



The Last Alcalde of San Jose Yalbac

MAXIMO

Written by **Carmen Carrillo and Delmer Tzib** | illustrated by **Carlos 'lito' Quiroz**
edited by Melissa Espat



Misael Perez

oral historian | village elder | son of Maximo

Acknowledgements

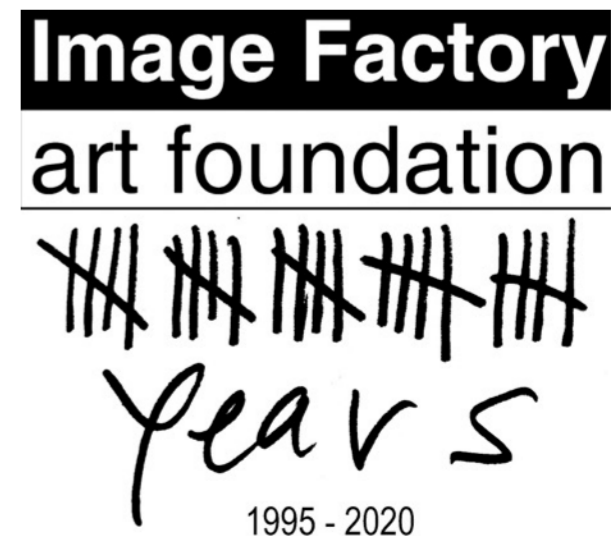
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This story is in memory of the legacy of Maximo Perez, as the last Alcalde of San Jose Yalbac. He was an avid advocate for social justice, equity, and respect. More importantly, he believed in community resilience, and the continuance of the Maya bloodline in Belize.

Viva Maximo Perez!





**“We are Indians;
we are poor,
but we are not stupid.”**

In Belize, whenever we talk about national heroes and patriots, we tend to focus on high ranking political characters who served our nation. We leave local leaders on the fringes or evaluate their actions based on Eurocentric values. Revisionist historians are currently rewriting history from the perspective of the oppressed, and throughout the process, researchers are identifying marginalized leaders and their heroic actions, works, and decisions. The in-depth questioning of colonial narratives has continually yielded the names of new heroes in the emerging decolonized space, such as the case of Maximo Perez, whose actions were down played by British narratives as those of a Maya rebel. Oral accounts are now presenting a new view into the history of San Jose Nuevo Palmar, forcing a re-analysis of the region’s history.



Perhaps purposefully erased from our national narrative, Maximo Perez is a symbol of Maya fight and resistance against the colonial enterprises. Born on May 11th, 1910 to parents Manuel Perez and Teodora Perez, Maximo enjoyed his early years in San Jose Yalbac as the eldest of four brothers, Ambrosio Perez, Bernadino Perez, and Elojio Perez. Raised in a relatively remote and independent Maya community, the Icaiche Maya descendant developed various traits and talents. He was known for being a skilled farmer, shoemaker, carpenter, tailor, musician, chiclero, broom-maker, and house builder. Despite his many talents, it was his role as the Alcalde of San Jose Yalbac that merited his recognition. When his father died in the 1930s, Maximo rose to the position of Alcalde, following the traditional procedures in the Alcalde system. Young and energetic Maximo executed his duties in the community, but quickly faced the wrath of British colonialism in Yalbac, and the immediate effects of the Belize Estate Company (BEC).

Fearless, the Maya leader stood against the odds to protect the interests of his people.

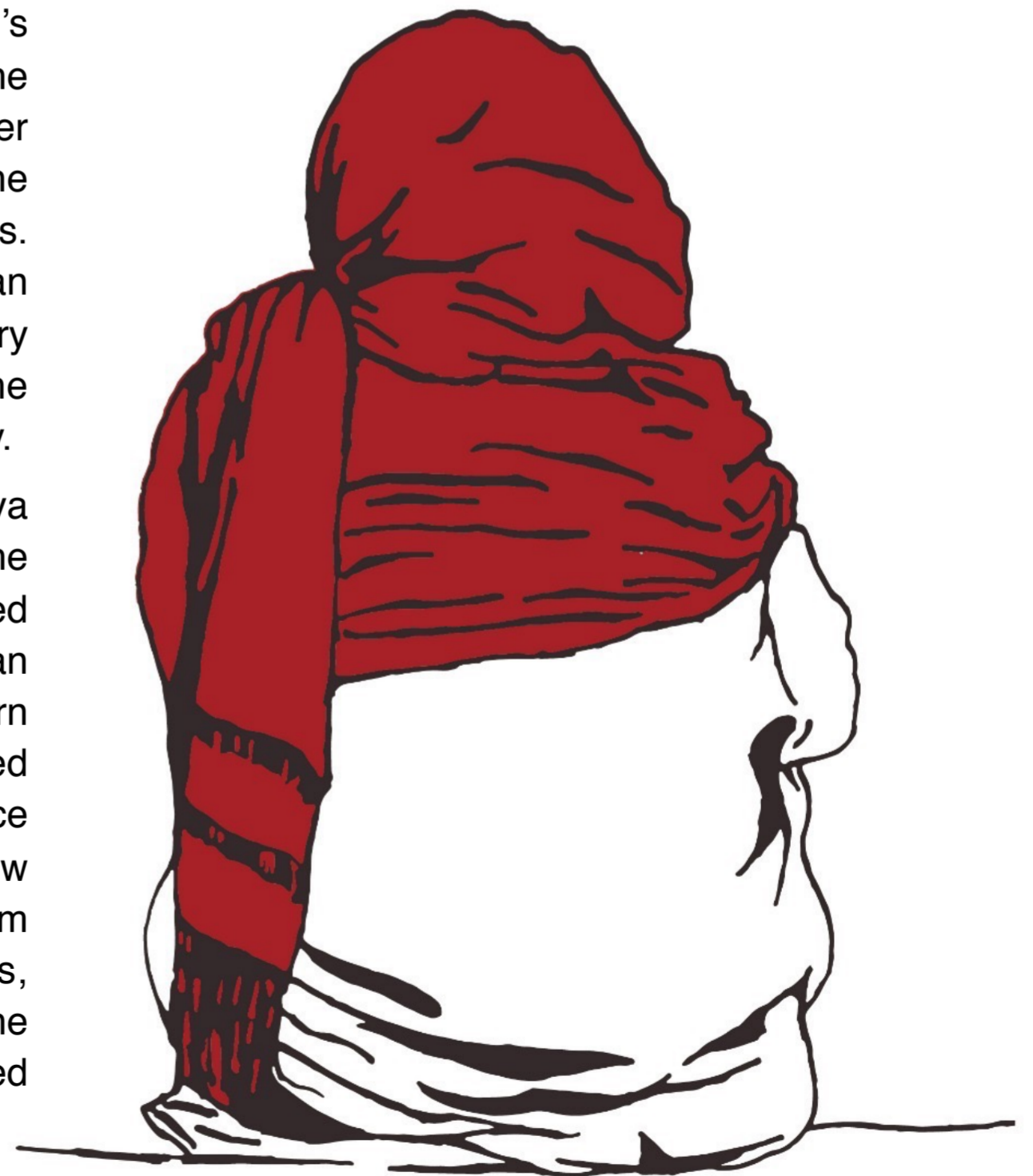
After living in the Yalbac area for over 100 years, the Maya were faced with potential eviction in the 1930s. The Belize Estate Company saw them as a threat to their logging efforts and wanted them to vacate the area. In response, Maximo Perez and his villagers showed great resistance to protect their homes. Because of evading threats, divide and conquer tactics, and bribes, the village reacted violently toward the BEC's disrespect to their church, which will be discussed later. The case eventually ended in court and Maximo Perez won the case on behalf of his village. Upon receiving additional support from the King, the villagers of San Jose Yalbac got access to the lands of San Jose Nuevo Palmar in Orange Walk. Maximo's selfless leadership proved to be key in the process of securing the continuity of the Maya community.

