
Emphasizing that heritage involves making meaning “in and for the present” (p. 2), Alicia Ebbitt McGill approaches archaeology and education as linked sites for the state’s production of “official” heritage in Belize. As state actors develop school curricula, oversee archaeological research, and manage historical and cultural sites, she argues, they define Belizean heritage in ways that shape Belizeans’ understandings of their nation and their places within it. This is no small task, given the country’s ethnic diversity, which includes Afro-Caribbean Kriols and Garifuna, Central American Maya and Mestizos, and a number of smaller groups such as Mennonites, Indians, Chinese, Lebanese, and Whites. Thus, McGill also attends to the ways that communities interpret and challenge official forms of heritage through their own vernacular heritage practices, which construct alternative identities and values.

McGill’s analysis extends across scales and time periods. She tacks between state constructions of heritage at the national scale and heritage practices at a smaller (local) scale comprising the ancient Mayan site of Chau Hiix in north-central Belize, the focus of a community-based archaeology project between 1989 and 2007, and two contemporary Kriol communities located near that site, Crooked Tree and Biscayne. She also examines continuities and ruptures in the construction of official heritage across time, from the colonial period (late nineteenth century to the mid-1950s) through the independence period (late 1950s to independence in 1981 and its immediate aftermath) to the “globalization” period (late 1980s to the early twenty-first century). She draws on archival sources, including education and archaeology policies, reports, and curricula, as well as data collected via interviews with state and community actors and through participant observation in community schools, archaeological research, and community traditions and events.

McGill demonstrates how education served as a form of colonial statecraft under British rule and how nationalist actors in the independence era developed educational content on Belizean culture and history to help citizens overcome colonial legacies, embrace a new national identity, and understand and appreciate Belizean ethnic diversity. Although she suggests that community members in Crooked Tree and Biscayne accept much of the nationalist content purveyed by the contemporary curriculum, she also reveals ways in which they challenge official heritage through language and subsistence practices that comprise vernacular heritage.
Similarly, McGill interrogates archaeology’s role as an official heritage practice, suggesting that the state has deployed archaeology in pursuit of dual agendas. Responding to international interest in the ancient Maya, Belizean state actors have prioritized archaeological research at Mayan sites. Although these sites have been used to anchor Belizean national heritage, they have also been marketed to attract foreign tourists, with tourism gaining in importance relative to nation-building across time. Drawing on her ethnographic data, McGill probes the complex relationships that rural Kriol communities sustain with archaeology. Although the expansion of tourism to ancient Mayan sites offers economic opportunities to Kriol communities like Crooked Tree, located adjacent to a Maya site, the privileging of ancient Maya culture in response to perceived tourist demand render Afro-Belizean Kriols and their history and culture less visible and less valued. Residents of Crooked Tree and Biscayne respond by advocating for resources to enable their participation in archaeological tourism, while resisting archaeological practices that marginalize them. They turn to vernacular heritage practices, McGill asserts, to define themselves in relation to their own distinct values. Sometimes, they reflect on those values to draw connections between themselves and ancient Maya people in creative, unauthorized ways.

Analyzing the efforts of the Chau Hiix Archaeological Project to engage the residents of Crooked Tree and Biscayne and the responses of community members, McGill concludes with a call for community-based heritage scholars to work harder to understand the historical and cultural contexts in which they conduct research. In particular, she urges such scholars to focus on the way their work has contributed to official heritage discourses that marginalize vernacular heritages and reproduce historical processes of inequality. Her contribution will be of interest to heritage scholars generally, and the book is especially relevant to archaeologists seeking to decolonize their research practices through community engagement. Her study offers valuable insights into the potential pitfalls and unintended outcomes of such efforts as well as guidance concerning the possibilities for productive, reciprocal engagements with local communities. McGill’s straightforward writing style makes the book accessible to undergraduate students as well as professionals.

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