone but me when Armando, one of my friends from San Jose, shouted out the PUP’s new slogan “Somos mas,” to which he appended “pendejos!” (We are more...dumb-assed!). Judging from the reaction of the farmers around us this was a commonly shared sentiment.

As the march made its way through the streets of Corozal the man in the pickup with the sound system exhorted the cañeros in Spanish. For the most part he recapitulated the basic PUP party line. He began by saying that “la caña es la vida del
"norte" (cane is the life of the northern Belize) and the UDP’s recent actions can only bring sadness to la masa cañera. By changing the laws governing the quota system the UDP had violated the cañeros constitutional rights. He went on to blame the UDP for the closure of the Libertad refinery in 1985 and all the misery this had caused. The cañeros do not want to be “la vaca lechera de un gobierno UDP” (the milk cow of a UDP government) which now refuses to pay cañeros’ social security claims. Cane farmers want their economic autonomy to be respected. If the UDP is allowed to run over the Cane Farmers’ Association, then tomorrow it will be the papaya and citrus growers turn. Cane farmers pay half of the Sugar Board’s operating expenses and now they are using our own money to fuck us.

The route of the march took us through downtown Corozal, past the offices of the CFA and the BSB, down the Northern Highway and back to the Capri. Once there the march split into two groups, the cañeros filed into the ballroom to hear Marin’s speech while the Creole demonstrators retired to the dining area in the back for beer and rice and beans with pigtail. Although the cañeros were absolutely silent during the speeches, the racket coming from the dining room made it difficult to here the speakers.

There was really very little that was new in either Florencio Marin’s speech or that of the speaker who preceded him. In sum they explained that the march had been called to demonstrate cañero solidarity: it is critical that farmers stick together if we are to get ahead. Cane is the largest industry in the north but with current low prices for sugar and the rising cost of living, what little the cañero earns doesn't go very far.
The economic situation will only get worse when the UDP’s new small farmers enter the industry. Large farmers hire labor to cultivate their fields during the *tiempo muerto* (the dead season or the period between harvests). Because the UDP farmers are all small farmers they will do all their own field labor and so they money they earn from cane will not be redistributed during the season when underemployment is most severe in northern Belize.

The PUP does not object to allowing new farmers to enter the industry, but it does object the careless way it is being done. The government is illegally interfering in the affairs of the Cane Farmers’ Association and this is only the beginning of the violation of the farmers’ democratic rights. “This is a violation of the constitution and the only reason they can do this is because they control the courts.”

Marin went on to say that the Secretary of the Sugar Board, all its members, and the Permanent Secretary of Industry who oversees the Sugar Board are all hand-picked by the UDP and the Sugar Board is now distributing licenses on the basis of politics. The CFA has lost the right to recommend farmers for quota increases and so the farmers who have demonstrated their ability to grow cane are being screwed. “They are treating us like *chamacos* (children) because we have been very docile.”

The farmers’ response to Florencio Marin’s speech is best described as unenthused resignation. A few applauded but most just filed out of the ballroom and began looking for their ride home. In reality there was very little which could be done now that the new quotas had already been made public—albeit unofficially. For those farmers who were hoping to increase their quotas through the official system—on the
basis of their production having exceeded their existing quota—the only option now
would be to look for someone who had a quota to sell.

As Bernaldo explained on the drive back to San Jose, many of the new "farmers" who would receive quotas didn’t even have any land, let alone sugarcane. No doubt many of the new quotas the UDP had issued would soon be on the market. The Sugar Board does not have the resources to verify that someone has land under cultivation in sugarcane. Even if they did have the people needed to do this, its easy to show someone who is not from your village a relative’s cane field and say that part of it is yours. That is why the CFA should control the distribution of quotas. Only the CFA branch officers who work in the same area as the applicant know whose cane is whose. His last comment on the subject before I dropped him off in San Jose was “Pues ni modos, uay que aprovechar y asi lo hicieron” (Well, no matter, one must seize the opportunity and that’s what they did).

