

A long walk to dignity

Belize, "God save the Queen"

The only British colony in Central America, it was called British Honduras, and it was a nation built by pirates. When Elisabeth II ascended the throne, people here didn't have right of vote. Yet, the strange relationship with United Kingdom spared this small country the violence of banana republics and saved it from near Guatemala.

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Belize. Pronounced in English, indeed in Kriol, it becomes a sweet sound, like a light wind (breeze) blowing from Caribbean. Belize is sea and forest, a country as large as Tuscany, literally wedged between Guatemala, Mexico and the Yucatan South. The forest is Maya, the sea is of blacks. The more you go inland, the easier you hear Spanish, eat *tortillas* and *frijoles*, beginning to feel the melancholy of the natives, even if Maya here were not dominated by *Conquistadores*, because they fiercely fought and they were helped by an hostile environment (and lacking of gold and silver). Empty streets for miles and miles, pushing greenery around, grapefruit plantations, sugar canes, bananas, some tinplate bar along the road, a few small towns close to the border and the anonymous very small legal capital, Belmopan (13 thousand inhabitants of total 300 thousands).

But the true spirit of Belize, its total diversity from the rest of Central America, is on the shores of Atlantic Ocean, which saw the slaves from Africa. They often stopped in Jamaica, island which was the real basis of Her Britannic Majesty in the area. The Belize River, which gives its name to the nation, reaches the sea in the largest city, Belize City, which is no longer capital because of Hattie. Hattie was the most devastating hurricane of the twentieth century: it was in 1961, the government decided to move inland, in Belmopan, in fact. Belize City has been the main center, home of the only international airport, a "rough sea town" as the Lonely Planet guide defined it.

Belize City is especially poor rather than rough, except for a few big hotels in the seacoast, and the suburb of Fort George District, with its white villas with gardens. There is not many touristic areas here, and it is said that the city is becoming increasingly dangerous, full of "crack" and guns, hidden in putrid dirt roads, in wooden houses which would be picturesque if they didn't fall apart. Little traffic, many boats passing under the Swing Bridge, pride and perhaps symbol of the city.

The discomfort can be seen clearly, but it is difficult to feel it with rhythms of life so mild and relaxed. Such as Jamaica, you can feel a "Rasta" approach in everyday life: marijuana (and rum) is always available, divorced from the reality (and from work, because tourism, always in transit here, does not stimulate so much), but basically positive. In short, the black and colored, classified as "Creole", on average, seem as proud as available.

If you look for the real sea, the small fishing towns in the South populated by Garifuna (African interbreeding with Indians of the Caribbean), then you discover the mild, benevolent heart of people, starting with children who seem very happy with their life, although they live in a country which has serious social imbalances and a third of population is below the poverty line, but where the basic education system is guaranteed, and the human development rates (95th place in the world ranking) are significantly higher than in neighboring Honduras and Guatemala. The Belize could become a dark Guatemalan province, essentially identical to the Petén, the wildest part of the country of the Maya.

Instead, Belize began a different story (though no less difficult) than classical Latin American one, made of Spanish masters and native servants, just because it was an off-limits land, a free zone, able to host European glorious dregs which, in the seventeenth century, dedicated to the "privateering": the pirates, in fact. The war of the seas which fascinated the literature and cinema, from Steinbeck to "Pirates of the Caribbean", was a kind of "everyone against Spain" to counter the monopoly of Madrid in the Atlantic. The British crown never was very subtle about war, starting with Elizabeth the Great and

Sir Francis Drake, the man who stopped Spanish "Invincible Armada" which was to land in England in 1588.

Criminals in the Gulf of Mexico and heroes at home, English pirates used as bases small islands (Cayes) of the coral reef and the coast of Belize River estuary. In these seas by shallow seabed and winding passages, the pirate vessels were virtually unstoppable to the heavy Spanish warships. Spaniards attacked the pirates settlements always from the Yucatan. The conflict lasted beyond the 1670 Treaty which stopped the privateering. Three times Spaniards drove out British, who left the profession of buccaneers and were called simply Baymen. The Bay men, untamed, always returned, until the last challenge, the St. George Caye naval battle (1798): with the help of African slaves and soldiers of His Majesty, they gave a final blow to Spaniards, who since that moment no longer tried to dislodge from their settlements those strange British subjects, who become pioneers, and went into the forests of Belize to seek their new treasure: the mahogany.

In fact, mostly African slaves were in the forest, and they were largely Ibo of Nigeria (so that the first name of Belize City was "Eboe City") as far as their masters were ruthless, the forest allowed a freedom unknown for their brothers in the plantations in the rest of America. Small teams of loggers felled mahogany trees and carried them along the river at the mouth of the sea. There, they were shipped to London and other Atlantic ports. For nearly two centuries this was the economic and social life of Belize, which was not yet called British Honduras, but it was a place with no name and no other law but the one of land ownership established by the descendants of pirates. In practice, twelve families controlled eighty percent of the available land, as an English superintendent pointed out in the early nineteenth century.