Prologue

The narrative recounts the painful history of San Jose Yalbac through the eyes of Eleonor, who one day sat down to talk to her nostalgic father. The unexpected conversation quickly turned into an extensive discussion about the community's formation, triumphs and tribulations. Summarized as an emotional encounter, both Misael and Eleonor recount the refugee history of their community and the several stages of psychological depression. Although Eleonor, better known as Carmen, maintained a Master's degree in Education, she was unaware of the community's history. After being informed of her ancestors past and her grandfather's role, she merits the community's existence to their actions. In the story, Carmen's reflective perspective is an analysis of her father's narrative. This oral history attempts to provoke a re-analysis and the questioning of San Jose Nuevo Palmar's history.

Eleonor Carmen Carrillo is a proud Maya descendant of Maximo Perez, the last Icaiche Maya Alcalde of San Jose Yalbac. She has lived all her life in San Jose Nuevo Palmar and is an active promoter of Maya culture in northern Belize. A career educator, she has published several educational books and is also a Justice of the Peace. She dedicates this story to the new generations of San Jose Nuevo Palmar to inform them of the village's past, their troubles, tribulations and resilience. More importantly, she prides in honoring her grandfather who showed great honor and loyalty to his people.

“The story of San Jose Nuevo Palmar,” is an oral community history from the perspective of Misael Perez and his daughter Eleonor Carmen Carrillo.



Wi' it' o' om,

Óotsilo' om,

mix takchalako' oni'

The Story of San Jose Palmar

One of the first things you will probably ask is, why is my grandfather special?

Everyone has a grandfather dead or alive, so what makes mine different? Perhaps you may be wondering what he did, what position he held, where he lived, or why it is important for Belizeans to know about him. Though I have a sentimental connection to Maximo Perez, my grandfather, it is his actions in history that makes me want to share this tale with the people of San Jose Palmar, the Orange Walk District, and Belize. I am the proud daughter of Misael Perez and Cecilia Perez, and I have been living my short life in San Jose Palmar, probably naïve of my community's long and painful history.

Until recently, I thought of my grandfather as role model, but had limited knowledge of the impact of his life. I can still remember the countless conversations I maintained with him; and despite being intrigued by his adventures and experiences, I could not comprehend the dimension and stature of his actions. I remember him every day, as a calm and visibly weak old man. He always maintained a smile on his face and a strong devotion to his Catholic faith. Worn down by various illnesses, my *Tatito* (grandfather) enjoyed the company of his grandchildren. He took advantage of every opportunity to nostalgically speak about the good "ole days". It was as if the energy of the past invigorated his spirit, and brought joy to his face. On countless occasions, I quietly sat on the floor near his old rocking chair on the breezy verandah to hear his stories. Unfortunately, when he passed away, I was too young to realize the messages in his parables. I will never forget his wrinkled face plastered by a big smile like Carl Fredrickson from the movie "Up," when he (Fredrickson) finally set his house beside the waterfall.

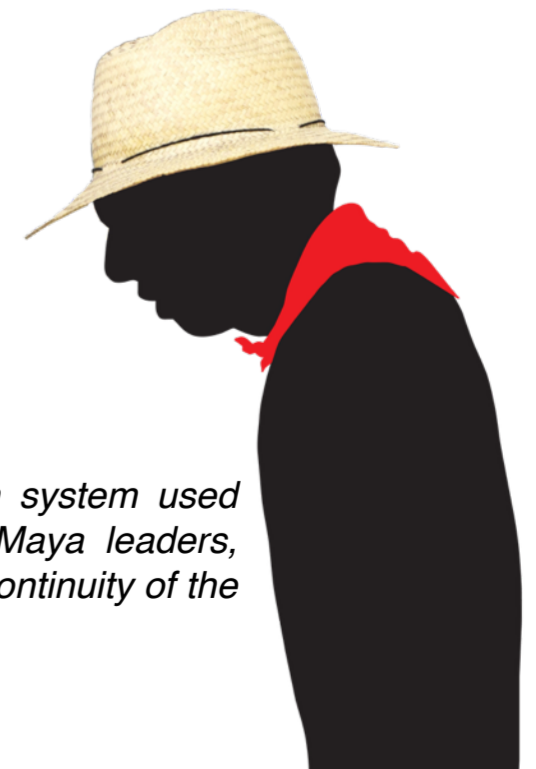
Although it has been twenty four years since my *Tatito* died, at the age of 86, I still feel his presence around. My father takes every opportunity to talk about the life of his father. One rainy morning, my dad and I had a long talk about my grandfather. It was ten minutes to eight in the morning, Sunday June 28, 2019, when I was awakened by heavy showers. I did not want to get out of bed, and clung to my pillows and bed sheets. However, through the crevice between the door and the wall of my room, I could see my father sitting on the porch of my house. As he raked himself on the rocking chair, I thought to myself how unusual it was for him to be home on a Sunday. Sundays are his farm days, rain or shine. I decided to get out of bed to see if he was feeling well. As I passed by the small kitchen of our house, I greeted my mother good morning, and proceeded towards the porch. I met my father rocking himself as he gazed unto the community center. I noted that something was not right. He seemed depressed, metaphorically it resembled the gloomy and rainy day.

I recently met Mr. Alfonso Tzul who told me about the resistance and migration system used according to the people from San Antonio, Cayo. He said that some Batabs—Maya leaders, identified some able men and instructed them to leave the war zones to ensure the continuity of the Maya blood lineage. Perhaps this is a good explanation for how they migrated.

Gently, I proceeded to sit down beside him and asked if he was ok. He answered: "aye hija, I miss your grandfather and his stories." I immediately felt compelled to stay beside him, knowing that if he spoke about my grandfather and his experiences it would make him feel better. I told him, "tell me about Tatito, his stories; how did this village start? Tatito liked to talk about that, please tell me". As he reclined on the chair, he smiled, and looked at me, as he discussed the origins of my ancestors. He said:

Your grandfather always told me about the Caste War, and our origins in the Yucatan region. According to my taat (dad), our ancestors came all the way from Chiapas. They passed all that large area of land (referring to the region from northern Yucatan to Belize), and migrated into these areas. Not into where we are today, but in Yalbac. A number of small Maya villages existed back in those areas by Cayo, almost all formed by people running away from the war. The year I cannot tell you, but I think it was in the 18th century. During those days, the white Yucatecos, who lived in the areas of Merida and northern Yucatan wanted to take over the Maya land in the South. They wanted the land to harvest Henequen (used to make ropes). The greed of the white Yucatecos caused the war, and the Maya responded by running away from the violence of the war, which lasted for over 100 years. Your Tatito never spoke about how they organized the migration.

While my father spoke about my village's origins, I could not help feeling a bit lost. Not because his words were confusing, but because I did not have the wealth of knowledge on the Caste War. I could not comprehend my connection to those distant places in Southern Mexico. In contrast, my father poured his heart out with a whirlwind of emotions when discussing our origins and our ancestors. He was visibly touched describing the displacement of the Icaiche and Santa Cruz Maya. It was as if my grandfather was seated right beside him vociferously talking into his head, reminding him of his ancestors.



