**Indigenous Resurgence, Decolonial Praxis, Alternative Futures:**

**The Maya Leaders Alliance of Southern Belize**

# Abstract

While most scholars working on resistance and decolonisation in Latin America and the Caribbean are familiar with the Zapatistas, far fewer have afforded committed attention to the parallel Maya land rights struggle and autonomous social movement in the region. Notably, a movement that is currently advancing in both Central America and the Caribbean, namely, Belize––a former colony of the British Crown. Accordingly, this piece offers a summary of the struggle of the Qʼeqchiʼ and Mopan Maya communities of Toledo District, Southern Belize. More specifically, it introduces readers to the Maya Leaders Alliance (MLA)––an ever-evolving grassroots coalition of Maya organisations, land defenders, and human rights activists that comprise the movement. We start by illustrating the current context of heightened tension that exists between the Maya and the state, and then share an overview of the movement's political aims and programme of activities in the face of the historical, structural, and ongoing colonial forces the Maya are up against. Ultimately, this profile will demonstrate how Maya communities in Belize are practising “non-metaphorical decolonisation” and engendering “Indigenous resurgence” whilst mobilising for land, dignity, and a peaceful future.

# Keywords

autonomy; decolonisation; Indigenous resurgence; resistance; Caribbean; Latin America

*For a colonized people the most essential value,*

*because the most concrete, is first and foremost the land:*

*the land which will bring them bread and, above all, dignity.*

Fanon (1963, 9)

# The Reality

Across Latin America and the Caribbean, the land rights of Indigenous peoples are the oldest claims to have not been respected or implemented by the vast majority of governments. This has resulted in the persistent marginalisation of Indigenous people and their worldviews in national development planning and economic policy throughout the region (Jackson, 2012). Despite overwhelming support by governments across the circum-Caribbean for the adoption of the United Nations (U.N.) Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, and the Caribbean’s place at the vanguard of clarion calls for reparations––the well-being, cultures, and futures of Indigenous groups across the region continue to be compromised by the behaviour of numerous postcolonial states (Del Popolo, 2014). Furthermore, Central America, conspicuously remains one of the most dangerous places in the world for human rights activists (Igarapé, 2018). This is patently made obvious by the intensifying degrees of intimidation, displacement, and exploitation being experienced by Indigenous communities as a result of governmental acquiescence to third-party encroachments upon ancestral territories; violations of Free, Prior, and Informed Consent (FPIC); state-sanctioned land-grabs, and corporate extractivism (Anaya, 2017).

Belize is case-in-point. More precisely, the (post)colonial situation faced by the Maya communities of Toledo District (Wainwright, 2011). Indeed, the realisation of the Maya’s right to self-determination as Indigenous people has been habitually fettered due to both a Westminster-style government and private capital’s “development needs” (Grandia, 2009). Present-day challenges inclusive of racial stigma, destruction of heritage sites, and endemic poverty due to state repression all represent the ongoing products of historical-imperial occupation, dispossession, and industrial extraction. Likewise, as a result of the same continuing colonial-capitalist processes and neoliberal logics, the Maya’s ability to ensure their own economic development, social welfare, healthy communities, and flourishing ecosystems has been severely impeded. Evidence of this is stark (Cultural Survival, 2018).

Consider, for example, that amongst Belize’s ethnic groups, the Maya, who constitute over 10% of the total population of Belize (~30,000 people) represent the country’s most impoverished demographic; nearly 70%. In fact, half the Maya population of Belize are classified as indigent (earn less than $2.74USD/day, $1000USD/year). Moreover, Toledo District, where over 20,000 Maya people reside, has the highest incidence of poverty in the nation. About 80% of people in Southern Belize are cash poor, with nearly 40% living below the poverty line. Of significance, too, are the realities Maya women face in Southern Belize. Globally, Indigenous women disproportionately experience more poverty, poor health, and gender-based violence, as well as participate far less in national governance and local decision-making, not to mention hold less land (IACHR, 2017). These all apply to Q’eqchi and Mopan Maya women of Toledo District, a reality that is further compounded by territorial incursions into Maya communities by corporate extractors. Critical scholarship contends these are all indicators of state abandonment and both structural and slow violence (Farmer, 1996; Nixon, 2012).

