

*There is neither a first nor a last word and there are no limits to the dialogic context.*  
Mikhail Bakhtin

# INTERETHNIC RELATIONS BETWEEN RUNAWAY AFRO-BELIZEANS AND MAYAS IN THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY

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**Mark Lentz, Utah Valley University, United States**

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**Interview by Ana Fonseca**

**Ana Fonseca:** Thanks for listening to Radio Heteroglossia, I'm Ana Fonseca and our guest today is [Dr. Mark Lentz](#). Dr. Lentz is a historian and an assistant professor in the Department of History and Political Science at Utah Valley University in The United States. During this interview we will be discussing the article written by Dr. Lentz entitled, "[Black Belizeans and Fugitive Mayas: Interracial Encounters on the Edge of Empire, 1750-1803](#)," published in 2014 in the academic journal *The Americas*, which provides insights into the nuances and complexities that shaped indigenous and African relations in the frontier region between Yucatan, Guatemala and Belize - a disputed border between British and Spanish colonial powers in the 18th century - while examining the variety of responses adopted by Maya peoples towards Belizean runaway slaves. Dr. Lentz, welcome and thank you for joining us today.

**Mark Lentz:** Thank you.

**Ana Fonseca:** What events in the eighteenth century motivated Belizean slaves to escape to Spanish territories in Yucatan and Guatemala?

**Mark Lentz:** The precedent that motivated the slaves to make the escape is that Spain promulgated the Sanctuary Policy. It started with Florida, and it's just the idea that any slaves who reached Spanish territories from English and Dutch territory, basically protestant colonies, and that wanted to be baptized as Catholics, they under Royal Policy actually would have had the right to be freed and not go back

into slavery and the right to actually remain in Spanish colonies. They didn't necessarily observe that to the letter of the law, but it was obviously a big enough motivator and observed with enough regularity that it drew a lot of slaves from English speaking border territories. So that's sort of the legal framework that would have been the motivator. The actual conditions were that Belizean slaves, the type of work they did, wasn't a plantation economy. It was a slave-based economy but not plantation. There were definitely hundreds of slaves escaping just because it wasn't a militarized colony, the type of work the slaves did required that they not have exceptionally close oversight. And also during various attempts on the part of the Spanish to dislodge the British, those types of wars would have provided other opportunities for escape as well. So there is the legal background, the sort of condition slavery that required a lot of mobility and then the various wars, and of course there was a widespread knowledge that English complaints about, "the Spaniards are seducing our slaves with their promises of freedom, " which takes on a sort of stronger accusatory tone right in the 1790s because this is a time, as a result of the Haitian Revolution, that is perceived as very dangerous by all the imperial powers to incite slaves to flight or rebellion. That said, sometimes I like actually reading mid-level administrators and low-level administrators' writings better because they are little less polished and they actually write what they seem to be thinking, and I forget which one it is but I mentioned it in the article briefly that he actually wrote, "well, the real reason that we are doing this is to undermine the English and weaken their position in Belize." So there is the religious justification on the one hand, but then there is obviously more practical considerations.

**Ana Fonseca:** Your article draws attention to the importance of frontier regions in broadening our understanding of race relations in the Americas. How does this particular frontier region between Spanish Yucatan and Guatemala and English Belize complicate or expand conventional understandings of indigenous and African relations in the Americas in the eighteenth century?

**Mark Lentz:** Borderland areas are areas where there are both maroon communities and unconquered indigenous societies. From the Spanish perspective, frontier regions are areas of refuge for both runaway slaves and unconquered or fugitive Maya groups as well.

**Ana Fonseca:** That leads me to my next set of questions. Your article distinguishes between conquered Mayas and unconquered Mayas while describing the different responses of Mayas towards Belizean runaway slaves. I wonder if you can talk more about this and how were the responses of unconquered Mayas towards Belizean runaway slaves different from those of conquered Mayas?