Obviously there is no right or wrong point of view in this complex situation as evidenced by the fact that two weeks after the PUP demonstration there was a UDP-organized a counter-demonstration in Corozal. Although I was unable to attend this meeting, the farmers who did told me that there were about 800 farmers present who were in complete agreement with the changes being made in the CFA by the UDP. These farmers, mostly UDP, wanted to see quota control taken completely away from the CFA because they felt that quotas have been increasingly controlled by politics.
Planning to increase the annual grinding capacity of the Tower Hill refinery began long before the 1993 elections. The refinery was built in such a way that capacity could be increased with major structural modifications up to a limit of 1,000,000 tons. After the market crashed in 1985 and the Libertad refinery was closed, the Tower Hill refinery had to keep expanding its capacity just to absorb the production of all the Corozal farmers who had previously delivered their cane to Libertad. However, the latest expansion was the result of a recovery in the price of sugar on the world market.

The PUP was in power at the time when plans to increase Tower Hill’s grinding capacity were first announced and it was their intention that increased factory demand be met by bringing the size of the existing cane farmers’ delivery quotas up to 300 tons in order to “rationalize” sugarcane production. Having a great many farmers with small quotas spreads the industry’s profits through a vast number of small producers but the cost is that no one can make ends meet solely on the basis of cane farming and farmers complain that they don’t earn anything from cane. In reality the 300 ton production level is still basically subsistence production since it takes from 400 to 500 tons of production for a family to exist entirely on the proceeds of cane farming. Nevertheless, since 90 percent of farmers have quotas of less than 400 tons, bringing everyone up to 300 tons is a more realistic goal (E. Zetina, per comm. 1994).

The PUP politicians and sugar industry analysts thought that if all the existing farmers’ quotas were increased to a minimum of 300 tons, then farmers would of necessity adopt more efficient, capital-intensive production techniques. In essence, by
increasing the farmers’ quotas they would compel them to intensify production and thereby increase both the productivity of existing fields and the sucrose content of the cane produced. Many farmers would still be able to meet the increased labor demands of larger quotas with household or family labor; however, some planners and PUP politicians maintained that the increased work-load of larger quotas would increase field labor employment in cane cultivation during the dead season, the five months between cane harvests when underemployment is most severe in rural northern Belize.

Clearly the PUP’s expansion plan would benefit existing small farmers by increasing their quotas. However, it would also lessen the possibility of the smallest cane farmers acquiring additional quotas for their family members without having to buy them from other cane farmers. Under the official system of quota distribution and revision, whenever increased demand warranted—usually when the factory increased its milling capacity—farmers were able to petition the Sugar Board, through the Cane Farmers’ Association, to have their quota increased if they had consistently surpassed their quota by delivering additional cane when the refinery was experiencing a shortage.

This is one of the strange ironies of the CFA/farmer-controlled harvest delivery system. At certain times during the harvest the line of trucks waiting to deliver their cane to the refinery can be three miles long and it may take a thirty-six hour wait for a truck to unload. At other times the refinery may be on the verge of shutting down for a lack of cane to grind. In February of 1985 the BSB announced that during that month all cane delivered to factory on Sunday would be considered as "additional" (applicable toward

---

12: When the quota system was first instituted colonial planners naively assumed they would be able to keep people from buying and selling quotas and speculating on the market--this has since proven to be impossible.
demonstrating that a farmer had exceeded his quota) on the condition that the farmer's daily quota was delivered on the other days of the week. This measure was introduced as an incentive for farmers to fill the factories' cane requirements on Sundays, which are not normally filled. The results showed an improvement over the 1984 Sunday deliveries for the same period (Monthly Report of the Sugar Industry 2/27/85).

The PUP's plan to expand only existing quotas was popular among larger farmers because they could afford to buy quotas for their offspring. For large farmers, it was also convenient to have small farmers' surplus production available for purchase in case they needed to buy cane to fill shortfalls in their own production. Perhaps the PUP was counting on the political clout of the larger farmers to carry the election. Whatever the case, they certainly underestimated the power of the small farmers who saw this plan as a threat to the least expensive means by which they could increase their families' aggregate quotas.

The PUP also hoped that by increasing the size of existing farmers' quotas and thereby keeping the number of farmers stable, it would also be possible to better organize and thereby improve the efficiency of the cane delivery system. The main problem with the existing harvest transportation system is not a shortage but an excess of transportation which leads to "the undisciplined, uncontrolled delivery of cane to the factories by cane farmers. The present practice is wasteful, costly and disorganized" (UNCTC 1983 cf. BSI 1993:14). The question of their "inefficiency" is a very sore point among cane farmers and the CFA officers who organize the harvest delivery schedules. BSI and the CFA have long been debating whether the 65/35 split is a fair distribution of profits. In
November of 1992 *El Cañero*, which is printed by the Orange Walk Division of the CFA, reported that BSI was claiming that its efficiency had increased and so should the efficiency of the CFA’s harvest delivery system. This struck a nerve and *El Cañero* responded in kind.

