

# THE GLOBALIZATION OF A CEREMONIAL TREE: THE CASE OF CACAO (*THEOBROMA CACAO*) AMONG THE MOPAN MAYA<sup>1</sup>

MICHAEL K. STEINBERG

---

**Steinberg, Michael K.** (*Department of Geography and Anthropology University of Southern Maine, Gorham, ME 04038 USA, mstein@usm.maine.edu*). THE GLOBALIZATION OF A CEREMONIAL TREE: THE CASE OF CACAO (*THEOBROMA CACAO*) AMONG THE MOPAN MAYA. *Economic Botany* 56(1):58–65, 2002. *The uses, perceptions, and economic significance of cacao have radically changed in the past 25 years among the Mopan Maya in southern Belize. Cacao was once perceived as a ceremonial crop with little cash value. Over the past 25 years though, cacao has become the most important cash crop grown by the Mopan Maya. The Mopan Maya grow organic cacao that has allowed them to tap into a specialized, high-end chocolate market. However, the emergence of cacao as an important cash crop has altered traditional uses and created conflicts in villages where increasing acreage of reservation lands are planted with cacao, thereby assigning a commercial value to previously communal lands.*

**Key Words:** cacao; organically grown; Maya Gold; Mopan Maya.

---

The historical importance of cacao (*Theobroma cacao* L., Sterculiaceae) within Mesoamerican cultures is well documented (Bergmann 1969; Gomez-Pompa et al. 1990; Sauer 1993; Young 1994). Aztec royalty consumed cacao drinks in large quantities, and indigenous groups used the bean as currency well into the 19th century in remote parts of Mesoamerica (Bergmann 1969; Thompson 1930). Cacao beans were traded throughout the Maya realm, often moving over great distances (McKillop pers. comm.). Cacao also played a significant role in indigenous religious life, with the tree and bean often depicted on Maya steles (Gómez-Pompa et al. 1990; Young 1994). The cacao spirit was one of the most powerful deities in Maya cosmology (Thompson 1930).

Although the beans are no longer used as a medium of exchange in Mesoamerica, cacao still maintains an important place in some indigenous cultures as a ceremonial drink and more recently as a cash crop. The Mopan Maya in southern Belize (Fig. 1) are an example of an indigenous culture in which cacao is significant as a ceremonial drink among older villagers and increasingly as a cash crop among the younger generation. This paper examines the cultural and eco-

nomical relationship between the Mopan of southern Belize and cacao by examining the past and present perceptions of cacao, the management of cacao, and how this important plant has re-emerged as a valuable commodity in modern Mopan culture and economy. Thus, cacao has come full circle in that it has again become a form of currency among a Maya group. This paper also discusses intervillage conflicts developing as a result of the expansion of cacao production on a commercial scale and how expanding cacao production has disrupted the traditional, common-pool land tenure agreements among the Mopan Maya.

## PHYSICAL AND CULTURAL SETTING OF THE STUDY AREA

This research was conducted in the Toledo District in Southern Belize in 1998 and 1999. The study area is located on the southern edge of the Maya Mountains (Fig. 1). Although very rugged due to the karst geologic formations, the area is considered tropical lowland in that the elevation of the Toledo District does not exceed 1000 m and all Belize Mopan settlements are found in areas lower than 400 m (Hartshorn et al. 1984; Wilk 1991). The physical landscape settled by the Mopan contains all of the typical karst features such as extensive cave networks,

---

<sup>1</sup> Received 7 February 2000; accepted 13 April 2001.

sink holes, and rivers appearing and disappearing at the surface.

The limestone geology has created ideal conditions for cacao farming. Soils in the Mopan area are more fertile than many tropical lowland environments. The red oxisols so typical of many tropical forest areas are absent in these hill lands. However, due to high amounts of intense rainfall, sheet erosion is rapid once the forest cover is removed (Hartshorn et al. 1984). Thus one of the attractions of cacao is the fact that it minimizes soil erosion compared with other agricultural activities such as swidden farming.

According to Wright (1996), the vegetation in the vicinity of Mopan villages is the northernmost extent of truly wet tropical forest in Central America. Broadleaf evergreen trees, typical of the lowland tropical rainforest, dominate forests with some species reaching upwards of 50 m in height (Hartshorn et al. 1984). However, due to extensive clearing, mature natural forests are today found far from Mopan villages or on slopes too rugged for cultivation.