The two-minute passionate episode soon transformed into a full-fledged discussion. I could feel my father's sadness, nostalgia, and happiness. I soon realized that my ancestors were refugees, and I could not understand how this land that I call my own was a foreign piece of land to my ancestors. Feeling confused but connected to my father and grandfather, I continued, "Papa so if they ran away from Mexico, how did they choose a land to settle? Why did they settle in Yalbac? I mean, how did they survive in that bush?" Calmly, my father looked at me, chuckled and said:



Carmencita, there are many things that you are yet to learn. The area you call bush signified survival to the people that ran away from the war. For them and us elders, the land and peacefulness equated to keeping our Maya blood alive (holding and shaking his left hand with his right hand); it equaled to finding gold, or winning the lottery. The life in those small distant villages in Yalbac was simple. They made their farms, and hunted. They drank and used water from a nearby creek that came from the mountains... they dug out the edges, and placed some palm leaves, and bamboo to collect water. Everyone went there to obtain water... Oh! that land that you call bush was all they needed; they did not need any money, they had food and all that was necessary to survive. Maybe once in a while they needed money to buy shoes or clothing; but besides that, they were surviving. I do recall your grandfather saying that he was a shoe maker too; he spoke about being a carpenter, a musician, and a tailor as well. Our elders definitely knew a lot of things, but most importantly, they found a new land to call home!

My father's words impacted me in several ways. First, as much as I tried, I could not comprehend how a lonely, and bushy land signified hope for survival. My naivety evidenced the disconnection from my ancestors, and community's past. It troubled me to understand what it meant to be a refugee; how it felt to leave everything behind; and how it felt to be in a desperate situation longing for peace and food. However, my father's face of optimism, when talking about the new lands in Yalbac, indicated that he related survival to the agricultural production of food. In his narrative, he continued to describe the resettlement process, as a show of community resilience and creativity, including the usage of natural resources to create a new home. I could sense my father's pride when discussing the relative independence of the small villages. His particular statement "they did not need money," contextualizes a different reality. Did my ancestors really live without money? I find it unusual and strange but I am happy to learn this part of my past. As my father continued discussing the early days of San Jose in Yalbac, he exalted the traits and creativity of the first settlers.



Deep within my father's narrative, I could identify a sense of identity. While my father spoke about his parents and grandparents, he kept reminding me and himself that coming to Belize was to keep the blood alive. His words "peacefulness equaled to keeping our Maya blood alive," coupled with his facial expressions of agitation to express a connection between our ancestors, my father, and myself. His words and gestures seeped into my consciousness to develop a better understanding of the origins of my community. A bit disturbed, anxious and nostalgic, I processed the various events my ancestors endured:

- 1. My ancestors were forcefully displaced in Yucatan.**
- 2. My ancestors desperately ran into Belize and recreated, their agricultural lifestyles in Yalbac.**
- 3. My ancestors forged a new home surviving on the resources from the environment.**
- 4. And my ancestors sole handedly ensured the continuity of our Maya bloodline.**

A mix of emotions overcame me; as I started to cry incessantly, I realized that it is because of our forefathers that we are alive almost four generations after. While I pondered on my father's accounts, I still could not believe that until that Sunday morning, I was unaware of the plight of the early villagers.

In shock and almost in disbelief, I was even more intrigued about how the early communities in Yalbac operated. While hearing my father's praise of San Jose Yalbac's relative independence, I wondered about Cristina Coc and Pablo Mis. A week ago, I heard them talk about the Toledo Alcaldes Association on *Open Your Eyes* and it made me question whether my village used that system. Excited, I proceeded to ask my father, "Tat, did those villages in Yalbac use that system the Maya in the south use—the Alcalde system?" When I asked that question, it was as if I injected energy into my tat's thoughts and words. He sat forward in a right angle on the rocking chair, while answering:

Hija! Yes, they used that system! Precisely, your grandfather, the great Maximo Perez who was married to Erudina Tzul, was the last Alcalde of San Jose Yalbac. I am the second son of the last Alcalde, and you, my daughter, are his grandchild. You see, my grandfather was also an Alcalde, but when he died, my father being the eldest, had to take the post as Alcalde. It was the custom that the Alcalde (a man) passed the title of Alcalde to his son, so my father took the place very young, at age 20 or 21. Your Tatito had three Sukuns (brothers), Ambrosio Perez, Bernadino Perez, and Elojio Perez; and it was the eldest who would be chosen as the next Alcalde.

The words coming out of my father's mouth surprised me, but for a moment I felt so proud. My grandfather's smiling face came to mind, and my heart was filled with emotions thinking about the great things that my *taat* did for his community. I could not control my emotions; with tears in my eyes, I still entered a phase of confusion. My mind became a loaded machine gun with thoughts: How did the Alcalde rule? Did people respect him? What role did he play in the community? How did decisions impact his village? How did he maintain peace in the community? Was he like politicians of today? All of these thoughts, coupled with my father's sense of deep pride and joy while describing the role of this father consumed me.

Although my *taat* was filled with happiness, he noted my frustration. He giggled, and maintained a smirk while opening his harms. On the other hand, with tears in my eyes, I sat having a face of deep confusion and emotional turmoil. Trying to console and inspire me, he continued:

Calm down Wa'l (daughter), I know it comes as a surprise, but let me tell you more about the Alcalde system and your Tatito. Your Tatito spoke a lot about it, but you were too small to understand. See, now you have one more reason to remember him (while opening his arms and smiling). He always spoke about his time as an Alcalde. He said that everyone respected him. In those days, everyone respected and obeyed the Alcalde. He was more than a chairman; he had his own court system and his own set of constables, (the British called them police constables). He had to do his court sessions and decide on small matters in the village with the support of the local "constables." In those days, the Alcalde was the law. Your Tatito had much power. He imposed fines, and if it were something serious, he also ordered for people to be tied and whipped on a post reserved for whipping. He decided on the fines charged, or he ordered guilty persons to return what he or she stole. He dealt with small domestic cases; but in cases of murder, attempt murder, assaults, and other serious crimes, he captured the persons and took them to the town. In those days, our village was not even part of Orange Walk. We were part of Cayo, and my father took prisoners to the magistrate in San Ignacio. Yes, the village always had its issues, but your Tatito did not deal with big cases. Some people were ambitious and want to take advantage of others, so your Tatito had to find solutions to those issues. He called meetings with his constables, and they made the decisions.

Like an expert, my father detailed the functions of the Alcalde system. With pride, he explained the level of power previously held by my grandfather. For me, hearing about the Alcalde system was strange. Although I comprehend how it worked, I still could not picture people following such a system in today's society. I understand it is different from the village council system, but I could not imagine, and I doubted that people respected a chairman who would order for people to be whipped.