The worst is that the company is criticizing the so-called inefficiency of the cane farmers when in fact they caused the situation in which all cane farmers must bring their cane to one refinery. Nevertheless, the company has managed a higher return for its owners and certain of its employees have received “creature comforts” valued in the millions (my translation *El Cañero* 11/92). 123

It is impossible to know whether any of BSI’s employees have received “creature comforts valued in the millions,” however I think it unlikely since the company is now 85 percent employee owned. The farmers’ hostility toward BSI is a legacy of the days when BSI, then Plantations Limited, was owned by Tate and Lyle and was clearly perceived to be a danger to the small farmer.

The rationalization of sugarcane cultivation and the harvest delivery system have been explicit objectives of the sugar industry since the 1970s (see Hulse 1970, Ayuso 1972, Persaud 1974, BSI 1993). The reason these goals have never been realized is that although they may be rational from a neoclassical economic standpoint, they are neither politically practical nor are they consistent with the logic of peasant sugarcane production which is the basis of Belize’s sugar industry.

For most cane farming families, which may include more than one cooperating household, maximization of total income from various sources rather than maximization

123 "Lo peor es que la compañía ha lanzado críticas de la llamada 'ineficiencia de los cañeros' cuando ellos mismos causaron que el cañero tuviera que traer todo su caña a un solo ingenio. Siembargo, la compañía ha logrado dar un mayor retorno a sus dueños y ha dado otras comodidades valorado en millones a ciertos empleados."
of profit or of the marginal product from sugarcane guides cane production and overall labor deployment strategies. Small farmers clearly recognize the dangers of over-dependence on sugarcane. As one farmer so succinctly put it, “Ajuantamos una buena chinga en 1985 cuando cayo el precio, y no queremos otra.” (We got a good fucking in 1985 when the price fell, and we don’t want another.) So long as farmers do not over-capitalize production, either by increasing their dependence on hired labor (as opposed to unpaid family labor) or purchased inputs (fertilizer, herbicides, pesticides, etc.), they can survive the inevitable fluctuations in the world market price of sugar and years when cane farming yields negative profits. Farmers oppose the rationalization of the harvest transportation system by restricting the number of licensed cane carriers because they would lose control over another aspect of the means of production and they would no longer have flexibility to respond to crises (accidental and/or intentional burning of their cane fields, the early onset of the rains) season) as well as occasional opportunities to deliver additional cane beyond the limits of their quota.

Despite setbacks that occurred during the 1980s due to increased competition from corn sweeteners and reduction of Belize’s export quota to the United States, sugar is still Belize’s largest export earner and the basis of the economy in the northern Belize. Aside from the national bureaucracy, the Belize Cane Farmers’ Association (CFA) is the largest and—were it not for factionalism—potentially the most politically powerful organization in the country. The CFA is run by committees elected from its membership and represents the farmers’ interests in negotiations with the government and the nation’s two refiners (Belize Sugar Industries, Ltd. and Petrojam Ltd.), concerning the regulation
of the industry and the determination of the price farmers' receive for their cane. The CPA’s most important function, however, is its control of the scheduling of farmers' cane deliveries to Belize Sugar Industries (BSI) which refines ninety percent of the cane produced in Belize. Control of sugarcane delivery scheduling is, in essence, control of the critical link between the cane fields and the refineries. Although elected village councils are the putative basis of local government in rural northern Belize, these councils have virtually no legal authority: their primary function is to make the villages’ needs known to the elected district representatives and government ministries. In comparison to the local branches of the CPA, which directly control the local farmers' deliveries of cane to the sugar refineries, the village councils’ political power is insignificant.

The process of refining sugarcane is very hard on machinery and refineries require substantial, ongoing capital inputs from one year to the next. Due to climate, the cane harvest in Belize lasts only seven months which means that the refineries are idle for almost half the year. Cane cultivation and harvesting must therefore be coordinated to maintain a steady flow of cane into the factory so that it operates at peak efficiency and profitability during the grinding season. As Sidney Mintz notes, the need to closely coordinate the cultivation of cane with its mechanical/chemical transformation into sugar arises from the inherent perishability of the crop. Once a cane field is burned prior to cutting, the cane must be processed within seventy-two hours or it begins to rot and its sucrose content quickly disappears. The links between the cutting, grinding, boiling, and crystallization processes must be synchronized under one authority if a refinery is to
operate efficiently, and efficiency and time-consciousness are the hallmarks of industrial
capitalism (1985:50).