# The Response

Notably, even though the most recent poverty appraisals of Belize indicate that Maya households represent Belize’s most impoverished demographic––the Maya do not see themselves as “poor.” That is, across the 39 Maya communities of Toledo District, where hundreds of families and thousands of people reside, the Maya are not going hungry, homeless, or lacking in kinship or community support networks. Likewise, the communities are holding onto their traditional system of Indigenous governance (the Alcalde System) and sustaining Maya cosmovision (source-removed-for-review). That said, the poverty statistics are undeniably telling. This, however, is not because they confirm that the Maya are “poor,” but rather, because they are evidence of the systemic marginalisation and institutionalised discrimination the Maya are experiencing.

Amidst this postcolonial reality, as well as the myriad international data designating their Indigenous communities as “less developed”––the Maya, still, have fought for and won rights to their ancestral lands. In April 2015, after decades of arduous work, the Caribbean Court of Justice issued a final order in favour of the Maya people of Toledo District affirming their rights to the lands they have traditionally used and occupied. The unprecedented victory was over two decades in the making and affords the Maya people the legal right to guide the direction and processes by which their lands, culture, and communities develop. The watershed decision has enabled Maya communities to begin developing an alternative economy that eschews capitalist logics and is based upon solidarity, traditional knowledge, gender equity, and most significantly––*se' komonil*––the Maya notion of togetherness, community, and dignity.

Despite these gains, the Government of Belize remains steadfast in disregarding the rights and entitlements of the Maya. Evidence is offered in the U.N. Human Rights Committee’s International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights report (2018), which asserts:

The State [Belize] should comply with the consent order of the Caribbean Court of Justice and recognise and protect customary land tenure of Maya peoples. The State should also guarantee, in law and in practice, genuine good faith consultations with Maya peoples occupying customary lands prior to concluding concession agreements with a view to obtaining their Free, Prior, and Informed consent.

The Government of Belize continues to prevaricate on these responsibilities whilst tensions rise. Notwithstanding the state repression, and in order to overcome the economic deprivation, health problems, and environmental degradation that have been inflicted upon their lands and communities, the Maya continue to develop their own solidarity economy and sustainable agro-ecological enterprises. This is being accomplished via collective mobilising, human/land rights training, village outreach, and grassroots counter-mapping exercises. Included, too, are workshops focusing on community empowerment, heritage protection, and ways of increasing participation amongst internally marginalised groups (e.g. youth and women). The aim of the Maya economy is to secure a dignified and sustainable future for their communities and beyond––an alternative to the future offered by capitalism.

# The Movement

In turn, the Maya Leaders Alliance (MLA), an autonomous coalition representing the 39 Maya communities of Toledo District, has confronted the state head-on. In doing so, the MLA has become a lynchpin umbrella organisation for the Maya in their ongoing fight for land, freedom, and dignity. Markedly, the MLA, rather than being placed atop a hierarchical structure, was formed to put itself in the service of the Maya communities and conduct political work on behalf of the villages “from below.”

In locked arms and alongside the MLA and Maya villages are two other partner organisations, both also based in of Southern Belize. One is the Toledo Alcaldes Association (TAA), with the other being the Julian Cho Society (JCS). The TAA is an organisation of 78 Maya leaders from the 39 communities. It is the main representative body and highest central authority of the Maya people. A pillar of the Maya culture, movement, and struggle has been and remains the Alcalde System––the Indigenous governance system of the Maya, which existed prior to contact. Alcaldes are traditional leaders, two from each community, who are selected for leadership roles based upon their respective track records of service to the Maya people and communities.