The Mopan Maya are relatively recent arrivals to Belize, beginning to migrate from Guatemala in the late 19th century. The Mopan migrated from the adjacent Peten in Guatemala to avoid forced labor and high taxation. Initially about 100 Mopan undertook the journey from the Peten to Belize (then known as British Honduras). The group first settled near modern Pueblo Viejo (Fig. 1). However, Guatemalan authorities claimed this territory was still within their borders. The group moved farther east in 1889 and founded San Antonio (Wilk and Chapin 1991). This west to east axis, between Pueblo Viejo and San Antonio, is still the center of Mopan population in Belize.

In an effort to accommodate a small but growing Maya population in the early 20th century, as well as protect the mahogany-rich forests, British Honduras colonial authorities established several indigenous reserves in southern Belize. These indigenous reserves were territories in which the Mopan and Kekchi (the other Maya group in southern Belize) were largely left to themselves to practice subsistence agriculture. However, the borders of the reserves, as well as the rules governing tenure were and remain ambiguous. This is one reason that conflicts have arisen today over commercial cacao production on reservation lands (Maya Atlas 1997).

The Mopan have a long history of being

smallholder independent farmers, mainly practicing swidden agriculture (Wilk and Chapin 1991). Although relatively new to the area, many Mopan, particularly older villagers, have an extensive knowledge of local flora and fauna. Today, population growth has strained available land resources resulting in declining fallow periods, declining crop production, and seasonal out-migration (Steinberg 1998). Thus Mopan farmers that remain in villages (still the majority) are increasingly interested in activities other than swidden agriculture such as cacao farming.

## METHODS

Interviews were conducted with cacao farmers from San Jose and San Antonio (Fig. 1). Interviews also took place in Punta Gorda, the regional market center where the cacao cooperative headquarters is located. Cacao farmers often congregate at the cooperative office, thereby providing easy access to large numbers of individuals. Cooperative officials also supplied limited data such as the amount of cacao produced in the recent past and prices per pound. A total of 15 farmers were interviewed about cacao management issues. Questions relating to cacao mythology were posed to three older villagers in San Antonio where the author was conducting a more extensive study on Mopan cultural ecology (Steinberg 1999). These interviews were much less formal than discussions regarding cacao propagation because I found that stories relating to mythology were not accessible in more formal, structured interviews. Instead, participant observation methods were employed with open-ended questions posed to informants.

## PAST AND PRESENT PERCEPTIONS OF CACAO AMONG THE MOPAN MAYA

During the past three decades, the perception of cacao has changed among the Mopan as the use of this tree evolved from a ritualistic plant with ceremonial importance to a crop plant with economic importance. Thus cacao is representative of the larger transition of Mopan culture from local, subsistence oriented, to more global and market-oriented.

Traditionally, among the Mopan, cacao is a member of a small group of plants significant for their cultural/spiritual symbolic importance. Both the cacao tree and its beans are said to contain spirits (Fig. 2, 3). Locally known as *cucu*, cacao has numerous folk tales associated