For years both the government and BSI have tried unsuccessfully to acquire
greater control over the scheduling and transportation of the sugar harvest to improve the
is published by BSI, noted that negotiations were under way between the government,
BSI, and the CFA to increase the farmers’ share of profits from sixty-five to sixty-six
percent if the CFA would implement a delivery control system acceptable to BSI. At
current cane prices this would increase farmers income by $0.85 per ton (Monthly Report

The CFA, which is made up of the farmers themselves, has been unwilling to
surrender control of harvest delivery system for an obvious reason. To somewhat
oversimplify the matter, in industrial sugar production control of the means of production
is not just ownership of the land on which sugarcane is grown, it is also control of harvest
transport and refining processes. As long as the CFA controls the scheduling and
transportation of the harvest, farmers retain control over two-thirds of the means of
production. This explains why cane farmers demand and receive sixty-five percent of
the value of Belizean sugar sold on the world market while the refiner receives only
thirty-five percent.

Throughout this dissertation I have argued that the Belizean export sugar industry
is based on the production of peasant farmers. Peasant sugar cane farmers are both more

\[124\] For years the government has also been trying to get farmers to become stockholders in
BSI but farmers have been unwilling to do this.
numerous and more successful than capitalist farmers because they are able to withstand periodic sugar price declines on the basis of their reliance on family labor and production strategies which maximize total income from various sources rather than maximizing profit from cane. Their ability to adapt the technology and production practices of milpa farming to sugarcane cultivation is another key to their success--this would not be possible were it not for Belize’s low population density.

The industry has also remained under their control as a result of what might best be described as “the politics of small numbers”: the constant redistribution of the benefits of the sugar industry throughout the rural population of the northern districts by politicians seeking office. While it may be tempting to suggest that the cane farming population is being manipulated by self-interested politicians, I don’t believe the situation is quite that simple. As in the case of the UDP’s most recent victory over the PUP, the UDP was forced to expand the cane farming community by an additional one thousand new cane farmers in order to win the election. In so doing they were forced to abandon the sugar industry’s long-standing goal of rationalizing production. The most important point however is that these 1000 new farmers were not coerced into growing sugarcane and unless they are suffering from a peculiar form of mass delusion, they must know whether other farmers have benefited from sugarcane. Either that or the industry is based on some form of especially sinister exploitation of which small farmers are completely unaware.

I believe that the tendency of some researchers to attribute peasants’ gains to the base motives of politicians arises the tendency to see peasants as passive victims of
history. It's no exaggeration to say that intellectuals—not to mention the leaders of reform movements—love miserable victims. On the other hand, however, they seem to have little tolerance for peasants who build or take over institutions to serve their own needs and then proceed to manage them without the supervision.

The tendency, which had begun in the 1957 elections, to recruit parliamentary candidates from their [rural] constituencies had its political advantages, but it also limited the number of candidates who could have been selected from the intellectual repository of Belize City (Grant 1976:243)

This is a condescending attitude toward people who can, in fact, be creative, innovative, and sometimes very powerful in their response to external threats to their way of life.

The cane farming commercial peasantry came into its own in the 1950s and has been gaining power ever since. By the end of the 1960s the commercial peasantry had become a self-conscious class, "la masa canera, and was pursuing their own interests in opposition to those of the government, the sugar refiners, and even those politicians who helped organize the Cañeros movement. While it is indisputable that the early PUP government of George Price and the Northern Cane Workers' Union certainly furthered the cause of the small cane farmers, we can't say that it was all done for them without examining these politicians' motives. The driving force behind the growth and reorganization of the sugar economy was not altruism but peasant resistance and persistence. With the exception of the brief plantation era of the nineteenth century, peasant farmers have always produced the majority of the sugarcane grown in Belize.

The peasants of northern Belize benefited greatly from the land and sugar industry reforms of the 1960s and 1970s. The transfer of sugar production from the plantations to
rural small holders did increase their "dependency" on export agriculture; however, it also
gave them the right to own land and control of the means of production, access to credit,
and political power—all of which were firsts in the history of northern Belize's peasant
population.