It took several decades to establish the London authority in this wild corner of Central America. Eventually, in 1862, the new colony was made official with the name of British Honduras. In the same years a private company working for a royal mandate was formed, the "British Honduras Company" was founded by some of the great English merchants, and it became the "Belize Estate Company" (BEC). Since then, the history of Belize was largely the history of BEC: the presidents of the company were Roseanne with the Governor of His Majesty, representing the British government: "the interests of both are virtually identical," said one of the earlier presidents of the company.

Belize represented the perfect colonial model, in which political and economic power are welded, in a double dependence on London. Strategic decisions was taken in Europe, and went in one direction: to have the interesting raw matter, in this case, the mahogany, low cost, and export finished products, for the delight of the Company and the caste of merchants and owners. The brutal slavery mechanisms had become more complex and treacherous, because now the chains were invisible, and called debts. Workers, with seasonal contracts, got an advance on their meager salaries at Christmas to spend it with the family for the holidays, so they left to the forest already indebted, and there they burdened themselves with other debts because they pay high prices on food, drinks and everything else; if high prices imposed by the owners were not enough, there is the devaluation of national currency, which raised the cost of imports from England and reduced the purchasing power of wage earners, for the delight of the company controlling business on behalf of the Crown. Everything was perfectly legal: the law helped the strongest one, the law regulating labor relations said it in its name: it was called "Masters and Servants Act," lasting since 1883 until the forties. An employee in debt was obliged to sign a one-sided contract again, if he stayed away from work, he could be immediately arrested; and each occasion was good to apply fines, namely deductions from a subsistence wage.

The veterans of World War I (yes, there were also soldiers of Belize to fight in Europe), who experienced the racism of His Majesty's army, organized a revolt, demanding that British Honduras became a "Black man's country ". Their leader was a follower of Jamaican Marcus Garvey, the first member of the Rastafarian movement. Their song "Land of the Gods", became the national anthem of Belize, as "Land of the free."

Changes came from the sea, and the United States. Monoculture of mahogany, was accompanied by the chicle's one, the plant used to produce chewing gum. In the twenties, thanks to relations with the

U.S., a black producers elite established itself and opened a crack in the monopoly of wealth. Over all, Robert Turton working for "Wrigley's" (chewing gum) in Chicago. Other colored "entrepreneurs" dedicated to the production of alcohol to smuggle during prohibition age in the States. They were not the protagonists of social protest, but in their wake a new ruling class formed, the one that led the country in the long journey towards independence, starting with George Price, mulatto secretary of the Creole businessman Turton. The first real rebellion, however, came from the lower level of society, from workers suffering the consequences of the Great Depression in 1929 and of the terrible hurricane in 1931, which brought out all the meanness of British colonial administration. It was a Latin, Antonio Soberanis, who led the revolt of the unemployed and employees. He denounced B.C.E. as a bunch of "bloodsuckers", he said that the governor and King George of England were two "cheaters". He was imprisoned, he came out even more popular. The colonial establishment began to lose ground, up to admit, believe it or not, the legality of the rising trade unions (1941).

In those years the alliance being the basis of the country was formed: the ethnic one, between blacks and Maya, that British tried in vain to tarnish, and the political and social one between the union and the party, the "People's United Party" (PUP) was founded in 1949 and led by Creole middle-class. For everyone, it was clear that the exploitation was linked to the colonial regime, and that the social struggle had to become the struggle for political rights, as soon as possible, and then for independence. The Belize backwardness, in the early fifties, was terrible. "Belize City is probably the most depressed place in the entire Commonwealth. It is unbelievable the situation of hunger, poverty and pollution where people live", wrote a British reporter at that time. Political rights were still in the nineteenth century, only two percent of the population could vote. In October 1952, just as Elizabeth II ascended the throne of England, George Price and the PUP and Union (the General Working Union) leader challenged: a general strike. His target was the legendary B.E.C. and even the infamous American multinational United Fruits, which added a Yankees hint to British colonial exploitation. Washington dominated the rest of Latin America, starting with the most classic of "banana republics", Guatemala. Here, the United Fruits felt cheated by the land reform and progressive policies of Jacobo Arbenz, and for that demanded and obtained a military coup led by the CIA, in the name of "anti-communism."

British tried to play the same ideological card against George Price and the PUP. But Price, born in 1919, was simply a Catholic educated in Catholic social teaching come from Saint John's College, a school run by religious, which was a forge of supporters of independence. In his mestizo chromosomes, the three ethnic groups in Belize were united, but it could also pretend to be white; he was a middle class exponent and a journalist of "Belize Billboard." And PUP was rather a sort of progressive Christian Democrats than a left-wing party. No one talked about a revolution: the colonial system, as responsible of exploitation and of the poverty of the people in a rich in natural resources country, was denounced. The immediate goal was the universal suffrage, the first step towards independence. The colonial administration and the usual B.E.C. tried to stand out against it by every mean, in vain. In 1954, just as in Guatemala history was brought back, the people of Belize got the right to vote. The first democratic elections saw the overwhelming success of the PUP and George Price. The British tried to separate the moderate wing of the party, by favoring the birth of a "loyalist" faction, but the game did not work. A few years later, the loyalists became the eternal liberal opposition party, the United Democratic Party (UDP).