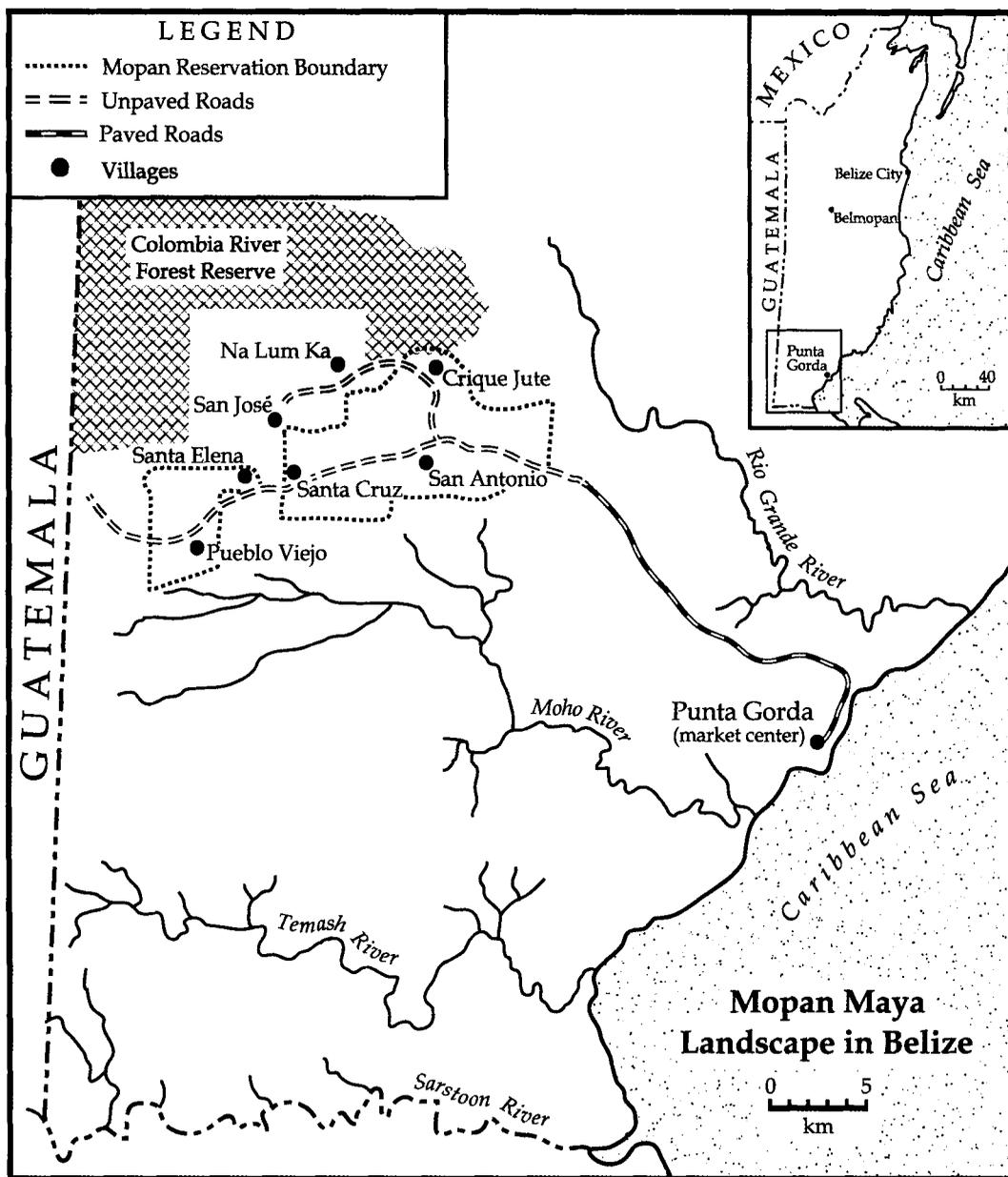


Fig. 1. Mopan Maya Villages in southern Belize.

with it, particularly explaining its origin in the Maya world (Thompson 1930). According to an informant in San Antonio, older cacao groves are haunted and can only be visited after performing certain religious rituals. These rituals include both prayers and offerings such as rum. However, such practices are dying out and are participated and believed in mainly by elderly villagers.

Before the late 1970s, cacao served as a ceremonial and celebratory drink among the Mopan Maya rather than a significant source of income. The Mopan drank cacao during important Mopan ceremonies such as planting and harvest celebrations, Maya Catholic religious holidays, and social ceremonies such as weddings. The cacao drink could be thought of, in terms of cultural importance, as the beverage equivalent of maize



Fig. 2. Cacao orchard.

tortillas among the Mopan, **maize being the crop around which life is centered** (Steinberg 1999). Among traditional belief holders, when one drinks the cacao beverage at ceremonies, they are taking part in a spiritual act because they are consuming a symbolically important plant. Historically, the drink was not served at routine, commonplace events.

The cacao drink is made by grinding roasted beans and adding water with ground corn, sugar or honey, black pepper, and sometimes vanilla. Black pepper is a recent substitute for an apparently forgotten combination of local spices, probably some combination of chili peppers (Thompson 1930).

Although it is not consumed as widely as it once was, the beverage is still served at present day versions of the celebrations listed above by many Mopan, especially older Maya Catholics. However, as many of these ceremonies and celebrations have declined, so too has the symbolic importance of the cacao beverage (Steinberg 1997). Even among those Mopan who continue to consume the cacao beverage, many are unable to state why it is consumed, other than it always has been. For example, a family I frequently

stayed with in San Jose (and who served me the drink) were not sure why cacao is associated with important events. Two elderly informants in San Antonio knew of the drink's connection with the spirit world, but they were of a different generation, one more in tune with past traditions. Cacao's connection with folk tales and spiritual qualities in the natural world has declined among many Mopan.