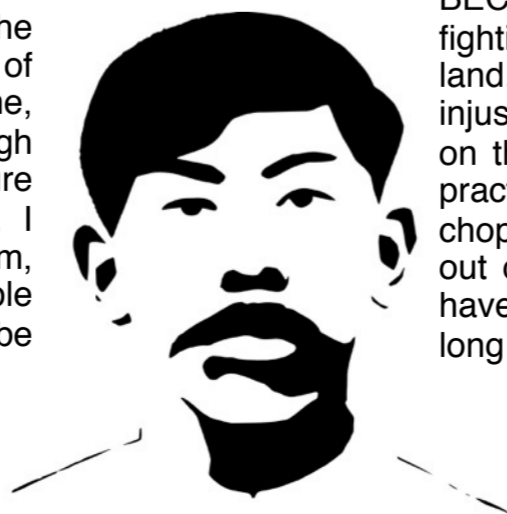
My father seemed to nostalgically long for the Alcalde system to come back. I could see the excitement in his eyes when he detailed how the community was maintained in Yalbac. My *taat* said:

Hija, your grandfather told me that he did not only enforce rules, but he did many other things. He told me, he used to blow a conch shell at the center of the village to call a Fajina. I do not think you know what a Fajina is. Well, a Fajina is a village clean up. So on a set day, your Tatito would call the villagers to an area, and gave them the areas to be cleaned. He said that villagers would come out ready with their machetes ready to chop and clean the village. He said that almost everyone cooperated, and that life was beautiful.

Very interested in my *taat*'s story, I sat forward, and looked directly at his face. The vivid details of community work made me imagine an ideal society. I thought to myself how beautiful it would be for a community to work jointly. The nostalgic and romantic way of viewing the Alcalde system allowed me to note the communal issues our villages face today. I quickly identified that politics and individualism have destroyed the sense of community, comradery and social capital. Today, people think only of their personal interests, and do not significantly care for one another. In my father's words, I recognized that, despite the flaws of the Alcalde system, what my father really desired was for the feeling of a similar community love to re-emerge. Subconsciously, I realize that the "blowing of a conch shell" did not signal community work, but community unity. The signal showcased a unity in dealing with community issues, unlike today where our communities depend on political powers.

In my perspective, the description of the Alcalde system presented an almost perfect society, in which, survival depended on the community and its resilience. Moreover, my father's narrative presented independence, hard work, subsistence through agriculture, and creativity, as the driving force for the thrive of the Maya blood in Northern Belize. But I still had a big doubt in mind, if everything was so perfect, living a calm life in Yalbac, why aren't we still living in Yalbac? Why did people migrate to where we are today? I progressed to ask my father, "*taat* it seems like life was perfect in Yalbac, so why did people move to where we live today? What happened? What caused it?" Little did I know that my questions would turn the conversation from a nostalgic and romantic one, to a very emotional discussion on injustices. My father's joyous face turned straight and then a frown overcame it. He sat back on the rocking chair, crossed his hands, and stared into the rain, as he narrated:

Land Wa'l (daughter) land was always the issue with those white men—the British, who came to Belize. Once our ancestors migrated into Yalbac, they settled in an area that was not occupied by anyone. It was empty. Imagine they came in, found water and decided to clear lands for farming. In the Maya system, the amount of land that you cleared for your house and for farming was yours. No one gave any paper or title, but everyone respected that your clearing meant property rights. People in the small villages lived in peace—that was how it was back then. It was all verbal understandings, which everyone respected; and if there were issues, the Alcalde solved them. They lived like that in Yalbac for over a hundred years when the tribulation started (lowering his head). Representing the Belize Estate Company (BEC), a person named Mr. Brown, showed up one-day announcing that the BEC were owners of the land. God knows how they became owners, but the people in Yalbac found out when the BEC started demanding rent payments. Some were upset and began fighting, not wanting to leave or pay the rent; after all, the land was their land. Your Tatito as the village leader was frustrated and upset. It was an injustice! The company wanted to extract mahogany, and the Maya living on the land were an obstacle. Remember our people were farmers and practiced slash and burn, which meant that some of the mahogany was chopped down. The BEC did not want that, and they wanted our ancestors out of the area. The conflict came about when the company claimed to have a title to the land, but our people had been occupying the land for a long time.



My father's eyes got watery as he disclosed the injustices relating to land ownership. His narrative indicated that there was a clash of ideas between the indigenous understanding and the colonial's understandings of land ownership. On one hand, the Maya believed that through occupation and farming, they maintained title to the land. Unbothered for over 100 years, they only knew about their system of land ownership with little or no contact with the wider British Honduran settlement. Therefore, the villagers were surprised when the BEC came to claim title to the territory. It was not ignorance; they had their own concept of the legalities of land ownership. The BEC and the British, on the other hand, understood land ownership as having *de jure* title. Taking a domineering approach, the BEC imposed its title and moved towards forcing the Maya out of the land. Personally, I felt such anger while hearing the approach taken by the company. It felt so wrong, and I could not imagine the frustration felt by the villagers. They had forged a home in San Jose Yalbac and now a company came to charge them rent, and even remove them.

Feeling a bit disoriented, I wiped some tears off my eyes and looked at my father. Visibly hurt, he looked to the rain and maintained a face of deep reflection. Although the discrepancy of land ideas impacted me, I still questioned what occurred. In my mind I could not picture a group of Maya people, known for bearing machetes, standing down and simply moving. Using a soft tone, I asked my father,

The questions impacted my father even more, he clutched his hands and took a rebellious tone while stating:

“Dad did the villagers simply move? Did they stay and fight? What occurred?”

When the problem started with the Belize Estate and Produce Company in the 1930s, they started to first attack the small villages that were around Yalbac. They did not attack San Jose because it was a larger village. The smaller villages only had three or four families so the company took advantage of them. The company started burning their houses and bulldozing their farms. Many small villages disappeared; some people migrated to other areas, but many instead of moving away began to populate San Jose. Instead of the people dispersing, they united at San Jose to resist; it backfired on the company. It happened over a long period because there were a lot of people that did not withstand the pressure, and migrated before the confrontation with the Belize Estate Company. The company wanted the Maya to become their workers, but the villages did not want that type of life. When the company started pressuring the people to leave the land many migrated to San Jose Soccotz, Santa Elena, and Santa Familia in Cayo, and others came up north to San Felipe, Guinea Grass, while some headed all the way to San Roman.

While my father nervously smiled and celebrated resistance, his rebellious tone did not blur my sentimentality to the story. I continued thinking of the events as blatant oppression that threatened the survival of the Maya in Belize. I remembered that my father spoke about land and agriculture signifying subsistence. The image of burning homes and bulldozing farms disturbed my tranquility. For a moment, I tried to imagine how it would feel to see my home burning, or to see the farm that provides food being destroyed. Tears ran on the sides of my face, and I could not help feeling disconsolate and hurt. I realized that my grandfather and his family experienced such pain. They were pressured, intimidated, and harassed to leave their home. As my father spoke, I experienced mixed emotions. On one hand, I was happy that the villagers resisted and defended their homes; on the other hand, I was saddened to know that the grandparents of my community experienced such anxiety.



The Belize Estate and Produce Company in the 1930s, started to first attack the small villages that were around Yalbac. They did not attack San Jose because it was a larger village. The smaller villages only had three or four families, so the company took advantage of them. The company started burning their houses and bulldozing their farms.

