

BELIZE FACTS AND FIGURES

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SECTION: PART II: THE PEOPLE OF BELIZE AND THEIR HISTORY/THE CASTE WAR OF YUCATAN

The Caste War of Yucatan

In 1821, the Spanish lost control of Mexico and a period of turmoil ensued. Extreme class divisions, especially on the Yucatan Peninsula, developed. The classes included, at the top of the society, the *Peninsulares* or colonial Spanish officials born in Spain. Next were the *Criollos* of Spanish descent but who were born in Mexico, then the *Mestizo* who were descendants of the intermarriage between Amerindians and the *Spanish*. At the bottom of the social ladder were the native Maya or *Indios*. Among the *Indios*, forced labor, extreme taxation and land confiscations led to the uprising known as the Caste War of Yucatan.

Yucatecan Spanish officials got wind of a possible Maya revolt and arrested and executed a Maya by the name of Manuel Antonio Ay on July 26th, 1847. Four days later, the Maya led by Cecilio Chi rose up in revolt, leading to bloody fighting. There was no political centralization in the region of the revolt and many Mestizo and Maya sought freedom in Belize which was relatively peaceful.

Over time, two groups of Maya emerged in the conflict against the ruling classes. One group was the Cruzob who occupied the area directly north of the Rio Hondo. The Cruzob believed in a Talking Cross which told them what to do regarding the conflict. The Talking Cross, however, was the work of one of their leaders, Manuel Nahuat, who was a ventriloquist. The Cruzob, who were said to be more bellicose, purchased arms from Belize and fought against the Mexican government.

Eventually, the Cruzob retreated to the forest of south Mexico and eventually fought the British in Belize over the right to charge rent until their population was decimated by cholera and smallpox around the 1880s.

The other group that emerged was the Icaiche who were more Catholic and eventually signed a treaty with the Yucatecan Mexican leadership. This angered the Cruzob and a conflict broke out between the two Maya groups.

The Icaiche eventually fought against the British, particularly over the right to use and occupy land in the northwest of Belize. Icaiche territory was north and south of the Blue Creek branch of the Rio Hondo in the Yalbac area. They claimed and occupied various villages in this area including San Pedro Siris, San Jose Yalbac, Santa Clara and Naranjal. Thus, in 1861 when the British were in the process of demarcating the western border north of Garbutt's Falls, conflicts emerged.

Icaiche leaders who rose to confront the British over land included Asuncion Ek and Marcus Canul. The Icaiche attacked and defeated the British in battle various times at Qualm Hill and San Pedro Siris. The British retaliated and burned various Icaiche villages in 1867. This angered leaders like Marcus Canul who attacked Corozal and Orange Walk towns. These attacks

struck fear into the colonial authorities and it is for this reason that the settlers in Belize City sought to become subjects of the British Crown.