Today, associating cacao with spiritual qualities is largely limited to elderly Mopan. Many younger Mopan reject what they perceive to be representative of a superstitious, conservative past. This rejection has been reinforced by recent religious changes among the Mopan. Since the 1970s, increasing numbers of Mopan villagers, especially young people, have left the Maya-Catholic Church and joined Protestant, often-evangelical groups. Converts often believe that linking objects in the natural world with the spirit world is tantamount to witchcraft. Converts believe they are "born again" not just spiritually, but also culturally and must reject beliefs and perceptions related to spiritual aspects of the natural world (Steinberg 1997). Many Maya are eager to break away from the seemingly more



Fig. 3. Drying cacao beans in San Antonio.

conservative, tradition-laden Maya Catholic faith. Among many, especially the young, the message of a new identity that embraces individual prosperity modeled after the United States is appealing. They believe that by shedding the cultural “baggage” of the traditional older generation, they can enter an economic and social world not accessible to their parents.

### CACAO MANAGEMENT

Until 15–20 years ago, families traditionally propagated a small grove of cacao trees for home consumption, sale and trade within villages, and occasionally to *cobaneros* who came from Guatemala to sell and trade goods that were difficult to find in Mopan villages in Belize (Wilk and Chapin 1990). Most subsistence cacao was grown in orchard gardens propagated in abandoned milpas (agricultural clearings) and kitchen gardens.

The hill lands where the Mopan Maya have settled are ideally suited for cacao production. Well-drained limestone soils with ample rainfall provide the setting for a long history of cacao

production in this area (Bergmann 1969; Coe 1993). Bergmann (1969) considered southern Belize an area of secondary importance for cacao production during the early colonial period; however, cacao must have been propagated in large quantities because remnants of these ancient groves can still be found in the area’s old growth tropical forests. The Mopan call cacao found in local old growth forests “wild” cacao. Today, Mopan farmers continue to plant cacao on well-drained slopes. Interestingly, several cacao groves planted on slopes I inspected were actually unexcavated Maya ruins. Planting cacao on unexcavated ruins provides an intriguing link between the present and past Maya cultures.

**The Mopan grow cacao organically.** This has enabled them to tap into a specialized market for their product in the form of an organically grown chocolate bar called Maya Gold that is processed and marketed by Green and Blacks, a **candy company in the United Kingdom.** The Mopan do not necessarily grow organic cacao because of an objection to pesticides, but because most cannot afford to purchase chemical inputs. When asked, “would you use chemicals if they were affordable and if they increased productivity” all 15 farmers stated yes (if the same market for nonorganic cacao existed, which it does not). There are complaints about minor pests and diseases, but now that their profits are tied to the organic industry, chemical inputs are not an option.

As an alternative to chemical inputs, some Mopan are planting more local *Theobroma* versus imported varieties as well as becoming increasingly interested in wild cacao. It is difficult if not impossible to know exactly how many farmers are incorporating local and wild cacao into their agroforestry practices. This is due to the lack of records kept by the cooperative and because communication and contact between farmers in different villages is limited. Also, I was told that farmers do not always want to share information about innovative efforts with their neighbors who are often seen as competitors. When I questioned informants about the origins of local cacao, all 15 Mopan farmers claim that they have “always had” this variety. But no one I spoke with could tell me if always meant they brought it from Guatemala or found it near early Mopan settlements in Belize. Wild cacao is found in the Columbia River Forest Reserve, located north and northeast of Mopan villages.

Maya farmers believe the local and wild cacao varieties are more hardy and pest resistant than improved varieties brought to Belize from Costa Rica beginning in the late 1970s. Realizing their profits are tied to organic production, some Mopan are increasingly willing to sacrifice the yield of improved varieties for the apparent resistant qualities of the local cacao. As one informant told me, "we have no choice, organic is the only market right now. And it's a good market."

### DISPUTES RELATED TO THE EMERGING CACAO ECONOMY

Traditionally within Mopan culture, cacao groves are one way to establish permanent land ownership. Cacao trees are recognized as an indisputable form of land tenure and can be passed down from generation to generation. There are several older Mopan families in San Antonio who own cacao groves that are said to be around 100 years old, meaning they were established near the time of the Mopan's arrival in southern Belize from the nearby Petén in Guatemala.