Unsure about how my father would react, I asked, “What did *Tatito* do? How did he react?” My father sat up and moved forward saying:

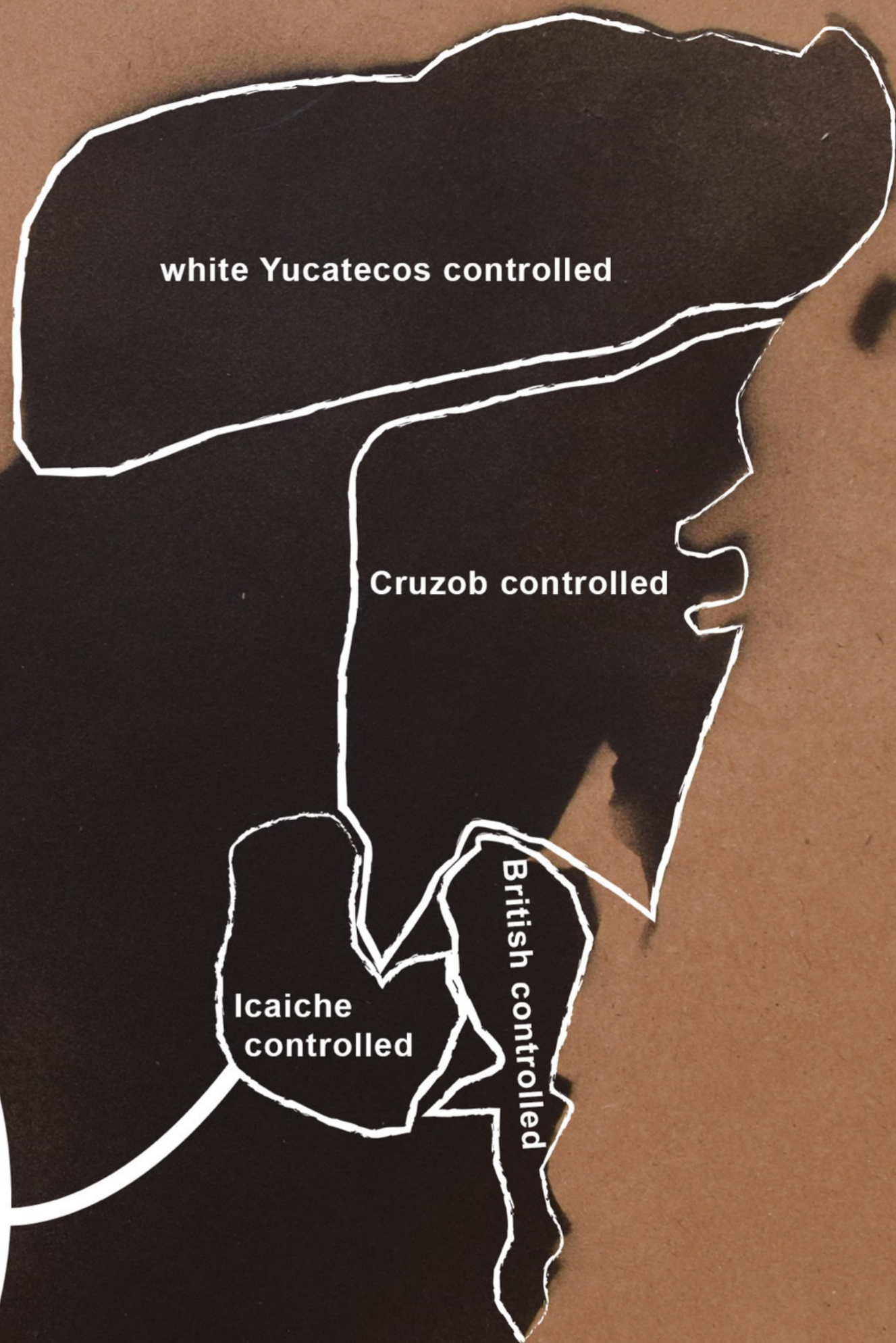
Your Tatito was the Alcalde when all of this occurred. It was a very tough situation for him because the BEC tried everything to take control. They had insiders to inform them about every move the village would take. There was for instance one man called Hernandez who was a foreman of the BEC. He used to take information to Mr. Brown, the representative/manager of the BEC. The reality is that we blame the BEC, but it was really Mr. Brown who did all the dirty work for them. Mr. Brown was a racist, who wanted to get all the Maya out of the area. He called the villagers “los indios” offering them cheap land or money to leave the areas. Hernandez informed and exaggerated about people not wanting to pay the rent demanded by the BEC. He backstabbed the village, and the BEC tried to see how they could destabilize the village. Hernandez and the BEC spread a lot of rumors about the Alcalde, trying to remove your Tatito, which made the problem bigger. The BEC became even more aggressive, and the people began to fear. The BEC began to bribe people by offering other lands. Some villagers said that they would not be taken out; that they would rather migrate on their own. For example, a man by the name of Andy Orellana decided to migrate to Orange Walk, and the workers of the BEC took his land to put the mahogany logs there. The placing of mahogany logs on that land was the start of the big problem because the company slowly moved closer and closer to the village. The BEC in a show of disrespect crossed the fence of the church, and that is when the “bomb exploded,” as we say it. The villagers of San Jose Yalbac were devout Catholic followers of San Jose, Esposo de la Virgen, and they were offended when the company started to go across church land with tractors and heavy machinery. The villagers were upset because it was as if the BEC were taking over, which I believe was their strategy.

One day, my uncle Bernardino attacked the driver of the bulldozer with his machete, and that was when all the commotion started. The pressure placed on the village by the BEC exploded at that point. The villagers stood up to fight as they gathered their machetes and rifles to attack the bulldozer drivers. It was that attack that pressured the BEC to bring authorities. It was then that your Tatito gained a more prominent role in the case; he was taken to Mr. Brown’s office. Mr. Brown told him, “why don’t you leave all those people, we are going to give you and your family land. We are going to give you whatever you want, just leave those people.” Your Tatito did not agree. He said **“We are Indians; we are poor, but we are not stupid.”** Mr. Brown got upset, and the BEC called the police to take him to court. The police came to find your Tatito in the night, but my uncles spoke to him telling him not to go, but to wait until the next day. One of my uncles had a rifle, and he wanted to attack the police too. There were also rumors of people planning to kill Mr. Brown, but Hernandez warned him before. Things got really rough in the village; therefore, they brought my father to the court. The courts said that Mr. Brown was ordering them to leave, and was asking the support of the court for them to leave. Mr. Brown accused my taat of allegedly wanting to kill him, and that he was conspiring against the safety of the company. Brown was doing all he could to get the people out of the land by pressuring and hoping to weaken their leader, my taat.