The Julian Cho Society (JCS), comparably, materialised from the land rights struggle and Maya defence of the environment. Formalised in the mid-2000s, the JCS takes its name from Julian Armando Cho, a Maya teacher and human rights defender from rural Belize. Dating back the 1990s, and in response to multinational corporate extraction taking place in Southern Belize, Cho organised demonstrations against both logging companies and concessions that were being granted by the state. Devastatingly, Cho was found dead outside his home in December 1998. His passing, suspiciously, occurred amidst his outspoken mobilisations against the Government of Belize and extractive corporations, as well as just after Cho received death threats for his opposition. Details of his untimely passing remain disputed, but his life and loss continue to resonate amongst and inspire the Maya. In turn, the JCS, as an autonomous non-governmental organization, advances in Cho’s memory and remains devoted to Indigenous land rights through environmental conservation and educational activities.

# The Vision and Programme

*There can be no discourse of decolonization,*

*no theory of decolonization,*

*without a decolonizing practice.*

Cusicanqui (2012, 100)

Driving the political work and organisational structure of the MLA noted above is a prefigurative dream of an alternative future. A future imbued with joy and dignity driven by a dream not dissimilar from the Zapatista’s Maya-anchored vision of building *Un Mundo Donde Quepan Muchos Mundos* (“A World Where Many Worlds Fit”). The Maya dream, in turn, has led to the emergence of six key actionable programme areas that are guided by Maya cosmovision. These programme areas include: 1) Sustaining, strengthening and constructing Maya governance and institutions; 2) Sustaining and revitalizing the Maya culture and 39 communities; 3) Sustaining, caring for, and revitalizing the lands and resources of the Maya communities; 4) Leveraging Maya capacities and resources for sustainable and just development; 5) Protecting the rights and well-being of the Maya people; and 6) Building education and institutional strengthening of the alliance. A synopsis of each programme area, inclusive of Maya concepts that reflect the movement’s spirit and foundation, are offered below.

## 1. Sustaining, strengthening, and constructing Maya governance and institutions:

The Maya communities, for generations, have organised, managed, and governed themselves via self-determination. There are customary rules, policies, practices, and ways each of the 39 communities ensure that Maya people, land, resources and those coming into the villages are properly guided so that problems do not arise. Central to this, is the *Jolomil Kaleb’aal/Polil Ka*; the Alcalde System and the Alcaldes, which comprise the model of traditional governance that operates in the villages. The time-honoured system, while admittedly imperfect yet ever evolving, is democratic, *of the people*, and focuses on remaining relevant and responsive to the needs of the Maya villages. The TAA is central in this domain, providing technical and administrative support to respective communities, particularly for decision making processes. The strengthening of these systems and construction of new institutions, which aim to be peaceful, responsible, and collective in character, draw from the Maya people’s Indigenous principles and values.

## 2. Sustaining and revitalizing Maya culture and the 39 Maya communities:

The Maya understand their place in the world through their connection to the land and each other. The Maya people have songs, music, dances, and stories. In Maya homes across Toledo District, Qʼeqchiʼ or Mopan are spoken daily. Maya culture is neither static nor monolithic, rather, it is interdependent, relational, and dynamic. This programme aims to sustain the culture and heritage the Maya have, and recuperate and revitalize what they have lost. Another goal is the promotion of healthy and respectful collective action amongst the 39 communities in a way that centres Maya ways of living, families, well-being, and education. Practicing traditional knowledge, medicine, language, art, and music, as well as Maya spirituality and values are paramount. Focus here is being placed on the inclusion and mobilisation of youth and women. A key aim at present is to better understand the needs, desires, and dreams of Maya youth and women and to create space for their meaningful participation.

## 3. Sustaining, caring for, and revitalizing the lands and resources of the Maya:

The Maya people are *aj ralch’ooch*––children of the Earth, meaning identity is connected to land. For this reason, over the last three decades, the Maya have engaged in litigation within domestic and international courts to determine their constitutional rights over the ancestral lands they use and occupy. In 2015, the Caribbean Court of Justice affirmed the Maya have rights to ancestral lands equal in meaning and weight to the notions of property found within the Belizean constitution. Therefore, it is imperative for the Maya to take steps to safeguard this land for future generations. This requires boundary harmonization and regulating the use and access to community lands and resources. For example, in forestry, Maya communities are already implementing a “Personal Use Permit” for community members to sustainably extract and use timber. Under this program, training and education related to biodiversity protection, sustainable land use, and climate change adaptation will take place.