As population pressure increases on available land resources around villages, disputes have risen over staking a permanent claim to land by planting cacao on indigenous reservation territory, especially cacao on a commercial scale. Planting cacao takes that piece of land permanently out of the common-pool swidden system. In a setting where a growing population depends on a finite amount of land, taking land out of this system has resulted in newly planted groves being destroyed by angry Mopan villagers. Destroying groves has been noted also in nearby Kekchi villages for similar reasons (Wilk 1991). Many Mopan who expanded or created new cacao groves in recent years have planted it on officially surveyed reservation lands and on private property located outside the indigenous reserves. (The exact numbers of farmers and exact acreage are difficult to determine because no records are kept by anyone regarding where farmers plant cacao.) Planting on surveyed common-pool lands also causes disputes because this breaks up the communal nature of the reserve and it is usually only the economically better off who can afford to have the land surveyed and leased from the government or purchase private land. The breakdown of the common-pool land system is leading to an increasingly class-based Mopan society.

In the past, a village *Alcalde*, or judge, would

intervene in disputes over issues involving land claims in the reservation, but today, if someone can afford to have land surveyed and thus recognized by the government, there is little village authorities can do to stop such actions. As more commercial cacao is planted, Mopan villages become divided. Commercial cacao is one of many socioeconomic factors that have created schisms in Mopan villages. Other factors include national political integration, religious conversions, and further inclusion into a market economy. Those negatively impacted by this stratification are usually elderly couples or widows who cannot afford the initial start-up costs associated with cacao farming.

Certainly there are both environmental and economic benefits to the development of the organic cacao industry among the Mopan. Environmental benefits include an expanding agroforestry system that protects soils, doesn't rely on chemical inputs, and provides some ecological structure where little existed before (on slash and burn plots). And economically, price guarantees and reliability of the market have certainly benefited many farmers and their families. However, there are costs as well in the form of more economic stratification within villages.

### CHANGING SIGNIFICANCE OF CACAO AMONG THE MOPAN

The cultural and economic significance of cacao is changing within modern Mopan culture. One significant factor contributing to the changing perception of cacao is its recent resurgence as an important cash crop. From the time it ceased being used as a means of exchange until about 25 years ago, cacao was mainly viewed as a ceremonial crop, with minor economic importance. Today though, economic rather than ceremonial importance, is increasingly associated with the tree and bean. Beginning in the late 1970s, the Mopan began to plant more cacao, which was purchased by the Hummingbird Highway Hershey Company (Wilk and Chapin 1990). However, falling prices offered by Hershey almost resulted in the complete abandonment of this previously expanding agricultural industry. Thousands of pounds of cacao were left to rot on trees in the 1980s because Hershey set prices so low making it unprofitable to harvest, clean, and ship the cacao to the processing plant.

Maya cacao farmers were given an economic reprieve in 1994 when an outlet developed for organically grown cacao with Green and Blacks. This company followed a trend that developed in the past two decades by linking its product with a social and environmental issue. Green and Blacks purchases organically grown cacao from Maya smallholder farmers providing farmers with an alternative income generator to swidden agriculture and not forcing Maya farmers to purchase chemical inputs, thus providing the company and Maya farmers with an environmentally and socially "friendly" product. Prices offered per pound to Maya farmers are also, on average, around three times higher than other outlets such as the Hummingbird Hershey plant, and the company offers a five-year rolling contract thereby providing some future security.

The economic relationship between the Mopan and Green and Blacks has been endorsed by the Fairtrade Foundation, which consists of a group of private aid agencies in Great Britain. The Fairtrade Foundation investigates environmentally and socially conscience products to determine if company claims are legitimate. In the case of Maya Gold, the foundation concluded that farmers have benefited from the guaranteed prices, credit availability, and long-term trade agreements provided by Green and Blacks (<http://www.fairtrade.org.uk/belize.htm>).

Partly in response to the growing demand for cacao, Maya farmers in southern Belize formed the Toledo Cacao Growers Association to disseminate technical information and to organize smallholder farmers for greater economic leverage. The association provides storage facilities and scales for cacao beans in Punta Gorda and acts as a representative for the farmers to the multinational candy company. As a result of the growing demand for organic cacao, it is becoming the most important cash crop among the Mopan. In 1998, cacao sales to Green and Blacks totaled over US \$53 000. The fact that cacao is now a growing income generator within many Mopan households has further altered the traditional perception of cacao from that of a plant considered to be part of the cultural core, to one that is part of the economic core.