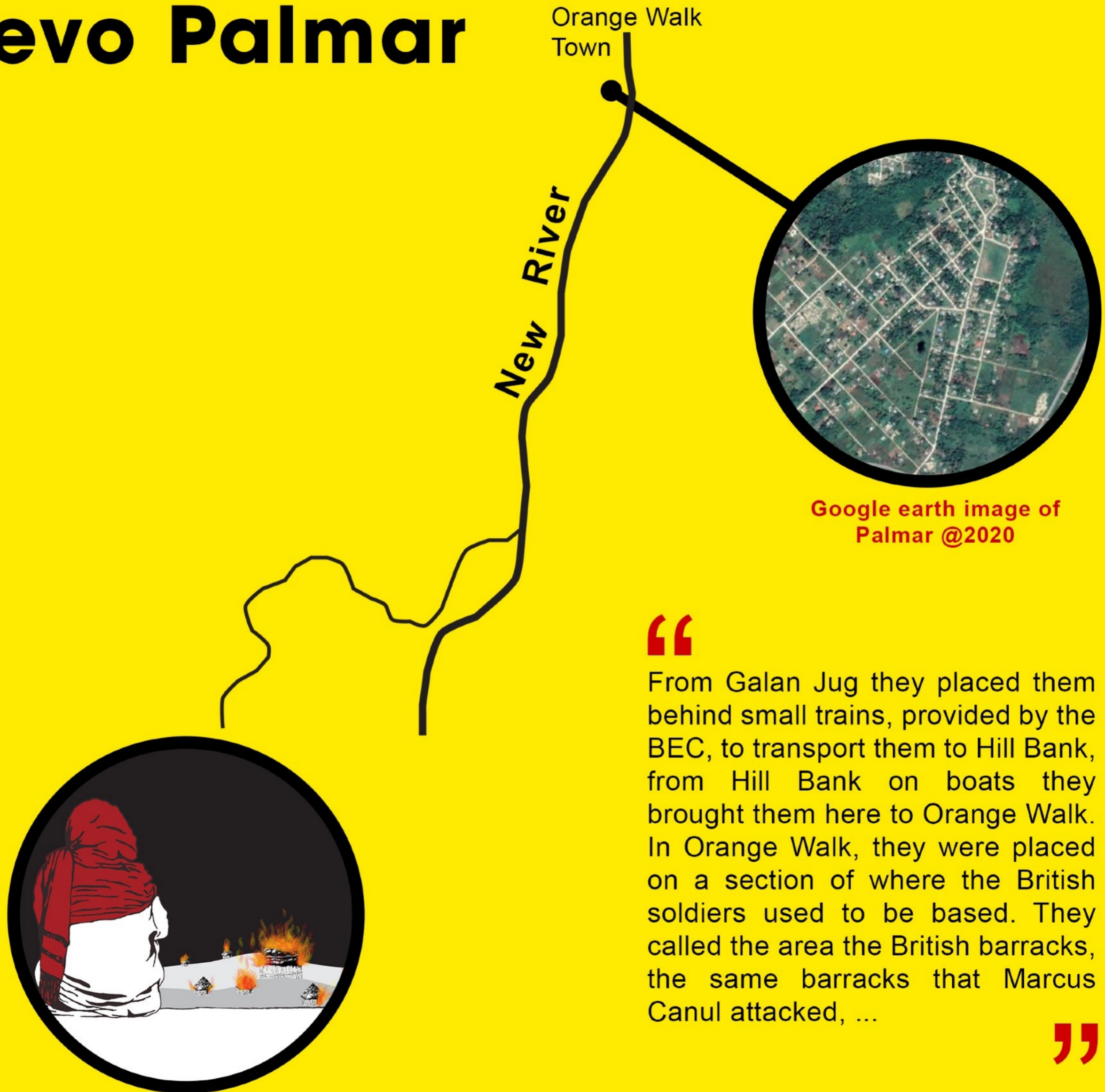
from the Caste War

The geographical area referred to as the Yucatan peninsula is witness to hundreds of years of civilizations, and a constantly changing concept of the ownership of space. In this region the present political borders which exists are mostly a result of the most significant political event to have occurred in the past 200 years, which is the Caste War.



According to Grant Jones (1973 publication), the white dots on the map shows major territory the Icaiche Maya controlled around 1867. The people of San Jose Yalbac and eventually San Jose Nuevo Palmar are descendants of the Icaiche region.

to San Jose Nuevo Palmar



Google earth image of
Palmar @2020

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From Galan Jug they placed them behind small trains, provided by the BEC, to transport them to Hill Bank, from Hill Bank on boats they brought them here to Orange Walk. In Orange Walk, they were placed on a section of where the British soldiers used to be based. They called the area the British barracks, the same barracks that Marcus Canul attacked, ...

”

The British burn San Jose
Yalbac in 1930s.



Awed, I could not believe that this occurred in Belize and to my ancestors. I heard about poor people being taken advantage of, but I would have never related it to my community. My *taat's* descriptions detailed actions of cruelty from a rich company that sought to enrich itself at the expense of the suffering of a group of people. Imagine—they harassed Maya farmers in order to extract mahogany! Their unscrupulous strategies of getting informants, bribing people, promoting political instability, and promoting divide and conquer tactics, are similar to the contemporary American model in the region. Although this story is unusual to me, it reminds me of how the political system oppresses the masses. My poor *Tatito* was trapped in this whole drama, and, as the leader, I am proud that he stood by his people. It is admirable to see the level of loyalty that he had, and the amount of pressure he took to maintain the peace and stability of his people.

The most impactful statement was my *Tatito's* words “we are Indians; we are poor, but we are not stupid.” My father’s tone and nervous giggle indicated a proud statement of resistance. My *taat* drew strength from my *Tatito's* statement because, it was a moment of peace and comfort within the storytelling of injustices and tribulation. At the moment my father repeated my *Tatito's* words, I felt an overwhelming feeling of pride. In my mind, I repeated it over and over. My *Tatito* had the courage to stand before the mighty BEC for his people; my *Tatito* had the courage to stand before the state for his people; and my *Tatito* had the courage to go to jail or die for his people. I was sad to hear the reality of my ancestor’s history, and now I had an explanation as to what might have caused the migration to where we live presently. The story intrigued me more because I knew that the early settlers would resist the unjust treatment, and I wanted to hear more.

My father continued his long description of the events highlighting the resistance by the villagers of Yalbac as led by my *Tatito*. More and more, I developed a deeper admiration for my grandfather, and I knew that his actions merited a lot more attention. My *taat* continued by noting:

Your grandfather and his people were not dumb. They knew who they were fighting against, and they did not want to lose. So, he led his council to contact the secretary general of the Commonwealth; furthermore, some Jesuits helped your grandfather, who reached on horseback every month to give mass in the village. When the case was being heard in court, there was also a Jamaican man (I do not know if he was a lawyer), but he was in the court, only described as a black man that moved around with his umbrella and walking stick. The Jamaican man advised your *Tatito* about how to defend himself, and your grandfather won the case, and the BEC lost. As he stepped out of the courts, he was advised to write a letter to King George the 6th the monarch at the time. The Jesuits sat down with him while they wrote the letter. The same priest took the letter to London because he was going on a trip. The king responded to your grandfather that he would send his evaluators from London to evaluate the value of the land, and the investments made by the villagers in Yalbac. Upon getting the evaluators’ report, the king directly ordered the BEC to pay the villagers the amount stipulated by the evaluators.

The BEC saw the amount of money required, and said that it was too much, "we can't afford that, but we have other lands that we can give you." That is when the idea of moving came forward. The BEC offered the whole community, lands elsewhere. There was one piece of land by Santa Martha, another land by the lagoon near Honey Camp, and one where San Jose Palmar currently sits. Your Tatito and his councilors visited those pieces of lands to explore and decide which land they would obtain.

They decided to settle here. The terrain was not the same, and the water sources were on the outskirts of the community, but they found a hill where they would build the church. They planned to recreate San Jose. They chose this place because of the creek that had drinking water, and they saw an amount of palm trees, which is why they called it Palmar. They used those palms to build houses, and they also ate the heart of the palm. The stream provided fish and turtles, and they hoped to start their farms in this area. This time they chose to move because they were given the opportunity to decide on a place to live. They believed that with the king's support the company would not take advantage of them and

By 1935, it is estimated that The Belize Estate & Produce Company owned 957,172 acres of land. They were ranked as the largest land owner in Belize.

source: Land In Belize, 1765-1871 by Nigel Bolland + Assad Shoman, p. 103



B.E.C

they acceded to moving to the land that later became San Jose Nuevo Palmar in Orange Walk.