Nevertheless, once the peasants achieved these gains they began charting their
own course which was not that which either the NCWU or the PUP intended for them. In
light of the history of peasants' successful resistance to the expansion of plantation
agriculture in northern Belize, their ability to thwart to government efforts to rationalize
the sugar industry, their retention of control of the means of production, and the share of
the proceeds they continue to receive from the sale of Belizean sugar I find it difficult to
consider them victims.
NOTE TO USERS

Page(s) missing in number only; text follows. Microfilmed as received.

UMI
APPENDIX D: ILLUSTRATIONS, TABLES, GRAPHS

Figure 1: 1975 Size and Distribution of Sugarcane quotas for the Corozal and Orange Walk Divisions of the Belize Cane Farmers Association.
Source: Belize Sugar Board Statistics

Size and distribution of quotas
1975

Number of farmers

Tons (Hundreds)

Corozal

Orange walk
Figure 2: 1985 Size and Distribution of Sugarcane quotas for the Corozal and Orange Walk Divisions of the Belize Cane Farmers Association.
Source: Belize Sugar Board Statistics
Figure 3: 1986 Size and Distribution of Sugarcane quotas for the Corozal and Orange Walk Divisions of the Belize Cane Farmers Association.
Source: Belize Sugar Board Statistics
Figure 4: 1991 Size and Distribution of Sugarcane quotas for the Corozal and Orange Walk Divisions of the Belize Cane Farmers Association.
Source: Belize Sugar Board Statistics
NOTE TO USERS

Page(s) missing in number only; text follows. Microfilmed as received.
REFERENCES CITED

Aass. Sven

Abrams, Ira R.


Annual Report of the Labor Department

Ashcraft, Norman

Attwood, Donald

Ayuso, A. L.

Baptismal Registry, Orange Walk, La Immaculada Parish, 1888-1970

Baran, Paul A.

Barlett, Peggy F. (ed.)

Beckford, George
1972 Persistent Poverty: Underdevelopment in Plantation Economies of the Third World. New York:

Belize Sugar
1992-1993 Miscellaneous Articles, Tower Hill.

Belize Sugar Board

Belize Sugar Board (BSB)

Belize Sugar Industries (BSI)
1989 A Brief History of Sugar in Belize and the Contribution Made by Belize Sugar Industries Ltd and Tate and Lyle to the Development of the Industry from 1964 to 1989

1991 Submission to Arbitration Committee

Belize Times.
1957-1993 Miscellaneous Articles, Belize City.

Berkner, Lutz K.

Bemsten, Richard H. & Robert W. Herdt

Binns, Bernadr O.

Birdwell-Pheasant, Donna

Blue Book

Bolland, Nigel O.


Bolland, Nigel O and Assad Shoman.

Boserup, Ester

Bricker, Victoria R.
1981 The Indian Christ, the Indian King: The Historical Substrate of Maya Myth and Ritual. Austin: University of Texas Press.

Brindley, J.R..

Bristowe, Lindsay W. and Philip B. Wright.

British Honduras.

Brockmann, C.Thomas
Brown, F.A.


Burdon, Sir John Alder

Burns, Allan F.

Cal, Angel E.


Careaga, Lorena Viliesid, ed.
1990 Quintana Roo: Textos de su historia. Mexico: Instituto de Investigaciones Dr. Jose Maria Luis Mora.

Carter, Anthony T.

Cawich, A.
1979 Constraints on sugarcane production in Belize. Research paper, Belize Sugar Industries.

Central Statistical Office

Chayanov, A.V.
Chenaut, Victoria
1989 Migrantes y aventureros en la frontera sur. Mexico: CIESAS.

Chibnik, Michael

Clendinnen, Inga

Cline, Howard F.

Colonial Report

Courtenay, P.P.
1965 Plantation Agriculture. London: G. Bell and Sons

Deere, Carmen Diana

Deere, Carmen Diana, and Alain de Janvry

de Janvry, Alain

Department of Agriculture Annual Report

Department of Lands and Survey, Map Collection, Orange Walk Town.

Department of Lands and Survey, Land Lease and Tax Records, Orange Walk Town.
Dobb, Maurice
1973 Theories of Value and Distribution since Adam Smith. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Dumond, D.E.
1977 "Independent Maya of the Late Nineteenth Century: Chiefdoms and Power Politics." In Anthropology and History in Yucatan, pp. 103-38. Edited by Grant Jones. Austin: University of Texas Press

Dunk. Herbert

Dunlop, W.R.