George Price started a long constitutional path to reach the self-government in 1964. There were all conditions for independence, already allowed by London to almost all former colonies (including Jamaica, in 1962). Wilson's Labour government would have be more than favorable. Yet, to achieve the independence, Belize waited 17 years. All this time, defense and public order were still entrusted to the United Kingdom. Why? The delayed independence has only one meaning, as it may sound incredible: to protect themselves from the expansionist ambitions of the miserable Guatemala.

Every respecting "banana republic" is based on the alliance between the caste of landowners, the U.S. Multinationals and military. Most of the time with the blessing of the Catholic Church, at least

until the sixties. Now, the army always lever on nationalism, preferably accompanied by some war. The more countries in Central America were zealous servants of Washington, the more they nourished a grotesque nationalism. Thus, Guatemala decided since the forties that Belize was simply one of its provinces. And the military juntas which succeeded one another after the coup labeled "United Fruits" in 1954, repeatedly threatened an invasion. Among the many paradoxes of this strange international relationship, there was a half crisis (so to speak) among historical Atlantic allies, U.S. and UK in the sixties: Washington supported the coup generals of Guatemala, so with Kennedy as with Lyndon Johnson. The envoys of the latter awkwardly tried to solve the territorial issue with a plan dramatically in favor of Guatemala, which was obviously rejected to the sender; the Guatemalan army would have never challenged the Army of Her Majesty.

Given that the United States made up for a sorry figure, it is no wonder that the first country to recognize the Belize was Cuba, closely followed by Panama (for the of disobedient soldier Omar Torrijos, who at the same time gave back the canal by Jimmy Carter) and later by other Latin American countries. When the motion was finally voted at the UN, only Guatemala voted against it. So, September 21, 1981, fall equinox, Belize became independent, remaining in the Commonwealth. The head of state formally remains the Queen of England, like Canada or Australia.

Having what it wanted, Belize had to work. But progress in the last quarter of the century, does not seem to have been exciting. Meanwhile, George Price and the PUP, aging in a unchallenged power, began to decline, clipping the wings to any attempt of ruling class renewal. For this reason they were punished by voters in 1984, who wanted more than anything else wake up the old and glorious separatist leadership, and rewarded the opponents of all time, the Liberals of UDP. Between the two parties there were not abysmal differences (so in the present), but the liberal reforms of UDP did not like a lot, and so in 1989 Belize's people brought the legendary George Price back, eighty, and the PUP.

The alternation between the two parties, ie between the center-right and center-left coalitions, did not change the deep structure of the nation, which remains deeply unbalanced in favor of land ownership and commercial and financial elite. British entrepreneurs was joined by American; almost symbolically, the legendary company BEC was bought by an U.S. holding company in 1971. As if Belize had maintained its characteristics as a free port, "*refugium peccatorum* (refuge of sinners)": many business people, even from Taiwan, bought the passport of this little unknown state, or established here their head office. There were also some wealthy Americans who thought they had found here a kind of lost paradise, two-hour flight from Miami, and privatized some of the most beautiful islands, building villas overlooking the sea or building exclusive "resort" isolated from world. The Belize became "trendy": the singer Madonna in the late eighties singing "La Isla Bonita" extolling San Pedro, seaside town located in Ambergris Caye; Leonardo DiCaprio and other Hollywood stars have bought beautiful houses on the coral reef. But VIP tourism was and remains virtually invisible, with no consequences. Just in 2000s the tourism industry became the driving force of the economy, so today represents the most consistent voice of GDP, followed by agriculture, and employs most of people. But the society of Belize, for now, has not been overturned, it has basically remained the same, for better or for worse. For worse, given that the wealth is not equally distributed, and poverty, first of all in Belize City, quickly become misery and the delinquency grows (even if Belize is still an oasis of peace, especially when compared with other Central American countries).

For better, for the soul of the people is intact, relaxed and gentle in manner, very tough in the arguments, as you can deduce by reading "Amandala", popular national newspaper, which has an incredible circulation of 45 thousand copies (of a population of 300 thousand). In a leading article celebrating the 38th anniversary of the foundation of the newspaper, the director Russell Vellos wrote that his grandfather, "a black man", told the British soldiers who wanted to interrogate him without a warrant to take a running jump, and reminded readers that they are the true strength of democracy, and that only thanks to them the journalists were not influenced by the two parties, government and opposition, and the entrepreneurs controlling the advertising market.

Squeaky clear, those of "Amandala" are outspoken. They know that for many people of Belize four Belize dollars (that is two U.S. dollars) per week to buy the newspaper is not a trivial amount. Yet they continue to support a press which is not the megaphone of the establishment, but his guardian. Being poor does not mean not having a critical consciousness. For this reason the director seems sincere when he ends the leading article with the old slogan "Power to the People". Indeed, with the Creole "Luv Ya. (We love you). For real. Power to the people. "

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