My father carefully crafted an account that highlighted community resistance and resilience. His statement, “Your grandfather and his people were not dumb,” indicated that he equated my grandfather’s strategies to be important aspects of leadership and community continuity. The ability to challenge the British establishment, in his view, merited much emphasis. The act of contacting the Commonwealth and getting advice also indicated that the villagers were aware of the legal processes and procedures in defending their land. In his narrative, my father also pinpointed that it was almost by the grace of God that individuals such as the Jesuit priests and the Jamaican lawyer came forward to aid the villager’s case. Despite the clear description, there is a contrasting understanding of the role of the king in this issue. The king is represented as both savior and law, as he was the one who granted land for the people of San Jose. It was his valuations and his letter that forced the BEC to step back. The account gives much credit to the word and backing of the king; however, it undermines that it was the king’s system of land ownership that caused the issue in the first place. There seemed to be a blind trust in the king; and in a way, the narrative also undermines the community’s efforts to withhold land. Herein, we note the impact of the colonial mentality, in which although the Maya stood up against the system, they still respected the king. In other words, they were oppressed by the same king who more importantly saved them; which is why they celebrated his actions.

After reflecting on my father’s words, I also noted that at this point my ancestors had become refugees once more. Although on the surface it seemed as if they were the ones choosing to move and deciding on which location to move to, the reality was that they were being forced to relocate. The King gave the people from San Jose Yalbac the hope to stay in their lands, if the BEC were unable to pay them; however, the company’s ability to bargain with land as capital enabled the BEC to force a relocation. I cannot imagine the frustration and helplessness felt by the people who knew that they had to leave their home for a new territory. Although they had the hope of a secured land, it did not quell the depression of the forced migrants. The villagers only wanted peace and a secure future.

My father interrupted his narrative to get up from the rocking chair and go into his room. He had written part of the story of Yalbac and wanted me to read it. The story that detailed the migration read:

The villagers had to take their belongings but only the things they could carry, while walking to Gallon jug. Everything stayed behind—the corn harvest, the plantain fields, pigs, chickens, and their houses because they could not carry them. From Gallon Jug they travelled behind small trains, provided by the BEC, to transport them to Hill Bank. On boats from Hill Bank, they arrived in Orange Walk. In Orange Walk, they were placed on a section of where the British soldiers were formerly based—the soldiers had cabins, and the people were settled there. They called the area the British barracks, where Marcus Canul attacked. The authorities had promised them to build their houses, but it did not occur, at least not immediately, as the villagers lived in tents for almost a year. It was not that easy though,



they did not have food. When they arrived, and had nothing to eat, no jobs, no water, no farms, their new life was hard. At the barracks they had nothing, and some even died.

Some children got sick and died. Not having food forced people to go out begging; there were no jobs and their small savings were used up. At the same time, they had to be working to build their homes in the new land in San Jose Nuevo Palmar because that was one of the conditions placed to get the title of the land. The villagers had to occupy the land or else the BEC would take over again. Imagine the conditions at the barracks were not adequate, but they had to stay there until they could build their homes in the new site. Some of the vendors from Orange Walk, who knew them, helped them to establish themselves. I think they were at the barracks for about a year until they managed to get into the village today. My father was always worried because he knew that they needed to occupy the land within a timeframe, or else they would lose it. He said that it was frustrating because although they wanted to recreate their lives, they had no resources, and it took time to build a home. The community united to build a house for one family at a time, until they built the houses of each community member. They joined forces to build houses, and it took some time because they had to clean the place, clear and create the central plaza; chop the high bush and burn. Luckily they had a source of drinking water near. In those days, the water was not contaminated. When they started to plant then farm, it was already two to three years later, and the second world war was damaging the economy. It made the conditions worse. The villagers had to go from creating their foods and managing their fields, to now searching for work—and work was not even available. The people were treated less than animals. The sky was their roof; the ground was the bed, or they used a hammock; the stones were pillows. The sufferings were over the limit to what a human being could support. Many of the elders still cry today when they speak about this because it was depressing.


The whole account I read that morning centered on nostalgia and reflection, but at this point my father could not hold up. As he watched me read, he broke down. Almost as if he was trapped on that rocking chair, my father clutched the handles of the chair and became emotional. It was the first time I saw my father so broken. As he started to talk about leaving “home,” tears slowly ran down his cheeks, and he quickly lost composure. He was shaken and it hurt him to talk about the forced relocation as an episode similar to the “trail of tears” endured by native Americans in the United States of America. Despite losing composure, he managed to maintain himself strong to continue watching me read his narrative. As tears ran down my cheeks, I could not hold up while watching my father crying and reading about the depression at the barracks. I questioned how this could happen in Belize. As I looked up I saw my father starting to sob; his face trembled, while his lips uncontrollably tried to tell that his people were strong. We were both hurt by that colonial history. The story still hurt my father deep in his psyche. On the other hand, I got influenced by my father’s emotions and story. I could not control my tears and I decided to hug my father. We consoled each other, and I felt a deep connection with our village’s ancestors and history.



After three minutes of hugging and consoling each other, my father gained composure to talk about my grandfather's work in the new setting. He said:

Once they started living in the barracks area, they faced many new challenges. The new village's central problem was a threat for survival. There was nothing to eat, and no place to go hunting because there was no game. The terrain was filled with dung, and our fathers and mothers felt a high level of disillusionment, depression, negativity, and a feeling of helplessness towards the new setting. Our ancestors had no choice, but to recreate a new home in the 'barren' new setting. They were upset about the conditions and complained of not being able to recreate their lifestyle.

As I reflected on the account, I thought about my ancestors becoming refugees in Belize. They were forcefully disconnected from Yalbac, stripped of their way of life, and forced into dependency. The villagers in Yalbac planted and harvested their food; used the natural resources to create objects of primary and secondary need; and maintained an orderly society based on the Alcalde system. They were uprooted and brought into a distant land, where they were forced to buy their food, work for someone else for survival, and, at least at the early stages, become dependent on others. The villagers had to beg for food, water, and work. The biggest effect behind the relocation is that the villager's dignity, humanity, and survival was hurt. However, their agency and spirit of fight continued strong. As a community showing resilience, they fought together to start a new home in San Jose Palmar, but the conditions required a new lifestyle relatively away from farming. This was the strongest form of oppression that removed a big aspect of the village's lifestyle, identity and avenue for survival.



After the very emotional discussion, my father and I calmed down and continued talking. I found it very therapeutic to be letting all these feelings out. My *taat* also appreciated that I was there listening and going through the emotions along with him. He continued explaining:

Your Tatito stated that once they came to settle here, there were no jobs. Coincidentally, the only job available was with the BEC. Some of the villagers had to swallow their pride, and go to the company to ask for jobs. At that time, I was already born I remember that we ate whatever we found; for clothing we bought the sacks in which the rice and flour came in; we survived on whatever we found. Our ancestors lived through tough times in the early years of this place. The things started to get better until the 60s. They started to get small jobs, and that is how they started to live a better life here. But your Tatito was always worried about occupying the land because it was one of the conditions for the people of San Jose to own the land. After ten years of being in the new land, a man by the name of Mr. Longworth came along with other members from the lands department to present the title of the land. They decided to give it to my father. Living on the land for ten years was a condition that the BEC and the crown placed as a requirement to obtain the title of the land. They gave the land to my father, and told him that the village needed to take care of the land. He explained that the land was not for lease or for sale because the community owned it. Having at least that tranquility and peace of mind that the land was for the community, it was the hard work of the people battling depression, learning new traits, and working together that developed this community.