## 4. Leveraging Maya capacities and resources for sustainable and just development:

The lands of the 39 Maya communities are one of the richest and fullest areas of biodiversity and natural resources in Belize. Toledo District contains the living Maya culture of Belize, majestic rivers and waterfalls, and fertile soil. In addition, over half of the 39 villages’ population are youth with secondary-level formal education. This programme aims to leverage our collective education level, human capacity, cultural vibrancy, and ecological resources for the construction of an alternative economy. A priority is the Creating Maya Economies initiative (CME), which seeks to continue the ancestral Maya stewardship over the land and prevent the alienation of lands and people to corporations in exchange for exploitative wages or other material commodities. The alternative economy will harness existing and future biocultural innovations, be guided by Indigenous governance principles, and improve the Maya economic base. A key aim is thus the development of an entirely new Indigenous economic model.

## 5. Protecting the rights and well-being of the Maya people:

To date, the rights of Indigenous peoples across the globe are advancing as a result of world leaders reaching consensus on minimum standards that must be upheld in protecting the rights of Indigenous peoples. Despite these gains, the persistent marginalisation of Indigenous communities endures, particularly vis-à-vis the negative upshots of climate change and poverty. This programme aims to continue advocating for the rights of the Maya people at national, regional, and international levels. This includes pursing the provision of ancestral land rights, education, healthcare, ethical economic development, and full political participation. Maya communities also suffer from many forms of social illbeing such as alcohol abuse, domestic violence, poor health, malnutrition, and disparate forms of exclusion. Accordingly, this programme aims to better understand the underlying causes of these pains and challenges, advocate for quality and culturally responsive interventions into alleviating them, and implement holistic and reparative programmes that directly address them.

## 6. Building education and institutional strengthening of the alliance:

This programme aims to create spaces for communities to further anchor themselves in Maya ways of knowing and being whilst opening spaces for new knowledges. This includes building the capacities of teachers and creating learning spaces that are culturally responsive and safe, as well as foster innovation, creativity, and self-efficacy. This area also serves and supports the journey of the Maya people by providing a shared platform where the TAA can operate. Accordingly, activities under this programme brings together Alcaldes, elders, former village leaders, youth, women, and solidarity organizations committed to the shared vision of the Maya people. In addition, this focus strives to accomplish these goals by ensuring that proper resources and capacity are in place to facilitate the journey. Lastly, this domain ensures that the operations of the MLA are consistent with the expectations of the Maya people as well as the laws of Belize.

# The Resurgence and Way Forward

The MLA, as an evolving entity, can be more readily thought of as a mutable and pluralistic coalition of self-determined Indigenous organisers, activists, Elders, farmers, mothers, fathers, families, and youth––as well as a social movement and political advocacy organisation––all at once. In day-to-day practice, the MLA works with both the TAA and the JCS, in addition to what lies at the heart of the movement––the Maya communities. Significantly, the MLA embodies a more than 30-year history of autonomous grassroots mobilising, direct action, and anti-racist praxis centred on land recuperation, cultural survival, heritage protection, economic justice, environmental defence, and accessible political education. Whilst advancing these aims, the movement forever remains in opposition to the form of docile colonial subjects and obedient capitalist consumer-citizens that the postcolonial Westminster state seeks to fashion, inculcate, and reify.

In sum, the everyday efforts and broader victories of the Maya movement remind us, as Tuck and Yang (2012, 3) so lucidly articulate, that “decolonisation is not a metaphor.” Just as the Maya struggle writ large enables us all to better understand that being Indigenous in the present moment––under modernity as we know it––means constantly having to resist (neo)colonial power. And finally, perhaps what the Maya movement of Southern Belize most readily reflects is that “Indigenous resurgence” (Simpson, 2016) is equally characterised by dreaming of, desiring, and concretely pursuing––whilst having the courage, imagination, and even audacity to envision––life beyond both capitalism and the state.

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