It is difficult to determine the exact number of Mopan who are now growing cacao as a cash crop. Most Mopan have several trees, and even those with just a few trees sell beans to Green and Blacks. But increasing numbers are expand-

ing their plantings for commercial purposes. According to Green and Blacks, about 150 farmers were part of the original group that began selling organic cacao to the company in 1994. Today, the number of individuals who are producing cacao on a commercial scale is probably in the range of several hundred. In regards to area planted in cacao, Cayatono Ico, the chairman of the Toledo Cacao Growers Association, estimates that around 1200–1300 acres are now in cacao production (both Mopan and Kekchi Maya). But again, because some villagers have just a few trees in kitchen and orchard gardens from which they collect and sell beans, it is difficult to quantify exact amounts of acreage planted. Although exports have expanded, Green and Blacks claims the demand for Maya Gold surpasses the production levels of the Maya farmers and desires that more Maya farmers begin to plant cacao on a commercial scale. The company has told the Maya that they will buy as much cacao as they can produce.

According to many Maya farmers, cacao production will likely expand in the future not only because cacao offers a higher and more stable price than other commodities grown in southern Belize, but also because as fallow times have declined in recent years due to greater pressure on land resources, maize and bean harvests have declined. Many Mopan Maya farmers perceive the commercial production of cacao as one solution to this problem because it thrives in the local limestone soils and requires few inputs except occasional weeding. It appears that as long as the relationship exists with Green and Blacks, increasing numbers of Mopan farmers will grow cacao on a commercial scale. This trend is indicated by the growing amounts of cacao exported over the past several years. In 1996, 36 424 pounds of cacao were sold to Green and Blacks, whereas in 1998, 63 455 pounds were sold and exported.

## CONCLUSIONS

The changing relationship between the Mopan Maya and cacao presents an interesting case study of the evolving nature of plants, culture, and economy. The significance and use of cacao has come full circle within Mopan society: starting as a cash crop in the pre- and postcontact eras, to a ceremonial subsistence crop with little actual cash value for most of the 19th and 20th

centuries, and now again to a crop that produces significant income.

Not only is the symbolic nature of cacao changing within Mopan society, from ceremonial to cash crop, the change has also significantly altered the traditional land tenure system employed by the Mopan. As the income potential of cacao groves expands, more Mopan have begun to plant it on a commercial scale. **As groves expand, more land is taken out of the traditional common-pool swidden system. Assigning a commercial value to formerly common-pool swidden lands contributes to an increasingly class-based Mopan culture, in contrast to the traditional communal social structure. Although cacao has become a popular cash crop and provides increased incomes for many Maya farmers, the breakdown of this common-pool land system threatens the very foundations of traditional Mopan Maya culture where community interests outweighed individual gains.**

#### ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am indebted to members of the Toledo Cacao Growers Association, especially the chairman Cayatono Ico, for sharing their insights regarding the cacao industry.

#### LITERATURE CITED

- Bergmann, J. F.** 1969. The distribution of cacao cultivation in pre-Columbian America. *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 5(1):85–96.
- Coe, M. D.** 1993. *The Maya*. Thames and Hudson, New York.
- Gómez-Pompa, A., J. S. Flores, and M. A. Fernández.** 1990. The sacred cacao groves of the Maya. *Latin American Antiquity* 1(13):247–257.
- Hartshorn, G. et al.** 1984. Belize: country environmental profile. USAID Contract, Robert Nicolait and Associates, Ltd., Belize City.
- Maya Atlas.** 1997. *The Maya atlas, the struggle to preserve Maya land in southern Belize*. North Atlantic Books, Berkeley, California.
- Sauer, J. D.** 1993. *Historical geography of crop plants: a select roster*. CRC Press, Boca Raton, Florida.
- Steinberg, M. K.** 1997. Death of the dance, cultural change and religious conversion among the Mopan Maya in Belize. *Cultural Survival Quarterly* 21(2): 16–17.
- . 1998. Political ecology, cultural change, and their impact on swidden-fallow agroforestry practices among the Mopan Maya in southern Belize. *The Professional Geographer* 50(4):407–417.
- . 1999. Maize diversity and cultural change in a Maya agroecological landscape. *Journal of Ethnobiology* 19(1):127–139.
- Thompson, J. E. S.** 1930. *Ethnology of the Mayas of southern and central British Honduras*. Field Museum of Natural History, Anthropology Series 17.
- Wilk, R. R.** 1991. **Household ecology, economic change and domestic life among the Kekchí Maya in Belize**. The University of Arizona Press, Tucson, AZ.
- , and **M. Chapin.** 1991. *Ethnic minorities in Belize: Mopan, Kekchi, and Garifuna*. Belize City: Society for the Promotion of Education and Research (SPEAR).
- Wright, A. C. S.** 1996. The Columbia Forest Reserve. *ECO March/April* p. 5–10.
- Young, A. M.** 1994. *The chocolate tree: a natural history of cacao*. Smithsonian Nature Books, Washington, D.C.