Esquivel, Manuel
1985 Speech to the Rotary Club in Orange Walk Town.

Farriss, Nancy


Folbre, Nancy

Fortes, Meyer

Fox, James W.

Frampton, A.

Frank, Andre Gunder

Geertz, Clifford

Goodman, Davis and M.R. Redclift.

Goody, Jack

Government of British Honduras

Grant, C. H.

Greenberg, James and Thomas K. Park

Greenhalgh, Susan

Gudeman, S.

Gudeman, Stephen and Alberto Rivera

Guillet, David

Guyer, Jane I.

Hagelberg, G. B.

Hall, Norris and Bruce Ergood

Halperin, Rhoda H.


Handbook of British Honduras

Hemstead, Anthony R.

Henderson, George.
1809 An Account of the British Settlement of Honduras; being a Brief View of its Commercial and Agricultural Resources, Soil, Climate, Natural History. London: C & R Baldwin.

Henderson, Peta M.

Henderson, Peta
Hershkovitz, Linda

Hill, Polly

Hubbe, Joaquin
1940 Belice. Merida: Eco de Comercio de Merida

Hulse, G. R.

Humphries, R. A.

Humphries, Sally

Jones, Grant D.


Jones, Grant D., ed.
1977 Anthropology and History in Yucatan. Austin: University of Texas Press

Jones, Grant D.

1990 “Chan Santa Cruz y el resplaldo de los colonos Belicenos.” In Quintana Roo: Textos de su historia. Lorena Viliesid Careaga, ed. pp. 192-195 Mexico: Instituto de Investigaciones Dr. Jose Maria Luis Mora.
Koenig, Edna L.  

Konrad, Herman W.  

King, R. B., Baillie I.C., et al.  

Lapointe, Marie  
1983 Los Mayas Rebeldes del Yucatan. Zamora: El Colegio de Michoacan

Lambert, John D. H. and J. Thor Arnason  
1982 "Traditional Milpa Agriculture in Belize." University of Ottawa, Institute for International Development and Cooperation

Macllnnes, I.I.  
1983 "The Internal Marketing of Food Stuffs in Belize." In Resources and Development in Belize, edited by G.M. Robinson and P. Furley, Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh

Marx, Karl  

Mintz, Sidney  


Minute Papers (MP)  
1902-1954 Colonial correspondence from the Archives of Belize.
Moberg, Mark A.

Monthly Report of the Sugar Industry
1972-1993 Miscellaneous Articles, Orange Walk Town.

Morris, Daniel

Myrdal, Gunnar

Netting, Robert McC.

Orange Walk Court Records
1888-1957 Uncatalogued Court Records of the Orange Walk District from the Archives of Belize.

Pan American Union

Patch, Robert W.


Persaud, B.
1972 "Cane Transportation Problems in Belize." Barbadoes: British Development Division in the Caribbean.

Pierce, Paulette
Pim, I. W.

Plattner, Stuart (ed.)

Polyani, Karl

Press, Irwin

Rao, P. Seshagiri
1991 Sugar cane varietal change and yield in the Caribbean. Research paper: W.I. Central Sugar Cane Breeding Station, Barbados.

Redfield, Robert


Reed, Nelson

Reinhardt, Nola

Report of the Committee of Lands Administration

Report of the Agricultural Commission


Romney, D.H.

Roseberry, William

Rostow, W. W.

Sampson, H.C.

Schwartz, Norman B.

Shanin, Teodor, ed.

Shanin, Teodor


Sheridan, Thomas
Shoman, Assad


Somos Mas

Sorensen, Clark W.

Stavrakis, Olga

Steggarda, Morris

Stone, Glenn, Robert McC. Netting, & M. Priscilla Stone

Stonich, Susan

Suarez Molina, Victor

Thompson, Richard A.

Taussig, Michael

Trouillot, Michel-Rolph
Turner, B. L. and S. B. Brush, eds.

Villa Rojas, Alfonso

Wilk, Richard R.

Wilk, Richard

Wallerstein, Immanuel

Warman, Arturo

Wolf, Eric R.

Wolf, Eric R. and Sidney W. Mintz

Wright, A.C.S. and D.H. Romney et al.

Yengoyan, Aram A.