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**Mark Lentz:** Yes, I absolutely distinguish between conquered and unconquered largely in terms of the use of political Spanish legal terms and Spanish ideology. So for the colonized Mayas, their dealings with the African runaways while they are not predictable - I think one of the points I am trying to make with this article is that there is no universalism- it's not "this indigenous group reacted in this way towards African outsiders consistently." But the language or the approaches that they use are very much influenced by colonial rule, by using governmental and military forms, using the language of conversion and Christianity and appealing to themselves as good colonial subjects, loyal subjects to the Crown. Now, where it gets blurrier is that you have some groups that are very clearly unconquered, they are still practicing indigenous religions, and they are avoiding European life as much as possible. The issue, though, is that it really should probably be three categories and I refer to them as "apostate", which is a tricky word, because this is the idea that there are also some Mayas who were colonized who would escape Spanish rule and move further into the countryside or deeper into the Petén out of the Spanish areas of effective control, and live independent lives. What happens then is there is definitely a mixing of those Mayas who have never been conquered and those who had actually fled or had to flee Spanish society. The unconquered Mayas, especially by the eighteenth century, are really sort of a mixed Mayas who had fled colonial rule and Mayas who have never actually been conquered. The Mayas actually who are not conquered take a different approach where they would assess their ability to be absorbed into Maya society versus their threat to Maya society, particularly if you have a runaway slave who is in the company of two Spaniards. That person would probably be perceived as a threat. Or, if they were on the offensive and attacked a British settlement, they probably didn't discriminate so much between races, just attacked whoever was part of that settlement.

**Ana Fonseca:** Dr. Lentz, does the archival record provide any indication that the identity of maroon, or *cimarrón* in Spanish, was used by the Spanish in this area to refer to runaway indigenous Mayas?

**Mark Lentz:** That's a good question, mostly no. They use a lot more the language of *bárbaros*, *salvajes*. They use more of the language of civilization and religion too. My reviewers don't like the term but it was what they used consistently to describe them, "apostate," the ones who had actually left. So they use religion and civilization a lot more in the case of the fugitive Mayas.

**Ana Fonseca:** That's an interesting contrast from other Spanish colonial settings in, for example, the Pacific Coast of South America, where archival sources document the use of the term maroon to refer to both indigenous and African runaways. I wonder if you came across any kind of documentation in the archives that illuminate why the identity of maroon wasn't used as much in the Mesoamerican context to refer to runaway indigenous Mayas.

**Mark Lentz:** I haven't found it explicitly but I think part of it is the influence Dominicans, Jesuits, Franciscans and secular clergy. When we are dealing with the Mayas in particular, there is this notion that they're "defiant, lost souls" who need to be sort of "saved." So there is more religious connotation. There is this idea that Petén after the conquest has to be better staffed and better administered by various religious orders and it turns into a little bit of competition down there for that. So it's probably the influence of the religious orders that there is more emphasis on the defiance of religion on the part of the Mayas.

**Ana Fonseca:** Near the end of your article, you describe Mayas and Belizean runaways as evading both colonialism and servitude. So in my reading of this part of your article you seem to be moving away from the conventional perspective of marronage that places it mostly within the framework of slavery, by approaching it more as a response to the larger context of colonialism. Is that the case? And if so, what is leading you towards that direction or more expanded view of marronage?

**Mark Lentz:** I think part of it too is some of Matthew Restall's work. He did a paper, and I'm not sure if he has published it yet or not, discussing how ethnohistory and the study of indigenous peoples has a lot to borrow from the study of the history of Africans and vice versa. That's definitely an influence there in sort of thinking, what is it that is motivating both of these groups, either the Mayas who had been under colonial rule but were actually evading it and the slaves to do so. I think it's just looking at what might have been the motivations. I wouldn't say I'm trying to do away with that framework entirely. But there are some of the cases where they recaptured runaway Mayas and they asked them, "why did you run away?" And they said, "well, because labour obligations were so hard, we couldn't make a living and manage to do all the work the Spanish authorities had

for us and pay all the taxes" that the church and the state and even their own *caciques* had to do for them as well. Obviously for the case of the Belizean slaves there is a lot of back and forth over whether or not they were fleeing because they want to become Catholic or they were fleeing because slavery was a horrible system to live under.

**Ana Fonseca:** Dr. Lentz, thank you very much for your time and for sharing with us your knowledge about these issues.

**Mark Lentz:** Thank you for your interest.

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