

Odile Hoffmann, *Property and Territory: Origins of a Colonial Order in Belize in the 19th and 20th Centuries*. Benque Viejo del Carmen, Belize: Cubola, 2021. 214 pp. (Paper US\$32.50)

First settled by English privateers, woodcutters, and African slaves in the seventeenth century, Belize is arguably the most anomalous of Britain's former Caribbean colonies. The English "Settlement in the Bay of Honduras" was established on territory claimed but largely neglected by Spain, and long governed itself with little British interference. Unlike the rest of the British Caribbean, the settlement's fortunes rested on the extraction of forest resources (logwood and mahogany) rather than sugar production. Lest the presence of English settlers antagonize Spain, Britain accepted treaty provisions allowing exploitation of timber but banning agriculture and fortifications. Well before the first British superintendent was appointed in 1764 (formal colonial status would wait until 1862), the "Baymen" of British Honduras had improvised a system of land tenure found nowhere else in the region. The colony's suppression of agriculture and uncertain sovereignty led to enormous resource consolidation by timber cutters and their descendants.

In *Property and Territory*, French geographer Odile Hoffmann examines the evolution of land ownership from the settlement's origins to the present day. Land tenure remains crucial to understanding class and power in Belize and the state's relationship to its ethnically diverse subjects. Yet there has been little new scholarship on the topic since Nigel Bolland and Assad Shoman's pivotal *Land in Belize: 1765–1871* (1977). Their work established how claims to land served foremost to control scarce labor in the sparsely populated settlement. Through a series of resolutions known as "location laws," the Baymen simply appropriated unclaimed land to harvest its timber resources. With the shift from logwood to mahogany and its greater demands of capital and labor, land was concentrated in fewer and fewer hands. Following a prolonged depression, a single London-based firm, Belize Estate and Produce (BEC), emerged as owner of half the colony's private land by the late nineteenth century. Even after removing accessible stands of mahogany, BEC tenaciously clung to its lands to deny the alternative of smallholder farming to forest workers. The firm's assets and near-monopoly on a chief export made it the colony's most powerful political actor, its allies in Britain's Colonial Office overriding even the mildest proposals for land settlement by reform-minded governors.

In a significant elaboration on Bolland and Shoman's thesis, Hoffmann demonstrates that multiple systems of tenure in fact coexisted with BEC's private fiefdom. These afforded colonial authorities some autonomy in allocating land, much of it along ethnic lines. While the colony's African-descended Creole

population was consigned to wage labor on BEC lands, other groups were identified geographically and racially with small-scale farming. Remote southern districts lay outside the timber region, allowing the government to claim extensive Crown lands, some of them designated as Maya and Garifuna “reserves.” Reserve lands were allotted to members of adjacent communities through the colonial-era office of *alcaldes*, or headmen, but were not eligible for freehold title, limiting the Maya and Garifuna to *milpa* production of staple crops. In the north, large private estates not owned by BEC were devoted to sugar production under British incentives and quotas. Until the emergence of self-government in the early 1960s, these lands were mostly leased by small-scale Mestizo and Maya farmers through patron-client relationships with a few powerful landlords. Hoffmann’s interviews with former cultivators reveal that some of these “patrimonial” owners were relatively benevolent, while others enforced coercive control through informers and the burning of undeclared parcels. These arrangements were implicated in land policies and cultural narratives alike that posited a primordial association between identity and occupation. Thus, racism forged through unequal access to land “feeds on a history of exclusion to justify further exclusion” (p. 52), in effects that cascade down to the present day.

The second half of Hoffmann’s book, drawing from both archival sources and ethnographic interviews, examines the transformation of these varied systems of tenure in the latter years of colonialism and in contemporary Belize. BEC’s fate was sealed with the final collapse of the timber industry by the 1940s, marking the ascendancy of North American capital as its lands were partitioned and sold to U.S. investors. The patrimonial landlords of sugar-producing areas gave way to no less clientelistic arrangements with the newly independent state. Yet the greatest challenge to land tenures originating in colonialism have developed in the south, long considered politically marginal to the rest of the country. There, the state has found itself on the defensive as Maya communities demand a territorial homeland far more expansive than their once-isolated reserves. Hoffmann’s concise but sweeping account reveals how land became central to defining identity and political power in Belize; in the Maya region, at least, the contested outcome of this story remains to be determined.

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