Although our emotions had calmed down, I felt insulted because the relocation forced my ancestors into working for the BEC. I thought to myself of how it must have felt for an independent Maya man, who was used to producing for his family, to beg for work with the same people who caused the damage. Although the people had secured land, they could not secure a livelihood.

The conversation with my father slowly came to an end. However, as I got up to go back into the house, I asked, "So my *Tatito* was still the Alcalde once they settled here?" my father sighed and recounted:

Here, when they came here, they removed your Tatito as the Alcalde and the court dealt with all issues of the community well, in order to keep peace. He was still respected as a village leader, and then became the patron of the church. He maintained the church and organized the feasts. In those days it was not easy. He had to raise the chicken, fowl, and pigs; then the village came together to prepare the food and celebrate. But after some time someone else got in and the village chose Don Ambrosio as leader. By then, the people had already began to get ambitious for land. People started fighting because some wanted land for their paddocks and farms. But everything was measured, and everyone got two "mecates". This was the law when my father was still the leader. He told them to plant in distant areas, but they couldn't really plant much, and they planted mostly fruit trees. But yes, some people wanted more than the others. Once the village started to grow, more issues arose. My father felt bad after he was removed, and then not even the government helped the community. The young people did not respect him. Over time, the political parties took over, and a land reform occurred. Unlike before, they now needed to get permission from the minister to get land. There was a lot of confusion especially from the elders. No one really knew how to manage the land in Palmar. The elders did not plan for the future; they lived like how the people in the south live, communally. It is because of the lack of planning that we have so many land issues today as well. There are still some free lands in the village that need to be divided. Some of the elders wanted to give lands to their descendants, but because political bureaucracies control everything, getting access to land is a challenge. Now, people who are not even descendants of the first settlers are fighting for land.

A bit disturbed, I paused for a moment to reflect. My grandfather stood up for, fought for, and felt responsible for his people. He suffered from seeing the pain in his people, and then he was just placed on the side. The system in the new location required a different type of leadership, but I believe that his work went unnoticed or undervalued. On a wider scale, I think that the story of our ancestors and their tribulations are hidden, and undervalued. The many issues that we currently face originated in a colonial period that treated the first villagers of San Jose Palmar unjustly. The land issues seem to be one of the most important controversies in our community today; hence, we must understand how we got here.

“Before I forget,” my father said. “I have one last thing to tell you about your Tatito.” He continued:

Despite facing all the depressive instances, your Tatito still showed great leadership. I remember that your Tatito worked for Castillo, who was the owner of the farm called Louisiana. He had his cows there. The villagers could pass there, but they had to clean the area. They also got some jobs to clean the areas at the farms, getting paid three dollars for the week. However, your Tatito took it upon himself to constantly clear the road that passed through Louisiana Farms so that the people from Palmar could go to Orange Walk Town. He made an arrangement with Castillo, and keeping the road clear was somewhat a payment for passing through the land. He did not think only for himself, but for his people, even if it caused him pain.

After such a painful conversation, I could not help but feel fulfilled by my father’s last statements. I could sense and share his deep feelings of hope and continuity. He celebrated my grandfather as a great leader, and I could not help but continue developing deep admiration for the old man I came to know. I never imagined how great of a figure my grandfather was. He probably did not realize how great he was, and I always remember his words saying, “all that power, my God, I don’t know if it was right or wrong.” He might not have realized the power of his actions and decisions, but history continues to show us that great leaders may not always be portrayed as heroes. He was considered a rebel, but he always maintained his community at heart. His personal sacrifice is what has given the new generation of Palmar the security of their land, and a heritage no other could have granted them.

On that gloomy day while having a long talk with my father, I learned a lot of things about my community. I did not ask more questions, not because I was not curious, but because emotionally I felt drained. The history of my ancestors, and especially of my grandfather, carries such much pain, oppression and injustice. But I am proud to say that I am a descendant of people who resisted, and with community resilience built a new home twice. As refugees, they came to where we live, but they could not be robbed of their agency. They fought hard to create a new society which we all enjoy today.

Photo: Carmen Carrillo proudly holding a portrait painting of her grandfather Maximo Perez





Photo: Carmen Carrillo (R) with her granddaughter Rachel Murray (L) in San Lazaro village, Orange Walk, 2018

Now seated on my bed, I reflect on the face of my father, I could see his pain. I never imagined that the morning would be so interesting and painful at the same time. I developed a deeper connection with my father and grandfather. But now, do you see why my grandfather is special? Yes, I am the granddaughter of that man. The last Alcalde of San Jose Yalbac, the man who fought for his people—Maximo Perez. I will always remember him through his statement, “We are Indians; we are poor, but we are not stupid.”

I am the grand-daughter of the last Icaiche Alcalde of San Jose Yalbac in Cayo, and the first and only Alcalde of San Jose Nuevo Palmar in Orange Walk.



Maximo Perez

Arise, alcalde, arise!
For the Yalbac Hills yearn for your presence.
They claim in loud voices of thunder and lightening
The same leader that walked his people to freedom.
The tears that you cried were not in vain,
For the legacy of your people will be known.
The overgrown paths that you once walked
Will flourish again when the conch shells blare
Your name in the land of glory!

Arise, alcalde, arise!
The jaguar that guards your sleep has shaken off
The dust of forgetfulness and shame.
The symphony of birds from the lush green forest
Have tuned up a symphony of celebration,
For your people are no longer asleep.
They claim your presence, to continue
The duties of a proud village
That wants to thrive and flourish in unity.

Arise, alcalde, arise!
For the spirits of the ancestors
Have dressed in their colorful huipils ,
And the drums are echoing with the heartbeats
Of the warriors that withstood oppression,
They chant the songs of their children,
The blessings of the toils that gave them
A land to cherish and to hold.

Arise, alcalde, arise,
Your tired arms can now be still,
Your sad heart is now a lions heart
That roars with your Indian blood
That was never silenced with the din
Of foreign laws, that tested your integrity.
Your victory is now sung by new generations
And your legacy will live on forever!

by Carmen Carrillo 21-01-2020

The in-depth questioning of colonial narratives has continually yielded the names of new heroes in the emerging decolonized space, such as the case of **Maximo Perez**, whose actions were down played by British narratives as those of a Maya rebel. Oral accounts are now presenting a new view into the history of San Jose Nuevo Palmar, forcing a re-analysis of the region's history.

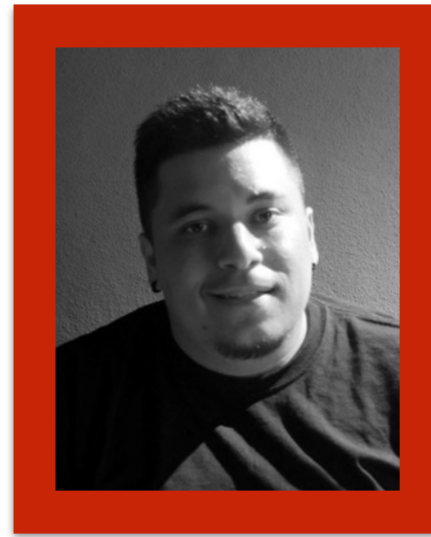
MAXIMO



Carmen Carrillo
poet | educator



Delmer Tzib
teacher | researcher



Carlos 'lito' Quiroz
graphic artist | designer



Image Factory
art foundation
|||||
years
1995 - 2020